



I always knew it would come to this. The universe does not offer second chances; the very thought is ludicrous. With suitable abash, I admit even I grew giddy when I first thought that the chance to travel through the intractable fabric of time presented itself.

But this was not meant to be, for no magic—not mine nor that of Ren Shin nor of the might of the gods themselves—is strong enough to split the hard armor of years that ensnares us all.

Though time can be charted as a fourth-dimensional field of energy through which third-dimensional space transits, and the vectors of that motion can be compressed or elongated through the concentration of energy, the flow of numina passes through it only along a single vector, and nothing can move through the time-energy field with a direction more extreme than absolute perpendicularity.

Part of my overeager naïvety stemmed from the existence of certain magics that can create the illusion

of reversing temporal motion; spells that claim to draw upon the future for prediction or to pull from or arrest the motion of time across scales of such a diminutive nature that their effects were impossible to correctly ascertain in the age of my birth. But as part of my intense research into the matter, I learned that the magic these spells shape is in no wise true time travel, any more than a candle's flame is the sun. Instead, even the vast numina they call upon merely excites the flow of probability, crafting from that a seeming of time that soon collapses under its own weight.

But the legitimate transit of time would require essentially infinite energy to make the attempt, and all my calculations show that even that might not be enough.

Moving through time would not simply demand all the energy that there is, but the sum of all potential energies throughout time, calculated for every discreet instant from the beginning to the end. And even that

amount is only if you consider time to be finite; if it proves endless—as the scholars of this modern past age seem convinced it is—then the sheer mass of reality could not be overcome even with unlimited power at your disposal.

I still remember the confusion and the despair that consumed me when I realized what had happened.

In the dark age of my time, I knew the world was dying. Magic had been drained from humanity and everything was on the verge of collapsing as the squabble between the terrible remnants of the Walking Gods escalated. But that was the key I had willfully overlooked, wasn't it?

In the beginning, there were two: Hundred-Handed Kaeshem and the Horned God of Disarray, Gwolth.

In the end, there would be only two: the One God—mother of her ordered hives—and the terrible dragon Geddephron.

Who can say for sure what cataclysm would

precipitate the ultimate fate of our world, but there would come a time when only they would remain and their power would collide with such terrible fury that all creation would die, and from its ashes would rise a new Spark and a new Quintessence. From the last remnants of the spent power of dying gods, an awaking would be rekindled, to create the universe anew.

You see, the power of the Great Gods would beget the Five Crowns and the Five Crowns would beget the Walking Gods and from them would rise Zithras and Tuzul Shek and they would become the One God and Geddephron and from their war it would all begin again!

It would be a destruction so absolute and terrible that nothing would remain: not the infinite planes, nor the eternal souls of the dead, nor even the memory of the cosmos. How many times has all creation died? Could it have happened only once? Or ten-thousand-thousand times? Does it matter?

Untold layers of creation built up...and what does that mean for choice and free will? Has each of these iterations been perfectly identical to the last? So far as I know—so far as can be known—no hint of the past cycles has ever reached across that point of absolute ending, so if the starting point were perfectly similar, absolutely everything would be identical, down to the placement of a single grain of sand upon a beach, and to the waves that lap at it.

But if that is true...have I learned this knowledge all these illimitable times? Have I acted on it, second-guessed myself, and acted upon it again, in endless cycle, to no result?

Or perhaps the subtlest of changes propagate with infinitesimally increasing force in every recursion, like the errors of a scribe who copies out his new manuscripts? Are my presence and the choices I make here a new permutation, with the possibility of throwing over the monstrous order that has consumed

all creation since the dawn of the very first reality?

In the end, I had no choice but to put faith in the only thing that has never failed me: myself. If this was a pantomime I was doomed to reenact for all of cyclical eternity, so be it, but I would march forward unto my bitter end, casting my defiance upon a laughably cruel postdestination. Petty fear could not be allowed to deny the possibility of change.

Let reality balk, for I have a plan.



