

A War In Heaven

By

Andre Wiselka

***This book is dedicated to Kotka
and Malusia.***

“That nature which contemns its origin
Cannot be bordered certain in itself.
She that herself will sliver and disbranch
From her material sap, perforce must wither
And come to deadly use.”

-King Lear, William Shakespeare

“A violent storm broke loose overhead, so that, as in the Homeric battle of gods and men, the disturbance below seemed to be vying with that on high.”

-Storm of Steel, Ernst Jünger



Greater Saxony and Tribal Environs, Circa 1140 A.D.

List of Characters

Adalbero – Archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen. Spiritual advisor of Father Vizelin

Adolph II – Count of Holsatia, and trading partner of the Obodrites

Albert the Bear – Margrave of the northern mark. Enemy of Adolph II

Beleknegini – Wife of Knyaz Nyklot

Bern – Acolyte monk from Bremen. Disciple of Father Vizelin

Bernard of Clairvaux – High Abbot of the Cistercian Order, and spiritual advisor to Pope Eugene III

Boliliut – Obodrite treasurer

Boyan – Tribal flamen of the Obodrites

Daso – Holsatian river merchant

Dmitri of Novgorod – interpreter of the Obodrites and adherent of Bogimilism

Eskil – Archbishop of Lund

Giselbert – Daso's deaf rower

Henry of Badwide – Holsatian count, and ally of Albert the Bear

Henry the Lion – Duke of Saxony

Ludomir – Military advisor of the Obodrites

Marchrad – Holsatian elder

Nyklot – Tribal knyaz of the Obodrites

Peter of Wollin – Amber craftsman of Wollin

Pribislav – elder son of Nyklot

Rimbert – Henchman of Marchrad

Sobieslav – Pomeranian champion fighter and nephew to Nyklot

Thorkell – Danish merchant

Vizelin – Priest of Hameln

Vratislav – younger son of Nyklot

Yaroslav – Tribal elder of the Obodrites

Glossary

Auroch – Ox-like species that lived in Northeastern Germany during the Middle Ages. Now extinct.

Blood and Hair – Wendish ritual of exchanging vows of blood and hair.

Bogimilism – Medieval heretical sect. Believed that the church was the work of the devil, and that man could have direct communication with God without a priestly intermediary.

Bread and Salt – Traditional Slavic greeting ritual.

Cowl – Hooded single-piece garment worn by monks.

Crosier – Long staff with a spiraling crest, a status symbol of Catholic bishops during the Middle Ages.

Denars – Silver coins, the most widely circulating coinage of the High Middle Ages; from Greenland to Samarkand.

Druzhina – Tribal retinue of professional warriors within Slavic society.

Flamen – Name of Pagan priest. (Latin spelling)

Joyeuse – Legendary battle sword of Charlemagne.

Knyaz – Hereditary chief of a Wendish tribe.

Kyrie eleison – Lit. "Lord have mercy" an ancient Christian hymn

Margrave – A warlord stationed at a 'Mark,' or a customs point on the border of the Holy Roman Empire

Marten – Small mammal, related to the wolverine, about the size of a beaver. Highly valued for its fur.

Mitre – The sacramental headwear of a Catholic bishop.

Niemcy – Slavic word for Germanic-speaking peoples. Pejorative.

Pram – Flat-bottomed row boat.

Reichstag – A formal assembly of the most powerful warlords of the Holy Roman Empire.

Rusalka – According to Slavic Folklore, a female water-sprite that dances men to their deaths. Usually an undead spirit that had died a violent death.

Part One

Journey Into Barbaricum 1138 A.D

1.

Lent in Hamburg was generously warm this spring. Fresh shipments of herring were arriving in the harbor, netted off the coasts of Scania and salted in Lüneburg. The cool, spring winds passed through the gates of the abbey as the mild sun beamed down onto the earth, so that the plum trees were already beginning to blossom fragrant, white buds.

Inside the abbey walls the acolyte Bern was pensively tending to an herb garden as the silhouette of a crosier overtook him from behind. He continued to pluck weeds from a chive patch as the shadow stretched forth over the cobblestone courtyard, announcing the presence of the archbishop. He dropped his trowel, and lowered his head.

"The boatman has arrived," said a firm voice from above.

It was still early morning in Hamburg, and the monks of the abbey were tending to their respective duties: sweeping, gardening, chanting, praying. Bern, a novice choir monk, grasped his wooden rosary, tied to the belt of his robe.

Turning, he saw the outline of Archbishop Adalbero. He bowed low. The archbishop, adorned in mitre and sacramental robes was an elderly man with a gentle passion in his eye, who had been servicing the diocese of Hamburg-Bremen for many years now, and had come to study this gentle monk particularly well.

"At ease, my son. Please – walk with me," he said, putting his arm around Bern. They walked out of the herb garden, past the chapel, and refectory.

"Why do you fear?" asked Adalbero, with a penetrating gaze.

"It's not fear, my lord," responded Bern.

"Was this not your wish? To be reunited with your teacher? Well, the desire of your heart is to come to pass. He is calling for you. God willing, you will be reunited by as soon as tomorrow evening."

"Only in the worst times of war does he call. Not out of his love for me but out of necessity," he said, dejectedly. "Never, my lord, have I known of life in the open field. I confess to you that I do have no desire to taste the life of torch and sword. Prayer and book-learning suffice me." For some reason this frankness came out in front of the archbishop, a man who, despite his authority, had a disarming presence.

Adalbero tilted his head, opening his eyes widely. "Is it God or Mammon that you serve, my son?" he asked, without raising his voice.

The monk lowered his head again. "Your teacher has told me that you have a kind spirit, and that you cherish truth, and learning. I know. I listen to you sing in the choir. I hear your voice reach angelic heights when you sing the *Kyrie eleison*. Do not feel neglected, my son. Taming wild beasts is not for the faint of heart, and such is the nature of your teacher's work. Do you know to whom he preaches the Word?" he asked, trying to elicit an emotional response.

"Yes, lord. He ministers to the Holsatians and to the pagan Wends."

"It is for this reason that he neglects you. But I assure you that a braver soul is not to be found in Christendom," said Adalbero. "Upon the conversion of the Wendish apostates I will personally invest him with the bishopric. It must happen soon, as it is written in the Book of Life that all nations must be reborn in Christ in order to make way for His return. It is for this reason that you are now called."

Bern felt a tight cramp in his belly. "Amen," he replied, as they approached the infirmary, passing a limestone slab of sundial and astrolabe.

Archbishop Adalbero nodded his head in approval. "It is all part of the divine plan, Bern. The prophet foretold of it and now that the End of Days is upon us we must all suffer through it and thus we will endure. I have visited Faldera myself. It is there that your teacher awaits you."

Flattery dropped the guard of the young monk. He had barely suspected that the archbishop even knew his name.

"I will charge you with one duty, and one duty only," said Adalbero.

"Yes, my lord."

"Follow me towards the gate."

They exited the hospital and as they did the nuns returned, bowing to the archbishop. Bern saw the boatman from afar, waiting at the abbey gates. As they walked towards the gates an elderly monk approached them from the opposite angle. He held a small, wooden cage in his right hand with a pigeon inside. He handed Adalbero the cage, bowing, and continued to walk on without saying a word.

Adalbero handed the cage to Bern.

"This little bird is the ideal Christian, for he always remembers where home is," said Adalbero. "I trust that you will be the same."

"Yes, my lord," said Bern obediently.

Approaching the abbey gate, the boatman was smiling, and opening his arms towards Bern.

"This pigeon will always find his way to me, and he will always talk with me, but I command him what to tell me. Do you know what I want him to tell me, my son? I want him to tell me if there are any new martyrs of God's faithful by the hands of the pagans. I want him to tell me if it is true what they say: that the heathen priests in Wendland drink the blood of Christians in their godless rituals."

Bern felt a tremendous fear as he listened to the last sentence, and looked at the messenger pigeon. It was sitting on its perch, cooing. He looked back up and Adalbero was staring at him intently.

"His presence at my window sill will tell me, and as he is a faithful little bird, I ask you to be his eyes and ears. Open the cage and he will return to me with the information that I seek. But if what I seek is untrue and only the rumors of evil men then snap his little neck, and return immediately to me. *Deus vult*," finished Adalbero.

The boatman stood in the front of the dock, smiling nervously and cracking his knuckles. He was rather tall but had a slight hunch in his back. He wore a brown, linen garment with a black, woolen cloak draped over his left shoulder. Bald with pockmarks on his face, and yellow, crooked teeth, his open-toed sandals revealed wretchedly deformed toes. Bern could not help but feel uncomfortable by the repugnant appearance of this stranger.

"Lord Adalbero," said the boatman, bowing low. His voice was scratchy and truculent. "It is an honor to service you. I bring you..." he reached into his pocket, but Adalbero lifted his hand and the boatman stood silent.

"Daso, there is no need to enter into gift-giving when you do such a kind service for the church. Is not this gentle deed of hauling the Lord's servants a sufficient honor before God that worldly formalities do not apply?"

Daso smiled. "Indeed, lord," he said, as a clay jar of honey returned to his pocket. He wanted to say more, but he refrained.

"This is Bern, a choir monk from Bremen," said the archbishop and turned to Bern. "Daso will carry you free of charge to Segeberg where your teacher ministers to the Holsatians."

Bern greeted him and thanked him for his kindness.

Daso greeted him in return, and requested prayers for a safe journey to Adalbero who consented, making the sign of the cross over them.

Everyone within the abbey walls had stopped in their respective stations to look at them.

Adalbero gave him an intense gaze. "Sing the *Kyrie eleison* always, my son. May the Holy Spirit keep you safe until the blissful translation to eternity. Go now, and may the mighty troop of St. Michael's angels protect you."

Bern kissed his hand and turned to follow Daso. They walked for a moment in silence, and turning, Bern noticed that the archbishop remained at the gait, and that other people in the streets were pausing to look at him.

"Come now, young man. We must make good time," said Daso, still smiling. He appeared to be enjoying the attention.

They walked along the dirt road that ran parallel to the River Alster, a tributary of the Elbe at the edge of Hamburg, surrounded by the harbor.

Horse-drawn carts full of wheat and millet rushed to and forth from the staple market, where many traders, and artisans gathered to sell their merchandise. The marketplace was situated on the opposite side of the river. Daso minded the steamy lumps of fresh horse dung as he guided Bern onward.

Bern could hear the music that came from the marketplace, and the adjacent taverns. A flute, bells, cymbals and a zither were playing, and a troubadour was singing as a large crowd gathered around him.

"Do you know the song that he sings?" asked Daso, as if eager to show off his learning. Bern shrugged his shoulders. "It's the *Chanson de Roland*. They say it's about the mighty Caesar, Charlemagne, who conquered many heathen folk, including our own forebears. You are a Saxon, no less?"

"My father was from the Harz mountains. I was consecrated to the Lord when I was five years old. I have lived in the Bremen monastery ever since," replied Bern.

They passed by several court ladies adorned in green and brown silk gowns with long flowing sleeves, trimmed with sable fur and golden embroidery. Their hair was braided, and crept out from under short, white

veils. Daso bowed to them as he crossed. One of them gave him a look of disgust; the others ignored him all together, looking towards the foreign troubadour.

After elbowing their way through the busy streets they finally reached the harbor situated between the confluence of the Elbe and its tributary, the Alster. They walked down a pier to a flat-bottomed river boat where a hooded man was sitting by the oars, sipping cider from a wooden mug.

"Giselbert, this will be our friend for the journey," said Daso to the hooded man who looked up at Bern. He smiled and waved to Bern with a thick, calloused hand. "Giselbert doesn't possess the gift of hearing, but he's as strong as an otter, upstream."

Besides the rower, the contents of the boat included an anchor, a bucket for water bailing, and in the middle several barrels of grain. There was also a crossbow in the front, alongside a leather bag full of stag antlers.

"You sit next to the bucket, young friend," Daso said to Bern. "And lend yourself useful if need be. These pine planks were caulked less than a week ago, but that doesn't stop the river from seeping in now and again."

They pushed off from the harbor, and wafted up the Alster, through town, passing the bloomery hearth where ironsmiths hammered molten steel, humming an ancient work song.

They passed the watermill on the Western side of the river. Its combines turned as men walked in and out of the building connected to it. The river traffic seemed to be rather slim, only a single, empty barge coming into town in the opposite direction, and when they reached the city wall on the northern wall the watchtower men didn't so much as look at them, much less demand a toll.

It was a clear day and the sun was still rising. Bern looked back at the city walls once, and then glanced yonder at the peasants plowing the fields, and the orchards in the Western fiefs. Several boys in filthy brown tunics, about eight or nine years of age, were playing mock combat with staves by the riverside. They were a year or two too young to help plow the field and still had much time for boyish leisure. They followed the boat for awhile, hurling questions at Bern, and Daso who both ignored them.

After a short while they made their way into the dense, pine forest. Bern made the sign of the cross as it darkened. Daso, situated in front of the ship, with crossbow at his side reached into the cargo.

"You hungry?" he asked Bern.

Bern nodded his head.

"We've got black bread, beech nuts, smoked jerky and cider," said Daso. "Don't harangue me about the meat, now. I know its Lent season and all, and I know the Lord wants us to abstain from meat, but out here in the forest a man has to keep his strength." He took a bite of the jerky, and offered Bern some.

"The bread will suffice."

Daso shrugged and handed him a hard loaf of bread.

"If I may," said Bern politely, breaking the bread. Daso noticed that Bern, a skinny youth gave liberal portions to the pigeon.

"You don't speak much," said Daso addressing Bern.

"In truth I often spend many days and weeks without speaking to anyone," replied Bern. "I go to be with my teacher who has called for me. His name is *Vizelin*."

Daso stopped chewing immediately and his countenance grew frightened. For a moment there was silence except for the paddles hitting the water. When he regained composure the jerky disappeared and he smiled as he took a bite of bread.

"Do you like the bread?" he asked. "You might enjoy it more with this," he said and handed him the same container of honey that he had tried to give to Archbishop Adalbero. "Go on, take it."

Bern accepted the honey reluctantly, thanking him for it. "I do, by the way. I do want to hear everything about our destination that you can tell me," he said. "You know my teacher. You know about his mission. Please tell me. Tell me about our destination. Tell me about the wars in the north," requested Bern.

"To understand where you are going you must understand the rivers. To navigate the rivers is to be able to navigate your way through the north. But to navigate the hearts of men is an even more important skill. I am half Wend. Don't be alarmed I am no heathen, and am a Saxon in my heart, but the woman that gave birth to me was a captive heathen. I never knew my father, but was raised by my mother, a slave, and me? Free as any freeman could be! I can travel as a guide and as an interpreter

between the tribes. When there is no work as either I can make my fortune selling wares. But not only wares, mind you! It's not just wares that flow into these northern harbors but rumors, legends, and tales, all of which have their price."

Bern noticed that Daso had a golden ring on his finger. He had not noticed it back in town.

"I, too, never knew my father. He was killed in an accident mining silver. I was only a child. My mother gave me to the Lord when I was a child. I have not seen her since."

"Why the pigeon?" asked Daso, ignoring the last comment. Bern told him, and he laughed an obnoxious laughter.

"As to your question about the wars," began Daso. "What can I say? It is a fight of all against all. The Danes fight the Saxons, the Saxons fight the Wends, the Wends fight the Saxons and the Danes, and when all of them are not fighting one another they fight amongst themselves. One takes tribute from another, the next slaughters the other, the next steals cattle from the first, such is the circle of life."

"Do the pagans really drink blood?" asked Bern.

"I have not seen it with my own eyes, and hope that I would never be forced to. But I will tell you one thing – there are several groups of pagans: the most important are the Wagrians, Rugians, Pomeranians, and the powerful Obodrites. There are several others but these are the ones that I am familiar with. The Wagrians are warlike. They live side by side the Danes and Holsatians in a brutal display of pride. They are fierce and will kill you without hesitation. They do not have a single leader and are prone to raiding. The Obodrites live beyond them. They have a large marketplace bursting with exotic wares. Much more than in Hamburg, I can tell you that. They are prosperous and united. They have a leader there. They call him *knyaz*.

"That is the word for their king, only not a proper king, but a tribal chief, rather. On the Baltic Sea live the Rugians. Their markets are also prosperous. They have a *knyaz* but he is not obeyed. There they have a heathen priest that prays to demons. He is their true leader. They erect large idols, more so than the other Wends, and make sacrifices to them. They sacrifice all life, including Christian souls. Of this I dare not speak of more. It's not wise to trade with those people."

Bern leaned forward, trying to absorb everything that he heard. "And my teacher – he sojourns amongst such folk?" he asked. He found himself more relaxed now. He enjoyed the smell of the pine needles, the chirp of the magpies, and the cool air of the forest. In the river there were beavers swimming, as the river trout lunged for mayflies.

"Your teacher ministers to the spiritual needs of the Holsatians, first and foremost. We are forest folk and live far away from the grace of God. When your teacher first came to us we were worshiping in groves, making sacrifices to base idols, and overall walking in darkness. He has erected a church in Faldera. It is a great meeting place for us where we hold vigils, attend mass and sing songs. When Vizelin is not in Holsatia he is with the Obodrites."

Daso took a long sip of cider and continued. "This current Obodrite knyaz hates Christ, but his father had been a Christian. There were churches in Wendland. Saxons roamed there freely, some even in the retinue of the Obodrite knyaz. But this new one is a proud, pagan dog. His retinue is purely comprised of Wends. They raid the Danes and take tribute from other Wends. Thus it is with the Wends – they eternally deny the gentle yoke of Christ for their vain idols."

Giselbert rowed on for several hours more, and turned up a small rivulet. When the sun began to set a pack of feral dogs began to roam alongside the boat, barking viciously. Their eyes glowed with an intense rage and hunger. Daso discharged a bolt from his crossbow into one of their chests and it died there, whelping. The rest dispersed immediately thereafter. Daso laughed mightily as he reloaded his weapon, cocking back the pull-lever with his foot.

Giselbert moored the boat at the bank of the rivulet next to a patch of oak trees that's roots extended in the water. Daso gathered a bundle of leaves and pine cones from the forest and lit a small fire with flint and stone. Bern lied down on a soft patch of moss next to the fire and gazed into the flames. He dozed off to sleep with the pigeon cage in his arms.

They rose at dawn. Bern had dew all over him and was shivering. Daso had been sleeping, propped against an oak tree, with his hood on, and cloak wrapped around his body. Giselbert slept in the boat, curled up next to the cargo.

"Today we will reach the River Trave, and arrive at our destination," said Daso.

Crossing another rivulet so small they had to get out and walk along the banks at one time. At one ford there was a giant, hewn memorial stone. Daso told Bern that it was to commemorate when Burwid, a Holsatian warrior slew a Wendish champion in a duel.

They finally reached Segeberg late afternoon that day. The terrain had become darker, and the lands were filled with marshes and bogs. Tall reed patches covered one's sitting view from the boat, and it was necessary to stand in order to see beyond the river.

When the rivulet came to a confluence with a larger river, Daso looked up, over the reeds into the distance.

"Good God," he proclaimed, making the sign of the cross. Bern felt a sharp pain in his stomach, and rose. He saw a stone wall, shaped like a half-oval on the north side of the connecting river. It was broken down in the middle and inside there were ashes all over, remnants of a church and several huts and market stalls, all of which were charred black. There were few men left inside but when the boat came into view they all ducked through the gate and made their way up to the north watchtower.

"Who prowls about unannounced?" asked a sharp voice from the watchtower. A yellow standard with a black stag rose and several crossbows aimed down at the boat.

Daso fumbled about for a white cloth. When he found none he shouted up to the men. "I am a Holsatian; Daso of the Ditmarsh. I bring grain and auxiliaries."

"How many of you are there?" asked the voice.

"We are three, sir. Just I, a novice monk, and a deaf rower."

"Moor your ship, and walk towards the watchtower."

Bern was frightened beyond measure. Gisbert looked at Daso who signed for him to moor the ship.

The River Trave carried them to the Eastern wall where they exited the boat and brought it ashore.

"Maintain your composure, young man," Daso said to Bern. "As a holy man you will not be harmed."

They walked towards the watchtower. Four men descended and walked towards Daso. The lead man was tall with shoulder-length auburn hair. He was mail-clad with a blue, silk cloak, brooch fastened at his right shoulder. His surcoat was of a black horned stag, and he carried his

sheathed sword at waist-length at the side of a leather belt. His leggings were tight and his boots came to his knees with attached spurs.

The three men that followed him brandished their swords. They were all mail-clad, and wore thick helms with lowered visors.

Daso smiled nervously, and held his hands before him intertwined and shaking. "Kind sirs, I am Daso of the Ditmarsh. I am a humble river-merchant, and transporter of holy men. We come to help the good flock of Segeberg. I am a friend of the great Count Adolph II of Schaumberg."

The auburn-haired leader gave Daso a contemptuous look, turning to his entourage. The man at his right gave Daso a harsh look. "This is Count Henry of Badwide," he said, nodding his head to his leader.

Daso bowed low, and quickly shot a look up at the watchtower. There were about eight men still there, all with raised crossbows.

"Kind lord," he said. "I have been away for over a year, shipping monks up and down the Weser River, watering Christ's many plantations. Pardon my ignorance. I had not known that you were now the lord of this manor. I beg your forgiveness."

Count Henry looked over his shoulder and raised his hand. The men lowered their crossbows. "News travels slow when the lowly dog, Adolph, denies the righteous investiture that I have received from the late Caesar Lothair himself, God rest his soul. Look around you, merchant. This has been my inheritance. Your Count Adolph has stood by like a rabbit-foot as his pagan friends destroyed my fiefdoms. I firmly believe that he played a part in this, at the expense of greater Holsatia. Come and see for yourselves." He grabbed Daso with his mailed-glove and brought him towards the front gate. Bern and Giselbert looked at each other, and followed several paces behind.

They walked towards the front gate. Bern looked out. He saw that there was a cleared area in the forest.

There had been many wheat fields on the horizon. All of which were burned down now. It was getting dark, and beyond the burnt fields there was a peat bog, still aglow with the embers of a potent conflagration in the distance.

"I lost many men. It was, I admit, the first siege that I had faced," said Count Henry who lowered his head. "My serfs, half of my retinue and all of the priests have fled to Faldera, where there is a bountiful stockpile

of grain there. Am I to continue paying everyone's sustenance when there is no revenue coming in?" He looked devastated.

There was silence for a moment. Daso looked pensive.

"Good Count," he said. "Never have I heard of such treachery. I assure you that I will tell everyone in the empire of this sedition by Count Adolph – as sure as my name is Daso of the Ditmarsh!"

The count nodded approvingly. "And you wish to gain the enmity of such a powerful lord? A puny river merchant such as yourself?"

"There are many powerful lords, sire," said Daso, bowing low. "Some more worthy than others."

"Good, merchant. Good," said the count with a tight grimace. "Remember that I, too, have friends. When the noble Duke of Greater Saxony, the Margrave Albert the Bear arrives here with a mighty host, eternal perdition to the stiff-necked will be unsheathed. But the just will always be rewarded for their fealty."

"I had much milled grain for sale, but now that I see the dire situation that you and your men are in I am inclined to forgo lucre in favor of Christian charity."

"I will pay you in silver for your grain, merchant. A fair price, no less. But I do ask that you stay with us this evening. I would like to get to know you better."

Daso faced Bern and Giselbert. "Monk, take Giselbert back to the boat. We must continue onwards with our journey."

"I was to come as far as Segeberg," pleaded Bern. "I want to know where my teacher is. Ask them, sir."

Just then, one of the mail-clad men came back to them. "The count wishes that I help you with the cargo. Afterwards you will dine with him. We have a little meat, ale, and some cheese. Soon hereafter we will break bread."

"Sir," said Bern. "Do you know where the priest is – Vizelin of Hameln?"

"Father Vizelin? The priest that exorcises demons? I can't say that I've seen him lately. He must be in Faldera with everybody else."

He picked up a box, and heaved.

"Then I must go to Faldera," said Bern to Daso.

Daso smiled. "I must go in the other direction, young man. Anyone of these kind men can guide you there for a small fee."

"I have no denars to pay a fee!" he said, rather irritated.

Another man approached, and grabbed a box. "No fee, necessary, sir. Be that as it may, Father Vizelin isn't in Faldera. He's with Marchrad last I heard."

Daso's eyes widened. "And where is Marchrad?"

"Count Henry has allowed Marchrad to maintain a small toll bridge between here and Wendland. It was something that Marchrad had always said was his right, but Count Adolph had never permitted it," he began to walk away and turned back around. "Actually it's not really between here and Wendland, it's *in* Wendland," he said, laughing.

Daso looked scared, but gained composure. "Good, good. Bern you will come with me. I will take you to your teacher."

Bern noticed that Daso finally used his name, but he took it as a slight. He was becoming less and less accepting of the river merchant.

The sun had set and darkness began to envelope the land. Bats began to circle around the settlement, and Bern looked up at their overcast silhouettes.

"Wait here," said Daso, and followed the men with a wooden box in his hands.

He returned about twenty minutes later with two small pouches of silver denars, one in each hand. He threw one to Giselbert. "Let's go," he said.

"Who is Marchrad?" Bern asked him.

"You will find out soon enough. Let's push off," he said, and walked straight towards the boat. "Easy rowing from here on out, Giselbert. We'll go down the Trave, pay the toll, and there I will drop you off, Bern."

"Why do you address Giselbert if he cannot hear?" asked Bern.

"I need to talk to someone on these long journeys. Otherwise I'd lose my good judgment."

Giselbert rowed down the River Trave. It was now completely dark, and Daso lit a torch. There was a lot more room now on the boat now that the cargo was gone. They rowed in silence for about half an hour.

"Who is Marchrad?" asked Bern.

"So many questions all of a sudden!" said Daso. "I will explain it to you –Marchrad is a Holsatian elder. A monstrous man, if I may be so bold. I hope to be past him as soon as possible." He grabbed his forehead

and then looked towards the sky. "You leave for a year and the whole world turns upside-down! I should have stayed on the River Weser. Less pay, but so much more serenity. Not a single barbarian anywhere! You hear that Giselbert? This is our last trip north, Giselbert! Our last trip north for all time!"

The River Trave flowed towards its inevitable destination. Little whirls rippled around the oars in the greenish water, and there was a hazy mist over land and river. After a few hours of silence the occupants of the river-boat saw torch fire in the distance and heard the raucous laughter of men.

Daso dipped his torch in the water. It sizzled and he put it next to his crossbow, which he hid under his outstretched cloak. He was fidgeting nervously with his fingers. The fear rubbed off on Bern who grasped at his rosary, and commenced to chant.

*"Salve, Regina, Mater misericordiae,
vita, dulcedo, et spes nostra, salve.
ad te clamamus exsule filii Hevae..."*

In the distance a wooden bridge wafted with torch lights, and several crossbowmen at its sides. In the center there was a beheaded corpse with its bowels hanging out, impaled on a stake. There were skulls lined up on staves that stood, sticking out of the water.

"Mother of God! I beg you to keep us safe," pleaded Daso.

Bern squeezed his eyes shut, praying, and wished that he had never left the serenity of the Bremen abbey for the damp and blurry edges of the empire.

Bern felt the abrasive vibrations of rocks scraping by the boat. The river became shallow and fordable. There were stepping stones ahead next to the raised bridge. Many torches were lit around it.

"Identify yourselves!" shouted a voice. A man approached from the riverbank and grabbed the flank of the boat.

"Toll and customs checkpoint. Moor your boat," said the man. He pulled the boat alongside the riverbank.

The man had a crossbow strapped across his back and a torch in his right hand. He was short and bald with a large scar across his face, with few, rotten teeth in his mouth. He wore a leather and a fluted iron helmet.

"Come along, come along," he said. He guided them up a little hill and onto the main bridge where another man was waiting with a drawn crossbow. He was tall, blond and had a large mustache.

His eyes smoldered with rage. He wore a leather armor coat over a filthy hempen tunic.

Bern could not remove his eyes from the mutilated corpse.

"He likes our scarecrow, Rimbert!" said the bald man, laughing. They both reeked of ale, and had rotting, brown teeth.

"Who are you and where are you going?" said the blond-haired one in a most stern tone.

"Sir, it's Rimbert they call you? Rimbert, I am Daso of the Ditmarsh. I am a transporter of holy men. I wish to leave this gentle monk with Father Vizelin, and pass on; nothing more, sir."

"What's the cargo?" he asked. "Bevo," he said the bald man. "Go and check."

Bevo, torch in hand went to inspect the cargo. "Not much. Some rations, some ale, and some deer antlers.

Rimbert looked them up and down for a moment without saying a word. They all neglected to meet his gaze. "Alright," he said. "You may pass on. The toll of our ford, *Agrimeswidil*, is five denars. You will have our protection throughout *Agrimeswidil*, but beyond you are with the pagans and your very soul is in danger. Do you still wish to proceed?"

Daso's face shook with frustration. "Such a price! Such a price, indeed! And under whose authority do you collect this toll?"

Bevo laughed viciously. "Under our own, Wend-kisser," he said. "25 denars!"

"Silence, ill-bred man!" said Rimbart. "Five denars and may God have mercy on your souls, you who do deals with the devil's frogspawn."

Daso reached into his pouch and produced five silver pennies, and proceeded to hand them to Rimbart.

The tall blond man counted out the coins, and gestured for them to move on. Then he turned his back to them.

"Where is Father Vizelin?" asked Bern, who yearned for his teacher now more than ever.

Rimbart turned to face them again. "We haven't seen him for awhile. He is with the Wend-king of the Obodrites." He turned his back to them again and walked towards the side of the bridge.

"You will spare some of your delightful ale before parting, yes? For the defense of the empire," said Bevo, laughing as he addressed Daso.

"Why of course. But we must be getting on now. Here, have some ale, but leave us enough for our journey. The river water will be getting saltier and saltier now. Come along, Gisbert," he said, pulling Gisbert back to the boat. "You will take care of this monk, sir, won't you?"

"And feed him with what? He is your cargo."

All of a sudden the men fell silent. Bevo and Rimbart stood as if in attention, looking towards the north side of the bridge: there stood an obscure figure. He was taller than all present, and was wearing a white linen shirt, rolled up the elbows with a sword in his belt. His trousers were dark, and he had on leather shoes.

"Such a commotion," he exclaimed with a calm voice. "What merits this fuss?" he asked.

He walked closer so his face could be seen flickering within range of a torch, exposing hair long and black but with many grey hairs.

"Just some river-rats carrying stag antlers to Wend markets, sir," said Bevo. "The skinny one is looking for the priest."

The tall man walked slowly towards the guards, past the beheaded corpse, as he looked all the while at the boat in the reed patch. He walked between his two men, put his arms on their shoulders and then in a fury, bashed their heads together.

Bevo fell down on the ground in agony while Rimbart clutched the back of his neck, fetching his helmet.

"You men are too drunk to be toll-taking. This post requires a keen eye," he said.

"Venerable Elder Marchrad! Greetings from the Ditmarsh! I am Daso, a Saxon and Holsatian at your service. I send you greetings from the archbishop, and carry God's servants up to your beloved kingdom. Do you remember me?"

"I do," said Marchrad who slowly paced up and down the bridge. "I remember you. Stag antlers were never your specialty. What will I find under your ship if I lift it upside down?" he asked staring into Daso's eyes.

"Sir, stag antlers are but a gift for you, venerable elder. Nothing more."

Marchrad stared him in the eye for along while and then snapped his fingers. His two guards hopped towards the boat, and turned it upside down, minding the pigeon cage and crossbow. When they put on land there appeared a bundle of sword blades tied to the boat's bottom.

Bevo laughed derisively. "That was a mistake, barge-man, a big, big mistake," he said. "How did you know it, my lord?"

"Stag antlers don't make a boat sink that low. I have taught you that, you fool."

For the first time Bern heard a helpless wail from the deaf rower, Giselbert, who seemed to be anticipating a cruel end.

"You are right, sir! You are right! I must have these blades confiscated. They are for you my lord, for you!" pleaded Daso. It was met with laughter from the guardsmen.

Marchrad smiled. "Fetter him, and do the same with the rower," he said, pointing for Rimbert to do it. "They will await my judgment tomorrow morning at dawn. Merchant, you will appear before me tomorrow at dawn, barefoot."

"You," he said, pointing at Bevo. "Take this gentle monk to my quarters and see that he gets a warm meal." He then walked back into the darkness.

Utterly numb with fear from the presence of the beheaded corpse, Daso and Giselbert resisted not a bit.

Bern was exhausted and confused. It was as if all of this was just a terrible nightmare and that he would wake up in the Bremen Monastery again, come morning.

"You thought you'd escape Agrimeswidil justice, dirty old weasel! Let's see if your heathen friends can help you now!" said Bevo to Daso as Rimbert cuffed him with thick, iron chains.

Bevo clutched the sword blades under his arm, and took the stag antlers and ale barrel in his hands. "Come," he said to Bern who took his pigeon with him.

They walked down a torch lit path along the bank of the River Trave. Bern saw bonfires in the distance and heard song-singing from far away. He looked at Bevo, whose image flickered in and out of the torch light.

"You from Hamburg?" he asked the monk.

"Bremen," replied Bern.

"Do you like Holsatia?" he asked, smiling. Bern didn't reply.

"We may not be the sweetest bunch, but I assure you we are kind to our fellow Saxons. We even got a Church now in Faldera. We've got a few taverns, too, in Cuzelina," he said proudly.

They walked on silently for a few more minutes. "Ever been to Hamburg?" he asked Bern.

"I am arriving from Hamburg."

"Did you like it?"

Bern thought for a moment and decided to respond truthfully.

"No," he said.

"Me, neither. They were the ones that did this do me," he said pointing to the vacant spots where most of his teeth used to be. "Priest had them kicked in when I was a boy for meat-eating during Lent. He thought that would teach me. It didn't."

They arrived at a row of rough, pine hewn huts with thatch and moss roofs. Red deer pelts covered the doorways.

Bevo entered one of the huts. It was exceedingly dark inside. Bern felt the damp ground, and smelled the hearth smoke that had caked the walls. He had a flashback of his childhood with his mother keeping him warm by the warm hearth embers. For the first time since leaving Bremen he felt at ease.

Bevo lit the hearth fire in the center of the hut with flint and dried moss. There was a black, iron cauldron over the hearth fire, and a wicker rope that held it from a rafter. Two skinned brown hares were hanging from the wicker rope from their hind legs. Bern sat beside an auroch pelt besides a wooden bedpost. "I am very sorry," said Bern.

Bevo gave him an odd look. "Beg your pardon?"

"About your teeth; I will pray that Christ heals them soon."

Bevo laughed, ignoring the comment as he exited the hut.

"Marchrad will be back soon," he said. "Let the cauldron-water steam up. Salt and oats are on the table," he said and left.

Bern shivered without being cold. He sat up to grab the oats, and fed a few to his pigeon. Looking around he began to notice more items. There was a sword in a scabbard on the wall next to a scarred, rusty mail shirt, and a bow and quiver full of arrows. The table had a small, carved idol of St. George. Next to it were a few wooden spoons and a ladle.

Although extremely exhausted, he began relax in the dark solitude. He began to pray.

Just then a dog barged through the door. It was short-haired, floppy-eared hound. It approached Bern, and began to sniff him. Bern petted its emaciated sides.

At that moment he lifted his head, and saw a tall, sharp outline lifting up the deer pelt and entering.

Bern felt Marchrad's eye on him. It was gentler than he had assumed it would be.

"You will forgive the unkind reception?" he said, sitting down next to the hearth besides Bern.

"I lead many unruly rustics who do not possess the gift of grace, and the river traffic around here isn't much more charitable, either."

His voice has gentle, but carried great weight. It drew one in and kept one on edge at the same time.

He looked at Bern closely, without judgment or hate, and Bern suddenly felt rather important.

"I will assure you that when you come to Agrimeswidil as a guest, and as a holy man you will always be received as a friend."

"Thank you, sir. I thank you, I thank you humbly."

"I am Marchrad," said the voice in the dark.

"I am Bern."

"Bern, I am delighted to have you as a guest. Will you dine with me tonight?"

"It would be an honor."

"You are young. I hear hesitation and inexperience in your voice."

"Forgive me."

"Innocence is to be admired, not forgiven," said Marchrad. "I see that Bevo has left you without company and with nothing to dine on."

Forgive him, he is a fool. As for the meal, we can stir a hare-stew, and I have a little bit of smoked pike from the river...but indeed this is not enough."

"It is enough. I require little," said Bern.

"Not so. Come with me," said Marchrad who stood up and walked towards the door. Bern and the dog followed him.

It was pitch black outside, and the clouds covered the moon and most of the stars of the sky.

Crickets chirped and frogs croaked loudly.

They walked past several more huts, some without deer pelts. Bern looked in and saw lone women nursing babies in a few of them. Afterwards there were several neighing horses in stalls.

On the left Bern could see the huge bonfire with a large circle of men gathered around it, telling stories and passing around a bulky mead flagon. They paced down a small path, through harsh brush, and came to a marshy area enveloped in streams of illuminated firefly paths. Bern's feet started get soaked the cold, marshy water.

Just then the moon appeared and Bern could see Marchrad; he had stepped onto solid ground, above some oak roots that dangled into the marsh. He grabbed the dog and dropped into the water for a few minutes. It whined anxiously, and when he pulled it out, it was covered in seething leeches. Marchrad brushed off the sucking black dots and gathered them into his pouch.

The water was boiling when they returned. Marchrad put in the hares, the leeches, the pike flakes, the oats, and some salt.

"We'll have a stew," said Marchrad.

Bern felt like saying something, anything. "You are a brave man," he said, and regretted it as soon as it left his mouth.

"Where do you hail from, man-of-God?" he asked, ignoring the comment.

"I was born in the Harz Mountains, but was given to the Lord when I was five years old, and taken to Bremen," replied Bern.

"An orphan?"

"An orphan."

"I never knew my father, either. I was given to the Lord when I was too young to remember. I don't know my birth date and don't know my exact age."

"Do you till the soil here?" asked Bern.

"No soil to till out here that won't be burned down. I'm a raider. I've been a raider for a long time now. It's not something to be proud of but there comes a time when a man must admit to himself the path that he chosen for himself. My path has been a bloody and fruitless one that has brought me little solace," he said looking up to Bern.

"May I ask you who was the slain soul on the lance?" asked Bern.

"You may," said Marchrad, pausing for a moment. "I will not suffer a heathen to live," he said simply, without expecting further inquiry.

"A Wend?" asked Bern.

"A filthy dog."

There was silence for a long time. Finally Marchrad spoke.

"Will you hear my confession? I have a heavy load to unburden myself of," he said.

"I am but a simple choir monk. I have no authority to absolve you of your sins," replied Bern, shyly. Bern felt strangely comforted to know that these Holsatians stood between Saxony and the Wends.

"Nevertheless you can pray for me," he replied. "Would you pray for me? If I asked you to?"

"I will," replied Bern.

"And you will share my confession to no mortal?"

"Not I."

Marchrad paused for a long while. He walked over to the table, where he set his weapon, and came back with wooden bowls, spoons, and a ladle. He poured the stew for Bern, who refused all but a little.

"How shall I begin the tale of deviance that is my life?" he said and took a bite of his foul stew.

"From the very beginning I was a curse before God and the angels. My father had gone on the Holy Pilgrimage to liberate Jerusalem from the devil's heathen Saracens. He fell in the path, cut down with his regiment on route by Scythian archers. Somehow he managed to return to Christendom, to his home in Hamburg, but with an embittered soul.

"As St. Michael, The Archangel and his heavenly troop battled the unholy legions of Satan's army in the heavens, the Christians destroyed the Saracens in splendid glory. My father knew of none of this honor and upon return took to heavy drinking.

"On the feast day of the Holy Innocents, when a man was supposed to abstain from his wife's bosom, he took my mother violently, against her sweet will. The next day under taunts from a militiaman he dueled and was slain. They refused to bury him in holy ground after the sins that he committed. My mother died giving birth to me, and from such an unholy union I am sprung.

"I was born with this burden on my shoulders and didn't take well to book-learning and holy life, but was drawn to the open field, where I confess, I began deer-poaching, and wench-napping. I was a born raider. I can hide in the woods as good as any Wend, and attack unawares.

"Eventually they accused me of deer-poaching as I had been caught by the abbot with a stag hoof in my pouch that I was going to sell. The truth was that it was of a raiding-mate of mine. I hadn't poached that deer, and wouldn't confess to it, and as I wouldn't confess they gave me a trial – a trial by ordeal.

"I remember it vividly. I was still a sprouting youth. They made me fast and prayer for three days, all the while asking me if wanted to repent and admit the deed. I had nothing to admit. When the day came they heated the iron in the fiery furnace and sprinkled it with holy water as Mass was being chanted. I then took the communion and with tongs they handed me the burning iron and I was to walk nine steps with it...

"May the blessings of the Holy Trinity come down upon this iron for the discernment of righteous judgment," said the priest.

"I walked all nine steps with it. I was screaming louder than ever before. Then I dropped it and passed out. They covered my hands, and after three days looked at the festering wounds.

"Because of the wounds I was pronounced guilty and removed from the monastery. My raiding-mate took me aboard a river-barge and brought me to my uncle, here in Agrimeswidil. This was the village elder. He raised me to hunt, and to raid. He was killed by our enemy.

"There used to be red deer a plenty in these lands but with the Wends encroaching with their antler combs it is dying out, and there is little food left for us to eat hardy. My uncle taught me that we Saxons are descendants of Noah's third child, Japhet, and that we are meant to rule this land, and that the Wends are our natural enemy, descendants of Ham, the cursed seed of Cain. Is this true?"

"I don't know for sure," responded Bern honestly. "I believe that Ham, and Japhet were brothers. They also had another brother named Shem."

"We are not brothers with the Wends in case you didn't know. They have slain many of us and I have slain many of them. I have practiced my designs on their women, and I have thrown their heathen babies into the fire. I have done my utmost to destroy their polluted stock."

He stared Bern in the eye with an intense gaze and the monk lowered his eyes. He still hadn't touched his stew, but finally took a sip, out of politeness.

"It's the wounds that stay with me. The wounds of my life, those I have inflicted and those that I have received. No matter how dark is the night, I can see all of my old enemies before me, taunting me. I kill them and kill them again but they never die. I am possessed by demons. I am sure of it. My father did this to me, and left me in a dark world of hell. I must follow his cruel path."

Bern frowned and thought for a moment. "The son shall not inherit the sins of the father," he said. "The Lord says that you do not have to follow the path of your father and that his designs are only his own."

They looked each other in the eye for a moment; Bern meeting Marchrad's intense gaze.

"I feel that I have gained a friend tonight," said Marchrad and turned to fall asleep. Bern turned in the opposite direction and followed suit.

Bern woke the next morning next to faint hearth embers. He was covered with the auroch pelt. When he had awoken he truly believed that he would be in Bremen. It took him all but a few seconds to alter that notion as he felt the sun beams coming into the hut, shining down on his face.

Marchrad was standing in the doorway, tall and proud with a hooded Peregrine Hawk perched on his left gloved hand, and three bloodied hares in his right. He walked in and tied the hares by their hind legs to the wicker rope that held the cauldron.

"A trial awaits us," he said as the hawk spread its wings. "I assume that you will be present." He then walked out of the hut. Bern followed him shortly thereafter with the pigeon cage in his hand.

When he exited the hut, Marchrad was nowhere to be found. He walked several more paces, and Marchrad came out of nowhere and overtook him with his long strides.

"Back to the toll bridge – there the merchants await trial," he said.

There was a large contingency of men waiting next to the bridge; ragged, and putrid smelling with a rusty hodgepodge arsenal of weapons; flails, axes, scythes, swords, and clubs. Some wore woolen masks with eye-holes over their heads. Bern noticed Bevo in the crowd with a leather whip in his hands. Past the gathering he saw that Giselbert and Daso were fettered to the cornerstones of the bridge. They looked frightened but unharmed. Both were barefoot.

When Marchrad approached, the crowd fell silent. He stood in the middle of the men with the hawk perched on his hand, and they all gathered around him in a circle, clinking their weapons on their wooden shields. He gestured for them to be silent.

"These river-rats have come to us and called themselves Saxons; have called themselves Holsatians," he began. His statement was met with jeers focused at the prisoners. Bern noticed that the fury in Marchrad's eye was growing. "And how to they service Holsatia? How do they repay the soil that is stained with the blood of our fallen brothers? With betrayal!" he yelled, and the veins in his neck popped out.

He walked up to Daso, who appeared to be in tears, and kneeled down to meet him at eye-length.

"What's a fitting punishment for you, bog-scum? Answer me!"

"Confiscation, sir! That is the law! The law! I love dear old Holsatia but I am destitute! Forgive me, Elder Marchrad, forgive me!" He said, crying profusely.

"Confiscation is the law for the contraband, but for selling secrets of the nature of our bulwarks to the heathen for filthy lucre? That is what I am referring to."

The mob spit, and yelled torrents of cruelty at Daso who cried like a punished child. Bevo approached him and struck him with a whip. The crowd howled in joy.

Turning, Marchrad grabbed a club from one of the men in the crowd and struck Bevo in the neck, dropping him to the ground. The crowd went silent except for Bevo who writhed in agony.

"No weapons, men. Drop them, all of you!" The men threw their weapons on the ground.

"Rimbert," he called, unsheathing his sword. Rimbert approached.

"Administer the strappado," said Marchrad. "Leave the rower, but untie him so he can watch."

He pointed his sword towards a large tree in the distance.

Rimbert removed a key from his belt, and unlocked Giselbert. He then removed Daso, chaining his wrists from behind and walked him towards a giant oak tree. Daso pleaded for mercy with Marchrad all the while who met him with eyes which matched the cruelty of his hawk. The sentenced man's face turned red.

As they carried him off Marchrad pull out Daso's pouch of silver denars. "Distribute this and the antlers to the men," he said to Bevo, throwing the pouch down on his chest. Before he could raise a finger a large crowd gathered around him, grabbing at the pouch.

Rimbert threw a long rope over a branch and tied it to Daso's chains. He looked to Marchrad who nodded his head. Rimbert lifted the rope and the prisoner dangled from off the ground, and began making the most hideous, pathetic cries that Bern could ever imagine possible.

"Please, kind sir," said Bern to Marchrad. "I beg you to end it! He will repent. He will surely repent."

"Pain purifies. It *edifies* the soul," said Marchrad. "So can purification be anything other than the most truthful form of charity?"

The mob continued to yell at Daso and finally approached him, pulling down his legs and laughing all the while.

"Wend-lover! Corpse-burner! Blood-drinker! Apple-eater!" They yelled as they pulled him feet to the ground.

Marchrad looked on, hawk in hand. He remained focused and unflinching as Daso's arms dislocated from his body, twisting in a most unnatural manner.

The screaming was desperate and relentless. Giselbert cried and whelped as his master dangled from the rope. After several more minutes Marchrad signaled for him to be let down. He received a few kicks, but Giselbert flung himself over him and the rest began to laugh at the miserable sight. He untied the rope, flung Daso over his shoulders and carried him off to the boat, as the mob made two lines around him as he walked away, one on each side, and mocked them and cursed them.

"It is done," said Marchrad to Bern. "He may proceed. But he will always remember us, and know that he could not make a fool out of real Saxon freemen. Here we pay tribute to no man nor tithe to base idols! May this edification spread to the four corners of the earth and let it be known that Agrimeswidil will forever stand its ground against all comers, be they wolves or weasels!" He followed Giselbert to the boat which was still moored in the reed patch. The mob followed him, still laughing and mocking.

"You are welcome as my guest here anytime monk," said Marchrad to Bern, who still held the pigeon cage in hand. "You may pass free of charge. But I say to you – always remember on what ground you stand." He handed him a small pouch of oats. "For the journey," he said. Then he turned his back on them and walked off as his hawk fluttered its wings.

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The current carried the pram until dusk. Giselbert hugged the fallen man, and stroked his head. They both moaned loudly in despair and agony. Giselbert produced his bag of denars and put it in Daso's hand, and kissed his knuckles. Bern began to sing the *Kyrie eleison*.

The river grew wider, arriving at a confluence with another. On the other side stood a large wooden fort with a few children playing besides it.

It was here that Bern saw a Wend for the first time; it was a boy with cropped, blond hair. He was wearing an ivory colored tunic, lined with blue. He had long trousers, girded up to the knees with leather cords that tucked away a small pair of leather slippers. At his waist there was a leather belt, from which hung a knife, and a leather pouch.

The boy was gathering rough amber and iron-ore in a small swamp next to the sandy river bank. When he saw the boat approach he ran to grab his spear.

He and Bern exchanged glances for a moment, the boy continuing to sing as the boat passed by. The river grew wider and wider. Bern tasted the greenish river water, and rejected its brackish flavor. They finally passed by a large island and the boat was discharged into the expansive Baltic Sea.

Bern looked out at the endless blue and felt a clear splendor. It was a calm and bright day, with a tender breeze.

"Monk," cried Daso. "What do we have left? What is left for us?"

Bern continued to look off into the distance. "There is nothing. No ale, no antlers, and no lucre other than that which you hold in your hand," he said without emotion.

"And the crossbow?"

"The crossbow is gone as well," replied Bern.

"Mother of Christ, be my witness that I have suffered more than I can bear! Accept me into your loving arms, I beg you!" he cried out and then began coughing, and writhing in agony and pain. "Monk? Monk? Are you there?" he asked. Bern went in front to sit next the hunched over boatman. "Monk?"

"I am here," said Bern. He was squinting his eyes as he looked at Daso.

"You think that I deserve this, don't you? You think that this is justice," he proclaimed venomously.

Bern concentrated on the sandy beaches, and the calm horizon of the sea, but thought long and hard on the question.

"Righteousness makes way for the Lord's return so that the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the lion will eat straw like an ox. Thus it will be."

"You naïve fool! You don't even know where that holy sentence came from, do you?" said the wounded man.

Bern remained silent, and kept looking at the sea without blinking. Briefly after, Daso began to talk again. "Monk, are you there? I am sorry, monk. I am sorry for insulting you. I never learn. I never learn."

"I do not require an apology," he said.

"Do you require water?"

"I am a bit thirsty."

"Well, so are me and Giselbert. I cannot move my arms. I couldn't even if you offered me all of the kingdoms and silver in this vile world, which as you know, monk, I would be eager to get my hands on."

"I have oats," said Bern.

"Give them to Giselbert. He needs them more than we do. He is a genuine war-horse," proclaimed Daso proudly.

Bern looked back on the deaf man who rowed his all of his might. "Aye," he said.

"Monk, are you thirsty?"

"I am."

"You have to go for water, monk. You have to go ashore. Will you do it? Take the flask, lying next to my leg. Gesture for Giselbert to head for dry land. You will find a river or a lake in the hinterland. Walk several bow-shots length inland if need be."

Bern gestured for Giselbert to steer towards the land, and handed him the pouch of oats. Giselbert began to row towards the beach.

"My ring!" cried out Daso. "I must trade my last possession for sandals and caulk. If only I could change my post in life!" sniveled Daso, who kicked the keel of the boat with his muddy boot. "Count, bishop, elder...it's no point striving at all in this world if one is born into filth." He

wondered off in his mind for a moment as he writhed around from the hips on down. "Bern, you know we will need to eat that little pigeon of yours soon if need be. Giselbert must keep us his strength, you know. I don't want to hurt your little friend. We aren't fed from charity, you know. We feed ourselves."

Just then Bern felt water creep in between his toes. He looked down and saw that one of the planks had been ruptured from the kick. It trickled down to Daso's thighs. He moaned as he felt it.

"Get the bucket, monk. Get the bucket!" he yelled.

"The bucket is nowhere to be found," replied Bern.

Just then they hit land. Giselbert hopped out of the boat and pulled it onto the beach with his tremendous strength. Daso continued to moan and make violent contortions as the deaf rower came to comfort him.

The sea wind hit Bern's face, and the pelicans flew overhead. He walked down the sandy beach, cage in hand, as he had remembered Daso's pigeon comment. The sand mixed freely with bushes, and wild flowers. He found this sight uncomely as he was used to the tidiness and order of the herb gardens that he had tended to back in Bremen.

As Bern stepped over a piece of beach wood, and approached the forest line he realized that upon return they might not be there. He almost considered this a burden off his shoulders, and stepped into the forest without any thought at all to the immediate future and its consequences.

It was the first time that he could remember ever been in the forest alone, out of sight of a town. He walked forth without looking back.

The forest was alive with sounds of the natural world: bees, mosquitoes, whippoorwills. Bern made his way through the brush, and looking up at the emerald-studded forest ceiling saw the sun aggressively trying to edge its way into the wild kingdom where the shade was cool and where everything breathed freely.

He walked deeper into the forest for several hundred paces and upon losing count continued all the same. Listening to the birch trees sway in the wind he thought that he heard a creek in the distance and continued on as straight a line as possible, marking his path every so often with a broken branch here and there.

Finally he chanced upon a natural spring that leaked out into a wider stream, and thanking God for the blessing he filled the leather flask.

Then he looked up and in the distance saw something that would change him forever.

There was a giant stone statue in the distance. For a moment it could be mistaken for a tree as it was tall and as lanky as the trunk of an elm. It has about nine feet tall and had the face of a man with a long beard, with folded arms and a sword at the waist. It wore a conical hat. Bern walked towards it slowly, his heart was beating rapidly. When he came before it he noticed that it was in the middle of an oak grove, on a tiny hill, with a moat around it. At its feet were the offerings of lit candles, fresh fish, and a dead roe with its throat slit.

He stood before it, horrified. Walking back he saw that it had four sides, each with the face of a man and each with its particular offerings laid at its feet. He continued to backtrack but couldn't take his eyes off of its proud and stoic countenance. This idol only been something that he had heard about and read about in the holy books. Never had he really imagined that such an ungodly thing could exist.

Bern let out a tiny moan, and then heard a laugh from behind. He spun around like a whirlwind and saw a beautiful young girl staring at him. She was wet and nude except for a towel at the waist, and straw sandals. Long blond hair ran down her chest, partially covering her breasts.

A bundle of emotions ran through the monk's heart at once; he was terrified, shocked, confused, and fascinated. They stared at each other for another moment that stood still. Then the girl lowered her eyes, focusing on the caged pigeon and began to laugh. Bern's eyes narrowed and sensing a change in his mood she turned her back and disappeared behind a patch of bushes.

All of a sudden he heard a male voice.

"Leave, monk, leave forever!" it said.

Bern took one more look at the statue, and walked off as fast as he could. When he was far enough away to be cleansed of the view of the statue he pinched a fistful of birch branches and then ran back to the shore. His legs were bleeding slightly from the brambles.

The boat was still moored on the beach. Seagulls were circling around it. Gisbert was mixing a concoction of pine sap, sand, and grounded snails. It was becoming thick and pasty. Daso was lying on the

beach in a fetal position, moaning and singing in a non-intelligible voice. He felt Bern's shadow over him.

"Monk, monk, are you back?" he asked in a feint voice.

"I am," replied Bern.

Giselbert smiled at him and began to paste his mixture into the contours of the boat with a piece of birch bark.

"Did you find water?" asked the fallen man.

"Indeed I did," responded Bern. "Please have some, and pass it on to Giselbert as well," he said and handed the flask to Daso.

"Quite refreshing. Where did you go?"

Bern lowered his head for a moment and then began to speak. He told him of everything that happened.

