

Requisition Mission

by C. P. Boyko

Florze wanted to put together a requisition detail. Lieutenant Farl, washing his hands and face with ashes from the cookfire, paused to consider. They were currently bivouacked in a hangar on the outskirts of Lucallzo, towards which they had been marching without sleep for two days. But more than exhaustion, the platoon—the entire company—felt frustration. The siege that had been expected to last days and cost countless lives was over in hours, before they even arrived. Thus the purpose of all their exertion, sacrifice, and nerve had been negated by the fleeing enemy. No counterattack was anticipated. Meanwhile, the supply column was at least a day behind, rations were scarce as ever, and many of the troops had abandoned every nonessential item on the road. Nothing would be better for morale than a good looting; but looting had been prohibited. It was going to be a long war yet, and they could not afford to alienate the medipodeans. Some soldiers in the Fifty-Ninth had even been shot for slaughtering a cow.

He told Florze to go ahead, but to restrict herself to whatever rations the enemy had left behind. —“But won’t they be poisoned, sir?” —“I doubt it. We caught them with their pants down. Bring Narran along to translate, so there are no misunderstandings with the locals. And I know our medics are short on morphine, bandages, and, um, antifatigue pills.” Farl had taken his last antifatigue pill five hours earlier, just before hearing that their attack was canceled. He was already feeling frazzled. “Ask Doc Tzu if there’s anything else she needs, and try to solicit some donations from a hospital or clinic, or another company’s aid station.” He gave Florze a score of blank and signed requisition chits, and wished her luck. “Be back by dawn.”

Despite the lieutenant’s blessing, Florze had difficulty finding helpers. Those who were not asleep were suspicious. “We’re not supposed to loot,”

said Tolb. —“We’re not. We’re requisitioning.” —“What’s the difference?” —“We’re not taking, we’re borrowing.” —“I don’t think we’re supposed to borrow, either.” —Florze scoffed. “And we’re not supposed to belch, either. —“I’ll pass,” said Tolb. “Bring me back something nice.”

Vrail was erasing the answers from the foxed pages of the platoon’s one crossword-puzzle book; Florze decided not to interrupt this delicate operation. Montazo and Burnok were again debating whether tracers had a different trajectory from normal rounds; Florze invited neither, not wanting to risk bringing along the argument too. Winurhtry was tinkering with a dud grenade; Florze kept her distance. She would have liked to ask Sergeant Costitch, who appeared to be awake and idle, but she was intimidated by the woman’s rank, soldierly competence, and self-assurance. Laskantan was amusing herself and a few others with “psychological tactics”: gibbering suprapodean-sounding nonsense into a captured enemy radio. Though no one could understand the aggressors’ replies, their anger and bewilderment were plain, and hilarious.

Raof did not want to go; she preferred to stay hungry. She believed in a cosmic balance of pleasures and pains, and her secret strategy for survival was to remain as unhappy and uncomfortable as possible, so as not to make herself a target for nemesis. This self-denial, coupled with a natural pessimism, had made of her a surly anchorite. When cold, she refrained from wearing more clothing; she waited a week to read letters from home, by which time they were soiled almost to illegibility; no matter how thirsty, she never emptied her canteen completely; and though always ravenous, she always denied herself the last bite of every meal—and would have denied herself the first, more delicious bite, if that were possible. That afternoon, she had not even permitted herself to feel relief that the attack had been called off.

Finally, Culverson, one of the pukes, agreed to come. Though exhausted, she could not sleep; her body seemed still to be marching whenever she closed her eyes. She hoped that there would be trouble, for she had not yet been in a real, close firefight. Boorq, too, was eager to try the .31-caliber automatic rifle she had stolen piecemeal from Thirty-Second Company and

lugged all the way here. Godbeer wanted to decline, for malnutrition had made her night-blind; but she thought this condition was psychosomatic and best treated with courageous disdain. They all armed themselves heavily, to Florze's disquiet.

Narran was in her sleeping bag but not quite sleeping. Since being deafened by an artillery shell three days earlier, she had spent most of her time inside the bag, and had even wrapped it around her shoulders on the march. With her hearing gone, her skin, and especially her hands and face, had become extraordinarily sensitive, almost painfully so. A breeze now felt like ice-water, walking on gravel was like chewing glass, and shaving her head made her skull reverberate with a noise like tearing canvas. At the moment she was half dreaming, half hallucinating that her hunger was a redoubtable enemy position, that the pinpricks of sweat breaking out on her back were badly aimed shells, and that the glimmers of firelight coming through the sleeping bag's seams and zipper were falling flares and rising anti-aircraft rounds. It took Florze a few moments to rouse her, and she remained befuddled even as she got her gear together; she never felt quite fully awake anymore. She assumed that they were going on a reconnaissance or prisoner patrol. She too took all the ammunition she had.

