

Chapter Six

Disorderly Conduct

Another knock came at Ohrder's door. It was becoming such a common occurrence that the wizard had barely had time to get through muttering to himself about the last miscreant that had dared to interrupt his cherished solitude—if you could call spending time with a chatty child and an even more verbose book solitude. In fact, it had become such a frequent event over the past few days that Ohrder even recognized the knocker. *Rap-rap, rap-rap-rap* meant Sir Steward, Prince Juhstice's valet had come calling *again*.

Ohrder paused in his writing long enough to look over at the boy and snap, "It's for you."

Begone looked up from his book with bewilderment. Not because he didn't understand what the wizard had meant—he too had become quite familiar with Sir Steward's knuckle nuances, and he recognized that he was the likely reason for the valet's visit. But *why* the wizard was looking at him to *do* something about it was a great mystery. One that got clarified a moment later.

"The door doesn't open itself, you know," Ohrder's perpetual frown deepened noticeably.

There were some things that could have been said to the that; *yes it does...all-the-time, and it closes itself too...and you'd better get out of its way quick unless you want your backside bruised*, or even, *liar, you should turn your own tongue to stone!* Such were the thoughts that went through the confused boy's mind that wisely never made it to his lips. Instead of putting his jaw to work he engaged his legs and trotted over to tug open the massive wooden door; something he was quite adept at since as far as Begone knew *he* was the only person that the monstrous thing didn't routinely leap aside for; which was another thought he kept to himself.

"Excellent, you are here," Sir Steward said with satisfaction, his eyes lighting up the moment he laid eyes on the youngster before him. "The princess has need of her shadow."

"Where else would he be?" Ohrder growled without bothering to look up. Had he done so he would have seen the baffled expression on Sir Steward's face. Not that it would have kept him from firing off his even more perplexing question. "I thought you were the *prince's* valet?"

"Ahhh...*I am*," Sir Steward answered. While he was a man most would consider to be of above average intelligence, subtly, and therefore sarcasm, was an unexplored territory for him.

"Then why are you always running errands for the princess...are you aspiring to become one of her next ladies in waiting?" A past master of both subtly and sarcasm, Ohrder hadn't even paused his writing to fire off his next two barbs.

"Because Prince Juhstice told me to," the valet gave the only answer he could. It was not his place to question the prince; in fact his loyalty to his liege ran so deep that he'd never once even *wondered* if one of the prince's orders might be anything less than exactly what was needed done. Should the prince go so far as to give him a command that would cost him his very life—and one day he would, Sir Steward would still not have hesitated to fulfill his duty with the utmost alacrity.

"Hmmmph," was the wizard's surly reply to that.

"We're to meet her in the usual place," Sir Steward shifted his attention back to Begone once he finally realized the wizard had also shifted his.

The boy nodded enthusiastically. As much as he loved the time he spent with his book, being the princess' shadow was almost like living out one of the stories he read there. He was on the

verge of retuning his prized possession to its place on the shelf and hurry after the valet when Ohrder apparently decided to expand his role beyond that of a disgruntled spectator.

“He’ll be along in a little while,” the wizard interjected, setting aside his quill to lock eyes with the valet.

“But...I believe this is a matter of some urgency...” Sir Steward started to protest from his position straddling the threshold. That was as far as he got before the door that *‘doesn’t open itself’* slammed shut in his face. Because he was an athletic and nimble-footed fellow he just did managed to keep from having his nose realigned.

“*Usual*, is a very interesting word,” Ohrder observed, giving Begone a look as probing as his comment. “It infers so much. In this case, not only that you and the princess are going to meet up in a particular place, but that then the two of you are going to go off and do something in particular as well. Do tell, my boy...what might that be?”

Ever since the talking book, the even more enchanting princess, and the whole concept of *wanting* had entered his life, Begone the potboy had started to change. How much more communicative he’d become in recent days was one of the more noticeable transformations. In spite of that, it took the wizard the better part of an hour to get the whole story out of him. A story that Ohrder decided—oh so reluctantly, that he needed to see for himself.

“And you’re saying we’ll be at this all night...until nearly sunrise?” the old mage groused from his newly arrived at station standing in front of a mirror that Begone would have sworn hadn’t been in the room until the wizard had walked over to it. In fact he’d never seen anything like it before; standing nearly six foot tall, it was housed in a shiny silver frame with intricate etchings all around. Impressive as that was, the only odd thing about it was that as ornate as the thing was you would have expected to find it as the centerpiece of Queen Vhanity’s collection instead of in the wizard’s chambers. There was one very unusual physical feature about the mirror though; instead of being oval or square, as you would expect, it resembled nothing as much as an oversized shield. Well, and there was the fact that the reflection of Ohrder in the mirror’s *‘glass’* kept changing clothes while the wizard himself was still wearing his normal white robe.

