

Chapter 7 – Castle Investigation

When the old servant said his master was ‘expecting’ the convoy, it didn’t mean he was waiting with open arms to receive them. Instead, the servant led them through the gate into the courtyard, then stopped and turned to face them.

“Stables’re thataway,” he said, pointing to a smaller side gate. “Just go out, turn right, and follow the wall. Planning to stay more than one night?”

Sergeant Tamharu, having been given the order to take the lead, said, “We don’t wish to inconvenience Master Ligish, but if he has places for us to stay, we would certainly appreciate it. We can use the stables if necessary.”

The old man grunted a laugh. “The master’s poor but ’e ain’t that uncivilized.” He turned and trudged toward a doorway opposite the one they’d entered. “Well, follow me.”

“Dismount,” Sergeant Tamharu called. “Private Ap, leave the cart here. Then you, Private Miljan, and Private Panijel care for the horses. Everyone else, let’s go. Mages up front with the captain and me.”

Thinking back to Kisiga, Xerxes unstrapped his longsword and brought it with him. The servant led them inside the castle and through a few corridors.

The interior wasn’t as bad as Xerxes had expected. Only the extremities of the castle were suffering from rot, although it was still possible to catch whiffs of mold and mildew. The east side of the place had guest rooms. Sergeant Tamharu split everyone up between them, with officers sharing one room, mages another, and the soldiers divided between the other rooms.

The servant disappeared at some point.

Xerxes, Gandash and Bel surveyed their room, within which were four beds and some wardrobes, as well as other random furniture pieces such as tables, chairs, and footstools. Tapestries adorned the walls, and a few rugs covered the floor. There were some lamps as well. The room was cozy without being cramped, even if it did smell quite dusty. Bel sneezed.

Gandash lit the lamps as Bel and Xerxes distributed their traveling packs.

A few minutes later, Captain Ishki stuck her head in the door. “Mages, change out of your traveling attire and get into your robes. The real work starts soon.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the three young mages responded. Mages weren’t soldiers, and once they put on their formal robes, that would become even more obvious.

“Ladies first,” Xerxes said, stepping to the door. “I’ll wait out here.”

“Right,” Gandash said, face flushing as he hurried to follow.

Outside in the corridor, Xerxes elbowed his friend and said, “You should have stayed.”

“Shut up.”

Ten minutes later, the door cracked open, and Bel stepped out.

She wore a robe of overlapping layers of magenta and blue cloth. The neckline was low, but not excessively so. A headdress of overlapping golden leaves covered her forehead, and both of her wrists were bound with bands of gold decorated with green and blue jewels. She had also applied blue eyeshadow and painted her mouth red. Her garb looked more Isinian than the fashion from Od, but that was the trend among mages.

“Wow,” Gandash said, then snapped his mouth shut and tried not to look awkward.

“You really clean up, Bel,” Xerxes said. “Even took time for makeup. In only ten minutes?”

“Your turn,” she said.

Xerxes and Gandash hurriedly threw off their traveling clothes and changed into their mage attire.

Their overlapping robes were of green and orange, with ornamental girdles of bronze and leather, plus white, cylindrical hats decorated with silver thread. The Mage Parliament allowed for some measure of individuality, and thus, Xerxes wore his hat tilted to the side, and also rolled up his sleeves jauntily. Meanwhile, Gandash added leather bracers to his outfit. Gandash’s outfit looked brand new. The stitching formed perfectly straight lines, and the metal gleamed. In contrast, Xerxes’ robes, which were hand-me-downs from his father, had seen better days. Normally, Xerxes would have been embarrassed about that. But in the excitement of the moment, he forgot to worry.

In fact, he preened a bit as he emerged from the room, as he knew how much the soldiers admired mages. Captain Ishki was waiting for them along with the stooped servant and two soldiers. Apparently, Sergeant Tamharu wouldn’t be joining them.

“This way,” the servant said, and he led them through more corridors until they reached the castle’s great room.

As soon as they entered, they saw Master Ligish seated at a wide table. He was middle-aged and wore the frilly clothing one would expect of an Isinian tradesman or merchant. His outfit wasn’t particularly fashionable, and it hardly fit him, draping over his stooped frame in a way that made it hard to tell if he was fat or skinny.

Standing, Master Ligish smiled and said, “Welcome, Captain Ishki and company! I hope I didn’t rush you!”

“Of course not, Master Ligish,” the captain said, brushing past the servant. The mages and soldiers followed her as she approached the table.

