

Chapter 23 – Something Big...

“What’s the situation?” Aban Saddi asked.

Walking to the table, Shemesh said, “While investigating the incident in Garden Terrace, we followed a lead that took us out toward the city walls. We found a warehouse there, with a tunnel leading to the outside. Probably built by smugglers, but controlled by fucking cultists. Some Abhorrent ambushed us. Now they’re loose in the city.”

Aban Saddi nodded. “Something similar happened to Ninsunu.”

Shemesh exhaled heavily. “Considering how it played out, I... I have no choice but to admit I was wrong.” He looked at Ninsunu. “You’re right, Nina. At least about their goal. They’re after *us*.”

“But if that’s the case, why have they been slaughtering the Unsighted?” Aban Saddi asked.

“If they’re after melam, then it makes sense,” Ninsunu said. “The Unsighted have melam within them, just not huge stockpiles like we do. Even flies are meat, right?”

“I never thought I’d see the day,” Shemesh said, “when I agreed completely with Nina. But yes, that analogy makes sense.”

Ninsunu tilted her chin up. “The group of Abhorrent we uncovered chased us halfway across the city before disappearing. Somewhere between Harborview and here. Presumably, something similar happened with you?”

He nodded. “We fought our way free from the initial onslaught. Then ran. And yes, at a certain point, they stopped pursuing us. Frankly... I was too concerned with our own safety to confirm where exactly they went.”

Aban Saddi massaged his temples. “At least we know our previous theory about how they got inside was correct. Tunnels.”

“It’s the same in Harborview as well,” Ninsunu said. “The slums have two or three smuggler tunnels to every *one* that exists elsewhere.”

“What if they’re gathering to prepare for a major assault?” Shemesh said. He looked at Ninsunu.

“It’s not impossible,” she said. “In fact... it seems entirely plausible.”

“We need confirmation,” Aban Saddi said. “Ataneedusu, go find Colonel Nur-Ayya. Have him quadruple the troops on the battlements and do the same with patrols. I want soldiers on the streets trying to figure out where these things are. Tell them to observe, *not* engage. Mages, inside the walls for now. Have the colonel assign at least three soldiers to every magic user. *All* of them should be guarded at all times. Also... bring the families inside the walls. The last thing we need is mages going out to check on loved ones.”

“Yes, Mystic,” Ataneedusu said. Leaning to Xerxes, he said, “See you later, Son.”

“Bye, Dad.”

The higher-ranking mages discussed more details of their plan to deal with Abhorrent, asking occasional bits of advice and input even from Gandash and Xerxes. For the first time, Xerxes felt what it was like to actually be part of the mages of the planet and not just a student. It felt good.

Eventually, Aban-Saddi dismissed the Seers, telling them to go to sleep and be ready for further assignments in the morning.

Xerxes’ father hadn’t returned, but there were troops lined up outside the door to escort the mages who left the council room. Six of them were assigned to Xerxes and Gandash, and marched behind them as they made their way to the general sleeping quarters set aside for mages.

With soldiers hovering over their shoulders, it was hard to make conversation. However, Xerxes was able to recount his foray into Harborview, and Gandash explained in detail what happened to him as part of Shemesh’s team.

“I was useless,” Gandash said. “Like I have been this entire time.”

“Don’t say that,” Xerxes said. “We’re only Seers, after all. How’s your chamber?”

“My dad gave me another pill, so I have enough for one spell. That’s it. At least you know how to fight, Xerk.”

“Fighting isn’t everything. Remember what happened at Ligish Castle? Your spellcasting saved my life. Keep your component pouch ready.”

“Yeah.”

The soldiers took their responsibility seriously, leaving two of their number to guard the entrance and stationing the others in key locations both in the room and down the hall.

After laying on the bed, Xerxes was certain he would be woken up within minutes to hear about a massive wave of Abhorrent monsters storming the castle. The thought was so terrifying that he didn’t think he could sleep. However, exhaustion caught up to him, and before he realized it, he was snoring.

A nightmare woke him just before the sun rose, and he couldn't keep his eyes closed after that. Everything was quiet; obviously, there hadn't been any sort of nighttime assault on the keep. He lay in bed, thinking about how strange the world had become and wondering what the day would bring. Would they flee the city to draw out the Abhorrent? Or would Ninsunu convince Aban Saddi to have everyone hide in the castle?

Xerxes wasn't sure what his opinion was. If it came to a vote, he'd probably just go along with whatever side seemed likely to win.

There was a different set of soldiers in the room. They'd obviously changed shifts during the night. There were also a few other sleeping forms.

He quietly left, escorted by three soldiers, to get breakfast. He hoped to go find his mother and sister after that, but before he could, word came from Aban Saddi that everyone needed to gather for a meeting. This time, the council chamber was packed, not only with the mages who had been missing the night before, but also with government and military figures, including King Nabuhisnu'isin and Colonel Nur-Ayya.

One of the mages to return was Zalle of Od, who had been Bel's mentor and close friend. She had the same fair skin and hair as Bel and Captain Ishki, but her braids were longer and interspersed with bone jewelry. And her mage garments were altered to be much more utilitarian and decidedly less modest.

"Is it true?" she yelled before she was even through the door. "Is Bel's body just sitting out there for the dogs and crows to eat?"

"I'm sorry, Zalle," said Aban Saddi.

Zalle then unleashed a scream of rage that left Xerxes' ears ringing and his chest tight as he recalled the horror of the bridge. Zalle bunched her hand into a fist, slammed it on the table, and let out another howl. Then she looked up and saw Xerxes across from her, his face pale.

Expression softening, she walked around the table and put a hand on his shoulder. "I heard about how you fought. You did what you could."

He opened his mouth to respond, but words wouldn't come out. He wasn't sure Zalle was right. He'd tried to stop thinking about that nightmarish fight, as it felt like every decision he'd made was wrong. Finally, he just stammered, "I-I'm... sorry."

Zalle's hand moved from his shoulder to the back of his neck. She squeezed and pulled him closer to her, until their foreheads touched. Lowering her voice, she said, "In Od, warriors don't say sorry. Not for things like this."

He nodded.

Voice dropping so that only he could hear her, she said, "Let's give these fuckers hell, all right? And when we kill all of them, we'll go back out and find Bel. Give her a proper burial. Agreed?"

He took a breath. “Agreed.”

“Good mage.”

After that, he felt a little better. *Give them hell. Yeah.*

The morning briefing wasn't enlightening. The strangest development was that not a single injury or death had been reported through the night. No soldier or civilian had encountered an Abhorrent at all. It was a marked difference from the previous week, during which time incidents had occurred regularly.

Everyone agreed that it meant something big was going to happen soon. There was a heated debate about the role of the mages. Ninsunu pressed for them to remain safely behind the walls. But neither mages nor the military folk were willing to sit around waiting, so when it came time to vote, the consensus was to take the initiative. And, as Aban Saddi said, to keep the people safe. Xerxes eyed the room carefully and voted with the majority.

Plans were made. Squads were formed, and they began to carefully investigate parts of the city where it seemed likely Abhorrent could be holed up. Every precaution was taken. Squads had whistles and flares in case they were attacked. No one was allowed to go anywhere alone.

Yet again, Gandash and Xerxes were separated. Xerxes was paired with Ninsunu, while Gandash joined Zalle.

The primary goal was to track down every known member of the Eternal Father Cult.

Xerxes learned a few things from Ninsunu, who was the resident expert on hunting cultists. For instance, she told him that the high-ranking members often learned to speak the Abhorrent language, or bits of it. And how they believed the Eternal Father to be superior to the Pontifarch. As for who the Eternal Father was, Ninsunu had theories but not enough evidence to make a determination.

Around the lunch hour, tension grew as squad after squad returned and reported no cult activity. Residences and businesses with links to the cult were abandoned. The mansion in Harborview had been torched in the night, causing the entire neighborhood to go up in a fiery blaze. The smoking ruins were still too hot to dig through. The warehouse with the tunnel had suffered a similar fate. Two other locations in the city had burned as well.

“Where the hell are they?” Shemesh asked.

“Maybe they fled,” said Colonel Nur-Ayya.

“Or got sacrificed,” added Ninsunu.

“Sacrificed?” muttered a soldier off to the side. He didn't seem to be the only one shocked by the concept.

“Human sacrifice isn’t unknown in the Cult of the Eternal Father,” Ninsunu said. “For a variety of reasons. Now that their so-called gods are actually here, maybe they’re stepping up their efforts.”

“To what end?” asked Aban Saddi.

No one had an answer.

Where were the cultists? Where were the Abhorrent invaders? What was the point of the entire invasion?

Aban Saddi allowed for a quick break for lunch, and, at long last, Xerxes was able to reunite with his family for a meal.

“I missed you so much, Xerk,” his mom said, taking him by the shoulders and then bringing him close. She was a classic Isninian beauty, which was one of the reasons Ataneedusu had fallen in love with her overnight, when they were nothing but Harborview waifs. She was still young—she’d given birth to Xerxes when she was only seventeen years old—but life in the slums had been tough, and the years showed.

“I missed you too, Mom,” he said, wrapping his arms around her. Many of his friends shied away from their mothers, but not Xerxes. He didn’t care that he was sixteen and grown up. He loved hugging his mother, and he always would.

“Zokey!” his sister cried, running over and jumping into his arms. He swung her around. He loved his little sister, too, and was more than happy to give a black eye to anybody who mocked him for it or who tried to cause problems for her. Not that she needed it. At eight years old, she was already more of a scrapper than he had been when he was ten.

Putting her back down, he knelt and said, “Ahassy, guess what?”

“What? What?”

“I got you something. Look.” He pulled out the driftwood dolphin.

“Oooh. It’s so pretty!” She took it, clasped it against her neck, and then hugged him again.

“Come on, kids, let’s eat,” Ataneedusu said.

Never before had Xerxes been so happy to enjoy a meal at home. Of course, his parents wanted to know all about his journey. He told them quite a bit, but most of it was about the journey *to* the castle. Not the return trip. He avoided mentioning Bel’s name, and when he noticed how his mother did the same, he realized his father must have explained things to her already.

The meal ended so quickly that he felt like his head was spinning.

As he and his father prepared to return to the council chamber, his mother put her arms around him again. “Stay strong, my son,” she said. “I love you.”

“I love you too, Mom.”

“Bye-bye Zokey,” his sister said.

He knelt and gave her one last hug. “I love you, Ahassy. Take care of Mom, okay?”

“Okay.”

The afternoon unfolded as the morning had, with soldiers and mages alike prowling through the city trying to determine what was happening. The results were the same.

Nothing.

No cultists.

No Abhorrent.

This wasn't comforting. In fact, it caused tension to mount, slowly but surely. Everyone was on edge, gripping weapons and spell component pouches, eyes shifting back and forth, just waiting for a poisoned dart to fly out of a shadowed alley or a monstrous Abhorrent to leap from a rooftop.

He never had a chance to reunite with Gandash, though it was to his delight that, in the afternoon, Sergeant Tamharu was assigned to his squad.

“Xerk!” the sergeant said. “How you holding up?”

“Doing okay, Sarge. Any news? Say, what happened to Master Ligish's machine? I forgot about it in all the commotion.”

“I think the mages forgot, too,” he said. “Captain Ishki got orders to lock it up for safe keeping. I guess they'll wait until we deal with this invasion before looking at it. You ready to go out there and skewer some bug monsters?”

Xerxes grinned. “Ready to slice 'em and dice 'em!”

Tamharu laughed.

As it turned out, they were assigned to patrol Harborview. To Xerxes' surprise, he learned that Tamharu had also been born and raised there.

“How come you don't talk like it?” Xerxes asked.

“Ow come *you* don't?” the sergeant responded. “I 'eard some of the boys saying you were born and raised 'ere, but you sound like an 'ogdown fancy-pants mage to me.”

“I don't know what the 'ell you're talking about.”

They both laughed.

They didn't encounter any Abhorrent. Or any cultists. They did stop a mugging and arrested a pickpocket, although Ninsunu said they didn't have time to cart them to jail, so they let the lawbreakers off with beatings.

When their shift was over, Tamharu asked Xerxes about Gem's box. When he heard Xerxes hadn't delivered it, he offered to accompany him. Xerxes agreed. Two hours later, they left Gem's wife and children with heavy hearts. Xerxes didn't know how he managed to make it through the entire ordeal without shedding tears, but he had. In something of a twist, Gem's wife seemed to comfort Xerxes more than the other way around.

He and Tamharu made their way back to the keep. It was time to part ways. Even though they'd only known each other for a short time, Xerxes felt closer with him than with virtually any of the other mages with whom he'd been associated for much longer.

"Take care of yourself, Xerk," Tamharu said.

"You too, Sarge."

"No need for the title."

Xerxes' heart sank farther. "Okay, Tamharu. Please, be careful. If things get bad... just... be careful."

The sergeant gave him a casual salute, then left. Xerxes tried to ignore the premonition this might be the last time he saw him.

Just nerves, he told himself.

Night fell. This time, Xerxes didn't sleep well. He woke at least three times.

The next day's routine was the same. While he, Ninsunu, and a few soldiers were poking around the docks, something happened on the other side of the city. Shemesh and Alwin stumbled onto a group of five Abhorrent lurking in an abandoned tailor's shop, along with three cultists. One Abhorrent died in the resulting clash. Two cultists lost their lives.

Alwin didn't make it. Another mage dead.

Aban Saddi flew into a rage upon hearing the news, pouring fiery curse words onto Shemesh. It was made even worse because Shemesh failed to prevent the surviving cultist from escaping.

One thing was certain: the Abhorrent and their cultist followers *hadn't* fled the city. They were still out there, hiding and waiting. But for what?

The only upside to the event was that Nohem—the third Buhhu mage—and Gandash tracked down the missing Abhorrent monsters before they went into hiding again. What was more, the four fleeing spawn led them to another nest of sorts. Neither Gandash nor Nohem was impulsive enough to barge into the place. Thus, Abad Saddi sent a group of sixty soldiers, led by Captain

Ishki and Seer Zalle, to deal with the beasts. Xerxes and his father, both Asgagu mages, were told to go along and provide extra offensive power. They wiped them out.

After that mixture of tragedy and success, two days passed in which nothing significant happened.

On the third day, the event they had all been waiting for... finally began.

Xerxes was one of the first to notice. Waking early, he ate a quick breakfast and, flanked by his usual escort of soldiers, went out to the battlements to look over the city in the light of the rising sun.

Leaning his shoulder up against a crenellation and resting his sword against his chest, he was gazing toward the east when something in his peripheral vision caught his attention.

A falling star.

A meteor.

A chill ran up his spine as the burning object streaked down and landed somewhere off in the distance. Although he couldn't be sure, it had to be only a few leagues from the city.

"Did you see that?" he asked of the soldiers who stood closest to him

"See what?" the soldier asked.

"Never mind."

Gazing back out into the sky briefly, he was about to turn back to the keep when another meteor appeared.

"Look!" he said.

The soldier stepped closer to get a better view through the crenelations. "Falling star?" the soldier said.

"Yeah," Xerxes replied. "The Abhorrent are coming in those things. I wonder..."

