

## Chapter 13 – Retreating and Preparing

A fraction of a second passed in which Xerxes perceived everything in slow motion. Bel jerked forward as the Abhorrent woman's disturbingly structureless fingers stabbed into her. She flinched as droplets of blood splattered onto her face from the wound.

Also in that fraction of a second, Xerxes thought about Gandash and how he smiled when talking to Bel. He thought about how all three of them had been close companions from the moment they arrived together at the Academy. He thought of the mischief they had got into in the capital, as well as the challenges they had overcome. He thought about how, only days before, they had been the ones to uncover the illegal machinery, and how that likely would put all three of them on the path to studying in a higher starisle.

In that brief moment, anger overrode fear. Swiveling, he flipped his sword around, grabbed the hilt with both hands, and lunged back in Bel's direction.

"Xerxes!" Tamharu shouted. "Don't—"

Bel screamed as the fingers tightened and pulled, yanking her off her feet. However, she'd already grabbed onto Goran, and that saved her. The Abhorrent woman's disgusting fingers had unusual reach but lacked immense strength. Bel nearly lost her footing, but she kept her grip on Goran's arm as if her life depended on it, which likely it did.

Meanwhile, Xerxes reached the scene and slashed out with as much precision as he could muster, cutting through four of the five fingers.

A guttural shriek erupted from the Abhorrent as her severed fingers snapped backward like loosened rubber bands. The fifth one came with them. The portions which had pierced through Bel collapsed into acrid, grayish-white liquid, and Bel fell to the ground. Then the fingers whipped back in their direction.

"Help her, Goran," Xerxes growled. Fueled by adrenaline, he took two steps forward and slashed at the fingers again. He didn't hit a single one.

In fact, one of the flapping white strips grabbed onto his upper arm. He swung the sword again, wildly, but missed and ended up in an even worse position as a rubbery white appendage slapped onto the blade of his sword, just above the crossguard.

*What the hell am I doing?* Before he could consider how to retreat, the monster yanked his sword out of his grip and tossed it away. Then, two flailing white fingers snapped onto his ankles, and one encircled his neck. He tried to wrench himself free but failed and felt himself being dragged up the hill. He grabbed the tentacular finger wrapped around his neck and attempted to rip it away. It held firm.

He was halfway up the hill when, without even realizing what he was doing, he scooped a handful of crabnickel powder out of his component pouch.

Only six or seven cubits away, the bare-breasted Abhorrent woman licked her lips as she stared at him. The teeth in her mouth were sharp and pointed, and her tongue was long and red.

Xerxes traced the Asgagu Isten rune into the crabnickel powder, and though he was sure his finger trembled like a blade of grass in a windstorm, after he drew the last line, he felt the melam flowing through him.

He was only two cubits away from the Abhorrent's gaping maw when his hand glowed brightly. He was one cubit away when he curled his fingers into a fist.

The Abhorrent opened her mouth even wider.

Xerxes threw his fist out, not in a wild haymaker like his fight with Ligish, but instead, a tight jab. He hit the monstrous woman in the eye, and his burning fist bit deep into her maggoty flesh, causing an immediate venting of steam and smoke.

The woman howled and stumbled back, dropping him in the process. She reeled left, her spidery legs clicking on the rocks as she nearly fell onto her side. She lurched to the right and then scuttled back over the crest of the hill, covering her wounded face with her hands.

He took a single step forward, briefly considering trying to take advantage of the spell to inflict further harm.

*No, I need to get out of here.*

He turned to see Goran trying to get Bel onto her feet. Tamharu was farther down the slope, and Ap was a short distance away, looking back at them.

It looked like Bel was unconscious. Xerxes' eyes darted around looking for his sword. He caught sight of it and jumped over to retrieve it.

"Xerk," Tamharu said, "take Bel back to the camp posthaste. No more fucking heroics, got it? Run and don't look back."

As his Singular Lethality spell faded, and his hand returned to normal, Xerxes bounded over to Goran and Bel. Bel's eyes were closed, but she was breathing.

“Yes, sir,” he said. “Goran, help me get her on my back.”

With the soldier’s help, he wrapped his arms around her thighs and held her tightly. He took a few experimental steps to the bottom of the hill. By bending forward, he could keep her balanced atop him while he ran.

“Go, Seer,” Tamharu said.

“Sergeant... please, hurry back.”

“We will.”

Xerxes ran. He dreaded the prospect of hoarse screams ringing out from behind him, but none came. Rihan was dead. Tekinalp too. No doubt about it. Sergeant Tamharu, though, was tougher. He’d fought in actual battles. He wouldn’t fall to that monster. Would he? No, he wouldn’t. He would get Goran and Ap back to the camp safely. Xerxes knew it.

Soon he was in the trees, pumping his legs without restraint. Now that he didn’t have to worry about non-mages keeping up with him, he could run at top speed. And Seers were much faster than Unsighted. The trees whipped by before giving way to rocky terrain.

At about the halfway point, he stopped very briefly to check on Bel. She lay against him with her head on his shoulder, breathing shallowly.

“Bel?” he said. “Bel!”

She didn’t respond.

Muttering curses, he continued running. He couldn’t help but think back to their training at the Academy.

In a lecture, Mystic Aban Saddi had said, “Balatu mages need to be protected at all costs during combat. Other mages and soldiers can sustain all sorts of grievous injuries, but as long as your Balatu mage is there to heal them, you can afford that. If your Balatu mage is struck down, though, it can spell doom for all.”

