

Chapter 11 – More Meteors

The Yellow Forest seemed a lot less charming to Xerxes now. *It* hadn't changed. He had. When he looked around, the shadows seemed... stickier. The vines seemed like they were trying to choke the life out of the trees. Even the animal sounds came across as more malevolent. What had previously seemed like the merry chatter of fuzzy creatures was instead the dangerous click of razor-sharp teeth. The fact that the soldiers didn't seem interested in singing songs added an additional level of gravity.

After twenty minutes within the trees, he shook his head and took a few deep breaths. *Come on, Xerxes. What are you, a baby? Scared of the dark?*

It wasn't the first time he had to force himself to clear his thoughts. Every so often, he shook his head and measured his breathing to get himself thinking straight.

Given the distance between the camp areas within the Yellow Forest, there was no point in trying to push for greater speed in getting back to Kisiga, and they spent the night in the same spot they'd camped on the way to the castle.

The dramatic events had shaken the three young mages free of the sense of wonder that filled them from the moment they left the capital. For mages, advancement in the magical arts was a tricky business, especially when on a campaign such as this. And Xerxes knew that every moment spent refilling and refining his melam was crucial. As such, he spent as much time as possible in meditation that evening, gathering melam from his surroundings and packing into his energy chamber. Gandash and Bel did the same.

Most ordinary people thought meditation strange. A mage would simply sit quietly, eyes closed, hands on knees, breathing in a prescribed fashion. The soldiers in the convoy, however, worked directly for the Mage Parliament and were used to the practices of mages. They kept the camp as quiet as possible while the mages went about their work and made sure they had water and food waiting when their meditation sessions ended.

As a Seer, Xerxes had a single chamber of energy, and if he wanted to reach the next level, that of the High Seer, he needed to form a second chamber of energy. The process involved filling his first chamber with melam, then using that entire stockpile to slowly build the 'walls' of the second chamber. When the existing chamber was emptied, he needed to refill it, a process that took no short amount of time. Afterward, he would drain it again to continue building the second chamber. Mages referred to that process as Flushing.

In order to advance from the Seer to the High Seer level, a mage had to perform twelve Flushes. Ordinary meditation practices allowed a Seer to fill their chamber in two months, which meant that by focusing completely on meditation and Flushes and not casting any spells, it would generally take about two years to reach a breakthrough point.

Before leaving on the mission, Bel had performed four Flushes, Gandash had done two, and Xerxes had completed one. On the road to the castle, they had spent a bit of time on meditation, but not much. And now all three of them had cast spells, reducing their stockpile of melam. For Xerxes and Bel, it wasn't as much of an issue. Asgagu and Balatu Seers could both cast twenty spells before draining their single chamber. But for Gandash, it was a different story. It took about nearly half of his total stockpile of melam to cast a single Spawn Duo. And he'd cast the spell twice. Needless to say, he didn't hesitate to consume the Concentrated Melam Pill his father had given him. That gave him enough melam that he could cast Spawn Duo again in an emergency, but it didn't completely refill his chamber.

They spent the next night in the tavern in Kisiga. The town coroner had finished his work and gave them an ornate box containing Gem's remains. Captain Ishki gave the box to Xerxes, who packed it together with the money he intended to deliver to his friend's family as soon as they got back to the capital. When he thought of facing Gem's wife and telling the story of her husband's passing... His throat felt thick.

What would he say? *How* would he say it?

All he knew was that it had to be done, and he owed it to his late friend to see everything through to the end.

Captain Ishki had everyone wake up early, go through morning prayer, and then pack to leave. As they gathered in the street outside the tavern, two burning streaks of light passed overhead.

"More meteors," Xerxes said as he pulled a book out of his traveling pack. "What the hell is going on?"

Bel stared up at the light. "We'll find out more when we get back home. The Mage Parliament must have noticed. They probably dug up every old text about meteors that exists in the Academy library."

"I doubt it's anything worth worrying about," Gandash said. "I was reading last year about planets in other starisles that have recurring meteor showers. Sometimes yearly."

Xerxes shuddered. "Maybe. All I know is that these meteors are giving me the creeps."

It was only then that Gandash noticed Xerxes' book. "Say, Xerk, I haven't seen you do any rune study this entire time. Are you finally going to buckle down and do some reading?"

Xerxes grinned wryly. Matters of energy chambers weren't the only things mages had to consider. Book knowledge regarding the runes was also a factor. "Yeah, I don't want to fall behind. Once I form my second chamber, I want to have *already* mastered the Asgagu Sebum rune."

"Oh? You're going to skip Asgagu Sanum?"

"Yeah." He held up his fist and looked at it. "I'm getting tired of relying on this."

"Just adding your foot to your arsenal isn't going to cut it for you?"

Xerxes dropped his fist. "Exactly. Once I can augment my sword, I'm going to be a thousand times more effective."

Gandash's lips twitched into a smile. "I can only imagine."

Now that they were out on the open road and could make camp anywhere they wished, Captain Ishki set a much faster pace. Everyone was happy to comply with her orders. The thought that they were carrying a load of illegal machinery weighed heavy on the minds of all, though the soldiers did a passable job of pretending to forget about it.

