

Chapter Thirty Eight

The First Rule

Three raps came at Dougerty's door, which made him look up from the book he was reading, but nothing more. A ten count later there came two more, followed by five seconds of silence and finally four additional, harder knocks. Dougerty sighed and closed the book, marking his place with a quarter draft note with King Pryhde's profile printed on it—not a great likeness with its exaggerated strong chin, and set it aside.

Come in, Fingers," he called out reluctantly. He would have much rather held onto his silence and his book, but if one of his lieutenants were seeking him out at such an 'early' hour, something important must have come up. That was concerning but not unexpected; the dragon's message had stirred up a lot of buried resentment even among the thieves' guild.

The door cracked open and the six fingered lifter sidled into the room. After a tip of his chin in greeting, Fingers gave him a weak smile and said, "Sorry, to bother you, but something's happened that I thought you'd be interested in."

Fingers had just stated the obvious, the curious thing was why the man seemed so out of sorts, nervous even. "Alright, what is it?"

"You remember a while back when we were considering bringing that big basher, Jogg, and his crew into The Hand?" At Dougerty's nod he continued, "Well, the kid he had with him approached me...he says he has something important he needs to talk to you about. Personally, I don't trust the little wretch, but I thought you should at least know about it."

Dougerty knew exactly who Fingers was referring to. The boy named Shahdow—who did have a relationship of some kind with *Prince Jogg*, but who was also apparently Ohrder's ward, or possibly even his apprentice since the boy possessed a supernatural ability to detect a magical creature's weaknesses that even the wizard seemed lacked. The fact that the youngster had sought Fingers out to get to him spoke volumes. Namely that his master didn't know what he was up to—which made Dougerty *very* curious.

"You did well," Dougerty told his lieutenant. "I will see him. Did you bring him here...?"

"Of course not," Fingers replied indignantly. "But he's fairly close by, I'll fetch him here if you like, or..."

That was as far as he got before the door Fingers had come through a few moments earlier swung opened again and Shahdow stepped into the room. Dougerty was more amused than surprised, but Fingers almost jumped out of his shoes.

"Why you filthy little..." The Hand's lieutenant snarled, drawing back one fist while reaching toward the boy with the other.

"It's alright, Fingers," Dougerty interjected, stopping Fingers in his tracks before...well, from the looks of Shahdow's wide-legged stance and his slight lean to one side, before the boy could do anymore damage to his subordinate's ego. "I'll take it from here."

Fingers grudgingly relented and left the room—*after* making sure that everyone knew that it was only Dougerty's generous, *if misguided*, generosity that had kept Shahdow from receiving the beating of his life. He was still huffing and puffing while pulling the door closed behind him when Shahdow cleared his throat to draw his attention. When the short-fingered thief looked his way, the boy pulled a fat coin purse from his cloak and tossed it to him. Giving Dougerty a nervous glance, Fingers snatched the leather pouch out of the air and made a hasty exit.

“You lifted his purse to blackmail him into bringing you here?” Dougerty asked once they were alone, but it wasn’t really a question.

Shahdow gave an unconcerned shrug. “I asked him nicely first, but he’s not really the accommodating type.”

Dougerty nodded. “As a rule, neither am I. So, why don’t we get right to it and you tell me why you’re here.”

“Ohrder says you’re a great military leader,” Shahdow said simply. “Maybe one of the best ever.”

Interesting opening, but far from getting straight to the point. “Did he happen to mention that I lost the only war I ever fought?”

“No, he didn’t,” the boy got a puzzled look for a moment, then inquired. “Why did you lose?”

“There were a number of reasons,” *hundreds actually*, but one stood out above all the others. “The chief one being that I led my men into battle before we were ready to fight, we were caught off guard and never recovered. Given that, I would say that Ohrder’s assessment of my abilities is overstated.”

Shahdow was silent for a good while before quietly stating. “The same thing that happened to us the other day. We were ready to fight the other creatures, but not the dragon.”

Dougerty gave a slow nod. “Precisely.”

