

Chapter Twenty

The Prince of Lahndsend

The tower bells were ringing again barely more than an hour after they'd signaled the midday rest—not that many of Ehlsewhere's citizenry would actually take it—not with both the Kingdom Tax and The Watch's tribute due in only a matter of days. The echoing tones were Princess Chahrity's first warning that her quiet day was about to be upended. The second came a short time later when one of her mother's ladies in waiting knocked at her door.

“Your Highness, your mother has sent me to inform you that we have a visitor...a *royal* visitor,” Mahtilda was the longest tenured and most trusted of Vhanity's ladies in waiting. As a rule, menial tasks such as being sent out on messenger duty were beneath her station. While Chahrity was still pondering that...and therefore just *who* this royal visitor might be that the princess would need to be notified of their arrival, Mahtilda added some new information that clarified matters a bit—including why *she* had been the one sent to fetch the princess. “The Prince of Lahndover is meeting with the king as we speak. After which, they will adjourn to the banquet hall for a formal reception. Naturally, the queen would like you to attend...” Mahtilda broke off as she carefully chose her next words. “...and to make sure you are...*your most presentable self* when you do.”

There were actually *three* Princes of Lahndsend to Chahrity's recollection, though there could be more by now. There hadn't been much interaction between the two kingdoms in the past few years, and Chahrity's level of interest in castle politics barely kept her apprised of the goings on within her own kingdom. She did recall the three Lahndsend princes though; the oldest, Dharis, being just senior to her, had seemed nice enough for a gangly teenage boy, though he'd spent most of his time with Juhstice in the Honor Garden practicing their swordplay. The other two princes, several years junior to their older brother were identical twins. They had also been fairly well behaved, other than the fact that both of them had obviously had a crush on her, and therefor followed her around like a pair of stray puppies in search of a new mistress. Given the age differences, and the fact that her mother had sent her own personal beautician to ensure she was *presentable*, Charity had a strong suspicion that it was Prince Dharis that had just arrived, and that whatever other business he had in Ehlsewhere, her mother intended to make her a part of the bargain. Which would also explain some of Vhanity's recent comments about it being time for Chahrity to start thinking about her future.

While Mahtilda attended to the princess—applying more blush and rouge and gloss and eye and brow darkeners than she normally wore in a year, along with turning her long dark hair into an intricately braided platform for her crown, Chahrity started *worrying* about her future. She'd always known that eventually she would have to marry, and that the marriage would almost certainly be a matter of state, as opposed to one of the heart. But, princess though she might be, she was still a young woman, who, like most others, hoped that love might someday come knocking at her door. Instead, it seemed that *duty* had finally stormed the castle.

Once Mahtilda had finished remaking her—and left Chahrity alone with the stranger looking back at her from the mirror, while the lady in waiting rushed off to scour the queen's wardrobe for something *adequate to the moment*, the princess took another minute or two to wallow in self-pity. Then she squared her shoulders and told her reflection, “People are counting on you. A kingdom...no *two* kingdoms will be watching your every move...and you will *not* disappoint them!”

Thusly self-reproved, she waited quietly until Mahtilda returned carrying three prospective gowns and even helped chose which one to wear. It was made of brushed velvet, a blue so deep and rich it bordered on being as raven black as Chahrity's hair, but the lace trimmings at her waist, cuffs and bodice, being several shades lighter, seemed to make the gown sparkle with life of its own, while also being a near perfect match for the princess' eyes.

Mahtilda stepped back to admire her handiwork and gave a satisfied nod. "You look positively stunning, Your Highness."

Chahrity regarded the young woman in the mirror and thought, *She is pretty...she's just not me.*

Since it was a formal reception, Chahrity was spared the awkwardness of being thrust immediately into the prince's company. Decorum required the attendees to be introduced and seated in reverse order of their station in life, leaving the royals from Lahndsend to be introduced at the very last since Ehlsewhere's royal family, being the hosts had already been seated at the head table before the festivities even began.

"Their Royal Highnesses, from the kingdom of Lahndsend, Prince Dharis and Princess Behlize," the chamberlain called out loudly as the royals from Ehlsewhere's nearest neighbor entered the reception hall.

