

Chapter Thirty Six

When Prophecy Comes Knocking

Princess Chahrity felt like she was losing her mind, but the much more likely possibility was that the people surrounding her had already lost theirs. Snippets of the bizarre conversations she'd had over the past few hours ran through her head, a tangled menagerie of impossible things being stated as if they were the most normal assertions anyone had ever made—and *done so in a tone that suggested that she not only didn't know what she was talking about, but also that she was either terribly naive or at least dull witted to be so far out of touch.*

“What are you talking about, *no one* is cancelling the festival,” her mother had actually laughed out loud at Chahrity's wonderment about how they were going to get all the visiting dignitaries safely home now that the festival wouldn't be taking place. “There are dozens of young noblemen here who will be vying for your attention. How could we possibly turn them away at this hour?”

To Chahrity, the more pertinent question was *how* was anyone supposed to think about something so frivolous as a festival or *romance* when a war against evil forces was raging around them? Her father, who she had sought out next, since as far as she knew he was the most pragmatic person walking the earth, had been only slightly better.

“While I would agree that this is a difficult time to be thinking of something as insignificant as a festival,” King Pryhde had acknowledged. “Cancelling this one would be a sign of weakness that we can't abide. As far as I know these creatures haven't attacked anyone with the city walls, as long as these suitors of yours stay inside they should be fine. If you're so worried about them, pick one and be done with it and we can send the rest home.”

That had certainly been pragmatic enough, but had actually left Chahrity seething inside worse than the meeting with her mother. *Pick one and be done with it!* As if choosing who to spend the rest of her life with was no more important or complicated than deciding what to wear when she got dressed in the morning. Never mind that the rest of her life—and *everyone else's*, might be a matter of days instead of years given the events overtaking them.

In desperation, she'd turned to Juhstice, normally her anchor in the sea of insanity surrounding her, but he turned out to be the worst of all. “The rendering *isn't* the end of the world, dear sister,” he calmly explained, when everyone knew that's *exactly* what it was!

She was so upset that she was actually in the act of snatching up the cup of tea, her lady in waiting, Monah, had brought her to help calm her nerves, to hurl it across the room, when a knock came at the door. Chahrity immediately arrested her movement, by some miracle only managing to spill a small amount of the still very hot tea on her hand, as the door cracked open and Monah peeked her head inside.

“You have a visitor, Your Highness,” she said hesitantly, knowing very well that given the mood her mistress was in, Chahrity wouldn't be happy with the announcement, but she still she added in a more hopeful voice, “It's Shahdow.”

That was a pleasant surprise, enough so to take most of the sting out of her burned hand. Chahrity hadn't seen the boy in what seemed like forever and she couldn't think of anyone who was more likely to brighten her day than the unassuming pot boy whose very presence always put a smile on her face. “Please show him in, Monah.”

The lady in waiting pulled the door open wide and Shahdow marched into the room. It had only been a few weeks at most since Chahrity had seen him, but the youngster seemed to be half

a head taller, coming up nearly to her chin. Had he really grown that much, or was it just his carriage, with shoulders thrown back and his chin up high he was no longer the shy little boy she remembered. Those weren't the only changes either!

"*What happened?*" Chahrity raced over to kneel down in front of him, taking him by the shoulders as she stared in horror at the cuts and bruises on his poor battered face.

"What...? Nothing!" Shahdow gave a start and took an involuntary step backward while giving her a look of utter bafflement. "What do you mean?"

"You look like a basher got hold of you," Chahrity said, then raised her eyebrows at him. "That's not what happened is it? You haven't been going into the city alone at night have you?"

"Oh...no, nothing like that," Shahdow shook his head. "I did take a few hits during sparing sessions...it happens to everyone."

"A few hits...?" Chahrity couldn't believe her ears. "Shahdow, you're covered from head to toe in scrapes and bruises. Maybe you're not cut out to be a swordsman...*and that's alright*, there a plenty of other things you can do with your life."

That made his face scrunch up with frustration—she hoped it was frustration. "*I won!* I win most of the time. And it's not just that I want to be a knight...I don't have any choice, I have to become one."

Having just experienced how disheartening it is to have someone completely disregard what you have to say, Chahrity restrained her first—admittedly dismissive, remark about his spending so much time in the Honor Garden obviously clouding his judgment. Instead, she gently inquired, "Why do you have to become one?"

Shahdow looked at her like she'd lost her mind—likely the same look she'd leveled upon each and every one of her family members that same morning. "Because of the *Rendering*," he said with exasperation. "Because the lizard in the prophecy...the *dragon*, is getting ready to destroy...*everything!*"

With her own thoughts at why it was foolish to continue with the plans for the festival thrown back in her face, Chahrity was forced to step back and take a look at herself. When she did she realized that what she really wanted more than anything at that moment was for *Shahdow's* life to go on as if there was no *Rendering*, no prophecy of doom hanging over their heads. And while that might not be possible even for a young boy, she couldn't stand by and let him blindly try to take on a role more suited to someone twice his age.

