

Detective Runewall Case Files

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B.T. Frost

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Other works by B.T. Frost

Detective Runewall Series:

Book 1: Detective Runewall: Uncut Gems

Book 2: Detective Runewall: Grave Secrets

Book 3: Detective Iceheart: Twin Crowns

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T h e D r u i d

“Has there been any word on Kane?” Joseph Runewall wasn’t overly fond of the man, but he was a colleague, and marginally assisted with the caseload.

“Nothing yet, my boy.” His training officer, Wadnar ‘Petals’ Pettlebottom, offered a half-hearted smile of reassurance. “I’m certain we will be informed if there is any change in his condition.”

Julian ‘The Fireball’ Kane was the senior detective for their precinct’s night shift, and had been possessed by a cursed object several days earlier.

To be possessed by a cursed object was one of the few fates that no one wished upon their worst enemy. There was simply no telling what horrors one would face at the hands of an item that was haunted by the shadow of a maddened spell caster.

The only reason that Kane escaped was because the entity that resided within the object had depleted his

body of life, dumped it, and moved to a healthier one. Some of the blue coats at the precinct were of a mind that it would have been a greater mercy if the cursed object had just ridden his body into an early grave.

Joe had heard stories of those killed by cursed objects. Going peacefully to eternal rest was not common. Many rose again in the form of a disturbed spirit or vengeful undead. What little he did know of Kane suggested that the man would not have rested peacefully. The alternative to death wasn't much better.

When they found Kane, his skin was ashen with deeply burnt cracks where his major arteries and veins should have been. He was also severely emaciated. It was a miracle the man still had a pulse. All reasoning dictated that he shouldn't have been alive.

Physically, there was a slim possibility of recovery. Mentally, there was no telling what state he would be in. Cursed objects tended to scramble the minds of those they inhabited – it made it easier to control the body.

Despite being left in the hands of the best doctors in the city, Kane wasn't improving. While discouraging, he also wasn't deteriorating.

Joe couldn't imagine what it would be like. Unable to wake, unable to pass on, and only the gods knew what kind of mental horrors he would have been suffering.

"I'd like to punch him when he wakes up." Joe said it with an exasperated sigh.

The trickster gnome hop-skipping along at his side tilted his head back and barked heartily. "HA! Hahaha! I do believe there would be a line, my boy."

Nobody knew how Kane came to be possessed by the Crown of Fire. The man wasn't exactly known for cooperation or informing senior staff on the progress of his ongoing investigations. It led many to believe that he had gotten himself possessed due to recklessness and an

inability to ask for assistance.

Because of his absence from the force, there was a sudden influx of cases. They were also down two blue coats from when the Fireball hit their precinct. Opportunists tended to jump with glee whenever there was city-wide terror and an absence of officers.

A report from Internal Investigations had also revealed that Kane had been the one to launch the Fireball while under the possession of the Crown of Fire. A great many innocents had been killed because of that attack. Despite being bed-ridden and near to death, Julian had a punch waiting for him.

Joe looked skyward and spotted a black and ominous cloud hovering a few feet above the buildings one street over. “Looks like we’re here.”

Petals craned his neck so that he might look up as Joseph did. “Appears so.”

Joe gestured to a nearby alley and proceeded towards it. He could already hear the shouting and screaming that was emanating from the other side. As if the city needed more things to be afraid of. It wasn’t bad enough that cursed objects had been set loose and a Fireball had dropped on a precinct.

People were gawking and pointing at the sky as they walked down the street. A few others began hurrying in the opposite direction once they spotted the clouds. He couldn’t blame them. There was an underlying panic gripping the people of Stormbay, and it was Joe’s job to exhibit calm.

The two of them turned the corner and looked down the alley to the other street. In the center of the cobblestones and in view of all storefronts, a helmeted figure clad in iron armor and a crimson cape floated in the air. The individual held a clawed and gauntleted hand skyward and bellowed in an otherworldly and terrifying voice, “**Bow to me, for the end is at hand!**”

Rule One: Don’t panic.

People were panicking, screaming, and running about in absolute hysterics. Blue coats were among the masses, shouting for people to remain calm.

Joe let out an irritated sigh. “Bet you a copper he demands payment in ex—”

“Empty your coffers and your souls will be spared from the coming apocalypse!” Lightning flashed through the dark and ominous cloud that swirled above the figure’s head.

“Blast it!”

Petals let out a slight chuckle. “Need to be a bit quicker on the betting my boy.” He shook his head. “I wouldn’t have taken the bet anyway. It’s too obvious.”

“Double blast.” He couldn’t stop the rest of the precinct from making bets about his life. But he could join them and steer them towards making bets that were *not* about his life. “Who says coffers anymore?”

“There wasn’t even any thunder or sound to accompany the lightning flash.” Petals shook his head in disappointment.

Joe blew some air out his nose. “Would be hilarious if the thunder was delayed.”

Petals began nodding, “Now that would be—”

A somewhat deep rumble – that must have been an attempt at thunder – emanated from the clouds and left the two of them in stunned silence.

Petals threw his head back, roaring with laughter.

“Oh, good god.” Joe couldn’t help but chuckle a bit as he started his way down the alley. The attempted display of intimidation was comically painful to watch.

Petals stumbled to the alley wall and put out a hand to steady himself against it. He cried laughing and waved Joe on. “You! Go!” He shook his head and took several steadying breaths between laughing fits. “Can’t!”

Another bit of ‘lightning’ flashed through the ominous looking gray clouds that swirled above the head

of the floating figure.

Joe took a few steadying breaths before shutting his eyes, opening them again to view the greater 'verse. He saw the natural eddies and energies of the living world. The sky above looked like clouds and swirls of painter's colors. The cobblestones were muted and only gave off the slightest of energies, as they were non-living. The brick buildings on either side and across the street were wire-framed with the flowing energies that connected the lantern lights to the main power sources. Alarms, switches, runes, and spellwork similarly filled his vision. He saw magic like an engineer saw the blueprints to a building. He saw people like compact, floating clouds.

