



TIN SWIFT

The Age of Steam

DEVON MONK



A ROC BOOK

Praise for
DEAD IRON

“Featuring a cursed hero, fabulous secondary characters, a world torn between machines and magic, and a plot that hooks your interest from the very first chapter, *Dead Iron* is a must read.”

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“A relentless Western and a gritty steampunk, bound together by wicked magic. The action is superb, the stakes are sky-high, and the passion runs wild. Who knew cowboys and gears could be this much fun? Devon Monk rocks—her unique setting and powerful characters aren’t to be missed!”

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“Werewolves, witches, and creatures of both flesh and metal clash in a scarred land stitched together with iron rails—a steampunk world so real I could almost smell the grease and hear the gears grind. Beautifully written and brilliantly imagined, Devon Monk is at her best with *Dead Iron*.”

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“A magical steampunk history of the Pacific Northwest ... this is a magnificent tale of Edenic mountains, steam-powered assassins, deathless love, and transformation. Fast-paced, tricky, turning from one extreme to another, the reader will be drawn ever deeper into the ticking, dripping iron heart of this story.”

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“Powerful and action-packed, Monk’s pacing is hypnotic, sending the reader into a Wild West that is as wired as it is weird. Keenly crafted characters and a deftly depicted landscape make this an absolute must read for fans of either Monk or steampunk.”

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“The mix of magic and steampunk worked very well. ... Curses, magic, werewolves, zombies, and the Strange ... they were all fascinating.”

—Fiction Vixen Book Review

“The steam age America that Monk has created for this series is ingenious. ... The Old West world is harsh and beautiful and the steam devices plentiful and fascinating.”

—All Things Urban Fantasy

“Monk’s entrance into steampunk is a tour de force.”

—*Romantic Times* (top pick)

“Monk has crafted a brilliant and gritty world rife with elements drawn from steampunk, blended with dark fantasy and a glint of glamour. She ... enmeshes the reader in a fantasy adventure that keeps them on the edge of their seat, up all night, unable to sleep until the fates of the main characters are determined.”

—Fresh Fiction

THE AGE OF STEAM

Dead Iron
Tin Swift

THE ALLIE BECKSTROM SERIES

Magic to the Bone
Magic in the Blood
Magic in the Shadows
Magic on the Storm
Magic at the Gate
Magic on the Hunt
Magic on the Line
Magic Without Mercy



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TIN SWIFT

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CHAPTER ONE

Cedar Hunt stared down at his blood-covered hands. Glossy and dark, fresh and plentiful, the blood dripped between his fingers, slicking his arms and snicking to the dirt between his boots. More than just covering his hands, the blood tasted sweet and thick on his tongue and coated his throat as he swallowed.

Not the blood of a beast, the blood of a man.

“That’s enough now, Mr. Hunt,” a woman’s voice said, steady and low.

He looked up. Realized he stood beneath a sparse forest canopy, evening light dabbing gold across branches and leaves.

Dabbing gold across Rose Small too. She had on her bonnet, the tips of her hair swinging just above her shoulders to catch that dusky sunlight and wear it in shades of amber. Though shadows lay low over her face, her blue eyes shone through like a sun-filled sky. But her mouth, so often curved in a smile, was tucked down in a tight frown.

She motioned with the shotgun held low at her hip. She didn’t have her long-shot goggles on. Didn’t have to. Cedar was only a few paces in front of her.

“I’d sure prefer it if I didn’t have to shoot you tonight, Mr. Hunt, but by God and glim I will.”

“Rose?” Cedar whispered.

Why was the girl pointing that gun at him? They’d been traveling together more than a full month across Oregon and were just into Idaho, he, Rose Small, the widow witch Mae Lindson, his cursed brother, Wil, and the three Madder brothers. He hadn’t once come to his senses with any of them standing at arms against him. Not even when the moon had taken him full into his curse.

“Glad you’ve a mind for talking, Mr. Hunt,” Rose said. “Even better your ears are working.” She lifted the gun. “But I’ll still plug you if you don’t step away from that man and head back into the wagon.”

He’d known what he had done the moment he’d seen blood on his hands, tasted it on his lips. He’d killed a man. In daylight.

And he’d done it as a man, not a beast, with no thrall of the moon to blame his actions upon.

He looked down. The dead man wasn’t very large nor very young. He had the look and the smell of someone who spent most his days riding and hunting bounties on men’s heads and most his nights gambling away the noose money.

“Who?” he rasped.

“I’d ask his name,” Rose said, “but don’t think he’ll say. He broke into our camp and tried to kill a few of us, Mae included. You...” Her voice faded off. Then she sort of huffed a chuckle. “Never saw thing like it. And I’ve seen things. Strange things.”

Mae. Of course. He’d never stand idle if she was in danger. But to lose his mind to this kind of rage was not at all like him.

“Did I change?” Cedar couldn’t remember the wolf coming upon him. Couldn’t remember sliding down that slick, hot stroke of pleasure to stretch into the fur and claws of the beast that the Pawnee gods had cursed him to wear on the three days of full moon.

