

Chapter 53 – An Announcement

Shabadras had them leave through a back entrance. Afterward, they wandered the bazaar before finding themselves back at the coffee shop where they'd first met up to start the mission. Inside, Katayoun ordered coffee, and Xerxes got an herbal tea. They sat in silence for a few minutes.

“He’s right,” Katayoun said at last. “We’re alive. Unhurt. That’s what matters.”

“I know.” He cupped his tea in both hands. “But I really thought this mission would get me an officer commission. *Fuck.*”

She nodded. Sipped her coffee. “Why do you care?”

He looked up from the tea. “Huh?”

She repeated the question. “Why do you care if you’re an officer? What does it matter?”

He wasn’t sure how to answer. “Well, why wouldn’t I want to be one? They’re the top people in the class. Everybody looks up to them. Look at Gandy. We grew up together, and I always beat him at everything. Well, not tests. At least not all the time. But in martial arts and whatnot. I’ve always been better than him. But now he might as well be a celebrity, and I’m just... I don’t know, one of the crowd.”

“So?”

He leaned back, his forehead scrunching up. “I mean. It’s important to me. Don’t you care about that?”

She put her hand on his wrist. “Of course. I’m just asking why you care so much. So what if you don’t become an officer? Only a few people made it.”

“Don’t tell me you didn’t at least *think* about being selected.”

“Not really.”

He took his hand off the tea mug to slip his fingers around hers. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah. My testing went great. I’m confident I got every answer correct. And the combat and spellcasting weren’t bad. But in my interview, I outright told them I didn’t want to be an officer.”

“What? But why?”

“Because I don’t *want* to be an officer. Xerxes, have you forgotten that we were conscripted? They didn’t ask if we wanted to come here. They made us come.”

“Who wouldn’t want to come to a college in Sin-Amuhhu?”

“Me.”

He opened his mouth to reply, but nothing came out. What was he supposed to say? Then he thought about her words, and the situation, and something popped into his mind. “What did they offer you? You never mentioned it.”

“To do the mission?”

“Yeah.”

She looked away. “Money.”

He blinked. “That’s it?”

“A lot of money. After my brother... died, things got bad for my family. A big chunk of money would help a lot.”

“I’m... I’m sorry, Kat. I didn’t realize....”

“It’s fine. That’s just how life works.” She squeezed his hand. “We can talk about it all another time. I just want to make sure you’re okay. I can tell that you’re upset. Is this really about you becoming an officer? Or is more to do with... with Gandash?”

He shook his head and sighed. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Did you ever apologize to him like I suggested?”

“I never found the right moment. It’s just... I feel like it’s not fair. He’s always had everything go perfectly for him. He’s smart. Rich. Then we get here and he instantly gets promoted. It’s like nothing bad ever happens to him, and he gets the best of everything.”

“Why don’t you just talk to him?”

“About what?”

“Tell him how you feel. Did you ever do that?”

“Of course! We talk all the time. Or at least, we did. Back home.” Except, he hadn’t spoken to Gandash much since Mannemid. Never once had they conversed about the chaotic events preceding their departure.

“Maybe it’s time to have another talk,” Katayoun said, again squeezing his hand. “You’ve been spending all your time with the Swordmasters. I mean, I know you’ve had to split time with me.

But the last thing you want is to lose your childhood friend because you found some new friends.”

“That’s true.”

After that, the conversation drifted to less serious topics. As they strolled through the bazaar, they passed a jewelry shop, and Katayoun pulled Xerxes inside. It was there that he found a beautiful glass dolphin pendant.

“This is it,” he said, holding it up to the light.

“For your sister?” Katayoun asked

“Yeah. Do you think she’ll like it?” He handed it to her.

“I like how it sparkles. She’ll love it.”

He had the shop owner wrap the glass dolphin in paper, and then they continued on their way to the school. Around the corner from the main gate, Katayoun grabbed his shirt and pulled him toward her. She backed up until she was against the outer wall of the school, and then she slipped her hands around his waist. She smelled like oranges and strawberries.

“Maybe we screwed up the mission,” she said, “but we did it together. And we survived. I wonder if it means... that we were meant for each other.” She was looking into his eyes right then, and her gaze pierced his soul.

“We *are* meant for each other,” he said. “I knew it from the beginning.”

“Me too.”

She pulled him closer, so they were leaning against each other. Then, before he knew what was happening, she pulled his head down and kissed him.

A bolt of lightning ran from his lips to the depths of his belly. His head swam. His hands fumbled as he tried to wrap them around her. She pushed her hips away from the wall, and then he was holding the small of her back. He pulled her closer.

Then she pushed him away.

“Hey...” he said, leaning his head forward.

She laughed, leaned in for another kiss, then grabbed his hand and pulled him toward the gate. It was over too soon.

Before he knew it, they were inside. She turned toward the girl dorms. “See you tomorrow,” she said. She walked to the door, turned, and looked at him. Her eyes and her smile were... perfect. She held his gaze for a moment, then disappeared inside.

Did that really just happen? He walked back to his dorm room thinking about her lips and the feel of her waist. It made his heart pound.

“E’s back,” Enusat said when he entered the dorm room, but Xerxes hardly noticed the words.

“You’ve been gone all day,” Jad said. “What the hell were you up to? Were you... hey. Xerk. Xerk! Are you listening to us?”

He climbed the ladder and lay on his bunk.

The three other mages devolved into jabbering. After what seemed like a few hours, but was just a few minutes, Xerxes leaned over the edge of the bunk. “Hey guys.”

“Oh, you’re talking to us again?” Enusat said.

“Sorry, I was distracted. Look, I got news. We’re shipping out soon. Real soon.”

“How do you know?” Kashtiliash asked.

“Confidential,” Xerxes answered. “I can’t tell any more details. Seriously. So don’t ask. But it’s soon.”

“I thought they wanted all of us to be High Seers before they deployed us,” Jad said.

“I know. You’d better try to focus. I think they might send us out whether we’ve broken through or not.”

“Fuck,” Enusat said.

The following day at class, Xerxes felt like a weight had been lifted off him. Granted, he’d failed in his attempt to get promoted. But at least he didn’t have to worry about the cult meetings anymore. What was more, given that he’d achieved his breakthrough, he could now focus on rune study.

Thanks to the book Rabya had gifted him, he had already reached the point where he could practice the Asgagu Sebum rune using paper and ink. That was the most expensive part of learning a spell, and he was careful to use his supplies wisely.

On Secondday, Kashtiliash achieved his breakthrough to High Seer.

On Fifthday, Rabya held true to her promise and took them to her favorite sword shop. There, Xerxes spent more money in one place than he’d ever spent in his entire life. He didn’t buy the most expensive sword there—that would have been impossible, even if they’d allowed him to buy it on credit. But he got something that put his old sword to shame.

None of the other members of the Swordmasters bought new weapons. However, all of them bought the fancy kind of sheath that Xerxes had first seen used by Purattu. It secured the large sword to the back, but at the same time, allowed it to be drawn easily. He paid extra for a variation designed for Asgagu High Seers, which facilitated easy casting of Minor Augmentation.

The announcement came on Sixthday during the morning assembly.

“This will be your last week at the school,” High Archon Kingallu said. “Abhorrent activities have surged, and we need mages on the ground in various starisles. Those of you who haven’t reached the High Seer level would do well to work as hard as you can toward that goal. Once you leave these walls, you won’t have the spell formations. Or the time. Because of this, we’ll be opening more slots for spell formation usage. Only for Seers. Any who’ve reached the High Seer level should focus on rune study or other training.”

During the assembly, Xerxes looked over to where the officers lined up. Gandash was there, clad in his special officer robes, chatting with some of his fellow officers.

After the prayer, Xerxes took a deep breath and walked over.

Chapter 54 – A Heart-to-Heart

Xerxes arrived just as Gandash was taking his leave from his friends. “Hey, Gandy,” he said.

Gandash looked over in surprise. “Oh. Xerk. Hey.”

“I think we should talk,” Xerxes said.

“About what?”

“Just... stuff. They’re going to send us out, and for all we know we might not see each other again for a long time.”

“That’s true.”

“I did some things. Said some things. I don’t know, I... I just want to talk. Like old times.”

Gandash smiled. “Sure. Now that you mention it, I have some things I ought to get off my chest. Tomorrow’s Restday. How about then?”

“Okay. Meet at the gate before lunch?”

“How about dinner instead? I have a bunch of things to do in the morning.”

“Sure. See you then.”

“Sounds good.”

Xerxes wasn’t sure what he would say to Gandash. And he could only imagine what Gandash wanted to get off his chest. But just having agreed to talk made him feel better.

The next day, he spent time studying in the morning, then did sword training with the Swordmasters for about three hours. All of them had vastly improved in their dueling skills. Xerxes and Kashtiliash were now about even in terms of who came out on top when they faced off. And they were getting better at the special move Rabya had them working on. They’d even come up with a name for it.

Swordmasters’ Vengeance.

What was more, they could now perform the move with real swords.

After sword practice, Xerxes cleaned up and headed to the gate to wait for Gandash. He made sure to fill his pouch with a few extra shekels just in case he needed them.

His friend showed up only a few minutes later.

“Do you know that lamb place to the north?” Gandash asked. “I forget the name, but it’s run by a guy named Tomer.”

Xerxes knew the spot. “I’ve heard of it. It’s pricey, isn’t it?”

“My treat,” Gandash said.

Xerxes’ jaw tightened. “It’s fine. No need.”

“If you say so.”

On most occasions when he and Katayoun ate together, or even when he went out to eat never-ending meat with the Swordmasters, they rarely went anywhere that charged more than about twenty to thirty minas. This place charged an even shekel. Granted, they could eat as much as they wanted. But at a price quadruple what he was used to, it was grimace-inducing. It was a good thing he’d come ready to spend money, so he paid and followed Gandash inside.

The pitcher of ale came before the meat did. Gandash poured, then raised his tankard.

“To the Mannemid boys,” he said.

Xerxes grinned. “Starting on an empty stomach? Officer training has toughened you up. To us.”

They drank. Then the meat came and they ate.

At first, they talked about trivial matters. Gandash told him about some of the subjects he’d been studying, everything from advanced cavalry tactics to boring things like supply lines. Xerxes talked about Mystic Rabya and her longsword classes and how much he’d learned about the Epitome.

When they finished the first pitcher of ale, Xerxes noticed that Gandash was talking louder than before. Maybe he *hadn’t* developed a more of a tolerance for alcohol in the recent months.

“Why don’t we take it easy on the ale...” Xerxes said.

“Nah. This could be our last meal together for a long time. Let’s make it memorable.” Raising his voice much louder than was necessary, he yelled, “Waiter. Another pitcher!”

They continued to drink and eat.

Is he trying to get drunk? Maybe to impress me or show me up?

A few minutes later, Gandash said, “What did you want to talk about?”

Xerxes leaned back as the waiter deposited another tray of meat in front of them. “Nothing really. Just... I feel like we haven’t had any time together for a while.”

“Well, that’s true. I mean, you do have your new best friends.”

Xerxes brow furrowed. “What?”

“It’s fine, I get it. I was sucked into the boring officer training, so what else were you going to do? It’s not like I blame you for it.”

“Gandy, you’re reading too much into this. Jad, Kash, Enusat. Teucer. They’re friends, for sure. But I didn’t grow up with them like you. *You and I* are best friends.”

“Are we? We hardly see each other anymore....”

Xerxes sighed. “We’re seeing each other right now.” He lifted his tankard. “To best friends.”

Gandash frowned but lifted his tankard.

They drank. Ate some more.

“Gandy, I never congratulated you on climbing the rankings. Everybody’s talking about it.”

“Surprised you had time to notice given your new girlfriend.” Gandash stuffed some more meat into his mouth.

Xerxes was working hard to keep his mood from turning black. It felt like Gandash was trying to provoke him. But why?

I need to distract him like I did that time back on Mannemid.

He opened his mouth to say something, but before he could, Gandash continued, “You’re doing it on purpose, aren’t you?”

“Doing... what?”

“Flaunting her.”

“Flaunting? Wait, you mean Kat?”

“You have a pet name for her now?”

Xerxes closed his eyes and took in a deep breath through his nose. He’d wanted to have a nice heart-to-heart with his childhood best friend. But Gandash had always been an angry drunk. Or at least... an unstable drunk.

“I’m not flaunting her, Gandash. I don’t even know what that means. How could I ‘flaunt’ her?”

“I saw you making out with her the other day. I was across the street, and you did it on purpose. And you’re always holding hands, looking all lovey-dovey. You *want* me to see you together. To remind me that I don’t *have* a girlfriend anymore. Tell me I’m wrong, I dare you.”

Xerxes forced himself to remain calm. “I didn’t see you the other day. That was the first time we kissed. I don’t even know how it happened. One minute we were standing there, and then next minute we were kissing. Just like back home when you and—”

Gandash shot to his feet, knocking down his tankard in the process. As ale ran over the edges of the table, Gandash jabbed his finger in Xerxes' direction. "Don't say it. Don't you dare say her name."

Xerxes stood. The restaurant had grown quiet, and the patrons were all looking at them. Everything clicked just then.

"I wasn't going to say... to say her..." The words died in Xerxes' mouth. He *had* been about to say Bel's name, simply because the randomness of his first kiss with Kat had resembled that first kiss between Bel and Gandash.

"You *were* going to say it," Gandash said, his jaw jutting out. His eyes glistened.

"Gandy," Xerxes said, lowering his voice. "Just calm down. This is getting out of control." He extended his hands, palms down, in his friend's direction.

"I'm tired of this, Xerk," Gandash said, bunching his hands into fists. "Everything's gone bad for me in life, while you're living it up. Brand new friends. Brand new girlfriend. Everything going your way, and you sit off to the side laughing at me. You're the only one who knows the story of me wetting my pants in the library. Why'd you spread that story, huh? You *wanted* to embarrass me?"

