

## Chapter Eight

### The “H-less”

Begone, the princess’ shadow, stood *outside* the wizard’s chamber looking down at the book in his hand and thought, *How strange*. But of late *strange* had become more commonplace than normal. In fact, he wasn’t even sure what normal was anymore. A few weeks before just thinking about sneaking out of the castle with the princess—not to mention doing so to pick people’s pockets of all things, would have been even more unbelievable than the wildly fantastic stories he read about in his book. Still, thinking back on the past few minutes, *strange* did seem to be an apt description.

“Be gone!” the wizard barked the instant he stepped into the room. The words he’d heard so often were the same yet different. Ohrder’s usual bored and distracted tone was replaced with a fierce coldness that stopped him in his tracks. “Can’t you see that I’m busy?”

In fact, Begone could see no such thing. The desk that was *always* buried in piles of books and scrolls was bare, and the wizard’s hands were just as empty, without a quill or parchment anywhere within reach. As odd as that was, what happened next was even odder. Instead of wisely turning to flee for his life, Begone opened his mouth.

“You do know him, don’t you?” he asked. He’d spent so much time lately puzzling things within the talking book out that it had become a habit to try and puzzle *everything* out. And so it seemed to follow that Ohrder’s sudden shift in mood today might quite likely be linked to something that had happened yesterday. “Dougerty, the leader of the Hand?”

Unbelievably, instead of turning him to stone—or something worse, the wizard simply nodded. “Though his name has changed. When I knew him he had an “H”.” Seeing Begone’s blank look, Ohrder asked, “You do know what that means, don’t you?”

How could he? A boy who didn’t even know who his parents were and who had been left alone to make his own way through life didn’t have an opportunity to know much at all. Until he’d ‘*chanced*’ upon the book, he hadn’t even know that there was a such thing as an “H”, let alone that it or any other letter could have a deeper meaning. Feeling both bewildered and saddened at the same time without even knowing why, he shook his head. “I don’t even have a name to have an “H” in it.”

Ohrder blinked, once, then again. He even opened his mouth, but then closed it again for a good while. Finally, in frustration, he just shook his head and asked another question. “What about the Rendering...have you heard of that?”

*Everyone* knew about the prophesy, including the boy who emptied chamber pots each day. Or rather, he knew of it; the exact details, or actually anything beyond the fact that at some point the whole world was going to be torn to shreds, wasn’t anything he could speak to. Still, he nodded and said, “That’s when everyone dies.”

“Ah...*maybe*,” Ohrder replied. It was a *big* maybe, one he’d spent most of his long life trying to figure out. “*Definitely* for the *hopeless*. There are several places within the prophesy where *that* is made clear. And one thing leading to another, many, many generations ago someone came up with the brilliant idea of having people add an “H” to their name signifying that they were *hopeful* not *hopeless*.”

“So, if everyone has an “H” in their name now...?” the nameless, “H-less” boy asked with puzzlement. “Then wouldn’t that mean that *no one* dies?”

“Which would countermand prophesy,” Ohrder said with a sour smile. “Naturally, that led to some now long dead king putting out the edict that only the royalty and those of elite status could claim to be hopeful. The commoners, being *hopeless*, aren’t allowed to have any “H’s” in their names, added or otherwise.”

Even to a boy who’d been raised to understand that the King had absolute authority, that didn’t seem right or fair. But something else was nagging at him even more. “So, did someone take away Dougerty’s “H”?”

“No,” the wizard shook his white head. “He was exiled, but with his “H” intact.”

Begone made a mental note to have the book explain what the word exiled meant, then asked the next question that occurred to him. “If *he* gave away his own “H”, basically saying he’s hopeless...what does that mean?” As troubling as that thought was, he had a more disturbing one. “Princess Chahrity says she thinks he’s a decent man, just misguided. Do you think she’s wrong, that he’s really bad?”

