

Chapter Thirty One

The Forgotten Tongue

After the two women had finally relented from trying to convince him to storm the throne room and singlehandedly subvert the wills of a reason deaf king and two equally stubborn princes, Ohrder sat back in his chair and tried to drum up the motivation to do the one thing he could do—accompany the two royals, Sir Behkworth and his hundred knights on their fool's errand. He was mentally cataloging everything he'd need to gather to do that—most of the items were scattered on the desk around him, when *another* knock came at the door. Because even the smallest use of magic had some level of draining effect on him, and considering the day that he likely had in front of him, Ohrder just looked at the door and called out in a tired voice, "Come in, if you must."

A moment later the door swung open and Dougerty, dressed in his castle servant garb stepped inside and closed the door behind him. "I must. As I'm sure you've heard, Pryhde is sending Behkworth back out...only this time a hundred men to be slaughtered. It's likely we'd be well rid of a number of them, but there'll be many good men included in their numbers as well."

The wizard nodded. "I'm planning to accompany them."

The chief thief gave him an appraising look. "You don't appear to be capable of accompanying yourself back to bed...which is where you should still be."

"My mother died before you were born," Ohrder replied sourly. "But *she* gave up trying to give me advice twenty years before that."

Dougerty frowned, then chewed on his lip for a bit. "I assume you tried to talk some sense into his royal ineptness?" When Ohrder gave a tired nod, he continued. "Wouldn't it be easier just to seal up the city gate? I'm no practitioner, but one spell seems easier than who knows how many."

Ohrder grew thoughtful, but a moment later shook his head. "They'd likely just knock a wall down. And even if they didn't, with the vile beasts roaming the land, we need the people fleeing from them to be able to get into the city."

"Alright then," Dougerty said with frustration. "I'll gather the archers and meet you and the others at the city gate."

"I'll gladly take their help...I've even got something that will help them take down the creatures easier," Ohrder said. "But you can't come. The beard you've grown helps, but Behkworth might recognize you. If he doesn't, Prince Juhstice certainly will, and I'm not sure how he'll react once he does."

Dougerty shrugged. "I can't stay behind any more than you can. And I'll have on the glasses you gave me and I'll keep the hood of my cloak up. Hopefully everyone will be so distracted looking for monsters they won't spend too much time studying the woodsmen you've brought with you."

Ohrder wasn't thrilled with the situation, but other than freezing Dougerty's feet to the floor, he didn't see what he could do about it. Plus, the old soldier had a way of seeing just what needed done when it was needed the most. Once the leader of The Hand left the room, Ohrder started gathering the items he'd need when a movement out of the corner of his eye caught his attention. Shahdow had put his book away and had climbed to his feet to walk over to his wardrobe, where he paused to remove his cloak.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Ohrder demanded in as firm of a voice as he could muster.

The boy didn’t look around, but settled his cloak upon his shoulders and headed immediately to the back of the room. A moment later the silver sword and shield were in his hands. “I’m going with you.”

“You most certainly are not!” Ohrder’s voice suddenly took on a tone of strength.

Rather than respond right away, the boy slowly crossed the room to stand before the wizard. The calculating look on his young face was one Ohrder had seen many time before—on someone older, slightly taller, and far prettier. “You really should let me come...*I know how to kill the beasts.*”

“I know you did kill one of them...” Ohrder began, but then he hesitated, pondering not only the words he’d heard, but the confident way that Shahdow had stated them. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know how, but when the creature was running at me, I knew exactly where I had to stab it with my knife,” the boy told him, looking as confused by his own words as Ohrder was. “And when we went out the other day...it happened again. Each time a beast appeared, I just somehow knew where I’d have to strike it if it came near enough.”

Ohrder hadn’t let any of those creatures get anywhere close to near enough to use a sword against them, so there was no way of knowing if what the boy was saying was true, but there was no denying that Shahdow believed it. And he’d seen enough unexpected things happen with and around the boy for him to automatically discount what he’d just heard, no matter how strange it might seem. He slowly nodded his consent.

“You can come. Do you still have the oyster shell I gave you?” When Shahdow nodded and patted a bulge in his cloak pocket, he added. “Then give me your word that the moment I tell you to use it, you will.”

“I promise,” Shahdow said eagerly.

“Good, then we best be off,” Ohrder said while making his way over to his closet. Opening the door, he removed his cloak before shutting it again. And it stayed that way as he gave the door a regretful look. “I’m afraid we’ll have to walk, I need to ration my spells if we’re to have any chance of surviving the day.”

It would have taken the better part of an hour for Ohrder to reach the city gates without the aid of magic—*or a horse*. Fortunately, he had the foresight to send the first of the castle servants he ran across hurrying off to the stable. By the time he and Shahdow reached the moat, there were *two* saddled mounts waiting for them.

“I think I’d rather walk,” the boy murmured, looking up at the tall black gelding in front of him with trepidation.

