

Rattenkrieg

Chapter 1: Bojt

They said that Tab was one lucky rat, but he struggled to imagine why as the canvas-topped truck jostled through the night. Gouts of flame and terrible roars broke the still summer night, the sound of dueling artillery pieces a constant reminder that the war was here, and that it was close. Night bombers blanketed the landscape in destruction in a sound like distant popcorn, and anti-aircraft guns answered in staccato bursts.

He turned to his left and right, looking at the fellow passengers jammed onto the benches. Back in the city there were always agitators saying that Patkani lives were just being thrown away by the tens of thousands, how the Union and its allies were trying to douse the fires of war with their seared flesh. He'd always thought of such statements as agitation and enemy propaganda, but now that he was on the way to battle and couldn't see a single Dwarf in this whole convoy he wasn't so certain.

The Patkani had been enslaved by the Dwarves long ago, but Dwarves had also been their liberators, and even welcomed them into their cities. True, they were poor, downtrodden, even victims at times, but Tab knew that nothing was ever so simple that it could be summarized in a war slogan or poster. Yes, he was a draftee, and yes, it was partly because he tried to stand up for his rights as a worker and gotten fired, but this country was his home, his parents' home, his grandparents' home... And he'd heard stories about what the enemy was doing to Patkani they captured. Better to have an explosion blast his body to shreds than to die starving in the bowels of some mountain.

Tab felt a hand rest on his shoulder. He turned to his neighbor, a big, brown-furred lug with half a tail and a nasty scar running down his muzzle and face. He wore his kettle helm low over his face, obscuring his eyes. Tab thought he was asleep.

"Relax, buck. The hard stuff's leagues away, and the close stuff is just thunder."

"How can you tell?" Tab asked nervously.

"Cause I've been there, been right on top of it."

As if to verify his claim, the clouds gathered and dumped a torrent of rain on the convoy, a chilly mist cutting through his serge uniform jacket and straight to the bones of his wiry, skinny, black-furred

body. Most of the Patkani troops wore khaki serge jackets, marking them out as infantry, but Tab's jacket was dark blue: Tank crew. He tried to keep his head down to avoid the resentful stares of his comrades, who wouldn't have the protection afforded by a thick armored carapace when things got bad. They clutched combat rifles in their rosy-skinned, clawed hands, heavy and obsolete bolt-action models that would never have been considered acceptable for Dwarven frontline units.

The infantrymen pulled some rubberized ponchos from their packs and slipped them on, quickly making Tab envy them instead. He'd practically been shoved onto this truck as an afterthought and his gear was on another transport, presumably. He crossed his arms and shivered as water splashed in from the front and back. Well, at least the air was refreshing.

This region was no stranger to rain, the roads metalled with coarse gravel to let the water drain through and prevent the roads from becoming a boggy mush. Though slowed, the convoy grimly lurched forward and the rain kept pouring until they reached the Fourth Armored Division staging ground. An increasing density of empty trucks opposed their path to the combat zone: Every single vehicle would be needed for transport or logistics, and soon. Tad climbed out of the back of the truck, his boots immediately submerged in a giant puddle. Always trying to look on the bright side of things, he could now say that his feet were as wet as the rest of him.

After several minutes of jostling and bustling the Patkani infantry filed off, leaving him with no answers on where the tanks were. He also frantically sought his rucksack and finally saw it in the back of one of the only trucks that was leaving the staging area. He chased after it for a few steps, but couldn't pick up any speed with such soaked pants and boots.

"Damn it! Grrr... Positive thoughts, Tab. At least you don't have all this stuff to carry around!"

Resigned to his loss, he continued his search for information and finally got a straight answer from the third sentry he asked. He slogged his way through the darkness and rain for a good kilometer before arriving at the village of Poole. He'd expected a garage or guarded cantonment with imposing armored fighting vehicles mutely sitting shoulder to shoulder. Instead, he found a scattering of tanks parked along the village streets, and fewer of them than he expected. He'd seen these kinds of tanks in the newsreels... The ones from three years ago. A Dwarf night sentry stopped him as he approached, then demanded to see his papers. Tab reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out something floppy and completely illegible.