The soldier gulped nervously. "I sure 'ope it's nothing but—"

Xerxes noted that this meteor was a lot closer than the other, so much so that he had to crane his head to see it. Furthermore, its angle of descent was much steeper. Having experienced a meteor flying directly overhead, he didn't duck as it passed over, but the soldier did. They heard a faint rumbling sound as the meteor crashed into the ground so close to the city walls that they saw a cloud of dust a moment later.

"Oly shit," the soldier said.

Xerxes gritted his teeth. "Yeah, we need to report this. Let's—"

He stopped talking.

Up in the sky was another burning object. But he could tell that this one was much bigger than any of the others.

The smaller meteors had streaked down like diving falcons; this bigger one tumbled end over end with no sense of urgency. It almost fell in slow motion. But as it got bigger, and bigger, and bigger, Xerxes' heart pounded.

How big was it?

And it seemed to head directly toward him. As the meteor grew larger and larger in his field of vision, he didn't get any sense that it was slowly drifting to the left or the right. No, it was coming right in his direction. What would happen when it hit? Fire? Explosions? Destruction? Probably all of those.

"It's going to land in the city," he said. "Maybe even hit the keep."

"Fucking 'ell," the soldier muttered, standing there as motionless as a gravestone.

"Yeah." Keeping his eyes on the meteor, he pushed past the petrified soldier and toward the door. "If that thing hits us, we're dead!"

Chapter 24 – Taking the Fight to Them

Xerxes ran down the tower and through the corridors. He didn't bother waiting for the soldiers, who still hadn't recovered from the shock of seeing a massive burning rock descending toward them. He raced toward the council chamber, leaving tapestries flapping in the long hallways as he accelerated past speeds that ordinary Unsighted were capable of.

When he burst into the room, the cacophony of numerous conversations made it clear the news had been reported already. Mystic Aban Saddi, who Xerxes suspected slept in the council chamber, was there. So were Ninsunu, Satahsusar, Zalle, and Nohem, along with other important figures in the city. Colonel Nur-Ayya was absent. Everybody talked at once, and about half of the people present were on the verge of yelling.

Did they know about the huge meteor? Or just the first, smaller one?

Heart pounding, Xerxes rushed to the side of the room and pushed through the doors to the balcony. He looked up.

The massive meteor still rolled through the air toward them, but it was closer. A lot closer.

"There's no time!" Xerxes said. The mages in the chamber ignored him, so he yelled, "HEY!"

The urgency in his tone worked. Everyone quieted and looked at him.

Gesturing toward the burning ball of fire that seemed cubits away, he said, "Look."

He turned his attention back to the meteor, vaguely aware of others joining him on the balcony. His heart was in his throat. It wasn't going to hit the keep. But it was going to come close. And it *was* going to hit the city.

"By the holy Pontifarch," someone murmured.

"It's going to crush Garden Terrace!" someone else said.

"No. Not even close. Garden Heights, probably. Maybe the Great Promenade."

"Should we ready troops? There'll be deaths. Fires."

"Yes," Aban Saddi said. "Have everyone gather in...."

Xerxes stopped paying attention to the chatter. The meteor roared past the keep, so close that he was sure he felt the heat from the flames. Then it crashed into a neighborhood to the north. Garden Heights.

Some buildings were outright flattened. Others shattered. Bricks flew like confetti, splinters of wood exploded into the air, and conflagrations broke out left and right. The blast from

the initial impact was so intense that Xerxes dropped his sword and clamped his hands over his ears, but it didn't do much good.

Garden Heights wasn't as rich of a neighborhood as Garden Terrace, but it was a nice location. And though Xerxes had no love of stuffy rich folks, even he had a few friends who lived there. How many innocent people were already dead, and how many were dying?

Clouds of dust and debris spread out, intermixed with distant wails and screams.

"Go now!" Aban Saddi shouted. "Ataneedusu, take Xerxes and—"

Five white tendrils shot up from beneath the balcony and headed right toward the Head Mage.

Everything went in slow motion for Xerxes. He saw the tentacular things, then caught a whiff of rotten eggs and bile.

He jumped toward them. There was no time to cast a spell or even grab his sword. He couldn't let the Head Mage get cut down in the middle of the keep. Shouting, he flew through the air and wrapped his arms around the five Abhorrent fingers, preventing them from reaching the Head Mage. Gripping the writhing things as tightly as possible, he dropped into a side roll. With shouts of alarm ringing out, he felt the fingers straining against him like immensely strong worms. He pulled them tight against his torso. Then, righting himself, he tugged them across his shoulder and pulled forward with all his might.

The fingers tensed and struggled to rip free, but he dug his fingers in and continued pulling. A mounting howl built behind him, and he felt like he was drowning in the disgusting odor. Bile gurgled in the depths of his throat, until he was sure he was going to vomit.

NO. Growling to resist the gag reflex, he kept pulling.

A finger slipped free.

Shit, he thought, knowing that it could circle around and stab him in a vital spot.

Then light flashed off to the side; his father was there, and he'd cast Singular Lethality.

"Be careful, Dad!" he said. "They can stab you!"

The howl behind him built into a crescendo as he forced himself to take two steps forward. Then he lurched another two steps as the fingers went slack. For a brief moment he rejoiced, thinking the Abhorrent had been slain. Until he realized it hadn't. Instead, it had let him drag it onto the balcony.

He let go of the fingers, spun, and put his hand on his component pouch. Before he could cast his spell, Ninsunu barreled past him, having transformed into another bestial form, this one with red, leathery skin and long black claws.

The Abhorrent didn't stand a chance. Ninsunu grabbed the creature, lifted it over her shoulder, and threw it off the balcony.

A shriek trailed behind it for about four seconds, then abruptly stopped.

Ninsunu leaned over the balcony railing. "More are coming up," she growled.

Aban Saddi walked past Xerxes to join Ninsunu. He had his spell component pouch loosened, and Xerxes could hear the clink of glass vials within.

The Head Mage didn't need to cast any spell. Though a group of about seven or eight spider-like Abhorrent spawn were climbing up the side of the keep, they were no match for the transformed Ninsunu, Xerxes' father, and the other mages.

However, even as the last of the bodies dropped, a roaring noise echoed out over the city that, at first, seemed impossible to identify. But as it stretched out, turning sharper and more high-pitched, Xerxes realized what it was. The cry of a living creature.

An Abhorrent.

Stepping to the very edge of the balcony, he craned his neck to look in the direction of the noise, but the edge of the keep obscured his line of sight.

"What is it?" Satahsusar asked. "That sound...?"

"It's an Abhorrent," Xerxes answered reflexively.

"That's obvious, boy," Satahsusar snapped. "I meant what kind. Head Mage?"

The roar echoed out across the city again.

Aban Saddi leaned out over the railing, hoping to catch a glimpse of the creature in question. "I doubt it's anything less than a mid-level juvenile. Probably stronger."

"Can we deal with something like that?" someone said.

"I knew we should have contacted Humusi," another voice added.

Aban Saddi hesitated. "No use second-guessing ourselves. We have to do something about this. Now. Come!"

The Head Mage ran, and everyone followed, though he was significantly faster. They went down a set of stairs, across a hall to another balcony. As they burst out into the open, Xerxes heard several gasps of alarm. He almost joined them but managed to keep his mouth shut.

Looming near the city wall a quarter-league away, partially obscured by the dust clouds and smoke, was a hulking creature that made all the Abhorrent he'd seen up to this point seem like children's' puppets. This beast was thrice as tall as any of the surrounding buildings and looked

like an ape with an elephantine head, except with three trunks and six tusks that curved up into sharp points. It was covered with long, reddish fur, as well as a cloud of what looked like flies, although given the distance, Xerxes guessed they might be bats or birds.

“Holy Pontifarch,” Seer Zalle breathed.

The gigantic Abhorrent roared a third time, then crouched briefly before launching into a jump. It sailed high, above the tops of the rooftops, giving everyone a view of its clawed appendages before it smashed into a building. The structure collapsed, sending up more dust and debris.

“That jump is probably a magical power,” Gandash said. “Something that big shouldn’t be able to do that.”

“How do we fight it?” Ninsunu said, her voice deep because of her transformation.

“W-we...” stammered Aban Saddi, “we...”

“Have Colonel Nur-Ayya set up the ballistae on the top of the keep,” Gandash suggested.

A shadow of a grin appeared on Xerxes’ face, despite the gravity of the situation. *That’s right, Gandy, you tell them what to do.*

Maybe all of his friend’s hours spent reading magical textbooks and military treatises would finally come in handy. The fact that someone as young as Gandash was so collected seemed to act like a splash of cold water to the face of Aban Saddi.

“Right,” he said. “Have the colonel array ballistae and archers on the keep. Seer Gandash, can you see to that?”

“Absolutely,” Gandash said, and he raced off.

“Nasaru mages should be with the ballistae,” Aban Saddi continued. “Send them—”

“Alwin was our only Nasaru mage,” Zalle interrupted.

“Fuck!” the Head Mage cursed. “Sinitu and Asgagu won’t be of much help against something that massive. And we lost our only Balatu mage before all this started.”

“Sir,” Xerxes said, “*you* are probably our best weapon.”

“That’s right.” The Head Mage thought for a moment before setting his jaw. “In that case, the course of action is obvious. Ninsunu, Xerxes, Ataneedusu, you’re going to be my escorts. No soldiers, they’ll just slow us down. We’ll go through the streets and try to remain unseen. Get as close to that thing as possible. Maybe Farland Bridge. Or Deer Park. I’ll cast Abhorrent Duo. If we’re lucky, it might only be a low-level juvenile, in which case I’ll be able to summon something of similar strength. Everyone else, support Gandash and Colonel Nur-Ayya. Let’s go.”

He ran, not waiting for any word of confirmation. Xerxes followed, as did the other mages who had been mentioned.

Of course, the Head Mage was a Mystic and had a much greater top speed than Seers or High Seers. But he set a pace that allowed all of them to stay close. They sped out of the keep, through the gates, into the city streets, and straight toward the massive Abhorrent.

Despite all the insane things that had happened in the past few days, Xerxes almost couldn't believe he was doing this. Running toward a building-sized monster that could probably kill him casually?

If you want everyone to believe you're worth being a mage, you have to do this.

Another roar swept through the streets, and they were close enough this time that it hurt Xerxes' ears. There was a blur of motion as the Abhorrent again jumped into the air before crashing into another building. This time, it was only a few blocks away, and Xerxes felt the ground shake as the creature landed.

"Deer Park is that way!" Aban Saddi said. "That's where I'll cast my spell."

He veered to the left, and Xerxes and the others followed. They ran down half a block, sped through an alley, then raced across more paved streets before bursting into an expanse of green grass and spindly trees.

From here they had a perfect view of the gigantic Abhorrent some several blocks down. It was breathing heavily, its fur undulating either from the wind or the movement of its own body. It was surrounded by a cloud of flying creatures that looked like a mix between spiders and bats. Just barely, Xerxes could make out a noxious stench in the air.

The Head Mage pulled out a vial, popped the cork, and poured the contents into his palm. Xerxes wasn't sure what the component was, but like all Buhhu components, its foundation was Abhorrent blood. It stank, but the smell differed from the blisterscale reduction Gandash had used.

Before Aban Saddi could start tracing out the Buhhu Sebum rune, Xerxes noticed something off to the side. Movement. Paleness.

A many-legged Abhorrent spawn lurked in the shadows of a nearby alley.

"We've got company," he said, entering the Skyward guard with his sword.

Aban Saddi looked over. "It's only a single one. Cover me while I cast the spell." He put his right finger above his left palm.

Xerxes kept his eyes on the Abhorrent spawn as he took a step toward it. Compared to the larger females he'd fought or the gigantic furred creature ahead, this thing didn't scare him. Cut it badly enough, and it would die.

He took another step toward it.

"There's another over here," his father said. "No, two."

Chapter 25 – Like a Sacrifice

“Keep them away from me,” Aban Saddi said.

Xerxes leapt forward, using a master cut called the Squinting Slash to alter his angle of attack at the last moment and skewer the Abhorrent. It squealed and lunged back, allowing him to bring his sword up again. Then he swung it down in a somewhat inelegant move that clove the creature in two.

Wrenching his blade out of the gore, he turned to see his father’s right fist glowing brightly as he threw an experimental blow at an Abhorrent.

Aban Saddi was still working on his spell, and Ninsunu stood there with her bestial hands clenched into fists.

His father’s first blow missed, but the second landed, punching a hole into the creature’s head area. Meanwhile, the second Abhorrent near his father circled to get an angle of attack.

Xerxes dashed toward his father, targeting the second spider-like beast. Leading with a kick, he followed with a downward sword strike. The blow wasn’t clean and got stuck in the Abhorrent. When the thing jerked away, Xerxes nearly lost his grip on his weapon.

Slamming his foot into the beast next to where the blade was stuck, he wrenched the sword free and then made a stabbing attack. The creature dropped.

Next to him, his father had dispatched the other Abhorrent.

“Dad, look,” Xerxes said, gesturing with his chin. Four more of the things had climbed out of nearby alleys. Three were small, like the ones they’d just killed, but one was larger, with the disturbing face-like head.

“We’re not out of the woods yet,” his father said.

“I’ll take the big one.”

Xerxes wondered what the hell Ninsunu was doing just standing around, but there wasn’t time to spend too much thought on it. Apparently, Aban Saddi was completely focused on his own spellcasting. Buhhu spells took time to cast.

Xerxes ran to intercept the larger of the incoming Abhorrent, while his father faced off with one of the smaller versions.

Not wanting to waste any time, Xerxes went in for a killing blow. However, the creature reared up to avoid the blade, and his attack went wide. He redirected his sword, not stopping his momentum. Stepping left, he avoided the swipe of the thing’s legs and grinned as the tip of his sword found flesh.

Before the creature could even hiss, he shoved the sword hard, causing it to stab deeply into the Abhorrent.

“Get ready!” Aban Saddi shouted. “Once I summon the juveniles, I can’t afford any distractions. If I—”

All of a sudden, Ninsunu lunged toward Aban Saddi, tackling him in a bear hug.

“What—?” he shouted as they fell to the ground together.

Xerxes twisted and slashed, ripping the Abhorrent apart, then jumped back to gauge the situation. Why had Ninsunu knocked the Head Mage down? Had a bigger threat arrived?

Ninsunu, in her bestial form, was on top of Aban Saddi. His father was trying to land a clean blow on one of the three Abhorrent that were slowly surrounding him. More spidery Abhorrent crawled out of alleys toward them.

Off in the distance, the massive trunked monster was... looking in their direction.

What was going on?

“Nina, what... what are you doing?” Aban Saddi shouted, his voice muffled.

Xerxes’ eyes were transfixed on the massive Abhorrent as it turned its shoulders, then took a step in their direction. As it did, the flying creatures around it swirled to gather in front of its face, creating a clump of darkness. Then a sphere, which pulsed out, then in, and suddenly Xerxes had a very bad feeling.

“Dad, watch out!” he said, just as the black sphere turned into a beam of darkness that shot toward them.

Xerxes jumped to the side, though it wasn’t necessary, as the beam didn’t come close to his position. Nor did it get close to Aban Saddi and Ninsunu. Instead, it slammed into the spot where his father had been standing seconds before. A loud buzzing sound filled the air as the beam melted a furrow in the stone for about two seconds before vanishing.

“Dad!” he yelled.

“I’m fine!”