The armor-clad figure that floated above the cobblestones looked like a rat's nest of various colored lines. A figure stood in the middle of that mess of magic.

It only took him a minute to read the framework and assess the situation.

Blobs of color ran by the alley entrance and blue coats continued to bark orders in an attempt to establish some sort of calm. They were failing miserably.

Joe blinked away his arcane vision and maintained his focus on the iron-clad figure. Since he had gotten closer, he could see the finer details.

The armor was darker, like a heavy iron, and only seemed to cover the head, chest, and arms. The rest of the body was hidden beneath an ornate crimson cape and a traditionally-styled black battle tunic.

What is it with villains and black and red?

He reached into his vest pocket and drew out his wand as he pondered the reasons.

I suppose they are 'fearsome' colors.

A blue coat spotted Joe and hurried over to him, yelling above the chaos and panic of the citizens. "Sir! We need to—"

Joe lifted a hand to halt the man from saying

any more. He released his wand into a staff and planted the butt of it on the ground. "I got this."

"But, sir!"

Joe lifted and slammed the butt of his staff on the cobblestone and sent forth a rippling wave of energy. The two manacles that regularly floated about the top of his staff similarly launched forth.

"**I am Korganoth! Dest – AH!**" The otherworldly and terrifying voice quickly changed into a shrill scream when two manacles clamped about the figure's legs and pulled. The individual was immediately yanked from their feet and swung about to hang upside down.

The rippling wave of energy wiped out the illusion that had been occupying the entirety of the middle of the cobblestone street. The ominous clouds vanished instantaneously. The iron armor and crimson cape transformed into baking pans, baking gloves, a colander, and a bed sheet. The colander dropped off the head and fell to the cobblestones. A cutting board clattered to the ground; it had been enchanted to levitate if stood upon.

A young man dangled in place of the ominous Korga-whatever-their-name.

Over half of the panic-crazed citizens that had been running about and screaming also vanished. There were only a handful of people that were actually present and watching the illusionary chaos. Five blue coats looked about the street and to each other before straightening out their coats and hats in obvious embarrassment.

Joe slowly walked towards the dangling young man, who flailed his arms helplessly.

"Help! Help! I can't hang upside down! I have dizzy spells and nosebleeds!" His voice cracked, and his face was covered with the greasy red spots and white heads that marked him as a youth. His white button-up

was pit-stained and his brown trousers were patched and frayed. He didn't look too unlike Joe when he was younger.

He felt a great swell of pity for the young man and lowered him down to the ground. Despite going easy on the boy, he didn't remove the manacles. He'd been fooled by a youth before, and wouldn't let it happen again.

Satisfied that his suspect was sufficiently detained, he tapped his staff on the ground and ordered it to stay. It remained upright on its own. Joe reached into another vest pocket and pulled out a miniature law index. He quickly thumbed through it and made a mental list.

Petals approached a moment later, beaming and still chuckling. "What have we here, my boy?"

Joe breathed in through his nose and breathed out while reading off a long list. "Disturbing the peace, inciting a panic, illegal use of illusionary magic, illegally enchanted items." Joe used the book and gestured to the colander, oven mitts, and other bits that the young man had been wearing. They were all imbued to manifest sensory illusions that created the appearance of armor, cape, flight, and thunderclouds.

"Ah! Oh my. Those will have to be confiscated, contained, and destroyed." Petals nodded his head while stroking his full white beard.

"Indeed." He couldn't help but sigh. He sighed a lot lately.

Joy. More paperwork. Thanks, kid.

"Destroyed?" The young man croaked.

Joe didn't hesitate. "Yes."

"But these are my mother's!"

Joe snorted. "That's the least of your worries."

"What?"

"Oh, I still haven't finished listing off your crimes. There's still the charge of con-artistry,

apocalyptic falsehood – yes, it’s actually a crime to claim the existence of an impending apocalypse when you know there isn’t one – and disruption of a city thoroughfare.” Joe gestured to the carts that were angrily ringing their bells. Now that the threat of an ‘apocalypse’ had passed, the drivers needed to go about doing their business.

He turned to Petals while lazily wiggling his pocketbook. “That last one is a new one. They just passed it last fall. Did you know that?”

Petals beamed up at Joe. “Why yes, I did, Detective Runewall. Bravo, my boy.”

“And here I feared I would never get the chance to charge someone with that one.” He turned to look back at the wide-eyed young man. “Thanks. I get to check that one off my list.”

“But – I – you can’t!”

Joe waved it off. “Quit blubbering. Nobody was seriously injured.” He pointed to the empty cobblestones, “And despite your illusionary act, nobody tossed you their coin purses. The worst we can charge you with is being a pain in the—”

“Joseph.”

“What? I was going to say backside.”

“What? No. Not that. We just got another case.”

Joe hung his head back and let out a long groan of irritation. “More paperwork... fantastic.”

Petals poked Joe’s side. “You’ll want to hear this one.”

He turned his head to look down at his superior. “Is it interesting?”

“Yep.” Petals had his crystalline network box in hand, and he was frowning at it in confusion as he listened to dispatch. There was a knob on the side that could be twisted to set the box to private; it prevented others from hearing what was discussed. It was clearly in

use, as Joe heard nothing.

“What is it?”

The little man tilted his head, then looked up at him. “Reports of a naked man hugging a tree.”

He eyed his superior, awaiting the punchline... there was none. Having accepted that this wasn't some weird prank, Joe turned to the closest blue coat and gave him orders to take the young man off their hands and back to the precinct. Once there, he was to fill out a *Destruction of Enchanted Items* request form and call the detainee's mother. Joe quickly jotted down the list of charges.

The blue coat took the list, hauled the boy off the ground, and clapped him in irons. Joe picked up his staff and recalled his manacles from the young man's ankles. Once done, he turned to his superior. “Bet you a copper the man is inebriated.”

Petals shook his head as he twisted his mustache, “Too easy, my boy. You need to be more specific. Odds are heavily in favor of the man being inebriated. No one would take that bet.”

