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Wolfhound Empire

Written by Peter Higgins

Published by Gollancz

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WOLFHOUND EMPIRE

The complete trilogy

Wolfhound Century
Truth and Fear
Radiant State

PETER HIGGINS



First published in Great Britain in 2016 by Gollancz
an imprint of The Orion Publishing Group Ltd
Carmelite House, 50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK Company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 473 21064 6
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc



www.wolfhoundcentury.com
www.orionbooks.co.uk
www.gollancz.co.uk

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WOLFHOUND CENTURY

The wolfhound century is on my back –
But I am not a wolf.

OSIP MANDELSTAM (1891–1938)

Part One

1

Investigator Vissarion Lom sat in a window booth in the Café Rikhel. Pulses of rain swept up Ansky Prospect, but inside the café, in the afternoon crush, the air was thick with the smell of coffee, cinnamon bread and damp overcoats.

'Why don't you go home?' said Ziller. 'No one's going to come. I can call you if anything happens. You can be back here in half an hour.'

'Someone will come,' said Lom. 'He's not sitting out there for no reason.'

Across the street, a thin young man waited on a bench under a dripping zinc canopy. He had been there, in front of the Timberworkers' Library and Meeting Hall, for three hours already.

'Maybe he spotted us,' said Ziller. 'Maybe the contact is aborted.'

'He could have lost us straight off the boat,' said Lom. 'He didn't even look round. He's not bothered about us. He thinks he's clean.'

They had picked him up off the morning river-boat from Yislovsk. Briefcase – that was the cryptonym they gave him, they didn't know his name – had hung around the wharves for a while, bought himself an apricot juice at a kiosk, walked slowly up Durnovo-Burliuk Street, and sat down on a bench. That was all he had done. He carried no luggage, apart from the small leather case they'd named him for. After an hour he'd taken some bread out of the case and eaten it. Except for that, he just sat there.

Ziller picked up his glass of tea, looked into it critically, set it down untouched.

'He's an arse-wipe. That's what he is.'

'Maybe,' said Lom. 'But he's waiting for something.'

The truth was, Lom rather liked Briefcase. There was something

about him – the way he walked, the way his hair was cut. Briefcase was young. He looked … vulnerable. Something – hatred, idealism, love – had driven him, alone and obviously frightened, all the way across the continent to Podchornok, his ears sticking out pinkly in the rain, to make this crude attempt at contact. The call from Magadlovosk had said only that he was a student, a member of some amateurish breakaway faction of the Lezarye separatists. The Young Opposition. The Self-Liberation Will of All Peoples. He was coming to meet someone. To collect something. Magadlovosk had sounded excited, unusually so, but also vague: *The contact, Lom, that's what matters, that's the target. The contact, and whatever it is he's bringing with him.*

'You really should go home,' said Ziller. 'What time did you finish last night?'

'I'm fine,' said Lom.

'Fine? You're over thirty, you do twice the hours the others do, you get no promotions, you're on crappy pay, and you need a shave. When did you last eat something decent? '

Lom thought of his empty apartment. The yellow furniture. The unwashed plates and empty bottles. Home.

'Why don't you come round?' Ziller was saying. 'Come tonight. Lena's got a friend. Her husband was killed when the *Volkova* went down. She's got a kid but … well, we could invite her—'

'Look,' said Lom. 'I had some paperwork last night, that's all.'

Ziller shrugged. He lit a cigarette and let the smokestream drift out of his nose.

'I just thought …' he said. 'Maybe you could use a friend, Vissarion. After the Laurits business you've got few enough.'

'Yeah. Well. Thanks.'

They sat in silence, awkwardly, staring out of the window. Watching Briefcase staring at nothing.

'Shit,' said Ziller, half-rising in his seat and craning to see down the road. 'Shit.'

A line of giants, each leading a four-horse dray team and a double wagon loaded high with resin tanks, was lumbering up the hill from the direction of the river quay. They were almost in front of the Rikhel already – the rumbling of the wagons' iron wheels set the café floor vibrating faintly – and when they reached it, Briefcase would be out of

sight. The teams were in no hurry: they would take at least ten minutes to pass.

