

Chapter 5 – Aftermath

Other soldiers showed up shortly after that, having been alerted when Bel burst into the tavern to get her component pouch. Xerxes felt a sting of humiliation that they were seeing him like this, but there wasn't anything he could do. He kept his neck hunched and forced himself to stop crying.

Captain Ishki arrived eventually, then the town constables and even the mayor. There were interviews and paperwork. After all, multiple individuals were dead, and the matter needed to be investigated. Operating on the authority of the Mage Parliament, there was virtually no chance that the local constables would defy Captain Ishki's decisions, unless they were flagrantly unlawful. The captain was the type who did everything by the book, anyway. She was beyond furious that one of her soldiers had been killed. The mayor and the constables reacted like chastened schoolchildren as she unleashed her rage on them. She berated them for allowing such lawlessness in their streets and demanded full cooperation in bringing the surviving accomplices to justice.

Xerxes heard Bel's account when she reported to the captain. As it turned out, she was the one who killed the other fallen woodsman. A blow to the temple from a Seer could do that.

Gem got blindsided. It was as simple as that. He was a soldier away from the battlefield, with no armor and no shield. A sharp blade would bite as easily through his skin as it would through any other person's. Perhaps if he had been one of the legendary martial adepts, who spent lifetimes turning their bodies into weapons, he might have performed some superhuman feat and single-handedly taken down multiple attackers in a matter of moments. But he wasn't a martial adept.

When Bel finished her story, Captain Ishki nodded and sighed. A quiet moment passed that seemed to last forever. Then she spoke, her voice soft but firm. "Seer Bel... why didn't you have your spell component pouch with you?"

Tears welled up in Bel's eyes as she took a shuddering breath. "I... I..."

"It was my fault," Xerxes jumped in. "She was going to go back and get it when we left, but I dragged her out of the tavern."

"I see," Captain Ishki said, the muscles in her jaw tightening for a moment before they loosened. "I see."

Xerxes told his side of the story, leaving out nothing. He explained about what happened at the weapon shop, and how he and Bel had gone out of the town proper to do some training.

In the end, Captain Ishki seemed angry but understanding. She muttered a few words, then walked off to talk to the mayor.

During the initial flurry of activity, Xerxes didn't see Gandash. But he caught sight of him sometime later, after the crowds built. There was no chance to talk with him, though they shared a nod from a distance.

As might have been expected, word traveled quickly through the town, and by mid-afternoon, any soldier who took to the streets was the subject of odd looks by the townsfolk. In many cases, people crossed the street to avoid them.

On the one hand, Biru and his fellows were woodsmen who didn't call the town home. They didn't even identify as Isinians; they'd said so themselves. They were essentially foreigners, and by the mutterings Xerxes overheard, they had a reputation for causing trouble. But they were familiar faces to many people, and they had connections to numerous businesses and individuals.

At best, the town's reaction was mixed.

A few hours later, after things calmed down, everyone returned to the tavern with Captain Ishki.

"I'm going up to change," Bel said.

"Me too," Xerxes said.

As Captain Ishki and the other soldiers took seats, Xerxes and Bel headed up the stairs. At the top, Xerxes was about to turn right and head to his room when he sensed hesitation on Bel's part.

He looked back to see her standing there with a blank look on her face.

"You okay?" he asked.

She turned, and though her eyes were blank, they came into focus when she realized he was standing in front of her. She stepped forward, threw her arms around him, and buried her face against his neck.

Surprised, he took a moment before putting his arms around her.

Seconds turned into about a minute, then she released him and stepped away. "Sorry. It's just...."

"I get it," he said. "Same here."

She nodded and looked at her feet.

"We're gonna be fine," he continued. "I think."

She nodded again, turned, and walked away.

He watched her go, then went in the opposite direction.

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About twenty minutes later, he came back down to the common room, free of mud, and wearing his only other set of clean traveling clothes. Captain Ishki was nowhere to be seen, but other soldiers were present, in two groups, one in a booth, the others at a table. Gandash was there, and he looked up as soon as Xerxes appeared.

Their eyes met, and Gandash got up and hurried over. They stood in front of each other at the bottom of the stairs for a moment.

“Sorry for being an asshole,” Xerxes said.

“Don’t say that,” Gandash replied. “I wasn’t thinking. I just got excited and... I don’t know what—”

“You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“So, we’re all good?”

“Yeah.”

Gandash chewed at the inside of his cheek for a moment before continuing, “Are you okay, Xerk?”

“I will be.”

“And... what about Bel?”

“I don’t know. But... I think she needs someone to talk to, Gandy. Or maybe... someone to just be there with her. Hold her hand maybe.”

