

Chapter Sixteen

Vanities of Vhanity

While the prince was busy working his frustration off in the Honor Garden, his valet, Sir Stewhart, found himself engaged in a battle of his own. The summons that had brought him to the Golden Arm's private quarters had come as a surprise; that rarely happened. In fact, in Sir Stewhart's personal experience, it had never happened before. As the Crown Prince's personal valet, his daily duties and schedule were set by Juhstice himself, but technically Sir Behkworth *was* still his superior. A point that was made abundantly clear from the moment he stepped into the room.

What kept you? I sent for you over an hour ago?" Behkworth demanded before Sir Stewhart had time to finish closing the door he'd just walked through, much less offer the salute that was due a superior officer.

"Ahh...I was attending to his Royal Highness," the valet stammered, so caught off guard by the accusation that he completely forgot about his salutatory responsibilities. Sir Behkworth didn't and leveled an even more disapproving glare at him, which brought Sir Stewhart back to the moment, causing him to belatedly put his hand to his brow as he hastily added, "My apologies for keeping you waiting."

"The prince has been in the Honor Garden most of the afternoon," the Golden Arm pointed out, obviously not willing to let the matter go. "*You have not!*"

"Let me rephrase..." Sir Stewhart took a moment to compose himself before replying, then drew himself up to look the other man in the eye. "I should have said I was attending to a task for Prince Juhstice. There is something he wants to do tonight that I needed to make preparations in advance of our setting out. Since *he* considered it to be an urgent matter...so did I."

Sir Behkworth's broad face became lined as his scowl deepened. "The prince seems to have a number of his nights burdened with *urgent matters* of late. I've had reports that he...and *others*, have been leaving the castle at the oddest hours, exiting through the most unseemly of portals. And odder still, though they are obviously *attending* to something *within* the city, *The Watch* has as yet to catch a single glimpse of them."

The Golden Arm left off there, letting his words hang in the air. And though there hadn't been an actual question asked, Sir Stewhart still felt the weight of the unspoken query pressing down on him. "The prince has sworn me to secrecy regarding that, but I can assure you, he...*and the others*, have been safe at all time."

"Either you're a fool or you take me to be one," Sir Behkworth snapped. "The royal heirs being outside the castle walls with only two swords to protect them is the farthest thing from *safe*! Tell me, when the prince first posed this outlandish plan of his to you...whatever it is, *did you even think to object?*"

Sir Stewhart heaved a sigh as Behkworth's words ripped the scab off an old wound, the guilt of which he'd been doing his best to ignore for the better part of a month. "I did...more than once. But, the prince...can be quite stubborn. And Princess Chahrity...while her sweet nature is undeniable, I have no words to describe how...*adamant* she can be about certain things."

"Yes, well, be that as it may," Sir Behkworth's voice softened as he nodded his understanding before crossing the room to drop into a well-appointed and nicely padded chair stationed beside the lit fireplace, indicating as he did for the valet to take his place on its twin beside him. It was all a feint, setting up for the killing blow—and a very well timed one at that.

“*We* still have our duties to protect them...even from themselves. I think it’s time you told me just exactly what the princess and her brother are so *adamant* about.”

Sir Stewhart gratefully dropped down into the offered seat, but then he hesitated. “As I mentioned before, Sir Behkworth, the prince has sworn me to secrecy on the details of the matter. I’m afraid I may have already said more than he’d be happy about.”

“Did he also make you renounce your oath to protect him no matter the circumstances or cost?” the Golden Arm growled, his gaze once more as sharp as newly fractured flint. “And have you forgotten *who* it is that carries the *full* responsibility of maintaining the safety of the entire royal family?”

“That would be you,” Sir Stewhart acknowledged sheepishly.

“Then tell me what I need to know to be able to do my duty,” Sir Behkworth grated. “And since you’ve already completed the preparations to enable your master to go gallivanting around the city again this evening, I need as much time as possible to ensure he truly is safe when he does.”

Nearly an hour later, after the Golden Arm had finally completed his full inquisition, Sir Stewhart beat a hasty retreat, thanking his *host* profusely for allowing him to keep their ‘*conversation*’ just between the two of them, since bothering the prince with the details they’d worked out would likely do nothing more than cause him unnecessary consternation. The valet was barely out the door before another one—leading to a small study, opened and another man joined the Golden Arm.

“What do you make of all that?” Sir Behkworth asked the Royal Steward.

