

Chapter Forty Five

A Light in the Darkness

Prince Juhstice and Ohrder had left the meeting with the king at the same time, walking out together, and by silent agreement they'd stayed in step with each other as they wound their way through the castle. Juhstice was the first to speak once they reached an empty passageway where there was no chance of their conversation being overheard.

"You seem to have a way of being aware of things even as they are happening. Do you have a way of determining where my sister might be?" It was an accusation, but one delivered in a civilized tone.

"A *magical* means...no." Ohrder shook his white head while still moving forward purposefully. "I'm as blind to what might have happened to her as everyone else. But I do have someone in mind who might be able to shed some light on the topic."

Juhstice had an uncomfortable suspicion that he knew who that unnamed *someone* was—*especially if he was right about Chahrity having snuck out to visit the city*, but he kept his thoughts and opinions to himself and concentrated on keeping up with the wizard. In short order that inexplicably required him to break into a jog just to keep up; not that he was complaining.

As they reached Ohrder's chambers, the door flew open allowing the wizard to rush through and plant himself in front of another one located behind his desk. After giving a wave with one bony hand, he grasped the and hurried through the opening. Juhstice chased after, only realizing once he was on the other side that he was standing inside another very large room—one *filled with piles and piles of books, of every size, shape and color*. Odd as that was—he'd been certain he was about to enter a cloak closet, there was no time to worry about it.

"Good morning," Dougerty stepped out from behind a quadruple tower of fat tombs that reached nearly to the ceiling to favor them with a frown. "And to what do I owe the pleasure..." after a moment he snapped the book he was holding closed to offer a slight bow. "...Your Highness?"

Juhstice almost drew the sword at his side to—*well, he wasn't sure what he would have done, but he definitely felt the urge to do so*. Before he could speak—even to tell the leader of thieves to rise, Ohrder stepped forward to fill the gap.

"The princess has gone missing. No one in the castle has seen her since early last evening," Ohrder's tone was measured despite the urgency of his words. "We're hoping you can help us locate her."

Per usual, Dougerty didn't bother to try and hide his own emotions. Concern wrote itself across his bearded face as he said, "I haven't heard anything regarding her, but I'll get my people out searching for her immediately."

"Both her *and* Cassy," Juhstice interjected heatedly.

"Yes...I assumed Cassy was the one we really needed to be looking for," Dougerty replied, meeting the prince's eyes. Then he added in a harder voice, "You realize this means Cassy the lifter will no longer have free roam of the city, don't you?"

"I wish that were already the case," Juhstice said sourly.

Dougerty nodded, then, tossing the book he was holding on a nearby pile, he started for the door his guests had come through a short time before—the *door that was now closed, though Juhstice didn't remember pulling it shut behind him*. Before he reached it a hard knock—*of sorts*,

came from the other side. A thump loud enough to make Juhstice give a start was followed by four more raps all soft enough to be delivered by a child's hand.

"That's one of my lieutenant's," Dougerty stopped and turned to whisper. "I'm not expecting anyone, so this could be important. You should probably get out of sight."

Important to whom? Juhstice thought morosely, thinking it likely he was about to find himself huddled down like a five year old playing hide and seek while the leadership of the hand held a quick meeting to tidy up his affairs. And yet he found himself following after Ohrder to squat down behind the same wall of books where Dougerty had been stationed when they arrived.

"Enter," Dougerty called out. Juhstice heard the door open and the soft pad of footsteps as whoever was outside entered the room.

"By the light, Lem, what's happened to you?" Dougerty exclaimed, for once losing his composure. "As much blood as you've obviously lost you should be at a healer's not here!"

"I'll be fine and this wouldn't wait," despite the denial, the answer came back in a hushed rasp. "There's trouble afoot, Dougerty, bad trouble."

"Move him over to the chair," at first Juhstice thought the command was directed at him, and it was delivered with such authority that he found himself wanting to jump to obey. A moment later more sounds, of shuffling feet and several grunts of exertion and pain came to his ears.

"Alright, now what's this about trouble coming our way?" Dougerty asked once the injured man—*Lem?*, had apparently been lowered into a seated position. If Juhstice recalled correctly, Lem was a basher and a brute of one at that; hopefully it wasn't a spindly little chair they're placed him on.

