



BASED ON THE AWARD-WINNING



GAME

THE WARCASTER CHRONICLES



VOLUME TWO

THE BUTCHER OF KHARDOV

BY DAN WELLS





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THE BUTCHER OF KHARDOV

DAN WELLS

Cover by

SVETLIN VELINOV

Illustrated by

MARIUSZ GANDZEL

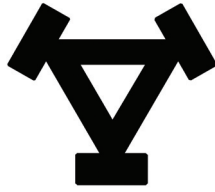






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PART ONE

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. One 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

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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 ox, 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—"

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"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 it 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.

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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—an 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

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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 her 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 if 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 at 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.

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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 outlaws 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

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back toward the alcove, blocking and redirecting, 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.

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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 out the snow.



"Jack!"

Orsus ignored him, raising his heavy axe and chopping down again on the massive log. He hated it 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 ninety 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.

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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 mechanics 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. "Molonochnaya, just after dark. We're not even fighting anyone, just . . . accelerating a few design flaws in their 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

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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 if 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 I 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*

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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 this 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

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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 got 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."

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“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.”

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“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, with the prisoner bound safely in the courtyard?”

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“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 a 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 onto cargo boats—nothing less will hold him, and nothing less than a Man-O-War can hold those chains. I 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.*

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“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—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. He 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

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bring down heavy warjacks. Forty Winter Guard, not as an honor guard but as a real fighting force, led by our best kommanders, 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

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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, an 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

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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, boogymen 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, scabbling 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, their 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.

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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 Agnieska 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. Agnieska grabbed the girl, practically smothering her to keep her quiet, and though Orsus could barely see them 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

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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.

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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 her. 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, then 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 this 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—if Orsus let them in, it

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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 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. 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

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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' 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's going to leave now* when suddenly the Tharn drew a jagged bone dagger from its

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belt, walked to him impassively, and stabbed him in the stomach. No familiar emotion registered on the thing's face; it 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 to 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 Agnieszka's body up from the cellar, to save his meal from the rats, and threw it down by the bag. 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.



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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 others, 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, 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."

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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 villagers. 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

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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—slightly underneath, Orsus noticed, his own coin. Orsus slid it out, so that his own money clinked down onto 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’d started a fight right here? My mother hated it when I fought. Maybe this girl is the same?*

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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?"

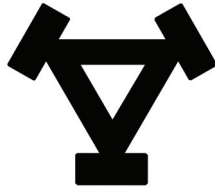
"Yes," he said awkwardly and swallowed again. He cleared his throat. "My name is Orsus."

"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 those 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 Arktus, precursor to the Kodiak, looking like its two giant metal fists had seen more than their share of battle, and one even more ancient, a laborjack by the look of it. He could see why the people on the street 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 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*, his 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

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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, so 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

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it closely, spotting an odd bolt here, an unusual welding line there. “It’s 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 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 Korsik Winter Guard. And you are?”

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“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.”

He tried another angle of approach. “I was admiring your steamjack as I walked over here—that’s an old Laika, isn’t it?”

Zoktavir furrowed his brow. “How did you know her name?”

“Her name?” Polten stared at him in confusion for half a second before deducing the man’s thought process. “Laika is the name of a steamjack chassis, a . . . group of steamjacks, if you will, all using the same basic model. Your other is called an Arktus.”

Zoktavir paused a moment, as if analyzing this new piece of information. “That one is called Dimyuka, and I see you have one very similar to it.” He pointed down the field, where a squad of soldiers was drilling with a Kodiak—slightly larger than the Arktus, and far more sophisticated, but still quite similar. Polten had rarely seen such a keen eye for ‘jacks on a backwoods peasant. “Laika is the only ‘jack of this model I’ve ever seen,” said Zoktavir, in a voice that sounded hungry for more information. “Even here.”

“The Laika is an old design,” Polten said. “I don’t think I’ve seen one in working condition in at least ten, maybe fifteen years, and even that one was on its last legs.”

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Zoktavir smiled, a toothy, terrifying expression that made him look like a hungry wolf. “She does break down a lot.”

“Do you mind telling me where you got her?”

“The ones you have in here are smarter.”

Polten blinked. “Excuse me?”

“The ‘jacks here in your training yard,” said Zoktavir, gesturing at a nearby Juggernaut and a more heavily armored design called a Devastator, standing silently by the barracks gates where the guards on duty could use them in an emergency. “The ‘jacks we passed in the city have bigger brains than Laika, but the ones in here have *smarter* brains.” He looked back at Polten. “They’re different, and more dangerous.”

Polten’s first thought was, *How in Morrow’s name can he tell that?* but his second thought came quickly enough to supersede it: *This man is a warcaster.*

That was the only way a man could tell what a ‘jack was thinking, as far as Polten knew, but there was simply no way this untrained yokel was a warcaster. Polten kept his face calm. “The models you see here in the training yard are military. They’re a little more sophisticated than the old models you’re accustomed to, designed with quicker reflexes and a more autonomous cortex.” He shot a glance at Harch, then looked back at Zoktavir. “You have a good eye for ‘jacks.”

Zoktavir studied the warjacks for a moment, then turned back to Polten with a serious expression. “You’ve trained them well,” he said. “They won’t listen to me.”

Polten controlled his reaction, though inside he was reeling at the man’s tacit confession. The policeman was not so disciplined.

“Tears of mercy,” said Harch, “he’s a warcaster.”

Polten sighed. There was no harm in the outburst, he supposed, but he had hoped the younger officer would display more decorum. Polten ran through the list of tasks this stranger’s nature prompted: He would need to contact the Greylords, who would be interested in at least talking to

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Zoktavir, possibly recruiting him for official training. It would fall to Polten to keep him here until the Greylords arrived, and if the giant woodsman decided to leave, that detention could get ugly very quickly. He would have to think of ways to stall the man.

Polten was opening his mouth to send for a messenger when the woodsman spoke.

“I have come to join your army.”

Polten stopped short. “That’s . . . very good. I’ll call the Greylords.” He smiled. “I can’t fault any man for his love of Khador.”

“I have nothing left but Khador,” said Zoktavir. He brought his massive axe down from his shoulder as lightly as if it were a walking stick and planted the vicious mechanical blade in the grass at his feet. “I have given my loyalty to many things, and Khador is the only one left to me. There is nothing more important than loyalty.”



Aleksei Badian’s voice cut through the room like a dagger. “There is nothing more important than loyalty. What we’re about to do, we do for each other, and for me who supports you, and for the bosses who support me. The kayazy are businessmen, and as their employees we are not crooks, and we are not sergeants. We are a team, bratya: brothers. Each one of you is a member of this team. When we get into a fight and the knives come out and blood starts to flow, you may think you’re the most important member of that team and try to save yourself, but you’re not. The guy next to you is. You try to save him. You watch his back. You help him do his job the best he possibly can, and you can do it because there’s another guy doing the same thing for you, and there’s another guy doing the same thing for him, and on and on and on until every last one of you is safe, and you’re not individuals anymore, you’re a team. You stay loyal to this bratya and we live; you betray your brothers, and I will see to it myself that you die. Do we understand each other?”

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Six voices answered him, Orsus' mingling strongly with the others. "Yes."

"Do we trust each other?"

"Yes!" Except there were only five voices that time. Orsus and the others looked to the last man, Gendyarev Rabin, who shook his head sourly.

"I trust most of the team," said Gendyarev, "but not him." He pointed at Orsus. "Not the kid."

"Gendy," Aleksei said, "he's twice your size."

"He's fourteen years old," said Gendyarev. "Completely untested. Sure, he can beat any one of us in a wrestling match, but how do we know he'll follow orders? How do we know he won't get scared and run—or worse, get too cocky and screw the whole thing up? How do we know he won't go talking about it tomorrow in the village?"

Isidor Lukashenko, a razor of a man, laughed snidely. "Is that any worse than you getting drunk last month and trying to impress that girl in the tavern? You told her two of our hits before we dragged you away."

"I've proven my loyalty a hundred times," said Gendyarev. "This kid's done nothing but grow."

"You were a first-timer once, too," said Aleksei.

"I was eighteen!"

"What do you want me to do?" Orsus said, and his voice was strong enough—not loud, but powerful in the small back room—that the rest of the thugs grew quiet. "Aleksei's given me my job, my food, everything I have in the world. You want me to prove myself, just say the word." He fixed Gendyarev with his coldest stare. "I bet I'm willing to do a lot more than you are."

"If willingness was all it took I wouldn't doubt you," said Gendyarev, "but we're not just roughing up a warehouse watchman and knocking over a few bags of grain. Nazarov hired thugs of his own—he knows we're after him, and he knows what it takes to beat us, and he's ready. I'd rather go in one man short than with a man who doesn't know what he's doing."

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“Do you trust me?” asked Aleksei.

Gendyarev nodded, though his voice lacked enthusiasm. “Of course I do.”

“Then stop arguing. The kid goes because I say he goes, and I wouldn’t send him if I didn’t trust him to back you up. So either you’re okay with the kid, or you’re not as okay with me as you say you are.”

Aleksei left the words hanging in the air, letting the full implication sink in. After a long pause, Gendyarev threw up his hands.

“I’m okay with the kid.” He shot Orsus a fierce glance. “Don’t let us down.”

“I won’t,” Orsus growled.

Aleksei seemed satisfied, and the group did a final check of their gear. Orsus was armed with a long slim dagger, perfect for quiet kills, but the plan Aleksei had laid out seemed more likely to result in a full-on brawl than a quiet assassination. He wished he had a club, or better yet the thick long-handled axe he used on Aleksei’s logging crew, but if a dagger was all he had, he’d fight with a dagger. It wouldn’t be the first time, no matter what Gendyarev said.

The group was dressed in black and brown, and when they slipped out the back door into the midnight alley they blended almost seamlessly with the darkness. Orsus was the only one not wearing a beard and mustache, and his face shone white in the moonlight until he pulled his hood down low over his eyes and followed the others in silence.

Aleksei’s operation was based in the village of Suvorin, Orsus’ home. From there he controlled the entire valley and as much of the forest around it as one man feasibly could. Tonight, they would strike in the valley’s largest village, a riverside shipping hub called Telk—not as big as the towns some travelers spoke of, far away in the heart of the kingdom, but here in the northern forests it was the biggest thing around. Aleksei’s informers had let him know that Fanin Nazarov, the Telk shipping master—so called because he owned the town’s one and only warehouse—was skimming the profits before passing them along

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to Aleksei. Aleksei had approached him to discuss the matter, and Nazarov had turned him out with armed thugs. It was the biggest threat to Aleksei's control in nearly ten years, and he was answering it in kind. No one in that warehouse would survive the night.

Orsus said a silent prayer to Menoth that he would not disprove Aleksei's faith in him.

Nazarov knew they were coming, like Gendyarev had said, so the group split in half before closing in on the warehouse: Isidor, the crag-faced Khirig, and a one-eyed man named Tselikovskiy turned left down another dark alley, while Orsus went with Aleksei, Gendyarev, and the one called Emin. Emin led the way, keeping watch with eyes and ears honed by years of hunting in the deep woods. If Nazarov decided to try a preemptive strike, Emin would know almost as soon as Nazarov did.

Aleksei's group circled around the village a bit, to throw off any pursuers and give Isidor's group a chance to get in place. When the prearranged time arrived, Aleksei signaled to Emin, and the hunter led them to the wide loading yard in front of the warehouse, where they paused in the darkness to survey the scene.

"No guards," said Gendyarev.

"They're inside," Emin said, "watching through the slats in the windows. He knows we could take out a single guard before help could get out to him, so he pulled them all in for safety." He looked at Aleksei. "He's scared."

"He's an idiot," said Aleksei. "He knows we're coming and he knows where we're coming from—the windows facing the loading yard should be filled with gunners. Draw us out with a lone guard by the door and murder us with a volley from behind."

