

Chapter 4 – Mud and Blood

Grinning, Biru pointed his sword at Xerxes. “I ’ope you’re ready to apologize, boy.”

Xerxes’ lip curled slightly. “For kicking your ass? Why would I do that?”

Biru bared his teeth and was about to talk, but Gem beat him to it.

“Calm down, everybody,” he said.

However, even as the words left his mouth, two more figures stepped out from alleyways and leaned up against the sides of the buildings. Between these two, one had a hatchet similar to the axes Xerxes and Bel had been training with earlier. The other had a short spear.

Men like this didn’t bring weapons and gang up on a small group simply to talk.

Biru twirled the bronze sword and took half a step forward. “We’ll calm down if two things ’appen. First, chickenshit mageboy ’ere will get onto his ’ands and knees and beg me for forgiveness. Second—” his eyes darted to Bel, and his lips twisted lasciviously “—the lady soldier comes with me for the afternoon.”

The second comment caused Xerxes’ jaws to tighten, and he was preparing some scorching profanity to hurl at Biru but was beat to the punch by Bel herself. She was normally quiet and soft spoken, but not now. Looking the big man in the eye, she said, “Fuck you, piss-for-brains.”

Her words provoked a few chuckles from the other men. Biru glared at one of them and spat, “Shut the ’ell up.” Then he looked at Gem. “I told you my terms. Yes... or no?”

Gem’s hand was still on his dagger. “Do you know who we are?”

“I don’t care if you’re soldiers from the capital. We seven call the Yellow Forest our ’ome. We ain’t Isinians. Understand what that means?”

Xerxes understood perfectly well. These men knew that if they caused trouble, even murder, they could ‘mysteriously’ disappear into the woods and never be found.

“You’re a real idiot,” he said. “Two mages and one soldier versus seven woodchoppers like you? We could kill you all without risking a bump on the head.”

His words caused a stir among the six other men. Their hands tightened on their weapons, and to a man, they stood up straighter.

“You didn’t say *she* was a mage too, Biru,” one of them said.

“It’s a lie,” Biru said. “The Mage Council sent two mages out ’ere, and the other one’s a boy like this one. They were both in the tavern last night. Besides, if the foreign girl were a mage, she’d have one of those magic purses.”

Xerxes laughed. “My friend here *is* a mage, dipshit. By the way, it’s called the Mage Parliament, not the Mage Council.”

Biru’s fellows grew even more hesitant. Seeing that, the man took a step toward Xerxes. “Even if your girlfriend *is* a mage, who cares? You only got the upper ’and on me last night with a sucker punch. If you’re so confident, why not face me in a fair fight?”

“Fine,” Xerxes said, throwing his hood back and rolling up his sleeves.

“Allow me to cut in again,” Gem said, raising his voice. “Biru, my friend, the truth is that these two young mages are worth *three* of you in a fight. And that’s without casting spells. As for me, I’m a veteran of two wars, and I’ve killed more people than I’d care to confess to. So why don’t we just—”

“Shut it, old man!” Biru said, walking directly toward Xerxes.

Xerxes grinned and settled into a fighting stance. “Great. Let’s do this!”

“Xerk,” Bel said, “this....”

“We don’t—” Gem began, but then the rest of the woodsmen took steps forward. Gem drew his dagger. “Now listen....”

Xerxes’ focused attention solely on Biru, who was now only two paces away. The woodsman was bigger than him and had a weapon. It wasn’t an ideal situation. But as a Seer, Xerxes had the advantage in terms of strength and speed. And he had training on his side. In fact, he had trained many times for this exact scenario: dealing with a sword-wielding opponent while being unarmed.

He wasn’t even thinking about the knife at his belt or his component pouch. Using a knife against a sword didn’t make much sense, and there was no way he would resort to a spell in this situation.

As Biru neared, the man gripped the bronze sword in both hands and threw it up like it was an axe to split wood. Xerxes kept his focus razor sharp, gauging the distances involved, and preparing to lunge forward at just the right moment.

Off to the side, a shout rang out as Gem clashed with two of the other men. Bel had pulled a cudgel out from her bundle and used it in concert with her knife to defend herself. Xerxes tried to ignore them and remain focused on his own situation.

