

Chapter Twelve

The Vow She Swore

The entire castle was on the verge of imploding upon itself. From all the commotion and consternation, you would have thought a foreign army had suddenly appeared outside the gates. While it wasn't anything *quite* that dire, the situation was quickly escalating to the point where bloodshed was almost inevitable. You see the pot boy had failed to show up to perform his daily duties. In fact, he was nowhere to be found—which was the *only* reason there hadn't already been some bloodletting. King Pryhde, having already been *forced* to waste time and resources on a ridiculous festival because of the vile little miscreant's irresponsible behavior, had already called for both the guillotine and gallows to be made ready, and he fully intended to use both—obviously not in that exact order. Ohrder found all this out when someone came frantically knocking at his door. With an impatient wave he bade the door to open and wasn't the least bit surprised to see the princess standing on the other side, but her bedraggled appearance *was* a bit of a shock—she was still in her night clothes, wearing a heavy cashmere robe over her gown, and frankly, her hair was a complete mess. While she didn't have her mother's obsession about her appearance, Ohrder had never once seen Chahrity when she wasn't prim and proper.

“Good morning, Your Highness,” Ohrder intoned—though he doubted that was actually the case. He gave another wave to beckon her in. “You're out and about quite early.”

Rather than answer his comment, which was really a question, the princesses rushed into the room and began sweeping her gaze around it anxiously. She even strode over to look behind the large silver mirror at the far end of the room before hurrying back to finally address the wizard.

“He's not here either?” her words came out dripping with worry.

“I assume you're looking for him because he's late attending to his duties again?” Ohrder didn't have to ask who she was referring to since there was only one other *he* besides himself to frequent his chambers.

“He's not *late*...it's past noon Ohrder,” Chahrity's tone was close to chiding. “I'm afraid something's happened to him. And if nothing has already, it's going to...Father is determined to have him executed before the day is over!”

Clocks were commonplace in Ehlsewhere—as were unshuttered windows that would let you know if the sun or the moon were making an appearance. Ohrder had no use for either; one made an incessant ticking sound and the other let in wind that tended to turn scrolls into kites. Still, he was a little surprised to hear how late in the day it was; and more importantly, the princess was right. Even when he was feeling ill, the boy was stubbornly dogged about seeing to his duties. Sitting there at his desk, he felt something reach inside his chest and begin to squeeze his heart.

The day before, if you'd have asked Ohrder what he did when he felt so panicked that he could hardly take a breath, he would likely have scoffed at you. Standing there with his imagination running wildly over the myriad of possibilities that could have befallen the boy, he had to fight through that very thing. Why that would be when they were talking about the person who day-in and day-out annoyed him more than all the other denizens of the realm combined, made absolutely no sense at all—especially when the youngster probably got distracted chasing after some new bug he'd discovered, but that didn't change things a bit. The thought that kept chasing itself through the wizard's wizened head was, *What if it's too late? I may be able to slow time down, but I can't change it!*

“He sleeps in the stables...” Ohrder began once he composed himself enough to speak, but the princess cut him off midsentence.

“That was the first place I had checked, thinking he might have simply overslept,” she said, then rattled off the dozens of other places she’d had most of the castle’s household staff and her own ladies in waiting look since discovering Shahdow’s absence. “The reason I’m only just now coming here is because he told me how much you dislike his interrupting your mornings, so that he doesn’t come here until afternoon.”

True as they were, that didn’t take the sting out of Chahrity’s words. Ohrder didn’t dodge them, but he did make a promise to himself that some things needed to change—*would change*—if only he got the chance to change them.

“Well, if he’s not in the castle, then that leaves the city or the forest,” Ohrder muttered. Then remembering that he wasn’t just having a conversation with himself—but not *who* he was having it with, he said, “Send your people to scour the city...every shop, street and alleyway. Then find your brother and the two of you search out Dougerty or one of his minions and get them on this too.”

Chahrity nodded her head in agreement as if she were used to being ordered around by one of her subjects. “I should have thought of that. But the city’s a big enough task with all of us looking...if he has gone into the forest, how will you ever manage to find him?”

“If he’s there, I’m afraid I know *exactly* where to look,” the wizard said morosely.

