

Chapter Thirty Three

Alliances

Juhstice watched Dougerty drop his end of the cloak and take a step towards him. *Dougerty! How could Ohrder be associating with the man who'd vowed to kill his father?* Oddly, the leader of The Hand sheathed his sword as he moved closer, to of all things, open something that looked like a seashell that the wizard had just handed him. Juhstice had spent enough time in Lahndsend on the shores of the Endless Sea to recognize the thing even though he'd never seen one of its ilk before. When the traitorous thief opened the shell and touched his finger to something shiny on the inside of it, the forest disappeared and Juhstice suddenly found himself standing in Ohrder's chambers back at the castle—he and Dougerty both, and they weren't alone either. Shahdow, with Prince Dharis—*looking as bewildered as Juhstice felt*, was standing just off to one side.

Because Dougerty had sheathed his sword to open the shell, that left him as the only one *not* holding a weapon. Juhstice wasn't clear on what had just transpired to bring the four of them back to the castle, and his mind was struggling to make sense of just what the sudden appearance of the bizarre flying creature back in the forest might portend—*had it really been speaking to Ohrder, and if so, why had it called him Behniel?* But there was one thing he was certain of—he wasn't going to pass up the golden opportunity that had just been handed to him. At that point, he raised his sword to place its tip under Dougerty's chin. The former Golden Arm's reaction was to laugh and shake his head, then he calmly turned around and crossed to Ohrder's desk where he carefully set the shell down on its top.

"You're welcome," Dougerty told him after turning back around.

"I didn't ask you to bring me hear," Juhstice retorted. "We should still be back in the forest helping the others to deal with those monsters."

"I suspect that shortly...if not already, the only people left in the forest will be dead men," Dougerty told him sourly. "Which is why Ohrder had me bring you here. So, you're right...you shouldn't be thanking me, but you *do* owe your life to him."

"*We abandoned them to die?*" Juhstice demanded, unable to believe his ears.

"Ohrder's intent was to create a portal at the old gate, one large enough to bring everyone through," the other explained. "I only hope he has...or will succeed."

Juhstice used his sword to point angrily at the desktop. "Use that thing to get us back there...we have to help them!"

Dougerty shook his head sadly. "It doesn't work that way. Believe me, if I could go back I would. But no matter what else happens today, Ehlsewhere *will not* lose its heir, Your Highness."

Juhstice let out a growl of frustration before striding forward to place his sword once more at Dougerty's exposed throat. "Then as heir to the kingdom I can at least do my duty to protect it by doing what I promised would happen the next time we met...you're under arrest for treason!"

"I said you wouldn't die today," Dougerty answered slowly. He still hadn't made a move to rearm himself, but his next words made it seem as if he had. "That doesn't mean *no harm* will befall you."

"I'll take my chances," Juhstice replied with a steady voice, nor did the sword in his hand waver, but that didn't mean he was unphased by what he heard. Empty handed as he was, Dougerty looked as confident as if he was still leading the Royal Guard—with a thousand knights at his back. "As I would do even if it wasn't three of us against the one of you."

At his words, Dharis took a measured step in their direction, which wasn't lost on Dougherty, who gave the prince a hard look. "I have no animosity against Lahndsend, by you do not have allegiance to your kingdom either. Raise your sword against me, Your Highness, and I *will* kill you."

That caused Prince Dharis to raise his eyebrows in surprise; never-the-less, he took another step forward. Shahdow, beside him, put a hand out as if to stop the prince from going any further, then with a troubled frown drew it back. Both Dougherty and Juhstice saw the motion; it was the former who commented on it.

"As far as the boy goes, would you really ask him to choose between you and his master?" Dougherty asked. "He knows I've been working with Ohrder, that I wouldn't be standing here now if I wasn't doing his bidding."

"He's a knight in training, his first allegiance belongs to the realm, and as his prince, he takes his orders from me," came Juhstice's immediate reply, mostly to help the youngster know how to deal with the situation. Not that his words wiped the look of concern off of Shahdow's young face—*quite the opposite*.

"I thought I'd taught you to look beyond the obvious," Dougherty said with disappointment.

Then, an instant later, while Juhstice's thoughts and eyes were elsewhere, there came the soft swish of metal on metal, letting him know that Dougherty was no longer unarmed. He took an instinctive step back, but by then the other man had already brought his blade up sharply, striking the flat of his sword hard against the bottom of Juhstice's elbow. The jolt that shot through his arm nearly made him drop his sword and left his entire arm numb.