'You'll have to go outside,' said Lom. 'Keep an eye from the alley till they're gone.'

Ziller sighed and heaved himself reluctantly to his feet, trying to shove the loose end of his shirt back under his belt and button his uniform tunic. He took a long, mournful, consolatory pull on the cigarette and ground the stub into the heaped ashtray, squeezed himself out of the booth and went out into the rain with a show of heavy slowness. Theatrics.

Lom watched the giants through the misted window. They walked patiently under the rain: earth-coloured shirts, leather jerkins, heavy wooden clogs. The rain was heavier now, clattering against the window in fat fistfuls. Only one person was standing out in the street. A soldier, bare-headed and beltless, grey uniform soaked almost to black, left sleeve empty, pinned to his side. He had tipped his face back to look up into the rain and his mouth was wide open. As if he was trying to swallow it down. He had no boots. He was standing in a puddle in torn socks, shifting from foot to foot in a slow, swaying dance.

Two kinds of rain fell on Podchornok. There was steppe rain from the west, sharp and cold, blown a thousand versts across the continental plain in ragged shreds. And the other kind was forest rain. Forest rain came from the east in slow, weighty banks of nimbostratus that settled over the town for days at a time and shed their cargo in warm fat sheets. It fell and fell with dumb insistence, overbrimming the gutters and outflows and swelling the waters of the Yannis until it flowed fat and yellow and heavy with mud. In spring the forest rain was thick with yellow pollen that stuck in your hair and on your face and lips and had a strange taste. In autumn it smelled of resin and earth. This, today, this was forest rain.

Ziller was taking his time. The giants and their drays had gone, and Briefcase was still on his bench. The soldier wandered across to him and started waving his one arm. He seemed to be shouting. He had something in his hand and he was trying to show it to Briefcase. Trying to give it to him. Briefcase looked confused.

Shit. This was *it*. This was the *contact*!

Lom crashed out into the rain and across the road.

'Hey! You! Don't move! Police!'

Where the hell was Ziller?

Briefcase saw Lom coming. His eyes widened in shock and fear. He should have waited. Showed his papers. Said he had no idea who this soldier was, he'd just been sitting there eating his bread and watching the rain. Instead, he ran. He got about ten paces across the road, when Ziller came out of the alleyway by Krishkin's and took him crashing down into the mud.

The soldier hadn't moved. He was staring at Lom's face. His eyes, expressionless, didn't blink. They were completely brown: all iris, no whites at all. He opened his mouth, as if he was going to speak, and Lom smelled the sour, earthy richness of his breath, but he made no sound. His one hand worked the small cloth bag he was holding as if he was crushing the life out of it. Lom snatched it out of his grip.

'Give me that!'

The man's fingers felt cold. Hard. Brittle.

Lom undid the cord and looked inside. There was nothing but a mess of broken twigs and crushed berries and clumps of some sticky, yellowish substance that might have been wax. It had a sweet, heavy, resinous perfume.

'What the fuck – ?' said Lom. 'What the fuck is this?'

The soldier, gazing into him with fathomless brown eyes, said nothing.

2

Five time zones to the west of Podchornok, on the roof of the Grand Hotel Sviatopolk in Mirgorod, Josef Kantor waited. Despite the ragged fingernails of wind scraping at his face, he was immovable: a pillar of patient rock in a dark and fog-soaked coat. The fog had come and gone. Drifting in off the river before dawn, it had enfolded him in blankness and sifted away at the cold rising of the sun, leaving him beaded with dull grey droplets. He had not moved. He was waiting.

Kantor teased the cavity in his tooth with the fatness of his tongue. The hurting was useful. It kept him rooted in the true present, the only now, the now that he was making come to be. He only had to wait in the cold and it would happen. He only had to not be deflected. Not be moved. And it would happen.

