

Chapter 12 – Crater Investigation

Atop the hills, soldiers and mages alike stood stock still, all of them looking for the signs of movement Bel had mentioned. Several seconds passed.

“Maybe it was just smoke,” she said.

Xerxes took his left hand off his sword and reached over to ease the ties on his component pouch, just in case. If a threat appeared, he might only have moments to decide whether to fight with his mundane weapon or cast a spell.

“Rihan,” said Sergeant Tamharu, “you circle around that way.” He gestured to the right. “Ap, you go the other way. Both of you keep spears out and shields up. Stay atop the hill, but try to get a better angle of view. See what’s inside the crater. Tekinalp and Goran, nock arrows and spread out. Xerxes, be ready for anything. Bel, forget your bow. Have your pouch open and your healing spell ready, just in case.”

As Rihan and Ap drew their weapons and loped in opposite directions, Tekinalp and Goran prepared their bows. Bel loosened her component pouch.

Unlike the other infantrymen, Tamharu had a sword but not the unusual type Xerxes preferred. Instead, he had a short bronze blade that was perfect when used in combination with a sturdy, round shield.

All of a sudden, the odd odor Xerxes had detected earlier rose in intensity, filling the area with a scent like that of rotten eggs and bile.

Private Tekinalp made a gagging sound, and Sergeant Tamharu coughed.

“Disgusting,” said Private Goran. “Do rocks from ’eaven usually smell like this?”

“Ain’t never been around a space rock,” Tekinalp said. “Ave you?”

“Nope.”

A breeze sprang up, and the smell faded.

“No chit-chat, you two,” Tamharu said.

“Sorry, sir.”

Xerxes shifted his lead foot forward, bending his knee. He wasn't quite sure why he felt the need to be so prepared for combat, but it felt comforting to at least have his weapon at the ready.

It took less than a minute for Ap and Rihan to reach positions farther along the hilltop. A moment later, Rihan called out, "Sergeant, there's definitely something in there. Can't tell what it is. Something lighter-colored than everything else. Maybe a rock."

Sergeant Tamharu let loose a breath that he'd been holding for a very long time. "Okay. We can deal with rocks." Cupping his hand to his mouth, he raised his voice and said, "Ap, you got anything?"

Ap, who was craning his neck and leaning forward, said, "I see that white thing in there. It does look like a rock."

"Seers, do you have any insight?" Tamharu asked, tapping his sword onto his shield a few times absentmindedly.

"No, sir," Xerxes said.

Bel shook her head. "Sorry, sir."

"All right. Well, I still feel like we might as well take things slow." Taking a half step forward, he said, "Rihan, approach the crater nice and slow. Get a closer look and tell us more."

"Sure thing, Sarge." Keeping his shield in front of him and his spear resting atop it while pointing forward, Rihan carefully climbed down the hillside and was soon picking his way through the smoking vegetation and shattered rocks.

When he was about halfway to the edge of the crater, he stopped. "It's moving," he called up.

"Hold!" Tamharu called. Then he lowered his voice and said, "Fuck. Tekinalp, Goran, be ready to loose arrows at any moment. Be ready for spellcasting, Bel." He took a few short steps forward until he was on the downward slope of the hill.

Xerxes' eyes were drawn to something in the middle of the crater, a pale object rising up slowly from within. At the same time, the unusual odor returned, its acridness causing Xerxes to subconsciously scrunch his nose.

As the white shape rose higher, something clicked in Xerxes' mind.

"Bel," he said quietly, not turning his head, keeping his eyes fixed on the white object. "The smell. Do you...."

He trailed off as he realized what the white object was.

A woman.

His jaw nearly dropped as he realized there was a naked woman standing in the middle of the crater. Both her skin and hair were a creamy white color, creating a nearly blinding contrast to the darkness of the smoking crater around her. It was a different paleness than Bel's skin. Bel's skin, though light, was almost pink.

But this woman who had fallen from the sky had skin the color of a maggot and hair like bleached bone. Due to her position, he could only see her from the waist up, as though her legs were curled beneath her in a trough within the crater itself. In fact, that pale hair stretched so far down her back it piled messily on the ground.

She had her arms crossed in front of her, partially concealing her breasts and obscuring the curve of her waist. As for her face, her features were attractive, though her eyes were closed. Two slips the color of drying blood were her lips, neither smiling nor frowning.

Normally speaking, Xerxes' heart would have been pounding at the sight of an unclothed woman standing right in front of him. But there was something about this woman....

The noxious odor waxed dominant, pushing away the smell of the wild hills and replacing it with something vomitous.

Tamharu choked again, and the other two soldiers made spitting sounds.

"Xerk," Bel said, her trembling voice barely above a whisper. "The smell, it's like from back at the castle. Those spider things."

"Abhorrent," Xerxes said, almost uncertain if the word had come out of his mouth. He raised his voice. "Sarge, it's not a woman, it's an Abhorrent."

Tamharu turned to look at him, eyes squinted in disbelief. "That's not possible."

It wasn't possible. Or at least, it shouldn't have been. The Abhorrent had been isolated in the Nightmare Cove for millennia. Quarantined. Imprisoned.

Other than those summoned by mages, they were *never* seen. Never even heard of, outside of stories and the tales spun by bards.

How could one be *here*?

