

Chapter 1

“They’re sending us a Rust, somebody who goes by Blossom, and Halt.”

“Halt?” Twitch says the name again, emphasis different. Not supposed to be anything surprising in the monthly update. “What could we possibly have done to deserve Halt?”

Twitch might be appalled.

“Five years in fifty means they’ve got to send Halt *somewhere*.” Which is just true, not an explanation. Not when Independents don’t serve with the Line — there’s five centuries of custom back of that.

“West Wetcreek isn’t somewhere. Even back in the day, Westcreek wasn’t anywhere.” Twitch was born here, says this like the laws of the universe are being changed. Twitch don’t like it.

These days there’s a Westcreek (dust dry), a West Wetcreek, a Lost Creek (swamp), and Split Creek (on some fixed astrological schedule: fire, blood, venom, beer) in the province of Westcreek. I’m leaving out the rest of the Creeks, plural, the stuff further east.

For a place that wasn’t anywhere back in the day, stuff happened — Split Creek’s not a little working. Despite that evidence of past activity, Westcreek Town, Westcreek the province, West Wetcreek the watershed, the whole of the Creeks, is full of people who claim nothing happens here.

Strange claim when the population tripled with the Commonweal and The Peace Established, steady for the last three hundred years or not. And the better beer-barley, and, well, it’s a list.

Creeks will still tell you nothing happens. They’re proud of it — happenings imply a lack of care, I think. Or maybe inadequate social decorum.

If I ever get Creek social decorum figured out I’ll be doing well. There are days I figure this century would be a notable achievement. I’m pretty sure that has something to do with how few other folk have ever visited, never mind migrated. Polite, certainly, but still such a long and lonely way from the rest of the Commonweal.

Works the other way: a few militant Creeks into the Regular Line, a few more gone for training — doctors, our sergeants, the occasional engineer. Engineers are both ways; Creeks love their canals. Clerks and members of Parliament and judges go up to The City Of Peace. They all come back.

It’s the only place I’ve ever been where spring feels *planned*. Even the lambs are orderly.

Does a good solid reliable job of peaceful.

So why... “Hand me down The List, will you?”

Twitch: twitchiest guy ever — tongue clicking, toe-tapping, will drum on any small object you don't take away provided an absence of immediate lethal threats — looks at me a bit funny and hands The List down, tapping on the cover.

There's a lot of Independents these days, sorcerers good enough that the basic deal — the Line don't extinguish them, and in return they show up for five years in fifty and do subtle clever things to make the Commonweal work better, besides staying out of trouble and politics — applies. That's the List, the sorcerers good enough to make themselves ageless by a means the rest of us will tolerate. But the List contains the Short List, too. Parliament gives it a polite name, but what it means is, "if this one causes trouble, send a battalion". There's fifty-odd names on the Short List, out of the couple thousand on the List as a whole.

Out of the Short List there's the first page; no-one tries to give it a polite name or come up with some reason for it. It's a list of twelve names, all them older than the Commonweal. Halt's name is the first of that dozen, by any measure: knowledge, terror, or simple grim seniority. Even Twitch, born and bred here, left West Wetcreek only into the Line, has heard of Halt.

If any among the Twelve causes trouble, the standing orders are to send nothing less than a full brigade in full array. That might be overkill: the Foremost, Laurel and the Foremost, back in the day, took down everybody on the first page of the Short List, and everybody else with the Power and pretensions of lordship, and the Foremost mostly weren't what would muster as a full battalion these days.

No one wants to take a bet any of the Twelve haven't learned something in five centuries of The Peace.

I've met Rust. Rust is not obviously anything. One of those people who could be thirty or fifty — Rust could be a schoolmaster or an architect or a team lead for a manufacturing collective, anybody in a trade both dry and not too dusty. Neat, clean, clothes and eyes are good and plain and honest. Rust's name is the fourth name of that dozen, and Rust and Halt do not get on.

