

## Chapter 10 – Prototype Three, Iteration Four

Xerxes shouted no battle cry. He ran as fast as he could on the balls of his feet, trying to prevent his footfalls from making any undue noise. He neared Ligish, clenching his hand into a burning fist. He still had a few seconds left before he would have to recast Singular Lethality.

*I can kill him with one blow if I hit him right.* Even if he failed, he would at least do significant damage.

Bel shrank back from Ligish, all the while fumbling endlessly with an arrow that refused to come out of the quiver.

Xerxes halved the distance between himself and the martial adept and still saw no reaction from the man.

*I got this.* With only a few paces separating the two of them, he pulled his fist back and eyed the spot on the ground where he intended to plant his foot and generate the force for his blow.

Just as his foot touched the spot, Ligish spun, delivering a roundhouse kick that smashed into Xerxes before he could lift an arm to deflect the blow. Luckily, the kick didn't hit his jaw, connecting instead with his shoulder. Otherwise, he would have been knocked unconscious. Nonetheless, it threw him to the ground and sent him flopping to the side.

"You think I'm deaf or something?" Ligish said. Glancing at Bel, who had finally pulled another arrow out but couldn't get it nocked properly, he stepped toward Xerxes. "I'm almost a hundred and fifty years old. You're a tenth my age, or thereabouts. You really think you could best me in combat?"

Scrambling back onto his feet, Xerxes kept his burning hand out in front of him, palm open. Only to see it flicker back to normal.

*FUCK!*

It couldn't have been a worse time for the spell to end. Grabbing a fistful of powder, he shouted, "Bel, can you get to the captain?"

A flash of surprise appeared on Ligish's face as his plan to eliminate the mages before having to deal with the soldiers was suddenly threatened.

"I-I..." Bel stammered.

Ligish turned as if to make a move on Bel, and that was when Xerxes cast Singular Lethality a second time. He moved quickly. More quickly than was safe, but it earned him a spare second or more. As his fist once again burned with fire, he shouted, "Hey!" and then pounced, flailing his hand toward the martial adept in what had to be the sloppiest blow he'd delivered since he was a toddler.

Sloppy but effective. He hit the man in the chest with the heel of his palm, and though it was a glancing blow, the power of Singular Lethality was enough to melt flesh, eat through muscle, and bite into bone. Ligish screamed and instinctively lunged away from the burning force.

Xerxes followed up with his own roundhouse kick, landing a clean blow on the man's calf before landing a Singular Lethality haymaker.

Ligish's chest was smoking, and melted flesh still popped and bubbled around the wound. But he ducked out of the way of the blow and even managed to reach out and grab Xerxes' forearm. Then he snapped his leg out in a vicious kick, knocking Xerxes' foot out from under him. Before the young mage could recover his wits, the martial adept pushed his arm into the back of Xerxes' elbow in a movement that seemed casual. And yet, such was the strength of a martial adept that Xerxes' arm snapped.

He screamed as bones shattered and tendons ripped. Ligish then kneed him in the stomach, dropping him. Finally, he grabbed Xerxes by the hair and jerked his head back.

"You little son of a bitch," Ligish growled, forming a knife hand that he pulled back to deliver a killing blow.

The Singular Lethality spell would last for seconds more, but it didn't matter, as the horrifying break in his arm made his limb completely unusable. In fact, the pain was so intense he could hardly breathe, but he still tried to make a fist with the other hand. He tried to let out a growl, but it sounded more like a whimper.

Ligish's muscles tensed, and he inhaled as he prepared to deliver the blow.

That was when something long, thin and white slid over his shoulder and latched onto his chest. Followed by another slender, pale appendage. At the same time, a noxious odor washed over Xerxes.

"What...?" Ligish growled.

Three more spindly legs clamped onto his chest, while a handful grabbed his arm.

Xerxes shuddered as two Abhorrent behind the man dragged him in the opposite direction.

“Get out of there, Xerk!” Gandash yelled.

Ligish released Xerxes’ head, grabbed one of the spider-like legs, and pulled it away from his chest. Two more legs grabbed onto him.

Ignoring Gandash’s suggestion to flee, Xerxes launched a strike with his uninjured hand. He caught Ligish directly in the jaw. The man glared and tried to punch him, but hideously stick-like Abhorrent legs maintained their grip. Keeping his injured arm pressed against his side, Xerxes punched him again. Then again. The pain from his injury was nothing but a dull awareness dampened by adrenaline. For now.

Ligish tried to kick him but failed.

