

# **Book 1: The Horror on Mannemid**

*In the beginning, long before the Immanent, when the horrors came, I was a fool. I knew not what to value, nor what to keep. I thought only of myself. Though I changed, it was far too late to save some of the most precious things.*

Impetum Praeludere 1:4, *Words of Xerxes the Great*, Revised Great Reef Edition

# Chapter 1 – Knives

“I ran into a mage once!” a farmer shouted from near the front of the tavern. “Two cubits tall, buck teeth, and talked with a lisp. Gave me some cheek, so punched ’im in the face! Dropped like a sack of turnips!”

The comment drew a handful of laughs in the crowded common room. Xerxes wasn’t amused but also wasn’t offended. He’d heard more than his fair share of ‘mage’ jokes. He’d even told a few.

A bard occupied the stage, clad in bedraggled finery. Instead of commenting on the joke, he chose to take a sip of wine and tune his lyre.

Xerxes’ friend Gandash didn’t take as kindly to the attempt at humor.

“Bastard,” he growled, his hand clenching into a fist. “I’ll show him what happens if you try to punch a mage.”

“Ignore him,” Xerxes said. He raised his tankard. “Come on, drink.”

Gandash’s hand relaxed as he lifted his own drinking vessel. “Yeah, sure. Cheers.”

The two friends clinked tankards and drank deeply. Both young men were sixteen years of age and thus adults by the standards of the law. If they wanted to drink, they could drink. If they wanted to get drunk, they could get drunk. Not that Xerxes would. His father had taught him how to handle alcohol responsibly. Gandash, on the other hand....

An aroma of firewood, roasted meat, curry, stale alcohol, sweaty people, and mold filled the common room. There was also a touch of something exotic, a smell that common rooms in the capital didn’t have. Maybe it was from the ancient Yellow Forest that bordered the town, its odor carried in by the hunters and trappers that formed a constantly shifting migrant population here.

All Xerxes knew was that this place smelled interesting.

Outside, the rain pounded down relentlessly, making him glad to be in the warmth, with a tankard of ale and a plate of food, instead of out on the road like they’d been for the past weeks.

Before Xerxes and Gandash could put their drinking vessels down, a slurred voice rose from another corner of the room.

“Did ya know that in Od, the mage women are all ’ores? A shekel an ’our they charge, at the temples!”

"Like 'ell!" another voice replied.

"Swear on the Pontifarch 'imself! I would've sampled one myself, but I didn't 'ave a shekel to spare."

"You've never even been to Od, ya lout!"

A ripple of laughter passed through the room, then settled into a general buzz of conversation.

"These *idiots*," Gandash said, putting his tankard down and tensing as if to stand up.

"It's not worth it," said Xerxes. "Who cares what these people think?"

"Yeah, guess you're right. Good thing Bel and Captain Ishki went to sleep early."

Xerxes and Gandash were both Isin-born mages, but their fellow mage Bel was from Od, as was the officer in charge of the entire convoy, Captain Ishki.

It was obvious the alcohol was already getting to Gandash, so Xerxes tried to lighten the mood.

"This is great, isn't it?" he said. "Out on the open road, in an actual tavern. Sitting with the locals. Drinking ale. We're truly mages now, Gandy, on a real mission for the Mage Parliament. Can you believe it?"

Gandash's expression softened, and he grinned, his dark eyes glittering. "I *can* believe it, Xerk. What else did you think was gonna happen when the two of us made Seer?"

Before they could continue their conversation, the bard cleared his throat and said, "Given the talk of mages, good friends, shall I play you a ballad of magic and folklore?"

"Yes!" a few voices shouted.

"Please, don't," Gandash muttered, running a hand through his hair. He and Xerxes both had typical features: dark hair and eyes, olive skin. But Xerxes' nose was straight while Gandash's was aquiline. And Xerxes was a few fingers taller than his friend. No one would mistake them for being related.

Xerxes chuckled. "Not all songs about magic are bad."

"Just most."

The bard's fingers danced on the strings of the lute, and the patrons in the common room quieted.

"I can think of a few tunes pertaining to the eerie and miraculous," the bard said. "Is there any particular number you'd prefer?"

