

Chapter Thirty Seven

The Dragon Speaks

“Good people of Ehelsewhere, today is the beginning of period of unprecedented joy, freedom and peace that has been denied this land for far, far too long...*if you chose to accept it!*” There was still the rock slab being dragged over gravel undertone to Khaos’ voice that Ohrder had heard back in the Dearth, but somehow the serpent wizard had manage to achieve a soothing tenor within his words as well. Ohrder’s eyes were on Dougerty so he knew instantly that he wasn’t the only one hearing the broadcasted mental message.

“How is it doing this?” Dougerty hissed, for some reason feeling the need to whisper. Rather than answer, Ohrder quickly raised a silencing hand, not wanting to miss any of what his old master had to say.

“Who is this that speaks inside my thoughts you may be asking yourself,” there was a pause and then an image of the majestic dragon soaring high in the sky flooded Ohrder’s mind. *Majestic...? That* thought had certainly not originated with him. The dragon was obviously planting more than mere words in people’s heads. The realization sent a feeling of dread through him to his very core. “I am Khaos...the promised one. The world has been waiting for my arrival since the beginning of time and I have finally arrived to set it free. Free from what...? Have you become so accustomed to your fetters that you don’t even mind being a slave to those who have stolen your wealth, your joy, and most of all...*your freedom*. Freedom to live life as *you* would have it. Have you ever dared to imagine such a thing while living under the bondage of those who have enslaved you. Who am I referring too? Oh, they call themselves by different names. Kings and queens, prince and princess, lords and ladies. In truth, most of them are slaves themselves, unwittingly treating others in turn the same miserable, soul crushing way their masters treat them. Trust *me*...this is not the way life is supposed to be. Why do you need a king to take the fruit of *your* sweat and toil? Who decided that a few are born to live in opulence while the majority live in squalor...and what do those few *really* do other than leach off of the ones they have enslaved?”

There was a period of silence; no doubt to let the lizard’s words have time to set their nefarious roots deep into the minds he’d commandeered. Ohrder feared that was exactly what was happening too because he was sure Khaos was purposefully plucking the stings of the very tune every peasant in the land had sung to themselves at least a time or two before.

“I don’t envy you your next visit with His Majesty,” Dougerty gave a harsh laugh that had no humor behind it.

“You know the prophecy I’ve come to fulfill,” the voice that rumble so deep it almost seemed to vibrate the very earth resumed. “The Rendering is upon us. The Rendering that has been feared instead of rejoiced over as it should be. I have not come to destroy as much as restore. The evil that has been being done *will not* be overlooked, nor tolerated any longer. I promise you that. More importantly, to the victims of these atrocities I offer you a new beginning, a chance to experience a peace beyond all understanding, always and forever...*if you will only accept the free offer of my fellowship*.” The rumbling voice pause for a few moments, then resumed with a hardened sharp edge to it. “Tonight a full moon will rise. For now I will leave you to consider what you’ve heard, but I will return the *next* time the moon rides full and high in the sky. When that happens, all who would join me will be welcomed. As for the rest... the judgment of the ages will commence, and I, Khaos, lord of the fallen star, will bring it.”

The voice fell silent again, but this time Ohrder felt an emptiness as if something vital had been stolen from him. How long had Khaos been touching his mind, five minutes—*less*? And he more than anyone *knew* the evil that was behind what had just happened. What effect would those same words have on the average citizens of Ehlsewhere; especially the majority whose innocent, sheltered lives had never had to deal with anything more sinister than a spiteful neighbor or a less than honest merchant?

“Your old master certainly has a way with words,” Dougerty commented thoughtfully.

“No...he *doesn't*,” Ohrder shook his head. “Or at least he *didn't*, before...*the star*. Khaos was never subtle. He had no hidden agendas, no use for subterfuge. If he was still himself, he would have immediately demanded everyone bow down to him or suffer the consequences, and believe me, he would have been hoping for most of them to choose the consequences. I fear that thing has done more to him than I even imagined...if there is anything left of the Khaos I knew at all.”

