

Chapter Thirty Two

There is a Dragon

What have I done...what have I done...what have I done? The thought ricocheted through Shahdow's mind endlessly, seizing his thoughts and paralyzing his body. It wasn't a question without answer either, since he knew *exactly* what he'd done as he remembered the last time he'd stood at the gate and looked up at the sign. Dougerty's words, *I believe there is a dragon mentioned in the oldest prophecies*, left no doubt about that. There is a dragon—*because of me. I set the lizard loose on the world!*

At some point Ohrder and Dougerty had stopped talking and were making their way around the sagging gate to move deeper into the Dearth. A part of him *felt* like that was a very bad idea, but he pushed the sensation down and urged his horse forward to follow them. A minute later they topped a gentle rise and the world before them took on a bright glow. It was almost reminiscent of a fall sunset with its pervasive orange hues, but the season was wrong and with the sun at their backs, Shahdow knew there had to be another answer. Lifting his rainbow lensed spectacles proved his worst fear to be true; the glow disappeared, which meant its source was something magical. Something, or some *things!* How many vile beasts would it take to cause such a cavalcade of brightness? Ohrder, wearing his own spectacles, had to see it too, but the wizard never hesitated, he rode forward toward the vibrant glow; he wasn't exactly sitting tall in the saddle since his old shoulders were slumped with weariness, but even his diminished stature had a sense of determination about it. Dougerty and the archers stayed right with him, leaving Shahdow to hurry after.

The first thing of note that came into view was the remains of a cottage. From what Shahdow could tell of its skeletal remains, it must have been impressive at one point, but now it was completely overshadowed by the object hanging in the air above it, which was somehow both pitch black and shining as bright as the sun at the same time. Shahdow lifted his spectacles to get an unencumbered view of the bizarre scene and found that even without the glow his eyes were having a hard time locking onto the inky undulating...*whatever it was*, that was hovering in the air over the ruined house. Though he was having a hard time seeing the thing, he could *feel* how wrong it was with every ounce of his being. Movement below the pulsating black drew his eye and Shahdow looked down to discover the area was teeming with vile beasts. He'd apparently missed them while wearing his spectacles because their lesser glow was obscured by the near blinding light of the thing they'd been huddled under. Huddled no longer, as one they were rising up from where they'd been laying; sleeping, or possibly they'd been bowing, now that Shahdow took a closer look.

"There must be close to fifty of them," Shahdow heard Dougerty exclaim, sounding more angry than concerned.

It was true. The very ground all around and within the burned up ruins seemed to be writhing with life as creatures of every size, shape and color began to climb to their feet or whichever other apparatus they used for movement. Then suddenly, they weren't just rising up, they were attacking, and his time for recriminations about what had happened in the past or worrying about the future was over. Shahdow let go of the reins and jumped down from his horse; others might be able to fight while mounted, but he knew where his skills lay. The first of the creatures racing toward them came as a swarm. Likely hatched from the same batch of eggs, a half dozen ants, the size of a large house cat and with the heads to match, skittered across the ground, making a

distinct clicking sound as their armored legs contacted each other; this came coupled with intermittent angry feline snarls. Shahdow took one look at them and knew that the hideously malformed cat's heads with their snapping yellow fanged jaws weren't the real threat. It was the razor hooked forelimbs that would shred a man to pieces in seconds; those had to be avoided at all costs. Unfortunately, he could also tell that the mutated insects would be extremely hard to kill.

"Don't let them get close!" The words were out of his mouth before he realized it. The nearest archer, and man named Orren Sweely, raised his bow and let fly an arrow.

The steel arrow head stuck the lead ant in its plated thorax with a sound like a blacksmith's hammer hitting an anvil, then proceeded to bounce off without penetrating, but at the same time all six of the creatures legs suddenly became lifeless as it let out an outraged howl that echoed through the dead forest. In an instant the thing's siblings were upon it, ripping and biting with teeth and talons that were more than a match for its chitin hide. And better yet, in their frenzy, the rest of the colony turned upon itself, and the pandemonium expanded further when some of the other vile beasts arrived on the scene and joined in the fray.