Hearing the double introduction came as a surprise, and for a slim moment Chahrity thought she might be getting a reprieve, but then hearing the princess's name she realized that Prince Dharis hadn't brought along a wife, but was instead being accompanied by his oldest sister. Chahrity and Behlize had been good friends years before, when the two families intermingled more regularly, so it was still a welcome surprise. The Lahndsend siblings were escorted to their seats, which were *conveniently* located opposite the prince and princess of Ehlsewhere—which *wasn't* in accordance with normal protocol, since by all rights, as visiting royalty, they should have been seated within easy speaking distance of the king and queen.

"I thought it prudent to forgo tradition in this particular case," Queen Vhanity explained glibly once their guest were seated and greetings were exchanged. "Given that the four of you practically grew up together."

"So very thoughtful of you, Your Majesty. I have been looking forward to visiting with old friends," Prince Dharis told the queen with a smile, one that Chahrity thought might even be genuine. But she also couldn't help noticing that the prince, other than giving her a nod as they exchanged hellos, hadn't so much as looked her way. For some reason she found that to be...well, '*irritating*' couldn't be the right word, but she couldn't think of a better one either.

"As have I," Princess Behlize put in brightly. She *did* look Chahrity's way as she said it and gave her a quick smile, *before* turning her gaze back to Juhstice, where it had essentially been glued since the Princess of Lahndsend had entered the room. Juhstice of course was oblivious to this, but that was nothing new either. Chahrity knew that Behlize had always had eyes for her brother, and that Juhstice was completely blind to the situation. Selfishly, she found herself wondering if her parents would be content if only one of their children ended up in a marriage arranged to strengthen the ties between the two kingdoms? It was just a fleeting hope, one that was dashed against the reality of knowing that even if that were the case, there were always other kingdoms and princes waiting in the wings. But might one of those other unnamed princes be willing to at least look in her direction?

The reception progressed through several courses of food and eventually, once the topics required by protocol were completed—the giving a receiving of updates on the status of the

respective kingdoms, things settled into a much less formal affair where Juhstice and Dharis fell into a lively discourse of some of their shared passions, which basically included sharp and pointy objects and the various ways you could use them. Meanwhile, Chahrity and Behlize appeared to be just as passionate about the latest fashions and plays and poetry, and any number of other inane things a lady of the court was supposed to be interest in. As Chahrity recalled, Behlize found all of that just as pointless as she did, but surrounded as they were by other women whose entire lives revolved around such activities, the two younger ladies put up a good appearance, because after all, for a royal, what could be more important? Several long hours later—but not excruciatingly long—Chahrity *did* very much enjoy Behlize’s company, the reception finally ground down to an end and King Pryde and Queen Vhanity bid everyone a good night. Which didn’t mean that Chahrity was excused for the evening. It would never do to have a visiting dignitary left to their own devices, and given their history and similar stations in life, seeing to Behlize’s needs naturally fell to her; just as attending to Dharis fell to Juhstice.

Chahrity *did* break away to return to her chambers long enough to make herself *less* presentable—and *much* more comfortable, after making arrangements to meet up with Behlize outside her mother’s garden within the hour. And the princess of Lahndsend was there waiting for her when she arrived, along with one of her ladies in waiting—which was expected, but Chahrity was surprised to see that Juhstice and Dharis were also there with her. The latter looked up as she approached and his eyes went wide.

“Yes...?” Chahrity couldn’t help but put a voice to her discomfort. The way the prince was ogling her had made her glance down to make sure she hadn’t exited her chambers wearing only a petticoat.

“Ah...I’m sorry, Your Highness,” Dharis dropped his eyes as he stumbled to find what to say, but a moment later he shook his head with a laugh and looked back up at her. “It’s just that, frankly, I seems as though I’ve met two different princesses today.” Seeing Chahrity’s raised eyebrows, he quickly added. “Both quite lovely, mind you. But...*different*.”

“I’m the real one,” Chahrity assured him, while also having the distinct feeling that she too was seeing a version of Prince Dharis that had been missing at dinner. It was a welcome change and she found herself wondering if he was thinking the same thing—or if instead his gapping look had been one of disappointment?