He thought for a moment, checked his watch, and narrowed his focus. “All right. I bet you he's *drunk*.” It was only just turning midday, but that didn't stop some people, and the last few days had been horribly distressing for everyone. Depending on what neighborhood they were called to, the odds could sway from drunkenness to drugs.

Petals narrowed his eyes, and a slow grin spread across his face. “I bet two coppers that it is a non-alcoholic intoxicant.”

Joe took a half moment to contemplate the wording of the bet and the raise in stakes, then nodded. “Two coppers.”

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Like the incident before, Joe and Petals arrived at the scene via a side alley. The disturbance was set halfway down the road, on the opposite – south – side of the street, and bordered two well-to-do neighborhoods. One was a community of gnome homes, and the other for middle-class residents; it was an older neighborhood and wasn't too far from the precinct.

Due to the proximity of law enforcement and the diligence of the residents, there wasn't much crime. That made the incident fairly unusual and a little hard to believe.

Despite the unlikeliness of the scenario, dispatch didn't play practical jokes. There truly was a naked man hugging a tree. He was average height and thin enough that his ribs showed. Long brown hair hid his face behind a rat's nest of mats and tangles. A thick layer of dirt covered every bit of sunbaked skin, exempting his thighs and a pasty-white pinched bottom. Based on the provided evidence, the best first guess was that the man was homeless.

The part that dispatch failed to mention – and made the incident all that much more unbelievable – was the fact that the hugged tree was flailing its branches.

It was not swaying with the wind, the tree was moving of its own accord. Despite being high summer, the flailing tree looked to have shaken or shed most of its leaves. A large blanket of green covered the cobblestones, and the bare branches whipped about with whistling fury. It loudly creaked and groaned as it lashed out at any blue coat that dared to try and get near the naked man.

Behind the blue coats were the onlookers. A rope barricade had been put up on either side of the street. Sadly, it didn't stop people from trying to push forward to get a better view. There were even a few investigators from notable news organizations in the

crowd. He could make them out by the badges in their hats.

Fantastic, an audience.

Over the noise of the shouting officers and the gasps and drone of onlookers, Joe thought he could make out muffled singing. It seemed liked it was coming from the naked man. Joe's assessment of the situation was that they were dealing with a drunk and homeless nature wizard.

"This is new." All his life, Joseph had watched trees sway and rock in the wind. He'd never seen one flail about unaided. It was honestly quite unsettling.

Petals stood with a look of concern upon his face as well. "This is certainly unusual."

Their attention was pulled to the right when they saw a blue coat duck low and squat-run towards the base of the tree in an attempt to nab the naked man and pull him away. Unfortunately, the tree was quicker, and swatted the poor blue coat.

The whip-crack of the impact and the young man being thrown to the ground caused Joe to suck on his teeth and the gathered crowd to "Oooo!" in sympathy.

That was when he looked closer and noticed what kind of tree it was and grumbled, "Fireballs, it just had to be a willow tree."

"When you get hit with the whole branch, does it truly matter what type of tree it is?" Petals looked up at him with a raised eyebrow.

Joe gave the little man a sideways glance. "The whole branch? No. But if you can avoid the big ones, then all you have to deal with are the little branches." He momentarily recalled the very few times that he had angered the sisters at the Temple of Light. The ensuing punishment involved a willow switch. "However, depending on the tree, the little branches can hurt just as much as the big ones."

Petals straightened a little and seemed to accept the answer, but didn't look fully convinced.

The young blue coat that had been felled by the tree slowly crawled to a nearby colleague. That was when Joe noticed that the colleague was old Bob Johnson. The wiry old man had a thick white mustache that wiggled a bit when he talked. "Stormin' tree thumped you to the deck! Be glad it wasn't barnacled, my boy! Otherwise it would have taken strips off your skin!" He was also a sailor before he turned to the law.

Joe and Petals stepped clear of the alley entrance and headed towards the old blue coat. He mindfully kept his distance from what he deemed to be the tree's zone of reach. "Hey Bob, mind filling us in?"

Bob turned his head one way, then the other, and his eyebrows lifted when he spotted Joe approaching from his left. "Ho there, my boy!" His bushy white eyebrows sank as he looked about. "What you mean 'us'?"

Joe halted, looked to either side, then spun about full circle. Petals wasn't with him anymore.

There was a sudden increase in loud murmurs and gasps amongst the gathered crowd.

Instinctively, Joe looked to the tree. Petals was casually standing a few steps from the naked man. Clearly the trunk was too thick to bend and the branches couldn't reach down to its own base. Petals had likely teleported over in order to avoid the flailing branches.

He turned his attention back to Bob and the injured blue coat. The former was trying to help the latter to stand. It looked to be a bit of a struggle as one was spindly and old and the other was younger, burlier, and broader of frame.

Joe hurried over and took the broad blue coat's other arm, easing the load off poor Bob's shoulders. "Mind telling me what's going on?" The two of them started to drag their colleague off to the side where there

looked to be several injured citizens and a makeshift infirmary area. The precinct physician, Dr. Broom, was organizing things.

Bob wiggled his mustache as he gathered his thoughts to answer. "All I heard was that a tree was attacking folks and then a bearded and disheveled naked man started hugging it."

Joe tried to look back over his shoulder, but couldn't do so with the arm slung over it. Bob's simplistic statement only raised more questions. The naked man had arrived after the tree started flailing. If it were true, then how did the naked man get anywhere near the tree without being swatted? He hadn't recalled seeing any lacerations or bruises, but the clothing-impaired individual was also covered in a heavy layer of dirt, which could have easily hidden some injuries.

Some blue coats had sectioned off a bit of the cobblestone street for Dr. Broom and some nurses to tend their craft. There only looked to be a handful of injured and mostly minor abrasions or sprains.

Bob and Joe picked out an empty stretch of cobblestone and set down the newest victim of the flailing willow. Dr. Broom stepped around the other moaning and groaning victims in order to give the young man a look.