"I've no more time for this. Ohrder is likely at the city gate doing his best to keep a legendary monster and a horde of vile beasts from following him through his portal," Dougherty declared, giving his prince a reproving glare. "If you really want to protect your kingdom, Your Highness, then it's high time you open your eyes and take a look at what's really happening here."

Then, while mutter something about a *'blind-eyed incompetent fool'*, the thief who was once and always would be a soldier, sheathed his sword and stormed out of the room. After a long moment of silence, Prince Dharis finally found his voice to inquire, "Might I ask just exactly who that was? He looked familiar, but I can't place where I've seen him before."

"You would know him as Sir Dougherty. He was Ehlsewhere's Golden Arm when we were children," Juhstice told him wearily.

"And the man whose name is posted *seven times* on the wall in the Honor Garden," Dharis added with a note of awe in his voice.

"He would be the one," Juhstice nodded.

"Well, considering that, I am happy to report that I've had a *most* unproductive day," at both Juhstice's and Shahdow's curious looks, he added with a laugh. "It seems I've spent the entire morning doing nothing except try to get myself killed...*and failed miserably!*"

As he watched the portal collapse in upon itself, Ohrder almost did the same thing himself; and likely would have except for the horse beneath him. Relieved shouts of joy intermixed with groans from the many wounded drew his eyes over to the soldiers who'd accompanied him back from the forest. His first thought was that there weren't nearly enough of them. *Had he inadvertently left some of them behind?* After replaying the chaotic escape scene back in his mind, he realized that no, that hadn't been the case. While the knights had been more than holding their own before Khaos' arrival, once he'd appeared overhead and started raining flames upon the battlefield the tide had shifted massively, with Sir Behkworth's men taking the blunt of

the casualties. A glance to his left, at the *three* woodsmen that remained, told him the soldiers weren't the only ones to pay the price for venturing into the dragon's domain. Further thoughts on the dire events of the morning were interrupted by the insistent ringing of the city bells, drawing a hard sigh from Sir Behkworth.

"I'll need to go see the king," the Golden Arm told his second in command, a knight named Sir Cohnely, if Ohrder remembered correctly. A moment later he looked the wizard's way. "You might want to come along too."

After the morning he'd had, subjecting himself to King Pryhde was in fact the last thing Ohrder wanted to do. Unfortunately, he knew it was the *first* thing he *needed* to do. Afoot, Sir Behkworth turned and marched off toward the castle with determination; Ohrder on the other hand allowed his horse to plod along after him at a more leisurely gait while he considered what to say to keep his volatile monarch from living up to his reputation. It was a prudent endeavor, but one that ultimately proved to be without merit, since by the time he arrived in the throne room, King Pryhde was already well into throwing a royal tantrum.

"So...tell me again, *why* are you here talking to me when there are still creatures roaming the forest?" the king asked derisively. "Did you and your men need a rest break...or perhaps you though a quick bite to eat before resuming your *sworn duty* might be in order?"

Ohrder was still standing in the entryway, waiting for the court chamberlain to have an opportunity to announce his arrival, but upon hearing how poorly things were already going, he turned and said, "I'll just go on in, he'll figure out I'm here."

The chamberlain's eyes went a little wide, but he swallowed hard and let Ohrder pass through the arched doorway. If the king noticed the breach of protocol he said nothing about it as he continued to glare at his Golden Arm while Sir Behkworth struggled visibly with his emotions, and likely even harder to find the right words to answer the accusation that had just been leveled at him, without earning a trip to the gallows.

"Your Majesty, we would *not* have disengaged if there was any other choice," Behkworth began in a tightly constrained voice. "As I told you, we had the battle well in hand...had already killed dozen of the fiendish things before...."

He paused, no doubt trying to find a way to explain how something to rival the darkest of nightmares could suddenly become so much worse. Ohrder decided it was time to set in and help him to that.

"Before the dragon showed up to announce that the *rendering of the world* has finally begun," he spoke into the void and then just let his words settle across the throne room. The king had his usual pack of conies ready at hand, so quite a number of faces turned to look at him with concern, a few of them already going pale. Pryhde's eyes were the last to land upon him; rather than appearing worried, the king looked...*perturbed*.

"What in the world is a dragon?" King Pryhde demanded impatiently.

"A flying serpent," Ohrder told him in a tone void of emotion. "Bigger than an ox with giant bat-like wings and armored scale hide. It breaths fires and controls a dark magic that knows no bounds."

