

Chapter Two

Ohrder in the Court

The next day Potboy was right on time getting to the Royal Chambers. There was no need to try and be brave facing the king. He'd promised himself he'd try to be if necessary, but when the need didn't assert itself he was greatly relieved. Did *that* make him a coward? He spent some time pondering that later while sitting on his fur rug after the wizard sent him away and he came back to reclaim his spot by the bookcase. This is probably a good time to point out there were actually *two* bookcases in the wizard's chambers, and though they looked quite similar in most respects, they were worlds apart where it mattered most—or so the wizard had led him to believe. But then, wise as he was, Ohrder didn't know everything. Begone was sitting beside the '*silly books*'. One day, years before, Begone had gotten up the nerve to ask the wizard about the leather bound volumes he sat beside and oh so longed to touch—but *of course he never had*. Stanger still, Ohrder had answered him.

"They're just silly books," the ancient eyes turned to look at Begone as if he were one of the various insects the old man sometimes trapped in a clear jar to see how it would react as he did this thing or that to it. When the boy's gaze shifted to the other bookshelf, the wizard added, "*those* are not."

Begone actually had no interest—or at least very little, in the not silly books. Ohrder almost always had one of them down off the shelf, with his long pointy nose moving to and fro across the pages with such a frown on his wrinkled lips that Begone couldn't imagine there was anything of interest to a young boy there. A silly book on the other hand...that held promise. Begone wasn't a great noticer at that point in his life, but one thing he had discovered was that while "*silly things*" tended to make grownups scowl, they usually made him smile and sometimes even laugh. Therefore, since the very first moment he'd learned there were silly books in the world, Begone had yearned to hold one. It was not uncommon for his hand to lift as if it had a mind of its own and reach out toward the bookcase with fingers slowly grasping but never quite touching the coveted leather spines with their mysterious squiggly markings.

"Can I look at one of the silly books?" the words sprang from his lips as if they too belonged to someone else. As much as he wanted to snatch them back, Begone waited with frozen angst for the wizard's response—*should there be one*. So often Ohrder was deaf and blind to anything but his books—and "*yes*", books do speak, all of them do if you stop and think about it—one of them even audibly as we're about to find out.

"You can't read," the hope-dashing words came with a decisive headshake.

Two short days before that would have led Begone to be gone, exiting the room in search of something more engaging than another disappointment. Except a shake of the head didn't *always* mean "no". As far as that went, of all the possible bodily movements, the wizard tended to shake his head almost as much as he pursed his lips or narrowed his eyes. Which is to say as often as not.

Begone watched his hand rise up and extend itself toward the bookcase. Instead of pulling it back at the last second while casting a worried look over at the wizard to see if he had noticed the audacious move like he normally did, the boy urged it forward, guiding it to a particular book that seemed to call to him more than the others. It always had with its sky blue binding and the little crooked characters that somehow seemed friendlier than all the others lined up beside it. It was smaller too. A boy-sized book if there ever was one. Begone took it from shelf to lap in one

smooth motion, as if he'd been book picking his whole life. Opening the cover came just as naturally, but with that there came an even bigger surprise. Begone had peeked over Ohrder's shoulder while he was reading his not-silly books enough times to know what was to be found there, which was nothing less than row, after row, after row of incomprehensible black characters flooding the white or yellowed parchment they were printed upon. That knowledge had often led him to wonder why he so yearned to hold a book of his own. So, it was with absolute amazement that his eyes beheld a bright red apple shining up at him from the page before him—along with a fair amount of the aforementioned characters, but at least these were bigger and drafted in a very enticing blue hue as well. Oh, how Begone wanted to know what those magical markings would tell him. Suddenly it was the most important thing in the world. The ache of his longing, his hunger for knowledge beyond anything a simple pot-boy could ever hope for, fell like rain on the parched parchment and it sprang to life.

"A is for apple, its taste so sweet, it's more than a fruit, it's a treat," the words weren't loud, but they were still enough to cause Ohrder to lose his place.

"Shush," he said as he had countless times before. He was so distracted with trying to regain his position on the page that it took him a moment to realize that the childlike voice he'd heard didn't belong to a child at all.

That realization made him do something he almost never did. He closed *his* book—the *Not-Silly* one, before he was finished with his current topic of study, and turned to give his full attention to the silly little book that had interrupted him. The boy was so enraptured by what was happening that he took no notice of what the wizard was about. If the book noticed, it apparently didn't care, because it kept chattering happily along.

"Apple begins with the letter, 'A'." As the words came out said letter began to pulse, glow and grow on the page. "The letter, 'A' has two sounds... 'ah', as in apple... or 'aye', as in ape."

A chimpanzee suddenly appeared on the page to snatch up the apple and begin chomping away at it. The boy giggled. The wizard pursed his lips. The book continued on, while the two humans—both sitting in the same room, but worlds apart, watched the magic of language unfold. Sometime later, there was a knock at the door. The boy, who was still new to hearing and listening both at the same time, didn't notice. Ohrder did, but he ignored it. Two more times the knocking came, louder with each iteration. Finally, the knocker gave up and took a more direct approach. A latch clicked, ancient door hinges squeaked, and the Royal Steward stepped into the room. He was wearing a frown, but it didn't come close to measuring up to the one he found looking back at him.

