

Chapter Thirty Nine

The Greatest Weapon

Tuvor Hukks scooped up another forkful of straw and tossed it out of the stall onto the growing pile that was already there. He muttered the whole time he was doing it, as he had been since Ol' Whinc had drug him by the ear—*literally*, ten minutes earlier to get him started on the task—*again!* Tuvor's job as a serf in the Royal Stable primarily revolved around mucking out stalls. One day he hoped to be promoted to '*the other end of the horse*' as Ol' Whinc put it—feeding and watering the animals instead of cleaning up after them, but that day wasn't coming any time soon. Tuvor's problem was that he *had* mucked out the stall he was now standing in, *before* the persnickety old codger had come along and tried to twist his ear off; at least as much as it needed to be. The way Tuvor saw it, one pile of pasture apples didn't require an entire clean out, and he'd been raise on a horse farm—and a fine one at that too, so he should know. But the old man had acted like he was tossing manure into the stall instead of cleaning up the little that was there, calling him every name in the book but his own, while threatening to banish Tuvor from the stables if it ever happened again. The old man went on at length about, "*What if Prince Juhstice happened by to see his stallion living in such a sordid state?*" Like the prince would be able to notice anything else with Ol' Whinc bowin' and scrapin' and who knows what all while trying to gain His Highness' favor. Tuvor Hukks gave a snort of disgust and muttered to himself, "Bixly was right about that part, Lord Khaos knew his business when he was talking about how high and mighty some people think they are."

As if on cue, footsteps behind him made Tuvor turn around. The person he saw standing there put a smile on his face despite his sour mood. "Mornin' to you, Bix."

"And to you, Tuv," Bixly Sact replied, then the apprentice groom frowned and asked, "Why in the world are you shoveling clean straw out of that stall?"

Tuvor tossed his latest swath of straw aside then set his fork into the ground to prop one foot up on the back of its tines. "Because *his Lordship* is afraid the prince might stop by and notice a speck of dust on it...next he'll probably have me slap anther coat of whitewash on the stalls, it's been almost two weeks since the last time."

Bixly shook his head, but then he got a nasty sneer. "Don't worry, he'll get his soon enough."

"What do you mean?" Tuvor's bushy eyebrows furled.

"It's like Lord Khaos said," Bixly smiled. "Judgment day is coming. Whinc and all the rest of *them*, they're going to pay for what they've done to us."

"Do you really think so," Tuvor had liked a lot of that he'd heard the other day, but would this Khaos be any different than the king or his nobles? Fancy words were one thing, but in Tuvor's experience they rarely amounted to much.

"Look at this," Bixly leaned in to show Tuvor the back of his hand. There were three deep scratches in it—red and inflamed scratches, but the groom looked as happy and excited as if he were holding out a fistful of gold coins. "It's a 'K'. I went to see Lord Khaos and...*he marked me!* Claimed me as his own."

Tuvor looked again, and this time he did see the letter now, it stood out as clear as could be. "*Claimed you*...what does that mean?"

"I don't know all of it yet," Bixly admitted. "But the moment it happened, I knew this life we're living right now...Tuv, it's all just a lie and the *truth*...it's coming...the next full moon, it's coming! You should see the army he's building, Tuv...it's a terrifying thing...and they're

going to be free! No more Whinc ordering us around, no more bowing, or even daring to speak because someone with a fancy title in front of their name might take offense. That world is coming to an end!”

Tuvor’s eyes went wide. “I’d sure like to believe that.”

“Believe it,” Bixly grabbed Tuvor’s calloused hand with his newly scarred one. “*That’s what it takes!* Lord Khaos made that clear to me the yesterday...all we have to do is put our trust in him, and *he’ll* do all the rest. But we to need to do our part. Believe with all our hearts, and tell others that they need to listen to what Lord Khaos has to say. We can’t let this opportunity go by, Tuv.”

When Bixly, the man Shahdow had spotted and followed through the burned out forest the day before, left a short time later. Shahdow watched him exit the stable from his perch in the hayloft where he spent his nights. The night before had been a restless one, filled with dreams of misshapen monsters, a flying dragon and endless lines of people wandering through darkness, who were apparently as deaf as they were blind, because no matter how loudly he shouted at them, they just kept marching forward through the forest. He’d awoke to the sound of Ol’ Whinc, the Royal Stable Master, reprimanding one of his people. The old man was handing out a harsh rebuke to a young man who was new enough that Shahdow didn’t know much more about him than his name. Tuvor had taken the tongue lashing without a word of complaint, but even inch of him shouted out the anger he was feeling. It wasn’t the first such incident Shahdow had witnessed; the stable master was heavy handed, literally so, when it came to disciplining his subordinates.

