



A HOUSE *of* COLD IRON

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CHAPTER 3
ALIGHT IN THE HOLLOW

HAUNTED DEEP

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CHAPTER THREE

ALIGHT IN THE HOLLOW

She felt it faintly, fleeting, a flicker of heat beneath her breast, fading slowly but burning, burning nonetheless. Tiny, sacred, dim. The flame in Veronica's chest. Day by day she felt it dwindle, guttering like a candle, a whisper of a spark on the wick. Her fingers massaged the flesh above the bone above her heart, a reflex, her limbs acting on their own while her mind wandered. They tapped at her sternum like a safe door, thick, stubborn iron concealing her most precious part.

In the muggy interior of the stable, she felt heat return to her blood, warmth burning at her cheeks. After so long in the cold, she should be grateful. She knew this. Heat. Warmth. Heat and warmth and dry, clean air. But no fire. Not *her* fire. Lamplights and body heat. Straw packing repelling the chill and damp of the storm.

No sooner had Jacob dropped the tailgate, the girls leapt from the wagon. They fumbled like newborn calves on unfamiliar legs, on foot for the first time in an age. The city girls, DuVall and Priss and the mousy lass—always trembling—stood encircled, gabbing in low tones. Hess, the broad-shouldered brute, joined them, her eyes darting hither and thither, baffled lines crossing her brow, a woman following the chittering of magpies.

Drummen sat alone on a hay bale. She rubbed her shoulders near an open lamp flame, muttered to herself, too quiet for the rest to hear, though her

eyes brimmed with curses. She caught Veronica staring and pulled her hair out behind her ear. It made a veil over her face. She continued her muttered cursing.

Damiane walked Agathe in slow circles like an old nag working out its kinks. Little Tali sat on Iscah's knee, the two practicing the girl's numbers with a slate and chalk. St. Tryphine made a game of it, like a miscreant hero trading riddles with a sphinx.

Jacob and Abel busied themselves with the oxen; Abel ungeared their yokes and stored their tack; Jacob rubbed them down, his shirtsleeves rolled up and his waistcoat open, looking every bit the dapper scarecrow. Veronica watched him from the tailgate of the wagon, her feet dangling over sawdust and dirt.

Her forehead flared, just a spot, a tiny spot above her right eye, the size of a Sommer See tenpiece or the breadth of a fingertip. Or a gun barrel.

Jacob brushed the last ox smooth and the beast lowed appreciatively. He threw his rag into a bucket and vaulted out of the stall. Veronica pitched herself off the tailgate. Her bootheels hit the planks hard, slipped out from under her, sawdust flying, arms blading out on instinct, balancing her center. She hobbled as though balancing on high heels the like city girls adored so much. The earth vibrated under her feet, the whole globe bobbing on a train, though, truly, what she felt was an absence of motion, memories of days on the road prickling under her muscles. She batted her thighs, steady now, and walked.

"Jacob," she called. "Mightn't that be a tavern I smell nearby?"

The thin man did not answer, only daubed his brow with a towel slung over his shoulder. His eyes watched her through straw-colored locks plastered to his brow, glistening tendrils caressing his cheekbones. He snapped his fingers and a matchbox appeared at his fingertips.

"Mayhap," said Jacob, another snap and a tin appeared in his other hand. "Not one that'll be havin' you, though." He relit a half-gone black beauty.

Charm had never been a tool in Veronica's box; fires pitters rarely dabbled

in subtle impressions. Regardless, she folded her hands behind her back, kicked her foot through the sawdust bashfully.

“Jakey-Jake,” she pouted, “friend, goodman, I’m just...” She shivered dramatically, clutching her shawl about her shoulders. “...freezing. A terrible chill has caught me. Bit of straw may be good for the beasts but need something hot in my blood. Please, one drink. A few minutes before the hearth. That’s all.”

“*Jacob*,” he corrected brusquely, hissed smoke in her direction. It brushed her cheeks like lechers’ fingers. She fought the urge to blink even though he wasn’t looking; he admired the burning ember at the end of his rollup. “Know who greeted us on our way into town?”

Veronica grit her teeth. The Sheriff, obviously, but obviously not. *You love your little traps and lures, don’t you, whoreson?* She said nothing, only shrugged, ignorance the safest bet.