Reason left him when the beast was in control and his thoughts reduced to hunger, hunt, and killing the Strange. He searched his memory for how the dead man had come to be broken, his blood pouring down Cedar’s throat.

Nothing came clear.

“You didn’t change,” Rose said. “Not in skin anyway. But I’m not sure how much of a man’s mind

you were in possession of. Didn't use a gun to kill him, Mr. Hunt. You used your bare hands. Broke him once and just kept right on breaking him."

She paused to let that soak in good.

"So," she said brightly, "now you need to be moving on. We want you locked up in the wagon for safekeeping. Yours and ours."

Cedar took one last look at the man. "Someone should search his body. See if he carried a reason to be following us. He was following us, wasn't he?"

"The Madders said maybe for a week or so. They're off seeing if he had company." Rose started walking, her boots crunching through the dry autumn underbrush.

Cedar started walking too, staying well ahead of her trigger finger.

"Don't know as to why he thought killing us was worth the effort," she said. "We don't have much to steal. We aren't causing any trouble."

Then she grinned. "You don't suppose we've gotten famous, do you? Maybe someone heard how we took apart Shard LeFel and his matics? Wrote us up in a newspaper somewhere?"

"Folk are rarely hunted for their good deeds," Cedar said. "I don't think we're famous."

Sure, he had mistakes in his past that might put a price on his head. But Rose had never been outside of the little town of Hallelujah, Oregon, until now. Mae Lindson might be a witch, but she wasn't the sort of person to go about causing harm.

The Madder brothers were a mystery when it came to their moral standings and past deeds. They liked to spin tales fantastical of things they'd done, places they'd been, but none of those yarns pointed clearly to shady doings.

"Could be nothing to do with us," he finally said. He rubbed his thumb over his lips, wiping away the blood there, and resisted the urge to lick it off his fingers.

Core-deep inside him, the beast shifted, letting him know it was still hungry. If there was no Strange blood to spill, it seemed just as happy with the blood of a man.

He straightened his shoulders against the chill of dread that slipped down his spine.

The beast was growing stronger. Hungrier.

"So he was just desperate?"

"Could be," Cedar said. "Saw an opportunity to plunder his way westward. Plenty of folk do it."

"Land pirates?" Rose sounded excited about the prospect.

She'd seen violence. Killed without a flinch men and Strange creatures that crawled up out of nightmares. But even death and much darker happenstances hadn't been able to shake Rose Small's sense of wonder in the world.

Cedar hadn't yet seen a thing that could dim her spirit.

"Just a rustler, more like." He paused. Turned to her. "We should search him."

Rose hesitated. Cedar gave her time to look him straight in the eyes. She held his wild gaze and measured his sanity.

Looking at him like that, when the beast was so near the surface of his reasoning, was something most people couldn't do.

But then, Rose had a bit of the wild in her too. Wasn't a metal she couldn't shape or a device she couldn't jigger with her fast-thinking mind and clever fingers.

"Not that I don't trust you, Mr. Hunt," she said. "It's just..." Her mouth tugged a crooked frown. "You tore him apart. With your hands."

"Rose," he said softly, resisting the urge to put his hands behind his back, where she wouldn't see the blood. As if that could hide his sins from her. "Whatever happened, it's done."

She bit her bottom lip and those springtime eyes searched him like she was peering through the shutter of his soul. "I'll keep the gun where it is, just the same."

Cedar walked back to the body. He glanced at the surrounding forest. Didn't see anything out of place. Well, except for the dead man. Not many bugs had found him yet, so it'd been just a few minutes at most since he'd killed him.

Snapped his neck, to be precise.

Cedar knelt and turned the man so he could study his face. A heavy black beard spread chin to temple. All his unwhiskered skin seemed to be covered in grime. His eyes were rolled back in his head and blood dripped a line out the corner of his mouth. Cedar picked up each of his hands. All the fingers were still attached, calluses and scars where you'd expect them to be on a man who rode the range.

He'd carried two guns, one thrown off in the brush about ten feet east, the other still in the holster. The weapons weren't nothing fancy, but they were well tended. He'd been good with his guns.

Not good enough to draw more than one before Cedar had killed him.

With his bare hands.

Cedar searched pockets, coat, and shirt. Handkerchief, tobacco pouch, rolling paper, and a knife. Not a lot else. Not a single coin on him, not a scrap of a letter, not a photo of a loved one.

"You done pawing that fellow to death?" The voice was so near him, Cedar started.

Alun Madder, the oldest of the brothers, crouched down on his heels near Cedar. Cedar was not a small man, but Alun took him on width.

Built like bull buffalos, the Madder brothers were all heavily bearded, wide-jawed, and accustomed to a life of mining, drinking, and brawling. When they weren't fighting, they had an uncanny knack with metal, matics, and odd devices.

Cedar owed them a favor for helping him find his brother, who he had thought was long dead. They'd been true to their part of the bargain, and so he was holding true to his.

Riding east to return Mae to her witch sisterhood before her ties to them and the magic of the cove sent her clean insane. Riding east so maybe those same witches could break the Pawnee curse Cedar and his brother carried. Rose, he supposed, was just looking to see the world wide, though he knew she cared for Mae and wanted to see her set to rights.

