



Before Heaven

a story by Vincent Joseph Manzo

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Preface

This tale was first conceived in 2002, when I was 20 years old, though writing did not actually begin until late 2003. Now, in my 22nd year on this planet, this story has taken this form. Most of the content is based on my original writings that, most of which, appeared on my website as early as 2001.

This story was written in an allegorical fashion. The thematic elements in this story are not squarely limited to their context and should not be rushed through. It was my intention to slow down the pace of the reader.

The setting for this story takes place in some other planet "in a world like yours"; similar to life the way we know it now—not in the way that some people depict other worlds as being anarchical and chaotic. These people have electricity and modern devices.

This story might not be what you are expecting—let it speak for itself. It is my sincere hope that you will find this book challenging and exciting. For myself, after reading this book (and writing it), I can never look at what I do in the same way.

*~VJ Manzo
Spring 2004*

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I. At the Great Banquet

Somewhere else, in a world like yours, and in the main hall at the Great Banquet, men and woman have gathered to enjoy the company of one another. Fathers are sitting and talking with fathers, as mothers are laughing with mothers. Children can be seen playing as the political leaders share cheerful conversation with each other. It was one of the most noble of these gentlemen, Alexander, who called attention to me as I sat amongst some of the children telling stories.

“Demodokus,” he called as most of the citizens quieted their speaking, “won’t you, being wise and along in years, tell us a story of our past?” The halls resounded with applause and raised glasses as I waved my hand, acknowledging to Alexander and to the other citizens of our province of Aninon, that I would share with them a story of their past.

There was silence as I started to play my music softly—muttering, quietly to myself, a prayer to guide my words so that I might tell my story accurately. And I spoke:

ii. The Seven Tournaments

In the eighth year, a tournament was held in each of the seven provinces. A series of judged events in which the two contesting teams of musicians were to compete in three rounds to determine the reigning political powers in that province until the next tournament: a power of either team’s choosing.

It was during this competition that the Virtuosi had lost two of the first three tournaments to the Slyte in the provinces of Dilynia and Griffien, though they had gained victory over the Slyte in the third province of Naeliona. It was in this third tournament that Ardent, of the Virtuosi, was awarded the red ribbon of victory over Reave, of the Slyte. That ribbon, combined with the red ribbon the Virtuosi had won in the first round, resulted in a Virtuosi victory in the province of Naeliona.

In the third round, one soloist from each of the two teams must perform improvised music accompanied by an ensemble of neutral players from that province known as the Synod. The two players will alternate solos until the Synod has finished playing. A single judge, of the panel of five, chooses one of two pieces that the Synod has prepared. The players are judged according to his technique, musicality, and quality of presentation as well as use of modality, sensitivity, appropriateness and various aesthetic details.

The day after a tournament, the province traditionally holds a parade in honor of the winning team and a ceremony in which the winning team announces its choice as that provinces chief official. The provincial official who is chosen remains the reigning political authority over that province until the

next competition is held. It is at these tournaments that his fate as the provincial official is determined.

Ardent and his teammates had contacted their outlook, the conservatory in which each member of the Virtuosi had received their training. The outlook gave them oversight concerning which individual to select as the new provincial official. This consultation is the custom of both teams since each team competes so that the provincial officials selected are affiliated with one outlook. A majority of officials affiliated with either the Virtuosi or the Slyte will determine the quality of reigning powers over each of the seven provinces until the next set of tournaments is held.

The Virtuosi victory in Naeliona changed the reigning power from one ruler appointed by the Slyte outlook to one ruler appointed by the Virtuosi outlook. Having lost the first two competitions, the Virtuosi must win competitions in Southern Dilynia and Aninon where there are currently Virtuosi appointed officials, and Cronlia and Noriad where there are currently Slyte appointed officials.

It was during the parade following the tournament in Naeliona that Adam, the Virtuosi apprentice, separated from his group for a bit. During this time, Reave had instructed Bane, of the Slyte, to seize Adam. As Adam was walking through the crowd, Bane followed quickly behind him. Recognizing Bane and noticing that he was following him, Adam began to walk faster. Looking to his left and right, he noticed other members of the Slyte approaching him. Adam began to run through the crowd creating a mild disturbance. Just as he broke through the crowd into a clearing, Reave stood behind him, and so it was that as Adam turned around he saw nothing until Reave's outstretched arm plunged a knife into his chest.

When Pulse, a member of the Virtuosi, broke through the crowd that had gathered around Adam's body, he knelt beside him and wept bitterly. Later, Pulse gave the news of Adam's death to Ardent as he

was standing on the balcony of the Official's palace discussing strategies with the Virtuosi coach, Fermat. Ardent's countenance fell as all at once he felt sorrow and anger for the loss of Adam. Before Pulse could delve into any detail of Adam's death, Fermat sent a young messenger to rally the rest of the team. Ardent turned his face from Pulse before asking, "Reave?" "Yes, we think so." Pulse answered.

iii. The Apprentice

The next day, a small memorial service was held for the members of Virtuosi and the relatives of Adam since he had been born in Naeliona. Team members consoled the weeping family members as Stealth began to play his clarinet. His slow and mistakably mournful song brought hope to those who wept the loss of Adam.

It was after the service had concluded that Fermat was approached by a young man. "Excuse me, master," he said. "Might I have a moment to speak with you?"

Fermat, recognizing the sorrow in this young man, who had most likely been related to Adam somehow, smiled. As they began to walk, Fermat asked the young man what was on his mind. "My name is Nova," he said. "Adam was my older brother. I have been a student of the Naelionan outlook for many years, and though it is not customary for a team to take on an apprentice without the consent of the outlook council, especially for one who has not yet finished his studies at the outlook, I urge you to consider my services as my brother's replacement. I understand the risks involved in these tournaments, though I do not fully understand the tournaments in the way that my brother did. And so I ask: tomorrow, when you speak to the council, remember my request."

Moved, Fermat responded: "My dear boy, your brother was an honorable young man, and as I can tell from your words: you are also. Your parents have been blessed to be the ones to have raised such fine young men." "They are gone, my lord", Nova quickly interjected. "They passed through when Adam and I were young boys. Though it had been their desire that

we be trained to serve. These people around me are but distant relatives and neighbors of my parents. I have no one else and nothing else, yet if you deny me this servitude, I will return to my outlook and continue my studies."

Fermat paused for a moment, carefully staring into Nova's eyes. Then once again, Fermat responded, this time with a mild edge: "My dear boy, your words do tear at my heart, yet, you show more zeal than sorrow. Yes, Nova, I can tell now that your words only hint at the fire that is in your heart. I can see in your eyes that your mind has already been made. This thought makes my skin crawl: that what you've shown in this plea, will follow you until you are reunited with your brother." Fermat paused for a moment.

"Tomorrow, when I speak to the council, I will make your request known, and I will do all that I can to make certain that your request is granted. Now quickly resolve any outstanding matters you wish to complete." Handing Nova a piece of paper with an address on it, Fermat continued: "Tomorrow night, we shall leave for Southern Dilynia." It was with a handshake that this pact was sealed and their conversation ended.

The next morning, Fermat appeared before the outlook council. It was at these meetings that Fermat presented his strategies for the next tournament, and reviewed with the council, in detail, the events of the previous tournament. It was after this that Fermat explained his recommendation for Adam's replacement to a panel that was not nearly as enthused.

"I understand that this boy is a relative," one of the council members said, "but there is a particular protocol that we have to follow. It is an orderly system that we have followed for generations." "I understand that," Fermat replied. "But the preliminary responsibilities of the apprentice position have already been fulfilled. All of the equipment is working. All of our traveling plans and accommodations have been

made. Almost everything has been taken care of already. We are only in need, now, of a person to handle the small things." "This boy hasn't even completed his training," another council member added as another joined in: "There is a long list of people who are waiting to get this opportunity—an opportunity that you are willing to hand over to this untrained boy?!"

Now, Fermat was a well-known man. His team loved him, the students at the outlook looked up to him, and the people in each of the seven provinces respected him and all that he had done. Knowing this, Fermat sometimes used his rapport with the people as leverage. "Council members," Fermat stated loudly, "As you already know, I have announced my recession from these tournaments after this competition is completed. I have done much reflecting as of late. As I see it, I have requested very little of this council in my career, so I ask you to hear what I have to say: I know what I saw in that young man's eyes, and one day after we have crossed through, he will have become a man and will stand where I am standing now. Even now, the members of my team are introducing themselves to him—he is already beginning to complete his training. After I leave here, I will go back to him and my team, and, among other things, I will say one of two things. Either I will tell them that Nova is our team's new apprentice, or I will say that he is not. If that is the case, then I swear to you and all of those who have gone before me, I will call them all together: 'Come in everyone; let me tell you the story of the once great Fermat and his faithful servitude to the Great Council of the Virtuosi, so that you may do what you do because it is burns inside of you and not for the praises of others. Let me give you the synopsis: you give yourself to your calling," he continued. "You find your place within the system. You learn to make the best choices when the worst ones are easiest. You train others to take your place—making little replicas

of yourself. You go the extra distance. You help out. You serve. You set an example. You improve the overall way of life. You live by your creed. You give of yourself. You do things greater than anyone has ever done them before...or, possibly, ever will. You don't sell others out, and when it is all over, you will be regarded by people like all of the others that have left them. People like our Great Council. They will disown your sacrifice. They will adopt your replicas as their own. They will write your deeds off as mere acts of kindness. They will forget what has been done for them through you, and they will remember your shortcomings. They will try to stain every pleasant memory of you doing what you were made to do. They will shadow your good with worldliness. They will place you with the others that have hurt them. They will reevaluate your dreams and passion. They will disown you."