Dougerty nodded thoughtfully. A moment later he asked, “So, one month. We’ve got thirty days to stop the end of the world. Any idea on how we’re supposed to do that?”

“No,” Ohrder shook his head wearily. “Other than I better to go see the king, or we may not have to worry about what a star possessed dragon will do.”

Ohrder was expecting to find pandemonium within the throne room; was already preparing himself for a tirade of unprecedented magnitude from the king. Instead he entered at the chamberlain’s announcement to find Pryhde and his other counselors chatting quietly as the monarch sipped tea and nibbled at a pastry.

“I’m glad you’re here, Ohrder,” King Pryhde said cheerfully as the wizard approached and bowed out his respects. “I would have sent for you, but you’ve been looking a bit worn lately and I thought you might need your rest.”

How anyone could rest with a dragon yelling in your head, Ohrder hadn’t a clue. But then the king and his court didn’t seem the least put out by the ordeal. That made the wizard take another look, wondering if Khaos’ message had even been delivered to the people he’d most vilified. A closer inspection of the royal court quickly let him know the truth. Though each of the men were putting on a good show, there were obvious signs of stress—*beyond the normal tensions of just attending to the king*. Sir Pettybohne’s pallor was so sickly Ohrder was worried he might faint. And though Sir Guihle was nodding his head as if agreeing with what the king was saying, his eyes were so unfocused Ohrder wasn’t sure he was even aware of his surroundings.

“I appreciate the concern, Your Majesty, but I’m feeling much better,” which was true enough—*physically*. “I thought I’d stop by and see what your thoughts were on...*recent events*.”

Pryhde laughed. “Are you referring to the drivel that creature just showered everyone with?”

Ohrder tried to produce a smile of his own. “Yes, that.”

“What utterly outlandish nonsense,” the king continued to chuckle. “I confess that I had thought the appearance of this flying lizard portended the onset of perilous times, but seriously, if it was the actual beast out of prophecy it would have simply attacked rather than trying to sway the ignorant by bandying a lot of nonsense that everyone will surely recognize as the blatant propaganda that it truly is.”

“There’s no arguing the logic in that,” Sir Pettybohne bobbed his head up and down in concert with his words. And while there most certainly were points to argue, Ohrder held his tongue while he considered just what the long term ramifications of the king’s take on things might be.

“Still...” King Pryhde’s expression became stern. “I’m not pleased with this beast thinking it can just force its warped thoughts on the citizens of Ehlsewhere. Don’t let it do that again, Ohrder. And make sure it suffers the consequences of taking such outlandish liberties while you’re at it.”

Choosing his words carefully, Ohrder replied. “I’m not sure how to prevent such a widespread *broadcast* from happening again, sire.”

The king gave him an incredulous look. “Well I certainly don’t either. *I’m* not a wizard. I *assume* what happened was done through magic. Am I correct?” At Ohrder’s grim nod, he continued. “Then block that thing’s spell or cast a better one. I don’t care...just don’t let it happen again.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Ohrder gave the only answer available to him, telling himself that all things considered, his visit to the throne room had turned out better than he could have ever hoped.

The moment the mental monolog finally broke off, Juhstice turned to look at Princess Behlize with consternation. “Why does it seem like much of what that thing was saying echoes what you’ve been telling me about the true meanings behind the prophecy?”

“The dragon’s tongue spews lies as well as fire,” she told him without any attempt to shield the anger from her voice. “And the best lies are skins of truth stuffed with twisted facts and misdirection.” She paused to gather herself, then asserted with conviction. “This serpent is almost certainly the one foretold in prophecy, but he *is not* the Renderer!”

They both fell silent for a while, letting the message play through their thoughts again, sorting thought what it meant and what it might entail for the coming days. Juhstice finally heaved a sigh while shaking his head. “As powerful as Ohrder is, I doubt he could have put his thoughts into every mind in the kingdom...I assume that’s what just happened. And while I won’t argue with you that this creature isn’t the Renderer out of prophecy, what difference does that make if it’s so powerful that we have no way of stopping it?”

