

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.

From the editor of *Mythmakers & Lawbreakers: Anarchist Writers on Fiction* and author of *What Lies Beneath the Clock Tower* comes a seditious novel of utopia besieged, a novel that challenges every premise of contemporary society.

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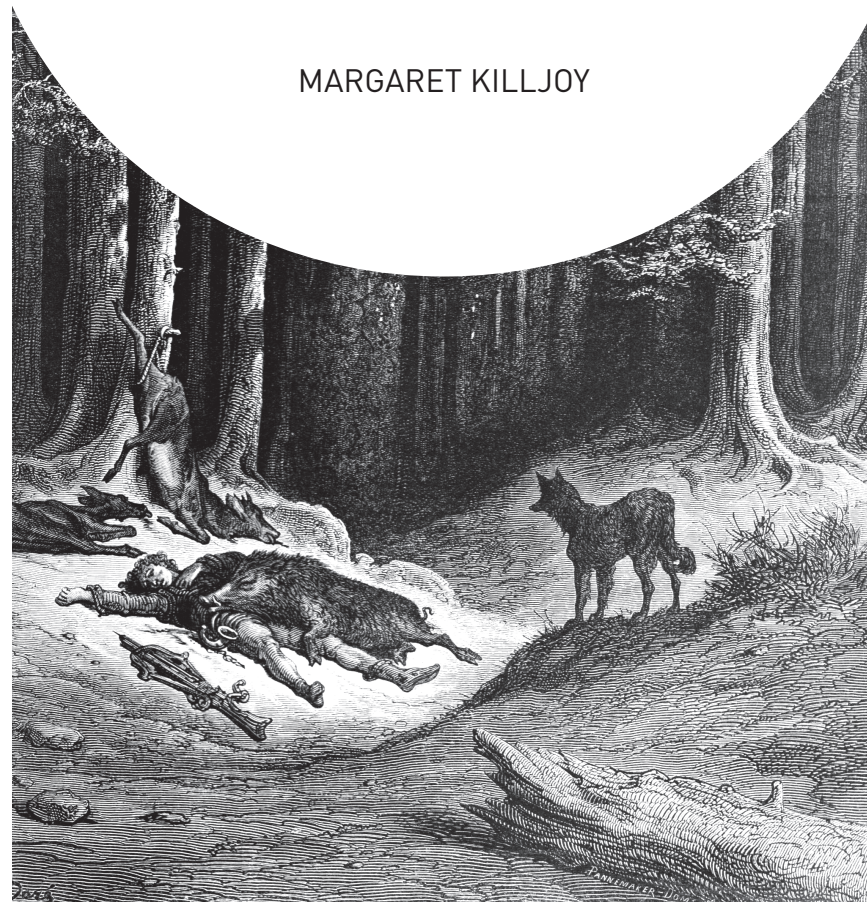
"An exciting and mysterious novel, a story of war and love."

—Kim Stanley Robinson, author of the *Mars* trilogy

A COUNTRY OF GHOSTS

(part 2 of 2)

MARGARET KILLJOY



A Country of Ghosts
Margaret Killjoy, 2014

ISBN-13: 978-1-938660-13-9

zine adapted from the first revision.

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Paperback edition published by Combustion Books:
www.combustionbooks.org
info@combustionbooks.org

Zine edition published by Strangers In A Tangled Wilderness
www.tangledwilderness.org
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Also by Margaret Killjoy:
What Lies Beneath the Clock Tower
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that day took a necklace of teeth, and a dying custom was reborn.

The funeral was declared across the whole of Hron and Karak, and for a week, the country mourned, dressed all in white in honor of the new ghosts. I traveled to Moliknari for the ceremony there, the one with the bodies, and at Nola's assistance I helped carry Sorros in a maple coffin into the cave of the dead, into the Mountain, to lay beside his mothers.

The Freer Companies from Karak took some of the heaviest losses—all but the Freer Company of the Hollow, who saw the odds and refused to fight. Representatives from Karak and Hron talked things out, and while of course none could speak on behalf of anyone else, Hron largely agreed to a pact of mutual self defense.

I stuck around for two weeks more, interviewing survivors and helping out as much as anyone would let me. But I was mostly just floating in grief, and I knew I needed to get away. So I left for Hronople.

Twenty

Six months have passed, and the snow has melted in the valleys. The panes have come down off the large greenhouses and I can wear a single long-sleeved longshirt while I work the fields, pruning trees and weeding, fixing irrigation. I might have ridden off the “war hero” prestige for awhile longer, but there's work to be done and it feels good to do it.

Vin and I fell in love, or at least infatuation, on the way back from Sotoris. He changed my bandages every night, applied ointment to my wounds, and cooked me dinner. He's dropped his plans for moving back to Tar to foment revolution, at least for now. I think he's doing it for me, and I suspect in a year or two I'll lose him to that calling. Myself, there's a chance I'll join him in Tar if he'd have me, but I won't be going back to Borol anytime soon. It's full of the wrong kind of memories and it's full of people who'd love to kill me.

Freedom is a relationship between people, and freedom was given to me by Sorros and Ekarna Ralm, by Grem, by Desil Tranikfel. By four thousand women and men from these mountains who died in the war. His Majesty's forces might be back, but they haven't been yet.

I'm happy in Hron. I've got an eyepatch and a wicked scar down my face—Vin says it makes me look tough. I live with Jackal and have been studying Deded. Nola, Dory, and Joslek have found new recruits for the Free Company of the Mountain Heather, including almost a dozen people from Karak. Habik stayed in Moliknari, working to see what he can do about producing firearms, ammunition, and armor without destroying the ecosystem. I haven't seen Sakana or Varin, but I heard they both survived and I hope they've found what they're looking for. Vin spends half his time as a farrier and half his time helping Jackal blow things up, and his friends are quickly becoming my friends.

This book, though, this book isn't for Hron. I'll print it in Hronople, but this book is for the people of Borolia, so that they might know the country their leaders tried to invade. It's for anyone who wants to know that there are ways to relate with one another besides through the authority of economic or political power. It's so that they know that another way of life is possible, that there are people who live it.

part 1 can be downloaded and printed from

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Eleven

We were alone on the bleachers when he pulled the knife on me.

“Rat bastard!” he yelled, then lunged.

I had my brass knuckles on in an instant. I don't even remember going into my bag, I just remember having them out. Gunfights were new and frightening, but a knife fight was something I understood. I put out my arm, my bad arm, and he went for it. Even trained knife fighters seem to go for what's closest. I pulled back my arm and got him in the sternum with my other fist, knocking him back.

“Help,” I yelled. “Help!”

I moved in towards him and he pulled a gun. Not fair. Distantly, I heard my call for help echoed down below.

“I know you,” I said, “don't I? You were with the army.”

He cocked the gun. I leapt to the side as he fired and I slammed my good shoulder into the wooden bench.

He screamed in anger, turning to aim again.

I twisted away as a bullet shattered the wood where I'd been. I found my feet and dove for the gun before he could pull back the hammer to fire again. We wrestled on the roof as I continued to cry out.

While the assassin and I tumbled on the roof, footsteps rushed up the stairs. I was no match for the fellow, though. He had military training and I had a bullet wound.

“Get off of him!” I heard an old woman yell, then a boot was kicking Charl in the ribs with a fierce determination.

Charl pulled off of me and stood. I scrambled to my knees and saw that the three people I'd been eavesdropping on had joined me on the roof. The younger of the two woman—still easily in her late fifties—had been kicking my attacker and stood brandishing a ceramic mug.

“Back the fuck off, old woman!” Charl screamed. “I have a gun!”

“I can see that,” she said, then stepped in swinging.

He fired and my heart leapt. The bullet struck the woman in the forearm, and I can't swear to it but I think I heard her bone shatter from where I was. I grappled Charl by the legs while the woman's friends came in and disarmed my attacker.

The gray-haired man turned to the fallen woman and helped raise her wounded arm over her heart. A dozen more people piled up the stairs and one took over treatment, ordering one person to keep back the crowd, another to bring him supplies, a third to assist him as he fashioned a tourniquet from his own shirt. People obeyed.

The oldest woman took the man's gun and looked to me.

"Who is he?" she asked.

"An assassin," I said, gasping for breath. "Sent to kill me. The Borolians."

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Dimos," I said. "A journalist. Of the Free Company of the Mountain Heather."

The woman turned to her captive, put the gun to his chest, winced, then fired. She cocked the gun back and fired into his dead body until the bullets were spent. She had one hand over her face but peered through the cracks in her fingers.

"Why'd you help me?" I asked, once I'd found myself sitting on the bleacher with my three saviors. "He had a gun. He could have killed you."

"You must be new here," the old man said. "This is Hron."

Later, I found Nola. "When I was on the roof, a man was treating the woman's gunshot wound," I said. "He ordered people around like a military commander, and everyone obeyed. So you *do* use authority here?"

Nola thought about it for a minute before answering. "We do, yes. We allow, in some circumstances, people with the authority of experience to control things. And there's nothing un-free about it. One of the best feelings in the world is letting someone else take charge of you for moments, when you do so willingly. Sometimes, the things that are the worst when they happen to you without your consent are the best things when they happen to you *with* your consent. Touching, sex, restraint, command. Fighting. Confession. Conversation. Responsibility. Choosing to do things is all the difference in the world."

I slept badly that night, and was glad that, when I woke from nightmares, I was in a room with my friends. Sorros had moved out from Marly's house and he and Nola were curled up together in the bunk above me, both snoring softly.

I stared at the moonlight on the floor for what must have been an hour. I scarcely remembered who I had been when I'd donned a mask to creep through the trees with the Free Company before that battle, and the novelty and excitement of the war had long since been lost on me. I was exhausted and jumpy, and worse than that, I was hunted. I missed my apartment and the relative safety of the near-poverty I'd left.

The next morning, at breakfast, those of us of the Free Company talked over our options.

"We can't stay here," I said, and no one disagreed.

"We move on to Holl," Nola said, "and from there it's only five days to Hronople. Once we're in the city, we can call for a council of war."

"We should get on our way then," Dory said.

"Right now?" Sorros asked, casting a mournful gaze to the food in front of us that we would be leaving.

"I've been telling people to meet in the square after lunch," Nola said. "They want to hear war stories, but unfortunately, instead, we're going to tell them stories of the coming war."

"Now I know you don't like me much," Sorros began, from where he stood at the center of the square, in the spot so recently occupied by the head of Lord Winter. The square was almost as crowded as it had been during the evening's ceremonies, and the same white-dressed figures moved through the crowd with food and drink.

friends and community. If Hron had taught me anything, it had taught me that.

I thought I was going to stay in that chair until news returned, waiting on the widow's walk of the palisade. But the cold and, it must be admitted, boredom came to me eventually and I returned to the warm barracks and lost myself in my writing most days.

I was asleep when the first militia on skis made it back to the wall and inside the gate, but the excitement woke me and I made it to the wall in time to see a thousand people come flooding into the valley from the pass and march back to Holl.

I went down to join the small crowd, those of us who'd stayed, along the main road into town.

"So few?" I said, or maybe someone near me did.

"My friends?" I asked, when I saw Vin and his comrades.

"With the back, guarding the wounded," he answered.

"And...?" I asked.

"Molikhari is ours," he said. "What's left of it."

The news must have reached elsewhere in the crowd at the same time, because a ragged cheer went up. First two voices, then more. Slowly, the grim-faced soldiers joined in, into a tumult of catharsis that hacked away at our throats and burned out the worst of our fears. We had won.

"Your speech worked," Nola said. I held her to my breast as she cried. "But Sorros listened too well."

Along with a squadron of the Gray Brigade, my friends had taken the vanguard. Nola, Dory, and Joslek remained. Grem and Sorros did not.

"We said we'd fight them with the bones of our body," Dory said. "And we did."

I went into journalist mode to cope, and by the end of the day I'd pieced together the battle.

With the body armor only effective against small arms fire, and the Imperial army equipped with machine guns, it was determined that close-quarters combat was safest. Kata, Habik, Jackal, Bahrit, and a few other munitions experts crept across the snow in white cloaks under the new moon and sapped the walls, first to the front and then to the fore. Habik and Kata were both shot in the process. Habik survived his wound, Kata did not.

The vanguard ran in the front gates from the valley, a distraction, the rest came in the rear, down the mountain. Sorros might have been the second, after Kata, to die on our side, picked off from a tower just after he crossed back into the town of his birth.

The fighting was street to street, building to building. The vanguard, with more trained snipers and more elderly combatants, took a tower and began picking off anyone in the green-and-gold. Grem went down with a bullet in his shoulder—the bullet struck an artery and he died fast and cold. He never did play his concertina again.

Vin and the ex-conscripts took the main square and held it, probably the most important tactical move in the battle. He says it had been Somi's idea. Somi and Mol went down together, cut in half by a gatling gun.

The militia left the front gate unguarded, however, and eventually they forced the army to retreat.

Nearly five hundred stayed, both those too wounded to move and those who committed to rebuilding and refortifying the town. Every widow and widower made on the field

this: ‘All people are free. When we speak of freedom, we acknowledge that freedom is a relationship between the people of a society. This relationship of freedom is created by means of mutual respect, the acknowledgement of one another’s autonomy, and the ability to hold one another responsible for their actions. All people are free and all people are responsible to themselves and to one another.’

