

Chapter Forty

Juhstice's Justice

Five minutes after leaving the stable on his way to the Honor Garden, Shahdow turned back around, five minutes after that he was standing over the corpse of a dead man. In ten minutes Ol' Whinc had gone from wishing him a good day to bleeding all over the freshly raked dirt floor of the stable. *Ten minutes!* If he'd been a little slower in waking up he might have been able to stop whatever had happened. If he hadn't forgotten to put his oyster shell in his cloak before leaving—he'd promised Ohrder never to be without it, then he wouldn't have returned in time to realize that it was either Tuvor or Bixly—or both, who had killed the stable master. It had to have been since they were the only other people there when he had left the stable. There was no sign of either man inside the building at the moment. Just to be certain things were as grave as he thought they were, Shahdow bent down and placed his ear against the old man's chest. As expected, he heard nothing but silence.

"He's in here, come see," the voice, high with emotion, was familiar. Shahdow looked up and around to see Tuvor come racing through the stable's open double doors, followed a moment later by an armored member of the Watch.

When Tuvor saw Shahdow kneeling over the dead man, he stumbled to a stop and took a sharp intake of breath. It was a momentary falter; a second later he recovered and pointed an accusing finger in Shahdow's direction. "That's him right there...I don't know why he came back, but he's the one what killed Ol' Whinc!"

Shahdow climbed to his feet, too shocked to even deny the accusation. The soldier, probably noticing how young he was, looked over at him doubtfully, but then he did a doubletake and started striding purposefully forward. A quick glance down at himself told Shahdow why. When he'd been bent down to listen for a heartbeat, he'd gotten Ol' Whinc's blood all over himself. Shahdow had never been one to run from consequences—or *from anything for that matter*, but in that moment his mind started playing out what was about to happen. The watchman would arrest him for murdering the stable master based on Tuvor's testimony, in his defense he would claim that it was really Bixly who had done the deed even though he *hadn't* witnessed it himself. Meanwhile, Bixly was likely off cleaning the blood off of himself, so even if anyone *did* bother to look his way he would have had time to destroy any evidence to implicate him. The end result would surely be Shahdow being drug off to the Royal Court to face King Pryhde. The same king who had already wanted to hang him a number of other occasions. His last thought before turning and dashing toward the back door of the stables was, *I don't think Ohrder will be able to get me out of this one.*

Where he was going after leaving the stable was never in doubt. As far as he could see, his only chance of proving his innocence was *predicated* on bringing the real murderer to justice. Predicated wasn't a word he'd ever thought he'd find a use for, but doing so was barely a bright spot considering the bleakness of his day. He'd been to Bixly's place of residence exactly once in his life, a few years before when the groom had failed to show up for work and Ol' Whinc had wanted to make sure he truly was ill instead of enjoying a self-appointed day off. Shahdow had made his way to the little room above a teahouse that was barely bigger than a closet and found that Bixly was sickly—from drinking large quantities of beverages that weren't *tea*. Shahdow had covered for the man then, he had no intention of doing so now. His most immediate hope was that the groom hadn't relocated in the intervening timeframe.

The quickest way to the teahouse once you left the castle and crossed the moat was straight down the main thoroughfare until you were well into the city, then a quick right at Hawker's Lane and you were there. Taking that route covered in blood would likely draw much more attention than Shahdow wanted. So, he took a detour to the nearest outside water trough where he didn't even bother trying to wash away the blood—which would have been futile anyway, instead he grabbed up handfuls of black muck that had built up on the bottom of the trough and smeared it all over his blood stained clothing and the side of his face where he'd leaned down on the stable master's chest for good measure. *Then he took off at a run as fast as he feet could carry him.*

A filthy boy racing along at breakneck speed drew a few looks—but not as many as you'd think since no one was chasing after him—*yet!* He didn't slow down until he reached the teahouse and circled around the back to the narrow staircase leading up to Bixly's loft apartment, then he did take a few moments to catch his breath before creeping up the stairs to listen outside the door. There might have been the soft sound of someone moving around coming through the heavy wooden door, or maybe not. It could have just as easily been the gentle breeze that was blowing, or just his imagination for that matter. In the end, Shahdow reached down and turned the latch on the door, which swung open with a low groan of protest from the rusty hinges. Across the room a shirtless Bixly jerked around to stare at him with startled eyes.

His missing shirt, along with the discarded horse blanket he must have used to cover himself on his trip from the stable, was laying at his feet in front of washbasin the groom was standing before. Bixly had already washed Ol' Whinc's blood off of his face and hands and was in the process of doing the same for the knife he normally kept in the now empty sheath at his waist. The moment he laid eyes on Shahdow he apparently decided it was time to stop removing blood and add some more. Without hesitation, he charged straight at Shahdow.