The council sat in silence. Then Fermat concluded: "And so I ask you: how do you think the team, the students and the people will respond to what I have to say?" After a few moments, they began to face each other and discuss some type of compromise. A somewhat annoyed Fermat stood waiting for their decision. Then one of them spoke: "Upon further review, the council acknowledges that since most of the legwork of the apprentice position has already been completed, we see no harm in the installment of this young man as your apprentice. Fermat thanked the council and left the room.

IV. Tournament in Southern Dilynia

When the night of the tournament in Southern Dilynia had arrived, Nova sat anxiously on the Virtuosi sidelines. Customarily, the stage is to be set with both team's sidelines facing a room where a panel of five judges sit. Between the two sidelines is a throne, which also faces the judges, that is reserved for the current reigning official of that province. Public seats are made available behind the sidelines looking down toward the stage area.

Nova had spent much of the afternoon setting up chairs and related equipment on the stage in front of the Virtuosi sidelines, according to a diagram that Fermat had given him earlier. The Slyte apprentice had also dressed the stage for the Slyte team.

Moments before Nova and the Virtuosi took the stage, they had gathered in a room behind the stage. Nova had been so overrun with nerves that he did not hear a single word being spoken amongst the team before they gallantly walked out of the room and onto the sidelines.

Nova spent much of the next few minutes sitting still, wondering what was to happen, for he had only heard stories and, since he had not yet fully completed his training, was not fully informed. Moments later, a neutral trumpeter played a fanfare to signal the start of the tournament. The crowd cheered as selected members of both teams moved toward their side of the stage; fine tuning their instruments in what was to be the first of three rounds.

"Ladies and gentlemen," an announcer's voice spoke through the massive speakers recessed in the ceiling. "For the first round, a prepared selection will be performed by a member of each team. Two judges have reviewed each selection.

Since the last official appointed was chosen by the Virtuosi, they may choose which team performs first". It was then that Fermat signaled to the judges that the Virtuosi would perform first by raising his right hand over his team.

The stages cleared until just two individuals remained on each side. Spire had already discussed with Fermat that he would be performing a prepared piano piece in the first round. Silence swept through the arena before Spire began to play. The arena was so quiet, that you could hear the breathe Spire took just before his first note.

Softly but quickly came Spire's music; a gliding song without words passing through highs and lows of the piano. The crowd became enchanted. The piece seemed to have become Spire's expression. Then all at once, striking heavy tones brought contrast to the people's expectations, and when a few more moments had passed, the music returned the people to where they had been before the music began—then a few breaths of silence—followed by applause.

It soon came time for a member of the Slyte to perform. Their coach, Prog, had already made arrangements with Airs to perform, and so he sat on the stage fine tuning his harp. During this time, the judges remained concealed in their room reviewing Spire's performance and sharing comments. A moment later: silence, followed by Airs' harp playing—a dreamy prayer of beauty and ease.

While he was still playing, Nova leaned to Spry, Spire's sister, who was sitting next to him with her guitar in her hands. "How can the judges compare two instruments that are so different?" he asked. "Shh," she whispered back, "they know what they're looking for—that's why they're judges." "What do they do?" Nova whispered back.

She answered, "Two judges select the variables for each round, one judge for one team and one judge for another team per round. The variables

are things like how to play the music. For instance, in this first round, a judge may very well have told Spire to perform his piece with a certain emotion like 'rage' or 'fear'. Get it? After a judge has made a selection for a given team, he may no longer make any selections, but continues judging with the other four. This pattern continues until each of the five judges has selected variables for each event: two for the first round, two for the second round, and one for the third round. The judges are different in each province.

The round that a judge adjudicates is determined by their time served as a judge in that province. A judge serving the least amount of time will adjudicate the first round, while the judge who has been around the longest will most likely adjudicate the third round. A judge may change any variable in a given round such as number of players unless it is contested by three of the four of the remaining judges. The other judge selecting variables for that round must also be in agreement with the change in variables. Obviously, no changes can be made once the round has begun.

At the end of a round, the points are tallied by the judges, and a red ribbon is awarded to the winning team for that round. The first team to get two red ribbons wins that tournament. If a tie takes place, a third round is added. There are no draws for the third round. If necessary, the judges may select an additional piece to be played.

By now, Airs was coming to the end of his piece. Nova commented, "That sure is a beautiful work he's playing," Spry replied, "He could have been singing 'I Love You' in every known language and it would still be ugly." Nova asked, "Why is that? Because you don't like him?" "Shh," she said back, "you'll see in time. The judges are about to award a ribbon."

The arena was silent as the two judges walked out from their booth carrying a red ribbon on a pillow.

They stood in the center of the stage and bowed. Just then, they both turned toward the Virtuosi team indicating that the red ribbon was awarded to them. The crowd cheered and the two judges returned to the booth.

The announcer's voice filled the air once again: "For the second round, each team must select an ensemble from the members of their team to perform in an improvisatory event. Any player may solo, and any number of players may alternate taking solos, duets and so on. A judge has randomly selected the musical literature to be played from list that each team has submitted. Teams are judged according to the standard criteria of the previous round. Soloists are judged according to the same criteria as well as use of modal inflections, sensitivity, appropriateness and various aesthetic details. Since the Virtuosi team won the last round, they may choose to perform first or second."

And so it was that the Virtuosi gathered themselves on the stage, each one with their instrument. The crowd applauded and then: silence. Then the sounds of nylon strings plucked by Spry in unison with Stealth's flute: a few quick notes to state their motive. Then there were more, followed by the entrance of Donar's bass ostinato. Pulse began to accent Donar's figure on the timpani: loud, thunderous hits that echoed in the hall so that the people in the stands put their hands on their vibrating chests. The music was becoming powerful and the crowd became excited.

And it was that as Donar changed his musical figure, Bay entered the mix: singing softly and playing the piano. His voice grew until it was balanced with the ensemble. A freely sung sort of melody—it was the first solo that the judges would have to score. Deep and fast words sung in a minor mode. The text spoke of a stale love—a mournful charge played to the dry

people of Southern Dilynia. Those who listened were silent.

Suddenly, Ardent's violin entered hocketing with Bay's voice. Moments later, Ardent's violin expressed what Bay's voice could not, and his singing faded away. Reave and the other Slyte looked on at the Virtuosi in scorn as the crowd looked on in awe. This was the second solo that the judges would score. Ardent's notes were fast and percussive and they caused the rest of the ensemble to explore different tonal centers with him as he soloed. This especially disturbed the Slyte since Prog, the head coach of the Slyte, had been recently emphasizing the importance of anticipating each other's playing—a feature that only comes across naturally when an ensemble really learns to live with and know each other. The Virtuosi playing in this instance was clearly a team improvisation.

And so it came that the Virtuosi finished their piece and the Slyte took the stage. The room swept with silence as Acrid and Airs stepped forward; Acrid with his trumpet and Airs with his cello. The two nodded at each other to set the tempo before beginning a fast, minor-key duet. After a few moments, Airs began an arpeggiated figure as Acrid began to solo. While he was soloing, the other members of the ensemble poised themselves for their entrance and when Acrid signaled to them that he was finishing, they entered the mix imitating figures that Airs had been playing. Now, Airs was soloing. His solo was well-executed and very musical. Since microphones were used in Southern Dilynia, there were few, if any, balance issues that arose between the cello and the ensemble, even when the cello stayed in its low register. This allowed each member to be more expressive without the concern of being overpowered by a loud ensemble. Airs' solo was extraordinary. Then suddenly, the ensemble all dropped out from playing; all of them except for Draco on drum set and Odium on piano who changed the progression altogether. Once a

new tonal direction had been established, Blare lifted her voice above the mix with a haunting vocal solo. This would be the third solo that the judges would score. The words she used were less important than what she was expressing. The verses she used were more like short phrases meant to evoke a strange marriage of visual images and emotion. A few verses later, as Blare continued to sing, Rift and Bane reentered on bass guitar and electric guitar causing a gradual crescendo.

When the Slyte finished their piece, another pair of judges came out of their booth with ribbons to award. This time, the red ribbon was awarded to the Slyte. The crowd cheered once again because they knew that a third round was to be played in order to break the tie.

Nova looked on at the very tired Virtuosi and wondered who would play for the last round. Fermat walked over toward Spry. "Will you?" he asked her. Spry stood up and grabbed her guitar. On the other side of the stage, Reave was tuning up his violin for the final round.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it is time for the final round," said the announcer. "In the case that a third round must be played, each team chooses one soloist to perform in an impromptu manner over changes played by a neutral Synod that consists of provincial musicians using music written by a provincial composer. Soloists are scored by a single judge who has selected the music and will score each soloist based on the previous round's criteria."