"Do you remember that little lifter girl, Cassy, that we considered taking in a while back?" Lem's words came out labored but clear. Juhstice didn't wait to hear what else he had to say, sword already in hand, the prince was instantly in motion, dashing around the stacks of books.

The basher *and* his lieutenant—*Worrels, Juhstice didn't know the man well but had always thought he a decent sort—for a thief*, looked up with surprise, then the latter turned and ran toward the door. He got almost three full strides in before he suddenly turned into a statue, hanging in the air with only the tip of one boot touching the floor.

"Where is she?" Juhstice shouldered past Dougerty to point his sword at the wounded basher, who simply sat there looking at him with one hand pressed tight against his blood stained shoulder.

After a time of consideration, the basher found his voice. "We didn't know who she was when we took her, Your Highness. We thought she was just a no account lifter meddling in the Hand's business. I would never hurt the princess...an never intended any harm to her before I knew who she really was. She's not like most people...always went out of her way to treat *everyone* right. When Fingers told me who Cassy really was...and what he wanted to do to her, *I wouldn't have any of it!* And you can see where that got me."

Juhstice's sword arm stretched forward until the tip of his blade was against Lem's exposed throat. "I'm going to ask you one more time...*where is she?*"

Juhstice sensed Dougerty starting to shift beside him and prepared himself to deal with the chief thief first if he had to—*hopefully Ohrder would take matters in hand before it came to that*, but before anything along either of those lines happened, Lem raised a restraining hand to his boss and said, "In the sewers. We took her down to the old Watch station to hold her until Fingers figured out what to do with her. Ovler was left to keep watch on her during the night, but Fingers claims the princess stuck a knife in his heart...but after what he did to me, I'm thinking he's likely the one what killed Ovler. Not that it any of it really matters...I imagine Fingers has

done what he wanted to with the princess by now. If there had been a way, I would have stopped him.”

“*Why didn’t you go to the Watch instead of coming here?*” Fueled by anger and frustration, Juhstice’s words came out in a shout.

Lem gave a harsh laugh as he raised a hand helplessly. “Look at me, Highness...what would a watchmen do upon seeing me and hearing what I had to say? How many people would I be passed through before one of them finally decided to listen to me...*if* they didn’t just march me off to the gallows. I knew the moment Fingers turned and ran that the princess probably wouldn’t live out the hour, but that her *only* real chance lay with The Hand, and so here I am.”

It was suddenly hard for Juhstice to breath. It felt like the room was closing in on him and there was no place to go. While he was trying to figure out what to do or say next, Dougerty stepped purposefully past him and addressed Ohrder in a controlled but insistent voice. “Can you take us down to the Watch Station?”

“It’s been so long,” Ohrder said doubtfully. “I can try, but I have to be able to picture a place to open a portal there. So, I need everyone to keep silent and let me concentrate.”

The wizard moved pasted everyone, including the man he’d turned into a statue, and stationed himself before the closed door that under normal circumstances opened to the hallway outside Dougerty’s apartment. He stood there for several excruciatingly long seconds, holding one hand upraised before the door and the other wrapped around his forehead as if trying to massage the image of the place he was envisioning out of his memory. Finally, after letting out a heavy sigh and making a series of quick motions with his extended hand, Ohrder reached down and grasped the doorknob.

Chahrity was still shaking, from the cold of being tied up in the underground sewer overnight, but even more so from watching a man being murdered right before her eyes. The basher had kidnapped her, and he’d been the one to hit her hard enough to knock her out too when she’d struggled to free herself, but that didn’t keep his death from weighing heavily upon her. She couldn’t help feeling responsible; if she hadn’t been trying to talk him into letting her go he’d still be alive. *But would you?* She knew the answer to that question—and it did help, but did it really matter that she’d lived a few more hours—*they were hardly precious given her circumstances?* She knew it was only a matter of time before Fingers returned from disposing of the dead man’s body, wherever that might be.

You have to keep trying, she chided herself. But it was so hard. With the gag back in her mouth, her teeth couldn’t full chatter, but every few seconds the rest of her body was wracked with spasms from the cold and dampness. She had lost all feeling in her hands, feet and most of her lower body hours before; so much so that though she was telling her hands to move around to try and loosen the bindings on her wrists, she couldn’t even tell if anything was happening. Laying on her side in the total darkness, with arms pulled behind her and lashed to her feet, Chahrity was feeling utterly defeated, as helpless and hopeless as a person could get.

