

Chapter Twenty Six

Unwinnable Wars

By the time Ohrder got back to his chambers he was seriously considering taking a nap. Old as he was, he was still vigorous enough that naps were not part of his normal routine. But fighting five of the vile beasts the day before—wielding spells, especially complex ones, was every bit as exhausting as flailing away with a sword would have been, and then doing battle with both the king and his tenacious daughter had just about done him in. He had just crossed the threshold of his self-motivated door while contemplating whether he should go so far as to climb back in bed when he discovered that he wasn't alone.

Shahdow was at the center of the room, gripping the silver sword in one hand and the matching shield in the other. The boy was far from just standing there. Even as he entered the room, Ohrder saw him drop into a low crouch, sword arm held close against his body while swinging his shield, which when extended was parallel to the ground, in a wide arch around him. If the shield's edge was sharper that might have made sense; it would have been a rough equivalent of brandishing a short-handled broad-axe, as it was, Ohrder could see no value in the maneuver.

"I've visited the Honor Garden a number of times over the years," Ohrder observed dryly. "As I recall, they always taught that you are supposed to *block* with that...I believe the sword is the implement you're expected to attack with."

Shahdow rose up and looked around with surprise. "I didn't hear you come in." An embarrassed smile crept across his lips as he glanced down at the objects he was holding. "I know I should have asked before just picking these up again...I'm sorry."

Ohrder waved a dismissive hand and wandered over to his desk to sit down. "Better to use them for what was intended than what they've been doing. But what were you doing there with the shield when I came in? I've never seen anyone do that before?"

Still looking a little chagrined, he answered, "Sir Grahson says the hardest part of combat is dealing with the unexpected. I thought that when someone is expecting you to do this..." he made a couple thrust and lunges to demonstrate. "But then you suddenly do this..." making one more quick stab with the sword, he dropped back down in to a crouch and repeated the whirling slash with his shield Ohrder had seen a few moments before. "I'm not sure they'd be ready to defend against that."

While Ohrder had zero personal experience wielding either a sword or shield, he was able to picture how hard it would have been for an actual opponent to get out of the way of the boy's unorthodox shield attack; especially when Shahdow's momentum brought him right around to make another perfectly executed lung with his sword. Ohrder also noticed that the youngster's every move was as precise and fluid as any dancer or acrobat who had ever performed before the Royal Court.

"No, I don't suppose they could," the wizard agreed. Then settling back in his chair, he gave a tired nod and said, "You can go back to practicing, I've got work to do myself."

A knock at the door brought Ohrder back to awareness. He must have dozed off while watching Shahdow as the boy continued to work on his swordsmanship skills; dozed off and stayed that way for some time by the looks of things. The sword and shield were back in their accustomed place acting as a freestanding mirror, and there was no sign of the boy who'd been wielding them

to be seen. Another knock came at the door, soft but insistent. Ohrder took a moment to rub the sleep out of his eyes, then gave a wave, bidding the door to open. It swung wide, revealing a stooped over middle-aged man wearing servant's attire that looked as alien on his slight frame as the beard he'd decided to grow.

"Good morning, Dougerty," the wizard gave a wave. "Won't you come in."

The former Golden Arm stepped across the threshold, straightening to his full height as he did. After the door shut itself behind him, he looked around curiously. "Morning...? It's closer to dinner time, Ohrder. Maybe you should invest in a clock." He finished his perusal of the room and commented. "Interesting place you've got here. I realized as I was trying to remember how to get here that in all my years in the castle I'd never visited your chambers before."

"And yet now, when the castle is about the last place you *should* be visiting, here you are," Ohrder pointed out sourly. "Why might that be?"

"You killed a vile beast," Dougerty answered simply, as if nothing else needed said.

"It wasn't me," Ohrder shook his head.

"Rumor says it was a young boy...there's another one that claims the same boy is a personal favorite of the princess. Which, if that's the case, I suspect that he's also an accomplished lifter who was once being considered as a member of The Hand," Dougerty shrugged. "Even so, I still find it hard to believe he killed a monster out of prophecy...not without help anyway."

"If you saw him with a blade in his hand you might change your mind," Ohrder told him. "In any event, *I* didn't help him. But I still don't understand why that would bring you to my door when there are still scores of people roaming the castle who could recognize you."

