

Chapter Forty Three

Besieged

“We are *not* cancelling the festival!” Queen Vhanity’s voice rose several octaves above what was proper for a high ranking lady, but she didn’t seem to care in the least. “This is just another one of Chahrity’s antics. She’s trying to manipulate us into acquiescing to her demands.”

King Pryhde considered his response carefully; a very rare feat for him, but then his wife was one of the exceptional individuals that he couldn’t simply brush aside or completely ignore—*much as he wanted to*. He wasn’t aware that his daughter was prone to *antics*; nor, to his recollection, had her *suggestion* the previous day come across as anything resembling a demand. It was true that Chahrity could be stubborn—*just nowhere near as stubborn as her mother—or as doggedly adamant about getting her way!*

“We’ve searched the entire castle?” The question was directed at his Golden Arm.

“Twice, and they’re doing it again as we speak,” Sir Behkworth assured him. “Plus, as a precautionary measure, I’m about to personally meet with every member of the watch who was on duty last night to see if any of them noticed any young woman leaving the castle or wandering the city no matter how she might have been dressed.”

“That seems prudent,” the king nodded thoughtfully, then turned back to his wife. “If you’re right and Chahrity has indeed just gone into hiding...where do you suppose that might be?”

“I haven’t a clue,” Vhanity waved a purple manicured hand dismissively. “But I can tell you how to find her. Go forward with things as planned...that girl won’t miss an opportunity to have the commoners cheering and fawning all over her. She’ll turn up in time to join the parade, I promise you that!”

Then why did she try to get me to cancel it? As deserving of an answer as it was, the question went unasked. Without any signs of foul play, a ransom note being delivered, or even a rumor to track down, King Pryhde had no idea what might have happened to his daughter. Her mother on the other hand, he knew *exactly* what was going on with her. Vhanity was not about to deny her subjects a chance cheer and fawn—*over her!* Heaven and earth would pass away before *that* happened. A glance off to his left at the gem studded clock that took up the better part of the east wall of the throne room told him it was still three hours before the midday bells rang—*three hours until the Grand Festival officially commenced with the launching of the parade*. Next his eyes drifted across the faces surrounding him. His Royal Counselors had yet to utter a word of advice on what he should do; that wasn’t too surprising for most of them, almost to a man they would never dream of speaking in opposition to the queen. But Ohrder’s silence was beyond curious; that and his brooding look almost made Pryhde think he might know something about Chahrity’s disappearance, except the wizard tended to dote on the princess as if she was his own granddaughter. Then there was Juhstice. When his son had learned that his sister was missing, the boy had seemed more angry than concerned—*maybe Vhanity was right and Chahrity was up to something, something Juhstice had knowledge of or at least suspected?*

“We will continue with things as planned,” he announced to the room at large, in a voice ringing with resolution despite his internal misgivings. Then turning to Sir Behkworth, he added, “If the princess hasn’t reappeared by the time the parade has concluded I’ll expect you to turn the entire kingdom upside down to find her.”

The Golden Arm gave a solemn nod of agreement, but he needn’t have bothered; Ehlsewhere was already doing summersaults long before the parade reached its end.

Fingers made his way through the sewers almost without the need of the torch he had raised overhead. He'd spent so much time wandering the meandering mazes of Ehlsewhere's underground sanitation system that he'd often bragged he could make his way from one end of the city to the other blindfolded. Half the time he believed it himself. His destination on this particular morning was an old abandoned guard post. Abandoned because at some point in the distant past the current king or possibly his Golden Arm had decided to replace human guardsmen with a massive iron-barred grate where the sewer ran out past the southernmost boundary of the city wall. Supposedly the grate was also warded by magic spells that would both sound an alarm and kill anything within a hundred paces if anyone attempted to cut through its rust-proof metal. Fingers didn't know if any of that was true, nor did he care. He was just happy the sewers had become the one place you could go without having to look over your shoulder to see if a watchman was lurking nearby.

Turning the last corner and climbing a short flight of stairs, he found himself at the entrance to the guard post. Upon seeing him, the bleary-eyed basher leaning against the stone doorway lifted a hand in greeting. While Fingers had been able to return home to his bed, Glorn had stayed behind to keep watch on their *'guest'*.

"How is she?" Fingers inquired without any real interest. In truth, he almost regretted snatching the girl the night before. It had been a rash decision even by his standards, but since he was sure that he was dealing with a crewmate of the little sniveler of a lifter who had been causing him so much trouble of late, he wasn't about to just walk away after the girl spoiled his pick of one of the biggest berries he'd ever set his sights on. Not that he'd planned on getting any coin from the linen merchant the night before; no, the old codger had made it clear on their first meeting that he wasn't about to pay anyone else tribute when the Watch already had their hand in his purse. Fingers had let him get away with his high and mighty talk at the time, but last night should have set things on their proper course. The nobleman would have seen things differently if he'd had to start pulling off his boots to count to ten.

