

Prologue

The day war was declared, a rain of telephones fell clattering to the cobblestones from the skies above Novy Petrograd. Some of them had half melted in the heat of re-entry; others pinged and ticked, cooling rapidly in the postdawn chill. An inquisitive pigeon hopped close, head cocked to one side; it pecked at the shiny case of one such device, then fluttered away in alarm when it beeped. A tinny voice spoke: "Hello? Will you entertain us?"

The Festival had come to Rochard's World.

A skinny street urchin was one of the first victims of the assault on the economic integrity of the New Republic's youngest colony world. Rudi—nobody knew his patronymic, or indeed his father—spotted one of the phones lying in the gutter of a filthy alleyway as he went about his daily work, a malodorous sack wrapped around his skinny shoulders like a soldier's bedroll. The telephone lay on the chipped stones, gleaming like polished gunmetal: he glanced around furtively before picking it up, in case the gentleman who must have dropped it was still nearby. When it chirped he nearly dropped it out of fear: *a machine!* Machines were upper-class and forbidden, guarded by the grim faces and gray uniforms of authority. Nevertheless, if he brought it home to Uncle Schmucl, there might be good eating: better than he could buy with the proceeds of the day's sackful of dog turds for the tannery. He turned it over in his hands, wondering how to shut it up, and a tinny voice spoke: "Hello? Will you entertain us?"

Rudi nearly dropped the phone and ran, but curiosity held him back for a moment: "Why?"

"Entertain us and we will give you anything you want."

Rudi's eyes widened. The metal wafer gleamed with promise between his cupped hands. He remembered the fairy stories his eldest sister used to tell before the coughing sickness took her, tales of magic lamps and magicians and djinn that he was sure Father Borozovski would condemn as infidel nonsense; and his need for escape from the dull brutality of everyday life did battle with his natural pessimism—the pessimism of barely more than a decade of backbreaking labor. Realism won. What he said was not, *I want a magic flying carpet and a purse full of gold roubles* or *I want to be Prince Mikhail in his royal palace*, but, "Can you feed my family?"

"Yes. Entertain us, and we will feed your family."

Rudi racked his brains, having no idea how to go about this exotic task; then he blinked. It was obvious! He held the phone to his mouth, and whispered, "Do you want me to tell you a story?"

By the end of that day, when the manna had begun to fall from orbit and men's dreams were coming to life like strange vines blooming after rain in the desert, Rudi and his family—sick mother, drunken uncle, and seven siblings—were no longer part of the political economy of the New Republic.

War had been declared.