

Chapter 18 – Mage Considerations

“As you might have noticed,” continued Aban Saddi, “the situation in the city is far from optimal. But before we get into that, do you have anything relevant to report?”

“A lot,” Captain Ishki replied.

Xerxes expected the assembled mages to utter exclamations of shock when they heard about the illegal machinery, the subsequent escape of the mastermind, the Abhorrent, and the deaths of Bel and the dozens of soldiers.

The reaction was much more subdued. Dumamu and Ataneedusu closed their eyes. High Seer Ninsunu cocked an eyebrow, and Shemesh frowned. Mystic Aban Saddi’s eyes turned somewhat colder. It was only Alwin, the youngest mage besides Xerxes and Gandash, who reacted with barely masked horror, his face turning pale before he sat down heavily in the chair behind him, muttering to himself.

It was King Nabuhisnu’isin who broke the silence. “I’m sorry to hear of the loss of Seer Bel. It’s a genuine tragedy.”

“It’s indeed a tragedy,” said Shemesh. “Seer Zalle is going to be furious, as will all mages from Od. But unfortunately, it only goes to reinforce my previous point.”

“It does *not* reinforce your point,” Ninsunu said. “There is no clear-cut evidence proving the Abhorrent are hunting mages specifically. The vast majority of the victims have been Unsighted.”

Shemesh’s cheek twitched. “What do you want, a written missive explaining their motives? Seer Athalaric is dead, Ninsunu. And now Seer Bel is gone. What more will it take before—”

“Enough arguing,” interrupted Aban Saddi. “I don’t disagree with you, Shem. I think it’s entirely possible the Abhorrent are searching for mages. However, fleeing the capital isn’t the answer. The fact remains that, as Nina has repeatedly stated, the Unsighted citizens of this city are in danger. We can never forget that the people of this planet are the responsibility of the Mage Parliament. They’re *our* responsibility. We’re charged with keeping them safe.”

Shemesh shook his head but said nothing.

I knew it. The Abhorrent are here. Xerxes' eyes flashed back and forth between the various mages as he tried to determine what political elements might be at play. Ninsunu and Shemesh were butting heads as usual, and Mystic Aban Saddi hadn't picked a side yet. Xerxes' father owed his career to Gandash's father and almost always followed Dumamu's lead. So... which side was Dumamu on?

Xerxes looked at him, but the man's expression was unreadable.

The silence in the council room continued for a short time, until High Seer Ninsunu said, "Aban Saddi, sir, you obviously agree with me that—"

"I never said anything of the sort!" Aban Saddi snapped. "We're facing a crisis right now, but I'm not convinced we mages are in imminent danger. It's not the time for political maneuvering, so please hold back from your usual posturing." He looked at Shemesh. "I'm sorry, Shem, but I just don't see the evidence. I know you're convinced, but I'm not making a decision based on intuition."

"I fear you're going to regret it, Aban," Shemesh said softly.

"I hope not. For now, our primary responsibility is to the common people. We need to find the Abhorrent and eliminate them. And now we have an advantage." He looked pointedly at the newcomers. "Veterans."

"Mystic," Dumamu protested, glancing at Gandash. "Surely you don't mean—"

Aban Saddi raised his hand, and Gandash's father stopped talking.

"I *do* mean that," Aban Saddi said. "Like it or not, your son now has more experience in dealing with the Abhorrent than anyone else on this planet. As for you, Seer Ataneedusu, we all know your son has devoted more time to training than you. It's nothing to be ashamed of. In fact, you should be proud to be the father of such a competent warrior."

Xerxes felt awkward hearing such words spoken aloud, but they were true. His father had never had the circumstances to live up to his potential as a mage, and everyone knew it.

Aban Saddi didn't let either father say anything further. "Seer Xerxes, Seer Gandash, are you physically rested and mentally prepared enough to accept a new mission?"

"Yes, sir," Gandash said.

Xerxes hesitated. On the way back to the capital, he'd dreamed of reuniting with his family. He'd envisioned having a nice meal with them, hugging his little sister and mother, and then resting in his own bed. Now he was being asked to go back out into danger?

However, there was no way he would let Gandash one-up him. How was he ever going to earn the respect of the higher-level mages if he didn't accept *every* mission possible?

As all eyes in the room shifted to focus on him, he tried to stand straighter and said, "Of course, Mystic. I'm ready."