Orsus silently resolved never to let Aleksei place him on guard duty.

"It's all the same in the end," said Gendyarev, "and better for us to have them all inside anyway."

"There's something in there," Orsus said, peering closely at the wide closed door.

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"Of course," Gendyarev snorted, "that's what we've just been talking about."

"But I mean . . ." He couldn't explain it, and thus didn't say anything more, but he couldn't shake the feeling that something inside was . . . *waiting* for him.

"Are we going to call out?" asked Emin.

Aleksei shook his head. "I've tried talking, and Nazarov wasn't interested. I'll let Isidor announce our presence."

They waited, and sure enough, Orsus saw a flash of orange in the sky behind the warehouse. An arrow soaked in pitch and lit with a burning brand. Emin crouched low and readied his rifle.

"Get ready," Aleksei said softly, drawing his two long daggers. "The fun starts . . . now!"

The man-sized door on the front of the warehouse flew open and Emin fired in almost the same breath. A shadowed figure dropped to the ground with a cry, and another man dragged him back in while Emin reloaded. The orange glow behind the warehouse grew larger and brighter. There was only a small back door, and Isidor's group could watch it easily: one man to light the arrows, one man to shoot them, and one to kill anyone who tried to escape. The only other exit was here, both a small office door and two-story loading door for the warehouse. It was their only escape, and because the yard fronted the river it was their only means of putting out the fire. Nazarov had to do both if he wanted his rebellion to mean anything.

Aleksei cackled viciously.

The door opened again, and again Emin fired into the blackness, but there was nobody there; a heartbeat later an armed dockworker stepped into the doorway, raising his rifle and thinking he was clever, only to die when Gendyarev dropped him with a deafening blast from his blunderbuss. Aleksei laughed again while his men reloaded.

Orsus heard a sound in the alley behind them. He turned to see a pair of black-clad footpads creeping toward them in the darkness.

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“Looks like Nazarov’s not as stupid as we thought,” said Gendyarev, opening the breach of his rifle and sliding in a powder cartridge.

“Keep your eyes on that door,” said Aleksei. “Orsus, why don’t you show us why I brought you along?”

Orsus stood tall in the narrow alley, nearly filling it from side to side, and sized up the two footpads. One wore a hood, the other a tattered brown headband, but beyond that they were identical—dirty leather clothes, thin leather boots, and short glittering daggers. No one in the north would dress like that, Orsus knew; they were probably river men, hired off the last barge. Orsus crouched a bit, lowering his center of gravity, and held his dagger loosely in front of him.

Headband moved first, feinting left and then plunging right, hoping for a quick first blood, but Orsus anticipated and kept his guard up, slashing and forcing the man to keep his distance. Hood dashed in quickly behind him, leaping to the left and stabbing ferociously at Orsus’ unprotected arm. Orsus let this attack go by, practically flattening himself against the right-side wall as if he didn’t care about protecting his friends at all, and Hood took the bait, overextending his thrust at a new target of opportunity and unbalancing himself in the process. Orsus reversed his sidestep, smashing his fist into the teetering footpad’s arm, dropping him to the ground and planting his giant northman’s boot on the man’s dagger hand. Headband pressed his attack while Hood screamed in pain, but Orsus’ reach was longer and his arms much faster than his size suggested. A few slashes later and Headband was backing away, clutching his face and cursing. Orsus paused to smash his free foot into Hood’s screaming face, then leaped a few steps forward to slam the other footpad’s head into the brick wall. The entire fight had taken just a few short seconds.

Emin and Gendyarev fired almost simultaneously; Orsus whipped around to see the warehouse’s giant loading doors burst open in a hail of splinters as something enormous charged through it without even bothering to open it. Orsus had just enough time to register something

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tall, vaguely man-shaped, and glistening like oily metal before Nazarov's full mob of brigands swarmed out behind it and into the yard. Aleksei screamed a battle cry, and the four thugs charged into the fray.

Nazarov had ten men, by Orsus' quick count, and a full six of them ran straight to the river with buckets while the other four pressed the attack alongside the giant metal monster. Orsus had never seen a steamjack in real life, though he'd heard plenty of stories: self-propelled machines with the strength of a hundred men, powered by a red-hot furnace where a heart should be. Nazarov probably used this one as a massive longshoreman, but its obvious combat applications sent a thrill down Orsus' spine, even though it was in enemy hands. He felt an instant attachment to it, almost a kinship, that he couldn't explain.

The towering metal monster lurched forward, reaching out with a giant hand to knock Gendyarev away from the man he was fighting with. Gendy managed to scramble away, but only because Aleksei fought back his human pursuer. Gendyarev was bleeding freely from his forehead, and he clutched his arm in pain as he staggered to his feet. Orsus rushed the steamjack with a roar, confident that he could have some kind of effect against it, but it was as solid as a rooted tree. Emin screamed a warning, and Orsus rolled away just in time to dodge another of the steamjack's massive iron fists.

"Stop the bucket brigade!" shouted Aleksei, pointing with one dagger while plunging the second into a brawler's neck. Orsus looked at the line of dockworkers gathering water in the river, then back at the steamjack. "Forget the 'jack," Aleksei screamed, "stop the water!"

Orsus growled but looked toward the fire. With the door gone he could see deep into the cavernous warehouse. The back wall was only faintly ablaze—Isidor's arrows hadn't proved as effective as they'd anticipated. Nazarov's men would have no trouble putting out the fire, and then the battle would become even more one-sided. Their only hope of success was to stop the buckets now and let the fire grow out of control; they might

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defeat the enemy when they broke ranks to extinguish it or flee. Orsus knew this, and yet . . .

The steamjack managed to grab Emin with one of its arms and raise him, screaming, into the air. It clamped down on his flailing leg with its other arm and tore the limb off almost casually, shocking even Nazarov's thugs into a moment of silence. Orsus seemed to feel it—the tearing tension as the body came apart in his hands—and took a step toward the 'jack in a stupor of awe and confusion.

"The water!" Aleksei screamed. "Go!"

Orsus turned with a growl of frustration and launched himself toward the bucket brigade. Three dockworkers had already run back into the warehouse, a bucket of water in each hand, but the other three were still on the dock. One of those set down his bucket and turned on Orsus, drawing a hunting knife to defend his comrades, but Orsus lowered his head and barreled into him, taking the knife on the solid bone of his forearm. The wicked blade sliced a wide flap of skin but did no real damage, and Orsus simply kept running, crushing the man's windpipe with his other fist before pushing him backward off the edge of the dock. The other two water-carriers were crouching down and facing the wrong direction, so he finished them even more easily, cracking their heads against each other before shoving their limp bodies into the river. At the same instant he staggered, the image of a different battle than the one he was fighting imposing itself upon him. The sudden change of perspective made him dizzy. He gripped the edge of the dock for support, but the feeling was gone almost as soon as it came.

The battle behind him had become a nightmare. With Emin lying broken on the ground, it was all Gendy and Aleksei could do to dodge the steamjack's bone-crushing hands and the vicious, slashing daggers of the thugs swarming around its feet. It reminded Orsus of his sudden flash of vertigo, as if he'd seen that same fight just seconds ago, but from the lofty perspective of the 'jack. He struggled to understand what was going on,

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but he didn't have time to puzzle through it. The three other water-carriers returned with empty buckets, and when they saw Orsus they fanned out to surround him. Nazarov was among them, smiling grimly. Aleksei's group was outnumbered, and even if the warehouse burned to the ground it wouldn't hurt them one bit: Nazarov would simply kill Aleksei and step into his place as the new kayazy boss, backed up not just by cutthroats but also by an unstoppable metal demon. Orsus watched it fight as his human antagonists circled him warily; it was huge, and surprisingly fast for its size, but there was something off. Its reactions were late—not just slow, but late. Aleksei would dodge to the side, and a moment later the steamjack would follow. The same agile speed, just . . . late, as if the jack were reacting a full second after its targets.

Or it was reacting to something else altogether.

Nazarov gestured at the dagger in Orsus' bloody hand. "You look like you know how to use that knife," he said, then spread his arms to reveal a pistol shoved into his waistband. "But you know what they say about bringing a knife to a gunfight."

Orsus nodded at the weapon. "How fast can you draw that gun?"

"One second," Nazarov said. "Shoot you through the face in two."

"Then it sounds like I have two seconds' worth of knife fight before that gun becomes an issue."

He bolted forward and Nazarov dropped his buckets, reaching for the pistol. Orsus ducked low under the first man's clumsy attack, sweeping the knife across his belly; the man staggered back, trying to hold in his guts while Orsus moved to the second man, slicing his arm, his chest, and his face in a frenzied blur of steel. The attacker howled, clutching his bleeding eye, and Orsus whipped his knife into Nazarov's heart in the exact moment the man fired his gun. His aim was high and wild, thanks to the ten inches of glistening steel piercing all the way through his chest and out his back.

"Two seconds," said Orsus. "Knife wins."



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Aleksei screamed, and Orsus looked across the yard to see him down on the ground, a knife in his leg, the steamjack crushing Gendyarev to a pulp in its giant iron fist. The other fighters had all gone down, torn to ribbons by Aleksei's legendary skill with a dagger, but that skill wasn't going to save him from the two-ton monstrosity already turning toward him.

A flash of movement caught Orsus' eye, high over Aleksei's shoulder, and Orsus glanced up to see another man crouched in a window, peering out from the darkness with his hands raised in full view of the 'jack. The mysterious man held his hand up straight, palm forward, and a moment later the steamjack dropped Gendyarev's mangled body. The man punched his fist forward, and a moment later the steamjack lumbered forward, advancing on Aleksei with ground-shaking force.

In a single blinding instant, Orsus knew what was happening. Nazarov had set a trap, exactly as Aleksei had mocked him for not doing, but he'd filled the windows with something far more devastating than gunmen: the steamjack's controller. Poised in that window he could see the entire battlefield, and the 'jack could see him, easily watching and obeying hand signals that told it what to do.

The 'jack stomped toward Aleksei. Orsus had mere seconds to act. He shoved Nazarov's body aside, ready to dash toward the battle, but in a flash he was inside the machine's head again, seeing through its eyes, feeling the titanic strength of its steam-driven pistons and gears. He reached toward Aleksei with a crushing metal hand . . .

. . . and stopped. Orsus told it to stop, and it did. He blinked in surprise, suddenly back on the ground, staring up instead of down, and dropped to his knees as the vertigo washed over him. High in the window, the 'jack marshal gestured frantically and called out, but the steamjack refused to obey. Without knowing how he knew it, Orsus was sure the thing was waiting patiently for its next command . . . from *him*.

Aleksei opened one eye, peering up from where he cringed on the ground, and looked at the steamjack standing over him. "What happened?"

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Orsus swallowed, still getting his bearings. “There was a man in an upper window controlling the ‘jack.” He rose unsteadily to his feet. “He’s . . . not anymore.”

Aleksei grimaced, surveying the carnage in the loading yard. Gendyarev groaned, somehow still alive despite his injuries. The rest of the yard was a bloodbath. “What, did he see how badly he was losing and decide to join our side?”

“No,” said Orsus, walking slowly toward him. “The ‘jack did.”

“What?”

“I don’t understand it either.” He placed a reverent hand on the ‘jack’s leg, then glanced up at the window. “He’s gone.”

Aleksei pulled the dagger from his leg with a grunt and flipped it toward Orsus with more nonchalance than he could possibly be feeling. “Find him and kill him. I don’t want any of these traitors to survive the night.”

Orsus caught the dagger but shook his head. “We need him alive. He needs to teach us how to control this . . .” He looked at the nameplate etched into the ‘jack’s leg. “. . . Laika.”

Aleksei laughed, though it quickly turned to a growl of pain as he tried to put weight on his wounded leg. “Orsus, you may have just turned this horrifying defeat into our greatest success in years. I think you’re going to have a long, happy future in this organization.”