"A serpent...you mean some kind of a...*lizard*?" the king had obviously locked in on one particular aspect of the wizard's description.

"*The lizard!*" Ohrder gave a grim nod. "The one foretold in prophesy to usher in the rendering of the world. Yes, *that* lizard."

Whatever reaction Ohrder might have been expecting, he didn't get it. King Pryhde leaned back on his throne and steeped his hands in front of him as he looked up at the domed ceiling

with a blank expression on his face. He stayed like that for quite some time. When he finally looked back down it was to place his eyes on Sir Behkworth.

“You had the greatest threat to the kingdom right in front of you, and you...*ran away?*” It was more than an indictment, it was a judgment, passed in a cold dead voice. “It will take every brave man in Ehlsewhere to deliver us from this evil...*we cannot have a coward leading them!*”

It’s interesting to note that while people can believe in the words of prophesy, they will none-the-less try to undo what it says and reshape it to suit their own will. Ohrder was actually pondering that very thing while *he* stepped forward to do the very same thing.

“If Sir Behkworth had his way, he’d still be back in the forest...he and his brave knights. And they’d all just be smoldering piles of ash by now,” Ohrder interjected with so much heat that fire should have shot out of *his* mouth. “I forced them to come back here. If you want to hold someone responsible for retreating in the face of certain destruction, start with me. But I warn you, Your Majesty, you’ll need both his golden sword and my magic in the coming days.”

It was the closest to crossing the line of outright insubordination—*especially in a public forum*, that Ohrder had ever come. Had he not been so tired and distraught it’s likely he could have found a more diplomatic way of expressing himself, but at that moment he really couldn’t have cared less if the king had ordered him arrested or even marched off to the executioner. Neither of those options would have ultimately ended up the way that Pryhde intended, but they would have greatly complicated matters. And yet, Ohrder found that he just didn’t care; a part of him had the wherewithal to realize that that might be the most disturbing thing of all.

Amazingly, King Pryhde gave out a laugh as he gave his royal wizard a rueful shake of his crowned head. “Not today, Ohrder. Not today. But...we do still have a festival coming up and I’ve just decided what the main attraction will be. I will announce a name at the grand banquet...the name of the person who has proven to be the greatest failure to his...” he left off to give a perfunctory shrug. “...or her, as the case may be, king and kingdom. Then we will promptly show everyone just how unacceptable that is.”

More was said after that; assurances from the Golden Arm of his loyalty, and dedication to freeing the countryside from the vile beasts and their heinous reptilian leader, testaments by the other court officials of Pryhde’s brilliant *motivational insights*, all intermixed with a smattering of other veiled threats from the object of their pandering. Ohrder was so fed up with it all that at the first opportunity he *politely* excused himself and made his way back to his chambers. Slow as he was since he was much too weary to use a time compression spell, or weave a portal, he still almost made it before the heavy sound of footsteps coming up the passageway behind him came to his ears. He turned tiredly to see that it was none other than the Golden Arm who had tracked him down.

“I know it’s been a long day, Ohrder, but I’d like a quick word with you,” Sir Behkworth explained as he hurried forward.

Ohrder did stop, but he didn’t even bother to answer, forcing the other man to continue. “I’d thank you for what you said back there except what you told the king was basically the truth. Left to my own devices I would have stayed and fought on...though I don’t agree with your assessment of how things would have turned out. That...*dragon*, was a formidable opponent, but I’m confident we would have prevailed in the end.”

“If Khaos or his beasts didn’t get you the fallen star would have,” Ohrder informed him shortly. At Behkworth’s blank look he explained. “I’m sure you had to have noticed that seething blob of blackness above the ruined house...that was the fallen star. It caused the Dearth by

devouring everything living within reach...you and your men were plenty close enough for it to feast on you.”

The Golden Arm raised his eyebrows at hearing that, but a moment later he just nodded and said, “You just made my main point for me. We have to work together if we’re going to defeat these things. I’m sure you had your reasons, but *my* men should have been the ones using magic arrows. I’m thinking magic swords and lances would come in handy too. And wouldn’t *you* feel more secure having a squad of knights surrounding you than those untrained woodsmen?”

Ohrder had a quick answer to all of that, but instead he explained. “I have a hard time working with someone who extorts the people he’s supposed to be protecting.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Behkworth replied in a voice that was instantly ice cold.

“Well, you’d better figure it out...and soon,” Ohrder told him. “Because you’re right, none of us has a chance if we can’t work together.”