

## Chapter Eighteen

### Uncommon

“How can you say that?” Shahdow found himself wondering if he’d even heard correctly. If anything he was surely the most common commoner of all since he didn’t even have a family or a home, and he said as much to Reginhald.

“That’s all I used to see too,” the other boy shrugged. “Just a lowborn boy who empties chamber pots and sleeps in a stable. But then I took another look. Shahdow, you can claim the prince and princess of the realm as your companions, and you casually ask favors of the Royal Wizard...who most people dare not even speak to.”

“I wouldn’t be so bold as to say Princess Chahrity and Prince Juhstice are my companions...that makes it sound like we’re friends,” Shahdow protested. “I *do* things for them occasionally, but that’s really the extent of it.”

“For them or *with* them?” Reginhald gave him a probing look. “And as far as occasionally goes, from what I’ve seen and heard, you’re at the princess’ side nearly every day. Isn’t that why everyone calls you Shahdow now?”

Rather than automatically throwing up another blind parry, Shahdow stopped to consider Reginhald’s words. He had to admit they had some merit to them; however, there was one glaring detail he’d obviously overlooked. “I agree I do get to do things most nobles never will, but I’m *not* a noble.”

“One day a knight you shall *be*...” Reginhald quoted. “Isn’t that what Prince Juhstice told you on your *first* day of training? Well, you may not be aware of it, but *all* knights are nobles. Or, as my grandfather likes to put it, *they are the very pinnacle of our nobility*. And he said that *after* my father was named the Royal Steward.”

“Your father’s not a knight?” Shahdow asked with wonder.

“No, he went through the training like all boys from noble families do, but he never progressed beyond the second echelon,” Reginhald said matter of factly. “According to him, he’s more suited to the pen than the sword, which *he* claims is mightier.”

“So, you believe that Prince Juhstice saying I’ll be a knight one day means I’m a noble?” Shahdow asked doubtfully.

Reginhald gave a decisive nod. “If not now, some day.”

“Unless I fail out like your father did,” the mere thought sent a jolt of fear through him. In the back of his mind, Shahdow must have known that not all of those in training continued on until they became knights. But since the day Prince Juhstice had invited him to join the Honor Garden, he’d been counting on the skills he would be learning there to enable him to save the princess. Remembering the vow he’d made the last time he’d stopped to study the lizard tapestry he wasn’t sure if he should laugh or cry for being such a prideful fool.

Reginhald *did* laugh. “*You*, fail? It’s more likely you’ll be the Golden Arm someday.”

“Are you teasing with me,” for a moment Shahdow feared Reginhald had returned to his hurtful ways.

“No!” Reginhald gave another laugh. “Shahdow, I’ve been training with the sword for almost five years. And I promise you, I *will* be a knight someday. But you picked one up only a month ago and today you bested me.”

“Only because I got in a desperate, last minute combination,” Shahdow reminded him.

"I remember," Reginhald gave him an searching look. "And where did you learn that combination?"

"Ah..." Shahdow replayed the moment in his mind while he struggled to find the words to answer the question.

"You *didn't* learn it," Reginhald answered for him. "At least not from anyone in the Honor Garden. You completely opened up your left side with that move...something that's drilled into us *never* to do. But you did it knowing that from the position I was in there was no way for me to exploit your weakness. I had no more chance of doing that than I did of evading your unexpected attack. And if you can already do things like that...things no one else even thinks about trying, what will you be like ten years from now? There won't be a swordsman in the realm who will even think of challenging you."

Now, ordinarily, such strong praise, especially to someone so young, might lead to prideful thoughts and an inflated ego. And that might well have been the case if the recipient had been focused on his own interests. Shahdow's thoughts ran along a different line. *But what if it's not a man you have to battle? And what if a sword won't even hurt the thing you're fighting?"*

Of course he couldn't voice those concerns to Reginhald, not at that early stage of their relationship. Instead, he deflected the other boys complements with some of his own. "I think it's more likely you'll be the Golden Arm someday. I've seen how hard you push yourself to get better each day."

"I do," Reginhald said solemnly, but then he grinned. "So that I can be the Master at Arms after Sir Grahson retires. *I* plan to spend my days in the Honor Garden with other knights rather than milling about the Royal Court pandering to the kings every whim as *you're* destined to do."

"I think I'd rather keep emptying chamber pots than do that," Shahdow said forlornly, making both boys start to laughing uncontrollably.

