

Chapter Seven

Lifters, Shifters, Bashers and Berries

The abbreviated discussion they'd had on the way to the meeting hadn't provided Ohrder with all of the details of what the prince and princess had been up to. A lot of what the man Fingers was saying and asking about was far from *clear* to him. But he'd picked up enough from what Juhstice and Chahrity *had* said to feel like he had a pretty good idea of where the short-fingered thief might be going. For instance, the prince had mentioned that both the princess and her shadow were training as "*lifters*", even though his preference was for his sister to be a "*shifter*", since women tended to be better at distracting people—especially men, than children or men were. As far as a Jobber went, the likelihood was that that was just a term applied to everyone in the thief's nefarious line of work. Or so he hoped. Either way, Ohrder realized he needed to say something since Juhstice obviously wasn't.

"I suppose if I was *bad* at what I do you might have heard of me," Ohrder observed nonchalantly. "Say if I was caught with my hands in a another man's pocket and lost some fingers for it...that type of thing will get you noticed. But, I never have been. Not once. And you'll never have heard of any of my berries either, because they never know they've been picked...or they're too embarrassed to admit it ever happened."

Fingers mulled that over for a few moments, rubbing what remained of his digits together thoughtfully, then gave a shrug. "Maybe that's all true, but I'll still be needin' some proof." He nodded in the direction of Ohrder's four companions. "I've seen them in action. You'll have to pass the same muster they did before I'll be willing to introduce you to anyone else."

"Who's the toughest berry you know of?" Ohrder asked, suspecting he already knew what his answer would be. He wasn't disappointed.

"Ha. Well, that would be me," Fingers gave an incredulous laugh. "But old man Tahnner who owns the tack shop up the way a bit...if you can snag a purse, or even a few coins off of him...that would go a long ways toward earning my respect."

"Why would that be? What's so special about him?" Ohrder asked; not that he really cared, but if his instincts were correct, a '*shifter's*' next task *after* selecting his berry was to distract him. Before the question was out of his mouth he had already completed the second, giving the princess' shadow a silent nudge in the form of an invisible ear flick—a tactic he tended to use any time the youngster was a bit remiss in doing something the wizard told him to do. Out of the corner of his eye, Ohrder saw the boy turn to give him a questioning look. That coincided nicely with Fingers reply.

"He's so worried about being thieved and so tight with his money that he keeps it in a bull hide that's not just sewn shut but also secured by a *chain* around his neck," Fingers explained. "Supposedly, it takes him the better part of an hour to cut it open on the rare occasions he does decide to part with a few of his precious coins."

Ohrder gave a firm nod in Finger's direction as if in appreciation of what the thief had just told him and said, "I think it's time to teach *this* unpickable berry a thing or...*two*. A man like that likely has more than just a purse on him. Whatever he's carrying, we'll relieve him of *all* of it."

The boy was still looking at him blankly, so Ohrder suppressed a sigh and switched from an ear flick to a not so gentle "nudge" in Finger's direction. Begone's stumbled forward with a startled look, but then his eyes went wide and he turned to gape at Ohrder with wonder. Happily,

that lasted only a moment, then his expression became intensely calculating as he shifted his attention over to where Fingers stood facing the wizard with his arms crossed confidently across his chest.

Satisfied that things were finally headed in the right direction, Ohrder continued. “Since he’s obviously thwarted you so many times in the past, I imagine you’ll take great satisfaction in our finally taking him down, even if you weren’t able to accomplish it yourself, he paused reflectively. “If you like we can even let it be known that *you* were behind the whole thing, that should go a long ways toward restoring your reputation.”

“What...? I never said I tried to pick Tahnner,” Fingers bowed up, his face turning a shade darker even in the weak moonlight. “And my reputation is as sterling as any. I’m a master of my craft...Dougerty himself couldn’t be any better respected than me!”

