

Dimos Horacki is a Borolian journalist and a cynical patriot, his muckraking days behind him. But when his newspaper ships him to the front, he's embedded in the Imperial Army and the reality of colonial expansion is laid bare before him.

His adventures take him from villages and homesteads to the great refugee city of Hronople, built of glass, steel, and stone, all the while a war rages around him. The empire fights for coal and iron, but the anarchists of Hron fight for their way of life.

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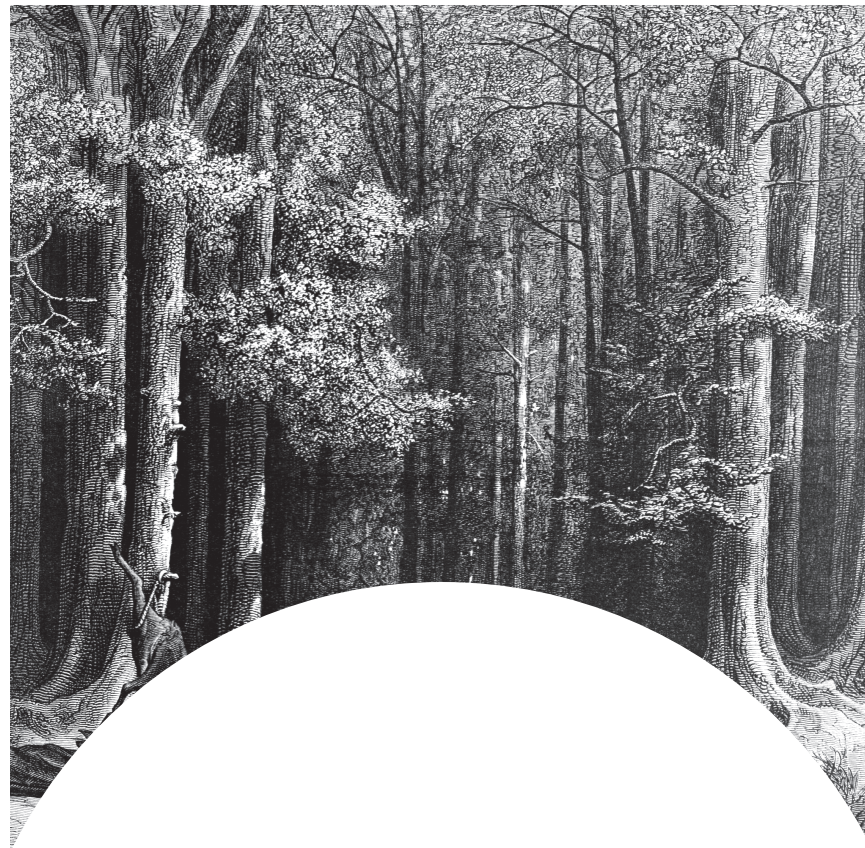
—Gabriel Kuhn, author of *Life Under the Jolly Roger*



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## A COUNTRY OF GHOSTS

*(part 1 of 2)*

MARGARET KILLJOY

"An exciting and mysterious novel, a story of war and love."  
—Kim Stanley Robinson, author of the *Mars* trilogy

*A Country of Ghosts*  
Margaret Killjoy, 2014

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zine adapted from the first revision.

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I would have done so.

“Are you drunk?” he asked.

“The tiniest bit,” I said, “but not so much. This frenna is good stuff.”

“Then, if you’d permit me, we could go somewhere more private? We can wait until you’re sober and see how you feel?”

He put his hand on my leg. I reached out and held it. He smiled, I smiled.

And ten minutes later, on the roof of the guest hall, he tried to murder me.

*For Kate. This whole utopia thing was her idea anyhow.*

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Despite the expert advice I received from so many, any mistakes and oversimplifications are completely my own.

## Introducing The Anarchist Imagination

Everyone knows the world is a mess. There's starvation and ecocide, racism and sexism. The rich get richer and the poor just die, all while species go extinct and carbon warms up the air. It's not surprising that so much of our fiction is as bleak as our future threatens to be.

But we can imagine other worlds. We can imagine better ways to organize ourselves, better ways to treat one another, better ways to treat the earth. And specifically, we can imagine worlds without the authoritarianism of the state and capitalism.

So we bring you "The Anarchist Imagination," a new series by Combustion Books that will showcase stories set in such worlds.

Our intention is not, of course, to put down blueprints that must be followed line by line. We offer no prescription for future society. Instead, the utopia is a form we can use to explore our revolutionary desires, to showcase ideas we might put into practice, to give us glimpses of what we fight for.

strode down the aisles of the crowd, lighting iron braziers as they went, filling the air with tangy smoke. They reached the singer, went around her, and set their torches to the head of ice. The flame snaked up the side, following the trail of some accelerant, then lit pools of liquid fuel set into the sculpture's eyes, mouth, and crown.

The woman finished her song and the crowd roared.

"The first night is ceremony and drinking," Sakana said, as she led Varin and I into the crowd. "The second night is games and drinking, the third night is cleanup and drinking. The fourth day we call *gorasi*, which some people might tell you is the old word for 'rest' but it really means 'hangover.'"

"Gorasi is my favorite day of it," Varin said. "You don't really know someone until you see them recover from a festival."

"If I drink this much every day," I said, "I'll never make it to gorasi."

"Most everyone switches to water at midnight," Sakana said.

The music started, a sort of crowd-song. Sakana and Varin knew their parts and stood arm in arm belting out the words to some fantastical opera, while all around me the square began to become one complex, multi-throated voice. Curious, I left them to explore. Some people played instruments, and the song itself changed tone and character as I wove through the crowd: more ethereal here where flutes and baritones dominated, more crass and throaty where horns and drunks prevailed. The incense from the braziers continued to burn, and people in white moved through the crowd with food and drink.

I found a seat on a bench from which to people watch and eavesdrop. A strange hobby, maybe, but one that has done me plenty of good as a writer. Nearby, a trio of happy, gray-haired locals were arguing, loudly to hear one another over the crowd song.

"It's better this way," one of them, clearly the oldest, said. She had a necklace of teeth that, I was guessing, marked her as a widow.

"Too many people from out of town," a man said. By his tone, I assumed him to be the sort who enjoyed his role as a curmudgeon. "I wouldn't want to bet that one in three of people here know the sagas, know why we burn the ice titan."

"I'm not sure one in three of my own grandchildren know the sagas, and they're Moli-knari born and raised," the third said, her gray hair tied in a braided crown.

"There's the problem," the man said. "The accord. Before we were Hron we knew where we were *from*, by the Mountain, and we knew what that made us."

"Lonely and bored," the first woman said, "from what I recall. I met my Gorry at the first festival we ever hosted for our neighbors, and there's not a chance I would have without the accord."

"Bah. Before the accord we cared about *tradition*," the man continued. He accented the word tradition with a subconscious toast of his mug and downed more of whatever he was drinking.

"What's this, then," the first woman said, "besides our tradition? We've burned the titan to make way for spring and it doesn't ruin it for me that some folks from Holl are here."

Charl approached my bench, interrupting my eavesdropping. "Mind if I sit?" he asked.

"Please," I said.

"I don't get any of this," he said.

"I don't either," I replied, "but I'm having a good time."

He laughed and I think I swooned a little. Certainly, if I had the coloration to blush

things that they want. People steal food, or they steal expensive things to sell to buy food. In Hron, food is free. Shelter is free. Nothing is ‘expensive,’ because nothing is bought or sold or bartered. Theft is usually a crime of poverty, and here there’s no poverty.”

“Most thieves in this country are children,” Varin explained, “stealing to be mean, to deprive someone else of something. But they learn the social cost of that pretty quickly, when no one’ll play with them. And, yeah, sometimes adults steal things of sentimental or practical value. Like with any other crime, if they’re caught, or they own up to it, they face the consequences of their actions.”

“Which are?” I asked.

“If what you did isn’t a big deal, you might lose some of your friends over it, or just deal with everyone being mad at you. If it’s something major, you might not be welcome where you’re from, and it’s likely that those hurt by your actions will ask a few specific things of you—like what happened to Sorros. And the truly unrepentant?” Varin emptied his mug of frenna, then continued. “They can fuck off. If they’re clearly a danger, like an unrepentant rapist or murderer, then we’ll probably kill them. If they aren’t, if they’re just an asshole who doesn’t want to act socially with others, then they can go to Karak or out into the rest of the world.”

“Karak,” I said. “Is that your prison?”

“No,” Nola said. “Karak is a hellish place but it’s a hellish place of its residents’ own making. It’s a town of the antisocial. It’s still better than Vorronia, if you ask me—there’s no king, no conscription, no prison, law, or money. But it’s full of people too proud to apologize, who’d rather fight someone than talk things out, who don’t care how their actions affect their neighbors.”

“Does it work?” I asked, “does holding people accountable without trial work? Have you ever killed the wrong person? Ostracized someone who didn’t deserve it? Is the threat of social stigma enough to keep you safe?”

“It kept us safe until the Borolian empire decided to march on our villages and burn them,” Sorros said.

“Does prison work?” Varin asked.

“No,” I admitted.

“The Hronish system isn’t perfect,” Nola said. “But it’s a hell of a lot better than anything else I’ve seen.”

“Fair,” I said. “And if I can say nothing else about your fine country, I’m quite fond of the prices.”

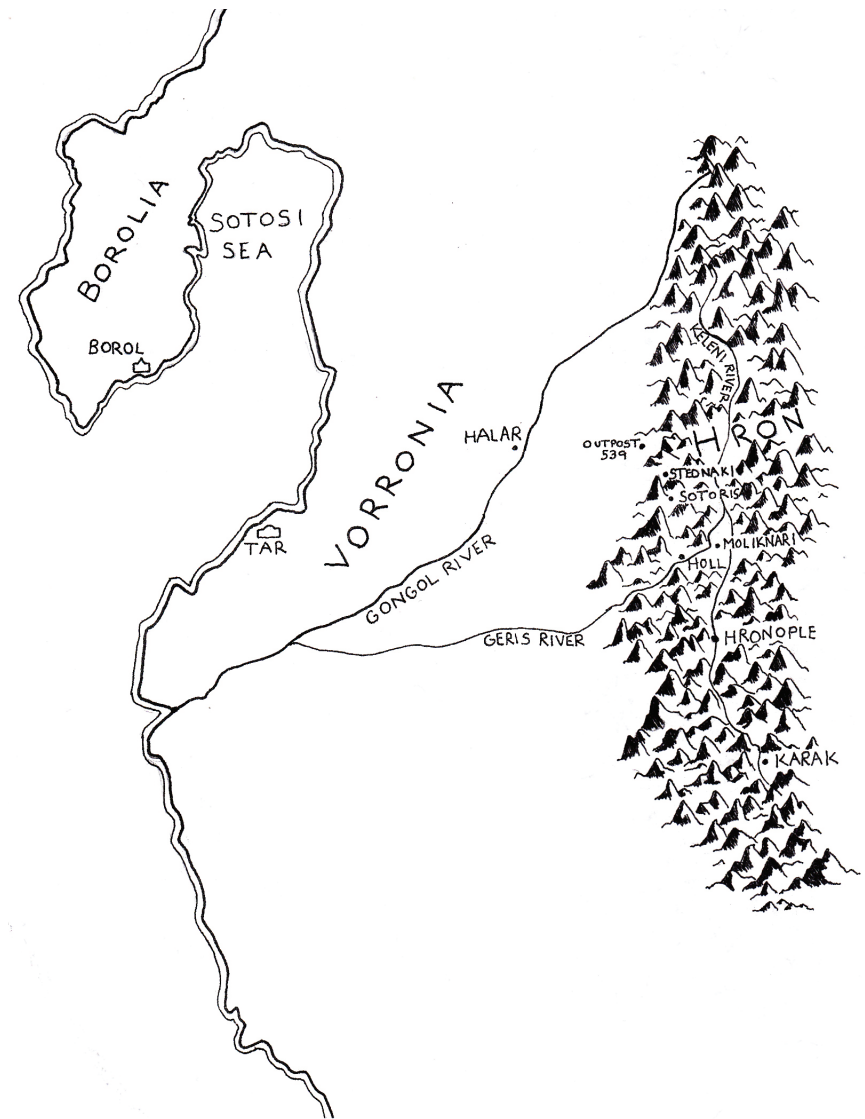
This was good for a laugh from the drunker of my companions, and Varin offered a toast to Hron.

The festival began at sundown, with all the assembled townsfolk and visitors crowding into the central square. Our party sat nearby on the roof of the guest hall, on a series of aged wooden bleachers that slotted into notches set into the tiles. Below us, the massive severed head of a giant, carved from ice, lay on its side on the cobbles. Its tongue was hanging from its mouth of pitted and twisted teeth, the eyes were squinted in death. A woman dressed in a snow-white poncho and skirt stood in front of the sculpture and bellowed, though the acoustics weren’t good enough for her voice to carry to where we sat.

“What’s she saying?” Varin asked.

“The head is Lord Winter,” Sakana answered. “One of the titans.”

The woman raised the pitch of her voice into song, a slow operatic tone. Torchbearers



# One

THE MAN BENEATH THE TOP HAT” IS WHAT I THOUGHT I WAS GOING TO CALL THE SERIES, back when the editors of the *Borol Review* first assigned it to me. Forty, maybe fifty column inches a week for six months on Dolan Wilder, “the man who conquered Vorrionia.” Dolan Wilder, the enigmatic young upstart of His Majesty’s Imperial Army, famous for his bold, ride-at-the-front-of-the-charge style. The man who put more square miles under the gold-and-green than anyone had in a century.

I was all set to write about his rough-shaven face, his black locks, his fine taste in brandy, and the soft touch he had for granting quarter to conquered foes. I was told at least two column inches were reserved for his gruff-but-friendly tone. I was to write about a cold, stony man who nursed a tender heart that beat only for service, only for the King, only for the glory of the Borolian Empire.

Instead, though, I saw him die. But no matter, that—he bore few of those traits I’d been told to ascribe to him, and bore none of them well. Instead I write to you of Sorros Ralm, a simple militiaman, and of the country of Hron. And it seems you won’t find my report in the *Review*.

For a writer of my adventurous temperament and immodest ambition, it was a dream assignment. I can’t tell you I wasn’t elated when Mr. Sabon, my editor, called me into his smokey office and told me I’d been sent to the front, to be embedded in Wilder’s honor guard.

“I’ll be honest with you, Dimos,” Mr. Sabon said to me, breathing shallow in that strange, wounded way of his, “you’re not getting this job because we think you’re the best. You’re not. You’re getting this job because it’s important but dangerous, and you’re the best writer we can afford to lose.”

“I understand,” I replied, because I did. My middling place in the stable of writers had been made clear to me near-daily since my demotion.

“I know you like to tell the truth,” he continued. “You’re an honest man. And that’s fine—we’re an honest paper. But I don’t want you stirring anything up just for the sake of stirring it up.”

“I understand,” I said.

“I mean it. Look me in the eye and tell me all that’s behind you.”

“It is,” I said. And at the time, I’m pretty sure I meant it.

“Good,” he said. “Because this is an important assignment, real important. You do this, and everyone in this city is going to know your name.”

That much, at least, was true.

I walked out of his office with my head held as high as my spirits, floated down the stairs, and returned to my desk in the pool of hacks. I put on my bowler and coat and walked out of that building and onto the streets of Borol, the low winter sun failing as always to bring even a hint of warmth through the chill fog that rolled off the bay and stunk of industry.

I took more mind of the city that day than most, knowing I was soon to depart. I was off to the savage wilds, to the very edge of empire and civilization, to leave behind the comforts and sanity of His Majesty’s capital city. Not ten feet from the door, I tripped over an urchin girl passed out from hunger or vice.

“Oh?” Blosik inquired, “what trade?”

“Writer’s guild,” he answered, then started coughing on the smoke.

“Two useless bastards at one table, then!” Blosik shouted, slightly drunk and clearly happy. “Our Mr. Horacki was a journalist out of Borol before he fell in with and saved the Free Company of the Mountain Heather.”

I expected Varin to bristle—I would have bristled at such high praise aimed at another writer upon first introductions—but instead he turned to me and beamed.

“I want to know everything about your mother country” he said, in thickly-accented Boroli.

“I’d be happy to tell you,” I said, in Cer to keep the conversation from drifting away from those at the table who weren’t fluent in my first language.

“I’ve been working on a story set in one of your... *prisons*...” he said, using the unfamiliar Vorrionian word, “and I want to know everything.”

“I haven’t been in a cell since I was little,” I answered.

“They put *children* in prison?”

“No,” I said. “Well, yes. It’s a different prison and we don’t use the word prison, we call it a reformatory. For children who misbehave.”

“What’s the difference between a reformatory and a prison?” he asked. He pulled out a notebook and began to take down my words.

“A reformatory has the ostensible purpose of reforming young offenders, so that they won’t commit further crimes upon their release.”

“And a prison doesn’t?”

“It... well, that’s the ostensible purpose of prisons too, but society doesn’t bother as hard with that facade. The recidivism rate in both is incredibly high, however. Most imperial advisors seem to think that the solution to this problem is longer sentences, to scare away potential criminals and to keep those who do commit crimes away from the rest of society.”

“Does it work?” the young man asked.

“It’s a crime against humanity!” Sorros yelled. “They put humans in cages and they call it justice. They keep them away from light, from company, from anything that might possibly help them come to understand the need for social behavior, then put them *back* in cages, for *longer*, when they act out!”

“Hear, hear,” Blosik said.

“What would you have us do with criminals, then?” I asked.

“Give them medals,” Sorros said. “For daring to be antisocial in the face of an anti-social order.”

Varin replied more calmly. “From what little I understand of it—which I assure you, is little indeed—your system seeks to ‘punish’ a class of people it deems ‘criminal.’ That’s not the way we work. If a crime has been committed, like theft, assault, murder, or rape, we take each instance as its own unique event. What’s the most common crime in Borol? What are most of the people in your prisons guilty of?”

“Theft,” I answered. “Or assault or murder related to theft.” I’d been arrested for theft a half-dozen times myself.

“We don’t have that here,” Varin said.

“Bullshit,” I replied. “You have people? And people own things? You have theft.”

“We mostly don’t, actually,” Nola said. “In Vorrionia, we had theft. In Hron, it’s one of the rarest crimes. I think that in general, people steal things that they need, or occasionally

We drank *frenna*, a low alcohol, spiced beer that was apparently brewed just for festivals and other such occasions.