Some of the patrons murmured, and the owner of the restaurant was walking in their direction.

"Gandy, sit down," he said. "Let's talk this out."

He reached out, intending to put his hand on Gandash's forearm and pull him back down into a sitting position. In response, Gandash blurted, "Back off," jerked his hand away, then shoved Xerxes.

He nearly toppled backward.

"Hey," he said. "That's enough!" He managed to grab Gandash's wrist.

His friend pulled in the opposite direction, forcing Xerxes to lean forward. Then Gandash tried to punch him.

The blow was wild and easy to dodge. While Gandash was still overextended, Xerxes clenched his own hand into a fist and punched him in the stomach. Hard.

His friend doubled over.

Stepping out from behind the table, Xerxes said, "Enough, Gandy. You're drunk. We need—"

Gandash let out a shout and threw another wild haymaker. Xerxes leaned back and hit him right across the side of the face. Gandash grunted and half-spun, half-fell onto the table. Meat, dishes, and cutlery flew in all directions. Xerxes took a step forward, but Gandash was just lying there breathing heavily, so he backed up.

Looking around at the shocked patrons and staff, he found the manager and walked over. "Sorry," he said. He dug out a shekel. "Will this cover the inconvenience?"

"Of course," the manager said, smiling woodenly. "What about... your friend?"

"He'll come around soon. Maybe have someone escort him back to the Institute."

"Will do, Sir Mage."

"Thanks."

Leaving Gandash behind, Xerxes stalked back to the school.

Chapter 55 – New Arrangements

Xerxes slammed the dorm room door behind him, startling Kashtiliash, Jad, and Enusat.

“What the ’ell?” Enusat said.

“I finally had it,” Xerxes said, flopping down into the chair of his study desk.

“Gandash?” Kashtiliash asked.

“Yeah. He doesn’t handle his alcohol well. Said some things. So I laid him out.”

Jad, who’d been relaxing with his hands behind his head on the bottom bunk, swung his feet around and sat up. “Hold on. What do you mean ‘laid him out?’”

Xerxes hit the desk with his fist, causing everything on it to jump into the air, then thump back down. “It was a clean right hook. Knocked him down and he didn’t get up.”

Enusat let loose a slow whistle. “Damn. Xerk, not pulling any punches. Literally.”

Kashtiliash was still lying on the opposite bottom bunk. “You’re serious?”

“Yeah,” Xerxes said. “I hit him in the belly first, but he just kept coming at me.”

Silence. Xerxes looked around to see his friends exchanging disbelieving glances.

“I’m not exaggerating,” Xerxes said. “I’m just done with it all. I get that his girlfriend died, and that’s horrible and all. But that doesn’t give him a right to throw lies in my face.”

“Wait, his girlfriend *died*?” Jad said.

Xerxes nodded. “In the Abhorrent invasion. The three of us were on... well, a training mission. A juvenile ambushed us, and Bel died. I was there.” He closed his eyes and forced away the memory of Bel screaming as she fell to her death. “She was my friend too. And my main sparring partner. So I don’t like thinking about it, much less talking about it.”

Another silence prevailed, this one longer. Xerxes kept his eyes closed and tried to steady his breathing.

“Where’d you hit him?” Jad asked.

Xerxes opened his eyes. “What?”

“You said a right hook. But where’d it land?”

Xerxes thought. “About here,” he said, putting his hand up near his cheek.

Jad exhaled. “Fuck...”

“What?” Xerxes said. “Why does it matter where I hit him?”

“Because it’s a rules violation to strike an officer.”

“I forgot about that.”

“Yeah,” said Enusat. “Don’t you remember my prank with the plaster? If it wasn’t for that rule, my payback on Randy Gandy would ’ave been a lot more... painful. Striking an officer is bad news. If ’e reports you....”

“If he reports me? Then what?”

Jad lifted his shoulders in a shrug. “Depends. A disciplinary committee at the least. Demotion isn’t really an option since none of us have official ranks. Technically, expulsion is one of the possibilities.”

“He’s a High Seer,” Xerxes said, “there’s no way a little punch is going to leave a mark. How would anybody know?”

“Witnesses,” Kashtiliash said. “There were other people there, right?”

Xerxes heart dropped.

“Besides, you’re also a High Seer,” Jad said. “Rabya had a whole lecture on what kind of damage High Seers can take and how the Balatu mages are supposed to deal with that stuff. Remember? *Bruises aren’t worth wasting melam on*, she said. What if you gave him a black eye?”

“Dammit,” Xerxes said.

They continued to talk, and nothing the others said was any comfort to Xerxes. As the alcohol slowly left his system and he cooled down further, regrets piled up.

I should have just walked away.

He began second-guessing himself, wondering if suggesting the meetup had been even the shadow of a good idea. Should he have groveled to Gandash?

Then he considered the ramifications. What if he got kicked out of the Institute and sent back down to Mannemid? How would he keep in touch with Katayoun?

He wouldn’t. It would be the end of their relationship.

If the two of them received different assignments and were deployed to different starisles, at least they would both still be members of the Sin-Amuhhu Combined Armed Forces. But if he got kicked out, that would be the end.

It would come down to Gandash. Would Gandash report the matter?

We're best friends. He said it himself. Or was I the one who said that?

He tossed and turned long past when the other Swordmasters fell asleep.

The next morning, more details came.

“We’ll be deploying all of you at the end of the week,” High Archon Kingallu said, provoking a buzz of reaction among the assembled students. “This morning, the officers will receive their assignments. The rest of you will learn further details from your primary teacher. Make the best of your final week here. Everyone is being deployed to different locations, with different missions. *All* of the missions are important. Furthermore...”

He went on like usual, but Xerxes only half-paid attention, as the speech didn’t contain any concrete details about the assignments.

Katayoun found Xerxes after the assembly adjourned, and they held hands as they walked to the classroom.

“What happens if they separate us?” she asked.

“I thought about that,” he said. “Even if it happens, we’ll keep in touch. And we’ll be back together soon, I’m sure. They won’t just send us away forever.”

The tension in the classroom was palpable. There wasn’t any of the usual banter as they waited for Mystic Rabya to appear.

When she arrived, she looked around and said, “Getting nervous already? I’d say that’s normal.” She put down her teaching materials and sword, then leaned against the desk. “As you can imagine, there’s good news and there’s bad news. I’ll start with the good. Black Jackal classroom is staying together.”

Xerxes breathed a sigh of relief, and he felt Katayoun touching his arm. He put his hand on her fingers. Had Gandash reported their brawl? Would Xerxes be hauled in front of a committee and expelled?

“Okay, what’s the bad news, Mystic Rabya?” asked Atra-Hasis, the auburn-skinned Nasaru mage. “That if we haven’t made High Seer we get kicked out?”

Only about half of the members of the class had achieved their goal and reached the High Seer level. In addition to the Xerxes, Jad, Enusat, and Kashtiliash, that number included: Katayoun; the short-haired mages Arwia and Kuri; and Dasi from Sin-Masu, with her tattoo, silver bracelet, and piercings. All the other members of the class were still Seers.

The lower-level mages included Teucer, who was the fifth member of the Humusi Swordmasters, along with his friend Laxu. Ningsummunu, a friend of Dasi from Sin-Masu, who also had many piercings. Droopy-jowled Tizqar, stick-thin Ningal, Kishar from Dumusi, and Atra-Hasis, who had just asked the question.

Mystic Rabya chuckled. “No. Everybody’s staying. And I’ve even arranged for an extra round of Double-Concentrated Melam Pills for those of you who haven’t formed a second chamber. I’d recommend trying to break through before deployment. Once you’re out there in the field, it’ll be difficult to find the right time and place.”

I’m getting kicked out, aren’t I? Xerxes thought, his fingers tightening on Katayoun’s hand.

“No, the bad news isn’t really that bad. It’s this: I don’t know who your commanding officer is going to be nor what your mission is. I’d hoped to give you some insights before the news gets broken, but sadly, I can’t.”

There was a short silence.

“That’s it?” Dasi asked.

Rabya nodded. “See? Not so bad after all.”

Xerxes exhaled softly. Although, it didn’t confirm that he was off the hook.

“I don’t even think that counts as bad news,” Teucer said, provoking a few chuckles.

“Perhaps not,” Rabya said. “In place of this afternoon’s practical training, we’ll be meeting your new commanding officer. She or he will provide some basic details of the mission, then do some very high-level evaluations. Starting tomorrow, all the practical training will be led by the officer, with a focus on aspects relevant to the mission. Any questions?”

Katayoun raised her hand.

“Yes, High Seer?”

“Mystic Rabya,” Katayoun said, “you must have at least *some* idea of what kind of missions we’re being sent on. Can’t you give us a clue?”

Rabya’s lips twitched, and she stood there for a moment with her arms crossed. “I’ve heard a few things. Based on my guess, most groups are going to be deployed to starisles with increased Abhorrent activity. But it seems there are a few other missions being handed out that don’t involve Abhorrent. So it’s really impossible to say. Just remain patient. You’ll know within a few hours.”

Rabya then explained a class assignment relating to combat strategies for massive Abhorrent. It wasn’t their first time discussing such a subject, but the assignment was different from anything they’d done before. Rabya had a stack of wax tablets that she passed out.

“I want you to write a description of an imaginary Abhorrent. A stage six juvenile. Include a physical description and two magical powers. Keep it all within the bounds of what seems reasonable.”

“From our imagination?” Laxu asked. “Why?”

“Yes, from your imagination. The reason is simple; however much we know about the Abhorrent, there’s more that we don’t know. We have no idea what kind of monsters you might face, and being able to deal with the unknown is going to be important. As you’ll probably remember from some of the texts we read in earlier classes, there have been many instances, even in recent years, of Buhhu mages summoning new and unusual Abhorrent.”

Each student contrived a fake Abhorrent, then switched with another student and came up with combat strategies. Generally, these boiled down to three options: mages backed up by Unsighted troops, mages fighting with other mages, and mages fighting solo. Each had their overall advantages and disadvantages.

It was an interesting exercise, but Xerxes had a hard time focusing.

It seemed unthinkable that Gandash would do something so drastic as get him kicked out of the institute. Then again, the two of them had never been involved in a physical clash. In fact, back on Mannemid, they’d rarely even disagreed with each other. Who knew how Gandash would feel after he sobered up, especially if he had marks on him? What if the school demanded he tell them what happened?

The morning dragged on. Lunch was boring. Then they regathered for the afternoon training.

“Did I ever tell the story of the first time I cast a spell in real combat?” Rabya asked. “No? Well, it was in one of the Ku-Aya starisles, Lira to be specific. We were up against a warlord who...”

Xerxes tuned out the story and lost himself in thought. His reflections were interrupted by a knock on the door. He looked up.

“Here we go,” Rabya said. “Prepare to meet your commanding officer.” She raised her voice. “Come in.”

The door swung open, and Gandash entered.

“Fucking ’ell,” Enusat muttered, quietly enough that Rabya didn’t hear him.

I should have known.

Gandash was decked out in his officer’s uniform. His headgear was white and cylindrical, but unlike ordinary mage hats, it had two golden horns that curved from the back and came to a point near his forehead. Higher-ranking officers would have additional horns. His outer robe was deep blue, and he had a red sash draped from shoulder to hip. Of course, the garment had golden fringe, embedded jewels, and other accouterments. He had leather boots with bronze strips that went up to his knees and bits of jewelry.

Xerxes couldn’t deny that he looked impressive.

But what drew the most attention was the swelling and redness around his left eye, and the way the skin was starting to turn dark.

It took effort for Xerxes not to flinch.

Gandash looked over the group, his eyes sliding past Xerxes without stopping.

“Good afternoon,” he said.

“Greetings, Captain Gandash,” Rabya said. “I suspected the Strategist might be chosen to lead Black Jackal, but I didn’t want to say something and get hopes up prematurely.” Her eyes shifted to Xerxes, and if she noted the complex expression on his face, she didn’t give any indication of it.

“I was surprised and delighted when I saw my commission,” Gandash said, closing the door behind him.

“Would you like the lectern?” Rabya said.

“Yes, please.” His jewelry and other embellishments clinked as he stepped over.

Meanwhile, Rabya moved to the one empty seat in the classroom and sat down. “I’ll stay for a bit, if you don’t mind. I’m curious what my students are going to be up to.”

“Of course.” Gandash stood at the lectern and clasped his hands behind his back. “I’d like to start out by letting you know we aren’t being sent to fight any Abhorrent.”

He waited as if expecting to hear either sighs of relief or mutterings of complaint. When no one said anything, he continued, “There’s some good news, specifically for High Seers Jad and Enusat. We’ll be heading to one of the Humusi starisles, Jehannemid. Congratulations on getting a quick trip home.”

“Hunh,” Jad said.

Gandash gave him a tight smile. “Yes. I can’t guarantee there’ll be time for reunions with family and friends, but it’s possible. I’ll give some more details later, but the long story short is that there’s been some major political unrest on Jehannemid. We’re being sent to escort a member of the nobility, Lady Erabu, from a rather distant city back to the Gateway complex. There will be potential bandit infestations, rebel troops, possibly even rogue mages. Though this isn’t Abhorrent-related, it’s highly likely we’ll be in combat situations.”

Enusat muttered something that Xerxes couldn’t make out. Gandash ignored him.

“You’re all being given the rank of lieutenant. And you’ll be paired with a group of ten Unsighted soldiers, led by a sergeant. Later on, I’ll pick four of you to be promoted to first lieutenants of either heavy or light infantry, or heavy or light cavalry, primarily to help coordinate with the other mage lieutenants.

