

The Saga of the C'Peyough

Introduction

Gather ye, my children, about the fire and I will tell you of the brave men of yesteryear, of glory and honor, of heartbreak and tears. I shall weave you a tapestry rich in hue, relating the saga of that most fearful of demons, that diabolical spirit known to the Indians as "C'peyough"¹.

¹ CPU. The author of this story (Al Zimmerman aka Xim) right out of college was thrown into the building and debugging of the CPU board for the BTI 8000 computer. The CPU board itself was over 20 inches square and had over four hundred ICs along with a piggy back board and had a clock frequency of 15MHz. This saga is of the fabrication and debugging of this board.

Going to Pcdes Ign.

It was long ago and far away (at least to the end of the hall) that the wizard Quackenbush, having spent many months poring over manuscripts, notebooks, potions, and spells, put down his pen and finished his greatest plan. He looked upon the strange diagrams, figures and graphs with pride. Who would ever be able to understand the mechanisms and spells he had outlined on the yellowed sheets of parchment? In moments of weakness, he himself sometimes doubted that his grasp of his task was strong enough for the struggle he knew lie ahead.

It would have to be. For no other could do the task. He had gotten himself into it, after all. He was a full sorcerer, cloaked and hooded many years. His tall boots showed evidence of many years of travelling. His well-worn staff spoke of many spells cast, some subtle, some char-ingly powerful. He was one who travelled in rarified air, among the Mighty and Powerful. Yet, he tried to keep himself separate from the power plays and position games played by his peers.

He was Steward of Arendi, Keeper of the Hardware Meetings, temporary leader of the powerful kingdom of necromancers in the known world of the Two Continents -- he had no time for politics.

Arendi itself was an enigma to it's neighbors in the continent of Bl d'Ingtu.² They considered the

kingdom to be a place of black magic, demons, and danger. They were not far from the truth. Below ground of the fortified city of Aren's Deep, inside the endless catacombs and labs, the walls were singed and charred. Many experiments had been performed here, sorties with the unknown and the unknowable; many spirits had died the real death in these underground pits. Wizards, necromancers, apprentices, and nether-servants worked day and night in those labs, experimenting and casting spells. They labored to clear the world of ignorance, to expand the meager sphere of human knowledge, and to make a quick buck before the market dropped out of the sorcery business.

They were perilously close to the proverbial edge at that very moment, all things considered. Hopelessly lost, wandering on the dry, windblown deserts of Cill Eakon Valley, they searched for, more than any other secret, a way out of that god-forsaken land. The paths were not easy to find, however, and they were perilous to walk. Dangers unknown to ordinary man confronted their wizardry and, at times won. Already, the scars of the journey were evidenced on the populace of Arendi. Some limped where before they had walked with proud step. Some crawled where before they had flown with the mightiest sorcerers. And some moved no longer upon the face of the earth by any means, having left to rolm the netherworlds, in tandem with the

² Building Two. BTI was in two buildings: Building One contained administration and 3000 manufacture and Building Two contained Field Service

and 8000 development. For security reasons, the 8000 area was kept behind locked doors thus isolating it from the rest of the company.

darker forces.

They had been sent, several years before, on an exploratory voyage into the uncharted wastes known only as "Non-R&R territory".³ They had sailed to the second continent and, like a platoon of spys, had been left on the beach by a small fleet of the Admiral's ships, with strict orders to return in two years time for pickup. The small group headed into the uncharted undergrowth.

They built settlements, emulators, barns, and high-bandwidth busses. They forged new development tools. They created new and amazing machines, called ancient and powerful spirits to their command and crystalized new spells who's like had not been seen in an operating system environment in this reality or the next. Their numbers grew and so did their pride in their mission.

But their leader, Chuang Lu, was building a Kingdom out of what had once been a mere department. He cut the communication channels between the daring exploratory colony and the continent of Bl d'Ingwoan (their homeland, the land of their true King) to a minimum and, at the same time, encouraged his people to range far afield, in pursuit of whatever truths of hard and soft realities which they might find. He was well admired among his people -- at least that is the legend that has come down through history.

³ BTI's principle customer was Reynolds and Reynolds who accounted for at least 70% of sales. The 8000 was to get BTI into a different market and thus out of reliance on R&R.

History does not record the reason, nor does memory recall why disaster struck, but when the appointed time came to return to Bl d'Ingwoan, across the Ensi Sea, quite simply, they missed the boat. The King's ships waited for months... and left empty, crossing the Ensi Sea with just some nuts, animals, and driftwood they found on the beach.⁴ Luckily, they had ample sails at the time and so continued on their way.⁵

Oddly enough, few complained or indeed even noticed when the date came and went in the land of Arendi. The people still had their work to do. Life went on.

The mark, however, was left on the landscape in many ways. A great, fortified city came into being, Aren's Deep, named after the patron saint of Obscurity. Few of the people on the continent (and there were many) who were not flying sorcerers or whatever, ever came within the land in recent years. Few visitors challenged the unseen sentry at the main gate. Fewer passed through that huge orifice. Quackenbush did not mind; his people had enough hassles from the netherworld to have to contend with hassles from this reality.

He gathered up his yellowed parchments and set off to take them to one skilled in transforming them into a living work of intellect. He chose an elvenlord schooled in the

⁴ The NCC conference that the 8000 was to be announced had only a mockup of the machine with non-working boards plugged into the mainframe and a BTI 3000 machine (hidden within the show booth) driving terminals displaying the features of the 8000.

⁵ Sales to R&R of the BTI 3000 was sufficient to see the company through the development of the 8000.

ancient crafts known as Carys. Quackenbush's journey lasted a great while, yet was but a moment compared to the period to come. On this occasion, he first went out to the fields and glens around Aren's Deep to find his faithful companion and trusted friend, the coal-black stallion he called "W'di". He found the horse a few miles away from the walls of the fortress and asked for his service. W'di was more than happy to help. He'd been largely idle lately anyway.

They set off one morning, crossing through the huge, reinforced doors just as the sun was rising. The guards, still bleary-eyes, watched them silently from the ramparts, offering neither question nor encouragement. The sentinel closed the gate after they had passed, soundlessly taking up its vigil. The sun had yet to rise and yet the gray sky was too milky to be called dark. The world waited in limbo.

At last the horse delivered Quackenbush to the south gate of Pedes Ign and would go no further. The wisened, old wizard looked into his faithful mount's eyes and read there the animal's fear. Stories had come down from the dark past about the horrors of Pedes Ign: the seemingly endless elvin mazes, the uncertain rule of their unstable leader, Princess D'Jetyzyr, and, of course, the infamous torture chambers, where innocents were subjected to severe schedule slippage while strapped to that horrible device of delay, the light table.

"Don't worry," the man said. "You don't have to go in at all. I'll

only be there a few weeks — a couple of months at most. You run along now, and wait for me back at the Deep. I'll be fine. Then, we'll get back on the road to Ensi Sea in May."

The large animal nudged his friend's face. "I know what you're thinking," said Quackenbush. "'Won't you reconsider the going to the Wirr Rappir?' Yes, we've discussed this before and you know I'd rather not consult them until it's absolutely necessary. You know the prices they demand. Now, no more discussion. Go on." The two parted company there at the gate, not knowing if they would see each other ever again.

"It hasn't been an easy spell, you know," said the small figure examining the sheets of hieroglyphics. "It might take two tries to get it working, it might never work at all. I'm not going to guarantee anything, you understand: not at this time." He made a quick count. "Why, there's over four hundred imps alone! How am I going to handle the routing of all these deamons? First they worry about the food, then they worry about the layout..."

"Well, hasn't George, son of Will, laid the groundwork for most of the other half?" said a quite voice. "You and he worked together for many months..."

"And got less than nowhere!" spat out the elf. "Listen: this job is big; bigger than the karmic controller, bigger than the vibes transducer!"