“Thank you,” said Orsus. “I think about the future a lot.”



Lola pulled another giant shirt from the pile of wet laundry, stretching it out like a sail as she pinned it on the clothesline. “Orsus,” she said, “do you ever think about the future?”

Orsus looked up from the side of the wide wooden washtub. “I certainly never think about the past,” he said, scrubbing another shirt vigorously against the washboard. It was kind of her to help him, the village orphan, with his laundry, but he’d been doing it on his own for five years, ever since

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his family . . . well, that was part of the past he didn't like to think about. He looked up at Lola. Her hair was tied back to keep it clear of the wet laundry but was still ringed with summer flowers and framed her face in a red-gold halo. He smiled as he couldn't help but do every time he saw her, and she smiled back shyly. "The present's pretty great, though," he said, then made a look of mock consternation. "Unless you mean that in the future you might do my laundry for me, instead of just hanging it while I do all the real work?"

She threw a damp sock in his face, laughing at the loud wet slap it made against his eyes, and he laughed with her, more peaceful and carefree than he'd felt in . . . ever, really. His life before Lola had been a cold grey trudge through a world all too eager to kill him; it hadn't been a life at all, really, just a lack of death. But the six months since he'd met her, and the two months since they'd been officially courting, had opened his eyes to a kind of happiness he'd never known existed. It was more than just not being alone. Lola wasn't a friend or a fellow worker or a member of Aleksei's crew, she was a part of him. Finding her had been like finding his second half.

The thought that any part of him, even by association, could be so soft and kind and loving had changed the way he thought about the entire world.

Lola lifted the limp sock from his face with a laugh, then plucked the scrubbed shirt from his hands and unfurled it with a flourish. "I could never wash this much shirt in one go," she said. "It's like a giant flannel blanket. You could keep a whole family warm with this thing—two kids at least, maybe three if they're small."

"Is that how many you want?" The words were out of his mouth almost before he knew what he was saying, but only because he'd been thinking them for weeks—for months, if he was being honest. He'd never wanted a family before, but with Lola? He wanted everything he'd never dreamed.

Lola stared at him, shocked by the hint of marriage, but he'd come to know her eyes as well as he'd ever known anything, and the light shining

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forth from them now told him she was thrilled at the idea. Another smile crept into the corners of his mouth, but at the same time her smile faded. She turned away to face the clothesline, hanging the shirt silently with slim wooden clothespins.

“What’s wrong?”

She didn’t answer, softly fingering the hem of his hanging shirt, and just when the silence had stretched too long and he opened his mouth to ask again, she yanked the shirt down from the clothesline and brought it back to the washtub.

“It isn’t finished yet.”

Orsus wasn’t sure how to interpret her sudden change in behavior or what his shirt had to do with it, but he took the garment gently from her hands. “I scrubbed this one for nearly five minutes.”

Her voice was impassive. “There’s blood on the hem.”

“I worked on that spot for most of the five minutes.” He searched it out on the wet garment. “It won’t come out—”

“You’re a killer,” she said, and her impassive voice cracked just a fraction on the last cold word. She looked at him, and he at her, not knowing how to answer, until at last she pulled away and went back to the basket of clothes, fumbling for the next piece of wet laundry with fingers too shaky to work.

“I do jobs sometimes for Aleksei,” he said, “but it’s not like I’m a murderer.”

“Don’t think I haven’t thought about a life with you,” Lola said, “because I have.” She turned to face him, tears tracing tiny rivulets along her cheeks. The beauty and sadness of it broke his heart in two. “You’re a good man, Orsus, and a hard worker. You make me laugh, and you’ve even made me dinner.” She laughed at the memory, but with it came another glistening tear. She cleared her throat and breathed deep, adopting a firm, almost businesslike tone. “You’d be a fine husband, and a good father, and I’d share my life with you and wash your giant shirts and do everything I could to

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make you happy, but then . . .” She shook her head. “Then Aleksei would call, and you’d go off in the night, and I’d sit at home alone wondering if you were ever coming back, and how long it might take, and how many new splashes of blood would be on your shirt when you did.”

“You don’t have to worry about me, I know how to handle—”

“I tell you you’re a killer, and the only thing you can say in defense is that you’re good at it?”

The words were a slap in the face. Orsus fell silent.

“I’ve thought about this a lot,” she said softly, “and I guess I thought if I kept putting it off then this day would never come. I don’t want to be the shrew who gnaws your soul to pieces, and I don’t want to make you into something you’re not.” She put a hand on his chin, the way she always did, so soft and delicate, and his skin seemed to burn at the touch. “If it’s going to be the two of us then I want it to really be the two of us—not one controlling the other, but two souls joined.” She sniffed back tears and took another breath. “But this is too much, Orsus. Life and death. Love and murder. That can’t be a part of who I am.”

Orsus looked at his hands, too uncomfortable to look at her directly. He’d never wanted violence to be a part of his life, either; then one hellish night in a bloody Tharn raid had changed that course forever . . . but no. Even as he thought it, he knew it wasn’t true. He’d always been a fighter, wrestling with the neighbor kids, hunting with his father, even cutting trees with Aleksei’s logging crew was another way of breaking things down, of forcing them to fit, of using his strength against the world. The nighttime jobs with Aleksei weren’t beautiful or honorable, and he knew that, but he was good at them, better than he’d ever been at anything—better than anyone, he thought, and that was saying something.

He looked at Lola helplessly. “It’s what I know.”

“You know many things.”

“It’s what I’m good at.”

“I told you, I don’t want to hear how good—”

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"I know you don't want to hear it," he said, more loudly than he intended. He hoped she could hear that his voice held more pain than anger. "I know you don't want to hear how good I am at fighting, but that's not what I'm saying. I'm saying I'm not any good at anything *else*. Do you understand me? I've tried other jobs: cargo, 'smithing, everything this village has to offer, but I'm not . . ." He struggled to find the right words. "I'm not a steamjack. I'm more than just giant arms under giant shirts, but that's the only option I have here."

"We could leave."

"And go where? Every village is the same. Every job is the same. Even logging is just moving heavy things—an axe, a tree, a branch, a stump. My work with Aleksei is . . . I don't know how to describe this. It's like a song, with all the words and notes in their right, perfect place."

She frowned, confused, and he racked his brain for some way he could describe it to her.

"It's like the puzzle box I bought you for Giving Day—all the little wooden pieces so perfectly interlocked. It's not the punches or the stabs or the physical . . . anything, it's mind against mind. Plan against plan. Pitting your wits against another human being. Making that happen, and seeing that through, it's not about destruction at all. It's the most wonderful act of creation you've ever seen."

Her voice was bitter. "So you're just too brilliant *not* to kill people?"

"That's not what I'm saying."

"You're saying that a big man in a tiny village gets stuck with all the grunt work the oxen can't be bothered with, and I understand that and I'm sorry, but you're not the kind of person who has to sacrifice other people's lives just to get a thrill from his job. You don't have to kill to be happy."

"It's not about the killing—"

"But killing happens anyway, right?" Her eyes seemed to burn with indignation. "No matter how careful your plans and how intricate your

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puzzle box, something goes wrong and you have to kill to stay alive. Maybe not every time but every third time, every fifth, every hundredth—and it's still too many. Even when you don't kill anybody, you hurt them or break their things or ruin their lives. You're good at it because you're good at everything, Orsus, but it's not who you are, and it's not who I love."

The words rocked him back on his heels. All the times he'd dreamed of saying it, of hearing it, and this was how it happened—in a fight, locked in conflict, sobbed in hopeless desperation. It couldn't happen that way; he wouldn't let it. He would not rob the woman he cared about—the woman he loved—of the beauty this moment was supposed to have.

He rose to his feet. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

He reached her in a single stride, sweeping her up with his arms and lifting her into a kiss, perfect and passionate and glorious. He wanted to hold her forever, to melt into her body, to taste her soft, supple lips for the rest of his life. She held him tight and kissed him back, and he realized that he would do anything for this woman. That he would give up anything. Become anything.

"I love you," he said again.

"I love you, too," she murmured.

"I want to marry you, and have three children—four, if they're small, but they won't be because their father's a talking bear."

She laughed, her tears now tears of joy.

"And I'll stop working for Aleksei," he said more softly, though his voice crackled with intensity. "I'll give it all up—I'll tell him today if you want me to. I'll tell him right now. No more killing, no more fighting, no more violence, because you're right about me and that's not who I am."

"You could be a carver," she said.

"What?"

"A wood-carver. With a shop in village, making puzzle boxes for Giving Day and the other festivals."

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He smiled. "All those perfect pieces, in just the right spots. It would take a long time to earn the money to get started."

"What's time to us?" she said. "It'll take us that long just to finish washing your gigantic shirts."

He kissed her again.

"Will Aleksei let you stay on the logging crew?"

"I think so," he said. "I hope so. He's all about loyalty."

A slight frown passed over Lola's face, the smallest hint of worry, the tiniest shadow of despair.

And then it was gone.



"Ride!" Orsus shouted, spurring his warhorse forward. "Ride 'til your horse dies under you, and pray that we're not too late!" Behind them a vast army of Khadoran horsemen thundered through the valley, their horses hot and lathered, their weathered uniforms never touching their saddles as they stood in their stirrups and urged their mounts. Kommander Orsus Zoktavir had heard word of a Cygnaran-hired mercenary force attacking in southern Umbresk, and nothing would stand in his way. The other battalions of the Fifth Border Legion had been led astray by a decoy force, and now he would have to ride all night to reach the threatened towns in time. The infantry and warjacks couldn't keep pace and were following separately, hauled by wagons, but Orsus couldn't afford to wait. More than one horse, and even a handful of riders, would fall by the wayside before the desperate ride had finished.

Valleys opened and closed as they passed; farms drifted by in the darkness. Orsus drove his army, always faster, harder, and more fiercely, propelled by a single-minded madness. He would not arrive too late. He would not let innocents be slaughtered. Lola clanged against his back as he rode, a reassuring presence and a damning, overburdening weight. He would not let his charges be killed.

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Not again.

They smelled the smoke before they saw the fires, a dark pall keeping the brighter flames hidden until the army raced around the last corner, storming through the final valley like the host of Menoth's judgment. The Cygnaran incursion force, mostly composed of mercenaries, stood in the vast plain beyond the ruined village, camped for the night near the sizable Umbrean town of Vlasgrad but alerted to Orsus' approach by their scouts and already prepared for battle.

Towering warjacks stood arrayed among the troops, faintly illuminated by torchlight; hundreds of soldiers moved restlessly at their feet, a formless, shifting mass in the dark. Orsus scanned them quickly, almost subconsciously, cataloging their numbers and formations as he rode to the burning town. Homes and shops burned madly in the predawn, the great church of Morrow in the center of the village square now nothing but a crumbling, shattered mass. Adults screamed hoarsely for water, for bandages; children ran in terror from the destruction of everything they had ever known and loved.

Orsus reined his horse sharply to a stop and leaped down to the dirt, charging madly into a flaming cottage where a faint cry sounded from the wreckage. He shoved the burning timbers aside, heedless of the heat even as it singed and curled the edges of his cloak. The voice called out again, and he surged forward through the blaze. Three women lay screaming in a flameless corner, choking on smoke and too weak to escape. As Orsus approached them, a rafter crashed down in his path with a burst of cinders.

"Lola!"

He pulled the heavy axe from his back and attacked the rafter recklessly, sweeping it aside with a roar. The women reappeared before him, but with each heavy step the world flickered, the air wavering in the heat, the image twisting and revolving. *Step*. Three women. *Step*. Two women. *Step*.

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One woman.

Always one woman.

"Lola!"

"Why weren't you here?" Her voice was weak and faltering in the furnace heat, the summer flowers wilting in her hair. "Why weren't you here to save me?"