*It is done...this cruel cycle can be altered, and if it can be changed then it can be **broken!***

Time and resources untold in their vastness have been expended, but I was able to shift the occurrence of a single cycle. Though it galls me, I could not do it alone, instead conspiring to induce another bridging of the cycles such as precipitated my intrusion onto an

iteration of reality not my own.

I knew from my own time that the Cypher Key had taken to traveling with a group of vagabonds and thieves. In this second cycle, I set into motion the events that would propel them from this cycle into a third cycle, traveling along to that cycle as well. There, I conspired to induce them to release the Aurora from the northern climes. Having experienced that monster once myself, I knew that its strength would be more than sufficient to irreparably change the world from the one I knew.

I had not calculated on Barankal being cut off from the Prime—and thus me from its resources—though it was able to trap Vez'roon, so he could not lend his strength to complicating the new issue.

Regardless, I have proven that my theories of the cycle of reality are correct and that—by my hand, if no other—they can be altered. It falls to me to forge a new destiny for us all.

To that end, I must keep the secret of exactly what the cycles are close to my breast. I know from both my interactions with the Cypher Key and what I have heard of Ren Shin's research that they believe the time travel hypothesis and, indeed, even follow the same avenues of research that I at first did when I arrived in the previous cycle.

Though Ren Shin would discover the truth eventually, if given the time, the scenario that the Cypher Key and his ruffians precipitated ensured that his attentions were well and truly focused elsewhere. And now that I have the measure of my foe, I must determine both why it is and how to defeat it.



Three options exist for the possible culprit of what I came to think of as simply the Cycle:

- I. Kaeshem and Gwoth
- II. The Five Crowns
- III. The Thane

With the first, I would have to consider if there was some reason intrinsic to themselves that the two Great Gods would wish to be locked into eternal struggle. But to what end and how? After all, for many centuries following the fall of Valjaradan, Zithras would exist before the birth of Tuzul Shek. If the Great Gods were indeed the cause—rather than, themselves, victims—would this event not upset the balance of power between them?

The deeper I considered and the more I researched, it became apparent that the mental contortions necessary to make them the culprits was so far beyond logic that I could only return to that possibility if the other options were exhausted to the uttermost point of incomprehensibility.

Then, what of the Five Crowns?

Seela, the Goddess of Song

Lio, the Goddess of Color

Typhi, the Goddess of Wings

Qumu, the Goddess of Stars

Zeeye, the Goddess of Motion

Each cycle, they would be born anew from the power of Kaeshem and Gwolth, yet they would give rise to the Immaculata. Indeed, Zithras and Tuzul Shek both would come from Qumu alone.

Would it be possible for such a regeneration of power every cycle to sustain itself without the intervention of outside forces? Would the Crowns possess either the strength or the will to end not only their progenitors, but the creations over which they labored with such concern?

And what purpose would be served by the Crowns

so immolating themselves, dying and being reborn in time with their creation?

No...while it might be more possible to ascribe motive to the Crowns, it would still be an exercise in making human that which is divine. And the mechanism by which they could ensure the perfect symmetry of every cycle could not possibly survive the destruction such a reincarnation would demand.

And what of the Thane? The...myth? Prophecy? Warning? Whatever it turns out to be, the poem is known to all who dabble in archaeology, magic, or theology:

*Seven swords for seven Lords,
And one sword for the Thane.
Gods above and Gods below,
And a God in all but name.*

Seven lands assembled now,
A crown for every head.
And a crown of blackened blood,
For the eighth to rule the dead.

It is easy enough to parse, with the seven Lords representing the Great Gods—the Gods above—and the Five Crowns as the Gods below. The "sword" refers to the power of divinity that makes them Gods. The Thane, then, is the incipient Eighth God, which is meant to be either Zithras or Tuzul Shek; whichever emerged victorious in their struggle and reclaimed the shattered power of the Figments to forge their metaphorical sword.

But how can that be? If they are both destined to be reborn in the next cycle as the Great Gods—the first two of the seven Lords—then how could one of them also be destined to be the Eighth?