"It is a large undertaking, to be sure," replied the robed wizard from a chair by the fire. "Yet, it is not much larger than the last task you performed for me. Remember, this deals with two additional layers — planes of power which neither you nor I have commanded before — these will ease your task considerably."⁶

The dark haired elf looked up. "Ah! Now that's a curse of a different color! No problem. 'Have it to you in six weeks.'"

"I knew you would see it my way. I'm glad I didn't have to take my case up with the Princess."

"The Princess!" sneered Carys. "I don't draw spells for that old Bag! I'm a seventh level Padmaster, and neither you nor she had better forget it! Out! Get out!" He threw the parchments to the floor. "Or else this infernal creature of yours will be called into the world stillborn! Out!"

The wizard stood, insulted by the elf's outburst. "Be warned, Carys!" he cried. "You may occupy a high position here in Pcdes Ign, but that is all you are. The Lost King of Arandi may yet return an..."

"Bullshit! 'The Lost King of Arandi' indeed! You fool of a wizard! Does the cloak of Stewardship weigh heavy on your rounded shoulders? What can a mere wizard know of the role of King?" Carys leered at the glowering figure. "And when will the 'Lost Kine' return unto his own, my friend? How long has his lineage lain dead, buried deep in the vaults of

Pyr Inyl?"

"The Quest continues," said Quackenbush quietly.

"And will. Long after we are victims of the head-hunters ourselves."

The two stood there for a minute in silence. They had worked together many times and respected each other's skill at necromancy. This argument could not effect that.

"I will check back with you from time to time," said the wizard gently.

"Return with the waxing moon and I will have something to show you," replied the elf, sitting down at his table. He began to murmur, waving his hands above the glowing surface. Small, regularly spaced dots appeared, or seemed to appear, in the air before him, connected by thin, luminous traces in a spider web of light.

"I'll leave you to your work," said the slowly dissolving sorcerer. "Don't forget to leave a good 15 mil margin..." he said, then disappeared.

⁶ The CPU was to be a two sided board with buried power and ground — a design not used at BTI

before.

A Conversation with l'Ibb

"How's the spell coming along?"

"Who knows?" The young man did not look up from his orb. "I wish we had some decent cast equipment around here ... been trying to see this little Glitch for the last three hours ... couldn't trigger worth shit until the Moon moved into Aquarius."

"Why not just cast the spell with your other crystal ball?" asked his companion.

"That piece of newt dung?" he exclaimed, glancing up, "It's an A'Chpi!"

"Oh. So you're using the boss' ball?" the student asked. "Does he know?"

"Of course. He's the one who wants this done to begin with."

"How's his project coming along, anyway?"

"Should be ready any time now," said the wizard's apprentice. "At least, that's what he says. He indicated Carys would be done any day now and then we could begin the check."

The white-robbd youngster looked at Xim in disbelief. "YOU'RE going to check the apparatus with CARYS? You'd better be careful."

"Yeah. I've heard he leaves his power spells slightly loose, if you know what I mean."

"He can't be as bad as the elvin twit who laid out the Psychic Services Unit. When we checked the spell, fifteen or so imps weren't even assigned! They got all over the lab and fucked up everything!" The two

laughed at the thought of those skinny little scrawny bodies dancing along the lab's electric arcs. "So, we had to cast up a quick one to catch them all," said l'Ibb, "and charred three walls!"

"Fast little bastards."

"You bet. So you'd better be careful with Carys and those fairies, their vinyl, their knives and their (rather graphic) artwork."

"They're not fairies," said Xim, "they're elves."

"I wouldn't be too sure."

A Moment's (and Other) Reflections

It wasn't more than a few sunsets later that Quackenbush found himself walking along the guard wall of Aren's Deep, lost in dismaying thought. He had been walking along this very path, just a few months before. This night was very much like that one, as a matter of fact — a peaceful late summer evening perfect for strolling. Then, his kingdom had been cast into turmoil. Chuang Lu and he had been arguing that night when the assassins struck. Neither of them had felt or shown any surprise; the death had been expected for some days. Yet Quackenbush felt little nostalgia for the old days of dreams and deception. The scales had yet to fall, he felt; his eyes could not fail in their effort to open, but he still felt blind.

"The blind," he said, "leading the lame."

He had not welcomed assuming the Stewardship. The oracles had assured him one would come to lead, as of old, out of the line of kings. Yet, no word had come out of the depths of Pyrs Inyl for months and he grew ever more concerned that the lineage was lost, forgotten.

He had seen them come and go — phantasims. First one, then another would attempt the withdraw the card from the ancient cardcage, each one failing in turn. It was said that only the true king would be able to accomplish this feat of skill, cunning, and strength, yet Quackenbush did not expect to see it happen in his lifetime.

"All they'd have to do is give it one good Whap! upside the connectors," he mused. "It worked for me..."

His reverie was shattered by the arrival on the walkway of his faithful apprentice, Xim the Magnificent. He had just awakened and was reporting for duty. Quackenbush regarded the youngster from beneath bushy eyebrows, idly wondering how he had gotten saddled with such a burden. Well, he consoled himself, everyone's got their cross to bear.

"Like," Xim began the ancient ritual greeting, "What's the buzz?"

"Doan' ask me man," replied the wizard in the long dead tongue of the Hippites, "I jus' need a place t' crash."

"Hey," said Xim, formally assuming the guard position for the next watch, "Be cool. Catch your zees, man, an' I'll cop the view for a few."

"Far out." But, instead of departing with the last words of the ceremony, Quackenbush stayed for a few minutes up on the wall with Xim.

"I'd like you to do something for me, if you don't mind," he began. "The new apparatus Carys is building for us now will be tapping energy from planes of power, planes with which many here in Arendi are unfamiliar. We need to explore these planes and learn the aspects of their reality. We must not venture into the future unknowing."

"Surely you've travelled these planes many times, Oh Great Wizard," said Xim quickly, not

relishing any part in an adventure. "You must be familiar with their rules and realities."

Now, one can't really fault the little bugger for attempting such a weak defense, because he was fighting with a severe disadvantage — he really hadn't heard anything about what the wizard was discussing. If he did, he probably had blocked it out of his mind as too painful a fate to contemplate. So, like always, he filled in the empty spaces in his brain with standard phrases out of his save-your-ass file and held up his end of the verbal exchange as best he could. He didn't have a chance, in the end, and he knew it.

"If it's not inconvenient," said the wizard, knowing it couldn't possibly be, "I'd like you to be ready to go tomorrow. Upon your return, you are to give a seminar on your findings to the whole of Arendi."

"But I really don't know anything about... A seminar?" Xim looked at the wizard in disbelief. "What would I possibly have to say that could hold their attention for more than five minutes? I just got here!"

"By the time I'm through with you," smiled Quackenbush, "You'll have enough stories to scare a pack of Boy Scouts right out of their sleeping bags." He laughed a low, sinister laugh.

"Why are you laughing such a low, sinister laugh?" asked the apprentice, right on cue.

"I was thinking about the cheap literary tricks the author's been resorting to in this narrative," replied

the wizard.

"What tricks?" asked the confused youngster.

"Ah!" exclaimed the wizard, "I see you serve as tool to other masters, young one!" and he laughed loudly.

"Huh?"

From a long way off, the fronts weren't really all that intimidating. The problems only started just before you went up, when it would be on top of you long before you could possibly do anything about it. That's if it was clean. Tom help you if there were spikes, moguls or Glitches. The local natives had a word for it: Onyuras.

Xim sat at the end of a clock line, his elbows resting on his bent knees. He had fastened his suit closely to protect him up here on the signal planes, but he hadn't anticipated the ferocity of the winds. Barely able to hear his own thoughts in a silent room, he was taxed to the limit to catch his feeble mental meanderings as the maelstrom whipped around him.

