



BASED ON THE AWARD-WINNING  GAME

THE WARCASTER CHRONICLES



VOLUME TWO

THE BUTCHER OF KHARDOV

BY DAN WELLS





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PART ONE

Orsus found Lola again in a village in the mountains, listening to a traveling minstrel in a tavern full of peasants. He arrived after dark, covered in snow. He stood at the door and stomped the mud from his feet. It was a poor place, small and forgotten by the larger world, but it was the most civilization Orsus had seen in almost six months. He told Laika to wait outside, using his mind to give the steamjack a set of rudimentary instructions, then ducked his head through the low entryway, feeling shy and dirty and out of place.

The room was lit by torches and the bright-orange glow from a massive hearth, where the musician stood with his violin and winked boldly at the serving girls while he sang. Orsus registered his presence and analyzed him, along with the others in the room: eleven strong men, probably farmers, and seven more who looked softer and dressed more finely—landowners, perhaps, or craftsmen. None of those sat apart. His clothes marked him as an outsider, a traveling merchant, Orsus guessed. None of them were a threat, so he ignored them. He shook the snow from his massive coat—nearly the full hide of a black bear, rimmed with its thickest fur—and strode to the bar, leaning his long-handled axe against it while he pulled off his gloves. A serving girl no bigger than the axe eyed it in obvious fright but managed to stammer out a greeting and ask for his order.

“Vyatka,” he said, more gruffly than he intended. He had no quarrel with this girl or anyone in the village; he wasn’t even sure what village this was. It had simply been too long since he’d spoken to anyone other than Laika, and his voice sounded raw, unfamiliar. He nodded to her and forced a smile, trying to remember how civilized people behaved. He felt the farmers’ eyes on him and the serving girl, who was pretty enough, with gold-tinged brown hair just the color of Lola’s. He wondered if she were in danger from any of them—a jealous suitor, maybe, or a simple lech. She turned away to fetch his drink, and as he watched her go, his thoughts turned to Lola again for the first time in ages . . .

. . . and then there she was, leaning against the bar beside him. “Nothing for me?”

Orsus felt his throat catch, but he was too hardened to startle easily. He kept his voice low and answered without even looking at her. “You don’t drink.”

“You never used to, either.”

The serving girl set a glass on the bar—not a stoneware mug but a real glass, tall and thin and fragile—and poured a double shot of vyatka from a slender green bottle. Orsus never asked for a double, but most servers gave him one anyway. He was seven and a half feet tall and built like an ogre, his gaunt face scarred from countless battles. He lifted the glass, ready to down the entire thing in one go, but paused, set it back on the worn wooden bar, and slid the glass over in front of Lola.

“Would you like some?”

He still hadn’t looked at her, still hadn’t dared, but her voice was like sunshine and honey, so familiar he’d know it anywhere. A voice he heard every night in his dreams.

“Excuse me?” asked the traveling merchant. He was sitting on Orsus’ left, away from Lola, and Orsus turned his head just enough to catch him in the corner of his vision.

“This doesn’t concern you,” Orsus said.

“I’m sorry,” the merchant said, “I thought you were offering me a drink. Awfully friendly little town, I thought. Glad I stopped in. No matter, my fault for mishearing you, my name’s—”

“I was talking to the lady,” Orsus growled, turning away. The vyatka was still sitting there, Lola’s pale white hands resting softly beside it, but he thought he could see the faint print of her lips on the glass. He wanted to pick it up, to put his lips in the same spot and imagine for just a moment that they were touching—

“What lady?”

Orsus narrowed his eyes and looked back at the merchant. “Excuse me?”

“Not many here I’d call ladies,” the merchant said with a leer. “Closest thing in this whole place is that dark one in the corner, and she looks awfully taken. Clinging to that money changer’s arm like she was made of gold, which it probably is as far as she’s concerned. A woman like that you’d have to woo. The rest of these trollops—”

“*What did you say?*” Orsus’ voice was dark and full of menace. He rested his hand ever so lightly on the man’s back. Even so, the weight of his pan-sized hand—his fingers stretched nearly from shoulder to shoulder—was threatening. He felt the merchant grow tense.

“Didn’t mean nothing by it, sir, honestly sir, I’m just passing through. I don’t want any trouble with your village, sir.”

“It’s not my village. But the women in it—the ladies, whether you think of them that way or not—you may consider to be under my protection. Now get out of here.” He lifted his hand and the merchant was off his stool and halfway to the door in a second. Orsus turned back to the bar, calming his rage. “I’m sorry about that.”

“You can’t let everything bother you so much,” Lola said. “This isn’t how we used to live.”

“I’m sorry for that, too.”

“That doesn’t change it, though.”

Orsus noted the hint of sadness in her voice. He wanted to say something else, but he didn’t know what—he’d already given an apology, and she obviously wasn’t interested in another. He stayed silent, hoping she would fill the empty air. She always knew what to do.

Lola’s fingers tapped the wooden bar in time with the minstrel’s song. “Would you like to dance?”

Orsus laughed, feeling again the way she’d always made him feel in the old days—a uncomfortable schoolboy, gigantic and clumsy and too in love to say no. “You know I’m no good at dancing,” he said, but she put her hand on his and his protests were burned away like mist in the sunlight.

The feel of her skin was a miracle, smooth and shocking and familiar and electric, like going out and coming home all at once, an endless adventure more right and real than anything he’d ever known. He looked at her now, for the first time in he’d forgotten how long. Her eyes were wide, carefree, and brimming with life as they’d always been, her hair rich and sparkling, her skin soft as silken cream. He put his hand on her waist, their eyes locked, and he shouted to the minstrel in a voice that boomed across the room like a cannon.

“Do you know any dancing songs?”

The minstrel struck a sour note on his violin, shocked by the volume of the request. “I . . . don’t have a *bayan*, sir, but I could try to—”

“Your fiddle is enough,” said Orsus. He smiled at Lola. “Play a *kareyshka*! I’m going to dance with my wife.”

They stepped toward the center of the room, small sideways steps in the traditional style, but no music came. Orsus looked up in a fury to see the minstrel with his jaw hanging open, staring dumbly. “I told you to play!” he roared, and the minstrel positioned his violin. He began bowing out a song unsteadily at first, but faster and with more confidence as his hands fell into their familiar patterns. Orsus looked back at Lola and twirled her through the room, stepping and stomping and weaving between the tables. He smiled at her, more alive than he’d been in years, and she smiled back, more alive than—

People were laughing. Orsus ignored them. Let them laugh; they’d laughed at him his whole life and he’d never let it bother him. He was in love with the most wonderful woman in the world, and now he had her, and she was looking at him, smiling at him, holding him again just like she had before the—

His head ached from so much spinning, and he returned to the simpler part of the dance, small steps forward and back, holding Lola first in one hand and then in the other, torchlight glinting in his eyes like steel.