And so it was that the ensemble began playing a soft slow piece. Spry quickly jumped in along with them to begin a solo. Reave was now forced to wait until she was done before he could begin soloing or else he would be penalized. The ensemble was not very loud. This served to Spry's advantage since her instrument lacked a vast dynamic range.

Shortly after Spry began, she gave room for Reave to solo. He slowly crept from note to note, slurring around the fingerboard until he moved his way into a soft tremolo in the high register of his instrument. Spry knew that she needed to top his solo, so she listened for any motive that she could hear being played by the ensemble. When the opportunity arose for her to solo, she began to play a growing scalar passage and then attacked the strings with a strum. What she did not account for was the broken string that resulted from her strum. It caused her to stumble through the next few notes until she found her way to a part of the neck that allowed her to continue her idea without the use of that string. Later, when Reave began his second solo, Spry became saddened because she knew that her score was at a disadvantage. "That almost never happens," she said to herself, as the members of the Virtuosi whispered to each other the same thing.

When the third judge came out to award the ribbon, Spry hung her head and Reave smiled as the Slyte was awarded their second red ribbon: the victory in this tournament. This left the competition standings at the Slyte with three wins and the Virtuosi with one win.

While they were on the bench at the tournament, Fermat had instructed them to go home and rest up for a long rehearsal the next day at one of the local outlooks. Each team member did as Fermat had instructed them. That night, each member of the Virtuosi went back to the hotel where they were staying.

V. The Rehearsal

The next morning, Fermat called Nova's room and gave him directions to where the team would be having their rehearsal. He asked Nova not to show up until later in the evening. Nova spent a lot of that day in his hotel room brushing up on his keyboard skills on a small practice instrument that he traveled with. He also spent time writing down his experiences thus far. In the late afternoon, he recorded this entry into his journal:

These last few days have been extraordinary. There is a lot that I can learn from these people, so I will try my best to keep quiet and observe everything. So far, everyone has been inclined to entertain my questions.

My nights have also been of interest. I have been having vivid dreams lately. Last night, I dreamt that I was in my childhood house. I do not actually remember my old house nor do I remember being that young and surrounded by my family, but there I was, the age I am now, in the midst of them.

I was dressed in really nice clothes and everyone else in my house was busy getting ready for whatever event it was that I was dressed for. I stood around waiting for everyone else to get ready to go. After a while of waiting, I individually approached the people in my house and told them to hurry up or else we would be late. I continued waiting as they all kept getting ready, no more frantically.

When everyone was finally ready, my father told me that I needed to clean up my bedroom. I told him that I had already cleaned it earlier, but he replied that my brother had been in my room and that it had since become a mess. I couldn't believe what I was hearing as my family now impatiently turned to me. A moment later, I woke up.

Two nights ago, I dreamt that I entered a room through a door with three locks. The room was divided into three sections and it extended farther than my eyes could determine. On the far left, the room was very bright with lights; on the far right, the room was dark and objects could not be seen in it. In the middle of the room, where I stood, the floor and the air were neither predominantly dark nor light. I could barely see things in front of me as I began to walk down this middle section of the room. A few moments later, I saw two men sitting in a car. The men were obviously drunk and were still drinking. I overheard the two men conversing. They were laughing and having a good time. Just then, the man in the passenger's seat reached for the car radio and turned it on. "What are you doing?" the man in the driver's seat asked. "You know I don't listen to anything other than what is sacred." Then I awoke from that dream.

What does this mean? I don't know what's been happening lately—and by lately, I mean since a short time before my brother died. I have noticed this: whenever I walk under a streetlight, it burns out. No matter where I am or what the time: every now and again, I notice that this happens. What does that have to do with anything? I just don't know why, lately, I notice the things that I do.

That night, Nova set out to walk from his hotel to the place where the team was rehearsing. On the way, Nova passed by a small establishment that caught his attention. It was a dimly lit sort of club with no more than two-hundred people in it. The people were attentively listening to the music of the group on the stage. A middle-aged man playing a saxophone stood at the front of the small stage. An older gentleman on the drums smiled contently as he played along. The keyboard player was a younger man than the saxophonist. Nova could tell from looking at the keyboardist that he was handicapped in some way. The bassist was seated on a stool. On the floor next to him, there sat a medium-sized dog which the man obviously used as a guide.

Nova stood in the doorway of the club observing the room. The music was heavy, but the atmosphere in the room was uplifting. Every eye in the room was on the band, and every face in the room wore a smile. The band finished a tune and the people cheered with a sound that seemed to be three times the crowd's size. The front man smiled and thanked the audience as he adjusted his mouthpiece. Nova spotted people at the tables, within his eyesight, swapping recordings of this band: homemade and live recordings. Noticing the time, Nova stepped out of the doorway and walked a few more blocks until he reached the outlook where the team was rehearsing.

When Nova walked in, everyone was seated except for Ardent and Stealth who were standing. "Of course it's not her fault," Stealth said emphatically. "But now we're down by a lot, with only three tournaments left, because of a stupid mechanical error. In a situation like the third round, we can't afford these little mistakes. Spry, you know I love you like a sister."

Everyone was silent, and Fermat stood up from his chair on the other side of the room near the door that Nova had just walked through. "Stealth, no one

doubts your sincerity. We understand that it's all for the good of the team. Now, Ardent is our captain, but I am the coach, and it was my decision to have Spry play.

It costs me a lot to make my decisions, but they are my decisions. I don't think any of you would disagree. When you all were younger and your friends were outside playing or going to parties, and you stayed home playing your instrument and studying, it cost you something. When you stayed up late and woke up early so you could get a head start on your daily practicing, it cost you something. It costs me something to have Spry on this team, but what she brings to this team outweighs the cost in my opinion."

"Your right, Fermat. It's just that..." "Stealth," Fermat interjected, "it also costs me something to have you on this team". They both smiled and the rest of the team laughed quietly. "Ardent, was there something else you wanted to address?" Fermat asked.

"I just wanted to stress the importance of our own personal practice time in addition to our team practice time. For people who live like we do, you're either evolving or becoming extinct. If you don't believe me, then, once we're done with these tournaments, stop practicing for a while and see how you play then. On the other hand, practice twice as much and you'll see the difference. You never feel like you learn it all because you can't. There's never a time when any one of us should feel like we've reached a plateau. Expression has never been a problem for us, but we need to find the balance between our expressive side and our technical side.

Now, we've done well so far as a team with our prepared pieces in the first round, but for the second round, and especially for the third round, we need to be ready for anything. If the final judge in the third round throws a jazz tune at us, we need to transform in order to play that piece right; we can't just approach it from our most familiar style. This might sound

hypocritical, but it really isn't: one of our strengths in this living comes from our ability to imitate all of the styles out there—and imitate them well."

Taking a deep breath, Ardent put on his most serious face: "Musicians are common", he said confidently. "They're everywhere—chosen ones are not. We've got to learn to sharpen our skills, speak from our experiences, and learn from our mistakes. It's what we need to do in order to win the next tournament in Cronlia and the two after that. Questions?"

The mood in the room had suddenly grown very intense and the last part of Ardent's speech made Nova wonder if the team could pull off three consecutive tournament victories. The tension in the room was especially thick, since most of the team shared the same line of thought as Nova. The room was very silent.

A moment later Pulse stood up and responded to Ardent's inquiry: "Ardent, you were that kid in school that never went to any of the parties, but always got really mad if you weren't invited to one, right?" A moment later, everyone burst into laughter including Ardent, and immediately the tension in the air began to dissipate. "It was a good speech man. It really was," Pulse commented as the laughter slowly faded down. "I just want us to be good at answering our frequently asked questions," Ardent replied, "so that we sound intelligent. This may be more difficult for some than others." Everyone laughed again. "Alright, folks," Fermat said, "let's call it 'quits' for tonight." Then, everyone stood up and some of the people began playing each other's different instruments, while others simply packed up their gear.

As Stealth was leaving the rehearsal, he noticed a cellist playing across the street. As he walked over, he recognized the cellist and was suddenly surrounded by members of the Slyte with instruments in hand. Stealth doubled over in pain on the sidewalk

and covered his ears. He began choking and gasped helplessly for air. Suddenly, a drumstick flew through the air breaking a car window behind the Slyte. Pulse and Spire ran to where Stealth was, drumming on the ground and on cars and on the walls as they approached their friend. Seeing them coming, the Slyte left Stealth alone. Nova came running over a moment later. "What was that?" he asked. "I saw you both running from the doorway."

"You must never casually listen to what they play," Pulse said as he and Spire lifted Stealth to his feet. "Now, you're starting to become aware of how powerful their music is. Their music is like poison to us, and so is ours to them." "I don't understand?" Nova said. "Well," Spire continued, "you notice it when music makes you happy right?" Nova stared blankly; puzzled by Spire's analogy. "Come on, let's have a talk." Spire said. Then the three of them helped Stealth dust himself off and began walking down the street.

Nova, Spire, Pulse, and Stealth entered a nearby diner and sat down. While they waited for the food to come out, Stealth began to explain who the Slyte are. "They are those who have missed the point in life; having developed the gifts they have been given, they've squandered them—for whatever reason. For some of them, it was for money and acclaim, but for most, like Reave, because it takes them a step closer to power. It drives them mad to see us; to see how we use what we have been given; to see us with so much power though we remain under authority. They are simply a perversion" he said. "And so is their music." Just then, some local musicians walked into the diner and walked past them to a table in the back that was big enough to accommodate the crowd of young girls that walked in with them.