Ohrder folded his hands across the top of his walking staff and gave the protesting thief a placating smile. “*Of course*...I’m sure you’re a *pillar* amongst your peers. Still, it probably wouldn’t hurt any to make sure everyone knows it was the *infamous* Fingers who finally picked the unpickable pocket,” Ohrder’s smile grew. “Why I imagine word of it will spread throughout the kingdom like wildfire. Soon *everyone* will know just who’s the greatest thief in the land.”

“What...? No!” Fingers’ pompous arrogance transformed into worried irritation in the blink of an eye. “You’ll do no such thing. I’ll not have every soldier of the Watch combing the streets for me, looking to stretch my neck.”

“But weren’t you just deriding *me* for my *lack* of notoriety?” Ohrder asked innocently—or at least he feigned it to the best of his ability. Not that it mattered all that much. The ‘*shift*’ had worked and the boy was on the move, sliding with fluid grace over to his target where he stationed himself behind Fingers and just off to one side—but not so much that he’d be detected by the man’s peripheral vision. Ohrder was frankly amazed at how gracefully the youngster moved, but that was only because he rarely watched the boy. Begone’s time in the forest, climbing trees, leaping from stone to stone to cross a brook, or wielding the odd old branch to practice his ‘*swordsmanship*’ had imbued him with an effortless athleticism any professional acrobat would have envied.

Begone wasn’t the only one in motion. Chahrity, from her position, had seen the boy creep forward and had immediately assessed the situation for what it really was to move in to flank Fingers’ other side. Using their own bodies and the pickpocket’s as shields, Ohrder couldn’t see what else they were doing, but only a moment later, both of them stepped back and in unison looked up to give him a wide smile.

“There’s a world of difference between being known within the trade and having every king’s man bantering your name about thinking of collecting a fat reward,” Fingers was so caught up in his righteous indignation that he failed to notice that Ohrder was suddenly looking bored enough to fall asleep standing there in the middle of the street.

“Yes, yes, fine, we’ll just keep it between the six of us,” the wizard waved an impatient hand. “Now, the berry’s been picked, so let’s be off to this meeting you’ve set up.”

“What are you talking about?” Fingers demanded. “Tahnner’s place is a half dozen blocks from here, and we’re not going anywhere else until...”

Something must have clicked for him at that point, because he broke off and began to look around, eyeing the people behind him suspiciously. For their part, Begone and Chahrity just gazed back at him with innocent faces. Juhstice on the other hand was wearing a concerned grimace, while Sir Steward, who was apparently enjoying the show, was sporting a wide grin. It

was likely the latter that made Fingers uncross his arms to begin patting his hands over his body searching for things that were no longer to be found.

“Tahnner wasn’t the toughest berry...or the closest,” Ohrder explained once the pickpocket faced back around to give him an angry scowl. “And I’m sure you consider your time just as valuable as I do mine.”

“Give ‘em back!” the six-fingered thief growled, thrusting out a hand toward Ohrder even though those holding his possessions were gathered behind him.

Ohrder gave a disinterested nod and Begone and the princess stepped forward to reunite their berry with *both* of the purses they’d lifted off of him. Fingers snatched them back angrily—humiliation disguises itself as many different—‘*darker*’ emotions, then promptly turned his back and started marching toward the alley he’d exited only a few minutes earlier.

“Wait! Where are you going? Are we supposed to follow you?” Juhstice called out in panic as he saw his carefully laid plans start to crumble before his eyes.

“Don’t even think about it,” the pickpocket called back over his shoulder without slowing. “I’ll not be taking the likes of you anywhere, especially not into the inner circle of the Hand where you have to be able to trust the man or woman beside you with your very life.”

“That’s quite alright,” Ohrder called out. “I’m sure we’ll be able to find our own way to your inner circle eventually. Once we do, I’ve got some questions for your Mister Dougerty and the others...like, why do people who have to trust each other with their lives still feel the need to carry around two money pouches?”