“I feel that to the core of my being, I grew up with it and my great, great, grandmother grew up with it. I can’t understand anyone who’d live a different way. I wish I could, but I can’t. I’m not even angry at Borolia, not really, because I can’t understand them. I’ve never been angry at a fever. I’ve never hated a blizzard, or a drought or a famine. They are just things that happen and we fight them.”

The first risers were up already, and a handful of people were headed to the kitchens.

“Why are they here?” Sorros asked. He sounded plaintive, childlike. “Why did they invade?”

“They told me it was for the glory of the King,” I said, “and maybe for coal and for iron. And that’s part of it. But they’re here because they’re an empire. It’s expand or die for them, it’s built into the very economy. Class tensions at home are near to bursting. Peace doesn’t work.”

Sorros gave Dammit one last pat, then stood. “I think I’ll help with breakfast,” he said. He started to walk away, then came back and hugged me. “I hope your speech is good,” he said, then walked away once more.

Nineteen

We are anarchists, and we are immortal. We are the country of ghosts, and we are immortal. We will fight them until we are dead, and our bones will fight them after. The memory of our existence will fight them. We will drive them to Tar, we will drive them to Borol, and in each of their hearts we will brand the memory that those who are free will never yield. Today, let us be ghosts! Today, let us be ghosts!

I watched from the battlements as they marched out in the morning, dour and cold and determined. Those who stayed and waved them off did so with tears in their eyes.

I had one hand resting on the wooden wall in front of me, the other on the arm of my chair. I’d declared it mine, made three strangers drag it to the battlement so that I could stand guard. Ekarna would have thrown a fit, but Ekarna was dead, and I figured that if someone took Holl while our army was away, I wouldn’t have time to die of infection anyhow. So I sat in my chair under blankets with a rifle and a basket of eggs.

I watched long after they were gone, long into the night, then curled up on blankets to sleep. I woke frigid in the starlight and paced the wall until the sun returned. I kept vigil in my chair the whole of the next day and night. It was the least I could do, I thought. The very least.

Survivor’s guilt is a terrible thing, it turns out. In some ways, it would have been easier on my nerves if I’d gone with them. But I had been a bad shot even before some hired colonial thug had cut my dominant eye in half, and with my fresh wound, I would have been more a liability than an asset. Most everyone, at the core of their being, wants to be an asset to their

“We like Borolia even less,” someone shouted, and was met with laughter.

Nola stepped forward. She’d never looked so tall or powerful as she did that day, dressed in freshly-laundered militia garb. When the General spoke, people listened.

“The army came in and struck the smallest villages, taking their birds and winter stores like common bandits,” she said. “They killed suspected militants, and when Sotoris put up a fight, they burned it to the ground.”

People murmured at that.

“The men who did that are dead.” In Cer, the word “men” doesn’t connote all of humanity the way it does in some other languages, so her choice of calling the soldiers “men” was one that put emphasis on their gender. “The Free Company of the Mountain Heather ambushed and killed them.”

That was good for a long, sustained cheer.

“We wouldn’t be alive, let alone victorious, without the help of Dimos Horacki,” Nola continued, “a journalist who saw injustice and knew it for what it was, a man who fled from our enemies and came over to us.” I decided not to correct her on the fine point of whether or not I had fled or simply survived. “And he’s got, well, unpleasant news. Please, my friends, my comrades, heed his words.”

I stepped forward. I don’t know for certain why I wasn’t nervous about speaking in a foreign tongue before so many strangers. Perhaps, as I like to think, I was born for the stage. Most likely, I was still in shock from the previous night’s attempt on my life and to be honest my only concern as to the size of the crowd was that it might hold in its numbers another assassin. But people were on the lookout for such behavior and any would-be murderer would be unlikely to survive an attempt on my life.

“We killed Dolan Wilder, General Armsman of His Majesty’s Imperial Army, and killed or routed his men. This is a huge blow against the Borolian propaganda machine—they’d put a lot of stock in Wilder, and his death isn’t going to be taken lightly.” Tried as I might, my voice didn’t carry with the power of Nola’s, and I paused occasionally to allow those who could understand to relay what I said to those who couldn’t.

“They came into the Cerracs to tame a savage people,” I said. “To mine your mountains for coal and iron. They didn’t expect resistance. But they’ll be back, and stronger. A hundred times stronger.”

“How soon?” someone asked.

“I don’t know. Spring, most likely. Summer, if they want to be careful.”

“How many?”

We’d talked about this all morning, and decided, to Nola’s displeasure, to tell them the truth. She had been convinced that the truth would inspire only despair. Sorros, however, insisted that the whole of the truth was essential so that people could make informed decisions, could truly be autonomous. “He commands thirty thousand men,” I announced. “By summer, he could have four times that many, trained soldiers all.”

Nothing I have said in my life has caused more fear in more people than those two sentences. Some shook their heads, cast their gazes to the ground. Others looked around, as though the army was upon them already.

“We’re fucked!” a kid from the crowd yelled.

“We’re not fucked,” Grem said, walking to the fore of the stage, supported by his sister. “If you tell me you think we’re fucked then you’re saying I lost my friends for nothing.”

“We’re fucked,” the kid yelled. “Fuck your friends, fuck your leg, we’re all going that way soon enough.”

“To hell with that!” Dory shouted. Most of the murmuring stopped. I’ll never understand how some people command attention and others don’t. “How many Borolians know these mountains? How many of them know the canyons? How many imperial soldiers do you think can tell the difference between a rocky trail and a dammed up river that’s waiting to drown them? We’re fighting for Hron, gods dammit, and they’re fighting for little tokens that they keep in their pocket to spend on sex and food.”

Nola spoke next. “We can win. I’m not saying we *will*, I’m saying we *can*. We can win this war if we start accepting that it’s coming *now*. We need to raise and train militias, manufacture arms, set up posts and ambush points, fortify and booby trap our towns, everything. We need everyone to start scheming, and more than that, start working. In one month’s time, there’s going to be a council of war in Hronople. Every town, smallholding, and militia should send their spokespersons so we can share our plans, needs, and what we know.”

I’m rarely tempted as a journalist to lie in print, but I truly wish I could write here that the crowd was jubilant, that we had rallied their spirits and sent them off with a renewed sense of hope. But of course, we didn’t. Our tidings were grim, and as much as we tried to cheerlead, we left no one in a spirited mood.

After the rally, we got ready to go. We’d head to Holl, then Hronople. Grem and Dory chose to accompany us to the city, in part to be extra sets of eyes and arms in case of attack en route, in part so that Grem might see a prosthetist.

“You’re not the bastard I thought you were,” Sakana said to me as she helped me pack my effects.

“Thanks,” I said.

“No, I mean it. And more than that, I’m sorry how I was the first day.”

“I’d already forgotten,” I said. “And thanks, sincerely, for the hospitality.”

Sakana grinned. “I’ll be getting plenty of it myself. Hospitality, that is. I’m leaving with Varin. You inspired us, we’re going to spread the word. ‘Make plans for war, and send a spokes to the council.’ Varin thinks we can hit six, maybe seven towns and still make it in time for the council ourselves. There’s a meeting tomorrow after lunch for those of us who’re going to be messengers, so we can be sure to make it everywhere.”

“I can’t wait to see you in Hronople,” I said.

I signed the log in the guest hall, going on perhaps at overdue length—the writer’s curse—about how pleasant I’d found my stay.

Sammit and Dammit were relieved to see us when we picked them up from the dog run on our way out of the city, and the houndswoman who’d been keeping them seemed relieved to see them go. “These aren’t town dogs,” I believe her words were. “Lovable I’m sure, but get them the hell out of here.”

I remember that encounter more vividly than some of the other more mundane encounters I’ve had in Hron, because I remember it was when it occurred to me that this gruff, grumpy demeanor seemed endemic to the country. A curious thing for a group of people who share freely and keep no track of debt or wealth.

Then we were off, and I remembered just how goddam much it hurt to ride a horse with a bullet wound in your arm.

“Aren’t you a glassmaker?” I asked.

“Sure,” he said. “But she’s going, and I love her more than I love my life. So I’m going.”

“Time to put my book learning to use, I guess,” Somi said. Both of them were trying to keep up a stoic front. Both of them were terrified.

The whole town was terrified. They were seven thousand marching on nine that sat behind fortifications. It was a death march. The most expensive bluff I’d ever imagined.

Nola stopped by in the early hours of the morning. I hadn’t even tried to go to bed. “Write me a speech,” she said.

“What?” I asked.

“I’ve never been any good at speeches,” she said. “And I know I’m not a general and I know we’re all equals but you know, people look to someone like me before we run in and try to shoot people. And I want something to say to them other than ‘shoot anyone who tries to kill me please, also Hron is great.’ Because honestly I tried to write something earlier and that’s basically what I got.”

“Starting with a joke is for politicians,” I said. “A good battle speech, from what I figure, is full of earnest superlatives that are, somehow, nonetheless true. A good battle speech is the kind of thing that doesn’t make any sense if you’re not about to get shot at, if you’re not surrounded and outnumbered.”

“Got it,” she said. “Write me a speech. A short one. I’m going to bed.”

I wrote her a speech.

Sorros came last. Only the battle-insomniacs were still awake, speaking in hushed tones in the hall, or reading books, or just staring at the walls.

“You came,” I said.

“I came.”

He sat next to me, took my hand in his, and we were silent for a long time.

“You saved my life,” I told him at last. “You and Nola.”

“You’ve repaid us twice over,” he said.

“I just wanted to thank you, is all,” I said.

“Believe me when I tell you that you’re welcome.”

“Are we going to get through this?” I asked.

“Probably not,” he said.

“You should be with Nola,” I said.

“I’ll be with her on the march,” he said. “And I can’t sleep.”

Dammit walked up to us then, wagging her tail, and she laid down across my feet.

“I guess I just want to say that, whatever happens here, I hope you write about us.”

“I will,” I said.

“Write about us honestly, too. I don’t want to see propaganda. We’re just people. People have to make informed decisions. Lies won’t help with that.”

“What was it like, growing up free?”

“I don’t have a frame of reference,” Sorros said. “I can’t imagine anything else. I fought with my moms all the time and I hated hard work and I loved the woods and I loved winter. If I hadn’t joined the militia I’d probably have wound up a woodsman, I think. Gathered herbs and mushrooms. That never felt like work, that was a treasure hunt.”

He got out of his chair to sit on the floor with Dammit, rubbing her belly.

“I might have lied when I told you I didn’t know the accord,” he said. “I just didn’t want you to get hung up on it. But you’ve seen this place now. The most important part of the accord came from the villages, not the revolutionists. The most important part is

because my home had just been destroyed. Then, for a long time, I *was* afraid to die. Or to lose my other leg or something. Now I'm not afraid anymore. I'm going to war again, and this time I'm carrying my friends in my heart. By my life or death, I'll continue their legacy. As long as there's Hron, or honestly, as long as there're anarchists somewhere in this world, then I'll be alive."

I looked at him for awhile.

"I guess that's how I've been," he said. "Everything is so serious now. Everything has such weight. I think, if I get through this, there might be levity again in my life. I hope so."

"I miss adventure hour," I said.

He teared up. I did too, only when I did it, it hurt like hell.

He hugged me, then. No one hugs much in Hron, I realized. When they do it, they mean it.

The day before the march I was set up in a chair in the barracks, drinking far too much carsa and trying to make up for it by drinking calming teas. Over the course of the day, practically everyone I'd met in Hron came to see me.

When Varin, the writer from the midwinter festival, came, he sat quite close and I tried not to get swept away by how good he smelled. I also tried, and failed, to not become overly self-conscious about my bandaged face.

"I'm almost jealous of you," he said.

I looked at him.

"I'm sorry, that's a terrible thing to say," he said. "It's just... well, the war is over for you, isn't it? You don't have to ride out in the morning wearing a heavy clay vest and holding a piece of metal designed to murder people. I like to wander, I like adventure, but I genuinely don't know that I have it in me to look a person in the eyes and shoot them. Or more so, to look at a field of carnage and run onto it, hoping I can use my life to leverage more life for those around me."

"You don't have to go," I said. "You're a free man."

"I thought about that," he said, "for a long time. But that's not true. I do have to go. For Hron, yes, but I have to go for myself. I have to go precisely because I *don't know if I have it in me*. I want to be a writer, and at least as much as writers need to know other people, writers need to know themselves. So maybe a few days from now I'll know as well as you know."

I wanted to tell him I didn't know myself, but I wasn't sure if that was honest. I hadn't had enough time to think it through.

"Where's Sakana?" I asked.

"She broke up with me," he said. He started laughing. "Left me for a militiaman. I swear to you, though, that's not what this is about!"

"I believe you," I said. "Take care of yourself. No, to hell with that, take care of your friends and let them take care of you. Do stupid things for them."

"You're twenty-three, about to turn seventy-four," he said, grinning.

"I feel it," I said.

He clasped my hand and then went back to his preparations.

I watched from the chair by the fire as people came and left. Dory brought me mashed turnips and boiled greens, about all I could eat. People cried and drank and boasted and played and stood around nervously. Mol came by and introduced me to his wife Somi.

Twelve

"Does this hurt?" Nola asked when she washed the bullet hole.

"Yes, goddammit," I replied. "It hurts like shit!"

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm going to pour alcohol on the wound now. Are you going to punch me when I do it?"

"I don't know," I said. I was drunk. "Probably."

"I'm not going to do it if you're going to punch me," Nola said.

"I'll try not to punch you."

She poured alcohol on the wound. I've got nothing to compare the pain to. Fortunately, I was drunk. I didn't even punch her.

