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Iron Council

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In years gone, women and men are cutting a line across the dirtland and dragging history with them. They are still, with fight-shouts setting their mouths. They are in rough and trenches of rock, in forests, in scrub, brick shadows. They are always coming.

And in years long gone someone stands on a knuckle of granite, a clenched-up mountain fist. Trees cover the peak as if a spume of forest has settled. He is above a green world while feathered and tough-skinned fauna speck the air below him and pay no mind.

Up past pillars of batholith is the path he has made, and abutting it tarpaulin bivouacs. There are men and fire, little neutered cousin to the conflagrations that fertilise woodlands.

The man apart is in wind that frosts this old moment in place forever while breath cold-congeals on his beard. He consults mercury sluggish in its glass, a barometer and inch-marked cord. He locates himself and the men with him above the belly of the world and in a mountain autumn.

They have ascended. Columns of men have faltered against gravity, tight-knotted dangling in the lee of silicate walls and corners. Servants of their equipment, they have carried the brass, wood and glass oddments like dumb nabobs across the world.

The man apart breathes in the moment long gone, listens to the coughs of mountain animals, the beat of jostling trees. Where ravines are he has plumbed lines to bring them to

order and know them, has marked them and annotated his drawings, and learning the parameters of the peneplain or open-sided corries, the tributary canyons, creeks, rivers and fern-scruffed pampas, he has made them beautiful. Where pines or ash are tethered and he notes the radius of a curve, the land humbles him.

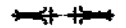
Cold takes six of his men and leaves them white and hard in make-do graves. Githwings rinse the party with blood, and bears and tenebrae leave them depleted and men broken and crying unfound in darkness and mules fall and excavations fail and there are drownings and indigens who trustlessly murder but those are all other moments. In this long-gone time there is only a man above the trees. West, mountains block his way, but in this moment they are miles yet.

Only wind speaks to him, but he knows his name is raised in abuse and respect. His wake is disputation. In the built hilltops of his city his endeavours split families. Some say they speak for gods and that he is proud. He is an insult on the world's face and his plans and route are an abomination.

The man watches night colonise. (It is a long time since this moment.) He watches the spits of shadows, and before he hears the tin clatter of his men at supper or smells the cooked rock vermin he will eat with them, there is only he and the mountain and the night and his books with renderings of everything he has seen and measurements of these disinterested heights and his want.

He smiles not cunning nor sated nor secure, but in joy because he knows his plans are holy.

PART ONE



TRAPPINGS

1

A man runs. Pushes through thin bark-and-leaf walls, through the purposeless rooms of Rudewood. The trees crowd him.

This far in the forest there are aboriginal noises. The canopy rocks. The man is heavy-burdened, and sweated by the unseen sun. He is trying to follow a trail.

Just before dark he found his place. Dim hotchi paths led him to a basin ringed by roots and stone-packed soil. Trees gave out. The earth was tramped down and stained with scorching and blood. The man spread out his pack and blanket, a few books and clothes. He laid down something well-wrapped and heavy among loam and centipedes.

Rudewood was cold. The man built a fire, and with it so close the darkness shut him quite out, but he stared into it as if he might see something emergent. Things came close. There were constant bits of sound like the bronchial call of a nightbird or the breath and shucking of some unseen predator. The man was wary. He had pistol and rifle, and one at least was always in his hand.

By flamelight he saw hours pass. Sleep took him and let him away again in little gusts. Each time he woke he breathed as if coming out of water. He was stricken. Sadness and anger went across his face.

'I'll come find you,' he said.

He did not notice the moment of dawn, only that time skidded again and he could see the edges of the

clearing. He moved like he was made of twigs, as if he had stored up the night's damp cold. Chewing on dry meat, he listened to the forest's shuffling and paced the dirt depression.

When finally he heard voices he flattened against the bank and looked out between the trunks. Three people approached on the paths of leaf-mould and forest debris. The man watched them, his rifle steadied. When they trudged into thicker shanks of light, he saw them clearly and let his rifle fall.