"The statue is one of the Wendish gods," began Daso. "Redigast, Perun, Swantovit; it could have been any one of them for all I know. They all have many heads and receive bountiful libations. As for the girl, she was a demon. They call them the *Rusalki*. They are demon nymphs that hide in the forest and live underwater in streams and springs. They seduce wonderers and afterwards they dance them to death. The voice was another demon that fears our God. Oh Holy Lord Almighty! Thank you for delivering your humble servant out of the Lion's mouth."

Daso smirked in anguish as he lifted the flask to his mouth. Afterwards Bern handed it to Giselbert.

"How do you know so much about such abominations?" asked Bern.

"As I've told you – my mother was a Wend. She had been taken captive when she was young. It was she that raised me in a small hut in a dark marsh in Western Holsatia. My father was a brewer and only came home to whip us around with a piece of lumber. I learned her tongue first, and God forbid, her gods first. I am not to blame: I have extirpated myself of such horrible idolatry."

"The Word existed before the beginning of the world, and will shatter such vain images," said Bern. He walked off to the edge of the beach where the grass and bushes encroached on the sand, knelt down, and began to flagellate his back with the birch branches as he chanted a *Pater Noster*.

Afterwards he searched for dew on maple leaves and gathered it on one giant leave to quench the thirst of his pigeon. Then he fed it a worm and a few snails.

They left an hour later. The calk had dried and was holding together for the moment. Giselbert rowed along the sea, never losing sight of the desolate coast.

"Daso," said Bern.

"What do you want?"

"Why didn't the Wends take a toll back on the Trave?"

"Those Wends don't want to take tolls. That would incur the wrath of the Obodrite Knyaz, Nyklot," said Daso. It was the first time that Bern had heard this name.

"Who is he?" he asked.

"He is the leader of the Obodrites. A proud pagan he is. Wrathful and swaggering. You will see him soon enough. Just keep praying. Pray for all of us. They say that our God answers prayers. Surely He will listen to you before He will listen to me."

"Why would Nyklot disapprove of toll taking?" asked Bern.

"Monk, do you understand the world?" asked Daso. "No? Nyklot receives revenues from his market for all of the wares that are sold there. He wants people from far and wide to come. He even has settlements besides the stronghold of Northmen, Poles and Greeks. Even Saracens have made there way up to his market. I have seen them with my own eyes. Their skin is charred brown from their intense sun. They sell incense and silk like the Greeks. They come for amber, slaves and marten furs; there are many markets by the sea. They are all competing with one another to attract the merchants, and craftsmen."

Bern was still shaken from all of the events that had taken place since the beginning of the journey. He longed for his teacher now more than ever and felt a cold fear that he would never be able to return to his monastery in Bremen.

The sea was starting to leak in a little at a time. Bern tried to patch the calk as best as he could but the water continued to seep in.

"We will be in Veligrad my tomorrow morning," said Daso. "There we will eat splendidly and have a change to make right some of the things that have been done wrong to us."

"Will your wonderful denars buy you a splendid meal in pagandom?" asked Bern sarcastically.

"There we will not pay. The Obodrites deem it wise to be hospitable to all comers; it is their custom."

"And why do they give even to those that are friends of Christ?" asked Bern.

"There they show their greatness by beneficence. The most hospitable is the most admired," replied Daso. "Such it is with the Obodrites."

"I wish to be reunited with my teacher. I fear the demons. A powerful one told me to leave. I fear that they will try to inhabit my soul and make my works unfruitful. I will not stay in Wendland if my teacher is not there."

"And where will you go, boy? What will you do without your despised lucre? Will you make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land all the way from the great Scythian Lake?"

"I wish to arrive for now; nothing more."

"We will be there soon enough. Now sing us a song and let us try to lift our spirits above the Sea floor and into the upper echelons of God's Kingdom, shall we?"

4.

In the land of the Obodrites everything in life revolved around the stronghold. It was there where Knyaz Nyklot lived with his beautiful wife, Beleknegini, and where his top advisors and their families lived; Boliliut, the treasurer of the Obodrites, Ludomir, the head military counselor, and Yaroslav, the chief village elder.

It was also where the whole tribe would enter in times of siege. As it was 150 meters long, 70 meters wide, and was oval-shaped, like a giant egg, there was room enough for several thousand people. On the outside it was surrounded by a moat, irrigated by a fresh water stream. A thick row of sharpened pikes on the outside of the moat covered everywhere except the four cardinal directions where there were four equally long drawbridges, over which stood four watchtowers, each 15 meters high.

The limber walls stood over eight meters high. There was an outer wall and an inner wall. In between was room for mounted men to make quick sallies out towards a battle.

Inside of the stronghold itself there was a large grain depository, the horses in their stalls, next to a hay depository, a large shack that contained a ferocious arsenal of weapons, and the treasury of the Obodrites that was guarded by sworn, handpicked men. There was also the large dining hall where Nyklot would habitually entertain his druzhina as well as receive traveling guests.

Next to his two-story home there was a small hut with a large hearthstone in the middle. This was the sauna that Nyklot used. It was also where his top counselors briefed him every day in the morning.

Outside of the stronghold was the whole of the village life of the Obodrites; to the West were the majority of the sunken-floor family huts that comprised the peasantry. There were over 4,000 such huts. Beyond this village was an expansive cow pasture and beyond was pine forest.

To the north was an large range for druzhina war-training. It was secluded from the other areas by small patches of bushes and trees. Further to the Northeast was a small lake and at its edge stood a flourishing market with many wooden stalls, and tables where merchants from all over the known world came to exhibit their merchandise, both commonplace and exotic.

Next to this market there was a small section of housing for foreign merchants. Here there were artisans and traders that the Obodrites hosted along with their families. There where Greeks from Constantinople, Russians from Novgorod, Northmen from Gotland, Denmark, and Sweden.

Alongside the traders were many artisans most of which were from the Baltic coast, that fashioned the finest jewelry from amber, ivory, and silver, along with tailors that made the finest clothes from silk, velvet, and furs. There were blacksmiths that made not only weapons, but nails, shovels, and other useful utensils.

This market attracted many wealthy buyers. They came from far and wide; Northmen, Poles, Greeks, Arabs, Bulgarians, and Russians. On any given day one could find Wine from Noirmoutier, saddles and stirrups from Prague, elephant ivory, chalcedony, and bloodstones from India and

Africa, Walrus ivory from Greenland and Iceland. From Novgorod came slaves, honey, furs, and wax.

By way of Byzantium came spices, jewels, and silk. By way of the Islamic Caliphates came Persian rugs, saffron, incense, and silk. The Northmen brought finely decorated drinking horns and goblets as well as walrus ivory, falcons and slaves. The Baltic Slavs from further east brought salt, amber, iron ore, flint, deer antlers, auroch horns, and bear pelts. The peasants brought surplus wheat, millet, and fruit from the orchards. The fishermen brought pike, perch, herring, mackerel, and eel. Religious men brought books, relics, potions, and spells.

And finally from the West came merchants who sold steel and other weapons from various parts of Saxony. Only these merchants came illegally as the Holy Roman Empire would have no dealings with pagans, officially or otherwise. This put a high price on their expertise and wares.

It was customary that the knyaz would collect a portion of the profits from the marketplace and place it in the treasury. Later he would spread the wealth as it befitted him; bestowing many gifts on his warriors and the clan elders.

Next to the marketplace stood a small wooden church made by the hands of the missionary, Vizelin of Hameln. He gave Mass every Sunday and administered to the needs of his flock. He was only permitted to preach near the market and was not allowed to wonder into the realms of the peasants. His flock was mostly wondering merchants but he also made a few converts among the native Obodrites.

Next, curving around the stronghold, was a path that led out to the harbor where Nyklot kept his fleet of twenty two warships, and the fishermen kept their smaller river boats.

To the south were many open fields of various staple foods and orchards. On the sides, next to the stronghold were many pig pens as well.

Beyond to the south was a dense pine forest, and an intensely trodden path that led to the sanctuary of Perun, the god of thunder and war. It is here where many of the rituals and ceremonies of the Obodrites took place.

It is here where we pick up our story, as the Obodrites celebrated the passing of winter, and the renewal of life, a celebration that had been going on since as long as the village elders could remember as their grandfathers and great-grandfathers had celebrated before them.

It was here that the flamen, made his sacrifice to Perun, to predict the year's harvest and to keep the seasons, the stars, the sun and the moon in their harmonious continuance.

And it was here that the first murder would take place that would forever change the fate of the Obodrites and their Knyaz, Nyklot.

5.

Nyklot woke to the gentle nudges of his most trusted advisors, and that after half an hour. The roosters still crowed as the sun was rising, just now peaking into Nyklot's second story window. His wife, Beleknegini, remained asleep at his side.

Yaroslav, the bald elder, hunched over his bed as Ludomir and Boliliut stood in the background. Nyklot yawned, and looked around, first noticing that he was fully dressed except for his boots.

"Mighty festivity last night," he said and sat upright. "Maybe the gods will start telling the Greeks about our feasts here, and the Greeks will start believing in the old gods again."

The men chuckled. Nyklot always began the morning with a joke or at least with a good-natured comment. His voice was deep and stern but trusting and benevolent as was his gaze. He wore a moss green tunic embroidered with golden animal motif linings. His blond hair fell to his broad shoulders, and his thick mustache highlighted his square jaw and dominant blue eyes.

"That will be the day, Honorable Knyaz," replied Yaroslav, still smiling. "And perhaps the Northmen will return to their old ways one day as well?"

"Nothing's changed with that lot," said Nyklot. "They just grew weaker."

"Knyaz," said Ludomir, chief warrior of the Obodrites. "Your sword."

As Nyklot rose Ludomir handed him *Mistui*, his broad sword, was named after the original owner, Mistui, the ancient Knyaz, and great-great grandfather of Nyklot. It had been refurbished several times by the finest blacksmiths in the Baltic and now was sharp enough to cut through leather armor, and strong enough to crack open a stone. The crossguard was graven with the name Mistui, filled with amber inclusions. Its pommel had a graven carving of a roaring grizzly bear made of walrus ivory.

"Alright men, I think I might need a hand," said Nyklot laughing, as Boliliut robed him in his red, silk cloak, which had a rampant bear emblazoned on the shoulder and which was buttoned at the neck with a silver brooch of long, winding spirals.

The counselors took him under their arms and walked with him out of the front door, lifting up a lynx pelt at the doorway.

They walked towards the sauna. As they arrived in front of it they began to undress fully, putting their attire on a wooden rack that stood besides the door. Nyklot squinted from the sunbeams as he nodded to the crossbowmen in the watchtowers who saluted him from their perch. He listened to the sounds of the morning. The magpies were chirping, and druzhina brothers were singing from far away as they chopped wood.

After removing his war horn, Ludomir lifted up the deer pelt for Nyklot to enter, grabbing a large pouch of rough amber in one hand and several buckets, filled with water and sponges in the other. Yaroslav and Boliliut followed suit.

Upon entering the sauna the pleasant steam and inviting pine aroma filled the entrants with vigor. The stones were already lit in smoldering embers from the previous evening and when Ludomir dumped a bucket of water onto the stones it sizzled and emitted a new cloud of fresh steam. Nyklot made a few more jokes before the men began to brief him on the current situation in Veligrad. Ludomir spoke first.

"Knyaz Nyklot," he began. His body was strong from years of wood-chopping and war-training, and all of his muscles were defined even after 42 harsh winters. "Last night several foreigners floated into the harbor. None are here to celebrate the Vernal Equinox with us this week. In fact they seemed ignorant of our festivities." He said.

"They are Greek peddlers of fine silk," said Boliliut, with a nasally voice. "They arrived before the sun rose. They seek an audience with you later."

"And have these new Greeks not been informed of our custom?" asked Nyklot, already somewhat irritated. "That no man or woman dons silk robes in the land of the Obodrites other than the Knyaz and his wife?"

"They have been informed. We woke Dmitri to interpret early this morning. He was sleeping somewhere in the merchant's quarters, on the street, still drunk from last night."

Nyklot smiled at this tidbit of information. "Okay, I will buy some of their silk out of kindness, the rest of their wares they can sell in the market. They will be given a stall and charged. They are welcomed at my table tonight as well. I hope that they understand that if every Obodrite dons silk robes than I will need a robe of golden dust, and pearls to distinguish myself and then all of our silver will be gone. Who else arrived in the harbor last night?"

Ludomir threw the amber pieces onto the rocks and they began to melt, emitting a most pleasant pine scent. The men began to sweat.

"A *Niemcy* named Daso. He has been here before," said Ludomir. "He has brought us Saxon steel in the past. Now he is wounded and comes without wares, but says that he has much information for you. He is with a monk and a deaf rower."

"Have them housed somewhere in the merchants quarters with a family," said Nyklot. "Best to have them in and out as soon as possible."

"Thorkell is back," said Boliliut. "He brings fine wares and a slave girl. His men have the look of Gotlander mercenaries. They claim to be sick and don't wish to enter the harbor but remain on the boat."

"He has a permanent house here," began Nyklot. "And only comes a few months a year, always with a different crew. Perun strike him down with a mighty thunderbolt if it is him that has been raiding our coasts lately with this Gotlander crew of Northmen swine!"

"We will have ample chance to interrogate him this evening as he is very fond of feasting and drinking," said Ludomir. "I have devised a trap for him; one that will not expose the nature of our questioning, but that will give us the perfect pretext for raiding the Danish coasts."

"Details later," said Nyklot. "Are you ready?" he asked, looking at Boliliut, who was holding a fistful of bundled birch branches in his right hand.

Boliliut nodded and began to hit Nyklot's torso with the branches. Blood rose to the surface of the flesh, and Nyklot felt invigorated.

"Speaking of the Niemcy," began Ludomir as Nyklot received repeated lashes on his outstretched arms. "Vizelin, the Christian priest, would like an audience with you, Knyaz."

"Again with that imp," said Nyklot in irritation. "Save a meeting with that bald-headed-manikin for after our festivities. Today we will throw out the effigy doll, and tomorrow our flamen will make his sacrifice and forecast this year's harvest. Afterwards I will allot time to this shadowy worm of a priest. Today's festivities must not be cast away by low spirits. Only the other day I heard a rumor that Boyan aroused a peasant to murder the bald-headed-manikin."

"It must not be permitted," said Boliliut. "We must be neutral with foreign religions lest our markets evaporate into thin air; if we get a reputation for killing pilgrims, traders will be scared off and it will take years of extravagant feasts to mend our reputation. Meanwhile we will need to supplement the treasury with much raiding in order to throw our great feasts."

"Noble Knyaz," said Ludomir. "Boyan is openly disobeying you. He is jealous of Vizelin, and jealous of your authority. He knows that the flamen of the Rugians controls the druzhina of Arkona while their knyaz grovels at his feet. He is jealous of such status and undermines you every chance he gets. I propose to discreetly *put him to the sword*."

This last sentence was not forewarned and affected all present. Boliliut seemed to be contemplating the implications, whereas Yaroslav seemed to be shocked at such a breach of honor towards the flamen.

Nyklot looked at his men. "I will deal with him myself," he said. "Tomorrow."

"He must be sent across the sea for his excessive scheming," replied Ludomir. "If I may say so."

"Like the links of chain mail are we all one, Ludomir, son of Boramir. Unravel one link and the whole Obodrite world will fall open to wounds," said Nyklot. "I will deal with Boyan tomorrow, as well as the bald-headed-manikin. Today I will settle with the Northman Thorkell. Already do I have a plan for him, and if he as a Dane is responsible for the previous raid on our coast than we will take our fleet and set out for Jutland to ravage their coast in turn. May they feel the mighty thunder bolts of Perun's wrath!"

"What is your plan, Noble Knyaz?" asked Yaroslav.

"If you come to the marketplace today I will show you, but keep silent for as long as I command. We will go to the market and then to the festival and then tonight we will feast like mighty giants of this earth," said Nyklot proudly.

"Aren't you forgetting your Latin lesson with Dmitri of Novgorod?" asked Boliliut.

"Oh, yes. Find the old drunk and give him a few kicks, but if he doesn't rouse don't trouble yourself; I don't care to listen to his absurdities today."

After striking Nyklot several more times with the birch-stick bundle, Ludomir produced a straight razor with an ivory handle that had a battle scene with elephants and chariots carved into it. He also took out some soap and began to rub it onto Nyklot's muscular arms, and shoulders.

The knyaz felt the razor graze his neck. It was considered an honor for his advisors to be able to approach Nyklot from behind, and to shave him. Ludomir took the honor this day.

"Speaking of the old drunk," began Nyklot. "It was him that gave me this razor. It comes from the land called India which is at the end of the earth. There the men are brown from the burning sun and still put their loved ones to the funeral pyre as we do, instead of letting them rot in the ground as is the custom of the Christians. Do you hear that Yaroslav?" he asked. Yaroslav smiled as he rubbed soap over his body.

"We still have friends – at the end of the earth." The men laughed. "But all around us do we have nothing but enemies who wish to destroy us under every little pretext. One by one our old friends go, abandoning the ways of their ancestors to worship the god of the worms.

"Even the Pomeranian tribes accept the Christians into their land. The monks tell them not to trade with us, not to feast with us – the Obodrites, their own cousins! And they obey!"

Nyklot suddenly waxed gloomy as he wiped the sweat from his brow.

"Indeed we have many friends from far away," said Boliliut. "They come from all over the world in order to feast with our noble Knyaz; Constantinople, Kiev, Prague, Novgorod, even Baghdad. The Northmen bring raven-haired maidens from afar, rich wines from Aquitania, and walrus ivory from the northern edges of the earth."

"Indeed," said Nyklot to Boliliut. "Many still come for our market and for our hospitality. We have hearts big enough for many friends, but for every friend there are ten enemies smiling to our face while behind our backs they set daggers to the whetstone, and scheme. Hence, we must scheme, as well, in order to keep up, and we spend all of our merry time scheming instead of loving and fighting, like real men."

"Forgive me, Noble Knyaz, second to none in courage and wisdom. I am but a humble warrior of this tribe and have been so all of my life. I fought alongside your father against the Rugians and I witnessed Saxon and Obodrite fighting side by side in your father's druzhina. Some concessions might bring about lasting peace."

"You dare mention my father, a man who worshipped the god of the worms? And in a good light, Ludomir?" said Nyklot, raising his eyebrow..

"Forgive him, Knyaz" interceded Boliliut. "He meant no offense. We have all sworn an oath to Perun, so that none may rot in the ground, but that we may all go across the sea to meet our noble ancestors without shame."

This placated Nyklot, who trusted always men who were close to his bosom, men who had taken an oath before Perun, in front of his very eyes.

"If I may speak, Noble Knyaz," began Yaroslav. "I, too, am sworn before Perun, the mighty lord of the thunderbolt, and have witnessed many passing of the seasons. Fifty-nine winters have I endured and experienced much on this side of the sea. I am but a simple peasant, the chief elder of my family. Oh, how the people rejoiced when you rose to the seat of power and chose to follow the ways of our ancestors! No longer did we have to accept the Saxon whip of your father's foreign druzhina, whose severe priests prohibited us to sing our songs and to praise our ancestors. There is much time for loving and fighting, Noble Knyaz, but also remember the old proverb which states: *'to cunning and the gods alone, do we owe our very existence.'*"

Nyklot smiled and the whole steamy room emanated with his warmth. "Wise, Yaroslav, son of Prosimir! When the ancestors call you to the pyre you will come to them without shame in bliss and eternal honor. I wish to bestow upon you a noble gift this evening at our feast; you will kindly be so good as to join me."

"An honor, my Knyaz. I, a humble peasant, who neither crafts fine wares, nor campaigns by your right side in brutal wars. I, Yaroslav, a humble tiller of the soil accept your noble invitation."

Yaroslav appeared genuinely touched, and took the opportunity to speak his mind about the aforementioned Boyan. "A long time, Knyaz, many years indeed has Boyan been outcast from our social order, yet still he influences the peasants and the young warriors of our druzhina with his tales of the ancient days, and his amulets, and spells. It was your father, Noble Knyaz, a Christian who consorted with the Saxons, who banished him to the woods, where he lives like a vile, wretched creature, surviving from alms and from the small hunt that his night owl lands him. If he would be permitted to return and collect from the oblations of Perun, I assure you that he would fortify the peasantry with pleasant songs, and firm faith in the old ways, without rousing them to rebellion against you, as he had done against your father. Surely you see this fact? It is, after all, he that has the power of predicting the harvest which forges men's actions throughout the year, and holds the hearts of men captive as he speaks with the gods and keeps the seasons in perpetual motion. Such an honored post ought not to be treated with such contempt, lest his powers recoil and the gods be displeased.

"May this not happen, I pray, as the Mighty Oak Tree of the universe holds up the heavens in the sky and keeps the seasons and the harvest in continuance. The market may go; we were Obodrites before the market and will be Obodrites after it leaves, singing the same songs as our ancestors, but let our ways and our flamen be preserved."

Ludomir continued to shave around Nyklot's prominent mustache, but looked at Boliliut whose anger had been roused.

Nyklot sensed the tension and gestured for Ludomir to cease shaving. "Yaroslav, son of Prosimir, do you accept the judgments of your Knyaz?"

"Indeed, Noble Knyaz; I do."

"Then trust that I will deal with our flamen with justice and kindness, as I too, am a believer in the ancestors and am a man who would never have his sons bury him in the ground for the worms to eat out my eyes. May Perun hurl down a thunderbolt on my head at this moment if what I say is false! However, men who scheme excessively I cannot trust. Even at this moment the flamen of the Rugians is in control of the treasury

of Swantovit, while their Knyaz grovels at his feet. Such is not custom, but as the times are evil, man loves neither father nor child. I must hear all counsel and weigh it with the full strength of heart."

"I accept your judgment, Knyaz, and will proclaim to the peasants that your rulings are just and beneficent to all."

"And I will honor your commitment to your people, wise Yaroslav."

Nyklot turned his torso, and leaning over kissed the old man on the forehead.

They lifted the deer pelt one at a time and exited the sauna with steam rising from their heads. Nyklot's two sons stood at the doorstep. They were Pribislav, the elder brother and Vratislav, the younger. Both wore the white tunic, lined with blue stripes as was the druzhina custom. They had long hanging leather pelts with a flint pouch and an antler-handled knife next to it, with their swords and scabbards hanging at the left side of their belts.

The two clothed their father while the counselors dressed themselves.

What have you done so far this morning, my sons?" asked Nyklot.

"I led my troop on horseback and practiced spear-throwing," replied Vratislav.

"I led my troop to set traps in the western forests, and then inspected our fleet at the harbor," replied Pribislav.

Nyklot smiled with approval, and put his arms around his sons. "You are bear-slayers, both of you, true men of the druzhina! Will you feast with us tonight?" he asked, cheerfully.

They both nodded affirmatively and felt honored by the invitations have only passed through 22 and 20 harsh winters, respectively.

"These boys have both made me a grandfather," said Nyklot with much pride to his counselors. "I am very pleased with them."

"Knyaz," said Pribislav. "Father; I must inform you that elders from the Brizani, Dravani, Linguones have all arrived today in order to pay you tribute. I believe they have arrived early because they feel that they will not be invited to feast with you and wish to save face by not witnessing any preparations by the cooks."

"Nonsense, boy," scoffed Nyklot. "Our brothers can always feast with us. I will accept them in the hall this evening. Do you have the gifts prepared?" he asked Boliliut.

"Yes, Knyaz; they have been prepared already."

"May all of you attend this counsel and stand at my side!" proclaimed Nyklot.

Nyklot walked into the feast hall, and looked over the surroundings: various war flags hanging from the walls, and painted shields hanging from the rafters. Several pillars, encircled with wicker-rope and torches flickering off the sides. On the right was the large feast table. Walking forward Nyklot reached his wooden throne, covered in red and green silk, and lined with hempen rope, knotted with pearls. He sat down, putting his feet on the footstool, and his hands on the cushioned arms, carved as two lion heads.

Ludomir followed him closely behind, grabbing Nyklot's sword as he sat. He stood at his right side. Yaroslav and Vratislav entered the building and walked to the throne's sides as well. Shortly thereafter Boliliut walked in with three leather bundles filled with walrus tusks, engraved silver brooches, and various colored glass beads.

Afterwards Pribislav entered with three bearded men in smoke-stained tunics. They had cropped hair, wore amber amulets around their necks, and carried several fur pelts.

"Knyaz," said Pribislav with his left arm outstretched. "These are the emissaries of the Brizani, Dravani, and the Linguones. They have come to present you with tribute and to reaffirm our mutual friendship."

The men bowed to the knyaz.

"I trust that you all had an easy journey?" asked Nyklot, interlacing his fingers.

The men all nodded their heads, easily understanding the sister dialect of the Obodrites.

Pribislav set a table and wooden chairs in front of them with bread and salt.

"Did you travel by wagon?" asked the knyaz.

This time the emissary of the Brizani spoke. He wore a brown tunic with green lining and a sable-lined cloak.

"Yes, noble Knyaz," he said. "Indeed we traveled by wagons. The trails are dense with fallen brush from the winter, but it was a safe journey."

"A fault perhaps of us, I daresay," said Nyklot. "Our friendship should extend year round, as our peoples do not live within horn's calling distance of one another, the trails should always be cleared so that messages can travel quickly."

"More a fault of our people, Knyaz," said the emissary. "We will indeed look into it and see that the paths be cleared by our humble druzhina. I will personally make this a priority so that the next time you come to our village for feasting we will have the paths cleared to make the journey as pleasant as possible."

The emissaries looked at one another. It seems that the emissary of the Brizani was their appointed speaker.

"We bring the just tribute to you, knyaz; a silver piece per plowshare and a beaver pelt for every hearth. We also wish to reaffirm our support to you; in time of mutual defense you may call upon and lead our respective druzhinas to battle. Also we bring you this," he said, handing Nyklot a fine, tanned cloak of marten pelts.

Nyklot beamed with satisfaction. "Noble elders; I have sworn before Perun to always be faithful to my friends. You are all friends and kin! I would be honored if you all would join me this evening and feast among friends." He pointed at Boliliut who handed them the bundles of goods.

They accepted the goods, and said that they would join Nyklot for the feast. They then exited the building, bowing before the doorway.

"Vratislav?" asked Nyklot.

"Yes, Knyaz?"

"See to it that these men are entertained today. Have the festivities begun? I think I hear music."

"Yes, and Yes, Knyaz. And I do hear the flute. Soon the young ladies will be out to dance and all of the young men will follow shortly thereafter."

"A the wolf chases the hare," said Yaroslav.

The men laughed hardily.

"Much hunting will be going on today, men," said Nyklot. "If only I were a young man again. Now I have bear pelts on the wall, but young ladies only in my memory."

The men all chuckled.

"Alright," said Nyklot. "Bring in the rodent, Daso. Prepare a small pouch of antler combs for him."

Boliliut walked out of the feast hall. As he approached the door Daso walked in, carried by Giselbert. The former appeared absolutely wretched; ticks festered in open soars on his leg, and his arms dangled limply, like abandoned oars.

Nyklot's men stood at his side, expressionless.

Daso panted heavily as he bowed low, kissing the hem of Nyklot's tunic. "Knyaz Nyklot, I greet you," he said in the tongue of the Obodrites. "Forgive me as I have no gift to give you, master. I have been robbed by cruel Holsatians. Everything that I had is all gone. Long, long have I been a friend of the Obodrites!" he said smiling. "Many times have I risked my hide to bring you Saxon steel, and now, alas, time has caught up with me."

"You look terrible, man," replied Nyklot. "Were you lodged well last night?"

"Indeed, master."

"With whom may I inquire?"

"With a kind lady in the peasants' quarters," said Daso, striking his foot to the ground. "Always, do I tell travelers of the hospitality of the Obodrites. It is known from here to Hibernia that when strangers come to Veligrad they will be treated as kindred souls, sharing in the opulence of the Obodrites."

"And the blades that you have brought in the past; nothing now?"

"Master, nothing; I was robbed of all that I possess in this world. Only this very ring do I keep, a ring given to me by my dear Wagrian mother which I must trade for clothes and medicine."

"Rest assured, Daso, that you will be refurbished and treated at our expense, as we never forget old friends here in Veligrad."

"Oh, Great Knyaz! I thank you for your kindness and mercy! Wide and far does your reputation travel. Your name is great throughout the entire world."

Nyklot remained emotionless and ate a fig from a silver plate.

"With the Christians my name is indeed an abomination, a terror at best."

Daso laughed nervously.

"Saxon steel in getting harder and harder to come by," said Nyklot. "Our blacksmiths make mail shirts second to none, spurs, nails, horseshoes, helmets, flails, but our swords are not crafted out of a godly furnace the way that your people make them. The scarcity worries me as my druzhina grows. Old warriors fall; new ones fight to enter the fray. I must outfit them with the highest quality steel. Crossbows are even dearer in our lands."

"Knyaz Nyklot, noble master," said Daso. "I will tell every merchant in Holsatia that you call on them."

"Good," said Nyklot. "And let them know that they will swim in silver if they deliver to me what I desire."

"I will, master, I will. As you are beneficent."

"And this brings us to another little issue. It seems that a beaver has built a big dam on the River Trave, yes?"

"Indeed, master."

"And I am sure that you would like to have the injuries that you have received repaid on the heads of those who did you such harm?"

"Master, I only wish to bring you more Saxon steel!"

"Then give me the information that I need to clear this little dam, and we will pay you, clear out your path, and heal you of your ailments. Does this please you?"

Daso's heart sunk, and a tear dropped from his eye. "Yes, master, yes it does. A simple tramp like me is unworthy of such kindness!"

"Here we have physicians skilled in bonesetting, leechcraft, and herbs. Rest assured that you will be healed and sent on your way."

"Thank you, master! Thank you for your kindness. I and this deaf man here were almost on the brink of death and you saved us from our fate! I am so very, very grateful, master!"

"I know you are, Daso. That is why you will do my bidding; when you are good and ready to leave you will take a small detour and visit our mutual friend Knyaz Adolph of Holsatia: I will have a message for you to deliver to him. Do you accept this task?"

"I do, master. I do. Count Adolph speaks very highly of you, and values your friendship greatly. I know him very well, and I know that he will always come to your aid if you need him."

"My business in Holsatia is preserved by Knyaz Adolph, just as his business in my lands is preserved by me. If I am to clear away the pesky little beavers that hinder your travels I must settle with him first. This is the order of how things stand."

"I understand, master! I understand. Please believe me that I will do your bidding, master. I swear it," exclaimed Daso, pale and sweating profusely.

Nyklot ate a date, looking Daso in the eye. "You will tell all useful information to Ludomir and my sons. They will make good use of it, and will pay you in kind."

"Thank you, Knyaz! I will not fail you."

"Now go and rest. Go to the house you came from, and tell your host that we will come and visit many good things on her head for her kindness to you. Hospitality is the law of the land here, Daso. Remember that."

Daso thanked him and he walked out, arm in arm with Giselbert. Nyklot motioned for his two sons and Yaroslav to follow them.

Nyklot paused for a long while. His men looked to him, awaiting a response.

"It appears that our druzhina will not be idle this spring. When the rain passes and the earth grows firm we must march to this dam and root out these beavers with torch and with sword. That is if the Wagrians don't do it first."

"We have an agreement with Knyaz Adolph," said Ludomir. "The River Trave is to remain a free pathway. If we strike first without his prior knowledge it is by former agreement, and as such is acceptable."

"Indeed," said Nyklot, pensively. "And Thorkell? Where is the Northman?"

"The insolent scoundrel doesn't appear," said Ludomir.

"Perhaps he and his men are genuinely laid up?" suggested Boliliut.

"It matters not," said Nyklot. "I will devise if it is him and his Gotlander mercenaries that have been raiding our coast, and as he regards our hospitality so lightly, so unworthy of his swaggering nature he will receive the Obodrite justice for inhospitality."

"When shall we burn down his house?" asked Ludomir, anxiously.

"This evening, after the feast. Have some of the peasants do it."

"Thorkell brings in much revenue for our treasury," said Boliliut. "I advise that he be warned first."

"He has been forewarned," objected Ludomir. "And he has lived amongst us for seven cruel winters, yoked together with us in our trials, and our sufferings. He knows our ways, and nevertheless chooses to disregard them."

"Even so, these Northmen are proud and dumb," said Boliliut. "Show him explicitly what is expected of him. In fact I will speak with him if it pleases you, Knyaz."

Nyklot raised his hand and his advisors fell silent.

"We must have one law for stranger and Obodrite alike, lest the seeds of partiality fall into the earth and discontent sprouts," he said. "If Thorkell is so dumb that we must treat him like a boar so be it; even a dumb, stinking boar can learn."

Boliliut and Ludomir laughed.

There were dark clouds in the distance, but they were considered auspicious, as their rain water nourished the copious wheat fields. The sun held suspended in mid sky, benevolently warm. The wind was equally gentle, swaying the orchard trees back and forth.

The earth was green and the flowers were blossoming into various colors. Butterflies fluttered about while the frogs and woodpeckers generated their distinctive forest-rhythm.

There were riotous festivities going on in the open fields by the lakes that surrounded the peasant's quarters. There the married women were building a giant effigy doll, and the young girls made smaller imitation dolls out of twigs and walnuts. There was a giant bonfire and the men and women were singing and dancing around it with the music of flutes, zither, and gongs in the background.

The guardsmen of the eastern gate lowered the drawbridge and Nyklot exited on his white horse followed by Boliliut and Ludomir. Knyaz Nyklot was dressed entirely in silk lined in gold threads, save the leather shoes and belt. His sword hilt stood at his side with its roaring-bear pommel, and the scabbard was engraved with spiral designs and gems.

He kicked his spurs into the side of his horse and rode towards the harbor. The wind swayed his blond hair about. Various peasants approached and kissed the hem of his silk tunic.

As he arrived at the harbor he noticed that there was a giant long-ship sailing off towards the sea. Its mast was made of two interlacing lines of white and red, and there were painted shields on its sides, above the dozen rows of oars that hit the water in unison.

"Has Thorkell left already?" asked Nyklot.

Ludomir rode up to a fisherman at the harbor who stood by the moored fleet of the Obodrites.

"Young man," he said. "Who was on that ship?"

The fisherman was sitting next to the frame of a river boat, sitting on the keel, knitting a giant net. He approached Nyklot in order to kiss the hem of his tunic.

"Knyaz," he said. "They were all Northmen. Gotlanders, I believe. They left their master here in the market and then rowed off without touching ground."

There was silence for a moment.

"Perhaps this is a sign that Thorkell will stay with us for a long time?" said Boliliut.

"Perhaps it's a sign that he doesn't want us to catch a glimpse of his men," said Ludomir.

"Perhaps we have unhelmed them before in coastal skirmishes and he wishes for them to remain in the shadows of the sea."

"Perhaps," said Nyklot, contemplating. "We should not judge too quickly. Let us ride to the market where we will certainly find him." He kicked his spurs and rode north. His men followed him.

When they arrived they walked through the plank road, where stalls of merchandise stood on both sides, amidst bulky crowds. Druzhina guardsmen, fully armored with mail shirts, coifed onion-shaped helmets, and spears nodded their heads and bowed to Nyklot as he rode past. Nyklot heard many languages, both familiar and unfamiliar. Many of the visitors didn't even recognize him and mistook him for just another rich man who came to the market for buying and selling.

The stalls were filled with the finest things of the world: jewelry, spices, garments, perfumes, weapons, oils, relics, medicines, incense, soaps, saddles, stirrups, pottery and foodstuffs.

Beyond was a more open market where there stood fettered slaves accompanied by their owners auctioning them off.

Nyklot passed Dmitri of Novgorod on the right who was selling splinters of the true cross, as well as a femur bone that was allegedly from St. Adalbert. He smiled at Nyklot and bowed to him.

Nyklot disdained to acknowledge him and passed on.

Passing a group of young ladies, Nyklot looked over his left shoulder and saw an axe-juggler of his druzhina performing, and the priest, Vizelin, with a cowled monk next to him, who was reaching his hand into the pocket of the priest. *What strange customs the Niemcy have*, he thought.

Shortly thereafter a crowd gathered in a circle. Nyklot pulled up to it, looking over the many curious bystanders, and what he saw shocked him. It was Thorkell performing sex acts with a slave girl on a thick outstretched Persian rug. He was penetrating her from behind and licking her back, and was naked except for his sword which was hanging from its baldric on his back. His arm rings were fondling her ribs, and his thick beard scratched her back as she sat there in a state of horror and confusion.

"Such immodesty," said Boliliut, involuntarily.

Ludomir turned to Nyklot. "Should I stop this?"

Nyklot appeared terribly vexed. "If we stop it now, we will let the entire world know that our guardsmen do not obey their superiors. No, let it continue, but this evening find out who was on guard here, and have him flogged and demoted. This is a mockery, and cannot be allowed to persist in the future. Now go and get the old lady."

"Aye," said Ludomir, riding off.

Just then Thorkell raised his head and saw Nyklot above him, blotting out the sun. He quickly rose and kicked over the girl who lay on the ground as if dead.

"Knyaz Nyklot," he said in the local tongue with a heavy accent. "I was just coming to look for you," he said and began getting dressed. As he put on his pants he tripped and everyone began laughing at him. His face was red and veins were bulging from his forehead. He puffed the hair out of his face and shot everyone an indignant look. The crowd began to clear.

"Knyaz Nyklot," began Thorkell, bowing. "I bring you many fine gifts from overseas; many bottles of wine and walrus tusks from the very edges of the earth."

"Save your gifts, Thorkell," said Nyklot with a straight face. "Your kindness supersedes yourself."

Thorkell grabbed the lone braid on the right side of his head and stroked it as he panted and puffed out air to remove the long blond strands from his brow.

"It has been at least six full moons since I saw you last, Jutlander," said Nyklot, softening his tone but still not dismounting his steed. "You travel long and far."

Thorkell seemed pleased with this last statement but remained on edge. He smiled. "Indeed, Knyaz," he said. "To the ends of the earth I've been."

"Not to Constantinople anymore?"

"There are too many tolls and too many savages on the way. The only reason to go to that place is for blood money, and I keep my hands clean nowadays," he said, laughing mightily.

"Indeed," replied Nyklot.

Boliliut seemed slightly consternated and jumped off of his horse onto the ground.

"Thorkell," he said, affably. "We are glad to have you. Do you require help with lifting your wares?" he asked with a raised eyebrow.

"No. No need at all. My druzhina did it all last night and then departed."

Boliliut looked towards his Knyaz.

"Why didn't they stay and feast with us, Thorkell?" asked Nyklot.

A bad outbreak of leprosy we had, Knyaz. I had to send them back to Gotland where they is from," he said. Nyklot didn't know if he was speaking with such terrible grammar out of forgetfulness or out of disrespect.

"Uh, huh," said Nyklot looking down and to the left. "And her?" he said motioning to the slave girl who was now convulsing and lying in a fetal position.

"A Slav girl, Knyaz, just like the maidens here," he said with a repulsive laughter. "I pick her up in London, trading her for just a few pieces of amber. I figure that someone here would like her back all the same in whatever capacity. I'll sell her very cheap, I promise."

"And how long do you intend to stay, Northman?" asked Nyklot.

"A few days, perhaps," he said. "Got lots of herring to catch when comes May season. The men will want good fish."

At this moment Nyklot was about to lose his patience when all of a sudden a middle-aged lady with a silver band on her head and an embroidered apron on her tunic (both of which symbolized her state of being married) ran at Thorkell, screaming.

"Beast!" she cried, and began to hit him in the chest. The crowd that had dissipated again gathered around and started laughing, and jeering at the scene.

"You took my daughter, you disgusting swine, I know that you did! I know that you did!" she yelled, still striking him in the chest. "Wife-napper! Daughter-thief!"

Thorkell looked violent and confused, and stared up at Nyklot who waxed stoic.

"Miroslava? Is that you?" said the old lady looking at the naked girl who lay on the ground. "It is you, my precious little lamb. Yes it is you. Come to me," she said with her arms outstretched, and went over to comfort the fallen girl.

Just then Ludomir returned and jumped off his horse. He approached her, and gently guided her away. "Forgive her," he said to Thorkell as he passed. "This is my mother, and she gets extremely lonely since my sister got snatched a month ago. Now she thinks other girls are her Miroslava."

They walked away and the old lady continued to cry.

Thorkell appeared extremely uncomfortable.

"What says you, Thorkell?" said Nyklot.

Now the Jutlander's eyes began to show signs of rage.

"It is as he says," said Thorkell. "That is not really her daughter."

"It would be most noble of you if you would release this young girl to the old lady," said Nyklot.

Thorkell was silent for a moment, and then smiled warmly.

"Okay," he said. "She can have the wench," he replied, laughing.

"You are a most kind man, Thorkell," said Nyklot. "Please grace us with your presence more often," he proclaimed, and turned around to ride off.

Boliliut followed and rode up beside him. He only spoke when they were out of hearing range from the market area.

"Guilty as could be!" he said.

"Didn't even bother to refer to a price," said Nyklot. "That is not the behavior of a trader, but the behavior of a scared man."

"What should we do? We cannot impale a foreign trader; his druzhina would come looking for him, and would demand satisfaction."

"Meanwhile, a base man like this can pick and choose amongst all of the markets of the Baltic coast and treat us like we are beneath him; like we are one of his common whores. It greatly rouses my fury."

"Please, Knyaz. Thus is life, and your market is known far and wide. Our revenues are second to none, except for perhaps that of the Arkona market, and that only because of their advantageous location on the sea."

"Men like that come here because nowhere else can they can be themselves as they can in Veligrad," said Nyklot with disgust. "And such is what men do with their freedom." He seemed melancholy.

"Indeed," said Boliliut. "The Christians would not allow such behavior in their marketplaces."

"So we get stuck with the basest driftwood from the sea; men that respect no law or custom."

"It is not so glum, Knyaz: they come and go but leave much silver."

"Silver is not what makes me rise early every morning," said Nyklot, and rode off.

"But it's what makes many men rise early," replied Boliliut when he was out of hearing distance.

Nyklot rode through the merchants' quarters and surveyed the men from afar without entering a single homestead. He saw candle-makers, tanners, blacksmiths, amber artisans, silversmiths, tent-makers, carpenters, and comb-makers. He only recognized about half of them. The other half he assumed that at least Boliliut would recognize.

"To the edge of the earth would I go for friends," he said to himself. "For true friends that follow the path of the ancestors."

A small child approached him from behind and pulled at his hem. He was at least seven years old, as his hair had been cropped, and he wore a simple brown tunic.

"Greetings, Knyaz," he said, gleefully.

Nyklot dismounted. "Hello, little boy," he said. "What have you there?"

The boy smiled and opened his filthy little hand, exposing a small amber bear figurine.

"This is for you. It is from my father."

"And who is your father?" said Nyklot.

"Peter of Wollin," said the boy. "He is an artisan."

"Wollin," exclaimed Nyklot. "I have a sister, a brother-in-law and a nephew that live in Wollin, but I never hear from them anymore," he said as if to himself. "And do you Pomeranians of Wollin speak highly of us Obodrites?" he asked, and the boy smiled.

"Of course," said Nyklot. "You are too young to care about such things. If I were your age I wouldn't occupy myself with such hassle, either." He put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Boy," he said and removed the brooch from his shroud. "Give this to your father, and tell him that he is invited to feast with me tonight. I shall expect him shortly after sundown."

The boy bowed, took the brooch and ran off.

All of a sudden Nyklot heard the calling of the war-horn. It sounded two long blares and then a number of short ones which was a positive call, and in this case meant that the town was about to throw the effigy doll into the river.

As if by providence without warning the sky turned grey, and rain started to pour down on the foggy earth.

"Perun is roused," thought Nyklot, and headed for the stronghold, toward his home first to change into a new tunic and cloak. His wife was there. She was with a slave girl, and the two were chattering on about something when Nyklot walked in.

"You will not attend the ceremony?" asked Nyklot.

"Too cold, and wet," said Beleknegini.

"And the feast, tonight?"

"Of course I will be there," she replied with a smile. "Who else would toast such brave, wet warriors." Nyklot smiled and walked up the wooden log (that had a flight of steps carved into it) to the second floor where he changed clothes.

Nyklot awaited Boyan. It was understood that he was to arrive without acolyte, and without sword. The Knyaz stepped into his throne and rested his body on the cushions. His hair was still slightly wet from the spring showers.

A bolt of lightning hit the earth and the mighty crack of thunder followed for all to hear. Boyan would be out divining omens now, speaking in Perun's name, if he hadn't been summoned.

Just then Ludomir opened the pelt on the doorway, and walked in, soaking wet.

"Knyaz," he said. "Boyan is here to see you now. I will prepare bread and salt."

Nyklot nodded his head affirmatively. Boyan walked in.

The priest was a short man of ominous appearance. His dark long hair fell to shoulder length and his beard and mustache covered his entire face. On his hunched shoulder there stood an owl, an animal that Boyan was deeply acquainted with and whom they say that he could shape-shift into. He was covered in nothing but filthy rags, and walked with his amulet-staff which had a giant, polished amber-head fastened at its crown, which had a writhing, ferocious-looking lizard inclusion in it.

Ludomir placed a small, oaken table in front of Boyan, with bread and salt on it, and slid him a chair. He then looked to his knyaz and walked out of the building.

Boyan hunched over and kissed the hem of Nyklot's tunic.

"Kneeeeyaaaaaz," he drawled in his characteristic way. "My Knyaz." He then took a seat.

"Perun has been roused for your divination, Flamen Boyan," said Nyklot.

"As sure as Volos, the winding serpent, whom Perun eternally battles with his thunderbolts, speaks to me from under the earth, I will prophesize and make the sacrifices of our people."

Nyklot ate a date from the golden vessel.

"You will prophesize a prosperous year, no doubt? Spendthrift peasants are stomach-happy and come for much paid counsel, true?"

"Just as the gods desire our prosperity and our adherence to their ways, so I desire the same. Just as I desire the happiness of the people I will divine what the gods tell me."

Nyklot ate another date.

"Times are troublesome, Boyan. Perhaps I should include you in my counsel more often. That is if you will get along with the rest of the counsel."

Boyan appeared to scoff, but lowered his head effortlessly.

"Just as the gods speak through me to the people," began the flamen. "So I will transmit what they tell me. It is my sacrifices that hold together the fabric of this world," he said and his eyes grew intense. "Without them the very seasons would cease, and shortly thereafter all life would collapse. The World Tree would wither away and die, and thus the heavens would come crashing down on our heads. Counsel is good, but how can divine counsel be treated lightly?" he asked.

"And if I may ask your counsel, Boyan, what would you do with the Christians that live in our community?" asked Nyklot.

It appeared that Boyan's wrath had been fully aroused. "The god of the worms, Knyaz, is the downfall of us all. It is the downfall of the whole world, noble Knyaz! They wish to destroy all of our rites, our sacrifices, and our gods. They put axe and torch to our precious groves. They teach our children that their grandparents burn in a lake of fire. They would destroy the throne that you sit on, noble knyaz. What must be done with such a people?"

"Indeed, how I empathize with you. Tomorrow I must even speak with the bald-headed manikin, and must listen to his ill-omened proposals. May Perun's wrath remain dormant! May I ask *your* roposal for dealing with such a persistent people?"

"Just as they desire our deaths, so, in the name of the gods, may we visit sword and torch upon the crowns of their bald heads, and above in the heavens the gods will battle the god of the worms, as we obey their will from below, on earth. Thus will the order of the world be preserved that has been ordained since the beginning of time. Thus we will prosper."

"More will come, though," said Nyklot. "They always do. And every one of their deaths is but a pretext for the Niemcy to send raiders into our lands. I have always sought to harass them with mockery, and to make them leave by their own account – thus they grow frustrated, and thus they have no pretext to our lands. Is this not a wise strategy?"

Boyan lowered his head again, and lifted it only when finishing his thought. "Wise is your heart, Knyaz, wise!" he exclaimed. "Wise, indeed. However, excluding me from the counsel has not been beneficial to our people, as I have many eyes and many years, I know the inner workings of the Obodrites like no other. I know what the peasants feel, and I know what their leaders think in their hearts."

"Speak what is on your mind," said Nyklot.

"The Niemcy do indeed make converts, despite your wisdom, Knyaz," the last part he said somewhat sneeringly. "For every Christian they convert there is the problem of burial, for it is widely known that the Christian god desires that his servants lay in the ground until resurrection. Even more widely understood amongst the village elders it that this leads to vampires being born; walking undead that will stalk our people and hunt them like cattle. Only the burning pyre translates our souls across the sea, and only the flamen can administer this sacred ritual!"

Nyklot listened with his fingers interlaced at his knee.

"My many eyes and ears tell me," said Boyan with full confidence. "That your druzhina-leader, Ludomir, speaks with the bald-headed manikin, and that he desires to have the warriors dipped into the waters of baptism, washing away the path of our grandfathers forever."

A mighty thunderbolt hit the earth close to the stronghold. Nyklot trembled.

"On what do you base this accusation?" he asked.

"My many eyes and ears," said Boyan with a grim smirk.

"Ludomir has sworn allegiance to me before Perun."

"Nevertheless, he feels that conversion will benefit the Obodrites, and he feels that my death would be desirable, too. Is this how you feel as well, Knyaz?"

Nyklot stared him directly in the eye. "No," he said and ate a date. "It is not." He looked down on the flamen for a long time. "And does your prophesy stand as it does; for a bountiful harvest?"

"Yes it does, my Knyaz," replied Boyan, smirking. He then bowed low.

All of a sudden Nyklot unsheathed his sword, and held it in front of his face so that the reflection of smoldering torches could be seen in the snake-like writhing of the pattern-welded blade.

Boyan lifted his head up high.

"Do you know to whom this blade belonged?" asked Nyklot.

"Indeed, knyaz, indeed. It belonged to the mighty knyaz of ancient times, Mistui, who rose and slew many Christians."

"It belonged," began Nyklot, "to my ancestor." There was a long pause and Nyklot continued to hold the sword in front of him, contemplatively. "In those times there was a war between our people

and the Niemcy. During the spring-divination that year the flamen was to predict the harvest and make his sacrifice, only it was cut short as the arrows of the Niemcy pierced his heart, and his throat. He fell to the ground, and although there was no sacrifice, the seasons continued as usual..."

There was a long silence.

"It was the blood of the flamen itself that made the ground fertile that year," said Boyan, contemplatively. *"It was he himself who was the sacrifice."*

"Indeed," replied Nyklot ambiguously, sheathing his sword.

The two men stared at each other and the owl cuckooed at Boyan's shoulder.

Nyklot popped another date into his mouth. "I want the divination to forecast a year of scarcity this year," he said, and there was another long pause.

Boyan looked Nyklot in the eye for a full moment as he considered the implications of Nyklot's last subtle threat..

"It shall be so," said the flamen, and then turned his back, walking out of the building.

Nyklot noticed that the bread and the salt were absent from the table, but when he walked to the front entrance he saw that they were lying in the mud, uneaten.

Nyklot returned to his throne and thought about the encounter.

The thunder struck louder.

The previous evening, a full moon loomed over the Baltic Sea. After several hours of steady rowing it was overtaken by dark clouds and Giselbert lost his astronomical bearings, just knowing to stay close to the shore.

When the rain started to fall the lightning struck shortly thereafter. Bern thought of the time when Jesus and his disciples had been sailing over the Sea of Galilee and calmed the storm. Bern began to pray intermittently as he bailed out water from the vessel.

It was a terrifying sight. Bern imagined what it would look like without even the shore in sight and only the deep waters in all directions. Being totally at the mercy of nature was more than he could bear and he longed more than ever to be back home in the quiet monastery in Bremen.

Over two more hours passed in the same conditions. There was a longship approaching them from behind, and Giselbert, already completely exhausted began to row even faster. Finally a large bay appeared. Giselbert paddled into it. They came before a lofty, timber watchtower and the watchman yelled to them in the tongue of the Obodrites. "Hoist your flag!"

Daso was lying on the plank floor in a state of misery, lifted up his head and yelled back. "We have none. We are friendly merchants, let us moor the boat!"

The watchman lifted his warhorn and roared out a long signal.

Rough pieces of amber were surfacing in the waters and young boys netted them on the shore.

Bern noticed that the boys paid no heed to the newcomers.

Two men with flickering torches and mail shirts moored the boat, which was filled with water up to the knees. They then helped out the wounded Daso, who was suffering from a fever.

"Men," he began. He could barely stand, and he slurred his speak in Obodrite. "I am a merchant and a Wagrian by birth. Please take me to Bieslava, my host, in the peasant's quarters. She lives with her husband, Bratumil. They are peasants."

The two guards looked at one another, recognizing the family.

They walked around the stronghold to the peasants' quarters. There were rows and rows of pine hewn huts, with thatched roofs. The guards called into a few of them to see if they had reached the right one. Finally they found the home that they were looking for.

The guard called for Bieslava and Bratumil, and got a positive response.

"Enjoy the hospitality of our people, Niemcy," said one of them to Daso.

"I will," said Daso. "Gift-giving is common amongst us, as well."

"Yes, I received a gift from your folk," said the other guard, lifting up his mail shirt and tunic, exposing a scar from a spear wound. "It's okay, though. I gave him a better gift in kind."

Just then a woman lifted the deer pelt on the doorway and let in the travelers. She talked with the guards for a moment more and then walked in after her guests. They stepped down a large rung and stood on the earthen floor.

Bern immediately felt uncomfortable as if he were witnessing something that he felt that he had to right to. The woman laid down Daso on a bear pelt in the corner next to a stone oven filled with glowing embers. Meanwhile Bern stood at the doorway and surveyed his new environment.

Herbs and flowers hung from the rafters. Over the door hung a row of garlic. To the right was a large oaken table with a giant bowl full of figs, nuts, smoked ham, and bread. In the corner there was the stone oven where Daso was now lying next to, and Gisbert and the woman were standing over him. To the left were several rows of planks that stood out of the wall, one on top another. There were two small children and an elderly man sleeping on them, covered in sheepskin blankets.

On the opposite wall to the door there was a shrine with a burning candle and a small wooden idol sitting on the wall; at its foot stood pots full of grain and silver denars. Bern felt a violent discomfort at this sight, but was still absorbed with his new surroundings.

The woman turned towards Bern, and gestured for him to sit at the table. She wore a green linen band around her head with long silver rings hanging from it.

Bern sat at the table, next to a spindle whorl, loom, and some needles. The woman put a piece of brown bread in front of him and a little bowl of salt next to it. He thanked her in Latin, and ate the bread, feeding a little piece of it to his pigeon, who sat in the cage on Bern's lap.

Just then there was a voice at the door. Pribislav, son of Nyklot walked in, and the old lady took his soaking cloak.

"*Salve*, foreigner," he said to Bern in Latin.

"*Salve*," replied Bern.

The lady spoke to him for a moment.

"She says for you to help yourself to food, and that your friend will be taken care of. In this household you will lack nothing."

"Thank you," said Bern with the utmost gratitude.

They both looked over their shoulder at Daso who was passed out on the pelt.

"I am Pribislav, son of Nyklot, the king," proclaimed Pribislav, firmly.

"I am Bern, of Bremen."

"And what is your position in life, Bern of Bremen?" asked Pribislav.

"Where I am from, sir, there are those who work and there are those who pray. I am one of the latter."

"Here everyone works and everyone sings," replied Pribislav, with a slight tone of disapproval. He looked the monk over from head to toe, sizing him up.

Why the pigeon?" he asked, stroking his beard.

Bern contemplated for a moment and decided that he should tell nothing but the truth, and did so. Pribislav appeared laughed hardily when he heard the explanation.