“They key to a good festival is maintaining your drunkenness somewhere a little below ‘stupor’ until late into the night,” Grem said, when he came to join us at lunch.

“I prefer ‘not at all,’ personally,” Nola said, turning to refill her mug of *carsa* from a samovar on the table behind them.

While her back was turned, Grem stuck his tongue out at her, his eyes crossed, his fingers in his ears, in an uncharacteristic display. “I’ve been sober this whole damn war,” he said, when she turned back around. “I mean to spend today very close to unreasonably drunk.”

The conversation lapsed and I returned to watching the street. When I’d been riding with the imperial army, I hadn’t really learned to distinguish the people of one town from the next. But after my time with the Free Company, and a few days in Moliknari, I think I started to recognize how differently people dressed and acted.

Men and women from Moliknari favored ponchos instead of cloaks, and a lot of the strangers wore skirts instead of pants. The color schemes and the patterns were all different, and I was fairly certain that if I spent enough time in the mountains, I’d learn to tell where people were from by whether their cloaks were floral or abstract, earth tone or pastel. Others wore what I assumed to be festival garments, from tight-fitted single garments like union suits to ostrich-feather-ornamented vests paired with skirts worn with leggings. On a very few, the style seemed distinctly Vorronian—tight-fitting pants and shirts in blacks and grays, with wide-brimmed felted flat-top bowlers or other Imperial-style hats.

“Hey, where do I get clothes like that?” I asked Sorros, nodding to a young man dressed in such garb.

“Hronople,” he said. “Looks good, but it’s not practical.”

The young man saw us looking and walked towards us. His hair was long with black ringlets that framed a handsome angular face, and his eyes were dark and piercing.

“I’d love something to drink,” he said. “Do you mind if I join you?”

“Not at all,” Sakana and I said at the same time. He pulled a chair up next to Sakana and introduced himself to us as Varin, giving a polite but joking one-fist salute to those of us in militia garb and offering a loose handshake to the others. Then, when he sat down, he pulled out a pouch of what I presumed to be tobacco and rolled a cigarette. He offered it around the table, and while my friends dismissed the offer, I accepted and he lit the cigarette.

I breathed in. It wasn’t tobacco.

“What is this?” I asked.

“Mugwort,” he said.

“What does it do?”

Dory and Sorros started laughing.

“Nothing,” Sorros said.

“It’s good for your stomach, good for your dreams,” Varin said.

“You’re talking to a man who smokes opium and tobacco,” Sorros said. “And by comparison, yeah. Mugwort does nothing.”

It tasted okay, but yeah, it did nothing. I took out my pouch and lit a pipe of tobacco, then offered it to Varin.

“What brings you from Hronople?” Sakana asked him.

“I’ve been on the road six months,” he answered. “Journeyman.”

I know most of my readers will be well-acquainted with the conditions of the working and middle class of Borol, so I won’t linger too long on the details of that walk, but I hope you will indulge me a bit as it serves such an amazing contrast to Hron, to the world I did not yet know I was off to see.

My walk took me through the docks and their attendant horrors of press gangs and bribed officials, through the meatpacking district and the human screams that were so often indistinguishable from the death cries of slaughtered beasts. I walked through Strawmarak Square, where the nobility and merchant houses attend theatre, defended from the protestations of the poor by means of policemen with sticks and guns. I walked the edge of Royal Park, where, scattered among the birch groves, were the sorry lot who’d been left with little to sell but sex. I walked past men at work and men without work, past children playing games like “nick a wallet or you won’t eat tonight,” past barkers and buskers and scavengers and skips, past cripples and beggars and whores, past dandies and gang fights, past lamentations and sorrow and the strange joy one finds in the daftest of places.

In short, I walked through Borol. And I didn’t suppose I would miss it.

I was month-to-month at my rooming house, so packing up meant saying goodbye to my tiny apartment. To be honest, that wasn’t very hard—it’s been a long time since I’ve been sentimental about where I sleep. And I owned almost nothing, as my room had come furnished and I got my books from the library.

My three suits went into my steamer trunk—I doubted I’d have a chance to wear them where I was going, but I had nowhere to leave them anyway. My underclothes and most of the rest of my personal effects filled the rest of the trunk.

In my satchel, I put tobacco and pipe; a journal; my travel documents; and, wrapped up in the cotton kerchief that was all that remained of my mother, a set of brass knuckles. It might have been like bringing a knife to a gunfight, but the solid weight felt like more than enough with which to take on the world.

Truth be told, it was to be my first time off the peninsula. I’d been a reporter for five of the twenty-three years I’d been alive, but here’s how colonial reporting was done at the *Review*: I sat at a desk and read morse code off the wire. Sure, I spoke four languages, and sure, I took raw data and used it to write what I hoped were compelling, informative narratives, but there was a reason they called us hacks. Nearly all of our foreign correspondents were rather domestic.

The Chamber of Expansion itself was underwriting the story on Wilder, so I had an economy cabin aboard the *HMR Tores*, a double-wide luxury train that ran the overland route to the mainland. It was the long way to Vorrionia, to be sure, but the Council had provided me with no small amount of reading material and the extra few days gave me time to pour through the tens of thousands of words already put into ink regarding the exploits of our hero Wilder.

I spent the hour of daylight that remained watching as the famous idyll of the Borolian countryside swept past my window, then turned my attentions to the task before me.

“Our country is in peril,” my assignment from the Council began. “Popular support for expansionist policy is flagging, leaving us vulnerable.”

The council went on to explain that, ever since Vorrionia had acquiesced to our rule and signed the Sotosi Treaty, recruitment had been down. There was a whole page about

how the Cerrac mountains were rich with iron and coal, and a second about how it was our duty to bring the fruits of civilization to the few scattered villages and towns in the area. What the country needed was a hero to inspire recruitment, the Council explained, a hero like Wilder.

“The Man Beneath the Top Hat” was born in poverty and dragged himself out of the mire with hard work, patriotism, and a gravely voice that demanded respect, reaching the rank of General Armsman by force of will and valor alone. And I had three thick books in my luggage that could prove it.

It’s hard to remember how I’d felt about the assignment at the time. I’d like to say I’d known it was all so much horseshit. I’d written probably a thousand column inches in the *Review* about the conditions that the majority of Borolians lived in, back before they put me to staffing the wire, and I didn’t think the Vorronian war had done anything for them but killed those fool enough to enlist or unlucky enough to be conscripted. Victory, unsurprisingly enough, hadn’t brought a one of the corpses back to life.

But I admit that I’d probably thought this was different. We weren’t fighting a war, we were colonizing the mountains. We were guaranteeing the country access to resources.

And it wasn’t my job to editorialize. I’d tried that once, had maybe oversimplified some things, and I’d seen with my own eyes the damage self-righteous reporting can wreak. So I didn’t think it was my place as a journalist to question the story itself, the story that ran all the way to the roots of the Empire. I didn’t question the story that of course we had a king, that of course we obeyed the Chambers and their attendant police. Of course we worked for the expansion of imaginary lines, of course we let industrialists amass wealth.

So I was probably just excited to have been given such an important assignment.

In my four days on the *Tores* I ate more money’s worth of food than I had in the rest of my life up to that point all told. I was fed delicacies from the colonies and elsewhere around the world: stuffed red swan from Zandia, rainbow caviar from the Floating Isles, wildfruit cobbler from Ora, live-fried eel from Vorronia, sprouted godleaf from Dededeon, the list goes on.

Even at the time, I knew what was happening. I was being bribed, teased by a taste of the upperclass life. The Chamber of Expansion was trying to win me over, and they wanted me to write about their generosity. Even more so, they wanted me to write of their fine taste. Because even if I wrote about the decadent luxury of the aristocracy with the intent of fueling class hatred, the story would still be “the rich have fine taste. You should want the things that only imperial society can grant you.”

So yes, I drank their scotch and brandy, ate their exotic foods. These things were passable. Delectable, even. But, then, I used to think the measure of a food was found in its richness and rarity.

I read every one of those books, for what it’s worth. But I feel no need to repeat what I learned of Dolan Wilder here. There’s enough propaganda in Borol about the man, and I feel no need to add to it.

We pulled into Tar just after dawn, the train clanging south along the isthmus. The sun rose over the bay and cast the train’s long shadow over the Sotosi Sea. I had a tranquil moment then, looking out over that expanse of red water. The tide was an iron-and-blood shade of crimson, and it was hard not to think about the decades of war and the hundreds

I thought about it. I wanted it. “I’m too drunk, I think,” I said, my brain confused at what my mouth chose to say. “I’ll see you tomorrow, though?”

“It would be my pleasure,” he said, then went back to the conversation at the table.

I stumbled to bed, lay on my back, and slept happy.

Obviously, alcohol only has the effect of borrowing happiness from the future, and waking up was harder on my body than I would have liked. But soldier habits—even those newly formed—die hard, and I couldn’t manage to sleep much past dawn, so I woke with an aching head and shoulder. Carsa and leftover potatoes were waiting in the kitchen, so that helped. And for a moment, when I was lost in my self-loathing for having caused my own hangover, I remembered that roughly a week prior I had been shot in the arm in the heat of battle—suddenly, a hangover seemed a pittance of a problem.

Sakana was in the kitchen, along with ten or so volunteers, cleaning the place.

“I’d like to help,” I said, while sipping carsa with my good hand.

“I’d like you to too,” she said, though I knew by then she was only teasing. “But you’ve got a genuine war wound and can’t really do much good.”

“There’s a lot of not much good I’m doing,” I said.

Sakana put down her scouring pad and walked up to me. “It’s fine. When I told you about everyone pulling their own weight, I think I might have glossed over the part where we help each other out.”

“Yeah, okay,” I said, not quite convinced.

“Let me show you around the festival,” she said. “You’ll barely recognize Moliknari from yesterday.” She hooked her arm through mine and we left the hall.

The city was indeed transformed. Bright banners hung from rooftops and an entire shantytown had been built overnight, leaving only narrow walkways through the streets. People snored on cots and on the pavement under heavy furs and wool, and the smells of barley grits and spiced meat filled the air as others began to cook breakfast.

The central square was mostly free of squatters. In the middle was a block of ice the size of a house, with scaffolding up its side and at least a dozen workers crawling over the thing with chisel and hammer, carving it into something.

“The town’s population more than doubles when we host a festival,” Sakana said, leading me past a makeshift ball court. Children from five to ten, bundled up for the weather, were playing some game that seemed to involve hitting one another in the head with a comically-large hollow leather ball.

“These people are from all over Hron?” I asked.

“In a summer festival, absolutely. A midwinter festival only attracts maybe a third the travelers a summer one will—most of these folks traveled less than a week to reach us. There are, I think, three midwinter festivals happening this year, spread out across the country.”

“What are they for?”

“*Frenna*,” Sakana replied.

“What’s that?”

“You’ll see.”

The short day went fast, spent as it was sitting on the brazier-and-brick heated porch of the café with my friends. Sorros joined us that morning, and he was uncharacteristically quiet. One look from Nola, and I knew better than to ask him how his days had been.



sick, with pregnant families, with nursing parents—anyone who needed a warm bed—while others, traveling alone, crowding onto mats on the ground floor. Us four of the Free Company squeezed into one of the smallest rooms and onto two bunk beds. By grace of our injuries, Grem and I were granted the bottom bunks.

As soon as the first guests came to the hall, food preparations began in the generous kitchen alongside the main room. I volunteered to help, but, with no faculty for getting by with only one arm, just got in the way. I retired back to the main room and took a seat at one of the long tables, watching the crowds come in.

It wasn't long before a handsome young man approached and asked, in a thick Vorronian accent, if he could join me. He was tall and thin, with long black hair and deep-set black eyes, perhaps a year or three older than myself. I'd been too long alone, I thought suddenly.

"Of course," I said, and offered him the seat across from me. He removed his tailed coat, hung it on the chair, then sat. His eyes never left mine.

"I am Charl," he said, his Cer strained almost unintelligible, "recent from Vorrónia. This is my first winter in the mountains, and my first festival. And you are?"

"Dimos," I said, in Vorronian, "from Borol."

"Dimos," he repeated. "Your Vorronian is flawless."

"Thank you," I said, smiling.

"As is your smile," he said.

"You're very forward," I responded, but I was still smiling.

We fell to chatting, and he told me his story. He said he was a war refugee, fleeing conscription, that he'd found a home in a town called Mros and joined them to come to the festival, excited to see more of his new country. By the time he was done with his story, we'd been joined by more and more people, young and old, excited from their travels. Dinner came out shortly thereafter, and it was a feast the like of which I'd never seen.

Portioning was done in the kitchen, and each course of the meal came out already on plates. "It's to keep things fair," Dory said, pulling up a chair next to me. "In autumn, we just set the food on the table and let people take as much as they want. In the winter, there's less food, and it's customary for the cooks to dole out portions in the kitchen."

But there was no reason to complain about the serving sizes. We ate buttered beets and sauteed mushrooms, steamed greens and battered squash. There were deep-fried slices of potato and a stew served in bowls of fresh-baked, bitter-herbed bread. Dessert was self-served from copper trays filled with bonbons, cakes, and savory muffins. A few volunteers set up a bar and emptied barrels of mead and beer into flagons.

"Where's the meat?" Charl asked, after the last plate had been served.

"A lot of Hron is vegetarian," Dory replied. "At festivals, we don't serve meat at the banquets."

"The meat makes the man," Charl replied, indignant and rude. I began to reconsider my crush, and I began to understand why so many Hronish people I'd met had been reluctant to befriend a foreigner. But as I fell further into my cups, Charl regained his charm. He regaled us all with tales of adventure in Vorrónia, of his times at sea on merchantmen, of his daring, solo flight into the mountains with the Borolian press gang on his trail.

Finally, drunker than I'd been in months, I stood up and announced my intention to sleep. I gripped the back of my chair to steady myself.

"Do you want company?" Charl asked.

of thousands of people who had bled out into or drowned in those waters. It's the algae, not the blood, that turns the tide red of course, but the algae feeds on blood.

I tried to see Borolia, but there's not a spyglass in the world that could have let me see my home a hundred miles across that water.

I'd written uncountable words about Tar, the capital city of Vorrónia. For two years I wrote about the war there, following the front as it advanced and withdrew, and I knew the street map of the place by heart. For three years after that I wrote about peace there, and I knew more about the factory strikes and the reimposition of child labor by colonial forces than, I would guess, the average citizen of Tar. But I was not arrogant enough to say that I knew the city. A city is more than a map of battles and it is more than its news.

I can't describe what it was like to pull into King's Station (née Pior Station) and see the iron palisades, to walk out onto King's Square (née Vorros Square) and look out on the steel-clad, eight-masted palace ship, moored in the bay, stationary now for 450 years, attached to the shore as much by polished barnacle as by chain and rope. I knew all of these things would be waiting for me, but they were not *quite* as I had pictured them in my head for the past five years of my life. It was uncanny, unnerving, and absolutely beautiful.

There in Tar, my assignment was a mixed blessing. It was being sent to the front that had brought me to the city of my dreams, but it was my duty to a group of men I didn't even much respect to catch the next train for the front. There I was in Vorrónia, but no matter how much I longed to walk the canals, to flirt with guppymen and test my Vorronian sailor slang in the aviary bars of the gull district, I couldn't.

I took in the ambience of King's Square—the scents of herb bread and piss, the cries of gulls and sparrows—and then turned sharply on my heel and marched back into King's Station. I found a seat on a stone bench, waited an hour, then boarded a train headed east from Tar. I fumed.

The Chamber had wined and dined me on the *Tores*, but that was the last comfort they were to extend to me. I was to take that regional train for eighteen hours, out to the end of its line. To Outpost 539—an evocative name, that. There, I was told, someone or other would meet me and we'd make the last leg of our journey by carriage.

No longer granted a cabin, I took my seat on the aisle next to a Vorronian woman maybe five or ten years older than myself. I envied her the window view, and spent most of the day watching farms rush past. Many of them had been abandoned to the wild, and even the inhabited ones were clearly falling into disrepair. Grapes flowed over their trellises unchecked, and green flower creeping-vine had swallowed entire buildings.

My seatmate noticed me looking, and I was grateful she recognized I was staring at the countryside and not at her.

"This is your fault," she said in her own language, with none of the characteristic Vorronian politeness I'd so often read about.

"I'm sorry," I replied, in her tongue as well.

"Your soldiers burned our fields. Your soldiers burned our ships with our soldiers aboard. And now? The war's been over for three years, but there isn't anyone one to work the fields but children."

"I'm not proud of everything Borolia's done," I said, to be diplomatic. It was a true statement, but it wasn't what I really wanted to say. I wanted to point out that the war took its toll on us as well. The war claimed my mother when the navy's longguns struck the docks where she'd worked, my father when the munitions plant exploded. And Tar had wanted to conquer Borol as much as we'd wanted the reverse.

“That’s good,” she said. And for most of the day, neither of us spoke.

The second to last stop was the town of Halar, at the eastern edge of Vorronia, and the train pulled in shortly after sunset. The train car emptied, but filled just as quickly again with soldiers in imperial gold and green.

“They’re done with their empire-sanctioned brawling and vandalism for the month and are returning to the front so that they can kill more foreigners,” my seatmate informed me.

“Oh,” I said.

“Why’re you going to the front, then, foreigner? You a soldier?”

“No,” I told her, “I’m a journalist.”

“You’re a whore, then,” she said, “same as me. That’s respectable.”

I wanted to argue her point, but had a hard enough time formulating my reasoning in Boroli, let alone Vorronian. I said nothing.

I slept badly in my seat. The soldiers were boisterous and boring, with no interest in sleep at all. My seatmate snored softly, her head against the window, and I reclined as well as I could and waited for dawn.

The moon cast a pale glow on the landscape outside the window as we left the pastures and farmlands behind. The Gongol river tossed itself across rapids, the white foam spraying up towards the tracks that ran alongside the riverbed, and soon canyon walls raised up around us. I fell asleep at last, lulled to sleep by the rhythm of the train and the ethereal visage of the ice that encased the world around me.

Outpost 539 was unimpressive—though to be fair I was likely to be irritated by most anything by the time I arrived, bleary-eyed and grumpy, at the end of the line. We’d left the canyon lands behind us in the night, arriving in the foothills of the Cerracs and their attendant maple forests. A cluster of four stone buildings stood like gravestones in a fire-cleared field, the scorch marks still visible on the tree line, and a palisade of upturned logs did what it could to keep the wild at bay. The outpost’s “train station” was a boardwalk and the only people waiting for us there were two military men.

