

A LIBERTY HOUSE NOVEL

ROGUE COMMUNITY COLLEGE



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THE UNDERTAKER'S BOY

The house could give up the ghost at any moment.

Isaac scented blood, which was no surprise in a place like this. Old and new mixed with a sour flavor, chemicals and something wild, something strange he couldn't place.

Sad, scraggly trees ringed a red stone facade that might have been beautiful a century ago. Garbage piled around the foundation and plywood covered the windows on the first floor. Soot stains spoke of an old fire, but the grass was shaved to the ground, probably by the city since citations and tickets plastered the front door.

Isaac circled to the side to avoid detection and scaled the wall. His fingers found easy holds in the ruddy stone. Hefting himself atop a porch roof, he crouched to peer through an open window.

A trio of prayer candles, white wax in glass tubes, gave the room its only light. The scents grew stronger.

A twin bed took up most of the space. An elf lay stretched atop it, gagged, his ankles bound with rope. They'd handcuffed his wrists to the headboard.

A steel gurney waited against the wall.

Isaac climbed through the window.

“Haven’t seen one of those in a while.” He pointed to the antique embalmer waiting beside the gurney. It had seen recent use. He could smell it.

The bound elf’s shock of black hair curled around his ears and forehead. His pale skin had a faint bluish cast, but he wore dark jeans and a T-shirt with some faded band name on it. His eyes were something darker than night, something more like ink. He narrowed them at Isaac.

“If I ungag you, will you keep quiet?” Isaac asked.

The elf nodded.

It was hard to tell, but Isaac would put him around his own age, maybe a few years younger. It would be hard to know without a taste, and he did have to wonder what sort of blood ran through those veins, what secrets it contained.

That wasn’t the job though. Isaac was here to rescue the guy and get arrested in the process.

He drew a knife and began to saw at the ropes binding the elf’s ankles. He considered nicking the elf and spilling just a drop . . . but no. He needed to keep his eye on the prize, the endgame—the future.

Isaac shook off the temptation and jerked the gag down.

“What are you doing?” the elf demanded. “You’re ruining it.”

“Ruining what?” Isaac eyed the handcuffs. “Where’s the key?”

He might be strong enough to break the wooden headboard, but he’d lose any element of surprise. Then again, the elf might even the odds. If he was an elf. He had the ears, but something felt off.

“What’s your name?”

“Huh?”

“Name,” Isaac stressed. “I can’t keep thinking of you as *the elf*.”

He made air quotes with his empty hand.

“Vran.” He sighed. “And you really should go.”

“What?”

“Tie my feet back up and go please.”

“Do you want them to drain your blood?” Isaac waved his knife at the embalmer. “Because that’s probably the plan.”

“Of course not.” Vran jerked his head to the window. “But seriously, just leave.”

Isaac blinked. “Talk about mixed signals. You don’t want to be rescued?”

“I do. Very much, just not by you. I’m waiting for somebody else.”

“That kind of hurts, dude. You don’t even know me.”

“Exactly.”

“What in the hells?” a voice asked.

Three figures had filled the bedroom’s doorway. Short, green-skinned, and broad, they had bulbous noses and long, pointed ears that flopped to the sides of their heads.

They smelled like body odor and noodles on a crowded summer bus.

“Now you’ve done it,” Vran said.

“Me? I told you to be quiet.”

“And I told you to leave. She’s going to kill me.”

“That’s what I was trying to tell you,” Isaac said, jerking his head toward the largest of the creatures.

“Not *her*,” Vran said. “She’s just a goblin.”

“Is that what you are?” Isaac waved a finger at the handcuffs.

“I don’t suppose you have the keys for these?”

The goblins bared thick, yellow teeth.

“You can’t have it,” the largest said.

She wore a beaten leather biker jacket and combat boots. Isaac had no doubt she could kick his ass in a fair fight.

That was okay. He never fought fair.

“You’re going to drain him?” He jerked his thumb at the vials and table. “You know that’s seriously illegal, right?”

“What do you care?” the goblin demanded. “You a Guardian or something?”

“Hey. No need for insults.” Isaac waved his knife. He liked this one. A British commando. Black, double-edged, with a decent throwing balance if it came to that. “Do I look like a Guardian?”

“They come in all shapes these days,” the goblin said. “Even human.”

“I was just passing by,” Isaac lied. “And who said I was human?”

The goblin’s sallow, bloodshot eyes fixed on the knife. She squinted.