"Can I pass out now?" I asked.

"Not yet," she answered. "Not until I've got this new bandage on."

She took the freshly-boiled bandage from where it sat in a pot of medicinal tea, then wrapped it around my arm. It hurt, but it hurt so much less than the alcohol that the pain scarcely even registered.

"Now you can pass out," she said. "Just don't go falling into the mud again while wrestling a dog."

"Yes, General," I said, then I passed out.

We stopped for the night at a smallholding—one of the hundreds or thousands of small homesteads scattered across the country. Most were farms or artisan lodges. This one, Sorros explained on our approach, was a library.

Dogs barked at our arrival, and a giant of a man strode out the door and showed us to the stables.

When he saw Sorros, he bear hugged him and lifted him two feet off the ground. Then he clasped each of our hands in turn as we were introduced.

"This is Mol," Sorros said. I've plenty of practice learning foreign tongues, but it took me three tries to pronounce his name to his satisfaction.

"A friend of Sorros is a friend of mine," he said, then led us into the house.

It was as warm as summer inside, and we stripped down to our long underwear in the front room.

The house was a single story, half built of glass, and sprawling. Every wall that wasn't a window was a bookshelf, and I saw books in at least eight languages. It was warm and there were books. I wasn't sure I ever wanted to leave.

The "kitchen" was a counter in the living room, and we fell back into comfortable chairs while Mol returned to the stew. A fat, happy black cat was on my lap in an instant.

"So what is it you do here?" I asked.

"Careful," Sorros said, "Dimos here is a journalist."

Mol laughed politely, then answered me. "Me, I make glass. My wife Somi—she's in the city, hates the winter—she's a tactical historian."

Dory and Nola both perked up.

"All these books—" Dory started.

"Military history, tactical theory. Analysis of battles."

"Can we—" Dory asked.

“Nothing that looks older than, I don’t know, a hundred years,” Mol said. “And Somi will kill me if you damage anything. But other than that, go ahead.”

Dory and Nola looked at each other like children, then got up and began to explore.

“Tell Dimos why you live here,” Sorros said. “Tell him how you heat your house.”

“Thermal vents,” Mol said. “The whole house is set over a crevasse in the earth.”

“You live on a volcano?” I asked. “I’m sitting on top of a volcano?”

“Not on top of,” Mol said. “At the base of. And yes. One day his whole place will go up in flames or be buried under molten rock. But in the meantime, my house is warm and I’ve got the furnace of my dreams.”

“Mol supplies half of western Hron’s windows,” Sorros said. I’d never seen him so proud of anyone.

“How does that work?” I asked.

“Well, so I’m not part of any specific town,” Mol said, “but it works not too different than if I was. Towns and smallholdings send things around—trade, if you will—just like people within a town do. I can head into Holl and pick up supplies and they know they’re welcome here to pick up glass anytime they need. I grow and hunt about half of what I eat out here, and I get grains in town. But people only need windows every now and then, and I need food every day. So it can’t work one-for-one. It’s not barter.”

“I get that,” I said. “But what if there’s famine? Is a farmer in Holl really going to set aside grains for you when there’s barely enough to go around? Or if half the country has a drought, can they make the other half feed them?”

“Make?” Mol said. “No. And it’s come to that a few times. A hard year, you’ll really learn who your friends are.”

I thought back to my years in the boarding house, and more so, my time on the streets. “Sharing is easy when there’s enough to go around. It gets harder when you’re hungry.”

“I’ve never heard truer words,” Mol said. “We’ve had some bad years. But as much as adversity can drive people apart, set people to hoarding, it can bring out the best in people. When it comes down to it, we all agree—if there’s not enough to go around, Hron will share with Hron. It’s hard and it’s awful and we do it.”

“Is that part of the accord?”

Mol laughed. “I have no idea. I think so?”

“This is how Karak got asked to leave Hron,” Sorros said.

“Pardon?” I asked.

“We expect a culture to abide by the accord the same as we expect people to. If a culture doesn’t want to share, that’s fine, that’s on them, but the rest of us want to be with people who do. Karak was just a smallholding at the very south-eastern edge of Hron when the accord got signed, and they opened their doors to anyone who wanted a taste of ‘real freedom.’ Five years later, the whole west and north of the country lost its harvest, and everyone pitched in. Everyone but Karak. They want to live alone? Let them.”

“I can see why you don’t like them,” I said.

“Here’s to Hron, then,” Mol said, serving out bowls of stew. “Greens from the greenhouse, grains from the foothills, and guests from half the continent.”

We lifted our bowls in a makeshift toast and then ate. Travel does wonders for the appetite.

After dinner, Nola and Sorros slipped out to walk in the moonlight, and the rest of us stayed up late talking. Grem was feeling lively, and I saw hints of his old self peering out through the gloom.

“We *were*, for awhile,” Dory said.

“States are like people,” Vin said. “The best I understand, most people work like this: if they think they can beat you up and take your shit, they will. Letting them knock you around is a losing strategy. If you stand up to them, most of the time they back off. You just have to actually let them back off. That’s the only way to live in peace.”

“He’s got a point,” Nola said. “It’s a principle in tactics. You never surround an enemy, not completely. If you put their backs to the wall, they’ll fight like demons.”

“Didn’t the Free Company of the Mountain Heather drive the last invading force up against a cliff and then over it?” Dory asked.

“Well, yeah,” Nola conceded. “But that’s because we thought we’d get away with it. And besides, Wilder tried to run anyway, if I recall.”

Sorros tipped his top hat.

“So we need to kick them hard enough that they run back home,” Sorros said, “but not so badly that they want to kill every last one of us?”

“Basically,” Nola said. “Unless we’re reasonably assured we can entirely destroy them, which I’m sad to say we can’t.”

“What does this mean to the revolutionists in Tar?” Vin asked.

“If anarchists in Tar have a revolution and call for help,” Sorros said, “we’ll help. Even if it’s suicide. Because maybe states *are* like people, and if so, Hron will act like Hron.”

“So…” Dory said. “Frontal assault on Moliknari?”

Sorros sighed, and everyone else smiled.

Our proposal went in front of the council the next day, and because I was stuck in the clinic I was spared the eleven hour debate that followed. According to Sorros, it had been easy to convince people to join a frontal assault, but a lot of people had had their heart set on the total annihilation of the invading force. No one had the power to outright ban anyone from circling behind their position and killing anyone who tried to flee, of course, but it was determined in the end that doing so would go against the crux of the plan. There would always be time, people realized, to fight a war of annihilation if His Majesty’s troops ever came back. And besides that, the assault itself seemed suicidal enough.

When the plan was in place, runners went out to let all the forts and emplacements know and to recall all the ambushers set along the enemy’s line of retreat. Three days were given to the messengers as a head start before the army set off to march. Those days were spent in training and/or debauchery, as best suited each person.

After another night, they let me out of the clinic but told me I was under no circumstances to do anything that might possibly let infection set in, like go to war.

“Grem,” I said one evening, catching up with my friend as he left the barracks that had been built of the guest hall. “I’ve barely heard a word out of you since I got here. Or since before I left Hronople.”

He nodded. The youth was gone from his face. He was walking well on his wooden leg.

“How have you been?” I asked.

“You told me once, a million years ago, right after I lost my leg, that there was no afterlife. I don’t remember if it was you or me who said it, but we said the only remnant of my friends was the freedom they’d left me.”

“Well, I don’t think either of us put it as eloquently as that,” I said.

“When I joined the Free Company, I wasn’t afraid to die because I was a child and

“Can I talk?” I tried to ask. I failed.

“And don’t talk,” Nola said. “And when you *can* talk, maybe tomorrow, the first thing you’re going to do is thank Jackal.”

“He carried you here,” Sorros said, “if you can believe that.”

After what I’d been through with the old man, I could.

“I don’t know how much you missed,” Sorros said. “But, well, I guess I’m going to swallow my pride and say—shit, kid, you just saved us all again. If Karak and their ‘Freer Companies’ hadn’t shown up I don’t know what we’d be doing.”

“You’re in Holl,” Nola said.

“Before they pinned us down, we were doing better than we feared,” Sorros said. “Better than we expected. But worse than we’d hoped. We had the terrain and the spirit but we were short on supplies and people.”

“The backbone of this war,” Nola said, “has been goatherds with skis and rifles picking them off every time they peek out from behind their walls.”

“But they left in a mass, and they cut us off,” Sorros said. “It was looking bad. Now, though... the ammunition, the guns... and by the Mountain the armor! I take back everything bad I’ve ever said about Karak.” He thought a moment. “Half of everything bad I’ve said about Karak.”

“We can keep them pinned down now,” Nola said.

Dory stood up and paced around the room. “But our advantage lasts only as long as winter,” she said.

“The snows won’t melt until June,” Sorros said.

“They’ll have reinforcements by then,” Dory said. “We have to get them now.”

“No,” Sorros said. “Our only advantage is terrain. We can’t give that up and attack them head on.”

“Dory might be right,” Nola said. “They can sit still and wait for reinforcements. We, on the other hand, just got all we’re going to get.”

“If we retake Moliknari we can push forward, retake Steknadi,” Dory said. “It’s a village, but from there we can block both passes into Hron and they won’t be able to move in. It’s easy to defend.”

“We can’t set up strong placements,” Nola replied. “Not in a guerilla war. If we just build walls, they’ll blast them down. We have to stay mobile.”

“What would it take to win?” I asked. It hurt like hell, and it was unintelligible, but I had to ask it.

“What?” Nola said.

Dory brought me paper.

“What would it take to win?” I wrote. “Do you need to kill every Imperial soldier? Invade the empire? Assassinate the king? What’s the endgame of this war?”

Dory read my question to the group.

“We probably have to ask *you* that,” Dory said.

“Ask Nola,” I wrote. “I’m just a writer. She’s a general.”

Dory read it, then laughed, then read it aloud.

“When we were fighting Borolia,” she said, “we wanted to conquer it. We wanted to be the ones with an empire. The war went on so long because both sides were convinced that their countries couldn’t survive without the subjugation of the other. But before this month, Borolia didn’t even know that Hron was here.”

“We felt safer that way,” Sorros said.

“How’s the leg?” I asked.

“Lack of leg,” he answered, but he was smiling.

“How’s the lack of leg?” I asked.

“It’s amazing,” he said. “It doesn’t hurt all the time anymore.”

“I’ve still got your concertina,” I said.

“It’s too soon,” Grem answered. “I’ll get back to it one day but not yet.”

“Hey Mol,” Dory said, “you’ve known Sorros for awhile, yeah?”

“I have,” Mol answered.

“Tell us an embarrassing story about him.”

Mol stared at his beer for awhile, thinking.

“Sorros Ralm. We grew up together in Moliknari. He went off to join the Free Companies and I went off to make glass.”

“You were friends since you were kids?” Dory asked.

“Hell no, I couldn’t stand him,” Mol said. “If I’ve ever met a man who hated work, it’s him. I swear on the Mountain I’m pretty sure he joined the militia because he’d rather get shot at than work hard. And he only did *that* because half the town was threatening to cut him off if he didn’t do *something*. So here’s your embarrassing story: when we were, I don’t know, fourteen or something, we had the summer festival, and Sorros decided that frenna wasn’t enough, he wanted liquor. Darkness fell at last and we gathered in the square. The summer song began. My friends and I went to unveil the maple titan, tore off the sheets. And there was young Mr. Ralm, curled up naked and snoring, in the crown. We startled him awake and he jumped to his feet, then threw up on the chanter.”

Dory had started giggling halfway into the story, then broke out into full-on fits of laughter by the end.

“So what happened?” I asked.

“We got him down, hosed him off, and the crowd chopped up the titan while singing the hymn of summer.”

“No,” I meant, “what happened with you and Sorros? You’re close now?”

“Ah,” Mol said. “That’s a better story. At least a nicer one. A year after the uh, the incident in Moliknari... not the naked and drunk incident, the killing someone incident... Sorros came here to study with Somi. He was here the whole winter, and they really fell for each other.”

“That must have been hard,” I said.

“Saved my marriage,” Mol said. “Yeah, it was kind of hard at the time, but it wasn’t too bad. He was really sweet to her and me both, and we talked it all out. Her and I’d been married two years and the spark was already fading. Sorros steps in for a few months, and suddenly it’s back. She was feeling smothered and she didn’t even know it. Ever since, she winters in Hronople, and we’re stronger than we’ve ever been.”

“Is that common here?”

“Open relationships?” Mol asked. “It’s common enough. Maybe not the norm. It’s funny, all these years later, to see Sorros and Nola... there’s no one else in the world for either of them, from what I gather.”

“Everyone’s got to find what works for them, I guess,” I said.

Mol lifted his glass and drank, then stared out the window behind me and smiled.

I turned, and Sorros and Nola were standing in the yard, lit by the moon, hand in hand.

We rode into Holl the next afternoon and, for the first time in all my travels, there was no significant gathering waiting for us in the town square.

“Where is everyone?” I asked. We’d passed a few herders out with their flocks in the fields, but the town looked practically abandoned.

“Inside, I’d guess,” Sorros said. “It’s winter. A quarter of the town probably went to the festival and won’t be back for a few days, and the rest are likely at home, enjoying the warmth of a wood-burning stove.”

Once I’d acclimated to the country, I began to realize just how different every town was from its neighbors. The general building style was dictated by available construction materials and weather conditions, but each settlement had its own flair. In Holl, the stonework was astounding, and most buildings bore gargoyles and ornaments a thousand years old.

