

## Chapter Twenty Eight

### The Vilest of the Vile

“No, we need to go, we have more important matters to attend to,” Ohrder called back over his shoulder, raising his voice to be heard over the shrieking monster.

“But surely if we wait some of its brethren will be along shortly,” Orren yelled back in protest.

The wizard shook his head. “We’re not here to kill the beasts. Burning the forest is our first and only priority. You only have so many arrows, Mister Sweely, and I can only cast so many spells during a given period of time. We need to conserve our resources.”

Ohrder just kept on walking and eventually the rest of the party fell in silently behind him. Dougerty suspected all of them were thinking the same thing he was. *If Ohrder only had a limited number of spells, what would happen to them if he ran out of them before they made it back to the city?* Those thoughts were cut off quickly enough; suddenly there were glowing objects closing in on them from all directions. The woodsman’s prediction had been correct. Dougerty counted a half dozen auras charging towards them. Of course Ohrder saw them too, but the mage didn’t slow a step, in fact he accelerated his pace, veering slightly to his left on a course that took him directly between two of the biggest glowing objects.

“Fire only if you must,” the wizard called back without breaking stride. “Hopefully they’ll pass right on by in their hurry to get to the wounded one.”

It turned out to be a good strategy—or so it seemed at first. Dougerty watched as all six of the creatures stormed passed without giving them a second look, but being the seasoned veteran that he was, he dropped back to the rear of their possession to keep an eye on their back trail. It was a good thing he did. Only minutes later one of the glows reappeared, only the creature making it was no longer running. The thing worked its way forward with stealthy precision, moving from one area of concealment to the next, with methodical care. The behavior was so different from what he’d seen out of the other creatures that Dougerty decided to let things play out for a while, just to see how cunning the beast might actually be. Should it suddenly change tactics, or close the distance between them too much, then he’d warn the others, but until then he patiently studied his enemy.

“Help me...*please...somebody help me!*” the desperate high pitched cry rang out from behind them, coming from the exact spot the creature that was stalking them had just ducked into. Dougerty felt a sinking sensation as he visualize the poor child who had been hiding in the thick underbrush suddenly set upon by the vile beast. As devastating as that image was, it lasted only a moment as other things clicked together in his mind. For one, the glow was still readily visible, shining through the vegetation the creature had crouched behind—the *moving glow*. The second thing that stood out was that even though Dougerty had as yet to get a clear view of the thing, he *had* noticed that it was smaller than any of the other beasts he’d seen to that point, and that it had equal facility moving forward on four legs or only two—like a bear—or *a human!* Movement from behind him brought Dougerty back to awareness and he put out a hand just in time to stop one of the woodsmen from charging past him.

“What are you doing?” The woodsman, a young fellow by the name of Wincelow tried to shrug off Dougerty’s grip, but the older man held tight. “Let me go...there’s a young child out there that needs our help!”

“Look again,” Dougerty told him just as another shrill plea rang out.

*“Quick, it’s got me...you have to save me now!”* Again, the sound seemed to emanate from the exact location of where the glowing creature was huddled behind a clump of bramble bush, craning its head around the side to study them. Royk Wincelow was one of the archers wearing spectacles so he would be able to see that clearly too.

“I don’t understand,” the bowman said with confusion.

“As I told you earlier,” Ohrder had doubled back to join them, along with the rest of Wincelow’s compatriots. “Some of the creatures have human aspects...but that doesn’t mean they are truly human any longer.” The wizard paused to look to his left. “Mister Sweely, would you kindly put an arrow in that thing...and I don’t care where you aim this time.”

In one fluid motion, Orren Sweely drew and fired. His arrow flew straight and true, slicing through the underbrush and lodging in the torso of the figure hiding behind it. The next sound that issued forth had the same high pitch quality, but no words accompanied the sound of pain and outrage; then suddenly the beast was in motion, charging out into the open straight toward them. A wave of arrows launched to meet it, at least six of them hitting their mark with Ohrder’s weaves following right behind. The monster screamed again, then crumpled to the ground as its time-locked body ceased to obey the mutated brain controlling it. Even in so short of an interval the creature had closed to within a dozen paces of them, giving every man there a clear view under the newly risen moon of what had been hunting them.

