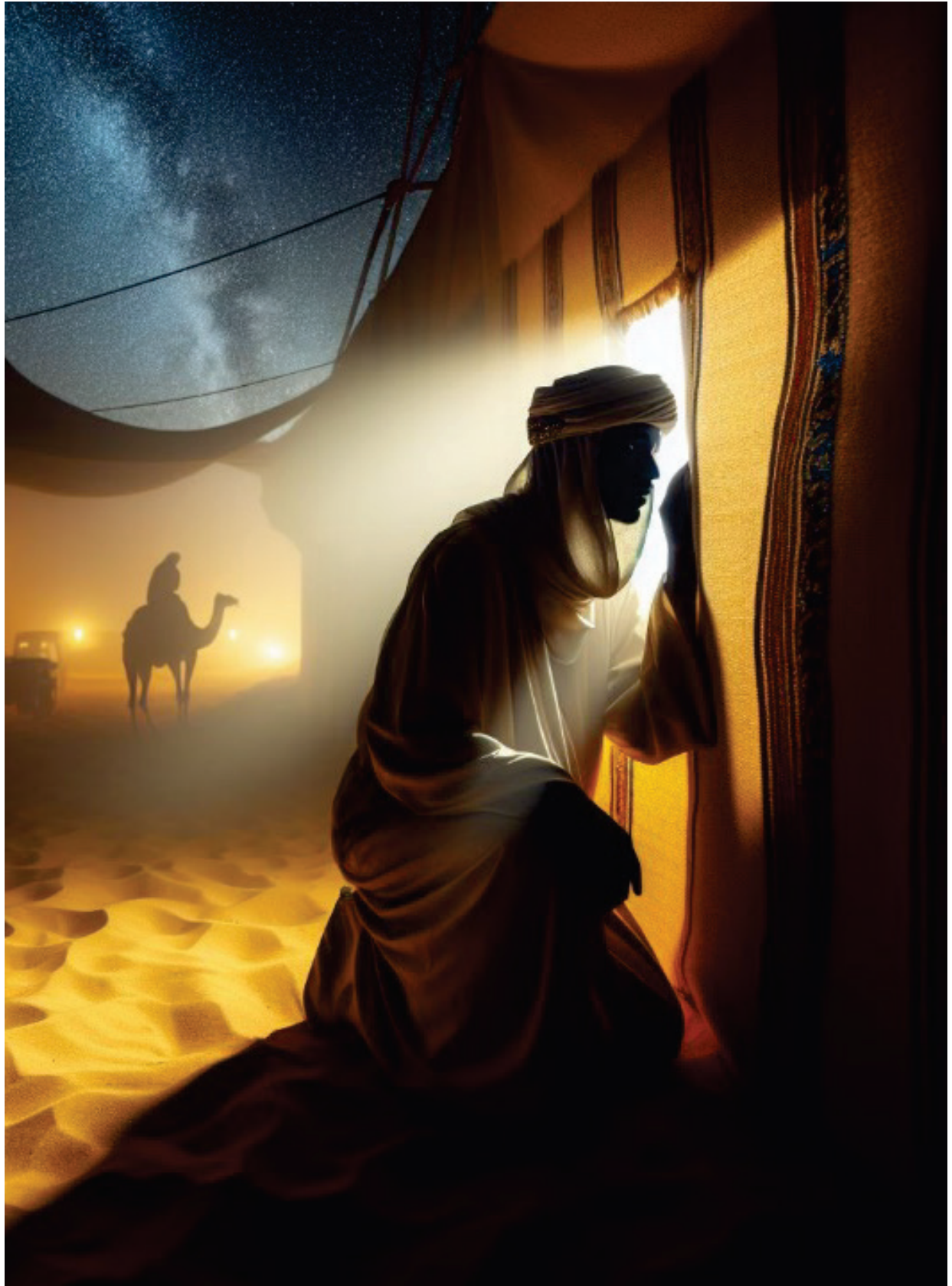


Introduction

Time is space. It is because space is the fabric of the Universe, and fabric is subject to the calamity known as tearing, that it would also go to say that Time would, on occasion, find itself subject to the dangers and pitfalls of becoming too heavy for its own trousers. This is the story of such a time.