Sir Pettybohne looked back with concern. “I can see why you were worried. Left to themselves who knows what dire fate might lie in wait for the prince and princess.”

“For *them*?” Sir Behkworth gave an incredulous laugh. “If I thought for a moment that the king wouldn’t pass the blame on to me I’d happily let some back-alley thug slit their throats...I might even hire it done myself.” Sir Pettybohne looked aghast but the Golden Arm was just getting started. “Did you *hear* what that little sniveler, Stewart said? The royal whelps are cavorting with the leaders of the thieves’ guild...the same rabble that have been doing everything in their power to disrupt the *tributes* we collect from the merchants. You remember the tributes don’t you...the ones that have allowed you to purchase your new villa in the country and your wife to acquire a wardrobe and jewelry to rival the queen herself?”

“Ah...yes, I see your point,” the Royal Steward’s expression turned sour. “You’re thinking they’re actually collaborating with these criminals instead of trying to deter their activities as young Sir Stewhart suggested.”

“Have you forgotten why I was summoned to see the king a few days ago...?” Sir Behkworth asked slowly, as if he were talking to someone with only half a wit—which he was beginning to suspect might very well be the case. “...because *both* of his meddlesome offspring had come whining to him about *rumors* of corruption within The Watch?”

As a matter of fact Sir Pettybohne *had* forgotten all about it since the king hadn’t laid that particular odiferous pile of dung at *his* feet—or at least he hadn’t thought so at the time. He certainly recalled the incident now. “I remember. I simply assumed you would have dealt with it, so I gave it no further thought.”

“I *am* dealing with it...that’s why I called Stewhart here and why we’re talking now,” Sir Behkworth considered himself to be a patient man, but the Royal Steward was pushing him

beyond his limits. “I needed to gather the facts, and now that I’ve done that...*we* need to take the appropriate action.”

“And just what might that be?” Sir Pettybohne asked, feeling a knot of apprehension starting to form within his gut. He really had thought this to be the Golden Arm’s dilemma, and oh, how he wished that were still the case. “I can’t imagine the king would approve of what his children running through the streets dressing up as commoners...and thieves at that...if only we could tell him *that* without the risk of exposing the rest of it.”

“Actually, I think we very well may end up doing that very thing,” the Golden Arm said thoughtfully. “Prince Juhstice wouldn’t be the first heir to turn to outsiders to help him seize the throne while his father is still seated upon it.”

“*Prince Juhstice...?*” Sir Pettybohne stared at Behkworth with astonishment. “Do you really think the king would possibly believe that?”

“You mean the prince who has recently made a habit of complaining to his father about how unfairly his subjects are being treated?” the Golden Arm got a nasty smile. “Yes...I think we can make a case that His Highness got so fed up with the situation that he decided to take matters...*drastic matters*, into his own hands.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” Sir Pettybohne acknowledged, even as the queasy feeling in his stomach began to grow. “And I suppose the princess fits into that scenario too...the way she dotes on the commoners is well known to everyone.”

“Maybe...” Sir Behkworth shook his head uncertainly. “But for someone who seems to care little about her royal lineage, she can be as regal as any monarch who ever wore a crown when the need arises. And during those occasions, when she speaks, the king listens. No, I’d just as soon Princess Chahrity was already out of the way when the time comes to deal with her brother.”

“But as you pointed out earlier, the king would likely hold *you* responsible for her death,” Sir Pettybohne said with exasperation. How the king’s Golden Arm could so casually talk about murdering members of the royal family was beyond him. *How did I ever get myself into this?* He found himself thinking, when in reality what he really needed to focus on was finding a way out.

“I’m not planning on hurting the girl,” Behkworth chuckled. “Not at this point anyway. I just think that she’s caused *this* kingdom enough trouble and it’s time someone did something about it.”

“I don’t understand,” the Royal Steward shook his head with confusion.

“And you don’t need to,” Sir Behkworth said with a shrug. “I’ll take care of the princess. You need to focus on our troublesome prince...specifically, we need to find some of your merchant friends who will come forward to complain about someone ‘*claiming*’ to be Prince Juhstice who is going around the city picking people’s pockets.”

Sir Pettybohne’s eyes went wide upon hearing that, but he slowly started nodding his head.

