

Wall of Thorns

By Jake Burns

Alison left her father's house before the crack of dawn. The city was quiet as she walked down the cobblestone roads towards the market district. No town criers shouting up and down the street. No blacksmiths hammering away at their anvils. No carts creaking and rattling down the streets, or bards playing their flutes. Aside from the beggars in their filthy, sun-bleached rags, almost every soul up at this hour was going the same place she was. The lines would be long today.

She arrived at the market as the sky was beginning to lighten, and the guards were beginning to put out the street lamps. It would still be an hour until the sun rose over the walls, and the bread line already stretched out of the square, around the corner, and down the road east. There she stood, waiting for the line to start moving. Finally, the man in front of her shuffled forward a few steps. As the wait dragged on, the sun rose, and the sweltering heat of the late summer came with it. She wore a bright blue dress made of light cloth in hopes it would help with the heat. Alison's father was a tailor, and she loved helping him fill custom orders and maintain the shop. She rested her basket over her head to block the sun, and looked around at the guards. She caught one staring at her, a young man who looked as if he might melt inside his armor, leaning on his spear haft. She smiled at him, and his bored face flickered to life and smiled back. She didn't mind if the guards stared. Since the plague broke out, nobody was allowed in or out of the city, and the guards were the only ones who maintained order. They could stare if they wanted.

She tried to strike up a friendly conversation with the woman behind her, but nobody seemed to have the energy for idle chatter in the draining heat. It must have been past midday when she finally got to the front. The bald, sweating baker barked at her.

“What ya want?”

“Two loaves of bread, please.” She dug into her coin purse and slid three silver coins to the baker. He looked at the coins and raised an eyebrow.

“Gonna need more ‘n that.”

“What? Is this not enough?”

“Prices raised.” He jabbed a finger at the pricing board. “Two silvers for a loaf of bread.”

“Yesterday it was three for two loaves!”

“And lots of people want bread. Tough shit, girl. You paying for two loaves or not?”

“But I only have three silvers...”

“Then I guess you’ll only get a loaf, then!”

“Fine. One loaf then.” She grabbed the last silver, loudly sliding it along the counter into her coin purse. The baker frowned and left, returning with a loaf of bread.

“Run along, now. You’ve held up the line enough.”

Defeated, she stuffed the bread in her wicker basket and set off for home. She felt hungry eyes watching her from the line, which was now even longer than when she arrived. As she crossed the square to head home, a voice called out to her.

“Ally!”

She stopped and turned her head to see a lean figure clad in green trotting towards her.

“Brennan?”

“It’s been too long! How are you?”

“I’m well! Where have you been for the past weeks? I was worried something had happened to you.”

“Just staying out of trouble, as usual.” He grinned at her.

Alison and Brennan had met as children. Brennan was from the Gulley, which was in the South West of the city and sat at the bottom of a slope. It was the first place to flood during a storm, and got the hottest in the summer. The people there lived in poverty and squalor. Brennan’s mother worked in a tavern in the Gulley, but the Gulley taverns were no place for a child, so she sent Brennan to live with and work for the apothecary who lived across from Alison and her family. They grew up together, playing in the streets when the shops closed for the day. Now they were grown up, and Brennan moved back with his mother and worked at the tavern. Before the plague came, they always met once a week to keep in touch. But when the gates closed and the quarantines started, Brennan had disappeared.

“How are you here? Isn’t the Gulley closed off?” she asked, whispering.

“Maybe with that attitude!”

“And where did you get those clothes?”

Brennan was wearing dark leather boots she had never seen on him before, and a fine green tunic that seemed a bit long in the sleeves for him. She tried to imagine the sort of man he might have stolen them from.

“I’ve had some great luck lately. Are you heading home?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll walk you home, then.”

They walked back through the streets, sweating in the sun, stepping past beggars who moaned and pleaded for food.

“Are you and your mother faring well?” Alison asked.

“It’s hard, but we’re not sick. More than I can say for some friends.”

