

Chapter Twenty Four

Within the Dearth

A knock came at the door causing Prince Dharis to look up from the desk he was sitting at with a frown. Then, realizing that it was almost certainly his valet, Sir Rhupert, he heaved a sigh at not having to lever himself up from his chair and called out, "You may enter."

It wasn't Rhupert. The door swung open to allow Princess Chahrity to come marching in, making the prince scramble frantically to his feet after all. He did his best to keep the grimace of pain off his face, but his voice was still tight as he managed a *somewhat* lordly bow while apologizing. "I'm so sorry, Your Highness, I foolishly made the assumption that you were Sir Rhupert."

Chahrity took one look at him and shook her head. "You should have stayed seated...though I suspect the healers would rather you were abed."

Ignoring her second comment he answered the first, even managing to smile through his discomfort. "Had I no legs instead of one bruised one, I'd still manage to get to my feet when a lady entered the room...and that's even truer for some ladies than others."

Chahrity felt the heat rising in her face and hoped she wasn't blushing, or lacking that, that the weak light from the room's sconces would hide it. "Well, I supposed it's nice to know the rumors about our neighbors to the west being total barbarians aren't true. But really, do sit back down, you're making *me* hurt just looking at you."

Though it pained him almost more than his injured leg to sit while Chahrity was still standing, Dharis dropped back down—literally, without being able to suppress the grunt that escaped through his clenched teeth.

"Should I summon the healers?" Chahrity asked with alarm, all pretenses of lightheartedness gone from her voice.

Dharis waved his hand dismissively. The motion was directed at his own weakness, but seeing Chahrity's hurt look he quickly explained, "Forgive me again. Thank you for your concern, but really, I'm fine. Your healers have taken good care of me and assure me that my leg will be fully repaired...*in time*. I confess, I'm just not very patient with my own shortcomings." He paused to give Chahrity a knowing smile. "But I doubt you stopped by to hear me sniveling about my troubles anyway, did you?"

Chahrity laughed, and wondered why she found it so easy—and *enjoyable*, to be around someone who she really hardly knew. "Actually, I *did* very much want to check to see how you were doing..."

"But...?" Dharis prompted.

She nodded at the door leading into the next room. "But I also want make sure he's doing well too."

"He said he was feeling good when I saw him last night. I haven't been in to check on him yet this morning, I've been drafting a letter to my father, updating him on *most* of my visit so far," he indicated the half-written letter on the desk in front of him. "I thought I'd leave the particulars of the hunting trip out until I can explain the situation to him in person."

Understanding better than anyone the need to properly *manage* information given to the ruler of a kingdom—even if he is your own father, Chahrity nodded appreciatively. "That's probably wise."

Prince Dharis looked over at the door leading to his former bedchamber. "I thought I heard voices in there a little while ago, but he must have just been reading his book, no one else has been by to see him yet today."

That put a funny look on Chahrity's face and she walked over to gently rap on the doorframe. When no answer came from inside, she reached for the knob and stuck her head into the room. A moment later she let out a sigh and finished pushing the door the rest of the way open.

"Is everything alright?" From his chair, Dharis craned his neck around to look through the doorway. He couldn't see all that much, but could tell that the bed was empty with a book lying on top of it.

"It seems you can have your room back," Chahrity told him, not sounding a bit happy.

"He's gone?" Ignoring the pain, Prince Dharis climbed back his feet and limped past Chahrity, crossing the threshold to look around the empty room with confusion. "How...? I've been out here the whole time...he couldn't have gotten past me without my knowing it."

Remembering times they spent together in the city where the boy's stealthy moments were all but undetectable to his prospective berries, Chahrity was confident Shahdow *could* have snuck out of the room, but she told the prince what she suspected had really happened. "Order comes and goes as he pleases...and *how* he pleases. I'm guessing the voices you heard earlier were the two of them talking *before* the wizard whisked them both away."

"This wizard of yours can just appear...and disappear, anywhere and anytime he wants?" Dharis asked dubiously.

Chahrity's initial response was a dubious look of her own. "Lahnsend doesn't have a Royal Wizard?"

"We have some conjurers," Dharis shrugged. "None of them are full wizards...which I'm starting to think is a good thing."