Xerxes punched again. And again. Over and over until he lost track of how many blows he’d landed.

Eventually, Ligish went limp. But Xerxes wasn’t going to leave anything to chance, so he kept beating the man until the skin of his face split and blood poured out.

“We got him, Xerk,” Gandash said, stepping around his conjured Abhorrent spawn.

Xerxes dropped to his knees, moaning as he cradled his damaged arm. That was when he realized his other hand was cracked and bleeding, and it hurt so bad it was likely he’d broken finger bones and knuckles. “Fuck, it hurts.”

He felt Gandash’s hand on his shoulder. “Bel will be back in a minute, and you’ll be fine.”

Xerxes glanced at Ligish again, just to make sure the man really was out cold. Then he chuckled, though there were shades of both madness and fear in it. “We did it, Gandy. Didn’t we?”

Gandash made a sound that resembled laughter. “I think we did.”

Bel returned. However, Xerxes’ injuries were severe enough that she didn’t want to cast Minor Restoration until Sergeant Aniskipel took a look. Aniskipel, who was an army surgeon, did a few things that sent waves of immense pain through Xerxes and forced him nearly to the point of blacking out.

“Okay, go on an ’eal him,” Aniskipel said.

Bel cast Minor Restoration, and Xerxes gritted his teeth as his bones and tendons knitted back together properly. The pain rose to such a level that he moaned, then it was over. Wiping the sweat off his forehead, he grinned. “All good. Thanks, Bel.”

Even though the damage was repaired, for many hours afterward, Xerxes kept rubbing his elbow. The pain somehow lingered in his mind. He felt certain that he would never forget the sound and feeling of his arm being snapped the wrong way. Nor of beating a martial adept into unconsciousness and breaking his own hand in the process. The mere thought of it all made him shudder.

By the time Captain Ishki came with Sergeant Tamharu and a few other soldiers, Gandash's second pair of Abhorrent had long since vanished to whence they came.

Ligish was still unconscious. Under Tamharu's direction, the soldiers wasted no time binding the martial adept in a quasi-ritualistic fashion that was designed specifically to counter his strength. Martial adepts were rare, but most officers in armed forces of the three kingdoms on Mannemid were trained to deal with them.

Despite it being the middle of the night, there was a massive flurry of activity. Soldiers ran through the castle arresting all of Ligish's people, with the exception of a few who fled into the Yellow Forest, including the servant who had met them at the gate when they arrived. The three young mages took Captain Ishki into the workshop they'd discovered.

The captain let loose a string of profanity under her breath, then hooked her fingers into her belt and said, "Well done, you three. Very well done. Except for the part where you almost got yourselves killed. Again."

"We survived, ma'am," Xerxes said. "All three of us."

"That you did. Okay, walk me through everything."

The aftermath lasted for about three hours. Upon closer examination, they found that the boulder was attached to a special contraption hidden in the cave's mouth, which was designed to make it easy to move the rock by inserting a rod into a hidden spot where the stone met the earth.

"Wait, does that mean him being a martial adept had nothing to do with how he moved the boulder?" Bel asked.

Gandash shrugged.

Late into the night, the captain let the three mages get some sleep. By that point, the terrible excitement had worn down, and they were exhausted to the bone.

The next morning, they woke early when Sergeant Tamharu knocked at their door.

"Captain seeks mage counsel," he said. "Food's waiting out here in the corridor. Find her in the courtyard when you're done."

Fifteen minutes later they were outside in the main courtyard, lined up in front of Captain Ishki.

“Hope the three of you can make do with only a few hours’ sleep.”

“Of course we can, Captain,” Bel said.

“Good. Here’s the thing. I don’t want to spend another day in this accursed castle. Illegal machinery is nothing to take lightly. If we don’t handle this properly, we could get the attention of the Nergal. And nobody on Mannemid wants that. So, we’re going to be packed up and out of this place by lunch time. Now, let me ask you a question: do any of you have a clue what that damn thing is? Or even a guess?”

Xerxes shook his head in the negative, and Bel and Gandash did the same.

“I figured as much. Ligish and his people are all staying tight-lipped, and we don’t have time for hard interrogation. In other words, you have about four hours.”

“To do what, ma’am?” Gandash asked.

“To find something that tells us what the thing does. I’m having the men search this place as thoroughly as possible, but I’m getting the feeling there’s only this machine on the premises. I don’t think Ligish was tinkering with all sorts of technology. He was focused on this one thing. I had the men move his personal diaries down into the library. I suggest the three of you start going through everything. Of course, we’ll be bringing as much as we can with us. But once we start traveling in earnest, there won’t be time to sit around doing scholarly work.”