If Father Time were aware that approaching the speed of light had been adding extra girth to his middle, he may not have attempted. But as it happened, and because we're steering clear of dead metaphors, let's just say that Space-time was about to try and bend down and touch it toes¹.

¹ Anyone over the age of fifty knows this can be detrimental to the back, much less the trousers.



Chapter One: Hazeus's Return Home

There is a reason why the word desert gets only one 's' but dessert is spelled with two.

I found this out during the year 33 AD when I was eavesdropping outside of the tent where the great Hazeus of Nazareth was holding an argument with Lazarus. He'd just resurrected the guy whom Mary and Martha were trying to help guide toward reason.

I would have had an easier time listening if the wind would have chilled out. As it was, I had been using the sleeve of my robe to coax the grit from my eye sockets and trying to block the sandstorm with the bulk of my turban every time it picked up. Two female silhouettes moved inside the tent and then sharp, cold sand sprayed me again, so I leaned nearer the canvas. You see? No one ever asks for a second serving of desert.

I could hear Hazeus inside.

"Put that down, Lazarus."

The wind continued to rise and the women's shadows separated and shrank as they backed near my side of the tent. The wind finally abated and there came the sound of shattering clay.

"Just a cup or two?" slurred Lazarus. "We should celebraaagh..."

"Christ, Man," said Hazeus as something plopped to the floor inside.

"Please," came Martha's voice. Her silhouette grew and knelt to pick something up. "Wine is what did this to you in the first place."

Mary's shadow also grew as she neared the lantern at the center. "Well, dust it off first!" she said.

"Oh," said Martha. "Here."

The shadows returned to normal and then there was a slurping sound and a crunch, then Lazarus again, "Argh. Ur, there. Much better."

"Just look at you!" Mary said.

"It's okay," said Lazarus wetly. "We'll reveal the miracle tomorrow. Let's celebrate tonight."

By the sounds and shadows I could tell a jug was set heavily on the table.

"No," said Hazeus, followed by a pronounced silence. Hazeus's shadow overtook those of the women and another candle was lit this side of him, vanishing all silhouettes. "Look, I've lit the candle at the altar. Do not douse it with compulsions."

Lazarus's voice crumbled at Hazeus's feet, "What's life, withargh—" there was a crunching sound, "Ere. There. This time it'll stay, I promise. What good is life without pleasure?"

Hazeus's voice went down to meet him, "Not a single drink, Lazarus. Promise, me?"

Just then, Martha came out from the tent flaps, and I quickly took two steps away. She was shivering and had a hand on her forehead, so I went over and put an arm around her.

“I feel terrible for the guy!” she said through sobs.

“I know,” I said softly. “He’s just been raised from the dead and can’t even have a decent drink.”

“No, I mean he has to keep putting his parts back in place! His jaw, especially.” Then she looked at me, her sobs immediately evaporating through suspicion.

“Uh, I mean, Hazeus knows what’s best. Trust in his wisdom,” I said. Then I saw her eyes drop to my side. I looked down, then slowly hid the wineskin beneath my tunic.

“Ugh!” she said, removing my arm and pulling her veil tighter across her face, then stormed back into the tent. I would like to say I didn’t go back to listening in on the conversation, but hey, I had to know if she was gonna rat me out! I didn’t want to be the next victim of forced sobriety!

“Lazarus, today we have taught each other,” said Hazeus. “Life is more valuable than our compulsions, Friend. If you can value that truth, I can better find reason to continue my own path of righteousness.”

I could hear Lazarus sobbing and then the shuffling of feet and robes swishing and what was surely Hazeus patting him on the back. Then again, a jaw being put back in place.

The sand started blowing again.

I was spitting some out when the wind stopped completely and light from inside cast a triangle onto the ground once more.

“Tom?”

It really was amazing how the weather cleared whenever he decided to step out.