Ninsunu was getting to her feet. The cloud of creatures around the Abhorrent was significantly thinner.

“We need to move!” Xerxes said. In the back of his mind, he realized that Aban Saddi’s spellcasting had been interrupted. The Head Mage surely had more spellcasting components on hand, but what about his supply of melam? Buhhu mages expended massive amounts of it when casting spells, and if Aban Saddi had gotten to the final stages of spellcasting before being interrupted, he could theoretically have wasted too much melam to be able to cast another spell.

However, as Ninsunu stood up, Xerxes' heart dropped.

The Head Mage, the only Mystic on Mannemid and the strongest mage they had, hung limp in Ninsunu's arms. At first glance, Xerxes wondered if the Head Mage had hit his head in the fall, and had been knocked unconscious. But the man had spoken twice *after* being knocked down.

No, Ninsunu held Aban Saddi the way a wrestler would hold an incapacitated opponent. Xerxes had training in martial arts, and though he didn't consider himself particularly proficient in grappling, he knew a thing or two. And Ninsunu was definitely using a chokehold.

Given that she was a High Seer, she didn't have the same level of physical strength and toughness as Aban Saddi. However, the shapeshifting abilities of Sinitu mages could provide an edge in that regard. Besides, a chokehold was a chokehold and, if administered properly, could easily allow a weaker combatant to neutralize a stronger one.

"Nina..." he said, unsure of what was playing out.

Ignoring him, she bounded forward three steps, then planted her foot and leaped into the air, sailing up to stand on the rooftop at the end of the park.

Ninsunu raised her voice and shouted, "Ya sath Syha'hlw'nafhoth!"

The words meant nothing to Xerxes, but the mere sound of them caused a chill to run down his spine.

There's no way.

"What did she just say?" his father asked.

Snapping out of his reverie, Xerxes looked over and realized that the small Abhorrent which had been closing in on them were currently standing motionless.

He looked back at Ninsunu on the rooftop. She was now holding Aban Saddi up in front of her, with one hand around the back of his neck.

Beyond her, the massive Abhorrent was merely staring, presumably at Ninsunu.

"She just spoke the language of the Abhorrent," Xerxes said.

"What?" Ataneedusu blurted.

The reality of the situation hit Xerxes like a wave of cold water. "She's a cultist," he said. He wasn't sure how he knew or how it even made sense. But it was the reality of the situation.

"By the Monad," his father murmured.

Meanwhile, the gigantic Abhorrent responded to Ninsunu in the same language she'd just spoken. However, its voice was so deep and resonant that Xerxes felt like his bones vibrated in response. He understood none of the words, although he was half-sure he heard 'melam.'

Ninsunu spoke in response, beginning a brief conversation.

“We have to do something,” Ataneedusu said. “If Ninsunu is a cultist, and she has Aban Saddi...”

“But... do what?” Xerxes asked. He glanced at the nearby Abhorrent, who were still motionless. “Neither of us is strong enough! And we can’t make ranged attacks.”

His father reached into his component pouch and pulled out a handful of crabnickel powder. “It doesn’t matter. We have to do something.”

Xerxes shifted stances so that his sword was over his shoulder. “I have better range with my weapon. I might be able to take her out before she knows I’m coming.”

Before either of them could say anything more, the gigantic Abhorrent snorted something in its disturbing language, then launched into the air, flying in a neat arc before crashing to the ground just in front of the building upon which Ninsunu stood. Clouds of dust and rubble billowed as she held Aban Saddi out in front of her. A vomitous aroma filled the area, while at the same time, the cloud of flying creatures around the Abhorrent were getting denser. How long until it could unleash that black beam again?

“Son, are you sure—”

“I’m sure, Dad.” And without another word, he ran.

One shot. At the same time, all of his experiences in the past weeks ran together in his mind. The fight with Biru. The time he tried to sneak up on Master Ligish from behind. The terrifying, bloody melee with the Abhorrent on the bridge.

Lessons he’d learned, both consciously and subconsciously, swirled together as he formulated his plan. How he would plant his feet and jump. The way he would hold his blade.

There really would only be one chance to get it right. And if he failed... he would probably die. He kept his sword in the Skyward position as he took his first step.

While dust continued to gently rain down, the gigantic Abhorrent said another set of words in its disgusting language.

“Grk ba’ya melam.”

Xerxes dashed forward, using a park bench as a launching point to get onto a rooftop.

That was when Ninsunu pulled the unconscious Aban Saddi back, not as if to remove him from the presence of the massive Abhorrent, but more as if she were getting ready to throw him.

Oh no. A building cut his view off. He scrambled up the wall and onto the rooftop. Now, he was a level above his target.

At the same time, Ninsunu hurled Aban Saddi’s limp form toward the gigantic Abhorrent.

Fuck. He sped up, readied his sword, and jumped off the rooftop. He didn't have time to consider how to save Aban Saddi. At least, not yet. He swung his sword in the Wrath strike, the most basic attack. Not any sort of a special move. As long as Ninsunu didn't realize what was happening, it would be devastating.

He sailed through the air toward her, and Aban Saddi flopped toward the Abhorrent.

The blade of Xerxes' longsword dripped dark blood and gore as it closed the distance, heading toward Ninsunu's right shoulder.

The goal of the most basic sword strike, as Xerxes understood it, was to cleave the opponent in half through the heart. In training, sparring, and combat, an opponent would obviously attempt to block or parry any ordinary strike. But in this case, Ninsunu's back was to him.

There's no way this is going to work, he thought, and he kept himself ready to disengage and attack from a different angle or perhaps abort the attack entirely.

The fur on the gigantic Abhorrent's massive arm rippled as it extended its clawed fingers toward Aban Saddi.

Xerxes closed in on Ninsunu.

The Abhorrent's fingers wrapped around the Head Mage, but at the same time, its eyes shifted as it noticed Xerxes.

Xerxes' blade was fingers from Ninsunu's neck.

It's not going to work. She would duck at the last moment, then spin to punch him in the gut. Or lean forward and kick her foot back. Something. She couldn't be so arrogant as to have completely ignored the two Seers behind her. And that wasn't to mention the fact there was a massive monster looking right at Xerxes.

The Abhorrent pulled the Head Mage toward him, and if it intended to do something about Xerxes, it didn't have time. Xerxes' sword hit Ninsunu. It cleaved through her bestial fur, burying itself in her neck and slicing into her torso.

A spray of blood landed on his face as his sword cut through flesh, muscle, and—backed by the immense strength of a Seer—bone. He felt the shudder as the steel severed her spine and continued another finger or two before lodging firmly somewhere in her rib cage. He was fairly certain that, if she hadn't been in her transformed state, he would have cut her clean in half. In any case, she was dead now.

The momentum of his jump kept him going, and he tumbled forward, over Ninsunu's corpse, which was already reverting to human form. He lost his grip on his sword in the process and left it behind as he rolled before skidding to a stop in the rooftop gravel.

Looking back, he expected a queasy feeling to rise from the pit of his stomach at the sight of blood-drenched Ninsunu. Instead, all he felt was disgust. Not at himself, but at her, for speaking the language of the Abhorrent and for offering Aban Saddi up like a sacrifice.

Aban Saddi.

There was still a chance to save him.

Xerxes turned and looked for the Head Mage.

But all he saw was the giant, clawed fingers of the massive Abhorrent speeding directly toward his own current position.

Chapter 26 – Dead in Ten Minutes

With the cloying stench of the Abhorrent surrounding him and the creature trying to snatch him off the rooftop, Xerxes scrambled backward. By chance, his hand brushed the hilt of his sword.

Grabbing it, he got to one knee and jerked it away. He expected it to stick stubbornly in Ninsunu's bones, but it didn't. Blood gurgled as it dislodged from the High Seer's body, which came as such a surprise that he nearly fell. However, his feet somehow stayed under him, and he scrambled away, holding the sword out in the Longfacing position in front of him.

But what could his tiny sword do against this gigantic monster? The cyclopean hand neared, the skin leathery and gnarled, like an old tree. Would his sword even pierce it?

He backed up two more steps.

Oh. The Abhorrent wasn't reaching toward *him*.

The hand slammed onto Nina's corpse, and a moment later, the High Seer was gone.

Xerxes watched with wide eyes as the creature brought both mages, one dead, one unconscious, closer to its face. Deep in the back of his mind, Xerxes knew that Aban Saddi was alive. And even further in the depths of his psyche, he felt an urge to jump forward and try to save the man. But that tiny, prickling sensation died before it could truly come to life.

The monster's serpentine trunks writhed forward like wrinkled leeches and latched onto the mages before pulsating slowly.

"What the hell?" Xerxes muttered.

He heard something to his side and looked over to see his father land on the rooftop a few cubits away.

"By the Monad," Ataneedusu said. "Is it... taking their melam?"

His father was right. How had he not realized it the moment he saw the trunks latch onto them? The trunks pulsed *from* the mages *to* the creature. After all, when a mage died, their melam would disperse, but not immediately.

"Dad, I think we need to get out of here."

"But then what?" his father asked. "Think of how many people are in the city. Is it going to just... kill them all?"

"I think it wants mages specifically," Xerxes said. "Plus—"

From a rooftop some two or three hundred cubits away, a pair of spheres covered in black slime whipped through the air and smacked into the gigantic Abhorrent's shoulder. Another pair of spheres followed shortly after it.

Hissing sounds reached Xerxes' ears, and bits of steam seeped out from the Abhorrent as corrosive mucus from the sphere-like creatures melted bits of its fur.

Looking over, Xerxes just barely made out a figure on the distant rooftop. "Gandy," he said. "Where'd he come from?"

Trunks still sucking at Ninsunu and Aban Saddi, the massive Abhorrent turned in Gandash's direction.

"Is he out there alone?" Ataneedusu said.

"Wasn't he overseeing the ballistae on the keep?"

"Dammit, if he's got no backup, he's a sitting duck."

The massive Abhorrent's trunk detached from Ninsunu, and he threw her body to the side, causing it to smack into the wall of a nearby building. It left a smear of blood as it dropped to the ground. Then the Abhorrent took a step in Gandash's direction, trailing a thin cloud of flying creatures.

"Dad..." Xerxes said.

"I know. We've got to help him. Let's go."

His father ran, and he followed. Together they leaped from rooftop to rooftop, using their enhanced physical prowess as Seers to maintain as much speed as possible. However, they weren't able to move much faster than the Abhorrent.

Meanwhile, Gandash backed away as the smaller Abhorrent spawn he'd summoned continued to eat away at the gigantic Abhorrent.

There was no way Xerxes and his father would reach Gandash before the Abhorrent did.

"Gandy, get out of there!" Xerxes screamed, making a wild waving gesture.

Gandash looked in his direction and shouted, "Go back to the keep!"

The massive Abhorrent stopped walking, tossed Aban Saddi's desiccated corpse aside, and turned yet again toward Xerxes and his father. They kept running, but that didn't stop the Abhorrent from shoving its clawed hand in their direction.

"Watch out, Xerk!" Ataneedusu barked.

The hand smashed into the building they were running across, sending gravel spraying everywhere. Ataneedusu leaped into a forward roll, scraping through the gravel, while Xerxes skidded to a stop and simultaneously slashed downward with his sword.

His blade chopped through some of the beast's fur but failed to pierce its tough skin.

The creature spoke, the words dripping with loathsome clicks and thrums, but Xerxes had no idea what it was saying. Then its hand was gone. As he ran forward and put his hand under his father's arm to help him up, he looked over his shoulder and saw that the Abhorrent was still looking at them, and its hand was in motion.

"Jump!" he said and half-dragged his father into a scramble toward the parapet. They barely reached it, jumping wildly into the air as the clawed hand destroyed the building behind them. They landed hard on the opposite rooftop, which had no gravel, but instead simple wooden planks.

Xerxes tossed his sword aside, grabbed a handful of crabnickel powder, and started casting Singular Lethality.

"What are you planning, Xerk?" his father asked.

"I'm going to jump on its arm," he said. "Then run up toward its head. Maybe I can punch directly into its brain."

"That's insane," his father said.

"I don't see any other option. We have to kill it. Fast."

Melam swirled through him as he finished tracing the Asgagu Isten rune, and then his hand turned into pure power.

The Abhorrent let loose something like a combination of a roar and a laugh, then shoved its hand in his direction.

"Son, you—"

"Dad, there's no choice. You get Gandash out of here, I'll catch up."

The Abhorrent's hand accelerated, and Xerxes crouched slightly, then broke into a run.

Gotta time this right. But I can do it.

Planting his foot on the parapet just as the hand was about to smash into the building, he jumped, simultaneously unleashing a wild shout.

His half-battlecry half-scream echoed across the rooftops as his feet made contact. He'd landed on the Abhorrent's wrist.

"Ha!" he shouted, then ran up the creature's limb. The shaggy fur felt like thick grass as he bounded up the forearm and relied on momentum to carry him toward the thing's shoulder. He batted aside one of the bizarre flying creatures, then vaporized another with his burning hand.

He clenched his hand into a fist and prepared to jump up to the thing's face. What about the trunks? The tusks? What about its magical power? Was it ready to be unleashed again? What if—

The Abhorrent jerked its shoulder like a human trying to dislodge a bug that had landed on it.

Xerxes planted his foot incorrectly, and his ankle twisted. Then a massive hand swept toward him, as if that same human were also trying to swat the bug off of it.

Whether for better or worse, the hand never hit, as he started falling.

“Oh shiiiiiii—”

The tree-lined stone street rushed toward him, then everything went black.

**

When his eyes opened, an unfamiliar face loomed over him. A human face, belonging to a somewhat pudgy young man with light brown hair. Beyond the face were the trees.

“You woke up quickly,” the young man said. “You’re lucky the trees broke your fall. That was stupid, what you did. Stupid but brave. I gotta admit, I’m impressed.”

He extended a hand toward Xerxes.

Xerxes took it and allowed the young man to pull him up. His head hurt, and he felt dizzy. “Who are you?”

The young man wore clothing finer than the type worn by even the most well-known and famous mages on Mannemid. Overlapping garments of black and violet, with a golden girdle, a silver headband, and jewel-encrusted bracers. Most noteworthy of all to Xerxes was the hilt of the sword strapped to his back. It was a very long hilt, and given how high it protruded, it could only be a longsword. Definitely not the type of bronze weapon used by natives of this planet.

“I’m Purattu from Ku-Aya. Here.” Purattu extended his other hand, and Xerxes saw his own battered longsword in it, held toward him, hilt-first.

He took it. “What? How?”

“I’ll explain later. First, I need to put that bastard Abhorrent down.”

Looking past Purattu’s shoulder, Xerxes saw the back and shoulders of the enormous monster, roaring and flailing its arms.

“This way,” Purattu said, and he jogged toward a nearby alley.

Xerxes followed. “You’re from Ku-Aya?”

“Yeah. I’m the backup they sent to help with this invasion. By the way, where the hell did you get that longsword? I didn’t think people in the less... lower starisles even knew about the Epitome.”

Xerxes wasn't sure what the Epitome was, but he didn't want to reveal his ignorance. "I got it from my Master. He teaches the sword to a few of us."

"A follower of the Epitome, here on lowly Mannemid. Interesting. This way."

Purattu dashed into an alleyway, then picked up speed so rapidly that Xerxes fell behind. In fact, Purattu moved so quickly that he started running up the wall before launching himself into the air and disappearing onto the rooftop ahead.