“As would I,” Ohrder said sourly. “But I’m sure everyone else will be mounted, so we need to be too. You do know how to ride, don’t you? I assumed you must since you sleep in the stable.”

“I’ve watched how it’s done,” Shahdow replied uncertainly. Then, letting out a sigh, he put a foot in the stirrup and swung up into the saddle, looking like he’d done it before, but not so much that anyone would mistake him for a seasoned rider. The horse seemed to sense his rider’s nervousness because the moment Shahdow was settled in the saddle it began to whinny and dance about. The boy had still been trying to get a good grip on the reins, but as the horse started acting up, he tighten his hold and gave a sharp tug as he gave a stern, even somewhat confident sounding warning. “That will be enough of that!”

Whether or not the animal was truly convinced of Shahdow's horsemanship, the horse did quiet down and obeyed the boy's direction as he urged it down the lane toward the city gate, following Ohrder aboard his own mount. Ten minutes later they arrived at their destination and found that the hunting party, including Sir Behkworth and the two princes, were already on the far side and looking ready to depart, though the later three were off their mounts with their heads together. As Ohrder and Shahdow rode through the gate, Dougerty and his five woodsmen came into view where they had been gathered off to one side. They were not mounted, but each man was holding the reins of a horse. As soon as Dougerty saw them, he and another man—Ohrder could just make out Orren Sweely's hawk nose within the recesses of his deep hood, started toward them. A moment later the remaining woodsmen fell in behind.

"I was starting to worry you might not make it," Dougerty said as he drew close. His gaze darted to Shahdow; there was a question in his eyes, but it went unasked. "I suspect Behkworth is about to give the order to depart."

That might have been the case, but the Golden Arm suddenly turned away from the two princes and started marching toward them. His tone when he reached them was no lighter than the scowl that had been building as he approached. "*Ohrder*...I wasn't informed you were to be accompanying us."

"I'll be accompanying you," Ohrder informed him flatly, then just sat in his saddle looking down at the other man.

Behkworth's eyes darted to the wizard's left where Dougerty and the five woodsmen—all with bows and a quiver full of arrows over their shoulders, had gathered. "I don't need to tell you that where we're headed is no place for a boy...and I've got my own squad of archers. So, I hope everyone else here has just come to see you off."

"Where we're headed is no place for *anyone*," Ohrder said testily. "But as for the rest of it. *Everyone* you're wanting to leave behind has already faced, fought *and* killed the things we're hunting...which is more than can be said about those in your group. Plus, *these* archers have magic arrows. You should be grateful for our help, but like it or not, *we are* coming with you."

The Golden Arm certainly looked like he had something more he wanted to say, but after a moment of staring daggers through the wizard's eyes, he turned around to march back to his men and threw himself into the saddle, laying angry spurs to his warhorse the moment he did.

"That was a nice speech," Orren Sweely observed. "That part about the magic arrows was especially inspiring...I don't suppose there was any truth to it?"

In response, Ohrder reached into his cloak and withdrew what on first glance appeared to be a bundle of finger-length pieces of thin wire. "Each of these is encased with a spell like the ones I used the last time we were in the forest...but to a slightly lesser degree. If you hit a limb it should incapacitate it. Wrap them around the shaft of your arrows near the heads. The spells will be activated upon making forceful contact with anything magical...so have a care that you don't jostle them around in your quivers too much." The wizard paused and introduced Shahdow to those who weren't familiar with him, then finished with. "If he tells you to target a particular spot on a creature...even if it's *not* a limb...*do it*."

The woodmen took that last direction with a simple nod, like it was the most natural thing in the world to be taking fighting orders from a boy who wasn't yet shaving. At that point there was no more time for talking because the bulk of the expedition was already charging off after their furious leader, leaving a thick cloud of dust in their wake. Seeing that, Ohrder shook his head and urged his own horse forward while the rest of the party fell in behind him.

Behkworth was angry, but apparently not a complete fool, because he slowed the procession down to a slow trot before reaching the blackened skeletal remains of the Royal Forest. Upon entering the burned up trees, he pulled to a stop and sat looking out at the devastation before him as if uncertain how to proceed. Juhstice and Dharis were at his side, but neither of the royals appeared any more sure of which direction to go than the Golden Arm. That was the first sensible thing Ohrder had seen or heard out of the trio in recent memory. Signaling for Shahdow, Dougerty and the woodsmen to stay back, Ohrder rode forward. A brooding glare and two inquisitive looks met his arrival.

“It really doesn’t matter which direction we go...the beasts will find *us*,” Ohrder said without preamble. Then he reached into his cloak and pulled out a pair of rainbow lensed spectacles and held them out to Behkworth—*reaching past the two crown princes as he did*. Whether or not the Golden Arm took it as a sign of goodwill or not was immaterial—the leader of the army needed to be able to see the battlefield from the best vantage point. “These will let you see anything magical, including the creatures, even if they’re hidden behind something.”