“Is that what you meant?” It was a familiar voice, the merchant’s, cackling with high-pitched laughter that rose above the violin. “He told me the *vyatka* was for a lady—I never imagined he meant that old thing!”

Orsus seethed, the rage inside him growing hotter, but Lola clucked her tongue softly. “Just ignore them.”

“His wife, he called it,” said a farmer, greeted by another gale of laughter. “Do you suppose he kisses it as well? Filthy thing like that?”

“Take that back!” Orsus’ roar shook the rafters, and in two steps he was beside the man, lifting him from his seat with a single hand around the throat. “Take it back now or I’ll break your neck!”

The entire room was on its feet in an instant, some men backing away, some leaning forward as they intended to rush him. Orsus was more than a head taller than their tallest, a full hand-span broader than their broadest. The farmer in his grip kicked wildly as he hung in the air, clawing Orsus’ fingers around his neck.

“Let him go,” said one of the craftsmen. A dark-haired woman cowered behind him, and the serving girl behind her. “Just set him down, nice and easy, and we’ll forget this whole thing.”

“He called her filthy.”

“And he’s very sorry.”

“I want to hear him say it.”

“It’s just an axe!” shouted another farmer. “For Menoth’s sake!” The man put a hand on Lola’s arm, yanking her away, and Orsus watched as her dress tore, her arm ripped, her chest blossomed with blood.

The world turned red with blood and fire, the air filled with ash and snow and screams. “Where were you?” she pleaded. “Why weren’t you here to protect me?”

The farmer in his hand gave a choked scream as Orsus hammered him into the man on Lola’s arm. Both men went down with a crunch of bone, and the room swarmed him. There were seventeen men still standing, small knives and cudgels appearing in their hands, seemingly from nowhere. They were not farmers but warriors, thieves, brigands, and murderers.

In the space of a heartbeat he studied the room, mapping its obstacles and cover, identifying the greatest threats. The man behind the bar had a blunderbuss but wasn’t an expert with it, and Orsus

guessed it would take him eight seconds at least to ready and fire it; he had eight seconds to work his way back to an alcove near the door, where a sturdy wooden beam could shield them from the blast.

He kept Lola close beside him in his left hand, turning his body to protect her as the first wave of outlaw thugs crashed against him: six men at once, clubs swinging for his face and guts and knees, knives darting in through the gaps in his defenses. He had no armor but his thick bearskin coat, which he turned with a swish to catch the first small dagger, brushing the blade harmlessly to the side. He turned into the man, cracking him in the face with his left elbow and opening a hole in their circle where Lola could stand clear. At the same time he reached out with his right hand and caught a heavy wooden cudgel aimed for his face, levering it down in a brutal swing that dragged its wielder with it, blocking two more attacks from the mob—one with a cudgel that thumped the man's spine, another with a dagger that pierced the man's side with a blossom of red. The man wielding the dagger stumbled back, eyes wide, but before he could protest his innocence Orsus threw the stolen cudgel at his face and dropped him wordlessly to the floor.

More men joined the fray, armed with increasingly larger weapons—a chair leg, a table leg, an entire table—and Orsus slowly worked his way back toward the alcove, blocking and redirecting and striking when he could, counting down the seconds. In his eyes the men were snarling and rabid, snapping their jaws like wild animals, hungry for just a taste of Lola's lips, of her skin, of her soft, supple flesh. The bartender raised his blunderbuss, and Orsus fought more furiously than ever, cracking skulls, snapping spines, and throwing broken bodies like javelins at the cowards who tried to flee. His ear pricked like a wolf's at the sound of a tiny click, and he stepped behind the thick wall just as the blunderbuss fired, a half pound of burning lead flying straight for his skull. The blast tore a hole in the wooden beam, exploding in a cloud of wooden splinters and bits of twisted iron, but it didn't penetrate all the way. He and Lola were safe.

Orsus leaned Lola gently in the corner. He found a dagger stuck into his leg and pulled it out with a grunt, stepping out from behind the wall and hurling it at the barkeep. It sunk deep into his throat, he fell, and the room was empty.

Orsus surveyed the destruction, vigilant for more attacks, but nothing moved. His adrenaline faded and the red in his eyes subsided, replaced with great splashes of hot red blood coating the walls and broken chairs and splintered tables. Women lay among the dead; had the women attacked him, too? He saw his glass of *vyatka* on the bar. His axe was gone. He hadn't used it in the fight, and no one had used it against him, but it was gone.

The ash and snow were gone, too, and the howling and the screams and the fires and the bright, vivid clarity. In their place a blankness crept over him, a deadness, as if his soul were stone and his flesh iron. As invulnerable and unfeeling as a steamjack.

He knew where his axe was. A part of him, he thought, had always known. He walked to the bar, stepping over the broken bodies, and stared at the *vyatka*. The lip print he'd seen was gone. He raised it to his lips and drank; it burned, he knew, but he didn't feel it.

Six months in the wilderness. Maybe he'd stay longer this time. Maybe he'd never come back.

Orsus walked to the corner and looked at his axe, five feet tall and a hundred pounds at least, leaning gently in the alcove where he'd stood to protect her. "Come on, Lola. Time to go." He picked up the axe, pulled his hood low over his eyes, and walked back into the snow.



"Jack!"

Orsus ignored him, raising his heavy axe and chopping down again on the massive log. He hated when they called him Jack.

“Jack, boy, I’m calling you! Are you as deaf as you are ugly?”

Orsus rose up to his full height—nearly seven feet tall, though he had just turned sixteen—and looked at his boss, Aleksei. “My name’s Orsus.”

Aleksei was a short man, though nearly as broad as Orsus. When he smiled, his lips curled up in a grin so devilish it made the women in town grow pale and make the sign of warding. He smiled now as if reveling in Orsus’ discomfort. “I know your name, boy, I’m using your official title. We’re done with this tree, and I need a ’jack to move it.”

Orsus glanced at the log by Aleksei’s feet, where two of the younger village boys had spent the last ten minutes hacking away the twigs and branches, preparing the log for transport back to the mill. It was a small tree, probably too small for the logging crew to bother with, but still twenty feet long and several hundred pounds at least. Orsus studied it a moment, calculating the weight and balance. He shook his head. Aleksei’s crew was a major operation, the biggest logging company in the forest, and they didn’t have time to bother with a tree that small. The one Orsus was working on had been nine feet at least, and more than three feet wide at the base; he was chopping it into three equal sections for easier transport back to the mill. That was the kind of tree they needed. A tree the size of Aleksei’s . . . there was no good reason to fell it in the first place.