He's so fast. He must be higher than the Mystic level. Is he a High Mystic? An Archon?

Pushing forward with as much speed as possible, Xerxes jumped onto a small storage shed built into the side of a wall, then leaped even higher, grabbing the rooftop parapet and then scrambling over it.

Purattu was unstrapping his sword. Xerxes had never seen a sheath mechanism like this one. It had at least three straps that allowed the sword to remain firmly in place behind him, and the sheath itself seemed specially designed to allow the sword to be drawn easily from the back.

Beyond him, the gigantic Abhorrent flailed its arms at forces obscured by its own bulk. He caught sight of some arrows flying, as well as some javelins.

"Perfect," Purattu said. "The stupid brute has no idea I'm here."

When the sheath mechanism was off, he wrapped the straps around it and then half-turned toward Xerxes.

"Hold my sword... what's your name?" He tossed the sheathed weapon.

Xerxes caught it. "Xerxes, son of Ataneedusu."

"Okay, Xerxes. Keep that sword safe. Don't draw it, understand? There's a protective spell formation inside. I'm going to go kill this damned Abhorrent. Wait until I get back."

Not waiting for a confirmation, he ran across the rooftop, while simultaneously reaching toward a velvet component pouch on his belt, one of three that rested there.

Xerxes glanced down at Purattu's sword and the strapping mechanism. He smelled leather and oil and saw the glint of expensive metals. Without even being able to see the steel of the blade, he knew this sword was vastly superior even to the sword he'd found in that shop in Kisiga.

Looking back up, he saw Purattu casting a spell while simultaneously speeding up. He jumped, sailing through the air with the grace of a bird. Then he landed on the massive Abhorrent's shoulder.

The giant didn't seem to notice his presence. Purattu flitted forward, then lifted his right hand back and above his head.

That was when Xerxes noticed a faint darkness to the hand, as though it emanated, not light, but shadows.

Purattu slapped his hand onto the back of the Abhorrent's head, then backflipped and pushed off. Twirling, he landed on a nearby rooftop. Less than ten seconds later, he was back with Xerxes.

"Sword," he said.

"Right, sir," Xerxes replied, handing it to him.

"Just call me Purattu. No need for that 'sir' business." He started strapping the sword back on. "Can you help me with this buckle here?"

Xerxes stepped forward and helped him while simultaneously looking nervously over at the gigantic Abhorrent. It was still swiping its arms at whatever force of soldiers was assailing it from the other side of the city.

Purattu tightened the straps and adjusted some buckles. "All right, that's good. I guess I could have kept the thing on, but you never know what might happen in a fight with a monster like that. Not that I have much experience in that regard. Well, nobody does, really." He gave a final tug to one of the straps. "I suppose that big building over there is Mannemid's headquarters?"

Xerxes followed his gaze to the keep off in the distance.

"Yes, that's the keep," Xerxes said. "Where the king lives. And it's where the Mage Parliament is right now. Except, the Head Mage just got killed...."

"Aban Saddi? Dead already? Must have been pretty useless." He walked to the edge of the roof, and when Xerxes remained standing in place, he looked back. "Are you coming?"

Xerxes looked at the massive Abhorrent. "But, aren't you going to...."

"To what?"

"*Do* something about that thing?"

Purattu snorted. "It'll be dead in ten minutes. My other people will keep it occupied until then. Don't worry. No more innocent lives are going to be lost. Come on."

Chapter 27 – Restructuring

Purattu hopped off the rooftop and to the street below. Xerxes followed, trying to break down the meaning of Purattu's words. He had simply touched the Abhorrent and now claimed it would be dead in minutes. How?

What spell had he cast? If only Gandash were here to ask; he was a breathing encyclopedia. That would certainly save some time. Instead, Xerxes went through all the spells a High Mystic could conceivably use.

There were six orders of magic: Nasaru, Asgagu, Balatu, Sinitu, Hasasu, Buhhu.

A Seer could cast one spell from a given order. But once they reached the High Seer level, things changed significantly. They had two additional spells they could theoretically master. A Mystic had three beyond that, and a High Mystic four. In other words, a Mystic had access to a total of six spells they could learn and potentially cast, and a High Mystic had ten. Simple math indicated that, including all the orders of magic, there were sixty spells Purattu could have cast, assuming he was a High Mystic.

It wasn't too difficult to narrow down the possibilities in terms of which order of magic he specialized in. Nasaru was the magic of defense and shielding, and obviously Purattu hadn't used any spell like that. Asgagu was for combat, and Xerxes knew lots about that order. Whatever spell had been used wasn't from the Asgagu order.

It wasn't a conjuring, so Buhhu was out.

Hasasu? The magic of mind-reading and divination? No, that didn't make sense. Hasasu couldn't really be used in combat. Sinitu? No, there hadn't been any sort of transformations or transmutations involved.

That left Balatu.

Of course. The Balatu order initially focused on healing, but that wasn't all it was limited to. As he'd learned in classes, healing was considered the *restoration* of life. But Balatu mages could also *take life away*. There were no Balatu mages on Mannemid who could cast spells of that level, but that didn't mean they didn't exist.

He had his answer.

Purattu had to be a High Mystic of the Balatu order. Unless he was an Archon. He had three pouches, but that didn't mean he was limited to three spells. But what was the exact spell he had cast?

Xerxes resolved to ask Gandash as soon as he could.

Purattu strolled down the street as though he were out for a casual walk. After hurrying to catch up, Xerxes couldn't help but look over his shoulder at the hulking Abhorrent, which was still

visible over the rooftops. He could still hear its roars, as well as indistinct shouting. Who was fighting the thing? Who had Purattu brought with him? Soldiers? Or other mages?

“You’re from here?” Purattu asked. “Like, this exact city?”

“Born and raised,” Xerxes said, turning his attention away from the fighting.

“Ever been off-planet?”

“Nope.”

“Well, you’re about to.”

Xerxes blinked. “Excuse me?”

Purattu stopped at an intersection and looked around. “Which way to the keep? Actually... you just lead. I’ll follow.”

“Oh, right. Um, this way.” He turned the corner.

“As I was saying, I’m taking you away from this place. Orders from Sin-Amuhhu.”

“Sin-Amuhhu?” Xerxes worked hard to make sure his jaw didn’t drop to his chest. He wasn’t an expert in the starsea’s structure any more than he was proficient regarding every aspect of magic. But he did know his basic geography, including the fact that Sin-Amuhhu was a starisle so high and distant he couldn’t even guess what it would be like to go there. As a brand new Sighted, he’d occasionally thought about traveling to such locations. But daydreams were daydreams.

Mannemid was a subsidiary starisle of Humusi. Humusi, in turn, was subsidiary to Ira. Ira was below Ku-Aya. And Ku-Aya was under Sin-Amuhhu. Xerxes’ home was literally worlds apart from that distant part of the starsea.

“You heard me,” Purattu said. “The Sin-Amuhhu Institute of Military Magic is recruiting. Or rather, conscripting. And you’re going there.” The young mage looked at him with a faint grin. “I guess that’s what happens when the Abhorrent invade. People such as yourself get a chance that most mages only dream about.”

“People such as yourself?” Xerxes echoed quietly, and it was only after the words left his mouth that he realized he’d been speaking out loud.

Purattu looked at him. “Mages from less... lower starisles,” he said. “That’s all I meant. Normally, you can only get to top colleges by testing. Best of the best; that sort of thing. In this case, you’re getting a free ride. Look, I’m not the kind of person to beat around the bush, so I’ll just tell you straight up. I’m jealous.”

Xerxes looked at the young mage with his jewel-encrusted weapon, his garments made of fine cloth, and his various expensive-looking accouterments. As far as Xerxes was concerned, he didn’t look like someone who needed to be jealous of anything.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Purattu said. “That I’m probably some stuck-up rich guy from a higher starisle, so what the hell do I know about being jealous? And... you’re right.” They had reached another intersection, and in this case, it led into a broad thoroughfare that went straight to the keep.

“I wasn’t thinking *that...*” Xerxes said, except even he could tell how insincere the words sounded, so he chuckled. “Ah, who am I trying to fool? Yeah. That’s pretty much what I was thinking.”

To his surprise, Purattu laughed, reached out, and clasped his shoulder. “I think I’m starting to like you.” With that, he stepped out into the street and walked toward the keep. “I think I can figure out the way to go from here. Before we get there, why don’t you tell me who else on Mannemid I should take up to Sin-Amuhhu. Besides you. They only want Seers. Ones with potential.”

A muffled boom reached Xerxes’ ears from the direction of the fight with the Abhorrent, and he reflexively looked over. “What...?”

The giant creature was no longer visible above the buildings.

“It fell,” Purattu said. “Instant Death is a great spell name, assuming you cast it on people. It’s not exactly *instant* when used on giant monsters.”

Of course. How could he have forgotten a spell with a name as impressive as Instant Death?

“It’ll kill a High Mystic like me in a minute or less,” Purattu continued. “Even a High Archon won’t last for two. But a stage five juvenile Abhorrent, like that one back there, well... they have a lot more life in them, so it takes longer. Even before they actually kick the bucket, though, they’ll hit the ground and twitch for a while. Anyway, you were saying? About Seers?”

Xerxes ran his hand through his hair. “Right, Seers. Well... there are quite a few on Mannemid. But not many are students. Are you specifically looking for students?”

“Yeah. Sin-Amuhhu doesn’t want fogies who’ve fooled around for decades not making any progress.”

“Okay. Well, there’s my friend Gandash. He was fighting the Abhorrent too, before I got knocked out.”

“Gandash? I met him. Your father, too, right before I came down for you. So, this Gandash is your friend?”

“Yeah, Gandy’s my best friend. We basically grew up together. He’s a lot smarter than me, to be honest.” Realizing that he wasn’t exactly talking himself up, he quickly continued, “But he’s not much of a fighter, if you know what I mean. He’s... well, how should I put it?”

Purattu chuckled. “Yeah, I get it. He’s scrawny. A bookworm, I bet.”

“Yeah. Like that.”

“But he’s a Buhhu mage, which is rare. So that’s a big plus.”

“Yeah, Buhhu. I’d definitely recommend him. Besides Gandy, some of the other young Seers are Visimar, who’s Balatu like you. Nidintu and Panya, who are both Asgagu mages like me. Gad, who’s Nasaru.... There are plenty more. Except none of them are here in the capital. Just about all the students at the Academy were given training missions, so they’re out in the countryside. Or maybe even in Fal or Od.”

“Fal and Od, the other nations on this planet.”

“You know about them?” Xerxes was surprised that a mage from such a distant and famous starisle would know so much about a place like Mannemid.

“I did my research,” Purattu answered.

By this point, they were closing in on one of the keep’s side gates. The soldiers there looked nervous and had their weapons out and shields up.

Purattu stopped about fifty cubits from the gate. “Do you know your way around the palace?”

“I know the general layout. That’s about it.”

“Good enough. I’m going to rely on you to do most of the talking at first. Can you handle the guards?”

“Sure.” Xerxes stood straighter. He, a mere Seer, was being promoted to a spokesperson for a mage from lofty Ku-Aya? The thought filled him with pride.

“Good,” Purattu said. “Having someone talk for me will help maintain an aura of authority. Plus... I won’t have to ask for directions constantly. Take me to the main audience chamber, then arrange for all the mages in the city to come for a meeting. Can you handle that?”

“Absolutely.”

**

As the mages filtered back to the keep, the glory Xerxes had envisioned came just as he’d imagined.

“Seer Nohem,” he said to the man who was now the only other Buhhu mage on the planet besides Gandash. “This is High Mystic Purattu of Ku-Aya, sent with the authority of Sin-Amuhhu backing him.”

“Greetings, High Mystic Purattu,” Nohem said, bowing deeply.

Purattu gave a slight nod of acknowledgment but didn’t say anything. He just stood there with his arms folded, looking at the view beyond the balcony.

Straightening up, Nohem looked at Xerxes with a slightly bowed head. “Er, Seer Xerxes... sir, is it true that Aban Saddi... is no longer with us?”

“High Mystic Purattu will explain everything shortly.”

“Of course.” Nohem ducked his head and backed away.

High Seer Shemesh was cowed by Purattu’s lofty rank. But he clearly didn’t like the idea of Xerxes being a spokesperson. After the introductions, he glared and said, “Seer Xerxes, I was told by soldiers that you were knocked unconscious in combat, is that true?”

Xerxes, feeling more confident than ever with Purattu’s favor, said, “Yes, that’s true, but—”

Shemesh interrupted with a harrumph. “Perhaps you aren’t aware that the measure of success in a combat scenario is—”

“What the fuck did *you* do?” Purattu interrupted with a shout.

The entire room went silent, and Shemesh’s face fell.

“H-High Mystic Purattu,” Shemesh stammered, “I... I um—”

“You’re what, a Hasasu mage? Did you read the thing’s mind? Did you look at the stars and figure out how to beat it? Or did you hide here in the castle like a coward, waiting for everyone else to do the fighting for you? Huh? Well?”

Shemesh barely managed to stutter a few syllables of nonsensical gibberish before Purattu cut him off.

“Kindly shut the *fuck* up,” Purattu continued. “And going forward, I don’t want to hear *anything* from you, you useless idiot.”

Xerxes looked over at Gandash. His friend’s eyes were wide, and Xerxes knew his own expression was similar.

Turning his attention away from Shemesh, Purattu said, “Seer Xerxes, would you kindly arrange for the king of this nation to join us? I don’t want to discuss matters relating to his kingdom without him present.”

Xerxes hurried away, returning about ten minutes later with the elderly king.

“King Nabuhisnu’isin,” Purattu said, bowing deeply, “it is a true honor to be in your presence. Even in my home on Ku-Aya, I have heard of your wisdom and foresight.”

The King chuckled. “You flatter me, High Mystic.”

“It’s no flattery. I know of the tripartite peace agreement you brokered with Fal and Od, as well as your efforts to quell piracy on your southern coast.”

The King looked surprised. "I had no idea Mannemid politics were a subject of interest in higher starisles."

"Trust me, Your Majesty, your style of rule is a breath of fresh air, especially compared to some idiot monarchs like the one in charge of, say, Ira. In any case, we have a lot of work to do. We should start with the corpse of the Abhorrent out there."

The gigantic Abhorrent had indeed shriveled into a desiccated corpse within minutes of Purattu hitting it with Instant Death, but they still needed to deal with the remains. And there were many other monstrous beasts left in the city, not to mention cultists. Purattu hadn't been exaggerating. There was a lot of work to do.

**

Two days later, Gandash's parents hosted a feast at their manor in Garden Terrace. It was a small banquet, but a banquet nonetheless. Other than Xerxes' family, the only guest present was Purattu, who only the day before had announced he would be taking Xerxes and Gandash with him when he left.

"I wish there was more time for you to say your goodbyes," Purattu said as they sat down to eat. "But there's much work to be done. I've been to Kartos, Erishti-Aya, and Nos, which means my work gathering Seers isn't even half done. Of course, you know that."

"The off-planet Seers were instrumental in purging the capital of monsters and cultists alike," Xerxes' father explained for the benefit of the mothers, neither of whom were Sighted or did work related to the government or military.