“Actually, Dharis,” Prince Juhstice interjected. “I’m not sure you’re ready to meet the *real* Chahrity...or ever will be for that matter.”

Joking Juhstice was such a rare commodity—though he had been much more lighthearted of late for some unknown reason, that even Chahrity wasn’t sure how to take him. If Juhstice even noticed the muteness spell he’d just cast over everyone, he shrugged it off and continued. “So, I’m guessing you ladies are going to take a tour of mother’s garden. And if so, Dharis and I have a garden of our own to tour?”

Seeing Behlize’s confused look, Chahrity said, “The *Honor Garden* is the name of our practice grounds where the knights train.”

Hearing that Behlize’s eyes lit up and she turned to Chahrity with excitement. “Oh, that’s right...I’d forgotten. Can we go watch?”

Women were allowed in the Honor Garden, and of course, a princess could go pretty much anywhere she wanted to, but Chahrity had rarely set foot in the place—mostly out of a stubborn bitterness that her parents had never acquiesced to her pleas to let her *participate* in the training. Even so, she had to admit the thought of standing around watching grown men play with wooden swords was more enticing than watching plants do nothing. “I don’t see why not.”

Behlize actually clapped her hands with joy, then she turned to her lady in waiting, a pretty young woman about her own age. "Ahrlene, I won't be needing you for the rest of the evening and I'm sure you're probably famished. You're free to go and I'll see you in the morning."

"Thank you, Your Highness," the girl replied as she dropped into a quick curtsy, but as she rose to leave her eyes darted over to lock onto Chahrity. Though it was only for an instant, Chahrity could have sworn the look the lady in waiting threw her way was smoldering with anger. Since the two of them had never met before that made no sense whatsoever, leading her to write it off as nothing more than a trick of the lamp light.

Once they reached the Honor Garden, Juhstice led them on a tour, explaining the different areas and the activities they hosted. Because of the lateness of the hour there were only a handful of knight present; some sparing or working on their forms while others were seeing to repairing or polishing their equipment. Once they'd made the rounds, the two men meandered over to the barrels containing the practice swords while their sisters climbed up to find their seats on the observation deck.

"Is Prince Juhstice a good swordsman?" Behlize looked at Chahrity expectantly.

Because such things weren't of much interest to her, Chahrity didn't have a ready answer, but after searching through her memory, she replied. "I've heard he's one of the best in the kingdom."

Behlize got a happy smile. "I'd hoped so. Dharis is too...this should be a good match."

Dharis was more slightly built than Juhstice, but every bit as fit and if anything even more nimble on his feet than her brother. Even to Chahrity's untrained eye she could tell that Behlize had been right...it *was* a good match. One that started slow, with each man feeling out the other, but that lasted only minutes before the pace picked up so dramatically that the wooden swords in their hands—and their very limbs for that matter, became a constant blur as the cracking of their blades against each other became such a steady staccato that it they almost merged into a single sound. In spite of herself, Chahrity found herself admiring the precision and grace with which the Prince of Lahndsend comported himself.

"He is good!" Behlize leaned in to say breathlessly. "I wish they'd count their marks so we'd know who's winning."

Chahrity wasn't exactly sure what a mark was, but she found herself even more curious about who the other woman was rooting for. Subconsciously, she found herself pulling for Juhstice. After all, he was her brother, and of course he represented their kingdom. But she wasn't sure Behlize was looking at things the same way. Then another thought made Chahrity sit back in her seat as she realized, *a year from now Behlize and I may have switched titles and kingdoms.* Aloud she asked, "Who do you want to win?"

Behlize didn't hesitate. "Juhstice of course. Nothing has changed since we were children. I still intend to..." She broke off there and got a troubled look. "He hasn't...there isn't anyone else, is there?"

Her look was so apprehensive that Chahrity wanted to reach out and hug her. She did loop an arm around Behlize's shoulders as she told her, "No. Most of the eligible ladies of the court fall all over themselves trying to get his attention, but I don't think Juhstice has ever noticed. I doubt it's even crossed his mind the real reason the two of you are here."