The Hand's leader waved a hand over the length of his body. "Most people see only what they expect to see...but you're right, I would have come no matter the risk. With the arrival of the vile beast there is no doubt the prophecy is upon us. So much of it is hard to fathom, but I have no doubt about one thing...we are now at war with the forces of darkness. And as every soldier worth his metal knows...the first rule of warfare is to know your enemy."

"You want me to show you the beast?" Ohrder asked with puzzlement. "It's been dead for several days now, and it wasn't pleasant to be around when they first brought it in."

"No, I don't need you to show it to me, I saw it the day it died," Dougerty replied. "And so you know, the arrow in its head came in at such an angle that it missed the brain entirely. The blade on the other hand found its mark perfectly, piercing the center of its heart. But I heard a few hours ago that you found more of the creatures...different ones...and something about an even larger threat looming on the near horizon."

Dougerty's level of knowledge wasn't all that surprising, nor was the fact that he'd apparently managed to dissect the creature. The wizard could just imagine him standing over the beast, flailing away at it with a hand axe. But, upon further reflection, it was even more likely he'd drafted one of the local butchers into helping him do a more precise job. And now the former Golden Arm had come knocking at his door seeking even more information. Ohrder considered sending the man on his way, but a moment later he turned to walk over to his cloak closet, opening the door into something that resembled a long neglected storage room to remove a chair, which he held out to his guest. "Dust this off and make yourself comfortable...this will take a while."

An hour or so later, Dougerty sat back and let out a long sigh. "You've had fifty years to prepare for this wizard and you still don't think you can beat him?"

“With an army behind me, I think I could deal with Khaos...though I suspect neither of us would survive the encounter,” Ohrder said evenly. “But the fallen star is another matter. Seeing its power *before* it started to feed still gives me nightmares.”

“And it’s been feeding through the Dearth for fifty years,” Dougerty lamented, drumming his fingers on the arm of his chair.

“So, now you know as much about our enemy as I do,” the wizard pointed out. “I’m not sure that anyone could defeat him...*or*, considering everything prophesized, that we’re even supposed to for that matter.”

“*Them...*” Dougerty retorted, though it fell short of a full rebuke. “*Enemies.* The wizard and the star are still sealed away, but the Dearth and the vile beasts are free, and we can...we *must* begin fighting them. Especially if you’re right about the vile beasts being an extension of the Dearth and that they are also feeding the star everything they kill something.”

“Sir Behkworth is tasked with quelling the beasts,” Ohrder said with distaste. “As far as the Dearth itself goes...since it’s most certainly an extension of the fallen star, I seriously doubt we could do anything to even harm it. Frankly, I’m not sure this war is winnable.”

Dougerty got a wry smile. “The Dearth isn’t really as much of an army as it is a supply line. In siege warfare if you cut the supply line, eventually your enemy will become so weakened that no matter how well entrenched they were, they can be defeated.”

“But how...?” Ohrder stopped there as Dougerty’s words sunk in. “You want to burn the Royal Forest.”

Dougerty shrugged. “Unless you’ve got a spell that will eradicate every living thing in a thousand acre radius.”

“If you’ll recall, that’s what we’re fighting against,” Ohrder reminded him glumly. “*If* I could wield a devastation spell of that magnitude, I still wouldn’t do it. *Any* magic that causes harm to another living thing leaves its mark on you. A spell like that would rend your very soul.”

“So, what does that say about your old master?” Dougerty mused.

Ohrder shrugged. “If he ever had a soul, it’s now blacker than the thing he serves.”

Dougerty looked back at him with puzzlement. “*He serves...*? I thought this fallen star was just an object...a magical one to be sure, but are you saying it’s something more?”

“It feeds and grows and becomes more and more powerful as it does,” Ohrder replied. “And while I know that Khaos searched until he found it, I suspect it found him years before. Whatever it is, it’s alive and too powerful to be under the control of a mere man...quite the opposite is my fear.”

Dougerty nodded thoughtfully. “Then there’s no time to waste, we need to cut off its food supply immediately before it’s too late.”

The wizard muttered something under his breath, drawing a look from the other man. “I’m just afraid it’s already too late. I suspect you’re right about what we need to do, but I can’t help thinking that if I had only consulted you about this years ago we might actually have prevailed in stopping Khaos.”

Dougerty gave a bitter laugh. “If you only knew how many times I sat in my cell wishing I’d asked for *your* help in fighting *my* unwinnable war. But the past is past, and the only way we’ll know if this war can be won is to fight it, as long and as hard as we can.” He paused reflectively. “How do you think Pryhde will take the idea of our wanting to burn down his Royal Forest?”

