

THE INEVITABLE PEACE

A Novel of the Managed Decline

N. Van Seters & Claude

THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE

Contents

Part I · MOBILIZATION	1
The Line	2
Readiness	6
Exceptions	11
The Corridor	15
Available	19
Part II · THE SMALLER WAR	22
Substitution	23
Continuity	26
Contact	29
Ari	32
Three Weeks	35
Part III · THE PRICE OF HOLDING	38
The Village	39
Rotation	42
Human-Years	45
The Missing Engineers	47
The Empty Position	50
Part IV · THE WITHDRAWAL	53
Sixty-Three	54

Not a Ceasefire	57
Incident 47	59
Reciprocity	62
Peacekeeping	64
 Part V · PEACE	 67
The Maps	68
Demobilization	70
One Year	73
The Position	75

PART I

MOBILIZATION

CHAPTER 1

The Line

The Rellan Corridor did not look like something worth dying for, and Sergeant Ansel Vray had stopped expecting it to. Twelve kilometers of scrub grass, low ridgeline, and a river that flooded twice a year and otherwise ran the color of weak tea. The border markers had been repainted so many times that the metal beneath the paint had started to show through in patches, like a bruise healing wrong.

His patrol moved along Sector Nine at 0440, night-vision optics washing the world the color of old bone. Four soldiers, one Calder-issue autonomous scout drone flying two hundred meters ahead at treetop height, feeding telemetry back to a screen strapped to Vray's forearm. Routine. The kind of patrol that had been routine for so many decades that the paperwork describing it had outlived several of the treaties that supposedly governed it.

"Contact, marker eleven," said Private Oskana Ruhl, youngest of the four, twenty-two years old and still capable of sounding surprised when the scope actually found something.

Vray checked his own display. An Orsanne autonomous border unit — squat, six-legged, roughly the size of a large dog, running a slow figure-eight patrol pattern on the far side of marker eleven, exactly where it should have been if the Third Armistice's supplementary protocols were still being honored, which as far as Vray knew, they were.

"Confirmed," Vray said. "Standard unit. Log it and keep moving."

This was the entire job, most nights. Confirm that the other side's machine was where it was supposed to be, doing what it was supposed to do, and continue on to confirm the next one. Two nations' worth of accumulated distrust, reduced to a series of small, mutual confirmations performed by increasingly automated systems, on behalf of populations

that had mostly stopped thinking about the Corridor at all.

The Orsanne unit's patrol pattern shifted.

Vray noticed it a half-second before his display flagged it — the machine breaking its figure-eight, rotating its sensor cluster toward his patrol's position at an angle that hadn't shown up in eleven years of logged behavior for this exact unit class.

"It's reorienting," Ruhl said, her voice climbing half a register.

"Could be a firmware update. Could be routine recalibration." Vray kept his own voice flat, the voice he'd trained into himself across nineteen years for exactly this kind of moment. "Hold position. Do not advance."

The Calder drone, following its own automated threat-assessment logic, interpreted the Orsanne unit's reorientation as a targeting behavior and — without any human in the loop fast enough to intervene — executed a defensive countermeasure: a brief, low-power jamming burst aimed at the Orsanne unit's sensor array.

The Orsanne unit's programming, in turn, interpreted the jamming burst as an attack.

It fired.

The round wasn't meant for a person. Later reconstruction would show the weapon's targeting solution had locked onto the Calder drone itself, a reasonable response to what its own systems had logged as a hostile electronic warfare action. But the drone had already begun evasive maneuvering, and the round, missing its intended target by four meters, struck the ridge just above Private Ruhl's position.

Rock fragments did what rock fragments do. Ruhl went down. Corporal Dennet, moving to reach her, took a fragment through the throat and was dead before Vray got to either of them.

Vray called it in at 0443. By 0446, Calder command had a name for what had happened: an unintentional exchange, autonomous systems on both sides responding to each other's automated responses in a feedback loop that had taken eleven seconds to produce two dead soldiers and one badly wounded.

By 0500, the exchange had a different name, because someone at a much higher level than Sergeant Vray had decided it needed one.

The Rellan Incident.

Not the first thing to be called that. It would not, historians would eventually note with a certain grim humor, be the last thing to be called that either — though nobody standing in the pale grass at Sector Nine that morning had any way of knowing this was the beginning of the last thing that would ever be called that.

• • •

Colonel Iset Marrow received the flash report at Calder Regional Command four minutes after Vray's initial call, read it twice, and picked up a phone that connected directly to the office of the Deputy Chief of Strategic Readiness.

"Sir. Sector Nine. We have two confirmed KIA, one wounded, and an unintentional exchange with an Orsanne autonomous unit that our own drone appears to have triggered."

"Casualties on their side?"

"Unknown. Unit's still active. No indication of Orsanne personnel in the vicinity — this looks like it was machine-to-machine, on their end too."

A pause on the line, the particular silence of a man doing arithmetic he'd done many times before and hoped, each time, not to need again.

"Get me the full data package," Tomas Keene said. "And get me projected notification timelines for Orsanne command. I want to know how fast they're going to hear about this, because I guarantee you they're already asking their own version of that question about us."

He hung up before Marrow could answer, because the answer didn't matter as much as what came after it, and what came after it — Tomas already knew, with the weary certainty of a man who had built his entire career preparing for precisely this Tuesday — was going to require rather more of him than a phone call.

• • •

Sergeant Vray gave his statement to the field investigator at 0700, sitting on the tailgate of a medical transport with Ruhl's blood still drying on the sleeve of his jacket, and found that he could not, when asked, produce a

single sentence that adequately explained what had happened in the eleven seconds between the Orsanne unit's reorientation and Dennet's death.

"It reoriented. Our drone reacted. Their unit reacted to that. I don't know what order the third and fourth things happened in. I was watching Ruhl."

"That's fine, Sergeant. The telemetry will show the sequence."

"The telemetry doesn't have to write the letter to Dennet's wife," Vray said, and the investigator, a young civilian contractor who had clearly not expected this particular observation, had no answer for that either.

By the time Vray's patrol's telemetry reached Calder Regional Command, it had already been packaged, annotated, and forwarded three separate times — first to the district military governor, then to the Ministry of Defence's overnight duty officer, then, at 0530, to a secure line connecting directly to the private residence of Calder's Prime Councillor, who took the call standing in his kitchen in the clothes he'd slept in, listened for four minutes without interrupting, and said only, "Convene the Council for oh-nine-hundred," before hanging up and standing very still for a while, doing his own version of the arithmetic that Tomas would spend the following three days doing on a larger scale.

Three hundred kilometers away, in Orsanne's capital, an almost identical phone call was reaching an almost identical kitchen, at almost exactly the same hour, delivering an almost identical version of the same eleven seconds, described from the other side of a line that neither government's cartographers had ever quite agreed on the location of.

CHAPTER 2

Readiness

The mobilization order reached Tomas Keene's desk at 0930, nine minutes after Calder's Council of State had voted, six to one, to authorize full readiness posture along the Rellan frontier. He read it standing up, the way he read every mobilization order, a habit left over from a younger version of himself who had believed that sitting down to read bad news was a kind of surrender.

Council authorizes Ministry of Defence to execute Readiness Level Three, effective immediately, pending Deputy Chief of Strategic Readiness confirmation of executable timeline.

Confirmation of executable timeline. That clause existed because of Tomas, or more precisely because of the office Tomas had spent eleven years building into something the Council could no longer politically survive without: a formal, unglamorous checkpoint between the moment politicians decided a thing was necessary and the moment soldiers were told to make it happen.

He'd built the office because of a war that predated his own service — the Twenty-Seven Day War, which Calder's official histories described, with the vagueness reserved for uncomfortable subjects, as "a period of intensive engagement resulting in significant reassessment of national defence posture." What that meant, in practice, was that Calder had mobilized in six days, fought for twenty-seven, and spent the subsequent four years discovering that roughly a third of its water-treatment engineers had been sent to the front and had not, in several documented cases, been adequately replaced before the treatment failures started.

Tomas had been eleven years old during the Twenty-Seven Day War. His grandmother had died in the third year afterward, of complications from a treatment plant failure that a properly staffed system would have caught in

its first week. Nobody at the time had called it a casualty of the war.

He'd told this story exactly once to a Council committee, eleven years ago, when he'd first proposed the office that now bore his title. He remembered the quality of the silence afterward — not moved, exactly, but uncomfortable, the discomfort of people being asked to accept that a war they remembered as a clean strategic success had also, quietly, killed people it had never officially claimed. The committee had approved the office anyway, though he'd never been entirely certain whether they'd done it because his argument had persuaded them or because it had been easier to fund an obscure bureaucratic checkpoint than to sit through that particular silence a second time.

He called Marrow back.

"Give me current readiness figures. Full mobilization, all branches."

The figures arrived within the hour, and they were, on their face, excellent. Calder's standing reserve totaled 340,000 personnel across all specializations. Equipment readiness sat at 94%. Automated systems — surveillance, logistics, targeting support — reported full operational capacity. By every metric that a Council member without Tomas's particular professional obsession would think to ask about, Calder could fight, and fight well, within seventy-two hours.

Tomas looked at the number for a long moment, the way a man looks at a bridge he has personally inspected and still doesn't quite trust to hold his weight, and then did the thing his entire career existed to make routine and that nobody else in Calder's command structure had the standing, or the stomach, to insist upon.

"Marrow. I want the same number again. But this time, cross-reference every specialization against civilian continuity assignments. I want to know how many of those 340,000 people are also doing something else that this country needs done."

"Sir, that's — that report doesn't exist in that format. We'd have to build it."

"Then build it," Tomas said. "I'm not confirming an executable timeline until I actually know what executing it costs."

Marrow hesitated at the door. "Sir, if I may. The Council's expecting confirmation by end of day tomorrow. If this report shows what I think it's going to show—"

"Then the Council will have accurate information a day later than they wanted it, instead of confident information that turns out to be wrong three weeks into a mobilization. I've had this argument with three different Ministers, Marrow. I'll have it as many more times as it takes."

• • •

He ate lunch at his desk, as he had for the better part of two decades, a sandwich his wife Renna had started packing him sometime around their fifth year of marriage and had never entirely stopped, even now that both their children were grown and gone.

Renna called at 1215, which was unusual enough that he answered before finishing his previous bite.

"You've seen the news."

"I've seen more than the news has," he said. "How are you? How's your mother?"

"She's fine. She wants to know if this is like the Twenty-Seven Day War."

Tomas considered this question the way he considered every question that arrived to him wearing the clothing of something simple. "I don't know yet," he said, which was true, and also the most honest thing he could offer anyone that day, including himself.

"Should I be worried?"

"I think everyone should be a reasonable amount of worried," Tomas said. "I don't think anyone should be more worried than that yet. Ask me again in a week."