"Er... Can't make sense of any of it. Let's get you to Company HQ and get sorted. I'll have to confiscate your weapons, though. You understand."

"I haven't got any, my gear's on some truck going the wrong way. If you see it, feel free to shoot it for desertion."

The sentry beamed, "That's pretty good, I'll have to remember that. C'mon, follow me."

"You're not going to throw me to the ground, pat me down, yank my tail, and rub my nose in the mud for good measure?"

"Nah, your kind's fine by me. The Dominion would have to be damned desperate to start taking on Patkani as infiltrators. Besides, soap's scarce enough as it is without making you lot even filthier. Let's go."

The Company Headquarters was a rustic farmhouse on the outskirts of town, complete with an old thatch roof. Through the pipe smoke and dim light he faintly saw Dwarf officers casually regarding him, but he also caught the telltale, big-eared silhouette of at least one Patkani officer. A radio set sat in the corner, its console dimly lit, but only one operator managed the chatter. Tad felt like he was interrupting a solemn vigil.

"Was there something you needed, Private?"

Tad put on his best salute, flinging water directly into the Captain's pipe and dousing it. Tad tried and failed to hold down a mortified look.

"S-Sir, Private Second Class Tab Horvath reporting for duty, sir!"

The spectacled, elaborately mustached captain regarded him coolly, blowing a bubble through his drenched pipe as if this impertinent private hadn't just killed his buzz.

"Ferenc, I believe this one's yours."

The Patkani officer got to his feet, revealing the subdued Lieutenant bar pinned to the chest of his tank commander's jacket. He was tall and lean. His left ear sliced but the rest of his face was

unscarred. He had white fur around his eyes, nose, and neck, the rest framed in black. He carried an expression of effortless amusement except for slightly tired green eyes.

“Thanks, captain. You won’t regret this! Private Horvath, I’m Lieutenant Molnar, but I absolutely insist you just call me Ferenc for the duration you’re in my platoon, which starts now. If you’ll follow me.”

“Er, yes, Ferenc.”

“Good, good,” He paused theatrically after passing Tad. “Oh, and you can stop with the saluting. Snipers love salutes, and the Dominion have some cracking good shots.”

Ferenc hummed to himself and had a curiously jaunty step, looking up expectantly at the sky. The rain was dwindling now and stars were beginning to punch through the dense cloud cover.

“Ah, right on schedule,” Ferenc said to no one in particular. “Chip chip charoo...”

He passed by a tank crewman carrying a crate of empty wine bottles from a barn. Tab peeked inside to see and hear a crew of slurred, singing Patkani tankers who were, well, tanked.

“Sergeant Nagy, I hope you’re maintaining strict operational discipline in there and not getting intoxicated.”

“Of course, Ferenc. This stuff? It’s just grape juice.” The sergeant leaned in closer to Ferenc, “Well, it was two years ago.”

Ferenc smiled, “Chase it down with purified water. Not rainwater! Remember what happened last time.”

“Yeah, who could forget that smell? The Dominion did us a favor blowing up that tank. Did the tank a favor, too, come to think of it.”

Tad honestly couldn't tell that the tank he was looking at was a replacement. It seemed to be a holdout from the last war and had all kinds of accoutrements bolted to it that didn't lend it a flattering silhouette. The parts of the hull not covered by add-ons had visible cracks that had been welded shut, gaping holes that had been plugged, and scorch marks that could never be scrubbed clean. The running gear could only be described as clean, but ragged. He was grateful to have the protection of a steel beast like this one, but it was so old and scarred... What was holding this thing together?

"Ah, right, introductions! Private Tab, this is Staff Sergeant Zoltan, his crew, and his beast: Steve."

Tab blinked, "Steve? Your tank's named Steve?"

Sergeant Zoltan set down the bottle crate, pumped up his chest, and put his fists to his side, a bit peeved.

"I see that look of jealousy, private. Indeed, it is tough to imagine a name that inspires more fear and wonder than Steve. Steve! Hear that terrible whoop echoing through the mountains! Hear the enemy divisions all emptying their bowels simultaneously, in terror!"