This wasn't as bad as the ground plane, he thought. Nothing, absolutely nothing to see, feel or experience. He didn't see much potential in it. Of course, it was just the opposite on the next higher plane, the power plane. He had felt charged with energy as he waded, searching for the wraiths that are said to inhabit that reality, powerful Glitches that can sting like a hornet you remain untriggered in the fastest crystal ball. He felt proud that he had seen two,

killing the second. The world was too full of decent people, he felt, to let those hooligans propagate where they pleased.

On the signal planes, however, things were alive with activity. Wavefronts washed everywhere, carrying thousands of little surfing elements known as Bits along from imp to imp. Sources and sinks of power were all about him, creating heavy vibe currents and luck eddys through which he had to pass. It had taken him a long time to reach his present position, hundreds of nanos from the temple of Alu, and he didn't know how much longer he could hold out without sleep. He had set his thumper ticking loudly at the other end of the long trace, at the input to the driver. Quite soon, he was sure, it would set up a few wavefronts on the line. They seemed attracted to thumpers; nobody he knew knew why, or would admit as much to him. So he waited on faith and was not disappointed.

He heard it, to rather felt it, long before he say it. The area around him was suddenly filled with Bits, all clamoring about with their boards, waiting to catch the wave. He listened as best he could to their high-pitched voices.

"Lockatha toobon tha twon!" he cried. "Kosmic," agreed another. Yet, their hip jive was soon drowned out by the roar of the wavefront. It was a buzzing earthquake at it sped towards him, and he didn't like the sound.

"Ringing," he thought, "I may need to terminate."

Then, without warning, it was upon him. Two severe positive-going spikes slammed into him from behind, reflections off a nearby feedthrough, and knocked him to his feet. He leapt towards the wavefront, hooks extended. All around Bits were flying helter-skelter, zipping down the wavefront even as Xim tried to climb it. He was sliding, slipping down the wave much too quickly to make it to the top and he knew his strength would fail him soon. Then suddenly he noticed a parulian and very ugly outcropping near the top.

"Ha! There's the forward-travelling little bastard!" he said and, grabbing hold of the noise spike with his left rod, swung aboard the edge. He planted the other hook just behind the peak value for stability and began to take measurements.

"Only three and half nanos, not bad for this distance." He wrote it all down in his spiral bound notebook. "But the driver's only pushing one point three two down the pike!" With figures like that, he wasn't looking forward to the discontinuities coming up, where the trace branched into several stubs. He whipped around a corner, almost fell but regained his footing. He looked forward and saw the stubs streaching away to the sides of his path. He could even see the hazy form an imp assumes when travelling about these upper planes. The imp was standing at the end of the first stub and seemed to be smiling as it munched contentedly on a handful of Bits.

"Since I'm headed into fifty ohms, I should be able to just slip off

as the level drops." Xim's voice was a hoarse whisper. The Bits had all disappeared; he didn't break his concentration to notice. He loosened his hooks and rose onto the balls off his feet preparing to leap. The first stub approached with a blur.

Whump! Instead of dropping, the wavefront jumped up nearly a half volt, catapulting Xim into the air above the traces. "That had to be closer to seventy-five," he thought calmly. "Must've been TEN mil stubs." He sailed through the air with the greatest of interia, hearing the imp laugh and giggle below as he waited to see Xim crash. Up here, the sudden contact of the apprentice's body with the firmement would cause an explosion visible across the board. Soon after, the whole lab would reek like a burnt resistor.

Thump! He hit the ground headfirst, careening into unconsciousness as the silicon and fiberglass exploded into the air around him.

There was a period of quiet, of darkness and cool, and he waited. He remembered something, he thought. At least, he thought, I think I remember something. And where was the driver? he thought. And how can the driver drive if the cab was gutted? Was that the problem? That's what I remember, he thought, and he thought it again so as not to lose it in the pain of remembering. There's a Problem Here and It's...

"...me? Xim. Can you hear me, Xim?" the shadow repeated itself again. Xim murmured, then the brittle brained apprentice reached in and reconnected his mouth to his throat.

"Yes," he croaked. His body felt like shredded yak tongue. He could open his eyes, he was sure; he could feel the wind on his eyeballs. But when he tried to focus on the shadow that was bending over him, his vision kept breaking into pieces. It was some time before he realized that he had lost control of the left side of his face and that the eye now had a will of its own. But the shadow kept talking.

"Good. You were gone a long time and were unfamiliar with reality on that plane; I was worried." Now there were two shadows, no, just one. What did they all want? Some sort of response?

"Yea, well..." he murmured, "It looks like we'll have more problems with reflac ... refleshup ... refashions than you thought..." He fell back again, and walked the hallways and aisles of the Sheet and Pillowcase Show for a time unrecorded by mortal beings.

In the Forest

Xim, unfamiliar with the local customs, was watching carefully for cues to correct social behavior. This was his first time outside the Deep's walls and he now travelled over ground nearly glowing with rumor and potential. He was walking, of course. The two wizards travelling along the trail with him, however, were floating a few feet off the ground, moving at a pace just brisk enough to be too fast for a walk, too brisk for a run. They didn't teach him to do THAT in school. The two necromancers were too busy talking to let Xim in on their foot-relieving secret, so he kept up as best he could with their pace, keeping an ear open to the forest.

"...don't see why they can't accept numbers!" said Quackenbush. The other wizard, flying several yards away, shook his head.

"They say their names are passed down, generation upon generation, too close to their roots to be abandoned," he said.

They traveled in silence for a time. the morning sunlight shining on the travellers through the overhanging branches. Xim trotted along as quietly as he could. He was increasingly uncomfortable the further along they went. His imagination whirled with huge spiders, blobs and mothrass and he wasn't exactly sure he hadn't spotted a few off in the dark, mossy distance. How the two wizards could keep up such a calm exterior was a mystery to him. He didn't know too much about the second sorcerer, for that matter, and he seemed a bit odd.

Xim was not sure of the nature of his power but it was plainly present in copious amounts — as he flew, the wizard shed a slowly varying, glowing orange light. In the shade he illuminated an area ten or twenty feet in diameter.

"That's all very fine," Quackenbush was saying, "but we can't fit every name in every imp location on every plane! For Tom's sake! Don't they have Social Security numbers or something...?"

"I don't think I hav—" The second wizard's body, having been glowing brighter and brighter every minute, suddenly released a huge electric arc, which found the nearest path to ground (a nearby tree) and promptly destroyed it.

"Great Hewlett's Ghost, Hyal, can't you control those damn things?" yelled Quackenbush, diving for cover. "That last one nearly scorched my pantaloons!"

"Sorry. I guess I just got more energy than I can handle. I'll try to keep a good distance from now on." The wizard Hyal looked at the former tree. " 'Sure does waste a lot of foliage."

"Excuse me, sir," interrupted Xim, "but I think there's something moving over there, up that trail." He pointed along a diverging path. Instantly, and without warning, both sorcerers disappeared, leaving Xim suddenly walking by himself, alone on the darkly green forest path.

"You!" called a voice to Xim. "Yes, you! Stand still, laddie!"

Kim froze, a thin trickle flowing down his leg. He imagined a huge, heavily armored knight, sitting astride a giant fighting stallion and aiming a nasty, poison tipped crossbow directly at his undefended back. He waited to die there, consoling himself that he wouldn't be alone in this time of passing if his assassin was there with him. He wondered how long the cruel brute of a killer would leave him there, hanging by a thread.

When nothing happened for a few seconds, Kim timidly opened one eye and perused the path. Nothing. He turned around and looked in the direction where he had heard the voice, seeing on-one but hearing the sound of hoofbeats. He waited to bolt from the horror he thought coming down the trail before him, but was powerless to move. He was mentally reviewing his group insurance policy when he finally say his persuer. A small, fat, brightly dressed little figure riding a Shetland pony approached him along the trail. Kim was terrified more that before. Taken off guard, he was unable to recall seeing such an apparition before, but he guessed it was an elf. He desparatly hoped the little man didn't need a date for the evening.

"Whh - who - who are you?" he asked.

