



*B*efore the dawn of Reformation would sweep away the final shadows of the Dark Ages from Germany, a small band of people found their paths crossing in a dangerous mission to uncover truths that the Holy Mother Church was keeping hidden from her children. This is their story.

Secret

Paths

CONTENTS

<i>Prologues</i>	1
BOOK 1 - INTRODUCTIONS	5
Farewell	7
The Engagement	13
Run Away.....	19
The Merchant of Hamburg	27
The Performance	33
The Twenty-Third Hour	41
BOOK 2 - ENCOUNTERS	49
The Guest	51
Revelations	59
The Merchant's Wife	71
Kristia	79
The Way It Went	87
A Plan Conceived.....	99
BOOK 3 - SEEDS AND SOLDIERS	107
On the Trail.....	109
The Raid	117
Courted	131
The Warning	139
Getting Close	149
Zalman's Proposal	161

Recommended age: 12 years and up.
(May be read by younger children at parents' discretion.)

Cover by Ester, Vicky, and Darren

Copyright © 2003 by The Family. DFO.
Printed in Thailand. Not for resale.

BOOK 4 - A MEETING OF PATHS	167
The List	169
Sentenced	177
The Attempt	187
The Letter	199
The Meeting	207
His Fury	221
<i>Epilogues</i>	243



PROLOGUES

November 22, 1997, Volgograd

Another long day over. Why can't I shake this feeling that's been looming over me like a cloud all day? I should be happy. The Graperine arrived today. We made it onto the Free Poster Shiner List. Cool enough! But it hardly seems to mean anything. No matter that we've gotten out hundreds of thousands of posters here. It doesn't seem to make any difference. The people are still depressing. The buildings are depressing. The weather is depressing. Even giving out posters is starting to become depressing.

I remember how much I used to enjoy doing it when I first came here. I'd forget all about whatever trials I was having once I got outside with a box of posters. It didn't really matter then that we didn't have a video machine, and that the only movies we could watch on a "big screen" had that terrible monotone voice droning on in Russian over the dialogue. Those were small sacrifices then that hardly mattered next to the vision of preaching the Gospel to every creature here.

You spoke of so many great things when I first set out to join the work here, Jesus. But it seems that these past two years have been spent in little more than an endless series of little things that, after all this time, hardly seem to amount to much.

Oh Jesus, is all this really worth it? What difference can I make? What difference can our little Home make? It's just one more team out posterizing, one more team out trying to provision enough food for the week, one more team trying to raise enough money to buy the meat we need and to pay the rent. What am I doing here, Jesus? What's it all for? If I could know, maybe I wouldn't feel this way...

November 22, 1503, Hamburg

My hands are tired. My fingers ache. That is my reward today. Thirty long handwritten pages ... seeds ready to be planted in the hearts and minds of those who find them.

I lean back and gaze upon those simple pages with pride. They seem to glow with a brightness of their own, even if I know that it is only the glow that my lone and faithful candle casts upon them. The ink is still drying. Then I must stow them away in secrecy, along with this accounting of them.

There are those who have given their lives so that men like me might have these pages, might read these words. Perhaps someday I will have to do the same. Until then, I pray that my work and efforts are worthy of the price those men had to pay for the salvation of others. In their own way they have paid for the sins of men as Christ did, to bring salvation to their fellow man. Can there indeed be a higher calling than this? Can there be a nobler death than for a man to lay down his life for another in the name and after the example of Christ?

Lord, You Yourself said that the day would come when men would kill us, thinking they do God service. Forgive those, Lord, who know not what they do! And remove those who do know, who would stand in the way of truth and bar the only door to true salvation that Your great sacrifice opened to us.

May my life be worth the price so many have had to pay for its salvation and spiritual freedom, and may these humble seeds of Your Word be spread far and fall upon fruitful ground, that they might bring forth fruit to Your name.

Book 1

Introductions

- 1 -

FAREWELL

*Lower Saxony
Germany, 1472*

The small, dingy hut on the outskirts of the village of Kiefen was unlit, and the extremely poor family of seven children and their parents sat together in the dark room. They were quietly eating their meal of bread and “soup”—in reality little more than salted water with floating lumps of flour in it.

The father rose slowly from his stool, hunched over from the day’s hard labor, and cleared his throat. With a hoarse whisper he began to announce, “I am pleased to tell you, that we have arranged for you, my dear son...” He turned and looked at Gerth, his third child and second son, and then stopped. A lump rose in his throat. He turned quickly and walked out of the room, his eyes red and moist.

The kids immediately grew even more somber and stopped eating. The youngest began to sob, seeing his father’s distress, and the mother rose, taking the little one in her arms. Tears were streaming down her wind-beaten cheeks as she addressed her children.

“We are too poor to sustain all of you. Let us not weep, though I know it will be hard. Tomorrow Gerth will be going to a better home. It is our hope, Gerth,

that you will make us all proud, for indeed, becoming a priest is a most honorable vocation, and I could not wish for a better opportunity for you, my son. I ... we'll miss you." With that, the mother, too, left the room.

All eyes now turned to Gerth, who sat anxiously, too stunned to reply. He'd known all too well that someday this would happen. He had been visited by several priests over the years, but he had not known that his parents had already come to a decision.