"He named it Steve on a bet," Ferenc whispered to Tab, then turned back to the big sergeant. "Keep her happy, Zoltan."

"She'd feel a lot better with a replacement bogey. I'm feeling particularly courageous today, let's make that two replacement bogeys!"

"Of course. Would you like them carved out of stone or wood?"

Tab couldn't hold back his curiosity, "What's a bogey?"

Zoltan turned to him, grinned, then to Ferenc, then burst into throaty laughter.

"Oh, Ilona's going to like this one!"

“Right, Tab, let’s acquaint you with your tank and crew. This way, private.”

They continued through the village, passing two more tanks and crews that seemed to be happy at the sight of their lieutenant. He’d heard lots of horror stories about junior officers, their naivete, their pettiness, and their profligate use of men’s lives in the pursuit of military glory. Maybe dumb luck had landed him with one that was tolerable?

They approached another tank, the same model as Steve and the others. He suddenly remembered the name: Gallowglass. In the very limited instruction he’d received, he learned that this was an early war allied model, enough to understand its silhouette and not shoot at it by accident, provided he ever even got close to the main gun. A name had carefully been painted to the hull: Bojt.

“Botched?”

“Hmm?”

Tad pointed out the name, “Is that how you pronounce it?”

Ferenc sighed, pressing a palm to his face, “Oh, not you too... It’s pronounced ‘Boit’. It’s the mother tongue, means ‘alacrity’.”

Tad nodded, “Good name... But why not just call her Alacrity?”

“Because we’re not Dwarves. If you haven’t seen that yet, you will,” He paused, remembering something. “I... think it’s best to leave this topic be. I was indiscreet.”

Bojt stood in front of a barn, inside of which was a rustic wooden banquet table smothered in aerial photographs, weather reports, kidney-shaped canteen cups, and empty ration tins. Tab saw three figures in the light of a single floodlamp. One of the biggest brown Patkani bucks he’d ever seen was seated at the end of the table emptying a bottle of sauce on a plate of food. Opposite him and directly under the light was a pretty, mousy blond doe wearing a mechanic’s boiler suit and a bandanna. It looked like she’d disassembled an entire radio set and was picking through the wires, bringing one to her rodent incisors and chomping through it, making a clean cut with a gentle ‘twang’. At the side of the table was a slim brown Patkani with black hair slicked and combed, as well as a carefully maintained thin

pencil mustache running down the sides of his muzzle and a cigarette hanging from his mouth. He looked like a movie star, or, at least, he would if they'd ever cast a Patkani in a leading role, which was damned unlikely.

"Crew, this is Private Horvath, goes by Tab. He's our new Assistant Driver and Bow Gunner!"

The mustached brown buck approached first, shaking Tab's hand, "Sergeant Victor Hazy, Vic for short. I'm the gunner, and the junior member of the crew until you came along. Every now and again I hit things too. This is my third tank and my sixth crew, so I've got sergeant stripes."

"What happened to the other five? Crews, I mean," Tab asked.

"Number 1 drowned in a botched river crossing. Number 2 got cooked up with the ammo when I was riding up top. Number 3 deserted after abandoning me thinking I was bad luck, then got court martialed and shot. Number 4... You get the idea. The point is I'm one slippery, gymnastic bastard with uncanny luck."

The big buck approached Tab next, shaking his hand with a strong grip, but what surprised him was decorative red nail varnish on his claws.

"Corporal Alexa Szabo, loader. I've been with the Bojt for over a year. If it holds ammo, I can show you where it is and load it with my eyes closed, though I'm a little faster with my eyes open. I can sustain 30 rounds a minute... but only for about three minutes, cause then we're out of ammo."

"Nice to meet you, Alexis."

"Alexa," Vic corrected. "She goes by Alexa."

"She?" Tab looked at the corporal, with their powerful upper body and clear physical masculinity. Still, he didn't want to make enemies, smiling awkwardly. "A pleasure, Miss Alexa."

Alexa seemed to warm to that, "Thank you."

Tab turned to the doe, and shook her hand. It was amazingly firm for her petite size, and he saw stubborn grease stains all over her pink hands.

“Specialist Ilona Laski, I’m the driver. I’ve known Ferenc for about 34 months and been on, in, or under Bojt for 28 of them.”