Their precinct doctor wasn't quite as tall as Joe; he was a middle-aged man with ebony hair and a gaunt frame. Like all doctors, he wore a white trench coat that bore the blood-red emblem of the medical corps, charmed to resist any stains. His trousers, vest, and shirt were similarly enchanted and emblazoned.

The Doctor turned to Joe and gave him a quick look up and down. "You're not injured... for once." The man was also a bit surly and didn't often smile.

Joe sagged in the shoulders and glanced back at the flailing willow. "Day's not over yet, Doc."

"Yes, well, be extremely careful."

Gee, what a brilliant idea, and here I was just going to charge in head-first like the moron at our feet.

Joe gave a hearty scowl as he threw his flippant thoughts out into the ether, if any mind-readers cared to listen. "I didn't exactly have plans of doing otherwise, Doc."

Doctor Broom slapped at Joe's leg, causing him to jump a bit and move out of the way. The doctor was trying to get around him to better examine the groaning blue coat. "Don't be smart. There's already half a dozen on their way to the hospital." The thin man stood up from his examination and turned to speak in a softer tone. "There's already one that's been sent to the hospital that likely won't make it."

That puts a grave spin on things.

Joe kept his voice low. "What were the injuries?"

"They had a collapsed lung, internal bleeding, and nearly every bone in the poor man's body was smashed."

Extremely careful' it is.

He shook his head in dreaded sympathy before gesturing to the blue coat they just brought over. "How is he?"

"A few cracked ribs. The vest and coat protected him a bit."

Joe nodded and turned a little so that he could eye the naked man and Petals; they looked to be having a conversation.

"As much as I appreciate Pettletbottom's diplomatic tendencies, I would greatly appreciate it if he stopped that beggar lunatic at once! I don't want or need any more injured coming my way." Dr. Broom was rather heated in his opinion.

Joe ignored it, and focused on Petals. The trickster gnome wasn't snapping his fingers or applying any magic. He could have halted the entire thing within

seconds.

Leaving everything for Joe to solve wasn't Petals' way of doing things. If there was no risk of injury and Joe was capable of handling the situation, then his superior absolutely stepped aside so that Joe could dive in. If innocents were at risk, Petals intervened, as any officer of the law should. The fact that Petals was talking instead of acting suggested far more was taking place.

A greater sense of urgency and danger caused Joe to focus on his breathing and shut out all noise. He shut his eyes, and opened himself to the greater 'verse.

The world burst alight around him with auras and lines of structured energies. His vision was filled with the natural eddies and energies of the people, the buildings, and street. Petals was a ghost to him; he couldn't see the little man at all. Trickster magic was irritatingly difficult to spot. The naked man, however, was a bright green beacon of light. Energy was slowly flowing from his body into the trunk of the tree.

The bright green was combating angry red tendrils that were worming their way through the rotted moss-green frame of the tree. It looked like the tree was being infected with blood magic.

"Ah, Fireballs! He's not infecting the tree! He's trying to cure it!"

"What?"

"What?"

Bob and Dr. Broom had barked out in surprise at the same time.

Joe reached out to his right and blindly grabbed Bob by the arm. "Go tell the officers to stand down – he's not trying to infect the tree, he's trying to calm it!"

The old officer was thankfully one of those men that jumped to attention when given an order, even if it didn't immediately make sense. He ran off to the nearest cloud of color and began issuing the order that Joe had given.

The part that troubled him the most was that he didn't know how the magic was being applied. He couldn't see any lines of energy flowing out of the tree or into it. Typically, magic required some form of physical or ethereal tether in order for a caster to actively manipulate things. A person can't just look at an object and shout a word and cause it to start dancing. There had to be some form of connection first.

If it was blood magic that infected the tree – which he didn't even know if it was possible for that kind of magic to afflict a bloodless entity – then there needed to be direct contact. He couldn't see anyone other than the naked and bedraggled nature wizard touching the tree trunk. It couldn't be a self-sustained spell, as the living energy of the nature wizard would have already overcome the infection. Someone had to be sustaining it, but how?

Joe slowly scanned the crowd at the other end of the street and saw nothing that would suggest any magic at play. He was about to turn and scan the crowd behind him when he noticed that the angry red energy was much stronger at the base of the tree, and it even seemed to help illuminate the roots a little through the muted cobblestones.

Using what he had learned in order to reveal hidden magic, Joe took a deep and slow breath so that he could push his focus even further. A quick partitioning of the mind allowed him to block out the noise of the world around him and concentrate on the tree.

The green energy that was emanating from the naked wizard wasn't steady. It pushed out in rhythmic waves.

Heartbeats.

Joe was suddenly very aware of his own heartbeat as it softly thumped in his ears and chest.

Narrowing his focus, he noticed an oddity in the

angry red tendrils. There were three distinct rhythmic beatings, and they were acting independently of each other.

There are three casters!

One of the rhythms was focused on the movement and flailing of the tree and its branches. The second was focused on the stability and flow of magic. The third and final flow of energy was attacking and fending off the naked man.

The answer came to him when he noted that the thumping energy was moving from the roots upward.

Joe pulled his focus back, blinked away the arcane vision, and directed his thoughts to his superior.

Petals!

The trickster gnome jumped slightly, turned, and leveled a pint-sized stink eye at him.

They're infecting the tree roots from the storm drains!

The bushy white eyebrows of his training officer shot skyward. He looked at his feet, frowned in concentration, then looked back to Joe and nodded in understanding.

“What is going on?” Dr. Broom kept his voice low. He was wise enough not to cause a scene or grab attention.

“Someone is cursing the tree from the storm drains.” Joe kept his eyes focused on the tree and the blue coats that surrounded it. They didn't look like they wanted to run in and tackle the naked man anymore, but they were holding their ground.

Why are you infecting a tree?

Joe was at a loss as to why anyone would want to infect a tree so that it flailed around and hurt people. Doing so from the storm drains allowed the enchanters to attack anonymously and from safety. He could see the logic in that tactic. The purpose behind the attack was what had him completely stumped.