“That’s the way it...*usually* is,” Begone paused to savor the new depth of the word he’d always taken for granted. “*Often*, I end up doing my rounds as soon as we’re back, then I go to bed.”

“Hmmm...well, how can you expect someone to know how to take proper care of a child when they’re really just a child themselves?” Ohrder mused distractedly. Then he gave a nod and asked, “What do you think?”

Begone looked past Ohrder’s tall and lanky frame to the mirror where an even older version of the wizard was stooped over wearing a tattered and soiled woolen cloak, while leaning on a staff as gnarled as the fingers clutching it.

“That would do well,” the boy nodded his head appreciatively; though he didn’t know what the point was, he couldn’t see them dragging a gigantic mirror around with them while they went about their night’s activities.

“Then we’d best be off before someone else comes to beat down my door,” Ohrder didn’t bother to hide his irritation at just the thought of that happening. But instead of turning around to exit the room, he stepped forward and *into* the mirror, which gave a hard ripple like when someone has thrown a large stone into a perfectly still pond. By the time its shiny surface was settled back into place the hunched over old beggar came hobbling out from behind the mirror.

“Quit your ogling, we’ve got places to go and a long night in front of us,” the wizard chided the gaping boy, then he turned and led the way toward the door—which of course opened well before he reached its threshold.

The *usual* place turned out to be a place people *usually* avoided. Ehlsewhere had one city dump—officially, unofficially, there was a second just outside the rear door of the royal kitchens. That wasn’t uncommon, the same thing happened in other kingdoms, but in Ehlsewhere even stealing the king’s garbage was a hanging offense, so the poor and destitute who would normally happily take care of most of the mess didn’t dare step foot near the place. The end result was a putrid mess—in more ways than one.

The boy and wizard exited the castle proper and Begone immediately broke off to hurry over to a pile of discarded fruit crates, leaving Ohrder to survey his surroundings with a disgusted look on his face while reaching up a hand to pinch his nostrils. He could have turned his own nose to stone, that would have completely deadened his sense of smell, but if a strong enough sneeze were to overtake him he could very well be left with nothing but a gaping crater in the middle of his face. While Ohrder pinched and looked around for the rest of the *usual* dump dwellers, Begone pulled a tattered grey cloak out of one of the bins and slipped it on over the fancy new clothes the princess had given him, neatly masking them and instantly transforming him from a castle servant into a street urchin.

“What do you think?” Begone inquired, posing the same question to Ohrder that the wizard had asked him a short time before.

“I think that now you probably stink as badly as this place does,” Ohrder grouched, but in fact the young boy and old man *did* complement each other quite well; the major difference being that the wizard’s garb only *appeared* to have been gnawed on by rats. “Where do you suppose your cohorts are...I thought this was supposed to be an urgent matter?”

While Begone sifted through his growing vocabulary and still came up blank on what a “*cohort*” might be—no matter, the book would fill that gap easily enough later, Ohrder’s question got answered by the sound of crunching egg shells as Prince Juhstice, Princess Chahrity and Sir Steward made their way out from behind one of the particularly large piles of refuse, all looking as dirty and disheveled as he and the boy did. Then Juhstice just stood there frowning at the wizard. His sister adjusted quicker to the presence of their unexpected guest and found her voice first.

“What are you doing here, Ohrder?” her words were pointed but her tone was the same as if they were exchanging greetings while passing in the hall.

“Something I’m sure I’ll regret,” the wizard snapped. “What are *you* doing here?”

Chahrity rarely frowned but she got one then as she looked from Ohrder to the boy at his side with confusion. Ohrder gave a sigh of impatience and continued, “He told me what he knows...which apparently isn’t much...something about cleaning up the streets, pickpockets, cut-purses and the like. None of it made much sense.”

“Ahmm, yes,” Juhstice found his voice. “We thought it best not to burden Shadow with *all* the details of our activities. That way should things take an unexpected turn he wouldn’t feel obligated to...” The prince squirmed mentally for a moment before weakly finishing with, “...fabricate something.”

“The boy’s no liar!” Ohrder’s voice dropped an octave, causing Juhstice to drop any pretense of being stately and chivalrous.

"I know that," the prince said quickly. "Trust me, we would *never* ask him to do something he shouldn't...something *wrong*."

That made Ohrder tilt his head to the side. "He *did* mention something about learning to become something referred to as a...*lifter*? Which from the sounds of it is just another word for pickpocket."

"Do you recall our last conversation about how doing the wrong thing can actually be the *right thing*?" Juhstice put in quickly. He took the wizard's glare as agreement and continued. "Well, strange as it might seem, *stealing*, from thieves, might be the way to eventually rid Ehlsewhere of all of its criminals."

