

Bloody Roses

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Chapter 1

Wounds

Every door on every street has its own story. Not all of them are centered around the people who live, die, and bleed inside. Some stories are the creatures that roam the walls or feed on the corpses. Some aren't living at all.

—Jaboril Hasik, *Behind Door 28C*

Storm clouds rippled across the sky, spewing rain like vomit across the streets. The wet sloppy droplets smacked against the roofs and walls before dropping to the cobblestones. A heavy mist blew in and out of the evening dark, obscuring feet, rats, and potholes alike.

It was the perfect weather for a bit of thievery.

Balar leaned just inside an alley while peering across the street to a brownstone on the other side of the road. It was a cute little place with a wrought iron fence and raised gardens on each side of the stone path leading up to the door. If he was the type of guy to retire, that would be the kind of place.

He scoffed. More likely, he would just use the brownstone as a safe house. The entire neighborhood would be a

far better cover for laying low, ordering food, and kicking back while the heat died down.

The brownstone was owned by an old bat who lived by herself. Almost no one ever saw her outside of her place, but judging from the vibrant garden, she spent too many hours puttering around and taking care of it. He didn't know the types of flowers, but he guessed they were roses. That sounded like a flower, right? He shrugged and ignored it, he didn't care.

He wondered why she had bothered to set up umbrellas to protect some of her plants. A few lacquered parasols towered over the flowers closest to the house. Even from across the road, he could hear the water splattering off the hard ridges before pouring into a series of pots.

Balar didn't care about the flowers or the old lady. Rumor had it that she had survived three marriages and had a sizable fortune buried in the back garden. All he had to do was get rid of her and then dig out the backyard before it stopped raining. At least the wet ground would be easy to haul.

He sighed and grabbed his shovel. "The things I do for my weight in money."

Making sure the road was empty and the neighbors' lights were dark, he walked across the dark road and hopped over the fence. His heavy boots thudded into her garden, crushing the delicate flowers.

The sweet smell of the petals rose around him. He scoffed and dropped the blade of his space into the nearest parasol. It cracked and collapsed, crushing the plant underneath it. He gave it a vindictive twist before pulling the blade free.

Balar smiled to himself and tromped through the rest of the garden to the front door. Taking one last look at the

empty street, he reared back. Flipping the shovel around, he slammed the blade with all his might into the latch.

There was a flash of light from his enchanted tool and the wood shattered from the impact. The metal bar that pinned the door shut snapped in half, falling to the ground with a loud clatter. He ducked inside while sliding his hand further down the shaft of his instrument.

The inside of the house wasn't much better than the garden. Flower pots sat in all of the windows. The old bat had vases everywhere, all of them filled with fresh flowers.

He sniffed loudly and then pulled a face. It smelled like some sort of creature had vomited petals everywhere. He stopped and then shook his head. No, that was a terrible analogy.

Balar decided just to focus on murder and robbery. He enjoyed that. He had to stop to correct his thoughts. He enjoyed robbery, murder just happened.

In a brief moment, he wondered if he should just walk away. To give up on breaking and entering, from stealing entirely. He could go home and swear off the last years of his life.

The feeling passed.

Moving his hand down near the head of his shovel, he bounced the sharpened blade against a table and left a deep gouge in the wood.

Behind him, he heard the clacking sounds of a horse's hooves against the cobblestones. Fear crawled over his spine. He grabbed the broken door and pushed it closed. It wouldn't latch, but at least he could give it the impression of being closed as long as it took for the horse to pass.

The sounds outside grew louder.

His heart pounded. This was always the dangerous point of breaking and entering. He didn't have anything of worth to take with him if he had to break out and there was no

way of bluffing his way out of it. He peered around the room in hopes of seeing a pile of money somewhere among the flowers, but didn't spot anything.

As the horse passed, he caught a hint of noise. Cocking his head, he turned and peered down the hallway toward the back of the brownstone. It may have been his imagination, but he thought he also saw a flicker of light.

Tightening his grip on his spade, he kept his eyes locked on the back of the house while the horse finished passing and the street grew silent.

Balar waited a long count before he cracked open the door and peered outside.

The street was empty and dark again.

He breathed a sigh of relief. Turning back to the house, he got ready to investigate the noise.

Before he shut the door, something caught his attention. He turned back to the garden out front and looked to the side. The parasols had all tilted, bent back to expose the flowers to the rain. The heavy flowers quivered with the rain striking the petals. It looked like a dozen little creatures staring at him.

The only parasol that remained in place was the one he had destroyed.

Balar frowned. "That's strange."

For the briefest of moments, he considered just walking out the door and escaping the flowery hell.

The lure of money brought himself back to his senses. He abandoned the door and hefted his shovel. Lowering himself slightly, he crept down the hallway toward the back of the building. He kept himself alert, waiting for a surprise attack or even an old lady in a nightgown looking for a midnight snack.

Like most brownstones, the back of the house had a kitchen area and a small eating area. True to the old lady's

obvious obsession, the kitchen had dozens of little herb gardens on every surface. They were on the counter and the windowsill. A set of circular pots lined the table, leaving only space for a single person to eat.

Balar peered around before cocking his head to listen.

Someone hummed a song outside the back door.

He frowned. Was the old bat gardening at midnight? In the rain?

Walking over to the back door, he peered through the small glass panes and into the back yard. Fortunately, there was one street light that shone into the yard and let him see.

The old woman knelt in the grass. She moved slowly but surely while she dug a hole using a small spade. A few flowers rested in the rain next to her; the roots were wrapped in canvas and the petals fluttered in the rain. She wore an old nightgown; the rain had plastered the fabric against her thin frame.

Balar shook his head. The old bat truly was insane.

She picked up one of the flowers and unwrapped it. With her other hand, she wove what looked like a gold necklace into the roots before setting both down into the hole she had just dug.

“Masks of Shadows, steal my heart,” whispered Balar.

A cold shiver ran down his spine. She was planting flowers and jewelry in her backyard. In her nightgown. In the rain.

Balar considered himself a lucky man. He eased the back door open.

The old woman didn't respond.

He slipped his hand down to the far end of the shovel. Grabbing it with both hands, he stepped off the back porch and walked across the grass. Rain splattered against his

back, but the sensations quickly faded as he focused intently on his victim.

She made no indication that she was aware of him.

He let his spade swing back. It didn't even make a sound as the magically sharp edge cut through leaves and roots. He held his breath to avoid alerting her and then brought the shove up and over his head.

The supernaturally sharp blade cut into the back of her skull. It didn't even jerk on its path down her spine before the blade plunged into the grass below.

The old woman's body froze for a moment. The small spade in her hand tumbled out of her slack fingers. Then her split body peeled apart, falling in opposite directions to slump loudly to the ground.

Balar chuckled and used the shovel blade to knock the withered knees apart so he could kneel down where she had been. Her leg fell away at an unnatural angle revealing a dry spot under her body. With a smile, he dug into the dirt and yanked the flower free from the soil. The golden necklace tumbled to the ground.

He tossed the flower aside and grabbed the necklace. It was heavy with a large gemstone. Easily worth a couple hundred crowns and enough to keep him drunk for days. Laughing to himself, he dug into the next flower she had planted. His bare fingers dug into the wet soil. He could feel roots and stems but kept digging until his fingers wrapped around another chain.

With a triumphant grunt, he yanked it free. Another heavy necklace worth a few hundred crowns.

Balar looked around. There were hundreds of freshly planted flowers in the back yard. Each one of them had the potential for a prize underneath.

And he had a shovel. One that would make short work of even a hundred holes.

He grabbed his tool and use it to pull himself up. He had a lot of plants to dig up before morning.

It took him a moment to realize that he had not stood up. His hand slid down the shaft of his spade. With a frown, he grabbed it with both hands and tried to pull himself up.

Something held him down.

He peered down but it was too dark to see clearly. His legs felt as if they had fallen asleep. With a frown crossing his face, he reached down with one hand to feel around the ground.

His fingertips came up against roots.

Roots? He looked around again while focusing on his fingers. His eyes caught on the corpse of the old lady. He didn't notice it before, but her inner organs looked wrong in the dim light. Confused, he leaned closer to peer down.

Balar didn't spot the usual organs he expected: lungs, intestines, or anything else. Instead, the old lady's corpse had been packed with petals. They were the same types of flowers as outside, the ones protected by the parasols.

A cold sensation filled his body, it could have been fear but he wasn't sure. He hadn't killed the old lady, she was nothing but a shell. His earlier thoughts came back, giving up crime and heading home seemed like a better idea than ever before.

Something moved to grab his fingers.

