

Chapter Twenty One

The Hunt...

The morning training session was ended and as was their normal practice, Shahdow and Reginhald were flailing away at each other with precisely controlled abandon when Prince Juhstice suddenly appeared beside them. Both boys immediately broke off and performed smartly executed bows, while also speaking in near unison. “Good morning, Your Highness.”

“Good morning to you,” Juhstice bade them rise. “I hate to interrupt such a fine contest, but I have need of your services, Shahdow.”

A few weeks before, Shahdow would have taken that in stride without much thought, but for reasons unknown to him, his nightly forays into the city with the prince and princess had suddenly stopped. And while Princess Chahrity did still call for his help now and again—which he felt was really just her wanting to check up on him, the prince had hardly spoken to him beyond a greeting on the odd occasions they happened to cross each other’s path. Surprised as he was, Shahdow still managed to give a quick nod and reply, “Of course, Your Highness, anything you need.”

The prince motioned for Shahdow to step aside with him, then, once they were out of earshot of anyone else in the practice yard, he explained the situation. “I’m sure you must have heard we have some important visitors staying in the castle.”

Of course Shahdow had heard, who else would be emptying their chamber pots, but he just nodded and the prince continued. “They’ve expressed interest in going into the city this afternoon, which I’ve arranged. But while it’s easy enough to provide them with an escort, we both know that won’t keep them from falling victim to The Hand...which would be *very* embarrassing.”

In his mind Shahdow could easily visualize members of The Hand circling the visiting royals like hungry vultures eager to swoop in and pluck the foreign berries. What he couldn’t see was what the prince expected him to do about it, and he voiced his misgivings aloud.

“Whatever needs done,” Prince Juhstice said unequivocally. “Warn them off...lift a lifter, shift a shifter. I doubt with the guards nearby you’ll have to deal with bashers, but if it comes to that, do what you need to...your work in the Honor Garden has shown you’re up to the task.”

Shahdow wasn’t sure he had as much confidence in his own abilities as the prince seemed to. Nevertheless, he nodded and promised Juhstice he wouldn’t let him down.

“Good, it’s settle then,” Juhstice reached out to give his shoulder a firm clasp. “I have another matter I need to attend to, but you can meet up with the others at the castle gate within the hour. Chahrity *will* be there, but she won’t be expecting you. She thinks she won that argument...she’s concerned for your safety even though I assured her you are more than capable of taking care of yourself.” The prince paused to give Shahdow a hard look in the eye. “I know how loyal you are to her, but let me remind you that though you may be *her* shadow, as a squire undergoing training to become a knight, you take your orders from me. So, if she tries to send you on your way, you need to politely but firmly let her know that your duties dictate otherwise. Do you understand me?”

Even though he had no doubts about where his *greatest* allegiance lay, Shahdow nodded because if there was even the slightest chance the princess might be in danger there was nowhere else that he would be but by her side. “I’ll see to it, Your Highness.”

Juhstice let out a sigh as if a great weight had been lifted off his shoulders. “I’ll be in your debt after this. Speaking of which...if you’d be interested, tomorrow morning we’re going on a hunt in the Royal Forest. It will be just myself, Prince Dharis and a few other select knights, but we’ll also be taking along a handful of squires to beat the brush for us. You’re welcome to join us if you’d like.”

Shahdow hesitated, but only long enough to drum up the nerve to ask a favor. “Would it be possible for Reginhald tar Pettybohne to come too?”

“I think that would be a fine idea,” the prince agreed. “We’ll leave from the Honor Garden at first light. Provisions for the day will be supplied, but you’ll both need to get there early enough to draw a spear from the armory.”

With that, the prince left to see to whatever task awaited him, while Shahdow hurried up to Ohrder’s chambers to claim his peasant’s cloak from his wardrobe. The wizard was nowhere to be found, but that had become the norm since the night Shahdow had returned to tell him about the Dearth’s latest growth spurt. And, just as the prince had promised, a short time after Shahdow had arrived at the castle gate, Princess Chahrity and the two Lahndsend royals showed up with a contingent of soldiers in tow. The princess seemed to be so preoccupied with her guests that she hadn’t even noticed him, but a few minutes later, while her companions were busy selecting which type of pie they wanted to try from a cart vender, she turned to give him a disapproving frown. As much as that hurt, Shahdow held firm, meeting her eyes while giving her only the slightest of bows. It was the honorarium a soldier under arms would offer, and while Shahdow carried no sword or weapon of any other kind, he hoped she’d understand his reaction.