Sounding almost pleading, his father said, "Sir, they're teenagers. They don't—"

Aban Saddi's tone was hard as he interrupted. "They're adults, Atanee. And I've already made my decision. Captain Ishki, you're dismissed along with your officers. You did well considering the circumstances and have earned a short respite. Tomorrow, I want you to coordinate with Colonel Nur-Ayya regarding this Master Ligish. We need to track him down after the Abhorrent business is taken care of. The Nergal won't forget about all this just because of some random Abhorrent attacks."

The captain saluted, as did Tamharu and Aniskipel, and they left as a group.

"Now," Aban Saddi continued, "I'm forming a new task force. Nina, you'll take Seer Xerxes and Seer Satahsusar to Harborview to track down the cultists you mentioned. Take ten soldiers with you. You pick them. If it's as you say and the cultists are involved in calling the Abhorrent here, then we can't afford to simply let them be."

"An operation like that would normally be planned out weeks ahead of time," Ninsunu pointed out.

"And obviously we don't have weeks. So, take extreme measures. Use violence if necessary."

"I'll need Marshal Authority..."

Aban Saddi looked at the King. "Your Majesty?"

"You have the authority, Nina," King Nabuhisnu'isin said. "I trust you. We need this crisis solved as soon as possible. I'll have the paperwork drawn up later."

Ninsunu swept away from the table. "In that case, I'll go retrieve Satahsusar. She's not going to be happy being forced back onto the streets so soon, but I guess we all need to make sacrifices. Seer Xerxes, you come with me."

"Yes, ma'am." He looked at his father, exchanged a curt nod with him, then leaned toward Gandash and quietly said, "Good luck, Gandy."

"Good luck, Xerk. See you when I see you."

Sword in hand, Xerxes followed Ninsunu out into the corridor, where she set a rapid clip away from the council chamber, forcing him to trot after her.

After rounding the first turn in the corridor, Ninsunu said, "I'm sorry for your loss, Xerk. You were close with Bel, no?"

"Thank you, High Seer Ninsu—"

“Call me Nina. You’ve done more than enough to prove yourself by now.”

“Oh.” His chest swelled. “Well... Nina, yes, I was close with Bel. Although... um, er...”

She turned to look at him. “Well?”

“She and Gandash were a lot closer. They were... a couple.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah. I’m worried he’s taking it even worse than I am.”

“Good to know. A loss like that can be devastating.” She led him into a large open chamber he wasn’t familiar with. It looked like some sort of temple. Their footsteps echoed on the smooth tile floor as they crossed it. “I’ll check on him later on, once all of this is over.”

“So, you think it’s going to be over soon?”

At the other side of the temple chamber, they entered another corridor. “I hope so. Now, tell me more about the Abhorrent. Not the summoned ones.”

Xerxes gulped and went on to describe everything he remembered about the vile monster.

When he mentioned the way the creature talked, Ninsunu said, “You’re certain it said the word *melam*?”

He paused before answering. “I’m not *absolutely* certain,” he said. “But... I think so.”

“Interesting,” she said. “I’m surprised you were able to make out that word clearly.”

“You’ve heard them talk before?”

“Of course not. Summoned Abhorrent can’t talk. But we know they have a language.”

“Oh.” Feeling foolish, he clamped his mouth shut.

They left the main part of the keep and crossed a courtyard. Up above, the sky was darkening in the east.

Now, the silence between them was making things even more awkward, so he cleared his throat. “Ma’am, what am I supposed to do on this mission?”

“I’ll explain in a moment once Satahsusar is with us.”

“Right.”

Their conversation ceased at that point. They walked for about three more minutes, leaving the keep itself and crossing the street to a squat building with no exterior markings to indicate its function.

That was where they found Seer Satahsusar. Though he'd heard her name spoken many times, he'd never actually seen her. It was quite a surprise. If he hadn't known better, he would never have guessed that she was actually older than Ninsunu, by nearly a century at that. Unlike Ninsunu, who looked middle-aged, Satahsusar hardly looked more than twenty. She wore her dark hair in three long braids that hung down her back and had a circlet of gold with a serpent-shaped diadem at her forehead.

Satahsusar had been injured a few days ago and was in convalescence. She didn't seem happy to be assigned a mission.

"I need your mind, Sata," said Ninsunu.

