

## Chapter Three

### Chahrity Begins at Home

At some point you may have heard someone profess that a certain person is just like their father, or possibly their mother, whichever the case may be. And, as is often the case, the observation would be true. But often is not always. To her credit, Princess Chahrity was nothing like either of her parents. In a world of pomp and circumstance, she was a quiet, gentle soul who preferred a solitary, but well-lit, corner to snuggle up with a book. Or on her more adventurous occasions, a meandering stroll through the woods. Since the latter always entailed a sizable escort of the Royal Guard to accompany her, she tended to save it for special occasions, like the first snow of winter, or its counterpart, the breaking forth of the first green shoots of spring. But if you're thinking of her as an introvert who shunned the company of people, you'd only be half right. The aristocracy, the high lords and ladies that paraded through the castle, garbed in their garish silk clothing, with their noses tilted to the rafters and their velvet shod feet marching blindly forward, making anyone not of noble blood have to scurry out of their way lest they be trampled under, or worse, face the wrath of the one they'd had the audacity to impede; those people, even though she was technically one of them, Chahrity could happily go the rest of her days without having to spend another minute with one of them. But velvet slippers weren't the only ones to trod the castle's myriad of passageways and chambers. For everyone within the stone walls of noble birth there resided at least six others strategically stationed to meet their needs, or whims as was more often the case. From the cook to the shy little boy who changed out the chamber pots, Chahrity loved them all, even if all she could do to show it was give them a smile or a whisper a kind word in exchange for all they provided for her. It wasn't fair or right, not to her mind, but one of the first lessons she'd been taught was that being a princess came with privileges—but that speaking her mind *wasn't* one of them. She found that out one particularly dark and dreary day when she'd made the mistake of telling her mother and father that it was so sad that the people had to work outside when it was so cold and wet, and that she wished there was something she could do to make them all feel better. Queen Vhanity had been too busy reapplying her lip rouge to pay any mind to what her daughter had said, but King Pryhde had been aghast and had turned to lash out at her with a ferocity she'd never experienced from him before or after.

*"They are peasants, Chahrity!"* he'd roared. "They are not worthy of your pity. They only exist to serve us. Don't ever forget that, daughter, because the moment you do...*they will too!*"

So imagine her surprise when one of her lady's maids came bustling in all atwitter to exclaim, "The king is going to throw a grand festival...a kingdom wide banquet where *everyone* is invited!"

Mona, like the rest of the lady's maids *was* encouraged to speak her mind—within the inner sanctum of Chahrity's private quarters. She rarely did, but the sheer magnitude of the moment had gotten the best of her.

*"My father...? King Pryhde...is throwing a banquet for...everyone?"* Chahrity was at a loss. Had she just been told the sky was green and grass was blue it would have been easier to digest.

"My lady, you sound just like the town crier when Sir Pettybohne gave him his orders," Mona laughed. "I happened to be standing nearby and Regale actually made the high lord repeat himself. I'm having a hard time believing it myself, but it's true."

To the maid the announcement was a cause for wonderment and celebration. To Chahrity, it was that, but something much more too. A door had just been opened, linking the world she lived

in to the one she'd always longed for. She vowed on the spot that she wouldn't waste the opportunity. But where to begin?

The book was singing the praises of the letter "Q", literally—the tune wasn't one Ohrder had ever heard before, or even suspected existed, about a 'quite quotable queen quickly quieting a quaking quartet of quail', when there came *another* knock at the wizard's door. That was unusual. Almost as unheard of as a quotable queen or quacking quail—or *a singing book*. He considered ignoring it, but given the unsettle state the king was in when Ohrder had last seen him, the wizard decided it might be more prudent to see who'd come knocking than not. Lifting a gnarled hand, he waved at the massive wooden door which promptly unlatched itself to creak open and reveal those waiting behind it. Funny how an apparently self-motivated door could seem so mundane while a talking book was such a mystery, but such was the world Ohrder lived in. Although the wide-eyed group gathered on the other side of the threshold obviously didn't see things quite the same way. They completely disregarded the boy with his book while staring fearfully at the still moving door.

"Come in if you like," the wizard rumbled impatiently.

"Oh...yes, thank you," Princess Chahrity found her voice and forced her eyes away from the door to the seated wizard. It took an extra few heartbeats to get her feet moving again, but in short order she stepped into the Wizard's chambers—for *the very first time in her young, seventeen year old life*. Considering all the strange and unsettling rumors she'd heard over the years about the things lurking there within, Chahrity hid her distress quite admirably as she crossed the threshold, even managing a weak smile. Not that *her* feet were the first to enter the room. Two of the eight members of her Royal Guard who always accompanied the princess anytime she left her private chambers—as *far as anyone but Chahrity herself knew*, scrambled inside ahead of her, posting themselves between her and the rooms two visible occupants—and *any unseen threats*, while the remaining six, two to each side and two to the rear, kept pace with her as she moved forward, until eventually the sixteen legged human cage the Princess of Ehsewhere lived within reformed inside the wizard's study. Ohrder watched the whole ordeal with obvious annoyance.

