

Chapter 21 – Another Clash with Abhorrent

The disgusting odor grew stronger. If Xerxes hadn't already encountered such olfactory assaults on multiple occasions, he would have shrunk back from it. In fact, behind him, he heard a retching sound from Satahsusar.

And Ninsunu said, "In the name of the Pontifarch. That smell...."

In the darkness ahead were spindly white legs, followed by a pale, glistening body and a maroon 'head.' It was exactly like the Abhorrent Gandash had summoned, except larger.

He gripped his sword and bent his knees. What to do? Slice off legs? Or try to stab it? Did these things have hearts or brains? How did you kill them? During the fateful battle with the female Abhorrent, he hadn't learned much other than they could take immense amounts of damage and still keep fighting. And they were stronger, even than mages.

The thing crawled toward him, its dozens of spider-like legs moving in waves as it pulled itself through the corridor. Unlike the smaller versions, the reddish 'heads' actually resembled mouthless human faces.

"Careful, Xerk," Ninsunu said. "If it's a juvenile, it could have powers."

"I know."

The legs. I'll go for the legs. If it can't walk, it's not going to be as dangerous.

He was preparing to jump forward when something caught his attention. Movement farther down the tunnel.

"There's more than one," he said.

The first one was about five cubits away, with the second only a few cubits behind.

"What do I do, High Seer?" he said.

"Get back out into the open," she said. "That way I can help you."

"Okay." However, he had already identified the best position to launch a blow, and he didn't want to lose that opportunity. The Abhorrent slid closer, and he jumped. The corridor was narrow but tall, giving him just enough room to bring the blade down and to the left.

His blade slashed through five legs at once, sending the whitish stalks flopping to the ground amidst gelatinous ichor that pumped from the severed ends. The Abhorrent made a hissing sound—from where, Xerxes wasn't sure, as he still couldn't see any mouth—and shrank back briefly.

Okay, this isn't so bad.

He used that moment to back out of the corridor into the courtyard, keeping his eyes on the monster the entire time. It only took seconds for it to forget about its injury and crawl forward.

Off to the side, Ninsunu reached into her spell component pouch.

Glancing in the other direction, he tried to locate Satahsusar but didn't see her.

Don't tell me she ran off.

As the wounded Abhorrent came closer, Xerxes prepared to deliver a second blow. The first attack had been successful, so it made sense to follow up with more. As it reached the doorway, he jumped forward again. It flailed two or three legs to block his blow, but he chopped through them. His blade continued, biting into the thing's side and causing a brief spurt of blackish internal fluid. The stench grew stronger.

It hissed and struck him with its legs, but he dodged to the left and pulled his blade back before swinging it from a downward position. It chopped right through the Abhorrent's reddish 'head.' Taking advantage of his momentum, he pulled the sword back and then stabbed it straight into the thing.

He twisted the blade and then angled it straight up, slicing the creature nearly in half from middle to top. It shuddered and shrieked, black blood and milky ichor splattering everywhere. The stench became overwhelming. The creature then collapsed, and Xerxes backed up, feeling more confident than ever.

"They die easily," he said. He flicked his sword through the air hoping to get some of the blood and gore off of it. It only helped a bit. There wasn't time to fumble for the cloth he'd brought along for that purpose. It would have to wait.

He heard a thump next to him and looked over to see Satahsusar. So, she hadn't fled.

"In that case," she said, "I can't let you have all the glory."

She held a long, curved dagger in each hand. Where she'd been hiding them on her person, he had no idea. Satahsusar held the blades with confidence, the way an expert fighter would. But her two, small blades differed greatly from his own longsword, which was roughly two cubits from end to end. He had a big advantage in reach.

Meanwhile, Ninsunu still hadn't taken out any spell component to cast a spell. "How many more are there?"

“At least one,” Xerxes said. Even as the words left his mouth, the second monster crawled out into the open, all of its legs intact, its pale body glistening. “The legs are stronger than they seem. They—”

Seemingly making a point of ignoring him, Satahsusar jumped forward, her knives flashing as she removed four legs from the Abhorrent. She danced backward just in time to avoid a follow-up leg swipe from the creature.

“They’re not manifesting any powers,” Ninsunu said. “They’re not juveniles.”

“Agreed,” Xerxes said. He bent forward on one knee and struck from above, his sword completely avoiding any legs while cutting into the thing’s back.

It swiveled and swiped at him, and one of the sharp, claw-like ends snagged his pant leg, ripping it open. He jerked the sword out of the Abhorrent’s body, then jumped back to avoid more leg swipes.

“Need to be more precise than that,” Satahsusar said, lopping off a few more legs, then burying a knife deep in the thing’s head. Ripping the knife downward, she successfully ended its life, causing it to flop down next to the other.

Was the tide of battle turning?

Satahsusar tsked. “I really don’t see why everyone is in such a tizzy over a few overgrown spiders. They’re no different than—”

“It’s not over yet,” Xerxes interrupted. He’d seen more motion in the corridor.

Pursing her lips, Satahsusar said, “You ought to show more respect for—”

This third Abhorrent didn’t waste time. It leaped forward like a jumping spider, targeting Satahsusar. She let out a squawk and jumped back, but the tips of the thing’s claw-like legs snagged her skirts, tripping her. One of her knives clattered to the side. As she fell into a seated position, Xerxes swung his sword, severing the legs that had grabbed her. There wasn’t time to help her to her feet. He tried to slash some more legs, but this Abhorrent was either smarter than its fellows, or perhaps it had learned from observing them get cut down.