One directed the outpour of soldiers, then departed with them. The other one was there for me.

“First Armsman Mitos Zalpii,” he said, saluting.

“Dimos,” I replied.

He stood at attention saluting for several awkward moments until I caught on.

“Dimos Horacki,” I said, managing an amateur salute.

“We’ll wait here for our carriage,” Mitos said, and I took a seat on a bench on the platform. My seatmate from the train emerged a few moments later, elaborately made up and wearing a fine bustle that gave her body the S-curve that society demanded of women. No one met her, and she walked off on her own.

Mitos and I waited for another two hours. I had a thousand questions for him, but instead of asking them I dozed in and out of sleep. When our armored wagon arrived, drawn by six horses, I boarded it and slept some more.

Molikhari himself by having left, by not letting his side turn it into a fight against the other side.”

Blosik came to join us at the table.

“You’re from Borolia, are you not?” he asked me.

I nodded.

“Do you know why I feed you?”

“I don’t,” I admitted.

“I feed you because I choose to. In Borolia, you use tokens, yes? By performing tasks, or by being born into wealth, or by controlling other people, you receive tokens, which you leverage against people or trade with people for goods and services?”

“Yeah,” I said, “in a manner of speaking. And you don’t, here, if I’m right? You simply give out food?”

“I give food to whom I choose,” he said. “Some people here will feed you simply for being people. Some people here will feed you because you’re militia. I’d probably have fed you once or twice simply for existing, because why not? But I’d feed you much longer because I know you’ve risked so much, losing your home and almost your arm or your life, on our behalf. But there are other people in this town who wouldn’t feed you at all simply because you’re friends with Sorros.”

“Where do you get your food and tea, then?”

“From farmers. They give it to me because they know I redistribute it fairly. They give it to me because I have a good reputation. In Borolia, you’re measured by the tokens you carry, whether you’ve earned them or not. In Hron, you’re measured by your reputation.”

“Whether you’ve earned it or not?” I asked.

“Perhaps,” Blosik replied. “Perhaps. But ideally, a reputation is built out of deeds. Like everything in Hron, it is flexible, dynamic. And a reputation might mean different things to different people. There are probably people here who think Hessol had what was coming—I don’t, I loved the boy, even if he could be a brat—and to them your friendship with Sorros might be to your honor instead of your discredit.”

“What about strangers?” I asked.

“Strangers have a blank slate,” he answered. “Myself, I would let strangers drink my carsa for days enough to see what they’re made of. If they make themselves useful in some way or another, in my cafe or somewhere else in town, then they’re welcome here. If not?” he shrugged. “Then perhaps they should move on.”

“So Sorros—” I started.

“If Sorros chose not to stay with Marly, his reception in Molikhari would be very cold indeed.”

## Ten

An hour before sunset, the first caravan of travelers for Midwinter showed up on skis, a seemingly never-ending procession of families and individuals. Some hauled sledges, others did not. Some brought dogs, others did not. They flooded into town, setting up thick tents and tarps as they went, filling into the empty cracks of streets and buildings.

That night, the guest hall came alive, the rooms filled to capacity with the elderly or

## Two

On the third day, us four travelers and Sakana took one of the larger tables in the cafe. “Who did Sorros kill?” I asked Sakana, I suppose forgetting my promise to act tactfully.

“How’d you know that?” she asked. She wasn’t mad, however.

“That woman, Marly, called him Ghostmaker, and he called her Ghostmother. He killed her kid?”

Sakana nodded.

“Why? How?”

Sakana smiled sadly. “Have you ever seen Sorros drink?” she asked.

I thought about it. “No, never,” I said.

“Sorros doesn’t drink,” Nola said.

“He used to,” Sakana said. “Six years ago, he did something that divided the town in half. I was a teenager then, and my friends and I used to joke that we were going to draw a line down the center of everything and split it into Molik and Nari.”

She paused to sip her *carsa*, then went back to her story. “Sorros was a popular guy, the militia trainer. He taught people firearms, archery, hand-to-hand, strategy, tactics, codes... anything military, he knew it and he taught us. Gently, too. Every other militia representative I’ve seen since has been kind of... macho I guess. Sorros wasn’t like that, except when he was drunk. He was a monster when he was drunk. He had a reputation, and while half the town loved him, the other half started to hate him. Then, one night, Marly’s son, his name was Hessol, was drunk in the town square, harassing people. Throwing bottles at people, calling them all kinds of names. He was a grown man acting like a kid, throwing a tantrum. Everyone told him to go home. Two of his friends tried to calm him down, tried to take him away, and he lashed out, shoving them. Sorros came over—they weren’t friends, mind you—and knocked him across the face with a baton. Hessol fell on his head and he died two days later as a result of, I don’t know the word for it, brain bleeding.”

I was quiet.

Nola answered first. “Sounds like an accident,” she said.

Sakana nodded. “That’s what half of us thought. The other half didn’t. No one—well, no one but Marly and a couple of Hessol’s friends—wanted to see Sorros dead or packed off to Karak, but a lot of people weren’t comfortable with him after that. He was probably the best fighter in town, and instead of just taking Hessol to the ground, he hit him in the face and killed him. Even more than that, he didn’t let someone sober handle the problem. So, after the funeral, everyone concerned got together and had a meeting. It went on for two days. Eventually, we agreed—now, I say ‘we’ even though I wasn’t there, but I think they made the right choice. We agreed—Sorros would leave, so Marly and the rest of Hessol’s kith and kin wouldn’t have to see him every day, and if Sorros wished to show he was sorry, he’d quit drinking.”

“If she can’t stand him, why did Marly put him up?” I asked.

“She’s an odd one, Marly. I think the idea is that if Sorros is going to be here, he should have to *really* feel what he did. She feels her loss every day, so maybe she wants him to understand that, at least for a moment. I assume he’s staying in Hessol’s old room, sitting at dinner in Hessol’s old chair.”

“Who would stop him if he didn’t want to?” I asked.

Sakana looked at me, considering my question. “You’ve got strange questions, Borolian. I guess no one. But the reason he’s welcome in Moliknari at all is because he’s sorry. He shows that by conceding to these sorts of requests. And he shows that he cares about

In a war between armies, like the Vorronian war that Borolia so recently won, the “front” is a dynamic, but tangible, geography. It exists. Though inadvisable, one can stand on it or cross it. Armies wait in barracks or trenches or repurposed city buildings and fire guns at one another like gentlemen (or gentlewomen in the Vorronian case, as that culture historically lacks the Borolian censure of women combatants).

But the new war was against territories and not nations, against peoples and not armies. The front in a war like that is amorphous, and from talking to soldiers, it’s largely a state of mind. To be at the front means to be ready for battle.

At the time I was sent out, no one even knew the country of Hron existed. The Cerracs were just a territory to be conquered and colonized, with only a handful of villages and towns to speak of. The snow-capped mountains were just to be an eastern wall for the empire, butting up against Ora. The Imperial forces expected little resistance. Thankfully, they were wrong.

I woke up groggy as the carriage came to a halt, but my mood was a thousand times improved. Mitos was staring out the window, vaguely bored, at the leafless trees beyond.

“Hey,” I asked, pretending I was startled. “Who’re you? Where am I? What did I have to drink?”

Mitos replied with a short-lived, sardonic smile. “Glad you’re awake, Mr. Horacki. I am to be your handler. We are in charge of one another, you and I. If I tell you what to do, you will obey me to the letter without question—I am responsible for your safety and frankly, you’re at the front. So I’m in charge of you, but you’re in charge of the story. You tell me what you need and I’ll do my best to make it happen. Am I understood?”

“Yes,” I said, sitting up on the bench.

“Yes, sir, you mean. You will call me ‘sir,’ Mr. Horacki,” Mitos told me.

“Yes sir,” I said. I’d probably never said “yes sir” before in my life, and I honestly didn’t plan to make it a habit, but I saw no reason to make an issue of it.

The winter sun was warm on my face, but a mountain breeze found its way through my overcoat and I shivered as soon as I had both feet on the ground outside the carriage. The land smelled frozen and dead. Leafless aspens crowded in around me, and the Cerracs loomed close in on the horizon.

An honor guard of sorts was waiting for us: seven solemn men with horse and rifle, saluting Mitos and me. The gold and lime green of their dress uniform stood out strongly against the snow, rocks, and trees, marking them as targets from a mile away. Having just been told at some length about dangerous conditions at the front, I was not reassured.

“Take this,” Mitos said, handing me a revolver in a gun belt. I had never touched a firearm in my life. On my second try, I buckled it on correctly. I then mounted a blue roan hack and we started out into a path among the trees, leaving the carriage and driver on the road.

After hardly a minute, all traces of respect fled our escort and they began to talk and laugh amongst themselves. “A hack on a hack,” I heard one say. I’m all for puns, but it wasn’t hard to realize that it wasn’t well-intentioned. Most of the soldiers I met could scarcely abide my presence and made little secret of that fact.

I took out my pipe, packed it with tobacco, and began to smoke. It kept me relaxed. It was a strange afternoon, winding up that hillside. The world was silent and desolate and beautiful, but every time I let myself get caught up in that beauty, either some trace of disparaging conversation would drift to my ears or I'd find myself remembering that I was at the front in the company of men dressed in a startlingly inappropriate color scheme for their surroundings.

I offered Mitos my pipe, but he declined.

By the time we found our way to the soldiers' encampment, the gloaming was upon us and the scarce warmth of the sun fled from the world. The camp was a neat collection of tents and pavilions radiating out from a natural alcove in the cliff face. Cannon and other large guns faced outward from a palisade, and a bunker overlooked it all from atop the cliff.

General Armsman Dolan Wilder stood just inside the palisade to greet us. He wore his frock coat and his signature top hat, and was of course recognizable at a glance.

"Good day!" he called as we rode up.

The men accompanying me saluted and dismounted, then filed off to other duties. All but Mitos, who stayed at my side.

Wilder took the reins of my hack as I dismounted, and I followed him to a stable. The stablehand was a brute of a man with a shock of startlingly blonde hair who yanked at the reins and spit on the poor mare when she didn't respond graciously.

From there we walked down the central boulevard of camp, a muddy street paved with loose rocks and sticks. Cook fires were all around.

"In a good war," Wilder began, "a civilized war, a man may keep a cook fire at any point he likes. He is safe behind his own lines. But here, in the Cerracs, we fight savages. We cook in the twilight, when it's too dark to see smoke and too bright to see flame."

A soldier my father's age squatted in the mud, stirring a large pot. He looked at Wilder and saluted. Wilder saluted him in return.

"There are more than two hundred men in this camp," the General Armsman said. "And do you know what I fear the most?"

The question was rhetorical, and it was clear that he wasn't likely to care much for my personal opinions.

"The guerilla mindset is not a healthy one, you understand. It's a poison. I fight this war for His Majesty, above all else, but I also fight it for civilization. I fight for a world where we solve problems with metered justice and law, where men don't skulk about in forests. I fight savagery with savagery and I have no fear of death, my own or my men's. The only thing I fear is that we might become twisted by all this savagery, that we might fall ill with it."

Wilder led me to his command pavilion, distinguished from the tents around us only by its size and the four guards stationed around it. Once inside, a passable dinner of bird and root vegetables, as well as his five highest-ranking officers, awaited us. The General drank his liquor out of a snifter while the rest of the entourage drank theirs from clay mugs.

I was introduced to each man in turn, though the only name I can recall now is that of Lord Vasterly, the Major Armsman—third-in-command. Danis Lonel, Wilder's First Captain and second-in-command, was away. No matter as to the rest of these officers' names, however. They are dead to a man now, and I see no reason to celebrate their lives by ascribing them their names herein.

mustache sopped up as much carsa as he got into mouth. Townsfolk came in and out throughout the day to drink tea, catch up on news, or eat a light meal, and it was altogether a frightfully pleasant place.

True to Sakaná's prophecy, we washed our own dishes before taking our leave each evening, and though Blosik protested that we need not do so, he showed us to the dish pit readily enough.

"Why do people call you General?" I asked Nola one day.

"It's a misnomer, really," Nola said. "I never made it past Second Lieutenant."

"You were in the war, then?" I asked.

Nola nodded.

"What brought you to Hron? Sorros?"

"Wish it had been Sorros. No, it was another man. He called himself Hideon, which probably wasn't his real name. I asked what his last name was one time, and he looked thoughtful, then told me his full name was 'Hideon Hideon.' He was a Vorrsonian revolutionary, an anarchist, born in Tar but trained in sabotage at a camp in the countryside."

"Doesn't Hideon mean—" I started.

"'Devil,' I guess you could say, that's probably the best translation," Nola finished for me. "But a sort of childlike devil. An imp. Regardless, he was a saboteur, working for the dream of the revolution that had failed five years before he'd been born. I caught him on the side of the palace ship, ten pounds of black powder in a sack in his hand. That's how I made Second Lieutenant, actually."

"And?" I asked. "You fell in love with him?"

"I did," Nola said, laughing. "Though to be honest I was probably more in love with his ideals. I sprung him and another ten of his comrades and used my rank to smuggle them into Hron."

"Where is he now?" I asked.

"Oh, we joined the Free Company of the Mountain Heather, about nine years ago now, but he met a woman in some town or another and decided he might be happier as a goatherd. He wasn't a soldier, not really. Most people can learn to fight. And most young people *want* to, if they care about the war enough. But killing and violence and boredom and trauma take their toll and it's not for everyone. In Hron the same as Vorrnia, you'll find most combatants are no older than twenty-five."

"I think I understand," I said. "And I think, by what you're saying, I'm probably no soldier either."

"No shit," Nola said, smiling.

"So the Free Company?" I asked.

"There are about twenty companies skirting around the border of Hron," Nola said. "I joined the Mountain Heather because it watches the pass in from Vorrnia. There are about a hundred of us in the Company, but we rotate through, and there are a lot fewer of us active in the winter. Most of the time in the Company, we do nothing but ride and sing and train. We sometimes drive off Vorrsonian settlers. When I met you, I was coming back from reconnaissance in Tar."

"Do you miss him?" I asked.

"Miss who?"

"Hideon the Imp," I said. "Do you miss him?"

"Not really," Nola said. "He was a sweetheart, but he was a terrible lay. Sorros, on the other hand..."

“Alright,” I said, and we went into our rooms.

Within hours of arriving in town, I discovered the wonders of Hronish bathing technology. In Borol, I thought I’d been doing well—the coal-fired furnace in my apartment at home had doubled as a water heater, and I’d been able to take a shower almost anytime I wanted. In Moliknari, however, the hot water pipes themselves warmed the building, and the slate floor of the generous bathroom was comfortably warm on my feet. The water was kept hot through any number of methods, including absorbing the heat of the sun while in greenhouse walls and, perhaps most ingeniously of all, by utilizing the excess heat put off by composting waste. Charcoal and wood served as backup fuel sources for heating the water and buildings, but this was rarely used outside the dead of winter. And to top it off, the water from the shower drain was used for greenhouse irrigation.

I hadn’t taken a real shower since leaving Borol, and it was natural that, with hot water flowing over me, my thoughts turned back to the home I’d left, the home I was certain I would never be welcomed to again. I tried to get nostalgic and sad, I really did. A sort of pitiful thing to try to do, but I felt like a monster for not missing the place, so I tried to and failed. There were things here and there I could summon up memories of with longing: the fog rolling in from the harbor, the music in the streets, a few of the men I’d known; but no sooner had I settled my mind on one of these things than I remembered being a kid watching the rich feed their scraps to the dogs while my stomach had churned with hunger. I remembered sitting in the endless pool of hacks at the *Review*, writing about things I couldn’t care less about just so I might be given the dignity of not starving. And I remembered the police, the armed men who roamed the streets enforcing laws they couldn’t even recite, who killed with impunity.

Still, I miss the fog. And the people. Borol is a beautiful place—it’s a shame about the way it’s run.

I got to shave, with a mirror and warm water and everything. It was nice to see my chin again. And it felt good to sleep behind real walls that kept the winter winds at bay. It felt good to have some privacy. At long last, in the guest hall of Moliknari, I felt like I’d left the front.

Alone and warm for the first time in weeks, I started to think through my situation. I’d been cast along by the winds so long I had a hard time figuring out what I actually wanted to do. I wanted to see more of Hron, I knew that. I wanted to see Hronople. And I probably couldn’t go home. The country was founded by refugees—maybe they had room for one more.

I laid off the questioning, and soon Sakana warmed up to me and my companions, hitting it off particularly well with Dory. The two disappeared for hours at a time every afternoon. Grem was quite content to spend most of his time reading in his room to give his leg a rest, so Nola and I wandered the village ourselves.

We spent most of our time at a small, unnamed cafe, sitting in a window nook and watching the snow fall lightly in the wind. I drank a lot of *carsa*, a black tea infused somehow or another to be as strong as coffee, and I ate a lot of biscuits and other baked goods sweetened with honey. The local scones—or the closest they had to scones—were flavored with foreign and bitter herbs, but they went well with the *carsa*. After so long at war, it was bliss.

The old man who ran the cafe, who went only by his surname Blosik, took to joining us at the table. He was jovial to a fault and every time he drank, his white drooping

I took my seat at Wilder’s side and took a pleasant sip of brandy. “What are we up against?” I asked, my first question to the man who was to be the subject of my writing.

“Bandits,” he answered. “Simple bandits. I’m sure that before we came, these dirty outlaws were robbing homesteads and villages, but a few of them have turned their attentions and guns on us. And worse, a lot of these hovels are sheltering them. But we’re here to bring the King’s peace to the Cerracs, and a handful of half-starved criminals will be of little threat.”

Then we ate. The officers had been waiting for our arrival, and they tore into the food with the sort of hunger I swear I only see in those who risk their lives on a day-to-day basis. As bones of our meal were scattered on our plates like dead foes, the banter began.

“Caught Greig and Halmos going at it in the forest today.” Lord Vasterly sneered as he spoke, his heavy black mustache curling up with his lips. “Greig had his pants around his ankles, his arms around a tree. He was moaning like a girl.”

“With a man today, with a goat tomorrow,” another man suggested. A cliché in the army, I was soon to discover.

All the officers laughed at the joke. Wilder, for his part, smiled politely, knowingly.

“I’m not sure I understand,” I said. It took me some time to word my question as safely as I could. “Is homosexuality looked down upon here?”