Anyone who has been in The City Of Peace for any length of time would know that. Rust and Halt may stay out of politics — they're both known for being abrupt about it — but if you tell one of the terrors of the earth to solve a problem, you're telling them to make policy. They don't agree about policy and they've been writing snarky articles at each other in the scholarly journals for so long that the earliest ones were two major vowel shifts ago.

Blossom, though, Blossom is under a hundred and on the Short List already.

Either someone's decided that Split Creek desperately needed plugging about a hundred years ago, or someone else is afraid that Halt and Rust's long feud is soon to have a failure of decorum and believes the devastated landscape ought to be far away from City of Peace.

There's a third option.

There was a time when I could have believed the third option wasn't what we were going to get for,

oh, at least a minute and a half.

“Twitch?” Who has to look up; I’m handing back that thin damned book.

“Yeah?”

“Next drill night is full array. Like it’s the Bad Old Days returned.”

Chapter 2

The drill night wasn't a disaster.

When the Line sets out to decide if they're going to give you a warrant of authority, one thing they pound into your head over and over is that there are no bad troops. You work with what you've got, with equal emphasis on "got" and "work".

The West Wetcreek Wapentake — don't think I'll say that five times fast — isn't bad, precisely. Aside from me, and Twitch, four (it should be five, but we've got four platoons instead of five short ones) sergeants and a quartermaster, none of them think this is their job. It's something they do, but the job is what gets food from the earth or on to the table. So in files of eight they're splendid; most of them work together all the time, farming or timbering, and pretty much all of them have been pulled into cleaning wool or helping with the canning, so there's a reliable delicacy of touch you don't expect to find in the Regular Line. Foremost, there are stonemasons and glassblowers and copper-smiths, four full teams of sheep-shearers, and five or six guys who took to soldiering because they'd lost their nerve for a weeding-team; folk whose livelihoods flat depend on delicacy of touch. For anything you can do in files or double files, a regular unit wouldn't beat them.

Even by platoons they're not bad; they do a lot of canal marching, it's familiar and all the discussion got done in their great-great-grandparents' time. The camp-ditching is fine, too; you'll have a better-than-regulation ditch and a stone-faced wall in two hours if they have to make the stones. I've seen them go so far as to make great thick refractory tiles, glazed in regulation colours, when camped on a mass of old clay lakebed.

As a company they don't coalesce. Every individual file has an opinion; the platoons form, and they hold pretty well, but they all want to argue, inside and between platoons. Getting the company as a whole to latch on to the standard — it is a standard; there's a theoretical battalion, if things ever get that bad — is work, and it doesn't hold well at all. Which is six kinds of frustrating, because there's lots of kick; it's not like anybody is trying to hold back out of conscious doubt or unwillingness to exert.

For some guy whose ancestors weren't born here, or for a standard half of them think runs on necromancy, there just isn't any reflex of trust.

So they want to argue, and do great canals and they'd be hopeless at fighting, when you must react without thought. Back at the end of the Bad Old Days, you'd get some sorcerer willing to pound at the focus to see if there was a way through; these days, they know there isn't, not with anything they can do, and go for flash floods or a million hornets or worse, anything to get your attention off them long enough to get away. If they do get away, they come back by surprise; you can't keep a company together all the time. Not a problem for a regular battalion, which can keep a guard company up in rotation. Pretty hopeless when one company is all you've got.

Demons are worse — demons are fast — and over the borders is still the Bad Old Days.

I can't figure out how to explain what a fight is like without delivering the company to one, which wouldn't do any good at all. Cannot — and I've tried, since I got here — get a Regular Line company out here for a shoving match, which is about the most harmless way to explain. Though you do it some place you figure isn't presently flat enough, and which don't have either anything built on it you want to keep nor useful agricultural properties.

You wouldn't know any of this from watching the company parading; they all showed up, on a day still threatening more rain. The drill is fine, there's even a drummer for the show of it, and they have the whole eyes front thing down cold.

To look at, it's eyes front. Every single trooper has enough of a grip on the standard that the company, while by no means arrayed for war, is keeping a good eye all round. Really all round, which is, by long tradition, entirely acceptable, or half of entirely respectable, anyway; the other half is not having it show in the drill when something unusual happens.