"You will eat now, monk," he said. "Regain your strength after the long journey. When you leave here you will tell the merchants in your land that our ways are unpolluted, and that all are welcome here for feasting and for trading."

"But I must stay, and find my teacher," said Bern.

"And what is the name of your teacher?"

"Vizelin," replied Bern.

Pribislav's countenance changed suddenly as if he was thinking of something threatening and menacing.

"And what are they here for?" asked Pribislav, pointing at Daso and Giselbert.

"They came to trade sword blades, but ran into angry men on the way. Now they possess nothing."

"I see," replied Pribislav.

Just the lady of the house spoke to Pribislav.

"Monk," he said, addressing Bern. "'You must eat,' says Bieslava."

"Please tell her that I thank her with all of my heart, God bless her."

Pribislav translated this.

Bern swallowed the morsel of bread, and remained silent.

"It is late now, monk," began Pribislav. "Tomorrow I will tell your beloved teacher of your arrival, and he will come and see you."

Bern's eyebrows rose.

"My teacher lives!" said Bern. "He is here?" he asked.

"I thought that it was commonly known that he is here," replied Pribislav.

"Kind sir, I yearn to see him at all costs!"

Pribislav looked surprised upon receiving this extra information.

"I go now," he said, padding his cropped hair. "If there is anything you need from me, ask for me, and shortly thereafter I shall appear." He began to walk out the door.

"Who shall I ask to get an audience with you?"

Pribislav paused and looked at the monk.

"Anyone," he replied. "News travels quickly in our little world. By the morning everyone will know that you are here. I won't even have to tell your teacher directly, but he will come upon hearing of your arrival, and he will come quickly."

That night Bieslava put Bern to bed and sang him a song which calmed him and reminded him of his own home. To this song he fell asleep.

The words of Pribislav, son of Nyklot were not base; in the morning shortly after the sun rose a voice was heard from outside. Bern was sleeping as light as a cat when he heard the voice. Bieslava was already awake, and knitting a scarf of indigo blue yarn. She bade the man to enter.

In walked a short, bald man, robed in the humble garment of a rustic friar; brown wool, and a simple walking stick. His nose was pointy and veins popped out from his forehead.

Bern woke with the intense eyes of Vizelin staring him in the face. He finally lost control like he never had before and grabbed at the man's outstretched leg.

"I have come for you, teacher," he muttered, almost crying.

"From far away have you journeyed, my boy," said Vizelin. His voice was sharp and direct.

"Not without gratitude do I receive you," he said, and stroked Bern's face.

Bern hugged his teacher.

"I must tell you of my journey," he said. "It was horrible, and I have no love for this world or its base pleasures, I assure you."

"Good, my boy," replied Vizelin, looking at Daso who slept as Giselbert affectionately deloused him. "Let us walk and you will tell me everything."

He said something to the Bieslava in her language and then they walked out. Bern carried the pigeon at his side.

They walked through the peasants' quarters, passing huts, open cauldrons, and charred swine spits. Chickens strode to and fro, and friendly dogs approached them, while the peasants ambled off to the fields with their yoked horses. As they walked, Bern told him everything that had happened on the journey. "You seemed surprised, my dear boy, of the fiery trial that awaits us all."

Vizelin nodded at many men walking by, as they spoke. Bern thought about such a statement.

"Perhaps you are right, teacher," he said. "It came so suddenly."

"As suddenly as the Final Days are coming, catching unaware the unprepared."

"Teacher," said Bern. "How long have you languished out here amongst the heathen?"

"You must know, my boy, as it has been as many years since I have last seen you," replied Vizelin.

"Nine years," said Bern. "I was but 12 years of age the last I saw you, and since then I have never had the same guidance from any other."

"You flatter me, my boy. Surely there are wise men to take my place as I carve out a diocese from the wilderness."

"Is that your intention?"

"Indeed it is, and it has been promised to me by our mutual friend, the archbishop himself; the man who you now communicate with via your little bird. Tonight the heathen will celebrate the changing of the season and you will see firsthand the blood-drinking priest of the devil. All day long the heathen will riot in their unholy ways, and you will witness firsthand what you have only heard about from afar."

They walked on in silence for several more paces.

"How do you find the folk here?" asked Vizelin.

"What is said of their hospitality is so very true."

"We in Christendom have much to learn from them, perhaps?"

"Perhaps," said Bern.

"Do not be deceived," retorted Vizelin. "Their charity is not as ours, but is a facet of their thievery, for here the most charitable is the most powerful; the biggest raider. For many of their gifts comes from the shores of Jutland and Saxony herself, stolen from our own people. It is their thievery that makes their world go round, and that supplants their rich feasts and markets, which in turn attracts the buyers and sellers of wares."

"Nevertheless that old lady was very kind to me," said Bern.

"As she has been kind to me, and many other pilgrims," replied Vizelin.

"I shall very much like to aid you in the conversion of this folk," said Bern, speaking from the heart.

"I know, my boy, I know," said Vizelin with his sharp eyes. "And you shall help. Now we will go to our church. There is very little time to waste."

They walked out of the peasants' quarters towards the east, and on the path next to the moat of the stronghold. A troop of mounted horsemen rode past them singing a song. The words of the song were as such:

"Knyaz, Knyaz lead on your men
Lead us to victory
The Obodrites shall never again be fettered
We fighting men shall fight to the end
Our blood and our soil shall not be tainted
Tribute we shall collect
But not surrender

Silver to the druzhina!
Silver for the druzhina!
We will always be free from the yoke!"

Vizelin translated the words to Bern.

"You shall teach the heathen to sing songs of God, so that they do not languish in their false ways," he said.

"I am ready to do so," said Bern.

"Are you prepared to smash idols?"

"I am."

"Are you prepared to burn groves?"

"I am," replied the monk, blocking the sun from his eyes. "How big is our flock?" he asked.

"Marginal," replied Vizelin. "But I have faithful folk from all quarters of this realm, and have exorcized demons from all classes of people. We must make way for the coming of the Lord, and we all have our spiritual gifts. Yours is to sing."

Finally they reached a small wooden church, just north of the marketplace where men were beginning to unload their wares into the stalls. The church was pine-hewn and had an earthen floor, but was cozy and tranquil. There was a pulpit and a wooden cross behind it and a few pews, but nothing else.

After entering, they prayed together for several hours as they had done in olden times. Bern's soul soared above the tribulations of the earth and his heart calmed immensely.

Bern was refreshed, and when he returned to the temporal world his heart was tranquil, and he heard music coming from outside.

"Soon I must go up the river," said Vizelin.

"And am I to join you?"

Vizelin looked at the ground, and then looked in Bern's face.

"Are you prepared for martyrdom?" he asked.

Bern looked down at his feet.

"It is not likely that that will be the case, but Christ knows who his true soldiers are. The times are perilous, son!"

"And I am to stay here alone amongst heathen folk?"

"Only for a short while and I will be back. Take my word for it, boy."

"And what am I to accomplish alone? I, a simple choir monk?"

They walked out of the church and saw many peasants singing and dancing. There were huge bonfires in the distance, and little children were running about with small dolls made of twigs and walnuts.

"You will do what you do best, Bern. You will sing with our flock until I return. Administer Mass, and keep the flock safely in the church."

"But I am not sanctioned for administering Mass and how am I to know who is of the flock?"

"They will come to you; sing the Kyrie eleison, pray fervently and the rest of your questions will be answered by the Holy Spirit who will visit you kindly when you are in need."

They walked towards the crowded marketplace. The wooden-planked streets were crowded and filled with the exuberant music of zithers, and flutes. Vizelin led Bern to a group of children that were playing with glass marbles. The two men towered over them.

"I will show you what to do," said Vizelin.

The children were hitting marbles in and out of the circle. Bern didn't understand the rules of their game.

"Hello, children," said Vizelin to the children in their native tongue, and then translating back to Bern everything that was said. "What game is it that you play?"

"And who amongst you has received the holy baptism?" he continued.

Two of the kids raised their hands.

"And isn't it important that Christian boys remain pure from such heathen games and abstain from contact with non-believers?"

He grabbed the two boys and pulled them to his side.

"And who amongst you children would like to live in eternal bliss?" he asked, addressing the others. They all raised their hands. "So who amongst your brave young boys will receive the holy baptism and come to mass this Sunday to hear the word of God?"

There was silence for a moment and Vizelin's stern eyes gazed at all of their lowered heads.

"Whoever would like to receive the holy sacrament of baptism step over to me. Whoever desires to remain in filth and despair remain where you are."

First, one boy came over hesitantly, and then the rest followed.

Vizelin looked sternly at Bern. "Thus you must minister to win the youth. Tomorrow I will show you how to proselytize to adults." Vizelin looked over Bern's shoulder. There was a large crowd gathered around as the singing troop was marching through towards a large bonfire. Vizelin and Bern followed them.

A warrior of the druzhina was juggling axes, from behind his back towards his front side. Bern feared that he would cut himself on the crown of his own head. He then felt a momentary feeling of fright, as the crowd roared with excitement at the juggler.

"Why do you despair, my boy?"

"So soon do I come that you leave, and I am to stay with the heathen folk all alone."

"You will sing with them, our songs, instead of theirs. That is more than enough."

All of a sudden clouds enveloped throughout the sky, and a slight drizzle poured down to the earth.

"I am weak. I am too weak to be left alone here," said Bern. "Since you left us I have often been alone with my sinful thoughts. I try to practice the *Law of Colombanus*, lashing myself a hundred stripes every time for these thoughts, as you did to me in former days, but I am too weak. During the voyage, when I was in the forest I experienced temptation so strong..."

"My boy," said Vizelin. "Just remember what Joshua did on the way to the Promised Land," he then took Bern's hand and put it in his own pants. Bern withdrew his hand in horror.

"Yes," said Bern, with a gaze of astonishment. "Of course."

Suddenly a hand-axe flew over the heads of Bern and Vizelin, landing blade-deep into a birch tree behind them. Bern jumped out of the way, but Vizelin stood still and smiled unflinchingly at the juggler who threw the next two axes into the tree over Vizelin's bald head. The drunken crowd was roaring with laughter as the axes whistled closely past Vizelin's ears. Both the second and the third axe missed the tree and flew into the ground.

Vizelin then approached the man and made the sign of the cross over him. The crowd seemed disappointed and soon turned their attention back to singing and dancing.

Suddenly thunder struck.

"Soon shortly after now you will witness what you have been sent to witness, my boy," said Vizelin. "And then you will send the pigeon back to our archbishop."

The war horn blew and the people all rushed from the marketplace towards the sandy beach of the bay.

The tribe, unified, reveled in the storm.

"Where does everyone flock to?" asked Bern.

"You are about to witness a pagan ritual; pray fervently."

The crowd, several thousand strong, trickled out by the harbor. Lightening struck beyond the bay.

From far away a huge mass of women and children carried a huge effigy-doll towards the water. It was about twenty feet long, and was fully clothed in a massive linen tunic.

The mob split into two rows, making way for the effigy doll. An elderly woman emerged from the crowd and began to sing:

"In the highest branches of the Eternal Oak Tree
Sit the gods
Stroking their grey beards of wisdom
And guiding the stars through the sky
Mighty Svarog, the Creator
Illuminates the sun
And delights in his children from his throne above...
The fish swim from the river out to sea
The brown bear roams through the woods
The auroch grazes in the valley
The fox chases the hare
And the druzhina-brothers
Sing songs to woo the
Beautiful maidens
Thus the gods delight and have joy
In mortal beings
Who one day will greet us all
When we travel across the sea"

The crowd swarmed around the effigy doll, and running out knee deep into the water, and threw it in, cheering as it sank. Bern asked Vizelin the meaning of the ritual.

"It is the deeply-rooted belief of these people that throwing the effigy doll into the water permanently ends winter, making way for spring, and that the sacrifices of their priest makes the ground fertile and makes the seasons continue in due order. It is our duty to show them the error of their way, and show that the seasons continue with or without the blood sacrifice, alone by the will of God."

There was a loud commotion and the horn sounded again. The crowd dispersed and headed south, past the stronghold, and into the dense forest. Bern and Vizelin followed the crowd.

After about thirty minutes of walking down a small path they reached an opening in the dense pine forest. There was a small oak grove, and on top of a small hill there was a tall wooden statue with four sides, each pointed in a cardinal direction and each with a carved semblance of a bearded god with a long tunic and folded arms.

At its feet were many oblations; milk, silver, fish, and clay pots full of grain. All around the statue were vigorously burning hearth fires.

Several thousand peasants and warriors gathered around the statue on all sides. Many were singing as they danced around the giant oak trees. Bern and Vizelin stood in front of the crowd, glaring sullenly at the horrendous idol.

Just then lightening struck again, and the crowd made way for Boyan who approached the idol, followed by a cropped-haired acolyte. The flamen bowed before the idol. When he turned he held out his arms, staff in hand, with his owl's wings fluttering. The whole community fell silent.

"Oh, Mighty Perun!" he exclaimed again to the idol. "I, Boyan, noble flamen of the Obodrites called upon you, and you have graced us with your presence today." He faced the people, who all bowed to one knee, again and he sang a song:

"Oh, mighty Perun, Oh saddled warrior
Hurl your mountain-leveling
Thunderbolts down to the Earth and
Chase away Volos,

The voracious dragon!
May Volos writhe and slither through the forest
May he hide beneath the Earth's fluvial caverns!
And may you, Perun,
Reign in the heavens eternally!
To your health Perun,
To your health, noble warrior
Oh, brave rider, carry us to victory
And let the people praise
Your name forevermore!
In the autumn when death comes for me
Scythe in hand
I will greet him as a friend
But until then let me praise your name
So that you may reward
The kinfolk bountifully"

He swiftly fell to his knees, and the community stood at their feet again. The acolyte walked off, and when he returned he brought with him a mature ox, held by a collar. Boyan tapped the amber head of the staff on the ox's head, and then handed it to his acolyte who in turn traded him the collar of the ox.

The people were singing in unison. Bern looked around and realized that Vizelin was no longer at his side.

Just then Boyan removed an antler-handled knife, and slit the ox's throat. The ox dropped to its knees, then fell on its side, and began convulsing.

Boyan spoke incoherently as the lightning struck the earth in the background and as the forest winds rustled the treetops. He then dropped to his knees and began drinking the blood of the fallen ox. He rose, covered in blood running down his beard, dripping onto his tunic.

The multitude bowed low. Bern was shaking and grasping his rosary in one hand and the pigeon cage in the other.

Boyan then cut open the belly of the ox, and stirred the entrails about on the ground as he spoke in an indistinguishable mutter.

"Oh, noble Obodrites!" he said and spread his hands out to the sky. "Perun has warned us many times, and many times have we disobeyed him."

He looked Bern in the eye directly, and Bern felt a cold shiver run up his spine.

"Thus says Perun; this year our harvest will be meager and unfulfilling, and it is because we have let the foreign gods corrupt our ancient ways. Repent, Obodrites, repent! Only by listening to the gods will the harvest continue! Only by sacrificing to them do the seasons revolve and continue in due order!"

He lowered his hands, and stared into Bern's eyes as the wind and rain fluttered his unkempt hair. Blood was dripping down his chin. The lightning struck, illuminating the vicious eyes of his owl, perched on Boyan's shoulder.

Bern fell backwards onto the ground. He looked around him but Vizelin was nowhere to be seen. The people were still singing and dancing gently in the rain.

It is time, thought Bern. *I have witnessed what I have come here to witness.*

What happened next, Bern would reflect upon until his final days. He opened the cage, grabbing the pigeon as the thunder cracked beyond the grove. When he got to his feet he tossed it into the air and it flew off into the sky.

Boyan gazed on at the pigeon, and with a minute movement of the shoulder sent off the owl who fixed his eyes on the defenseless bird. The predator flew after the prey and all eyes were skybound.

Just as the owl was about to sink its claws into the airborne pigeon, an arrow shot out of nowhere, striking the owl in the breast. It fell to the ground dead.

The lightning struck again, and the crowd murmured in confusion. Boyan marched off in indignation.

"*Deus vult*," proclaimed Vizelin, emerging suddenly behind Bern.

"It seems that although we were separated for a moment, God's angels always watch over His faithful."

The multitude seemed to think little of the incident, and filed out, towards the path that they came from, still singing songs.

The rain trickled down on Bern's head.

"God is not in this evil grove," he said, shaking.

"Fear not," said Vizelin. "Only the Word of God lasts throughout eternity. Lucifer, the Child of the Morning has fallen, bruised, never to rise again. His vanity will be eternally smashed."

"Did you shoot the owl?"

"I have not possession of such carnal weapons, but I can say this: the pigeon will tell Christendom of our predicament."

Lightening struck again.

Vizelin looked at Bern's downcast head.

"I must leave soon," he said.

Bern clutched his rosary, as he glared at the morose sky.

7.

At sundown many wealthy men gathered round Nyklot's oaken table on pine benches: four druzhina commanders, Yaroslav, Boliliut, three Constantine traders in fine silk tunics, Thorkell along with four other Northmen, two Finnish fur-traders, a Khazar man-hunter, and Dmitri of Novgorod, who had walked in uninvited, sitting at the far end of the table.

The men were hesitant at first to begin conversation, but Nyklot sent for several of his warriors to facilitated dialogue.

Soon a servant brought in a large golden goblet filled with mead, and handed it to Nyklot.

In walked the beautiful Beleknegini, fully adorned in an embroidered green silk gown, silver ornaments dangling from her headdress. Nyklot handed her the goblet and the crowd rose.

"Gentlemen," she said, standing in front of fully embroidered war banners of Perun. "I drink to your good fortune."

All and sundry roared with delight, throwing off their hats towards the corner hearth fires where their weapons stood, perched against the south timber wall.

Beleknegini took a long drink from the goblet and passed it to her husband, who drank and passed it to Ludomir at his right, who drank and passed it down the table.

Several young boys in tunics walked in with arms full of wooden bowls, trenchers, drinking horns, and ladles followed by another row with large platters of meat and fish, and cauldrons filled with stew of chickpeas and cabbage, spiced with sage and anise.

That evening they served rye bread along with almond milk, boiled pike, herring, perch, mackerel, and roasted boar. The stew contained venison, lentils, mushrooms, parsley, garlic, onions, and parsnip, all salted and spiced with saffron. Teeming quantities of mead and ale were doled out, and soon everyone was uplifted in the merry occasion as musicians gathered in the corner with flutes and zithers.

When widespread drunkenness came about, the storytelling commenced. Thorkell grew animated as he spoke of his faraway journeys to the northern world. His speech was only partially intelligible and he was slurring his words.

"And I tell you all," he said standing, with arms outstretched, "that the north is not like these fair lands here, but far more dangerous. We face Cyclops' and giants. We battle amazons who tear out the hearts of men and eat them!"

His speech began to animate Dmitri who listened intently, laughing at this last line.

"If I may," he continued. "Beyond Hibernia there are other frozen lands, at the very edges of the earth. I have ventured there many times.

Barren and bleak they are with nothing but large sea dragons that swallow ships whole! And beyond them the very edges of the world! Ships venture out and are swallowed by the giant maelstrom! Yes, the land of my forefathers is perilous indeed, which makes company with Obodrites sweet as honey on all counts."

He contemplated a moment and raised his drinking horn, spilling ale as he tottered back and forth.

"To your health, Knyaz Nyklot!" he proclaimed.

All men raised their drinking horns. Nyklot raised his, and they drank.

"And what is beyond these devouring maelstroms, Northman?" asked one of the Obodrite warriors. "I am very curious."

"Only death," replied Thorkell, unflinchingly.

Dmitri burst out laughing, spilling ale on himself. He wobbled back and forth, and appeared that he would trip over himself.

"My curiosity is roused, Dane," he said. "Maybe we should mount an expedition to the edge of the world with our fleet, and bring back some of that beautiful walrus ivory that you sell in the market. I propose, gentlemen," continued Dmitri, "that since these Northmen love our company so much, we should pay them a visit in their homes beyond all of the sea critters, and beyond 'death' and bring them some of our hospitality!"

Nyklot, thoroughly drunk now, was eating figs from a silver platter and laughing at the whole spectacle. Only Yaroslav the elder seemed to show concern.

"Dmitri of Novgorod," said Thorkell without the least bit of humor. "I remember you once had a family. You were prosperous and conceited, until famine destroyed your beloved Novgorod, and you were reduced to selling phony religious relics on coastal emporia. The proud people of Novgorod were reduced to selling all of their silver in exchange for oats. I remember buying some wonderful slaves there. The children of starving men and women who sold their offspring for bread. And look at you now; all that has stayed with you is your conceit."

"The Lord gives, the Lord takes away, and the Lord destroys," responded Dmitri gravely.

"Enough of your sour contagion, man!" said Nyklot to Dmitri. "Must you poison our feast with your perpetual sufferings, and your

strange beliefs? What man here has not lost loved ones? I have lost two brothers in battle, yet do I envenom the young night with tales of sorrow?"

"To whom did you lose your brothers?" Replied Dmitri, gesturing to the Northmen.

Nyklot's face turned red with fury.

Just then a man in a white cloak walked in wearing Nyklot's brooch.

"I challenge you, you vile farce!" said Thorkell to Dmitri, spitting offensively on the ground.

"He challenges a fellow Christian to a duel!"

Everyone around Dmitri rustled his hair and egged him on, bellowing with taunts and laughter.

Thorkell's face turned red. He stabbed his eating knife into the table and walked towards the weapons that leaned against the pillars and pine walls.

"No weapons!" shouted Nyklot. "If you kill this drunken fool, I have no one else to translate the Greek tongue."

Thorkell walked out of the dining hall, and Dmitri, being pushed by the warriors walked out as well. The entire table emptied except for Nyklot, Boliliut, Ludomir, Yaroslav, and the humble-looking man that stood at the doorway.

The stranger bowed. "I am Peter of Wollin," he kept his head low. "Forgive my tardiness, Knyaz. It was I who made you the gift today. It was I who sent my child to deliver it to you."

"Peter of Wollin," replied Nyklot. "Come and dine with me. We have roasted pork, lentil stew, and abundant sorts of eel, and fish."

"I thank you, Knyaz," he said and walked up to the bench and sat down.

"Will you stay long with us?" asked Nyklot.

"I will return tomorrow to Wollin," he said and devoured a knife-ful of roasted pork.

"And may I ask, how does my reputation stand in Wollin?"

Peter gulped down a mouthful.

"Honestly, they don't speak much of you there. The monks do not allow pagans to be spoken of kindly."

Nyklot slammed his fist against the table.

"I send my sister there to marry amongst your folk, and this is how I am treated," He said indignantly.

"The priests and the monks advice against intermarriage with absconders of the faith. This is why they do not communicate with you anymore."

"Do you hear this, men?" asked Nyklot, holding his drunken face with both hands. "I have no friends until the ends of the earth!"

"The people do not speak badly of you, Knyaz. They are affectionate towards the Obodrites and see you as relatives."

Yaroslav had a grave look in his eye. "The Pomeranians are blood brothers with us Obodrites as we are both descendants of our ancient ancestor, the mighty Knyaz, *Lech*. For them to deny our kinship is blatant treachery."

"I, too, know of our ancient bloodlines, but the flamens have been cast out to the forests, and no one sings the same songs anymore. We all sing the songs of the monks now, and receive their baptism and their communion."

"And you, Peter of Wollin, a Pomeranian, do you receive their baptism and their communion?"

"I must work my craft and sell in many markets, but if I am to work and sell in my native market then I must be a Christian."

Nyklot stared him in the face for a long time.

"Your nephew is stronger than a bear," said Peter.

"It has been many years since I last saw him, but he was vigorous and brave, and I will cultivate him to be even more so."

"He is our champion," replied the artisan.

Nyklot covered himself with his cloak, and headed outside.

In the darkness outside, drizzle fell from the sky. A large circle gathered around Thorkell and Dmitri. When Nyklot broke through the ranks he saw Thorkell with his forearm at Dmitri's throat. Dmitri was turning red in the face, and then all of a sudden he desperately bit the Northman in the forearm.

Two warriors pulled Thorkell up at Nyklot's behest. Thorkell was panting.

"I demand satisfaction for this insult," he said, clutching his bleeding arm.

"You don't make demands here, Northman," replied Ludomir.

"What is your position on this matter, Nyklot?" he said looking towards the Knyaz.

Nyklot started off in the distance with a look of contempt on his face. He then turned his back and walked off, out of the stronghold. It was the first time in since becoming knyaz that a man had called him without his title.

"He was impudent," said Boliliut. "I will demand an apology from him lest he permanently loses trading rights here."

"Don't you understand, treasurer?" asked Ludomir. "His insolence is a result of him not caring whether he trades here or not."

"Ludomir," said Nyklot. "He has been found guilty of breaking our tribal laws of hospitality already, am I correct?"

"Indeed."

"Then let us shrug off his current insolence and treat him as a defector. Burn his hut at dawn, while he is sleeping."

"It shall be so."

The horizon was a light blue when two peasant boys put flaming torches to the thatched roof of Thorkell's hut. They scattered several paces away in order to catch a glimpse of the Northman as he ran out screaming, but he never came out even as the flames and smoke engulfed the entire structure.

"No man would have slept through that without a scream, no matter how drunk."

They examined the ashes of the structure and found no evidence anything of value.

"Let's check the stable."

They walked over to the stable of the merchants' quarters and found that his stall was empty.

"He rode out a little while ago," said a sleepy voice from a shadowy corner. "He headed into the haunted forest, perhaps making his way north towards the sea to wait for his crew."

The two boys looked at one another.

"We will investigate," said the older boy, proudly.

They ran out towards the woods, but when they arrived they were afraid to enter.

"It is haunted with vampires!"

"If you go first I will follow you."

The boys unsheathed their knives and walked into the forest, brandishing blade and torch.

"It is Ludomir!"

"And a vampire has drunk his blood!"

They ran back to town as fast as they could.

Ludomir's pale corpse lay on its back with a surprised look on his face. He was holding the amber amulet with the lizard inclusion in his hand.

As the sun rose the war horns sounded and all of the community exited their huts, with vigilance and fear at the cautious blasts.

8.

Nyklot sat at his throne in the dining hall surrounded by his two sons, Boliliut, Yaroslav the elder, Ludomir's outstretched corpse, and the slain man's widow, Dabrawa.

"Prepare the funeral pyre," said Nyklot solemnly. "His body is to be translated at dawn."

"Aye," said Boliliut.

"Any sign of Boyan?"

"No, father," replied Pribislav. "None at all."

"Thorkell?"

"We assume that he rode north to a secret rendezvous with his crew of Gotlanders on the coast; all of his wares are gone."

Everyone looked to their feet. Finally Vratislav spoke.

"I knew darkness would befall us since last evening when Boyan made the spring sacrifices to assure the continuance of the seasons. There was an evil omen."

"What evil omen?"

"A monk, one of the bald-headed manikin's, let loose a small dove."

"It was a pigeon," said Pribislav. "It was meant to communicate to their high priest a confirmation that blood is spilled during our sacrifices."

"How did you know this?" asked Nyklot.

"I interviewed the monk when he arrived," replied Pribislav.

"And who did you tell this to?"

Pribislav scratched his head.

"Only a few people at the market. I found it rather humorous."

"Humorous?" asked Nyklot, squinting his eyes.

"Yes."

All of a sudden Nyklot's backhand flew towards Pribislav and landed on his lower lip. Pribislav stormed out of the room in a fury, blood flowing down his chin.

"Continue," said Nyklot.

"Then as the little bird flew into the sky, Boyan sent his hunting owl after it. The wings fluttered and it flew towards the pigeon, claws outstretched, and then all of a sudden an arrow laid it low. The owl dropped to the ground, dead."

"Indeed it is an evil sign," replied Nyklot. "Dark times are upon us. My heart has been telling me this since the snow melted."

"Whoever shot that arrow is the killer of Ludomir!" exclaimed Boliliut.

"But assuredly when a rumor is whispered in the market," replied Yaroslav. "It will be shouted aloud from here to Byzantium. And take into consideration the amount of skilled fowl hunters in our druzhina – the killer could be anyone."

"And your opinion, my son?" requested Nyklot.

"The peasants are afraid," replied Vratislav. "They believe that it was a vampire."

Everyone looked at the bloodless corpse.

"I always thought the man would meet his end in a raiding campaign or at least during a frontier skirmish," lamented Nyklot. "This is unbearable."

The widow burst into tears.

"And this?" asked Nyklot, holding up the polished amber piece with the lizard inclusion in it.

"Obviously an attempt to implicate our flamen," said Boliliut.

"And how did they get this?" he asked.

"The amber amulet was present during the ceremony last night. We will find out who took it from the flamen and who shot the arrow."

"Boyan was jealous of Ludomir's influence at your court, father."

"I don't suspect him," replied Nyklot. "It is unbefitting for a flamen to murder a tribal kinsman."

The widow stopped crying for a moment, and pulled at the hem of Nyklot's tunic.

"Knyaz," she said. "Kind Knyaz; there is something that I must tell you."

Just then Pribislav walked in again, lip puffy, interrupting the widow.

"Knyaz," he said. "The bald-headed manikin is here to see you."

"Maggots are never satiated," said Nyklot with contempt. "But I will not deny an appointment even during times of tragedy. Let that be a lesson to you, my sons."

Pribislav returned with Vizelin, who was followed by Bern. The monk looked timid and was carrying a large stone in his hands.

Vizelin stood before the throne of the knyaz, and bowed without kissing the hem of Nyklot's silk tunic.

"Knyaz Nyklot," he began. "Cordial greetings, I thank you, sir, for granting us humble servants of God a meeting, and I sincerely lament the tragedy that has occurred."

Nyklot held a stoic face. He gestured to Boliliut, who handed Vizelin a bag of spices and a bottle of wine.

"I thank you for your generosity, Knyaz. When I disperse these gifts among the poor flock of Christians here, I will be sure to mention your generosity to the believers, who in turn will pray for your soul."

Nyklot remained expressionless.

"I too, bring you a gift as well, Knyaz." He gestured for Bern to walk forward and display the hewn stone.

"Now I will talk to you," said Nyklot, with his eyebrow raised.

"My previous gifts of relics, and bibles were infinitely more precious but you kept silent in those times. I pray that you will genuinely receive my counsel now for the right reasons."

"Speak now, as I cannot promise that my attention will hold for long."

"Knyaz Nyklot, a noble knyaz such as yourself deserves the friendship of many other men that are of the same rank as yourself. There are many a knyaz in our kingdom that would love to feast with you, to exchange gifts with you, and to exchange daughters and sons in marriage, however they fear the Lord God too much to befriend you when you walk in a state of apostasy."

"I have enough friends already," replied Nyklot, who paused to eat a fig. "My table is always full of friends, including the knyaz of your lands, Adolph. He is my friend, and dines with me often."

Vizelin paused for a moment, and smiled.

"One can never have too many friends, Knyaz. Different friends give different gifts, and have different skills. Do you know the story of our Lord, and Savior Jesus Christ? Do you know how his servants administer the needs of his flock through different posts, as the Holy Spirit has given different skills to different believers?"

"I know all about the story of your impaled god, *Niemcy*. Perhaps if he had had a larger druzhina he wouldn't have been impaled in such a wretched manner. But in all honesty if I only had twelve men to fight besides me in war, I believe that I too, would have given up and submitted to the cruel dictates of your Roman Empire."

Vizelin appeared somewhat disturbed by the last comments.

"But I do like your proposals," said Nyklot. "For the first time in my life, *Niemcy*, I am tempted to bow to your God."

"It would be a most wise choice for you and for your people, Knyaz."

"I will be the judge of that."

"Will you consider accepting conversion, you and your druzhina?"

"I would under certain conditions – first of all it is our custom to burn the corpses of our departed so that they may be translated directly to paradise. We feel that Perun would not be pleased if we let the worms eat our children. Second, we wish to continue singing our songs as they are a part of us, our heritage and our very souls. If you grant us these concessions than you and your monks can sweep through here and build many stone cathedrals and castles."

Vizelin smiled as Nyklot spoke, and noted the concurrence in the body language of Yaroslav.

"Such concessions go against the spirit of Christ, whose Father deemed it wise that believers should dwell peacefully under the earth until the resurrection."

"And what of our songs?"

"Certainly songs should be sung to the glory of God, and not praising vile activities such as thievery, fornication, and idolatry."

"Our songs focus on our past victories, and on our ancestors," said Nyklot. "Surely there is nothing more pure and upright than a man praising his ancestors?"

Vizelin remained silent.

"Where are our ancestors, priest?" asked Nyklot with a raised eyebrow.

"They dwell not with the Lord God."

"And where do they dwell?"

Vizelin's eyes grew animated.

"In a lake of burning fire they dwell! For all eternity."

Nyklot looked around at his counselors, and his sons who all stood at his side.

"You can insult me, and you can insult our hospitality, *Niemcy*, but you cannot heap abuse on our beloved ancestors who sacrificed life and limb in order to give us our inheritance; thus are our ways! I shall kindly ask you to leave."

Vizelin smiled as he still had one more weapon in his arsenal. He gestured for Ludomir's widow to approach him. "Come, *Bozidara*."

Tears dropped from her eyes, and she slowly rose and walked towards the priest with her head lowered.

The counselors all looked at each other in confusion.

"The widow Bozidara is of our flock, Knyaz. As was her loving husband, a firm believer in Christ. We shall kindly ask that you permit us to bury him according to our custom; at dawn. We will gather to sing hymns, and to praise God as we bury the dearly departed."

The widow drew back to kiss Nyklot's hem, but he gestured for her to remain where she was.

"I was going to tell you, Knyaz; as was Ludomir. If you look back you will find that he wanted to steer you towards the faith, as you are

already a saintly person in deed towards your people. It was my husband's last wish that the Obodrites would convert and thus gain recognition among the nations of the world as equals! I have said all that I can say now I must go and prepare for his funeral. Goodbye."

Nyklot grew hot with indignation. "This is the real vampire in our community," he said as Vizelin was walking out with Bozidara and Bern.

Vizelin turned his head around and stopped, a cunning fire in his eye.

"Goodbye, Nyklot," he began. "I feel that we will meet again one day. I will pray for you; I will pray that you are baptized in this land amongst your own people, and *not in a faraway land among foreigners*. God bless you."

The three then left.

Nyklot face turned bright red, and he grinded his teeth.

"A joyless day indeed," he said.

Everyone fell silent.

"Must we bury such a fine warrior under the dirt?" asked Vratislav.

"We mustn't," responded Boliliut. "The people would not have it. Have you not heard of the ancient tales of what happens with a buried carcass?"

"No," replied Vratislav.

"Many of our peasants believe, son," began Nyklot. "That to bury someone in the earth is an improper burial as it retains the soul of a man here so that he is unable to cross the sea. They believe that he will grow into a restless demon that will feed on the blood of the living in order to maintain its odious existence."

"Our flamen himself tells such tales," said Pribislav. "I heard such a story at a bonfire gathering once out of his very mouth."

"Such is the fate of a dead man that is buried under the earth," began Yaroslav, stroking his bald head. "For a woman she is doomed to become a *Rusalki*, who seduces wonderers in the woods by dancing them to death, and when they are tired out she sucks the life out of them. Such a fate happened to an unhappy man many winters ago when I still had a full cropped head of blond hair. We found him lifeless and rotting in the woods with a sensuous smile on his face. The only remedy for such corpses is to drive an oaken stake through their hearts, and then to burn the corpses properly."

"We must cremate the corpse of Ludomir properly," said Nyklot, firmly. "This time of the season is no time to destroy the morale of our peasants who have much grain to sow."

Everyone nodded their heads in obedience.

"I must confess before you all that I am very disturbed by this revelation. I did not know of his faith, as I had assumed that he took his vows before Perun seriously."

"Men change," said Boliliut bluntly.

"Pribislav," said Nyklot, ignoring Boliliut. "Announce to the whole community that there will be a funeral pyre at sundown at Perun's grove, understood?"

"Aye," he said, and left the building.

Nyklot was silent for a moment, and then spoke after contemplating the situation.

"As for the murderer we will have to narrow it down: he is a fowl hunter, someone that can shoot. He does not kill with the spear so his personality is not of a distant nature; he is amiable, and likes to approach his enemies with a kiss. Such is a man that kills with a dagger. He is not afraid to venture into our haunted forests at night, despite the rumors of blood-sucking demons that live there."

He paused for a long moment.

"It could be a wide number of men," he continued. "Some of whom I don't even know. And the more I think, the more I realized that I am often not capable of recognizing a man's true nature when I want to love him, and when I want him to love me. Ludomir for example wanted our flamen dead."

"And now perhaps our flamen has exacted revenge on the one man that could kill him and also that could influence you to convert the people, thus destroying his powers," said Vratislav.

Nyklot paused for a long time.

"Perhaps," he said. "Vratislav, I am putting you in charge of the military training of our druzhina."

Vratislav bowed. "Shall I investigate our flamen?" he asked.

"Find out how his amber amulet got to Ludomir's corpse," he replied. "When you find out, report to me immediately. I am still not certain of the motivation of our murderer, but I do know one thing: these arrogant monks have reported back to their high-priests that not only do

we Obodrites drink blood, but that we drink the blood of men. They are gathering pretexts in order to destroy us!

"Gentlemen!" continued Nyklot. "We must sustain our spirits high, towering above the lowly like noble eagles! The only way to regain our spirit is war! We must raid the Jutland coasts in revenge for their slaving-raids that they have inflicted upon our women and our children. When the spring storms are over and the sky is blue we will strike Jutland coasts with our noble fleet. May Perun strengthen our hearts!"

The men burst into wild cheers.

"Now I must go, my son," said Vizelin to Bern. The church's fireplace was lit, and its embers illuminated the bare wooden walls. "Will you permit me to wash your feet?" he gently asked, arms outstretched.

Bern shed a tear. "It would not be appropriate," he replied.

"Nothing could be more appropriate."

"That is what I fear most."

"Do not fear, my son," said Vizelin as he removed Bern's straw sandals. "I assure you that glory awaits Christ and his servants in this life and the next. I lament that I sent for you so late."

The widow, Bozidara, handed Vizelin a wooden pail of water and he began to wash Bern's feet.

"Do you marvel that such fiery trials had awaited you?" asked Vizelin. Bern shook his head.

"You and I will be reunited, but now I must return to my other flock; the more fruitful flock, that is. It is there that I am most needed to deliver the Holy Spirit."

"To whom do you refer?" asked Bern.

"To the Holsatians, of course," he replied. "Our church is in Faldera. It is there that I go now. I have lifted them from heathenism to Christ, and they cannot endure in faith for long without guidance. My age is what bothers me most, my son. I am not young, and there is so much to accomplish yet."

"What am I to do here, father?"

"Bern, you are a son to me, and you always have been. I ask this of you only: to administer to the needs of the flock, to sing the *Kyrie eleison*, and to stay true to the Eternal Word whose truth shatters vain idols. There

is a war going on in heaven, my son. We are but God's messengers on this earth, and we must be faithful soldiers on earth as His angels are in heaven!"

"I will do as you say, father," replied Bern. "But who here is of our flock?"

"They will receive you this evening at the funeral. The hidden shall reveal themselves before all. The faithful shall show themselves and proclaim that they are witnesses to the Resurrection."

"How will you return?" asked Bern.

"Do you remember the boatman?"

"Yes."

"He is dead," replied Vizelin. "He died this morning. You are to bury him tomorrow next to the church. We will begin a graveyard here for the faithful. And I will return to our dear Holsatia with the deaf rower."

Bern made the sign for the cross and then was silent for a moment before speaking again. "Will the Obodrites convert?" he asked abruptly.

"I have been here for nine years, my son. I have very little to show for it. I do not even have a bishopric. Just trust that God's work will be done."

"How am I to learn this barbaric tongue?"

"Stay with the old lady, the one that sheltered you. Eat at her table and learn the language from her. Until then there will be many men who will speak to you in the Latin tongue, and our Christian faithful will always give you of their hearth and of their heart. Make friends in the marketplace, as well, for there are foreigners there who share our faith and our designs for the future."

"Who will feed me when I am hungry?"

"It is the custom here that the most generous is the most beloved. This opulent folk will fight each other in order to feed you. Have you not heard the legends of Wendish hospitality?" Vizelin laughed.

"You will learn much here, my son. I pray that we are reunited soon."

He finished washing Bern's feet. He then bid farewell to Bozidara and kissed Bern on the forehead.

"Father!" he paused for a long moment. "I have so many things that I want to speak with you about and so many things that I want to ask you that I do not understand."

"What would you ask me?"

There was a long pause.

"I don't remember."

"Peace be upon you, noble Christian. You are in my prayers always."

And with that Vizelin left.

"As you are in mine," whispered Bern.

After a moment of reflection, Bozidara took Bern by the hand, gesturing for him to come forward towards the fire. He followed her and when he came under the light near the embers he saw the corpse of Daso, who lay face up with his eyes open. Bern closed the eyes, and then looked to beyond where there was another wooden table, and a girl with blond hair was there, writhing unconsciously in a fever. It was the same girl that Bern had confronted in the woods before the idol.

"I know you," he said. "I saw you in the woods when I went for water."

Suddenly a man entered the church. He was tall, with cropped hair, and a full brown beard.

"Do you speak Latin?" he asked.

"I do," replied Bern.

"What are you called?"

"I am Bern of Bremen, a Saxon."

"I am Dmitri of Novgorod, I am the interpreter of the Obodrite king, but share none of his religious idolatry!"

"Do you follow the Latin Rite?"

"Far from it, monk; I am a Bogimilist," proclaimed Dmitri. "I worship God directly without any earthly intermediaries. Our prophets are all dead and our community is scattered."

"Who are your prophets?"

"Our last prophet was Basil. He was burned alive in Constantinople. I was but a boy then. I trust that we will have plenty of time to become acquainted and in such time I will tell you all there is to know about my faith and we will discuss many other things as well. It has been some time since I last used Latin. I have books as well. Do you read?"

"I read the Holy Scriptures, and I have also read Cicero, and Virgil."

"A good selection, may I add that you might enjoy Aristotle and Seneca?"

"You may," replied Bern, smiling.

"Bern, I believe that I have made a friend."

"An honor, sir."

"I will leave as there is much commotion in the marketplace today. Many rumors and fears because of the death of the warrior, Ludomir. People are shutting their purses and not parting with their silver."

"Will you attend the funeral tonight?"

"I will."

"Will they really burn him?"

Dmitri smiled. "Yes," he said. "They really will."

"Will you ask this kind widow if she intends to stop it?"

Dmitri spoke to her in her language.

"She says she will beg for the corpse of the dearly departed, 'her and her fellow believers.'"

"Indeed," replied Bern with a fearful feeling in his stomach. "May I ask you one more question?"

"Of course, my friend."

"Who is this feverish girl?"

"She was a captured girl from the coast. A Northman brought her here. She was to be a slave, but the lady rejected her after finding out that it was not her own daughter."

"This particular Northman took many young girls from the coasts of our lands, including, some say, the daughter of that particular woman. She almost believed that this was her daughter, as she was delusional but when she came to and realized that it was not her real daughter, she rejected her. This church took her in shortly thereafter."

"I have seen her before."

"And where have you seen her before?"

"Maybe on my journey here, or maybe only in a dream."

Dmitri laughed.

"Or perhaps both?"

He continued to laugh and then bid farewell to Bern.

Bern bid farewell to Dmitri and hoped that he would see him again. Afterwards he bid that Bozidara join him in singing the *Kyrie eleison*.

Nyklot stood over his wife, Beleknegini. Her long blond strands of hair whirled over a lynx pelt as she lay gently resting. She awoke to her husband's intense gaze.

"Am I worthy of love?" he asked.

She suddenly became frightful as she was unaccustomed to hearing her husband speak like this.

"Of course you are," she said and hugged him. "I love you."

"And the people? Do they love me?"

"Our people love you and would go to death with you, Knyaz."

"Do you know what happened?"

"I do," she said. "I know everything."

"Word travels very quickly around here. I sometimes think that I am the last to know everything that there is to be known."

"You know me, my husband, my love. I entertain the wives of the druzhina, and you should know that we are a gossipy bunch."

"He betrayed me," said Nyklot, and bit his knuckles in rage, thinking of Ludomir with contempt.

"He did not, Knyaz," she said and hugged him. "He only did what his conscience told him was the best for the people. He knows that he who is of the wormy faith cannot be transgressed upon without a fine excuse according to their church, but that we Obodrites with our ancient ways are fair game to all comers. He was a military man. He was thinking strategically."

"And his wife?"

"She will have no company with our band of druzhina-wives, I assure you."

"What is your opinion of her conversion?"

"It is a simple matter: she is afraid to go to the funeral pyre with her husband."

"It is not a mandatory custom."

"But an expected one, especially from the wife of our military commander."

"Indeed," said Nyklot. "And now I am without a right hand to execute my rulings. I have put Vratislav in charge of military command for the time being, but if offense comes, or tribute collection I will need someone from afar to execute justice, lest corruption and favoritism arise."

"You are wise, Knyaz. I admire you, and love you, just as the flame in our kiln burns throughout the years without cessation so is my love for you."

"Will you go to the funeral pyre with me?"

"I will my Knyaz," she said, and they embraced.

"I have several thousand farmers and fishermen out there that need to believe in me. Our silver hoard is not as full as it should be, and we need a bountiful harvest this year. I must not let fear destroy morale!"

"The common people already fear," she replied. "They fear that there are vampires loose in the forbidden woods. They fear because the lead warrior was bled dry and nobody knows who did it. Everyone fears that if it could happen to him, it could happen to them."

"This is dreadful," replied Nyklot. "Our peasants believe many things, most of all they believe in what I tell them to believe through my agents. How easy it can be turned against me!"

"Why do they fear vampires?"

"They fear vampires because they should fear being buried in the earth. A vampire comes about because his corpse is not burned, and he is cursed to walk the earth in eternal loneliness."

"Do you believe in vampires?" she asked, smiling.

"I do," he replied.

"The vampires are the confounded silk-sellers that drain my treasury in order so that I can adorn you with the finest Greek fashions of the day."

Beleknegini laughed.

"Do not fear, my Knyaz," she said. "Let us go to the sauna, and I will bathe you, and perhaps thus I will help make another strong son with you."

That evening they left the embers burning in their kiln.

9.

Nyklot approached the pyre, on which laid the stretched out corpse. His two sons followed him, as did a multitude of mounted warriors and walking peasants.

"Svarog abandoned us, my boys," he said. "He created the World Tree, and then said to his sons Redigast, Perun, Volos and Swantovit 'I retire from active affairs in the world. Here is the Eternal Oak Tree that separates heaven from earth!' and thus the earth trembled as he spoke. 'Take care of it, as you dwell in the upper columns, and make sure that you take care of the children that walk on the earth for they are all blood-drinking vampires at heart.'"

"And if we are vampires, what are the gods?" asked Pribislav. "Be it that we try our hardest to emulate them."

"The gods are not vampires because they do not *need* blood," replied Nyklot. "But they revel in it anyway."

He kicked his horse and rode forward towards the statue of Perun. When he arrived he saw rows of standing men and women before the statue, and before a large pyre where Boliliut stood with a large torch in his hand. The corpse of Ludomir was lain out across the pyre. He was dressed in linen tunic, hair combed down the middle, and a candle in his hands.

The people sang the death song:

"The eternal flames
Are roused to the noble funeral pyre
O noble kinsman, you depart us from the earth!
We bow to you nobleman
We bow to your works that you did
Evermore caring for your kin!
May Perun greet you as a friend
Across the sea
May he greet you with goblet in hand.
Go, noble clansman
Go to be with the ancestors!
We mourn you forevermore
From your ashes will grow the future
Of the folk
Goodbye, noble kinsmen
We will greet you again in good time!"

Nyklot approached Boliliut on the pyre, and they embraced before the entire community.

"Boliliut, you are my supreme council now," said Nyklot. "You have been the treasurer since my father's times and served him as you serve me; faithfully and with refined counsel."

"I thank you, Knyaz, for your faith in me."

"Where is our Flamen, Boliliut?" asked Nyklot curiously.

"He is nowhere to be found," replied the treasurer. "We dispatched two mounted warriors to his hut in the woods. He was not there, nor do we know his whereabouts."

"Hmmm," said Nyklot. "He is humiliated as he has been demoted since the times of my father, and now he has had his owl killed in front of all, and is constantly defied by the Christian missionaries."

"His absence has only strengthened his position, though," said Boliliut. "It is the peasants belief, as you know, that a flamen can shape-shift into many creatures; an owl, a wolf, a bear, and a trout. They believe that he is ever here with us to protect us from the vampires that are hounding our community."

"Do the peasants fear?" asked Nyklot.

"They do."

"Then perhaps it would be wise of me to reinstate our flamen amongst our counsel. After all it was my father, a traitor to his people, that outcast him because he follows our ancient folk religion. Certainly by staying true to his calling he has been an exemplary Obodrite."

"And would it not be a perverse example to allow a murder suspect to be rewarded on the eve of murder?" asked Boliliut, looking agitated.

"It all depends on who is murdered," replied Nyklot. "Boyan is a shadowy manipulator of public events, he is self-willed and conceited, but he has never once betrayed me, and he has never once betrayed his kin, unlike the dead man that lies before you right now."

"I beg you to reconsider, Knyaz," replied Boliliut. "If I may say so, your judgment is skewed, as you are distressed because of the revelation that Ludomir desired the conversion of our people. However, consider that he also never betrayed you, and only guided you as he felt was right for our people."

Nyklot looked around and smiled, puffing out his chest proudly.

"We must not argue here, Boliliut," he said. "Smile now and we will have it out later when we are alone."

Boliliut nodded his head and bowed.

As the community sang, people approached the corpse to say their final words. When nobody else came, Nyklot took the torch, and put it towards the pyre, when all of a sudden there was a commotion in the crowd.

Bozidara walked towards Nyklot with her arms outstretched. Bern followed her.

"Knyaz!" she exclaimed, crying. "Must you burn my husband? It would not be his wish for you to do so. I beg you to let me *bury* him."

She looked around and all of a sudden several people walked behind her: a few slaves, children, and widows.

The whole community shouted heaps of insults upon the Christians.

Nyklot ignored her and waxed stoic. He then set fire to the pyre and then people continued to sing, however, Bern, Bozidara and the others that joined him sang the *Kyrie eleison*, disrupting the harmony of the music.

Nyklot laughed at them and then turned to Boliliut.

"Now I am inclined to reinstate Boyan even if he did kill this rodent. I have an insatiable rage in me at this moment, and I cannot long endure it."

"Endure it, Knyaz," reprimanded Boliliut. "Slay this vile scum, and you are but inviting the dam to break open a wave that will destroy us all."

"I have not freedom, Boliliut. I only have slavery if I must endure this wretched sight with a cold face!"

As the flames rose throughout the pyre, the flesh popped and fizzled, and the two songs continued in discordance.

Nyklot looked around him, contemplatively.

"I finally understand the strength of their god," he said. "He loves not just the strong, but everybody; the weak, the blind, the poor, the disfigured."

"Besides," said Boliliut. "He is One! Our gods are many. If we could succeed in reviving the worship of Perun we could expand our power over all of the tribes and be a force in our lands, uniting Obodrite with Polabian, Wagrian, Rugian, and Pomeranian."

"Perun and not Swantovit? Isn't Swantovit's oracles sought so much more often by all of the various tribes of the Baltic?"

"It's true, Knyaz. Swantovit's oracles have yielded more truth than that of Perun's, but count that a blessing for you, Knyaz. Very few folk come from abroad to visit Perun, and thus his treasury is nil, whereas in Arkona, where Swantovit's statue lies, the knyaz is knyaz in name only; the flamen controls the treasury, and hence the druzhina."

"We have very few options, Boliliut."

"If I may say so, Knyaz; lead by example. A strong knyaz will be loved and followed by his kin. A weak one will destroy the morale of a people and bring them to oblivion."

"Should we reinstate Boyan to counsel?"

"Let him loose, but claim no authority over his actions. If he attacks the monks and Christians we must not have connections to him, at least so we can be innocent in the eyes of the Pomeranians who understand our plight and would perhaps still come to our aid if our enemies transgressed upon us."

"It shall be so, Boliliut. I breathe more easily. I must reward you for your counsel, for it is wise."

Boliliut bowed deeply.

Bern was astonished with himself that he had led choir in front of a multitude of apostate barbarians. Furthermore he thoroughly enjoyed it. Bozidara admired him, and he her, outcasts together.

Beleknegini refused to acknowledge her presence, and other druzhina-wives followed her lead. The next morning she began to teach him basic words with body language, and discovered that Bern was enthusiastic to receive her instruction. A strong bond grew between them, although Bern was less than half her age.

The young girl was still feverish, and several of the church members brought her fresh linen, and warm blankets. Bern constantly looked after her as she dazed in and out of conscience.

"We must bury the body," he said in Latin, gesturing towards a shovel that stood in the corner. They dragged him outside of the side of the church where there was a plot of tall grass that would serve as a cemetery. Bern began to dig, and the passer-byes in wagons and on foot all stopped to watch for a moment as they passed on the road in front of the church.

After several minutes of digging Bern heard the trotting of a horse, and a shadow enveloped him as the horse neighed. He looked up and saw Pribislav.

"How goes it, monk?" he asked.

"I am well. And yourself?"

Pribislav did not reply but dismounted from the horse and lowered himself to inspect the grave.

"You are making a hole for the corpse?" he asked.

"Yes, I am."

"Before you do so may I have a word with you?"

"Indeed."

"Come, let us walk together."

They walked towards the marketplace where there was much music and commotion.

"We are a superstitious lot, dear monk," said Pribislav. "The peasants will not take kindly to you putting a dead body in a hole in the ground. Such things are not done here."

"Is it because they believe that the body will turn into a vampire?"

"It is precisely for that reason."

"Good sir, I am a Christian monk, and I must obey my God and his commandments. I desire no one harm. Would you kindly tell the gentle folk that the body will not turn into a vampire?"

Pribislav laughed.

"Oh, if only it were so simple," he said. "Our flamens create such legends, monk, and they do so for a reason. Nyklot's counsel, however, me included, I assure you is a civilized folk; we hear histories, and tales of ancient lands, we understand the customs of various tribes, and some of us even speak different languages."

"How did you learn Latin so well, sir?"

"My grandfather was a Christian, mind you. There were once many monks in our land. It was my father that harassed the monks out of this land. It was your teacher that was the most relentless. He stayed here, coming and going, even after my grandfather died. But not much fruit has been harvested for your hurch as you can see."

"We have very few followers, I see."

"When will your teacher return?" asked Pribislav with a raised eyebrow.

"In all truth I couldn't say," replied Bern.

"Monk," said Pribislav, putting his hand on Bern's shoulder. "I go now. Will you heed my advice?"

"I must bury the corpse in the earth so that he will be whole come the resurrection. It is something that I am obliged to do."

"Indeed," replied Pribislav. "I have no desire to harm you, monk. I enjoy your rapport; however I cannot protect you against a mob. Many generations have passed in our lands and many monks have been put in holes under the earth because they aroused the anger of the flamens. It is

my duty to see that this doesn't happen. Make sure that you ponder my words."

"I will ponder them," replied Bern. "And I thank you for your advice, however, when I go the way of all flesh I am prepared to earn a martyr's laurels if need be."

Pribislav smiled, and turned into the crowd in the market and greeting a large crowd there that was gathered around, throwing dice and gambling silver coins.

Bern turned around and went back to the church to continue digging.