“I can’t believe it’s gone on this long. How much worse can it get?”

“You’ve obviously not seen the Gulley if you think this is bad.”

“My apologies. They say horrible things about the plague. Is it true?”

“It’s worse. What have you heard?”

“They say it makes people bleed and act like beasts.”

“First they start coughing. Then they start scratching themselves. Then their eyes get red and they start to cry blood. And *then* they act like beasts.”

“How long does it take?”

“About a week to start bleeding. Then they act like animals and go into a rage over nothing. Then they vomit up blood for about a day and die. It takes about two weeks in all.” Alison and Brennan looked at each other.

“Are you getting enough food?” Alison asked.

“No, we’re not,” another voice said from in front of them. They stopped and Alison saw that the voice belonged to a terrifyingly ugly man, with a crooked nose and horrible red boils on his face. Behind him stood a second thug with greasy hair, breathing heavily through his mouth, which was missing a number of brownish-yellow teeth.

“Please, miss. We’re just dyin’ of hunger. Surely you can afford to help,” the man said. His voice was rough and menacing. Their filthy gray clothes hung loose around their skinny frames. The one with the boils had a knife tucked into his waist.

“Please, we don’t want any trouble.” Brennan moved his right hand and rested it on his hip, revealing a dagger on his belt, in a black leather sheath with gilded steel fittings. The ugly man looked down at the knife, then back at Brennan, and grinned.

“Course, no trouble at all for one o’ Lasko’s boys. Safely on your way, now.” He stepped aside. Brennan grabbed Alison by the arm and strode onward down the street.

“Keep walking. Let’s go,” Brennan muttered.

When they were almost to Alison’s street, she slowed.

“Where did you get that knife?”

“Someone gave it to me.”

They stopped in front of Alison’s home. The sign above the door read “Rupert’s Tailoring” with a picture of a needle and thread.

“I’m not naïve, Brennan.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Are you in the Gilded Crows?”

Brennan paused. "Yes," he answered, "I know what you're thinking, but they aren't as bad as you think."

"They're *criminals*, Brennan. Why would you get involved with them?"

Brennan's face looked wary, and his eyes darted up and down the street to see if anyone else could hear them. "I'll explain. Can we just talk inside?"

"Fine. Come in."

She unlocked the door and they entered.

"Come into the kitchen."

Brennan followed Alison through the front room of the house, which served as her father's tailoring shop. Elegant dresses and fine tunics and trousers adorned hangers around the room. On the back wall, shelves held stacks of folded silk and wool of all colors. Brennan walked slowly behind, looking around. Alison set the bread down on the kitchen table in the back room.

"Can you set the pot to boil? I need to check on my father."

"Sure." Brennan picked up a log and tossed it into the hearth.

As Alison made her way upstairs, she heard muffled coughing and wheezing from up the stairs. She stopped, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath.

Her father lay in bed, right where he had been when she left in the morning. He turned his head to her and smiled. The sun spilling through the window onto his face made the bags under his eyes look more pronounced. He had fallen ill a week before the plague broke out, leaving him bedridden for weeks. He had no signs of the plague, but his illness seemed to drain him a bit more every day.

"How are you feeling, father? I hope I didn't wake you."

“No.” His voice was thin and frail. “A nice day outside. Shame to spend it inside.”

“It’s awfully hot. Do you need anything?”

She helped him get out of bed and squat over the wooden pot placed at his bedside.

“More privacy than the public privies,” he joked. Alison forced a smile and helped him back into bed.

“I’ll make you some soup.”

Alison went downstairs to find Brennan sitting at the table, hands folded in his lap and staring at the bread on the table. As she opened the drawer of vegetables, she saw a black shape with glinting eyes squirming inside.

“GAH! Rat! Damn, get out. Out!” She shook the drawer and smacked the underside. The rat snarled as it writhed onto the floor and scurried out of the kitchen. The carrots and onions had bite marks on them. She took out a carrot and an onion and began slicing them on the counter.

