

Chapter Fifteen

One Day a Knight

Prince Juhstice didn't leave the Honor Garden after handing Shahdow over to the Master at Arms; he knew how fond his sister was of the boy, and he had firsthand experience on just how poorly commoners and nobles fit together. Given those two things, he thought it best to stay around at least long enough to make sure he hadn't tossed the boy into something he wasn't prepared to handle. Ten minutes later he was worried that's *exactly* what he'd done. When he watched Sir Pettybohne's son go from being a lethargic mockery of a swordsman to a fiend brandishing a sword-shaped truncheon the moment Sir Grahson's back was turned his worse fears were realized. He was already striding across the practice yard to set things right—as right as they could be anyway, when he noticed something. Though he was being bludgeoned mercilessly, his sister's undersized shadow was showing no fear. In fact his expression was just as determined—if not more so, than the moment he'd come running back to get started after selecting his practice sword. *And*, despite take hit after ruthless hit that would have turned most children his age into a blubbing puddle of tears, the boy was hardly flinching at the blows that were leaving red welts on his skin; ones that would doubtlessly turn to various other hues as they morphed into bruises.

Torn between what to do—or *not* to do, Juhstice pulled up at the periphery of the paired off contestants and forced himself to remain calm. After all, he wasn't the one taking a massive beating; no matter that he had to keep himself from wincing every time the Pettybohne boy struck another blow. Each second felt like it took an hour to tick past, and as they slowly did, Shahdow also slowly began to become a little quicker and a bit more effective with his parries—so slightly that only a trained eye would notice it. Then, just as Juhstice was beginning to hope things might not turn out to be a total disaster, tar Pettybohne landed a fearsome blow to the side of Shahdow's head that should have knocked the smaller boy off his feet. The prince was about to rush forward when a voice spoke from behind him.

"I'm sorry, Your Highness, things were going fine just a moment ago," Sir Grayson apologized in a tight voice even as he was wading past the royal heir to jump into the fray himself. "I'll put an end to this right now!"

But before he could take even another step, Shahdow took care of the situation for himself. When Reginhald tar Pettybohne let out his cry of pain and dropped his practice sword in the dirt, every eye in the Honor Garden turned to see what had happened; every eye but Reginhald's, who's angry glare melted to horror as he looked up to see the Arms Master glowering at him.

"There'll be a price to pay for that," Sir Grahson snapped, and he wasn't just referring to the sword laying in the dirt either. And he was about to expound on his comment when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"But not until later, right?" Prince Juhstice asked lightly, giving the Arms Master's shoulder a comradely squeeze. "At the moment they all need to be focused on the task at hand, wouldn't you agree...and I believe it's time for the open sparring session. Isn't that right, Sir Grahson?"

The Master at Arms gave him a disbelieving look, then asked in a soft voice that only the prince could hear. "Are sure, Your Highness?"

Juhstice gave a shrug and replied just as quietly. "No...but the boy's made it this far, I'd hate to rob him of his chance to finish the day."

“I wouldn’t bet a shaved copper that he will,” Sir Grahson muttered under his breath, but apparently still loud enough for the prince to hear.

Juhstice, who wasn’t much of a drinking *or* gambling man, smiled and asked, “What about a tankard...? I say the boy will not only finish the session but score a dozen hits before it’s over.”

“Respectfully, Your Highness...” Sir Grahson replied. “I think *you* must have taken a sharper blow to the head than I remember giving you, but since it’s your fault that I’m feeling so parched right now, I’ll happily take that bet.” Then turning back to his waiting students, he bellowed out, “Open sparring...you’ve got ten minutes to prove your mantel. Count your marks and tallies aloud, and as always, the losers get to stay behind to clean the garden while the winners go home to brag about their exploits. Ready...*begin!*”

With his back to the Arms Master, Sir Grahson’s command caught Shahdow completely by surprise. Fortunately, Reginhald was still in the process of reclaiming his sword when the order came. Even so, the bigger boy came up swinging, his embarrassment and anger fueling a flurry of blows that Shahdow just did manage to fend off—most of them anyway—Reginhald still ended up calling out, “*Mark one*” and “*Mark two*”, during the first volley. But by frantically skipping backwards at every stroke to maintain some distance between them, Shahdow somehow managed to survive the first frantic minute. By then his opponent’s relentless barrage began to wind down as Reginhald’s embarrassment fueled adrenaline played its way out.

There are defining moments in life; a wobbly legged baby lets go of the chair it’s been clinging to and takes its first faltering steps across the floor, a young child looking at a page filled with squiggly marks suddenly sees them come together and transform themselves into the word, “apple”. Within nature it can be even more drastic; though we rarely even pause to consider the metamorphosized caterpillar breaking free of its cocoon to finally spread its wings. Shahdow made another last instant parry, just barely preventing Reginhald from walloping him upside the head again, but this time his movements were so desperate and disjointed that his block was more of a swing and the two swords came together with a sharp crack. Reginhald didn’t let out another cry of pain or drop his sword again, but the impact drew a grunt as the taller boy took his first retreating step backward.

