

## Chapter Thirty

### A Lady in Waiting

*When all is darkness and there is no light, when helplessness and hopelessness are all that remain, when even giving up seems futile because there is nothing left to loose, when all these things become truth, know one thing—you are living a lie. No amount of darkness can ever prevail against a single speck of light—light always wins. And if that is true, and it is, then as long as we seek the light, we are never helpless, and there is every reason to remain hopeful. When all is darkness, remember to look to the light.*

Prince Dharis stood at the window of his guest chambers and let the words of the little book his mother used to read to him and his siblings wash through his mind while looking out at the gray sky and blood red sun. Gray and red are not black, but they certainly darkened his already bleak mood. Was he hopeless? He certainly didn't want to believe that. Was he helpless? That was an even more bitter pill to swallow, but for the life of him he couldn't think of a single thing to do to thwart the doubts that were assailing him. He took another breath of the rank air that permeated the room despite the fact that the window was closed. He hadn't seen the Royal Forest burning with his own eyes, but rumor had that it was a complete loss, without so much a single sapling surviving the horrendous blaze. The same rumors claimed those living on the north side of Ehlsewhere, closest to the forest, could feel the heat through the stones of the city walls. Remembering his recent foray into the forest only days before, Dharis had to shake his head with wonder; could all that vast expanse of wilderness now be nothing more than endless rows of charcoal encrusted skeletons presiding over a sea of ashes. And as grim as that was to consider, it didn't compare to the horror that had befallen the squad of soldiers that had dared to venture out into the forest before it had burned. Dharis considered all these things and weighed them against the reason he'd been sent to Ehlsewhere. As much as he knew his father yearned for a *blood* alliance with their powerful eastern neighbors, after what had happened in the past few days, Dharis was far from convinced that was still a good idea. An alliance would mean that Ehlsewhere's problems—and *enemies*, would become Lahndsend's too. Dharis had no idea exactly how many men at arms Ehlsewhere could muster, but the report Sir Behkworth had brought back of suddenly finding himself facing a full dozen of the vile beasts left him wondering if every living soul of *both* kingdom's going to battle against the ashen monsters would stand a chance. Granted he'd watched the youngster, Shahdow, dispatch one with a knife, but that was *after* the thing had three well placed arrows in it, and even then it was a complete miracle that the boy had survived and the creature had not. A knock at the door pulled him away from his dark thoughts, and Dharis turned to frown at the door.

"Come in," he called out reluctantly. Truly, he would have rathered that whoever it was would just go away and leave him alone to continue stewing over his thoughts.

The door cracked open and a woman with an expression as bleak looking as Dharis' mood peaked in. The fact that she was also beautiful and that she was the one person on earth who always seemed be able to make his smile—no matter how dismal his day had been going, should have lightened the princes' spirits, but in fact her appearance only added to the weight that was already pressing down upon him. Still, he tried to put a smile on his lips as he beckoned for his sister's lady in waiting to come inside. "How are you, Ahrlene?"

"I'm well, Your Highness," Ahrlene assured him, though it was clear she was no such thing. "I know I shouldn't have come here, that it's not my place, but..."

She left off, seeming at a loss for how to proceed as she came the rest of the way into the room, leaving the door behind her slightly ajar; since it was just the two of them alone in the room that was the proper action without a chaperone present. Another two steps into the room and she paused to drop into a well formed curtsy, which she held until the prince bade her to rise.

“Ahrlene, you know that’s not necessary when it’s just the two of us,” Dharis said tiredly.

The lady in waiting got a sad smile. “If it was just the two of us standing on a rock at the center of the Ehdless Sea, there would still be *two* kingdoms rising between us. I let myself forget that once...it *won’t* happen again.”

The prince let out a sigh. “And yet here you are.”

Ahrlene slowly nodded and for the first time looked up to meet his eyes. When she didn’t speak to further explain herself, Dharis was forced to ask, “Why have you come?”

“Your sister sent me away so she could be alone with her grief,” Ahrlene replied. At the prince’s questioning look, she continued. “We received word that the king is going to send his Golden Arm back out to assess the damage from the fire...*and* to deal with any of the *creatures* that may have survived. Princess Behlize is beside herself with worry that the crown prince will insist on accompanying them.”

Dharis nodded his understanding. He had also heard of the king’s determination to rid his kingdom of the vile creatures lurking outside its walls. That piece of information is what had brought on his bleak mood. “I’ve heard the same thing, though nothing as yet about what Juhstice’s intentions might be.”

“I know nothing of Ehlsewhere’s crown prince,” Ahrlene said. “But your sister is convinced that he will be out front leading the charge. I *do* know *my* prince though, and I have *no doubt* about what his response would be to such a foolhardy turn of events.”