He was being sent to the monastery of Saint Paul in Adendorf, some 45 miles away. Although there were other monasteries much closer, Gerth's parents had decided on Adendorf for several reasons. It was nearer to Hamburg, and thus received greater support from the Mother Church there, but also because it was a good distance away. The agony of this decision would only be greater if he were nearer.

The Reverend Father of the monastery had kindly agreed to take the boy in, as monasteries often did with needy families, on the condition that the child make his vows for life. Both the parents and the monastic order benefited from the arrangement. The parents would have one less mouth to feed, and the order would have one more convert to further their cause and ensure their own survival.

It had not been an easy decision for Gerth's parents, but Gerth had been the logical choice. Their eldest son was needed to help work and provide for the family. Gerth, at eleven years of age, was both too young and too frail for intensive labor. The choice had been the most difficult for his mother, who had grown fondest of him during their frequent times at home together while her husband and eldest son were out working. Still, she considered it an honor that the Reverend Father had accepted Gerth, and she was sure it was because Gerth had shown himself to be a bright lad, keen on learning, as well as pleasant and often amusing company.

His elder brother now stood with Gerth in the far corner of the room in which they all slept. They were best of friends, and as the rest of the family fell into a fitful and restless sleep, the two brothers talked in hushed whispers.

"I almost envy you," the elder brother said. "You will now have a warm place to sleep, good food to eat, and you will probably become more learned than any of us will ever be. I know you will do well, but all the same I shall miss you terribly. But I promise I will come see you someday when our fortunes are better—perhaps when I have a family of my own, for that is easily how long it could take."

"I wish you could come, but I know that you are needed here. Since I will likely be made to say prayers, I promise to say them for you, and our family."

The two embraced and held back tears, then talked of memories, hopes, and dreams, until the sun rose and their father entered the room dressed and ready for the journey. The time had come.



The five had made friends ever since they had first joined the monastery, and were now huddled together in the small dormitory where they whispered of what to do with the evening on that cold Saturday night. The elders had all left earlier that evening to attend a meeting. Most of the others were already in bed, deciding to use this time to catch up on privileged sleep. These five, however, were wide awake, and ready to make the most of this time.

Johan, the tallest of the group, and at eighteen years also the eldest, whispered, "I haven't been out for a drink, or even for a decent walk outside these premises since I've gotten here!"

Jorgen, a smallish dark haired boy agreed. "I tell you, the other day I saw a damsel so pretty, but I couldn't even tell her my name or ask hers. It makes me sick to think of being confined the way we are forever."

Hansel readily agreed. Like the others, he had only entered the monastery to escape poverty. Gerth and Mark, however, remained silent.

Johan spoke again. "If I'm right, no one would know of us leaving this wretched place, even if it were only for an hour. Who would come with me?"

"We will," said Hansel and Jorgen.

"Come on, Gerth and Mark! Why don't you come along, too? It'll be fun, and we can keep it as our secret—between the five of us."

Mark spoke up. "I know I can trust you all to keep this between us, but it's just that I really don't care to go. Regardless of the circumstances that brought me here, I willingly made my vows for life. Why should I tempt myself to err from the faith? And besides, I see no need to feed my flesh with the worldly pleasures of life. I would urge you three to reconsider as well. You know how the Scriptures instruct: *Et nolite conformari huic saeculo*. 'Be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed, by the renewing of your mind.' We're supposed to separate ourselves from these things for the sake of Christ. You know that."

Then Hansel spoke. "It wasn't my choice to be separate from this world, and right now my choice is to be separate from all these pompous creatures in here, like you! The three of us are going to go out and have a good time, right, Johan? And you can just stay here and study or sleep, if that's what you want! What about you, Gerth?"

Gerth sighed and lay back on his bunk. Then he said, "It's not that I mind having fun, and I rather like the idea of going out secretly. But I know I shouldn't. The Fathers trust us not to, and I don't feel like betraying that trust, or yours either. So I will stay here with Mark. What you do will be between you and God, and whoever He chooses to tell it to."

Johan, the self-appointed leader of his disobedient disciples, led the way, followed closely by Jorgen

and Hansel, and the three of them were soon out on the streets, their monks' garb disguised under large cloaks as they looked for places and ways to engage in the merry-making that commonly filled the evening streets in a certain part of town.



Knock, knock, knock.

"The door is open," a raspy voice answered.

Johan opened the door gingerly. The Father and three other elders of the order were sitting around a small table with a simple vase in the middle.

"Ah, Johan, my son, come in, come in," the elderly Father said when he recognized the boy. "So, what have you to tell us?"

Johan pulled out a vacant chair and joined the elders at the table, then began his account. "Fathers, I have done as you requested of me. The announcement regarding your absence for a meeting provided ample excuse for me to inspire temptations in the hearts of the boys in question. I was able to persuade, with not much difficulty, some of them. Others would not be persuaded, though they agreed to keep the matter a secret."

"Forgive me," one of the elders interrupted, "but please, identify these you speak of by their names. That is what this was all about."

Johan looked down for a moment, hesitating, then went on. "Jorgen and Hansel went with me without any hesitation, even mocking Gerth and Mark, who both chose to stay, and who considered their vows of greater importance than this appeal to carnal desires."

"And of the two who stayed, who do you feel takes his vows more seriously, and who was just following the other?" the same elder asked.

"It's hard to say. Both seemed quite sincere in their own desire to stay back."