“Can I help?” Brennan asked.

“Yes.” She stopped and looked over her shoulder at him. “You can ‘explain’ to me why you’ve joined the Gilded Crows.” She started slicing again.

“Because they can help. They’re not bad people!”

“It’s a *gang*, Brennan. They’re criminals!”

“Just ‘cause it’s a gang doesn’t mean it’s bad.”

“They steal from people! They tried to make Master Merrick from down the street pay them protection money!”

Brennan fidgeted inside his poorly fitting clothes.

“They do good things too!”

“Like pay you to be their thug?”

“I am not a thug!” Brennan said incredulously. “When was the last time you went to the Gulley?”

“What does that have to do-”

“When?”

“I can’t remember, exactly.”

“Well I live there, and it’s horrible. We don’t get the fancy food lines like you do, with guards to keep everyone calm. Once a day, they’ll roll a cart or two of mostly scraps into the Sweat Street and sit back while people tear at each other trying to get food. I saw a man smash another man’s head against the ground until he died just for a handful of potatoes. The guards just stood there and watched. Sure, the Crows aren’t squeaky clean, but we’re also smuggling food into the Gulley through the sewers. We give it to the old, the young and the sick so they don’t get trampled trying to get food from the carts. We try to keep the peace as best we can, ‘cause the guards don’t care. We even managed to smuggle a healer in from the Temple who said she wanted to help the plagued. If no one else cares about the Gulley, we might as well try.”

Alison carried the carrots and onions over to the pot and dropped them in. She felt the heat of the fire and steam on her face. She felt the heat of Brennan’s glare on her back.

“So you’re telling me you’re not becoming a criminal?”

“Well, I sometimes have to do illegal things...”

“Like what, Brennan?” Alison turned to him.

Brennan narrowed his eyes and pursed his lips. He took a sigh and looked away, pausing.

“Well, the other night we snuck into the Rosy Hill. Followed rich men home from the brothel and took their gold. They were so drunk they didn’t even know we’ve touched them.”

“That’s still stealing! It doesn’t matter if they’re rich!”

“So what does matter, then? They wait out the plague getting piss drunk and fucking whores, while people in the Gulley are starving to death. Why should I just let them die? It does matter that they’re rich! They can help but they don’t!”

Alison’s face got hot. She took a short breath and held it. Her body felt tense, and her heart pounded as she stared at Brennan. A muffled cough from upstairs broke the silence.

“I need to check on my father.” Alison poured a bowl of soup and broke off a chunk of bread.

She found her father awake again.

“Some food for you, father?”

“Yes, please dear.”

She knelt down beside him and spooned some soup towards his face.

“No, my dear. Help me sit up. I am strong enough to feed myself.”

She helped him sit up against the wall and handed him his food.

“Is someone here with you?” he asked. The soup spoon trembled in his hand.

“...Yes. Brennan’s here. I’m sorry father, I can tell him to leave.”

“Bah, no need. How is that boy? Last I saw of him, you brought him here with two black eyes and a cracked rib. Some fight with the boys down the road, I think.”

“He’s... fine.” She forced a smile.

“You keep an eye on that boy. He seems to have a good heart, and people with good hearts tend to suffer the most in times like these.”

“I’ll try, father.” She got up and went downstairs.

When she entered the kitchen, Brennan was staring at the bread. He glanced up at her and back down again.

“How’s your father?”

“He’s ill. He came down with a horrible fever right before the city got locked down. He’s barely gotten out of bed since, but at least it’s not the plague.”

“I’m sorry. I hope he gets better soon.”

“Thank you. Brennan... I’m sorry I went after you. I know it must be hard for you right now. I just worry about you. You disappear for weeks and then you come back and you’ve joined a gang. It’s dangerous right now. I don’t want to lose you.”

“Thank you. I wouldn’t join them if I thought I had a choice, but I have to survive somehow.”