"Actually, I'm more of a stowaway than anything," Behlize admitted. "Mother and Father didn't want me to come. They were afraid I'd do something to upset...well, what they're hoping will happen between you and Dharis. I only got to accompany him because I convinced them

that because of my past friendship with you I might be able to convince you that he wasn't a total cad."

Chahrity had to laugh. She'd forgotten how easy and fun it was to be around Behlize. "He seems nice enough...you know, for a *prince*. But I'm glad you're here." Then before she realized the words were even coming out of her mouth, she found herself asking, "What about Dharis...is there someone else with him?"

The guarded look that dropped over Behlize's eyes was answer enough, but a moment later she shook her head and rushed to explain. "No...not anymore. At one point he wanted there to be...he and one of my ladies in waiting, they...grew fond of each other. But they both knew...*know*, that it could never be."

Something clicked for Chahrity and she said, "Ahrlene."

Behlize frowned and asked, "How did you know?"

Chahrity got a sad smile. "A little while ago she gave me a look that made me think she would have liked to come with us...to fight me with real swords."

"Oh no!" Behlize exclaimed. "I'm so sorry. I'll talk to her..."

"You'll do no such thing!" Chahrity said adamantly. "The *only* thing Ahrlene has done wrong is to be born with the wrong title. And we *won't* be holding that against her, will we?"

The two princes continued to go at each other with a fury for the better part of an hour before stopping and giving each other a bow. Chahrity had to admit that watching the bout had been much more interesting than she would have ever imagined—fascinating even. Somewhat to her surprise, instead of staying together and rejoining her and Behlize, after retiring their swords the two men parted ways, each wandering off to a difference section of the Honor Garden. While she was still wondering about that, Behlize got a happy grin and excused herself to rush off in Juhstice's direction. Realizing that the Princess of Lahndsend wanted a chance to be alone with her brother, Chahrity took the only other avenue that was opened to her and climbed down from the observation deck to join Dharis, who was standing in front of the garden's *Wall of Honor*, admiring the rows of bronze plaques mounted there, each a tribute to the kingdom's greatest swordsman during any given tourney season—a new one would be crowned at the upcoming Grand Festival.

He glanced around at her approach and gave her a polite nod—with a somewhat sour expression. When he spoke his tone lighter than his visage, but not by much. "I'm surprised your brother's name isn't on display here."

"Actually, he doesn't participate in the tourney," Chahrity told him. "Juhstice claims it wouldn't be fair because the knights would hold back, not wanting to embarrass their prince."

Dharis gave a harsh laugh. "I'd like to see them try!"

There was enough bitterness in the comment to draw a probing look from Chahrity, leading the prince to quickly apologize. "Forgive me. I asked Juhstice to give me a moment...*to catch my breath*. What I didn't say was that I really needed some time alone to regain my composure." He got an abashed look as he confessed. "I don't like losing and I have a hard time being civil when it happens. My apologies for not warning you away until I completed my little temper tantrum."

Chahrity found herself smiling. Dharis' honesty was...*endearing*. And his sharp features took on his brooding look quite well. There was no denying that the Prince of Lahndsend was a very handsome man. "Well, for what it's worth, from where I was seated, it looked as though you gave as good as you got."

Well, that's something I guess," Dharis sighed. "I do think I pushed him a time or two, but I'm not sure that most of the time he wasn't holding back to keep from embarrassing *me*."

"I highly doubt that," Chahrity told him truthfully. "And, depending on how long you're planning to stay with us, I'm sure you'll have other opportunities to prove that to yourself."

Dharis gave her a quizzical look. "I thought you knew. Behlize and I have come at your father's invitation to attend the Grand Festival."

Then it was Chahrity's turn to be confused. "But the festival isn't for several more weeks?"

"Correct. Which is why I'm here *now*. By the time the festival arrives, Ehelsewhere will be flooded with eligible young nobles from dozens of other kingdoms. And all of them vying for your attention," Dharis nodded at the wall in front of them, then looked back at her. "There's more at stake this year than someone getting their name on a plaque, Your Highness."