“A young lady, about your age, I think. Hard to tell, of course. Burnt to cinders as she was, left on a wheel. With half a hundred others to keep her company.” He held his arms out wide in greeting. “Welcome to Keeper Country, the backwater’s backwater. Where they *make* fanatics. Lucky us, however, Sheriff’s just the right mix a smart an’ chickenshit to know not to wrastle the bear what’s wandered on your lawn when you’ve forgot your gun an’ its eyes are on ya. We’re clingin’ by a thread here, missy. And I’ll not be havin’ you kill the lot of us over a nip and a song. Aye? Savvy?”

He traced circles in the air with a fingertip, curls of smoke followed his movements until a vaporous noose formed in the air and floated into the rafters.

Veronica stood firm, arms across her chest, teeth grinding, acutely aware of the mildew scent of her shawl, the nits in her hair, the nails in her spine, and that same vibration in her boots rattling up to her knees. She could coo. She could beg. She could flirt. *No*, she thought. *No, damn it all.*

“Bleeding fucking cunt, you are, Jacob DuQuesne,” she said, loud enough for all to hear. The room went quiet, all eyes on them.

Jacob shrugged with a grin. “Reckon I am. But we’ll be alive come mornin’. Till then, you can staunch your bloody cunny with straw for all I care.”

“That what you been stuffing up your own minge?”

The room froze down to the blood coursing in their veins. Only Iscah moved, vainly distracting little Tali with a new problem on her slate, the little girl’s sight frozen on Veronica and Jacob.

Coals burned behind the thin man’s eyes. He took a long drag on his cigarette. Veronica’s fingers bit into the knitting of her shawl, drawing it tighter around her shoulders as though that would serve a shield from the man’s wrath. She knew better than to open her arms, form a fist. She’d seen Jacob draw his gun faster than a man could blink, crack a man’s temple before his fingers got the orders from his spine. The ring of flesh above her right eye flared again, memory crackling on her flesh like an iron brand, white-hot. The memory spread to her knees, the chill of mud stinging there, a coat of it over her writhing carcass, ants scurrying beneath her skin, the Turn upon her, she knew. And there stood Jacob, on his feet, iron in his hand, the barrel set firmly to her brow. *Click*, said the hammer. His icy eyes said nothing. She’d begged him to pull the trigger, then. The thought tore her breaths ragged, throat gone dry as a husk. She felt herself trembling before the man, feeling a fool. *Veronica Dable does not tremble at a man’s fist*, she told herself.

Jacob clicked his tongue.

“You,” he said matter-of-factly, “have run short my last nerve, darlin’. I got a deep well of patience but damned if you haven’t dragged me to the bottom of it.” One last drag off his cigarette. A flick of his fingers and the butt soled passed her head. Embers bounced off her cheek as it burst against the wagon’s canvas behind her. “If you find our hospitality wanting, deary, then,” he bowed, palms up in offering, “by all means, fuck right off. Carry yourself out that door. We’ll wave farewell while the townies burn your carnie hide on a wheel fit for a tumbler such as yourself.” His fist found the

collar of her shirt and he jerked her forward, their faces an inch apart.

Iscah appeared at the man's shoulder.

"Jacob," she cooed, like a mother chastising her too tall son, all gentle sweetness where anger no longer found purchase. "Forgive the girl. Poor thing's reached her wit's end, so she bites the hand of charity like a too hungry beggar. Please, if your patience has been wasted, then show her the measure of your grace—the very virtue you expect of her." Jacob did not meet the woman's eyes, only stared icy blue daggers into Veronica's face. Iscah's hand squeezed his arm. "Look at her, Jacob. Shaking. Trembling." The woman's indigo gaze darted to Veronica. *Obey*, said her eyes, and Veronica surrendered despite herself. After all, she hadn't the flame left in her. The sacred light within her heart flickered, dimmed. But something flitted in Iscah's eyes then. She massaged Jacob's arm and cooed, "The girls have gone a week without a dose to calm their nerves. Would you mind?"

Jacob blinked. He looked at Iscah, then, looked at the girls surrounding them. He looked at Veronica. She felt herself shaking no matter how fiercely she fought to quell the fear in her flesh. *Is it fear?* said someone familiar in the back of her mind. No, not fear.

The man's fingers uncurled but lingered a moment below Veronica's face, as though he might snatch out an eye in recompense, but it dropped to his side. Jacob exhaled one last billow of smoke and the rage fell from his face like rainwater.