“That’s just not right...*it shouldn’t be!*” Wincelow voiced what everyone else was thinking as he looked down at the immobilized and possibly dead thing before them; Ohrder’s spell had completely encased the *‘child’* so there was no way of knowing if any of the arrows piercing *her* body had proved to be fatal or not.

Dougerty looked down at the now still body and tried to make sense of what he was seeing. At first glance he was looking at what appeared to be a young girl, not yet even in her teens. But upon closer inspection, her thick black hair was filled with porcupine spikes, while her pale skin glistened under the moonlight as it reflected off the interlocking scales that covered her from head to toe—scales that even mimicked clothing where applicable in a display beyond anything the most accomplished chameleon could hope to pull off. Her hide wasn’t the only reptilian thing about her either. The slatted black pupils of her eyes and the long fangs protruding from her open mouth—each with a droplet hanging from it that *might* have been nothing more than saliva, also testified of her coldblooded heritage. The thing Dougerty couldn’t help but wonder was whether or not she had at one time actually been just a little girl, or if instead the monster before him had been *‘birthed—hatched’* whole from the abomination known as the Dearth? A glance at Ohrder made him think the other man was having similar thoughts, but a moment later, without a word, the wizard turned and started walking again.

A half an hour or so later, blessedly without coming across any more of the vile beasts, Ohrder drew up and said, “Light your first fires here. Once they’re going well we’ll move on and set some more. Archers be ready, I suspect the flames will draw some attention our way.”

Half the assembly unshouldered the packs all the woodsmen were carrying to break out axes and an assortment of fire making materials. Soon the forest was reverberating with the sounds of wood chopping and the snapping of dry branches as the workers began to build a series of pyres, all of them running north and south to make the most of the light breeze that thankfully was starting to gain more momentum as the night progressed. The woodsmen worked quickly and efficiently, laying down the first pyres in minutes as opposed to the hours one might have assumed. Still, Ohrder and the archers had to spring into action early on as vile beasts began appearing, drawn to the unusual commotion within the quiet forest. As hard as it was for the

former soldier, Dougerty stayed with the woodcutters, lending what aid he could there since he didn't even own a bow, and hadn't fired one in decades had he thought to borrow one. He was carrying a sword—and should the need arise, he wouldn't hesitate to step forward to use it, but as things were, with the archers wounding the beast at long range and Ohrder immobilizing them as bait to draw other creatures, his blade was best served chopping kindling for the pyres.

“I think we're ready to light,” Artur Longly announced loudly enough for all to hear. He was a large burly bearded man with a voice to match. As Orren Sweely had wordlessly taken charge of the archers, Longly had essentially done the same with the woodcutters.

“The sooner the better,” Ohrder called back. He'd just finished tying off the weaves of his latest light spell—the eighth of the night, so his own voice came out sounding less than enthusiastic.

Longly and his crew took the tired comment like it was an imperial command, breaking out their strikers and throwing enough sparks at the pyres to make you think it was the beginnings of a fireworks display. Within seconds their careful laying down of abundant tinders and multi-staged kindling resulted in a roaring bonfire over a hundred paces long, which, pushed by the gusting wind, began to spread voraciously into the heavily timbered forest. The flames were so ravenous that Ohrder and the archers had to hurry to get clear of their path, but soon the entire party was reunited and moving on to the next burn site. And so the night progressed. Four more times they broke into their separate teams to construct the massive long fires. With each new endeavor the two groups became more efficient at their tasks, but the toll of constantly swinging axes and drawing bow strings wore on the men—even though they switched off with their tasks, made their movements slower and less precise as time slipped by. Dougerty was the most worried for Ohrder. By the time they started in on the fourth set of pyres the wizard had visibly wilted; for the first time in Dougerty's memory the Ohrder actually looked his age, leaning up against a tree to keep from falling over as his arms struggled to raise up high enough for his gnarled fingers to weave a spell. By the time he finished the last sluggish motion the creature he'd targeted—a wagon sized tortoise with a rat's head, feet and tail, was almost upon two of the archers who had to scramble on their own weary legs to keep from being trampled over. Still, exhausted as everyone was, the moment the beast stopped moving, the archers moved in to retrieve their arrows. That had become the norm as the night drug on. Had they not started doing that, with the number of vile creatures they were facing, they would have run out of ammunition long before. Even with Ohrder's spells in place the retrieval process was not without risk, since in most cases the wizard only paralyzed the creatures limbs to bind them in place. There had been several close calls where men had almost been severely injured, with nearly all of the archers sustaining cuts and bruises. Mostly that was from having to lung out of the way of seeking teeth or claws. Dougerty doubted any of them would make it out of the Royal Forest without a scar of two to remind them of their time spent battling monsters.