“Now, I want to make something clear, and this isn’t my decision, it comes from High Archon Kingallu himself: though you technically outrank the sergeants, you will not be in charge of your

units. You'll be attached to your unit and will fight with them, but the sergeant will be higher than you in the chain of command. At least, until I see fit to change that arrangement.

“Because our mission is more ordinary in nature than our fellows being sent to fight Abhorrent and will involve some significant travel, the rest of this week's afternoon training will focus on some specific tasks related to horsemanship, battlefield maneuvers, rapid building of fortifications, and the like.

“Today, we'll do some very brief evaluations. I've already gone through all of your assessments from earlier in the year. Frankly speaking, book knowledge of things like geography and history won't be important. I want to see how much progress you've made in spellcasting, especially on horseback, plus combat maneuvers and similar things. The Institute will provide compensation for components and pills to make up for lost melam.

“In terms of lectures, I'm hoping Mystic Rabya can help me with some mission-specific topics.”
He looked at her.

“Absolutely, Captain Gandash.”

“Good. We can brainstorm about that later. Any questions?”

No one raised their hand.

“Very well. Let's head out to the back fields. I already have a pavilion set up for the evaluation.”

Chapter 56 – Deployment

“I can’t believe this fucker is making us do *tests*,” Enusat grumbled as they lagged behind the rest of the class on the way to the back fields. “What are we, children?”

“Forget that,” Jad said. “Can you believe we aren’t fighting Abhorrent? All of those classes. All that training. Pointless. Swordmasters’ Vengeance? What a waste.”

It soon became apparent that their class wasn’t the only one involved in practical evaluations. Another class was already on horseback, two others were getting ready for combat drills with Unsighted troops, and one group was at work on the mockup giant Abhorrent.

The afternoon flew by as Gandash, assisted by Rabya, presided over a host of activities and tests.

During the entire process, Gandash offered minimal input and commentary. He simply gave instructions, watched, and took notes. When it was all over and the dinner hour loomed, he said, “All of you did amazing. I’m very impressed. I have the prerogative of giving a name to our newly formed company. I think Black Jackal is appropriate. Thank you for letting me be part of a team that’s been bonding for months now. I hope I can do a good job leading you in this mission. Now, you’re dismissed.”

Xerxes wanted to talk to Gandash, but his friend turned to Mystic Rabya and the two fell into a conversation as they strolled back to the school.

He didn’t reconnect with Katayoun until the following morning. As they ate breakfast together, Katayoun said, “Did you see Gandy’s black eye?”

Xerxes almost choked on his porridge. “Right. That.”

“Do you know what happened?” she asked. “Everyone’s talking about it.”

He looked back and forth, then lowered his head. “Don’t say anything, but... it was me.”

“WHAT?” she said, and then clamped her hand over her mouth. Lowering her head just like him, she leaned forward and said, “What happened?”

“Remember how I told you I was going to talk with him? It didn’t go very well. He got drunk and said some things. He kind of attacked me. So... I punched him.”

Katayoun didn’t say anything. He looked up from his porridge to see her lip slightly curled.

She looks disgusted. He cleared his throat. “I didn’t start it. *He* did. And he tried to hit me. What was I supposed to do?”

She looked down into her own porridge. She dipped her spoon in and ate.

What the hell was she being so dramatic? He’d killed people in front of her before, but a scuffle with Gandash was the end of the world?

“Kat, come on,” he said.

“I’m just disappointed, that’s all.”

“Disappointed? Kat, he *attacked* me.”

She put her spoon down. “Xerk. You go on and on about how Gandy isn’t a good fighter. How he’s a bookworm that studies all the time. How you and your Swordmasters are *real men*. That’s the picture you paint. So what happened? Did Gandash cast a spell? Try to stab you with a knife? What?”

Spluttering, Xerxes said, “He... he....”

She looked at him expectantly.

“He pushed me!”

“He pushed you.” She pursed her lips.

“*And* tried to hit me.”

“He *tried* to hit you? So he didn’t hit you at all. And you gave him a black eye?”

The way she framed her words left Xerxes with little to say. She wasn’t wrong. Now more than ever, he wished he *had* walked away from the argument.

“Kat, you should have heard what he said. He talked about *you*. He said that you and I are out to get him. That we’re plotting against him.”

“Plotting? Us, against him? Seriously?”

“Well, he didn’t use those exact words.”

Katayoun’s nostrils flared slightly. Shaking her head, she said, “Xerxes. Can you just grow up a bit? Please?”

She stood.

He half stood. “Give me a break here—”

But she grabbed her tray and walked off.

“Kat!” he said, but he didn’t want to cause a scene in the dining hall, so he just let her go.

Women, he huffed.

**

He didn't find a good chance to talk with Katayoun about their argument, but the following day she slid up to him in the afternoon and intertwined her fingers with his. After that, things went back to normal. Not that there was much time for anything other than the last-minute training and preparations.

There was never any opportunity to talk to Gandash, despite how much Xerxes wanted to. He *needed* to make things right. But his friend was truly acting the part of an officer. He was always busy, always talking to important people, never available. Gandash's black eye developed into a deep purple color which lasted for about two days before it started to fade. Neither Katayoun nor the Swordmasters breathed a word of what they knew, and rumors hadn't spread from the restaurant. It seemed Xerxes' fears of the school pressing for an investigation were unfounded.

Xerxes was now confident enough with his runes that he submitted a request for a new component pouch, as well as a supply of the stibnite talc that he needed for Minor Augmentation. His request was approved. The school even provided a free batch of component for a test casting, as well as a pill to make up for the lost melam. After casting the spell in the meditation chamber, the tip of his sword glowed with bright light, and he let out a whoop of delight.

On Thirdday, Gandash named the first lieutenants. To Xerxes' surprise, he was assigned as first lieutenant of the heavy infantry units. Jad was attached to the light infantry. Dasi, with her tattoo and many piercings, was assigned to the heavy cavalry, and Kishar was first lieutenant of the light cavalry. There were six units of heavy infantry, four units of light infantry, three units of heavy cavalry, and two units of light cavalry. Xerxes wasn't really sure what it meant that things were broken down that way, but he felt a spark of pride at being 'in charge' of the largest group of units.

After the appointments, the mages were introduced to the sergeants they would be paired with on the mission.

Xerxes was in Unit One, which was led by a muscular man named Stratos, who had a host of frightening scars on his face and neck. Stratos must once have had a luxuriant head of black hair. But now he was balding on top, and much of the black had been replaced by white and gray.

"Pleasure to meet you, First Lieutenant Xerxes," the sergeant said, offering his hand.

Xerxes shook it. "The pleasure's mine, Sergeant."

"I 'eard you study the Epitome," Stratos said.

"That's right."

"In that case, the men'll love you. Our unit specializes in the short sword, but like most soldiers in the Combined Armed Forces, we know of the Epitome."

After that, Xerxes met the soldiers under Stratos' command. Of the nine members other than Stratos, eight were men. The sole woman, whose name was Vadamerca, had broader shoulders than most of the men and looked like she came from a culture similar to that of Bel and Fal back

on Mannemid. However, instead of fair skin and light hair, her complexion was that of oak, and her nose was wide.

“Fall in and introduce yourself to the first lieutenant,” Stratos barked.

The soldiers lined up.

“Mazlauwa of Sin-Amuhhu,” said the first soldier, a tall man with curly hair.

“Hes-Ra from Ku-Aya,” the next one said.

Xerxes immediately forgot all the names but promised himself he would memorize them as soon as possible.

After the basic introductions, they practiced some maneuvers. Stratos was a veteran, and the soldiers he commanded were well-disciplined. They moved with fluidity, and Xerxes could tell he wouldn't have any trouble fighting alongside them.

Units One, Two, Three, and Four were the Asgagu mage units: Xerxes with Unit One, Kashtiliash with Unit Two, short-haired Kuri with Unit Three, and Teucer with Unit Four.

The other two heavy infantry units—Five and Six—had Balatu healers, Katayoun and the skinny Ningal.

Gandash gave a speech about the basics of mage-integrated formations. Most of the basic concepts were familiar thanks to Mystic Rabya. Then he went into further detail, specifying some of the main formations he wanted the Asgagu and Balatu units to use.

The Asgagu mages were the powerhouses of the entire company. However, Gandash made it clear that he wanted them used with precision and planning. They wouldn't lead the troops, but would wait until key moments to attack, whereupon the heavy infantry with their armor and shield would act like escorts and protectors.

“Under no circumstances do I want any of you Asgagu mages to run off by yourself,” Gandash said. “No heroics. Stay with the line. That's how we'll all keep alive. As for the Balatu mages, they're our lifeblood. As long as they're safe, we can afford to take more risks and absorb more damage. And that's why Units Five and Six have only one primary mission: keep Lieutenants Katayoun and Ningal safe and alive, while facilitating their efforts to heal the wounded.

“We shouldn't have to deal with any Abhorrent other than potential stragglers. But there could be bandits, rebels, or even trained soldiers opposing us. As such, I've prepared three combat scenarios to practice the formations. We'll start with one I like to call Open Curtain....”

The soldiers were skilled and experienced. The mages had gotten to know each other well in the past months. All-in-all the training went well.

The days flew by.

Deployment day was Sixthday. There was to be a parade through the city to the Gateway complex.

The 'graduating' students were given two uniforms, a set of armor, and a ceremonial dagger. They were also assigned horses. Xerxes recognized his, a spirited fellow named Red that he'd always enjoyed riding in training.

There was a lot of pomp and ceremony. After all, though their company had sixteen mages and over a hundred and fifty soldiers, there was a lot more to their traveling group than that. The mages all had horses, plus there were five units of cavalry. That was a total of seventy-five horses, plus pack animals. There were also carts, servants, attendants, and Gandash's personal guard. And that was just Black Jackal Company.

An additional twelve companies also took part.

The city had been cleared from the school all the way to the Gateway complex, with the avenues and streets lined with armored city guards.

At first it was exhilarating to see hordes of citizens lining the street cheering. But it got old quickly. Everything moved at a crawl. For much of the time Xerxes found his thoughts wandering. Juggling his various friendships and relationships was becoming more and more difficult, to the point where he felt overwhelmed. Almost every plan he came up with for how to balance everything seemed to reveal a new problem. And now that he was a High Seer, he needed to think about striving to the level of Mystic. Would it be possible to make any progress while deployed?

After what seemed like hours of sweating on top of Red, they reached the complex.

Yet that was only the beginning of another long stretch of doing nothing.

The sun was setting by the time Black Jackal Company entered the Gateway to Ku-Aya.

On Ku-Aya, the Gateway complexes were far apart, and Gandash kept pushing them. There were no parades slowing things down, and the time difference between the two locations made it possible to reach the next Gateway before evening.

Once on Ira, things became easier. They marched across the complex to the Humusi Gateway, and then over to the one leading to Jehannemid.

By that point, everyone was exhausted.

Lining up in front of the Jehannemid Gateway complex, Gandash gave his final orders.

"We're to be met by the Head Mage as soon as we arrive," he said. "Barring unforeseen circumstances, we'll strike camp and have a formal dinner. Then get some rest. After that, we'll start the march across the continent. As usual, be prepared for anything and everything. No Abhorrent have been sighted there for months, but there have been occasional meteor showers. We can't afford to be complacent.

“Heavy infantry will go in first, starting with Unit One. Make sure the platform is clear, then fan out.

“Let’s go.”

Gandash led the way inside. However, the shimmering Gateway didn’t open as expected. Gandash looked at the operators. “Something wrong?”

“Sorry sir,” the shift commander said. “Hold on a moment.” The soldiers fiddled with the various controls for about two or three minutes. Then the shift commander said, “It seems the other end isn’t set for a receiving connection. We can override their settings, of course, but it will take another few minutes.”

“Fine. Hurry up.” As the operators worked with the controls, Gandash said, “Let me repeat for your sake, First Lieutenant Xerxes and Sergeant Stratos: be prepared for the unexpected. It could mean many things that the Gateway isn’t ready, and I can think of few that are good.”

“Yes, sir.”

The ‘few minutes’ the shift commander had mentioned stretched into nearly an hour. But eventually, the Gateway opened.

“Keep your eyes and ears open,” Gandash said. “Proceed!”

Stratos turned to Unit One. “You ’eard the captain. March!”

They entered the Gateway.

And when they came out the other side, it was obvious things weren’t going to go as planned.

Book 3: Blood and Grit

I have come to find that moments of horror are often the prelude to ignorant bliss. How easily the mortal mind can forget pain, at least for a time.

Iter Mortis 1:1, *Words of Xerxes the Great*, Revised Great Reef Edition

Chapter 57 – Two Paths

The platform was empty. The control station, made of stone, with two wooden stools behind it, was empty. The only thing to accompany the Xerxes and the soldiers of Unit One was... silence. Neither sound nor even a slight breeze could be detected.

“Where is everybody?” Xerxes said. “Wasn’t the head mage supposed to be here?”

“Good question,” Stratos said. Raising his voice, he said, “Clear the landing area, then fan out. Unit Two comes through in two minutes. Check the corridor, but don’t go too far.”

Under normal circumstances, the landing platform of a Gateway was manned by at least five people. Two were responsible for operating the passageway itself accompanied by three guards, one overseeing the platform and two at the door. That was just in the immediate vicinity. Other personnel occupied other positions within the complex. Where was everyone?

Xerxes had been through many Gateways, and though there were differences in layout, interior decoration, and the uniforms of the staff, one thing was a constant: there were always people present.

Not here, though.

As the soldiers of Unit One spread out, Xerxes walked over to the control station.

It was a table of stone with a wooden contraption atop it bearing a host of dials, levers, and buttons. The entire thing was a complex spell formation, and it looked exactly like the one he’d studied back on Sin-Amuhhu.

He checked the switch that controlled the receiving connections. It was flipped to the ‘receive’ option, which was expected considering the staff on the Humusi end had forced the connection. He looked at some of the other switches and dials, wondering if the receive option had been toggled off to allow for outgoing tunnels to Jehannemid’s lower starisles.