“Here,” I said, coming around from the side and pretending to be adjusting my robes. “Nature called.”

“Let it be written,” said Hazeus, “to discipline the body is to feed the spirit.”

I quickly unrolled my parchment and set to it with my reed and ink.

“Ah,” Hazeus said, stretching out in the silver light of the desert moon, “it’s nice when the tears of happiness flow.”

My hand stopped briefly while I wondered if he was referring to Lazarus’s or his own. I almost teared up myself when Hazeus gleefully poured the wine bottle out onto the sand.

Anyhow, the next two weeks were the roughest, as Hazeus was terribly grumpy. He finally led us on a brief excursion to Ephraim following his storming off after a class and claiming that the questions asked were intentionally redundant and meant to make him look boring.

“I was kinda thinking you were going a little fire and brimstone back there afterword,” I said.

“Yeah?” he snapped.

I waited until his brow softened, “Uh, maybe, not?”

“I know,” he said. “You’re right. I shouldn’t let things get to me. What’s it been, two weeks?”

“Yeah. Here.” I tried handing him some bread.

“No, it has sugar in it,” he said.

“Hazeus, for your mother’s sake, you can’t stop drinking cold turkey and refuse to eat!”

“I’m not refusing to eat, just refusing to eat the stuff that tastes good. There’s unleavened if I’m hungry. This getaway will be good for me. I just need some rest.”

“If you say so,” I said, sneaking a bite and stuffing it back in the donkey’s pack.

He slept away most of his time off until one day receiving word from Mary in Bethany. *Lazarus was drinking again.*

I found myself on the road to Jericho trying to keep Hazeus’s spirits up. “People aren’t perfect!” I was saying. It wasn’t a very good argument for Lazarus. In fact, it was the opposite of an argument, but appealing to Hazeus’s compassion was often a winning tactic.

“I think you mean grateful,” he muttered. “People aren’t grateful.”

“Oh c’mon. Lazarus cried tears of joy in your arms, remember? He’s just hit a weak spot, that’s all.”

He ignored me and went on muttering, pretending to be rehearsing. I did my best to steer him in a more positive direction, “Look, have some sweet bread.”

He glowered at me.

“Come on, he without sin, remember?”

He watched me while I imitated the adulterous woman shivering and hugging herself helplessly. I got nothing. Tough crowd. “You want to be the only one entitled to throw stones?”

He stopped and the pack mule lumbered on fastidiously. When he looked at me, his face lightened. Then he took a bit of bread and ate it while we walked on. But that was the last time I saw him eat.

It was in Jericho that he really got on about chaste living being the seat of power and it only got worse back in Bethany. He didn’t exactly condemn anyone for imbibing, nor did he confront Lazarus directly, but by the time we were gathered for the last supper, he was becoming pretty quick to point out the disciples who were indulging in too much food! That, and he was in one of his moods.

“I’ve always said that I should have been born a few thousand years earlier!” Hazeus said at the supper table among his disciples.

“Well, I’ve always said I shoulda been born in the Orient,” I responded in my usual banter. He’d seen my skill with the nunchucks.

“Come now, Son,” said Mary, squeezing his shoulder and pulling his head into hers, “lighten up.”

“I just don’t fit in,” he said sourly.

“C’mon man, everyone is here because of you,” I said. All present were surely aware that being with someone who could transmogrify things had its perks.

“Perhaps you should have a drink?” Mary said, letting him have his own space again at the center of the table.

“I don’t want one,” he said, “someone’s got to keep their wits about them.”

“Hey,” I said, proud I’d learned to pace myself- at least until the sun started setting. It’s tough documenting the son of God’s miracles when you’re too drunk.

“I suppose things didn’t have to make much sense to anyone before I came along. Before I showed up, things just, well, things probably just happened!” he said.

“Yes, but they happened to prepare for your coming, Son,” said his adoptive mother. “Truly, you should have a drink. Try and relax.”

