

# Chronomaton

Ryan Miller

From set *Magic 2013*

11. 07. 2012



Bazzle woke with a start. He heard a cry of alarm and the sounds of boots rushing outside. He sat up with some effort and listened to the chimes and ticks of the two hundred twelve clocks around him. It was a comforting noise, so much so that the cry for help had to register a second time in his mind before he realized what had probably happened.

*It got out again. My creation continues to defy my wishes!*

He cast his eyes on the creature's bronze shell, completely covered in filigree lines and a slight patina of rust that somehow made it look stately. He had done all the work himself, of course, and with his one good hand. He had lost his left arm to the creeping plague that had been his constant companion for the past six years—the plague turned the strange clockmaker into the village pariah. He was certain that, were it not for his rare skills, he would have been cast out into the snow-covered forest and forgotten long ago.

*Probably would have been better off... no, that's just self pity. Poor form, old man.*

He had abandoned his dreams of a wife, children, and even mentoring his own apprentice. He poured himself into his work. None of the villagers understood why everyone else touched by the creeping plague had died, while this strange tinkerer lived on. When the clock orders inevitably ceased altogether, he carried on nonetheless, turning out one masterfully crafted clock after another. His work-

space began to look like an overgrown tomb in a forest of silver and bronze, clicking, clacking, and chiming all around him. He imagined they were colorful birds.

But this—this was the pinnacle of his work. He had nearly gone blind cutting the thousands of gears the legs required. The chest cage was the most difficult by far and required two huge keys—front and back—to wind its springs. Working with only one arm, he had come up with a way to turn the keys simultaneously: twist the front one enough and the clockwork arm sprung to life and turned the one in the back. It had taken him a year to figure that out, and another year to get the movements to align precisely. The memory made him smile.



Chronomaton | Art by Vincent Proce

Yes, this was by far his greatest creation. One that would be his lasting legacy to a world that had shunned him. But now it seemed that even it preferred the company of others and went out on its own at night to terrify the villagers down the lane. He hid the keys, chained the thing up, and tied boulders to it, but nothing seemed to suffice.

*You can't blame the thing. You would go out on your own too, if you could.*

Sometimes he would awake to find strange things in his shop—objects that had no business being there. A guard's helmet, the stirrups from a saddle, even a pair of wooden teeth. Mostly, he found strange keys, hundreds of them, filling small burlap sacks and stacked near the door. He never bothered to return them, since their original owners would never touch them now that he had. He merely pushed them into one of the few corners of his shop that wasn't covered in parts, tools, or shavings and forgot about them. They were brass, after all, and no use to him.

This morning, he looked warily at his surroundings to see if he would be surprised again. He awkwardly ambled over to his workbench, nearly knocking over his favorite sitting chair, and stopped in

his tracks, letting out a pathetic yelp. There, resting on the boarhide desk cover, lay a crude clockwork arm.

*You have really gone down the well, old man. Now you're making things you don't even remember making.*

He approached it cautiously, slowly reaching out his good hand as if he expected the thing to jump to life and grab him. He winced as he touched it, but the thing didn't move at all. Something was just not right about this artifact. Something that tugged at the back of Bazzle's mind.



Wild Guess | Art by Lucas Garciano

He pulled the leather headband that held his reading crystals in place from the owl clock next to his desk and put it on. Swinging the thickest of the crystals over his eye, he began to scrutinize the work in front of him.

No filigree, no smoothing of the rough-cut corners, and hammered pins! And was that trace of gray mineral... zinc? This was brass! Bazzle refused to use brass, since it cheapened the end result of his hard labors—at least in his estimation.

*You didn't do this. Nobody else could have.*

His paradoxical line of thinking was interrupted when he noticed something. There *were* lines on the arm after all, but they seemed to make a haphazard kind of sense; clearly intentional but lacking any artistic logic. That's when he saw the angular teeth and the looped handles.

*Keys. This is made of melted keys.*



He compared it to the creature's arm, the one *he* had made, and found the evidence he hoped he would not find. Its fingers were covered with brass filings, held in place by clock oil. For decades, he had scrubbed a similar mixture from his own hands at the end of a long day's work.