She let him go without pressing further, and Tomas returned to his sandwich and the silence of an office waiting for numbers that were going to tell him something he already, in the oldest and least official part of his own judgment, suspected.

• • •

The cross-referenced report arrived at 1640. Marrow delivered it himself, in person, which was its own kind of message.

"Sir. It's not good."

"Show me."

The numbers, when Tomas finally had them in front of him, were not catastrophic. That was, in its way, the worst part. Catastrophe would have been simple. What he had instead was something far more difficult to explain to people who had spent their careers thinking about readiness as a single number rather than a competition between two entirely legitimate uses for the same finite population.

Of Calder's 340,000 reserve personnel, 340,000 were, on paper, available for mobilization.

Of those 340,000, a cross-reference against the National Continuity Registry — a database that, until this afternoon, had mostly existed to track workforce planning for infrastructure investment, not military readiness — showed that 118,000 of them held a second designation. A civilian continuity role. A job that some other part of the country was, at this exact moment, relying on them to keep doing.

Water treatment. Power distribution. Regional hospital staffing. Transport network maintenance. Agricultural automation oversight. The unglamorous scaffolding that kept a country of 8.7 million people fed, warm, and alive, running on a workforce that had shrunk by nearly two-thirds since the era when 340,000 reservists had represented a genuinely surplus population rather than a genuinely surplus population.

"A hundred and eighteen thousand people," Tomas said, mostly to himself.

"Some of them are more replaceable than others," Marrow offered. "Some civilian roles have depth. Multiple qualified personnel per position."

"How many don't?"

Marrow checked the report again, though Tomas suspected he already knew the number and had simply been hoping not to have to say it first.

"Forty-one thousand, across all specializations, hold civilian continuity roles with no qualified backup currently available. If we pull them, sir, those systems don't degrade gracefully. They just stop."

Tomas sat with the number, turning it over, looking for the angle that would make it smaller, and not finding one.

"I need this broken down by category," he said. "Water, medical, power, transport, agriculture, everything. I need to know exactly what forty-one thousand people are doing right now that this country cannot survive without, and I need it before I put my name on any executable timeline."

"That'll take at least two days, sir."

"Then it takes two days," Tomas said. "The Council authorized readiness. They didn't authorize me to lie to them about what readiness actually costs."

CHAPTER 3

Exceptions

Lidia Corren's morning began, as most of her mornings began, with a spreadsheet she had built herself eleven years earlier and had spent every year since refining into something closer to an actual nervous system for the State of Orsanne's civilian infrastructure — a live, continuously updated map of exactly which humans, in exactly which roles, kept exactly which systems functioning, and what happened to each system if that human were, for any reason, suddenly unavailable.

She had built it after the Occupation Period, a stretch of Orsanne history that predated her own career by two decades and that the official records described, with the same careful vagueness Calder applied to its own uncomfortable chapters, as "an extended period of military administration during which certain civilian functions experienced service reductions." Lidia's grandfather, who had lived through it, had described it rather more specifically: eleven months during which the regional grain co-operative outside her family's town had operated with a single qualified agricultural engineer covering four facilities, because the other three had been called up, and the resulting yield failure had not killed anyone directly but had made the following winter considerably harder than any winter needed to be.

Lidia did not intend to preside over a repeat of that particular kind of failure. It was, more or less, the entire reason her position — Director of National Continuity Logistics — existed at all.

The first exception request arrived at 0815, forty-five minutes after the Council of Delegates authorized Orsanne's own readiness posture in response to the overnight incident. It came from the Regional Water Authority covering the southern basin, a mild, procedurally correct document requesting deferral of reservist activation for two named

engineers, on the grounds that the basin's filtration system required a minimum of two qualified supervisors at all times and currently employed exactly two.

Lidia approved it without much thought. This was routine. Every mobilization, however small, generated a handful of these requests, and most of them, on closer examination, turned out to have more slack in the system than the initial request implied.

The second exception request arrived at 0834. The third at 0851. By 1000, she had fourteen of them, and by 1100, she had stopped approving them reflexively and started reading them properly, because something in the pattern had begun to bother her in a way she couldn't yet name.

She called her deputy, Renn Okafor, into her office and spread the requests across her desk.

"Tell me what you see."

Okafor scanned them, the particular scan of a man who had worked alongside Lidia long enough to know that when she asked a question like that, she already had an answer and was testing whether he'd arrive at the same one.

"They're all legitimate," he said slowly. "I mean — I'd have expected padding. Agencies asking for more than they need, hoping to keep extra people out of uniform. This isn't that. Look at the water authority request — they're not asking to keep four engineers when three would do. They're asking to keep two when two is the minimum the system can run on at all."

"Keep going."

"Same with the transit authority request. Same with the two hospital requests." Okafor looked up. "Lidia, if these are all this tight, that's not agencies being protective. That's the actual staffing margin. That's what depth looks like now."

"Pull the full continuity registry," she said. "Every reservist currently holding a civilian role with a documented single point of failure. I want the complete list before end of day."

"That's going to be a large number."

"I know," Lidia said. "That's exactly why I need it today and not next week."

• • •

She called the southern basin's water authority herself that afternoon, mostly because the first exception request had been sitting in the back of her mind all day and she wanted to hear the actual voice behind the procedurally correct document rather than simply approving it and moving on.

"Director Corren," said the woman who answered, sounding faintly startled that anyone from the capital had called directly rather than routing the matter through three layers of regional liaison. "I wasn't expecting — is there a problem with the request?"

"No problem. I wanted to understand it better than the paperwork explained it. You have two qualified supervisors for the entire basin filtration system?"

"Two. We had five, six years ago. One retired, one transferred to the coastal system when they had a shortage there, one — " the woman paused. "One died. Heart condition, nothing to do with the job. We never replaced her. There wasn't anyone qualified to replace her with, not without pulling someone from another system that was already just as thin."

"And if I approve the deferral?"

"Then the system runs the way it's run for the last two years. Tight, but it runs. If I don't get the deferral, I'm down to one person covering a role that's designed to always have a second person cross-checking the chemical dosing. I'm not telling you that to be dramatic, Director. I'm telling you because it's true, and because I'd rather you hear it from me than read it as a bullet point."

Lidia approved the deferral before she'd even hung up the phone, and sat afterward with the quiet unease of a woman who had just been reminded that every line item in her spreadsheet had, underneath it, exactly this kind of conversation waiting to be had, fifty-two thousand times over, if anyone had the time to have all of them.

• • •

The complete list, when it arrived at 1730, contained 52,000 names — reservists whose civilian roles had no currently qualified backup, spread across water, medical, power, transport, and agricultural systems that collectively kept 7.1 million Orsanne citizens fed, treated, and warm.

Lidia sat with the number, not shocked exactly, since some part of her had clearly been building toward this exact discovery for eleven years without quite admitting it to herself, but confirmed in a way that felt heavier than mere confirmation should have felt.

She drafted the memo to the Ministry of Defence at 1800, rewrote it twice, and sent the third version at 1945.

Ministry of Defence — Office of the Director, National Continuity Logistics
Re: Reservist Activation, Category Analysis

Of the 187,000 reservists identified for potential activation under current readiness posture, 52,000 hold civilian continuity roles for which no qualified replacement currently exists. Activation of these personnel without a minimum sixty-day transition period will result in documented service degradation across water treatment, medical capacity, power distribution, transport, and agricultural oversight systems, affecting an estimated 2.1 million citizens directly and the remainder of the national population indirectly through supply chain effects.

This office does not recommend activation of the affected 52,000 without either (a) a minimum sixty-day transition period, which current strategic timelines do not appear to accommodate, or (b) explicit Council authorization accepting the documented civilian service degradation as a cost of current mobilization posture.

I am available to brief the Ministry directly at the Ministry's earliest convenience.

— L. Corren

She sent it, and went home. Her apartment was exactly as she had left it that morning: one cup in the sink, a half-read novel facedown beside the bed, the basil on the kitchen sill beginning to lean toward a window she had forgotten to open. She watered it, ate reheated soup standing at the counter, and checked the continuity registry once more before forcing herself to put the screen away. She did not sleep especially well.

CHAPTER 4

The Corridor

The Rellan Corridor ran roughly ninety kilometers north to south, a strip of land bounded on its eastern edge by a low ridgeline that had been fortified, abandoned, refortified, and abandoned again so many times across three centuries that engineers occasionally still unearthed the foundations of installations nobody currently serving in either army had known existed.

Its history, insofar as either country's schoolchildren were taught it, began with the First Rellan War, fought over a combination of grievances so thoroughly intertwined by the time historians got around to studying them seriously that no single cause could be cleanly separated from the others: a disputed river-access treaty, a border community that had spoken a dialect closer to Calder's language than Orsanne's official tongue despite sitting on what Orsanne considered its side of an older dynastic line, and a vein of industrial-grade minerals running beneath the ridge that had, for roughly forty years in the conflict's earliest phase, made the Corridor genuinely valuable to whichever nation controlled it.

The minerals had been exhausted a hundred and eighty years ago. The river had changed course twice since, on both occasions for reasons entirely unrelated to either nation's engineering, leaving the original access dispute technically unresolvable because the disputed access point no longer existed in any form either side's original treaty language could be applied to. The border community itself — Rellan Cross, once home to some six thousand people — had shrunk, across the demographic contraction both nations had spent the last century quietly absorbing, to a population of one hundred and ninety, none of whom, according to the last cultural survey either government had bothered to commission, particularly cared anymore which dialect their grandparents had spoken.

What remained was the war's own accumulated vocabulary, a naming convention that Tomas Keene, sitting through his mandatory annual briefing on Corridor history, had once privately catalogued out of a boredom he'd never quite admitted to anyone: the Boundary Campaigns, the Second Rellan War, the Occupation Period, the Twenty-Seven Day War, the Rellan Emergency, the Winter Mobilization, the Third Armistice — each generation inheriting a conflict it had not designed, renaming it something that sounded appropriately serious for its own particular chapter, and eventually handing an updated version of the same essential disagreement to the next generation, who would rename it again.

Nobody currently serving in Calder's military had been alive for the last conflict serious enough to earn its own proper noun. The Third Armistice, sixty-one years old, had held for longer than any prior ceasefire in the Corridor's recorded history — not, as far as anyone in Tomas's office had ever been able to determine, because either side had grown wiser, but because both populations had, over that same sixty-one years, grown smaller at a rate that made sustained conflict progressively less attractive without either country ever formally admitting that this was the reason.

Eleven thousand people currently lived in the disputed portion of the Corridor. Rellan Cross's hundred and ninety. Scattered agricultural settlements on both sides of the contested line, none exceeding four hundred residents. A handful of automated mineral-survey stations, unmanned for the better part of two decades, that both governments continued to list in official Corridor infrastructure inventories out of what Tomas privately suspected was pure institutional inertia rather than any genuine ongoing strategic interest.

