

# The Artificers

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## Preface

This piece is set in the world of Chrono Trigger, being a window into the history and motivations of the Three Gurus of Zeal. It's intended for people who have played the game and are familiar with its plot, but may still be intelligible to non-players. Parts 1–3 mostly stand on their own. Parts 4 and 5 tie into the rest of the game more, and may be harder to follow.

I've violated canon in a few cases where I felt a strict interpretation would detract from the story. I have not played Chrono Cross and know next to nothing of Radical Dreamers, so I've made no attempt to integrate those parts of the Chrono series canon. Just pretend this was all written in 1996.

If you want to give feedback, please direct it to [error@feymarch.net](mailto:error@feymarch.net), or post a review at Archive of Our Own. Here are some things I would appreciate knowing about if you spot them:

- Spelling and usage errors.
- Broken formatting.
- Continuity errors.
- Anything cheesy or narmish. (ham is mostly OK)
- Things That Just Don't Make Sense.

If you haven't played the game, I also want to know about anything that fails to make sense because of apparent missing information. That doesn't mean I'll fix it, but I want to know about it.

I'm indebted to the makers of the [Chrono Compendium Encyclopedia](#)<sup>1</sup>, and particularly those responsible for the [Chrono Trigger Comprehensive Script](#)<sup>2</sup>. Their collection of reference material was indispensable. Additional

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<sup>1</sup>[http://www.chronocompendium.com/Term/Main\\_Page.html](http://www.chronocompendium.com/Term/Main_Page.html)

<sup>2</sup><http://www.chronocompendium.com/Term/Scripts.html>

thanks to anyone who posted segments of the game on Youtube, which I used extensively in writing Part Four.

And very special thanks to the denizens of the Less Wrong Study Hall, whose regular support has kept me on track and writing, and without whom this may never have become a finished product. You are awesome.

# Part I

## Life

*“The ancient red rock has been passed down through the ages.  
From it, a magic pendant and a knife were made. We embody  
Melchior’s dreams, sealed, within the knife. . .”*

– Masa

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In a sense, the dream that would one day be called the Masamune began the day the Mammon Machine was completed.

Melchior, the Guru of Life, stood at the foot of its dais. He cupped the Dreamstone pendant that served as its key in his hands and inspected it. He didn’t *see* any errors in the engravings on its surface, but he checked again all the same. One could never be too careful.

“How’s it look?” Belthasar called out absently. Up on the dais itself, he and Gaspar looked over the Machine, one checking the front, the other the back.

“I don’t see anything wrong,” Melchior said, “but we’ll trade places when you’re done.”

Melchior was pretty sure Belthasar didn’t hear him. The man just liked to talk. He was too far gone in his work to hear the response.

After a few minutes the three of them rotated. Belthasar took the pendant, Gaspar took his place, Melchior took Gaspar’s. No one found any mistakes. They rotated again. When all three had vetted everything, they gathered to confer, and Melchior took the pendant back.

There were six people in the room. The Gurus themselves, Queen Zeal, her daughter Schala, and a scribe. The scribe was not common; everyone present was perfectly capable of spelling words on to paper. But Melchior didn’t want any magic in the room except that of the Mammon Machine itself.

“We’re ready,” Melchior told the Queen.

She nodded. “Good. Schala?”

“I’m ready, too.” She reached out a hand, and Melchior placed the pendant in her open palm. She hesitated, then bowed her head and looped it around her neck.

Melchior looked at the scribe briefly.

“I am also prepared, Guru,” the man said, gesturing with his quill.

“All right. Test number one, activation without use. Schala, you can proceed.”

Schala's voice rose, clear and precise, and Melchior felt her reaching out to the Machine. It was like moving a mountain exactly an inch; this would take both powerful magic and a deft touch. Queen Zeal couldn't have done it. Power, she had. Skill? Sure. But caution and care weren't really her style, in Melchior's charitable opinion.

The queen had laughed when Melchior told her that.

The pendant began to glow, and the Machine woke. Schala's voice settled into a rhythmic cadence. The Machine's Dreamstone heart pulsed in time with it.

Melchior felt the magic stabilize. So did Schala. She ended her chant. The Mammon Machine kept running.

"Fellows," Melchior said, nodding at Belthasar and Gaspar. The three of them verified that it was working properly, then continued.

"Second test, connection. Schala."

Speech again. Melchior felt magic stretch out from the Machine, stretch *down*, through the floor, through the stone beneath it, through the miles of sky and storm beneath that. Into the ocean, and still down, down, down.

Down there, buried in the earth, the creature called Lavos slept. It hadn't moved in millennia. Yet any mage that took the trouble to inspect it, even at this vast distance, could feel that it thrummed with power. Ancient, untapped. Usable. Zeal needed a power source. Something to replace the Sun Stone, aging and diminished. Something to maintain their home above the clouds and the eternal storm.

Lavos suited. It was life, of a sort, though not a kind the Guru of Life had ever seen. He thought it might not be of this world at all.

*Connection.* Everyone in the room took a step back. The invisible cord of magic reached Lavos, and Lavos's magic flooded back up its length, as if drawn by a water pump. Out of the ocean, to the floating islands of Zeal. Into the Mammon Machine. Melchior felt the Machine's spellwork straining to contain it. Schala's voice developed a touch of urgency. He put a hand on her shoulder. She glanced at him, but couldn't stop the spell to express appreciation.

The Mammon Machine held. The flow calmed. It was still vast, but it was steady. The Machine's heart began to glow.

"It's working," Melchior said.

It was indeed working. The Dreamstone heart bore all the power that came in. Unlike the Sun Stone, it was limited in what it could hold, but that was okay. It would do well enough.

Schala fell silent again. She smiled at the Gurus, tired but triumphant.

“Third test, usage,” Melchior said. “But if you need a moment to rest, feel free.”

“Melchior,” Queen Zeal said, “If you’ve no objection, I’ll do this part.”

Melchior considered. “Sure, if you want.”

Queen Zeal stepped up on to the Mammon Machine’s dais. It wasn’t necessary to touch the Machine to use it, but she reached out anyway, rested a hand on it. Her face...twisted, as if in pain. She didn’t say anything. Melchior frowned; he was the only one in a position to see it.

The queen raised her other hand and summoned a ball of light, shining blue and silver. It was a simple thing, but it served well enough as a test. Melchior and the others could see her channeling power from the Machine, expending Lavos’s magic instead of her own to fuel the spell.

Belthasar applauded, grinning. “Well done, us,” he said.

“Yes,” Melchior said quietly.

“Don’t look so grim, Melchior,” Schala said. “You really have done well. You can celebrate a little.”

Melchior let his lips twitch into a smile, and Schala hugged him. He eyed the Queen over her shoulder. She didn’t say anything about that moment when she’d touched the Machine, didn’t mention it hurting at all. Her face was *flat*. For some reason, that bothered him.

Lavos was *powerful*. That, of course, was what made it useful. Dangerous, too? Not to them, supposedly. The Enlightened Ones of Zeal had left the frozen wastes of the earth for the clear bright blue of the sky. An entire people that walked on air and thought it an everyday thing: of course they had nothing to fear.

Melchior felt a touch of fear anyway.

The dream that would one day be called the Masamune was conceived in Queen Zeal’s expression.

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Three weeks after the Machine’s activation, Queen Zeal summoned her Gurus to a private office. It was crowded; six seats around the table, of which five were filled. The Gurus Melchior and Belthasar occupied one side of the table. The Queen’s daughter, Schala, and her aide, Dalton, sat across from them. There was a chair for her son, Janus, but he sat in the corner instead, silent and watchful.

The Queen herself was at the head of the table. Melchior eyed her as carefully as he dared. Was there something wrong in her eyes? He couldn't tell.

*Why isn't Gaspar here?* Melchior thought. Such meetings had been called before, but the Queen invariably kept all her advisors in the loop. The Guru of Time was missing.

Between them all, at the center of the table, were two diagrams. The first was the design for the Mammon Machine. Melchior knew it well; he'd drawn most of it. The second diagram was a chart of a deep ocean trench, far away from any continent. The depths, distances, and markings were all written in Belthasar's incomprehensible scrawl. The ink was still wet in some places. Well. Now Melchior knew why the man had been so hard to find recently. But why a sea chart?

"I'll get straight to the point," Queen Zeal said. "I intend to move the Mammon Machine closer to its source, that we may improve its output. Belthasar has surveyed the relevant parts of the ocean. We are going to build on its floor. Belthasar, if you would."

Belthasar, the Guru of Reason, cleared his throat. "Very well. To begin with, Lavos is under here." He indicated a large red dot on the map. "It's around ten miles deep. Well, deeper than the ocean, anyway. The floor itself is almost five miles down. Almost makes me wonder if Lavos didn't want to be found. If we're going to get the Machine as close as possible, that means setting up shop on the sea floor. It's a long way down so hold your breath."

Dalton snickered. Belthasar smiled at him. To Dalton, the smile said "Thanks for appreciating the joke." To Melchior, the smile said "That was bait and you are easily amused." Melchior saw rather more of the Guru than Dalton did.

"A modified Skyway can get a man down there, of course, but not keep him alive afterwards. So the first order of business is to construct a reception room. A structure of a few hundred square feet, bolted to the rock, would be enough to set up a Skyway. It will need to be temporary and disposable, as we haven't a hope of placing it accurately; we'll be sinking it from the surface. We start by attaching a magically-reinforced metal cable to the structure. I'd like your help with that part, Melchior. It needs to be as close to indestructible as we can make it, and it needs to be long enough to reach the surface."

Melchior grunted in acknowledgement. It was fair; he had been a metalsmith before he was a Guru.

“Once the Skyway is ready, that’s how we get personnel down. We get additional components down by attaching them to the initial cable and sliding down it. Further cables can be deployed by the staff as needed. Breathable air can be extracted from the water with proper spellwork. From there, the plan is to extend a tunnel – or dig one, if it turns out to be easier that way – from the landing site to the intended primary chamber. We run a new sink cable and Skyway there. After that it’s a simple matter of construction.”

Melchior chuckled at that one himself. Dalton didn’t. He probably hadn’t understood the joke. It was, indeed, as simple as construction; but such construction would be anything but simple. Under all that pressure, in an overwhelmingly hostile environment, with everything too large to transport by Skyway having to be dropped in from the surface... Melchior himself would have dismissed the idea as impossible. But he was a smith, a philosopher, a botanist, a biologist. Belthasar was an engineer in spirit, and Melchior had seen Belthasar do many impossible things. No doubt there was a third diagram, only partially complete, specifying just how this impossible thing could be accomplished. That diagram would not have been included at the meeting, nor shown to anyone as yet; it undoubtedly existed, but it was drawn only in the mind of the Guru of Reason.

“Once construction is finished and the site is safe, there are a couple of options for transporting the Mammon Machine. We can sink it inside a container, or we can attempt to build a Skyway capable of moving it. Or we might come up with something else. In any case, it can be done, and we have time to work out how. Years, no doubt.”

“How many years?” Zeal asked, in a voice of anticipation.

Belthasar shrugged. “Until I have the design complete, I couldn’t say. Ten years, perhaps.”

*Liar*, Melchior thought, amused. *You’ll tell her eight when you have the design complete, and you’ll actually finish in five.*

Zeal just nodded. “How soon can we start?”

Belthasar shrugged again. “You know I can’t answer that. I’ll be ready when I’m ready.”

“*How soon?*” she snapped. Harshly.

Taken aback, Belthasar stared at her. He frowned. “Maybe six months?” he said, in a tentative tone. He was clearly disturbed, and well he should

be. Zeal had never treated the Gurus with disrespect before.

She was *eager*, Melchior realized. Belthasar saw it, too.

“Drop your other project and start on this at once. Melchior, nothing is required of you for the time being, but you will be needed to advise on the safe transport of the Machine and its appropriate use at such a distance. Make yourself available when needed.”

“All right,” he said. “A question, if I may?”

“Yes?”

“Why isn’t Gaspar here?”

Zeal looked confused. “Why would I need him? His expertise isn’t relevant to this.”

“Never mind. I’ll let him know what we are doing.”

“If you must,” she said, irritated at the distraction. “Now, let us discuss the manner of magic that will be needed, and who should be brought in on the project. . . .”

Melchior, as the other Gurus, existed to advise the Queen. So, he advised. But he was increasingly uncomfortable, and glad when the time came to stand up and leave. They filed out one by one, Dalton in the lead. He enjoyed being in the lead. It was one of the reasons Belthasar disliked him. Truth be told, Melchior didn’t care for that sort of ego either.

The Gurus followed. Schala left the Queen’s offices last. Her face was sad as they parted ways in the hall outside.

Melchior realized as he was leaving that the Queen’s daughter, holder of the key to the Mammon Machine, hadn’t said anything at all.

“Schala!” he called out to her. She turned as he approached.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

She motioned Janus away, and spoke softly. “Not entirely. Mother. . . she has been strange, lately. Driven. I see why she wants the Machine moved, but. . . she cares entirely too much about it. Maybe you can talk to her?”

“I’ll try, child. But it seemed in there like her mind was set.”

“It bothers me that she didn’t invite Gaspar, too. She’s not wrong, just. . . .”

“It’s out of order,” Melchior finished for her.

“Yes.”

“I’ll see what I can do. Keep that pendant safe.” *And keep it to yourself*, he privately thought.

“I will. Good day, Melchior.”

“Good day.”

---

Melchior headed to Gaspar's quarters without delay. The Guru of Time was there, as usual. His study was a mess of books, scrolls, and magical tools. He was writing in a book of his own when Melchior entered. His script was as neat as Belthasar's was careless, and it made for an amusing contrast with the heaps of unknown *stuff* that occupied the room as a whole. Precision in his work matched by indifference in his life: that was Gaspar.

"Hey," he said. "Are you back from the Queen's meeting already?" His tone was mild. It was always mild.

"You knew about it already, I suppose."

Gaspar dipped his pen in an ink pot and continued writing. "Belthasar came to get me beforehand. He didn't realize I wasn't invited, and thought I would have forgotten."

"Understandable. That's happened before."

"Right. So, what brings you here?"

Melchior sat down and described the meeting and his reservations. Gaspar continued his work, but they had known each other for far too long for that to be offensive. Melchior gave as complete an account as he could, and when he finally petered out, Gaspar set down the quill and turned around. To an outsider it would have looked like he was just beginning to pay attention. Melchior knew he just hadn't been ready to speak.

"What do you plan to do?" he asked.

"I don't know. There's nothing wrong with her plan. Nothing I can find, at least, and if it really couldn't be done, Belthasar would have said as much."

"Belthasar doesn't believe there's *anything* that can't be done," Gaspar said.

"Has he ever failed to make something he set out to create?" Melchior asked pointedly.

"Well...no," Gaspar admitted. "Not since before he was Guru, anyway. There's things he has set out to *understand* and failed, though. Like the Siblings."

Melchior smiled wryly in acknowledgement. The Three Siblings – Masa, Mune, and Doreen – were an enigma that none of them had managed to crack. They were not human. They had magic, and so the Enlightened Ones never minded their presence. But no one could remember a time

when they hadn't been around. They had no family besides themselves, belonged to no species Melchior had ever found record of, and never said anything substantiative about their past and origins. They did not bow to the Zeal monarchy's authority, but never made a point of contesting it either.

Melchior knew little of Doreen, but he knew the two brothers well. He liked them, and was pretty sure they felt the same. He could not claim to *understand* them, however.

Melchior wished to know what they were. Gaspar wished to know what they'd seen. Belthasar just wished to know what they knew. None of them got what they wanted. It was just something they had learned to live with.

"I'm afraid I don't have any advice for you," Gaspar said.

"That's all right. I just wanted to keep you informed. It bothers me that she didn't invite you."

"I don't feel left out."

"You mean you don't mind being left out."

Gaspar acknowledged him with a nod.

"Any relevant history?" Melchior asked.

"That's difficult," Gaspar said. "Lavos is a new entity to us. The closest comparison would probably be the discovery of the Sun Stone itself. Without it, we could never have pulled up the bones of the earth to make this place." Gaspar motioned vaguely with his hand, but Melchior understood; he meant Zeal, as a whole. "But knowing that now is different than knowing it then. It wasn't that one day we thought 'Well, we can't rise above the clouds, and that's a shame,' and the next day we realized we were wrong and tried it. Back then, we *never would have considered the possibility*. For a long time people didn't realize there *was* anything above the clouds.

"So, too, here. We just used Lavos's power to raise a new island, but that's almost irrelevant. Adding one more island is quantitative, not qualitative. If you want a prediction, here's one: Whatever true change Lavos brings, it's going to be something we haven't thought of yet. And it will be as drastic and unexpected now as living above the clouds or beneath the seas would have been, to the men and women who first unearthed the Sun Stone."

"I wonder," Melchior said, "If we could use Lavos to stop the winds entirely. Break up the clouds and let the sun shine through."

"You've been thinking that for a while, I take it." Gaspar said.

Melchior nodded.

“The Earthbound Ones would love us for it, at least. Right up until we all realized that without the clouds, we don’t have snow. Without snow there’s no fresh water. Without fresh water, we all die. For all our magic, we still can’t make water out of nothing.”

“Maybe. But the cloud cover hasn’t been there forever, has it?”

Gaspar frowned. “You have a point. There are prehistoric cave paintings on the surface that show the sun in the sky. I wonder... I wonder what they drank.”

“New project?”

“I think it just might be,” Gaspar said. “We know very little about what came before the eternal storm. I think I’ll try to fix that. Thanks, friend.”

“You’re welcome. Enjoy it.”

“You know I do.” The Guru of Time began to dig among one of his haphazard piles of books. “Now, let’s see...”

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A year later, Melchior was called upon to seal the Sun Stone away, and he began to understand just what Gaspar meant, about things that one simply didn’t consider.

*Here it has stood, he thought. For thousands of years, the power of the sun and the elements has borne our weight. Now it peters out, and we discard it.*

And something about that felt *wrong*.

The Sun Palace’s architect had been lost to history; even Gaspar didn’t know who built it. But Belthasar had been using it for inspiration in the design of what was now dubbed the Ocean Palace. Melchior could see why. The building was beautifully made, a work of art. Zeal’s ancestors had worshiped the Sun Stone as a gift from the heavens, and they had built a fitting shrine for it.

That shrine would be closed today.

Janus, the Queen’s son, had been sent with him. Melchior knew a bit about why. Janus wasn’t happy about the Stone being closed away. His mother felt he had silly, sentimental ideas about it, and thought taking part in the sealing would banish them. Melchior doubted it. He didn’t think the boy was being silly, either.

“The wind is silent, here,” Janus said as they entered.

“Of course it is,” Melchior said. “The storm is far below us, and this place was built to keep the noise of the outside world away.”

“That’s not what I mean.” Janus’s tone was sour.

“Sorry,” Melchior said, and didn’t inquire further. He was always a bit cautious around the prince, mostly for fear of hurting him. The boy, though nearly ten, had never shown a speck of magic. Most among the Enlightened Ones began at six or seven, and their power could be sensed well before that. Janus was of royal blood, and the others of his line were as powerful as wizards came. It was puzzling, and to many, shameful.

Janus never seemed overly sensitive about it, but he was taciturn. He didn’t seem to like Melchior much either. Or anyone else. Melchior had never seen him speak warmly to anyone but his sister and his cat.

The Palace was empty save for the Sun Stone. The Stone was perfectly spherical, and held in a bowl-topped pedestal to keep it from rolling. The bowl was deep, and shaped such that the light from the Stone angled upwards. It reflected off the vaulted roof, which diffused the light perfectly across the inside of the palace. The effect was like daylight indoors. It heated the building, too. There were gated openings in the roof that opened in the summer to let the heat out, and closed in the winter to keep it in.

“Well,” Melchior said, “Let’s do what we came for, I suppose.”

“This is stupid,” Janus said. He thought a moment, then added: “And you’re stupid.”

“That’s rude, boy. But I think you might be right.”

There were two things that had to be done. The entrance had to be sealed shut. And a guardian of sorts had to be erected, an elemental, to guard the stone in case someone made it in. Both spells would be linked to the Sun Stone for power, so that they wouldn’t fail until the Stone itself failed. After that it wouldn’t matter. Zeal just didn’t seem to want anyone using what little was left of the Stone’s power against her. She had become, in Melchior’s opinion, quite paranoid.

“Want to have a look first?” Melchior suggested.

Janus blinked. “Can we?” he grinned. It was the closest thing to enthusiasm Melchior had ever seen from him. He wasn’t sure if it stemmed from the idea of looking at the Stone, or just breaking the rules.

“Sure, why don’t we?” Melchior said. “But if you look straight at it, it will blind you. Hold still while I spell your eyes.”

“Okay.”

Melchior did so for both of them, and the light surrounding them seemed to dim significantly. Melchior walked up and looked over the side of the pedestal's bowl. He had done this before and suspected he would not have an opportunity again.

Despite its name, the Sun Stone wasn't much like its namesake. It was a foot across, shaped like an orb, and entirely made of some kind of translucent black glass. It looked like a huge obsidian gem. The light it radiated made Melchior's eyes hurt, even with magical protection. He glanced over at Janus. The boy stared at the Stone, mesmerized, and something about him looked wrong.

No. Felt wrong. The Stone's magic echoed throughout the chamber. Melchior could feel it on his skin, sense its absorption and reflection from the walls.

Janus's features stood out as sharply as anything else in its light. But magically... Melchior should have felt the Stone's power, absorbed into Janus's body, radiated back out, like it did with everything else. Instead... nothing.

Melchior, curious and disturbed, took a finger of magic and probed him directly. To an adult it would have been immensely rude; to a child it was barely acceptable.

Janus suddenly took his eyes off the Stone, alarmed. He whirled to face Melchior, shouted something incoherent, backpedaled, then tripped over his own feet and fell down. He lashed back at Melchior's spell instinctively, cutting it off, but that just confirmed what Melchior had already discovered.

Janus wasn't magically inert. Had he ever been? He was just *hiding* it. Janus was stronger than his mother, and his sister, and the Gurus. His talent was *immense*, but nobody had eyes to see it.

"Boy," Melchior said, "what on earth have you been doing? How long has it been?"

"Nothing!" Janus said, the instinctive lie of a child who hasn't yet learned to make his lies believable.

Melchior sighed, and sat down. Janus glared at him. Melchior just waited him out. People with secrets always, deep down, wanted to tell them. Children especially. He didn't have long to wait.

"Last winter," Janus said. "A little bit after the Mammon Machine finished and Mother went crazy. That's *your* fault, you jerk."

"And *nobody* knows?"

"Well, I guess you do," Janus said sourly.

“Why did you hide it?”

“Because Mother is nuts!” Janus said, tears held back in the corners of his eyes. “And she’s making Schala do all these things with the Machine, and that’s just making her more nuts, and sooner or later it’s going to take Schala too! And me!”

“You don’t want her ordering you to take Schala’s place.”

“I wouldn’t!”

“No, I guess you wouldn’t. But she’d try. And then... what?”

Janus really did start crying, then. “I don’t know. I don’t know. That’s what I’m afraid of.”

Melchior sighed. “I suppose I can’t really blame you. Well, I won’t tell her.”

“What am I supposed to do?” Janus blubbered.

Awkwardly, Melchior patted his shoulder. What did you tell a child who couldn’t trust his own blood?

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I’ll make it better.”

It sounded stupid and didn’t help. But Janus did stop crying, after a while.

“I’ll come up with something,” Melchior said, and then had a thought. “Tell me. You’re almost never alone. Have you done *anything* with magic before?”

“Not really. Just hide it. I don’t know how to do anything. I tried to fix some of Alfador’s scratches when he got in a fight with another cat, but I couldn’t do it. I can see the future a little bit – like, if someone’s going to die, I can tell. But I can’t do it on purpose. Nothing I try to do on purpose works.”