In light of what we know, the answer becomes painfully simple: they are not. Are even the Gods ignorant of this truth? I do not, as yet, know, but consider that all eight Gods will come to possess a crown, but only the Gods of our current cycle will have a "land" while, in lieu of this, the Eighth will receive apparent rulership over the dead.

But something goes wrong.

Somewhere, some part of the plan breaks down, the universe collapses, and the entire cycle starts again with the last survivors of the old world: Zithras and Tuzul Shek.

That only makes sense if the Thane is not what we believed. In my seminal work, "On the Nature of the Thane," I posited that the being born from the union of the last vestiges of the power of the Walking Gods might actually be different from the core Immaculate that comprised it, that ultimately, it might not matter which of the two won.

But rather than it not mattering, what if the reason that the Thane would bear no resemblance to either Walking God was because it was never meant to be one of them? What if another entity was always meant by the makers of that prophecy to ascend to the place of divine rulership?

Taking that idea a step further, there is nothing inherent about the Walking Gods that demand that one of them fulfill the role: it would only be a matter of the power involved. Any being capable of accepting and surviving the divine numina could control it.

No mortal—not even a hero—could hope to contain a hundredth part of that energy without being destroyed utterly, but what if there was something else on the same scale as a God? Something that not only had access to the static power of the gods, but to power that could grow of its own accord, over time, until it would have a potential beyond even those that bore it?



To go beyond simple conjecture, I would have to delve into the black past of my family: the secrets of the Traitor-Heroes. I knew for sure only what I learned from my grandmother for—though the people of my blood have proven long-lived—it was generations even for us since the collapse of the Well and what I still think of as the "present."

When Alutuus and Ren Shin shattered the world, they did not die as many expected: indeed, as heroes, they were the only ones who still retained the power to use magic without making a contract with a Great Beast. Instead, they reunited and made a pact to steward the world they had created. To that end, they produced a child: my great-grandmother.

She begat my grandmother, who begat my father, who begat me. Though each generation saw our powers weaken, our intellect was wholly

undiminished, and it soon became apparent that the tremendous measures taken had only delayed the sickness, rather than cured it. You see, Ren Shin had learned a terrible truth about the Figments and the Walking Gods and the destiny of the Thane.

Despite what the Five Crowns said—and perhaps even believed—it was never meant to be Geddephron or the One God who took the crown of the Eighth.

Within the Well itself, the vast swirling of pure power and the constant exposure to hundreds of millions of thinking minds for centuries had roused a brute, primitive consciousness whose rapacity was growing with every passing minute. As with the power of the Great Beasts, every time its energies were called upon, they would regenerate greater than they had been before, ensuring that as the population grew with each passing day, there would be enough power to connect new souls to it, and that, in turn, would make it stronger in a self-reinforcing cycle.

When he unsealed these truths, Ren Shin brought the evidence before Alutuus—his most vocal and persistent critic on the Black Rock Council—and when even she could find no fault with his reasoning, they knew it must be taken to their fellow Heroes. From there, the pair rushed to the Citadel, calling an emergency meeting to present everything that had been learned.

Desolation and reality were all that was there to greet them, though. When they came forth with their revelation, they were faced with another, for Blind Vez'roon, the head of the Council and an old friend to all there, revealed that he not only knew this truth, but had been in contact with the entity. You see, his powers had opened his mind like no other to the Well's probing thoughts, and it had spent decades whispering beyond the edge of his consciousness, slowly eating away at Vez'roon's will with a depth of patience no mortal being can truly grasp, until he was

nothing but a puppet of the proto-Thane.

With surprise and the power of his patron, Vez'roon lashed out, hastening his planned subversion or destruction of the various Council members. But one could not so easily overmatch so many heroes, and though all but Ren Shin and Alutuus perished in the conflict, they were able to destroy their old friend. Alas, Vez'roon was only a vessel, and his death did nothing to avert the problem.

