

A HOUSE OF COLD IRON

by

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HAUNTED DEEP

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CHAPTER FIVE
HANG THE JURY

Veronica had seen worse as taverns go. Rotting marsh sheds tapping corn swill from rusting bath basins. Dusty, plank-roofed trenchworks on the edge of lost Bastilla, salvaged cannonballs slotted into adobe walls, names of the dead scrawled into black iron hides—they served agave wine in shotgun shells and patrons shouted toasts in Fortezol as often as Arauner. And half the pubs beneath the Belle Dame’s petticoats, slant-walled shacks a stiff breeze could topple into the great green deep of the Sommer See—there, barmaids served homebrewed sour beers under the shouts of bookies taking numbers, taproom chocking on brine and cigar smoke. But damned if she had ever seen a place so glum, so...melancholic. Less than a dozen people filled a space that could easily accommodate half a hundred on a slow day. Loggers, mostly, by the look of them. Burly, thick-limbed men, stout of body but long in the legs and arms, faces hatcheted from wood, socketed eyes locked with the abyss at the bottom of their mugs. As bound by unwritten code, a beard coated every face in various states from kempt and oiled to rat infested snarls. They scarcely seemed to notice the arrival of four strangers, their minds deep in their cups, and this brought Veronica some ease.

The only womenfolk in the room were the innkeep behind the bar—Camille Mercer, so the sheriff said—a barmaid polishing glasses all in a row, stricken with boredom, and a girl around little Athaliah’s age perched on the

edge of a corner table. She bowed a well-worn fiddle while a man—her father, she presumed, *hoped*—sat slumped in a heap beside her, lightly snoring. She played a slow, folksy tune, mournful and soft—perhaps inelegantly but for all Veronica knew, the warbled notes and squeal of the strings were part of the charm. She imagined the song told a story: a dying soldier mourning his buried wife atop his dying horse while his dog awaited him at home (the dog, of course, also dead).

Jacob rapped her on the shoulder and gestured toward an empty table in the back. “There,” he said. “I’ll see to our drinks.” And with that, the man strutted off toward the bar. He’d fetched his coat before they left the stable, a knee-length gray-blue affair with black cuffs and collar, silver buttons adorning his wrists, tails flared out behind him like a peacock in repose, swishing with his gait. He wore black breeches and a black waistcoat over a simple gray shirt complimented by a black silk cravat about his neck. Opposite the innkeep in her reserved gray blouse and brown apron, he looked a proper dandy. He tipped the short-crowned top hat adorning his scalp and the innkeep threw the towel she’d been polishing the bar with over her shoulder and regarded the man with a queer expression.

Veronica turned to Iscah who gazed into the frozen black eyes of a trophy buck, head mounted on the wall, antlers too tall and broad to be believed, the woman resplendent in her black silks and raven feathers.

She tapped Iscah on the elbow. “Shall we?” she said. The woman looked at her, indigo eyes bottomless wells of indifference. She nodded.

More trophies stared down from the walls as they walked: dead-eyed elk and caribou; whole beavers mounted on logs posed like dolls, trapped in the moment before the bullet found its heart; a lonesome brown bear stood upright, a perplexed expression frozen on its face; a pair of mountain cats baring their fangs at one another, claws raised in mortal combat.

The tables were slabs of ancient redwood, cross-sectioned, about four feet in diameter, rings within rings spanning decades, circled by four cobbled chairs. Veronica ran her hand across the surface, unvarnished and coarse but

sanded smooth, at least. Iscah sat, her arms hugging her chest, a hand clasped over each elbow, her back straight as a board, chin always dipped. Veronica slumped over the table, resting her chin on her palm.

A lamp sat at the center of the table, its base bored into the wood, black radial scars burned into the tabletop, tales of old scuffles, shattered glass, and spilt oil scoured into the wood. Veronica chewed her thumb nail, resisting the urge to hold her hand over the glass cylinder with its blackened rim, feel the heat and the lick of flame under her palm. Her hand twitched at the idea, so she crushed it with the other like some skittering bug.

Jacob returned holding a tray with three mugs and a clay jug.

“No luck for whiskey?” said Veronica.