"I'm well aware of all of that," she assured him. "But, Sir Behkworth already has *hundreds* of seasoned knights at his disposal...men who are already fully trained and ready to battle these creatures and this dragon too. *You* don't need to concern yourself with doing what is already being done by others...you're a remarkable young man, but what is happening here and now is not *your* battle."

Shahdow's look of frustration became a full-blown scowl. "I've already *been* battling them...*twice now* I've fought them. And since I'm the one who called the dragon here, how can it *not* be my battle?"

Chahrity felt like the world was tilting around her. Apparently Shahdow had accompanied the party that had gone out to rid the land of vile beasts, but *why*, and how had she not known about it? That was bad enough without him somehow thinking he was responsible for everything that was happening. "What do you mean you called it here?"

Slowly, haltingly, as if every word was painful to spit out of his mouth, Shahdow told her the story of how earlier in the year he had stood outside the gate guarding the area that as far as she knew had always been called the wizard's lair—though the particulars of *why* that was so were a

mystery, and how he had come to *know* that the Dearth was caused by something inside and that that something was the evil lizard foretold by prophecy, and finally, how at the very instant that that truth washed over him, simultaneously a change had occurred within the sealed boundary. The boy sighed and finished with, “Remember the line from the prophesy about rendering? Well, the ancient stump ushered me in and now I’ve ushered in the dragon.”

Once again Chahrity wanted to be dismissive of what he was saying, desperately wanted to. Except a part of her sensed that there was more to what she was hearing than just an adolescent boy’s active imagination—*much more*. “Even if that’s true,” she finally asked. “What can you do about it. You’re a remarkable young man, but you’re just one young man.”

Shahdow shrugged. “You’re a princess, but I doubt the dragon cares about that. He’s not going to do what you say just because you’re royalty. What can *you* do to stop him?”

He left off there, without adding, “*Because you’re the one prophesied to stop him*”, but the realization of that truth struck Chahrity with the weight of the castle above her being dropped on her head. Of course it wasn’t the first time she’d thought about it. From the moment Ohrder had label the thing in the courtyard a vile beast she’d known the prophecy had come knocking and that the likelihood that she was indeed *the princess* had just increased a thousand fold, but at the same time she’d unconsciously been holding back going beyond that thought, waiting to see how things would play out. At no point had she taken on the same mindset that Shahdow obviously had; actively moving forward to fulfill his part in what was happening. *Just what exactly was her part?* Chahrity had no answers for that, other than to belatedly admit to herself that standing idly by and watching as others stepped to fight the evil that had descended upon them *wasn’t it*.

“I don’t know,” Chahrity’s answer came in a hushed voice. “I guess I need to figure that out, don’t I?”

Seeing the change in her, Shahdow had one of his own. His expression became concerned for her. “The reason Ohrder took me out to the battle was because I can tell how to kill the beasts just by looking at them. That didn’t work for the dragon, but I didn’t get very close to him...maybe you’ll just know what needs to be done when the time comes too.”

“How...how do you know?” Chahrity asked with confusion.

Shahdow lifted his hands to show his own puzzlement. “It’s like when I looked at the sign over the gate and knew what it was really supposed to say...I just do.”

Chahrity drew in a deep breath and blew it out sharply, then she gave a laugh. “I’m not really looking forward to getting close enough to this dragon to see if I know how to hurt it.”

“You won’t be alone,” Shahdow assured her. He said it with absolute conviction, and looking at him—*truly looking at him for the first time in a long time*, Chahrity felt a wave of calmness wash over her.

He’s just a boy...how can he be so confident? But that wasn’t true, not any more. The little lost boy who had quietly roamed the castle carrying chamber pots to and fro was no more. She wasn’t exactly sure who it was that had taken his place, who it was standing there comforting her when she’d intended to do the same for him, but she decided it might be time for the two of them to get reacquainted.

Dougerty knocked impatiently on his door. There was no doubt about any of that, Ohrder had come to know the man’s habits—especially his habit of interrupting the wizard’s day all too well. Rather than call out for his unwanted visitor to enter, he showed some of his own lack of patience with a hard wave that sent the door flying open and a scowl that left his ancient face creased with shadows.

“Have you lost your mind?” Dougerty demanded before his feet had even come to rest in front of Ohrder’s desk.

“I’m not the one storming into a tired and grumpy wizard’s chambers without so much as a word of greeting,” Ohrder pointed out sourly. A bony finger pointed in Dougerty’s direction began to draw symbols in the air ominously. “But wearing as the day has been, I assure you I’ve recovered enough to cast a spell or two as the need arises.”

“Apparently not,” Dougerty fired right back. “If my sources are correct, the king was practically begging you to dispose of one of the kingdom’s greatest threats and instead you make him out to be a hero out of legend.”

“That’s not exactly how it went,” Ohrder gave a caustic laugh. “But did you happen to notice while we were all fighting *humanity’s greatest threat* that Sir Behkworth risked his life over and over again without a moment of hesitation?”