"Now's our chance to make sure he doesn't sing '*Wizard Passes Wind*,'" Gandash said.

Xerxes groaned. "Good point. Well, you're the music-lover. Why don't you make a request?"

As the bard plucked a few more strings, Gandash turned his eyes up in thought. Then he raised his hand and called out, "Bard, do you know '*Maribel's Magic*'?"

The bard's eyes lit up. "A classic! Very well, friends and neighbors, prepare your hearts and ears as I sing a ballad sung in starisles far and near! Hopefully you don't mind if I put my own personal spin on the lyrics."

"His own spin?" Gandash said. "What does that mean?"

Xerxes shrugged. "Guess we'll find out."

The bard stamped his foot on the wooden stage to create a basic rhythm, then strummed the opening bars.

Keeping his voice low, Xerxes said, "How does this guy know what people sing on other starisles, anyway? I doubt he's ever been out of Isin, let alone off-planet."

"Neither have you, Xerk," Gandash said.

"Hmm... fair point."

*'Maribel's Magic'* was a lively tune intended to get the whole room singing, and other patrons were already starting to tap feet or fingers to the rhythm.

After playing through the main melody, the bard started singing.

*"Maribel was a mage unlike any other,*

*"She'd have made an excellent mother,*

*"But when I saw her casting a spell*

*"I knew she was a snuffer!"*

Xerxes felt a hand on his shoulder as someone sat down at the bench to his left. It was a portly man wearing a rumpled soldier's uniform, with a bit of a hunch to his back and pocked skin that made him seem unhealthy. If you didn't know him, you might not guess he was a veteran of multiple wars and was a beast with sword and javelin alike.

"This fellow ain't 'alf bad," the soldier said, talking in a soft lisp thanks to the fact he was missing both of his front teeth.

Giving him a friendly elbow jab, Xerxes said, "Hey, Gem."

"Xerk," Gem replied. "Gandy. 'Ow's the ale, fellas?"

"Not bad," Xerxes said.

"Nasty," Gandash said at almost the same time.

Gem laughed. "Sounds like my kind of swill."

As the soldier waved down one of the serving girls, the bard reached the first chorus, and everyone in the tavern lent their voice to the effort.

*"Dinner under the stars*

*"We ended up with scars!*

*"What could be more tragic,*

*"Than Maribel's Magic?"*

The song told the story of love gone awry between a noble prince and a mage named Maribel. In the usual version, Maribel was beautiful but moody, while the singer of the song was naive and lustful. However, this bard tweaked the lyrics to change the meaning, turning Maribel into a misunderstood romantic, while the singer seemed depressed that he wasn't a mage of her caliber. This change somehow made the song even funnier than the common version.

"Okay, I think I like this rendition," Gandash said after the third chorus.

"Same," Gem said as the serving girl swept by and dropped a tankard in front of him. Picking it up, he said, "Cheers, boys."

The three of them drank and enjoyed the rest of the song. By the end, the room was in a frenzy, screaming the chorus and stamping feet and clapping hands with such vigor that the entire tavern shook. After the bard finished, he stood and bowed to thunderous applause and quite a few lewd comments.

"I'd give Maribel a good time," a farmer shouted. "Or two! Bahahaha!"

"What ol' Maribel needs ain't a mage, it's a good strong man!"

Gandash ground his teeth; it was clear he was still irritated at the locals' crude jokes about mages.

"Come on, Gandy," Xerxes said, "they're just farmers and bumpkins. I bet nobody here's ever even seen a real-life mage before."

“Xerk’s right,” Gem said. “Don’t take it to ’eart.”

“It just pisses me off,” Gandash said. “Gem, do you know how hard Xerxes and I worked to get to this point? Seers at only sixteen? Already sent on a mission from the capital? And they talk about us like we’re either fools or limpicks or—”

“Calm down,” Gem said, putting a hand on Gandash’s forearm.

“Yeah,” Xerxes added, “who gives a shit what they think, anyway?”

Gandash didn’t seem convinced and continued to glare around as various raucous comments and laughter wafted about. The bard had left the stage and was taking a break before starting another set. It was late, but not that late, and there was no way the tavern or the bard were going to miss out on the coin a crowd like this would turn over.

