



# A HOUSE *of* COLD IRON

JOSH MOSTEIT

CHAPTER 2  
FOR THE WOLVES

# HAUNTED DEEP

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## CHAPTER TWO

### FOR THE WOLVES

Mud sucked at Jubal's boots and fingers clutched his heels with every step. Groping at his toes, climbing up his arches, curling digits pulling him down, down, down. Fingernails bit into his arm. His own, thank Kath. But he could see them clear as a sunlit sky—those hands at his heels, those arms whirling the earth, those...*things* under the mud—even as rainwater lashed his eyes. Something in his stomach coiled. Something in his stomach saw them. Broken, twisted women beneath the mud, swimming like eels through the earth, legs broken, gored, wound into slithering tails, wriggling just beneath the rain-soaked soil. His mind's better half knew no such things could be, that Nan's old stories were always that: tales to keep him awake on rainy nights. He'd shiver and whimper under his quilts while she sat rocking with her needles, clicking away at a scarf she never seemed to finish, chuckling beneath the humming downpour. *They belong to the Drowned One*, she'd say, *like the sirens of the Deep and the morgen of the stream. Come for all the li'l wickeds out where'n they oughtn't be.*

Damned old woman.

His wrist ached under the weight of his black iron lantern. It screamed on its hinge in a voice that tore his ears raw. Burning hot and white on kraken oil, it carved a cone out of the hardened pitch, painted the world an alien white, ivory statues painted dull, fading shades. A world dashed in

turpentine.

Kraken oil.

Jubal often thought of it. Men on ships of wood and tar dredging beasts from the sea. His fists clutched his cloak close to his chest as he trudged into the oncoming wind, imagined himself there on the high borne seas, smelled salt on the air. A buffeted ship conquering the waves. Tendrils of an ancient beast splintering the deck out from under his feet as he rushed to the harpoons or swivel gun. The thought put iron in his legs, pushed him through the mud and up the road.

He'd split one open one day. Take the fuel coursing its veins like blood coursed through his own and spread it across the whole continent: the colonies and commonwealths, the provinces and dominions, the Concorde and its protectorates. To the street lamps of the merciless Dame. To the cannon forges of lost Bastilla. They all needed fuel. They all needed light. His oil would burn hot in Colosse's fevered nights.

The old watch house loomed up the road. On fairer days, Jubal could make the run from his mother's porch to the watch in less than a minute, not a thimble's worth of sweat on his brow to show for it. Now, time stretched as endless as the dark. His knees quaked under his weight. The lantern grew heavier by the second and he saw the handle shearing off his fingers at the second knuckle and flinging them into the abyss. Offerings to the Drowned One. He shivered.

His ankle twisted. He fell to one knee. His free hand caught the ground before he went sprawling into the mud, the treacherous soil holding, thank Kath. He righted his ankle, found it little more than sore, and rested on his knees a moment.

He watched as the rain carved deep trenches into the road, little rivers the breadth of his palm flying out into the night beyond the cone of light, ribbons of white fire dancing on their surface. The sea. A vast and unending sheen from sky to sky, and all the horrors beneath, waiting for him. Krakens, whales, *cetea* and tannins, bloated *daganu* and coiling *jörmung*, and the mighty

Liyotan ever on the horizon.

*One day*, he thought, *the sea*. And that was enough.

He felt himself sinking slowly into the mud. No fingers. No groping hands. Only mud. Only mud, he told himself and breathed air sharp as knives.

*The sea*, he thought. *One day*.

He found purchase with his toes and pushed himself upright.

He trudged past lodge houses rowed on the western wall of town. Town square opened on his right, he knew—though only a yawning abyss black as the Deep stood there—the wheel-peaked spire of the church crowned on the eastern edge of town, barely two hundred yards between each side. Travelers called his town small though Jubal wouldn't know. As lightning crashed again, the cobblestone wall to the north grew larger, closer. One jump over the wall lay Hayley's Field. Most called it the witchfield now, in rare and guarded breaths. Nurse Parish told him poppies once grew there. A century gone, Hayley Wardwell planted them with her very own hands, the seeds a guarded treasure from the Old Country. She recounted it well as she splinted Jubal's leg, fallen as he had from a cherry tree. The boy could only imagine: a vast scape of red, crimson as fresh-drawn blood, waving in the wind like a scarlet sea. *O for poppies*, she would say, *poppies and sunshine*. But a flood had taken them when she was a child. No flowers would grow there again. Only witches now. Nurse Parish one among them.

Just inside the city wall lay the Sheriff's watch, an ark hauled up from the river still standing on its raft more than a foot off the ground. An aura hung over the porch—lantern light—and within, the rocking silhouette of the Sheriff, a specter in black and orange.

The boy climbed his way there and mounted the split-log steps. He leapt under the awning and shuddered violently, the cold upon him all at once before the naked flame of the Sheriff's lamp. It burrowed into him like worms fleeing sunlight.

The Sheriff cocked his head at the boy, quizzical, as if Jubal were a squirrel

wandered too far from his tree. He sat in his rocking chair, smoking his pipe, a rifle across his knees. Jubal shuttered his lantern before the Sheriff complained of the wasted light. He set it at his feet and removed his cloak. It came away like a second skin, licking at his face as he hauled it overhead. He let it fall to the boards and collapsed into a chair next to the Sheriff, a hardback carved from brushwood. A wheeze slipped through his lips that surprised even him.

“Your mama send you out here, boy?” said the Sheriff. The pipe never left the corner of his mouth.

