

Chapter 22 – Tentacular Strands

Satahsusar was caught completely by surprise as more tentacular, white strands wrapped around her legs and pulled them out from under her. She screamed, but it was cut short as her back and skull smacked onto the roof tiles. Tiles cracked to pieces beneath her. Then the white tendrils dragged her down toward the courtyard. She screamed again.

Xerxes didn't like this woman one bit, but she was a fellow Isinian, a fellow mage, and a fellow human. So he bounded over the rooftop and leaped forward to grab her.

Roof tiles crunched beneath him as he landed, but he managed to wrap his fingers around her wrist and felt her fingers tighten on his.

"Hold on," he said.

Unfortunately, the roof was sharply angled. Almost as soon as his fingers closed around her wrist, he found himself sliding down toward the courtyard with her. He dropped his sword and tried to grab onto something, but there were only more roof tiles. His fingers closed on the edge of one, but then they slipped loose and he fell.

He landed nearly on top of Satahsusar, with roof tile chunks raining down around them. There were hulking, spider-like Abhorrent everywhere. However, they were all looming in place and doing nothing else. They *weren't* advancing toward him and Satahsusar. The reason was obvious, and it caused his mouth to dry with dread. There was a more powerful of their kind emerging. A topless woman climbed out from the shadows of the mansion. Beneath her were a host of spindly legs, and she had long white hair and lips like dried blood.

He thought for a moment that this was the same beast that had dragged Bel to her death. But it wasn't. Her facial features were different; her chin was rounder and her nose flatter. In other respects, though, she was the same. And her long, ropey fingers still had a tight hold on Satahsusar.

"Melam-oth," the female Abhorrent said, and she chuckled, dragging Satahsusar out from under Xerxes.

Days ago, Xerxes would have been scared witless. But not now.

“Let her go,” he growled, getting up on one knee. He jabbed his hand into his component pouch, drew out some crabnickel powder, and started the Asgagu Isten rune.

The female Abhorrent made a dismissive gesture, and the other Abhorrent moved again. Toward him.

He ignored them and focused on his anger to keep fear from taking hold inside.

His fist flared with bright light, and not bothering to come up with a plan of attack, he jumped toward the female Abhorrent.

This came as a surprise to her. All she managed to do was open her eyes widely before his fist plunged into her side, burning through the soft skin beneath her ribs. Sizzling and popping sounds could be heard, accompanied by a cloying reek so intense that Satahsusar vomited.

The Abhorrent reared back screaming, dropping Satahsusar but dragging Xerxes up with her, as his hand was now inside her. She clawed at him with her legs, but the angle was such that her superior strength didn't dislodge him. He didn't think about the sting of pain and instead reached out and grabbed her forearm. With that bit of leverage, he shoved his burning hand deeper into her side, ignoring the wave of nausea that swept through him as the steam from her boiling blood and ichor entered his nostrils. He shoved his hand deeper. Deeper. And even deeper still. The shrieks of the monster were almost unbearable.

“Fuck you and all your kind!” he growled. His arm was now inside her up to the elbow, and she was reeling to the point where it seemed she might topple over backward. Letting loose a guttural shout, he shoved his hand even farther inside her torso, toward where he hoped her heart was. Gore spurted out of her, coating his shoulder, splashing onto his face, but he ignored it.

Then his *shoulder* was inside her, and she fell backward.

The ground approached, and he leaned his head back just in time to avoid smacking it on the paving stones.

Crawling to his feet, he yanked his arm out from inside the beast, resulting in a sound like a cantaloupe being extracted from a barrel of lard. He flicked his arm, sending chunks of mostly-cooked bits of internal organs, muscle, and even skin off of him. His fist still burned, so he held it out in front of him as he prepared for the Abhorrent woman to clamber to her feet.

She didn't.

That didn't mean the other Abhorrent had vanished, though. As blood and other fluids dripped from his elbow to the ground, he saw movement all around him. Satahsusar was a few cubits away, her hand gripping her thigh, where a stain of blood spread out. The death

of this larger Abhorrent hadn't cowed the others. If nothing else, her living presence had. They were moving.

Again, no time for delay. The light of Singular Lethality was fading, so Xerxes grabbed another handful of powder and recast it. Just as one of the Abhorrent lunged at him, the light shone brightly again, and he punched it hard in the abdomen. His fist drove directly into the thing, killing it in a single blow. Except... more came out of the mansion.

He heard a thump behind him and turned to see Ninsunu in her bestial form. Lashing out at the nearby Abhorrent with clawed hands, she drove them back, then picked up Satahsusar with both arms.

"Come!" she said. She jumped back up. Xerxes smashed one more nearby Abhorrent, melting its face, before following. Ninsunu was already running up to the ridge of the roof.

His sword lay precariously at the edge of the rooftop; snatching it, he bolted after Ninsunu. Together, they ran along the ridge, then reached the end and leaped off, clearing five cubits of intervening space before landing hard on another rooftop.

Glancing over his shoulder, he saw one of the spider-like Abhorrent climbing up. He kept running.

A clattering noise caught his attention from behind as the Abhorrent jumped in pursuit.

"They're not giving up!" he shouted.

Ninsunu looked back. "Run faster," she said.

They sprinted and jumped across the rooftops of Harborview. The Abhorrent chased them.