We rode to the guest hall and stabled our horses. The stable was remarkably warm, as it was built as a sort of greenhouse—the southern wall, facing the winter sun, was a skeletal frame filled with thick glass panes while the northern wall buried into the side of the hill for insulation. We left Sammit and Dammit there as well and strode into the hall proper, which was sadly less well heated than the stables.

By the fire, a young woman in a wheelchair and a man in a large cushioned chair looked up from their respective books at the newcomers.

“Can I help you?” the woman asked. By her voice, I suspected she had a mental, as well as physical, impairment.

“We’re from the Free Company of the Mountain Heather,” Nola said. “We’re heading to Hronople, calling for a council of war. If possible, we’d like to call a council here in Holl, as well.”

The young man walked up to us and nodded, then put on his cloak, summoned Nola with a gesture, and the two of them strode out the door.

The next morning, I smoked the last of my tobacco as the sun rose over the mountains.

“Where can I get more tobacco?” I asked.

“You can’t,” Sorros said. “Not in Hron.”

I got angry. “You banned tobacco?”

“No,” Sorros said. “It doesn’t grow here.”

“You don’t trade with anyone, is that the idea?”

“We don’t have any system in place for trade,” Sorros said. “We exchange goods through mutual aid. Until we find another anarchist country, I don’t think we’ll be trading.”

“That’s absurd,” I said. I’d finally found something I disliked about Hron. “Countries don’t trade with other countries because they’ve got some deep love for their neighbors. They do it because it enriches life, provides variety, allows progress—”

“Don’t care,” Sorros said.

I fumed.

“We mostly make our decisions independently, as individuals or small groups,” Grem explained, as I walked with him and Dory through the city street on the way to the council. “In order to make sure that what we’re doing doesn’t step on one another’s toes, we have council meetings. They’re mostly for coordination, for information sharing, like this one we called for in Hronople. But sometimes we have to make decisions as a town, so we bring it up at council. Every town does it differently. In Sotoris we had it once a

We were on the march an hour later. The wounded stayed behind to bury the dead and a crew of doctors and medics stayed to treat them.

By afternoon, we stood at the top of the pass and the Holl lay below.

My only friend in that company was Jackal, and we didn’t share a common tongue. A half a mile below us, spread out over half the small valley, was a siege of a thousand enemy troops. I didn’t know the plan, I didn’t know if there was one. I was sure, based on the fear rising in my heart, that we didn’t have a plan. But there was one, it turned out, and it was a good one.

Four whole companies, each one hundred strong, had split off the night before when the scouts returned with the news. They’d missed the party and missed the ambush and, in white cloaks, crept behind and flanked the enemy, waiting for the signal.

The signal was when we opened fire from the top of the pass with captured gatling guns until we’d spent their ammo, then we charged screaming, skiing down the hill, guns raised. Ponies don’t know much about charging down icy slopes, however, and by the time I reached the battle it was over.

Almost over, actually, as it turned out. A stray bullet took down my pony and when I rose, I found myself face to face with a very, very angry man in a green uniform. His saber came down, and I blacked out.

Eighteen

I opened my eyes and the world was hazy, gray, and dim.

“He’s awake,” said a familiar voice. After a moment, I placed it. Nola.

“Your friend here likes getting stabbed, doesn’t he?” Kata asked.

“Last time it was a bullet,” Nola replied.

“Close enough,” Kata replied. “Good evening, Dimos. Welcome back to the land of the living.”

I tried to talk. I was going to say “I was dead?” but as soon as I opened my mouth, searing pain shut me down.

“Don’t try to talk or move or breathe too hard,” a stranger’s voice, a high tenor male voice, said. “You’ve taken a sword to the face. You can’t see because there’s gauze over your right eye and... and you don’t have your left one.”

I felt a hand on mine. Probably Nola’s.

“You’re going to survive though,” the stranger said.

I fell back into the warm blackness.

When I woke up again, I was sitting in a chair and surrounded by friends: Sorros and Nola, Grem and Dory, Kata, Joslek, Jackal, even Vin was there. The gauze was gone, and I could see fairly well. There was a paper cone taped over my remaining eye, with the bottom snipped off, leaving me the tiniest field of vision. I had to turn my head to look around.

“That cone’s there so you don’t move your eye,” Nola said. “The nurse told me that when you do, the muscle in your left eye moves too, and I’d say ‘it’s still healing’ if it had started healing yet at all.”

than a gatling gun opened fire on us from a placement somewhere close above us in the hills, and the roar of the guns was deafening. The entire mountain was alive with sound and soon blood was melting the snow like piss.

I took cover behind a rock. Jackal was nearby, hiding behind his dead pony.

“Dimos!” he shouted.

“Jackal!” I replied.

“Catch!” he said, and he threw an egg of god at me. Well, more like *to* me, in a light overhand lob, but it was all I could do to reach out and catch the bomb instead of flinching away. I caught it, and it didn’t kill me. I set it down and put crampons on my boots, then picked up the bomb. I unholstered my pistol, decided I might need the grip of a free hand, and re-holstered it. I waited for a break in the tat-tat-tat-tat of the gatling gun, then ran. I scrambled up the bank as best I could, then saw the gun placement. The gunner must have seen me, because the gatling gun spun its ten-barrel nose towards me. I dropped to the ground and breathed in, savoring the last air I expected to ever breathe.

I heard an explosion nearby—Jackal must have thrown a bomb himself into the hillside. I stood and scrambled a few more paces while the gunner was distracted, then hurled my egg with what strength I had. It struck the gun and broke through the rock-and-snow gun placement. I charged in, saw two stunned soldiers, and shot them both in the head and took their pistols.

The gatling gun had been destroyed by the egg, and I wouldn’t have been able to operate it anyway. Jackal, unable to navigate his way up the icy hill, stayed in hiding, peering out to lob bombs and shoot at the soldiers fool enough to approach.

I thought about waiting out the battle in the gun placement, but decided I would never live with myself if I did. I thought about using my rifle to try to pick out enemy soldiers in the melee below, but realized with my absolute lack of training, I was as likely to hit my own side as the enemy. So instead, I came to terms with my own death once more and ran along the hill, dropping in behind the next gun placement. The gunner was busy spitting death on those below, but his companion saw me coming and shot at me twice. His first shot got me in the chest, knocking me back, but the ceramic vest I wore saved my life. I jumped into the gun placement. With a two-handed grip, I shot the gunner in the chest and turned in time to see a saber slashing down at me. The next thing I knew, I pummeled the man to death with the butt of my gun. And at that, the fighting was over.

Afterwards, I washed my hands in the snow and breathed deep.

“Where are we at?” I asked. There were about a hundred of us standing in a semicircle, protected from the weather and stray bullets by a cliff face.

“Two hundred dead. Half a hundred wounded,” someone answered.

“And the enemy?” someone asked.

“A hundred dead.”

“Any survivors?” I asked.

“Not anymore.”

“They ambushed two thousand people with one hundred?” someone asked. “Are they brave or insane?”

“Neither,” someone said. It was the ex-soldier, the one I’d accidentally snubbed at the public house in Karak. I still didn’t know his name. “They’re soldiers. They get orders and they follow them.”

“So... insane.”

week, or more often in emergencies. Everyone who wants to comes and we talk everything through. It’s boring as hell.”

“Give me an example,” I said. “Not of how boring they are, but what you talk about.”

“Let’s say I want to build a house, right? That’s pretty much my business, but I suppose there are things about it that might affect other people, like if I put it where it steals the sun from another building. So I should probably bring it up at council, let everyone know what I’m planning to do. If someone has objections, they’ll bring them up and we can work it out.”

“So what are things you all have to decide together?” I asked.

“You know, they’re actually pretty rare. Even if I wanted to like, change the name of the town, let’s say from Sotoris to Gremshold. There’s not really an ‘official’ name for the town anyway, a name is just the thing we all more-or-less agree to call something. So I wouldn’t put it to the council, I’d just start calling it Gremshold and see if it took off.”

“I’ll call it Gremshold,” I said.

“Yeah, sure, just don’t burn it down again.” He was smiling. “Okay, here’s an example that happened here in Holl. Ten years ago, everyone was getting sick. Some people looked into it, and it was the shit. The old pit toilets were full. A handful of people worked out the actual details of how to get a sewage system in place, but they couldn’t exactly go into people’s houses and install these better toilets without clearing it with everyone, so they took it to the council. It wasn’t hard to convince people though. The system they designed, with worms to process the waste, has since been put in place in like half of Hron.”

“So the council is your system of government?”

“I bet you’re sick of hearing this answer from everyone,” Grem said, “but... yes and no. Mostly no. It can only make decisions for itself and for the people who choose to abide by its decisions, which is most of us most of the time. If the council agreed to something I didn’t, because, let’s say, I wasn’t there because going to council is dull as shit, I don’t really have to abide by it. But then again, I get a hell of a lot out of being part of society, and if I want to continue to do so, I probably am going to have to abide by most of the council’s decisions.”

“I don’t think council is dull,” Dory said. It was the first time she’d spoken on the walk.

“You wouldn’t,” Grem said. “You’re old.”

We reached the council building, a stone pavilion with heavy tarps hung over the sides for winter, and walked in. Maybe two hundred people were gathered—nearly a third of the town’s population, sitting on stepped benches in a circle, drinking tea and carsa and liquor from stoneware goblets. The three of us found seats at the top, next to Sorros and the two guest hall caretakers, and listened.

At the center and bottom of the circle, Nola stood next to a middle-aged gentleman who seemed to be running the meeting.

“We’ll hear from our guests,” the man said.

“Thank you,” Nola said.

“Where are you from?” someone interrupted, once they heard her accent.

“I hardly see how that matters,” someone else responded.

“I’m from Vorronia,” Nola said. “And I can see how where I’m from might play into your decisions. I’ve lived in Hron for ten years now, and most of those I’ve spent guarding the borders with the Free Company of the Mountain Heather.”

“I can vouch for that,” one woman in the crowd said.

“As can I,” said another voice.

"I'll ask that anyone who has questions about the reputation of our guests please inquire shortly after the council," the facilitator said. "Please, Nola, continue."

Nola gave a similar speech as she had at Moliknari, with similar results. When called upon, I walked down to the center and said what I suspected about the invading force, then returned to my seat. After speaking her followup piece, Nola came and sat with us.

"So then, a council of war has been called in Hronople and we've been asked to ready ourselves for invasion," the facilitator said. "Do we want to brainstorm in this group now? Or set this question of how we defend ourselves to smaller groups and individuals, then return to discuss this in the near future, perhaps tomorrow?"

"Those who would like to could stay here to discuss it as a town," one person recommended, "but also know that we'll meet about it again tomorrow, and those who'd prefer to think this through on their own or in smaller groups would be free to do so?"

"Agreed," a voice shouted.

"Objections? Counter-proposals?" the facilitator asked.

There were none, and while some of the people left the pavilion, presumably to discuss plans elsewhere, most stayed and talked for hours. The facilitator kept his opinions to himself and simply helped the discussion stay on the various trains of thought it explored, keeping track of tangents to return to later. I was as astounded by the process as I was by the discussion. There was almost no desperation in the council, what's more, unlike at the talk we had given in Moliknari. What I came to realize is that by coming to people in Holl as we did, to their council, we had simply given them information and empowered them to find the solutions to their problems. Rather than shouting to them as a crowd, as a mass, we spoke to them as peers and appealed to their collective wisdom to find solutions to the problems we presented.

For the first time in weeks, I had hope. I had hope, a hot shower, and warm food, and the doctor who came to the guest hall to check on me seemed to think the worst was through. Just no tobacco.

Once I realized that I was happy, however, I got scared again. Happiness is something to lose.

That night we had an agreeable dinner at the guest hall and learned more about our hosts. The woman, Hillim, was studying to be an agricultural planner and spent most of her time reading books on the subject. I could scarcely understand a word of it, since I have approximately zero experience in the subject and following technical conversations in a foreign language is never easy. From what little I gleaned, she was talking about creating gardens that worked like forests, where human involvement could be kept to a minimum. She was a fascinating conversationalist, however, and once you were used to it, her speech impediment wasn't really a problem.

Sjolis, however, the man, was deaf, and the sign language in Hron had seemingly nothing—not even grammar, somehow—in common with the sign language I knew. When he joined the conversation, he did so by first signing to Hillim, who relayed his words to us. He helped in the fields, he said, and he liked to climb, but he didn't know what he wanted to do with his life. He'd thought about joining a Free Company, but he also wasn't sure he wanted to spend time away from Hillim.

Hillim and I had made sweetcakes for dessert and we served them to our friends with smiles on our faces. No one was drunk, but everyone was merry. We played parlor games like *Secrets Of The Stone and Faced With Eternity* into the small hours of the morning,

never spent so long in the company of someone I couldn't speak to, and it frustrated me not to have a grammar book, but I think we became friends regardless.

I was eager to reach Holl, to see my friends, to ascertain they were still alive. His Majesty's troops must have come in fast, arriving less than a month after Wilder's death, and I doubted they had any interest in a long winter campaign.

The two weeks I spent in the company of the Freer Companies taught me almost everything I've come to know and treasure about anarchism, largely by negative example. Freedom, I think, isn't enough. You need freedom and responsibility paired together. As Sorros would say, freedom is a relationship between people, not an absolute and static state for an individual.