Sometime later, after leisurely working their way through the city, and stopping at a vender's cart to purchase a mug of cider and a wedge of pumpkin pie for each of them, they arrived at the city gate and passed through it. Shahdow had planned for them to hurry their way across the open area separating the castle from the forest, but the manmade meadow with its lush grass was teeming with deer. There must have been over a hundred of them, and while that was nothing new to Shahdow, Reginhald pulled up and just stood there staring at them with amazement.

"Would you just look at *that* one," he said, pointing out at a buck whose antlers rose more than three feet above his head, with almost too many tines to count.

For the first time in a long time, Shahdow did just that, and found himself wondering how he could have ever taken such a beautiful sight for granted. From that point onward there was no thought of hurrying. Whenever Reginhald discovered something new to marvel at they would pause and Shahdow made sure he marveled at it too, anew. Once they made it into the forest, using a path Shahdow had used more times than he could remember, the wildlife and flora and fauna was so varied they spent more time stopping and looking than walking.

"How come there aren't hundreds of people out here enjoying this?" Reginhald said a while later as he shook his head sadly. "Why would anyone spend their day in the city...or the castle, when they've got this waiting for them?"

"I don't know?" Shahdow gave a shrug. "I come out here every chance I get. But, it's rare that I see anyone else. Maybe it's because this is the king's forest. Nobody can live here or even forage or hunt."

"That seems a shame," Reginhald commented. "But still, just being here is treat enough."

Shahdow certainly agreed with that. “Wait until you see what’s up ahead. I think it’s my favorite spot in the whole world.”

That raised Reginhald’s eyebrows. “I don’t want to wait...lead on, good sir,”

They did hurry then; just a little bit. But there wasn’t all that much to see anyway because the place they were going was at the heart of the forest, causing the path to narrow as the trees and underbrush created virtual walls on either side of them. It was the same route that would eventually take them to the ancient stump, but that wasn’t their destination. Shahdow was thoroughly enjoying Reginhald’s company; he just wasn’t quite ready to share *everything* about his life with the other boy. When they reached the fork in the trail that would take them there, Shahdow was about to turn onto it when Reginhald, who was behind him, gave a shout.

“Stop!” he called out. And Shahdow did, after stumbling forward a few more steps. Then, because the unexpected cry had caused him to turn and look back over his shoulder suddenly, his toe had caught a rock, causing him to have to windmill his arms wildly to keep from landing on his face.

“What is it?” asked, looking back at Reginhald with concern once he’d regained his footing.

“Ah...I...” with an expression of utter befuddlement on his face, Reginhald was staring over Shahdow’s shoulder at the gap in the foliage the trail ran into. “For a moment there I thought you were about to walk into a huge thorn bush, and...”

“And what?” Shahdow prompted.

Nothing, it was just a trick of shadows, everything is just so thick in here.” Reginhald answered, though he didn’t sound all that convincing.

The truth was he *had* seen a monstrous thorn bush blocking the path. And the sense he’d had that it was a *hungry* thorn bush was accurate too—as far as what the creator of the illusion had wanted it to portray. But the moment Shahdow—who had no idea it was even there, stepped close to it, Ohrder’s magical ward had vanished as if had never existed; just as it always did whenever he came near; which was something the wizard would have said was impossible since illusion spells either worked or they didn’t as far as he knew.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen a thorn bush out here,” Shahdow observed with shrug. “I’m sure there are somewhere, but even though the path gets narrower from here on out, it’s a good trail.”

Reginhald gave the gap in the foliage a critical frown, but a moment later he nodded and they resumed their journey. Ten minutes later, after taking another fork in the trail—an unwarded one, the trees and undergrowth opened up, letting the boys walked into a small clearing whose dominate feature was a lily pad covered pond with a small stream running through it. It was a magical place—a different kind of magical than the spell that had tried to block their finding it, and Shahdow liked to think he was the only who even knew it existed—he was almost right too.

“There’s a sandy shore on the other side where we can go wading if we want,” Shahdow exclaimed with excitement. “And there’s different kinds of fish in there too...and turtles and frogs...”

“Do they bite?” Reginhald asked worriedly.

“*The fish?*” Shahdow gave him a puzzled look.

“Any of them, actually,” Reginhald said distractedly, looking past Shahdow to frown at the pond.

“I did have my thumb bit by a turtle once,” Shahdow confessed. “But that’s only because I picked him up and tried to rub his nosed with it.”

“*Why would you ever do that?*” the boy who’d never ventured past the city gates before asked.

“Why *wouldn't* you?” Shahdow laughed, but then he reached out and gave Reginhald's shoulder a friendly clasp. “Come on, there's really nothing to worry about, you're going to love this place. I promise.”

