

Chapter Twenty Five

Confessions

Make no mistake about it, some lives are harder than others, and this doesn't have to be just a matter of circumstance where a certain person is born into poverty and upheaval and another is raised in a loving home by well-to-do parents. No, sometimes the strains and toils of life are of our own choosing. For instance, let's take a look at two brothers, not twins but otherwise so very much alike—*on the outside*. They both end up being clerks in different government offices. Now the one brother takes a look around and sees chaos and dissention all around him, but he says to himself, "I am but a simple clerk, so clerking is what I shall do, and I'll leave the rest of this mess to others to deal with. However, the other brother, while getting settled into his own office notices a similar, but even worse state of affairs; and here is where their fates diverge, because the second brother's only thought upon realizing what is going on is this. *Though I am but a lowly clerk, seeing all the angst and despair in those around me, my first duty each day is to do whatever is necessary to help them through it.* Of course, once one comes to such a decision, there still remains the task of carrying it out. Seventy-five years later, Ohrder still often found *doing* the right thing to be quite distasteful. But, seeing no alternative, he gritted his teeth and marched forward into the Royal Court where King Pryhde was seated on his throne surrounded by his other Royal Counselors—including Sir Behkworth for a change. All-in-all, that was probably a good thing, and better yet, the prince and princess were in attendance too. But that had never really been in doubt; Shahdow wasn't one to neglect a task he'd been given.

"Ohrder, Royal Wizard to the king..." the court chamberlain called out in a voice loud enough to echo throughout the massive room. Prince Juhstice and Princess Chahrity gave him a welcoming nod while the Golden Arm cast a scowl in his direction. The rest of the court did what you might expect, which was to ignore his presence entirely until the wizard reached the foot of the throne and gave a half-bow to the king—*for once he even held it until King Pryhde bade him to rise.*

When Ohrder lifted his head he found the king's angry—angrier than usual, eyes blaring down upon him. That came as no surprise. Their last meeting, when Ohrder had to convince the monarch that murdering an innocent boy who'd gotten lost in the woods *wasn't* in his best interest hadn't ended as well as he'd intended. After a long and heated discussion—*that might have had some not so veiled threats woven through it*, Pryde had relented, allowing Shahdow to live. So, while he'd won the battle, Ohrder was afraid he might have lost the war—which was concerning since he was fairly certain the *real war* was just beginning.

"I've granted you your audience," the king snapped. "But don't be all day about it, I've other...*important* matters to attend to."

Ohrder doubted that, and even if it was true, nothing could be more important than the issue he was bringing to the king, but whether or not he'd be able to get that across to the self-absorbed fool sitting on the throne was another matter. After a moment of reflection, during which he harkened back to long past days when a better man ruled Ehlsewhere, Ohrder decided the time for subtlety and smooth talking was over. "The Dearth is expanding at an alarming rate," he announced to every ear without preamble. "At its current rate, it will *devour* the city and everyone here within a few months."

When everyone just looked at him with shocked expressions he continued. "There's more. On a *short* scouting trip into the Royal Forest, we encountered five more of the vile beasts

similar to the one the hunters brought back a few days ago...one of the five had human attributes. And I think I can say with confidence that their numbers will grow every bit as rapidly as the Death does.”

King Pryde gave an impatient sigh. “I heard about the creature they brought back...some kind of bear, wasn’t it?”

“It was no ordinary bear, father...!” Prince Juhstice tried to interject, but the king cut him off with a silencing wave.

“*Whatever* it was, a *child* killed it with a skinning knife,” Pryhde pointed out sourly. He glanced to the side at Sir Behkworth. “I’m sure the Golden Arm and his soldiers can deal with them, however big the *threat* truly is.”

Sir Behkworth gave the king a confident nod, but the garish smile that had creased his lips began to fade a moment later when Ohrder replied, “I wish them all good luck. *I* tried my best to kill all six of them...and failed in *every* attempt.”

While the rest of court blanched upon hearing that, King Pryhde gave a depreciating laugh. “Then perhaps you’re not really the great and powerful wizard you’ve always made yourself out to be.”

Other than the arrogant fool that had made the statement, every other person in the room had a similar thought cross their mind, the fear that they were about to witness the death of the king of Ehlsewhere. Fortunately—for the fool’s sake, Ohrder was still determined to do what needed done. Keeping his spells to himself, and choosing his words carefully, he said, “I’m not the wizard *anyone* should be worried about. The one that’s been sealed within the Dearth for the past fifty years...the one who may break free at any moment to exact his evil will upon any and everything in his path...*he* wields a power beyond any of our imaginations. Except I don’t have to imagine it...I’ve already seen it with my own eyes.”