“Want to help me with this?” Melchior gestured vaguely at the Stone.

“I don’t know how,” Janus repeated, miserably.

Nothing buoyed a talented person like using that talent well. It would help the boy’s mood, and it would be good for him to learn something anyway. Melchior thought for a moment, and decided that he would make the Palace guardian out of fire. It suited a place consecrated to something that burned like the sun.

“Just follow along with me,” Melchior said. “And do what I do.”

When they were done, Melchior observed as Janus reformed his magical cloak. It was a sink, of sorts. Magical emanations touched him, were drawn in, and dissipated silently.

Melchior's interest was professional curiosity; nothing more. But the dream that would one day be called the Masamune was given form by Janus's strange power.

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"You're not seriously going down alone," Melchior said.

"Sure I am," Belthasar said, grinning. "I want to be the first to walk on the bottom of the ocean."

"What if, what if, and what if," Melchior said, his tone wry. It was a regular joke, and he didn't need to fill in the predicates; Belthasar *never* listened to What Ifs.

They were on the bridge of the Blackbird, flying towards the rising sun. They both adjusted their weight as it banked into a wide turn.

"We're about there, looks like," Belthasar said. "Anyway, yes, of course I'm doing it myself."

"One of these days, 'something new' is going to get you killed."

"It's not like someone else wouldn't have to run the same risk," Belthasar pointed out.

*If someone else dies, the project doesn't die with them*, Melchior thought in response, but it was pointless to voice it. Belthasar loved adventure; he would not be persuaded.

The Ocean Palace was six months behind schedule; only now were they sinking the Skyway room. The geology and geography of the ocean floor were inhospitable. It had taken longer than expected to design and spell a container that could withstand ocean pressures. Melchior's metal-strengthening had taken longer than expected.

On purpose.

It was a secret he hadn't even told the other Gurus: He no longer trusted that his creation would do good, and the more Queen Zeal's fury at the delays mounted, the more his concerns seemed confirmed. Melchior didn't know what to do about it, so he worked slowly. The more he could delay things, the more time he had to work out the correct action. There had to be a way to retain the Machine's power, restore the Queen's proper dignity (he did not use the word "sanity", even in his thoughts), and withdraw from Lavos's influence; for Melchior was now convinced that it was contact with Lavos itself that was the problem. The creature was in some way malevolent.

Perhaps he could modify the Machine to let its power through, but hold back anything else. . . .

The Blackbird began to circle above Lavos. Nothing could be seen, of course. The clouds were beneath them, the sea beneath that, and miles of rock beyond separated them from Lavos. But they were in the right place. Belthasar had almost single-handedly invented navigation, just so that he could usefully employ a flying machine. He would not be mistaken now.

"Well, time to go be a crab," Belthasar said. "I've been a bird already. Let's try something new."

He left the bridge, and he did not waste any time. Minutes later Melchior felt the Blackbird shudder and lift up as the Skyway container detached from its underbelly. It came into view off to starboard as they circled. Despite its size, it fell slowly. Belthasar, now inside the container, was holding it up with wind-magic. He was perfectly safe, for now.

After a while it disappeared below the clouds, and Melchior could see no more. He left the bridge and headed down to the makeshift Skyway room set up in the cargo hold. Once Belthasar reached the ocean floor and established himself, he would appear there. Melchior did not expect him for several hours. It may well take all day.

He found a surprise in the hold.

"Hey, old man Melchior! What are you up to?"

It was the Siblings. The two brothers, at least: Masa and Mune. They were curious creatures. They were not human, but stood upright, about five feet tall. They had pale, yellowish, hairless skin, and both their ears and their noses were long and pointed. They each wore a long white smock and a short scarf, and nothing else. They appeared to be twins, although they always referred to Masa as the elder brother. It was difficult to tell them apart, and so they wore the scarves in different colors; Masa in green, and Mune in blue.

The two of them were like kids, sometimes: irreverent and irrepressible. Melchior liked them, but they never took him seriously. He liked them *because* they never took him seriously.

It was Mune who had spoken. Melchior smiled at him. "Hello there, Mune. Are you the wind yet?" Wanting to become the wind was Mune's personal obsession.

Mune grinned back at him. "Pretty close today, old man. I went and peeked out one of the hatches and nearly fell."

Melchior laughed. “You haven’t changed, I see. I’m surprised to see the two of you here.”

“It’s all his fault,” Masa said. “He heard you were taking out the Black-bird and insisted on stowing away.”

“So what are we out here for, anyway?” Mune asked. “I felt Belty going down, but nobody’s screaming so I guess he’s all right.”

“He’s taking down the first piece of the Ocean Palace.” Melchior said. He kept his tone neutral.

“And you don’t like that.” That was Masa.

“Let’s just say I have my reservations.”

“So, what, he’s flying down in that big box that was hanging under this bird?” Mune asked.

“Yeah.”

“And he didn’t invite *me*?” Mune said, indignantly. “Doesn’t he like us anymore?”

“Maybe he didn’t want to listen to you blabber for hours while it sinks.”

“Hmph. I do *not* blabber.”

“True,” Masa said. “You *blather*. There’s a world of difference.”

“Can I throw him over the side, old man?”

“No. He might land on somebody.”

“So if he wouldn’t land on somebody, then I can throw him off? Aren’t we over the ocean right now?”

All three of them laughed. Melchior leaned up against the wall and sat down, crossing his legs. There were worse ways to spend time waiting than chatting with the Siblings. They were better company than the Queen’s retinue, that was for sure. Her dark moods appeared to be contagious; Dalton and his people were more abrasive, these days.

“How’s the Queen?” Mune asked suddenly. Melchior looked up. Mune’s eyes were as transparently innocent as always.

Instead of answering, Melchior asked: “Can you read my mind?”

“No. If I could read your mind, I wouldn’t have to ask. But I can *guess* real good, and you’re not happy.”

“She’s just awfully insistent on getting the Mammon Machine down near Lavos. She’s never been so...driven before. I don’t like it. She’s been odd ever since we started it up.”

“I never did like that thing,” Masa said. “You humans were never very good at handling power.”

“Hey,” Melchior objected, “we’ve done pretty well for ourselves, I think. Zeal is a wonderful place for all of us.”

“Not *all* of you,” Masa said darkly.

The Earthbound Ones. Of course he was right. Zeal was a land of clear lakes, green grasses, bright sunlight and marble cities. It was eudaimonic if you were born with the power of magic. . . and wholly out of reach if you were not. The Earthbound still lived on the surface. Their world was huge, but barren and cold. They could go anywhere, but had nowhere worth going.

“If Lavos and the Machine produce as much power as we hope,” Melchior said quietly, “we might be able to bring our life to the rest of the human race.”

Masa nodded in something close to approval. “You dream good dreams, old man.”

“Now you sound like your sister.”

“I got that one from her,” Masa admitted. “Just remember that not all dreams turn out well.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of. And the Queen’s behavior isn’t doing much to ease my worries.”

“So let’s throw *her* over the side!” Mune suddenly crowed. Melchior flinched and looked around. Hopefully no one heard that.

Masa didn’t rebuke his brother. “Perhaps Schala could step in, if her mother really isn’t well.”

Melchior sighed. “That makes sense but it wouldn’t work. Schala. . . well, she’s a good woman, if young. But her idea of responsibility is doing what her mother tells her. She may be royalty, but she *serves*.”

“Isn’t that a good trait in a ruler?”

“In a ruler, yes. In a leader, no.”

“And those aren’t always the same thing,” Masa finished the thought, grinning. “You’re too wise for me, old man.”

“Oh, stop making fun of me, I’m serious. Anyway, stepping in as a regent just isn’t something Schala would do, even if the possibility were handed to her.”

“What about you, old man? Do *you* serve?”

Melchior thought about it. “I suppose I do,” he said.

The brothers waited for more.

“For now,” he added.

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Melchior's office was effectively a greenhouse. Normal people kept their plants in pots filled with soil. The Guru of Life kept himself in something like a pot, and the rest of the room was lined with soil. A glass ceiling let the light in. Small bushes grew on each side of the door. The walls were lined with tightly-planted trees interspersed with rooted vegetables. Vines crept up and around what passed for his desk. The desk itself was a single piece of living wood, rooted in a pair of separated soil pots, its growth guided by magic to produce a surface as flat as any cut with steel. Similar magic kept the plants from starving each other or growing beyond their bounds. A few small animals explored among the plants. Another spell kept them from wandering outside uninvited. The end result was a room that looked like wild growth but was actually carefully managed.

Melchior sat at his desk, observing a small rodent. He murmured some soft words under his breath, extending a whisper of magic. It looked at him, its eyes heavy, and it lay down. Within moments its breathing slowed with sleep. Melchior positioned a looking glass over it and inspected. Complex spells embedded in the glass focused light and magnified images; it could also see through objects at a slight depth, so one could, say, inspect internal organs. Melchior had invented the device in his youth, to displace vivisection – which nauseated him – but that was not what he was using it for today. He was studying the structure of fur. Furred animals were rare in Zeal; most species from the surface couldn't survive above the clouds without magical assistance. Too warm.

He took notes on parchment as he went, in plain ink. He could have spelled words on to the paper, but that would have diverted his attention; he could write by hand without thinking much about it. He worked steadily, patiently. The stuff was remarkably like human hair, which was not really all that surprising in retrospect.

When he was done the page was covered in notes. He nudged the creature gently with one finger, and it woke. It looked at him, snorted, and scampered back into his strange indoor garden.

"Thanks," Melchior said.

He heard footsteps outside, and listened for a knock that didn't come. The door swung open, and Queen Zeal stepped in. Schala was with her, a step back, and so was Dalton. They both looked irritated.

*She always knocked before*, Melchior thought. The thought stuck with him more than it really should have. What did she want?

“Melchior!” Zeal said, her voice high-pitched and angry, “what’s this I hear about you turning off the Mammon Machine?”

*Oh. That.*

“Maintenance,” he said. “Tomorrow in the early afternoon, when no one is scheduled to tap it. The flow of energy isn’t as smooth as I’d like; I think the work at the Ocean Palace is disrupting the connection. I need to make some adjustments.” His tone was carefully neutral.

Zeal frowned; he got the distinct impression she was looking for something to complain about. “Why do you need to turn it off for that?”

“It’s unsafe not to.” Simple. To the point.

“You should have discussed this with me!”

“You were busy when I noticed the problem. It didn’t seem necessary to wait.”

“Why is it a problem at all? Did you make a *mistake* when you built it?”

“Yes,” Melchior said mildly.

She blinked.

“The design did not account for the presence of unrelated, very strong magic located between Lavos and the Machine. In part that’s because the Ocean Palace wasn’t under consideration at that time. But it is still a condition that I should have taken into account. So, yes, I made a mistake, and I am fixing it. Gasper will assist me. I thought it best not to ask Belthasar, since he is otherwise occupied of late.”

“Mother,” Schala said from the door, “let Melchior do his work. He knows what he’s doing. We’ve done without the Mammon Machine all our lives. We can stand to lose it for a day.” Her face still betrayed irritation – behind her mother’s back, out of her sight – but she copied Melchior’s tone exactly. Not conciliatory or defensive; that would have invited argument. Just calm.

“Very well,” Zeal said. “Just see it done.”

She strode from the room. Schala glanced after her. It looked like she wanted to stay.

“Schala!” Zeal called behind her, not turning her head.

“I’m coming,” she said. She met Melchior’s eyes for a moment and silently mouthed “Sorry,” at him, then turned and followed the Queen.

Melchior went back to his work, but his heart wasn't in it. Eventually he gave up and went looking for Gaspar. The Guru of Time was in his office, reading, as usual. Melchior sat and waited for the Guru to reach a good stopping point. Eventually Gaspar looked up.

"You look troubled," he said.

"Did you mention tomorrow's maintenance to the Queen?" Melchior asked.

"No. But I did let the staff know to expect us. Perhaps one of them passed it on. She certainly doesn't seem very happy with us right now."

"She came to see you, too?"

"She left just before you got here."

"What did you tell her?"

"I told her I agreed with your assessment and that it is necessary. Both of which are true. She was angry."

Melchior stood up and paced, feeling uncharacteristically restless. He started reading titles off the bookshelves, realized he didn't remember any of them, then sat down.

"What are you reading?" he asked. The question was irrelevant and they both knew it.

"*Principles of Chronomancy*. First century. Melchior, it bothers me too. I've just been too busy to do anything about it. She said something strange as she was leaving. You should probably know about it."

"Oh?"

"She said 'Hurry up. We can't afford to wait for immortality.'"

Melchior bit his lip. "There's a lot of people who believe Lavos's power will bring immortality to the Enlightened. Her, too?"

"It seemed like it. She may be right, of course. Remember what I said, about dramatic, qualitative changes?"

"I do. But I don't like it."

"Really? I could do without death, all things considered."

"That's not what I meant. Do you believe the same?"

"I don't 'believe' anything on the subject. It's a possibility."

"That's the right way to look at it. But she's already acting based on that assumption. She never asked me about it. Or you. She's taking it for truth, but hasn't bothered to ask the experts – who are also supposed to be her personal advisors."

"She's hardly the first to believe what she wants to be true."

“Sure, except... *Queen Zeal*? That’s out of character for her. It’s exactly the sort of assumption that she would check, *before* acting. And she *always* talks to us. Or did.”

Gaspar was silent for a while. Melchior shared the silence with him.

“You’ve worked all that out already, haven’t you?” Melchior asked eventually.

Gaspar smiled wryly at him. “Yes. I wanted your opinion but didn’t want it tainted by mine.”

“Fair enough. Maybe we’re being overly critical. She’s spent a lot more time with Belthasar than us recently; perhaps she’s talked to him about it. I’ll ask him. Maybe he’s figured out something we haven’t. Wouldn’t be the first time.”

“All right. I know I’ve been keeping to myself recently, but if you need anything, let me know.”

“Thanks.”

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*A nightmare. He was trapped in a frozen prison of magic, far away from anywhere, unable to move, unable to think. His consciousness was strangely split. One part of him was in stasis, sleeping dreamlessly. The other part of him was a dream-self, observing without interacting. He did not know where he was, but he knew how he had gotten there: He had been imprisoned. Cast out. Away from Zeal.*

*He had spoken out against the Queen’s plans for the Machine, but he had opposed her on such matters before. This time she hadn’t taken it well. Criticism was no longer welcome. Doubt was treachery. Lavos was all she cared about.*

*Zeal was no longer Zeal. Her mind was poison and she had cast him out for trying to save her. His work had somehow been discovered; that damned prophet knew everything.*

*Everything, what everything? What was this dream?*

*He had hidden the knife, at least. There was that. For some reason, they had been looking for a sword.*

*He still couldn’t move.*

*Melchior woke.*

He was chilled, goosebumps making their presence known so strongly that it was painful. His breath came in gasps. In his waking he felt as if he still could not move, and was momentarily terrified.

The feeling went away. He sat up. Proper memory flooded back in.

He was in Enhasa, the City of Dreams. The project no longer needed him, not for now. He wanted to get away from the palace and have some time to think. Enhasa had a way about it. Something in the air triggered dreams – potent, vivid dreams that reliably stayed with you when you woke. Here, you could think clearly in a dream, sometimes. You could control it, make your imagination become reality for so long as you were asleep. Here, you could think clearly *about* dreams, all the time. Here, the window into your own soul was wide open.

His chambers at Enhasa were comfortable. The residents were relaxed and peaceful. Melchior liked it here. It was a good place to come and collect his thoughts.

“You dream bad dreams, great student of Life.”

Melchior didn’t let himself jump. “Good morning, Doreen. Your brothers say hello. Also, knock before you come in, please.”

“I did. And then I came in.”

Doreen had the same alien look and wore the same white smock as Masa and Mune. Visually, one could barely tell them apart.

“You have the look of one who has had a future-dream,” she said.

Melchior reflected. It happened sometimes, in this place.

“I was trapped, somewhere,” he said. “Imprisoned by the Queen.”

“I see. What are you doing to earn such a thing?”

Melchior looked sharply at her. “Nothing...yet. Have you been talking to your brothers about me?”

“Do I need to speak to them to know their thoughts?”

He sighed. He should have known better than to ask. “Fair enough. I have certain doubts about the Queen’s actions. I have not yet decided what to do about that. But there is a reasonable chance I will do *something*. So yes, it’s possible I might earn imprisonment one day.” He did not hesitate to share his thoughts with Doreen. The Siblings were all as discreet as any man might ever want. Masa and Mune delighted in secrets but never shared them. Doreen just never answered questions.

“She is not known for abusing her authority.”

“That’s true. She isn’t. I’m going to get dressed. Walk with me afterward.”

He dressed simply. As a Guru, he was a natural focus of others' curiosity. There was no need to draw more attention than necessary.

Enhasa was one of the oldest cities of Zeal, and like most cities from the early era it was built as one large continuous structure. Gaspar had once told Melchior that the design was an anachronism, a holdover from the times when Zeal's people still lived beneath the clouds. Down there, exposure to the elements could kill you. Men lived in caves and, if they built on the surface, built everything together under one roof. It minimized the need to go out in the wind and snow. When humanity founded Zeal, its people kept the mindset for a time, and with magic they made grand cities that were wholly indoors.

Melchior wanted privacy, and here that meant going outside. His chambers were not far from an exit, so they left Enhasa proper and went out into the fields. The grass was short and bright with life. To the north, a wide road connected Enhasa to other, smaller communities on this floating isle. To the south, less than a mile away, the island ended in a sheer drop. Far below, the endless sea of clouds churned.

Melchior and Doreen walked in that direction. The cloud sea that was so violent on the surface looked beautiful from up here. He wasn't afraid of falling. A magical barrier at the edge of the cliff kept anyone from falling off, while leaving the view clear and unspoiled.

"All right," he said at last. "The Mammon Machine. I built it; or at least, I designed it and led the construction. Now Queen Zeal is obsessed with it, and I don't like that."

Doreen grinned toothily at him. "You put your hand in a fire and wonder why you get burned. Are you as wise as these people claim you to be, Guru?"

"Maybe not."

"What will you do?" she asked.

"Are there self-fulfilling future-dreams?" Melchior asked in return. Doreen knew more about dreams than anyone.

"Are you dreaming now?" she responded.

Then she vanished.

*Drat. I should have known better than to ask her questions.*

Melchior trudged along the cliff edge, thinking. *If I wanted to stop or destroy the Mammon Machine, how would I do it?*

It was just a hypothetical, but going by his nightmare, thinking it was treason. The thought itself was prompted by the same nightmare, of course.

If Zeal would be willing to imprison him, she had changed so much as to be someone else entirely. If she had been malevolently altered by her contact with Lavos, then Melchior was perfectly justified in breaking that contact.

Hence the nightmare could create the conditions required to fulfill it.

*But not the conditions that justify such an act*, he mused. *It just showed me what already is. Believing it doesn't change anything about the real world.*

*If I wanted to break it...*

There were two requirements. The Machine's power, through its connection with Lavos, was self-sustaining; as long as the magic was flowing it would not stop however badly damaged. The first step, then, would be to sever that connection. The second was to permanently damage the Machine by shattering the stone at its heart. That stone was Melchior's own work; no other had the skill to reproduce it.

He could do it, he thought, even under his own power. But not quickly. Not quickly enough. He would be noticed. Stopped. Arrested. Imprisoned.

He needed a better way to achieve the same goal. A sharper, more violent way than simply applying his own magic. Well, he wasn't as familiar with history as Gaspar, but he knew a few things about the bad old days before Zeal. He knew about weapons.

Melchior was a smith at heart. He needed to make a weapon.

The dream that would one day be called the Masamune was dreamed in the fields of Enhasa.

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He slept in Enhasa. He meditated in Kajar. He visited the Sun Palace, closed though it was. He watched the North Palace from a distance, where ancient weapons were kept, long unused, and wondered if there was anything within it he could use. A futile hope; it had been sealed for years, and he could not break that seal without it being known.

He traveled restlessly from place to place. Weeks passed. A month. Two months. Somewhere, miles away beneath the sea and ice, the Ocean Palace was taking shape. He only had so much time. But if his future-dream was any indication, he only had one chance to get this right, too.

These things, he needed:

*A blade.* Something to pierce the physical Machine. Something to reach its heart of stone and destroy it.

*An explosive.* Not a physical one, though Belthasar knew how to make such things. A magical one. Melchior had created the Mammon Machine with care, and the knowledge that it would have to withstand immense forces. But not *sharp* forces. He had designed it to handle a continuous flow. A sufficiently large burst of magic could stress it beyond its limits, breaking said flow.

*A counterspell.* The magic surrounding the Machine was considerable. It would resist penetration. Melchior himself could pierce it, but not quickly enough. It had to be weakened, neutered. Only then could the weapon do its work.

Melchior was a smith; he could make a blade. It did not need to be fancy. A long knife would do. His choices of substance were limited; it had to be made of something that could bear magic, most likely the same red rock he had used for the Machine's heart.

For a counterspell, he thought he could make use of Janus's magic sink. The boy had been inventive but not subtle; his spell didn't truly *hide* his magic so much as tuck away any nearby power, diffuse it into the environment. Melchior was certain he could improve upon it. Rather than diffuse magic, the weapon would absorb and then nullify it.

He did not know how to create a sufficiently powerful explosion of magic, so as to shatter the Machine's remaining shell and allow the blade to penetrate. That did not mean Melchior could not do it; merely that he had not worked it out yet.

He passed through Kajar while Gaspar was studying there. The Guru of Time had withdrawn even further from public life in recent days, leaving events to take their course. Melchior did not know what occupied him; he had troubles of his own. But troubles that he thought Gaspar might be able to help with.

Gaspar habitually warded his door shut when he was busy. The ward was very light, not really meant to keep anyone out. It was a courtesy of sorts; it meant "I'm occupied; please don't enter without good cause." Melchior waited outside, but the ward remained up. Eventually he decided he had shown enough patience. He canceled Gaspar's ward and opened the door.

Gaspar was reading. He didn't notice Melchior enter. Melchior eventually tapped him on the shoulder to get his attention. Gaspar started, then turned his head. He blinked his eyes blearily.

“Um,” Melchior began, at a loss for words. He suddenly felt guilty for stepping in. “Are you all right, my friend?”

“I’m fine, I’m fine. Just . . . tired. I’m sorry, have you been waiting long?”

“Not really.” It had actually been well over an hour. “I was looking for some old books and thought you might be able to help me. But it can wait for tomorrow, I think. You look as if you haven’t slept in . . . well, far too long.”

“Yes, well, my own fault,” Gaspar said. “I’ve been cheating a bit, to get more hours in a day. What time is it?”

“Midafternoon.”

Gaspar nodded slowly, his exhaustion mixed with satisfaction. “I got up this morning as usual, but I had some work I wanted to get done today and I’ve been at it for nearly twenty hours.”

“No wonder you look like hell warmed over.”

“Yes, well. I must admit it didn’t occur to me that it would *feel* like twenty hours. On top of maintaining the spell that long. Well. Oh well. I suppose it is still useful. What can I do for you?”

“Well, you can *sleep*, for one thing,” Melchior said. “I wasn’t kidding, you look like you could keel over any second. Go sleep. The other thing you can do for me is to point me to any books you have on the Northern Palace.”

Gaspar blinked. “That place is a museum. Oh. Of course. That’s why you need me. Um.” He scratched his head. “What exactly is it you want to know?”

“A catalogue of the contents, if possible.”

