

Chapter Twenty Three

Vile Beasts

The hunting party passed through the castle gates and made its way to the courtyard two hours later. They could have made it sooner had Prince Juhstice been willing to leave the carcass of the monster behind. But as much as he wanted get the two injured boys and Prince Dharis—who claimed he was fine despite moving about with a pronounced limp, back to have the healers attend to them, he knew he needed to have *proof* of what had happened when he rode back into Ehlseswhere. So, the creature was lashed to a travois made from some of the saplings it had snapped off, which was pulled behind a pair of the horseback knights. While Kholin's broken body was carried on another after being covered by Prince Juhstice's long cloak. One of the other knights had to surrender his own mount to the Lahnsend heir—against Dharis' many protests, while Reginhald was seated behind another. Shahdow, who hadn't regained consciousness since the hunters had arrived back in the meadow to roll the dead creature off of him, made the trip cradled in Prince Juhstice's arms. The boy's breathing was steady, but he was covered in so much blood—there was no telling at that point how much of it was his own, that it looked like the prince was riding along with a corpse in his arms. Juhstice had sent a runner ahead as soon as they reached the city gates, so by the time the hunting party reached the courtyard half the royal court had turned out to meet them—the most notable exceptions being the king and queen of Ehlseswhere, but that really didn't come as much of a shock to Juhstice.

Princess Chahrity broke away from the those gathered at the edge of the courtyard to come rushing up to her brother. Her eyes swept briefly over the horrendous sight being drug along behind a pair of horses, but then shifted to her brother and finally to the motionless body in his arms. Seeing Shahdow's dreadful state, she put a hand to her mouth and gasped, "What happened? Is he alright?"

"I don't know," Juhstice answered her second question as he dropped the reins he was holding to motion impatiently to a pair of healers still standing back and watching with the rest of the crowd.

To their credit, the white-clad figures—a man and a woman, hurried over and not only took Shahdow's unconscious body from the prince, but after laying him gently on the ground began to immediately assess his injuries; one of them pulling damp clothes out of a stoppered vile he was carrying to start wiping away the dried blood on the boy's face and arms while the other took out a magnification horn to listen to his heart. They were still in the initial stages of their inspection when a door suddenly appeared out of nowhere behind them, only to open a moment later to admit Ohrder, who came striding through it looking like a dark cloud that was about to thunder and lightning on everyone in sight. Upon seeing him the two healers started to shrink back, but the wizard motioned for them to hold their place.

Then he turned to Juhstice and asked the prince the same question that had been posed to him only minutes before, though his sister's tone had been tinged with worry instead of dripping with danger. "*What...happened?*"

Rather than answer directly, Juhstice motioned to the only eyewitness to the horrific events that had transpired. Sir Ghilem, who Reginhald was mounted behind, rode up and Juhstice gently instructed the boy, "Tell them what you told me."

Reginhald looked at the wizard's brooding face, swallowed hard and began. He didn't embellish the story, but neither did he leave anything out. During the entire dissertation his voice

had held steady, but as he drew to the end it quavered as he looked down at Shahdow and added, "He saved me...I think he saved us all."

Ohrder nodded, whether in agreement or just distractedly as he absorbed what he'd heard, it was impossible to tell. A few moments later the wizard turned abruptly and strode over to stand beside the dead thing on the travois.

"What is it?" Prince Dharis, who had spoken hardly a word on the ride back to the castle, asked the question as if his life depended on the answer.

"A vile beast," Ohrder answered without hesitation.

"Yes, undeniably, but what *kind*?" if Dharis had tried to keep the impatience out of his voice, he'd failed miserably.

Looking down at the creature that still had a knife hilt protruding from its chest, Ohrder shook his head. "No matter how many more of these we come across, I doubt we'll ever see one of its like again...some will be worse...*none* will be anything less than a nightmare."

Prince Dharis looked shocked by Ohrder's answer; that might have something to do with the inference that there were more—and worse versions of the creatures out there. But Chahrity's expression became pensive as she said, "Vile beast...why does that sound so familiar?"

For answer, Ohrder quoted from a scroll he'd read countless times before and one that everyone gathered had heard the words of, even if until that moment they hadn't remembered them. "Vile beasts and worse will roam the earth. Set loose they'll rend, 'til the curse descends. As the land was cursed, when he spoke the verse, so the world will end, when he speaks again."

The princess looked at him with wide, fearful eyes and asked, "Are you saying the prophecy is beginning?"

"Actually," Ohrder told her with a heavy voice. "My hope is that it's not already ending."

