

Chapter Thirty Five

Because He Had To

A short time after Dougerty stomped out of the room in a huff, both princes quietly followed him out the door. Neither of them so much as wished Shahdow a good day as they departed—seeming to be so caught up in their own thoughts that they'd forgotten he even existed—if *only he could do the same*. What he wouldn't give for some forgetfulness of his own; to not constantly be reminded that he'd called a prophesied winged serpent into being, or have the horrifying the image of a sword blade thrusting through the open mouth of a ram-horned man playing over and over in his head. *But surely he was already dead before I did that...he had to be*. The thought, logical though it was, brought little solace with it. As exciting as practicing with a sword had always been, Shahdow had discovered that the actual use of one in battle inflicted deep and painful wounds on the wielder as well as the adversary.

Those recriminating thoughts led him to look down at the sword still held in his hand—the *blood stained sword*, and he wanted nothing more than to cast it aside, somewhere so far away that he would never lay eyes on it again. Except...except...*except there was still a dragon*. He couldn't forget that...mustn't *ever* allow himself to forget that for even a moment. The two princes may have neglected to wish him a good day—which all things considered would have been a waste of breath anyway, but the day still lay before him, and he realized that if he didn't find some way to fill it, his dark thoughts might...well, he didn't want to think about that. The last time he'd felt this way, he'd ended up at the stump intending to touch one of the glowing symbols, and enticing as that had been then—and *now*...there *was* still a dragon that needed to be dealt with.

He started by beginning the process of returning the sword and shield to their normal place; configuring them back into a mirror. He couldn't bring himself to use Ohrder's wash basin to clean the dried blood away from the blade, instead he opted for hiding the sword under his cloak as he snuck it out to the stables, where he used fistfuls of straw, wet from the water trough to scrub the sword clean. Once he was back in the wizard's quarters, with the sword and shield restored to looking like an oversized silver gilded mirror, Shahdow found his eyes drawn to the bookcase housing the '*silly books*' and to one particular silly book at that. Life had gotten so busy of late, since the day he'd joined the Honor Garden, that he'd neglected his reading almost entirely for the better part of two full months. He rolled the word '*neglected*' around in his head for a while. Could he really consider his not reading neglectful? After all, no one was forcing him to read; not like Reginhald whose parents did require their children to read for at least an hour six days a week. Still, standing there with his eyes on the object that had had such a huge impact on his life, he couldn't help but feel that, yes, yes indeed, he *had* neglected doing something important, and for far too long. And maybe one of the book's many adventurous stories was just what he needed to pull him out of the quagmire of dark thoughts he'd stumbled into.

Settling down on his fur rug, he pulled the book off the shelf and opened it at random. Random worked as good as any other method since no page was ever the same as it had been the last time he'd opened the cover. On the page before him was a caption and an illustration. The picture was just above crudely done, displaying a bearded man with humble attire standing before what looked like a pole with a crossbar mounted on it about two thirds of the way up. The only other thing of note was a hammer and three long spiked nails, which were lying at the base

of the pole as if left there and forgotten by whoever had put the pole up in the first place. As odd as the image was, the title was even more puzzling. It read, "*Because He Had To*". Shahdow pondered all of that for a few intriguing moments, then turned the page and began to read.

It took the better part of an hour to finish the story—*thought Shahdow wasn't sure the story ever would truly end*, not if he truly understood it correctly. It turned out that the 'man', the main character in the story wasn't the simple craftsman he'd appeared to be. In fact he was the one and only son of the same god Shahdow had read about in so many of the book's other stories. At first Shahdow was confused on how a god could have a human son, then after the son, Emanuel, started showing everyone that he was indeed who he claimed to be, by doing powerful things beyond anything even a great wizard could perform, Shahdow wondered if he was even human at all—until the people he had come to save nailed him to the pole—and *he died!* After the trauma he'd lived through that morning, Shahdow had almost stopped reading at that point as tears streamed down his face. He was actually closing the book when the title came back to him and he found himself wondering, *why did he have to? What was the point of it all? Surely his father—who was almighty god, wouldn't have sent his only son to his death for...nothing? Would he?*

