



A HOUSE *of* COLD IRON

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PROLOGUE

A PLACE WITHOUT WHISPERS

HAUNTED DEEP

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“Gold is for the Mistress—silver for the maid—
Copper for the craftsman cunning at his trade.”

“Good!” said the baron, sitting in his hall,

“But Iron—Cold Iron—is master of them all.”

—Rudyard Kipling, “Cold Iron”

PROLOGUE

A PLACE WITHOUT WHISPERS

The forest howled with wind and crackling bark, danced in the rain with the whirling clouds, pulsed with the beat of a hundred wildling hearts. Around a clearing trees bent and swayed, flower girls about a maypole, round and round with the wind and the rain. At the clearing's heart lay a stone. A crownstone, once tall, once broad, once mighty, now fallen and sunken, clothed in lichen, rain-slick and wind-swept smooth. It told a story once, in letters etched deep and true, lost, too, to the wind and the rain. And time. The ceaseless, flowing forces of the world. And here sat a hunter, waiting. Waiting in the wind and the rain.

He traced the etchings with a fingertip, read words upon the fading stone: "...a knotted Curse twisted in his corded Heart. 'So be it, then,' spake Hallstrom Whispers, 'Fates and Knucklebones cast Folly on us all, thy Tongue has sealed it thus, my blooded Brother. Know this, Giants I felled with but a Whisper, and so thy People named me, but for you I will bring great Shouts and Bellows and shuddersome Cries. For you I bring a thunderous Roar. For you I will speak Blood with every Word and all the Corners of the World shall hear me. To the vaulted Skies, to the shimmering Stars, to the harrowing Face of the Killing Moon, and, oh! how the Moon shall weep...'” It trailed off there, the runes weathered grooves pooling rain, but the hunter knew the story. It ended poorly. For all involved.

The hunter smiled.

Rivulets streamed down his face. He looked to the sky, black-sheeted and flowing, felt water seep into all his corners.

Glimpsed across a taproom, you would not know him for a hunter. From the surcoat and chainmail, you'd think him a man fallen out of time, a knight, a crusader, a soldier in sovereign service, slayer of monsters, bandits, foul heathen worshipers of foreign gods and demons. A thing out of histories but fairy tales, too. A thing out of songs sung at beddy-bye time. Songs that crossed deepest oceans from the countries old, unreachable, your mother's mother's mother's home where all the heroes walked. You'd wander close, curious, you, for Old World things, as are we all. But, oh! that paling skin, that faded hair, those eyes...they swim in sickly colors, oil-slick and roiling...they swim in witchery...and you would know him for a hunter then. By the nail hung from his neck, you would know his ancient House. By his smile—the smile he shone you on your way, step by step, toward this Old World thing—by his glimmering teeth, you'd know his name. Yes, then you'd know his name. It hides inside you, hidden among the ghouls and ghaunts and graveyard spooks—all those things that keep you awake at night, awake in the dark, though you'd never admit such a childish heart still beats in you. Deep in the pit of you.

Something boomed through the forest behind the hunter. The rumbling trod of great footsteps—no, hoofbeats. They thundered above the rain's ceaseless din. The hunter grinned to himself, smelled blood on his bloodless hands. A tree shattered and filled the air like fireworks, a whole tree made splinters by the sound. A hideous whinny followed, a sound caught between roar and scream, full of pain and confusion, breathing splinters.

He sat undaunted, stretched his knuckles, felt them pop beneath the thick leather of his gauntlets, studded iron rivets glinting like diamonds. He carried no sword, no axe, no stave. Only his hands. He fanned his lovely fingers, preened over them and waited. In the wind and the rain, he waited.

The thing tumbled out of the forest, nearly collapsed in the clearing where

the crownstone lay. It stood the height of two men; indeed, it looked a man in its arms and torso, propped up on gnarled knuckles like an ape, sleek fur rippling over corded muscle betraying the beast within. Its hind legs crooked like those of a deer, ended in thick cloven hooves that ripped at the earth as they strode. Its face, too, seemed caught between man and cervine: snout long but stunted, lips curled and scowling, peeling away from dislocated teeth, flat grinding molars falling way to canine fangs. Its black, tar-drop eyes twisted, bulged, faced forward like any good predator. Outstretched antlers sprouted from either side of its head, clawing the air, stained red and black with wet and dried blood both. They caught it midst a kill, it seemed, or someone fell unlucky.

The hunter grinned.

The beast stumbled forward, hooved legs teetering behind it, pulled forward by its quivering arms. Its breaths filled the air with thick, white fog—the billows caressed its bloody face. It thought itself safe, escaped. It slowed, it slumped. Its hind legs fell out from under it and sat hard upon the ground, a quake resounding through earth and stone. It brought its arm to its misshapen maw, gingerly, something like sobs wracking its chest. The hunter saw the lashes traced up the beast's arm, long, open, puckering wounds. Its blood seeped away as the creature licked at the pain. Its tongue bloated and black seemed an alien worm slipping between its teeth.