"That's the best use of a single arrow we're likely to ever see," one of the other archers said, and Shahdow nodded his head in relieved agreement.

It would have been nice if all the other vile beasts had been drawn into the fracas, but that wasn't the case. For every one of the monsters that turned aside to attack its brethren, two more ran forward to assail the human invaders. The archers, with their magically enhanced arrows, were able to stem the flow initially, strategically striking the lead beasts to incapacitate, or at least slow them enough to draw in those closest to them as Sweely had done with the cat-faced ants. Unfortunately, the carnage quickly became so widespread that in essence the entire area was one chaotic battlefield. So much so that had Sir Behkworth and his knights not hurried forward, Shahdow, and the others would have been overrun.

The knights, with the Golden Arm and the two princes leading the charge, split into three groups that targeted any of the creatures that weren't already rending each other, using their own archers or spearmen with their long halberds to wound the beasts at length at which point the swordsmen, most of whom were now dismounted, would rush in to finish it off. That was usually easier said than done; the soldiers certainly took some casualties of their own, but after Shahdow joined their ranks things quickly turned in the human's direction.

Shahdow had arrived at Prince Juhstice's side just as a cow-sized salamander with tentacles growing out of its neck was about to jump on him after taking out the two knights that had been guarding him from the front. Both men had made the mistake of trying to down the creature with strikes to its head and chest, hoping to hit a vital area, but somehow Shahdow knew what really needed done.

"Cut off the arms!" he shouted and dashed past the surprised prince to slash at the closest whip-like appendage as he did. Even surprised as he was, Juhstice reacted immediately and a moment later the salamander was laying helpless on the ground as its lifeblood gushed out from the four stubs where its arms used to be.

Juhstice paused to give Shahdow an appreciative glance. "Thanks. I'll have to talk to Ohrder about getting a set of those spectacles for myself."

Shahdow just nodded. He didn't know how to tell the prince that it had nothing to do with magic lenses he was wearing, not when he didn't understand what was happening himself. Nor was there time if he had been so inclined. With the battle raging all around him, he was too busy calling out the weaknesses of the various monsters that the knights were facing. At first his cries

went unheeded, but once Juhstice started repeating the instructions that were being ignored and the knights began to see how advantageous that was, things quickly changed in the knights favor and soon men were calling out to Shahdow asking him where and how to attack the creatures they were facing. Left to his own devices, Shahdow would have done more than just *tell* them what to do, but just as the prince had men surrounding him and holding him back from joining in the fighting, Juhstice clamped a hand down on Shahdow's shoulder and ordered him to stay put.

"Yours eyes and voice are too valuable to risk," Juhstice told him simply, and though it was a hard truth to swallow—it didn't seem right to stand there just hanging onto a sword while other men fought and died, Shahdow knew that it was true and devoted himself to keeping as many of the knights alive as possible.

The dead forest was alive with the groans and shrieks of dying men and monsters, the wet smacks of blades, arrows, claws and fangs hitting flesh and the sharp, poignant orders of leaders giving commands to their harried men, interspersed now and again by Shahdow calling out specific instructions on how to defeat a new foe. Until suddenly, it wasn't. Sir Behkworth drove his golden sword through the neck of an eight-legged boar with even more tusks—as Shahdow had instructed him to, the creature crumpled to the ground and all was silent. For a moment Shahdow thought the battle was over, that they had somehow miraculously won, but when he looked around to spot Ohrder, still mounted on his horse a short distance away—and let his own eyes follow the wizard's gaze, he quickly learned how wrong he was. Many—if *not most*, of the monsters were still gathered at the ruined foundation of the old cottage; gathered and watching. They stood shoulder to shoulder—those with shoulders—most did and possessed human heads, as well as many other aspects of men, while silently studying what remained of the army that had dared to enter their domain. That's what Shahdow thought they were doing, but then he remembered whose domain it really was and a shiver of fear ran down his spine.