They do that fine, even though today unusual is being led by a five-tonne sheep under a howdah.

I have Twitch march them off by platoons and dismiss them to their homes, which means out by the actual streets; the armory isn't a fort and doesn't have a wall. That won't get them all to go away, but it makes it clear they're not to stand around staring at the visitors. It also gets them loose from the standard until after the introductions have been made.

The gate guard are entirely proper and formal and polite about it, which is good. If the Independents are going to make a point of stopping and asking welcome, by all means let even the Territorial Line make a point of being polite. Plus it gives me some time to get over there without looking like I hurried.

We've got Rust, all right. Rust's horse looks good and plain and honest, too, and it might have been. It might still be; Rust has been riding the ghost of that horse since there are records, and if anyone knows how that works, they're not saying.

The sheep with the howdah has to be Halt. If you're willing to call something six-horned and about five tonnes a sheep, anyway.

Smells like a sheep.

Rust looks almost amused as the great mass of wool kneels down in the road. Twitch looks appalled. The Creeks raise a lot of sheep; it's probably harder to view an animal that size as a sheep, wool or no wool, if you're used to the regular size. The wool isn't quite the right colour; it's an even grey with an odd dull shine.

The mix of horns — great, massive, you-could-hold-a-dinner-party-on-those curling ram's horns, great back-curved goats' horns with visibly faceted points and sharp edges on the inside curve, suitable for ripping the ribs out of most anything, and long, low, turned-up-at-the-tips horns running down its face until they turn up over the nostrils — can't be helping. Even without the metallic undertone it would look unnatural; at the size, it looks like someone set out to cross malice with a

sheep and got black iron and brass into the malice.

It breathes slow, which you'd expect, and fire, which you would not. Pale flames a metre long from each nostril on the exhale, which is giving Twitch pause. Might not show to strangers, but there's no twitchiness in Twitch just now. By the third breath what was wet road has a patch of dry a metre across and the howdah door has opened and someone has kicked down some stairs.

Stairs means it's time to stride forward and offer greetings. I get a threatening eye-roll from the sheep, and the fourth breath kicks up dust off the road bricks. A voice in the howdah says "Eustace!" in warning tones, and the ears go half-back and the muzzle dips; not repentance, but at least awareness of being watched.

I give Halt the short bow and the nod and offered arm with semi-pleasant "Madame" tradition or manners, if they can ever figure out which is which, require.

Not just Twitch looks rattled; everybody has heard of Halt. Everybody knows a lot of things about Halt, some of which are true. Hardly anyone seems to know Halt's not a metre-fifty tall and looks like someone's grandma. Maybe not your grandma, no-one in the Creeks is that delicate, even adjusting for scale, but someone's.

Twitch manages a short bow; Halt looks, not indulgent, more as though that's probably all that can be expected.

It won't be helping that Twitch has enough of a grip on the standard that Twitch's eyes are seeing what comes by plain old photons: knit shawl with beaded fringe, cane, wire framed glasses, could be anybody's grandma, and the standard is showing something else.

Same with Rust, who can manage to look good materially. Plain and honest, yeah, right the way through, but even as an adjective, "good" sort of shudders away from the standard's view of Rust.

Halt's best benign look is an excellent effort, all the same.

"How may the Line be of service to those also in service?" More tradition.

Halt hands me a stick.

A piece of waxed wood; planed, smooth, neat. Five centimetres wide, seven millimetres thick, and seventeen centimetres long, token size. It's a warrant as a Staff Thaumaturgist, First Class. It's made out to Halt, and it's real; the standard accepts it without doubt.

Looking up was a good idea, even if I did it because the way Halt was smiling wasn't anything I wanted to look at. Rust, still mounted, is handing me down another stick, and yes, for real, Staff Thaumaturgist, First Class.

Staff Thaumaturgists get kept around to do things like straighten nails; anything too delicate to get the duty platoon to do. Anyone with enough active talent to consider seriously that someday, if they work hard, they could become a qualified assistant village sorcerer is drastically overqualified to be a

Staff Thaumaturgist.