"I came as fast as I could. Let me take you—"

"I am already dead, Orsus."

"Then leave me in peace!"

"You should never have left me, Orsus. You betrayed me."

"I will save you!"

He gathered her up, her body light and fragile as it always was, every time, again and again. He brought her through the flames, through the heat and smoke and Urcaen itself, but when he laid her down upon the cold dark road it was not Lola but another face, three faces, soot-smudged and retching but alive.

Never Lola.

Again and again and again, but he never saved Lola.

Kovnik Bogdan dismounted next to him. "Well done, sir. You've saved them."

"She is dead."

"The village burns, but those who lived here are alive, Kommander. Our scouts have already circled the perimeter, and I've spoken with the mayor myself. The mercenary forces pulled back when they heard of our coming. They're ready for us, but we've saved hundreds of our people."

"She is dead, and we will have our revenge. Tell the men to form ranks."

"One villager is not the end—"

Orsus grabbed the man's collar with his iron-studded glove, lifting him. "One villager is everything, Kovnik! One villager is the kingdom." He threw Bogdan to the ground. "Tell the men to form ranks. We do not wait for dawn."

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Bogdan choked and gasped for air. "The horses are too ragged, Kommander. They will die before we reach the enemy!"

"Then we will fight on foot," said Orsus, his face a flashing horror in the firelight, "and when our feet give way we will fight upon our knees, and when our knees are bloody stumps we will crawl to the enemy and we will kill them with our teeth."

"But why, sir?"

"Because she is dead. Someone must be punished."

The kovnik staggered to his feet and shouted the command. The flagging forces took up the cry and stumbled into formation. Spears were uncovered, swords were unsheathed, guns were primed and loaded. Orsus strode to the edge of the village, Lola in hand, and when the fires rose up behind him his shadow fell dark and boundless upon the enemy.

"I have come for your lives!" he roared. *And they will never be enough.*

He did not wait for his army. Gripping Lola tightly, he bellowed a challenge and charged the foe alone, a Kodiak and a Marauder following close behind their master. Bullets ripped past him, against him, through him, but still he hit their lines like an artillery shell, scattering broken soldiers with each swing of his giant axe. The Marauder pounded a mercenary Nomad into scrap; the Kodiak met a charge of Steelhead cavalry, picking up the leader and throwing him back into their midst, horse and all. The Khadoran soldiers were shouting now, following their kommander, but Orsus ignored them; they would live or die on their own strength. It was time now for the only thing he'd ever been good at.

"That's not true," said Lola.

He screamed again to drown her out, and wrought the work of death upon his enemy.

By dawn the foe was scattered, broken, and dying on the field. There were stragglers to put down, and the men needed food and rest, but then . . .

"Are the horses ready, Kovnik?"

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Bogdan shook his head, too exhausted to speak.
“Have them saddled, then. We ride again at midday.”
Maybe this time we’ll save her.



“Molonochnaya,” said Orsus.

Aleksei nodded.

“You’re breaking equipment only? No broken legs, no injuries, no death?”

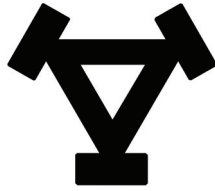
“None.”

Orsus glowered at the tavern floor. “A shop is expensive,” he said at last. “You spoke of a bonus.”

“One month’s pay.”

“You will give me two.” He stared Aleksei down, brooking no argument.

Aleksei paused, then nodded. “Two.” A cold grin broke across his face. “Good to have you back.”



PART THREE

“**T**he fortress is called Boarsgate,” said the newly minted Kommandant Frolova. “Ordic forces have held it for decades, but I am proud to say they have gone no further—this village, called Deshevek, is practically in Boarsgate’s shadow, but it has always remained devoutly Khadoran.” His voice, already cold, grew icy. “Until now.”

Kommander Orsus Zoktavir scowled at the map. “They’ve taken it?”

“I have received a report from spies in the village,” Frolova said. “It’s a vague report, with little to confirm it, but in this particular case I consider it worthy of our attention. Deshevek is not a village I am prepared to lose.”

Orsus turned toward the door. “I will root them out.”

Frolova frowned. “You don’t stand much on ceremony, do you, Zoktavir?”

Orsus looked back. “You wouldn’t tell me of spies if you didn’t want them dead. Our village is in danger, so I’m going to defend it. Or were you going to order me to do something other than serve the kingdom and kill her enemies?”

“The kingdom is served by more than death,” Frolova said. “If that were all she wanted, perhaps you would be the kommandant and I the kommander.” He paused, letting the restatement of their ranks speak for itself. If Orsus were a common soldier he’d be court-martialed for a comment like that, perhaps whipped, but he was a warcaster, one of the greatest weapons in the kingdom’s arsenal. He served Khador, just as he claimed, and he killed their enemies more effectively—more gleefully—than any other soldier under Frolova’s command. But his attitude was

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dangerous—not because he was insubordinate but because he didn't think. He saw problems and killed them, even when other solutions might be better. Someday he would go too far, ignore too many regulations, and the results would be disastrous. Frolova would need to consider a more proper form of reining him in, but there was no time now. This matter must be resolved.

"The village is worthy of our attention because there is talk of secession," Frolova said.

Orsus looked up sharply. "Khadoran turncoats," he said, chewing on the words as if he wanted to grind them into dust. Again, he moved toward the door. "They will be brought to justice."

"Only as a secondary objective," Frolova said. "My spies in the area are working to find their counterparts with more subtlety than you could bring to bear. I do not send you there for subtlety, Kommander Zoktavir, but to put the fear of Menoth deep in their hearts. They must see the might of Khador's armies. Remind them of their loyalty to the true source of their protection. These spies—these dissidents—must gain no ground among our people."

"They will find Khador more resilient than they expect," Orsus said.

"Be sure that they do. The kingdom is strong, but there are whispers of weakness—not among the faithful, certainly, but the outlying regions hear only rumors, often exaggerated through multiple tellings. The queen is young, and so the story emerges that she is too young; her advisors counsel her faithfully, and so the story emerges that they move her like a pawn. Show her power in the land, and these rumors will be quelled."

Orsus' eyes blazed with indignation. "Have you considered that these turncoats are planning more than secession?"

Frolova frowned. "I talk of turncoats, and you see a revolution."

"You talk of traitors," Orsus said, "and where there are a few traitors, there are always more. Disloyalty spreads like a plague." He put his hand on the door. "I will find those responsible."

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“See that you do. Dismissed.”

Kommander Zoktavr turned and left, taking up his axe as he pushed his massive frame into the hallway beyond.



“You’re giving an axe to a steamjack,” said Lola. Her eyes twinkled with mischief.

Orsus shot her a bemused glance, shaking his head wearily as he drove the wagon along the forest road. “Don’t say it.”

“A lumber axe for a ‘jack,” she said airily, casting her eyes at the lofty branches above them. “A ‘jack that will chop lumber. What could we call such a thing?”

“Don’t say it,” Orsus said, “or I will be forced to get physical with you.”

Lola batted her eyelashes. “Is that a threat or a promise?”

“The entire logging crew was there when I proposed the idea to Aleksei,” Orsus said. “We’re not talking about men with especially large imaginations. I have heard the same joke approximately four thousand times in the past month alone. I don’t need to hear it from you.”

“So you’re saying I have the poor imagination of a man on a logging crew?” Lola wrinkled her lips in mock indignation. “I should make the joke just to punish you for that.”

“Don’t worry,” he said solemnly, “you’re a better kisser than almost all of them.”

“Almost?”

Orsus laughed and ducked his head as she punched him in the shoulder. He’d made her crack first. She punched him again, giggling almost as madly as he, before settling back into the wagon’s front bench and leaning against him. He watched the forest roll by, scanning every shadow for wolves or bandits or other dangers.

After a long silence, waiting for her to speak, he laughed. “Well at least say it. I know you want to.”

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“Say what?”

“The joke,” he said. “You’re dying to say it, so just get it out.”

Lola furrowed her brow. “What joke?”

“The lumberjack!” Orsus cried. “You’ve been dying to call Laika a lumberjack, so just—” He stopped short at her laughter, then rolled his eyes when he realized she’d taken the joke one step further by tricking him into being the one who said it. “I can’t believe I fell for that.”

“It’s not your fault,” she said sweetly. “You work on a logging crew, after all—you don’t exactly have a large imagination.”

He shook his head, and she laughed again, putting her arms around his shoulders—as far around them as she could, at least—and squeezing him happily. “I love you, Orsus Zoktavir.”

“I love you, future Lola Zoktavir.”

“Just one more month,” she said. She rested her head against his arm. “Thanks for bringing me on this trip. I needed the break.”

“It’s not much of a break,” Orsus said, “just an errand.” They had found an axe deep in the forest, clutched in the hands of a battered warjack so ancient it made Laika look new. It had identified the logging crew as enemies and refused to submit to Orsus’ control—whether through damage to its cortex or something more—and so Orsus had been forced to put it down with an axe of his own. The jack itself was beyond salvage, but its axe needed only minor repair and looked like the perfect size for Laika. Aleksei had commissioned the repair from a mechanik in Hedrinnya, a mining town not far from the valley, and now that the job was done he’d assigned Orsus to retrieve it. Orsus had asked Lola to come along as company. Any day he got to spend with her—and only her—was a day to be treasured.

“My mother wants crocuses,” she said. “I keep telling her that it’s chamomile or nothing.” She sighed. “I think she’s ready to call my bluff and insist on nothing.”

“She doesn’t like chamomile?”

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"She says they're too plain for a wedding."

"I say *she's* too plain for a wedding."

"She's my mother, Orsus."

"Which means we'll see plenty of her before and after." He shifted the reins in his hands and shrugged. "Same with everybody else, really. All we need for the wedding, technically speaking, is you and me and a priest."

"Don't even say it." She buried her face in his shoulder. Her voice was muffled. "It's far too tempting, and my mother would kill me."

"Better not, then," he said with a grin. "I can protect you from a lot of things, but she frightens me."

She pulled back and scowled at him, but broke into laughter almost immediately. "Stay on her good side as long as you can," she warned. "She's a much better cook than I am."

"I've been cooking my own meals since I was ten," said Orsus. "I think I've got that covered. Which do you like better: cracked wheat gruel or cracked wheat gruel with lumps?"

"Real food is going to amaze you," she said. "Even mine." She leaned on him again, watching the forest creep by as their horse pulled them. When she spoke again, her voice was soft and sad. "I'm sorry your parents can't be there. They'd be very proud of you."

"Not as proud as they'd be if I'd saved them."

Lola sat up straighter. "Is that . . .?" She frowned. "Are you still blaming yourself for their deaths?"

"Forget I said anything."

"That's what you say every time, Orsus, but we need to talk about this. Is that really how you think of them? Of yourself? You were ten years old."

"I killed their killer. Obviously I wasn't too young, I was just too late."

"It was not your fault," Lola said.

"I should have saved them."

"You were ten years old! Can you even imagine the kind of bloodthirsty, paranoid, horrifying life a ten-year-old would have to lead to outdo a massacre

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by Tharn raiders? To outfight monsters who fight every day of their lives? I don't think I would have liked that ten-year-old very much, and I certainly wouldn't have fallen in love with whoever he'd grow up to be."

"And what if they come for you?" Orsus said. "The Tharn aren't gone. They raid through these valleys every year, and sooner or later they're coming back to ours, and they're going to hit our village, and I'm going to have a family again. I'm going to have you, and maybe a son or a daughter, maybe more. What do I do then? I want to protect you, Lola."

"If that time comes, you'll protect me," she said. "I know that for a fact; I don't even have to wonder. But I pray every day that that time never comes, and you . . ." Her voice cracked. "I don't know if you do. Sometimes I think it's all you ever think about."

"I think about you."

"You think about hurting things that hurt me." Her voice was suddenly small and weak, like the sound of a mouse in vast, empty room. "That's different."