"I'm not the only Hasasu mage around," Satahsusar grumbled, folding her arms and looking out the window. "Can't you get someone else?"

Xerxes disliked the way she turned her nose up at Ninsunu. Here *he* was, exhausted and still struggling with the loss of a dear friend, and he hadn't balked at a new assignment. What right did she have to act so high and mighty?

"I don't trust Shemesh. And Dumamu... lacks experience outside the court. Besides, Aban is the one who gave the order, so stop stalling. Time's limited."

Ninsunu arranged for a carriage to take them to the barracks, where she asked for a sergeant she knew. Once they had ten soldiers to escort them, they made their way across the city to Harborview.

As the name indicated, it overlooked the city's sizable harbor. Though the name sounded picturesque, the place was anything but. It was a squalid, shadowy location with numerous winding alleyways and decrepit buildings that honest folk generally avoided. That said, Xerxes was more than a bit familiar with it and was curious why they were heading to that specific location.

As soon as the cart started rocking back and forth, Ninsunu said, "All right, we have a few minutes, so I'm going to explain what's happening here. Mostly for your benefit, Xerxes.

"We're dealing with an Abhorrent invasion, that much is certain. Or at least... an incursion. Which is why I keep telling Aban we need to simply hole up in the keep and close all the gates. I think if we did that, we could weather the storm. But I'm not in charge. In any case, Xerk, have you heard about the Cult of the Eternal Father?"

"A bit. I think we're supposed to have a class on them next term."

"I see. In that case, why don't you tell me what you *do* know, so I don't waste any words?"

He grinned wryly. "Truth be told, I don't know much beyond the fact that they're... bad? Maybe they have something to do with illegal machinery?"

"Not quite."

Off to the side, Satahsusar covered her mouth with her hand as if to prevent herself from laughing, while simultaneously making sure he heard her laugh.

"Sorry," he said, flushing.

Glaring briefly at Satahsusar, Ninsunu said, "I didn't mean it that way. There's no need to be embarrassed not knowing about the cult. It's not as though anybody takes them seriously other than me. Well... they *didn't*. Now even Aban seems to realize they're more than just simpletons and crazy people.

"Simply put, the cultists worship the Abhorrent. Of course, the vast majority of them have never even *seen* an Abhorrent, so I'm not sure why the hell they're so confident in their beliefs. Regardless, here on Mannemid, it's been a non-issue for centuries, as only Buhhu mages can summon the things from the Nightmare Cove, and we aren't exactly teeming with Buhhu mages. But in higher starisles, it's a different story."

"Why would they worship the Abhorrent?" Xerxes asked.

"Good question. Based on my understanding, including interrogating actual cultists, they believe the Abhorrent are the source of all magic. Perhaps... *causal origin* is a better word. Not even I'm exactly sure of the specifics of their teachings."

Xerxes shook his head. "That makes no sense. Magic is possible because of melam. How could the Abhorrent have anything to do with the existence of melam? It's everywhere. It would be like saying the Abhorrent are responsible for air."

"That's the same question I've asked cultists in the past. They jabber nonsense in return."

"What about the Nergal?" Xerxes couldn't help but ask. "Doesn't he care about them?"

"The Pontifarch has other people assigned to deal with the cult. But... Mannemid is too small of a place for such individuals to care about. The cult doesn't pose any overt threat, so we've only given them half-hearted attention. With what's happened in the past few days, though, my suspicions have been aroused. My contacts have mentioned a new cult leader that seized local power sometime in the past year or so. A man by the name of Malos. My gut tells me that he has something to do with this invasion.

"So. We're going to go into Harborview and ask him directly. I have Marshal Authority from the king, so I don't plan to waste time. We'll go in quietly and carefully, but we're not going to pussyfoot around. Xerk, how's your chamber looking? Not full, I take it?"

“I cast a few spells during the fighting. And... I didn’t do much meditation on the way back. But I have enough melam for plenty of spellcasting.”

“Okay. Keep your component pouch ready and your sword up. If you feel the need to cast a spell, don’t hesitate. Just drop your sword and do it. At the same time, keep an ear out for orders from me. If you end up using any crabnickel powder, I’ll personally see to it that you’re compensated. No need for applications. However, there’s one thing to keep in mind. Don’t kill Malos. We need him alive.”

The cart trundled to a stop.