Queen Vhanity was in her garden, gazing upon all the lovely flowers surrounding her, some almost as lovely as the one admiring them—*almost*. She got a small, secretive smile at that thought. But it was true. A flower, no matter how vibrant and delicate could ever truly compare with a beautiful woman, and it wasn’t her fault if the queen of Ehlsewhere happened to also be the *most* beautiful woman in the whole kingdom; or for all she knew, the entire world. Vhanity gave out a contented sigh and leaned down to sniff one of her favorites, a blood red rose so large that it would take two hands to hold it if she were to pick it—not that she would, there were lesser plants, in *other* gardens, whose sole purpose was to provide daily floral accoutrements for the castle. The scent was magnificent and she decided on the spot to have her personal perfumer

create a fragrance to match it. But of course that would also require a new red gown to go with it—with matching shades of rouge and lip gloss to round things out. She rose and turned, looking for one of her ladies in waiting to dispatch the necessary instructions, only to see one of them escorting a visitor into the garden; a male visitor, which was quite unexpected. When her uninvited guest cleared a tall stand of Hollyhocks, she recognized Sir Behkworth, her husband's Golden Arm, though at the moment he was bereft of his armor, dressed in a frilled gray coat and matching trousers which were tucked into black knee-high boots polished to mirror-like perfection. Vhanity appreciated how well quaffed the man always was, including the precise grooming of his wavy, shoulder length dark hair and sharply pointed goatee. She had to admit he cut a dashing figure even without his armor and once again found herself wonder why none of the ladies of the court had as yet managed to land him; goodness knows there were certainly plenty of them who had tried.

"Pardon, Your Majesty," Bohralain, her lady in waiting, dropped into a shallow curtsy—as befit her station, as she drew near. "But Sir Behkworth requests a few moments of your valuable time...he claims it's a matter of some urgency."

Vhanity turned to look at the Golden Arm with one arched eyebrow—a pose that was both stately, and alluring, at the same time. She'd practiced it in front of the mirror enough to be confident of that. "I hope it is an urgent matter since it's interrupting the miniscule amount of *personal* time I've managed to carve out for myself today."

"My apologies, Your Majesty," Sir Behkworth swept his arm down in a flourish while bending at the waist in a bow deep enough to bring his nose within inches of his boot tops. Formalities complete, he rose back up, squared his shoulders and continued, "No matter of state should take precedence over that. I'll take my leave and seek your indulgence at a more appropriate time."

The Golden Arm looked ready to sweep out another bow when the queen raised one perfectly manicured hand. "Since you're here...convenience aside, a queen's duty to her people must always come first. So, you might as well tell me what's going on."

"Actually, Your Majesty, it's more about my *need* for information than my having anything to impart," Sir Behkworth clarified. "But, since it *is* dealing with matters of state..." he paused to glance over at the queen's lady in waiting. "Perhaps we should keep this just between the two of us?"

Vhanity generally found '*matters of state*' to be boring in the extreme and happily left them to King Pryde and his bevy of courtiers. But, since this was the first time *ever* one of them had sought out *her* opinion on anything, she found herself intrigued. "Bohralain, would you excuse us for few minutes...perhaps you could go check with the gardener and ask him why there was a weed growing amongst my azaleas?"

Bohralain curtsied and departed, leaving Vhanity to turn her attention back to Sir Behkworth—whose *full attention* was already on her. Because she was beautiful, Vhanity was used to having men's admiring eyes upon her; but, since she was also their queen, they were always careful to be circumspect in their appraisal. The Golden Arm showed no such decorum; his eyes were brazenly locked onto her. Vhanity felt herself flush—something that hadn't happened since *she* had been a lady in waiting, and this time she raised *two* eyebrows at the man standing in front of her. At that point, Sir Behkworth showed enough tact to drop his eyes, but Vhanity was almost certain she saw the hint of a smile cross his lips as he did.

Still, once more back in control, the queen tilted her chin in the air and asked, "So, what is this matter of state that has led you to seek out my opinion rather than the king?"

“Actually, I have consulted with the king on this,” Sir Behkworth explained. “But there are some aspects that just naturally fall under your purview...I’m speaking of the upcoming Grand Festival. While I understand that you and King Pryde have left much of the planning of it to others, there are so many rumors floating around of things that *might* take place, that it’s hard for me properly organize The Watch to ensure everyone’s safety. I’d hate to find myself in the position of sending soldiers scurrying here and there at the last minute to try and cover everything.”

