

Chapter Forty Four

Twists and Turns

The Honor Garden was closed. That was due in large part to the fact that the majority of men who would be training there had already deployed into the city, to scout for troublemakers and then to act as parade escorts. The rest were busy setting up the castle courtyard where the Champion's Tournament would take place starting on the morrow. So, since other's had taken up his chamber pot duties, Shahdow decided to spend his morning reading. There were many options in that regard since a side effect of his helping Dougerty sort through his newly acquired library was having his choice of reading materials, instead he picked up an old friend. Shahdow never knew what the book had in store for him when he cracked its cover, it was never the same, except this time it was a story he'd read before—*his favorite one of all time in fact*, so he threw himself into the tale of the boy who killed a giant with a rock. Only this time as he read he came to realize that wasn't really the case—*not when you stopped to think about it*. The boy, David—*what an odd name, but the book was full of odd names*, made it clear that *his God* would be the one to defeat the giant, and in fact the story had gone to great extent to point out how that was indeed what had happened. No human or weapon could truly claim victory that day, but only God himself. Shahdow was still pondering that when the knock came at the door. Moments later the story and everything else was pushed out of his head as news of Princess Chahrity's disappearance was delivered to Ohrder by a breathless page boy.

Ohrder left for the throne room immediately, his visage as dark as a thunderhead. Shahdow was right behind him, waiting only long enough for the door to close before dashing over to retrieve his cloak for the wardroom and deprive the silver mirror of its support, which he'd strapped around his waist. Then, he too was off, but his destination wasn't the throne room; Chahrity wouldn't be found there. Shahdow ran all the way to the castle gates and on through them into the city. Only then did he pause, for breath, and to figure out where to go next. He silently hoped he was wasting his time; it was possible the Princess Chahrity was still in the castle somewhere—it didn't really matter where, because she'd still be safe anywhere within its walls. But the opposite was true if she'd donned her own disguise to head into the city as he feared. There was no place she'd be safe there, surrounded by people with the dragon's words echoing through their heads—not if it was discovered who she really was. Where oh where within the great sprawling city would she go? That was the question.

"She wouldn't have let the Watch catch sight of her," Shahdow murmured to himself. That was true enough; and the princess, with her lifter skills, certainly had the ability to stay out of their sight. *But what about The Hand?* Nothing happened within Ehlsewhere's borders that their eyes didn't catch.

Shahdow was tempted to head straight for Dougerty's quarters, except the Hand's leader had been so obsessed with his books of late that he'd become almost as reclusive as Ohrder. That wouldn't be the case for his lieutenants though, and Shahdow had spent enough time trailing one them around the city recently to be quite familiar with his waking habits—it had taken him two days of tagging along behind Fingers before he'd finally managed to lift his purse and use it to blackmail him into setting up an appointment with Dougerty. Fingers had an '*office*' of sorts, a quaint open-air café, The Widow's Lark, located in a quiet section of the city where the Watch rarely patrolled. Fingers spent parts of each day at the café sipping tea or wine—as the hour might dictate, while the thief teams under his command came to him for direction. Thought it

was still earlier in the day than Fingers usually appeared, Shahdow made his way to the café anyway, resigning himself to the thought that he'd have to stand around and let precious minutes tick by as he waited for Fingers to show up. He didn't like it, but he couldn't think of any better options—*it's a good thing he did too*.

Just as he turned the corner onto the street housing the café, Fingers appeared out of the alley flanking it, moving quickly with a determined look on his narrow face. The Hand's lieutenant didn't even hesitate at the café, instead rushing past it so fast that Shahdow had to turn around and run himself to keep out of sight. He could have just stood there and intercepted Fingers as the thief barreled toward him, but something inside Shahdow caused him to duck away—*could Fingers urgency and the princess' disappearance be somehow connected?* The surest way to figure that out as far as Shahdow could see was to follow along and discover what might make a lazy thief go charging through the city.

The journey turned out to be short, and ended up at another drinking establishment, a tavern called *The Thirsty Ox*. Fingers slipped inside, then, while Shahdow was still deciding whether or not to follow him inside, the lifter came right back out again, accompanied by a man nearly twice his size. Shahdow didn't recall ever having seen the fellow before, but from his bulk and the many scars decorating his bare arms, knuckles and face, he had little doubt he was looking at a basher. The two men hurriedly ducked around the side of the building into another alley—Fingers preferred place of business when he wasn't holding court at The Widow's Lark, leaving Shahdow to make his way up to its mouth to try and get a look and a listen at what they might be up to. Quick as he was, the men were already locked in a heated discussion by the time he was able to get into position behind a rubbish bin just inside the allyway.

"I told you we shouldn't have grabbed her in the first place!", the basher stated hotly, clenching his jaw as the words left his mouth.

"But we *did*..." Fingers snapped back. "And there's no taking it back now, Lem. Things have gone too far."

"Just let her go," Lem growled angrily. "She's a low-level lifter, what's she going to do...run tattle to Dougerty? If she does, it's our word against hers on what happened."

