

Redin sighed and tapped the side of his notebook against the stone block floor, yet again running everything back and forth through his head. Some time back he had decided to deliberately stop himself from doing work outside of his appointed hours, but still – he was an archaeologist, a scholar, and he lived for the pursuit and gathering of knowledge. And what he had found there in that ancient tomb today... quite possibly, it predated everything else he knew.

The mechanism did not match the surrounding architecture or motifs. The scholar sat up, opened his journal, and flipped through the pages, seeing all the clean, concise sketches of friezes, busts, cartouches, stained glass windows pieced together from fragments... gods both current and ancient, temples standing and ruined. Notes on thaumaturgy, its workings and fundamentals; ideas and information about this new civilization he had found; and then, abruptly, seven pages of scribbles and mistakes, a sketch that he just couldn't get right.

It waited for him just here in the same room, apparently set into a divot in the center of the otherwise smooth floor, glistening black stone streaked through with whitish-green. Each of his failed sketches looked so much like it yet missed some vital, central portion, and every time he tried he felt no closer to discovering what it was. It felt almost as though it changed when he wasn't looking, or that depending on the angle, its very structure seemed to shift... the scholar peered close at the thing, glimmering golden metal like burnished zinc, and for a moment reached out to fetch his quill and ink.

But then he stopped himself. It wasn't going to help, and he had already had some of the soldiers drag his accommodations down here *into the ruins* so that he could get right back to it come morning. He sighed again, snapped the journal closed, and leaned far enough away to that it would be a hassle if he wanted to pick it back up, then tugged the blankets up.

The heat from the sun naturally did not reach this deep through solid stone, yet still another heat simmered undeniably up from the earth underneath. Redin hadn't noticed it before, but as he lay there, organizing and shelving his thoughts and discoveries from the day, he became aware of a slow, ponderous rhythm echoing from somewhere within the ruins, gentle and faint, like the heartbeat of some great sleeping beast. It was this that lulled him to sleep, this low, plodding beat – and it was this that drew him into the world of dreams.

And what great, fantastic, terrible dreams they were. At once they played out in full yet felt as only small, insignificant fragments: massive structures, works of architectural and societal hubris

that he recognized yet couldn't say he had seen before. Names and deeds that sounded familiar, yet not from his own waking world. Redin stepped through the halls of these ruins, yet the civilization that built them was in its prime. The people here had skin like smooth, sweet molten bronze, and when they spoke their words and syllables swung and swam together, lyrical without even trying. They spoke to him, welcoming him forward, beaming and grinning as though they had been awaiting his presence for a long time.

They beckoned him forward, and there in the center of the room before the golden device with its strange angles and nonsense concavo-convex mechanics, stood a hooded figure. He lifted his head, and Redin could still see no face beneath the twisting, swirling fabric, sheer yet solid as though it were woven from cold, shaded water. It looked at him though it had no eyes to see; it tilted its head, appraised him up and down, then spread its arms – then spread a second pair, and a third, the crux of each along the same pair of shoulders.

Redin felt no fear. In awe the scholar stepped forward, only now aware that the figure, the priest, the deity, perhaps, stood a full arm's breadth above his head. One of those arms came forward and the seven-fingered hand spread out, reaching for his, beckoning him forward. So the scholar looked from the hand, to the figure's blank face, to the device behind it, the inner mechanism – in the physical, waking world missing – spinning slowly.

He took the hand, and each of those seven fingers wrapped gently yet firmly about his palm. The device spun faster. A low hum issued; the arms of the device creaked and spun and shifted, and...

And Redin woke up, mind already working far beyond his body. He scabbled for his journal, remembered he had placed it away, fetched it – and then without even dressing in his robe, stepped over to the dismantled device, the vital center portion, the engine, so to say, missing. And he sketched the frame, the exterior, the binding arms, the gear workings, technology inspired and otherworldly. There in the center waited a gap, noticeable to him now yet unidentifiable before.

So he paused, chewed on the end of his quill, and then sketched out that part, too. It just – made *sense*, and like so many times before, Redin felt like a fool in how he couldn't see it before. He dressed, had a simple breakfast, and called for a basic shipment of parts from the surface portion of the camp: though the device's workings were strange and intricate, built around dimensions of thinking and engineering that he could hardly try to conceptualize. But,

still, it *made sense*. It wasn't some special alloy, as it was still liable to rust, tarnish, breakage, and battering. So the things they had around the camp would still work, so long as he pass them through the smith first.

As Redin sat back down beside the device, getting a look at it from a lower vantage, he couldn't help but smirk. His brother was a watchmaker; perhaps that discipline would help in the understanding of this device. Even though he had finally managed to sketch down the device and work a feasible blueprint of its setup, still the scholar had more to do. He set his inkwell beside him, unscrewed the top, laid out his other scrolls of study, and got to work.

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Amala sighed as he scuttled down the hallway, all of these certainly fantastic carvings and remarkably intact structures dimly lit by the torches set up in their sconces along the walls. Master Redin had specifically ordered the freestanding holders, as he wanted to preserve the original beauty and integrity of the structure – which was fair. It was just that the standing sconces were much heavier to move and harder to swap out than the wall-mounted ones.

This would be Amala's fifth venture today up and down from the surface, and as far as ancient ruins went, these were *expansive*. His calves and thighs burned just from yesterday's work, and now the good scholar was sending him back and forth, back and forth, *fetch these pieces, bring me this, bring me that, I need a new stick of charcoal, will you heat my tea? I need a gem. I need a hammer.*

*I need slate. Slates. Several. Ah... twenty, perhaps?*

Absurd. He grumbled under his breath and shifted the pack over his shoulder one more time. Since then Master Redin had asked for two more batches of twenty, and wouldn't let the poor scribe into the room each time he returned. Whatever it was he did in there with all of these slates – well, he might have to start paying out of his own pocket to recover the stores.