Xerxes’ sword touched nothing but air, and then the thing was on him, its legs flailing at him from all directions. It snagged some loose parts of his clothing: his sleeve at the elbow; his pant leg.

Before it could get a firm grip, he landed a kick on the thing’s reddish face that shoved it back by half a cubit. He used that opportunity to spring away.

By this point, Satahsusar was on her feet again and reaching toward her fallen knife. Seeing her present her back to it, the Abhorrent turned away from Xerxes and attacked her. She shrieked again as her skirts were caught, which caused her to fall to her hands and knees. Her other knife clattered in the opposite direction. Now she had no weapon.

Meanwhile, another Abhorrent had appeared in the corridor, and Xerxes was sure he could see more motion behind it.

“More are coming!” he shouted.

“Get Sata out of there!” Ninsunu said. Having shoved her hand into her component pouch, she brought it out with a handful of glittering dust. Xerxes wasn’t an expert regarding spell components, but he knew Sinitu mages used gold dust as their base.

Having never seen a Sinutu mage cast a spell, he was curious about what would happen, but now wasn’t a moment for casual observation. He swung his sword at the Abhorrent harrying Satahsusar, taking off a leg and slashing its abdomen. It squealed, spun toward him, and forced him back.

Another Abhorrent was now out in the open, with a third behind it. Worse... Xerxes saw a glint that indicated yet another one was on the way. Soon the courtyard would be so crowded he couldn’t swing his sword properly.

Now more than ever Xerxes wished he was a High Seer. If he was, he could cast Minor Augmentation and turn the tip of his sword into a burning expression of power, not just his fist. With a weapon like that, he could chop these Abhorrent into pieces with almost no effort.

But he wasn’t a High Seer. And there were now three Abhorrent to deal with. Probably more.

Satahsusar had one of her knives back and was hiking her skirt up while simultaneously waving her weapon in the general direction of the nearest monster.

“Hya!” Ninsunu shouted.

Xerxes turned, and his eyes went wide as threads of melam filled her, causing her to twitch as she changed shape and size. She grew taller and broader of shoulder, while at the same time her face became flatter, and curved horns sprouted from her forehead, sweeping back toward her neck. Her arms lengthened and sprouted dark green hair, while jagged claws emerged from her fingers. Her voluminous clothing remained intact, almost as if she had picked her garments specifically to cover her even after casting her spell. She continued to transform, but Xerxes forced himself to focus on the Abhorrent.

He slashed and stabbed, while off to the side Satahsusar was devolving into a frenzy as she tried to defend herself. Then a roar rattled the corridor as Ninsunu finished her transformation, stepped forward, and grabbed one of the Abhorrent bodily. It let loose a shrieking hiss as she threw it hard against the opposite wall. A few of its legs were crushed, but little more happened. It dropped to the ground and jumped at her.

Another Abhorrent emerged. The courtyard was really getting crowded. He thrust forward, stabbing the nearest Abhorrent in its reddish head. But that didn’t stop it. Spindly legs struggled to grab his blade as he backed farther away. His back was almost to the wall.

“This isn’t working!” he said, his previous confidence collapsing.

Satahsusar lunged forward, trying to pull off the same move she had before but failing and getting slashed across the arm in the process. Blood flowed toward her hand as she lurched away. "I agree with Seer Xerxes," she said.

Ninsunu let loose another bestial roar as the Abhorrent she'd thrown latched its arms around her shoulders and another grabbed her legs from behind.

Using her massive, greenish arms to hold the Abhorrent at bay, she kicked at the one behind her. But then, the monster in front of her twitched, and a line appeared from its 'head' to the base of its abdomen. It was like a long, thin crack that opened wider and wider, sticky slime stretching between either side.

The opening widened, like a massive, vertical mouth. And as it opened, countless swaying tentacles appeared within, like undulating teeth that slowly extended toward the High Seer.

When Xerxes saw that, his heart went cold, and he felt weak at the knees.

"Help," Ninsunu grunted, her voice deep and gravelly.

Gritting his teeth, he jumped toward her, raising his sword overhead before bringing it down with all the force he could muster. It slashed clean through the entire Abhorrent, resulting in an enormous spray of black blood and white ichor.

Yes!

Ninsunu tossed the corpse aside, spun, and kicked the monster that was harrying her. It tucked its legs around itself as it rolled backward.

"Send up the flare to call the soldiers!" Satahsusar said.

"No," Ninsunu growled. "They'd get slaughtered. We go."

She bent her legs and jumped straight up onto the rooftop.

More Abhorrent were coming out of the mansion's entrance, some of them crawling right over the mangled corpses of their fellows.

To the side, Satahsusar slashed at some legs, severed one, then turned and made a leap for the rooftop.

Holding his sword with only one hand, Xerxes did the same, taking a running leap and then extending his free hand up. His fingers found purchase on a roof tile, and he pulled himself up, scrambling for a toehold on the wall as he did. Behind him, an Abhorrent stretched its legs out, but he pulled his feet over the top of the roof before it reached him.

Standing, he looked around to see at least six Abhorrent in the street courtyard below, and more coming out of the building. Some were small, similar to the ones Gandash had summoned at Ligish Castle. Others were larger.

A few cubits away, Satahsusar clambered up, dislodging a roof tile in the process but otherwise making it safely away from the courtyard. She only had one knife left.

“We made it,” he said.

“Vile things,” Satahsusar spat, turning to look down. “What do we do, Nina? Run back to the cart? Or wait to see how many will come out of—”

A white tendril shot out from the dark corridor and stabbed her through the thigh.