And on the way he would uphold his promise to hunt for the Holder, a device made of seven ancient metals cobbled together into a weapon of great power.

The Madders said even uncobbled, the Holder could cause ruin, rot, destruction.

If that was true, then the brothers' priority of gathering it up—wherever it was the pieces had landed—and getting it out of the hands of the innocent was a worthwhile cause.

"You're of a quiet mood, all of a sudden," Alun Madder said. "This man someone you know?"

Cedar pulled a cloth out of his back pocket and wiped his bloody palms and arms until they were mostly clean. He shook his head. "You?"

The miner had a blue kerchief tied tight over his head, but wore no hat. His gaze was on the dead man. "No soul I've ever known. Looks to be a drifter. Found his horse back a ways in the forest."

"Bring it. We can use a fresh mount."

"Already done, Mr. Hunt. I'm not the sort to leave a useful thing"—he gave Cedar a pointed look—"or creature behind. No matter how it falls into my hands." He pushed on his knees to stand and peered down over his thick dark beard.

"As Miss Small was saying, we'd like you locked in the wagon now. Night's coming. We'd rather you weren't out roaming. And besides"—he walked off toward camp—"the witch says she has an idea for easing that curse of yours."

A pang of hope snarled Cedar's gut. "She said she couldn't break the curse unless she had the sisterhood, and days to do it."

"Said otherwise just before you wandered off," Rose said.

“So she’s talking?” Cedar stood.

~~“Oh, she’s been talking nonstop since we set camp. Just don’t know who she’s been talking to.”~~

Cedar followed Alun through the trees to the clearing. There was a little more light here beyond the reach of branch and shadow. The grass was tall and silk-yellow around the stones, bent to the wind, and hushing away at every stray breeze. They’d had the luck of clear weather, but any day now the skies would change.

Storms were coming down from the north Cascade Mountains and Bitterroot Range. Strong enough to bury them in snow. Strong enough to swell little creeks into hungry rivers and trails into muddy bogs. They’d a plan to skirt the bottom of the mountain range and reach Fort Boise, Idaho, by the next week. Now he was just hoping they’d make it far enough into the Idaho Territory by nightfall to reach the vicinity. If the rains hit hard, they’d be locked flat in their tracks for the whole of winter.

Alun strolled over to the hulking wagon he and his brothers drove. The drafts that pulled for them were off a ways grazing. So too the other horses, with a new little roan among them. The dead man’s mount. Theirs now.

“Keep going, Mr. Hunt,” Rose said from behind, the gun still at her hip. He’d like to tell her she was being overly cautious, but that wasn’t true.

More than once he’d pulled up out of a dream of hunt and kill and blood, only to find himself sitting in his saddle, his horse spooking and the other folk in the group asking him what he was stopped and listening for.

He’d told them nothing. But that wasn’t true. The beast inside him wanted out. It was making sure it could be heard.

He knew what the Pawnee had planted in his soul and knew how to keep it caged.

Until today.

Mae paced near the fire they’d set between the Madders’ wagon and the women’s tent. She had a handful of plucked grasses and was braiding them together as she walked and muttered.

Less sane every day that went by. The coven of witches she’d once belonged to was calling her home, and taking away bits of her mind the longer it took her to get to them. He didn’t understand witches. Didn’t understand why her vows to the coven meant now that her husband was dead, they could drag her to madness unless she returned to them.

But he knew cruelty when he saw it.

“Look who I found just out in the trees, Mrs. Lindson,” Rose called out.

Mae turned and studied him across the fire. She seemed to be made of sunset there against the sky. The red firelight burnished her pale skin and yellow hair, catching sparks in her inscrutable eyes, and drawing dusty shadows across her soft lips.

Cedar’s pulse kicked up a beat. Since his wife’s death, he’d thought he’d never be shed of the pain of grief. Never have reason to feel again.

Until he’d met the widow Mae Lindson.

“I’m gonna take him to the wagon now,” Rose said. “And when you’re of a mind—”

“No.” Mae drew her hand up to smooth her dress, discovered the grasses, and frowned. She let the grasses drop from her fingers. When she looked back up at him, it was with an ounce more clarity.

“Leave your guns and knife here, Mr. Hunt,” she said.

Cedar unhitched his gun belt, then his knife. Set them all down easy on the ground. When he straightened, Mae walked round the fire and stopped right in front of him.

He couldn’t help but inhale the scent of her, always the sweet honey of flowers. They’d been on the road for days now without much more than a splash in a creek or two to sluice the trail dust. But Mae was beautiful, serene. Looking upon her made his breath catch in his chest.

She took his hand and turned it over like she was looking for a wound.

“This blood,” she said. “It’s not yours, is it?”

When she spoke, it was as if a rope had been cut free from around his heart. It was a puzzling thing being near her. A thing that felt so much like love, it might even share its name.

Not that he’d said as much to her. He didn’t know if there would ever be room in her grief to love another.

“Mr. Hunt?” Mae said. Then, “Are you hurt?”

“No.” The beast inside him twisted and dug deep, wanting out. Wanting Mae.

She caught his gaze and held his own hand up so that he would look at it.

“Where did this blood come from?”