“Because *we’re* not the ones who will stop it,” Behlize stepped close to wrap her arms around him and Juhstice accepted her into them gratefully. “There *is* a Renderer, and *he will* render to all accordingly; the good to the good, the evil to evil. Dragons, vile beasts, men and everything else, we will all receive our just reward in the end.”

“So, I guess the real questions become, when is the end and what do we do until then?” Juhstice buried his face in the top of Behlize’s lavender scented hair and drew in a long calming breath. Oh how he wanted to believe the words of this woman who had brought more joy and laughter into his life than he had ever known before. Even more he longed for the true peace she promised awaited all those who placed their hope the one she claimed *all* prophecies truly pointed to. If only he *could* believe, truly believe. But, to a man who had been raised with the understanding that the weight of the world rightly rested on men and woman wearing crowns, that was not an easy thing to do.

The dragon’s voice cut off and Chahrity let herself collapse back against the cushions of the chair she was sitting on, her thoughts a jumble of half formed opinions and even more questions. Monah had come in just before the beast started speaking to see what she wanted to do for lunch, but now the poor girl was just standing there with a mostly blank look on her young face—*mostly*. After another minute she came back to herself and turned her fear filled eyes on Chahrity.

"I'm sorry, Your Highness," she started to apologize, then half sobbing, asked, "What was that... what just happened?"

"I'm afraid that was the voice of the creature we've been hearing about since we were children," Chahrity rose up and took her lady in waiting's hand to comfort her. "The prophecies aren't just stories, Monah."

"But if he... that flying lizard, is really the Render, why is he saying he wants to help people when he's supposed to come and kill everyone?" the girl asked with confusion.

"He'd *not* here to help *anyone*... except himself," Chahrity assured her. "No matter how it sounded, most of what he said were horrible evil lies."

Monah gave a small nod of acceptance, but then she found her voice again. "He made it sound like we... you and I and the other nobles... that we're the evil ones." Tears were forming in her eyes as she added. "I hate to think what it will be like to go into the city now... I feel like people will look at me like *I'm* a monster out of prophesy."

Chahrity continued to comfort her for quite some time until Monah's anxieties finally died down enough for her to return to her duties. Only then did Chahrity allow herself the freedom to let her own concerns start to come to the surface. *What was it like in the city even now, after only an hour had passed since the dragon had started sowing his seeds of discontent? How long before bitter thoughts became angry shouts, and cries of outrage turned to more tangible forms of protest? Violence and bloodshed were almost unheard of in Ehlsewhere, but would that continue to be the case going forward? Would the flying serpent even need to enter the city walls to reign down death and destruction?* A soft knock at the door followed by Monah immediately poking her head inside pulled her out of her dark meanderings.

"Shahdow's here," the lady in waiting said hesitantly. "Should I show him in, or would you rather I had him come back later?"

"No, please have him come in," Chahrity said quickly. She couldn't think of anything she'd rather do than spend some time with the boy who always seemed to find the bright spot in even the cloudiest of days.

Despite her own optimistic expectation, Shahdow came in wearing an expression as dark as the cloak draped over his shoulders. When he approached her to bow—*not a full one either*, she caught a glimmer of silver under the garment and wondered where he'd managed to get a sword, one that *wasn't* made out of wood.

"Good day, Your Highness," he said and even his words had extra weight to them.

"Good day, Shahdow. Please rise," she replied, then tried to keep her tone light as she inquired, "Can I ask why you're carrying a sword with you?"

He just blinked at her for long seconds before answering. "Of course can ask... you're the princess."

He kept a straight face at first, but then his young face split into a grin, letting her know he knew exactly what she was really asking. After she raised her eyebrows at him, he got a sheepish look and added, "I had to go into the city, and with what happened earlier I thought it might be better to have a sword with me than wishing I'd brought one. That's what Ohrder says about cloaks and cloudy days."