It was a promise that Shahdow kept, though it took some time for Reginhald's concerns to wilt away enough for him to see the utter beauty the pond and its myriad of plants and creatures had to offer. What turned the tide in that direction more than anything was seeing a family of otters at play in the shallows of the pond.

“They're like kittens fighting over a ball of yarn,” Reginhald laughed. The otter's ball of yarn was actually a hapless fresh water mussel who would eventually morph from being a plaything into dinner. “Only wet...and much crazier.”

The otters weren't the only ones to get wet and crazy that afternoon. It turns out even accomplished swordsmen—or swordboys in this case, with their lightning quick reflexes, are no match for a speckled trout when said fish's freedom and life is on the line. Even so, the boys had so much fun *attempting* to catch them that the otters stopped to watch *them*. There were other wondrous adventures at the pond too; Reginhald had never skipped a stone before—which Shahdow had learned at an early age from a bored soldier of The Watch standing guard near the castle moat. And the most favorite thing of all, turning over rocks in the pond's shallows to see what kind of strange and amazing creatures might be lurking underneath. Eventually they transferred their activities to dry land where tree climbing and a foot race all the way around the pond were added to the docket. Though it was never formerly stated, both of those events were hardly fought contests, with Shahdow easily winning the former since it was Reginhald's first arboreal event, while the Royal Steward's son, with his longer legs, left him in the dust on the latter. And all too soon the sun was creeping toward the horizon and it was time to make their way back to the castle.

“I thanked you on the way out here,” Reginhald said thoughtfully, once they'd started walking. “But I had no idea how much I really needed to. This has been one of the best days of my life.”

It was a bold statement, but Shahdow found himself nodding with agreement. “For me too. And the good news is, we can come back any time we want...the pond isn't going anywhere.”

Another bold statement, innocently but naively made, as Shahdow would find out after taking a few dozen more paces down the trail he was following. It was a different route than the one they'd taken to get to the pond; slightly longer but worth it because it afforded some breathtaking views once you got through the thickest part of the forest. It certainly lived up to that statement a few minutes later.

“*What is that?*” Reginhald gasped, staring out at the desolate whitewashed landscape stretching out as far as the eye could see before them.

“The Dearth,” Shahdow answered in a choked voice. Then he repeated what Ohrder had told him on the day *he'd* first laid eyes on the monstrosity before them. “It shouldn't be *here*.”

“It's supposed to be somewhere else?” Reginhald asked with disbelief. He still hadn't been able to tear his eyes away from the terrible sight in front of him.

“No...but the last time I saw it, it was a long ways from here.” He shook his head with worry while trying to figure out what to do. “I don't even know what it really is...but I need to tell Ohrder how much it's...*grown*.”

“Grown...?” Reginhald shook his head. “No, something has to be alive to grow...there's nothing alive out there.”

"I know it looks that way," Shahdow had a hard time putting his thoughts—and *feelings* about the Dearth into words. Maybe it wasn't alive the way other things were, but it did *exist*. And that existence *was* growing, and it seemed intent on *devouring* every truly living thing it came into contact with. What he said aloud was, "But even if it isn't alive, it has to be stopped."

"I won't argue that," Reginhald agreed fervently, then his voice lowered as he asked, "Are we going to walk through that?"

"No," Shahdow shook his head. "We could as long as we didn't touch it...but, it's actually quicker to go back the way we came, and I want to tell Ohrder what's happened as soon as I can."

"That sounds like a better plan," Reginhald said with relief.

The trip back was somber, especially given how joy filled the rest of the day had been. The boys spoke hardly a word until they reached the city gate and Shahdow pulled to a stop to ask, "You know your way back to the castle from here don't you?"

Reginhald nodded up at the massive stone battlements that even so far off in the distance as they were rose dominantly over the city. "I think I can find my way back. Why...aren't you coming with me? I thought you were anxious to see the wizard."

Shahdow gave a small shake of his head. "There's something I need to do first."

Reginhald considered for a moment. "You're going back to that Dearth thing, aren't you?"

"I have to," Shahdow told him regretfully. "The last time we saw it, Ohrder had me measure it. I know he'll want to know how much bigger it's gotten."

"How are you going to measure it?" Reginhald asked, then he held up a hand. "Never mind. Why didn't we do that while we were still out there?"

The boy who never lied dearly wanted to tell one, but instead he dropped his head as he answered. "It's not your problem."