'Here,' he shouted. They dropped foolishly and looked for him. He raised his hand above the earth rise.

They were a woman and two men, dressed in clothes more ill-suited to Rudewood than his own. They stood before him in the arena and smiled. 'Cutter.' They gripped arms and slapped his back.

'I heard you for yards. What if you was followed? Who else is coming?'

They did not know. 'We got your message,' the smaller man said. He spoke fast and looked about him. 'I went and seen. We were arguing. The others were saying, you know, we should stay. You know what they said.'

'Yeah, Drey. Said I'm mad.'

'Not *you*.'

They did not look at him. The woman sat, her skirt filling with air. She was breathing fast with anxiety. She bit her nails.

'Thank you. For coming.' They nodded or shook Cutter's gratitude off: it sounded strange to him, and he was sure to them too. He tried not to make it sound like his sardonic norm. 'It means a lot.'

*

They waited in the sunken ground, scratched motifs in the earth or carved figures from dead wood. There was too much to say.

'So they told you not to come?'

The woman, Elsie, told him no, not so much, not in those words, but the Caucus had been dismissive of Cutter's call. She looked up at him and down quickly as she spoke. He nodded, and did not criticise.

'Are you sure about this?' he said, and would not accept their desultory nods. 'Godsdammit are you sure? Turn your back on the Caucus? You ready to do that? For him? It's a long way we've got to go.'

'We already come miles in Rudewood,' said Pomeroy.

'There's hundreds more. *Hundreds.* It'll be bastard hard. A long time. I can't swear we'll come back.'

I can't swear we'll come back.

Pomeroy said: 'Only tell me again your message was true. Tell me again he's gone, and where he's gone and what for. Tell me that's true.' The big man glowered and waited, and at Cutter's brief nod and closed eyes, he said: 'Well then.'

Others arrived then. First another woman, Ihona; and then as they welcomed her they heard stick-litter being destroyed in heavy leaps, and a vodyanoi came through the brush. He squatted in the froggish way of his race and raised webbed hands. When he jumped from the bank, his body – head and trunk all one fat sac – rippled with impact. Fejhechrillen was besmirched and tired, his motion ill-suited to woodland.

They were anxious, not knowing how long they should wait, if any others would come. Cutter kept asking how

they had heard his message. He made them unhappy. They did not want to consider their decision to join him: they knew there were many who would think it a betrayal.

'He'll be grateful,' Cutter said. 'He's a funny bugger and might be he'll not show it, but this'll mean a lot, to me and to him.'

After silence Elsie said: 'You don't know that. He didn't ask us, Cutter. He just got some message, you said. He might be angry that we've come.'

Cutter could not tell her she was wrong. Instead he said: 'I don't see you leaving, though. We're here for us, maybe, as well as for him.'

He began to tell them what might be ahead, emphasising dangers. It seemed as if he wanted to dissuade them though they knew he did not. Drey argued with him in a rapid and nervy voice. He assured Cutter they understood. Cutter saw him persuading himself, and was silent. Drey said repeatedly that his mind was made up.

'We best move,' said Elsie, when noon went. 'We can't wait forever. Anyone else is coming, they've obviously got lost. They'll have to go back to the Caucus, do what's needed in the city.' Someone gave a little cry and the company turned.

At the hollow's edge a hotchi rider was watching them, astride his gallus. The big war-cockerel plumped its breast-feathers and raised one spurred claw-foot in curious pose. The hotchi, squat and tough hedgehog man, stroked his mount's red comb.

'Militia coming.' His accent was strong and snarling. 'Two men militia coming, a minute, two.' He sat forward in the ornate saddle and turned his bird around. With very little sound, with no metal to jangle on wood-and-leather

straps and stirrups, it picked away high-clawed and belligerent, and was hidden by the forest.

'Was that—?' 'What—?' 'Did you fucking—?'

But Cutter and his companions were shushed by the sound of approach. They looked in unsaid panic, too late to hide.