Bozidara made a small cross out of two pieces of pine and a wicker rope. It lay on the fresh grave until nightfall, arousing the comments of those that passed by on the dirt road.

At night Bozidara and the other Christians went back to their parents' huts, mostly in the peasants' quarter. Only Bern and the sick girl remained, who writhed in and out of conscience. Bern tried not to look at her when she was asleep, although he did intermittently out of the corner of his eye.

Is it you? He thought. Are you the one that I saw in the woods?

He looked up at the ceiling, and then at the embers of the stone oven, and then at the sunken floor structure of the hut. It had been made by Wendish hands, he thought. Nothing was similar to home here. No gardens, no books, no masonry or cobblestone. There were no boundaries, no order: forest encroached on the town, and the town encroached on the beach. He suddenly felt lonely. Was he really prepared to earn a martyr's laurels? He lay awake, pondering.

Boyan approached the freshly dug grave, torch in hand. A group of a dozen peasants followed him, carrying shovels.

"Dig it up," he said, and they began to dig.

When they exhumed the corpse, Boyan lifted it up, and wiped away the dirt from the face.

"Look," he said to his followers. "The hair and nails still grow!"

The peasants gasped in horror.

"He will walk again at the full moon, and take the blood of cattle, and of children. This we cannot have."

Just then Boyan lifted up his head, and saw Bern standing in the sunken doorway of the church, sneering at him.

"Give me a blade," he said to one of them, who handed him a long sickle. He never took his eyes off of Bern's, and smiled as the monk's expression became more fearful. He dropped to his knees and began to decapitate the corpse. He then stood with the head in his hands as the peasants dragged off the bodies with torches in hand.

Bern ran inside the church, dropped to his knees and began to pray fervently. The girl was writhing and yelling in her sleep and tore off her tunic. A beam of moonlight peaked in through a crack in the ceiling, and he caught a glimpse of her naked body.

"Lord, give me strength!" he gasped. He looked through a crack in the walls and saw that the flamen still stood there, head in his hand, and sickle in the other.

Bern ran to a corner, and covered himself with his cowl. He grasped his rosary and prayed ardently.

"Lord, give me strength!" he repeated. "Take me from this vile place of barbarity!"

He remained in the dark corner the whole night, clutching his rosary.

Part Two

The Conquest of Wendland 1142, 1143 A.D.

1.

Entering the haunted forest, a hooded being approached a female. A narrow moonlight beam penetrated the forest ceiling, revealing a beautiful woman wearing nothing but torn rags, sprawled out on a moss-padded log, next to a sparkling creek.

"Hello, my vampire," she said and kissed him passionately. Her rags fell to the ground.

"Hello, my tender *rusalka*," replied the hooded visitor. "How I missed your loving kiss."

"I want to be all yours," she said. "I don't know myself, and I don't understand this world, but I am a mysterious water-sprite, a seducer of highwaymen, yet I am gentle, pure, and beautiful. Am I not?"

"So you are, my love," said the visitor.

"I want to be yours."

"So you shall be."

"My wise love," she said. "Will you tell me about my old mortal self? Will you tell me of the human woman that I descended from?"

"I will, my beautiful *rusalka*," he replied. "And then I will drink your blood, and you mine, and our souls will be bound for eternity."

"Oh, my love," she exclaimed passionately. "How I long for love! How I long for eternity!"

"It will come, my beautiful fluttering butterfly."

"Tell me now, master of the forest; tell me of my ascent as your bride."

"I will indeed tell you your tale," he began. "You were outcast from your tribe of coastal Wagrian tribe, for bearing a child of the Niemcy. You were married, and when the Niemcy had ravaged you during a cattle raid, you prudently refused to tell your husband for fear that he would seek revenge on your honor and destroy himself in the process."

"Oh, it is terrible indeed!" she cried and grasped the man, squeezing him with all of her strength. He stroked her long blond strands of hair.

"But when you gave birth to an auburn-headed son, well, fathers can recognize their own children. He questioned you and finally you told him, and when you told him, he birched you within a thread of your life."

The girl began to cry intensely.

"He accused you of infidelity, and you were shamed amongst your kin, but that is not all..."

"Do not continue, my love," she cried. "For my old life was worse than death."

"I will continue, my tender little parsnip," said the man. "For thus you will understand the true purpose of your existence, and you will reach final destination of eternity and peace after this torrential road of blind sufferings. The truth is that you *permitted* the enemy to ravage you..."

She wiped away her tears, and listened intently, with a slight smirk.

"Thus for a few weeks after banishment and separation from your child and kin, you walked along the coast in torn linen. You fished for little perch in the tributaries and bathed in the rivers, until one day you saw a longboat yonder. You knew that you were supposed to flee into the interior when you saw this longboat approaching you, but you gave up caring about your fate, and so felt inclined to be swept far away."

Her sobbing lightened to intermittent snivels as she caught her breath.

"The sailors ravaged you, and you didn't care, but permitted them. And finally they brought you to this place in the market, and after ravaging you in public did the leader leave you for dead, where you finally found yourself in the church. Then I whispered to you from the forest, to return where you belong, and turned you into a rusalka by drinking your blood, and removing the ancient stain that had befallen you as a mortal."

She clutched him as hard as she could.

"The Northman who ravaged you maintains a post on the coast of this sea, less than a day's journey from here," he said, stroking her hair.

"He still can come and visit through these very forests, in order to check the bulwarks of the Obodrites."

"All around us there is darkness," she said, hopelessly.

"Not in a heart that has love," replied the visitor.

"Do you love me?"

"I love you, and cherish you as my queen, the queen of the forest."

"Men have told me they loved me for a moment," she said. "And then kicked me into the mud."

"Let my deeds speak for me," he replied.

"I will, my love. You have resuscitated me, and revived my spirit as a new being."

They kissed passionately.

"How did you know about my old self?" she asked.

"I talked with you before you died, and were reborn, plus as a shape-shifter I knew you even before you entered into this realm. I will take care of you," he continued. "We are creatures of the forest, you and me, not creatures of the valley. Those being come and go, and dig and plow, but we stay and lurk, and then we grow again over their remains."

"I wish to be the Queen of the Forest," she said. "Your inner light makes you a prince of the earth."

"You will be my queen after this evening," he said. "And you will live forever as my love."

"I desire nothing less," she said and gazed into the eyes of the stranger. "I must be cleansed of all that I have suffered through."

"Then you must fulfill your duties as a rusalka. You must seduce highwaymen that wonder into your realm, and you must dance them to death. Can you do this?"

"Yes," she said giggling.

"Good," said the visitor. "I will tell you when it is necessary, and when it is not. Until then accept my blood as a token of our love."

He unsheathed a blade, and lifting his cloak, cut himself under the chest. A drop of blood trickled down his ribs. The woman's eyes lit up in an unknown intensity as she guzzled the blood.

"Drink, my love, drink. Such is the ancient way of the eternal forest spirits."

They made love in a dark spell of misery and girl felt that she was a whole new creature, cleansed of her former life, reborn in the blood of a powerful forest demon.

2.

At dawn a pram crept into the Veligrad harbor. Four men rowed, and the standing warrior in the back hoisted the fluttering Pomeranian fleet flag; an image of St. Adalbert, the Northern Martyr.

The watchtower guard observed that the man was of abnormally large size and strength, and was fully adorned in mail shirt, and a standard fluted, war helmet with a small visor and a chained coif. His broadsword hung at his side, and the mail rings draped over his dangling leather belt.

The ship moored in the harbor, and the warrior jumped out with a sack of his belongings. The ship then sailed off without a goodbye from its passengers.

"Who are you, and what is your business in Veligrad?" asked the guardsman, who stepped back upon seeing the size of the newcomer was almost two heads taller than he.

"I am Sobieslav of Wollin!" proclaimed the stranger, smiling, with a deep, drawling voice. "I am the nephew of Knyaz Nyklot. He has called for me."

"Follow me to the stronghold."

Nyklot was musing over the recent murder, eating apples and pears when the deer pelt lifted over the doorway and the guardsman entered.

"Knyaz," he said, bowing. "A man named Sobieslav of Wollin is here. He claims to be your nephew."

Nyklot gave a look of excitement. "Prepare the bread and salt," he said. The guardsman did so, and then exited the building.

Sobieslav bent at the knees to enter through the doorway. Nyklot rose from his throne and greeted his nephew with kisses on the cheeks.

"You are as big as an oak, nephew, and strong as an auroch," said Nyklot affectionately. "Come and sit with me."

They sat at the table where there was bread and salt waiting for Sobieslav. Nyklot carried over the wooden bowl filled with fruit.

"Was the journey long?" he asked.

"We began at sunrise, and now we are here. Of course they were fishermen that brought me here and not druzhina-brothers, so they stopped several times in order to net herring."

Nyklot laughed hardily. "Fishermen from Wollin?" he inquired.

"We have them," replied Sobieslav. "We are not *all* bee-keepers."

"Such is what we think, eh? Of course you are not," Nyklot paused for a moment as Sobieslav tore into his food. In Veligrad it was assumed that all Pomeranians were bee-keepers as it was the principle trade of their community. "How is your mother?" he asked.

"Your sister, my mother is well," he replied. "She sends her regards, and wishes to tell you that she will come and visit you one of these days."

"And why do you come alone, then?" asked Nyklot. "

"I assure you, Knyaz, that I am not in agreement with our sad state of affairs. The flamens have been outcast to the woods, and our druzhina sings songs to the impaled god of the Niemcy. We fight skirmishes with the Poles every day, and the monks sit around and chant, and when they are not chanting they are chastising the common people for not following their rules."

"And your knyaz, Ratibor, permits this, does he?"

"He accepts it," replied Sobieslav. "We need a powerful friend nowadays, as the Poles are constantly trying to destroy our market, which competes with theirs, situated at the mouth of the Vistula River."

"So now that your tribe is filled with these infectious monks what do they say of us Obodrites?"

Sobieslav lowered his head. "They say that we are to have no contact with you as long as you remain in apostasy. We are not to trade with you anymore. This edict came only two years ago."

"Curse these vile monks!" said Nyklot, slamming his fist against the table. "They separate brother from brother, father from son, and create a perverse step-family of unnatural filth with them at the head of the table. It is intolerable!"

"Many of us share your sentiments, Knyaz."

"And why are you here then, nephew, with us apostates?"

"I am here because I know that you have a vacancy for your druzhina-leader. There is no man in the Baltic that will fill this post with more might and honor than I!"

"You speak proudly, young man. What makes you think that I would assign you such a place of duty?"

"Because on one hand, in order to execute your justice, Knyaz, you need someone that does not have longstanding ties to this community so that he will not be partial in executing punishment and collecting tribute. On the other hand, you need someone that you can trust, someone that is of your own blood, and I am that man. I am an experienced war-leader. I have designed many campaigns against Poles and Baltic pirates. I am the man that you are looking for, Knyaz."

"And if you die in a campaign, nephew, shall I put you in an earthen hole and erect a wooden cross over it?" asked Nyklot, eyebrow raised.

"That would be my last desire of all things, Knyaz. I would wish for you to put me to the pyre so that I would meet our grandfathers."

Nyklot looked at his nephew with scrutinizing eyes. "I agree that you have many attributes that I find desirable. I would definitely accept you into my druzhina, and give you a fine horse, and a fine wife, as well as your portion of war spoils. However, in order to lead you must gain the trust of the druzhina. They respect strength and courage. This is something that you must prove to them and to me."

"I am prepared to do so, Knyaz."

"How many winters have you undergone?" asked Nyklot.

"I have lived through 22 winters."

"Do you have a wife and children yet?"

"Not yet, Knyaz."

"This is not good, nephew. By your age you must have a wife and child, and as you are such a strong warrior, the mothers of young maidens will send their daughters into your hut before battles. This practice is best avoided as it leads to confusion and ill-will between young tribesmen. Tomorrow I would swear you into our tribe, and into our druzhina before Perun. Do you have a good sword?"

"Saxon steel," he replied. "The best."

"And a steed?"

"That I did not bring with me, but sold it for a pouchful of denars before I came here by boat."

"You are very sure of yourself, nephew," said Nyklot, folding his hands. "Make sure that when you find a young maiden that suits you to tell me, and I will approach her father and mother so that you may throw silver over her head and claim her for yourself."

"Thank you, Knyaz," replied Sobieslav, lowering his head.

"Tomorrow, during the day you will challenge our current champion to a duel with staves and wooden shields. If you are victorious I will allow you to lead an expedition against a band of Northmen, encamped beyond the mouth of the Trave River. After that, if the men agree in your favor then you will be our new military commander and tribal executioner. Does this prospect suit you, nephew?"

"Indeed, Knyaz," said Sobieslav, bowing his head low. "I am honored by your trust in me."

"You will sleep on our top floor tonight of my home. Tonight you, me and my wife will sip mead and recall old times."

"How is Beleknegini?"

"She rides her horse, hunts boar, and drinks with us at feasts. A mighty lynx of a woman she is, who has given me four sons, two of which died in childhood, and the other two which grew to be fine warriors. They are almost your age; do you know Vratislav and Pribislav?"

"I shall very much like to get to know my cousins," replied Sobieslav.

"You will tomorrow," Nyklot assured him, and continued eating apples.

The next morning Sobieslav rose at dawn. First he and his uncle bathed in the sauna. He shaved Nyklot with his favorite razor. Then he walked to the training field of the druzhina with Nyklot by his side, towering on horseback. There was an open meadow for training tactics with scarecrows, and wooden logs. Sobieslav carried a bundle of spears, staves and axes.

"The cocks have crowed, and my men are not yet training," said Nyklot with consternation. "Summer is approaching, and we have not led a single raid this year. Last summer we raided Jutland and carried back bags full of silver, slaves, and swords which I distributed to the druzhina. I sense no hunger amongst this lot."

"It is lack of leadership," said Sobieslav.

"It is my son that is charge of them, acting as a surrogate commander at the moment," replied Nyklot with his arms folded.

"Forgive my rashness," replied Sobieslav, bowing.

"Let's see what you can do, nephew," replied Nyklot. "I trust by your strength that you do not lack fundamentals."

"Knyaz," replied Sobieslav. "Every morning I wake to chop wood, throw my spear, and row my canoe against the current."

"And here in Veligrad every warrior supplies the fodder for his own horse. This will take you a good portion of the day when you are idle and not war-training."

"In Wollin we have the monks do that!"

"So they do have their advantages!"

Sobieslav grasped a spear and threw it at a young birth tree several paces away. It penetrated the dead center of the trunk. He threw three more in a row, and they all landed slightly lower than the last.

"Now the hand-axes," said Nyklot, handing him a bundle of axes. Sobieslav threw four axes, one after the other, and they all landed squarely in the small birch tree. He then gazed at the western forest.

"What is behind this forest, Knyaz?" he asked.

"This forest is the only barrier that we have with the Niemcy. However there are woodsmen, the Wagrians that live side by side the worst of the Niemcy. They slaughter the other side one day, and sing songs together the next day. Neither can be trusted, despite the fact that the Wagrians are our kin."

"Such are the Pomeranians and Poles; I have led many skirmishes against them; they are hungry for our lands, and our ports."

"Such hungry in the hearts of men in insatiable," replied Nyklot. Just then a large troop of horsemen rode up, led by Vratislav.

"Now we will see what you can do at close quarter," said Nyklot.

"Knyaz," said Vratislav, bowing.

"You arrive late, son," said Nyklot. "This does not please me. Where is your brother?"

"He is planting booby-traps in the haunted forest, and practicing cavalry maneuvers with his troops."

"He forgets the fundamentals," replied Nyklot. "First a warrior must chop down trees and throw the spear, then he must hunt boar, and only then will he be fit enough to make war with men. Such is the natural way of things."

Vratislav bowed.

"This is Sobieslav of Wollin," said Nyklot with his arm outstretched. "He wears his mail-shirt even when he cultivates honey."

The troop laughed aloud while Vratislav unmounted. The two cousins embraced, and exchanged a few words, and then Vratislav began to lead his troop in cavalry maneuvers. They tossed spears to one another, from the front rider to the back, and then the latter threw the spears into a tree from horseback, all landing on target.

"Are you impressed?" asked Nyklot.

"They do not lack ability," replied Sobieslav. "But I can do better. Who is the present battle champion?"

"Casimir the Bucktooth; he is strong but has not the stomach to execute justice. He has never impaled a man, and once when I commanded him to blind a thief he shook violently before doing the job, and afterwards he vomited."

"I will make quick work of such a man. Please lead me to the dueling ground."

Sobieslav drew a large circle in the ground with a hand-axe. This aroused the ire of the druzhina, who recognized its bellicose implication. They encircled the line and unmounted their horses. The Pomeranian grabbed a long yew-hewn stave and a wooden shield. "I call forth Casimir the Bucktooth," he proclaimed. "I request a duel."

A man approached him amidst the crowd. He was as tall as Sobieslav, but not as brawny. He had dark cropped hair and a long beard. His teeth were indeed bucked, and his countenance was mean but not quite fierce.

"Do you challenge me to a duel in bee-keeping, foreigner?" asked a grinning Casimir, and the men laughed.

"I have cultivated bees in my day," said Sobieslav, "but my word cultivates death for the weak, and that is what I have to offer you, weakling."

Casimir's smile turned sour. He unhinged the spiral-brooch from his cloak, grabbed a stave and shield from a druzhina-brother, and entered the circle. Sobieslav removed his mail-shirt to match his opponent who wore none. There were loud shouts, egging them on for a good scuffle.

The fight began. Casimir attacked Sobieslav wildly, slashing his stave fiercely as he lunged forward. Every thrust was side-stepped by Sobieslav, who parried the blows, and measured the timing of his opponent. The crowd cheered.

After four lunges Casimir slowed a bit, and when he cocked back his weapon for a huge blow, Sobieslav's stave met his forehead with equal ferocity, and he fell to the ground, not showing any signs of life. Sobieslav threw down his stave, and walked to a corner. There was absolute silence.

Vratislav went to check Casimir. "He is dead," he said.

"We will translate him across the sea at sundown," said Nyklot. He then commanded two men to tell the family of Casimir, and another two to prepare the pyre before the statue of Perun.

Nyklot entered the circle. "My beloved družhina! This is my nephew, Sobieslav. He will lead you this season against the Northmen! I ask that you respect him as you would me."

Sobieslav walked towards the birch tree to retrieve the weapons. As he removed the axes he heard several mounted men speaking.

"He is nothing but a bee-keeper, and he is to lead us against the Northmen?"

Sobieslav felt that all eyes were on him. He bent his knees and clutched the gnarled trunk with his two huge hands, and grunted as he pulled at the tree.

All of the men stared at him curiously as Nyklot smiled.

Sobieslav's face turned crimson, and the roots began to come undone as he swayed back and forth. Finally the roots unhinged from the earth and he slammed the birch over his shoulder as a suplex movement.

There was silence and disbelief amidst the družhina, until finally one man spoke.

"He is like a flood!" he said, and the men laughed. After that Sobieslav earned the appellation 'The Flood,' as he was an uprooter of trees. By evening his deed was known by everyone in Veligrad, and by the end of the summer his reputation would be known and feared by all of the various tribes that traversed the Baltic waters.

That evening, Nyklot rode out to the statue of Perun, followed by Boliliut, Pribislav, Vratislav, Sobieslav, and a dozen other warriors.

They arrived to many hearth-fires lit in the oak grove around the statue. Boyan was standing there with a torch in his hand, and his amber amulet with the lizard excursion in the other. A hooded acolyte stood at his side. They approached the grove and dismounted.

"This is our flamen, Boyan," said Boliliut to Sobieslav, who bowed low. Boyan led Sobieslav to the statue.

"This is Perun," he drawled. "This is the god of the mighty thunder-bolt, our powerful Knyaz in the heavens that guides his children, the sons of Lech, on this earth. He speaks through me, and tells me that your heart is right, and that you will make a noble družhina-commander if you obey him. Will you obey him?"

"I will," said Sobieslav, bowing low.

"And will you obey your knyaz, the knyaz of the Obodrites, the wise Nyklot, until your dying breath?"

Sobieslav nodded.

"And if need be, will you die fighting and protecting Veligrad from any and every enemy that breathes air and that writhes in the bushes?"

"I will," said Sobieslav.

"And will you make a sacred compact of blood and hair with me, the flamen of the Obodrites? Will you do this before your knyaz, and before these druzhina brothers?"

"I will."

Boyan handed the torch and staff to his acolyte. He removed a blade from his belt and cut off a strand of his long hair. He then cut the palm of his hand, and put the hair in his hand which dripped blood. Sobieslav removed his knife and did the same. The two then joined hands, and blood fell down to the ground.

"May you rot in the eternal damp netherworld of cowards and foreigners if you betray your oaths that you made here," proclaimed a fierce-looking Boyan.

"Aye," said Sobieslav, looking Boyan in the eye, intensely.

Boyan removed his hand. "Bow before Perun."

Sobieslav lowered his knees and bowed before the four-sided statue.

"Now bow to your knyaz," said Boyan.

He turned and bowed to Nyklot.

"Good," said Boyan. "You will make a fine member of our druzhina. Now you are one of us."

Everyone present embraced him one at a time.

"Tonight you will sleep on our second floor again, nephew. Tomorrow your cousins and druzhina-brothers will help erect a pine hut in the druzhinas' quarters. Does this please you?"

"It does," replied Sobieslav.

They returned to town.

"Tomorrow, nephew, I will fetch you a steed. And remember that I request that you find a wife soon," said Nyklot.

"I will, Knyaz."

"From now on you will lead a troop of 25 warriors. I will observe you, and if your actions please me I will have you lead your men in coastal

raids before the next full moon, and then if you are agreeable to the men, they will cast votes for you to see if you will become the new družhina-commander.

"Thank you, knyaz," he said, bowing low.

They then returned home to the glowing embers of their hearth fires.

3.

Sobieslav's command was brutal and unforgiving, but inspired loyalty in his men. He roused his troop at dawn every day, to chop wood until the sun grew oppressive, and then threw their spears into the birch trees five hundred times a piece. Afterwards they practiced cavalry movements, and swordplay until noon, where they gathered amongst themselves to feast outdoors under a raised tent.

During the afternoons the training varied, but usually took place in the forest, practicing stealth, tree-climbing, trap-making, warhorn signals, and horse racing. Sometimes they would hunt wild boar, and sometimes Nyklot would send them to collect tribute from various tribes in the region, in which Boliliut accompanied them on these travels.

Over time, concern for Ludomir's murder waned as other pyres were lit for fallen warriors. The mead benches shook with feast and midnight merriment, clouding out the affliction of the hot sun over the open field.

"I have learned all of the druzhina songs, Knyaz," Sobieslav said one day to Nyklot as they rode their stallions through the southern forest for the hunt. "The men train, and feast but they are ever hungry for plunder."

"I understand their hunger," said Nyklot. "I have an intelligence report from several traders, as well as from my fishing fleet that there is a party of Northmen slavers that have camped on Wagrian coasts. The Wagrians are forever occupied fighting the Niemcy, and therefore do nothing. I would have you root them out."

"We will need a guide, and nothing more."

"You shall have one."

"And the booty?"

"We must give a cut to the Saxon knyaz, Adolph. He is our friend. The rest will be distributed to the treasury and amongst the men that go on the expedition."

"It shall be so," replied Sobieslav.

"Call my sons," said Nyklot.

He whistled three long times, and soon thereafter Pribislav, and Vratislav appeared before them.

"Who thirsts for action?" asked Nyklot.

They both replied affirmatively.

"And more importantly," said Nyklot. "Who will delay their thirst for action, and stay behind to command the rest of the druzhina?"

Pribislav replied that he would do so.

"You show wonderful merit Pribislav," said Nyklot. "Tonight I will honor you with a roasted boar, and we shall drink to your health."

"Vratislav you will accompany Sobieslav."

"Cousin," said Vratislav to Sobieslav. "These Northmen fight differently from the Poles; such are not friendly skirmishes but are often fatal."

"I have fought them before, cousin. Do not fear for me."

"In all truth," said Nyklot. "Neither of them are as vicious as the Niemcy."

His two sons nodded their heads emphatically.

"The Wagrians are forest-folk," said Nyklot. "They are poor and hungry. They have little use for the plow but make up their meager living by raiding, hunting and very often as mercenaries. They live side by side the Niemcy in mutual enmity. If you come across these men, as they are your cousins, do them no harm and if they help you in the fight, share your spoils with them."

Sobieslav listened intently and bowed to Nyklot.

"Why don't they cultivate the land?" he asked.

"Because they constantly would have their farmland burnt and raided," replied Pribislav.

"It is our duty," said Nyklot to Sobieslav, "to support the Wagrians. They are kin. We often send them grain and arms. We must do so, as they are the only buffer between us and our enemies. We must not give them too much or too little."

Sobieslav listened intently.

"If we give them too much," continued Nyklot. "They will become lazy and satiated, and will drain our treasury. Over time they will come to expect our grain, and take it for granted that it comes

from the sweat of our own hard-working peasants. But if we give them too little we shall not have their loyalty – they might raid our lands, or sell their hands in war against us. We must keep them hungry against our enemies."

"I assume that the Niemcy do the same with their forest-folk," said Sobieslav.

"Indeed they do," replied Nyklot. "Last year I heard a report that the Holsatians, the forest-folk of the Niemcy, are toll-taking on the Trave. We must root them out, as it taxes our market."

"Aye," replied Sobieslav.

"But first things first," said Nyklot with enthusiasm. "We must rid our coasts of the cursed slavers! Sobieslav, you have my confidence!" and with that he slapped his nephew on the back.

"First things first," said Pribislav. "Let us slay a boar. If I am to have any honor at all this must first be done."

They all roared with laughter.

That evening Sobieslav's troop dined with Nyklot, Boliliut and his two sons. Beleknegini, looking rouged and sultry, came in to toast them, and the entire troop bowed low to her. When they were all very drunk, they took to story-telling about past exploits, and various rumors.

"I trust that the swine-roast is ready?" asked Nyklot, already drunk. Just then two young boys entered the hall carrying the roasted boar on a large wooden platter. The men roared with contentment upon the sight, and all unsheathed their antler-handled knives.

When they put it on the table, all of the men lunged forward to slice off a portion for themselves. They then went back to guzzling ale and mead, whilst telling tales.

"It was a fine spear throw," said Nyklot to Sobieslav, who bowed his head. "You dropped that bear like it was a small child!"

"I must take your training to heart more, cousin," said Pribislav. "Maybe then I could have the least bit of honor around here." With that he got up from the table and walked out of the feast hall.

Vratislav appeared to be concerned.

"Leave him be," said Nyklot.

"You did say that you would honor him this evening, father."

"You are right, my son," replied Nyklot, appearing to have remembered now.

"And you held him back from tomorrow's expedition," added Vratislav.

"Indeed, you are correct. I will remedy this. Pribislav will be honored, and he will lead an expedition before the fall harvest."

"He could take my place this time around if it pleases him," said Vratislav.

"It will not be necessary," said Nyklot. "I cannot have both of my sons out on an expedition lest..."

"There is no need to continue," interrupted Sobieslav. "To your health Knyaz!" he said, lifting his silver goblet. "May Perun guide your mighty sword so that it strikes like a torrential thunderbolt!"

That evening Nyklot called Pribislav to his home. When he came his mother kissed him on the forehead and then walked up a lot that had steps cut into it and went to the second floor.

"Do you despise your cousin?" asked Nyklot.

"Not in the least, father," replied Pribislav.

"Did you despise Ludomir?"

"Hardly, I admired the man very much."

"Good," said Nyklot, and bit an apple. "You must understand, son, that holding back a headstrong warrior from battle is the kindest thing a knyaz can do. Especially since power must pass from father to only one son, and since you have my faith, I assume that that would be you."

"I am honored," said Pribislav, bowing.

"You must be ever-vigilant, son. One cannot trust in this lifetime. Remember my lesson to you when you were young that we must be like beetles in this life; hardened on the outside, and soft on the inside, that is, only with kin."

"I have always taken your lessons to heart, father."

"Good," said Nyklot unsheathing his sword, and pointing the ivory bear-head towards his son.

"Because this ancient sword must pass from father to son until the World Tree falls under the weight of the heavens, and the seasons cease to continue."

Nyklot kissed his son's forehead.

"You will be the standard-bearer soon enough," said Nyklot.

The next morning at dawn the men rose, and piled in the provisions: dried meat, smoked fish, bread, mead and apples.

They also packed their swords, spears, shields, and armor into a single longship. Vratislav, and Sobieslav also brought their steeds, and the war-standard of the Obodrites, an embroidered image of Perun mounted with a drinking horn in one hand and a thunderbolt in the other.

The loved ones of the warriors saw them off. Nyklot embraced every last one of them as they boarded the longship. The mast was raised they pushed off with 16 men rowing, eight a side. The other nine warriors sharpened the blades on whetstones, and preparing their two crossbows. Meanwhile, the scout told Sobieslav and Vratislav all he knew of the camp that they were to raid.

Vratislav raised the standard, and all men bowed before it reverently, as it fluttered about in the fierce northern winds as they began another song:

“Earth below, earth within
Air above, air within
Water below, water within
Fire above, fire within
These, I am above
Thunder strikes from heaven,
The first child of the sun
This I am!
This I am!
Lord Perun speaks through my deeds!”

The guide approached Sobieslav. He was short and pudgy, huge digits for fingers and looked like he could wallop a bull to death with a single mace blow.

"Commander," he said, exposing his crooked teeth. "I will tell you what I have seen with my own eyes. The camp is beyond the Trave in Wagrian country. It is an outpost for slaving and fur-trading. They buy Wagrian girls there from hungry families."

"How many of them are there?" asked Vratislav, war-banner perched on his hip.

"Not more than a dozen, but they are fierce and cunning Gotlanders. They sneak up on men when they are unawares, and then violate the womenfolk."

"We know their tactics," said Vratislav, "and have for many, many generations."

"I, for one, would very much enjoy splitting Gotlander skulls," said the guide, joyously.

Sobieslav smiled contentedly, and Vratislav laughed aloud.

A warrior who happened to be sharpening an axe blade spoke enthusiastically: "Our commander, Sobieslav the Flood, will lead us to victory and squash the skulls of the Gotlanders with his bare hands!"

After nightfall the fleet reached the mouth of the River Trave and bivouacked on the beach.

Sobieslav unsheathed his sword, and lifted it into the air as he shuffled in his bowlegged fashion back and forth amidst his troops.

"Men," he began. "We will set out towards our destination while the stars still twinkle so that we may land immediately at dawn. We will slay the men, all but one, and spare women and children. Burn their roofs, and collect the loot, which will be distributed later. But I promise all of you this: The largest portion of loot and glory will go to him that slays the most Northmen!"

At dawn the longship approached the coast. There were several thatched huts, and even a small horse stable, both of which were slightly visible from the beach. Sobieslav whistled and charged forward, standard in one hand, sword in the other. His troop followed him, running out in bands of five, armed with spears, shields, axes, and swords. Their mail-shirts clinked and their fluted helmets pointed forward like bulls as they charged the settlement.

Vratislav blew his warhorn, and then charged off into the scuffle. When he arrived he saw that there were many more than a dozen men present. In fact it seemed that for every Obodrite warrior there at least one Northman and more appeared to be exiting their huts.

Sobieslav stood in the forefront, cutting down scores of men. Blood was splattered all over his face. In the heat of battle he dropped his

shield, and gripped his broadsword with both hands, slashing left and right at the enemy.

As the sun rose, amidst fierce battle cries, little streams began to trickle blood out to sea. Ravens and vultures flew around in relentless circles over the scourging battle.

Sobieslav blew his warhorn and his men regrouped behind him in the open field. The enemy regrouped as well, but they were fewer in number, were not wearing armor, and still looked beleaguered and confused.

There was a moment of stillness as the Northmen all rallied behind a giant bearded man with a bloody battle-axe in hand. All of a sudden a bold hit the leader in the forehead, and he fell to his knees, blood streaming down his face. His men fled.

"Charge!" shouted Sobieslav, who trod into the midst of the fleeing men, cutting them down left and right.

Vratislav reloaded his crossbow, but the battle was all but over. A few men surrendered and were dragged back to the beach naked and fettered.

Sobieslav was fully splattered in blood and panting heavily. He ordered the slaves and loot to be transported to the beach. The injured Obodrites were taken inside the boat, while the wounded Northmen were one by one hacked to pieces as they lay moaning amidst heaps of carnage on the pebbled shore.

"Count the dead," commanded Sobieslav to one of his warriors. He was still panting heavily, and thrust his bloodstained sword into the ground to support his body weight.

"We have not lost a single man," he said. "Six of our men are injured. Our guide is wounded badly though, and is bleeding profusely from the abdomen."

"Bandage him. How many enemies were slain, and how many remain?"

The man strode inland, and when he returned he reported to Sobieslav. "All in all I counted 23 dead, and these nine here amongst the remaining."

Sobieslav looked around at the scene: his men were carrying women, weapons, and chests full of silver denars on board, as well as wounded men. The seven captives were on their knees, breathing

heavily, and coughing up blood.

Vratislav trod up to the captives and unmounted. He put his sword blade under the chin of one of them. "Thorkell," he said in astonishment. He then told Sobieslav who the man was, and that he had once traded in Veligrad, and had feasted at Nyklot's table.

Sobieslav approached him. "Thorkell, you are called?" he asked. "Do you understand me?" Thorkell shot him a glare of utter hatred, and Sobieslav hit him in the face with the round pommel of his sword.

"Do you understand me?" he repeated.

"I do," said Thorkell without lifting his bruised face this time.

"Do you trade with us Obodrites and eat at our table?"

Thorkell remained silent.

"Do you then raid us and our neighbors?"

There was another long silence.

"You are proud, yes? Perhaps you have not heard of me..."

"This is Sobieslav the Flood," said Vratislav.

"...But I assure you, Northman that you will never forget me from this day hence."

Then Sobieslav approached the captives and stabbed the napes of their necks one by one, except for Thorkell and the two that kneeled to his immediate left and right side.

"You steal," he said, glaring down at Thorkell. He put a block of pine in front of him. "Put your hands on the stump." Thorkell did so, hesitantly.

Sobieslav turned his back for a moment to Thorkell and then swiftly turned around, hammering his blade down onto the wrists of his captive, which immediately severed his hands. He shrieked in a bloodcurdling manner, and everyone looked on at the merciless spectacle.

He sheathed his blade. "You remaining men return to your homelands, and tell them that our land is never to be defiled again. From now on, all slavers shall be impaled, no exceptions."

And with that the Obodrites raised the mast, and sailed off.

Sobieslav walked towards the gunwales on the starboard side of the ship, looking off towards the rising sun. The wind hit him in the face, but his hair was matted down with blood. Vratislav approached him from behind and offered him water.

"My father will say that you were excessive and cruel; he will say that sharp, but benevolent action is the swiftest and most enduring."

"Men must fear my name and tremble, lest we will be trod upon by halflings such as those."

"But they have more ships, and bigger ships. They can come and do the same thing to us if it pleases them to do so."

Sobieslav was silent. He approached the women, who numbered 14 in total.

"Where do you women hail from?" he asked. "I, Sobieslav the Flood, will personally see to it that you are all repatriated to your lands."

They were silent for a moment and then told him where they were from: Wagria, Silesia, Gniezno, Novgorod, and Kiev.

"Give them my rations, and the rations of all that is superfluous," he said. "The women will eat, the wounded will eat, and the rowers will eat. The rest of us will feast bountifully when we return," he said, and then approached Vratislav.

"They are from all over the world!" he exclaimed.

"And you promised to repatriate all of them," replied Vratislav.

"Never speak too suddenly nor promise what you cannot fulfill," he said and then walked to the other side of the deck.

Sobieslav raised his head, and looked towards the land.

"Any sign of the Wagrians?" he asked.

"No," replied Vratislav, confused by the complete absence of Wagrian scouts. "None at all."

4.

By this time Bern had a fundamental understanding of tongue of the Obodrites, and could understand and communicate with all of the different Slavic dialects that he met with through his Christian contacts and through the marketplace when he wandered there in order to make new acquaintances.

He administered Mass, and heard confession despite the fact that he was not ordained to do so. Early one Sunday morning a crowd of children, slaves, and widows gathered in the church in order to hear Mass. Bern chanted:

*"Gloria
Gloria in excelsis Deo."*

At that moment Pribislav walked in and sat in the last empty pew.

*"Domine Fili unigenite, Jesu Christe.
Domine Deus,
Agnus Dei, Filius Patris.
Qui tollis peccata mundi, Miserere nobis."*

*Qui tollis peccata mundi,
Suscipe deprecationem nostrum."*

Pribislav appeared to be somewhat disturbed, and greeted him in the Slavic tongue, which was a break from the previous times they had met.

"You have picked up our tongue rather well, monk," he said.
"Where did you learn it from? And so well!"

"You flatter me," responded Bern. "To be honest I go to dine with my host family very often. Bieslava, that is, she who took me in at the very beginning."

"And do you chastise this fervent heathen for her demonic ways?" asked Pribislav, stroking his beard.

"I pray for her," replied Bern. "Every day."

"And do you tell this congregation of yours to defile our deity?"

"Of what do you seek to know?"

"Someone slashed the Perun idol the other day. The scar is visible, and the peasants believe that Perun will take retribution for this affront. Do you know anything about this?"

"I do not," replied Bern.

"Our new war leader is impetuous and aggressive. He strongly desires to make a name for himself. He will most likely be the new druzhina-commander."

"I have heard of him," replied Bern. "He just returned from an expedition with much plunder. They say that he is fierce and brave."

"Indeed," replied Pribislav. "And I will tell you that if you incite your flock to riot, even tacitly, I will not have the power to protect you from his wrath."

"But I do not incite them to anything," replied Bern with an innocent look on his face.

"Look at that!" yelled Pribislav suddenly, pointing at the stronghold. Bern's muscles tensed and he obeyed, mildly. "Do you know what that is there for? It is there so that in times of war our people, our grain, and our cattle will not be slain and burnt!"

Bern lowered his head.

"And let me tell you, monk – we have intelligence that war will soon come, and when it does there will be two groups of people: those who fight to defend the stronghold, and those that will be slain for inactivity and treason! Have you been forewarned?"

Bern nodded his head.

"I am sent to speak with you by my father," continued Pribislav, and a certain feeling of fear rose in Bern's heart. "He desires to tell you that you must not transgress certain boundaries here. Did you not tell Bieslava the other day that the astrological symbols on her pottery was in vain and would not bring her good fortune?"

"I did," replied Bern.

"You disrespected her hospitality, monk, and you insulted our customs and beliefs."

"I just wanted to edify someone that I love," said Bern, softly.

"You will never understand, monk," said Pribislav, with a harsh look on his face. "Two gods cannot live under the same roof in harmony."

Bern fell silent for a long time.

"Do you still keep that slave wench in your church?" asked Pribislav in a more civil tone.

"Not often," replied Bern. "She comes and goes, and what she says does not make sense. I personally believe that she is possessed by a demon."

Pribislav scoffed. "Very well, but I am also here to ask you: will you take in more like her?"

"Yes, why?" responded Bern with a raised eyebrow.

"We have many such enslaved girls of a similar fate with us now. Apparently a group of Gotlanders were slaving off our coasts, and selling their captives to Khazars in the Novgorod market, and even as close as Wagria do they set up shop."

"What do you think you will do with them?"

"They will probably be sold off to wealthy men as concubines."

"Will the young men of the druzhina not marry them?"

"Perhaps," replied Pribislav with a smile on his face. "But I tell you – we druzhina brothers must fight the maidens off with a stick."

Bern smiled along with him. "Maybe so," he replied.

Then Pribislav grew more serious. "Now I go," he said. "But remember what we talked about this day, and ponder it."

Bern bowed and the two parted. The monk then walked back to the church. On the way he thought about what Pribislav had said.

"Monk," said a voice from behind him in Latin. He turned around and saw the interpreter, Dmitri. He was dripping with sweat from the summer heat, and carried a piece of birch bark in his hand.

"Dmitri," said Bern. "My greetings to you. Would you like to come and dine in the church with me? The other day I happened upon an ancient sheep-skin parchment of St. John Chrysostom in the marketplace. It was written in Greek of course. The seller, a rustic Samogitian, who could not read or write did not know its proper value, and would certainly part with it for a few denars."

Dmitri raised his hand. "What have you to eat, monk?"

"Cabbage and lentils," he said with a lowered head. "Will you dine with me?"

"Well," said Dmitri. "I have fresh wild turkey in my hut so I might have to decline your offer, kind sir. However this parchment that you speak of; I looked through it the other day."

Bern's eyes lit up. "Did it fascinate you?"

"Far from it," replied Dmitri. "It was a forgery. Nothing more."

"Do you mean that the legendary Archbishop of Constantinople never wrote such words?"

Dmitri stopped and stared Bern in the face for a moment. "On the contrary," he said. "He wrote those words, but *he himself* was the forgery."

Bern wiped the sweat from his forehead and began to feel slightly offended. He had met with Dmitri several other times before, and was always fascinated by his knowledge of classical literature, and the tales of his travels to Constantinople, but when it came to his faith, Bogimilism, he retreated from the topic.

"I have offended you," said Dmitri. "My apologies. I was rash."

"On the contrary," replied Bern. "I do wish to converse with you on that which matters most. And as the Lord's way is one, I trust that the Holy Spirit will illuminate our conversation."

Dmitri smiled. "I wanted to show you this," he said, and handed him the piece of birch bark.

Bern looked at it, and saw a strange form of writing, or which he could not make out anything.

"Is it Greek?" asked Bern.

"Hardly; it is The Lord's Prayer in my tongue. The alphabet is from St. Cyril. We Bogimilists use this alphabet now."

They arrived at the church and Bern lit a hearth fire with flint and dry grass. When the water began to steam he stirred in the lentils.

"What exactly do you believe in, Dmitri?"

"I believe in the same God as you. The Lord of the worlds who created man out of dust exactly 6648 years ago, who created the various races of man from Ham, Shem, and Japhet, after the great flood."

"And thus," he began, "you contradict the Obodrite tale of Lech, Czech, and Rus. As you know the common people here believe that they are derived from a great war-chief Lech..."

"It is true," replied Dmitri. "The people here do not have long memories, because they do not put ink to parchment. Let me explain...you and I are both derived from Japhet, as are all of the people of the north. However after a thousand years our ancestors split in search of new hunting ground. The Slavs were one people only 500 years ago, and then the three brothers that you mentioned: Lech, Czech, and Rus mighty war-chiefs all of them, walked in different directions in order to hunt boar. I, Dmitri of Novgorod, am a descendant of Rus, whereas the people here are descendants of Lech."

"I do not claim to know where I come from beyond what I am told."

"And what are you told, monk?"

"I only know that my father died in the Harz Mountains. He was indebted to the local lord, and repaid his debts by slaving away in the silver mines where he met an early death. I never knew him, and barely remember my mother. Afterwards I was sent away to a monastery, and now I am here."

"It is sad, monk," replied Dmitri. "I, too, have lost family. I was once a wealthy man of property in my native land – I owned the rivers between Novgorod and Constantinople, and sent the nomads running when they attempted to ambush cargo. Then one harsh spring a frost destroyed the crops, and the people became destitute and fled. Those who could not afford to do so were at the mercy of foreigners who exchanged bread for crying infants. Such were the conditions, never before or since have I eaten earthen moss and horseflesh, I tell you."

There was a long moment of silence, and Bern felt it prudent to change the topic.

"I feel that we have much in common, Dmitri of Novgorod," said Bern. "We both believe in the true God, we both are literary, and we both have suffered much. I would very much like to see you in church service one of these days."

The water in the cauldron started to bubble.

"Monk," said Dmitri, with a solemn face. "People of my faith believe that *Satan* is in charge of the church. We trust no man, pay no man to intercede between us and God. Such are our ways. I will leave now if I have offended you."

Bern felt a sharp pain in his abdomen. He then bowed, and turned his back to Dmitri, and prayed. When he turned his head again, Dmitri was gone.

He removed his cowl, nude, and began to scrub the dirt from it.

"I remember you," said a voice from behind him. Bern was frozen with embarrassment, at the prospect of being seen naked in the church. "You saw me on the beach that one day. The same day that they took me away, the same day that they changed me, and led me on my path of becoming."

He knew that it was the slave girl, and was surprised that he had remembered that day on the beach when Daso had sent him to fetch fresh water.

"Turn around," she said. "As you have seen me, now I will see you."

Bern didn't understand what impelled him to do so, but without thinking, he rose to his feet and turned around. He saw the girl smiling, deviously. She then burst out laughing in a most searing tone.

He immediately felt shame, and covered himself. After that she walked out, still laughing at the top of her lungs.

As the water boiled over the surface of the cauldron, Bern felt a rage that he had never known before. Slowly a subtle spirit of embitterment crept into his heart. He went to the corner and stared at the walls, biting his lower lip until it bled.

When the time comes, he thought. Will Vizelin return and rescue me? Why would I defend heathendom against the church? I have walked on the razor's edge in the path of righteousness, facing

martyrdom from the devil's priest, and his vile ways. I have not made a single convert since I arrived, and the only people that want to converse with me are those that wish to brush up on their Latin.

He then thought about Bieslava and her kindness. She always fed him and told him delightful peasant stories of husbandry and hearth. She laughed with him and cared for him as a son. Would he leave her? No, he thought. He would take the faithful, and bring them to the side of the faithful. Their souls would bear much more fruit in Lower Saxony, which was springing up a growing number of Cistercian monasteries.

And last of all, thought Bern with a new confidence. Aren't these apostates guilty of the martyrdom of Ludomir, the only convert with enough clout to bring these Wends to the Lord?

He thought over it for a moment, but of course he could not prove who had killed him. If he could he would easily rouse the ire of the new converts, and show them that their faith was not a benign show of love, but a public declaration that could lead to martyrdom for the sake of truth. Such a call is not to be taken lightly.

"I will investigate his death," said Bern aloud. "I will investigate it since nobody else will, and I will find the murderer, and when I do, the culprit's name shall be proclaimed on all of the rooftops of the various marketplaces of the Baltic, even if it earns me an early migration to Christ."

Bern thought of Boyan's image, of how he made him shiver and fear. "I will not fear you anymore, you wretched monster. I shall expose you and your base idols once and for all."

He began to stir the cabbage with a long wooden ladle.

He waited several days in order to speak with Bozidara. Finally she came to the church, with a hempen bundle of fresh rye bread under her arm that was meant to feed Bern and the orphans that ran about the pews from time to time. "Hospitality is the key to the hearts and minds of the people," she would say, brushing off the dough from her apron. She would spend many hours milling grain with her stone quern, and then baking it in her stone oven.

She entered with a smile on her face, and Bern almost shed a tear at the sight of her gnarled, swollen hands.

"You are an amazing saint," he said. "You have sacrificed your position in this world in order to serve Christ."

Bozidara bowed to him. "My dear, young monk; I was baptized in the forest by your teacher, Vizelin. He showed my husband the truth of God, and he showed him the advantages that would accrue to the Obodrites if and when we convert. My husband loved his people, and would have done anything for their salvation."

Bern lowered his head. "I believe you, sister. I believe you. If we succeed in bringing the Obodrites to the Lord, then they will be protected by God, and by all of the angels in heaven."

Bozidara laughed derisively at this statement, as Bern looked at her in confusion.

"It is not so much that we need the protection of the angels in heaven, young man. Much more pertinent is that we give your people no pretext to destroy us."

"We have no such desire," he responded.

"You do not, monk, but you do not know the hunger of the warlords of your realm. You do not understand that they desire land and souls. It was exactly for this reason that our former military commander, my husband, may he rest in peace, secretly desired to bring about our conversion. Were you not there yourself when Vizelin handed the hewn stone to Nyklot? That was the only reason why he would even listen to a priest."

"I am intrigued," said Bern, leaning forward. "It was I that carried the stone that day, and as I was still foreign to the Obodrite tongue, I hadn't the faintest idea of what was going on. Why was I to carry that stone?"

She gave him a look of incredulity as if it was impossible that he didn't understand. "My dear, dear monk. You are so ignorant to the ways of this world; two powerful men to not convene to give each other simple rocks. Such would be an insult that would end it sword blows. That hewn stone was a symbol of stone masonry, and meant that if Nyklot converted, the counts, and dukes of Saxony would willingly come here and teach the Obodrites the art of masonry so that we could build stone castles instead of our wooden strongholds. We would be on open trading terms with your empire. All Nyklot would have to do would be to relinquish the tribal ways of our ancestors, and to let the monks and priests come and go as they please. Then the marketplace would be open to your empire, and there would be no limit to trade between our two worlds."

"I now understand," said Bern with a sour look on his face. "It was not out of the love of Christ that your husband converted but out of some deceitful cunning to acquire more military acumen."

"You tender soul..."

Bern's heart began to thump, and he felt a distinct feeling for the Obodrites that he had never felt before; he was starting to feel a tiny degree of hatred for them.

"I am alone in this Scythian wilderness," lamented Bern, "and those that say they are friends are no real friends, but only hide one level of duplicity upon another in order so that they may combat the very people that wish to save them."

"You take it too personally, Bern," she said, and hugged him against her chest. "I only speak so frankly here because I care for you, and because I am a true Christian in my soul now, as was my husband when he migrated to Christ."

"I have been thinking of your husband long and hard, good lady. He was murdered, and I believe that it must have been that demon-possessed hell-fiend that they call a flamen around here."

"These are dangerous words, monk," said Bozidara, eyes widened. "You do not want to mock that wretched man, as he could easily lead a mob to burn down this church with you and I in it."

"Do you believe that he did it?"

"I know that they found his amber lizard-amulet on Ludomir's body, and I know that he hounded for my husband's blood once the rumor became known that he was a Christian, and since then the two were locked and poised to utterly destroy one another."

"I will make sure that he is exposed for the murder of a Christian believer, and there shall be justice."

"Does your heart tell you that he was the killer?" asked Bozidara.

"It does," replied Bern. "And what does your heart tell you kind lady?"

"As the wife of a warrior I never suspected that my husband would wither away as grass does in fall. No I always was prepared for the day when he would die violently by another's hands as it happened. Perhaps for this reason my aspirations for revenge are not high. Let God sort out such confusion."

Bern felt ashamed that she saw him as 'seeking revenge.'

"But I must believe that my husband died for a purpose," she continued with a stern look on her face.

Bern scooped the vegetables with a ladle into a wooden bowl. He then put the bowl in front of his guest.

"Thank you," she said, and continued speaking. "We always spoke of our people as our family and as our children, and even though I am held in low esteem by the wives of the druzhina, my former friends, I am still fiercely loyal to the Obodrites. They are my family and the young here are all my children, and as such I must work to finish my husband's beliefs. When that is done, I can die, because I know that he is watching me, and that he will be pleased with me if I finish his work, and take care of our people. Only then can I go to be with him, and I must tell you honestly, I long to be with him more than anything else in the world."

Bern was stunned at the raw emotions that Bozidara displayed. He put his hand on hers. "I promise you that you will see him again, good lady. You must be very highly esteemed by the Lord God. I promise that he will look after you in this life and in the next, where you will meet Ludomir with full honors, and glory."

"That is a pleasant thought," replied Bozidara, smiling.

Bern said a prayer and they ate the bread and steaming vegetables.

"Is there anything else that you can tell me about the murder so that I may track down the killer?" asked Bern.

"All I know is this – Ludomir often had secret rendezvous' at night with an informer. He told me little about this, but I knew that he went. Either this informer was the killer or was one of the killers because he went to the haunted western forests and never came back. Our common people are afraid to enter this forest at night for fear of demons and vampires. However makes secret rendezvous' there is the killer."

"Does the flamen go into the woods?"

"The flamen *lives* in the woods, and lives during the night. That is all that I have to say on the subject right now. I must go now." She stood up, made the sign of the cross towards the altar, and walked to the door. "You know, Bern," she began, "I knew your teacher, Vizelin, and it's interesting: you are very much like him – at first when he came here he was enthusiastic about helping our people walk in the light, but afterwards a certain bitterness and contempt arose in his heart, and he sought revenge

against the flamen as well. And now he is gone..." there was a long silence. "I will pray for you," she said, exiting.

That night at about midnight under a full moon, Bern laid curled up under a deerskin pelt on his wooden cot when the young slave girl came in. He felt too ashamed to speak with her so he feigned sleep, but watched her with squinted eyes. It had been the only time in his life that he had seen a naked woman that time in the woods, and this very creature stood before him this very moment, eating up all of the remaining vegetables and bread. He longed more than anything to lash his back with birch branches in order to rid himself of the burning desire that issued forth from his cursed loins. And yet she would not even acknowledge him...

After she was done eating she walked out of the church in her old rags, apparently not caring who saw her in such a state. She paused at the doorway and spoke thus under her breath: "I am coming for you, my beloved demon of the forest," and then lifted up the deerskin in the doorway.

Bern walked towards his favorite crack in the walls. Previously he had removed the clay and moss from this one spot so he could peek out and see the comings and goings of the community when he was alone.

Under the moonlight he saw the girl remove her last remaining rags, and twirl them. Her long blond hair, almost reached her bare butt, which swayed back and forth, illuminated by the moon and by the fireflies. She walked towards the haunted forest of the west.

"You are most certainly demon-possessed, young lady," said Bern to himself. "And soon enough you will lead me to Ludomir's killer."

He walked away from the crack in the wall, and kneeled down on the ground as a beam of moonlight hit him in the face, and prayed fervently.

5.

The druzhina commenced to casting lots. Sobieslav was overwhelmingly approved without a single speech raising any objection over his would-be reign as military commander. It was autumn and the crops swayed in the wind, the orchards bore fruit, and the children of Veligrad laughed and played under the sun as their parents cut down wheat with sickles. Fishermen carried abundant netfuls of mackerel, pike, and herring to the marketplace, which added to the feasts that Nyklot threw almost nightly with his druzhina and foreign guests.

One night Nyklot was feasting with a large group of Poles that had come up for purchasing in the fish harvest. That night they ate perch, and salmon, spiced with garlic, parsley, and saffron.

Sobieslav stood at the right side of Nyklot during the feast, Boliliut on his left.

"Sobieslav," said Nyklot. "These men need their prams filled with smoked herring. When they wake they should find it loaded."

"It will be done, Knyaz," replied Sobieslav, after a long period of silence.

"Do you understand anything other than battle?"

Sobieslav remained silent.

The next morning they woke at dawn. Boliliut and Nyklot arrived first. Shortly thereafter Sobieslav appeared before the sauna looking tired and wearisome, holding a pouchful of rough amber.

When they entered Boliliut threw a bucketful of water on the smoldering rocks, and steam filled the air.

"Are you offended by my comments that I made last night, Sobieslav?" asked Nyklot as he removed his Indian razorblade and handed it to the military commander.

"Knyaz," said Sobieslav bowing low. "Not in the least! Forgive me, please. It's just that I have had my mind on other things," he said and with that lathered soap on Nyklot's chin and began to shave him around the mustache.

Boliliut smiled. "Every rooster must know where the hens are hiding."

Nyklot laughed.

"So that's it!" he exclaimed. "You have your eyes on a maiden, finally!"

"Indeed, Knyaz," replied Sobieslav with a slight grin.

"Who is the lucky little kitten?" asked Nyklot.

"There is a girl that has caught my eye."

"A Slav girl, no doubt? Foreign women do not like to have silver on their heads, as their necks quickly grow tiresome."

Sobieslav tossed the amber stones onto the heated rocks which emitted a most pleasant pine fragrance.

