

Chapter 19 – Low Street

“We’d get better results if we weren’t dressed as mages,” Satahsusar said as she climbed out of the cart. Looking around Harborview, she sniffed as though she’d detected a foul odor.

Xerxes’ dislike of her grew stronger. “If you think this place stinks, try smelling an Abhorrent up close.”

Ninsunu cast a sharp glance at him. “Seer Xerxes, you might be the same rank as Seer Satahsusar, but in terms of seniority, you’re far from being her equal. Please consider that.”

He ducked his head. “Yes, High Seer.”

He looked away from Satahsusar, who was returning the favor. He was hoping to avoid mentioning that he’d been born in Harborview. It wasn’t a big secret, but neither was it common knowledge, as his father had moved the family out of the neighborhood before Xerxes reached his teen years.

Though the neighborhood they lived in now was no shantytown, it wasn’t a place that people vied to move into. In fact, his family’s current abode would be considered substandard for virtually all Isinian mages. Almost everyone—from Gandash’s family to Mystic Aban Saddi—lived in the hilly Garden Terrace area closer to the keep.

“This way,” Ninsunu said, leaving orders with the soldiers to stay put until she called for them.

“You really want to go into this slum alone?” Satahsusar said.

“This isn’t my first time dealing with cultists.”

The three mages walked down one of Harborview’s crooked main streets, which was so narrow it felt cramped even with the city in a semi-deserted state. In other places like Garden Terrace, it would have been considered a servant’s access route, not a primary thoroughfare.

The buildings seemed narrow and unusually tall, supposedly because that had been the architectural style when this neighborhood was gleaming and new, centuries ago. On either side of the street were shops selling everything from clothing to fishing nets. And there was a faint salty-sea aroma that filled every corner of the place.

Xerxes remembered bringing Gandash here once, and how much his friend had disliked the place. Gandash had imagined every scruffy-looking man leaning against an alley wall to be a

pickpocket or worse. Of course, there *were* a lot of criminals here. But that didn't mean everyone was dangerous. Especially if you were streetwise.

As they walked along, Xerxes' gaze flitted back and forth taking in the surroundings and noting the individuals present. After proceeding about five minutes down the winding street, he'd only spotted one or two people he would peg as criminals. They simply watched the mages pass. There was no question that people knew who they were. Though Xerxes was still clad in his traveling clothes, Ninsunu and Satahsusar stuck out like parrots at a chicken farm.

They stopped briefly in a small open area formed by the intersection of five streets. In the middle of the square was an old fountain that had ceased functioning years ago and was in the process of crumbling to pieces. Despite the circumstances in the city, a few locals had thrown tarps onto the ground with wares set out on them. Xerxes knew full well that many people in Harborview lived from day to day. In other words, if they didn't make some sales, they wouldn't eat. It didn't matter if there were monsters roaming the streets.

"This place is like a maze," Ninsunu said, half to herself. "And there aren't any street signs."

"What street are you looking for?" Xerxes said. "Maybe I can help."

"You know this area?"

He hesitated briefly, sure that Satahsusar would start needling him about his lowborn life once he brought it up. But he didn't want to come across as deceptive. "Yeah. I grew up around here."

"Oh?" Ninsunu said.

He glared at Satahsusar, expecting a quip, but she didn't say anything.

By the time his father became Sighted, his mother was already pregnant with baby Xerxes. The following years had been full of hard choices. After all, though Sighted individuals did have a small level of physical superiority compared to Unsighted, until they achieved their first breakthrough and became Seers, they would struggle to outperform talented athletes and professional soldiers. And without any spells to cast, they had little else going for them.

Rich families could afford to have children drop everything to focus on magical studies. But a young man struggling to feed a family while living in Harborview couldn't just sit around all day meditating to build a chamber of energy. In fact, his father had only become a Seer a few years before Xerxes himself became Sighted.

Xerxes didn't want to get into all of that. "Yeah, you could call me a Harborview local, I guess. What's the street name?"

"Low Street," Ninsunu said.

Xerxes looked at the five streets that fed into the small square. He pointed at one. "That's it right there. You can tell by the marks on the corner bricks."

