

BARTIMAEUS

— THE —
GOLEM'S EYE



A hidden power. A deadly enemy.

JONATHAN STROUD

Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

The Main Characters

Prologue

Part One

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Part Two

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21

Part Three

Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31

Part Four

Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Chapter 37
Chapter 38
Chapter 39
Chapter 40
Chapter 41
Chapter 42

Chapter 43

Chapter 44

Chapter 45

Chapter 46

Chapter 47

Chapter 48

About the Author

Also by Jonathan Stroud

Praise

Copyright

About the Book

In *The Amulet of Samarkand* the young magician Nathaniel won wide acclaim for his daring exploits in saving the powerful jewel for the government; now he seems set to continue his meteoric rise through the ministerial ranks.

But the mysterious Resistance inflicts terrifying destruction on London, and soon Nathaniel's job and his very life are under threat, not only from the elusive Kitty and her companions, but from an unknown and bewildering source. Nathaniel is forced to embark on a perilous mission to the enemy city of Prague and to summon once again the troublesome, enigmatic and quick-witted djinni, Bartimaeus.

A roller-coaster ride of magic, adventure and political skulduggery in which the fates of Nathaniel, Bartimaeus and Kitty explosively collide.

JONATHAN STROUD

THE GOLEM'S EYE

BOOK II OF
THE BARTIMAEUS TRILOGY

CORGI BOOKS

For Philippa

The Main Characters

THE MAGICIANS

Mr Rupert Devereaux	<i>Prime Minister of Great Britain and the Empire</i>
Mr Carl Mortensen	<i>Home Secretary</i>
Ms Jessica Whitwell	<i>Security Minister</i>
Mr Henry Duvall	<i>Chief of Police</i>
Mr Marmaduke Fry	<i>Foreign Secretary</i>
Ms Helen Malbindi	<i>Information Minister</i>
Mr Julius Tallow	<i>Head of Internal Affairs</i>
Mr John Mandrake	<i>Assistant to the Head of Internal Affairs</i>
Mr George Ffoukes	<i>Magician Fourth Level; Department of Internal Affairs</i>
Ms Jane Farrar	<i>Assistant to the Chief of Police</i>
Mr Sholto Pinn	<i>A merchant; proprietor of Pinn's Accoutrements of Piccadilly</i>
Mr Quentin Makepeace	<i>A playwright; author of Swans of Araby and other works</i>

And various other magicians, policemen and spies

THE COMMONERS

Kitty Jones
Jakob Hyrnek
Mr T. E. Pennyfeather
Anne Stephens
Fred Weaver
Stan Hake
Nicholas Drew
Clem Hopkins

And other members of the Resistance

THE SPIRITS

Bartimaeus	<i>A djinni - in service to Mr Mandrake</i>
Queezle	<i>A djinni - in service to Mr Ffoukes</i>
Shubit	<i>A djinni - in service to Ms Whitwell</i>
Nemaides	<i>A djinni - in service to Mr Tallow</i>
Simpkin	<i>A foliot - in service to Mr Pinn</i>

And numerous other afrits, djinn, foliots and imps

A note on pronunciation:

'Djinni' is pronounced 'jinnee', and

'djinn' is pronounced 'jinn'.
'Bartimaeus' is pronounced 'Bart-im-ay-us'.
'Golem' is pronounced 'Goal-em'.

Prologue

Prague, 1868

AT DUSK, THE enemy lit their campfires one by one, in greater profusion than on any night before. The lights sparkled like fiery jewels out in the greyness of the plains, so numerous it seemed an enchanted city had sprung up from the earth. By contrast, within our walls the houses had their shutters closed, their lights blacked out. A strange reversal had taken place - Prague itself was dark and dead, while the countryside around it flared with life.

Soon afterwards the wind began to drop. It had been blowing strongly from the west for hours, carrying word of the invaders' movements - the rattling of the siege engines, the calling of the troops and animals, the sighing of the captive spirits, the odours of the incantations. Now, with unnatural speed, it died away and the air was steeped in silence.