There was no evidence of that. All the control options were in their default state. It was as if the connection switch had been flipped, but nothing else.

Looking away from the controls, he examined the surroundings. The stools the operators would sit on had been pushed away from the table. There was nothing to indicate why the place had been abandoned. There was no blood. No hint that there had been any sort of struggle or other dramatic events.

“Corridor’s empty,” said Vadamerca, who had stepped out of the tunnel entrance platform.

“Noted,” said Stratos. He looked at Xerxes. “First Lieutenant, why don’t you stay in ’ere? We’ll start looking through the complex.”

“Sure.”

“Unit One, ’ave weapons out and shields up. Let’s clear the area.”

As they filtered out of the platform area, Xerxes looked around more closely, hoping to find any clue that would give a hint about the situation. Nothing jumped out.

Unit Two arrived shortly thereafter, with Kashtiliash and his assigned sergeant, a man named Arda.

“What’s going on?” Kashtiliash said as soon as he saw Xerxes alone behind the control station.

“We’re trying to figure that out. The place seems abandoned. Sergeant Stratos and Unit One are out there looking around.”

“Unit Two, let’s go join them,” Arda said.

Kashtiliash stepped over to stand next to Xerxes.

Over the course of the next hour, the rest of the Units arrived. Then the pack animals and carts. By the time Gandash came through, they had secured the complex and confirmed that the entire place was abandoned.

Gandash didn’t look happy when he learned of the situation. “First Lieutenants, come with me,” he said.

They followed Gandash through the Gateway complex until they found a small conference room with a round table in the middle. As soon as he was inside, Gandash produced a leather map tube. Unbuttoning the top, he pulled out a roll of maps and flipped through them.

Meanwhile, olive-skinned Kishar was the last in. After she closed the door, Gandash put one of the maps on the table and said, “Tell me what we know.”

Since Xerxes had arrived first, he said, “The place is abandoned. The stable’s empty. They locked everything up, but it seems obvious they left in a hurry. The controls for the Gateway were in the default setting, except for the connection switch, which was set to the ‘lock’ option. There are some tracks going down the mountain that look like they’re a few days old. Other than that... we don’t know much.”

Gandash looked at the map, which depicted the mountainous region that the Gateway complex was in, as well as the surrounding area. “The next local holiday is months away, so that couldn’t be the explanation. Right, First Lieutenant Jad?”

Jad nodded. “Right.”

“Can you think of any other explanation for why they might have abandoned this place?”

“Not really....”

Gandash tapped the map. “There’s no evidence of an attack, whether by human forces or Abhorrent. The nearest city other than the capital is—” he traced his finger along the map “—here to the northeast. Likely too far to be relevant.”

“Captain,” Jad said, the word sounding awkward on his tongue, “there’s a watchtower attached to this Gateway complex....”

Gandash looked up. “You’re right. I forgot about that.”

“I remember hearing people say you can see the capital from here. If that’s true, the watchtower would be the best view.”

Gandash smiled. “Good thinking, Jad. You and Sergeant Vasilios go up there and see what you can see.”

For the next few minutes, Gandash asked the opinions of the First Lieutenants. Xerxes felt strange interacting with his friend in this capacity, but he did everything possible to make it professional.

In the end, there was still very little information to go on.

“Despite the strange circumstances,” Gandash said, “there’s not much we can do other than proceed with the operation.”

“Should we send a message back?” Dasi asked.

Gandash rubbed his black eye. “No. To be honest, this isn’t entirely beyond what I expected.” Looking around the table, he said, “We came because of local unrest. Although we don’t know the exact reason why the facility was abandoned, we do know that the situation on Jehannemid is unstable.”

The door opened and Jad returned.

“Something happened,” he said as he closed the door behind him. “There’s fire in the capital. A big one.”

“It’s ten leagues away, so my guess is that you couldn’t make out details.”

Jad nodded in agreement. “But there’s a lot of smoke. Looks like it’s covering the entire capital and everything around it.”

“That’s not much to go on,” Gandash said. He looked back down at the map. “And our destination isn’t the capital. On the one hand, I don’t like the idea of heading across the continent without knowing what’s behind us. But I’m not sure we have a choice. The mission orders specifically say to move toward our destination, Puabi, without allowing for any delays.”

Jad leaned over the map. “There are a few ways down out of these mountains. I bet you’re thinking of taking this path here.” He pointed at a line heading from the Gateway complex and to the east. “Am I right?”

Gandash nodded. “That seems the most direct route.”

“It’s direct, yes,” Jad said. “But if we go this way—” he shifted his finger to another line on the map “—we’ll pass through a village. Can’t remember the name. But we went through it on the way up here with Purattu.”

Gandash said, “It’s called Urmia.”

“Right. Not far past Urmia, the path veers north and then east. Granted, we’d lose some time. Maybe a day of travel. But we could get news.”

“At least we might get an idea of what’s happening in the capital,” Xerxes added.

Gandash stared at the map. “I do like the idea of being informed. Except, after leaving the village, that particular path has some major downsides. This part here. It’s even labeled. Maker’s Ravine. And here. Atranu Gorge. Also here. Another ravine.”

Xerxes wasn’t sure what Gandash was getting at, and upon looking around the table, he saw that the other mages seemed confused.

It was Kishar who broke the silence. “What does that matter?” she asked.

“They’re the perfect places to ambush a passing force like ours. First Lieutenant Xerxes and I experienced something like that not too long ago. Remember that, Xerk?” Gandash looked up at him.

He was expecting to see anger in his friend’s eyes. Instead, Gandash’s expression made it seem like he was asking about a math equation.

“How could I forget?” Xerxes said. “But... we have no reason to believe anything here’s related to the Abhorrent, do we?”

“It doesn’t matter whether it’s monsters, bandits, rebels, or anything else. If I have the choice between going through multiple bottlenecks where potential enemies could take potshots at us, or going this way—” he indicated the other path going to the east “—which is safer and quicker, well, I’d rather play it safe while we can. How much sunlight do we have left?”

“Only an hour or so,” Jad said. “Gandash, er... Captain, even if we don’t go down that path, you could always send one of us down there to ask some questions. We—”

“I’m aware of that, First Lieutenant.” Gandash rolled up the map. “I’ll think about it. Since we don’t have time for traveling today, let’s make camp. We’ll start out at first light. You’re all dismissed.”

Outside the tent, Jad muttered, “What an asshole.”

Xerxes didn’t respond.

The Gateway complex itself had only a few rooms for guests. There weren’t enough for all the mages and officers, so Gandash ordered everyone to set up camp outside. They had to care for the horses, start fires for cooking, post guards, and tend to other tasks. Not seeing any reason to waste time digging trenches and building dirt mounds, and having no indication there was any threat of enemy activity, Gandash declined to have them build fortifications.

After eating an evening meal of lentils and ale, Enusat grumbled, “What’s the point in us being lieutenants if we don’t get special treatment? We don’t even get a better camp position than the Unsighted? Stupid.”

“Randy Gandy’s trying to get the regular soldiers to like him,” Jad said. “That’s all.”

“It’s fair,” Kashtiliash pointed out.

“Maybe,” Enusat said.

“Say, why don’t we go up to the watchtower?” Jad said. “The view’s incredible.”

Xerxes stifled a yawn. “Aren’t you tired?”

“You can always catch up on sleep. Who knows when we’ll have another chance to get this view.”

Enusat stood up. “Let’s do it.”

The watchtower was just barely visible through the trees to the west. Jad led them across the camp, past the guards, and up a narrow path. Eventually, they reached the tower, which was made of stone and looked to be at least fifteen or twenty cubits tall. As Xerxes climbed the ladder and stepped out onto the tower itself, he thought back to Ligish Castle and the time he, Bel, and Captain Ishi had stood beneath the stars.

He looked up. The night sky was different here, and though he recognized a few of the constellations, most seemed to have slightly different shapes than what he was used to. The moon was different here. It was larger and yellower. Right now, it was a waxing gibbous moon, providing enough light to see some of the basic terrain details around them.

As the wind buffeted his hair, he looked out over the mountains and the trees that covered them.

Pointing to the west, Jad said, “The capital’s that way. Can’t really see much now. The haze is the smoke.”

“View’s still good,” Kashtiliash said.

Enusat spit over the edge, then crossed his arms. “I can’t believe Randy Gandy just blew off your idea, Jad. Or rather, I guess I *can* believe it. That fucker.”

Kashtiliash sniffed. "Don't say that too loud."

"Nobody can hear me. We should send someone to that village. What if the entire capital is burning down? What if there's an Abhorrent invasion?"

"It's not an invasion," Xerxes said.

"We don't know that," Enusat said.

"Look," Kashtiliash said.

He pointed to a spot north of the camp, where a trail was just barely visible in the moonlight.

"That's the path," Jad said. "Follow that, you'll reach that place I was talking about. Urmia. I remember there's a little tavern there. A few buildings."

Enusat chuckled. "A brothel too."

Jad tsked. "You're lucky *your* name doesn't rhyme with 'randy.'"

"You should talk to Gandash," Kashtiliash said, obviously directing his words at Xerxes.

"What do you mean?" Xerxes said.

"About that village."

"Yeah, good idea," Enusat said. "E might listen to you."

"Hmm," Jad said. "It might be worth it. Maybe you can convince him to check out the village. What do you think, Xerk-man? Would you be willing to give it a shot?"

Xerxes hesitated. He still hadn't talked to Gandash about the incident at the restaurant. Would it be wise to go to him and give unsolicited advice, given the circumstances? That said, he was a first lieutenant, so if he didn't do it, who would?

"Do it, Xerk," Enusat said. "Remind him that Jad and I are both from around 'ere. If the two of us go alone, we could be there and back in an hour or two."

"Wouldn't hurt," Kashtiliash said.

Xerxes looked off into the darkness in the direction of the capital and the smudge of smoke on the horizon. Then he glanced back at the trail leading away from the Gateway complex.

"Sure," he said. "No harm in trying, right?"

Chapter 58 – Tents in the Night

Xerxes left the Swordmasters behind, climbing down the ladder and heading across the camp toward Gandash's tent. Along the way, he tried to come up with the right words to use. He decided that apologizing about the restaurant fight first would be best, and thus composed a few things to say.

However, upon arriving, he found that Gandash wasn't alone. He stood hunched over more maps, accompanied by Arwia and one of the Unsighted officers. Xerxes' prepared words fled him.

Gandash looked up. "First Lieutenant?"

"Hey, Gandy, er, I mean... Captain."

"Can I help you?"

"I was wondering if I could have a moment alone. I just wanted to talk about the plan for, uh, tomorrow."

Gandash looked back down at the map. "Say what you want to say, First Lieutenant."

Xerxes glanced at Arwia. Being from Al-Ga, she had short hair and was a Nasaru mage attached to a light infantry unit. But Jad was the first lieutenant of the light infantry as well as a local, so why did Gandash have Arwia here?

"I just wanted to reiterate a suggestion from Jad that we send some people to that village to the west."

"I haven't forgotten his suggestion," Gandash said.

"But Jad and Enusat are both from here. They know the local customs and whatnot. If you sent the two of them, they could—"

"No."

Arwia looked up from the map, glancing first at Gandash and then Xerxes. "Captain, should I see myself out?"

"Don't," Gandash said. "There's no need. I'm not sending Jad and Enusat off into the night in the hopes of digging up rumors."

Xerxes was taken aback at being shut down in such a way. What was more, the quick rejection caused his jaw to tighten. "Not rumors. Intelligence. We need to know what the enemy is up to."

"No," Gandash said, with more force this time. He looked up again from the map. "There's a command structure here, Xerxes, and I'm the one who bears ultimate responsibility. I already made the decision. I'm not sending Jad and Enusat to that village. Enusat's reputation is no

secret. You think I don't know what he was up to that night I ran into the two of you after curfew on campus? Plus, everybody knows that he went to brothels back in Gula Bazaar. *That's* why those two want to go to Urmia. So I'll repeat. No."

Xerxes gritted his teeth. "Just because you're pissed at me, Gandy, doesn't mean you should ignore good advice. Even if you don't send Jad and Enusat, send *someone*."

Gandash's lips compressed. "I'm not 'pissed,' First Lieutenant. The decision has nothing to do with you."

"It has everything to do with me," Xerxes shot back, his voice louder. "You're punishing my friends because of our argument!"

"I'm *not* punishing them. It's a decision based on the big picture. And I'll remind you again, there's a command structure here. I'm the one who calls the shots, and the answer is the same as before. NO!"

His final words were shouted, not with anger or emotion, but with an iron tone that Gandash had never used on Xerxes before.

"Fine." Xerxes turned on his heel and walked away.

Outside of the tent, quite a few people were looking in his direction, making him wonder how loud the conversation had been. Feeling his neck turn hot, he forced himself not to stomp as he walked through the camp back toward his own tent. Along the way, he glanced to the side and noticed Katayoun looking in his direction, an odd expression on her face. The edges of her mouth were tight, and it looked like she was shaking her head.

Grimacing, Xerxes went to his tent and crawled inside. Sitting down on his bedroll with a huff, he put his hands on his knees and ground his teeth. After five or ten minutes passed, his temper cooled. And then he wanted to kick himself.

You knew going in that he wouldn't say yes, he told himself. So why lose your temper over it?

The more he thought about it, the stupider it all seemed.

He needed to break the news to the Swordmasters. Poking his head out of his tent, he didn't see anyone looking at him, so he went out and prowled the camp. He found Kashtiliash near his tent.

"Kash," he said. "You seen Jad and Enusat?"

The bearded mage shrugged. "A few minutes ago."

"Any idea where they are?"

"Nope. We heard you got in a yelling match with Randy Gandy. After that... not sure where they went."

