

Chapter Fourteen

The Honor Garden

The next day Prince Juhstice was still fuming over his encounter with Dougerty. And, as was his wont whenever he was in a fouler mood than any foul wind that blew his way, he made his way to the '*Honor Garden*'—so named centuries before by a former Arms Master because, "*That's where honorable knights are grown*". Ehlsewhere's current Master at Arms, Sir Grahson, had the '*pleasure*' of helping the prince work through his frustration by crossing swords with him. The position of Master at Arms was one of the few in the kingdom that couldn't be handed down father to son, or procured through showing exceptional '*loyalty*'—financial support, to the kingdom. No, the only way to become the reigning Master at Arms was to be the mightiest swordsman in the land—with two very important distinctions. Firstly, the King's Golden Arm couldn't also hold the position of Arms Master—though many throughout the centuries had still maintain a firm grip on the events happening with the Honor Garden after being promoted from one to the other. And secondly, and more germane to the moment; you couldn't have royal blood flowing through your veins. It just wouldn't do for a royal to have something so base as a '*job*', even if it was one of the most respected one in the kingdom.

That's what Sir Grahson kept reminding himself as Prince Juhstice continued to batter him around the practice field, *There is no shame in losing to a better swordsman*. They were on their third lap with the Arms Master breathing heavy while being bathed in sweat while his opponent looked as fresh as if he was taking a Moonday stroll. It could have worse. If they had been using real swords the moisture covering the Arms Master would have been bright red—and there would have been a lot more of it. Still, there was nothing for it but to keep swatting aside the

prince's thrusts and slashes to the best of his ability, though the only real good it was doing him was that if he put up a strong enough fight then maybe, just maybe, he wouldn't have to face a dozen new challenges for his position from the other knights who'd assembled to watch the proceedings. That was the real rub. Every time Prince Juhstice decided he needed a *real* workout, Sir Grahson came away looking like little more than a bumbling farmer picking up a sword for the first time in his life, and *then* he ended up spending the next week proving that he wasn't.

In truth, the match wasn't quite as lopsided as it might seem. Had it been a real battle the prince would still be winning—likely would have already won it, but he wouldn't have been unscathed by any means. And sensing that he was nearing the end of his strength, Sir Grahson decided to go out with a flourish—*literally*. The tricky part of that was he needed to start with a strong parry; a good enough one to put the prince off balance for the barest of moments. Sadly, the only way to ensure that would happen in the next few minutes—which was about all he had left in him, was to let his guard appear to falter even more than it already was. Given the state of things, that wasn't hard to do. The prince reacted instantly, sweeping his blade in for a vicious slash with his full weight behind it, which knocked Grahson's sword completely out of position, then allowing the recoil from his blow to perfectly poise him for a killing thrust.

Except the thrust was deflected—not by Sir Grahson's sword, but by the metal bracer on his left wrist. And he didn't use it to block either, but pushed his arm forward, sliding the bracer along the length of Prince Juhstice's blade until the two men were standing nearly toe to toe. A trained swordsman's every instinct is too always ensure he has enough room between himself and his opponent to deploy all his tactics, so, predictably, the prince threw himself backwards, attempting to bring his sword up into a blocking position for the thrust he assumed was coming. It was a perfectly executed maneuver—had Sir Grahson's sword still been in his right hand, but

the moment the prince had broken contact the Arm's Master had brought his hands together just long enough to transfer his weapon. That, since his left leg was already in the lead position, instantly gave him an extra three feet of reach without have to make a lung forward which prince would have had time to parry. All the was needed was for him to raise his arm upward, which he did, sipping his blade past Juhstice's own sword until it's tip rested against the prince's exposed neck. At the same instant he felt pressure against the left side of his chest.

"So, shall we call it a draw then?" Juhstice asked, lowering his sword. "Interesting move you made there at the end...I'm not sure how I could have countered it."

Sir Grahson let out a weary laugh, then reached up to massage the spot over his heart where the prince's sword tip had rested a moment before. "I believe you did, Your Highness."

"I meant while still being amongst the living myself," the prince rejoined cheerfully. "In any event, I thank you. That was a sterling workout, and just what I needed to start off my day. I look forward to our next contest."

"Yes, as do I," Sir Grahson politely lied.

"I wish you a good day then," Juhstice told the Master at Arms, thinking as he did that he was feeling a lot better about the day. Sir Grahson gave him the abbreviated bow appropriate to a man under arms and the prince was about to turn to leave when he spotted a familiar but unexpected face in the crowd that had been watching the bout. Instead of exiting the Honor Garden, he found himself beckoning to the boy who only hours before had stood the entire kingdom on its head. Shahdow's eyes went wide when he saw the prince motioning him over, but after only a moment's hesitation he came shuffling forward.