"What are they waiting for?" Dougerty's voice, tinged with irritation, drifted across the distance separating them. Clearly the ex-soldier would rather the remaining beasts would have charged straight at them like their brethren had. Ohrder didn't respond to his question, but the creatures did.

As one they started forward, spreading out as they came, and though they ranged greatly in size and means and methods of locomotion, they progressed as if marching in step to a silent band. That was disconcerting even to Shahdow who wasn't trained in military tactics; Dougerty gave out a vehement curse.

"I suspect since I can't hear anything that they're using some form of mental communication," Ohrder noted.

"Is that even possible?" Dougerty growled.

"I assure you it is," Ohrder answered, making a grimace as if recalling an unpleasant memory.

"So, given that, I suppose it's no coincidence that the whole mass of them are aimed right at you and our archers with their magic arrows?" Dougerty gave a harsh laugh.

"Doubtful," Ohrder said tiredly. Shahdow knew he'd been casting spells to incapacitate the attacking beasts right along with the bowmen, but at the moment he seemed to barely have the energy to speak.

"Then I guess we should probably do something about that fellow with the ram's horns growing out of his head," Dougerty raised a hand to stroke his jaw thoughtfully.

When Shahdow looked back at the advancing throng of vile beasts he immediately saw the creature The Hand's leader was talking about. The '*man*'—he was one of the least human of

those approaching, but he did somehow walk erect on his sheep's hooves, was at the center of the group, about a pace behind the rest. He was also the only one looking around while all the others had their eyes fixated on the humans in front of them.

"He does look to be in charge, but it's going to be rather difficult to get to him with his entourage marching before him," Prince Juhstice pointed out. Both princes had slipped up without Shahdow noticing their approach.

"It would be better if we were behind him," Ohrder agreed, then with a sign he swung down from his horse and turned to Dougerty. "I need to borrow you cloak."

Since the wizard was already wearing one of his own, Dougerty gave him a silent frown; none-the-less, given the urgency of the situation, he quickly divested himself of his outer garment and held it out to Ohrder. "You might find it's a little large on you."

"The bigger the better," Ohrder told him shortly, then instead of accepting the cloak, he looked Juhstice's way and asked, "Your Highness, would you mind helping him hold it up like it's been hung out on the line to dry...as wide as possible and with the hem touching the ground?"

That drew curious looks from everyone, but the two men hurried to comply—though they did so while glaring daggers at each other, looking like they'd rather have steel in their hands than a piece of cloth. Shahdow wasn't sure either of them even remembered there were monsters approaching. If Ohrder noticed any of that he gave no sign with his expression, but his hands did come up to gesture as he wove a spell. A moment later he stepped forward to draw back one side of the cloak like you would a tent flap and everyone's questions were answered.

"Quickly, I'm not sure how long I can hold it," Ohrder said weakly to Orren Sweely.

The woodsman, who was standing just off to one side, hurried over and his eyes went wide as he looked through the newly created portal to see the back side of the ram-headed creature framed within it. Without a word, he dropped to one knee, pulled back on his bowstring and let fly. The arrow found its mark, the feather fletched shaft blooming out of center of the creature's lower back, just above its woolen sheep's tail, dropping the beast in its tracks. It was likely the spell that was released on impact wasn't even necessary, because Shahdow was certain the arrow had severed the creature's spine. That didn't keep it from howling with rage as it lay on the ground thrashing its head and upper body about. Nor did it cause the remaining beast to even miss a beat as they continued steadily on.

