

Chapter Forty Two

A Moonless Sky

Dougerty stood at the little window of his room looking out at the night sky—the *moonless night sky*. The missing moon signaled the halfway point between the last full moon and the next. It had been two full weeks since Khaos had announced his intentions to every mind in Ehlsewhere and as far as Dougerty knew the kingdom was no more prepared to deal with what was coming than the day it had happened. And since Dougerty had a direct connection to the Royal Wizard and eyes and ears stationed throughout the castle, he was confident that his grasp of the situation was unfortunately quite accurate. Turning from one bleak view to face another—his current quarters, a single room, but a good sized one, was currently almost unnavigable because everywhere you looked there were books and more books; hundreds if not thousands of them. In his desperation to find *the lost book*, Dougerty had set the entire body of the Hand's lifters, shifters and bashers on a quest to gather as many books out of every shop, home, and even within Ehlsewhere's castle walls, by whatever means possible. To ensure his people were properly motivated he'd put out the word that he was seeking one particular book that pointed the direction to unimaginable treasures. As far as Dougerty was concerned that was nothing but the truth. The result was impressive—dauntingly so; and amazingly enough, lifting and outright burglary had played much less of a role than bartering, buying or borrowing. Granted, many of Dougerty's shifters could talk a snowman into having a hot cup of cider, so he had no delusions that many, if not most, of the legal acquisitions still nudged up against the line of thievery. He was more than pleased with the results if not the means, but the sheer number of books that needed sorted was overwhelming and getting worse by the day.

Walking over to the nearest unsorted stack—after a week of digging through more books than a man could read in a lifetime, the unsorted side of the room still dominated, Dougerty picked up what was likely a leather bound journal to resume his search. As he did, a soft grunt of surprise came from off to his left where a young boy had his nose buried in another book. Shahdow had apparently discovered something that had caught his attention.

"What is it?" Dougerty inquired without even looking—*many* things drew the youngster's interest. The boy was a sponge about sucking up knowledge. It was more likely he'd stumbled across another science or history book than anything to do with prophecy, let alone the lost book.

"Ehlsewhere used to have a different ruling family," Shahdow said with wonder—*so, history*. A part of history that wasn't news to Dougerty. "Yes, King Dahvus tar Vhallum was overthrown by someone named Gharit the Bold."

"Yes, supposedly Dahvus' was so ruthless and cruel that half of his inner council petitioned the Golden Arm at the time...Sir Gharit to lead a revolt," Dougerty replied. "Even so, by all accounts it was a bloody affair with thousands losing their lives before all was said and done. If memory serves me correctly, Gharit the Bold was King Pryhde's great grandfather."

"It wasn't just the Royal Counselors that helped Gharit become king," Shahdow noted thoughtfully. "*This* says Gharit the Bold would have lost without the help of a battle mage named Khaos."

Chahrity paced—*stalked or marched were probably better terms*, the length of her quarters and back again for at least the twentieth time since returning to them. Her parents were to blame for her unsettled and...yes, she could admit it, *angry* spirit. Were they blind or just callous and

uncaring? The princess refused to acknowledge the obvious answer to *that* question; for all their faults, she did love them. If only she could believe that affection was returned to her—or *the people they ruled*. She had gone to her mother first, hoping to garner the queen’s support; that together they might convince her father to cancel the Grand Festival—she knew her brother and Ohrder had already spoken to the king on the matter and failed. Even so, she’d reasoned that a final united front from his wife and daughter might finally persuade King Pryhde to change his mind. *Reasoned*. She must have been out of *her* mind to think that Queen Vhanity would surrender *any* opportunity to bask in the limelight; especially one that included a parade through the city where every citizen would have the opportunity to wave and cheer for her. If only Chahrity believed that was what would really happen. The princess herself hadn’t ventured into the city since the day the dragon had invaded everyone’s thoughts, but Chahrity’s ladies in waiting had told her many stories of the unrest within Ehlsewhere, including numerous incidents of violence breaking out between the classes. The reason she hadn’t seen any of that for herself was that, given the unrest, her father had forbidden her from even leaving the castle grounds—*yet somehow he thought bringing everyone together in a place where ale and stronger drink would be available in nearly unlimited quantities would work out just fine*. Chahrity wasn’t sure they’d even make it that far into the schedule of events. If Ehlsewhere survived the opening parade without erupting into open revolt she’d count it a true miracle.

Or is it really as bad as all that? The question brought to mind her mother’s response when Chahrity had first broached the subject of cancelling the coming activities. “Don’t be silly,” the queen had laughed. “Certainly there are rabble rousers...there *always* are. But, the heart of the citizenry know how blessed they are to be ruled by such a gracious and magnanimous family as ours.”