The room sighed.

Jacob reached behind his back and pulled a hipflask off his belt, waved it in St. Tryphine's face. "We'll be lucky if this lasts another week, you know." Jacob shook the flask at the girls huddled in their pack, contents sloshing. "You wanted a nip, girls? Well, here it is." Veronica felt the collective shudder, a pack of dogs drooling at the sound and scent of bone and vittles.

Yes, daddy has your scraps, you mongrels. She bit her lip, imagined the taste of blood filling her mouth. Her veins twitched, too, like all the others, another starving mutt.

“One splash for the each of ya. And I do mean a *splash*. Catch you slippin’ and all the gods in the sky won’t stay my naked hands.”

The girls gathered round the man while Iscah retrieved little Tali off her stool, the poor thing clutching her slate to her chest like a shield. Damiane propped up the crumbling matron and guided her into the circle.

Jacob uncapped the flask and held it out for Johanna DuVall but when her fingertips brushed the burnished silver, he snatched it away, admonishing with a pointed finger, that bastard grin plastered on his face again. DuVall blanched and set her eyes on the floor. She held out her hand. Jacob placed the flask on her palm.

“Thank you, sir,” she said, soft and courteous.

She upturned the lip against her tongue for naught a second then held it out for Prissy Quaite. The ichor hit her a moment late as Priscilla took the bottle from her hand. Veronica could see it in her shoulders, the fleeting shiver, the quiver down her spine. Veronica’s tongue went dry and she grit her teeth. The other girls each took their splash, each reeling in their own way. Hess grimaced like a teetotaler downing a shot of vodka after a decade’s sobriety. Priss unwound, her limbs went slack, and her eyes fell back under their lids languidly. Drummen hissed through her teeth, nothing more. She offered the flask to Veronica, but Jacob snatched it out her hand, his eyes on the fire dancer.

He held it by the shoulders, swayed the base back and forth—the slosh filled the stable like clock strikes. She clenched her teeth so hard they might shatter. *Good*. She could spit the shards in his damned eyes. She held out her palm like a penitent begging communion. He placed the butt of the flask there but kept his fingers on the head. The ice chips in his eyes

She forced her teeth apart. “Thank you, sir.”

“So difficult, is it?” His smirk sickled up his cheek. “A little gratitude?” He let go the flask. She saw the skin sloughing off his face like wax down a candle, his bones wilting like wet paper, flames bursting out his eye sockets, the teeth that fox grin popping like ivory bubbles.

A scowl replaced his grin.

“Well!?” He flicked his middle finger against pewter, the metal rang hollowly, tuneless.

Veronica flinched out of her reverie, noticed the object in her hand. She grinned at his scowl and tipped the flask toward Jacob’s heart.

“*Salud*,” she said and tipped it back, neck on her tongue.

The scent of it struck her first, a nail through her septum. A peppermint snakebite numbed her face. The splash hit her tongue and a plume burst in her chest like kerosene on a campfire. An unworldly heat filled her chest, radiated to her limbs, bristled and danced on her fingertips. Gooseflesh rippled down her arms, her back, her buttocks. It fed the flame in the hollow of her heart. A moment. A flicker. Like that splash of kerosene—a screaming flash, gone as quick as it came.

Ichor. Hotblood. Milk of the witch’s tit.

Absinthe and cream twirled on her tongue, wisps of remembrance, her favorite tincture for downing the oil-slick bilge. It would not mix, only hang in spiraling curls, suspended in the other liquid. One shot before a show, she could fill the big top with flames the size of thunderbirds. One splash on the tongue after weeks nearly dry, she could light a match after a fit of concentration.

She sighed, tasted the witchblood on her breath, sweet like peppermint, bitter like unsweetened cocoa. She held the flask out for Jacob and he took it, handed it to Iscah. Little Tali sat on her arm, tiny hands wrapped around the tall woman’s neck. She held the flask up for the little girl who cringed and turned away, burying her face in Iscah’s neck.