Purattu accepted a goblet of wine from Xerxes' mother. "Thank you, ma'am." After taking a sip, he continued, "We'll be visiting Hannemid next. After that Jehannemid and Gehannemid. Well... you get the picture. I need to keep moving. No time for rest and relaxation."

"We completely understand," Dumamu said. Looking fondly at his son, he said, "We're all very proud that Gandash and Xerxes are getting this opportunity. Sin-Amuhhu, it's... it's just incredible."

"It is," Gandash's mother said. "Although... having spoken to many of the family members, I can tell you people are worried. What if the cultists wait until you're gone to make a move? What if more Abhorrent attack?"

"Valid concerns, ma'am," Purattu replied. "But I wouldn't worry if I were you. We were thorough in tracking down the cultists. Though High Seer Ninsunu was one of them, we have no reason to suspect any of the other mages."

"Except for Gad," Gandash said.

"Gad?" his mother asked.

“Ninsunu’s apprentice,” Dumamu said. He reached out to clasp his wife’s hand. “He’s traveling in Fal right now. We’ll find him.”

“Besides,” Purattu continued, “a Seer cultist isn’t anything to stay awake at night worrying about. As for any leftover Abhorrent, you can rest assured. From what I can tell, the spawn and juveniles were sent down to make way for the big one. Now that it’s dead, the only ones left behind are runts the local mages and military can handle.”

Xerxes’ and Gandash’s parents had many questions, and Purattu answered them all patiently.

“What’s ‘Military Magic’?” Xerxes mother asked.

Purattu rubbed his chin. “Good question. It’s not like it’s a special type of magic. Military Magic is one branch of the armed forces. The term conveys a focus on military applications of magic. Not all mages fight on the battlefield, after all. In fact, most don’t.”

It wasn’t until the meal reached its conclusion that the family members got emotional.

“Don’t go, Zokey,” Ahassunu said, tears welling up in her eyes.

Xerxes pulled his sister into a hug. “I’ll be back soon. With some great dolphin jewelry from Sin-Amuhhu.”

His mother hugged him harder than he remembered her ever hugging him. “You come back to me,” she said. “Promise?”

He returned her hug. “Promise.”

**

Purattu presided over an inspection of Ligish’s mechanical devices. After poking through the bits and pieces, and then leafing through the schematic Xerxes had uncovered, he said, “I’ll handle the paperwork. This kind of thing is more common than you might think. Martial adepts...” He cleared his throat. “Never mind. The less you know, the better. Anyway, I’ll hand over the report personally when I get to Sin-Amuhhu. Don’t worry, this kind of machine won’t attract the attention of the Nergal. That said, lock it up and throw away the key. Just in case.”

Later that day at the keep, there was a final bit of business that Purattu had to take care of. With Aban Saddi gone, there was a need for a new Head Mage. No one dared to nominate Shemesh, and all the other High Seers were away from the capital.

“By the power vested in me by Archon Belu-Bani of Ku-Aya,” Purattu said, “I hereby appoint Dumamu son of Nidintulugal as the new Head Mage of Mannemid.”

Just like that, Gandash’s father became the most powerful figure on the planet. He still had years to go before he reached the High Seer level, much less the Mystic level, but that didn’t matter. Purattu gave him a small gift of some jewels and medicinal pills, as well as a schematic for a spell formation he said would ‘aid in meditation.’

After that, there were some general formalities, and then Purattu led his group of conscripted Seers out of the city. In the past, Xerxes would have been excited about the journey out of the capital, as well as the small box of shekels his parents had given to him for spending money. But he felt like a different person now.

Given they weren't being held back by Unsighted, Purattu had them make the trip to the Gateway complex on foot. What would have been a two-day trip on horseback only took a matter of hours for a group of Seers and a High Mystic.

Just before entering the Gateway to Humusi, Purattu said, "Gandash, Xerxes, this is your first time, so be ready for some strange sensations. You might vomit on the other end. If so, don't feel embarrassed. It happened to me the first time."

With that, Purattu entered the swirling light. A mage named Kashtiliash followed him, then a few others. Xerxes stepped inside and experienced the strangest sensation in his life. Visually, he knew he was moving. He was in a tunnel with bright lights that flowed past him like multicolored river water. However, when he closed his eyes, he didn't feel like he was moving at all. He spotted someone ahead of him, while Gandash was behind him, seemingly a huge distance away.

The entire process only lasted for about a minute. Then everything turned white, and he was ejected onto a wide platform that looked very similar to the platform he'd strode across to enter the Gateway. The sensation was disorienting. He felt dizzy and nauseous, to the point where it took some effort to prevent himself from vomiting.

Gandash came out a moment later, and he made a gagging sound but also kept the contents of his stomach where they belonged.

"Bellies of steel, eh?" Purattu said. "Impressive."

After all the mages had exited the Gateway tunnel, Purattu organized them into ranks, with one line behind Xerxes and the other behind Kashtiliash.

Is he putting me in charge or something? Xerxes thought.

During the days of activity on Mannemid, he had been introduced to all the other Seers in Purattu's group. But even still, he hadn't memorized all their names, much less any detailed information about them.

Kashtiliash was obviously favored by Purattu, so Xerxes had made an effort to pay attention to him. He knew that the young man was an Asgagu mage who had been born on Ira but grew up on Kartos. That was unusual. Normally speaking, mages sought to go up in the world, not the other way around, and Kartos, like Mannemid, was subsidiary to Humusi, which made it much lower than Ira.

Perhaps that was why Kashtiliash was so aloof. He rarely talked and always seemed to be looking away from everyone else. That said, he had a beard that made Xerxes extremely envious; he kept it well-oiled and curled tightly. Combined with his skin, which was as dark as the

shadows in the Yellow Wood, it made him seem imposing in a way Xerxes couldn't even hope to imitate. Most mysterious of all was that he carried an unusually long traveling pack, as opposed to the smaller backpack-style bags most of the other mages favored.

After their ranks were in order, they proceeded through Humusi's Gateway complex to another area where they went through the tunnel to Hannemid.

Chapter 28 – Let's Get Going

Purattu paused before climbing the steps into the actual complex and looked back at the small group of Seers.

“Remember, the situation could be bad, like it was when we arrived on Mannemid. Be ready to fight at a moment's notice. Nobody get killed, all right? That's the last thing I need, to have my conscripts dead before I get them back to Sin-Amuhhu.

“If there's fighting, follow my orders without question and without hesitation. In my absence, listen to Xerxes or Kashtiliash.

“If there's no fighting, well... you still need to follow my orders. We'll assess the Abhorrent situation, make sure it's under control, then conscript the best Seers they have available and nearby before continuing to the next starisle. We have a deadline to get back to Sin-Amuhhu, and I want to beat it. Any questions?”

There were none.

Xerxes expected Hannemid to be completely exotic to him. In some ways it was. For instance, the climate was different than the city where Xerxes had grown up. Instead of dry and dusty, it obviously rained a lot. And when they stepped out, it seemed earlier than it should be. The sun was higher in the sky.

The architecture looked more like that in Harborview, except not as decrepit. However, in terms of the fashion, the art, the cut of the stones on the street, and numerous other small details, everything looked similar to Isin.

No massive Abhorrent invasion plagued the city.

In fact, an investigation revealed that, as far as anyone could tell, the Abhorrent hadn't arrived on Hannemid at all. There hadn't been a single attack nor any unusual meteor showers.

They conscripted some mages from the pool available in the city surrounding the Gateway, a process that took them two days. Then they left for Jehannemid.

Purattu was obviously intent on moving as quickly as possible. When they weren't on the move, they were eating. When they weren't eating, they were sleeping. Whenever they had a spare moment, he forced them to spend it in meditation or rune study. No conversation. No time for relaxation. He led morning prayer on a regular basis, though. After a few such prayers, Xerxes noticed that Purattu never said 'Pontifarch,' which was odd.

There's no way he's a member of the One Faith, is there? he thought. There wasn't an opportunity to ask. Nor did Xerxes find a chance to ask Gandash his opinion or his thoughts on the whirlwind of events in general. There just wasn't time.

The constant activity also made it impossible to get to know the other Seers.

Unlike the Gateway complexes on Mannemid, Humusi, and Hannemid, all of which were surrounded by civilization, the Jehannemid complex was located amidst craggy mountains a good distance away from the nearest city. For Unsighted on horseback, the journey to the capital would have taken days. Moving at the speed of Seers, the trip went much faster.

Once out of the mountains and into civilization, they found that the Abhorrent had arrived even earlier than on Mannemid. However, there were no gigantic, high-level juveniles.

Purattu and the Seers provided help cleaning out some of the remaining monsters. It wasn't a difficult task. There was no spellcasting involved, and Xerxes only used his sword once.

When the work was done, the Head Mage offered to hold a banquet in celebration. Xerxes expected Purattu to decline the offer, but he didn't. During the event, Purattu explained his conscription mission.

"We would be honored to send our best and brightest with you, High Mystic Purattu," the Head Mage said.

"Good," Purattu said. "Before leaving, I'd like to check the mage population of your sister city, Puabi."

"Er, that's not necessary. We here in the capital—"

"Cut the bullshit," Purattu interrupted. "I know there's political tension between the capital and Sheik Hatim. Has it escalated into outright war?"

"Of course not."

"So it has. You do know who Sheik Hatim is, right?"

"Of course. He's the son-in-law of... K-Kingallu."

"*High Archon* Kingallu of Sin-Amuhhu. I honestly can't believe you have the guts to openly clash with the family member of one of the most powerful mages in the Great Reef."

The Head Mage puffed his chest up. "*We* aren't clashing with him, I'll have you know. *He's* the one who—"

"I don't care," Purattu interrupted. "I just want to make sure I'm taking the best Seers to Sin-Amuhhu, so I'll be heading over to Puabi tomorrow."

"It's on the other side of the continent, some one hundred and fifty leagues away. The roads are winding, and if you go off them—"

"I'm a High Mystic, remember?"

"Right...."

"I'll leave first thing in the morning and be back before the dinner hour."

That meant that Xerxes and the other off-world mages had an actual free day.

“Make the best use of it,” Purattu said before disappearing.

“What does that mean?” said one of the mages they’d picked up on Hannemid.

Xerxes grinned. “He didn’t mention meditation or study. My guess is he wants us to loosen up a bit.”

“I don’t know…” Gandash said.

Xerxes shoved his shoulder. “Come on, Gandy. Let’s just look around. We’ve been going nonstop for days now.”

“I guess it wouldn’t hurt.”

The other mages followed suit.

As Xerxes stepped out into the street, he thought about Bel. How long had it been since he dragged her out of the tavern in Kisiga on the fateful day when Gem died? Glancing over, he saw an odd expression on Gandash’s face and assumed similar thoughts were going through his head. It was hard to believe things had changed so quickly. Days before, Xerxes had faced death repeatedly in quick succession. He’d witnessed nightmarish death and destruction. Now he was about to go shopping?

Shaking his head, he reached down and triple-checked that he had his component pouch, as well as a good knife. As for his sword, it was too bulky to take along for a casual tour of the city. Besides, the place was well-patrolled by the local guard.

They spent the morning wandering the capital. It had its own characteristic flair but was similar enough to Mannemid that they didn’t feel out of place.

Gandash bought some trinkets at a market. A ring. A letter opener. A piece of coral. Xerxes kept his eyes open for longswords and dolphin jewelry but didn’t see any, so in the end, he saved his money. Given the abundance of sights, smells, and sounds, there was no time for chatting.

“Let’s get something to eat,” Xerxes said. “I’m famished.”

“We have to try some of those saffron falafels. You’ve seen the signs, right?”

“Yeah.” Saffron falafels were some sort of specialty in this city. And apparently, saffron was as pricey as it was back home. “They’re expensive though.”

“Come on, my treat.”

Xerxes gritted his teeth but tried to smile. “It’s fine, Gandy. I’ll pass. Let’s save our money for when we get to Sin-Amuhhu.”

“Hmm… fine.”

Instead of the saffron falafels, they picked a street meat vendor with small tables set up by the side of the road.

As they threaded through the tables trying to find a suitable spot to sit, Gandash said, “Xerk, have you thought much about—”

In that exact moment, Xerxes noticed a familiar face a few tables down. “Gandy, look.”

“Huh?”

“Hey!” Xerxes said, rather loudly. “Kashtiliash?”

The bearded Seer sat there with his legs stretched out and his arms crossed. Upon hearing Xerxes’ greeting, he gave them a nod.

“Let’s join him,” Xerxes said quietly to Gandash.

“He doesn’t seem very friendly,” Gandash replied.

“He’s just shy.” Threading through the tables, Xerxes said, “We Seers ought to stick together, eh?”

Kashtiliash eyed him as he pulled a chair out and sat down. “Sure.”

Gandash followed and sat down. “Hi,” he said.

Kashtiliash shifted his eyes but didn’t move his head. “Gandash, right?” He looked back at Xerxes. “And Xerxes.”

“That’s us,” Xerxes said. “Did you order already?”

“Yes.”

Xerxes waved at a nearby waiter. “Whatever this guy ordered, add two portions!”

The waiter barked an acknowledgment and hurried back toward the kitchen.

“Hope you like spicy food,” Kashtiliash said.

“Of course!” Xerxes said.

Gandash made a face but didn’t say anything.

Xerxes leaned back in his chair. “So... you’re from—” Before finishing the question, he recalled Kashtiliash’s strange background, having been born on a higher starisle, but being raised in a lower one. It made Xerxes think of his own birthplace, the rundown slum of Harborview, and how he preferred to avoid that topic. “—er, never mind that. You’re an Asgagu mage. Do you have a background in martial arts?”

“Some.”

Xerxes smiled and nodded. *Quite a conversationalist we have here.*

Right about then, the waiter brought a flagon of wine and three wooden cups. Kashtiliash distributed them and poured wine.

Xerxes took a long sip. *This is turning awkward fast.*

“You fight with a longsword, right?” Kashtiliash asked.

Xerxes’ ears perked up. “Yeah. You know about longswords?”

The bearded Seer nodded. “Have you seen my pack?”

“It’s big,” Gandash said. “At least three cubits in length. Made of brown canvas. Wrapped twice with hemp rope.”

Kashtiliash looked at him. “Very observant.”

Gandash shrugged. “I try to keep an eye on my surroundings.”

“Mm-hmm.” Kashtiliash took a long sip of wine. “It’s big because it has a longsword in it.”

“What?” Xerxes blurted. “Are you serious?”

“I don’t look serious?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Kashtiliash looked at him for a second or two. “Yeah, I have a longsword. Didn’t need the thing, so I didn’t bring it out.”

“That’s incredible.”

“Want to cross swords later? Train a bit?”

Xerxes’ heart swelled. “Of course!”

The waiter brought two trays laden with flatbread and skewered meat. The three mages ate for a short time in silence.

After devouring a few plates of meat, and refilling his wine cup, Xerxes burped and said, “What do you think’s going to happen on Gehannemid?”

“No clue,” Kashtiliash said. “A challenge would be nice.”

“I hope Gehannemid has *nothing* happening,” Gandash said. “That way we can get to Sin-Amuhhu faster.”

Kashtiliash looked at him with an eyebrow raised.

Before they could continue the conversation, the cry of a hawker reached their ears from across the street.

“Saffron falafels! Hot and fresh!”