"I get the impression it's *everyone's* problem," Reginhald disagreed. "I'm going with you."

Shahdow looked up and shook his head adamantly. "You can't. It should be safe. But, if something were to happen...*someone* needs to tell Ohrder what we saw today."

"You've got this all figured out, haven't you?" Reginhald said with frustration.

"I hope so," Shahdow sighed. "But if I'm not there tomorrow morning to empty your chamber pots, will you'll go see Ohrder?"

"No! If you haven't knocked on my door by the time The Watch rings last call tonight, that's when I'll go find your wizard," Reginhald countered. "*And the prince and princess too!*"

Shahdow laughed. "Then I best be going."

"Yes," Reginhald agreed. "But be careful. I know what I said about it not being alive, but that thing didn't *feel* right."

Shahdow was careful, *after* he finished his mad dash back to the spot where the path met the Dearth. Then, because his mirror supplied clothes had no loose threads or ties, he very carefully found a handful of small stones that he could transfer one at a time from one pocket to another as he counted off his paces. And he he moved into the Dearth, he was even more careful to watch his step—lest he take a tumble and make contact with the ash white ground. Twenty-five hundred and eighteen steps later he found himself standing—and shivering—he'd forgotten how incredibly cold the Dearth was, before a massive barred gate with a hatchet carved sign posted over it.

*Five hundred more than last time, and it hasn't been all that long,*" he mused silently as he looked down at the lifelessness beneath his feet. Like everywhere else he'd trod for the last hour, there wasn't much to see—not much that the *eyes* could perceive. Mostly just a blank whiteness

devoid of features, other than bleached out rock and the skeletal remains of plants and bugs, and here and there even the odd animal or bird whose carcasses had shriveled but not rotted as you'd expect. Because even dead things are eaten by other living organisms, but when there are no other living organisms, that's what happens. Shahdow didn't know any of that, but he *sensed...something*; something that reached beyond what his eyes were telling him, and a thought occurred to him.

*I wonder if the Dearth is like the roots of a tree, always spreading out further and further in search of water to drink in?* That left him curious about what a tree that sucked in life itself might look like, and he found himself looking back up at the gate wondering what it held locked up inside. His eyes drifted even higher and he beheld the sign, *'The Wizard's Lair'*. Could a wizard really be doing all of this? Because if a wizard could, then why couldn't Ohrder stop it? Surely, there was no one more wise or powerful than Ohrder...was there? And if by chance there was, why hadn't the other wizard broken free of the cage his Dearth ignored?

These thoughts and others ran through Shahdow's head as he stared at the sign, then something started to tickle his brain. *It's like Reginhald said about the Dearth...something doesn't feel right about that sign.* Words had become so big of a part of his life since finding the talking book that often found himself so distracted by a word or a phrase that caught his attention that he might end up standing in one place staring at a wall—or a barred gate, as minute after minute ticked by without his even realizing it while he mulled it over.

*Wizards don't have lairs...they may not be quite like the rest of us, but they are human,* Shahdow thought as he strove to work through what was bothering him about the sign. *Animals...dangerous animals have lairs. Bears, lions, jackals, and...lizards?* Yes, Shahdow could certainly see a giant winged lizard being behind something so dire as the Dearth. That made much more sense. He even gave a gruff laugh at the thought, realizing that the sign might very well have proclaimed that if just one letter was different. In fact, after taking another look at the sloppily hatched hewn lettering, he wasn't sure that the crudely carved "W" *wasn't* in fact a misspelled "L". It was such a profound experience that you'd have to categorize it as more of a realization than a speculation, and the moment it happened something else did too. There was a shifting, both within the boy standing on the outside of the wall, and within another being locked behind it.

As the redrawn image of the sign etched itself into his mind, Shahdow turned to start back to the castle. Because he did that, he missed the ripple that passed over the decades old weathered wood above him; or the much bigger ripple that transpired not so far away on the other side of the gate. In fact, at that point, he hadn't even an inkling that either of those two things had happened. Now, you might be feeling a little skeptical right now, "How could a mere thought change *anything*?" The answer to that question is really quite simple, but even more remarkable than a transformed sign? Because the boy believed. *Why* he believed what he did, we may never know. But for some reason he did; without a doubt or any reservations, he knew that it was truly the lizard from the prophesy that was locked behind the wall and responsible for the Dearth. And because his belief was so complete and pure—*it was so!* And just so you know, if he—or you or I, were to have that kind of belief about a say, planting a tree in the middle of the sea, or moving a mountain from here to there, that would happen too.