“Is there a third?”

What must be Blossom rides up, between Rust and Halt’s conveyance. Regulation armour, what is perhaps a real horse, if you stretch “horse” a bit, and really quite a respectable salute.

I salute back. Nothing to be done with token-sticks; the Standard is quite sure this is an officer of the Line, someone holding warrants of authority and commission. Nothing to be done with the shape of my face for a moment, either; the Standard is just as sure this is an Independent. Not outside the Law; Parliament doesn’t generally make laws forbidding impossibilities. Done very quietly, because I haven’t heard.

Blossom hands me a sheet of paper, folded in three lengthways, personal orders, unit orders is a stack of paper, and something that can only be called a scroll.

The standard reaches out and eats the scroll, which is I suppose what it is supposed to do when this kind of thing never happens. The orders...Part-Captain, detached half-battery, Blossom in formal and actual command, battery to be attached, specialisations, commendations, and a hand-written postscript from the Foundry-Master to the effect that if Blossom is not returned to artillery-making whole and intact said master shall have my tripes tanned and used for tompons.

Much joy I might wish the Foundry-Master of the attempt. That shows, there’s a thread of caution from Twitch.

Off the horse-thing when I look up, which is both neatly done and tact.

“Part-Captain Blossom.”

“Captain.” My appointment, rather than my rank. Which is right. So is the armor, really right, not just wearing it right. Takes the Line seriously.

“Park your battery at the east end of the square; quarter your gunners in the east barracks. Welcome to the Wapentake of the Creeks.”

I get a tenth-second flash of a grin that could bend metal, and another salute. I return it, and Blossom’s striding away and shouting for the Master Gunner. The horse-thing picks its dainty, cloven-hoofed way behind, its hide the colour of fresh blood.

I nod at Twitch, who strides off too. Twitch will be making introductions with the Master Gunner and getting the actual work done, even if Part-Captain Blossom cannot resist putting the artillery tubes to bed personally.

Handing back the warrant sticks gives me a moment to grab some focus, the personal kind that sends your sense of self high and quivering out of your body. There’s a vast gulf between “correct” and “safe”.

“Staff Thaumaturgists to report to the Captain at the seventh hour. Stabling for your conveyances” — I am still getting the eye from Eustace — “and quarters to be arranged by the Quartermaster.”

Neither of them look one narrow anything less amused.

Staffers are of the Line, not in the Line, and are not welcomed to units, which means there is another customary phrase.

“I am sure your service will be excellent and memorable.”

Not less amused at all.

Chapter 3

It's been a long time since there was even a territorial battalion stationed in West Wetcreek; the opinion that nothing happens in the Creeks is not restricted to the folk who live there.

The armoury was built in the days when there was a full battalion, and the main drill and mess hall and two of the barracks are still there, now East and West instead of One and Two. Barracks Three through Six were taken down nearly two hundred years ago; the plan was to move the Captain's House, Gate House, and Infirmary north to close off a smaller drill square and free up the space for civil uses. Then it turned out the Captain's House and the Gate House had foundation bindings no one knew how to move. So now the west edge of the square has the township hospital, in place of the old Infirmary building and barracks Four and Six, and the asymmetry of it all makes Twitch complain.

Where barracks Three and Five were is grass, and gives a place to put the artillery; sometimes it gives a place to put extra sheep, building materials, or lost cattle.

The Captain's House is about what you'd expect: a bit older than usual, sawn granite instead of fieldstone, one of less than a dozen standard-shrines that date from the time of the Foremost, but still the common-to-the-Line Captain's House. One big main floor for meetings out of the rain, standard-shrine and a map room upstairs, quarters out the back for supernumeraries.

Supernumeraries such as Staff Thaumaturgists.

There's no kitchen — no point — but Creeks don't do social well without this vile stuff they make from wood lettuce roots. The same stove-and-kettle setup will do for actual coffee, and since Creeks in general have the same view of coffee as I do of the lettuce roots, what would be scant supply for a company can stand to have a couple of Independents added to the Captain and Quartermaster.

