

Chapter Four

Juhstice for All

Prince Juhstice stood at the rail of the castle's uppermost battlement looking out over the kingdom of Ehsewhere with indecision. It had been an odd day, but that was the oddest thing of all. Juhstice was *never* indecisive. Why should he be? If something needed done, you did it. And when it came time to do it, you did it right; you *always* did it right and you always *did the right thing*. That simple philosophy had severed the prince well for almost his entire life, from the moment when he was just a child of five and had seen the Royal Cook's son stealing a blueberry tart when his mother's back was turned. The king and queen were much too busy to be bothered with a five year old's questions, even if it dealt with what to do about a case of petty thievery, so Juhstice had turned to the one adult who always seemed to have time for him—if not a lot of it. Ohrder had looked at him gravely and said, “Do the right thing.” So after giving that some thought, Juhstice did. Even at five he knew that the law must be kept and that it was his royal duty to uphold it. He also realized that if he turned the matter over to the Royal Steward or another of the court officials that the “thief” would almost certainly loose a hand, maybe two since the tray he'd stolen the tart off of was being prepared for the king himself. Therefore, Juhstice decided to take things into his own hands. Hand actually, his right one, which he balled up into a fist to punch the cook's son squarely in the nose. There was some blood—but only a little, and some tears, but also what seemed a sincere promise from the other boy that it would never happen again. That was the part Juhstice liked. In its own way, the punch itself had been as painful for him as it had for the cook's son. But knowing that he'd done right by both the kingdom and one of his subjects, that had been one the best moments of Juhstice's young life.

And he vowed it wouldn't be the last either. A vow he'd kept for almost two decades until that very morning when he'd caught his sister outside the castle walls dressed like a peasant and acting like one too. And worse, she'd asked *him* to not only keep her unacceptable and foolhardy behavior a secret, but to *join* her in doing it. In case you haven't picked up on it yet, if one were to describe Prince Juhstice's character, one might very well say, "Here is a young man in whom there is no deceit." While there might be other and better examples of people who fit that description, Juhstice would certainly have fit in well with their company. So saying Juhstice was indecisive was like saying the sun was cold or that water was dry. And yet, there he was, frozen at the top of the battlement while his heart and his head struggled for control of the rest of his body.

"She's wrong," he told the empty air. At that very moment the wind, which had been mostly absent, rose up, blowing full into Juhstice's face, making him put his hand on the parapet to keep from being pushed backwards. It wasn't an agreeable breeze, but that just meant that it was wrong too. Still, something nagged at him. A half-formed thought at the back of his mind. Something Chahrity had said—wrong as her actions were, had seemed *right*.

"It's our duty to take care of our subjects," his sister had stated defiantly when he'd told her to turn around and go back to the castle, and to never put on her silly disguise again. "I can't do that if I don't know what they need and they won't even *talk* to Princess Chahrity because they're too busy bowing and curtsying and worrying about saying something that would get them thrown into the dungeon or worse! Instead of telling me to stop, you should be helping me."

In his frustration, determined to *show* Chahrity just how *wrong* she was, Juhstice spun on his heel and stalked off to descend the winding stone staircase that took him to the castle's main courtyard. From there, he stormed through the gate and past the moat, not stopping until he was

well within the borders of the city with its hodge-podge mixture of stone and wooden structures. Everywhere he trod people hastened out of his way, dropping whatever they were doing to give a quick bow or curtsy, only to bolt off to the nearest shop or alleyway the moment he acknowledged them—exactly as Chahrity had predicted. *It must be because they can sense my dark mood*, Juhstice told himself. Drawing in a calming breath, he slowed his gait to take on a more leisurely pace and put a smile on his face. Then, instead of nodding at the next person he came upon—a fellow hawking fruit out of a street cart, indicating he should carry on, Juhstice waved the man over instead.

“Yes, my lord, how may I be of service?” the man asked in a tight, squeaky voice as he dropped into yet another bow, this time going to one knee at Juhstice’s feet and lowering his head and eyes in submission. Of course that was what was expected and always happened, but for the first time the prince found himself wishing it didn’t, *and* wondering why it had never bothered him before?

“Actually, that’s the question I have for you,” Juhstice replied. “You may rise.”