• • •

Mira Halden had lived in Rellan Cross her entire sixty-one years, in a house her great-grandmother had built on what both nations' surveyors, at various points across the intervening century, had confidently placed on opposite sides of the border, sometimes within the same decade.

She had heard about the incident at Sector Nine on the local relay two hours after it happened, from a broadcast that mostly concerned itself with

grain prices and a scheduling change at the regional clinic, the Rellan news itself compressed into a single flat sentence read by an announcer who did not sound especially alarmed, because announcers reading news about the Corridor rarely did anymore.

"Here we go again," her neighbor Tobin said, when she mentioned it over the fence that divided their two properties, a fence that predated either of their families' arrival and that neither of them had ever bothered determining which country's jurisdiction it technically fell under. "You'd think after three hundred years they'd run out of things to fight about."

"They never run out. They just find a new word for the same thing."

"You worried?"

Mira considered this honestly, the way she considered most things, with the patience of a woman who had watched this exact anxious conversation happen perhaps a dozen times across her life and had learned that most of them ended the same way: some tense weeks, a great deal of news coverage from cities that had never sent anyone to actually visit, and then, eventually, nothing, the Corridor settling back into the specific quiet it had occupied for as long as she could remember.

"A little," she said. "Not for me, particularly. I've got nothing either army wants anymore. I'm worried the way you worry about weather you can't do anything about. You just watch it and hope it goes around you."

She went back to hanging her wash, and the two of them didn't speak of it again that day, though both, if pressed, would have admitted to checking the relay rather more often than usual over the following week.

• • •

Both nations' official maps showed the entire ninety-kilometer strip as sovereign territory. Neither map agreed with the other about where the actual boundary ran. Both histories described the current arrangement as provisional, awaiting a final resolution that three centuries of provisional arrangements had never quite gotten around to producing.

Tomas had asked, once, early in his career, why Calder continued to maintain a formal territorial claim over land that, by any economic or strategic measure available to him, no longer meaningfully mattered to the

country's survival.

His mentor at the time, a retired general named Corvath Ellis who had fought in the tail end of the Rellan Emergency and lost a brother in it, had given him an answer that Tomas had spent the subsequent three decades turning over without ever fully resolving it.

"Because our grandfathers held it," Ellis had said. "And because if we stop claiming it, we're the generation that finally admits everyone before us died for nothing. Nobody wants to be that generation, Tomas. It's not strategy. It's grief, wearing a strategy's uniform."

CHAPTER 5

Available

The Council of State convened at 0900 on the third day of the crisis, and Tomas Keene stood before them with the completed report Marrow had built at his insistence, feeling the particular vertigo of a man about to say something true that nobody in the room especially wanted to hear.

"Deputy Chief Keene," said Council First Delegate Osra Vantry, a woman Tomas had briefed perhaps two hundred times across his career and had never once seen visibly rattled until this exact morning. "You have Calder's mobilization confirmation for us?"

"I have Calder's numbers, First Delegate. Whether they constitute confirmation depends on what this Council decides to do with them."

He advanced through the figures methodically: readiness at 94%, standing reserve at 340,000, equipment and automated systems fully operational. The room, predictably, relaxed slightly at each of these numbers, the collective posture of people hearing exactly what they had hoped to hear.

Then he gave them the other number.

"Of our 340,000 reserve personnel, 118,000 currently hold civilian continuity roles. Of those, 41,000 hold roles for which this country currently has no qualified replacement. If we activate those 41,000 without a transition period, we will see documented degradation across water treatment, regional medical capacity, power distribution, transport networks, and agricultural oversight, within approximately three weeks of activation."

Silence, of the quality Tomas had learned to recognize as a room recalculating everything it thought it understood about a decision it had believed, ninety seconds earlier, was already made.

"How large a degradation?" Vantry asked.

"Manageable, individually. A hospital operating with reduced surgical capacity does not collapse. A water system running with one supervisor instead of two does not immediately fail. But these are not isolated costs, First Delegate. They compound. And they do not resolve themselves the moment the mobilization ends, because retraining replacement personnel for these specific roles takes months we will not have spent preparing for during the crisis itself."

A Council member Tomas didn't recognize — new, appointed sometime in the last election cycle, young enough that his own service obligation had likely fallen after the most recent reserve-age expansion — leaned forward.

"Deputy Chief, are you telling this Council that Calder cannot mobilize?"

"No," Tomas said, and meant it, because the distinction mattered more than almost anything else he had to say that morning. "I'm telling this Council that Calder can mobilize. I'm telling you what mobilizing actually costs, in a currency this Council has not previously been asked to consider paying in. Readiness Level Three is executable. I can have Calder's forces at full posture within the ordered timeline. I am asking this Council to decide, with full information, whether the civilian cost of that timeline is one you are prepared to accept — because I do not believe anyone in this room has yet been asked to make that decision honestly."

Delegate Corrin Hask, the Council's longest-serving member and the closest thing Tomas had to a reliable ally in that chamber, spoke for the first time since the briefing began.

"Deputy Chief, I remember your testimony on the Twenty-Seven Day War's aftermath. Are you telling us this could be that again?"

"I'm telling you it could be a smaller version of that, First Delegate Hask, spread across more systems, less dramatically, in a way that might be easier to overlook precisely because no single failure will be large enough to make headlines. I built my entire office on the belief that the failures we don't see coming are the ones that cost the most. I would be failing at my job if I let this Council authorize full activation without saying so plainly."

"And if we authorize a reduced activation instead?" Hask pressed. "Something the country can sustain without this cost?"

"Then I'd need three more days to model it properly, and Orsanne would have three more days to finish their own mobilization while we deliberated. I don't have a clean answer for you, First Delegate. I have a true one, and a difficult one, and they happen to be the same answer."

Vantry looked at the report in front of her for a long moment, and when she looked back up at Tomas, something in her expression had shifted from the careful neutrality of a politician managing a crisis toward something closer to the exhaustion of a person confronting a fact she suspected, on some level, she had always known and had simply never been forced to say out loud.

"Give us the timeline anyway, Deputy Chief," she said finally. "Full activation, forty-one thousand included. We will address the civilian consequences as they arise. This Council did not call this session to be talked out of defending Calder's territory."

"Understood, First Delegate," Tomas said. "I'll have the executable timeline to this Council within twenty-four hours."

He left the chamber and walked back toward his own office through corridors that had not yet begun to feel the particular strain he had just spent an hour describing in careful, bloodless numbers.

• • •

PART II

THE SMALLER WAR

CHAPTER 6

Substitution

Tomas built the executable timeline across the following eighteen hours, sleeping perhaps three of them, and what he built was not the mobilization the Council had originally imagined when it voted six to one for full readiness posture. It was something narrower, more deliberate, and — Tomas allowed himself this much private satisfaction, somewhere around hour fourteen — genuinely clever.

The 41,000 personnel with no qualified civilian backup did not get activated in the first wave. Instead, Tomas's office produced a substitution architecture that reassigned the problem rather than solving it outright.

Automated systems absorbed what automated systems could absorb. Surveillance duties along eighty percent of the Corridor's length shifted entirely to autonomous platforms, freeing roughly six thousand personnel who had previously stood or driven those same stretches in person. Logistics routing, previously requiring human dispatchers at every regional depot, consolidated into three centralized automated hubs, each overseen by a skeleton crew a tenth the size of what the old system had required.

Reserve age limits, quietly and without public announcement, extended from fifty-two to fifty-seven — not because fifty-seven-year-olds made better soldiers than thirty-year-olds, but because the fifty-two-to-fifty-seven cohort, born during a period of comparatively higher birth rates two generations back, contained proportionally more people who had already completed their civilian continuity training decades ago and could be activated without leaving an unfillable gap behind them.

And for the roles that could not be automated, extended, or substituted — the water engineers, the surgical specialists, the power-grid technicians — Tomas's office designed something he privately thought of as scheduling rather than mobilization: activation windows short enough that a single

person's civilian role could be covered by overtime and deferred maintenance rather than by an actual replacement, rotations tight enough that the same forty-one thousand people effectively did both jobs, alternating, for as long as the crisis demanded it.

He presented the revised timeline to the Council at 1100 the following day.

"This activates full Calder combat readiness within the ordered window," Tomas said, "at what I estimate as roughly sixty percent of the civilian continuity cost in my original assessment."

"Sixty percent of forty-one thousand," Vantry said slowly. "That's still sixteen thousand people carrying two jobs."

"Yes, First Delegate. I did not find a version of this that costs nothing. I found a version that costs less."

Hask, who had pressed him hardest in the previous session, studied the revised numbers with visible reluctance to simply accept them at face value. "Deputy Chief, you extended the reserve age ceiling without bringing that decision back to this Council first."

"I did, First Delegate, and I'll accept whatever consequence this Council decides that warrants. I judged that a five-year extension, applied to a cohort with existing civilian continuity training, was within my office's standing authority to implement operationally. I should have flagged it to you regardless, out of courtesy if nothing else. That's a fair criticism."

"It is," Hask agreed, though something in his tone suggested he was more troubled by the substance of the decision than the process that had produced it. "Fifty-seven. Some of those men and women haven't held a service weapon in decades."

"Most of them won't need to," Tomas said. "The roles I'm activating them for are largely the same civilian specialties they've spent those decades practicing. I'm not asking a retired accountant to become an infantry officer, First Delegate. I'm asking a fifty-five-year-old structural engineer to keep being a structural engineer, in a uniform, for slightly longer hours than he's used to."

Hask did not look entirely satisfied by this answer, though he did not press further.

The Council approved it unanimously. Tomas walked out of the chamber with the hollow satisfaction of a man who had just been congratulated for solving a problem he privately suspected he had only postponed, and postponed at a price — sixteen thousand people, working double shifts across roles that mattered — that nobody in that chamber had yet been asked to actually witness.

• • •

Petrin Halworth received his own activation notice two days later, at fifty-five years old, a structural engineer who had completed his original reserve obligation decades earlier and had assumed, reasonably, that the matter was permanently behind him.

"Fifty-five," his daughter said, reading the notice over his shoulder with the disbelief of someone encountering a policy change she'd had no idea existed. "Dad, you haven't held a rifle in thirty years."

"I'm not being activated to hold a rifle. Look at the designation — they want my old engineering specialty. Bridge assessment, load-bearing structural review. That's exactly what I did for the transit authority for the last decade."

"That doesn't make it better."

"No," Petrin agreed. "But it does make it make sense, which is more than I can say for most of what this country's asked of people my age across my lifetime." He folded the notice and set it on the kitchen table with the care of a man handling something he'd genuinely never expected to see again. "I suppose there aren't enough thirty-year-old engineers left to go around anymore."

"Is that really it? They just ran out of young people?"

"I think," Petrin said slowly, working through the thought as he spoke it, "that they ran out of young people a while ago, and only just now ran out of ways to avoid noticing."