Gandash looked up eagerly. “Xerk, I can’t stand this. I have to try one.”

Xerxes grinned wryly and shook his head. “Go for it, Gandy.”

“You want one?”

“Nah, it’s fine.”

Without another word, Gandash crossed the busy street to intercept the hawker.

“Your friend must be rich,” Kashtiliash said, sliding some more meat off a skewer.

“Basically,” Xerxes said. Jaw jutting, he said, “And he always seems to flaunt it.”

“I had a friend like that back on Kartos.”

Xerxes took a swallow of wine. “*Had?*”

“We’re not friends anymore.”

Gandash returned with a rapturous expression on his face. “You guys have no idea how amazing those things are. Here, I got one for each of you.”

He put a saffron falafel on the table in front of each of the other mages.

Xerxes’ jaw twitched.

Kashtiliash looked at it. “I prefer Kartos falafels.”

“Er... okay,” Gandash said, sliding back into his seat. “What about you, Xerk? What do you think?”

Xerxes ate the falafel and worked hard not to moan in delight. It was one of the most delicious things he’d ever eaten. “It’s all right,” he said. “Overpriced, for sure.”

They wandered the city with Kashtiliash after that.

Later that evening, Purattu returned alone. “No mages in that city are worth bringing along,” he said. “We’ll just take the ones the Head Mage provides.”

When he heard that the Seers had explored the city, he chided them for wasting time. “When I said to make the best use of the day, I didn’t mean shopping and snacking! None of you have maxed out chambers. You should have been meditating! Or studying runes!”

The next morning, the Head Mage brought three Seers to join Purattu’s party.

One of them was a heavy-set girl with droopy eyes and buck teeth. Xerxes’ eyes slid over her without pause.

The other two were far more eye-catching to him. It wasn’t because of their physical appearance—one was tall with a wide smile and a seemingly smaller-than-average head, the other was short, with thick hair and a long nose—nor their clothing, which conformed to the local fashion. It was the fact that both carried longswords.

They noticed the similar sword that he carried, and they both nodded to him from across the room.

Introductions were made. The three new mages were Jad, Enusat, and Inatli, although the names fled Xerxes’ mind almost immediately.

Purattu led everyone to the Gateway complex. They went up to Humusi, then to Gehannemid.

Gandash’s wish was fulfilled. There was no Abhorrent activity on either Gehannemid I or Gehannemid II. Neither planet had any clue there was an invasion going on. What was more, Purattu wasn’t impressed with the mages there and ended up only picking one Seer to join them.

They spent two days on each planet before leaving. As they all stepped out into the Humusi Gateway complex, Purattu led them to a small public square.

“All right, runts,” he said. “Now we’re going to begin the most amazing journey of your lives. From here we’ll go from Ira, and then to Ku-Aya, and finally to Sin-Amuhhu. Don’t do anything embarrassing, or I’ll kick you back down to whichever of these mudholes you came from. Maybe I’ll even send you farther down. Got it?”

The assembled mages gave murmurs of agreement.

“Good. Let’s get going.”

Chapter 29 – Lives Changed Forever

On Ira, there were multiple Gateway complexes, so Purattu arranged for carriages to take them through the city. He had Kashtiliash and Xerxes ride with him, leaving the other nineteen mages to divide themselves as they saw fit between four additional carriages.

Once on the streets, Xerxes peered out and saw, to his disappointment, that the city was very much like the other cities. He'd expected this higher starisle to have gigantic buildings plated with gold, or at least something like that. Granted, the city seemed bigger, and there were a *few* more towers and temples than back home.

"Not impressed?" Purattu asked.

Xerxes wiped a frown from his face that he hadn't even realized had appeared. "Well..."

"Ira's a shithole," Kashtiliash said.

Purattu barked a laugh. "Well, that's indeed what many people say. Supposedly the last four or five kings in a row have been morons who care more about amassing harems and going hunting than running a government. Just wait until you see Ku-Aya and Sin-Amuhhu."

"You've been to Sin-Amuhhu?" Xerxes asked and immediately regretted it, remembering Purattu had openly stated he was jealous of their group for being assigned to a college there.

"No," Purattu said, his nose flaring slightly. "But I've heard a lot about it. It's definitely a step up from where I was raised. And compared to where you two come from, it's like heaven compared to hell."

Trying not to think about what Purattu's words implied about Mannemid, he looked back out at the city. The streets were packed. There were armed soldiers on patrol, rich merchants with attendants holding parasols over them to shield them from the scorching sun, beggars crouching in alleys, and street performers at all the big intersections. The young men all looked proud, and the young women were so attractive Xerxes had to force himself not to stare at them.

After a few minutes passed, Purattu said, "Forget about the sights for a moment. I brought you two with me because, well, I like both of you. It was a surprise to find people who study the Epitome in lower starisles, and that's why I put you in charge of the others. I'd hoped to do a bit of training with you while we traveled, but there was never time.

"Once you get to the Sin-Amuhhu Institute of Military Magic, don't expect any special treatment. They'll assess you and use the results to split you into different groups. Some of you will end up as officers who command fellow mages and Unsighted troops. The rest will be put in with the regular troops."

"What's better about being an officer?" Xerxes asked.

"If nothing else, the pay is better, and I know both of you had hard lives growing up."

Kashtiliash stiffened.

“Hey, hey,” Purattu continued, “it wasn’t meant as an insult. You want to know one thing that pisses me off? It’s those shithead mages from rich families who use money to get ahead in the world. I hate people like that.”

Kashtiliash loosened.

Purattu sighed. “It’s true I come from a family with money. But my dad—he’s Unsighted by the way—he grew up poor. He worked hard to get his fortune, and he forced me to do the same as a mage. I *earned* my way to where I am now, but not everybody is like that. Anyway, I have a proposition to make. Even though I haven’t been to Sin-Amuhhu, I know it’s a wild place. There are rich fools there who would make me seem like a beggar. The cost of living is insane, and you’ll only have a stipend of two shekels a month from the Institute. That won’t do much other than buy you a few extra meals on your days off. So, I’d like to offer each of you a loan.”

Xerxes’ eyes flitted to Kashtiliash to gauge his reaction. The bearded mage was looking at him for the same reason.

He looked back toward Purattu. “A loan? Not... a gift?”

Purattu pshawed. “Gift? Are you kidding me? I wouldn’t insult you that way. I’m talking about a loan. No interest, at least not the money kind. You can pay me back after you graduate or after you return from your first major mission and get paid.”

“What’s the catch?” Kashtiliash asked. “There’s no way you’re just going to give us money out of the kindness of your heart.”

“Of course not. You’ll owe me. A favor, I guess. I don’t know, I haven’t thought it through very deeply. The thing is, I can afford this, and I want to do it. Help the two of you. And later on, when you’re High Mystics, I’ll have two friends. In my belief, friends and allies are a lot more important than gold and silver.”

Xerxes and Kashtiliash again exchanged a glance. Xerxes hated the way Gandash threw money around, but this offer from Purattu felt different. It wasn’t him flaunting his money nor him pitying them.

“How much?” Xerxes asked.

“Fifty shekels,” Purattu said.

Xerxes nearly choked. His father barely made thirty shekels a month, at least before the Abhorrent invasion. Who knew how things might change with Gandash’s father as the new Head Mage. In any case, his father and mother had nearly drained their savings to give him forty shekels of spending money upon leaving Mannemid, and he had considered that an enormous sum.

“I can’t—” Kashtiliash said, but Purattu cut him off.

“Don’t be dumb,” the High Mystic said. “This isn’t charity, it’s a business deal. Use it to invest in a new sword. Better armor. Spell components. Whatever. The point is that I help you get an edge, and later on down the line, you help me. Consider it the start of an alliance. When I become the Head Mage of Ku-Aya, I’ll appoint the two of you as advisers. And with that power base, we’ll take on Sin-Amuhhu. Eventually, the entire Great Reef. One day, we’ll all be Anunnaki!”

Xerxes chuckled, and a moment later, Purattu joined him. Even Kashtiliash let out a snort that bordered on laughter. The thought of the three of them taking over an entire major portion of the starsea was completely ridiculous. And even more far-fetched was the idea of them becoming immortal Anunnaki.

“Well?” Purattu asked. “Deal?”

A short silence followed, which was broken by Kashtiliash. “Deal.”

Xerxes grinned. “Deal!”

**

After Ira was Ku-Aya, Purattu’s home.

Ku-Aya was indeed much more impressive than anything Xerxes had seen on Ira, Humusi, or any of the lower starisles. All the buildings were taller. There were columns everywhere, some of which featured statues of fantastic creatures atop them, like winged lions or horses with horns. There were archways and temples, public squares and broad streets wider than the largest squares on Mannemid.

Most impressive of all was a mass of white and green rising up in the middle of the city.

“Is that a mountain?” he asked.

“Nope,” Purattu said. “Behold the Hanging Gardens of Ku-Aya. You won’t find anything like them in a lesser starisle, believe me.”

It was a huge structure made from white stone, with ascending tiers of gardens. It contained trees, bushes, vines, and even entire fields, all on this massive man-made structure that he’d originally mistaken for a landform. Circling around it took a full hour, and there never seemed a lack of interesting aspects to gaze upon. Immense sculptures. Waterfalls. Bridges.

Xerxes was so entranced he hardly noticed how long it took to reach their destination.

Eventually, the buildings outside the carriage changed. They were now in a district of mansions surrounded by brick walls. Then Xerxes realized they were entering one such compound. After they went through a set of outer gates, the carriage rolled to a halt.

It was a villa owned by the Ku-Aya Mage Parliament. They were assigned rooms, with most mages being put with other mages from their own starisles. Xerxes and Gandash got a pair of bunks in a tiny room at the end of a hallway.

“Not incredibly impressive,” Gandash said.

Xerxes tossed his traveling pack onto the ground at the foot of the bed and his sword onto the mattress. “Better than the Academy dorms. At least there’s a timepiece.”

“True.”

After dinner, Purattu told the mages they would spend the night and the following day in the villa while he gave a report about his mission and made arrangements for the final leg of their journey.

“Don’t leave the compound,” Purattu said. “I want you to spend the entire time in meditation. Get your chambers of energy as full as possible before we get to Sin-Amuhhu.”

Xerxes was getting very behind on meditation. He still had yet to perform a second Flush. And given that he needed to do twelve total to reach the High Seer level, he knew he shouldn’t be slacking. Of course, there were some mages who were content to take years, decades even, to become a High Seer. There were even some who, because of lack of talent or initiative, never managed it. And that wasn’t to mention the baffling limitations imposed by natural law. But Xerxes knew he *had* to become a High Seer.

Once he got to the Institute on Sin-Amuhhu, he needed to rise above his peers. If nothing else, he wanted to repay Purattu as quickly as possible. In fact, even though Purattu didn’t want to charge interest, Xerxes was determined that he *would* provide interest with the repayment. That was what an honorable person should do. And he obviously couldn’t do that if he didn’t make some significant progress with his magic.

That evening, he focused fully on meditation, except for about an hour studying the Asgagu Sebum rune.

The following day, he was equally studious, to the point where he skipped lunch.

It was around the dinner hour when Purattu returned. As the mages gathered to eat, Purattu pulled Kashtiliash and Xerxes aside.

“Here,” he said, handing each of them a lacquered box. “Fifty shekels each, as promised. I split them between gold and silver.” He grinned. “Don’t spend it all in one place.”

After a light meal, they were back in the carriages and heading to the final Gateway complex.

There were a lot more guards and soldiers and more formalities. Purattu handled everything. There was only a short wait for carriages after they stepped out of the tunnel. Once on the streets of Sin-Amuhhu, Xerxes found himself yet again staring out the window.

The strangest thing was that when they left Ku-Aya, it was evening, but when they arrived at Sin-Amuhhu, it was morning. This turned out to be good, as the trip from the Gateway complex to the school took many hours.

However amazing Ku-Aya was, this place was even more impressive. The buildings were bigger and taller. The streets were wider. Everything was extremely clean. The paint was fresh. Some structures had gold, silver, and jewels embedded into them. Right on the street!

There were no beggars. What was more, everyone on the street wore clothing of finespun cloth and even silk. And they seemed laden with immense amounts of jewelry. And the girls were prettier.

Even Purattu was craning his neck to take in the sights.

About two hours later, the carriages passed through the gate of an enormous wall.

“This is it,” Purattu said. “The Sin-Amuhhu Institute of Military Magic. Get ready for your lives to change forever.”

As they stepped out of the carriages, they found a group of three uniformed individuals waiting, presumably staff or teachers. One of them led Purattu away to fill out forms. The other two took charge of the new arrivals.

What followed was a whirlwind of activity. The twenty-one mages were interviewed, took a medical examination, and provided some basic personal information. They were given new uniform robes of overlapping blue and white fabric, with girdles of black leather, plus a strongbox for valuables.

Finally, they were assigned temporary quarters. Female mages and male mages were kept separate.

“You’ll stay here for a short time,” they were told. “After your assessment, you’ll be split up and relocated.”

By the time Xerxes and Gandash were finally able to sit on their cots and look each other in the eye, it was evening. They were both exhausted yet exhilarated.

“This is amazing,” Xerxes said.

Gandash nodded. “Yeah. I just wish... never mind.”

He’s thinking about Bel.

Xerxes cleared his throat. “Yeah. I know what you mean.”

A minute passed. Two. Maybe it was finally time to talk about all those unspoken things from Mannemid.

“Gandy?”

Xerxes didn't get a response.

“Gandy?”

He looked over and saw his friend's chest slowly moving up and down. He was asleep. Xerxes yawned. Seconds later, he was also sleep, without even having changed his clothes.

Book 2: A Respite on Sin-Amuhhu

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.

Ignis Cappilus 3:12, *Words of Xerxes the Great*, Revised Great Reef Edition

Chapter 30 – Red Hair

The next morning, they found out there were other mages who had arrived before them. *Their* group consisted of Seers from the nine starisles subsidiary to Humusi. But Humusi was itself part of a set of Stricken starisles subsidiary to Ira. And apparently, High Mystic peers of Purattu had been sent to all of those other places to recruit Seers. Five of the other groups had checked in. Four hadn't.

Even still, there were already well over one hundred conscripted Seers.

All of them were present for the morning assembly in the main courtyard. There was a wide mix of individuals. There seemed to be a slight majority of males, but he wasn't completely sure. There were short and tall people. Fat and skinny. All sorts of hair colors—the majority dark, but a few with lighter hair like Purattu or even fair hair like people from Od—and a host of different skin complexions. The only thing uniting all of them was that they were young.

The Humusi mages followed the example of the others and arranged themselves in ranks. Back home, the Academy had been a supposedly prestigious location. And yet, on the entire planet, there weren't even fifty Seers total, with only a small portion of them being students at the Academy.

Seeing so many magic practitioners in one place, Xerxes muttered, "This is crazy."

"I know," Gandash said. "There are more mages here than on all of Mannemid. And we're all students."

"Newcomers from Humusi, welcome," said a man who stood at a podium at the front of the square. It was the same gray-haired man from the day before. "I'm High Archon Kingallu, the headmaster of this school."

Xerxes' mind spun. A High Archon? In his entire life, the most powerful mage he had ever known prior to meeting Purattu was Mystic Aban Saddi. He had always thought of Aban Saddi as an all-powerful expert, yet Purattu had killed a massive Abhorrent with a single spell. But compared to a High Archon, lowly Mystics and High Mystics might as well be called weak.