“He wasn’t when I knew him,” Ohrder answered, then got a wry smile as he regarded the innocent boy looking over at him. “But people *do* change...sometimes right before your eyes.” He gave a dismissive wave. “Enough of that. Hope isn’t about letters, and what people call you isn’t as important as what they see when they look at you. Now, is there something else you’re determined to bother me about, or can I finally get to work?”

“I just came by to read for a little while,” Begone confessed, casting a longing look over at the bookshelf.

Ohrder negated the unspoken request with a firm shake of his head. “I won’t have that infernal book blathering away while I’m trying to think. If you want to read, do it someplace else.”

That was a fine and very enticing idea if it weren’t for the fact that the wizard had threatened to turn him into a boneless skeleton—and “*no!*”, he hadn’t dared to ask how such a thing could even exist, if he ever so much as *thought* about taking a book—or anything else out of his chambers. Apparently that wasn’t *exactly* true, since Begone was definitely *thinking* about it. But did he possess the courage to actually try to do it? While he was still debating that internally, Ohrder’s paper thin patience ran out.

“Take your silly book and be gone, Begone, or Shadow, or whatever you finally decide to call yourself,” the wizard snapped. “Away with you now, no more dawdling.”

Freed to do the unthinkable, the startled boy dashed over to snatch his cherished book off the shelf, then turned to hurry just a quickly toward the door. Since it was already open by the time he got there, he didn’t even have to break stride as he raced across the threshold, throwing a belated, “thank you!” over his shoulder as he went. As an afterthought, just as the door was closing behind him, he called out, “And I think that if I ever did have a name...I would like it to be Shadow.”

There were many places within the castle that he liked to spend time; the loft of the stables where he spent most of his nights, the kitchen where the head cook, if she wasn’t *too* busy, might slip a buttered hot roll into his eager hands, or the practice ground where he often found a quiet corner to watch the men at arms sparing or drilling through battle formations. But no place drew him like the forest beyond the city gates. There was just nothing like sitting beneath the shade of a giant oak tree on a sunny day and just watching, hearing and smelling the world around him with all its vast array of teeming life. The idea of adding his favorite book to that mix was just too good to pass up.

As he walked through the bustling city streets on his way to the gate, Begone had to marvel at scene around him when compared to the bleak and shadowed emptiness of the night before. It was quite a contrast; everywhere he looked people were laughing and talking as they went about their busy lives, seemingly without a care in the world. And for the most part that was true because most of them were commoners—the “*H-less*”—who didn’t seem to realize their ‘*hopelessness*’ in the least. Begone still didn’t know all that much about *The Hand* and their activities, but the first thing that had been made clear to him was that commoners were *not* berries, and therefore strictly off limits when it came to picking. The merchants and castle dwellers on the other hand were fair game and Begone’s recently trained eyes sized up a number of choice prospects as he made his way along. Not that he’d do anything about it—the princess had made him promise not to *really* steal from anyone. Chahrity made doubly sure that all the berries they’d picked to work their way into the Hand’s confidence got reimbursed by an unnamed benefactor later. Even so, Begone noticed that his weren’t the only eyes working the crowd—a number of shopkeepers and their wealthier customers would end up having their purses lightened or missing by day’s end.

The city gate like the castle’s portcullis before was open, but that’s where the similarities ended. Where the former had had a dozen guards flanking both sides of the entrance who allowed only a single person at a time to approach, the latter was an unrestricted thoroughfare teeming with activity as people came and went as the needs of their day demanded. Or as in Begone’s case, simply desired. The forest began nearly a league from the city—as far as Begone knew it had always been that way, but in fact one of King Pryhde’s distant ancestors had ordered all the land surrounding the castle and the city cleared to prevent a neighboring kingdom from getting any ideas about making a sneak attack. While busy streets and green forest have plenty to offer as far as occupying a young boy’s active mind, the space in between, with its single rutted road and smattering of wild flowers and other assorted low vegetation, was mundane enough to cause him to try something new. It turned out that reading while walking wasn’t all that difficult, as long as you didn’t mind the odd trip or stumble now and then. Begone became so immersed in what he was reading—a fanciful tale about a warrior who vanquished a thousand men with a donkey’s jawbone, only to be undone by a treacherous woman, that he didn’t even notice when the barren meadow gave way to majestic trees and soft green clover. Only at the end of his story—a sad one, did he look up to find himself on a narrow path already deep into the forest. Looking around he tried to orient himself, thinking that his feet must surely have taken him to a place they’d travel many times before even without his having realized it. That was not *quite* true. Begone was standing someplace he’d been before—*exactly once*.

