

Chapter 9 – Gears

Xerxes' fingers tightened around the hilt of his longsword. "Are you going to send the Abhorrent in first? Or keep them behind us to watch our back?"

"They'll scout," Gandash answered. "I'd rather *they* be the ones that set off any traps or run into any enemies."

"That means one of us should keep an eye on our rear," Xerxes said to Bel. "Me, or you?"

"Me," Bel replied, drawing an arrow and fitting it loosely to her bow. Bel was great at hand-to-hand fighting, but like many Balatu healers, she had been trained to avoid melee clashes.

"I'll take point behind the demons," Xerxes said. "Gandy, you're our brains and our summoner. You need to stay safe in the middle."

Gandash grinned slightly. "All right. Let's go."

Xerxes followed the two Abhorrent as they crawled into the tunnel. The way their pallid bodies glistened in the lamplight made his skin crawl, and he kept his nose bunched tight to fend off their malodorous aroma. It didn't do much good.

The ground was packed dirt, and from the look of it, had seen recent traffic. There was no gathering of dust that one would expect in an abandoned tunnel. The walls, made primarily of dirt and rock, had occasional sconces for torches, with one or two containing used torches. The Abhorrent's long, spindly legs made faint thumping sounds as they walked along.

After about fifteen cubits, the tunnel bent to the right. The Abhorrent made the turn, and then Xerxes stuck his head around.

"There's a room here," he said, proceeding.

Gandash followed. "Bel, you stay at the turn while we check out the room. Keep your eyes on the tunnel entrance."

"Okay."

Xerxes opened his eyes wider, trying to make out details as the light of Gandash's lamp struggled into the room beyond. In his immediate vicinity were some sturdy wooden workbenches, a bookshelf, a rug, and a desk with a chair in front of it. There were candles everywhere, unlit.

"I only have a few more seconds with the Abhorrent," Gandash said.

Xerxes walked forward as the light touched something at the far end of the room. Something made of wood. A framework of some sort.

“I think that’s as far as the room goes,” he said. “It isn’t very big.”

Light slowly slid over the wooden structure, but before Xerxes could make out much in the way of details, he heard a sound from behind him that resembled a piece of paper being crumpled into a ball, mixed with something like the slapping of a dying fish.

He looked over his shoulder to see the Abhorrent being sucked away into vortexes of pure darkness. Within seconds, they were gone, taking their stench with them. Despite knowing that they would be powerful allies if any sort of fighting broke out, Xerxes felt better having them gone.

“They didn’t last long,” he commented.

“Yeah,” Gandash replied. “I can only summon them for a couple minutes with Spawn Duo.” He swept his lamp around as he examined the place. There were more benches along the walls, including one that seemed designed to store tools, plus large wardrobes.

“What is this place?” Xerxes said, continuing to move toward the large structure at the end of the room. The thing was massive, reaching all the way to the ceiling, which was at least six or seven cubits overhead.

“Obviously a workshop,” Gandash said, stepping toward the bookshelf.

Xerxes spotted a gear, and his nostrils flared slightly. Gears were the most obvious sign of illegal machinery, but they weren’t necessarily an absolute guarantee that something nefarious was going on. For instance, timepieces, the creation of which was highly regulated, weren’t illegal as long as they didn’t have over three gears. Other crucial bits of machinery that were necessary for a well-functioning society, such as grain mills or water pumps, often made use of rudimentary, interconnecting parts. It was only when the machinery became too complex that it became dangerous.

As Gandash shifted his lamp, the light revealed more of the wooden structure, and Xerxes’ eyes widened.

There was definitely more than three gears here. A lot more.

In addition, there were pumps, pulleys, tubes, and other mechanical parts, all intertwined inside of what looked to be a frame nearly twice as wide as it was high. In the middle of it all was the largest of the gears, which had to be at least three cubits from end to end.

“Gandy, are you seeing this?” Xerxes asked.

Looking back, he saw that his friend had been examining the contents of the bookshelf and was only now turning in his direction.

“Oh,” Gandash said. “Oh wow.” He put down whatever document or book he had in his hand and turned to face the huge machine.