Two men came stepping over fungused stumps into view. They were masked and uniformed in the militia's dark grey. Each had a mirrored shield and ungainly pepperpot revolver slack at his side. As they came into the clearing they faltered and were still, taking in the men and women waiting for them.

There was a dragged-out second when no one moved, when befuddled and silent conference was held – *are you, are they, what, should we, should we—?* – till someone shot. Then there was a spate of sounds, screams and the percussion of shots. People fell. Cutter could not follow who was where and was gut-terrified that he had been hit and not yet felt it. When the guns' heinous syncopation stopped, he unclenched his jaw.

Someone was calling *Oh gods oh fucking gods.* It was a militiaman, sitting bleeding from a belly-wound beside his dead friend and trying to hold his heavy pistol up. Cutter heard the curt torn-cloth sound of archery and the militia man lay back with an arrow in him and stopped his noise.

Again a beat of silence then 'Jabber—' 'Are you, is everyone—?' 'Drey? Pomeroy?'

First Cutter thought none of his own were hit. Then he saw how Drey was white and held his shoulder, and that blood dyed his palsying hands.

'Sweet Jabber, man.' Cutter made Drey sit. (*Is it all right?* the little man kept saying.) Bullet had taken muscle.

Cutter tore strips from Drey's shirt, and wound those cleanest around the hole. The pain made Drey fight, and Pomeroy and Fejh had to hold him. They gave him a thumb-thick branch to bite while they bandaged him.

'They must've fucking *followed you*, you halfwit bastards.' Cutter was raging while he worked. 'I told you to be fucking careful—'

'We *were*,' Pomeroy shouted, jabbing his finger at Cutter.

'Didn't follow them.' The hotchi reappeared, its rooster picking. 'Them patrol the pits. You been here long time, a day nearly.' It dismounted and walked the rim of the arena. 'You been too long.'

It showed the teeth in its snout in some opaque expression. Lower than Cutter's chest but rotundly muscular, it strutted like a bigger man. By the militia it stopped and sniffed. It sat up the one killed by its arrow and began to push the missile through the body.

'When them don't come back, them send more,' it said. 'Them come after you. Maybe now.' It steered the arrow past bones through the dead chest. It gripped the shaft when it came out the corpse's back, and pulled the fletch through with wet sound. The hotchi tucked it bloody into his belt, picked the revolving pistol from the militiaman's stiffening fingers and fired it against the hole.

Birds rose up again at the shot. The hotchi snarled with the unfamiliar recoil and shook its hand. The arrow's finger-thick burrow had become a cavity.

Pomeroy said: 'Godspit . . . who in hell are you?'

'Hotchi man. Cock-fighting man. Alectryomach. Help you.'

'Your tribe . . .' said Cutter. 'They're with us? On our side? Some of the hotchi are with the Caucus,' he said to

the others. 'That's why this place's all right. Or was supposed to be. This lad's clan got no time for the militia. Give us passage. But . . . can't risk a real fight with the city, so they've to make it look like it was us killed the officers, not their arrows.' He understood as he said it.

Pomeroy and the hotchi rifled the killed men together. Pomeroy threw one of the pepperpot revolvers to Elsie, one to Cutter. It was modernistic and expensive and Cutter had never held one before. It was heavy, with its six barrels arranged in a fat rotating cylinder.

'They ain't reliable,' said Pomeroy, harvesting bullets. 'Fast, though.'

'Jabber . . . we better fucking go.' Drey's voice went up and down with pain. 'Fucking *guns* going off going to call them for miles . . .'

'Not so many nearby,' said the hotchi. 'Maybe none to hear. But you should gone, yes. What you for? Why leave city? You looking for him come by on the clay man?'

Cutter looked to the others and they watched him carefully, letting him speak.

He said: 'You seen him?' He stepped toward the busy hotchi. 'You seen him?'

'I not seen him, but I know them as has. Some days, week or more gone. Man come through the wood on a grey giant. Running through. The militia come after.'