He drew his hand gently away from hers. “Man needs burying back a ways.”

Rose stepped up a little closer to rub out a stray ember that popped free from the fire. “We can take care of the dead,” she said, “after the living are tended and resting in the wagon.”

“Are you sure you’re not hurt?” Mae asked with a sort of worry he hadn’t heard out of her in days.

He pulled a smile into place, hoping it softened his eyes, eased the hard line of his jaw. Hoping it made him look more like a man who still had his reason in place.

“As well as can be, thank you.”

“See?” Rose said kindly. “We’re all doing fine.”

Cedar tipped his fingers to his hat, then strode off toward the wagon, Rose right behind him.

If he stayed near Mae any longer, he’d take her in his arms. Hold her. Hell, kiss her and do the things a man can do to a woman.

Things she would not welcome. Not with her husband’s death so fresh in her eyes. Not with the tracks of tears on her cheeks. And the nights, every night, her whispering his name like a prayer.

The clatter of metal on metal rose up from the other side of the wagon, louder the closer he came.

The other two Madder brothers, Bryn and Cadoc, were off just a ways from the wagon, cussing over a chunk of brass and tangle of wood equipped with at least three valves that were sending off thin puffs of steam.

Bryn, the middle born, was taller by a finger or two than Alun, but not so tall as Cadoc. His beard was clipped tight, and he wore a brass monocle strapped over his ruined eye. The lens flashed an unnatural turquoise from under his floppy hat as his wide, nimble fingers used a half dozen tools to tinker with the steam device.

Cadoc Madder didn’t much involve himself in conversation unless it was to say something vaguely prophetic. He had on the same denim overalls and heavy overcoat all the Madders wore, the pockets of which bulged with gadgets. Tonight a knit cap sat over the bush of black hair on his head.

Cedar didn’t know what sort of contraption they were trying to fire up, but it appeared to require a heavy hammer and wrench—both currently being used to pummel the thing.

Alun Madder leaned against the wagon wheel, smoking his pipe and watching Cedar with a hard gaze.

“Here we go now.” Rose motioned the shotgun toward the wagon steps. “A roof over your head and a lock on the door. Cozy.”

“You’ll need more than a lock,” Cedar said. “You know where the shackles are?”

“I think so.”

“Find them.” He stumped up the stairs and ducked into the darkness of the wagon.

The wagon was so cluttered with supplies, packages, and oddments, it was like stepping into a town bazaar. Nets and scarves and rope hung from the framed ceiling; boxes, bundles, chests, and shelves were stuffed tight to bursting.

The nets could be set out for hammocks, as the Madder brothers were used to traveling in some comfort. To one side of the nets was enough space for a bed. That’s where Cedar headed.

He ducked a swinging lantern and stood at the bottom of the bedroll spread on a pile of sacks that had fewer hard edges than most the rest of the wagon's contents.

Wil lay curled on the wool blanket. Even when Wil was in wolf form, his eyes remained the same old copper color and carried an uncanny intelligence. The wolf lifted his head and ears, watching Cedar sit and press his back against the sideboard.

Cedar let his hand drop so Wil could scent the blood, which he had probably already smelled before Cedar had even entered the wagon. Even though Wil seemed able to keep the mind of a man about him while in wolf form, it was plain foolish to bed down near a wolf with unfamiliar blood between you.

Wil sniffed Cedar's hand, then stared past him at the wagon door.

Rose was coming. He could hear the weeping chime of the shackles in her hands.

But it was Mae who stepped into the wagon.

"Mae?" he said. "I thought Rose was bringing the chains."

"She is," Mae said. "I'm here for your curse. To...to make it less if I can."

She held a bundle in one hand, just larger than a handkerchief. He couldn't smell what she had wrapped up in it, but Wil whined.

"Do you think you should? Now?"

"Rose saw you kill a man." Mae spread the kerchief out on a crate, revealing the contents. Herbs, a candle, a small bowl, and a bell. Her hand dipped to touch each item, over and over again, as if doubting their reality.

"I suppose she did," he said.

Mae pulled the skinning knife from the sheath at her waist. "I don't think we can wait any longer to...ease this."

She straightened her shoulders, but it did nothing to hide the exhaustion threading her. Mae had spent most of the journey dazed in her saddle and staring at the sky through the night.

It tore him up to see her falling apart more and more each day.

Not that she'd complained. Not once. She'd known that leaving the coven would someday set this cost in motion.

"I appreciate your concern, Mrs. Lindson," he said, "but don't you need your sisters' help?"

"What I need, Mr. Hunt," Mae said softly, "is a man with a sound mind." She swallowed and nodded, as if agreeing with herself. Or with the voices only she could hear.

"A lot of land to cover before winter strikes." She nodded, nodded. "Your expertise on the trail and surviving the wilds is invaluable. We are relying on you to see that we arrive at our destination. Safely. As safely as we can."

"Sad day when a cursed man is the sure bet," he muttered.

"Not sad. Not at all. It's a practical thing," she said with a faint smile. "I...trust you. And I will need your blood, Mr. Hunt. Water could work, or tears, or sweat, but for what you carry..." She studied him as if she saw him clothed in another man's wardrobe. "For that curse to ease, I'll need the blood that carries it."

