

## Chapter Thirty Four

### The True Princess of Lahndsend

The day after battling against vile beasts and a flying, fire breathing lizard, Prince Juhstice found himself standing in his *'thinking place'*, the battlement guarding the tallest parapet on Castle Ehlsewhere. He certainly had some thinking to do. He still hadn't come to grips with the fact that Ohrder had aligned himself with Dougerty. How could he when the wizard knew full well that the man had all but come out and declared that he was going to assassinate the king? Then, while he was still ruminating on how he was going to confront Ohrder on *that* topic, he'd found out the wizard had also interceded on Sir Behkworth's behalf just as his father was about to remove the corrupt knight from his position—*hadn't that been something that he and Ohrder and Chahrity had been working to make happen for months?* Not only had the world become an insane place, but apparently those populating it had lost their minds as well.

"I'm sure that was a much prettier view a week ago," the softly spoken words shot like a lightning bolt into his dark thoughts Juhstice to turn around with a start. As usual, the Princess of Lahndsend was smiling—*and as beautiful as ever.*

Juhstice silently chided himself for that last *'undisciplined'* thought and gave a slight bow. "It was. I only hope that it might be again someday."

Princess Behlize crossed the stone expanse separating them slowly; that was knew, since her arrival—and even before when they were children, she tended to surge through life without even a hint of reservation. While Juhstice had always admired that carefree trait, he had to admit that at times he'd found it to be somewhat offsetting. She glided up close, but not so close that she was in position to reach out and put a hand on his arm—something else she was prone to do. Juhstice wasn't sure *how* he felt about that one. With only a few feet between them, she tilted her head and looked at him even more intently than she already had been.

"Will you tell me the truth if I ask you something?" Behlize asked. She said it lightly for such a weighty question.

Juhstice had to laugh at the fact that it was such a calculating question coming from someone who was normally so spontaneous. "Life taught me long ago that I am a horrible liar. I'm afraid that honestly is *all* I have to offer you."

Behlize considered that for a moment, then gave a measured nod. "Alright then...tell me this, would you rather I left you alone...or do you *want* my company?"

"Oh no, please stay. While I do come up here to try and clear my thoughts at times, you are welcome to join any..." He left off there after realizing that the question he was answering wasn't really the one he'd been asked. Pausing to draw in a deep breath before continuing, he suddenly found himself at a complete loss for words.

Behlize motioned out over the parapet, to the sprawling city and the burned up landscape beyond as well. "The world has changed since I arrived here. It isn't as beautiful of a place as I once believed. Like you, I have hope for the future too, but the stark reality of what is happening around us has made me reevaluate some things."

Behlize kept her soft brown eyes upon him as she talked, the directness in them making it hard for Juhstice to meet them, but he couldn't tear himself away from them either. No words had yet come to him, but she seemed to have more stored up that needed to be said.

"All my life I've been good at doing what I must, taking each day as it comes," the statement was made without either bitterness or boasting. "Like any girl, I've had dreams...of falling in

love, and being a wife and mother..." She stopped to give a lyrical laugh. "...when I'm not busy taking care of a kingdom, mind you."

Given his own background, Juhstice had to laugh too, but then Behlize's warm smile turned somber. "Of course I knew that for a *true* princess...unlike the one's in the children's stories, that really *was* just a fairy tale, that someday I'd end up marrying whoever my kingdom needed me too. And I was alright with that...*until this last week.*"

Juhstice knew exactly what she was referring to. Her brother, Prince Dharis had joked about trying to get himself killed, but the truth was he *had* almost died *many* times since arriving in Ehlsewhere; and he'd been one of the lucky ones, because dozen of people *had* died—*terrible deaths!* It was enough to make anyone rethink their situation, and a large part of why he'd found himself making the long climb up the parapet.

"And now...?" he finally found his voice to ask, and was surprised at how much interest her answer held for him.