"Who wants to know?" returned the elf.

"I am, uh, Kim, son of Xam, son of Xoom, son of —"

"Ok, ok, cut the history. What happened to the two fly boys?"

"I'm not going to answer any questions until you tell me who you are." said Kim, feeling very nervous. Where WERE the two wizards?

"I am Carys. Padmaster of Pcdes Ign," replied the elf.

"Holy shit!" exclaimed Kim. This was THE elf! The one whey were coming out into this forsaken wilderness to meet! The one he had heard terrible things about; the one he had nightmares about; the boogie-man in the flesh! He hastily attempted to collect his shit about him but was only partially successful.

"I mean... we were just coming to meet you," he said.

Pop! Pop! The two sorcerers suddenly reappeared and with their arrival, the poor apprentice's battered and abused psyche finally succumbed to the morning's combined terror and shock. He greeted Quackenbush with an articulate and terse warning of danger as his last act.

"Ishgardlbing!" he gasped, then fell over and lay quivering on the ground.

"Hi, Q!" said Carys. "I see you're still hiring the handicapped."

They woke the apprentice and, when Kim eventually remembered his name and how to use his legs, the stranger joined them and they continued their course down the path. The elvenlord did them honor by coming out from his city to guide them the last few leagues. Though the way into the city was complicated and confusing, it didn't exactly require you to float down on a barrel and the wizards could've easily gained entry

on their own. Yet it was good that Carys had come out to talk, for the politics of Pedes Ign would not allow him to speak freely within the city. Things had the nasty habit of changing when you least expected them to with the elves and it was best to keep your plans to yourself. For this reason, Quackenbush expected some sort of inner view of the talented padmaster to be revealed in the coming conversation. "How does the apparatus fare?" asked the wizard.

"As I mentioned in our crystal ball conversation of last week," replied Carys, "it stands completed upon my light table, imps at the ready."

"They all know their duties?" It was almost rhetorical.

"That's rhetorical and you know it, you old coot of a Quackenbush," said the elf. "Have I failed you before? It has been a long journey along our roads together and I have yet to hear of your disappointment."

"Of course, of course..." said the wizard. "...I will not argue. This has been one of your greatest achievements, Padmaster. The Princess will be pleased."

"Yes, the Princess..." The elf nearly choked on his words. He had been against her from the start, secretly supporting the resistance movement from the moment old Princess Tapethl Aout had abdicated. Yet, the powers that are had at last forced him to accept the new regime. Or thought they had. "Is there no chance of weaving the old spells," asked Carys, his eyes betraying his intentions, "now that the old Bad has

declared the Grid?"

"No," said Quackenbush, "We will submit it to the Princess before sending it out." The Grid had guaranteed that. When the order had come out, the streets were already filled with her guards. Nobody, from the beggars to the princess, would henceforth violate the Sacred Spacing.

Nobody.

"Their only sacred spacing is between their eyers!" muttered Carys.

"What?" said Hayl.

"Nothing. Just that the device will be ready when we arrive." The party rode, ran, and flew in silence. After a suitably long interval, Carys cleared his throat. "Here it comes," thought Quackenbush.

"Q," said the Padmaster, "How long do you figure this business is going to hold out?"

"What, you mean the recession?" returned the wizard, knowing it was not what the elf meant.

"Yeah. Do you think it's going to experience the tremendous growth and opportunities for the small business man to maske a killing that the, say the housing industry had recently?"

"Your brother's a housewright, isn't he?" asked the wizard. "No, my brother-in-law," replied the elf. "He's built three castles, a treehouse, sub-contracted two moats. and completed a full burial mound in the last six months!"

"He does quite a business."

‘Not only that,’ said the elf with pride, ‘but he designs and sells matching battering rams and catapults to the current opponent, to maintain the balance of power. Pretty smart cookie.’

Quackenbush turned to him and frowned. ‘It would be better to use the subtler arts of defense,’ said the wizard. ‘Your relative depends heavily on the technology.’

‘Well,’ said the other wizard, ‘there’s them that say that’s the way of the future.’

‘Still, I don’t like it.’ They rode, ran, and flew a few furlongs, then stopped for lunch. There, Carys brought up the subject again.

‘Quackenbush, my friend, I mean to quit this business.’

‘I saw that in your heart as we first met this morning,’ said the wizard softly. ‘You’re becoming a contractor?’

‘Yes. I’ve already started two cavern-condos up in the Murky Mountains —’

‘Those are narcs and goblins living up there!’ cried the three magicians together.

‘— what? Oh, yes, I know, that this valley has always had a problem accepting that particular minority but I think it’s time we provided them with low-cost, high quality housing before the Feds cram it down our throats!’

‘And besides,’ said Xim, ‘those bloodthirsty cut-throats will pay outrageous rates to get a cave with a jacuzzi and balcony. You two must be cleaning up.’

‘And what will you people accomplish?’ asked the elf with a shout, ‘You and your killer layouts! Hear me, oh wizards of Arendi! This endless pursuit of multi-spectre hexing will be the burnt-out of you all! Can’t you see that, and get out before it’s too late?’ He was standing on a rock beside the campfire, his arms waving wildly above his head. the wizards, sitting on the ground, looked at him with slight puzzlement in their eyes.

‘But,’ said Quackenbush, ‘It’s not THAT large a board.’

‘Aaaaarrgghh! ‘Not that large a board!’ You try to get all those imps on grid! You try to get them from slouching!’ the elven padmaster screamed. ‘But NO! Not you! Ah!’

‘I think this one’s lost his supply of 0.5 pencil leads,’ said Xim under his breath to Hayl.

‘I’ve had enough!’ cried the elf finally. He drew himself up to his full height and glared up at them. ‘Hear me, oh wizards! I curse your infernal ‘Peyoughs! May they turn their layout designers to stone!’ And, before they could do anything, he exploded a cheap stink bomb at their feet.

When the smoke cleared, of course, the elf had disappeared.

‘Well,’ sighed Hayl, ‘I guess we catch up to him at the castle.’

And so it passed that Carys, Padmaster of Pedes Ign, wrought his last and perhaps greatest design, delivered it unto its designer and left the land of Arendi. His curse has come through the ages unchanged

however, and to this day, Arendio layout designers do their work as if looking into a mirror, lest they be stoned by their labors.

And what of his last and perhaps greatest design? The apparatus matched the designs flawlessly. Every imp was accounted for, each trained in a particular way, for a particular function. There were only two problems.

First, the imps had been trained intensively — perhaps even ruthlessly. Quackenbush had recruited most of them from the crack Schottky troop legions, where a line could rise or fall in a matter of nanoseconds. And he had driven them beyond their thresholds. They had attacked their jobs with such ferocity in Carys' initial tests that he was afraid to run them at full bore. The most disturbing facet was their inattention to the Scared Spacing. Carys did not consider this too terrible, however. The old Prince had never minded.

The other, remaining problem was this: externally, the apparatus was fine. Its flaws went undetected in the exhaustive checkout. They would return, however, as soon as the device was activated. By then, of course, it would be much too late.

The Calling

The darkened room stank of solder, sweat, and smoke. In one corner, the dying embers of the cauldron glowed dimly, their heat making the air above the huge, living rock receptical shimmer slightly. A large pentagram was drawn in the dirt in the center of the underground chamber, five candles made from the fat of kodiak bear flickered about the perimeter.

In its center sat the strange and ugly apparatus, waiting in silence. A dark figure rose from his oaken chair by the ancient, roughly hewed table and approached the center of the room. He removed a small vial of powder from within his cloak and sprinkled a little on one corner of the pentagram, then began to chant under his breath.