“We’re doomed,” Chahrity said aloud to the empty room as she came to an abrupt stop and let out a forlorn sigh. Her malaise lasted only a moment before her expression reset itself into one of determination and she strode over to her wardrobe to kneel down and pull out the bottommost drawer. Inside was a small satchel filled with garments she hadn’t worn in several weeks; ones which she couldn’t change into until she was outside of the castle walls. “Maybe things *aren’t* as bad as I fear...I can at least go see for myself.”

An hour later, under the moonless sky, she—*make that the lowborn lifter, Cassy*, was free of the castle and into the heart of the city. As usual the streets were mostly empty—*mostly*. Even though she’d venture out to get the pulse of people, initially she’d stayed in the deepest shadows, avoiding all contact. She told herself that was based on caution more than fear. When she’d first started her forays into the city it had been alone—and during daylight; it wasn’t until Juhstice, Sir Stewhart and Shahdow had joined her that her incursions had become nocturnal. Not that she was completely helpless; she had a brace of daggers hidden within her clothing, with some rudimentary training from Juhstice on how to use them. Still, she’d decided it would be prudent to avoid the other shadowy figures wandering the streets beneath the starlit sky and instead make her way to the one of the many hostels that stayed open all hours which tended to draw just the sort of people Cassy was looking to spend a few informative hours around.

She’d been inside *The Ox and Ale* before and as she’d hoped the place was packed almost to capacity. Making her way to the back of the main dining room, she took a seat at a corner table and ordered a spiced cider when the serving girl eventually made her way around. The spot let her circumspectly watch the crowd; thankfully, she saw no familiar faces among them. The majority of those around her looked to be city workers, dressed in worn and dirty clothing and clutching their mugs with strong, calloused hands. While Chahrity didn’t see anyone sobering

drunk, most of the men and the handful of women scatter amongst them seemed to have already quaffed enough ale to let their tongues wag freely. One of them, a pock-faced fellow with a hawk's nose, told a story of his dealings with a merchant who had come out of his shop to yell about all the racket being made as the worker was busy repairing a loose board on the boardwalk in front of his shop. The final result was the hook-nosed fellow kept working long enough to remove *all* the planking on that particular boardwalk, exposing the sloppy mud underneath—it had been a rainy week, then packed up for the day—or *three*, telling the *pompous son of a feral goat* that he was welcome to go crying off to the Watch to his heart's content if he liked. That drew a laugh because—as the leather aproned fellow beside him pointed out, "*Like the Watch has time for piddling complaints like that with everything else they've got deal with.*"

That was a sobering comment. Chahrity couldn't image a commoner being so bold as to talk back to a nobleman, even if he was only a merchant. A month before that would have been enough to earn him a visit to the throne room where he would have had to explain himself to the king. Which made Chahrity wonder what the '*everything else*' the Watch had to deal with might be? Her speculations on the topic were interrupted by the room suddenly falling quiet as two men suddenly appeared through a doorway at the back of the room. The first had a familiar face; though she hadn't seen Sir Ghosley in years—which explained the gray at his temples, she was certain she was looking at the tall and slightly portly linen merchant—who also happened to be the father of Ahrlene, Princess Behlize's lady in waiting. There was no doubting the identity of the second man. Sir Behkworth's chiseled features and hard eyes were unmistakable even without his golden armor.

Chahrity quickly dipped her head as the two of them turned in her direction as they started walking toward the door. *Where is your armor, sir knight, and what have you done to put such a pained look on poor Sir Ghosley's face?* she found herself wonder. The pair didn't pause; a moment later they reached the wooden door leading out to the street and made their way outside. Since the Ox and Ale's entrance was flanked on both sides by a pair of leaded windows, Chahrity didn't have to move from her spot to see the men part ways; Sir Ghosley going left and the Golden Arm striding off to the right. Without even thinking about it, she was on her feet in an instant and hurrying after them, but she hadn't be the only one who'd been watching and the two hulking forms that suddenly separated themselves from the shadowed archway they'd been lurking within were even quicker than her. Chahrity didn't recognize either man, but she knew the type all too well—*bashers*. True to their nature, they practically knocked the door down on their way out of the hostel, neither man thinking to even cast a look behind them to see if *they* might be being followed too. When Chahrity had first rose up from her table she'd intended to stay with Sir Behkworth to try and determine what the corrupted guardsman might be up to; that changed the moment she saw the pair of bashers move off in the direction the merchant had gone a short time before.