Shahdow opened his eyes to find himself in an unexpected place. He recognized it readily enough since he knew every bedchamber within the castle, but the fact that he was lying abed in the room Prince Dharis had been given during his stay in Ehlsewhere was as unexpected as you could get. In a rush of panic he was about to jump up and rush from the room when an invisible hand pushed him back down into the soft mattress.

"The healers say you need to rest for another day or two," Ohrder's gruff voice seemed to speak from thin air. Turning his head in the direction of the sound, Shahdow found himself looking at a full-length mirror mounted on the chamber wall. The reflection he saw there was nothing out of the ordinary, just a reversed image of the room he was in, until a moment later when its surface rippled and the wizard stepped through.

"I wish I would have had one of those with me in the forest...*yesterday*...?" Shahdow commented, turning one sentence into both a thoughtful statement and a probing question. One part of his comment or the other caused the wizard to break stride and get a speculative look of his own.

"It *was* yesterday," Ohrder nodded. "Barely...they'll be ringing the last bells for the night any minute now."

Shahdow looked to the room's only window and saw that night had already fallen, which from Ohrder's comment meant that he'd slept for more than an entire day. "Why did I sleep so long?"

"The healers gave you something to keep you from waking up to allow your body to heal," the wizard replied. "Your wounds aren't serious, but they are...*extensive*."

Extensive. Shahdow let the new word bounce around his head for a moment and decided he liked it. It wasn't one you'd get to use *extensively*, but he'd make sure he did whenever the opportunity *arose*. "I don't think I can go back to sleep. Can I get up?"

Remembering the shove—gentle as it was, that he'd receive the last time he'd tried to exit the bed, Shahdow had used his most supplicant voice, but the wizard just shook his white head.

"No," Ohrder answered unequivocally. "But you *can* have visitors."

With that he gave a wave at the bedchamber door, which proceeded to unlatch itself and swing inward. A moment later the Prince of Lahndsend came limping across the threshold. Dharis made his way painfully over to the side of the bed to stare down at Shahdow, a grave expression was etched on his face for long seconds before he began to speak, letting his eyes confirm what he'd been told, that the boy was really and truly alright. Actually, after what he'd witnessed in the forest, he was having a hard time understanding how the youngster was still *alive*, much less how he was lying there looking like the most stressful thing he'd done lately was take a stroll through the woods instead of battling a creature out of nightmare.

"How are you feeling?" the prince finally asked, still studying the boy intently.

Since Shahdow hadn't done anything more strenuous than try to sit up in bed, he had some painful surprises in store for—and he *did* remember the events of the Royal Hunt, but at that moment he shrugged and said truthfully, "I feel fine. But it looks like you hurt your leg when the horse fell on you."

Prince Dharis nodded, but then he shook his head with wonder. "And yet a creature *bigger* than a horse fell on you and you seem to have come through mostly unscathed." He broke off to look down at Shahdow's left forearm, which was wrapped in bandages. "Other than taking a nasty scratch, that by all rights should have taken your arm off at the elbow."

Shahdow's eyes went wide as he looked down at his cloth wrapped arm. As if reading his troubled thoughts, Ohrder spoke up. "There will be a scar, but the healers assure me that it will heal perfectly otherwise."

That came as a relief, but his face remained troubled as he considered his situation. Finally he looked back up at Prince Dharis and asked the question that to his young mind seemed the oddest turn of events out of everything that had happened in the past few days. "Why am I here in your room?"

"Because they were discussing whether to put you on a rug in the wizard's chambers or take you to the stable," the prince informed him, obliviously still irritated at what had transpired.

"*And*...because I owe you a life debt. You saved my life, Shahdow. I will never forget that...nor will my kingdom. I *will* see that you are properly rewarded for your bravery!"

Shahdow sorted through Dharis' words for a few moments, but then he shook his head decisively. "You don't owe me anything, Your Majesty. You saved *my* life first...mine and Reginhald's...both of us, so if anything, I owe you a life debt. But I don't have any way to repay you for it other than to say, thank you."

"Remarkable," Prince Dharis had to laugh at the boy's humble response. "Nevertheless, a title and lands await you in Lahndsend. My hope is that when I return home after the festival that you'll accompany me to claim them." Seeing Shahdow's shocked, then worried look, he was quick to add. "Not that you need to...weeks from now, decades, or never if you chose...Lahndsend is at your disposal, not the other way around. And...I promised Ohrder that I wouldn't linger so long to tire you out, so I'll wish you well and take my leave. But Shahdow, I'm right outside your door if you need anything, and don't hesitate to call."

After the prince had hobbled back out of the room, Shahdow turned to Ohrder and asked with a troubled voice, “What did he mean by a title and lands?”