"People are already talking about that?" Xerxes asked.

“It’s a small camp.”

“Right. Well, g’night.”

“Night.”

Xerxes made another round in the camp, steering clear of any possible conversations with anyone. He wasn’t in the mood for chatting. Jad and Enusat weren’t in their tents or anywhere else he thought to look. In fact, they weren’t anywhere.

Don’t tell me they heard about the yelling match and decided to run off to that damn village without permission.

For the briefest moment, he considered reporting the matter to Gandash. No. It would earn him favor with Gandash but would alienate the Swordmasters.

He found Katayoun at a campfire near her tent, but she was so engrossed in conversation with Kishar and Dasi that she didn’t notice him trying to catch her eye.

Feeling deflated by everything, he gave up, went back to his tent and tossed and turned for a few minutes before falling asleep.

**

“Xerk-man. Xerxes! Wake up!”

He cracked his eyes open and found Jad looming over him.

“What the—”

Jad clamped his hand onto Xerxes’ mouth and made a ‘shh’ sound.

Xerxes opened his eyes wider. The tent was dark, but the front flap was open, letting in some moonlight. There were dark blotches on Jad’s face, but Xerxes’ mind refused to deduce what they were.

“We need your help,” Jad whispered. “Get Katayoun!” He loosened his grip on Xerxes’ mouth and leaned back.

“What are you talking about?” Xerxes asked quietly, sitting up.

With a better view of Jad, he realized that the dark blotches on his friend were blood. And it wasn’t just on his face. He had blood all over him.

“Enusat’s hurt,” Jad said. “Bad.”

They did it. They snuck out of the camp.

“What happened?” he said. “Shouldn’t you report it?”

“No,” Jad whispered. “We’ll get in trouble. Just go find Katayoun and bring her to Enusat’s tent. All she has to do is heal him, and we can forget about this.”

Xerxes was fully awake now. Throwing the blanket off, he said, “Why Kat? Why not....” he trailed off as he considered that their company only had three Balatu mages. Other than Katayoun, they were Kishar—Katayoun’s best friend from the Dumusi starisles—and Ningal, the stick-thin girl.

All of the mages of Black Jackal considered each other friends, but the Swordmasters weren’t close enough to Ningal to trust her with something like this. And if it came down to asking Kishar or Katayoun, it made sense for him to ask Katayoun.

“Never mind,” he said. “I get it.”

Jad reached over with his non-bloody hand and gripped Xerxes’ shoulder. “I knew I could trust you. Remember, Enusat’s tent. Hurry, he’s in awful shape.”

Jad ducked out of his tent and was gone.

A moment later, Xerxes was out in the open as well. The moon had moved in the sky, and was now setting over the trees, obscuring most of the camp in mottled shadows. He glanced around to get his bearings, then made his way through the tents.

Weren’t there guards? Where were they? How did Jad and Enusat get past them?

He wasn’t sure, although given the guards were Unsighted, it wasn’t *that* unusual of an accomplishment.

He reached Katayoun’s tent on the other side of the camp. Crouching a few cubits away, he picked up a pebble and prepared to toss it against the side of the tent. No, if she was fast asleep, it wouldn’t be loud enough to wake her. He dropped the pebble and inched up to her tent. There, he used mage touch to untie the flap.

Sticking his head inside, he first confirmed that he had the right tent by making sure the sleeping occupant had red hair, then whispered. “Kat. Kat!”

No response.

Fuck. I can’t go in the tent. Can I?

“Kat!” he said, as loud as possible, while still whispering.

No response.

What would happen if he crawled into her tent and then she woke up screaming? It didn’t seem likely, but what if she was the kind of person who had nightmares or something?

He pulled his head out, found another pebble, then leaned halfway into her tent. He tossed the pebble, and it lodged in her hair.

Dammit.

He grabbed a few more pebbles. The second shot worked out better. The tiny pebble hit her cheek.

“Kat.” He waited for a moment and threw another pebble. She stirred. “Katayoun!”

Her eyes cracked open. “Wha...?”

“Kat, it’s me Xerk.”

She looked up, saw him, and at full volume said, “Xerk, what—”

“Shhh,” he said, putting his finger to his lips. Now that she was awake, he felt more comfortable slipping into the tent.

“What are you doing?” she said, sitting up.

“Someone’s hurt,” he said. “Enusat. Grab your component pouch.”

“Enusat’s hurt? How?”

“I don’t know. I just know they need help.”

“Did you tell the guards? Or—”

He shook his head curtly. “Kat, they snuck out of the camp. I don’t know what happened. Jad said a spell will fix everything.”

She sat up and shoved a mass of red hair away from her face. “Xerk...”

Hesitation played on her face.

“Kat, please. Consider it a favor.”

Her expression was turning from confusion mixed with sleep to something more like... anger.

“You’re asking me to break the rules? *And* waste melam?”

“Not break the rules,” he said. “Just keep this thing quiet for now.”

She shook her head, and the look in her eyes intensified. “We’re not supposed to cast outside of combat unless we have authorization. I can’t believe you’re asking me to do this.”

He opened his mouth, but the truth was that he was already regretting all of this. “I... it’s not like that...”

“Never mind,” she hissed. “Just get out of my tent. I’ll be out in a minute.”

He ducked out and then glanced around the camp. It seemed still and empty. It was only then he noticed how cold it was. Wrapping his arms around each other, he rubbed his forearms to bring some warmth to them.

A moment later, Katayoun was out of her tent with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders. "Which way?"

"Follow me."

Keeping his head down as much as possible, he led the way through the tents to Enusat's. Jad was crouching outside on his haunches. When he saw them approaching, he let loose a sigh of relief.

"Thanks, Katayoun," he said. "We owe you big time."

She didn't respond.

He pulled open the tent. As Katayoun entered, Xerxes glanced over her shoulder and glimpsed Enusat sitting cross-legged. He had both arms wrapped around his midsection, and was moaning.

There was blood. A lot of blood.

How did they plan to clean that up?

The tent flapped closed, and Jad turned to Xerxes. "Thanks, Xerk-man."

"What the fuck happened?" Xerxes asked.

Jad glanced around, lowered his voice even more and said, "We went to... get information. Some things happened. I'll explain the details in the morning."

They heard an indistinct sound from the tent, and saw melam flowing in the area. Then Jad pulled aside the flap to look inside. Katayoun brushed past him and walked away. Xerxes followed her.

Halfway to her tent, she stopped in her tracks and turned to face him.

"I'm done," she whispered.

"Huh?"

"It was bad enough when you beat up your own best friend. Now you're coming to me in the night asking me to break the rules? It's stupid."

"Kat...."

"Go back to your tent, and go to sleep. And just hope that this blows over. Leave me alone from now on."

Not waiting for him to say anything further, she turned and walked back to her tent.

He stood in the moonlight as he considered whether or not to go after her. He didn't.

Did she just break up with me? Nah, she's just pissed off. I'll talk some sense to her in the morning.

Chapter 59 – An Attack

Xerxes woke the next morning expecting bad things to happen. Maybe Katayoun would report the matter to Gandash. Or Enusat and Jad would get caught trying to dispose of blood-soaked clothing.

Nothing of the sort played out.

The camp stirred before dawn. They ate a simple breakfast, quickly went through a morning prayer, then broke camp and marched to the beat set by the drummers in the middle of the procession. During that entire time, he didn't get anywhere close to 'talking sense' into Katayoun. He tried his best to catch her eye, but she avoided him.

There wasn't time to press Jad and Enusat about the previous night's event, either. By the time the sky grew light, they were leaving the vicinity of the Gateway complex, and he had no idea what was going on.

The marching order Gandash prescribed had the heavy infantry in the front of the line, specifically Units One and Two, those to which Xerxes and Kashtiliash were assigned. He sent light infantry from Unit Fourteen to scout ahead. Ningsummunu, one of the group who hadn't reached the High Seer level before deployment, went with them.

Katayoun was a Balatu mage, and Gandash had the healers in the middle of the procession.

At least that meant Xerxes could talk to Kashtiliash, although he waited until they were a good thirty minutes from the Gateway.

"Any idea what happened last night?"

"They fucked up," Kashtiliash replied.

"I guessed that. But how? What went down?"

Kashtiliash shook his head. "Not sure."

The scenery was beautiful. Towering trees with furry animals scurrying up and down their trunks. Craggy rock formations. Blue skies and puffy clouds. Xerxes wasn't paying any attention to it.

Had Jad and Enusat been attacked by thieves? Had they run afoul of local constables? Had they encountered trouble in that brothel Enusat had mentioned? The possible ramifications worried Xerxes the most. Jad and Enusat were both High Seers. How could anyone have possibly inflicted such a bloody wound without them retaliating?

Late in the morning, when a lunch break was called, Xerxes headed back up the line. Katayoun huddled with Kishar and was still avoiding him. He passed her and went further down to find Jad and Enusat, who had clambered onto a boulder shortly off the trail. He could tell as he

approached that they were both in foul moods. Enusat's jaw jutted out when he wasn't chewing, and Jad slouched away from Enusat.

"What the hell happened?" Xerxes whispered as he joined them.

"Stupid shit," Enusat growled.

"That's basically it," Jad said. "There was a tavern. We had some drinks and started asking questions. We got dragged into a fight."

"Which wasn't our fault," Enusat said. He spat a seed into the underbrush.

"That's it?" Xerxes asked.

"Simple as that," Jad said.

High Seers were much stronger and tougher than Seers, who were in turn far beyond any newly-Sighted mages and of course any Unsighted. That wasn't to mention that Jad and Enusat were no slouches when it came to fighting. Was that all there was to the story? He wanted to press them. Ask for more details.

But he could sense that it wouldn't lead to anything fruitful. Maybe later, when they both calmed down.

"All right," he said, tucking in to his meal. There wasn't much conversation after that. He finished his food and went back down the line. Katayoun's attitude hadn't changed in the past few minutes. She refused to meet his eye.

"This isn't *my* fault," he muttered as he passed her, though not loud enough for her or anyone else to hear.

Back on horseback, he continued down the mountain next to Kashtiliash.

Two hours later, a scout came back, hunched low over his galloping horse.

"What's happening?" a soldier yelled at the scout as he passed. The scout didn't respond. Scant minutes later, a halt was called.

Gandash came up on horseback, accompanied by five light cavalymen, one of whom was the scout from moments before.

"Lieutenant Kashtiliash, Sergeant Arda," he said, "I want you to take all of Unit Two down the mountain. Private Tustimant here—" he gestured at the scout "—will take you to meet Lieutenant Ningsumunu. They've spotted an Abhorrent. I want it killed and the area secured. It's most likely a spawn, so you shouldn't have any trouble."

"Yes, sir, Captain," Arda said, and Kashtiliash made a muttered echo of the affirmation.

As Xerxes watched it all happening, he thought, *Why didn't he send me?*

Was Gandash punishing him? After all, Xerxes had the most experience fighting Abhorrent, so shouldn't he be the one to do the honors?

As Kashtiliash left, Gandash said, "First Lieutenant Xerxes, Sergeant Stratos, you and Unit One are our 'front line' so to speak. I want you on guard at all times. We have no reason to believe it's anything other than a lone Abhorrent. But... be ready for combat."

The wait was agonizing. The road was wide enough that Stratos had the soldiers form a line from one side to the other, while Xerxes hung back several cubits with his sword and component pouches ready. Behind them, the rest of the troops in the company waited. The breeze from earlier had died, and the sun crawled across the sky, baking them in the mid-day heat.

Flies buzzed.

Xerxes recalled the horrors of Mannemid. The journey through the Yellow Forest. Asnu Gorge. The juvenile Abhorrent ripping soldiers to shreds and dragging Bel to her death. But they'd faced that juvenile only a few dozen armed fighters, while here they had nearly two hundred. Not to mention nearly fifteen mages. And there were no bridges or cliffs. In that respect, he was glad Gandash had decided to travel this route.

It's nothing like back then.

The distant thud of galloping horse hooves reached their ears. The Unit One soldiers tensed, lifting shields and weapons. Xerxes put his hand on his component pouches.

One of the light cavalry soldiers rounded a distant bend and galloped toward them. He wasn't alone in the saddle. Someone was slumped behind him.

"Healer!" he shouted when he got close enough.

Those in the front line relayed the message, and by the time the cavalry soldier reached them, Katayoun was there.

"What happened?" she asked.

One of the heavy infantrymen from Unit Two leaned against the cavalryman.

"We got the bastard," the cavalryman said. "But the damn thing was slippery. Ripped Cossus here open before Lieutenant Kashtiliash gutted it. They're back there making sure there aren't any more of the fuckers."

Katayoun helped the wounded Cossus off the horse. He was unconscious.

Sergeant Stratos tapped Xerxes' arm. Xerxes turned his attention away from Katayoun and the wounded soldier.

Voice so low it might as well have been a whisper, Stratos said, "With all due respect, High Seer, we should be keeping our eyes on the road ahead."

“Right,” Xerxes said, and from that point, he kept his eyes locked on the path. However, he could still hear what was going on behind him.

A moment later, Katayoun said, “It’s pretty bad. He’s obviously lost a lot of blood. Minor Restoration will deal with the wound, but I can’t cast the spell to restore blood. He’ll need rest.”

Silence followed for a good minute or two.

Then, Katayoun said, “Take him back to the wagons.”

Not long after that, Kashtiliash and Sergeant Arda returned along with the rest of Unit Two. Not far behind was Ningsumunu. The latter went back down the line to confer with Gandash briefly before going back down the mountain to scout.

The line started moving only fifteen minutes later.

Once again, Xerxes found Kashtiliash.

“You all right?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“What kind was it?”

Kashtiliash shuddered. “Not some hogdown Abhorrent. I’ve never seen one like it before. Or heard of that kind.”

“You told Gandy about it, I assume?”

