

Chapter 3 – Weapons

Someone who knew little of swords might not think this one was very impressive. No jewels encrusted on the hilt. No gold filigree. No special etchings on the blade.

But Xerxes could tell just by looking at it that the craftsmanship was superb. For one thing, it was made of steel, and Mannemid didn't produce steel.

"The blade's nine 'ands, one and a 'alf fingers in length," the old man said. "Grip, two 'ands and one finger. Feel for yourself how 'eavy it is." He offered it to Xerxes with two hands.

Xerxes took it and felt it for weight, then gripped it with one hand to test for balance. "Very nice," he said.

"Indeed. According to the story I was told, this blade once belonged to a famous swordsman from Sin-Amuhhu, who used it to slay no fewer than fifteen bandits on the road from...."

Xerxes tuned out the story and focused instead on the blade. The term "Sighted" wasn't figurative. Mages could see everything related to melam energy, including spell formations, which were permanently cast spells. They could also see things hidden to the naked eye, whether poison in food or doorways cleverly disguised as bookcases.

Xerxes sent his mage sense into the weapon to examine every aspect of it. Spell formations were exceedingly rare, so he didn't expect to find one in the sword. But if there was one....

After a moment, he exhaled in disappointment. There was no spell formation, which meant the sword wasn't magical.

Even still, it was the work of a master craftsman. That much he could tell just from the quality of the steel. All in all, it made his current weapon seem... ordinary.

"... and 'e 'eld the gate for twelve hours," the old man was saying, "until the carcasses of the enemy piled like mountains on either side of 'im..."

The shop was too cramped, the sword too large to swing it around. But Xerxes was able to heft it. The more he held the thing, the more he could envision himself wielding it in a duel or on the battlefield. It was almost like it was *made* for him.

"I get the picture," he said, interrupting the old man's story and handing the sword back to him. In all likelihood, the tale the old man had been spinning was a fabrication. If not in whole, definitely in part. But that didn't change the fact that the workmanship was superb. "It's an incredible blade. How much are you asking for it?"

“Twenty shekels,” the man answered. “A steal, if you ask me, but I do need to get rid of it eventually.”

Xerxes’s lips tightened into a grimace. His own father earned thirty-six shekels per month, and that was high for someone of his position. After all, he worked directly under Gandash’s father in the political machine of the capital city, and Gandash’s father had pulled plenty of strings to get him a higher-than-average salary. Xerxes knew that, years ago, before he had been born, his father and mother had survived on less than fifteen shekels per month.

“That’s outrageous!” Gandash said. “Twenty shekels? That sword isn’t worth eight shekels, let alone twenty.”

The old man reacted with a pained expression. “Wrong, young man. If I sell it for twenty, I’ll hardly break even! Let me tell you about how I got it. It’s quite a tale....”

Xerxes and Bel looked on in amusement as Gandash waded into a heated negotiation. However, even after fifteen minutes of haggling, the lowest price he could get was sixteen.

It was still far more than Xerxes could afford. “It’s a great sword,” he said, “but I’ll have to pass.”

“Your loss,” the old man said.

“Excuse us a moment,” Gandash said, then grabbed Xerxes by the arm and pulled him away from the counter. Lowering his voice, he said, “Xerk, it really is an amazing sword. You might not find anything like it without going to a higher starisle.”

“I agree,” Xerxes said. “But I can’t afford it. Simple as that.”

Gandash flashed an irritated look. “Just pay what you can, and I’ll spot you the difference.”

Xerxes noticed Bel and the old man staring at him, and he felt a tiny spark of anger in his chest. He only had one shekel and a handful of minas, which was more than he had paid for his current weapon. Even if he spent all of his pocket money right here and now, Gandash would have to chip in nearly fifteen shekels. Given that mage studies made it impossible to do steady work on the side, it meant Xerxes had to survive on whatever his father could give him. In other words, paying back a loan of fifteen shekels could take years.

Trying to ignore the mounting embarrassment at being stared at by Bel and the shop owner, he shook his head. “No. Gandy, it’s not a big deal. It’s just a sword. The one I have is fine.”

Gandash sagged dramatically. “Are you kidding me? It’s made from high quality steel! Even if it wasn’t forged on Sin-Amuhhu like the old man claims, it definitely comes from a higher starisle. Honestly, sixteen is a good deal for something like that.”

