

## Chapter Twenty Two

### ...and the Hunted

Shahdow, Reginhald and the other four boys who had been chosen to be bush beaters went to the Honor Garden's armory where each of them drew a six foot spear, a pack containing a half-ration and a canteen of water, and a long knife in a belted. Shahdow, who had little experience with either a spear or a knife, spent his time walking behind the horses testing the heft and balance of each in turn.

"You can use the long knife like an extremely short sword," Reginhald, who was walking at his side, offered. "But the spear, despite its bladed end, is a whole different matter. You hear stories about soldiers throwing them great distances to skewer their opponents, but Sir Grahson says that unless you know exactly what you're doing, you're better off hanging onto it with both hands." After a moment of reflection, he added. "He also says most people would be better off using it as a staff rather than trying to poke a hole in anything with it."

"I don't know how to use a staff either," Shahdow looked down at the thing in his hands dubiously.

"Honestly, I'm hoping we won't even have need of a weapon. You said all of the animals out here are afraid of us, didn't you?" Reginhald spoke in a voice low enough that it reached only Shahdow's ears. In front of them the Princes and their knights were going on quite raucously about which of them would be the first to shoot or spear something—to a man they were all armed with both spear and bows and arrows, and of course, the swords that almost never left their sides.

Shahdow nodded. "I think our only real job is to work through the underbrush to scar anything in there out so Prince Juhstice and the others can get a shot at it. I've never gotten closer than a dozen paces to any animal out here before it ran off, so this should be easy."

The area they were passing through continued to go up and as promised, the forest began to thin out until a half mile or so later they crested the ridge they'd been climbing and looked down on a narrow valley that sloped away from them running northward. The valley itself was a large meadow with very sparse vegetation growing within it, but it was hedged on both sides with old growth trees and patches of thick red hued underbrush. Past experience told Shahdow the crimson bushes were covered with thousands of tiny thorns, but that they also tended to be a favorite haven for wildlife. He passed that information along to Reginhald who nodded his head appreciatively.

Prince Juhstice, still mounted, surveyed the layout for a few minutes then laid out his battle plan. The *'bush beaters'* were divided into two teams of three, Shahdow, Reginhald and another boy named Kholin would work the right side, while their counterparts took the left. Both teams would wait where they were until the knights made their way down the hill into the valley. Then the boys were to spread out, keeping a dozen or so paces between them as they entered the treed areas and worked their way forward along the sides of the valley. The idea being that anything hiding inside would be pushed right towards the waiting hunters. The last thing Prince Juhstice told the boys was that they *didn't* need to worry about being quiet about what they were doing. Which initially didn't see right since when you normally thought about hunting it was all about sneaking up on something unaware, but as Shahdow thought about it, the method they were using did have its merits—as long as you could hit a fast moving target. Looking down at the

ungainly spear in *his* hand, he wasn't overly confident he could manage to reach out and stab the stationary tree growing in front of him.

Once the hunters were in position, Prince Juhstice raised his arm and waved the brush beaters forward. Shahdow, who was on the side closest to the meadow, waited for Reginhald and Kholin to enter the trees before him, with Kholin, who was the farthest out going in first, followed by Reginhald. The idea was that the three boys would act as a wedge, with Kholin being the first to enter the forest, driving any animals hiding in front of him toward the other two boys, who would then continue to push them toward the meadow and the waiting knights. Shahdow watched Kholin then Reginhald disappear into the trees, then counted to one hundred before starting forward himself. At first the going was quite easy with very little underbrush to deter him, but remembering Prince Juhstice's instructions, he used his spear to beat at all the red thorn bushes he passed anyway; off to his right he could hear the other two boys doing the same.

In the first ten minutes he spooked out a rabbit and a pair of partridges, all three of which *did* run or fly off in the direction of the meadow, but Shahdow doubted any of the hunters would waste an arrow on trying to take them down. Then, instead of seeing something with his eyes, a sound came to Shahdow's ears that made him snap his head around to look off in Reginhald's direction with worry. It was a cry from an animal, but like nothing he'd ever heard before during all his years roaming the forest. Starting as a shrill whistle, it morphed into a strangled cry of pain, and even more—*fear*. Shahdow was certain of that. But before he could even decide what to do, more sounds drifted up to him as something large—and *fast* came charging through the trees straight at him.