Watching the youngster in front of him, Dougerty could almost see the cogs turning within his head. That made him remember back to the day of the battle in the burned up forest, and how Shahdow had handled himself as the fighting raged around him; men and vile monsters screaming and bleeding on all sides and never once had he hesitated or shown fear. If Dougerty hadn’t know better, he’d have thought the boy was a seasoned veteran with a dozen campaigns under his belt. One of his sources within the castle had told him that the boy had started training in the Honor Garden, so that helped explain his composure, but only partially. And Dougerty had seen with his own eyes the ease with which the boy had handled his sword that day—*the sword—the Shining Sword!* In all the excitement, he’d forgotten all about that! Shahdow had carried the sword that legend claimed had been forged to fight the lizard—*the dragon!* He had no doubt about that; how many times during his years as Ehlsewhere’s Golden Arm had he walked past the silver suit of armor with its matching sword and shield on his way to meet with the king? No, there was no mistaking such a renowned weapon, though he did have to admit that the sword had seemed smaller than he remembered it, but then, knowing that a magic wielding wizard had likely given it to the boy, that was understandable.

“Starting to think you came to see the wrong man?” Dougerty gave Shahdow a wry smile.

“No,” the boy shook his head. “I need to figure out how to kill the dragon...aren’t you doing the same thing.”

Dougerty let out a sigh. “I’m trying. But a flying, fire breathing beast with armored hide and the intelligence of a man...who also, according to Ohrder, has spent his entire life learning the darkest and most destructive spells imaginable is a formidable opponent. And that’s without even mentioning the fallen star, whatever that really is, enables him to do.”

“But the prophecy says the dragon can be killed, doesn’t it?” Shahdow asked stubbornly.

“Possibly...” Dougerty allowed. “Though not in so many words. At least not by human hands.” Then it was his turn to ask a question. “You’ve come to *me* to ask how to fight the dragon, but aren’t *you* the one who can see how to kill these magical beasts?”

That drew a frown, followed by a bitter confession. “With the others I can. But it didn’t work with the dragon.” He gave an irritated shrug. “Maybe it was because I never got near enough...it seems like I have to be close enough to fight them before it happens.”

Dangerously close, is how Dougerty interpreted that. But then again, just standing on the same continent as the dragon seemed dangerously close to him. Even so, what he wouldn’t give to set the boy in front of the dragon just long enough to find out if he *could* detect a weakness within the apparently unstoppable monster—*would doing that give them the information they needed to defeat the monster?*

The boy was just as deep in thought for a few moments, but then his eyes shifted to Dougerty who was still seated at the table, and more precisely, to the book he’d been reading. “My Enemy,” Shahdow read the title aloud. “What’s that about.”

“It was written over a thousand years ago,” Dougerty told him. “By a man named, Joshuel, probably the greatest general who ever lived.”

“And you’re just now reading it?” the boy asked with puzzlement.

Dougerty laughed. “No, I first *read it* when I was about your age...since then I’ve been *studying it*. I hope someday to have gleaned at least it’s most rudimentary lessons.” He reached out to tap the book. “The first lesson...*maybe* the most important one, is what we’ve been talking about...whoever understands their enemy the best will claim the victory.”

Shahdow nodded thoughtfully. “Then we need to go...*study* the dragon.”

Two hours later Dougerty was cursing himself for a fool while wondering where his imminent death was more likely to come from the scorching breath of a flying reptile or the petrifying gaze of an angry wizard—*if any one of the dozens of other varieties of vile beasts they were sneaking past didn’t notice them and tear him to shreds first?* Since such thoughts were completely unproductive, he did his best to shove them aside and focus on the task at hand; as unimaginable as it was. Somehow or another, the *child* he was following—into possibly the single most dangerous place on the planet, had convinced him to not only accompany him *without* the wizard’s help or knowledge, but the audacious youngster had also insisted they both leave behind their magic detecting lenses too. Because, Shahdow was *pretty sure*, some of the vile beasts could detect magic too—which was also the reason he’d purported they needed to leave Ohrder out of their plans since the wizard would stand out like a small sun to anyone—*or anything* with said magic detecting senses. Dougerty had stood firm on bringing Shahdow’s portal creating oyster shell along, refusing to even step foot outside of the city gates without it, even though in its inactive form it still gave off a faint magical glow. For some reason Shahdow’s sword, which he was wearing under his cloak, hadn’t produced a glow through Dougerty’s was certain the weapon had to have some kind of magical properties. The reason Shahdow was leading was because he claimed that the same sense that let him know what a vile beast’s weakness was, also alerted him to their presence.

Dougerty’s thoughts were interrupted when ahead of him, Shahdow came to a sudden stop and crouched even lower than he had been while moving. They were in a part of the fire ravaged Royal Forest where the underbrush had been completely consumed, but here at least there were still enough charred trees standing to provide a decent amount of cover. Shahdow pointed off to his left and held up two fingers. Then suddenly something off to his left must have startled him, because he dropped straight down onto his stomach. A few moments later the boy slowly pushed himself back up off the ground again and Dougerty could see him shaking his head with frustration. While he was still trying to figure what had Shahdow so concerned, the youngster

turned to look back at him and started making a frantic waving motion, signaling him forward. Holding back a growl of frustration, Dougerty started moving, staying as low as he could.