Xerxes’ jaw tightened, and he pulled his arm out of Gandash’s grasp. “I said no, all right? I’m not buying it!”

“What if I get it for you as an early birthday—”

“NO!” Xerxes snapped, then turned on his heel and walked out of the shop, slamming the door behind him.

“Asshole,” he muttered as he threw his hood over his head and stalked down the street, away from the town square. Along the way, he noticed a woodsman leaning against the side of an alley across the street, looking at him.

“Got a problem?” he growled, casting a glare at the man as he walked past. The man didn’t respond.

The rain had let up, but the streets were no less dry, and the way he stamped through them caused flecks of mud to splatter his boots and the bottom of his cloak. Turning into an alley, he threaded his way through some smaller lanes before reaching a point where a rocky hill marked the northern edge of the town proper. He climbed the hill, stopping at the crest to look at the view beyond.

For about half a league, there was mostly open land peppered with occasional trees and boulders. Beyond that, the Yellow Forest took over.

Realizing the rain had stopped, Xerxes pulled his hood back and stared at the forest. He’d never traveled this far north in his life, so this was his first time seeing trees this tall and dense. According to what he’d been told, they got even bigger and taller the farther you went into the depths of the forest. Despite its name, the place wasn’t yellow. Supposedly, it was called that because of tiny yellow flowers that bloomed in springtime on the vines that choked the lower levels. Right now, it was mid-autumn, and any such blooms were long gone.

Only a minute or two after arriving at the hilltop, he heard a noise and glanced back to see Bel climbing up toward him. He noticed her holding a bundle in both hands, and for a brief moment his temper flared as he thought it was the longsword. As she neared, he realized it wasn’t. The bundle was too short and thick.

Stupid. This mission traveling to the outskirts of the kingdom had been one of the most amazing things he’d done in his life so far. Why let things turn sour now?

Bel stopped next to him and took a deep breath. “Smells different compared to where I grew up, that’s for sure.”

“I imagine so,” he said. A moment passed. “Sorry for losing my temper.”

“No skin off my back. You caught Gandash by surprise though. He seemed... well, anyway. You okay?”

“Yeah.” He laced his fingers together behind his neck and sighed. “It was dumb of me. But... it just pisses me off sometimes.”

“What does?”

“Gandash throwing money around all the time. It’s like he has no idea that not everybody in the world is rich.”

“I never thought of him as rich,” Bel said.

Xerxes shrugged. “Maybe not rich. But not poor, I can tell you that.”

She grunted in response.

They stood there for a while, looking at the clouds rolling over the forest. Finally, Bel said, “I have an idea.”

“Oh yeah?” Xerxes said. “I love ideas.”

“Look down there.” Bel pointed. “It’s a nice little clearing. No rocks or other junk. How about we do some sparring?”

He looked at the clearing, then back at her. “It’s too wet for wrestling,” he said. “And I didn’t bring any training weapons.”

“I did,” she said, holding up the bundle. “I dropped a few minas on some cheap stuff at the shop. Might as well try them out, don’t you think?”

He smiled. “Sure.”

They climbed down the hill, crossed some of the rough terrain, then ended up in the clearing Bel had pointed out earlier. She unwrapped the bundle to reveal four small wooden fighting axes and two wooden staves.

“Axes first?” she said.

“Sure. I haven’t done much training with axes before.”

“Me either. But back in Od, we have a thing called *axe dancing*, and my uncle taught me a thing or two about it.”

Xerxes folded his cloak and put it in a dry spot. Bel did the same, wrapping her cloak around her pack. Then she tossed two of the axes to him.

“Okay,” she said. “In actual combat, you’ll probably never fight with an axe in each hand. Axe dancing is more for performance purposes than anything else. But my uncle said a lot of the basic moves have combat applications. Let’s start with some of the opening stances.”

After a few minutes, they started testing some moves out on each other.

Xerxes’ mood improved as his blood started pumping. The weather remained blustery but clear, without so much as a sprinkle of rain.