"So what about those guys," Nova asked, "Do you think their music has a good meaning?" "As opposed to what", Spire asked, "the kids you see on

the beach singing their Major-key songs?" "This is the same conversation I end up having all the time", Stealth noted. "Instead of only protecting people from the dangers of life, I wish they'd also teach people to judge for themselves." "Well," Spire continued, "positive and negative meanings aside: the common ground the music shares is the elements of music itself: the composition; the actual construction and architecture of the notes. You hear all of these songs on the radio about individuality and anti-conformity and anti-establishment, yet the music itself is so traditional and typical—it's just the opposite." "So what are you saying", Nova asked. Spire answered, "I'm saying that the lyrics, or the story, or the lack of a programmed story are most commonly reflective of the music first, and the music speaks for itself." "Well, what determines what the music says" asked Nova. "Ah ha," Spire enthusiastically interjected, "now you're asking the right questions: is it the composer? The performer? The listener? They have a lot to do with it, but it probably has more to do with what has been spoken through the composer and the performer than the individuals themselves." Nova responded, "So a composer who has good morals..." "No," Spire quickly interrupted, "you're not listening. Throughout time, some of the most honorable men have done some horrible things. Do those things nullify their good work? Suppose that you listen to a piece of music and are moved to tears. Suppose you also feel a sense of purpose in living that you've never been aware of. Suppose it changes the way you view your life.

Suppose you find out, later, that the man who wrote the music was suicidal and that the performers were contracted musicians who took the money that they were paid and used it to support their bad habits. What then? Does it change your experience? Did it make your tears any less real?" Just then, the waitress brought them all glasses of water and set them on the table. "So, it's the listener who has to explain it," Nova

said. "Explain it?" replied Spire. "If we could put art into words, we wouldn't need art. The art expresses the things that can't be put into any language. Do you understand? The listener interprets it for himself. Everything else is a guideline for the interpreter within the context of life as he knows it. You're going to have to accept that there's a lot of gray area."

Later that night, into the early morning, Spire and Nova walked to the hotel. "So do you ever listen to the type of music that those guys in the restaurant probably play?" Nova asked. "I gauge it all for myself. You know: what's best for me. If I can't handle it, then I don't care who recommended it to me. Most often, I find that I connect with few certain composers' music, so I lean more toward that, but I still listen to popular music sometimes. I guess, to people who only know that music, it's the greatest thing ever, but I demand a lot of from the music I listen to.

Those tunes are not all worthless like some people say. Sometimes, I'll hear one of those songs, and I'll start to cry." "Why does it make you cry?" Nova asked. "Because, Nova", he said. "It reminds me that I still have areas of my life that need to be cried for." By this time, the two had reached the hotel.

"Do you ever compose?" Spire asked and then continued: "Popular music or anything? Most pop people—and of course, you understand, when I say pop, I mean styles other than art music—most of them have a really good idea and they just repeat the life out of it. When I play out with my own band when I'm not on the road with the team, I sometimes borrow their good ideas and use them in my own way; not in a sampled, 'club music' sort of way, but I'll elongate phrases, change the rhythms, and sometimes, in a live setting, I might stick their chorus right in the middle of my song if it's appropriate. Why not right? Some people would disagree, but there are a lot of people who write an awesome 16 bars of music surrounded by

repeat signs and fluff. If those people are my brothers, then why can't I include their song with mine?"

That night, Nova had a dream. In his dream, a man was showing him houses that were for sale. He took him to see all of the houses that were recently put on the market. They came upon one home that still had a family living in it, though; they were not in the house at the time of their visit. Nova and the man made small-talk as they went about each room in the house. "Where do you live?" Nova asked the man in order to keep up the polite conversation. "Oh," the man replied. "I am currently neither here nor there, but if you're looking to buy I'm looking to sell." Then the man smiled a strange and eerie smile and began to recite a small verse of poetry: "*Houses and all my possessions are vast, but if you want a future, it'll cost you...*" Suddenly, the man's phone rang which he quickly answered: "Hello? Yes...yes...definitely...then we have a deal? Done!" Then the man put the phone back onto his belt. "Sorry about that", he said. "Come on; let me show you a room upstairs".

The two of them walked upstairs into the bathroom. Much to Nova's amazement, there was a bathtub filled with bubbles. In fact, the whole room was filled with giant bubbles. As Nova stood there looking at this site, he began to notice images in the reflection of the bubbles. One image was of a huge sea of people at an outdoor concert. As he looked again, Nova saw another image was of a very rich man lighting a cigar with a stack of flaming money. Nova turned to the man showing him the house, but he was no longer around. Nova looked a third time and saw his own reflection. He became startled and then awoke.

vi. Tournament in Cronlia

The next day, the Virtuosi team drove to the Province of Cronlia. It was not a very long drive. Some of the members who lived in this province had traveled back the night before and slept at their homes with their families. Pulse and Nova traveled with Fermat.

When the three of them were close to where the tournament was to be held that night, they saw signs for a diner and decided to stop in. While they were turning in, Pulse said, "Hey, you know the 'clicky' sound that happens when you put the signal light on? Where does that sound come from? I don't see a speaker for it anywhere. What makes that 'clicky' sound?" Fermat and Nova laughed only lightly because they knew that Pulse's question was half-serious.

When they walked into the small diner, Pulse noticed the owner's dog in the corner behind the register and excitedly approached it, leaving Nova and Fermat alone to sit at the counter. As they sat there, they noticed some rock stars on the television talking about their music and showing off awards they had recently received. The program was also showing clips of the band performing.

"Stardom is relative," Fermat said to Nova. "Is talent for the sake of having talent? That's the dangerous side of music. Is music simply for entertainment?" Pointing to the television, he said, "For him and his crowd it is. But truthfully, it is more than that. Has it moved you closer to heaven? Has it drawn you out of the pit? Have you moved people out of the pit? This is the expression, Nova. The better you know the language, the more precisely you can speak to those emotions. Look at that guy. He has awards

presented to him by people who get money from folks who've had their spirit played on, not played to. What good are awards from those people? Anyone can play sad music to make people stay sad. But who will play music to free people in chains? I pity that 'young rock icon'. I pity him for only playing the music that people move to, and not the music that moves people.

Just then, Pulse interjected loudly from a distance and behind the counter where he was still playing with the dog: "I know why people have dogs for pets. It's symbolic. Dogs are like that one member of the family that no one can really communicate with. 'Do you want to go outside?' we ask them, but we don't really have any idea what they want." Nova looked at Fermat and smiled at the thought that a conversation as deep as the one he was sharing with Fermat could be interrupted with such trivial words. Soon the waitress came over and took their orders. Pulse continued playing with the dog behind the counter.

"Nova, the pieces we choose for use in our ceremony: they are like the paper we use for writing letters. Some paper was put together quickly and it didn't cost a lot. Some paper is of the finest quality and took a lot of time to create. Some paper also took a lot of time to create and may have cost a lot, but it may not be ideal for writing on." Nova responded, "So how do you choose?" "Fermat lightly laughed, "good question. You know it's never the same twice? One of our strengths comes from our ability to determine what's right for that crowd at the time.

One time, I was having a hard time gauging the crowd's response in a particular round. I just wasn't sure—not of the music, but of the character with which to play. You have to listen for it; listen so you can win the crowd. Make them think with you, let them laugh with you, cry with you. Feel with them, and then risk it all by doing what you were made to do."

Looking over, Pulse was still playing with the restaurant owner's dog. He held up the dog's food bowl and asked "Hey, at what point in time did we say to ourselves: 'Sure, dogs will like the taste of this?'"

Nova, ignoring Pulse, continued with his conversation and asked Fermat "Do you always feel like doing what you were made to do?" Fermat answered, "Me? No, sometimes I don't feel like it. A lot of times I wallow and just feel down." Fermat paused for a moment and then continued, "But this is what I was made to do, so I put it on like coat while I do what I must do." Fermat smiled, "And later, if I want to, I can always go back to feeling down".

Pointing to the television, Nova asked, "And so what becomes of these guys?" "Well," Fermat answered, "they move on. Somewhere along the line, they may try to mature; to evolve their music. Then they'll have to worry about things like whether their 'loyal' fans will accept their new face. The fans may, if the artist has absorbed his influences in such a way so that it doesn't consume him, but unfortunately most of them can't make the crossover. How does anyone reinvent himself? Why would anyone want to? Truthfully, that's my biggest complaint with that music: it relies on a gimmick to compensate for mediocre music. Even when it's good music: it still gets cornered into a gimmick. That idea is everywhere. I don't care if a certain band doesn't understand music theory, as long as they're not settling for something other than their best at that time. Years down the line, of course they're going to look back at their first few albums and wonder what they were thinking, but who cares? A man has to live with his choices. I just wish some of these people would choose honor instead of shameless gimmicks." Nova laughed as Fermat continued. "I'm sorry, but guys my age who still sing about life and love like they're teenagers is pathetic and sad, and I don't care how well you play. You expect that stuff

from little kids, not middle-aged dads and moms with homes in the suburbs.