The light of afternoon came down to them all and the forest animals began to make their noises again. Cutter was locked in by miles of trees. He opened his mouth more than once before he spoke.

Cutter said: 'Militia followed him?'

'On Remade horses. I heard.'

On Remade horses with hammered metal hoofs, or

with tiger's claws or with a tail prehensile and coated in poison glands. With steam-pistons giving their legs ridiculous strength or with stamina from a boiler-excrescence behind the saddle. Made carnivorous and long-tusked. Wolf-horses or boar-horses, construct-horses.

'I didn't see,' said the hotchi. He mounted his cockerel. 'Them went after the clay-man rider, south in Rudewood. You best go. Fast now.' He turned his fight-bird and pointed a smoke-brown finger. 'Stay careful. This is Rudewood. Go now.'

He spurred his gallus into the undergrowth and dense trunks. 'Go,' he shouted, already invisible.

'Damn,' said Cutter. 'Come on.' They gathered their little camp. Pomeroy took Drey's pack as well as his own, and the six of them went up out of the cock-fighting pit and into the forest.

They went southwest by Cutter's compass, along the path the hotchi had taken. 'He showed us the way,' Cutter said. His comrades waited for him to guide them. They drove between rootmasses and blockages of flora, changing whatever they passed. Quickly Cutter's tiredness was so profound it was an astonishing, alien sensation.

When they noticed darkness they fell where they were, in a pause between trees. They spoke in puny voices, affected by the undertones of the wood. It was too late to hunt: they could only pull biltong and bread from their packs and make weak jokes about what good food it was.

By their little fire Cutter could see that Fejh was drying. They did not know where there was any freshwater, and Fejh poured only a little of what they had on himself though his big tongue rolled for it. He was panting. 'I'll be all right, Cutter,' he said, and the man patted his cheek.

Drey was paper-white and whispering to himself. Seeing how blood had stiffened his sling, Cutter could not imagine how he had kept going. Cutter murmured his fears to Pomeroy, but they could not turn back and Drey could not make the return on his own. He stained the ground below him.

While Drey slept, the others pulled around the fire and told quiet stories of the man they were following. Each of them had reasons for answering Cutter's call.

For Ihona the man they sought had been the first person in the Caucus who had seemed distracted, who reminded her of herself. His unworldliness, the quality that some mistrusted, made her feel there was room for imperfection in the movement: that she could be part of it. She smiled beautifully to remember it. Fejh, in turn, had taught him as part of some investigation of vodyanoi shamanism, and had been moved by his fascination. Cutter knew they loved the man they followed. Of the hundreds of the Caucus, it was no surprise that six loved him.

Pomeroy said it aloud: 'I love him. It ain't why I'm here, though.' He spoke in terse little bursts. 'Times are too big for that. I'm here because of where he's going, Cutter, because of what he's after. And what's coming after that. That's why I'm here. Because of what was in your message. Not because he's gone – because of where he's gone, and why. That's worth everything.'

No one asked Cutter why he was there. When it came to his turn, they looked down and said nothing while he studied the fire.

A war-bird woke them, wattle rippling, blaring a cock's crow. They were stunned by their uncivil wakening. A hotchi on his mount watched them, threw them a dead

forest fowl as they rose. He pointed eastward through trees and disappeared in the green light.

They stumbled in the direction indicated through underbrush and the morning forest. Sunlight flecked them. It was warm spring, and Rudewood became dank and heated. Cutter's clothes were sweat-heavy. He watched Fejh and Drey.

Fejh was stolid as he moved by kicks of his hind legs, by lurches. Drey kept pace, though it seemed impossible. He leaked through his leather and did not scatter the flies that came to taste him. Blooded and white, Drey looked like an old meat-cut. Cutter waited for him to show pain or fear, but Drey only murmured to himself, and Cutter was humbled.

The simplicity of the forest stupefied them. 'Where we going?' someone said to Cutter. *Don't ask me that.*

In the evening they followed a lovely sound and found a burn overhung by ivy. They hallooed and drank from it like happy animals.