I was floating high above the Strahov monastery, just inside the magnificent city walls I'd built three hundred years before. My leathery wings moved in strong, slow beats; my eyes scanned the seven planes to the horizon.[fn1](#) It did not make for happy viewing. The mass of the British army was cloaked behind Concealments, but its ripples of power already lapped at the base of Castle Hill. The auras of a vast contingent of spirits were dimly visible in the gloom; with every minute further brief trembles on the planes signalled the arrival of new battalions. Groups of human soldiers moved purposefully over the dark ground. In their

midst stood a cluster of great white tents, domed like rocs' eggs, about which Shields and other spells hung cobweb-thick.[fn2](#)

I raised my gaze to the darkened sky. It was an angry black mess of clouds, smeared with streaks of yellow to the west. At a high altitude and scarcely visible in the dying light, I spied six faint dots circling well out of Detonation range. They progressed steadily widdershins, mapping out the walls a final time, checking the strength of our defences.

Speaking of which . . . I had to do the same.

At Strahov Gate, furthest flung and most vulnerable outpost of the walls, the tower had been raised and strengthened. The ancient doors were sealed with triple hexes and a wealth of trigger mechanisms, and the louring battlements at the crest of the tower bristled with watchful sentries.

That at least was the idea.

To the tower I flew, hawk-headed, leather-winged, hidden behind my shroud of wisps. I alighted barefoot, without a sound, on a prominent crest of stone. I waited for the swift, sharp challenge, the vigorous display of instant readiness.

Nothing happened. I dropped my Concealment and waited for some moderate, belated evidence of alertness. I coughed loudly. Still no joy.

A glimmering Shield protected part of the battlements, and behind this crouched five sentries.[fn3](#) The Shield was a narrow affair, designed for one human soldier or three djinn at most. As such, there was a good deal of fidgeting going on.

'Will you *stop* pushing?'

'Ow! Mind those claws, you idiot!'

'Just shove over. I tell you, my backside's in plain view now. They might spot it.'

'That could win us the battle on its own.'

'Keep that wing under control! You nearly had my eye out.'

‘Change into something smaller, then. I suggest a nematode worm.’

‘If you elbow me one more time . . .’

‘It’s not *my* fault. It’s that Bartimaeus who put us here. He’s such a pomp—’

It was a painful display of laxity and incompetence, in short, and I refrain from recording it in full. The hawk-headed warrior folded its wings, stepped forward and roused the sentries’ attention by banging their heads together smartly.^{fn4}

‘And what kind of sentry duty do you call *this*?’ I snapped. I was in no mood to mess about here; six months of continual service had worn my essence thin. ‘Cowering behind a Shield, bickering like fishwives. . . I ordered you to *keep watch*.’

Amid the pathetic mumbling and shuffling and staring at feet that followed, the frog put up its hand.

‘Please, Mr Bartimaeus, sir,’ it said, ‘what’s the good of watching? The British are everywhere – sky *and* land. And we’ve heard they’ve got a whole cohort of afrits down there. Is that true?’

I pointed my beak at the horizon, narrow-eyed. ‘Maybe.’

The frog gave a moan. ‘But we ain’t got a single one, have we? Not since Phoebus bought it. And there’s marids down there too, we’ve heard, more than one. *And* the leader’s got this Staff – real powerful, it is. Tore up Paris and Cologne on the way here, they say. Is *that* true?’

My crest-feathers ruffled gently in the breeze. ‘Maybe.’

The frog gave a yelp. ‘Oh, but that’s just dreadful, ain’t it? We’ve no hope now. All afternoon the summonings have been coming thick and fast, and that only means one thing. They’ll attack tonight. We’ll all be dead by morning.’

Well, he wasn’t going to do our morale much good with that kind of talk.^{fn5} I put a hand on his warty shoulder. ‘Listen, son . . . what’s your name?’

‘Nubbin, sir.’

‘Nubbin. Well, don’t go believing everything you hear, Nubbin. The British army’s strong, sure. In fact, I’ve rarely seen stronger. But let’s say it is. Let’s say it’s got marids, whole legions of afrits, and horlas by the bucket-load. Let’s say they’re all going to come pouring at us tonight, right here at the Strahov Gate. Well, let them come. We’ve got tricks to send them packing.’