With the military convoy in town—to which Xerxes and Gandash were attached—there was business the likes of which a place like this normally wouldn’t see outside of major festivals. Plenty of woodsmen and locals filled the tables, interspersed with soldiers from the convoy. Of course, though Xerxes and Gandash had some basic military training, they weren’t soldiers. Neither was the other mage assigned to the convoy, Bel. However, given that their mage robes were packed away, it wasn’t possible to tell that from a glance. To the tavern’s clientele, they looked only like young soldiers.

The convoy had been on the road for the better part of a month, and this was the last bit of civilization before they headed out into the wild forest. Their mission wasn’t dangerous or interesting, being little more than an inspection of a castle close to the border. But the soldiers were happy to relax in a tavern and spend some time without mud-spattered boots and nights spent on hard bedrolls.

As they waited for the bard to return for his next set, Gem tried to make some small talk. Xerxes accommodated, but Gandash wasn’t cooperating and seemed more interested in cocking his ear to listen for any unflattering comments made about mages. Xerxes knew what was going on. Normally speaking, Gandash wasn’t as sensitive as this. But these tankards of ale were *big*, and he was on his second one already.

Xerxes weighed his options. The last thing they needed was to start a tavern brawl. If that happened, Captain Ishki would have their hides. She was from Od just like Bel, but Xerxes knew full well that she wouldn’t give a rat’s ass if these yokels made a few bawdy comments about mages or people from Od.

Struck with a sudden idea, he said, “Gem, you up for a show?”

“What do you mean, Xerk?”

“What if we did a little demonstration for these Unsighted gentlefolk? Show them ‘plain and simple’ what a mage can do?”

Gem grinned widely, revealing the huge gap made by his missing teeth. You 'ave something specific in mind?"

Xerxes explained his plan, and Gem's grin widened. Even Gandash's frown had leveled out and seemed on the verge of turning into a smile.

"Agreed?" Xerxes said.

"What if someone's seen that trick before?" Gem asked.

"Play it by ear?"

Gem nodded. "All right. Let's do it! Been a while since I've been part of a show." Without any further discussion, he smacked his hand on the table and rose into a standing position. "Friends!" he shouted over the buzz of conversation, and quite a few heads turned in his direction. Clapping twice, he raised his voice even louder and said, "Friends! I've an announcement to make!"

The room quieted even further.

"Allow me to introduce myself. My very short and simple name is Gemegishkiri hallat, and I'm but an 'umble soldier from the capital!"

His comment provoked some laughter. His long name was something of a running joke among the soldiers, although there was another soldier in the group who had a similarly long appellation.

As he continued, Gem exaggerated his rustic accent. "I'm passing through your most lovely town along with my fellow soldiers... and mages."

As Gem let his words hang for a moment, the room grew quieter. Xerxes took the opportunity to look around and gauge the feeling of the crowd. Most people seemed curious, and perhaps apprehensive.

"You 'eard me right," Gem continued. He gestured at Xerxes and Gandash. "My two friends are no soldiers. Nay, they're mages, assigned by the Mage Parliament itself to watch over our convoy. Unfortunately, one of them 'as taken issue with some of the rather crude comments we've 'eard. In fact, I'm both nervous and disappointed to say that this mage is considering turning the lot of you into toads or sheep."

Which wasn't possible. Seers who studied the Sinitu order of magic could indeed perform transmutations of the physical form. In other words, shapeshifting. But neither Seers nor High Seers of that order could transmute multiple people into toads or sheeps. Above the Seer level were the Mystics. And while Sinitu Mystics *could* perform mass transmutations for a very short time, and a Sinitu High Mystic could cast such a spell that would last about an hour, neither could make the effects permanent. But neither Xerxes nor Gandash were Sinitu mages.

Of course, these Unsighted farmers didn't know much about how magic worked, and from the looks on the faces of various crowd members, ranging from nervous to outright fearful, it seemed Gem's monologue was having the intended effect. They were really looking cowed.

"Thankfully," Gem said, "I intervened on your behalf. And instead of casting spells, my friend decided that a simple demonstration of magical skill would convince you of the amazing nature of the mages in our kingdom. Thus, I'd like to introduce you to my friend Xerxes, son of Ataneedusu, a Seer of the Asgagu order, born and raised in the capital, and a mage of immense power and insight."