“You know what?” Now he was heatedly directing his voice to the heavens, “It must be wonderful being parents in the spiritual realm.” He waved his hand absently turning another cup of water into wine. Then, probably because I’d be the only one to remember a thing come morning, he asked me, “I mean, there wasn’t anything material for Mother Earth and Father Time to worry about, now was there?”

I shrugged.

Then he continued aloud to himself. “And yes, they happened for me, okay? And still, they happen for me.” He turned to another disciple who was approaching with a cup and some bread.

“Are you going on about your father again, Hazeus?”

“The both of them,” Mary said while Hazeus waved. Immediately, the gent smiled and moved back to the end of the table with a hiccup.

“Things do happen for me, and I’ve told everyone here, that they would happen for you too if you would only quit giving into compulsions!”

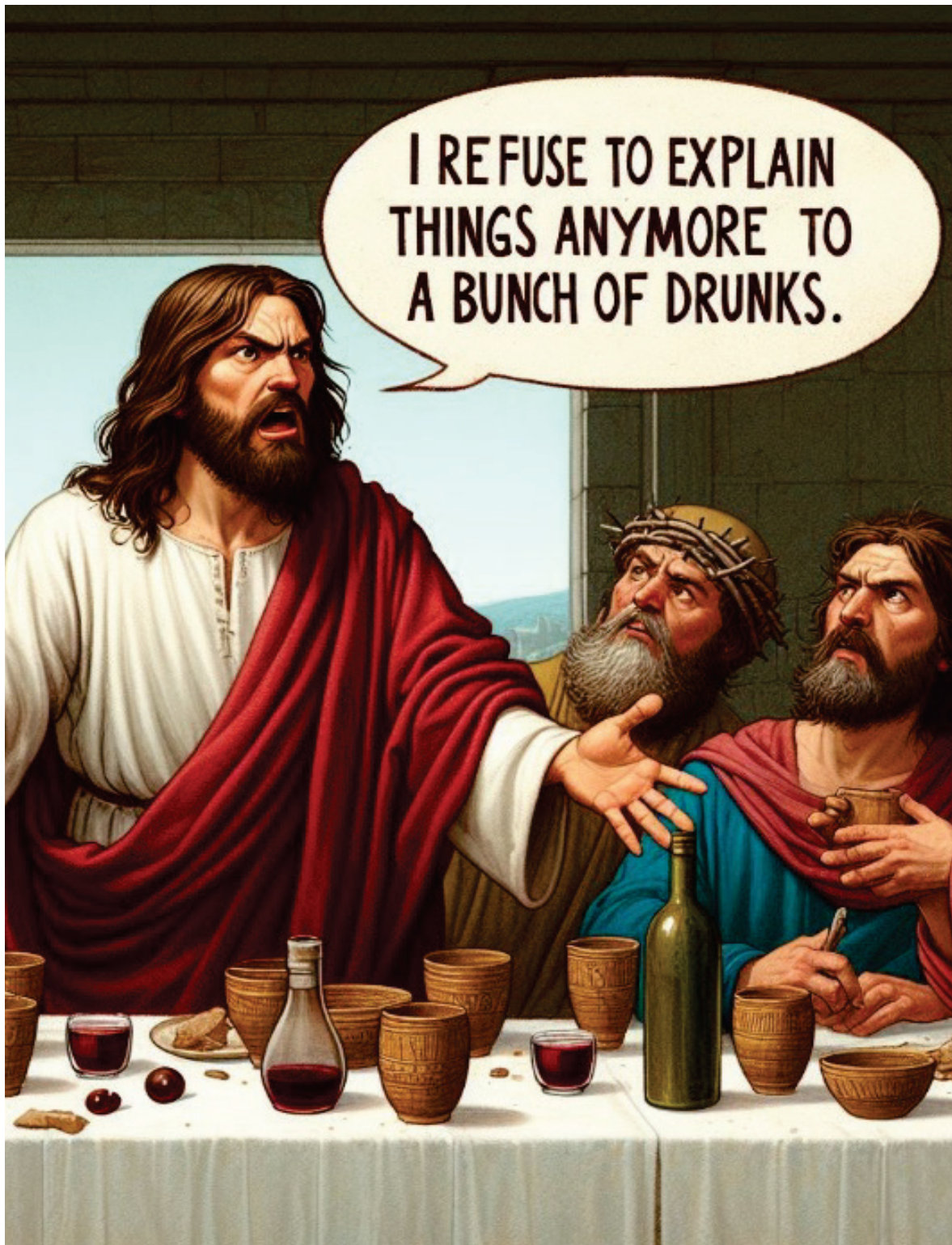
This brought a small uproar which worried me, but I stood up to quell it by raising a cup and saying, “To compulsions!” That ended the raucous and turned it into a cheer and then the thunk of wooden mugs loosely in agreement!