‘Such as what, sir?’

‘Tricks that’ll blow those afrits and marids right out of the air. Tricks we’ve all learned in the heat of a dozen battles. Tricks that mean one sweet word: *survival*.’

The frog’s bulbous eyes blinked at me. ‘This is my first battle, sir.’

I made an impatient gesture. ‘Failing that, the Emperor’s djinn say his magicians are working on something or other. A last line of defence. Some hare-brained scheme, no doubt.’ I patted his shoulder in a manly way. ‘Feel better now, son?’

‘No, sir. I feel worse.’

Fair enough. I was never much cop at those pep-talks. ‘All right,’ I growled. ‘My advice is to duck fast and where possible run away. With luck, your masters will get killed before you are. Personally, that’s what *I’m* banking on.’

I hope this rousing speech did them some good, for it was at that moment that the attack came. Far off, there was a reverberation on all seven planes. We all felt it: it was a single note of imperious command. I spun round to look out into the dark, and one by one, the five sentries’ heads popped up above the battlements.

Out on the plains, the great army surged into action.

At their head, soaring on the updraughts of a sudden ferocious wind, came the djinn, armoured in red and white, carrying slender pikes with silver tips. Their wings hummed; their screams made the tower shake. Below, on foot, a ghostly multitude: the horlas with their carved-bone tridents, skipping into the huts and houses outside the walls

in search of prey.^{fn6} Beside them, vague shadows flitted – ghuls and fetches, wraiths of cold and misery, insubstantial on every plane. And then, with a great chattering and champing of jaws, a thousand imps and foliots rising from the earth like a dust storm or a monstrous swarm of bees. All these and many others came a-hurrying towards the Strahov Gate.

The frog tapped my elbow. ‘Good job you had a word with us, sir,’ he said. ‘I’m overwhelmingly confident now, thanks to you.’

I scarcely heard him. I was staring far off beyond the terrible host, to a low rise near the domed white tents. A man was standing on it, holding up a stick or staff. He was too remote for me to take in many details, but I could sense his power all right. His aura lit up the hill about him. As I watched, several lightning bolts speared from the boiling clouds, impaling themselves upon the tip of the outstretched staff. The hill, the tents, the waiting soldiers were briefly lit, as if by day. The light went out, the energy absorbed into the staff. Thunder rolled about the beleaguered city.

‘So *that’s* him, is it?’ I muttered. ‘The famous Gladstone.’

The djinn were nearing the walls now, passing over waste ground and the wrecks of newly dismantled buildings. As they did so, a buried hex was triggered; jets of blue-green fire erupted upwards, incinerating the leaders where they flew. But the fire died back, and the rest came on.

This was the trigger for the defenders to act: a hundred imps and foliots rose from the walls, uttering tinny cries and sending Detonations towards the flying horde. The invaders replied in kind. Infernos and Fluxes met and mingled in the half-dark, shadows looped and spun against the flares of light. Beyond, Prague’s fringes were aflame; the first of the horlas thronged below us, trying to snap the sturdy Binding spells that I’d used to secure the walls’ foundations.

I unfurled my wings, ready to enter the fray; at my side, the frog swelled out its throat and uttered a defiant croak. The next instant a looping bolt of energy stabbed from the magician's staff far off on the hill, arced through the sky and smashed into the Strahov Gate tower, just below the battlements. Our Shield was ruptured like tissue paper. Mortar and stone shattered, the roof of the tower gave way. I was blown spinning into the air—

- and fell almost to earth, colliding heavily with a cartload of hay bales that had been drawn inside the gates before the siege began. Above me, the wooden structure of the tower was on fire. I could not see any of the sentries. Imps and djinn milled about confusedly in the sky above, exchanging bursts of magic. Bodies dropped from the sky, igniting roofs. From nearby houses, women and children ran screaming. The Strahov Gate shook with the scratching of the horlas' tridents. It would not hold for long.

The defenders needed my help. I extricated myself from the hay with my usual haste.

'When you've picked the last bit of straw from your loincloth, Bartimaeus,' a voice said, 'you're wanted up at the castle.'