"His majesty has need of you," Sir Pettybohne informed Ohrder in a slightly nasal and fully sanctimonious voice.

He is such a toad, Ohrder thought, getting ahead of himself. But before he could lift his hand to waggle temperament into reality, Pettybohne suddenly noticed the menace radiating from the dark eyes across the room from him.

"I am *truly* sorry to intrude," he quickly amended, adopting the tone that those who spent most of their time in the king's presence employed so well. He even bowed his head—slightly, as he continued. "King Pryhde's patience is wearing even thinner today than usual. I humbly suggest we don't keep him waiting."

It was enough to keep the wizard's hands in his lap. Two of Ohrder's fingers did give a quick wiggle, resulting in the Royal Steward having to fight off the urge to hop instead of walk the rest of the day—and flies took on a strange fascination for him during that time too, but all in all, Sir Pettybohne managed to complete his mission without significant difficulty or delay.

Ohrder levered himself up out of his chair and started for the door. He wasn't fearful of what the king might do if he tarried, at least not as much as he worried about what *he* might be forced to do if the king lost his temper and decided to do something rash. He considered Pryhde to be an utter fool, but then who would want to spend all their days chasing after the myriad of mundane affairs required to run a kingdom but a fool? Certainly not Ohrder. He didn't have time for such nonsense, or to bother with the lesser tedium of finding a replacement should King Pryhde suddenly become the shining pillar of nobility he imagined himself to be—or maybe just a wobbly stool, which seemed much more apt. Either way, the heir, Prince Juhstice, was too young and naïve to take on that mantle. Besides, Ohrder rather liked the young man and it seemed a shame to ruin his life just because his father was an imbecile.

Leaving the other boy he was somewhat fond of to the lively maturations of his silly book, Ohrder exited the room to go present himself to his overstuffed monarch. Sir Pettybohne cast a quick glance at the pot-boy and the talking book before turning to hurry after the wizard. As odd as the scene was, he forgot all about it before he even crossed the threshold—what did you expect to see when you ventured into the lair of a wizard. To his dismay, the steward had to run to catch up to the wizard—that actually gave him a chance to pull off a couple of good hops; he would have been even more perplexed if he'd been able to look past the old man's long white robes to find the swollen and age-blotched feet creeping along at a snail's pace—*two inches above the stone floor that was zipping by beneath them.*

"He's worried things have gotten lax of late and believes a public execution would serve to remind everyone to do their due diligence for the kingdom," Sir Pettybohne explained somewhat breathlessly as they approached the massive stone columns fronting the Royal Court where King Pryhde presided on his throne. He'd said it as if answering a question though Ohrder hadn't asked one, but the information wasn't surprising. The wizard translated it as, *people aren't groveling or pandering to the king as much as he thinks they should.*

"Ohrder, Royal Wizard to the king and Sir Pettybohne, Royal Steward of the realm," the court chamberlain proclaimed in a loud and carrying voice as they moved into the court proper. Hierarchically, he should have announced Sir Pettybohne first, but being no fool, he looked past the two men's titles to where the real power lay. He'd once made the mistake of idly twirling one of his long black mustaches while introducing the wizard and found himself in need of shaving six times a day for the next month.

A quick note here. It may seem like the wizard goes out of his way to punish people, but make no mistake about it, he doesn't have to go out of his way...it's very easy for him. It's also worth mentioning that the person Ohrder holds to the highest standard is Ohrder himself.

King Pryhde didn't stop what he was doing to greet the new arrivals. He didn't have to since all he was doing at the moment was sitting on his throne brooding, with his hands resting atop the head of the marble lions that made up his armrests while one foot tapped up and down impatiently on the velvet rug beneath his feet. Sir Pettybohne and Ohrder made their way forward to the foot of the throne to make their presentations; the Royal Steward bowing low while the wizard dipped his chin, which was about the limit of how far subservience would go.

"The halls must have been excessively crowded," the king noted irritably. The steward rose up to voice a hasty excuse, but Pryhde waved him off. "Never mind, we've wasted enough time already. I assume you've apprised Ohrder of our dire situation?"

"I've tried my feeble best, Your Majesty," the steward simpered. "But I lack your eloquent dictum for describing the gravity of what we're facing."

King Pryhde accepted Pettybohne's shortcomings with a curt nod and proceeded to trot out the list of atrocities he'd been suffering of late. "One of the axles on my carriage broke on my tour of the city...that was after I'd suffered an hour of being jostled over rutted roads. Then it took another *two* hours for someone to return to the castle to fetch the queen's carriage just so I could travel back over those same deplorable roads. I'm surprised my teeth weren't shaken out of my head by the time I got back here."

King Pryhde looked at Ohrder expectantly, no doubt awaiting his words of sympathy, but all he got was a slight rise out of the wizard's bushy white eyebrows.

"*Everyone* knows I like to personally inspect my kingdom every month or two," the king explained, though in truth it was more like every year or two. "Yet knowing that, they dared to allow the roads to be in such a disgraceful state of repair? What's next...will the farmers stop planting their fields or the merchants neglect to open their stores?"