“Sure, I have that,” Gaspar said, and began looking through one of his voluminous bookcases. “I kept a copy when it was sealed last century. Superstitious nonsense, sealing it; it was a treasure trove of ancient knowledge, even if none of it has any use today. It’s not like anyone was going to pick up a pre-Zeal sword or axe or something and start using it. Same for the Sun Palace. No offense.”

“Actually, I agree with you. But what’s done is done.”

“I suppose. Ah, found it.” Gaspar pulled a particularly thick book off the shelf. It was quite old, but in good condition. Gaspar took good care of his various collections. “This one is just a list of everything that was in there. Is that enough?”

“Maybe.” Melchior had a sudden thought. “I found some old spellwork down on the surface that I think might be pre-Zeal. I’m studying it, and I’m

mostly looking for information on how the early mages constructed their spells. But the only things we have from that age are the weapons in the Northern Palace, and I can't just go look at those. So if you have something that's more than just a list... say, that goes into detail on what we've discovered about the magic enchanting them... that would be helpful."

It was a flat lie, of course, but Gaspar's eyes lit up. He lived for that sort of work. "Sure." He dug out two more books from the same shelf. One was titled *First-Century Spellwork*, the other *Artifacts of the Northern Palace*. "Try these. *Spellwork* is from the early third century and it's the best reference I have for anything earlier. *Artifacts* is actually one of Belthasar's books; he spent a few years studying there off and on, even after it was officially closed. Will you bring whatever you've found back here soon? Maybe I can help."

"I might, but I'd rather not move them until I know what I'm dealing with. I'll let you know what I find out, though."

"Please do. Nobody's found anything older than about the fifth century in quite a number of years."

And that was that. He had Gaspar's help, he had an excuse that would hold, and nobody liked to visit the surface except Melchior himself, so the lie was unlikely to be discovered. He would never have to cough up on his promise to share his discoveries, which was good because there were no discoveries to make. He just wanted a look at how magic weapons were made, from a time when they were still used. Now he had it.

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"You have a determined look to you today, Melchior of Life," Doreen said.

"Not a sad one?"

"That, too."

They were walking among the fields of Enhasa again, months later. Melchior's plan had taken shape. A knife hewn from Dreamstone. A magic sink developed based on Janus's inverted shield. And... a form of magical attack. Melchior had not solved that yet. Nothing he could produce could strike hard enough, fast enough. Not to disrupt, in a few seconds, spellwork that he and his companion Gurus had spent years constructing.

*He* couldn't do it.

But he thought he knew someone who could.

"You realize, of course, that I am contemplating treason," Melchior said matter-of-factly. He did not hesitate to speak freely to Doreen. She shared nothing.

"I am not blind."

"I need help."

"I will not help you. Your dreams are your own."

"I know. Actually, I was looking for your brothers. I know a few things, from watching you three. You have more power than any human mage I've ever known, but you don't use it."

"You think to *study* us." She smiled. She did not sound surprised.

Melchior sighed. "How could I not? You three are a mystery of life. Are you offended?"

"No."

"Do you think they'll help me? Perhaps that's a silly question. If I know them at all, of course they'll help me. But I don't know what you are. I don't know what kind of risks they will be taking."

Doreen stared at him, expressionless. Melchior waited; he was used to this sort of behavior from her. But after a while it seemed that she had never waited so long, nor had her face been quite so...imposing.

"If you believe you know them, then you are being foolish," she said at last. Melchior was shocked to hear such blunt words from her, but she continued before he could speak: "Nevertheless, you are correct. They will do as you ask, if you ask it. As far as your concern for their well-being goes, it is unfounded. They will not die until the world dies, any more than the rocks or the wind or the seas can die.

"But know this, you who have seen them as well as any man who ever dreamed: If you would wield them, *they* will in turn wield *you*. As well grasp in your hand a force of nature. They may well accept binding for a time, but it will be on their terms, and may not be for your ends. You will be laying hands on a power you may understand but can never truly know. Treat that power with all the respect it calls for."

Without so much as pausing, her customary smile returned. "What regard should those flies have for you, when they enter your open mouth?" she asked. And then, of course, she vanished.

Melchior closed his mouth, with some effort. It was perhaps the longest speech Doreen had ever spoken to him. He wondered if he might be mistaken in his course.

“And where are your brothers?” he asked the empty air. “I’ve been looking for them and can’t find them.”

“Behind you, old man.” Mune’s voice was soft. Melchior turned around. The twins faced him, sharing a single grin.

“You look for us, we wait for you,” Masa said.

“You don’t approve of the Queen’s dreams,” Mune said.

“We don’t, either.” Masa.

“Are you done serving, old man?” Mune asked, at last.

Melchior relaxed. “All right,” he said. “Here is what I need you to do.”

---

It was perhaps six months until the Mammon Machine would be transferred to Ocean Palace. Construction was nearly finished. The Queen was itching for it. Truth be told, everyone was itching for it. Magic took effort, but the flow of power that came from Lavos through the Machine only needed to be channeled. New islands were being torn from the ground to join Zeal’s floating archipelago, and work that once required hundreds of mages working together could now be done with mere dozens.

Melchior did not think he had been unjustified in hoping they could use it to stop the eternal storm. Maybe it could be. But he was quite sure that it *wouldn’t* be. Zeal – both the Queen and the People – dreamed of immortality. That was what they wanted. As dreams went it wasn’t a bad one, but it was a cold one. Immortality for them. At the expense of anyone, and anything, else.

Queen Zeal was not herself, and that was terrifying. Power was not the only thing being channeled by the Machine. The device the Gurus had built was *not under their control*. And the Thing on the far end. . . innocent? Cooperative? The Queen’s behavior suggested otherwise.

Dalton had long since taken over the last of the construction; Belthasar had turned to safely getting the Mammon Machine down to the sea floor. Gaspar had disappeared into his studies, no longer needed, no longer wanted.

Melchior, too, disappeared. It was time.

He readied his tools in a hidden smithy, in a cave near the Earthbound Village. As far from Zeal as he could get. He had his hammer. Anvil. Tongs. And that strange red rock, which men called Dreamstone, ready to be worked.

“We’re ready, old man,” Mune told him. He and his brother hovered in the corners of the room, watching intently. They would *change* today. Become something new. Something dangerous.

Melchior’s magic infused the room. Mune’s and Masa’s joined it, intensified it, all focused on the anvil and its charge. Melchior raised his hammer.

Brought it down.

Again.

Again.

Beneath the hammer of Melchior, the dream that would one day be called the Masamune was given *life*.

# Part II

## Time

*“Gaspar, the Guru of Time, knows how to restore lost or misplaced time streams...”*

– Magus

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### ***Kajar – Year of Zeal 324***

In its appearance, Gaspar’s creation might well have been referred to as the Time Egg. In its function, he thought of it as the Chrono Trigger, at least once it had been created. That’s getting a bit ahead of the story in one way, and behind it in another. Being ahead of, or behind, his time was very much Gaspar’s job in life. One part historian, one part prognosticator, he was Zeal’s Guru of Time and when Time appeared to be dividing, that was very much his business.

In one timeline, there was no division. Then there was, and in both timelines, there was a division. What Gaspar was to discover, was that it was possible to reach into the space of that division and *twist* it, *undivide* it, so that time once again followed a continuous flow. Along one path, or the other path.

That, too, is getting ahead of the story.

In both the undivided line and the divided line, in the 324th year of Zeal’s existence, after the Gurus began their work on the Mammon Machine but before the Rise of Lavos, Gaspar sat at his desk and wrote these words:

”Time resists modification by magic, and does so very strongly – such that even with great practice and considerable power, I can perhaps manage to speed it up, or slow it down, in a local area, but I cannot make changes to it. What is interesting is that this resistance is *not* infinite, though it is proportional to the local magic field and so under normal circumstances it should be impossible to change historical fact by means of magic. We should probably be glad of this.

”The variation in the resistance of time to manipulation occurs both over time and across space, but it appears to be predictable and the rest of this volume will describe its patterns. The final formula is mostly continuous across both time and space. Local variations in space will move forward in time at the same rate that we experience it. The field can have vertical asymptotes at which temporal resistance is infinite; I do not know what to make of these, and I am not sure any actually exist. Under my current

model, time should not pass in such places, but clearly it must. Such discontinuities are invariably instantaneous, and do not remain as time moves forward.

“The field as a whole is positive, but tends towards zero as time approaches infinity. There is another discontinuity at infinity, where resistance becomes negative. It is interesting to speculate about this. If there can be said to be such a thing as the end of time, then time at that spot should be trivially manipulable and easily connected to any other time. I do not know what that means in terms of physical reality. Such an environment may be quite inhospitable to humans. Any local minima with a resistance of zero or less would have a similar property; it might be possible to *breach* the timestream at such places, with sophisticated magic or in some other way. Fortunately, although such places can exist, no such minima exist in our time period; and because of the forward-moving nature of the function, they never will.”

Everything Gaspar wrote was true except the last bit. He wasn’t stupid enough to tell the truth about that.

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### ***Zeal Palace – Year of Zeal 326***

The first *twist* in time went almost unnoticed. Gaspar was studying its resistance field and found that in the space between one day and the next, it changed. He noted the change and noted that it did not match anything predicted by his model.

Like Belthasar, and unlike Melchior, Gaspar had the soul of a scientist. He dutifully recorded the phenomenon, and found that his formulas still correctly predicted his observations over the next few days. This confused him. Initially, he hypothesized that it was a side effect of the Mammon Machine, but that was an easy enough idea to check and discard – Princess Schala had been attending to the Machine at the time and reported no strange events. Gaspar studied the problem for a while after that, and then eventually gave up and moved on to other things. Without a second such event, there was no way to work out a pattern.

Besides, life was busy, and there were other things to do.

Six months later, he had mostly forgotten about it – and so did not make the connection, when a man appeared who would give Gaspar serious competition in the Time business.

The man called himself the Prophet. He was tall, thin, and had the characteristic pale violet hair of the Enlightened Ones, but he was not one of them. There was an aura about him, of rage and sorrow...and power, wild but carefully restrained. Gaspar didn't know what he was, or who. The Prophet never gave his name, only his title.

He was admitted to the Queen's presence for curiosity's sake alone. He told her this: "Within three days, there will be an accident at the Ocean Palace. Three of the Earthbound will die, and one of the Enlightened." And then he walked out immediately.

Queen Zeal interpreted it as a threat; she had already begun to change, and was more paranoid than Gaspar realized. But she had not ceased to listen to Gaspar's advice yet. The Guru advised her to have the Prophet observed, to ensure that he would not cause the event he had predicted; and also to have Dalton and Belthasar use extra caution in the construction over the next few days. Belthasar, in designing the Ocean Palace, had included a complex series of flood locks and pressure barriers to mitigate the inevitable risks of working under the ocean. He checked them personally; but in the meantime, work continued.

Two days later, a mage cutting into the rock of the ocean floor broke into a dormant undersea vent. The gaseous release tore the chamber open. The sea flooded in, drowning all present. The floodlocks held. No others died.

Queen Zeal summoned Gaspar, and the Prophet.

"You will explain yourself," she demanded. Her voice was dark, Gaspar noticed. It was his first indication that something was seriously wrong with her. "How did you know? Who and what are you? Even Gaspar, here, cannot predict such precise events."

"I told you," he said, "I am the Prophet. I know many things."

"I would like to know if there is anything else you have to tell us," Gaspar said.

"Right now, nothing. But if you wish more proof that I can do what I say I can, here are a few things. Your son, the boy Janus," he addressed the Queen, "has been missing for several days. His caretaker is worried. He can be found in two days in a cave east of Kajar Falls. He is otherwise safe." He turned to Gaspar. "Belthasar has been working on another aircraft, one

that can fly beneath the clouds safely. He has not told you this. But he will mention it in a few weeks, if you do not otherwise bring it up.”

Gaspar was mentally taking notes. “All right. Anything else?”

“Yes.” The Prophet smiled. “Not everyone wants to see the Mammon Machine project reach its full potential. Some will come who wish to oppose it, and the Queen.”

After a moment of silence, the Queen nearly screamed: “*Who?*”

“I will be keeping that to myself for now. But I will tell you when it is needful; and you will know, by the truth of my prophecies, that my words are real ones.”

Queen Zeal’s eyes burned, and for a moment Gaspar thought she might assault him physically.

“Do not play games with me, Prophet,” she said in a dangerous voice.

“I do not play games with anyone.”

She scowled at him. “I will speak to you again later. For now, you may leave. You too, Gaspar.”

The two of them bowed and exited. Before they parted in the hallway, Gaspar offered his thoughts:

“She’s been on edge lately. Don’t provoke her.”

“I didn’t intend to. But I agree, she does seem quick to anger.”

Gaspar thought for a moment, then changed tactics:

“Tell me something. There is a golem who visits me somewhat irregularly while I am here at the palace, to talk about my work. When should I expect to see him next?”

The Prophet’s eyes darkened. He said nothing.

“I see,” Gaspar said softly. “Then there are some things you cannot predict.”

“This surprises you?”

“No. I am merely interested in how you do it. I don’t suppose you would be willing to share? Of course not. Well, fine. You will have to prophesize more, to keep the Queen convinced; and if you did not want her convinced, you would not be here. Perhaps I can work it out by looking at what you do and do not predict.”

The Prophet smiled. “Does it bother you, Guru, that I succeed where you cannot?”

“Why on earth does that matter? This is my field, after all, and it’s an interesting puzzle. If you can tell the future, it’s my business to figure out how. Does it bother you, that I want to know what you know?”

The Prophet gave him a puzzled frown. “You are one of the Gurus. I would have expected you to fear for your position.”

Gaspar blinked. “No, not really. Should I?”

“Maybe not,” the Prophet said wryly.

“Where are you from, by the way?”

“Zeal,” he said, “the same as you. The same as all of us.”

*Liar.* “All right, keep it to yourself if you want. I was just curious.”

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### ***Kajar – Year of Zeal 326***

Belthasar, the Guru of Reason, had his own private studies in Kajar and Enhasa. “Private” mostly meant “secret.” Gaspar had no idea why his friend seemed to delight so much in being able to squirrel himself away, but he knew better than to interrupt Belthasar at such times without good cause. Today he felt he had good cause.

There was something wrong with Time, and had been for a while. Gaspar’s instruments were not working right. The temporal pendulum was swinging too far to one side. The chronorecorder produced a sharp angle where it should have shown only curves. His grandfather clock kept time as well as always, but Gaspar kept glancing at it, expecting it to do something different, make an error.

Something had *changed*. Like a rock deflected by another rock, the timestream had moved from one course to another. Gaspar did not understand it. But he knew that something wasn’t right.

He explained all this to Belthasar, who understood him just fine the first time, something that only Belthasar was typically able to do.

“I’ll take your word for it, of course,” Belthasar told him, “but what do you want me to do about it?”

“Math,” Gaspar said. “Something has knocked Time off-kilter, replaced one timestream with another. We are not living the lives we were meant to lead, to whatever extent we’re ‘meant’ to do anything. I don’t know why and I don’t know if it’s something we should be afraid of. I want to be able to knock it back if we need to, and I think I can make a device to do it. But it will take precision. I’ll give you the problems I want to calculate; you hand me the results and I’ll take it from there.”

Belthasar shrugged. "Sure, I can do that. I don't suppose you have some of it on hand?"

"I do," Gaspar said, giving him a small book. Belthasar took it and flipped through the first few pages before Gaspar could say anything, then grinned at him.

"Gaspar, check your brain. This is pre-Zeal history."

"Sorry, I didn't have any blank paper to hand when I was writing stuff down. Check the back."

Belthasar gaped at him. "*You defaced one of your history books?* To save a bit of time? That's not like you, my friend. You really are worried, aren't you?"

"Yes."

He flipped to the back of the book and looked over Gaspar's formulas. They were as neatly-printed as ever, despite extending into the margins of the last few written pages. The numbers described temporal resistance and related effects; under them were a brief set of conjectures he wanted proved or disproved.

"Okay," Belthasar said. "Yes, I can do this, and I'll get back to you as soon as I can; just be aware that the Ocean Palace has to take priority, so it may be a bit. Speaking of which, the Queen is here in Kajar and wants to speak to me in her offices on the subject this morning. Want to come along?"

"No, thank y--wait. Will the Prophet be there?"

"I don't know. Why would he be?"

"Call it a hunch. I'll come along after all."

"Professional curiosity?"

"Professional curiosity."

They left Belthasar's secret chambers and set out through the streets of Kajar. Gaspar, who as usual had kept to himself until he had cause to emerge, peppered the Guru of Reason with questions about what he had missed.

"Well," Belthasar said, "your Prophet appears to be the real deal, as far as I can tell. He's made a number of predictions and they've all turned out true – and they were all things he had no way of knowing or influencing, again as far as I can tell. The Queen is pleased as punch and I want to punch him in the head."

"Any pattern to what he can predict?"

“Not really. Most of his predictions are related to events surrounding the royal family, but that makes sense since most of the time he’s talking to the Queen to begin with; I don’t think that you can draw any conclusions from it. I don’t like it, though. He tells the future, fine, I’ll give him that, but I still want to know why he’s here. There’s something familiar about him that I just can’t place.”

“What does the Queen think of it?”

“She thinks his words are made of gold.”

“That isn’t good.”

“No, it’s not.”

The entrance to Queen Zeal’s personal chambers was opulent but not quite gaudy; its main decoration was the frame, which was made from hollow glass and contained a small saltwater aquarium. Fish from the surface could not live in the rivers and lakes of the floating isles; the Queen had found a way to exhibit them anyway.

The two Gurus stepped inside, and nearly collided with Schala as she was leaving.

“I’m sorry,” Gaspar said, “are you all right?”

“Yes, I’m fine, thank you.”

“Schala, I will speak to you after this meeting,” the Queen was saying. “Gaspar, I don’t recall inviting you.” Her voice was suspicious. A year ago that would have been uncharacteristic of her. No longer.

“Actually,” Gaspar said mildly, “I’m here to see the Prophet. I can wait until you are all done if you’d like.”

“Fine, wait outside. Schala, you too.”

Schala looked as if she was ready to object, but thought better of it and left the room. Gaspar followed her.

“Your thoughts?” he said. Schala was closer to the Queen than any of them.

“She’s not herself,” Schala said. Her voice was frustrated. “Please don’t be angry at her.”

“Dear child, have you ever known me to be angry at anyone?”

Schala blinked, then smiled. “I suppose not. Still, she’s not herself. She used to *trust* you. And Belthasar, and Melchior. Now she seems irritated at all of you. Me, too. I think she’s only polite to me because she needs me to run the Mammon Machine. She doesn’t even really like the Prophet, she just thinks she can use him. Janus is beside himself. It’s like he thinks

there's something else wearing her face, like a mask. Sometimes I'm not sure he's wrong." She heaved in a breath. "Gaspar, I'm sorry."

"It's all right."

"Are you really here to see the Prophet?"

"Something like that. I wanted to observe him rather than speak to him. I was hoping to sit in on their meeting, but it seems I can't, so I'll see what I can learn from him afterwards. Belthasar will let me know whatever he says in there, I'm sure." Gaspar paused. "Perhaps you should not tell your mother that," he said.

"I won't."

"What do *you* think of him?"

"I'm not sure," she said slowly. "He's arrogant and contemptuous of most people, but he's always polite to me. Well, no, not polite. Just not...well, he gets above his station." She wrinkled her nose, like she didn't like having to make the comparison. "He'll talk to me like an equal, which almost no one does. But he's not *rude* about it. Not to me. And something about him feels...familiar."

"Oh? How so?"

"I don't know. But a lot of the predictions he's made have been about me. Even more than Mother, or Janus. He seems to know us all far too well. And he just...*looks* familiar. I swear I've never seen him before, but I get the strangest feeling..."

"Has he ever been wrong?"

"Once. He told Mother I was going to re-activate the Mammon Machine on my own, and that I would be injured in the attempt. I was eavesdropping. They didn't know. I wanted a better look at the power of this...Lavos...without Mother distracting me, but after hearing him, I changed my plans for the day. Mother sent some people to head me off, but of course I wasn't there. She was furious at him for being wrong, until I told her what I had done. Then she was furious at me."

"If you hadn't been eavesdropping, the Prophet would have been correct?"

"Yes. Well, probably."

"Then he can predict the future, but others can still change it. How interesting. Schala, can you do me a favor?"

"Of course. What do you need?"

"Write down whatever he said that you can remember, along with anything new. I'm trying to work out how he does it."

"I've already been doing that. Almost from the start. I'll have a scribe copy it and send it to you. Actually, I'll do that myself."

"Thanks. Better not tell your mother."

"I won't," she said, "but I don't like keeping things from her."

"I don't either. I'm not entirely sure what's going on. Be careful with the Mammon Machine, Schala. I've been talking with Melchior about it, and he thinks it might be the Machine itself that's responsible for her... changes."

"He's noticed too, then."

"We've all noticed. You're not alone. Have you noticed any changes in yourself? You work with it far more than the rest of us."

"No, but a better question might be if *you* have."

He regarded her thoughtfully. "No," he said, "You appear to be yourself, which is at least some evidence against the idea. Still, be careful."

"I will." She shivered. "Believe me, I will."

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### ***Zeal Palace – Year of Zeal 327***

"Hey, Old One! Feel like guessing yet?"

Gaspar smiled and turned around. "Hello, Spekkio. No, not yet. I still don't know who created you, but I'm narrowing it down."

Spekkio was a construct, and quite strange as such golems went. He was much more articulate than most, and he was... quirky. Gaspar liked him. The "old one" was a joke; Spekkio was actually older than Gaspar, a relic of the early days of magical constructs. Today he was wearing the shape of a Kilwala, a white furred creature from the prehistoric age. That meant he was feeling good. If he was pensive he would have taken the form of a Nu; if angry, a demon of some sort. One time he had come to Gaspar's office as a walking tree, just to see the reaction.

Gaspar was sure the shapeshifting business would eventually yield a clue as to who created him. Until then, Spekkio liked to needle him about it.

"You're no fun," Spekkio said. "How's work?"

"Nerve-racking. Did you know time is split into at least three branches, as of, um, one year ago and two weeks ago respectively?"

"I do now! Which branch are we in?"

"I don't know. Well, we're in the one that exists, and there's two others that now don't. And I don't know how they got that way."

“Bummer.”

“How are your own studies going?”

“Oh, mine are great. Did you know there was a war in Pre-Zeal fourteen-hundred that was fought entirely with snow?”

“Well, I remember war in that period. Three of the larger mountain tribes, all fighting over the same water supply, right?”

“That’s the one! Apparently when negotiations broke down nobody knew what to do, because it was one of those ages where everybody had forgotten how to make real weapons, and sticks and stones couldn’t kill people fast enough. But they knew how to make fire. So they started using fire to cause avalanches and drop tons of snow on each other.”

“Why didn’t they just melt the snow and use it for water?”

“They did. That’s how the war ended, when they blocked up the original spring they were all fighting over and all had to turn to snow to drink.”

Gaspar frowned. “That doesn’t fit. They had to know they could drink melted snow. What were they really fighting over if it wasn’t the water supply?”

“Nothing, really. Everybody just wanted to be King of the Three Mountains, I think. Have I ever mentioned that you humans are stupid? Because you humans are stupid.”

“Sometimes I think you’re right,” Gaspar said dryly. “So what are you interested in next?”

“Let’s go back further. Got anything from the third millennium P.Z.? And let’s go for something a bit more sophisticated than sticks and stones this time, hrm?”

“I think the third millennium P.Z. was *all* sticks and stones,” Gaspar said. He got up and scanned the shelves in his office. “There was an empire in the late fourth that fell apart and pretty much took all of human civilization with it. They fought a lot building that empire, though. Would that do?”

“I like it, Old One.”