Cedar stood, took off his coat, then rolled up his sleeve.

In the enclosed wagon, with the warmth of the day still trapped inside, her presence was almost tactile. The scent of flowers, the halting rhythm of her breath, and her gaze that searched him as if uncertain, or afraid, of what she was looking for, fell on his senses like heady wine.

He offered his forearm. "Will this do?"

She nodded, and placed the bowl to catch the blood. "I won't need much. Still—I'm sorry."

He opened his mouth to say he didn't mind, but she had already slid the knife quick and sure through his skin.

A hot sting licked across his arm. It hurt, but not all that much.

Mae set to gathering the drops of blood, her hands sure, as she suddenly became more interested in the blood than in the man who bled.

Cedar forced himself to look away from her, to the wagon door, and the sky and trees beyond.

Rose Small jogged up the steps, shotgun strapped to her back, a smile on her face.

“Found the chains,” she declared. “We’ll have you tied up and bug snug in no time. Oh.” She stopped just inside the door. “Is everything all right?”

“A spell,” Mae said. “For Mr. Hunt. For the curse.”

“Think you should take a seat, Mr. Hunt?” Rose asked.

“I’d prefer it,” he said.

Mae didn’t seem to hear either of them. She pressed a cloth against the cut on his arm. “Hold this.”

He put his fingers over the cloth, chose a pile of burlap bags for a chair, and sat.

Mae returned the bowl to the crate and then shook out a handkerchief, which she quickly folded.

“Do you need me to tie that over your arm?” Rose asked.

“No. It’s nearly done.” One of the things the curse gave him was a faster healing time. Already the cut was beginning to close.

Rose shook the chains free to untangle them. “Wish there was another way, Mr. Hunt,” she said. “I hate seeing anyone in cuffs.”

“I don’t much like them myself,” he said, trying to put ease in his words. “But it’s not as if they do me any harm. Given the choice, I’d much rather the cuffs than your bullet in my chest.”

Rose shrugged a little and clasped the cold metal around each wrist. “I would have aimed at your leg, I think,” she said, fastening the ankle cuffs.

“And if you’d missed?”

She double-checked the chain that ran from the ankle cuffs up to the wrist cuffs, then latched to the side of the wagon. “I wouldn’t have missed.” She gave him a smile. “You know that, Mr. Hunt.”

He couldn’t help but smile back at her. She was right. Rose was a crack shot.

Wil limped over to stand next to Cedar, ears up, head high. He didn’t look concerned, wasn’t whining or growling. No, if Cedar had to guess, he’d say his brother was just curious about the whole thing.

“I’m going to stand right over there by the door,” Rose said, “in case any of you need anything.”

She did just that, moving far enough to be out of his reach, but plenty close enough to blow a hole in his leg, or any other part of him, with that elephant gun if she wanted to.

“Mrs. Lindson,” Rose said gently as if waking her from a dream, “Mr. Hunt is ready for that spell now.”

Mae jerked and swallowed hard. Her gaze pulled away from whatever distant horizon had caught her thoughts.

An absentminded witch about to call on magic was worrisome, to say the least.

“Good,” Mae said, wiping her hands down the front of her dress, a nervous habit she’d taken to lately. “Relax, Mr. Hunt.” She didn’t turn to look at him. “As much as you can.”

She crumbled the herbs between her palms, dusting them into the bowl.

Next she lit the candle nub and set that carefully in the bowl. Then she began whispering.

Cedar shifted so the shovel handle sticking up behind him didn’t dig quite so deeply into his ribs, and waited. Seemed all the world waited on Mae’s words, only moving forward at the pace of her hushed breath that slowly grew into a song.

He lost track of time as Mae’s words lifted, fell, and became a second voice for the breeze, a second heartbeat of the world. He vaguely noticed daylight slip away, felt the rise of the moon climbing the sky.

The beast within him squirmed, tugged, wanting free of the bindings, wanting free of the small

space of his body, the vise of his will.

Cedar wouldn't let that happen. Wouldn't let the beast take his sense away again. Not so long as he could stand on two feet as a man.

He held tight to his calm, ignored the beast, and let the witch do her work.

Mae held the bowl up to her lips, whispering over the edge, her words coming faster, softer, almost as if she were caught in a thrall. She finally turned toward him, took the few steps across the wagon, her eyes unfocused. Or more likely focused on things Cedar could not see.

Rose shifted against the doorframe. She'd kept the gun holstered and instead held a little bottle with a mix of cayenne pepper, water, and oil. She'd bargained the pepper from the Madders and boiled it to a wicked concentration. Rose said it would stop a man dead in his tracks if he got a face full of what was in that bottle.

Cedar didn't savor the idea of being the man she tried it out on.

"Cedar Hunt." Mae's voice trembled, exhausted as if she were indeed carrying all the world on her shoulders. "Let your debt be paid. Let your ties to those who walk the earth and stars fall away in peace. Let your soul become unburdened, unbound, and return again to the true shape of spirit and flesh."

She blew out the candle and the smoke rolled toward him. He inhaled.

