

Chapter 8 – Guesswork and Conjuring

Gandash looked around the library with furtive eyes. “Help me put these books back. I’ll explain back in the room.”

Xerxes and Bel helped him replace the books he’d piled onto the table. Then the three of them padded through the dark hallways of the castle to their temporary abode. After barring the door, all three of them used their mage sense to inspect the parts of the room that seemed like they could be used for spying purposes. From what they could tell, there was no sign someone was secretly watching them.

Gathering around the small table against the wall, they leaned their heads close to each other.

“Here’s the thing,” Gandash said in a near-whisper. “All the books in the library are old. Like... *really* old. Okay, not every single one of them. But most. And when I say old, I mean like hundreds of years old or more. This isn’t the type of collection you easily build up, even over a matter of decades. And it’s not something you would usually see as a *private* collection. In a library or museum, maybe.”

Xerxes didn’t feel the need to question Gandash about how he knew this, nor did Bel. Gandash was a book person, and if he said the books were old, Xerxes trusted him.

“Even stranger,” Gandash continued, “most of them aren’t books you expect to find in Isin. Lots are from Fal, and there are others whose origins I can’t speculate on. Either way, the point is that, number one, this collection didn’t originate in our parts. Maybe not even on Mannemid. I’m sure of it. And, number two, the collection is expensive. I’d guess it’s worth more than my dad’s entire life savings multiple times over. How does someone who claims to be so poor have a collection like this?”

Xerxes frowned in thought. “What do you think it means?”

“Maybe nothing,” Gandash said. “After all, he wasn’t hiding it. And he even invited me to stay alone to look at it. There’s probably a simple explanation that I haven’t thought of.”

“Maybe he inherited the books,” Bel said.

Gandash nodded. “Could be. He’s not from around here, right? His accent is off. Oh, there’s another thing I noticed. He has a lot of books about fighting.”

Xerxes’ ears perked up. “Fighting manuals?”

“Yeah. An unusual amount. It stuck out to me because... I don’t know, it seemed weird. I’ve been to a lot of libraries back home. Not just the big library at the Academy, or the public libraries in the capital. Private libraries. Dad’s friends. I even got to see Mystic Aban Saddi’s den. But in all of that, I’ve never come across so many fighting books.”

“What do you mean when you say *fighting*?” Bel asked. “As in warfare? Strategy and tactics? Or...?”

“No,” Gandash answered firmly. “Actual fighting manuals. Some are treatises regarding martial arts styles and lineages. Now keep in mind, I only had a few hours, so all I could do was skim things. But I did find it strange.”

“Hold on,” Xerxes said, as a wild notion sprang into his mind from the various bits of information.

Bel and Gandash looked at him expectantly.

“Okay, Gandy, listen to this.” He shared what they saw during their inspection tour, highlighting the boulder Captain Ishki found suspicious. When he finished, he said, “Obviously Master Ligish didn’t hire a bunch of High Seers to put that boulder there. Nor did he bring engineers from the capital. *But*.” He grinned at his friends. “Those aren’t the only two types of people who could theoretically move a really heavy rock.”

The other two mages stared at him with blank expressions for a short time before Bel’s eyes lit up. “A martial adept could.”

“Martial adept?” Gandash said. He considered the possibility for a moment. “Unsung individuals who strengthen their physical bodies, as opposed to practicing magic. They *do* get extra longevity, just not enough to live more than a few hundred years. But it could explain how he had time to build up such a good collection.”

“I heard they need a lot of resources for their training,” Bel added, “which is why they’re usually sponsored by one of the three kingdoms. If Ligish is doing this all on his own, it could explain why he’s so poor.”

“But martial adepts are rarer than mages,” Xerxes said. “I’ve heard Isin has two or three in the army, but I’ve never even seen any of them. Have you?”

Bel and Gandash both shook their heads.

“But they do exist,” Gandash said.

“Plus,” Bel added, “the Southern Sea is a big place, much of it unexplored. I’ve heard there are entire tribes of people who cultivate the martial arts. For all anybody knows, there could be a lot more martial adepts than we know.”

“He does have an odd accent,” Xerxes noted.

“It would explain why he has a bunch of old books,” Gandash said. “Plus, a really old martial adept might be strong enough to move a boulder like that.”

“Okay,” Bel said, “let’s assume that we’re right. Master Ligish is from the Southern Sea, and is also a martial adept. He has some sort of secret facility hidden in a mountain cave, with the entrance sealed by that giant rock. Even if it’s true, there isn’t anything the three of us can do to confirm or deny the theory. What’s more, someone like that could be a real threat.”