I need my sword, Shahdow thought. Unfortunately, Ohrder had insisted he stopped carrying it after his foray into the Dearth with Dougerty, thinking he was less likely to end up around people or things wanting to kill him without it—*so much for that theory*. Still, the sword would make things so much easier, and after a fashion it *was* close at hand—if he could survive the next few seconds to retrieve it. Fortunately, Shahdow was quite accustomed to having people lunge at him with blades, dull wooden ones verses sharpened steel to be sure, but on the positive side, his usual opponents were highly trained as opposed to the stable groom who's experience before that morning was limited to whittling or cutting up his dinner. Unfortunately, there were two other factors in play that weren't working in Shahdow's favor. First, the room was so narrow a broad shouldered man would have had to turn sideways to navigate it, and more importantly, Shahdow had *never* faced anyone as desperate and motivated as Bixly.

With his teeth bared in a fierce snarl of rage, the groom went from standing stock still to an all-out dash with his knife hand leading the way. The extended blade should have given Shahdow a target to either dodge or deflect, but Bixly was slashing it widely back and forth, greatly complicating the situation. Coupled with the fact that there had only being a few paces between them *before* the groom's charge, Shahdow quickly found himself wanting his shield even more than his sword. A split second before Bixly reached him, Shahdow dove forward, beneath the sweeping blade and right at the grooms legs. He'd expected to feel the bite of the knife blade on his exposed back—and *there was a tug that told him his tunic would be in need of mending*, but a moment later he hit the ground to twist into a role that brought him back up onto his feet. Why he hadn't connected with Bixly's legs and sent the man sprawling he didn't know; somehow the groom must have jumped completely over him. But rather than worry about it,

Shahdow ran forward to scoop up the bloodied shirt off the floor. Only then did he turn to find that Bixby had gathered himself for another charge, which he did, letting out a roar of frustration as he raced forward again. But by that point Shahdow had the oyster shell open with his free hand and was reaching for the pearl.

As one small dank room became another larger, but no better lit one, Shahdow was already turning to run to the spot where his sword and shield were currently disguised as a stand mirror. Before he even got there, a loud thump came to his ears, making him turn to see what had happened. Bixly—the absolutely black, turned to stone version of Bixly, was lying face down on the ground somewhat balance on his outstretched arms, gently rocking back and forth as his inertia continued to play itself out after he'd crashed to the ground. Shahdow pivoted around to find Ohrder regarding him with a pronounced look of agitation written across his ancient face.

“Would you care to explain what’s going on here...*this time*?” the wizard growled.

After Shahdow did—including his reluctant confession that it was likely the entire force of the Watch was now out hunting him down, Ohrder shook his head impatiently and said, “I think you’re giving the Watch way to much credit, but just in case, have your shell ready and come back here if they try to stop you.”

“Come back her from where and stop me from what?” Shahdow asked with confusion.

“From asking the prince and princess to join us here so we can figure out what to do about this mess,” Ohrder said like it was the most apparent thing in the world.

“Prince Juhstice and Princess Chahrity?” Even though he was almost certain that was the case, with so many other royals from other kingdoms wandering around of late he thought he'd better check.

“Yes, those would be the ones,” Ohrder said distantly while frowning at the now still pitch black statue lying face down on his floor. “And while you’re at it, you might as well bring that other fellow...Tuvor wasn’t it...along with you when you come back.”

“How am I supposed to do that?” Shahdow exclaimed.

“How did you get *him* here?” Ohrder retorted, pointing down at the immobilized groom.

“Oh, right,” Shahdow mumbled, feeling so dimwitted that the wizard might as well have had to remind him that water was wet. Then, after taking only long enough to clean himself up, which included a change of clothes, he set out.

Ohrder had been right, none of the soldiers of the Watch he ran across cast a second glance his way, so the first task, convincing Prince Juhstice and Princess Chahrity to go to Ohrder’s chambers wasn’t as difficult as it was time consuming. Locating them was hard enough; Juhstice was meeting with the king, so Shahdow had to wait for him to finish with that, while Chahrity was having lunch with Princess Behlize, which took just as much patience on his part. Then, since you couldn’t very well tell their Royal Highnesses to just go see Ohrder and all their questions would be answered, he had to spend time explaining what was going on before they would consent to his request. That actually had a hidden benefit to it since by the time he finally reached the stables things were quiet; Ol’ Whinc’s body had been taken away and the spot where he’d lain was being tended to by Tuvor who was busy raking fresh dirt over the area. Since Tuvor’s back was to him, Shahdow just strolled up behind him and activated the pearl.