“34 months?” Tab ran through the math in his head, “Doesn’t that mean the lieutenant was there at the beginning of the war?”

“Not just there, he was in the eye of the storm. He escaped with the handful that broke through the encirclement at Rossko. I was a civilian trapped with the 400,000 troops but snuck out in the night and joined the refugees. A lot of people died to give us that chance. The rest of the story I save for those who earn it. Tell me, how many hours do you have behind the wheel?”

“Ilona, we’ve gone over this. We don’t haze crew members anymore, it’s a waste of time,” Vic crossed his arms.

“How many?” Ilona insisted.

Tab gritted his teeth, anxious and isolated. He knew that he had to tell her the truth and how she’d feel about it. And he was right.

“Four hours.”

“And how many of those hours were actual driving and not simulation?”

“Two.”

Ilona took a long, hostile look at Ferenc, Vic, and Alexa, but she didn’t needle Tab. Instead, she continued the interview.

“Do you have any experience with vehicles prior to basic training?”

"I was a deliveryman."

"And your vehicle? Was it a truck?"

"No, a motorcycle with a sidecar."

"So you've driven a tank for two hours, and the rest of your motorized experience is on two-wheelers. Do I have that right?"

"Ilona, seriously, that's enough," Alexa chimed in.

"No, Alexa, this is not enough. We spend a month waiting for a replacement and HQ sends us someone with almost no training? If I get hit in there, if I die in there, your lives will be in this one's hands until you get a new driver. If you get a new driver."

"If it comes down to it, I can drive," Vic said. "We're all cross-trained here, enough to get out of a bind. Alexa knows her way around the gun now and Tab can help her out."

"Ugh, that's not the point," Ilona turned around, walking back to the dismantled radio. "We're just replacement parts to them. One dies, so they swap another in and pretend it's the same. Keep doing it again and again and the machine lives forever... or dies a thousand times over."

There was an uncomfortable silence, with Ferenc clearing his throat.

"Ahem... Well, that's the crew of the Bojt. Welcome home, Tab!"

The reality suddenly sank in. Tab wasn't just the Bow Gunner for one of the tanks in Ferenc's platoon. He was in the command tank, occupying a place beside a highly veteran crew. He should have been honored, but instead he found himself petrified. No one had ever expected much of him, and now he'd have these veterans' lives in his hands.

Tab felt a hefty slap on his shoulder, "Come on, new guy, let's get you acquainted with Bojt. Bring your bedroll, new guy always spends a night in the tank. It's a tradition."

"Yeah, about that... I lost track of my things."

"Oh... well, we have straw in here!"

Tab was unbelievably tired and sore after a long, cold, wet night in the back of a bumpy lorry, and wouldn't even mind sleeping on a rock at this point.

"I'll make do without."

"Well, it's your preference. Bojt doesn't have a lot of creature comforts or padding."

Alexa climbed onto the sloped glacis plate at the front of Bojt, extending a hand so Tab could climb up. The normally smooth surface had two road wheels affixed to it as well as several rows of spare track, giving the Bojt just a little extra frontal protection. On top of that was a row of sandbags that Alexa got a firm footing on. The muscular... lady easily hauled him up with one arm, bringing him before two hatches near the roof.

"First, we have the driver's hatch on the left and the loader's hatch on the right. We keep these open most of the time, but when bullets are inbound we button them up. No arguing the point."

"Does the Bow Gunner have a hatch?"

"You get to choose! I recommend following Ilona out the driver's hatch, I have big shoulders, so it takes me a while. There's also a hatch in the floor, but that's no one's favorite. Supposing the engine is damaged or on fire and the tank's still moving, it will cover whoever's underneath the tank in burning fuel as it passes over, which isn't fun. Not from personal experience, of course, but I have seen others try it."

"What about Vic and the Lieutenant? I mean, Ferenc."

“There are two hatches on top of the turret, see? The commander gets the one on the left, and sometimes a lucky infantryman rides in the other one to give us some extra eyes. We might ask you to come up here sometimes as well.”

As Alexa lifted the hatch and climbed in, Tab couldn't hold back his curiosity any longer.

