

Chapter 14 – Abhorrent Attack

Murmurs rippled through the soldiers at the ridgeline.

“In the ’oly Pontifarch’s name,” someone said.

“What the ’ell is that?”

Xerxes’ countenance fell as he saw something white moving at a speed that surpassed anything human or animal. Even a Seer could run faster than a horse, but this thing was moving faster than any Seer.

“Come on, Sergeant,” Xerxes muttered.

The rough terrain didn’t cause any problems for the Abhorrent, whose multitude of many-segmented legs moved with wave-like rhythm as it navigated easily through the boulders and ravines.

As Tamharu, Ap, and Goran neared the ridge, the Abhorrent closed in on them.

The buzz among the soldiers had died down, and the only sound to be heard above the faint breeze was the creak of armor and the scrape of gauntlets against weapon hilts.

“Nock arrows,” said Captain Ishki.

Xerxes’ throat tightened as he watched the Abhorrent getting closer and closer.

“Seer Xerxes, fall back,” Captain Ishki said.

Dammit. He didn’t want to leave the ridge in such a tense moment, but he complied, trotting back toward where Sergeant Aniskipel was still tending to Bel.

“What’s going on?” Aniskipel asked.

“An Abhorrent is chasing Ap, Goran, and Sergeant Tamharu.”

“Fucking ’ell,” the surgeon muttered.

“How’s Bel?”

"Not sure. Don't think she 'as a fever. None of the wounds seem really bad, but smelling salts aren't doing much. Don't know if there's much else to do but wait."

From the line of soldiers on the ridge, a chorus of shocked exclamations arose. Xerxes looked over but had no way of seeing what was going on below.

"Loose arrows!" Captain Ishki said. "Keep firing!"

Twangs rang out as the archers sent arrows flying downward, then prepared to shoot again.

Xerxes' heart pounded in his chest. What was happening?

"They're not going to make it," a soldier said.

"They'll make it," another responded.

"I don't know..." a third added.

"Get ready for shock fighting," Captain Ishki yelled. "Squad One, get those shields up! Seer Gandash, back up and wait to cast a spell on my mark."

More bowstring twangs rang out.

Soldiers inched away from the ridgeline. Xerxes subconsciously put his hand down to Bel's shoulder and clasped it tightly.

"Make room for Tamharu and Ap!" Captain Ishki shouted, herself backing away from the ridge.

Sergeant Tamharu scrambled over the ridgeline. He was panting, covered in sweat, and his eyes shone with terror. Right behind him came Private Ap, who looked equally terrified.

"Shields together!" Tamharu shouted as he lunged forward.

Three ribbonlike streaks of white appeared, flailing as they descended on Ap. He shouted in fear as two latched onto his leg, and one stabbed into his shoulder.

"NO!" Tamharu yelled, jumping back with his sword raised.

It was too late. Ap disappeared over the edge of the ridge.

"More arrows!" Captain Ishki yelled. "Then get behind Squad One. Tam, get back!"

"Ap's in the way!" a soldier blurted, but he was the only one who refrained from shooting. Then the archers backed up.

By this point, Tamharu, who led Squad One, was part of the line. "Stay tight! Don't let this thing through!"

"Captain," Gandash said, "should I—"

"No, wait for my mark!"

Xerxes saw the white hair and ghastly pale skin of the Abhorrent woman as she climbed up. The right side of her face looked hideous where Xerxes had punched her. Her eye had been completely destroyed, and much of her disgusting skin was burned or melted away. There were arrows sticking out of her, which she grabbed one by one and threw to the side, her movement unhampered.

"Grk ba'ya melam!" she said in that grating voice. "Grk ba'ya melam-oth!"

The Squad One soldiers held their position.

She continued to rise up, her spindly legs stabbing into the earth of the ridge crest as she heaved herself onto the flat ground, all the while repeating the same incomprehensible words as before, albeit with slight variations in vocabulary or tone. Along with her came that indescribable stench that caused the nose hairs to tingle.

Xerxes' instinct was to turn and run. Instead, he took a breath, stood, and put his hand on his component pouch.

But then the creature's eyes locked onto him, and she smiled and moved in his direction. A wave of dizziness swept through him, forcing him to step backward. He tripped over Bel, landing on his rear and nearly tumbling onto his back.

Almost in concert with his fall, the Abhorrent woman stopped moving, and the grin faded from her face. Then she moved forward, only for her spindly front legs to lose their grip. She faltered and half fell.

"The henbane's working!" a soldier shouted.

"More arrows!" Captain Ishki cried.

About half of the archers had the presence of mind to fire again, with only about five of the arrows plunking into the Abhorrent's maggot-colored skin. Growling, she got back to her feet, only to sway sharply to the side, nearly toppling over. Then she spat out some words in her bizarre language before spinning and making what looked like a drunken dash back the way she'd come, leaping over the ridgeline and disappearing from sight.

The entire camp was filled with silence. Even Captain Ishki just stood there breathing hard, a haunted look on her face. Off to the side, a soldier made a gagging noise.

Moments ticked by, and then people started moving again.

“Keep it together, Squad One!” Sergeant Tamharu yelled. “Let’s get Ap back to safety. Forward!”

“Seer Gandash,” the captain said, “hold your position.”

The Squad One soldiers inched toward the ridge.