Biru’s sword descended, and Xerxes lunged forward and grabbed both of the man’s wrists. At the same time, he threw his ankle behind Biru’s calf. Twisting and pulling, he tried to throw Biru to

the ground. Unexpectedly, Biru didn't fall. Instead, he stumbled to the side. Worse, he managed to keep his grip on the sword.

Dammit, Xerxes thought. That wasn't how the move had worked in training. And now he was locked in close quarters with an opponent who still controlled a razor-sharp weapon.

Xerxes had his hands clasped around Biru's wrists, which, given his superior strength, gave him a measure of control over the direction of the blade. But as Biru caught his balance, he pulled hard, trying to free his hands. Xerxes was tugged off his feet, and then Biru kicked him.

Xerxes grunted in pain as the man's boot heel connected with his inner thigh. Biru jerked again, and one of Xerxes' hands slipped completely off one wrist. He maintained his grip with the other hand, but it was now holding Biru's forearm.

This is going from bad to worse. And it was no training exercise. A stray stab or slash from that weapon could cause major damage.

Xerxes heard cries from off to the side, and out of the corner of his eye saw flashes of motion as Bel and Gem fought the other woodsmen.

Biru kicked Xerxes again as the struggle between the two became more chaotic. Xerxes tried to knock the man down, but failed. Every blow he launched landed wrong, while every evasion attempt by Biru worked out perfectly.

Biru kned him in the side, and they struggled back and forth. Xerxes found himself on his back in the mud, not sure how he got there. By now, Xerxes' confidence had evaporated, and he knew he was fighting for his life.

Biru tried to hack him with the sword, forcing Xerxes to roll to the side in the mud. He kicked out again and caught Biru in the knee. The larger man squawked as he dropped into a kneeling position but simultaneously slashed out with the sword.

Xerxes barely avoided it. Maybe casting a spell wouldn't be a bad idea. But did he have the time? He would have to untie his component pouch, draw out the crabnickel powder, trace the Asgagu Isten rune, then channel the melam energy in the proper fashion. Only then would the spell be cast, causing his right hand to transform into a destructive, burning expression of power.

That entire process would take at least three or four seconds at best, and that wasn't to mention that he could fail in tracing the rune, or in directing the melam. After all, he'd never cast a spell in an actual combat situation before.

Xerxes jerked his head back, barely avoiding the bronze blade as Biru waved it toward him. Then he managed to scramble to his feet. Very vaguely out of the corner of his eye, he saw that one of the woodsmen had been knocked onto the ground and was either unconscious or dead. Gem and Bel were still on their feet but were surrounded.

This isn't working. Got to end this. Fast.

Biru slashed the sword wildly, Xerxes dodged, and then jumped forward and slammed his shoulder into Biru's solar plexus.

Biru collapsed, and Xerxes fell on top of him. Even before they hit the ground, Xerxes' hands were on Biru's, trying to wrench his fingers off the hilt of the weapon. One finger came back. Then another. Taking advantage of the angle, Xerxes smashed his elbow into Biru's jaw. The big man yelped and released a hand to protect his face. That was just what Xerxes needed. His fingers slipped around part of the bronze sword's hilt, and he pulled away hard.

The sword jerked out of Biru's hand. Xerxes rolled to the side, jumped to his feet, and held the sword out in front of him.

"Fucker!" Biru spat, then pulled his long knife out of its sheath as he got to his feet. Wiping blood off his mouth, he tried to stab Xerxes.

Wrong, Xerxes thought. Acting almost purely on instinct, he sidestepped, then slashed the short sword toward Biru's head. To Xerxes' surprise, the sword bit into the man's neck just above his collar bone. Blood poured out. More blood than Xerxes had ever seen in one place. Gripping the sword in two hands, he prepared for Biru to lunge toward him again. But the man didn't.

Instead, he clamped his hand onto his neck and staggered to the side.

"You..." he said, then slipped in the mud and fell. Blood kept pouring through his fingers. "You..."

He tried to get up but failed and fell onto his back. He groaned, and then his hand fell away. Biru spasmed, and Xerxes looked away from the red waterfall. The man was dead.