Gaspar started pulling books out and stacking them. War and war history was Spekkio’s hobby. It fascinated him, at least in part because Zeal had never known war. The Sun Stone provided nigh-limitless power for the Enlightened Ones, so there was no need to fight among themselves. Conditions on the surface for the last few centuries had been too harsh for the Earthbound to bother fighting with each other. War between the Earthbound and the Enlightened was laughable. So who fought? Nobody.

War was an alien concept, understood only as a historical curiosity, and Spekkio was nothing if not curious.

“Here you go,” Gaspar said.

“Ooh, hey, *Weapons of the Third and Fourth Millennia*. I wonder if Melchior would be willing to help me make some of these?”

“You could ask him, but I don’t think he’ll see the point of it. And someone might have a problem with you carrying around stuff meant to kill people.”

“Aww.”

They talked for a while about Gaspar’s work and Spekkio’s hobbies, and then Spekkio left. Gaspar watched him go thoughtfully. A line in the conversation stuck out to him:

*Everybody just wanted to be King of the Three Mountains, I think.*

The Mammon Machine would provide limitless energy to all, as had the Sun Stone of old. That was the story. But so far it was being kept close, within the royal family. Part of that was simple safety; only a few had the strength and skill to control it. But was that the only reason? Was ambition as obsolete as it seemed?

The thought bothered Gaspar, and he went back to his books, this time looking at the early history of the Sun Stone. The founders of Zeal had to have grappled with certain issues when the Stone was discovered. Maybe they could tell him something useful.

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***Zeal Palace – Year of Zeal 327 – Two Weeks Later (Timeline C) – Three Weeks Later (Timeline B) – Never (Timeline A)***

Gaspar didn’t find anything enlightening in his history books, but his attention soon turned elsewhere. Belthasar returned Gaspar’s book along with notes of his own, written in the careful yet barely-legible block print that he used when he knew someone else would have to read it. Some of it Gaspar couldn’t read anyway. It didn’t matter. He might have been able to verify Belthasar’s work, but not quickly. He would just have to trust that the Guru of Reason had done the job right.

The results were more than he had expected, but less than he had hoped for.

Conjecture: There is at least one resistance-zero temporospatial location for any given instantaneous timeframe. False, disproven by numerous counterexamples. Timeframes with what Gaspar thought of as a “weakness” in time were somewhat rare. That bothered Gaspar, but not much; he knew for a fact there was at least one such location already extant in his own time period.

Conjecture: All resistance-zero temporospatial locations can be breached. This one turned out slightly more favorable. Belthasar hadn’t been able to prove it, but had proven that it could not be disproven, which was not quite the same thing but was almost as good. Additionally, Belthasar had shown that at least *some* such locations could be breached.

Conjecture: The local time distortions Gaspar was investigating – the “lost timestreams” as he thought of them – each branched off beginning at a zero, and in fact *had* to do so. This, Belthasar had been able to prove...mostly. Such breaks were provably impossible at any location not resistance-zero or resistance-infinity. Gaspar still didn’t know what resistance-infinity meant, but it didn’t matter.

There were ten or twelve more conjectures mostly involving complicated interactions of magic and time. Some were proven, some weren’t, but the whole added up to what Gaspar wanted: It was possible to breach the timestream, it was possible to do it with a reasonable degree of power and precision, and it was possible to pass through such a breach and survive. In theory. In practice, he would need to create a device capable of doing so.

He was not sure yet what he would use that device for, but he wanted it. Something was *wrong*. He needed options. This was something he could do. Something *only* he could do. He needed time and privacy, to think it through, to *create*. Like Belthasar, he had his own place to go when he wanted to be alone.

He penned a note:

Melchior, Belthasar:

Be careful. Someone or something is altering the flow of Time and has been for around a year. I don’t know what’s supposed to happen when the Mammon Machine is turned on, but I am quite certain something is going to change. Watch for unexpected problems. You can find me at my private island if you need me. I will return shortly before the Ocean Palace’s completion date if I don’t hear from you before then.

He thought for a few minutes. A year since Time went off-kilter. He didn't need a formal proof to draw a simple conclusion. He added another line:

Don't trust the Prophet.

Gaspar signed it, then made two copies of the note. He would leave one in each of Belthasar's private offices and another in Melchior's smithy, spelled to be unreadable by any but the intended recipients. They could get hold of him if they needed to.

He packed a bag – he traveled light – and then thought of something else. He wrote another letter.

Schala:

Could you send your notes to my private island? Thanks.

*Gaspar*

She was a smart woman; she would get the point. He turned around, stopped, and turned back to his desk again. One more letter.

Spekkio:

Help yourself to anything off the shelves. I'll be back when the Ocean Palace is done. Feel free to look me up then.

*Gaspar*

Gaspar left that one on the desk for Spekkio to find. He waved at the lamps to put them out, then finally left his study. He did not return.

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### ***Unmarked Island – Year of Zeal 328***

The Guru of Time lost track of time, working. Gaspar's "office" was really a cave. Like his counterparts, he had a need for private spaces. This was his. He took privacy seriously. He spent months at his private island, hunched over desks, books, magical apparatus. He altered time as much as he could, to get more hours out of a day. For the first month, he slept only briefly and

intermittently. Eventually he found that exhaustion was interfering with his work, and spelled himself into sleeping longer. Still he carried on.

He named the device the Chrono Trigger, but when Spekkio finally interrupted his work, it was still just a concept in his mind. It didn't exist yet.

Gaspar didn't notice Spekkio's arrival. The cave had no door, nothing to knock on or keep intruders out. It didn't need one. The few who knew where to find it knew better than to interrupt him. Except for one irreverent golem, apparently.

Spekkio crept up behind him, then shouted: "Hey! Old One!"

Gaspar didn't twitch.

Spekkio tried again: "How's it going?"

"The math isn't balanced," Gaspar said. His voice was high-pitched and the words came out blurred together.

"Are *you* balanced?"

"You can't have an infinity in here and have the math be balanced. It doesn't work. So why does it look like using a Trigger has to produce one?"

"Hello? Gaspar?"

"I must have made a mistake, somehow. Or Belthasar did. No, probably me."

Spekkio gave up and nudged him with a giant snout. Today he was wearing the form of an Earthbound Beast, a long bearlike creature that was about six times Gaspar's size and weight. Gaspar fell right out of his chair.

"What? What?" the Guru said.

"Wake up, Old One," Spekkio said. "Nose out of whatever it's in."

"Oh, it's you. Hi, Spekkio. What are you doing here? How did you even know where to find me?"

"Meh, you're easy to find. But you need to come back. They're moving the Mammon Machine down to the Ocean Palace next week."

"But I'm not ready yet!"

"So what? The world is moving on without you, great student of Time." Spekkio's voice was mocking. "Better start catching up."

"Better start *slowing down*," Gaspar countered. "Okay, fine, I meant to come back when the Palace was ready, but it's not *that* urgent. Melchior and Belthasar can keep a handle on things just fine without me, even if the Queen is still a little off."

“Like I said, the world is moving on. Melchior’s been exiled – forcibly. Dalton had Belthasar arrested, and he’s being held in his own Palace work-room.”

“*What?*”

“Do I finally have your attention, now?”

“All right. Yes, you have my attention,” Gaspar said. He stood his chair back up and turned it to face Spekkio, then sat down. “Find a shape that doesn’t block up so much space. Then tell me what’s going on.”

After a few moments, Spekkio turned himself into a ground sloth only slightly larger than a human. The air *whupped* in to fill the suddenly empty space. “Better?”

“Good enough. Where are Melchior and Belthasar?”

“Melchior’s been sent to the Mountain of Woe. Belthasar is in his private offices at the Ocean Palace. Both were by order of the Queen.”

“And she still intends to turn on the Mammon Machine?”

“Yes.”

“Without *any* of its designers on hand?”

“Yes.”

Gaspar bit his lip. “Okay, why them and not me?”

“My opinion? Because she doesn’t know where you are to arrest you.”

“Dalton? Schala? The Prophet?”

“Princess Schala spoke out against the arrests. I think the only reason the Queen stood for it was that she needs Schala to activate the Machine.”

The echo was disturbing. “You know, Schala once told me something similar.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, you should have paid attention.”

Gaspar got up and started pacing. What to do? He couldn’t *directly* oppose the queen; in a contest of magic, he would lose. He might be able to match her strength for strength, but he would have to fight Dalton as well, not to mention any of her other aides and guards. Moreover, if the Mammon Machine was reactivated and the Queen had access to Lavos’s power through it, any advantage he had would shrink to nil.

Much as he would have liked to, he could not count on Schala. She was too much under her mother’s thumb, too invested in doing what others expected of her. So, what? Reach Melchior himself and go in together? It was a thought. All three of them worked on the Mammon Machine, but Melchior was its primary architect; if anyone could come up with a way to destroy the Machine, he could.

*What problem am I trying to solve?*

That was the rub. He could find or rescue his fellow Gurus. He could challenge the Queen. He could, possibly, break the Mammon Machine. But he couldn't do all three, not with so little warning. Did he need to do all three? Probably not. Melchior and Belthasar were perfectly capable of getting themselves out of their own sticky situations. And the Mammon Machine?

"Well?" Spekkio said.

He sighed. "Here's the problem. We built the Mammon Machine for a reason, and that reason still holds. We *need* a power source to replace the Sun Stone. But the Queen can't be trusted with it."

"Obviously."

"Obvious *now*. It *wasn't* obvious when we built the thing."

"I don't know about you, Old One, but from over here it looks like you can't safely use it anyway."

"We *can*. Schala does it. Or has she suddenly become megalomaniacal in the time I've been out here?"

"No," Spekkio admitted, "from everything I've seen and heard, she's fine. It's just her mother that's changed. And maybe Dalton."

"No, Dalton was always a jerk."

"Why did she keep him on staff, then?"

"Because he's a good administrator and he gets things done. Or at least he's good at getting other people to get things done. She always valued competence in her assistants. Well, she *used* to, anyway."

Gaspar started to pace again, then stopped.

"Okay," he continued, "Melchior will have to fend for himself. I'm going to the Ocean Palace. I'll try to talk some sense into the Queen, maybe try to talk to Schala too. If I can convince Schala to stand her ground, that might help."

"And if you can't?"

"Then either I get hold of Belthasar and we try to do it the other way, or..."

"Or, what?"

*Or most likely it all goes to hell and I try to undo it after the fact.*

"We'll fly that sky when we have to," Gaspar said.

### *Ocean Palace – Year of Zeal 328*

He ended up arrested, of course. That was nearly a foregone conclusion. The Queen wanted to exile him as she had exiled Melchior, but there were only a few people with the magical strength to keep Gaspar restrained, and time was short enough that she needed them all on hand. Dalton and the Prophet escorted him out, instead.

“It will end badly,” Gaspar told her.

“It will end with *immortality*,” she replied.

Dalton gathered four guards, making an escort of six, and they saw Gaspar to his personal office. At least, it was listed on the Ocean Palace’s design as his personal office. Gaspar had yet to take a trip down to the sea floor and had never set foot in what was supposedly his own space. No one dared to re-purpose it, though, so while it was furnished, it was otherwise empty.

“You will not be allowed to leave,” Dalton said. His tone was overly officious; he was clearly enjoying himself. “My guards will inspect your office regularly and bring you food regularly. You may not see visitors. You may not use magic at any time.”

“Did Belthasar punch you when you gave him that speech?”

The Prophet and a somewhat incautious guard both smirked. Dalton’s face turned a hilarious shade of purple. “Watch him!” he said to the guards, then stalked out.

“Sorry, Guru,” said the one guard. From his insignia he was the squad’s leader. “I don’t know what’s going on, but I don’t want to give you any trouble. And Belthasar did hit him. Laid him clean out.”

“I could tell. I wish I could have seen that.”

“You can if you want. I do illusions and spell recordings. Here, watch.”

The guard cast a short spell. Light flashed from his hands on to one wall, making a picture. There was no sound, of course. Belthasar and Dalton faced each other in the image, in a chaotic mess of an office that could only have been the Guru of Reason’s field workshop. They exchanged words. Dalton, again, was clearly enjoying himself. Belthasar nodded along, grinning. Then Dalton was through speaking, and oh, here came the fist, no magic at all, just a wide swing and a pompous aristocrat going over backwards like a falling tree.

There was a barking laugh from the door. The guard snapped his illusion off and turned around, startled. It was the Prophet. He hadn’t left with

Dalton.

“Uhh,” the guard said.

“You four, wait outside,” the Prophet said. “I will speak with the Guru alone for a moment. I will not tell Dalton about your indiscretion.” His voice carried the assumption that he would be obeyed. And he was obeyed. The four guards filed out wordlessly.

“I see you’ve risen to some sort of authority while I’ve been gone,” Gaspar said, guardedly.

“You could say that. I have things to do, so I’ll be brief. Would it be safe to say that you care for Princess Schala’s safety?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Events will shortly begin to spiral out of control. When that happens, find her and get her out.”

Gaspar raised an eyebrow. “Think twice before trying to command me. But I have no objection to doing so. Indeed, I already intended to talk her into leaving. Possibly taking charge from her mother, as well. While today’s events may have biased me, I think I can truthfully say that her mother is no longer fit to rule.”

“Schala *should* rule,” the Prophet said. Gaspar was surprised at his vehemence.

Also his candor. “You certainly put a great deal of effort into winning the Queen over. Now you suggest she should be deposed.”

“I needed her. The time when I will not is fast approaching.”

Gaspar’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t like the sound of that, Prophet. My problem with her is practical, not personal. She’s simply not herself. I have served the royal family for a very long time, and if you would bring harm to them, I *will* stop you.”

There was silence in the air between them.

“No,” the Prophet said softly.

“No, what?”

“No, I don’t mean harm to them. And no, you can’t stop me.”

*Good enough.* “Schala. You’re asking me to get her out. Why can’t you do so yourself?”

The Prophet’s eyes hardened. “I will have other business when the time comes.”

“And what’s your investment in her safety?”

“That, too, is my business. Things are going to go very sour, very soon. I say that as the Prophet; take heed. If it goes badly, she may need help to escape. Be ready.”

He turned on his heel and stalked out. Gaspar thought for a while, then opened the door. The guards were standing just outside. They hadn’t bothered to lock it.

“Can we help you?” the squad leader asked, politely.

“You could let me go.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t. I wish I could.”

“I know, I was just kidding. I’m fine here. Could one of you get me some food, blank paper, and writing implements? And let Belthasar know I’m here.”

“Of course, Guru.”

Gaspar went back to his work on the Trigger. Schala did visit him, briefly. She told him that the Mountain of Woe had collapsed, and Gaspar thought: *Melchior*. He’d known the man could take care of himself. Schala told him she was going to the surface, out of her mother’s reach, where she could not be used. Gaspar never had to suggest a thing.

It wasn’t as good as getting the girl on the throne, but it would do for now. If the Prophet was right, Zeal was heading for disaster anyway. But Gaspar could change its course. If he could figure out just the right set of spells. . . .

He was still working on them when the world went to hell.

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### ***The End of Time – Infinity***

Go far enough forward in time, and time ceases to have real meaning.

In the Year of Zeal 328, after the Ocean Palace Incident, all three of the Gurus were cast out of time, out through Gates to wheres and whens unknown. Gaspar, the Guru of Time, was better prepared to fall through such a fissure than his companions. He could use his magic to *stabilize* it. Make it less dangerous. Less unpredictable. As he hurtled forward all unknowing through a strange, mottled darkness, he did his best to keep that darkness *ordered*.

He was better prepared, and so came out worse.

Stable and safe, the darkness couldn't eject him. He left Melchior behind in 600 A.D. – he knew not that the calendar had changed – and centuries later, Belthasar landed in the 23rd century. Gaspar flowed onward. In this place, Time was not really Time.

Gaspar held his place, trying to keep himself in one piece long enough to understand his surroundings. All unknowing, he held his place forever. Then it was over.

The change was subtle. The dark blue-black expanse stopped rushing by him quite so fast. Its contours became...softer. That was all. It was just as empty, just as strange. He noticed that he was not taking in breath and did not seem to be bothered by it, as one might discover in a dream. He had spent enough time in Enhasa to know that he was not dreaming. He had simply...come to rest.

He knew this place. Or at least, he knew *of* it. He had predicted its existence.

"Nothing here," he observed aloud, stunned.

*This must be...*

*...the End of Time.*

He floated in the abyss, but it was anyone's guess whether he floated there for seconds or an eternity. It did not matter. He had all the time in the world. He did not need to sleep. Did not need to eat. He did not really get bored or tired or frustrated. He did not feel unemotional. Those emotions with a temporal cause just...didn't happen.

Eventually he decided to fix that. It seemed wrong.

From the void, he conjured the semblance of lumber, stone, and iron. He shaped it. He made cobblestones. He made a lamp-post with a torch for light, and knew that it would never go out in this timeless place. He fenced off some space with iron rails. He made something like gravity, and when the spell was cast it kept its place without the need for maintenance. When he was done, there was a small plaza amid the emptiness. A place to stand, and to think. There was little else he could do.

So he stood, and thought, and because he was the man he was, he studied. He knew much, and learned more. This place was not quite connected to everywhere, everywhen. It was possible to connect it to many places, however. And it was possible to *watch*. He named the doors through time Gates. He had come here through a Gate, though an odd one. Most of them were stable; he could open them with magic. The one he had arrived through had immediately collapsed.

His first thought was to use one such Gate to go home. One existed; one *had* to exist. There were only certain times, certain places where temporal resistance approached zero. There was one such location in his time period. He went looking for it and could not find it.

Gaspar conjured up a notebook, felt his surroundings with magic, and penned some figures. He determined that the Gate he wanted did not exist here yet – and when it opened, it would lead to his own “past” (that word now had quotes in his mind, and always would). There were dangers involved in trying to use such a thing. But if he waited until it did appear, and then continued waiting until it was beyond the time at which he had been pulled away from Zeal... then it should be safe.

He could wait. He had all the time in the world. Literally all the time. Well, he was still a Guru. He could no longer advise anyone, but he lived to understand the world. So he watched through the Gates and studied the surface of Time, and wrote down his findings. Over the course of seconds and centuries, he wrote this:

”Time has been twisted, in a sense. I find myself at the end of Creation, but my friends have been scattered across other eras. I know that Zeal has fallen – I cannot see it through any future Gate – but I don’t know what happened after I left my home time period.

”I have learned some things here. There are many Gates going to many places, and all link to each other here. Most are shut. Some don’t exist yet, but will eventually. Some once existed and no longer do. Only two are consistently open at this time. One goes to the far future and what I see through it is bleak and dead.

”Through the other, I have witnessed the end of the world.

”Lavos, it seems, went quiescent for a time after the Ocean Palace incident. I do not know why. The Mammon Machine was damaged (possibly destroyed) and it may have something to do with that. Lavos did not stay dormant forever. It rose again approximately fourteen thousand years later, and it was far more powerful than I ever would have believed possible. It rained fire across the earth for days, and the world died.

”The Gate to that time is different, and I do not understand why. It always goes to the same place. If I look through it, I always see the same thing. If I were so foolish as to pass through it, I would always end up at the same time. Mathematically, Gates should continuously move forward in time, just as we do, and for the same reasons. This one does not. I suspect, but cannot prove, that the existence of Lavos itself warps Time in

such a way as to produce Gates. Perhaps that is why the Gate that led me here opened so unexpectedly, and why it proved so unstable. This one is stable, but behaves strangely.

“I have built a small container around it to remind me not to accidentally use it. If I can work out how it manages to maintain a static destination, I may be able to replicate the effect.”

That Gate was the last piece he needed. And it was not as if he had anything better to do. So he worked, and the device he once named the Chrono Trigger began to take shape. It was an egg. A Time Egg. It did not need to be large. It could...fasten...on to a moment in time, and create a Gate from here to there.

It had limitations. It could only go to a single moment. It could be used to change that moment once and once only; “hatching” would destroy it, and altering a moment in time in that manner would corrupt it in such a way that even a second Trigger could not reach it.

Gaspar was disappointed to find that it was impossible for the Trigger to go to an arbitrary location; only a subset of possible destinations were available to it. Some of them involved Lavos. But there was also a factor he could not identify. Something Else. Something that twisted time just as Lavos itself did.

It was a while before Gaspar understood what he was looking at. The Gurus were not the only ones to be cast through time. Others traveled too, and they...changed things. Time did not like being changed. Like coagulating blood, its wounds sealed themselves. But not well enough. Not well enough. The Chrono Trigger could reach into the wounds where time had been changed and change it *again*, change it *back* if necessary. Anywhere a time traveler walked the earth. And with no need for an existing Gate.

Gaspar thought of the Prophet, and finally understood. The Prophet had never been able to *see* the future. He had *already seen* the future. He knew its course because he had lived it once already. He had seen Zeal’s fall, and returned to witness it again. Why? For what purpose?

*The royal family. The Mammon Machine. The Ocean Palace project. How many people knew such intimate details about all of these things? How many that I would not recognize?*

And just like that, Gaspar knew who the Prophet was. He laughed. *Boy, you played the most dangerous game I can imagine, and you did it well. I wish that I could tell you so.*

Well, he had his own game left to play. But where could Gaspar go?  
What moment could he touch, alter, that would change fate?  
He considered that question carefully.  
And he considered it for a long, long time.

## Part III

## Reason

*“The Professor’s programming was, in a sense, his own eulogy. Soon I, too, will be able to sleep forever. But first, there is one thing I must do. . .”*

– Nu

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The future was *cold*, Belthasar thought.

There were lots of other things wrong with it, of course. There were practically no plants left. Just about every domesticated animal was extinct. Those that remained had gone feral, and half of everything else seemed to want humans dead. The water was unclean and sometimes brackish, and food was next to nonexistent. But what really bothered the Guru of Reason was the *cold*, and the darkness. He had lived nearly his entire life above the clouds, in clear sunlight. Here, the sun hid, and an ashen sky mocked his memories.

*This*, he thought, *must be how the Earthbound Ones perceived the world.*

And unlike the ash and dust, the dome couldn’t keep the cold out. What little would burn kept it at bay only briefly, making it even worse when the embers cooled and the cold crept back in. Belthasar could keep himself warm with fire magic, but he needed it far more than he would have liked, and constantly felt drained.

Despite the desolation, there were humans in this time, scattered throughout the domes. They wrapped themselves in blankets and burned anything flammable for warmth. There was not enough food; they kept themselves alive with a marvelous machine that fed whatever nutrients you needed directly into your blood. It still left you hungry. Belthasar did not like it, although he admired the workmanship. All of the workmanship; on the feed machines, the domes themselves, the marvelously intricate devices he had come to know as Computers. This dead civilization had known how to *build*. It was a horrible shame that it was dead.

Belthasar collected blankets from among the wreckage, and when he wasn’t working he wrapped himself in them just like the Earthbound. He still thought of them as Earthbound, even though they had never heard the term and, in fact, had never heard of magic. They had the same wasted look of despair to them, and it was so familiar and so sad.

Today he was in the main hall of Arris Dome, seated at a dilapidated, barely-functional computer terminal, reading through textbooks written

thousands of years after his own birth, yet still hundreds of years old. He had much to catch up on.

“What occupies you today, Belthasar?”

The speaker was named Noel. He was the closest thing the humans in this dome had to a leader.

“Robots,” Belthasar said.

“Robots?”

“Robots. I’m always fascinated by what you people can do. Golems without magic.”

Noel, of course, had no idea what golems or magic were. He knew better than to ask. They spoke the same language, but Belthasar’s vocabulary was both idiosyncratic and much larger. Six months after the Guru of Reason set foot in this time period, he knew more about the technology of the future than most of the residents. His title was not without cause.

“I’m going below,” Belthasar said.