“Yeah. He said he’ll have a mage council later to talk about it.”

“Right.”

From that point on, Xerxes couldn’t stop eying the surrounding trees. This forest wasn’t like the Yellow Forest back on Mannemid. It was drier and smelled more earthy. The vegetation wasn’t a vibrant green, but something more mottled. There was a lot more brown. And the dust hung heavily when kicked up by feet and hooves.

As the sun continued its arc across the sky, and afternoon slowly turned into evening, the shadows deepened. Providing plenty of places for Abhorrent to hide. But the invasion here was months passed. There couldn’t be many more in the area. Could there?

About halfway down the mountain was a camping area set up for travelers. Except it wasn’t designed for nearly two hundred people plus vehicles and animals, so the camp ended up taking up much of the road as well.

After an evening meal, Gandash called the mages together in a large tent designed for conferences.

He hadn't brought bulky tables and chairs, but there were rugs, so they sat cross-legged on the ground in a rough circle.

To Xerxes' right was Kashtiliash, and to his left was short-haired Arwia. Just beyond Arwia were Kishar and Katayoun. The angle made it awkward to try to catch Katayoun's eye, not that she would allow that.

"There are a few things I need to explain," Gandash said. "First is about the fight earlier. The scouts noticed the Abhorrent lurking off the side of the road. Unit One and half of Unit Fourteen engaged it and killed it. One soldier was wounded because of... Lieutenant Kashtiliash, could you explain?"

Kashtiliash nodded. "The thing had lots of arms. Not arms like a bug or animal. But like this." He held his right arm out and flexed his biceps. "A human-like arm. The hand had fingernails that were basically claws. The men were... frightened, I guess. Sort of stunned. The thing started flipping around, right past me and into the Unsighted. By the time I killed it, Cossus was hurt. That's about it."

It was the most words Xerxes had ever heard Kashtiliash string together at one time.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Gandash said. "We're not supposed to be fighting a lot of Abhorrent on this mission. But we knew from the beginning it was possible there could be stragglers from the initial invasion. There have been reports of occasional out-of-season meteors and even some full-on meteor showers. But never more than three or four at one time, so it's not as though we'll ever have to worry about an army of the things.

"One thing to keep in mind is that most of the Unsighted soldiers haven't ever fought Abhorrent. Every single one of us *has*. I'm sure all of you remember the first time—" his jaw tightened momentarily "—the first time you actually fought one of the things. Be ready for two possibilities. One, Abhorrent you've never seen before. Two, the troops may freeze up. Their conditioning doesn't make them immune to common human emotions and reactions, after all.

"Moving on, I want to talk about that village near the Gateway complex, Urmia. Lieutenants Jad and Enusat suggested we scout the place out. At first, I didn't think it was necessary. But later I had second thoughts, so I sent Tizqar to snoop around, with spellcasting authorization since he's a Hasasu mage. Tizqar, do you mind giving us a brief summary of what you found?"

Tizqar was the overweight mage with droopy jowls. A High Seer, he had already mastered the second spell in the main line of Hasasu spells, which was an upgraded version of Base Empathics. The spell was called Greater Empathics, and it allowed the caster to sense emotions at a much greater range and with more accuracy than the lesser version. With magic like that, Hasasu mages were the perfect choices for reconnaissance missions.

Tizqar cleared his throat. "Nobody I talked to knew why the Gateway complex was abandoned. They said soldiers rushed through the village about a week ago. Since then, no one's come from the region of the capital. There was some sort of disturbance last night. Someone got killed, though I'm not sure the circumstances. It was hard to get much detail about it, as there's only a single constable in the place, and he wasn't being very cooperative."

Xerxes couldn't help but glance over at Jad and Enusat. To their credit, they were doing a commendable job of keeping straight faces.

“Thank you, Tizqar. As I suspected, seeking information in that village was a dead end. Although, I do thank Jad and Enusat for the suggestion. Now... there's something far more important to discuss. Something that could affect the whole group.”

Chapter 60 – A Bracelet and a Box

Gandash reached to where his robe folded below his neck, pulled it open, and dragged out two objects.

They were both pieces of jewelry attached to his neck by means of silver chains. He unclasped the chains and put the objects on the table. The first was a circle of bronze that looked like a bracelet. The second was a rectangular box of dark wood, trimmed with silver.

Putting his hand on the circle of bronze, Gandash said, “This is a bracelet of holding. As all of you probably considered, supplying a force like ours during a long overland journey can be difficult. This bracelet contains water, flour, salt, and other basic necessities. Enough to keep the entire company fed to our destination and back. Of course, we also have the supplies in the wagons. Add some hunting and foraging to that, and we don’t need to worry about lack of supplies.

“If I die, ownership of the bracelet will shift to one of you. If that person dies, or is dead when I die, then another will gain ownership. Whoever gains ownership will sense it. I was the one to decide the order of passing.

“The same goes for this.” He moved his hand to the rectangular box. “And in fact, this carrying case is far more important than the bracelet of holding. It’s protected by a spell formation linked to my soul. If anyone but me tries to open it, the case will destroy itself. Inside of it is a set of orders. Different orders than those we were originally given.

“The point of the operation, as stated, was to travel to the city of Puabi, then escort Lady Erabu back to the Gateway. However, that’s not really what this mission is about. Once the proper conditions are met, I can open the carrying case and reveal the true nature of our mission. The basic requirement involves getting to Puabi, although there are other circumstances in which I could open it earlier.”

He put the carrying case back into his garment. As he did, silence filled the small tent.

Gandash sat there, his back straight as a board, looking around at the mages as if expecting someone to speak or ask a question. When no one did, he continued, “I was told we would have a secondary mission and that I shouldn’t mention it to any of you until after we were on the road. Thus, this meeting. There’s no need to reveal this to any of the Unsighted. And I wouldn’t even tell you if it weren’t for the fact that the box could pass to you if I die.

“It worries me that we ran into an Abhorrent. It’s been months since the Ira starisles were supposedly ‘cleared’ of the things. Though we did know it was possible there could be stragglers, finding one only a day’s journey from the Gateway is another matter.” He frowned. “I don’t like it. However, my orders were clear. Regardless of the circumstances, I’m to lead the company across the continent to Puabi.” Yet again, he looked around the circle of mages. “I expected more surprise from you,” he said. “Maybe some questions.”

Ningal raised her hand.

Gandash smiled faintly. “There’s no need for hand-raising. If you have questions, just ask.”

“Do you have any idea what the real mission is about?” she asked.

“Unfortunately, no. The secret instructions were given to me by Archon—” Gandash cut himself off. “Never mind. It doesn’t matter who gave them to me. I was told it’s a vital mission and that we should make haste to Puabi. Any other questions?”

Xerxes had questions. Had Shabadras had given Gandash this mission? Was it connected to the Eternal Father Cult? Did Gandash really have no idea what the true mission was? But he knew his friend wouldn’t be able to answer them, so he kept his mouth shut.

Gandash let some time pass. “In that case, I adjourn this meeting. Get some sleep. Tomorrow we’ll be out of the mountains, and we’ll travel hard and fast. The sooner we get to Puabi, the better.”

The mages got to their feet to leave.

“First Lieutenant Xerxes, do you mind staying for a moment?” Gandash said.

Xerxes’ heart flip-flopped as he sat back down. *He knows about Jad and Enusat, doesn’t he?*

When the other mages were gone and the tent flap closed, Xerxes looked at his friend.

Gandash was sitting there cross-legged, looking down at the ground in front of him. A moment ago, he’d seemed just like the important military officer he was supposed to be. But now he slumped, and his jaw worked as though he were trying to come up with words to speak.

Xerxes thought back to when they had just lost Bel and how Gandash seemed like a husk of himself. He felt a lump in his throat. “Gandy, about what happened at the restaurant—”

“Stop,” Gandash said.

Xerxes closed his mouth. *This is where it all comes crashing down, right?*

A moment of silence passed.

“I was an asshole,” Gandash said. “I said some harsh things, and I’m sorry. You know I don’t handle my liquor well. It was stupid of me to start pounding down that ale.” He shook his head sharply. “Wording it like that makes it seem like I’m trying to shift responsibility. I’m not. It was my fault. And I’ve even sworn off alcohol because of it.”

“Gandy, it wasn’t your fault,” Xerxes said.

“Ultimately, it was. I’m not saying that you handled yourself perfectly. But everything I said was... worded badly. And of course, some of it was wrong.” He looked up. “I’m sorry, Xerk. Really.”

Xerxes didn't know what to say. Ever since the scrap with Gandash, he'd been worried about getting in trouble and second-guessing himself for getting into a physical conflict with his friend. But now, it seemed Gandash blamed... himself?

"Gandy, you don't need to be apologizing. We're men, right? So what if we have a yelling match and then punch each other's lights out? It's water under the bridge. Although, I know I was in the wrong, too. I should have just walked away, not start fighting back. Thanks for, well, you know."

A grin flashed across Gandash's face briefly. "So, you're fine with everything?"

"Of course. We grew up together, right? Best friends, no matter what. One day they'll sing songs about us. The Swordmaster and the Strategist, they'll call us. Right?"

Gandash chuckled. "That's hard to imagine."

"You never know," Xerxes said. He hesitated briefly. "By the way, I get it. The stuff you said was exaggerated. And not well-worded. But you weren't the only one who was drinking. After I calmed down and got the alcohol out of me, I understood what you meant."

He paused for breath, and Gandash just looked at him, so he continued, "We haven't had much time together since we got separated on Sin-Amuhhu. You're a fancy officer. I'm... just a normal mage. I made some new friends, and it might seem like I decided I liked them more. But it's not true. And about Kat, I swear to you, Gandy, I never once was trying to 'flaunt' her."

"I know," Gandash said, and he looked down again. "That was the most rotten thing I said. I wish... you could just forget that."

"I already forgot it," Xerxes said, wishing he could smile, but failing to find it in him.

Xerxes wanted to keep talking. To tell Gandash that he understood about Bel, who his friend had loved for years before losing only days after he'd professed his feelings to her. But he knew it would be a mistake, whether or not Gandash was drunk.

Gandash looked up. He nodded. Hesitated a moment. "Xerk, a blind person could tell that something happened between you and Katayoun. You were inseparable for a while. Now she's not even looking at you."

Xerxes opened his mouth. To say what? *Enusat defied your orders, killed someone, got hurt, and I got Kat to heal him, so she's pissed?* Instead, he lifted his shoulders in a shrug. "Women," he said.

Gandash laughed softly. "Say no more. I hope you can work things out. Just... please don't let it interfere with this mission, got it?"

"Of course not."

"I have a bad feeling about this whole thing. I have no idea why we have these secret orders, and... I can only imagine what's in store once we get to Puabi."

“I get it.”

“Don’t tell anybody that, obviously.”

“I know.” Xerxes licked his lips. “Gandy, can I ask you something? And you don’t have to answer if you don’t want.”

“Sure.”

“Did you get the orders from Archon Shabdras?”

Gandash’s brow furrowed, and he sat with pursed lips for many long seconds. “I shouldn’t say. Why does it matter?”

“Because I did a job for him. I’m not supposed to talk about it. But I have a feeling that if he’s the one who gave you the secret mission, then... the Eternal Father Cult is probably involved. And if the cult is involved....”

“Then so are the Abhorrent.”

The two friends looked at each other.

“If you promise to keep it confidential,” Gandash said, “then I’ll say that, yes, it was Shabdras. I suppose it’s not a huge surprise, considering the big picture.”

“I guess not,” Xerxes agreed. “But still worrisome.”

“Agreed.”

They chatted for a few more minutes, just like old times, talking about gossip and rumor, speculating about the future, and reminiscing about the past. Gandash even brought up Bel. Somehow, they talked about her without shedding tears.

Finally, Xerxes excused himself.

He headed back to his own tent wrestling with emotions from different sides of the spectrum. On the one hand, he was glad that he and Gandash had gotten past their fight. On the other hand, he wasn’t happy about keeping secrets from him. Jad and Enusat’s midnight escapade and Katayoun’s involvement hung over his head even more than before.

Katayoun’s behavior hadn’t changed. Her shoulder was glued to Kishar’s, which meant that if he wanted to talk to her, he’d have to make a scene. For now, he would refrain. But if she didn’t give him a chance to talk to her soon, he wasn’t going to just sit around and do nothing.

The next day, Units Three and Four were rotated into vanguard position in the line. Short-haired Kuri and Teucer of the Swordmasters were now up front, while Kashtiliash and Xerxes brought up the rear.

“Is this a punishment?” Kashtiliash said.

“I think it means we get to relax,” Xerxes answered.

The morning passed without incident. By evening, they were out of the mountains and into the foothills. Xerxes could now see the lands below stretching out into the distance. They were brown and mottled, similar to the mountains they’d just traveled through.

Two days, he thought. That was how long he was going to give Katayoun before he forced her to talk to him.

That night around dinner, Enusat came up with an idea. “There are two main ways to Puabi. North by the Brocade Road, and south through the Nergal Badlands. If Randy Gandy is smart, ’e’ll take us by the northern route.”

“Why?” Kashtiliash said.

“Because the Brocade Road goes through Eresh,” Jad answered. “Which is known for its brothels.”

“Fuck off, Jad!” Enusat said. “It’s because the Brocade Road would be faster.”

“There’s no way it’s faster,” Jad said. “It’s *leagues* longer.”

“Think, Jad! Going through the Nergal Badlands might be *shorter*. But it’s not faster.”

“Hold on, guys,” Xerxes said. “You have a whole area around here named after the Nergal? And it’s called *badlands*? Sounds ominous.”

“It sounds worse than it is,” Enusat said. “But the terrain is rough, and the weather is bad. I’m telling you, the northern path will be faster.”

Jad stroked his chin. “You might be right. What do you think, Xerk-man? Is it worth bringing up to Randy Gandy?”