Doc Tzurakin had gone into town to help at a forward aid station, but they found a medic who told them what was needed. "Ethyl chloride, if you can find any, or any anesthetic, and hydrogen peroxide, or any good disinfectant." She spelled *ethyl chloride* and *hydrogen peroxide*, while Florze watched spellbound as she sprinkled maggots into a soldier's open wound. "Don't drink all the ethyl chloride on the way back," she teased. "And don't drink any of the hydrogen peroxide," she added, seriously.

They escaped the buzzing confusion of camp and began the descent into Lucallzo. After weeks of huddling in wet trenches and frozen dugouts, tramping through fields and forests, and sleeping in barns and basements, they would have found any large town magical. But the sight of Lucallzo was breathtaking, like something out of a dream, or history. Lit only by sporadic fires whose clouds of smoke were made more garish by sunset, its thousands of exotic buildings and structures carpeted the hills around a little glowing

mirror of lake. All this was open and available to them. They had to restrain themselves from running.

In the air were stone dust, the ammoniac smell of cordite, and a delicious aroma of roasting meat. Godbeer's stomach turned, slightly, when they passed a team of soldiers with flamethrowers who were spraying heaps of rubble with jellied gasoline. They were burning the buried bodies before they could start to stink. This was, she supposed, preferable to waiting till the bodies had begun to rot before burning them. Hard luck for anyone still alive under that rubble, though.

Down one dim street, Boorq spotted children kicking a ball and laughing; down another, she saw adults standing around in small groups, as if gossiping on market day. She was disgusted. "Don't they know there's a fucking war going on?"

At a makeshift roadblock of furniture, an MP captain asked their unit and destination. He could not direct them to any hospitals or aid stations, but pride in his work, inflated by a long day of chaos and danger, pressed him to offer some advice. "Hug the walls," he said. "Half the resistance we met here was from local snipers, and we haven't by any means flushed all of them out." They thanked him, and with rifles at high port, continued in single file along one side of the street, gazing up uneasily at the buildings on the opposite side.

Boorq was now angry and incredulous, and looked at the civilians in the street differently. Florze was confused and dismayed. Local snipers? Didn't they realize her army had come to liberate their town from the aggressors? Godbeer began seeing, or imagining that she saw, hostile faces at windows. Narran, who had heard nothing the MP said, deduced from her comrades' behavior that the town was still teeming with the enemy. Culverson felt an urge, as inexorable as peristalsis, to fire her weapon.

They entered a wide promenade lit at intervals by burning trees. There were more soldiers here, and they felt safer. From one grandiose hotel there escaped flashes of electric light, the thrum of generators and music, and the smell of frying fish. But a glance inside revealed that only officers were being served here. The sight of so many commanders gathered in one place was

tactically repugnant to them, and they hurried from it.

They were turned away at the door of another hotel by a private made truculent by guard duty; she too would have preferred to be inside and eating. “This is for Twenty-Second Artillery Company only,” she said. “Find your own rations.”

“Come on,” said Boorq, and led them down a side street of shops and apartment buildings. “There,” she said, pointing up at a window that flickered with what might have been candlelight or might have been the reflection of distant fires. “That’s as good as an invitation.” Finding the front door locked, she tried the next building, and then the next. —“We’re not supposed to bother the locals,” said Florze. —“Who’s bothering anybody?” muttered Boorq. She began hammering the door with the butt of her rifle and shouting the medipodean word for “enter.”

Culverson, surprising even herself, fired a round into the plate-glass shopfront. Narran started at the sound and also let off a burst. “What the fuck!” cried Florze. Some shards fell tinkling to the ground, but the window did not shatter. —“Sorry,” said Culverson. “I heard a shot.” Indeed, they had been hearing the sporadic crackle of small-arms fire all night, from afar. —“Come on,” Boorq laughed. “Let’s get out of here before we get arrested.” —Culverson, realizing that she was still squeezing the trigger, released it with an effort. —“What happened?” said Narran, shuffling after them.