Finger’s was already into the mouth of the alleyway and picking up speed when he braked to a sudden stop. When he turned around his face was completely masked by shadows, but countenance aside, his suddenly slumped shoulders told Ohrder everything he needed to know even before the words tumbled out of the defeated pickpocket’s mouth.

“Follow me,” Finger’s said weakly, then without another word he turned back around and led the way deeper into the shadows.

The inner circle actually met in a square; Bartholohmy Square, in the back room of an Inn called The Goose and Gander. The innkeeper even somewhat resembled a gander with is long neck and the odd way his kept bobbing his head when listening or talking. His wife on the other hand was a tiny little woman wearing a vibrant green dress as she flirted around the place, tidying this or straightening that. Ohrder took one look at her and thought, *humming bird*. The hallway leading to the back room was wide, which was handy since it was lined on both sides by large men wearing rough clothing and even rougher expressions. There were no weapons *visible* on any of them, discounting their heavily knuckled fists. But that seemed perfectly appropriate since the wizard could only assume he was looking at a throng of bashers. The last massive body between the group following Fingers and the open door stepped out into the hall to block their way while they were still a pace away.

“I was told you’d be bringing four,” the giant growled, holding up a hand and giving Fingers a surly frown.

“Well, things change,” the master thief replied. “Dougerty wanted talent and I’ve brought him a full crew. Step aside, Higgins, we’ve kept them waiting long enough.”

The basher considered for a moment, then shrugged and went back to leaning against the wall. “It’s your neck.”

At first glance upon entering the room you’d be tempted to think it was just another eating house, sprouting a dozen or so tables, each with its own group of people who may or may not

have even known each other as they ate and drank and conversed with each other while paying little or no attention to the world around them. On closer inspection you might pick up on the fact that there were only a handful of women in the room and none of them dressed in anything close to matronly attire, nor did any of them seem to be paired up with any particular man, no matter how close together they might be seated, nor was there a single child to be seen. But if you were particularly observant a few other things would likely draw your attention; like the fact that despite the apparently haphazard arrangement of the tables, and all of them being nearly filled to capacity, no one was sitting with their back to the door. And that the table farthest from the door had the only man in the room *not* talking to someone else, who also happened to be the lone person *openly* watching the arrival of Fingers and his small troop of followers.

"I'd ask why you're late but I can see there's been a complication," Dougherty spoke softly as they approached his table. It was easy to pick up his words because the room had suddenly grown eerily quiet. There wasn't even the scrape of a single chair shifting, but suddenly every head and eye were looking in their direction.

Ohrder looked back at the man looking at him and thought, *He's thinner...I wonder what else has changed?*

"He's a shifter," Fingers supplied by way of explanation. "And from what I've seen, a good one."

"Does he have a name?" the question was possibly directed at Fingers—the chief thief had as yet to move his eyes off of Ohrder; in any event, Fingers was the one to answer.

"Ord," he nodded in Juhstice's direction. "Or so the basher says. Claims to have a history of working with him."

"A shifter in my city who I've never heard of..." Dougherty mused aloud. "...who comes strolling in here like it's *his* city. Now what do you make of that?"

"I had similar thoughts," Fingers confessed in a voice tinged with worry. "But I figured you'd want to see him for yourself."

"If you'd ever been to Myhth...I believe you call it Fahraway, then you might have heard of me...if you knew my real name," Ohrder interjected, and was pleased to see Dougherty's expression darken even further. As well it should; Ohrder had never actually been to Myhth before, but the leader of thieves certainly had, and it wasn't something he would soon forget.

"And what brings you all the way across the sea to our fair land?" Dougherty asked once he managed to unclench his jaw enough to speak.

"A short time ago someone I knew, someone I trusted, betrayed me. A young man I took as my apprentice decided the world would be a better place without me in it," Ohrder's lie came easily since it was simply the truth turned inside out. "I'll eventually get around to *repaying* him for his breach of etiquette, but for now I'm content to let his attention *shift* to other matters."