All the artist needs is a generation—give or take a little time." "I don't understand," Nova said. "In this culture," Fermat continued, "the music, the message, all of the tricks: they all stay the same. The faces change, and the names change. The older stars realize that they weren't as serious as they thought they were; they see that what they saw as 'truth' or 'the cause' was just another form of entertainment, and a lot of them pursue other things. Of course, people will be heralding that 'so and so' is a groundbreaking new act, but let's be honest: in that genre, the evolutionary changes are so subtle. After you've been alive for a while, you'll see the same trends coming back over and over again. This is why it's not genius to make 'hits' like they do. Isn't that the point of that music: to give it a little flare, but yet make it very accessible? They use the same progressions to evoke the same emotional response. They know what audience their music is geared toward, but, then again, so do we.

Nova, if you take the sincerity out of an act, *you* lose something as well—not just the music. You give up a part of yourself that begs you not to settle, and music becomes a formula." "So it should sound completely different." Nova stated. "Look Nova, if you look at the music of the great composers, you'll see huge parts of them that reek of the composers that came before them. Does that mean they stole it or ripped it off? It's only natural that what you do will have some elements in it that sound like the music that has gone before you, but it should have a little 'Nova-twist' to it. Do you understand? It has to become yours before it can become anyone else's. I think this is a lot for you right now, but trust me: it'll make sense down the line. For now, let's just eat."

By nightfall, the team had gathered at the arena. This arena was most peculiar. In order to get

inside, one had to travel down a tunnel into an underground lot. From there, you walked a long distance under the ground until you entered a huge cavern. The wall directly across from the entrance you used to get in, was not really a wall at all, but a huge waterfall which flowed from the river above the cavern. The stage and stands were set up in the usual manner with the backs of the people in the stands facing the waterfall.

It came that Spry was challenged in the first round by Odium. The judges requested that she evoke a certain emotion in her music: 'longing' in her piece. This would prove most difficult for her since her piece was a dance movement. She would need to score higher than Odium, who had performed and illustrated 'bliss' before her.

And so it was that she focused her train of thought and, for the short period of time when she performed her piece, Spry became the spirit of longing incarnate. Though the piece stayed the same, she changed to accommodate what was appropriate for that performance and the change was enough to convince the judges, thus awarding that round to the Virtuosi.

In the second round, a quiet pluck of a viola string hushed the audience, as did the nearly bare stage of the Slyte which consisted of only three participants. Once again, Reave plucked a single string on his viola to give Blare a pitch. A moment later, Blare began a freely chanted line. Her voice resonated through the cavernous venue. As she continued to sing, Blare turned to look at the Provincial Official of Cronlia who was seated between both teams. The Official knew Blare since it was the Slyte who's victory in Cronlia during the last competition had resulted in his appointment. Moments later, Blare changed from singing words to syllables as Reave entered. When she stopped singing, Rift entered with his cello which served to accompany Reave as he began to solo.

After Reave and Rift had finished their solos, the Virtuosi took the stage. They, too, had chosen a smaller ensemble for this round, as a quiet and dissonant piano solo grabbed the crowd's attention. Soon Ardent entered playing the cello, a slow and melodic variation of the ideas Spire had just played on the piano. As Spire continued to accompany Ardent, he remained sensitive to the ideas which Ardent was now forming. Moments later, Ardent began to play along with Spire's accompaniment as Stealth entered with the clarinet. As he played, Blare was standing behind the official and both she and the official turned their heads slowly toward Stealth in disgust. Stealth, noticing the antagonizing look of Blare and the official, stared boldly into their eyes, and soon both Blare and the official began to bleed from their noses.

And when both teams were finished playing and the crowd was finished, the judges presented the ribbon to the Virtuosi which gave them two rounds and, thus, the tournament in Cronlia. The next day, a ceremony would be held to appoint the next provincial official selected by the Virtuosi outlook, as was the custom.

That night, Nova had another dream. He dreamt that he was back at the service that was held when his brother had passed. As the music played, and Adam lay in his casket, Nova saw a man walk in through the back door. He was very tall and was wearing shadows over himself so that you could only discern his silhouette. Nova was afraid of the man as he approached the front row where Nova was seated, yet he was intrigued by the man's presence. Why had no one seen this man come in? Why had he come here?

The man walked to Nova and spoke in a language that no one could interpret, yet Nova understood the mysterious sounds that the man made. He knew that it was for this reason that his brother Adam awoke from his casket. The people were silent as Adam walked to the piano behind the casket. He

joined in with the strings behind him in a beautiful concerto. For those moments while he was playing, those in their seats were overjoyed that Adam was with them once again, but Nova knew full-well the message that the tall man had conveyed. Adam was with them once again, but when his music would come to an end, so would his reawakening. Adam was aware of these terms as well.

As time went on, the string ensemble behind him grew tired and soon only Adam was playing. The music continued this way for a time until Adam looked over toward Nova and then to the tall man. He smiled at them both and continued playing. Furiously, he banged on the piano keys harder and harder, though the sound that came forth in the room grew fainter and fainter until Adam made his final cadence and stood up at the piano and bowed. Then Nova awoke.

Nova was not the only one having dreams those nights. As he was sleeping, Ardent was dreaming a memory of when he was a child studying music at the Eden School of the Arts. His mentor was working with all of the violin students on that day that Ardent was dreaming about. His mentor approached Ardent and another student to review the piece they had both been working on.

"Play, Ardent," the wise old master said. Ardent began playing the piece which he had been working on: the Heterodox Sonata. As Ardent continued playing, he encountered a very difficult passage. As he fumbled around the fingerboard, the master held up his hand signaling that he should stop playing. Turning to the student next to Ardent who was also working on the Heterodox, he said, "Reave, begin playing the section where Ardent had difficulty." Reave began to play the same section, fumbling at the same part that his friend Ardent had. "No, no!!" the master said. "Look at the music." They both looked down at the score. "Now, tell me where the problem is." Pointing to the same measure, the two of them

answered, "here". "Ah," the master said as he picked up his violin. "You think the problem is there because that is where the problem manifested itself, but the problem is always in the place before you first heard the problem."

Pointing to a few bars of music before the place the two boys had identified as the problem section, the master began to play. "You see this scalar section here before we encounter the fermata? There are only a few choices concerning fingerings in this section. I will show you one now." The master played the scale passage slowly and as he approached the fermata which indicated that he should hold the note, Ardent raised his hand and said "stop". "Yes, Ardent," he asked. "You're finger is on the third string at the hold before you enter the difficult section," Ardent said. "Every time we did it, we used a different finger pattern so that we landed on the second string at the hold before the difficult section," said Reave. "Exactly, my boys", the master continued. "The most common way to play those notes is the way you chose. Nine out of ten violinists of your level would have chosen the same fingering, but in order to make the music flow, you must view the entire context of this passage. I don't care how well you played the scale passage before the hold, and I don't care how long you hold that note: if you don't land on the third string, you will have no chance at the section that follows." As he wrote down the correct fingering for the entire passage, the master continued: "That is why the Heterodox Sonata is so difficult: there are many ambiguities concerning the approach to the music. Some sections can be played in a number of positions on the violin, but eventually, you realize that you end up in a place that renders you unable to continue. Since this is such a good learning experience for students, teachers and publishers rarely give their students a score with all of the correct fingerings and positions marked in. For

next week, I want fingerings marked in from both of you—ones that work!”

After the lesson, Ardent and Reave walked to Reave’s house. They met up with another young man, already in Reave’s garage and after plugging in guitars and keyboards, they began to jam. Reave screamed “Tone Poem” and then Ardent awoke.

vii°. Tournament in Noriad

After a few days of rest, the team arrived in the snowy province of Noriad. On the night of the tournament, they walked over a snow-pressed walkway before entering the arena. “You know,” Bay said to Spry who was walking next to him. “When my kids were growing up, after it snowed, the ground had footprints and sled marks everywhere. No spot of snow was left untouched. And one day, you look out over your yard and realize that there aren’t any footprints at all.”

In the hall at Noriad, Prog, the Slyte coach, chose Acrid to open the tournament. Now, Acrid had been knowledgeable in the ways of technology and had developed a synthesizer attachment for his trumpet. It was during this first round of the Noriad tournament, that he unveiled his device which allowed him, among other things, to record and playback his instrument on the fly. It was for this reason, that he selected a 4-part trumpet fugue for the Slyte prepared piece.

What an outstanding sound it made. Stealth’s solo sax piece which followed was no match for Acrid’s performance, and the round was awarded to the Slyte.

And it came to pass that the second round would be awarded to the Virtuosi, and in the third round, Fermat selected Bay to solo, and Prog selected Blare to solo. The music began and Blare began to sing along with the fast minor-key music. Though the work was, obviously, chosen at random and was unfamiliar to her, she wasted no time showing off her technical ability.

Moments later, Bay entered with a deep and masculine voice. Now, in Noriad, the Provincial Official

had been previously appointed by the Slyte, and the people of Noriad were content with his authority. It was for this reason that while Bay was still singing, a young man broke through the crowd of people in the stands and ran toward the stage.

Carrying a wooden club in his hand, he ran behind Bay so that he could not see him approaching. It was then that Bay turned around just as the young man raised his arm to strike him with the club. Instantly, Bay sang his highest note in full voice—an awesome piercing tone that caused the man to drop his club and fall backward. Bay continued to descend from this high pitch as security officials dragged the man away. Blare soloed again and then Bay once more. When the round was over, the award was given to the Virtuosi who were belligerently booed by the people of Noriad.