Maybe this is to send a message?

It was possible that the residents that lived by the flailing tree were somehow enemies of the enchanters. He quickly deemed that thought to be unlikely, as the entire affair seemed like a fairly messy and inaccurate means of assault. Those with magical skill tended to think a bit more intelligently.

“If the threat is still present, then we should be evacuating these people!” Dr. Broom snapped in hushed tones.

Joe swatted down the suggestion. “No! We don’t want to start a panic. That’s how more people get hurt.” It was also possible that it was all a large trap and a means to gather as many officers and citizens as possible. Trying to evacuate everyone could potentially tip the enchanters into releasing whatever it was that they had planned next.

“My purse!”

Or they were using the flailing tree as a means to gather and distract as many people as possible while their cohorts picked pockets.

Joe turned to the source of the outburst; it had come from a woman near the back of the gathered crowd. She was frantically searching about the pockets of her blouse, dress, and vest. A nearby gentleman in a flat cap began to pat his vest and coat pockets “My coin purse is missing as well!” A murmur broke out amongst the crowd as everyone began to search through their pockets.

Several exclamations of outrage ran along the back of the gathered crowd. Wisely, the pick-pocket kept to the back so that they could easily escape.

Hoping that the culprit hadn’t already left, Joe went up on his toes in order to scan the very back. Being a scant taller than most, it didn’t take him very long to spot the culprit.

A rail-thin man was wobbling and weaving away

from the gathered crowd. He wore a wide-brim that was too large and drooped over the eyes. His shoulders were far too thin, causing the coat to droop over his frame and hang low around the wrists. When the culprit glanced back over their shoulder, he revealed a childishly small face plastered with a ridiculously large and twirled mustache. The bristling nose duster was stiff and glossy black, unlike the bits of sandy brown hair that poked out from underneath the wide-brim.

“Joseph?” Bob had returned to his side and was puffing a bit from having run and delivered Joe’s orders. “What’s up, my boy? What you looking at?”

He honestly wasn’t certain, but he had a guess. “I think I’m looking at a halfling on stilts in a trench coat.”

“What?”

The suspect scanned the crowd to see if anyone was watching them. That was when they locked eyes with Joe. They perked up, but didn’t stop walking. Then, a devious and sharp-toothed grin spread out from under the overly-large mustache. It was a bloodling in a trench coat.

Well, that confirms that theory.

Joe swapped his staff to his left hand and drew his six-shooter with his right. As soon as he did, the gathered crowd let out a collective scream as they ducked in fear.

Figuring he might as well feed off of the atmosphere he had created, Joe empowered his voice and bellowed with as much authority as he could, “FREEZE!” His roar echoed through the street and caused nearly everybody to pause.

The bloodling tilted his head down and quickly jittered something in his quick chipmunk-like language. It must have been something along the lines of ‘scatter’, because three red blurs suddenly burst from the trench coat. The disguise fell to the ground like an empty husk.

The little menace hadn't been on stilts; it had been three bloodlings standing on one another's shoulders inside the coat.

A quick twist of his wrist caused the manacles to fall free from his staff. Joe stepped onto the iron rings and took to the air in a rush. The crowd gasped in surprise as he soared over their ducked heads.

The three red streaks took off in different directions. One streak headed down a northbound alley. One headed the opposite, down a southbound alley. The last headed towards a storm grate.

He didn't spend too much time in the air, as he needed the manacles to catch the pickpockets. As soon as Joe cleared the crowd, he jumped off the manacles to land on the cobblestones. A quick look down both alleys and a twist of his staff tethered the manacles to their intended targets. They shot off down either path.

It was entirely possible that the bloodlings had some means by which to evade or block his magic tethering, but he had a strong hope that the manacles would do their jobs. Joe returned his focus to the storm grate and barreled forth.

The third bloodling had already jumped down into the storm drainage tunnels and had a few seconds' head start. Joe didn't like the idea of fighting in tight quarters with a nimble and magical creature – especially one that had an affinity for knives – but it was his job.

Figuring that the little deviant was likely waiting for him, Joe ran forth with an arcane barrier held at the ready. It was humming off of his left arm. He slowed as he approached the open storm grate and pointed his firearm down the hole as he peered in.

Thankfully, the blasted little menace wasn't waiting for him. Unfortunately, that meant he would have to get down into the tunnel and chase him down.

Not being a complete idiot, Joe quickly peered into the drainage tunnel to determine how many paths

there were. There were only two; up street or down street. A wave of his staff and a bit of his will made it so that either entrance was shielded with an invisible wall of energy. He didn't feel like being jumped as soon as he dropped in.

Shaking his staff caused it to shrink to a wand; it wouldn't fit into the drainage tunnel if he kept it at full size. The shield barrier continued to hum and thrum against his left arm as he holstered his firearm and pulled a handkerchief from his pocket.

As soon as he put the cloth to his face, the long ends wrapped around to the back of his head and tied themselves into a little knot. He had spelled it so that it would tie to his face if positioned there. It was also spelled to smell like freshly-baked muffins and suppress his gag reflex.

Joe put a hand to the cobblestones and dropped down into the drainage tunnel. It was a good thing he had put up the barriers, because a rascally red blur slapped against the one heading downstream. The nattering little bloodling threw a slew of profanities at him in Common before darting away in another red blur.

Blasted little monsters.

Doubting that he would get a clean shot off, and also not wanting to kill his suspect, Joe opted for advancing without his firearm.

There was another warbling thump as the upstream barrier was slapped by a red blur as well. Another nattered slew of profanities followed the expedient exit of the red-hatted menace.

Either the same bloodling had gone around in order to test the other side, or he was dealing with a second attacker. He hoped it was the first possibility.

Bloodlings could easily outpace him in the storm tunnels. He wasn't anywhere near as fast as they were, and he couldn't shield-block all the tunnels. His

best bet was to head towards the tree roots and hopefully catch as many as he could in the act.