Xim watched the wizard carefully. The casting of his spell was the culmination of their months of toil and tears and he wanted desperately for it to succeed. He had spent months of near-terror in the castles of Pcdes Ign and he was not anxious to return there. Carys and he had reached a tenuous understanding as they worked together; it had pleased Xim to be able to reach an elf — they did not open up easily. Yet, it had disturbed him to hear of Carys' disappearance soon after he delivered the apparatus. Why so suddenly, so secretly? Had Carys' views on Pcdes Ign politics and personalities hastened his departure, perhaps even cause it? He didn't know. All he did know was that the apparatus had appeared sound to his inexperienced eye and

that Carys had assured them all that it would work. They would put it to the test...

"Now!" cried Quackenbush in a strange, strangled voice. Xim leapt to his feet and ran to the cauldron. He picked up the dead rat lying on the floor and, per instructions, threw it into the embers. With a blinding flash, the apparatus screamed into life, throwing off sparks in all directions. The room was bathed in light, blinding him. He couldn't see the wizard, but he knew Quackenbush was standing before the glowing pillar, his hands upraised high above his head, his hood thrown back as he chanted the ancient rites.

"Oh, great C'Peyough!" cried the wizard in a voice Xim had never heard before, "Tool of the universe! Expose yourself to us! We have opened the Path of the very Least Resistance, transforming reality, step by step, until the final junction had broken down!"

The air hummed with the sound of four hundred imps dancing their fiery steps of doom. Their scrawny bodies almost flew about the apparatus, doing their appointed tasks, working the machineries of black magic to a frenzied pitch.

"C'peyough!" cried the wizard. "Who are you? We humbly bid you accept our transfer — back up not!"

Silence. The two waited with held breath. Then, slowly, a hazy shape began to form in the pentagram, beside the blinding pillar. Xim nearly fainted, but held on. He didn't want to miss this, not now. The shape grew more and more solid,

more and more real every nanosecond. The imps screamed their satisfaction and doubled their intensity.

"Now!" cried Quackenbush again. Xim stood as if frozen, staring at the glowing apparition.

"XIM! NOW!"

"Wha...? Oh, right." Xim ran to a control panel, twisted a knob. "Sixty seven!" he called. The light grew in intensity but his eyes had long ago saturated and he stood in the white blindness straining his ears. The whine of the apparatus rose to a crazy-dog pitch and he felt the sound penetrate into his skull like a needle, beyond hearing. On top of that he could hear the low moaning of the spirit as it was called into a mortal body. Xim suddenly had a flash from his subconscious and he remembered a problem, not really an error, that he and Carys had found in the final days of the check. He wondered if he should bring up the subject now but decided against it, remembering how little concern the error's discovery had caused Carys. Besides, at that moment, he heard a click through the screaming noise and he knew the wizard had made the final adjustment.

Whumn! ka-BOOM! A shock wave smashed the boy against the rock wall, knocking him unconscious. He travelled for a time in dreams he had seen before, dreams of running as hard as he could through air the consistency of molasses, getting nowhere. He ran and ran, knowing he had to get some place, unable to make any progress.

When he awoke, the room was empty, the pentagram a large smudge on the floor, the apparatus a molten heap. There was no sign of the spirit they were trying to call, no sign of success. The wizard sat, head down and sorrowful, looking at his parchments on the table.

"What happened?" asked Xim groggily. "No bus response," said the tired wizard, "and the Psychic Services Unit maintains that the vibes were strong, our karma good. I just don't understand..." He shook his head slowly. "The apparatus is horribly messed up, full of errors. The little demons just went suicidal..."

Xim wandered over to the blackened rubble and picked up a dead imp.

"Well," he said, "Business as usual."

Journey to the Wirr Rappir

"Do we go to the Wirr Rappir now?" asked Xim, looking down on the inhabitants of Aren's Deep. He and the sorcerer walked along the wall, discussing the few alternatives they had left.

"Looks like that's our only hope, if we're going to make it to the Ensi sea by mid-May," said Quackenbush, absently mindedly creating fireballs and tossing them into the air. His mind was somewhere else. "I really don't like it, though." A green ball floated up after a dim red one.

They collided and passed right through each other.

"Well, it's not so much the Rappir that scares me," explained the wizard, turning his face to Xim. The fireballs floated for a while, then dissolved away. "It's getting to them, through the mountains and through the land of Pyrch A'Syng and all. A few of the inhabitants are friendly and useful enough, but then again..."

"There's always a few trolls in every crowd, right?"

"Exactly."

Troll was too kind a word, thought Xim. He had just spent an hour on the line with an agent of transfer over in the city of Pyrch A'Syng. Not that the fellow had been unwilling to help, just unable. Xim couldn't help wondering why he had to go through those people to get what he wanted when he could probably make the whole journey on his own, alone.

"That's the way the system works, kid," the agent had said,

"First, you make out a parchment order, then you take that to a large oak tree, standing about a hundred yards to the south of the Deep, where you'll find a dwarf by the name of Ballhog...Baylrog...Eggnog or something. He'll tell you whether or not the weather is ok for your needs. Have him sign the parchment and assign a proper astrological sign to the project. Then, when the planet Saturn enters your newly assigned sign, bring the order to me and I'll give you an enscribed description of the route to take to the home of the Wirr Rappir."

"Can't you just tell me now?" Xim had asked.

"Not without the proper order. And make sure Quackenbush puts a binding spell over it."

Xim angrily cut the crystal ball connection. Regulations were meant to be avoided, he thought, and this one's no exception.

Two days later, parchment in hand, he appeared before the gated of Pyrch A'Syng. Above the huge iron-wrought door was an intricately carved inscription saying "DO NOT DISTURB". Below that, several other, hastily scribbled notes were also present, saying "Out to Lunch" and "Gone Fishing". Ignoring them, Xim lifted the heavy door knocker and let go. It fell off. He kicked the door with his work boots. After a few minutes and a few more kicks, he heard someone coming to answer the door. A peephole opened, exposing a bloodshot eyeball.

"Didn't you read the sign?" said a thin, weak voice. "No solicitors!"

"I am Xim from Aren's Deep," announced the apprentice, mustering all the importance he could into his voice. "I've come to see —"

The peephole closed with a small but determined slam. Xim kicked the door again. After a moment, the eye reappeared.

"You again?" said the voice. "I told you, Deliveries to the Rear." The tiny door slammed once again.

"Ok, bozo," said Xim quietly, "You asked for it." He took a small vial out of his tunic and placed it on the ground in front of the door delicately. Stepping back a few feet, he picked up a pebble and tossed it lightly at the vial.

When the smoke cleared, the entry gate had magically disappeared. In its place stood a soot-blackened, half naked man, his hair styled straight back, his clothes neatly shredded.

"Hello," said Xim, smiling as he extended his hand, "You must be Ken Cryon, agent of Pynch A'Syng."

"Yes. And you are...?" said the little man irritably.

"Late. Why don't we cut the crap and you just tell me how to get to the fabled lost city of the Wirr Rappir." He crossed over the smoldering rubble and showed the agent the parchment. "I've got all the paperwork here."

"I haven't finished the inscription," said the man. "Are you sure you're acting on the authority of the wizard?"

"Would you like to see more magic?"

"Uh, no," admitted the agent, "I'll take your word for it. Listen: we really are busy here, what with the solstice coming on and production increasing and all —"

Xim tried a trick Quackenbush had showed him a few days before.

Crayon, sans the rest of his hair, began, "First, take the Turnpath until you cross three rivers, turn left at the deserted castle and head north..."

Several days later, Xim found himself looking again at the map the agent had drawn for him. He knew now where the Ken had gotten his name. He peered at the smudgy, multi-colored scribbles for a minute, located a likely looking landmark and thought he'd figured out where he was. He looked around for the entrance to the fabled city.

His gaze was met only by pine trees. He tuned a full circle but saw only more pines, standing tall in a dark forest for as far as his eye could penetrate. He walked around the tree nearest to him and examined the Crayola drawn map again.