Ninsunu was a lot faster than him. Not only was she a High Seer, in her transformed state she was more athletic. And that meant he was holding her back.

"You go ahead," he said. "I'll go on the streets."

"Meet at the keep."

Making one last leap across the top of a roof, he slid down the opposite side and went over the edge. Landing on his feet, he took a moment to gain his bearings.

He was on the very edge of Harborview and recognized the surrounding streets.

The keep's that way.

Keeping his sword gripped firmly in his hand, he ran. In his opinion, sticking to the streets was better. Not only was it easier to run on level ground, but also, the Abhorrent couldn't see him.

Although... could they *sense* him?

He kept glancing over his shoulder but didn't see any pursuing monsters. He ducked left and right through various intersections, picking what he felt was the fastest route back to the keep, while simultaneously avoiding any of the main thoroughfares.

He wondered what the Abhorrent were doing now. If they weren't chasing him, were they killing people? Innocents?

About halfway back to the keep, he couldn't keep those thoughts from his mind. Gritting his teeth, he jumped back up to the rooftops. Looking back toward Harborview, he saw no evidence of Abhorrent. Nor did he see Ninsunu.

Not sure what it meant, he dropped back down and kept running.

Before long he was back at the gate of the keep, without having seen or smelled any hints of monsters. The soldiers at the gate were waiting for him.

"Welcome back, Seer," one of them said. "Igh Seer Ninsunu said you'd be coming this way."

"Thanks," he said, entering. "Did she say where to go?"

"She said to clean up, then 'ead back to the council room."

"Got it. Thanks."

He hadn't even had a chance to cleanse the dust of travel off himself after returning to the city, so he was glad for the chance to do so, rushed though it was. It was already nighttime, and the urge to sleep made his eyes scratchy.

Clad in a proper mage's robe and white hat, he hurried along the route Captain Ishki had taken earlier.

The council chamber was emptier than before. Mystic Abban Saddi was there, but the king was nowhere to be seen. Ninsunu was present, back in her ordinary form. Satahsusar wasn't there. Nor were Shemesh, Alwin, Gandash, or Gandash's father Dumamu. However, Xerxes' father *was* there.

As Xerxes entered, Ataneedusu breathed a loud sigh of relief. "Thank the Monad," he said, hurrying over and embracing his son.

"I'm fine, Dad," he said, hugging his father back.

"I was worried," Ataneedusu said gruffly. "High Seer Ninsunu said you single-handedly killed a juvenile Abhorrent? That's incredible!"

The corner of Xerxes' mouth turned up, but he stifled the grin. "I just did what I had to do."

“You deserve a medal,” Aban Saddi said. “And I’ll give you one, after all this is over.”

Xerxes stood up straighter and tried hard to stop from smiling. “It was my duty, sir.”

Aban Saddi nodded.

Ataneedusu squeezed his son’s shoulder, then guided him to the table.

“What happened to the ones that were chasing us?” Xerxes asked.

“They disappeared,” Ninsunu said. “Which is a big concern. And as I was saying, Aban, this *yet again* proves my theory. Or at least lends weight to it. The Abhorrent are after *us*. We shouldn’t be strutting around in the open. Gather everyone and hole up in the keep. That’s our safest option.”

Aban Saddi crossed his arms. “I don’t disagree. But, why don’t we send an emergency request to open the Gateway to Humusi? Once they learn what’s happening, they might send help. High Mystics, at the very least. Maybe Archons.”

Ninsunu shook her head. “They almost never respond to messages, Aban. Besides, what if we’re not the only starisle that’s being invaded? It’s entirely possible they *want* us isolated. Quarantined.”

“We could open a Gateway to *lower* starisles. Either hole up in one of those worlds, or conscript some mages to form a larger force to defend ourselves. Hell, Nina, I’d even be happy sailing to the south. Find an island somewhere. Anything but sitting in this castle like fish on the chopping block. Look at what happened to Satahsusar. She’s not exactly a combat whiz, but she knows how to handle herself in a fight, and she barely survived. Imagine if those things infest these corridors.”

Ninsunu frowned. “Seer Xerxes, what do you think?”

Xerxes opened his mouth to respond but was so taken aback at being asked for advice that he didn’t know what to say. “I... um....”

The Head Mage looked at him. “Don’t be nervous. Just tell us what your gut feeling is.”

He took a moment to consider. The last thing he wanted to do was end up disagreeing with the majority. And right now, Ninsunu’s ideas seemed the soundest. “I agree with High Seer Ninsunu. It’s true I killed that thing earlier, but I think it’s because I caught it by surprise. It was the same type that was hunting us on the road, and—” his lip curled in disgust “—they’re dangerous. Very, very dangerous. Even *one* is scary, let alone if there’s an entire horde of them.”

Aban Saddi exhaled slowly and sat in his chair. “Fine. Once the other teams are back, we’ll hash out the details. Shemesh, Gandash, and Alwin went to investigate an incident in Garden Terrace. Be’at, Nohem, and Zalle are still on the same mission from earlier. They’re

both supposed to return this evening. We can have a course of action ready for when the sun rises.”

“Sir,” Ataneedusu said, “I was wondering—”

The door slammed open, and Shemesh stormed into the room, Gandash and Alwin trailing behind him.

“We have an issue,” he said. “A big fucking issue.”