She peered in the direction he'd pointed, craning her neck to make out the details on the corner of the building.

"I see what you mean," Ninsunu said. "Thanks, Seer Xerxes. It would have taken me quite a while to piece the clues together." Glancing at the locals in the square, she lowered her voice. "There's a personal residence near the end of Low Street. A mansion of sorts. The owner is Malos, who runs a fishing business that I believe to be a front for cult activity. The reason you two are here is to provide two possible options, depending on what plays out. Xerk, you're the muscle. Be ready to crack skulls at a moment's notice. Sata, you're our clairvoyant. If this turns into some sort of mind-game, you're going to be the star of the show."

As a Hasasu Seer, Satahsusar wasn't truly clairvoyant. But she could sense emotions via spellcasting, an ability that could come in very handy during investigations and interrogations.

Not giving any further explanation, Ninsunu crossed the square toward the street Xerxes had identified. Satahsusar followed, with Xerxes bringing up the rear.

As he passed the fountain, he looked down at some junk laid out on a tarp in front of it, tended by a smudge-faced girl who couldn't have been over ten years old. He was going to simply walk by when a dolphin-shaped pendant carved from driftwood caught his eye. The craftsmanship wasn't amazing, but it obviously wasn't the work of a complete amateur.

Stopping, he knelt, leaned against his sword, and picked up the pendant.

"Your work?" he asked the girl.

She nodded.

He turned it over in his hand. His sister Ahassunu was only eight years old, but she loved both jewelry and dolphins. She would definitely like this pendant.

"How much?" he asked.

"Fifteen minas," the girl squeaked back.

Xerxes tried not to smile. Glancing at the two mages and seeing that they were already entering the street, he lowered his voice and said, "I was born around here, you know." Gesturing vaguely with his head, he said, "Around the corner from Shellburn Way. You know, that little dead end with the scraggly tree and the rock that looks like a big shell?"

"By the old soup-seller lady?" the girl asked.

He grinned. "Yeah, over there. Anyway, I want to buy this for my sister, and I also want to help you out. But I know it's not worth fifteen minas...."

She averted her eyes but failed to hide the faint smile that tugged at the corner of her mouth. "Two minas," she said.

She'd take one mina if I pushed hard. Digging into his money pouch, he counted out three minas. "Here, take an extra."

"Really? Thanks!"

Stuffing the dolphin pendant into a pocket, he stood and hurried after Ninsunu and Satahsusar. They hadn't even noticed his absence, or if they had, they refrained from saying anything.

Low Street was narrower and even more winding than the main avenue they'd just walked down. It was barely wide enough for three people to walk next to each other, so the mages went single file. The buildings' sloping, tiled roofs had eaves that stretched out so far they nearly blocked out the sky. That style of architecture was indeed unusual, as most Isinian buildings had flat roofs that made it easy to enjoy the evening breeze on hot days.

Being in the back, Xerxes noticed how Satahsusar kept her robes clamped tightly against her body. He sneered. Granted, this neighborhood wasn't exactly a gleaming example of cleanliness, but it wasn't as though the place would infect her if she touched something.

Damn rich people. It would do Satahsusar good to come live in Harborview for a time. She'd been alive for over two centuries, but it wouldn't surprise him at all to learn that she'd never had permanent lodging anywhere other than Garden Terrace.

At a certain point, Low Street widened out into something akin to a courtyard, possibly even a square, with four residence gates visible within it, two on either side. Compared to the cramped alleys, the place seemed spacious. All four residences were mansions, with slightly finer plaster on the walls and fancier roof tiles.

Ninsunu stopped and looked at the four gates set into high walls.

"Which one is Ogden Manor?" she muttered.

The gates themselves were solid wood, making it impossible to see what lay beyond them. They were unmarked by either numbers or written text, ensuring that an outsider would have difficulty telling them apart. But Xerxes saw the differences. In Harborview and other similar neighborhoods, people preferred anonymity and let the physical characteristics of their homes serve as their identifying marks. For instance, one of the gates had a lintel with ceramic tiles featuring a peach motif. Another gate had spiral carvings on the panels, while the one opposite had a bottom rail made of metal. There didn't seem to be anything special about the fourth gate.