“If you say so...”

The silence seemed to take a toll on both of them.

“Well, sorry if I troubled you. I should get going.” Brennan said.

“Wait... If you’d like, you can stay for dinner. It’s not much, but I imagine it’s better than in the Gulley.”

Brennan smiled for the first time since he sat down.

“Thanks. I’d like to stay... but I have to get back home. I’m late, my mum is probably worried.”

“Of course. I hope your mother is well.”

“I’ll say hello for you.”

They stood up and headed for the door. They hugged and said goodbyes.

“I’ll be in the market again tomorrow. Will I see you there again?” Brennan asked.

Alison was planning on making the bread last for another day or so between herself and her father, and wasn’t planning to go to the market the next day. She did, however, want to see Brennan again, and said she would be there. Brennan smiled and stepped out into the warm night air.

~

The next day seemed even hotter. It didn’t help that Alison had slept in until the sun had already risen, and had to walk to the market in the growing heat of the day. She hadn’t been able to fall asleep the night before. She spent hours listening to her father cough and snore, but it was thoughts of Brennan that kept her up. She was angry about the Gilded Crows, happy to see him again, but most of all, concerned.

By the time she arrived in the market, the bread line was daunting, stretching even further than the day before. She got in line and waited. In the market, towards the front of the line, a crier stood on a crate shouting to anyone who could hear. After a few hours, she was close enough to hear him. The line moved slowly, and

many people around her relieved themselves on the spot rather than lose their place in line. The heat made everything stink even worse. After another hour, she was right in front of the crier on his crate. He stood there in white robes with red stripes on the cuffs and the torso. A silver chain with a star medallion hung around his neck. Beads of sweat glistened on his face as he spoke.

“Debauchery! Greed! Deceit! Complacency! These are the seeds we have planted inside our society, inside ourselves. And now, we reap the fruits of these bad seeds. We are sinners, all of us. We have ignored the teachings of Balidor for too long! And now look at us. Disease of the foulest nature plagues our city. Hunger grips us when we once ate plenty. Our once proud walls now protect nothing but our own suffering and squalor.”

Something about him captivated her - made her want to listen. Perhaps it was the way his sweat-stained robes swung with every gesture, or how even the heat had not dampened his fervor. Or perhaps it was just because he simply seemed to believe what he was saying. She did not take any notice in the footsteps that approached her.

“Alison!”

She turned and saw Brennan smiling at her, still wearing the same clothes from the day before.

“Brennan! I didn’t see you coming.”

“I noticed. This monk had you under his spell.”

“Oi, line starts back there!” a man called from behind Alison.

“Don’t worry! I’m just talking with her, not jumping in line,” Brennan replied.

“How’re you?” he continued.

“I’m fine. I suppose it is easy to listen to the monks when you’re hungry. It makes you think perhaps there’s a reason it’s all happening.”

“They are quite the talkers.” Brennan turned to listen to the crier.

“...But do not fall into despair! Balidor may seek to punish the wayward and sinful. But he also brings us opportunity! To prove ourselves in the crucible of his will! However, there are some amongst us who would seek to avoid such trials! They would rather continue in their path than seek the road to the light. I speak of course of those pampered and perfumed people of the Rosy Hill. Atop the Rosy Hill they sit, drinking and fattening themselves through these trying times. From atop their wall of thorns they sit on cushions soft as rose petals, laughing at those below. Balidor is just, however, and his righteous judgment knows all, in this life and beyond!”

“Quite the speech. Besides all the sinning and judgment, he’s got a point.”

Alison was just about to respond when she heard a commotion near the front of the line. When she looked closer, she saw a crowd gathering in front of the bakers. The shop was closed up and the crowd was banging on the doors.

“Looks like they ran out,” Brennan said. “I’m sorry. We should go.”

As they crossed the market the clamor grew louder, and the crier’s voice slowly faded amongst the groaning crowd.