Not knowing if Petals' mind-reading could work through cobblestone, Joe decided to push out his thoughts anyway.

I'm in the storm drains, heading upstream to the roots. Cover the other side if you can.

His wand gave off a soft hum of silvery light. It wasn't enough to illuminate the tunnels, but it was enough for him to see where he was stepping. It wouldn't take long for his eyes to adjust.

Joe released both shield walls and headed upstream. He maintained the shield on his left arm but left his back exposed. He simply couldn't split his focus on maintaining two arcane barriers that were both mobile and could fit within the confines of the storm drain while also looking for his suspects. He would simply have to rely on his trench coat for protection.

Unfortunately, he couldn't exactly move stealthily through the drainage tunnel. Every step resulted in a sloshing of water; muffling magic could only do so much.

A partition of the mind had him focusing on noises and he set a trigger in the back of his mind to alert him if he was ever watched. It was a new trick he had learned; if he were to be observed, it would alert him to where he was being observed from.

It worked.

His years on the streets as a blue coat had conditioned him to respond quickly and reflexively. The moment he felt the pinprick at the back of his mind, he swiveled on the spot and thrust his shield arm out to the rear.

The red blur that had been barreling towards him abruptly reversed course as it rebounded off his shield. The bloodling let out a strangled series of screams as he tumbled end over end through the

drainage water.

Joe watched as the little man flopped face down into the fetid water upon his final tumble; he waited a few seconds to see if they would get back up. They didn't, so he hurried over and grabbed them by the back of the shirt and hauled them up upright so they didn't drown. He propped them up against the wall, bound them with a pair of manacles, then tethered the manacles to the cobblestones on the curved wall of the storm drain.

Satisfied that they wouldn't drown, Joe headed upstream once again.

The storm drains were fairly straight, and he could see a fair ways since his eyes had finally adjusted to the darkness. Oddly, he couldn't spot the tree roots or the other bloodlings when he should have been able to. Keeping his wits about him, he slowly advanced.

It wasn't until he was a good fifty paces into the storm tunnel that he noticed something strange with the water in front of him – the ripples were being interrupted. At first, he thought it was just a stick or a twig, but as he drew closer, it looked more like a hard line, and there didn't appear to be any obstructions in the water.

That was when his heightened senses and partitioned mind failed him.

A tiny hand appeared out of thin air and came down in a stabbing arch. A curved and blood-slicked blade jammed down into his left thigh. An inaudible pop burst through the air as the illusion wall broke.

The hard line in the water had been the point at which the illusion wall had begun. He didn't know why he couldn't sense the magic at play, but it wasn't exactly his greatest priority at the moment.

Beyond the wall was a mess of stone and dirt. Half of the storm drainage tunnel had collapsed in. The roots of the willow tree were exposed, and as predicted,

three bloodlings were applying their blades to the tree roots. Nine more bloodlings were standing guard, and one of those nine had just jabbed his dagger into Joe's leg.

On any given day, the dagger would likely have spelled his doom. Thankfully, he had recently enchanted his work trousers to be tear-resistant. They had done their job and had prevented the dagger from penetrating through and cutting his flesh.

It didn't mean that it didn't hurt. On the contrary, his thigh muscle spasmed violently as a sickening wave of agony spread through him. His response to being stabbed was to release an unholy roar of fury and pain and punch the bloodling that stabbed him.

CRACK!

The bloodling's head whipped back, and he was thrown to the stone rubble. The dagger clattered off to the side and fell into the water.

Joseph staggered and dropped to a knee as his left thigh continued to spasm. He was only down one bloodling and already hobbled.

Fantastic.

The remaining miscreants stared at him for a half moment before charging forward with high-pitched wails of fury. Red streaks of light filled the tunnel as they all teleported to surround him and began slashing with their knives.

Thankfully, Joe was just as quick with his thinking as they were with their attacks. He expanded the barrier from his left arm and pushed it to encompass his whole body. Unfortunately, the quick movements of the bloodlings forced him to pull the barrier as tight to his body as he could. There wasn't much room to maneuver.

Knife attacks reigned down upon his shield barrier, causing sparks of light to bounce off. Those

attacks momentarily and sporadically illuminated the tunnel.

Help! Down by the roots! Could use some help!

Joe threw his thoughts topside as wildly as he could, hoping that Petals could hear him. He didn't yell it out loud, as it would have been a waste of breath. Any noise he made in the tunnels would be garbled and muffled by echoing and whatever magic the bloodlings had been using to hide their presence up to that point.

The sharp-toothed grins soon turned to irritated snarls and sneers as the lot of them furiously stabbed and slashed away at his barrier. They clearly weren't going to break through.

One of the bloodlings stopped stabbing long enough to whisper something to his dagger. It began glowing red, and when he next stabbed at Joe's head, the tip of the blade pierced his barrier by the tiniest bit.

Oh, Fireballs!

Joe pulled his head back just far enough that the tip of the dagger stopped short of slicing his nose. A dart of the eyes told him that they were all going to follow suit and empower their daggers as well.

Double-blasted Fireballs!

With only the briefest of moments, Joe sucked in a lungful of air and quickly conjured a compression sphere in the palm of his hand. The sphere was the precursor to a Fireball spell. Joe didn't know how to properly craft such a frightful thing, but he was very well-versed in barriers. Compression spheres were little more than barriers that contained compressed air.

A vortex began to violently pull all the air from the storm drain. Wind roared through the tunnel and the water raised a step. The gathered bloodlings were yanked towards Joe and found themselves slapped tight against his shield. Many of them dropped their daggers and all of them began gasping and struggling to breathe.

Joe tightened his grip and focused all effort on

the compression sphere. His hand was shaking and his entire right arm was trembling with the effort of gathering all the air.

Clear the topside!

Once he was certain he couldn't compress any more or contain the sphere, Joe released it.