Their eyes and their silence were heavy on me. After a bit, Mitos answered me, surely more diplomatically than anyone else would have. “Not everything that passes as acceptable behavior among civilians is acceptable in the army.”

Wilder spoke next, always looking for the chance to sound wise. “The Vorrionian army allowed women in its ranks and proved beyond the slightest doubt that at least some women are every bit as competent in warfare as the average man. And yet His Majesty’s army doesn’t allow women to join. Why is that?”

He swirled his brandy about the snifter and answered his own question. “We don’t allow women in His Majesty’s army because their sexual availability destroys the social fabric we work so hard to maintain. Homosexual men make themselves available to other men and have the same effect.”

I nodded. I even, bless my patriotic heart, tried to be understanding of someone arguing that men of my persuasion were not welcome. It didn’t work, but I tried.

“We’re in camp one more day,” Mitos told me after the meal, “before we’re off.”

“Where’re we going?” I asked.

“Elsewhere,” he said. The man was inscrutable, as always.

The food was good, for winter rations, but it didn’t sit well in my stomach owing to the company. And, later on my cot in my oilcloth tent, I slept badly.

The next morning, I rose with a clear head and a new determination. Whatever I saw, I was going to see as a journalist. I was there to observe and report. The truth, the bare facts, would vilify or heroize these soldiers, and I saw it as my duty to remain objective and detached. It was that determination, for better or worse, that saw me through much of my time at the front.

I rose from my cot, with its heavy wool blankets, and dressed in the freezing morning air. Mitos had left me a woolen civilian uniform—identical to those worn by the rest of the soldiers but completely devoid of demarkations—and it was warm and well-tailored. My cold hands fumbled as I tied my boots, but on the whole I didn’t really mind the weather. In a way, the mountain winter was a refreshing change from the smog, humidity,

and general miasma of the city I'd left behind. Everything felt crisp and sharp, and the air was fresh. The wind carried the smell of the forest into the camp.

There was no mirror, and I'd brought none with my shaving kit. I refused to fret about the situation, however—a few day's stubble has never done a man's face any harm.

I set out from my tent to find something to eat. I had met—and formed an opinion of—the officers, but the enlisted men were largely unknown to me.

"Hey journalist," a man cried, in a thick Vorronian accent, as I walked past, "why don't you eat with us?"

"We'll feed you if you write us up in the *Review*," his friend said.

They had pancakes and eggs, so I took up their offer. Both the men were young, younger than me, and might have been brothers. It can be hard to tell men in uniform apart, however, and I really only remember that both had ear-length shaggy black hair and the dark-olive Vorronian complexion and that one had a mole on his nose.

"So why'd you join the Army?" I asked, while they loaded up a tin dish with food.

"Whores," the one with the mole said.

"I want to kill somebody," the other one told me.

"Horseshit, both of you," I said, in Vorronian. "I'm not going to lie in the papers. Why'd you join the Army?"

They looked at one another and shrugged identical shrugs. Brothers or childhood best friends.

"Only job that will keep me fed," the one with the mole told me in Vorronian.

"Yeah," the other one said. "It's this or farming but my aunt says it's going to be a drought year and to be honest I never liked farming."

"And the whores though," the mole said. "And the killing. Those weren't lies. Only lie I've told in awhile is when I told the recruiter I was old enough to join."

The breakfast was good, and I thanked them for their time.

But they weren't the only ones who wanted me to write about them, though they were among the most polite. As I walked through camp unescorted, the soldiers did their best to cajole, harass, and even threaten me to grant them eternal fame by way of the written word. By instinct, I walked back to the stables, the only place I'd been in camp other than the command tent and my own quarters.

I heard the rhythmic pounding of hammer on steel and walked up to see a powerful, squat man in the process of shoeing a horse. He had a black and gray mane almost like a horse's, shaved on the sides, short on top and longer in the back—a haircut popular in the lower class areas of Vorronia, from what I knew.

I was watching him at his work for probably half a minute before he noticed me. He put in the final nail, set the horse's hoof on the ground, then turned to face me. He grinned, and I realized he'd gone partly gray quite young—he couldn't have been a day over thirty.

"Journalist!" he said. I was right—by the accent, he was from the lower class of Vorronia, probably from Tar.

"Not you too," I said, in Vorronian.

"Don't worry," he said, switching to his native tongue and clearly happy for it. "I don't want to be immortalized in print. Least of all for doing such despicable work as shoeing horses for the army."

This response surprised and endeared me immediately.

"No?" I asked.

Sakana looked at my travel companions for reassurance that they knew I was clearly a madman.

It was Dory who answered my question. "If Sakana stepped down and no one stepped up, the guest hall would go unmaintained. People would bring it up that every now and then at council, and if someone decided it seemed like a useful or pleasurable thing to do, they'd take over."

"What if no one wanted to, I don't know, harvest food or tend to the ostriches or cook or wash up?" I asked.

Sakana was exasperated by my questioning.

"I'm sorry," I said to her, though I intended for my apology to extend to my companions as well. "I'm here as a journalist and the place I'm from is very, very different from Hron. I don't understand the way you live."

"If people wanted to starve, I suppose they could," Sakana said. "I tend to find that people prefer to eat. And to eat, we have to plant and harvest, we have to herd and hunt. We find joy in doing things for ourselves and our communities."

"What about less pleasant things, like washing dishes? Or, I don't know, maintaining your systems of sewage? Cleaning latrines?"

"Where you're from, do you have to get paid to shower? Dress yourself? When you're done working, do you walk off and leave the tools in disarray? I don't mean to sound disrespectful," Sakana said, "but are you a country of children?"

"No," I said.

"Well, since you're a grown man, while you're a guest at Moliknari, I'll expect you to clean up your own waste and wipe your own ass."

"I meant no offense," I said.

"Then make none," she answered.

Sakana led us to the back of the hall, through a door to a hallway with at least a dozen rooms leading off of it. "These are the quarters. You've got the run of the place for the moment, but you'll have to share when more people arrive for midwinter." Sakana turned to look at me. "You do know how to share, where you're from?"

I grew angry, but chose not to express it. "Yes," I said.

"The water closet is the last door on the right. If you make a mess of it, clean it up. I'll start cooking dinner at sundown this evening, and could use a hand or two to help in the kitchen."

With that, Sakana turned and walked down the steps.

"That didn't go well," I observed.

"Moliknari," Dory suggested.

"Not everyone likes foreigners," Nola said.

"Aren't you a foreigner?" I asked her.

"Used to be," she answered. "Ten years on, I'm just a girl with an accent. And listen—not everyone likes foreigners and more than that, not everyone likes journalists. Not everyone likes knowing that anything they say might end up in some book some day—or worse, as propaganda for the enemy."

"That's fair," I said. "I'll try to be more careful."

Nola put her hand on my shoulder. "For what it's worth, I don't think you pissed her off, just frustrated her. It's like someone coming into Borolia and asking you why you work for a living. It just doesn't make any sense to her. Hronople is a city of immigrants, but Moliknari has been living this way for hundreds of years."

in the central square, terrified. That February morning, when I rode into town with just the five of us, there was a welcoming committee of twenty gathered on the central square, armed and calm.

“Hey everyone,” Sorros said, dismounting ten yards away and walking forward with his hands held out to the side.

“Sorros Ralm,” an elderly woman said from where she stood at the front of the crowd, no trace of affection in her voice.

“Marly Ghostmother,” Sorros replied.

“What did I say to you, last time we spoke?” Marly held a short-barreled rifle slack at her side.

“That if you saw me again you might shoot me,” Sorros said.

“And here you are,” she said. “You think you’re a hero now that you’re a militiaman?”

“I do not,” Sorros replied.

“Then why, by the Mountain, am I looking at you?”

“We were waylaid by the storm,” Sorros said. “I had no intention to ride home.”

“This isn’t your home, Ghostmaker.”

Sorros bowed his head.

“If you’re here, Sorros, then you’re to stay three days in my house, from now until the start of midwinter. Your friends are welcome in the guest hall. Is this amenable?”

“It is,” Sorros said, raising his head, color returning to his face.

Marly turned from us and walked away, and Sorros followed. He took his top hat from his head and held it at his side. That was the last I saw of him until the festival.

“Anarchists are kind of strange,” I said to Nola, in Boroli.

“You’re onto something there,” she replied.

I’d assumed they were great halls—in every town we’d gone through, there’d been a single large hall somewhere near the center of everything. I’d assumed they were for weddings and feasts, for the ruler or rulers to make decisions or live. I’d assumed wrong—they were guest halls. Our host Sakana, a young woman in practical clothing with a streak of white in her light brown hair, explained everything to us.

Moliknari’s guest hall was the most impressive I’d seen thus far, a three story mansion built with ancient timbers and stones as tall as people. We walked in through the ornately inlaid doors and into a clean and hospitable open dining hall, with hearths in three of the stone walls and a circular stair leading up to balcony floor above us. We stood in the colored light of a stained glass abstract that cast strange colors over our faces and bodies.

“The guest hall doesn’t belong to the town,” Sakana explained at my questioning. “Artisans from nearby villages build them over the course of a summer or two, and they’re meant to represent the pinnacle of their craft. In its way, the guest hall is the symbol of our allegiance to all of Hron: residents of Moliknari won’t step foot into them. They’re for visitors only. Well, except for the caretakers. We can go in, of course.”

“What got you the job of caretaker?” I asked.

“I chose it, the same as anyone chooses a job.”

“What if you didn’t want to do it?” I asked.

“Then I wouldn’t do it.”

“And someone else would take your place?” I asked.

“If they wanted,” she replied.

“What if no one wanted to caretaker the guest hall?” I asked.

He set down his tools and came to join me by the door. “No,” he said. “There’s no pride in this for me. At best, it’s work—and who likes to work for other people?—and at worst I’m party to murder. To conquest. To the expansion of the same empire that so recently conquered Tar.”

“Why do you do it?” I asked.

“I’ll tell you, but you can’t put me or what I say in your articles,” he said. “Not yet. Not until I’m dead or free of this place.”

“I swear,” I said.

“Then I’m going to trust you. Don’t betray that, my new friend, or you’ll get me hanged. What’s your name?”

“Dimos Horacki,” I told him.

“A pleasure to meet you, Dimos,” he said. “My name’s Vinessay Solock. You can call me Vin.”

He led me out away from the stable and towards the gate in the palisades. As we approached, the three pikemen on duty stood to attention, though they did not salute.

“Your business?” one asked.

“I intend to take our guest here, the journalist, to see the gibbet.”

They looked at one another, considering his words, then the same man responded. “Very well.”

“Formalities,” he said as we walked out the gate, “are either a sign of the love and worship to be found in ceremony and ritual, or more often, they’re the sign of a weak mind desperately clinging to power and law in the face of the wilds, of chaos.”

“Just who are you?” I asked. I was starting to get nervous. I had no idea what to make of the man, and for a moment I worried he might be a Vorrsonian nationalist, on a mission of sabotage. I shivered, half with fear, half with excitement.

“I’m a farrier,” he said. “Nothing more. My mother was a strong woman, though, and I like to think she left me a lot. She died in the war before the war, when I was a baby.”

I’d heard the term before, somewhere in my research, and I wracked my brain to place it. “The revolution?” I asked. Before the war against Vorrnia had broken out, there’d been an uprising by a mix of anarchists and republicans. Borolia had ridden in to the rescue, only to grab territory in the north of the country as soon as the peasants were put down with gunfire. That treachery had sparked the war, not the longgun strike on the Borol harbor, despite what we print in the *Borol Review*.

Not ten feet from the front gate, we took a path that took us alongside the palisades and, two minutes later, to the gallows. A strong oak beam projected out from the top of the wall, supporting the weight of two hanged men. Each had the same haircut as Vin.

“They look like you,” I said.

“They *are* like me,” he responded. “Conscripts. Caught deserting.”

I looked in horror at the rotten flesh that hung loose on the prisoners’ bones, then turned to Vin. He was smiling, a tight, sad smile.

“As sad as I am, looking at two of my friends hanging from a beam in the Cerracs, I know that there were four more with them that left that night. I wish I’d had the courage to join them. The four that escaped, or even these two here. I don’t like this work, and I don’t know if I like these mountains. I don’t like my company, and least of all do I like myself.”

## Three

The next morning, with the sun still below the mountain, I rode out with Wilder, Mitos, and seventy men. We picked our way down the trail to the road, single- and double-file. I rode with Wilder near the front, though he was quiet that morning. Once we reached the road, the General galloped off ahead with the vanguard.

Roads in the Cerracs are a lot like the roads in the north of Borolia: packed dirt and gravel with deep wagon ruts. The main force of the army rode at a walk, to keep pace with the supply and ammunition wagons, and I had plenty of time to stare at, and make note of, the magnificent forests and hills around me. But my hopes for quiet contemplation were quickly dashed—an army, as it turns out, even a small one, doesn't go anywhere quietly. The wagons rumbled and clanked, and the men shouted and boasted. They fired their guns into the forest at the slightest noise, shooting at squirrels and bears and wild turkeys or just the sounds of the wind.

Most of the time, roads in the mountains follow the course of rivers, and that morning's ride was no exception. "What river is that?" I asked Mitos.

He shrugged.

I asked the man to my left, a gray-haired veteran.

"A wet one," he said.

I gave up on questioning the men after that.

Some time later, we found Dolan Wilder and his vanguard waiting for fresh horses. Wilder's horse was dead, ridden to death by the man who wore spurs as sharp as a barber's razor. Wilder mounted a spare gelding and fell in beside me.

Not long after, we reached the village of Steknadi. I only learned its name a month later; his Majesty's Army didn't know or care who these people were, let alone what they chose to name their settlements. On Wilder's map, they were numbered instead of named.

"They must have seen us coming," Wilder told me. A hundred or so villagers were gathered on a cobbled square in the center of town, surrounded by their goats and mountain ostriches and gigantic shepherd dogs. The peasants were unarmed and clearly afraid.

"If it weren't for that sow of a horse," he told me, as though in confidence, "we'd have been on them before they'd had a chance to disguise themselves and take off with the weaponry."

The unit spread out over the village, securing the road and the most visible paths into the forest, while Lord Vasterly rode in to speak with the assembled peasants.

"I'd like to hear what he has to say," I told Mitos.

"It seems peaceful enough here," my handler granted, and the two of us rode closer.

"You're in the Empire now," Vasterly was saying. His Cer—the dialect of Vorrionian spoken in the mountains—was terrible, accented so thickly I doubt more than half the crowd understood him. "You'll be under our watch. Under the King's watch. We give you peace."

Everything was silent. Even the wind was still. Even the goats did not bleat, the ostriches did not call out.

"What peace is that, fat man?" a boy from the crowd finally asked. "The peace of the grave?"

Vasterly drew his gun and aimed it at the boy. "If you so please," he answered.

"The King's peace," Wilder interrupted, riding up alongside Vasterly and me. His Cer, while accented, was a thousand times more studied than Vasterly's. "We extend mercy and

"Old ways... like Ekarna and her necklace of teeth?" I asked.

"Oh, that's the least of it," Grem said. "They've still got worship in Moliknari, from what I hear. With sigils and effigies and everything."

"And madwomen and madmen who set themselves alight on the midsummer, too, is that it Grem?" Sorros asked.

"Well I heard—" he started.

"I don't doubt you've heard a lot of things about where I'm from. Worship or no, it's just a place—filled with people, some crazy some sane."

"Where I'm from," I said, "anyone who said you could get by without a formal government would be called crazy, deluded, or idealistic."

Grem grinned. "Maybe we're all three!"

There's no reason I can really explain as to why riding in deep snow is as tiring as it is. It might be the slow pace, it might be worrying about icy patches that could drop the horse. It might be just how damn cold it is.

Grem pulled out his concertina when we stopped for lunch, the first time I'd seen it in his hands since the battle. He began to play a song, a fast and happy song, but stopped before he finished the first bar. He tried a slower song, a mournful song, but made it no further. He threw the instrument into a snowdrift, then tried to stand up. Even with his crutch, he failed, and fell into the snow. Dory was with him in a second, helping him to his feet, and I heard his sobbing cries.

I went and retrieved the concertina, brushing it dry with my wool coat.

"Leave it," I heard Grem cry out.

He collapsed into Dory's arms and wept. Dory brushed his hair with her hand and looked out across the snowscape, her face unreadable. It was a long time before we were back on the march. I packed the concertina with my things.

On the morning of the fourth day since the storm, we drank a thin soup of snowmelt, wild winter greens, and rabbit bones for breakfast. We mounted our weary horses and began the day's journey. Grem and I had run out of opium, and I passed out from the pain at least once while we rode.

Two hours later, we saw Moliknari. It was larger than any town I'd seen in the mountains, with hundreds of buildings. The houses, however, were like those I'd seen anywhere else in Hron, built of stone and timber with steeply-pitched roofs.

"Wait here," Sorros said, then started to ride towards town.

"No," Nola said. "We won't let you go alone."

"Our entire reason for being here depends on you earning their respect. If you ride in with me, that might not be possible."

"Don't care," Nola said. "I won't pretend I don't know you."

Sorros looked at the rest of us, and one at a time we nodded.

"You're idiots," he said. "Solidaritous to a fault." We don't have an adjectival form of the word "solidarity" in Boroli, but they have it in Cer and they use it all the time. "At least keep your guns hidden so they don't think you're like, thugs from Karak I've hired to keep me safe."

I looked to Nola, and since she was unbuckling her gun belt I did the same. She took her pistol and put it in her saddlebag, which she left unbuckled. We rode into town.

When I'd ridden into towns with the army, most all the villagers had waited for us



buried in the same hole as my friends, after all.”

I didn't answer him, but instead stared at the majesty above us.

“I think I'm going to call that one my leg-star,” he said, pointing. “That one there, in the Sower's leg. It's kind of dim. I hope when I die I go to it instead of some other star.”

“You don't actually believe any of this, do you?” I asked.

“No,” he said.

“That's good,” I said.

“But it's kind of pretty to think about,” he said.

“I think you just summed up religion,” I told him.

He smiled politely, then crutched back to the tent, leaving me with the heavens.

I looked up at Huros, the sailor, my favorite constellation, high up in the sky in midwinter. I looked at his two eyes, the twin stars, equally bright, one white, one gold. I thought about my parents, and I started to cry. I thought about everything I'd seen, and I cried harder. I wailed in the snow, among ancient oaks in the Cerracs, crying for the souls of the dead.

I'm a terrible atheist.

