

Chapter 6 – Into the Mountains

They rose early. Captain Ishki led the morning prayer, beseeching the Pontifarch to watch over Gem's soul on its journey through the cycle of reincarnation. Then they left Kisiga.

The mayor and head constable were there to see them off. They didn't seem sad to see the soldiers go but weren't hurrying them away either. Assuming things went as planned, the convoy would pass through town again on the way back to the capital, only a few days hence.

Although Xerxes kept thinking about how Gem should have been there with them, he was still excited about entering the Yellow Forest. This was his first time leaving the kingdom, and he almost couldn't sit still in the saddle.

The mages were mounted, as were the officers, including Captain Ishki and Sergeants Tamharu, Aniskipel, and Nozar. The rest of the soldiers were infantry, with Squads One and Three being heavy infantry, and Two being light infantry. Those soldiers were on foot, except for Ap, who drove the cart they'd purchased in Kisiga. Although it was unlikely Master Ligish was doing anything illegal, in the remote chance he was, they might need to arrest him and bring his illegal machinery back to the capital as evidence.

But illegal machinery was the last thing on Xerxes' mind as they followed the muddy path out of the village, across the bare hills, and into the Yellow Forest. The rain had passed, and clouds still choked the sky, but occasional patches of blue shone through as well.

Both clouds and blue sky disappeared once they were in the forest itself. The trees were enormous, with snaking roots covered by blankets of vines. Presumably those were the ones that would turn yellow with flowers in spring.

This was an ancient expanse that covered the entire northern part of the continent and had remained mostly untouched by man for centuries upon centuries. In another, more ancient time, there had been a civilization which made forays into the north. But that civilization fell, whether to war, famine, or disease, few people knew except for the most scholarly mages. The forest had long since reclaimed the lands, with only scattered remnants of that ancient civilization remaining. One example was Ligish Castle, which was said to have been the last bastion of the now-extinct northern kings.

The forest smelled different from anything Xerxes had encountered before. There was a mossy aroma in the air, as well as a vague spiciness from the fragrant herbaceous plants that grew in the shadows. Large colonies of mushrooms gave an earthy undertone to everything. Birds sang and arboreal rodents chattered. And behind everything was the occasional drip of water as the trees shed their blankets of rainwater.

There was something calming about this forest that appealed to Xerxes. It seemed at harmony with itself, as if every element *belonged*. No wonder the woodsmen liked to live out here.

About an hour into the journey, some of the soldiers took to singing “Maribel’s Magic” before veering off into other popular songs. Xerxes was too caught up in the forest’s novelty to join in. In fact, the sights, smells, and sounds were so distracting that it took a few hours before he realized he had no companion riding next to him. The officers rode together toward the front of the column, and Xerxes had to look over his shoulder to see Bel and Gandash behind him.

You’ve got to be kidding me. They’re already all cozy in public?

Looking back out into the depths of the forest, he chuckled softly to himself. He wasn’t the type to get jealous. In fact, he was happy his friend had overcome his years-long hesitancy and bared his heart to the girl he liked.

As the day wore on, the forest got thicker and darker. Also colder. Upon reaching a clearing that was obviously used as a resting spot for travelers, the convoy stopped for a midday meal of bread and cheese. Xerxes wasn’t the only one who had noticed the sudden closeness between Bel and Gandash. Soldiers had sharp eyes for such things. They kept their jokes under control, though.

In the past, Xerxes might have sat down with Gem, Ap, and Rihan to eat, but not today. He stuck with Gandash and Bel instead. Bel was spending some extra time with her horse, which meant he had a moment along with Gandash.

“Forgetting about your old friends now that you’ve got a girl, Gandy?” Xerxes said, trying to keep a straight face.

“It’s not like that,” Gandash said.

“I know, just messing with you,” he replied, the corner of his mouth twitching.

Bel joined them a few minutes later.

“Sorry to steal your friend, Xerk,” she said. “We just had some... things to talk about.”

Xerxes put his palms out. “It’s fine. Back home at the Academy, I can’t get him to stop jabbering about mage history and spellcasting theory. Believe me, it’s nice to get a break.”

Gandash shoved his shoulder playfully.

“What do you think this Master Ligish is going to be like?” Bel asked.