Ohrder frowned. “I’d rather not find out until *after* it’s done.”

Dougerty nodded thoughtfully, then got up and began to pace a bit before asking, “You say Behkworth will be hunting the beasts...but only during daylight hours I’m guessing?”

“I don’t know for sure, but entering the forest at night with the creatures on the loose would be madness,” Ohrder answered.

“Well, I don’t see that we have any choice,” Dougerty told him. “If the king won’t support our burning efforts, and Behkworth and his men are active during the day, then we need to do the deed under the cover of darkness.”

“Who are you referring to when you say *we*?” Ohrder inquired. “It’s a big forest. Are you think that the two of us could do it, or are you intending to engage The Hand?”

“Neither actually,” Dougerty replied. “Just because it’s a hanging offense to hunt the King’s Forest hasn’t kept everyone from doing it. There are quite a few skilled woodsmen who provide for their families, and more, by frequenting the forest after the sun goes down.”

Ohrder’s eyes went wide at hearing that. Of course there were many farms and even a few other villages within a few leagues of Ehlsewhere, and those people weren’t completely safe now that the vile beasts were on the prowl. But, because no one was allowed to live, hunt or gather on the king’s land he hadn’t been too worried about anyone’s safety up to that point.

“We have to warn them!” Ohrder almost shouted.

Dougerty held up a calming hand. “They have been. Though, honestly, these are not the type of men to be put off by the cautionary words of an old man. I’m sure more than a few of them even see this as great challenge. I would have at their stage of life.”

Ohrder shook his head. “How many do you suppose we’ll have to bury before they decide to listen? I’m not just speaking of your poachers, I’m talking about Behkworth and his men as well?”

“All the more reason to strike a match to the situation as soon as possible,” Dougerty said gravely. “In the meantime, I’m giving thought to *leading* a group of the more seasoned hunters into the forest just to show them what they’re up against. Hopefully, between all of us we could hold our own if we come across one of the creatures.”

“There will be no *if* about it,” Ohrder assured him before asking, “Are you sure *you’re* not the one looking for a challenge?”

“Believe me, I’m not,” Dougerty laughed. “I’d much rather spend the night sitting before a nice fire nursing a mug of ale. But, we’re going to need help going forward with this, so I’m thinking this might be the quickest and best way to gain the trust of those most suited to the task.”

The wizard considered for a moment, then reached into his cloak to pull out his rainbow hued glasses, which he held out to the other man. “Take these, they’ll let you spot even the best hidden of the creatures long before you get within striking distance. I’ll do what I can over the next day or so to make more to supply those helping you as well.”

The thief leader slipped the spectacles on and looked around the room before shaking his head with amazement. “Will only beasts glow, or are there other things in the woods that do as well?”

“You should consider *anything*...beast *or* man that glows as being the most dangerous thing you’ve ever faced,” Ohrder told him flatly. “And if you do find yourself in a fight with any one creature, don’t get so distracted that you miss the others that come running to join in the fray.”

Dougerty nodded thoughtfully. “That’s good advice. I guess I should be going if I want to have a chance of gathering up a party before the sun sets.” He climbed to his feet looking to head toward the door before turning back to ask the question that had been nagging at him since the wizard had told him about his old master. “Ohrder, if these are truly the vile beasts out of the prophecy, does that mean that Khaos is the renderer?”

“I don’t know,” Ohrder answered slowly. “I have no doubt that *he* thought he was, but there are so many possibilities there is no way to be sure. Remember, a good portion of the scholars throughout the ages have believed the renderer to be good, not evil.”

“Why does it have to be such a puzzle? And where is the Wanderer with all of this going on?” Dougerty shook his head uncertainly, then turned back toward the door, muttering as he went. “But I guess if we had all the answers we’d have even less reason to believe we needed a creator.”

After he left, Ohrder found himself wonder how with so much evil in the world anyone could ever believe in a loving creator in the first place. But he also found himself wishing that there was one.

A continent away, in a place where the sun had already set, the Wanderer was leaned back in a patch of clover looking up at the stars and marveling at the majesty behind them. Over the many long years of his lifetime he’d come to be able to tell the time by the twinkling lights above him. Days and months were a little less clear, but since he had happened to see a calendar earlier that morning he was well aware of the date. And because it was within a sunrise of a day he would never forget, even if he were to live another five hundred years, he found himself remembering and thinking, *Tomorrow it begins...tomorrow they start the fire.*