A laugh bounced in the man’s throat as he passed them each a cup. “Oh, plenty of luck. Comes with no label and a drop what fell on the bar stripped the varnish clean off. Figured you ladies would prefer somethin’ a bit more...delicate.”

Veronica cooed sarcastically. “Ever the gentleman, you.”

He uncorked the jug and poured them each a glass of dark brown ale. The smell was nutty, the tasted surprisingly sweet to Veronica’s palate—someone about town knew a thing about brewing, at least. They drank for long speechless moments, the warbling notes of the fiddle girl twirling in the air. Iscah held her cup at her fingertips, turned it slowly on its base like a scrying stone catching the light—she didn’t take so much as a sip. Jacob sighed and leaned back in his chair, balanced on its back legs, he pulled the brim of his hat over his eyes and cradled his mug in his hands. Veronica had done nothing but sleep for the past day and a half, yet she felt enormously tired. Maybe the abyss was claiming them more and more, pulling them deeper into the great black deep at the heart of the world where the wheels don’t turn and there are no dreams. Only the void.

She downed her cup and poured another. She tapped Jacob’s boot with the toe of her own. When he lifted the brim of his hat with a finger, his green eyes burning at her, fuse still running short, she rubbed her thumb and

forefinger together and smiled coyly. Jacob's lips pursed, then he clucked his tongue.

"Why not?" he said and fell forward, chair rattling the floorboards as he landed.

He drew a deck of divination cards from a pouch on the back of his belt where most might keep a dagger. Seventy-two cards made for a bulky deck, but Jacob shuffled them nimbly, cutting, quartering, arching quarters back into halves back into a whole. The cards danced across his fingers. He could build arches and parapets between his palms, build a pyramid that collapsed into a cradle then back into a simple deck of cards. The girls had marveled at it, laughed, and Jacob smiled, too, not that fox grin that showed too much teeth but a genuine grin of a goon who learned a few card tricks. They'd wiled away days and days on game after game. Veronica wrinkled her nose at the nostalgia glazing her eyes. *Who feels nostalgic for three weeks ago?* The feeling weighed heavy on her lids nonetheless. When had they grown tired of those games? When was the last they'd played? Walpurga? No, before. Walpurga would have been enough to kill the joy in them but it had ended days before then.

Jacob dealt their hands, seven cards for each. Veronica cupped hers in hand, fanned them over her fingers, arranged, then rearranged. The edges of the cardstock bit into her fingers, so thick and strong. She'd drawn two trumps: a painterly vision of the Hollow Sky, so vast and purple-black, shown up at her from one card while a shadowed silhouette of a great Herne nestled in her palm, antlers splinter-sharp against a backdrop of mist-shrouded trees, its eye a single touch of red. An exquisite set of cards. Veronica wondered why Jacob wasted them on idle play. She shuffled her hand again, then fanned them out once more.

"So how dead are we this time?" she said without looking up from her cards.

"We'll be out of here come mornin'," said Jacob without pause, voice as sure as a crownstone. His eyes never left his cards either.

“Will we?” said Iscah.

That tore Jacob from his hand. The two stared at each other, a silence between them thick as a fog, Jacob glaring at her like a drunken friend about to spill all his secrets before the whole party. Of course, these two had never been friendly, as far as Veronica knew. Yet he deferred to her, valued every word she whispered in his ear. (The memory burned on Veronica’s brow again—Jacob and his pistol, Iscah at his ear, mud cool on her knees, tears burning on her face—and she fought the urge to scratch it away.) Whispered questions answered most often with a simple nod or shake of the head.

“You can say that even now?” she continued. “After what you saw on the road?”

Jacob clapped a card down on the tabletop—never mind they hadn’t drawn to establish turns yet. The sharp crack of it filled the room and Veronica caught herself peeking out the corners of her eyes for nearby faces, drawn by the sound—suspicious, wary. She found none. Only hard men still lost in their cups.

The Bantam King glared up at them from the table, a mighty fowl the size of a stallion, resplendent in its technicolor plumage, scales trailing up the underside of its neck where feathers thinned, its beak hook-sharp like a hawk’s, stained with blood, its talons buried in the corpse of a destrier. It cried up into a twilight sky, heralding the looming night.