Xerxes had just patched up his relationship with Gandash, and the last thing he wanted to do was create another source of tension. “Sure, I’ll bring it up to him when I can.”

Except he didn’t. Because everything changed the next day.

Chapter 61 – Base Empathics

As they broke camp the following morning, a figure appeared to the west. A man in a blue garment and a yellow hat, with a sharp goatee, rode out of the mountains on a mule.

The company was still forming as the man galloped toward them. Xerxes and Kashtiliash were again on rear guard duty, so they were among the first to see him coming.

“Who the hell is this?” Kashtiliash asked.

Xerxes checked the position of his sword on his back. “My thoughts exactly.”

The man neared. “I need a meeting with the ranking officer!”

His mule, surprisingly nimble and responsive, heeded his commands as he reined it to a stop just short of the heavy infantry units in the rearmost position.

“Did you hear me?” the yellow-robed man asked. “I’d like to talk to the person in charge.”

“State your name,” Sergeant Stratos said.

“I’m Constable Daniyel from Urmia.”

The sergeant just looked at him. “Is that supposed to mean something to me?”

“Urmia,” Daniyel said. “The village on the other side of the Gateway complex.”

“Okay...?”

“There was a murder, and I need to talk to your commanding officer about it.”

“Wait here. I’ll go convey your request.”

Stratos trotted up the line toward Gandash. Meanwhile, Kashtiliash looked at Xerxes. “Murder?” the bearded mage said.

Xerxes’ lips tightened. Off to the side, Daniyel simply sat on his mule, casually studying the line of troops.

Stratos returned three minutes later.

“Captain Gandash said he’ll see you,” he said to Daniyel. “First Lieutenant Xerxes here will accompany you.”

Xerxes nodded at the constable. “Come with me,” he said, then sent his horse forward.

Daniyel urged his mule forward until he was riding directly next to Xerxes.

“The captain’s name is Gandash?” the constable asked as they proceeded.

“That’s right.”

“What’s he like?”

“Smart.”

“Ah.” Daniyel smiled, took off his hat, and wiped his brow with a kerchief he pulled from his belt. “By the way, on the night you came through the Gateway, did anyone from your group leave the camp and come to our village?”

Keeping his eyes straight ahead, Xerxes said, “The captain sent someone to scout around. Said he talked to you. Did you forget?”

Daniyel smiled. “Ohhh, right. So Tizqar *was* from your company. Good to know.”

Toward the middle of the line, Gandash was mounted and flanked by his personal guard. When Xerxes approached with the constable, Gandash called out in greeting, “Constable?”

Daniyel replied, “Captain. I’m following up on the conversation I had with High Seer Tizqar. I’m not sure if you remember the details. A merchant named Firooz was killed in the night by an unknown assailant.”

Gandash’s mount was a mighty stallion, which placed him nearly a cubit above the constable. Looking down with narrowed eyes, he said, “Lieutenant Tizqar reported the basics of the situation.”

“Did he mention that the cause of death was a blow to the neck that came close to severing poor Firooz’s head?”

“Very grisly. Has new evidence come to light?”

“It has.” The constable glanced at the soldiers present, as well as some of the nearby mages, including Tizqar himself. “Perhaps a discussion in private would be appropriate?”

Gandash sighed. “I’m on a tight timetable, and as you can see, my entire company is ready to move. I’d rather not waste any time.”

Daniyel nodded. “What if we simply move a few cubits away?” He gestured off the road, where the trees were thin. “Perhaps over there?”

Gandash considered the proposal. “Fine. First Lieutenant Xerxes will accompany us.”

The two mages and constable rode about fifteen cubits away, to where they could speak in relative privacy.

“What’s this about, Constable?” Gandash asked.

Daniyel smiled and rubbed the back of his neck with his kerchief. “I’m embarrassed to say that, after further investigation, I suspect someone from your company might have been involved in the death of the merchant.”

“Death? Or murder? There’s a distinction between the two.”

The constable took a deep breath. “Murder. In the initial chaos of the event, it was difficult to make heads or tails of what happened. After all, High Seer Tizqar visited at first light, when the shocking scene had just been discovered. There was a fight in the gambling hall a few hours before. Lots of stories to listen to. Now that I have a clearer idea of what happened, I fear that the merchant wasn’t killed in the chaos of the brawl. He was killed at roughly the same time, except outside of the establishment. By a stranger. Or more precisely, two strangers.”

Xerxes tried to keep his face as still as stone. A drifting breeze stirred robes, hair, and manes.

“Do you have a physical description?” Gandash asked.

“I do. The suspects wore garments similar to those worn by your men. Just now, I confirmed that your uniforms are blue and white, and that your men wear black girdles. The officers have a fringe on their garments, but witness testimony was conflicted as to whether or not the suspects had such an adornment. In any case, there were two assailants, one short, with a large nose, the other taller.”

Fuck. FUCK.

Gandash turned and looked at Xerxes for a long moment. Xerxes held his gaze.

“What else?” Gandash said, returning his attention to the constable. “How do you know it was a murder and not self-defense?”

“Truth be told,” Daniyel said, “I don’t know. That’s why I’d like to talk to the suspects. That said, given the circumstances, as well as details of the crime scene and witness testimony I didn’t have access to when I first talked to High Seer Tizqar, I’d say it’s probable the killer, or killers, were not acting in self-defense.”

Gandash sat atop his horse for a long moment as the breeze blew.

Then Daniyel lifted his finger and said, “Oh. I almost forgot. One of the attackers was stabbed in the abdomen. It would have been quite bloody, I imagine. And painful. The kind of injury an Unsighted would probably die of. But a company as large as yours surely has Balatu mages who could heal such wounds.”

His choice of words didn’t go unnoticed by Gandash. “I’m not a fan of wordplay, Constable,” he said. “Are you leveling an accusation against me?”

Daniyel ducked his head. “Of course not, Captain Gandash.”

“You know something about magic. That’s not what I would expect of a village constable. Is it because you grew up near the Gateway?”

“I grew up in Puabi, actually. Served there as a teen, and as you might know, there are more mages there than any other city on Jehannemid. Anyway, I ended up in the capital later on. But I saw too much blood and death, so I ‘retired’ to the mountains, hoping to get away from it all. Guess the Pontifarch had other plans for me.”

“I see.” Gandash closed his eyes for a moment. Opened them. “Constable, please return to the rear of the line and wait with Sergeant Stratos.”

Daniyel tugged on the reins, but he stopped his mule before they went far. He looked over his shoulder. “Captain, I should remind you that I’m an officer of the law, duly appointed. I already sent a preliminary report to the capital. And I have the authority—”

“Constable,” Gandash interrupted, “I would in turn remind you that I’m a captain in the Military Magic branch of the Sin-Amuhhu Combined Armed Forces. I’m here at the behest of High Archon Kingallu and the Sin-Amuhhu Mage Parliament. If I wanted to, I could tell you to fuck off and never bother me again. In fact, I could tell the entire Jehannemid Mage Parliament to fuck off, and they couldn’t do a thing about it.” He let a long moment of silence build. “Instead... I’ll look into the matter.”

Daniyel flashed a smile that involved an upturn of his lips, yet didn’t touch the rest of his face. “Understood, Captain. I’ll go find Sergeant Stratos.”

After the detective was out of earshot, Gandash said, “Xerk, do you know anything about this?”

Xerxes opened his mouth but hesitated.

Before he could come up with words, Gandash said, “Never mind. Let me simplify the question. Did you go to that village?”

“No, Gandy. I didn’t.” He closed his mouth and considered what to explain.

Again, Gandash didn’t let him. “Go get Jad and Enusat. Also Tizqar.”

Xerxes complied. He reached his two friends, who were fidgeting on horseback.

“Come with me,” Xerxes said, then went down the line toward Tizqar.

Jad heeled his horse closer to Xerxes. “What’s going on, Xerk-man?” he asked, almost under his breath. “People are saying a constable came down from the mountains.”

Keeping his own voice low, Xerxes said, “It’s about what happened in that village. The constable is saying it’s murder.”

“Fuck. What did you tell them?”

“Nothing,” Xerxes said. “But you and Enusat had better get your story straight, because this isn’t going away.”

Jad fell back to confer with the shorter mage.

They picked up Tizqar and were soon off the road again with Gandash.

Gandash wasted no time. “Here’s the short version,” he said and recapped Daniyel’s story.

Xerxes kept his gaze straight ahead, but out of the corner of his eye, he could see Jad and Enusat sitting very stiffly in their saddles.

“So now we come to the big question,” Gandash said. “First Lieutenant Jad. Lieutenant Enusat. Were you there? In the village?”

The breeze blew. Xerxes turned his head slightly to look at his two friends. Jad’s lips were tight. Enusat licked his.

Finally, Enusat said, “Yes. But it wasn’t murder, Gandy. I swear to the ’oly Pontifarch. I was defending myself! I just—”

“Stop,” Gandash said. “First Lieutenant Jad, am I to understand that it was Enusat who struck the blow?”

Jad hesitated briefly. “That’s right. But I was there with him. I can tell you what happened.”

“Go ahead.”

“Enusat... got friendly with a woman we met at the gambling hall. One thing led to another, and... well, he didn’t know the woman was married. A fight broke out. I don’t think we had anything to do with it. But somehow, the woman’s husband showed up right when Enusat was getting his clothes back on. He had some thugs with him and they chased us out back. They attacked us. We defended ourselves. Next thing I knew, the merchant was dead. The thugs ran. That’s about it.”

Gandash looked at Enusat. “You fucked some man’s wife? Then killed him?”

Xerxes expected Enusat to get angry, but instead, the short mage wilted.

“I didn’t know, Gandy,” he said. “I mean, I didn’t *really* know. She threw some ’ints out. But *she* was seducing *me*. I’m telling you, that’s what ’appened. And the man got the jump on me. The thug ’it me from behind, knocked me down. Then the fucker stabbed me. In the gut! It was after that I... I struck back.”

“You almost decapitated him,” Gandash said.

Enusat’s mouth opened a closed a few times.

“This is what’s going to happen,” Gandash continued. “Tizqar, you’re here because you’re a Hasasu mage. I want you to cast Base Empathics and pay close attention to the questions I ask Enusat and to his answers.”

“You’re going to read his mind?” Jad asked, looking incredulous.

“Y-you think I’m lying?” Enusat blubbered.

“It doesn’t matter what I think,” Gandash snapped. “And you both know full well that Base Empathics isn’t mind-reading. Tizqar, get ready to cast the spell.”

Tizqar reached down to untie his component pouch but fumbled in the process. The drawstring knot was tight.

“Gandy, this isn’t fair,” Enusat said. “You’re not supposed to cast mind spells on us. It’s against regulations.”

“I have the authority to circumvent those regulations,” Gandash said.

“That bastard stabbed me. ’Ow could it not be self-defense?”

Gandash didn’t respond.

Tizqar got his component pouch open and pulled out some glittering powder. “I’m ready,” he said.

“Lieutenant Enusat,” Gandash said, “I expect you to answer all the questions quickly. If you stall for time, I’ll have Tizqar cast the spell again and make *you* pay for the components, including pills to compensate for lost melam. Tizqar, cast the spell.”

Tizqar traced the Hasasu Isten rune, and melam flowed. “Go ahead, sir.”

“Is your name Enusat?” Gandash asked.

Enusat gritted his teeth. “Yes.”

“Are you a fish?”

“No.”

“Is the sky blue?”

“Yes.”

“Are you naked?”

“No.”

Gandash looked at Tizqar. “Is that good enough for a baseline?”

“I think so,” the pudgy mage replied.

Gandash returned his attention to Enusat. “Were you in the mountain village called Urmia, the night we arrived here on Jehannemid?”

Enusat ground his teeth even harder. “Yes.”

“Did you kill someone that night?”

A long pause. “Yes.”

“Who struck the first blow?”

“They did.”

“Could you have ended the fight without killing the victim?”

“That’s not a fair question,” Enusat said. “It’s more complicated—”

“Yes or no,” Gandash interrupted. “Could you have ended the fight without taking a life?”

Enusat squirmed in the saddle. “No.”

“Could you have prevented the fight from happening in the first place?”

Enusat’s jaw jutted out. “No.”

Tizqar cleared his throat. “One minute left.”

“You were injured,” Gandash continued. “How did you heal yourself?”

Enusat blinked several times.

“How did you heal yourself?”

Fucking hell, Xerxes thought. This is it.

He was sure Enusat was going to say that Katayoun healed him. What else could he say, with a Hasasu mage probing him with Base Empathics?

“I took a pill.”

“What?” Gandash blurted. “You had a healing pill?”

“You ’eard what I said.”

“Where’d you get the pill?”

“Bought it at Gula Bazaar.”

Gandash's gaze narrowed. "Did anyone assist you the night of the... conflict?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"Jad," Enusat said, jerking his head in his friend's direction.

"Anyone other than Jad?"

"No."

"Was anyone else with you in the village besides Jad?"

"No."

At that point, Tizqar raised his hand. "Spell's done," he said.

Gandash nodded. "Jad, Enusat, you're dismissed. Xerxes, Tizqar, you stay here."

Chapter 62 – Dancing by Firelight

When Jad and Enusat were gone, Gandash said, “Well, Tizqar?”

“You want me to go statement by statement?”

“No, just your overall impression.”

Tizqar scratched one of his droopy jowls. “There’s no question about it: he killed the man. And he believes he acted in self-defense. As for whether he could have prevented the fight from happening... it’s hard to say what he thinks. I think even he’s not sure. In terms of how he healed himself and the mention of a pill...” Tizqar trailed off, took a deep breath, then exhaled sharply. “It’s strange. I felt like he was telling the truth. At the same time, he seemed... smug. If I was to guess, he did use a pill of some sort, but there’s more to the story that he didn’t reveal. Maybe he stole the pill or something like that. Regardless, someone besides Jad must have helped him out when he was hurt.” Tizqar’s eyes flitted ever so briefly in Xerxes direction. “If you want, I could cast again and you could narrow the questions down.”