## Nine

In the morning, over grits, we talked over our options.

“If we're going to ride,” Nola said, “we've got to leave soon. When the snow forms a crust, it's bad news for the horses. They can cut their legs breaking through the ice. And we can't ride hard or they'll sweat too much and freeze.”

“I think we need to go to Moliknari,” Sorros said.

“I agree,” Nola said.

“What happens if we try for Holl instead?” I asked.

“We run out of food, kill our horses, and probably freeze to death in the snow or at the very least they leave us wounded behind,” Grem said. “Is that a fair estimation?”

“Yeah,” Dory said, “pretty much.”

“So what's the problem with Moliknari?” I asked.

“I'm from there,” Sorros said.

“So?”

“You're from Borol, right? Imagine how welcome you are there at the moment.”

“I hardly expect you sold your country out to some anarchists in the hills,” I said. I started laughing, because I'm an idiot. “What did you do? Break the accord?”

“That's enough,” Nola said. She moved to sit beside her partner and put her hand on his knee. “He clearly doesn't want to talk about it. Whatever they think of him in Moliknari, we'll deal with it.”

“I'm sorry,” I mumbled, then filled my mouth with dried berries and turned away.

“I've always wanted to see Moliknari,” Grem said. “And I haven't been to a midwinter festival in, I don't know, three years?”

“What's in Moliknari?” I asked.

“A lot of people there still follow the old ways,” Grem said.

“A lot of people there are raving lunatics you mean,” Sorros interjected.

justice to his citizens and reserve our bullets—” at this he took a moment to stare down his subordinate, “for his enemies. Your enemies.”

“We have to set an example,” Lord Vasterly said, in Boroli.

“We just did,” Wilder replied. “And you will not interrupt me in any language.”

“Yes sir.”

Vasterly began to explain the terms of the village's new governance. Largely, it consisted of taxation—to be taken that very day—of herd animals and food stockpiles. This news apparently didn't come as a surprise, though it was clearly unwelcome.

Three soldiers approached, dragging a struggling woman. The smallest of the men stepped forward to address Wilder.

“We found her trying to get into the woods,” the man said. His voice was soft, his eyes were bright.

“I had to find my herd,” she said, in formal Vorronian.

“What she say?” one of her handlers asked, in the thickest northern drawl I'd ever imagined.

“Said she had to find her herd,” the soft-voiced man answered.

“Arhuh huh huh,” the man laughed. “She had what to go crawling if she was looking for ostriches? Maybe what they was tiny little ones?”

Wilder drew his crop and struck the man across the face, then the back. “You will not speak in such a peasant tongue in His Majesty's army.”

“Yes sir,” the man said, trying and failing to master his accent.

The man in the top hat turned to the woman and spoke in her language. “You were off to warn the rebels, no?”

“Fuck you,” she said, in Boroli.

Dolan Wilder dismounted and led the party of us—the woman, her three attendants, myself, and my attendant—into the forest for nearly two miles. He spoke to her at length in Cer, telling her what a merciful man he could be. She refused to speak.

At length, Wilder gave up and ordered her tied to a tree to be “salted.”

The soft-voiced man obliged with a smile, securing her with rope to the trunk of the ancient aspen. He unsheathed his bayonet, cut open the woman's flank, and sprinkled powder into the wound. She began to howl in pain immediately.

We left her there and walked back.

“What was that?” I asked Wilder. But he didn't answer. His face was a mask, his eyes expressionless.

“What was that?” I asked Mitos.

“Gorsalt,” he answered. “Hallucinogenic salt from Ora. It induces nightmares and attracts wolves.”

“Why'd you do it?” I asked the soft-voiced stranger.

“Wasn't me, not really,” he told me. “It was an order. Wilder's the one who gave it.”

But it wasn't Wilder's bayonet that cut into the woman's flesh. It was not by his hands that she was salted. It is in this way that the Imperial Army—indeed, any authoritarian military force—eschews individual responsibility. If there is a devil in this world, it does its work through hierarchy.

We rode from Steknadi to a nearby lake and set up camp for the night. Wilder was in a sour mood and took his dinner alone, so I walked out to the rocky beach. My greatcoat took the sting from the air and the moon above was gibbous and lovely.

I thought about the salting, and fear began its way to the fore of my brain. I couldn't tell why I'd been invited along to witness the woman's execution. Maybe Wilder had meant to scare me, but honestly, I thought it then and I think it now, I just think the man saw ruthlessness as a virtue. Wilder wasn't trying to scare *me* because I wasn't even a person to him, I was a vessel through which he could communicate with the world. I was an object, a tool. I was a journalist. Wilder wasn't trying to scare *me*, he was trying to scare the world.

Tobacco wasn't enough to calm me down, though I smoked quite a bit that evening. First conscription, now this. My loyalty was shaking, and I didn't know what to make of that.

My friends and I in Borol used to talk in the bars about ourselves as cynical patriots—we knew what was wrong with Borolia, or so we thought, but we were pretty glad when our side won the war. We hated the rich and maybe we didn't agree with everything the King said or did, but we loved our soldiers almost enough to sign up ourselves.

The stars my witness, that evening at the lake in the Cerrac mountains, I decided it was my job as a writer, maybe even my duty to my country, to tell the truth about my time at the front. No matter if it angered a man so civil and terrifying as Dolan Wilder. I'm not sure what I would have done, however, if I'd known just what effect my vow would have on my safety.

I was solemn the next day's ride. I tried writing on horseback—a terrible and illegible failure, that—before giving up on getting much more done than thinking in the saddle. And I'd started to grow bored of just thinking.

"Hey Mitos," I asked.

He rode up closer.

"I'm trying to write about what's been going on, and I don't have the words for everything. Those shirts, or dresses, or whatever they are that the peasants wear. What are they called?" Everywhere we'd been, the residents wore basically the same garb: woolen pants tucked into boots, with some sort of long shirt that came down to mid-thigh, and a bright, woven cloak over it all.

"I don't know," he said. "Shirts? Maybe a tunic? How does it matter?"

"Hey, Mr. Journalist," someone called out. I turned and saw a soldier, my age with long black hair, riding a black horse. He rode up on my left.

"I just put it together. You're Horacki, right?"

"Yeah," I said.

"You wrote that article! You're the one who got the Grinder burned down!"

I hadn't been recognized on the street in four years. My hand went into my satchel, wrapped around my brass knuckles.

"I'm glad you did, is all," the soldier said. "I grew up there. I hated that place. So thanks." He gave a salute, then spurred his horse up to the front of the ranks. My hand relaxed.

"What was that about?" Mitos asked.

"You didn't hear about it? An article I wrote, maybe four years ago."

"I've been in Vorrionia for ten," Mitos told me.

"My first big story. I'd been at the *Review* a year and finally got the go-ahead. After my folks died in the war, I got sent to Miss Grinosti's Boarding House. We called it, and her, the Grinder. I was barely a teenager and was a ward of the state. Ran away a couple times, always ended up back there. After I got out..."

taken over or burned to the ground?" Grem asked.

"Hron's only a few years older than me," Sorros said. "And while *any* country is more of an idea than a physical thing, I think that's especially true here. People have been living in the Cerracs for centuries at least. Moliknari, where I'm from, we've got records going back a thousand years. But we didn't have a *country* until the Western War started. The failed revolutionists from Vorrionia poured into the Cerracs and founded Hronople. They called for a great council, and people from every town and village in the mountains arrived. The council met for two years and hammered out the Hron Accord."

"Is that your constitution?" I asked.

"I... I guess," Sorros said. "I don't think that's the best word for it. I like 'accord.' But the Hron Accord sets out the principles of unity that bind us together. Anyone—any individual person, any group of people—can be part of Hron if they abide by the guidelines set out in the accord."

"And those who don't?"

"Most people do," Sorros said. "But those who don't want to associate with others by those principles are more than free to associate with others in whatever way they want, just not here, and not with us."

"So follow the rules or you're banished?" I asked.

"The rules don't say 'give us your three best ostriches every season,'" Sorros said. "They don't even say 'don't ever kill anyone,' not really. They're not the same as your laws. You're looking at this from the viewpoint of a Borolian."

"Well, what *do* they say?" I asked. I was growing defensive, and for some reason became committed to outing the hypocrisy of the anarchist.

"I actually don't remember," he said.

"I don't really either," Dory said. Nola and Grem were just smiling.

"You don't remember the rules? You don't remember the accord that you hold people to?"

"No," Sorros said, "I don't. The rules don't really matter. It's the spirit that matters, I think."

"Where I'm from, in Sotoris" Dory said, "we kind of remembered it like this: don't do anything horrible, and if you do something horrible, own up to it."

"I do remember that someone tried to amend the accord, about a decade ago," Sorros said. "They wanted to add a provision to the bottom, explicitly forbidding anyone from getting too hung up on the specifics of the accord."

"Did it pass?" I asked.

"You know," Sorros said, "I don't remember!"

Everyone was laughing at that, but I wasn't convinced. The Free Company of the Mountain Heather had operated efficiently enough without a central command, but there had been thirty of them. I couldn't imagine a country doing the same. They had laws, I was sure of it. They were likely just embarrassed about them.

The storm broke that night, and the sudden silence roused me. I'd been sleeping lightly, regardless—the day cooped up in the tent had left me restless—and I put on my greatcoat and stepped out of the tent. The snow was up to my mid-thigh.

Dory was there, leaning on his crutches, staring at the sky with his opium pipe in his mouth. I joined him, and looked up into the heavens.

"Do you think my leg is up there too, burning in one of the stars?" he asked. "It's

“Enough of this shit,” Grem said. The rest of us had stood, but he, for his injury, was still in his bag. “Get to work!”

I volunteered to help Dory re-hang the tarps while Nola and Sorros went off looking for wood. I fumbled with knots through my thick wool glove, resorting to my teeth since I had only one good hand. The wind was vicious, and soon I was shivering.

“We’ll be fine,” Dory said to me, putting a hand on my back.

My mother used to do that. She used to put a hand on my back when she was reassuring me. Even when it was about something she didn’t believe herself.

It took us hours to get walls on the pavilion and the horses inside. I was soaked. On Grem’s advice, I built up the fire, stripped off my clothes to dry, and curled up under blankets. In minutes, I was asleep, though I woke up several times in the night, convinced every sound in the forest was someone who wanted me dead.

The storm raged the entire day, and by evening visibility outside the tent had dropped to nothing. The horses were agitated and so were we. Only Sammit and Dammit, bred for just such conditions, kept up their spirits.

Long after I’d shut down from pain and cold and fear, though, Nola, Sorros, and Dory kept up their work. They packed the snow outside into windbreaks, taking shifts to warm themselves by the fire. Nola saw to the horses. Sorros cooked three meals. And while the winds howled outside, while trees cracked under the weight of snow and crashed to the ground around us, Dory read books to her brother.

By dinnertime, we had a cozy home, and for a moment during dinner I managed to forget my predicament and tried to turn back into a journalist.

“Can I ask you about Hron?” I asked everyone after I’d cleaned my plate of winter greens and oats.

“Sure,” Dory said.

“Well, then, what is it?”

Nola smiled. Dory laughed.

“You’ve fought for it,” Dory said, “But I guess you don’t know the first thing about it?”

“I think it’s a country I accidentally invaded,” I replied. This got a laugh from everyone.

“Hron’s a country, I guess,” Sorros said, “in that we’re a collection of people with a somewhat-shared culture who commonly defend certain rough borders and principles. But we’re not a country like Vorrionia or Borolia or even the Floating Isles. We don’t have a king or a parliament or a council or a royal priesthood or trade barons or capitalists or really any of the vestiges of power at all. We’re a country, but we’re an anarchist country.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“It means that everyone in Hron is their master of their own destiny,” Sorros said. “It means that there are no laws here, no prisons.”

Dory chimed in. “The Free Confederation of Hron is a voluntary association of autonomous groups and individuals who cooperate to provide one another mutual aid,” Dory said.

“Yeah, that mouthful right there. That’s Hron. We’re people who have each other’s backs because having someone’s back means someone has yours, and that’s a good way to live.”

“Why doesn’t anyone know you exist?” I asked. “We talk about the Cerracs like it’s just, I don’t know, unaffiliated villages.”

“What’s so wrong with unaffiliated villages that makes them just crying out to be

“After you got out, you swore you’d see the place destroyed,” Mitos said.

“No, no, nothing like that. Well, okay, that’s close. After I got out I swore I’d tell the world what I’d been through. I’d show just how terrible that place was. Miss Grinosti worked us hard, didn’t teach us a thing. We barely got fed. The ceiling leaked, our bathwater was red with rust. Disease went rampant. So I wrote about it. As a journalist. I did my research—I found the bribed inspectors, the forged forms, the overseas customers. But, well, when the article ran, Miss Grinosti set herself and the boarding house on fire. Three kids died.”

“How’d you feel about that?” Mitos asked. He was staring straight ahead, poorly concealing anger.

“Awful,” I said.

“Good,” he said. “You murdered four people.”

“That’s not quite fair,” I said.

“By the King it *is* fair,” he said. “That woman didn’t teach you a thing? No? Then how’d you walk out of there at 17 and get hired by the best paper in Borol? And you think your life was hard because the *ceiling leaked*? While you were living for free I was fighting a war.”

“It was my father taught me to write,” I said. There wasn’t much to say, after that. I’d felt guilty for years after the article ran, but I hadn’t murdered anyone. That was on Miss Grinosti, that was on the bribed inspectors and the whole system that let that place be the Grinder. I didn’t feel guilty for exposing it, I felt guilty because my plan hadn’t worked—I’d wanted to see the place fixed up, not destroyed.

Two days later we razed the village of Sotoris to the ground. Three score wooden buildings were put to the torch, houses and halls and granaries and stables. Three people—a woman, her husband, and their twelve-year-old child—had had the temerity to meet us as enemies instead of liberators, had shot at us from the second floor window of their three-hundred-year-old house. Their bullets missed the soldiers, but one of them managed to wound a horse before a score of armed men captured the family alive.

I say it was “we” who razed Sotoris because I consider myself complicit, I say it was “we” because I did nothing to stop them. Because I saw myself as a journalist, impartial. Because I thought honest words alone would raise me up and and out of sin. Because I was wrong. It’s possible I will forgive myself eventually, but it’s not likely.

The child was executed immediately, garroted in a chair in the center of town before the assembled villagers. It seemed monstrous at first, but truly it was a mercy. The woman was taken off by Vasterly for interrogation while her husband was tied to the chair on top of his dead child.

“Flinders under his nails, if you would,” Wilder commanded to the soft-voiced man. The man ran his knife along the chair, carving off long splinters. There was no hesitation, no savoring of the bound man’s pain. The torturer just removed the husband’s boots and, quickly and efficiently, rammed the wood under his toenails.

The man screamed, and someone in the crowd shouted out.

“Execute the unruly,” Wilder commanded, and a trio of soldiers strode into the crowd, found the shouter, and cut his throat.

“Pull out the flinders,” Wilder commanded, and the soft-voiced man obliged.

“Where are the rebels?” Wilder asked.

“I wouldn’t tell you if I knew,” the tortured man replied.

Wilder removed his sidearm and shot the man down through the top of his skull. I think he did it that way so that the bullet wouldn't pass through and hurt anyone in the crowd. Maybe he did it to minimize the blood.

Lord Vasterly returned shortly, pulling his black riding gloves back on, and took Wilder aside to confer. I couldn't overhear, but after they spoke, Wilder pistol-whipped his third-in-command, bloodying the man's temple.

"Raze the village," Wilder said. "But hurt no one else."

The villagers were too cowed to do more than mutter protestations and cry loudly in sorrow while everything they owned, everything they had built with their own hands or inherited from their families, was destroyed by uniformed strangers. I stood there, observing, trying to maintain a journalistic detachment, as an unspeakable cruelty was levied upon the people of the Cerrac mountains. We taxed them of almost their entire herd and then left them, homeless and helpless, in the dead of winter.

With the fire still raging behind us, we started back to camp. Mitos was ever at my side.

"Why did he hit Vasterly?" I asked my handler.

"Wilder's a gentleman," he replied, "and he doesn't tolerate officers who disrespect His Majesty's fairer subjects, even those who don't want to *be* His Majesty's subjects. Lord Vasterly has been demoted to Second Armsman, and he will be lucky if he holds onto his lordship when he returns from this campaign."

"And this village, weren't those His Majesty's houses and halls we just burned?"

I heard the clip clop of hooves while Mitos took his time formulating an answer. "Wilder is an eloquent man, but it's his penchant for irrational violence that commands authority, not his speeches. That's true of his troops and that's true of his new subjects. The Empire offers a lot to the Cerracs. The roads and the trade will come, eventually, but they're going to be laid on a bed of respect and submission."

We rode in silence for the rest of the evening, and when we camped in a field, Wilder took his meal alone once more. I stayed up late into the night composing my first column, which I handed to the mail carrier in the morning. I stuck to the objective truth, which was nearly my undoing.

## Four

It was less than four hours after we returned to camp when Wilder called me into his tent. A brazier tried and failed to light the corners the sun couldn't reach, and a uniformed stranger stood warming his hands over the flame. The man was short and thin, with a close-cropped red beard and wire-rimmed spectacles. Despite his officer's regalia, he didn't strike me as soldierly.

"Mr. Horacki, I would like you to meet First Captain Danis Lonel, my second-in-command," Wilder said, by way of introducing me to the stranger.

"Danis, please," the man said.

I liked him instantly, a fact that caught me by surprise.

"Lonel made First Captain in the Vorronian War," Wilder went on, "and I served under him. A fine man, and an excellent scout."

I thought about losing my parents in the war. "It comes in waves because you should get to be happy sometimes."

"We killed those bastards," Grem said. I don't know if he'd heard me or not. "Didn't we? We shot every fucking one of those motherfuckers who came into Hron like they could do anything they want."

"We did," I said.

"That makes me happy," Grem said. "And the waterfall, I can hear the waterfall. I don't think I even need to see it. I can hear it. And those trees. And tonight we'll get stars."

"I've read that in the Floating Isles," I said, "people believe that when you die, your spirit picks a star, or is picked by a star or something, and you join it. It burns your soul, and the brightest stars are the ones that are burning the most people. I think it's supposed to be a good thing."

Grem laughed. "In Hron, I guess we each believe something different."

"What do you believe?" I asked.

"I think my friends are just dead," he said. "The only thing left of them is this conversation, their corpses rotting in the ground, and the bits of freedom we gained through their deaths."