Jubal inhaled a few smoky, rainless breaths for a moment before he spoke. The Sheriff gazed out into the drumming depths, absently. You’d think the man spoke to himself for all the attention he paid the boy.

“Ma says dinner’ll be ready soon,” he said. He neglected to capture her tone. “I set the table. Stew, I think. Rabbit. Should be...should be ready soon.”

The boy grasped for any other excuse that might drag the Sheriff home—raccoons in the attic, a grease fire on the stove, highwaymen snatched mama and absconded into the woods. He found none that would budge the man.

The chill crept up his arms and into his elbows as he sat motionless. The sheriff sat with his shirtsleeves cuffed, his coat tossed over the back of his chair. His hat hung on a peg atop the chair, swung like a pendulum as he rocked. If the cold touched the man, he showed no sign of it. Jubal set his elbows firmly on his knees to keep away the shakes and laced his fingers tightly.

Maybe this moment would be the rest of his forever: locked in place, knees rusted shut, hands clasped eternally, waiting for a reply never to come. He told himself to leave. After all, he delivered Ma’s ultimatum. That was all she asked. He willed his legs to move, his hands to reach for the lantern’s handle. He begged his lungs to fill with enough dry breath to endure the muddy trek home. His fingers tightened, crushed his knuckles.

“When the dam broke in ’31,” began the Sheriff, wistful as a *once upon a*

*time*—the boy’s stomach unfurled with relief before sinking with resignation—“a torrent rolled over this town likes a’ which would make the Hallooed Mother weep.”

*Hallowed Mother*, thought Jubal though his lips remained firmly set. You make that mistake with the Sheriff once—and only once. Only Vicar Gelder walked away unscathed correcting the Sheriff’s drawl. He felt himself soaking away into the chair’s gnarled wood, his hands and knees at ease, surprisingly, having made peace with their fate before Jubal himself could do the same. The Sheriff chewed the end of his pipe as he gazed into the rain, memories carving lines into his brow.

“Sammy, Lyle, Ned Thom, me, whole mess a’ boys, we were out in the street playin’ half ball—Lords! We’d pound the mud barefoot, swingin’ at that lump a’ rubber through most any kind a’ drizzle you could imagine so long’s we couldn’t drown in it.” He exhaled a laugh that trailed into a sigh. “Not a one of us with a proper bat, even. Broomsticks an’ rakes—me, I had a broke shovel handle—damned Pritchett boys had proper clubs. Lemme tell you, though, width of your bat don’t matter none if you ain’t got that eye.” He touched a fingertip to the corner of his eye then pointed at Jubal’s own, mustache quirked in a grin. “That’s the truth.” He snapped his suspender with a thumb for punctuation. A puff of white hissed out the corner of his mouth and the wistfulness escaped his eyes. “I was the last to see it.” The creak went out of his chair as the man froze, his bootheel gutting into the floorboards. *A wall of white fire*, thought Jubal, his hands sore and limp on his knees. Only the roaring downpour filled the air between them. “Mud coated up to my shins, up to my elbows, too. The ball skidded right to my feet. Snatched it up, quick as a whip, reeled back to pitch but...Ned just stood there, gob wide open, stick still in his hand ‘stead a’ runnin’ for first.” The tips of his mustache crooked up over his pipe, offering a rare glimpse of the old man’s tar stained smile. “Thought crossed my mind to wing it straight at his witless face. Then I saw the others, their faces, all around me, slackjawed fright starin’ right past me. But I heard it first ‘fore I saw it. Like the sky



crashin' down behind me. Finally, I turnt round and..."

Jubal waited, waited for the wall of fire that awaited the boy every time he turned. Just once, Jubal wished the boy would avert his eyes, keep forward, get washed away down the mountains. Then he noticed it. A tiny fleck of orange piercing the dark beyond town. The Sheriff sat upright in chair, settled the rifle into the crook of his arm. They sat in silence, watching as the light grew brighter, closer. The Sheriff took up Jubal's lantern, twisted the shutter open, and focused the beam onto the road. There, they could faintly discern the outline of a wagon, an oxen train at its head, four in all.

Four, thought Jubal, long enough for regular travel up and down the coast but shy two or four to make the trip west into the Nationlands or south into laCastra. A covered wagon. White or tan canvas marked out migrants moving home from colony to colony. Black or brown meant traders. This wagon's hide returned none of the lantern's light, save a rain-slick shimmer. Black.

As the wagon approached, the Sheriff rose and silently held out his rifle to Jubal. The boy took it by the stock. A *lupara*. "For the wolves," it meant. A double-barreled shotgun, sawed-off, one barrel stacked atop the other. The stock sawn, too, down to a grip. A weapon for keeping civilized worlds clear of savage beasts. *Works well enough for people, too*, the Sheriff told him.

The wagon pulled through the gates of town where once a stony archway stood, complete with arcing banner of Solomn timber, bidding new folk "Wardwell Welcomes." The flood of '31 took that, as well. Only two uneven pillars remained. Stacked slate jagged like sharks' teeth.

The Sheriff leaned out from the awning and waved the driver down, lantern aloft. The driver hauled up on the reins and the oxen strained to a stop, slipping and kicking through the mud. They pulled the wagon just before the watch house and skid to a halt, cab rocking on its axle. The Sheriff donned his wide brimmed hat and coat, both a brown so dark they looked a black in the night, bits of brass for buttons and clasps. His badge of office shined on his lapel: a disk of polished brass embossed with Solomn's crane

and wreath. He aimed the beam up at the driver, careful not to shine the stranger full in the eye—good way to burn a man’s retinas out.