No good reason, but one painfully obvious bad one.

Aleksei leered, gesturing at the tree, and several of the other loggers were looking up now as well, pausing to enjoy the jest. As always, Orsus refused to give them the satisfaction. He turned back to his own tree, readying his heavy axe for another strike. “Get Laika to do it.”

Orsus raised his axe and brought it down with a thunk, burying the wide blade nearly eight inches into the wood. The felled tree came nearly to his knees, a thigh-high monster for any other man on the crew, but Orsus would cut through it completely in just a few more strikes.

“My dear little boy.” Aleksei adopted his most patronizing nursemaid tone. “Laika is a steamjack. She carries the big trees. Something this small would be an insult to the mechaniks that made her. The side of his mouth twisted up in a sneer. “This is a job for a man-jack.”

Orsus paused, tempted to let this final jibe sway him, but he closed his eyes and took a breath. He would ignore it. He raised his axe again and brought it down at an angle to his last deep cut. The blade bit deep into the wood, meeting the line he’d carved with his previous swing, chopping out a wedge-shaped chunk the size of a man’s leg. He leaned down and picked the fragment up, tossing it to the side as if it weighed no more than a toothpick. The other loggers looked away, disappointed he hadn’t risen to the bait.

Aleksei walked toward him. Orsus knew what was coming and set himself for another argument. “I want you to come with us tonight,” Aleksei said, lowering his voice conspiratorially. “Molonochnay just after dark. We’re not even fighting anyone, just . . . accelerating a few design flaws in the equipment.”

Molonochnaya was the neighboring village, nearly an hour away by foot. They had a new logging operation of their own, Orsus knew, a desperate attempt to get out from under Aleksei’s thumb, and the conniving little man was apparently confronting the matter directly. It was hardly surprising—Aleksei had been performing similar “after-hours projects” around the area for years, keeping his business strong by stomping out the competition. It was standard practice for the kayazy, as Orsus well knew. He’d been one of Aleksei’s thugs for years.

But not anymore.

“There are plenty of trees for everybody,” Orsus said, turning back to his work. He swung the axe again, biting another giant chunk from the tree.

“Trees, yes,” said Aleksei, “but customers? Where am I supposed to find more of those? Molonochnaya starts buying from somebody else? And what about the villages east of them—am I supposed to give up their business, too? I’m barely paying the bills as it is, Jack. If I lose them I’ll have to make some painful cuts to the labor force. No pun intended.”

Orsus bristled at being called Jack again, but Aleksei’s subtle threat overshadowed his irritation almost immediately. He glared at the small man. “You’re talking about letting me go?”

“I might have to let a lot of people go—”

“I do the work of any two other men in this crew,” Orsus hissed, “and you’re talking about sending me away because I won’t break some poor villager’s legs for you?”

“Sending you away from what?” Aleksei said, his thin voice thick with indignation. “With a new logging company starting in Molonochnaya I’ll lose buyers, I’ll lose revenue—I’ll lose the whole business. I don’t want to let anybody go, you know that, but without a proper business to support us we won’t have any other options.”

“So you’re forcing me to help you, or I lose my job.”

Aleksei frowned, his mock indignation blossoming into mock righteous anger. “Your job? Such grotesque selfishness! This is bigger than your job and my job and anyone’s job. This business employs half our village, which means it feeds half our village, which means you’ll be taking the food right out of their mouths.

“When you hear there’s a new logging company, you shouldn’t balk, you shouldn’t stand there like a schoolboy. You should be running to Molonochnaya to break their legs without ever being asked. I’m not *forcing* you to do anything, Orsus. I’m guiding you.” He gestured at the two village boys hacking self-importantly at the branches of another fallen tree. “I’m guiding them. I’m making sure nobody does anything stupid and gets themselves hurt. We go together, or not at all.”

“Not at all,” Orsus said.

“And you wonder why they call you Jack.” Aleksei shook his head and tsk-tsked. “Heartless as an empty boiler.”

Orsus had heard this all before—the taunts, the pleading, the threats. Aleksei was ambitious and cruel, but he lacked imagination, and his arguments followed the same spiraling path toward his own interests—the only end that mattered to him. He’d appealed to Orsus’ sense of goodness, a quality Aleksei did not himself possess, and now that it hadn’t worked he’d appeal to something he was more familiar with: greed. Orsus nodded as Aleksei continued.

“I’m bankrupt if you don’t come, but if you do? There’s a bonus in it for you.” He jingled his coin purse. “A month’s wages, paid on completion of the job. I’ve never been so generous in my— Why are you laughing?”

“Because you’re small-minded and predictable.”

“Says the axe to the arm that swings it. If you’re so much grander than I am then why don’t I work for you, Your Majesty, instead of the other way around?”

“I only work for you until I’ve saved enough to buy a shop,” said Orsus. “I’ve told you that before.”

“Ah, yes,” said Aleksei, “the great bear of the woods carving bread boards for a living, or little wooden suns to hang over the door. And I’m small-minded? Look at you—you’re a walking mountain. I’ve never seen a man more suited to violence in my life, and I trust you know enough about my life to appreciate what that means. You don’t belong in a wood shop, Orsus, you don’t even belong in the

village. Do you know how much I weep at night for the potential you're throwing away? You could have wealth, you could have power. If I had your strength and strategy I'd rule this whole valley, and all you've done with it is cut down a few trees. It's a waste." He jingled his coins again. "If you're not willing to make something of yourself, at least make some money. Think how much closer you'd be to that shop with a whole month's wages in your pocket."

"A month closer," Orsus said. "I can wait."

"Then you're as brainless as a 'jack as well!" Aleksei shouted, and Orsus knew the argument had spiraled down to its low, grimy center. "Think of everything I've done for you! Everything I've given you, and this is how you repay me? I gave your father a job when the rats destroyed your cellar, and I gave you a job when the Tharn destroyed your father. Who was it that paid off the officials to keep your name off the conscription census? Without me you would have been in the Winter Guard and gotten yourself shot somewhere. I taught you how to work, I taught you how to fight, I taught you how to stand up for yourself, and all you can do is throw it back in my face? What do you own that wasn't bought with my wages? What do you have that doesn't come directly from me?"

And Orsus smiled, because he had the most wondrous thing in the world. "I have her."

"A girl? I can get you girls."

"Not like Lola."

"Better," said Aleksei. "Girls so beautiful you'll forget this Lola ever existed."

"I've seen your girls, Aleksei, and Lola puts them all to shame."