Balar yanked his hand up. It was harder than before; something tugged at his fingertips. He pulled with all his might until he felt strands snapping. With a lurch, he pulled his palm into the light.

Tendrils were wrapped around his fingers, the torn ends oozing sap as they wiggled around.

"By the Mask!" he gasped.

Frantic, he grabbed his shovel and yanked it from the ground. The magical blade easily came free. Without giving

a second to hesitate, he drove it into the ground on both sides of his knees to slice the roots and then lurched forward over the hole in the ground.

One leg came free but the other caught on the roots. He spun the spade and hacked away at the roots. After years of using his choice of weapons, he didn't even graze himself with each blow. Dirt and plants flew in all directions.

Balar grunted in fear and yanked with his might. The sensations were returning to one leg but his trapped limb continued to grow more numb. He could almost feel the sensations dying up his leg, like a poison.

"Shit, shit, shit," he gasped. He jammed the blade underneath his trapped limb and cut it free. The shovel blade shone with a dull glow and he crawled away from the boiling mass of roots and vines that had quietly erupted from the old woman's corpse.

He saw the two necklaces tumble away but dismissed them. His robbery had turned into a trap and he needed to escape more than he needed money.

Balar grunted with the effort to pull himself up but he saw that the ground underneath had begun to boil. Waves rippled underneath the grass and the flowers around him quivered to life. The movements were unnatural, moving against the rain that still splattered against the petals.

He tried to regain his feet but his trapped leg had lost all feeling. His effort pulled him more into the light from outside the garden and he could see the tendrils were wrapped around his limb. Blood oozed from where the roots had pierced his skin. His flesh boiled with the plants that started to crawl underneath his skin and dig into his numb muscles.

Balar almost screamed out in panic. He looked around for some place of safety, but the entire back yard had

turned into a writhing mess of animated plants. He was trapped, caught like a fly.

Grabbing his shovel, he used the blade to cut away the roots and leaves that dug into his limbs. Tiny little cuts and slices soon left him bloody. It hurt but he couldn't risk letting them keep digging.

Despite cutting close enough to shave, the writhing sensation underneath his skin only grew more intense. He looked for more to cut but couldn't see any in the dim light. It was too late, they were inside him.

Death had come for Balar, but the murderer wasn't ready to give up quite yet. He looked around frantically for some way to safety. He was going to get out and then head straight out of town.

His eyes lit on the back door. It stood near the side of the yard and next to a tall fence that separated the houses. More importantly, the old lady or whatever the hell was in the house didn't have climbing vines on the walls. Nothing but white-painted wood. If he could make it there, he would be able to crawl up and escape.

Balar knew he would have been hard-pressed to succeed even if he was in good shape. But, with plants eating him from the inside, pulling himself free wouldn't be enough.

He knew what to do, but he didn't want to do it. He just didn't have time to make a decision.

"Ah, shit in my skull," he muttered before he gripped the shovel haft near the blade. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath, and then slammed the blade hard into his thigh just below his hip.

The supernatural weapon cut easily through muscle and bone. With a sickening sensation, he heard but didn't feel his left leg snap. It fell away. A spurt of blood splashed across the grass which seemed to ignite everything into a

fury. Even the grass appeared to boil, buckling the ground underneath and creating ripples that raced across the yard.

Balar didn't see the expected flash. There wasn't the heat he needed to stop the bleeding. He let out a groan and channeled as much of his will into the blade and slammed down, slicing off a thin slice of his leg.

The second blow came with a flash of light and the smell of burning flesh. Pain exploded from his injury and he let out a cry of agony.

Fortunately, the agony faded quickly with a surge of adrenaline that rushed through his veins. Knowing he only had moments before the rush would subside and he would be in agony, Balar fumbled with the leg that had been cut off. With blood spraying everywhere, he yanked the trouser off the limb and frantically use it to wrap the end of his leg. His fingers kept scraping against the burnt flesh that his shovel had cauterized.

If he was a different person, tossing his severed leg aside would have been surreal, but he didn't have time think about it. He slammed the spade into the ground and pulled himself up. He hopped across the yard. His blade cut through roots and leaves, leaving divots in the ground behind him. His foot kicked and tugged at the roots that caught his toes.

He slammed into the back door.

Inside, the herb pots had come to life and were writhing with anticipation. No doubt every plant in the house was going to kill him. He didn't even want to know what the flowers under the parasols would do.

With the ground heaving underneath him, he swung his shovel and slammed it into the back of the house. It thudded loudly into the solid wood. With a grunt, he grabbed the shaft with both hands and pulled his leg away from the clutching ground.

Blood dribbled from his wound. His movements had opened up the cut but at least it wasn't pouring out from an artery. He could hear it splattering loudly on the ground. Dizziness washed over him. He couldn't stop; if he did, he would be dead. With fear-fueled strength, he pulled himself further up until he could jam his body between the door frame and a nearby window. He grunted and swung his remaining foot to catch the bottom of the window. It slipped off from the blood and rain coating it.

Underneath him, the wooden step coming out of the house cracked with the plants moving underneath.

He stared down with concern. Without a doubt, he should have walked away from the robbery. If he managed to get out, he was going to stop robbing.

"I promise!" he grunted and tried to get his foot brace again. Every muscle in his arms and legs ached with the effort to hold himself up on the spade. He couldn't find the words but he would do anything to escape: stop robbing, stop killing, stop anything. Hell, he'd donate money to orphans.

Balar's toes finally caught on the windowsill. Gasping in triumph, he shifted his position and put his weight on his foot so he could yank his shovel free. The blade easily slipped out with the proper grip; it was part of the magic when he had enchanted it.

Beneath him, the living plants were in a fury as they chased after the river of blood that poured out from his body.

A wave of dizziness slammed into him. His fingers grew slack.

"No!" he screamed and forced his fingers to grip tighter. He reached out for the side of the fence but missed.

"Please!" he gasped. "I promise I'll never do this again!"

He swung again.

“I swear!” he screamed at the top of his lungs.

To his relief, his fingers caught the edge of the fence. For the briefest of moments, he could hold himself still but then his fingers began to slide on the rain-drenched edge. Desperate, he dropped his shovel and grabbed the fence with both hands.

“Fuck!” he screamed.

Balar wasn't a fool. He already knew what would happen if he tried to rescue his instrument.

Using the last of his strength, he hauled himself over the fence and threw himself over the other side. It was too dark to see but he tried to throw his arms ahead of him to catch himself.

The ground crunched into his body. The bones in his one shoulder snapped followed by his one good leg. Gravity's cruel claws drove him harder into the ground with a flash of tearing muscles and more broken bones.

The impact drove the air from his lungs. He struggled to move, his mouth opening and closing but no air flowed into his stunned body.

With tears in his eyes, he looked up to see someone standing in the back door of the neighbor's house. Their forms were only a blur in the rain and his agony.

Shaking, he held up one hand. His lips worked silently, trying to beg for help, but no noise came out.

Oblivion rushed up, pounding in his ears and darkening his vision. He didn't know what would kill him, blood loss or the bloody roses next door. If he managed to survive, Balar knew he would honor his promise. No more killing, more stealing.

Only if he lived.

“P-Please?” he gasped before slumping the ground.

Chapter 2

Regrets

Secrets are like poisonous snakes stuffed into your pants.

—*Confessions of the Soul*

It took all of Balar's willpower to stop moving but he couldn't concentrate on remaining still for only a few seconds at a time. Twinging muscles and bone-deep aches forced him to move again. There was no comfortable position, no way to arrange his body that wouldn't hurt seconds later.

Every time he moved, sharp pains radiated from his injuries. Cuts and scrapes covering his limbs were nothing new, but he had never had so many across so much of his body. He glanced down at his limbs and hated seeing so many of them crisscrossed with bloody and stained bandages.

His gaze focused on his left leg. More importantly, his attention sharpened on where it ended six inches past the joint of his hip. There was nothing there except for heavily wrapped bandages soaked with blood.

One of the pale-skinned healers came in, a sour-faced man wearing red and white. He had a small tray of rolled bandages and a knife. With a glare, he came over and set it

down on the table next to Balar. “The guards will be back for you in a few hours.” There was no compassion in the baritone voice.

Days ago, Balar would have said nothing. Nothing good ever happened by proclaiming innocence or trying to deny it. However, the brush with death and horror still haunted him and he found it impossible to not say something. “No doubt,” came his quiet reply.

It wasn’t many words, but for Balar, it felt like he had just confessed to a murder. He took a deep breath and let it escape through his teeth. Inwardly, he berated himself for even letting two words escape.

He repeated the mantra that had kept him safe for years: don’t talk to the healers, the guards are never your friends, just keep quiet.