What if the Nergal shows up and punishes us for just looking at it? That possibility plagued Xerxes on more than one occasion. Others in the convoy were clearly thinking the same thing. The Nergal was, on the one hand, a bogeyman adults used to frighten children. On the other hand, he was very, very real, sent by the Pontifarch to deal with rebels, blasphemers, and heretics, and he supposedly inflicted pain and death on the subjects of his wrath. Granted, neither Xerxes nor anyone else on Mannemid had ever seen him. But everyone knew he existed, and they knew what happened if he arrived in a starisle. People died. In fact, there were stories of him destroying entire starisles.

Every member of the convoy was happy to run farther and harder than usual. As a result, they passed by the spots along the road that were generally used for camping. Given the peace in recent years on Mannemid and the relative law and order in Isin, there was no reason to fortify their position or hide their camp from passersby.

The first night out from Kisiga, they camped on a hill overlooking the road.

The second night, they chose a spot off the road and near a small forest that Private Apuulluunideeszu told them about, as he had traveled through these parts before he became a soldier. On the third day of travel, the clouds returned, slowly filling the sky until it was dark and leaden.

"Rain's coming, I bet," said Goran.

However, rain never came. As the days of travel passed, they slept in a random valley, on another hill, near a farmhouse, and then, by chance, at a campsite. As they neared more civilized parts of the kingdom, they saw more towns and villages but skirted them when

possible. In some cases, the road ran right through such places, but they never stopped. Captain Ishki didn't want to risk word spreading among the populace about what the convoy was carrying.

For Xerxes, the journey from the capital to Kisiga had been one of excitement and anticipation. This trip back was nothing of the sort.

Although Gandash and Bel didn't exclude or avoid him, they obviously wanted privacy, and he accommodated them. Which meant that he ended up stewing in his thoughts more frequently than before. He kept remembering how it felt to have his arm broken. He thought about Gem dying in front of him and killing the woodsman, Biru. He tried *not* to think about the Nergal.

He talked with the soldiers, but it was different from before. Early on, he'd been trying hard to impress them and fit in with them. Now, they accepted him readily, and somehow... that left him feeling empty.

Meditating to gather melam from the surroundings was an easy way to not worry about his thoughts, so he did that as often as possible. But it was difficult to meditate on horseback unless you were virtually born into the saddle. Meditation required one to sit absolutely still, and Xerxes just couldn't do that while swaying on the back of an animal.

The following day, they made their way through hilly terrain that served as a line of demarcation between what Isinians considered the outskirts of the kingdom, and the interior. Captain Ishki set a more relaxed pace of travel given the terrain.

"You all right?" Gandash asked sometime after lunch.

"Huh?" Xerxes said.

"You've been looking a bit more... I don't know, *thoughtful* than usual. The past few days."

Xerxes shrugged. "I don't know. I'm fine. Just been thinking about a lot of things."

"All right. Well, guess what? Bel has a bottle of wine she's been hiding this whole time. Want to share it with us at dinner?"

"Yeah, sure."

Captain Ishki called an early stop when they found a hilltop campsite not too far from the road. After tending to the horses and other camp-related duties, Xerxes ate with Gandash and Bel for the first time since they started on the return trip. In the back of his mind, he almost regretted pushing the two of them to become a couple. Almost.

It was nice to eat and drink with friends. As they were cleaning up from the meal, Xerxes heard something of a stir from one of the nearby campfires.

Looking over, he saw the soldiers rising to their feet and pointing into the sky. He looked up.

There was a bright light in the dark clouds overhead, traveling at a rapid speed. A moment later, an enormous ball of fire dropped down. At first, Xerxes thought it was flying toward their camp, which caused his heart to leap into his throat. However, a moment later, he realized it wasn't flying directly toward them.

It was a meteor, of course.

It was much closer than any of the ones they'd seen on the trip so far. It was so near that Xerxes could see the flames and smoke, and he almost felt like he could reach up and touch it.

A loud hissing sound filled the air, reminding him of the sound of an arrow just shot from a bow.

As the burning object flew overhead, most everyone in the camp ducked reflexively, simultaneously turning to watch the thing falling toward a nearby forested area.

It descended, disappearing into the darkness of the trees. A moment later, they heard a muffled boom, and Xerxes was certain he felt a tremor in the ground beneath his feet.

"Wow," Gandash said. "Did you feel that?"

"It must have hit the ground less than a league away," Bel said.

A murmur of conversation filled the camp as the soldiers sat back down around their fires.

"Guys," Xerxes said, "remember what we were talking about back in the Yellow Forest?"

Bel nodded. "I remember. You're wondering what's inside that thing, aren't you?"

"Yeah."

"Probably metals, minerals, that kind of thing," Gandash said. "There are quite a few spell component ingredients that can *only* be found in meteorites."

Xerxes rubbed his hands together and then cracked his knuckles. "We should go check it out. Think about it, Gandy. You cast *two* Spawn Duos. How much do you think those doses of blisterscale reduction cost?"