"There are some here that would agree with you," Chahrity told him. "Some days I might even be one of them. But other times I'm not sure the kingdom would survive without him. And one thing is certain...he *always* keeps things interesting."

"Hmmm," Dharis grunted noncommittally, giving the room one last sweep as if he was still having a hard time accepting that *anyone* could simply vanish into thin air. "I wonder what *interesting* place he's spirited the boy off to?"

"*That*...I can't tell you," Chahrity replied, but then she got a sad smile. "What I can tell you is that had your leg been in better shape, it would have been a very nice day to take a stroll through my mother's garden...not that I imagine you'd be interested in such a thing."

Dharis looked thoughtful for a moment, then, with a decidedly surly, but determined expression, he hobbled past her, back into the smaller valet's quarters, where he bent down behind the narrow cot he'd slept on since surrendering his bed and pulled something out. It was a cane of all things. A very nicely crafted one at that, with ornate etchings and a leather wrapped handle; still the prince lifted it up like it was a piece of spoilage scavenged from the refuse dump. Holding the obviously detested thing out towards Chahrity before lowering it to take the pressure off his injured knee, he told her, "Only for you would I suffer the indignation of being out in public in such a sordid state...but I can't guarantee that if someone does see us that I won't toss this in the nearest flower pot and claim it's the world's most hideous rose bush."

The princess laughed freely; the fact was that she thought the cane just made Dharis look even more dashing than usual, but that she kept to herself.

The first interesting place Ohrder had taken Shahdow to was the wizard's own chambers—which was certainly interesting enough even if the boy had spent so much time there that all the oddities that surrounded him seemed quite normal. That changed a few moments after arriving. As soon as they'd stepped through the mirror, Ohrder had turned and started toward the door that opened upon his cloak closet—amongst other things, before coming to an abrupt halt and shaking his head with impatience.

“This is no time to be losing your head,” he muttered to himself, but loud enough for Shahdow to hear. “Unless you *really* want to lose your head.”

Moving like a man a quarter his age, the wizard did a quick about-face and moved to his desk. “Here...” he said, by way of warning, as he plucked an oblong object off the top of the desk and tossed it in Shahdow's general direction. Surprised but nimble the boy made a lung and found himself holding what looked like one of the mussels he sometimes found in his favorite pond except this one was white, with a pitted and uneven surface.

“What is it?” the boy asked.

“It *was* an oyster...a creature of the sea. It's were pearls come from,” Ohrder relied distractedly even as he continued to remove other objects from the desktop and its many drawers. “Open it up and you'll find one inside.”

Having ‘*opened*’ mussels before, which usually required a knife and fair amount of effort, Shahdow gave the object he was holding a dubious look, but after only giving a small tug the two half shells parted without protest, revealing a shiny rainbow hued interior and something else. Shahdow looked down at the perfectly round little ball with its mirrored surface—he'd never actually seen a pearl before, and instinctively reached for it.

“*Don't touch it...*” the wizard snapped while Shahdow's fingers were still several inches away. “...not unless you're in danger. *Then*, certainly do touch it and it will bring you right back here, to this very room. But since you're not in danger at the moment...and you're already here...I'm not sure what would happen. In the meantime, keep it with you at all times...just in case.”

Shahdow nodded as he closed the shell and placed it in the coin pouch he kept hidden beneath his tunic. Since the oyster was barely bigger than his thumb and he rarely possessed more than a coin or two at any given time, it was an easy fit. When he looked back up, Ohrder was holding something else out to him. He accepted the spectacles, much like the ones Ohrder wore when reading or writing, except these had lenses that flashed through all the colors of the rainbow as he twisted them in his hands under the flickering light of the room's sconces. In answer to his unasked question, Ohrder plucked an almost identical item off the desktop and proceeded to set it across the bridge of his long nose, then indicated he wanted Shahdow to do the same. Overall, the room was a little darker, but that's not what made him let out a gasp.

“You're glowing,” Shahdow said with wonder. In fact, the wizard wasn't glowing, but most of the things adorning him, his clothing, the three rings he always wore, the chain holding a medallion hidden beneath his robes and too many other objects to list there were secreted away in various pockets and pouches, were.