Shahdow wiped his face, opened the book back up, and continued on. The world was divided over the son's death; some mourned endlessly while so many others celebrated their undeniable victory. And it was undeniable, even for those who had been closest to the son—until two of them were taking a somber journey down a country road and a stranger—who turned out to be not a stranger at all, joined them and pointed out things they already knew about the son, but that they and everyone else had seemed to have forgotten. His life, *and death*, had been prophesied from the beginning of time—but, *only through his death*, by his blood being shed by his being nailed to the pole, could the world be made whole again. You see, at some point in the past, so long ago that everyone seemed to have forgotten about it, God and his *human* children had had an impenetrable barrier placed between them—*until the son had died on the pole and torn it asunder*. Then, and only then, could they be fully reunited—*eternally*. God the father would accept nothing less than that, and his only son gave his life to make it happen—*because he had to*, because like his father, anything less than being one with his children was unacceptable.

Shahdow closed the book and reflected on the story; a hopeless situation that turned out to be the *only* true hope for all of humanity. Was it even remotely possible that his own hopeless situation wasn't what it seemed. In his mind, it was only a matter of time before the dragon destroyed everything he loved, including the princess who meant more to him than life itself. But, what if he was as blind as the people in the story—including *the son's followers*, to what was actually going on? Might these darkest of days in some way actually be an opportunity to look for a beacon of light? As hard as that was to believe, Shahdow determined to try, after all, what choice did he have—there *was* still a dragon. So, knowing that, he would continue on—*because he had to*.

Closing the book, he reshelfed it—but *he vowed it would only be for a day this time*, and climbed to his feet. He glanced at the sword and shield across the room, but shook his head. They weren't what he needed—*not today*. With his chin lifted with determination, he strode to the door and let himself out.

The Honor Garden was relatively quiet with the morning training sessions complete. Shahdow had missed them by going to the forest to battle the vile beasts. Most of the boys his age were long gone, but not all of them. The '*losers*' were still milling about, cleaning the practice

grounds and its assortment of implements. Some of the faces were very familiar to Shahdow, coming from his own training contingent, others not so much, most of them older boys who trained with Reginhald. Of Reginhald himself, there was no sign. Of course not. Shahdow would have been shocked if his friend was numbered amongst the losers. So...he'd have to make do with what he had. Which meant doing something he found almost as frightening as battling a vile beast. First though, he made his way over to the barrels filled with practice swords and sorted through them until he located his favorite, which he drew it out. Next, he crossed to the area where the shields were kept. Shields were *not* a part of *daily* training; it was Sir Grahson's opinion that a shield had its place, but that place tended to interfere with a *proper* swordsman range of motion, thus hindering a student's ability to learn while wielding one. In all his time in the Honor Garden these past months, Shahdow had received instruction on using a shield exactly twice, and both sessions had lasted less than an hour. With all due respect to the Master at Arms, Shahdow knew that needed to change—as valuable as a sword was—*it couldn't block flame*. It took a while to find one he was satisfied with; hardly wider than his forearm and only slightly taller, the diminutive oval shield had been crafted for the youngest students, but Sir Grahson was right, he didn't want a large shield to hinder his movements. Plus, even though it was made out of wood, it was noticeably heavier than the shape shifting metal shield he'd left back in Ohrder's chambers. The easy part done, Shahdow steeled himself for what came next.

Two of the boys dusting and polishing the plaques on the Wall of Honor were from his practice group and Shahdow approached them first. After hearing his request, Domhinik, the taller of the two and a good enough hand with a sword to look unsure of what to do with the polishing rag he was holding, looked around at him with surprise.

"You want us to do what?" he asked incredulously.

When Shahdow explained himself again, *slowly*, with more detail, Chordy, the other boy and the nephew of the Sir Grahson, if Shahdow remembered correctly, told him flatly, "Me, I've had enough of getting wacked around for one day, thank you."

"What if instead of just taking your next loser's shift if you best me, I also take your chamber pot duty the next time it falls to you?" Shahdow sweetened his offer.