"Bits of freedom sounds like a good legacy to me," I said.

"I'd prefer a heaven," Grem said. "I don't want to die."

"Then don't for awhile," I told him.

Grem laughed.

But the stars didn't come out that night. The clouds, instead, rolled in. We ate our dinner—oats with honey and fried yams and beets—around the fire, mostly feeling cold and tired.

"It's going to storm," Nola said.

"No it's not," Sorros replied.

"Yes it is," Nola said.

"No it's not," Sorros said.

"Shut up," Dory said. "Both of you. I'm tired and my everything hurts so you two need to shut up about it."

They shut up about it. We talked a bit longer, but with little joy, and soon curled up in our bags to sleep in a circle around the fire.

The storm hit before dawn. The wind woke the dogs, and the dogs woke us. The first flakes of snow fell heavy and wet and by the time the sun was rising, there was a foot of snow on the ground.

"What do we do?" I asked, while Nola rekindled the fire.

"Gather wood," Sorros answered. "As much as we can before it's buried. Hang more canvas, turn our pavilion into a tent. Get our horses in, it's going to be cramped."

"If you have gods," Nola said, "I'd suggest prayer."

"I wouldn't take you for a woman who believes in the power of prayer," I said.

"I believe in the power of prayer to keep panic at bay in those who believe in the gods," Nola said.

"We've got enough food for another four or five days," Sorros said, "but a lot less if the horses can't graze and we've got to feed them."

"We're not killing the horses," Dory said.

"Not yet," Nola agreed.

“No,” Sorros said.

“If you change your mind, let me know.”

We made it to the main road soon enough, which was beginning to feel familiar to me. There, to the right, was the snag of a behemoth aspen tree. To the left, a trio of granite boulders loomed over the road and cast long shadows in the evening. We passed over three bridges in rapid succession, each built of stone and seemingly as old as the earth on which we rode.

“So where are we headed?” I asked.

“Moliknari,” Nola said. “It’s a village maybe three days uphill from here.”

Sorros shook his head. “We should start in Holl. Moliknari is too small—it’s not worth our time.”

“Moliknari is closer, and they’re hosting the midwinter festival next week.”

“No one from Moliknari will fight,” Sorros said. He was agitated. I’d never seen him agitated. “They’re just hill trash. Can’t tell a gun from a spear.”

“Hill trash? Aren’t *you* hill trash?” Nola asked, her voice beginning to raise slightly.

“I am,” Sorros said, his voice going soft. “And I’m from Moliknari. And I don’t think we—especially I—should go there anytime soon. It might not be safe.”

We rode on for a minute or so in silence, the hoofsteps keeping time.

“Alright, we’ll go to Holl,” Nola conceded.

“Don’t we have a say in this?” Dory asked.

“Of course,” Nola said. “What do you think?”

“I actually don’t really care,” Dory said. “I just wanted to make sure we got a say in it.”

“Well, I think—” Grem started.

“No one cares what *you* think, Grem,” Dory said.

Grem laughed, and I think I saw him smile for the first time since the battle.

“I think we should camp somewhere pretty tonight,” Grem said. “Even if we could press on further. I think we should camp by a waterfall, or in a grove of ancients.”

Sorros Ralm found us both. In the mid-afternoon we left the main road for a game trail that took us past the edge of the forest and into the older trees. As Sorros explained, most mature forests are only dense and tangled in the outer ten or fifteen feet. Further in, less sunlight hits the ground, so less can grow and things open up significantly. We rode through ferns and over moss-blanketed logs until we reached an open glade towered over by twenty ancient oaks. Not far off, we heard the dull roar of a small waterfall.

As soon as we came to a stop, I slid from my horse exhausted. My shoulder was killing me and I felt weaker than ever. Dory helped her brother down from their horse and he and I laid in the grass, thankful for the cessation of motion. We smoked opium and let the others string the tarps, begin dinner, and raise the food stores above bear-height from a tree branch.

Dammit came and curled up between the two of us, perfectly positioned so I could scratch her head while Grem scratched right above her tail.

“Why am I happy?” Grem asked me.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Ekarna cut my leg off yesterday. No, not yesterday. The day before? I don’t know. It doesn’t matter. Ekarna cut my leg off and I watched her do it. And Evana, and Desil... I shouldn’t be happy.”

“Grief comes in waves,” I said. Six years older than my friend, I was trying to be wise.

Danis smiled at this. I couldn’t tell if his smile was genuine or sardonic. To this day I sometimes wonder—he was an intriguing man.

“We’ve had reports of raiders to the southeast harassing a Vorrionian settler. Stole some cattle. Tomorrow, First Captain Lonel will take you and a dozen men to find the bandits. You will engage and capture or kill them.”

“I don’t believe a dozen men can do it,” Lonel replied. “Give me fifty. And no offense to this man, but a tactical raid is no place for a civilian.”

Dolan turned his gaze on me and smiled. “Lonel made First Captain in Vorrionia. And here, three years later, he’s First Captain still. He’s a... cautious man. Cautious men have their place in a command structure but that place is *not* the top.”

Dolan looked back to Lonel. “You’ll take a dozen men and find these bandits. If at all possible, you are to engage them. If that’s not possible, you are to return here with information. And you will bring the journalist. Mitos will see to his safety.”

“I’d been hoping to have a chance to see camp—” I began.

“You’ll leave in the morning. The last man you spoke to in camp, the farrier, has deserted. I don’t know what you told him, I don’t know what lies he told you. You’re not here to speak with the enlisted men here at camp: you are here to write a story on this campaign and the officers who run it. That is an order. You might think that you, a civilian, aren’t required to obey orders, but if so, you’re wrong. You’re a servant of the Sovereign, and I represent your Sovereign’s will. You’re dismissed.”

I nodded and turned to leave. Out of the corner of my eye, sitting on Wilder’s desk, I saw the green envelope that contained my first column, the one I had sent out with the day’s mail immediately upon my return to camp.

Even in the company of Danis Lonel, I spent my days riding in silence. Mitos had long since stopped talking to me except as necessary, as neither of us liked the other, and Danis was friendly enough but seemed to have little to say.

I grew to begrudge the isolation. Had I been alone, I would likely have spent my time observing the birds, the clouds, the frost-bit grasses that peaked out from the side of the road. Instead, I was surrounded by men who spoke to one another all day but who could scarcely spare a cigarette, let alone a word, for me.

“If we’re scouts in hostile terrain,” I asked Danis one evening as we ate, “why’re we out here riding in broad daylight?”

“These are our mountains,” the officer replied, drinking brandy from his steel canteen. “We can’t be seen skulking around in the darkness like common thieves.”

The military mind of the Imperial officer is beyond me.

On the seventh day, we reached a tiny homestead of herders and levied a tax. We were greeted politely, as welcome conquerers, before riding away a short time later. My belly was full of good meat and fresh fruit and the sun was out, breaking through the shade of the maples and dappling the ancient road before us. A herd of taxed ostriches and goats kept pace. Danis looked to me, his pipe hanging out of the corner of his mouth, his hands on the reins.

He opened up to me, for the first time. But I think he spoke of all the things one would like to see written about in print—his love of country, of his hometown Winne, how much he missed his wife and family, those sorts of things.

“I used to think,” he said to me, after awhile, “that if anyone came into Winne and tried this, we’d kill them for it. But that’s just the thing, isn’t it? Someone already did. It was just a long, long time ago. That’s why we have Borolia.”

That was the smartest thing he ever said to me. And to this day I can't figure out why he said it with such a smile on his face. Or really, why he told me that at all. But unfortunately for my curiosity—and fortunately for the people living in the Cerrac mountains—his pondering was interrupted by gunfire and the men around us died reaching for their guns. The ostriches began to stampede through the horses, off into the trees.

I've been in a few firefights now, which I can't really recommend, and time does some strange things when there are bullets involved. The first volley was over before it had started, but afterwards I felt like I had all the time in the world to drop from my saddle and into the dust. Maybe I should have pulled my gun and shot back, but it honestly didn't occur to me to do so.

The Imperial Army lost that fight before the enemy even showed itself. There were fourteen of us riding that day, and ten were wounded or killed in the first volley.

To his credit, Mitoš Zalbi, with whom I had shared as few words as possible, stood over me and died with a rifle in his hands. I never liked him, and he never liked me, but he died fulfilling the duty he had been arbitrarily assigned. That duty being my wellbeing, I still think of him fondly and genuinely mourn his passing.

When Mitoš fell forward, half his face torn off by a fusillade of rifle fire, I looked up and saw Danis with his hands above his head, his pistol and saber still untouched at his side.

"I give up!" he shouted in Cer.

## Five

About a score of brigands came into view, on foot, from the hill to our right, the woods to our left, and the road before us. Each bore a pistol or rifle, and they were roughly equally men and women of a mix of ethnicities, though largely Cer. All of them wore balaclavas, scarves, or other masks over their faces.

The bandits walked through the mess and shot the wounded men and horses. One woman and two men, one short and olive skinned, the other tall with a Borolian's fair complexion, approached Danis and me, guns drawn.

I stood slowly, raising my heads above my head.

"I am the officer here," Danis said. "I surrender."

"Yes," the shorter man said, then shot the First Captain in the face.

I entirely disassociated at this point. I saw what was happening around me, but my body shut down to keep panic at bay. When the woman walked towards me, gun held limp at her side, I was certain I was going to die.

"I know you," she said, in Vorronian.

"The train," I answered.

"You're that whore of a journalist."

I probably nodded. At least, I wanted to nod, and I might have succeeded.

"If you want," she said, "you can come with us."

I think I nodded again.

The brigands took their time going over the site of the ambush, strangely playful and laughing as they went. They took the guns and the horses. They stripped each dead man naked and took their uniforms.

a bacterial infection in there, you'll be lucky if you only lose your arm. So keep it covered and clean if you want to live."

Then she clasped my hand goodnight, called me a turncoat, and went off to her tent.

I slept well that night, thanks to the opium. My wound only hurt violently if I did something as stupid as move it, lie on it, or think about it.

In the morning, we were off. The closest to consensus we'd reached the night before was that we couldn't stay where we were. Some of the Company wanted to return to their base camp and continue to patrol the area. Others wanted to rebuild Sotoris. For my own part, Nola and Sorros talked me into accompanying them on a recruitment drive of sorts. We were on our way to Hronople to call for a council of war.

It took no urging to make me see the advantages of this plan. I longed to see more of Hron, and more so I longed for a warm bath and the chance to shave. A cold front was moving in and I had no plans to get stuck in the militia camp for months on end.

I mounted a blue roan we'd taken from the enemy. I'd grown quite accustomed to life in the saddle, I was proud to say, and I chose the roan because it reminded me of the one I'd ridden that first morning on my way to the Imperial camp. What I hadn't anticipated, however, was how every step of the way would send knives of pain into my wound. With Nola's help, I tied myself into the saddle in case I were to pass out.

Dory and Grem came with us. Grem, as much as he hated to admit it, was out of the war, and Dory had only joined the Company to see her younger brother stay safe. The whole recruitment drive idea was Nola's, but as a foreigner herself she wouldn't get far without Sorros. And Sorros, for his part, seemed happy enough to get out of the snow.

We said our goodbyes to the rest of the Company. Grem and Dory tried to convince Joslek to join us, but failed. He wanted to fight, he said. Half his friends had died at the hands of the invaders, and anything that delayed his chance to open fire on the gold-and-green was simply unacceptable.

Ekarna gave Grem and me more healing herbs, clean bandages, and strict instructions to keep our wounds clean and away from stress. She told Grem to find his way to Hronople within a month or two so he could be fitted with a prosthesis.

We brought five horses for the five of us, though Grem and Dory rode double. The extra mount carried provisions. Two of the dogs came with us. Sampson, a huge black beast, and Sampson's mottled sister Damsel—named ironically in Boroli. I took to calling them Sammit and Dammit, because that's what Dory called them. The two animals were a great comfort to have at our sides.

"Winter comes late in the Cerracs," Sorros told me as we rode.

"This isn't winter?" I asked.

"It's only January," Sorros replied. "The real snow will hit soon, and we'll stable the horses until snowmelt. People who have to will get around on skis and everyone else will stay indoors. Most riders caught in blizzards never return, and too many of those who do have eaten their horses. Avalanches, come early spring, are worse. My grandmother claims an entire village once got swallowed in snow, and it's not uncommon to lose a homestead somewhere in Hron every year. In the city, though, it's not so bad... the geothermal vents warm most of the houses and the covered walkways."

I nodded, though I didn't really understand. I was Borolian... what did I know of winter?

"You trying to scare the foreigners?" Dory asked.

only campfire still burning, the watch fire. Three scouts with dogs went off into the woods, and five people faced outwards while the rest faced inwards.

"We're all here," Sorros said. "So there's that at least."

"They came for me," I said. "I'm a traitor."

"Is that how you see yourself?" Nola asked.

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe. But I don't know that I owe an empire allegiance simply by accident of birth." It was the first time I'd thought of it that way.

Nola nodded at that.

"It was four men we released," a scout reported on returning. "They must have circled around after we checked on them."

"We can't stay here," Dory said. "We're in no shape for a fight."

"Anyone hurt?" Ekarna asked.

"My wound re-opened," I said, and no one else spoke up.

So Ekarna and I left the circle for the hospital tent. The old surgeon lit a lantern and began to clean and re-stitch my wound.

"Thank you," I said.

"You're welcome," she replied.

I was silent for awhile, fighting off the worst of the pain.

"I know you don't like me much," I began.

"You're fine. I just don't trust you, is all. It's hard to trust a turncoat."

"Is there anything I can do?" I asked.

She sighed. "No, honestly, there's not. You're probably a perfectly fine young man and I'm glad you did what you did. You saved my life by warning us about the ambush as sure as I saved yours tonight. It's just a thing, I don't know. It's probably not fair to you, either."

"It's not like the other side ever saw me as one of them either."

"That's true, I'm sure. And for the young folks here, they get it—they get what you said, about not owing allegiance to the side of a fight on which you're born. But for me? For me I guess I think you *do*. I guess I'm just old-fashioned. Though if you're a turncoat, at least you're *our* turncoat. And any chance I'll get, I'll try to keep you alive. Just make sure your coat-turning days are over."

She cut the thread and started on the exit wound on the back of my shoulder.

"Whose teeth are those?" I asked, nodding towards her necklace.

She laughed, the first time I saw her do that. "Would you believe me if I told you that they're the teeth of men I've killed?" she asked.

"Yes," I answered.

She laughed again, this time hard enough she had to stop sewing me up for a second.

"They're my dead wife's teeth," she said. "Sorros's birth mother. Maybe it seems macabre to you, but it's what we used to do, where I'm from."

"You're Sorros's—" I began.

"I'm his birth mother's wife, yes. Which makes me his mother too. And if you say we're anything alike I'll stick my fingernail into your bullet hole."

I grinned. She finished patching me up, then made me tea. "For the wound," she said, "and for your nerves." While I sipped on the mug of strong, bitter medicine, she walked me to my tent. At the tent flap, she handed me a leather pouch of herbs, told me to chew on them then apply them as a poultice at least once a day when I changed the dressing. She also handed me a pouch of opium, for the pain.

"A bullet wound is a puncture and a burn both," she said. "And it goes deep. If you get

One very young woman, rifling through Danis's saddlebags, stood up and shouted. "I found a map!" She unfolded the canvas and several of her compatriots came over to look before returning to their own looting.

The man who killed Danis Lonel stood by me the entire time. The first thing he did was politely relieve me of my gun belt. He checked the revolver, saw it was loaded, and strapped the belt around his waist. He then slung his rifle over his back and waited and watched. He stayed calm, never acted aggressively towards me, never pointed a weapon at me. If he and his friends hadn't just killed every person I knew within a half a hundred miles, I might have even relaxed.

I was a journalist, I told myself. If I survived, I'd better have something to write about. I tried to keep track of the details I would use later. I can't say this calmed me down, but it kept me from entirely falling apart. So I stayed detached and kept stock of what happened around me.

The bandits were dressed roughly the same as the peasants I'd seen in the mountains: wool pants; a long, dress-like shirt, and a thick winter cloak. But where those in villages had preferred woven patterns of reds and blues and purple, the bandits were dressed to match their surroundings: white, brown, and green.

My handler was a handsome man and kept looking at me. His green eyes looked out over the bandanna, his flat-top bowler was pulled low to hide much of his brow, but I could see emotion there. The man uncorked a ceramic flask of water, pulling up his mask past a neat-trimmed black beard to drink.

After a half an hour, a pair of brigands came out from the forest onto the road, accompanied by the greater part of the lost flock of ostriches and two massive Cerrac Shepherds. I'd seen a few of these dogs over the past few weeks, but they were still a little unnerving—a Cerrac Shepherd is almost half my height at the shoulder and is easily sixty pounds heavier than me. They're covered in thick fur and have the cutest canine face you'll ever see, but they were originally bred to hunt bears before they were adapted to ostrich-herding duty. Imperial soldiers had an unfortunate tendency to shoot them at the slightest provocation, so I'd never met one up close.

An hour after the attack, all the brigands met back up to talk in the middle of the road, having loaded all of His Majesty's horses with the bounty of the kill. My handler stayed with me, just out of earshot from the impromptu meeting.

"What're you going to do with the bodies?" I asked, in Cer.

"Leave them for the vultures and wolves," he answered.

"Isn't that a bit... I don't know the word in Cer. Cold?"

The man took another pull from his flask. "I suppose it is," he said. "Do you feel like burying them?"

"No," I admitted.

"Neither do I," the man told me.

"We go!" the woman from the train shouted over to us.

"I hate to say this," the man said, "but if you're coming with us, we'll have to put a bag over your head for awhile."

I spent the ride condemning myself for how little I seemed to care about the scene I had witnessed. In retrospect, of course, I know that traumatizing events can take time to sink in, but for that long afternoon on horseback with nothing to see but a canvas sack and the hints of sun through the threads, I couldn't decide if my callousness meant I was

a monster or just a damn good war correspondent.

I was mounted behind my handler on my own horse, and the bandit's rifle banged into my chest whenever I slumped forward too much. I caught snatches of conversation.

"Who is he?" one woman asked.

"The General met him on a train," my handler told her.

"Why's he alive?" she asked.

"He's a journalist," he answered.

She laughed. "That doesn't really answer the question."

"He didn't even draw his gun. I'm not going to kill a man who isn't a soldier."

"I could do it," she said, "if you like."