A broad slab of a man sat the driver’s seat, made bulkier by his coats and cloak and the quilted blankets across his knees. A slouch-brimmed hat atop his head dribbled from one side. An enormous beard, reddish brown—a kind of copper, maybe—stretched nearly to his navel, tied at the middle and end with leather thongs. He tipped his hat to the Sheriff and Jubal.

“Evenin’, goodmen.”

The Sheriff nodded. Jubal mimicked the gesture, hard lips, furrowed brow and all. He gripped the rifle as casually as one conceivably could—that is, not well at all. The Sheriff swept the lantern down the wagon’s length. “DuQUESNE BROS. TRANS-COLOSSAL TRADING CO.” emblazoned across its hide in chipped and cracking gold, the canvas, indeed, a trader’s black.

Returning the light to the driver, the Sheriff tipped his hat in return. “Sheriff Karl Hardy, goodman. Wardwell Township welcomes you.”

“Thank you kindly.” The corners of the man’s mustache squared up in a smile, described most by his cherry cheeks. If Sheriff Hardy’s soup catcher earned a solid yellow ribbon, then this man boasted a fat blue ribboner; the copper cord masked his lips entirely and the tips tapered and fanned like gull wings. “Abel DuQuesne. One-half the DuQuesne brothers.”

“Might I ask what brings you to our town?”

“Passing through. On course to Fort Ramage down south.”

Hardy’s lifted his brows at that. “The border, eh? Supplies? Or you crossin’ the Karkosas?”

“Aye, sir. Crossing it is. We’ve business in Candine.”

“Oh?” What little humor filled the Sheriff’s voice died. “Takin’ your goods down to the Concorde, then?”

The stranger pressed the brim of his hat to the side of his head. “Oh, no, good sir. Not at—”

“People, actually.” Jubal started at the sudden voice from the rear of the

wagon. A tall, shapeless figure rose up out the dark. Hardy stood firm, shot Jubal a withering look, then directed the light at this new stranger. A lanky man wrapped in a hooded cloak, gaunt, sharp face gazing at them with a subtle smile. "Evenin', gentle sirs."

The Sheriff scrutinized the man, face a stern mask, eyes ticking from head to toe like a storekeeper checking a list. "Other half a' the DuQuesne brothers?"

"You presume correctly, goodman." Hand to his heart, the man bowed, swishing his arm, billowing his cloak like a luxurious cape. "The DuQuesne Brothers Trans-Colossal Trading Company. At your service, sirs." He stood back on his heels and gripped the front of his cloak as though gripping the lapels of his coat. "Jacob DuQuesne, if you'll have me."

The two could not be more unlike. Where the driver was squat but broad, this new man was tall and, but for his rain-fattened layers, looked to be all bone and gristle. Clean shaven. The locks pasted to the man's brow looked blonde as straw. Like a scarecrow hexed to life. With the voice of one, too. Hoarse and scratchy yet somehow childlike in pitch. If a child smoked ten cigarettes a day from birth, perhaps.

"Now, you wouldn't think it," called the driver from his seat, playfully, "but he's the younger of the pair and don't believe his lies otherwise." He spoke with a baritone that befit his vessel, polished with a softness that betrayed a nervous temperament.

"Really, Abbie? Not ten minutes in town and you're tellin' such lies." His smile betrayed a trickster, a fox out a story book, the sly grin of a cardsharp and a hustler. No doubt the salesman of the two. "Could leave it to my distinguished, perspicacious personage to speak the truth but, nevertheless, I assure you I am the elder here."

Jubal knew enough to spot a rigged game and yet he couldn't help but ponder the riddle. They looked of an age yet so unlike that either could be to one side of mid- to late-thirties.

Jacob stepped toward them but stopped short before the disheveled steps

of the watch house. He splayed a “May I?” gesture with his hands. The corners of Hardy’s mustache traded peaks as he considered. Finally, he waved the man up. Jacob mounted the steps and joined them under the awning, throwing back his hood once he escaped the rain. He shook out his hair with his hands, combed it back with his fingers. His straw-colored locks formed gold-slick cables down the back of his head.

“Say you’re haulin’ people down south?” said the Sheriff.

The man reacted as though he’d just noticed them and removed his hands from his head and offered one to shake. Hardy took it, firm as a vice, his fingers stark white against the black leather of the man’s gloves.

“Aye, that is so, Sheriff,” said the man. “Not to trade, of course.” He held up his hands in mock surrender and chuckled. “That would be illegal, not to mention heinous unmoral, in this civilized North or ours.” Jubal could make out the fine stitching on the man’s gloves, black as the canvas hide of their wagon. He saw the cracks and peels across the thumbs, where leather stroked the hammer of a pistol, where heat and gunpowder stripped the base white. Jubal tightened his grip on the *lupara*. “No,” the man continued, “the folks we’ve taken aboard are servants of the Commonwealth.”

Hardy cocked his head.

“War widows mostly. Volunteered for the exhumation, preservation, and relocation of Solomn’s fallen sons still lyin’ on the wrong side a’ them mountains. The graves run deep, I hear, and we’ve too few hands to dig ‘em up—‘specially since the ‘Corde ain’t about to let your boys in uniform lend a hand. Perhaps some brothers from your little Wardwell still restin’ in Candine soil?”

Hardy thought a moment. “Pearson’s boy, maybe, and Time Stone. But as I understand it, the Concorde let us carve out those graves years ago.”

Jubal remembered the cavalrymen rolling into town. They carried pine boxes wrapped in Solomn Black and Purple, iron branded with a sandhill crane clutching a wreath of thorns.