“These reveal the emanations of magical...*things*,” the wizard explained. “*Where we're going...*that will be important.”

Taking this new knowledge in, Shahdow looked around the room and found that it was filled to overflowing with ‘*magical things*’. Not surprisingly, one of them being the door that the wizard turned to walk towards. Before reaching for the handle that would presumably open up to

show him just *where they were going* might be, the wizard paused to tell him, “Grab your cloak...it’s going to be cold.”

Standing in the center of the room the wizard always kept on the hot side of warm, Shahdow felt a chill go through him. He wasn’t surprised when a moment later Ohrder pulled the door open to reveal lush green grass and a mixture of deciduous and coniferous trees—already wearing his cloak, the wizard had bypassed the closet’s mundane form entirely. Fighting against the fear the mere thought of going back out into the Royal Forest sent through him, Shahdow hurried over to his own wardrobe and struggled into his heavy wool cloak.

Why are we doing this? Somehow he managed to keep the words screaming through his head for coming out of his mouth. And he tried to tell himself that there was nothing to be afraid of, that since he’d killed the monstrous thing that had attacked the hunting party, there was nothing left in the forest but ordinary creatures, of which, even normal bears and lions would be no threat. Except as much as he wanted to believe that, he had a memory of lying on the ground covered in blood while Ohrder had recited lines of prophecy, prophecy about vile *beasts*, not a *vile beast*. And if not one, then *how many?*

“You should bring those as well...just to be safe.” Ohrder had paused in the doorway with a troubled look on his face. He was pointing back into the room, in the direction of the mirror they had come through a few minutes prior. The magic mirror that for some reason wasn’t glowing. Thinking there must be something the wizard wanted *behind* it, Shahdow walked over and found nothing but bare floor.

“The sword and shield,” Ohrder grouched impatiently when the boy looked at him with confusion.

It’s funny how you can look at something a hundred times without really seeing it. It was as if the wizard’s words had snatched a veil off of his eyes. The mirror that had been there as long as he could remember *was* a shield—a very large one, being propped up in place with a sheathed sword, which was anchored to the shield’s arm straps—the enarmes, by the belt attached to the sheath. Once again, it’s worth noting that none of these things glowed under Shahdow’s lens enhanced scrutiny; not even when he reached out and grasped the sword hilt with one hand while gripping one of the enarmes with the other. The moment he did that multiple things happened. The first was the belt becoming snakelike in its actions as it unwound itself from the shield to fall limply to the side. An instant later both the sheathed sword and the shield came to life too, seeming to draw in upon themselves as they transformed from objects crafted for a grown man into ones perfectly suited to a twelve year old boy. Odder still, though each had a *‘weight’* to them, Shahdow found that neither the sword or the shield were in the least bit heavy.

While he hurriedly began to buckle the sword around his waist, Shahdow turned to look at the wizard. “Why aren’t these glowing...aren’t they magical?”

“Apparently not,” Ohrder answered sourly. “I haven’t been able to figure out what they are. They’ve always been light enough that I thought you could carry them, but I’ve never seen them become...*animate* before.”

Without another word, the wizard turned and walked through the doorway, forcing Shahdow to hurry after him. When he too stepped across the threshold he found himself not just in the Royal Forest, but standing in the little meadow beside his favorite pond—or at least what was left of it. Apparently the Dearth moved through water much faster than land, because even though the creeping whiteness had only just brushed up against the edge of the pond, its entire surface was a flat gray pool of death. Flat, but far from smooth. Everything that had once been

alive within the pond was now floating on its surface. Shahdow let out a groan of despair, feeling as if a part of him had died too.

“Yes, I know,” Ohrder gave him a sympathetic look. “Come...let’s get this over with.”

The wizard led them forward into the Dearth. When Shahdow stepped across the demarcation line the warm gentle breeze that had been caressing his skin became an icy blast, making him reach quickly for his hood, which he pulled into place, tying the drawstrings tight. Everything within the Dearth was just as he remembered it for a good while, with nothing moving and no sound to be heard besides the crunch of dead things under their feet and the soft whispers of their breath. Then, suddenly, within the drab whiteness, Shahdow spotted a glow—a very *large* glow. He’d almost forgotten about the lenses over his eyes until then, and traveling through the endless white sea of death he’d stopped worrying about anything living being around. The thing in front of them was definitely alive—even if it had no right to be.