“True,” Xerxes said. “We should probably just report this to Captain Ishki and let her decide what to do. Worst case scenario, she might have us dig around the boulder. What engineers can accomplish with skill and mathematics in a matter of days, we and the soldiers could accomplish with grit and elbow grease.”

Gandash let out a huff. “I’m disappointed in the two of you. Have you forgotten about me?”

“What...?” Xerxes said.

Bel cocked her head. “Oh, damn. You’re not suggesting what I think you’re suggesting, are you, Gandy?”

Gandash grinned.

It took Xerxes a moment longer to get his mind going in the same direction as the other two. “Oh. Ohhhhhh. Shit, how could I have forgotten?” He reached out and clasped Gandash’s shoulder. “We have a Buhhu mage on our side.”

Bel was their healer, being a student of the Balatu order of magic. Xerxes was their fighter, with his focus on Asgagu magic. Comparing those two, Asgagu was considered less difficult, and as a result, more common. Balatu magic was slightly higher on the list in terms of difficulty. But Buhhu magic was the most difficult and rare of all. Gandash only practiced it because of strings pulled by his father to acquire scarce and expensive tomes from higher starisles. He also paid a lot, both in cash and favors, to have Gandash tutored by Mystic Aban Saddi, one of the only other Buhhu mages on Mannemid, as well as visiting mages from other starisles. In addition to Gandash and Aban Saddi, there was only one other mage on the entire planet who studied Buhhu.

But there was another reason why Xerxes and Bel hadn’t initially suggested he used his spellcasting abilities to deal with the boulder, and that was the expensive nature of the components.

Buhhu magic was the magic of summoning. Not only were the runes archaic and difficult to master, but the components were rare and costly. Each order of magic relied on one base ingredient augmented to create a unique component for each spell. For instance, all Asgagu spell components were built on a foundation of talcum powder. Balatu components needed beach sand. As for Buhhu components... they required a reduction of the blood of the creatures to be summoned.

“It’s too risky,” Bel said.

“She’s right,” Xerxes said. “You can’t afford to waste your spell components, Gandy. And that’s not to mention the melam. What happens if you cast the spell and it turns out there’s nothing behind the boulder?”

“Granted, that wouldn’t be ideal,” Gandash said. “But think of the glory if we’re the ones who blow the lid on this thing. We’ll be guaranteed a spot in a college off Mannemid. Besides, there’s something I didn’t tell either of you. Before we left, my dad got me two extra portions of blisterscale reduction *and* a Concentrated Melam Pill. I don’t want to waste them, but at the same time, there’s no reason for me to hold back just because I’m worried about losing components or melam.”

“Hold on,” Xerxes said. “Your dad got you a *Concentrated Melam Pill*? That’s got to be worth, what, forty or fifty shekels?”

Gandash grinned. “Dad said that this mission is a chance to make a big impression, so he went all out to help me prepare. Come on, guys, the three of us are a team, right? And we have everything we need to make this happen. So why not do it?”

Xerxes looked at Bel; she was just as surprised as he was. As the two of them sat there with Gandash virtually hopping up and down in his chair waiting for them to respond, Xerxes concluded that there was no reason to object. If things went well, they might impress Captain Ishki and, beyond her, the Mage Parliament. If things went poorly, then Gandash wasted some expensive spell components and some melam. There wasn’t exactly any huge downside.

Xerxes could almost imagine the heaps of praise the soldiers would dole out if the three of them single-handedly unmasked Master Ligish as some sort of sinister figure.

He suppressed a smile. “Okay, let’s do it. Bel? You in?”

She hesitated. “Shouldn’t we at least tell Captain Ishki first?”

“And lose our chance at impressing her? No way!”

A moment later, a smile spread across her face as well. “All right, sure. Right now?”

Gandash stood. “Right now!”

Xerxes grabbed his longsword, and Bel snatched up her bow and some arrows. Gandash prepared a lamp.

They headed out. The castle was as eerie as Xerxes expected it to be. Even after stepping outside into the cool night, the moldy aroma of the place lingered in his nostrils. He didn’t see a single person as they crept to the side courtyard with the boulder.

“It really is big,” Gandash said.

“You’re sure the spawn you can summon will be able to move it?” Xerxes asked.

“I’m sure. Even with a simple Spawn Duo, I can summon two Abhorrent spawn, each of which is probably three times as strong as even a Seer. And definitely twice as strong as a High Seer.”