What the princess’ thoughts were he didn’t know, but he didn’t have much time to worry about it either. Prince Juhstice had been right, within minutes of the royal entourage entering the city, Shahdow started spotting members of The Hand closing in. The first two attempts on the visiting royals were made by simple lifters—who were no doubt sent in by more seasoned Hand members just to test the waters. Shahdow tripped the first, sending him headlong into a mud puddle and effectively undermining any chances he’d have of even getting near the royals before finding time to visit a bath and a laundry. The second, a boy with one arm in a sling but with very nimble looking fingers on the other got a hard enough rap across his good knuckles to make it difficult to open his own purse. Shahdow had lifted a flute off a street musician to do that bit of work, but he slipped it back into the man’s pocket as soon as the deed was done. And so it went. Three more attempts were made in the first hour; all but one of which Shahdow was able to thwart before the pickers even drew within reach of their prospective berries. The final one, a girl a year or so senior to him, he let through, but only because he saw Princess Chahrity watching her come out of the corner of her eye and he wanted to see what would happen. Five minutes later the girl ran off trying her best to wipe away the tears that were streaming down her freckled cheeks why crying out something about how she’d never do another *bad thing* again in her lifetime. The next member of The Hand to make an appearance was someone well known to Shahdow, though he’d never seen the man’s face in the light of day.

“What do you think you’re up to boy?” Fingers demanded as he drew near. As was his habit, he’d just appeared out of the mouth of an alley to come striding straight toward Shahdow.

“Whatever needs done,” Shahdow answered without flinching, using the same words the prince had spoken a few hours earlier. “There’s no work for The Hand here today.”

“My, aren’t you a brazen one,” Fingers laughed. “Well, let me tell *you* something. I don’t know what you’re up to, or who you’re working with, but these berries aren’t *your* berries. Now clear out or we’re going to have a problem.”

Shahdow *wasn't* normally brazen, but at that moment all he had to call upon was envisioning what others might do in his situation, and the first person that came to mind was a certain unyielding wizard. Looking Finger's straight in his leering face, he told The Hand's lieutenant, "Leave now or I'll call the guards over here. I don't think they'll take kindly to the dagger you've hidden in your boot...or the extra purse you're carrying." While Fingers was still absorbing that, he added. "And if anyone else shows up, I'll let them do their business...*then* I'll call in the soldiers."

Fingers chewed on that for a while, but in the end there really wasn't anything he could do but walk away. Not that he didn't have a parting shot as he did. "It's a good thing you're so cozy with them soldiers," Fingers grated. "Because if you ever set foot in the city again without one of them standing close by...well, let's just say that purses aren't the only things that get picked.

The rest of the day went by quiet enough, without Shahdow spotting so much as a scout wandering by to check up on the royals. But by the time Chahrity and her guests finally turned around to make their way back to the castle, Shahdow was ready to pick the insufferable Prince Dharis himself. He was almost as upset with Princess Chahrity; couldn't she see that Dharis, with his ever-present toothy smile and constant yammering about every nonsensical thing you could imagine, was just another shifter wearing a fancy coat, trying to distract her with his silver tongue while getting ready to steal her unguarded heart—which *he couldn't really care about having only just met her*. All of that seemed so clear to Shahdow, but while the princess was obviously blind to what was going on, all he could do was stand mutely by and watch it happen.

Shahdow's mood hadn't lightened much by the next morning. Even the prospect of "*the hunt*", which as exciting as it sounded, he had no real earthly idea about what it might actually entail, didn't seem all that alluring given that it was being put on to entertain Prince Dharis. On top of that, it occurred to him that since the hunting party was leaving at daybreak it was doubtful that he'd be back anywhere near the time when he was supposed to be doing his chamber pot duties. All in all, he was in as wretched of a state of mind as you could imagine by the time he drug himself through the high stone arches of the Honor Garden. Reginhald was already there but Shahdow sulked right on past him after giving him a grumbled, "Good morning", and made his way over to where the two princes were standing with Sir Grahson talking.

As protocol dictated, he stopped a half dozen paces short of the trio, and, since he wasn't under arms, dropped down to one knee where he held, waiting to be called forward, however long that might take. It was actually only a matter of seconds before Prince Juhstice noticed him.

"You may rise, Shahdow," the Prince told him, waving him over. Then, after a taking closer look, he asked. "What's the matter?"

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said I'd go on the hunt," Shahdow answered forlornly. "I'd miss doing my other duties and that...that would be very bad."

Prince Juhstice nodded his head with understanding, but then he got a thoughtful look and turned to the Master at Arms. "Do you happen to have anyone on your '*delinquent*' list?"

"Indeed I do, Your Highness, I actually have *two* students that still owe me for dropping their blades this week," Sir Grahson said after only a moment of reflection. Then he let out a laugh. "It'll be just like the old days."

When the Arms Master saw Shahdow's puzzled look, he explained. "Before you came along chamber pot duty was as much a part of motivating proper knightly behavior as polishing armor and cleaning the Honor Garden."

"Nobles cleaned chamber pots?" Shahdow asked with disbelief.

Sir Grahson gave another laugh. "Indeed *we* did. I'd dare say there isn't a nobleman in the realm that hasn't taken a turn or twenty on chamber pot detail." He paused to nod at Prince Juhstice. "With the obvious exception of His Royal Highness, of course."

"Oh no," the prince demurred. "I dropped my sword *twice*. And your predecessor wasn't about to let anyone else do my penance for me just because my father was the king."

"No, I don't suppose Sir Whenchle would at that," the current Master at Arms noted fondly.