He’s still hurting, Shahdow realized with amazement. *If only I could do that again.*

The moment stirred a not so distant memory. It was during one of his first sessions on lifting, under Finger’s exacting tutelage, that the Hand’s lieutenant had barked at him, “Late again! I swear child, a blind man could do better than you.” Shahdow had actually been feeling good about his performance at that point. While it was true that he had been a little slow at snatching his practice partner’s—the *princess*’, purse out from under her cloak, he *had* gotten it—if *not exactly cleanly*, and he’d been succeeding that evening more often than not. But Finger’s was far from satisfied and he’d continued his scathing critique within moments of his pupil’s next attempt. “Mother’s mustache...*where are your eyes, boy?*”

Shahdow turned to look at the senior thief with bewilderment. “Watching her purse...?”

“Exactly,” Fingers shook his head with exasperation. “Which became worse than a waste of time the moment you spotted it. Once you know where it is, it’s time to focus on where it’s *going* to be. Then instead of having to make a rushed grab you can let the berry walk it right into your waiting hand.”

Shahdow had immediately grasped what Fingers was saying and from that point on he’d never fumbled another lift. What he *hadn’t* done was apply that same strategy to other parts of his life—until that moment he hadn’t realized he needed to be anticipating Reginhald’s actions

instead of reacting to them after they were already in motion. Shahdow forced his eye away from the wooden sword assailing him where they'd been riveted, to take a wider view of the boy gripping its hilt, thinking, *You're just another berry, so show me where you need picking.*

Reginhald shifted his weight to his left foot while his right elbow bent and pulled slightly away from his body—it was a move he'd made dozens of times before and each time... Shahdow went from analyzing to reacting in an instant, snapping his own blade up in a sweeping arch that caught Reginhald's sword before it even had a chance to start its descent. The move was made with so much more force and decisiveness than his earlier parries that it sent a jolt through both boy's arms. Reginhald couldn't help a yelp issuing from his lips, while involuntarily he jerked his injured wrist back in pain. Shahdow had anticipated that too; stepping forward, he stabbed the blunted tip of his practice sword out to impact the other boy's suddenly unguarded chest. A belated moment later he remembered to call out, "Mark one!"

Shahdow scoring a hit against him, even more than the pain from their previous exchange, caused Reginhald's usually smooth and sure strokes to falter. Off balance—physically and mentally, the older boy fell into a stumbling retreat as Shahdow's newfound confidence gave him a surge of energy that he transformed into a relentless assault. In short order instead of being two marks down, the Honor Garden's newest student found himself leading the match as he quickly counted off, "Mark two...three...and four", after finishing off a successful triple slash, thrust, thrust combination that until that point he'd never tried out on anything but a stationary evergreen tree.

Reginhald lurched back from the final hit—a hard jab to his midsection that partially knocked the wind out of him, and stood there gasping for breath while regarding his smaller opponent with disbelief.

"Halfway point," Sir Grahson's baritone voice rang out and all activity came to a sudden stop as the dueling pairs dropped out of their stances to take a much needed—if abbreviated break.

The *point* of the halfway point actually wasn't to let the combatants regain their strength; at least not nearly so much as allowing them to consider how their encounters had been going so they could make some much needed adjustments. Here and there, members of Sir Grahson's staff of senior knights would even approach a boy to show him a finer point on something he'd been struggling with during the initial phase of the sparring session. Interestingly, no one came near either the group's newest member or his much more experienced partner. That might have been because the other knights realized that the Arms Master *and* the crown prince were both watching the pair keenly, and surely if they thought something needed done they would do it; it was also possible that the other knights hadn't stepped in because they believed the boys would be able to correct their own weak areas. In any event, a few short minutes later, Sir Grahson gave another shout, "Ready...resume!"

There was no official ranking of the students within their respective groups, but most of them and the staff would have ranked Reginhald far Pettybohne at the top of his class. Not only was he naturally gifted physically, but he was also a good and dedicated student; one who listened carefully to his instructors and took their lessons to heart—*usually*. The halfway point break gave him an opportunity to realize he'd been failing miserably at that from the moment he'd volunteered to be match up against the castle's chamber pot cleaner. After all, who needed swordsman skills against a lowborn servant?

You do! Reginhald chided himself silently. *And if you don't shape up quickly you're going to lose to this little wretch and in the process turn yourself into the laughing stock of the entire castle.*

Thus were Reginhald's thoughts as he fought to regain his breath and his composure in the interval between the two parts of the Open Sparring session. By the time the Master at Arms gave the recommencement order, he knew exactly what he needed to do—it was the first thing Sir Grahson made all of his students memorize on day one of their training, *Treat every single one of your opponents as if you're facing the greatest swordsman to ever draw a blade*. And that's what Reginhald did.