"Fine, then." Orsus watched warily as the weaselly man spoke. The conversation was going in a new direction. "Say she's the most beautiful girl in the world, the best cook, the best lover, whatever it is you value in a woman—"

"The kindest," said Orsus, "the bravest, the smart—"

"The most annoying, then. Whatever she is, it doesn't matter. You're still a backwoods mountain boy without a penny to his name, without a horse to call his own, with a leaking roof and a bed of straw and a knife and fork you carved yourself from scraps."

"All true."

"And you think your girl wants that? Come back to me—come back to the *bratya*. There's money in this business, Orsus, but you won't find it chopping logs like one of these idiots." He gestured at the other workers. "You and I together, we can be rich—richer than you've ever dreamed. You can give your Lola a real house, with porcelain plates, a velvet dress—can you imagine her in velvet? In silk. She should have jewels in her hair, Orsus, and you can give them to her."

Orsus could imagine it—he didn't want to, but he could, and he had, and now the vision was already there in his mind and he burned to make it real. She deserved all those things and more, so much more, and a trip now and then to Molonochnaya, or Telk, or Chaktiz . . .

Orsus shook his head, and the vision collapsed. "No." He hefted his axe and turned back to the tree. "That's not the kind of potential I want to live up to."

Aleksei's voice was sharp as a blade. "Then maybe you really are no better than a 'jack."

Orsus looked at him, counting slowly in his head, restraining himself from breaking the man's sneering face. He dropped his axe, walked to the fallen log, and stood over it, calculating. The village boys backed away in surprise, and the other loggers grew silent. In years of teasing, Orsus had never actually gone for it.

He estimated the weight in his head, gauging the balance, pinpointing where to put his hands. He took a breath, crouched low to get his hands under it, and lifted. The tree rose, wood chips and pine needles cascading down as the twenty-foot log crept into the air. He walked carefully, deliberately,

gritting his teeth with the effort, straining to hold on, until finally he dropped the tree wordlessly into the pile with the others. He stared down at it, panting, surprised even at himself, and walked back to his axe.

“Forget the bratya,” Aleksei said. “A man like you should be a warlord.”

“No more fighting,” Orsus said.

“But why?”

“Because she doesn’t want me to. And I never will again.”



Simonyev Blaustavya, great vizier of Khador and chief advisor to Queen Ayn Vanar XI, knelt before her throne, bowing his head low before the young ruler. He had served the royal family for much of his life, including as lord regent during Ayn’s minority. The new queen—inexperienced as she may be—was like a daughter to him. She deserved all the same respect that her ancestors had, and even more of the same protection.

“Forty Winter Guard behind the prisoner,” said Simonyev, “and six of our most decorated combat veterans in Man-O-War armor to surround him directly. They will be holding the chains. We will have ten Iron Fangs in a rank before you, here, armed with pikes to keep him from getting too close—”

“Man-O-War armor,” the queen said, “in the palace throne room?” Her voice was soft, but Simonyev thought he heard—as he often did lately—a deeper current of independence in her voice. It would have been a welcome sign in a more experienced ruler, but in a young and untested one . . .

No, he told himself, I must not think such thoughts. She is inexperienced, but she is more than ready for responsibility. She is not a girl, but a queen. I’ve been training her for this for years.

“Man-O-War armor is indeed unconventional in the palace, Your Majesty, and runs some risk of damaging the mosaic tiling your grandfather installed here. However, your life is of paramount importance, and if we must crush priceless artwork to protect you then we will crush priceless artwork. Unless you have reconsidered my suggestion to conduct this interview from the balcony, will the prisoner bound safely in the courtyard?”

“I will address the prisoner in here, as I do with all kommanders accused of treason. It is my duty, is it not?”

“Your duty requires only that you address them. Addressing them in the throne room is merely tradition.”

“But traditions are important. I have heard you say so yourself many times. We have a throne room filled with art, both commissioned and conquered, because it impresses upon our visitors the wealth and power of our nation. Surely a trained warcaster turned traitor to the Motherland should be reminded of those qualities even more strongly than the average visitor.”

Simonyev kept his face serene, but inside his pride was battling with his nerves. She was showing all the strength of character he had hoped to see in her, but it could get her killed. “That is wise, Your Majesty,” he said with a bow, “but if you will forgive my failure, perhaps I have not fully explained to you the nature of the prisoner you are addressing today. He is a monster.”

“All traitors are.”

“In their souls, perhaps. This man is a monster in physical form, with no soul to speak of. He stands a full head taller than your tallest guard. His chest is as broad as a bear’s, and his arms and legs are thick as tree trunks. He is bound in the same heavy chain the dockworkers use to lift warjacks on cargo boats—nothing less will hold him, and nothing less than a Man-O-War can hold those chains.

assure you, Your Majesty, the Man-O-Wars are not excessive force, they are a bare minimum necessitated by the size of that doorway.” He pointed to the throne room’s arched stone entrance. “If we were anywhere else, if you would allow us to hold this judgment in any other venue, I would have him flanked by Juggernauts at least.”

The young queen mused over this, cocking her head in a manner reminiscent of her late father. *He would have listened to reason*, thought Simonyev. *Morrow save us from headstrong children.*

“My grandfather also commissioned many rugs and tapestries,” said the queen. “Lay them on the floor, as thickly as you can stack them, and let the Man-O-Wars walk upon that.” She smiled. “Naturally, you will clean their feet first.”

Simonyev bowed, a gesture that allowed him to close his eyes in silent frustration. “If you wish, Your Majesty.”

He began calculating how many rugs he could gather and how many layers he could lay if he stretched a path from the throne room to the door. He might be able to do it, and it might actually help preserve the floor, though certainly at the expense of whichever rug came in direct contact with the Man-O-Wars’ metal tread, cleaned or not. And if the prisoner tried to escape or—Morrow forbid—attempted to assault the queen, the floor would be ruined regardless and the rugs destroyed in the bargain.

“We have yet to address the greatest danger,” he said, “which is his arcane skill. Even if he doesn’t move—even if he doesn’t lift a finger—he could kill you with a thought.”

“He will be wearing chains infused with mystic power, specifically designed to negate his connection to magic,” Ayn said. “At least I assume he will. Surely we won’t neglect that aspect of our security?”

Simonyev permitted himself a silent, invisible sigh. Of course she would remember the chains. Her father had taught her well. “Of course he will, Your Majesty. He will be as unable to work magic as we can possibly make him. However . . . if you will permit me the question, Your Majesty: why is this so important to you?”

“It is my duty, as we have already discussed, and this is the best place for that duty to be carried out.”