Indeed, in the last moments, he was able to infect the mind of young Meecia Whem, sending her to the court of the Xenarch of Dyykada. From there, the mind-plague spread quickly throughout the rulers of the nations, and when Ren Shin and Alutuus tried to pursue, they were, instead, confronted by the growing legions of the Well's enslaved thralls.

Seeing no other solution to the rapidly-deteriorating situation, they abandoned their half-conceived plans of a safe quarantine and shutdown of

the Well and struck with hammerblows, seeking to destroy the Well and its master.

It succeeded, and they were able to disperse the power of the Well...but in doing so, they sealed the death of our world.

You see, as the released numina saturated the world, it weakened the mortal races, forcing them to rely on the Great Beasts for their survival, while that worship continued to increase the power of the Beasts.

Naturally, when Zithras and Tuzul Shek adopted their new forms as the One God and Geddephron, they did so in the way most appropriate for our damaged world: Great Beasts. But in doing so, they accidentally opened themselves to the numina of men, which grows when used by those from whom it was once taken.

I can only conjecture from this point, as none of my excursions through the Cycles included a trip to the post-human ages that their struggle birthed, but as they grew in dominance, their domains would come to

rule more and more nations. The Council of Wyrms...Estruaza...the Tide Princes...all of the great powers of our world would fall, and their people would either perish or fall into the thrall of one of the two.

And so would the Great Beasts who ruled them. As each of those Beasts died, their numina would return to the world to be absorbed by the other Beasts. And when only Geddephron and the One God remained? All the power of the old Well and all the power of the Great Beasts that had grown in the centuries of use and all the power of the greatest two of the Walking Gods would be concentrated in only two places.

Is it so difficult to see, in them, power to rival the Gods? Who can say for sure what happens from there. Perhaps their fight would be vicious enough to end everything, or perhaps they would wage war upon the heavens first, to bring down their mothers and their grandfathers, or perhaps something beyond our

understanding would happen.

But the end result is the same: it all ends, and from the shells of the two, opposing forces would rise the Spark and the Quintessence, which would give birth to Gwolph and Kaeshem.



Very well, I knew now whom my foe was—the mind within the Well, destined to become the Eighth God, yet wholly unfit for the task—and was charged with the great destiny of somehow midwifing this monstrosity whilst preserving our world.

It could not be slain outright, for that would only result in the truncated future of my own cycle.

But just as surely, it could not be allowed to be born, or the land of the dead which it would rule would be our own world, and balance would persist over a lifeless void.

Instead, I began to ponder the flaws in the system, deciding that they could ultimately be summed up by the two unfavorable options. First, that the power of the Eighth could not be divided, or it would eventually war upon itself. Second, that the power could not be allowed to exist without a check on it, or its whims would ultimately come to ruination.

With that as a starting point, I began my work. What if the power of the Well could be channeled out of it, stripping the fledgling mind of its energies while keeping them intact, both for the races of the world to continue drawing from, and to take up the mantle of the Eighth? What if those powers, then, could be held in cooperative tandem by multiple entities whose strength was sufficient to bear up under the energy?

Two would obviously be too few, and I briefly considered five, as with the Five Crowns. But in the end, I believed that an even number would be better, to reflect the nature of the world. So I drew upon old

lore, thinking of the Eight Trigrams that the Valjaradani mystics claimed reflected the four primary elements and their four "manifestations" upon the world. Though it is old magic and much-discredited in modern times, it is not without power and would be a fitting relation to the Eighth God.

Therefore, I would make four pillars of support, each charged with a primary Trigrams as a face to represent the strength to hold up the power and a secondary Trigram to represent the strength to hold the outside world at bay, essentially forming a shell into which the energies of the Well could be poured, free of consciousness.

Each of these four pillars would be faced with the two corresponding of the Eight Elements that form a pair: earth and mountain; water and sea; wind and lightning; fire and heaven.

Even before I learned the truths of the Cycle, I had already discerned a great deal of the Well's theoretical

fundamentals. With time and my own connection to it, I was able to puzzle out a sufficient degree of its complexity to begin constructing the groundwork for a means of channeling its power.