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He woke with a start and sat bolt upright. Joe was topside once again, and people were standing about him. He was deaf to the world – he couldn't hear anything. It wasn't that there was something plugging his ears or some irritating ringing that was blocking out any other sound. There was simply nothing. He had a sickening feeling that he had blown out his eardrums and he had a horrible headache that made him internally pray to the gods for mercy.

The pain and exhaustion hit him in a wave. He flopped over onto his right side and simply let it wash over him as he tried to breathe through it. Everything hurt. It was worse than when he'd been hit by lightning. Every bone, muscle, and joint felt like someone had tenderized it with a mallet.

Before he shut his eyes in an attempt to grit through all of the aches, he caught a glimpse of the street and those who were standing about.

Doctor Broom had been the one to awaken him, undoubtedly with some sort of odorous chemical. Petals stood nearby as well, and he also saw several blue trench coats. None of that was surprising.

The tree, on the other hand, looked to have regained all of its tree leaves and the cobblestone street was in one piece. He had been almost certain that if he had released the compressed air bomb, it would have left a crater.

Joe worked his jaw open and closed in hopes of

clearing his ears and restoring his hearing. There wasn't a very high likelihood of it working, but it was better than doing nothing.

He jumped, cringed, and squirmed when something hot and wet fell into his ear. It itched like something horrible had just crawled into his head. Joe went to jam his small finger into his ear in order to dig it out, but someone's wiry hand grasped his wrist and stopped him. One eye remained squeezed shut as Joe opened the other to try and determine who had grabbed his wrist.

It was Doctor Broom. The doctor looked back at him and shook his head while holding out his other hand to suggest that Joe wait. Thankfully, the irritating and itching sensation in his ear lasted only a few seconds. After which his hearing returned with a sudden and gratifying pop.

All forms of noise returned to him in a flood of chaos; one never imagines how much noise there is in the world until it is all taken away. He could even hear the distant roar of the ocean and the inconsistent whistle and buffet of the wind. There were birds chirping in the distance and the odd murmur of talk or the ring of a distant cart bell. Joe felt a much greater appreciation for his hearing, and the limits of his hat's ability to protect it.

"Congratulations, you burst your ear drums..."

Doc sounded irritated and sighed as he spoke. His voice sounded explosively loud in comparison to the hollow quiet. The wiry man also wiggled a tiny brown bottle and eye dropper at Joe to show him what had been dropped into his ear. "Roll over, so I can get the other one."

He did as he was told and squeezed his eyes shut in anticipation. Naturally, the sensation was just as horrible the second time. Joe had to bite his lip and clench his fists in order to resist digging into his ear to get the itching to stop. Usually, silence was considered to be a blessing. In that moment, the sudden pop and rush

of noise was considered the blessing.

Joe groaned and flopped to the cobblestones.

“Well done, my boy.” Petals spoke, and his voice seemed just as obnoxiously loud as Doctor Broom’s. “You managed to subdue every last culprit without blowing anything up or permanently injuring yourself.”

Joe replied, painfully, “Not for lack of trying.” It hurt to move his jaw and his ears were throbbing, so it came out as more of a grumbling mumble.

Doctor Broom helped Joe up in to a sitting position and proceeded to jam cotton into his ears while whispering, “Your ears will be sensitive for a while. Keep these in.”

It explained the booming voices.

“That was awesome! I saw the whole thing through the tree roots, man!” The happy and irritatingly loud outburst was immediately followed by a round of breathy laughter that was punctuated with the odd soft snort. Joe could only presume that the individual that had spoken was the naked and homeless nature wizard, as he didn’t recognize it belonging to any blue coat he knew.

Someone must have loomed over him, because the light of the sun no longer hit his eyelids. A callous finger poked the side of Joe’s head. Normally, he’d swat away a stranger poking his head; especially a bath-deprived and naked stranger that had a rather strong earthy aroma to them.

Sadly he wasn’t exactly in a state to do much swatting or complaining. Happily, a warm sensation flooded his entire body – healing magic was at play. It felt similar to the magic that an elf had once applied to him. It gave him happy chills as the pain ebbed away. He melted against the cobblestones as the aches vanished. “Oh, thank the gods.”

The breathy laughter returned. “I’m not a god!”

Joe opened his eyes when the finger retreated. He worked his jaw about and felt his ears pop a little, then took the hands offered to him by Doc and Bob. They hauled him up and dusted off the back of his trench coat. His leg was thankfully healed in the process as well; otherwise he likely would have been limping for a few days with a fair-sized bruise, if not some torn muscles. His hearing also seemed to be significantly less sensitive, so he pulled out the cotton balls, to Doctor Broom's dismay.

Steady on his feet again, Joe turned to face the nature wizard. He was wearing a blue coat to cover his indecency. The man had a happy grin on his face with an affable and relaxed demeanor. He even raised a hand and waved excitedly at Joe.

The odds of the man being drunk were extremely limited. Nature wizards didn't imbibe manmade intoxicants. They consumed nature-made ones; like mushrooms.

Joe glanced back to the cobblestones around where he had released the compressed sphere. "I didn't collapse the storm drain?"

Petals grinned broadly. "Quite not. Though you did cause quite a few storm grates to spew a fair bit of unpleasantness."

The unnamed wizard airily chuckled. "It was like the city coughed up some boogers." Nature wizards were not common in urban environments. Like druids, they tended to stick to the countryside.

"You said we caught them all?" Joe focused his question at his superior.

"Quite so. We pulled you out of the storm drains along with a dozen bloodlings."

Joe remembered his staff and manacles and patted his vest pockets. "My wand?"

Petals snapped his fingers and spontaneously produced the marbled iron maple that was Joe's wand.

The nature wizard seemed easily impressed, because he immediately exclaimed in amazement, "Whoa! That was amazing, little man!" It was followed by another bout of airy laughter.

You must have eaten mushrooms.

A slight wiggle of the fingers was all that was needed in order to summon it and return it to his hand. It jumped from Petals' fingertips and slapped firmly into Joe's palm. A quick shake released it into a full staff, and a thump of the butt-end to the cobblestones rekindled the connection to his manacles.