"She is," replied Sobieslav. "A fine maiden, indeed; flowing blond hair, full lips, striking blue eyes, and an unchanging facial expression...like a mystery."

"Such are the finest maidens," replied Nyklot. "Is she the daughter of a druzhina-brother?"

"No, she is not. She is an orphan of some kind, I believe. She lives in the church with that little bald-headed monk."

Nyklot and Boliliut shot each other a glance.

"Yes, my boy. I do know the one that you speak of," said Nyklot. "Tell me – do you have your mind made up?"

"As sure as Perun's thunderbolt reigns down from the heavens."

"Alright, then. If you have your mind made up, then you must not delay; the harvest celebration is arriving. It would be most fitting for the benefit of all the people if you would throw the silver over her head on this day, and not a day sooner or later."

"So be it," replied Sobieslav.

Nyklot stared at him. "Well? Go find her! Tell her that you would throw the silver over her head! With your reputation that is all that you must say, and it is done!"

Sobieslav hesitated. "Right now?" he asked.

Nyklot and Boliliut roared a mighty laughter.

"Sobieslav the Flood, the most feared warrior of the northern seas, scared of a young maiden!" exclaimed Boliliut.

"I am not afraid! I will go at once," he said, dressing as he stormed out of the sauna.

"Shall we tell him?" asked Boliliut.

"There is no need; he is impetuous and would storm out to Jutland in order to sever the remainder of Thorkell's extremities."

Sobieslav fed his horse a generous amount of hay. He trod past the wheat fields, and listened to the farmers singing their harvest song:

*"It is harvest time, harvest time
Come from far and near!
Gather together O noble clan-folk
Gather around and sing
Marzanna has been kind this year
With hops for beer
And wheat for bread
We peasants are pleased with our work
Our spirits filled with joy!
Our ancestors have taught
Now dance to the blossom*

*Stream of the flute
As it reverberates in our hearts"*

He knew that he would not find her in the church; when he trained his men in the field early mornings he almost always saw her gathering flowers alone by the forest entrance.

Surely enough she was there, in the same ripped tunic that she had arrived with, picking violets and golden samphire, arranging them in the holes by the glass beads knitted into her tunic lining.

Sobieslav felt a twinge in his belly, one that he had not felt since his first mêlée with the Poles. He felt like riding away but he saw her turning her head, and noticing him. It was too late to retreat.

"Do you know who I am?" he asked, approaching her from behind.

"You are a skirmisher," she responded.

"I have had my eye on you for a long time," he said.

"I have *felt* your eye on me for as long a time."

"So what is your name?"

"I once had a name when I was a maiden in Wagria, but I no longer remember it. Now all I know is that I am a rusalka who wonders about in the forest and collects flowers."

"You speak nonsense," replied Sobieslav with his arms folded.

"Would you expect anything else?"

"No, I guess not."

"You very much enjoy a mystery."

"So will I throw the silver over your head now or when you return from visiting your parents?" he asked, ignoring her last statement.

She stopped picking flowers, and turned around.

"You would not want me," she began. "I am a cursed creature, and will surely not bring good fruits to any living soul."

"It is not peace that I desire in this lifetime," he responded, unfolding his arms.

"So be it then," she responded.

"Do you now wish to know my name?"

"No, I do not. I like it this way."

"So you are not interested in my proposals?"

"I am interested in your proposals, very much so."

Sobieslav looked confused for a moment. She continued picking flowers.

"So be it," he said, already bored, and wishing to throw a spear into a tree. "I bring you fresh linen, a woolen shroud, and a silver brooch."

He tossed the items at her feet.

"Thank you, good sir," she said and turned around to him. "It is most kind of you."

"Is there anything else that you wish to say to me while I am here?"

"Yes, it is that you must pay an offering."

"To whom must I pay?"

"To the demon of the forest, the vampire that protects me."

Sobieslav paused for a moment. "I enjoy your subtleties," he said and tossed a pouchful of silver at her feet.

She smiled at him in a most warm, and gentle manner.

"I will send the match-maker for you tomorrow, and we will wed three days from now, and from then on out you will no longer wonder alone in the woods, searching for acorns and berries but will stay in my hut, and enjoy freshly hunted boar and drink mead every night."

She turned her back to him again, still smiling, and returned to picking flowers.

With that, Sobieslav mounted his horse, and rode off, desiring to practice cavalry maneuvers, not thinking about the incident for the rest of the day.

Three days hence they wed at sundown. Thousands of Obodrites gathered in the forest, swatting butterflies out of their faces as they danced around the oak trees in circles.

The grove reverberated with flute music and songs provoked by mead and ale.

Boyan sacrificed an ox, drank of its blood, and then skewered the entrails with his knife, predicting a harsh winter as Perun's retribution for the people not sufficiently honoring his treasury.

Afterwards he handed Sobieslav a flaxen headband with engraved silver pendants hanging from it. The youthful warrior put it on his bride, who was adorned in a ceremonial white gown. She smiled curiously. He carried her off into the woods, and as people cheered and threw flowers at them as Nyklot looked on with pride.

After walking until they were out of sight he set her down on a dry moss patch, and removed his tunic, revealing a sculpted physique. Butterflies fluttered around them. She smiled, and licked her lips as he savagely tore off her clothes.

"Ravage me," she cried. After making love until the stars shone they fell asleep, the girl in Sobieslav's massive arms.

Later that evening he woke alone. She was nowhere to be found. He heard drumming and flute music, accompanied by huge bonfires that he saw from the distance.

He approached the massive bonfire in the forest. The flames reached towards the heavens. There were young couples fondling each other around the fire. Several souls that were jumping through the flames, and dancing to the drums and flutes.

All of a sudden his wife jumped through the flames, landing in front of him. Her clothes were ripped and her breasts were exposed.

"Come," he said to her.

"You come," she said, smiling, and returned through the fire.

Sobieslav walked around the fire, dodging the jumping bodies. She appeared again, this time behind him, and grabbed him from behind.

"You are a strange creature," he said to her.

She stared at him seductively and began to tear away her clothes.

"Ravage me again like the monster that you are," she said.

He pushed her down on the ground, and made love to her again. This time she scratched his back until blood came to the surface, and bit him in the neck.

He swatted her nails away from his back.

"Your blood, strong man," she said, with blood on her lips. "Your blood gives me strength."

"Stop your nonsense now."

She looked overhead and began laughing hysterically. "Blood!" she screamed. "Blood!"

Sobieslav turned around. Standing over him there was a young boy with long blond hair, plastered in blood. His eyes looked beyond at something that Sobieslav could not see.

All of a sudden, more people came out of the shadows, totally drenched in blood, and shivering with a wild look of horror on their faces.

The music stopped, and the people got up, looking alarmed.

Sobieslav grabbed his warhorn and blew several times, and resounded for miles in every direction.

"Run to the stronghold!" he yelled to her.

Nyklot had been resting in his bed when he heard the warhorn. He quickly grabbed his sword and armor, and headed outside where people were pouring in by the hundreds, and where the guards all ran to position themselves on the top gangplank with bows, arrows and catapults.

Nyklot bolted up to a watchtower. The warriors ran to the armory, and then stood to guard the grain depository, and the treasury. Many of them ran to the drawbridge to assist the people entering and to help out those that fell into the moat.

Several of the guardsmen lit their arrows in the lit torches that stood at every post, making the strong hold appear as a flaming ring from any distance.

"Where is Sobieslav?" asked Nyklot to Boliliut, who had just run to be by his Knyaz' side.

"It was he that blew the horn," replied Boliliut. "I have come to recognize the distinct reverberation that every horn makes, and that tune came from his."

"We will see shortly," replied Nyklot. "Until he arrives do your best to command this rabble, and calm down the hysteria. Hoist the battle-standard, and lead a battle-song. Do this until you find out what is going on and then report back to me."

"Aye," said Boliliut.

The peasants were being herded into the Eastern most part of the stronghold by several members of the druzhina. From the hightower it was clear that several of the traders were packing up and leaving the harbor with their merchandise.

It was a misty night and the watchtower guards shot flaming arrows into the dirt roads in an attempt to glimpse anything beyond the fog. Meanwhile several other warriors raised the drawbridges. Bozidara ran into the church where she found Bern praying.

"We must enter the stronghold immediately!" she yelled. "Bring anything that you value, as all else will be burned."

Twenty minutes later the stronghold was packed filled with the entire population.

"My scouts have not seen any encroachments of Niemcy," said Nyklot to his son, Pribislav. "And no longships can be seen from any of the watchtowers. What could this be?"

"We will soon see," replied Pribislav.

All of a sudden Sobieslav appeared from behind the midst, yelling to the guards to let down the drawbridge. He was carrying four young boys in his massive arms.

They let down the drawbridge, and he walked towards Nyklot, who stood in the entrance way of the south gate, sword and torch in hand.

"Where is the enemy?" asked Nyklot.

"I assume that he is approaching – look at the victims," he said and put down the children.

Nyklot examined them.

All of a sudden scores of people began to appear from the misty darkness. It was mostly women and children, but some elderly men as well. They were almost all soaked in blood, some with severed limbs, and stared with a terrible gaze into the distance.

Bern and Bozidara approached the stronghold, but seeing that the drawbridge was already raised they decided to head back to the church. When they entered they saw the slave girl sitting in the corner with blood smeared all over her face. She was giggling and talking to herself.

Bern's heart was racing fast and he began to panic as Bozidara tried to calm the girl.

"Pray!" she said to Bern. "I trust that God would let us be burned out and ravaged for our stupidity in tardiness, but I hope that he will intercede on our behalf out of pity for this poor girl."

Bern did as he was told.

"Young lady," asked Bozidara. "Whose blood is this?"

She kept giggling and then she pointed to the door. A beam of moonlight revealed a naked woman covered in blood. She stared into the distance. Bozidara screamed, and Bern fainted.

Back in the stronghold everyone looked out into the distance as they watched dozens and dozens of bloodied people walk in, some crawling on their knees. They all seemed to be at a loss for words.

Boliliut looked out towards the harbor and saw many foreign merchants hastily rushing about preparing to set sail. "If there are no

enemies about, this will surely be a very expensive mistake," he thought to himself.

Meanwhile a band of druzhina-brothers began to distribute water to the peasants, and calmed them with jokes, and confident body language.

"Send out a dozen with torches and arrows," said Nyklot to Sobieslav. "Find out who else is out there. If it is the Niemcy I want a report on their arsenal and numbers."

"Aye," said Sobieslav, and went to the watchtower to call his hand-picked men.

Nyklot looked at one of the women who clutched a crying infant in her hands. There was blood plastered all over her face, and hands. She was wiping it onto the head of her infant, although she seemed oblivious to it.

"Kind lady," said Nyklot, putting his hand on her shoulder. "I am Knyaz Nyklot of the Obodrites. Please tell me who committed this atrocity against you."

"*Niem... Niemcy*," she sputtered.

"Are they near? How many are there?" asked Nyklot impatiently. Meanwhile hundreds more battered people walked into the stronghold.

"They are...they destroyed us," she said, looking into the distance.

Nyklot looked at Boliliut who had just joined him.

Suddenly a scout reported back.

"Knyaz," said one. "There are no signs at all of enemies: the forest doesn't bear a single horse print. The men are riding in all directions and will sound their horns if anything comes up but I doubt it will."

"So these people fled but were not followed?"

"I assume that they had a mighty skirmish with the Niemcy, they lost the battle, and then had their homes scorched."

"But where are the men?" asked Nyklot, with a strange feeling in his stomach. "There are no fleeing warriors at all to guard and protect the women and children."

He looked at Boliliut for a moment and then addressed the scout.

"Report back to me if you hear anything new."

He bowed and rode away.

"It appears that your young warrior has made a mistake," said Boliliut.

"He dreams only of war," replied Nyklot. "He perpetually wishes to fight."

"His impetuosity will cost us dearly on three levels: one, merchants have fled, two, they will tell others that we are under siege while the ones that remained behind will tell their kin that we are easy to invade and are prone to false alarms, and three, the peasants will fear. As a result of their fear they will bury their silver under the earth somewhere and will not buy at the marketplace, which will decrease the number of merchants that sell here as there will be less business for them to do. Thus as our market shrinks so do the revenues, and thus our arsenal cannot become greater."

"Can you not think of anything else at this moment, Boliliut?" asked Nyklot as he stared at the victims. Boliliut bowed and stepped back.

"Guard," said Nyklot to a mounted warrior that stood by him. "Make sure that these people get bread and water! Have them fed and bathed. Try to find quarters for them in the peasants' homes. The young boys with long hair: let it be cropped at this moment as they are now men, and must behave like it. This *was* their initiation. The people will clear out of here when the scouts return."

They waited for the scouts to return. Pribislav and Vratislav stood perched on high with bows in hands, and signaled to Nyklot when the scouts rode back, who approached Nyklot on their horses.

"No sign of the enemy," said one.

"And Sobieslav?" asked Nyklot.

"He still rides alone. He told us to return while he continues to search."

Nyklot and Boliliut shot each other a daunting glance.

"You may command the peasants to return to their homes," he said to one of the guards, who blasted his horn in three long bursts.

"We must feed these people," said Nyklot to Boliliut. "They are Wagrians; kin."

"Our treasury will suffer if we take in so many indigent folk, Knyaz. Truth be told, our grain depository could not hold several hundred more people in times of a siege, and it looks as if war might be coming. Not to mention, the winter will be here before the next harvest and we will have to support these people throughout the winter."

"And what would you have me do with all of these people?" asked Nyklot exasperated. The people started to file out, and return to their homes.

"I would repatriate them immediately," replied Boliliut. "Knyaz, I am your treasurer, and I have sworn to be responsible to the Obodrites and to you. I must look at things from this perspective, as what I see best."

"It is not a problem," replied Nyklot. "We will buy extra grain in Arkona and Stettin, and support these people until they become assimilated."

"It is possible, Knyaz, but remember that if you buy from Arkona, from the Rugians, all of the silver will go to the treasury of Swantovit, which is controlled by the flamen, who in turn would have a flamen rule over the Obodrites so that all of the Christian monks would be slaughtered. It is an enemy reign that you would be supporting inadvertently."

"And Stettin?"

"As the Pomeranians are now controlled by the priests and monks they do not officially permit trade with our people as we are not Christians. Thus the transport would need to be done covertly by individuals that would risk social ostracism, and thus this grain would be dearer."

"A heathen tax," lamented Nyklot.

"Plus the small tribes to the south under our suzerainty have already paid us tribute for this year."

"And the Sorb tribes in the south?"

"They are engaged in constant warfare with the Niemcy, and cannot afford to be as merciful as you, Knyaz."

"We will buy grain from Stettin," said Nyklot. "That is my ruling. Let the top layer of silver be siphoned from the treasury, as it is not there in order to grow old, but to help the people who are in need. We will be repaid by young men who will soon be of plowing and fighting age who will remember the slight done to them and their family, and who will also remember who it was that saved them."

Boliliut bowed and then walked away.

Nyklot walked towards the treasury, and the two armed guards made way for him. Inside there were many large clay pots filled with silver denars. There were also many trinkets such as golden diadems with encrusted jewels, and engraved silver goblets as well as emerald rings and pearl bracelets.

He stuck his torch in the ground and measured out how much silver he thought he would need in order to support this new population throughout the winter by putting aside several pots, and after awhile he came to a pile of old dusty clay jars. He grabbed a handful of denars from the jars and saw that the inscriptions were written in Arabic. "It is the old silver," he said to himself, eyes glimmering."Accumulated by my forefathers."

6.

The previous winter, several rustic warlords from the Saxony covertly convened in a small hunting lodge in the forests of Faldera, in order to conspire, and to decide the fate of wider Polabia and its various inhabitants.

A fierce blizzard reigned in. The horses neighed, and brushed against the stall as they shivered in the cold. It was midday but very dark, and there was a warm glow that protruded from the window of the lodge. Outside the frosted hunting dogs, who remained tied to a pine tree, let out spirited whimpers. Inside Henry of Badwide, Vizelin, and the Margrave Albert the Bear sat around the hearth fire warming their hands as Marchrad cut fresh venison from the red deer that they had slain from the hunt that day.

Count Henry stroked his auburn hair. "It is so like the man to always be late for a meeting," he said. "Does he not consider us his peers?"

"Calm yourself, good sir," replied Vizelin. "Count Adolph is traveling from far away, and will probably arrive by sled."

Suddenly the dogs began to bark. Vizelin removed the hood of his woolen cloak, and walked towards the window. "I believe that this must be him right now as we speak."

A hooded man approached on sled. He was fully covered in a long beaver-skin robe. After halting he paused for a moment and looked side to side. He then grabbed a box from the sled and walked towards the door where he was greeted by Vizelin, and Albert the Bear.

"How was your journey, Count?" asked the chubby, bearded Albert.

Count Adolph unmasked himself, exposing a bright red set of hair and vicious, glaring eyes, chiseled out of intense pain and contemplation. "It was well, thank you, Margrave," he said with a controlled but fierce voice. "Have I missed the hunt?"

"Marchrad felled a deer," said Vizelin. Meanwhile Marchrad neglected to turn around but continued to butcher the deer on the counter, standing meditatively with a fierce countenance. The deer's decapitated head faced the table.

"Indeed he did," replied Count Adolph, and put down several bottles on the table. "I brought cider," he said.

"We are most obliged," said Count Henry ironically, as he paced back and forth in the corner.

"Archbishop Adalbero sends his warmest regards to you, Count Adolph," said Vizelin, interrupting Henry. "He is sorry that he could not be here, but unfortunately his health is steadily declining."

Adolph gave Vizelin a long intense stare. All eyes centered in on him, including Marchrad's, who stopped cutting, and turned his head.

"Let us not waste time on formalities, priest," said Count Adolph. "It is no secret that the man standing before you hates me with an intense passion, and that his friend here, Albert the Bear also presents me with no good will."

"Silence, impudent man!" hissed Count Henry.

"Gentlemen," supplicated Vizelin. "Can we not put aside our differences for the time being as Christian brothers? Does not Satan smile derisively as he watches Christ's servants tear each other apart? Come now; let us be brothers, for we all face a common enemy."

There was silence for a moment, and then Adolph sat at the table, warming his hands at the hearth fire and again addressed his peers.

"Do you desire to expand your property, gentlemen?" he asked, directed towards Albert and Henry.

Albert looked around at all present, and began to speak. "If I may, good men..." he said, and cleared his throat. "We have a new Duke of Saxony. He is no friend of mine, and I assure you all, that he will be no friend of yours, either. He is Duke Henry, and has now earned the appellation 'The Lion' although I scarcely understand how such a spiteful youth could acquire such a fierce reputation in such haste. In a manner that I wish not to delve into deeply I must tell you that he has deprived me of my Duchy, but I have retained possession of the counties of Weimar, and Orlamunde."

Adolph looked at his feet as Count Henry smiled in contempt.

"You have not heard this news yet, Adolph? You thought that I was now just a simple margrave?" asked Albert, with scrutinizing eyes.

"Please, gentlemen, as we are all God's servants..." supplicated Vizelin.

"Be it, as you know, that our new Emperor, Conrad III, is of the house of Hohenstaufen, while our new Duke Henry is of the house of Guelph. Young Duke Henry was being primed for the office of Emperor, and I have now had to relinquish my duchy for this impudent boy to make way for cohesion in the empire."

"What you tell me, Margrave," said Adolph II, "is known by every peasant in the empire. I am not as provincial as you may believe; I have my court spies and field scouts, as well. I have heard that as this young

duke will not be included in the court of Emperor Conrad III he has an eye on expansion here in Saxony. Well, the Empire usually turns its face south to Normandy, and east to Transylvania, but almost never north to our homeland."

"And it is precisely for this reason that we are gathered here today," exclaimed Vizelin. "The rumors are that this young duke cares not for the ways of Christ."

"Ah! I have devised your plan," said Adolph eyes widened, with his fist shaking in the air. "We are to expand our holdings here in Holsatia at the expense of the Wends! We are the new Christian confederates! I swear by Charlemagne's mighty *Joyeuse* we shall continue his legacy and do the Lord's work here in the north!"

The others looked at one another at the boldness of his ironic tone.

"Do you mock us, Count?" asked a tense Albert the Bear, as he leaned over the table.

"Not in the least. However your plan will be difficult to implement. We are all Wend-slayers here. Be that as it may I have many tributaries amongst the Wagrians. I speak the language, and I dine at the table of the Obodrite chief. How can I be assured that I will gain by fighting my own tributaries?"

"By our mutual interests," said Albert the Bear. "This new duke of Saxony will expand his land against us all, if we do not unite now and drive east to further our own holdings."

"And you have a plan all worked out in advance?"
Albert looked at him sternly for a moment. "Indeed," he said, with confidence.

"Tell it to me, I am intrigued."

Vizelin interrupted. "We must take into consideration the new chivalry that is sweeping through the land."

"If you mean those Knights Templar, you can take those Frenchmen against the Wends and see how they get slaughtered wholesale," said Adolph.

Marchrad giggled at this comment and then threw several large slabs of venison onto the hearthstones.

"Count Adolph," began Vizelin. "Have you read *De Laude Novae Militiae*, by the beloved Cistercian Abbot and defender of Christendom, Bernard of Clairvaux?"

"I have skimmed through it, yes."

"I am reminded of a certain passage, allow me to quote from memory: 'As He then, by the strength of His mighty hand, threw down the princes of darkness, so now *He exterminates their followers*, those sons of misplaced faith, put to flight by a band of His mighty ones, bringing about even now His people's redemption and raising again the cup of salvation for us in the house of His servant David.'"

"Ah yes, *extermination*," said Adolph.

"As we are civilized men, descendants of Japhet, we have a moral right to subjugate the barbarian seed of Ham, who is marked for slavery in this life and for relentless perdition in the next!"

Marchrad sat down next to the fire when he heard this. "Such is the Word, right?"

"Yes, my son," replied Vizelin. "As I have taught you."

Marchrad flipped the venison slabs, and they sizzled and bubbled as the blood trickled out of them.

"I assume that you men have the logistics all figured out," said Count Adolph. "But whatever you can do now to the beleaguered Wagrians, I assure you that it will be in vain, as it will not appease the wrath of Nyklot, the Obodrite chieftain, who will harass and burn down any settlement you could possibly construct. Trust me, as I have thought over this situation many times before: the Wagrians are the greatest buffer between us and Nyklot."

Marchrad scoffed. "You speak so brazenly in front of *the other half of your buffer*," he alleged with indignation.

Count Adolph II shot him a look of contempt. "You speak above your rank, sir!"

"'God makes the low high, and the high low,' right Father?"

"You cannot even read, you putrid mongrel!" shouted Adolph II.

Marchrad smiled at him. "Let us disseminate no longer be it that we are all gathered here, as peers!" he yelled. "You use us as buffers, not to prevent Christendom from the heathens but only so you can justify the your tribute-taking from them, and so that you may supplement your income with raiding-fees you get from Wendish piracy in Jutland."

Adolph lunged at his sword that stood beside him, and Marchrad curled his lip at him, while clutching his dagger. Vizelin stepped in between them.

"So says the Word of God – 'if there is fighting amongst you then you are still carnal and walk not in the ways of the Lord.'"

They calmed down, but Count Henry snickered to himself.

"Good sir, nobly-born," began Albert the Bear, leaning forward towards Count Adolph. "You – you alone will take care of this Nyklot for the time being. As we are both Wend-slayers I will share a word of advice with you – they are worth more dead than alive, this I have found out in my forty-two years on this earth."

"Dead men do not tithe and do not pay tribute," replied Adolph.

Vizelin and Albert looked each other in the eye for a moment, and Adolph looked up at them to discern what their body language meant.

"Kind lord," began Vizelin. "If I may say so – Christendom is swelling with souls."

"*Like arrows in a quiver*," said Albert the Bear, quoting Psalms.

"Ah! Now I see the whole design before me, and I must say that it was indeed worth the time of dragging me out into this snowy wilderness for a phony hunting expedition among *'friends'*."

Everyone laughed, heartily.

"Tell us, what do we devise?" asked Henry of Badwide in a challenging tone.

"You devise to expand your land titles, and thus you devise to follow the formula worked out by father Vizelin here and the noble margrave, which is, chiefly to eliminate the Wagrians, import immigrants from the Empire, and tithe them accordingly, as they will be grateful for the land, and will never take arms against their masters. You have called me because this can only be achieved if I placate the pagan Obodrites that live beyond these dark forests."

"Also," said Albert. "Your military expertise will help us blot these heathen's names out from the Book of Life." He skewered the slab of venison with his eating knife, and took a hearty bite. "It will be as such," he continued, "We all will meet next September by the church of Faldera. By that time we will have time to train our retainers, and get as many provisions and conscripts together as possible for the campaign. As we confederates have much to gain by repossessing the land, and much to lose by playing the centuries-old game of trading blows with the heathen, I trust that not a man here will be absent from this important meeting. Let every man stake his claims here and now!"

Marchrad took the floor first, sticking his fillet knife into the table as he rose to his feet. "I desire the land that belonged to our forefathers in ancient times past, that is part of the place that we now inhabit *Agrimeswidil*, and further along the Trave River on the north and south shores all the way to Lübeck. We will be under the suzerainty of Count Henry of Badwide, as has been mentioned in previous conversations, but we will tithe to no man, and will continue to root out the most vicious heathen when the foreigners approach, who will stay away from us and our free promised lands that we will cultivate ,and live under our natural liberty."

Adolph smiled at the slight that Marchrad offered him by preferring the leadership of Count Henry to himself. "The cross has done much to civilize you, Marchrad. Let's hope that the plow will do the other half for you and your men. I for one would much prefer *tithing souls*."

"If I may interrupt," began Vizelin. "I shall rouse all of Holsatia against the heathen, sign them with the cross and lead them to battle. I have been promised the bishopric to these lands once they become hospitable. I plan on erecting a new church in Lübeck once I am adorned with mitre and crosier."

"I will stake my claim," began Adolph, "and let it be acceptable to all present – I would take all of Wagria other than this port area that you claim for you and your forest-folk, Marchrad. As for my land I wish to inhabit it with my own Holsatians from the Ditmarsh."

"So be it," said Marchrad, and the rest appeared to be in concurrence.

"Then I will stake my claim now," said Count Henry, piercing his dagger into the woodwork of the table. "I would have the region of land to the south of Wagria, where the Wendish tribes now stay who call themselves the Polabians. I plan on making this land inhabitable for farmers from Westphalia and Flanders who will tithe and make the desolate land a habitable part of the empire once again."

All nodded their heads and confirmed the Count's claims to the land of Polabia.

"Now let Margrave Albert stake his claim, as he I assume he is ultimately the reason that we have all been roused together here," said Adolph.

All eyes gazed towards Albert the Bear.

"Just this," he said, with glaring eyes. "That I have your word that you will defend your new kingdoms with all your might against the incursions of this new Duke Henry the Lion. It is all that I can expect you to do anyway. Count Adolph, after you placate this pagan Wend Nyklot, and all of our land is consolidated and fortified in stone, I will keep a protecting garrison of the men of my march, and we will plow forth to uproot the heathen savages all the way until the River Vistula. Only thus will I be able to compete with this upstart duke and his vile ambitions of reckless youth. Will everyone present, all of you noble and fierce Wend-slayers pledge an oath here before all and before God that they will do their best to take care of their own realm, which will be won with much bloodshed and toil?"

"Aye," said all present, unanimously.

"May God bless our righteous endeavors and make them fruitful," declared Count Henry of Badwide.

Albert the Bear turned his head towards Vizelin and smiled. "To convince oneself of something requires little strain, especially when ones self-interests are involved, but convincing the rest of the world often requires toil."

"That, kind lord, shall be taken care of," said Vizelin with a smile. "My good and faithful servant sent a messenger pigeon to our archbishop in Hamburg declaring with all of his good will that he has seen with his own eyes their heathen priest drinking blood. Shortly after this pigeon arrived in the monastery refectory all of Christendom will soon have had their worst fears confirmed about the horrific rituals of heathendom. I'm sure that by now this message has reached as far as the Cistercian Abbot Bernard of Clairvaux, and perhaps as far as even the Pope."

"I believe that I met your monk," said Marchrad thinking. "The one with the pigeon?"

"Alright," interrupted Albert the Bear. "If that is settled, then let me continue with the plan. I handpicked this team because there is not a fiercer group of men in the entire empire. If we joined forces to destroy the Saracens we would take the Holy Land within a month, to the greater glory of God."

Marchrad smiled, viciously.

"Saxons are the greatest warriors in Christendom," he continued. "And we grew up fighting the Wends, not those petty Saracens, and we

have a right to take back the land that God has ordained for us." He slammed his fist against the table, and all men present became roused.

"May the Battle of Heaven be mirrored and reflected in microcosm on this earth!" said Vizelin making the Sign of the Cross. "As St. Michael, the Archangel battles the fallen angels, obeying God's Will, so let us battle and rout the heathen on earth."

"Amen," said Marchrad.

"Let us now speak of strategy," said Albert the Bear once again. "I have many estimates as to the numbers of Wends in Wagria, and Polabia, up until the forests that separate them from the Obodrites. We will need to outnumber their fighting men at least two to one, if not more. They also have several strongholds; the one in Oldenburg poses the greatest threat. It is here where I will concentrate my forces during the attack. I have a battle-hardened garrison ever-ready for battle, and I can levy many thousands of conscripts. I will also rouse mercenaries from Flanders if need be, and pay them off with land. We also will need auxiliaries, wagons, and the amount of bread and fodder that it takes to feed a large force of men and horses."

"I will rouse all of the faithful of Holsatia to fulfill God's promise to them," said Vizelin.

"My men do not need an excuse to slay Wends," said Marchrad.

"We have been waiting for this opportunity for epochs, and I assure you that we will surely make the most of the opportunity."

"My garrison is ever battle-ready," said Count Henry of Badwide.

"I will also rouse Westphalian mercenaries, and feed them out of my own pocket."

All eyes turned to Count Adolph II of Schaumberg. "I bring to the table the binding piece of this deal," he said. "I will keep the Danes and the Obodrites at each other's throats while we level the Wagrians, and the Polabians. I also have my warriors who are in constant struggle with the Wends. Afterwards I will make peace with Nyklot and then we will have our new settlements fortified in stone."

"Amen," said Marchrad again.

"Now let us drink cider, gentlemen," said Count Adolph.

As the winter winds whistled outside the men ate their venison steaks, and drank cider together, laughing merrily, and with the compact

of the deal and preparation for war all of the old divisions amongst them were mended.

The ensuing September, on the eighth day of the month, the aforementioned parties met in Faldera to hear mass and to celebrate the birth of the Holy Mother of God. After midnight vespers, there was a procession of monks carrying relics, candles, and crosses, and several thousand armed men fell to their knees, kneeling in a great circle before the holy church.

Dawn was still approaching and the candles of the church illuminated the clearing in the woods where the church stood. Vizelin stood on a bear pelt with his hands outstretched towards heaven as he read a long passage from the bible: Deuteronomy 18.9 to 20.18. Two monks were kneeling to his left and right, holding candles in their hands.

From left to right the war-chiefs were as gathered with their men: Count Henry of Badwide kneeling, visored helm in hand, was surrounded by over a hundred Holsatian cavalrymen, four hundred infantrymen from Sturmaria and the Ditmarsh, and over three hundred Westphalian mercenaries. The saddle on his horse displayed his blazon and standard: a rampant horned-stag which fluttered in the wind, and a shield marked with red bendlets.

To the right of this group was Marchrad and his ragtag army of poorly equipped men, numbering about six hundred in all, armed with rusty flails, axes, and scythes. Some of them had iron caps and mutilated mail-shirts. These men rallied around a standard of St. George. Marchrad looked on at all of the strangers with immense distrust.

Further to the right was the largest party of the confederates, which belonged to Albert the Bear, Margrave of the Nordmark. His horse displayed his shield painted with pallets and had a flurrying azure standard with a rampant brown bear. His cavalry consisted of three hundred-fifty marchmen, all battle-hardened and accustomed to his command. He also had a bulging contingency of infantry with pikes and crossbows who could withstand cavalry sallies from the Wendish strongholds. Besides them was a group of Flemish mercenaries, armed with broadswords, cross-

bannered spears, all well-armored with visored-helms, chain-shirts and iron gauntlets. Each had a palm-frock displayed on his sur-coat.

The last party of kneeling warriors was that of Count Adolph II of Schaumberg. His shield exhibited a green fess, and his standard was that of ermine, flaunting a black displayed eagle. His men were not as well equipped as those of Albert the Bear's, with only simple iron caps, broadswords, axes, and flails, but they made up for it in their fierce intensity and experience against Danes, and Wends. As all other men bowed their heads, he gazed around at the various parties as his flaming red hair fluttered about in the sharp wind.

Beyond him to his left were wagons full of rations and fodder, with auxiliaries waiting by, some of them lowering the tents that the men had just waken from about an hour ago.

Father Vizelin preached, hands spread out towards heaven, as he concluded the biblical passage. "And thus noble Christians it is assured you that you will either earn the laurels of martyrdom, migrating directly to Christ where he will greet you with open arms, or if he deems you worthy, you will partake of a new Promised Land flowing with milk and honey, as it is promised to you by the Lord. And so as we humble servants of the Lord have obeyed His Word, reconciling Christ with Caesar, it is assured that this kingdom, this Roman Empire of ours will last until the end of times, when all of the enemies of God are blotted out from the Book of Life or willingly converted to the blessed yoke of Christ. And only thus will we make way for the second coming of the Lord, whose Holy Name is hallowed now and forevermore!"

"Amen," exclaimed everyone present.

"I now bless you holy warriors, who go forth to battle Satan's minions on this earth, even as God's holy army of angels battles the demonic winged-rebels in the sky! And as the ground is stained and defiled with the blood of righteous Christian martyrs it is therefore divinely sanctioned to belong to the humble followers of Christ."

All bowed before God.

"Gloria Patri, et Filio, et Spiritui Sancto. Sicut erat in principio, et nunc, et semper et in saecula saeculorum."

"Amen," said the congregation.

"Dominus vobiscum! Pax Domini sit semper vobiscum!" and with that he made the Sign of the Cross, and all men present stood up, raising

their swords and bannered spears in the air, shouting in glory and triumphant exaltation.

The trumpet sounded and the various parties filed out towards their chosen destination.

The sound of the trumpet, and the fiercely edifying sermon resonated with the men as they marched out to do God's work. Marchrad and his men filed out first. His men knew the woods of Wagria as it was their native home. They had several canoes full of supplies that they hauled down the River Trave.

They camped several bowshots away from the Wends, and attacked the following sunrise, making wide slaughter amongst the inhabitants. Many were slain on both sides, but finally Lübeck was delivered to them, and all of the adult populace was put to the sword.

They built a large bonfire and threw the screaming babies into it. Marchrad watched unflinchingly as his men did this, and praised God.

Several dozen miles away, Albert the Bear and his men were besieging the stronghold of Oldenburg, or *Starigrad*, in the Wendish tongue. They burned the huts and crops, slew the animals, then damned up the water supply. The beleaguered inhabitants were short on supplies. After a few days of holding out, their meager cavalry made a sally from the stronghold, but were cut down from the infantry's pikes and crossbows. When they surrendered they were promised peace in exchange for their lives, but were all slaughtered and butchered upon exiting.

Count Adolph and his men faced a ferocious open-field battle, and finally routed their enemies after several hours of intense carnage. When the battle was over one of his bloodstained men approached Count Adolph, who gave him his Mercy-Giver dagger. "Work on your Latin," he said to the man who then began to stab in the throat every fallen enemy that still breathed. "*Unus, duo, tres, quartuor, ciunque, sex, septem, octo,*" he counted as Adolph stared at him to make sure we finished the job. *I still hear the music*, he thought to himself. "*Septigenti novem, septigenti decem,*" said the warrior as he continued after an hour's worth of butchery, entire body sticky with blood. Meanwhile Count Henry was ambushed in Polabia and was routed by fierce tribes. Finally he sent a messenger to Albert the Bear who in turn sent one hundred cavalrymen to lead the

battle. After the siege of Oldenburg, he took the majority of his men and headed south to help Count Henry exterminate the Polabian tribes.

Several Polabian boys and girls hid in the marshes underwater, breathing through the hollowed-out reeds. Many others fled after watching their husbands and fathers fall in battle. The few that stayed children that stayed were sold into slavery, sent as far as Cordoba and Baghdad.

It took about three weeks in all to depopulate the regions of Wagria, and Polabia. Such carnage had never been seen before in the memory of the bloodstained soil.

And the momentous bloodshed was only just beginning.

7.

The church swelled with disposed children. As the first sun beams crept through the cracks in the wall, Bern, Bozidara, and Dmitri flocked around a little girl with flaxen hair. Bozidara was crying hysterically, and Dmitri went to calm her. He patted her head, which had a soothing effect on her.

"Mother, mother," cried the little as she dozed in and out of sleep. "Your eyes are bleeding mother; there is blood coming out of your eyes!" She clutched at the blankets, and tears came out of her eyes. "Mother,

wake up and I will heal you. Wake up, mother!" She continued to cry as she drifted in and out of conscience.

"These are the last of the Polabian tribes!" cried Dabrawa. "Their language, their customs, their laughter, and their tears are forever blotted out from the face of the earth! What could possibly be more horrible?"

"Life is forever filled with such tragedies," replied Dmitri. "This little girl will find a way one day that will give her happiness."

Bozidara continued crying. "I know now that my husband died for nothing," she said, facing Bern. "Your people take and take and take and do not desire a peaceful conversion at all."

Bern lowered his head, and responded without making eye contact. "No Christian could dare commit such a horrendous crime against women and children. When I was in the monastery we always took in orphans no matter their state of apostasy. It was the Holsatian pagans that committed this crime. I have seen them with my own eyes. They are a bloodthirsty lot, and do not follow the true ways of the Lord."

"You are an ignorant monk," proclaimed Dabrawa. "Who do you think guides those wretched monsters? Do you know who? Do you really want to know who?"

Bern became flustered and actually lost his temper for a brief moment. "What you say is not true. Although I have not seen my teacher in a few years I do know that he is in Faldera, ministering to his flock and would never think of assisting such acts against woman or child."

"Believe what you will," she replied. "But I will no longer go on believing in your ways, monk. Not after this."

Bern lifted his head with a look of shock.

"I will go to Nyklot," she continued, "and beg forgiveness. And I will find the real killer of my husband, and Beleknegini will forgive me, and I will speak before the assembly and I will tell them never to follow the ways of foreigners ever again. And your pigeon, monk?" she said, looking at him accusingly. "What did your pigeon say? Do you remember your pigeon?"

Bern lowered his head, and felt a deep anguish in his soul.

"You brought this all upon us, monk, don't you realize? It was all you!"

Just then everyone looked up and saw Pribislav peeking his head through the doorway. He lifted up the deer pelt and walked in with a smile on his face. "I couldn't help but overhear the conversation. It appears that others are now thinking the same way as we in the high counsel."

Bozidara threw herself at Pribislav's feet, begging forgiveness.

"Do not worry, kind woman. You will have your time to address the assembly...which is the reason that I have come: to inform you all that we will have an assembly and all will have a time to speak their peace. It appears that we will be going to war. The Niemcy have begun to settle foreign immigrants into Wagria. We have sent messages to our friend Adolph of Schaumberg, but he has not responded. We must burn out the newcomers, for they are a threat to our very existence."

"I am in favor of it!" cried Bozidara. "And we must find the killer of my husband for he is the spy of the Niemcy and the one that desires our death. There must be justice, and we must find the killer of my husband!"

"Indeed," replied Pribislav, with a slight grin.

"Do you have any theories, Pribislav?" asked Dmitri.

"I intend to use my mind, Dmitri of Novgorod."

"I could not recommend anything more beneficial," said Dmitri.

"Please tell us how you see it, Pribislav," said Bozidara.

Pribislav sat at the table, setting his sword at his side. "I will tell you all that I know at the moment, and any of you may fill in more details as you see fit.

"First of all there is Boyan, our flamen: he hates all Christians with a passion as they threaten his post, and are responsible for banishing him into the woods, via the monks that controlled my grandfather, our late Christian Knyaz. His amber amulet with the lizard inclusion was found on the body, clutched in the hands. That was the only amulet like that that exists. If it wasn't Boyan than somebody must have stolen it from him. Who?"

"And if it was Boyan?" asked Dmitri.

"Why would he leave the amulet there if it identified him?"

"He knew that the man's Christian faith would be discovered," replied Dmitri, "and therefore would be vindicated, just as he was. It was widely whispered in the marketplace that Ludomir harbored sentiments towards the conversion, as he thought that it would help to integrate the

Obodrites into the community of nations, and destroy the pretext for Niemcy invasion."

"It is a touchy subject, Dmitri of Novgorod. To kill a flamen would be a great insult to the peasant populace, who would fear the end of the seasons; that the harvest dry up; it was our flamens that made these assertions over the generations and now they are widely believed. Also we might wish to unite with the Rugians one day and as they elevate their flamen over their knyaz, it would destroy our alliance if we put our tribal flamen to the sword."

"But if this flamen is responsible for my husband's death he must be impaled," supplicated Bozidara.

"We must think of alternative theories for the time being, and whittle them down until our will is like a spear."

"What are your other theories?" asked Dmitri.

"It is my father's firm belief that whoever shot the owl that chased after the pigeon of this monk Here, is the killer of Ludomir and the man that has brought this devastation upon us. Even if he is not the actual murderer we will ensure that he will tell us who the real murderer is, and where we can find him."

"That would conveniently rule out the flamen," said Bozidara.

"The man whose amulet was found on my husband's body, the man who feuded with my husband, the man whose livelihood and prestige rests on the murder of my husband!"

"Come now, good woman," replied Pribislav. "Let us reason here; wouldn't you agree that the person that shot the hunting owl had a motive in doing so?"

"Why else would someone do something?"

"And would you agree that if that someone had a motive then it must be obvious to that person what the pigeon signified?"

"Of course," she replied. "But after this monk here told you what the pigeon signified who did you tell?"

Pribislav lowered his head. "I believe I mentioned this at the marketplace, and as a result no doubt it spread like wildfire after that, and within a day everyone knew about it. Certainly I will have more prudence in the future."

"Perhaps then it was the priest, Vizelin?" suggested Bozidara.

Bern shot her a look of contempt.

"Perhaps, but it is not probable," replied Pribislav. "Do you have any idea how hard it is to fall a flying bird? Only an experienced hunter that passes his days in the open field is capable of such an act, not a priest who passes his days under a roof. No, the man that shot the owl was a hunter."

"And he must have been sympathetic to the Christian cause," said Bozidara.

"Or at least sympathetic to the destruction of the Obodrites," suggested Dmitri. "Such motives are much more widespread."

"That day the people were singing and dancing," continued Pribislav. "Whoever shot the owl was hidden away in the forest, and must have been very inconspicuous. As a result, it is not necessary to think that it was just someone that was so obvious as the flamen, or as the priest."

"What about that cursed Northman, Thorkell?" asked Bern. "Have you considered him?"

"Of course we have; who else would be so wonton and so greedy as to desire our destruction? He also had access to the wood paths via his slaving emporia on the seaside."

Bozidara squinted her eyes, and listened intently. "And what of the forest Niemcy themselves? They know the woods just as good as any Wagrian, and are the source of the massacre that has taken place."

"I have seen their viciousness close at hand," said Bern. "There is a rather dangerous set of toll-takers that have rooted themselves along the River Trave. They are bloodthirsty, and hate the Wagrians with all their heart."

"We know of them," replied Pribislav. "We had intended to root them out last year, but instead we decided to raid the Danes. Perhaps we should have concentrated our energies on those brutes, instead."

"But let this much be known; whoever is the murderer of our dearly departed military commander does not fear the haunted woods, and therefore is no peasant; he is a skilled hunter, and killer that makes secret rendezvous' with people in the forest at night, and has a visceral hatred for our people."

Bern stood up, and glared at all of them. "I must say," he began. "I have always been an outsider here, and I still am. Be that as it may I have a burning love in my heart for the Obodrites, and I swear by the God that I swear by that I truly wish their good. I would never do anything to hurt

any of them, and I trust that neither would my teacher, the priest that is called Vizelin of Hameln. Furthermore, I believe that I can find out who the killer is. I trust that I will then vindicate my teacher, myself, and my faith, and also bring the murderer to justice."

Everyone was silent for a moment and kept their eyes on Bern, not knowing exactly what to think.

"Is there something that you are not telling us, monk?" asked Pribislav.

Bern grew more confident as he spoke. "Only this," he said. "I believe that the girl that has frequently stayed here, the one that is now married to the new military commander is in some way involved in all this."

"Why do you suspect her?" asked Pribislav.

"It is just a thought. Be that as it may, I need to find her as I have not seen her in awhile, and if I follow her, I believe that she will lead me to the killer."

"There is only one problem with that," said Pribislav. "Sobieslav feels shamed, and has built a small hut near the woods to avoid the gossip that surrounds him. He trains the druzhina, but does not keep company with the rest of us anymore. I believe that he has taken his wife with him and will certainly not relinquish her for observation. He will not rest until he has vindicated himself for his costly error, and I assume that he keeps his wife all to himself in his time of need."

"It is not so," responded Bozidara. "This girl is severely wounded in spirit as most girls who experience violation are, and is perhaps not even aware of the fact that she is married; she wonders about to and fro, flirting with many men and collecting flowers in the forest."

"Why would your cousin pick such a girl?" asked Dmitri.

"I don't know," replied Pribislav. "He is not a man that desires peace in any way. When she neglected to enter the stronghold on the night of the infamous horn blow he returned and birched her savagely. Such is not a custom amongst our nations, and is not recommended for a happy marriage."

"And what about your cousin, Pribislav, son of Nyklot?" asked Bozidara. "Was it not he who had the most to gain from my husband's death? Was it not a certain messenger of his, Peter of Wollin, who was sent to deliver him, and who disappeared on the night of the murder?"

Pribislav was silent for a moment. "Such an idea has not been considered."

"I believe that it should be considered," responded Bozidara, sternly. "I believe that all ideas should be considered, no matter what the costs may be, no matter what ugly worms are writhing and crawling under the rocks waiting to be uncovered."

"I agree with Bozidara," said Dmitri. "No idea, no matter how sacred, should be left undissected. If ever there is an idea that is considered un-considerable, than certainly there are powerful forces behind it, keeping it's irrationality in a state of utter holiness in order to maintain their own grip on the minds of the common people."

"Very well," said Pribislav. "Shall I mention your theory to my father, Bozidara and Dmitri?"

Both of them lowered their heads.

"So we will keep our tongues to ourselves for now and continue to investigate."

"So be it," said Bozidara.

"By the way, monk – I am here to inform you to kindly attend our assembly today. I believe that you might even be called upon to speak in front of the people."

Bern felt a deep fear in the pit of his stomach. "Why me?" he asked.

"Because you are deeply involved in the fate of our community, monk. Whether you like it or not."

With that he lifted up the deer pelt, and left.

Shortly thereafter she and Dmitri filed out, leaving Bern alone to look after and tend to several crying children. He gave them milk and soft oats, leaving almost nothing for himself. He soothed them when they cried, and said prayers over their head, smiling as he felt the prayers lifting up towards The Heavenly Father who infused the church with His Holy Spirit in superfluous abundance.

After several hours of fervent prayer he lifted his head towards heaven, opening his eyes and found that he was enveloped in a shadow. He looked towards the doorway, and saw the gigantic figure of Sobieslav in it, bending at the knees, and leaning against the side of the doorway to make room for himself.

He was wearing his mail shirt, which hung out over his belt, and then dropped down to the waist, with a slit in the middle. His left hand was perched on the pommel of his broadsword.

"To whom do you pray, monk?" asked Sobieslav.

"To Him that created the Heavens and the Earth," replied an indignant Bern, with a slight fear in his belly.

"*Svarog* is indifferent to supplications. He is only the creator and observer. It is below his dignity to interfere with the lowly creatures of his creation. But his son Perun answers prayers, especially prayers accompanied by sacrifices; the bigger the sacrifice the more he is pleased."

Bern looked to the ground, and felt a slight tinge of anger rise in his heart.

"My woman," said Sobieslav. "Where is she?"

"I have not seen her in many days," replied Bern.

Sobieslav walked in and wiped his face in the holy water, making little bubbles as he dunked his head in the bowl.

"Know this, monk; even if you are hiding her, it is below my dignity to slay you with my sword," he said. "But the god that I worship is a hungry god, and is always willing to accept hefty sacrifices. I do not know why exactly, but Perun likes it when I crush walnuts with my bare hands and put it before his alter. Why me crushing things with my bare hands gives him satisfaction I am unaware."

He then turned his head to Bern and looked him directly in the eye.

"You aren't hiding my wife from me, are you?" he asked, brazenly.

Bern's anger turned into a deep fear, and feeling of resentment. "I am not hiding your wife, and have no desire to do so."

Sobieslav stared at him for another moment with an intensely unsociable ogle. He then turned his back to Bern, and left. "Remember where you are, boy – you are not at home," he said, exiting.

Bern walked to the crack in the door to glare at Sobieslav as he mounted his horse and rode off. *I will find your wife at her worst moment,* he thought to himself. *And when I do I will expose the dark forces that work in this community.*

8.

The rough amber began to melt on the sauna hearthstones, creating the most relaxing and pleasant aroma that Nyklot could imagine, more so than the foreign incense sold in the marketplace. Even when he was busy ruling his kingdom he often yearned for this precious beginning of the day.

Yaroslav and Boliliut huddled around him as he sat on the wooden bench, lightly striking his back and arms with birch branches until the blood surfaced on the skin in tiny globules.

"Sobieslav does not appear," said Yaroslav.

"It portrays an extremely base character," added Boliliut, as if finishing the thought of Yaroslav.

"Patience," said Nyklot. "Were we not young at one time? He was only called with the warhorn slightly before we dumped the first buckets of water on the stones."

"But should he not be held accountable for his actions? Is he not showing a lack of respect for the high counsel?" asked Boliliut.

Nyklot raised his hand above his head, and there was silence for several more minutes, until Boliliut dumped another bucket of water on the stones. Just then Sobieslav walked into the sauna, and kneeled at Nyklot's feet.

"Knyaz," he said, with his head lowered. "Please forgive my tardiness. I was looking for my wife, and..."

"Men may counsel men," said Nyklot. "But a wife's counsel is irreplaceable."

Sobieslav remained silent.

"Today we will have an assembly," said Boliliut. "The whole community will be there. Do you plan on attending or will you continue hiding in the woods, hunting boar by yourself while duty is neglected?"

"I will come," he replied. He then put some powdered soap into a bucket, creating a lather to put on Nyklot's face.

"Listen to me, nephew," said Nyklot. "It is my duty to keep spirits high, lest the people fall into melancholy and despair. I have lost two brothers in warfare, and have been betrayed by those closest to me in my time of need. But I will tell you one thing that I would like you to remember – self-pity is an expensive indulgence. It not only reflects on you, but reflects on me, and infects the community with a poisonous atmosphere."

Sobieslav bowed low, reflecting on the admonishment.

"Nobody said it would be easy, but you are now in a position of high standing, and must act the part, do you understand?"

"Yes, Knyaz," he said, and began to lather his chin and neck with the soap. "There is not a single person that looks down on you, for we all make mistakes."

He bowed again, and when he rose he put the Indian razor to Nyklot and began to shave him.

"Have you sent an emissary to Knyaz Adolph?" Nyklot asked Sobieslav.

"I have, Knyaz. He returned this morning, and reported that the garrison of Adolph reported that he was in the southern part of the empire, and would report to you as soon as he had returned."

"Very convenient for him," said Boliliut.

"Meanwhile my scouts tell me that the Niemcy have dug in along the Trave, and will not let any river-traffic pass through," said Nyklot.

"They are importing farmers from all over their empire," lamented Yaroslav. "Thus the exterminated Wagrians' blood makes the ground fertile for their thievery and bloodlust."

Boliliut gave him a sharp look. "Yaroslav, son of Prosimir – you of all people should know that some things that are obvious need not be spoken of."

There was silence for a moment.

"It will be the decision of the entire community if we are to go to war with the Niemcy, as we are outnumbered, and will have to make great sacrifices. But I swear by Perun that as I am the descendant and successor of the ancient Knyaz Lech, and the great Knyaz Mistui that I will lead my druzhina in battle against our enemies!"

"I will do whatever you request of me, Knyaz," said Sobieslav, humbly. "And if it requires me throwing myself headlong into the enemy so be it. I must vindicate myself."

"You will have time for vindication, but first you must learn more patience. Any reckless boar can throw himself head first into the fray of battle, but you will vindicate yourself and your prestige by always being a steadfast leader who considers all of the outcomes and implications of the situation, holding his tongue and his sword in check until the right moment to strike."

Yaroslav and Boliliut nodded their heads with assent.

Sobieslav bowed low to show that he understood, and then completed shaving Nyklot around the chin and mustache.

"Good," said Nyklot. "Now we must go forth to the assembly – Yaroslav, rouse the peasants, Sobieslav, you rouse the druzhina, and Boliliut have my throne brought out to the open field and perched under this scorching sun."

They bowed low, and upon exiting the sauna dressed Nyklot in his finest silk tunic; black and lined with golden embroidered interlacing lines, with a rampant bear motif on the chest. They then blew their respective signals on their horns, and with that the populace was roused to the open field next to the druzhina's training quarters.

It was a luminous day and the wind was strong. Perun's banner flew on top of the raised tent, mounted on a warhorse, holding sword in one hand and drinking-horn in the other. Below it, several other flags flew with images of displayed eagles, and rampant bears.

Several thousand people gathered around the raised tent which stood several feet taller than the tallest man present. Below the top of the tent was Nyklot's throne. Boliliut, Pribislav and Vratislav stood at its sides.

Soon thereafter, Nyklot approached the tent on his steed, followed by Sobieslav, and Beleknegini, both mounted. The people cheered as Nyklot approached his throne.

Nyklot dismounted from his steed, and sheathing his sword, took his seat. Sobieslav and Beleknegini stood with the other members of counsel by his side. They waited with stoic faces until the clamor of the crowd calmed down.

Knyaz Nyklot rose from his throne and spoke piercingly to the multitude. "We are called forth today on a matter of the utmost importance; one that concerns every man, woman, and child of Veligrad and all of the surrounding Obodrite villages. We are here to decide whether or not to go to war with the Niemcy. If the Obodrites are prepared to go to war than I will lead you to victory; if not we will develop an alternative plan. We will now hear those who desire to come forth and speak."

Yaroslav was standing next to several other elders of all of the respective clans that lived within Veligrad, and from the villages that stood within several dozen bowshots away.

Boyan stood surrounded by his acolytes and several followers. He took the opportunity to speak first.

"Thank you, noble Knyaz, for rousing the people before your throne today," he said loudly, so that his voice would travel far and wide. He waved his amber staff in the air. "I bow to you, and the druzhina. I bow to the village elders and their accumulated wisdom. I bow to the whole people here, and most of all I bow low before Perun, and his mighty battle axe to whom we owe our victories, and our rich harvests. Thanks to his love we have a bounty from all over the earth, a rich supply of silver with which we can arm our druzhina and train it to be a supreme fighting force. We are prosperous indeed, but we accompany our wealth with the utmost negligence of duty and respect. Little is given to our god in the way of sacrifice, and his treasury is almost nil. Meanwhile, our closest kinsmen have all been put to the sword.

