

Chapter Seventeen

Friends...?

The Honor Garden was the same as every other morning; organized chaos, and yet it wasn't. Something was different. Shahdow couldn't for the life of him figure out what, but he was sure of it. And then the Arms Master made his appearance and cleared the whole thing up.

"Everyone, give me your attention," Sir Grahson announced in voice loud enough to carry across the entire practice area. "Something very rare is about to transpire...I'm going to give you some good news, something that most of you will want to hear."

The Master at Arms paused to laugh at his own joke—he was the only one; everyone else got worried expressions on their faces. Sir Grahson's idea of '*good news*' usually entailed some type of difficult training event that would turn all of them into *proper* swordsmen. "The Golden Arm will be gracing us with his presence shortly to explain our part in the upcoming Grand Festival," the Arms Master continued. "By *our*, I mean knighted arms men. The rest of you...will be excused."

A murmur arose amongst those gathered, mostly the younger ones. Having a day off from arms training was a rare—and *cherished* thing, an event so uncommon it was almost unheard of. The Master at Arms got a grimace—though Shahdow suspected it was put there to hide the smile that had tried to grow on his stern face. "But, *before* that happens," he continued sternly. "We still have time for a short, informal sparring session. Pair off and get to it. You'll have about a quarter hour, and if nothing else, maybe that'll drain off enough energy to keep you all from getting into too much trouble." He broke off long enough to sweep his hard gaze across the assembled groups before barking out a final command. "What are you waiting for...get to it!"

Shahdow glanced around at the other boys in his group, but even though most of them were older, and all of them were much more experienced, not a single one was looking in his direction. In fact, they seemed to be quite anxious to find a sparring partner that was anyone but him. This was nothing new. Because Sir Grahson gave them no other choice, the other boys accepted the fact that a commoner was going to be training with them, but the humiliation of being bested by the boy who cleaned their chamber pots each morning was another matter, and something they went to extremes to avoid. Because their group was comprised of an odd number—unless someone was out sick, Shahdow knew he would eventually find his reluctant opponent, but before that could even happen, moment off to his left caught his eye. He turned with surprise to see Reginhald tar Pettybohne striding towards him.

"Need a partner?" Reginhald asked without preamble. Then, after receiving nothing but silence and Shahdow's shocked stare, he stuck a thumb up over his shoulder, pointing back at the group he'd just left. "They're bigger, but you're better. So...do you want to do this or not?"

Since claiming their swords was the first thing all the trainees did upon entering the Honor Garden each day, Shahdow answered by raising his into the ready position. Without another word between them, the battle commenced. And so it continued until nearly a half hour had transpired and Sir Grahson finally called a halt to things. Neither boy had uttered a sound during that entire time, aside from a few grunts of exertion and some heavy breathing. Both had landed their marks, but neither had called them out. It was Reginhald who had set that tone, scoring a hit on Shahdow's left shoulder moments after they'd crossing blades without uttering a word. Even so, Shahdow had kept a silent tally and by his count he was two marks up—after landing a

successful triple combination just before Sir Grahson had shut them down. From Reginhald's sour expression as he lowered his sword, he'd kept the same silent tally himself.

"Good match," Shahdow said as he let his own blade fall to his side. It was something he'd picked up from watching the older students and also their instructors, they always congratulated each other after a sparring session. Shahdow had started extending the same courtesy to his own opponents but had as yet to receive anything similar in return.

"Yes it was," Reginhald agreed. "The best I've had since our first one."

At first Shahdow was too dumbfounded to speak, then, since his usual form of carrying on a conversation generally consisted of abbreviated head movements and assorted grunts in response to other people's questions, he surprised himself when he managed to spit out, "I guess we can leave now. I hope you have a good day."

Reginhald nodded thoughtfully, as if considering what he might do with his unexpected free day. Then he looked back at Shahdow. "What are you going to do with the day? I mean...what do you do when you're not here...or taking care of the chamber pots?"

This was *entirely* new territory for Shahdow. As far as conversations went, he'd had a few short exchanges of information with Ohrder recently, and the princess liked to prattle on about this of that to him, and she had *tried* to get him to talk with her, but he'd always managed to sidestep even her most ardent attempts. So, maybe you can understand when I tell you that suddenly his heart was hammering in his chest and it felt like he couldn't breathe, simply because another boy was treating him like *he* was just another boy too. As suffocating of a feeling as that was, it was also too wonderful to put into words. But Shahdow recognized that if the moment was to have any hope of growing into something more, *words* were exactly what was needed.

"I like to read..." he said shyly, trying to look Reginhald in the eye as he did, but not quite succeeding. "...and sometimes I got out into the forest...*that's* one of my favorite things."