“Not all,” said Jacob. “Corde opened up the western tracts along the

Lundeen River not afar the Battle of Hadleigh. Part a' some amnesty dealin's the Eastwicks cooked up."

Hardy glowered. "They were holdin' back corpses for—what? Tariff-free ginger and limestone what Wardwell ain't never gonna see in a god's age?"

Jacob shrugged. "Politics, Sheriff, not my business."

"And you boys volunteered for this, too, then?"

"No, sir, we'll be gettin' paid for our services. All due respect, a' course, but my brother and I are Maidenheaders by birth, though we've been travelin' the roads for more'n...oh, what?"

"Twenty years now," called Abel from his perch.

"Aye, that's right. More'n twenty years." A wistful chord struck his voice and Jubal marveled. Two decades without a home, roving the countries, up and down the Colossal coast. His eyes drifted to the wall at the edge of town; waist high, if that, but it may as well have been built to the sky for Jubal Hardy.

"Maidenheaders, eh?" said the Sheriff. His tone snapped Jubal's eyes back to the craggy man's face. "Y'all not," he twirled his fingers quizzically, "a bit afeared a what them ashcoats have done to your kin back home? Ashboys ain't know for hospitable conquest, as it were."

Jubal missed something, he knew. His knuckles seared with memory. Ms. Bracken rapping him with a switch. On the board, the map of northern Colosse, all the known territories, the Nationlands, the Dispute between, and the endless west but...That's right. The map was wrong. He told her so. General Knox had felled the magistrate of Roilune after a weeks long siege of Lagrange, making Roilune Concorde country. That precocious snit earned him a lash across the hand. Maidenhead fell to the Concorde five years ago, three years after Roilune. Except...

Now it was Jacob's turn to ponder the Sheriff quizzically.

"Oh! Of course. See, Abbie and I come from the western valleys up in the Iron Heights. What they been callin' West Maidenhead nowadays. Resilient lot, our kin. Even the 'Corde couldn't mow us down with all

creation's horses."

The Sheriff spat. The gob flew out into the downpour, vanished in the streaming wall.

"Your *kin*—" Hardy breathed sharply, and Jubal knew what was coming with sudden apprehension. "Them kin a' yours woulda been mowed down if not for the savages at their backs. Got no love for ashcoats, no, I don't, but I'd sooner stand my ground against ten hundred bayonets with naught but m'own pecker in my hand before I turn around and sell iron to those red-skinned mongrels."

Jacob held up his hands in surrender, with honesty this time. "Now, friend. I know how you feel. But...consider. Trampled by the 'Corde or entreat the Nations. Rock an' a hard place kinda thing, ain't it? Up in them hills, little good farmland for harvest much less slaves to tend fields. Naught but trees and rocks and iron. All we've known is survival, few know what it means to truly...*prosper*. A flood at our doorstep, we do what we must to survive, like anyone would, I imagine. We had more guns than hands to fill, so we looked for more hands. 'Cause that's what we needed to survive. Can't say I'd have done the same in their shoes but, then again, we been out the country for a lifetime. Don't agree with it—no, sir—but I won't blame them either."

Hardy glared at the man, a foxhound's snarl creasing his face. Air hissed out his nose and the anger softened. His brow unfurled, his normal crags returned.

"Gods," he said. "Thinkin' a' them bastards marchin' over the river, up *here*..." He rubbed at his chin. "I bluster about my ground and my pecker but...I'd be lyin' if I said I mightn't contemplate the same. Ashen coats or red skins. Rock an' a hard place kinda thing, aye." And like that the lethality vanished from his voice. "So what sorta goods y'all traffic in, then? Y'know, when you're not enterprisin' for the Commonwealth."

The man shrugged. "Textiles mostly." If the Sheriff's near meltdown shook the man, he showed naught for it, his boots firmly set, his hands

dancing as he talked. “Silks and cottons down south, hemp and pelts from up north. Sell one to the other and the other to the one, makes these round trips quite the venture. Or used to, anyway. Concorded buyers been gougin’ us of late. And so, we look to the Commonwealth and the Commonwealth provided.”

The Sheriff nodded. He wandered to the edge of the porch, inspected the muddied wheels and undercarriage as though they might divulge some secret payload. Abel busied himself un-flopping the brim of his hat to keep the rain from dribbling. He paid the Sheriff no mind.

Jubal sensed Jacob ruffle. Felt it on his spine. The same guileful smile decorated the man’s face but something in his stance, his posture, his shoulders perching up like the wing bones of a mountain lion. He met eyes with Jubal and the boy’s entrails quivered. *Don’t stare, y’ damn fool boy*, echoed the Sheriff’s words. The crook in the stranger’s smile bounced from one corner to the other.

“This your son here, goodman?”

Hardy twisted on his waist like a clock gear stuttering. His face full of offense though he knew not what to be offended by. His eyes dotted over the question as if to find some hidden meaning. “Aye,” he said. “Married his mother, didn’t I?”

Jubal squirmed, worms beneath his skin.

“Lovely young lad he is. What’s your name, goodson?”

Jubal swallowed but the snakes in his throat kept coiling. *Worms under skin. Snakes in his throat. Fingers at his heels. Don’t fidget, boy!*

“Ju—...Jubal Hardy, sir.”

“Jubal,” he echoed, his Maidenheader drawl lolling the vowels like sweets on the tongue. He held out his hand and Jubal gawked at it, a beartrap called civility in flesh and bone, his soul obliged to step within. The abrasion stretched down Jacob’s thumb, the mar in that black leather, stood out like a battle scar on a handmaid’s face. Jubal freed his hand from the rifle, abandoned the trigger, and shook the stranger’s hand. *A man should never be*

*unmade by manners*, said his father. Jacob's grip was firm and assuring. Friendly, even. A grip fit for delicate hands or hardened mitts. A salesman's grip.