Xerxes looked back at the tangle of equipment. He noticed a table inset into the huge thing, atop which lay a contraption of suction cups and a harness of sorts. “What the hell it?”

“Something illegal, that much is clear,” Gandash said, stepping across the workshop to put his hand on the side of the frame.

“We probably shouldn’t sit around studying it,” Xerxes said. He faced his friend. “This is the kind of thing that will get continents razed to the ground by the Nergal. Even entire planets. I say we report this to Captain Ishki right now. Even if we have to wake her up.”

“Agreed.” Gandash walked back toward the room’s entrance. Xerxes followed, keeping a tight grip on his sword.

As they got close to Bel, she said, “What’s in there?”

“Some kind of technological device,” Xerxes said. “Lots of gears and stuff.”

“You’re kidding me.”

Gandash shook his head. “No. No joke. We need to get back and tell the captain right away.”

Turning the corner, they hurried toward the mouth of the tunnel. The entire way, Xerxes expected to hear something from behind him. Some creak or noise to indicate that they hadn’t been alone in the room after all. Or perhaps something from ahead. A cough or a laugh that would prove they’d been watched.

They heard nothing. They emerged from the tunnel and walked past the boulder. There, they stopped for a quick moment to look back.

“Guys,” Bel said, “it’s actually happening. What we talked about before.”

Gandash slipped his hands into the pockets of his robe, a cocky grin covering his face. “I knew I should’ve asked Dad to negotiate ahead of time with Aban Saddi, in case this happened. Now we’re going to have to submit applications to travel off-world and all that.”

“It’s just paperwork,” Xerxes said, also grinning. “How much you wanna bet that this time next year, we’re in a college in a higher starisle?”

“Not likely,” a voice said.

All three young mages spun and looked toward the source of the sound, a location on the wall that surrounded the small courtyard. A figure stood there, face obscured in shadow. However, his voice was distinct, and there was no questioning who he was.

“Master Ligish,” Xerxes said. He took a step forward and swung his sword out into the most basic guard position, Longfacing, with the sword in front of him. “You need to come with us to talk to Captain Ishki.”

Master Ligish chuckled, then stepped forward and jumped off the battlement.

Bel gasped.

The battlement, being about fifteen cubits from base to the crenelations, wasn't exactly a massive cliff. But it was high enough that an ordinary person who casually leapt off of it would end up with broken legs or worse.

But Master Ligish had done just that. He plummeted down, landing in a thump that caused one of his knees to touch the ground briefly before he stood up straight and tall. No longer was he hunched over, and in fact, his posture made him seem like an entirely different person.

“The hell...” Gandash murmured.

Ligish wore sleeping garments consisting of a robe and loose pants. Underneath the robe, he was shirtless. The fabric had shifted aside during his jump, revealing muscles that had previously been hidden by his frilly garments. His musculature was so defined as to be chiseled, as if he had been sculpted from granite.

“I admit I made a mistake,” Ligish said. “I should have dug up better information about who the Parliament sent to intrude on my work. I never imagined a Buhhu mage would be in the group. If I'd known a conjurer was here, I would have taken more thorough measures to make sure my workshop remained safe.”

Xerxes' heart rate was climbing. The implications of Ligish's words weren't exactly veiled in complicated wording. He planned to do them harm. Xerxes' fingers tightened on the hilt of his sword.

“I know the name of every mage on Mannemid,” Gandash said. “And you're not a mage. Which leaves only one possibility regarding who, or what, you are.”

Ligish reached to the belt that secured his robe. Tugging on the end, he pulled it away and threw his robe off, revealing his spectacularly muscled torso, shoulders, and arms. “You're foolish if you think there's no way for mages to sneak on and off of worlds. Mages from higher starisles come to hellholes like this all the time. Who doesn't like to do a bit of slumming now and then? Although, you're right. I'm not a mage.”

I knew it. He's a martial adept.

“In any case, I don't plan to sit around here chatting,” Ligish continued, “telling you my grand plan. I'm just going to kill you. Then kill the rest of your convoy as they sleep. It's going to cause a lot of trouble, as I'll have to dismantle everything and move away. But by the time the Mage Parliament realizes what's happened, I'll be long gone.”