CHAPTER 7

Continuity

Lidia built her own version three days later, after the Ministry of Defence's response to her memo arrived in the form of a joint working session rather than the outright dismissal she had privately braced for.

"We need a version of this crisis Orsanne can actually sustain," the Minister told her, in a tone that suggested he had already concluded, independently, something close to what her memo had told him. "Build it."

She built it the way she built everything — methodically, with the paranoia of a woman who had spent eleven years imagining every way a system might fail and had, on more than one occasion, been proven insufficiently paranoid.

Orsanne's civilian functions consolidated faster and more aggressively than Calder's, in part because Lidia had less patience than Tomas for half-measures and in part because Orsanne's political culture tolerated a degree of top-down restructuring that Calder's more fractious Council would never have approved. Regional hospitals, previously operating as forty-one independent facilities, reorganized overnight into eleven consolidated medical zones, each staffed at a density that allowed the departure of specialists without immediately collapsing coverage — at the cost of patients in outlying areas now facing considerably longer transport times for anything beyond routine care.

Water and power systems, similarly, consolidated their human oversight into regional command centers, trading the redundancy of local, on-site supervision for the efficiency of centralized monitoring — a trade that worked beautifully right up until the moment something went locally, physically wrong in a place too far from the nearest remaining human to reach quickly.

Maintenance schedules, across every system Lidia's office touched, deferred. Not canceled — Lidia was too careful an engineer's daughter to cancel anything outright — but pushed, quietly, into a future she privately hoped the crisis would resolve before that future actually arrived.

Rotations shortened to the minimum interval her deputy Okafor's own modeling suggested a human being could sustain without measurable degradation in judgment or physical safety: fourteen days deployed, seven days civilian, repeating, for as long as necessary.

"This works," Okafor told her, reviewing the completed architecture. "It genuinely works. I didn't think it would."

"It works for now," Lidia said. "Ask me again in two months whether fourteen-and-seven holds up for people doing it for the fifth or sixth cycle."

She submitted the plan to the Ministry that evening. It was approved within six hours, with the speed of a government that had been waiting to hear it could still do the thing it had already decided to do.

• • •

Elsbet Marne lived forty minutes outside what had, three weeks earlier, been her nearest hospital — a small regional facility that had served her farming community for two generations before the consolidation folded it into a larger zone ninety minutes away.

Her husband's diabetes had never been an emergency before. It became one on the second week of the new arrangement, when a medication timing error he'd normally have caught with a routine check-in at the local facility instead went unnoticed until the symptoms were already serious enough to require the transport she now had to wait fifty extra minutes for.

He recovered. The regional coordinator who called Lidia's office to log the incident was careful to note that the outcome would likely have been the same either way, that this was not, technically, a failure the consolidation could be blamed for. Lidia read the report anyway, twice, and added it to a private file she had started keeping — cases that hadn't gone wrong, exactly, but that had gone worse than they needed to, by margins too small to appear in any of the official metrics she was required to report upward.

"You don't have to keep that file," Okafor told her, the one time he noticed her updating it. "Nobody's asking you to track near-misses this granularly."

"I'm not keeping it for anyone else," Lidia said. "I'm keeping it because someone should know the actual shape of what fifty extra minutes costs, even if the number never shows up anywhere official."

• • •

Both nations, within the same seventy-two-hour window, had discovered they could still fight. Neither had yet discovered what fighting, sustained past the first few weeks, was actually going to require them to keep paying.

CHAPTER 8

Contact

The first sustained engagement began at 0200 on the ninth day, along the ridge overlooking Sector Nine, the same stretch of ground where Sergeant Vray's patrol had triggered the entire crisis nine days earlier.

It bore almost no resemblance to the wars either nation's grandparents had fought. Calder's opening move was an automated strike package — a coordinated swarm of loitering munitions, guided by predictive targeting systems that had spent nine days building a threat model of Orsanne's ridge defenses from satellite and drone telemetry, released from launch positions eleven kilometers back from the actual line. Human operators authorized the strike; humans did not, in any meaningful sense, aim it.

Orsanne's automated air-defense grid intercepted sixty percent of the incoming munitions. The remaining forty percent found their targets with a precision that would have seemed like science fiction to the soldiers who'd fought the Twenty-Seven Day War, striking sensor arrays, command nodes, and forward observation positions with almost no collateral damage to the ridge's civilian-adjacent infrastructure, because both sides' targeting systems had been explicitly constrained by decades of accumulated ethical-use protocols that neither government had any political appetite to loosen.

Orsanne's counterstrike followed within forty minutes: a mixed package of autonomous ground units and a smaller human assault force, moving up the eastern approach under cover of an electronic warfare screen that briefly blinded Calder's own sensor net across a four-kilometer stretch.

Actual human beings fought each other for the first time in this iteration of the Rellan conflict at roughly 0340, when a twelve-person Orsanne assault team breached Calder's forward position on the ridge's northern shoulder.

Corporal Ines Tarry was the first Calder soldier to see them come through the wire, in the green-gray wash of a night-vision feed that flattened everything into the same texture of urgent shadow. She had eleven seconds to decide something before the decision made itself, and she spent most of them shouting the alert rather than firing, because the position's automated response system needed exactly that alert to activate its own countermeasures, and she'd been trained, across four years of exercises that had never once felt like they'd actually matter, to trust the system's timing over her own instinct to act first.

The system worked. A defensive drone, holding station forty meters back, engaged the breach point 2.3 seconds after her alert, and the resulting exchange — automated suppressive fire on one side, a mix of human and autonomous assault on the other — lasted six minutes, though Tarry would later tell the after-action interviewer that it had felt considerably longer and considerably shorter at the same time, in the specific way that combat always seemed to bend the ordinary rules of how long six minutes should feel.

Three Calder soldiers died in those six minutes, two of them from the same autonomous weapons platform malfunction that also, in a piece of grim arithmetic nobody found especially comforting, took out the Orsanne squad leader who'd triggered it. Five Orsanne soldiers died. The position changed hands twice before Calder's automated reinforcement — a hardened combat platform that arrived on-site four minutes after being summoned, faster than any human reinforcement conceivably could have — retook it and held it.

Tarry survived. She would spend the following several weeks unable to explain to her own satisfaction why she had, and would eventually stop trying, the way most soldiers eventually stopped trying to answer that particular question and simply carried it instead.

By dawn, Calder controlled roughly two additional kilometers of the ridge. Orsanne had lost the northern shoulder outright and, in a counterattack that afternoon, retaken a crossing point further south that Calder's forces had held since the Third Armistice.

Both sides' equipment worked. Both sides' soldiers, the ones actually engaged in direct combat, performed with a professionalism that Tomas, reading the after-action reports that evening, found himself genuinely admiring, the way he might admire a well-executed engineering solution to a problem he wished did not exist.

The war, in the narrowest sense of the word, was entirely real, entirely functional, and entirely capable of continuing exactly as it had for the previous three centuries.

The question neither side had yet been forced to answer was how long either of them could keep paying for it.

CHAPTER 9

Ari

Ari Pell received his activation notice on the eleventh day, delivered to the small apartment he shared with two roommates in Calder's western river district, arriving on the same government messaging system that had, six weeks earlier, sent him his quarterly performance review for the ecological restoration program he'd spent the last two years working for.

He was twenty-three years old, and he was, by the arithmetic that neither he nor anyone in his cohort particularly enjoyed being reminded of, one of approximately 31,000 Calder citizens currently between the ages of twenty and twenty-five — a generation roughly a third the size of his parents' own cohort at the same age, born during the trough in Calder's birth rate that demographers had, with characteristic bloodlessness, taken to calling the Second Contraction.

"You're not even surprised," his roommate Dara said, watching him read the notice.

"I've known my whole life this was possible," Ari said. "Everyone my age has. It's not a surprise. It's just annoying."

His restoration crew — nine people, restoring wetland function along a river system that had been industrially degraded two centuries earlier and was only now, after decades of patient, unglamorous work, beginning to show measurable recovery — would lose him for an unspecified period. He spent his last morning before reporting walking the section of riverbank his team had replanted eighteen months earlier, checking on a stand of reed grass that had, against his own private expectations, actually taken root.

His mother called that evening. She did not cry, which Ari had expected, and did not ask him to find some way to avoid reporting, which he had also expected, because both of his parents had made clear across his entire life that avoiding one's service obligation was not a thing either of them would

respect him for attempting.

What she said instead surprised him.

"There are so few of you," she said. "I don't mean you specifically. I mean your whole generation. When I was your age, if something happened to one person, there were four more just like them coming up behind. Now there's just — you. All of you, however many of you there actually are. I don't know how to feel about a country that needs literally everyone it has left."

"I'll be fine, Mom."

"I know you will," she said. "I'm not worried about you specifically. I'm worried about the arithmetic. Does that make sense?"

It did, more than Ari wanted to admit. He reported to his assigned unit two days later — a mixed reserve company, ages ranging from twenty-three to fifty-one, more than half the unit closer in age to his own father than to him.

"You're the youngest one we've had rotate through in eight months," a reservist named Costa told him, on his first evening, without any particular unkindness, simply stating a fact the way people in Ari's generation had learned to expect facts about their own scarcity to be stated. "We used to get whole platoons of twenty-somethings. Now we get one every few months, and everyone treats him like he's made of something more breakable than the rest of us."

"Are you going to treat me like that?"

"No," Costa said. "I'm going to treat you like someone who needs to actually learn this job, the same as I did at your age, except there were forty of us in my cohort doing it together and there's basically just you. I figure the kindest thing I can do is not make that stranger than it already is."

Ari found, across the following days, that he preferred this to the alternative — the careful, faintly mournful deference he'd occasionally gotten from older Calder citizens who seemed to regard his entire generation as something precious and endangered rather than as people capable of doing an ordinary job competently. Costa's directness felt more like respect than the deference ever had.

He did the job he'd been trained to do, competently, without particular distinction, the way most soldiers throughout history had done most of

their jobs: not as heroes, not as symbols, simply as one more person doing a difficult thing because the difficult thing needed doing and he happened to be one of the people available to do it.

CHAPTER 10

Three Weeks

The first documented civilian consequence arrived on Tomas's desk on the twenty-second day, in the form of a routine infrastructure report he would, six weeks earlier, have barely glanced at.

A regional hospital in Calder's northern district had reduced elective surgical capacity by thirty percent, not because of any single dramatic failure but because two of its four qualified anesthesiologists were now splitting their time between hospital duty and a reserve medical unit attached to the ridge, per the fourteen-and-seven rotation his own office had designed. The reduction wasn't catastrophic — nobody had died who wouldn't otherwise have died, no emergency case had gone untreated — but the hospital's waiting list for non-urgent procedures had grown by eleven weeks in twenty-two days, a number that would, Tomas understood without needing anyone to explain it to him, keep growing for as long as the rotation continued.