This was the last turn of the hall, though, and for a moment Amala considered dropping the bag and throwing it the rest of the way. Thinking about how Master Redin had yelled at him when he

had just *leaned* against one of the walls, though... he heaved another sigh, continued forward, and rapped the back of his dagger against the solid stone of the door, knowing that his knuckle would make no audible noise. That, and it still ached from all the times he had done it before. So he knocked, and waited. And waited. And waited some more.

“Master Redin?”

Nothing. Amala frowned, put an ear to the crack in the threshold, listened for a moment... then shouldered the heavy, carved stone open, the bag of slates sliding on his shoulder. With a grunt he dropped it down right next to the door and was just about to turn to leave – his master often fell asleep on the job, then cited the instance as *inspired meditation* – when he saw the scholar himself leaning over that strange contraption in the middle, seeming to glow with a light all its own.

“Master Redin, is everything-”

Amala trailed off. Spread about the pedestal foot of the device were all of those slates from before, many of them shattered, broken, sheared apart; many more crudely carved and scribbled; and then, in a neat pile, a handful that seemed carefully, deliberately formed, reduced from their oblong rectangular nature into a clean circle, edges ridged with some indecipherable glyphs in the center. Redin held one of them now, fingers rolling over the edges with anticipation. The scholar licked his lips, looked down at the slate, then stepped around to the console of the device, with the slight indentation that seemed, right there...

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...to perfectly fit the stone he had carved. He couldn't remember doing many of the others, but still the evidence littered the room around him, botched and failed, not quite right. Inspiration had a tendency to hit him like this, when everything all of a sudden *made sense*. The device worked similarly to thaumaturgy, in some ways, but the one way to see would be to run it. And he finally had the key. Redin swallowed, peered into the center of the device – his haphazardly assembled core would likely work only the once – then pressed the stone tablet into the console. At first, nothing happened.

And then, in a moment of powerful, dizzying vertigo, it started to spin. Or, really, it felt more like the world *around* the device spun and twisted, while the device itself held still. Redin found himself grabbing onto the console for support, while a shout from the back of the room alerted him that someone had broken his privacy against his express whim to be left alone. He cast his head over his shoulder to shout – it looked like Amala, his idiot scribe – before another noise from the device drew him back, the same low, constant whirring that it had issued in his dream.

For a moment there was a flash of something else, of some great, three-meter figure with six arms, each capped by a seven-fingered hand. What was that? Where had he seen it before? It seemed familiar yet not, just a flash of imagination and fanaticism and – and then the machine shuddered and bucked, and a terrible, searing crackle filled his ears.

Redin took a step back just in time for a strange, shimmering door to open in front of the console, with five more opening in turn around the circumference of the device. Each one seemed to shear *through* and *between* the space around it, rather than conventionally *opening* – as though he had run a knife through a sheet of fabric, then dug his fingers in and tore the hole wider. Strange, dizzying portals, blue and black like water scrubbed from the depths of the ocean, swirled and shimmered before him. Amala called for him, then shouted for the guards – but Redin was captivated. He looked over his work, laughed softly, reached forward...

...felt another moment of intense vertigo and dizziness, spun, swirled...

...and stepped through onto smooth ground, the sound of crashing waves all around, the familiar taste of salt in the air. Still the whirring continued: he spun around and saw another device behind him, the same yet different, this one older, larger, clumsier. With another step back he realized that two of its siblings stood nearby as well, one of them shattered and broken as though the engine at its core had abruptly burst, astrolabe arms twisted and shattered. *More* of them? He patted at his cloak, hoping that he had taken his journal along, realizing he hadn't, then saw the five remaining portals – the one he had come through sucked in on itself, shuddered, and winked out of existence, the space around it snapping back into place – and started to move for a second.

Then, though, the distinct noise of a sword slipping from its sheath behind him caught his attention, as sharply and suddenly as the point of that sword poking up between his shoulder blades. Redin gasped, froze, and slowly raised his hands.

“You are to turn around,” said a voice behind him, strong, confident, male. Immediately he clocked that voice as belonging to a soldier, or a commander, or... “and identify yourself, clearly and quickly. We have had too many mishaps with the map device to trust anyone or – *anything* that comes out of it.”

Redin swallowed, looked up to the sky, and then slowly turned. When he did so he couldn't help but press his lips together and suppress a smirk: of course the owner of that voice wore an eyepatch, stone-tan hair slicked back across his head, mustache pointing downwards in a permanent frown. He held a sword in a hand quite obviously accustomed to wielding it, though his other arm hung down at his side beneath the weight of a vicious edged mace; the armor he wore looked to have been forged in proverbial fire, with great, vaulting shoulders and a frontpiece that arced down towards a glowing red central gem.

Around this commander arrayed a handful of other rough types, warriors and soldiers, rangers and, perhaps, other scholars. Redin's heart thumped in his chest.

“I am – Master Redin,” he said, willing the nervousness in his voice to still. “Pray tell, where am I?”

Concern and distrust shone in the soldier's single eye. He glanced over his shoulder, nodded to one of the other warriors, and stepped around to the side.

“Wraeclast,” the soldier finally answered. The word echoed and whispered in Redin's head. “Why are you here?”

*Wraeclast. Wraeclast. Beyond the golden gears...* A shiver vibrated down the scholar's back.

“I’m not sure,” he answered, truthfully. The image of the six-armed figure echoed through his mind again. “But I think this is where I am *intended* to be.”