"Might as well just knock on all the doors," Satahsusar said, making no attempt to keep the distaste out of her tone.

"It's that one," Xerxes said, pointing at the most nondescript of the four gates. The two women looked at him askance.

"It's not *Ogden* Manor," he explained. "It's *Ogdown* Manor. You know, hogdown?"

"Hogdown?" Ninsunu asked, clearly puzzled.

Xerxes bit his lip briefly to stifle the feeling of annoyance that grew with every minute spent among upper crust people like this. On the one hand, he thirsted for the prominence and respect they commanded. On the other hand, he hated their stuffiness. “Hogdown is slang for ‘normal’ or ‘ordinary,’” he explained. “Of these four doors, which looks the least unusual to you?” Before either woman could reply, he said, “That one. In Harborview, just about every courtyard like this has a ‘hogdown manor.’ If there’s more than one, they’ll call it hogdown north or south. Something like that.”

“So,” Satahsusar said lightly, “do we just let ourselves in? You do have Marshal Authority, after all.”

“The reaction to a knock will tell a lot,” Ninsunu replied. “And I doubt the seconds we’ll lose if they refuse to open will change much.” She stepped over and rapped four times on the wooden door.

A few seconds passed before a door viewer opened at around eye level. It was dark on the other side of the door, making it almost impossible to see who was looking at them from inside.

“Who’s there?” someone said from inside, their voice muffled.

“I represent Mystic Aban Saddi and have Marshal Authority from the king himself. This is about the recent incidents in the city. I have some questions for Master Malos.”

The person behind the door didn’t respond for a good two or three seconds. Then they said, “Okay, I’ll tell him. Wait right here.”

The door viewer snapped shut.

“I vote we go in,” Satahsusar said.

In this instance, Xerxes didn’t disagree with her.

“We wait,” Ninsunu said.

As seconds passed, Xerxes’ hand tightened on the hilt of his sword. He looked up the street and then the other way, finding both directions completely empty. This entire area seemed deserted.

Satahsusar sighed. “They’re probably running out the back.”

Xerxes suppressed his distaste for the woman and opened his mouth to voice agreement with her.

Before he could, Ninsunu said, “I’ve arrested dozens of cultists through the years. Never once did any of them run away when I knocked on the door. Even they know that running makes you look guilty.”

Satahsusar shrugged. Xerxes flipped his sword around and rested the blade on his shoulder.

A few more seconds passed, then Ninsunu stepped closer to the door until she could reach out and touch it. “That said, I do agree we shouldn’t just stand around forever.”

Closing her eyes, she put all her fingers on the wooden surface of the door.

Xerxes didn't sense anything unusual, but it was obvious she was sending her mage sense into the door.

"Not a very complex lock," she said quietly.

"I'm really getting bored here," Satahsusar said.

Give me a break, Xerxes thought.

"Xerk," Ninsunu said, "I'm going to open the door. You go in first, sword out, but be ready for spellcasting. I'll be right behind you."

He edged forward and to the left.

A moment later, he heard a click and a thump from inside the door. Mages didn't just have 'mage sense,' they also had 'mage touch.' The range on it was shorter than mage sense, and though its combat applications were so limited as to make it useless, even Seers could use it to do things like open doors or levitate small objects.

The door swung open slowly, and Ninsunu stepped back.

"Representatives of king and parliament!" she called out loudly. "Stand down and prepare to be inspected!" Lowering her voice, she said, "Go ahead, Xerk."

Holding his sword in the Skyward guard position, with the tip pointing up and slightly behind him, he took a tentative step into the door.

Repeating Ninsunu's call, he said, "Representatives of king and parliament! Anybody there?"

There was no response. However, as Xerxes took another step, the odor of bile and rotten eggs brushed across his face, causing his nose to wrinkle and his heart to leap into his throat.

Looking half over his shoulder at Ninsunu, he said, "That's the smell of Abhorrent."

"Are you sure?" she asked.

The scuttling sounds coming from the corridor within answered for him.