"No," my handler said.

We rode in silence awhile longer before another horse fell into step beside ours.

"He's a journalist? From Borolia?" a deep voice asked.

"Yes," I answered.

"How long were you with the soldiers?"

"Two weeks," I said.

"Glad you brought him," the man said. "He'll be useful."

There was something ominous in the way that the man said the word "useful," and for the first time, a real, deep fear made its way up my spine and into my brain. All I could do was keep breathing—deep breaths, down in my lower lungs. I told myself I was a journalist, that I was uninvolved. It worked, sort of.

I heard the waterfall from what must have been a quarter mile away, and by the time we reached it, I could hear little but the rush of crashing water.

We stopped, and my handler dismounted.

"You can take the hood off, now, if you'd like," he said, and I did.

The waterfall was something from a fairytale, dropping a hundred feet down the cliffside we stood atop to the canyon river below. Ice caked the walls around it, and the low sun made the frozen rocks sparkle and shine.

Overlooking the canyon, we stood at the very edge of an alpine meadow where horses—mountain ponies but for a few lowland thoroughbreds—ran unbridled and ostriches and goats wandered freely. A few shepherds, human and canine together, kept an eye on everything.

"My name is Sorros Ralm," my handler said. "And it's my pleasure to introduce you to the Free Company of the Mountain Heather."

"Dimos Horacki," I said. I offered my hand, which he took and clasped instead of shaking.

The men and women dismounting didn't look like it was in fact a pleasure to be meeting me, however. Not a one of them had removed their masks, and while none pointed weapons at me, many kept them slack in hand at their sides.

"We leave the livestock here, with some shepherds," Sorros explained, "and we'll make the rest of our trip on foot."

One or two at a time, all the bandits walked to the edge of the cliff and hopped down to a ledge below. The way would have been invisible if one didn't know where to look for it. I followed.

We started towards the waterfall, and the company struck up a song. They have asked me since to not put any of their lyrics or melodies into writing, and I will honor that wish,

"It is."

"Objections?" someone asked.

None were raised.

"We're agreed?" Dory asked.

"Agreed," people said.

"Then let's figure out some really good ways to murder imperialists," Nola said, and everyone laughed.

There's no distinction in Cer, in turns out, between "to murder" and "to kill." There's only one verb for both concepts. To this day, I'm not sure if that is a political statement or an oversight. Nor am I convinced I know which meaning Nola meant that night as the flames of the campfire licked the mountain air.

The rest of the night was spent brainstorming, clearly a favorite pastime among the Free Company. Eventually, the seriousness of the proposals faded, and, sometime after Dory suggested dressing up ostriches in Imperial uniforms to spread rumors that we were witches who could polymorph men into animals, I went off to my tent to set down my notes by lamplight. They wanted a journalist, and I had plenty to write.

An hour later, I cut the light and lay on my back, my hands under my head. It took me a long time to fall asleep. A month prior, I'd woken up every morning in the twilight to walk to work a job I'd hated for a man I could scarcely abide. A fortnight prior, I'd been in the company of the worst men I'd ever met. But just then? Just then I felt free. Tired and scared and wounded and free.

## Eight

I woke with a start to the report of nearby gunfire. Six, maybe seven shots in rapid succession, both rifle and pistol fire. My tent was dark, so I threw open the flaps and saw a muzzle flash from the tree line as a rifle went off. I reached for my pants, changed my mind, and simply pulled on my boots—to walk barefoot on a January night in the mountains was likely as dangerous as the gunshot. I left the tent in just a union suit, my loaded revolver held slack at my side.

And immediately, a hand covered my mouth. A pistol pressed into my temple. My unseen attacker jerked me backwards, pulling me off my feet, and started toward the tree line. My wound re-opened, and I cried out instinctively.

"Shout again, rat," my captor said, in refined, upperclass Boroli. "I'd love the excuse to put you down."

I heard a galloping horse and the thick sound of a sword cutting flesh, and the pistol dropped from my head. My captor collapsed behind me, his hand on my face pulling me down on top of him. I pried myself free and rolled away, shivering.

By firelight, I saw Ekarna on a horse, bloody saber in her hand. I turned to the tree line and saw three men in the green-and-gold. I emptied my revolver into one while he fired into the camp, and soon the other two fell as well. Two militia—in the dark I couldn't tell who—ran up to the woods.

"Clear!" Nola cried out.

"Report!" Ekarna called, dismounting. The Free Company gravitated naturally to the



I'd been thinking about that all day, and I had my answer ready. "His Majesty will declare Wilder a hero and the city will mourn. The newspapers will drum up popular opinion against you all—against us—and sometime, maybe this spring, maybe this summer, they'll march in with cannons to 'civilize' this place. It won't be pretty."

"How many will come?" someone asked.

"His Majesty commands a peacetime ground force of thirty thousand, down from one hundred thousand at the peak of the Vorronian war, most of whom could be called back to active duty. If he mobilizes his navy, that's another twenty thousand."

This news was not well-received. Around the fire, faces looked grim.

"There are only one hundred thousand people in all of Hronople," Sorros said, "and only that same number again in all the villages, towns, and smallholdings together."

"How many troops can you mobilize?" I asked.

"We're not 'troops,'" Ekarna replied. "We're free women and men."

"How many will fight?" I asked.

"There're around two thousand of us armed and trained in the militias," Sorros answered. "And most able-bodied adults will fight if pressed."

"A peasant with a spear is no match for calvary," someone argued.

"We'll have to get them guns," someone replied.

"So they can accidentally shoot themselves?" someone suggested.

"There're five, ten thousand people in Karak," Dory said. "And I doubt they want the empire here any more than Hron does."

"Fuck Karak," Sorros said.

"Karak?" I asked, but no one answered me.

And so it went. In the face of the overwhelming odds against them, the Free Company of the Mountain Heather, so recently victorious, fell into bickering.

"There's nothing for it," Nola said. "We have a few months to raise an army and drive them off. There might be fifteen or a hundred thousand soldiers marching against us, but that doesn't change what we need to do."

"The General's right," Dory said. "We can rally Hron to war."

"We can attack them first, set fire to their crops and houses," someone else recommended.

"We can fortify the mountain passes," Grem suggested.

"We could surrender," Sorros said.

Nola looked at him as though he were a stranger. "You want to give up?" she asked.

"No," Sorros replied. "I don't think we should. I think we should fight them until they break our bones with artillery and even then I think we should make the splintered bits of our body pierce their flesh and paint the snow red with their arterial blood. But I don't want us to rule out any possibilities yet. For two reasons: one, if we think of it, then someone else we're trying to convince to fight will think of it too. If we think it's a terrible idea we need to be prepared to tell them why. And two, well, it's *probably* not what we want to do, but *it might be*. And just because it's 'weak,' doesn't mean it might not at some point be the smartest plan."

"I like the part where even our bones try to kill them," Nola said. "I think that's a better plan."

"Those of the Free Company of the Mountain Heather will fight the agents of the Empire until, if not beyond, their dying breath?" someone suggested.

"Is that a proposal?"

but know that it was a song of immense beauty, of hopeful words. A song of spring and war. There were numerous harmonies, and while not every person of the company was up to the task of holding a tune perfectly, it worked out all the same.

"The song is our passcode," Sorros informed me, during a break in the baritone part he had been singing. And not one hundred yards later, the ledge widened and we walked between two gun placements. The sentries on duty looked at us, counted, and grinned. It only then occurred to me that the bandits had killed thirteen soldiers without suffering a single casualty.

After the gun placement, the ledge widened, and around the next bend I saw a rather well-concealed guerilla camp: shacks and tents were pitched under the overhang of the cliff or in the shade of the low grove of bristlecone pines. It would be all but invisible to anyone atop the cliff.

The waterfall rushed right past, and my eye went immediately to the clever open-top pipe system they had erected to bring running water to their camp. His Majesty's army, for comparison, had made do with water bearers who carried jug after jug from a nearby stream.

Most of the Free Company left for various tasks around the camp, but Sorros, a few strangers, and the woman from the train they called the General stood around to ask me questions.

"Who are you?" Sorros asked. "And not your name. But who are you?"

"I work for the *Borol Review*," I told them, "it's a paper. I'm on assignment to write about the war effort. They wanted me to write about Dolan Wilder."

"What do you know about him?" Sorros asked. "What does he eat, what does he drink? Where and when does he sleep? How does he treat his soldiers?"

I was terrified, but I didn't want to answer. So I asked a question. "You're not just bandits, are you?"

"Bandits?!" Sorros asked. "Mr. Wilder is the bandit. We're here in the mountains in the dead of winter because Borolian bandits have been harassing villages all along the edge of Hron. We're the militia."

"Hron?" I asked.

"Wilder," the General cut in. She'd taken off her mask. "Tell us about Wilder."

I looked at her, at the armed women and men around her, and it occurred to me that Sorros was likely telling the truth, that I might have been on the wrong side of this fight. I sighed, and my breath came out heavy and visible in the air in front of me.

"I won't," I said.

Someone cocked a gun. I couldn't see it, but I heard it. The General raised her hand to stop whomever it had been. I heard the gun uncock.

"You'll tell the whole goddamned world about him in an article but you won't tell us?" the General asked.

"Yeah," I said. "It's different and you know it."

"Write about us instead?" Sorros asked.

"What?" The question took me off guard. It took almost everyone else off guard too, it looked like, because soon it was only myself, Sorros, and the General.

"I'm not going to kill you. You can stay here for awhile or you can leave. And if you're going to keep writing about the front, why don't you write about us? Get, you know, both sides of the story."

"Alright," I said. I couldn't imagine *not* writing about my experience in the hands of

Borol's enemy.

Sorros grinned. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen such an enthusiastic smile. He then turned to the General, took her hand in his, and stood on his toes to whisper in her ear. She started laughing, then kissed him on the mouth.

"I'm Nola," she said, offering her free hand to me.

"General Nola?" I asked.

"Not a chance," she said. "Don't listen to anyone who tells you otherwise."

After that, Nola walked off and Sorros took me to a well-built one-room shack set against the cliffside. The first two feet of the wall were unmortared stone, the rest of rough-hewn wood. Inside, it was decorated and insulated with heavy draped fabric in drab earth tones. There was no furniture save a wide sleeping mat against the center of the back wall. On the wall above it was a tapestry that radiated color into the otherwise dull quarters and depicted a forest scene of wild horses. In the lower left corner was a small crest I'd never seen before, of a horse with two horns, a bizarre mix of rhinoceros and unicorn.

"Is this place yours?" I asked my captor or host, whichever he was.

"I built it, and I've been staying here," he replied.

"You don't own it, is that the idea? It belongs to the Free Company?"

"I don't think we talk about things in the same way as you do. I think if I used possessive words around you, you'd get the wrong idea," he said. "At home, in Hronople, I 'owned' my home. I knew I'd be gone for so long, though, that I gave it away. Out here, we're at war, and a soldier of Hron doesn't 'own' much at all. I built this place, and I can make use of it, but I'd be a damned fool to not make use of it in the way that best serves us in this conflict. Anyone can come and go at any time, and I trust them not to invade my privacy without some reason."

"But you could bar them from doing so?"

"Why would I do that?" he asked. "If my heart wasn't with my people, would I be out here in the snow hunting soldiers?"

"Why *are* you here?" I asked.

"Your journalist questions will have to wait," he replied. "I'm going to go eat. You wouldn't be welcome to join us, I'm afraid, but Nola and I will be back soon and I'll bring you back a bowl of something."

"Am I free to go?"

"You have the queerest questions. I'm not detaining you here against your will. You're 'free to go.' You're free to wander the frozen mountains, lost, until you're eaten by wolves, if that's what you want to do."

He smiled as he said this, and I realized that he just thought I was a very, very strange man. At the time, I could scarcely understand his logic, however.

Sorros left me to my thoughts. I had so many it was hard to piece through them all. What did they really want with me? Why did they want me to write about them? Were they telling me the truth? Those thoughts were useless... the Free Company didn't seem to offer me harm, so a risky escape seemed like a poor option and whatever was going to happen was going to happen. Why had Wilder sent only fourteen of us out to attack the bandits? What was he doing with my column on his desk? Those were the more interesting questions. I lay back on the sleeping mat to think them through.

I woke with a start in the darkness when Sorros and Nola returned. Sorros had a huge wooden bowl that smelled of beets and set it before me, along with a wooden spoon.

tooth from her necklace, kissed it, and threw it into the pit. Then together, everyone but the wounded buried the dead.

The corpse-fire was still smoldering on the overlook, so we moved our camp out to the forest.

I woke up sore and miserable. It was cold and I was lonely and I'd been dreaming of home. I dragged myself off the cot, into my wool overclothes, and into the morning air. Ekarna came by on her rounds and helped me back into my sling, admonishing me for having removed it to sleep.

"What needs doing?" someone asked at breakfast. Everyone was groggy and sleep deprived.

"We need to take inventory of stores, ours and theirs," someone suggested.

"We'll do it," Dory said, "Grem and I."

"Thank you," people said.

"I could use a few people to help me track down the soldiers who ran," a scout said. "Tail them for a bit, make sure they aren't regrouping for attack."

Several people volunteered.

The tasks were divvied up as people wolfed down sausage. Someone handed me a tin mug full of coffee—I hadn't had coffee since I'd been rescued by the militia. It was strong, black, and delicious.

Sorros and I volunteered to scavenge what we could from the soldiers' main camp, and we helped load carriages with provisions and munitions and most of the assorted spoils of war. I took all the tobacco I found. But the journals of enlisted men were left untouched and most of what in the empire passes as "valuables" were left as well. I asked Sorros, and he explained.

"We'll take what we need from those we've killed, but no more. I can't imagine a reason I need a dead man's earrings any more than I need the letters he got from his wife. Maybe some friend of his will find these things and they'll one day find their way to his family, maybe not. I won't be the one to make certain they don't."

Wilder's belongings, however, were treated with no such reverence. We kept his log-books and letters alike, and Sorros took to wearing his top hat. He was, as he pointed out, the man who brought down the scourge of the Cerracs. He offered me his old flat-top bowler, which I took gladly and have worn daily since. Later, I gave my old bowler to Grem.

"Are you a hero now, then?" I asked Sorros.

He grinned. "I'll be forgotten one day the same as you. I'm no hero. I just decided I get to the keep the hat."

But while Sorros was cheered from all corners, and my own standing in the Free Company of the Mountain Heather went up substantially, the real hero who had been made from my point of view that night was Desil Tranikfel, a sixteen-year-old warrior raised as a goatherd in the now-destroyed village of Sotoris. She had been a woman of uncommon bravery—and, however briefly, my friend.

When we came to my own tent, my trunk was gone. No matter, that. Finding a new suit was the least of my worries.

That night at dinner, the scouts returned with news that the deserters had not regrouped, but appeared to be making their way out of the mountains. Our talk turned to the future.

"So Dimos," someone asked me, "what's the King going to do now?"

Hronople, at the best hospital in Hron. And Grem's not in pain; the ether cuts it away."

"Screaming..." I said.

"Side effect of the ether," she said. It didn't help I'd never heard the word "side effect" in Vorronian before and had to figure it out from context. "Ether," fortunately, was a Vorronian word in the first place.

"I want my arm," I said.

"They aren't going to amputate your arm," Nola said. "You got lucky. The bullet went right through. And if you *stay* lucky and if you keep the wound clean, you'll keep your arm."

I turned over to face Nola. Behind her, Grem had passed out. The surgeon was done and was cleaning her tools at the wash basin. Dory held her brother's hand and stared at the place where Grem's leg had been.

I remembered Desil and I started to cry uncontrollably. Nola got uncomfortable and left me, but Dory took my hand in her free one and started to sob quietly as well.

Since I was conscious and not mortally wounded, I was asked to leave the hospital tent after Ekarna put a few black stitches across the entry and exit wounds and put my arm in a sling. Outside, I focused on my breathing, on the cloud of vapor that escaped my mouth with every breath. Around me, women and men saw to the tasks of hard-won victory.

At the final count, thirty of us, with twenty-four dogs, had killed one hundred and seven and captured twenty—which meant at least fifty had likely run off. Eight of our people were dead—Desil, Evana, Yormos, Talli, Astos, Reu, Molisha, and Lilt—as well as another six dogs. Twelve of us were wounded.

The prisoners were asked if they wished to bury their compatriots, but they refused. The dead soldiers, all but Wilder himself—were instead stacked with wood and burned in the largest and most vile fire I'd seen in my life. I'd call it a funeral pyre, but there wasn't a funeral. Sorros and another oversaw the release of the prisoners four at a time, in groups of two wounded and two fully-able, to make their way out of the Cerracs. Each was told that were they to return, they would never receive quarter again. Some looked thankful, others murderous, but they were released all the same.

One man, I believe the stablehand I'd met the first day of my arrival in the Cerracs, never took his eyes off of me. "We'll find you, Dimos Horacki," he said, his voice hoarse on account of the dog bite that had broken his collarbone, "and we'll kill you. Your family, back in Borolia? They'll hang even sooner."

For the first time in my life, I was glad the war had orphaned me.

"The Empire never forgives a traitor," he went on. "I'll watch you—"

The man never finished that sentence, however, because Nola put her pistol under his chin and fired, sending a fine spray of gore into the air. In perfect but charmingly accented Boroli, she announced, "If anyone else would like to threaten the lives of non-combatants, please do so now."

Unsurprisingly, no one did.

A captured Fourth Armsman pleaded his case to bring the body of Wilder with him when he left, but his request was denied unanimously. "We will salt his corpse," a woman told the officer in a thick accent. "Though the dead cannot suffer the same as the living."

It took most of the militia most of the day to dig far enough down in the rocky soil to bury our eight comrades, and as the sun went down we gathered to say our farewells.

"We are of the earth," Grem said, from a stretcher carried by two of his friends. "To the earth we will return." Dory threw her brother's leg into the grave. Ekarna unstrung a

"It's not very hot anymore," he said, by way of apology. "We stayed up late talking."

"We'll be gone most of the next two weeks," Nola told me.

"And, well, there's a chance we won't be coming back at all," Sorros said. "If we don't, then you can either make your way back to Vorronia—follow the river, it eventually joins up with the Gongol and will take you to the coast—or wait until spring when reinforcements are due. You can eat our stores, and if we don't return, start into the ostriches up above. I'm not sure how you'll be received by our replacements, to be honest."

"Where are you going?" I asked, though I was pretty sure I knew the answer.