His caution wasn't wasted. Not twenty paces in front of them Dougerty saw the two creatures Shahdow had pointed out to him; a woman with black sheep's wool covering most of her body she also had cloven hooves at the ends of both arms and legs. With her was man sporting cat features—a muzzle and tail probably belonging to a lynx. The cat-man's tail twitched with excitement as the two vile beasts watch the movements of the third individual Shahdow had spotted—the one who'd started him. As the man came closer, crossing in front of them, he looked to all appearances to be *fully* human. In fact the fellow was dressed in the livery of a castle servant.

Shahdow started to rise up, likely wanting to warn the man who seemed to be blinding walking straight into the waiting arms—*as it were*, of the two vile beasts, when Dougerty thrust a hand out to clamp down on his shoulder and pulled him back down.

"*We have to stop him!*" the urgent protest was just loud enough to make it to Dougerty's ears.

In answer he shook his head adamantly and leaned in to whisper back, "Look again."

Shahdow's eyes went wide as the truth dawned on him. There was nothing blind about the path the fellow was taking, in fact he was watching the beasts every bit as much as they had their eyes trained on them—*and if anything he had sped up!* A short time later Dougerty's misgivings were confirmed when the man reached the monsters and the three of them began to speak together. They were too far away for Dougerty to pick up on their conversation—which was a short one that ended with the woman pointing a hoof off deeper into the forest. The man gave a half-bow and respect and started walking again in the direction he'd been given, a few minutes later Shahdow and Dougerty followed behind him—*after* backtracking enough to get clear of the Sheep-woman and her companion. It didn't take long to catch up to the traitor—*that's how Dougerty thought of him*, not just a traitor to the kingdom, but to the entire human race. Keeping back so that he remained just in sight, they trailed him all the way in, past the fallen wall and the double gate that had once guarded the area, to the ruins of the old cottage inside. Everything was just as Dougerty had last seen it, including the large gathering of vile beasts packed in around mostly fallen down rock foundation, *and* the pulsating mass of evil blackness hovering above it. Of course the most dominate feature was the dragon itself. He was reclining on the highest part of the rockwork wall that had made up the north side of the foundation. The yellow eyes with their black slitted pupils that had haunted Dougerty's dreams since the day he'd first felt their gaze were closed at the moment, possibly in slumber; even at a distance Dougerty could see the monster's broad scaled chest rising and falling with even breaths. Ever the military tactician, Dougerty found himself thinking—*if it breaths and sleeps...then surely it must be able to other normal things...like bleed and die!*

He glanced at Shahdow, giving the boy a questioning look, but the youngster just shook his head with frustration. Close as they were, it apparently wasn't yet close enough. Fortunately, they had someone else moving into the area to draw the attention of those already there. As the traitorous castle servant moved forward he brought more and more attention on himself with every step, until every corrupted eye, lacking only the dragon himself were cataloging his progress. Seizing the opportunity, Dougerty and Shahdow—down on their bellies now, inched cautiously nearer to their quarry as well. Things were going better than Dougerty could have ever hoped for until the human reached the outermost creatures gathered beneath the fallen star where

he came to a sudden stop. As he did, a man with human eyes and mouth but a vulture's head, neck and wings started talking to him. When that happened the dragon woke up.

Khaos—as Ohrder had named him, *did* glance down at his human visitor, who was already in the process of bowing down in subjection, but an instant later he rose up on his hind legs, craning his neck around to look directly at the fallen tree Dougerty and Shahdow were crouched behind.

“Time to go,” Dougerty declared through clenched teeth, reaching as he did into this cloak to pull out the oyster shell he'd insisted Shahdow give him while they were back in the city. The boy had assured him he'd use the portal at the first sign of danger, but Dougerty's had trusted the assurances of someone who would casually stroll into burned up forest teeming with vile beasts; his instincts on that account true proved themselves true a moment later when Shahdow put a restraining hand on his arm to urgently whisper, “*Wait...something's happening!*”

Something *was* indeed happening. The dragon launched itself into the air, its mighty wings beating hard enough to send the now terrified traitor, who had already started to couch down, flying backward in a wild somersault. The dragon ignored its latest convert, soaring upward and then folding its wings to come diving straight toward the other two humans who had dared to invade its domain. The insanity increased moment later when Shahdow jumped up and drew his sword, the silver blade catching the sun's bright rays to send out a blinding flash that must have somehow burned right across the diving dragon's eyes. At least that was the only explanation Dougerty could come up with for what happened next, because suddenly the monstrous wings began to assault the air again, flailing madly until the dragon's descent was completely arrested. A moment later Khaos swiveled around and became a streak flying back toward the fallen star.