The hawk-headed warrior glanced up. 'Oh - hello, Queezle.'

An elegant she-leopard was sitting in the middle of the street, staring at me with lime-green eyes. As I watched, she negligently rose, walked a few paces to the side and sat down again. A gout of burning pitch slammed into the cobblestones where she'd been, leaving a smouldering crater. 'Bit busy,' she remarked.

'Yes. We're done for here.' I jumped down from the cart.

'Looks like the Binding spells in the walls are breaking,' the leopard said, glancing at the trembling gate. 'There's shoddy workmanship for you. Wonder which djinni built that?'

'Can't think,' I said. 'So, then - our master calls?'

The leopard nodded. 'Better hurry, or he'll stipple us. Let's go on foot. Sky's too crowded.'

'Lead on.'

I changed, became a panther, black as midnight. We ran up through the narrow streets towards Hradčany Square. The roads we took were empty; we avoided the places where the panic-stricken people surged like livestock. More and more buildings were burning now, gables collapsing, side walls falling in. Around the roofs small imps were dancing, waving embers in their hands.

At the castle, imperial servants stood in the square under flickering lanterns, gathering random pieces of furniture into carts; beside them ostlers were struggling to tether horses to the struts. The sky above the city was peppered with bursts of coloured light; behind, back towards Strahov and the monastery, came the dull thump of explosions. We slipped through the main entrance unopposed.

'The Emperor's getting out, is he?' I panted. Frantic imps were passing us, balancing cloth bundles on their heads.

'He's more concerned about his beloved birds,' Queezle said. 'Wants our afrits to airlift them to safety.' The green eyes flicked at me in rueful amusement.

'But all the afrits are dead.'

'Exactly. Well, almost there.'

We had arrived in the northern wing of the castle, where the magicians had their quarters. The taint of magic hung thick about the stones. Down a long flight of stairs the leopard and panther ran, out along a balcony overlooking the Stag Moat, and in through the arch that led to the Lower Workroom. This was a broad, circular room that took up almost the entire ground floor of the White Tower. I had often been summoned here over the centuries, but now the usual magical paraphernalia - the books, the incense pots, the candelabra - had been swept aside to make way for a row of ten chairs and tables. On each table was a crystal orb, flickering with light; on each chair, a hunched magician

peering into his or her respective orb. There was absolute silence in the room.

Our master was standing at a window, staring through a telescope into the dark sky.^{fn7} He noticed us, made a gesture for silence, then beckoned us into a side room. His grey hair had turned white with the strain of the last few weeks; his hooked nose hung thin and pinched, and his eyes were as red as an imp's.^{fn8} He scratched at the back of his neck. 'You don't need to tell me,' he said. 'I know. How long have we got?'

The panther flicked its tail. 'I'd give us an hour, no more.'

Queezle looked back towards the main room, where the silent magicians toiled. 'You're bringing out the golems, I see,' she said.

The magician nodded curtly. 'They will cause great damage to the enemy.'

'It won't be enough,' I said. 'Even with ten. Have you seen the *size* of the army out there?'

'As ever, Bartimaeus, your opinion is ill-considered and unlooked-for. This is a diversion only. We plan to get His Highness away down the eastern steps. A boat is waiting at the river. The golems will ring the castle and cover our retreat.'

Queezle was still staring at the magicians; they stooped low over their crystals, mouthing continuous silent instructions to their creatures. Faint moving images in the crystals showed each one what their golem saw. 'The British won't bother with the monsters,' Queezle said. 'They'll find these operators and kill *them*.'

My master bared his teeth. 'By then the Emperor will be gone. And that, incidentally, is my new charge for both of you - to guard His Highness during his escape. Understood?'

I held up a paw. The magician gave a heartfelt sigh. 'Yes, Bartimaeus?'

'Well, sir,' I said, 'if I might make a suggestion. Prague's surrounded. If we try to escape the city with the Emperor,

we'll all die horribly. So why don't we just forget the old fool and slip away instead? There's a little beer cellar on Karlova Street with a dried-up well. Not deep. The entrance is a bit small, but—'

He frowned. 'You expect me to hide in there?'