“I’ve heard of you. You’re the Undertaker’s boy, aren’t you?”

“Not anymore.” Isaac made a gimme motion with his empty hand. “Keys, please.”

The goblin squeezed into the room. The goblets moved to flank her. Isaac kept his focus on the big one, but they all posed a threat.

“His blood will go for plenty.” The goblin nodded to Vran as she slammed her fist into her open palm. “But maybe you’ll go for more. Maybe your old master wants you back.”

“He doesn’t.” Isaac drew a second knife.

“How about in pieces?” one of the goblets asked in a high-pitched voice.

“You’re a lot squeakier than I expected,” Isaac said.

Two hands. Two blades. Three goblins. Not the best odds.

“If the Undertaker won’t pay, we’ll see what your blood will go for,” the largest goblin said. “Whatever you are.”

Vran sighed and pulled his wrists apart, snapping the handcuffs. He leaped to his feet. Something cold and clinging, like fog in the Graveyard, crept across the floor.

Greenish light filled the edges of the room. The shadows crept and coiled. They had hungry, shining eyes.

The air chilled until Isaac's breaths came out in little clouds.

"And I thought my magic was creepy."

The goblins charged.

Isaac whirled as the big one slammed into him. He dropped one of his knives as they tumbled to the floor.

Damn it. He'd gotten distracted by whatever Vran had conjured.

Isaac tried to roll her off him as she punched him hard enough to rattle his teeth. He tasted blood.

That was no good. His own was useless.

He slashed out with his remaining knife, not to kill, but to scratch.

The goblin reached for his skull and took it in both hands, intending to pound it against the floor as the shadows slithered closer.

Isaac licked the knife.

He'd never tasted goblin blood. He had to force aside any memories, any thoughts riding it. He didn't need those. He needed her strength.

The cut inside his cheek closed.

Healing. Nice, he thought.

Isaac grabbed her by the wrists and forced her off him.

Her eyes widened.

The goblets had backed against the wall. The shadows circled them, swimming through the air like eels.

No, the goblin thought. Isaac heard it through her blood. *My babies.*

They weren't minions or underlings. The goblets were her children.

"Don't kill them!" Isaac shouted to Vran. He faced the goblin. "Surrender. Just let us go. I'll call him off."

“We surrender!” she said, relaxing her grip. “Just don’t hurt them.”

Isaac wasn’t certain Vran had gotten the message. His eyes had gone all black. Blue sparks swam in their depths and dark lines had crept up his neck and over parts of his face.

The elf looked strained. Isaac got the sense he was trying to hold back the swarming shadows.

Their thrashing shook the house, slashing holes into the walls. Dust and plaster rained from the ceiling.

“Run!” Isaac told the goblins.

They broke for the door as a chunk of roof crushed the bed.

Isaac did not know what to do. He could nick Vran, try to drain off some of his power, or maybe counter it, but he didn’t know what the elf was, what his magic was, or how to use it.

He didn’t know his limits either. With the goblin blood still pulsing in his veins, Vran’s weird power might prove too much. Isaac could burn out like a spent match.

The decision was taken from him as the house imploded.

A flash like cold lightning swept away the shadows.

“What happened?” he asked.

He couldn’t see, but he wasn’t standing where he had been. Whatever was under his feet wasn’t dusty, splintered hardwood but something soft, like spongy moss. The scent of the air had changed to green, heavy with rain and damp, growing things.

“You’ll be able to see in a moment,” a new voice said. She had a clipped accent, not British, but something like that—stuffy and formal.

“Are you all right, Vran?” she asked.

“I think so,” the elf said. He was coming into focus, a slender shape dressed in shades of black and blue.

“Glad to hear it, because I’m going to kill you.”

“Literally?” Vran sounded very young.

She sighed.

“Probably not.”

Isaac could see her now.

Another elf, but not the same sort as the boy she glared at.

Her skin had an almost metallic sheen. Her eyes were the grayest gray, untouched by her ruby red dress. It sparkled with gems. The look clashed with the long sword in her hand.

“No,” she decided. “Definitely not, though I am sorely tempted.”

“Excuse me, but where are we?” Isaac asked, his eyes widening as he took in the landscape.

They still stood on a street, but the buildings were overgrown with vines and branches. Old, thick trees shot through the roofs and split the sidewalks.

The house was gone. A crater stood in its place.

Light from a bright green moon filtered through the leaves.

“This is the Spirit Realm, Isaac Frost,” the woman said. “I brought you here to save you from what Vran unleashed.”