"I'll do it," Domhinik said with sudden determination, but then he hedged a little bit as he asked, "But just so I know what I'm agreeing to, it's two of us against you, and you only win if you count *ten* marks against us, but we only have to have a combined *seven* against you?"

"That's right," Shahdow nodded. "But we need to find you a partner..."

"Do you get to count a mark if you land a hit with shield?" The question came from a beanpole of a boy covered in freckles and with arms as long as Shahdow's legs. His name was Ahdison and the only reason Shahdow could imagine he was still around was if he'd found himself matched up against Reginhald earlier in the day. "And what's with the shield and wanting to fight two of us at a time anyway...do you think you're something special?"

Shahdow wanted to laugh at that, but he just shook his head. "No, as far as the shield mark goes...and no, I know I'm nothing special. Today I had to watch some men die because they weren't ready for the monsters they were fighting against. A shield might have helped. Some of the beasts spit or throw things at you, and they rarely come at you one at a time, so you need to be able to fight more than one at a time," Shahdow left off, giving a forlorn shrug. "I don't know if this will help, but I want to try to get better for...the next time."

All three boys that were standing there with him, and several others close by, looked at him with startled expressions on their young faces. Of course, *everyone* knew that there had been several battles against the strange creatures roaming outside the city walls, but none of the young

men still in training to be knights could have guessed that one of their own had already been thrust into the fray. Ahdison was the first one to find his voice.

“Alright, I’m in,” he said with conviction. “Just tell me what you need me to do...and don’t worry about taking my shifts either. I’ll help you all I can.”

Beside him, Domhinik nodded his head. “The same goes for me. What do you want us to do?”

Shahdow was almost too shocked to speak, but after a moment, he managed to tell them, “Let’s treat it like a normal sparring session. One of you say, begin, and we go until someone lands the agreed upon marks.”

His two opponents exchanged looks and nods, then a moment later Ahdison called out, “Let’s begin!”

With their sudden and unexpected show of support, Shahdow had been a little worried that the other boys would go easy on him—that proved laughable from the instant the words left Ahdison’s mouth—his initial attack, a dashing thrust, almost took Shahdow’s left eye out. He just did manage to dance aside in time to keep the older boy from counting out his first mark. That happened a heartbeat later when Domhinik dropped down to swing a wide arching blow beneath the bottom of Shahdow’s shield that landed on his exposed calf. The surprise of the hit, followed by Domhinik’s shout of, “Mark one!”, left Shahdow reeling and in short order he was down four marks to zero.

Well, isn’t this something special, Shahdow thought morosely. “At this rate I’ll end up spending all my time cleaning and emptying chamber pots without getting a lick better at fighting monsters.

It was all well and good that the other boys had said they’d forego holding him to the bargain they’d made, Shahdow knew himself well enough to know that he *would* keep to his promise; sooner than later apparently. Ahdison nearly landed another hit, to his sword arm, set up by a combination of three quick thrusts from Domhinik on his other side, when Shahdow did two absolutely unthinkable things—according to expected swordsmanship standards; first, he left his feet, diving headlong away from his two opponents, landing in a heap that he managed to turn into an awkward summersault to regain his feet, *then*, he let his pursuers back him into a corner. That second part greatly restricted both his mobility and options, but it also did the same to the other boys. It did one other thing too. For the first time things proceeded at a pace that allowed Shahdow to think and plan instead of simply reacting to the flurry of blows that were being showered upon him. The first thing he noticed was that up to that point he’d acting as if he had *two* shields in his hands, and that foolishly he’d been doing the majority of his blocking with his *sword*.

