

Chapter Twenty Seven

Blood and Ashes

Dougerty hadn't been sleeping well anyway, so after the nightmare of an evening he'd just scouting the Royal Forest he wasn't expecting that to change. By the time he finally made it back to his room he was so exhausted that he was barely able to work up the resolve to kick off his boots before collapsing on his bed. But sleep did come, amazingly, a deep and peaceful sleep—*before the dream came, drenching him in sweat and causing him to sit straight up in bed with a gasp as it ended.*

"It was just a dream," he told himself while listening to his heart pounding in his ears. And he hoped that was the case, that it was just a manifestation of his greatest fears after what he'd witnessed the night before—but it seemed like it might be something more than that. Strange and unfocused as it was in some respects, in others it seemed all too real. Sitting there in the dark, he let the images run through his mind again, pondering what they might mean—*if they were more than just his troubled thoughts leaking into his dreams.*

So much of it had been shrouded in shadows—almost everything except the blood—*so much blood.* The men—nameless and faceless, had been marching forward in formation, despite the fact that they were moving through a forest that should have rendered that impossible. There was no sound; no footsteps, no brushing of fabric or armor against the thick foliage they toiled through...nor cries as they started to scream a short while later. Even through the dark mist that enveloped the dream he could see the soldiers mouths and eyes gaping with terror and pain as they died—*as they were slaughtered.* Slaughtered by foes that seemed more a part of the darkness than not, as they lashed out with seeking claws and rending teeth. That's when everything turned red as their shed blood washed across the dream like an over-gorged river bursting a dam. But only for a moment, and then the flames came, wrapping everything in their ravenous hunger. Bodies, trees, the darkness, and even the deadly things hidden within it; all of them were consumed by relentless ever expanding fire. A fire that wasn't quenched until the only thing left to be seen was ashes; piles on the ground and particles swirling in the breeze. Then the scene shifted one last time. The new place, so starkly removed from the dead forest, was vibrant green, covered in clover and glistening with dew under a bright morning sun. The drastic change of view made it hard to reconcile the two images with each other. Yet, there was a sense that the events were linked in some way, which was given credence a moment later when the young man laying at the center of the green meadow opened his eyes, sat up, and looked sharply off to his right, staring at something in the far off distance. At first his gaze was unfocused, as if his slumber had been long—very long indeed, and he was having a hard time waking up. Then his expression changed, as concern etched itself across his young features and a spark of understanding lit his eyes. But that too lasted only a few heartbeats, before his eyelids grew heavy again and he lay back in the clover. And that's where the dream ended—if it *was* a dream. Considering the night he'd had—and the one he was *planning* to have, the first two parts could be dismissed as nothing more than that, but what about the young man in the field? *Where had that come from?* In its own way, that part of his dream had disturbed him more than anything.

"It doesn't change anything if it was a vision from the Maker Himself," Dougerty chided himself as he rubbed a hand across his face, as if that could wipe the weariness and consternation he was feeling away. With a growl he pushed himself up off the bed to begin the day; it was time to make another trip to the castle; he needed to see if Ohrder had been able to make good on his

promise. He was at the door, ready to leave, when something made him hesitate. With a wry chuckle, he turned around and headed back to the bedside to do something his long years in a cell had ingrained in him, but that the intricacies of life had eroded of late. He spent long minutes on his knees, enough to make them ache, but his by the time he finished he felt more refreshed than he had any time in recent memory. Then, after his prayers were laid at his Creator's feet, he rose back up and started once more toward the door.

"So, did you find what you were looking for?" Ohrder asked the questions while looking over the tops of his reading spectacles—the rainbow hued ones where laying on his desk.

Dougerty nodded gravely. "And more. I managed to convince a half dozen men to go with me...all skilled woodsmen and archers. If I'd taken one less I doubt I'd be here talking with you...and even then it was a near thing."