The healer grabbed Balar’s left thigh and dug his fingers into the joint. With a twist, he pulled the injured limb to the edge of the bed.

Pain cut across Balar’s senses. He arched his back and the rest of his breath came out in a loud hiss of agony.

“You are a damned murderer. Everyone knows it.” The healer yanked down, tearing off the bandages in a single swoop. “The guards wouldn’t have brought you here and they wouldn’t have chained you to a bed if you were innocent.”

With a cry, Balar gripped the edge of the bed tightly. The iron manacle around his wrist rattled loudly. The pain tearing through him made it impossible for him to correct the healer; he was a thief who wasn’t opposed to killing anyone who got in his way. Somehow, he doubted the healer would appreciate the distinction.

The healer gestured down to the severed end of his leg. The entire end had been coated in a thick, sticky poultice that kept him from bleeding to death and stave off infec-

tions. “Too bad whoever did this didn’t aim higher. A foot and you’d be less than a man.” He scoffed. “Or at least gut you properly. The world will be a better place with your corpse.”

The urge to say something rose up but even Balar had trouble believing it. The healer would laugh at him if he said he cut it off to avoid a supernatural plant that had burrowed into his leg and was trying to eat him out from the inside. He shuddered and clamped his mouth shut. The guards weren’t your friends, he told himself. Don’t trust anyone.

The healer grumbled as he bent over to inspect the wound. With a frown furrowing his brow, he leaned over and peered at it. “What of the Divine Grace?”

Balar tensed. The memories of his amputation came back, of the terrible sensations of plant tendrils digging into his flesh and along his bones as they crawled for his crotch. It was as if worms were eating him out from the inside. He had cut off his leg in desperation to stop the plant.

Even the thought of the plants caused phantom wriggling to caress against his senses. He imagined the tendrils had returned, burrowing up around his bones as they tried to kill him again.

The healer didn’t look up. Instead, he shoved his fingers into the bloody wound and began to twist and probe.

Balar let out a sob of pain. He twisted trying to escape the healer’s probing. The manacles rattled loudly.

The healer let out a chuckle and then started to pull.

“Damn the gods!” Balar’s voice echoed against the walls, higher pitch than he had ever heard before.

“Got it!” cried the healer. He pulled on something.

It felt like a thousand thorns were tearing out of his leg.

The sharp smell of blood flooded the air. The healer slowly drew out something long and string-like. It was a

plant tendril; the end of which was deep inside his stomach, twisting around his organs. With every tug the healer made, Balar felt it slipping off of his hip bones and ripping out from his groin.

Balar let one last cry. “Fuck!”

The healer yanked it free. The bloody tendril swung back and forth. Frowning, he stepped away and peered at it. “This is a root. What is a root doing in you leg?”

Panting, Balar stared at it and whimpered. It had gotten deeper into his body than he thought. It was writhing inside him. He shuddered with the sensation as his imagination began to paint more squirming tendrils across his senses, a phantom feeling of death inching closer but never reaching the deep ache of whatever the root had just torn open.

The door to the chamber banged open. A red-cloaked guard came sweeping in. He had a massive pole weapon, a halberd of some sort. It crackled with energy and the lights in the room flickered in response.

The healer turned with a shock. “You can’t have that thing in here! We have people recovering from injuries and you could kill them with the feedback.”

“They’re fine,” snapped the guard. He looked around the room and then headed straight toward Balar. The butt of his weapon thudded against the ground, rattling the floor boards more than just footsteps would have provided.

Balar cringed. He didn’t like the guards but the mage-captains were the worse. They had magic and were always pushing with their questions.

The captain stopped next to Balar’s bed. “I’m Mage-Captain Wathin, the investigator.”

“Coming to arrest him?” asked the healer, still holding up the bloody root.

“No, not at this point,” said a second mage-captain in the door. The second one was an overweight man with only a fringe of hair. He had the captain’s bracelet but wasn’t wearing the typical cloak.

“Pity, the bastard deserves to be in prison.” The healer tossed the root on the tray.

Balar stared at the tendril. Everything else was less important than the overwhelming fear that the plant still crawled inside his body. His eyes ached with the effort to see any hint of movement. Any suggestion that it was still alive.

The second mage came further into the room. “Our investigations have not concluded. We will not charge anyone until that point. Anything else would be a violation of the law.”

The healer scoffed.

Wathin leaned against the bed, between Balar and the tray. “Balar, right?”

Balar looked up. “Y-Yes, sir.”

Wathin was a handsome man but he smelled of perfume and smoke. Balar knew the type, a pretty boy who liked to play with others. He had the look and attitude of the buddy guard, the one that got you to confess all your sins in exchange for an easy smile and friendly but empty promises.

Balar’s jaw tightened. He had to be careful around the captain. He looked away from Wathin’s bright brown eyes and toward the tray with the bloody root. When he realized Wathin stood in the way, he tried to peer around. The phantom, squirming sensation in his leg redoubled until he had to slump down.

“So, Balar, what were you doing in The Hagril’s backyard with your leg cut off? Seems kind of unusual, don’t you think?”

Balar glanced at the guard. Don't say anything. Don't trust the police.

Wathin focused off a disarming smile at him. "Who cut off your leg? That wound was very straight and clean. I'd say a sword cut and I know you don't have one of those on you."

Balar almost said something, but he couldn't. The guards couldn't be trusted. They could never be trusted.

"He isn't going to say anything, Wathin," said the other mage with a chuckle.

"Why do you say that, Mudd?"

"Tension in the muscles, the flex in his cheeks. Not to mention, he is focused on the contents of the tray more than you. He's a mousetrap."

Balar tensed and looked up sharp at the other mage, Mudd.

Mudd didn't seem to be triumphant or probing. There wasn't any excitement in his voice; in fact, he seemed more clinical and monotone than Balar would have expected. The mage walked to the tray and peered at it. Balar couldn't see what he was looking at.

The mage bent over before pulling out a pair of white leather gloves and slipping them on. He picked up the bloody root and inspected it carefully.

Balar's phantom sensations grew and he squirmed with discomfort.

Wathin stepped away from both of them, turning around and standing next to the healer.

Fighting back the urge to whimper in pain, Balar watched Mudd carefully.

"This is a root, isn't it? Looks like the tap root of a perennial of some sort."

Wathin said, "You saw plenty of those in the neighbor's house. The entire place is littered with them." He shuddered. "Too many plants, as far as I'm concerned."

Balar's head snapped up. He looked in fear at Wathin's and Mudd's face. Neither looked like they were about to arrest him for murder.

"Yes, but for an abandoned house, those plants were in excellent upkeep. Not to mention, a well-manicured backyard."

Balar almost missed what Mudd said. Abandoned? The house wasn't abandoned. He distinctly remembered killing the old lady in the back. His body tensed when he remembered what came next. She wasn't an old lady, the inside of her corpse had been filled with flowers and roots.

"A few questions, if you don't mind," Mudd said. He set down to the root and then pulled a notebook out of his pocket. He wrote something down for a few moments and then circled around the bed. "What severed your leg?"

Balar clamped his mouth shut. His mind still ran furiously. If he remained silent, then they could just get him for breaking and entering the house, not murder.

Mudd looked at him and then back to his injury. "Sharp blade. Looks like a single cut of considerable force. Judging from the cut marks, the blade was wide. At least seven inches across."

"A seven-inch sword? Sure it wasn't a downward slash?" asked Wathin with a frown furrowing his brow. Mudd was obviously saying something that either disturbed or surprised Wathin.

"No, I determined the profile of the weapon from cuts I found along the front door and flooring. The same instrument was used on the front gate. Despite the wide blade, it was used for slashing and piercing."

Wathin leaned toward Balar. "Do you have a sword?"

Balar struggled. There was nothing good talking to the guards, even if he was honest. He looked up at Wathin and

couldn't help but want to respond. He groaned and fought it for a moment, then he sighed. "No."

"What cut off your leg?" asked Wathin.

Balar glared at him. Keeping quiet during interrogation was always the hardest, but he was a free man because he knew the merits of keeping his mouth quiet. He shook his head.

Wathin sighed. "Come on, was it a friend of yours?"

Balar refused to answer.

Mudd chuckled.

Wathin sighed. "What?"

"Mousetrap."

"Mouse... damn it." Wathin turned back to Balar. "Do you want to go back to the guardhouse? I could throw you into interrogation."

"Please," muttered the healer. "Get him off the street."

Mudd and Wathin turned on the healer. Neither said anything but the tension in the room grew uncomfortably.

The healer twisted for a moment. "I-I should finish wrapping this up."

"Please," said Mudd.