Far below him, Levrovskaya Square, transected by tramlines, was monochrome with yesterday's snow under the blank white dawn. Twelve floors beneath his feet the lobby roof projected, taking a small trapezium bite out of the squareness. Pavement tables were set in two neat rows, penned in by a rectangle of potted hedge. Empty. Sellers were setting up next to the tram stop: a woman putting out a stall of old clothes, linen and dressing gowns; another, wearing a sheepskin coat, lighting a stove for potatoes; an old man arranging his trestle with trays of pancakes, bowls of thin purée, cans for kvass. For the first time, Kantor consulted his watch. Exactly nine a.m.. It was time.

The iron car rattled around the corner and into the square, drawn by a pair of horses, stepping carefully, leaning into the weight, heading for the Bank of Foreign Commerce. His people would begin to move now. He looked for the women first, and there they were, Lidia and

Stefania, the edges of their skirts wet with melting snow, crossing to the gendarme in his kiosk on the corner. The women were laughing, and soon the young gendarme was laughing too. He would be smelling their heavy, promising scent. Kantor used the women to ferry explosives, and they soused themselves with perfume to cover the clinging smell of dynamite strapped against their sweating bodies.

Lidia drew the revolver from her skirts and shot the young gendarme twice. His legs gave way and he crumpled into a sitting position, hunched over his burst belly: blood in the slush; crimson in pale grey. He was still alive, moving his body from side to side, pawing weakly at his face. Lidia stepped in close and shot him in the side of his head.

In Levrovskaya Square, no one noticed.

No, that wasn't correct. An old man in the uniform of the postal services was staring across from the opposite pavement. He took his bag from his shoulder and laid it on the ground, gazing at the dead boy. That didn't matter. The strong-car had reached the middle of the square. But where was Vitt? He should have come out of the Teagarden by now.

And there he was, but he was running, his grenade already in his hand. He dropped it hastily into the path of the horses. It didn't explode. It simply lay there in the snow, inert, like a round black fruit. Like the turd of a giant rabbit. Yelling, the driver hauled on the reins. Kantor watched Vitt stand, uselessly, eyes blank and mouth slightly open, gazing in abstraction at his hopeless failure of a bomb.

Vitt turned and ran out of sight down the alley between the Teagarden and Rosenfeld's. The driver was still screaming at the horses. They stood confused, alarmed, doing nothing. The back of the car opened and soldiers climbed out, looking around for something to fire at. Kantor saw Akaki Serov saunter towards them, smiling, saying something jaunty. When he was close enough he lobbed a bomb with casual grace, going for the horses, and another that rolled under the car. The double flash came, and sudden blooms of smoke and flying stuff, and then the sound of the concussions. The force of the double explosion disembowelled the horses and tore legs and arms and heads off the men. Akaki Serov, who was too close, was burst apart also.

Into the silence before the screaming began, the rest of Kantor's people surged forward, the giant Vaso wading among them like an adult among small children. Lakoba Petrov, Petrov the Painter,

hurried along beside him, taking three steps for his one. Petrov was bare-headed, his face flushed pink, firing his Rykov wildly at groin level. The pair ran towards the burst-open strong car, out-distancing the others. Petrov shot a soldier who was rising to his knees, while the giant wrenched at the doors of the car, tearing the metal hinges, and climbed inside. It seemed improbable that he could fit himself inside such a small space, but he ducked into it as if it was a cupboard to hide in.

The others spread out across the square, firing and lobbing grenades. Pieces of flesh, human and horse, spattered the cobbles. There were soft messes of blood and snow and fluid. The screams of the injured sounded as remote to Josef Kantor as the distant cries of the gulls in the bay.

The revolutionary is doomed, he whispered across the Square. *The revolutionary has no personal interests. No emotions. No attachments. The revolutionary owns nothing and has no name. All laws, moralities, customs and conventions – the revolutionary is their merciless and implacable enemy. There is only the revolution. All other bonds are broken.*

The potato seller lay on her face in the middle of the square, her leg somewhat apart from the rest of her, her arm stretched towards a thing she could not reach.