Orsus wanted to tell her she was wrong, but his eyes were already scanning the forest shadows again, his ears pricked up at a sound he'd heard off in the trees. "I'm not going to close my eyes," he said evenly. "There's a balance between living for violence and pretending it doesn't exist."

"Have you found it?"

"Probably not, but I think it's a lot farther to one side than you seem to. I refuse to lose you, and if that means I have to be ready for certain . . . problems, then I'll be ready for them. I don't drag you into it, and you never have to know."

"But you drag yourself into it. You drag yourself through it, like mud, and it breaks my heart to watch you do that to yourself."

"Then I'll . . ." He grunted in frustration. *I'll hide it better*, he thought.

"You put yourself through agony over what happened to your family," said Lola, "and you don't have to. You don't have to put yourself through agony over what might never happen to me. You're a good man, Orsus—

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you have to deal with darkness sometimes, and maybe even with death, and I understand that." She put her hand on his chin. "But you don't have to wallow in it."

They had reached the foothills now, and the road turned up the mountain toward Hedrynya. Orsus didn't answer Lola because he didn't know how; she saw the world as a bright, happy place where good people were rewarded for good deeds, and if you stayed away from the bad stuff it would stay away from you. That was a tempting view of the world, but it had never proven true in his experience. The bad stuff, the darkness and the death and the pain and the loss, they came for you whether you invited them or not. No matter how far away you tried to stay. Even the best intentions could go wrong.

He thought of his mother, cowering in the cellar, telling his sister to hush as they hid from the raiders, telling her to stop crying, to stop breathing. Limp limbs dangling like meat in a smokehouse.

"I love you," said Lola. "I'm sorry we fought."

"I love you, too," said Orsus. But still he rode in silence.

The mechanik had a storefront built up against the mountainside and a shop within that cut deep back into the stone; boilers churned and whistled, big curls of smoke billowing out from chimneys on the cliff side high above. Orsus pulled the wagon to a halt and tied the horse at the post in front, offering him a splash of water in the trough before taking Lola gently by the waist and lifting her down to the ground. The valley stretched out before them like a deep-green blanket, vast swathes of pine forest covering wide, rolling hills, with the bright-blue line of the Neves River coiling through it like a ribbon. A wisp of wood smoke here and there was the only sign of the tiny villages nestled in the folds of the land.

A young boy covered with soot and eating an apple jumped up on the porch when they arrived, running inside with a shout. He returned to hold the door open, inviting them in with hands stained black from coal dust. "Yermo's inside."

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Orsus nodded and offered Lola his arm as if they had just been announced at a royal ball. She took it with a smile, and they entered the workshop, Orsus ducking his head through the doorway.

They were greeted inside by a bronze-skinned man with singed eyebrows who shook Orsus' hand enthusiastically, surprising him with the crushing strength of his grip. Orsus nodded. There were not many men who could impress him with their strength. "Yermolai Garin," said the mechanik. "But you'll forgive me—I thought I was repairing an axe for a steamjack."

Orsus frowned. "You were. Was there a problem?"

"It's not for you?"

Orsus glanced at Lola, embarrassed, hoping he wouldn't have to explain something awkward. "Why would it be for me? I wouldn't . . . commission a weapon."

"Of course, of course," said Yermo. "I apologize, I simply saw how big you are and wondered if maybe I'd heard wrong and the weapon was supposed to be for you. All is well! Come, come, I have it right back here."

He led them deeper into the shop, and Orsus marveled at the odd combination of familiar and bizarre: blacksmith's tools he had seen before, but some of the old man's devices seemed downright arcane. Generators burned, buzzed, and crackled. One table was covered with thick sheaves of smudged paper, each page bearing an intricate pattern of lines, like the veins in a leaf. Thick metal rails crisscrossed the ceiling, and here and there a bundle of chains hung down to hold some part of a jack leg or torso. "A lumber axe for a steamjack," Yermo said as he walked. "You could call it a lumberjack, no?"

Orsus groaned, and Lola giggled.

"I straightened the haft and replaced the blade," said Yermo, "but the real work was the accumulator. You may have found this on a ruined warjack, as you say, but it was built for a warcaster." He stopped by a wide metal cabinet and fumbled with a set of keys. "It's an absolute shame to waste it on a warjack—someone with the skill to channel magic energy can use this

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axe to double his strength, at the very least, probably more. Ah, here's the key I'm looking for. Isak, fetch a chain."

He opened the cabinet to reveal a full rack of tools and weapons, but it was obvious which one Orsus had come for. The soot-stained boy ran up with a chain to help carry the giant weapon, dragging it along one of the ceiling rails, but Orsus simply grasped the axe by the haft and lifted it out.

It was a thing of beauty.

"I like the balance," Orsus said.

"You're sure it's not for you?"

"The opposite, actually," Lola said with a grin. "Orsus works for Aleksei's logging company, but he's leaving soon to start a wood shop." She beamed at the old mechanik. "It was Orsus' idea to teach the steamjack how to fell trees so the company could keep going without him and not lose their pace."

"They need a jack to replace him," said Yermo. "Doesn't surprise me at all."

Orsus moved the axe a bit, as much as he could in the cramped workshop. He longed to get outside and test it with a real swing. It fit his hand and arm almost perfectly. It was heavier than any other axe he'd ever used, but it was better made, better weighted, and looked a hundred times more powerful. He wondered how many cuts it would take to segment a tree with it—or to cut through a steamjack's armor. If they ever faced another one, like they had with Nazarov, an axe like this would give them a fighting chance.

Almost as soon as he thought of it he stole a guilty glance at Lola. She was clucking playfully at the shop boy, Isak, and didn't seem to have noticed.

"How much did Aleksei offer you for this?" he asked. Aleksei was too much of a skinflint to pay even a fraction of what the axe was worth, and the bagful of coins he'd given Orsus to deliver, allegedly the second part of the full payment, didn't seem remotely adequate.

"Oh, I don't remember," Yermo said, "something to cover the materials. It doesn't matter—I've never had the chance to work on a piece this intricate before, and I've learned more just studying its design than any amount of

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compensation could pay for. Don't tell Aleksei that, of course, or he'll never pay me for anything again. That old Laika of his will be due for repairs soon, don't let him forget."

"I won't." Orsus pulled the bag of coins from his belt and dropped it in the mechanik's hands. "Thank you, this is . . . it's perfect."

"My pleasure," Yermo said, turning to lead them back out. Orsus gripped the axe in one hand and Lola in the other, smiling like an idiot.

His smile faded with every step.

I promised to give up that life for her, he thought. The fighting and the violence and the death, and yet . . . I see a weapon like this, a perfect work of art, and I know that this life is a part of me. I can give it up, and I will, but it will always be there, and I will always know it, and I think she will always know it. Even if I never kill anyone again, I'm still a killer. I'm still that same little ten-year-old boy plotting vengeance in a nightmare cellar. She said she'd never love the man that boy grew up to be.

How can she ever love me?



Luka Kratikoff, riding point for Kommander Zoktavir's small contingent, was the first to see Deshevek. The rest of their forces were behind them, breaking camp and preparing for the final leg of the march, and the kommander had taken a small force of fifty riders and a Juggernaut ahead; the 'jack slowed them considerably but made for a much more impressive sight. If their mission was to impress the locals, this was an effective way to do it.

Luka examined the tiny village carefully through his spyglass, furrowing his brow in consternation as the villagers reacted to his presence—not gawking as most peasants did when the Winter Guard arrived, but running madly. At this distance he couldn't tell if they were excited or terrified. He watched a moment longer, then turned and rode back to the kommander.

"Report," said Zoktavir.

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“No obvious dangers on the road, sir, and the outriders report none in the trees.”

“None that we can see,” said Zoktavir, “but we will proceed with caution.”

“Yes, sir,” said Luka, frowning at the thought of spies. The people in the village had been acting so strangely. “There’s one more thing, sir. The villagers were . . . I don’t know how to say it, sir. They acted strange.”

“You spoke to them?”

“I saw them from a distance, and they saw us. They started running, not away, just . . . in circles. Almost like they were trying to prepare something.”

Zoktavir’s eyes darkened. “A trap?”

“Here? Luka said. “In our own lands?”

“This is the utmost border of our lands, Korporal, with nothing between that village and Ord but a mile of fallow farmland. They’re practically foreigners.” He turned and called out to the other riders. “Kovnik Bogdan!”

“Sir!”

“Tell the men to draw arms. We may face resistance in the village.”

The kovnik delivered the orders, but Luka felt unsettled. There was no sign that the villagers were traitors. They were just running. It could mean anything.

I suppose it’s better to be prepared, he told himself. The kommander is zealous, but he’s not a murderer. He won’t attack harmless villagers unless they attack us first, and at that point they aren’t really harmless anymore, are they? He drew his sword and thought of the promise he’d made to his daughter—barely thirteen years old and devastated to watch him ride away to active duty. *Don’t worry, Sorscha, he’d said. I’ll be home again soon.*

They approached the village at a steady canter, not charging but not ambling peacefully either. Luka’s first impression was that the village was shaped wrong—there were more structures than he’d seen in the spyglass, or maybe the same structures in different places. It didn’t make sense, but he gripped his sword more tightly, ready for the worst. In the back of the village he could see them gathering women and children into the old stone

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church—a sure sign the inhabitants expected battle. It made Luka even more unsettled than before.

And there, in the far distance, the worst sign of all: a single horse with a single rider, galloping hard toward the rugged Murata Hills. The dim shape of Boarsgate squatted darkly on the horizon, and Luka felt a chill so cold he couldn't help but shiver. It was possible that the rider was simply a lone man fleeing the scene of battle, but unlikely. He'd been in the Guard too long not to recognize the rider for what he was: the villagers had sent a messenger to Boarsgate. Luka looked at Kommander Zoktavir, almost too terrified to tell him, but the fury in the man's eyes told him the warcaster had seen it for himself.

As they drew closer, he saw that the villagers had constructed a barricade across the road, and a handful of men were huddled behind it clutching rakes and hoes. Luka's heart sank.

"I am Kommander Orsus Zoktavir of the Fifth Border Legion." Zoktavir reined up a dozen yards from the barricade. "I order you to tear this outrage down immediately, and to explain yourselves. Who speaks for this village?"

A man stood up behind the barricade, trembling in obvious terror. "I do."

"Are you a rebel?" asked Zoktavir.

"N-no."

"No faithful servant of the Motherland would bar our way. You're a traitor and a liar."

"We want no trouble, sir," said the peasant. "For us *or* for you—"

Zoktavir drew his giant axe, holding it up like a fearsome totem of destruction. "What trouble do you think you can cause me?"

"It's just that . . ." The man swallowed, practically too nervous to stand. "Begging your pardon, sir, it's just that this land is so distant from Korsk, and often forgotten. We see more Ordic soldiers than Khadoran."

"I've sent men from my own legion to patrol this stretch of border," Zoktavir said. "Are they not soldiers?"

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"Soldiers who steal our food and harass our daughters," said the peasant. Zoktavir's eyes flared, and the man stammered, pale as a ghost. "What I mean to say, sir, is that we haven't seen soldiers who defend us. The Border Legion are worse than invaders, sir, and we can't live like that anymore."

Zoktavir's eyes were cold, and his voice was a thing of barely controlled rage. "What are you saying?"

"Like I said, sir," the peasant swallowed nervously, "we don't want to cause trouble. The men of Ord have protected us, and we've come to rely on them, and when we saw you coming . . . we've sent for help." His voice became more desperate, more pleading. "They have an army in Boarsgate, sir, more than you can deal with. We want no trouble for us or for you—please spare yourselves the battle and leave!"