Fejh sat in it and it rilled where it hit him. When he swam, his lubberly motion became suddenly graceful. He brought up handfuls and moulded with vodyanoi watercræft: like dough the water kept the shapes he gave it, coarse figurines shaped like dogs. He put them on the grass, where over an hour they sagged like candles and ran into the earth.

The next morning Drey's hurt was going bad. They waited when his fever made him pause, but they had to move. The treelife changed, was mongrel. They went by darkwood and oak, under banyan hirsute with ropy plaits that dangled and became roots.

Rudewood teemed. Birds and ape-things in the canopy spent the morning screaming. In a zone of dead, bleached

trees, an ursine thing, unclear and engorged with changing shapes and colours, reeled out of the brush toward them. They screamed, except Pomeroy who fired into the creature's chest. With a soft explosion it burst into scores of birds and hundreds of bottleglass flies, which circled them in the air and recongealed beyond them as the beast. It shuffled from them. Now they could see the feathers and wing cases that made up its pelt.

'I been in these woods before,' said Pomeroy. 'I know what a throng-bear looks like.'

'We must be far enough now,' said Cutter, and they bore westward while twilight came and left them behind. They walked behind a hooded lantern hammered by moths. The barkscape swallowed the light.

After midnight, they passed through low shinnery and out of the forest.

And for three days they were in the Mendican Foothills, rock tors and drumlins flecked with trees. They walked the routes of long-gone glaciers. The city was only tens of miles away. Its canals almost reached them. Sometimes through saddles in the landscape they saw real mountains far west and north, of which these hills were only dregs.

They drank and cleaned in tarns. They were slowing, pulling Drey. He could not move his arm and he looked bled out. He would not complain. It was the first time Cutter had ever seen him brave.

There were insinuations of paths, and they followed them south through grass and flowers. Pomeroy and Elsie shot rock rabbits and roasted them, stuffed with herb-weeds.

'How we going to find him?' Fejh said. 'Whole continent to search.'

'I know his route.'

'But Cutter, it's a whole *continent*...'

'He'll leave signs. Wherever he goes. He'll leave a trail. You can't not.'

No one spoke a while.

'How'd he know to leave?'

'He got a message. Some old contact is all I know.'

Cutter saw fences reclaimed by weather, where farms had once been. The foundations of homesteads in angles of stone. Rudewood was east, weald broken with outcrops of dolomite. Once, protruding from the leaves, there were the remnants of ancient industry, smokestacks or pistons.

On the sixth day, Fishday, the 17th of Chet 1805, they reached a village.

In Rudewood there was a muttering of displaced air below the owl and monkey calls. It was not loud but the animals in its path looked up with the panic of prey. The empty way between trees, by overhangs of clay, was laced by the moon. The tree-limbs did not move.

Through the night shadows came a man. He wore a black-blue suit. His hands were in his pockets. Stems of moonlight touched his polished shoes, which moved at head-height above the roots. The man passed, his body poised, standing upright in the air. As he came hanging by arcane suspension between the canopy and the dark forest floor the sound came with him, as if space were moaning at his violation.

He was expressionless. Something scuttled across him, in and out of the shadow, in the folds of his clothes. A monkey, clinging to him as if he were its mother. It was disfigured by something on its chest, a growth that twitched and tensed.

In the weak shine the man and his passenger entered the bowl where the hotchi came to fight. They hung over the arena. They looked at the militiamen dead, mottled with rot.

The little ape dangled from the man's shoes, dropped to the corpses. Its adroit little fingers examined. It leapt back to the dangling legs and chittered.

They were as silent for a while as the rest of the night, the man knuckling his lips thoughtfully, turning in a sedate pirouette, the monkey on his shoulder looking into the dead-black forest. Then they were in motion again, between the trees with the fraught sound of their passing, through bracken torn days before. After they had gone, the animals of Rudewood came out again. But they were anxious, and remained so the rest of that night.