Oh, to be sure, the men and women of Karak (and it was largely men, in about a 3-2 ratio with women) were decent people, or at least better people than those I'd met in His Majesty's Army, but I never felt safe in their company. Just like the streets. I'd met some of the most amazing people I've ever known while homeless, but a gutter rat will fight over scraps. When the police and all of polite society has rejected you, the only safety you have is the safety you make, and it's dangerous to ever look weak, to ever put down your guard. It's dangerous to cry. The gutter rat life is a form of anarchy, perhaps, but it wasn't one that ever suited me. Karak seemed much the same.

After fifteen days, we reached the valleys I had known, and our pace slowed as we doubled the scouts. The seventeenth day, at dinner, the scouts reported what they'd seen.

"The Free Companies are holed up in Holl," a young woman said, "They've got barricades up, and trenches, but they're pinned down. Maybe a thousand men blocking them off to the west, slowly working their way around."

"So we'll go in and kill them," a man my own age said, with the arrogance of youth. "And save the day."

That night we drank half the booze we'd brought. And in the morning, when we set off hungover, the end of the trip in sight, ready to be the heroes, we were ambushed.

Seventeen

We broke camp as usual, slowly, lingering over breakfast and carsa, then set out on our skis along the snowed-over and frozen bank of some nameless creek. I was near the fore, as was my habit, and the first gunshots were far off.

The first two reports that I heard, I assumed there was fighting amongst one of the companies. There hadn't been a substantial number of brawls en route, but I figured that for a fluke. But when the shots kept coming, and were met with more gunfire from elsewhere, I knew we were in battle.

"Take cover!" a man yelled.

"Fuck that! Kill the motherfuckers!" another voice called out.

As a force, we'd drawn thin, spread out in a line more than a mile long. The firing was coming from the middle. I dismounted, pulled down my mask, checked my pistol, unslung my rifle and, for better or worse, ran towards the mass of militia that were skiing with all haste towards the tumult.

The first strike had been targeted. No sooner had chaos broken out amongst our ranks

with catchy choruses about death and honor and alcohol and sex.

Jackal kept to himself, drinking from a bottle of poison, so I walked through the crowd and tried to make friends.

“You’re the guy from Hron, right?” The speaker was a short woman in a floor-length black dress and gaudy bright makeup around her eyes. She stood in a circle of similarly-clothed androgynous folks.

“I suppose,” I answered. It amused me to suddenly be the man from Hron, a country I’d spent such a short period of time in.

“What do you think of Karak?” she asked.

“It’s different,” I answered.

“Fuck your diplomacy,” she said. “What do you think of Karak?”

“I honestly don’t know,” I said. “I’m from Borol, really, and I don’t know what to make of this place at all. What do *you* think of it?”

“It’s alright,” she said. “It’s better than home. I left Hron because I wanted, you know, I wanted real freedom.”

She offered me a drink from her wineskin, and the whiskey therein I’m happy to say tasted worlds better than what I’d had with Bahrit.

Behind my new companions, I saw two men exchanging angry words. Soon, they were shoving one another, and the crowd opened up a circle to watch.

The main aggressor, six foot six and built like a bear, threw the first punch and missed. His antagonist, a heavy-set gentleman with gray walrus whiskers, kicked the tall man’s knee and soon the two were scrapping on the ground. The crowd cheered.

“Shouldn’t we do something?” I asked.

The woman shrugged. “They’ve got some shit to work out, it looks like.”

Karak was a town of street kids, all grown up. It was like watching something I myself had done at fifteen, but these were adults.

The taller man, the one I would have put my money on were I into such macabre sport, was soon pinned and the walrus man starting bashing his fist into the man’s temple. Repeatedly.

“He’s going to kill him,” I said.

“Might be,” the woman said. “Probably not.”

Soon, the loser was unconscious—I could see a bubble of blood pop out of his nose, so he was still breathing—and the winner had stumbled off, drunk and wounded, into the crowd.

“What would have happened if he’d killed him?” I asked.

“Probably nothing,” the woman replied. “Maybe it would have gotten bad, dragged everyone into it. But probably nothing.”

An excited young man came up to join us. “So Roka told Sar that he knew about Sar’s brother’s defection to Ora,” he said, clearly hoping to impress my new friends with this knowledge. “And he said he hoped he’d get to kill Sar’s brother himself. So Sar tried to hit him, and, wow, that old man can fight!”

Everyone started laughing. I departed.

The sun was past its zenith before the seventeen Freer Companies of Karak—as they styled themselves—left for the north, almost twenty-five hundred strong. Most were on skis, with the ponies largely carrying supplies or dragging sledges. Jackal and I rode our ponies and kept to ourselves. He played music every night, and taught me the words. I’d

telling one another our stories and fears and hopes.

But much to my displeasure, we decided we could stay only one night in Holl. Winter would only set in worse, and there was no way Grem or I would be skiing anytime soon. If we wanted to reach Hronople, we had to beat the snow.

When I signed the guest log in the morning, in addition to going on at length about the brilliance of the facilitator I’d witnessed, I wrote:

“Holl is my favorite town in all of Hron so far. I spent an entire day here and not a single person tried to murder me.”

Thirteen

The river Keleni runs southwest out from the spine of the Cerracs, fed by snowmelt from the caps of Mt. Nisit and Mt. Raum. It runs through the Keleni valley, what many might call the heart of the Cerracs, and then, at the southern edge of the plateau, it drops off the edge. Keleni Falls is one of the largest waterfalls in the world, I was told, two hundred yards wide and dropping almost half a mile into the canyon below.

Hronople is built spanning the river and the top of the falls, so as soon as we crossed through into the valley, we saw rainbows in the mist emerging from the city walls. The entire place is roughly medieval in appearance—odd considering the bulk of the city is no greater than thirty years old—though the architectural biases of the Cerracs were present as well in the stone-and-glass designs with fiercely sloped roofs. Hronople is a work in progress, but the largest buildings are in the north, the furthest from the falls, and they descend in height down from there, giving the entire thing the look of a grand staircase. This design was implemented to catch the best of the winter sun, I was told.

Here the hack *Review* writer in me comes out, because I’m tempted to speak in superlatives, the likes of which I ascribed to cities I’d never seen when I used to write articles for the travel section. Yes, the city was charming, quaint, unique—a “must-see” even. But I cannot divorce the sight of the city from the experience of my journey to reach it, and more than anything when I saw Hronople I saw hope. Even with the city walls only half-built, the place looked formidable. The pass we’d ridden through couldn’t support an army at march with machines of war and the home-terrain advantage would be nigh unsurmountable. The war felt far behind me.

The closer we got to the city, the more Sorros relaxed and became more the man I’d first known at the front—when the road took us through a young forest populated by oak and nut trees, he took delight in pointing out the edible plants growing everywhere. It was as much a garden as a forest, he explained, much like our host in Holl had described.

The sun, low on the southern horizon, cast a faint glow on us through the haze. It was occasionally warm on my face, but mostly I was surrounded by the bitter cold of a mountain midwinter. Yet as we approached closer to the city, we rode past people in their shirtsleeves at work inside enormous greenhouses built of plate glass and wrought iron.

“How’s that work?” I asked, pointing towards one such group of gardeners.

“There’re thermal vents under the whole valley,” Sorros explained. “This was the winter home for half the towns in the Cerracs five hundred years back, and the Hronople engineers are masters of harnessing the heat of the earth.” It was clear from the way he

gestured and spoke that he took no small amount of pride in the ingenuity of his people.

“What happened, then?” I asked.

“Pardon?”

“This place *was* the winter home. Why happened?”

“Oh, the Rift. One town decided it owned the place and wanted to move here permanently. The other ones weren’t so keen on that, and, well, words turn to knives sometimes, you know? When it was over, everyone decided to leave the place alone. Too many ghosts, whether literal or metaphorical, for most people’s liking.”

“Hronople is the city of ghosts,” Nola said. “Hron means ‘ghost’ in Old Vorronian.”

“When the refugees poured in, there must have been fifty thousand of them, there was nowhere else for them to go,” Sorros said. “My mom, my birth mom, used to tell me what a nightmare the whole thing was. The villages didn’t have much to do with one another back then, not on any organizational level, and while there was a lot of resentment for the foreigners getting one of the nicest valleys around, there wasn’t really any organized way to stop them either.”

“Wait,” I said, “hold on. ‘Hron’ means ‘ghost.’ Your country is named ‘ghost.’”

Nola nodded, but Sorros answered. “When it started, I think the idea was that the whole concept of having a name, of needing to name your country, really only mattered in the context of comparing ourselves with other societies. And what are ghosts? Ghosts are invisible and you can’t hurt them, but they haunt you by the memory of their presence. The refugees really liked that angle, the idea of being an invisible country that still affects those around it. I think the rest of us went for it because we mostly didn’t care and didn’t really see ourselves in conversation with people from outside of Hron anyway.”

“But that’s not how it turned out,” I said. “The other night we toasted to Hron. There’s a patriotism here, at least in the younger generation.”

“True,” Sorros said.

“Does that matter?”

“No idea,” Sorros said. “Maybe.”

“Do you have a flag?” I asked.

“No.”

“Should you?” I asked.

“Why would we want a flag?”

“Symbols mean something. Like ghosts. They’re not real but they affect everything.”

“Okay,” Sorros said, “I’m curious. What does Borolia get from having a flag?”

I thought about it for awhile. It was nice to have something to think about other than how much I was tired of riding. “It’s easier when you’re an empire to want a flag,” I admitted. “Borolia wants to see the gold-and-green hanging over more and more houses, over more and more cities. In the war room at the *Review*, we had a big map on the wall and we moved little flags around the board as the front shifted.”

“We don’t need that,” Sorros said. “We have no interest in expansion and honestly we have no interest in imaginary lines anyway.”

“What if you lose territory? What if Holl is occupied by Imperial troops?”

“Unless they kill every one of us, they won’t have ‘occupied’ the territory,” Sorros said.

“You’re evading the question,” I said.

“What question is that? What little icon some imperialist newspaper can put on the war room map to indicate Hron? If we had a flag it would be a black one. The negation of a flag.”

councils I’d witnessed in Hron, and little effort was made to make room for lesser-heard voices, but they reached a tentative agreement rather quickly: anyone who wanted to was encouraged to join in the fight against Borolia. They would fight to free Hron, to secure an agreement of mutual defense, and, it was stated quite explicitly, to shove it in Hron’s face that it couldn’t survive without the men and women of Karak.

Dal, a woman fluent in Deded and Cer, offered to interpret for Jackal and Bahrit, and I spent the day in their company packing ammunition into crates and discussing the machinery of war.

“What happened with those bandits?” I finally had the chance to ask Jackal.

“I’ve been working with cardiotoxic snake venom for decades,” he said, by way of Dal. “I’m immune to it. And, I have to say, I have developed a taste for a brandy only I can drink.”

“And the egg?” I asked.

“Gunpowder and a primer,” he said. “The primer is kept in a hummingbird egg inside the larger crow’s egg. Breaks on impact and explodes. The crow’s egg is thickly lacquered with tree sap to keep it from breaking during transport.”

Bahrit and Jackal discussed industrial production for awhile, and Bahrit led us from the arms factory to the second factory across the street, filled with body armor.

“Here,” Bahrit said, handing me a block of white ceramic about two inches thick, “take a look at this. Look closely at the grain of it.”

I held it up to my face, looking for a grain pattern, but none was visible. I heard a gunshot, and the plate cracked in my hands, sending shards of ceramic towards my face. Fortunately, none cut me or got in my eyes. I dropped the plate and saw Bahrit standing with a pistol aimed at my head.

“You’re fucking crazy!” I shouted.

“The heat generated by coal power—we get the coal by raiding trains in Ora, no one here wants to mine the stuff apparently, myself included—lets us get kilns so hot that we can turn clay, well not just any clay, into something that’ll stop bullets.”

I was shaken as badly as I’d been in battle, and I started to walk around to curb the inevitable adrenaline that began to flood my system.

My company seemed unperturbed by the demonstration, and Jackal was incredibly enthusiastic.

“It’ll only stop small arms, for now,” Bahrit said, “and only the first shot, but it’s lighter and stronger than steel. We put these plates into pockets built into vests, or mold the whole thing into helmets.”

Soon after, the conversation between the two men fell into small talk, and Dal announced she was going home.

“Are you coming with us?” I asked.

“No,” she said.

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t feel like it,” she responded, then walked out.

That night there was a party in the militia hall, the largest interior space in town. The building was drafty and cold, with unfinished walls, and barrels of burning coal and wood provided the only heat. There was plenty of liquor to go around, and for the first several hours, people seemed happy enough. Small bands of musicians took their turns playing for the enthusiastic crowd, playing mostly uptempo jigs and reels

Bahrit nodded, pouring himself a thick liquor from a closed-top pitcher on the table. It smelled like solvent.

"I've heard you're the smartest man in Hron," I lied.

"We're not in Hron anymore," Bahrit said. "We're in Karak, no-man's land."

"Hron might fall without your help. Your help specifically, and the help of anyone here trained to fight."

"Are you here to offer us amnesty?" he asked, sipping at his drink.

"No," I said. "I'm one man—I can't offer you a country's amnesty. I suspect people will look with more favor on anyone who comes to fight, but I also..." This was the gamble I'd worked out in my head on the trip. "I suspect that you and most of the people here don't want amnesty at all."

"Oh?" Bahrit asked. "What do you think we want?"

"I can't presume to say."

