

BLOOD BOUND

by Sarah Cawkwell

Branches whipped against him as he stumbled blindly through the woodland night. In the tumbling and breathless panic that had taken him into its embrace, their spindly touch invoked terrifying images of groping fingers reaching out for him; desperate to haul him back to that terrible place. He plunged onwards.

Through bramble and bracken he ran, never once daring to pause and look behind. Hungry, avaricious branches caught in his clothes and his hair, tearing huge chunks of flesh from his face and leaving red welts wherever they connected with skin. The stinging pain came and went without much notice. He felt warm blood trickle down his cheek, dribbling its unmistakable copper tang into his mouth, but he didn't stop to wipe his face clear. Stopping was not an option. He had to *run*.

And so the terrified man did just that.

He ran.

His breathing was ragged, his heart pounding like a battle drum against his ribs. It had been many years since he had exerted so much energy and the constricting pain across his chest was excruciating. He felt as though his heart was on fire, a burning ball of flame threatening to consume him from within. Still he ran as though all the demons of hell were hot on his heels.

There was no moon tonight and the inky blackness fed even more fear into him. He glanced distractedly down at his tunic, where the material had been shredded by inhuman claws and caught sight of the deep gouge in the skin beneath. The wound did not flow with blood, but the oozing was steady. He remembered the precise moment he had acquired it. It had been when that... *thing* had reached out and snatched at him. It had been singularly terrifying and the recollection was still vivid in his mind.

The wound ached dully and a deep-seated fear rose in him as to the implications of such an injury. Fresh adrenaline flowed and his muscles surged with renewed vigour as he ran faster.

The still-lurid memory of the... *thing* that had attacked him cycled around his mind. Despite the fact that it was a long way behind him – or at least he hoped it was – his nasal senses still brimmed with its putrescent stink. As he ran, he wept at what he had wrought; sobbed pathetically for the doom he had called down on himself.

All because he had never learned when to leave well enough alone. All because he was too curious. All because he had simply chosen not to listen to those who knew what they were talking about.

He fled onwards, running from the seeds of his own destruction despite the knowledge deep down that it was little more than a panicked reaction; an exercise in

futility. But he had to *try*. He had never let anything defeat him before, and he wasn't going to let it start now.

If my life is now measured in hours and minutes rather than days and years, he thought as the first tears spilled from his eyes and down his face, then I'm going to make them count.

His name was Jareth De'roth and he was a thief. He wasn't necessarily the *greatest* thief in Tiam's long and politically complicated history, but that was the naked truth of what he was. It wasn't something he was outwardly proud of but he was good at it nonetheless. As his long-dead father had once told him, play to your strengths.

Jareth had very few strengths. He was a small, wiry man with a face, as they said, only a mother could love. He was no good at socialising, was no good with his hands and had the business sense of a rock. What he *was* good at was thievery. He had tried to dress it up, tried dallying with semantics ('the acquisition of prime merchandise' had been a personal favourite), but it always came down to the fundamental facts. He picked locks. He broke into houses and tombs. He took things that belonged to other people and to which he had no right whatsoever. He was a thief.