Dougherty considered that for a few thoughtful moments. Ohrder was hopeful the thief leader's suspicious mind had been diverted away from studying him—at least temporarily, to drift back over his own jaded past, a past that was mired in treachery and betrayal. Possibly that did happen, but eventually Dougherty stopped frowning to give Ohrder, of all things, a smile as he pushed himself up from his table. Then he took a leisurely stool across the narrow distance separating them and placed himself squarely in front of the wizard.

"I find myself wondering," Dougherty began in a light tone. "How is it that though you've only just arrived here, that it *feels* like I *know* you? Have we met before?"

The question ended with the younger man bending his knees to try to get a look into the deep shadows of Ohrder's hood. The wizard hesitated only a moment, then reached up to pull the

sheltering cloth off his head. The second he'd stepped into the room and recognized the other man he knew the time might come when he would have to reveal himself and simply appearing as an older and grimmer version of himself would never do. He was limited without being able to use a mirror, but far from helpless. By the time he was a dozen steps into the room he'd woven an old but reliable illusion that made him appear as a still wizened, but much *meatier* man who had traded off his facial hair for a somewhat vacant look in his eyes. While the latter didn't fit well with the way he'd been speaking and behaving; well, you can't always judge a book by its cover. Ohrder could only hope the chief thief didn't continue to flip too many pages.

"I think I'd remember meeting you," Ohrder said, then gave a shrug. "Or maybe not...you do resemble a berry I picked once back in Myhth. But that's not likely...*is it?*"

The scowl came back as Dougerty gave an indignant huff. "Not likely since you're still breathing." Then he gave a dismissive wave. "No matter though. And as far as your services go...we don't need any more shifters for what we've got planned. Good day to you, Mister Ord...or whatever your real name is."

With a quick turn on his heel that would have made any soldier proud, the leader of the Hand marched back to his table and reclaimed his seat. "You can show our guest out, Fingers. Then get back in here...we've got business to attend to."

When he'd set out from the castle Ohrder had done so thinking that he was wasting valuable time '*mothering*' the royal heirs—since their biological one certainly wasn't up to the task; his concern was more about making sure they didn't stumble into something so embarrassing that he'd have to clean up later. That changed the moment he'd stepped into the back room of the Goose and Gander. So, Dougerty's sudden dismissal didn't come as just a surprise, it was a massive inconvenience, since the wizard desperately needed to know what the man who once wore polished golden armor was planning to do to the kingdom he once served. Even so, he gave a '*no matter*' shrug of his own and let Fingers escort him from the room. Everyone watched him go; his four companions with very concerned expressions on their faces, looking for all the world like they'd just decided to take a stroll across the moat without first stopping to check to see if the drawbridge was down. Which served them right for rushing off to entangle themselves and the boy in such a quagmire of—well, of whatever nefarious business Dougerty and his minions were up to. They deserved to be left alone—not that he would actually let that happen. The oversized meeting room was sparsely furnished, but one thing it did boast was a large mirror mounted on one wall.

As he walked along docilely behind Fingers, Ohrder reached back to pull his cowl back over his head; mostly to hide the smile that emerged on his face. True to his master's orders, Fingers did escort him out of the room, but the moment they cleared the entrance hall the thief abandoned him—after giving their burly leader strict instruction not to let "the codger" back in. That freed the wizard up to reach a hand into one of the many pockets of his cloak and remove one of the objects he was never without. It had once belonged to the queen, but she had so many others she hadn't even missed it when Ohrder had noticed it one day and decided it was just perfect size to fit in your hand without anyone even being able to tell it was there. After finding a quiet corner in the alleyway on the outside of the inn, Ohrder lifted up the little mirror and rejoined the meeting he'd been thrown out of, just as it was being called into session. It lasted a long time, but Ohrder stayed even longer—even after Dougerty had dismissed everyone but his lieutenants. And that's when the real business of the evening began.