Given what he’d seen the day before, Shahdow had been surprised when Bixly had appeared on the scene. He honestly hadn’t expected the man to return to the castle after his meeting with the dragon—truthfully, a part of him half expected Bixly to be growing animal parts by now. But the thing that made his breath catch in his throat was the fact that he could now *sense* Bixly’s presence, just as if he was one of the dragon’s vile beasts. *He marked me!* The groom’s words echoed through Shahdow’s mind. Could three scratches really transform a man into a creature of darkness? Apparently the answer was, yes, or so Shahdow concluded at the time. It wasn’t until the next morning when he ‘*sensed*’ Tuvor working in the stable below him, *without* any dragon scratches marring his body, that he learned the actual situation was much more insidious than that. Insidious was a word he’d come across a while back, one that he *hadn’t* been looking forward to using in a sentence. The revelation was so demoralizing that Shahdow had a hard time dragging himself to the Honor Garden. Once he got there, he was so distracted that not only did he have his sword knocked out of his hand *twice*, but later, when he and the other *losers* were cleaning the garden, Sir Grahson came up to see if he was feeling well. Shahdow told his first lie in years, assuring the Arms Master that he was perfectly fine, that his opponent had just been the better swordsman.

Later, as he stopped by the castle kitchen hoping to scavenge a bite to eat—not that he really had much of an appetite, his day got even gloomier when one of the serving girls whom he’d known most of his life came into the room. She stepped through a doorway a few paces from where Shahdow was standing, but he’d sensed her arrival long before she’d entered. The moment she was across the threshold, Hilde, paused to sweep room with an angry scowl. That was the point when Shahdow remembered that he’d been seeing Hilde and Bixly spending time together. The girl he’d thought he knew so well was a few years older than him, a little on the shy side and lacking in self-confidence; that had led to her receiving more than her fair share of Mistress

Lehwellen's 'gentle' reprimands. Gentle if you took into account that the head cook was always threatening to rap someone on the head with the flat tipped wooden serving spoon that never left her hand, yet always doled out her punishments with her even blunter tongue. In Shahdow's experience, Hildie had always taken her chastising with lowered eyes and a remorsefully muttered, "Yes, ma'am." He barely recognized the fiery-eyed young woman who stalked through the kitchen glaring at the whole world—*until her eyes landed on her mistress and they blazed with seething hatred*. Shahdow felt a knot of fear form inside of him as Hildie drew closer; if she and Tuvor had both been corrupted just by spending time with Bixly, the thought of even breathing the same air with her made him want to turn and run. But he could have no more done than he could have stayed in his tree and watched the Lion-bear tear apart Prince Dharis.

"Good day, Hildie," he tried to keep his voice light as he put a smile on his face.

She stopped and turned to give him a long hard look, then shook her head. "I'm sure *you* would think so...*Shahdow*."

She said his new name with a sneer, while her eyes blasted him with every bit as much hatred as she'd been projecting at Mistress Lehwellen. Not knowing how else to respond, he spoke his heart. "What's wrong with you?"

"Me...?" Hildie laughed. "I'm just fine. I'm not the one prancing around in fancy clothes pretending I'm the son of a high lord instead of a homeless orphan. And while you may be the princess' pet today, what do you think will happen to you when some other passing fancy catches her eye, like say...*a handsome prince from a far off kingdom*? Are you such a fool to think she really cares for you?"

"She's not like that! You know she's not," Shahdow protested, more hurt for the princess than anything Hildie had said about him. "Have you ever seen her even raise her voice at someone? She's kind to everyone, she doesn't treat us like other nobles..."

His voice dropped off there as the corners of Hildie's mouth turned up in victory. "Right. She's kind...or at least puts on a show of being so, while as you were about to point out...*the rest of them are cruel and heartless*."

"Not all of them," Shahdow argued weakly. "In fact, as I've gotten to know them better, many of them treat me quite well."

"Almost like you're one of their own," Hildie shook her head. "Because that's what you are now...*one of them!* The pot boy might as well be dead. And just so you know, when you and the rest are *kind* to us lowly peasants...it's not real, it's more like someone deciding *not* to kick a stray dog...just so they can feel better about themselves. The *dog* doesn't actually matter."

"No...that's not true," Shahdow instinctively reached out to put a comforting hand on her arm, but Hildie jumped backwards like a snake was about to strike her. A moment later she gave him one more scathing look, then turned and ran off back the way she'd come a few minutes before. Shahdow watched her go, feeling a sadness washing over him like nothing he'd ever felt before.

It wasn't that everything Hildie had said was true, brushing up against the two worlds like he did, the nobility and the commoners, he knew both sectors had their fair share of good and *not so good* people. But there was enough truth behind her words to send him reeling, struggling to come to grips with a sudden, undeniable realization. The book that he'd borrowed from Dougerty, the one about knowing your enemy, had talked about three main areas; knowing your enemies greatest strengths, greatest weaknesses, and also his greatest *weapons!* Shahdow

suddenly knew with every ounce of his being what the dragon's greatest weapons were; the thought came crashing down on him with an avalanche of despair...*it's us!*

He wandered aimlessly for a long time; first through the cold stone corridors of the castle, but afterwards he found himself roaming the streets of the city. Everywhere he looked he saw examples of Hildie's accusations; the undeniable chasm between the nobility and the commoners—and *the growing animosity toward the former from the latter*. That left him sure of one thing, the dragon's words were working their way deeper and deeper into people's thoughts and feelings with every passing moment. How long would it be before Shahdow would be able to *sense every person of common birth within the kingdom?*

As much as he tried to push his conversation with Hildie aside, Shahdow found himself reliving it over and over; especially the parts about Princess Chahrity. *She's not that way*, he kept telling himself. *She's really does care... not just about me, but everyone.*

Shahdow's internal struggle continued as the day drug on. Isn't it strange how some words—even ones we know are lies, grab hold and won't let go as if they have a life of their own. They are but dark imitations of another word, a word—the *Word*, that is living and active. But while the Word of Truth is able to pierce to our very souls, the ones based on lies strive to destroy them. Sadly, at that point in his young life, Shahdow didn't have the wisdom to know the difference between the two. What he did have was an innate ability to seek light in a dark world, and as his weary soul struggled within him, he found himself drawn to the brightest light he knew.