Xerxes dropped the bronze sword as a wave of numbness seeped through him. He exhaled shakily.

In his peripheral vision, he saw the other woodsmen stumbling away into the nearby alleys.

"Biru's got 'imself killed!" one of them said, his voice trembling.

"Fuck 'im," another said. "We gotta get out of 'ere!"

He tried to take another deep breath.

Someone was yelling. Screaming. It was Bel.

"Gem!" she shrieked. "Gem, are you all right?"

Xerxes turned and saw the portly soldier lying on his side, Bel next to him on her knees, leaning over him.

Xerxes walked toward them, shaking his head to gain clarity. "What's wrong?" he said.

Bel looked over her shoulder at him. She had blood smeared on her face.

“He’s hurt. Cut in the neck.”

Xerxes rushed over to see the wound. It was in a different place than the blow which had killed Biru, but it was still a neck wound. Despite how Bel pushed her hand onto it, blood oozed out nonstop.

“Fuck me,” Gem said, his voice raspy and quiet. “Can’t believe this is ’appening.”

“Can’t you heal him, Bel?” Xerxes said.

Bel shook her head. “My component pouch....”

“Fuck.” Xerxes dropped to his knees on Gem’s other side.

“Xerk,” Bel said, “you keep the pressure on his neck, I’ll run back. It’ll only take a minute.”

“Right.”

“You take over in three, two, one, *now!*”

When Bel took her hand away, an enormous wave of blood surged out of Gem. Xerxes put his hand on the man’s neck and pushed down. Nausea clawed at his stomach, and he felt like throwing up but suppressed the urge.

Bel sprinted off. As a Seer just like Xerxes, she could run many times faster than an average human. But would that be fast enough? Every twist and turn she had to make would slow her down.

“Just hang in there, Gem,” Xerxes said. “She’ll be back quick. It’ll take a matter of seconds to patch your neck up.”

“Not sure about that, kid,” Gem said, his voice trembling and already quieter than before. “This is bad.”

“You’ll be fine.” Xerxes pushed down harder on the wound, but the blood oozed out nonetheless.

“I have some... sh-shekels in a wood box in my stuff. Can you... g-get it to my wife and kids?”

“*You* can give it to them, Gem.”

“Tell them... tell them I love... t-tell....”

Gem closed his eyes.

“No,” Xerxes murmured. Gem was still breathing. “Don’t die, Gem. Just a matter of seconds, really. Bel’ll be right back.”

He watched the soldier breathing, and felt the blood flowing through his fingers. How had this happened? *Why* had it happened?

He looked briefly over at Biru, who lay there just as before in a pool of bloody mud. He looked back at Gem.

“Bel!” he shouted. “Bel, hurry up!”

Gem went still. No breathing.

“Fuck. COME ON, GEM!”

Xerxes let loose a hoarse shout of rage and frustration. It did nothing.

The blood had stopped flowing. It still seeped out, but Xerxes could tell it wasn't being pushed out with force. Gem's heart had stopped beating. He took his hand away, grabbed the man's shirt, and shook him. “Start breathing again!”

He heard the slap of footsteps, and then Bel slid to a stop in the mud next to him.

“I got it!” she said. She shoved her hand into her component pouch and pull out a handful of green sand.

“It's too late,” Xerxes said hollowly.

She looked down, stricken. She stood there frozen for a moment. Then her expression hardened. “Might still be a chance.”

Cupping her hand in front of her, she drew the Balatu Isten rune into the sand to cast Minor Restoration. A moment later, melam flowed out from Bel's hand. Delicate spirals encompassed her forearm as she dropped to both knees and touched Gem's chest.

The melam disappeared into him, and Xerxes' heart leapt briefly as some of the flesh around the wound twitched. But that was it.

Nothing else happened. Healing spells only worked on the living.

She exhaled sharply. “I can try again. Maybe my rune was off.”

“It wasn't, Bel,” Xerxes said. He realized tears were streaming down his cheeks. Nonetheless, he reached out and took Bel's hand. He squeezed it. “He's gone.”

She squeezed his hand back.