“What do you need us to do?” Bel asked.

“Nothing. Just stand guard, I guess. If there’s really a secret cave behind here with illegal machinery inside, Lighish might have someone watching.”

Xerxes rested his sword on his shoulders and loosened the string on his spell component pouch. The battlements above were empty from what he could tell.

A moment later, a soft clink could be heard as Gandash opened his pouch and pulled out a glass vial. When he popped the cork and poured the contents into his palm, an acrid odor filled the air that caused Xerxes to wrinkle his nose.

“Yuck,” Bel said.

Gandash chuckled. “Abhorrent blood stinks, just like they do. Can’t get around that.”

Putting the empty vial back in his pouch, he traced the Buhhu Isten rune. He went slowly, exercising care to make sure every aspect of the rune was perfect. A moment later, melam flowed into two whirlpools in front of Gandash.

Then the summoning portals opened, dark holes filled with nothing but endless emptiness.

Xerxes’ heart pounded as he realized that he was about to see an Abhorrent for the first time. After all, the other occasions on which Gandash had cast this spell had all been in testing situations attended only by senior mages.

For about a second, nothing happened. Then something reached out of the dark portal. It looked like a sleek, whitish stick narrowed into a point. It was followed by a second stick, then a third, a fourth, and a fifth. More followed.

Similar appendages then appeared from within the other portal.

As they moved, knobby portions appeared, which proved to be joints. Xerxes realized he was looking at long legs like that of a spider or other insect. The legs curved as they emerged, so many of them that they couldn’t be counted easily, although Xerxes was sure there were probably about twenty of them protruding from each portal.

A body emerged from the first portal, pale, with reticulated scales, all of them as pale as a corpse.

The thing seemed to have a head, a round, reddish section up front that lacked eyes, mandibles, or any other sensory organs.

As it gained footing outside of the portal, and the second emerged from the other portal, Xerxes gauged their bodies to be roughly the size of a large dog, with a leg span much larger than that. The things pulsed, presumably as they breathed, but given Xerxes couldn't see any mouth or nostrils, he wasn't sure. Both *things* were covered with a sheen of slime that turned his stomach. The acrid odor that had filled the air when Gandash poured out the blood became many times stronger, such that Xerxes felt the urge to plug his nose.

He glanced over and saw a sickened expression on Bel's face.

He felt the same seeing this Abhorrent spawn.

The Abhorrent, the vile creatures who lurked in the depths of the Nightmare Cove plotting the demise of humanity. At least, that's what most people believed. According to the common teaching, it was the ancient war with the Abhorrent that had prompted the Pontifarch to destroy or disable all Gateways leading into the Nightmare Cove. Since that ancient time, the Abhorrent had been stranded in that corner of the starsea and were seen only when Buhhu mages summoned them by force.

The mere presence of this vile creature filled Xerxes with a sense of disgust, but he suppressed the feeling and forced himself to focus on the task at hand.

As the black portals continued to spin, Gandash raised his hand. Tendrils of melam extended from his fingers into the summoned Abhorrent. His fingers twitched, and the two spider-like monstrosities crawled forward on their spindly legs.

"They don't look very strong to me," Xerxes whispered.

"Just watch," Gandash said.

When the first of the creatures reached the boulder, it raised six of its many legs up, then smashed them down. Chips of rock flew everywhere as the pointed ends of the legs pierced into the boulder. The second creature crawled to the other side of the boulder and similarly punctured the stone.

Then both Abhorrent pulled. At first, nothing happened. They strained, their other legs digging into the soil beneath them, sometimes slipping and sliding before finding purchase.

The creatures scrambled as they pulled, until the boulder shifted.

"It's working," Bel breathed.

The boulder shifted more. It tipped slowly away from the earth upon which it lay, gradually, slowly, until a small space became visible behind it.

It leaned up, up, up, until... it tipped over, forcing the Abhorrent to scramble out of the way as it thumped to the ground loudly, sending up a small shower of pebbles, dirt, and dislodged grass. It was loud, but not loud enough that they worried anyone outside of the courtyard would hear. In fact, Gandash let loose a faint whoop as he took a few steps to the side to get a better look at what lay beyond.

Xerxes followed, keeping one hand on his component pouch, one hand on his sword, and one eye on the disgusting Abhorrent.

“Bingo,” Gandash said.

Taking one final step to the side, Xerxes looked past his friend to see a gaping cave mouth leading into darkness.

“I knew it,” Bel said.

Gandash walked forward slowly. “Let’s get inside while I still have these monsters on a leash.”