"And now I realize that the life I'd been preparing myself to live isn't the one that I want...*or will accept,*" Behlize stated boldly. "My very coming here was in the hope that you'd find me an...*acceptable match.* And I would have been quite content if duty bound us together even if your heart was never a part of the bargain." She raised her chin just short of defiantly. "*That* is no longer the case. I will be the wife of a man who wants *me*...all of me, to be a part of all of him...or I won't be a wife at all."

The Princess of Lahndsend finally ran down and stopped to consider her own words. After a minute she gave an uncertain nod of her head. "Well, now you know who I *truly* am, maybe it'll make answering my question easier," she said with a sigh. "Though I'm wondering if I should have just stuck with my original plan?"

"Which was...?" Juhstice asked hesitantly.

"To come up here and give you a kiss that you'd never forget as long as you live," Behlize laughed, and suddenly every other care Juhstice had in the world seemed to melt away. Kingdom strife, vile beasts...or even a mythical dragon, none of it mattered to him as he just stood there basking in the presence of the beautiful woman before him. But did he dare tell her that?

A few hours later, after searching the interior of the castle, Prince Dharis found Juhstice in the Honor Garden. The Prince of Ehlsewhere had been there for a while, long enough to wear down every available sparring partner on the grounds. Even so, Juhstice wouldn't so much as greet the him until Dharis had a practice sword in his hand. Fifteen long grueling minutes after that, between heaving breaths, the two men finally started having a conversation—*of sorts.*

"I take it your day hasn't been going as well as one might have hoped," Dharis ventured between parries, prying without doing so blatantly.

Juhstice considered for a moment, then confessed. "It may be the bleakest day of my life." Dharis nodded commensurably. While that was an obvious invitation to pry away, he decided a friendly, patient and compassionate ear might be what was truly in order. So, he waited silently until his old friend settled on the how and why he'd go about unburdening himself. Not that he needed to, he'd already heard enough to have more than an inkling of what was going on.

Juhstice held up his sword appreciatively. "*This* you can rely upon..." he broke off with an disgruntled shrug. "...usually. I know it let me down today...and it wasn't the sword's fault."

"No, it was you," Dharis confirmed. "You were pathetic. I think one of the newest recruit's *sisters* could have bested you."

“Well, thank you for that, even though I will point out that I tallied a few marks against you too,” Juhstice dropped his arm back down. “But my point stands. A sword is a sword. Take hold of it and you know *exactly* what you’re getting. Granted, there is some learning about it involved initially, but once that’s over it’s the same today as the first day you met it, as it will forever be.”

Dharis nodded. “Unlike...”

“*People*,” the word came out as an accusation. “You think you know someone...have known them your whole life and then they turn around and betray your trust, do something that they *warned* you never to do.”

“Are we talking about your wizard here?” Dharis guessed. “His working with the former Golden Arm, Sir Dougherty?”

“*And* the current Golden Arm...Sir Behkworth is in some ways an even bigger traitor than Dougherty,” Juhstice informed him. “The man should have been dealt with long ago...and my father was on the verge of finally doing that today, when Ohrder stepped in on his behalf. Given everything else that’s going on...well, it’s just maddening.”

“Trust me, I understand. Lahnsend has its fair share of shady castle politics too,” Dharis assured him. But since he also realized that dealing with that kind of intrigue—frustrating as it might be, was something that Juhstice would have known since before he could execute a double thrust combination attack, Dharis asked the thing that he suspected was really bothering the other prince. “Now that we’ve got that out of the way, why don’t you tell me what my sister did to turn the finest swordsman I’ve ever faced into a fumble fingered clod?”

Juhstice gaped at him with disbelief for long seconds until he finally blurted out, “She either wants to marry me or have nothing to do with me...*I think?* I’m not entirely sure about any of it.”

Dharis gave a slow nod of understanding. “And which of those two stated options bothers you the most?”