"I'm sorry to intrude," Chahrity began sweetly, then paused to give her host a chance to assure her she wasn't. Ohrder just kept glaring at her and her entourage, so she continued. "Did you hear about the grand festival my father is going to put on...*for everyone?*"

Ohrder frowned deeper. The boy's head snapped around to fasten on the princess, and even the book fell silent. After an uncomfortably long pause, Ohrder finally responded. "I did."

"Well, I want to do my part to make sure everyone knows they are truly welcome to participate," Chahrity's enthusiasm boiled up to the surface drowning out her earlier nervousness. "I'm afraid if I don't no one will come because they'll be afraid..."

Her voice trailed off there as she searched for the right words. How does someone find a *kind* way to say that their father is a cold hearted tyrant who never does anything for anyone but himself?

Taking pity on her, Ohrder just nodded and said, "I understand. What would you like me to do to help?"

"Um, actually," Princess Chahrity got a sheepish grin and pointed over at the boy holding the book. "I was hoping *he* could help me...if you could spare him for the afternoon?"

Ohrder's perpetual frown lines fought with themselves as surprise washed over his face. The effect was so peculiar that the princess couldn't hold back a giggle. That was actually a blessing since it allowed him to grimace again.

"Whatever for?" the wizard finally asked. It seemed like there was more he wanted to say, but he just sat there looking at her until Chahrity found herself explaining what she had in mind in one mad gush of words.

"I thought I'd start here in the castle, going to the various servant's quarters to hand out special, personal invitations...along with a small gift...I was thinking a pretty piece of ribbon to tie their hair up for the ladies and a baked desert for the men...and of course candy for the children..." When the wizard's brows dipped toward the tip of his pointy nose Chahrity realized she'd missed answering Ohrder's main question entirely and quickly started over.

"If it was just me...and..." she nodded at the armed guardsmen hemming her in. "...them, I'm afraid all I'll find are *empty* residences with the people inside huddled in fear while hoping I'll just go away."

As valid as her point was, Ohrder didn't see how the boy's services would have much effect on any of what she'd pointed out. He looked over at the rug by the bookcase to see its occupant staring up at the princess with wide wondrous eyes. "And how does *he* change *that*?"

Chahrity's face lit up with a smile as she too looked over at the youngster on the rug—who's face flushed crimson the moment he felt the princess' gaze upon him; whereupon he promptly buried his nose in the book he held as if he was actually reading it. Seeing that, Chahrity gave a satisfied nod and smiled even wider. "By just being him. Everyone loves the pot boy. The doors he knocks on always get opened."

Being someone who tended to *not* open his door when people came knocking; but also realizing with some astonishment that even he had *never once* turned the boy away, Ohrder decided the princess might be on to something. Still, since she'd *asked* instead of giving a royal command, the wizard turned his attention to the object of their discussion. "Do you want to go with the princess and assist her?"

Ever so slowly, the book crept down until two very wide eyes became visible. They darted back and forth between Ohrder and Charity, looking so panicked that the wizard was worried the boy might be on the verge of leaping to his feet and rushing for the door; though for the life of him he couldn't understand why that might be. What he didn't realize despite all his studies and many decades of life was that something brand new and *completely* unexpected had just happened.

For the first time in his life, someone had *asked* the boy what *he* wanted to do. While you might think that was a wonderful thing, the boy felt as if someone had reached a hand inside his chest to start squeezing his heart and there seemed to be no air left in the room to fill his lungs with either. And all the while the princess just kept on looking at him with that smile that lit up his day brighter than any summer sun had thought of doing, while waiting for him to say that he would do what she wanted him to. And he *did* want that too—maybe more than anything he'd ever wished for in his whole life, but experience had taught him that just being around Princess Chahrity made his feet get tangled up with each other when he tried to walk while his fingers weakened and trembled so much that he couldn't manage to hold onto a feather. And worst of all his tongue seemed to thicken to the point that a protracted stutter was the only thing he could force past his quivering lips. Given his current state, he didn't even try the latter, but by some miracle he did manage to shake his head back a forth a few micro millimeters. That's when the princess did the unimaginable.

“Please...?” Chahrity said softly, her voice reaching his ears with a gentle caress even as she stepped forward and knelt down before him bringing her perfect blue eyes level with his while laying a warm hand on his shoulder.

From his position at his desk, Ohrder watch with fascination as things played out and the wizard found himself thinking, *Maybe talking books aren't all that strange after all—comparatively speaking.*

The princess put a wrapped bundle containing a number of items into his waiting arms, including some buttered hot rolls, the intoxicating smell of which were threatening to make him droll. “Do you have any questions?” Chahrity asked, which was considerate, but a clear waste of time since the boy had as yet to utter a single sound since she plucked him out of the wizards chambers. The wide-eyed youngster shook his head but otherwise just stood there looking at her, so Chahrity reached out and took him by the shoulders to turn him around and start him off toward the door. He moved forward, slowly at first, but with his back to her each step seemed to come quicker than the last until he was practically sprinting by the time he reached the first of the narrow entryways cut into the castle’s heavy stone walls.