Jacob shrugged as he reached for Veronica’s hand. “Half a hundred girls on wheels. Not the most common sight, I’ll grant you, but nowadays...” His fingers hovered over Veronica’s cards like a thief searching out the most precious jewel in the trove. She could have guarded but only had a pair of threes worth protecting. He stared into her eyes, reading them.

Without breaking his gaze, she said, “Not so much the sight as the *multitude* that bothers us,” she nodded at Iscah, “if I might speak on your behalf, milady.”

Iscah’s head lolled to one side, as if she hadn’t heard. She fanned her cards as if to shuffle them but closed them back up a moment later.

“Where do you imagine they found so many girls, Jakey? Town can’t be more than, what? Two? Three-hundred people thick?”

He plucked the Three of Bones from her hand and added it to his own. The Three of Bones. Of course. The Bantam King vanished into Jacob’s upturned hat.

“Fugitives, most likely,” he said, “or so I imagine. You know, girls from up north fleein’ south out the grasp of the manglers and the hunt. Probably concocted some cockamamie excuse for crossin’ the border like—hell, visitin’ kin down south, goin’ on mission, whatnot. Girls with too little sense and too many questions rattlin’ around their damn heads who just will not, won’t not, listen to a man when he tells them what his name is and is not.”

Veronica drew a new card from the deck and smirked at the man. “Sorry, was that a stupid question, *Jakey?*” She held the King of Stones, a plated Aurvander royal stared up at her with a single ornate eye. Now she had a pair of kings. A fine trade.

Jacob opened his mouth to snap at her but Iscah cut him off.

“More likely local girls.” Her cards were face down on the table. She traced the floral print on the back of one card with a finger. “It starts slow, at first, one or two accusations, an affair or squabble fallen out of control, emotions so high murder seems paltry. Most see it as such a casual threat. Harmless, really. Just passing words in anger. Few likely realize their enormity until they see their former friends and lovers strung up and burning.”

Silence filled the space between them once more, bowed notes circling the air around them, mournful cries unheard. Veronica shrugged and player her turn, laid down the Herne, the Eighth Arcanum, its red eye practically glowing against the black of the beast’s silhouette. She could retribute Jacob, chance retrieving her Three of Bones—retribution would make her seem desperate, make him think she has nothing left—but the man was too clever with cards, not easy to goad in the directions she wanted him treading, so she reached for Iscah’s hand instead.

“A field full of wheels,” said Jacob, more to himself than the two ladies, his gaze drawn into his cup, unfocused and hazy as the ale swimming within. “Ladies spread out like flowers--a whole damn bed of ‘em. Gods...”

Saints and lords, she sang in her head as if completing Jacob’s thought. Veronica felt a tension in her shoulders ease though she hadn’t known she’d been carrying it. *Since when is he so miserable?* “I’m sure you’ve seen worse,” she said. “All the stories you tell, a few dead ladies should be less than nothing. Ships on fire. Cannons turning men to mist before your eyes.” Veronica plucked a card from Iscah’s hand and the woman let it go without a guard. She came away with another Arcana—the Soothsayer, the Seventh Arcanum, her eyes closed, head tilted up, long black hair flowing like waterfalls down her shoulders, a cracked scrying mirror in her hands. One trump for another and a weaker one, at that. She bit the inside of her cheek to keep from grimacing as Iscah drew a new card to complete her hand.

“That’s war,” said Jacob. “It’s senseless, cruel, sure, but...” He tapped his cards on the edge of the table as he searched out the words, straw-blond locks swinging on his brow. “There’s a special kind of cruelty, I think...killin’ your neighbors. Soldiers ain’t got faces, ain’t got histories; they’s just machines, same as you, comin’ at one another, both ready to kill, and both ready to die.” He shook his head. “Hated most the folk I grew up around but...I’d never condemn a one of ‘em to the wheel.” He shook his head and sipped from his tankard.

“It put the fear in Abel, too,” said Iscah.

Jacob flinched, dribbling ale down his chin as Iscah laid down the Scales, Fourteenth Arcanum. “A mighty stupor seemed to consume him, from what I heard; fortunately, you were there to talk him down.” She reached for Veronica’s cards.