"'Twenty paces north of the tall pine' he says," says Xim. "WHICH tall pine, dummy? Crimanutly! Guess I'm on my own again!" He dropped the map there and walked in the search of a road. Several hours later, he had skirted around a few lakes and finally located a dirt path. He followed it in one direction until it petered out to nothing then, retracing his steps, he followed the trail in the other direction.

For a long time, he wandered through the forest without seeing any sign of life. At one point, however, he did find an old Harvard Lampoon pocket watch, engraved with the inscription, "To Whitey From the Whole Wonderland Crowd!" laying in the middle of the path. Otherwise, he saw nothing unusual. After about four hours wandering along the path, Xim finally came within sight of civilization. The path gradually became covered with asphalt as he walked along although it did not widen. He approached a small building, a hermit's hut, and called out a greeting to the inhabitant's within. There was no answer. He called out again and, walking under a long eave to the front door, knocked loudly. After a few minutes he saw a small, munchkin-sized figure dressed in an old bathrobe come padding to unlock the door.

"Didn't you see the red flag, buddy?" said the little man, "We've run out of regular for the rest of the day!"

"No," said Xim, "I don't need anything like that. I need a map. I need to know where I am, first of all, then I need to get out of here. Would you, perchance, happen to have a map of the routes the the land of the Wirr Rappir?"

"Why ye be goin' that way?"

"Visiting my maiden Aunt Hilde."

"Well, you're in Minnesota now, buddy. You've been led off into the woods!" He snickered.

"Oh, great!" said Xim resignedly. "It'll be another month until I get there and back. They may leave without me..."

"You Rappir kin, then?"

"What? No. Uh, Auntie was kidnapped as a child and grew to like the place so much she bought a condo. Listen: do you have the maps?"

"They're three pieces of silver each," said the little man slyly.

"They used to be free!"

"That was before the Vibes Shortage of '72, buddy; things are alot leaner now, for all of us."

"I'll bet."

"Do you want the map?"

"Here. 'Take your thirty peices of silver!' " Xim handed him the coinage.

"What?"

The mand handed the apprentice an oil-soaked parchment embossed with the "Third Eye" logo of the vibes refiner at the bottom. Xim left and, standing just down the path from the hut, decided on the fastest coarse toward his destination. He was reminding himself of his limited time frame when he heard an angry shout from back at the hut.

sprinted away down the path as the little man, the three coins having dissolved away to dust, waddled as fast as his little legs could carry him in pursuit. He tired quickly and soon gave up the chase, but not before hurling after the thief every expletive his meager verbal resources afforded him.

"I would have council with the Weaver," Xim's voice echoed out of the darkness, bouncing back to where he stood in the middle of the hall. He received no immediate reply. A single light shone several hundred feet above his head. Whether it was a source or merely a skylight, he was unable to resolve; it was too far away. The thin shaft of light it dropped into the huge chamber fell about his shoulders, bathing him from above, yet it made no pool of light on the black floor. The beam illuminated just a small circular area around him; if he moved, he disappeared instantly into darkness. Far off in the distance he could see one or two OSHA-spec EXIT signs glowing at the parimeter of the vast arena.

"I am the Weaver." The viece seemed to come from quite close to him, although he had heard no-one approach on foot. Must've flown he thought.

"I seek an Apparatus," he said quitly in the direction he had heard the voice, "I've heard you guys don't mess around."

"This is true: We touch not the signal planes but travel the ether between."

"I need these paths soon."

A dust mote entered the shaft of light, falling toward the stone floor.

"We are swift, my lord," said the voice after a delicate pause, "Yet even the dirvish can only turn around so fast."

"I an willing to pay" I need it before the solstice and my need is the heart of a people's survival!"

There was a silence. Xim could follow the dust mote as it rose slowly in the warmth of the light. He felt a butterfly touch to his elbow and then his thigh.

"I will cost you this arm," said the voice at the same time, "And this leg."

"Um... uh." Xim looked for the EXIT signes but they had been turned off. He still could see nothing around him although his whole body was perfectly visible. He felt an overwhelming presense around him that transcended sight and he knew without vision that he was surrounded. He felt like a Butterball Turkey in November. He thought desperately for a way out.

"Um," he thought at last, "I'll need to get you a purchase order from back at the lab."

"We accept cash."

"Uh, my Prych A'Syng agent would kill me if I didn't get his ok on this big a deal," said Xim, "Really."

"You may go," said the voice in the darkness, "But our terms will remain the same, no matter the method of your payment. We even have a phalanges installment plan, if you like."

Xim noticed an EXIT light come on and made a break for it, doing a better time in the quarter-mile than he had in high school.

"Take it up with my agent," he called, slamming the door on his way out.

A Plea for Ancient Help

"You're sure?"

"Oh come on, Q! Those Rappir are kooksville! No!"

"Not even for your department?" But the wizard's question was interrupted.

"They'll see you now."

Xim looked over at Quackenbush who stood, bowed to the aging herald and walked down the hallway, his cape billowing out behind him. Xim ran to catch up with him, gratified they had dropped the grisly discussion.

"Who are we going to see, again?" he asked in a stage whisper.

"Your brain rivals that of a flea, young one. Have I not explained our present mission several times to you before on our way here?"

"Yes, but you throw in enough details each time to gag a balrog!"

"Silence!" the wizard commanded. "We approach the council chambers of the First Three!"

"The First Three what?" Xim wondered out loud, but the two magicians arrived at the foot of the huge brass doors before any answer came. They stood there quietly for a time, examining the runes intricately engraved all over the huge surface. They were old. Depicting a series of scenes from long ago, the words were accompanied by bas-relief sculptures. Armies battled, wizards cast fire and dangerous spells, kingdoms were won and lost, all in the marvelously textured pictures of long ago. Quackenbush saw them and smiled at the

long-faded memories they evoked. With the slightest of sighs, the door opened slowly at a word from the wizard, exposing a room empty but for three large abstract statues. He walked slowly into the room. Xim waited outside. He didn't like the sculptures; they reminded him of something dangerous but he couldn't remember what.

"Come on, boy," said the wizard, "They like to keep the door closed." Xim entered the room, the two huge doors clicking quietly behind him. They waited there for awhile, standing in silence, examining the three works of art. The walls were white and bare of design, the floor covered with a regular pattern of tiles. The pattern and type of tile used here, noted Xim, had not been used on Tu for many centuries. His minor at college had been "History of Flooring Tile", after all. He smiled grimly, remembering all those who had said such a degree would be worthless.

The silence and severity of the room became oppressive. There was no place to sit, no ashtrays, no complementary magazines or anything. Xim fidgeted. After a few minutes, the apprentice nervously broke the silence.

"When were these made?" he whispered. The wizard looked up at the sudden sound of the apprentice's voice.

"Long ago, when the world was young and many strange flavors of being walked the Earth," replied Quackenbush. "They are the First Three called to help us in the Struggle. I had hoped they might rest in

peace, but it appears we now need their help again."

"The First Three what?" asked Xim. Quackenbush did not hear.

"Hear me now, Old Ones!" he said loudly. "Recall former days of glory, harken to my words and remember me from out of you endless past. I am the one called Quackenbush, Steward of Arendi, your father and guide, teacher and master. Appear before me now!"

There was no visible change in the room, but Xim suddenly smelled the unmistakable odor of old National Geographics, long-packed Army trunks and attics. The aroma of age permeated the room. His brain was filled with fleeting images of his earlier days and the room's barren walls and oddly shaped statues dissolved away into a scene from his early childhood, before they changed the water in his town.

He saw himself casting children's spells in his neighbor's sandbox, his silicate rockets shooting high into the treetops, when, without warning, three terribly old, horribly ugly and vile-looking men appeared out of nowhere. Before he could run or even scream, they were all sitting around him, watching him from the missiles. He was frightened out of his mind and quite unable to speak as they asked about himself and his family, difficult questions that he couldn't possibly answer. The scene cleared away to reveal the wizard sitting on the floor in the middle of the three statues, resting in a lotus position.