Xerxes washed down some bread with a mouthful of water. “My bet is there’s nothing to the allegations. Nobody on Mannemid has been arrested for illegal machinery in what... centuries?”

“Decades,” Gandash said. “Seventy-two years, to be exact.”

Xerxes stared at him. “How the hell do you remember that?”

“It was a test question last semester. Don’t you remember?”

“Uh....”

“I remember,” Bel said. “Hillalum the Wise of... some city in Fal.”

Gandash nodded. “Good memory. Yeah, this fellow Hillalum built a whole gearwork factory right under the noses of the mages of Fal. It went on for ten years before word leaked. Got arrested by High Seers Ninsunu and Be’at, although they were only Seers back then. Anyway, Hillalum the Wise got taken to a higher starisle, I guess to be imprisoned, but who knows, maybe they executed him.”

“We’re just lucky the Nergal didn’t come,” Bel said.

“True.”

Xerxes made a spitting sound. “There’s always some idiot willing to break the law and think they’ll get away with it.”

“True,” Bel said. “*The Pontifarch’s eyes are farseeing. Only fools and the mad defy his will.*”

It was a quote from *Words of the Pontifarch*, the holy text used by the Church of the Pontifarch.

“Er, right,” Gandash said.

Xerxes nearly choked on his bread as he tried not to laugh.

“What?” Bel asked, looking at him quizzically.

He gave her a look. “Come on, Bel, you know. Ol’ Gandy and I aren’t exactly on board with all the mainstream beliefs.”

“Ohhh, right,” she said. “I forgot the whole Monadite thing.”

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Gandash looking extremely awkward, causing him to remember how embarrassed his friend was of the religion they had both been raised in. Though Xerxes and Gandash didn’t keep their faith a secret, they didn’t exactly advertise it either. Even after being close with Bel for such a long time, the topic of religion came up so infrequently that they had never even discussed this with her before.

Gandash’s mouth hung open like an idiot, having clearly been caught off-guard by the turn of conversation.

Clearing his throat, Xerxes said, “Members of the One Faith. We don’t call ourselves Monadites.”

“Right, sorry,” Bel said.

“It’s fine. Anyway, you know the basics, right?”

Lowering her voice, she said, “You don’t believe in the Pontifarch, right? But... who do you pray to in the morning? And how come the Nergal doesn’t come to punish you?”

“We pray to the Monad,” Gandash said. “Simple as that. And the fact that the Nergal *doesn’t* come to punish us shows that the One Faith is true. Think about, if the Benediction of—”

Xerxes held up his hand. “Gandy. Let’s not get into boring stuff.”

Gandash gulped. “Right.”

You think girls want to hear you jabber about hokey religious stuff like the so-called Monad?
He resolved to have some strong words with Gandash later about this subject.

Hoping to steer the conversation back into a more normal direction, he said, “Bel, what do you think about this Ligish fellow? You really think he might be working on illegal technology?”

Finishing her last piece of cheese, Bel said, “You’re probably right that the accusations are fake. But... imagine if they turn out to be real! And *we’re* the mages who arrest him. Our names will go down in history for sure!”

“That’s true,” Gandash said excitedly. “Who knows, it could be our ticket out of this starisle.”

“Guys,” Xerxes said, lowering his voice.

The two other young mages looked at him expectantly.

“Is it bad that I hope this asshole really is a criminal?”

Bel and Gandash laughed.

“Hey,” Bel said, “if it gets us into a college on Sin-Amuhhu or Ku-Aya, then I’d be fine with it.”

“Hell,” Gandash said, “I’d settle for a college on Ira or Humusi.”

Bel’s fair hair danced as she nodded. “True. Just about anywhere else in the starsea would be an upgrade from Mannemid.”

About an hour after calling for the rest, Captain Ishki had them moving again. The forest canopy made it impossible to gauge the exact time by checking the position of the sun in the sky. After several hours of travel, they reached another rest area, this one larger, and obviously designed for overnight camping. The trees had been cleared so thoroughly that they had a direct view of the sky overhead. As the soldiers set up tents and picketed the horses, the evening sunset streaked the sky with pinks and purples. By the time they finished with the evening meal, the stars were out.