So, you’re both against me, she thought, only half-listening to whatever argument was blossoming between her two opponents. She played the Hollowed Sky, Twenty-First Arcanum, highest trump in the deck, and Iscah pulled her hand away. They discarded their trumps, and each drew a new

card from the deck while Jacob dabbed his chin with his sleeve, color blooming anew on his cheeks. The man slipped in and out of anger like some people slipped out of socks.

“Abel is...has *always* been...a sweet soul, who sometimes worries a bit too much for poor wretches in need. The wretches, here, bein’ you lot, to be clear.” He passed his turn with a wave of the hand. “He worries himself near to death over you hexy coozes and—well, I don’t have to tell you how much I’m sick of it.” He emptied his cup in one large gulp and poured himself another. “If this fool’s errand takes his life in the end, be assured I’ll see you all drown with him. I’ll see the whole world drown...” His last statement descended into a mutter behind another plug of ale.

“Well,” said Veronica, unperturbed by yet another threat on her life, “don’t know if I can speak for all the girls, but I’m sure the lot of us wretches don’t want a hair’s worth of harm to befall your dear brother’s head.” She laid down the Soothsayer. “Mostly because we like him well more than we like you.”

Jacob smirked despite himself and Veronica smiled in return. He offered no guard, so she snatched a card from his hand. The Wanderer. Value zero. The fool’s card. She hissed under her breath and discarded her entire hand into Jacob’s hat, the smug bastard staring her in the face all the while. She drew a new hand. Nothing. No kings. No pages. No trips. Not even a pair.

“Anyway,” she continued, grumpily, “the sheriff. What do you make of him? Any worries?”

“Nah,” said Jacob. “Clear enough he wants no trouble from us. No doubt most of those girls out in the field are no witches, just townies with bad luck or on the wrong side of a grudge.” He shot Iscah a look. “And he ain’t the one puttin’ innocents to the wheel. Just willin’ to stand by while the mob has their lynch and make sure no drunks hurt themselves in the aftermath. Y’know. A real proper *lawman*. So long as we avoid the local vicar or his friends, we’re golden.”

Iscah played her turn, trading a trump for a card from Jacob's hand who let it go without resistance, drawing a new card off the deck.

"Any zealous eyes on us now, y'think?" said Veronica.

"Drinking alone on a rained-out afternoon? Not likely." Jacob eyed Iscah who gazed into her cup as if reading the tea leaves. "Anything to say on the matter, Madam St. Tryphine?" A note of posh entered his voice whenever he intoned her name in full.

The woman looked up at Jacob with raised brows, as though she'd forgotten she were part of their conversation. She closed her eyes and lowered her chin as though falling into a dream. "We escape this town by miracle or providence," she said, coolly. "By which god's hand I can scarcely say, but we will need a miracle, I think."

"The only god there was is dead in the sea," Jacob muttered, mostly to himself. He played the Fifth Arcanum, the Ancestor, and took a card from Veronica's hand again. He traded one trump for another, the Fourth Arcanum, the Maelstrom, and Veronica grinned when he saw the card and realized he'd gained nothing.

"Regardless," said Iscah, "for these woodland folk—so far from civilization proper, when your trade relies so much on the fickle tides of the season—devotion is all they have. Solomn does not reward their service with the coin they deserve, so far away, so in need of oil, cloth, and steel, they can hardly haggle themselves out of mediocrity."

Veronica rolled her eyes and played her turn. Her last trump, the Deer Woman, third in rank. Iscah laid down her guard the moment Veronica reached for her hand: The Journey, value thirteen. Veronica huffed.

"City girl," she said, keeping a snarl hid under her tongue, "what would you know of small folk?"

"I wasn't always a city girl, Ms. Dahle," Iscah replied, a waggish hint in her tone. "I was raised a Quiver in a fishing village up north."

Veronica nearly dropped her cards. "Quiverfolk, huh? Whalers?"

She shook her head, black locks tumbling.

Thought your lot had a strangle on the whaling business, thought Veronica but she kept her lips sealed. “From fisher’s daughter to Belle Dame gentry-woman—well, aren’t you a tale in furs, hmm?”