The cabin-sized stump was just as he remembered it, ‘*growing*’ in the center of a small clearing and soaring some twenty feet or so into the air where it ended abruptly looking like some giant had come along with an enormous saw and took its top off. Except Begone was convinced that the tree had never been carved on by human hands—*despite* its flat top, having a doorway, hollowed out interior *and* a plethora of strange symbols decorating its sides. He walked forward to check again, just to be sure, and saw the same thing as before. As unnatural as it looked, everything about the giant tree stump was completely natural. As impossible as it seemed, it had just grown that way.

His fascination with reading and letters made him want to take some time to study the symbols, but first he took moment to step inside. There was no one waiting in there for him, but he couldn’t have missed the last visitor by too much time—the bouquet of flowers they’d left, along with a note about their sick granddaughter, had barely begun to wilt. Since that told a true

story compared to the made up one he'd just read, Begone felt a hard tug on his heart strings. He wished there was something he could do for the little girl, especially because he couldn't see how leaving some flowers in a hollow tree would do her much good. He found himself wondering what the girl's name was—or if she had an “H”? *He* hoped she wasn't hopeless, regardless of the spelling of her name, but he could understand how her grandmother—or *grandfather*, might have felt *helpless* enough to bring the flowers. Even the members of the royal family were helpless to do anything but wait when one of them got sick. Of course they called in the Royal Healers, but even the pot boy knew that the healers didn't really '*heal*' anything. The best they could do was maybe make you feel a little better until you recovered—or *didn't*. Even Ohrder couldn't heal people. It was such a depressing chain of thought that Begone made a concerted effort to switch his attention elsewhere—which *wasn't hard to do considering where he was standing at the moment*.

After a moment of wandering around the inside of the tree and studying the symbols there, odd as it seemed, Begone thought they looked *familiar*. Giving that some thought, he made his way back outside and took another look at the ones there. His conclusion was that he was almost certain that whatever was '*written*' on the inside of the stump was the same as that on the outside--*almost certain*. But then it occurred to him that he had a way to check to see if he was right. His book. One of the things he was able to do with it was practice his writing. To do that all he had to do was turn to a blank page—there seemed to one at the ready anytime he needed it, then he'd use his finger to draw letters and words on it. His finger didn't have any ink in it but it still somehow made marks on the page. With a rush of excitement, he opened the book and began flipping pages until he came to a blank one. Then, working his way along the outside of the stump, he made his way to the spot where some of the symbols seemed to be grouped together and started tracing them carefully onto his empty page. His intent was to copy enough of them to take them inside to do a comparison, but he never got that far.

The moment he finished fingering in the first symbol something unexpected happened. Unexpected, but not unprecedented; the book took an active role in his efforts. Directly below the first symbol another character appeared, a letter Begone recognized, a “K”. The implications of that weren't lost on him and he hurriedly began to transfer the remaining symbols onto the page. The result was watching a sentence appear below his markings—one that almost made sense.

#### *Knock and the door will open*

“Knock where?” Begone wondered aloud. “There is a *doorway*...but it's missing a door!”