"The head...it has to be the head. Nothing else will work," Shahdow exclaimed. Even as he spoke he saw a ripple pass over the portal and sensed that Ohrder was about to lose control of his spell. Prince Juhstice and Dougerty both snapped their heads around to look at him with worry, but with their hands occupied holding up the cloak, the two men were helpless. Orren Sweely and his archers were in no better position since when he'd fallen, the sheep-man's head had become largely hidden behind its body, with the exception of its massive ram's horns. And with Sir Behkworth and his knights too far way to be of any service, that just left two options. Both Shahdow and Prince Dharis dove forward at the same time, almost knocking each other over as they collided in the center of the portal and stumbled through to the other side.

Two strides with his longer legs brought the Lahnsend royal to his target a second before Shahdow and the prince didn't hesitate, bringing his already drawn sword down on the fallen creature's neck with such a mighty blow that the horned head rolled several feet off to one side. Shahdow looked up and found, just as he'd feared, that the other beasts were continuing forward as if nothing had happened—a *neck is not a head*. In one bounding step he was straddling the decapitated head, sword hilt gripped in two hands above his own head with the tip of his blade

aimed at the sheep-man's open mouth—which though no sound was coming it, was still working frantically as it no doubt continued to issue orders to its followers. That knowledge was enough to erase any hesitation Shahdow had left about attacking something that might have once been human. Gritting his teeth, he drove his blade downward, plunging it through the beast's soft upper pallet into its brain.

As the life faded from the sheep-man, the rest of the vile beasts came to vibrant life. Their silent and steady lockstep movements were suddenly cast off as they began to howl and thrash about in agitation. That lasted only a moment before each of them picked a target—blessedly, in a few cases that was the beast's closest neighbor. The rest charged straight for the waiting humans, eager to release the blood fueled rage that had seized them. As frightening of a spectacle as that was, Sir Behkworth with his knights, and Dougerty flanked by the archers were ready for them. The latter still had a few of Ohrder's magically enhanced arrows in their possession and used them to great effect, incapacitating the closest or most dangerous looking of the creatures to let the knights swarm in on them. Not that it was an easy campaign for the humans, far from it. With their higher intelligence, the half-men proved far deadlier than those face before; a woman with short black and white striped fur became a virtual statue once an arrow struck her leg and locked her in place—until a contingent of knights approached her, then she opened her mouth and sprayed them with a yellow mist that left them screaming, but only for a moment before they collapsed to lie still on the ground. Shadow didn't have time to call out instructions before another arrow lodged itself in her still open mouth—*if only he had been looking her way before she'd had an opportunity to attack then six men would still be alive!* A short distance away, another encounter that had seemed to go the human's way was reversed when the most normal looking of the creatures, a small man with only slightly reptilian features and slit pupils, lay down as if dead when pierced through the chest with a spear, but when the knight came close to retrieve his weapon, the 'dead' man's hand shot out and gripped the knight's arm. Though the touch lasted only a moment, the knight wrenched his spear free and turned it on one of his fellows, who he attacked with rabid abandon. It was the misfortune of the second soldier that in his urgency to defend himself he too ended up getting close enough to the snake-eyed man for the creature to reach out and grasp his ankle. From that point on, it took a full squad of halberd bearing knights to finally deal with their corrupted fellows and the thing that had turned them to do his bidding.

There were a number of other surprises too, but for the most part the battle was going the way of the humans, until suddenly an earsplitting shriek rent the air, followed by what at first sounded like rolling thunder, but when Shahdow lifted his eyes into the air to see what was causing the new commotion, he found something much more terrifying than a lightning storm. The new creature had somewhat human traits; its taloned hands had thumbs like a man's, and somehow its scaled wolf-shaped head was able to convey emotion—*Shahdow was certain he detected hate, and oddly enough amusement reflected there*, but the body belonged to a lizard, as did its long pointed tail and iridescent yellow-green hide. Except lizards don't fly on giant bat wings, or have smoke billowing out of their nostrils as they shoot jets of flame out of their mouths. The thing in the air looked quite at home in the air, but Shahdow couldn't help thinking that it belonged on a tapestry hanging outside of the royal chambers in the castle.

“Is that you, Behniel, wrapped in wrinkles and drowning in fear?” The words were just barely recognizable, formed as they were by sounds that might have been emitted by a crackling fire.