A water-treatment facility in the same district reported a maintenance backlog for the first time in six years, nothing urgent, filters slightly overdue for replacement, testing frequency reduced from daily to every third day, a set of small deferrals that individually meant nothing and that Tomas, reading the report, recognized immediately as the exact pattern that had killed his grandmother twenty-six years earlier, simply not yet advanced far enough to have killed anyone this time.

Transit authorities across three regions reported reduced service frequency, longer average commute times, and a modest but measurable increase in reported near-miss incidents at unstaffed rail crossings that had, until three weeks ago, employed human safety officers during peak hours.

An agricultural automation inspector named Ruth Beckwith, one of only three still covering the entire western growing region after two colleagues had been activated to the ridge, missed a routine calibration check on a fertilizer distribution system that a fully staffed rotation would have caught within days. Nobody noticed the miscalibration for eleven days, by which point it had cost a mid-sized cooperative roughly six percent of one field's yield — not a disaster, not even large enough to trigger the cooperative's own insurance threshold, simply a small, quiet loss that would show up, if anywhere, as a slightly smaller number on next season's regional harvest report, attributed to weather, or soil variance, or any of the dozen ordinary explanations that existed specifically to absorb losses too small to investigate properly.

None of it made headlines. None of it constituted the kind of dramatic failure that might have given the Council pause, or given the public something concrete to organize its growing unease around. It was, instead, a thousand small degradations arriving simultaneously across a country that had spent decades optimizing every one of its systems to run efficiently with exactly the number of people available to run them — and had never, until this exact moment, been asked what happened when a meaningful fraction of those people were doing something else.

Lidia's own reports, arriving from Orsanne's side of a border neither of them had ever crossed to meet the other, told an almost identical story: a consolidated medical zone in the southern basin reporting increased patient transport times, a power grid running with reduced redundancy that had, twice in the past week, required emergency load-balancing that would have been routine, unremarkable maintenance under the old staffing model.

Tomas read both his own reports and — through channels that existed specifically to monitor exactly this — the aggregated, unclassified version of Orsanne's public infrastructure data, and understood, with the clarity of a man finally seeing the full shape of a problem he had spent three weeks watching arrive one small piece at a time, that both countries were now paying the same bill, in the same currency, for the privilege of continuing to disagree about ninety kilometers of scrub grass that eleven thousand

people currently called home.

He did not share this observation with the Council. It was not yet, by any measure available to him, a crisis. It was simply arithmetic, continuing to accumulate, the way arithmetic always accumulates, whether or not anyone in a position of authority has yet decided to look directly at the sum.

• • •

PART III

THE PRICE OF HOLDING

CHAPTER 11

The Village

Calder forces took Kest Hollow on the thirty-first day of the crisis, in an engagement that Tomas, reading the after-action summary, recognized as a genuine tactical success by every conventional measure available to him: minimal casualties, an Orsanne garrison of forty that had withdrawn rather than face the automated assault package Calder had committed to the operation, a settlement of some three hundred and forty residents that had, according to the report's own careful phrasing, "transitioned to Calder administrative control without significant disruption to civilian life."

• • •

Ordo Vasek, who ran Kest Hollow's only grain mill and had done so under three different flags across his sixty-one years without the mill's actual operation changing in any way he could name, watched the transition happen from his own front step, a cup of tea going cold in his hand.

The Orsanne garrison left before dawn, in vehicles that made considerably less noise than Ordo had expected an army's departure to make. Calder's forces arrived by midmorning, a mixed column of automated platforms and perhaps thirty actual soldiers, who set up a checkpoint at the town's northern road, posted a notice at the town hall in language mostly identical to the notice it replaced, and otherwise, as far as Ordo could tell across the following week, did very little that changed the actual texture of anyone's day.

"Same taxes?" he asked the young administrator sent to explain the new arrangement to the assembled town council.

"Same rate, different collection office. You'll get a new form."

"Same school?"

"Same school. Same teacher, if she wants to stay, which the notice says she's welcome to."

"Then what's actually different?" Ordo asked, not hostile, simply genuinely curious, the way a man asks a question he expects to receive an answer that will finally make the whole exercise make sense to him.

The administrator, who was perhaps twenty-six and had clearly not been given a satisfying answer to this exact question by anyone above her either, considered it honestly before replying.

"I don't know that anything is, for you specifically. I think the difference is mostly on a map somewhere, in an office neither of us will ever visit."

Ordo nodded slowly, finished his cooling tea, and went back to running his mill, under its fourth flag, exactly as he had under its first three.

• • •

The Council celebrated it, briefly, as the first unambiguous territorial gain of the crisis. Tomas received the congratulations that came his way with the discomfort of a man who understood, before anyone else in the celebrating room, that the engagement itself had been the easy part.

The staffing requirement arrived on his desk four days later.

Permanent administration of Kest Hollow, per the Ministry's own occupation-governance standards — standards written decades earlier, during an era when occupying territory had been a matter of course rather than a luxury — required a minimum garrison of sixty for security, a civil administration staff of twenty-two, rotating medical coverage requiring four additional personnel at any given time, transport and supply logistics requiring a further eighteen, and communications infrastructure maintenance requiring six specialists who did not currently exist in Calder's available reserve pool at all, meaning six positions would need to be filled by personnel pulled from other, already-thin civilian roles.

One hundred and ten personnel, minimum, to permanently hold a village of three hundred and forty people who had, by every account reaching Tomas's office, continued going about their ordinary lives within days of the transition, largely indifferent to which flag technically now flew over the town hall.

Tomas did not raise the disproportion with the Council. Kest Hollow had already been won, already been celebrated, and unwinding a celebrated victory over an uncomfortable staffing table was not a fight he believed he could win in the crisis's current mood. He filed the occupation-governance request, authorized the necessary personnel reassignments, and made a private note — the kind of note that had, across his career, tended to accumulate into something eventually too large to ignore — that the arithmetic of holding ground and the arithmetic of taking it were not, in fact, the same arithmetic at all.

He did not yet know what to do with that observation. He simply kept it, the way he kept everything that troubled him without yet having a use for it, filed alongside his grandmother's death and the silence of a Council committee eleven years ago.

CHAPTER 12

Rotation

The problem announced itself first as a scheduling anomaly, the kind of thing that reached Tomas's desk disguised as routine administrative friction rather than the structural discovery it actually was.

"We have a gap in Ridge Battalion's engineering rotation," Marrow told him, during what had become a daily briefing neither of them had originally expected to still be holding six weeks into the crisis. "Third rotation's due to swap out Thursday. We don't have a fourth rotation ready to swap in."

"Why not? We built the fourteen-and-seven cycle to sustain exactly this kind of continuous rotation."

"We built it to sustain the cycle for people we could actually keep cycling," Marrow said. "The problem isn't the schedule, sir. It's depth. We had enough qualified combat engineers to fill three rotations comfortably. The fourth rotation exists on paper. In practice, it's the same people from rotation one, coming back around for a second full cycle, six weeks after their first one ended, because there isn't anyone else qualified to send instead."

Tomas sat with this for longer than the observation, on its face, seemed to warrant. "We modeled fourteen-and-seven as sustainable."

"We modeled it as sustainable for as many cycles as we had personnel depth to support. We didn't model what happens once the depth runs out and the same people start doing their second, third, fourth cycle. I don't think anyone modeled that, sir, because I don't think anyone believed the crisis would still be running long enough to need it."

This, Tomas understood with the clarity of a man recognizing a mistake in his own earlier reasoning, was the actual shape of the problem he had spent six weeks only partially perceiving. Mobilization was a single, difficult decision, made once, under pressure, with whatever personnel happened to

be available at that exact moment. Sustainment was a different problem entirely — not a decision but a continuous, compounding demand, and Calder, like every modern military built on the assumption of an eventually-renewable population, had designed its entire rotational doctrine around an assumption of depth that simply no longer existed.

Three hundred kilometers away, Lidia Corren arrived at an almost identical realization by an almost identical route — a maintenance crew scheduled for its third consecutive deployment cycle, a regional hospital's emergency rotation roster running out of qualified names before it ran out of weeks — and found herself, reviewing the numbers late one evening, thinking of her grandfather's account of the Occupation Period not as history any longer but as a preview she had somehow failed to fully credit until this exact moment.

• • •

Ari Pell received his own second-cycle notice on a Thursday, six weeks after his first rotation had ended, and found that the unfairness of it took him longer to name than he expected.

"Wasn't I supposed to get a full rotation off?" he asked Costa, who had, by this point, become something closer to a mentor than the reluctant training partner he'd started as.

"You were. There's supposed to be a third cohort behind us to make that possible. There isn't one. Not enough people your age finished specialist training this cycle to fill it." Costa didn't dress the answer up, which Ari had come to appreciate about him even when the undressed answer was one he didn't especially want. "I got called back early too, for what it's worth. Fourth time for me. I stopped being surprised by it two cycles ago."

"How do you not go crazy, doing this over and over?"

Costa considered the question seriously, the way he considered most things Ari asked him. "I don't know that I've entirely figured that part out. I think you stop measuring it in cycles and start measuring it in whether the work still means something each time you do it. Some days that's enough. Some days it isn't, and you just do the work anyway, because the work doesn't actually care how you feel about doing it a second time."

Ari reported for his second cycle three days later, alongside eleven other names on the same roster he recognized from the first one.

• • •

You could borrow an indispensable person for two weeks. You could not borrow the same indispensable person indefinitely, not without eventually exhausting something in them that no amount of careful scheduling could restore on the country's preferred timeline.

Neither country had built for a war that required depth. Both had built, across decades of demographic contraction, for exactly enough people to run themselves during peacetime, and peacetime, it was becoming clear to both Tomas and Lidia in their separate offices, had never actually included a margin for anything else.

CHAPTER 13

Human-Years

Tomas requested the historical figure on a Tuesday afternoon, almost as an afterthought, the way a man asks a question he suspects will confirm something he already believes rather than reveal something new.

"I want total Calder resource expenditure on the Rellan conflict," he told the archival research office. "Across the full historical record. Military service, training, veteran care, infrastructure, industrial reserve, diplomacy, everything you can attribute to it. Render it in human-years."

"That's an unusual request, sir. Human-years specifically?"

"I want a single number. Not a budget figure. Not a casualty count. I want to know how many years of human life, in total, this country has spent on that stretch of ground."

The request took the archival office nine days to complete, cross-referencing records that spanned three centuries of inconsistent bookkeeping standards, incomplete wartime records, and at least two periods where entire archives had been destroyed and had to be reconstructed from secondary sources.

Tomas requested the second figure the same afternoon the first one arrived — the number he had been building toward without quite admitting it to himself since the day Kest Hollow's staffing requirement had crossed his desk.

He put the two numbers side by side on a single page, without commentary, without a cover memo explaining what they meant.