"She tries to whine, but it don't do much good with Barloff's nose rag stuffed in her mouth." The comment was accompanied with a mean smile.

Fingers laughed and stepped past the basher to make his way inside. The flickering torchlight showed him that the girl was right where he'd last seen her, leaned up against the far wall with her knees up tight against her chest to fight off the morning chill. It had been a cold night and the sewers tended to be a lot chillier than the city above. Handing his torch to Glorn, he walked forward and squatted down by the girl's side to reach out and lifted off her hood. When he did that, he discovered that regardless of Glorn's comments at some point in the night the dirty little retch had manage to free herself of her gag.

"Hello there, Cassy," Fingers said merrily. "Don't bother trying to scream. There's no one near enough to hear you...plus, if you do, I'll do more than stuff a rag in your mouth."

The girl looked up at him with hooded eyes through the curtain of her dark bangs. The way the little lifter wore her hair always hanging in her face had always driven Fingers mad—*how were you supposed to know it a woman was comely or not if she was hiding behind a mop?* Reaching out once more, he brushed the hair out of her eyes—and froze. Fingers the lifter had never gotten closer than twenty paces to *any* royal in his entire life—that he'd know of, but he instantly recognized who the dark angry eyes looking up at him belonged to. Without even realizing he was doing it, he stumbled backwards, wheeling his arms frantically as if trying to claw his way away from the impossible scene in front of him. In his haste, he nearly collided

with Glorn where stood holding his torch, cause the basher jump aside to keep both of them for catch fire.

“What’s the matter with you?” the basher snarled, even as he took a step forward, lifting the torch on high to see what could have possibly caused Fingers to react as he had. A moment later the brawny thief proved that he had a rather impressive vocabulary—*of the most vulgar persuasion*. His final statement was more genteel, though no less charged with emotion. “*What have you gotten us into, Fingers?*”

“You need to let me go...*right now!*” the crown princess of Ehlsewhere declared with all the confidence of one borne to command, despite the fact that she was currently trussed up like a prize hog on its way to the butcher. “You have to know they’ve already got the entire Watch out looking for me by now.”

Her last statement actually had a calming effect on Fingers. Let them look all they wanted, they’d never find the princess in *his* sewers. Well, maybe *never* was too strong of a word, but he couldn’t image they’d even think to look for her underground until after they’d searched every square inch of the city. That meant he had time to think. *Think, Fingers, think! There has to be a way out of this.*

“You didn’t know who I was when you kidnapped me,” Princess Chahrity pointed out gently. “So, if you let me go now, there’s no harm done.”

“She’s right!” Glorn pounced on the idea, already looking ready to spring forward and cut her loose from her bonds.

“Right! Kidnapping a commoner’s just fine,” Fingers retorted sarcastically. “The king won’t have our necks stretched for that! Why he’ll probably even be grateful that all we did was keep his only daughter tied up all night in a rat infested sewer...maybe he’ll give us a medal for taking such wonderful care of her.”

“I won’t tell anyone. I don’t want my father to know that I was out in the city pretending to be a lifter any more than you do,” the princess persisted. Her words washed right off of Fingers; he knew a shift when it was being dangled in front of him. But she must have seen something different in Glorn’s expression because a moment later she switched tactics, looking directly at the basher to say, “I’m guessing that beside the work you do for Fingers that you’re also a member of the laborer’s guild, and from your comment a few moments ago, I’m even more confident you wouldn’t have taken *this* job had you know what it entailed. As such, it can’t be held against you. But starting *now*...you work for *me*. I’ll pay you a hundred crowns to escort me back to the castle.”

“Don’t listen to her, Glorn,” Fingers could almost see the other man’s will being eroding before his eyes. “There’s no way you march up to the front gate of the castle with Princess Chahrity without drawing the attention of the entire kingdom. Your part in this *will* come out if you do that, and you’re the biggest fool who ever drew breath if you think the king will just look the other way.”

“He’s right about one thing, Glorn,” the princess said without hesitation. “There will be no hiding from this...eventually my father *will* find out what has happened...he will not rest until he does. So, the only real question you need to ask yourself is this...when that happens do you want me standing between you and a hangman’s noose, *or not*. ”

“She’s right. We don’t have any...” the basher started to say, even as he took a step forward, but that was as far as he got. Even with only two fingers and a thumb gripping the dagger he’d taken off of the princess the night before, Fingers drove the blade home straight and true into the

basher's exposed back. The cold steel slid between Glorn's ribs and into his heart; he did manage to let out a startled cry, but he was already dead before he hit the floor.⁴