"Do you believe me now?" asked the wizard, looking at each of the

three in turn, "I would not bring anyone at all dangerous to your sanctuary. May we begin?" We waited for a short time, appeared to get a reply and continued.

"The Struggle continues," he began, his voice almost a chant, "and, altho many have risen and fallen in the many years since we fought together, the world is much the same as it always has been. The inhabitants of Arendi, lost from their traditional birthling place of the Ensi Sea for many years now, wander aimlessly without a King in the deserts of the Cill Eakon valley. We must reach our home soon, or the race will die out, leaving but a grease smudge on the disk surface of life.

"We have sought to raise another Dark One such as unto yourselves to aid us and have suffered ignoble defeat, losing him in the state of Abnormal Data. We have journeyed over thousands of cubits, to the realm of the Wirr Rappir only to discover the sands of time place too high a price on Wirr skill! We return to you, therefore, and entreat you to join once again in the Cause, regain your former shells and lead us to the Sea!" His voice shaking, the wizard finished his pitch and waited. Xim opened his mind to any stray vibes passing by and caught a snatch of the three being's reply:

"...have consulted the Oracle and her answer was thus, 'Reply hazy; Ask again later.' We must wait wizard..."

"Pray, Old Ones," said Quackenbush quickly, "Swirl your eightball again! The time runs out even as we

“speak!” This time the response came clearer to Xim’s ears.

“ ‘Today is your day; Take the initiative.’ So read the signs, wizard...” he heard the three mind-voices distinctly now. “We will help again, as of old. It will be good to do something besides debug microcode...”

The sorcerer smiled. “I’m glad,” he said, “We’ll work out well together. Oh, by the way, we’d like to get the bus down to sixty-seven —”

“That was not in the original contract!” protested the statue on the right.

“But that is what’s in the specs.”

“Did you try to call your latest Peyough at that speed?” asked the middle one.

“Yes.”

“No wonder you bit the big one, Q!” the middle one seemed to laugh, “The world isn’t ready for things like that. You are far too far ahead of your time for your own good.”

“Or perhaps,” kidded the wizard, “You are far behind, eh? We’ll have to make a few changes to you before we’re done, but you’ll be looking good when we’re through.” He stood, made a sign of leave-taking to each of the statues and walked through the opening doors.

Xim waited behind, unnoticed in the corner.

“How old are you?” he formed the thought loudly in his mind.

“Eh?” said one of the old C’Peyoughs.

“Just how old are you?” replied Xim.

“It’s the apprentice,” said one.

“I can see that,” said another.

“We are from before your time, from the Whang dynasty of Chuang Lu.”

“Will you really help us?” asked the apprentice timidly.

“He doesn’t trust us.”

“Would you?”

“Below seventy-five, I’m honest as sin!”

“And sharp as marbles.”

“ALRIGHT YOU TWO.” interrupted the middle being, “Now, young one, do not be afraid. We have travelled the roads to the shores of Ensi Sea many times and know the routes as well as any mortal being. We will guide your people East in the Spring, fear not!”

“But I thought the ocean was to the south of us,” said Xim.

“Oh, uh... yes you’re right. We will guide you due South, unto the sands —”

“He means Northwest, doesn’t he?” said the one on one end to the one on the other.

“No! The green waters of the Ensi Sea wash snow white beaches a few short miles from here, into the setting sun!” disagreed another.

“That cannot be,” said the first, “I’ve been there many times and the waters are crystalline blue!” Soon, the three spirits were arguing loudly among themselves, having completely forgotten about the apprentice

standing there. He quietly left the room then, the confused conversation fading in his mind as the great doors shut behind him. He found his way back through the deserted baroque hallways, back to where Quackenbush waited.

"You sure they know what they're doing?" he asked the wizard.

"I'm sure they're as confused as they possibly could be and still function," said Quackenbush. "They're older than the mountains."

"So they're getting senile after all this time?"

"I wouldn't say 'senile', exactly," said the wizard cautiously.

"Insane?"

"Crazy as loons."

"Why do we place our fate in the hands of lunatics?" asked Xim in amazement.

"Why should this company be any different?" said the wizard. He then took off, heading down the road at his usual breakneck speed. Xim sighed and then ran after him.

In the Lab

"Look, he's been here, too!"
"How can you tell?"

"Here, look at this!" The robed youngster held up his evidence.

"'Cup O' Noodles!'" exclaimed his companion, "Sure enough!"

"Do you remember anyone at breakfast mentioning him, Xim?" said l'Lbb.

"Oh, they all talk about him. I'm sure, though, that nobody's seen him. They all carefully avoid that claim. I've heard," the apprentice confided with an air of secrecy, "that he only communicates with the other wizards, and then only through the log!"

"I don't see how he can be so productive! Any other wizard would have to sleep some time, but not Dy. When ever I come in, he's there. I know he is! Yet all I see are these 'Cup O' Noodle' containers." l'Lbb shook his head.

The two walked for some time through the dungeons beneath Aren's Deep on their way to the labs. Passing beneath the entranceway to one wizard's office, they paused to listen to the strange and electric music coming from above. The door, glimmering softly on the dimly lit corridor, allowed them but a brief view of the room within, filled with wondrous robots, glowing hot plates and magically muralled walls. Xim wondered aloud who was the owner of the office.

"Charl," said l'Lbb, "Another wizard. He commune with the spirit of Pascal, they say. All I know is he has a pretty decent sound system."

As if in confirmation, the screaming crash of high-powered, heavy metal rock and roll exploded out of the office door in a rainbow of color. Xim held his ears and dove for cover but l'Lbb only smiled.

"He puts on some of the best shows around this place," he said, "if you ask me."

After a few minutes and a shortcut through the home of the Field Gnomes and Shipping Trolls the two apprentices reached the lab containing the ancient C'Peyoughs. Opening the door with an unlocking rhyme, they walked in to find Quackenbush and two other humans sitting around, dwarfed in the midst of a room of equipment. There were five huge pentagrams glowing fiercely on the floor of the cavernous laboratory, each machine accompanied by its attendant 'Peyough. The M'Peyough, holding the reins to the core of the universe, stood shining at the side of its gnarled apparatus. The P'Peyough floated serenely in the midst of its pentagram, quietly glad that it, for once, was not in the spotlight. Its apparatus has humming softly, the imps lounging at their positions.

Two pentagrams, however, were dark and silent. The large, abstract sculptures had been carefully packed up, taken from their retirement lab, and placed in the center of the two dead pentagrams. They were silent, though on and equipped with crews of imps. Xim noticed now how the statues looked vaguely like the apparatus Carys had constructed, with nooks and crannies all over to

hold the myriad little workers such a machine required. He wondered why he had not noticed this before and finally decided they must have been being maintained with skeleton crews, just sufficient to keep the 'Peyoughs in contact with the physical plane. Yet, even though they were now fully staffed, they showed no signs of life, lacking attendant spirits, C'Peyoughs.

Around the two dead pentagrams sat the visible portion of the debugging team. Quackenbush was looking at his parchments. At his side sat another wizard, named Ra, who carried a small, apparently female baby on his shoulder. The baby seemed perfectly comfortable perched up on his shoulder and babbled on occasion about whatever caught her fancy.

"Nidge de bunguerdol!" she exclaimed to wizard beneath her.

"Huh?" asked Ra, The baby declined further comment. Quackenbush looked up at the child.

"What was that?" he asked Ra.

"She wanted to double check that signal line we looked at a few minutes ago."

"I think the problem's a bit deeper than that."

"Gorph a ching, eesh de barbledong!" said the baby.

"She says," added Ra, "It was only a suggestion."

"Who is that?" asked Xim of his companion. L'Ibb explained that, as some sorcerers keep animals like ravens or cats as connections to other worlds, Ra had taken up with this seeming infant fifteen years ago. They were now inseperable. Although

the wizard had grown older in their years together, the baby had not aged from the moment anyone had first seen her.