The fruit vendor hesitated, then climbed cautiously to his feet, holding onto the stained white apron he wore in a white knuckled grip. His head was no longer bare inches from the ground but his eyes were still firmly locked there. Other than his chest rising and falling as if he’d just pushed his cart up a mountain side, he was a statue. Since the prince had never had a truly nervous or fearful day in his life, Justice was left wondering what was the matter with the fellow. Aloud he said, “Well?”

“Sire...?” the squeak had become a croak.

“Look up at me,” Juhstice heard the impatience in his own voice and forced calmness on himself again. Producing another smile required a greater act of will, but he managed to paint one on by the time the merchant lifted his head. “I asked how I might be of service...to *you*?”

“Ahhhh...if someone’s filed a complaint about anything, Your Majesty, I assure you it wasn’t me,” the words stalled, then came out in a great fearful rush. “And if someone is complaining, then it’s my opinion that they don’t know how lucky they are to be living here in Ehlseswhere...living under the benevolent rule of King Pryhde and the rest of the royal family.”

“Yes, that’s good to hear,” Juhstice said, suddenly very happy that a certain member of his family wasn’t there to also hear the vendor’s words of praise. Chahrity, with her sweet nature, probably wouldn’t have said, “*I told you so!*”, but she’d surly have been tempted. “But I wasn’t asking about a complaint. I was simply wondering how *you’re* doing? Is everything alright with you?”

“With me...?” after those initial two words the man seemed to get stuck, his eyes becoming unfocused as they stared off into the distance somewhere over the prince’s left shoulder as he struggled to assign meaning to Juhstice’s question. Finally, with a start, he held up his hand and shook his head adamantly back and forth. “Nothing amiss, Your Majesty. Things were a little slow early in the month, but it’s picked up well in the last week. I’ll have no problem meeting my tax tribute, I can assure you that. If you like I can run fetch my ledger and show you how carefully I’m tracking everything.”

Juhstice spent a few more minutes trying to get the man to just talk to him, but in the end all he got for his efforts were more unsolicited compliments on how he and the rest of the royal court were managing things and assurances that the merchant’s taxes and other duties would not be neglected. After two more tries which bore almost identical results, Juhstice admitted defeat

and turned around to make his way back to the castle. Somewhat to his own surprise, a few minutes after entering the giant stone edifice, he found himself standing in front of a certain metal shod wooden door that most people avoided, and raised his hand to give a hard knock. The door swung open, seemingly of its own accord, and Juhstice made his way inside. As seemed to be always the case, Ohrder was at his desk with his nose buried in a thick tomb. Oddly—even for the wizard, he had a quill in one hand hovering over a blank piece of parchment, but there wasn't an inkwell in sight.

“Yes, Your Majesty?” Ohrder asked even though his activities had him focused away from the doorway and he hadn't bothered to look around or even up. Juhstice let that tiny mystery slip past as he strode over to the desk to get some answers to the greater one that had brought him there.

“You once told me to *do the right thing*,” the prince stated in a voice thick with emotion. “But what if the *wrong thing* is the right thing?”

“So you finally figured that out?” Ohrder commented dryly as he lowered the tip of his feather to scratch at the empty parchment. To Juhstice's eyes his efforts had no effect; the page remained as blank as before.

“I haven't figured anything out!” the prince exclaimed. “*Wrong* can't be right.”

“Then why did you say it was?” the quill went down on the desk and the wizard's head finally came up. His eyes regarded the heir to the Ehlsewhere throne with interest.

“Well it shouldn't be,” Juhstice said with a sigh.

“Should be and shouldn't be can get just as tanglesome as right and wrong,” Ohrder noted.

“Now, tell me what's got you in such a dither?”

Realizing he truly was in a dither, Juhstice was horrified. Princes were supposed to be above such things. Commoners and, at times, even the aristocracies tended to lose their heads as various trials and tribulations arose, but those of royal blood were to remain undaunted, standing firm and unflappable for everyone else to look to for strength. Doing anything less was...*wrong!* Chagrined, Juhstice drew in a deep breath, squared his shoulders and spoke in a voice once more under complete control. "I caught Princess Chahrity in the village without her escort...she was dressed as a peasant."