After his meeting with the king and queen regarding their missing daughter and the upcoming parade, Sir Behkworth stalked through the city like a lion on the prowl for an unsuspecting deer. Except that wasn't quite accurate; the Golden Arm was on the hunt for predators not prey—*though prey is exactly what they would become should he happen upon any of them*. He and four squads of his best soldiers had set out from the castle an hour before the midday bell, splitting up into teams of twos—except for Behkworth himself—he didn't need *anyone* to watch his back. His thought was that jackals tended to stay hidden in their burrows when even more dangerous creatures are out and about. But if any of them were brave enough to stick their necks out, you could rest assured the Watch would be there to make short work of them. If only the Golden Arm had any confidence that his show of force would do any long term good. Ever since the dragon had made his surprise attack—*that's how Behkworth viewed having the creature speak words directly into his thoughts*, Ehlsewhere's normal somber peacefulness had been eroded by growing acts of violence amongst the lower classes. To that end, he'd detailed another *ten* squads of the Watch to escort the parade once it started making its way through the city. Ehlsewhere's most prominent nobles, as well as good number of distinguished visitors from other lands would be marching in the parade—or in Queen Vhanity's case, being transported on a golden litter hoisted upon the shoulders of eight of her private guardsmen. Surrounded as they'd all be by his best knights, in theory they should all be every bit as safe as if they were back in the castle; at least that's what the Golden Arm told himself as he walked along.

The ringing of the midday bells caused Sir Behkworth to halt in his tracks and turn around to start back toward the castle. There was no great hurry; in honor of the special occasion the bells normal cadence was being greatly expanded, after which, as the last note from the bell tower died out, the Royal Orchestra would strike up, playing Ehlsewhere's national anthem. Only then would the parade emerge through the castle gates. Sir Behkworth wouldn't make it back in time for that, but he'd be close, certainly close enough to intercept the parade before it reached the city proper. His intent was to attach himself to the queen's retinue and to stay with them until Vhanity was safely back inside the castle grounds. An incident involving any of the other participants, while unfortunate, could be handled; the Golden Arm didn't even want to think about what would happen if some crazed citizen manage to even get within arm's length of the queen. An hour later, positioned just to the side of Vhanity's litter bearers as they marched along a street lined with cheer people, he was beginning to think all his worrying had been for nothing—then the little girl came running out of the crowd.

She was too young to even know what she was doing; bare foot and wearing little more than rags, she broke free of her mother who was wresting with an even younger child and dashed past the nearest soldiers before they even realized what was happening. The crowd, caught up in cheering and clapping as the grand procession passed by—made it impossible for anyone to hear what the girl was saying even though her little lips were moving rapidly with excitement—*likely it was something about the beautiful lady she was racing toward*. That certainly fit with her upraised arms as she neared Vhanity's gold plated litter. In her innocence and enthusiasm the girl didn't realize that she was running directly into the path of those baring up the queen, and thus presented a serious tripping hazard. The first soldier in line, the one she was about to become entangled with *did*, and he instinctively put his out, intending to sweep her aside. Unfortunately, encumbered as he was and as quickly as the child was rushing towards him, the pushing aside

became a forceful kick as the metal shod toe of his boot connected squarely with the frail little thing's started face. The girl was sent flying through the air to land in a crumpled heap in the muddy gutter at the side of the road. That was the last *clear* memory Sir Behkworth had as a day of celebration turned into a nightmare of blood and death.

The reaction to what had happened couldn't have been more immediate and visceral if every person gathered had been somehow related to the unfortunate child—they *obviously all felt a connection to her*. Within moments the soldier who had kicked her was surrounded by a swarm of angry men, and not a few women, who pulled him into their midst while raining blows and kicks down upon him. The other litter bearers somehow managed to maintain their footing, but they too would have been overwhelmed if Sir Behkworth and every Watchman in the vicinity hadn't rushed to the queen's aid. The Golden Arm had given the order for any altercations to be handled *without* drawing a sword if that was at all possible; that edict got cast aside in the first few minutes as the soldiers found themselves struggling not just to guard those in the procession, but fighting for their own lives as well. Unbelievably, the enraged masses continued to surge forward for several minutes even after the soldiers had resorted to flailing about themselves wildly with their naked blades. The carnage was incredible, even rivaling that of what Behkworth had witnessed during his battles with the vile beasts.

Eventually, though the details of exactly how it had been accomplished were muddled, the Golden Arm was able to form his soldiers up into a cordon surrounding the entire procession, keeping the still seething mob at bay mostly with threats, but also with a few well-paced sword thrusts when they were necessary. From there, he was able to get everyone moving again and they slowly made their way back to the castle. As the last noble finally passed through the gate Sir Behkworth stood and looked back at the city, feeling for all the world that he was gazing out at an enemy encampment come to lay siege to the kingdom. As bizarre as that thought was, he never-the-less found himself turning his eyes to address Sir Cohnely, his second in command, "Raise the drawbridge and secure the gates...no one enters or leaves the castle grounds without my order."