Shahdow realized within moments—that's how long it took Reginhald to call out, "Mark three", that things had changed during the break in activities. Anticipating where the other boy's blade was going to be was like trying to guess which way the wind would blow from the inside of a tornado. Reginhald's sword was everywhere, and at the same time nowhere as the older boy suddenly started using more feints and double-feints than he did thrusts or slashes—and even those were disguised to look like something else, and *never* landed in the spot it seemed they would. From the outset, Shahdow was back to scrambling away and throwing up desperate parries, to that point his best defense—forget about even trying to do anything offensively, was to stay out of Reginhald's reach.

What can I do, Shahdow asked himself. *He's so fast and...?* And what? Precise...that was a good word for it. It was a term he'd looked up in his book after one of his lifter training sessions. Fingers said it was a crucial aspect of lifting, that if he'd been more precise when he'd been Shahdow's age he'd still be able to count to ten without pulling off his boots. And the only way to become precise was through repetition...practice, practice and more practice. Shahdow believed that and applied it to his lifting—and his own self-initiated swordsmanship lessons, but if Reginhald's precision came through the same means...why were his movements so unpredictable? And the answer came to him. They weren't unpredictable...just incredibly complex; like trying to do a double purse lift in broad daylight on a man sitting down with his back to a wall. Something like that took the combined—and coordinated efforts of at least a lifter and shifter, and throwing in a second lifter and basher wasn't a bad idea either. *But it all still had to be precise, meaning practice—and therefore somewhat predictable*.

Shahdow forced himself to stop reacting to every weight shift and elbow and knee flex while going back to throwing up last second parries—that sometimes even worked, while studying his opponent in a whole new light, trying to link Reginhald's movements together. Theoretically—a word he'd picked up from Ohrder and that he liked very much, the random feints, thrusts and slashes weren't random after all. And if they were in fact linked together in some way, by doing what he did best—*watching*, eventually he should once again be able to anticipate some of Reginhald's moves. Eventually took a while. Every time he thought he might have an inkling of what the other boy was doing, and dared to try a thrust of his own, Reginhald's blade intercepted it with ease, and each time the Royal Steward's son was able to call off another successful mark immediately after. It wasn't just perplexing, it was maddening, and Shahdow, who almost never lost his temper, felt frustration fueled anger start to rise within him.

I might as well toss my sword on the ground, he thought bitterly as he frantically ducked below Reginhald's latest attack, a sweeping slash aimed at his left ear. *He seems to know where I'm going to put it even before I do*.

The truth of that dawned on Shahdow the instant the thought entered his head. What he'd been striving so hard to do with Reginhald, Reginhald was already doing with him—he was reading Shahdow's moves and reacting to them almost before he could make them. Shahdow's thrusts and slashes were routinely turned aside and his parries had become nothing more than targets that Reginhald battered aside to get him off balance.

If only I were Prince Juhstice, Shahdow lamented silently. *He's so good he doesn't even need to parry*. No, as he recalled the earlier encounter between the prince and Arms Master, he realized that wasn't true. The Prince did parry, whenever he absolutely had to, but most of the time he simply leaned or stepped out of the way—*while his sword was busy doing other things than blocking—deadly things*. At least they would have been deadly if Prince Juhstice had been wielding a real sword. But Reginhald wasn't using a real sword either, so as reckless as the tactic seemed, what did he really have to lose?

Reginhald's next attack, a lunging thrust aimed at Shahdow's left shoulder, came after a double feint. It was one of the combinations Shahdow was becoming familiar with, and recognizing it, he let the feints go by unchecked, then when Reginhald's blade flashed towards him, instead of bringing his own sword up to parry, he turned sideways. His move worked better than anticipated since the momentum he gained by dodging instead of blocking naturally brought his own sword up and around in a sweeping arch that impacted heavily with Reginhald's exposed left bicep.

Reginhald tar Pettybohne let out a surprised grunt of pain as Shahdow called out, "Mark five."

Twice more in rapid succession Shadow was able to slip aside Reginhald's advances and bring his blade to bear before his opponent could recover. His triumphant cries of, "Mark six" and "Mark seven", brought a scowl to Reginhald's face, but unlike earlier when the older boy had let his tempter get the better of him, this time Reginhald took two very purposeful steps back and just stood there studying Shahdow for several long seconds. Finally, as if he'd come to some deep and enlightening conclusion, he gave a firm nod and stepped forward again with sword raised.