Ohrder always looked like he was frowning, but hearing that, his face truly did set in a grimace as he gave Juhstice his full attention. While the prince hadn't an inkling of how rare of an event that was, he realized that he'd never actually looked the wizard directly in the eyes before, and he had to admit to himself that he found it to be quite uncomfortable. With an effort he forced himself to not shrink away from the sudden scrutiny upon him, though he couldn't stop himself from blinking a number of times.

"Did she tell you *why*...?" Ohrder inquired a short eternity later.

"Yes...and *no*," Juhstice didn't know how else to put it. "She went on at some length about this mad plan she has to bring the people together and help them rise above their lowly stations. To her way of thinking they are living dreary and debased lives, no matter how much I tried to persuade her that our kingdom is renowned for its fair and benevolent ways."

"Yes, I'm sure you did," Ohrder leaned in, his eyes narrowing to a bare squint as if Juhstice had fine print written across his face that he was trying to bring into focus. "Just as your tutors persuaded you to believe as you were growing up. But while you blindly took them at their word, your sister has opened her eyes to see beyond the veil."

“What veil?” Juhstice felt his world beginning to tilt again and had to lock his knees in place to keep his feet from turning to flee the room.

“If they had told you that mice like cats, would you have believed them?” Ohrder posed the question lightly, but the weight of it quickly settled upon the prince’s shoulders. Naive he might be, but Juhstice was far from dimwitted.

“I am not a cat,” Prince Juhstice stated vehemently. “And our people aren’t mice to me.”

Ohrder sat back in his chair. “Are you sure?”

Rather than letting the prince sort through the jumble of thoughts his last question had stirred up, Ohrder threw another armload of wood on the bonfire that was building inside the royal heir.

“I assume the reason you were upset at Chahrity was because you felt it wasn’t safe for her to be in the village without her guards?” the wizard commented casually. “But surely you saw other young women wandering the streets alone...*did you spare even a moment of concern for their welfare...Your High-ness?*”

The prince hadn’t eaten or had anything to drink since breakfast, but that didn’t explain the sudden spots that appeared before his eyes, or the dark shrinking tunnel that the room had become. He looked around in desperation for a chair to collapse into before he found himself face down on the floor, but there wasn’t one. The closest thing available was a rug off to one side near one of the room’s numerous bookcases. A stumbling step took him to it and he managed to lower himself down, unceremoniously, but without making a complete spectacle of himself, where he sat for several long minutes doing nothing but drawing in long deep breaths. When he finally looked back up he found Ohrder regarding him—not unkindly—for the wizard anyway.

“My life is a lie,” Juhstice said with anguish.

“Not all of it...and *not* anymore,” the words were delivered as a pronouncement. “The question becomes, now that your eyes are open...where will they lead you?”

“I was always taught that my duty above all was to protect the kingdom...to guard it against all threats, whatever they might be,” Juhstice spoke words of conviction without having any.

Ohrder gave a nod. “Good...now, what do you mean by *kingdom*?”

Rather than give an automatic answer, one that contained phrases like a place that is a beacon of nobility and a royal vanguard of honor and justice, he put the lessons of his tutors aside and stopped to ponder the wizards question on his own. After several minutes his eyes went wide as he said with wonder, “The people. It’s the people...*all of them!*” And then a moment later he added, even more wonderingly, “Chahrity *wasn’t* wrong.”

Sometime later Juhstice made his way back out into the now lamp lit corridors of the castle, mumbling something about needing to find a cloak with a deep hood on it, while leaving Ohrder to go back to whatever he’d been doing before he’d been interrupted by his latest visitor. Except that was now no longer possible. Before the prince’s knock had landed on his door, he’d been in the process of jotting down his thoughts on why the Prophecy of the Rendering was still at least a generation away, given that the current royal family was so entrenched in carrying out their duties, including—or even especially the children. Given that, there was no way either of them would abdicate their positions and leave the kingdom. With a thoughtful frown he looked down at the pertinent line of the scroll he’d been studying and read it again with new eyes.

*When prince and princess leave their abode, the lizard stirs
and the shadow grows.*

Then he picked up his apparently inkless quill and carefully crossed out everything he’d written down prior to Juhstice’s visit.