For a moment, he felt lifted, as if he stood beside himself instead of set solid in his own skin. For a moment, the beast seemed a great distance from him, as if pulled away by a retreating tide.

An explosion blasted through the night.

Pain, hot and claw-sharp, dragged him back as if the beast tore into his flesh, muscle, and bone, and clamped down with brutal jaws.

He opened his mouth to yell, to gasp for air.

And the pain was gone.

He sat, shackled, on the burlap. He was not bleeding. He was not injured.

And he was not cured. The beast was still inside him.

The Madder brothers outside the wagon cussed and laughed, congratulating themselves.

Rose stomped back into the wagon. He hadn't heard her leave.

"They blew a hole the size of a barn into the ground. Scared the horses half to death. If we hadn't ground-tied them, we'd have lost them in the night."

"Dynamite?" he asked.

"No, they heated up the boiler so high it blew. Bits of metal and wood everywhere. Such a waste. They think it's a matter of hilarity."

Mae wiped the back of her hand over her eyes and leaned back against the crate, all the strength out of her.

"Did it work?" Rose nodded toward Mae.

"No," Cedar said, "I don't believe it did."

Mae frowned. "It should have. It should have worked. The explosion. Was there an explosion?"

"Nothing to worry about, Mrs. Lindson," Rose said. "It was just a bad turn of luck the Madders are all fired up with stupid tonight."

"The Madders?" Mae said. "That was reckless. Inexcusable. To break the spell..."

Cedar watched as her face heated with anger. For a moment, for more than that, he wondered just what an angry woman who also happened to be a witch was capable of doing to a man.

"It's done," he said. "Let it be for now. We all need sleep." He lifted his hands, the chains clinking. "I'll be of no harm to anyone this night."

Mae pressed her lips together, and then her anger was replaced by something more resembling confusion. "I'm sorry."

"Don't worry yourself," Rose said. "After some sleep we'll be coming into new supplies tomorrow."

Isn't that right, Mr. Hunt?"

Cedar nodded. "If we want to get over the mountains before winter locks the passes, we'll need to make Vicinity by nightfall."

"There might be herbs we could buy so you could try that spell again," Rose said.

"I don't think..." Mae licked her lips and shook her head. "I don't think herbs will help."

"Don't you worry, Mae." Rose took Mae's hands and helped her to the door of the wagon. "There's nothing but bright skies and sunshine for us tomorrow."

Cedar admired Rose's outlook, though he didn't share it. He didn't know what tomorrow would bring. Wil lowered his ears and growled softly at the Madders' laughter.

It was terribly convenient that their device had exploded just when Mae was so close to breaking her curse. A curse that happened to make him hunger to hunt the Strange. A curse that made him an undeniable benefit in the Madders' quest to find the strangeworked Holder.

If Cedar were a suspicious man, he might just think the Madders had broken Mae's spell on purpose.

CHAPTER TWO

Stump Station wasn't much more than a collection of shacks built precariously into the pockets and wedges on the east side of the Bitterroot Range in the Idaho Territory. So barren and out of the way, even the vultures risked starvation.

It was the perfect sort of place to attract those members of society who preferred to remain unnoticed by others. Hard men and rangy women who spent most of their days waiting for the right wind to carry them up to the glim grounds where they could harvest their fortune.

Glim, more precious than diamonds or gold, used to power ships on air, water, or land. Used to heal the sick, cure the blights, turn the tide in wars, and make anything and everything stronger and longer lasting. Glim was even rumored to extend a man's life well beyond his years.

Rare and desired, glim. And as hard to locate as Hades' back door.

Some said glim could be found underground, or out at sea. But the only place glim was known to occur with any regularity was above high mountain ranges, and up higher still. Above the storm clouds, floating like nets of soft lightning, the glim fields were capricious and fleeting. Difficult to find. Deadly to harvest. Most ships couldn't launch that high, last those storms, or lash and land without killing those who flew them.

So it was no wonder glim fetched a pretty price in the legitimate markets, and a king's ransom in those markets less savory.

Captain Hink counted himself among his own kind out here in the rocks. Outlaws, prospectors, glim pirates, soldiers of luck, fools, and the foolhardy, brothers all.

Not that he wouldn't drop a brother at a thousand paces if he jumped his claim, stole his boots, or touched his airship, the *Swift*.

But then, he supposed any of the rock rats who ported, docked, or launched from Stump Station would do him the same.

"Problem, Mr. Seldom?" Captain Hink asked as his second-in-command ducked through the canvas tarp that hung in place of a door in the tumbledown that Hink called home.

Seldom was a wiry-built, redheaded Irish who looked like he'd snap in half if he sneezed too hard. Most people thought he got his name from how often he spoke. But Captain Hink knew he went by Seldom for how many times he'd lost a fight.

Hink figured he and Seldom didn't much resemble each other. Hink scraped up a full six foot, three inches, and had shoulders that took the sides off doorways if he wasn't mindful. Yellow hair, skin prone to tanning, and eyes the gray of a broody sky set in a face that women had never complained about, Hink might have been considered a catch if he'd grown up in the social circles of the old states instead of as the bastard child of a soiled dove.