"A pleasure, goodsir," said Jubal, transfixed in Jacob's steely gaze, the stranger's eyes a cold and icy blue.

"Lost his father to the war," said the Sheriff over his shoulder, focused on the gold linework across the wagon's back. His voice boomed over the rain with ease.

Jacob made a cooing sound and clasped Jubal's hands in both of his, warm yet constricting. "So sorry for your loss, son."

"Well," continued the Sheriff, "t'weren't the war what killed him, per se. War only took his leg. Rest of him we lost to the morphinism."

Jacob dropped Jubal's hand and folded his own over his heart. "A shame that. Terrible shame. What the poppy does to people." He shook his head slowly. "Lords and saints preserve."

Hardy shuttered the lantern and walked back under the awning. "Ever trade in opium, Mr. DuQuesne?" He focused in on Jacob, hawkish.

"Never, sir." His fox grin leered. "Not that we're so virtuous, mind. Opium's quite the premium—so near to wartime an' all—so most of it goes by ship. Silk mills usually have bolts to spare for smalltime like us, can only fit so much in our humble abode-on-wheels here. Poppy, though, that girl only travels fancy."

Hardy nodded, disinterested, then jerked his head toward the wagon. "Mind if I meet these 'volunteers' a' yours?"

"Course not, sir," said Jacob gaily. He pinched the lip of his hood as though tipping a hat. "I'm sure they'll be most grateful to set eyes on some handsome faces what ain't our awful mugs." He threw a thumb toward Abel and the driver batted the insult out the air with his hat. Jacob opened his arms invitingly, gestured *follow me* and, together, he and Hardy stepped out into the rain. The Sheriff opened the lantern and a white cone illuminated their path. Jacob's shadow stretched out long before them, a specter roving out the shadows. Jubal sank on his heels, fingers aching around the *lupara* in



his hands. He knew better than to move without orders, but the Sheriff's voice would be shot through with fire when he inevitably called his name to follow. Damned in the do. Damned in the don't.

"Lovely town y'all have here."

Jubal flinched. He'd forgotten about the driver. He leaned out of the awning to meet the man's face. Abel beamed down from the driver's seat, reins still in hand, hat back atop his head still dribbling off one side. In the light of the wagon's lantern, his smile shone bright even through the mask of hair dangling down his chest.

"Thank you, goodsir."

"Seems a quiet place," said the driver.

"Aye," said Jubal. He rolled the rifle about his hands to find the least threatening posture, realized too late there was none, so cradled it in the crook of his arm the way he'd seen the Sheriff do.

"Timber country, aye? You make the logs what others use to make their homes? Ain't that a thing?"

"Lumbermen do, aye. Make the logs, I mean; cut 'em down, bundle 'em up, float 'em down the river. When all's done, they load 'em on a ship and the men ride up to Wardwell. They stay a spell before headin' back to camp. Can't rightly say they *live* here, so I can't rightly say we *make* the logs. Least that's my estimation."

"Well, ain't that a thing," said Abel, "livin' in cycles like that. Round and round. Up, down, and back up again. Then again, that's not to far from what Jacob and I do year to year. Just got us a bigger wheel, eh?" He chuckled low in his throat and Jubal couldn't help but smile a bit at the man. Unlike his brother, he radiated an earnestness that crueller men would use to mark a fool. "Fell any trees yourself?"

"No, sir. Like I was sayin', town here, well—we don't make *timber*. We make charcoal. Trees round here ain't good for much but burnin', so...we do just that. When I'm not workin' with the—with my Pa, I work buildin' the mounds, dig out the coal when its ready, and the alderman sells it off to

the folk downriver.”

“Well, ain’t that a thing, too.” The man chuckled, and Jubal felt the echoes of it bouncing in his own chest. Warmth bloomed there. “People need good coal. ‘Specially now. Rains this cold in autumn? Winter?” He hooted. “Gonna be a thing, I tell you what.”

“Aye,” said Jubal, a grin tugging at his lips. “My father...my birth father, before he married my Ma, he worked the timbers. But after I was born he turned to woodworkin’, carpentry or...what passed for it, I guess. My Ma always said he’d never been too good with delicate work, y’know. So many years poundin’ an axe, musta busted somethin’ in his hands. Made ‘em fidgety. Could grip a handle like a vice but,” he made delicate carving motions with his free hand, “tracery and filigree and whatnot other fancy workin’s eluded him. Could make a damn sturdy barrel, though.” He remembered sanding down a table with his father, how the old man smiled at his fretting, the surface never too smooth or level Jubal’s eyes. “But...then came the war and...that took his leg and then, well—”

“Jubal!” cried the Sheriff. The boy flinched. Couldn’t help it. “Come ‘ere, boy!”

Jubal gave the driver an awkward nod, Abel tipped his hat in kind—his smile held a warmth Jubal loathed to leave behind. He whirled his cloak about his shoulders, the weight like a dead animal around his neck, sodden and vengeful. He descended the ark and followed the voice to the back of the wagon.

The cold and rain bit into him. Trails down his shirt found the curve of his spine and pricked a needle on every nerve. He rounded the wagon and the Sheriff nearly blared the lantern straight in the boy’s face. Jubal nearly shrieked but swallowed the impulse. His hand caught the worst of it and only white ghosts lingered on his eyes for a second’s time.