It was late, the sun had set and most of the residents of the castle had settled down for the night, many of them retired for the evening. Still, Shahdow raised his hand and knocked on the door, though softly in case the one who lived inside was herself asleep. But a few moments later, the door cracked open and Princess Chahrity peeked outside. As soon as she saw Shahdow's troubled face, she pulled the door wide and ushered him inside.

"What's wrong?" she exclaimed, taking his hand as she leaned down to ask him the same question he'd posed to Hildie a few hours before. That realization made him clamp down on the words that were about to come off his lips; he was suddenly determined that the darkness Hildie had passed to him wouldn't go any further.

"Nothing," he finally replied. "I...I just wanted to make sure you were alright."

From her expression, Chahrity wasn't buying his answer. Without another word, she stood back up and, taking him by the hand, led him from the entryway deeper into her chambers where Shahdow discovered she wasn't alone. The Princess of Lahndsend was reclining on one of the lounges in the princess' sitting room. As they entered, she looked up and gave him a smile.

"Hello there," Princess Behlize said. She even rose up to meet him—which reminded Shahdow that he'd neglected to properly greet Princess Chahrity when she'd opened the door. His face flushed bright red as he hastily dropped to one knee before the Princess of Lahndsend.

As soon as one princess bade him to rise, Shahdow turned to the other and dropped right back down again. "I'm sorry, Your Highness, I don't know what I was thinking earlier...I guess I wasn't."

"I'm sure that wasn't the case," Chahrity told him gently after motioning him back to his feet. "If you weren't thinking then your thoughts wouldn't be so deeply troubled. Now, as your princess, I'll ask you again, what's wrong, and this time I want an answer."

Shahdow's eyes darted from one young noblewoman to the other nervously, which wasn't lost on Chahrity. "Behlize and I are like sisters," she assured him. "I trust her completely, and so can you."

"You saved my brother's life, Shahdow," Behlize added in. "So, know this...if there is every anything that I can do for you, all you need to do is ask."

Shahdow felt more than heard the sincerity in the words both women had spoken to him and felt a great weight start to lift off of his shoulders. He was still careful to choose his words, not wanting to impart any unwarranted guilt to the princess, but he *did* talk with them about what he'd seen and come to understand over the past two days. About how the dragon's word had begun to corrupt people he'd never even laid eyes on, and how he feared that in the coming days the creature's hateful message would begin to tear the kingdom apart as Ehlsewhere's citizens turned upon each other. When he was through, Princess Chahrity was very quiet, obviously shaken by what she'd heard and lost in thought about what might be done to put things right. Behlize was silent for several long seconds too, but she was the first to speak.

"You may very well be right that this dragon's greatest weapon is us, Shahdow," she acknowledged, before adding with quiet conviction. "But that is nothing compared to *our* greatest weapon. *Love conquers all!* We just need to learn how to wield it properly."

After the boy had left, Behlize found herself marveling at how...she almost wanted to say mature—and he was obviously that for someone so young, but the words insightful, or even *wise* seemed to apply better. Yes, *wise* was probably the most apt description. Shahdow was pondering, and pondering deeply, things that most grown men and women would hardly notice, or give thought to if they did. Truly a remarkable boy—make that young man. No wonder Dharis was so taken with him.

"We have to do something," Chahrity exclaimed after letting out a long sigh. "We can't just sit by and let this happen. But what? I don't disagree with you on the power of love...certainly a gentle hand is needed here, Behlize. I just don't know where to start."

"You already *have* started, Chahrity," Behlize told her. "I just saw that with my own eyes. If the rest of Ehlsewhere's nobles followed your example, this dragon's words would fall on deaf ears."

"Well, we do have the festival coming up. That should give us a chance to show everyone that the line between nobles and commoners isn't as deeply drawn as people suppose," Chahrity pointed out hopefully, but after seeing Behlize's doubtful look, she asked, "What is it...?"

"I'm sorry," the Lahndsend princess told her. "But what good does it do for you to treat one servant like he's your younger brother if the royal cook has set a queen's crown on her head and doles out more rebukes than she does meals? If you want to really change, *everyone*, from the king himself all the way down to his lowest ranking official, needs to start treating those we've been entrusted to govern better than we do ourselves."

Chahrity heard the truth in her friend's words, but knowing what kind of a man her father was, how could she feel anything but despair for the impossible task before her. Well, she might not know what to do about King Pryhde at that point, but she had pretty good idea of where else she might start.