As unhappy as Ohrder sounded about wherever *exactly* might be, *finding* Shahdow was only half the problem. “And what about Father,” she asked. “What do we do about him?”

“Leave the king to me,” Ohrder told her with a grim smile. “As you astutely reminded me recently, Your Highness, it’s *my* job to provide him with wise counsel.”

The stump was the same as the last time he’d saw it. Oh, there might have been a few more imperfections on its time worn back, but the same could be said for the man looking at it. That was on the outside. Inside was a different story. Ohrder stood in the arched entryway and had a flashback to a decade before; to the day he’d just happened to pause and look inside the strange old tree instead of passing it by as was his normal routine, and found a baby sleeping inside. Though no longer a babe, the boy curled up at the far side of the hollow stump looked to be sound asleep. Ohrder let out a sigh and drew in his first full breath since Princess Chahrity had come knocking at his door. Sadly, relief brought its ugly cousin with it and he was about to bark out an angry command to the disobedient youngster when he remembered the promise he’d made to himself. Some things need to change and he began by shelving the, “*Wake up, boy!*” that was poised on his tongue, reminding himself that *the boy* had a name he preferred to be called now.

“Shahdow...” softly spoken, his voice still echoed off the walls of the hollow tree. “...it’s time to wake up and come home now.”

The youngster stirred, letting out a grunt of protest typical of any child being prodded out the warm of embrace of blissful slumber—why is it that their little souls fight so hard to enter the thing that in a few brief hours they will resist giving up with all their might? Next there came a long stretch; possibly to work the kinks sleeping on the hard ground inevitably brought with it. Then, suddenly, the boy’s movements became sharp and focused as he apparently became aware of his surroundings and the situation. Jerking bolt upright, he turned to look back at the doorway with wide, worried eyes. Seeing Ohrder standing there the worry changed to something else; something dark and suffocating—it actually quite resembled the same look that had come over the wizard’s face a few hours before. Wanting to reassure him that everything was alright and

that he wasn't in trouble—no matter how much he should have been, Ohrder took a step forward just as Shahdow was raising his hand, looking for all the world like he was about to knock on the wall next to him as if it *was* a door. But then a moment later, in concert with the wizard's arrival into the stump's interior, the boy's arm fell limply to his side as he let out a deep and troubled sigh.

"I've never understood your preference for sleeping in the stables," Ohrder tried to keep his tone light, thinking the youngster was still worrying about being reprimanded. "By this looks to be a considerably *less* inviting place to take a nap...or did you sleep here all night?"

It was a proper question, delivered as gently as anyone could ask for, but the only response it received was a reluctant shrug as Shahdow dropped his head to look forlornly down at the ground in front of him. From that point on, no matter how much Ohrder tried to coax him to do so, the boy wouldn't speak, or even look up at him. Other than those two things though, Shahdow was his normal obedient self, falling in behind the wizard and trailing after him when Ohrder told him it was time to go back to the castle. Even so, the way he drudgingly shuffled along, with stooped shoulders and never lifting his eyes from the path in front of him, you'd have thought he'd been made aware of the king's plan to send him to the gallows—and *he nearly was*. Three times in rapid succession after they entered the city gates members of the Watch came up determined to take the boy and hustle him off to stand before the king. All three got redirected by the wizard, the first two patiently, but the third, a fellow named Ghafney, who from the neck up somewhat resembled a plucked owl, received a warning that if another soldier so much as looked their way before they reached the castle then he might as well turn in his sword since he wouldn't be able to wield one with feathers where his fingers used to be. Apparently the watchman took the threat seriously because from then on they only caught a glimpse a handful of soldiers and all of them looked to be in full retreat.