For once, King Pryhde looked doubtful, as if he might just have realized that the absolute power he wielded as monarch of the realm wasn’t so absolute after all. With a note of concern in his voice, he asked, “Just who is this other wizard?”

Ohrder’s answer wasn’t a short one; standing there in the middle of the audience chamber, he bared his soul. Explaining how as a lowly office clerk he’d sought out the wizard who lived in the woods thinking he might learn of ways to help his struggling kingdom dwellers—*despite the wizard’s reputation for being anything but helpful to his fellow man*. While he didn’t go into great detail of how he’d discovered how to manipulate time, he did provide his enthralled audience with a full description of how he’d *frozen* Khaos just as the dark wizard was calling upon the power of the fallen star, intending to *feed* Ehlsewhere and who knew what else to it. After he finished, silence reigned for several minutes, until Princess Chahrity finally found her voice.

“But if you sealed him up in a place where time doesn’t exist,” she ventured. “Then how could he ever escape since, *ever*, requires the passage of time, doesn’t it?”

“Because time does exist,” Ohrder replied. “I thought my spell stopped it, but in truth it only slowed its passage...almost to an imperceptible point, but it still creeps forward. Think of plants sprouting, only instead of days or weeks, the events within the spell take decades to progress. I first became aware that this was the case when I saw that the Dearth, which should have been fully contained began to spread.”

King Pryde shook his head with irritation. “I understand that the Dearth will have to be dealt with somehow. But how will this Khaos ever pose a real threat if it takes him decades to cast a single spell? Surely the combined force of the kingdom can be brought to bear to thwart that?”

It was an astute observation. Pryde had many faults, but stupidity wasn't one of them. Ohrder got a pained look as the king's question brought the thing that had haunted him for decades front and center into the conversation. "That would be true, Your Majesty, *if* Khaos didn't realize he was being held within a spell, *or* that he didn't know how to break it."

At the king's, and everyone else's, wondering looks, Ohrder explained how the time spell he's used on Khaos wasn't the first one he'd cast that day. And how once the evil wizard discovered his time suspended dinner resting on the stove, then it would be just a matter of his working out the intricacies of the spell before he was able to free himself.

"So, in truth, he might have broken out years ago?" King Pryde's question sounded more like an accusation. At Ohrder's slow nod, the monarch declared, "Then *why* am I just *now* hearing about it? Your *inaction* has put the entire kingdom in jeopardy!"

While on the surface that was an accurate assessment, it was also vastly understated. The reason Ohrder had never shared his secret was because he'd never seen that it would do anything but cause a panic. The simple truth was, if *he* wasn't able to stop Khaos, who could? His response brought that concern to light. "Now that you do know, Sire, what will you do? How will you stop something that devours everything in its path within seconds, growing stronger and stronger as it does? One of the first things your grandfather ever taught me was not to just bring the king a problem, but to also supply him with possible answers. So, until today, I've kept my silence...because I have no answers...all I have to offer is one slim chance of survival."

"And what might that be?" the king asked warily.

"Leave!" Ohrder stated flatly. "Gather everyone in the kingdom up and start marching, as far and fast away from this place as possible. Then, just maybe by the time Khaos breaks free, and starts to feed his fallen star, we'll have enough distance between us to find a safe haven."

"Do you really believe that?" Princess Chahrity asked with exasperation. "Two days ago you said the thing in the courtyard was one of the vile beasts out of prophecy. If the rendering is really upon us, there is no running from *that!*"

"No one is running anywhere," King Pryde stated unequivocally, shutting down all other discourse while sounding every bit the unflappable monarch he was supposed to be. "Ehelsewhere will stand...*we* will stand. Sir Behkworth and his men will begin dispatching these beasts however many of them there might be," He paused to give Ohrder an extra hard glare. "And *you*...you will find a way to defeat this wizard. Unless he's grown scales then he's just a man...and no one man will bring down my kingdom. Do you hear me?"

It was an odd thing to say, the part about the scales, enough so that one might be tempted to think the king had some seer blood in him. In any event, Ohrder bowed in acquiescence and turned to leave so he could start doing the same thing he'd been doing for the past fifty years—interpret prophecy with the hope of figuring out a way to stop a madman.

Ohrder almost made it back to his chambers before the pitter pat of soft footsteps chasing after him came to his ears. Despite his advanced age his hearing was superb so he was aware of his pursuer for some time before the princess finally called out his name. Even then, his inclination was to keep right on walking—if there had been a mirror handy he might have just made quick exit and left the whole troublesome kingdom behind. Not that he truly could have; his mirror spells were limited to a few miles at best, but even the Dearth seemed more appealing than Ehelsewhere at the moment. When he finally stopped and turned around he found that while Chahrity *was* obviously chasing after him, she looked far from the panicked girl he was expecting to find.