“Be careful.”

He passed by the rest of the Earthbound on his way; most didn’t try to meet his eyes. Many were unsure what to do with this strange man who made bizarre comments and still walked upright without shame. Belthasar found it somewhat disappointing; he liked company, and could have done with a friend. Well, he would *make* a friend if he had to.

If Belthasar understood the words of the ancients correctly, once upon a time this huge multi-storied dome had been served by a machine of gears and pulleys that functioned very much like a Skyway. That time was long gone; the power that ran all these future machines, which they called Electricity, had in some way died. The entire building was running on “Emergency Power”, a phrase which Belthasar thought he understood and seemed to translate to “nothing works but the bare essentials, and not even most of them.” Today, merely reaching other levels of the dome was done by tubed ladders.

In his own time, the Sun Stone had been drained out, and sealed away, and Lavos tapped to replace its power. What if Lavos had not been discovered? Even if the disaster at the Ocean Palace had not occurred, without the Sun Stone’s power it would have been very difficult to keep Zeal afloat. Belthasar, magic engineer that he was, knew that better than anyone. Would they have ended up like these people, eking out a barren living on the pitiful remnants of consumed and exhausted magic?

No. Magic predated Zeal itself by millennia; people had survived under the clouds and gotten by all right. But it was an unpleasant thought.

Belthasar hated crawling up and down ladders to get where he needed to be. It took too long and he couldn't think properly while doing it. Going from a walk to a climb to another walk disrupted his chain of thought in a manner that was really quite irritating, like having someone tap you on the shoulder repeatedly. Well, he had no choice but to climb by hand, so he climbed by hand, and wondered if he could get one of the dead elevators up and running without having to maintain it himself. Probably not.

He made his way to the lower parts of the dome, looking for robot parts. There were plenty to be found; in the days before the Fall, humanity made extensive use of them as servants, far more so than Zeal ever made use of golems. Belthasar picked up anything that looked useful and threw it in a sack on his back. Some of the smaller old robots were still active, though not the sentient ones. He disrupted them with lightning when he had to, took them apart, and pocketed whatever he could re-purpose. His study over the last several weeks had given him a good idea of what parts would be needed and what parts would not.

The third time he shocked a small cleaner bot, he had a revelation. *Of course. This thing the future calls Electricity, it's just* bottled lightning. He knew how to work with bottled lightning; much of the Ocean Palace had been managed in just that way.

Which meant he could power whatever he needed with magic, with a bit of work. He didn't need a future power source, and he didn't need to re-engineer his creation to accept magic as one. Just find an electric storage device (*battery*, his mind informed him) and zap it. It would save him weeks of work.

He whistled softly to himself as he returned through the desolate metal warrens that made up the basement of the dome. He felt satisfied.

Noel hadn't moved at all when he got back. "Any luck?" the old man asked.

"Quite a bit! It's surprising just how much of this stuff is still in one piece."

"What on earth do you plan to do with it?"

"Build one, of course. What else?"

"But nobody's built a new robot for centuries!"

"Why should that stop me?" Belthasar asked, and went looking for a terminal that had some privacy.

He had built a golem this way, once, long ago. He'd constructed it from soil and rock rather than metal and oil, but the principle was little different. He needed a companion. He had work to do, real work, and it was too much for one pair of hands. He needed a couple more.

As he had once done in the dim mists of antiquity, he built his golem – robot – in the shape of a Nu. The Nu fascinated him. They were older than humans; much older, Belthasar suspected. He did not understand why Melchior hadn't put more effort into studying them. As forms of life went, they were a mystery. Zeal, as a society, employed them as high-status servants. The Nu never seemed to mind, but who knew what they were thinking? For a species whose body structure consisted almost entirely of a single giant face, they were remarkably hard to read.

It took him six months. The actual functional parts were all mechanical, a change for him; golems were made entirely of magic. But in this bleak future he could not afford to expend magic on maintenance. So he constructed it in the manner of the future, slowly and with care, and used magic merely to clothe it in flesh and skin. The result was physically very close to a Nu, although it had some odd speech patterns. He was quite happy with it.

It took six or seven attempts before he could get it to turn on, move around, speak. That was five or six more than he was used to, but much of this technology was alien to him.

"Guru," it said, at last. "What is your command?"

"Come along." Belthasar smiled. "We have work to do."

"Very well, I will follow you."

He went back to speak to Noel. "Hello, my friend. I'm afraid I'm going to have to leave you."

Noel blinked at him. "Where are you going?"

"There's a dome near the foot of Death Peak that's unpopulated, isn't there?"

"You're going *there*? You're crazy, Belthasar."

"Do you know what sort of condition it's in?"

"*Nobody* knows what condition it's in. It's been abandoned since Lavos started breeding on the mountain."

"Well, somebody is going to find out. That's where I'm heading."

"You're nuts. Even more nuts to set out alone. I've seen you do some strange things, Belthasar, but this is awful dangerous even for you."

“Well, I’m not quite going alone. I do have a companion.” Belthasar indicated his new robot, grinning.

Noel, who somehow had missed seeing it, gaped. “What the . . . what on earth are *you*?” he sputtered.

“Nu!” it replied.

---

As it turned out, aside from the shattered roof, gaping holes, destroyed infrastructure, and general mess – features common to all the domes Belthasar or anyone else knew of – this dome was in fairly good shape. Its generators were intact, missed by Lavos’s rain of fire. Looters had never touched it; people feared coming this close to Death’s Peak.

The first order of business was power. Anything that could be done without magic, Belthasar wanted to do without magic, so that he could save his strength for the real work. He spent the first two weeks collecting cables and replacing cut ones. He worked mostly on his own; his robotic Nu companion lacked the fine motor control needed to handle cabling, although it could carry equipment just fine. Belthasar made a mental note to do something about that.

Getting the generators to *start* was harder. Any manuals were long gone. Belthasar had to figure it out for himself. That did not faze him. He was an engineer; he figured it out.

After the lights came on, he checked everything again. Bottled lightning fizzled out when something went wrong, if the spells were constructed correctly. Electricity did not. A bad cable or connection could catch fire. There wasn’t much to burn, but it was still something Belthasar worried about. Once he was confident the system was working as expected, he relaxed a bit.

He cleared a workshop and some storage space, and began seriously pursuing that endeavor so many others had not dared: looting. Anything the evacuees had left intact was fair game. And they’d left quite a bit of stuff intact.

He didn’t know what he needed, so he gathered whatever appeared undamaged and useful. Everything from kitchen piping to computer terminals ended up in his storage room. He particularly looked for petri dishes, microscopes, anything that might have come out of a biology lab. Plate metal

and anything else that might serve as raw material, he stored in what would one day be a hangar.

Lavos had burst out of the bowels of the earth hundreds of years ago, shattered the world and left it to die. It took a home for itself on a great mountain, and the human survivors named it Death's Peak. Now Belthasar was here, on Lavos's doorstep. He was afraid, but not in the same way the Earthbound were afraid. This was the fear he had once felt, descending to the ocean floor in a sealed metal box, thousands of tons of water trying to crush him, and himself filled to the brim with magic and determined to reach the bottom *just to prove that he could*. Now he was looking at ascending a mountain, going up instead of down, but the feeling was the same. This was fight-fear, not flight-fear.

It was possible to kill a thing through simple force, as one might step on a spider. Lavos had stepped on humanity in just that way. But spiders were not defenseless. If a spider was so inclined, it could reel down on its web and come on a human unawares. With the right venom, a tiny bite could kill something a thousand times its size and strength. Where main force was impossible, the *right form of attack* could succeed.

Belthasar needed to know his enemy. Great works were best approached by understanding the problem first. Lavos lived on this mountain; therefore Belthasar had to come here. To study it. This was work that really should have been Melchior's, student of Life that he was. Circumstances decreed that it must be Belthasar's work instead. So be it.

But that was not all he had to work on. In Zeal, he had been designing another flying machine; something smaller than the Blackbird, more maneuverable, and spelled in such a way that it could travel beneath the clouds safely. He saw no reason not to re-use the design, since he needed an enclosed unit anyway. Besides, he wanted to fly again. That slate sky was getting to him. He needed to get above it. He needed wings.

But he needed something else more than wings. He counted himself fortunate that Gaspar's old notebook had still been on his person when he was ripped from his time and cast into the future.

"Guru," his companion said at one point, confused by their endless collection, "may I ask, what is our goal?"

It amused Belthasar to respond to that literally: "Sure," he said. "You may."

"What is our goal?" it continued, completely missing the point.

"I intend to go *back*."

Belthasar wished he had Gaspar with him. This was not his area of expertise. The notebook and his own intelligence would have to be enough. They would have to be.

At one point, they found a set of equipment that he could connect to a robot's brain to adjust it. That was good. The Nu could respond to spoken commands, but was not good at value judgments; he couldn't just tell it "go collect useful parts" and have it do the right thing. Belthasar spent a few days attached to its brain, giving it an idea of what he considered useful, and then turned it loose to search the dome. In the meantime, he sat down to study Gaspar's notes and do some thinking of his own. As Gaspar had once done, he expressed his thoughts as a series of conjectures.

Conjecture A: "Time travel is possible." Obviously true; he was living its truth. Belthasar was in the future, therefore it was possible to go to the future.

Conjecture B: "Time travel *to the past* is possible." Not obviously true; Belthasar had only one data point to work with. But Gaspar's equations were symmetrical with respect to time's direction; travel to the past was *probably* possible, to the extent that his equations were correct. Belthasar did not think he could do any better work in that respect than Gaspar. He would treat the Guru of Time's conclusions as correct.

Conjecture C: "*Changing* the past is possible." On this, he had no data, and Gaspar's notes were silent on the subject. If he went to the past, could he do anything other than fulfill that which had already happened? Could Time's march be redirected? On this, all hinged. Belthasar was not done with Zeal's kingdom or its Queen.

And he was not done with Lavos.

This was work that really should have been Gaspar's, student of Time that he was. Circumstances decreed that it must be Belthasar's work instead.

Once again, so be it.

He walked outside and looked up at Death's Peak for a long time.

"I see you up there, Lavos," he said. "I see you, I know you, and one day I will come for you."

Killing Lavos or its spawn was both beyond his power and, at this time, of little worth. It would not restore the world. It would not restore Zeal. All those that he knew would remain dead. All those that he did not know would remain dead. The earth itself would remain dead.

But kill Lavos in the *past*...

It was not something he could do alone. But if he could find Gaspar and Melchior...

Presumably, they were also adrift in Time's flow. Maybe he could find them. When Lavos rose at the Ocean Palace, they were unprepared. Together, armed with knowledge and ready to fight, they might do better. They might win.

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If Belthasar had thought the future as a whole was cold, Death's Peak was even worse. Everything beyond the foothills was bare rock and glacier ice. The paths were treacherous. In the foothills, dangerous creatures frequented the caves and only came out to hunt each other. The upper reaches were utterly lifeless.

Belthasar sewed together a coat from scraps of cloth found around the dome. He was not particularly good with a needle; it was ugly and not entirely airtight, but it was layered so thickly that it didn't matter. He could not survive the mountain without it. Even in the warmest clothing he could manage, he still had to take shelter in caves at night, and warm himself with fire magic from time to time. He worried about that every time. Humans with the power of magic could sense its use; could Lavos do the same? Belthasar knew it had magic of its own, for that was what the Mammon Machine had been created to tap. Would it even deign to notice magic's use? He wasn't sure.

Like the cave animals, he was hunting. Like them, he felt hunted in turn. Somewhere on this mountain, Lavos's spawn were growing, eating, preparing for a day when they, too, would travel to other worlds. Belthasar couldn't kill Lavos itself. But he thought he might be able to kill one of its spawn, if he could catch it alone, by surprise.

He wanted a sample.

Belthasar was alone. The Nu was back at the dome. It wasn't designed for this environment, it couldn't fight, and it wasn't mobile enough to keep up with him anyway.

Three times, creatures came for him at night, looking for food. They didn't fare well. Their usual prey probably didn't have wards to alert them of intruders. Their usual prey probably looked more or less as dangerous as it actually was. Their usual prey probably could not light them on fire with a few words, or encase them in a block of ice with a thought.

Belthasar developed a habit of moving on each time a hunter found his cave. Just in case his presence could be sensed.

On the fifth day he found the tracks. Lavos's spawn *slithered*, like gargantuan snakes, and left behind a smoothly rippled path in the ash and snow. The track could not be old, or new precipitation would have obliterated it. It was easily visible from a distance. Belthasar did not follow directly in the spawn's wake. Instead he climbed a nearby ridge, kept an eye on the track, and paralleled it. He wanted to see his quarry well before it could see him. If it took longer that way, so be it.

He followed the track for two days before the spawn came into sight. Its body was half again the size of a mammoth, but it had no legs and was built in the shape of a slug. Most of its body was covered in a forest of spines. Its head was a shell of sorts. Belthasar knew that the head could dilate open to reveal an organ very much like an eye, but right now it was closed. Clearly it had other ways of sensing its environment. From the tracks, Belthasar knew that its underbelly was smooth and unspined, and might be more vulnerable than the rest of it; but that did not help because, pressed against the ground as it was, he had no way of reaching it.

It was slowly turning when he came into sight, and after a few minutes it began to undulate onward, away from him. Good.

Belthasar hid with his eyes just surfacing over a rock, and made a small fire a hundred feet away. The fire was not intended to do anything. He just wanted to see if the creature reacted to the magic.

It didn't. Good.

It did not move very quickly, and Belthasar found that he could keep up easily. Night was several hours away. He had that long to find a good spot. He kept the creature in sight as best he could, and circled around, keeping to ridges and maintaining higher ground. It had not reacted to his magic, but he had no idea how intelligent these creatures were. Who knew if it was just leading him on? He didn't sort of power to expect from it, either. Lavos had rained fire across the world in the space of a day. Belthasar did not think its spawn could replicate that feat before maturity. But he was not sure.

It made its way up a tight valley, and it stopped several times along the way. Belthasar couldn't tell why, but it gave him a chance to get ahead. Eventually he found what he needed: a high cliff-side, coated more in snow than ash, built up and up until it seemed a small mountain of its own. He settled down and waited for the creature to catch up. If it changed direction,

he would have to try again. While he waited, he worked, chanting spellwork. Like a spider, he wove a web. But his web was made of fire and lightning, and he embedded it into the rock itself. One could count on one's fingers the number of mages of Zeal that could create a spell of this complexity. It did not require that much power. Just a careful and precise mind.

If you didn't have enough power to do something – like, say, kill – then, well, you just borrowed some from your environment. That was how Belthasar saw it. Gravity would do what he could not.

Lavos's spawn did not change direction, and he watched as it made its way up the valley. He moved further down, still on the high ground, but behind it. He didn't want to get caught in his own trap.

As the spawn approached the base of the cliff, Belthasar began to murmur another spell, as quietly as he could manage. He reached out into the mountain snow, and deep beneath the surface, he summoned fire.

He could not see the difference. More importantly, Lavos's spawn could not sense the difference. It continued onward, oblivious to the increasingly precarious snowdrift far above.

As deep as he was working, the packed snow was no longer snow, but glacier ice mixed with ash. Belthasar turned up the heat, and felt it begin to change, to melt, to become less *ice* and more *water*. Water with a huge mass of even more ice and snow suspended on its surface. The edifice groaned audibly.

Belthasar was not done yet. As the avalanche began, he fed all the power he could summon into his granite spiderweb spell. The avalanche poured down the cliff face, and the mountain itself *vibrated*. The weakened stone could not take the strain, and between the avalanche and the web of fire, it cracked. Shattered. Broken rock joined the flow, and the lethal mix went into freefall as the cliff completely gave way.

When the Guru of Reason set out to do a thing, he made sure he did it right.

The spawn noticed. How could it not? The mountain itself was practically screaming, and the avalanche had become an earthquake. The spawn stopped moving. It had no neck. It could not *look up*. It could not *see*.

Belthasar felt its magic come to life. It reached upward and formed a shield, halfway up the cliff face. The first wave of falling rock struck the shield and was shunted to one side, harmlessly dropping further down the valley. But there was more behind it, so much that it *collected*. Belthasar could feel the magic that went into that shield, so much that his head hurt

just from being nearby. It buckled beneath the weight, but somehow it held.

The spawn started backing away, down the valley. He couldn't let it go. Was that all the magic it could bring to bear? It felt like it might be.

Belthasar raised his hand and threw lightning down at the spawn, then ducked behind a crag and rolled away, without waiting to see the results. The response was so immediate that it had to be instinctual: a searing bolt of fire cooked the place where he'd been standing. A moment later, two giant spines followed, struck the mountainside, and sank into it for half their own length. Belthasar shivered. He scrambled away and tried to stay out of sight. All he'd wanted was to force it to take some power and attention away from the shield. Was the distraction enough?

It was. He felt the spawn's magic shield collapse. A cacophonous roar echoed across the mountain. Ten thousand tons of death came down from Death's Peak, and buried one of Lavos's children in its bowels.

*Well, Belthasar thought, that went about as well as I could have wanted. Now how do I get a bloody sample?*

---

It took Belthasar nearly a year to unearth the remains, over the course of many trips to the mountain. It was just as well, because the damned thing still wasn't quite dead.

Oh, it was broken, all right; the shell crushed, the head destroyed, most of its innards turned to mush from the impact. But as it turned out, there was almost an entirely separate creature buried inside of it, its "brains" as it were. It was about the size of a baby, and vaguely humanoid in structure. The huge, impervious outer shell had done its job: this creature was still intact. Who knew how long it had survived before finally dying of starvation? What passed for its blood still flowed sluggishly, even though it was clearly inert.

"Mental note, Self," Belthasar said as he inspected the corpse, "Don't try that on the grown-up version. It won't work."

There was no way to bring it all back, of course, but he tried to bring as much as he could. Tissue from each organ that he could identify. At least some chunks of the shell. And as much as he could manage of the organ-creature that he thought was the brain.

He levitated most of it back to the dome. It was a ridiculously slow process, trying to stay hidden, trying to stay alive, and trying to drag hundreds of pounds of corpse-flesh behind him. At least it was so cold in the mountains that the flesh did not rot.

At last he staggered back into the dome, and let his levitation spell unravel just outside. The Nu greeted him at the entrance.

“Guru, I welcome y—”

“Yes, yes, shut up and help me with this.”

“Yes, Guru.”

They put the remains in a freezer room. Belthasar was thankful this civilization had found a way to keep things cold without magic; he was so tired he didn’t think he could chill it himself. By the time they were done, he was shivering with cold and exhaustion, a bone-deep chill that genuinely scared him. For the first time in his life, he suspected he was feeling his age.

“Guru, you should sleep,” the Nu said.

“Of course I should. I’m only about to fall down.” And then he fell down.

He looked up at the Nu blearily as it picked him up. “Remind me, when did I tell you I was Guru of Reason? I don’t remember telling you that.” Then he passed out.

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“Conjecture: Lavos is mortal. Proof: Its spawn are mortal.”

“That doesn’t actually prove anything, you know. Maybe it becomes immortal at maturity.”

“That would be stupid and insane.”

“Says the man who is talking to himself.”

“You’re talking to yourself too. Idiot.”

Belthasar was working on the time machine, but he was thinking about Lavos. He was not Melchior, but he knew a thing or two about biology, and he learned more every day from the computers and textbooks of this era. The tissues in the spawn’s outer shell and organs were nothing like those of any other living thing on earth. It really had come from another world. He hadn’t been sure. But he was increasingly sure that the actual sentient being – the “I” of the species – was the humanoid structure deep in its core.

Which invited the question: *Why is it humanoid?*

Then he took a closer look, and found that while the outer structure was wholly alien, the inner structure had traces of Earthly life.

It reproduced asexually on Death's Peak, but it was *not* simply cloning itself. Mammals usually required a partner to breed, to provide genetic variation. Melchior had discovered the mechanism behind it, long ago. Belthasar knew from the records that the future's civilization had rediscovered the principle. But Lavos had no partner. It was getting its genetic variation from whatever it found in its environment.

It didn't have to eat humans. Like Belthasar, it just needed a *sample*. The rest could die. In fact, since other life could be a threat, it was probably better to just kill it all off. Make the world safe for its children. Did it even really feel hostility to humanity? Or was its position more like an animal herder towards his flock, deciding when to slaughter them? Didn't matter. It was inimical to humanity either way.

Which made his other project all the more important. He had to go back to the past, to undo this future.

The work was long and tiring, and he had little to go on but Gaspar's notes and his own intuition. It had been four years since his escapade on Death's Peak. This was his third attempt at creating a time engine, the heart of the machine, to warp time and draw its host into the portal thus formed. He would eventually go through eight prototypes, but he did not know that yet.

Part of what made it so difficult was testing; it was a complex system of mechanics and magic, but the really hard parts could only be tested as a unified whole. So he did not know he had failed until the device, fully formed, failed to start, or failed to behave as expected. He tried to make smaller devices, not to travel through time but just to touch it in some way he needed, and that worked better. But it was still slow going. He could not personally sense the flow of time, like Gaspar could. And he could not trust the Nu to do the work for him.

He turned the engine on and drew back slightly. A series of lights on the front cycled on. This one meant its temperature was within the right range. That one meant the generator was producing the right amount of magic. Another measured the local temporal field resistance. There were quite a few more such lights. Each indicated something about the device's status.

But just because the lights were supposed to tell him if something was wrong, didn't mean he trusted them to actually tell him if something was

wrong. He poked lightly at it with magic, looking for abnormalities. Mechanically, everything was in order. Electrically, everything was in order. Magically, everything was in order. That just meant it was working as designed; it didn't mean the design was correct.

A dial on the side specified when and where it would go when activated. This was something he worried about. If he set it to something like "five minutes ago", clearly it could never work; he had just experienced five minutes ago, he should see a second engine already. Instead he set it for five minutes in the future. Hopefully, it would disappear momentarily and reappear shortly. He hit the activation switch.

It gave a loud *bang*, and suddenly contracted, twisting itself into a small ball. Smoke and soot poured out. Belthasar barely flinched. He blew the dust out of his face, grimaced momentarily, and started poking it with magic again, writing in one of his own notebooks as he went.

"Professor, are you undamaged?" the Nu asked from its own workbench.

"Professor?"

"It is a word from the pre-Lavos age. It means both teacher and student."

"Ah. I like it. Yes, I'm fine." He levitated the warped and blackened time engine into the Nu's view. "See? Everything working just as usual."

"Yes, Professor."

*Well, you could at least humor me*, Belthasar thought. He was amused rather than bitter. His new approach had failed. That barely fazed him; he just took notes on the results and tried to incorporate them into his plans for the next one. This was the hardest problem he had ever attacked. The Blackbird had been trivial by comparison. Even the Ocean Palace, for all the engineering mastery it had required, was not like this. Belthasar, Guru of Reason, was working at the limits of theory and practice, of science and magic. *This*, he was thinking, *must be what the forefathers of Zeal felt, when they first set out to uproot the earth and bring down the sky.*

He had no idea what he was doing. But for all that his work was born of desperation, he loved every minute of it.

---

By the time he made his first real breakthrough, he had lost track of the years and had to check his calendar.

“Year fourteen, day one hundred and six,” he said, out loud. He had taken to using a recorder to take most of his notes. He played it while he slept in the hopes that, somehow, his mind would unconsciously begin working on unsolved problems. “Today I succeeded, twice, in getting a time engine to function. In the first case, I set the time-dial to plus zero. That is, the machine left and re-entered the time stream at the same moment, effectively going nowhere in the subjective sense. However, the engine itself recorded it as a successful trip.