"Very well," the Father answered. "I think I speak for all of us when I suggest that we consider both of

them the next candidates for training in the ministry under Father Christian.”

The other elders nodded their heads in agreement. The Father added, “Good, Johan. We are thankful for your willingness to help us by testing your brothers in this way. It is not an easy thing to do, but you know as we do that many of the boys have not come here out of a sincere desire to serve God, but only out of necessity. And you have helped us immensely in finding those it will be worth spending time to train in the ministry and duties of priesthood, and we would ask that you continue to do so for us.”

Johan nodded his agreement, and thus the meeting came to an end. Johan was dismissed.

- 2 -

THE ENGAGEMENT

Outside Hamburg, in the countryside, 1480

A chicken ran through the courtyard as though it already had no head, chased by a plump but fair woman with a large axe in her hand. As Tundrinna watched the commotion from the second-story window, she couldn't help but laugh, until a loud voice made her turn.

“Tundrinna! Class is in here, not out there where the servants are!”

Tundrinna sighed as she looked at the gray-haired man who wore whiskers and a high collar that covered his cheeks and made him look ridiculously stuffy. He taught Latin—something Tundrinna thought was totally unnecessary since the common folks, which were the majority of the population, could not speak or read it. If she were a physician, why then perhaps she would need it to read the medical books. Or if she were to be like her parents, always trying to impress their social peers, then she would wish to learn all this. But her heart was with the people who struggled and toiled; who, though they were poor, found a joy in their lives by living in simplicity and in the love of their families. Then there was the church, where texts were also always read in Latin, and again Tundrinna

couldn't figure out why, since none of the peasantry—by far the neediest ones—could understand it.

“Very well then. If I cannot persuade you to take your class hours more seriously, I shall have to ask your parents to deal with you. As I've admonished you many times, if you are to become anything in life, you must be learned. But now it's already late noon, and I must be off. You are dismissed from this class, but I'll warn you that if you haven't finished your assigned studies by tomorrow, you will regret it!” With that the man gathered up his books, and exited the room.

Tundrinna turned her attention back to the window. The curtains were long, of pure white silk, and they looked beautiful against the cedar-paneled walls that were polished to a high sheen. A high bookshelf lined one wall, filled with countless books of literature. Though the recent invention of the printing press had made duplicating written works a much simpler process, complete books were still largely of the costlier handwritten sort. The sight of all those books only reminded Tundrinna again of her studies, and she suddenly wanted nothing more than to leave the room.

She threw a dark brown shawl over her shoulders and snuck down the hall, peering cautiously into a room where she heard her parents chatting noisily with a stranger. The stranger looked well dressed, and was reclining comfortably in an overstuffed chair. It was not the kind of conversation Tundrinna wished to be drawn into, and she tried to cross to the other side of the door making as little noise as possible.

Just as Tundrinna breathed in relief, thinking herself to have passed unnoticed, her mother stood.

“Oh, Tundrinna, do come here, Dear.”

“What is it, Mother? I am busy.”

“Don't ask, just come,” her mother sang with excitement. “It's a surprise!” Turning back to the visitor, she continued verbosely in the same high-

pitched tones, “She is such a dear, and so precious. She is the very picture of serenity! She'll be so happy to see you.”

Tundrinna entered the room and all eyes became fixed on her.

Her mother giggled and exclaimed, “Didn't I tell you? Pretty as a rose, and I'm sure she'll make a wonderful companion. But I wouldn't want to embarrass you, and I'm sure you two will have plenty to talk about, so we will leave you for awhile!”

Mother winked at her husband and nudged him in the direction of the open doors.

“Mother! Please, I don't know what you are talking about. You haven't even introduced us.”

“Oh! Good heavens, how could I have forgotten? Tundri, this is Rupert. Rupert, Tundrinna.”

This being said, Tundrinna's father and mother left the room, closing the doors behind them.

Rupert now stood and officiously clasped his hands behind his back, though at the same moment he blushed deeply. He kept his gaze on the marble floor for a few moments, and then slowly looked up, where his gaze froze for a moment on the girl standing before him.

“You are as fair as your mother described you,” he finally said. “I only hope you find my presence half as agreeable. I know that it may seem hard to you that we are to wed, hardly knowing each other, but I'm sure that in time, you will learn to love me, as I already know I shall love you.”

Tundrinna turned her head quickly, holding her forehead. She felt tears approaching and confusion overwhelm her as she tried to make sense of this sudden announcement. *I knew nothing of this! How could they do this to me? They've never spoken a word concerning my engagement or marriage before. Must it be so sudden? What about my say in the matter? Why can't I find my own love?*

Hoping to comfort her, Rupert rested his hand on Tundrinna's shoulder and whispered, "I'm sorry if this has been presented awkwardly. You seem not to know anything about this. I would've imagined that your parents had already informed you of the arrangement. But I assure you that I have the best intentions towards this engagement. I will be a good husband to you, and we can live happily together."

Tundrinna did not want to be mean to the man, but could not help jerking away when he touched her. She cried as she ran out of the room and past her parents.

"What was all that about?" the mother asked, surprised.

Rupert was almost indignant. "You mean to say you had told her nothing of me?"

"But ... we wanted it to be a surprise. I was sure she'd be delighted."

"She most obviously was not!" Rupert answered.