An awkward, stricken expression overtook Gandash’s face. “Uh, you mean...?”

Ya dummy, Xerxes thought. “I mean you should go up, knock on her door, and ask if she’s okay.”

“Me? B-but—”

Xerxes threw an arm around his friend’s neck, leaned closer, and lowered his voice. “Brother, she just went through a big ordeal and needs some comfort. Got it? Go talk to her. Or just let *her* talk, and you listen.”

Gandash’s mouth opened, then closed. Then it opened again as he said, “What am I supposed to say to her, though? I mean...”

“I already told you. Go up, knock on the door. Say, ‘Are you okay?’ Simple.”

“‘Are you okay?’” His brow furrowed in thought.

Xerxes removed his arm and pushed his friend toward the stairs. “Go.”

Gandash started up hesitantly, but his stride became more confident as he got closer to the second floor.

Maybe this will finally be the tipping point between the two of them.

He joined the soldiers at the table, and they drew him into conversation. Rihan was there, and Goran too. Even Sergeant Aniskipel. Not every soldier present was a grizzled veteran like Gem. But they were soldiers, and they knew what it was like to live through a deadly combat situation for the first time. For weeks now, Xerxes had been doing everything to impress them and get them to like him. Now, he felt like a fool in their presence. And he was also worried they would blame him for Gem's loss.

At first, he tried to put on a boisterous front. But almost as soon he started telling the story to them, he found himself swept up in emotion. At one point, tears leaked out of his eyes. They didn't blame him. Instead, they treated him like an equal. They nodded gravely, joked, slapped him on the back, and offered sage bits of advice. It wasn't how he'd envisioned being accepted by them.

Before long, Xerxes was stable again, his emotions in control. He still felt a heavy weight on his shoulders but was confident he could move on from the ordeal without turning into a basket case.

Later in the evening, as dinnertime neared, Captain Ishki called everyone together into the tavern's common room. Slowly but surely, the soldiers gathered, pushing tables and benches together. It was obvious the place wasn't going to be bustling like the night before. Only two or three woodsmen had come, and they huddled quietly in the farthest booth they could find from the soldiers. A handful of locals were present as well, most likely regulars who would show up regardless of the current climate in town.

Gandash and Bel came down together. It wasn't as though they were holding hands or standing physically closer, but to Xerxes' eyes, something about them had changed. They were looking at each other differently than before.

I knew it. Gandy pulled it off. He resolved to ask Gandash about the details later.

The bard returned to the stage, but being able to read the crowd, he didn't try out any foot-tapping tunes and instead stuck with calmer melodies.

Captain Ishki had arranged for a special dinner. "Our last civilized meal before heading out into the wilds," she said. It consisted of roasted beef, a fish stew, sweet dishes with dates and honey, pastries, and an ale that vastly surpassed the ordinary stuff they'd consumed the previous night.

After the food came out and everyone dug in, Captain Ishki stood and called for a toast.

Being from Od, the captain resembled Bel in the lightness of her skin and hair, as well as her general facial structure. However, she was shorter and stockier. What was more, the scars visible on her face and neck made it obvious that she had seen more than her fair share of combat on the battlefield. In Isin and Fal, it was rare for women to serve in the army and to fight in battle. But not in Od. Captain Ishki had a reputation for being tough but smart. And unlike many Isinian

officers Xerxes had encountered, although Ishki commanded respect, she didn't take herself too seriously. As a result, the soldiers admired her.

"Let's drink to the upcoming mission," Captain Ishki said, holding up her tankard.

"To the mission," said one of the light infantry named Tekinalp.

They drank together. Then the captain set her tankard down and put her fingertips on the table in front of her. Leaning forward, she said, "The incident this morning was tragic, but things like that happen sometimes. We lost a dear friend, and I know we're all shaken up about it. Let's have a moment of silence."

After the silence passed, the captain said, "But there's a good side. I think we're all proud that our Seers handled themselves so well. Am I right?"

There was a bit of clapping and cheering.

"Let's drink to the mages!" Goran said, lifting his tankard.

"To the mages," the captain said, lifting her tankard again. "Regarding the morning's incident, I believe Sergeant Tamharu has an update. Sergeant?"

Tamharu, the leader of Squad One, was a burly, scarred man who, like Gem, had fought in many battles. He was tall, with a full beard and a fearless glint that never left his eye.

Standing, he said, "Yes, Captain Ishki. I did some digging and got the names of the other woodsmen involved in the fight. Physical descriptions as well. They cleared out of town immediately. I imagine they're deep in the forest already."