As they walked back towards Alison’s street, they talked about all the things that had happened in the past weeks since they last spent time together. It seemed like the tension from the night before was gone. Alison buried her reservations about the Gulley, about Brennan, about the day before. She just wanted to talk with

him, to be with him. Everyone she knew was trying to keep their own family safe, and she hadn't seen many of her friends in weeks. She was sweating through her clothes, she wasn't bringing home any food, and her mouth was dry with thirst, but at least she had a friend. Suddenly, they were gripped by shouting from around the corner, followed by the blowing of the guard horn. They hurried around the street to find a building along their path home on fire, flames pouring through the windows. Guards panted as they rushed past, shouting for buckets of water. One of them approached Alison and Brennan.

"Move along, not safe for townsfolk. Road's closed until the fire's put out."

Alison looked at Brennan.

"It's alright, I know another way. Follow me." Brennan said.

He took her hand and led the way back up the street, where they turned into a dim alley where the sun didn't reach. They rounded a corner and collided with two men going the other way.

"Hey! Watch it!" one of the men grunted.

"Sorry," Alison replied.

And then she looked up and realized who they were. The man with the ugly face, and next to him was the man with the missing teeth. The men both looked at her and Brennan, recognition flashing across their faces. The one with the crooked nose grinned.

"Say, you're that *lovely* couple from yesterday. Me 'n my friend here are still *very* hungry. You wouldn't happen to have any food to spare?"

“We don’t want any trouble. Just trying to get home,” Brennan said. He put his hand on the hilt of his dagger.

“Well, you best give some food, then. When a man goes hungry, an’ no one’s around to guard pretty little ladies bringin’ home food, trouble comes easy.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t have any food,” Alison whimpered.

“Don’t you lie! Give it here right now!”

“Back off, now!” Brennan commanded.

“Suck my cock, boy! Now give it here, bitch!”

The man lunged at Alison and grabbed at her. She threw the empty breadbasket at her feet, but the man wasn’t satisfied.

“Where’re you hiding it?” he growled at her. His spit landed on her face as he spoke. He yanked and ripped at her clothes, searching for the hidden food that wasn’t there. Up close, Alison saw every feature of his hideous face. His flaking boils, his swollen gums, his bloodshot eyes.

Suddenly, she felt the man’s body jolt and shift to the left. Brennan had plunged his knife into the man’s side. He let go of Alison and fell to the ground, red staining the cloth around the man’s side. Brennan kicked the other man in the knee as he watched his friend fall to the ground.

“Come on!” Brennan shouted, grabbing Alison’s hand. They ran down the alley, veering off into another dark side passage.

“It’s a dead end!” said Alison.

“No, in here!” Brennan opened a wooden trap door in the alley.

“The tunnels. Come on!” They descended into the sewers.

It was entirely dark except for the one light shaft coming in from up above. Alison's eyes strained to adjust to the dark. She could only sense the damp, cool air on her skin, the smell of sewage, and the sound of flowing water and skittering rats.

"Just take my hand and follow me." Brennan said, leading her through the dark. He found a torch mounted on the wall, and lit it with sparks from his knife that he struck against a piece of flint in his pocket.

"One of the perks of being in the Gilded Crows," he said.

"Are they going to follow us?" she whispered, hoping no one else would hear their echoing voices down in the tunnels.

"Maybe one of them. I don't think your friend is going to be following anyone for a while. Let's just keep moving and we'll be safe."

"We should have just waited to go down the road."

"I know. I'm sorry." Brennan stopped and turned to her. "Are you hurt?"

"No, just frightened. Are you hurt?"

"No, I'm fine. I'm scared, too."

They eventually came to a ladder that went up to a hatch in the tunnel ceiling. They opened the hatch and climbed into what looked to be a warehouse. Shelves lined the walls, and stacks of boxes and piles of sacks surrounded them. A musty smell hung in the air.

"Where are we?" Alison asked.

"Should be somewhere in the Rosy Hill."

"Have you been here before?"