Back inside the castle, Ohrder led Shahdow straight to his chambers and got the boy settled on his rug, which he did readily enough. Though when the wizard suggested he might like to read from his favorite book, the boy gave a weak nod, but his hands stayed in his lap and the book stayed on the shelf. Flummoxed about not only what might be happening with the youngster, but what on earth to do about it, Ohrder sat down at his desk and pretended to look through a scroll while pondering his options. It was clear that something significant had happened—but *what*. Several times on the trip through the forest he'd tried to broach the subject, explaining to Shahdow that he could see that he was upset and that he just wanted to help, but the boy hadn't so much as acknowledged that he'd ever heard a word he said. Could it be that something had happened while Shahdow was out in the city pretending to be a member of the Hand? The mere thought sent Ohrder's blood to boiling. If that were the case, then rest assured, whoever had done whatever would rue the day they were born. If only the princess weren't so obsessed with saving the world, and if only the boy weren't so obsessed with helping her do it—or anything else she might ask of him for that matter. And with that thought came another. Even an ancient wizard had a mother at one point in his life. It was such a distant memory that it was almost as if it was something he'd read in a book instead of an event he'd lived through, but Ohrder's thoughts went back to a rainy day when he'd come home to the little stone cottage where he and his mother lived, soaked to the bone and covered head to toe in black stinky mud—the kind you can only find in a well-used hog wallow. He'd tried to tell his mother that he'd fallen in on his own, but being a mother, she saw right through that—and beyond, to just what she needed to say and do to make her miserable son's day not quite all right again, but much, much better.

“You wait here, I’m going to go fetch us something to eat,” Ohrder told the listless boy. It wasn’t a complete lie; he did intend to make his way to the royal kitchen—eventually. As soon as he managed to hunt down the closest thing to a mother that Shahdow had ever known.

Princess Chahrity let herself into the wizard’s chambers and left the door hanging open behind her. That was the only way her guardians would obey her order to stay outside, and even then their compliance came with no small amount of protest from Sir Ahbernaty, the captain of her guard, who posted himself in the doorway with one hand ready on the hilt of his sword and his eyes constantly moving about the room as if he expected a hidden assassin to spring forth at any moment—in truth he didn’t, but he was primed and ready to defend his princess with his very life if the need did arise.

Shahdow was right where Ohrder had said he would be, sitting cross-legged on his fur rug with his hands in his lap and his head bowed as if in prayer—he wasn’t, at that point in time he had no way of knowing how much he needed to do that, or even to who he needed to be praying. The boy didn’t even look up to see who had entered the room, so he missed Chahrity’s worried smile as she made her way over to him. Then, despite the fact that she’d taken time to get properly dressed for the day and was wearing a white lace trimmed gown, she dropped down on the floor beside him.

“You gave me a terrible fright,” she said, reaching out to gently rub her hand across his stooped shoulders. Soft as both her touch and her voice were, the youngster gave a start and turned to look up at her with his big brown eyes. They were filled with wonder at seeing her there beside him, but that didn’t completely mask the pain that also resided there.

Shahdow opened his mouth, but then closed it again, as if he couldn’t find the right words to say. Chahrity studied him for a few moments; her smile never dipped, but while her eyes never left the boy beside her, she seemed to be looking at something beyond just Shahdow himself. She finally nodded and said, “Whatever it is that’s troubling you, you’re trying to deal with it alone...when you’re *not* alone.”

Shahdow looked up at her when she said that, but though he didn’t utter a sound, his denial of her words was written all over his face. The princess pursed her lips upon seeing that, but they didn’t stay in that position for long. “You’ve been helping me every day for the past month,” she persisted. “It’s only fair that I help with this...whatever it is. I insist. And since I’m your princess, I *royally* insist. Another word for that is *command*.”

Shahdow’s eyes went wide and this time when his jaw dropped open some words actually fell out. “But...you *can*’t!”

“Why not?” Chahrity leaned back and gave him disapproving frown—somehow or another there was still a smile lingering behind it. “Is it because *I’m a girl*? I get so tired of that.” She put her hands on her hips and lifted her chin in the air to look down her nose at Shahdow, when she next spoke her words came out deep reproving; a surprisingly accurate imitation of her father. “*Chahrity, what are you doing with your brother’s sword, put it down this instant before you slice a finger off, and “no”, you can’t go on the boar hunt, that’s a gentleman’s sport. Or, the one I detest the most...stop poking your nose into matters of state...surely there’s a book somewhere that needs reading or needles in want of some knitting.*” She paused to give a grudging shrug. “Not that I mind a bit of reading or knitting mind you, but I don’t see how that disqualifies me from all the rest of it. *You’ve* seen me pick a man’s pocket as deftly as any male lifter in the city, tell me I’m wrong if you think so.”