“You would become a noble of their realm,” Ohrder explained. “The lands could be anything from a large section of farm land to a city estate with a manor house, with of course the servants to manage it. And whatever the land you were ceded was called, would become part of your title. So, let’s say you were given a holdings known as...*New Haven*, then you would be, Shahdow, Lord of New Haven.”

“Like Reginhald’s father,” Shahdow said with wonder.

“Quite right,” Ohrder confirmed, watching his reaction closely.

“But I don’t have to...I don’t have to go to go to Prince Dharis’ kingdom, or even become a lord, if I don’t *want* to?” the boy asked hopefully. Even though it had been several months since he’d first been asked what he *wanted* to do, Shahdow was still having trouble accepting that he could at least somewhat be the master of his own fate.

“No,” Ohrder assured him. “Prince Dharis seems completely committed to seeing to your best interests...whatever those interests might be.”

Shahdow cast a guilty glance over at the door. “Has he been staying in the valet’s quarters?”

The wizard nodded. “He insisted. And he hasn’t left since you were brought in.”

The valet *‘quarters’* were really nothing more than an oversized closet adjoined to the entryway of the visiting dignitary’s suite Prince Dharis had been staying in since his arrival. Shahdow only hoped the prince’s valet, Sir Rhupert—a noble in his own right, hadn’t been relegated to his own *‘quarters’* in the loft of the stables.

Ohrder stood by his bedside, looking down at Shahdow, but not necessarily seeing him. After a fashion, he roused himself with a shake and stalked in his own purposeful measured way over to the mirror mounted on the wall and reached an arm inside. A moment later he was back at the bed holding forth a well-known and much loved book.

“Please stay in bed and out of trouble,” the wizard made the request sounding like he doubted either of those things were likely to happen.

Shahdow accepted the book eagerly and assured the wizard that he would comply with his wishes, even though he would have much rather at least got up long enough to search out Reginhald to see how his ankle was doing. After Ohrder left, Shahdow lay back on the bed and thought about Prince Dharis’ visit. Reginhald said he already lived better than a noble, and from what he could see, that was largely true. So, why did the thought of being given some silly title and property in a faraway land make a part of him want to take the prince up on his offer? It made no sense. His thoughts drifted back to the morning of the hunt when Prince Dharis had pointed to the distant snow covered peak—what had he called it...*Eagle’s Reach*?

“Lord of Eagle’s Reach,” he whispered the words to himself, then immediately darted his eyes over to the mirror. Surly he hadn’t said it loud enough for Ohrder to hear, had he?

On one level it’s interesting that he chose that particular place and that particular title to let his imagination take flight. But on the other hand, of course that’s how it went.

He drew the book close and even opened its cover, trying to put his time—idle as it was, to better use. The book certainly did its part, presenting him with a story of a boy about his own age who was having trouble taking care of his flock of sheep. As interesting as the story was—and even early on it was *very* interesting, his mind kept drifting back to a realm he’s never seen, or even heard of until a few days before. There was *something* else about the kingdom of Lahndsend that was nagging at him that he couldn’t quite put his finger on—and *then it hit him*. He remembered the morning he’d spent in the city keeping members of The Hand from *‘picking’*

Prince Dharis, and the way the prince had looked at Princess Chahrity and the way *she* had looked back at him. Immediately his dislike for the man—even though he *had* saved Shahdow's life—and nearly lost his own in the process, came roaring back. But along with that flood of emotion came another, *sobering* realization. If things between Prince Dharis and Princess Chahrity continued on as they had two mornings ago, then he might have a *very* good reason to become a Lord of Lahndsend. He couldn't very well protect her if the two of them were living in separate kingdoms; but why was it that he felt like the thing he needed to protect her from the most was Prince Dharis himself, which didn't seem at all fair given that in the short time they'd known each other, the prince had already shown him more kindness than you could hope for in ten *lifetimes*.

Disgusted with himself and the whole situation, Shahdow jammed his nose into his book and forced himself to start reading. That turned out to be an exercise in humility when he discovered that the boy in the story had to protect his flock from a lion *and* a bear. And while you could make the argument that neither an ordinary bear or lion was equal to the *lion-bear* he'd killed, the boy in the story had faced them alone—*with nothing but a sling!* The pride he'd felt at killing one creature with a spear *and* a knife, and only *after* Prince Dharis had already put two arrows into it suddenly had a bitter taste to it.

Things might not have been so bad if Shahdow had paid closer attention to what he was reading. Then he might have noticed that the boy in the story wasn't really alone; and that might have prompted him to remember that, like David in the book, he too had prayed right before facing his vile beast, and that after doing so, as the fateful moment arrived, his fear had melted completely away, replaced by a peace that surpasses all understanding. None of us are ever truly alone, no matter what kingdom we happen to be standing in.