'Well, it would be tight, but I reckon we could squeeze you in. Your pot belly might give us trouble, but it's nothing a good shove wouldn't fix— Ow!' My fur crackled; I broke off sharpish. As always, the Red-hot Stipples made me lose my train of thought.

'Unlike you,' the magician snarled, 'I know the meaning of loyalty! I do not need to be compelled to act honourably towards my master. I repeat: You are both to guard his life with your own. Do you understand?'

We nodded reluctantly; as we did so, the floor shook with a nearby explosion.

'Then follow me,' he said. 'We don't have much time.'

Back up the stairs we went, and through the echoing corridors of the castle. Bright flashes illuminated the windows; fearsome cries echoed all around. My master ran on his spindly legs, wheezing with each step; Queezle and I loped alongside.

At last we came out onto the terrace where for years the Emperor had maintained his aviary. It was a large affair, delicately constructed from ornate bronze, with domes and minarets and feeding ledges, and doors for the Emperor to stroll between. The interior was filled with trees and potted shrubs, and a remarkable variety of parrots, whose ancestors had been brought to Prague from distant lands. The Emperor was besotted with these birds; in recent times, as London's power grew and the Empire slipped from his hands, he had taken to sitting for long periods within the aviary, communing with his friends. Now, with the night sky rent by magical confrontation, the birds were in panic, swirling round the cage in a flurry of feathers, squawking fit

to burst. The Emperor, a small plump gentleman in satin breeches and a crumpled white chemise, was little better off, remonstrating with his bird handlers and ignoring the advisers who massed about him.

The Chief Minister, Meyrink, pale, sad-eyed, was plucking at his sleeve. 'Your Highness, *please*. The British are pouring up Castle Hill. We must get you to safety—'

'I *cannot* leave my aviary! Where are my magicians? Summon them here!'

'Sir, they are engaged in battle—'

'My afrits, then? My faithful Phoebus . . .'

'Sir, as I have already informed you several times—'

My master shouldered his way through. 'Sir: I present Queezle and Bartimaeus, who will assist us in our departure, then save your wondrous birds as well.'

'Two cats, man? Two *cats*?' The Emperor's mouth went all white and pursed.[fn9](#)

Queezle and I rolled our eyes. She became a girl of unusual beauty; I took Ptolemy's form. 'Now, Your Highness,' my master said, 'the eastern steps . . .'

Great concussions in the city; half the suburbs were now alight. A small imp came bowling over the parapet at the end of the terrace, its tail aflame. It skidded to a halt beside us. 'Permission to report, sir. A number of savage afrits are fighting their way up to the castle. The charge is led by Honorius and Patterknife, Gladstone's personal servants. They are very terrible, sir. Our troops have broken before them.' It paused, looked at its smouldering tail. 'Permission to find water, sir?'

'And the golems?' Meyrink demanded.

The imp shuddered. 'Yessir. They have just engaged with the enemy. I kept well away from the cloud, of course, but I believe the British afrits have fallen back a little, in disarray. Now, about the water . . .'

The Emperor gave a warbling cry. 'Good, good! Victory is ours!'

‘The advantage is only temporary,’ Meyrink said. ‘Come, sir, we must go.’

Despite his protests, the Emperor was bundled away from the cage towards a wicket gate. Meyrink and my master were at the head of the group, the Emperor behind, his short frame hidden among the courtiers. Queezle and I brought up the rear.

A flash of light. Over the parapet behind us two black figures came leaping. Tattered cloaks whipped about them, yellow eyes burned in the depths of their cowls. They moved across the terrace in great drifting bounds, touching ground only rarely. In the aviary the birds fell into sudden silence.

I looked at Queezle. ‘Yours or mine?’

The beautiful girl smiled at me, showing her sharp teeth. ‘Mine.’ She fell back to meet the advancing ghuls. I ran on after the Emperor’s entourage.

Beyond the gate a narrow path followed the moat north, under the castle wall. Down below, the Old Town was on fire; I could see the British troops running through the streets, and Prague’s people fleeing, fighting, falling before them. It all seemed far away; the only sound that came to us was a distant sighing. Flocks of imps drifted here and there like birds.