Now, it seemed, he finally had an apprentice.

Bazzle stared, wide-eyed, as the implications began to fill his brain like milk poured into water. The creature had somehow learned its creator's trade and was using it to build... what? *A companion? An army?*

He frantically tugged at the thing's chest key, but he was still sleep-weak and his good arm failed him. He gritted his teeth and pulled again, this time dislodging the key and sending it clanking across the room. To his horror, the creature's arm reached around and began turning the back key, the loud cranking sound filling the sad little workshop. Before Bazzle could do anything, the hand swung back and struck him squarely in the face. The last thing he heard was the chiming of the two hundred twelve clocks. It was time for breakfast.

On the second morning, Bazzle woke up on his own, a splitting headache reminding him of the previous day's attack. He looked around frightfully, trying to remember where he had thrown the key. With it, he might regain control of his creation and dismantle it, ending this terrible endeavor and perhaps saving the old man some of his waning dignity.



Captain of the Watch | Art by Greg Staples

The militia was marching outside and he could hear the hoarse shouts of the sergeant-at-arms. They were searching the farmhouses, no doubt looking for his mischievous metal child, but he knew they would not come calling today. The pitch-black skull painted on his door, the symbol of plague, was

better than castle walls for keeping out invaders. He found himself looking forward to the annual visitor who would refresh the paint.

The sunlight pouring in from the hole in his thatched roof caused a sparkle in the corner of his eye. *The key!* It rested under what used to be his dining table, but which was now covered in tools and metal bits, much like every surface in his shop. He stood up, groaning with pain and suddenly losing his balance. He fell toward his workbench, grasping it for stability. As he lifted himself up, his heart jumped into his throat.

He was staring at a severed head.

He swooned in shock. As his mind began to realign, he recognized the metal features he had come to know in the mysterious arm. This was a clockwork head. The guard's helmet had been fashioned into a skull, Bazzle's own reading crystals repurposed as eyes, and the stirrups and wooden teeth set in the jaw in a sad mockery of a human face. He could hear his heart beating deep and low in his ears, almost in time with the ticking that surrounded him, but not quite.

*Your child has grown beyond your ability to control. You should have left well enough alone. Stupid, sad old man.*

He fell to the floor and reached out for the key, just as he heard the dreaded but familiar whirr of gears. The thing had a mind of its own and apparently no intention of going quietly. Bazzle dragged himself with his good arm toward the golden promise the key held.

*Not far to go now. Just an arm's length, just a hand's-width, just fingers away.*

He felt the cold metal of the key on his fingertip just as the thing's arm connected with the back of his neck. Pain pierced through his mind and he felt the room spinning. He saw the thing reaching out for the key, heard the metal action of the mechanism as the thing slid the key into place...

On the third morning, Bazzle opened his eyes. He was momentarily oblivious to the events of the past two days—a state of mind he was soon to envy. He realized he was seated at his workbench. The pain in his neck made him want to reach up and rub it, but his arm would not heed the call of his instincts.

One look around the room told him why: his formerly good arm lay severed on the floor near his bed, and attached to his shoulder in its place was the metal arm from days before.

*Isn't this what you wanted all along?*

He looked down at his creation; *his* metal body. The body he had spent six years making. The body that had helped him cheat the creeping plague death. Bazzle realized all too late that the thing wasn't making a companion. It wasn't constructing an army. It had merely decided it would no longer share a body with a rotting old clockmaker.



Butcher's Cleaver | Art by Jason Felix

The arms began moving again, and no matter how much Bazzle's mind screamed at them to stop, he could not control them. The hand he had made and the hand he had not served a different master now, and there was nothing he could do but watch.

The desk was strewn with surgeon's tools: a bloody bone saw and a huge cleaver. He watched as the arm he had made clicked into action, the springs singing their song of tension's imminent release. The metal fingers wrapped around the cleaver, raised it to neck height, and reared back.

The last thing he saw was his shop spinning roof-over-floor around him. He would not hear the final click of the head as the hand snapped it into its newly-vacated space.

Finally, his creation was complete.