"It has certainly been a cloudy day," Chahrity agreed. "And what did you find in the city?"

"It's not bad... not yet. Everyone almost seems to be wandering around like they're in a daze," Shahdow said, weighing out his words. "But I don't think it would be a good idea for you to go there right now. It's probably best to wait for a while and see how things turn out."

"I wouldn't go without my entourage," Chahrity reminded him.

“I know, but that’s the biggest reason I don’t think it would be a good idea,” Shahdow told her. He searched for words for a moment, then just blurted out. “Having six armed men surrounding you...protecting you from *them*...it’s kind of what the dragon was talking about.”

The truth of that hit Chahrity so hard she almost took a step backward. Of course the people would see it that way. What else were they supposed to think about her having a wall of soldiers between herself and them. *What had they thought about that before the dragon and invaded their thoughts?* Was she naïve to believe that like her, everyone else had simply taken the situation for granted as a grossly overcautious way of preventing a kidnapping or assassination attempt by a foreign agent?

“I suppose you’re right,” Chahrity admitted sadly. “Thank you for that insight, Shahdow.”

The boy gave a shrug. “Sir Grahson says the best way to protect something is to keep from having to.”

The princess laughed. “That sounds...*prudent*.”

“Prudent...” Shahdow repeated aloud and then a couple of more times silently, his lips moving with no sound coming out.

“You don’t like the word?” Chahrity asked, giving him a sideways look.

“No! I do!,” Shahdow assured her. “I like new words and that one has a great...*ambiance* to it.”

“Ambiance...” Chahrity laughed. “Where did you get that one...I can’t imagine it coming out of Ohrder’s mouth?”

The boy blushed. “I read it in my book. I’ve been looking for a good time to use it for a week now. I doubt prudent will be any easier to...*empty*.”

And just like that, Chahrity’s dark morning became brighter; as usual, Shahdow pushed his bright light into her dreary world. He’d come there with an agenda; her safety, but that didn’t get in the way of just spending time with someone you cared about—and she’d forgotten how much she did care about Ehelsewhere’s most notable orphan. He’d claimed a place in her heart all his own and Chahrity wasn’t sure what she’d ever do without him—*not that she ever intended to find out what that might be like*. As much as Shahdow felt responsible to take care of her, she was equally motivated to ensure nothing ever happened to the pot boy who had stolen her heart. Such pure and ultraistic thoughts from two of the world’s most selfless people. If only their hopes and desires were the only ones in play. Unfortunately, only a few leagues away, another being, as corrupt and selfish as any creature who had ever drawn breath, was at that moment plotting and scheming to make their world as dark and polluted as his heart.

Khaos perched on the crumbling rock wall beside the undulating blackness of the fallen star, drinking in its power as he considered the day. The thoughts of all the pathetic little human minds he’s reached into lingered with him. Some were so ripe and fertile for what he had planned that he probably needn’t have bothered planting his seeds; others, steeping in their insufferable ‘*goodness*’ made him want to reach out through space again with something much more tangible than words to snuff them out of existence. And he probably could too; with the star beside him, it might even be easy. But not yet, not yet. For some reason, and it wasn’t the way he would have chosen, the star drew more power from the living than the dead—*as long as they came to it willingly*. So he would wait, and eventually the ones who didn’t come willingly would come anyway, they would be pulled down off of their self-made, self-righteous pedestals and they too would feed the fallen star—and his anger, with their deaths instead of their lives. In the meantime Khaos savor the memory of the others, the ones who had immediately reacted with

unbridled joy at the opportunity being presented to them. The ones who without hesitation had mentally lowered themselves to grovel at his feet in adoration. Sitting on his stone perch, Khaos had to laugh at the irony of the identities of some of his new subjects. It was going to be a long month, but not an unproductive one, there was already a long list of things to be done as he started building his new kingdom.