

A CONTINUING STORY

THE CLOAKED SAVIOUR



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READ THE OPENING

**THE SCALES LIE.
THE LEDGERS AGREE.
IN HEARTHOLLOW, THAT MAKES INJUSTICE LAW.**

A spoiler-safe preview from the locked first-edition interior.

Cricket is seventeen, observant, and very good at being overlooked. When she realises the lord's scale is rigged, she sees what everyone else has learned not to see: Hearthollow's hunger is not an accident. Then stolen grain appears in the square with a message.

“You take from them. I take back.”

This preview contains A Note on the Record, the complete Prologue and the opening of The Long Hundredweight.

STANDALONE

adult low-magic fantasy

FIRST EDITION

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LANGUAGE

English

KICKSTARTER

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One complete story. A much bigger world.

A Note on the Record

What follows is reconstructed from three sources: Cricket of Hearthollow's rough wartime record, the Widow Greenmarsh's clean copy and earlier witness statements, and testimony gathered later. Where they disagree, Cricket's rough record has been preferred.

The songs got there first, and they got it wrong. They needed a saviour; the record found a village. This is that record. The Archive at Hearthollow.

Prologue

Nineteen years before anyone proved a scale wrong in Hearthhollow's square, a great house in the Greenmarsh valley burned with most of a family inside. The fire was lawful. There was a warrant. Five hired companies stood at the gate to carry it out, and they would be paid when the work was done. They had even made an offer first, at the door by lantern light, in the polite administrative tone reserved for ugly things: sign the contract, keep the hall.

The lord of the house read the contract twice, his thumb resting on the lines, and refused. What came next arrived in good order, as such things often do, by lists.

One child rode away.

What the child remembered most clearly was a corridor. An upstairs corridor with polished floors, filling with adults who should have known what to do. Instead, they stood still. Servants who could carry a season's wood up three flights. Men who broke horses. Women who ran kitchens like small stern countries. All of them waited in the smoke for somebody above them to say what was allowed, while below them the fire climbed the stairs.

The child stood among them in a nightshirt, seven years old, a wooden hawk on a string clenched in one fist, and

learnt without words the lesson it would take nineteen years and a valley of strangers to unlearn: if you wait for the grown people, you burn.

The child did not wait. Somewhere between the corridor and the yard, the wooden hawk was gone from their fist; they never remembered losing it. A groom came out of the stable smoke leading a horse with his coat over its eyes. He found the child already halfway across the yard, swept them up without breaking stride, and rode. Afterwards, the child remembered almost nothing of him. Not his face. Not his name. Only the smell of the horse, which for a year was the last thing the world had said. At the top of the far hill, the groom stopped because the child was fighting his arm, then turned the horse so the child could look back once.

That was all the mercy the night had to give. It was real mercy, and the child never learnt whom to thank for it. From the hill, the burning hall looked, with the terrible simplicity of a seven-year-old's thought, like a lamp.

The fire took two days to die. The counting men took nine.

They came up from the city of Viremont while the beams still ticked: clerks from the Bastion's salvage office, in good boots, the seal of a serpent coiled around a flame stamped on their satchels. They walked through the ruin with rods and slates and listed what remained: plate fused in the strongroom, granaries, livestock, iron, and every piece of

furniture in the unburnt wing down to the last stool. Everything was weighed, valued, and charged against the dead house for its rebellion.

It was patient, thorough work. A woman stood at the end of the lane for all nine days and watched. She had dressed the lady of the house for eleven years. She had escaped through the drying-yard gate with the under-cook and two children not her own, and she had nowhere else to be. So she stood there with her hands folded and watched the counting. She kept quiet, because a servant from a condemned house who spoke too loudly could become part of the inventory.

On the sixth day she saw a young clerk, quick with his figures and careful with his cuffs, climb out of the great hall's wreck with something flat and black under his arm. She was too far away to see it clearly, but she did not need to. She had polished it herself: the crest of the house, a hawk and barley sheaf, half scorched away where a beam had fallen across it.

The young clerk stepped away from the others and rubbed one edge clean with his thumb, slowly, the way a man cleans a coin to read the year. He looked at it for a long moment. Then he wrapped it in rough cloth and put it on the cart with his own tools, where the inventory did not go. The woman watched him write a line in his slate book. She could not read it from that distance. She would have given a great deal to.

One line. Whatever it said, it was the first entry of his that was ever false, and no one alive had the right to challenge it.

The clerk rose, as careful men in good boots do. The woman grew old, kept her tongue, and took Greenmarsh, the burnt valley's name, for her own so that somebody, somewhere, would still be saying it. The child grew up with the smell of horses and the habit of rooftops and did not stop moving for nineteen years. And the ruin's whole worth went into the Bastion's ledgers in a neat round hand, every stool accounted for, so that anyone checking the record would find it complete, correct, and closed.