“Is that thing talking to you?” Dougerty’s voice came through the still open portal clearly to Shahdow as the former knight turned to look at Ohrder.

“That *thing* is my old master, Khaos,” the wizard said with a heavy voice. “And we need to get out of here...*now!*”

“And just exactly how are we supposed to do that?” Dougerty asked, not sparing a glance Ohrder’s way as he kept his eyes locked on the flying lizard.

Dougerty’s question was a good one, but not one with an immediate answer. Ohrder was still reeling from Khaos’ words echoing not only in his ears but in his mind too. The moment he’d seen that the barrier was down, and therefore knew that the other wizard was free, he’d felt an impending sense of doom descend upon him. Drained as he was from all the spell casting he’d done of late—the first battle with the vile beasts and then spending the prior night creating the wires for the archer’s arrows, he was having a hard enough time just sitting on a horse.

Thankfully, the archers had been both accurate and judicious in the use of their gifts, so he hadn’t had to lift a finger during the fighting so far, other than to weave the passageway to get behind the advancing beasts. Looking up at the iridescently scaled creature hovering in the air above him, he was sure of one thing—that was about to change. *But what could be done?*

“What is that thing?” Prince Dharis’ voice carried through the passageway to Ohrder’s ears.

“It’s the dragon,” Shahdow’s words, soft and tight with fear came a moment later. “The lizard foretold in the prophecies.”

The realization of the truth behind Shahdow’s words woke Ohrder up and made him do something he found so detestable he’d refused to even consider taking part in it for the past fifty years. “*Use the shell,*” he reached out to touch the boy’s mind, speaking the words there instead of aloud. “*Stand beside the prince so he goes with you.*”

Through the portal, he saw Shahdow hesitate, but a moment later he sheathed his sword and put a hand in his pocket. Only then did Ohrder turn to Dougerty to answer his question—also with a projected thought since *other* ears were within range. “*Take this,*” he pulled the twin to the Shahdow’s shell out of his cloak and leaned down to hold it out to Dougerty. “All you have to do is open it and touch the pearl. Stand close to Juhstice when you do...then you’ll have to close it as soon as you’re back in the castle or he’ll likely be fool enough to try to come back here.”

Dougerty took the shell, but he wasn’t as quick to comply as Shahdow had been, and whether or not he’d even realized Ohrder had spoken to him telepathically, his own concern was voiced out loud. “What about you and the others?”

“Hopefully, we’ll be right behind you,” Ohrder said, but his words lacked conviction. When Dougerty gave him a dubious look, he added, “The gate we passed to get here will serve just as well as your cloak did...better actually, since it will make a big enough passage to take the soldiers and their mounts through.”

Since he was still connected to Dougerty’s mind, Ohrder read the doubt there; the same doubt that was eating away at his own resolved. Still, the ex-soldier nodded and dropped the cloak he was still holding with one hand to stepped over beside Prince Juhstice. The prince gave him a probing look, but a moment later Dougerty had the shell open and was reaching a finger down to touch the silver pearl inside. That was all Order needed to see. A quick glance past the still approaching, though now jagged line of beasts, to confirm that Shahdow and Prince Dharis were safe—as safe as they could be in a world gone mad, then Ohrder turned to look in the direction of the woodsman.

“We’re leaving,” he told Orren Sweely shortly “Don’t worry about killing any more beasts. We’re headed back the way we came...hold everyone close and keep our path clear.”

What the woodsmen’s leader thought about that—or the fact that the wizard had just sent Dougerty and the prince away with the very instrument that he’d used to save all their lives earlier, he kept to himself. Instead, Sweely got busy rounding up his men—and Dougerty’s abandoned horse. Seeing that, Ohrder kicked his heels into the flanks of his own mount and took off in the direction of the Dearth’s once formidable, now mostly in ruins, gate.

