

Chapter Five

The Wizard's Lair

Be gone! Ohrder thought, but of course, unvocalized, that in itself wasn't enough to banish the youngster and his infernal talking book from his presence. *Not that it would matter if he did speak the words, he'd just come right back anyway.*

Except that might not be true. The boy hadn't been around nearly as much lately. The wizard was sure of it—or almost sure. Admittedly, he wasn't all that attentive to the world around him when he was working on a puzzle. And the puzzle of all puzzles had just become even more perplexing than usual—or maybe it was finally starting to make some sense. Honestly, he couldn't even make up his mind about that. With an irritated sigh, he rolled up the scroll he'd been working on, slipped it gently back into its case, and pushed himself up from the desk.

"You'll need to put that book down if you're coming with me," he announced before turning to cross the room. He didn't spare even a glance in the direction of the boy on the rug, who may or may not have even heard him over the prattling of the tomb in his hands.

Begone did hear, and as caught up as he was in the story of a young boy about his own age going out to fight a giant, he never-the-less slammed the book closed and unceremoniously shoved it back into its place on the shelf. As much as he cherished the book and his time spent with it, Ohrder rarely spoke to him, and had never *invited* him to do anything before. Even though the old man moved much faster than you would expect of someone of his advanced years the boy was right on his heels when the wizard reached the far end of the room and opened a door that the boy didn't even remember seeing before. The action was anticlimactic—at first.

Ohrder reached into the shallow closet and pulled out a heavy wool cloak, which he slipped over his shoulders. Then turning to give the boy discerning frown and seeing that his wearing a simple linen shirt and trousers, though of a much nicer cut—and *cleaner* than he usually wore—*where had he gotten those?*—he reached back inside and brought another cloak and held it out to the youngster. "Here, you'll need this. It'll be cold when we get where we're going."

When Begone put it on he was surprised to find that it fit him perfectly. But not nearly as surprised as when the wizard closed the door only to open it right back up again. The cloakroom was gone, replaced by a lush green forest growing on the other side of the doorway. That brought so many questions with it that all he could do was stand there mutely and stare with wonder while he mind fought to make sense out of what he was seeing. If Ohrder even noticed his conflicted state, he ignored it and strode forward into the wilderness awaiting them with as little concern as if they were stepping out into one other castle's myriad of corridors.

"Should I shut it?" Begone asked breathlessly after hurrying across the threshold to keep from being left behind.

"No need," the wizard answered without even slowing.

When Begone looked back he saw that was true—there's no need to close a door that isn't there anymore. "How are we going to get back?"

"The same way we got here, of course," the wizard stated impatiently, then added, "If you used your eyes more and your tongue less you might be surprised at what you could learn."

While Begone couldn't see how that could be true—he was pretty sure he could study that strange door for a lifetime without figuring out how it worked, he bit his tongue and fell into step behind the wizard. Being no stranger to forests—he loved to roam the one surrounding Ehlsewhere, glancing around he didn't find anything that he hadn't seen hundreds of times

before. Tall, some even gigantic, evergreen trees surrounded them, with a few of their deciduous breather thrown in here and there, and every kind and hue of underbrush you could imagine filling in the rest of the portrait stretching out as far as the eye could see. As far as the boy could tell the mysterious door had deposited them somewhere just beyond the village, but rather than risk another rebuke he kept that observation to himself.

Ohrder was leading them down a trail. A well-traveled one that meandered a bit but ran in a mostly easterly direction toward the still rising sun that was an hour or so from reaching its zenith. Just as Begone was starting to think that things were looking familiar and that he might know where they were, they crested a rise and he found himself looking down on a pristine little lily pad coved pond with cattails growing along its sides and a half dozen varieties of water fowl swimming across its shimmering surface. He was positive he'd never set foot near the place before, but it turned out he was wrong.

"That's where I found you," Ohrder said mater-of-factly, drawing the boy's attention away from the mesmerizing little pond to follow the direction of his bony pointing finger.

They'd been passing by big trees all morning but the one Begone's eyes fell upon dwarfed all of them—or *at least it once would have*. The '*stump*', still rising at least twenty feet high and hollow in the middle had to be at least ten feet across. There was no doubt that it was hollow because there was a doorway carve into it. *No*—not carved—*grown*. He thought his eyes had to be deceiving him about that until he crept closer and found that, yes, both the perfectly uniform and arched doorway and the hollowed out interior beyond showed not the slightest indication that a tool had ever been used on it. The same was true of the plethora of symbols adorning its bark that you might not even notice if you didn't look closely, but once you did it was then hard to see anything else because they almost seemed to pulsate with life. The book in the wizard's study had been teaching Begone to read, but none of the symbols before him matched anything he'd seen before. So, if they were letters they weren't in a language he was familiar with, leading him to speak his thoughts out loud. "I wonder what they mean?"