When Dharis just stood there looking at her, Ahrlene actually stomped her foot in frustration. “*You can’t*...you can’t do this! My heart breaks knowing that we can never be together, but I tell myself that if I wait long enough eventually that pain will dull and I will be able to go on with my life,” she paused to shake her head sadly. “That’s only possible if I have the hope of seeing *you* have a life too. I can let go of you to let you fulfill your destiny, to lead the kingdom, even though it means there will be someone else at your side, but I cannot image living a single day in a world without you in it. But if you won’t turn aside from this for *me*, think of everything else that is at stake. You are the crown prince of Lahndsend, *not* Ehlsewhere. Your duty lies with your own kingdom...dying in a foreign land, fighting a battle that isn’t yours to fight...you know your father wouldn’t want you to do *that!*”

Though he knew he shouldn’t, Dharis held out his arms and Ahrlene ran into them. He held her tight, feeling her body shake with sobs as he stroked her hair, never wanting to let her go. But he would, because he *was* the crown prince of Lahndsend, and that meant his life was not his own to command. One day he might command a kingdom, but until then—*and even then*, the kingdom’s needs would command him. Ahrlene had vocalized the same arguments that he’d been having with himself, but there was a counter point that no matter which way he tried to twist and turn it around in his mind, there was no escaping.

“My father sent me here to create an unbreakable alliance between our two kingdoms,” Dharis spoke gently as he continued to hold the woman he loved in his arms, if only for a fleeting few moments, and one last time. “How could I possibly say I’ve done my best to bring that about if Prince Juhstice goes out to face a fierce foe while all I do is hold back and watch him go?”

The only answer to his question was Ahrlene's hard sobs as her tears stained his velvet coat.

Chahrity hadn't meant to eavesdrop. She'd been on her way to invite Prince Dharis to lunch with her, and possibly for a stroll in her mother's garden afterward; just to do something normal and pleasant after the traumas of the past few days. She'd raised her hand and was about to knock on the door to Dharis' chambers—despite the fact that it was already cracked open, when she heard a woman's voice. Her hand froze in the air, and Charity was on the verge of turning away when the words she was hearing took on meaning and she suddenly found herself rooted in place. Of course she'd already known of Prince Dharis' and Behlize's lady in waiting's *prior* relationship, but hearing the pain in the young woman's voice hit her like a physical blow. Then the rest of what she was hearing sunk in and Chahrity felt the breath catch in her throat. The fact that her father was sending more men out to face the vile beasts was new to her. After having already lost twenty of his best men, what was he thinking? And from what she'd heard, those lives had been lost without the knights taking down a single one of the creatures.

A rustling from the other side of the partially opened door brought her back to the moment, causing Chahrity to do a quick about face and hurriedly exit the room. Safely back out in the passageway connecting the guest quarters to the main castle, she let what she'd overheard run through her mind. Regardless of her motives, Princes Behlize's attendant had a right to be concerned; Chahrity wholeheartedly agreed with that. But what was there to do about it? She reached the joining passageway that would take her to the throne room and her father; opposite it was the corridor leading off toward the Honor Garden where Juhstice was no doubt gathering with the other knights getting ready to leave the castle. As she stood there weighing out her options and what she might say to either of her pig-headed male family members; though she doubted there was *anything* she could say that they wouldn't simply brush aside, the sound of someone coming up behind her made her turn and glance over her shoulder.

She'd heard the lady in waiting's sobs and now she saw the puffy red eyes that went with them. Never-the-less, the young woman raised her chin and strode purposefully forward to give Chahrity a deep curtsy. As soon as she was bade to rise she looked the princess straight in the eye and said, "I was just on my way to your chambers to find you, Your Highness, this is a very fortuitous meeting."

*Very fortuitous indeed...that we didn't meet just outside Prince Dharis' door,* Chahrity found herself thinking. Aloud she said, "What can I do for you?"

The other woman hesitated, but only for a moment. "You once told me that I should speak freely around you, and..." she left off upon seeing the confusion on Chahrity's face. "You don't remember me, do you?"

There was something familiar about the Lahndsend lady in waiting tugging at Chahrity's memory, but she shook her head. "I'm sorry, I don't."

"I'm Sir Ghosley's oldest daughter, Ahrlene. We used to play together upon occasion when we were younger, mostly during festival times. And I was invited to one of your birthday party's too...it was that time to which I was referring," Ahrlene Ghosley explained.

Chahrity didn't remember Ahrlene attending one of her parties, but she didn't doubt that it had happened. She *did* remember the linen merchant's daughter, though that girl had been small and shy if Chahrity recalled correctly. Time had been good to her, turning a retiring minor noble's daughter into a confident beauty—and one that had manage to steal a prince's heart at that!

“Of course,” Chahrity nodded thoughtfully. “I do remember you. I just didn’t connect that young girl with Princess Behlize’s lady in waiting. How did that happen?”

Ahrlene shrugged. “I believe it was brokered between your father and King Rhoderick, to strengthen the ties between the two kingdoms. I became one of Princess Behlize’s ladies in waiting, and I believe a boy from Lahnsend came here to act as valet for your brother.”

If Chahrity had ever heard of such an agreement, she’d forgotten about it. But it did make sense. And now that she thought about it, she *didn’t* know of any noble houses named Stewhart in Ehlsewhere and it was incumbent upon her to know such things. So, Juhstice’s valet, Sir Stewhart almost certainly *did* hail from the kingdom to the west. “That is indeed very interesting...but obviously *not* what you wanted to talk to me about. And please, *do* speak freely.”