They walked downhill into a less affluent neighborhood. Night had now fallen, and the town was so silent that they could hear a truck being started miles away, could even track its course through the streets. Boorq stopped suddenly, punched Narran’s arm, and pointed at some figures lurking in the shadows. “Ask them where we can find some food.” —Narran slowly aimed her rifle at the group. —“What the fuck!” cried Florze, batting it down. —Narran was flustered. “I thought you said to cover them.” —The figures, meanwhile, sputtered “Friend, friend!” and scurried away into the darkness. Boorq, like a predator provoked by the flight of its prey, sent a careless burst of automatic fire after them. The noise and power of her new weapon was intoxicating, but she noted that the muzzle had a tendency to rise. She tried

again with the weapon turned sideways, and now achieved a satisfying horizontal spray of bullets. Godbeer also fired a few shots, equally harmlessly. —“What the fuck,” groaned Florze.

Boorq thumped her on the shoulder and gestured at the nearest apartment block. “Come on,” she said. “Let’s reap the rewards of gratitude for ridding their neighborhood of collaborators.”

The door was unlocked, but feebly barricaded by an overturned armoire. They pushed past this into a dark, close stairwell, in which only Narran felt more comfortable. Florze clapped her hands and shouted, “Friends, friends!” Culverson produced a red-tinted flashlight, which was supposed to preserve one’s night vision, but which probably only achieved this effect by emitting little light. Boorq squeezed Narran’s elbow, and gestured her up the stairs first, because she spoke the language. Godbeer, unable to see anything, came last, gripping Florze’s tunic.

On the first landing, Boorq knocked politely at a door. “Friends,” said Florze. The doorknob turned immediately, but there was a long pause before the door was pulled open.

A stooped and wizened man stood clutching a candle in one hand, and in the other a bedsheet whose symbolism he had forgotten. The five soldiers pointed their five rifles at his chest.

He raised his arms. “We haven’t got much, but of course you’re welcome to anything you can find . . .” —“Shut up,” cried Boorq. To Narran she said, “Tell him we’re hungry. Ask him if he’s got any food.” —Florze muttered that they weren’t supposed to loot. —“All right, ask him if he wants to *give* us any food.” —The old man said, “There’s no need for guns. It’s just my wife and our grandson and I and we’re all unarmed. We’ll cooperate, of course . . .” —“Clip the gabble,” said Boorq. She nudged Narran. “Ask him!” —Narran, who thought she was being ordered to shoot, whimpered, “He’s just an old man.” —Boorq pushed the door farther open with her toe. “Ask him if there are any snipers here. Ask him if he’s shot anybody today.” —Another door on the landing opened or closed behind them; Culverson wheeled around. “Don’t move!” —“I can’t see shit,” said Godbeer. “I’m lighting a heat tablet.” —“Guys,” said Florze, “this was supposed to be

my detail.” —A woman’s voice called out from within the apartment. “For God’s sake, Solley, don’t block the door or you’ll give them an excuse to shoot you.” —The old man staggered back a few steps. —“Who was that?” said Boorq. “Who else is here?” She asked Narran, “What did she say?” —“Narran!” cried Culverson from the landing. “Tell these people to come out here with their hands visible and no clever stuff.” —Boorq said, “What are you doing? We got our hands full with this situation in here.” —“Oh God,” moaned the woman, as Godbeer began striking matches. “They’re going to burn us down.” —“What the fuck did she say?” —Narran lowered her rifle with resigned defiance. “Fuck you, Boorq. You’re not my sergeant. You do it.” —“What are you talking about? I don’t speak the fucking language!” —From a higher floor came a child’s scream: “Go away! There are no bad people here!” To the jumpy soldiers, this sounded like a war cry. —Now Godbeer managed to light the heat tablet, and the stairwell began to fill with smoke and suffocating fumes, which caused her eyes to water and blinded her further. More doors opened and closed, and more voices were heard. —“Guys,” said Florze, “come on.”

“Hello,” called a voice. “You are for wanting the booze, okay? I will show you for where to finding the booze.” The owner of the voice descended the stairs slowly with his hands held out before him. His undershirt and baggy pants, his receding hair, and his cumbrous, accented infrapodean reminded Culverson of her father; she lowered her rifle in distaste.

His offer, as it was translated and circulated among his neighbors, prompted a flurry of protest. That afternoon, the fleeing suprapodeans had urged the local populace, by radio announcement and handbill, to destroy all stocks of liquor, because there was no knowing what atrocities the barbarous and bloodthirsty invaders might commit if under the influence of alcohol. The man in the undershirt did not doubt this characterization any more than his neighbors did, or indeed than the propagandists who had in good faith broadcast it. But he did not care what these soldiers did outside this building, where his children were; and he hoped that a gesture of goodwill might placate the new occupiers, drunk or not. For the past year, he had been meticulously courteous to the suprapodeans, and they had never given

him cause to regret it.