"Desil found a map on one of your horses that includes the location of Wilder's camp. We're from these mountains—we think we can take them."

"There are hundreds of soldiers there at any time," I protested.

"We know the terrain," Nola said. "They won't see us coming. We'll hit them while they sleep and be gone before they wake. Maybe we won't get them all, but maybe we will."

I nodded. There was no way I was going to change their minds, and I wasn't even sure why I would want to. Only these two had shown me even a basic level of kindness. Why should I have cared what happened to their company?

Sorros took my hand in his warmly. "Goodbye, Dimos Horacki. If we don't return, I hope you survive and that you write about us honestly."

Nola smiled at me, then the two left me in the cabin. Off to follow the map to the camp. The map that Danis had had on his person. For some reason. It clicked together in my head—the map, my newspaper column, the small scouting party. I'd been sent off to die. Danis had been sent off to die. We'd been bait.

I stood up, spilling my still-untouched soup on the sleeping mat, and bolted out the door.

"Wait!" I shouted at the massed silhouettes who were just beginning to walk out of camp. Several turned and pointed rifles at me. Sorros, however, approached.

"It's a trap," I explained.

"You were part of it!" a voice shouted from the crowd. Crowds are good places from which to shout anonymous accusations.

"Not on purpose," I replied, then told them what I knew. Which, to be honest, wasn't that much.

"*This* could be the trap," another voice said, more calmly than the last.

"I suppose," I said, "though it wouldn't make too much sense."

"Why are you telling us?" someone asked.

"Did you miss the part where Wilder sent him off to die?" Nola asked.

Another woman, a stranger, nodded. "I believe him. At least enough to hear him out."

"There's an outcropping overlooking the camp. If I was Wilder, I'd have moved most of my troops up top, leaving only a skeleton crew down below. When you attack, they'll drop the mountain on you, or at least rain mortar."

"And kill their own troops?" asked a voice.

"Of course they'd kill their own troops," said another.

"If he's right," Nola said, "we can catch them on the overlook. Drive them to the edge and over. If he's wrong, we don't really lose anything."

"If he's wrong," Sorros said, "we'll lose the element of surprise."

"It's worth the risk," a voice said. "We should try it."

"All agreed?" a voice asked. "That we try this journalist's plan?"

“Aye,” the crowd responded.

“Amendment,” one voice replied. “We bring him with us. If he’s lying, we shoot him in both legs and throw him off the cliff.”

“Objection,” another voice responded. “We bring him with us, and if he’s lying, we kill him. But we do it as cleanly and quickly as circumstances allow.”

My head was spinning trying to follow the conversation.

“Conceded,” said the voice that had offered the amendment.

“Amendment,” Nola offered. “If he’s telling the truth, we give him a gun. They tried to kill him, afterall.”

“All agreed?” a voice asked.

“Aye,” the crowd responded.

I think that had he been from another culture, Sorros would have slapped me on the back. Instead, he just grinned.

## Six

The way back to Wilder’s camp was lit by a waning half-moon—unlike conquerors, the actual residents of the mountains felt no need to ride during daylight. I rode alone on a mountain pony while most of the rest of us went double on horses, and almost two dozen Cerrac Shepherds padded silently alongside. Our moonshadows stretched far in front of us, and in that company I felt powerful.

Nola and Sorros shared a black thoroughbred mare and I most often rode alongside them, though sometimes I lagged back for a bit of solace. We spent a week on the march, camping during the day in caves or dark thickets. We skirted towns, afraid our presence might provide an excuse for reprisal. Our scouts, however, visited settlements almost every day and returned laden with provisions. One day, while eating mountain blackberry jam spread over fresh bread, I realized that food given freely tasted objectively better than food taken by force.

“The way you make decisions,” I asked Sorros over dinner one morning. “Is no one in charge?”

“You’re learning,” Sorros said. “Yes, no one is in charge. We’re all here because we want to be—or because we feel like we need to be—and we’re all risking our lives. Why would it be appropriate for one person to tell me how it is I’m going to end my life? Shouldn’t that be my own decision?”

“How do you get anything done?” I asked. I wasn’t ready to tackle the ethical argument he presented, because I had never considered it before.

“You’ve seen it,” he answered. “We listen to one another and discuss things. In council at home, decisions with a lot of people take awhile. Here in the Free Company, we try to speed things up a bit.”

I nodded, but I didn’t really understand.

While none of the Free Company was initially friendly with me, I had days to observe them and I started to distinguish between them. They became individuals instead of just a mass of nervous, armed strangers—which, to be fair, they also were. By the look

It was near the end of it all that two more soldiers burst out of the smoldering tents towards the path we were covering. Nola shot one, but Sorros’s rifle jammed as he drew bead on the second. I shot him from less than ten feet away and he crumpled to the ground. A third figure, a tall man, ran next. A muzzle flash lit his face—Wilder. I raised my gun and I’d like to think he even saw me, even recognized me. Sorros shot him in the heart and he fell backwards with a whimper that by rights I ought not have heard over the sounds of the battle.

I broke from the trees to run over to him. There he was, the man who had conquered Vorrionia, dead on the mountain. He’d been laid low by a peasant with a captured rifle. He was in his night clothes, his top hat clutched under his arm.

I was through with hiding and strode into the field of combat. Inside the line of tents was a chaos unfit for the stories of hell. Men lay as broken corpses. A dog chewed at a man’s face. Another dog stood over her dead master and howled. Two men shot at me. I killed one of them, I think, and the other one was shot down by a woman bleeding from her neck who could scarcely stand. I heard a blast and through the haze of smoke, I saw the militia forcing its way into a gap in the wall of the bunker. Desil led the charge and fell first, shot in the face by a man who was soon to die himself.

Within seconds it was over. The last remnants of His Majesty’s forces came out with their hands above their heads and were stripped and guarded.

We had won. The dead were all around us, ours and theirs, and the wounded cried in pain or stared blankly at their wounds. So many of us had been injured—including me, it turned out. A bullet from one side or another had struck my right arm near the shoulder.

A cheer went up at the end of it all, a ragged thing, full-throated and loud and rasping. I joined in. Then I passed out.

## Seven

The screaming woke me up, as did the cold, as did the pain. Daylight filtered in through the canvas walls of the medical tent and illuminated the scene next to me. Grem was thrashing on his cot not three feet away, held down by a pair of assistants including his sister Dory. Ekarna served as his surgeon, her earth-tone militia garb covered with a blood-soaked black apron. She had a bone saw in hand and was busy cutting off the young man’s leg at the knee.

I lost it. I’d been fighting panic successfully for weeks, but it was too much for me. I fought for air with shallow breaths and was torn between flight and paralysis. Paralysis won. Under Grem’s screams, I heard the grinding of saw against bone. I turned away and started shaking. The pain in my shoulder grew worse. Better to have pain than no arm. I tried to stand up but my mind wouldn’t let me move.

A hand touched my shoulder—my good shoulder. “It’s alright,” Nola said to me.

“How is that” I managed, though I didn’t turn to look at her. The screaming next to me stopped, replaced by a thick, panicked breathing.

“Ekarna has done this before,” Nola told me. I’d been speaking, and especially reading, Vorrionian since I was thirteen, but my language faculties had all but escaped me in the moment and it took me a long time to process her words. “She’s a surgeon from

“You didn’t lie,” he responded. “But if you did, I’ll kill you.”

We moved forward as a group, crouched low to hide our silhouettes, until the scout motioned us to stop. A dog and three people disappeared into the trees, and we waited.

I want to describe to you what it felt like to wait there, knowing a signal meant both the start of the attack and that our advantage was lost. Knowing I was a combatant in what most people would consider not-my-war. But the words I have available don’t seem adequate. Was I afraid? Perhaps. Was I excited? Most assuredly. Were my bowels loose and did bile rise in my throat? Of course. My mind reached down towards that ember of hate in my belly—I wanted to stoke it up until it burned inside me. But I couldn’t find it. And yet, I was part of something. When I couldn’t find courage within myself I took it from the men and women around me. I had a pistol in hand and a mask over my face, and together we were going to kill a lot of people who probably needed to die.

No alarm went off, no gunshots rung out in the night. The same four silhouettes came back through the trees, and it was done—the guards had been silenced. We moved forward, up to the overlook.

Sorros, Nola, and I were at the back. On their own insistence, my young friends formed the vanguard.

I’ve no natural affinity for skulking through the underbrush, it turns out, and I spent so long disentangling myself from brambles that I was surprised I made it to the battle at all.

When we reached the clearing at the top of the overhang, we saw scores and scores of low tents, some pitched against the side of the earthen bunker, some in tight rings outside those. The mortars, to my relief, were manned but clearly facing down towards the camp below.

“Our job is simple but essential,” Nola told Sorros and me. “We hang back, by this path, and shoot anyone in a uniform we see. We’re keeping our own escape clear and preventing theirs.”

I nodded. It didn’t seem as simple as she made it sound, but I checked my pistol. I’d never fired one before in my life, but it seemed an inopportune time to bring up that detail. It was loaded, and I knew the basic idea.

Two shadowy torch-wielders bolted out from the trees from either end of the clearing and crossed over to the camp. Within seconds, the outermost tents were ablaze, and the four arsonists moved towards one another, lighting every scrap of canvas in their path. Before they met in the middle, twenty bandits and two dozen dogs tore out from the woods at a full run, screaming as they went. They broke into the camp and explosions went off.

Howls of anguish cut into the air. A burning man in his nightclothes came down the path towards us, but before I could lift my gun, Sorros had shot him dead.

I don’t like gunfighting. I know that now. It has nothing in common with a street brawl. I don’t like being shot at and, it turns out, I even more strongly dislike shooting at people. Particularly when you shoot those people in the face and then their face keeps the same expression as they fall over never to rise. Even when it’s people I don’t like very much. Even strangers. But I shot at maybe thirty people that night and I probably killed four or five of them.

I see the faces of the men I killed more clearly in my dreams than I ever did in life, but I don’t wake full of fear or guilt, just perturbed.

The battle went on longer than I thought it would. Most of the enemy were slain or mortally wounded in the first attack, but some took refuge in the bunker.

of them, they were mostly in their early twenties like myself, though there were several among them with gray or white hair. The oldest was a woman most likely in her sixties. Most people respected her, but were maybe a bit afraid of her too. She was quiet most of the time, yet when she spoke people listened. The rest of the elders rode together, but she rode alone, at the front, her shotgun never far from her hand.

Then there was a group of five youths that stuck together every hour of the day. The youngest couldn’t have been sixteen, the oldest might convince me she was twenty if she swore on her life. Everything was a game to them. During the day, they sat around camp and told stories and inside jokes. At night, they rode ahead or lingered behind, and they declared “adventure hour” and took their leave of us every night when we took our midnight lunch. Two of the youngest were musicians and they played together almost half the day, every day, while riding or resting. One had a concertina, the other a fiddle, and they played complex fast melodies the like of which I’d never heard.

The rest of the militia, to my surprise, accepted the youths’ irresponsibility as inevitable. And while I overheard Nola complain occasionally, no one attempted to dampen their fun. Myself, I was quite happy for the levity they brought to the trip—they reminded me of my wild youth, the months I’d spent on the run from the Grinder.

No one knew quite what to do with me, that was plain. Some people treated me like a prisoner, others like a stranger. The oldest woman, Ekarna, was perhaps the cruelest of the bunch. It was plain she didn’t trust me. But she wore a necklace of human teeth around her neck—a style I hadn’t seen on anyone else—and I was reasonably sure the distrust was mutual.

On the third night we stopped at the ruins of Sotoris and I thought my heart was going to crawl out of my throat to lay among the ashen remains of the village. Many in our company wept as they picked through the rubble, and I longed for death in a more tangible way than I ever had, before or since. I had done this. I had destroyed an entire community. We didn’t camp there, thank the heavens—I have no idea what I might have done.

Strangely, this sense of sin renewed my courage for the assault against the imperial forces—my newfound disregard as to whether I lived or died did wonders to steel my resolve. It was weeks or months more before the last sparks of my patriotism flickered out, but the burning of Sotoris and being sent to my death by Dolan Wilder had certainly changed my priorities. As we rode across the mountains on frozen nights, I felt a hate growing in me I hadn’t felt in years. I wanted to see Dolan Wilder die.

On the fourth day, as we camped under the leaves of an ancient maple grove, the youth with the concertina invited me to sit with him and his friends. They introduced themselves to me. There was Grem, who had invited me, and Dory, his sister. Joslek, a handsome and shy young man I felt just slightly too old for. Evana, the youngest, who played fiddle. And Desil. It was Desil whom I came to know the best the soonest. She was a heavyset woman with smart eyes and an aura of tight black curls that framed her head. She was without a doubt the wisest of them, and perhaps the wisest person I’d met, if you’ll pardon me the risk of hyperbole. She couldn’t have been more than seventeen.

“You cried last night in Sotoris,” she said to me. “Why?”

I began to tell her about riding in with the man in the top hat, but she cut me off.

“I know about that—I was there, I saw you. All five of us grew up there. The Holorots, the family they killed, were my second cousins. Yor, the kid with the open throat, was my friend. But you weren’t the one who did it.”

"I didn't stop them," I said.

"Neither did I," she replied.

Desil cut an apple in two with her boot knife and offered me half. I took it, bit into it. It was more tart than sweet, but ripe nonetheless and the juice ran down into my growing beard.

"You can have your guilt," she said, "if it makes you feel better. Or if you like the way that it makes you feel worse. Whatever it takes for you to learn to carve distance between yourself and the place you're from, from the soldiers who speak your mother tongue, that's alright. But when your guilt stops being useful, you'd better let it go. It can fester and ferment in your belly."

I nodded. Thereafter, I rode with her and her friends as often as with Sorros and Nola. I went with them on adventure hour, exploring frozen creeks and scrambling up rock walls in the light of the waning moon. I was older than them, but since I didn't seem to have a problem acting like a kid they didn't have a problem accepting me as one.

Grem was about my size, and he gave me some clothes—wool pants and a longshirt. They just call it a longshirt, it turns out. It felt good to get out of the uniform, but I held onto the greatcoat. The militia cloaks were just too formless for me.

One exceptionally cold night the six of us clambered up behind a frozen waterfall. My hands were so numb I barely felt it when a sharp rock cut through my glove and into my finger, but I'd have risked much worse for a chance of that view. I've never seen anything like it. The falls had become a single frozen sheet, a cascade of icicle lit by the waning moon, and behind it was a semicircle shelf carved out from the cliff by thousands of years of water.

Grem stalked around the cave with his concertina, listening to the acoustics, trying to find the best spot.

"Careful," Dory told him, as he walked up to the icy edge of the shelf, the frozen falls just out of reach beyond.

"Listen," he said, then played a few long, slow notes, the lowest on his instrument. They carried throughout the half-cave and I felt them in my bones. Then Grem picked up the tempo, started into a mournful song, then, over the course of minutes, transformed it into a happy reel. He was dancing.

Everyone was smiling but Dory, who watched her baby brother like a mother watches her child. When Grem slipped, she was up in an instant, lashing out her arm and catching him by the longshirt. His hat went over the cliff.

Grem was suspended over the cliff's edge for a moment, and time was frozen like the waterfall. Then, with a deep breath that carried out into the night air, Dory dragged her brother back from the edge and onto the shelf.

The two collapsed.

"Shit," Grem said. "That was close."

"Be more careful," Dory said. "Please."

The moment between the two was so private that the rest of us—well, at least I—felt like intruders. I turned to Desil, beside me.

"I'll never figure out if I'm supposed to let worry get the best of me," she said. "Because I don't want to fall off a cliff but I don't want to risk never looking over the edge."

I wished I had some wisdom that had come from age to share with her, but I had none.

As we rode past landmarks, my young friends pointed them out to me. I learned a

lot about the land from them, though I could never tell when they were speaking from experience or simply making things up. Either way, their sense of awe and excitement was infectious, and I think I came to love the mountains. Almost enough that, sometimes, I forgot we were marching to war. One day we built a sauna out of canvas tarps, steamed it with hot stones, then ran naked from the near-unbearable heat to jump naked into the near-unbearable cold of the Geris river. Another night, we stopped for midnight-lunch in an open field and watched a meteor shower.

I ran out of tobacco halfway through the trip, and only once the last pinch had gone into my lungs and out into the air did it occur to me that none of my companions smoked. I've never been one to smoke more than once or thrice a day, but running out made me all the more anxious.

The final night was grim. We all rode close together, and keeping calm became a full time endeavor for most of us. The moon was new. The stars were out, a tactical disadvantage, but looking at the constellations as we rode became my primary solace as the fear and anxiety turned my stomach into knots and my thoughts into nightmares.

We saw the cook fires from a half a mile out, at least a dozen of them burning in the camp—a clear contradiction to General Wilder's stated policy. We dismounted and tied our mounts to trees.

"Cut through her tether halfway," Nola told me as I secured the pony. "In case we can't return, she'll be able to tear herself free."

Two scouts returned and called us together, and the thirty of us formed a circle with two rows, the inner circle squatting, the outer circle standing. I stood in the outer row. Five people faced outwards, scanning the dark for enemies.

"We saw two sentries at the base of the path up the overlook," a man said, his dark skin darkened further by soot. "They've got a small fire and are playing cards. They might be drunk, too, but they're definitely awake."

"There's likely another pair watching the first," Ekarna suggested. I found myself nodding along with the rest of the Free Company.

"Doro will smell them out, and I'll cut their throats," a woman said. She patted a hound, presumably Doro.

"Flash a light when you're done, or if you can't find them," the first scout said, "and we'll take out the card players."

"The rest of us will wait just out of sight," Nola said. "If we hear gunfire or an alarm, we'll start the battle. Otherwise, we'll wait for you to get back and then creep closer."

Everyone nodded. In the starlight, faces were indistinguishable. What's more, many of the Company had begun to don their masks. Identity became unimportant.

"Objections?" someone asked. There were none.

"There are a hell of a lot more of them than there are of us," Nola said. Her voice took on a tone I'd never heard her use before—the General in her, I supposed. "Ten to one. But they're expecting us below, in the main camp, and we know they're up top, peering over the edge. So we'll be behind them, just give them a little push, and down they'll go. If at *any* point we find ourselves in a fair fight, I say we get out. Meet at yesterday's camp."

"Aye," someone said.

"Aye," more people murmured.

"We can do this," she said.

With that, the circle broke. Sorros handed me a balaclava and my old gun belt.

"If I lied?" I asked.