“Oh, confound it!” said Hazeus. Then he stood up from his seat, gently pushing away the offerings of bread and wine crowding in on him. “If you insist on whittling away at your intelligences, then go on imbibing, but I refuse to explain again to a bunch of drunks!”

There came a brief silence which Hazeus took immediate advantage of.

“This will be my last supper,” he declared, then disappeared in a wisp of smoke.

At least that's what he remembers. What the rest of us experienced was a bit more, er, real, you might say.



Chapter Two: Father Time and Mother Earth

“Hey!” said Mother Earth turning from the dishes. “Don’t use your father’s name in vain!”

Father Time and Mother Earth knew everything was going to turn out okay. They had seen it. In fact, they knew it with every fiber of their being because, well, reality *was* every fiber of their being. But even Gods can’t keep the wool pulled over their kid’s eyes forever.

So, when the people were going to crucify Hazeus for refusing to drink wine with them, it was no surprise when he came marching in and demanded to know just what in God’s name was going on!

Hazeus stopped at the dining room table and Father Time lowered his newspaper to peek over at his son. “She’s right, Son. If you’re going to curse someone, curse yourself. One day, you’ll learn that everything is your own damn fault.”

“Okay...” Hazeus said, but the word came out like a train carrying the world and stopping on a dime. He took a deep breath and reconsidered. His father had a knack for always being right, so he said agreeably, “Well then have it your way. What in my name is going on?”

Yep, now that they had a growing boy, they were going to have some explaining to do. Just as most marriages go, the majority of that explaining was done by the father directly to the wife. But Father Time, as always, was prepared. Some answers were not quite appropriate for a young God, so those stories had been recorded on magic video discs for use at a later, more appropriate date. Up to now, they had tried keeping Hazeus from experiencing ugly things; they hid the adult mvds² in the closet behind the false panel with the Christmas gifts.

“Well?” said Hazeus.

Father Time raised an eyebrow in Mother Earth’s direction and then cocked his head toward the bedroom. Hazeus watched Mother Earth pull the damp dishrag from her shoulder and drape it over the faucet. Was that an eye-roll? She untied her apron and hung it on the peg by the refrigerator as she walked by. He couldn’t help but notice that her eyes were shooting arrows at Father Time the entire way.

When she returned, she had a stack of albums in her arms. Hazeus looked from her to Dad and saw a giant smile spread across his face. Dad folded the newspaper, slapped it on the table, and slid his chair back. Hazeus suddenly felt uneasy.

“Well,” said Father Time, coming over and grasping his son by the shoulders, “I think it’s time you knew the truth.”

The truth? How eager Lazarus had been to give the people the truth. Hazeus had always felt a little truth was best left to speculation.

² Magic video discs

Dad shook him, tousled his hair, and then took the stack of Mvds from Mom. Then he turned and presented them to Hazeus. "You're old enough to handle these I should think."

Hazeus glanced at the top one before looking up at his father questionably. He may have read the title had the bright red adult rating sticker not upstaged everything else. His father winked and then reached an arm around Mother Earth's shoulder leading her back toward the bedroom. "Yes," said Father Time, "it's a proud day for a father."

What?