“That doesn’t excuse his crimes!” Dougerty shouted with exasperation. He would have said more except at that moment Ohrder finished a final finger twitch and the Hand’s leader found that his tongue no longer worked.

“That’s better,” Ohrder gave a satisfied nod. “Now stand there quietly and listen for a minute or I’ll turn the rest of you into stone as well.”

Dougerty’s face turned beet red and he looked ready to burst out of his own skin, but after a moment, he drew in a deep—and silent, breath before nodding for the wizard to continue.

“Prince Juhstice was here earlier making basically the same case, except *he* wondered why I was protected *both* of Ehlsewhere’s most detestable villains,” Ohrder said with a smile. “So I’ll tell you the same thing I told him...because we can’t afford to lose *either* of the two greatest military leaders this kingdom has ever produced...no matter how grave their shortcomings may be.”

Dougerty stood there motionless for a moment, then frowned and pointed at his mouth. Ohrder responded with a reverse twirl of his finger and looked at his guest expectantly.

“Did you mute the prince too,” Dougerty inquired lightly.

“No...he was much politer about calling me an imbecile,” Ohrder replied.

“Well, while I see your point,” Dougerty acknowledged grudgingly. “I’m not certain that either Behkworth or I...or any number of fighting men for that matter will have much of an impact on how things turn out. *Do you...?*”

Ohrder shook his head uncertainly. “I know there are battles after the dragon appears...horrendous ones...as we’ve already witnessed. But, no, from what I’ve read in the prophecies, he is either never defeated or is somehow thwarted by a young woman...likely a queen or a princess...and there may or may not be a lone knight at her side.”

Dougerty nodded adamantly. “That’s what we know so far.”

“So far?” Ohrder gave him a probing look.

“We need the lost book,” the statement was made as if it could not be argued with.

“The lost book is nothing more than a compilation of various Rendering prophecies that someone put together over the years...*if* it truly existed at all,” Ohrder argued. “If we were to find it, I seriously doubt we’d discover anything the past fifty years hasn’t already taught me.”

“The book was not written by human hands,” Dougerty told him. “Nor have two people ever found the same things inside its covers. The book is living and active...it tells each of us the things we most need to know.”

Of course Ohrder had heard such nonsensical assertions about the fabled book before, and he’d scoffed at them then, as he did now, “If there ever was a book that did such thing then

magic would have to be involved...and *everyone* knows that prophesy comes for seers...and that seers and wizards are as opposite as insanity and reason. As any reasonable, sane person would tell you."

"The person who told me about it was my grandmother," Dougerty informed him stoically. "She said *her* father used to read the book every day and that she would never forget some of the amazing stories he would read to her out of it."

"And where was this?" Ohrder asked, giving the other man a hard look. Though he might have scoffed at even the notion that such a book existed, that hadn't kept him from searching for it over the years.

"Right here in Ehlsewhere," Dougerty answered, then shrugged. "Somewhere in the kingdom, I don't know the precise location. My great grandfather was a historian of some sort, when I was younger I was under the impression he worked in a library, but then I found out that Ehlsewhere doesn't even have one."

"Not anymore," Ohrder reached up to rub his chin thoughtfully, remembering his first months after becoming a resident within the castle—*during which time he'd convinced King Honhor to let him take charge of the library.*

"There used to be?" Dougerty raised his eyebrows in surprise. At the wizard's nod, he asked, "Where?"

"Right here," Ohrder waved his arm around the room. Then he gave a hard laugh and pointed up at the top of the tallest bookcase where he kept his most treasured toms, and the empty spot at its steeped pinnacle where there was room for just one book—*one missing book.* "I was told that *the lost book* used to reside right up there. I've always thought it was nothing more than superstitious nonsense. I wouldn't be surprised if every kingdom or city doesn't have a similar claim. I can assure you, there was not a book up there when I moved in here. Which isn't too surprising, any time I've place a book on that particular shelf it's ended up falling to the ground in less than a day...shelf must be canted or loose I suppose."

Dougerty took all that in stride as he cast his eyes around the room expectantly. "So, you think the book is in here somewhere?"

The wizard got a trouble look and shook his old head sadly. "As I said, I don't believe it even exists, but, if it was here, likely it's gone now. There were ten times as my books in here when I first moved in. I spent months sorting through them, selecting those I thought had merit...which I kept. The rest I believe were offered to the nobles and their families...I think the majority of them ended up being handed over to the local merchants. Frankly, I wouldn't be surprised if some of them didn't end up being thrown on the rubbish heap outside the kitchen door."

Dougerty got a sickly look upon hearing that. After a long tense moment the former Golden Arm let out a rumbling sigh. "Ohrder, I was angry when I first came here, but I have to say, if I could go back in time right now, I just might strangle you."

Though Ohrder couldn't really blame him, he was ready with a caustic comment of his own; one he never got to speak because another voice came blaring into his head.