"Perun is forewarning us! He is warning us that if we are to continue in bounty and harvest we must show him proper respect! And in order to do so we must remove the stench of the Christians from our community! They plague our harvests and our fortune with their vile ways. They take our children from us and teach them to accept that their ancestors are boiling in a lake of fire. When the peasants plow the field one man sings to Perun, while his neighbor sings to the god of the worms! It has disrupted all harmony in Veligrad!"

He paused to look around him. All eyes were on him and many were deeply affected by his speech.

"We must remove this plague from our vicinity once and for all! Only when we are pure again, only when we are undivided can we make war. Before then it is useless to speak of such things as war!"

There was a loud roar of support for Boyan's speech. Bern, who was present, felt himself sink low and felt the urge to be invisible.

Yaroslav waved his hands in the air. "Good people of Veligrad and men who have come from other Obodrite villages, I beseech you to listen to me, the tribal elder Yaroslav, son of Prosimir. Few men have as much clout as our wise and noble flamen who has dedicated himself to Perun, and therefore to the preservation and continuance of our harvests. Be that as it may, I daresay that he is incorrect about the Christians. It is impossible to slay them because it is their deep belief that ground stained with the blood of their fallen ones is ripe for invasion. We must not give them yet another pretext, as we have all by now learnt that they use our rituals to their own favor, transmitting to each other that we are blood-drinking savages."

Looking around, Yaroslav saw that he had everyone's attention. He smiled at his beloved tribe and continued his speech. "If one thing is certain, it is this – war is the greatest test of truth, for when the warhorn calls its battle signal, we see who is one of us and who is not. We see who man's the stronghold, risking his blood, and who runs to his boat to abscond. When war knocks, and it always does, than friend and enemy separate themselves, and no amount of deceit can robe the nakedness of its truth. It is therefore useless to kill a small amount of indigent people, but it does call into question how we as a people could have arrived at such a point where there is no unity, when we all do not sing the same songs anymore and worship the same gods. We live yoked together with strangers who contaminate our ancient ways, and why are they here? What do they serve? They are only here for silver, and what do we gain? Silk tunics! Ivory-handled knives and bottled wine! Well, let me tell you all something – We do not need these things! Our ancestors were content with linen tunics, antler-handled knives, and homebrewed mead!"

There was a loud cry of approval from the peasant populace, who flung their fists in the air, and screamed in support of the elder.

"It is not the church that is the dangerous incursion in Veligrad; it is the marketplace, and the primacy of the marketplace that threatens us more than the church and even more than foreign invasion itself. If we are

to make way we must make sure that we have nothing but friends on our side. If we keep the stalls bustling with wares it is my firm believe that all of our ways will go across the sea and that none will stay on this earth for much longer."

The peasants burst out in loud applause again with much screaming and yelling.

"When our community is besieged by foreigners our young learn duplicity of tongue as a way of life instead of direct honest speech as was taught when I was young. The youth are not content with linen but feel that they must have silk. They care not to listen to the tales of our ancient chiefs but instead focus on the foreign warriors who appear more fashionable just because it is told from the lips of some unusual trader who sells exotic spices and comes from overseas. They tell us tales to weaken us, not to strengthen us. Our tales and our songs are best for us. Thus I have spoken."

The community roared with approval. Nyklot leaned forward with interlaced fingers on his lap. He tapped his thumbs together and listened intently.

Boliliut stepped off the platform and called attention to himself with gestures and supplications.

"I have served in the tribal council through eleven harsh winters as the treasurer of the Obodrites, and have seen what separates us from other tribes: we have maintained our independence in the face of overwhelming odds precisely because we *are* traders. There was a time, and I believe that the elders will recall this fact, when we Obodrites were *tributaries* of the Niemcy. Now we collect tribute from clans deep into the heart of the Oder River where the Sorbs live. Trading amber and fur has increased our arsenal, our druzhina, and our capacity to hold on to the very autonomy that you, Yaroslav, son of Prosimir, cherish."

There were many cheers as Boliliut continued about the might of the Obodrites.

"Our treasury is so big, in fact, that we have an accumulation of wealth that goes back in time even before a hundred winters ago, and we can take in refugees if we please, as we have now chosen to do, out of the kindness of our Knyaz' heart. This is something that most tribes cannot afford to do, and look at the consequences; we take tribute, but do not pay; we have a huge arsenal of fine blades and crossbows. All of this comes

from silver, and silver is the only international language that every people speak. I propose that we root out the main problem, which is the confounded Niemcy woodsmen that live along the River Trave! It is them that are responsible for barbarities against the Wagrians, and it is them that corrupt the flow of goods that come in from Saxony."

"But noble treasurer," replied another elder that stood next to Yaroslav. "Those monsters are just pawns of the more powerful empire that stands behind them. We are outnumbered at least ten to one by them. I have seen Saxony with my own eyes when I was a young man, and it is vast, overflowing with youths who are eager to take up the sword and fight against us. Should we not isolate ourselves before it is too late?"

"I must admit that I held back another benefit of silver," replied Boliliut. "And that is – mercenaries. Yes, some of you that have endured many, many harsh winters will cringe at the very idea, be it that the former knyaz, father of our current Knyaz, employed foreign mercenaries, despite the fact that they were brutal to the Obodrites. Be that as it may, you bring up a great point about us being outnumbered as we are, at least ten to one! Within the Roman Empire there are vast lands beyond Saxony that are filled with warriors, peasants and monks, and we are even forgetting about our other enemy to the north that comes in from many islands to ravage our lands, but we have survived here from generation to generation precisely because we have been equally wise, cunning, and daring as our enemies. But if the time comes that we need to increase our armies we will be able to purchase Samogitian mercenaries to equal the fields of battle so that we may level our foes and cut them down as grass. This, alas, was a novelty that the dearly departed Wagrians did not have."

There was much discussion in the crowd amongst themselves.

Finally Sobieslav, impetuous as ever jumped down from the platform and spoke amidst a crowd of his druzhina-brothers.

"I will speak now, although I am young, although I am impulsive, and although I am a beekeeper."

There was a roar of laughter, and Nyklot smiled at his young commander for lightening the dreary mood of the people.

"But although I am young I do know that in life there are times of feasting, and times of sacrifice, and the one goes together very good with the other on many different levels. Now is a time for sacrifice for the enemy is taking the fight to us, slowly but deadly, digging in to our own

hinterlands, multiplying like hares, but like hares with vicious claws. I propose that we take the fight to the enemy! I believe this only adds to the wisdom laid out by the previous speakers. We must bow low to our Knyaz, and have him guide us in battle! And as Perun hurls down his lightning bolts onto the earth so we will obey his commands and crush our new neighbors while they are still in a stage of infancy – unfortified, and fragile!

"Under the auspices of our noble Knyaz we could not only take back Wagria, and Polabia, but united all of the Slavic tribes under Perun's war banner. We could then create a modern confederacy here on the Baltic coast, growing rich off trade and plunder for the next thousand winters to come!"

With this he brandished his sword in the air, and received a larger cry of raucous approval than any of the previous speakers. The warriors cried loudest of all, brandishing their swords in the air.

Boliliut's and Yaroslav's eyes met with raised eyebrows.

After a few minutes the clamor died down and there was much commotion in the crowd. Nyklot raised his head, and saw that the back tiers of the multitude were making way for a mounted warrior carrying a black displayed eagle standard.

People made way for him as he approached Nyklot. He dismounted, and then bowing low, approached the platform under the tent. Sobieslav took his sword and knife. He then stood close to Nyklot, who gestured for the man to come forward.

"You are one of Knyaz Adolph's men?" asked Nyklot with interest.

The man had auburn hair, and was missing most of his front teeth. He walked forward, bowed low, and kissed the hem of Nyklot's tunic.

"I am," he said with a heavy accent. "My knyaz is approaching, and requests an audience with you. He brings many gifts."

"What does your Knyaz wish to speak to me about?"

"About your mutual friendship," he said. "Will you see him?"

"How appropriate of him to come at this moment, when all of our forest guards are gathered together in this assembly. Perhaps I know now that he is coming on friendly terms otherwise he could have ambushed us here and now, helpless and unprepared as we are at the moment."

Everyone in hearing distance laughed aloud at what Nyklot said, but it seemed to go past the emissary, who only had a spattering of the language. He looked up at Nyklot still not knowing what to say or do.

"Bring him forward, man!" said Nyklot. "This discussion we are having now concerns him as well as us."

The man bowed low. "May I take the Christian monk with me?" he asked.

"If you do I will have to take a splinter out of your toe to return the favor," responded Nyklot. The man didn't understand again and Vratislav laughed aloud. "Of course you may take him! Be gone now!" The man bowed, and headed for his horse. Sobieslav handed him his blades, and then called for Bern, who came forward.

"Bishop Vizelin calls for you," he said to Bern in his native tongue. "Will you come? It is now or never."

"Bishop?" he asked. The man asked again and said this was his only chance to leave before he rode off.

"If it is only possible now than I shall have to decline your offer, and stay here as an act of heartfelt contrition," said Bern.

The emissary shrugged his shoulders and then rode off beyond the open fields into the wooded forest.

Count Adolph rode in the middle of four men, two on each side. He was unmistakable because of the flaming red hair that flung up and down as he bounced on the saddle, grabbing the stirrups with one hand, and a javelin with a white flag hanging from it in the other.

He alone rode through the crowd. It made way for him, and he unmounted in front of the tent. The druzhina made a pathway for him to come forward. Sobieslav met him at the wooden steps that led up to the tent, and searched under his chain mail and green leggings, took his sword and allowed him to come forward where the two men greeted each other with a hug, and three kisses on the sides of the cheeks.

"Knyaz Nyklot," said Count Adolph, smiling. He had only a slight accent. "It has been awhile."

"So it has been," replied Nyklot, who gestured to Vratislav to fetch another chair of equal height for the count. "I believe the last time we communicated was when we sent your share of our raid on the Northmen's coastal slaving emporia."

"I thank you for it," replied Count Adolph, smiling.

"You don't mind the people here? They are all staring at you right now."

Vratislav fetched the chair and put it at Count Adolph's feet. They then both sat.

"Of course I don't mind, I enjoy seeing the flower of Obodrite youth all in one place."

Nyklot smiled at this last comment, grasping its insidiousness. "Do you know why we are gathered here?" he asked with searching eyes.

"I believe I do, and I believe that you know that I do, and are asking my in order to see the way that I respond – you are gathered here to discuss the fate of the Wagrians and the Polabians that were brutally defeated in battle recently."

"They were brutally taken unawares, and slaughtered," replied Nyklot. "There was no battle that I am aware of, unless you have light to shed on that subject?"

"I happened to be tending to the estate of my late grandmother in Bavaria when the fighting took place. I arrived only recently and upon hearing your message I came at once, in person, to display my friendship to you."

"Of course you were in Bavaria, and of course you knew nothing about this," said Nyklot. "But are you not the supreme Knyaz of Saxony? And are you not responsible for the actions of your underlings, just as I hold myself responsible for the actions of my people?"

"As I have tried to explain to you before, Knyaz, our system is much more complicated, as I am theoretically bound to a knyaz even higher than myself."

"You speak of the new high Knyaz, Emperor Conrad III?"

"No," said Count Adolph with the most serious eyes. "I mean the new Duke of Saxony, the so-called Lion, who is also called Henry. It is he that has much hunger for land and souls in our region of the world."

"So you yourself, Knyaz Adolph, have an incentive to expand your land and titles at all costs as well, am I correct?"

Count Adolph smiled for letting himself not anticipate this question, and getting snared by such an obvious retort. "Much bigger incentive have I to receive tribute from Wagrians, and protection taxes on those who pass through my lands in order to make raids on the Northmen."

"Perhaps," said Nyklot. "I have not done the counting of which would yield more power and more silver, but if you know which is better for you than I assume that you must have done such counting..."

Count Adolph looked out at the crowd, and just then noticed that there were thousands of people staring at him, anxiously anticipating an outcome.

"If you doubt my friendship at this moment you will not when you see the gifts that I have collected and brought to you in compensation for the loss of your neighbors."

"The loss of our neighbors is irreplaceable and therefore the only placation that this assembly has decided on is putting the entire enemy to the sword, and taking back the land to the people who has stewarded it since Knyaz Lech walked bravely and severely on this earth."

"Are you sure?"

"I doubt that whatever beautiful silk and gems that you have in that wagon will me."

Count Adolph smiled. "You will soon see that my friendship is sincere." He then stood up and gestured for his escort to bring the wagon forward, which they did. Nyklot's druzhina cleared the path for it and it was wheeled forward towards the tent, where the two war-chiefs sat.

They both walked down to the wagon together, and Count Adolph lifted back the curtains, revealing a vast arsenal of delicately honed Saxon broadswords, pull-lever crossbows, iron flails, maces, and fine *Misericord* daggers.

"Do you still doubt my friendship?" he asked. Nyklot appeared stunned. Meanwhile Sobieslav was feeling the urge to slay the enemy escort, hold Count Adolph for ransom, and steal the weapons, an idea which he quickly conveyed to Vratislav who stood at his side.

"Will this not alone atone for all of the grievous errors that my tributaries have committed against yours? Your druzhina is already eyeing the wares lustfully."

"What is your steak in this?" asked Nyklot with his arms folded.

Count Adolph shrugged. "I simply desire to reinforce an old friendship that I feel that I have neglected for far too long."

"So be it," repeated Nyklot. "But this will only help us slay our enemies with more facility."

"Then do not desire war," said Count Adolph. "It will be better for everybody."

"Why are you so sure?"

"Because the newcomers are just simple peasants that will not desire any troops marching through their farmlands. With this new buffer you will be able to concentrate your raiding on Jutland alone, and I will lend my cavalry and my conscripts to keep the Danes occupied while you pick off the coasts."

"Their coasts are already empty for fear of our fleet and the fleet of the Rugians."

"So you will go further inland and raid their monasteries and their strongholds."

"Are you willing to swear an oath that you promise peace?"

"I will do so," said Count Adolph. "And I believe that you will have it; the Wagrians were troublesome to our Empire, as they made raids and ambushes inland against our roads, but the Obodrites fight our enemies, the Danes, and do not destroy our churches and our fortresses."

Nyklot listened intently.

"Not to mention," continued Count Adolph. "Our empire focuses its military might towards the south and the east. No one but this new Duke Henry the Lion wishes to dominate the north, and if he comes you will have a whole new arsenal to fight against him with."

"If I am to mention your deal with my counsel, and hence with this vast assembly, here you must promise to make an oath of blood and hair."

"So be it."

"And you must promise to prevent further incursions into our land."

"It will be beneficial for me, as well, to prevent that from happening."

"But if there are further inroads from the enemy than we will burn them out of the land once and for all."

"I concur, but only if they make further inroads."

Nyklot looked Count Adolph in the eyes for a long time. "Alright," he said. "We will discuss this matter with my counsel and then we will find the best way to put it to the people who will accept it if they see that we accept it."

"Very well," responded Count Adolph.

Boliliut, Vratislav, and Pribislav needed no convincing that such was the best deal for all parties. Sobieslav however raised as many doubts as he could, but failed to influence the other members of the counsel.

Afterwards Count Adolph himself spoke before the assembly and asked forgiveness on behalf of the Roman Empire for the Wagrian slaughter, and he then reaffirmed his friendship with the most symbolic token that he possessed: the rich arsenal that he had bestowed to Knyaz Nyklot, who in turn would distribute it accordingly to his own druzhina.

Finally the people accepted plans for peace on the premise that there were to be no further inroads into Obodrite territory.

Knyaz Nyklot and Count Adolph cut their hair and their hands, and put them together in a show of friendship and then hugged before the assembly who cheered on the peace process between the two great war-chiefs.

Count Adolph kissed Beleknegini's hand, bowed to Nyklot, and then rode off, followed by his escort, towards his honorary hut that was furbished for him, as he and his men were to dine at Nyklot's table that evening.

9.

After the assembly cleared out, Nyklot called an immediate counsel in the sauna. Those present were his two sons, and Sobieslav and Boliliut. As it was of military importance he did not call on Yaroslav.

How do you see it, father?" asked Pribislav.

Sobieslav listened as he shaved Nyklot's neck.

"It is obvious – Knyaz Adolph played some role in the invasion, which was either brazen or tacit, lest he himself fall into war with the other knyazes of the Niemcy. He has not called on me to help him fight any other knyaz, but only desires to pacify us. He thought his choice of gift would confuse me into accepting him as a loyal friend, however the implication is obvious; he and the others are digging in as much as they can now, because soon there will be a bigger knyaz that will press against them and against us. The weapons that he gave us were as much for his own benefit as for ours."

"Then why didn't we choose to destroy this filthy Niemcy this very day?" asked Sobieslav with a severe look in his eye. "Could we not unite with the Rugians and create an even larger fleet and druzhina to defend the land, and even take the fight to the enemy?"

Nyklot looked away from him, and towards Boliliut.

"Such considerations will be investigated in due time," said the treasurer. "Right now we need to direct our immediate course of action."

"We will hold tight for now," said Nyklot. "But we will need new eyes and ears in the empire. Knyaz Adolph will be our friend as long as we raid the Northmen's shores and pay him his share of the proceeds, but he will not help us ever again, in any way when his own kinsmen make inroads into our lands."

"Did you witness what happened with the Christian monk?" asked Pribislav.

"No I didn't," replied Nyklot.

"He refused an escort back to his land. I believe there is much to be read into in this action."

"You know him most of all, Pribislav. It is you that I always send to investigate the inner workings of that confounded church."

"As I speak such good Latin could there be any other choice in the matter?"

"I have never spoken with the monk," exclaimed Boliliut. "But I hear that he has picked up our language rather well, and is very fond of his host-mother, Bieslava. He also cares for several refugees in his church."

All the men present looked at one another.

"So, brother," said Vratislav. "You would trust this monk to spy on his own people for us? To save us? I scoff at this idea."

"I would not trust him for any regular reconnaissance work," replied Pribislav. "But this monk is a man of principle, and he abhors bloodshed more than anything else. He is even still investigating the murder of Ludomir."

With that Sobieslav's hand slipped and he slightly cut Nyklot's neck. Blood trickled down. Without wincing Nyklot looked Sobieslav in the eye with an offended gaze.

"Knyaz," said Sobieslav, bowing low. "Please forgive me."

"You do not know your own strength," said Nyklot. "With time you will learn the subtleties of command, but until then please let us continue our conversation."

The other men laughed, and Sobieslav looked offended and hurt. He continued to shave in silence, without speaking another single word during the counsel.

"So," said Nyklot. "You would have us rely on this monk alone?"

"Not alone," responded Pribislav with a confident smile. "But I would turn him out of here, and have him promise that if he hears any other thing about invasions and slaughters of Obodrites to come and inform us."

"Could you convince him to do this?" asked Nyklot.

"I could convince him even to swear this by the God that he swears by."

"Then that will be a start, but we will need something else."

"The first thing we should do," said Vratislav. "Is sail up the River Trave and root out the scum that blocks up traffic there. Not only does our

market suffer because of this, but our flow of information from the west as well."

"That is a sensible idea," said Nyklot. "But we have agreed not to transgress upon the newcomers."

"The forest Niemcy are not newcomers, but undoubtedly the perpetrators of the violence that has destroyed our neighbors. They are also hurting commerce here."

"Vratislav, you go to Adolph and tell him that we are unsatisfied with the toll-takers along the Trave. Tell him that we desire to root them out, but not to harm anyone else in the process."

He then snapped his fingers and turned to his other son.

"Pribislav, do what you can with the monk, but it is only best that he is turned out of here immediately and as gently as possible. Last time we entered the stronghold he did not appear, and should have had his abode burned to the ground as a result, but did not because we cannot harm their holy men. Now is the perfect pretext to have him leave.

"Vratislav, make sure to mention to Knyaz Adolph to take his monk with him."

"So be it," said Vratislav, and Pribislav, bowing simultaneously.

A half hour later Vratislav returned to the sauna. Nyklot, Sobieslav, and Boliliut were outside getting dressed. He rode up to them and unmounted from his horse.

"Knyaz Nyklot says that he cannot accept you to interfere with the toll-takers who reside along the River Trave."

Nyklot squinted his eyes.

"He says that he himself will do it, as you have no reason to sully your hands in such an undertaking."

"So be it," said Nyklot. "Now we will wait to hear from my other son."

"Are you willing to repay your debt?" asked Pribislav to a guilt-torn Bern.

"I am indeed," replied Bern, with sincerity.

"Then I ask you this, and only this – that you leave Veligrad tomorrow at dawn with your kinsmen, and only return under one condition..."

"What is that?"

"You spend your waking hours in the towers of your realm and have eyes and ears to know what is going on in high places, am I correct?"

"You are correct."

"And it is against your god's will to commit violence on women and children, am I correct?"

"You are," said Bern. "Please get to your point."

"Would you warn us if our enemy plans another invasion into our lands? Would you come and tell us in person?"

"I would do so," he replied after a brief pause.

"Would you swear by your god that you would?"

"I swear by the Ever-Living God that I will always tell the truth and will always protect the widow and the orphan."

Pribislav smiled. "I believe you," he said.

"I will leave tomorrow," said Bern. "Tonight I will find Ludomir's killer as I know where to find him. Do not ask me anymore about it, but I promise to deliver the name tomorrow, on my word of honor."

Sobieslav arrived home to find his wife asleep in bed. He had not seen her in four days.

"You are worthless to me on so many levels," he said, standing over her. "Why would I love you? Why do I?"

She rolled over to the other side as his face grew red with rage.

"I would love for you to respond to me, as I do not usually speak this way, and am therefore compromising myself."

There was no response. He bolted towards her and wrapped his fingers around her neck. She gazed at him, daringly, egging him on to squeeze. His rage grew so much that he wanted to snap her neck at once.

"Even now I cannot do it," he said, and a tear dropped down his eye. "I care for you so much, and I cannot explain why."

"Why do you love me?" she asked. He let go of her, and covered the tears that rolled down from his cheeks.

"Perhaps because we are bound together by something. I don't know what, but we are, you mysterious demon-wench."

She put her hands on his massive shoulders, and he immediately relaxed.

"I love you, too," she whispered in his ear. "Perhaps because we are both called for destruction, and that is the only reason why we understand each other, while no other person understands us."

She put him down on the bed, and removed her tunic, revealing a gorgeous naked body.

"I cannot explain why we were called to lead such a path in life, but I just know that I am on it, and so are you, and that makes us friends, does it not? Even when I was mortal I longed for empathy, but never found it."

She began to kiss him. And after straddling his naked body she began to bite his neck until blood trickled out, and licked it up as she moaned ferociously.

That night Bern quietly swept through the open fields, and into the haunted forest. It was most unsettling for him to be in this dark, shadowy world, where demons lurked behind every corner. He clutched at his rosary, and shook nervously every time he felt pine needles tickling his shoulder.

Finally he came to a dense patch of birch trees and heard the gentle flow of the creek. Lifting a patch of brush out of his face he saw the moonlight seeping into the forest and collecting itself on the naked body of the girl, sitting on a mossy log.

He remained still for several more minutes until his eyes adjusted, and when they did they revealed two catlike eyes that were staring at him from out of the shadows.

He yelled out in horror when he realized that she was watching him, and that she could see every expression that he made on his face. All of a sudden he heard a fierce laughter coming from her corner.

For several more moments he stayed where he was, listening to the crickets chirp, too afraid to move.

"Come forward," she finally said. He did so, obediently. "Why do you come to look at me?" she asked.

Bern's lip quivered. "I wanted to know who came to visit you."

"Liar," she said. "You wanted to see me, more than anything, and you wanted a pretext to come and see me."

He remained silent as he listened to himself breathe.

"Do you like me?" she asked. "Would you like to touch me?"

Bern said nothing, but clutched his rosary.

"Do you remember the first time that you saw me?" she asked.

"Back in the old country when I was still a mortal?"

"I do remember. I thought that you had forgotten."

"Not at all," she replied. Her cat-eyes were growing more fierce.

"Perhaps I did not mention it before because I was afraid of being close to you."

"Why is that?" asked Bern.

"Because I would destroy you," she said, simply. "I would eat you alive, rip you to shreds and you would relish in it until the very end."

"Perhaps you are right."

"Come closer," she said.

He did so. At a close position the moonlight revealed the full splendor of her body, and her startling sensual buoyancy. He breathed heavily as she touched him. She then began to kiss his neck, and when she began to bite his neck he didn't recoil, but when he looked at her and saw that she was sucking his blood he recoiled in horror.

She laughed as the blood dripped down her chin. Bern stepped back, shaking ferociously, and finally stumbled over a log, falling into a bush. He stayed there for several more minutes in a state of helplessness.

Finally the laughter died down, and he heard footsteps approaching from far away.

He looked to see who was there. It was a hooded man greeting her.

"Hello my little Rusalka," the voice said. "Are you bleeding?"

"Don't worry about it, my sweet little tenderfoot," she replied. "I want you to make love to me."

"If I cannot have command of the druzhina than I will at least have command of the commander's woman," said the voice.

"Take off your cloak, my love," she said.

He did so, and in the glimmer of moonlight Bern saw the face of Vratislav, son of Nyklot. He felt his heart sink into his belly, and went limp in all sections of his body.

He woke the next morning covered in dew. He was shivering like he had never shivered before, but managed to get to his feet as quickly as possible. He had no desire now to say goodbye to anyone, and only wanted to leave as quickly as possible.

Upon returning to the stronghold he saw Count Adolph and his men gearing up to leave.

Pribislav was with them, helping them with extra provisions for their journey back.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" asked Pribislav, laughing out loud.

Bern gave him a look of horror, not knowing how to interpret the laughter.

"Remember your oath, good monk," said Pribislav, putting his arm around Bern. "We now bid you farewell."

Count Adolph approached Bern, looking him up and down. "Why did you not come when you were called yesterday?"

"I am sorry," replied Bern, not offering an explanation. "I am here now."

"So be it," said Count Adolph. "You will ride with me. Someone is anxiously awaiting your presence."

Nyklot came out of his home to bid them farewell, and they rode off into the woods. Bern held the saddle, and looked at the scars on Count Adolph's neck.

The count turned around his head. "You did not see anything," he said.

"I saw you give weapons," replied Bern.

"But you did *not*. Lest I send you to your Maker right now. Do you understand?"

"So be it," replied Bern, who felt all of the love and charity seep out of his heart.

"I will take you to Bishop Vizelin now," proclaimed Count Adolph. "He is awaiting you in his new diocese."

"In Faldera, I assume, correct?" asked Bern.

"No not in those vile woods," replied Count Adolph. "The Bishop has received a new diocese where he shepherds a large flock of pilgrims that have come from far away to cultivate the land here in this wilderness."

"And the vile woodsmen that haunt these forests, are they a part of the new flock?" asked Bern.

"They are, indeed," said Count Adolph.

"Of course they are," replied Bern, shaking his head with a look of derision on his face. He then began laughing with a bitter laughter that had never possessed him before.

They rode towards Lübeck, the new town at the mouth of the Trave River.

"You have done the Lord's work, young man," said Count Adolph. "You have much to be proud of."

"Do I?"

"Of course you do. Not everyone survives several years amidst the bloodthirsty heathen Wends.

I believe that your teacher will be most proud of you."

"I assure you, sir, that there is not a man in this world that I desire to see more than my teacher, Bishop Vizelin of Hameln."

With that not another word was spoken, and Count Adolph, Bern, and the escort rode on until sundown. How they navigated through the dense forests and marshlands were beyond Bern's understanding at first, but after awhile he notices many inconspicuous human artifices; a fallen tree here with axe cuts in the middle and other there a tree cut in half.

The men bivouacked alongside this unsung trail. The guardsmen took turn to keep watch, crossbow in hand. By sunrise they mounted again after a small meal of smoked venison and dried oats.

They reached Lübeck by sundown next evening; it was situated at the confluence of the Trave and the Wakenitz River. Bern was shocked beyond believe to find a whole other civilization standing so close to the one that he had finally grown accustomed to.

There was a wooden church, and right next to it was a church that was being built by various men hauling lime mortar and clay bricks. The wooden church was erected with a typical Saxon framework, and not like the church that had been erected back in Veligrad with the sunken floors. Beyond the church clearing there were many villagers around, and some were beginning to plow the land with moldboard plows pulled by oxen and horses. One of the men that was pulling a plow Bern recognized in the distance; it was Marchrad, the elder of Agrimeswidil that he had met five years ago on the toll.

Bern looked back at the wooden church. In the entrance he saw his teacher, Vizelin of Hameln, adorned with mitre and crosier, in addition to

richly ornamented garment. The escort unmounted and bowed to the ground as Vizelin made the Sign of the Cross over them.

Count Adolph entered the church, first kissing Vizelin's hand. Whatever they talked about was brief. When they were finished Adolph mounted his horse and rode off, followed by his men.

Bern remained standing there, until Vizelin walked out of the church towards him with outstretched arms. Without thinking, Bern reflexively fell to his knees, and kissed the hand of the bishop who raised him to his feet and kissed him on both cheeks.

"How have you been, my son?" he asked with a warm smile.

"Am I back?" asked Bern.

"You are," replied Vizelin. "You must be in shock, but you are back in Christendom. We are building civilization out of the wilderness here, and have brought our masonry, books, relics, and most importantly we have brought the Ways of God to this barren wasteland."

"I passed through here once, when I first came to Wendland. There was a small wooden fort where this very church lies, and I remember a little Wend-boy was over there by the river scrounging around for amber."

"And now there are Christians here, able men that tithe and that reap God's just rewards, is that not eternally superior?"

"Indeed it is, but I would like to know what has happened to the native inhabitants of this land."

"And you shall, my son," said Vizelin with a concerned look on his face. "And you shall. But first I would recommend that you reacquaint yourself with God's flock. There are many people here that know of you as a doer of God's work, and who admire you greatly."

"But I am very tired from the journey."

"Very well," replied Vizelin. "You shall dine with me this evening. We will have a succulent swine-roast, would that please you?"

"What would please me more than anything would be to see the library. I have been book-starved for many years and wish to see letters again."

"Very well," said Vizelin, who grabbed Bern by the shoulder and let him towards the library.

"Father Vizelin," said Bern. "What happened to the Wends that used to live here?"

"If you must speak of it, my son, they were spewed out of the land, a just retribution of God for spilling Christian blood on this land."

"And it is preordained that land stained with the blood of Christian martyrs is to be ruled by Christians, am I correct?" asked Bern.

"You are correct, my son."

"Would it be Ludomir's blood that you are referring to?" asked Bern.

Vizelin stopped and gave him a serious look. "I am talking about all of the Christians that have died in these Scythian lands since Charlemagne himself fought their likes, may he rest in peace."

Bern looked on the table and it was Virgil's *Aeneid* that stood in front of him.

"Are you not pleased?" asked Vizelin with a grin on his face.

"I am," replied Bern.

"We also have the gospels, and the first and second book of Maccabaeus, which the men of this flock very much like to hear during campfires, and during mass."

"Do you have Seneca or Aristotle?" asked Bern.

"Where would you pick up such reading habits?" asked Vizelin.

"I am just curious to read them," replied Bern.

"Aristotle is the cornerstone of the University of Paris, where I studied when I was a young man. The university lecturers there are so in love with the idea of learning that they forget that there is a unambiguous purpose behind their learning, but instead they just learn to learn."

"How impudent of them," replied Bern, and paused.

"What post do you desire for me?"

"I would give you the new bishopric."

"Which new bishopric?"

"Why the one that will be carved out of Veligrad, of course. As you know the people, and speak the language, and are influential with many people there I would give it to you, and Archbishop Adalbero would as well."

"Mustn't I first be an ordained priest to be invested with such an honor?"

"You will become one, my son. You will become one. Now rest. From now on we will be together as we were in the olden times, and I will be your teacher again, and you will learn from me. We will prepare you

for the priesthood and I will teach you all that I have in my head, and in my heart as granted to me from the Holy Spirit."

"It is an honor," replied Bern.

"Will you do one thing than to show me your devotion?" asked Vizelin.

"Of course I would," responded Bern.

"Would you tell me the gifts that Count Adolph bestowed on the heathens?"

Bern told him, holding nothing back. Vizelin turned red with indignation, and with that he bowed out, leaving Bern alone. The one thought that he held was that for some reason he more than anything longed to return to Veligrad.

Part Three

**The Flood Unleashed
1147A.D.**

1.

On the sunlit morning of March 13th, Anno Domini 1147, Bern and his beloved teacher, Bishop Vizelin of Hameln, rode to the Reichstag in a horse-drawn carriage. Since taking the role of disciple to his beloved teacher, Bern had assumed a silent confidence that aroused respect in others.

He had spent the previous four years training for the priesthood, of which, he was soon to be invested with in the upcoming winter. His teacher instructed him in all of the sacraments and duties of priesthood, imparting in him a firm missionary zeal that he had lacked when he was younger.

Bern looked out of the carriage, onto the shadowy window and saw the trusted elder, Marchrad riding horseback at his side with a torch in one hand and a crossbow in the other. There were several other armed men trailing the carriage to prevent any highway robbers from looting them.

"Our retinue," said Bern. "It is a trustworthy lot, am I correct?"

Vizelin nodded.

"The Cistercian abbot Bernard of Clairvaux will be at the Reichstag. Why?"

"The duchy of Edessa, a colony of pilgrims in the Holy Land, has fallen to the Saracens. "God have Mercy," replied Bern, making the Sign of the Cross.

"It will be another holy war, and this humble abbot of Clairvaux will rouse all of Christendom to fight."

"Would not His Holiness, Pope Eugene III, be responsible for making such an imperative decision?" asked Bern. Vizelin smiled. "His Holiness has already issued the papal bull *Quantum Praedecessores*, calling for a holy war. Yet it is not the pope that steers the rudder of Christendom, but his beloved teacher, Abbott Bernard. If we can influence him today we will be able to rouse all of Saxony to our cause in the north."

"How can a simple abbot such as Bernard of Clairvaux control the decisions of the Holy Father himself?"

"His holiness Pope Eugene III is a simple man, a kind and gentle Cistercian monk, and it was the good Abbot Bernard that has been responsible for the spread of the Cistercian Order. All over Christendom there are Cistercian abbeys sprouting up and taking root. His Holiness was a disciple of the abbot, and still looks to him for guidance."

"Who else will be there?" asked Bern.

"The young Duke of Saxony himself, Henry the Lion, as well as his arch-rival, the Margrave Albert the Bear. Also present will be the Archbishop Adalbero, and several other bishops, myself not the least. Count Adolph and Count Henry of Badwide will be there to prevent us from directing the war in the north. But it is Duke Henry and Abbott Bernard that we must reach if we are to finish our mission in the north."

"And the emperor himself?" asked Bern.

"Emperor Conrad III has already taken up the cross and is now preparing to embark towards the Holy Land. Not only him but the King of France, Louis VII, as well. It is the war-hardened Saxon knights that the Abbot is after now. But we are to ensure that he does not get them."

"And how will we do that?"

"It will take little effort – all that needs to be done is to emphasize that this new excursion to the Holy Land is a Hohenstaufen expedition, the house that Emperor Conrad III belongs to. Duke Henry the Lion is of the rival dynasty, the house of Guelph, and will therefore be looking for any pretext he can find in order to refrain from marching to the Holy Land. When he finds out that is this pretext will furnish him ample land in the north he will wholeheartedly concur to make a holy war on the Wendish pagans, and his rival, who fears losing influence and wealth differentials, Margrave Albert will follow him out of necessity."

"I have changed so much over the years," said Bern. "I now see things from a worldly point of view, instead of from a godly worldview."

"Would you rather have others dominate the high towers of Caesar's office?" asked Vizelin.

Bern looked outside again, and saw the sun was peaking on the horizon. They were approaching a magnificent castle which loomed in a hill. Husbandmen crossed the path with hay on their backs, as large crowds of shabbily-dressed peasants gathered about, apparently awaiting the arrival of Abbot Bernard of Clairvaux.

They approached the concentric stone castle. Thousands of ravens circled above the high towers. Bern noticed that the guards held halberds, and that there were ample torches lit over the moat, where there were sally ports, and cross-shaped arrow slits. The white-cross flag of the Order of the Hospitallers flew from the watchtowers amidst many mailed crossbowmen that stood watch. Bern rubbed his cold fingers together as the guardsmen lowered the drawbridge.

Inside the castle, past the gatehouse, and a curtain wall there was the *palas*; the administrative hall where various powerful men sat around chatting and drinking wine as a minstrel played a troubadour melody with his flute. On the great table was a delicately embroidered satin table cloth and glass jugs of cider, wine, and plates full of flatbread and figs.

There were rows of pews laid out in velvet that led up to the chapel altar, behind which there was a life-sized crucifix and icons of The Virgin Mary and St. Sebastian. There was also the femur bone of St. Adalbert, The Martyr of The North, which was said to have tremendous healing properties, which was next to the altar, which was adorned with hundreds of glowing candles. On the opposite side of the pulpit lay several ancestral marble sarcophaguses under golden crosses.

Several parties were already assembled. In the balconies were two separate parties that did not mix in conversation: the Danes, and Duke Henry the Lion and his garrison. The first, that of the delegates and ambassadors of the Danish crown. Several traders were there, including Thorkell of Jutland, who now only had stumps where his hands used to be. These men were accompanied by Archbishop Eskil of Lund, A stout, bearded priest who carried his crosier in one hand, as an iron mace swung from his belt. Also accompanying them were a few representatives of the two rival claims to the Danish crown, Canute V, and Sven III. Each man of importance had at least one squire attending to him.

Eskil looked toward Thorkell's withered body and dry face. As he was a man that was always prepared to do his best for his countrymen, he advised Thorkell not to dwell on the idea of revenge but to do God's work willingly, whatever it may be.

"Just remember this one thing," proclaimed the Danish bishop. "The ability to remit sins is a precious commodity; in the empire other useful commodities such as cunning and ruthlessness are rather quite

common in this day and age. Let the clerics do the talking and let the warriors do the listening."

To the left and opposite side of the balcony sat the young Duke of Saxony Henry the Lion and his retinue of warriors, all bedecked in the finest Parisian fashion of the day. Duke Henry, a swarthy beard with dark brown hair and jet black eyes was wearing a richly embroidered silk shirt and a sable-lined crimson cloak.

"And so I have heard," began a paladin, "that the good abbot of Clairvaux hates falconry as well as gambling and chess. If we are to follow this Hohenstaufen expedition we will not only be led to slaughter by our domestic enemies but the journey to the Holy Land will be incredibly *boring*." The men laughed.

"It is not up to us whether we go or not," said another warrior. "As it is commonly known that the good abbot will speak to the wives of all men that refuse their duties and promise them all kinds of honors in this life and the next, and it will be our proper womenfolk that influences us to take the cross!"

They laughed again, this time heartily. Duke Henry remained silent with a look of intense agitation on his face as he continued to rattle his sword. His men became silent when they saw how agitated he was and then looked down and saw the contingency of Margrave Albert the Bear, the duke's arch rival.

"The French say that they give birth to the culture of Christendom like chickens do eggs," he said. "Well, if they are the chickens of Christendom, we Saxons will surely need to be the roosters." The retinue roared loudly and all of the other parties stopped what they were doing and looked towards this group of raucous men.

When Bern entered, he felt his heart sink upon seeing the splendor of the castle, the likes of which he had never seen before – silver candleholders, golden chalices, crimson velvet carpets, the life-size icons and the magnificent curative relics of holy saints. The walls were adorned with luxurious embroideries, and the windows were of a marvelous stain glass scenes of the Stations of the Cross.

Vizelin led the way, followed by Bern, Marchrad, and Rimbart. The latter two appeared even more humble and out of place than Bern, who noticed that the various contingencies all were staring at them as they walked in. Bern had not felt so nervous since he was first in Veligrad.

As Marchrad and Rimbert fell into the humble background Bern followed Vizelin forward who began to greet many bishops seated in the front rows, and then proceeded to introduce his young acolyte to all of them. Bern kissed the hands of the Bishop of Brandenburg, Olmutz, Munster, Halberstadt, Mainz, and Merseburg in that order before coming to the Papal legate himself, Anselm of Magdeburg, who was speaking with Abbot Wibald of Corvey.

Finally they approached Archbishop Adalbero himself, whom Bern had not seen since the beginning of his journey into Wendland. After kissing the hand of the archbishop, Vizelin handed his crosier to Bern and spoke into Adalbero's ear. They then both turned to Bern, smiling. Bern bowed before the archbishop and kissed his hand.

"I believe that it is I who should humbly kiss your hand," said the archbishop, who then proceeded to do so.

Bern blushed, having never felt so recognized in his entire life.

Outside there was a commotion. The clatter of thousands of peasants could be heard from inside the castle walls. Vizelin led Bern to a seat in between the aforementioned clergy and that of the retinues of Margrave Albert the Bear, and Count Henry who had now been dubbed Count Henry of Ratzeburg, named after his new city in the conquered territories.

"It is the Abbot of Clairvaux, Bernard himself who is arriving," said Bishop Vizelin. "Who is undoubtedly the most powerful man in Christendom and knows when to apply the spur and when to apply the break to all spiritual matters."

"And I trust that you would have him apply the whip against the Wends?"

Vizelin gave Bern a stern look. "There must be unity and order and discipline in this world," he responded frenetically. "As long as the Lord breathes his Holy Spirit into my lungs I will strive towards that goal."

The Abbot did not enter for the next half an hour as he attended to the common people that flocked around him; the elderly, the lame, the infirm, and the curious. Bern could hear outpours of emotions from outside, and several more bishops arrived, telling tales of how Bernard had just made a crippled boy walk, by the grace of God. Bern's anticipation rose higher and higher.

When he entered, Bern noticed that he did not bring an armed retinue with him, but was surrounded by Cistercian monks, bowing and cowed with their hands in their long sleeves.

Abbot Bernard was as frail as a corpse from his diligent fasts and vigils. It appeared to be made of only flesh and bone, but his eyes spoke another story; they were tranquil, sharp and penetrating. All men rose to their feet, changing to a serious disposition as he entered.

A monk began playing pious tunes on the organ, and all bowed as several monks carried candles to the altar, followed by Abbot Bernard who took the pulpit. After several bouts of chanting and organ music the abbot began to speak of the new crusade that was being launched against the Saracens in the Holy Land.

"And so," he said with his hands outstretched towards heaven, always making mesmerizing gestures. His voice was soft but echoed penetrating seeds of reflection. "The love of God," he paused again, "It a debt owed, not a favor given freely to our rebellious souls. As our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, has sacrificed all for our salvation, is not our righteousness naught but filthy rags before His Eternal Majesty?"

Everyone's emotions became aroused as he spoke of the satanic armies of Saracens who trampled on humble Christian pilgrims in the Holy Land.

"O Satan, you have tempted a Third of the Angels in heaven and how much more a proportion of mankind!" He said with his fists in the air:

"Yield, heathen!
The Trumpets of the mighty angels roar
St. Michael wields his powerful sword
And the demons retreat in derision!
O Satan, thou terrible author of confusion,
May thou be struck down and found contemptible!
May the Eternal battle sword of St. Michael
Loosen the thick sinews of your proud neck!"

When all spirits were roused with a flaming passion in their hearts began to speak of the remission of sins that would be granted in all that took the cross and went to the Holy Land to fight for Christendom.

It was the Margrave Albert the Bear who spoke first to interject. When he raised his face and body language betrayed his vested interests even before he spoke, and Abbot Bernard dissected every last detail and took note.

"If I may, your eminence, a word..." he said in broken Latin with his head lowered before Abbot Bernard, who nodded for him to continue. "We good Christians here in the North have been fighting Saracens since St. Corbinian and his bear walked through the lands of this empire preaching the Word to our ancestors."

All eyes scrutinized the margrave as he spoke.

"As it is the doctrine of the church itself that land stained with Christian blood cries out for revenge, so we march-men are ready to do Christ's duty and revenge the land that has been defiled by pagan blood-drinkers who murder Christian souls."

"Surely, good margrave, you would be willing to serve in the Lord's army wherever God needs you most?" asked Abbot Bernard.

Margrave Albert nodded his head affirmatively.

"This is a good sign," replied Bernard. "Our Holy Church is only now recovering from much tremendous corruption, and in the meanwhile Christendom is rotting from the inside out; our dear and sacred Holy Father, Pope Eugene III must reside outside of the holy city of Rome at this moment in time as Satan's army has taken over the city walls. In Southern France there are Cathar heretics that preach that the church is the very embodiment of the devil. Is it not safe to say that Satan is causing derision everywhere?"

"It is safe to say so, Abbot Bernard," replied Albert the Bear.

"I wish to hear more about the situation that you have here with these 'Saracens of the North' as you so quaintly put it."

"My lord," continued Albert the Bear. "For forty years now there have been appeals for a holy war against the Wends. The proclamation was issued in the diocese of Magdeburg but has not since been given papal authorization."

"For remission of sins and land titles?" asked Abbot Bernard with a raised eyebrow.

"For whatever prizes the Lord feels are just, sir."

"And you are the foremost expert on these pagans, Margrave?"

"Indeed I am, sir," he said firmly, which was followed by much murmuring in the various contingencies.

Duke Henry the Lion shot him a look of hatred, and continued fondling his sword pommel.

Count Adolph of Holsatia rose to his feet.

"If I may your eminence, I am Count Adolph of Holsatia," he said, bowing. "I believe that I could assist the noble margrave in explaining to you about the situation here, as I have been Wendslaying since I was a boy, and speak the language of these pagans."

"You certainly do speak their language!" shouted Count Henry of Ratzeburg, who was unaccustomed to courtly manners. "The language of thievery, and lewdness!"

"Such an outrage is unacceptable!" cried Count Adolph. "I demand a duel from you!"

The two factions rallied to their leaders, and there was much clamor. The Danes and Duke Henry's warriors laughed aloud from the rafters. Abbot Bernard quietly took note of everything.

"Gentlemen!" interceded Bishop Vizelin, who stood and waved his crosier in the air. "Is such behavior fit for men of your stature?"

They both bowed towards the alter and sat.

"Forgive us, your eminence, for we Saxons are rude and untutored in manners, and have not ever had the pleasure of your grace before this day. We therefore are very excited, and thank you for your audience."

"And you must be Bishop Vizelin," said Abbot Bernard. "I have heard that you are the lead missionary in the North and have built a bishopric out of the wilderness."

"I have done my best, your eminence," replied Vizelin, bowing.

"Finally a man who speaks the *right* language – that of humility," said Abbot Bernard, looking around at the various parties. "Bishop Vizelin, perhaps you are the man that I should be speaking to regarding the situation in the North."

Vizelin bowed again.

"Please tell me all there is to know," continued the abbot.

"Your eminence – the Wends are a peculiarly stiff-necked people that live alongside the empire.

Their tongue is alien to ours, as are their customs; it is their firm belief that there is one God who created the heavens and the earth, but

who has retreated, and does not intercede on behalf of his children anymore. They worship a demon whom they believe is a god of lightening, and who they believe is a great war-chief in the sky that protects them and who renders the ground fertile when sacrifices are made to him."

"What kind of sacrifices?" asked Abbot Bernard, who leaned forward intently.

"Sacrifices of blood, your eminence," he replied, and the Abbot himself looked away in disgust. "Blood that their cruel pagan priests drink!"

"It is true!" cried Marchrad, who appeared out of the corner. "I have seen the savages do it with my own eyes! They must be blotted out from existence!"

Vizelin looked at his feet in embarrassment.

Duke Henry the Lion leaned forward. "Who is that fool?" he asked, quietly.

"He is a Holsatian elder that leads a small militia along the River Trave," replied one of his warriors.

"I shall very much like for him carry my shield for me when I march through his territories and make them my own."

"Is this one of your soldiers, Bishop Vizelin?" asked Abbot Bernard.

"He is, your eminence, a member of my garrison."

The abbot was silent for another moment.

"Your eminence," continued Vizelin. "Heresy multiplies in these northern emporiums. Not only the heathen religion but also the cousin sect of the Cathars, the Bogimilists infect the northern coasts with their sham doctrines, teaching that which is unseemly to heathen ears, who have remained pagan for hundreds of years, burning down every church that has been placed there."

"And has there been a Christian martyr there, recently?"

"There has been, your eminence, a Wendish convert named Ludomir was found, drained of all blood with the mark of the heathen priest, which was an amber amulet with a demonic inclusion in it. It is believed that the pagan priest killed him, and drank his blood in order to appease the demons that they worship."

Abbot Bernard made a look of disgust, and crossed himself several times. "Enough of the foul details, Bishop," he said. "Now onto logistics..."

"That, your eminence, I will leave up to the Margrave Albert the Bear, who is much more familiar with such worldly calculations..."

As Abbot Bernard gestured for Albert the Bear to rise, Count Adolph shot Vizelin a look of utter hatred, and then turned his back to the altar in his rage. Abbot Bernard remained as serene as ever.

The abbot looked at the papal legate, Anselm of Magdeburg. He then bid farewell to the assembly and walked out, followed by this legate who commanded the guards to lower to the drawbridge.

Vizelin's eyes glared, and he gripped Bern's arm so hard that the circulation slowed and blood rushed to the surface of the palm. "The judgment is coming," he said.

A few moments later the papal legate, Anselm of Magdeburg returned with a box, which he placed on a large oaken table, adorned with dozens of candles. He looked up towards Duke Henry the Lion, and gestured for him to come down from the balcony to receive a gift from Abbot Bernard.

Duke Henry's heart began to thump intensely and he slowly walked down, tightly grasping the banister as his spurs rhythmically hit the wooden steps. Only when he stood before the table, and felt the warmth of the congealed wax, dripping next to the timber box did he realize that there were hundreds of eyes on him, all of which represented thousands more dependant souls that would soon here of what was about to happen.

The box had a scarlet ribbon around it, which Duke Henry began to unwrap with his delicate, courtly hands. He opened the lid and inside the box were seven ram's horns; each hollowed and shaped as trumpets.

The outcry was riotous. Count Henry of Ratzeburg stormed out of the castle, followed by his garrison. Count Adolph bowed lowly to Duke Henry and then left the castle. Meanwhile,bbAlbert the Bear stood still, expressionless, contemplating the situation.

"What has happened?" Bern asked Vizelin.

"Duke Henry has been invested with remission of sins, and land titles if he makes a Holy War against the Wends, him and all who follow him!"

"What is the present? The horns?"

"You must read your bible more carefully, my son – the seven ram's horns were to be blown by the children of Israel before they broke down the walls of Jericho."

The minstrel began to play his flute.

Duke Henry felt an empowering surge of strength in his chest, unlike that he had ever known. All of a sudden he noticed a frowning Bishop Eskil running down the steps. The Duke watched as the bishop's face twisted and contorted into an exaggerated smile.

"Good Duke," he said, bowing at the knees. "Alas, I am grateful to make your acquaintance."

Whatever was said afterwards, Duke Henry did not remember, as he could not resist the urge to look over at Margrave Albert. The two exchanged false smiles, and then Duke Henry turned to Bishop Vizelin who had stationed himself close by, so when he turned his head again the Vizelin was right in front of him.

"Bishop Vizelin," he said.

"Duke Henry," replied Vizelin.

"We have much to discuss."

"Indeed we do, sir. But first, do enjoy the fine merriment."

Bern approached amidst much laughter and wine guzzling. Thorkell had approached Duke Henry the Lion, and was telling him of his experience and expertise, despite his stumps where his hands used to be.

"And the Wends are so opulent that even the peasants eat apples, taking a few bites and throwing the rest to rot on the ground," he said.

"I have heard that you, good sir, are fond of only taking only one bite of a maiden and throwing away the rest to rot on the ground," said one of Duke Henry's warriors. Everyone laughed, except Thorkell who was on the verge of taking offense, but then who started laughing too.

"I shall need excellent guides," said Duke Henry, open-endedly.

"How would you deal with the new Flemish settlers that are making the Wendish wilderness fruitful through their labors?" asked one of the bishops.

"It is better to have several bodies of reserves than to extend your front too much," replied Duke Henry, quoting the Roman military philosopher, *Vegetius*.

Bern felt himself crowded out from his place at the table as the people gathered around Duke Henry the Lion. Somebody hit the table and a silver candle holder fell, and the tablecloth caught fire. Bern looked around but nobody took notice, so he went to put out the fire by himself.

Then all of a sudden there was a ferocious foot-stomp which echoed throughout the castle walls.

Everyone fell silent. Turning around they saw Margrave Albert the Bear, standing before Duke Henry the Lion. The two men stared each other in the eye for a pregnant moment of silence. Albert the Bear then approached the duke and kissed him on the cheek, and the duke did so in turn. There was a loud cheer, and the servants began to replenish the wine flagons as the warriors emptied the old ones down their gullets.

Duke Henry the Lion whispered something into his squire's ear. The squire ran out towards the gates, and when he returned he carried a silver-pommeled broadsword and a fine hauberk mail-shirt. He handed them to Duke Henry.

"Margrave, your honor and bravery precede you," said Duke Henry, bowing.

"As does your character precede you, O nobleman," said Albert the Bear, bowing equally as low.

Duke Henry raised an eyebrow at this opaque comment, but continued his speech. "I bring you these first-rate gifts, made from the finest ironsmiths in my duchy."

Margrave Albert bowed, and received his gifts. "I thank you for your generosity and wish to impart you with a gift from myself," he said and snapped his fingers. Immediately his squire juted his arm forward with a boisterous peregrine falcon perched on his wrist.

"A most rare and beautiful hawk, margrave," said Duke Henry. "Is it Bavarian or Swabian?"

"It is in fact from Vineland, a land beyond all others in the north, sir; beyond Iceland and Greenland, sir."

"I see," said Duke Henry, his face turning red. "I now bid you farewell," he said bowing low.

Vizelin walked away from the crowd with Bern, squeezing his hand all the way. "Praise God in heaven!" he exclaimed. "We have triumphed. Be prepared to be invested with the new bishopric, young man! I will see to it that you are to be well primed for it!"

"What is happening?" asked Bern. "You are going too fast."

"I sometimes forget that you are untutored in the courtly language of largesse. Allow me to explain: Abbot Bernard is the man that is most responsible for the upcoming Holy War, and it is he that secretly directs Christendom through his innocent disciple, His Holiness Pope Eugene III."

"Yes, you have told me this, but..."

"And as he is a busy man that must rouse all of Christendom to the good fight he has little time to spend in our region."

"Of course, but..."

"At the beginning you saw an intense lobbying for his favor, which he found displeasing. It also exposed the discord between the various factions here that would not go well in a three month journey to the Holy Land."

"And you directed his favor away from the Holsatian Counts?"

"Indeed I did. As they love lucre more than righteousness, I would never have them join in our expedition. The redhead Adolph II even bought peace with the Wends by arming them against our new flock that is rendering the land fruitful at this very moment."

"You mean the new settlers from the Rhineland and from Flanders?"

"Precisely."

"And Duke Henry?"

"Duke Henry will lead the military expedition under papal terms which will be delivered at once, issued from His Holiness himself who will write them. The Danes and Margrave Albert will also join him. As will the clergy."

"How do you know this?"

"It was all right there in front of your eyes: in the gifts."

Bern appeared perplexed.

Vizelin laughed. "You are in the realm of politics in the Roman Empire, my son. Don't think for a moment that anything is at it seems."

"Please tell me, then."

"Duke Henry was either wise, or indifferent. Such was the reason why Abbot Bernard picked him to lead the expedition, but the young duke is inexperienced in military matters; he will need help from the more experienced warrior, Albert the Bear. This was conveyed by the sword and

mail-shirt, which always was a subtle insult; by saying that they were made 'by the finest ironsmiths in my duchy' was tantamount to saying 'I will dispense to you out of the reservoir of what I have taken from you,' as Saxony previously belonged to Margrave Albert."