“Corporal Alexa? Did you... always go by Alexa?”

“No. Not long ago, before I got drafted, I was Alexis.”

Tab got a little angry. He'd heard stories about this, people who pretended that they were insane in order to get removed from armed service. He didn't like his chances if this brewed up into an argument, but he had to know, so he gathered his courage.

“Do you pretend to be a doe because you're going for a medical discharge?”

Alexa laughed at this, beefy torso still sticking out of the hatch.

“You're forward, kid, but be careful with your phrasing.”

Alexa prepared to descend, but Tab interrupted him again.

“Alexa, you heard what Vic said. We can't waste time with secrets. A battle could be underway at any moment. I just want to know the people I'm fighting alongside.”

Alexa thought for a moment, then shrugged, “Initially, yes. I wasn't jazzed about putting my life on the line for people that wouldn't spit on me if I were on fire. After the first battle, that feeling intensified. I sought a way out, started dressing and acting like a doe, tried to call attention to my clear insanity, but it didn't work.”

“So... If it failed, why continue doing it?”

“Because I realized I enjoyed it. I liked the way I felt in makeup, and even though it was just jokes at first I liked the attention. Ever since, I’ve been keeping an eye out for cosmetics not because I want to be ejected from duty, but because I feel more complete, more at ease with them on. I felt better imagining myself as a doe than a buck, and that realization shocked me more than anyone. Not everyone accepts the new me, but this crew does, and now that you’re part of it you need to understand that.”

“Does that mean you’re no longer trying to get out of the service?”

“Not that way, at least. Don’t get me wrong, I love this crew and I even love this pile of scrap, but the minute my enlistment is up I’m climbing on the fastest thing moving away from the warzone and I’m not coming back. I got a lot of beauty sleep to catch up on.”

Alexa descended into the belly of the beast, beckoning Tad to follow him after a few moments. Tad planted his hands on either side of the loader’s hatch and lowered himself into the darkness. He sought something to plant his feet on as he got lower and lower but couldn’t find anything. Suddenly, a fierce hiss emerged from inside the tank, and in a panic he slipped and fell in, banging his head on something on the way down.

As his eyes adjusted he turned to see Alexa holding something big and furry in his arms, something with vivid stripes and glowing, almond-shaped green eyes. Tad felt an instinctive terror wash over him as the creature climbed out of Alexa’s arms and perched itself atop one of the ammo boxes, back arched high and fur standing on end.

“Diesel, this is Tad, our newest crew member. Be nice.”

“There’s a cat living in your tank,” Tad trembled. “A very big cat.”

Tad looked up at the feline, who seemed to be settling down, relaxing and laying on the box. Something very ancient inside of him panicked, causing his heart to race and his breathing to pick up, but he slowly got it under control and reached out a hand toward Diesel.

“Does your cat scratch?”

“No.”

Tad’s hand inched closer to Diesel, who reached out and swiped at him in the blink of an eye, raking its claws against the offending finger and nearly drawing blood. Tad recoiled, stumbling backward and landing on a bench. He gave a stinging, betrayed look to Alexa.

“I thought you said your cat doesn’t scratch!”

“Diesel is not my cat,” Alexa grinned. “He’s Ilona’s.”

“So I’m to sleep in here with that switchblade in a fur coat stalking around?”

“This is his house and you’re a visitor. He doesn’t like grumpy people, so relax a bit!”

Alexa stood up, handing Tab a pillow and a rough woolen blanket.

“Try to get some sleep, Tab. We’ll sort out a cot for you tomorrow, but the bench you’re sitting on is the best seat in the house and, coincidentally, your duty station.”

Alexa extended a hand. Tab wasn’t enthused, but he took it anyway. Alexa smiled warmly.

“Welcome to the crew.”

Once Alexa left, Tab’s curled up on the padded bench and pulled his tail up toward his chest to keep it warm, holding his hands around it beneath the blanket. His mind went to his soaked clothes, the not so little beast stalking around in the darkness, and the grim realization that he was likely sleeping in the spot where his predecessor was killed. Despite all of this, his fatigue got the best of him and pulled him into the dreamy abyss.