Being a forgiving, honest, and intelligent God isn't just built right in ya know, it takes a good upbringing and Hazeus was in for a few final lessons. It was also then that the son of God would be reeducated about the birds and the bees. According to the sounds that were coming from his parent's bedroom, it was also on that very night that his sister was most likely conceived.

But where did this magical place go, you may ask?

Well, that's the question that needs answering now doesn't it?

The good news is, there is an answer. It's all still right here, in Rootworld. Everything the first Gods created for their children and all the magic that goes right along with it.



Chapter Three: Rootworld

The clouds inside of the crystal sphere turned all staticy after Hazeus placed the album on the turnstile and pressed the play button. The needle bounced along the vinyl surface making little pops and scratches, and something told him that there was more going on than he was imagining.

He would find out that he was correct when his mother's voice emanated from a couple of speakers disguised as golden dragon statuettes built into the cradle of the magiscope.

"One may consider your father rather harsh if you think about the multitude of incarnations that might have been swept under the rug to come up with a working model of our known universe, or even a single ant for that matter," her voice said while the interior static of the device fought to gain purchase on a practical interpretation of what was being said. It finally seemed to decide when a cartoon version of a Lego set was shattered by a hammer, and a broom walked over to begin sweeping up the mess.

"But," his mother's voice continued, "if one were to ponder for a moment from your Father's point of view, they may in turn develop a deep sense of self-love. This of course would follow a sense of intelligence from understanding the truth."

The image had gone through a cycle of ants marching into and out of their hill and some complex diagram that might have been an ant's brain, and now was becoming a magic carpet that looked terribly surprised.

"And the truth is," the dragon statuettes purveyed, "there was no rug."

The magic carpet's tassels drooped in a strange display of disappointment before it was unraveled among the magiscope's imagery.

"To understand how your father may have created everything perfectly on the first go-round, one would have to have the extremely rare talent of being able to picture an invention in their mind down to the minutest detail and even run it through all its successes and failures before ever building the physical model. In short, things would always work exactly as they intended³."

Swimming through the spherical lens of the magiscope were various contraptions that Hazeus had no idea about, but he did share a curious taste for the ones that were sizzling with electric lightning.

"Your father does a similar trick."

The images shifted again into a gray miasma.

"You see," continued Mother Earth, "things don't get real until someone runs the gambit."

The magiscope now contained a living image of his father lost in thought. As his mother's voice narrated, the eyes began flicking out reflections of his father's fondest memories, starting with their meeting.

³ Tess Nikola, a famous inventor of Rootworld had this talent. Though, her friend Ian Stein would say that this talent had nothing to do with skill but rather with sex. As he had engaged in many arguments with Tess and always ended up agreeing with her in the end.

“What he did was,” she began, “envision a perfect run of the universe. Forget the perfect run of the Universe. And then—” Hazeus thought he saw a smile crawl across his father’s visage as images of his own birth flashed briefly in the placid mirrors, “live a lifetime... to remember it.”

The magiscope went grey again and Hazeus thought it might be the end of the record, but then the speakers said pertly. “And there you have it⁴.”

“Everything,” the golden dragons continued, breathing to life again, starting with a picture of the globe and flying down in a bird’s eye view within close enough distance to skirt the outside of the great pyramid of babel, “I suppose you could say we are living in his wake so to speak.” Then as the scene dropped down to cut eddies across the surface of a great body of water, his mother’s face appeared on that surface and said rather sarcastically, “A thing you get used to as a wife. Which is why I always steal his thunder whenever possible.”

Then her picture was lost in the ripples, speeding away as the bird’s eye pitched and flew over a marketplace of milling people.

“The people down there have already started touting the idea that before our universe was independent there was some endless expanse of waves that our infant universe was bouncing along on in our inflaton submarine⁵.”

That made Hazeus look back at the jumping needle along the vinyl track.

“But all of that is speculation on the Globe, where the inhabitants have been drunk for so long they’ve nearly forgotten describing their God as hovering over the surface of the deep, in a book more than two thousand years old. I mean, c’mon! It’s right in the beginning, people!”