“Now, now, dear heart. You need your medicine as well as we all. Just a dab on the tippy-tip of your tongue.” The girl whimpered but revealed her face, wet eyes looking up in St. Tryphine’s divine white face. The woman stuck out her tongue and cross her eyes. The girl giggled, high and trilling, the sound bouncing off the walls, against the thrumming storm outside, filling their ears like sweet song. The girls grinned, smiled, even Veronica felt

her chest lighten. Then Tali stuck out her own tongue, though with none of Iscah's irreverence. St. Tryphine touched the neck of the flask to the child's tongue and tipped it back and down again. Tali shuddered, tears welled in her eyes, nearly overflowing their edges.

"Tastes like poison," she said.

"How would you know what poison tastes like?" said Damiane, a weary smile crossing her face.

"It tastes like poison," the girl insisted, "like the powder my daddy put on cheese for the rats in the basement. It tastes like that smelled."

Prissy Quaite hummed and prodded her chin with a yellowed finger. "Was it garlicy? Like pungent garlic, like a clove shoved straight up the nostril?"

Baffled, the girl shrugged.

"Zinc phosphide, maybe. Common rodenticide. Always tastes of spearmint crushed in vodka to me." The room gazed at her oddly. She stared into the distance over their heads, rubbing at her lower lip until she noticed the eyes on her. "The ichor, I mean. Not rat poison." She ran a yellowed hand through her blue hair and gazed into the rafters as though their eyes were too bright to meet.

Iscah held the flask for Damiane and you would think the woman held a mousetrap on her palm from the look on Damiane's face. But Iscah insisted and the woman obliged, took the flask from her hand. She splashed herself, barely flinching, and passed it to Agathe. The old woman wetted her tongue to no reaction. No flinch or blanch or rapturous shudder. Damiane passed the flask back to Jacob.

"You, too," he said to Iscah. "A proper sip, too." He held out the flask, shook it so the liquid sloshed at the bottom, the sound so odd, like thick cream though the taste was airy and light, evaporated on the tongue like flash-burning acid. Veronica felt her throat clenching shut, shriveled dry.

She grumbled. "We beg for pennies while she gets a tithe."

Jacob shot her a look, his eyes full of ice and fury. He said nothing, lips a

thin line.

Iscah took the flask and did as Jacob ordered. A proper sip. It wracked her like a seizure. She spent a full moment with her wrist pinned to her lips while Jacob steadied her by the elbow.

“Easy now,” he cooed. “Won’t have you vomitin’ up that slag.”

The woman recovered and handed the flask back to Jacob. He capped it and hid it away from the hidden pocket whence it came, his fingers too quick and too sly for their eyes. He knew a shade of close-up magic, Veronica judged by the manner his fingers flitted and danced, distracting the eye.

He clapped his hands like a schoolmarm herding children.

“Oy-oy! Y’allve had enough of a walk about. Back in the cab.”

Everyone groaned at that. “But my back, sir, please,” said Cassia. “I’ve slept too long, another slumber and I’ll wake a hundred years hence,” said Johanna.

“Oy!” cried Jacob. “Didn’t ask for no talkback, aye? Asses in the wagon. Now.”

The girls settled down, a collective slump fell on their shoulders, and they turned toward the wagon. Save Veronica, who stood still, watching them go. Then watched as the old woman Agathe approached Jacob despite Damiane tugging at her sleeve and shoulder.

“Goody Jacob,” she said in her raspy drawl. “A favor, kind sir.”

The man rubbed at his brow, knowing what came next. “Aye, ma’am, favors I have naught to give. Empty as my bleedin’ stomach, my well of favors. Into the wagon with ya.”

“Sir, please,” she begged, her gnarled hands cupped in a prayerful fist. “I’ve not spoken with the Mother in three weeks. They Lady will be wonderin’ what’s become of me, why my voice has gone out from the choir. Please. Fifteen minutes at the church, sir.”

“Forgive her, Mr. Jacob,” said Damiane. “She forgets herself. Knows not when she is, much less where.”

“I know where I am, girl,” spat Agathe, bitterly. “Ten thousand leagues

from my babes. My grandbabies. Tossed away like the fillin's of a chamber pot out the winda'. The Lady needs to know I forgive 'em. Needs to know I understand why they threw me away."

"They didn't throw you away, ma'am," said Jacob. The earnestness in his voice surprised Veronica, as well as the regret in the lines of his face, cracks in the mask most often hidden by that infernal grin. "They feared for your safety. Feared the manglers and their hammers. They only thought of your well bein', I assure you."

The old woman worked her jaw nervously, chewing through her memories, piecing together a riddle that changed its shape by the moment.