Xerxes was just preparing to stand up when someone in the crowd spoke up.

"Asgagu?" said a skinny man with a deep tan that could only come from long days working outside in the fields. "Ain't that the *combat* magic?"

Gem nodded. "Exactly, my farmer friend. You see, Xerxes could slaughter every one of you while 'ardly breaking a sweat and definitely without a prick of conscience. In fact, back in the capital, I was personally present when 'e removed the 'eads of seventeen brigands. But only after dismembering them first!"

Quite a few gasps could be heard in the large room, and Xerxes nearly laughed at the stricken looks on the faces of most of the surrounding customers. Those near him edged away as best they could. Of course, Gem's story was poppycock. Xerxes had never killed a single person in his life, let alone tortured seventeen criminals to death.

Xerxes' eyes flitted to Gandash, who was now smiling broadly.

*Good, Xerxes thought. Now, as long as I can keep him that way, we can end this evening the happy way.*

"Fear not!" Gem shouted with a theatrical flourish of his arm. The man could well have been a showman instead of a grizzled soldier. "For I've convinced Seer Xerxes to restrain 'imself. Instead, 'e'll show you a simple training exercise that would shock experienced, professional acrobats in the capital. After all, not even the most skilled Unsighted could 'ope to match a Seer. Xerxes, my friend, would you like to take the stage?"

*My turn, Xerxes thought. Glancing around to note the locations of the soldiers he knew, who he was still working very hard to impress, he clambered onto the table, raised his arms in a rough approximation of Gem's theatrical gesture, and said, "Ladies and—" He cut himself off, looked around, and sighed. "My apologies, ladies, I don't see many gentlemen present..."*

The serving girls all laughed, as did the handful of women present in the common room. And the soldiers, to Xerxes' pleasure. The reaction among the rest of the men present was



mixed and included everything from chuckles to groans. Many of the men still seemed shaken from Gem's monologue about the terrifying nature of mages.

Smiling, Xerxes said, "I'm just kidding, friends. Truth be told, in all my travels through our fair kingdom of Isin, I've never seen such a group of honorable folk as yourself. Believe me, we mages know our nation survives only because of the hard work of loyal and talented Unsighted such as yourselves."

An approving buzz rose in the room, and many of the ashen expressions changed.

"Clear the way, friends!" Xerxes said, then bent his legs and jumped with the agility of a feline hunter onto the next table. The wood thumped dully under his boots, and the patrons leaned out of his way as he made a second jump, landing square on the stage.

Twirling to face the crowd, he raised his voice and said, "Honorable patrons of this establishment, you may be aware that mages are stronger and faster than an ordinary person. But that doesn't mean we can't improve ourselves. And thus, every morning and evening on the road, I strive to better myself, from reactions and reflexes, to combat skill and magical abilities."

Gem climbed up onto the table. "Friends, observe the superhuman strength and speed of a Seer!"

Before anyone knew what was happening, a brace of knives appeared in Gem's hand, each of them about a hand long including handle and blade. They were real knives but with dull edges as they were designed for throwing. That said, they were sharp enough at the point to pierce into wood, not to mention skin.

During the short moment in which Gem spoke, Xerxes, having gauged the distance between the two of them, took half a step back. He needed to be in just the right spot for the trick to work.

"Watch!" Gem said. He pulled out one of the knives and placed the blade between his fingers. He held it up in front of his face.

"Bring it on, old man!" Xerxes said.

Gem threw the knife seemingly with all his might, and it whizzed through the air toward Xerxes.

The truth was that Seers were indeed inherently superior to the Unsighted. After all, the Unsighted were 'blind' to the *melam* energy mages used to fuel their casting of spells and also to become stronger practitioners of the arcane arts. There was no pejorative implication to the term Unsighted, as the overwhelming majority of the population was made up of such people. Young ones within whom magic awakened in the teenage years were called Sighted, and they quickly became faster and stronger than ordinary people. A

Seer, who was a person who had gathered enough melam to form an internal 'chamber of energy,' was even stronger and tougher than a Sighted.