No one said anything as the healer finished treating Balar's wounds. Then, with a huff, he left and shut the door firmly behind him.

Balar tensed.

Mudd leaned over and picked up Balar's clothes. Setting them on the end of the chair, he inspected each piece including turning his boots over. "I notice you have mud and broken leaves from the plants in the front gardens from next door, 28C."

He plucked a crushed petal covered in blood from one of the ridges. "The species of this plant is distinct, I have never encountered them anywhere except in that house and yard."

Balar tensed.

Mudd moved up. He took Balar's hand.

Surprised, Balar didn't resist.

"Are you a farmer?"

"I used to be." Balar realized he had given away something that could be used against him. The guards were not a friend, he told himself.

Mudd peered down at Balar's fingers. "Yet you have steadily used something with a relatively thick shaft. Judging from the calluses, I would say you..." His voice trailed off.

Balar tensed and looked at both of the guards.

The mage released his hand and stepped back. He pulled out a notebook and began to flip through the pages.

"Mudd? You have something?"

"Yes..." Mudd's said distractedly. "I'm looking for..."

The mage did not say anything for a long moment.

Wathin sighed and leaned against Balar's bed. "That's the problem with Mudd. He is very focused on finding the source of a crime. Of course, if you were to explain why someone cut off your leg—"

"No one cut off his leg, Wathin." Mudd still flipped through his book without looking up.

Balar tensed.

"What?"

"He did it to himself with a... a... shovel I think. Wide blade. Should be about eight inches across and sharp, maybe magically so."

Balar felt all the blood drain from his face. The world spun around him and he clutched the railing tightly. They were going to arrest him. He was going to be in prison for the rest of his life.

Wathin looked down in surprise. "You cut off your own leg?"

Trembling, the words spilled out of Balar's mouth before he could stop them. "Y-Yes."

"Why?"

Balar managed to clamp down on any other words.

Wathin turned to look at Mudd. "Why?"

The bald mage didn't look up. "Judging from his reaction to the bloody root next to you, of which was pulled out of his leg as we were entering the room, and a suggestion of self-injury, I'm going to say that he was in mortal peril."

Mudd finally put down his notebook. "Don't you think it's interesting that the house is on the registry without any reasons?"

Wathin shrugged. "Most of the registry is blank."

Balar looked back and forth. "R-Registry?"

Wathin rested an easy hand on his shoulder, the kind gesture setting off warning bells in the back of Balar's head. "Registry of Forbidden Locales. It's the list of places the guards are not to investigate or allow anyone to break in during a dark and stormy night."

The phantom squirming sensation redoubled. Balar shifted his leg as he fought the urge to reach down and see if there were plants still crawling underneath the skin.

Mudd stared at Balar. "Would you be willing to make a deal with me?"

Wathin's hand tensed.

Balar shook his head. Never make deals, never trust the guards.

Mudd sighed. "I want to know what tried to kill you. I suspect you aren't planning on breaking into any more houses in the near future, are you? Maybe use this opportunity to stop your life of crime?"

Balar thought back to his screamed-out prayer as he was crawling for his life. He said he would stop robbing. It hung in the back of his head, but there was a doubt. He didn't

have many other skills besides stealing. Without his leg, his options were significantly curtailed.

Mudd flipped his book again. “Dame Hagril reports hearing a man screaming ‘Please. I promise I’ll never do this again.’ Seconds later, the suspect crawled over the fence and landed on the ground.”

Balar froze, his heart pounding. Everything hurt and his skin crawled as he stared at Mudd with horror and trepidation.

Wathin sighed. “You are really going to do this, Mudd?”

Mudd shrugged. “It serves the greater good.”

The two mages stared at each other for a long moment.

Then, with a sigh, Wathin shook his head. “You better be right about this.” He patted Balar on the shoulder. “Better not be back here, Mousetrap.”

To Balar’s surprise, the combat mage grabbed his halberd and walked out of the room. His body could be seen through the door, but he didn’t walk away. Instead, he leaned on the far side of the door and shut it with his weight.

Slowly, Balar looked back at Mudd.

The remaining mage glanced at the door. Then he picked up a chair and brought it over. “Balar is your given name?”

Balar clamped his mouth shut.

“You came to Rougan three or so years ago?”

It was startling how close Mudd had guessed when Balar had left home to come to the bigger city.

“I’ve been tracking a series of crimes since then with a common pattern of a thief breaking and entering using a wide-ranged weapon. While the crimes were mostly focused on high-profile robbery, there were a number of murders executed during the process.”

The monotone way Mudd listed Balar’s crimes somehow made the litany more terrifying.

Mudd gestured to Balar's boots. "You haven't changed those since you arrived in town. The tread mark is somewhat distinctive and enough to suggest you were the criminal in question."

A whimper escaped Balar's lips. He had been caught.

Mudd sighed and tapped his notebook. "I should have figured out it was a spade. Wide blade made more sense given the pattern of the wounds. Enchanted?"

Rapidly losing control of the conversation, Balar managed to keep his mouth shut.

"I heard of a set of farm implements made by a former weapon smith in the Village of Kas."

"M-my mother." Balar realized he had just revealed more than he intended. "Shit."

"You realize it was probably destroyed. It isn't among the inventory of 28C."

The idea that his spade was missing struck him like a blow. His mother had made it and four others for his brothers. Each one had been perfectly crafted and enchanted to be more effective. Only Balar had decided to use it for the very purpose his mother detested: to kill.

Balar shook his head and looked down.

"This might be an appropriate time to revisit that promise you made."

"Shit."

"Without your shovel, having your leg amputated, and a near-death experience, I suspect you are at a crossroads of life." Mudd continued to speak in a monotone, without a waver or hint of emotion.

The mage closed his notebook. "You have something I would like to trade. A simple exchange."

Don't trust guards. Never trust deals.

"Between your boots, spade, and time of arrival, I'm sure I can confidently connect you to twenty-three robberies

and sixteen murders. Three years isn't that long of a time and a number of questions would track your movements enough to ensure I could get a conviction for at least half of them. Furthermore, with the murder weapon identified, I could probably double the number of potential crimes."

Balar choked. He looked around, wondering how hard it would be to escape his manacles and throw himself out of a window. He wouldn't get far with only one leg but it might be enough, Mudd looked fat enough he would be a struggle.

Mudd held up a finger. "As I suggested, your crossroads has given me an opportunity to populate the registry with information that could save lives. I don't like missing data, too many times a key piece of lost information could have saved lives."

Balar ground his teeth together. Don't say anything.

"Given that your career as a thief and murderer appears to have come to an end, I propose a trade. Information about 28C in exchange for me not connecting you to your previous crimes."

"Why would I trust you? You're the city guard."

Mudd shrugged. "That is the crux of the problem. You have no reason to trust me and I benefit either way from your choice. Either I solve three years of cold cases and send you to prison—"

Balar squirmed.

"—or you give me detailed information of your experiences of 28C and I fail to connect you to your previous crimes."

With the pressure of the question and the cold, calculating way Mudd presented it, Balar shuddered. It seemed like an easy way out, a simple way.

He shook his head. It was never easy. The guards would screw over anyone to get their crime. Mudd would no doubt

take it down as a confession and then charge him with the murders.

Mudd stood up. The chair legs scraped against the ground. "I'm aware that you cannot trust me. There is no reason for you to do so and there is no proof that I will honor my end of the bargain."

The mage shoved his notebook into his pocket and then headed for the door. "My offer stands until you make a choice, a month passes, or I find your enchanted shovel."

Balar tensed. He watched as Mudd opened the door.

Outside, Wathin stepped forward and turned around.

Mudd gestured him to the side. "Come on, Wathin, decisions have to be made."

"Decisions?" asked the other captain.

"Not by us."

Wathin glanced at Balar and then shrugged. Together, they turned and headed away.

Balar made a choice, a desperate and frantic one. "Captain!"

Mudd turned and peered into the room.

"Both of you promise? A deal?" Inwardly, he screamed at himself. Don't trust the guards. But, he also didn't have much of a choice. It was only a matter of days before Mudd found Balar's shovel and he would be thrown in jail. At least a deal would give him a chance.

Mudd turned back. "I made the offer."

Wathin sighed. "I trust Mudd's judgment. Not to mention, he's the forensic mage. If I don't hear anything, then I can't do anything." He tapped his halberd against the ground and turned to stride away.

Mudd watched him and then re-entered the room. Shutting the door, he pulled out his notebook. "Let's trade."

Balar knew he was going to be making a terrible mistake. Years of keeping quiet and now he was going to confess to a crime.

“Now, you were walking down the street at midnight and noticed the door of 28C was open. Naturally, as a good citizen, were there any other details you notice?”