“And there’s the war across the mountains,” Iscah continued, unabated by the interlude. “A war that will inevitably cross them any day, any week, any month now. Here they sit, no militia of their own, their best sons either dead or made blood simple from the shock of the last war—useless. So, they turn to other voices when the state will not provide. If the governess will not give them wealth enough to survive, Bel may answer. If the state will not send aid when Fort Ramage falls, Bel may guide the ashen armies west and away. If the ‘Corde spreads east, finds their town alone in the sleeping woods, Bel will be their only source of strength. Bel will be all they have to defend themselves when pistols and pitchforks won’t hold back the Ashcoats. But how does one bargain with god? What could Bel desire? What does the dragon crave? Devotion. Devotion in fire. Devotion in flesh.”

“Sacrifices,” said Veronica. “Blood sacrifices. We know. Jake and I served our sabbath’s eve schooling same as you.” She hissed a laugh. “Blood sacrifice. Same damn thing they think we need to conjure hexes. They would do that to us so some dragon in the heart of the sun might put coin in their pockets. Feh!”

“Dead in the sea,” said Jacob, a breath into his cup.

“And we are a trove, our little caravan. They could make a banquet of us.”

Veronica caught herself eyeing her fellow patrons again. Loggers and woodsmen, sleepy and miserable folk with no stories or songs, only their drinks.

“Doubt we have much to worry about from this lot,” she said, “matter of fact, we seem to be slipping through at the most opportune occasion—storm’s put the whole town to sleep like princesses under a witch’s curse.” Veronica tipped her cup at Iscah. “Your turn, love.”

Iscah admired her cards like a hawk admired sheep. So much plump meat too big to carry away in her claws. What a waste. “Will providence slip us through Fort Ramage so easily?” She gestured at Jacob, passing her turn.

Veronica shifted her gaze. Jacob had forgotten his cards and lost himself in his cup again. “Well?” she said.

He stirred, noticed the two staring at him. He held up his tankard like a shield. “It’s *her* damn papers that’ll get us through. Our story’s solid. Ramage will have seen more than a few corpse details through the ‘Corde by now. You girls play your parts and...what!? Sure, I’m the salesman here; I can spin a bolt of tweed into silk among these smallfolk—”

“But you can’t spin a coven of *häxan* into a comely crew of maids, can you, Jakey boy?” She took the last sip of her ale and slammed the tankard down for emphasis. “To soldiers on Del Eastwick’s dole at that? Those are the questions.”

“Jacob,” he corrected. “And it’s not that bloody hard if you nattering quims just—”

“Sheriff Hardy saw through us easily,” said Iscah.

Jacob clenched his jaw. “He did,” he said through his teeth. “That he did. But whose fault is that, hmm?”

“Mine.”

Jacob’s brows shot up in surprise.

“Yours,” Iscah continued. “Hers.” She gestured at Veronica who filled her tankard from the jug without acknowledging her. “The documents were well-crafted, more than enough seals and signatures to make any half-literate sheriff look the other way. Still, three negroes, a circus woman, *myself*...no.” She crossed her arms over her chest and stared into the empty distance. “What’s the expression? Something about a lie too big for the throat to swallow? This is my failing, more than any. I should have known better.”

Veronica ruffled at the implication, that she had blown their cover. *It always comes back to my bloody haircut, doesn’t it?*

“If we can’t fool a backwoods lawman, how are we to fool a whole platoon of Solomn militiamen?” She looked them both over, but neither would meet her gaze, Iscah lost in her hands, Jacob in his cup. “Doomed from the start then, weren’t we? Just a weeks’ long stay of execution.” She rubbed at her eyes. “Should have stayed in Belle Dame. Could have drank myself to death, at least. What now then? If Ramage is a lost cause...?”

Jacob sighed. “There’s west and there’s north—unless you’d like to walk east into the sea and drown on less palatable drink. North into the Aurlands is just another war of its own, not to mention just too far: we’d be crossin’ lands we’ve already covered, facin’ whatever rangers or manglers might be on our trail. West puts us into the Dispute. The forest hides many things—may hide us, too, mayhap—but Crowcoats or wilderfolk will sniff us out eventually. No, south. South by land, that was our only choice.”

“Tell it to your man,” said Veronica, drink burning her cheeks. “Sorry, your ‘brother,’ all aquiver in his boots, so’s Iscah says.”