He mulled that over for a few moments without coming up with any ideas and decided that at least he could still go inside and see if the symbols there were telling him to knock on something too. He was about to do that when one of the '*lone*' symbols caught his eye. Most were clumped together like the ones that had formed the sentence, but here and there he could see single solitary symbols scattered haphazardly about the stumps uneven surface. Those seemed to '*glow*'—though they weren't really glowing, more than the others too. For no particular reason, Begone decided to trace it into his book too. Amazingly, even though it was just the one character, an entire word appeared below it.

“Myhth?” Begone said the word with bewilderment as he remembered the last time he'd heard it. *Isn't that the place across the sea Ohrder and Dougerty were talking about?*

The moment the word was out of his mouth, the symbol didn't just glow, it began to pulsate. Begone's first instinct was to leap back; instead, for some unknown reason, he raised his hand and knocked on the undulating mark.

Visually, nothing happened. But there was a sound as if strong gust of wind had just come up, though not a hair on Begone's head was stirred, and it lasted but only a moment before everything fell still again. When he turned in the direction the sound had come from he found himself looking at the empty doorway and simultaneously found himself wondering, *I wonder if the room beyond is still empty too?*

Even though he knew he was no hero in a story—though he surely wished he had a jawbone in his hand instead of a book—a sword would have been even better, he crept forward until he could peek around to look inside at the hollow interior. You would have thought he'd let out a sigh of relief at finding it empty—except it was *too* empty. The flowers and the note had vanished.

By the time Begone made it back to the castle the sun was still out, but far from high in the sky. The incident at the stump had shaken him up so badly that he'd ended up wandering through the forest oblivious to his surroundings for most of the day—until he'd looked up and found himself at the edge of the lifeless Dearth. That had woken him right up and he'd turned around to find his way back to the castle; which hadn't been an automatic thing by any means even though he'd done his best to memorize the way the last time he'd been out with Ohrder. But even after hours of reflecting back on what had happened when he'd knocked on the mysterious Myhth symbol, the thing he couldn't quit thinking about was that his parents—whoever they might be, might not even be from Ehlsewhere. You wouldn't think that would matter—but it did! While he hadn't gleaned much about the land he'd always known as Faraway, what he had heard whenever anyone spoke about it was what a horrible dangerous place it was. And if that was true—if *that was really the case*, then maybe his parents hadn't *abandoned* him by leaving him in the stump, *maybe* they had been trying to *save* him. And as far as that went—who knew what type of strange and dire lands all the other symbols might point to? It was enough to spin an orphan boy's head, and it certainly did.

So, by the time he made it back into the castle to rush up to the wizard's chambers to return his book, Begone was practically running in his eagerness to tell Ohrder about what had happened. In his excitement he failed to even knock at the door and barged right in. Not that it mattered, for once the wizard was not at his desk or anywhere else he found either. Disappointed, Begone turned to sulk over to the shelf to return his book and almost stubbed his toe on a new piece of furniture that had been added since his visit earlier that morning. It was small wardrobe; nothing too fancy, just big enough to hold a cloak and a few other personal items. And there *was* a cloak inside; one resembling the one he'd left lying in a crate outside the Royal Kitchens, only this one only *looked* dirty and rat chewed. That put a warm feeling in his heart, but not nearly as much as the little nameplate affixed to the outside of the wardrobe. There was only one word inscribed on it, but he found himself standing there reading and rereading it for a long, long time.

### *“Shahdow”*

He still didn't know who his parents were, but having a name, *and* an “H” to go with it was still a pretty good thing. Not that he *needed* an “H”; that was something he *had* worked out as he wandered the forest. He wasn't hopeless no matter who he was or where he was from. He had a good life and it seemed to be getting better every day. It's worth pausing here to note that while ‘*Shahdow*’s optimistic outlook here is commendable, it's also a truism that if you find yourself at the top of a hill, then there is nowhere to go but down. But then the optimists among us would

likely say, “Ah...but that just means there’s a higher hill yet to be found. And sometimes they’d be right.