Xerxes clambered back to his feet and looked down at this component pouch, worried that he’d spilled some of his crabnickel powder when tripping over Bel. He hadn’t.

Tamharu led Squad One forward, taking the final cubit or two at a near crawl.

Xerxes’ half-expected the Abhorrent woman to jump back up and start ripping the soldiers to shreds. Squad One stopped at the ridgeline, and then a few groans could be heard. Tamharu’s shoulders slumped.

“Sergeant?” Captain Ishki said.

“The thing isn’t anywhere in sight,” Tamharu reported. “Ap and Goran are... they’re gone.”

Xerxes learned later that both men had been killed violently. Goran’s remains lay in a lake of blood just before the base of the hill. Ap had essentially been ripped in two, although his entrails connected the two parts. Xerxes didn’t see the sight with his own eyes though, for Bel woke up shortly after the conclusion of the frenzied melee.

After her eyes fluttered open, Sergeant Aniskipel helped her into a sitting position.

Gandash was already there. “Bel, are you okay?”

“Not sure,” she said, her voice trembling.

“You were ’urt pretty bad, girl,” Aniskipel said. “Will an ’ealing spell fix it?”

“I hope so,” she said.

She lost an entire dose of green belladonna sand when her trembling fingers resulted in a failure of her first healing spell. The second spell worked. Whatever the disgusting ichor was that the severed Abhorrent parts left behind, it didn’t seem to have caused infection or sickness.

Gandash wrapped his arms around Bel, and she returned the embrace.

“Now’s not the time for that sort of thing,” Captain Ishki said from a few cubits away. “Refill your component pouches and be ready.” Raising her voice, she gave out new orders.

The camp was reorganized. The fires were moved to different locations. Additional fires, much larger than those in the camp, were started at the base of the hill, in the four cardinal directions. More sentries were assigned, ten in total, with four of them focused on the direction the Abhorrent had originally come from and the others facing the other directions.

Spent arrows were retrieved. Spare arrows were brought out. All light infantry took time to apply golden henbane to as many arrows as possible. Unfortunately, they had been on an inspection tour and didn't have a large stock of henbane or many of the other assets that could have been useful.

They did have tools with which to build entrenchments. Shovels, pick-axes, pry bars. But to create anything that would help defend against a monstrous Abhorrent would take far too long, so Captain Ishki said not to bother. She gave a speech to inspire the soldiers and also provided detailed orders about how to defend the camp.

Everyone was on edge for about two hours after the attack. They sat with weapons in hand, anxiously tapping knees, humming random tunes, or staring out into the deepening darkness.

The remains of Ap and Goran were retrieved. Sergeant Aniskipel packed them into bags and had them put on the cart.

Master Ligish demanded to be set free.

"No," was Captain Ishki's simple answer.

"It's murder," Ligish said. "If that thing comes back, me and my people will be slaughtered, with no way to defend ourselves."

Ishki pursed her lips and walked away from him.

Another hour passed with no further developments. At that point, the captain came over to the mages.

"You three need to get some rest," she said. "Bed down in the middle of the camp, and I'll have some men watch over you. Be ready if that thing comes back. Especially you, Seer Bel. I don't want to lose anyone else on this mission."

Xerxes was exhausted but couldn't fall asleep. It seemed Gandash and Bel were in the same boat. They lay there on their bedrolls, staring up into the darkness.

After a while, Xerxes closed his eyes and tried to think of calming things. It was impossible. This mission had turned from a dream into a nightmare that only got worse and worse with every day that passed. How was it possible that they were facing an Abhorrent? It had been millennia since they were something to worry about. Now there was one out in the night, staring at them and planning how to rip them to shreds.

But how? Xerxes knew what the official history classes taught. The supposed Pontifarch had disabled all the Gateways leading to the Nightmare Cove, so it shouldn't have been possible for them to go anywhere else in the starsea.

More important than the *how* was the *why*. Why was this thing chasing them? Did they have something it wanted? Or was it just a bloodthirsty beast who tried to kill anything it saw?

Xerxes' eyes opened, and he jerked up into a sitting position.

Gandash noticed, looking over with eyes so wide they looked like they might pop out of his skull. "What's wrong?" he whispered.

Bel sat up and put her hand on her component pouch.

"Nothing's wrong," Xerxes replied quietly. "It's just... that thing came out of a meteorite that fell from the sky. So... what about all those other meteors we saw? Did all of them have Abhorrent in them?"

The thought chilled him to the bone, and when he turned to look at his friends, they looked no less haunted.

Xerxes cleared his throat. "Sorry, I shouldn't have said anything. It just... just occurred to me."

He lay back down.

Now his thoughts wandered even more. He thought about his family back in the capital. His father, mother, and sister. He thought about Gandash's family. Of their friends. Their teachers in the Academy. The other mages who called the capital home.

Which direction had the meteors been falling? Could any have fallen in the capital itself? Or nearby?

One moment, he was obsessing about an army of monsters invading the capital, the next he was in a deep slumber.

He dreamed. He, Bel, and Gandash were attending class in the capital when the building caught on fire. They ran out to find meteors smashing into the city around them. Everything was burning. He heard screams. The screams grew louder. Louder still.

His eyes snapped open.

The screams were real.

The Abhorrent was back.