Stunned, Balar stared at him in surprise.

Wathin groaned. “Damn it, Mudd.”

Mudd ignored the other captain. He sat down on a chair and held up his notebook. “Well, you wouldn’t have been casing the joint to rob it. So, you decided to see if there was someone in danger? Or was it just an open door that concerned you?”

Balar looked back and forth.

Wathin strode over to a chair on the far side of the room. He grabbed it and then dragged it loudly to the door. Turning it around, he planted himself down. “Yes,” he said in a sardonic voice. “You were just an innocent man who had nothing but good intentions.”

The thief looked back and forth.

“Just go with it, Balar. Mudd is trying to be nice.”

Balar started to whisper his mantra but then stopped. “Fine, I was...”

“... walking down the the street...” prompted Mudd.

“... when I noticed the door open.” Before he knew it, he was revealing the deals of his own robbery to two captains, something he would have never done an hour before.

D. Moonfire

Chapter 3

Betrayal

The will of the gods is subtle and fleeting, but for the stone-headed man, sometimes a more serious blow is required to remind him of their will.

—*The Will of the Divine Couple*

A cold wind blew down the street, kicking up flecks of snow and drawing ripples in the slush. Balar shivered and clutched the ratty blanket tighter around his shoulders. The small metal cup in his hand clicked with the two coins at the bottom. It hadn't been a very productive day but he was hoping to get at least a crown before nightfall; that way, he could afford a hot meal at the local church instead of his usual hunk of jerky with a bit of bread and water.

His stomach rumbled and a headache throbbed along the right side of his head. It had been a long time since he had eaten to his fill. It all started three months ago when he decided to turn his back on his life of crime and try to make an honest living. Having to cut off his own leg to survive a haunted house filled with killer plants was a good reason; it was impossible to rob someone without a left leg.

His skills weren't suitable for clean living and there was no way the Three Gods could convince him to return home. No one in his village liked him nor could he come back with his tail between his legs.

Another wind tickled his nose. He tugged up the scarf and looked around at the road. He had camped out near the corner of two busy roads, but it was after the normal working hours. The sun had already dipped below the horizon and the last of the light was weakly dragging its corpse across the skies. His prospects for begging looked slim.

Balar sighed. He should have lied to the guard. He should have found a way of robbing houses and stores. It didn't really matter if his missing leg would have made that impossible. All that mattered was the knot in his stomach and the shivering that wouldn't stop.

To his left, he heard boots crunching on ice. Dragging his scarf down his face, he steeled himself against the cold and held up the carved wooden cup in his hands. "Just a few crowns, sir," he asked the passing man wearing a black Inverness cape.

The stranger stopped and turned around. "Bal?"

When Balar didn't register, he pulled back a knitted cap from his head to reveal a face that Balar had seen before: Steler, a protégé back when Balar worked with teams to strip away houses while the occupants were at parties. Steler had the same philosophy as Balar did at the time: get everything of value, kill anyone who saw.

"What are you doing down there, Bal?" Steler spun on his heavy boots and came over. He squatted down. "I haven't seen you in months."

"Had a bad spill." It felt strange talking to a man who had once called Balar "a great teacher" and gave a percentage of his take for almost a year in fees.

Steler's eyes scanned over Balar's body. It was the look of a professional thief, no doubt looking for anything of value. Then the eyes focused on Balar's half-covered left leg.

Without a word, Balar tugged the blanket away to reveal where his leg ended about six inches from the hip. The wound had healed over but there were still discolored flesh and a few scabs left from his injury.

Steler whistled. "I heard you got hurt, but I never realized it was that bad."

Balar resisted the urge to snap. Before he lost his leg, he thought he had a thousand friends that would jump up and help. Instead, they left him behind to fend for himself. Once he had no more value in stealing or spending money, he ceased to exist in their eyes. He tugged the blanket over his leg. "Bad spill."

Telling everyone that he fell was much easier than explaining that he used a magical shovel to cut off his leg to avoid the supernatural plants. His hand twitched but he didn't scratch himself; at least the sensation of having roots crawling in his leg had faded in the last month. Now, it was almost normal except for the starvation, freezing, and loneliness.

Steler looked around and then held out his hand. "Come on, old man. Let's get you warm and maybe get you back into the game."

Balar hesitated for a moment but the promise of warmth lured him. He took the offered hand. As Steler pulled him to his feet, Balar used his crutch for balance. It took him a moment to steady himself and then another to gather his things.

Steler shook his head in disappointment and then turned his shoulder in a clear gesture for Balar to use it. "Come on."

Balar gripped the cape tightly and together they headed down the street. It was a painfully slow process, with Steler's heavy boots a counterpoint to Balar's crutches.

"I got a big job going on," Steler said as they walked. "I've been planning for better part of three months. Coming up with the contingencies like you suggested, trying to find the most efficient way to get in and then out. I could use your help in spotting things I missed."

Balar felt his thoughts returning to his happier days. "How big of a crew?"

"Six. I got Two Toes, Kisnar, Fangol, Spittoon, and the Hawk Twins."

"Pretty young crew."

Steler shrugged. "Fangol and Toes been at it for a few years. Those are my points. And if you got Toes—"

Balar chuckled. "Then you get Kisnar. At least they are keeping their wedding vows. Twins are on watch?"

Steler nodded and then pointed to an alley. "Down there. No, the Twins are doing the second story, hit the bank from three directions. Spitton is watch this time. He's got a new mechanical bow that can punch a foot-deep hole into stone at three chains."

Balar nodded. It felt good to do something, anything. He missed it.

Steler slipped away to open an unmarked door on the side of the alley. He gestured inside.

His crutch rattling, Balar took the invite and worked his way down the three short steps. He hated the feeling that he was only inches from missing and falling. It was just one more reminder how crippled he had become.

The basement room looked like every storage hall Balar had clandestine meetings in before: a lantern hanging from the ceiling joists, an impromptu table made from crates, and papers tacked onto the side of more crates. He had

made more than a few plans to break in someone's house or business in rooms like the one in front of him.

Balar scanned the labels. They were all yarns and textiles and dyes. He could smell the chemical scent that permeated the room, it must have been a fabric weaving business.

Four men and two women looked up from various places in the room. He had met all of them, but none of them since he lost his leg. They weren't friends but they also were enemies.

No one moved. Balar could feel the snow dripping off his face.

Steler came around him. "He's just here to check our work."

Two Toes, a sour-faced woman with black lipstick, glared at Balar. "He's been out of it for a while."

Her wife, Kisnar, smacked her lightly. "He isn't going with us, right, Stel?"

Balar shook his head. The warmth of the basement was more than he had in days. He wanted to crawl into the fabric and sleep until spring. Or at least, to get out of the wind.

"Good," said Toes in a curt voice.

Steler guided Balar to the table. The first thing the old thief saw were diagrams for a bank. The spiral pattern was distinct for Tarsan-style banks, with reinforced walls and guard posts. It was a big bank, probably one of the twelve that deal with trade monies through the various networks.

Balar scanned across the designs. He was glad to see that Steler had learned from one of Belar's earlier mistakes and didn't add identifying names. However, he was familiar with most designs and could identify the bank by the layout.

Spitton, an old woman knitting in the corner, sighed. "I'm going to be dead before you finish looking at it."

“Well,” Balar said as he tested the table. It could hold his weight and he rested against it. “If you are going to rob a Ralonix, it probably wouldn’t hurt to take your time and do it right.”

He looked up to see Steler’s muscles tightening. Pointedly, he gestured to a list of schedules with last names on that. “Use aliases for schedules, remember? Rooster, mouse, snake? Never identify people on paper.”

“Damn it,” muttered Steler. “How did you know it was a Ralonix?”

Balar leaned on his crutch to point behind the counters. “Ralonix always had these triple doors and no other bank has them. Plus the way the communication offices are arranged. This bank likes to have them in one big room to watch over them while others spread them out to avoid feedback.”

Some of the tension left the room.

Balar smiled to himself. Maybe he could get a job planning heists? He had a lot of knowledge it would use the skills he had. More importantly, he wouldn’t be robbing anyone himself.

It was a technical point, but the gods wouldn’t begrudge him a warm home, right?

He followed the various lines that the crew had arranged. An assault on the front and back at the same time. They went through a couple loops of the spiral. About a third of the walls were marked in colors, the others left blank. When he spotted a place where the lines went through a wall to get behind a guard post, he stopped. Leaning over with a grunt, he tapped it. “Going through here?”

Toes grunted. “There is a heavily-guarded post around that corner, coming around while they are distracted by the first squad is the only way we’ll crack it.”