“What are you doing here?” the prince asked, then remembering the turmoil that was swirling about the boy, and that his question could easily be taken wrong, he added, “Not that you shouldn’t be...I’m just curious.”

Shahdow didn’t respond right away; in fact he mulled his response over for a good while before finally coming up with *an* answer. “I like to watch the knights practice.”

While obviously not the complete story, Juhstice thought he could guess at the rest—what young boy *didn’t* want to grow up to be a knight in shining armor someday? He could still remember the excitement of *his* first time not just being a spectator in the Honor Garden, but actually being able to participate. As a prince that was inevitable. For the castle’s chamber pot cleaner, a commoner, it was an impossible dream—or *it should have been*.

“Would you like to do more than watch?” Juhstice asked.

His answer came in the form of a complete look of astonishment, which was immediately followed by staccato head bobbing. “Yes, Your Highness,” Shahdow blurted out, suddenly no longer shy. “I would like that very much!”

“Sir Grahson, I leave him in your capable hands,” the prince turned and nodded to his practice partner.

Sir Grahson hesitate only a moment at receiving the unexpected requested, then bowed to his prince and led his new charge away. It was a short journey, just across the practice field to a spot where the youngest of Ehlsewhere’s nobles were gathered, going through their lessons. They were sectioned into three groups, mostly by age, but skill level was the true determining factor. The Arms Master approached the smallest group—height wise. Being the least experienced of the gathered students they were all of them several years younger than Shahdow, but since he was somewhat undersized for his age, the disparity between he and the others wasn’t all that

noticeable. What you couldn't miss was that they were all broken into pairs working through their lessons together. And since there were an even dozen of them, that left Shahdow as the odd boy out. But that didn't seem to bother Sir Grahson in the least.

"Fetch a sword from the bin," the Arms Master said, indicating a repurposed barrel with a number of wooden sword hilts sprouting out the top of it. "Pick one that's got some weight to it, but not so much that you'll have a hard time maneuvering it."

Obediently, Shahdow ran over and began to pull one sword out after another, testing each one according to the knight's instruction. Not only did they vary in weight, but there was an assortment of lengths to choose from too. Sir Grahson hadn't said anything about that, but Shahdow settled on one that was of medium length because it just felt better than the rest as he was waving it around to get the heft of it. When he carried back over to the Master at Arms, Sir Grahson gave an approving nod.

"Good choice," the knight told him. "I prefer dexterity over reach myself."

That gave Shahdow a new word he'd have to look up later, but he accepted the praise with a smile. Which became a look of rapt concentration a moment later when Sir Grahson told him, "Now let's see what you can do with it."

"First, we need to teach the proper grip..." the Arms Master began, but before the words were even out of his mouth, Shahdow had repositioned his right hand on the practice sword's hilt so the upper side of the pommel aligned perfectly with his wrist, which he held firmly, but not too tightly, as if he and the sword were shaking hands. He didn't stop there either; even as the hilt was still settling into place, he set his feet shoulder width apart with his right foot forward with most of his weight over it, but without giving up his center of gravity. "...and...yes that's a good one, and well done with your stance too."

“I’ve been watching,” Shahdow explained. Now, the word watching to him didn’t necessarily mean that same thing as it would to most people. Because most people grew up having not just someone, but many someone’s, around them; mothers, fathers, instructors, and even other children to teach them all sorts of the things. Until a certain talking book came along, the *only* reliable way for the pot boy to learn anything was to watch how others did it. Watching itself is a skill, and a sadly neglected one for most people, but it was one that Shahdow had honed to perfection.

“I can see that,” Sir Grahson nodded. He then started running the boy through all the elemental stances and movements the beginner class members were still working to perfect. In each case Shahdow executed them flawlessly. What the Arms Master had no way of knowing was that not only had the boy been watching the knights and future knights in the Honor Garden for *years*, but that he’d also been going to the forest to practice what he’d seen for several hours each week. His diligence had obviously paid off because rather than waste any more time, Sir Grahson gave a shrug and walked his new pupil over to the intermediate group.

Before, Shahdow had been slightly taller than the rest of the boys, but he suddenly found himself looking up at everyone. He recognized a number of them—those whose families resided within the castle; he’d been emptying their chamber pots for years. Of course, they recognized him too, as was evidenced by the curious looks he got—along with a few sour ones. Princess Chahrity’s belief that *everyone* loved the pot boy wasn’t entirely correct. One of the students who happened to also be the biggest of the lot gave Shahdow a particularly menacing glare. But that wasn’t surprising, Reginhald tar Pettybohne, the Royal Steward’s son, gave him an especially hateful glare—but that was nothing new. Reginhald was also known to try to trip up someone who’s arms were loaded down with full chamber pots upon occasion.