"Humusi Seers," the gray-haired man said, "please pay close attention, as I'll give you a very brief summary of the situation and what will happen today. All of the previous students at our establishment were deployed to deal with some of the more extreme situations that have arisen because of the Abhorrent invasion. You've been brought here to form a new student body destined to be battlefield mages. We still don't know how the Abhorrent got from the Nightmare Cove to our part of the starsea, the Great Reef. Regardless, we need to have more qualified mages ready to fight the enemy.

"We are still waiting for more Seers to arrive from Harmu, Sin-Masu, Al-Ga, and Dumusi. Those from Dumusi should be arriving sometime tomorrow morning. In the meantime, you'll attend lectures before lunch and general training classes in the afternoon. You will devote evenings to rune study and meditation.

“Once the other Seers arrive, we will hold assessments to further identify your strengths and weaknesses. Until then—”

The sound of metal creaking interrupted the Archon, and all heads turned toward the main gate.

As a group of carriages entered, Archon Kingallu said, “Ah, the new recruits from Dumusi. Seers, turn and face the newcomers. We’ll greet them properly. Humusi Seers, accept our apologies for not offering you a similar greeting, but you arrived late in the evening.”

Xerxes turned along with the other Seers to face the newcomers. As the carriages trundled to a stop, he stood straighter as he realized he would likely be one of the first people the new Seers saw. That was, until three of the school staff hurried out to meet the newcomers, similar to the way they had met the Humusi mages yesterday.

It didn’t matter. Xerxes still felt proud to be part of this group. Yesterday, he had been a nobody, but now he was part of this new class of Seers at the Sin-Amuhhu Institute of Military Magic. He didn’t know a damn thing about how the school worked, but he was wearing the uniform, and these new Seers weren’t.

Clasping his hands behind his back, he threw his chin up and looked at the carriages.

The doors opened, and mages climbed out. As expected, they were young. And, of course, they were clad in traveling clothes. There were men and women, with different skin tones and hair colors. But they all looked similar to average folk from Mannemid.

Then, something caught Xerxes’ eye. A flash of color completely different from anything else present.

Red.

It was a bright, fiery color that curled out of one of the carriage doors, almost like a wisp of fire, or a swirl of leaves from the deepest part of autumn.

At first, Xerxes was confused. Then he realized the red color was someone’s hair. Fascinated, he focused on the person stepping out of the carriage and realized it was a young woman. Her hair was alive around her, a crimson mass that caressed her shoulders and seemingly defied gravity as it floated around her. However, it obscured her face, such that Xerxes craned his neck to glimpse her eyes.

As she stepped onto the paving stones of the courtyard, she brushed her hair aside, revealing her face. She had a long, straight nose and pink lips that were curved into a permanent smile. He couldn’t tell the color of her eyes from such a distance, but they were light. Perhaps blue. Regardless, in all his recent travels, he hadn’t seen anyone else like her.

This is her. The soulmate he’d been waiting for. The woman he would marry. Even after the concept popped up in his mind, he didn’t think it strange. There was something about her that struck him to the core. He cared about her. Right away.

More Seers emerged from the carriages, but he wasn't looking at them. He was staring at the girl with red hair, his mind swirling with a thousand thoughts. *What's her name? Which order of magic does she study? What kind of food does she like?* The thoughts eventually ran together until his mind was a mush, as if he'd been knocked out while standing straight up.

She wore traveling clothes, including knee-high leather boots, sturdy trousers, a brown outer garment, and what appeared to be a homespun cloak. Every single piece of clothing accentuated her perfectly.

I don't know who you are, but I love you.

After the red-haired girl stepped out of the carriage, another girl joined her. The second girl was also attractive, but she had the same dark hair and olive skin as so many others.

Like the other newly-arrived mages, the red-haired girl looked around the square, appearing nervous but at the same time expectant.

"Fila, daughter of Haljala?" someone said loudly.

One of the other mages in the group stepped forward. Xerxes' attention shifted to her briefly, and he noted her fine garments and thick coat of makeup.

"Here," she said.

"You come with me," one of the school staff said. "The rest of you, form ranks over there." He gestured. "The admission process will begin shortly."

The girl Fila, who was obviously the 'Purattu' of the new group, hurried away, while the group wearing traveling clothes moved to the spot indicated to join ranks.

The girl in the red hair walked with them, her eyes sweeping across the gathered students, and for a very brief moment, stopping on Xerxes.

Their eyes met, and he could see deep into her soul, and she into him. Everything he had thought about before was confirmed. He was *meant* to be with this girl. He was *meant* to marry her.

Then her eyes moved past him, and the connection was broken.

But the feelings remained.

High Archon Kingallu started his speech over from the beginning, but Xerxes wasn't paying attention. He kept looking out of the corner of his eye at the red-haired girl. Unfortunately, there were too many other students in the way to get a good look at her.

After a short time, High Archon Kingallu concluded with a morning prayer and then said, "Dismissed!"

As the students scattered, Gandash leaned over and said, "Are you ready?"

“Ready?” Xerxes said, looking over his friend’s shoulder as the travel-worn Dumusi mages hurried away to begin their admission process.

“Were you even listening?” Gandash said. “Hey. Xerk. Hey! What are you...?” Gandash looked over his shoulder and saw the Dumusi mages. “XERK!”

Gandash’s yell finally snapped Xerxes out of his reverie. “Sorry. What now?”

“What the hell were you looking at?”

Xerxes cleared his throat. “Nothing. I was just thinking. What are we doing now?”

Groaning, Gandash grabbed Xerxes by the elbow and pulled him into a walk.

“We have a lecture to attend. We don’t want to be late.”

They went to a large hall with desks set up, where they attended a lecture about basic magic theory, but Xerxes couldn’t pay attention for more than a few seconds at a time. Occasionally, the teacher would ask questions, and whenever Gandash raised his hand and got called on, he answered correctly.

Halfway through the class, the teacher called for a break.

“Can you believe this?” Gandash said.

“What?”

“Did you ever think about how Balatu and Hasasu could be used like that on the battlefield? We were always taught Hasasu wasn’t for combat!”

“Oh, that. Right...” Xerxes said, although he had absolutely no idea what Gandash was referring to.

His friend looked at him. “You weren’t listening, were you?”

Xerxes flashed a glare. “I was listening! Just not to that part.”

Gandash rolled his eyes. “You’ve been acting weird since those Dumusi mages showed up. What happened?”

Xerxes hesitated. Looked around. Then lowered his voice. “Did you see that one girl with the red hair?”

Gandash’s brow furrowed. “Red hair? I think so. What about her?”

Xerxes sighed and leaned back in his chair. “I wonder what her name is.”

“*That’s* what you’re thinking about? Instead of listening to the lecture?”

“I *was* listening!”

“Come on,” Gandash said, sounding as if he were hiding disgust. “At a time like this, you should be paying *more* attention. Not getting distracted.” He stood. “I’m going to get some water.”

A moment later, Xerxes was alone. *What’s bothering him?*

A minute or two passed as he sat there with his thoughts. Then he vaguely realized two figures were looming over him.

“You’re Xerxes, right?” one of them said.

He looked up to find the two male mages from Jehannemid standing in front of him. One of them was tall, with a wide smile and small head, the other short, with thick hair and a prominent nose.

“Yeah, I’m Xerxes. You’re…” he thought for a moment before saying, “Jad, right?”

The tall one nodded. “Yeah.”

Xerxes looked at the short one. “And you’re… Enusoth?”

“Close. Enusat.”

Xerxes shoved his hand into his hair and grinned. “Right, Enusat. Sorry, I’m terrible with names.” He extended his hand to the shorter man. “No hard feelings?”

“Nah, it’s fine.” The young man gripped his hand, and he shook it.

Xerxes then offered his hand to Jad, who shook it.

“I noticed both of you had longswords,” Xerxes said. “How long have you been training?”

“A couple of years for me,” Jad said.

Enusat shrugged. “I started a few months ago.”

“That’s why we came over,” Jad continued. “Longswords are pretty rare, but we saw that you used one. Just like Purattu. We were thinking… maybe we could get together and trade some tips?”

For the first time since glimpsing the red-haired girl, Xerxes’ interest was piqued by something else. “Sure!” he said. “As long as you promise not to laugh at my sword. It’s a bit beat up. Well… more than a bit. It’s borderline junk.”

Jad laughed. “I’ve seen yours. It looks better than mine.”

“And an ’undred times better than mine,” Enusat said. “I think mine might fall apart at any moment.”

It was Xerxes' turn to laugh. "All right, noted. You know, there's another guy from Humusi that knows longsword. Kashtiliash."

"The guy with the beard?" Jad asked.

"That's him. He's pretty cool. If we add him, we'll have even more sparring partners."

"Okay, sounds good."

"If there's time after the lecture," Xerxes said, "maybe we can all meet up. Or if not, after dinner."

"Agreed. Thanks, Xerxes."

"Just call me Xerk."

Chapter 31 – Soup

The proposed post-dinner meetup never happened. The instructors seemed intent on enforcing the schedule, especially the routine of study and meditation. The next day featured two shorter, back-to-back lectures by different Archons.

The first lecturer was Archon Shabdras, who had gaunt cheekbones and a crooked nose. He started the morning by saying, “Think about the base components used for Nasaru, Asgagu, and Balatu spells respectively. Desert sand. Talcum powder. Beach sand. All of them are dry and granular. It’s for this reason that we often classify those three orders of magic....”

Xerxes rested his chin on his hand and looked in the direction of where the red-haired girl was sitting. And from that point forward, he hardly caught half of what the Archon said. As he sat there, he envisioned asking her name. Regardless of the answer, he’d be ready to respond with a compliment.

“What a beautiful name,” he’d say. “I’m Xerxes, an Asgagu mage from Mannemid.”

“Xerxes? I’ve heard about you. Though you’re a lot more handsome than I thought you’d be.”

“Oh, you flatter me. Did you know I killed an Abhorrent in battle once? Also, I can catch knives. What? You’ve never seen something like that before? It’s really a trick, like what jugglers do, but it’s still impressive. I’d be happy to show you!”

“Right now? I can’t wait to see!”

The second lecture of the day was more interesting, as it focused on practical aspects of battlefield formations. Back on Mannemid, mages were treated like wildcards, not integral parts of the military itself. But things were different here, as a major part of their training was going to revolve around strategy, tactics, and leadership.

“Different mages have different strengths and weaknesses,” said the lecturer, a tall, broad-shouldered Archon named Adonia, who reminded him vaguely of Captain Ishki, except she had black hair and black eyes. “What are the four primary types of troops fielded in war?”

Gandash was one of a handful of Seers who raised their hand. The lecturer pointed in his direction. “You.”

“Cavalry, heavy and light. Infantry, heavy and light.”

Archon Adonia nodded in acknowledgment. “Yes. According to Macrides’ *Unifying Military Treatise*, which is the primary text you’ll be using in your studies, certain mages lend themselves to specific troop types. For example, let’s talk about heavy infantry, which are the armored soldiers who engage in front-line shock combat. What mage types would do well working among or *as* heavy infantry?”

Numerous Seers raised their hands, and she called on one. “You.”

“Probably Asgagu.”

Adonia nodded. “Good. Any others? You.” She gestured at a mage on the opposite side of the gathered crowd.

“Balatu.”

“Exactly. It’s little surprise that we consider fighters and healers well-suited to roles among heavy infantry. But there are other mage types that can work well in that role. For instance, Hasasu or Buhhu mages. How do you fit mind-readers or summoners into troops on the battlefield? Let’s consider what Macrides said in chapter 3. Listen carefully....”

After the lunch hour was practical training in the form of a game of capture the flag.

Xerxes had a much better time running around with blood pumping through his veins than he did sitting around listening to endless talking. He was paired with Gandash and two mages from the Harmu starisle named Laxu and Teucer. They worked well together, especially once Gandash took charge and explained a weakness he’d noticed in the other team’s strategy. After exploiting that weakness, they crushed their opponents and won handily, much to the praise of Archon Adonia.

Dinner followed.

“Only twenty minutes to eat?” Gandash said. “I’m going to get a stomachache.”

“You’ll be fine,” Xerxes replied, stuffing a barley cake into his mouth. It was so dry he had to wash it down with water. “Okay, maybe you’re right.”

“It’s not disgusting, but it isn’t banquet fare.”

On the way out, he spotted Jad and Enusat on the other side of the dining room and nodded in greeting. So far, he still hadn’t found any chances to reconnect with them.

The next day at the morning assembly, Xerxes saw the girl with the red hair, and he wanted to catch her eye, but she was too far away.

The first lecture of the morning was about history. Xerxes nearly yawned to death when the lecturer explained the origin of the Nightmare Cove and how it related to the other main parts of the starsea.

Archon Adonia’s lecture on practical magic was about troop formations. She even brought in a few hundred soldiers—King’s Guard or something similar—to help.

The Unsighted troops lined up, and Adonia placed mages into the crowd. As Xerxes trotted to his spot, his heart swelled when he saw the red-haired girl in the next formation over.

Maybe this is going to be my chance.

It was not his chance, as she never looked in his direction, nor did he get close enough to speak to her.

At lunch, he somehow got separated from Gandash but was happy to find himself at the same table with Jad and Enusat.

“Sorry about not following up on the sword thing,” he said. “I didn’t realize they’d keep us so busy.”

“It’s fine,” Enusat said. “We might ’ave to wait until the weekend.”

“I saw you looking at Katayoun,” Jad said. “She’s a looker, eh?”

Xerxes opened his mouth to deny that he’d been looking at anyone, then paused and grinned. “So, that’s her name. Katayoun?”

Slurping some soup, Enusat said, “The ginger? Yeah, I ’eard some of the Ashlultum fellas talking about ’er.”

Xerxes gave an extended sigh. “There’s something about her. Not just the way she looks. But... you know. Her heart. Her spirit! I feel like it’s connected to mine.”

Jad gave a faint whistle. “You saying she’s your soulmate? That’s pretty heavy stuff.”

Xerxes paused with his spoon dunked in his soup. “I’d say it’s possible. Very possible.”

Jad licked his spoon clean and used it to gesture at Xerxes. “In that case, I think we have a more important mission than sword practice.”

Xerxes looked at him. “Oh?”

“Yeah. We need to make sure she knows about you.”

“*You’re* going to make sure she knows about *me*? How?”

Jad and Enusat exchanged a glance.

“Good question,” Enusat said. “It’s not like we’re experts on women. But Jad did ’ave a couple of girlfriends back home. Knows more than me.”

Xerxes looked expectantly at the taller of the two young mages.

Jad took another spoonful of soup and then sat there looking thoughtful. Finally, he said, “Okay, I have nothing.”

Xerxes looked at him for a long moment, then laughed. Jad laughed too, and Enusat joined them.

“But seriously,” Jad continued, “we’ll think of something. That’s what friends are for, right?”

Xerxes thought about it. “Yeah, I guess so.”

The horrors he had experienced on Mannemid had been pushed so far into the back of his mind that they might as well have been forgotten. And he was fine with that. It seemed a lot better to be thinking about a beautiful girl than deadly monsters and dying friends.