Balar shook his head before tapping the wall. “That isn’t a good idea.”

The female robber stood up. “Like shit it isn’t. I went through those walls myself. The ones with wards are marked clearly, I double checked! If you think I’m going to pound my way through a ward, you’re stupid as you smell!”

Balar steeled himself. He tried to favor the rash robber with an easy smile. “These are designed by Decrail.”

She scoffed.

“The alchemist?”

“So?”

Balar tensed. “The one who is fond of putting acid in glass and nestling it between walls that looked like obvious weak points?”

Her eyes grew wider and her arm tensed.

He tapped the map. “This is only one loop from the vault. You have to assume that every wall that isn’t warded is going to be alchemically trapped instead. It lasts longer, is harder to detect with magic. When you were scanning, did the wards seem really powerful?”

Toes ground her teeth together.

Kisnar nodded. “They were. Really bright.”

“That’s to hide the magic in the traps. It gives you a false sense of security before your face melts off.”

“Then what do you have in mind, old man?” asked Toes with a sharp tone.

“I suggest—”

Any word that came out of his mouth ended when he felt something crawling along his left leg. It was delicate, no more than an earthworm burrowing through the earth. Except that it wasn’t on his skin, it was deep inside the muscle. A quiver of something that shouldn’t have been there.

Memories rushed back, of the frantic desperation to cut off his own leg to prevent the supernatural plants from

crawling through his flesh. He had begged the gods to save him, if he only stopped robbing.

“Bal?” said Steler in quiet voice. “Are you okay?”

The wiggling sensation grew more pronounced. He couldn't tell if it was moving up or his imagination, but he could easily picture it snaking through his muscles and burrowing deeper, curling around the bones for purchase like some weed.

He thought about his musings only a few minutes earlier. Was the sensation coming from the gods? Were they reminding him that he had promised to stop crime if he lived.

Trembling, he reached down and pressed his hand against his leg. He couldn't feel anything underneath his fingers, but the squirming sensation continued to wiggle inside him.

“Bal?”

The gods had to be talking to him.

“I-I have to go,” Balar said. “It's good. Just be... be careful of the traps.”

He turned and hobbled toward the door. “Sorry,” he said.

With the eyes boring into his back, he fumbled with the stairs and then the door handle. He started to tilt back until he grabbed it with both hands and twisted hard. Flushed with embarrassment, he snatched his crutch and limped outside.

The door closed behind him.

The wriggling sensation continued to writhe inside him. He could imagine it was digging into his intestines, squeezing in places that caused his pulse to race.

“Stop,” he whispered. “Just stop growing. I'm not going to do it, I promise.”

The muscles along his side continued to spasm. He whimpered and held himself.

“Balar? What’s wrong?” Steler asked as he came out the door. He shut it behind him.

“N-Nothing. I just... just... I just lost my edge.”

Steler looked into his eyes for a long count. “Are you sure?”

“Y-Yeah. You’re going to do great, it’s a good plan.”

With a frown, Steler stared.

Balar forced his hand away from his leg. “I promise you. You’re going to be rich.”

Steler patted him on the shoulder. Then he dropped his hand into Balar’s. When he pulled back, there was a few bills in his palm, each of them hundred crowns. It was more money than Balar had seen in months.

“Stel?”

Stel waved and turned away. “Be careful, Balar. If you need me, leave a note at the Drunken Horse.”

It was a seedy dive that Balar used to favor in better days. Many of the thieves and robbers drank there, at least until the next guard raid and then they would scattered to dozens of others equally disgusting places.

Balar shoved the bills into his pocket. If he stretched it out, he get a small bit of warm food and the cheapest boarder house to make it through the winter.

Hating how his life had changed, Balar situated his crutch and began to hobble down the alley.

With every step, the writhing in his leg and side felt like it was growing worse. His imagination painted an image of roots wrapping around his organs as the sharpened points worked their way toward his heart and lungs.

He twisted in discomfort. “Come on, I’m not robbing anyone.”

His breath fogged with his cry but the crawling didn’t subside.

Struggling to move, Balar forced himself to hobble down the street. There were a number of cheap boarder houses. For a few extra crowns a night, they would have some hot food in the morning for the tenants. The idea of having some comfort, and at least one hot meal, kept him going for almost a block.

The writhing sensation redoubled.

Growing more panicked, he stopped and pulled up his clothes to stare at his wound. The icy touch of wind against his bare flesh hurt, but it was nothing compared to the horror he expected to see.

Nothing looked out of the ordinary, other than the dread of having some sort killer plant growing in his body like it was a pot of dirty.

It had to be the gods. It had to be the world telling him that he had violated his oath.

He whimpered and looked around at the empty street. He couldn't cut it out this time, not with the feeling that it was burrowing deep into his gut.

A few blocks away, a pair of city guards started to walk down the street toward him.

Balar thought about the two mage-captains that had questioned him when he first escaped the backyard where he encountered the killer plants. One of them, the fat one, had surprised him by trading information about how he lost in leg in exchange for walking free.

He frowned. "What was his name. Wat... no... Dirt. Dirty. Slime. Mud. Mudd!" Mudd, the strangely monotone captain with probing questions. Maybe he could appease the gods by talking to him.

Balar froze. Was he really going to betray Steler and the others by telling a guard what was happening? He couldn't. The underbelly of the city would gut him in an instant.

More importantly, guards were not his friends. Nothing good ever happened when he talked to the guards.

A twinge in his leg made his decision for him.

Balar crossed the road and headed toward the guards. “Excuse me? I have a question.”

Twenty minutes later, Balar was hobbling toward the edge of the district. The guards had promised to send word to Mudd but Balar didn’t trust them. All guards were assholes. But they did tell him that Mudd was investigating a murder at the edge of the Goldstone District. It was only twenty or so blocks.

The wiggling sensation kept him company, reminding him that he had betrayed the gods with his desire for warmth and food and the old days.

A plain-looking woman going the opposite direction suddenly turned around and then came up even with him. “Balar?”

He jumped. “Y-Yes?”

She reached up to tug her white leather gloves over her hands. He stared at them for a second, remembering the same type of gloves on Mudd when Balar was questioned.

A prickle of fear ran along his spine. He glanced at her, at the sober outfit and button-down shirt. She looked cold, as if she had a cloak but abandoned it.

She dug into her pocket and pulled out a notebook. On her wrist was a guard bracelet. The ruby indicated she was another mage.

He stumbled.

The woman caught his elbow. “Careful now, it’s slippery in this weather.” She lowered her voice. “I was told that you asked for Mudd?”

He glanced around. No one seemed to have noticed but the windows were open and there was always someone

watching. He ducked his head. “Yes. I was hoping... to talk to him.”

“About what?” She had the same piercing tone as Mudd.

Trembling, Balar reached down and pressed his hand and grabbed his stump. He could still feel the wriggling sensation of the plant growing inside him. It was twisting around his stomach and making it hard to breath.

He hated that he couldn't tell if it was anxiety and imagination that made it impossible to tell if it was real.

“I... I broke my promise. T-The one I made to him.”

She leaned closer and spoke in a low voice that wasn't quite a whisper. “Not to commit a crime?”

Leaning back, she looked him over. “It doesn't look like you have a farm instrument. What was it? A hoe?”

Balar shook his head. “No, that's my brother. I had the shovel.”

She looked surprised for a moment and then shrugged. “He forgot to tell me that.”

“Do you think I could... talk to him, Captain...?”

“Lieutenant, but why don't you call me Viola? It seems like you aren't in a good place to use my ranks.”

“No,” he sighed. “I don't think this ends well for me.”

“Want to talk about it?”

Everything inside him screamed out in protest. Don't trust cops. Don't tell them anything. They will never do anything but betray you.

The squirming sensation increased. He imagined he could feel the pressure burrowing their way toward his groin, a deep pain that was so far beneath the surface that he could only feel it as pressure.

Sweat prickled along his brow.

He tried to convince himself the feelings were just his imagination, a remembered terror from his ill-fated night.

He was fine. It had been months and no plants had burst out of his chest since that happened.

Why had it changed now? He struggled with his emotions, on the edge of bursting into tears and losing it. He shook his head as he thought about how the rest of the community would handle it. They would slaughter him, string him up and let him dangle. There was no chance talking to the guards, even innocently, could ever be seen in a promising light.

Viola watched him, her gaze taking his face. It felt as if she could hear his thoughts or see directly into his soul.

“Shit,” he muttered and looked around again.

“Need me to leave?”

He opened his mouth to say yes. He couldn't betray Steler and the others. Even if he wouldn't get a fraction of the money they were going to steal, there was a sense of honor among thieves. He couldn't let the guards know the plans.

