



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 Korsk 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?”