The battle recommenced, but it was nothing like it had been previously where Reginhald had been the fervent aggressor forcing Shahdow into a constant retreat. Reginhald remained on the attack—for the most part, but at a much more deliberate pace...and never overextending as he had earlier. That kept Shahdow from being able to just dodge and counter, but it also allowed him to make some offensive moves of his own, and as time went by, he was able to make more and more of them. Both boys scored marks here and there, but as time wore on the contest had largely become an exercise in stamina, which, because of his larger size and all the time he'd spent in the Honor Garden, began to weigh in Reginhald's favor.

"*Time!*" Sir Grahson called out a few minutes later and Shahdow, who was visibly panting by that point, gratefully lowered his sword. Reginhald, though he wasn't obviously winded, still looked quite relieved to do the same.

"Winners you're free to go," the Master at Arms loud enough to fill the Honor Garden with his gravelly voice. "Losers, there's plenty of cleaning and polishing to be done before you can do the same."

Shahdow had been a spectator in the Honor Garden enough times to know what was expected of him—the final tally between him and Reginhald had been thirteen to eighteen, but before he could join the other *losers*, Sir Grahson and Prince Juhstice came sauntering over.

"That was quite a match," the Arms Master casually noted, then he nodded at Reginhald. "I think it's time we moved you up to the next level."

Reginhald got a surprised look on his face, which he quickly wiped away, replacing it with a stern expression as he said, "Thank you, Your Lordship, I'll do my best to make you not regret it."

“I’ve no doubt about that,” Sir Grahson replied before turning to look at Shahdow. “Grow a few more inches and we’ll do the same for you...have you ever picked up a sword before today, boy?”

“No, sir,” Shahdow answered, then his already ruddy face flushed even more as he confessed. “Not a real one...or even a practice one like this anyway...but I do tryout some of the things I’ve see here when I’m out in the forest sometimes...I use a branch for a sword when I do that.”

Sir Grahson gave a laugh and looked at the prince. “Maybe, sire, we should move everybody outside. Apparently a forest makes a better training ground than our Honor Garden.”

The prince chuckled. “You may have a point. Perhaps we’ll discuss it over that tankard of ale you owe me.” His smile disappeared then as he turned to look at Shahdow. “You did well. So well that I’m confident that if you continue your training, one day a knight you shall be.”

Shahdow was so shocked by the prince’s words that his jaw dropped open while he stood there like a deaf mute, too stunned to speak. In fact, he was so overcome that breathing had become difficult.

“But until that day comes, and you are raised as a knight of the realm,” Prince Juhstice continued. “You must give me your vow that you will not take up arms against another. The skills you learn here must only be used to serve the kingdom...and only after the time arrives when you are judged worthy to do so.” He paused and gave Shahdow a probing look. “Do I have your promise on that?”

As much as he wanted to say yes, Shahdow’s chin dropped and he slowly shook his head. “No, Your Highness, I can’t promise you that.”

“Why not?” the prince asked with surprise.

“Because if the princess were to ever be in danger before that day came, I’d have to break my vow,” the boy replied miserably. “I promised myself I’d never let anything happen to her, no matter what it took to protect her.”

The prince stood there speechless for a few seconds, then he turned to look at Sir Grahson. “It seems they teach oath taking better in the forest too.” With a wry chuckle, he reached out and clasped Shahdow’s shoulder affectionately. “Well said, and I’ll hold you to it. But for now, I believe you’ve got some cleaning and polishing waiting for you, so I won’t detain you any further. Maybe tomorrow you’ll be one of the ones who doesn’t have to stay behind.”

“I’ll try my best, Your Highness,” Shahdow assured him while giving a deeper bow than required of someone still holding a sword. “I’ll always give my best...I *can* promise you that.”

Then he was gone, scampering off so quickly that he was out of earshot by the time Juhstice quietly replied—mostly to himself. “I have doubt about that...none what-so-ever.”

Later, after the sun was set and most everyone inside the castle and beyond its walls were settling down for the evening, the long corridor leading to the royal chambers had an unexpected visitor. Unexpected because he usually only appeared there in the mornings. Shahdow stood facing the intricate tapestry that had hung on the wall for generations and let his eyes drift across its foreboding landscape as he’d done countless times before. But this time was different than all those others; this time he was seeing it in a whole new light. If you could see a sword stroke coming in time to block it or get out of its way—why couldn’t you do the same for other dangers that came your way?

“You’re never going to go into a cage...I won’t let that happen,” Shahdow spoke the words quietly, but with a fervency that seemed to reverberate off the cold stone walls. It was bravely

spoken, and a vow worthy of even the most senior members of the Honor Garden—though naïve in the extreme. You see the tapestry, though being only a hand-sewn image, was a depiction of a scene out of prophesy. And prophesies—*true prophesies*, though they are specifically designed to forecast coming events, can never be parried or dodged. What will be, will be. The only real and pertinent questions surrounding them are the details of how they will play out, and...*when?*