"According to your father, there are no criminals in Ehlsewhere," the wizard pointed out sourly.

"Then he's either *wrong* or...*fabricating*," Juhstice said with a sigh.

"Sometimes people want to believe something so badly they are blinded to what's really happening," Chahrity, ever the peacemaker, suggested. Ohrder gave a huff to that.

"Do you suppose we could continue this conversation someplace less *fragrant*?" the wizard asked. He'd pinched his nostrils again so the words come out so nasally they were almost a whine, causing Begone to have to suppress a giggle.

"Right, we should be on our way," the prince nodded. "We're already late enough as it is."

"Late for what?" Ohrder inquired once they were far enough into the city that there was only the normal mixture of pleasant and not so pleasant smells to deal with.

"We've a meeting with a fellow named Fingers who's a lieutenant in the Hand," Juhstice explained as if that explained everything. After a lengthy series of follow up questions and answers—most of the best of the latter supplied by Chahrity, Ohrder learned that the Hand was an organization of '*fair-minded*' criminals intent on redistributing the city's wealth amongst the '*haves*' and '*have-nots*', with a focus on ensuring the haves had less—preferably less than less, and the have-nots had lots and lots. Based on what he knew of human nature, Ohrder did some of deductive reasoning of his own and concluded that if the leaders of the Hand got their way there would be nothing '*common*' left to them since they would have effectively switched places with the very rich men they claimed to abhor. When Ohrder voiced his suspicions aloud both of the royal heirs nodded their heads.

"As long as greed is the real reason behind anyone's activities there is no hope for true fairness to reign," Chahrity said sadly.

What she left *unsaid* was that she obviously thought there was a way for '*true fairness*' to reign. As audacious as that thought was, Ohrder was even more intrigued by what silly ideas must be swirling through her naive young head.

"And just what do you intend to do about it?" he asked, turning as they walked to watch her response carefully.

"Our hope is to convince the leaders of the Hand that it is better to reason with those they feel are taking advantage of them," the princess replied, her voice surging with enthusiasm. "That they can gain far more through negotiation than robbery and extortion."

"Or lacking that, we can supplant them," Juhstice interjected matter-of-factly.

Ohrder snapped his head around to give the prince a hard stare. "You want to take over a group of street thugs?"

"I will do whatever is necessary to protect my people," Juhstice drew himself up to flinchingly meet the wizard's eyes. "Even if that means protecting them from themselves."

It was an admirable thought—misguided but admirable; especially since Ohrder knew that the prince's words weren't a mere whim that would evaporate when the next passing fancy caught his eye. If the prince were to suddenly change his name to Intehgrity, it would have suited him perfectly. Unfortunately, he'd overlooked one itsy-bitsy, teeny-tiny detail; his current course was going to bring him into a head-on collision with his father's iron will; and King Pryhde only had one way of dealing with those who opposed him. Ohrder was about to point this out—bluntly, when a shadow—not the princess' broke free of an alleyway and sauntering toward them.

"There you are," a raspy voice complained. "I'd begun ta think you coward out on me...or that the watch snatched you up."

Fingers, or so Ohrder assumed him to be since he claimed to be expecting them, moved with the fluidity of a snake as he slithered up to join them. Moonlight gave more testimony to his identity as it showed he *did* have fingers, four of them to be exact—two on each hand, and he still had his thumbs. Despite the king's insistence that there were no criminals in Ehlsewhere, from time to time people would be caught '*misbehaving*', and if said individual was say, a young boy who was '*borrowing*' something without permission, then he'd lose a finger to teach him better manners. Fingers was apparently a slow learner. Other than his misshapen hands, he was a fairly ordinary looking fellow, though he could have used a little more chin and a tad less nose. The eyes looking over the group he'd joined weren't quite darting around suspiciously, but they weren't calm either.

"Who's the codger?" he demanded, stepping forward and dipping his head to try to get a look under Ohrder's cowl hood.

"This is Ord, we've worked together on and off over the years," Juhstice gave a ready answer. He'd obviously been expecting the question to be posed. "He's good talent, you'll be glad we brought him."

"Maybe, but I don't like surprises," Fingers gave the prince an unfriendly glare. "Now if we were better friends I might take your word for it. But seeing as we've barely just met, I'm gonna need to verification. What's he do...lifter, shifter...? If he was ever a basher those days are long gone. And if he is so good, how come I never heard of him before? I don't know of anybody named Ord and I think I'd remember if someone told me about a jobber old enough to remember the first sunrise. How about you start off with telling about one of the bigger berry's he's picked."

When Juhstice just stood there looking at him with uncertainty—the prince obviously *hadn't* prepared himself for all of the thief's questions, Fingers gave a nasty laugh and told him, "You better start talking, or we're going to have a *b-i-i-i-g problem*."