Shahdow gripped his spear with white knuckles and stepped up behind the biggest tree in sight, placing it between him and whatever it was that was racing towards him. A moment later a stag—the biggest he'd ever seen with a rack of horns four feet wide and almost twice that tall, broke out into the open, still running full bore right at him. Big as he was, the sight of the stage—a familiar creature of the forest, came as a huge relief, and though he wasn't thrilled with the idea, Shahdow knew he had a job to do.

Taking a step to his right, he raised up both arms and starting shouting at the top of his lungs, hoping to get the stage to veer toward the meadow. Instead, the mighty beast came to a sudden stop and regarded Shahdow with wild eyes as its sides rose and fell like an out of control billows. The stag's labored breathing wasn't the only thing Shahdow saw, and a moment later he found himself wondering, *how is he even still standing?*

From his front shoulder back, the stag's left side was one large gaping wound, with the hide laid back and the flesh beneath, from shoulder to haunch, looking like it had been sliced apart by four sharp fillet knives—very large fillet knives. The sight made Shahdow fall silent as he stood and stared at the poor creature, while the first thoughts of wondering *what* could have done such damage to it started churning through his head. Suddenly, the stag's head snapped around and he looked back the way he'd came, but only for a moment, then he was dashing full out through the trees again. But he *had* altered his course, turning to run straight toward the meadow. On instinct, Shahdow found himself running after it, all the way to the edge of the meadow where he stopped to watch as the stag raced across the open ground seeking the shelter of the trees on the other side.

The hunters must have heard him coming because they were already riding full out, with bows drawn by the time Shahdow spotted them. Apparently, the distance between them and their quarry was too great, because none of them let lose their arrows, instead focusing their efforts on urging their mounts forward to narrow the gap before the stag regained the trees. Incredibly,

severely wounded as he was, the stag *gained* distance on them and barreled into a narrow opening in the trees to disappear from sight. But that was not the end of the chase. Without hesitation, the hunters dove in right behind him, not even slowing their horses as they too vanished from sight. Shahdow stood there for a moment—a moment that would later haunt him, wondering how effective bows and arrows would be within the tangled confines of the forest, when the thought that should have been his first priority came surging to the surface. *Whatever did that to the stag, it's still in here!*

Fear threatened to squeeze the breath out of him, but it wasn't his own safety he was most worried about. With a wild-eyed look of his own, Shahdow went racing off into the forest, taking his best guess at the course that would take him to Reginhald. As he ran, though he wasn't sure how wise it was to do so, he started calling out his friend's name over and over again, pausing after each shout to listen for an answering yell.

"Over here," Reginhald's voice rang out, sounding every bit a harried as Shahdow's, and thankfully quite close as well. A few stumbling steps later, as Shahdow tore straight through the middle of one of the innumerable clumps of red thorn bushes, he broke out on the other side to see his friend standing behind the sheltering bole of a large evergreen tree with his spear thrust forward defensively.

"*Oh, it's just you!*" Reginhald let out a sigh of relief. "I thought it might be a bear coming at me from all the commotion you made."

"I'm sorry," Shahdow told him between gasps of breath. "I was worried..."

That was as far as he got before another scream rent the air—this time a very human one. From the sound of it, Kholin was close by too, but Shahdow had a sickening feeling that he wasn't close enough. Again, without thought, he found himself racing forward, headless of what might be awaiting him, his only concern for the life of a boy he hardly knew. A part of him was aware that Reginhald was right on his heels, but while on one level that was comforting, it also brought with it an extra burden, because it added to the number of people he felt responsible to defend. Suddenly, the trees opened up in front of him, displaying a small clearing and at its center Kholin and the *thing* that had attacked him—*was still attacking him, though there couldn't possibly be any life left within the broken shell that was left of the poor boy's body.*

Pure white and at least eight feet tall, with the head, mane and forelegs of a lion, the rest of the creature resembled a hairless bear whose alabaster skin was covered with bulbous oozing tumors. Add to that the fact that all of its bizarre parts were somewhat misshapen and out of proportion to each other, and you were left looking at something straight out of a nightmare. As the boys burst into the clearing, the creature lifted its hideous head and sniffed the air; once, twice, and then a third time, before turning to look in their direction. Except you can't look if you don't have any eyes. Maybe it had once, but now in their place resided another set of tumors.