Dark as it was, Chahrity was still easily able follow after the two bulky shadows moving purposefully down the narrow lane the Sir Ghosley had taken shortly after leaving the ale house. Her own dark clothing let her blend into the background and even gave her the courage to break into a halting run after them which was periodically necessary to keep up with their longer strides. Time passed, enough of it to start Chahrity wondering where the linen merchant might be going—they were definitely heading into a nicer part of the city, and why the two bashers were even following him. Had she gotten it wrong, instead of thieves were they Sir Ghosley's personal guards? She knew some of the nobility did hire men for that purpose. While she was still mulling all that over, a sharp cry of surprise brought home the fact that her distraction had led to her

letting her quarry out of sight. With an self-debasing oath, Chahrity broke into a full run and raced into the darkness, but by the time she caught up it was just in time to see the two hulking thieves force Sir Ghosley down the throat of a narrow alley.

"I don't have any money on me," the merchant's voice came to her tight with fear. "But if you'll just come with me to my place of business I can reward you handsomely."

"Sure, and no doubt you'll invite us in for a mug and a chat by the fire while you're at it," a gruff voice barked back mockingly.

Before the linen merchant could continue to plead his case, the other basher spoke, his words coming out low and menacing as they echoed out of the alleyway. "We're not looking for money, old man. Not tonight. Tonight we're after something more precious than coins. You were warned and now you get to pay up... *with your own blood.*"

Bashers were known for their affinity to deal out punishment with their fists or sometimes clubs, but standing in the mouth of the alley, Chahrity heard the swish of a blade clearing leather and a moment later her eye caught the glint of starlight reflecting off of the naked steel.

"Watchmen hurry... *they're over here!*" Chahrity shouted at the top of her lungs, her voice echoing loudly down the alley and up both sides of the street behind her. She had no idea if there actually were any watchmen within range to hear her cry, but her hope was that neither would the two bashers. "Come quickly, brigands are attempting to rob and murder a nobleman!"

Swearing, followed immediately by a sharp cry pain, erupted from the shrouded alleyway. Then the sound of heavy footsteps racing away down the cobblestone pavement came to Chahrity's ears, which left her hoping for all their sakes that it wasn't a dead end alley the two assailants were fleeing down. Soft moans drew her forward, until Chahrity reached Sir Ghosley's side. The merchant was still on his feet but huddled in pain and fear up against the alley wall.

"Are you injured?" Chahrity asked with concern.

"I took a cut on my arm," Ghosley's voice was ragged. No doubt he was in shock. "I can't tell how bad it is, but there seems to be a lot of blood."

Chahrity quickly drew one of her daggers—*why had she not done that before*, and bent down to quickly cut a long strip off of the hem of her simple cotton dress. The material was dyed a dull, dirty gray, but was in fact quite clean. Sheathing her knife, she held the cloth in one hand while reaching out to locate Sir Ghosley with the other. "Guide my hand to the wound... I've got something here I can use as a bandage to help stop the bleeding."

While she worked, Chahrity kept an ear out for someone approaching; hopefully the members of the Watch she'd threatened the bashers with, but even after several minutes had passed and she was as confident as could be that Sir Ghosley wasn't in immediate danger of bleeding to death, no one had appeared.

"We need to get you to a healer," she said as she finished knotting the improvised dressing in place.

The merchant had been silent the whole time she'd been tending to him, but he found his voice and she was relieved to hear firmness within it as he answered, "My home is not far from here. I can make it there easily enough, and once I do I'll send a servant out to fetch a healer."

Send a servant out to fetch a healer. Yes, that's what we do, isn't it? We command others to complete the tasks we don't want to do ourselves. She'd had such thoughts before the dragon's appearance, but somehow her outlook on life within the nobility had darkened in recent weeks. Forcing a note of compassion into her voice, she said, "I can go with you if you like."

“No, I’ll be fine. In three more blocks I’ll be at my front door,” Sir Ghosley assured her, the fear and hesitancy gone now that the danger was past; he was the already stepping past her to start walking as he said.

In moments he was lost to the darkness, or would have been if his princess hadn’t decided she couldn’t risk the chance of the two men she’d scared off—or others of their bent, appearing to finish what they’d started. For his part, Ahrlene’s father, a man of the nobility, though just barely, hadn’t even thought to thank the young peasant girl who had saved him—or to caution her to take care as *she* made her way through the city at night. Chahrity tried not to let any of that bother her as she stayed just out of sight until the man she was following reached a large two story house with colonnades fronting its stonework entrance. Then, somewhat lost in her thoughts of what had just transpired she turned to start making her own way home, only to find her way blocked by two large and now familiar figures. As frightening as that was, things got much worse when another man broke free of the darkness and Chahrity suddenly had a knife pressed to her throat. Her last thought before one of the bashers stepped forward to shove a rag in her mouth and drop a hood over her head was, *At least if I’m missing or dead they’ll have to cancel the Grand Festival.*