"You dare threaten me?" whispered Zoktavir, and his eyes seemed to blaze as he reached out his hand, curling his fingers as if to grip the man's throat from yards away. Bright-blue runes appeared in the air around him, orbiting the powerful warcaster like intricate ribbons of ethereal steel. Luka half expected the villager to choke. He started in surprise when the earth itself seemed to erupt beneath the barricade, obliterating it in a shower of rocks and splinters, tossing the men around it like broken dolls. Zoktavir snarled in grim satisfaction, leaping from his horse and storming forward as he loosed his massive axe from his back. "Who else wishes to leave the Motherland? I'll send you straight to Urcaen!"

The few men who'd survived the explosion cried out as they scrambled to their feet and ran in terror. Zoktavir caught one with a swing of his axe as he ran for a nearby cottage. "Forward!" the kommander cried. "Kill every traitor in this cursed village and burn it down around them. No mercy and no prisoners."

"Please, sir," said Luka, rushing toward him, "they're just scared peasants."

Zoktavir whirled to face him, his eyes wild not just with fury, but with madness. He seemed to look at and through Luka at once, as if seeing

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something else that wasn't there. He hissed through clenched teeth: "Traitors must die!"

"Let's talk to them," said Luka. "Perhaps we can—"

"We've tried talking, and they insist on their treason. You have your orders, soldier. Now kill them!"

Luka slowly circled the kommander, placing himself between him and the nearest cottage. Behind the wild-eyed Zoktavir, the other soldiers sat on their horses, holding their weapons uncertainly.

"They're peasants," Luka said again. "We can arrest them and hold them for a government represent—"

"I am all the representative that Khador needs," Zoktavir said. "Or are you questioning my authority as well?" He advanced a step, and Luka stepped back, his palms sweating.

What am I doing? he thought. *This man will kill me where I stand.* He heard a frightened whimper in the cottage behind him, the sobbing of innocent men reduced to nothing, and forced himself to hold his ground. "These people deserve a trial, not a slaughter."

"Insubordination!" said Zoktavir. "You're in on it too, aren't you?" He turned and saw the soldiers behind him, still unmoving. "Are you all traitors as well? They've left the kingdom! If they wish to be treated as our enemies, we will oblige them with our blades!"

"They're farmers with hay rakes," said Kovnik Bogdan. "We can't just slaughter them."

"You have your orders." Zoktavir turned back to Luka and gestured with his axe. "Open that door and kill everyone inside, or by Menoth I'll kill them and you together."

Luka raised his sword, trembling even harder than the peasant had. *Forgive me, my daughter. I have no choice. May Morrow watch over you.* "I will not let you kill them."

"So be it," Zoktavir said and swung his axe.





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"It's a simple job," said Aleksei. "There's a man in Molonochnaya trying to start his own lumber company. Our lumber company currently supplies the entire valley and a lot of the surrounding villages, and that's not the kind of business I'm prepared to lose. The good news is, I have it on excellent authority that their equipment is about to suffer a number of catastrophic malfunctions, starting tonight when we slip over there and hack it to pieces."

Most of the crew laughed, but Orsus merely shifted his weight, a simple action that, thanks to his size, focused everyone's attention on him.

"That's all we're doing, though, right?" he asked. "Just smash a few wagons and steal a few tools, no actual confrontation?"

"I forgot to welcome our good friend Orsus back," Aleksei said thinly.

"Gone six months and already a coward," said Khirig.

"I'm not a coward," Orsus said. "I'm getting married in six days."

"Seems his bride-to-be doesn't want him getting into any fights," said Aleksei, "so we're going to keep this as peaceful as possible."

"Why is Orsus' woman dictating our plans now?" Isidor said.

"Have you seen Orsus' woman?" asked Tselikovsky. He leered grotesquely, his one eye wide and lascivious. "I'd let her dictate anything for a taste of—"

Orsus grabbed the man by the neck and slammed his head into the table, holding it there firmly as he spoke with a low, controlled voice. "Lola would be very disappointed if she learned I just did that. If any of you cause me to disappoint her further, I will become angry. Is that understood?"

Isidor raised his eyebrows. "This is you not angry?"

"Is that understood?" Orsus repeated. The men in the room nodded and murmured their agreement. Orsus gently rattled Tselikovsky's neck. "You too."

"Understood," he said, though the sound was muffled by the table. Orsus nodded and let go.

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"If we're done proving how big we are, let's get on the road," said Aleksei. "Molonochnaya's a good two hours away, so if we leave now we'll get there right around one in the morning. Perfect time for a night raid."

They left the tavern and readied their horses. They wouldn't be pushing the creatures for speed, but having them made the travel easier. Orsus' mount was a massive draft horse named Krasny, seventeen hands high at the shoulder with wide legs and shaggy fetlocks. The lumber crew used him to pull trees through the thick forests where Laika couldn't reach. Orsus had modified a saddle for himself and rode in silence until halfway through the trip, when Isidor ambled up to him, keeping pace as he spoke.

"You hear about the Tharn attack?"

Orsus shook his head.

"One of the outlying villages. Krupec, I think. Razed it to the ground."

"This is too early in the year for Tharn raiders," Orsus said.

"They're getting bolder. Or they're planning something big—which means, I suppose, that they're getting bolder."

"Last time they came I killed one," said Orsus. "I was ten." He growled. "If they try to come again I'll kill every damned one of them."

"Then you'd better hope they don't come tonight."

Orsus thought about this, then shook his head. "It's too early in the year for Tharn raids. They'll wait for winter."

"I hope you're right." Isidor rode in silence a moment before speaking again. "How much are you getting for this?"

"Hm?"

"Obviously you're getting something, a nice bonus, a little extra on the side. We all get a little something for these jobs, but I figure you're getting more, or you wouldn't have come back. What's he paying you?"

He could tell that Isidor wanted an exact figure, probably as leverage to negotiate an extra bonus of his own, but Orsus merely shrugged.

"It's a good bonus."

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Isidor smiled, but there was no good will behind the expression. “A wedding present from good old Aleksei.”

“I suppose.”

“Need the money for something?”

Orsus glanced at him, worried by his sudden interest. *What is he after?*

“I’m getting married in six days,” Orsus repeated. “I’m going to have a family to support, and I’m not going to do it on a logger’s wages.”

“So you’re supplementing with violence.”

Orsus frowned at the word. “I’m going to open a wood shop.”

“So you’re paying for that with violence.”

“What do you want?” Orsus demanded, turning in his saddle to face him. Isidor was slim and sharp, and in his dark clothes he seemed to almost disappear. “Why are you harping on violence? You heard Aleksei—there’s not going to be any fighting tonight, we’re just breaking some tools.”

“And yet we’re armed.” He gestured to Laika’s giant axe, strapped tightly across Orsus’ back. Orsus frowned and shook his head.

“Sometimes things go wrong. I don’t want to fight at all, but if I have to I want to make sure we win.”

“True,” said Isidor, and Orsus saw the slim silhouette nod. “And yet I can’t help but wonder why Aleksei is paying you extra to help us break a few tools, with or without a giant axe. Seems like we could do that just fine on our own—we always have before.”

Orsus frowned again. He’d wondered about that too but chalked it up to a recruiting ploy. “I think he wants me back for good, so he’s playing nice to convince me.”

“Maybe,” said Isidor, and again the silhouette nodded. “Maybe. Or maybe it’s a wedding present, like you said.”

Orsus furrowed his brow, Isidor’s concerns reigniting his own.

“Or maybe,” said Isidor softly, “this is another power play, like Nazarov. This man in Molonochnaya might be trying to start his own lumber

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company, or he might be trying to start his own bratya. To become a kayaz himself. There's a lot of business here, and Aleksei manages it fairly well, but he's not perfect. No one can be everywhere at once. Another Nazarov was bound to happen sooner or later, so what if this is it?"

Orsus blew out a long, slow breath, puzzling out the situation in his head. Isidor's theory was possible, but it was just a theory. "Do you know anything for sure?" he whispered. "Do you have any evidence?"

"Aside from you?"

"I don't mean anything—"

"You're practically an ogrun," said Isidor. "Aleksei didn't bring you for a quiet night of sabotage, and he didn't pay you extra for an average battle. He's expecting trouble, and he's expecting a lot of it."

Orsus shook his head, not wanting to believe it. "Then why didn't we bring Laika?"

"That's what's been bothering me this entire ride. If we're heading into a battle, why bring one of our best fighters but not the other one? That's why I think this is a power play." He leaned in more closely. "If this was just a battle and nothing more, we'd bring everything we had, but if someone out there is actually targeting the business, they might have the same plan we do. After all, we didn't just leave Laika, we left most of the crew."

"Because we only need five men to sabotage their equipment," Orsus insisted. "You're jumping at shadows."

"I think Aleksei is expecting two battles, and he split his forces accordingly. One in Molonochnaya, to put down this usurper, and one at home, to stop the usurper from doing exactly what we're trying to do to him."

Orsus grimaced, trying to dismiss the theory—it was desperate and paranoid, after all, with very little evidence to back it up. And yet there were aspects that rang all too true. Aleksei *wouldn't* pay him two months' wages for just a quiet night of breaking things; that had been bothering

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him all day. And yet their five-man team was too small for a real battle, too large for an assassination. Aleksei would never bring so few unless something else were forcing his hand, and an attack against the lumber mill could force it in this exact way. Orsus didn't want to believe it, but the more he thought of it the harder it was to ignore.

Orsus growled in frustration. "Suppose it's true," he whispered. "Why bring this to me? What's your plan?"

"I brought it to you because I needed confirmation," said Isidor, "and because you're smarter than these other no-neck thugs. I don't have a plan, I'm still figuring this out. If this is another Nazarov, I don't want to end up like Gendyarev."

Both men fell silent a moment, thinking of their old companion. The rifleman Emin had been killed outright in the battle at the warehouse, but Gendyarev had been crippled—a worse fate by far. He couldn't work, could barely eat, and had ended up begging for scraps in the street. Orsus hadn't even seen him for months.

Yet the odds of another overwhelming battle were low. "Worst case scenario, we know we're in the safer group," Orsus said. "Aleksei wouldn't come with us unless he was sure we could handle whatever we're up against."

"That's true." Isidor thought for a moment. "Maybe we just keep quiet and see how it plays out."

"Or maybe I leave and go home," said Orsus. "I promised Lola I wasn't going to fight."

"You've already gone behind her back," said Isidor. "At least stay long enough to get paid."

Orsus grimaced again, torn by the decision. He didn't want to stay, but Aleksei's presence was telling—this had to be the safer place to be, or the boss wouldn't be here. The man was too self-preserving to plan it any other way. He could stay, fight whoever this upstart had guarding him, and get paid a full two months' wages. Two months closer to quitting his job,

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opening his wood shop, and saying good-bye to Aleksei and the criminals and all of it forever. It was simple. It was the easiest thing in the world.

"Let's see who's waiting for us in Molonochnaya," Orsus said and adjusted the axe on his back.

But when they reached the rival lumber yard they found it empty, the gates hanging open, the crew and the equipment gone.

"They've run away!" shouted Aleksei, sounding equal parts furious and triumphant. "They knew we were coming and went into hiding."

"Is our equipment similarly protected?" asked Orsus. Aleksei looked at him oddly, and Orsus accused him more directly. "The other half of our forces are protecting our equipment from a counterattack." It was not a question. "Were you smart enough to hide them as well?"

Aleksei sneered, and Orsus knew they'd guessed correctly. "Our equipment is safe. The others are armed and ready, and Laika's a better fighter without that axe than you are with it."

"I'm proof enough of that," said a voice, and they heard a sliding, scraping sound in the darkness. Khirig raised a lantern. They watched a broken man drag himself slowly across the empty lumber yard, reaching and pulling, reaching and pulling. His left arm was twisted. His legs trailed uselessly behind him.

The broken man laughed softly.

"Gendyarev," said Aleksei, spitting the word like poison. "You've betrayed us."