"Don't work yourself up about this. She simply needs to come to her senses, that's all. And I'm sure that once she realizes what a magnificent prospect this marriage is, she will come crawling back to you with tears of gratefulness in her eyes."

Tundrinna's father raised his eyebrows. He was obviously less than convinced himself.

Tundrinna, for her part, did not stop running until she came to a simple bench by the side of a quiet road out of sight from the house. There she let her tears flow freely, and when they could flow no longer, she sat there, silently brooding, until her senses were distracted by the delicious scent of fresh bread.

She lifted her eyes and spotted two ox-drawn carts being driven by nuns. The carts were laden with goods, and a small group of nuns walked beside the carts. Soon the group was in front of her.

"Are you all right, my child?" one of the nuns asked.

"I'm feeling better now," Tundrinna answered. "Where are you going?"

"To feed the poor in the village. We are bringing fresh bread to a tavern where some monks of our order are preparing a broth to go with it. They make the broth and bring the tables. We bake the bread and provide the hands to distribute it."

"May I go with you? I can help." Tundrinna sensed an opportunity to do something that would distract her from her gloomy thoughts.

"We can always use an extra set of hands," the nun answered.



It wasn't long before Tundrinna and the caravan of goodwill reached the village. Tables had already been set up in front of the tavern and were stacked with more wooden bowls than Tundrinna had ever seen together in all her life—though it was hardly more than a few hundred. A few monks milled about here and there amongst a gathering crowd of people—many poor and some simply hungry—that had heard of the event.

Once the nuns arrived, they wasted little time getting everything ready to be served, and soon the hungry crowd was lined up in an orderly fashion so that each could receive a bowl of broth and a slice of fresh bread.

The sight of a group of children running around, happily munching on the treasured food, brought a smile to Tundrinna's lips. That someone would care enough to help these less fortunate ones was wonderful. In turn, Tundrinna's youthful enthusiasm became apparent to the other nuns, and her smile seemed to grow more radiant with each person she served.

When the sun lowered in the sky, the nuns and monks began to pack up the tables and dishes. Tundrinna was tired, but hardly noticed it for the joy of having helped so many that afternoon. Before leaving she

asked the Mother Superior, “If it pleases you, Mother, and you are to do this in other villages, I would be most eager to help again. This has been the best day of my life! I’ve always wanted to help the needy, but my parents would not approve of it. They will not likely approve of what I have done today either, if they ever find out. But they don’t need to. After all, I am quite grown now!”

“How old are you, my child?” the Mother asked sweetly.

“I’m nearly eighteen years of age, ma’am.”

“Dear girl, I thank you for your contribution today, and for your offer to help again, but I fear that you must still have your parents’ blessing to do this work. I know that it is a high calling and a rewarding one to help those in need, but your parents are your parents, and unless you are married, I’m afraid that they do have a say in the matter.” Seeing the gloom that these words brought over Tundrinna’s countenance, the Mother quickly added, “However, if they consent, I would be most happy to see you at our convent this coming Friday morning, as we are indeed planning another mission of goodwill, and volunteers with as much energy and zealously as you have are hard to come by!” The Mother smiled wide, and placed a hand on Tundrinna’s shoulder. “I shall pray that God will have His way. Bless you, my child.”

“Thank you, Mother. I will try in all earnestness to be there.”

- 3 -

RUN AWAY

“SURPRISE, TUNDRINNA!!!!!!” nearly fifty voices thundered the moment Tundrinna walked into the ballroom.

Tundri knew this was coming. Her mother always tried to surprise her on her birthday, but it never worked. Besides the fact that she hated “surprises” such as these, and couldn’t stand the guests her mother invited to such parties, she wasn’t looking forward to turning a year older.

“My, my!” Tundri’s mother exclaimed, adding a patronizing pat on her daughter’s head. “Already eighteen. Oh, and isn’t she a rose? But she’ll always be my little baby!”

Tundri forced a polite smile for the guests who had come “all this way” to wish her a happy eighteenth birthday.

As her eyes scanned the room, she spotted the usual group of her parents’ stuffy acquaintances and their bratty children. It was all so familiar and boring that it was only with the greatest of effort that Tundri managed to make the customary and expected small talk while trying to look as if she were enjoying herself.

She was being gawked at by every young man in the room, while a group of gossiping ladies chatted in a corner, casting occasional glances in her direction.

Tundri's mother waltzed over to her side, followed by some of the older ladies. All at once they began to chatter around her, and she nodded her head once in a while, as if she were catching the words spoken. The one thought that brightened her evening was remembering that tomorrow she would once again join the nuns in distributing goods to the needy.

During the middle of the ball, the polished doors flung open, and a finely dressed young man entered, hands clasped behind his back.

"Rupert!" Tundri heard her mother screech. "You've finally arrived!"

Hearing the name, Tundri quickly turned away in disgust and ran to a balcony, hoping to escape unnoticed.

Rupert paid no attention to the girl's mother, but instead followed after Tundri until he caught up with her. He lowered his eyes as he spoke.

"Forgive me. I know I am late, but I could not come any sooner. I ... I've brought you a gift. It would mean much to me if you would accept it from my unworthy hands."