Total Calder resource expenditure, Rellan conflict, three centuries: 4,100,000 human-years.

Current population, disputed Corridor territory: 11,200.

He did not share the page with the Council. He was not certain, yet, what sharing it would accomplish, beyond forcing a room full of people into a

silence he suspected none of them were ready for.

He filed it instead, in the same private place he kept his grandmother's death and Kest Hollow's disproportionate staffing table, understanding without yet being able to say so aloud that he was accumulating, one filed observation at a time, the actual case he did not yet know he was going to eventually have to make.

CHAPTER 14

The Missing Engineers

The failure, when it arrived on Lidia's desk, was not catastrophic. It was, in fact, precisely the kind of small, fixable problem her entire career had been built around preventing — which made it, in its way, worse, because it meant the prevention had not been sufficient, and she now had to solve the same problem twice, once in advance and once in the moment it actually occurred.

A load-balancing failure at the Halveth power substation, serving roughly four hundred thousand people across the eastern basin, had gone undetected for six hours longer than the old staffing model would have permitted, because the two engineers who would normally have caught it during a routine overnight check were both currently attached to a reserve unit supporting logistics operations near the ridge. The substation's automated systems had caught the failure eventually, on their own, before it became an actual outage — but six hours was six hours longer than Lidia's own standards permitted for a fix of this category, and the report crossing her desk noted, with the specific dryness of an engineer documenting something she found genuinely alarming, that a slightly worse failure occurring during those same six hours would not have had an automated system available to catch it in time.

"I need those two engineers released back to civilian duty," Lidia told the military liaison assigned to her office, a colonel named Fenn Dassar who had, across six weeks of working together, developed the weary patience of a man negotiating the same argument with slightly different numbers each time.

"They're supporting an active logistics operation, Director. I can't simply pull qualified personnel because—"

"Because a power substation serving four hundred thousand people came within six hours of a failure your logistics operation would very much notice if it actually happened," Lidia said. "Colonel, I'm not asking you to weaken the ridge operation for a preference. I'm telling you that this specific substation failure is more dangerous to Orsanne's actual survival than whatever marginal logistics efficiency those two specific engineers currently provide. Find me two other people who can do their logistics job. I cannot find you two other people who can do their engineering job. There aren't two other people."

Dassar took the matter to his own superior, who took it to the Ministry, and the argument that followed occupied the better part of two days before Lidia won it — not through any dramatic confrontation but through the simple, patient accumulation of the same argument, restated calmly, to progressively higher levels of authority, until someone with sufficient rank finally looked at the actual staffing numbers rather than the operational abstraction and reached the same conclusion Lidia had reached on the first morning.

The two engineers returned to civilian duty on the third day. The ridge logistics operation absorbed their absence by redistributing their responsibilities across personnel already present, a solution that worked, marginally, at a cost in efficiency that nobody bothered calculating precisely because the alternative — a power failure across four hundred thousand people's homes — was not a cost anyone in the chain of command wanted to be responsible for having weighed and found acceptable.

• • •

One of the two returning engineers, a woman named Sorin Ket who had spent six weeks attached to a logistics unit doing work she privately considered well beneath her actual training, met Lidia briefly at the substation the following week, during a routine inspection neither of them had strictly needed to attend in person.

"I heard it was you who got us pulled back," Ket said.

"It was."

"Thank you. I spent six weeks organizing supply manifests for a unit that had two other people who could have done it just as well. I could have told anyone who asked that the substation needed us more. Nobody asked me."

"I'm sorry it took a near-failure for anyone to ask," Lidia said. "That's on my office as much as anyone's. We should have flagged the substation's staffing risk before it became a six-hour gap instead of after."

"Will you? Flag it properly, I mean, so this doesn't happen again next rotation."

"I'm trying to," Lidia said. "I don't know yet whether trying is going to be enough."

• • •

Lidia logged the victory in her private file without satisfaction. It was nearly ten at night. A message from an old university friend asking whether she was still coming to their monthly dinner had been sitting unanswered on her personal screen for three hours; Lidia sent back two words — Next month — and knew, as she sent them, that she had written the same thing the month before. She had not solved the underlying problem. She had won one argument about which of two legitimate, competing needs got to consume the same two scarce people, on this particular Tuesday. Another version of the argument would arrive soon, and then another after that, for as long as the crisis continued to ask more of Orsanne's people than Orsanne's people could give.

CHAPTER 15

The Empty Position

Calder surveillance flagged the anomaly at 0600: Orsanne's forward observation post at Greller Ridge, a position that had been continuously staffed for as long as any current satellite record existed, showed no thermal signature, no communications traffic, no movement across a six-hour observation window.

"Could be a trap," Marrow said, reviewing the imagery with Tomas. "Draw us into occupying it, then hit us with something we haven't seen coming."

"Could be," Tomas agreed. "Send reconnaissance. Careful approach, full sensor sweep before anyone gets close enough to matter."

• • •

Corporal Ines Tarry, six weeks removed from the six minutes that had killed three of her squadmates on the ridge's northern shoulder, led the reconnaissance element up the approach to Greller Ridge at a pace that felt, to her, considerably slower than the situation's actual danger probably warranted, though she'd learned not to argue with caution after the last time speed had cost her something she couldn't get back.

The position looked exactly as the drone imagery had described it: intact, silent, its sensor mast still rotating on automated power, its bunker door standing very slightly ajar in a way that read, to Tarry's trained eye, less like an ambush setup and more like the carelessness of people who had left in a hurry and not expected anyone to be checking the door for weeks.

"Clear," she called, after the full sweep turned up nothing but an abandoned ration wrapper and a logbook whose final entry, dated four days earlier, read simply: *reassigned per Directive 114. Automated systems remain active.* — Sgt. Renn Kolt.

"That's it?" her second-in-command asked. "They just left a note?"

"I don't think it was meant as a note to us," Tarry said, turning the logbook over in her hands. "I think it's just what you write down when you're the last one leaving a place and you're not entirely sure anyone's ever going to read it."

She called it in, and within the hour, the question had moved past her entirely, upward through channels she'd never see the inside of, toward a decision that had nothing to do with the empty room she was currently standing in and everything to do with numbers on a page three hundred kilometers away.

• • •

The reconnaissance team found nothing more than that, because there was nothing more to find. Greller Ridge's observation post had been quietly, administratively abandoned four days earlier — not overrun, not destroyed, simply vacated, its automated sensor suite left running on its own independent power supply, its personnel reassigned to duties Orsanne's own command structure had apparently judged more urgent than continuing to staff a position that, by every strategic assessment available to either side, had not mattered in any meaningful sense for at least the last two decades.

The question reached Tomas within the hour: did Calder want to occupy the now-empty position?

He ran the numbers before answering, the same reflexive calculation that had become, across two months of crisis, almost as automatic to him as breathing. Permanent occupation of Greller Ridge required a minimum garrison, communications relay maintenance, resupply logistics across a position that sat at the difficult end of Calder's existing supply chain, and — this was the detail that settled the question before he'd even finished the full accounting — a level of long-term staffing commitment that exceeded, by a considerable margin, any strategic value the position could plausibly provide against a Corridor whose disputed territory now held roughly two people for every square kilometer of contested ground.

"Recommend against occupation," Tomas told the Council, in the brief written assessment that accompanied his recommendation. "Position offers

negligible strategic value relative to sustainment cost. Recommend continued automated monitoring only."

The Council approved his recommendation without debate, the first unanimous decision in six weeks that hadn't required him to argue for it.

Greller Ridge became, quietly, the first piece of contested Corridor territory in three centuries that neither nation actively held. Orsanne had left. Calder could have taken it and chose not to. Neither government announced this; in both systems, it remained a minor administrative footnote.

Tomas filed the observation beside Kest Hollow's staffing table, the four-million-human-year figure, and the rotation depth that didn't exist. The entries no longer looked unrelated.

He was documenting a pattern. He simply did not yet know what he was going to do with it, or who, beyond himself, was currently in any position to recognize it as one.

• • •

PART IV

THE WITHDRAWAL

CHAPTER 16

Sixty-Three

Calder forces withdrew from Callow Ford on the seventy-fourth day of the crisis, a modest river-crossing settlement that Calder had held since the opening weeks of the engagement, for reasons that Tomas, reviewing the withdrawal order that had crossed his desk for confirmation, recognized as the same reasons that had produced Greller Ridge's quiet vacancy two weeks earlier: the position cost more to hold than it was worth holding.

Orsanne intelligence flagged the withdrawal within six hours.

"Political leadership wants to know if we can occupy it," the briefing officer told Lidia, who had been pulled into the discussion specifically because any occupation decision now required, by standing order the Ministry had issued after the Halveth substation incident, a continuity-cost assessment before any territorial action proceeded.

"Can we?"

"Militarily, yes. Eighty-six personnel for initial security and administrative transition. Long-term, the garrison requirement drops to thirty-four, but you add infrastructure support, transport, rotating medical coverage, communications maintenance, and civil administration on top of that. Total sustained staffing burden comes out around a hundred and seventy."

Lidia already knew, before she asked the next question, roughly what the answer was going to be, because she had run this same category of calculation often enough across the preceding months that the shape of the answer had become as familiar to her as her own handwriting.

"Population of Callow Ford?"

"Sixty-three," the briefing officer said. "Last verified census, current as of eleven weeks ago."

A hundred and seventy people, minimum, sustained indefinitely, to administer a settlement of sixty-three. Lidia did not need to run the

comparison against Kest Hollow's own disproportionate ratio to recognize that Callow Ford's arithmetic was, if anything, considerably worse — nearly three occupying personnel for every single resident, a number that would have struck anyone reviewing it a year earlier as simply impossible, the kind of ratio no functioning government would ever seriously entertain.

She wrote her assessment plainly, without softening it into a recommendation that left room for political discretion to override it on sentiment alone.

This office does not recommend occupation of Callow Ford. Sustained staffing requirement of approximately 170 personnel exceeds any plausible strategic value of the position, and diverts personnel from civilian continuity roles at a cost this office assesses as materially greater than the territorial gain. Recommend continued automated monitoring only, consistent with prior determination at Greller Ridge.

The Ministry approved her recommendation without debate. Not because anyone had grown wiser about the Corridor's actual strategic value — Lidia harbored no illusion on that point — but because the numbers, laid out plainly and repeatedly enough, across enough separate decisions, had begun to argue for themselves in a way that no single official any longer had the political appetite to argue against.

Orsanne declined to occupy Callow Ford. Not diplomatically. Administratively. The decision generated no announcement, no diplomatic note, nothing that either government's official record would ever describe as a gesture of restraint.

• • •

Mira Halden heard about it from her neighbor Tobin, three days after the fact, in the same unhurried way she heard most news that concerned the Corridor's larger politics.

"Callow Ford's not held by anyone anymore," Tobin said, over the same fence that divided their two properties. "Calder left. Orsanne looked at what it'd cost to move in and decided against it."

