

Bixby

The Hob

(An Excerpt)

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Entry 1: You're a Thief, Bixby Bluebottle

{Queen's Month, fourth day, 5012}

All me troubles started with a blueberry pie.

At least that's when things got...interesting. I credit the pie with saving my life, after all. I would tell you about it, but I've been sworn to secrecy and bribed with, well, blueberry pie, of course. Magic blueberry pie, at that.

Maybe I can get permission to tell you. I'll ask. Or not.

Really, my problems started when Felonius Ratcatcher called me into his "office" and said, "Bixby, I got a job fer ya."

Felonius Ratcatcher is the guildmaster of the guild I'm in. He is all kinds of trouble for me.

But, I guess you could really say that, strictly speakin', all me troubles began when I was born in the Mudwallow Slums. It's a tough life at times, but me and me Mums and me sisters do alright.

I have one mom, just to be clarifyin', but I calls her Mums. It's like a nickname. I have six sisters that are more trouble than Felonius.

But before I go into all that, I guess I should let you know what you're in for, iff'n you keep reading this book.

I like to say that I'm a finder—and an enlightener. I go out and I find things that people might not be, perhaps, takin' care of as much as they should be. Maybe they're not lockin' them up in their home the way they ought, or maybe they're not quite paying attention to their pouch of coins. I find those items and take care of them.

I finds 'em, and they gets more enlightened. Not the items. The people. They become more enlightened-like and aware of their valuables.

It's kind of like a game. If people didn't want their treasures taken, then they'd hide them better, right? Like Dragons and Snacks. Or Hoop and Stick. Or Knights and Dragons. That's my favorite!

Another way of looking at is, I lighten the owner's of their burdens. Plus, they becomes more alert to the dangers around 'em. And I become a few coins richer.

After all, someone who's actually dangerous might break in on 'em—tempted by all that stuff they're leaving around. Some'un like that, well, they might put the hurt on those folks just to get at those coins or trinkets.

If I helps 'em by finding that stuff ahead a time, then they'll be more careful, and the real thugs won't break in and give 'em the hurt.

Now, I know what you're thinking.

So you're a thief, Bixby Bluebottle.

Well, yes. Yes, I guess I am.

I'm a thief, but I'm an honest thief, at least as honest as I can be in a world where the little people have no power, and not enough to eat, and the bad guys want to eat you.

Couple a' trolls tried to eat me once, but I'm small and pretty fast, even compared to other Hobs, so they didn't get to eat my arm the way they wanted to—not even a finger! (Is that where the expression 'finger food' comes from? Because, if so, that's kinda gross.)

So, as I was saying. Thief. Honest thief. Not all my pals are honest, I can tell ya that.

Some of them'll steal yer undergarments while yer sittin' in the outhouse, so they will. I would never steal someone's underwear while they were sitting in the loo. Or anytime, come to think of it. I mean, what would you do with 'em anyway?

In fact, I got a set of rules me uncle taught me to follow, and I do. Most of the time. At least I try to. He goes by Ged Ebonshadow. You've probably never heard of him because, well, if a thief is famous, they's not very good, are they? He gave me my lockpicks and taught me how to use 'em. And he gave me a slip of paper with these rules on it:

@@ Check other rules for repetition. Font = Lucinda Blackletter

- # 1. Don't Get Caught.
- # 2. Don't Steal from poor Folks.
- # 3. Don't hurt Anyone, Except in Self~Defense.

That last one is especially for innocent people who don't know 'nuff to get out of the way.

That makes it pretty easy. Because even with the folks you can't steal from, there's plenty of bad guys in the Mudwallow Parcel. A parcel is what our kingdom calls districts. I dunno why.

One time a Goblin clown that **were** part of a traveling circus told me that he'd never 'eard of parcels before. I said I ain't never heard of Goblin clowns before, and we got into a fist fight. It **were** a draw, and then we went and got some spun sugar on a stick.

The Chanevar Parcel is across the river, where the nobles live. Not that I've never been over the bridge to that side. I really, really want to go someday!