While Ohrder was still mulling what he'd heard and what the king might expect *him* to do about it, Pryhde added one last smidgen of a detail. "I blame that wretched little pot boy. *Twice* in the last fortnight he's been late to clean my chamber pot. Word gets out when things like that happen and people see the king turning a blind eye. I've been torn between having him hung or drawn and quartered, but then Sir Guihle suggested *you* might come up with something even grander to get everyone's attention."

Ohrder looked over the king's shoulder to where the Royal Chancellor was standing. Guihle gave him a nervous smile, and because there was a slight chance he'd made his recommendation to give Ohrder a chance to intercede on the hapless youngster's behalf, the wizard let him keep it. King Pryhde waited with unveiled impatience while the Royal Wizard worked through the problem. *Not* about what to do with the boy, but about what to do with his liege? Removing and replacing King Pryhde was certainly problematic—the entire thousand-man force of the Royal Guard existed to prevent that very thing, but *keeping* him was becoming even more burdensome. Ohrder had looked the other way on more occasions than he liked to admit when the monarch's whims had cost another man his life, telling himself that was just the nature of kings and kingdoms, but the boy was not just another man—not anymore, and in truth, he never had been. The wizard knew that even before a talking book told him so. Just exactly *what* the boy was, Ohrder didn't know. What he did know, was that *today*, he wasn't going to be Pryhde's latest victim.

"Well," King Pryhde demanded. "Did I drag you all the way up here for nothing or do you have something to contribute that might help put this kingdom back on the right track?"

"I believe I do," the wizard said with sudden insight. The sparkle in his eyes and the wicked grin on his face made everyone lean in as he continued. "Since the problem has spread to the entire kingdom, then *the kingdom* shall be made to pay...not just some no-account child."

"Oh...!" King Pryhde's eyes went wide with anticipation. If he were a dog, he might have started drooling. "How?"

"You throw a banquet, the grandest banquet ever," the wizard said simply; too simply for his confused audience, but he moved on before they could start regaling him with an endless stream of questions. "That will remind them of what a gracious and loving king they have, encouraging them to open their ears and hear the words of wisdom he's going to impart to them."

The ego stroking lit up King Pryhde's face like a crystal candelabra. "Yes, yes. I like it...and what will I tell them?"

“That sadly, they have not been living up to the standards expected of the greatest kingdom the world has ever seen,” Ohrder paused for effect. “And that, sadder still, the next person to come short of his duties will face a fate...*worse than death.*”

“So *no one* gets hung?” Sir Pettybohne asked.

“Or drawn and quartered?” Sir Guihle voiced his confusion right behind him.

“No one dies?” the king sounded more displeased than perplexed.

“A fate *worse...than...death,*” Ohrder reminded all of them. “Execute one man...or boy...or even a hundred, and a week later it will be as forgotten as which way the wind blew last Moonday. But, a fate worse than death, every tongue in the kingdom will be set on fire speculating about what that might mean as their imaginations conjure up untold horrors that will motivate them for *years* to come.”

“What could be worse than death?” Sir Guihle laughed.

“Do you *really* want to know?” Ohrder asked quietly. Apparently not, because suddenly the Royal Chancellor was looking everywhere but at the wizard.

It took a little more coxing and prodding for the king and his counselors to embrace the plan, but once they did, they were like a group of schoolboys scheming out the best way to make a roomful of girls squeal with but a single frog at their disposal. Satisfied that the kingdom would survive another day, Ohrder offered the king an extra deep bow that actually involved the movement of a few vertebrae below his shoulder blades, and turned to get back to more important business.

“The *reason* the boy has been late of late is that he’s been studying the tapestries outside my chambers,” the first part of King Pryhde’s statement was enough to halt the wizard in his tracks. What followed next made him face all the way back around. “In particular, the one depicting the Rendering Prophecy.”

“Boys tend to be drawn to fanciful things,” Ohrder observed dryly while his mind took hold of the new puzzle piece and started twisting it to and fro, trying to fit it into the increasingly convoluted swirl of images surrounding the youngster he’d left back in his chambers.

“*And...* I noticed the sword and shield are missing from the suit of armor,” the king added, arching a perfectly groomed black eyebrow at his Royal Wizard.

“I assure you they are not...*missing,*” Ohrder replied. “While I have my doubts about the ‘*prophecy*’, for now it seemed best to remove the sword and shield to someplace less conspicuous.”

“And just where might this less conspicuous place be?” King Pryhde asked pointedly.

Before answering, Ohrder, *pointedly*, swept his gaze over the other men in the room, most of whom were awaiting the wizard’s reply just as expectantly as the king himself. “Do you want me to tell you now, or would you rather I came back when you weren’t so...*busy?*”

King Pryhde’s eyes went a little wide as he absorbed the meaning behind Ohrder’s words, but a moment later he’d composed himself and stated in a confident voice, “I’ll summon you later...I *do* have more pressing matters to attend to at the moment.”

Thus dismissed, Ohrder exited the court to hurry back to his quarters, thinking as he went, *Surely this day can’t get any stranger.* And yet it did.