Later that night, the team gathered at a local bar near the arena called 'the Zero Hour'. Everyone was having a good time. Amidst the background music and laughter typical of bars at night, Stealth said, "Hey Pulse, tell us that story again about when you first met Ana." Immediately, there was applause and cheering from the team.

"OK, well," Pulse continued. "We were both kids in school. I was not what you'd call the most 'popular' guy on the block, but I had some pals who were on my level of sophistication. Anywho, she was my crush for a long time, but, of course, I never said anything." "Come on", Spry yelled. "Alright, alright," Pulse responded.

"So I was in the hall between classes, and I saw this suave older kid quickly glide down the hall, round the corner by the lockers where Ana was and put his arm around her friend and dip her backwards. Then he lifted her up, gave her a kiss on the cheek and kept on moving. You should have seen it. It was so smooth. It was the most amazing thing I'd ever seen. In retrospect, I guess I thought it was a sign for me to

make my move. So I started trying to glide gracefully down the hall—oh, did I mention I was a little overweight? Anywho, I got around the bend by the lockers, but I guess I didn't account for my speed or my escape velocity or something, but I put my arm around her and I just couldn't stop turning. I started pulling her with me, and when I did, she dropped her books and her body turned back around toward me. And that's when she accidentally punched me in the mouth. Luckily, it stopped me from turning, but I fell back into the lockers and hit my head on someone's lock. It was just a mess. Needless to say, when I woke up in the nurse's office, she was holding my hand and I knew she was mine".

Applause mixed with laughter filled the section of the bar which the Virtuosi occupied. "That is an awesome story, bro" said Spire. "Thank you, thank you," Pulse said as he raised his glass. "Where's she now", Nova asked. Slowly, there came a pause in the cheering. Pulse smiled with his glass still raised and said, "She has gone on ahead into the promise that waits for me." "For us all", Bay said. Cheering once again, the team said enthusiastically, "For us all!"

"Alright," Fermat said loudly, "we have another big night tomorrow: our last ride in the Aninon province. We should have a mild edge since the official in Aninon was selected by our outlook during the last competition, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't be our best. Spry, Bay, the outlook requested that I send two people from our team to do a public relations event in a nearby town, so I'd like you two to do that tomorrow. It's just a master class that they want you to observe at a local school—you know, watch the kids play and then give them a critique. They'll pick you up in the morning. As for the rest of you, don't stay out too late, don't get into any trouble—Pulse—and I will see you tomorrow night. Nova, I live in Aninon and I want you to come over to my house tomorrow

sometime in the morning. I'll send someone to pick you up."

Nova went and sat at the bar by Stealth and Donar. "Hey man, what's Pulse's story? Based on the way everyone looked at me when I asked about Ana, I think I may have really put my foot in my mouth." "Don't worry about it, Nova", Stealth replied. "It wasn't your fault and everybody knows that. Pulse used to have a wife and a kid. You've heard the man play—he's awesome. He used to do these gigs all up and down the coast where he lived. I can't remember where he lived. Hey, Donar," Stealth shouted across the bar: "Where was Pulse from?" "I think it was Dilynia", Donar said back. "Oh, right. Anyway," Stealth continued, "he was playing out at clubs 4 or 5 nights a week. He loved it and so did his wife. The kid was too young to enjoy it, but he would've loved it. Pulse used to only play at the premier clubs, not these low-level bar places. All of this to say, he was driving back home one night after a gig, and a truck tire came barreling into his lane. He tried swerving out of the way, but it hit the front of his car. I guess if he hadn't started swerving the car might not have flipped, but it did. Pulse woke up in the hospital the next day with only some scratches, but his wife and kid who had been asleep in the car—they died. Pulse was crushed, man. He quit playing out and just stayed home all day practicing. A few years later, Fermat heard about him and gave him a call, and the rest is history."

"That's terrible", Nova said softly. "Look, kid," Stealth replied, "I wish I could tell you that we all have good reasons for being here—I mean, I wish I could tell you that we all got to this point in our lives without any friction, but it just isn't true. Not for me anyway. Look at Donar. Hey Donar," he shouted across the bar, "What does your old man think about what you're doing?" "He told me to get a real job", he replied smiling as he raised his glass. "My mom still wants me to go to medical school." "Do you see?" Stealth said.

"And Donar is a very educated man. Everybody in here has a story. You either keep the story to yourself or you tell it to people, and if you tell it to people, then you can relate to people. And if they can relate to you, then it gives them hope. But if you want the story, you have to pay the price, Nova".

And as time went on, one by one the team disbanded until just Spire and Donar remained seated at a table. It was during this time that the house band had set up and was playing. After a while longer had passed, Spire and Donar got up, paid their tab and walked toward the door. The guitarist from the house band called to them: "Hey," obviously recognizing who they were since the Virtuosi were popular in that part of town. Spire and Donar turned around. Pointing to Spire, he continued: "Let's have a go—me and you".

Now it had been Spire's practice to walk away from challenges like this one—this was common knowledge to the other members of the team, since Spire made a public effort to keep a cool head during confrontation. Donar whispered to Spire, "If you want to go, I'm with you. Let's shut this guy's mouth and make him drop his jaw." "No," Spire said softly, "those days are done for me. I play on a different stage now." By now, the motion in the room had become still and the people in the bar were poised to see what events would take place. The two turned around once again toward the door. "Oh, what? You're too good to accept a challenge from someone outside of the tournament? Whatever! Then how about you?" the man yelled, pointing to Donar. As the man was still speaking, Donar became enraged and turned his face toward Spire: "That's your conviction, brother, not mine." Donar marched toward the stage taking off his jacket along the way and throwing it on a table. Spire sat down once again as Donar grabbed the bass guitar from the bass player in the house band. Before the guitarist could even play a note, Donar tapped into the

fire inside himself; quickly ripping through scale passages and arpeggiated figures on the man's bass.

The drummer and bass player stepped off of the stage. As Donar closed his eyes and began to flow into some improvisatory piece. Opening his eyes, he began to walk closer and closer to the guitarist until there was no more room for the man to stand on the stage. Donar continued playing until everyone in the bar, including the people in the back rooms, were quietly looking at what he was doing. Whispers of the events leading up to this spectacle could be heard around the room. When Donar was finished, he unplugged the bass and threw it toward the bass player, and he and Spire walked out of, what was now, a very quiet bar.

VIII. The Dawn of Aninon

The next day, the teammates split up to pursue different activities before the final tournament that night in Aninon. At the outlook's request, Spry and Bay went to critique the performances of young people at a certain music school where they received training.

Many musicians performed for them including soloists and ensembles. Spry and Bay gave helpful criticism to the students after they finished playing. They also performed for the kids; Spry on her guitar and Bay singing. After some time, the function ended and Spry and Bay separated to speak to the different people that worked at this school.

Bay approached one woman who worked there. She was a pleasant looking woman in her late middle years who wore a friendly smile on her face. Bay asked her, "How long have you worked here?" "Oh me," she said in a calm voice. "Not too long, but I'm not a fulltime worker. I'm only an adjunct." "Oh, I see," said Bay. "When do you become fulltime?" "Well, you see, sir," she replied bashfully, "I work very hard at what I do here, and I often do more than what is required—often more than the fulltime faculty." They both laughed lightly. "If I didn't work as hard and show the dedication that I do, my employers would probably not keep me here, but since I do my job very well with only an adjuncts pay, it doesn't make sense to promote me to a 'fulltime' status since I'm doing the work of a fulltime worker at and adjuncts pay." "Well, that doesn't seem quite fair," Bay said concernedly. "Well, yes, you're right," she replied. "But my promotion from my employers, who are great men,

doesn't change the truth." "The truth?" Bay asked. She continued: "We are all, everyone, in a fulltime job."

On the other side of the room, Spry was talking to a young man whose quartet had performed earlier. Bay thanked the woman he was speaking to and walked over by Spry and the young man. The boy reached out his hand to shake Bay's. After the greeting, he looked at some of the teachers and helpers at the school and said, "Would you look at all of these burnouts. I wonder at what point in their lives they settled for this instead of something important like what you guys are doing." "Hey," Spry said, "this is important too." "Yeah," Bay continued. "You know, these people have to support themselves too. They keep the doors open so that people can take the music somewhere else from where they first found it. They deserve to be honored."

"Yeah," he said, "you're right—I'm just being funny. Take a listen to this." The young man pulled a disc player out of his backpack and set it up on the table. Spry and Bay recalled critiquing his string ensemble earlier in the day. They remembered that the performance was less than stellar. The music began to play from his disc player: it was the same piece that his ensemble had tried to play, but had not fully executed. "Hey," said Spry, "this sounds excellent. What, did you guys get nervous during the performance today?" "No," he replied. "I recorded this on my own: I played each part myself, overdubbing the different layers with the different instruments. You guys are lucky: you're surrounded with good players; people who are really passionate about what they're doing. In my group, I'm carrying the most weight. Sometimes, I think the other guys don't even care. I've been patient and encouraging, but it doesn't burn in them like it does in me. I can't even make it burn in them either. They just don't see what I see. Sometimes I feel like leaving the group altogether. I know there's more than this." "So what keeps you

here?" Bay said calmly. "I write my own music. I'm not dependent on them, and I know I'm not doing them any favors by staying with them. I just know that being with them is what I'm supposed to be doing right now. I know there's more to it, so I guess that's it—that's the reason why I don't leave: I'm supposed to be going through this experience—not for them, but for me. I guess it's a part of what I was made to do." "Alright then", said Spry. "Hey," the young man said sincerely: "thanks a lot. I feel a lot better." Then he packed up his things and went away. Bay turned to Spry: "I'm glad we could help."