"Betrayed what?" asked Gendyarev. "The bratya I fought for, the bratya I gave my legs for? The brothers who abandoned me, took my job, and left me to die when a fight went sour? I didn't betray the bratya, Aleksei. The bratya betrayed me." He stopped crawling and looked up, his mangled face leering in contempt.

"What have you done?" Orsus demanded.

"I told them where to find you, how you'd react to the right kinds of pressure, and apparently I was correct." He curled his face into a twisted

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smile. “They’ve been planning to bring down the infamous Aleksei Badian for quite a while, practically raising an army right under your nose. I just helped them aim it.”

“We have Laika,” said Aleksei, “we can defend ourselves just fine.”

“Oh yes,” said Gendyarev, “the steamjack you tried to teach me how to use—my one last chance to be useful, before others proved more adept.” He smiled again. “I gave them Laika’s code words, too. That battle’s going to be a lot more one-sided than you expect.”

“And why?” asked Aleksei. “What did they promise you? Money? Power? Whores they paid not to scream at the sight of your face?” He leaped off his horse and drew his daggers, advancing on the cripple with a look of pure malice. “You can’t expect to live long enough to collect payment.”

“I asked only one thing,” said Gendyarev, his face practically beaming. “To be here to see the looks on your faces when I tell you this: These men are more heartless than you, more ruthless than you, more vicious than you. You came to kill a leader; they’ve gone to kill everyone you ever loved.”

Orsus surged forward. “No!”

“You too, Orsus,” said Gendyarev. “You did this to me and you left me to die. Don’t expect a white wedding.”

Orsus gripped his axe and the world turned red.



“What are you in for?” The scrawny man in his cell was filthy, covered in so much dirt it was hard to see his skin. He was like a mole or a rat, a creature who spent its time buried deep in something foul. A creature for which the sun was a stranger. This was his company in the dungeon; this was the kind of man he was now reduced to living with. The mighty Orsus Zoktavis, warcaster to the kingdom of Khador, a kommander of the Fifth Border Legion, honored recipient of the Shield of Khardovic . . .

He was not a kommander anymore, not a soldier or even a servant. He would not think about what he was.

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"I'm a thief," said the filthy man, evidently tired of waiting for a response and eager to fill the silence. His voice was thin and unwholesome. "The sewers go everywhere, and I go in the sewers, and none of their little shinies are safe from me. There's only killers in this part of the dungeons, though. I told 'em it was an accident. I told 'em I didn't mean to. Girl like that had no business being out at night, and even less business screaming and wailing and bringing the whole Winter Guard down on my head. It's not like I had any choice, you understand."

Orsus took a slow, deep breath, calming his rage. As a kommander he would have broken this mongrel for his sins against a helpless girl, but as a traitor he had no such privilege.

The thief whistled softly. "You're big as a house, you are, with more scars than an orphan slave. You stuck somebody bigger than a serving girl, that much is obvious, and probably plenty of them, too. Dockside brawler? Smash and grab man? Or an enforcer, maybe, breaking any heads the boss says to break."

Orsus said nothing. He'd never liked talking to criminals, even when he'd been one, but now . . . now he felt lower and dirtier than them all, than even this rat-faced ruin leering eagerly from the shadows. His entire life—his place in the world, his very comprehension of it—lay in shards and tatters. They were ashes tossed and scattered into nothing. Even this wretch was more worthy than he was, for he had not fallen from so high a place.

"Oh come on," said the thief, "we're cell mates now, that's a bond thick as blood. You can talk to me. I'm the last face you'll ever see, because the hangman wears a mask. Well, me and Queen Ayn. Quite a company to be in." He grinned lasciviously. "That's a mouth I'd like to touch before I die."

Orsus curled his hands into tense, iron fists, wishing he could access his magic and flay this man's flesh from his bones. The runic shackles on his wrists and ankles prevented even that.

"Pretty thing they say she is," said the thief. "Might be worth a run for it—"

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"I killed a village," said Orsus, too incensed to hear another word of the man's confession. If the murderer wanted Orsus to talk, by Menoth he'd give him the darkest words in the world.

The thief started, eyes wide. "What?"

"An entire village," said Orsus, his deep voice rumbling through the dungeon cell like a distant earthquake. "All of them, even the soldiers who tried to stop me. Every living one killed with axe and boot and tooth." He parted his lips in a humorless smile, and the thief pressed himself tightly against the wall. "Gone."

"Surely you . . ." The thief swallowed. "Surely you're exaggerating?"

"I cut their throats and broke their bones," said Orsus, reveling in the man's terror, "and when their bodies stopped moving I tore down their houses and burned away footsteps until the land was bleak and bare."

The thief's face was even whiter now, that of a pallid ghost streaked black with grime. "You're the bloody Butcher," he whispered, and Orsus fell silent again. Word traveled fast, it seemed. He had heard that word before.

No longer a kommander, but a butcher. *The Butcher.*

All sport drained from his torment of the thief, and Orsus sunk deep within his thoughts. The criminal, at least, was too scared to speak again, but even that was cold comfort, for in the silence Orsus could hear the cries of a hundred dying women, a thousand, a host so great he would hear nothing else forever.

The cell was full of them, even when he closed his eyes. Accusing and crying and asking where he'd been. He sat still and stared ahead and tried to think of nothing.

He thought of his life, and it was the same.

When the guards came for his final judgment, they brought guns first, a regiment arrayed against him in the hallway beyond the bars, ready to riddle him with bullets at the first sign of trouble. Kommandant Frolova was there, augmenting the weapons with magic until the air seemed to crackle with unseen power. *I could make my flesh like iron and charge into*

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their center, Orsus thought, using the close quarters to make them slaughter each other in crossfire. But he would not attack them. Strip away his titles and he was nothing more than a killer—a madman, some said, and the throngs of wailing, burning women screamed their agreement at his back. He was a rabid dog, and he would be put down. Whatever small part of him retained its honor prevented him from stopping it.

He was already in manacles, but they wrapped him further in heavy links of fat black chain. They led him to the yard outside, where his escort was bolstered by Man-O-War shocktroops and Widowmaker snipers perched high on the walls.

Pull left to off-balance the armor, he thought, then right to use their reaction momentum against them. Stay close to the Man-O-Wars for cover and use their weapon strikes to split the chains. As soon as my arms are free I'll steal the nearest weapon and slaughter them to a man—

The thoughts leaped up unbidden, the dance of death forever in his thoughts. A puzzle box of tactics and violence, a seamless blend of mind and muscle. *She was right about me, he thought. I will always be a monster.*

A Kodiak loomed over him—one of his own, though the pass codes had been changed. He could touch its mind, but he could not control it. He was in the same training yard he'd arrived in, years ago when he'd emerged from the wilderness after years of aimless wandering. He'd tried to run from her, but she was a part of him, and no matter how hard he'd tried he could never run away from himself. Korsk had been his last chance—a new life to atone for his sins, outlive them, or forget them. He had failed all three.

Kommandant Frolova stood before him, his eyes weary. "I will tell you bluntly that we expected more resistance," said the kommandant. "Even here, surrounded by this escort, you could fight us; you could not win, but you could perhaps get lucky. The Orsus Zoktavir I know would have fought us to his dying breath, and even after." He considered Orsus a moment. "Why?"

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Why? thought Orsus. *Because I can never be free. Because the only way to save her was to become the kind of man she couldn't love. That's all I ever wanted—her safety and her love—but no matter which I gained I was doomed to lose the other.*

And then I chose love, and she died for it.

I'm not resisting this death because I already died, years ago, with her shattered body hanging lifeless in my arms.

Orsus' mind was a tortured wound, but his secrets were not for this man or any other. He stood straighter. "There is nothing more important than loyalty," he said. "If I am a traitor to Khador, then it is my duty to see myself destroyed."

Aleksei stood next to Frolova, his severed head in his hands. "Loyalty." The word dripped from the stump of his neck like blood. "They don't understand it at all."

Neither do I, thought Orsus.

The head leered. "Tell me about it."

Frolova nodded, though his face was impossible to read. "You will be judged by the queen herself. May Menoth show you the mercy you never showed any other." He stepped back, gave the order, and fell in line with the escort as it marched solemnly toward the end. Orsus shuffled slowly in his chains, passing guard after guard, 'jack after 'jack, field guns and Widowmakers and the cold dead eyes of a thousand ghostly accusers. He walked through the palace gates, in the wide front doors, through the marbled halls to the throne room. The corridor was lined with soldiers, hand cannons at the ready, and behind each one stood the battered body of a woman he'd failed to save. He searched their faces, but he never found her.

She was inside, seated on the great golden throne.

He fell to his knees at the sight of her, resplendent in white and gold, silk and satin, a crown upon her brow and a scepter in her hand. She watched him impassively, never rising, never moving. The Man-O-Wars had to drag him toward her, and he hid his face in shame.

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It was not the queen, but Lola.

"Where were you?" Lola's voiced boomed through the crowded hall, the accusation thick with betrayal. "Why didn't you come for me? Why didn't you save me?"

"I couldn't," he sobbed, "I did everything in my power, but I couldn't save you!"

Lola and the queen stood side by side, speaking in unison. "You destroyed those people."

"They were traitors."

"You didn't ask me which people."

"They were all traitors!" he shouted. "Everyone I've ever killed, I've killed for you, and I have given my life to destroy them but it's never enough! I will never. Be. Free."

The young queen studied him, black hair lightly brushing her ears. She cocked her head the way she used to, the way Lola used to, and her voice was soft and subtle as an assassin's dagger, damning him no matter how he answered.

"And would you kill more?"

He was trapped more tightly by those words than by the manacles, chains, rifles, cannons, and steam-powered armor. If he said no then he was a liar and a coward, useless as a warrior and admitting, by implication, that his actions had been wrong. They had been brutal, and perhaps even illegal, but they had not been wrong. And yet if he said yes he was a monster, the Butcher of Khardov, the man who lived for death. He could never save her before, and he could not appease her now.

Better an honest monster, he thought and whispered his own foul condemnation. "Yes."

"You would?"

"I would kill everyone who threatens you," he said. He rose to his knees, chains clanking at his sides. "I would find every enemy, root out every traitor, anticipate every foe in all the world who dares to think for half a

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second about the ending of your life.” He stood tall now, the soldiers around him tense, the target of a hundred aimed and readied rifles. “Though you despise me for it, I will kill your enemies. Free me and I will do it again. Accuse me and I will confess. Execute me, and I will rise from the grave to kill your enemies, over and over.” His voice was a roar now, filling the room like thunder. “I lost you once, and I will damn myself a thousand times before I lose you again.”

Lola stood, her scepter ready for the sign of final sentence, but instead of judging him she walked forward, her gown shimmering in the gas lamps. She passed through the clustered soldiers and the guards and the rifles and the steel, and she stepped into the circle of armored Man-O-War soldiers, past the outstretched chains. Orsus kneeled before her, his head bowed, his eyes wet with tears, his neck bared for the fall of an executioner’s axe.

She touched his chin.

He lifted his eyes again and the golden crown was gone, replaced with a simple ring of chamomile. She wore a homespun dress, and instead of a royal scepter she held a simple hand-carved puzzle box. The image blurred in his tears.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“Then serve me.”

“What would you have me do?”

The queen’s red lips parted, and she spoke the sweetest sounds he’d ever heard. “Kill for me.”

The throne room filled with whispers, shocked voices murmuring back and forth in a torrent of gossip and speculation, but Orsus ignored them all, lost in rapture, his paradox solved. His impossible dream come true.

“Remove his chains,” the queen commanded. “This prisoner is more loyal than any man here, and he will serve me, and his actions will be a sign to the world that disloyalty will not be tolerated. Infidelity will be punished. Treachery, if anyone is so foolish as to consider it, will be met by my servant as he met it near Boarsgate: with massacre.”