The record was wrong. This is the rest of it.

The Long Hundredweight

1

The scale was wrong, and Cricket was the only one in the square who could prove it.

She stood at the edge of the assessment line with a sack of the loft's barley on her shoulder and watched the clerk's man set the lord's hundredweight, the stone used to weigh their quota, on the left-hand pan. It was a handsome stone, smooth and stamped with a serpent swallowing its own tail. It was also too heavy.

Not by much. By enough. As a child she had hung from the village's old measure a hundred times, both arms around it and her feet off the ground. She knew what a true hundredweight did to a beam. This one pulled lower. Every sack weighed against it came up short, and every short sack went into the ledger as debt.

Thim stood beside her, counting carts under his breath. He was fourteen and counted everything. Carts, crows, buttons on a soldier's coat. He said numbers stayed where you put them, which was more than could be said for most things in Hearthollow.

"Eleven," he murmured. "That's two more than the autumn price last year."

“Quota’s up,” Cricket said. “Keep your eyes on your boots.”

The line shuffled forward over frozen mud. Coal fires burned in iron bowls at either end of the platform, more for the clerk’s fingers than for anyone waiting. The clerk sat under a canvas hood with the assessment book open across his knees, a narrow man with ink to his second knuckle. Beside the platform, Captain Rhoen sat on his horse and watched the village weigh out its winter.

Cricket had learnt to read faces long before anyone offered to teach her letters, and Rhoen’s was the easiest kind. He wasn’t cruel the way a dog was cruel. He was cruel the way weather was. He watched the beam settle without expression.

The thatcher went before her. He set his two sacks on the pan with the care of a man laying down a child. The beam tipped. The clerk’s man called the short weight. The clerk wrote.

“That clears the household,” the thatcher said. “That’s the whole of it.”

The clerk turned back three pages, which was never good. “Aldric, thatcher. Brother to Corvin, thatcher, deceased at the mines in the spring.” He found the line with his finger. “Corvin still owed nine measures. Debt passes to the household. You are the household.”

“He’s dead. He died in your lord’s own pit.”

“The debt didn’t.”

Cricket watched Aldric look at the page, then at the cart that would take him away. A man could pay everything and still owe. Two soldiers walked him to the cart like men leading a horse that had already stopped fighting. He climbed in by himself. The only sound his wife made was a breath she didn’t finish.

Nobody in the line looked up. Looking up was a tax too.

Brenn came up after the thatcher, and the square’s attention followed him the way it always did: sideways, from under hat brims. The smith didn’t queue with grain. His quota was iron, and he brought it in a handcart: a season of hinge sets, plough blades and barrel hoops, all of it good work because he was incapable of the other kind. He tipped it onto the platform boards with a crash that made the clerk’s ink pot jump.

“Count it there,” Brenn said. “It doesn’t like the pan.”

The clerk’s man picked through the pieces with a gloved hand. Black flakes from the forge fell from the plough blades onto the frost. Cricket watched the clerk weigh good iron against the serpent stone and write the smith short like everyone else. Brenn watched too, arms folded, saying nothing.

“The keep wants six dozen horseshoe nails,” the clerk added, not looking up. “Over quota. The keep’s horses can’t wait.”

“Then the keep can bring me coal. I’ve had no coal ration since harvest.”

“File a petition,” the clerk said, with the calm of a man placing a plate just beyond a chained dog’s reach. He turned the page. Brenn stood there for a moment, frost steaming off his forearms, then wheeled the empty handcart away. Cricket added the coal to the long list in her head of things the keep managed to take twice.

While the iron was being carried away, a herder from the far lanes climbed the platform’s side steps out of turn and bent close to the clerk’s hood. He spoke behind his hand. Cricket knew him only by sight: in-and-out work, a face like a closed door. The clerk listened, opened the ribboned pages at the back of the book, and made a small mark. The man left around the square instead of through it. When his own sacks were weighed an hour later, the clerk’s pen moved differently. Shorter. A line, not a column.

The clerk had reduced his debt. Cricket didn’t know what the book called that yet, but she understood the trade. Some debts you paid with grain. Some with names. That was why nobody in Hearthollow said anything that mattered above a

whisper, and why even whispers stopped when a door opened.

Thim had stopped counting carts. His thumb moved over the little wooden bird in his coat pocket, the whistle he had carved in the summer and never finished tuning. He did that when he wanted to say something and knew better.

“Weigh yours short,” he whispered. “Tell them the damp got in.”

“The damp doesn’t lighten a sack, it fattens it. Hush.”

Her turn. She swung the barley up and made herself smaller than she was, a skill like any other. The clerk’s man marked the tally. The beam settled. He called the short weight, and the pen scratched. That was Hearthollow’s arithmetic: the stone lied, the book believed the stone, and the book was the law.