Bahrit smiled at my words and responded. "I asked for coal once in Hronople, from the miners up north. I know they're bringing it out of the mountain along with everything else, but they wouldn't let me have it. They said 'we can't burn coal, it'll smoke up the air.' I tried to build a factory once, to produce ammunition at faster than artisan speeds. 'You can't build a factory,' the construction syndicate told me. 'Humans aren't meant to be alienated from the products they produce.' So yes, I'm happy in Karak, where I'm free to do as I please."

He gestured towards the workers on the line, who seemed engaged with their labor. "Not everyone wants to be a gunsmith. Yornos there, he's a songwriter. Hli designed the sawmill—I help out there from time to time. Notra... she killed a man on the road and no one in Hron took her side. She's a hunter, but spends the winters helping out in the factories so she has something to do. Karak is no paradise, nor does it pretend to be. We had ten murders in town last year, and before I started sleeping in the factory someone—probably someone I know and trust—broke in here and stole every last bullet we'd poured, probably sold them to Ora. And what I did in Hronople is simply inexcusable. No one should forgive me for that. But you know what? I've had to move on with my life, even though I ended many others."

"So you won't help us?" I asked.

"Oh, I'm going to help you," he answered. "I just wanted you to understand me. I'm going to help you because the bandits from Ora are getting worse and more desperate, and while we've handled them so far, we could use a pact of mutual defense. Us anarchists have to stick together—even if I think they're a bunch of stuck up bastards and they think I'm a murderous fuck. I suspect we'll be able to raise a sizable force."

"Can I have a drink?" I asked.

"I just thought you'd be too good for our swill," Bahrit said, pouring me a tumbler. "One for this gentleman? Who is he, besides a creepy walking corpse? He doesn't understand Cer, am I right?"

"He's from Dededeon. Military researcher in Hronople."

"A man after my own heart," Bahrit said, pouring Jackal a glass.

The three of us toasted, and I downed their swill. I had not been deceived by its solvent smell.

It took only a day to mobilize the Karak militia for war. Word of the invasion went around that night, and in the morning they had a meeting. It lacked the formality of the

"Or one with a cute little ghost on it," Dory said. I hadn't realized she was listening. "Like what a kid would draw. That's what I'd pick."

"What else do we need a flag for?" Sorros asked.

"When you go off to war," I said, "everything I've read leads me to believe that banners and flags, as symbols, improve morale. It's the tangible object that represents the intangible ideal."

"That's an easy one," Nola said. "I've thought about this a lot. I used to lead troops, and flags inspire loyalty. But in the Free Company we aren't looking for loyalty, we're looking for solidarity, for bravery. For us, it's the mask. We inherited it from the revolutionaries—they used masks when they went into battle so the authorities wouldn't know whom to arrest later. But we keep it up because the mask is something more than that. It's the flag and the uniform all in one—at its simplest, in the middle of a fight I know who my friends are. I know whom to shoot. But more than that I know my friends and myself are one thing, that my own life is only a portion of the whole. I feel powerful with a mask on, as powerful as I ever felt with soldiers at my command who were loyal to the white-and-red."

The conversation took us through the field of greenhouses and out along the Keleni. I caught a strong whiff of sulphur, and soon we passed a group of ten middle-aged women and men relaxing nude in a hot spring, passing around a cigarette. They saw me staring and a few of them waved. I waved back. I wanted to join them.

In front of us loomed the northernmost buildings of the city, built of stone in the late medieval style with delicate flying buttresses and elaborate arched rooftops. Some were bare stone and marble, others had brightly painted reliefs carved into them with varying degrees of skill.

When we reached the unfinished border wall, we passed through what would likely one day become a massive gatehouse, but was at present a literal hole in the wall. On the other side, a dozen youths aged five to fifteen were playing a game that involved shouting prime numbers and tackling one another.

"Afternoon!" a ten-year-old girl called from where she lay underneath a pile of younger children. She shook them off and approached. "Just getting to town?"

"We are," Nola said, dismounting to stand closer to the girl's own height. "What's news?"

"There's a council of war that got called," the girl answered, "but it's not for a few weeks. And the tomato crop failed, and Jol and Simol jumped off the falls and their friends are pretty upset, so if you go to the Cold Quarter expect a cold reception!"

"You've been saving that pun for hours," Nola said, "haven't you?"

"I have."

"Any good news?"

"The winter greens are coming great, my mom says, and Myilin said this morning that both sides of this stupid engineering fight over railroads versus zeppelins have agreed that the fight is stupid so they're starting to talk to each other again. And my dad's back from the mountain for a few days and he brought me a grasshopper the size of my arm. Well not really the size of my arm but it's really big."

"Where can we stable?" Nola asked.

"Myilin said that only Falling Horse Stables is full."

"Thank you," Nola said. "You're doing a great job. Have you been doing welcome gate long?"

“Oh just since lunch,” the girl said. “But I did it last month too and last year Bijji used to do it a lot and her and I used to be best friends so I came and played with her a lot while she was doing welcome gate.”

We waved farewell to the welcome committee and rode into the city.

“Kids work here?”

“You’re doing it again,” Sorros said.

“Doing what?” I asked.

“You’re judging our country based on your own assumptions. Where you’re from, child labor is a bad thing, right?”

“It is,” I said. “I hated it.”

“The idea is what?” Sorros asked. “That it’s bad to force children to do labor because labor is horrible and dangerous and so kids should at least have a chance to grow up some before they are forced into a system of wage slavery?”

“That’s... that’s not how I would have put it,” I said, “but yeah, maybe.” I thought about it more. “No, that’s not right at all, actually. It’s bad for kids to work because they don’t have the social capital that adults have, and it’s easier to force them into worse work conditions.”

“The same argument could be used against making poor people work,” Grem suggested.

“People work in Hron because it’s fulfilling to do something socially productive and because it’s necessary,” Sorros said. “We don’t force kids to work any more than we force them to eat, to learn, or to play. You know what my favorite game was when I was growing up? My friends and I called it knife-killer. We found out what bugs were bad for the garden and we hunted them down in teams. At the end of the day all the teams piled up the corpses of the bugs they’d killed, and the older kids picked out the ones that were ‘valid kills,’ the pests, and we counted them all. We were competing against ourselves, against our teams’ best previous scores and the best previous scores of the whole lot of us playing. Somewhere in Moliknari, I bet there’s still a wooden board we carved the highest collective score from each year. No one called it ‘work.’”

“Why’d you skip out on work all the time then?” Dory asked.

Nola started laughing. Even Sorros looked amused.

“Mol told you about that, did he?”

Dory smiled.

We stabled our horses at Nine Swallows Stables, at the edge of town. The stablehands there treated us like royalty—or at least heroes—when Grem explained we were part of a Free Company. The rest of the way we went on foot. This time, at last, Sammit and Dammit came with us.

“Are we staying with you two?” Grem asked.

“We don’t have a house,” Nola said. “We ran off to play hero.”

“Where then?” I asked. “Are there guest halls here?”

“Kind of,” Nola said. “But to be honest they’re not as nice. Space is at a premium in the city, and so the guest halls are kind of crowded and tend to attract people who...”

“Are terrible at everything?” Sorros suggested.

“I was going to go with ‘aren’t habitually clean,’” Nola said.

“I like ‘are terrible at everything,’” Sorros said. “Though I suppose it’s kind of rude.”

“Didn’t you all...” Grem started.

“Yes, yes,” Sorros said, “we met in the Stained Mare, where we were both living. But

“Fuck the army,” he said. “Fuck His Majesty. You know what? I never had a home and now I do.”

I thought he was drinking from the beer to prove it wasn’t poisoned, but he didn’t give it back.

“And you know what else?” he said. “You think you’re better than me because the King didn’t give you a rifle. You think you don’t have as much blood on your hands as I do. So fuck you too.”

He turned his back on me and walked back to a corner to sit with his friends.

I walked up to the bar. The kid was standing on a stool behind it.

“Where can I find Bahrit?”

“Factory,” he said.

I probably should have figured that out myself. We left the bar and walked our ponies the rest of our way through town unmolested.

The sun was already low on the horizon, and only one factory had a light on inside, so it was easy to choose which to approach. When we walked up to the double-doors, a middle-aged man in a top hat and a leather coat stepped out of the building.

“Can I help you gentleman?” he asked, in a Vorrionian accent.

“We’re looking for Bahrit,” I replied.

“What’s your business with him?”

“I’d prefer to speak to him directly,” I answered.

“Why would *he* prefer it that way?”

“Sorry,” I said. “I don’t mean any offense. We’re here with urgent news from Hron and have a lot to discuss with him.”

“Well, leave your guns with me, then,” the man said. “There are a lot of people from Hron who have more to discuss with Bahrit than he might be willing to talk about. Things like retribution and revenge, or whatever nice terminology they’d come up with for it. Accountability maybe.”

I nodded, and handed him my pistol. Jackal looked at me, then followed my lead.

“Your names?” he asked.

“Dimos Horacki,” I said. “And this gentleman is Jackal. You?”

“Olevander Bahrit,” he answered, “though it seems everyone just calls me Bahrit. Can we go inside? It’s cold as shit out here.”

Inside the factory was as strange a sight as I’d seen yet in my adventures. In so many ways—the conveyors, the stacked pieces of who knows what machines, the furnace heat—it was like any factory in Borol. But the workers here, the dozen or so I saw, seemed to set their own pace, and as many were staffing the assembly line as relaxed in comfortable chairs, drink in hand, chatting loudly to be heard over the roar of the machinery.

“Much better,” Bahrit said, leading us to a small coffee table in one corner of the shop floor where we took seats.

I stripped off my overcoat, set my hat on the table, and wondered if the man might be partly deaf if this was his idea of better. I focus better in the cold, it turns out, than in the tumult of a factory floor.

“What brings you to Karak, Mr. Horacki?”

“Borolia has invaded Hron,” I told him. “They’ve burned Sotoris and captured Moliknari. Ten thousand soldiers are marching, presumably, towards Hronople and they’re killing everyone who stands in their way.”

Sixteen

I could smell the city before I saw it, the first time I'd had to breathe in the fumes of industry since I'd left Tar. On the fifth afternoon we left the canyons behind and dismounted as we started down a shallow grade on a treacherous road of ice and mud. There wasn't a tree in sight, but where the snow was thinner I saw a forest of stumps. The road bent around the hill, and Karak lay before us.

It was bigger than I'd seen it in my head, covering a decent portion of the valley floor. The town was laid out like a pear, bisected by the single main road. At the northern edge, the top of the pear, along the road, was a shanty town of canvas and wood, but further south it looked like any frontier town in Vorrionia, with wood houses of two and three stories and two factory buildings that spit smog into the sky.

Subconsciously, I checked that my pistol was holstered at my side, my brass knuckles in my satchel. Our other weapons were hidden in blankets on our mount.

We walked our ponies into town and eyes peered out from glass windows or wooden, pane-less slats. The first well-built house we walked past was a one-story schoolhouse with a flat roof, cleared of snow and full of playing children. The tension began to release from my body.

Two blocks on, we tied up our mounts on a hitching post outside what looked for all the world like a Borolian public house, with frosted-glass windows and white clapboard walls. We walked into a cloud of smoke—tobacco and opium and stranger herbs—and I was immediately taken back to my days on the street.

Twenty women and men filled the place, lounging on barstools and chairs, one man sitting on a table, precariously perched between full glasses of beer. Half the eyes in the room were on us, and only half of those looked friendly.

"Horacki?" I heard my name, turned, and saw a soldier I'd met while riding with Wilder. The young man who'd been at the Grinder.

I stepped back and put on my brass knuckles. Especially with a wounded arm, I probably should have gone for my gun, but habits are what they are.

"Easy," he said in Boroli. "I'm not looking for a fight."

"You're a soldier," I said.

"Was a soldier," he replied.

We had the room's full attention. Conversations dropped off, and with no music playing, all I heard was the drip of some unseen faucet.

"Can I get a beer for my friends here?" the man cried out. The room went back to its business, but I wasn't about to let down my guard.

A kid—no more than eight—brought us each a tall ceramic mug of beer. I held mine but didn't drink it. Jackal did the same.

"You really don't trust me," he said, "do you?"

"No," I said. "I don't."

He took the mug from me and drank, then licked the foam from his lips.

let's move on from that subject..."

"Where are we staying then?" I asked.

"Friends of my mother's," Sorros said. "Friends of Ekarna."

The city was laid out, like so many cities, in a confusing mixture of a rational grid and a complex and chaotic maze. The closer we got to the heart of the city, the more convoluted and winding the roads and the more impromptu the architecture became. Most of the streets were covered with wood or glass for the winter, and it wasn't long before I had my overcoat over one shoulder and was wishing I was wearing slightly less wool.

More than half the streets seemed more like alleys, and I lost count of the number of bridges I crossed over frozen creeks or the Keleni.

I was counting on the roar of the waterfall to orient me south, but the location of the sound was obscured by the complex streets and soon I was thoroughly lost. But eventually, we came to a three-story stone house with the relief of a two-horned horse carved into the lintel.

Nola smiled, took off her gloves, and opened the door.

The two weeks I spent in Hronople were likely the happiest of my life. We stayed in a house overlooking the falls, one of the oldest houses in the city. Eight people lived communally there, sharing a kitchen but each with their own bedrooms. Our hosts were mostly doctors, but for a gardener and a woman named Carhi. When I asked Carhi what she did she told me she was a "layabout" and chastised me for labeling people based on their work preferences. Later, Sorros told me she spent her time studying philosophy and pitching in with odd jobs.