The castle and other buildings tower above the trees, and Picks, my buddy who's better than me with locks—and also pick axes—he says he heard there are golden apple trees in the castle courtyard. And, when you pick one, it magically turns into real gold! One of these days, I'm going to get over there, steal an apple, and live like a king.

The problem is, I'm stuck in Mudwallow, and being tempted by things like blueberry pie and cookies and such, which is a strong temptation indeed, especially for a Hob, and that creates complications that slows down me progress and all.

You can't just go walkin' across the Star Bridge like you belong on the other side, after all. Especially when yer in ratty clothes and with dirt on yer face. You gots to look respectable and all.

So that means me and my pals, we gots to gather up enough scratch to buy decent clothes to cross the bridge before we can even think about stealin' some of those golden apples.

[[Greek mythology – prize of golden apple. Goddess Iduun cares for golden apples in Aslan. Gives eternal life.]]

Not that that stops us actually dreaming and scheming about it. Some days, though, it makes me tired just thinking about it, and I go fishin' instead.

Most days me and me gang are right at it. We're motivated, not like some of the urchins and old grumpkins in the guild. Hobs are natural thieves and burglars. But, we ain't robbers.

Robbers use a fist, a knife in the gut, a cudgel upside the head. No style at all.

Hobs have more finesse. We'll fight, if we have to defend ourselves or someone else. But we prefer not to use violence like a common thug. We use diversions. We distract. We glad-hand. We charm.

Hobs have Style.

We're very charming, Hobs are. We run the long scheme, the long con. We pick a pocket, we scale a wall—we get in a building and back out again before the owner has even finished their fresh, warm, *delicious* blueberry pie.

(See how I worked that blueberry pie back in there?)

At least that's how it's supposed to work.

Oh, I should probably tell you what a Hob is, and why I'm writing this journal.

A Hob is me. I am a Hob.

A lotta time, people call us halflings, but that's really kind of rude if you think about it. Yes, we're shorter than a lot of other species (even dwarves), but we're not half of anything. We're the whole bean, thank you very much. Call us halflings, and we'll steal your socks. Just one sock from each pair, mind you. Did you ever wonder where all those missing socks go? Well, now you know.

The truth of it is, everyone calls us halflings. Us and the other short races. Except dwarves. No one calls *them* halflings. Probably because they're built like granite blocks and would snarl at anyone who called them a halfling. A dwarf snarling is like a wolf growling. It's a warning. They're 'bout to punch you like a battering ram.

A lot of the short races all kinda have a relationship. Not like cousins but more like a loose alliance. A common front, you know? Us short folk gotta stick together. It's the only way to survive in a tallfolk world.

Anyway, like I said, a Hob is me.

Hobs have a bit of mischief about them, as you may have gathered. We're great friends to have around. Friends are family.

We're also a terrible pain in the buttocks if we decide we've been offended and choose to make your life miserable for a while.

No one is as good at practical jokes as the "wee folk," which is definitely a nickname you should never call us, or someone might put poison ivy in yer bed.

As much as Hobs are naturally sneaky, most of us tend to be homebodies, which is why everything in Mudwallow hasn't been stolen right down to people's skivvies. Me mum and most of me sisters like nothing better than to curl up in front of a warm fire after a hot meal, a bit of hot cocoa, and to read *The Chanevar Gazette*, the *Mudwallow Gabber* or a new book, when we can get one.

I do like readin' books and newspapers, too. But I'd much rather be walking the streets of the city, watching the people, and maybe pickpocketing a mark or climbing into a third-floor window with me mates to see what treasures we can find.

I especially love finding a good book to bring home for me Mums and sisters. Books are expensive and hard to come by, especially in Mudwallow. I can usually find a copy of the *Gabber* people have thrown out after readin' it. Sometimes I even gets a *Gazette*, ifn I'm lucky.

We have *nine* books in our house, including this journal, which is way more than anybody else I know, not counting me Uncle Jordan, and he's a wizard.