"Please," she said, barely a word, a breath with shape. "Ten minutes. A kneel and a prayer. Please."

Jacob sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. *Soul slipping away, son? Surprised you had any left to lose.* He looked at Iscah; the woman stood by with Tali in her arms, the little girl dozing against her shoulder, the tall woman bobbing her gently. Iscah met his eyes. She shook her head subtly, the gesture lost in her cradling sway.

"No," the man said flatly. "Forgive me, Madam DuCante, but the answer's no. This town...it's a pit of vipers. What church is here...Well, it's no church that'll suffer a witch, aye?" He offered the woman his hand. She looked for a moment as if she'd swat it away, then something within the woman collapsed and she wrapped her bony fingers in his. "There's a girl. Promise, first church in Candine we find, I'll whip the hide off every slaver and bumpkin there and you'll have all the time in creation for grace and absolution. Promise."

Agathe mumbled, her words muddling in and out. "...can't step—won't step..."

Jacob leaned in to hear.

Damiane interjected. "She says there's no way in Kathryn's name she's stepping into a Concorde church." *Nor will I*, said her tone.

The man wiped the length of his face with a hand, sweat glistening on his

glove. Then he threw his arms wide. “That’s the best I can promise ya. If you’ll have no church down south, and no church up north will have ya, then you’ll have no church at all.” He clapped his hands to cut off Damiane’s response. “Into the wagon you go. Now.” He pointed into the cab where the other girls adjusted their quilts and bedding, whispered to themselves, oblivious to the old woman’s plight.

Damiane sighed and bent toward Agathe. “You heard the man, Agathe. Back to bed we go.”

“No,” said the old woman in the tone of a child. “No, please.”

Damiane squeezed her shoulders gently and eased her along. “Now, now, dear. Come along, come along, lift your feet and get along.” The singsong rhyme seemed to ease the woman, or maybe acceptance finally took root in her, and she followed Damiane to the wagon. Iscah followed with Tali still in her arms.

Jacob squeezed his hand over his mouth as though that would hide the shame on his face or shovel down the guilt swelling in his throat. Veronica stood by, unnoticed, leaning against a post, a vagrant spying the world from a street corner. When Jacob finally noticed her, he scowled, hand falling from his face. He said nothing. Only pointed to the wagon like a parent too frothing to even yell at their child, only stab the air toward their room. Veronica felt stinging heat on her fingertips. A little more and a plume of flame would ignite across her palms, the ichor coursing through her now, the witchblood mixing with her own, becoming her own, unburnt kerosene in her veins, volatile and hot. He took two steps toward her, hand reaching at her throat, a claw in black leather.

St. Tryphine strolled passed them both toward the door into the inn.

Jacob’s hand froze in the air, his face a mask of astonishment that drowned out the rage, though that soon returned, burning on his voice.

“Where in damnation you think you’re goin’?” he snapped at her back.

Iscah stopped. She turned at the waist, one heel on the boards in mid-step; she looked at the two of them over her shoulder, waves of night ocean

hair obscuring her lips and cheek. She shrugged.

“Fancied a drink,” she said. “Thought I’d help myself.”

Now astonishment mingled with the rage on his face, the two battling across his cheeks and brow, confounding the words in his throat. His clawed hand turned into a commander’s two-fingered jab, aimed at Iscah’s heart. Veronica, too, marveled at the woman. Marveled too long, in fact, as Jacob’s free hand found the scruff of her neck and she nearly doubled over as his arm pressured her down uncomfortably, forced into a stooped posture. A vein throbbed on the man’s temple. Seeing it pulse drove any thought of struggle from Veronica’s mind. She only watched as his lips moved but no words fell out his mouth.

This his hand snapped to his face, palm flat on his brow, fingers trembling. He wiped the expression from his face, revealed that familiar, rueful fox grin, the ice in his eyes bright and flashing like cats’ eyes in torchlight. *Up comes the mask, down come the fists.* Veronica swallowed hard.

“Certain of that?” he said, baring his teeth. The fox became a wolf, though Veronica couldn’t imagine such treacherous glee on a wolf’s face.