Hazeus leaned back on his elbows and wondered at the marvel of it all. How hadn’t he realized it before? He was looking at events that had already occurred on the globe! He got real close to the crystal orb and stared down into it.

“We have to remember to give the world a little slack because, Space-time, or the continuum of Time-space, depending on where you were raised, can be confusing.” A book cover materialized with a shadowy image branded into the leather that reminded him of, well, it reminded him of himself!

It was him alright! Right there in line art, burned into the cover and written in gold was the title TOME OF AGES.

“When you’ve read in the Tome of Ages that God hardened the Pharaoh’s heart, while in Egypt, to help further sink in a lesson⁶, you kind of start to think that God may be an out-with-the-old and in-with-the-new kinda guy, not leaving much room for mercy on innocent bystanders. But one would have to understand that this manuscript was produced in and for a universe other than the original and for far different purposes.”

⁴ The ultimate truth

⁵ Likely until it was swallowed up by a whirlpool where also likely there lived a kraken.

⁶ The Tome of Ages reports that the Pharaoh was ready to give up but God said, let the plague continue. And locusts, they’re were even more locusts.

Suddenly there was a horrid screeching and the orb filled with that familiar snow left over from the early background radiation of the universe. The needle had jumped track and was nodding to and fro right off of the edge of the player.

Hazeus reached down to replace it in the cradle but stopped when he thought he felt his stomach rumble.

This brings us to another outstanding truth; that no matter what universe you may find yourself in, or find yourself observing, there are always bound to be gods and they will always need to eat.

While Hazeus is away, I would like to interject for you readers who are wondering how it is that storytellers like me can know all these things. That was a trick that once baffled me as well whenever I was in the presence of Merddin as a young chap at Arthur's side. And once again it confounded me while growing up on books by my favorite authors. You could find me more than once declaring, "This bloke must have been there! It's the only way!"

Well, that's about right. Turns out I was there, and soon you too may remember a little something about your pasts. Time is strange like that. Well, at least the next one in office, anyway⁷. That means gods are strange, too.

In fact, in many texts, man himself has often been referred to as a small god. But if we're talking about the earliest ones like Hazeus and his parents, then we must think inside the box⁸.

Not to worry, the Son of Father Time will soon be happily munching on thickly buttered popcorn and returning to the enjoyment of his first Video disc on the magiscope, this time with headphones in, no doubt, since the kitchen is in earshot of his parent's bedroom.

To him, existence is a totally ethereal experience. From any omnipotent being's frame of reference, there would be no physical world except that which they might imagine. And that they do quite extensively. So, nothing is ever destroyed. Things are ever only recycled.

Taking out the trash is a foreign idea to the omnipotent. They *are* the bin. Everything in the box, self-contained. Batteries included, if you will⁹.

And if that is hard to consider, then think of how we only know reality from a totally physical frame of reference. You might ask yourself what spiritual or invisible world might even exist besides what you can imagine. You can't blame Atheists in that regard. Yet, I know better because I remember.

The only disappointment I've really dwelt on throughout my lives is that it has taken this long for beings on both sides of the equation¹⁰ to respect one another's tangibility.

It can make a person, or God, put a finger to their chin and ponder, like young Hazeus for example, when he saw the impact his life would have on a world appearing in front of his own eyes.

⁷ And by next, I mean previous

⁸ A box of R-rated Mvds passed down from a certain Father Time

⁹ And it can get musty in there. But there are creative ways to handle the funk. Just look at the advances and ingenuity in space exploration. Because really... that's what Godding is all about (surviving on your own resources in a vacuum).

¹⁰ And it is in fact an equation. It took Laura Mersini and a couple of friends weeks to make the proper calculations, but it was eventually finished. The exact equation is $\text{Im}(1/\Lambda) > 0$.

Who knows what he must have been thinking as he ran his finger along the title of a magiscope video disc and read the name Arthur. And who knows whether or not those ponderings held any weight or created any gravity or if they were just intangible musings. Either way, it was at this precise time that in Hazeus's world of science and magic, a savior would be born.