Several romantic notions flitted across my mind—crowns, magic swords, or arcane devices of crystal and force—but I ultimately settled on the wholly utilitarian: suits of adamantine metal, overlarge and intricate. They would have the right mixture of size and durability to ensure construction with as few complications as possible, and once they had become whole and wholly charged, their form would be ephemeral and the wearer could easily adapt them.

I will not belabor the plans for their construction here; suffice it to say, they would require not only materials of the highest quality, but reagents both rare and exotic. So exotic, indeed, that I would not be able to collect all of them in the span of a single Cycle.

Even just one suit would demand a dozen fortunes

to attempt, and all four would be beyond even my considerable means. I would need both time and resources, so I began forging my network of influence across the face of this Cycle, as well as securing Barankal again as my base.

Producing even the first suit was a tremendous effort, my plans almost exposed several times and my own life threatened no less than twice in the process. It took far longer than I had hoped, but it was worth it when the completed artifact sat before me, thrumming with both inborn magic and incipient potential. It was the first—the Armor of Earth and Mountains—and it proved that I could accomplish what was needed.

Taking it and what resources I could not replace, I then transitioned to my fourth Cycle, but as I have said elsewhere...my lineage is long-lived, but we are not immortal. Even as I write this, I am failing. I knew I would need others to carry on my work.



My progress in the fourth Cycle has been expedited greatly not only by my unwitting assistants, but I have been able to disrupt the Heroes by pushing the Cypher Key of the third Cycle forward into this one. It is a gamble—I will have less time to complete my work—but it and its followers should provide a much-needed distraction at the most critical moments of the process. I will gladly trade a deadline for greater security.

The completion of the other three suits has since occupied almost every waking moment I have and consumed more wealth than the me of the old world ever dreamed existed. Since each is built around one of the four primary elements as its heart, I have come to think of them as my Primal Armors. That they inch nearer to completion is an inevitability I hope to keep hidden from the world as long as possible...but the consumption of such resources as these require is

not easily masked, and my methods for subterfuge must needs become increasingly more extreme, though that presents me with dangers of its own.

Still, I will push through and do what must be done, as has always been my way. Lesser minds can fellate their egos with talk of petty conscience; mine is a purpose too glorious and great to be allowed to fail beneath the burdens of decency. Even if the people of the future demonize me, they shall do so with the time that I have given them.

Besides, I have greater concerns now: upon whom to place the armor. It is no simple burden, and one I am forced to admit I cannot take upon myself. I am failing more with every passing day, and I despair to see the end of my great work.

There are my assistants, perhaps, but who can say if they are prepared for the burden? Or if I am even willing to foist it upon them...

There is no way to know what changes will befall

those who wear the armor—in mind or in body—
when they draw out the powers of the Well and create
the Eighth. Perhaps they shall be raised to rank of
demi-gods themselves, exceeding even the power of the
greatest heroes? Or their souls might be stripped away,
their basest will bonded to the armor to serve as
eternal guardians of the power like some half-damned
golem? It may be that an entity wholly new and
unique will arise from the wreckage of their psyche?

Those or any of a thousand other possible fates
threaten any who would accept the burden of the
Primal Armors.

But I will find them, wherever they may be: minds
I can trust with the possibility of ultimate power, but
who are also willing to accept existing through all
time in some damaged, diminished state.

It is worth it, for the possibilities that the Eighth
God of my own manufacture will open up.

With the unlimited potential energy that the four

Primal Armors will be able to shape—with its capacity for infinite growth—nothing will ever be the same again. In time, its energy will dwarf the Gods and its feats will transcend the limits of our abilities to understand. New life, new magic...it may be possible to create wholly new worlds to fill all of space. Imagine, a universe where every point of light in the night's sky is replaced with an entire world as rich and vibrant as our Zenathrás...

This is the beginning of everything that will ever be new; the point at which the Cycle ends and time and reality—true time and reality—will begin. With those lofty ambitions, I have taken to thinking of my endeavors as the *Origin Project*.

What is the past, but an archive of abandoned longings?