"I think we should run your microdiagnostics now, Kragg," said Quackenbush to the third member of the debugging team. Kragg was a tall, bearded man whoes age Xim was unable to guess. He had heard many tales about the men up in the hills, many old wive's tales about magic deeper than the roots of mountains and older than the giant redwoods that grew into immortality. Kragg had remained silent up until then, resting comfortably in his deerskin and leather clothes. Now, called upon, he leaned forward in his chair and spoke silently to the wizards in a woodland stream of vioce.

"Now, what exactly is the complaint about?" he siad.

"The spirits say that the addition of the new imps and the rerouting on the signal planes have made the apparatus unlivable. They won't inhabit them until they are restored to 'proper working conditiions'."

"Does the apparatus work?" asked Kragg.

"As far as they'll tell US. I'm no biomation!"

"Ok." The mountian man stood and, ignoring the power spells placed around the parimeter of the pentagram, stepped into the figure and stood next to the apparatus. He snapped his fingers and instantly the faint outline of a C'Peyough appeared floating in the air beside him.

"I've never been able to call one that quick!" whispered Ra to Quackenbush, "Neither have you!"

Ignoring them, Kragg regarded the hazy, glowing shape hanging there in the air for a moment, nodded and began his diagnostic routine.

"You're on, aren't you?" he asked. The shape nodded.

"Are you happy?" The shape frowned and with it, Kragg. Some had said he could feel empathy with the ancients he walked among, some said he was one of them himself. He waited a respectful time and then began the ritual chant of the Diagnostic faith.

"Do you work at seventy-four?" The C'Peyough nodded.

"Do you work at seventy?" Again, strong agreement.

"Do you work at sixty seven?" A milder nod.

"Do you work at sixty?" A week wag of the head, nothing more came from the fading image.

"How about fifty-five?" The image died completely. Kragg snapped his fingers again and the 'Peyough reappeared. Kragg waived it down to sixty four again.

"Where does it hurt?" The shape, glowing stronger now, pointed to a small imp, slumbering contentedly at its position, unaware of the task it was neglecting. Kragg took careful aim with his forefinger and gave the tiny demon a miniature kick in the rear. It awoke with a squeal and glared at the mountain man. Kragg just laughed. He then examined the other apparatus. It, too, had

a slumbering Extractor operator, which was quickly reawoken. Kragg examined the other imps, prodding here and there to keep everyone on their hooves, and restarted the machines running. The imps occupied all of their positions at once.

"There," said the quiet, wilderness-worn man, "It should work fine for you now." He sat down again. The two wizards looked at one another, at a loss for what to say. The two apprentices stared at the man in awe. Nobody they had seen in their lifetimes had walked amidst so much power and remained untouched by it, without becoming ensnared in its charms. Yet Kragg had walked through the most powerful magic Arendi had wrought and it did not touch him. The pentagrams should've stopped him at the perimeter. The C'Peyoughs normally never answered a callback for many cycles of the wheel, sometimes never at all. Most of all, the man could remove, install, even handle at will any imp or demon without getting scorched or bending any pins! Xim didn't know what to say and commented appropriately.

"Well," said Quackenbush, "Let's nuke 'em!" and pushed the BOOT button. There was a sound of grinding metal as the dual machine wound into life. In contrast to the suicidal young fanatics of the most recent apparatus, these imps were veterans of many campaigns and did not relish the long, introspective process of self-testing that went along with start-up. It was several milliseconds before the last of them had finished chanting and reported for duty. As they did,

the C'Peyoughs returned to the physical plane and inhabited the structures once again.

Across the huge lab, other spirits were becoming awake. The Psychic Services unit climbed the steps of its apparatus and began calling the faithful to their knees. All of the 'Peyoughs in the hall chanted in response and resumed the ancient hierarchy.

"What's next?" whispered Xim.

"Usemoremem!" cried Ra's companion, m "Ish hopperdot bang-bangbang!"

"Right!" agreed Ra and cast the first rat into the couldron. The pit blazed with and unnatural glow and the P'Peyough cried out in anguish.

"Aaarrrgh! Seek Error! Gaggh! Disk Overflow!" it screamed in terror.

"Hold on!" cried Ra, "Just a few more proceses!" and he prepared to throw a few more rodent corpses into the remote front couldron.

"Can I do that?!" asked l'Ibb.

"Sure!" said Ra, "Here, have a rat."

The apprentice threw four more rats into the file fire and with each one a new explosion sounded in the depths below the floor. The room was humming harder and harder as the the system's load grew. All of the pentagrams were flooded with light, every 'Pe;yough was singing shrilly as it went about its eerie business.

The two wizards beamed at one another. This was the longest the system had remained alive in days and there was no reason for it to quit

now.

Tha-BUmp!

Wheeaarrrrrrddmmmmmm..... Something gave way and the system crashed, the blinking lights dimming, the prayer wheels turning slower and then stopping. A low sigh escaped one of the team, although Xim could not see who. Ra picked up a listing and examined the front cauldron for a minute. He didn't like the look of the ashes.

"See, there it is again Q," he said, "One of those little buggers gets miffed for some reason or another and won't talk to anybody!"

"Why?" asked the senior wizard naturally enough.

Kragg shook his head, "The apparatuses and imps are all in working order. I can hear none of the bad vibes."

"They won't tell me either!" cried Ra, "I wish I knew! We need somebody besides you that speaks their language!"

"I'll talk to someone in Pyrs Inyl," said the wizard.

"Well, Ben," said the sorcerer's apprentice, "Is she coming today?" He was walking down the hall with Ben Whocares, Baron de Inyl, who had come to visit and also to escort his latest find to her office.

"Cool your jets , kid," said Ben, "She's not your type. I'm not sure she's anyone's type."

"Whatdea mean, Ben?"

"Well, to start with, the bird's been studying one language or another most of her life, locked away in her little office at UCLA." The Baron shook his head. Xim imagined the poor woman slaving over ancient manuscripts and scrolls until she was a shrivelled little prune.

"Do they really work them that hard at UCLA?" he asked.

"Worse. But she loves it. Big school sports fan too, from what I understand," said Whocares, "Anyway, I don't see how she'll interest you: she's nearly four centuries old."

"Four centuries! How the hell...
,,

"And wait until you see her!"

Ben was right, thought Xim. Without fail the Baron came through on the promised delivery date. He was standing off to one side in the lab watching the wizards, Kragg and the new one, Zanne, argue with the system spirits. She was magnificent, he thought. The Baron had joked about that 'four centuries' business too much for it to be real. She didn't look a day over twenty-three ;yet there was the hint of deep experience behind her dark eyes. Quackenbush and Ra were having difficulties concentrating on their work, as a matter of fact. She was, concluded Xim, a thoroughly fascinating and captivating woman. How she had fallen for one of Whocares' lines was beyond him. !!!!!

The Final Journey

On the Beach

The Return of the King

Appendix

A'Chpi	H.P. (Hewlett Packard)
Arendi	R and D
Ballhog	Carl Balog
Ben Whocares	Don Whynott
Bl D'ingtu	Building Two
Bl D'ingwoan	Building One
Carys	John Caris
Chuang Lu	George Lewis
Charl	Charles Haynes
Cill Eakon Vally	Silicon Valley
C'Peyough	CPU
Dy	Dennis Yelle
Ensi Sea	NCC (National Computer Conference)
Gomper	Guy Laughterbach
Happy Happy	Jim Jolly
Hayl	Hal Sparks
Imps	ICs
Ken Crayon	Ken Crane
Kragg	Craig Johnson
L'Ibb	Jeff Libby
Pcdes Ign	PC design
Princess Tapethl Aout	???
Pyrs Inyl	Personnel
Pyrch A'sing	Purchasing
Ra	Robert Adams
Tom	Tom Poulter
Vibes	oil
W'di	Woody Bode
Wirr Rapper	Wire wrapper
Xim	Al Zimmerman
Zanne	Suzanne Jacobs