"And the falcon?"

"The falcon was Albert the Bear's way of saying that he carries the weight of the Northern crowns behind him, undoubtedly where such a rare specimen came from."

"Is not the duke a keen falconer himself?"

"Indeed he is. All the more defiling to him, as he will never use such a beast in the hunt, be it that it was a gift from his enemy, but will let it rot in the mew until its death."

"Such is that which passes for Christian charity in the empire," said Bern, sorrowfully.

"And such gifts were brazen, compared to other gifts whose meaning goes unknown for years, even until the end of a man's life. The lords of the empire go their entire lives, sitting alone in their castles, devising plans to outdo one another. All the more reason to do God's work directly, as we do."

"I see only one problem."

"What is the problem, my son?"

You know as well as I do that the pagan priest, no matter how odious and terrible he may be was not the murderer of the convert Ludomir."

Vizelin's animated smile disappeared, and he rubbed his bald head. "You are so sure?"

"Yes, I am," said Bern with a straight face, and stern conviction.

"And so are you."

"It is too late now," said Vizelin turning away. "Such matters are mere trifles. A pagan priest who threatens God's elect should not be permitted a pulpit."

"I remember the time that you had me hand the Wend-king, Nyklot, a stone. Did it mean that you were offering him the gift of masonry if he converted?"

Vizelin steered his head in the other direction and remained silent.

"I will bring the Lord to them peacefully or die trying." *For I too have a gift for the Wends from my own blood-stained hands – I will deliver*

them the murderer of their most beloved warrior, Ludomir of Veligrad, he thought. And now I hide my true intentions as well. I am as great a hypocrite as the rest of them.

"You are sad to be learning the ways necessary to rule Caesar's chair," said Vizelin.

"How do you know my thoughts?" asked Bern in horror.

"I, too, was once young and naive."

Bern ran his fingers through the lukewarm brackish water. As he looked out on the horizon over the Baltic Sea, he prayed that no pirates would overtake their peaceful journey. He then turned his head towards Giselbert, who was sweating profusely in the summer heat, but appeared to be thoroughly content at his post.

He had found the deaf rower back in Faldera upon his return from Frankfurt. The man had aged dramatically since he last saw him, and was developing a strange cyst on his neck that the local monks attributed to an infestation of evil forest demons.

Yet all he needed was a sense of purpose, thought Bern. Look at him row – in so doing he finds his strength and his peace.

When they rowed into the harbor of Veligrad, Bern stood on foot in the flat-bottomed river boat as he waved a white flag in the wind. To his surprise the watchtower had been burnt down, and was still smoldering ashes.

The stronghold itself was smoking rubble, as were the plow fields and the orchards. The peasants' huts still stood, abandoned.

They moored the ship in the empty harbor. Bern listened to the waves hit the shore as he surveyed the area. In the distance he saw the figure of Pribislav walking into a hut in the merchants' quarters.

Bidding farewell to Giselbert, he walked towards the hut. The deaf rower began his return to Holsatia. At the entrance of the hut were two guards, each outfitted in the full attire and regalia of the Obodrite druzhina; each with a fluted iron helmet, coifed with metal rings that hung down to their long beards. Over their long tunics they wore mail shirts, which hung loosely over a dangling leather belt from which their longswords hung.

Each held bannered spears in their right hands, and round wooden shields in their left. The banners displayed a thunder-bolt, the symbol of their god, Perun.

Bern walked past them towards the peasants' quarters in order to investigate more fully, and returned in an hour with his theory confirmed. The guards held the same stoic faces, as if they didn't even see him.

"I wish to speak with Pribislav, son of Nyklot, who is beside this hearth," said Bern, in his rusty Obodrite tongue. They searched him, and let him pass after announcing his presence.

Inside several men were sitting around a hearth fire, throwing bird meat into the cauldron that hung over the fire. The men were Pribislav, Vratislav, Boliliut, and...Marchrad.

Bern's jaw dropped when he saw the Holsatian sitting next to the Wendish heathens.

They all stared at Bern, not bothering to greet him.

He turned to Marchrad first; whose face bore the indistinguishable image of rage upon the monk's sight. "You returned here directly from Frankfurt?" he asked in Germanic Saxon.

"As I am a mounted warrior who knows the land and her unwritten trails it is not difficult for me to go where I please, even as God grants me such freedom."

"Praise God," said Bern. "Where has the populace gone?"

Marchrad turned his head towards Pribislav who responded in Latin.

"I can only surmise your questions, monk. The people have been forced to abandon Veligrad. For two reasons this is so – one, there has been another murder. It looks like a vampire attack."

"Who is the said victim?"

"The girl that was the wife of Sobieslav."

"The one without a name."

"She had a name, I assume. But nobody ever asked her what it was."

Bern lowered his head in sadness.

"And why must everyone depart?"

"The peasants fear this forest. They feel that it is haunted by demons. Demons from your kin that were not burnt as corpses should be burnt, but that were put into the earth so that they would return to wonder about, creating more restless spirits in turn."

"It is your pagan priest that spreads such rumors, is it not?"

Pribislav did not answer, but continued to stare at Bern. Boliliut told Marchrad what was said in a Germanic/Slavic pigeon tongue that they were communicating in.

"And what is the second reason?" asked Bern.

"Your second reason you know already."

"Because there is to be a great war declared against the Obodrite people."

"How knowledgeable you are, monk."

Marchrad rose to his feet. "I will not spend any more time here than I am forced to," he said to Bern, exposing his blackened, decaying teeth. "To ally with such a host was not my first decision, but alas, we all must choose what benefits our kin the most, am I correct?"

"Why did you tell them?" asked Bern.

"Because I was approached by the duke, the one that they call 'The Lion' who asked me to carry his shield. Such is a great insult to a man of my ancient station. I am an elder of my people, and I lead them to battle."

"And what would Bishop Vizelin say?"

"It matters not. Those meant to rule by providence are not cruel to their natural inferiors, but weaklings desire to destroy the strong and free, above all else. The land that we have won through God's justice will be taken from us, and given to the new settlers who tithe more. We have been betrayed, and as a result we have made an agreement of non-aggression with the Wends. They will raze the settlers, and we will hold back and allow it."

"Why would you make me privy to your deals, Good Elder?"

Marchrad looked at Pribislav who unsheathed his dagger, and put it to Bern's throat. "Because you are *their* hostage now," replied the Holsatian, "and I have learnt that there are no such thing as friends in this world," and with that he bowed out.

Bern then turned towards Pribislav. "I must have an audience with Knyaz Nyklot immediately.

"Why would he give you an audience in such dire times?" asked Pribislav.

Bern stared at his cold, expressionless face, and did not see the friend that he had known for many years before him, but a cold, calculating man.

"Do you know what sort of man you just made a deal with?" asked Bern. "He is no friend of your people, and I can prove it."

"And you *are* a friend of our people, pigeon-man?" asked Boliliut, to which Vratislav laughed cruelly.

Bern lowered his head. "I am, indeed. I have come here specifically in order to divert the calamity that is sure to come. If I am allowed to meet with the good knyaz I will convince him that my plan is the only correct one, and the one that will bring peace to this land."

"What makes you think that we want peace?" asked Vratislav.

Bern paused for a moment. "Sons burying fathers is not a tragedy, whereas fathers burying sons most certainly is."

Pribislav gestured to his brother to lower the knife. "Why did you return?"

"Because I am here to inform you of the terrible storm that will destroy the Obodrites *forever* if you do not take heed and allow me to avert the disaster."

"Convenient for you to say this now when we have already been informed by your kinsman, Knyaz Marchrad."

"He is no kinsman of mine," said Bern. He then produced a sealed parchment out from under his cowl, and put it before Pribislav. "If this doesn't prove that my intentions are pure than I do not know what will."

Pribislav looked at it. "It is in Latin," he said. "Who wrote this?"

"It is from His Holiness the Pope, Eugene III. Do you know who the Pope is?"

"He is your high flamen, yes?" asked Pribislav.

Bern nodded his head.

"But he is also a knyaz in his own right as well?" added Pribislav.

"Something of the sort."

"But he has his own druzhina?"

"He can unite all of the kingdoms and duchies of Christendom to come forth and destroy you and your kin, and grant indulgences to his holy warriors in the meanwhile."

"Your people are certainly led by strange designs that are beyond my understanding."

"Let me speak to Knyaz Nyklot. If I can, I will dam the flood that will surely drown your people forever."

"And what would you tell him, monk?" asked Pribislav.

"Who the murderer of innocent people is in this village."

Vratislav's face became filled with blood, and he grabbed his knife.

"Why is this relevant to the present situation," asked Pribislav.

"Because the armies of Christendom are being roused at this moment to come and destroy you under the pretext that your flamen is a blood-drinking murderer."

"It was certainly a vampire that killed them," said Vratislav. "It is because you people bury corpses in the earth, not giving them proper rest,

and the only reason why there are armies coming forward is because of your likes, you filthy monk."

Pribislav was looking at the parchment. "Help me understand this part, monk," he said. Bern looked at it and read aloud:

"Contra Sclavos ceterosque paganos habitantes versus aquilonem ire et eot Christiane religioni subiugare Domino auxiliante intendunt."

"It basically says; 'with the help of God go forth to subjugate the pagan Slavs.'"

"By Perun's thunderbolt!" exclaimed Vratislav. "We must fight."

"Listen to me," said Bern, turning to Pribislav. "All of Christendom is uprooting and hurling itself at the Holy Land which has recently been reconquered by the Saracens, a people that have spilt much Christian blood. If I can get an audience with your knyaz I will prove that there has been no Christian bloodshed here by any flamen, at least not in this generation."

"And you really think that your flamens would care, Christian?" said Vratislav. "I am a naysayer when it comes to all things and all people foreign."

"Let me ride with you to meet your father, Pribislav son of Nyklot."

"As you are now our hostage, I will grant you this one request."

After lunching they and the two guards rode out towards the east, and the landscape grew progressively murkier. Boliliut led the way, guiding them on with his sword through the thick brush and deceptive mud puddles that led to fatal quicksand and weed-crammed fluvial caverns.

"Make sure you don't gain the enmity of the wrong people, monk," said Pribislav.

"Are you threatening me?"

Bern held onto the saddle as he dodged pine needles and fluttering birds that had been disturbed from their nests by the oncoming riders.

"You silly man," replied Pribislav, a grave insult in the Wendish tongue. "You still don't recognize when someone is trying to help you."

"Perhaps I don't," replied Bern. "But if you don't grant me an audience with your father then the same could be said for you."

Pribislav laughed. "You now assert yourself, monk. Soon you will be dueling with warriors and carousing with maidens."

"Carousing with women has led to many troubles recently..."

"What are you implying?"

After this last question Bern did not answer, but remained silent for many hours. Pribislav, who in his stoic nature would not press a conversation unless it served some specific purpose, remained silent as well.

As the sun set they approach a deep realm of the forest and the night owls began their midnight songs. Vratislav unmounted his horse, and examined the ground with what little sunlight remained, which was aided by the flickering fireflies.

"Do you see these tracks?" he asked towards his brother and Boliliut.

"What do you see?" asked Boliliut.

"A large band of druzhina-brothers rode out towards the west. They were in haste. They were also heavily armed."

"They must be going to burn out the new settlers," replied Boliliut.

"We will know their intention soon enough," replied Vratislav.

"Let us ride all night until we reach Dobin."

"Aye," replied the other men.

"Where is Dobin?" asked Bern.

"It is our new settlement," replied Pribislav. "One that will be immensely fortifiable against your people's sieges."

"And how can your brother tell if they were armed or not?"

"He can tell by the impressions of the tracks. He is a master at tracking, and he could surely tell you where you have recently been if it was anywhere upon this earth."

"Fascinating," replied Bern. "So it is safe to say that your brother is a master of the forest?"

"He is indeed," replied Pribislav.

Bern therefore remained silent on the topic of tracking. "If your people are starting a war with the settlers," he said. "Then there is nothing that I can do to help avert a disaster."

Pribislav laughed. "You give yourself so much credit. Knyaz Marchrad was much better informed."

"What do you mean? What did he tell you?"

"You didn't know? An army of Saxons and Danes has already been roused. Everything that we do from now on out is purely of a defensive nature."

"You knew this and let me continue?" asked Bern with indignation.

Pribislav did not respond but continued to ride through the night as Boliliut, and Vratislav took turns leading the way.

They arrived at dawn, and Bern had fallen into a light sleep as he leaned against the back of Pribislav's tunic. He woke to the sound of the warhorn, and breathed in the pine-smoke smell of the Wendish tunic.

Looking up he saw a dense forest with a small clearing, in an isthmus between two giant lakes. There was a huge stronghold already erected in the middle, and men were carrying stout timber on their shoulders, two men to a log. They were erecting giant pikes that stuck out of the sides of the stronghold, next to the sally-ports. Others were chopping wood with axes. Bern looked beyond the lake and found that there were many peasant huts erected in the forest.

"How long did this take?" asked Bern.

"We began last spring, and now we are finally moved. It was the only possible decision, once we found out that we were to fight the Danes and the Niemcy, at the same time. We now have no marketplace, yet our people are born to sacrifice."

"And grain?" asked Bern.

"Every man, woman and child is on rations. But we have enough grain and supplies to last us until the end of the winter. Meanwhile, we are brewing cider and trading it for grain with the forest people who are called the Kicini."

"And these forest people? They accept your presence here?"

"This is Obodrite territory and has always existed as an Obodrite outpost. But when the forest tribes, who are our tributaries, found out the grave danger that we are all facing, they immediately joined forces with us, and helped us build the stronghold, and in so doing in times of siege they will be able to take refuge inside of it."

People were deeply at work, singing songs as they chopped and logged timber.

"I must speak to my host-mother, Bieslava, wife of Bratumil."

"You may with my presence and under my supervision."

"So be it."

Just then a bearded druzhina-brother rode up to them. "Sobieslav took the fleet along with 300 druzhina-brothers to raze the settler-communities in the west. They also roused over 650 mounted conscripts from the Kicini, Brizani, Dravani, and the Linguone tribes who will attack the settlers by land, along with over 4,500 infantrymen. We are preparing for war. Did you send an emissary to Knyaz Adolph of Holsatia?"

"Knyaz Marchrad will speak with him," replied Vratislav.

"You trust him to do so?" asked the guard.

"Self-interest will guide him; that I trust."

"Who else will side with us?" asked Pribislav.

"An emissary including Boyan and several of his acolytes will rouse the Rugians to use their fleet against the Northmen. Meanwhile our fleets are on patrol in the Baltic coasts."

"What did Boyan ask for in return for this favor?" asked Pribislav.

"Full reinstatement as tribal flamen, with tithing rights to Perun's sacrifices."

Pribislav's face turned red. "We must reinstate a tyrant in order to defeat another! Such is this life of hazard that we live."

"Will the Pomeranians fight with us?"

"It is highly doubtful," replied the guard. "Their monks would run back to the Niemcy right away and tell them. Their minds are corrupted by these parasites as it is, and they now see no fellowship with their own kinsmen, we Obodrites."

"Let us go to the stronghold," said Vratislav, and with that they marched towards the stronghold.

Bern noticed the archers, and crossbowmen on the high towers that stood next to flickering torches, and guards that stood next to the drawbridge with spears and shields, mail shirts and fluted helmets.

Upon entering Bern realized that this stronghold was in fact bigger than the original in Veligrad. There was a huge grain-depository on the left side, opposite of Perun's statue, which had been uprooted and brought to the new location.

A horse-stall stood empty next to an arsenal stall that was also virtually empty except for a bows, arrows, and clubs. Bern made the Sign of the Cross as he looked at the Perun statue out of the corner of his eye. *I*

have a spiritual duty to put flame and axe to such horrendous idolatry, he thought.

But such a duty does not extend so far as to put axe to the neck of my beloved host-mother who nurtured me as if I was one of her own.

Boliliut, Pribislav, Vratislav, and Bern entered the large hut, wide and unadorned. Inside was Nyklot, covered all around him with his nine grandchildren, some were boys with cropped hair, others long-haired girls. Yaroslav, Beleknegini, and Bozidara were also there, and the latter smiled when she saw Bern enter. On the other side of the hut, next to a wooden pillar was the corpse of the unnamed girl, former wife of Sobieslav.

They all bowed to Nyklot.

"What did you find out?" he asked.

"This monk has a parchment that he would like to show you and something that he would like to tell you," said Pribislav.

"Let me see the parchment," responded Nyklot, not even looking at Bern. Bern handed it to Pribislav, who in turn handed it to Nyklot. The Knyaz then asked Pribislav to help him read the parchment.

Bozidara was shedding tears as Beleknegini stroked her hair, compassionately.

"Bern, dear monk, how goes it?" she asked with a warm smile on her face.

"My dear lady," responded Bern. "It has been many years since we last spoke. I have been well, and yourself? What is troubling you at this very moment?"

Beleknegini got up, grabbing her sword and walked out the door.

"Times are grim," responded Bozidara. "But they always have been and always will be. I have discovered who killed my husband," she said.

Bern leaned forward. "I have come with such an idea myself, but I would hear you first. Are you certain?"

"Could I not be? Do you see that poor girl over there? She was a victim of these horrible wars that we suffer through. The peasants believe that a vampire killed her, but any man could imitate a vampire killing by draining her of all of her blood. Just as my husband was murdered," she said, turning her head to Bern with a fierce expression on her face.

"The two murders were alike?"

"Identical," she responded. She then smiled as a tear rolled down her eye. "It appears that I have made a mistake; in following my husband in one way, I have abandoned him in the other."

"I understand your designs but frown on them."

Meanwhile Pribislav and Nyklot were interpreting the parchment. Bern looked over at the dead girl and a tear fell from his eye as well.

"You should not cry," said Bozidara, putting her hand on his arm. "You believe in your god, and serve him humbly. That is all that one can ask. I must now go to be with my husband."

"I would not watch," replied Bern, thinking of her body being enveloped in flames.

"So be it," she replied resolutely. "But my husband was murdered and I cannot bear the shame that I have stood by and done nothing to edify my people."

"Who killed your husband?" asked Bern.

"It was Sobieslav," she replied in a whisper.

"How do they know?" asked Bern, nodding his head towards Nyklot and the others.

"They know of the girl. It was no vampire spirit that killed that girl, but Sobieslav himself. He grew to hate her for her infidelities, which were many."

Bern thought of her wild, promiscuous behavior and cringed. "But she had never been taught any better. I forgive her."

"Your forgiveness is too late. Anyway, I cannot bear to live and see the murderer of my husband prosper, while I have sat back and abandoned my husband."

"Should he not be punished, this stubborn warrior?"

"And who would punish him? Life will punish him. He has been reprimanded by our knyaz, but in this time he is indeed more of an asset in the field than impaled on a stake, just as I am more of an asset to my kin if I set a noble example for the youth."

"How did he kill your husband if he was not here, but in Wollin at the time?" asked Bern, confused.

"He had an emissary here, named Peter. A Christian name, Bern. And tell me – was there another person that had so much power and prestige to gain as that ambitious young warrior? He is one that would do anything for power, and glory."

"Such ways are base, worldly ways."

"Such ways are the ways that motivate men, especially the young men of the druzhina who hear tales of the brave warriors of old as since childhood and wish to emulate such behavior. Such are the values of our songs, and legends. The only way for Sobieslav to vindicate himself for his many shameful acts is to die bravely in battle."

"Then such principles need to change," replied Bern. "Look at the destruction that they have caused," he said, nodding his head to the corpse in the corner.

"I am beyond the mood to judge, my energies have all been spent. I only have energy enough for one final act."

"Please, good widow," supplicated Bern. "You have been baptized a Christian, and such an act is contrary to all that God commands."

"Dear, dear monk; such are our ways," she responded. "I miss my husband more than anything in the world and would go to any lake of fire to be with him for eternity."

"It is a shame," replied Bern.

Bozidara smiled, as tears came down both of her eyes. "Bern," she said. "In a way, all of the Obodrites are my children. I have so much pride in them, and I want them to have pride in me. At this moment I am content. I have done all that there is to do."

And with that she stopped speaking to him, and began to sing a death song, quietly and to herself.

Bern moved away, astonished, and looked towards the corpse again. *There is just no way of knowing anyone for certain, it seems*, he thought.

"Monk," said Pribislav. "Monk." Bern looked around and saw that Nyklot and the counsel were looking at him. "What have to you tell our knyaz? Did you not request an audience with him?"

Bern bowed, and kissed the hem of Nyklot's tunic. "Knyaz, I came here of my own free will," he began.

"Sent from the bald-headed manikin?" asked Nyklot, referring to Vizelin.

"Of my own will, because I have grown fond of the Obodrites. I have brought this parchment to you."

"The parchment means little to us. Written words often are meant to mean the opposite of what they say, but the heart never lies. Knyaz

Marchrad has already told us that your flamens have roused the nations against us."

"It is true, they most certainly will come, and your friend, Knyaz Adolph will sit back and do nothing to help."

"You are still valuable to us as a hostage," replied Nyklot with his arms folded. "Would you kindly be our hostage?" he said more of as a statement than as a question.

"If it means Obodrite conversion than I would kindly suffer captivity or even martyrdom."

Nyklot looked at Boliliut, and the two started laughing. Then Nyklot turned back to Bern. "You think that you are ready to face death?" he asked, staring him in the eye. "Only the most intense moments in life reveal such truth," replied Nyklot. "Until you are tested, it is just smoke and ashes to make such daring comments."

"But you cannot win this war," said Bern. "The Empire will rouse many thousands of warriors, as will the Northmen. They will also levy troops from Poland and Burgundy. You will be outnumbered and outmatched. It is madness to resist such an amazing onslaught."

Nyklot laughed again, and this time all of the warriors present laughed with him.

"I do not expect you to understand the nature of warfare, monk," said the knyaz. "But I do expect you to tell the invaders of what your eyes see in this stronghold in times of siege. I, too, can rouse thousands of troops that will be able to defend this narrow isthmus with *ease*. All fields will be burned for many bowshots away in all directions, and there will be no foraging for the enemy to feed upon. We have enough grain to last us for months, and it would be impossible for your kin to take us. You will be forced to retreat in shame, and we will continue to raid all trespasser communities until the day that Perun becomes a peaceful farmer."

Everyone laughed aloud except for Bern. "It is cruelty to the people to resist," said the monk.

"They must have the opportunity to grow old in peace without having the stigma of apostates on their shoulders even before they are born, and their souls immersed in unrepentant sin." Bern amazed himself at his own boldness.

Nyklot leaned forward and gestured for Bern to do the same. "I am old and in my ways, ways that have worked for me, and that have worked

for my forefathers since Perun walked the earth. To abandon these ways would be a living death to our people and that one could not put a price on."

"What did you wish to speak to the knyaz about regarding the murders?" asked Pribislav. Bern noticed that Vratislav's face became red when the subject came up.

"I cannot speak of that subject because I feel uncertain about it but what I am certain about is that I wish to take the corpse of the girl that lies over there. She was a part of our Christian community and our church. I would bury her in the earth as it befits her."

"Take her and bury her," replied Nyklot. "But do it out of sight of the peasants. If you bury her in sight of the peasants I will have you impaled. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Knyaz," replied Bern, who turned to Bozidara. "Please come with me, dear lady. "Let us bury her together."

"What is her name?" asked Bozidara.

"I never knew."

"Then give her a name," she said, and then kissed Bern on the forehead. When Bern looked up he saw Beleknegini in the doorway, tall and proud. She was holding a sharpened dagger in her hand.

"The pyre is ready," she said, looking Bozidara in the eye. Everyone stood up, and kissed Bozidara on the forehead, and then walked out of the front door except Pribislav, who was appointed to look after Bern.

"Was that the only reason you wanted to speak with my father?" asked Pribislav.

"I am too shattered in my heart to speak now," replied Bern, who was gazing at the pale corpse.

He remained silent and prayed over her body.

"You must be too shattered to wrap her body up, as well," said Pribislav after the wait, and who then proceeded to take the large linen blanket that was under her and wrap up her body.

"Why did you take her all the way here?" asked Bern.

"Because we do not let corpses rot in the open. We are not animals."

Pribislav lifted the body over his shoulders, and had Bern pick up a shovel that was perched by the open doorway. Outside it was almost fully

dark. In the distance Bern saw the funeral pyre going up in flames. There were thousands of souls gathered around it, singing, and holding hands. Bern looked away and tried not to think of it.

They walked into the dense pine forest, through the brambles, and over the moss-covered earth.

Next to a decaying patch of fallen logs the stopped, and looking around, seeing that no one was there, Bern began to dig the hole as Pribislav hummed a druzhina song.

"Have you come up with a name for her yet?" he asked the digging monk.

"I have," replied Bern.

"What would you call her?"

"Ruth."

"Why Ruth?" asked Pribislav.

"Simply because it is a good name," replied Bern. He finished burying the grave, and Pribislav told him that a cross or any other burial marker was disallowed as it would attract attention.

Bern said a silent prayer over the grave, and began to cry. Pribislav, who felt that it was undignified behavior for the burial of a non-kinsman, walked away into the forest, so that Bern could save face.

All of a sudden he heard Pribislav yelling and racing about. He ran to and fro looking for his chaperone, but could not find him anywhere. Finally he popped out from behind a bush, startling Bern immensely.

"I'm sorry," said Pribislav. "It was only you. I thought I saw a pair of eyes looking at us, and I didn't know who it was."

"Is somebody watching us?" asked Bern.

"Do you feel the eyes on us?"

"I do, but perhaps it is just our imagination."

"Or perhaps an enemy," replied Pribislav, who had a slight look of fear on his face. "Let us patch up this grave with moss that it appears as a natural piece of the earth, and then we will leave, and return to the stronghold."

They returned to an array of blazing bonfires and music. The youth were singing, dancing, and jumping over the fire. Bern could see the different genders carousing in the shadows. He crossed himself, and looked towards the luminous starlit sky.

They stopped at one of the bonfires where several druzhina-brothers and peasants were gathered around Dmitri of Novgorod, who was telling a tale of the Greek Fire of Constantinople. He winked at Bern when he saw him from the other side of the flames and continued to speak.

"Would you like to participate in the funeral feast?" asked Pribislav.

"For whom?"

"For Bozidara, of course," replied Pribislav. "It is taking place within the stronghold at this very moment. There will be roasted boar, boiled partridges and honey-mead."

"As I am extremely tired I wish for nothing other than to sleep on the floor of the hut that my host-mother, Bieslava, inhabits."

"So be it, I will take you there," said Pribislav. "But remember that you are my hostage now, and I will keep you on a much shorter leash if you pull any tricks with me."

"As I am surrounded by forests and hostile tribes in all directions I see no manner of escape for me, therefore I have nothing to gain and everything to lose by disobeying you."

"It is good to see that you have acquired common sense."

"Where is Vratislav?"

"My brother went out hunting during the funeral and has brought back fresh game for the midnight feast."

"I was not aware of it. He is quick; it has been little time since he we all left the stronghold together."

"Wild beasts abound in these dark woods."

"Apparently," replied Bern.

They went to the densely packed huts in the forest and asked around for Bieslava and Bratumil.

When they found them, Bieslava greeted Bern with a warm hug, and offered to bake him a fresh loaf of bread, but he declined, and ate the last few crumbs that were left over from their dinner.

"But you are already so skinny, my little one," she said, hugging him.

"He looks like a bald scarecrow," said Bratumil, who laughed, exposing his rotten front teeth.

They all joined him in laughter, including Bern who had learned to laugh at himself since he had last visited Obodrite territory. They spoke for several more hours about many things, and then Bern fell asleep.

That night he dreamed of the girl that he had named Ruth. In the dream she was sitting on a bloody pagan altar, being ravaged by horned forest demons, than all of a sudden a familiar appeared with horns on his head, and Bern woke from his sleep, panting and sweating. *There will be a war*, he thought. *And I will be in the middle of it.*

"I know that it was not Sobieslav who killed Ludomir," he said to himself aloud. "I know who it really was, and I will prove it to the world."

When Bern woke the next morning it was late, as the sun had already risen, and Bratumil and Bieslava had already gone to fortify the stronghold.

Pribislav poked his head through the doorway. "Monk," he said. "We are going to war – Boyan has returned with news from Arkona; the Rugians will attack any and every Danish fleet in the sea. Meanwhile there is news from the empire – thousands of your countrymen have set sail to attack the Saracens in Lisbon and Jerusalem, and a Saxon party is gearing up to attack us."

With that, Pribislav left without saying anything else, apparently in a world of his own thoughts.

3.

The settlers in the village of Lübeck never knew what hit them. They were hardy peasants, Flemish and Westphalians, keepers of long traditions; unaccustomed to acting without authorization from higher clerical or lordly authorities.

When Sobieslav and his men attacked it was a quite June morning at dawn on the day of June 26, 1147. Some of the peasants were just

waking to till the fields, while others were still sleeping off the drunkenness from the previous evening.

It was to be a feast day, as it was the day that the holy martyrdom of St. John and Paul was to be celebrated. The monks opening their pine workshop stalls and prepared there candle-making, a craft that had started to attract inland tribes, and foreign merchants to visit their marketplace, situated on the island at the confluence of the Trave and Wakenitz.

The monks had smashed and burned down all of the pagan remnants of the area. They also fortified, and cleaned the bloodstained wooden-fort that had stood there, the only remaining vestige of the now extinct Wagrian tribes that had lived on the island.

A fleet of twelve longships with raised masts appeared on the horizon. An elderly, barefooted monk named Rotholph was gathering brushwood in a large wicker basket at the mouth of the Trave when he first saw the approaching fleet. He trembled, wanting to do something, but was too afraid to shout or retreat to the fort.

Sobieslav was at the helm of the leading ship. He was mounted on his steed, and decked out in chain shirt and a chain-coifed fluted helmet. He held a round, wooden shield in one hand, and was rubbing a small amber amulet in his other hand, a gift from Boyan. It had a tiny lizard inclusion in it, which rendered it worthless in the market, but made it a powerful charm according to the potent magic of the flamen. *I have charged this amulet with powerful fire-demons*, he had told Sobieslav before they both departed from Veligrad. *If you keep it with you at all times you will be invincible and remain untouched by spear thrust or by sword stroke. The enemy and the enemy's god will be unable to hurt you.*

The monk shouted out in terror. "Wends!" he shrieked. "The Wends are coming!" he screamed, running towards the fort.

Sobieslav snapped his fingers, and a druzhina-brother exchanged his loaded crossbow for Sobieslav's shield. The military commander aimed the weapon at the retreating monk, and shot him in the back, while other bolts and arrows from the fleet struck him as well. The monk fell to his knees, and died in a pool of his own blood. Several arrows protruded from his back.

When the ships hit bottom the men jumped off the gunwales, crying for war, some forgetting their steeds, and charged forward towards the fort and the huts that were situated alongside it. The defending

garrison was comprised of several dozen of Albert the Bear's march-men. They were hung-over and disorganized but went out to meet the enemy while other guards herded the peasants into the fort. At the gate a large bottleneck was forming as the peasants rushed into the fort.

As Sobieslav ordered his men onwards, he dropped his shield and his sword, and unmounted, walked forward towards the clinks, rattles and whelps of the bloody fray. Arrows and bolts whizzed around him, but he remained unfazed, and walked into the midst of the carnage, unarmed as if he floated a dozen feet high off of the ground.

The march-men had created a tight battle formation in front of the fort as the women and children ran in. Several bodies of fighting men already lay strewn on the ground, and as the two blocs of troops approached each other, the cries, and clinking of iron filled the air.

Sobieslav ordered his cavalrymen to circle around to the flank of the encompassed march-men, who were holding off the aggressive Wends by sword and shield. They did so, harassing them with throwing-spears, and arrows from all sides.

When the march-men were bewildered and surrounded, Sobieslav grabbed one of his men's swords, and rushed into the fray, unreservedly, slaying many men. Soon his warriors did the same, and the march-men retreated towards the fort as the cavalrymen cut them down from behind. The dozen or so remaining, surrendered.

Frequent arrows were shot from the fort at Sobieslav's feet. When he looked up, with his blood-soaked face he saw two scared boys firing arrows at him. He smiled at them and they retreated from their perch in fear and confusion.

"Commander," said his leading cavalryman. "The fighting men inside of the fort are scarce. These surrendered ones will ensure that they will lower the gates."

"Put them all to the sword," said Sobieslav.

"But, commander..."

"Put them to the sword and impale their bodies outside of this fort. Then set fire to all of the fields."

"Yes, commander," he replied, and rode off.

Sobieslav looked around him, and saw that one of his men had his arm sliced off. The man was cringing as two other druzhina-brothers looked at the wound. He then noticed the battlefield where at least thirty

enemies were laid low under the shadows of circling ravens that flew overhead.

The leading cavalryman put the remaining eleven men on their knees, as several druzhina-brothers lined up to plunge blades into their backs. Sobieslav nodded to the mail-shirted warriors, who then slew the captives.

He looked to his left and several dozen of his men were dousing their torches in flame, and running off to the fields to set fire to the crops. To his right were various captives; men, women, and children, all surrounded at blade point.

Inside of the fort several men lined up to see what was going on and yelled at Sobieslav in their strange, fierce tongue, of which he could understand not a single word. An infantryman approached him from behind. "What should be done with their captives, commander?" he asked.

"As we have been forced to burn our own fields, and plunder our marketplace," replied Sobieslav. "We have no choice but to supplement our treasury with the sale of slaves. Chain them in shackles, and then put them below deck."

"And the grown men?"

Sobieslav paused for a moment, not understanding the implication, and then spoke, finally. "The whip will make them equal to their female cohabitants if they resist."

All of a sudden Sobieslav heard screams and noticed that a small contingency had made a sally from the wooden fort. It was about eight men, in a flurry. He ran towards them, grasping his longsword in both hands. The four men that stood around him went to meet them, two a few steps behind, but when they approached, Sobieslav had already laid low four of them by his ferocious sword thrusts.

After striking a final death blow to an enemy, Sobieslav rose, blood splattered about the mail shirt and face. He panted but was not yet winded. In the distance the wheat and rye fields smoldered in flames, the smoke reaching towards the heavens.

Two cavalymen looked at Sobieslav. "He is invincible," said one.

"It is the magical amulet," said the other. "It protects him from all wounds."

A scout had escaped and brought back a fresh batch of mounted troops.

Sobieslav saw them fording the shallow currents of the Trave. He quickly roused a dozen of his men to mount their horses, and to meet them, knee deep in the water.

Sobieslav led the charge, screaming with all of his might, pointing his sword at the enemy. He met them at the edge of the river with fierce swordplay, always giving more thrusts than receiving. His men followed in a more conventional manner, harassing the enemy with spear thrusts from the mounted position. Several of the enemy fell this way, and then the rest unmounted, followed by the druzhina-brothers who did the same, meeting them in the river, as trickles of blood poured out towards the open sea.

When Sobieslav's sword dented on one man's helm, he grabbed him and suplexed him against the bedrocks of the river. The same man drowned there, unconscious, in a deep bloody puddle. Sobieslav then picked up the fallen man's sword and slew the rest of the enemy from all angles.

His men looked towards him in a combination of fear and reverence.

Other druzhina-brothers arrived at his feet, bowing, and returning from the fleet and the field.

All awaited instructions.

"We will invest this fort," he said. "All resisters will be put to the sword. All of the women and children will be sold to the Khazars, who will meet us on the coasts upon return."

"What should we do with the huts, and the church?" asked one of his men.

"Burn them all!"

The druzhina obeyed. Soon the whole town, except for the fort was invested in flames. There were fierce cries from the captives on deck. Several of the men resisted, and were therefore whipped unmercifully before the eyes of their wives, and children.

The church went up in flames, and the monks within the fort already terrified, grew hysterical, begging for God to translate them to heaven then and there. They screamed their prayers towards heaven, and the mass hysteria within the fort rose to higher and higher pitches of despair until the screams and moans came to drown out all other sounds under the sun.

When all of the druzhina-brothers returned from their tasks, they joined the focused, bloodstained Sobieslav in a semi-circle around the fort, each man with a lit torch in one hand and a sword in the other.

Sporadic arrows were shot from the fort now and again, but little resistance appeared left.

Sobieslav rubbed his amulet.

"How many wounded do we have?" he asked his leading man.

"Eleven wounded, four dead," replied the bearded warrior. "It looked like a few of the wounded will not make it through the day."

"Take care of them. Cut off the area with guards in all directions and have provisions distributed to the druzhina. See to it that the captives are kept in good condition so as to not diminish their market price."

He ferociously pointed to the men that he ordered to do this. They bowed and left.

"We will light the funeral pyre for our fallen men at dusk, here before the eyes of these enclosed invaders. I have heard that they find such rites distasteful."

"Aye," said his men, bowing.

Throughout the day the men looked after their duties and took turns eating while they sang druzhina-songs. The invested settlers tried to communicate with them by offering money and tribute payment. They threw silver denars at the feasters, who took no notice of it as if it was not even happening. The settlers grew more and more desperate in spirit.

Inside, one of the monks spoke to the battered remnants of the people. There were several hundred left, a few garrison members, many peasants and their families. The grain would not last them more than a few days, and it was uncertain if any help would arrive soon.

A monk named Ludolph grabbed a sickle in his hand and spoke thus before all the community that gathered around him in awe and wonderment.

"May God bless we beleaguered faithful! Neither tribute nor servitude does the Lord of Hosts offer to the ungodly heathen who revels in vainglory and the holy blood of God's elect! Let us sally forth, and put low the base pride of evil men!" and with that he brandished his sickle, and rallied all of the inhabitants to one last stand of courage. The men grabbed sickles, axes, hoes, and clubs, and prepared to go down fighting.

At nightfall the dead druzhina-brothers were put to the pyre, right in front of the fort. All of the inhabitants inside looked out at the scene of crackling flesh in utter rage and horror. This sight fortified their spirit even more, as they knew that they were fighting the devil and that the Lord of Hosts would send down his angels to fight the enemy's demonic powers over their very heads.

Several hundred druzhina-brothers camped outside the fort, as the inhabitants nestling away inside. They prayed fervently to heaven to deliver them from their impending doom.

That night Sobieslav's men lit giant bonfires outside of the fort. The huts and the church were still in sunken embers in all directions that conferred to the settled area a steamy red glow.

A mounted druzhina-brother rode through the forest towards the camp. He approached Sobieslav, who was sitting silently next to a bonfire as his men laughed, and drank mead. They all praised the deeds of Sobieslav, who had slain over a dozen warriors that day. Sobieslav looked off in the distance, not paying attention to any of it.

My heart has been embittered because of a woman, he thought.
And now life yields me little joy.

"Commander," said the mounted warrior as he unsaddled. "We have lain waste the countryside. Wagria is being subjugated and resistance is being destroyed in all quarters. The women and children are fettered and ready to return to Dobin with us."

"Good," replied Sobieslav. "Make sure that your men appreciate their commanders."

What do you mean, commander?" asked the warrior with a curious look on his face.

"Betrayal is worse than slaughter," he replied, simply. "If they fight valiantly, but mock you behind your back what victory could there possibly be?" The warrior bowed to him, and rode off without practical instructions from his commander, wondering if Sobieslav was mentally fit enough to be leading such an expedition.

The next morning at dawn, Sobieslav woke to gentle nudges from his men, who were awaiting instructions.

"They are taunting us and jeering at us," said one of them. Sobieslav looked towards the forts and noticed many of them were holding up chickens and pointing towards Sobieslav, who felt slightly

enraged and emasculated upon seeing this sight. He fondled his lizard amulet.

"Shall we set fire to their fort?" asked one bearded warrior.

"Tell them that I will slay their strongmen one by one until one of them can defeat me. If any man defeats me, I will let them all go."

His men smiled at this idea, and the Latin-speaking druzhina-brother rode towards the fort, and yelled the challenge at the top of his lungs.

There was no response as the sun rose over their heads, but when the Obodrite warriors started building pyres for the rotting corpses of the falling defenders, the gate dropped and a mail-clad warrior appeared, made the Sign of the Cross, and walked forward, face hidden behind a visored helm.

Sobieslav became offended at the sight of this challenge. He clutched his amulet, and then removed his mail shirt and his tunic so that he was only wearing linen trousers, girded with leather straps from the sandals up to the knees. His physique was so chiseled that the defender stepped back upon display of the bust of his chest. The druzhina began to cheer on their commander as he unsheathed a sword, and shuffled towards the challenger.

Cheers and prayers for the Christian warrior arose from the fort, as old men, women, and children gathered at the gate to watch their warrior defend them in battle.

Sobieslav hurled himself at the man with such ferocity of sword strokes that the man could not hold his ground, but was pushed off of his feet into the moat. The druzhina laughed so loud that some fell on the ground in delight. The man rose with his shield and sword, dripping water, sapped of confidence.

This time, Sobieslav grabbed two swords, and cut the man down at the knees. He then beheaded him in a single stroke as his men roared with contentment. Sobieslav threw the head into the fort, and order his men to continue the mass-pyres.

They began to burn the bodies of the settlers, including the beheaded champion. Then the gate lowered again and another fully-armored man walked out; this one was smaller, but appeared more pugnacious-looking by his onward body language.

Sobieslav grabbed a spear with his two hands. The man ran at him in full speed, and Sobieslav threw the spear towards his chest. It pierced the armor, and the man fell to his knees, pierced through the heart. He then beheaded him, throwing the head back into the fort.

The corpse-burning continued, and the fort remained silent. Sobieslav felt some satisfaction upon seeing the spirit of his enemies apparently crushed, but his heart was still not content.

As the day waned, the corpses continued to pile into the pyre, and the druzhina sang many songs, some sang from the ships and others sang from the land.

At twilight the gate lowered again and the monk, Ludolph, came out, armed with sword and shield. He had no helmet and no armor. The druzhina laughed at this sight, but Sobieslav took offense to it, and ordered his men to fully invest the fort now that the bridge was lowered.

They charged through the gate, ignoring the monk and began to penetrate the meager defense of old men and young children that occurred at the gateway. Ludolph, the monk, continued to charge Sobieslav, sword in hand.

Sobieslav looked at him, and fondled his amulet, without weapon in hand. The monk roared forward and plunged the blade into Sobieslav's belly. The warrior's face turned red. He removed the sword and began to crush the skull of the monk with his bare hands, and then bashed it against the rocks until he was dead. He then fell to his knees and watched his men storm the fortress as he bled.

A half hour later the investment was complete, the settlers were now fettered slaves, marching off towards the ships.

When his men returned to him they found him pale and weak, having already lost much blood.

They girded him up around the waist in order to stop the bleeding, and tried to lift him to the ship, but he refused.

The druzhina collected much silver and many slaves that day. They put the bounty on the ships and prepared to sail off, as it was getting dark.

Without warning several hundred torches appeared in the forest clearing, surrounding the island. Marchrad and his henchman Rimbert, torch and sword in hand, walked forward towards Sobieslav who was just preparing to embark. Almost all of the druzhina was already boarded on the ships.

"What was that about?" asked Marchrad in broken Wendish tongue.

"What do you mean?" asked Sobieslav.

Marchrad's face reddened and his eyes shined in hatred from behind the torch-fire.

"Blasphemy," he said, shaking his head up and down, hysterically. "*Blasphemy!*"

"Why do you cry?" asked Sobieslav. "Did we not do you a favor?"

Marchrad, with a look of complete rage and hatred on his face.

"You corpse-burning, apple-eating pagan devil! I will lay you low and make sure that the insatiable worms of hell eat your flesh for a wholesale eternity!"

The druzhina was preparing to embark, and urged Sobieslav to board, several of them grabbing at his massive arm.

"You have challenged me!" responded Sobieslav.

"So I have," replied Marchrad.

"Good," he said. "I accept."

The dueling ground was drawn in ash and flame. Hundreds of Holsatians and Obodrites stood around the circle under the stars, holding lit torches, chanting two irreconcilable songs.

Sobieslav didn't put on his armor, but only his tunic, and as a result Marchrad removed his hauberk.

When Sobieslav moved into the circle with only his sword, Marchrad handed Rimbert his shield so that the two would be evenly matched in all aspects.

The two combatants began to sidestep around each other inside the circle of flames. Marchrad struck first with a mighty parry that made everyone present flinch. Sobieslav sidestepped the blows and countered with his own flurry, which was fierce but sluggish.

He saw Marchrad's face in the shadows of the flames. It had the killer instinct and sensed weakness as it went in for the kill. He saw the decaying teeth of the Holsatian, chiseled and sharpened like a bat's. He suddenly felt like retreating for the first moment in his entire life, and then out of the blue felt a sharp pain in his abdomen.

Marchrad had thrown a dagger into his belly from several paces away. Sobieslav dropped his sword, and removed the knife. He then

grasped at his amulet, smearing blood all over his chest. The druzhina fell silent.

Marchrad approached the fallen warrior with knife to his throat.

"Did you tell Knyaz Adolph to send help?" asked Sobieslav, as he gasped for air.

"Never on pain of hell would I send your ilk help from our side," replied Marchrad, and with that he began to drag Sobieslav's mighty body towards his men.

"Quick!" yelled a warrior from the druzhina. "Get Commander Sobieslav!" and with that there was a quick skirmish between the Obodrites, and the Holsatians in the dark as each man slashed about with sword in one hand and torch in the other.

Finally they retrieved Sobieslav who had fallen on the ground as Marchrad fought back himself.

They then rushed off and into the deep of the midnight water that took them towards the sea amidst streaming trickles of blood.

Sobieslav found himself facing the clear starlit sky on the Baltic Sea, and finally felt a sense of serenity. All of a sudden he saw the face of his right hand man standing over him, a bearded warrior with a fluted helmet.

"We have succeeded, commander," he said. "We have destroyed the settlement and have brought the spoils along with us."

"There is no chance of lasting victory in deeds," replied Sobieslav.

Two more bearded warriors appeared over him, and all looked at one another in confusion upon hearing this last sentence.

"You fought bravely, commander," said one of them. "You are truly Sobieslav, the Flood. Your name and deeds will always be remembered by your kin."

"Am I close to death?" he asked, without the strength to lift up his own head.

"Let it be known," said a close druzhina-brother, "that if you soon cross over the sea, your brothers fought for you here so that the Niemcy could not eternally defile you by putting you in the ground for worms to eat."

Sobieslav smiled. "I do know what love is," he said to himself, and grasped the many hands around him. "I love my brothers."

"And we love you," said one of the bearded warriors with tears in his eyes. Sobieslav's spirit left him that evening as the mast fluttered in the open northern winds. They washed his wounds and sang a death song for him.

His lead man cut the amulet off from his neck. "This wretched thing did not help make him invincible!" he yelled.

"You believed that it would?"

"Our beloved commander believed that it would."

"No. No, he didn't believe that."

And with that he tossed the lizard amulet into the deep. It slowly fell to the bottom, tossed about by the underwater currents, never to be seen again.

The druzhina burned his corpse at dusk the next day amidst much weeping and lamentations.

The fleet then continued on towards their new home in Dobin after selling off the surplus populace to Khazar slavers in Samogitia.

By late summer of the year 1147, all of Christendom had been roused to holy war by Abbot Bernard of Clairvaux and his hundreds of Cistercian monasteries throughout Latin Christendom. The Holy Father, and loyal disciple of Abbot Bernard, Pope Eugene III, had ordered Papal Bulls proclaiming indulgences and remission of sins to all warriors who would fight on three fronts: in the Holy Land, in the Siege of Lisbon, and in the north against the pagan Wends.

The Obodrites expansion into Wagria only fortified the spirit of the Christians, who knew that they were fighting agents of darkness; church-burners, and blood-drinkers.

In late July, a large contingency of Northmen set out in a fleet of over 50 longships towards Obodrite territory. It was filled with the mail-clad warriors of the two rival claims to the Danish crown, Canute V, and Sven III, who both led a fleet of over two dozen longships each. The warriors were comprised not only of Danes, but also Gotlanders, and Swedes as well.

At the helm of the lead ship stood a proud Thorkell, who looked towards the land of the strongholds, Wendland. His hair fluttered about in the wind under the bi-colored red and white mast of the ship. The rowing men sang a war song as they treaded forward through the open sea. Bishop Eskil stood nearby, mace in hand.

Scouts had already reported that Veligrad had been burned down and the Northmen knew more or less where Dobin was supposed to be. When they arrived they planned on confederating with a 3,000 plus infantry, 480 cavalry comprised of warriors from Saxony, Burgundy, and Poland, led by Duke Henry the Lion.

Canute V's fleet ran into the Rugian fleet and met with a full scale battle that ended their participation in the campaign. After fighting the Rugians on sea and the brunt of the clash they turned tail and headed back to salvage Canute's claim to the throne of Denmark.

The other fleet led by Sven III and guided by Thorkell continued on. When they hit soil they scurried forth on foot towards the stronghold, trudging through thick marshlands and patches of quicksand. Some fell into wolf-pit traps laid by the Wendish forest dwellers, and others were ambushed by local forest tribes.

By the time they arrived at Dobin, most of the men were exhausted, and beleaguered from the inland journey through the swampland. A few of them were dead or being held captive.

Thorkell looked through a patch of reeds and saw the stronghold of Dobin, situated between two lakes. It was massive and imposing under the bright summer day. Behind him, stood over 900 Scandinavian warriors armed with broadswords and battle axes.

On the southwestern side of the stronghold and almost opposite of them, he saw several thousand warriors assembled in various contingencies, each man under the respective war-standard of his nation. Duke Henry the Lion sat under a tent as he devised strategies with his advisors. A flag with a rampant lion flew above the tent.

Sven III commanded his standard-bearer to hoist their flag.

Inside of the stronghold Nyklot rode to and fro, his sword brandished, as he commanded his archers to fire blazing arrows at the invaders every time they attempted a siege. Two men laid dead in the no-man's-land between the Saxon contingency and the stronghold; they had been cut down by Obodrite arrows and bolts as they had pushed forth a siege tower, which now stood stationary in the open field.

Nyklot had bought enough grain with the surplus money from the slave-raid of Wagria that he and his people could hold out for over a month, and enemies had no fields to raid for miles and miles in all directions. As a result his strategy was to harass the enemy into retreat through sallies, and ultimately hunger.

In the center of the stronghold many hearth-fires blazing as a multitude of women and children made bread to feed the masses that huddled together on the eastern side of the stronghold.

The peasants were singing songs in order to fortify their collective spirit.

On the outside Bishop Vizelin, crosier in hand, signed a group of mounted warriors with the cross, and then Duke Henry ordered them onward, under the momentous fury of trumpet blasts.

Nyklot ordered his druzhina to make a sally led by Vratislav. The two forces met about a hundred meters from the stronghold, approximately 200 men a side. The Saxon knights proved more disciplined in battle, all the while maintaining a tight formation, but the Obodrites were agile at close quarters, wheeling about, throwing spears,

and then coming in to exchange blows at close quarter. After several minutes of intense combat the sides unlocked their energies from one another to pick up their own dead and wounded, and then both retreated.

"It is because of the geographical location," said an advisor to Duke Henry, "that we cannot invest the stronghold immediately; our warriors outnumber theirs by at least three to one, but because of the narrow strip of land we must bleed them, bit by bit."

"And in the meanwhile," replied Duke Henry. "I must send for more and more provisions! I already feed the paupers of my manor, and now I must feed and pay silver to indigent foreign troops that do not even fight."

"Bleed them slowly, my lord," said the advisor. "The only thing certain is their defeat. Their men take turns making sallies, while we can send a fresh batch in every time and exhaust the flower of their fighting force."

All of a sudden Duke Henry saw Thorkell running towards the tent from a distance as flaming arrows were hurled at his feet from the stronghold.

Several guards with visored-helms approached him, and escorted him towards Duke Henry the Lion. Thorkell bowed before him. Duke Henry watched as his duplicitous face contorted to resemble that of a humble vassal.

"My lord," he said. "Our fighting men have arrived. We are prepared for the siege. How are things going here?"

"Well," said Duke Henry, looking at Thorkell's stubbed arms. "We could use an extra hand or two around here."

His men laughed, and the page that was holding his shield dropped from laughing too hard. Duke Henry shot the man a glance of contempt as he picked up the concave shield, painted with green chevrons.

"My lord," asked Thorkell. "We are prepared to invest the stronghold, but our men are weary and short of supplies. Will you support us with arrow fire and cavalry if we make a sally?"

"Our men are impatient, as well," said Duke Henry. "We have been here three days and still no word from the beleaguered pagan chief. Our plans of investment have not yet been successful, either."

All of a sudden Bishop Vizelin appeared at Duke Henry's right side. "The Wends are to face either annihilation or conversion, good man,"

he said. "But just remember that we pray for their conversion, first and foremost."

Inside the stronghold Nyklot sat mounted on his horse, next to Boliliut and his two sons. He fondled his mustache as he looked at his panting, wounded cavalymen.

"Pribislav," he said. "The Northmen are sitting in on top of the marsh, and must be exhausted from the inland travel. Now is the time to hit them. Will you lead our infantry against them, and surround them?"

"Aye," replied Pribislav. Nyklot kissed him on the cheek, and he rode off towards the infantry division, rousing them with his warhorn.

Bern was huddled in the corner amidst the singing peasants. He calmly chanted the Kyrie eleison to himself as flaming arrows and bolts flew over his head. All of a sudden Pribislav approached him.

"I must fetter you," he said, with chains in his hands. "Because I now go out to battle."

Bern lifted out his hands. "I know who killed Ludomir," he said. Pribislav gave him a queer look, and chained his hands and feet. Thorkell returned to the reed patch where prince Sven III stood, stroking his beard.

"Will they cover us?" he asked.

"Of course they will," replied Thorkell. "Let us make ample slaughter of these pagan dogs."

"We have time and energy only for one sally," replied the prince. "Our men are weary and underfed, and as my rival Canute V has proved himself a rabbit-foot, I too, must return to reclaim my rightful place on the throne. I will leave with my garrison, and you are now in charge," he said looking towards Eskil.

"Aye," replied Eskil, and with that the prince and his cohorts left, trudging through the knee-thick mud of the swamp.

Thorkell rallied the men onward. Many of them were drunken and exhausted. They lined up in eight files in order to traverse the narrow swampland. From the stronghold there were several blows of the warhorn and all of a sudden over 500 hundred mail-clad Obodrites sallied forth armed with spears and swords.

They marched forward into the swamp, and were met with the warriors behind Eskil's rallying mace. The two forces met amidst fierce war-cries as sword and shield crashed and meshed under their respective

fluttering battle flags in a raging mêlée. Pribislav led several files of his infantrymen out towards dry land, and they ran to the back lines of the Northmen, surrounding them on both sides, harassing them with spears and arrows from every angle.

The Northmen began to lose formation and started fighting everyman for himself. A second sally of infantrymen dashed out from the stronghold, led by Vratislav. They meandered around the battle towards the narrow corners of dry land, and began to hurl spears at the Danes. Crossbowmen and archers shot at them from a distance.

Eskil looked around after battering an Obodrite on the head with his iron mace. Everywhere his men were screaming as they fell beneath the muddy waters from sword thrusts and arrows. He felt his feet sinking into the mud, and realized that he had been completely exhausted from the inland march, before the battle even took place.

He blew his warhorn, and picked up the battle-standard that had fallen into the mud. His men rallied around him, and they made one last effort to hold off the Obodrites who surrounded them.

From afar Duke Henry mounted his horse, and his squire handed him his sword.