Hobs tend to be incredibly, uncannily lucky. We was just born that way. But I think Uncle Ged got a double dose.

Me Uncle Ged told me that Hob's is lucky because our patron god, Fortune Merrigrin Mischievin, once won a game of chance over a bunch of other gods, and they had to give all the races under his guardianship an extra measure of luck.

Like I said, he's an incredible burglar and me favorite uncle—but sometimes I really do wonder about the tales he tells me about his adventures. If I were you, I'd take the whole 'gods gambling' story with a big spoon a'honey.

Despite my skepti'cysm, he's great to be around. His stories are fun, and he can do coin tricks as good as any wizard. And I've seen quite a few wizard tricks, lemme tell you.

One day, after one of Uncle Ged's visits, me Mums gave me a package. It was a fat rectangular box tied together with string. I pulled the string, releasing the knot and lifted the lid. The warm smell of leather rose up to my nostrils. Inside was a book!

Ornate tool marks ran around the edge of the dark brown cover. The pages were thick and rough-cut, and the paper a slightly golden yellow, not from age, but just how they were made, I suppose.

I immediately loved the texture of those pages beneath my fingers, and the rich smell as I inhaled deeply. Ah! The smell of a new book.

I flipped through the pages, my body practically thrumming with anticipation at the story that awaited me. But, much to my horror, I discovered that the pages were blank!

“Mums!” I said. “Someone has magicked all the words away!”

Mum laughed and said, “Some books are blank. They’re called journals. Sometimes people call them diaries. Sea captains call them logs.”

I turned about as red as a ladybug at that one. I shoulda known better, but who’da thought that someone would spend all that money makin’ a book with no words in it?!

I also wondered why a book would be called a log, but Mums kept going. Maybe because paper comes from wood?

“A journal is a book people write in to remember and share all the things that have happened in their lives.” She said that I needed to fill in the pages with my own story.

I looked at her skeptically. I had never heard of anything so ridiculous before. She laughed again and gave me a hug and kissed me on the cheek. She smelled like flowers and fresh baked bread. And bacon. She’d made second breakfast a little while ago. “You’ll figure it out,” she said. “Go on outside and steal some muffins with your friends.”

What I didn’t realize at the time was that writing in the journal was going to become a regular part of my edification. Me Mums is making me do it! Suddenly, the idea sounds a whole lot less fun.

Of course, at first, I just jotted down a few thoughts each day. But once all this stuff happened, I figured I should write it down, so I added more details. This is the finished journal. Expanded and elucidated (that’s a fancy word for addin’ more details).

Oh, and edification is a fancy way of saying education. My mum makes me write words like that on the back page of my journal. Sometimes she’s as bad as a hobgoblin. (Just kiddin’, Mums! She reads this as part of me lessons.)

Oh, that reminds me. Hob-*goblins*. Close cousins to Hobs, although we don’t like to admit that. Note the goblin part. Hob *goblins* are meaner and uglier. If you make them angry, they skip right past practical jokes to making your cow dry up or setting your barn on fire. Hobgoblins are very bad news. Don’t cross them. And, please, don’t confuse us Hobs with them.

Anyway, keeping a journal is not all bad. I’m going to write all of me adventures in it and, someday, just maybe, I’ll be an even better thief than me uncle. Me and my cohort. I’ll tell you about them soon.

Oh, and the pie. I have to tell you about the blueberry pie, too.

Hmm. Maybe I should stop writing the word “Oh,” so much, too.

I'll have to think on that one.

Respectfully Submitted,
Bixby Bluebottle, Hob & Honest Thief

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Entry 2: Calista and Amity

{Queen's Month, fifth day, 5012}

@@ This chapter needs more. It is not compelling and violates Wren's rules.

@@ Talk about an adventure or misadventure for Calista and Amity.

This morning, I was sitting at the table having me first breakfast with me six sisters. (Second breakfast is about 10 AM, for you tall folk. How you can go four hours between meals is like a boggle in a barn to me!) I'll tell you about me sisters a few at a time, so it doesn't feel like you's tryin' to get a drink from a waterfall.