Shahdow took one last look at Kholin and knew he was beyond help. If only he'd gotten there faster that might not have been the case, but *now* there was nothing left to do for him. *There were certainly other things that needed done though.* Turning to Reginhald, he gave his friend a hard push back the way they'd come and shouted, "*Run!*"

Three bodies launched into motion almost simultaneously, the warped lion-bear only a heartbeat behind its next intended victims. Blind and deformed it might be, but standing eight feet tall, once it dropped to all fours it's long limbs were more than a match for the fasted horse. Both boys almost died in the first seconds of the chase, and would have if the massive clawed paw that swiped at them hadn't connected with a tree first. The tree, an aspen six inch across at the base, shattered like a weathered twig, but the resulting carnage of its broken trunk fell

directly in the creature's path causing it to stumble and giving the fleeing youngsters a new lease on life. As soon as it regained its footing, the beast took one long sniff of the air and bolted forward again, tearing through one of the thicker stands of thorn bushes as if it wasn't even there.

Shahdow happened to be looking back over his shoulder as that happened and felt his racing heart take an extra leaden beat in his chest. While he and Reginhald were fighting their way through a tangled maze of vegetation, the thing pursuing them could simply ignore the majority of obstacles that were slowing *them* down and charge straight at them—*which it was already doing with alarming speed*. Then the beast hit another—bigger tree, and though it just bounced off to get right back on the scent of its prey, the boys gained a few steps. Shahdow watched that happen too and felt renewed hope bloom within him.

"Keep the biggest trees between us and that thing," he called out. Then, as Reginhald looked back at him in confusion, he took the opportunity to jump into the lead. The route he chose was no longer about picking the fastest path, instead he veered and headed into a knot of aspen growing so close together that he wasn't sure *he* could fit between them without turning sideways. And while they weren't the biggest trees around, cumulatively, he hoped they'd prove to be an impenetrable barrier to the wide-bodied monstrosity chasing them.

Twisting and turning they made their way through the thicket, squirmed forward while keeping a constant eye turned backwards to see if Shahdow's plan would hold up. At first it did. The lion-headed beast reached the aspens, smacking its muzzle against one of them and tried to shift to one side only to have it happen again, and again, and again. After the sixth such attempt it let out a screeching snarl of frustration and reached out with its massive cat's paws to grasp the trees blocking its way, which it parted like they were nothing more than a pair of willowy lace curtains. Unbelievably, the beast was even more powerful than it appeared, and within moments Shahdow realized it could *tear* through the aspen saplings almost as fast as he and Reginhald could weave their way through them. Things only got worse a short time later when the boys reached the end of the thicket and found themselves on the edge of the meadow with nothing but its open expanse lying before them.

"What do we do?" A good two years his senior, Reginhald was still looking to Shahdow to give him an answer to their dilemma. Looking with fear-filled eyes, to which the younger boy could only shake his head.

"I don't know," Shahdow confessed, even as his own eyes searched around for an answer. An answer that needed to come quickly because the ravenous creature pursuing them was only seconds away.

Shahdow considered doubling back to try slide past the beast to resume their cat and mouse chase through the forest, except besides the fact that they were already losing that battle, the blind creature seemed to have an uncanny way of sensing *exactly* where they were and if that held true it would likely shift its course to cut them off as soon as they moved back into the trees. Then his frantic gaze swept back out over the meadow and landed on a large oak tree growing towards its center about a hundred paces away.

*We'll never make it*, he thought dejectedly, but he was already grabbing Reginhald's arm and starting to run.

The situation couldn't get much bleaker, but then it did. While the boys were still only a quarter of the way to the distant oak, Reginhald, who with his long strides had vaulted into the lead, stepped in a marmot hole hidden in the meadow's short grass and went down in a heap. There were two pops; one from the strap of his ration pack—which went flying off to into space, and one from the tendon in his ankle. By the time Shahdow reached him he was already

struggling to get back on his feet, but the second he tried to put weight on his injured leg he let out a cry and collapsed back on the ground.

In agony, and with his voice filled with fear, Reginhald pushed Shahdow's reaching hands aside and told him, "Go...you can still make it. Hand me my spear and go."

Shahdow did grab Reginhald's spear, which had fallen nearby, and he placed it in the other boy's hand, but then he pivoted around to take hold of his friend's other arm to help him to his feet as he told him, "Use it as a crutch...*we* can still make it."