“Understood, Captain,” Bel said.

“Good. Off to it, then. Report back if you find anything. If not, be ready to leave around the lunch hour.”

She turned and strode off briskly.

“Well, Gandy,” Xerxes said, “looks like we got put on library duty. Your kind of thing, eh?”

Gandash smiled. “You know it. Shall we go to the library?”

“There’s also that bookshelf in the workshop,” Bel said. “Xerk, how about Gandy and I go to the library, and you hit the bookshelf?”

“Sounds good.”

Xerxes trotted to the secret tunnel. Inside the workshop, four soldiers were at work dismantling the illegal machine, while Goran was off to the side keeping a record of all the parts.

“How’s it going fellas?” Xerxes asked them.

“Ey, Xerk,” said Goran while scratching the final details of a sketch into his notepad. “Complicated and nasty, this thing is. Ain’t no ’ogdown machinery, I tell you that.”

Hogdown meant “ordinary” and was a slang word from his home neighborhood that brought a smile to Xerxes’ face.

“Yeah,” said another soldier named Shiram. “Taking this thing apart’s like doing a damn puzzle backward.”

Goran looked up from his notepad. “Eard that Ligish fellow was a martial adept, but you three took ’im down anyways.”

“We did, though I got my arm snapped clean in half in the process.”

“Can’t even imagine,” Shiram said. “I seen stab wounds, cuts, scrapes. Even saw a fellow’s finger cut off once. But arm snapped in ’alf?” He gave a dramatic shudder. “Don’t sound fun.”

Xerxes asked a few questions before turning to the bookshelf and going through the contents. After an hour, he’d looked through about half the items but hadn’t made much progress. The titles seemed random and included everything from martial arts manuals to a history of the pork industry in Fal. None of it seemed interesting. In fact, he didn’t even see anything he thought Gandash would like. There weren’t any treatises on magic nor any journals or diaries. After taking a break to get some water, he set at it again.

Halfway into his second hour of investigation, he found a brown, oilcloth package that looked like a large envelope, wrapped in twine. Opening it, he pulled out a thick stack of paper, each sheet of which had been treated to make it partially translucent.

Spreading them out on the table, Xerxes breathed, “Is this it...?”

The top sheet had a huge gear on it that resembled the one that had occupied the central position in the machine but was now leaning against the wall, having been disconnected by the soldiers. Beneath that sheet was a layer depicting a network of pulleys. Each successive layer contained different bits of machinery. After glancing through them, Xerxes put one on top of another, then lifted them up so that the light from the tunnel shone through them.

“Oh yeah,” he murmured. Put together and illuminated with the outside light, he could confirm that the various drawings combined to form a complex technical drawing of the gearwork machine. Many of the sheets had precisely written lines of text, notes or explanations of some sort.

“Find something, Seer Xerxes?” a soldier asked.

“I think so. You fellas keep working, I’m taking this to the captain.”

“Sure thing, sir.”

Grabbing the oil paper folder, he placed the sheets inside, taking time to closely examine each one before doing so. Upon reaching the bottom sheet, he noticed a large line of text at the top.

*Life Force Extractor and Distillator.*

Beneath it were a few other lines of text.

*Prototype Three. Iteration Four.*

“Hunh,” he murmured. He put the papers in the folder, tied the twine, then hurried out of the corridor.

Captain Ishki was beyond delighted. Gandash was disappointed that he wasn’t the one to find the paperwork. However, his disappointment only lasted for a moment.

“Excellent work, Xerk,” he said. Looking at Ishki, he said, “Captain... any chance I can take a look at the papers?”

“I’m afraid not, Seer. If the Nergal investigates this matter, the fewer people who’ve seen the papers, the better. And if I were you, Seer Xerxes, I’d try to forget anything you saw when you found them.”

Xerxes’ heart flip-flopped at the thought of the Nergal. “Yes, Captain Ishki, ma’am. Once I knew what I’d found, I packed them away and brought them to you.”

*That’s mostly what happened.*

With the machine schematics having been found, the captain saw little need to continue poking around the castle. The soldiers finished dismantling the machine, and Ligish and three of his servants—one of whom was the one who had spied the three mages investigating the boulder—were bound and thrown onto the cart next to the machine parts and other bundles of evidence.

Shortly after the lunch hour, they left the crumbling stone edifice and made their way down the mountain and back into the thick of the Yellow Forest.