“The best in some ways,” said Simonyev, “and the worst in many others. This man represents a very real danger to you, and we cannot protect you properly inside your throne room. Six Man-O-Wars just to hold his chains—have you really thought about what that means? Six Man-O-Wars to hold a single prisoner. Ten Iron Fang pikemen armed with weapons designed to bring down heavy warjacks. Forty Winter Guard, not as an honor guard but as a real fighting force, led by our best kommander with orders to shoot him in the back if he so much as twitches. We’ll have Widowmaker snipers in the galleries above you; we’ll have soldiers with heavy iron shields on either side of you, ready to protect you from battle while your personal bodyguard escorts you out the back door. The traitor will be unarmed, unarmored, and bound with arcane chains, and still this morning I ordered ten more Winter Guard to walk in front of him, solely as an obstacle to slow him down if he tries to rush the throne. And this is the most important part: even with all of that, I can’t be sure that it’s enough.

“I should try myself for treason merely for allowing you to go through with this, for it is the most dangerous situation you have ever been—and I dearly hope ever will be—confronted with in your life. A final time, my queen, I beg you: address him in judgment from your balcony, so that he can remain in the courtyard, chained and caged and watched by warjacks. He is not simply dangerous, he is danger personified. He is death and violence in their most terrifying human form. He is an avatar of war.”

The queen seemed to consider this, or perhaps she did not know how to respond. Simonyev couldn’t tell. After a lengthy pause she spoke softly—though not, he noted, contritely. “Tell me again

of his crimes.”

“~~He slaughtered your people, Your Majesty: an entire village and every soldier who attempted to defend them. Some of them under his own command.~~”

“The Fifth Border Legion,” said the queen.

Simonyev nodded. “It was the village of Deshevek, Your Majesty, near Boarsgate on the Ordic border. There are hundreds dead, as many as half of them by this man’s own hand.”

“And they were traitors as well, were they not? Your report mentioned some evidence that they were planning to secede to Ordic governance.”

“There is indeed some evidence of that, Your Majesty, but that is no justification for a massacre. They should have been given the chance to account for themselves, to confess or disprove the accusation. A proper servant of Khador would have given them a trial, not wanton murder.”

The queen smiled—that sly, maddening smile her grandfather used to give—and Simonyev realized too late that he’d been trapped.

“If traitors deserve a trial,” she said, “then this traitor shall have one. Lay out your rugs, arrange your soldiers, and bring the man to me. I shall address him in judgment as tradition and duty demand. If a kommander has betrayed Khador then he has betrayed me, and I shall be the one to condemn him.”

Simonyev nodded, more determined than ever that the prisoner would not lay so much as a fingertip on the queen. She was even more strong-willed than he’d thought, a fitting heir to the kingdom’s legacy. *More snipers, perhaps, he thought, and another Man-O-War to stand at her side with a massive cannon shield. No one could get through that, not even the mighty Orsus Zoktavir.*

And then he paused, just for a moment, and felt himself grow pale. *He used to be Orsus Zoktavir, he thought, but no more.* After the massacre near Boarsgate the man had a new name, one whispered in halls and alleys, chilling the spines of Ord and Khador alike. *He is no longer a kommander, no longer a soldier, no longer a man.*

He is a Butcher.



Pyotr Zoktavir slammed the door closed, bracing it with his body as he fumbled for the heavy wooden bar to lock it.

“The Tharn are here!”

Orsus’ mother, Agnieska, cried out in terror, clutching her children close. Normally, Orsus—ten years old and too big for such coddling—would have tried to pull away, but now he was too scared, a instinctual reflection of his parents’ terror. He knew the Tharn from stories, fearsome barbarians who worshiped the Devourer Wurm. All the adults in the village seemed scared of them, but he had never seen them in person before, never really imagined that they were real. The Tharn were the stuff of bedtime stories, boogeymen to make his little sister eat her porridge, and yet here was his father, the largest man in the village, bone-white with fear, slamming the locking brace into place and scrambling past his mother and sister for the door to the old cellar.

“But the rats, Papa,” said Orsus.

A nest of rats had invaded the family cellar the year before—giant, vicious things that devoured their food and settled in and resisted all attempts at eradication. It had cost them nearly a year’s worth of storage and forced Pyotr into debt with Aleksei Badian, and months ago they had sealed the door and given up. Yet now he was prying up the boards, scrabbling at the nails, desperate to get it open.

Realization dawned in little Irina's eyes, and Orsus' sister screamed in horror. "We can't hide with the rats, Papa, you can't make us do it!"

Orsus' mother struggled to cover the girl's mouth, shushing her. "Please, child, please; it will be okay; we'll protect you from the rats, but you need to be quiet; please, Irina, stay quiet for Mommy . . ." She continued her tender, terrified mantra, and Orsus realized with shock that this was real, that the Tharn were really here, and that his parents were so scared of them that they considered the rats—once the greatest monsters in Orsus' young life—to be a haven instead of a threat.

He pulled away from his mother and knelt by the cellar door, helping his father pry up the covering boards. He heard a scream from somewhere outside—the first of many—a long, curdling scream of unbridled fear, and his mother cooed more loudly to Irina, holding her close, stroking her hair, the eyes shut tight against the world. Pyotr pulled up a board, Orsus another. There were three left. They heard another scream, and below it the deeper thud of hoofbeats in the road outside—no, not hooves but something different and alien. An unfamiliar cadence that made Orsus' skin crawl. He shivered and tore at the boards.

Another scream, closer.

The smell of smoke.

A guttural, inhuman roar.

"Done," Pyotr grunted, tearing the last board from across the cellar door. He swung it open. Orsus recoiled at the scurrying sounds below. The door was like a black window into nothingness; Orsus could see the first few rungs of their old wooden ladder, and then all else was lost to the void. Pyotr took Irina, holding her close while Agnieszka descended into the hole. "Stay on the ladder if you can," he whispered. "The rats won't climb it . . . I don't think."

More hoofbeats outside. The door shook against the jamb, but Orsus couldn't tell if someone was pounding on it, or if it was simply the wind. Pyotr glanced at it wildly, then lifted Irina down into the hole. Her wailing grew louder, and Orsus heard an answering chitter from the rats below. Agnieszka grabbed the girl, practically smothering her to keep her quiet, and though Orsus could barely see her in the dark he could hear his mother sobbing. He started to close the door, but his father caught it and shook his head.

"You too."

"But I can fight."

"You're a boy."

"But I'm big." Though it was technically true, he felt small and babyish for saying it, as if he were bragging about being toilet trained instead of his unprecedented physical size. Even at ten years old he was bigger than half the young men in town. Just two days ago, he had wrestled Gendy Rabin to a standstill. "Gendy will be fighting," he said.

"Gendyarev is sixteen years old."

"And I'm almost as tall!"