“There’s no need. Save your melam. And since this is an authorized use of spell components, you can add it to your list for compensation.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Head back. I know rumors are going to fly, but keep the details of the interrogation confidential.”

Tizqar nodded and went back to the line, leaving Xerxes and Gandash alone.

“Did you know about this?” Gandash asked.

Xerxes felt like he was on the edge of a cliff. No, not a cliff. A tightrope.

“I did know,” he said. “I mean, I knew he was in a fight and that he got hurt. I didn’t know he killed someone.”

Gandash closed his eyes and bowed his head.

“It was after you and I got into that argument,” Xerxes continued. “I think that’s when they snuck out of the camp. I looked for them but couldn’t find them. I went to sleep. Some time in the middle of the night, Jad came and woke me up. Said Enusat was hurt. So....”

Xerxes felt sick to his stomach. He was willing to accept responsibility for whatever happened, but it didn’t seem fair to drag Katayoun into it. In fact, it *wasn’t* fair. He tried to think of a way to word things that would keep her name out of it. It wasn’t possible. The company only had three Balatu mages: Katayoun, Ningal, and Kishar. If Xerxes lied or tried to hide the truth, all Gandash had to do was have Tizqar cast another spell, and he could get to the bottom of the issue.

“I get it,” Gandash said, opening his eyes. “I’m not stupid. Go get Enusat and the constable.”

What did that mean? That Gandash had already put two and two together and knew that Katayoun was involved?

Xerxes tried to concoct a theory about it, but his mind was too muddled. Minutes later, he was back with Daniyel and Enusat.

“Constable, I can confirm that Lieutenant Enusat is the one who killed the merchant,” Gandash said. “However, based on Hasasu spellcasting, I’ve determined that the lieutenant acted in self-defense.”

Daniyel glanced at Enusat. “Even if it was self-defense, Captain, I’m sure you know the law. The guilty party must still pay the fee.”

“I’m aware. Lieutenant Enusat, how much money do you have with you?”

“Six shekels.”

“You’ll forfeit three shekels to the constable. Constable Daniyel, consider those shekels a down payment on the rest of the fee. Lieutenant Enusat will owe a balance of four thousand nine hundred and ninety-seven shekels, due at a time to be determined later.”

“Five thousand fucking shekels?” Enusat said. “Are you crazy? I’ve never ’ad more than a few ’undred saved up in my entire life!”

“You can appeal my decision later. Beyond that, I’m demoting you to the rank of private.”

“What?” Enusat shouted.

Gandash glared at him. “There’s no getting around this, Private. The law’s the law. It doesn’t matter who we are. What did you think would happen? That I’d cover up your actions? Drive the constable away? The truth is that I should have you arrested and sent to the capital for trial. But our mission is more important. So for now, you’ll be free under my eye. After the mission’s over and we’re back on Sin-Amuhhu, the Parliament there will decide what happens to you. Now produce the down payment and give it to Constable Daniyel.”

Enusat glared daggers at Gandash before digging into a saddle bag and pulling out three shekels which he tossed to Daniyel.

“Get back in line, Private,” Gandash said. Once alone with Daniyel and Xerxes, he continued, “There you have it, Constable. Are you satisfied?”

“To a degree,” Daniyel said. “Normally speaking, I wouldn’t let a killer just ride off into the sunset based on a three-shekel down payment. But I get the feeling there’s something unusual going on with you and your company.”

“A mage is too valuable of an asset for me to give up, even if they are involved in a crime. Besides, we’ll be returning to the Gateway complex after certain tasks have been accomplished.

If you uncover more pertinent evidence, you can share it with me then. And I'd be happy to bring you with me up to Sin-Amuhhu to be a part of the trial."

"Just don't forget me on your way back from Puabi. That is where you're heading, isn't it?"

"We're actually traveling to the city of Eresh, north of Puabi, and I remember you saying you're from the area. Do you recommend the northern route or the southern route?"

The constable thought for a moment. "At this time of year... go north. It's much more of a straight shot, and you won't have to deal with the horrible terrain in the badlands. Besides, the rains are coming, and they hit harder in the south."

"Thank you, Constable."

Daniyel hefted the three shekels. "It's my pleasure, Captain. I'll have some formal paperwork drawn up for when you return. Will you be staying in Eresh for a time or coming back immediately?"

"We'll be back straight away."

"I see. Make good time, and you'll reach Eresh before the rains come."

"By the way, we noticed smoke around the capital. And the Gateway complex was unguarded. Any chance you know the situation?"

Daniyel put the shekels into a pouch and put them in his robe. "Riots. My understanding is all troops were recalled to secure the palace. Something like that. It shouldn't affect your mission."

"I see."

"Good luck, Captain. See you soon."

**

Once out of the mountains, it was easier to travel, the road being wider and flatter. There were no clouds in the sky, and the sun beat down on them relentlessly.

Gandash pushed them hard. Not to the point of exhaustion, but close. Everyone looked forward to when it came time to set up camp.

In the evening of the first day of travel, the Swordmasters ate around a campfire near their tents.

"Every single person in the company is staring at us," Enusat grumbled. "I swear to the Pontifarch I 'eard Dasi call me a murderer. The bitch. Course, it's that damn fucker Gandy's fault."

"Calm down," Kashtiliash said, taking a bite of hard cheese.

“I’ll calm down when Randy fucking Gandy’s paid in full. And this time it’s going to be painful. I don’t give a fuck if it’s against the rules. I’ll just leave afterward. Disappear. I’m *from* Jehannemid. I could vanish so good they’d never find me.”

“I’m with you,” Jad said. “We could go to the Cowry Coast. Join a pirate ship or something. Or maybe we could set ourselves up as assassins.”

Xerxes caught Kashtiliash’s gaze. They both rolled their eyes.

But Jad and Enusat were far from finished with their venting.

“Assassins,” Enusat said, looking thoughtful. “Not an ’alf-bad idea. In fact, we could start earning a reputation before we left the company. If you know what I mean.” He flashed a malicious grin, and Jad chuckled in response.

This is going too far. “Say, at what point are we going to do some sparring? We don’t want to lose what Rabya taught us.”

“Good point,” Teucer said.

“It’s too dark now, but if we stop early enough tomorrow, we can squeeze in thirty minutes of practice. There are enough trees that we could practice Swordmasters’ Vengeance. We know there are Abhorrent around. We could end up using it at some point.”

“Yeah, true,” Jad said.

The following day, Kashtiliash joined Xerxes in trying to get Jad and Enusat to calm down. At lunch, their efforts only angered the other two. They did some sparring before dinner, which helped vent some steam. As time passed, their work had a cumulative effect.

By the third day of travel, Jad was back to normal and joined in the attempts to get Enusat into a similar mental state. On the fifth day of travel, Enusat finally stopped obsessing over his situation. He still grumbled and cursed Gandash—in private—but none of it was as vitriolic as before.

Xerxes was uncertain what Gandash thought of the incident and his own role in it. It didn’t seem appropriate to force a conversation over the matter, and Gandash was always working on something. Xerxes didn’t get the sense his friend was angry at him. However, they didn’t have any time to talk.

Over the course of the days that passed, the biggest open-ended question was Katayoun. Before, he’d been determined to force her to talk to him. But after everything that happened, he decided against that. He was glad he did. Around the same time that Enusat calmed down, he caught her eye for the first time in days.

It only lasted a brief second, but it was a definite connection. The next day, it happened again in the morning. Then again at lunch. In the evening, after the camp was set, it happened again, and this time he was sure she’d smiled at him.

Now the big question shifted: when to approach her?

The next day, Xerxes and Kashtiliash were in the vanguard position yet again when scouts brought word that a group of horsemen was blocking the road ahead. They turned out to be representatives of a local warlord who demanded payment for passage. Gandash had the first lieutenants convene about the situation.

“Is the asshole serious?” Dasi asked.

“He’s serious,” Xerxes said. “He claimed he could field three hundred soldiers if we don’t comply.”

“I’m not in the mood for this,” Gandash said, scratching at his face where his black eye was now little more than a shadow. “Crush them. I want Units One through Three in a straight line. No fancy Arrowhead formations or anything like that. Units Eight and Nine behind the heavy infantry. First Lieutenant Dasi, I want you and your heavy cavalry in reserve. Unless necessary, no spellcasting. This will be a good opportunity for us to see some real action without being in any serious danger.”

“Can we mages at least fight in the line?” Xerxes asked.

Gandash hesitated briefly. “No. A stray arrow or knife could take you down. Stay behind the line unless absolutely necessary.”

Xerxes didn’t get the sense Gandash had mentioned a stray knife to conjure the memory of Gem. But regardless of his intent, it made Xerxes think back to that fateful street brawl. Gandash was right. And thus, the mages stayed behind the line.

The warlord fielded far fewer than three hundred men. And in an act of obvious ineptitude, he sent them charging right into the line of heavy infantry.

Units Eight and Nine peppered them with arrows and javelins, killing scores before they reached the line. They kept coming, though, and the Sin-Amuhhu soldiers fell upon them with spears and short swords. The fighting had only been going for about five minutes when it seemed obvious it would end in a rout.

However, that was when the enemy punched a hole in the line, led by a burly man wielding a longsword. The Unsighted troops tried to close the line, but they were obviously leery of someone who practiced the Epitome.

“The Epitome?” Kashtiliash said. “Here?”

Xerxes gripped his longsword in the Skyward guard. “Jad mentioned it was more common in the east.”

The burly man slashed and stabbed, and the Unsighted troops barely kept him at bay.

“First Lieutenant Xerxes,” Gandash yelled. “Handle that!”

Xerxes trotted forward and, without any preamble, launched into the Squinting Slash, just as Mystic Rabya had taught him.

The move caught the man completely by surprise, and Xerxes' blade bit into his shoulder.

"Fuck!" the man shouted, then threw a wild downward strike.

Xerxes parried it, then came around with a blow that landed right at the base of the man's neck. To Xerxes' surprise, the blow took the man's head off.

After that, the rout turned into a massacre. Bandits fell like wheat during the harvest, and once about half of them were dead, they turned and ran. Dasi and her heavy cavalry were never needed.

Not a single member of the company lost their life. There were a handful of minor injuries which the Unsighted surgeons attended to. Two troops sustained more severe injuries that required spellcasting from the Balatu mages.

Xerxes' quick dispatching of the enemy longsword fighter was the talk of the company. Soldiers and mages alike slapped his shoulder and congratulated him on a beautiful killing blow.

That night, Gandash called for an early rest and a banquet of sorts. Everyone dressed nice. Xerxes even brought out the thumb ring and necklace he'd bought on Sin-Amuhhu. Gandash allowed for drinking and feasting, though he emphasized that being hungover in the morning would not be tolerated. It wasn't lost on Xerxes that Gandash himself didn't drink anything.

The drinking led to singing and dancing.

At one point, after several tankards of ale, Xerxes saw Katayoun dancing in the firelight. The way she undulated, her hips swaying, her arms moving like waves... stirred something inside him. Then her eyes met his, and the world disappeared. Behind her was the fire, its flames silhouetting some parts of her but illuminating others. As she danced, the faint smile on her face took his breath away.

The music stopped, and she strode across the sand, then dropped to her knees next to him. She was wearing the choker he'd bought her.

"Hey," he said.

She draped her arms around his neck and leaned close to him. Like usual, she smelled of oranges and strawberries, except there was also a hint of alcohol on her breath. She slowly leaned closer. And closer.

"Um, about—"

"Shut up," she said, and their lips met.

He heard some cheering around him, perhaps from his friends. Things blurred.

Later, after the music was over and there was no more food or alcohol, he and Katayoun walked through the camp leaning against each other. They stopped at her tent.

He wanted to go inside with her. She pulled him to her, and they kissed.

“Not this time,” she said.

Had she read his mind? Or had he said something out loud without realizing it?

Then she ducked into the tent, and he bit his lip as hard as he could to force himself not to jump in after her.

Back in his own tent, he lay down on his bedroll and thanks to the alcohol, he fell asleep.

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If anyone was hungover the following morning, they hid it well. They broke camp and got on the road again.

Despite what had occurred with Katayoun the night before, things didn't go back to normal between them. She remained glued to other people and even seemed to avoid him in the evenings.

However, he wasn't worried. Their gazes still met occasionally. It didn't matter if she was toying with him or simply confused or hesitant. He knew he had her heart. And all he had to do was wait long enough for things to get back to normal.

Days passed. The weather never changed. It was obvious to everyone why the badlands were uninhabited and not well-traveled. They were dusty and dry, and the road contained twists and turns that made it hard to sustain a rapid pace. Just about every other day, it seemed, they ran into areas where rainy season floods had washed out the road in months past. Most such places had been repaired well enough that a handful of people could carefully cross them. But for a huge group like Black Jackal Company, it often required hours making sturdy repairs.

There were occasional signs of habitations. Villages built into cliffs, barely visible from the road. A crossroads with a few dilapidated buildings. An oasis, around which was built a permanent bazaar of sorts. They avoided such places or simply passed through them.

During the second week, they passed through an area where sand dunes stretched as far as the eye could see, and there were no areas of standing water.

Thankfully, Gandash had the 'holding bracelet' that provided them with water regardless of the weather or surroundings. The holding bracelet didn't contain anything that helped with heat, though, nor the dust or sun. They were like grinding stones that never stopped turning.

Eventually the company left the desert areas and got back into lands with trees and hills. The shade they provided and the occasional breeze that rushed through them made the days of travel

more bearable. They soon reached the third week. They only had another seven days of travel before they reached Puabi.

That was when everything changed.