"Shall we invest the stronghold?" asked his advisor.

"Our two main enemies are destroying each other, can you not see?" he asked.

"Indeed my lord, but..."

"No excuses... let them bleed each other dry. When the Danes and the Wends are both exhausted we will invest the stronghold with our siege engines."

Vratislav smiled at Pribislav from a distance. The two brothers joined each other at the edge of the swamp and hugged for a brief and intense moment.

"Will your arrows and bolts hold out much longer?" asked Vratislav.

"We are almost depleted of our spear-ward."

"When you are, sally forth on both sides of the marsh, and that way they will be surrounded from every angle."

"Aye," replied Pribislav, and ran back towards his men, splitting them into two forces and commanding one group to march around to the opposite side of the marsh.

Although the Northmen had originally outnumbered the Obodrites and their Wendish conscripts the numbers were now about equal and dropping rapidly as the bearded Northmen fell in confusion from numerous blows on all sides.

Eskil's forceful mace laid low many Wends as he tripped over the thick brownish, waters of the marsh which was strewn with blood and bodies. He noticed that his man had dropped the standard again, and it was sinking into the water. He threw down his shield and picked up the flag, rallying it in the air.

All of a sudden he heard the frantic cries of Pribislav's men who hurled themselves at the Northmen from the left and the right. The Danes and their allies were already exhausted and scared, but continued to fight fiercely as cornered beasts unvaryingly do.

"Now," said Duke Henry from his perched position on his warhorse. His symbol of the rampant lion was emblazoned on his surcoat that covered his finely-meshed mail shirt. He put his gauntlet-covered left hand over his heart, and drew his sword with his right. His page handed him his shield.

"All noble knights of my army, faithful in Christ, assembled in holy resolve – go forth to exterminate the heathen from the land!" He said, pointing his sword towards the foreign troops, and then at the stronghold.

The Polish and Burgundian contingencies darted onward, swords drawn, under the trumpet blare. When they reached the siege engines they rallied behind them, pushing them forward.

"Sally forth!" Cried Nyklot, with his sword, *Mistui*, drawn in the air. "Burn down the siege engines!"

His cavalry rode out to meet the enemy, and the two met in the middle of them open ground, meshing armor and sword together in a cacophony of pitiless slaughter.

Nyklot's cavalry perched their spears against under their elbows, and stabbed the invaders left and right before unsheathing their swords, and mincing them from the mounted position. On the sides of the isthmus, the foot soldiers began to get pushed into the water.

After an hour both sides began to disengage in order to pick up their dead, and then retreat to their corners. A few of the cavalry stayed behind to put torch to the siege engines which began to go up in flames.

Nyklot looked on in pride, and then, from the watchtower noticed that the Danes were surrendering.

He raised his sword, looking towards the huddled populace. "Obodrites! We fought on two fronts, and won both!" His yell of victory was followed by exuberant cries from the people.

The sun was setting as Duke Henry watched the troops retreating and the Danes surrendering, and fleeing away from the marsh and back towards the sea. The exuberance from inside the stronghold was what disturbed him the most.

"Send the foreign troops away," he said to his advisors. "We will stay here with the Saxon cavalry division and pitch camp. It is just a matter of time before the pagans succumb to my will. They are not weak at heart, and are not intimidated by numbers alone."

The foreign divisions were dismissed, and the Saxon knights pitched their tents, and sang songs as Bishop Vizelin read aloud from the first book of Maccabaeus. Bishop Eskil had escaped with several hundred of his men, but returned towards the Saxon camp with a small garrison with the object of retrieving his men.

When Pribislav and Vratislav returned their father gave them the warmest embrace of their lives. The foot soldiers of the druzhina held over three hundred captive Northmen, fettered and whipped by the druzhina commanders. Among them was Thorkell who was still undetected, but whose feet were chained to the horse stall.

Bern, who had held his head low for many hours raised it and saw that Boyan was standing over him. He had his amber amulet in his right hand, and walked towards the statue of Perun, and made voracious invocations to the thunder-god with wild gestures. This roused the people into further frenzy and confidence.

He has the lizard amulet! Thought Bern. *But the last one had disappeared with the warrior, Sobieslav. There must be at least two lizard amulets!*

Inside of the stronghold Boyan continued to invoke Perun to continue to protect them in battle, and outside Vizelin invoked The Lord of Hosts and St. Michael the Archangel. Meanwhile, both Nyklot and

Duke Henry devised their respective plans for facing the obstacles of the siege.

Nyklot noticed that many of the druzhina-brothers had sustained fresh wounds, but continued to go out to battle. Most of them had made various sallies since the siege began at dawn, three days past.

"Your sacrifices will not be forgotten," he said as he gave drink to the wounded men from his leather canteen.

Bishop Eskil spoke with Bishop Vizelin, and the two promised to deliver the Christian souls from within the stronghold before they left, no matter the cost. It was also communicated through a messenger that Bern was a hostage as well. Now the Obodrites had much bargaining power.

"Are these pagan dogs familiar with Aesop?" asked Duke Henry to one of his heralds.

"It is possible, my lord."

"Tell them the story of the Oak and the Reeds," said the duke.

"Tell them it is a message from me."

"I fumble stories around clumsily, my lord; especially in Latin."

Duke Henry raised an eyebrow and the herald looked down at his feet before riding forward on his horse. Dmitri of Novgorod and Pribislav went out to meet him.

The herald spoke: "There once was a great oak that stood next to a mighty river. One day a giant storm came along and uprooted the tree, and it fell into a patch of reeds. 'Why would you, little ones, be able to brave the storm while I could not?' asked the oak tree. The reeds replied 'because we were humble and bowed to the wind, while you were stubborn and would not.'"

Pribislav strained to understand at least every third word, but Dmitri claimed to understand what was said. When they returned to the stronghold he yelled to the people: "They have threatened to cut down our sacred oak trees and hurl them into the marshes!"

The people murmured and Boyan warned that Perun's wrath would destroy them with plague and fire if they committed such sacrilege. They yelled out in indignation at the very thought of such an occurrence.

"Did they understand?" asked Duke Henry.

"I think so, my lord," replied his herald.

"Good," he replied. "We will let them ponder their options this evening, and tomorrow morning we shall strike at full force, *relentlessly*, until the walls are scaled or the stronghold burned to the ground."

And with that the men retired from battle and departed to their tents, as minstrels hummed war tunes, and the scribes penned the noble deeds of Duke Henry the Lion, their patron and lord.

Inside the stronghold Nyklot took counsel from his two sons, and Boliliut. They stood by a small hearth fire in front of the statue of Perun.

Yaroslav approached Nyklot.

"Knyaz," he said. "You have called for me?"

"Yes," replied Nyklot. "See to it that you double the rations for the children and the pregnant women; they are the future and should not be starved at the expense of the elderly, who are already worn and frail."

"Yes, Knyaz," replied Yaroslav, bowing. He then walked off.

Nyklot then noticed that Vratislav was bleeding from several places under his tunic and chain shirt.

"How are you?" he asked.

"If need be, I will make another sally," he replied.

"It won't be necessary this evening; they won't try to besiege us during the night. Too much confusion. In the morning they will come at us in full force – that is why they dismissed their infantry.

We will kill every captive Dane we have if the enemy breach the walls, and must let them know this before dawn."

They all bowed to him.

"I will take your place, my son," he said to Vratislav, putting his hand on his knee. "You are pale, and tired, and have been fighting continuously for days. We can now concentrate on our main enemy."

In the morning Nyklot rose from his straw mat and put on his tunic, mail shirt and fluted helmet. He then centered his belt above the waist to distribute the weight of the mail shirt evenly.

Beleknegini rose. She had a stoic look on her face. "It is either my husband or my sons that risk their lives at every moment," she said.

"I will be back soon," replied Nyklot, and the two kissed passionately. "Bear the burden with strength as you always have. Triumph is at hand."

When Nyklot left the hut he saw his war-torn druzhina already assembled under the command of Pribislav. Father and son shared a glance of deep affection, and then Nyklot mounted his horse, riding in front of the druzhina. The druzhina bowed before their knyaz.

"Brothers!" He yelled passionately. "Today is the day that will mean the difference between our continual perpetuation and our eternal extinction! You have bled for your families' sake long enough and I promise that the next sally will be the decisive one, as we will cut down the flower of their manhood once and for all!" And with that he lifted his sword in the air, and the druzhina cheered. The multitude of peasants cheered as well.

Vratislav ran up a trunk of pinewood with hollowed out steps on it, towards the watchtowers.

He surveyed the panorama. To the north he saw the marsh, strewn with blood and protruding with bodies. Below he saw the multitude of peasants on the east side of the stronghold; they were huddled around the dozens of bodies of the fallen druzhina-brothers, who were laid on their backs on straw mats with candles in their hands.

At Duke Henry's camp the knights were gearing up for the siege. The auxiliaries prepared fodder for the horses as the knights kneeled before Bishop Vizelin who, crosier in hand, signed them with the cross.

"Bring our lead warrior to me," said Duke Henry to his herald. "I must command him before he strikes."

The herald rode off towards the lead warrior who returned, mounted on a fine steed. He wore superior-quality chain mail, covered with a white surcoat with a red Hospitallers cross on it.

He raised the visor on his helm, and bowed to Duke Henry. "My liege," he said. Raising his head Duke Henry took a look at the battle-scarred face and long grey hair of Marchrad, the Holsatian elder, whose eyes matched his in intensity.

"Deliver me this stronghold and I will see to it that you bask in silver as a poor man does in fleas."

"My liege," replied Marchrad. "You have mistaken my heart. I have followed you on this holy excursion for the deed, not the reward."

The shadow of Vizelin's crosier hovered over Marchrad from the tent. Marchrad looked towards his mentor, the bishop.

"My people want nothing other than freedom and innocence before our Creator – As for silver, I have never known it in my life and am none the worse for it, God be praised."

And with that he rode in front of the cavalry, who was standing in attention with bannered javelins raised to the sky.

"So you say," retorted a smirking Duke Henry to himself.

Marchrad held the battle standard in his left hand as the trumpet rang out. The cavalry marched forward in a tight formation. Numerous arrows, bolts, and sling-rocks were hurled at the aggressors, and when the oncoming force reached within 100 meters of the stronghold Nyklot rode out in front of several hundred reinvigorated, jeering Wends; Obodrites, Dravani, Linguones, and Kicini. All mounted, mail-clad, with coifed-fluted helmets, and spear and shield in hand.

Nyklot handed the fluttering battle-standard of Perun to his son, Pribislav, and then drew his sword, *Mistui*.

"May St. Michael, the Archangel protect us from heaven," said Vizelin, crossing himself from his watch-spot on the hill. "Oh, Lord – Crush the bones of the wicked."

"May Volos strangle the god of the worms once and for all," said Boyan from the watchtower as he rubbed his amulet. "Him and his impudent followers."

"Onward!" Yelled Marchrad as the trumpet rang out.

"Onward!" Yelled Nyklot, blowing his warhorn.

The two forces gained momentum; the horses trod over the ashes of the burnt siege engines and collided in the middle of the isthmus. They crashed hard against one another, and the horses in the frontline neighed and reared as spears pierced their necks. The warriors on both sides fell from their saddles and thrust daggers at each other as flails rained down on their heads from the mounted men of the opposite side.

Vizelin led his monks in a choir of the Kyrie eleison followed by fervent prayers for deliverance from heaven.

The peasants in the stronghold sang war songs from their huddled position , as the few guards within struck any and every insolent Dane with the whip.

Nyklot remained mounted and hurled his spear at a Saxon knight, dismounting him. He then unsheathed his sword and slashed at the masked warriors. All around him was confusion and danger.

His instinct took over and he focused on nothing other than slaying the enemy.

The battle intensified in the middle of the field. Nyklot wheeled out of the center to command his troops. Marchrad did the same. Their standard-bearers followed them, and thus the two elder warriors drew each other's gaze amidst the shrill terror of adrenaline and carnage.

Inside Vratislav took a look at the Danes from the high tower, and noticed the stubbed arms of Thorkell. The long hair and the thick blond beard were unmistakable as well. He shot a flaming arrow in from of his outstretched feet.

Thorkell looked up at him and shot him a look of unmistakable hatred. Vratislav then loaded another arrow and shot it at the Northman, piercing him in the forehead and killing him immediately. The others around him began to panic, but when they looked up towards the tower they saw no man pointing any weapon at them.

Bern saw the slaying from his position, and quick tried to tell Dmitri of Novgorod, but the latter he found head down, deep in prayer.

Marchrad and Nyklot intensified their gaze on one another, and then charged each other simultaneously. Both had lost their spears and had only their swords. They met with intense sword parries. Thousands upon thousands of eyes focused on their battle. Marchrad cut Nyklot's arm, wounding it severely, but at the same time Nyklot's sword came crashing down on Marchrad's helmet and the latter fell from his steed.

The defending Wendish confederacy saw this and gained new courage, striking back hard at the Saxon cavalry from foot and mount, with sword or spear.

Finally the two sides disengaged to pick up their dead and wounded, and Nyklot raised his sword in the air, yelling out in victory. There were exuberant cheers from the stronghold and from the battlefield as the defenders felt a collective second wind.

Nyklot smiled under his blood splattered mustache, and his men gathered around him in glory and victory.

5.

Duke Henry the Lion lowered his visor and began to devise a plan, as his ragged and tarnished cavalry limped back to camp.

All of a sudden a messenger rode up to him. "My lord," he said, bowing. "I am Paul of Brandenburg, a march-man and member of Margrave Albert the Bear's militia."

"What is it?" asked Duke Henry in irritation.

"My master sends word that he is coming to assist you in your siege."

"Surely he has not already captured the Pomeranian stronghold?"

"It is a long story; we set out with numerous monks and priests, all who wished to impose their will on the army. We rode forth deep into Wendland and slew many of the countryside inhabitants, attacking their sacred idols and groves with torch and axe. Finally we headed towards Stettin, the stronghold of the Pomeranians, but their chief, Ratibor, came forth with his assorted monks, while the defenders flung numerous flags with crosses over their walls.

"We had no choice but to abandon the siege, according to the will of the clergy that accompanied us. We tried to explain to them that the Wends practice double-faith and are still inwardly ravenous pagans, but it was to no avail. Afterwards as we retreated, the good Margrave, my master, Albert the Bear volunteered to assist you in your siege against these strong and seemingly invincible pagans that have overwhelmed your army."

"Be gone!" replied Duke Henry in wrath.

"But..."

"Be gone! For no help is needed here!"

The messenger looked at the wounded cavalry and the numerous dead that they carried in their arms. He then looked back at Duke Henry,

shrugged his shoulders, and then rode off. The duke, enraged beyond his threshold, kept his composure as he rode back and forth on his warhorse.

He then approached Vizelin who stood solidly, crosier in hand, next to the wounded men that graveled at his feet.

"Until conversion or deletion, am I correct?" asked the Duke, lifting his visor.

Vizelin nodded to him.

"And we must have the Danish captives back!" demanded Bishop Eskil, who still had much dried blood and dirt on his face, dried mud covering his mail shirt up to the waist.

"*And*," began Vizelin, "I want my disciple, Bern, who they are holding as hostage."

"It will be so," replied Duke Henry who gestured for his page. "Arrange a great feast," he commanded to the page.

"But, my lord," he said. "Our rations are meager as it is."

"Know that the natural state of man is hunger. Neither the starved nor the satiated understand the happiness of the hunt. I therefore say to you... *be thou hungry!*" replied Duke Henry, smiling viciously as if in a state of madness. "Hide all of the dead and the wounded. Make a large feast; spare not a single scrap. Bring out the minstrels and tell them to celebrate."

"Celebrate what?" asked the page.

"Victory!"

"As things stand in terms of victory, my lord, I am not so sure that they will understand."

"It is not their job to understand, but to celebrate," responded the duke with an ever-twistingly impatient smirk on his face.

The page scratched his head and rode off to do as he was told.

You will not lay claim to my land, Albert the Bear, thought Duke Henry. *On my life you will not.*

Inside the stronghold the people screamed in happiness and crowded around their hero, their knyaz, Nyklot. Wounded and spattered with the blood of many men he exalted in glory. The musicians harmonized their zithers and flutes as the people sang songs of praise to their leader. The warriors recounted their own deeds of how many men they slew and that of their leader who unmounted the rival leader in battle, causing the enemy to retreat.

They celebrated for another hour or so with song and dance. Finally Vratislav called his father from the watch tower. Nyklot marched up the pine trunk with the stairways carved in it towards his son.

"Father," said Vratislav. "Look."

Nyklot looked out towards the pitched camp and saw that the Saxons were feasting on bread and wine, making merry with mirth and music.

"Why do they celebrate?" asked Nyklot. "Did we not repel the best of what they had to offer?"

"They also slew our men," replied Vratislav. "I will lead the next sally and slay them all."

"They must have ample provisions if they can feast like that," replied Nyklot in consternation.

"We are low on grain. Lower than we had originally thought. Perhaps we could send a messenger with silver to our neighbors for supplies."

"Any neighbor that knows of our precarious situation would charge ten times the normal rate and still give us dirt instead of grain."

Nyklot waxed stoic as always. "So be it. But we must maintain high spirits, even if mine is currently low as I look upon this sight."

"Time for a parlay," said Duke Henry to himself, and rode forth on his warhorse, holding the wavering rampant lion standard in his hand. His page followed him.

"Look," said Vratislav. "He wants you."

"I will meet him," replied Nyklot.

"Shall I come with you?"

"You may," replied Nyklot. Vratislav smiled widely.

The drawbridge of the stronghold lowered and father and son rode out to meet their adversaries. Vratislav held the war-standard of Perun.

The two parties approached one another. Duke Henry lifted his visor and stared Nyklot in the eye. They eyed each other for a few undying moments.

"I know of your hunger," said Nyklot in Latin.

Duke Henry smiled and kept the same intense gaze on his opponent. "So we understand each other then?" he said.

"Your hunger knows no satiation. Why do you wish to speak with me now?" asked Nyklot.

"At this very moment an army much larger and more zealous than mine is marching towards this stronghold and they will not be content until every man, woman and child is thrown into the fire."

"We will brave every storm that comes our way," replied Nyklot in pride.

Duke Henry smiled and made a little circle with his horse. "Do you know why our militias are assembled against your people?" he asked.

"Because of your appetite," replied Nyklot.

"It is because you worship false gods that need to be replaced by the True God."

"Such a pretext we do not use when we invade the land of diplomatic people."

"Diplomatic?" queried Duke Henry. "I do believe that the Danes would disagree with that sentiment. Why our mutual friend, Count Adolph himself, told me something about it."

Nyklot raised an eyebrow. "What do you know of that?" he asked.

"I know that you pay tribute to him when you raid the Danish coasts. But he is no friend of yours; if he were, where is now, in your time of need?"

"It is true," replied Nyklot. "He is no friend of mine."

"Listen to me," said Duke Henry, leaning in. "I will march out of here with all of my army if you permit me to be your friend..."

"How so?" asked Nyklot, leaning in as well.

"I want to take over the tribute of Count Adolph. I am now master of Holsatia and master of all greater Saxony. Continue to raid the Danish coasts, but give me four out of ten denars that you plunder."

"With Knyaz Adolph it was only two out of ten."

"And look how effective his protection was for you..." replied Duke Henry as he scanned the bloodstained ground.

"What else would you want of me?" asked Nyklot.

"You must dip your retinue in the flowing waters of salvation. This will placate the priests. You must also release the Danish captives, and the Saxon monk that you have in your stronghold."

"I will give you back the Northmen in the stronghold; others among them have been eaten by the marsh and you will find their remains there. The rest turned tail and ran off back to their faraway coasts to raid nunneries."

Duke Henry chuckled.

"I will also give you your monk. I never wanted him in the first place."

"Fair enough," replied Duke Henry.

"But my men will not submerge themselves in water for they will fear that your priests will drown them, and will therefore resist."

Duke Henry paused. "I must placate the clergy if I am to turn around from here. Trust me I am honored to take over the raiding tribute from Count Adolph and as long as you are my business partner you will never see another army like this again. But if you refuse to permit this small insistence than I cannot protect you from them and their multitude or armies."

Nyklot looked at his son, who had no understanding of Latin. He translated the deal to him.

"Only my lead garrison," said Nyklot. "My top men will do it; half and half – one half will remain armed to defend the vulnerable ones, and then half will submerge themselves while the other half guards them."

"I accept," said Duke Henry.

"We should do it, father," he said. "Knyaz Adolph has stood by and allowed our whole world to be engulfed by these Niemcy."

Nyklot hugged his son, and the two walked back to the parlay. The page had been called by Vizelin during this conversation. When Nyklot turned his head the page was whispering in Duke Henry's ear.

"And we want your pagan priest," he said.

"Boyan?" asked Nyklot.

"Whatever his name may be!" replied Duke Henry with an impatient smile on his face.

Nyklot retreated a few steps in order to consult Vratislav.

"He irks me," he said to his son.

"Who, Boyan, our tribal flamen, or this Niemcy monster that has invaded our land, and who is ever-hungry to possess it?"

"You know who. I would be glad to be rid of him."

"If you get rid of him you will forever tarnish the world of the peasants who consider him their medium, and you will also cut the only rope of communication that we have with our allies, the Rugians, whose flamen rules with an iron gauntlet, commanding the druzhina."

"All the more reason to be rid of him! He is forever scheming against me and would love to usurp my throne."

"Is it true?" asked Vratislav.

"Who do you think I would give my throne to?"

"I had thought Sobieslav."

"It is against custom, and also against my heart – I would have you be the next knyaz of the Obodrites."

Vratislav shed a tear. They looked each other in the eye and then hugged.

Duke Henry kicked his spurs against his horse in indignation and impatience. *How dare these beasts keep me waiting?* he thought. The horse neighed.

Nyklot and Vratislav returned. "I would buy peace for my people with the blood of a single man," he said.

"Good," replied Duke Henry. "Now let the baptisms begin. Deliver the pagan priest to our clergy as you see fit."

Nyklot and Vratislav returned to the stronghold. They rounded up all of the Northmen that were old and scabby, and sent them out of the stronghold. The healthy ones they kept behind for mule work. Nyklot picked several dozen druzhina-brothers to go out to be baptized. As was the terms of agreement, half of them remained armed to watch over the other half.

Nyklot and a few picked men accompanied them out of the stronghold. Bishop Vizelin and his monks were awaiting them, knee-deep, in the northern lake. At the edge of the lake stood a bloodied and enraged Marchrad, along with several other Saxon knights who stood in holy resolve to witness the baptism of the pagans.

"Call forth Boyan," commanded Nyklot to one of his men.

"*Et nomini Patri, et Filii, et Spiritu Sancti, Amen,*" repeated Bishop Vizelin as he dunked each member of the druzhina into the water. The monks chanted the Kyrie eleison as Vizelin performed the baptisms.

Boyan paced forth, staff in hand. The amulet was shining in the summer sun, and the lizard had a terrifying look on its face. When he saw the baptisms being performed his face lit up in indignation and hatred. He and Vizelin shared a brief moment of enmity in their gaze.

"Go forth to be baptized," said Nyklot to Boyan. "This is a forthright decree from your knyaz, on pain of death."

Boyan gave Nyklot a look of sheer hatred. "I should have wrested power from you when I had the chance! Instead I permitted the voracious worms to eat away at our faith, and now the druzhina is submitting to our enemy! But you will see – soon the land will be filled with vampires and the seasons will end and Perun's wrath will come down upon your head!"

"Thank you for your candid sentiments," replied Nyklot.

Vizelin's eyes lit up as he gestured for Boyan to come forward. Boyan walked forward, clutching a dagger under his cloak as he stared Vizelin in the eye. He lunged forward towards the bishop, knife in hand, but Marchrad grabbed his wrist from behind and twisted the blade out of it.

He then dunked Boyan's head under water as bubbles rose to the surface.

"Et nomini Patri, et Filii, et Spiritu Sancti, Amen," proclaimed Vizelin.

Two druzhina members unsheathed their swords, but Nyklot gestured for them to back down.

The baptisms and chanting continued as Boyan's life was slowing extinguished in an unholy concoction of blood, sludge, and water.

Marchrad sweated until he felt no more resistance. He then dragged Boyan's corpse across the shallow side of the lake towards the northern marshland in order to dispose of the body. Meanwhile, the first batch of druzhina-brothers had been baptized. They then swapped weapons with the second batch of men who breathed deeply and uncomfortably as they prepared to be submerged in the water.

"It is finished," said Vizelin after completing the last baptism. "May this holy sacrament shine bright upon the future of your people, by the grace of God," he said, looking towards Nyklot.

"Your monk has refused to leave the stronghold," said Nyklot. "I assure you that we asked him fervently."

"Then let him stay; he will come to me in his own good time."

Duke Henry rode up to the lake. Vizelin nodded to him with a grin of fulfillment on his face.

"It is our custom," began Nyklot to Duke Henry, "that when two warriors make an oath to one another they exchange blood and hair."

The duke gave him a curious look. "You will know the strength of my oath by words...and by my deeds. That is enough for any sound man to understand my sincerity."

He then retreated from the scene. His page remained behind to tell Nyklot how to deliver tribute to the Duke for all future Jutland raids.

Marchrad followed the duke, yelling to him from the lake as he trudged through the water, which was waist deep. He was covered in blood.

"You are retreating, and the enemy still stands!" cried Marchrad. The duke made no reply.

"Shall we not at least torch and forage the land first and come back to slaughter the enemies of God when they are feeble from hunger?"

"Is this not our own land that we would be razing? And our own vassals that we will be slaughtering?" replied the duke, and rode off.

Marchrad was enraged. He unsheathed his sword and charged Nyklot, screaming in frenzy.

Nyklot grabbed a war hammer from his closest man, and bashed the charging Saxon over on the helmet from his perched position on his horse. The Holsatian fell to the ground and the druzhina laughed heartily as they dripped with water.

"Twice does he attack, twice does he fall!" said one of the warriors, and they all burst out laughing.

Marchrad's loyal vassal, Rimbert ran forward to drag his wounded and bleeding leader off to safety.

Just then a large contingency of warriors marched through the woods towards Duke Henry's camp. It was led by Albert the Bear, who approached Duke Henry.

"We are here to assist the siege," boasted the smiling margrave.

"How very kind of you, sir," replied the duke. "But the siege is over – the pagans have accepted baptism, to the greater glory of God, and will now join Christendom to make way for the Coming of the Lord."

Duke Henry smiled at his rival, who turned red with rage. "I know your ways: you have made a pact with hell itself!" he yelled. The duke laughed and rode off to his men, who greeted him with a cheer.

Bishop Vizelin walked over to the other bishops in the oncoming contingency to confirm the baptism, and they all crossed themselves in relief upon hearing the good news of conversion.

"It is only the good margrave that does not seem to share our sentiments," said the duke, and the bishops looked over towards Albert the Bear as he cursed at his men in sheer rage.

Bern heard the news of baptism and walked towards Pribislav, who was caked in dirt and blood.

"Pribislav son of Nyklot," he said. "The druzhina has taken steps towards conversion, praise God! We can end all of the fighting now and there can finally be peace between our great nations!"

Pribislav did not turn his head, but continued to look out the front gate at the retreating armies.

"The fight is over for the day, but tomorrow we will face starvation, and this winter we will be huddled around huts eating moss and wormwood. Your peace comes with a heavy price, but our liberty comes at a heavier one still."

"Listen!" exclaimed Bern. "In Faldera, in our church the grain depositories are overflowing. Deliver unto me the conversion of the entire Obodrite people and I will deliver you abundant amounts of bread so that no man, woman, or child goes hungry this winter."

Pribislav turned to him in contempt. "If we were to live on the bread dole we would cease to be Obodrites; starvation suites us better," and with that he sheathed his sword and walked off.

Just then Nyklot rode in the front gate, sword raised above his head. His entire face was caked in blood, and a drop trickled down his mustache. When the people saw him they all ran up to him to kiss his hem and hug his legs; Nyklot, the deliverer of the Obodrites.

Bern fought for a place in front, screaming and wrestling for a position, and all of a sudden a song broke out praising the ancestors amidst much raucous laughter and festivities.

That night there was much celebration and after a large meal of porridge and cider the people began to trickle out, stoically packing up and excavating their buried belongings and returning to Veligrad.

A few of the elders wondered where Boyan was, and insisted on making sacrifices in front of Perun's four-headed statue. One of them took a sheep and slit its throat, sprinkling the blood in all directions and praising the god for deliverance.

Bern felt a rush of anger and disgust upon seeing this sight. He quickly signed himself with the cross and left the stronghold. He walked

around the northern lake so that he could be alone, and think. *The common people believe that it was that vain idol that delivered them from extermination, while it was really the Lord of Hosts*, he thought. *I will smash this idol sooner or later and the people will know that it is vain when they see the demon that inhabits it as it is pulled down into hell.*

Deep in thought he looked up in front of his path under the twilight sun, and suddenly gasped for air. Amidst the brambles and mulberry trees lied the corpse of Boyan; he had been disemboweled and beheaded. In his left hand was the lizard amulet, which his stiff hand grasped tightly. Bern signed himself with the cross.

I must return and tell the Obodrites who the killer and traitor amongst them was, he thought. *I must tell them who and why.*

6.

At dawn the next morning the druzhina began to whip the captive Northmen. *Feed them the whip and it will immediately sap the enemy of his courage*, Nyklot had said the night before. They then lit several mass funeral pyres for the fallen warriors of the druzhina, singing songs all the while.

The bearded forest men began to reappear out from amidst the pine trees and supplied the druzhina with bread and smoked ham. Nyklot was not surprised by their sudden good nature, for the Obodrites had emerged with the flower of their fighting force intact.

The men built a sauna for Nyklot, who was still caked in dried blood.

"I request an immediate audience with the knyaz," said Bern to Pribislav. "I wish to tell him of the murderer amongst us."

"Who is he?" asked Pribislav.

"He is the man that visited the slave girl in the woods. That is all that I will say for now." Pribislav turned red, and walked to find his father who was stood before a giant funeral pyre that was burning corpses from the fallen druzhina-brothers.

Bern began to feel threatened, nervous, and aggressive all at the same time. He eyeballed a double-edged axe that stood against the pine

walls of the stronghold. He then looked at the statue of Perun and felt a complete loathing for it. *You are the reason that these people cannot see the truth.* He then looked up at the watchtower. Pribislav and Vratislav both eyeballed him with an intense interest. *If now is the time for martyrdom, so be it,* he thought.

The smell of pinewood smoke and burning flesh filled the stronghold. Bern felt anxious and overwhelmed all of a sudden and yearned to grasp the axe more and more.

The two brothers walked down the pine-trunk stairway, towards Bern. Meanwhile a troop of druzhina-brothers unfettered the captive Northmen and guided them back towards Veligrad.

"We will take you to our father," said Vratislav. "But watch that you don't slander any good man in light of our victory. We will not take lightly to such an offense."

"I have come to learn," began Bern, "That the only just action is that in which the consequences of the action falls entirely on the acting party. It is contrary to my heart to slander any innocent man."

Bern noticed that Vratislav held an amber amulet in his hand with a lizard inclusion in it. His heart began to race and he looked towards the axe again but this time it was too late as they walked towards one of the funeral pyres that stood outside the eastern gate of the stronghold.

Nyklot was sitting in front of a flaming pyre, on a hacked-off pine stump, leaning forward on his sword pommel. His druzhina gathered around him, singing songs to the ancestors, and to the fallen ones that sacrificed themselves for their kinfolk.

Boliliut, Yaroslav the elder and several warriors stood over their knyaz, who looked pensive as he listened to the dead bodies fizzle and pop on the pyre.

"Father," said Vratislav as they approached. "Your sauna is ready and filled with steam. We have prepared the birch branches as well."

Nyklot rose, and walked towards the stronghold.

"Father," said Pribislav. "The monk, Bern, wishes to have a word with you; it is not about his god, at least from what I have gathered."

"Let him follow me; him alone."

Bern followed him to the sauna. He looked towards the forest and felt eyes glaring on his. His heartbeat quickened.

"Knyaz," began Bern.

"I am in no mood to hear about you god, monk. Everything that you could say has been said, and we have paid for our freedom with the loss of our quarters and our marketplace. The people must dig up their silver from holes in the ground and return to plant a few crops before the upcoming winter. There is nothing you can offer me that I would accept."

"I wish to tell you that you are sure to be assassinated," said Bern, hesitantly. "I believe it will happen today, in the sauna!"

They continued to walk in silence. When Bern saw that the Obodrite leader wouldn't respond, he continued.

"And as I am a Christian, all things held sacred to me are related to my God, but I assure you that the man who will come to kill you is not a Christian, but a power-hungry demon that has made every attempt to destroy the Obodrite people."

"A vampire?" asked Nyklot.

"A vampire in the highest sense; the vampire who killed Ludomir."

"You may follow me to the sauna."

They approached the sauna. Nyklot removed his armor, tunic, scabbard, and trousers, revealing a still strong physique, albeit aging.

"You would benefit from removing your clothes in the steam, monk."

Bern felt a deep fear in the pit of his stomach and refused to compromise the dignity of remaining clothed in his cowl. "I will remain robed," he replied.

Nyklot walked into the sauna, and immediately felt the intense and purifying steam globules glitter his blood-caked body. He sighed and felt all of his muscles relax.

"I have very little time for you, monk," said Nyklot. "I must begin to transport the slaves back to Veligrad in order to rebuild our stronghold there."

"And how will you make a living now, knyaz? The marketplace is destroyed for good. It would take many years of feasting to bring back the merchants."

"We will survive just as our ancestors have always survived."

"Your druzhina is accustomed to the good living; silver and ivory."

"We will survive just as our ancestors have always survived!"

"You will continue to raid the coasts of the Northmen, and thus continue to inflame Christendom. It will only be a matter of time before the armies of God come back to destroy all that you have rebuilt."

"Monk," said Nyklot. "I am losing my patience with you," he said grasping at his sword hilt.

"The man that requests to shave you," said Bern. "Will be the man that intends to take your life," he concluded, bowing low.

Nyklot raised his head for a moment, and then continued to rub his aching muscles. All of a sudden a nude Vratislav walked in, eyeballing Bern with a ferocious temperament. He walked towards his father, grabbing some birch branches and began to hit his back with it, ever so gently.

"This monk is either dishonest or inadequate," said Vratislav. "Look how he refuses to unclothe himself in this heat."

Nyklot held out his arms for Vratislav to hit. The latter did so with the branches, and then threw several pieces of amber on the stones.

There was a shadow at the doorway for a moment and then the deer pelt flapped down again.

"Knyaz," said the newcomer. It was Boliliut, bowing before Nyklot's feet. "The pyres are almost complete now. We will begin to transfer the slaves back to Veligrad immediately afterwards."

"Good," replied Nyklot. "See to it that they are well fed and not abused by the druzhina. They must be kept in good condition for work."

Boliliut bowed. The steam was filling up the entire sauna so that one could not see beyond one's own hands.

Nyklot heard the pelt flap again and in walked another person, who bowed before Nyklot's feet.

"Are you my would-be murderer?" asked Nyklot. It was Pribislav.

"How could you ask me that?" replied Pribislav, dejectedly.

Bern took him aside and then whispered something in his ear.

The deer pelt flapped again and in walked another person.

"Knyaz," said the voice. "Allow me to shave you." Nyklot felt a razor touch his neck for a moment and then heard the fierce crack of a whip.

There was a sharp cry of pain, and Bern walked into the center of the sauna to see what was happening. Nyklot felt a trickle of blood

dripping down his neck, and looked over towards Pribislav, whip in hand. On the floor lay Dmitri of Novgorod.

Nyklot looked towards Bern with squinted eyes as he grasped the cut on his neck. He then reached for his sword hilt and deftly placed the blade to Dmitri's throat.

"I now understand the meaning of your gift," said Nyklot. "I had always cherished the razor you had given me, but such exotic toys have been dearly paid for in blood." Dmitri raised his head. There was an intense rage in his eyes.

"You are caught, fool," said Pribislav. "The monk told us it was you."

Dmitri looked towards Bern. "It matters not," he said.

"You are a murderer, Dmitri of Novgorod," said Bern. "You killed Ludomir, you killed the Holsatian merchant Daso, and you killed the slave girl Ruth after you seduced her and lied to her repeatedly."

"What proof do you have?" asked Dmitri.

"I understood the nature of your gift when I was away, only then did it dawn on me. Afterwards I returned to Veligrad and looked into your compost next to your hut, and found nothing but fowl bones; you are a great hunter, capable of shooting down an owl as it flies through the air, are you not? Then I asked my host-mother, Bieslava who came to visit Daso on the day of his death; I knew he had been wounded but it was not fatal, and you were the only visitor. You must have snuffed his life out. I also assume that you purchased an amber amulet with a lizard inclusion in the marketplace sometimes before you staged that fight with Thorkell, the Northman, in order to divert attention to him as a possible murder suspect; you knew the peasants would fear vampires but you also knew that the leaders of the community would not be so easily fooled."

"You staged the fight with the Northman?" asked Nyklot. Dmitri began to laugh aloud, and Nyklot immediately demanded silence from him.

"Murderer!" acclaimed Bern. "You have brought this conflagration upon the world!"

"Murderer you say?" replied Dmitri in a most serious tone. "Was not God himself a murderer when he created the flood that wiped out almost all flesh on the earth? And are we not created in his image?"

"Silence, coward!" yelled Nyklot, as his blade pressed harder against his flesh.

"The most indignant are always the worst offenders!" exclaimed Boliliut.

"I am indignant at this world!" exclaimed Dmitri. "I had to trade my youngest child for bread when the great famine came to our land. I saw all of my prosperity wiped out, and all because of the many marketplaces that have sprouted along the coasts of the Baltic. But I tell you that Novgorod will rise again and be the only trading route between the two great Christian empires! We will rise again and be the sole source of amber, pelts, and slaves between Rome and Constantinople! Your prosperity that existed in defiance of ours is now through! And with that I say, my work is done..."

He now retired to praying to himself.

Nyklot rose to his feet with fury in his eyes. "Your treason has defiled your honor for eternity! When I slay you, your corpse will know neither the flame nor the worm, but will be strewn about for the pelicans and wolves to lay claim to your seditious heart!"

"What good will it do?" asked Dmitri. "I have accomplished everything that I set out to do, even without doing a thing! My wife and my last remaining child are safe in Languedoc amongst our own spiritual kin. As far as your accusations are concerned I neither confirm nor deny them, but I do readily admit that I despise your prosperity! I despise how you eat apples in the autumn while Novgorod scrapes bark from maple trees.

"Oh, how I lied to you all along, Nyklot! You waste this precious amber on the sauna stones when you could buy a slave for a little piece of it in Constantinople. Every translation I made for you was false. I made sure to tell the Greeks how you hated their wares! I made sure to guide all of them towards Novgorod, and Novgorod was where they all went!"

Nyklot guided his sword, Mistui, cocking it in full force. The others stepped back out of the way. "I slay you with the eternal blade of my ancestors! May your soul migrate to the dark netherworld of cowards and traitors!" and then he released the blade which severed the head of Dmitri of Novgorod.

The body fell as the head rolled to the corner.

"I lament the loss of our marketplace, Knyaz," said Boliliut. "It is the loss of our prosperity. But reversals of fortune are inevitable with men eternally scheming for their own benefit."

"How did you know?" asked Nyklot to Bern.

"It began as a hunch, when I started to realize how powerful men exchange gifts. It means the opposite of how the humble ones give gifts. I then added up the clues and felt that when Dmitri's scheme failed he would come to finish you off, thus severing the head of the entire community."

"Luckily the right head was severed this time," said Vratislav.

"How and why did he do it?" asked Pribislav.

"He lured Ludomir into the woods; probably they spoke at the marketplace. He must have offered a way to bring about Christianity into the community on a peaceful level, as it is widely known that Ludomir was a believer in the true faith. He knew Thorkell from either Constantinople or Novgorod I assume or the both knew that they had a vested interest in the destruction of the Obodrites in many levels, so they faked the fight and then Thorkell was commanded to leave so it would look like he was the murderer.

"He knew that Daso would come sooner or later and transmit vital messages between the two communities, but he also knew that Daso was easily bought and could lie in order to gain a profit. When he heard about my pigeon, probably from rumors in the marketplace, he knew that he had a surefire way of transmitting the idea that the Obodrites are blood drinkers and are therefore worthy of extermination. He knows the many cultures of the Baltic and knows their mentalities and he knew that they would send an army here to destroy the people and the market as well, thus creating a direct link between Novgorod and the two major Christian empires.

"Dmitri was a forest man; he did not enjoy the company of other men. He probably lived so much in the forest that he bumped into Boyan several times and knew that he would be the perfect suspect; he knew that the flamen was out of favor at Nyklot's court and he knew that he had a motive to murder the Christian warrior who also had it out for him as well, and who would have gladly taken away all of the flamen's worldly power if he had had the chance.

"When he decided to kill Ludomir he must have stolen the amulet from him or at least purchased another one, almost identical to it on the marketplace. It was the perfect way to frame Boyan, which thus gave the Holy Roman Empire a pretext for raiding this land; a blood drinking pagan priest who kills Christian souls.

"Dmitri was in the woods when he saw the owl going after the pigeon and was prepared for it, shooting it down. He was perched in the forest from an angle no one could see. He then quickly returned and joined the crowd.

"Dmitri used the slave girl for information and had her marry Sobieslav. He claimed to be a powerful vampire, and knows she was too crazy and unreliable for witness. He wants to know all that goes on in the head of Nyklot and Sobieslav. He was also planning on killing Sobieslav by luring her into the woods, thus creating complete despair in the populace, and rendering them even more helpless.

"When she outlived her usefulness to him he snubbed out her life, and made it appear that it had been Sobieslav who had done it. Sobieslav was too proud to admit that another man could kill his wife so he silently took credit for it, but was really relieved that she was dead because she cheated on him time and again with any one that would give her attention," he concluded looking at Pribislav, whose face turned red.

"He has created great despair," said Ludomir. "Now that their flamen is murdered the peasants will fear the end of harvests, and will not have any impetus to plow the fields."

"That is why you must convert to the true faith!" exclaimed Bern. "It is the only way to save your souls as well as your bodies from everlasting perdition."

"We are old and in our ways," replied Nyklot. "I will die before I let monks come in and destroy our ancient path."

"Praise Perun!" exclaimed Vratislav.

Bern walked out of the sauna, dripping wet from steam and perspiration. Vratislav followed him.

"Monk," he said. "You knew about me and the slave girl, did you not?"

Bern crossed himself and nodded his head.

"Why didn't you tell anyone?"

"Some things are best not spoken of."

"I admit that I desired my cousin's death because I am the rightful heir to my father's throne and he wanted to be the Obodrite knyaz. He also sent that messenger, Peter of Wollin, here as a guise to reintroduce himself to our knyaz. But now that he is dead I miss him dearly."

Bern didn't reply but continued to stare at the idol that stood within the center of the stronghold. *It is you*, he thought. *You are the reason for their stiff necks.*

Vratislav marched away towards the embers of the remaining pyres. The smell of burning pinewood and human flesh filled the air. Several elders walked about, carrying urns filled with the ashes of their fallen children.

Bern looked again towards the idol and then at the axe that stood at the wall. *They will kill me if I put axe to their vain idol. But at least that way they will see that it has no power and the demon that inhabits it will retreat back to hell in front of their very eyes.*

He walked towards the axe. *If martyrdom awaits me, so be it.*

He grabbed the axe with both hands and lunged himself at the statue. There were four faces of Perun, each faced a cardinal direction. Bern jumped up to reach each face with the axe blade, and kept hitting them over and over, and when he discovered that he had no leverage he began to strike the statue at waist length, chipping away at the limestone, little by little.

He looked up at the top, waiting for the demon to fly out of the idol, but it never appeared.

Finally Bern exhausted himself and fell to his knees, kneeling on the axe handle.

He looked towards the east gate. Beyond it was the forest and dozens of pyre fires, smoldering, and filling the sky with smoke. All of a sudden he saw a beautiful woman appear from amidst the smoke. She walked towards him.

"Ruth," he said to himself. "Is it you?"

She came closer and closer, and finally he realized that it was Beleknegini, the queen of the Obodrites. She was tall and proud, carrying sword in hand. Long bands of silver rings lined her braided blond hair, which hung down to her waist. She still had on a shirt of chain mail, and wore spurs on her ankles.

She walked past Bern without paying any attention to him and continued to walk to the other side of the stronghold where Nyklot, her husband, awaited her, fully clothed in a long white and blue tunic. His sword hung from a belt at his waist. She wrapped her arm around his and the two walked out the western gate. Boliliut and Vratislav followed them.

Bern sighed and dropped the axe handle.

"Farewell, monk." Bern looked up and saw Pribislav smiling at him. "We'll see you across the sea."

"Farewell," replied Bern. "I hope to see you again one day."

Pribislav laughed heartily. "Don't be offended but I hope never to see another monk again in my entire life."

He then followed the rest of them out of the gate. They mounted their horses and rode off through the dense forest.

Bern looked out towards the east gate and saw that the elders and a few warriors still sang songs to their fallen heroes. He then looked up at the idol of Perun, and closed his eyes tightly.

He walked towards a corner of the stronghold and fell asleep.

Bern awoke to the pleasant pine smoke aroma that he had grown to love. He began to dream of the little hut that he had been born into, with his mother comforting him at the dark, cozy hearth fire. He continued to snooze.

He awoke suddenly to an excruciating pain in his leg, and found that a smoldering log had fallen on top of it. He cried out in pain. Looking around him he saw that the whole stronghold was on fire. The statue of Perun was gone as well as the arsenal, the grain and the treasury. He clutched his leg. It was broken at the shin bone. The flames encroached upon him on all sides and he curled up as the watchtower fell towards him, large planks of wood falling at his feet. He slithered towards the center, where the statue had been.

All of a sudden a hooded figure approached from the dense columns of smoke. He picked Bern up over his shoulders and ran out of the stronghold. Bern felt the smoke creeping into his lungs, and then all of a sudden the heat and smoke were no more, and he was gently placed on a soft patch of moss with pine trees approaching the heavens.

Bern looked up and saw a dark hooded figure. The figure removed his hood. It was Marchrad.

His long grey hairs rolled down his neck and his thick mustache covered his mouth. There was an intense look in his eye as always. There were huge purple bumps on his forehead.

"Greetings, Bern," he said. "I have come back for you."

"I thank you for it," replied Bern.

Marchrad removed his knife, and clutched it at his waist.

"How do you feel?" he asked, with an intense look in his eye.

Bern felt his heart pounding and looked around over Marchrad's shoulders to see if anyone else was present. He saw nobody.

"I am alright. The leg hurts, though. I cannot walk."

"I have noticed," replied Marchrad, who then cut off a long strip from his woolen cloak. He then took an elm branch and made a tourniquet for the leg. Afterwards Bern thanked him, and Marchrad fed him jerky from a pouch that hung from his belt, opposite of his sword.

"The heathens left you for dead," said Marchrad. "Not so I; I would never leave a fellow Saxon, a fellow Christian, and a holy man behind. Nor do I forget old friends."

"You are hurt," said Bern, who noticed the bruises on his forehead.

"I will survive," he replied. "We Holsatians now have farmland to plow. All my life I have been bruised this way. I lived out in the forest so as to keep my freedom, living amidst foul unkempt men and pagan savages. I have won many battles and lost them others," he said nodding his head at the burning stronghold that stood like a mighty ring of fire in between the two lakes. "But now that we have our own land, free from taxes to the nobles and tribute to the pagans I realize that it was all worth it; all the years of avoiding loosening my neck and bowing before powerful men."

The two looked each other in the eye for a long while as the flames reached towards the blue sky. The wind grew fierce and every drift brought about hundreds of yellow, red, and orange leaves that fell onto Marchrad's head.

"It is harvest time for my kinfolk," said Marchrad. "We will reap our crops and praise the One True God in Heaven; our most high master."

"May you grow prosperous," proclaimed Bern.

"We just wish to maintain our freedom," replied Marchrad.

"I am sure that you shall," said Bern. "Bishop Vizelin speaks very highly of you."

"I have spent all of my days roaming about these wild forests in search of meat and liberty. But now we Holsatians will be able to have a home free from our foreign sway."

"But surely these forests here have not been available to the hunt as they are Wendish territory."

"Was Wendish territory," replied Marchrad, who cut off a piece of jerky with his knife. "But I am a forest man and have always known these beloved woods ever since my youth. The tribes only settle in cleared territories so if a man can read the signs of nature he can meander about for miles and miles inland into enemy territory without being detected. It is for this reason that I am the best scout in the land."

Marchrad smiled at him and then gave him his hand. The two began to walk in a northern direction. Marchrad stopped occasionally to look at subtle signs that he had made out of broken twigs and shallow footprints.

They marched towards the sea without breaking all day long. Bern became exhausted but luckily for him, the swift and vigorous Marchrad often stopped to check his trail, which was virtually invisible to Bern. Sometimes he would hand him his leather canteen, and Bern would take a quick swig and hand it back.

They traversed through muddy marshland and dry sandy patches of mossy turf, some areas were dense with pine trees and others were open valleys. Finally they came to an opening, sandy and open. The sand and bushes encroached upon each other and seagulls flew over head.

Bern heard the soft gentle waves of the Baltic, and they finally came to a sandy, grassy hill, and when they approached the top, Bern looked beyond and saw the endless sea on the horizon that glittered in the gentle afternoon sun.

He wiped the sweat from his brow and looked towards the beach. There was a pram boat moored, slammed by the encroaching waves. Two men stood by it; one of them held a tall, winding crosier in his hand.

Bern meekly limped towards them. The water began to creep in between his toes as he approached the tide. Seagulls flew overhead. "Hello, teacher," said Bern.

"Hello, my son," replied Vizelin. The two grasped each other's hand. "We have returned for you, my brave disciple."

"I am not brave," replied Bern, waving to Giselbert, who sat near the rudder of the ship. "I am only foolish."

Vizelin coughed loudly and then laughed heartily.

They began to waft out towards sea and raised the mast of the rowboat. Marchrad settled in front, next to a crossbow and then put the hood of his cloak over his head. Bern heard him doze off to sleep as he started to snore.

"Shall we travel during the night?" asked Bern.

"The sea has not yet been cleared of pirates; thus it is safer to travel during the night which is a safe bet if we don't lose sight of the coast," replied Vizelin.

"Wherever we go now, it will not be home to me; I am a grown man and have never known a firm hearth to call my own, but have let mighty powers waft me about like a piece of driftwood."

"As we are believers," replied Vizelin, putting his hand on Bern's knee, "We have no home on this earth, but only an eternal home in heaven. We are strangers in a strange land on this earth."

"This last part I believe."

Bern looked out on the horizon as the sun set. Giselbert continued to row and soon it grew dark.

"I would like to hear all about your life in the last nine years, during which our paths have rarely crossed."

Bern talked to his teacher for hours and hours, telling him all of his experiences in Veligrad. He made sure to emphasize the kind and hospitable nature of the Obodrites.

"You are brave, my son. You are brave."

"I have never known such a trait," affirmed Bern again, looking out as the sun came up.

"I would have you know, my son – I will not be around forever. In fact I am not going to make it through many more seasons. Soon my soul will translate into the palm of God's hand, and before that happens I would like to make sure that my flock is left in the best possible hands."

"You would have me succeed you at the post of Bishop?" asked Bern.

"I would have you succeed me, to take my crosier and my mitre and look after our flocks who will badly need refuge against the storms of worldly men."

"Why me, a humble monk?"

"You have learned much about life, politics, and the nature of men. You even speak the three most important languages of the north. I am dying; I want you to take over my mitre and my crosier when I am gone. I could think of no worthier man who would look towards God and the Holy Spirit, the church as guidance."

"I am honored," replied Bern, but felt no emotion in his heart whatsoever.

Vizelin looked over towards Marchrad, who was still snoring.

"It is autumn in Lübeck, and the leaves are falling. The harvest is about to be celebrated. When we arrive I believe that you will find it unrecognizable; you will see a thriving community of immigrants, fish fleets, stone walls, crossbowmen, and most importantly you will see the blazon of Duke Henry the Lion flying from the watchtowers."

"And the Holsatians?" asked Bern. "What of their sovereignty that they hold so dear?"

Vizelin lowered his head. "It will be up to us to see that they are treated justly under the new worldly powers. It is for this reason that you must take over my post when I am die."

"For this very reason, I most definitely will."

"You love God's flock," proclaimed Vizelin, with a melancholy look on his face.

"I do; not only the faithful but the sinners and the apostates as well."

"Good, my son. I know now that I can rest in peace. The path has been paved for you. You will bring brotherly love to a war-torn land torn apart with envy and strife."

"I will do it," replied Bern. "And the Obodrites? What will be there fate? They must be filled with pride after winning such a battle."

"'Winning,' you say? I would beg to differ. We have routed their gods; what will they fight more from now on? Once a man's god is routed, shortly thereafter he will be routed, and driven from his land to make way for the True God. It is only a matter of time before they meet either conversion or annihilation."

"I shall do my best to make sure that it is conversion."

"Good, my son, good," replied Vizelin. "You must understand one more thing about the nature of this terrible world, and then I will be able to die in peaceful bliss."

Soon the sun came up over the sparkling waters. Seagulls circled the boat overhead. Marchrad rose from his slumber.

"Marchrad," said Vizelin.

"Yes, my lord?" replied Marchrad bowing before him.

"The seagulls irritate me," replied Vizelin.

Marchrad lifted up his crossbow, and aimed it. He pulled the trigger, unleashing a bolt, falling a small seagull which plopped into the water.

"And this," said Vizelin, who held an amber amulet in his hand with a lizard inclusion. Marchrad bowed again, and took the polished amber piece and threw it out to sea. He then sat back down and looked out towards the horizon.

Vizelin stared Bern in the eye with an intense gaze. Bern refused to meet it. He began to breath heavily, and fell towards the keel of the ship. Vizelin stroked the monk's bald head as the oars continually hit the surface of the sea.

“Let us pray,” said Vizelin.

“Our prayers will never reach heaven again!” cried Bern, but who felt little shock or emotion, only a semi-feigned indignation.

“You admire me now more than ever,” replied Vizelin, mysteriously.

“I would hurl myself into these waters.”

“These waters will be waiting for you...for now you have other work to attend to.”

Bern lifted his head. He smiled in a fierce manner, even shocking Vizelin by doing so. “You killed them...”

“I had the owl killed,” replied Vizelin. “Nothing more.”

“It’s too bad,” said Bern, who paused and looked out at the sea. “I had hoped you had killed the rest of them,” he said, looking Vizelin in the eye with a newfound intensity.

Vizelin appeared shocked for a moment, and Bern laughed at the top of his lungs.

“Our souls are joined together for an eternity, whichever eternity that may be.”

Vizelin paused for a moment to contemplate Bern's last statement. “Let our empire and our people reach eternity through their will and their might!” he said, eyes a glare. “The lifeblood of our power is our faith. God has blessed us and will continue to do so if we continue in His path.”

“I accept that God works beyond my comprehension,” replied Bern, with an equal intensity. “I put axe to idol, and no demon was repulsed from it,” he said, laughing harshly.

They voyaged along the Baltic coasts on the serene fall day in the year of our Lord 1147, and the path that Bern was to trod upon had been forged for him in fiery trial and in dearth of pity.

Bern looked at the sky as he nursed his broken leg and praised The Lord for the Eternal Mystery that had finally penetrated his heart with a newfound equanimity.