Viola nodded. She dug into her pocket and pulled out a few bills. “How about I—”

“Steler is about to rob the main Ralonix bank!” he gasped in a rush.

The smile on her face froze. Then she slowly put the bills back into her pocket. “Well, that was not what I expected.”

He cringed and looked around. “Can we... find somewhere private to talk?”

She nodded. “You know of the Golden Flagon?” It was a massive pub on the edge of the Goldstone District.

Balar had robbed the Flagon twice during a festival but he was sure that the owners would never be able to picture his face from the fires. He nodded and stepped back.

“About midnight? Mudd and I should be done with our investigation.”

“It would be bad if they caught me.”

“One of the local politicians is having a fundraiser tonight. There will be a lot of drunken rich people, something that you would be reasonably expected to check out.”

Viola stepped back and nodded. “Good luck.”

He froze, unsure of what to say or do.

A cold wind blew past him, cutting through his clothes and bringing a chill to his body. He shivered violently while she walked away.

Balar waited until she was out of sight before he dropped his hand to his severed leg. The wiggling sensation had subsided and all he could feel was the shivering from the icy cold wind.

He had made the right choice.

If it came down to betrayal or his life, there was only one thing he could choose. He gave the surrounding buildings one last look before he headed toward the border houses. He had enough time for a warm meal and a bed before meeting with the guards.

Chapter 4

Surrender

Blood brothers never forgive a betrayal, even if it may take a lifetime to execute their revenge.

—*Jack of South and Waters*

Somehow, Balar had made it through the winter but he was in a far different situation than the before.

Last year, he remember celebrating the beginning of spring by blowing through a huge sack of money he had gotten from the fence. It was a robbery of opportunity, he had gotten a rumor than a rich old man had died in his house. Balar had rushed over and broken in, looting everything he could while stepping over the rotting corpse.

Things were drastic different with the next spring. He groaned with the effort to pull himself into bed. The stub of his left leg twinged with pain when he accidentally bumped it against the rusted rail at the foot of the bed. He muttered under his breath and finished yanking himself onto the mattress.

He had found a different calling, helping two guards with their investigations. It didn't pay nearly as much, but

he found an appreciation for the consistency of having a weekly stipend in his pocket.

Mudd, the mage-captain, had provided a series of drop boxes and locations for information and payment. They were scattered throughout the district and were difficult to monitor. Balar was thankful for that almost as much as the money. If Balar's old associates found out that he was talking to guards, they would be less than pleased.

Balar groaned and tugged the thin blanket up. He had just had his weekly cleaning, twenty minutes with a bucket and a rag in the basement. His shorts were thin and more suited for the summer months, but they were just right as he sank between two freshly cleaned blankets.

He let out a low moan. "This is the life."

"You should enjoy it while you can," said a woman.

Balar froze. He was not expecting a woman in his room. Nor did he plan on it being a specific one. He looked around toward the only shadowed corner. "Evening, Two Toes."

Two Toes was a muscular woman just under six feet. She normally wore dark makeup to contrast her pale skin, but there was only a few dark shadowed underneath her eyes. She had a curved knife in her hand, the blade had been painted black to avoid reflecting in the light.

A shiver of fear ran down Balar's spine. He didn't have to look around to know where he had left his knife. He also didn't bother trying to reach for it, Two Toes had too much confidence. She had taken away his weapon, he was sure of it.

She shook her head. "Don't you dare." Her eyes glittered in the light from the lamp outside her window. "They arrested my Kisnar. They beat her up and threw her into the street."

Balar shuddered.

“I know it was you. You were the one that told the guards about Ralonix job. I don’t know, but you disappeared.” She ground her teeth together. “They took her.”

He knew that he was responsible. When he walked out of Steler’s planning session, he had headed straight for Mudd and Viola, his assistant and a lieutenant. It was one of the biggest arrests in recent news and managed to get to the front page of the rags for days.

Balar sighed.

Toes waved her knife. “What? You aren’t going to deny it?”

“I had to.”

“Why? Because you wanted to live the rich life?” She scoffed as a tear ran down her cheek. “You wanted to get out? You couldn’t just walk away? I haven’t seen her for months!”

He gulped and reached down for his left leg. His fingers dug into the end. The wound from where he had amputated himself had mostly healed. It was tender but no longer ached every minute. More importantly, he didn’t feel a wiggling sensation just underneath the skin. “I can’t explain it.”

Two Toes was on him in a flash. She jammed the edge of her knife against his throat, the sharp edge just cutting into the flesh. “Try. Tell me why you lost my Kisnar.” She sniffed and more tears ran down her cheeks. “I lost my wife because of you!”

The knife dug deeper, the edge dangerously close to his artery.

He looked at her. “Toes—”

Two Toes yanked her hand back. The sliver of reflective edge on her blade flashed in the streetlight. In the same smooth gesture, she pulled away from him.

Balar slapped his hand to his throat before the pain registered. Hot blood burst out from his fingers, spraying a-

gainst his hand. It felt like he was holding onto liquid flame as the stench of blood surrounded him.

“Burn in all the hells,” hissed Toes. She backed toward the window until the sill pressed up against her back. Her eyes were hard as they stared at him.

Balar knew that looking at her pleadingly would be useless. She came to do one thing and he was dying. The tension in his body drained out of him and he lost his balance. With his free hand, he tried to catch his side table. His hand wasn't working as quickly as he expected and he tumbled over the side of his bed.

His forehead struck the side of his table and a burst of pain blinded him. He crunched against the ground, his face and hip catching the hard wood.

Trembling, Balar tried to clutch his neck tighter to keep the blood from spraying out from between his fingers. He knew he was dying, but his body refused to give up. He dug his fingernails deeper as desperation fueled his muscles.

Blinded by his position, he couldn't see or hear of Two Toes had remained behind. He flailed helplessly to the ground with an effort to find something, anything, that could stop his life from pouring out from his throat. He remembered his blanket and pawed helplessly for him but his position made it impossible to reach.

He wished he had friends still. They had all left him, either by his betrayal or when he walked away from his family. No one who would be close enough to save him. The guards weren't his friends, he remembered think for many years. It was still true, Mudd and Viola would never be more than associates. Either might try to save him, but it would take a miracle for them to come through the door.

He knew he wasn't that lucky.

His strength continued to pour out of him in a crimson wave. The heat and stench was overwhelming.

With the last of his strength, he managed to flip himself on his back while clutching for his blanket. His bloody fingers caught the edge and he pulled it off. When the fabric slumped over his chest, he stuffed it into his neck.

Darkness began to gnaw at the edges of his senses. He could feel it, a suffocating pain that wavered on his peripheral vision and turned his legs cold. It wouldn't be much longer.

The blanket began to pull out of his slack fingers.

He tried to clutch it but his digits refused to answer.

Balar tried to say anything but the only noise came out was a gurgle and a gasp. Tears ran down his face, burning his eyes even as his vision darkened.

His hand dropped to the wooden floor, limp and useless. His other hand was still pressed against his wound, swimming in the hot pool of blood that began to fill his lungs.

He closed his eyes and tried to steel himself for death.

A new sensation tickled the hand. It was a tingling, a faint sensation of wriggling.

He shook it weakly.

His numb hand caught on something. It moved along his skin, crawling from his fingertips down to his knuckles. His arm slipped to the side but then caught. Through the darkness of death, he could see his elbow shaking.

The movement gave him focus. He struggled to lift his hand. It took all of his willpower to force the numb limb up and into his vision.

Through the haze and darkness, it looked like it was wavering.

He shook with the effort to pull it closer.

There was something on his hand. Red and black worms rolling over his skin. They were working their way down his wrist and arm.

Balar gasped and peered closer.

No, it wasn't worms. It was roots. Tendrils of a plant had ripped out of his skin and was wiggling around like tiny flowers along a garden. The tingling sensation redoubled and he realized that he had felt it before, almost a year ago when he had broken into the brownstone at 28C and found his life at risk when the plants inside had attacked him.

Fear somehow gave him more strength and focus. He tried to brush the root away with his hand but it only smeared more blood on his skin.

The tendrils moved faster, groping for the smears before digging back into his flesh. He could feel them burrowing deep into his skin, wrapping around bone and joint in a tight web of horror.

Balar realized the phantom sensations from the last winter were not his imagination. They were the plant settling into his body, preparing for the moment when he died. They were feeding off his blood and then would expand.

More roots and tendrils ripped out of his legs and back. They wiggled and twisted, writing against his flesh.

He tried to roll over, but he felt resistance. He cried out and forced himself to continue forward, past the sensation of tearing plants, and continued until his face smacked against the floor.

