

Chapter 16 – Queasiness

As the fingers dragged him forward, Gandash plowed into the line of soldiers from Squad Three, knocking one of them flat on his back and sending another stumbling to the side.

Seeing Gandash pulled across the stone, Xerxes lunged forward and wrapped his free arm around his friend's leg. That stopped Gandash's momentum for a moment, but then both of them inched toward the woman as she pulled.

Arrows flew, smacking into the Abhorrent. Xerxes barely made out spears being thrust in her direction. She snarled, released Gandash, and used her whipping fingers to engage with the soldiers harrying her.

"Get up," Xerxes said, helping his friend to stand. Before Gandash was all the way up, Xerxes pushed him back toward safety. "And get *back*."

He stepped around his friend, keeping his burning hand clenched into a fist.

"I'm not leaving you alone," Gandash said.

"Gandy, get back here," Bel said from behind.

The Abhorrent woman threw another soldier off the bridge, then ripped a spear from the hands of another, spun, and hurled it at the mages.

Xerxes reacted on instinct, and his Asgagu-enhanced hand knocked the weapon out of the air, partially melting the spearhead. "You don't have enough melam to cast, Gandy. Get out of here!"

His friend backed away.

Glaring at the monster, Xerxes shouted, "You want a mage? You got one!"

Trying to stoke his anger hot enough to banish the fear that lurked in every corner of his body, he kept his hands up to protect his head and inched forward. On either side of him, Squad Three soldiers stepped up to include him in their line. Behind the Abhorrent, Sergeant Tamharu had his shield up and sword extended as he tried to sneak closer.

Have to keep her occupied.

Rubbery white fingers shot toward him, but he was ready. He dodged each one of them, and then snapped his hand out and severed one. Gluey fluid dropped onto the toe of his boot.

Tamharu lunged, swung his sword, and severed three spidery legs. The Abhorrent roared, spun, and used her fingers like a whip to flail the sergeant. He had his shield up, though, and he kept his knees bent, allowing him to weather the attack.

Xerxes took that opportunity to take a deep breath and run forward.

He wanted to scream a battle cry but instead bit his tongue, clenched his hand into a fist, and put all the power he could muster into a single punch.

His scorching fist slammed into the monstrous woman's torso. Flesh melted and burned, and his hand penetrated deep into her abdomen. The scream that erupted from her mouth nearly deafened him. He felt pain as a finger stabbed into his side. Another wrapped around his wrist and ankle. However, she'd grabbed the wrong wrist. He shoved his fist deeper inside her, trying to push it toward where he assumed her heart was.

He felt his feet go out from under him, and before he knew what was happening, he was flying through the air. She'd thrown him.

The bridge parapet neared, and he knew he was going to fly over it. He flailed his arms and legs.

By chance, he snagged a rough chunk of stone, halting his momentum. The rest of his body thumped painfully against the stone as his legs dangled over nothing. He buried his burning hand in the stone, then heaved himself back onto the bridge.

He looked up. The Abhorrent was trying to disengage from Tamharu and some other soldiers, but they were giving her a hard time.

Singular Lethality faded away, which meant that if he wanted to keep fighting, he would have to cast it again. Maybe it was stupid, and maybe he would die, but he didn't care. He was *going* to destroy this monster.

Back on his feet, he walked forward and cast the spell again. His hand flared with lethal light as he closed in. The Abhorrent's back was to him, so he ducked forward and used a knife hand strike, severing some spidery legs. Unlike her fingers, they didn't regenerate, and yet, no matter how many legs got chopped off, she always had plenty to spare. Fingers stabbed into him again, and he dropped to one knee. His neck was injured, and other places too. Arm? Side? Blood poured out. He flailed his hand but hit nothing.

Master Ligish came out of nowhere, smashing into the Abhorrent like a force of nature. His hands moved faster than humanly possible, blocking her writhing fingers while simultaneously striking her rapidly with fists and palms.

The Abhorrent woman stumbled away from him.

Xerxes felt himself being tugged across the bridge. He rolled his eyes up to see Gandash pulling him.

“I got you, Xerk,” he said.

“Gandy, what are you doing? You’re supposed to be—”

“You’re bleeding. BEL!”

Gandash dragged him farther down the bridge. On his back, Xerxes couldn’t see the fighting, but he could hear it. Ligish and Tamharu were coordinating.

Bel leaned over Xerxes and cast a spell. When she touched his chest, melam swirled into him. He gasped at the heat, and the odd sensation of flesh and muscle reconnecting. In a matter of seconds, he was whole again.

He sat up. “My sword...?”

Ligish and Tamharu had the Abhorrent pinned down.

“Seer Xerxes,” Captain Ishki said, “I want you and the other mages to get out of here.”

“We’re not going to leave you, Captain,” Gandash said.

“Dammit, Seer Gand—” she said, but a scream cut her off.

They all looked over to see that Ligish had been stabbed in the side.

Ligish easily ripped the ‘fingers’ out of him, then leaped several paces backward. “I’m not dying for you people.”

He stepped farther away from the creature.

“Ligish, you bastard!” Captain Ishki said, “You promised—”

He took a running leap off the bridge and landed on the opposite mountainside. A moment later, he was gone in the trees.