Once the door swung open there was still no way for the boy to make his way inside—even if *he had been invited in.* Mistress Grohwer was a large woman, sporting three chins and a surprised smile—*until* she spotted Chahrity over the boy’s shoulder. Then her face blanched and her triple chins began to quiver. When she finally found her voice it was tight and came out just above a whisper.

“Is everything alright?” she tried to direct her question to the boy in front of her but her eyes seemed to be stuck on the princess and her entourage of armed guardsmen.

The boy was all too familiar with the emotion he saw before him; it was the same one he had to deal with every time he had to step into the royal chambers to empty the king’s chamber pot. Seeing Mistress Grohwer’s fear turn her into a trembling statue helped him conquer his own. She was one of the few people who thanked him each morning when he came by, and where most people avoided making physical contact with the boy who emptied pots, she wasn’t hesitant to give him an encouraging pat on the shoulder or ruffle his hair as she let him through the door. Wanting to comfort her, the boy told her the same thing he’d been repeating to himself to bolster his own courage since leaving the security of the wizard’s chambers.

“You don’t need to worry, she’s really nice and she just wants you to be happy,” he said, then suddenly remembering what he was holding, he thrust the bundle forward. “She wants you to have this and for you to come to the festival...ah, I don’t know what a festival is, but she said it’s important and I believe her.”

Still somewhat in a daze, Mistress Grohwer accepted the cloth wrapped package and nodded absently. Then she just stood there looking at a complete loss for what to do next. Again, drawing upon his own experience of dealing with the royal family, and realizing how just being in their presence can make it hard to even breath, he gave Mistress Grohwer an encouraging smile and told her, “You can go back inside now. I’ll tell the princess you said, thank you.”

That seemed to break the spell that had fallen over the poor woman, who gave herself a hard shake, followed by a heartfelt, “Thank *you!*”—which had nothing to do with a bundle of hot rolls or an invitation to a festival. Then, despite her considerable bulk and full hands, she disappeared back inside hand and closed the door with enough gusto for the boy to feel the breeze it created blow across his face. Then came the hard part; turning back around to go face the princess. And the worst part was that on his foot dragging way there he remembered what he’d said about

telling the princes Mistress Grohwer had said, "Thank you", and right on top of that the memory of Ohrder's standing threat to turn him to stone if he ever lied again. So, once he finally did arrive in front of Chahrity, he gathered up every ounce of courage within him and blurted out, "She said, thank you," followed by pronounced gulp and a hastily added, "*Your Majesty.*"

Chahrity beamed back at him, which would have melted his young heart if he'd been brave enough to lift his eyes off the ground to see her smile. "Did she say they'd come to the festival?"

Her exuberant question brought a new sensation with it. A never before experienced emotion; it was worse than any of the fears or loneliness that had haunted him over his young life, and it reached out and seized him in its crushing grip. He couldn't even put a name to it. Disappointment or sadness didn't really come close to describing what he was feeling. It was like all the joy in the world had just been sucked away, never to return, because he'd *failed* to do something that was important to Princess Chahrity. Totally crestfallen, he looked up into her eager eyes and confessed, "I didn't ask her that?"

There was no mistaking the disappointment that washed across her face, but it didn't erase the smile on her lips. Thanks to that he was able to continue on since he wasn't sure his heart would have kept beating if she'd given him a look like her father or the other nobles often did when he fell short of their expectations. *I'll do better next time*, he vowed silently. Aloud he said, "I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry for, you did wonderfully," the princess replied, seeming to somehow cause the sun to shine brightly through the castle's stone walls. "Shall we continue on?"

Continue on they did. And the boy kept to his vow, doing better and better with each stop. By the time they'd worked through the first wing of the castle's upper residences, Begone had become quite proficient at calming the nerves of whoever came to the door, enough to engage most of them in conversation, to the point that twice he'd managed to convince them to speak to the princess directly. That brought such a wide smile to Chahrity's red lips that it almost made him forget his earlier shortcomings. It took two full days for them to work their way through the castle. On the third day they crossed the moat and stepped into the busy streets of the thriving village growing out from Ehlsewhere Castle's walls; a place where the royal family was only known by reputation and Begone the pot boy wasn't known at all. They tried to carry on just as they had within the castle walls, but after an hour of having streets empty the moment the royal entourage turned onto them, and finding that almost every door they knocked on went unanswered—and even the ones that did get opened might as well have stayed closed for all the good it did to try and talk to the terrified people inside, Chahrity called a halt to things. While Begone looked on helplessly, not having a clue on how to give the princess what she so wanted—though it broke his heart to admit that, Chahrity stood at the crossroads of yet another street and look off into the distance where a man lying on a pallet was accepting a coin from a passing merchant.

"They'll talk to a beggar, but they hide from me," she said thoughtfully. Then, for the first time since they'd left the castle, she began to smile.