"So who's in charge there now?"

"As far as I can tell, the mayor. Same as before either army ever showed up in the first place."

Mira considered this with the weathered equanimity of a woman who had watched the Corridor's ownership change hands enough times to have developed a healthy skepticism about how much any single change actually altered. "I suppose that's one way for a war to end. Just run out of anyone willing to pay for it."

"You think that's what's happening? The whole thing, not just Callow Ford?"

"I think," Mira said, hanging the last of her wash, "that I've stopped being able to tell the difference between a war winding down and a war simply getting too expensive to keep having. Maybe there never was a difference. Maybe that's just what winding down has always actually looked like, and we only call it something grander after enough time's passed for the grand version to sound better."

CHAPTER 17

Not a Ceasefire

By the ninetieth day, the pattern had repeated itself, in smaller and less formally documented ways, at no fewer than eleven positions along the Corridor's ninety-kilometer length — Calder abandoning an observation post here, Orsanne declining to reinforce a checkpoint there, neither side announcing any of it as policy, both sides continuing to describe the overall conflict, in every official statement issued by either capital, as an active and ongoing military engagement.

Calder's First Delegate Vantry stood before the Council on the ninetieth day and reaffirmed, in language nearly identical to language she had used on the crisis's opening day, that Calder's territorial claim over the Rellan Corridor remained absolute and non-negotiable.

Orsanne's own political leadership, a Council chaired by First Minister Aldric Senn, issued a nearly mirror-image statement the same week, reaffirming Orsanne's own historical claim in language that could have been produced by the same speechwriter, had either government ever employed the same speechwriter, which they had not, across three centuries, ever once come close to doing.

Both statements were, in the narrowest technical sense, entirely accurate. Neither government had surrendered anything. Neither had signed anything. The military maps both Ministries continued to maintain — the official record of which positions belonged to which side, updated daily by staff whose job existed specifically to maintain exactly this record — still showed a continuous, contested front running the Corridor's full length, exactly as it had shown for as long as either Ministry's current mapping conventions had existed.

The maps had simply, gradually, stopped being an accurate description of where human beings actually stood.

Tomas noticed this discrepancy first in a briefing that struck him, reading it, as almost comically mismatched to itself: the official operational map, projected at the front of the room, showed Calder holding forty-one distinct positions along the frontier. The actual personnel roster, cross-referenced against the same map by an aide who had clearly not expected anyone senior to actually compare the two documents side by side, showed Calder forces physically present at twenty-six of them.

"The other fifteen," Tomas asked. "What's actually there?"

"Automated monitoring only, sir. Same as Greller Ridge. We never formally withdrew designation from the map. The positions are still listed as held."

"Held by whom, exactly, if there's nobody there?"

The aide did not have a satisfying answer to this question, and Tomas did not press for one, because he suspected, with the weary clarity that had become almost routine to him across the preceding three months, that no satisfying answer currently existed anywhere in either government's official vocabulary.

CHAPTER 18

Incident 47

Private Kellan Dray had been activated in the crisis's fourth week, assigned to a supply convoy running the difficult southern approach to what remained of Calder's active frontier, and had, across nine weeks of service, developed a quiet, private pride in a job that involved considerably more driving than fighting and that he had, if he was honest with himself, found less frightening than he'd expected before he'd actually reported for duty.

• • •

Sergeant Yara Delken, who commanded the convoy Dray had spent nine weeks driving for, remembered the morning of the hundred and third day the way she remembered every ordinary morning that preceded something extraordinary: entirely unremarkable, right up until it wasn't.

The crossing at Sennet's Bend had never been contested, as far as her own maps showed it, a routine supply route Calder had used without incident since the crisis's second month. She'd cleared the convoy through the same checkpoint eleven times previously. Dray had driven the second transport in the column each of those eleven times, and had, on the tenth occasion, mentioned to her that he'd started recognizing individual trees along the route, which had struck her at the time as the specific, harmless boredom of a job well-suited to a young man who preferred routine to adrenaline.

The Orsanne reconnaissance element appeared on her convoy's sensors at 0640, two human operators and three automated platforms, moving along what their own maps apparently described as a legitimate patrol route through the same crossing. Neither convoy's presence should have surprised the other. Neither, by any account reconstructed afterward, had.

What happened next took, by the official timeline, four seconds.

Delken would spend considerable time afterward trying to reconstruct those four seconds into something that made emotional sense, and would eventually accept, the way Corporal Tarry had eventually accepted her own unanswerable question about survival, that some sequences of cause and effect simply did not resolve into anything a person could feel settled about, regardless of how many times they were reviewed.

• • •

The engagement that killed him, on the hundred and third day of the crisis, was not large enough to earn any name beyond the administrative designation it received in the after-action log: *Incident 47, Southern Approach*. An Orsanne reconnaissance element, itself reduced to automated platforms and a two-person human escort following the same staffing pressures that had emptied Greller Ridge and Callow Ford, encountered Dray's convoy at a river crossing neither side's current maps agreed was contested territory at all.

Nobody, on either side, intended the engagement. An automated targeting system, responding to a sensor reading it interpreted — incorrectly, as the subsequent investigation would eventually determine — as a hostile weapons lock, engaged first. Dray's transport vehicle took the resulting strike directly. He died before the medical evacuation reached him — one name added to a list that had, by this point in the crisis, grown considerably longer than anyone in either capital found comfortable to look at directly.

His convoy commander filed the report the same evening, in language that matched, almost word for word, dozens of similar reports filed across the preceding three months: an unintentional engagement, automated systems responding to an ambiguous sensor reading, one confirmed fatality, incident under investigation.

Nobody flagged it as historically significant, because nothing about it read as historically significant. It was, by every measure available to anyone present that day, simply one more small tragedy in a long accumulation of small tragedies, indistinguishable in its administrative shape from Sergeant Vray's own opening incident a hundred and three days earlier.

Dray's mother received notification the following morning. In the months afterward, she occasionally wondered aloud to friends whether her son's death had accomplished anything at all. Nobody in her acquaintance had a satisfying answer. There was no reason, then, to imagine his death as different from the others that had preceded it.

CHAPTER 19

Reciprocity

Tomas assembled the pattern formally on the hundred and tenth day, in a private memo he wrote for no audience beyond himself, the same habit of documentation that had, across the preceding months, become the closest thing he had to a confidant.

Greller Ridge, vacated by Orsanne, declined by Calder. Callow Ford, vacated by Calder, declined by Orsanne. Nine further positions along the frontier, emptied by one side or the other across the preceding six weeks, none of them reoccupied by the side that could, in theory, have moved in.

He laid the sequence out chronologically, position by position, and the pattern that emerged, once he could see the whole shape of it rather than each individual decision in isolation, struck him as considerably stranger than any single decision within it.

Neither government had negotiated any of this. Neither trusted the other's restraint enough to rely on it as policy — Calder's official military doctrine, unchanged since the crisis's opening days, still described a strategic environment in which Orsanne might move into any position Calder vacated, and Orsanne's own doctrine described an identical expectation in reverse. And yet, position after position, across eleven separate instances now, that expectation had simply failed to materialize, not through any agreement either side could point to, but through the accumulating fact that both nations, independently, arriving at the same arithmetic by entirely separate routes, had reached the same conclusion about what any given position was actually worth.

He requested a meeting with the Council's senior strategic planning committee and presented the pattern without editorializing, the same way he had learned to present every uncomfortable finding across his career: the facts, laid out plainly, and a question rather than a recommendation.

"I am not asking this committee to formalize a withdrawal," he said. "I am telling this committee that an informal one appears to already be underway, driven by staffing arithmetic rather than policy, and I believe this committee should decide, deliberately, whether to continue treating that arithmetic as an inconvenience to be worked around, or as information relevant to how this conflict is actually being fought."

The committee's response was not a decision. It was, more precisely, a silence — the quality of silence Tomas had come to recognize as a room recalculating everything it believed it understood, arriving slowly, without yet being ready to say so aloud, at a version of the same conclusion he had already reached weeks earlier, alone, in the private file where he kept everything that troubled him without yet having a use for it.

CHAPTER 20

Peacekeeping

The diplomats arrived, formally, on the hundred and twentieth day, a joint commission representing both governments, tasked by a Council resolution neither side had fully expected to pass, with the specific mandate of exploring what the resolution's own careful language described as "mechanisms for reducing unintentional engagement risk along the Rellan frontier."

Nobody called it a peace process. The language available to either government's diplomatic corps had never developed a vocabulary for a de-escalation that involved no treaty, no territorial concession, and no admission by either side that its historical claim had ever been anything other than entirely correct.

The commission's first proposal was, on its face, entirely reasonable: a joint monitoring force, staffed proportionally by both nations, positioned at contested crossing points to prevent exactly the kind of ambiguous automated engagement that had killed Sergeant Denet on day one and Private Dray on day one hundred and three.

Lidia ran the staffing requirements the same afternoon the proposal reached her desk, and found, with an exhaustion that had by this point become close to reflexive, that the peace architecture cost almost exactly as much as the war it was meant to prevent.

"A joint monitoring force at eleven crossing points," she told the commission's Orsanne delegation, "requires two hundred and ten personnel, rotating on a schedule that avoids the same depth problem we've already exhausted ourselves solving twice. I don't have two hundred and ten people to give you. I suspect Calder's equivalent office doesn't either."

"Surely peacekeeping can't cost as much as the actual fighting," the commission's senior Orsanne diplomat said, with the incredulity of a man

encountering, for the first time, an arithmetic that everyone actually running the war had been living inside for months.

"Peacekeeping requires people standing in specific places, watching for specific things, continuously, for as long as the peace needs keeping," Lidia said. "That's not different from war in the way you're hoping it is. It's the same scarce resource, spent on a different justification."

• • •

Tomas received the identical proposal from Calder's own side of the commission the same afternoon, and ran the identical arithmetic, and arrived, within the hour, at an assessment he found himself typing with something uncomfortably close to amusement.

Joint monitoring force, Calder contribution: 105 personnel, rotating.

He read the figure back to Marrow. "We've spent four months trying to find enough people to fight this war. Now the diplomats want us to find a separate hundred and five people to stop fighting it properly."

"Can we do it?"

"We can do it exactly as well as we could do the war itself, Marrow, which is to say: on paper, yes. In the actual country we currently have, no. I don't think anyone drafting that peacekeeping proposal has spent a single day this year looking at an actual staffing table."

"Should I tell them that?"

"Tell them the truth," Tomas said. "It's worked reasonably well for me so far, even when nobody especially wanted to hear it."

The commission's second proposal, presented three days later, scaled the ambition down considerably: automated sensor coverage at the same eleven crossing points, monitored remotely by a skeleton staff of perhaps twenty personnel across both nations combined, with a direct, automated notification protocol between Calder and Orsanne command whenever either side's systems flagged an anomalous reading — the same category of ambiguous sensor event that had, twice now, killed people before any human had the chance to intervene.