After cleaning up, the three young mages sat around a fire talking about their studies and their future. The discussion earlier in the day about colleges in other starisles had stirred all of their imaginations. Gandash recounted stories of famous mages of the past and wars fought on distant and exotic planets. They talked of remote corners of the starsea, such as the Far Regions and

even the Nightmare Cove. Eventually, they tilted their heads back to look at the vista of sparkling light overhead.

“Can you believe each one of them is another starisle?” Xerxes said.

“Well, technically, they aren’t,” Gandash said.

“Huh?”

“Not every single one is a starisle. If you want to know the specifics, the ratio of—”

“Not interested!” Xerxes interrupted.

They all laughed.

“Look!” Bel said, pointing at a streak of light overhead.

“Shooting star?” Gandash said.

Another streak appeared, this one seemingly much closer than the other. In fact, it was so close they could make out what appeared to be tendrils of fire surrounding the rock, and thick smoke left behind in its wake.

“More than a shooting star,” Xerxes said. “A meteor.”

“They’re the same thing,” Gandash noted.

“Technically, yeah. But the feeling of the two words is different.”

“The second one was close,” Bel said. “If we were out in the open, I bet we could track down where it landed.”

“Can you imagine what rare materials could be in rocks that fall from out there?” Gandash said. “Boggles the mind.”

“Well, my friends,” Xerxes said, “if this mission turns into our ticket off-planet, then maybe you’ll find out sooner rather than later.”

In the morning, Captain Ishki had everyone complete morning prayer individually before getting on the move again. An hour into the trek, they passed two woodsmen who said they were on their way to Kisiga with furs to sell on the coming market day. Other than that, they were alone. Shortly after that, they reached a wooden sign. Carved into the plank were two lines of text, with arrows pointing in different directions.

The arrow pointing to the left was accompanied by the text: *This way to Ligish Castle. One league.*

The arrow pointing ‘up’ had text that read: *Laughing Gorge, three leagues.*

They headed left, and the path grew steeper. They were into mountain foothills now, though the surrounding foliage showed no sign of growing thinner or shorter. If anything, it grew thicker for a time.

Up they climbed, men and horses alike laboring at the steepness.

There were no forks in the road, so there was no question of which way to travel. Two hours after the lunch hour, they reached a bridge of black wood that crossed a steep gorge, at the bottom of which was a small river.

On the other side, it was a short hike up a winding trail before they reached a ridge that overlooked a valley of sorts. Across from the ridge was the castle.

Xerxes, having grown up in the capital, was accustomed to large buildings, churches, temples, and similar structure. After all, the main keep that towered over the city center was massive. But this castle was unlike anything he had seen before.

It rose from the surrounding forest as if it had grown that way. It was imposing and ancient, its architectural style unlike the buildings usually seen in Isin. There were many pointed arches, complex stone facades, and narrow windows. It made him think of stories he'd been told growing up, about daring rescues carried out by brave mages and dramatic sword battles of antiquity.

I bet Gem would have liked to see this. A pang of sadness rose in his heart at the thought of his old friend.

As the convoy made their way down final stretch of road that led to the castle, and as they neared the immense structure, there was something about the place that struck him as odd.

He couldn't quite put his finger on it at first. But as they got even closer, he realized what it was: the castle was rotting. Black algae crept up its sides, and some sections had crumbled into almost complete ruin.

The battlements on the east side must have been damaged in some ancient war and had never been repaired. In some sections, the windows were intact, but in others, there were only gaping holes where glass had surely staved off wind and rain in the past.

There had once been a moat protecting the castle, but it was now nothing more than a bramble-filled ditch. And while the entrance to the castle had once sported a portcullis and a heavy door, nothing remained of them but crumbling wood piled haphazardly to the side. There were some signs of life and maintenance, for instance, the fact that the path was mostly clear of leaves. But whoever was trying to keep the castle up, they were fighting a losing battle.

Captain Ishki had them stop just before a rickety bridge that was the last portion of the path leading inside.

"Sergeant Tamharu?" she said.

“Yes, Captain,” the sergeant replied. Sending his horse out in front of the line, he cupped his hand by his mouth and yelled, “Delegates from the Mage Parliament, here to visit Master Ligish, son of Ahazu.”

The response came quickly. A stooped old man appeared, clad in livery that was halfway from well-worn to threadbare.

“Welcome. Master Ligish ’as been expecting you!”