“You said *we* when you were describing your trip into the forest,” the princess had drawn up close before speaking; her hard gaze and her tone would have done her father proud. “*Who was with you?*”

Rather than answer her stated question, Ohrder decided to skip ahead to the part that might mitigate the anger that was threatening to burst forth at any moment. “I took every precaution I could think of...I care about his safety as much as you do.”

“If that was true you wouldn’t have taken him into the forest!” Chahrity’s way of shouting actually involved lowering her voice. Still, Ohrder found himself blanching a little at her accusation.

“I had to, there was no other choice,” the wizard told her tiredly. “Believe me when I tell you that. I wish there had been.”

“*Why...?*” Chahrity shook her head with bewilderment. “What could Shahdow do that you couldn’t have done yourself?”

When it comes right down to it, secrets are just something you’d rather other people didn’t know. Ohrder’s thoughts on the boy he’d found in a tree stump a dozen years before fit into that category—*especially of late*. And if it had been anyone else making the inquiry, he would have simply brushed it aside, but Chahrity, with her unflagging care and attention for the boy, deserved an answer.

“I needed to know whether or not the creature that attacked Shahdow had just happened along, or if it was *hunting* him,” Ohrder told her, then waited for her reaction.

Chahrity pondered the phrase for a few moments. “Hunting him...? You mean, hunting *him*...Shahdow in particular, not just anyone...even though it killed the other boy first?” At Ohrder’s solemn nod, she asked, “Why would you think that might be the case?”

“Because other things that have been happening with him have led me to believe that he might play an important role in the events that are overtaking us,” Ohrder replied cryptically, though he hadn’t meant to do so.

“Prophetic events,” Chahrity muttered to herself, then she gave the wizard a curious look. “What other things?”

Ohrder laughed. “You mean aside from slaying a mythical beast with a kitchen knife or being offered a lordship in a neighboring realm? Well, there’s the fact that *you’ve* all but adopted him...while your brother’s been busy turning him into a knight of the realm...or lacking that, that he’s turned out to be one of the world’s greatest pickpockets. Then there’s also your father’s recent obsession with having his head separated from his torso.” He could have gone on, describing Shahdow’s astounding interactions with a certain object, a certain book and a sword and shield, that had all suddenly come to life at his touch, but he chose instead to tell her about the thing that most puzzled him. “But do you know what I find to be the oddest thing of all...it’s that the boy who wandered around this castle for years without anyone hardly even noticing him, is suddenly at the center of every major activity, with his name on everyone’s lips. You’d have thought the kingdom was facing invasion from all the common that took place on the day he went missing in the woods.”

“It’s as I told you before,” Chahrity said. “Everyone loves the pot boy.”

“No,” Ohrder disagreed. “No they don’t. Many of his fellow students from the Honor Garden...*and* their parents wish he would have *stayed* lost, or that the battle with the Dearth monstrosity had gone the other way. The affection you have for your Shahdow is far from universal.”

“I didn’t realize, but I can’t say I’m surprised,” the princess shook her head sadly. “So...*were* the creatures hunting Shahdow?”

Ohrder gave her a dubious look. “I don’t believe so. They seemed just as happy to attack me as him. Being creatures of the Dearth I think it’s likely they’re true motivation lies in reaping as many lives as possible. I believe they in essence an extension of the Dearth and were created to feed it.”

A veil of fear fell across the princess’ eyes. “Sir Behkworth is gathering a party to go out into the forest as we speak. Do they stand a chance against the beasts?”

“I don’t know,” Ohrder told her honestly. “Blades and arrows might very well prevail against them better than magic ever could.”

“Except the knights won’t have the ability to...what did you call it...*suspend them?*” Chahrity pointed out. “Maybe you should accompany them into the forest.”

Ohrder shook his head gravely. “Your father made it quite clear on what he expects me to be spending my time on, and while I may be far from his most compliant subject, I’ve never completely disregarded his orders either. Besides, in this case he’s absolutely right. As dire as the situation in the forest is, Khaos is by far the bigger threat.”

Chahrity heaved a sigh. “I suppose you’re right. And I should let you get to work. Thank you, Ohrder. I should never have doubted you. I know that you always have Shahdow’s best interests in mind...and everyone else’s too.”

Later, after she’d returned to her own chambers, Chahrity spent some time reflecting on the conversation she’d just had. It was only then that she realized she’d neglected to ask Ohrder one very important question. The wizard had essentially said the thought Shahdow would play an important role in the prophecy that was apparently unfolding around them. But he’d neglected to say what that role might be. And she was just as curious what the sage wizard might be thinking about her part in things as well.