A kind of quiet began to settle on the square, until the tall bronze doors of the bank were thrown open and a mudjhik came lumbering out, twelve feet high, the colour of rust and dried blood. Whatever small animal had given its brain to be inserted inside the mudjhik's head-casket must have been an exultant predator in life. This one was barely under control. It was smacking about with heavy arms, bursting open the heads of anyone who did not run. Behind the mudjhik, more militia came out of the bank, firing.

Whether it was the shock of the mudjhik or some more private and inward surge of life-desire, one of the horses attached to the strong-car twitched and jerked and rose up, squealing. Still harnessed to the car, its comrade dead in the traces alongside and its own bowels spilling onto the pavement, the horse lowered its head and surged towards the empty mouth of East Prospect. With slow determination it widened the distance between itself and the noise and smell of battle, pulling behind it thirty million roubles and Vaso the giant, who was still inside.

Kantor breathed a lungful of cold, clean air. The chill hit his hollow, blackened tooth and jolted his jaw with a jab of pain. Time to come down from the roof.

3

When Lom got back from placating Magadlovosk on the phone, Ziller was already in the office, writing up his report. Ziller wrote carefully, word by meticulous word, holding his chewed pencil like a jeweller mending a watch.

'Where are they?' said Lom.

'Who?'

'Briefcase,' said Lom. 'The soldier.'

Ziller put down his pencil. 'Oh,' he said. 'Them. Lasker had them taken across to the Barracks. The militia are going to sweat them a bit and then send them to Vig.'

'What?' said Lom. 'I'd have got what I needed in an hour. They won't survive a week at Vig. You saw them—'

Ziller looked awkward.

'Lasker wanted them off the premises. He said they were an embarrassment.'

'It was a contact,' said Lom.

'Yeah,' said Ziller. 'Well. Lasker thinks you fucked up. Actually, he just doesn't like you. But forget it; it doesn't matter anyway. You're going on a trip. There's a wire on your desk. There was no envelope, so I read it. So did Lasker.'

Lom spread the crumpled telegram out on the table, trying to flatten the creases with the side of his palm. A flimsy sheet with blue printed strips pasted down on it.

INVESTIGATOR VISSARION LOM MUST MIRGOROD SOONEST STOP ATTEND OFFICE UNDER SECRETARY KROGH STOP 6PM 11 LAPKRIST STOP LODKA STOP MANDATED REPEAT MANDATED ENDS

Lom read it three times. It wasn't the kind of thing that happened. A provincial investigator summoned halfway across the continent to the capital. They never did that. Never.

'Maybe they want to give you a medal, Vissarion Yppolitovich,' Ziller said.

'Or shoot me in the throat and dump me in the Mir.'

'Don't need to go to Mirgorod for that. There's plenty here would do it, not only Lasker, after what you did to Laurits.'

'Laurits was a shit,' said Lom. 'I saw the room where she was found. I saw what he did.'

'Sure. Only she was a non-citizen and a tart, and Laurits was one of *our* shits. He had a wife and daughters. That makes people feel bad. You're not a popular guy any more.'

'It wasn't a career move.'

'Better if it was,' said Ziller. 'They'd understand that.'

'I did it because he was a murdering bastard. That's what policemen do.'

'You shouldn't joke about this, Vissarion. Things could get serious. People have been asking questions about you. Turning over files. Looking for dirt. You should be careful.'

'What people?' said Lom.

Ziller made a face. 'You know,' he said. 'People.' He hesitated. 'Look, Vissarion,' he said. 'I like you. You're my friend. But if they come after me, I won't stand up for you. I can't. I'm not that kind of brave. I won't risk Lena and the children, not for that. It might be a good thing to be away for a week or two. You know, let things settle down.'

Lom folded the telegram and put it in his pocket. A trip might be good. A change of scene. There was nothing here he would miss. Maybe, just possibly, in Mirgorod they had a job for him. A proper job. He was tired of harassing students and checking residence permits while the vicious stuff went on in this very building, and they fucked you over if you did anything about it. He looked at his watch. There was time: an hour to pack, and he could still catch the overnight boat to Yislovsk.

'You can take the Schama Bezhin file,' he said to Ziller. 'Call it temporary promotion.'