The One who spoke speaks still...His hand that knit together all of creation still reaches out. The words Princess Behlize’s had said to her the day the stable man, Bixly, had been banished came to her unbidden. Those words and others. *Most see God as distant and uncaring, but that’s not true. He is ever-present, right here and right now, we have but to call upon him and he will draw us close to him.* Could Behlize be right that this world was but a vapor and that what came next was unimaginably better for those who loved God? Since the day they had spoken, Chahrity had pondered the many questions and possibilities her conversation with the other princess had

raised. Now, accepting that her life was slipping away—even if *Fingers never returned*, how many more hours could she survive in the cold, without food and water, Behlize's words took on a new level of urgency.

I've been told that you always listen, Chahrity tried to image the benevolent father looking down on his daughter that Behlize insisted was a much more accurate representation of God than the one most people held. *If that is true, please help me. Protect my family, my friends, my kingdom. I thought that was my job, but now I see that it has always been yours. So, please God, take care of them.*

The unspoken words brought unexpected comfort. It was as if, soundless though her plea had been, it had still been accepted, and the burden she'd born her whole life shifted to more capable shoulders. Set free from the need to struggle, Chahrity stopped shivering and led the darkness that went beyond the mere lack of sunlight wash over her.

Shahdow bounded up the stairs and into the room beyond just in time to see Fingers, torch held high in one hand with a dagger clutched tight in the other, squat down over the princess' supine form. Chahrity didn't even twitch as the lifter leaned in to strike his blade home.

"Get away from her!" Shahdow's shout echoed like thunder in the near empty room, causing Fingers to jolt upright, back up onto his feet once more. Torch thrust out in front of him, the lifter held his dagger at the ready as he squinted into the darkness trying to make out who it was that had interrupted him. After a moment he left out an angry snarl.

"I should have figured," getting a nasty smile, Fingers took a step forward; just one though, because by the time his foot hit the ground, Shahdow had drawn his sword.

New light blossomed in the darkness as a warm glow from the unsheathed sword broke forth, lighting room. The lifter blinked in surprise—and *newfound fear*, as he gave up the ground he'd just claimed.

"Keep back!" the thief hissed, dropping down to one knee to poise his dagger over Chahrity's inert form. "Or I swear I'll kill her."

With the unexpected glow from the sword, Shahdow had no trouble sizing up the situation. It was as if he was back in the Honor Garden facing a new challenge Sir Grahson had devised for him to work through. Fingers was probably too far away for a lunge to strike home before the dagger did its damage—*probably*. The lifter's reaction time likely wasn't as good as a knight's—or even a knight trainee's for that matter. So, if he had to, Shahdow would have to risk it. But was there a better option?

"You're planning to kill her no matter what I do," he countered, mostly to buy himself time to think. Apparently, he wasn't the only one doing some strategizing.

"Now that's where you're wrong," Fingers disagreed. "I came down here because I heard a couple of bashers had absconded an old friend of mine. I was always fond of young Cassy here and I didn't want her to come to no harm. I'm not sure where them two mush heads got themselves off to...I was just glad to find them gone. Then you showed up and I thought you was one of them and that's why I reacted the way I did. You can put away your sword, we're here for the same thing."

"Really...?" Shahdow let out a relieved sigh and let the tip of his sword dip towards the ground. "I thought you were the one who had taken her."

"Now you're sounding like a mush head! How long have we all been friends?" the lifter shook his head as if the comment was too ludicrous for words, but the dagger in his hand never wavered as it continued to hover over the princess.

“A long time,” Shahdow answered, taking a step forward as he did.

“Now that’s close enough while you’ve got that thing in your hand,” Fingers’ voice was still friendly, but with an edge on it. “Why don’t you put it away and give me hand helping this young lady get back on her feet.”

“Oh, right...” Shahdow gave a start of surprise and started to bring the sword up to slide it back into its sheath. The motion required him to shift his feet again, not forward but bringing his right toe out to where it was pointed directly at Fingers who was still crouched down before him—a *full step closer than he had been a few moments before*. Once his blade was up again, but before his wrist turned to send it home into its sheath, Shahdow spoke again. There was no warmth—false or otherwise in *his* voice. “You can stop lying now...and start running. It’s your only chance.”