She stood unmoved, this conversation mere courtesy to Iscah; she awaited not his permission but his surrender. *What hex has she bound up your heart?* thought Veronica, not for the first time. If the girls wiped their asses with the wrong hand, Jacob would be on them like a foxhound, but for Iscah he found some patience. Her words found his ear in ways Veronica’s could not. *They even saved you in the end, no?* said Rico Mandroga, years ago and far away, the ringmaster half out of costume, waistcoat open, a crystal glass in hand; the words were old, their context long forgotten, they rang in Veronica’s head like a siren’s call.

The ring of flesh above her right eye burned. She saw Iscah over Jacob’s shoulder. Saw her whisper in his ear. The barrel fell away though the iron burn remained, an invisible brand upon her brow. She remembered despair, a pit, a void, a slumber that smeared away memories like a filthy sponge. She fell in the mud, consciousness lost. The brand she remembered. The mud

she remembered. The fall she remembered. The awakening. The guttering in her chest. The new contempt on the girls' faces every morn. The origin of these she could not recalled—the world, it seemed, simply shifted into a new phase.

Jacob smoothed his eyebrow with his little finger. “I don’t think—”

“She just wants a drink, love.” Abel appeared with a gunny sack over his shoulder. Shorn to his sleeveless undershirt, Veronica remembered how much his shoulders made up the most of him, his torso a hardy cask meant only to prop them up. He wiped his hands with a cloth, sweat pouring down his arms, muscles knotted like ugly burls over and under. The strongmen Veronica had known, all oiled and poised, looked sculpted from finest marble; Abel, though, looked like the clumsy “art” timbermen carved with hand axes and left on roadsides, turgid totems assaulting travels with their sharp angled physiques.

Jacob pinched the bridge of his nose as if staving off a migraine, the canine mask slipped away like so much air. A hissing inhale foretold objection, but Abel stifled him with a swat of his handcloth along the arm that held Veronica. Jacob let go and Veronica stumbled a few steps away, rubbing at her neck where his fingers seared her.

“Even if that sheriff and his boy don’t talk, people know we’re here—you know well enough folk ‘round these parts are the pryin’ type. Best put in an appearance, at least—give the drunks some stories to tell ‘bout a dandy man and his fancy lady come to wile away the rain—let ‘em know we mean no harm.”

“All the more reason *you and I* should have a drink,” said Jacob coyly. “Two brothers, no women, they’d think we—”

“*I’ll* be getting’ a room and, with luck, a bed what’s ain’t but wool over straw. I’d hold out hope for a bath but this place ain’t nothin’ but logs an’ tin, so I’ll settle for a basin. You an’ Madam St. Tryphine—” Abel eyed Veronica. She smiled at him preciously, all sugar and spice and as much nice as her fire dancer’s eyes could muster. He rolled his eyes. “—and you, too,

Ms. Dahle, go have your drink.”

With that, Abel hefted his gunnysack along with his shirts and coat and pushed passed them as Jacob grumbled to himself. When the door into the inn closed behind him, Jacob whirled on Veronica, snatched her by the scruff of the neck and leaned into her face, his other hand jabbing a finger between her ribs.

“Not one spark outta you,” he hissed, his smoke-tinged breath stinging her eyes like burning caramel. “No magic. No juggling. No...” He jabbed his finger deeper into her ribs as if she’d cough up the right words. “...cantrips, hexes, tumbles, or foolery of any like or kind. None of your circus shit, hear? Nothin’. You understand?”

Her palms flushed with heat. She resisted the urge to set his hand alight. Instead, she dredged up the man’s Maidenheader twang as she said, “Oh, aye, suh. I’ll be the gent-lest, hum-blessed li’l lambkin in the abattoir, I will, I will. Don’t expect no funny ol’ mischief outta me, no suhree.”

He glared at her. His hand released her neck and she rocked uneasily on her feet, as though he’d been lifting her off the ground the whole time. He crossed his arms over his chest, one corner of his mouth quirked up, his expression...Was that disappointment on his cheeks?

“Shame,” he said dryly, “you used to be funnier.”

She could rip the eyes out his skull with white-hot fingers and it would not satisfy the lust in her blood. She forced a grin though she knew it would not show in her eyes. *You always know just what to say, don’t you, you rat bastard?* He grinned in turn, knowing he’d struck her tenderest innards.

He clapped his hands. “Good. So long’s we understand each other. I could use a drink about now, to be honest.” He cocked an eyebrow at Iscah who attached the two with indifference. He grinned like a man who knew all the secrets in the world. “Come along, then, lassies.”