And yet Bel had spoken the truth. The stench that filled the area was a more intense version of that which emanated from the Abhorrent spawn Gandash had summoned.

"It shouldn't be possible, Sarge," Xerxes said. "But Bel's right. Maybe there's a mage nearby, and this is a summoned Abhorrent. But it's an Abhorrent. Rihan needs to get out of there, *now*."

There were only two other mages on Mannemid who studied the order of Buhhu, and the thought of either of them somehow being out here in the wilderness randomly summoning Abhorrent seemed completely laughable. If this Abhorrent wasn't summoned....

"Rihan, fall back," Tamharu said.

The pale woman's eyes opened, and she looked around slowly. "Ya shlf n' ghft ep," she said in a voice both resonant and grating, the words she spoke so incomprehensible as to be nightmarish.

Rihan backed up, catching his foot on a rock and stumbling. At the same time, the woman extended her hand in his direction. Xerxes watched her fingers extend unnaturally in Rihan's direction. They moved like striking snakes, arcing through the air toward the soldier.

Rihan was no stranger to combat situations and ducked behind his shield. But the fingers seemed to ignore any known laws of physiology or motion as they simply curved around the barrier.

Before Rihan could react, two of them stabbed into his neck and shoulder while the others wrapped around his arms. He shrieked miserably and slashed at one of the white fingers with his spear, severing it. The severed portion dissolved into a white ichor that splattered to the ground beneath him.

"Loose arrows!" Tamharu shouted.

Two arrows flew forth, one piercing the woman's chest, just below her collarbone, the other hitting her arm. She ignored the arrows. Then a squelching sound could be heard as the just-severed finger reared back and then shot forward, stabbing into Rihan's biceps. Xerxes' heart flip-flopped at the horror of it.

"Fuck!" Rihan shrieked and again slashed at the gangly fingers.

"Sir?" Bel said, her hand twitching between her component pouch and her bow.

"Just wait," Tamharu said.

The Abhorrent woman jerked her arm, and the bizarrely extended fingers retracted, pulling Rihan with them, dragging him along the ground despite how he kicked with his feet and swung his spear wildly.

"Loose arrows again!" Tamharu shouted. "Ap, get back here now! Mages, take cover."

More arrows flew, but they seemed of no concern to the Abhorrent.

"Sarge, we can't just let Rihan—" Tekinalp began, but Tamharu cut him off.

"Nobody's going down there."

Rihan writhed as she dragged him closer, until he was right in front of her. With her free hand, she reached out, grabbed his throat, and ripped it open. His cries ended in a shower of blood and cartilage.

Then the woman shoved her free hand into the pit of his stomach, just below the breastbone, and jerked it around briefly. “Bak melam,” she spat and threw Rihan’s corpse down in front of her.

Ap was running back to their position, and the other two soldiers had shot more arrows, both of which penetrated the Abhorrent woman’s torso. Snarling more words in that disgusting language, she reached down and pulled each arrow out of her before tossing it to the side. Then she rose up out of the pit, and that was when Xerxes’ heart nearly skipped a beat.

A pale, spindly limb like that of a spider gained footing on the rocky crater. Then another, and another. It reminded Xerxes of Gandash’s summoned Abhorrent, and he suddenly wondered if this terrifying woman was somehow related to those two spawn.

Ap was back, and the woman was rising out of the ground, dozens of bug-like legs supporting her as her hair flowed behind her. Only now did Xerxes notice her eyes, which were black like the night. And they were looking at him.

Smiling, she extended her arm, and her horrible fingers shot in his direction.

“Xerk!” Bel blurted.

Reality blurred for a moment as he felt like he was back in the tavern in Kisiga, up on the stage, Gem throwing knives at him. Except, there weren’t two objects flying toward him, there were five. And he knew that if he didn’t react perfectly, he would end up skewered just as poor Rihan had been.

There wasn’t really time to think, so he reacted on instinct. Drawing his sword up and to the right, he defended himself from two of the fingers coming from that angle. The blade slashed through the serpentine things, preventing them from reaching him.

Two more he dodged mostly by luck and the way his body shifted after moving his sword. The fifth missed him as he tilted his head to the side.

The stench from the disgusting, maggoty flesh was almost overpowering.

He heard a choking sound from his left and turned his head to see that one of the fingers had curved to the side and pierced Tekinalp through the throat.

A slithering, slurping sound could be heard as the rest of the fingers similarly curved toward the now-doomed soldier. The bow tumbled from his hand as fingers pierced his belly and wrapped around his arms, then dragged him back toward the crater.

“Back down the hill!” Tamharu snapped.

Xerxes took a step backward and watched in horror as Tekinalp was pulled inexorably toward the pale, many-legged Abhorrent woman. Then Xerxes turned and scrambled down the hill, flipping his sword to face backward along the way.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” blubbered Ap.

The other surviving soldier, Goran, wasn't saying anything, but his face was nearly green as he lunged his way down the hill.

"The trees will give us more cover," Tamharu said. "Mages, you can run faster. Don't hesitate. Get back to the camp!"

"Sir," Xerxes replied, "what if—"

"That's an order!" the sergeant shouted. "Get back to the camp!"

Goran's foot caught on something, and he tumbled. Being just off to the side, Bel slid to a stop and knelt to help him, wrapping her hand under his arm to pull him up.

Which was when five white streaks stabbed into her.