

Ironhand

Charlie Fletcher

EXCERPT

Chapter Six The Flawed Hand

Eddie stared at George's hand, eyes wide in shock at what was happening to it. She tore her eyes away and saw that George had gone very pale as he examined the changes. He was staring so intently that he had completely stopped blinking.

"What's happening?" she asked quietly.

He had no idea, but it was something. From the scar that the dragon had slashed on it, three distinct lines had begun to emerge, dark lines coloring the pale skin of his hand as they spiraled down and around to his wrist like tendrils on a briar.

"Is it blood poisoning?" Eddie asked tentatively.

He examined the three lines closely, although everything inside him made him want to pull his eyes away.

"No," he said, mouth drying up. "It's something worse."

Each twisting vein was a different color and texture from the others. All three were slightly indented into his skin, like flaws in a rock.

"George. We should get you to a hospital or something."

He shook his head, fighting the waves of nausea rising inside him. "I don't think this is something a hospital's going to help with."

She bent in to examine the triple skein of veins more closely. "They're all different."

"Yeah . . . and they're not me. I mean, they're not made of me." He couldn't keep the revulsion out of his voice.

"Can I?" She reached a hand hesitantly forward.

He turned his head away, not wanting to see.

“This one’s smooth. Like metal.”

He decided he couldn’t duck this. He swallowed hard and turned back. “It is metal. I think it’s bronze or brass.”

He moved her hand out of the way and made himself trace the mottled bluey-green channel twisting next to it. It was cool to the touch. “This one’s not so smooth. It’s like marble.”

That left the last pale corded flaw twining down to his wrist. He rubbed it, feeling the rough shaley texture of limestone. As his thumb skated along the channel, tracing its course, he could feel a piece of grit detach from the surface and stick to it.

“Okay,” he said, clenching his teeth before managing to cloak them in a grin, “this is scaryish.”

“Does it hurt?”

He flexed his arm. The veins of bronze and stone seemed to flex with it. He shook his head. “No. But you know when they say something makes your flesh crawl?”

Eddie nodded.

George pointed to his arm.

“It’s crawling. It’s like I’ve got something inside my arm that isn’t me. I mean, if I think about it, it’s definitely going to creep me out.”

“So what are we going to do?” She stared into his tight smile.

Seeing the concern in her eyes somehow triggered the opposite reaction in George; he found himself once more determined to erase that look by making sure she was okay. It wasn’t necessarily a rational impulse, but it was one thing in their almost entirely ungraspable predicament that he could hold on to and work with.

“Not think about it,” he decided.

He stood up. The rain was easing. He reached down and pulled her to her feet. He didn’t really know what to say, so he dragged up things he’d heard other people say on TV and in films.

“Eddie. We’re going to be okay. We’re going to do this together. I’ll be right there with you. Anything, anyone trying to get you, they’re going to have to get past me first.”

As he said it, he was pretty sure he wasn't as convincing as the actors he was trying to copy had been. Maybe you had to be an adult to sound macho.

Eddie swept the hair out of her eyes and gave him a long, appraising look. "What? All ninety-eight pounds of you?"

He grinned back at her. At least she hadn't laughed. Not outright. He curled his lip and mugged at her, making a caricature of a tough guy.

"Yeah. All ninety-eight pounds of me. Until we get out of this, I've got your back. Look around anytime, I'm there."

He waited for her to join in the joke. Instead she nodded slowly.

"That's"—she struggled for the word, then leveled her eyes right into his—"that's good."

And because the earnestness of her belief in him was so unexpected and so sharp, George immediately felt as if he wanted to escape the moment.

"Come on, then. Let's go see the Friar."

And because she felt buoyed by his confidence, and strangely comfortable that he had her back, she straightened, walked ahead of him into the dwindling rain shower, and pointed down the road. "Blackfriars is down this way."

Because she was ahead of him, she didn't see the stone gargoyle take a headfirst leap off the gutter along the top edge of the alley, falling like the half ton of rock that it was, before its batlike wings snapped open. It swooped upward, one foot-talon neatly hitting George between his shoulder blades while the other closed around his ankle like a gin trap.

And because a half ton of wet sandstone packs quite a punch, Eddie didn't hear George yell. He couldn't yell. All the air had been knocked out of him as the gargoyle carried him, looping up and away into the darkening sky.

Instead Eddie turned around to see what was taking George so long, and saw nothing. No George where an instant before there had been, and no friendly face in the stream of wet pedestrians hurrying along the pavement. No one watching her back. It was as if someone had thrown a switch and George had simply been turned off.

Eddie was alone.