Ohrder was so distracted remembering back to a certain day almost ten years before that he didn't really pay attention to the boy's question. If he had he likely would have turned to ask what he was talking about, and *that* might have led to an amazing discovery. But since he didn't, and because he wasn't in the habit of admitting he didn't know something, he just mumbled, "Nothing you need to be concerned with."

"*And you found me here?*" Begone had approached the stump and he leaned in through the opening to look inside. What he saw was similar to the exterior except there was bare wood, turned gray with age, instead of bark; but there were still plenty of the symbols to be seen. The '*floor*' instead of being dirt as he'd expected was covered with soft green moss. Or so he assumed without having yet to set foot upon it.

The wizard hesitated before answering. The boy's question was formed of only five simple words, but Ohrder recognized his wonderment went well beyond that. "People sometimes bring things here and leave them...usually food, sometimes a prized possession; on rarer occasions a letter asking for healing or some other request. They think the tree has some kind of magic," he paused there for a moment as if speculating himself, then finished. "You are the only child who has ever been found and I don't know who or why they left you. It's just a good thing I happened along to find you when I did."

Strangely, Ohrder's comment about the tree being—or *not being*, magical was as confusing as anything the wizard had just told him. If the thing before him was just an old stump, then why did the symbols seem to dance with life. It was almost as if they were gyrating with the

anticipation of having him reading aloud whatever it was they had to say. But, then again, who knew more about magic than Ohrder? And remembering the wizard's sharp retort the last time he'd asked about a magic related item, he decided to keep his mouth shut.

"Come along now," Ohrder broke into his thoughts using a gentler tone than normal. "We've still a good ways to go in front of us."

Since the day Begone had reached out to take the talking book off the shelf, words had come to mean more and more to him. As he walked along, shuffling forward after the wizard, one word kept echoing over and over in his head, *left...Left...LEFT!* All his life he'd known that he didn't have a family. From time to time he'd find himself wondering why that was...wondering what had happened to *them*? Somehow he'd never considered the possibility that he was alone because he was unwanted. *Unwantedness* itself he had full understanding of that. It was clearly illustrated to him the looks and comments he received anytime a member of the nobility laid eyes on him. No that wasn't true. Princess Chahrity didn't look at him that way. In fact, he often felt like she even *wanted* him around. Remembering that was helpful, but the thought that two other people—the two who should have wanted him the most, had abandoned him in the forest made Begone, who had spent his entire life alone, suddenly feel like he'd never really understood the meaning of the word before. The emptiness that brought with it left him staggering along blindly, his eyes glued to the hem of the wizard's heavy cloak as it brushed along the forest path in front of him. When Ohrder braked to an abrupt halt the boy nearly collided into him before coming to a stumbling stop of his own.

"Aaurgh," the wizard made a sound that wasn't quite a word but still easily conveyed his displeasure. His feet were planted squarely at the edge of—*something*.

Begone had already seen a lot of odd things that day, but the sight before him made all the others pale in comparison. Not literally, since just beyond the front edge of Ohrder's robe the forest around them went from lush greenery to ashen white. Not *ash* white. No fire had caused what Begone beheld. It appeared as if something—a massive something, had come along and syphoned all the life out of every living thing in sight, taking with it almost all the color too. The line of demarcation stretched out on either side of them from horizon to horizon. The boy swiveled his head from side to side trying to take in the enormity of what he was seeing.

"What is it?" he finally asked, so caught up in the moment that he didn't even pause to consider how his question would be received.

"The Dearth," Ohrder snapped with irritation, though his ire had nothing to do with the boy's inquiry. "It's known by other names, but I've always thought that one suits it best." He made some other not quite word sounds, then added, "It shouldn't be *here*."

"Then where should it be?" Begone spoke his confusion.

"Nowhere!" Ohrder huffed before lifting an angry hand to point ahead. "But if it must be, it should be well in front of us."

Giving one last angry shake of his head, the wizard started forward again. He only went a short ways before turning to look behind him where Begone had become a human statue with one foot still planted in the green grass and the other raised above the washed out earth below. The fear on his face was obvious; no words were necessary to explain what he was thinking.

"It won't hurt you if you don't touch it," Ohrder explained. "You don't have any holes your shoes, do you?"