”For the second experiment I intentionally sacrificed the prototype. I set the time gauge to nullity; that is, it would leave this time period but never return to any other, remaining in travel-mode indefinitely. The engine disappeared and has not come back. I do not know where it will end up, but I consider it demonstrated that stream-exit is indeed happening. This lends weight to the claim that the going-nowhere trip actually did work as intended.

“My suspicion is that there are limitations on when and where any given object’s temporal path can intersect with that of reality. A travel path that goes nowhere is already intersecting with reality, so it works fine. A travel path that never re-enters has no other intersection, so that also works fine. But a travel path that re-enters at an ‘invalid’ moment can only fail. It might be asked why it fails on exiting reality rather than re-entering it, but such an incongruity is not entirely surprising given that we are Doing Strange Things with causality in the first place.”

”I am not sure what to do next. I cannot test varying travel paths and induct based on the results. The time and resources lost in failed attempts are too great. I will have to work out the potential paths from first principles, which is . . . problematic, given that I do not know the correct set of first principles.

“I am going to revisit Gaspar’s notes again.”

Belthasar shut the recorder off, feeling a twinge of pain in his fingers as he did so. It made him nervous, so he tried not to think about it. He was not a healer; he had no idea what to do about arthritis, and he had more important things to do. After so many years of beating his head against the wall, finally having something useful and functional to work with excited him enormously. But the time and effort he had put into it was astronomical, and the goal well ahead of him yet. The work was getting more difficult, too. He had reached that age where magical strength began to wane, and that was bad. Levitation, in particular, was beginning to

strain him, and he was going to have to rely more and more on the Nu as time went on.

Well, so be it. He wasn't going to let that stop him.

"I'm going to hole up for a few days," he said to the Nu.

"What shall I do in your absence, Professor?"

"Just clean up the workshop. And get a new set of engine parts set up on my bench. And move those metal plates up to the hangar; I'm going to need them for the wings. And go look through some of the storerooms, see if there's a real mattress or something. I've been sleeping on old clothes too long."

"Yes, Professor."

"Are you smart enough for electrical work? I think that last test blew out some circuits. Actually I think it blew out all the circuits. See if you can fix them." Belthasar knew how to fix them himself, and could have done it in minutes; he was just curious what the Nu could do. If he could offload some of the basic technical work instead of just manual labor, it would be helpful.

"Yes, Professor."

"Get me a handheld terminal, too. My old one's dead. Just leave it outside my door, don't bother to knock."

"Yes, Professor."

Belthasar barely heard its response. His mind was already halfway to the moon, trying to connect his memories of Gaspar's notes with Belthasar's own most recent results. He discarded the idea of trying to deduce possible exit points almost immediately. It was impossible. Better plan: Could he send out an engine to some time far in the past, and have it return without attempting to leave the timestream? There had to be some way to distinguish between places it could exit and places it could not. If he could have an engine record its environment on such a trip, and then come back to a known good location, i.e. his own. . . .

He stumbled into the door, realized it was closed, opened it, and wandered in the general direction of his bedroom. The Nu watched him go, its eyes wide as ever, its face expressionless.

Almost expressionless. Was there something like a smile there? Something. . . relieved? Though there was no one to hear it in the decaying dome, it spoke.

"I will do as you ask, great student of Reason," it said.

---

In between his work on the time machine, Belthasar poked and prodded at the remains of Lavos's spawn. Its size and age were interesting.

The spawn was an order of magnitude smaller than Lavos itself, despite having been around two hundred years old at time of death. Lavos had birthed it about a hundred years after emerging. That implied Lavos's species had a very long reproductive and growth cycle. How long would it take one of the spawns to reach maturity? A thousand years? Two thousand? What was its natural lifespan?

He read five biology texts on a computer terminal to educate himself, then put some bits of the spawn's corpse under a microscope. It didn't help him understand much, except to note that no, it didn't match what was in the textbooks. The shell was the most interesting part. The inner surface was iron-based and incredibly hard. The spines were sharper and more brittle than those of Lavos itself, and appeared to be detachable. Belthasar thought they might have some use in self-defense. The shell surface must have evolved to handle impact on a new planet, assuming it was normal for these creatures to go from one world to another within their lifetimes. Belthasar calculated the impact force from gravity and air resistance, but it didn't add up; even with such an impossibly rigid shell, there was no way it could survive. It would have to use magic to either reinforce the shell or slow itself down.

Belthasar returned to the mountain twice, looking for dung, detritus, broken shell pieces, or anything else from Lavos itself. He found some waste, but not much. It didn't enlighten. He found no shell fragments from Lavos itself, only its spawn. That wasn't surprising; anything that was likely to break off would have done so when it fell to earth. Belthasar stopped going back. He couldn't afford to make a mistake and die.

He scrounged through whatever he could find on the computer terminals. The data available was surprising, as if every fact that anyone on the planet had ever known was recorded. He found research papers from schools on the far side of the globe. He found personal diaries from all stratas of the population. He found... television. He was not impressed by television.

He also found geology. The future civilization had never identified Lavos for what it was, which was understandable because as far as he could tell, they knew nothing of magic and thus had no way of contacting it. They

had, however, gathered detailed geological records of almost anywhere interesting.

“This is a gold mine,” he commented to the Nu one day, going through it.

“How so?”

“You’re looking at probably the only geologist of my generation, and I was an amateur compared to these people. Nobody from Zeal ever knew much about the earth. We didn’t *have* to. Plenty of research was done when the islands were initially raised, of course, but most of that was lost. It’s not like we ever went down to the surface.”

“I see.” The Nu was expressionless.

“Anyway, I’m learning about things I never knew existed. They couldn’t contact Lavos, but they found it anyway. Look at this. Apparently its subterranean hibernation was a frequent source of earthquakes. They figured out where it was sleeping by *measuring earthquakes*. They didn’t know what it was, but they sure as hell knew *where* it was. I wish all these scientists weren’t dead. I would love to meet them.”

The Nu didn’t respond, and Belthasar went back to his work.

*Come to think of it*, he thought, *if they found where it was sleeping, I wonder if they also found where it came down?*

Lavos’s hibernation spot in this time period was not far from where it had slept in his own. Clearly it didn’t move around very much down there. It probably arrived close by. That narrowed the search space. Its arrival would have had the characteristics of a meteor strike, and Belthasar knew these people tracked meteor strikes. He went looking.

Sort for location of strike versus Lavos’s known location.

Sort for estimated mass of object versus an educated guess at Lavos’s mass.

There were only a few, all too recent. More recent than Zeal. Something wasn’t right. Maybe they had never found evidence of the impact? Maybe it hit the ocean. No, there were ocean impacts listed. A thought struck him; he went through the data again.

Adjust location of impact to account for plate tectonics.

And there it was. The right place, the right size. But the *wrong* time. Someone had clearly added a zero to the date. Or two. Or three. Definitely three. But he re-checked the math of the researchers and found that it added up. Lavos had been buried in the earth for sixty-five million years.

Give or take a million. And who knew how long it had taken to cross the stars?

“Holy hell,” Belthasar said. “It really is immortal.”

He looked over at the spawn fragments. He’d killed the spawn, killed it dead. Surely that meant Lavos could die, too. Unaging didn’t mean indestructible. Right?

Right?

---

The detection experiment was successful, and Belthasar found a number of possible exit points. Enough to deduce the truth: He could only go to time periods where a Gate already existed. He didn’t need to explicitly program in destinations, and worry about being off just enough to be a problem; he only needed to aim for a general time period, detect the Gate as the time machine passed it, and leave the timestream then. Since any time period with a Gate was available, there were no worries about where Melchior and Gaspar had ended up; he could reach them wherever they roamed.

The time machine’s final form began to take shape. There were no longer any technical problems to solve. There was only a physical, logistical problem: turning a collection of broken equipment and metal plating into something that functioned. Well, he could do that. He repaired parts; his Nu companion welded steel, assembled the machine, ran tests.

But there was a problem with Belthasar’s time machine: He could not finish it.

For all of Zeal’s magic, the Enlightened Ones had never succeeded in curing aging. People hoped for it from the Mammon Machine, but Belthasar knew that hope was unfounded, or at least misplaced; all the power in the world would not help without understanding the problem well enough to fix it, and even Melchior could not claim that. As history counted its paces, fourteen thousand years had passed since then. But as Belthasar’s body counted its paces... well, that was a different matter entirely, wasn’t it?

His hands kept trembling and slipping. He caught a glimpse of himself in a broken mirror; his face was wrinkled and his hair was gray. Worst of all, his mind went off on irrelevant tangents, floated in the clouds, and often he would find himself staring at a task, not realizing that hours had passed

and he had not moved. That was common for him; what was not common was coming out of such a reverie *without* some new idea, some insight.

Eventually he asked his companion. “How long,” he said, “have I been working on this?”

“I do not know. Your work on this machine pre-dates my activation.”

Belthasar grimaced. “How long have you been active?”

“Thirty-three years, eight months, six days, two hours and eleven minutes, Professor.”

Belthasar relaxed back into his chair. Three decades. He had been forty-nine years old when Zeal ended. He had lived nearly half his lifetime in this dying future. Ever working.

“Gaspar,” he said sadly, “I wish you were here. This would all have gone so much faster...”

“Professor?”

“Never mind. We’re never going to get the wings on, are we?”

“Negative.”

The Nu did not add that the job needed two strong pairs of hands, and Belthasar was too frail to help.

*I should have built two robots,* he thought.

Why hadn’t he just brought some people? Or gone to find assistants? It wasn’t like he hadn’t had time to consider his actions. The population of the entire planet might be only a few thousand, but so what? He could have found five or ten from one of the remaining domes. Five or ten pairs of hands would have been enough. Why was it just him and his robot?

*Because they were Earthbound.* Belthasar had always treated the Earth-bound Ones with respect. He thought the contempt that most of the Enlightened viewed them with was uncharitable, unnecessary, and reflected badly on them as a society. But *treating* them with respect was a different thing from *really* respecting them. And how strange was that, really? It was hard to have respect for people who didn’t respect themselves.

He didn’t ask them for help because, on a gut level, he didn’t think they could provide any help worth his time. How could they? He was at the foot of Death’s Peak doing research and development. Construction was well within the capacity of his Nu. Who needed more?

It had not occurred to him that it would take so long, or that he would get so weak.

Belthasar started to get out of his chair, then stopped. His mind, fogged though it was, grasped on to something important. Something critically

important. He tried to do the math in his head and found that he could not.

“What’s the inertial force experienced when this thing enters the timestream?”

The Nu gave him a number. It was a rather large number.

“And how much can an eighty-year-old human body take and survive, on average?”

The Nu gave him another number. It was a rather smaller number.

Belthasar sighed, and leaned back into his chair again. “I’m never going to make it, am I?”

“Odds are four to one against you surviving a trip, and seventy to one against you surviving more than one such trip, Professor.”

“You must go in my stead.”

“I would remind the Professor that I do not meet the requisite acceleration tolerance, either.”

Belthasar got up and walked outside. Limped, really. There was no getting around it; he was getting old. Too old. He didn’t feel the chill. Didn’t feel anything, really. The glass and dirt under his feet crunched as he made his way up a nearby ridge. He looked up. Up at Death’s Peak. He didn’t know if Lavos was still up there. Didn’t know if its spawn were still up there, either. After annihilating human civilization and harvesting whatever it needed from the remnants, it had not bothered to exterminate what was left. There was no need.

“Looks like Time,” he murmured, “will succeed where you failed, you damn bastard. I don’t want to leave my work undone.”

He heard his robot companion climb the ridge behind him.

“It’s all for nothing, isn’t it?” Belthasar said.

“No. Others will come.”

“Sure, someone from this age might find my work eventually. People who don’t know where to go and what to do. Probably take it straight to the Day of Lavos and die.”

“No. Others will come. The future *can* be changed, Professor. They can change it. They have changed it. You must make it ready for them.”

Belthasar turned around, slowly. Even with his mind in a fog, that was too much for him to ignore.

“I built you thirty-three years ago,” he said.

“Thirty-three years, eight months, six da—”

“Yes, yes. It’s been a long time, but I remember building you. I made you look like a Nu. But I don’t remember ever programming you to *act* like a Nu.”

“What is a Nu, Professor?”

“Maybe I should be asking *you* that. You called me Guru before I ever told you about my title. You tell me there are people coming, but you have no way of knowing that either. And you’re as cheerfully enigmatic as those big blue blobs ever dreamed of being. So tell me something, my friend. I was born fourteen thousand years ago and I am eighty years old. You were born thirty-three years ago; how old are you?”

It stared at him, nonplussed. Its face twisted into a disturbing grin, and Belthasar braced himself. It was the expression the Nu tended to wear when they said something inscrutable.

“Nu!” it said.

---

Belthasar was not ready to die just yet. He abandoned the wings; it would be nice if his time machine could fly as well, but it wasn’t necessary to its purpose. What little was left of the construction did not take long. The Nu did the heavy lifting; Belthasar did the troubleshooting. When it was done, he sealed the hangar with as much magic as he could still handle. It was not much, not compared to what he had once been capable of. But it would be enough; it would serve.

The design was inspired by the domes of this period. The machine’s body was silver-white metal, maybe fifty feet long, structured a bit like the fuselage of flying machines of the later ages. Of course, without the wings its appearance was just for show. The cockpit could seat three. Belthasar had intended those seats for himself, Gaspar, and Melchior, but it seemed that was not to be. A glass dome protected the cockpit seats, spelled to be as impenetrable as steel. Beneath the cockpit was a flight engine that he knew would never see use... and Something Else, that yet might. He had not given the device a name, but the time machine’s heart silently pulsed with magic and power.

The door slid into place, its shadow creeping across the machine’s body, hiding it, until eventually there was nothing left to see. It closed in silence. Belthasar was not being miserly, hiding away his secrets where none could

find them. He *wanted* that seal broken. But he wanted it broken by people with enough power to make a real difference.

"Today," he murmured to himself, "I lay to rest the work of a lifetime, and sad as I am, I am prouder still."

He turned away. "Nu," he said – it seemed appropriate to address it in that manner, now – "we're not quite done yet."

"Yes, Professor," it said.

He went looking for interface cables. He had used them to configure the Nu's brain a long time ago. Now he would use them for something else. Belthasar's body was dying. But his knowledge should not die with him, not until it was no longer needed.

He went to connect the Nu's head socket, realized he had nothing to connect it to (no socket of his own, of course) and shrugged. He understood this age's technology well enough by now. He could use magic to work with it. The merest trickle of lightning, far too small to be detectable by anything living, would be enough to rewrite the robot's memory in any way he wished. That did not require power. It required *precision*.

Reading his own mind was harder. But it could be done, if you pretended there was nothing strange about a spell that looped through its own casting.

He communed with his robot for days, without rest, without sleep. He read his own mind and wrote it to the emptiest block of the thing's memory that he could find. When he was done, it blinked back at him.

"Apparently, I am old and wrinkly and ugly," it said.

Belthasar smiled. "It worked, then."

"Seems to have." The Nu stood up. "I remember Zeal. I remember Lavos. I remember my work. I remember... huh."

"Is there a problem?"

"Our Nu friend is still in here. And I was right, there *is* more to him than we put there. How interesting."

"What did you find?" Even dying, curiosity was still Belthasar's defining trait.

"It *knows* things. Things it can't possibly know. I think it can see everything any Nu has ever seen or will see. I built a time machine, but time is already being altered. And I can see the ones doing it. They rampage through history like an Earthbound beast. And they're not done yet."

"That makes no sense. Shouldn't we see the changes?"

"I don't know. It seems like time travel is *weird*. They've already passed through this time period once, looks like. Now they're somewhere in the

prehistoric age. Now? What the hell does Now mean, in this context? Huh.”

“I get it.”

“I get it too. I should; I’m you, after all.”

“Time turns on two axes.”

“And the Gates move forward in time just as we do.”

“The Gate that cast us here; it was unstable, it wasn’t supposed to exist. There’s a Gate that links to this period, but ours was out of sync with it somehow. We came out thirty years earlier than we would have through the real one.”

“You should have done this years ago. We would have made much faster progress.”

“Or slower.”

“Right. Two brains with the same bad idea would stick to it longer.”

“Melchior should see this.”

“Gaspar should see this, too.”

Belthasar shook his head to clear it. Was he himself or the Nu? He poked himself, hard, and found that it hurt like a bruise. Yep. Definitely human.

“They’re carrying Schala’s pendant.”

*That* got his attention.

“The one Melchior gave her? The key to the Mammon Machine?”

“The very same.”

Belthasar grinned. “That makes things easier. I’ll just go key that seal to the pendant.” Then he thought for a moment.

The other Belthasar had the same thought. “No, good point. You’ll have to do it because I can’t; I just tried to call up magic and there’s nothing there. I think it’s because this body isn’t really alive, Nu or not.”

“All right. This is fascinating. The Nu kept so much from us.”

“It’s still in here, by the way; its personality is just in suspension. I think I’ll let it out in a bit. It’s been good to us.”

“I hope it’s not angry that we took a peek.”

“I think it *knew* we were going to take a peek. I think it was *counting* on it. You’ll never survive to reach the next dome, and there’s no way my personality can last very long in here. It’s showing me just enough to do what’s necessary with the time machine. I can see lots more but I can’t do anything with it.”

“All right, let’s go take care of that seal. While we’re at it, tell me whatever else you do see. I don’t care if it’s not useful; I just want to know.”

“Lead the way, Me.”

---

Belthasar was done. And that was well; he had had enough. He was not terribly worried about death, but he was no fan of dying itself. That was okay. There were things he could do about that.

He stood at his workbench, where he had spent so many years giving life to steel and magic. Melchior would have been proud of him.

He rooted through his collected junk for his audio recorder, and found it. Once again he was impressed by the technology of the future; such a simple thing, but not something anyone from Zeal knew how to do. It took a bit longer to find batteries that still worked, but he did find them. Eventually he relaxed back in his chair.

“I must have diverged from you further than I thought,” Nu-Belthasar said to him. “I’m not sure what you’re up to.”

“That’s because you’re not dying. I just want to say a few words to my successors.”

“I could pass it along.”

“Not in my own voice, you can’t.”

“Ah.”

“Anyway, you’d best switch off until they get here. No telling how long you’ll last in there without corruption. Have you had random episodes of panic? I have.”

“I have too. Do you sometimes drift off for a while, and when you come back, it takes a few minutes to remember that we’re not in Zeal anymore?”

“Yep. Wonderful. We really *are* going mad.”

“I don’t even have the excuse of being an old sack of flesh, like you.”

“And I don’t have the excuse of being an ad hoc mind-transplant, like you.”

They both laughed. It was hoarse and not very pleasant.

“I’ll switch off, like you say,” Nu-Belthasar said, “since I need to last until we have visitors.”

There was no visible change when Nu-Belthasar suspended himself, but somehow Human-Belthasar could tell that he was, once again, speaking to the Nu.

“Hello, my friend.”

“Greetings, Professor.”

“I’d love to know how I can build a robot that looks like a Nu and end up getting an actual Nu. I don’t suppose you’d be willing to explain, would you?”

“I am sorry, Professor.”

“Didn’t think so. What about these people? The ones that will one day use what I have made?”

“There is darkness. They bring light. They will do this. They have done this. They are doing this.”

“You haven’t changed, I see. Will you let my other self out, when the time comes? I don’t want to leave it to chance.”

“I will, Professor. I will see your machine fly, if not through space, then through time.”

“Thanks. And thank you for everything. Leave me be for a while, please.”

The Nu lumbered out of the room, and Belthasar was alone.

He thought about those missing wings. Why insist on a time machine that could fly? Why stick to that idea for so long? Because it could be done, because it wouldn’t make things any harder, really – he’d solved mechanical flight long ago, when he built the Blackbird. Flight wasn’t necessary to his purpose. But it had been thirty years since the time rift dropped him off in this age of soot and dust. Thirty years since he had seen his homeland.

Thirty years since he had seen the sun.

He just wanted to see the sun again.

He pressed record and started speaking:

“To those who opened the door: I am Belthasar, the Guru of Reason. I once lived in the kingdom of Zeal. A great disaster in Zeal somehow threw me into this era. To my surprise, Lavos exists here, and, I suspect, in other periods as well.”

How much did they know? Would they know about the Kingdom of Zeal at all? If they had seen enough of history, they just might. What about Lavos itself? Better explain that.

”Aeons ago, Lavos descended from the heavens. Burrowing deep into the world’s core, he began to consume our planet’s energy, and grow stronger.

In 1999, Lavos claimed this area, and now reigns from high atop Death Peak. Lavos continues to replicate...like a giant parasite, he is consuming our world.

"Forced to live here, I continued to conduct research on Lavos. But I am growing old. And it's impossible to keep sane in such trying times. So before I lose it completely, I shall safeguard my data, and my ultimate creation.

"How I long to return home...but I have grown frail. So you: you who have opened the door. I leave things in your hands. Only by mastering time, itself, do you stand a chance against Lavos. The odds will be against you; but you are true heroes. The world is in your hands. Open, now, the last door, and take what you find there. My last invention.

"My *Wings of Time*."

# Part IV

## Mammon

*“But... the future refused to change.”*

– Unknown

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Schala of Zeal made her way down the grand staircase of the Ocean Palace, accompanied by the Prophet. The brainchild of Belthasar did not disappoint, in quality or in grandeur. Made of obsidian, marble, and steel, it shone with light and magic in the depths of the sea. Above her, a transparent dome of spelled sapphire glass gave a view out into the ocean, illuminated by a soft, omnipresent glow emitted by the dome itself. She saw few creatures out there. This deep, most of them fled from the light and heat of the dome. She looked up into the abyss. There were rock formations and, somewhere in the distance, a sheer cliff that she thought was associated with a continental shelf. Beyond those, nothing. At this depth, blackness swallowed all.

Humanity had conquered the sky and made homes there, and now it had done the same in the ocean. For better or worse.

*What does it matter, Schala thought bitterly, that nearly eight hundred lives were lost in the construction of this place?*

Belthasar would have cared, but he no longer ran the project. Dalton, placed in charge after the heavy engineering was done, did not care. Like most of the Enlightened, he thought of the Earthbound as something less than human. Lately, it seemed as if he thought of the other Enlightened as something less than human, too. She wondered if he was tainted by Lavos, like her mother. She wouldn't have put it past him to try to use the Mammon Machine without permission... or protection. He was powerful, but his power tended to run wild.

“Your thoughts, Schala?” the Prophet asked.

“Belthasar has outdone himself again. As usual. A shame he isn't here to see it. Where is he?”

“He is here to see it, in a sense. After imprisoning Melchior, the Queen decided the other two must have been involved as well. They are being held in some of the lower chambers.”

“Your fault, then. You're the one that told her Melchior would turn on her.”

“Yes.”

“You should at least show a little shame.”

"I am not ashamed. The full connection of the Mammon Machine to Lavos is necessary. He would have interfered."

"Except he's still going to, so why did you bother denouncing him in the first place, Prophet?"

"What?" he asked, his tone confused.

*What?* Her thoughts echoed his.

"What do you mean?"

*He doesn't know.*

"Schala?"

*The Prophet doesn't know. He doesn't know what happened down there, at the Earthbound Village. He doesn't know that the Guru of Life is free! That he has allies!*

"Schala? Explain yourself."

She felt suddenly angry. "Explain *yourself*," she said. "You who know all that will happen, *how do you not know what I mean?*"

The Prophet seemed taken aback. He eyed her darkly.

"Gaspar told me once that there are some things you cannot predict. Well, predict this, Prophet: what will Melchior do?"

He was silent long enough for it to become uncomfortable. Finally, he turned away, left the landing, and continued down the stairs.

"I don't know what he will do. But now I know he's free, or will be. Thank you."

Schala flushed.