Once there, he turned to face back toward the boy, a bare-fanged glare of open hatred written on his scaled reptilian face as he watched Shahdow start to march defiantly forward, the shining silver sword raised high in the air as he did. Dougerty could even hear the great beast's gravelly voice as gave orders to his minions, though the distance separating them was too great for him to make out the exact words. Not that there was a real need for that; in moments the massed gathering of monsters rose up and started swarming straight towards them, but by then Dougerty was moving too. He not only had the shell open as he raced after Shahdow, but he was lowering his finger to activate the pearl too. As quick as he'd been to react, many of the creatures were even faster, to the point that when he finally was close enough to grab the still charging boy by one arm as he snapped a finger down on the activation pearl, he found himself wondering if he and Shahdow would have company when they arrived back in the wizard's chambers. That turned out *not* to be the case. The *first* thing Dougerty noticed once his eyes adjusted to the sudden gloom of his new surroundings was a pair of angry eyes glaring at him over one of the dusty tombs Ohrder was so fond of reading—and *the wizard didn't look in the least bit happy to see him.*

“Since *that...*” Ohrder pointed to the shell Dougerty had just snapped shut. “Is only supposed to be used under *dire* circumstances...I'm guessing I'm about to hear a *very* interesting story.”

A very tense ten minutes later the Ohrder sat back in his chair and placed his hands behind his head to stare up at the ceiling. “You're sure he retreated?”

“As much as I can be,” Dougerty nodded. He'd had the same argument with himself, but his recollection of events left little doubt. “The *why...*I can only guess at.”

“Guess away,” Ohrder looked back down and told him sourly.

“It wasn't *me* he was afraid of. I'm not sure he even saw me,” Dougerty shrugged. “Which leaves either the sword...or the boy.”

“Or both,” Ohrder added, rubbing his forehead distractedly. “But then why didn’t he behave the same way the other morning. Shahdow was there with his sword then too.”

“Actually, it may be that he just didn’t have time to,” Dougerty replied. “Shahdow used his shell to transport Prince Dharis away within a minute of the dragon’s arrival.”

“I can see how that could be true,” Ohrder gave an unsettled sigh, then leveled his gaze on *both* of the other people in the room. “I appreciate the motivation behind what you did...but I want you to *swear* to me that you will never try something like that again. We *will* have to risk our lives again, I have no doubt about that...but when that time comes...we will do it together!”

“You have my word, Ohrder,” Dougerty told him. “And, for what it’s worth, my apology for my actions, it was not my place to put the boy in danger like that.”

A moment later, when Ohrder turned to Shahdow, the youngster wasn’t quite so forthcoming. “I promise too...as long as the princess’ life isn’t in danger,” came his answer. “The prophecy says the dragon is going to try to kill her...I won’t let that happen.” He hesitated for a moment then added. “And you should also know that the reason we went there...to see if I could find any weaknesses in the dragon...I think it worked. It wasn’t quite like with the other beasts. With them as soon as I look at them I somehow know exactly how to kill them. That didn’t happen with the dragon. But when he got close to me, I found myself getting ready to strike at his head...not his neck which would have been an much easier thing. Just his head, nothing else would do.”

A few hours later, settled back in his room with his boots off for the day and his feet propped up on a stool place he’d placed in front of his chair for just such an eventuality, Dougerty was sipping a mug of ale when another knock came at his door. It was Fingers’ signature rapping, only sounding as if it was delivered by someone with a lighter hand, but a few more knuckles.

“Come in, Shahdow,” Dougerty called out, then, after the boy had slipped inside to give him a sheepish grin, he asked, “What can I do for you now?”

The boy didn’t hesitate, his words coming out as eager as the look in his eyes. “I was wondering if I could read that book of yours?”

Dougerty laughed and waved him forward. “Of course, come on in and have seat. You’ll probably want to grab a candle and striker on the way over, the light in here isn’t the best for reading and you’re likely to be here for a good while.”