Meanwhile, Nova was waiting in the lobby at Fermat's house while Fermat was getting dressed. The door bell rang, and Nova answered it. A small, quiet sort of man, along in years, walked briskly through the door. He asked softly "Where is Fermat?" Nova did not recognize the man and answered him in a strong voice "Who are you?" The man continued looking around the lobby area and up the stairs. He was carrying a small package in his hands. Nova raised his voice and once again asked, this time in a loud voice "Who are you, old man". When he did this, the old man stopped looking around and turned around to Nova. He walked right up to Nova and told him in a firm voice, "I make the music that people use to speak when they stand before Heaven. Now, tell me where Fermat is". At that point, Fermat began walking down the stairs. "Hey Nova," he said casually. "I see you've met Verve." "Hello, Fermat", said Verve. "I was worried for a moment, but it is great to see you again." "Verve composes the material we use for the tournaments," Fermat said, as he opened up the package which contained newly composed scores. "These look great, Verve!" he exclaimed. "I'll tell the outlook you stopped by. Give my regards to your family." The two of them shook hands and Verve left. "Come on," Fermat said to Nova. "I want to show you a place you've never been before."

Fermat and Nova drove for a long time until they reached a canyon out in a deserted land. They walked down the canyon for a very long time; through tunnels and passage ways until they came to an enormous cavern inside of the canyon. "Where are we?" Nova whispered. "They call this place the Hall of Echoes," Fermat said. "Why?" Nova asked. "What happens to a sound after it disappears?" Fermat asked. "Some people believe they don't really disappear. Words, notes, sound—some people believe they still exist, but just change their location; that they get cataloged here, in this room. Here, if you're quiet, they say that you can hear the sounds of the past."

Nova looked around the cavern. He saw people sitting by themselves and laying down on rugs that they had brought with them. Some people brought chairs to sit in. Some people were crying and some people were smiling. Nova and Fermat stood in the silence. As they both stood there, Nova noticed that Fermat had his eyes closed, and he dared not say anything to interrupt. In fact, Nova pretended not to notice him, and began to give some distance between them.

Nova walked around the room a few times, observing. Moments later, Fermat opened his eyes and smiled at Nova. He tilted his head to signal that they should step outside. Outside, Nova was quiet, as usual. "You know what's difficult, Nova?" said Fermat. Nova, as usual, answered, "Tell me." "When you're on the stage, any stage," he continued, "it's incredible. Even if your reason for being there isn't about you: it's amazing. You know, from time to time, I have memories of being under the lights, hearing the crowd, feeling the excitement of taking part of something bigger than yourself. Those memories stay with you. That's a good thing, son.

Stardom is so relative. The more I live, the more I realize how true that is. My little nephew plays on a youth running team—young kids. Well, once they

made it to the championship race. Those kids ran their hearts out, and when it was all over, they had won. Championship winners—could you imagine? You had to have seen all these kids on my nephew's team: jumping around, cheering, crying, and laughing. As I watched it, this thought occurred to me, and it has stayed with me: to those kids, the most important task of all time had been entrusted into their hands and they won. It's true: to those kids, there was no difference between their championship race and a professional championship race. If anything, their victory may have been more sincere since a kid doesn't think about finances and endorsements. Kids don't even worry about tomorrow. Those kids were on top of the world that day. Every one of those kids went home knowing that he did what he set out to do. They went home, back to their normal lives, but they'd never forget that day when they were stars. I'm not a gambling man, but I'd bet that if you asked any one of those young men today, to tell you the story of what happened that day, they'd light up with a smile. They would tell you their story as if it just happened. They'd probably act parts of it out, and exaggerate it, and quote the exact words they said that day—tell you what they ate for breakfast—and you'd stand there and think it was the greatest moment in time.

So this brings me to my question: 'do you know what's difficult'? How does someone come down from that experience and face life again? Why come down? Why not go out on a high note, so to speak? Why should anyone return to a normal life?"

Nova paused for a moment. "You must," he said. "You can't live from high to high. There's too much important information in between. I guess, if you don't come down and show other people where you've been and how to get there, then what's the point? Just a warm feeling? That's not what it's about.

Those kids didn't run just so they could feel good about themselves. They ran because they

believed that at that moment in time, there was no other reason for them to be alive other than to run. They answered to their teammates and their coaches and a bunch of other factors that all played a big part in getting them to do what they had to do. If it was just about being on top, then that would mean that it was just about themselves, but it's not about yourself—not any of it. The good feeling is just a bonus; you don't live for it. Those kids didn't live for it. That's why you have to keep going: because you must. There's more to it than just the payoff: it's everything in between *here* and *there*."

"Hmm" Fermat said quietly. "Very good. Very good, indeed. C'mon, let's keep walking around there are some other places I want to show you."

During this time, in another place, Stealth and Pulse were browsing around a local music store. After they had found what they had come for, they continued walking around. In the back of the store, there was a door which led to another room.

As they walked through the door, they entered another room with a tall ceiling where guitars and basses lined the walls. In the center of the room, there sat Donor quietly on the floor with his head in his hands. Noticing that he was speaking softly to himself, the two exited backwards through the door smiling in appreciation of the dedication of the strong and silent Donar.

While Stealth and Pulse were paying for some items at the counter, the clerk looked behind the two of them and over at some guys playing on the guitars on display—typical guitar riffs that are accustomed to being performed at such prestigious venues as music stores. Stealth and Pulse also looked over and then back at the clerk. "I've been hearing that same line for what seems like forever," The clerk said. "I don't know which of those rockers first played it, but before that line was first played: nobody played like that, but after he first played it, everybody started playing like that."

Pulse laughed and asked, "So what does that tell you?" The clerk paused and said "You have to be the archetype. Have a gift, not an alternative."

Later on that night, Fermat returned Nova to the inn where he was staying. "Get some sleep tonight. We have a big day tomorrow," he said as Nova waved goodbye. As he walked into the inn, he saw Ardent in the lobby sitting by the piano looking through some music. Nova began to walk by him without making eye contact, but Ardent waved at him to have a seat.

"Let me guess," Ardent said, "the Hall of Echoes." Nova laughed. "I didn't hear anything," Nova said shyly. "That's alright," Ardent said. "Sometimes, I think Fermat's faking it," he said jokingly. Now, Nova was seated at the piano bench, and so Ardent asked him naturally, "Do you play that thing?" Nova began to play a cheery sort of piece that was well suited for a casual talk in a public lobby. When he finished, Ardent applauded lightly and smiled, and so the two of them began to talk.

This was the first real chance that Nova had to sit down and speak to Ardent. They talked about many things, but many of Nova's questions gravitated toward Ardent's memories of Adam, Nova's brother. Ardent told Nova many stories of himself and Adam.

After much time had passed, Ardent sat up in his chair as if he had something important to say. It seemed as though the color in his face had gone away. "Your brother said something very interesting to me one time when he and I were together. Yes, he and I were sitting around just like you and I are now." Pausing for a moment to collect himself, Ardent continued: "Your brother was a good man, and he loved your father very much. I could tell that much just by looking at him, though he never said it. Adam was just that kind of man. He was a man who loved life.

Adam told me once that he didn't want to get old. I just laughed and let him continue. He said that

he wanted to make his mark, whatever it was to be, and get out. I assumed he was talking about the music business at first, but the more he talked about it, I understood what he really was saying. Honestly, I said the same thing myself in my younger days. He wanted to make his mark and be remembered the way he was when he made it. He said that he never wanted to fade away. I found it interesting to hear those words come from him, since they were nearly the same words I had heard a long time ago from your father."

Nova's eyes began to run as he looked up at Ardent. Simultaneous feelings of grief and wonder filled his heart, but he didn't say anything. He couldn't say anything.

"I'm going to tell you something, Nova" he said calmly. "When I was a younger man, Reave and I were close friends. We even played in a group together. It was an aggressive-sounding sort of band, but sophisticated—that's what every group says, right? *'We're unique—we don't sound like anybody else'*—oh yeah right. Anyway, this was way before we even knew or cared about outlooks and teams and tournaments. We were just some kids playing music—the two of us even learned to play guitar and bass, much to the chagrin of our violin teacher. We called our band 'Tone Poem'. Eventually, we played some really big gigs, but we also played a lot of smaller gigs—a lot of shows for charities and whatnot.

Some time later, through a long chain of events, we went our separate ways, Reave and I. That's another story for another time. All you need to know is that things just didn't seem right and I knew there was more. Anyway, the other member of the band continued to play out at places with Reave. It was shortly after this that I met Fermat, a much younger Fermat at the time. The rest of my story you can probably guess, but Reave's story is told a different way.