Tundri suddenly felt sorry for having run out of the room in front of Rupert. "No, forgive me. I should not have been so unkind to you. It really isn't your fault that my parents didn't tell me of their plans for us, and you had no part in their conspiracy. I'm sure you must feel the same way about me. Perhaps if we think together, we can find a way out of this mess."

"No, you don't understand." Rupert hesitated for a second, then cleared his throat and continued. "I didn't think highly of this plan at first either, until I met you. You see, I think I really do love you, and I consider myself honored to be chosen for one as fair as you, and the honor would only be greater if you would agree to ... marry me."

Rupert unclasped his hands from behind his back, and produced a small, intricately carved box.

He took Tundri's hand in his own and slowly placed the box there.

Tundri knew the box would contain an engagement ring, but just as she was about to open it, her mother and a following brood of gossips joined them on the balcony. Tundri quickly closed her hand around the present, and placed it at her side.

"Oh, there you two are," her mother said. "Goodness, Rupert, you should not be so eager for the bride that you ignore your mother-in-law."

Tundri bristled inside. Her mother was speaking as if she and Rupert were already married.

"My apologies, madam," Rupert answered. "I did not mean to be rude to you."

"Well, never mind that," Tundri's mother answered. "How could I ever stay mad at such a dashing handsome man as yourself? But now come back to the ball, and we shall have the orchestra play a song just for you two love birds!"

Tundri knew it would do little good to argue, and soon she and Rupert were performing the familiar moves of a dance as they held each other stiffly. Tundri, for her part, tried to ignore Rupert's gaze, and the gaze of everyone else following their every move. She could make out whisperings among the guests over the strains of music.

The music stopped abruptly when Tundri's mother dinged a spoon against a crystal glass, and Rupert and Tundri turned in surprise as she called out, "Silence, everyone! It is with great pleasure that tonight, on Tundrinna's birthday, I can announce to you all the engagement of Rupert and Tundrinna!"

Rupert and Tundri stood dumbfounded, staring at each other.

The guests began cheering, clapping, and congratulating and wishing them much happiness together.

"Show us the ring," one especially nosy, older lady Tundri particularly detested suddenly shouted.

Tundri realized she was still holding the small box in her hand. She clutched it tightly, but the old lady had already noticed.

“Don’t be bashful, dear. Show us!” The woman started to pry the box from Tundri’s fingers.

Tundri turned bright red with embarrassment and quickly let the box go.

The woman took the box with a victorious grin, and those nearest gathered closer to get a look.

The oohs and aahs over the ring were finally too much for Tundri. Tears began streaming down her face, and she hurried out of the room. Rupert, feeling guilty for having brought this embarrassment upon the girl, decided to let her be.

Without looking back, Tundri ran to her bedroom, where she grabbed a large knapsack and started throwing inside the first clothes and belongings her hands came across. Finally she grabbed a purse containing some coins, and then fled out into the moonlit night through the servants’ entrance.



Tundri arose early the next morning, along with the rest of the nuns who had graciously let her stay at the convent overnight after she’d come knocking frantically at their door the evening before.

Soon Tundri was walking beside the carts to the next village, where they found tables set up and a group of monks attending to a small gathering crowd.

As the morning progressed the heat became more and more intense. The first crowd began to disperse and a lull followed, but a second crowd would be sure to start arriving soon as news of the fresh bread and broth spread to further corners of the village.

One of the monks suddenly became faint. The nuns, alarmed by his pale face and weak condition, rushed to his aide, and decided it was best to immediately send one of the carts to return this man to the monastery, and that another come in his place.

“Tundri,” the Mother suggested, “you have the most energy. Why don’t you take the cart?”

“Yes, Mother. But how will I know who to speak with?”

“Ask for Father Johan. He will know who to send back with you.”



Some time later the cart reached the gate of the monastery, and was quickly admitted.

Father Johan came out to greet Tundri, and within moments several monks had lifted the faint man out of the wagon and taken him into one of the buildings. Brother Gerth was assigned to accompany Tundri back to the others.

As the two of them rode back, Gerth couldn’t help but stare at Tundri. She had light brown eyes and greeted him with the sweetest smile he was sure he had ever seen. Her long sandy brown hair was mostly hidden by the nun’s cloak she wore that day, as she had found none of her own hastily selected clothes appropriate for this occasion. Gerth was sure she was the most beautiful nun he had ever met—and from what he could tell, he was not the only one who thought this, as many men tipped their hats to the girl as they rode by.

Then something caught his attention. In a flash of movement he had caught sight of what looked like an expensive necklace around her neck. Nuns did not wear jewelry, and the thought of what this might mean about the girl next to him sent tingles up Gerth’s spine.

He mentally castigated himself. *Stop it, Gerth! You’re a monk!* Still, he determined that if an opening presented itself, he would ask this girl about that necklace, and about herself.

Tundri noticed that her companion was looking at her, and became suddenly self-conscious. He was by no means uncomely to look at, but she pushed

the thought out of her mind. After all, he was of the order.

Eager to break the awkward silence, Tundri asked, “What’s your name?”

“Gerth. What’s yours?”

“Tundri—I mean Tundrinna, but nobody calls me that.”

“You like being called Tundri better?”

“Yes ... I mean, no. I mean, it’s shorter. You can call me whatever you like, I guess.” Tundri giggled nervously and fidgeted with the goad in her hand.

“Well, in that case, I shall call you something no one else does. How about ... Dina?”