There was something about Ligish’s accent that stuck out to Xerxes, though he couldn’t place exactly what it was. The man didn’t speak like someone from Fal. And based on his dark hair and eyes, he couldn’t be from Od. But at the same time, he didn’t seem Isinian. Of course, even within the borders of Isin, there were different accents and regional lingo. And that wasn’t to mention there were other corners of Mannemid that weren’t controlled by any of the three kingdoms and had traditions and cultures that went back generations. In any case, the man’s speech patterns didn’t seem to fit anything Xerxes was familiar with.

“I put out a bit of a spread,” Master Ligish said, gesturing at the table. “Nothing as extravagant as the Mage Parliament is capable of. I hope you don’t mind. Please, sit wherever you’d like.”

Captain Ishki took the seat of honor, and everyone else sat according to seniority, with Bel taking the next seat in line, Gandash second, and Xerxes third. The soldiers sat at the end of the table.

Spread out before them was enough food to feed fifteen people, as well as ale and wine. All of it was plain and simple, at least by the standards of the capital.

“I don’t expect you to trust me,” Master Ligish continued. “Please have your mages check for poison and the like.”

“Seer Bel?” said Captain Ligish. “Can you do the formalities?”

Bel tapped into her mage sense and scanned the food. “It’s all clean,” she said a moment later.

Master Ligish smiled. “Please, eat first. Then we’ll discuss the matter at hand.”

Xerxes poured himself water and took some lamb, flat bread, and diced vegetables. Of course, he surreptitiously checked everything with his own mage sense first. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust Bel. Rather, their training called for them to exercise such caution at all times when on missions.

At first, everyone focused on eating. Then Master Ligish and Captain Ishki engaged in some small talk, discussing current events in the kingdom and Mannemid in general and the weather.

“Did you notice the meteor shower last night?” Master Ligish asked.

“We did,” Captain Ishki answered. “Unusual for this time of year.”

“Indeed.”

A few minutes later, the captain had enough of the chitchat.

“I’ll forgo bringing out the official paperwork,” she said. “You know why we’re here.”

Master Ligish nodded. “I do. These charges are ridiculous, I assure you. I suspect Master Korash of Castle Korash concocted them. He’s been trying for years to undermine me.”

“Regardless, formalities must be complied with. We’ll need to do a full inspection of your work facilities and the castle in general.”

“I would expect nothing less. When would you like to begin?”

“Now, if possible.”

A look of surprise appeared on Master Ligish’s face. “That soon? I’d hoped to throw a banquet of some sort for your men.”

Captain Ishki gave him a tight smile. “I’m sure you’d prefer us out of your hair as soon as possible.”

“In that case... I suppose we might as well start now.”

And thus, the inspection began. From the great hall, Master Ligish took them to a nearby drawing room, then more guest quarters, a side dining room, a few empty rooms, the kitchens, and then a library.

Captain Ishki stood back and watched while the soldiers performed cursory physical searches, and the mages took turns using their mage sense to see beyond what ordinary humans could see. Nothing unusual came to light, which was in line with what they’d expected. If Master Ligish was producing illegal machinery, he wouldn’t leave evidence just sitting around.

Gandash was particularly interested in the library.

“And I thought my grandparents had a big collection,” he said, stepping up to a bookshelf and looking closer at the spines.

“I’ve spent a long time accumulating this collection,” Master Ligish said. “Feel free to browse.”

“Seer Gandash,” said Captain Ishki, “would you care to stay behind here while the rest of us continue up to the second floor?”

“If you don’t mind, ma’am.”

Thus, they left Gandash with the books, along with a soldier to watch over him.

The tour of the first floor lasted about an hour. The entire time, Xerxes felt a mounting sense of unease. He wasn’t sure what precipitated it. Perhaps it was the tapestries on the walls, most of which depicted ancient battles or mythological events. Or it could have been the light. Candles, lamps, and torches provided illumination, but there never seemed to be *enough* light, and the constant flickering proved disorienting. It might also have been the odd aroma that lingered everywhere, that mixture of mildew, freshly lumbered wood, and solvents. Possibly, it was all of those things mixed together.

The tour of the second floor went more quickly, as at least three quarters of the rooms were empty. And the third floor was dusty and decrepit.

They went down into the cellars shortly before returning to the first level and then out into the courtyard. From there, they headed up through a tower and onto the battlements. The tour of the walls, including time spent in each of the towers, took another hour. There was one tower that climbed higher into the sky than any of the others, and they stopped atop it to look out at the valley and the castle complex.