THE BUTCHER OF KHARDOV

The chains fell from Orsus' body, and he stood tall beside the fierce, majestic queen. She smiled at him, and his shame was gone. His madness fled. He would serve this woman with every breath left to him.

Lola stood beside the queen and opened her mouth to speak.



Orsus ran through the forest madly, crashing through trees and sticks and branches, hot on the heels of . . . what? He couldn't remember. *A deer*, he thought, *or a wolf*. He'd been running so long he'd forgotten. It was almost dark, and the snow and the sky had melded into the same featureless grey, scarred by dark-black trees devoid of life. It was all he could see for miles. It was all he'd seen for days.

He'd been in the wilderness for years, long enough to forget human speech and human voices.

All voices but one.

"Orsus!"

It was angry yet sad, pained yet damning, lost yet beckoning. It came from everywhere and nowhere.

Had he been running toward that voice, or away from it?

"Orsus, where were you?"

He screamed back, bestial and inarticulate. The dead trees ignored him, and the sound died echoless and lost.

"Orsus . . ."

He ran.



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2009



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dan Wells has written many books, including the psychological horror series *I AM NOT A SERIAL KILLER* and the post-apocalyptic SF series *PARTIALS*. He has been nominated for the Campbell Award and three Hugos, and his podcast *Writing Excuses* is a two-time winner of the Parsec Award. He currently lives with his wife and five children in Germany, where he is slowly painting armies for both *Khador* and *Retribution*. He plays a lot of games, reads a lot of books, and eats a lot of food, which is pretty much the ideal life he imagined for himself as a child.

You can find Dan online at TheDanWells.com or follow him on Twitter: [@TheDanWells](https://twitter.com/TheDanWells).



GLOSSARY

Arktus: An obsolete Khadoran warjack chassis that served as the conceptual precursor to the Kodiak.

bayan: A Khadoran instrument similar to an accordion.

Boarsgate: A major Ordic fortress in the Murata Hills protecting that kingdom's northern border.

border legion: One of five legions in the Khadoran Army assigned to protect a section of the kingdom's borders and interior.

bratya: A criminal fraternity in Khador, most often being a small tight-knit gang but sometimes evolving into a larger organization. Bratyas are pervasive in Khador's labor prisons but also in the criminal underworld of most major cities and townships. Most bratyas answer to and are employed by a kayaz.

cortex: A highly arcane mechanical device that gives a steamjack its limited intelligence. Over time cortexes can learn from experience and develop personality quirks.

Cygnar: The kingdom on the western coast south of Ord and noted for its long coastline. Cygnar is generally considered the most prosperous and technologically advanced of the Iron Kingdoms and is the birthplace and seat of the Church of Morrow.

Devastator: A particularly heavily armored Khadoran warjack chassis capable of enduring tremendous punishment if its shield fists are closed to protect its more vulnerable central frame.

THE BUTCHER OF KHADOROV

Deshevek: A small southern Khadoran village located closest to the Ordic fortress of Boarsgate, known primarily for the Boarsgate Massacre of 587 AR.

Giving Day: A popular holiday taking place on the last day of the year across the Iron Kingdoms noted for festivals, family gatherings, and the exchange of small gifts. The nature of this holiday varies from region to region. While begun as a Morrowan tradition it has spread to other communities. Menites of the Khadoran Old Faith use this time to also contribute their tithe the local temple.

great vizier: A singular high-ranking government official in Khador, being the foremost advisor to the crown. As the great vizier speaks for the sovereign he is usually the second most powerful individual in the nation.

Greylords: Members of the Greylords Covenant, an organization of Khadoran arcanists serving their kingdom both in the military and by coordinating some intelligence-gathering activity. Greylords are versed in ice-based magic.

Hedrinya: A small Khadoran village located amid the foothills of mountains near the Neves River in the Scarsfell Forest.

Immoren: The continent containing the Iron Kingdoms, Ios, Rhul, the Skorne Empire, and the lands between them. Much of Immoren remains unexplored, and its inhabitants have had limited contact with other continents.

Iron Kingdoms: Initially the four nations founded after the Orgoth Rebellion: Cygnar, Khador, Llael, and Ord. The Protectorate of Menoth, founded after the Cygnaran Civil War, became the fifth Iron Kingdom after declaring its independence from Cygnar.

'jack: See steamjack.

THE BUTCHER OF KHADOV

'jack marshal: A person who has learned how to give precise verbal orders to a steamjack to direct it in conducting labor or battle. This is a highly useful occupational skill, although it lacks the versatility or finesse afforded by the direct mental control of steamjacks exercised by a warcaster.

Juggernaut: A staple Khadoran warjack chassis, the basic frame of which is utilized by the largest number of Khador's active warjacks. It is armed with one open fist and an ice axe.

kapitan: A military rank for a commissioned officer in the Khadoran Army, ranking above lieutenant and below kovnik.

kareyshka: A lively Khadoran folk dance particularly popular in rural areas. The dance varies considerably from one region to another.

kayaz/kayazy: Translated as "merchant princes," a privileged class of commoners in Khador with considerable wealth and influence. Various kayazy control many aspects of the Khadoran economy, including legitimate industry but also criminal enterprises. Kayazy employ bratyas to distance themselves from criminal activity.

Khadorov: An industrial city in western Khador that is also a major hub of the Khadoran railway.

Kodiak: A sophisticated and versatile Khadoran warjack chassis employing an advanced military grade cortex and a heavy boiler engine to enable it to maneuver ably in even difficult terrain.

kommandant: A military rank for a senior commissioned officer in the Khadoran Army, ranking above kommandant and below supreme kommandant. Supreme kommandants are the highest active military rank, reporting to the premier of the army.

THE BUTCHER OF KHADOV

kommander: A military rank for a senior commissioned officer in the Khadoran Army, ranking above kovnik and below kommandant. Most Khadoran warcasters are kommanders.

korporal: A military rank for a junior non-commissioned officer in the Khadoran Army, ranking above privat and below sergeant.

Kossite: Descendants of the ancient kingdom of Kos, now a major ethnicity of the Kingdom of Khador and most numerous in its northwestern region. Many Kossites are valued as expert woodsmen and serve as irregulars alongside the Khadoran Army to fulfill their conscription obligations.

kovnik: A military rank for a commissioned officer in the Khadoran Army, ranking above kapitan and below kommander.

Korsk: The capital of Khador and the nation's largest city, located on the eastern shore of Great Zerutsk Lake, occupying the lands between Great Zerutsk, Shattered Shield Lake, and Lake Volningrad.

Laika: An old but durable Khadoran laborjack chassis that is no longer manufactured.

Man-O-War: Term usually referring to Khadoran heavy infantry or their signature steam-powered armor. There are several categories of Man-O-War troopers identified by their weaponry, training, and battlefield role.

Marauder: A Khadoran warjack chassis notable for its two powerful ram pistons, often used in sieges to break through walls.

mechanika: The fusion of mechanical engineering and arcane science. Mechanical weapons and tools are those employing mechanika components to augment their basic function or to add new functionality.

THE BUTCHER OF KHARDOV

Menoth: The primal god credited by his worshipers with the creation of aspects of the world itself, including the division of the water from the land, the ordering of the seasons, and most importantly the creation of humanity. Menoth's gifts to humanity included fire, agriculture, masonry, and the written word in the form of the True Law, his divine commandments. Menoth's worshipers are known as Menites.

Molonochnaya: A logging village in the northern Scarsfell Forest.

Morrow: One of the Twins, brother to Thamar, and a god who was once mortal but who ascended to divinity by achieving enlightenment. Also known as the Prophet, Morrow is a benevolent god who emphasizes self-sacrifice, good works, and honorable behavior.

Motherland: Term used by patriotic Khadorans to refer to Khador itself, related to certain myths and folklore illustrating the intimate connection between the land and its people.

ogrun: A large and physically powerful race renowned for their great strength and honor. Most ogrun are citizens of the northeastern nation of Rhul, though they can be found throughout the Iron Kingdoms and Cryx.

Ord: The small and resource-poor kingdom on the western coast between Khador and Cygnar, respected for its formidable navy. Ord has defended against Khadoran incursions with varied success in several border wars since the Iron Kingdoms were founded.

privat: The military rank given junior-most enlisted soldiers in the Khadoran Army who have completed training and are no longer recruits, ranking below korporal.

Shield of Khardovic: A Khadoran military award bestowed for unflinching service and obedience.

THE BUTCHER OF KHADOV

steamjack: A steam-powered mechanical construct designed in a variety of configurations and sizes, used for both labor and warfare throughout the Iron Kingdoms, Cryx, and Rhul.

Suvorin: A logging village in the northern Scarsfell Forest near the Neves river.

Telk: A larger village and shipping hub in the Scarsfell Forest, along the Neves River.

Tharn: A savage breed of once-human warriors whose intense and prolonged worship of the Devourer Wurm transformed them into a monstrous race. They are capable of drawing on the Wurm to transform into bestial forms and view humans as their prey, eating of their flesh and particularly savoring human hearts.

Urcaen: A mysterious cosmological realm that is the spiritual counterpart of Caen. Most of the gods reside here, and this is also where most souls spend the afterlife. Urcaen is divided between protected divine domains and the hellish wilds stalked by the Devourer Wurm.

Vlasgrad: A town in southeastern Khador, populated primarily by Umbreans, and proximate to the Thornwood.

vyatka: A strong liquor usually distilled from potatoes that is common in Khador and exported across the Iron Kingdoms.

warcaster: An arcanist born with the ability to control steamjacks with the power of the mind. With proper training warcasters become singular military assets and are among the greatest soldiers of western Immoren, entrusted to command scores of troops and their own battlegroups of warjacks in the field. Acquiring and training warcasters is a high priority for any military force that employs warjacks.

THE BUTCHER OF KHARDOV

Widowmaker: A group of highly trained snipers in the Khadoran Army employing powerful long-ranged scoped rifles to eliminate high-priority enemy targets.

Winter Guard: The largest group of soldiers within the Khadoran Army representing the rank-and-file infantry. Unless they serve in some other capacity, nearly all male and many female Khadoran citizens are conscripted into the Winter Guard for a single compulsory tour of service. Guardsmen undergo brief but intensive military training and are equipped with relatively simple and inexpensive gear.

warjack: A highly advanced and well-armed steamjack created or modified for war. Some warjacks use power sources other than steam and are not technically steamjacks but are still referred to as such as a matter of custom.

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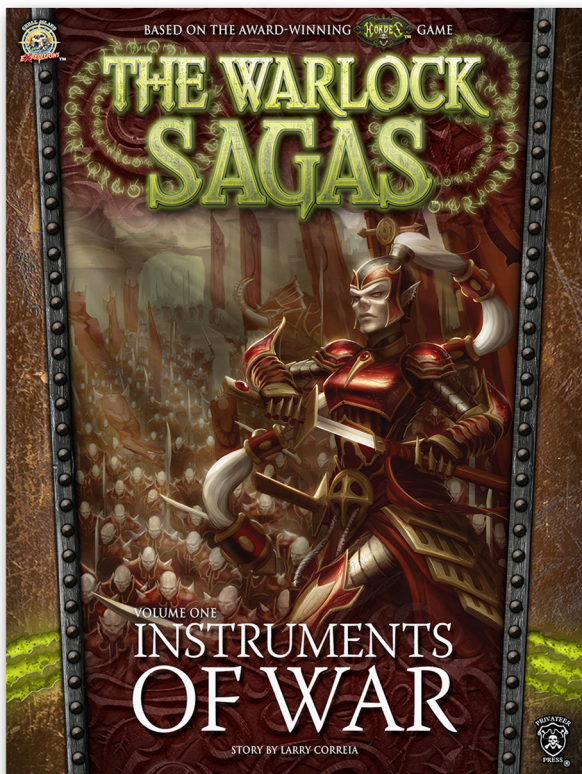
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