"What do you plan to do about it? I can stop you if I have to."

"No." His tone was matter-of-fact. "You can't. But do not worry. The staff have been asked to watch for him. They won't be able to stop him, but Melchior will not be willing to kill them merely to save time. He could reach us, but not soon enough. Once the Machine is connected, it will not matter."

"Then you, like Mother, serve Lavos."

He turned without warning and slapped her. She stumbled and sat back on the stairs, eyes wide. She looked at him. He looked back. He seemed just as stunned as she was.

"I'm sorry," he said at last. For the first time since she had met him, he sounded genuinely regretful. He extended a hand to help her up. She ignored it, and got to her feet on her own.

"Believe it or not, I don't mean you, or them, any harm," he said.

“I don’t believe it,” she said. “And that is the second time I’ve been struck recently. Being the crown princess does not seem to count for much in these times.”

“Second time?”

“Yes. Dalton was less than polite when he came to retrieve me. To me or to Melchior.”

“I see. I will have...words with him once we’re done.” His voice was stone.

“If you wish.”

---

Many floors further up, a small group of people arrived through the Skyway that linked the Ocean Palace to Zeal proper. None of them was Melchior. But they knew him well, even though he hardly knew them at all.

They were six, and they were varied. A walking machine, in the form of man, of the sort that Belthasar would become acquainted with many centuries hence. A woman, nearly as well-muscled as a man, dressed in furs. A young lady with thick glasses and an array of tools hanging from a wide belt. A creature with the features of a frog but the size of a man, with a longsword strapped to his back.

Leading them, a boy and a girl (or a man and a woman, depending on where one drew the line). The girl was a princess with the soul of a swashbuckler. The boy was a commoner with the soul of a prince.

At his right hip, the boy carried Melchior’s dreams.

The frog-man checked the door as they arrived, looking for threats, finding none. The group conferred quietly. Like the Prophet, they had come for the Mammon Machine. Unlike the Prophet, they had not come to see it used; they had come to destroy it. From the future and the past, they came.

They left the Skyway’s room. Descended the stairs. Down into the Palace. Down into the depths.

---

Masa and Mune were speaking with Masa and Mune, and what a bizarre conversation it was. The time-track of their weapon went something like

this: born as a dagger in Zeal, transformed into a sword, ten thousand years of silence, a succession of human owners, a *breaking*, a meeting with Melchior in the future, a reforging, a traveling through time again and again, and finally an arrival back in Zeal. After having gone so far and returned again, they met themselves. The frog-man's blade and the dagger the boy carried were the same weapon, but their owners did not know this.

The twins noticed. They spoke to each other in spirit, not wanting to share their private conversation with their human carriers.

"Hello, me!" Mune said brightly.

"Hello, me!" he said in return.

"Seen old man Melchior lately?"

"Oh, sure, but he's a bit older now. A few thousand years or so."

"You know, this is fascinating," future-Masa said. "I don't remember this meeting at all."

"Shame," past-Masa said. "I was hoping you could tell us how it's going to go."

"Nope, no clue. Things have already been changed pretty dramatically. When we were you, old man Melchior brought us down here. That was a long time ago."

"Well, how did it go that time?"

"It could have gone worse. Maybe."

"Hey," Mune said, "I wonder what would happen if we got these humans to cross our blades?"

"Well, assuming the world didn't explode, we would beat you up for trying such a stupid thing."

"Uh, which one of you?"

"I don't know. I'm starting to lose track of which of us is who. Or who of us is which. Isn't time travel fun?"

"Hey, I like it!"

"Time out. Looks like they need us for a few minutes."

The intruders – for intruders they were – held one good advantage over the human guards: they were not expected. The primitive woman (her name was Ayla; the future-twins knew this, the past-twins did not) was a natural sneak, and she took them down one by one as the party descended. Masa and Mune mostly ignored this. If humans wanted to beat each other up, that was not really any business of theirs.

The guards were not the only defenders, however. Magic constructs in various forms were concealed in nooks along the corridors. The Queen was,

after all, quite paranoid. How many mages had she set to creating these guardians? The twins did not know. Unlike the human guards, the golems and elementals were ever-watchful, and they knew right away that these six were *unexpected*.

Masa and Mune – the future pair – felt their owner draw them from the scabbard on his back. They shifted mental gears, prepared to fight. The edge on the Masamune’s blade was just for show; its true strength came from them. Their owner swung them, and they penetrated. Melchior had done his work well; the elemental magic of these creatures was food and drink to them. They sucked it up like a vampire sucking blood. The other humans fought around them, but the twins did not notice. Melchior had made them into weapons, and they fought as weapons would, a tool to the hand.

Then it was over. Their froggish owner attempted to wipe the blood off the sword before putting it away, then realized that these creatures did not bleed. He shrugged and sheathed them.

“He could at least brush the faerie dust off,” Mune complained.

“He can’t *see* the faerie dust. Also there is no such thing as faerie dust. You just made that up.”

“Of interest,” past-Masa said, “our new friends can use magic. But they are not Enlightened Ones.”

“Oh, they’re mostly from way, way, *way* after the Enlightened Ones ceased to be a people. I’m not complaining. They have no finesse at all, but they’re quite powerful. They took down one of Dalton’s best constructs. He was not happy.”

“I like them already.”

“Me too.”

---

He had been known by three names. As a boy he was Janus, magic-less Prince of the Enlightened, and was a target of the sort of careful condescension given to people one dislikes but shouldn’t. By birth he was fit to be a king; by talent he was fit to be Earthbound. And never mind that he was not really talentless at all, but a mage without equal who could have killed them with a breath. He kept his power to himself, showed it to few, used it little, and was therefore friendless – or at least he felt himself to be. He owned a cat. He liked the cat.

As a man he was Magus, lord of the Mystics, and he led them to battle in the middle ages of the Guardia Kingdom. He had no quarrel with that kingdom, but he had no care for it either. The war was a useful tool.

As a lost soul in Time, he was the Prophet. Returned to Zeal, his knowledge of the past let him predict the future...to an extent. That which he had changed, or had had no part in to begin with, was beyond his knowledge. He was living his life over again, in a way, but as an adult instead of a child, and as an adult he had the capacity to change things.

As an adult, Janus waited. In his original timeline, Lavos had undone his mother, probably killed his sister, and obliterated the land he called home.

*This isn't my timeline, he thought, this is a new one. You'll be here soon, Lavos, when these imbeciles get the Mammon Machine running again. But this time, there is one here who is ready for you.*

Something dark and foreboding whispered in his mind. As a child it had terrified him. As a man he was coldly indifferent to it. Now he looked forward to it. He'd been waiting.

"The black wind begins to blow..." he said to himself, and smiled.

A crane lifted the Mammon Machine into place on its altar. Nobody called it an altar, of course, but Janus thought of it that way. Nobody *said* it was a place to worship Lavos, but he didn't see much of a difference.

The Mammon Machine's form was vaguely humanoid, shaped like a suit of armor. The shape was Melchior's decision; it was inspired by the work of ancient metalsmiths from the pre-Zeal age. The majority of it looked like a giant breastplate, surfaced in gold, studded with emerald and great spikes of gold and brass. The spikes were entirely decorative, but the emeralds were functional. The three Gurus had jointly created them. They channeled magic in some way Janus didn't understand, pumped it away from the Machine's Dreamstone heart. Where a human's arms would have been, the Machine had two smooth, slightly spiraled appendages. These emitted the magic it absorbed from Lavos. Below the chest, the resemblance to armor was lost and its shape tapered to a point.

The Machine's heart was buried deep inside, but its glow escaped through a pair of seams in the workmanship. That glow framed an orifice, perhaps six inches across, covered with the same sapphire glass used in the Ocean Palace dome. Through this gap the heart itself was visible. It was the color of a real heart, and it pulsed with life.

Above him, Janus felt some of Zeal's magic constructs fail and die.

“It seems we’re no longer alone,” he said to Queen Zeal. “Perhaps you should alert your guards.”

She hissed at his words. “Who dares?”

“I’d guess our escaped captives.” He was beginning to regret helping them escape. Schala had asked him to let them go. How could he say no? Now he thought he must be paying for his mercy. Those stupid peasants had been a thorn in his heel far too often. They had no idea what they were doing. No idea what they were interfering with. Why were they so damn persistent?

“Dalton!” she said, “Where are you? Take care of them!”

“You left him to watch the Skyway.”

“Shut up, I know that,” she said. “Don’t get above yourself, Prophet.”

Janus seethed silently. How dearly he wanted to destroy this monstrosity wearing his mother’s face. He wanted to consume it in an inferno and listen to its screams. Instead he said nothing. It was not time yet. Soon.

“Whatever,” the Queen said, “I’ll send some of the guards up myself. Schala, when the Mammon Machine is ready, turn it on.”

Schala was silent.

“Schala?” she said, a dangerous edge in her voice, “did you hear me?”

“Yes, mother.”

*Yes, you will do it, or yes, you heard her?* Janus thought. It didn’t really matter. His sister had never been able to refuse their mother to her face. That was twenty years ago to him, but none to her. He had changed, but she had not.

Queen Zeal left to find the guard captain. Janus smirked, concealing it with his hood. Fools. Zeal had not known an enemy in centuries. They called themselves guards but they didn’t know how to fight, or how to keep their heads in one. They would go to “take care of the intruders”, and they would be slaughtered. Those they faced were as children in the practice of magic, but they were familiar with its use as a weapon – Janus knew that from personal experience – and the Enlightened Ones were not. They all *believed* in the ideal of Zeal, the idea that they were top of the world and none could stand against them. Never mind that no one had *tried*. You couldn’t forge a sword without heating it.

He shook off the bitterness. He’d been heated, and forged. But he had better things to do than help his people. He didn’t give a damn about his people. He looked over at Schala, silent, her eyes down and her face wan. He gave a damn about *her*.

Keeping her out of harm's way would be difficult. Janus hoped that Gaspar was somewhere nearby. Of the three Gurus, Janus judged Gaspar the most likely to prioritize Schala's rescue. Belthasar was too erratic, too *active*, and Janus knew that Melchior had his own mission. He'd chosen to warn Gaspar in advance because he felt that Gaspar could probably be trusted.

Probably. There were more dice in the cup than Janus was comfortable with. Too many things that could go wrong.

The crane settled the Mammon Machine into place. Schala sighed as it was pulled away, and looked behind her, after her mother. Then she raised her hands, palms out, and started to chant. The pendant at her neck gave off a green and orange glow.

Janus, watching her work, was struck by a thought. As a child he had hidden in a corner and watched, wanting to help his sister work but not knowing how. Was that child here again? He turned around, scanned the room. Trying to sense his own magic would be useless, of course. But he knew what he'd done to conceal his emerging powers as a child, and he knew what he had *not* done. He looked for a place where the magic that powered the Ocean Palace felt...muted. Because it was filtered through someone who didn't want to be found.

He had to look twice to find himself, but he did.

*What a strange experience*, he thought, *to look into my own eyes*.

Those eyes looked out from behind a large decorative urn, and they stared back, unflinching. Janus was proud. He knew how dark his eyes had become. How uncomfortable they made people. He checked that there was no one watching, then gave a slight salute to his childhood self.

"You will do well, boy," he said, too quietly to hear.

Confused, the boy went looking for another place to hide. Janus let him. No need to interfere too much.

The Machine's heart began to come to life, pulsing with Lavo's energy. A glow that matched Schala's pendant escaped through channels and gaps until the whole statue seemed tattooed with red-gold fire. In the distance, Janus could sense Queen Zeal returning. It was time.

---

The child Janus fled the room. He did not understand how the Prophet could sense him, nor why the Prophet seemed to vaguely approve of his

presence. It made Janus uncomfortable. He headed for the elevators instead of the main staircase, and heard his mother's voice approaching, berating a befuddled guard captain. He hid behind a vase and let them pass. *She* couldn't sense him. Or maybe she could and just didn't care.

Janus had come to the Ocean Palace with Melchior, but he didn't care for the old man's supervision and had slipped away shortly after they arrived. He could hear the black wind in his ears, steady and inevitable. Once upon a time he could foresee death by listening to that wind, noting who was nearby when it blew. It was a strange talent, and one his sister shared, though not so strongly. This time it was different. The wind had been whispering at him for days, and instead of waxing and waning with the presence of the doomed, it just...hung there. He couldn't get away from it. What was going on? What was going to happen?

Janus was still a child. It did not occur to him that if the wind was everywhere, that meant death was going to be everywhere.

When his mother and her lackey were well out of sight, Janus continued on. He took the elevator up a few floors and headed for the Skyway, still far above. A few of the Palace staff saw him and gave small bows as he passed, but he ignored them. Eventually the halls were empty of all save the occasional guards and constructs. Everyone who was not obligated to be elsewhere wanted to be down below. They knew the Mammon Machine would be reconnected today. They wanted to bask in its new power.

He heard an ethereal scream and a crackling sound and stopped dead. *Oh, crap.* He looked around for a hiding spot. There were a sequence of statues representing early rulers of Zeal in recesses along the wall. He squirmed in behind one of them and waited.

Janus heard footsteps, and quite a few of them. He peeked around the statue and tried to get a look.

He'd seen these people before.

The frog-man raised a hand and the others stopped. Now they were all in view. In the lead was a familiar face. The one for whom the black wind blew. Now it didn't just blow; it *screamed*, and Janus could practically see the air twist into demented shapes around him, shapes only Janus could see. This man was going to die, and his death was going to *matter*.

Janus staggered back behind the statue and tried not to cry out. From out of sight came a voice with a strange accent:

"We are not alone. See those footprints, in the dust. Few travel here, but one has. Look."

*Oh, shit.* Janus wasn't supposed to swear, or so Schala kept telling him. But he knew most of the words. He could almost feel their eyes on his hiding-spot.

"Oh, leave whoever it is be, Frog." This voice was feminine. "If they're smart enough to stay out of our way then I'm not going to pick a fight with them."

"As you wish, milady."

"Whoever you are, you should probably get out of the Palace! It's going to be dangerous here!"

Janus sagged against the statue as they were leaving. He was not doing a good job of hiding today. He crawled out from behind the statue after they left, breathing hard. He was afraid.

He looked one way, towards the Skyway. He looked back the other way, after the intruders. Curiosity or fear? He was a child. Curiosity *always* won out over fear.

He followed them.

---

Janus the Prophet watched his sister work. Their mother stood before the Mammon Machine, hands extended, palms pressed against it. Her face was a mesmerized nightmare. She let go.

"Schala," she said, "open the conduit as far as it will go. Power the Machine up to its limit."

She hesitated, but Janus knew she would comply. Not a prediction about her character; a memory of the event.

"Yes, mother," she said, her voice resigned. She continued her chant. The tone of it changed subtly, became more measured and forceful. He could feel Lavos's power emanate from the Machine, immense energy channeled into carefully controlled waves. Janus was impressed. The Gurus had done their jobs well, to control such a flow. Schala impressed him, too. Few could compete with him in magical prowess, but he would be hard pressed to duplicate her efforts here. The magic was visible as a warping in the air, like heat above a fire.

"This is incredible," Queen Zeal said, "I can *feel* the pulse of it. Eternal life, ever beyond our reach... but no more. No more."

The Machine flickered, the light reaching out from its heart cycling through the colors of the rainbow and into ranges that had no name, ranges

that were felt rather than seen. It *sparked*, small bursts of power coming from orifices in its surface. Schala cried out unintelligibly and fell to her knees.

Janus reached out involuntarily, then stopped. Schala would survive. He had seen this before, too. He could not show his hand yet.

“Mother!” she shouted. Her mother was glued to the Machine, its light shining through her hands until they were all but transparent. One of the staff tried to pull her away. She shook him away.

“Do not stop!” her mother commanded, not even bothering to look over her shoulder. “It is almost enough! We will live forever in glory!”

With help from one of the Queen’s aides, Schala got to her feet and resumed her spell. Her pendant shone like a miniature sun, matching the Machine’s pulses. It was no longer a matter of obedience, but a matter of survival. There was so much magic in the room that she had to control it or die. Janus readied himself. Only minutes now.

There was a commotion at the entrance. He had *not* seen that before. He turned.

*Them.*

Once upon a time, he had fought a Guardia knight named Cyrus and his companion, Glenn. Once upon a time, he had killed the knight and turned Glenn into a giant frog. Not because he had to. Just for sport; he’d always had a nasty streak. Now that damned frog and his new friends kept showing up everywhere Janus turned.

*I will not let you stop me! I will not let you stop me!*

He gathered his power, swearing inside. He could not afford to waste his strength on these *upstarts*.

“Schala!” one of them shouted, a blonde girl dressed in white. “We’re here to save you! Come on!”

Schala looked up and broke off her chant. “You?” she said, her face stunned. Of course. All *she* knew of them was that she had asked them to rescue Melchior. They were tenacious; they had probably succeeded. Schala would know about it, but Janus wouldn’t. Janus the Prophet did not remember it, because in his timeline, it had never happened. Were they even here for him? Maybe not, after all. What the hell was going on?

“Help!” Schala shouted, and half-ran, half-fell away from her post. The girl caught her and helped her stand.

The chamber groaned. Lavos was stirring beneath them. Waking up. Rising. Angry at those that would live like tiny parasites on another, greater

parasite. Janus backed away from the others. Perhaps this was to his advantage after all. Let them get his sister out, if that's what they wanted. Strange to entrust her to his enemies, but they were likely better guardians than most here, and he wouldn't need to split his attention between her safety and his own vengeance.

"Schala," Queen Zeal said, still not looking up, "What are you doing? Why did you stop? I need you here!"

One of the intruders pulled a knife, and raised it. He ran towards the Queen.

---

*Here we go, Mune.  
Ready, Big Brother!*

---

They swung down, passed by the Queen, aimed at the Mammon Machine's heart. The dagger parted metal and stone, burying itself nearly to the hilt in that glowing monstrosity. The Machine bled magic, and the dagger drank deep. The Mammon Machine was a Gate of its own, connecting Queen Zeal's perverted ambition to Lavos's unimaginable power. It was a conduit; it moved magic from point A to point B. Point A was Lavos. Point B was Zeal, or should have been. But the dagger broke the conduit, stole away the flow.

In the bowels of the earth below them, far beyond the realm of any living creature, Lavos began to move. The twins went to meet it, passing through the Gate. As the physical dagger cut the Mammon Machine, so too did their spirits cut Lavos itself, with all the fury of a raped and vengeful world.

Lavos shrieked, its rise checked. It lashed back at them instinctively, wounding the twins in turn. Their pain was silent, for they knew something Lavos did not: how to bear suffering.

*Strike at us, and the blade we have become, they thought at it in unison. We do not fear you.*

Lavos's power exploded outward, into the Machine, into the twins, black with malice...and they endured, and smiled. Its power flooded into Melchior's knife. The knife absorbed the magic, and it *grew*, inch by inch, until

it wasn't even really a knife anymore, but a sword. It shone, brighter than the Sun Stone, as bright as the sun itself. It sparkled like a diamond.

The dream was *awake*; the Masamune had been born.

Lavos continued to hammer at them, seemingly endlessly. Eventually, the shining blade *cracked*. It was a tiny crack, too small for the human eye to see, but enough that they, and it, were no longer quite whole.

They pressed on. *We do not fear you*, they thought again, and even when hurt the magic they struck with would have awed Zeal's best mages. They felt Lavos draw back. It endured this second attack better, but it seemed disturbed that they had not faltered.

The twins relaxed, exhausted and injured, but satisfied. They could feel Lavos's body writhe, feel what little spirit it contained bleed freely. They were hurt. Lavos was hurt. But they'd come out ahead, and that would have to do. The next time, it would be weaker and they would be stronger, even if it took them both thousands of years to recover from this day.

Lavos was unwilling to wait. Hurt, frustrated, and furious, it resumed its rise up through the crust of the earth.

At this, Masa and Mune were perturbed.

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Melchior was arguing with a guard, an utterly confused man. The guard had orders to keep Melchior out. He seemed terribly embarrassed to be obstructing a Guru.

Melchior felt it. Suddenly the conversation seemed much less pressing.

---

Belthasar was under house arrest, confined in his personal chambers inside the Palace. He was assembling an invisibility device out of whatever was on hand, because it would be fun and useful. He would need to get out eventually, after all.

Belthasar felt it, and broke his attention off his nearly-complete project. Unheard of.

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Gaspar was working. He had mostly forgotten his own arrest. He stared at the small stone egg on his desk.

Gaspar felt it. He looked up. *Oh, no. Too late.*

---

Janus watched as the Mammon Machine sparked and flared. Its eyes darkened and their glow shrank. Lightning rippled across its surface. The Masamune's wielder was forced to let go of its hilt, but it didn't matter; the damage was done, and more than done. The power flowing through the Mammon Machine was no longer stable. Cracks appeared. Its light darkened from orange-gold to red, and it was enfolded in a strange aura of deep black and blue. It was a Gate. Lavos's Gate.

It grew. It enveloped Queen Zeal, but she didn't seem to care. The boy with the knife fell in next. Schala followed. Zeal's personal retinue were all fleeing, but the intruders stood their ground, and were swallowed up. Janus was last. Somewhere on the other side of that gate, Lavos was climbing to the surface. Janus walked in to meet him.

The black and blue haze of the timestream surrounded him briefly. There was a discontinuity, and he found himself in a great open space, a sky of colorless chaos above, a surface of shining blue beneath his feet. More than a hundred yards away there was nothing.

And before him – before them all – was Lavos.

It was mammoth. It was shaped vaguely like an armored tortoise, if a tortoise had a face made of nightmares and a shell ridged with death. Its head alone stood taller than a man. Its back was forested with spine-like protrusions, too huge to cut or pierce. Giant centipede legs splayed out to the sides that might once have been used for locomotion, or might have been vestigial. It did not seem to use them; it seemed to lever its massive bulk around purely on muscle strength and momentum.

Lavos's head lazily blinked open and closed, revealing a single, giant retina. It seemed...satisfied. The air was hot and pulsing with magic. The tips of its spines glowed red, but the glow was fading. Before it, inert on the silver-blue surface, the six intruders all lay fallen. Who knew what sort of magic Lavos had brought to bear to bring them down? Janus knew they were not inconsiderable in strength. A couple of them were groaning in pain. Perhaps the others were also still alive. Perhaps.

Whatever power Lavos had expended on them, it would not have to use against him. Good. He stepped forward, casting his cloak aside to free his hands.

"I've been waiting for you, Lavos."

It blinked its single eye back open. Could it hear him?

“I swore to destroy you long ago. Now it is time to fulfill that vow. Fear me, Lavos. Fear me, and die.”

From behind him, his mother’s voice: “And just what do you think you can do, false Prophet? You are no more than a snack to him.” Janus turned around. His mother stood there, watching him. Between them, Schala faced her.

Schala held her hands to each side, barring her mother’s path. “Mother, please stop,” she said. Her voice was despairing. “This power can only end in ruin.”

“Get out of my way. Lavos’s power lives in all of us. You will be a part of it one day, just as I am. We *will* live forever. Oppose me in this and I will destroy you, too.”

Schala, aghast, stared back at her. Zeal grimaced and lashed out, power lancing from her fingertips. The blow threw Schala twenty feet. Zeal did not so much as glance at her daughter’s fallen form; instead she waved a hand and levitated herself up on to the ridge of Lavos’s shell, just behind its head. Her face was a sickening mix of rage and rapture. Janus could feel her magic, dark, poisoned, and terribly powerful. Was she tapping Lavos, or was Lavos tapping her?

“Come, Prophet,” she said. “Feel the power of Lavos.”