And whereas Seldom looked old for his thirty years, Hink looked like a man in his twenties, and that was no lie.

Seldom stabbed one thumb over his shoulder, stirring the wool scarves around his neck and jostling his breathing gear, which hung at the wait near his collarbone. "Mullins."

Captain Hink put the cup of boiled beans that passed for coffee up here in the stones down on the edge of the map spread across the buckboard that served as his desk. He leaned back in his chair, enough so his Colt was in easy reach.

He wasn't expecting Les Mullins to come in and shoot him dead. But he wouldn't be surprised if that was exactly what the captain of the big, and recently crashed and burned, *Iron Draught* hoped to accomplish.

Especially since Mullins had had to patch up that old mule of a steamer the *Powderback* to get around.

Mr. Seldom stepped to the corner of the room, and faded into the woodwork like a stick in a stack.

The canvas tarp whipped aside and in strode Les Mullins. Big man, high forehead under stringy black hair and a face permanently burned red from flying too long in the cold upper. He looked mad enough to chew coils.

“Just because I don’t have a door,” Captain Hink said, “doesn’t mean a man shouldn’t knock.”

Les Mullins smiled—well, more like sneered—showing tobacco stumps where his teeth ought to have been.

“Here’s the deal, Hink,” he said. “You give me that tin devil of yours, and I won’t tie you up like a hog, throw you off this cliff, and drag your broken bits in to the people who will shower me with gold for my trouble.”

“Deal?” Captain Hink said. “Why, we haven’t even cut the deck yet. How about you get the hell out of my house, Mullins?”

“How about you explain this?” Mullins tossed something onto Hink’s desk that landed and rattled like a tin can.

Hink made a big production of leaning forward and picking up the item, even though he knew exactly what it was. “It’s a tin star,” he said.

“It’s a badge,” Mullins said.

“So it is.”

“Says ‘U.S. Marshal.’”

“I see that, Mullins,” Captain Hink said. “You thinking of wearing this around so folk respect you? ‘Cause it’s going to take a damn bit more than a tin star to make people stand up and take notice of the bluster that comes out of your yap.”

“What I think,” Mullins said, advancing toward the desk, “is that you’ve been spying on us since you set up nest last spring. Weaseling out our stakes, claims, and buyers. What I think, *Captain*, is that you’re the president’s man, or near enough it don’t matter otherwise. You’ve come to shut our operation down and to haul us in to the law.”

“Shut it down?” Hink brought his hand, star and all, back casual-like toward his holster. “Why would I want to shut down an enterprise in which I make so much money?”

“Don’t know the mind of a turncoat dog like you.”

Captain Hink weighed that remark for one second. He had a reputation for a bad temper and a quick trigger. Something his mother had told him would get him killed, God rest her soul. So he always gave every statement a full-up two seconds of consideration before he acted upon it.

Then he pulled the knife from his belt and threw it straight and true into Mullins’s chest.

Mullins stumbled back. He clutched at the knife with one hand and clawed for his gun with the other. Wasn’t much successful with either attempt.

“I sure hope I haven’t damaged your talker,” Captain Hink said as he stood and sauntered over to the big man, who had stumbled to brace his back against the wall. Not that it’d do him any good. Walls couldn’t save men who rode the skies. “Because your story was just getting interesting.

“There’s a thing I have a powerful need to know, Mr. Mullins. Where in the world did you get this from?” He held up the badge. “You been sniffing down around the townies? Catch up some poor land lizzard with a knack for a tall tale?”

Mullins leveled him a glare and finally got hold of the knife hilt. He pulled it free with a yell and nearly fell to one knee. Didn’t much matter, Captain Hink thought. There was no chance this traitor to the states was walking out of his house alive.

“Found me a yellowbelly who knew you, Captain Hink Cage,” Mullins rasped. “Said his name was

Rucker.”

“Rucker?” Captain Hink said. “Name doesn’t jostle the memory.”

“He knew you,” Mullins said. “Knew what you did in the battle of Flatstand. Knew you took more than half your regiment and turned on General Alabaster Saint. Accused him of disobeying orders, profiteering, and holding correspondence with the enemy. You refused to move your men into position, on orders from the president. You cost the Saint the battle, his career, and his eye, you traitor snake coward.”

“He tell you any other stories, this Rucker you jawed with?” Hink asked.

“Not after I shot him dead, he didn’t.”

Hink didn’t even wait a second. He clocked Mullins straight across the chin and dropped down over him so he could continue with the beating, as he was the sort of fellow who didn’t mind getting his hands dirty to see that a job was well done. Got in one more hit before Mullins pulled his gun.

The cold click of the hammer cocking back soaked through the anger Captain Hink was enjoying and put him right away into a most reasonable and sober mind.

“Don’t matter if you’re alive or dead,” Mullins said. “Just so long as I bring you in.”

Mr. Seldom seemed to appear out of the walls themselves. And, just like that, was standing above Mr. Mullins. Then, just like that, Seldom swung the oversized iron marlin spike, slamming the gun out of Mullins’s hand. Likely broke up a few of the man’s fingers in the process, seeing as how loud he screamed.