Vhanity had been happy to pass on the planning and organization of the festival to her ladies in waiting and other select royal staff members. In fact, other than making sure she ordered up a dozen new gowns to see her through the festivities, she hadn’t given it much thought since the day she’d found out about it. Honestly, she wasn’t particularly pleased that the Golden Arm was bothering her about it now, or for that matter the least bit interested in it...with one exception. “*What rumors?*”

Sir Behkworth’s expression turned sour. “There are too many to list without using up your entire day, Your Majesty. But the one that I need clarification on, if I’ve any hope of providing adequate security to cover it, is the parade. Of particular interest is whether it’s true that Princess Chahrity will be leading it instead of your royal self—which if I might say so, seems ludicrous to me, but if it is true, it would simplify matters since I could easily surround her with her own guardsmen, who are already quite used to traipsing around the city with her, so they would need very little extra training to prepare for the event.”

It took all of Vhanity’s willpower to remain calm—*outwardly*. Internally, she didn’t even try. She was seething. As much as she hated the dreary politics of running the kingdom, court gossip was an entirely different matter. The fact that the Golden Arm was the first to bring her any news of a parade, that she may or may not even be a part of, meant her ladies in waiting were sorely neglecting their duties; an oh how they were going to regret it. Aloud, she quietly inquired, “And what would be so...*ludicrous* about my daughter leading this parade?”

Sir Behkworth hesitated, then firmed his jaw and brought his eyes back up to hers. “Such an event is to put the very best a kingdom has to offer on display for everyone to marvel at. Princess Chahrity is a bright and beautiful young woman, but...she is *not* her mother. Forgive my boldness, Your Highness, but you *did* ask. And even though it’s not my place to say so, I’ll also add that with you being constantly tied up with running the palace, leaving the princess free to fraternize with the common people to her heart content, it’s no wonder they’ve started to favor her over you...I just don’t like it, or think it’s proper.”

“The people...favor Chahrity...over me?” the queen had a hard time even getting the words out of her mouth.

“Only because they’ve forgotten how blessed they are to have you presiding over them,” the Golden Arm said with obvious frustration. “A goddess could descend to claim the throne and they would be no better off. But with you trapped in the castle and Chahrity roaming freely amongst them they’ve lost sight of reality.” He paused to give a weary shake of his head. “I’m probably making too much of it, and besides, it’s only a temporary thing. I’m sure that *someday* a proper suitor will come along and whisk her off to her own kingdom. It’s just a shame that Ehlsewhere is so remotely located or I’m sure that by now you would have found someone to...

Sir Behkworth suddenly stopped himself and just as abruptly dropped all the way down to one knee with his head bowed so low it threatened to touch the ground. “*Forgive me, Your Majesty!* I’ve greatly overstepped my bounds. Who am I to question the actions of someone as wise and dedicated to the kingdom as yourself. I’ve disgraced the title and the armor you and the

king have trusted me with. Just say the word and I'll lay them aside and turn myself over to the headsman."

"Come now, Sir Behkworth," Vhanity took on her most regal tone. "What kind of wise queen would I be if I were to snuff out the passions true loyalty to the crown brings with it. Ehlsewhere has need of your services...you've got the Grand Festival to plan for...including a parade that *I* will be leading. But there is one thing you've said that I will take to heart. You're right in pointing out that I've thrown myself entirely into running the kingdom...to the point of neglecting my daughter's future. *That* is going to change right now. Why should this Grand Festival be limited to the citizens of Ehlsewhere, it seems to me the perfect opportunity to extend a hand of friendship to our neighbors...especially those with royal heirs of their own who have yet to find a suitable match. Perhaps when all is said and done, we'll have even more to celebrate than we first imagined."

The Golden Arm climbed slowly to his feet and gave his queen a sweeping bow. "I am humbled, Your Majesty. I thought I was coming here to find out your plans and instead you have clarified mine. Thank you for your assistance...*and* your patience. I will take my leave to allow you to get back to more...*pleasant* matters."

After Sir Behkworth departed, the queen did try to refocus on her garden, but her mind was a thousand leagues away—in a dozen different directions, as she tried to recall the kingdoms bordering Ehlsewhere, the names and make up of their royal families, and which ones might look favorably on receiving an invitation to attend the upcoming festival. It seemed she was going to have to engage in some kingdom politics after all. But then maybe running a kingdom wasn't all that much different from tending a garden, in some respects. A little pruning here, or transplanting there, are necessary...if you want your most beautiful flowers to flourish.