“Ha. You are a creative man. No one has thought to call me that before.”

“You like it then?”

“It’s different, and so, yes, I think I do.”

“Good. I see that you are busy today.”

“What?”

“Yes, look. I can see the square already, and it looks like it’s full of people.”

“You’re right. I didn’t realize we were so close already.”

As they came to a halt at the square Gerth helped her out. He gave her a smile before they parted.

Morning turned to afternoon as the nuns continued to feed, comfort, and speak to all those who came. Before the sun started to set the nuns and monks started to load up the carts and return the tables in preparation to return to their abodes. Gerth found a moment when no one else was near Tundri to quickly bid her a private farewell.

“I hope that this day has been enjoyable. I took great pleasure in meeting you.”

“Thank you. I did have a good time, and I also am glad to have made your acquaintance. I hope we’ll see each other again.”

“As do I ... Dina.”

“I do like that name. Goodbye then, and Godspeed.” She turned to leave, casting a last glance at the handsome monk, and in the same moment tripping over a mislaid cobblestone. She let out a high-pitched yelp as she landed hard on her knees before managing to catch herself.

The nuns, who had paid no prior attention, now came running to help. But Gerth, who was nearer, was already picking her up and asking if she was hurt. She was not, but she was most definitely red cheeked and embarrassed as they departed. And this time Gerth had unmistakably glimpsed a diamond pendant on a chain around the girl’s neck, which she had quickly stuffed back under her robe.

En route to the abbey, Tundri couldn’t help but feel confused. She felt stupid and clumsy for having made such a fool of herself in front of Gerth, but also wondered why she felt the way she did for him. Perhaps it would be better to avoid him, and besides, the nuns always visited different villages. She decided to put the young monk out of her mind for the time being.



As the moon rose higher into the sky, Gerth tossed in his bed, unable to stop thinking about the mystery of the jeweled nun. Why had he not asked her more about herself? The ride had been a short one, but he knew that wasn’t the true reason. Being a monk had not stopped him from meeting and speaking with other fair ladies. Why had it been different with Dina? He had never felt like this before, and could not understand it. This was something he had vowed not to feel, but how could he not? He had not tried to. Besides, he knew nothing of love ... or maybe this was only carnal lust. Perhaps she did not even feel the same way for him. ... What way? They’d only met once. He should not be thinking of such things.

Pushing the subject from his mind, Gerth rolled over and tried to think of sleep.

THE MERCHANT OF HAMBURG

Hamburg, 1499

Marinda sat in the plush study next to a blazing fire, penning a letter to a distant acquaintance in Spain.

Tillone, her young son, sat by a bowl of sweets, stuffing himself with the candy while methodically ripping apart their tissue-like wrappings.

“Tillone, please stop that awful noise,” Marinda said quietly. “It’s hurting my ears and I can scarcely concentrate on my writing!”

“Ooh, it’s hurting my ears ... please stop!” Tillone mimicked her mockingly. A wicked grin spread across his chubby face. “First, get on your hands and knees and beg me!”

“Oh, Tillone ... please just be good! I’ll give you leave after supper to go play with your friends.”

“I don’t have any friends.”

“But I thought that the children next door let you play with them, and even brought you cookies when you weren’t feeling well!”

“So ... I don’t care about them. Besides those cookies tasted as if they were homemade and not bought, as all true gifts are!”

“But that isn’t so darling,” Marinda said with a sigh. “It’s the act of friendliness that counts.”

Tillone ignored her and continued in his noisy and destructive activity.

A husky man with a thick, prematurely gray beard and neatly trimmed mustache entered the room. "I have business at the docks," he said. "I will not return until later this evening, so you can tell the cook to save me supper."

Tillone quickly hid his mess and smiled sweetly at his father, whose name was Luden.

Luden closed the door, put on a warm overcoat and scarf and left the house, carrying a large empty gunnysack on his back.

Luden Horstein was a wealthy merchant from the city of Hamburg. His business managed ships coming in from the seas, and also barges that distributed goods to many villages and trading points further inland along the Elbe River and its many navigable tributaries.

It was getting dark as Luden rode to the port. His horse cantered quickly along the cobblestone pathways leading there. When he arrived, he checked with his fleet manager and right-hand man, Winthro, as to how things were going. Another ship had just come into port, and arrangements had been made for extra workers to unload it in the morning. The accounting of its cargo and some mail was on his desk.

"Very good. And the barges?"

"Fourteen loaded barges departed this afternoon. Twelve others have returned, bringing in a goodly sum between them. Some twenty other barges should be returning in the next few days, in time to be loaded with the new shipment."

"Excellent. Well done, Winthro. You may inform the workers that they can close up shop for the evening and return home. Oh, and one final matter. I've been hearing reports of missing goods from various traders on the Elbe. I would like you to carefully look over the list of crew members for each barge when

it is sent. We cannot have discontent customers. Please make sure the barges are manned by good and trustworthy men."

"Yes, sir. Good night, sir!"

Luden entered his cabin and lit the oil-lamp on his desk, taking a moment to warm his hands by the flame. Then he sat down at the large mahogany desk. He opened a drawer and took out a small dagger-shaped letter opener. Shuffling through the stack of papers on his desk, he noticed a sealed letter from one of his good friends and fellow merchants in Venice.

Eagerly Luden opened the letter and read.