The Emperor ceased his loud complaints. The group hurried in silence through the night. So far, so good. We were at the Black Tower now, at the top of the eastern steps, and the way ahead was clear.

A flutter of wings; Queezle landed beside me, ashen-faced. She was wounded in the side. ‘Trouble?’ I said.

‘Not the ghuls. An afrit. But a golem came – destroyed it. I’m fine.’

Onwards down the stairs in the side of the hill. Light from the burning castle was reflected in the waters of the Vltava below, giving it a melancholy beauty. We met no one, no one pursued us, and soon the worst of the conflict was left behind.

As the river neared, Queezle and I gave each other hopeful looks. The city was lost, as was the Empire, but escape here would allow us some small restoration of personal pride. Although we loathed our servitude, we also thoroughly disliked being beaten. It looked as if we were going to get away.

The ambush came when we were nearly at the bottom of the hill.

With a scuttle and a rush, six djinn and a band of imps hopped out onto the steps below. The Emperor and his courtiers cried out and fell back in disarray. Queezle and I tensed, ready to spring.

A light cough behind us. As one, we turned.

A slim young man stood five steps above. He had tight blond curls, big blue eyes and wore sandals and a toga in the late-Roman style. He had a rather sippy, coy expression on his face, as if he couldn't hurt a fly. However, as an extra detail that I couldn't help but notice, he also carried a monstrous scythe with a silver blade.

I checked him out on the other planes, in the faint hope that he might actually be an eccentric human on his way to a fancy-dress party. No such luck. It was an afrit of some potency. I swallowed. This wasn't good at all.[fn10](#)

'Mr Gladstone's compliments to the Emperor,' the young man said. 'He requests the pleasure of his company. The rest of you rabble can make yourselves scarce.'

That sounded reasonable. I looked at my master beseechingly, but he furiously motioned me forward. I sighed, took a reluctant step towards the afrit.

The young man tsked loudly. 'Oh, hop it, small-timer. You haven't a chance.'

His derision stoked my fury. I pulled myself up. 'Beware,' I said coldly. 'You underestimate me at your peril.'

The afrit batted his eyelashes with an ostentatious lack of concern. 'Indeed? Have you a name?'

‘A name?’ I cried. ‘I have *many* names! I am Bartimaeus! I am Sakhr al-Jinni! I am N’gorso the Mighty and the Serpent of Silver Plumes!’

I paused dramatically. The young man looked blank. ‘Nope. Never heard of you. Now if you’ll just—’

‘I have spoken with Solomon—’

‘Oh, please!’ The afrit made a dismissive gesture. ‘Haven’t we all? Let’s face it, he got around.’

‘I have rebuilt the walls of Uruk, Karnak and Prague—’

The young man smirked. ‘Prague? What, these ones here? The ones it took Gladstone five minutes to break down? Sure you didn’t work on Jericho too?’

‘Yes, he did,’ Queezle put in. ‘One of his first jobs. He keeps quiet about it, but—’

‘Look, Queezle—’

The afrit fingered his scythe. ‘Last chance, djinni,’ he said. ‘Vamoose. You can’t win this one.’

I shrugged in a resigned sort of way. ‘We’ll see.’

And so, sad to say, we did. Very quickly, too. My first four Detonations were deflected by the twirling scythe. The fifth, which I’d made a real humdinger, rebounded directly at me, sending me crashing off the path and down the hill in a shower of essence. I tried to rise, but fell back in pain. My wound was too great; I could not recover in time.

Up on the path, the imps were pouring onto the courtiers. I saw Queezle and a burly djinni spin past, hands at each other’s throats.

With insulting nonchalance, the afrit ambled down the slope towards me. He winked and raised the silver scythe.

And at that moment, my master acted.

He’d not been a particularly good one, all told – he’d been too fond of the Stipples for starters – but from my point of view his last deed was the best thing he ever did.