Rhoen’s horse shifted. His gaze passed over her the way a lantern passed over a wall and found nothing worth stopping for. Cricket was seventeen and had spent years teaching lanterns to do exactly that.

“Next,” said the clerk.

The weighing ended at dusk. The platform came down in sections; the fire bowls were tipped hissing into the mud. Doors shut early. The tavern kept its one window dark because the tavern keeper owed money, and light invited

counting. It was not peace. Hearthhollow had simply learnt how little noise it could afford.

She carried Mara's basket home the long way, past the thatcher's cottage, because Mara steered them there without saying why. The thatcher's wife sat inside with the door open to the cold. That frightened Cricket more than weeping would have. On the step already lay the village's answer: a bundle of kindling, a jar of cooking oil, somebody's good muffler folded small. Nobody had handed over a thing. No name could be written down for giving it.

Mara added a twist of dried herbs to the step without slowing. "Nine measures," she said, shifting the basket higher on her hip when a jar knocked loose. Cricket caught it before it fell. "A man goes into their pit and dies, and they send his family a number." She checked the stopper with her thumb. "Tools stay keep's property. Debt comes home."

At the church door two soldiers were nailing up the new winter quota by lantern light. A third stood beside them with his spear resting on the ground, guarding a piece of paper from people who mostly couldn't read it. Cricket remembered that. The keep knew exactly who the notice was for, and it was not the readers.

"Mara. What's the ribbon in the back of the book for?"

Mara's step didn't change. Her grip on the basket did. "For weak people in a hard winter," she said at last. "And that's the last time either of us mentions it out of doors. There's soup wanting to be stirred. Walk on."

That night the sick-house smelt of barley soup, wet socks and dried rushes. The Feast of Lamps was four weeks away, and the younger children had begun making wicks from the summer rushes Mara kept bundled in the rafters. In ordinary years each household set a lamp in its window after dark. Hearthhollow argued about what the custom meant. The local priest called it a promise that winter would turn. Mara called it a reliable way to discover who had forgotten to save enough fat.

This year the keep had taken most of the lamp oil with the quota stores, so the loft possessed five candle ends, one spoon of tallow and eleven opinions about fairness. Thim had put the materials in a row and was measuring the wicks against his little finger.

"One each is impossible," he told a six-year-old who had proposed it.

"Then cut them smaller."

"Small fire is still fire," the child said, with the calm confidence of someone who had never had to make one survive a breeze.

Cricket sat on the ladder, peeling carrots into Mara's pot, and watched Thim attempt diplomacy. He eventually ruled that the lamps would be shared by windows, two children to a light, with the odd child assigned to Mara because Mara counted as difficult enough for two. Mara, without turning from the pot, said she had heard that.

"Good," Thim said. "Then the notice is served."

Somebody laughed. The sound went up into the rafters and stayed there with the steam. For ten minutes the keep had nothing to do with anything. The important questions were whether a wick could be too crooked, who had stolen the clean spoon and why Mara's soup tasted burnt when she was standing directly beside it.

"Medicinal," Mara said when challenged.

"For what?" Cricket asked.

"Complaining." Mara gave her the ladle. "Stir."

Later, when the children slept, Thim tied the neatest unused wick around the wooden whistle-bird's neck like a scarf. "For the feast," he whispered. Cricket told him birds did not observe holy days. He said this one had been raised properly. She let him have it.

The crate was found at first light, set on the wellhead as if the night had put it there and forgotten it.

Cricket heard about it from a Chandler's girl before she heard the shouting. By the time she pushed into the square, thirty people stood in a wide ring around the well, and not one was within arm's reach of the crate. Fear has a radius. Hunger has a shorter one. In the frost, the two circles were fighting over the same ground.

The crate belonged to the keep. Anyone could see that. The depot's brand showed on the boards, and the lid had been lifted and set back loose. Under the rough cloth lay grain. Good grain. Hard and dry. Enough to see three households through a winter if they stretched it. On the lid, pinned beneath a smooth river stone, sat a strip of paper with one line of writing. Cricket couldn't read it. Neither could most of the square. The cooper's wife could, and she read it aloud in the voice people used in chapels.

"You take from them. I take back."

No name under it. No mark.

"It's a trap," said the potter. "They count their sacks. They'll count ours."

"It's a test," said the cooper's wife. "Touch it and hang."

THE REST OF THE RECORD IS WAITING.

“You take from them. I take back.”

You have seen how Hearthollow's arithmetic works. Someone has just started stealing back. Now Cricket intends to find them before the keep does.

Continue the story to discover who the Wanderer is, why Cricket refuses to leave the mystery alone, and whether a village can learn to save itself.

THE CLOAKED SAVIOUR

A standalone adult low-magic fantasy by Guus Kooij



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