“Over there!” Orren Sweely called out a short time later. Blessedly, after the tortoise thing had been dealt with, no other creatures had appeared despite the incessant angry squeals emanating from its rodent throat. Dougerty had begun to wonder if they had finally reached the end of the number of beasts the forest had to throw at them, but a look over in the direction of the woodsman's pointing finger quickly made that hope die a quick death.

He'd tried to pass of his own spectacles off to those armed with bows, but the men swinging axes had declined, understandably so, since they would have been more of a bother than a help when it came to chopping wood. Now, looking off at the long row of glowing bodies slowing

making their way toward them, Dougerty almost wished he was as blind to the approaching threat as the axe wielding men beside him.

“There’s too many of them,” Royk Wincelow’s voice was strained with emotion as he looked out at the impossible sight before his eyes. “If they all charge at once we won’t have a chance.”

Dougerty left his place at the pyres and jogged over in Ohrder’s direction without taking his eyes off the approaching line of creatures. By the time he reached the wizard the glowing line had closed the distance enough for him to make out individual bodies—at a quick tally he counted thirteen of them—*all of them walking upright on two legs*. As Dougerty reached his side, Ohrder was just pulling another pair of spectacles—ones with much thicker clear lenses out of his cloak, which he held up in front of the rainbow hued ones he was still wearing. After a minute or so of study, he pulled the new spectacles down and offered them to Dougerty, who followed his example.

The scene that jumped out at him as he looked through the much more powerful lenses was a vision out of nightmare—*no*, that wasn’t true. What they’d been dealing with for hours had been like living a nightmare, and he was pretty sure the events of the past few hours would haunt his dreams for years to come. But looking out at the assembled creatures—and they *were* assembled, there was no denying that since they’d stopped to gather close together; gathered together in a close ring facing each other and no doubt plotting the best way to eradicate the interlopers who had dared to venture into *their* forest. Dougerty decided he hadn’t really understood how bad a nightmare could get up until that very moment.

“Is there any chance you could catch them all in a single spell?” he asked Ohrder hopefully.

“If they stayed together like they are now...possibly,” the wizard replied without conviction. “But I doubt they’d have a meeting if they were going to do *that*.”

“So, what do *we* do?” Dougerty’s military mind said retreat—*now*, but he wasn’t sure even that would be anything more than a delaying tactic.

“Gather everyone together behind the pyres,” Ohrder said without hesitation. “We’ll keep building them as long as we have opportunity and light them as the beasts draw near.”

“And then what?” Dougerty heard the skepticism in his own voice. “Assuming the fire stops them...which hasn’t been the case with a number of the other creatures, the pyre isn’t all that long yet so they’ll easily be able to flank us.”

Ohrder nodded his agreement. “Then...we’ll find out if I have enough strength left to get us all out of here.”

Dougerty wasn’t sure what that meant, but before he had a chance to ask, the glowing bodies opposite them started moving again; they weren’t charging—*yet*, but they were definitely moving at a faster pace than before, and fanning out as they did, undoubtedly in an attempt to wrap the humans in a living net. Seeing that, Dougerty turned and started shouting at the archers, urging them run for the unlit pyres. As soon as they responded he turned back to Ohrder, ready to scoop the old man up in his arms and carry him if that was what it took, but the wizard was already in motion, his progress not as fast as when he’d been leading the party out of the city, but still much faster than one would have imaged for someone of his advanced years.