“And you are?” He already suspected the answer and didn’t like it.

“I’m the Guardian who’s taking you in.”

Isaac groaned.

Guardians were a pain. They lorded over races not privileged or powerful enough to sit on their council. They made all the big decisions from the top of the food chain, leaving the little folk to struggle.

The worst part was that they weren’t very good at their jobs. All sorts of trouble fell between the cracks, escaping their notice, which was how the Undertaker made his unliving.

Granted, Isaac had never met a Guardian. He only had the Undertaker’s word, but he didn’t like anyone telling him what to do, not even the Old Man, which was why he had to do this

job. Someday he'd be in charge, or at least be the right hand of who would be.

The Guardians had too much power. They ran the Watchtowers, the magical anchors that crossed the Spirit Realm. They were also the tool of the Council of Races, a collection of the powerful.

That was another reason to take this job. Isaac and his brothers were just the sort of people who fell through the cracks, beneath the Guardians' notice, unless they slipped up. The council saved their pity for their patrons and vassals, for the ones who kept the system going.

"It's his fault." Vran jerked a thumb at Isaac, bringing Isaac back to the moment and the elves.

"Isaac did not destroy the house, Vran. You lost control. *Again.*"

"I'm sorry, Argent," Vran said with a pained grimace.

"In his defense, it was a crappy house," Isaac offered. "And, uh, you know who I am?"

She cocked her head at him, looking every bit like an eagle or some other predatory bird on the verge of eating him.

"I do, and I know what you are. You're the boy who ran away from the Graveyard. Why are you here?"

Isaac held up a hand. "What I *was*. And I was passing by. He was in trouble, so I helped."

"Not the sort of altruism I'd expect from an Undertaker," Argent said.

"Like I said, I'm not one anymore."

"Why not?"

Isaac paused.

"It's just wrong, you know?"

"And you just happened to be passing by?"

"I smelled something." Isaac shrugged. "I got curious."

“Why do you look like that?” Vran asked.

Reaching out, he brushed Isaac’s ear with a fingertip. He lingered there, just for a moment, before pulling his hand away.

Isaac peeked beneath the cuff of his jacket. His left arm remained green, the skin thick and leathery.

“It will wear off.”

“He’s a Phage,” Argent explained. “A mimic. He sucked up some goblin blood in the fight. You know, the goblins he let escape.”

“I barely nicked her. She was trying to bash my head in.” Isaac jerked a thumb at Vran. “*He* was going to kill them.”

“Not on purpose.” Vran faced Isaac. “If you drank a turtle’s blood, would you become a turtle?”

“It doesn’t work like that. Wait, why a turtle?”

“I like turtles.”

“How old is he?” Isaac asked Argent.

“Older than he acts.”

Isaac could taste snow in her exaggerated sigh.

“Either way, we didn’t get what we came for,” she said. “We don’t need the goblins. We need whoever holds their leash.”

“So it was a setup?” Isaac asked. “That’s why you wanted me to leave you there.”

Vran’s expression was full of *dub*.

The elf was cute, and he’d touched Isaac. That sparked a feeling in his chest that he’d almost call warm. He couldn’t remember the last time someone had touched him outside a punch or a sparring session.

“Yes, it was a setup,” Argent said. “And you ruined it.”

Isaac cracked his jaw. His teeth weren’t loose anymore. The goblin’s blood had done its work.

Argent assessed him with cold, gunmetal eyes. He wondered what she’d taste like, but instantly realized that it would

be like diving into liquid nitrogen. A drop of her blood would freeze him solid, and after that, he'd probably explode into snow.

Her involvement made his job trickier. He needed to get it done and get out. He wouldn't survive a fight with her.

"So now what?" Vran asked.

"Isaac is going to help us track them," Argent said.

"Wait, what?"

"You have a bit of their blood in you. You should be able to use that to help us find them."

"I don't know how to do that."

"That's all right." She crossed her arms over her chest. "We'll teach you."

"I don't work for you, and I don't want to."

"You're not going to *work* for us, Isaac Frost. You're out here on your own, without the Undertaker's protection. Those goblins were ready to drain you dry, and there are plenty of beings who wouldn't mind taking a shot at you just to see if your old master cares."

"So?"

"So we'll train you, teach you how to protect yourself, and how to best use your powers."

"She's kidding, right?" Isaac asked Vran.

"No," Vran said. "She means it. You're coming with us."

"Where?"

Vran smiled wistfully.

"Back to the school."