There was a loud ringing whistle as both manacles returned in a hurry. They flew around the corners of the alleys he had sent them down, and they slowed to hover around the head of his staff. "Looks like we didn't catch them all."

Petals clasped his hands behind his back and raised his eyebrows. "Didn't we?"

Joe gestured to the manacles. "They're empty."

Petals pointed to a nearby cart that was pulling away from the scene. The cubed compartment in the back was full of little hands throwing crude gestures out the barred windows. "That's not."

He shook his head. "They're not the same."

His superior tilted his head to the side in question. "Aren't they?"

Joe paused and thought.

You're testing me.

If he had been Petals, what would he have done first?

As he pondered the question, the gathered crowd of blue coats, Doctor Broom, and the nature wizard darted their eyes from Joe to Petals.

It didn't take long for him to figure it out. "You followed the tracks down both alleys and found they led to storm grates. You then compared those tracks to the bloodlings that I apprehended down in the storm drains

and determined that we had indeed caught them all.”

Petals grinned. “No.”

Blast it.

“I found the stolen coin purses.”

That should have been the more obvious answer.

“But I shall give you credit for a well-reasoned deduction.”

“Then we were able to return all the stolen coin purses to their original owners?” It felt like too easy of a win for all the trouble the bloodlings gave them.

“It appears so, my boy.”

Doctor Broom piped in, “If you have no further need of me, I will return to my duties.”

Joe thanked the doctor and told him he’d be fine.

Bob grumpily handed a couple copper coins over to Doctor Broom and turned to go about shouting for people to head on off on their business.

“Wait... what was that about?”

Doctor Broom cleared his throat and waved off the question. “A friendly wager.”

Gods blast it!

Joe turned his irritation back to Petals and the unnamed naked wizard. “The worst of it involved some damage to the storm drains and a few injured civilians?”

Petals turned a serious gaze back upon Joe and spoke in quieter tones. “I fear not, my boy.”

Over a short period of time, Petals proceeded to explain all that had happened while Joe was unconscious, and the conversation he had had with the naked wizard.

It turned out that the homeless man was actually a druid. His name was Otto. Not Mr. Otto, or Otto something – just Otto. He was also a full-blooded human.

Joe had never heard of a human druid before. They were always fey-born. Otto was apparently the

exception to the rule. He lived northeast of the city in an open meadow. He had also come to the city wearing pants, and the willow tree had ripped them off of him in an attempt to grab him, explaining the nakedness. It didn't explain why he was in the city in the first place.

"I had a bad dream."

Joe paused his note-taking in order to run the words through his mind once again. "Were mushrooms involved in this dream?"

"Uh... I don't think so. I just remember dreaming about the tree." Otto looked to be deep in thought. His eyebrows were furrowed and his forehead was wrinkled. Joe presumed his eyebrows were furrowed as the amount of dirt on his face made it difficult to discern hair from skin. The man also had a thick beard and wide, expressive eyes.

Joe shut his eyes and tried to calm the part of his brain that wanted to reach out and slap the man. "No, I mean, did you eat any mushrooms prior to having this dream?"

"Oh, what? Oh yeah, all the time! Mushrooms are the best, man." Otto had a dumb and happy grin that suggested he was often vacant of thought. Joe blamed the obvious abusive consumption of hallucinogens.

He made a quick note about the reliability of the dreams that Otto had experienced.

Blast it all... I'm going to owe Petals some copper.

"So, you had a bad dream that told you to come to this tree?"

Otto's grin faded just as quickly as it had appeared. "Yeah... It was a really bad dream. I saw lots of things that weren't good."

Knowing better than to dismiss the possibility that the druid may have actually been granted a vision, he was forced to ask, "What else did you see?"

"Uhh... well... I saw hats."

"Uh-huh." He barely noted it.

“One was on fire.”

Joe felt his gut tighten.

“The other was so cold it had a cloud around it.”

He just heard rumors about the Crowns, that's all.

Petals didn't look as convinced. If anything, the little gnome looked a bit pale.

Otto didn't look like the type to tell a lie. He looked like the honest-to-a-fault type. Though, it was still possible that his mushroom-addled brain had simply mixed things up. Joe had to swallow and clear his throat in order to ask, “When did you have this bad dream?”

Otto looked skyward, deep in thought, and began counting with his knobby fingers. Eventually, he chuckled and shook in the shoulders as if trying to shrug at the same time. “I can't remember.”

Neither Petals nor Joe were laughing. “We need you to remember.”

Otto stopped laughing and looked at his feet. “Oh... right... uh... I think it was during the full moon before last.”

Petals and Joe shared a look that spoke volumes.

Their druid friend had indeed had a vision, and had experienced it nearly a full moon prior to the events surrounding the Twin Crowns. Otto also obviously picked up on the look and quickly added, “I started walking here as soon as I had the dreams though.” He nervously chuckled for a moment, and stuck his hands in the pockets of the trench coat he was borrowing.

“I need you to tell me *everything* about your dream.” Joe flipped his notepad to a fresh page and prepared to write it all down, as per standard protocol. A simple partition made it so that his hand was ready to take notes.

Otto looked a little less sure of himself, but he began. “Well... I saw a stone. I saw a glowing cat. I saw

a gravestone and a bear in a suit. I saw the tree. I saw rot...”

Despite having lived through and understanding most of the dream images, Joe jotted them all down. There were several that weren't immediately clear.

“I saw a big black pot and storm clouds...” He continued to mumble details as Joe jotted them down.

Petals stepped aside and pulled out his crystalline network box.

Not wanting to miss out on what his superior was about to say, Joe made a secondary partition of his mind, so that he could focus on both conversations while his hand freely continued to jot down notes. Secondary partitions were notoriously difficult, but Joe had been practicing in his spare time.

“This is Pettlebottom to dispatch, dispatch come in.” His superior paused as he awaited dispatch's reply. Nothing came through that Joe heard, as the crystalline box must have been kept on private. After a few moments of silence, his superior spoke once more. “We have a code Oracle.”