"It's not because you're a girl," Chahrity's antics had managed to burn through the darkness engulfing him enough to draw a weak smile from the miserable boy. "This is just something I have to do on my own...no one can help me."

"Why not," the princess asked. "Can you at least tell me that?"

Shahdow drew in a breath and let it out in a deep sigh. "I really can't...it's a secret."

"Hmmm," Chahrity considered his words for a moment. "Well, we're no stranger to those, are we? I've asked you to keep my secrets, secrets that if they got out could cost people their very lives. Why won't you trust me with one of yours? I won't tell anyone...not even Ohrder."

The boy dropped his eyes. "If I tell you, I'm afraid you won't want me to be your shadow anymore."

"*That will not happen,*" Chahrity assured him, reaching out to take one of his small hands in her own. "Now, I won't make you tell me, but wouldn't you want me to tell you if our positions were reversed?"

The boy let out another sigh, only this time when he blew it out it was as if it took the weight of the world off his shoulders with it. He looked up at the princess, fully meeting her eyes for the first time. "Did Ohrder tell you where I was?"

"Yes, he said he found you in the forest, by the mysterious old stump," Chahrity replied.

"*Again...*he found me there again," Shahdow told her. "And I was inside of it, just like the first time he found me there when I was a baby."

"I didn't know that," Chahrity confessed. "I always thought you were an orphan and that you'd lost your parents during the war against Fahraway."

The boy nodded. "I used to think so too. But now I think the stump brought me here, from someplace else...maybe even Fahraway...it's a magical stump."

Chahrity thought she was listening intently to him, but her ears were stuffed up with other things that she'd heard before, so she already *knew* there were people who *thought* that the stump had some kind of strange magical properties. That was the problem with uneducated people, they tended to believe in the most outlandish things.

"It's all part of the Rendering Prophecy," Shahdow continued his confession. "Ohrder told me that the stump is the tree that ushers in the renderer..." as hard as he tried he couldn't keep from looking down in shame. "I think I must be the renderer."

This time the princess *did* hear him, for his pained words struck a familiar chord in her own young heart. "I know the passage you're talking about," Chahrity was still holding his hand and gave it a squeeze. "But I'm guessing that Ohrder didn't tell you all of it."

Shahdow looked up at her with surprise. While he was still searching for words to ask her what she was alluding to, the princess began to quote from the second half of the prophetic passage that had haunted *her* for the majority of her young life. "*Unafraid, she faced the cage. And though crowned no more, the vow she swore, to sacrifice her very life, will usher in the final end; calling forth the one who reaps and rends.*"

Shahdow's eyes became as big as saucers. "Like the picture outside the Royal Chambers, with the lizard and the woman in the cage...*that's you?*"

Chahrity shook her head, but without any certainty. "I don't know, but it *might* be. There are so many different pieces of the prophecy. None of them fit together all that well, and some even seem to contradict each other. But most agree that a princess or a queen play a big part in the rendering. Learning that at about your age, I was very troubled that *I* might be the one who causes the world to end."

"But you're not anymore?" the boy asked with amazement.

“No...or at least not nearly so much,” Chahrity answered. “I don’t know what tomorrow will bring, but I know what *I* can bring to it. Every day I do my best to make our world a better place...that’s the surest way I know to make sure I don’t end up being a part to rendering it to pieces. *You’ve* been helping me do that...would you like to continue doing that?”

There wasn’t even a moment’s hesitation. Shahdow started nodding his head so adamantly that it might have caused a neck strain. “Yes...yes I would!”

“It’s settled then,” the princess told him, then leaned over to give him a conspiratorial hug. “And as far as all this prophesy business goes...I don’t know about any old vows, but I’ll make you a promise...no matter how it all shakes out, we’re in this together, you by my side, me by yours. And come what may, we’ll take it all on together.”

She said it lightly, thinking her words were nothing more than a comfort to a troubled boy, never suspecting that she’d just given voice to something that had been anticipated and speculated about for nearly six thousand years.