He went on to describe his journey into the Royal Forest, and how though it was only his intent to scout the area for vile beasts, that they'd come upon one almost the instant they'd entered the trees, but not before the half mole, half raven creature had sensed them and come swooping in with its claws and teeth bared. Four arrows had pierced its hide before it was upon them, and luckily one of those had broken a wing bone, but even then the monstrous thing had crashed to the earth and immediately regained its feet to run straight at the nearest man; a fellow by the name of Beekins, who would be lucky to ever draw a bow again as badly as his arm had been broken in the charge. Ten arrows later and a well-placed thrust through its eye with Dougerty's sword, the hideous thing had finally died.

"But that's where things got really interesting," Dougerty explained, pulling his hand out of his pocket to show Ohrder the glasses the wizard had provided him. "Fortunately I had these on, because as soon as I looked up from the dead one, I saw four others bearing down on us. If it wasn't for their stopping to rend the carcass of their brethren...and fighting over the chance to do so, there's no way we could have gotten away. I'm still amazed that we did."

"The first one behaved the same way. Shadrow says it stopped to rip apart a pair of backpacks, and that allowed he and another boy to climb a tree. It's worth remembering for the future," he broke off to give the other man a thoughtful frown. "What about your friends, did last night's adventure sour them on any more excursions into the forest?"

"Quite the opposite," Dougerty assured him. "Having seen the danger for themselves, they're committed to sending all these nightmare creatures back to the abyss they came from. Right this moment they're making the rounds trying to drum up as much help from their fellow woodsmen as we can get."

It's interesting that though Dougerty thought he was speaking metaphorically about the abyss, he was in fact closer to the truth of the situation than he could have ever imagined. But then again, the influences of the unseen realms upon the this temporal one are almost always more pronounced than *anyone* could ever imagine.

"I on the other hand *am* having second thoughts," Dougerty confessed. "I can't see that my taking them back out there would do more than get them all slaughtered."

For answer, Ohrder reached into the top drawer of the desk he was sitting at and pulled out a double handful of wire-rimmed spectacles—all of which were sporting rainbow lenses. "These should help. Plus, I'm going with you. I can't guarantee that we won't all still be killed, but this has to be done...the forest has to be burned if we want to have any hope of stopping Khaos once he breaks free."

Dougerty looked from the proffered spectacles to Ohrder's determined face and gave a reluctant nod. "Yes, of course you're right. I just hope..."

That was as far as he got before he was interrupted by the unexpected chimes of the city bells ringing out for all to hear. While the bells could be signaling the arrival of yet another delegation come to take part in the upcoming festival, the fervency with which the belfry ropes were being pulled left Dougerty with a sick feeling forming in the pit of his stomach.

"I'll be back," he told Ohrder. "I want to go see what's happening."

Ohrder could have reminded him that it was no longer *his* kingdom to defend, but rather than waste words, the wizard levered himself up from his desk and wandered over toward the large freestanding mirror stationed at the back of the room while his guest showed himself to the door.

By the time Dougerty made it to the city gates, Ehlsewhere's populace was already in a full uproar. He'd picked up on a few tidbits of what was happening on his way, so what he found wasn't a complete shock, but the sight that awaited him was even worse than the flapping tongues had indicated.

Pushing his way through the crowd, the first thing he saw was his old golden armor, no longer shiny and pristine, but looking as dirty and bedraggled as the man wearing it. Sir Behkworth was also covered in blood; how much of it was his own or belonged to the unconscious man cradled in his arms was impossible to say. Dougerty didn't recognize the young knight the Golden Arm was holding, and from a distance it was impossible to tell how badly he was injured—or even if he was still alive for that matter. What *was* plain to see was the agony on Sir Behkworth's face even as he kept shouting orders to those about him, despite the fact that there wasn't another of his men in sight. That didn't stop the commoners he singled out from hopping to as they received his instructions. A portly street vender hesitated only a moment before scampering off in search of a healer, while several other *volunteered* citizens began unloading his cart full of melons to turn it into a litter for the injured soldier. Meanwhile, a dozen others were tasked with closing the city gates—no small feat given their massive size and the fact that they hadn't been closed in so many years that their iron hinges were rusted in place.