"If you'd just listen for a moment," Finger drew in a calming breath and started over. "You'll see it's not that easy. She's not who we thought she was...she had on a disguise. We snatched up Princess Chahrity, Lem."

"*What...?!*" The basher's eyes nearly popped out of his head, and Shahdow felt his own breath catch in his throat.

"It's true and that's not all," Fingers continued. "When Ovler found out who she really was, he went at her...I don't know what he was intending to do, but somehow in the night she managed to get her hands free and before I knew what was happening she'd pulled that dagger we took off of her last night out of Lem's belt and stuck him with it."

"Ovler's dead?" the other basher recoiled with shock.

"Deader than a Moonday goose," Fingers nodded gravely. "But at least he managed to fall on Her Royal Highness as he was going down, so I was able to get the knife away from her and tie her back up."

Lem cursed and stalked about for a while, then turned back to face Fingers. "So, what do we do now?"

"Like I said before, we do what we have to do...unless you want to make the acquaintance of the Royal Executioner," Finger's voice had grown cold.

The basher licked his lips nervously, then he slowly began to shake his head. “You’re mad if you think I’ll kill the princess. What we’ve already done is bad enough, but if it’s ever found out we had a hand in *that*, we...and everyone we’ve ever known and loved, will wish they’d been kind enough to hang us.”

“What choice do we have?” Fingers hissed. “The second we let her go we’re dead.”

“As dark as it was last night, there’s no way she could recognize us,” Lem pointed out.

“Cassy the lifter knows perfectly well who *I* am and there’s plenty of people who saw the two of us together yesterday, Lem,” Finger’s countered. “Give that some thought.”

The basher did grow thoughtful. He wasn’t the only one. Shahdow felt a chill run through him even though the sun was up enough to shine brightly down upon him. What was he to do? From what he’d just heard, the princess was still alive—but *for how long*? Even if the basher didn’t go along with the plan, that wouldn’t keep Fingers from carrying it out on his own? Shahdow did have his sword against two unarmed men—thought one of them was half the size of a full grown ox; but what good was that when what he really needed was to know where the princess was being kept? It wasn’t like they’d just start volunteering information if he stepped out and pointed his blade at them.

Lem shook his head. “No. I won’t be part of it. I’m going to go find Dougerty...he’ll know what to do.”

Fingers started to say something else, but then he just closed his mouth and gave a shrug as the basher pivoted toward the far end of the alley and started walking. The moment his back was fully turned, a flash of light caught Shahdow’s attention as a knife suddenly appeared in Finger’s right hand.

“Watch out!” Shahdow cried, his voice echoing off the brick walls as Finger’s leapt forward with an upraised arm.

Lem’s reaction was impressively quick for a man of his bulk; stepping to his left, he brought his right arm up in a sweeping arch that caught Fingers across the mouth, sending the lifter stumbling back—but not before the blade in his hand bit deeply into the basher’s right shoulder. Lem let out a howl—probably more of anger than pain, and sprang at his attacker, but Fingers was quick too, letting his new momentum carry him backwards out of Lem’s reach, then turning to race away back the way he’d come a few minutes before. He was in such a hurry that he didn’t even notice Shahdow once more huddled down behind the trash bin. Nor did Lem who trotted to a stop after a few more steps, then, while holding a hand up to his injured shoulder and muttering something too softly for Shahdow to hear, he turned around and jogged off in the opposite direction.

Shahdow was in a state of shock from what he’d just heard and seen in the past few minutes, but a small voice inside of him made him climb to his feet and start running after Fingers. What he was going to do when he caught up with him, he hadn’t worked out. What he *did* know was that he couldn’t allow the black-hearted thief to get anywhere near Princess Chahrity.

The moment he broke out of the alley, Shahdow knew he was in trouble. He spotted Fingers disappearing down yet another alley, but that’s not all that he saw. Striding down the middle of the street in front of him was, of all people, the Golden Arm. Sir Behkworth’s head was forward, but his eyes were drifting side to side taking in his surroundings. If Shahdow was to just dash off after Fingers—which was *his only real hope of keeping him in sight*, he would instantly draw attention to himself. Could he out race the armor bearing man? Probably, but surely there would be shouting and not only would that alert Fingers, but it would almost certainly draw the attention of every other watchman in the vicinity, and Shahdow had noticed a number of them

lurking about in the initial stages of his tailing after the thief. He stood frozen with indecision as the seconds ticked by, until he realized something that might be important. Fingers had fled down the same alley he'd taken earlier on his way to meet up with the basher, Lem. Did that mean he was headed back to The Widow's Lark? While there was no way of knowing, Shahdow decided his best chance of catching up with the lifter was to proceed in that direction and hope for the best. Ducking his head and leaning against the wall of the tavern, Shahdow did his best impression of a youngster just standing around with nothing better to do. Unfortunately, even the poorest of young boys always had something they *should* be doing, so once the Golden Arm's eye landed on him, Sir Behkworth let out a bellow.

"You there..." the words came out harsh and accusing. "I don't know what you're up to, but we'll have no trouble today! Do you understand me?"

Shahdow wanted to turn and run girding up his courage and called out, "Yes sir...I'm just waiting for my mum to finish up inside, then we're going to the market."