The imps were all around him, vaulting over his head, ducking between his legs, reaching for the Emperor. He gave a cry of fury and from a pocket in his jacket produced a

Detonation stick, one of the new ones made by the alchemists of Golden Lane in response to the British threat. They were shoddy, mass-produced rubbish, inclined to explode too fast, or often not at all. Either way, it was best, when using them, to throw them speedily in the general direction of the enemy. But my master was a typical magician. He wasn't used to personal combat. He gabbled the Word of Command all right, but then proceeded to hesitate, holding the stick above his head and feinting at the imps, as if undecided which one to choose.

He hesitated a fraction too long.

The explosion tore half the stairs away. Imps, Emperor and courtiers were blown into the air like dandelion seeds. My master himself vanished utterly, as if he had never been.

And with his death, the bonds that tethered me withered into nothing.

The afrit brought the scythe blade down, exactly where my head had lain. It drove uselessly into the ground.

Thus, after several hundred years, and a dozen masters, my ties to Prague were broken. But as my grateful essence fled in all directions, and I looked down upon the burning city and the marching troops, on the wailing children and the whooping imps, on the death throes of one empire and the bloody baptism of the next, I must say I didn't feel particularly triumphant.

I had a feeling it was all going to get a whole lot worse.

[fn1](#) *The Seven Planes*: The seven accessible planes are superimposed upon each other, and each reveals certain aspects of reality. The first includes ordinary material things (trees, buildings, humans, animals etc.), which are visible to all; the other six contain spirits of various kinds going quietly about their business. Higher beings (such as me) can use inner eyes to observe all seven planes at once, but more lowly creatures have to make do with seeing fewer. Humans are remarkably lowly. Magicians use contact lenses to see planes two to three, but most people only see the first plane, and this makes them ignorant about all kinds of magical activity. For example, there's probably something invisible with lots of tentacles hovering behind your back right NOW.

[fn2](#) Doubtless, this was where the British magicians were skulking, at a safe distance from the action. My Czech masters were just the same. In war, magicians always like to reserve the most dangerous jobs for themselves, such as fearlessly guarding large quantities of food and drink a few miles behind the lines.

[fn3](#) Each sentry was a minor djinni, scarcely better than a common foliot. Times were hard in Prague; the magicians were strapped for slaves and quality control was not what it should have been. The chosen semblances of my sentries proved as much. Instead of fearsome, warlike guises, I was presented with two shifty vampire bats, a weasel, a pop-eyed lizard and a small and rather mournful frog.

[fn4](#) Five heads knocking into each other in quick succession. It was like an unusual executive toy.

[fn5](#) i.e. accurate.

[fn6](#) They found no one, as their disappointed keening soon attested. The suburbs were deserted. Almost as soon as the British army crossed the Channel, the Czech authorities had begun preparing for the inevitable attack on Prague. As a first precaution, the population of the city was removed within the walls - which, incidentally, were the strongest in Europe at the time, a marvel of magical engineering. Did I mention I had a hand in their construction?

[fn7](#) The telescope contained an imp whose gaze allowed humans to see by night. These are useful devices, although capricious imps sometimes distort the view, or add perverse elements of their own: streams of golden dust, strange dreamlike visions, or ghostly figures from the user's past.

[fn8](#) Comparing masters is rather like comparing facial spots: some are worse than others, but even the best don't exactly tickle your fancy. This one was the twelfth Czech magician I'd served. He wasn't overly cruel, but he was a bit sour, as if lemon juice ran in his veins. He was also thin-lipped and pedantic, obsessed with his duty to the Empire.

[fn9](#) It was rather cat-like in itself, if you get my meaning.

[fn10](#) The measliest afrit is worth avoiding, and this one was formidable indeed. On the higher planes, his forms were vast and terrifying, so presumably appearing in such a weedy first-plane guise appealed to his twisted sense of humour. I can't say I was laughing, though.

Part One

1

LONDON: A GREAT and prosperous capital, two thousand years old, which in the hands of the magicians aspired to be the centre of the world. In size at least it had succeeded. It had grown vast and ungainly on the rich feasts of empire.

The city sprawled for several miles on either side of the Thames, a smoke-bound crust of housing, dotted with palaces, towers, churches and bazaars. At all times and in all places, it thrummed with activity. The streets were clogged and crowded with tourists, workers and other human traffic, while the air buzzed invisibly with the passage of imps busy about their masters' errands.