Xerxes' mind was racing. He didn't know very much about martial adepts other than the fact that they didn't live as long as mages, but were faster and stronger. The last two points were the most salient. But training didn't equate to fighting experience, a lesson he had learned painfully only a few days ago. Just because Ligish was old and strong didn't mean he was invincible.

And Xerxes had a big advantage that Ligish couldn't possibly match.

Keeping his eyes locked on the martial adept, Xerxes stabbed his sword into the earth next to him and reached to his component pouch. Though the sword would give him an advantage in an ordinary fight, this wasn't going to be an ordinary fight. If he was going to end up tangling with a martial adept, he would much rather have his entire hand be an expression of pure power that could burn through flesh and muscle.

Looking at him, Ligish said, "Let me guess, you're an Asgagu mage." He shifted his gaze to Bel. "And you're either Nasaru or Balatu?"

Xerxes pulled a handful of powder out of his pouch.

Ligish looked back at him. "Crabnickel powder. I was right." He cracked his knuckles. "The only question for me is who to kill first. Even combined, your total strength doesn't surpass mine. Picking you off one by one will be—"

"Can you please just shut the hell up," Xerxes said. After the disaster of Kisiga, he wasn't eager to jump into a deadly combat. On the other hand, he *really* didn't feel like listening to a speech. Holding the crabnickel powder at the level of his solar plexus, he carefully traced the Asgagu Isten rune. Melam flowed, filling the lines of the rune and causing them to glow brightly before the energy swept throughout his body.

Bright light spilled out in all directions as his hand turned into a glowing expression of power. He clenched it into a fist.

"Right to the point," Ligish said. "I like that. Fine, I suppose I'll kill you first."

He dashed forward, moving much faster than Seers could.

I need to hit his throat or temple, Xerxes thought, preparing to launch a jab.

However, at the last second, Ligish veered toward Gandash instead.

Shit. Of course Ligish would rather take out Gandash first. If Gandash summoned two Abhorrent, Ligish would have a much greater challenge to deal with.

Xerxes shouted something indistinguishable even to himself as he lurched after Ligish.

There was no catching him. The man bore down on Gandash, who didn't have time to react before the martial adept leaped into the air and spun, sending his foot flying toward the mage's face. Ligish's flying kick was something even Xerxes would have feared. Gandash, who didn't have the same fighting background, didn't stand a chance.

The foot hit him in the side of the head, and he crumpled like a marionette with its strings cut.

“Hey,” Xerxes shouted, “why don’t you—”

Ligish spun, jumped forward, and planted his fist right in the pit of Xerxes’ stomach. Xerxes grunted as the force threw him backward at least two or three cubits before he slammed face first into the earth.

Pain and nausea rippled through him, and he groaned. He forced his hands onto the ground next to him and pushed himself up.

As he looked up, he heard a twang as Bel unleashed the arrow she’d nocked.

Ligish caught it out of the air.

Damn. It was one thing to catch a thrown knife. Catching an arrow was an entirely different matter. He’d seen people do it after years of training. But it wasn’t something even Asgagu mages did in combat, as it was too dangerous. The situation had to be carefully controlled, with both ‘performers’ standing in specific positions, a fixed distance between them, and the timing executed perfectly. Ligish had accomplished it as casually as Xerxes had caught Gem’s knife in the tavern.

Ligish snapped the arrow and tossed it aside.

Ignoring the pain that filled him, Xerxes tried to get to his feet but failed.

“Sorry, love,” Ligish said to Bel. “It’s the end of the line for you. It pains me to kill such a pretty little girl, but when you tangle with people like me, you can’t expect anything else.”

As he strode toward her, Bel reached to her quiver with trembling fingers and tried to draw another arrow.

You gotta get up! Xerxes shouted at himself. He forced himself onto his feet. He had only one option. He had to run as fast as he could toward Ligish. He bent his knees as he prepared to dash.

Bel got an arrow halfway out of the quiver before her fingers got the best of her, and she dropped it.

“Fuck,” she murmured.

“Quite a foul mouth for such dainty lips,” Ligish said. He was now only about three paces from her.

You’re going to have one shot at this, Xerxes thought. Quietly taking in a deep breath, he ran toward the martial adept.