Balanced with sword at the ready, he watched Fingers, waiting for the eye shift down that would precede the lung with the dagger, or the one to his left that would indicate he’d chosen the wiser option. There was also the outside possibility the lifter would overcome his natural cowardice and come straight at him. That would be foolish but less lethal than the first option; Fingers would likely lose a few more digits as Shahdow would be forced to strike the dagger out of his hand, but at least he’d still be breathing. After a long moment of silence, the cornered thief drew in a deep breath and blew it out sharply—Shahdow feared a glance down to select the exact spot to plunge his blade would follow—only he never got the chance for that to happen.

Lying still as a corpse the entire time since Shahdow had entered the room, Princess Chahrity suddenly came to life. Trussed up as she was, she couldn’t manage much, but she was able to make enough of a turn up onto her side to bring her bound legs up against Fingers hard enough to knock him off balance. The motion saved his worthless life. As he went sprawling, he threw out his hands to keep from planting his face into the room’s stone floor. From there—proving he was more nimble than he looked, he turned his tumble into a leap that took him toward the unguarded doorway. Shahdow could have stopped him—but not without drawing blood, and with the immediate threat to the princess past, he wasn’t quite ready to do that. A moment later, Fingers disappeared through the doorway into the darkness. Since he was still holding the torch, Shahdow could have gone after him, but there were far more important matters to attend to.

As he moved forward, the vibrant glow from the sword enabled Shahdow to get a good look at Chahrity for the first time. She was a mess; covered in grime from her time spent lying on the filthy sewer floor and looking so drawn and lifeless that Shahdow wasn’t sure she was still conscious. Nor did she so much as twitch as he was removing the gag from her mouth; but then a moment later, to his relief, she sucked in deeply, as if it was the first real breath she’d been able to take in a long time.

“Please hold still, Your Highness,” Shahdow said gently after he’d moved around to remove the restraints on her hands and feet and found that her struggles had tightened the knots beyond what his fingers were capable of dealing with. “I’m going to have to cut you free and I don’t want to risk hurting you.”

Chahrity gave a weak nod of understanding and Shahdow got to work. Sharp as his blade was it was quick work too, but even in the short time it took to free her, he realized that being bound wasn’t the worst of the princess’ problems. Her hands and feet were as cold as ice cycles, and though he knew the sawing motions he’d had to make to free her had to have hurt, she didn’t make a sound or even grimace as he went about his task. The moment he had her free, Shahdow stood up and stripped off his cloak then tried to get her upright enough to drape it over her shoulders.

“I’m trying to help,” Chahrity’s voice was a raspy whisper. “But I can’t feel my hands or feet.”

“You’re doing fine...but we need to get you out of here,” Shahdow said, fighting to keep the worry out of his voice. Then he almost laughed at his own stupidity. All he needed to do was use the portal shell and he’d have them both back in the castle in a heartbeat. He was in the act of reaching down to search through the cloak now draped over Chahrity’s shoulders when his hand froze with anguish. *You left it back in the wardrobe!* It was true. In his hurry to find the princess, and knowing that he’d have to pass through the city unnoticed, Shahdow had selected his ‘*lifter*’ cloak out of his wardrobe instead of the much nicer wool one he normally wore—and in the process had forgotten to switch the shell to his new garment.

“I think I can walk,” Chahrity told him, but a violent shiver ran through her even as she spoke the words. A moment later she added, “I think you’re going to have to help me to my feet.”

Shahdow bit down on a sigh as he resigned himself to the fact that the only way he was going to get the princess back to safety was for the two of them to make their way back through the maze of underground passageways. How they were supposed to do that he hadn’t a clue, he’d realized he was hopeless lost the first few minutes after following Fingers into the sewers. But none of that mattered; the princess needed to be someplace warm and safe where healers could make her well again and it was up to him to make that happen. Bending down to let Chahrity put her arm across his shoulders, Shahdow put his own arm around her waist—*despite the direness of their circumstances he was sure his face must be turning beet red*, and slowly rose up until both of them were back on their feet. Then, with the shining sword held out in front of them to light their path, they started forward, one halting step at a time.