"When we get back to the capital, we'll issue arrest warrants for them. I'll personally put a bounty on their heads and... you know, maybe I'll request leave to come out here and track the bastards down myself. We'll see to it that Gem gets *full* and *complete* justice."

"Here here!" a soldier said

"Justice for Gem," added another.

All of a sudden, Xerxes felt the urge to raise his hand. "Captain Ishki?"

"Yes, Seer Xerxes?"

"Gem mentioned a box with some money, and he asked me to get it to his family. If it's all right with you, ma'am, I... I feel like it's my responsibility to handle that."

"I know the box," Rihan said.

"Get it to Seer Xerxes," the captain said.

"Yes, ma'am."

Shifting her attention to a lanky soldier who everyone called Ap, she said, “Private Apuulluunideeszu, did you make all the arrangements with the coroner?”

Apuulluunideeszu held the second-longest name in the convoy and had been one of Gem’s close friends. Standing up, he saluted. “Ma’am, yes, ma’am! Arrangements have all been made, ma’am!”

There were a few chuckles among the soldiers at Ap’s excessive formality.

“Thank you, Private,” the captain said. “You can sit. Now, in a moment we can finish our meal and have a final evening of rest before we get on the road in the morning. It’ll take two days to reach our destination, so we’ll camp in the forest for at least one night.

“I don’t have any reason to suspect this will be anything but a routine inspection of this Master Ligish and his castle. According to the report, a traveler claims to have seen evidence he’s experimenting with advanced machinery. If you ask me, it’s probably a false report filed by a rival. But protocol requires us to make a formal investigation, and so we will. That doesn’t mean we’ll be lax, though. Everyone stay alert and be ready for trouble at all times. Especially after what happened this morning. Understood?”

The soldiers all voiced words of acknowledgment.

“Good. In that case, enjoy this meal, and don’t get too drunk! I’ll lead morning prayer for all of us tomorrow, and I don’t want to see anybody hungover!”

“No promises, Captain!” a soldier said, and everyone laughed, including the captain.

After that, the group dined and drank. At one point, Rihan brought down Gem’s box and handed it over to Xerxes in ceremonious fashion. Everyone had a story or two to tell about their lost comrade. Gallant tears were shed, but at the same time, jokes were made. As the hours wore on, spirits rose some, and many a toast was made in Gem’s name.

Eventually, people began to retire. Xerxes’ exhaustion was dulled by the alcohol, but he was beginning to feel the stiffness that came after a fight. When it became clear that Gandash and Bel weren’t planning to go upstairs anytime soon, he finally said, “All right, I’m done. I need to close my eyes.”

“Sure, Xerk,” Gandash said. “You go ahead, I’ll be up in a minute.”

Upstairs, Xerxes made his final preparations for sleep, then lay down and closed his eyes.

Despite his feelings of fatigue, sleep eluded him. He kept thinking of blood and the gurgling sounds made by dying throats. He remembered Gem’s smile and laughter. And the box he needed to deliver to Gem’s family.

It was nearly two hours later when Gandash quietly opened the door and slipped inside.

Xerxes lifted his head. “Finally,” he said.

“Oh, you’re still awake?” Gandash removed his boots, sat on the opposite bed, and sighed.

“Well?” Xerxes asked.

“Well what?”

“You and Bel? What’s going on?”

“Oh, that. Well... we kissed.”

Xerxes sat up in bed. “What? Are you kidding me?”

Gandash put his hands behind his head and leaned back against the wall. “Nope. I almost can’t believe it.” He sighed again. “It wasn’t exactly how I imagined it happening. But it was good. Really good.”

Xerxes half-laughed. “Gandy, I can’t believe you kissed her. That’s not what I said to do!”

“I didn’t plan it. It just sort of happened.”

“She nearly got *killed*. And *she* killed a guy. Then you went and kissed her? That was either a genius move or really, really stupid.”

“Shut up, Xerk. It wasn’t like I planned it. She was sad, so I put my arm around her. We started talking. Then all of a sudden... yeah.”

Xerxes lay his head back down on his pillow, glad to have thoughts of Gem pushed out of his mind. “My boy Gandash. Finally becoming a man.”

This time, Gandash laughed. “It’s not like you’re some sort of romance expert!”

“Not yet, Gandy. Not yet. But one day, the girl of my dreams is going to show up. I just know it.”

They chatted some more, with the talk turning serious before reverting to humor. Then it became serious again for a time. Back and forth they conversed, late into the night.

Eventually, as silver pinpricks of moonlight found their way through the slats in the window shutters, they fell asleep.