“Take this, boy,” Hardy barked, held out the lantern for the boy. Jubal obliged, balanced the shotgun on his should and took the lantern in his left. He let the handle run down his arm and perch in his elbow. The flame filled

the ground with scorching white, shadows flew up their faces like a ghost story campfire. Jacob leaned against the wagon, casual as any taproom cardsharp despite the downpour sloughed over him.

The back of the wagon stood open, the canvas drape roped to either side, a lamp hung from the cab's ceiling, an orange paraffin flame. Inside, near a dozen sleep sodden faces lolled awake and greeted Jubal with bleary eyes. Jubal seized up at the sight of three black faces among the lot.

An old woman craggy like an oak with eyes deep set like ancient, storm-carved caves, skin black as tar. A woman full grown, but only newly so—maybe five years Jubal's senior—her skin dark though not the pitch of the old woman's hide. And a young girl not ten years old, her hair in twin braided buns atop her head. She was palest of the three though still a rich shade of brown. *Wonder if they darken with age*, said a voice in Jubal's head. His grandmother cackled in the back of his skull. Clicking her needles.

The three huddled in the back corner of the cab, the small girl in the young woman's lap, the other girls keeping their distance even in the tiny space.

The rest seemed a normal, though mottled, bunch, save one. A gaunt and gangly woman sat in the middle of the floor. Everyone else kept their head near a wall but she seemed content among the others' feet, no doubt victim to the nightly kicks and fidgets of her companions. Bright shocks of red and orange streamed through her tangled hair, a dark shade of auburn at their roots. The sides of her head had been shaved and an inch of growth matched the length of her auburn roots. Threads of lambent orange obscured her face though Jubal could still make out the heavy bags beneath her eyes and the curled mix of annoyance and confusion contorting her face. She may have been young—youngest of the lot except for the colored child and her caretaker—yet had no mind to maintain her youthful gifts. While the rest of the women fidgeted and mussed about—flitting their hair, brushing the sleep from their eyes, smoothing their cheeks of dirt, resisting the urge to scratch and twitch as if they weren't riddled with fleas. This woman glared out at

Jubal and Sheriff Hardy, motionless save her slow, tempered breaths, as if they'd disturbed a relaxed day's nap. Jubal had never seen a woman of her like in all his life.

"And who is this?" said a voice from inside the cab but Jubal didn't see who spoke.

She was hidden by the drapes, nestled in the rear corner of the cab, and as she leaned into the cone of light, Jubal watched as her raven black locks tumbled down her shoulders in waves. Black velvet waves. "Evening, young sir," she said. Jubal seized up again, though not in fear. Again, he was greeted by the gaze of a woman whose like he'd never glimpsed before.

The Sheriff swatted the back of his head. "Boy, you address a lady when she speaks to you."

"Aye, sir, sorry," he blubbered. "Jubal, madam. Jubal Hardy."

"Iscah St. Tryphine, young goodman Hardy. A pleasure."

She appeared perfectly kempt and pristine as though ready to attend a Belle Dame soiree. Her porcelain skin seemed to glow in the glow. Her hair shimmered, waves of silken oil caught in ever cresting waves.

"The goodlady Tryphine has a letter for us," said the Sheriff, condescension dripping off his words. Jubal realized why he'd been summoned and anger bristled on his neck. *Letters. Of course.*

"Forgiveness, but that's *Saint* Tryphine, goodsir, if it's not too much a bother."

The Sheriff shut his eyes so she wouldn't see them rolling. He sucked air through his teeth. "Pardon my effrontery," he said. "*Saint* Tryphine, milady. The letter, if you please."

She began rummaging through her coat pockets. "Pardon my impertinence, Sheriff, but my mother labored years securing and validating our family's Tryphinean lineage. Plenty take the Saint for a name but only *we* St. Tryphines share blood with Prince Treveur and thereby his mother, the Saint herself. With the Old World lost, so too went our holdings in the Old Country. Now we have not but paper to prove our heritage."

“Truly a travesty,” said Jacob dryly and the Sheriff huffed a laugh in his throat.

The lady side-eyed Jacob but a smile quirked a corner of her pink lips.

“Jubal dear, I was just telling your father what a grievous wrong the DuQuesnes do your township. They neglect you. Treat you like some common backwater, like you haven’t coin for secondhand silks.”

The Sheriff puffed his mustache at that. “And as I said, we ain’t hurtin’ for silks in Wardwell, thank you, madam. My mother’s homespun and leather tanned by our own hands has done us fine for nigh three centuries now, no reason I can see for that to change. Now, if you please, ma’am—”

“Yes, of course!” The woman’s hand vanished as she rustled through her layers and into her coat. Jubal’s fingers tightened. He felt the flush on his cheeks burning overtop the blood rush brought on by the chill. Women easily flustered him, nothing new about that. But this woman—this lot—something seemed amiss about, something...smelled...He heard so many say “they smelled of hex and damnation” but never understood the phrase. What do magic and godly judgment *smell* like? But now sensed something of the like. Something in his nose burning away the hairs, bristling his sinuses, stuffing his head. Something ungodly and wicked.

The woman pulled a folded letter from her breast pocket, a black envelope bound with a purple ribbon. She offered it to the Sheriff with an officious tilt of the hand as though serving a summons from court.

“Here, goodsir. May it put your mind at ease. A writ from Governess Deliverance Eastwick.”