"A lot."

"If that meteor has some rare stuff in it, you could recoup what you spent on those spells. That's not to mention the green belladonna sand Bel used and my crabnickel powder."

They would get compensation for their time on this mission, but it would hardly suffice to recoup their losses. And though they could submit applications for additional remuneration, there was no guarantee the Mage Parliament would approve of their spellcasting decisions. In short, they might be completely on the hook for their components.

Seeing Gandash hesitating, Xerxes scrambled to think of something further to say that would pique his interest.

Before he could come up with anything good, Bel reached out and put her hand on Gandash's forearm.

"Gandy," she said, "the blisterscale reduction was a gift, so it's not like you need to replace it. But Xerk and I have to pay for our own components. We didn't get preemptive approval to cast spells on this mission, and who knows if we'll end up getting compensated. And even if we do, it could take months before we see the actual components...."

Gandash shook his head as if he felt embarrassed. "Of *course*. I was just thinking of myself. We should go check it out. Or at least ask the captain her opinion." He looked in the direction of Captain Ishki's campfire. While he was looking away, Bel caught Xerxes' eye and gave him a look that said *thank me later*.

Xerxes covered a smile by clearing his throat.

Well, who could have guessed? All it took was a girlfriend to get Gandash to understand how money worked.

"I'll talk to her," Xerxes said. "You two finish cleaning up."

Hurrying across the camp, he found Captain Ishki and Sergeant Tamharu in deep conversation. Not daring to interrupt, he clasped his hands behind his back and waited off to the side. Ishki noticed him. "Can I help you, Seer?"

"Captain, the other mages and I were thinking it would be a good idea to investigate that fallen star."

"Your reasoning?"

"It could contain valuable components for spellcasting. Besides, we figure the Mage Parliament might want information about them." The last part was something that had only just occurred to him right.

"That's what Sergeant Tamharu and I were just discussing," Captain Ishki said. "It's likely the Parliament already sent people to investigate other meteorites, but given the fact we're so close, I feel we'd be remiss to not take a look." She turned to Tamharu. "Sergeant, pick four other soldiers and two of the mages. The horses are already picketed and calmed down, so go on foot. You should be able to make it to the point of impact, look around, and get back before it's completely dark. If it turns out to be farther away, turn around. I don't want you tramping around the countryside after nightfall. Got it?"

“Yes, sir,” Tamharu said.

Xerxes opened his mouth to ask if all three mages could go together, but apparently Ishki had guessed he would do so, for she raised a hand to cut him off.

“I’m not going to send all my mages off to investigate a mysterious space rock,” she said. “Have our resident bookworm stay behind. Seer Bel is the healer, so take her with you. There’s virtually no chance of combat, but going over rough terrain in the evening isn’t the safest thing to do. Do you agree, Sergeant?”

“Yes, sir.” Looking at Xerxes, he said, “Ready yourself, Seer. Make sure you and Seer Bel both have your component pouches. We’ll leave in ten minutes.”

Xerxes hurried back and informed Bel and Gandash of what was happening. Gandash wasn’t happy to be excluded but wasn’t the type to gripe about orders.

Ten minutes later, Bel and Xerxes followed Sergeant Tamharu out of the camp on foot. Behind them were four other soldiers, Private Ap, Rihan, Goran, and Tekinalp.

At the far end of the camp was a ridgeline. Beyond it, they slid down rough shale and then hiked toward the forested region. They were soon climbing through boulders and scraggly trees. At least it wasn’t the Yellow Forest.

They hiked for about an hour, until the sky filled with evening colors.

“Look, over there,” Private Ap said, pointing.

Beyond a hilltop not too far away, a wisp of smoke rose up, then disappeared. A moment later, another wisp could be seen.

“That must be where it fell,” Sergeant Tamharu said. “No time to waste. We only have about two hours before it’s dark.”

The climb up the hill seemed to take forever. Xerxes cursed every time his foot slipped in the dirt, all the while wondering what they would see when they reached the top. About halfway up, his nose twitched as he detected an odd smell. In response, he inhaled deeply, but the smell was gone.

Tamharu reached the crest of the hill first. “By the grace of the Pontifarch,” he said, stepping to the side to make more room for those behind him.

Bel was next, then Xerxes.

The hill curved both to the left and right, creating something like a horseshoe shape. On the other side was a wide valley that had once contained trees and vegetation. However, the falling rock had destroyed everything around it. They were looking at a smoking crater surrounded by blackened trees and crushed boulders.

The crater was only about five or six cubits in diameter, but it was so deep that, from the hilltop, Xerxes couldn't see its bottom. His nose twitched again.

"Did you smell that?" Sergeant Tamharu said, his face wrinkling slightly.

"No, sir," Private Ap said.

Xerxes had indeed noticed the strange smell. But it passed so quickly, he wasn't sure what it was. It wasn't anything comforting, though. And it caused a seed of unease to form in the back of his mind.

"Look, something's moving," Bel said.

Xerxes dropped his sword into the Tail guard, with the tip pointing down and behind him. Then he craned his neck looking for any sign of motion.