As impossible as that seemed, at that moment the creature's nose drew it to Reginhald's pack and the monster started tearing the canvas bag into a thousand pieces as it poured out its pent up rage. The moment wasn't lost on Shahdow, who dropped his own pack before reaching an arm around Reginhald's shoulders to start pulling him in the direction of the tree.

By the time they made it to the oak the beast was already well into demolishing the second pack. Shahdow bent down and formed a cradle with his hands, telling Reginhald, "I'll give you a boost. Climb as high and as fast as you can...I'm right behind you."

On their last trip to the forest, Reginhald had proved to be less than an inspired tree climber, but maybe he'd just lacked motivation. Even with a bad ankle, within a minute he was twenty feet in the air and still going. Shahdow wasn't far behind. By the time the malformed lion-bear reached the base of their sanctuary, both boys were well out of its reach—as long as it couldn't climb a tree. Shahdow knew that bears could, but he'd never heard of a lion doing so. Still, he waited with bated breath to see what would happen. The creature didn't even try to climb. Shuffling over to the base of the oak, it *did* rise up on its hind legs for a moment as it lifted its nose to sniff at the air. Then it did something totally unexpected. It bent over and took a big bite out of the tree with its mouth while beginning to tear at it with its razor sharp feline claws. Within a minute it had ripped a good sized gash out of the side of the tree. Shahdow did a quick mental calculation and figured he had at best another five minutes to live.

He was so busy watching his future being eaten away that he didn't pick up the movement at the edge of the meadow, so he was taken by surprise as an arrow suddenly bloomed in the beast's backside. Another followed right after, this time striking just behind the front shoulder, which would have dropped a normal bear *or* lion. The only thing the beast did was swivel around to charge, seemingly no more injured than if a pair of angry hornets had paid it an angry visit. Shahdow let his eyes drift over in the direction the arrows had come from and found Prince Dharis, still mounted and calmly sighting to let fly another arrow. This one penetrated the tumor where the creature's right eye should have been, but unbelievably failed to have any effect beyond drawing a loud cry of outrage. Dharis was already pulling another arrow from his quiver before that last one hit home, but by the time he had it nocked, the beast was upon him.

As if its nostrils were every bit as sensitive as a pair of eyes, the creature took a massive swipe with its left paw that struck the horse beneath the prince squarely on its jaw, snapping the poor thing's neck as easily as it had the forest saplings earlier. The already dead horse flopped over, landing on its side with Prince Dharis' right leg pinned beneath it. The prince could easily have died in the next second had the beast not spent the next little while doing to the horse what he'd done to Kholin and the two backpacks previously. By the time he finished flailing the flesh off the front end of Prince Dharis' mount—while the prince struggled helplessly to free himself or at least his sword, Shahdow found himself back on the ground reaching for one of the spears that had been abandoned when he and Reginhald had taken to the air.

"No!" Prince Dharis cried out as he saw Shahdow race towards him. His protest did no more good than his arrow had earlier.

Shahdow ran forward without hesitation, only drawing up at the last moment to launch his spear in the air. Miraculously it hit its mark, striking the still frenzied beast in its hairless left haunch opposite where an arrow already protruded. Unsurprisingly, the creature whirled around to come racing right for him, showing no ill effect of its most recent injury.

*Unless you know exactly what you're doing, you're better off hanging onto it with both hands*, Reginhald's warning from earlier that morning rang in his head, but Shahdow *had* known what he was doing—he'd tossed away a stick to draw a blade. It was a very short blade, not even as long as his forearm, but he pulled it from its sheath and squared himself to face the onrushing charge of the crazed beast, standing there as fearlessly as if he was holding the Sir Behkworth's vaunted golden sword. He'd *watched* the lion-bear's mode of attack enough times to know what was coming. The instant the creature was upon him it threw out its paw, intending to swipe his head off his shoulders, but even as it did, Shahdow dropped down to one knee, simultaneously driving the knife upward, both hands gripping the hilt as he made the stroke with all his might. The arrow in its skull had failed to take the monster down, but that one and the other wounds it had taken *had bled*, so presumably it had a heart. Shahdow prayed that it did, and that his thrust would hit its target—and he did pray too, for the very first time in his life, just like the characters in the stories he'd read, while his young heart hoped there might actually be someone listening.

Then the beast struck him, its massive weight coming full upon him. Then everything went black.