Halt takes coffee black. Halt is also apparently incapable of sitting down for any length of time without knitting.

Rust has a small silver jug of chill table cream from somewhere, not going to ask, and is willing to share. Sheep's milk in coffee can be argued either way for worth it, and sheep's milk is what's to be had in Westcreek Town.

"You're not here to straighten nails." Half a smile, and a raised eyebrow.

"Can either of you explain to me how Part-Captain Blossom can be both an Independent and in the Line? I had understood this to be impossible." No one troubles to forbid the impossible.

The needles keep clicking away. Rust's coffee gets set down, an oddly formal motion. "The Binding of the Standards works by creating a mind out of unformed talent for the Power. Fewer than eight modest talents and there is not enough mind to do anything; greater than a brigade, call it eight thousand, and the mind cannot focus on a task even when it can form."

I nod; this part isn't news.

"The talent of Independents is not in any respect unformed; the customary analogy is the utility of a substantial and ornate bronze gargolye used as a cobblestone. Blossom is very young and was trained differently."

Halt snorts. The rapidly-growing knitting is at the end of a row, and the blunt end of a needle points. "You were 'trained' by not dying."

Rust shouldn't smile like that. "How heavy is a sword, Captain?"

I am halfway through saying "it depends on the sword" when I realize my forearm has lifted, without a coffee mug.

"Your arm knows."

Spine, and there are Independents who would know that.

"What has been done with Blossom and another youngster was to keep their arms from knowing, much as when you direct the standard, you direct a thing outside yourself, for all that your strength participates in the standard."

You can't ask if an Independent is crazy. The same Independent won't give you the same answer twice. And I'd be asking Halt and the guy who defeated the Archonate of Reems with alpine wildflowers.

But I can ask — "The Part-Captain can attach to the standard?"

"Yes." Halt's voice sounds about to be reedy with age, but it is not a frail age. "Blossom and one other." The needles click on.

I finish my coffee. I can get away with a cup a day, usually, and this makes three for today. None tomorrow.

"That provides some understanding; thank you." Because Foremost know the permissions and validation in that scroll didn't include any explanations.

All of the Twelve are terrible. They were, in their time and their kingdoms of wrath, very nearly gods. So far as anyone knows, each of them faced the Foremost and preferred life, and for five hundred and seventy-one years they have abided by the laws of the Commonwealth. So far as anyone can tell, and we hope at least one would betray the others if it were not so.

Nothing about those laws requires them to take a job for which an uneducated stripling of moderate strong talent can be overqualified.

"Does Eustace have an official reason for a sojourn in the Creeks?" There's a voice for inquiring after much-loved lapdogs. Not quite the right thing for five tonnes of opinionated mutton, but perhaps

close enough.

Halt might almost be favouring me with an approving expression. “Eustace’s breed is meant to eat weeds. Displaying a relish for whatever the Creeks want eaten shall prove Eustace’s breeding successful.”

It’s a secret. Halt is here, and Rust is here, and from what I can tell from the foundry-master, the best enchanter who has ever worked on artillery is here. And no-one necessarily knows they are here, because a Part-Captain and two Staff Thaumaturgists with a side job for the Food-Gesith aren’t of much notice in the City of Peace, the orders didn’t involve names. Now they are here, while they are here, however considerable their notice, all the citizens are Creeks. Passing for a Creek just to look at is tough, and if you look like a Creek, being anywhere near here without being able to explain where the previous six generations of your ancestors lived and what they did is impossible.

Magical spies have to worry about Halt.

“Will you have other duties beyond those to the Wapentake?” A regular Staff Thaumaturgist wouldn’t, and even whatever the Food-Gesith might actually want would fit in around the company.

Not even a look between them.

“Not at all.” Rust must practice holding the coffee mug to make the steam rise sinister and face-wreathing like that.

“Two days to settle in” — we’ll call it settle in, and not fuss unless they ask for live creatures or dead people — “and then on day seven, the company will require your presence to referee a game of catch.”

The needles stop clicking.

“Four tubes, four platoons. It should be instructive.”

Halt lets the needles say “Oh, that kind of catch”.