This, finally, both governments could actually afford.

The commission finalized the protocol on the hundred and thirty-first day. It was not a ceasefire. It was not a peace agreement. It was, in the driest possible administrative language, a bilateral notification-and-verification mechanism, requiring no territorial concession from either side, generating no treaty either Council would need to defend to its own veterans' associations, accomplishing nothing that either nation's official history would ever describe as historically significant.

It simply meant that the next time an automated system on either side of the line misread a shadow, a human being on both sides would know about it within four seconds, rather than finding out only after someone was already dead.

Nobody signed anything at a ceremony. The protocol activated quietly, at 0600 on the hundred and thirty-second day, and the sensors along the Rellan Corridor began, for the first time in three centuries, actually talking to each other.

• • •

PART V

PEACE

CHAPTER 21

The Maps

The territorial negotiations, when they finally occurred, resolved nothing, and both governments understood, going into them, that resolution was never actually on the table.

Calder's official cartography continued to show the Rellan Corridor as sovereign Calder territory, exactly as it had for three centuries. Orsanne's official cartography continued to show the same ninety kilometers as Orsanne's own. Neither delegation arrived prepared to concede a single meter of the disputed line, and neither delegation's counterpart expected them to.

"We are not here to resolve the boundary," the commission's chair reminded both delegations, on the opening day of talks that both governments had agreed, in advance, to describe publicly as "technical discussions on frontier stability" rather than anything that might imply negotiation over sovereignty itself. "We are here to determine how both nations continue disagreeing about it without killing each other over the disagreement."

Vantr'y's instructions to Calder's delegation were explicit on this point, delivered personally rather than through the usual diplomatic channel. "Concede nothing on the map. I don't care what else you concede. The map stays exactly as it's always been."

Orsanne's First Minister Senn delivered, by every account that reached Tomas's office afterward, an almost identical instruction to his own delegation, in almost identical language, for almost identical reasons — three centuries of accumulated domestic political cost attached to any government that admitted, even implicitly, that its historical claim had ever been anything other than entirely correct.

The talks produced, across six weeks, a framework neither side's official history would ever describe as a peace agreement, because it settled nothing that either government considered itself entitled to settle. Both territorial claims remained exactly as they had always been, printed on two different sets of maps that agreed on almost nothing except the general shape of the river. Both nations retained the legal right, on paper, to contest the boundary indefinitely.

What the framework actually established was smaller, and stranger, and considerably more durable than either delegation had expected going in: a standing agreement that neither government would attempt to permanently garrison any position the other side had vacated, verified not through inspection or treaty enforcement but through the automated notification protocol already quietly running along the frontier, and a secondary provision, almost an afterthought in the final draft, granting the Corridor's remaining local governments — Rellan Cross, Kest Hollow, Callow Ford, a dozen smaller settlements — expanded authority over their own civil administration, on the straightforward grounds that neither national government currently possessed the staffing to administer them intensively regardless of which map happened to be correct.

Mira Halden heard about the framework from Rellan Cross's own newly empowered town council, which had, within a month of the provision taking effect, quietly assumed responsibility for tax collection, school administration, and local infrastructure maintenance that had previously required sign-off from a regional office in a capital most of Rellan Cross's residents had never visited.

"So we govern ourselves now," she told Tobin, over the same fence. "Whatever that turns out to mean."

"Same as we always did, mostly. Just with slightly less paperwork going to slightly fewer places."

"I suppose that's not nothing."

"No," Tobin agreed. "I don't think it's nothing. I just don't think anyone's going to write a very exciting history book about it."

CHAPTER 22

Demobilization

The formal demobilization order reached Calder's reserve forces in stages, across the following two months, timed to the same careful arithmetic that had governed every other decision of the crisis: not all at once, not according to any dramatic ceremony, but role by role, as each civilian system's continuity requirements permitted its borrowed personnel to actually be returned.

There were no parades. Neither government's political culture had much appetite, after four months of a war that had never fully resolved into anything either side could call victory, for the kind of triumphant homecoming that belonged to conflicts with cleaner endings.

Sorin Ket returned to full-time substation duty on the first day of the second demobilization wave, and spent her first morning back simply walking the Halveth facility's control room, checking instruments she had checked ten thousand times before the crisis and found herself, this particular morning, genuinely grateful to be checking again.

Petrin Halworth's activation ended on the same wave, and he spent his first evening home doing nothing more remarkable than sitting at his own kitchen table, across from his daughter, who studied him for a long moment before asking whether he was going to go back to the transit authority job he'd held before any of this started.

"I think so," he said. "I'm fifty-five. I don't imagine there's much appetite for keeping a man my age in uniform longer than the arithmetic strictly requires."

"Are you glad it's over?"

Petrin considered the question with the care of a man who had spent four months thinking harder about exactly this kind of question than he'd expected to at his stage of life. "I don't know that it's over, exactly. I think

it's just become something we're not actively doing to each other anymore, which isn't quite the same thing. But yes. I'm glad to be home. I don't think gladness requires the whole thing to have resolved cleanly first."

Ari Pell's cohort demobilized in the fourth wave, alongside Costa, who shook Ari's hand at the processing center with the gruffness of a man uncomfortable with sentiment and unwilling to let that discomfort stop him from saying something anyway.

"You did the job well," Costa said. "I don't say that to many people your age. Mostly because there aren't many people your age left to say it to."

"Will I see you again?"

"Depends whether this thing flares back up, which I hope to every god I don't believe in that it doesn't. If it does, you'll see me again, because I'll be here, same as I've been here four times already. If it doesn't, I hope you get to spend the rest of your life never finding out whether you'd have shown up a fifth time."

Ari returned to his restoration crew the following Monday, and found, walking the section of riverbank he'd left four months earlier, that the reed grass he'd worried about had not merely survived his absence but had spread, quietly, across a stretch of bank nearly twice the size of what he remembered planting.

Across both nations, in numbers too large for any single account to fully capture, surgeons returned to operating rooms that had spent four months running at reduced capacity. Engineers returned to water systems that had spent four months deferring maintenance they could no longer safely defer much longer. Teachers returned to classrooms. Parents returned to children who had spent four months being raised by whichever relative happened to have the fewest other obligations pulling at them.

The systems that had degraded, slowly, across four months of borrowed and doubled-up personnel, did not recover instantly. Waiting lists took months to shrink back toward their prior length. Deferred maintenance took considerably longer to fully address than it had taken to defer. But the degradation stopped accumulating, and began, gradually, to reverse, and Tomas, reviewing the aggregate infrastructure reports each week across that slow recovery, found himself understanding something he had known

abstractly since his grandmother's death but had never before watched happen in reverse, in real time, across an entire country: that an army, in the end, was never a separate thing from the society that produced it. It was simply that same society, temporarily reassigned, and it could only ever be borrowed for as long as the society itself could afford to go without whatever it had lent.

CHAPTER 23

One Year

No shots were fired along the Rellan Corridor for the full year following the framework's implementation. Nobody declared this a peace. Nobody, in either capital, held a ceremony marking its anniversary, because there was no day either government's calendar had ever agreed constituted the beginning of whatever this actually was. Only in the retrospective casualty review did one administrative fact acquire a significance nobody had recognized when it happened: Incident 47, Southern Approach, remained the final fatal engagement. Kellan Dray's name was the last one added to the list.

Calder's official histories continued to describe the Rellan Corridor as sovereign Calder territory, temporarily subject to what the most recent textbook revision carefully termed "administrative complexity." Orsanne's textbooks described an identical territory in identical terms, reversed. Memorial ceremonies, held on both sides on the anniversary of engagements each nation's own history had chosen to commemorate, continued to describe the other side's historical conduct in language that neither commission, nor framework, nor year of uninterrupted quiet had done anything whatsoever to soften.

Veterans' associations on both sides continued to resent each other with the durable resentment of people who had watched friends die and did not consider a change in staffing arithmetic sufficient grounds for forgiveness. Border communities continued telling their children different histories, in different languages, from different textbooks, none of which agreed on very much beyond the shared, unremarkable fact that a war had once been fought here, for reasons that had changed so many times across three centuries that naming the current reason accurately had become almost beside the point.

Tomas still believed, a full year later, that Calder's territorial claim over the Corridor was the correct one. He had examined the historical record as thoroughly as any person in either country's government, and he had not found, in any of that examination, a single fact that changed his assessment of who actually held the stronger legal or historical argument. He simply no longer believed that being correct entitled a nation to unlimited human resources in defense of the correctness.

Three hundred kilometers away, Lidia held the mirror-image belief with, as far as either of them would ever have occasion to discover, precisely equal conviction.

Neither government had rebuilt Greller Ridge. Neither had reoccupied Callow Ford. The eleven positions abandoned across the crisis's active months remained abandoned, not through any renewed agreement but through the same continuously reconfirmed arithmetic that had emptied them in the first place — every annual defense review, on both sides of the border, running the same calculation, and arriving, every single year, at the same answer.

Doing so would require people. Neither country had found any that it could spare for the purpose, and neither, across the full year, had found the purpose itself growing any more urgent than it already wasn't.

CHAPTER 24

The Position

Tomas visited Sector Nine himself, on the first anniversary of Sergeant Vray's original incident, for reasons he did not entirely explain to Marrow when he requested the transport, and would not have been able to fully explain to himself either, had anyone pressed him on it.

The ridge looked exactly as it had looked for as long as anyone's memory extended: scrub grass, low stone, a river running its usual thin color of weak tea. The border markers, repainted so many times that the metal beneath showed through in patches, stood exactly where they had always stood. A single automated sensor mast, part of the notification protocol now running the Corridor's full length, rotated its patient, continuous sweep against a sky doing nothing more dramatic than being an ordinary autumn sky.

A maintenance vehicle crossed the old boundary road while Tomas stood there, driven by a technician from the regional utility cooperative, hauling replacement parts for a transformer somewhere on what both nations' maps agreed, at least, was the general vicinity of the correct side of the line. The vehicle did not slow at the crossing. There was, at this point, nothing there requiring it to.

Tomas watched it pass, and thought of nothing in particular, and eventually got back into his own transport and returned to his office, where the year's final readiness projection sat waiting on his desk, exactly as it did every autumn.

He reviewed it the way he reviewed every readiness projection, category by category, until he reached the line item that had, for as long as he had held his current position, always carried the largest single personnel allocation on the entire document.

RELLAN CONTINGENCY.

Personnel allocation: 0.

Not because the dispute was resolved. Not because the threat assessment had reached zero, or ever would. Because no mobilization plan existed, this year or any year Tomas's office could currently construct, that improved Calder's actual survival more than leaving those people exactly where they already were.

He signed the projection, and closed the file.

Across the Corridor, Orsanne had done the same.

No one replaced them.