Ohrder had seen it too and held out his hand to signal Shahdow to stop. It wasn’t something he’d needed to do; Shahdow had frozen in place the moment he’d laid eyes on the creature; or almost frozen. Without realizing it, he’d drawn his sword.

“Wait here,” the wizard whispered. Then, unexpectedly, Ohrder turned to his left and walked away.

Shahdow was relieved at first when the wizard *didn’t* head straight toward the creature, but when Ohrder kept going, putting more and more space between the two of them, he became a little concerned. Because the creature—a thing as big and colorless as the lion-bear he’d killed, but with an eagle’s head atop a stag’s body, with a pair giant wings sprouting from its back and a set of wicked looking talons growing out of the front of its chest, was also moving—and getting closer by the second. That made Ohrder’s, ‘*wait here*’ extremely hard to do, and that was before the bird headed stag locked it’s black eye’s on him and broke into a run.

“Over here, you putrid spawn of the abyss!” Ohrder’s voice shattered the silence as the old wizard began to run right at the abomination racing toward Shahdow. The massive eagle head turned to look and a moment later the beast showed that its feathered appendages weren’t just for decoration as they spread wide and lifted it effortlessly into the air. Two thunderous wing beats later the creature had halved the distance between itself and its new target, but that was as far as it got. Raising a defiant hand, the wizard spoke something too softly to reach Shahdow’s ears but a moment later the monster became a flying ball of fire. When it crashed to the ground with an anguished cry a few seconds later, Shahdow felt the earth beneath him shake with protest.

Incredibly, the vile beast wasn’t done. Almost the instant it touched down, it was back up again, even though it was still covered feathered head to stag-hoofed toe in roaring flames. Whether it could see through the fire consuming it, or by some other sense—or just blind luck, the thing gathered itself and sprang directly at Ohrder, who was now only a few sparse paces away. Unflinching, and with his arm still raised, the wizard spoke another phrase, accompanied by a rapid series of finger gyrations and instantly the flame covered beast became an almost formless inky black blob. A blob that was just as suddenly absolutely still—*once it toppled over to lay motionless on the ground.*

Not trusting that his eyes were telling him the truth, Shahdow walked over to look down at whatever was left of the creature, only getting closer didn’t help in the least. His eyes refused to focus on the total blackness that enshrouded the beast, no matter how much he tried to make out even one tiny detail.

“You can’t see what light can’t reach,” Ohrder told him—as if that really explained anything, before lamenting. “And it seems your blade works better than my fire for killing these things too. Still, I think we’ll just have to leave it be for now.”

Sensing the unspoken message behind the wizard’s statement, Shahdow asked, “There’s something else we need to do?”

Ohrder gave a grim nod. “Find more of them.”

They came upon four others within the next hour; no two alike, but all of them the same washed out white color as the Dearth they were roaming, with each also seemingly knitted together from at least two different *normal* animals. Without exception they were more vicious than a rabid dog and harder to kill than an armored cockroach—though the fourth one might actually have been part cockroach. Ohrder had thrown lightning bolts at the first two, wrapped another in a poison cloud and tried to seal the last in a block of ice, all to no avail. In the end he’d *suspended* all of them, just as he had the first; which had something to do with them not experiencing time like everything else did—though despite the wizard’s explanation, Shahdow still didn’t really understand how it all worked. Then they came upon the fifth vile beast—the one that *didn’t* attack the moment it laid eyes on them. Being part *human* it was smart enough to try and hide itself behind a fallen log until they passed by, allowing it to sneak up from behind to tear them to shreds with its razor sharp wolverine claws. If it wasn’t for the lenses they were wearing, that enabled them to spot the glow emanating from the monster even though it was hidden behind a log, it would have been successful too.

Ohrder didn’t even try to kill the man-beast, he just folded it in light and left it laying on the ground where it had been crouched. Then he turned to Shahdow and said in a weary voice, “I think we’ve seen enough. It’s time to go home.”