“*Where do you think you’re going, Behniel, running off like a scared little rabbit? You remember what happened to the last rabbit that tried to do that, don’t you?*” Khaos’ voice shouted in his mind. Ohrder *did* remember, but rather than stop, or answer, he did something that he’d theorized would work, but he’d never had the courage to try. He raised a shield, blocking the other wizard from having access to his mind. He knew he was successful a few moments later when the flying lizard’s next words came only to his ears.

“How dare you!” The screamed was followed up with a blast of fire that would have charred Ohrder, and the men around him, to the bone had Khaos not been so high in the air. As it was, Ohrder felt the heat and immediately changed his all-out straight line race to the gate into a zigzag affair. He also noticed that Sweely and the other woodsmen were wise enough to distance themselves from the dragon’s primary target.

The gate was only a hundred or so paces away by then, but Ohrder realized that he might in fact be too close. If he arrived before anyone else Khaos could torch both him and the gate before he even had a chance to weave it into a portal—and *that was assuming he even had the strength left to do it*. A quick look off to his right told him that Sir Behkworth and the remainder of his knights were still battling the vile beasts. *That had to change!*

“*Sir Behkworth, you need to take your men to the old gate. I’ll make a portal there for us to escape,*” Ohrder locked onto the Golden Arm and sent the message into his mind. While he was there, he noticed with amazement that the soldier was awash with emotions; anger, frustration, disappointment—but *no fear*. How that could when he knew the man had to realize he was facing almost certain death was beyond Ohrder, but it was backed up when the knight’s answer came a moment later—also telepathically, though no doubt Behkworth’s lips were also moving.

“As soon as we’re done here,” the words came without equivocation.

“Leave with me now or you will become the very thing you are fighting,” Ohrder sent a mental image of Behkworth being twisted into one of vile ashen beasts and for the first time fear did enter the knight’s thoughts, a fear that threatened to grow to panic. Ohrder felt bad, especially considering that the vision he’d sent out was *probably* based on a lie, but he couldn’t see any alternative. If the Golden Arm and his men were to stay all they would achieve was their own deaths—and maybe that was all any of them would be able to do in the end; maybe the situation truly was a hopeless as it seemed, but Ohrder was determined deny Khaos as many deaths within the Dearth as possible, because he *was* certain of one thing—every life lost within its borders fed the fallen star, and *that* was a fear worth listening to.

The retreat Sir Behkworth called was disjointed, but the moment the knights were given leave to abandon the fight, to a man they bolted after their leader toward the ruined gate. Ohrder made a final, frantic, turn—yanking on the reins so hard he nearly ripping the bit out of his poor horse’s mouth, to race once more straight toward the gate. And lucky that he did because a font of flame seared across the spot he’d been about to enter, setting fire to every in its path, even though most of it had already been burned almost to a crisp. The near miss gave his terrified horse new legs and it bolted forward with such abandoned that it was all Ohrder could do to

remain in the saddle. His own surge of adrenaline quickened his senses, cutting through the fog of fatigue that had settled over his mind for the past two days. But would it be too little too late?

He heard rather than saw another blast of flame as it was let loose, but this one cut off abruptly. He would later learn that Khaos had descended low enough for Orren Sweely to land an arrow in one of his wings. The serpent wizard had torn away the spell before he even reached the ground, but the distraction that arrow—and others that followed from Sweely's fellow archers, gave Ohrder time to not only reach the gate but to finish weaving his spell onto it.

“Open the gate!” he shouted loud enough for every ear to hear; thankfully a dozen men jumped immediately to obey his command.

As the gate swung wide, the area just outside the castle gate came beckoningly into view, but Ohrder made himself wait until the last man was through—Orren Sweely let fly his last arrow before stumbling through; only then did the wizard step through the portal himself. The last thing he saw before unweaving his spell was Khaos opening his fanged mouth to send forth one last incendiary breath. Whether or not the actual gate survived the blast he didn't, but those on the castle side of the portal were safe—as safe as one can be with a dragon roaming the land.