On the crowded quays extending into the grey waters of the Thames, battalions of soldiers and bureaucrats waited to set sail on journeys across the globe. In the shadows of their ironclad sailing ships, colourful merchant vessels of every size and shape negotiated the cluttered river. Bustling carracks from Europe; sharp-sailed Arab dhows, laden with spices; snub-nosed junks from China; elegant, slim-masted clippers from America - all were surrounded and impeded by the tiny riverboats of the Thames watermen, who competed loudly for the custom of guiding them into dock.

Two hearts powered the metropolis. To the east was the City district, where traders from distant lands gathered to exchange their wares; to the west, hugging a sharp bend in the river, lay the political mile of Westminster, where the magicians worked ceaselessly to extend and protect their territories abroad.

The boy had been in central London on business; now he was returning to Westminster on foot. He walked at an easy

pace, for though it was still early morning, it was already warm, and he could feel the sweat beading beneath his collar. A slight breeze caught the edges of his long black coat and whipped it up behind him as he went. He was aware of the effect, which pleased him. Darkly impressive, it was; he could sense heads turning as he passed. On *really* windy days, with his coat flapping out horizontally, he had the feeling he didn't look quite so stylish.

He cut across Regent Street and down between the whitewashed Regency buildings to Haymarket, where the street-sweepers were busy with broom and brush outside the theatre-fronts and young fruit sellers were already beginning to parade their wares. One woman supported a tray piled high with fine, ripe colonial oranges, which had been scarce in London since the southern European wars began. The boy approached; as he passed, he flipped a coin dextrously into the small pewter bowl hanging from her neck and, with an extension of the same movement, plucked an orange from the top of the tray. Ignoring her thanks, he went his way. He did not break stride. His coat trailed impressively behind him.

At Trafalgar Square a series of tall poles, each striped with a dozen spiralling colours, had recently been erected; gangs of workmen were at that moment winching ropes into place between them. Each rope was heavily laden with jaunty red, white and blue flags. The boy stopped to peel his orange and consider the work.

A labourer passed, sweating under the weight of a mass of bunting.

The boy hailed him. 'You, fellow. What's all this in aid of?'

The man glanced sideways, noticed the boy's long black coat and immediately attempted a clumsy salute. Half the bunting slipped out of his hands onto the pavement. 'It's for tomorrow, sir,' he said. 'Founder's Day. National holiday, sir.'

'Ah yes. Of course. Gladstone's birthday. I forgot.' The boy tossed a coil of peel into the gutter and departed, leaving

the workman grappling with the bunting and swearing under his breath.

And so down to Whitehall, a region of massive grey-clad buildings, heavy with the odour of long-established power. Here, the architecture alone was enough to browbeat any casual observer into submission: great marble pillars; vast bronze doors; hundreds upon hundreds of windows with lights burning at every hour; granite statues of Gladstone and other notables, their grim, lined faces promising the rigours of justice for all enemies of State. But the boy tripped with light steps past it all, peeling his orange with the unconcern of one born to it. He nodded to a policeman, flashed his pass to a guard and stepped through a side gate into the courtyard of the Department of Internal Affairs, under the shade of a spreading walnut tree. Only now did he pause, gulp down the remainder of his orange, wipe his hands on his handkerchief and adjust his collar, cuffs and tie. He smoothed back his hair a final time. Good. He was ready now. It was time to go to work.

More than two years had passed since the time of Lovelace's rebellion, and the sudden emergence of Nathaniel into the elite. By now he was fourteen years old, taller by a head than when he had returned the Amulet of Samarkand to the protective custody of a grateful Government; bulkier, too, but still lean-framed, with his dark hair hanging long and shaggy around his face after the fashion of the day. His face was thin and pale with long hours of study, but his eyes burned hot and bright; all his movements were characterized by a barely suppressed energy.

Being a keen observer, Nathaniel had soon perceived that among working magicians, appearance was an important factor in maintaining status. Shabby attire was frowned upon; indeed it was a sure-fire mark of mediocre talent. He