Sir Behkworth looked from the item in the wizard’s hand to the matching ones on Ohrder’s face. After a moment he accepted the offered gift and settled the spectacles in place before starting to look around.

“So, there aren’t any close by,” the Golden Arm said after finishing his three hundred and sixty degree perusal. It was more of a statement than a question. “I assume the glowing things are magical. I see your archers also have magic spectacles as well as their arrows. The boy’s got something in his cloak and you’re lit up like a candelabra...” He paused to lift up an arm to point out at what remained of the forest. “...but nothing out there. Do you think the fire got them all?”

“I doubt that very much,” Ohrder told him. “It might have gotten some of the lower types, but the ones with human traits are too smart to have allowed themselves to be trapped by the flames.”

All three of the other men considered that for a few silent moments before Prince Dharis finally asked, “How human?”

“From what I’ve seen it varies,” Ohrder answered. “Some have spoken to us. Others haven’t...but I’m sure they could if they chose to do so. Instead they speak to each other...coordinating their attacks.”

“I’ve heard all that before,” Sir Behkworth said impatiently. “My men know we’re not going up against a bunch of thoughtless beasts. But they’re not an unbeatable army either. As you so ably pointed out earlier, wizard...you and a small number of commoners have already manage to kill a number of them. Now we just need to locate and kill some more...as many as we can find.”

“If it’s many you seek,” Ohrder said as he lifted his hand to point toward the center of the forest. “You might want to head in that direction.”

“You want us to go to the heart of the Dearth?” Prince Juhstice asked tightly.

“The Dearth gave birth to these abominations,” Ohrder told him. “I’m not certain exactly how, but I have no doubt about that. And I’m personally curious to see what effect the fire had on the barrier that once locked it away.”

“Fine,” the Golden Arm shrugged. “Since you seem to know so much about this place and the things we’re hunting, why don’t you and your archers lead the way.”

Though he doubted Behkworth meant it as such, it was a very astute suggestion and Ohrder happily waved the others up to do just that. With he and Shahdow out in front, and Dougerty with the five woodsmen flanking them, they set out for the place Ohrder hadn’t visited in almost a year. Surprisingly, they didn’t encounter a single vile beast on the way there, or even after they

crossed the perimeter of the Dearth itself. Not did that change until they reached what remained of the high wooden wall that had once enclosed it.

Like the forest, the giant wall was a blackened remnant of its former glory. Most of it had fallen down and lay in charred heaps, with only a few of the thicker stand posts that supported each section remaining upright. The gate also was erect, though sagging with one of the double doors tilted open. Of the great bar that had once secured it, there was no sign; likely it had burned up completely, but it was also possible someone had taken it down at some point, though Ohrder doubted that. As the group approached, something else caught the wizard's eye, but Dougerty at his side was the first to speak of it.

"That's not what I remember being up there," the former soldier said quietly and with concern. He was looking up at the weathered and only slightly singed sign above the gate. "Is that the forgotten tongue?"

Ohrder gave a nod as he felt his breath catch in his throat. "It is."

"Can you read it," Dougerty asked, not sounding overly eager to hear the answer.

"The words don't translate directly," the wizard replied. "There are several possible meanings. The simplest, and most likely, since it closely matches what was there before, would be translated as...The Lizard's Lair."

"And the not so simple version?" Dougerty probed insightfully.

"The dragon's domain," Ohrder answered, turning to look at the other man as he did.

At first Dougerty just looked perplexed, but then his face tightened. "I believe there is a *"dragon"* mentioned in the oldest prophecies. If I'm remembering right, it's one of the names of the great lizard from the reaping."

"Yes, that's correct," Ohrder said grimly.

Because the two men were still looking up at the sign, neither of them noticed Shahdow's reaction as his young eyes gazed up at the strange letting with horror, while a war broke out in his mind. Ohrder's words, *'the lizard's lair'* repeating over and over again in his head while the memory of the last time he'd seen the sign assaulted him with equal fervor. As he stood beneath the gate looking up, it was as if he was once again standing with his back to it, imagining how similar the two phrases *'the wizard's lair'* and *'the lizard's lair'* were to each other, and also how the later was truly what should have been written there—and now it was, even if it was carved in a language he couldn't understand. Eventually, a new thought fought its way to the forefront of his brain...*What have I done?*

Ohrder finally looked down to noticed the troubled look on Shahdow's face. Watching the emotion play out there, he regretted bringing the boy with them. Of course he was afraid, why wouldn't he be; Ohrder was fighting a hard knot of fear that was forming in his own stomach. But, what was done was done, and there was nothing left except to press on and finish what they'd come for. Releasing a weary sigh, he urged his mount forward, around the listing gate, and on toward the house he hadn't seen in over fifty years. They didn't quite make it there before the first of the vile creatures came into view.