Where he was lying before, the plants were writhing in the pool of blood. He could see them digging into the wooden planks. One of them found purchase and sank a few inches into the wood. A moment later, the blood sank in a line that followed the plank before a tendril rose up a few inches away. In a matter of seconds, the supernatural plant had drank up the blood along the crevice.

Shock rippled through his fading thoughts. The plant was trying to set roots down. It was a weed, a parasitic weed that used his body to carry its seed to a new location.

It would turn his apartment building into the same thing that had happened to 28C.

For one of the first times in Balar's life, he thought about the hundred other men who lived in the boarding house. They wouldn't know what was coming. They would be victim to the weed as it took root in the building and then spread along the wooden floors to consume everyone.

He shuddered and closed his eyes. He was already dying. The only thing that seemed to keep him moving was the plants writhing inside his dying corpse. He just had to slump to the ground and let the plant take over.

He relaxed the tension, sinking into the writhing that boiled underneath his flesh.

His mind drifted back toward home. His brothers wouldn't ever see him again. NO doubt, that would give them a sigh of relief. He had betrayed his mother's will when he turned her magical tool into a weapon of murder and death; the former warrior had tried to teach all of them that violence wasn't the answer.

His shovel.

His mother had hand-crafted it for him just as she made the hoe, rake, and other tools for his brothers. They were suppose to bring peace, food, and harmony to the world but none of them really knew what to do with enchanted farming tools. He found it could cut through rock, stone, and bone easily enough and left for Rougan to make his name.

Balar's mind focused on the shovel. He had left it behind in 28C. Mudd had said he couldn't find it.

His head rolled to the side where the plants were still burrowing into the wooden planks. He noticed where the blood had been consumed, the tendrils were moving slower and wilting.

The weed needed blood.

He needed his shovel. He didn't know why, but it became important that he find it. The act would also take the plant away from the boarding house and the men who didn't deserve to die like he did.

Balar didn't think he had anything left to move. He forced his hand down on the ground and pushed up. Even though there was little blood left in his body, the plants wrapped around his bones and muscles twisted and moved. They acted as his limbs as he pushed himself up into a sitting position.

He had to use his face as a brace to pull himself up from the ground. Dying tendrils littered his bed, the remains of a weed that didn't have enough to eat.

Balar's mind grew foggier. He almost lost his focus when he had forgotten why he stood up. After a moment of swaying, he concentrated on the one thing he could picture clearly: his shovel. He had to get it.

He managed to turn around and stagger to the door. He hit it with his face and shoulder. Through the pain, he fumbled with the lock until his slack fingers caught it.

With a smear of blood, he pried open the door and thumped against the wall to the stairs. Behind him, he could tell that he was leaving behind a trail of gore and plants; he only hoped they would die before anyone else was infected.

Balar didn't make it down the stairs. He lost his balance and tumbled down them, cracking bone and smashing his limbs along the wall. When he hit the ground, the wet air flew out of his lungs with a splatter.

"Are you okay?"

He forced his hand against the ground. The plants writhed underneath the skin, causing the flesh to boil and twist. He couldn't tell if he was moving or the weed, but he somehow got back to his feet.

His eyes wavered and darkened. He waved at it, trying to clear his face, but his hand struck nothing.

Someone swore backed off.

He tried to wave at the wavering in front of him, but his hand was behind it. Trembling, he reached to touch his eyeball.

The movement was further in.

Balar pressed harder, rolling his finger along the orb until he could get a clear look at what was blinding him.

It was a flower. A tiny flower with countless petals. He had seen it before, back when he had broken into the brownstone. It was the plants that were outside the front door, the ones that were almost looking at him as he broke through the front door. It was also the same type of plant that filled the old lady that he had killed in the backyard.

The need to find his shovel rose into a fevered pitch. He lurched toward the front door.

Someone swore. "Get the damn guards!"

Balar ignored him. He had to get his shovel. There was a reason, but he couldn't remember anymore. He felt drained. An empty shell filled with worms, but the shovel was important.

Almost blind and staggering violently, he made his way down the street. There were screams and cries. He had to ignore them, it was the only way to keep moving forward.

He heard someone coming close. "Are you okay?"

Balar waved at them. He opened his mouth but only blood and tendrils spilled out from his lips. He could feel them twisting and shaking off his chin. Soft petals dripping with blood caressed his throat and shoulder.

"By the gods!" Thankfully, the person backed away yelling for the guards.

He continued to move blindly forward, but he knew where to go. The path to 28C had been burned into his

mind, the place he had lost the most treasured thing in his life, his mother's dying gift.

His shovel.

He had to get it.

There were more people coming closer.

Balar shook his head violently and waved his hands but didn't stop moving.

"Everyone back!" bellowed a familiar voice. It was Wathin, one of the mage-captains that had questioned him earlier. Balar could remember the handsome man that almost got him to spill his guts.

The air crackled around him. Balar could picture Wathin's weapon, a halberd that crackled with energy. He half expected Wathin to cut him down. Balar didn't know if that would stop the weed or let it spread out.

He decided the gods would know. He reached out toward his destination and kept staggering forward.

"Clear the path!" bellowed Wathin. Then, in a quieter voice. "You are heading back, aren't you?"

Balar nodded and then swayed.

"Eighteen blocks forward, I'll tell you were to turn."

He almost sobbed to relief. He focused on making each step forward. He had to keep going, to get his shovel. He didn't remember why, so he just concentrated to the feel of it in his hand and the way his mother looked when she presented it to him for his birthday. A small shred of joy, thought long forgotten, rose up and pushed back the horrid sensation of his entire body about to burst like an overripe milk weed pod.

One step in front of the other.

His hand reached for his shovel.

He had to get it.

Balar needed it.

Wathin gave him more directions.

He obeyed. When he bumped against the wrought iron gate of the innocuous brownstone at 28C, he almost collapsed.

“Keep going.”

Somewhere ahead of him, a door creaked open.

The flowers in his eyeballs began to quiver. He could feel the roots burrowing into his skull and sinking into his brain. Flashes of light, color, and perfumes flooded over him.

There was an old lady at the door, holding it open. He had killed her once before but she wasn't really dead. She was just a pod, a shell holding the weed that had consumed him.

She held out her hand.

Even blinded, he could feel the energies of his shovel. His birthright. He trembled as his hands grabbed the shaft and held it tight. It wasn't his muscles moving anymore, it was the blood weed. It gave him strength even when his own body failed.

The old lady stepped away from the door. Inside, the entry hall was filled with flowers of all types. They were looking at him, watching to see what he would do.

Balar turned to look at the crowd outside the gate.

In the front was Wathin, the guard held his weapon horizontally to prevent anyone from getting closer.

It didn't matter anymore to Balar. He was going to die, but cutting off his limbs wouldn't matter. He could feel the roots burrowing into his chest and tearing apart his organs. He was nothing more than food for the thing that had consumed him.

Balar stepped back and shut the door, sealing his fate with the brownstone at 28C.

D. Moonfire

About D. Moonfire

D. Moonfire is the remarkable intersection of a computer nerd and a scientist. He inherited a desire for learning, endless curiosity, and a talent for being a polymath from both of his parents. Instead of focusing on a single genre, he writes stories and novels in many different settings ranging from fantasy to science fiction. He also throws in the occasional romance or forensics murder mystery to mix things up.

In addition to having a borderline unhealthy obsession with the written word, he is also a developer who loves to code as much as he loves writing.

He lives near Cedar Rapids, Iowa with his wife, numerous pet computers, and a pair of highly mobile things of the male variety.

You can see more work by D. Moonfire at his website at <https://d.moonfire.us/>. His fantasy world, Fedran, can be found at <https://fedran.com/>.

D. Moonfire

Fedran

Fedran is a world caught on the cusp of two great ages.

For centuries, the Crystal Age shaped society through the exploration of magic. Every creature had the ability to affect the world using talents and spells. The only limitation was imagination, will, and the inescapable rules of resonance. But as society grew more civilized, magic became less reliable and weaker.

When an unexpected epiphany seemingly breaks the laws of resonance, everything changed. Artifacts no longer exploded when exposed to spells, but only if they were wrapped in cocoons of steel and brass. The humble fire rune becomes the fuel for new devices, ones powered by steam and pressure. These machines herald the birth of a new age, the Industrial Age.

Now, the powers of the old age struggle against the onslaught of new technologies and an alien way of approaching magic. Either the world will adapt or it will be washed away in the relentless march of innovation.

To explore the world of Fedran, check out <https://fedran.com/>. There you'll find stories, novels, character write-ups and more.

D. Moonfire

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