“I never said—”

“No, no, we all knew you for a chickenshit from start, *Jacob DuQuesne*. Gods know, we—I had no other choice but to throw in with you lot.” Her hands were trembling, candle flames burning on her fingertips. She nearly dropped her cup dowsing her fingertips. *Imagination, damn girl*, she told herself, *just your damn imagination*. She saw a burning pyramid against the night’s sky, pointed hoods threading through the trees at the forest’s edge. Her knuckles cracked under her grip. “No other choice. Choices...”

Jacob stared into emptiness, as though he hadn’t heard her at all, and Veronica was mostly thankful for that, though part of her wanted her words to sting.

She squirmed, loosening her fingers. “C’mon now,” she said. “Not even a little shout for us? A little backhand across the cheek? ‘Cunt’ this, ‘quim’ that? Hmm? Here I thought Jacob DuQuesne didn’t take no lip from Veronica Dahle.” She lifted her cup but found it surprisingly empty. Reaching for the jug, her fingers fumbled over the handle and she wondered

how much ale she'd put away without realizing. Her head was swimming. She gave up and pressed her palms into her cheeks. "Doesn't take much tongue from any woman, I hear," she muttered and grinned to herself. "At least play your damn turn already."

Jacob started, finally. He fanned his cards, examined them as though seeing them for the first time. He waved her away, setting his cards flat against the table.

Veronica shuffled her own cards uselessly, as though a pair might materialize from the friction, maybe her eyes were just too drunk to see. But, no, she had nothing. Her fingers were going numb, taking a dip in the drunkard's sea with her head and her stomach. *Not even my wits and cunning left to me, now*, she thought and slapped her cards flat on the table.

Iscah shuffled her cards absently, her eyes glazed, the little portraits with their fickle numbers worthless beneath her gaze. "West?" she said. Veronica had never heard such hesitation in her voice, and that filled her with more dread than anything she'd seen that night. "We ride west, dip into the Dispute, pray providence guides us under the eyes of the Nation and the wilderfolk, dip back into Candine..."

Jacob leaned forward, elbows on the table, hand hugging them tightly. "Rangers out west drove us east to begin with," he said and emptied his cup once more. "Besides," he wiped foam from his lip with a cuff, "Karkosas just bend up and north along Solomn's edge all the way to Jediah. Nearest passage would put us damn near *in* Jediah before we see any edge of the Dispute. We make it over the mountains, by the drowned god's graces, we'd be hunting game for supper—on foot, no less, can't get oxen through those trees and mud, after all—and avoiding Crow patrols, man-eaters, and hexy beasts what'll do more than just *eat* us." He gulped another draught and nearly spat it back up again when a belchy hiccup rushed up his throat. He stifled it with the back of his hand, then washed it down with a more sensible sip. "Least that's what you hear in fairy tales, huh?"

Silence enveloped them as they drank. The fiddle girl had ended her song

and had turned to practicing her scales. Iscah laid down her cards. And like that, the game was done.

Jacob scratched his chin. “We could—”

The door burst in and the wind roared in after like a swine-hungry wolf, gales guttering most every flame and set the rest to dancing. Veronica shielded herself as the chill and the damp crashed over them like a rushing flood. *Tell tales of fairies and they’ll appear*, she thought, madly. Cards flew every direction as three figures entered the inn, all dripping wet and clothed in black near as dark as the night at their backs. The last to enter, an enormous man near seven feet tall, ducked beneath the doorjamb, carrying some wooly grotesque over his shoulder, antlers nearly scraping the floor. He slammed the door closed behind him and the wind slammed it like a great beast banging at the door. He drew the bolt and the door settled in its frame. Jacob scrambled after his cards, cursing. Veronica had lost her hand to the wind while Iscah had kept a palm on hers. As the tavern sat in awe at the three strangers stood amid their sanctuary, she turned her cards over. Veronica, gone truly mad, she thought, found herself drawn to the woman’s cards. A trip of twos, a pair of threes, and a pair of fours.

Silence, true silence, settled over the Billhook Inn, save the wind against the walls, purring like a hungry beast. Iscah smiled only slightly, her lips grown rosier. She held up her cards to show Veronica. “Hung jury,” she said.