“Here now,” Sir Grahson barked, making everyone lower their practice swords and turn his way. “It’s time to switch it up...attackers, it’s your turn to parry and vice versa. And we’ve got a new lad joining us. Can I get a volunteer to put him through the paces?”

While everyone else was still digesting the request, Reginhald’s arm shot up like it had been launched out of a catapult. “I’d be happy to take him on, My Lord.”

“Right then, off you go,” Sir Grahson said, giving his newest pupil a gentle nudge. But being the burly swordsman that he was—and the fact that the boy suddenly wasn’t as enthusiastic as he had been, Shahdow almost ended up face down on the turf. While he managed to avoid that, his stumbling lurch forward resulted in the tip of his sword being drug through the dirt. And while it was only a practice sword carved out of wood, that was a breach of etiquette of the highest degree. A knight’s weapons, with their finely honed edges, where *never* to be treated like some farmer’s hoe.

A muffled gasp erupted from the crowd and Shahdow turned to look back at the Arms Master with chagrin. Sir Grahson frowned and crossed his arms across his chest and said, “There’ll be a price to pay for that...*later*. For now, focus on your task. Reginhald, let him have the choice of attack or parry to start off.”

“Certainly, My Lord,” Reginhald replied, giving the Master at Arms a formal bow. But the moment his new partner joined him, he whispered through gritted teeth. “You just chose to parry...and that price Sir Grahson mentioned...it starts *now!*”

“Begin,” Shahdow’s back was to Sir Grahson but he’d been anticipating the command and quickly brought his wooden sword up to attempt to block Reginhald’s—which eventually came, just me, just much slower and with much less force behind it than you might imagine. Reginhald,

who was facing the Arms Master, realized he and his partner were being closely watched—for *the moment*. Shahdow countered a pair of thrusts and a slow arching slash, clumsily, but without much trouble. Reginhald wore a vacant smile; graphed there for the benefit of the Arms Master as he lazily went about ‘*attacking*’ his opponent’s defenses. Even so, it was all Shahdow could do to keep up. While he had watched the Honor Garden’s students practice their parrying skills just like everything else they did, his own self-imposed practice sessions in the forest had lacked in that department. As active as his imagination could get, it never managed to bring the pine warriors he battled to life enough for them to actually swing their needle encrusted swords at him. Given that, though it certainly wasn’t his intent, Reginhald was acting the perfect partner to help Shahdow get his defensive footing under him. Five minutes later, Shahdow was actually starting to think that parrying wasn’t such a difficult task at all—and then Sir Grahson decided it was time to go check on one of the other groups.

Reginhald made another slow, deliberate thrust, except when Shahdow lifted his blade up to sweep it aside, there was nothing there. Suddenly, Reginhald was a blur of motion; his wooden sword moving too fast for Shahdow’s eyes to keep up, let alone his own sword to try and counter what was happening. Try he did, but in the space of ten seconds he’d taken a dozen blows from the hard wooden edge or rounded tip of his adversary’s weapon. If they had been using real swords, Shahdow would have been dead after Reginhald’s first real volley. As bad as things were, they took a drastic turn a moment later when Reginhald abandoned all pretense of simply trying to get his thrusts and sweeps past Shahdow’s parries to score a hit—which is what the drill called for, and focused with all his might to do as much damage as possible with each blow he landed. The first such instance left Shahdow seeing stars as the side of the older boy’s blade smacked viciously against his left temple.

Shahdow staggered back and shook his head trying to clear it while somehow managing to stifle the cry that wanted come off his lips as he did. Reginhald sprang forward immediately, raising his arm on high with the intent of bringing a crashing blow down on top of Shahdow's head. If it had landed it might have ended their session; instead of seeing more stars, Shahdow likely wouldn't have seen anything but blackness. But the expanded distance between them and the rush of adrenalin for the last hit he'd taken gave Shahdow the time and ability to do what he'd been trying unsuccessfully to accomplish for the last five minutes—he finally got his blade to make contact. Instead of just bringing his sword up to block the descending blow, Shahdow swung his arm in an arch of its own, and his target wasn't Reginhald's wooden sword, it was the boy's exposed wrist—unlike the Arms Master, Reginhald wasn't wearing bracers. There came a loud crack—and a cry of anguish, followed a moment later by the soft thud of Reginhald's sword impacting the turf.