The archers were quick to obey Dougerty’s instructions, moving at a run to get behind the pyres where their axe wielding brethren were still hard at work. As soon as he saw that, Dougerty started yelling out orders to the woodchoppers, telling them to begin lighting their fires. By the time he and Ohrder made it behind the line of downed trees—and they were the last ones to arrive, the nearest creatures weren’t more than a hundred paces away. Thankfully, a wall

of flames had already sprung up between them; though he had no idea if that would act as a deterrent or not.

“*Cawwww...die...die...die...time for you to die!*” The closest beast, a normal sized ‘*man*’—but *size* was the only normal thing about him, called out in a shrieking voice. How he was able to speak with a beak instead of lips was a mystery to Dougerty, but the words came through quite clearly. He was even more amazed a moment later when a pair of ebony feathered wings unfolded and the thing launched itself in the air straight at them.

“Take it down, lads!” Orren Sweely gave a shout, thought it probably wasn’t necessary, as a half dozen arrows seemed to strike the airborne abomination as one.

With another shrill cry—this one wordless, the monster crumpled to the ground, falling just on the other side of the burning pyre separating it from the humans; there it beat its wings against the ground in a thunderous drumroll of agony as its final death throes played out. That was the good news. What brought more than a few curses of frustration from the gathered humans was that none of the beasts altered their routes to pounce upon the fallen creature; that was a drastic change of behavior from what they’d experience before. Instead, the remaining monsters picked up their pace, only altering their courses to head around the sides or through the gaps in the burning pyres. At the rate they were going, Dougerty realized he and the others would be overrun in minutes. To a man, the woodsmen were doing their best to hold off the inevitable, firing arrows as quick as they could be nocked—there was even a thrown axe that caught one of the vile beasts square in its tiger striped chest as it had attempted to leapt at them through the flames. As well as the group of humans was holding up, Dougerty had no delusions about the final outcome.

“Gather everyone close,” Ohrder’s words came out as a harsh whisper.

Dougerty looked around to see the wizard pull something glowing out of his cloak, something he hadn’t seen since before he’d left Fahraway; a white oyster. He had no idea what Ohrder intended, but since the thing in the old man’s hand was glowing, he doubted it was merely a misplaced mollusk, and therefore did as he’d been asked by shouting for the rest of the men to join them. Ohrder didn’t wait for the others; with shaking hands he broke open the shell, parting it to reveal a mirrored interior, complete with a polished silver pearl at its center. Then, still looking like it took every ounce of strength he had remaining, Ohrder reached up and touched one boney finger to the pearl. Dougerty, at the wizard’s side, watched with amazement as the air around them began to shimmer and change, the ripples turning the shadowy green forest into the almost as dark stone chambers of Ohrder’s chambers in the castle.

“What about the others?” Dougerty almost shouted the question as he realized that whatever Ohrder had done—the doorway or portal he’d created with the mirrored pearl, hadn’t expanded more than a foot beyond the two of them, leaving the rest of the party behind in the forest to face the vile beasts alone.

Ohrder nodded and sucked in a deep breath before gritting his teeth and straining against something that Dougerty normally wouldn’t have been able to see, but his spectacle enhanced eyes watched with wonder as shimmering strands of light at the edges of the bubble surrounding them began to roll themselves back, enveloping more of the forest as it did. Suddenly, Royk Wincelow—face covered in sweat and soot, was standing with them, and moments later the rest of the woodsmen began to pile in behind him. While Dougerty was still trying to count heads, one of the other men stuck his head and arm back out into the darkness and a moment later pulled a struggling Orren Sweely inside with them.

“Aaahhh, we just lost Givers!” Sweely swore bitterly.

With that new piece of information added to those he'd already counted, Dougerty looked over at Ohrder and told him, "That's all of us then."

The wizard let out a relieved sigh and slammed the oyster closed, sealing away the burning forest and the even more deadly beasts it contained to finally deposit them firmly within the stone confines of Castle Ehlsewhere. The shells were barely back in place before Ohrder's eyes rolled back in his head and his knees buckled out from under him. Somehow, despite his own weariness, Dougerty managed to catch both the wizard and the magic oyster before they hit the ground.