Reave replaced me with another musician and reassembled Tone Poem. Just for the record: if a group should happen to make a drastic line-up change, they ought to come up with a new name for themselves." Nova laughed. "Anyway, they were on the edge of breaking in to the industry, or so I heard. They were playing some big gigs when the other member of our original Tone Poem—your father, Dean Opiso, announced that his girl was pregnant. His touring days were coming to an end, and Reave flipped out.

Shortly thereafter, the group split up again. Your father went to start a family and Reave spent a lot of time trying to form a group that would rival the success of Tone Poem, yet his attempts were unsuccessful. He became bitter at anyone who messed up his plans; bitter at me and your father and your father's child, Adam."

Nova began to cry more as Ardent continued his story. "Reave met Bane at a club, and was soon introduced to the Slyte. Now, Reave could really play, so he was welcomed to the team's outlook with open arms. While he was there, he surrounded himself with people who fueled his bitter drive for power.

A long time after, news of your father's untimely death made its way to Reave. I heard that Reave only mourned the fact that *he* had not settled the score with your father. Earlier in this tournament, Reave uncovered Adam's identity—not that anyone was hiding it. I think you can piece the rest of that story together.

It was your father's intention to put you boys on this path so that you would not wander through the years like a lot of people do: only to, one day, return to the path of honor with heavy burdens. Your brother was a good man, so was your father. He was my friend. You have a proud family history, son. I hope you see that."

Nova began to pull himself together. He dried his tears and began to smile at Ardent. The two of

them sat for a moment, looking at each other and smiling.

"Nova," Ardent said, "Looking back, you realize what this lifestyle has cost you...who it's cost you. All of those relationships I've had to let go through the years. And when you and those people move on, for whatever reason, you have to acknowledge the part of your life that they touched, and then go and find it for yourself. Understand?"

"I understand," Nova replied. "Good", Ardent said smiling. "So let me ask you: now that you've gotten to know how it is to live this life, what did you think of us when we first met you?"

"Well," Nova answered, "at first, I was a little intimidated. You all have accomplished so much. I would rather not assume to ascend to your level by means of familiarity, so I knew to keep my comments few and to ask lots of questions at every opportunity. There is a lot that I need to learn, and I knew there wasn't much common ground between us other than that we are musicians."

"First of all," Ardent replied, "you will never feel like you know it all with music. It's an illusion. In music, you're either getting better or your getting worse—learning or not learning.

Secondly, everyone, no matter how big or small has some common ground. It's easy to see someone who is famous or intimidating and think their life is unreachable, but they are no different from you, even if they don't show signs of similarity." Nova looked puzzled as Ardent continued: Look, everyone has a mother—even your enemies. They go home just like you do. They watch movies that make them cry just like you do. They put on music and sing when no one's listening just like you do. Nova, everyone frowns when they hear that a family member is sick. Everyone smiles when friends celebrate his birthday. Only a fool would get rid of these things. And for what reason would someone part with those things? For an image?

For words? For titles? Without those small nuances that make up a man's life, he's no different from a machine. Listen to me: there is no reason for a man to forget who he is or where he has come from."

Nova nodded his head, and began to run his fingers across the piano again. This time, it was in a slower manner. "Play me a piece," Ardent said. "Play a piece so that together we can remember where we've been, and so that we can have hope for our tomorrow."

Nova began to play a soft impromptu. As Ardent listened, the people and the noise around him in the lobby grew quiet until there was just the sound of Nova. At that moment, he closed his eyes and was thankful for being alive; thankful for Nova and his team; thankful for being born with a purpose and having found it. And when Nova finished, Ardent nodded his head, put his hand on Nova's shoulder, closed his eyes and said "Help us to do, tomorrow, what it is that we have to do". With that, the two of them stood up and went to their rooms.

ix. Tournament in Aninon

The arena in Aninon was peculiar. It resided in a very industrial city. There were tall skyscraping buildings all around it. Giant cathedrals next to the arena cast tall shadows on the ground below. Even the people in Aninon were peculiar. There was no sense of community like in some of the provinces.

So it came to be that in this final tournament, a draw was to be settled between the Virtuosi, who had won the first round, and the Slyte, who had won the second round. By the choice of the two coaches, the two contenders to settle this score were sitting on the warm-up bench next to each other as the crew cleared the stage from the previous round.

"I am living proof that choosing your side yields nothing," said Reave to Ardent. "Don't tell me it does; I played at every event that you did—I did every charity event that you did and every other 'honorable' event. We played in the lowest places for the greatest reasons and for what? An empty promise? And do you blame me? No. How could you? You thought exactly what I thought; only I carried it out.

"I didn't make my choices so that I could get something," Ardent replied. "I walked away from that life because there's nothing in it for me." Ardent paused to breathe. "Don't you get it? There is no reward that I'm looking for—just to do what I was made to do."

Then Ardent turned his head and looked right into the eyes of his old friend: "and, in a moment, you'll see what that looks like again. I'm going to charge from the gate and you won't catch me. You'll

hear my every sound, but you won't make one to match. You'll watch me leave and return, but you won't see all that is in between. My reward is fated; as is your defeat."

Reave became enraged: "Then let it be our final encounter. If the round is given to me, then you must withdraw from this lifestyle: the tournament, the outlook, everything. Unless what you were 'made to do' was lose! And if I should lose, then this I will remember as my final run."

"So be it." Ardent replied.

"I won't lose." said Reave.

"You've already lost." said Ardent.

So the round began and Ardent jumped in first with a solo. He ran all over the fingerboard catching overtones and adding color to the familiar tune that the Synod was playing behind him. The crowd stood to their feet, becoming aware that this would be, perhaps, the greatest match in the history of the competition.

Soon, Reave vivaciously began his solo. He incorporated many of the harmonic techniques that Ardent had presented. A moment later, while still soloing, he began to tauntingly circle around Ardent, like a shark encircles its prey. When he left a breath of space in the music, Nova entered with another solo. He began by imitating Reave's solo note-for-note in cut time. Then it dawned on him: that familiar music that the ensemble was playing—he knew what it was. Now, playing this familiar piece in an improvisatory manner, Ardent began to circle around Reave playing snippets of improvised material mixed in with what he remembered of the actual written part.

Ardent left room for Reave to enter which he did with a scalar passage followed by a long held note. The ensemble also held on one note. Reave recognized, now, that he had instinctively been playing the Heterodox Sonata. Looking across the fingerboard, he realized that he had not landed on string three. As he continued to hold that one note, he stared blankly into

Ardent's eyes like he had seen a ghost. All at once, Ardent began to see his old friend as a version of himself if he had made different choices. That was all: just a few different choices and they would not be so different at all. At the same time, Ardent knew this was no longer his friend whose eyes stared blankly into his. He had become something else; something that clashed with everything Ardent believed. Compassion for his old friend Reave had left him, and now only pity remained. When the ensemble signaled to break the hold and begin playing the next section, Ardent played the rest of the passage, sparing Reave the wrong notes he was destined to play. Reave stood silently for the next brief moments as Ardent finished his solo and the piece.

The stadium filled with an eruption of sound. The two men stood there looking around the arena. Not a fan there knew their history; none of them heard the words they exchanged; none of them knew that piece or what Ardent had done for Reave, but it was not important that they knew.

As the judge made his way from his booth toward the two men, Ardent reflected on some of the recent events that had happened. Why had his life turned out the way it had and not like Reave's? Why had Nova come to be a part of this team?

It was then that the judge walked slowly toward the stage, holding the red ribbon before them both. Turning to Reave, the judge opened his heavy old eyes and spoke: "Reave," pausing for a moment, he then continued: "The problem is always in the place before you first heard the problem, not where it first manifested itself." Turning then to Ardent, I, Demodokus, the son of Sophos, awarded the red ribbon, and thus the tournament, to the Virtuosi that night. The tournament was done and the reigning Provincial Official majority favored the Virtuosi outlook.

Now, as I sit here among you, at this Great Banquet, as an old man, I have freely shared with you

this story. Not because I covet your applause, but because everybody in this room has a story. You either keep the story to yourself or you tell it to people, and if you tell it to people, then you can relate to people. If they can relate to you, then it gives them hope. If you want it, you have got to pay the price. So let there always be stories and people who will tell them.

VJ Manzo

is an internationally recognized musician and has been involved in music full time since 1995.

VJ has been featured on many recordings as a composer, performer or producer/engineer. In 2001, he founded Clear Blue Media, a publishing label, which has been the pathway for many of his recordings including works by his band Clear Blue, and his 2004 fictional book, Before Heaven.



He is the Director of Music for City of Hope International Church in Kearny, NJ, a role in which he also functions as composer, performer and producer. His original musical score for the play Reflection was premiered in Spring 2005 with the COHIC Dramatics Team.

VJ has had years of performance experience in front of diverse audiences such as the NJPAC and the PNC Arts Center, Vincent received much of his formal training from Kean University where he graduated with High Honors, earning a B.A. in K-12 Music Education with a concentration in Classical Guitar.

He is also an accredited educator by the State of New Jersey and has been teaching music privately and in K-12 classrooms since 1998.

VJ serves to be an example and encouragement to people concerning the advancement of music and has traveled extensively around the country and around the world inspiring musical creativity and passion in various musical ensembles.

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