The Sheriff leaned into the cab over the tailgate, wiping his gloves on a blanket so as not to wet the paper. Jubal watched as Hardy took the envelope, unslipped the ribbon and unfolded the letter, unable to shake the feeling that the man was sticking his head in a massive mousetrap. It appeared to be as the woman described: a writ from Governor Eastwick’s office (signed by the Governess, of course, given Cotton Eastwick’s ailing health). Tight, neat calligraphed script covered the page, concluded with a

wax seal punched with the crane and thorns. Jubal couldn't make out the body of the writ but halfway down the paragraphs broke for a list of names, a list of those authorized to cross Fort Ramage over the Karkosa Mountains and into Candine, now Concorde protectorate (so long as the armistice holds). He could make out Jacob and Abel Duquesne's names at the top and St. Tryphine's below, the "S" in "St." particularly flourished. The Sheriff studied the letter with the same level of detached authority he wore to bed and adorned come morning.

"Goodmen Jacob and Abel DuQuesne," intoned the Sheriff as he reached the list of names. "The goodlady St. Tryphine." He leaned on the *saint* in her name and the woman brushed the back of her hand across her cheek in feigned indignity. "Cassia Drummen?"

A woman propped against the wall of the cab lifted her head and met the Sheriff's gaze. "Aye, sir," she said. A mat of auburn hair hung just below her jawline. Freckles crossed the bridge of her nose while red wine stains blotched her cheeks.

Hardy eyed her a moment and Jubal expected the woman to freeze reflexively like a deer at snapping twigs, but she only matched his gaze. No defiance or rebellion in her stare, only recognition, as if this sort of exam had become routine to her. Finally, the Sheriff nodded.

"Johanna DuVall?"

A woman with severe black hair the quality of frayed horse hair spoke up. Her skin was pale as St. Tryphine's though something in it seemed sicklier and the bags under her eyes hung lower and darker than the rest of the lot.

"Evelyn Hess?"

A broad woman with flaxen hair and sun baked skin spoke to that name. The trenches carved into her brow and cheeks spoke of long hours of field work. Jubal saw their like on many a face that wandered through town looking for drink or sup or simple conversation.

"Laurel Smithen?"

A miniscule creature hiccupped at that name. "A-aye, g-goodsir," she

choked. Of all of them, she wore her anxiety most openly, pinching her fingers, shoulders quaking. But her shakes reminded Jubal of his Aunt Charlene's small terrier. The poor thing quivered no matter the weather. Cold or heat. As if tremors were a natural state.

"Priscilla Quaite?"

"Aye," said a tall, shear figure slotted into one corner of the cab, a long neck mounted by a head quite recently trimmed, her hair only a few inches long. A shade of black that seemed almost blue like the coat of a shepherd dog, run through with gray, blended seamlessly into the black. Her hand clutched her quilt about her shoulders, fingernails black over yellowed fingers, raw like burns from alien fire, her knuckles and wrists wrapped in grayed cloth bandages.

*Hex*, thought Jubal at the sight. Something on those fingernails spoke *hex* to him though he could hardly form a sensible line of reasoning in his mind. Accusations cannot be made lightly, he remembered, and swallowed the words forming in his throat. Snakes still coiling there.

"Veronica Dahle?"

"Aye," said the woman with the fire-colored hair. Her chin planted on the heel of her hand, fingers rubbed at the skin beneath her eye—eyes hollow, emptied by boredom. Her head bobbed from side to side at the edge of sleep. Hardy glared at her, but she gave him no recognition like the others. When she finally noticed him staring, she cocked her eyebrow queerly as though he were the one out of sorts here. She glared back, a spark lighting in the back of her eyes. A green caught yellowing in autumn's grasp. A dry green. Fit for kindling.

Jacob coughed into his fist. "Circus performer, our deary Dahle," he said. "Juggler, fire eater, bit of a dancer, and...many other tricks, I assume. Always a bit odd, their lot. Carnies, you know."

Hardy would not turn his head, would not break his gaze with the queer woman in the middle of the cab, rainwater dripping off the corners of his mustache like foam building in the corners of a mad dog's mouth. At last,

he nodded and returned to the list. The fire-haired woman lolled her head onto her palm and immediately fell into a snooze.

“Dam—” The Sheriff focused in on the list of names. “Dami—” He pinched the corners of the page as though that would bring the letters into focus. He reeled on Jubal. “Boy,” he hissed, motioning Jubal forward to read the name for him. Jubal shuffled forward under the eave of the wagon, brushing back his hair so as not to drip over the paper.

He read the name in its tight little script. “Damiane Halle?”

“Goodsirs,” said the young negress, bowing her head to hide her eyes. She had none of Solomn’s lilt in her voice and Jubal could not place her accent. Something akin to Madam St. Tryphine’s punctuated enunciations but seemingly stripped of elegance and class. Maybe this one served as St. Tryphine’s housemaid?

The Sheriff ribbed Jubal and the boy’s eyes fumbled back to the writ. “Agathe DuCante?”

“Sirs,” said the elderly negress, bowing as well. This one bubbled in Gwynnsfall twang. If the two were mother and daughter, the younger clearly matured much closer to Sommer See.

“Athaliah Barnes?”

“Tali, please,” said the child negress. Halle swatted the girl’s cheek hard enough to draw tears, her face a mask of subdued panic. Her eyes seared into the girl, saying, *We do not speak to our betters thus*. The girl rubbed the sore spot across her cheek, eyes watering, though she did not flow her tears or cry.

“Tali,” said the Sheriff, as though witness to something remarkable. He looked to Jacob. “The Governess sending children to unbury our dead, too?”

“She’s Damiane’s niece,” said Jacob. “Damiane’s the only family she has left now, her father dead across the mountains. Afraid she had no choice but to bring the child.”