The Seers from Sin-Masu arrived that evening, but they came during the meditation hour, so no one saw them. Another group arrived early in the morning from Al-Ga.

Both groups stood out from the crowd, for different reasons. Those from Sin-Masu, males and females alike, seemed obsessed with piercings, and had bits of metal and gemstones attached to ears, lips, noses, and even cheeks and chins. The ones from Al-Ga had short hair, no more than half a finger long, regardless of whether they were male or female. Some even kept it completely clean-shaven.

The day went similarly to the previous day. Lectures. Practical training. Lunch. Meditation. Study. There were no opportunities for relaxation, and no chances for Xerxes to get into the presence of Katayoun. He kept spotting her. Across the field during practical training. At the lunch room. But he never got a chance to approach her.

That evening as they prepared to sleep, Gandash said, “Xerk, you seem really distracted. Like you’re hardly paying attention to anything.”

“Huh?” Xerxes replied. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“I’m just... worried. Once the mages from Harmu come, they’ll do the assessments, and you want to perform well, right? Some extra study time wouldn’t hurt. I’d be happy to help.”

“Don’t worry, Gandy, I might not look it, but I’m paying *super* close attention.”

“Okay. Well... night, Xerk.”

“Night.”

The next day should have been the start of the weekend, but the teachers informed them that downtime on Sixthday *and* Restday had been temporarily revoked.

That provoked quite a few groans, but there was nothing the Seers could do about it.

The Harmu mages arrived at the lunch hour, as Xerxes was in line getting his food. When the news broke, a cheer echoed in the dining hall. Although not everyone was as bored with classes as Xerxes, everyone was eager to get on to the next phase of their education.

Glancing around, he wasn’t able to spot Gandash, but he did see Jad and Enusat, so he started toward them. About halfway through the tables, he noticed Jad making a face at him. Squinting, he craned his neck to get a better view and realized the tall Seer was mouthing something.

Unfortunately, Xerxes wasn’t very good at reading lips.

“What?” he mouthed in an exaggerated fashion.

Exasperated, Jad started gesturing, at first waving, and then circling his finger in the air and pointing it at Xerxes.

What the hell is he going on about? Xerxes thought. Then it hit him. Jad was saying ‘behind you.’

Xerxes stopped in place and turned on his heel.

Directly behind him, also threading her way through the tables, was red-haired Katayoun. She had a lunch tray in her hand and was turning back to say something to her friend. And she was about to run right into him.

His feet were almost crossed and he had a tray laden with food. He couldn’t have been in a more awkward position.

Shit, he thought, and he tried to back away from her, but his heel snagged on the opposite ankle, and he stumbled. Then his calf hit a bench, and before he knew what was happening, he was falling.

This time, he cursed aloud.

“Shit!”

Katayoun turned, her eyes going wide as she caught sight of him tumbling to the ground in front of her. His soup bowl slipped up and then flipped over, sending hot lentils everywhere. Katayoun’s friend put her hand over her mouth.

Then it was over as he crashed onto the ground, soup soaking him from belly button to face. His tray clattered to one side and the bowl to the other. A few gasps rang out.

He got up onto his elbows, surrounded by chuckles. The chuckles turned into laughs. Katayoun stood above him, her expression one of embarrassment and shock.

How come she’s embarrassed?

More laughter rippled through the dining hall, and Xerxes’ cheek twitched as a smile formed. *Might as well make the best of this shit.*

Clambering to his feet, arms akimbo and dripping with soup, he looked at Katayoun, smiled broadly, and said, “Good thing I didn’t bathe yesterday, eh?”

That was bad. Real bad. Didn’t bathe? It makes me sound like a weirdo.

She stared at him for a very long moment, and he cursed himself for not acting more seriously.

Finally, she chuckled and looked away. “I’m so sorry,” she said.

“It’s fine, don’t worry about it. I’m Xerxes.” He extended his hand, then saw his palm covered with smashed lentils, and pulled it back.

“I’ll make this up to you,” she said. “Let’s go, Kishar.” She tugged her friend’s arm, and they hurried away through the tables.

Damn, she didn’t tell me her name.

One of the school staff came over, thrust a rag in his face, and said, “Clean yourself up. You don’t have time to change.” Then she started mopping up the surrounding mess.

Drying himself as best he could, he got a new tray of food and went back to Jad and Enusat.

Enusat sniggered. “Smooth move, Xerk.”

“Fuck you,” Xerxes said, grinning.

Jad grunted a laugh. “At least she knows who you are now.”

“No thanks to you two clowns. But hey, I know your heart was in the right place. If I could read lips better, I might have pulled off something amazing.”

The tall mage pushed a small plate toward Xerxes, atop which was a powdered pastry of dates and pistachios. “Here, take this.”

“Your dessert?” Xerxes said.

“Yeah, the best part of the meal. It’s a down payment.”

“For what?”

“I owe you. I should have done a better job with my signals.”

It was Xerxes’ turn to laugh, and while he did, he pushed the dessert back across the table. “No need. You’re right. She knows who I am, so the hard part’s over. And I have you to thank.”

“In that case—” Jad took the dessert and popped it into his mouth “—we need to come up with the next phase of the plan.”

Chapter 32 – Day of Rest

The following morning was the first assembly in which all the mages were present. High Archon Kingallu started with the same old ‘summary’ speech.

Then he said, “I have good news and bad news. The good news is that, though we said there would be no rest days, the teachers have decided... to allow for some downtime. It is Restday after all.”

A small cheer went up.

“We’ll have a lecture this morning, and then you’ll have the afternoon to relax and prepare for the coming week. For now, you won’t be allowed to leave the campus. That privilege will be added later.

"But feel free to roam the gardens close to the main school complex or the fields in the back. Explore the training rooms, the museum, the stables, or do whatever else you see fit. Nap if you wish. There’s a temple for those who wish to engage in formal worship of the Pontifarch. As you probably noticed, the walls of the Institute are designed to be functional, so if you wish to stroll on the battlements, you may. But be aware that there are spell formations bolstering the walls. Do not throw anything over the edge, spit, or attempt to climb down to the other side.

“And do not attempt to leave the campus by any other means. The punishment for breaking the rules will be severe.

“Now, for the bad news. Assessments will begin tomorrow, first thing. The order of testing will be announced later today after the dinner hour. We’ll begin with the Seers who arrived first, roughly speaking. That means that you from Harmu will have a few days to settle in and attend a few classes before the testing.

“The testing should be finished by Fifthday. The weekend will be one of rest and recuperation, and then your new assignments will be announced on the following Firstday. Which is when your real education will begin.

“Before we go into the morning prayer, I’d like to say something about the Abhorrent invasion.

“All of you here are from Ira starisles such as Humusi, Dumusi, Ashlultum, Al-Ga, and the like. But as you know, there are many other starisles subsidiary to Ku-Aya besides Ira. There are some members of the Mage Parliament here on Sin-Amuhhu who believe the Ira incidents to be nothing but a probing invasion. In other words, they think that far worse attacks will come in the future. That’s one of the reasons we’ve brought you here to train. So don’t think of this as some sort of vacation or a game.

“Take this evening’s rest time to prepare yourselves in mind and body. Starting tomorrow, things will get tough. Very tough.”

Finally, some free time. As soon as the morning prayer was finished and the assembly adjourned, he walked through the crowd toward Katayoun. However, she already had her back to him and walked shoulder-to-shoulder with her friend back toward the main part of the school and, presumably, the dorms.

As he tried to catch up with her, other students kept getting in his way. He was tempted to call her name, but it would have attracted too much attention.

She broke free of the crowd before he did.

“Move, buddy,” he growled to someone before nearly pushing him out of the way.

“Hey!” the young man called after him.

Xerxes broke into a jog, but Katayoun had already reached the dorm entrance. By the time he jumped through the entrance himself, she’d already crossed the grass and entered the wing set aside for female mages.

“Shit,” he muttered, slapping his palm against the wall. He waited for a minute or two, but she didn’t come out. Finally, he left for the lecture. When he arrived, Katayoun was already there, sitting with her friends.

Idiot, he chided himself. He’d totally forgotten that the dorms had back entrances.

The morning lecture went by so slowly that Xerxes wanted to die.

The topic was, yet again, starsea geography, a topic so dry and stuffy he wasn’t sure why they bothered with it. Who cared about the layout of Gateways and the configuration of starisles? What did that have to do with fighting on the battlefield?

Thinking he was half-paying attention—but in reality not paying attention at all—he spent the lecture thinking about longsword fighting, contemplating what it would be like to become a High Seer and finally be able to cast a spell that would make his sword on a magical level, and trying to get a glimpse of Katayoun through the crowd.

Unfortunately, he could barely make out much more than a lock of hair here and there, and eventually, he stopped trying. Then, before he knew what was happening, he fell asleep.

The call to wake up came when Gandash poked Xerxes’ ribs.

“Ow,” Xerxes said, sitting up. “What happened?”

“You’re lucky you didn’t start snoring. Come on, we have the rest of the day off.”

Katayoun, Xerxes thought, and he jumped up and looked around. There wasn’t a sign of red hair anywhere.

Gandash frowned. “She left already.”

“Oh.”

“Xerk, you’re acting...” Gandash didn’t finish his sentence. “Look, the assessments start tomorrow. *Tomorrow*. Let’s go back and study. We want to be totally ready, right?”

“Right.”

Back in the room, Gandash had a huge pile of books on the desk at the foot of his bed.

“Where’d those come from?” Xerxes asked.

“The library. That’s kind of the point of the place. Here, this one’s about starsea geography.” He slipped a book out from the middle of the stack. “Considering how much they’ve been talking about it, I bet you ten shekels it’s on the test.”

Xerxes took the book, sat at his own desk, and read. But after flipping through a few pages, he realized he hadn’t registered anything. *This is pointless. Whatever’s on the test, I either know it or don’t know it.*

“You know,” he said, closing the book, “neither of us have been to temple since before the mission on Mannemid. Knowing you, I figured you’d have gone to pray or something.”

Gandash looked at him. “They don’t have a One Faith temple on campus.”

“Oh, right.”

“There’s one to the south, though. I asked. Once we can go outside, I’ll definitely head there. You should come with me.”

“Sure.” He stood up. “I need some fresh air. I’ll be right back.”

Before Gandash could protest, Xerxes was out the door.

He wasn’t really sure where he was going or what he was going to do, he just knew he didn’t want to spend his only half-day off stuck in a room studying for a test.

A few turns later, he was out of the dorms and into the main square, where the assemblies were held. A few Seers mingled here and there. None with red hair.

He strolled around the campus, sticking close to the buildings. At one point, he noticed a cluster of Humusi mages he recognized. One saw him and shouted a greeting. He waved back.

Rounding the corner, he entered the back part of the campus, which contained expansive grassy areas as well as a pond, a small copse of trees that nearly qualified as a forest, and some hills.

“Hey!” someone yelled from the direction of the trees. It was a young man. Xerxes saw a figure there but couldn’t identify him. “Xerk!” the figure yelled again. “Come here!”

Xerxes walked across the grass toward the trees. Moments later, he realized it was big-nosed Enusat.

“Enusat!” he said.

“I was actually running out to find you. Hurry up!”

He ran the last few cubits. “What’s going on?”

“Come with me,” the shorter mage said, then ducked into the trees.

Xerxes followed. At first, the trees were too thick to spy what lay beyond them. But before long, it became obvious that a short distance into the small wood was an open space. It was a meadow of sorts, filled with well-trimmed grass and a few boulders around the edges.

Stepping out of the tree line, he saw small-headed Jad along with bearded Kashtiliash. There was another mage present, a hawk-faced fellow named Teucer who Xerxes had teamed up with during one of the practical training exercises.

All had wooden swords in their hands, with Jad and Teucer facing each other in standard guard positions.

“Look who I found!” Enusat said.

“There you are!” Jad said. “We looked for you after the lecture, but you vanished.”

Xerxes ran his hand through his hair. “Sorry. Tried to do some studying, but I couldn’t concentrate.”

Enusat hurried over to one of the boulders, where three wooden swords lay on the ground next to a pile of protective gear. He grabbed two of them. “Getting together for sword practice was your idea, Xerk, but we didn’t want to lose the chance to ’ave our first meeting.”

He tossed a sword to Xerxes, who caught it easily.

“Where’d you get the practice swords?” Xerxes asked.

“You can check them out from the armory. They have just about every kind of weapon you can imagine there.”

Xerxes swung the sword in a few circles to get a feel for its weight and balance. “I’m glad we’re finally doing it. I haven’t done any practice for weeks.”

“We’re just warming up,” Kashtiliash said. “Want to trade a few blows?”

Xerxes smiled. “Sure.”

He started with some basic movements to get his blood flowing and then some stretching. Then he crossed swords with Kashtiliash.

For the next few hours, they traded partners, doing very light sparring and practicing some basic moves. As it turned out, Teucer, who was also an Asgagu mage, didn't have any experience with the longsword. Kashtiliash had convinced him to come learn.

Jad and Enusat were both knowledgeable. However, it only took a bit of back and forth before it became obvious neither of them were on the same level as Xerxes, especially Enusat. Xerxes found himself going slower than necessary and explaining his moves about half the time.

At one point, Xerxes landed a very light blow on Jad's midriff. The tall mage stepped back, rubbing the spot where the wooden sword had touched him. "Damn, what was that?"

"The Squinting Slash," Xerxes said. "You've never seen it before?"

"If it's a slash, why did you end up stabbing me?"

Xerxes rested his sword on his shoulder. "Good question. Anyway, the key is how you sort of flip the sword around into a different grip. Like this."

He showed Jad a way of gripping the sword by using the thumb to stabilize the blade. Then he went back to the Skyward guard and went through the new move a few more times to show him how it worked.

Jad made an attempt.

"Not bad," Xerxes said. "Try it on me now."

Everything was different with Kashtiliash. When he and Xerxes finally faced off in the second hour, it became obvious that the bearded mage knew what he was doing.

After feeling each other out for about fifteen minutes, Kashtiliash said, "Let's do some actual sparring."

"Sure," Xerxes said.

Kashtiliash really went all out. He was careful with his blows, but it only took about five exchanges before Xerxes had a sense of the bearded mage's skill.

Backing up a few steps, he saluted Kashtiliash with his wooden sword and said, "You're my superior."

Kashtiliash saluted him back. "You're no hogdown swordsman yourself."

Xerxes grinned. "Thanks."

"Kash is good, but this club was your idea, Xerk," Jad said. "I think it's fair that you're the leader. Do you agree, boys?"

Off to the side, Enusat and Teucer voiced their agreement. Kashtiliash grunted and nodded. Wiping sweat from his brow with the back of his hand, Xerxes tossed his wooden sword back onto the pile.

“No way,” he said. “The best swordsman should be in charge, and that’s Kash.”

Kashtiliash flipped his sword around and rested it casually in the crook of his arm. “I guess I can do it.”

“What about you, Jad? You good with Kash being the leader of our little sword club?”

“Sure,” the tall mage said.

“I’m fine with it,” Teucer added.

Enusat nodded. “Same.”

“Then it’s settled,” Xerxes said. “Kash is the new head swordsman of the... the Humusi Swordmasters!”

“Humusi Swordmasters,” Kashtiliash said. “I like it.” He lifted his sword into the air. “Swordsmen, salute!”