“Ahhh...” Juhstice finally threw his hands in the air, one of them still clutching a wooden sword. “It doesn’t matter what I think...or feel. *My kingdom* is about to be *rendered* by a beast out of prophecy. This is no place for anyone to be...especially someone I care about. The sooner you and Behlize get away from here the better off you’ll both be.”

“The prophesy isn’t only about Ehlsewhere,” Dharis reminded him quietly. “The render will descend upon the *entire world*.”

“While I understand most people believe that,” Juhstice retorted. “It’s pretty clear that it plays out kingdom by kingdom, and there’s no debating at this point which one is first on the list.”

“Behlize knows that,” Dharis said firmly. “Our mother is an Url. We were learning prophecy before we could write our names.”

“And you still think she’d want to be the future queen of a doomed kingdom?” Juhstice asked with disbelief?

“What I think is that *any* kingdom, doomed or otherwise, would be greatly blessed to have my sister as their queen,” Prince Dharis told him. “I hope to be a good ruler someday, but I can assure you, and my father...if he was into his cups enough. would agree with what I’m about to say...Behlize has a gift for seeing through the most complex problems that would make any king envious. And as far as whether she would *want* to stay here in Ehlsewhere...Juhstice, she’s wanted to marry you most of her life, and while that might have been brushed aside as some young girls crush until recently, once we arrived here, and she’s been able to spend some time with you, I have no doubts about where her heart lies.”

Juhstice was listening, but the other prince's words didn't relieve the worst of his burdens. "But even if she would stay, how could I let her, knowing that every second she's here her life is in danger?"

"Because there's something else that I know, and Behlize knows...and that *you* need to know and come to believe," Dharis' voice took on an urgency that Juhstice had never heard before. "The prophecies...especially the newest ones were given to us primarily through the Url people, and most of them...*the prophets themselves*, don't see the rendering as a complete destruction. They believe it's a *preparation*, like you would render an animal, getting it ready to serve to a special guest at a grand feast."

Since being reminded that Dougherty was an Url, Juhstice had started looking into them again, but what he was hearing was news to him. And while he wasn't all that keen on Ehelsewhere being compared to a prize calf on its way to the butcher, the fact that someone—apparently many *knowledgeable* someones, could envision Ehelsewhere as having *any* hope of a future was encouraging beyond belief—if he only could make *himself* believe it.

Sometime later, *after* taking another stroll up to the parapet to gaze out at the burned up landscape while letting his mind sift through the events of the day, Prince Juhstice took another walk and found himself standing outside one of the doors in the visitor's wing of the castle. It took a while, but he finally drummed up enough courage to knock on the door. A few moments later it was opened by Ahrlene, Princess Behlize's lady in waiting, who curtsied and showed him inside. Behlize was much the same as he'd last seen her, still wearing the same pale lavender dress that—the one that he was having a hard time getting out of his mind.

She looked up from the book she was reading as he entered the room, the expression on her face unreadable, but a moment later she rose to her feet and bade her lady in waiting to do her waiting in the next room. Ahrlene dutifully did as she was told, but she also left the door to her adjoining apartment ajar, as decorum dictated.

"I'm sorry, I wasn't expecting company so late, I don't have anything to offer you as far as refreshments go," Behlize told him, raising her sculpted eyebrows ever so slightly. He thought there might also be a slight blush to her cheeks, but it could have just as easily been a trick of the sconce lighting. It was late too, now that Juhstice thought about it. Probably too late for him to be out visiting, at least as far as proper etiquette went—but *there was also no way he was leaving after finally mustering the courage needed come there.*

"That's fine, I don't want anything..." The words came out gruff and hurried and he bit them off the moment he realized it. Meanwhile, the beguiling girl just stood there with her beautiful brown eyes watching him. And then Juhstice did what he always did, which was whatever needed done. In this case he started over, in a voice that was softer but no less heavy with emotion.

"That's not true," he confessed meeting Behlize's eyes. "I do want something...*many things*...but could we start with the kiss that I'll never forget as long as I live?"

In answer, the Princess of Lahndsend almost bowled him over as she flew into his arms.