As had occurred numerous times during the journey north, Xerxes almost couldn't believe all of this was real. He, who had been born and raised in the slums of the capital city, having never traveled farther than a few leagues from its walls, was now just outside of the Yellow Forest in the far north, sparring with a barbarian girl from Od. It wasn't a huge surprise that he, Gandash, and Bel, all of them having recently become Seers, would be assigned to a simple mission like this, officially led by an experienced officer like Captain Ishki. All of the new mages had been sent out of the capital for training. But it didn't make it any less exciting.

Two hours later, they took a break.

"Should have brought some water," Xerxes said.

Bel unfolded her cloak and pulled out her pack, within which was a hand-sized canteen. She popped the cork, took a drink, then said, "Here," and handed it to him.

He drank. "Thanks."

A flash of motion from the top of the hill caught his attention. He turned, hoping it would be Gandash. Having calmed down after the workout, he was ready to apologize for his previous outburst.

Instead, the person atop the hill was Gem. Xerxes waved, as did Bel.

Gem returned the wave, then trotted down the hill and toward them.

"Thought you two might be doing something *else* out 'ere," he said, grinning.

"Shut the hell up, Gem," Xerxes said. *Bel is Gandash's girl*, he wanted to add, but that would have been inappropriate.

Bel didn't say anything, but Xerxes was fairly certain a flush was creeping up her neck. Xerxes liked Bel a lot but didn't think of her as anything but a friend, or a sister at most. And he still held the remote hope that, one day, Gandash would work up the gumption to tell her that he liked her. Xerxes got the feeling Bel knew and was waiting for his buddy to make the first move. But who knew for sure? Girls were impossible to read most of the time.

Gem looked at the wooden weapons they'd been practicing with. "Axes, eh? Nice."

Xerxes took another sip of water and then handed the canteen back to Bel. "I take it you didn't tromp all the way out here to say hi and crack some bad jokes."

"Smart fellow. Captain Ishki wants everyone back for lunch. Plans to go over some of the details of what's to come in the next few days."

Bel wrapped up her weapons, and she and Xerxes put their cloaks back on.

"Did you see Gandash?" Xerxes asked as we started climbing up the hill.

"Yeah, 'e came back about an hour ago," Gem answered.

“Oh.”

Cresting the hill, they started down the other side into the town, but before they reached the first of the buildings, someone stepped out of the very same alley Xerxes had come through earlier.

He was a skinny fellow wearing a combination of leather and sturdy fabric that marked him as a woodsman. And he was carrying a short spear.

Even as he stepped into the open, a second man in similar clothing joined him, a knife in his hand.

Gem stopped walking, and Bel and Xerxes followed suit.

“Can I ’elp you?” Gem asked, taking a step forward so that he formed the point of a loose triangle formation with Bel and Xerxes.

The first man to have stepped out spat on the ground.

Another man stepped out of another alley, several paces to the left. And a fourth man appeared to the right. Both had hunting knives in their hands.

Xerxes suddenly regretted leaving his sword back at the tavern. Of course, he had a sturdy knife at his belt, as well as his component pouch, which contained four handfuls of crabnickel powder. As an Asgagu Seer, he could use that powder to cast one spell, Singular Lethality, which would turn his hand into a deadly weapon. But spellcasting wasn’t something a mage did casually. Every spell depleted a mage’s supply of melam by a specific amount. And stockpiling melam was the key to growing as a mage. At lower levels, such as Seer, recovering melam after spellcasting wasn’t particularly time-consuming. But the stronger a mage got, the more precious melam became, and that carried over into the education given to young mages. Generally speaking, mages didn’t cast spells except when absolutely necessary.

Ordinary citizens didn’t need to wear weapons on the street in the Kingdom of Isin. What was more, the convoy had been dispatched with the authority of the Mage Parliament. It seemed ludicrous that anyone would try to cause problems for them.

Then again, they were on the fringes of the kingdom and had been sent here to investigate allegations of activities that were outlawed by the Pontifarch. Could it be possible that these people were working for the man they’d been sent to investigate, Master Ligish of Ligish Castle?

“What’s this about?” Gem said, putting his hand on the hilt of the dagger at his belt.

A fifth man stepped out, and in that moment, Xerxes realized what was happening.

It was Biru, the burly man from the tavern the night before. His face was swollen, and bruising had set in. But that only made him more intimidating.

He had his long knife sheathed at his belt again, but in his hands he held a weapon much more formidable than a knife. A bronze sword.