However, the demonstration being carried out by Gem and Xerxes had nothing to do with that kind of strength and speed.

This exercise was a trick Xerxes' sword instructor had taught him and was something he practiced regularly as a way of improving reflexes and gauging the speed, direction, and spin of thrown objects. It was a skill similar to the type jugglers honed and was not related to magic at all.

After being assigned this mission and learning that Gem was handy with throwing knives, the two of them had taken to practicing regularly, and as such, Xerxes could have caught the knife with his eyes closed.

Just to be safe, though, he paid close attention to the position of Gem's feet, how far he pulled his hand back, where he released the knife, the amount of spin, and all the other minutiae. After all, Xerxes *had* been drinking.

The knife spun once through the air. To Xerxes, it almost flew in slow motion, but to everyone else, it traveled so quickly they could barely track it. Of course, they had no idea that Gem put less spin on the knife than was necessary, such that, by the time it reached Xerxes, it was pointing almost straight up. If Xerxes somehow failed to get his hand up in time, and the knife hit his chest, it would bounce harmlessly away.

But it didn't hit him.

Xerxes grabbed the knife out of the air with a casual motion, then held it out for everyone to see.

Some oohs and aahs could be heard in the crowd, and a mustachioed soldier from Squad One named Rihan, who was seated in a booth against the far wall, cried out, "Nice one, Xerk!"

"Yeah," another soldier said. "Show them what you mages are made of!"

Xerxes' heart swelled with pride at the soldiers' praise, especially Rihan, whose mustache he admired greatly.

Gem threw another knife, and Xerxes caught it. He displayed it to the audience with a small bow.

Another knife flew toward him in a blur.

Xerxes caught that one, too.

There were more exclamations from the audience and even some scattered applause. Xerxes couldn't help but revel in the rush he experienced from being the center of attention like this.

"And now, the finale!" Gem said, drawing the last two knives and dropping the bracer to the table below. Chuckling loudly, he said, "Get ready, little mage!"

"Little compared to you, fatso!" Xerxes shot back with a theatrical smirk, his eyes locked onto Gem's.

Gem threw both knives at the same time. Xerxes, the smile never leaving his face, caught both of them. "I might as well have kept my eyes closed," he said, trying to sound bored.

The crowd erupted into cheering, and Xerxes went into a deep bow while simultaneously glancing at Gandash. His friend was clapping and cheering, and there didn't seem to be a shadow of his previous negativity.

*Mission accomplished*, Xerxes thought.

"And so, my friends," Gem said, projecting his voice above the din, "please watch your tongue when speaking of mages, at least while we lowly capital folk are in town!"

"Thank you, good patrons!" Xerxes said. Then he took a step forward and was about to hop off the stage when another voice rose above the crowd. It was deep and booming, the type that indicated it came from a person of unusual size and strength.

"Bullshit!"

A new hush fell over the crowd as heads turned toward the source of the ringing voice. A bear of a man in the clothing of a woodsman had risen to his feet at a nearby table. He had shoulders twice as broad as Gem's, a jaw so chiseled it could have taken the place of a carpenter's square, and a mouth that seemed curled in a perpetual sneer.

"Hey, quiet down, Biru," someone said.

"Yeah, it's all in good—"

"Bullshit, I say," Biru repeated, with more force than before. "I been to the capital on thrice occasions and saw with my own eyes this very trick performed by street jugglers! It ain't got nothing to do with magics!"

"Well now, sir," Gem said, but before he could continue with any manner of explanation or reasoning, the man named Biru reached to his belt and pulled out a gleaming woodsman's knife, nearly half a cubit long and sharpened to a razor's gleam. This was the kind of weapon that could be used to kill a bear and fell a tree, much less inflict injuries on fellow human beings.

Xerxes managed to keep his eyes from going wide, but in his heart he was already scrambling to come up with a plan for how to deal with the situation. It was one thing to catch throwing knives tossed by a comrade with skill and ability. But if this brutish Biru threw a hunting knife at him from that close, Xerxes could well end up losing fingers or worse if he tried to catch it.

“Look, friend,” Xerxes said, “I just wanted—”

“Catch this, you lying mage!” Biru said, hurling the knife at Xerxes.