Ziller grinned. 'And I thought you didn't appreciate me,' he said. 'Don't rush back.'

4

A messenger was standing near the back exit of the Sviatopolk, white-faced, gripping his bicycle. Kantor dragged the machine out of his hands and rode off in pursuit of the dying horse, the money and the giant. He found them in a lane off Broken Moons Prospect. Vaso had begun to unload the satchels of roubles, stacking them neatly in the gutter. The horse was dead. Vaso was inside the back of the car, filling it almost completely. Kantor leaned his bicycle against the wall and peered in.

Vaso looked back over his shoulder.

'They were waiting for us,' he said. His huge blue eyes peered into Kantor's face as if from deep under water. 'Inside the bank. They knew we were coming.'

'Yes.'

Kantor looked away a fraction too late. In some odd instant of rapport, some unprotected momentary honesty, there was a flash of communication between the giant and the man which neither had intended. Kantor saw the start of it in the giant's huge eyes and the changed way he held his massive shoulders.

'You,' said Vaso. 'It was you that told them.' He began to pull himself backwards out of the strong-car.

'Vaso,' said Kantor quietly, 'wait. It's not how you think.'

But even as he spoke, Kantor had already taken the grenade from his pocket and shoved it hard into the crevice between the thighs of the giant.

Three pounds of explosive filler encased in a sphere of brittle iron.

The release lever of a standard grenade is held in place by a pin. Once the pin is removed, only the grip of the bomber prevents the lever

from springing open, firing the primer and igniting the fuse, which detonates the main charge with a ten second delay. But when Kantor thrust the grenade between Vaso's legs, it was squeezed tight. The lever couldn't spring open.

Vaso, alarmed but uncertain what had happened, hastily tried to back out. Kantor retreated until he was pressed against the wall of the building behind him, watching the giant reversing into the light. At the last moment, the bomb dropped free, rolled forward into the vehicle, and exploded. The force of it struck Kantor like his father's fist used to. It cracked his skull backwards against the wall and the world slipped sideways. When it righted itself, the remains of Vaso were on the ground in front of him. The giant's head, as big as a coal bucket, was smouldering. There was no skin on his face, but his lidless eyes still had life in them. He looked up mutely at Kantor and the big gap of his mouth moved slightly.

Kantor reached inside his coat for the revolver tucked in his belt. He brought it out, showed it to the giant, and fired two shots into his head.

5

The light of the broken moons, circling one another in their slow, wobbling dance, floods the forest. Archangel dominates the empty landscape, a thousand feet high, like a solitary hill. The huge slopes of his body have accumulated a thick covering of snow. When he struggles to move, he dislodges avalanches and rumbling slides of ice, but he cannot shift himself. His body is irredeemably stuck, the lower part of it plunged many more hundreds of feet deep into the heart-rock and permanently fused there by the heat of his fall. The blast of his impact burned the trees flat for miles around, but new trees are growing through the ashes. Fresh snowfall carpets the floor of the shallow crater ten miles wide whose centre is him.

Call him Archangel, though it's not his name, he has none. He is what he is. But call him Archangel. It is … appropriate. The duration of his existence unfolds from everlasting to everlasting, measured by the lifespan of all the stars.

At least, that was how it seemed, until, in one impossible moment, the shadow fell across him. Now he's as you see him, caught, unable to escape, stuck hard in the planetary crust, at the bottom of the uncertainty well. He cannot adjust his density. He cannot extrude any part of himself by even a few inches. He cannot move at all. Only his perceptions can travel, and even that only within the limits of this one trivial, cramped, poisoned and shadowed planet. He is bound in a straitened prison, scarcely larger than his own self.

And he's afraid of dying.

He examines his fear carefully. Pain and surprise are its flanking attendants, but it is the fear that intrigues him. So this is what fear is like. It could be useful. If he is to live.

His attentive gaze, vast and cool and inhuman, moves restlessly across the surface of the planet, sifting through the teeming profusion of minds that populates it. So many minds. He opens them up, first one and then another, looking for what he needs. And he draws his plans.