Hardy examined the man, as though another layer had been carved from this onion, exposing the rot. He examined the negresses, too. The three kept their heads bowed respectfully, eyes averted, Damiane’s nails digging into



Tali's shoulder.

Jubal felt a sickness in his stomach. A burning in his nose. Something was amiss. Oh, yes. Quite amiss. Hardy and Jacob would not break eyes now. Both their postures changed. Hardy gripped his belt with one hand, the other on the tailgate, letter still between his fingertips, while Jacob leaned against the wagon. But now one arm stood akimbo on his hip, his hand hidden by his cloak. The snakes in Jubal's throat squeezed his windpipe closed. He couldn't breathe. The man's hand hovered above where his iron must rest. Jubal stood petrified, gripping a shotgun with frozen hands. He knew he couldn't draw on the man fast enough. A familiar coldness coated the man's eyes—a placidity, behind the fox grin and the huckster smirk. Jubal saw it on the rangers that passed through town, on the guards other merchants hired for protection, on the merchants themselves who could not afford such luxuries, on the soldiers who came home—on his father. An unfeeling glaze that settled over a man's eyes after he killed enough people.

The girls in the cab had gone silent, holding their breaths to a one—except the fire-haired woman who...snored? Was she honestly snoring?

Jubal looked to Sheriff Hardy, his stepfather, his mentor and master since the day his mother married him. He'd never seen the Sheriff draw his gun—heard tell of it, sure, but never seen it for himself—and wondered if now would be the first. The thought drowned the knot in his stomach with hot tar, it sluiced down his colon as the rain pounded all of them.

The stranger clicked his tongue through the corner of his grin.

Hardy coughed. "My apologies," he said. "It's good work you gentlewomen have set yourselves to."

He folded the letter and handed it back to Madam St. Tryphine.

"On behalf of Wardwell, I wish you all the best."

Jubal felt the world deflate, as though some plug had been released at the heart of the earth.

"If y'all care to ride out this storm, the Billhook Inn has a stable that'll accommodate. It's just down this road here and corner a' Main Street just

down yonder. Only got the two roads, so you'd have to try to miss it. Don't know about rooms, but I'm certain y'all can work some arrangement with the innkeep, Cammy Mercer. Tell her I gave you my regards an' she'll do right by ya."

Jacob hadn't moved, his grin never wavered.

"Thank you kindly, Sheriff," he said. "We sure do appreciate that kindness. So hard to find in these drownin' days." He showed them his teeth and again, yellow and sharp, mimed a tip of the hat.

The Sheriff grunted and took Jubal by the shoulder.

They watched from beneath the awning as the wagon pulled away, Hardy back in his seat, reigniting his pipe, Jubal still standing, hands rooted around the polished wood of the gun as if they were a solid piece, a clever sculpture of flesh and wood. The wagon faded from the lantern light and soon escaped into darkness. Bile and tar still coursed through him, feeling like some great slug trailing slime through his pit, a cousin to the snakes twisting round his throat and the worms beneath his skin, wriggling through his innards until he could stand no more.

"Sheriff," he said, whirling on the man. "Father, wh—why you lettin' them leave like this? They...they have the hex on them thick as this rain. I smell it. They's witches in that wagon."

Hardy stared at the boy, eyes stony cold, his hand poised over the bowl of his pipe, the flame of the match very near his fingers. "Maybe," he said. The man shrugged.

*Maybe!?* Jubal's hands at last uncurled and he slammed the butt of the gun against the railing. "We just...we just gonna let them go?"

The Sheriff looked beyond the boy then, beyond the edge of town. "Ended up in that tree there," he said.

Jubal's thoughts dipped off their track. "Wh—Sorry, what...?"

"Back in '31. When the dam broke. Flood crashed down on us, swept us away. Like a wall a' white fire it looked. Lyle and Ness wound up dead. Lyle smashed his brains out against a timber stack. Ness...they found Ness a

week or two, later, bloated and gone to rot in a field beneath the sun. Drowned.” He took a long drag on his pipe. “Pocket knife with his initials scribbled on it was the only way they knew him from the others. Me, I ended up that tree there.” He pointed. Jubal saw the large, twisted cherry tree a few dozen yards past the wall surrounding town. The lash of distant lightning illuminated its leafless, clawing branches. “Don’t ‘member grabbin’ a branch an’ scrabblin’ up. Maybe Ol’ Kath herself plucked me from the drink and set me there. Simply cannot say. Either way, I didn’t drown that day, boy.”

Jubal watched the tree, its afterimage dancing in the back of his eyes, an outline in the dim blackness beyond the watch house.

“So, we just let them pass?” The question surprised Jubal himself as he felt it escape his lips. “We take so many, one by one, but we let that...let an entire coven pass? What would Old Kath think of that? If we just...let a whole clan of hexed and wicked hags go?”

Hardy deflated, his shoulders slumping into his chair, cradling the pipe with one hand.

“Boy,” he shook his head, pushed his hat off his brow and raked his thinning hair, “I thought you’d figured by now. Ain’t no halfwit you but always—whatsit...*naive*.”

A sudden hollowness filled Jubal—the snakes, the slugs, the worms, all gone—and suddenly he was a boy again looking up at his father, looked down upon with half-lidded, disappointed eyes, a boy, *his age*, still believing the Yulebride leaves presents at Yuletide.

Sheriff Hardy stood, regarded his pipe a moment, reached a decision he kept to himself. He upturned the bowl and tapped out the pipe on the railing. Embers tumbled into the rain.

“Come along, boy. Said your mother had a stew ready for us, aye?”