Pyotr put a hand on Orsus' shoulder. The screams were louder now, some human, some eerily, indefinably different. The human screams sounded painful, scared, or both. "Listen to me," said Pyotr. "You're my son, and I'm proud of you, and I've never doubted you, and when you've said you could do something I've let you try, every time. Sometimes you're right, and sometimes you get hurt, but that's how we learn." He shook his head. "This isn't something you can learn from—you either succeed or you die. I need you to live, and to take care of your mother and sister. Do you understand me?"

Orsus' eyes were wide, and he felt his lip start to quiver. "Aren't you coming with us?"

Pyotr breathed deeply, staring solemnly instead of answering. "I need you to watch over them," he said at last. "Do you hear me? Do you understand?"

Orsus' voice cracked. "Are you going to be okay?"

The door rattled again, harder, and Pyotr swore under his breath. "I love you," he said softly, practically picking Orsus up as he pushed him back into the hole and down the dark ladder. "I love you." He closed the door, and Orsus heard a dull scratching above as his father dragged something heavy across the floor to cover the door. Irina was still crying, their mother struggling to quiet her. Below them, the rats scuttled hungrily.

There was a crash in the room above, and Orsus heard his father roar a challenge. Other voices answered it, sharp and sibilant, and then there was more crashing, more screaming, more thuds and thunks and cracks and howls. Orsus cowered in the darkness, clinging to the ladder, feeling the dull reverberations as the impacts shuddered down through the wood in his hands. He imagined his father being hacked apart by the Tharn or torn to pieces by whatever monsters they had with them, and he knew he should be helping, but he was too scared—too scared even to move—and so he clung to the ladder and prayed they would leave and hated himself for thinking it. The world tumbled, his vision disappeared, and sound ceased to have meaning.

Then the sounds stopped.

Orsus listened, straining his ears to hear something, anything, from the room above him. He hadn't gone deaf; he could hear his mother's soft sobbing below him and the rats chittering beneath him. Above him, though, was nothing: no fighting, no screams, not even a footstep. He waited, holding his breath.

Had his father won? Then where was he? Had the fight moved on? If the Tharn had won, where were they? He longed to ask his mother's advice, but she was below him; she had heard less than he, and explaining the situation might alert any enemies to their presence. Besides, his father had left him in charge. If he was dead, then Orsus was the man of the house now. He could make the decision on his own. He had a responsibility to do so.

So he waited.

A soft sigh that might have been wind, or might have been a distant scream. He couldn't gauge the volume or distance of anything through the thick wooden door. A long stretch of nothing. A creak that might have been upstairs, or might have been his own weight shifting on the ladder. Another stretch of nothing.

Nothing and nothing and nothing.

Thud.

It wasn't loud, but it was there. Above him, not directly, but definitely in their cottage somewhere. A footstep, but Orsus couldn't tell what kind.

Was it his father? But why would his father step so softly? Perhaps he had killed the first group of Tharn and was afraid of attracting more. Orsus wanted to ask him if it was safe to come out, but what if it wasn't him? What if it was a Tharn, who'd killed his father and was searching the cottage for loot or food or slaves? He should stay quiet until the raider left . . . unless the raiders had already gone and this was a rescuer from the village—Gendyarev or his father, or one of the men from Aleksei's logging crew. But a rescuer would be calling out for survivors. If it was someone from the village, and they were being this quiet, it was because they were hiding. Maybe the Tharn were hunting them—Orsus let them in, it might save their life. Or it might expose them all, and his mother and sister would die. He didn't know what to do.

Something scraped loudly across the floor.

Orsus looked up. His father had covered the cellar door with something, probably their thick wool rug and then perhaps a leg of their table, or his mother's heavy wooden chest. Now someone was moving it away. His father? Or a Tharn raider looking for something good to steal?

Whoever it was hadn't spoken. Orsus readied himself to lunge upward. His only useful weapon was a surprise. The wool rug was moved away, and faint lines of orange light outlined the square shape of the door in the floor. Orsus blinked at the brightness and wondered how he could possibly fight the intruder blind. The door moved slightly, then flew open. Orsus screamed, but it was the only attack he made, half war cry, half terror. Light flooded in and blinded him, and with it the smell of smoke and fur and blood. He kept screaming, eyes closed, and when a pair of hands reached down to haul him out of the hole he flailed wildly, hitting someone's arms and chest and legs without any apparent effect. The figure tossed him aside with the same strange, sibilant words he'd heard earlier, and Orsus felt his blood freeze: this was a Tharn. In his own home. He had to do something.

He expected to hear his mother scream, or Irina, but they stayed quiet. Orsus rolled when he hit the floor, coming up against a wall and struggling painfully to open his eyes. The room was bright, still orange, and, he realized too late, on fire. The cracks and snaps he'd heard were the wood walls of his home spitting and popping as the fire devoured them with long, orange tongues. He forced his eyes open farther and saw two bodies, one of them hairy and bestial, half man and half . . . something like a Wolf, maybe, or ox, or a combination of both. The other body, smaller and sickly yellow in the flickering firelight, was his father. The two corpses lay in a pool of shared blood, their clothing shredded, their bodies too broken to be anything but dead. Orsus heard shuffles and stomps and more meaningless words. Finally, he got his eyes open far enough to see the Tharn that had pulled him from the cellar. Just one, tall and snarling with a mane of fur around his mostly human face. The creature pulled a burning brand from the wall and dropped it into the cellar, peering after it to see what treasures it revealed. Orsus couldn't understand the words, but the look of disgust on the raider's face was obvious. The thing turned away from the hole and began rifling through the other objects in the home, searching for something to steal from the humble cottage to make its raid worthwhile.

Orsus scrambled to the edge of the cellar and looked down. The rats were scattering to the corners away from the light, and his mother was still sitting on the ladder, still clutching Irina's limp body, still rocking back and forth and sobbing and sobbing, her hand clamped tight over the little girl's mouth.

"Mama?" asked Orsus. She didn't answer. Irina didn't move, and he wondered if she could even breathe.

The Tharn spoke again, loudly, and Orsus looked up to see the monster bending over him with an unmistakably angry look on his face. It shouted a string of impatient nonsense words and finally peeled back its lips in a grotesque imitation of human speech.

"Eat," it said. "We eat. Where?"

Orsus felt his fear turning to anger—that this thing would come here, to the poorest cottage in the village, and kill his father for the food they didn't have. Was his sister dead too? What had happened to his mother? The thing continued its stuttered demands, and Orsus knew that he should attack it, that he should try in some way to defend his home, his family, that he should try to avenge his father, but he couldn't do it. He crawled backward on the floor, trying simply to get as far from the towering monster as he could, hoping he could hide or escape or disappear.