“Thought you’d know better than to upset my second, Mullins. You know how he doesn’t take well to people trying to plug me.” Hink rolled back on his heels and stood, staring down at the bleeding man.

Seldom retrieved the gun from where it had landed, wiped the blood off with one of the scarves hanging to his waist, and tossed the gun to Hink.

Captain Hink caught the weapon, gave it a glance, then tossed it back to Seldom, who pocketed it.

“Won’t matter if you kill me,” Mullins gasped. “Word’s already out. This whole town’s coming for your neck, Hink Cage.”

Seldom lifted the marlin spike again.

“Name’s Hink,” Captain Hink said. “Captain, if you can’t remember that much. Don’t go on and kill him yet, Mr. Seldom. I’ve still a question or two I want answered.”

Hink rolled the tin star between his fingers like a poker chip, then held it with the tips of his index and middle fingers.

“What’s this matter to you, Mullins?” he asked as the star caught a shine of light. “Some lander giving you guff about me being a marshal don’t exactly stand that it’s true. And if so, what do you have to hide you wouldn’t want a marshal to know?”

Mullins closed his mouth and didn’t do much more than glare and bleed.

“I think this isn’t just your business you’ve got yourself hitched up to, Mr. Mullins,” Captain Hink said. “I think you’re working for someone. Someone who doesn’t cozen to the law. Makes a certain sense, seeing as how we straddle the border of legality, shooting the sky for glim. But more than all that, I think there’s a spy in this house who ain’t me.”

Hink glanced over at Mr. Seldom. “You don’t suppose Mr. Mullins knows old Alabaster Saint himself, do you?”

Mullins caught his breath. Not a dead giveaway, but a giveaway nonetheless.

Hink rubbed at his chin. “Let me take a shot and tell you a story, Mr. Mullins. I say there was once a man named Les Mullins. Came from out Kentucky way. Signed up to serve beneath the hardest, bloodthirstiest monster that ever put on a uniform. Followed that monster, oh, let’s give him a name—say, General Alabaster Saint—through hell and worse. Les Mullins saw nine out of ten of his fellow

soldiers die obeying the general's bloody orders, until the general was tried and removed from command.

"I'd say Les Mullins thought himself damn lucky to have survived. Maybe even thought himself blessed and appointed to continue following General Alabaster Saint's orders long after the battles this United States were engaged in were done and gone. Long after the Saint had moved on to raising his own militia of mercenaries.

"So Les Mullins wants to make himself useful to the general he worships. And he knows what the general wants: glim. Knows the general has plans to bribe, bully, and kill his way into every peak and mountain of this country until he controls every ship and glim field. The man who rules glim and glim rules the world."

Hink paused and nodded toward Seldom. "It's a good story so far, don't you think?"

Mr. Seldom shrugged, focused on flipping the marlin spike: *slap, slap, slap*, as if his palms were restless determined to use it again.

"Let's see," Hink said. "How does this story end? I'd say it ends with General Saint's spy, Les Mullins, getting killed on the floor of a shack in the Bitterroots unless he tells a man named Captain Hink just who, exactly, he's working for and what, exactly, that man wants."

Mullins had gone from bleeding to wheezing. His good hand was pressed over the chest wound as if he could hold the blood inside. Looked like he thought he could hold the words inside too. But Hink would get them out of him. He'd done worse to better men.

"I'll give you a moment to consider my request, Mr. Mullins. Because this is the last time I'm asking you to give me answers. From here on out, I'll just be doing an awful lot of painful taking them from you."

Hink turned back to his desk and took a drink of coffee. His hands shook from a hard anger.

George Rucker had been a friend. The younger brother of William Rucker, a man Hink served with and had been unable to save from Alabaster Saint's bloodthirsty loyalists.

Hink had come too late to stop William's hanging, but he'd found young George Rucker and taken him in. Looked after him as best he could, even while carrying out the president's orders. Because Mullins was right about that. That tin star was his. He was Marshal Hink Cage when he wasn't wedged up here with glim pirates, trying to suss out the kingpin of their black market trade.

He'd given that star to George Rucker for safekeeping and as a promise that he would return from this mission to retrieve it from him.

A promise he couldn't keep now because of Les Mullins. A promise that had gotten George Rucker killed.

A shot rang out and the high steam whine of engines catching hot pounded the air. Not just engines. The *Swift's* engines.

"Captain Hink!" A woman yelled from a good ways off. "The ship. They're on her!"

The gunshot boomed out again, louder. That was the *Swift's* cannon.

Hink grabbed the map off the table and his shotgun, which had been leaning against the wall. Seldom already had one foot out the door. Hink gave half a second's thought about taking the time, and wasting the bullet, to kill Mullins.

Decided the man wasn't near enough worth either and was halfway down the road to dead anyhow.

He pushed through the canvas and squinted at the onslaught of harsh afternoon light.

There was enough of a tumble of rock and scree on this outcropping that the *Swift* could land and lash, but not so much that any ship bigger than her—and that meant every other ship in the range—could catch hold.

He'd chosen this spot for just that reason.

Mr. Seldom ran quick as a gangly jackrabbit over rock and around wind-twisted scrub toward where

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