Begone jumped backwards and quickly checked the bottoms of his feet. His shoes were new, like the rest of what he was wearing, a gift from the princess, but he figured it was better safe than sorry. Additionally, he took a moment to pull the hood up on the cloak Ohrder had given

him; then tied it closed and pulled his hands up into the long sleeves to protect them too. A moment later, after he'd drummed up the courage to follow the wizard into the Dearth, he was glad he did. At a guess, the moment he'd crossed the line the temperature had dropped to near freezing. Or who knew, with no water in sight to know for sure, it might even have been well below that.

"Has that book taught you how to count yet?" Ohrder's question caught him off guard, but Begone gave a quick nod of his head. "Good. Then start counting your steps, and don't get distracted, I need to know how far this has gone."

Two thousand steps later—give or take, Begone may have gotten off track a bit until the wizard told him to start tying a knot in the cord securing his cloak for every hundred steps, the Dearth was still the Dearth—only '*Dearthier*'. But the scenery did change as the forest gave way to an open field with a massive wooden wall erected at its edge; standing a good twenty feet high, it ran off in a gently curving arch in both directions until it disappeared from sight. Ohrder crossed into the meadow without hesitation, altering his course just slightly to take him toward the endless wall's only defect; a wide double sided gate—a *barred gate*, secured with a squared piece of lumber it would have taken fifty men to set in place—if those men could have reached ten feet in the air to lower it into its mighty iron brackets. As Begone drew nearer he noticed the colossal crossbeam wasn't the gates only adornment; mounted above it was crudely carved sign, its garish block letters looking as if they'd been hacked into the wooden planks by a clumsy—or possibly drunken, brute wielding a dull broad-axe. That wasn't close to what actually happened; the truth was that the young man with a simple hatchet in his hand just wasn't skilled at using it—magic was his specialty. With difficulty, Begone used his newfound linguistic skills to sound out the words chiseled there.

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Bewildered, he turned to gape at Ohrder, too afraid to speak the question the sign begged him to ask.

"Not *me*," Ohrder told him, managing to sound both indignant and amused at the same time. "Surely you didn't think I was the *only* wizard around, did you?"

In truth, Begone hadn't thought that he was or he wasn't since he hadn't ever given the matter any thought at all—Ohrder was Ohrder and as far as Begone knew that's the way things were, always had been, and always would be. He didn't think about the sun coming up in the morning either; or why fish couldn't breathe air or young boys couldn't breathe water. Still, instead of a more honest *shrug*, he gave a slight shake of his head.

"But why is there a wall...with a *locked* gate?" he finally managed to ask.

"To keep the Dearth from getting out," the wizard replied. The words came out sounding like they'd left a sour taste in his mouth. There was no need for him to add that whoever the wall builders had been that they'd failed miserably. In frustration he found himself turning around to look back at the lifeless blight that had escaped its bonds—not the wall, but the magical weavings that had contained it for so long; according to the boy's count the Dearth had expanded by almost a mile—in *all directions*! That realization brought a scowl to his features and the line from the prophesy back to mind; the line that had led him to return to inspect the wall after an almost ten year absence.

"The shadow grows," he spoke the last few words from the scroll aloud. Shadow being one of the other—though more obscure names, for the Dearth. He gave a resigned nod. "And, no, there is no denying that."

"Princess Charity says I get taller every time she sees me," the boy interjected gleefully.

As irritating as it was to have someone interrupt his thoughts by speaking to him, Ohrder had found that on rare occasions it was a good idea to actually listen to them. Turning back around, he leveled his gaze on the youngster looking up at him with a cheery smile on his lips. “And what might the shadow’s growing have to do with...*you*?”

“Ah...it is me,” the boy answered hesitantly, suddenly looking sheepish and dropping his eyes. “Princess Chahrity calls me her shadow and other people hearing her say that have started calling me that too. No one has called me Pot Boy in almost a week.” Though obvious a little embarrassed by the whole situation, it was clear that the youngster was quite pleased with the turn of events surround his name. Giving the bleached ground a nervous kick with his toe, he snuck a quick glance up at the wizard and asked, “Do you really think I’m getting taller?”

He likely was; there was no doubt he was finally putting some meat on his scrawny frame—that likely had as much to do with the time he was spending around the princess—especially around meal time, as his new name. One other change was obvious now that Ohrder stopped to take note of it; the stoop shouldered boy who had scurried everywhere he went avoiding people or even making eye contact was missing. The youngster standing beside him had his chin up and his shoulders thrown back looking ready to tackle—well, maybe not the *other shadow*, but you’d certainly no longer call him timid either. These were some of the many thoughts that stormed through the ancient wizard’s head; aloud he said, “There are more ways to grow than just getting taller.”