To my dear friend, Luden

How fare you? Things here in Italy at this time of the year are beautiful with the trees shedding their leaves on the canals. The weather is not yet too cold. My aunt has invited me to join her for the winter at her house, and I think I shall take her up on that offer, since mine is full of relatives visiting my wife. How nice it shall be to leave them all.

Luden laughed, picturing his quiet friend being swarmed by gossiping and traditionally loud Italian relatives. The letter continued.

The only thing that consoles me of their visit is the wonderful variety of pastas and dishes that are being served. You know how my wife controls the cooks and all that I am normally served in my home, though I can't say it has helped any, because there are plenty of taverns where I can pacify my greater appetites and belly. But I digress.

There is something important I must ask of you, and I beg upon your trust and our friendship to help as you can, and to keep this a

matter of greatest secrecy. You will understand why when the time comes.

A good friend of mine will be coming to Hamburg shortly. He is in need of a place of lodging. I ask that you do what you can for him. I will reimburse whatever expenses are needed to secure him a safe and ideally remote place of lodging. He will explain his needs, but I assure you they shall be modest.

On the evening of November 18, this year of our Lord, 1499, he will be at our tavern. You know the one I mean. Try not to be recognized when you enter it. He will be dressed in a long brown cloak, with a small emblem of a cross sewn into the left shoulder. Approach him, and ask, in English, the hour. His answer shall be that it is the twenty-third hour. Do not speak more than this in the tavern. Only tell him another place and time to meet. From there I ask that you take him to a place where he will be safe and undisturbed—and also well taken care of.

I trust my friend to your hospitality, and pray you will treat him as you would treat me. I pray that the good Lord will keep you in safety and that your business is prospering.

*With all gratefulness, your good friend,
Marco Lenzi*

Luden had always trusted Marco, so why should he not do so now? Still, he couldn't help but wonder what sort of man this "friend" would be, and why this was a matter of "greatest secrecy." Was this man perhaps an outlaw? But why would Marco risk associating himself with such a character?

Luden re-read the letter, making an inconspicuous mark of a small cross on his calendar to note the day and time of the friend's arrival, and then burnt the letter.

The date was just under a month away. Luden wondered what ship the man would be arriving on, or if he was coming by ship at all. Marco had not specified how the man would travel, and none of Marco's ships did business in Hamburg. Considering the unpredictability of such a long journey by any means of travel, Luden wondered if perhaps the man was already in Hamburg, simply waiting for the appointed day and time. But the date and instructions had been definite, and so there was little Luden could do but wait for the appointed evening to discover what this was all about.

He finished reading his other mail, the accountings of the barges and the manifest of the ship that had come in. Then he locked up the office and returned home.



After eating a light supper he went to bed in his own room, down the hall from his wife's. Twenty years of marriage had dulled the novelty of companionship that they had first enjoyed. After agreeing to disagree on many different matters, including the upbringing of their only child, they now lived largely separate lives on the large estate under the title of man and wife.

As far as financial matters went, Luden was the man of the house, and saw to it that he had the final say as to how the business of his home was run.

Marinda idolized and pampered Tillone to the point of spoiling him from the day he was born—an attitude Luden had strongly disagreed with. Luden would see to it the boy was properly punished whenever he chanced to hear of the lad's unacceptable behavior, but as little as he was home, this was infrequent at best. He had already long given up hope that this unbridled eleven-year-old boy would one day inherit his business, and had long purposed to give it all into the hands of the young and responsible Winthro when he retired.

THE PERFORMANCE

Adendorf, 1499

“Thief, thief! I cry thief!” Vester shouted with all his might. But there was nobody around to hear him, and the young scoundrel he was pointing at dashed gleefully down the deserted and muddy road.

Vester heaved a sigh as he swung a large black sack over his shoulder, and rose to his full height. He was tall and lanky, thin almost to the bone, and with a head full of scruffy red hair. He had a caricature-perfect face and an almost endless supply of cheerfulness and spontaneity that suited his profession well. Vester was officially the town’s minstrel, and more unofficially its jester—if a town could have one.

With no one else in sight, Vester knew the only way the little scoundrel was going to be apprehended was if he did it himself, and though lanky, Vester was anything but weak, and was well up to the challenge. He started off after the boy, and quickly picked up speed. His oversized legs gave him the advantage, and he easily gained on the short devil. His long arms had soon caught the boy by his collar.

As the terrified and out-of-breath youngster turned to look at his captor, Vester couldn’t help but laugh at the look of befuddled disbelief on the boy’s face.

“You shouldn’t pickpocket, and run, and then expect not to get caught—especially if you’re running with such a guilty countenance as the one you now wear. And as I always say, if you want to play, you have to pay! Tell me, laddie, you look older than some might think. I’d say you’re about twelve, and if you start in the world this way, you’ll never get far!”

“B-but ... I-I-I’m fourteen sir, just s-s-short for m-my age. I wouldn’t ever do such a horrid thing again. It was merely in jest. I just wanted to try it. I’ve never done it b-b-before—honest!”

“Judging by how poorly you did it, I’m inclined to believe you. Still, you should be ashamed of yourself! You’re old enough to be brought to the sentry and severely punished. But you are fortunate. I am in a merciful mood, so I will not turn you over.”

The boy looked relieved.