As the well-lit stable transformed into Ohrder’s chambers with its cased windows and minimally sconced lighting, Shahdow’s eyes struggled to bring his surrounding’s into focus. At least he was familiar having to do that. In front of him, Tuvor let out a gasp and dropped his rake. Then the young stable hand slowly looked around, taking in the roomful of people whose eyes were upon him before locking on the one who wasn’t looking at anything at all—Bixly was

still a black statue leaning face down on the floor, though someone had pushed him off to one side. While Tuvor was still staring at his workmate, Ohrder waved a hand and the groom became flesh and blood again and collapsed in a heap. Somehow or another he managed to avoid falling on his own knife, which he still held gripped in one hand. A moment later he had jumped to his feet to brandish the blade in a sweeping motion around him, but that was as far as he got before Ohrder muttered something under his breath while making another gesture and the groom froze in place again. This time, instead of turning black and being completely immobilized, Shahdow could see his eyes darting around wildly while his chest rose and fell like he'd just finished running a mile. But, from what Shahdow understood about how the first spell Ohrder had placed him under worked, that wasn't all that far from the truth.

"Is this the witness?" Prince Juhstice's eyes were riveted to Tuvor's terrified face. The intensity radiating off of the royal heir was palpable and Shahdow was suddenly very glad that unyielding gaze wasn't directed at him—which brought another thought to mind, making him quickly drop down to one knee with his head bowed low!

"Your Highnesses..." Those were the only words that came to him; you could hardly wish them a good day under such solemn circumstances, nor did it seem appropriate to greet each one of the royals since both Prince Dharis and Princess Behlize were also in attendance.

Seeing Shahdow's example, Tuvor immediately dropped down as well—onto both of his knees while almost slamming his head into the hard wooden floor in his haste. Words however failed him completely and he just knelt there trembling.

"Arise," Juhstice commanded and both boys climbed to their feet, Tuvor's actions completed with panic fueled fervor, after which he stood at rigid attention. "I'll ask again, is this the witness?"

Tuvor's continued silence left the question lying in Shahdow's lap. He nodded his head, then let his eyes drift to the man beside him as he said, "Yes, Your Highness, he is."

"Tell me what happened this morning," Juhstice said, his voice as hard as the walls surrounding them.

Shahdow was quartered away from Tuvor, but he still saw the man's eyes dart first to Bixly's spell-locked form before answering. He drew in a deep breath and then began, "It was like any other morning until Ol' Whenc showed up...and I should add that he was in a real foul mood too, Highness. Then he and..."

He paused for a moment to nod in Shahdow's direction, but before he could go any further, Prince Juhstice cut him off. "Whatever you do...don't, lie to me."

The words carried a weight with them that made Tuvor visibly slump as he drew in upon himself. A moment later Shahdow heard his quiet whimpers as he fought against the sobs that racked his body. The prince waited him out. Eventually, the stable hand was able to begin again, though his eyes stayed glued to the ground in front of him.

"Ol' Whenc showed up and started in on Bixly. He wasn't satisfied with the way Bixly was grooming your horse, Your Highness. That's nothing new, but Bixly didn't take it this time. They started arguing, that led to blows, then Bixly pulled out his knife...and that was that," Tuvor gave a shrug, likely thinking he'd done as he'd been asked, but Juhstice wasn't satisfied yet.

Shahdow had watched the prince throughout Tuvor's testimony and had seen the pain on his face as he listened to Ol' Whenc's part in what had happened. That was understandable given that Shahdow knew how much effort Juhstice had put into trying to get the stable master to change the way he dealt with his helpers. It wasn't only Juhstice with Ol' Whenc either; Princess

Chahrity had all but moved into the royal kitchen to mentor Mistress Lehwellen, and those two were just the ones at the top of the list the royals were trying to convince to reform their ways. Unfortunately the message hadn't quite sunk in with the stable master, and for that he'd paid the price with his life.

"What happened next?" Juhstice demanded in a tone devoid of compassion.

Tuvor nearly locked up again, but then drew in a hard breath and actually managed to look the prince in the eye. "Then Bixly told me to go find the Watch and tell them the pot boy killed Ol' Whinc...and I did what he said."

"Why...why would you do such thing?" The question came out like it was a great mystery to the prince.

"Because Bixly is my friend," Tuvor said simply, then he nodded in Shahdow's direction. "He's just another 'H', and there's not a single one of them in the kingdom that truly cares if any of us commoners live or die."

Rather than deny the charge, Prince Juhstice turned his attention to Bixly as he told Ohrder, "Release him."