The attic was a fine art workshop space that went largely unused, and we set our bedrolls down between the easels and bay windows. Each night I spent at that house I went to sleep cuddling Dammit, lulled by the sound of rushing water, and each morning I woke with the winter sun on my face and to the smell of breakfast. Dory and Nola and Sorros went off every day to do soldierly things and Grem spent his time in physical therapy, learning to walk with a prosthetic. I was invited to join the former group, but by and large I declined and spent my time wandering alone.

Hronople is split loosely into various "quarters," each dominated by a different style of living, though each of the quarters bleeds into others. And apparently, the Windrun Quarter and the Iron Quarter actually share an interwoven geography. Which is to say, they are the same place with two different names used by two slightly different cultures of people. Decentralization is a key principle in Hronish decision-making (I'd say "governance" but they'd hate me for it), and this rough sectioning off of the city plays an important role in that.

When Sorros explained the system to me, I was expecting something like the nascent gang culture of Borol, where names and identities are important and the lines between gangs are, while fluid, absolutely present. To my surprise and pleasure, this wasn't the case at all. Microcultures formed around all kinds of identities, from work preferences to music preferences to sexual preferences, but I never met anyone (well, anyone over the age of twenty or so) who belonged to only a single group or really came across as committed to the distinction between groups.

I found the Ink Quarter on my third day, with its binderies and libraries and bookshops (the difference between the latter two being rather blurred by the economics of the

place) and I'm afraid I let the rest of the city languish a bit after that. I spent most of my time reading, some of my time writing down my notes, and perhaps an embarrassingly small percent of my time helping out at the establishments I was frequenting.

I slept with an older man, in his late thirties, who stewarded one of the stores, and he made me swear up and down that any details about our encounters beyond that would remain between us. "I read books to get away from my life," he said, "and I don't like the idea of ever running across myself while doing so."

The city culture was as warm as the rural culture was cold, and strangers were almost unnervingly open and kind. I made friends quickly and easily—but, I suspected, perhaps not as deeply.

I started acting the journalist again instead of just the wounded soldier, and talked to dozens of people about their lives. On the whole, people seemed happier in Hronople than Borol, but not staggeringly so. They worried about their relationships and their health, they worried about the war, they worried about mortality and the afterlife. They worried about everything I'd grown up worrying about, except work, bosses, and poverty.

While the culture was different in the city than it was in the countryside, the politics were basically the same. I asked numerous people about that, and began to piece together more of Hronish history. When the Vorronian refugees had poured in, they'd brought their anarchist and republican politics with them—two politics with very little overlap. It was the indigenous anarchism that turned the tide against formal government, in the end. The towns and villages simply wouldn't accept any authoritarian governing state—they'd lived without law or money for a thousand years, and just because they were willing to confederate didn't mean they were willing to drop the rest of their beliefs. In the end, any trace of republicanism was wiped out, and the accord was a synthesis of the local methods and those espoused by the refugees.

I still wasn't able to find anyone willing to admit they knew the damn accord by heart, however.

A week before the council, Dory tracked me down at the library, dredging me out of my reverie.

"We're going to meet tonight after dinner," she said.

"When's dinner?" I asked. I'd been taking my meals at cafes in the Ink Quarter mostly, and had been to the house only to sleep on the nights I slept alone.

"Now," she said.

I looked at my book. It was marked with a blue X on the inside cover, suggesting that it wasn't for loan. I sighed and put it down, then followed Dory out of the building.

"What were you reading?" she asked.

"It was called *A Page of Heresy*," I told her.

"Vorronian, right?" she asked. "One of the revolutionary texts?"

"Have you read it?" I asked.

"No," she told me. "My parents were into it. It was one of my dad's favorite books. My dad was a refugee—his folks were killed in the First Gasp. My mom said she only liked it because it let her understand my dad better. I tried to read it once, when I was younger, but all that stuff about negativity and nihilism... it probably made sense in Vorronia, but I'm not really sure it does here. Here, I think what matters is how to defend yourself and your friends."

"The introduction of this version mentioned that," I said. "It was the first Cer edition

the poor lived in shacks built from the ribcages of elephants. And both, if stories were to be believed, had acquired the taste for human flesh. Still, they were among the most technologically advanced societies in the world, and Borolian traders ran routes to Ora through the Northern Ocean and down into the Blackwater, risking ice storms and pirates for the chance to trade silver and gold for machinery and plans.

The Oran bandits found us on the fourth night. So far from the front, we hadn't set up a watch, and with the weather so cold we hadn't put out our fire. This is one of the dangers of living in a society so polite as Hron, I realized when I woke with a pistol held to my throat—it was easy to leave your guard down.

There were six of them, all men, their heads shaved and their beards full and long. They wore suit jackets and wool overcoats and no masks—they were clearly not from Hron.

"What do you want?" I asked in Cer.

Most of the men didn't understand my words, but one of them, a teenager with serious acne, did. "We'll take everything," he said. "Your ponies, your guns, your food, your clothes. You'll walk with us for awhile until we decide what to do with you and if you're really good, we might not kill you."

I looked over to Jackal, who couldn't understand our words. His hands were shaking like an alcoholic's and he tried to dodder over to his saddlebags. "Make not-us drink brandy," he said, using pidgin Deded so I could understand.

"Keep away from there!" one of the bandits yelled, bringing the butt of his rifle down on Jackal's arm, knocking him to the ground.

"What did that old man say?" the boy asked.

"Make not-us drink brandy," Jackal repeated.

"He's an alcoholic," I said. "Look at his hands. He's got a bottle of brandy in his saddlebag there, he needs it."

"What?" one of the bandits asked, in Oran.

The boy answered back, speaking far too quickly for me to follow. I can't do much more than introduce myself and curse in Oran.

The man who'd hit Jackal rummaged through the saddlebag, came out with a smokey tinted bottle. He uncorked it, smelled, and took a swig.

"It's good," he said, passing it around. Everyone drank, but they refused to pass it to the boy, laughing at his protestations.

They began to rifle through our things. Then, less than a minute later, every one of them but the boy fell over in pain and died. Jackal reached into his coat, pulled out a chicken's egg, and threw it at the boy's head. It exploded on impact, destroying half the kid's face.

"Egg of god," Jackal said, in Cer.

"Holy fuck," I said, in Deded. Nausea came unbidden to my mind and bile rose in my throat—I swallowed it down.

We robbed their corpses of food and weapons, then, laden down, continued on our way in the moonlight.

“Jackal wasn’t working with us yet when Bahrit left,” Kata said. “So Bahrit might not have anything against him.”

“Well pack your shit too, then,” Sorros said. “I guess we’re all leaving tomorrow. If you get any of those bastards to fight, meet us in Holl. That’ll likely be our headquarters.”

Most of Hronople came out to see the Gray Brigade off. The old veterans didn’t march, *per se*, but walked with their masked faces high. Some held hands, some walked in lines with their arms linked together. Others stood alone. One in three of them had a firearm, the others bore spears, swords, or improvised explosives. Some walked with war dogs—or dogs who had become war dogs—and some did not.

My friends had ridden out in the frozen gloaming, as much to avoid the spotlight as to make certain no one commandeered their mounts, and they brought two hundred trained warriors with them. At least once a day, every day until I saw them next, I had to fight panic as I worried about them.

The war was to our north and west, but I left that day with Jackal to ride to the south-east on two mountain ponies. We rode hard the entire day on unfamiliar forest roads, just at the edge of our ponies’ endurance, and camped for the night in the ruins of a long-abandoned, roofless stone church.

“You don’t talk much,” I said as I lit a fire with scraps of lumber from the ruin.

“I do not speak Cer,” the man said.

“Do you speak Boroli?” I asked, in Boroli.

He looked at me without comprehension. “I do not speak Cer,” he said again in Cer. “My name is Jackal. I am of Dededeon.”

“I don’t speak Deded,” I said, in Deded. I could say maybe ten words in ten tongues. He nodded.

I roasted some hare, which he refused, but ate nuts and dried fruit from his bag, then made enough tea for the two of us. It was herbal, with clove and nutmeg and something else I couldn’t identify, but it did wonders for casting the chill from my skin.

After dinner, he pulled a thumb piano from his bag and played a tune, a sparse tune in a style that was completely foreign to me, but one I could appreciate the beauty of. Then he sang, and he did so with more strength and more passion than anyone I’d ever heard. His songs were long and winding, moving from staccato words to opera to an almost jolly rhythm. I fell asleep to his foreign words.

The next day I implored him to teach me Deded as we rode. I’ve got a good head for languages, though of course without the aid of writing or a shared tongue, I mostly learned verbs and nouns. Still, it gave us something to focus on other than the seemingly imminent death of our friends, our adopted country, and likely ourselves.

The third day, we found ourselves in canyons and Jackal led the way confidently through a maze carved by rivers and rain. The cold weather kept the risk of flash flooding at bay, though it meant fording even a stream was a life-or-death activity.

What I knew from the map I’d seen in Hronople was that Karak was at the southeastern edge of Hron, tucked in at the border of the country Ora, at least a two day ride from the nearest town large enough to be worth marking down. I knew almost nothing about Ora but what I’d read—and written—in the papers: a savage land at war with itself, the home of the pirates that ply the Blackwater Sea. It was, I had read, a place of class divisions that made Borol look like a utopia: the princes lived in towers built from silver and ivory,

and it talked about how the tactics the main text discusses, such as assassination, workplace sabotage, and the... what did they call it, the ‘vandalism of the instruments of banality,’ that those were more likely justifiable in the context of... actually, it used some words I didn’t really know. My Cer is kind of limited, but basically it seems like those tactics make sense when you’re surrounded by government but they don’t when you’re surrounded by freedom.”

Dory nodded. “My favorite books are a bit more practical. My brother goes in for fantasy novels, and I like those too, but I’ll take a book on tactics any day. Most philosophy I see seems like it was written to justify whatever the philosopher wanted to do anyway. Why do we need to justify acting on our desires? We should just act on them. The people who think what we’re doing is good will tell us, the people who think what we’re doing is bad will tell us, and we can use that to inform our future actions.”

“That’s philosophy,” I said.

“You’re trying to tease me, I think,” Dory said, “not just be rude. Right?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s not working,” she told me. “But I think I’m finally starting to understand you.”

“Alright,” I said.

We walked through the heated streets of the city, and I watched as people flitted past me, some smiling, some not.

“I miss adventure hour,” Dory said.

“Me too,” I responded.

“I miss my friends,” she said. “The dead ones and the living ones.”

We weren’t headed to the house, it turned out. I pulled my greatcoat tighter as we left the heated city and strode out to a large, low warehouse just outside the eastern walls. Inside, it was a workshop, full of furnaces and chains and all the ephemera of industrial production. I saw my travel companions from the Free Company spread out across the small living area along with three strangers. Despite everyone reclining deep into their couches and the spread of food and alcohol on the table, everything seemed tense.

“We’re fucked,” Sorros said.

“We’re not fucked,” the first stranger said. She was a woman of about thirty years, with curly red hair and the arms of a smith.

“Well, we might be fucked,” the second stranger said. He was young, probably my age, with a distinctive wine-red birthmark running across a large part of his face.

The third stranger, an elderly pale man, said nothing, only scowled from within his deep black hood.

“Dimos,” Sorros said as I walked in. “Would you be so kind as to explain to these fine people that we’re fucked?”

“Well, I, uh...” I began, stalling. I regained my composure after a moment. “Hi, my name is Dimos.”

“Kata,” the woman said. “And my husband here is Habik, and the man under the hood goes by the name of Jackal.” This last was the Boroli word for the animal.

“They make bombs,” Sorros said. “And poison.”

“Among other things,” Kata said, then turned her attention back to me. “I’ve heard you’re the pre-eminent expert on Borolian military technology. So, well, we’d like very much to know what you know.”

“I’ve never served in His Majesty’s Army,” I told them, “but I reported on the war for a number of years.”

"That's fine," Kata said. "That'll have to do. Vehicles?"

"Borolia's main strength is found in His Majesty's navy," I said.

"That's a mark under the 'we're not fucked' column," Habik said. He picked up a clipboard and made a note.

"They've got hot air balloons," I said.

"Do they carry ordinance?" Kata asked.

"I don't think so," I said. "They don't have the lift. They're used for reconnaissance. And they've got armored carriages, horse drawn, with machine guns up top."

"What's a machine gun?" Habik asked.

"It's a gun that fires four hundred rounds per minute," I answered.

"So... that's a mark under the 'we're fucked' column," Habik said.

"It takes a carriage to carry?" Kata asked.

"A carriage or a train or a ship," I said.

"So the roads, the roads are what matter. We can get by on skis and horses with what we need, and we know the terrain."

"You're going to destroy your own roads?" I asked.

"If it comes to that," Kata said. "We could mine them in places, at the very least, or blow the bridges."

"With what?" Habik asked. "Shotgun shells?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Sorros stood up and poured beer into a glass. "We've kind of got a... problem when it comes to military production," he said, handing me the beer.

"We don't do any," Habik said.

"Oh. That could be a problem." I sat down and took a sip. "Why not?"

"It's in the accord," Kata said. "Section six, technology. Technologies that are a detriment to the ecosystem reduce the ability for an abundance of life to flourish and thus tend towards the creation of homogenous and unhealthy spaces that deny the relationship of freedom between people."

"So you don't do military production because it's bad for the earth?" I asked.

"Basically," Kata said.