Fight like an idiot and you’ll die like one too! Sir Grahson’s words from former training sessions rang in his head. From there, Shahdow had another thought. There was nothing wrong with using a sword as a shield—that’s why they spent so much time learning to parry, but by extension, *there was no reason not to use a shield as a weapon either!* Shahdow saw Ahdison bringing his sword down in a sweeping arch, and instead of just bringing his shield into position to block it, he lunged forward using it as a battering ram that not only took Ahdison’s blow in stride but nearly knocked the other boy off his feet. Then, before his lanky opponent could regain his footing, Shahdow moved in and landed *two* marks in quick succession. He might have got in another except he sensed Domhinik rushing up behind him. With a fluid pirouette, Shahdow held his shield out wide and parallel to the ground as he spun, so that the leading edge of it smacked against Domhinik’s blade, sending out a loud crack as the sword was jolted from his hand. Had

he not been so far behind, Shahdow would have let the chagrined boy pick up his lost weapon before reengaging; as it was, by the time Domhinik had rearmed himself the bout was tied at four marks apiece.

Out of the corner once more, his twin adversaries were free to come at him for two separate directions again, but no longer was that something that didn't come at a price. Shahdow's ever expanding shield technique as he grew more confident at deploying it in a variety of blows and counter blows, kept the boys wielding only swords on their toes as they had no choice but to retreat as Shahdow constantly bludgeoned them anytime they allowed him to get too close. But Ahdison and Domhinik adapted too, learning to dart in quickly from Shahdow's exposed flank anything he went too fervently at their partner. Mark wise, the contest slowed to a crawl and the better part of an hour had passed before Shahdow finally called out, "*Mark ten!*", with relief. They had been sitting at six and nine for what seem like forever. All three boys collapsed to the ground, placing their hands on their knees while they panted for breath.

"Ready to go again?" the question came a few minutes later. Shahdow had gone from a crouch to lying flat out on the Honor Garden's cold paving stones. He opened his eyes to see the Arm's Master's nephew Chordy and his older brother, Mohrl—who Shahdow knew to be Reginhald's greatest rival within his group, standing over him. Letting out a tired sigh, he said, "Sure, why not?"

The next morning, with his body aching and bruised in too many places to count, Shahdow entered the Honor Garden with Reginhald at his side and looked up to see Sir Grahson stationed high above at the front of the observation deck glowering down at him. He was actually in the exact same place and wearing the exact same expression as the night before when Shahdow had looked up and spotted him there as he was finally making his way out of the training center.

Reginhald noticed the brooding senior knight a moment later and turned to give Shahdow a probing look as he asked, "Is everything alright?"

"Probably not," Shahdow told him, while wondering what the punishment might be for someone who flagrantly disregarded the Master at Arm's unwritten '*no-shields*' policy.

Reginhald didn't have time to inquire further because Sir Grahson was already descending the stairs in all but a run to march over to his podium, where he immediately called the assembled knights and students to order. Within moments everyone in the Honor Garden had hurried over to their assigned areas to fall in at attention with every eye on the Master at Arms, watching him expectantly.

"We've got a little surprise in store for us this morning," Sir Grahson announced ominously, then his eyes went straight to the spot where his only lowborn student was doing his best to turn himself invisible. "Shahdow, would you please come forward and join me? And while you're at it, grab a sword...*and your shield* on the way."

Shahdow's heart was pounding in his chest, and he didn't dare to meet the senior knight's eyes, but he did as he was told, hurrying over to the do as he'd been instructed while trying to steel himself for *whatever* no doubt painful and humiliating fate lay before him.

"Mohrl and Chordy," the Master at Arms called out a moment later. "I need you as well, and grab your swords on the way if you haven't picked them up already."

Shahdow crossed the last few paces to take his place in front of the podium with a heavy heart. It was bad enough to be stood out in front of the entire assembled Honor Garden—he knew what he'd done and there was no denying that whatever his punishment turned out to be, it

was justified. But having the other two boys be subjected to it too, when they were only trying to help—*how could he ever hope to make it up to them?*

“Now, I want *everyone*...from the newest pledge to the most seasoned knight to pay close attention to what you’re about to see...it may very well save your life someday,” Sir Grahson’s gravelly voice commanded, leaving no doubt about how much he wanted his words heeded. Then, in a quieter tone that only reached the three nervous youngsters huddled before him, he added, “Alright boys...let’s give them a show they’ll not soon forget.”