“What’s that area down there?” Captain Ishki asked, pointing to a smaller courtyard they hadn’t entered yet.

“A wing built later in history,” Master Ligish said, “after the castle’s original construction. It was supposedly built around a cave, used for storage or something along those lines. It’s long since collapsed. The cave, I mean. I can show you.”

“Please,” the captain said.

They climbed down through the tower and went through more corridors until they reached the small courtyard they’d just viewed from above.

Master Ligish pointed to an area where a huge boulder rested against the side of the mountain, surrounded by piles of smaller rocks.

“See?” he said. “It was like that when I arrived. I’m curious what lies beyond, if there’s anything at all. But moving that boulder would require the use of skilled engineers, the type you can only get from the capital. And frankly, I can’t justify that expense. I can hardly maintain the castle as it is, let alone do random excavations.”

“Interesting,” Captain Ishki said. She stepped up to the boulder, reached out, and put her hands on it.

As she did, Xerxes took a closer look at the area, both with mundane eyes and, when possible, mage sense, but didn’t notice anything noteworthy.

They went to a few other out-of-the-way locations in the castle after that. There were a few corridors that were walled off or boarded up. Master Ligish offered various explanations, and said the captain was welcome to inspect any of the areas beyond, even if it meant breaking down brick walls or tearing down the boarding. He politely added that he hoped they would clean up after themselves if they did that. Captain Ishki said she’d worry about it in the morning.

It was late. Master Ligish offered to provide more food and entertainment, but the captain declined, saying that they’d been traveling all day and needed to rest. She asked permission to take the mages up to the high tower to look at the stars, and the master of the castle agreed without hesitation. Then he bid them good night.

A few minutes later, Captain Ishki and the two mages were alone above the castle, with the soldiers having been dismissed. There were no clouds, allowing a clear view of the endless starscape overhead.

“What do you think?” the captain asked. “Did your mage sense pick up anything unusual?”

“Not mine,” Xerxes said. “But... I have an odd feeling. Something here seems strange.”

“I agree,” Bel said. “My mage sense didn’t reveal anything, but I noticed some unusual things. For instance, there are areas where furniture has been moved around recently. You can tell by the markings on the floor. Especially in the kitchen.”

“I saw that too,” said Captain Ishki. “As if something big had been shoved up against the wall until a few days ago. And his story about the boulder seems strange.”

“Oh?” Bel said.

The captain stepped over, leaned up against a crenelation, and looked down into the courtyard below. The mages joined her.

“There were three things I noticed,” the captain said. “First, the boulder doesn’t look like it’s been there for as long as he claims. It’s not sunk into the ground enough. There’s no moss or lichen at the base. What’s more, from up here looking down... do you see any sign of where it might have come from? A rockslide? Something like that?”

Looking down, Xerxes realized what the captain meant. Although it was hard to say for certain because of the dim light, he saw no sign that the boulder had fallen down the slope from above.

“You think he put that boulder there to hide whatever’s in the cave?” Xerxes asked.

The captain shook her head. “I don’t know. By the way, look over there.” She pointed to a specific section of the courtyard. “See that area where there’s less grass? It’s hard to say for sure, but if I was to guess, that boulder used to be sitting *there*. And not too long ago. Either way, what Ligish said is absolutely correct. It would take nothing short of a team of engineers to move a rock that big. Either that or a group of mages. Would you agree to that assessment?”

“Definitely,” Bel said. “It would probably take three or four High Seers to move it with brute strength. But it would be a lot easier for Ligish to hire engineers than to get a fifth of all the High Seers on Mannemid to come out here and move that rock.”

After gazing down at the courtyard for another minute or two, Captain Ishki said, “Something doesn’t add up, but I suppose we’ll have to think about it more tomorrow. It’s only getting later. Oh, look.”

Above them, a flare of light streaked across the sky.

“Another meteor,” Xerxes said, staring at it.

“If I was superstitious,” the captain said, “I’d say it was an omen.” She stepped away from the battlement and toward the ladder leading down. “Why don’t the two of you go find Seer Gandash. Maybe he found something interesting in the library. If so... the three of you can investigate further. Just be careful. After what happened in Kisiga, I don’t want any other mishaps.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Xerxes said, with Bel echoing his words.

They followed her down into the castle proper, then parted ways as she went to her room. Gandash was still in the library, sitting at a table with a handful of books spread out in front of him. When he heard them enter, he waved them over.

His voice in a near-whisper, he said, “You guys aren’t going to believe this.”