Lavos’s eye narrowed, looking at him. Through some orifice he could not see, it howled, not with rage or fear but with the sort of unadulterated sense of *threat* that might come from a tiger or a bear. Janus gathered in his magic, as much as he could summon, perhaps more than any other mage that ever lived. He knew his own strength. He was ready. The attack came. But it was a strange one, not a striking-out but a pulling-in. It wasn’t trying to kill him; it was trying to drink of his own power. His knees buckled with the strain and he felt his hands instinctively break the fall.

*I will not be beaten. I survived the darkness to destroy you, Lavos.*

As a child he had learned to hold his magic in, create a shield that would keep what was inside from escaping outside. As an adult he had learned to invert that shield, so that what was outside, stayed outside. He used that now, not nullifying the attack but deflecting it. He threw it off to one side, breathed in, and stood. Bowed but unbroken.

He ran forward, raising his hand. Out of the air he fashioned a great scythe, haft the color of hellfire, blade incandescent, made of Janus’s magic and Janus’s fury. He poured all the power he could summon into that scythe. Lavos’s eye widened as he approached, then closed. Did it feel

threatened? It should. It was no small feat to make something physical out of pure magic, but this weapon was more than physical. It would go through stone as easily as water. As air.

He swung the scythe in a high arc and drove it down through Lavos's head. The shock of impact left his arm numb, but it penetrated Lavos's armor and it penetrated Lavos's magic. Did it break into that strange eye? Janus was not sure. Nor did he care. It only needed to make a hole. He poured fire and darkness down the length of it, through the hole, everything he had, everything he knew. The scythe was not his weapon. His weapon was *hate*.

Lavos howled in pain, but no more. Janus could feel its spirit moving. *It should not have been able to move*. Not with that much force projected into its brainpan.

*What the hell?*

Lavos struck back, and Janus had dedicated so much to his attack that he had nothing left to defend himself. A great fist of magic struck him, and he felt it in his mind as well as his body. He tumbled across the strange silver-blue ground, slid and came to a halt, ears ringing. He looked around, tried to get his bearings. Schala was nearby, the others some way off. Zeal still stood on Lavos's collarbone. She was talking, but he couldn't hear. His head swam. The world around them seemed to echo, and he understood somehow that they were still in the Gate, that it was becoming less stable, less hospitable.

"Schala," he said. She was something he understood, in a world that had somehow gone horribly wrong.

One of the others, the boy with the red hair and Melchior's knife, struggled to his feet. Janus watched, bemused. He checked his friends, saw that they still breathed. Zeal watched indulgently. The boy walked over and looked down at Schala, his eyes searching. Janus still didn't understand why he cared.

"Crono," Schala said, "Run. You can't hope to defeat it."

Well, at least now he knew the boy's name.

Queen Zeal seemed to agree with Schala, and shouted down at them: "Why don't you do as Schala says, and run away, yelping in terror? Isn't your life precious to you?" She laughed mockingly. As if any of them were in any condition to run, or had anywhere to run to. Janus knew that better than any here; those who fled to the islands of Zeal would find no safety.

Crono's eyes bore a look that was equal parts determination and resignation. He turned away, approached Lavos. He drew a sword. It wasn't a magic sword, or no more magical than most weapons one could find in Zeal. Certainly nothing like Melchior's masterpiece. It was just a sword.

*If I can't take that thing, boy, there's no way in hell you can,* Janus thought, *and not with a weapon like that.* But he'd seen it in the boy's eyes: Crono knew that perfectly well. There was just nothing else to do.

Lavos's eye blinked back open. The retina was a deeper, almost bloody red, the pupil a brighter and sicker blue. The flesh was swollen and seared, and blackened bubbles pocked its surface. It looked like a bloody whirlwind. Janus felt some satisfaction at that. Let it suffer.

Crono walked right up to the eye and raised his sword. Lavos didn't bother waiting. A bolt of power ten feet across spat forth from the eye, struck Crono, passed through him. His body began to slowly lose its form, flesh peeling away in layers. It looked excruciatingly painful, but Janus was quite sure the poor fool was already dead.

Schala sobbed beside him, and lashed around her with magic. It was unfocused and wild, totally unlike her usual feel. Somehow she grabbed on to the edge of the Gate. It was already weakened; she yanked on it wildly. It began to fold in on itself, collapsing. The Gate closed like Lavos's lidless eye, and the strange blue world around them sluiced away. Janus howled silently into the abyss of the Gate, alone in his mind. He had walked the path of Hell all his life. He had bent time itself to his will. And still he had failed. Still he had failed. With his failure, the Kingdom of Zeal and all who were in it were doomed. All the thousands he did not care for, and the one alone that he did.

---

The ground cracked as Lavos's physical form approached the surface. A great rift yawned open, an abyss stretching nearly down to the earth's mantle. Charred and molten rock burst out. Boulders hundreds of feet across hung suspended in the air like so many snowflakes. The Beast rose from the pit. It was tired. It had suffered wounds. The Mammon Machine's conduit had sapped its strength for Zeal's use. The violent breaking of that conduit had left it hurting. Janus's assault had caused it pain. Nothing had ever caused it pain before. Clearly these creatures, the tiny insignificant

bacteria daring to lay claim to its world, clearly they were a threat. Lavos, like any other predator, had a preferred way of dealing with threats.

Far above, the most dangerous of the humans, the ones that had harmed it, lived among floating islands. It did not need to be able to see through the eternal storm to know they were there. Lavos focused. It was still strong. The tips of its spines glowed white.

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Lavos struck with beams as bright as the noonday sun. They pierced the islands as if harpooning whales. Dreamers in Enhasa died in their beds. Researchers from Kajar died mid-experiment. Functionaries at Zeal Palace looked up from forms to see their companions turned to ash – if they were lucky enough not to be ash themselves. Within minutes, there was mass panic everywhere. There were no leaders to give orders. The royal family were all at the Ocean Palace. So were the Gurus. Dalton had vanished. Anyone else of any authority was far outmatched by the circumstances. The people of Zeal were not helpless, but they were not used to being threatened. A few, those that kept their heads among the chaos, worked spells to shield themselves. It wasn't enough to take a direct hit, but enough that falling masonry could be shrugged off.

Masonry was not the only thing to fall. The great lattices of spellwork that kept the islands floating began to tear and break apart beneath Lavos's assault. Islands bucked and spun in the air, and the barriers that guarded their edges failed. People fell. Homes parted ways with both their foundations and their owners. Entire districts fell from the sky like slow meteors, the residents desperately fleeing from the coasts, working what magic they could to, if not stop the fall, at least keep it *stable*. Some succeeded. Some didn't. Most died either way.

The great main continent fell into the sea, spreading a tidal wave that would eventually reshape the globe. It sank slowly. Enhasa was long gone. The ruins of Kajar disappeared. Survivors fled in anything that would float, racing the rising waterline. Magic engineers made boats from rock and other unintuitive materials. They were few. Fewer still would reach anything resembling a shore. The Skyway, amazingly, still worked. Others escaped that way.

Behind them all, Zeal Palace, once the pinnacle of the physical and intellectual world, disappeared beneath the waves.

## Part V

### Hope

*“All who fear the night and stand against the darkness... please,  
give us strength!”*

– Marle

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The burst-whizz-*whoom* of Belthasar’s time machine woke Gaspar from a half-doze. He felt mildly disoriented. He’d been dreaming of very old times, before his sudden temporal eviction, before the Mammon Machine. In his dream, Queen Zeal ruled well and he and Belthasar and Melchior were just scholarly comrades. He felt melancholy as the dream slipped away. It had been real, once. He’d almost forgotten what sky-blue looked like, what with the eternal bland darkness at the End of Time.

The time machine – its new owners had christened it the *Epoch* – floated through the empty nothingness and up to the dock. Gaspar had assembled the dock some time ago, to make it easier for them to get in and out. It served the purpose well enough. Two of the passengers got out, the robot and the cavewoman. The woman’s name was Ayla. The robot was named Robo. The triteness of that name was lost on Gaspar, who knew nothing of robots. Lucca, who normally piloted, stayed on board as usual. After dropping off her passengers, she pulled the *Epoch* away from the dock. The machine vanished in a burst of light and sound. Gaspar winced at the noise.

*Well, I’m awake now.*

He waited. Once, she had shuttled her friends back and forth with the Gate Key (and what a piece of work that was, for someone with no natural magic). Now she did it with the *Epoch*. Gaspar watched Belthasar’s grand machine with admiration. To build a Gate where once was none, to the whims of its owner... *My friend, you surpass me even in my own field*, he thought.

It would still take a couple trips to bring the entire group back; the ship only seated three. After a few minutes, Lucca returned with the other young lady – Marle – and Frog. Gaspar did not understand why the others chose to rub Frog’s twisted form in his face by addressing him as such, but he didn’t seem to mind.

Frog, as usual, had Melchior’s Masamune strapped to his back. Gaspar mostly approved. It seemed to have found itself a reliable owner, if an unsightly one. The Wings of Time had found itself in good hands as well. Two artifacts from two of the greatest minds in history, and Gaspar was still

startled that they had ended up together. Right where they could do the most good, or so they all hoped. It was enough for him to start believing in fate...almost. He had seen Fate changed too many times to go quite that far.

Frog got out of the *Epoch*, then turned to help Marle down. She stepped down to the dock slowly, not with care but with a sort of lethargy, and Frog nudged her down the walkway. He gave Lucca a casual salute; in his time period, that meant something like “Okay, carry on.” She nodded and turned back to the controls.

Frog stepped up to Marle’s side. She said something Gaspar couldn’t hear, and then put an arm around his shoulders. It wasn’t a hug. She was leaning on him. She had a stricken look to her, and Gaspar began to understand that something was not quite right. Marle was always the most cheerful of the lot of them, the most... *indomitable* was the word that came to mind, but it didn’t fit. That might fit Crono. A better description for Marle might have been this: She sometimes got knocked down, but she always got back up. Today she looked like someone who could not get back up.

Lucca returned again, this time with a new passenger. Apparently they had made a new friend, from another new era. This man had the characteristic pale violet hair of the Enlightened Ones. Interesting; perhaps it was someone he knew? The man stepped out of the *Epoch*, and Gaspar got a better look at his face.

He was thunderstruck. It was the *Prophet!*

No, not the Prophet. That name was a lie, a magnificent parlor trick. It was *Janus*.

The group of them approached, as they had so many times before. Lucca led them. That was wrong. Their little party always had a clear leader, the quiet young man with the bizarre haircut. The one who spoke more in deeds than in words, even when those deeds were reckless.

Gaspar spoke without thinking: “Hey. Where’s Crono?”

Lucca looked down. None of the others would meet his eyes. Janus, seemingly unconcerned, was ignoring the exchange.

Robo broke the silence: “He did not make it.” His voice was somber, but clear, as only a machine could manage. “Lavos rose at the Ocean Palace, somehow. We fought it. We lost. Crono is dead and the Magic Kingdom has been destroyed.”

Gaspar felt a ball of ice settle in his stomach. He should have predicted this. He *knew* they were going to Zeal! He *knew* how it ended! Like Janus, Gaspar had lived those days before. He had believed these six could change fate, undo a past that did not deserve to exist. How wrong he had been.

He looked at his feet. "I'm sorry," he said, and meant it in ways they could never understand. "This is terrible news."

"We're looking for the Guru of Time," Marle said.

Gaspar, blindsided, struggled for words. "The Guru of Time? Well, I've heard of him, of course, but what do you want with him?"

"He knows how to bring Crono back. . . ."

*What? I know nothing of the sort*, he thought. But it was clear that she believed what she was saying. Where on earth had the girl gotten that idea? There was no magic that could return the dead to life, in this time or any other. He was silent for a while. He had nothing but despair for her.

"To bring back lost loved ones...it's what everyone wants," he said sadly. "Crono must be proud to have friends like you."

She smiled at him and walked off. Frog offered her a shoulder again, but she turned him away. The others followed her. Janus went last. Did Janus recognize him? Probably not. He would have said something. And Gaspar looked much older now, after spending eternity at the End of Time.

Gaspar watched them go. As a group, they looked. . . broken. Crono was the glue that held them all together. Without that, how long would they last? They had crossed continents and millennia, together, in their quest to destroy the creature that would one day murder the world. And they had failed. But they had survived. Most of them. That was more than anyone else could say.

Could they try again, without Crono to lead them? Maybe not. Gaspar sat back and sighed. It was all for naught, after all. All his hopes rested on those six. A series of coincidences across the ages had brought them together; Gates that opened at just the right time, to just the right places, in the vicinity of just the right people. They were the bravest souls he had ever known. They were trained to use magic in war, by Spekkio himself. They knew Lavos almost better than it knew itself, having witnessed its path and its history from one era to the next. They held the greatest artifacts of his own era, which itself was the pinnacle of what human civilization had ever achieved, past or future. They should have been able to succeed. They *deserved* to succeed.

Reality did not care much for what people deserved.

A thought struck him. Gaspar stood up again, his eyes blank.  
There was no magic on earth that could return the dead to life.  
*But what if he never died at all?*

He felt around in his pocket. Warmth.

*Miser. You've been holding out on them.* Belthasar's voice, dry and mocking, in his head.

*Use the tools you possess. Melchior this time. The prey that saves its strength will not outrun the predator.*

They had Melchior's blessing and his masterpiece. Belthasar had given them the same. Why not Gaspar himself? He took the Chrono Trigger out of his pocket and looked at it. Its egg-shaped shell glowed with the hint of a promise. He brushed it with one hand and felt something almost like pride. He was not used to pride.

"My dear fellows," he said to himself, too low to hear, "it seems that the gift we give to the world is not our knowledge or our deeds, but our creations."

He cleared his throat and used a whisper of magic to project his voice, to call them back.

"Hey," he said.

They came back.

## Author's Notes

The concept for this story has been floating around in my head for nearly a decade, but now that I've written it, I'm not entirely satisfied with the result. I don't feel like I really did the subject justice. That being said:

Zeal, the Gurus, and their artifacts are hugely important to Chrono Trigger's story, but we know very little of them before the player's party comes in contact with them. This story is my attempt to remedy that; to give a life and face to events that meant a great deal but happened "off camera", so to speak. It would not be too far out of line to suggest that the story of Chrono Trigger is the story of Zeal. Nearly every major plot point after the first hour or two is somehow connected there, even if it's not apparent at first.

We know the most about Melchior's backstory, and so his was both the first one I started writing and the easiest to finish. It helped that the twins are a lot of fun to write, since they take basically nobody seriously, including themselves. It was writing the twins that led me to consider including a sort of social symmetry between the three Gurus; each of them has some other mysterious party to sort of "bounce off of."

The Siblings are never fully explained in-game, beyond Masa's cryptic comment about embodying Melchior's dreams. Masa and Mune are, of course, associated with their eponymous sword. Doreen's sort of floating there. The most common theory I've seen for her is that she's a spirit associated with Schala's pendant in the same way that her brothers are with the sword, which is plausible but not specified in canon. It's also commonly speculated that Melchior outright created Masa and Mune, but that seemed unlikely to me because they were hanging around the palace without anyone considering it remarkable. I ended up writing them as pre-existing creatures of uncertain origin, rather like the Nu. The more I look at the game script, the more I think this might be wrong, that they were in fact created spirits. But I didn't reach that conclusion until after the job

was done, and it makes a good story as it is so I am leaving it in.

While it wasn't difficult to resolve, I feel I should mention that Melchior's profession is a weird incongruity in the source material. Why the hell is the Guru of *Life* a weaponsmith? I tried to address this in a plausible way: he was a smith before he was Guru, and turned that skill to weaponcraft only by direst necessity. Why he continued making weapons after being launched into the present day, I don't know. Thankfully, I didn't have to explain it here.

I didn't originally plan to include the scene with Janus and the Sun Stone, but when the thought struck it was too useful to pass up. It let me explain Janus's hidden magical power, Melchior's knowledge of it, and the Son of Sun, all in the same scene – all in-game elements given without much explanation – and at the same time connect to the Masamune's magic-disrupting qualities. It was too perfect not to do.

My biggest complaint with Melchior's segment is that I don't think I displayed Queen Zeal's descent into madness well enough, and so I think Melchior's gradual disaffection may not come across as believable. I really needed more space for that, I think.

Belthasar lands somewhere in the middle, as the Gurus go. We see relatively little of him in-game. The player's party *can* encounter him while he's still alive, but this appearance is entirely missable, and I intentionally left it out, because it was easier to assume they never met him than to integrate that scene into the story in a consistent way. Thankfully, Belthasar left behind both a recording of his motivations and a Nu robot programmed with a copy of his personality, so I wasn't left entirely in the dark.

There were still two unsolved mysteries that I had to resolve. The first is why he never used the Wings of Time himself. That one was easy. It's fairly obvious that he died of old age and it's not much of a jump to suggest that, by the time the Wings were complete, he was too old to physically survive time travel. The harder one is this: How did Belthasar know that Crono's party would be coming to retrieve his creation, that they would be carrying Schala's pendant, and that they would have the explicit goal of destroying Lavos? There is *no* explanation given in-game for Belthasar's apparent precognition.<sup>3</sup> There were a few ways I could have resolved it; I chose to make use of the Nu. This also gave me a way to make his Nu

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<sup>3</sup>This is also the reason I cut one line from Belthasar's final recording; he had no way of knowing of the events in 600. His knowledge of your impending use of the Chrono Trigger is even more bizarre, but I wasn't depicting anything related to those scenes so

assistant more interesting than “that thing Belthasar talks to when I want to do a dialogue section.”

Incidentally, there’s a fan theory that all Nu are artificial creations of Belthasar or the Enlightened Ones in general. I think it’s probably wrong. This is not obvious in the U.S. release, but in the Japanese, the robotic characters had a distinct “accent”. The Chrono Compendium retranslation project displays the accent as intermittent all-caps. I don’t know what aspect of Japanese language they’re trying to simulate, but whatever it is, it’s consistent. Only the two Nu explicitly associated with Belthasar have this accent; the others do not. I conclude that those two are creations and the others are natural beings. I also favor the competing theory that the Nu are the “eyes of the Entity” throughout history, although due to the generally mysterious nature of the Nu it’s more a case of accepting a particular wild fan guess. I assumed it to be the case for this story. It has no explicit canonical support beyond the cryptic book in Belthasar’s private study in Enhassa, as far as I know.

Belthasar’s final recording mentioned his continuing study of Lavos, and his hunt on Death’s Peak was my attempt to illustrate it. That was probably the most entertaining piece of his story to write. I wanted to show that he (and by extension, the other Gurus) were not mere bystanders; that their reputation for power and wisdom was not unwarranted. I think it worked out well *as a scene*, but it feels out of place next to the rest of that part of the story, somehow, perhaps because I don’t show much other work in that vein, and because it has nothing directly to do with the Wings of Time.

Noel, the old man from the dome that Belthasar spoke to, isn’t from the game. In-game, Doan led the survivors in that dome. But the events depicted are from decades beforehand; it seemed reasonable that someone else would be running the show at that time.

Some little niggling bits before I talk about Gaspar:

Queen Zeal is never referred to by name in-game, always by title or honorific. That made narration occasionally difficult. I had two possible solutions: Give her an original real name, or refer to her by title myself. I find messing with the names of canon characters jarring, so I chose the latter. There’s at least some precedent for kingdoms being named after their monarchs; in this case I assumed the monarch was retroactively “named”

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I didn’t have to explain it.

after her kingdom upon taking power. I'm not wholly satisfied with the result but it seems to work.

Originally only the first three parts of the story were intended; one for each of the Gurus. I decided that the end of Gaspar's storyline would be too anticlimactic if I did it that way. The latter part of it would be mostly dedicated to context for his decision to hand over the Trigger, and most of that context wouldn't even involve him. I did not want to be drawn into an extended description of the game's plot; If I wanted to novelize the game, I would novelize the game. I'm just filling in gaps. Instead I added the fourth part, Mammon, which wraps up the tale of Zeal, and provides the necessary context. I then moved the disposition of the Trigger to the epilogue. This also let me note the collection of the three artifacts under the banner of Crono's party. The symmetry of the story that I wanted is still retained; Gaspar's story, like the others, ends with the creation of his masterwork. Mammon itself covers the Mammon Machine, the joint work of the Gurus, and that seems a fitting climax.

Unfortunately, while that plan made sense at the time, I am not terribly happy with the results. I had to show most of Mammon from Janus/Magus's perspective. Not that I have a problem with him, but I would have preferred to alternate perspectives between the three Gurus, and keep the focus on them. There was no way around the fact that they are simply *not present* for the relevant events, though, so I had to limit them to their very brief flash appearances – just to ensure the reader doesn't forget that the story is really about them. I explicitly *didn't* want to tell it from Crono's party's perspective. And six characters is too many to do justice to in a small space anyway.<sup>4</sup>

Now, Gaspar. Gaspar's story was *by far* the hardest of the three to write, and I had to discard and rewrite large parts of it. Part of that is because Chrono Trigger's universe essentially runs on Doctor Who style Timey-Wimey Ball temporophysics, which made it difficult to write sane commentary on Gaspar's area of expertise. Also, despite having the most presence of any of the Gurus – being both the first you meet and the one you speak to the most often – we know the *least* about Gaspar's backstory.

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<sup>4</sup>Note to pedants: Yes, I know the player's party was limited to three in-game, with everyone else left at the End of Time. That was a mechanics limitation, not a plot one. There was nothing to stop one person from shuttling the rest between times with the Gate Key. Or Lucca could have just made a second one. I just assumed she did the smart thing and found one of the multiple obvious ways around the limitation.

We know virtually nothing about the Chrono Trigger itself. That is funny, not to mention frustrating, given that the game is *named* after it.

What we do know makes little sense. The lack of canonical information forced me to take liberties with the source material, and I ended up making a lot of it up out of whole cloth. We know explicitly why Melchior forged the Masamune, and it's not a terrible leap to guess why Belthasar built the Wings of Time, but the Chrono Trigger's origins are never mentioned. Its powers and limitations are also not particularly well described, although they are shown.

In-game it is used to go back in time and avert Crono's death. It produces a freeze-frame moment in which the player replaces Crono with a life-size doll, just before Lavos disintegrates him. This both saves his life and preserves the sequence of events that led to the Trigger's use, and it's one of the game's crowning moments of awesome.

Okay, fine. So the Chrono Trigger can take us back to a single moment and *change* that moment in some arbitrary way, with no possibility of interference by those present at that moment. What else do we know? Well, Gaspar stated that the Trigger could be used to save a life, if the deceased was important to the space-time continuum. Great. What *exactly* constitutes "important?" Why did he build a device that could undo a death in the first place, and only under such specific conditions? Its purpose is mysterious simply by virtue of being so *narrow*.

I could think of two reasons Gaspar might have made it. First, he already had someone he wanted to save, but they were not "important" enough for the Trigger to work, and he did not realize that until the job was done. Second, the Trigger has a more general function of which undoing a death is just a special case. I ended up going with the "more general function." This was partly to avoid having to introduce a new character and relationship into Gaspar's history without any canonical support,<sup>5</sup> and partly to make it easier to sanely specify what "important" actually meant. I purposely avoided mentioning that the Trigger had to be used at Death Peak, because I couldn't think of a way to explain that without a lot of bullshit. Death Peak didn't even *exist* when Gaspar began work on the Trigger.

In a sense, that's why the story ends where it does. I couldn't make

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<sup>5</sup>I could have used Schala here, but that would have involved a bit more temporal juggling than I wanted to get into.

Gaspar's next speech make sense. Thankfully, I didn't have to. I set out to tell the story of Zeal and its Gurus, and I told the story of Zeal and its Gurus. Telling the story of Crono and his friends, I leave to the game itself. It did a fantastic job, one that still resonates with me twenty years later. So thank you, Square. For making a world worth writing for.