“Fucker,” Ishki said.

The Abhorrent’s feet clicked as she stalked toward them. She must have lost ten legs, but she had plenty more. Arrows stuck out of her. She bled noxious blood from cuts and scrapes. Her side was mangled. But she was still coming.

Captain Ishki drew her bronze sword and stood forward. “Mages, get out of here!” she said.

Xerxes climbed to his feet, wishing he had his longsword. He pulled out the utility knife he kept at his waist. “She’s right. We need—”

The Abhorrent's flicking fingers knocked Ishki to the ground and sent her skidding to the side.

"Grk ba'ya melam," the woman said through maroon lips.

Xerxes lunged forward and swung his knife. He hit nothing but air.

The pale fingers lashed out, and this time Bel was the victim. She choked, hit through the throat and arm.

"No!" Gandash yelled. Grabbing Bel's arm, which was already red with blood, he tried to tug her free of the creature's grasp, but failed. Behind the monster, Tamharu and some of the few surviving soldiers hung back, unsure of what to do.

Xerxes edged forward. "You're not going anywhere, monster," he said. "You can't just jump off the bridge. Not even you."

The woman said something incomprehensible, and before anyone could act, she pulled Bel off her feet. Gandash tried to keep ahold of the healer, but the slickness of the blood made it impossible. Bel jerked out of his grasp and flew up to the woman, who drove razor-sharp teeth deep into her neck.

Bel couldn't even scream. She just wheezed.

Tamharu had switched weapons. He had a spear, and as Xerxes talked, he took a step forward and threw it like a javelin. The Abhorrent knocked it out of the air, but that was all the distraction Xerxes needed. He bounded forward with all the speed a Seer was capable of. Grabbing a spear off the ground, he lashed out toward the pale, rope-like fingers that held Bel. He got two of the five. Then his weapon continued on into the body of the monstrous Abhorrent.

The weapon bit deep, hitting in the mangled area he'd damaged earlier with Singular Lethality.

The Abhorrent woman removed her fangs from Bel and gurgled angrily as she scratched at Xerxes with the sharp tips of her legs. He ignored any pain and shoved the spear in deeper, then twisted it and wrenched it to the side.

The force of a Seer's strength made the difference, and the weapon erupted into the open, causing blackish-red entrails to flip and flop along with the spray of blood. Tamharu came from the side, also wielding a spear. He stabbed her, shoving her so hard in the process that she slipped backward. Then her legs caught on the bridge parapet. Bel jerked in her grasp like a rag doll.

"Bel!" Gandash screamed, and he jumped toward her. Xerxes dropped the spear and jumped after Gandash.

But it was too late.

Bel and the Abhorrent both toppled off the bridge.

Screaming, Gandash rushed to the parapet and looked over. Xerxes joined him.

What he saw at the bottom of the bridge, thirty or forty cubits down, among the jagged landscape of rocks, caused a deep queasiness to erupt in his stomach that swept through him so quickly he couldn't control it. Jerking to the side, he dropped to his knees and vomited, spasming so hard tears leaked out of his eyes. Even after it was over, the tears kept flowing.

He vaguely heard his friend shouting something.

Then Sergeant Tamharu was there, his hands on Gandash's shoulders.

"We have to go down!" Gandash yelled. "She's down there!"

"She's gone," Tamharu said.

"NO! THERE ARE RESURRECTION SPELLS!"

Xerxes remained slumped on the stone of the bridge. Distant starisles had mages who could resurrect the dead. But not a tiny place like Mannemid.

Gandash was in hysterics, but Tamharu seemed to have control of him.

A moment later, Xerxes realized Captain Ishki was kneeling next to him. "Seer?" she said, putting a hand on his shoulder.

He wiped vomit from his lips with the back of one hand, then dried his cheeks with the other. "Captain."

"It's over. Are you hurt?"

He shook his head.

"Good. Sit down against the parapet."

She helped him to move over to the side of the bridge, where he leaned against the cool stone and looked up into the bitter, gray sky.

Things went into a blur after that. He didn't register much of what the surviving soldiers did. Time passed. Maybe a few minutes or maybe an hour or two.

At some point he realized he was on his horse again, not really sure when or how he got there. They were traveling.

Xerxes looked around and saw Gandash on horseback next to Sergeant Tamharu. Neither were talking. In fact, nobody in the convoy was talking.

He found himself counting. "One," he murmured under his breath. "Two, three... eight, nine...."

Excluding the prisoners, as well as Gandash and himself, there were twelve soldiers, plus Captain Ishki. The captain had led thirty from the capital and was returning with hardly more

than a third of that number. And of the survivors, many were bandaged heavily. Without Bel present, that was obviously Aniskipel's handiwork.

Of the officers, Tamharu and Aniskipel had survived. But Sergeant Nozar of Squad Three hadn't.

Xerxes felt empty.

"Hey, Xerk," he heard Bel say, and he jerked his head around. She wasn't there. It was his mind playing tricks on him. Tears rolled down his cheeks again, but he wiped them away.

Then he looked at Gandash again, and the empty feeling inside him grew, joined moments later by that roiling queasiness.