The wizard waved a hand and the groom took a stumbling step forward as gravity reasserted its grip on him once more. Bixly, still clutching his knife, looked from Ohrder to the two princes—both with swords at their sides, then, showing he wasn't a complete fool, straightened his shoulders and sheathed his own blade.

"What have you to say for yourself?" Juhstice asked the newly freed groom.

Bixly gave an arrogant laugh. "What's there to say? You're going to do what you please no matter what...just like you always do. But make no mistake, *Your Highness*...your days are as numbered as mine. Lord Khaos is coming for you and he will not be denied."

"And what do you think your master intends for you?" Juhstice smiled for the first time; it was a very hard and humorless smile. At Bixly's blank look, he continued. "I have seen how your Lord Khaos treats his servants...I watched him burn many of them to a crisp without a moment's hesitation while they were already fighting for their lives against our knights. But maybe after he turns you into one of his deformed beasts you won't really care if you live or die anyway."

The groom's defiant expression became instantly sallow as he pondered what the prince's words might mean. A moment later, Juhstice removed all doubt of what he was planning when he declared, "Bixly tar Wanlong, I find you guilty of murder and treason against the realm. Your sentence I leave in your hands...immediate execution by hanging, or..."

Catching Shahdow's slow head shake out of the corner of his eye, Juhstice stopped and looked the knight in training. "What is it...?"

Shahdow pointed at the still infected scar on the back of the groom's hand. "That won't work with him anymore...you'd have to remove either his head or his hand...maybe both."

The entire room—including Bixly himself, looked thoughtful for a few moments upon hearing that, then Juhstice gave a nod of assent and amended, "Then make it execution by the headsman, or you can choose to return to your master for however long and painful your life may be."

Bixly licked his lips nervously. "You'd let me walk out the front gate?"

Shahdow was having just as hard of a time believing it, but the prince gave a firm nod. "Essentially. Ohrder will open a portal near where you met with the dragon when he marked your hand and we'll send you through. If you ever try to return to the city you'll be immediately escorted to the headsman."

The former groom let out a laugh. "Fine, I choose to leave."

Juhstice looked over at Ohrder, who without further prompting raised a hand to wave at a door in the wall off to Bixly's left. A moment later it swung open of its own accord, revealing the stark, skeletal landscape of the burned out Royal Forest with the white pallor of the Dearth stretching out just beyond. Bixly sauntered over to the portal grinning like he'd just won the prize pig at the autumn fair.

"I can't believe you'd just let me go," Bixly laughed as he stepped across the threshold.

"Neither will Khaos...*I can assure you of that*," Ohrder told him, then he flexed his fingers and slammed the door, but not before everyone still left inside the room saw the look of horror wash over Bixly's face.

Prince Juhstice watched the closed door for a silent minute, then shifted his attention over to Tuvor who was visibly shaken by what had just happened. In fact, Shahdow thought it not unlikely that the man might lose his breakfast at any moment.

"You have a decision to make too," Juhstice began and tears immediately started to roll down the stable hand's quivering cheeks.

"I don't want to die," Tuvor sobbed.

"I'm sure the stable master felt the same way," the prince said without sympathy. "Yet you stood by and watched while he was murdered."

"I'm sorry," Tuvor dropped down to his knees and thrust his hands out pleadingly. "I didn't like the old man, but I didn't want him to die. Please, Your Highness, have mercy upon me."

Juhstice's face remained as hard as a granite cliff. "Your choice is to renounce your allegiance to the dragon...and we will know if you try to do so with nothing more than empty words. Or, you can follow your friend and continue to intertwine your fate with his."

Tuvor's head snapped up, locking his eyes on the prince in disbelief as hope began to bloom upon his tortured face. "I renounce him...I renounce everything about him...I swear to you, I will have nothing more to do with him."

Prince Juhstice nodded his acceptance. "Good. Then go and seek out the Captain of the Watch and tell him who really killed the stable master."

Tuvor was suddenly looking shaken again. "But Your Highness, won't he punish me for lying to the other watchman?"

"He may," Juhstice told him. "Which is only what you deserve. But, if he says that you are to receive more than a dozen lashes, or a fortnight in prison, then tell him he is to come and see me and I will *again* intercede on your behalf."

Tuvor just stood there for a few seconds; he was still shaking, and seemed like he wanted to plead for further mercy, but then he just nodded and dropped back down to pay his respects before leaving. Shahdow thought he even detected a note of gratitude in his voice as he did so. More importantly, he was almost certain his ability to *sense* the stableman's presence even before he left the room was starting to fade.