Another Tharn shouted through the open door, something harsh and urgent. The raider in Orsus's home looked up, called back just as harshly, and snarled. *It hasn't found what it wanted, Orsus thought, and now it's time to leave.* Orsus had just enough time to think, *It's okay, we've made it; it*

going to leave now when suddenly the Tharn drew a jagged bone dagger from its belt, walked to him impassively, and stabbed him in the stomach. No familiar emotion registered on the thing's face; simply bent down, plunged the knife into his gut, and walked away. Orsus cried out, weeping uncontrollably, feeling his life seep away in hot, liquid spurts all over his hands.

This is the end, he thought. *We're all dead. We have nothing left.* He curled up in a fetal ball, lying on the floor, watching as the Tharn walked back toward the door and out into the snow—

—except it didn't walk out the door at all, and Orsus remembered the darkest rumor he'd heard about the Tharn: if they couldn't steal human food, they would just as happily eat the humans. Orsus watched in dawning horror as the hungry monster stood over the open cellar door, pulled another dagger from its belt, and hurled it down into the hole. Orsus' mother shrieked, her body fell loudly on the floor, and the chittering of the rats rose up like raucous laughter.

Orsus felt his jaw quiver. His pain turned to anger, to rage and then unbridled fury. To kill him was one thing, but his mother? An innocent girl at the bottom of a pit? He pulled the dagger from his stomach with a grunt. The Tharn knelt down, unslinging an empty leather bag from its back, and unwrapping two thin carving knives. Orsus gritted his teeth and rose to his knees. The Tharn hauled Agnieska's body up from the cellar, to save his meal from the rats, and threw it down by the back door. Orsus grabbed the edge of the table and pulled himself to his feet, inch by agonizing inch. Blood poured from the wound in his stomach, squishing in his boots and leaving dark-red footprints as he staggered across the floor. At the last second, perhaps alerted by the noise, the Tharn turned around. Orsus saw the shock in its eyes as the victim it thought was dying raised its own dagger against it, plunging the weapon toward its foul heart. The creature caught his wrist, but its grip was already weakening, and Orsus' fury made him feel stronger every second. He wrenched the dagger free and slashed it across the creature's throat, slitting it from ear to ear. It fell to a heap on the floor, hot blood spilling out to mingle with that of his parents.



Orsus heard a voice and looked up to see another Tharn in the doorway, staring at him in what Orsus' slowly fading mind could only interpret as surprise. Behind the creature he could see other men laden with sacks from their pillage, arrayed around a tall, monstrous chieftain. Other cottages were burning, too. The beasts growled gutturally to each other and glanced anxiously up the road.

"He killed three," Orsus choked out, one hand brandishing the stolen dagger and the other clenched tightly against the hole in his gut. "I will have two more of you to pay his debt."

The Tharn raised its axe, but the chieftain stopped him with a sudden bark. The Tharn snarled at Orsus, then turned and dashed out after his fellows as they raced for the trees. In a heartbeat they were gone, like shadows in the darkness.

Orsus collapsed to his knees, alone in the burning ruin, watching the empty doorway numbly. He wanted to lie down, to forget everything and die. He clutched his still-bleeding wound with one hand and his mother's hand with the other, and the world grew dim and silent. It was cold, he knew, but he couldn't feel it. He couldn't feel anything. He never wanted to feel anything ever again.

The last thing he saw was the men from the village, armed with axes and rifles, trying to pull him from the burning wreckage. In his madness he stabbed one with the Tharn's bone dagger as they dragged him from his mother's side.



Aleksei Badian surveyed the village fair with a disinterested eye. "Nothing here but trash," he said with a sigh. "If people actually wanted these worthless knickknacks they'd sell them more than once a year at the harvest festival."

"Probably good food, though," said Orsus. He sniffed. "I can smell roast meat, and at least one of those stalls has hot pie."

Aleksei flipped him a coin, and Orsus caught it deftly. He was only fifteen, but he was the biggest man on Aleksei's crew, and one of his most trusted agents. "Get me a pie then. Lamb if they have it. Come back with apple and I'll cut your hands off."

Orsus looked at the coin, far too much for a single pie. "What do you want, ten?"

"I want happy employees," Aleksei said with a smile. "Bring me a pie, and then . . . whatever." He leered. "Buy yourself something pretty."

Orsus shrugged and walked into the crowd. Aleksei was rarely this free with his money, but they'd had a profitable run last night and he was in a good mood. Someone had tried to ship goods through the valley without paying the kayazy tolls, and Aleksei's bratya had given their sleeping caravan an unmistakable message that this was not to happen again. Orsus had especially impressed him by overturning an entire wagon, all by himself, spilling out the cargo and breaking the wheels and axles against the rocks on the side of the road. They'd even taken a few trophies—just coins and a few raw materials, nothing traceable—and so Aleksei was in a mood to reward them. Orsus bought his boss a lamb pie, fresh from a squat black oven and piping hot, and jingled the ample change in his fist, wondering how to spend it.

He thought about a pie of his own or a fat brown cake full of raisins and nuts, but Orsus had been an orphan for five years, scrimping and saving for every penny; he was too careful with his money to waste it on such a luxury. A skewer of meat would be more useful, but still not the most economical. He wandered the fair, shoving his way through the crowd, looking through the stalls for new blankets or dishes or something he really needed, and then he saw her.

The center of the fair was an open square with a wide wooden floor, perfect for the stomping

dances favored by the mountain villages. That floor was full now of whirling, stomping couples and a trio of musicians with their instruments: a violin, an accordion, and a tambourine. They were playing the *kareyshka*, and a crowd gathered to watch. Near the edge of them, clapping her hands and laughing, was the most beautiful girl Orsus had ever seen. Her hair was brown and red and gold in the sunlight, like a forest in autumn, and her eyes lit up with a brightness and joy that made him long to see them closer. He stared, captivated, and in a sudden fit of madness he walked to a flower stall and slapped down his money, pointing to a crown of chamomile.

“That crown, and quickly.”

“I just bought that,” said another young man, tapping the coin he’d placed on the table—slight underneath, Orsus noticed, his own coin. Orsus slid it out, so that his own money clinked down on the wooden table, and handed the coin back to the man.

“I think you’re mistaken.”

The young man raised an eyebrow, his lips curling into an angry sneer. “You think just because you’re so big you can barge in here and get whatever you want?”

“Yes, I do.”

The man faltered, staring at Orsus’ thick lumberjack muscles, but seemed to swallow his fear. He placed his money back on the florist’s table.

Orsus felt the rage growing inside him, just as it had that night in the raid, just as it always did when anybody threatened something that was his. He wanted to shove the man down; he wanted to crush his hands and snap his arms and stomp on his chest until his ribs cracked to splinters and his guts oozed like jelly. The world turned red. He heard the warning growl of some massive mountain wolf, and the arrogant young rival muttered something about daisies and scuttled off into the crowd, pale-faced and sweating. Orsus almost chased him—his foot was already rising from the ground—but he stopped. The enemy was gone.