"You know how to read...and you *like* to do it," Reginhald said with amazement, though it was hard to say which part of that he found more astonishing. Then he frowned. "I've never been to the forest...my mother says there are dangerous animals living there."

"There are," Shahdow acknowledged. "But they're only dangerous to each other...they're afraid of humans. I see bears a lot...and twice I've chanced upon a lion, but they always run away, even though I wished they wouldn't so I could watch them for a while. They're very beautiful." The look that came over Reginhald's face as Shahdow talked was one of concern, but also...*yearning*? Leading Shahdow to ask, even before he realized the words were coming out of his mouth, "Would you like to come with me sometime...we could even go right now if you like?"

"I don't know," Reginhald sounded worried and excited at the same time. "We'd have to go through the city, wouldn't we, and my mother says it's even more dangerous than the forest. She never lets me or my bothers go there without an escort." He gave Shahdow an uncertain look. "But you go there by yourself?"

"Yes, I do," Shahdow answered, but looking at the lavish clothing the other boy was wearing and thinking about what some of the harsher members of the Hand my do to someone like him, he added. "But she's right. No one bothers me because..." he gave a shrug. "...why would they? But, you, the way you're dressed...it wouldn't be a good idea."

Reginhald chewed on that in silence for a bit, then his features set with grim determination. "Then I need to find some new clothes, don't I?"

Since Shahdow had already been thinking along the same lines, he immediate reply was, "I have an idea about that."

Ten minutes later the two youngsters were standing shoulder to shoulder outside a massive iron shod door everyone in the castle knew existed, but few were brave enough to approach. As Shahdow reached confidently for the door latch—*more confidently than he felt on the inside*, Reginhald leaned over to whisper, "Are you sure about this...I've heard he likes to turn people into...*other things*."

"It'll be fine, just whatever you do...don't lie to him," Shahdow said as he turned the latch and pushed open the door. At the last moment he added, "He's not a mean as he seems to be"

For once Ohrder wasn't at his desk. He was standing in front of the tallest bookcase deciding which of the tombs it held he needed to pull down. His back was to the door, but he never-the-less asked, "Who's your friend?"

Neither boy answered at first; both of them were waiting for the other to speak. Shahdow's main reticence came from the phrasing of the question. He didn't want to be so presumptuous as to assume that he and Reginhald were actually friends now, just because the other boy had agreed to visit the forest with him. A while Reginhald *could* have seized the opportunity to step forward and introduce himself, it was taking every ounce of courage he possessed to keep from turning around and running in the opposite direction.

Finally, Ohrder broke the silence himself. "He does have a name, doesn't he?"

"Yes," Shahdow found his voice. "This is Reginhald tar Pettybohne. He's the Royal Steward's middle son."

"Hmmm," Ohrder turned to regard both boys with curiosity. "And is he mute as well?"

"Ahhh....no, I'm not, Your, Royal....ah, *wizardness*...?" Reginhald said in a strangled voice.

Ohrder gave an amused chuckle that sounded more like an angry snarl to both boys. But, to their credit, they held their ground and awaited their fate, however dire it might be.

"And *why* have you invaded my abode?" Ohrder inquired, shifting his probing gaze from one nervous adolescent to the other. "Is there a purpose behind your coming...or are you just here to steal my air?"

Shahdow had enough experience dealing with the wizard to realize that if Ohrder was really upset with them that he wouldn't be harrying them and they wouldn't still be standing there. Thus encouraged, he boldly stated, "We need your assistance with something."

"Really, and just how might I be of service?" Ohrder asked. If his ancient face would have been capable of showing bemusement, that's what would have been displayed there.

"We would like to go into the city," Shahdow decided to leave off the part about their plans to go from there into the forest. That might prompt another discussion about a certain old stump and he saw no need to rehash that, especially not in front of Reginhald. "We were thinking that perhaps it would be best if we barrowed a cloak..." he gave a meaningful look over at the door that lead to Ohrder's coat closet—amongst other places. "...to keep him from drawing too much unwanted attention."

"And *I* think all the time you've been spending with the princess has affected more than just how *you* dress. There's nothing the matter with coming right out and saying what you really mean." Ohrder observed somewhat snidely; never-the-less, the comment put a wide smile on Shahdow's lips. "Still, you're not wrong, *both* of you should probably change your clothing if you don't want to get robbed, and, yes, I will provide them means for you to do so."

The wizard left off abruptly to look over at one of his boarded up windows. Then he showed that he wasn't completely omniscient by asking, "Is it a nice day outside?"

When both boys gave hesitant nods of their heads, Ohrder waved a bony hand to indicate something behind them. "Then just use the mirror."