*Why did Tamharu have Bel right up front? This is all his fault.*

*Leaping off a rather large boulder and onto a stretch of flat earth, he gritted his teeth. No use casting blame. I could have reminded him to keep Bel safer.*

The trip which had taken an hour via walking barely took a minute of top-speed running for a Seer.

Up ahead, Xerxes caught sight of the camp, framed against a deep blue sky that was rapidly turning violet as the sun set behind him. He noticed two soldiers standing apart from the others, obviously the sentries. Thankfully, the sentries noticed him coming before he zoomed into the camp area, bringing a cloud of dust with him.

“Surgeon!” Xerxes shouted, dashing toward the captain’s campfire.

More shouts rose up in the camp, and he heard Gandash’s voice among them. There wasn’t time to respond. Even as Captain Ishki rose to her feet, a look of alarm on her face, Xerxes tossed his sword to the side and lay Bel down carefully next to the fire.

“What—?” the captain said, but Xerxes cut her off.

“Abhorrent,” he said. “That meteor had an Abhorrent in it, and it attacked us.” Leaning over Bel, he found one of the spots where the tentacular fingers had stabbed into her. It wasn’t difficult to identify such locations, as they were soaked in blood and smeared with semi-translucent slime that reeked of Abhorrent.

The captain leaned over Bel. “You’re certain it was an Abhorrent? Was it summoned? Could it be a rogue mage?”

“Not summoned,” Xerxes said. “At least it doesn’t seem like it. Rihan is dead. So’s Tekinalp. Then Bel got hurt, and Tamharu told me to bring her back. He’s behind me with Ap and Goran.”

“What happened?” Gandash said, pushing his way through the small crowd that was forming. “Bel? Bel!”

“She’s hurt, but she’s breathing,” Xerxes said. “Bel!” He put his hands on her shoulders and shook her gently. There was no response. “Where the *fuck* is Aniskipel?”

“I’m ’ere! What ’appened?”

“She has wounds here, here, and here,” Xerxes said, pointing out the areas. “There are two more. Can’t you just wake her up? Once she’s awake, she can heal herself.”

Aniskipel dropped his medical bag onto the ground next to him, opened it, and pulled out a wrapped package. “Smelling salts might do the trick.”

Captain Ishki rose to her feet. “Everybody but Aniskipel, form up. That includes both Seers.”

“Captain,” Gandash protested, “I—”

“It wasn’t a suggestion!” the captain shouted. “You’ll be our most powerful weapon if we’re really dealing with an Abhorrent. Now get ready. And while you’re at it, have Seer Xerxes explain what he saw. See if you can tell us anything about this specific Abhorrent. Strengths. Weaknesses.”

“Yes, sir.”

Xerxes followed Gandash back to their belongings. Gandash grabbed his knife and put it on his belt, then checked his component pouch, which was already tied to his waist. Xerxes opened his traveling pack and rooted inside to find the jar of crabnickel powder tucked in its depths.

“She’ll pull through, Gandy,” he said. “I can feel it.”

When Gandash didn't respond, Xerxes looked over and saw tears glistening on his friend's cheeks. He looked away. Having found his jar of powder, he pulled it out and made sure his component pouch was topped off. Then he donned some of the bits of armor he had at his disposal, including bracers, a padded jacket, and shin guards.

"So, tell me what you saw," Gandash said. "What did it look like?"

"It was big but not *that* big. It had a human torso and legs sort of like the spawn you summoned. And its fingers could stretch really long and move as fast as arrows."

"It could be a more mature version of the kind I summoned, but I'm not sure. The stretching fingers were some sort of magical power. That means it's beyond the spawn level. It's at least a juvenile. Given the size, though, it's got to be on the lower end of juveniles."

"Okay, what does that mean?"

"It means... we might not be totally outclassed. The strongest and oldest juveniles are going to be larger than the one you described. And they manifest two magical powers. If we were up against something like that, we wouldn't stand a chance."

Gandash's words caused hope to flicker in the back of his mind. "You should probably tell the captain."

"Yeah."

After equipping themselves, they did just that. Less than fifteen minutes had passed since Xerxes returned to the camp. Just as Gandash finished telling the captain what he knew about Abhorrent, a shout from the edge of camp drew their attention.

"It's Sergeant Tam!" a soldier shouted. "Back with Ap and Goran."

Xerxes and Gandash joined the captain as she hurried over the ridge. Sure enough, off in the distance, they saw three shapes hurrying toward them.

"Good," Xerxes murmured. "They all made it. I knew they would."

More soldiers gathered on the ridgeline to watch their three fellows hurrying toward them, with the backdrop of a fading sunset behind them.

"Archers, pull arrows and apply golden henbane," Captain Ishki called.

Xerxes glanced at the line of soldiers and saw several of them produce small vials filled with a yellowing paste. Golden henbane was a common medicinal substance that, if reduced properly, became very toxic.

Xerxes looked back at Sergeant Tamharu and the others running toward the camp.

*Why did she have them apply the poison? Did she see something?* As far as he could tell, there was no sign Tamharu and the others were being pursued.

“Seer Gandash,” the captain continued, “be ready for spellcasting, but wait for my mark. Seer Xerxes, if any fighting breaks out, I want you standing guard over Seer Bel and Sergeant Aniskipel. We need her awake and ready for spellcasting as soon as possible.”

“Yes, sir,” he said. His hands clenched into fists as he watched the three soldiers making their run. They were now so close that they had to be only about two minutes from the ridge. They were definitely going to make it.

That was when he noticed movement among the distant trees.