Calista is twelve. We're the closest in age and the closest to each other. You know, I mean we get along good. She's me closest ally. Me Uncle Ged calls her my co-conspirator. I'm not exactly sure what that means, but I like the sound of it.

She's quiet usually, but funny. Like me, sorta. I talk a lot and I'm funny. At least I think so, and that's all that really matters, right? I amuse meself!

Calista even looks like me, with coppery-brown hair and green eyes. She's eleven months older than me. For one month, Calista and me are the same age. We call that being Hob Twins.

In case math is not yer jam on a biscuit, that means I'm 11, almost 12.

So, I'm smack slab in the middle. Three sisters on either side. Makes me feel like a sandwich sometimes.

I'll tell you about one more sister for now. The rest will haveta wait. Amity is 9 and annoying. I call her Enmity ifn I want to get her riled up. We get along like a dog with a sweet tooth who wants to play with a wet cat dipped in honey.

Speaking of dogs, last week I bet Amity that she couldn't squeeze underneath a kitchen chair. She slid her way under the rungs, and I sat down. She was pinned.

I smiled at her with that smile that says I gotcha, and she squeaked a very satisfying squeak. Then I reached behind me to the table and the frying pan that sat there loaded with bacon grease. I got a big old glop on my fingers and met her eyes. She squirmed and

yelled, "Mom!" but mums was out shoppin'. I smeared the grease all over her face and cheeks and chin.

But I wasn't done yet. Nope. 'Cause, then, when Amity was all greased up good...I called our dog Yapper.

Yapper licked her face all over, just to make sure she didn't miss a bit of grease. Amity really squealed. She was laughing, too, so it was all in good fun. At least I sure thought so!

The seven of us, plus the dog, are a lot for one mom to handle. A tempest in a teapot she calls us. Me dad disappeared months before Bhannie—the youngest—were born. We're not sure what happened. Someday, I hope to find out, but I expect it ain't good. He either left, got captured by someone—or he died somehow.

I don't think he'da left us. I was eight when he disappeared. He seemed happy with Mums and with us kids. He laughed a lot.

I remember him coming home with Uncle Ged, and they would stay up late into the night rehashing their adventures. I would hide on the stairs listening until I fell asleep.

One time, he brought home a stray pup. That was Yapper. White with tan spots and a tail that wags so fast you'd think he was a hummingbird. Another time, he brought home a book. It's my favorite book. *Tales of Farwell the Magnificent!* It's red leather with gold letters. Super fancy book. Dad would read it to us every night while he was home. When he left, Mums took over. It took a long time to read through all of his adventures.

Then one night, Dad rushed out of the house with his backpack, sword, and leather armor. He tried not to wake us, but Yapper ratted him out by running around and barking.

He told us, "I've got to go out and help Uncle Ged and Uncle Jordan out. I'll be back soon."

Three years is a long time, though, so it doesn't look good.

Uncle Ged, Uncle Jordan, and Uncle Barton won't tell us kids nothin' though. I have three uncles. None of 'em is *really* me uncle. We just calls 'em that because they're close friends of me da. I'll tell ya more about all of them as we go.

They say they think he's alive, but they won't say what he was doin' or where he was. Nothin'.

It's a bit frustrating. One of these days, though, I'll find out what happened to him.

If he's still alive, whatever took him's gotta be dangerous if even me uncles haven't been able to get him out.

First, I gotta win this contest and keep honing me blade skills, improving my sneakiness, and me nimble fingers for pickin' pockets and locks. And, maybe, if I've learned enough, I can go rescue him.

I don't think that will happen until my next journal. Maybe even the one after that. Hang in there, Dad.

Anyway, lots of sisters. We don't always get along, but mostly we do. If you mess with one of us, you mess with all of us. Inside the house, though, all bets are off.

I'm sure I'll tell you more about me sisters as I write in this journal.

Respectfully Submitted, Bixby Bluebottle, One Outnumbered Hob