"See that that's all you do," Sir Behkworth called out gruffly, but apparently satisfied, he continued on his way. The moment he was out of sight, Shahdow abandoned one alleyway and race off toward another.

Occasionally his journey would be impeded by another member of the Watch, and during those times he would slow his pace, still hurrying, but moving as if he had some place to go and needed to get there quickly. Otherwise his flight back to the Widow's Lark was a mad scramble, taking as many shortcuts as possible, including from time to time, dashing in the front door of an establishment only to fly out the back a few moments later. By the time he reached the street containing the little café that served as Finger's headquarters, he was completely winded and had to stop to breath. At least he would have liked to done so if he hadn't noticed a certain dark-robed figure turning down the alleyway on the far side of the Widow's Lark—*the same dead end alleyway Shahdow had first spotted the lifter coming out of earlier that morning*. At the time he hadn't thought much of it, figuring Fingers had been conducting a meeting back there with someone who had already departed. Now, Shahdow suspected there was more going on than he'd first suspected.

By the time he reached the far side of the café and risked a quick peek around the corner, there was nothing of Fingers to be seen. The *only* thing visible in the narrow alley was a stack of old pallets piled high enough to hide a stray cat, but little else. Shahdow made his way cautiously forward to take a closer look and quickly found the answer to his mystery. A rusty grate lay hidden behind the pallets. He'd seen it's like before; the entrances to the sewers were scattered throughout the city. As far as Shahdow had known, no one ever went down into those dark and smelly depths, but that was obviously not true. In fact, as he squatted down and peered down through the openings in the iron grate he could see a trace of yellow light flickering on one side of the narrow shaft beneath him. That made him speed up his movements as the thought of Fingers disappearing into the darkness use the aid of a lantern or torch that Shahdow *didn't* possess sent a new wave of fear washing through him.

The grate was heavy, but using the strength of his legs he was just able to lift one side up enough to allow him to slid it off to one side. The ladder leading downward was as rust covered as the grate, but held steady as he lowered himself over the side of the entrance and placed his weight upon the rungs. At the bottom he found himself on a narrow walkway that skirted the sewer passage which ran off in two directions. He could see that much from the light filtering down from above, otherwise all was darkness; somewhat concerning was the realization that

there was no longer any hint of illumination coming from whatever Fingers was using to make his way underground.

He went this way, Shahdow told himself firmly, looking down the inky passageway that ran off to his left. He was almost certain that was correct—*unless what he'd seen from above was caused by a weird reflection off the small stream of water running through the sewage channel*. Shoving that thought out of his mind, he started forward, running his hand along the wall to keep from stepping off the walkway and moving as quickly as he dared into what was soon complete darkness. While there was zero light, sound echoed through the sewer tunnels unobstructed. After taking only a dozen halting steps forward, Shahdow heard a soft thud, followed by an immediate splash right before Fingers' voice came echoing towards him, cursing the 'idiot' who had decided to set a lantern hook in the ceiling above a walkway. As encouraging as it was to know he was on the right track, Shahdow determined to be extra cautious going forward lest he too encounter something in the darkness that would betray his position.

Even so, he moved ahead as quickly as possible to take advantage of his ears since his eyes were basically worthless. Never taking his feet more than a few inches off the stone walkway, and inching them forward to set them down slowly, until he was certain there was firm footing underneath, he crept forward using one hand to slide along the wall while the other waved out into the darkness probing for hidden obstacles. That technique, halting as it was, enabled him to stay within earshot of Fingers as the thief led them through the maze of sewers. At least it did until he reached the first major intersection. There, at a point where two more tunnels branched off of the one he was traveling along, he was forced to stop and try and figure out which of his three options was the correct one. Turning his head from side to side, with ears and eyes seeking any hint of with direction to turn, after several long seconds, he heard a soft sound. It was just a whisper, what might have been the gentle scrape of a boot brushing up against a wall, followed immediately by something else; a plop as if something small had dropped into the running water. Those noises *seemed* to be coming from the tunnel directly in front of him—if only he could be more sure. Finally, he decided to press on, reasoning that if he hurried down the tunnel without hearing anything else he could always backtrack and take the other passage. Which is *exactly* what happened. A few minutes of continuing on straight ahead with the only sound coming to his ears being his own tense breathing, he reversed his direction and hurry back to take the tunnel that had branched away to the right. A hundred or so hurried paces going that way—just as he was considering doubling back again, he picked up the sounds of Finger's slow by steady progress once again. And so it went over the next half hour or so; traversing through too many twists and turns to count until finally Shahdow reached another deviation in the massive underground labyrinth, only this time he found himself standing in the doorway leading to a large chamber. It even had a short flight of stone steps leading up to another doorway; where torch in hand, Fingers was just getting ready to step across the threshold.

Shahdow hesitated, torn between hurrying forward after the lifter, or holding in place to let Fingers continue on alone for a bit, just in case he turned around to make sure he wasn't being followed. That decision was made for him a moment later when the murderous thief switched the torch he was holding to his left hand to allow him to draw his knife with the right. An instant later he disappeared through the doorway out of sight.