Reginhalde looked over at the gigantic silver thing with confusion while Shahdow took a hard swallow; *he* knew exactly what '*using*' the mirror entailed. Or at least he understood that he and Reginhalde would have to enter the mirror for it to change their appearance—it was wondering what would happen to them while they were inside that made him hesitate while his heart started pounding in his chest. But the fact that the other boy was standing there beside him, and that he could feel Reginhalde's eyes upon him, that got him moving. He motioned for Reginhalde to follow and the two of them walked over to stand in front of the mirror. As soon as they were in place, Shahdow saw Ohrder's reflection in the mirror waggle its fingers and suddenly the two well-dressed boys also displayed there took on the appearance of paupers. Reginhalde looked at his reflection with wonder; but his expression quickly changed to confusion when he looked down at himself and saw that in reality nothing had changed.

"We have to walk through it to make it work," Shahdow explained. Then, before Reginhalde could throw any questions at him that he knew he couldn't answer, he sucked in a deep breath and marched toward the mirror. When he'd watch Ohrder walk through the mirror the ripple he'd created had made Shahdow think of water; and that's what he'd braced himself for, expecting to feel cool wetness as he impacted the mirror's surface. What he got was more like a soft breeze on a warm day accompanied by a slight tingle that reminded him of the times he'd had one of his hands or a foot fall asleep from lack of circulation, except the sensation was so fleeting—lasting only as long as a given part of his skin was passing through the mirror, that he wasn't sure he even felt it. Then, only a moment later, he was through, standing on the other side, only to be knocked forward as Reginhalde—who had apparently dashed in right behind Shahdow, ran into him as he exited the mirror. The two boys turned to look at each other—then down at themselves as twin grins spread across their faces.

"There, it's done. So, why are you still cluttering up my chambers?" Ohrder demanded impatiently—mostly to cover up the smile that tried to creep onto his face.

"Right, we should be going," Shahdow agreed and turned toward the door.

Reginhalde was right behind, but then, remembering his manners, he stopped to give Ohrder a bow as he told the wizard, "Thank you, sir."

"You're welcome," Ohrder replied, but then he arched an eyebrow. "Dressed as you are, a bow like that will betray you in the city."

"Oh...I didn't realize..." Reginhalde exclaimed with chagrin, then he stood there frozen with indecision—having seen other perform a task thousands of times doesn't automatically mean you know how to do it.

"It's done like this," Shahdow said, dropping down to one knee while lowering his forehead until it was touching the other. "But don't worry, it's rare to come upon a noble in the city, and they're easy enough to avoid if you do."

Reginhalde nodded, but he quickly dropped down into the proper stance and held it until Ohrder growled, "Be gone...both of you!"

Their trip out of the castle proved uneventful and they soon found themselves strolling through the busy city streets. While that was nothing new to Reginhalde, there was a *big* difference between walking along practically invisible to everyone else surround you as opposed to having them continually bowing down in homage. It was a drastic change, and for the first time in his life he was seeing what everyday life in Ehlsewhere—for the common people, was

really like. And he found himself very much enjoying the unexpected freedom that somehow brought with it.

“Thank you,” he said with heartfelt sincerity.

“For what?” walking at his side, Shahdow looked at Reginhald in confusion. “We haven’t even made it to the forest yet.”

“For this...” Reginhald gestured around them. “I’ve never been to the city like this before. Even when I’ve been inside its walls before, I’ve always felt like an outsider.”

That made a certain sense to Shahdow, who even though he spent a part of each day inside the castle had never felt like he belonged there.

“Not to mention I got to meet the wizard,” Reginhald continued. “And do you think anyone else besides us changed their clothes today by stepping though a mirror?”

Shahdow had to grin at that; though he’d been around Ohrder all his life—the part he remembered anyway, even he had never quite gotten use to how strange life around the wizard could get. “You’re welcome, but I’m the one who should be thanking you.”

“What do you have to thank me for?” Reginhald asked incredulously as his mind drifted over the innumerable cruel things he’d done to the other boy over the years.

“For being my sparring partner when no one else wants to,” Shahdow told him. “And for coming with me today. Ohrder shouldn’t have said what he did about our being friends...I know that could never happen, but I appreciate...”

That was as far as he got before Reginhald cut him off abruptly, stopping in his own tracks and putting out a hand to bring Shahdow to a halt too. “Why can’t we be friends?”

“Because...” Shahdow hesitated; it wasn’t a hard question to answer—the answer had been drilled into him his whole life, but it *was* hard to say. “Because you’re a noble and I’m commoner...and that’s just the way things are.”

Suddenly Reginhald was laughing. “Shahdow, you are no commoner. In fact, you may be the most *uncommon* person in the entire kingdom.”