Ahrlene didn’t miss a beat. Her words came out measured, but heated. “Arguably, the two most important people in *both* kingdoms are likely to get themselves killed later today. I fear that Princes Juhstice and Dharis are planning to accompany the Golden Arm as he goes out to battle the vile beasts again.”

“So, I’ve heard,” Chahrity replied, without mentioning *where* she’d heard it. “And you think there’s something *I* can do about it?”

“My father says you have great sway over everyone in the kingdom,” Ahrlene exclaimed, the statement made with more desperation in it than conviction.

“I’m flattered to hear that, but the only sway I seem to have with any of my own family of late is to irritate them,” Chahrity confessed forlornly. “And both my father and my brother might as well be deaf once they’ve set their mind to something.”

“Well...what if you told Prince Dharis that you’d *never* marry someone who would go out on such a foolish endeavor?” Ahrlene ventured weakly.

“I suspect *you* know the prince as well as anyone,” Chahrity responded gently. “Do you think he’s fool enough to believe I have any more say in who I marry than he does?”

Ahrlene’s continence fell and Chahrity was afraid she was going to start sobbing again. But as hopeless as the situation seemed, there was one possible avenue worth exploring. Reaching out to give the lady in waiting’s arm an encouraging squeeze, she told her, “I’m convince *all* the men in this castle have heads as thick as the stone walls, *but*...there is *one* of them who also tends to have a fair amount of wisdom to go along with it.”

A few minutes later Chahrity was standing outside Ohrder’s chambers with Ahrlene at her side. The door swung open just as she was lifting her hand to knock for the *third* time, revealing the wizard at his desk—looking so tired he seemed to be slumping rather than sitting. Charity had never seen him looking so old. Shahdow was there too, sitting cross-legged on his rug, as usual with a book in his hands. The boy shifted his eyes from Chahrity to Ahrlene with a puzzled expression on his young face.

“Your Highness,” Ohrder spoke the greeting without getting up—or even inclining his head from his seated position.

The wizard was never one to go overboard on etiquette, but Chahrity had never seen him be so remiss in his deportment either. That and the way he looked was worrisome, but not more so than the situation that had brought her to see him. So, brushing aside both Ohrder’s bad manners and her concern for his health—*for the moment*, she got straight to business. “Have you heard that father is sending Sir Behkworth back out to deal with the vile beasts?”

Ohrder’s perpetual frown turned sour. “I did. I just left him. He won’t listen to reason. I doubt he’ll take the creatures seriously until they come crashing through the throne room doors.”

At her side, Ahrlene let out a gasp. “Could that happen?”

The wizard gave a shrug. “I don’t know at this point. We’ll have to see if the fire did anything to slow their progression.”

Chahrity silently digested Ohrder’s comment for a few moments. She, like most everyone else in the kingdom had assumed the forest fire was the handiwork of the vile beasts. But if in fact it was wizard behind it, she found herself very much doubting that he’d had the *blessing* of her father to burn down the entirety of the Royal Forest, which is what it had seemed had happened. It was good to know that Ohrder was already apprised of situation with sending out another hunting party—*not so good that Ohrder’s counsel had apparently fallen on deaf ears.*

“That doesn’t surprise me,” Chahrity said, she glanced to her left. “This is Ahrlene Ghosley, Princess Behlize’s lady in waiting. We’re worried that *both* princes are planning to accompany Sir Behkworth when he leaves to go hunt down the beasts...and that the consequences could be devastating for *both kingdoms!*”

“I doubt they’ll have to *hunt* very hard,” Ohrder replied morosely. “And while I don’t know about the Lahnsend heir, Prince Juhstice was there when I spoke with the king...and sided with him, insisting that it was a royal imperative that they send out a party in an effort to protect *all* the people of the kingdom, *and* that *he* would be along to personally ensure the matter was handled with due care and diligence.”

“Then Prince Dharis will go too,” Ahrlene let out a sigh that was half whimper.

“How many men are going out?” Chahrity inquired. She was no military tactician, but she knew that the twenty men who had gone out with Sir Behkworth last time were nowhere near enough.

“A hundred knights, plus Behkworth, the two princes, and I would assume their valets from what you’ve just told me,” Ohrder listed off the participants in a flat voice.

“Is that enough?” Chahrity asked hopefully.

The wizard shook his head uncertainly. “I don’t know. It might have been against the first beasts, but they’re *changing*. Many of them now have human aspects...some can even speak and they seem to be organizing, coordinating their efforts. I’m afraid even the less intelligent ones may be following the orders of the more advanced ones.”

Obviously more had been happening of late than just someone lighting the forest ablaze. “Is there *anything* we can do?” Chahrity wasn’t able to keep the despair out of her voice.

“Yes...” Ohrder told her, giving a nod that looked like it took every ounce of energy he possessed to pull off. “Though I don’t know how much good it will do...I can go with them.”