“Booze, okay,” said Florze, matching her diction to her interlocutor’s. “But food, too, okay. More okay.” —“Okay,” said the man in the undershirt. “Food and booze okay. I’m for showing you. You will for following me.” —“Hey, Boorq,” said Florze. “Come on. This guy’s taking us to get some food.”

Boorq did not like to leave without having requisitioned something. Her gaze flailed about in the gloom; at last she snatched the bedsheet from the old man’s grasp, tossed a requisition chit onto the floor, and hurried down the stairs after her comrades. (Later that night, after much deliberation, the old couple wrote in the chit’s blank, “Twelve loaves of bread”—and added it to the stack of other IOUs, which they supposed were now worthless.) In the street, Boorq saw that it was just an ordinary bedsheet, and tossed it in the gutter.

With solicitous backward glances, the man in the undershirt led them down winding streets to the former police station. He halted on the far curb, gestured at the building enticingly, and explained that until a few hours ago it had served as a barracks and warehouse for a company of garrisoned troops. Surely it was brimful with booze.

The soldiers conferred. Was it a trap? Boorq, bridling under Florze’s leadership, professed to think so. Culverson pretended to agree; she had traveled these thousand miles to escape and appall her parents, and she resented this man’s meddlesome assistance, so like her father’s. Godbeer pretended to disagree; she was so tired and fed-up that she positively welcomed a firefight, which at least might provide an opportunity to lie down. Narran, wrapped in her sleeping bag, shrugged.

Florze fired a few rounds into the side of the building. The man in the undershirt sank, cowering, to the pavement, but otherwise there was no response. “Combat-pragmatic reconnaissance negative,” said Florze. Then she squeezed Narran’s elbow and motioned her across the street first, because she spoke the language. Narran did not argue; she was still disgusted with herself for having failed to shoot the old man. She shambled up the front stairs, tucked the sleeping bag under one arm, and readied a grenade.

Then, leaning heavily on the door, she slipped inside. After a few moments, the others followed. The man in the undershirt hurried home, regaining stature as he went.

The building, inexplicably, had electricity. After ascertaining that the windows were blacked out, they moved from room to room, nontactically, switching on the overhead lights. Had the rooms been bare, they would have been awed by the size, age, and opulence of the building itself. But the rooms were not bare.

As excitement overtook disbelief, they scampered about opening cupboards, drawers, and boxes, and calling out to one another their discoveries. There was no need to hoard anything, for there was more of everything than five of them could carry.

“Powdered milk!” —“Sweet canned milk!” —“Bandoliers!” —“Powdered eggs!” —“Dried carrots!” —“Brand-new e-tools!” —“Actual potatoes!” —“More concussion grenades than you’ve ever seen!” —“Pinto beans!” —“Garbanzo beans here!” —“Peach Melba!” —“Load-bearing vests!” —“Looks like dehydrated soup!” —“Some kind of pork jerky!” —“Plastique! Cases of it!” —“Tomato sauce!” —“Rice!” —“Boots!” —“Tuna!” —“Corn!” —“Peas!” —“Sugar! Real sugar!” —“Cigarettes!” —“Coffee!” —They shouted themselves hoarse, pausing only to plumb one another’s astonishment. “Did you hear that I said *boots*?”

They found sacks of flour, tea, and salt. They found shoelaces, and run-cible spoons, and stainless-steel toothpicks. They found mustard, and pepper, and onions. They found complete uniforms, in a variety of extra-large sizes, that had never been worn. They found crackers, and cookies, and chocolate. They found handguns, and rifle oil, and muzzle flash suppressors. They found, in drums that had never contained anything else, gallons of water so pure it tasted sweet. They found no alcohol, and did not miss it.

“Blankets,” said Narran, pulling one from a box. It was dry, clean, soft yet sturdy, and so new that its nap was unruffled. She swaddled herself in it and subsided onto a bunk, whose squeaking mattress springs sent exquisite shivers through her body.

Fading exhilaration left Culverson’s nerves jangled. To keep from cry-

ing, she tried to be angry. “Why are these assholes so well equipped? I thought they were all supposed to be so weak and hungry and demoralized. Look at all this shit. It fucking demoralizes *me*.” —“Not me,” said Boorq. “Think about it. Would we have retreated if we were living like this?” —“We wouldn’t ever retreat,” said Godbeer. —“Exactly. These bitches,” said Boorq, “are a bunch of chinless sissies. We’ll wipe them out.”

Florze lighted a stove and began tossing ingredients into a dixie. Meanwhile, outside, the locals watched the building from a distance, expecting every minute the explosion of booby-traps.