Gazing upon it, full in its fury, full in its pain, the hunter's heart ached for the creature. Caught between two natures, knotting curses branded on its heart, shaped into something it should never be. Poor thing. Poor wretched thing. The hunter knew of that place, had lived there once, long ago, he remembered, but now he was true. Now he was whole. Now he gripped his knees and stood. His hands fell to his sides, calm and steady. He knew his purpose, unlike this creature, knew his place in this world, fit it like the facet on a jeweled crown. Or a nail. A nail in the beam of the vault of the sky. Purpose coursed through him like blood in his veins. Etched there like words on stone, though not so easily worn away.

He smiled and tasted the rain on his lips.

The creature started. Its head hunched low. Tar-drop eyes stared wide and hard. Black pearls in the flowing dark. It noticed him. Too late. Long open wounds scourged its back, as well, long and puckering, matted fur standing on end. its eyes and face burned with blisters and welts, boils and pox, nearly blind, nostrils gushing pus and bile. Maybe it tasted him on the air, despite the downpour, that bloated worm licking burnt leather and iron off the air. Perhaps it heard the chimes of his chainmail under the thrumming storm—it rang like a bell on a cat, or so he was told. Nevertheless, it found him too late. Its mouth went wide with a scream, a shriek that filled the forest night to the brim, drove out the downpour's din, filled the hunter's ears but missed his gut, missed his heart. The hunter grinned as you would grin for a hackled pup or a hissing kitten. How cute they seem. So furious, so small.

The beast leapt at him, arm lunging, great knotted fingers arching into claws. The hunter's legs snapped like trap jaws. He fainted inside the beast's reach, claws swept overhead, a gale mussed his hair. He carried no sword, no axe, no stave. Only his hands. They curled into fists. His muscles tensed, white hot fire rippling up from his mitts into his biceps, into his chest, back into his beating heart and round again. He set his feet in an instant. The earth quivered beneath his weight. The beast arced above him, still caught in the momentum of its wild swing, too blind and slow to recognize the trap had sprung. And like any good trap, it—

Another boom filled the forest, louder than any before. You'd think it cannon fire had you heard the echo. It rippled the treetops. Brushed the underbelly of the sheeted sky. It faded, and the storm filled the void again, its rhythm heavy, deep, and steady, as though it had never left. But, no, like a stumbled note can ruin a tune, the rain could not find its note again. It sang a tremolo, swung back and forth and the night sang vibrato in return. But it was lost. For this night at least, the rain would never sing the same.

In the clearing stood the hunter, straight-backed, arms held before him, fingers unfurled. He stared at the black sheet of sky. Tasted raindrops on his

lips. The creature lay at his feet, a bloody mass of gore where its neck should be, blood washing away into the earth. Parts of it still hissed with steam but those were soon drowned out, as well. The hunter brought his hands to his face, bloodless and warm, knuckles still white hot like fresh steel from the forge. He wiped the water from his face, laced his fingers through his hair. He exhaled. A billow white like steam from an engine filled the air, soon lost to the night like so much else. He smiled like a man complete, like the painter before the easel when the work replies, “Enough!” and hands fall away, exhausted. Beautiful? To some, maybe; to most, gods no! He didn’t care. He looked upon his work and thought it something more than beautiful. He thought it done.

He looked about for the beast’s head. It had flown a dozen yards afield, one antler lodged in a tree, the head held aloft. The wood groaned beneath its weight yet held stubbornly true like a squire with its master’s trophy, knees aquiver. The creature’s face hung frozen, snarl still on its teeth and lips. But the eyes...something in its tar-drop eyes had gone sallow, melancholic. Perhaps it sensed its folly. Much too late. And a sadness found it in that final fraction of a moment. Or maybe the hunter read too much. He pondered the grotesque ornament, considered its blistered cheeks, its bloodied brow, its lolling tongue, the bloat gone out of it, hanging like a deflated snake. Not his best work, he admitted. But not bad either.

Clouds parted overhead, little more than a sliver, a fray in the flowing velvet. The thrum filled the forest still, but the downpour parted like curtains around the hunter and the clearing and the beast. The fray in the night revealed luminous stars, the dusty, milk-white trail of the Dancing Moon’s wake. And above the dusty trail, the sickle band of the Killing Moon shone whiter than milk, whiter than snow, whiter than the youngest stars. The hunter gazed at it and smiled.

He smiled like a thing out of fairy tales, the woodsman at your grandma’s door. A wolf-bloodied axe in hand.