“I got a little lost, but I know which way to different parts of the city from the tunnels. Never been up this ladder though.”

“Looks like some sort of warehouse. Let’s find a way out.”

As Alison fumbled through the crates and shelves, Brennan lagged behind. She heard him unsheathe his knife and the sound of it slicing at sackcloth.

“Alison. Come here.”

“What is it?”

“Look.”

Brennan pointed with his knife, still wet with blood, at a sack sitting on a shelf. The sack was split open, and she could just make out what was spilling onto the floor in the torchlight.

“Grain?” she asked.

“Grain,” Brennan said.

Brennan walked to another shelf and split another bag, grain pouring out again. He split open another, and then one more. All of them bled grain onto the floor. He picked up a handful in his hand. Alison looked closer, and saw that it crumbled between his fingers, and tiny black beetles crawled around in his palm.

“It’s rotten. All this grain is rotten,” Brennan said. Alison could see a rage building inside him she had never seen before. “The monk was right. My boss was right.”

“What do you mean?” Alison asked.

“He was right about the rich fucks on the Rosy Hill. They don’t care about anyone but themselves. They bought up all this grain and stashed it away for

themselves, only to let it fucking *rot*. How many people in the Gulley starved because all this was sitting here rotting away?"

"Brennan, are you all right?"

"What do you think? I'm fed up with getting the shit end of things. Look at all this. Tons of grain. Food for hundreds, maybe thousands. I bet those barrels over there are full of wine, or salted meat, or... something good. These people can't even use up what they have, and everyone I know in the Gulley is hungry right now. We have to do something."

"But Brennan, what can we—"

"I need to tell them. I need to tell everyone about this. Once the Gulley gets word of all the shit they've got stored up here, they'll realize enough is enough. They'll knock down the barricades and take this damn city back."

"You want to start a *riot*? We can't just send an angry mob against the city!"

"Against the city? We're part of this city too!"

"People could die! What if some sick people get through spread the plague? Will you still be proud of that?"

Brennan paused for a moment. It seemed as if the frustration and anger from their argument the day before had never left.

"There are still plenty of healthy people who just want to eat. When I tell them, I'm coming back here with the Crows, and we're going to take everything that isn't rotten. If there's a riot, so be it."

"Please, don't do this Brennan. You could get hurt."

“I know. But I have to do this. I’m sorry. I hope you know I really care about you.” Brennan started leading Alison towards a door on the far wall of the warehouse.

“Then don’t put us all in danger.”

Brennan lifted the latch on the door and pulled it open, letting light from outside spill onto them.

“I promise, I’ll come find you. There’s so much I want to talk to you about, but I have to go.”

“And what if I don’t want you to find me?” Alison asked.

Brennan looked stunned, his mouth opening a bit and eyes holding a strained, concerned expression. He pursed his lips and sighed through his nose.

“I hope you don’t mean that,” he said. “I’ll see you soon.”

Brennan turned and walked back to the trap door, and began descending, torch in hand. Before he disappeared down the ladder, he looked back up at Alison and gave her a pained smile. Alison stared at him as he disappeared back down into the tunnels. She walked out into the streets of the Rosy Hill, slammed the door, and set out down the hill. She started heading back towards her neighborhood. She walked as fast as she could without attracting the attention of the guards. As she rounded a corner, she looked down the street, and between the buildings could see the almost the entire city from up on the hill. She had never seen it from up there. She could just barely see people going up and down the streets. She could see the market district, the way to her neighborhood, the smoke rising from the burning building, and even the gully on the other end of the city. The high walls encircled it

all, and beyond the walls, beautiful green fields and forests she had longed to see again. Below all of it, Brennan was travelling to the gulley through the sewers, ready to risk everything she saw before her to get justice. However, she would not let him risk her life or her father's life. She looked back to the fields, forests, and villages beyond the walls, and knew there was only one place to go. She took a deep breath, and dashed down the hill to find her father.