What about the ones on the outside? Dougerty found himself wondering. Ehlsewhere proper was a walled city, but there were just as many—if not more, structures and people scattered around the outside of the walls than those housed on the inside, not to mention all the farmers and ranchers in the area. Looking at the bloodied and bedraggled Golden Arm—and *recalling what he'd seen with his own eyes the night before*, he could understand Behkworth's desire to cordon off the city—but did the city truly end at the gates? And would he do things any differently if he were still wearing the golden armor?

News had traveled fast. Within minutes the first of The Watch began to arrive and shortly thereafter the area was teeming with more soldiers than civilians. One of Behkworth's lieutenants, Dougerty thought his name was Trouhbert, approached the Golden Arm to find out what had happened.

Behkworth turned wild eyes upon him to spit out vehemently. "We were ambushed! Shortly after we entered the forest we came upon a dead creature...some kind of giant snake with bat wings and a scorpion's tail. While we were still inspecting it more of the things seemed to spring out of nowhere...I don't know how many of them there were...they seemed to be everywhere."

Trouhbert looked from his superior to the unconscious knight lying in the repurposed merchant's cart. "What about the rest of the men?"

"Gone," Sir Behkworth told him flatly.

"*Nineteen men?*" Trouhbert asked with dismay. "Are you sure none of them survived?"

Behkworth gave a harsh laugh. “As sure as I’m standing here covered in their blood. If we dared to send out a procession to try to retrieve their bodies I doubt they’d be able to gather enough of what’s left to fill a single casket.”

Hearing the Golden Arm’s account of what had transpired, Dougerty remembered his nightmare and found himself wondering if he’d dreamed it, or if instead he’d somehow been made witness to the horrific events as they took place. But no, that couldn’t be the case, at least not entirely. The second part of the nightmare hadn’t happened yet—*but it needed to*. The fires had to be lit, the forest and all the evil it contained needed to burn. As fierce as Dougerty’s desire to return to Ohrder so that they could finish planning out the coming night’s activities, he knew there as another matter that needed his attention first. Word of what had happened to Behkworth and his men would spread faster than any wildfire, and if there was one thing he’d learned during his long and tumultuous life as a soldier, it was that if you wanted men to go to battle for you, the first thing you needed to do was convince them they could win...or baring that, that the war was still worth dying for.

Six hours later, with eleven other men at his side, Dougerty waited on the *outside* of the city gates for Ohrder to appear. A glance around at the solemn faces surrounding him and the yellow ball of the sun already dropping below the far horizon made him want to curse, but he bit it back to keep the men he was leading for realizing that he was just as anxious about what they were doing as they were. A sudden start from a man to his left made him jerk his own head around to find a door opening in the wall behind them—a door that Dougerty was certain hadn’t been there a moment before. A moment later Ohrder came sauntering through with a frown on his wrinkled face; not that that meant anything, Dougerty couldn’t remember a time when the old wizard wasn’t frowning.

“Umm,” Ohrder grunted after doing a quick survey of the group before him. “Well, I guess twelve will have to do. Come along, we’ve got a long night in front of us.”

Dougerty wanted to shout at Ohrder for his derisive comment, but instead he gritted his teeth and fell in behind as the wizard lead the way across the open expanse of land toward the forest. He’d thought it would be easy to catch up with the old man—and he planned to give the surly conjurer a few choice words on leadership and motivation, but he found he was practically having to run just to keep up. By the time they reached the edge of the forest everyone but Ohrder was laboring for breath and Dougerty had to restrain himself from bending over to place his hands on his knees.

“I don’t have enough of these for everyone,” Ohrder said, reaching into his cloak to pull out the spectacles he’d crafted. “My thought would be for the best archers among you to wear them...we’ll want to wound the beasts from as great a distance as possible, while the rest of you focus on setting the fires.”