What was I thinking? he wondered, feeling the wrath drain away. *What would she have said if I started a fight right here? My mother hated it when I fought. Maybe this girl is the same?*

He took the crown of chamomile and found her again in the crowd, still clapping her hands to the music. Other boys in the village often gave gifts and flowers to their girls, but Orsus had never had one to give things to. For all he knew this girl had a beau already, but as he saw her again he realized he didn’t care. He weaved toward her through the crowd, and when he reached her he held out the crown, simply and soundlessly, too overwhelmed to speak.

She looked at him, and the world smiled.

“Is that for me?”

“Yes,” he said awkwardly and swallowed again. He cleared his throat. “My name is Orsus.”

“My name is Lola,” said the girl. She took the crown, brushing his finger with her own, and laid the flowers on top of her head with a laugh. “How do I look?”

“Like a queen.”

Lola smiled again, cocking her head to the side as she considered him.

“Orsus,” she said at last, holding out her hand. “Would you like to dance?”



PART TWO

“We don’t know where he came from,” said Kovnik Harch. “He just walked into Korsk with the two antiques and started scaring the citizens. We didn’t know where else to bring him.”

Kovnik Polten nodded, glancing into the yard where the guest—he wasn’t exactly a prisoner, as he had yet to do anything illegal—stood in the shadow of two old steamjacks: a battered Arktur precursor to the Kodiak, looking like its two giant metal fists had seen more than their share of battles, and one even more ancient, a laborjack by the look of it. He could see why the people on the streets were frightened—the man was as big as a bear and dressed like one to boot. The axe he carried looked heavier than half of the new recruits running drills in the field beyond. “You did the right thing bringing him to me,” Polten said. “Not every man with a ’jack is a threat to the populace, but this one doesn’t look like every man.”

“Thank you, sir.” Officer Harch stood straight and saluted, snapping his heels together with admirable precision. Polten smiled again at the man’s military fidelity and waved for him to follow. As he began the slow walk out of his office, across the field to the stranger. The day was warm, and Polten enjoyed the sensation of sun on his shoulders. The cold made them ache, but he was proud that the aches came as much from old injuries as from age. *A dead soldier is a man who did his duty, but an old kommander used to say, but a wounded soldier is a man who did his duty intelligently enough not to get himself killed.* Battle was violence, but war was violence applied with brains. Polten had battled enough to collect an impressive set of scars and made war enough that when the former finally caught up to him he found himself back in Korsk, training new soldiers and managing the flow of the kingdom’s vast wartime resources.

Heh, he thought, “wartime resources.” As if there are any other kind.

“Where did you find him?” Polten asked as they trudged across the field.

“Our watchmen spotted him in the outskirts of the city long before he got close enough to do any harm,” said Harch, “but since he wasn’t acting drunk or violent they let him through. He seemed like a woodsman or a trapper, though a curious one. It wasn’t until he reached the market at the Plaza of Heroes that the citizens started complaining. No one wanted to go near him, as you can imagine, and the farmers said their business was ruined.”

“Never threaten a man’s coin,” said Polten, just a hint of sourness bleeding into his voice. He didn’t begrudge anyone their livelihood, but he did grow tired of hearing about it. “You approached him and asked him to leave?”

“We asked his business first. He said he was exploring, but he didn’t seem to mean it in the ‘looking for bargains in the marketplace’ kind of way, if you catch my meaning. His accent places him from the deep backwoods, and he’s certainly never been to Korsk before. I can almost believe by the way he looks around at things that he’s never even heard of it before. He claims he’s Khadoran, but he

doesn't seem to really understand what Khador is—not politically, at least. He's a woodsman, and he's . . . exploring. He's exploring us. He looks at Korsk as if it's just a really crowded stretch of treeless forest.”

“Interesting,” Polten said, though he wasn't sure what to make of it yet. He'd met Kossites in the far north with a similar lack of political knowledge, but this man was different. “And the steamjacks?”

“They're definitely his, or at any rate they obey him. I don't know much about 'jack marshaling, but I can't see how he's commanding them, but it's a close relationship.”

“That's an old 'jack,” said Polten, studying the laborjack as they drew closer. “Laika chassis probably geared for hauling rather than lifting, and obviously modified for cold weather, but there's something . . .” He peered at it closely, spotting an odd bolt here, an unusual welding line there. “It must have been heavily repaired, of course, but if I'm not mistaken it's had a custom refit as well. Primitive but competent. I wouldn't be surprised if our woodsman did the job himself.”

“You know your 'jacks, sir,” said Harch.

“You came to the same conclusions?”

“No, sir.” Harch wore a stiff expression. “I'm afraid I don't know 'jacks at all. But you seem to know what you're talking about.”

“That,” said Polten, “is how I ended up an officer.” He stopped near the stranger, noting the abnormally large contingent of soldiers standing watch nearby. The mysterious woodsman turned to face him, drawing himself up to full height: well over seven feet, and shaven menacingly bald under the massive brown bearskin he was using as a coat.

“Good afternoon,” Polten said, doing his best not to feel intimidated by the stranger's size and fierce expression—not to mention the absolutely massive axe, even larger than Polten had expected, which the stranger held casually over one shoulder. On closer inspection he could have sworn the axe was mechanical, but where would a woodsman get mechanika? Polten swallowed his sudden apprehension and spoke. “Welcome to the heart of the Kingdom of Khador.”

“The heart of Khador is her people,” the stranger said, “though your city certainly has plenty of those.”

Interesting answer, thought Polten, though again, he wasn't sure what to make of it. He could tell right away that the man wasn't stupid; his eyes and face seemed to crackle with an intense intelligence. His words and behaviors seemed different because his life and experience had been so different. This mystery only grew more and more intriguing.

“My associate here has been telling me a bit about you,” he said, gesturing to Harch, “but I'm afraid there's much we still don't know. Allow me to introduce myself: I am Kovnik Harald Polten, of the Korsk Winter Guard. And you are?”

“Orsus Zoktavir,” said the stranger. “Of nothing.”

“I see. And where precisely do you come from?”

“Khador.”

“Khador is the largest nation in western Immoren. I'm afraid you'll have to narrow it down a bit for me.”

“The forest,” said Zoktavir.

Polten raised an eyebrow. “Which one? Blackroot Wood? The Shadowweald? Scarsfell?”

“A big one. I lived alone there for fourteen years.”

“Any particular village of origin? You'll excuse me for prying.”

“No,” said Zoktavir. “And no.” He looked at Polten with eyes as hard as steel, and the old officer could tell he wasn't going to get any more information on that topic. He nodded. “Very well.”

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