"What would you think about making this a *permanent* arrangement once again? I seemed to be calling on Shahdow more and more these days and I'd like to free up some of his time," Prince Juhstice asked, then watched the Arms Master carefully to see what his answer might be.

"I think that would be a fine idea, Your Highness," Sir Grahson said after taking a few moments to weigh the matter. Then he gave Shahdow a hard look. "They'll blame you for this at first, but it's not like they've welcomed you with opened arms anyway. Eventually, the brighter ones of the lot...like your friend Reginhald over there, will realize that instead to worrying about you becoming one of them, they need to focus on being more like you."

Shahdow was struck dumb by the sudden turn of events and the lavish praise that had just been showered upon him. After several long seconds ticked by he realized that the men had finished speaking and were waiting for him to respond. But what do you say at such a time? Shahdow hadn't a clue. Finally, he just dropped back down to bow as low as he ever had before in his life and said, "Thank you, Sir Grahson...thank you, Your Highness...I...ah...thank you so much!"

Prince Juhstice gave a laugh, then bade him to leave, causing Shahdow to leap to his feet and race across the practice field to join Reginhald. Though out of earshot, Reginhald had been watching the exchange between Shahdow and the adults, and seeing his friends flushed face, he asked with curiosity, "What was that all about?"

"I get to go on the hunt!" Shahdow exclaimed, giving him a wide grin.

"Right...that's why we're here," justifiably, Reginhald was looking at him like he was addled in the head, and maybe at that moment it was as apt of a description as anything else.

"I know, but then I realized that if I went on the hunt I wouldn't be able to empty the chamber pots," Shahdow explained.

"Oh..." Reginhald grew thoughtful. "But if you *are* going on the hunt, who's going to take care of the pots?"

Shahdow raised his eyebrows at him. "You didn't happen to drop your sword yesterday, did you?"

The hunting party made their way out of the castle just as the first rays of dawn were breaking over the distant mountains. Once they were through the city and in the open area separating Ehelsewhere from the Royal Forest, Prince Dharis pulled up his mount and pointed off to the west at the farthest visible white capped peak; it was actually well behind the long ridge of mountains fronting it, but rose so high that it was by far the most prominent feature visible.

"Do you have a name for that mountain?" he asked Prince Juhstice and the other knights gathered around him.

"The Bastion," Prince Juhstice replied, then smiled. "In past...less peaceable times, the army that controlled it controlled the land for miles around."

"Yes," Prince Dharis chuckled. "I guess we do share that history, even if we have different name for it. To us, it's known as Eagle's Reach. And though it looks so high from here...because Lahndsend sits on such an elevated plateau overlooking the Ehdless Sea, our view is quite

different. We watch it knowing that when the white disappears from its slopes that summer is finally on the way.”

The statement left Shahdow staring at the mountain with amazement. Of all the days he spent in the forest, there weren't all that many of them that he could remember *not* seeing snow on the peak separating the two kingdoms. What kind of a frozen land was it that Prince Dharis called home?

While he was still pondering that, Prince Juhstice started forward again, turning the party to the right, paralleling the thick wall of trees at the edge of the Royal Forrest as he explained, “Ohrder tells me the Dearth has expanded back the other way and that our best hope of success lies this way to the east.”

“I'm afraid I'm unfamiliar with that term,” Prince Dharis said as he rode his horse alongside Prince Juhstice's.

“It's basically a blight that kills the vegetation leaving everything as dead as if a fire had burned though,” Juhstice explained casually. “But with nothing to forage on there aren't many animals to be found there either.”

If only that were true, Shahdow found himself thinking, remembering the many carcasses of insects, birds and animals that seemed almost as prevalent as the washed out remains of grasses, underbrush and trees. But then he supposed Prince Juhstice probably didn't know any better.

“Really, how interesting,” Prince Dharis mused. “I've never heard of anything of the sort in Lahndsend...what causes it?”

“I don't know,” Juhstice confessed. “Ohrder said he was looking into it and I'm sure he'll deal with whatever the problem is.”

That would explain the wizard's many absences of late. But the thought of Ohrder trying to *deal* with the creature Shahdow had come to believe was truly behind the Dearth sent a chill through him. Days had passed since he'd stood outside the barred gate at the middle of the forest, but the sensation that it had a beast of pure evil locked behind it hadn't dampened one bit. Unfortunately, as far as he knew, there was nothing he could do to help no matter how much he wanted to. The book had taught Shahdow many things by that point, but he had as yet to grasp the importance of the need for prayer. And of course there was still the problem of his believing that the one you prayed to was just another made up character in a story.

The hunting party went along for another mile or two with the knights on horseback keeping their mounts at a slow enough pace for the boys walking behind them to keep up. Eventually, they came to a spot where a break in the trees led up a gentle rise where it seemed to open up even further. Prince Juhstice rose up in his stirrups to survey it for a moment before announcing, “That looks promising enough...I'll bet we find something to test our merit in there.”

He was thinking of a large stage, or possibly even a bear or a lion. And he was right, there *were* some of those creatures waiting for them inside the forest's boundary—they just weren't the only things hidden from sight by the trees.