Without hesitation, one of the men stepped forward to claim the first pair of spectacles. He was a large burly fellow with a wild mop of dark hair and eyebrows to match. He gave Ohrder a mischievous grin, “Orren Sweely, your honor. Pleased to meet you, but I hope you won’t mind if I kill them from a great distance instead of just wounding them.”

“Actually, I do,” Ohrder replied. “A corpse *might* draw the attention of the other beasts, but a wounded creature is much more likely to.”

“From what I’ve seen a wounded one is also more likely to keep coming and tear us all to pieces,” Orren pointed out bitterly. “And I’m not sure we’ll want to draw the attention of any more beasts than necessary, as far as that goes.”

“Valid points, Mister Sweely,” Ohrder acknowledged. “But trust me when I tell you that I won’t let *any* of the creatures get near us...as long as you and the others give me time to do *my* part. My spells can hold the beasts at bay, but I’ll need time to cast them.”

Dougerty watched the woodsman look Ohrder hard in the eyes—something most men found hard to do. Then he gave a nod. “You’ll have your time...and your fires, wizard. We’ll do our part to make that happen, and you can trust *me* on that.”

The rest of the spectacles were handed out as the woodsmen paired up into teams; one man to light the fires and the other to don the spectacles and stand ready to protect the party. As soon as they were all situated, Ohrder lead them into the forest. He took a somewhat circuitous route, one that utilized a game trail almost wide enough to drive a cart down, that cut through the forest toward the extreme western side of it; that was the direction the wind predominately blew from, and though it was only a gentle breeze, one that barely rustled the leaves and needles of the trees around them at the moment, it tended to pick up as the night progressed. Dougerty, and everyone else, certainly hoped that would be the case this night. *If* things worked in their favor, once they had a line of fires lit along the forests western edge, nature should take care of the rest.

“*Pssst!*” Orren Sweely out in front of the party and a dozen paces off to Dougerty and Ohrder’s left. As several sets of eyes turned his way he raised a hand in warning, braking everyone to a halt. Sure enough, through Ohrder’s special lenses, Dougerty saw a glow approaching through the trees—approaching at an alarming pace. The archers—the entire group since there were no fire building duties to see to at the moment, moved as one, almost as if they’d been working together for many years, lining up and bringing their weapons to bear with strings pulled tight while waiting for the charging beast to break out of the trees and give them a clear shot.

“Remember what the wizard said, lads,” Sweely reminded his fellows. “Limbs not lungs, we want this beasty to hang around long enough to call his friends to the party.”

It should have been good advice, especially since the creature that broke into view had *six* limbs to choose from. Unfortunately, since its body and legs resembled a praying mantis’, those made for extremely difficult targets to hit since they were still basically thin sticks even though the beast was bigger than a horse. That last part was actually easy to judge since the thing had a horse’s head, neck and mane.

“Forget what I said before, body shots and lots of them,” Orren called out angrily even as he let fly his first arrow.

In an instant the night air was rent with the twang of released bow strings and the swoosh of flying arrows. A split second after that all other sound was drown out by the outraged cry of the equine-mantis. The thing let out a scream so loud and shrill that more than one of the men who’d just shot it released their bows to slap their hands over their ears. Ohrder would have liked to have done the same, but he was too busy drawing weaves of light with his extended arms. The beast hadn’t stopped when the arrows began to penetrate its body—those that didn’t just ricochet off the armored plating covering its thorax and wings, but it did wrench its horse head around to bite at the them; which slowed it down considerably, making it much easier for Ohrder to complete his weaves. Suddenly the creature stopped running as its six legs became frozen in time, causing it to topple over as its momentum carried it forward. Incapacitated but not entirely encased in a time-stopping fold of light, the thing thrashed about with its head while continuing to cry out its rage and frustration into the cool night air.

“You don’t want us to finish it off?” Sweely asked, his tone betraying how *he* felt about the matter, but the wizard just shook his head and started forward once again.