"Then who cares about the accord?" Grem said. "I get why we shouldn't start, I don't know, pouring coal into the river on some massive scale, but when it comes down to it why would you let some words on paper keep you from making what we need to survive?"

"A lot of people care about the accord," Kata said. "Especially in Hronople. We need it here more than elsewhere, there are too many of us. I even agree with it: I care about technology, about developing our own production of what we need, but if Hronople turns into a factory town, if we industrialize, we'd lose our soul in the process."

"So what do you three do?" I asked.

"Oh, we make weapons and bombs and armor and poison and all the ephemera of war and battle," Kata said, "but we hold ourselves to strict guidelines in production. There are some iron mines in the hills, but they don't produce prodigious quantities. There are gunsmiths in Hronople, but no more than ten of them, and they craft guns by hand. And coal... we don't do coal."

"What we were talking about before you showed up," Nola said, "is what these three can do, and what the Free Company can do to help them. That's what led us to the conclusion that, as Sorros said so clearly, 'we're fucked.' But while that's a serious possibility, it's not one that does us much good to entertain. So... what do we do?"

gun in their life have volunteered by the hundreds. They'll train at night along the way, and any of them who survive will train harder later. And finally, more than a thousand women and men who call themselves the gray brigade—veterans of the revolution, not a woman of them under fifty."

Nola nodded.

"There's something I'd ask of you," Kata said, softly. "Or of anyone, really."

"Anything we can do to help you three help us win this war," Nola said.

"Get Bahrit," Kata said. "Get Karak. If the gray brigade and these kids are able to push back the first wave, so what? Borolia outnumber us five to one and it's been a military state for longer than we've had an accord. Bahrit won't talk to us, I'm sure of it, but he might talk to you. Convince him to lend his strength to ours."

"How?" Nola asked.

"Amnesty?" Habik suggested.

"It'll never work," Sorros said, returning to the room. "People in Karak don't want amnesty, they want to live in their own way. Their own shitty, backstabbing, antisocial way."

"Then please," Habik said. "Think of something. There are eight thousand people there and to be frank, they know how to fight. And who knows what Bahrit has been designing, without the accord?"

"If we let them in as an army, what's to keep them from staying?" Sorros said. "No, I won't have it."

"You of all people," Habik said. "I thought you'd understand."

I've never seen Sorros so angry. To his credit, he mastered it better than anyone I've ever seen. His face and his fists tightened and relaxed rhythmically and he only spoke after five, maybe six breaths. "I, of all people, understand what it means to commit yourself to betterment. I, of all people, know what the mind of a man who has chosen to betray his fellows is thinking. I, *of all people*, will not have it."

Nola interceded. "I've recruited Sorros for a plan of my own," she said. "We're going to the front, and if we survive, we're headed into Vorrionia with the ex-conscripts. We'll strike at the prisons, free the people inside. Those people have been condemned to die in cells, have never had the chance to be accepted by a free society. We'll offer those people that chance, not Karak."

"I'll go," I said.

"What?" Sorros asked.

"I'll go to Karak. Tomorrow. I'm damn near useless in a gunfight and to be honest I hope I'm never in another one. But what Habik says sounds true."

"You can't," Sorros said.

"Can't?" I asked. "Am I not free?"

"You're free, journalist. I've never put you in ropes, not once. But you can't simply offer amnesty to those who live outside the society that we've made. You're free to offer them only your personal amnesty, and I suspect that once you meet them you won't want to."

"I won't negotiate with them," I said. "I get it. I've got nothing to offer them. But I *will* tell them about the ten thousand foreigners who are marching through the mountains burning and killing, and we'll see what they do."

"We will indeed," Sorros said.

"I will join you," Jackal said, startling me and everyone else in the room. His voice was a baritone and it seemed to shake the bone. I looked at him for clarification, but he said nothing else.

“Foment revolt,” the next person said.

Kata stood next, the last person in line. “Steal engineering plans,” she suggested.

“The hell with Tar! Get to Borol! Kill the king!” someone shouted from the audience.

The younger facilitator stared them down for speaking out of turn.

“Thank you,” Vin said. “We’ll consider your advice.”

The next person to stand up was an elderly man, discussing what role the leather-worker’s syndicate of Hronople might offer the war effort, but he hadn’t gotten far when Joslek, from the Free Company, bounded into the chambers and down the steps, panting to catch his breath before whispering to the facilitators.

The young facilitator then whispered to the glassmaker, who nodded and stood aside. Joslek stepped forward.

“They’re here,” he said, not quite loudly enough. The chamber went silent. “Three days ago. Ten thousand troops. They’ve taken Moliknari. Wiped out...” he stopped talking, leaned forward to take deep breaths and master his emotions. “They’ve wiped out the Free Companies of the Falls, Birch Root, Owl Skull, Laughter, and Mountain Heather.”

The room erupted. Dory ran to Joslek and embraced him. Sorros was crying, and Nola put an arm around him.

“How do we respond?” the older facilitator asked.

Grem stood up and hobbled down the steps on his prosthetic with the help of a cane. He stood facing the crowd until it quieted some to hear him out.

“We kill them,” he said. “We kill them all.”

Fifteen

“This is good news for us,” Nola said, back at the house. The living room was in terrible disrepair, filled with the possessions of at least a dozen people preparing to leave for the front at first light.

“Ten thousand soldiers invade while we’re catching our breath, that’s a good thing? My mother’s death, the destruction of my home...” Sorros drifted off, too numb to sustain his anger.

Nola clasped his hand in hers. “Winter in the Cerracs is deadly enough for those of us who know the mountains,” she said. “They caught us unprepared, it’s true, and they hit us hard. But one of us on skis is worth a dozen of them on foot. The conditions simply couldn’t be better for guerilla war.”

“Fuck your conditions for warfare,” Sorros said.

“You going to give up?” Nola asked.

Sorros let go of her hand and stormed off.

The three weapons researchers came in. Habik was calm, almost frighteningly so, but Kata’s eyes were red from tears and she could scarcely look anyone in the eye. Jackal was unreadable, as always.

“What’s news?” Nola asked.

“There are three thousand willing to leave tomorrow,” Habik said. “Youth who’ve been training with the militia for years, and youth just old enough to tell their parents they’re going regardless. Women and men in their twenties who’ve never handled a

“We ask people to pitch in to the war effort,” Sorros said. “We get everyone out there mining and smelting and turning rocks into rifles as fast as we can. We start canning food and smoking meats and we turn every scrap of wool into clothes that will get us through the cold spring nights.”

“We can do that,” Kata said. “And I guess we will. But that’s not the three of us. We’re research and development. And a lot of our development has been on hold after we lost Bahrit.”

“Bahrit?” I asked.

“Bahrit worked here,” Sorros said. “Until he decided he didn’t care about Hron.”

“That... that might be fair,” Kata said. “Bahrit was a brilliant man, but he didn’t want to hold himself responsible for how he applied that brilliance.”

“And?” I asked.

“He’s in Karak,” Kata said.

“We need him,” Habik said.

“The fuck we do,” Sorros said.

“We need him,” Habik repeated.

“Why has your development been on hold, then?” I asked, eager to change the subject at least a little.

“After one of our coworkers went antisocial,” Kata said, “we decided to be even more cautious in our experimentation. Our reputation wasn’t looking so good.”

“So your obsession with the environment and making sure your neighbors think you’re nice people means that your country’s research facility doesn’t do any military research because it might look bad?” I asked.

“Bahrit released a biological agent into the water supply of the Cold Quarter that killed fourteen people and left more than two hundred with permanent psychological damage,” Kata said. “They have nightmares in the day. Every day.”

“Oh,” I said.

“He took off as soon as it happened,” Kata continued. “If I thought he’d done it on purpose I’d track him down and kill him myself... not as revenge, you understand, but because a man who does something like that on purpose is a danger to every living thing in this world. He didn’t do it on purpose. He was careless, even reckless, and there’s no place for him here.”

“We need him,” Habik said.

“It won’t happen,” Kata said, and that was the end of the argument.

The rest of the evening we discussed plans for stealing arms from the enemy, a plan Nola was excited to bring to the rest of the Free Company after the council, though as the night got later we were further and further into our cups. I believe that by the end I had volunteered to assassinate the King himself. Fortunately, such agreements weren’t binding.

The day before the council, I went back to Nineswallow Stables so that I might go for a ride and see the valley—and return to the hot springs I’d passed on my way into the city. I saw a familiar face tending to the horses.

“Vin?” I asked. It was the farrier who’d run off from His Majesty’s Army.

“Dimos!” he shouted, then ran to me, dropping his hammer and catching me in a hug. He kissed me on the mouth in greeting.

“How the hell are you alive?” he asked, and I told him my story, at least the pertinent

details.

“And yourself?” I asked.

“My friends who ran, they told me the way out was to run to the villages, to throw yourself at their mercy. It sounded insane, but so did staying.” He spat. “I didn’t have the courage. But go ahead, ask me how I found the strength to run, to forget the gibbet.”

“How?” I asked.

“Alcohol!” he said. “My father taught me the trick. You focus on the thing you want with all your heart, the thing you’re too afraid to do, and then you sit down with a flask and focus on what you hope to accomplish. There at the bottom of the bottle you’ll find the courage, he said, and he was right.”

“Did it ever work for him?” I asked.

“Well he shot his boss,” Vin said, “so in a way, yes. Got caught and hanged pretty quick afterwards, so in a way, no.”

“But here you are,” I said.

A flask appeared in Vin’s hand. “A toast to the two of us, who’ve outlived the maggots of men who wanted us to die.”

I drank to that, and he joined me on my ride in the country, and then the next day my bliss came to an immediate and frightening halt.

Fourteen

The council chamber was an amphitheater housed in a drafty old wooden building, nothing like the grand structures I’d seen thus far in the city. But it was, apparently, one of the oldest buildings in Hronople and since it spent most of its time as a venue for performances and theatre, no one had ever gone through the effort of closing it for renovations.

The amphitheater did its job well. The rows of seating were carved from sound-absorbing limestone and the acoustic paneling suspended from the rafters helped keep the acoustics as clear as they could be. Amazingly, despite upwards of two thousand people sitting in on the meetings, most voices could be heard.

The front benches were reserved for the spokespersons from every group that chose to be present. Dory was representing the Free Company, so the rest of us took seats in the back.

There were two people facilitating the proceedings, a white-haired woman who leaned on a cane and spoke with a commanding voice and a younger person whose gender I couldn’t distinguish who seemed mostly present to whisper information to the woman.

“We’re here for a council of war,” the woman said, beginning the meeting. “The first one we’ve ever had. We’ve got a process we’re going to try, and during the lunch recess and then later tonight after dinner anyone who would like to discuss process may join us and do so. But we have a *lot* to discuss and a lot of people from all over the country

who clearly have important things to get done, so we won’t be discussing non-immediate process concerns during the meeting itself.

“Before we get started, I just want to clarify for those who haven’t been to confederational councils before that this is not a decision-making body. This is a coordinating body. The decision-making will happen in the groups that you each represent. We’ll hear from a few witnesses and experts about the threat that we face, then we’ll hear from each spokesperson about their plans. Concerns about plans may be raised but we are not here to police one another’s actions, only to give ourselves the knowledge we need to integrate our plans with one another so as to defend ourselves from this threat. Spokespersons will take the information they have learned today back to their groups and develop their plans, and we will have monthly confederational councils to discuss developments until that is no longer practical.”

“Does that really work?” I whispered to Nola. “You were an officer... can you really organize a war without a central decision-maker?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “We’ve never had to try it before. In theory, though, it’s got a lot going for it. It encourages initiative... hierarchy is notoriously slow. The worst of both worlds would be a committee though, some kind of central decision-making body that has to come to agreement with everyone. I’m glad we didn’t end up going for that.”

I was called down to the stage to present the case I’d made so many times before, giving my estimation of troop strength and likely timing, then Nola was called to discuss the command structure of the army she’d spent years fighting against. Others discussed road conditions and geography. Vin talked about conscription and horses.

Then Dory, for the Free Company, stood up and told them our plan to patrol the mountain passes and kill any soldiers they saw. It sounded simple and elegant the way she put it and her words were interrupted by applause near the end of every sentence until the facilitator asked for people to keep their cheering until the end of her speech. After going over our rather simplistic plan, Dory stated what we might have to offer other groups—information about troop movements and resources scavenged from the corpses we would make—and what we might be looking for from other groups: recruits, munitions, safe houses, and supplies.

One by one, spokespersons from all over the country took their turn to discuss their plans. Some details like exact locations were intentionally left out, I discovered, owing to the risk of spies. The crowd seemed about half groups committed to support—miners and farmers and engineers—and half groups committed to fighting.

After lunch, Vin took another turn in front of the audience. “I represent a group that doesn’t have a name yet, about forty strong. My friends and I are from Tar,” he said. “We’re new to your country and we love it and what it stands for in the way only immigrants can. We were trained to fight in His Majesty’s Army as conscripts, but we escaped. Our plan is to return to Tar and, if need be, destroy it.”

His words were met with wild cheers.

“You’ve already given us so much. So all I’m asking for now are your trust and your advice about what we can do in Vorronia.”

A few people from the audience stood and formed a line in the aisle, then addressed Vin’s question one at a time, speaking loudly to the audience.

“Kill their commanders,” the first man suggested while he gently rocked a baby in a sling across his chest.

“Sabotage their military factories and the rail lines that bring troops to the front,” a young woman—a girl, really, likely no more than thirteen—added.