“However, I do believe in justice, and justice shall have to be served, and I,” Vester said with a flourish, “shall be its waiter!” He said this with such an animatedly wicked tone and expression that the lad’s eyes filled with fright and tears sprung to his eyes.

“Please, please, I implore you! I swear never to do it again. Here ... here’s everything I’ve taken ... please, I want nothing to do with them anymore.”

“I should certainly think not,” Vester answered, taking back his shiny silver flute and harmonica that the boy presented, as well as a single leather pouch that he did not recognize. “Pray tell me, lad, what is your name?”

“I’d rather not tell you, sir. It would be a sorry moment for me if my friends heard of what I’d done, and how poorly I did it...”

Vester eyed the boy with a stern stare.

“B-but I suppose you deserve to know as much,” the boy quickly stammered. “Ferdinand ... my name’s Ferdinand.” Then, almost inaudibly, the boy added, “And what is your name, good sir?”

Vester broke into a mischievous smile. “Ah, trying to be polite now, are we? Well, it’s a little too late for that, I’m afraid. You should be finding out my name soon enough, for it is nearly time for our performance!”

“*Our* performance?” the lad questioned, as his brow furrowed in puzzlement.

“I mean what I say, and I say what I mean! Justice must be served, remember? And for the trouble you have caused me, I consider you participating in my performance your retribution. Unless, of course, you want me to hand you over to—”

“No, no!” Ferdinand quickly answered. “Go on. I’m listening.” The boy swallowed nervously. “Uh ... exactly what sort of performance are you talking about?”

“Simple enough,” Vester answered. “I’m a minstrel, and my witty brain has composed a new song. I shall play it on my lute, and you, my friend, your part is simple. You only have to sing it.”

“Sing it? But I can’t sing!”

“Then you shall have to learn, and quickly. Now, it goes like this...”



The rhythmic chanting was heard far and wide. One would’ve thought there was to be a public hanging, even if the tone was a jovial one. “Vester! Vester! Vester Silvester!” the chant echoed over and over.

The shouts grew louder and more fervent as Vester walked into the growing crowd.

I am loved! I know it. I knew it. I always did! the tall fellow thought proudly as he climbed up the steps to a simple stage in the middle of the town square. His hand half-pulled and half-dragged a red-faced and totally stunned youth up on the stage with him.

Realization hit, and the pickpocket was now truly sorry for his attempted thievery! Not that he hadn’t been sorry ever since he was caught and had been in the unrelenting company of the ruddy giant.

Ferdinand nervously glanced around, scanning the gathering crowd for any sign of his friends—and then nearly died from abashment when he saw them, and saw that they saw him.

“What have you there?” a small man with a large voice cried as the throng began to quiet down.

“Ahah, I was waiting for that question. Good fellows, and beauteous ladies, I wish to introduce you to a fine, well-meaning chap, with the voice of ... an angel. But what side he’s an angel to, you may have to judge for yourselves!”

The crowd burst out in laughter, which did not make Ferdinand feel any more comfortable. A large lump suddenly rose in his throat and for all his swallowing, refused to leave.

“Now, I must ask for utter silence, for it seems as though our angel has caught the stage-fright, and we may well need to be quieter than a priest’s bed to hear anything of him.”

There were a few snickers and giggles, but as Vester strung the first chord on his lute, the obedient crowd went silent in anticipation.

Ferdinand cleared his throat one last desperate time and then let out a squeak.

While Ferdinand was busy trying to find his voice, Vester kept on strumming his chords as he bent down near the side of the stage to where three large washerwomen were huddled and giggling together. Making sure that Ferdinand did not notice, Vester whispered something into one of the women’s ears, and then returned his attention to Ferdinand, who was now successfully, if faintly, humming the tune. The three women, meanwhile, had climbed onto the stage and were lined up behind the oblivious Ferdinand, waiting for the singing to begin, and swaying their hips to the rhythm of Vester’s strumming.

“Ooooh,” Ferdinand began croaking, “my voice is like the wind. Ooooooh the wind, the wind, the wind.

The wind that blows right through to my toes. Ooooooh, in my clothes, and freezes my nose!”

The first verse was sung, and the crowd was already doubled over with laughter. Not only was the lad’s voice terrifically horrendous, but the three women in the background, mimicking in exaggerated motions whatever awkward movements Ferdinand was unconsciously producing, made the poor boy look all the more hilarious.

Ferdinand would’ve jumped the stage at least twenty times by now, and he finally saw his chance to do so by edging slowly to the other side of the stage while keeping his gaze fixed on the audience. But he quickly edged into Vester, who had read the boy’s intentions and was there waiting for him.

This only brought greater laughter from the audience. Still Ferdinand had not seen the dancing party behind him, and figured he was the sole reason for the crowd’s riotous jeers.

The song went on, each stanza worse and less coherent than the last. It was clear the minstrel had not wasted one of his better songs on this episode, knowing that the comedy of this performance needed no further help than what Ferdinand was generously giving it, and soon even Vester could hardly keep himself from shaking with laughter, and could barely continue playing his lute.

Ferdinand finished the last stanza with a horrific final and prolonged note, and then turned around to dash off the back of the stage—only to ram directly into one of the large ladies’ stomachs and bounce back onto the floor.

This was all too much for the gathering, and many clutched their sides for the pain the laughter was causing them. This was also more spontaneous comedy than Vester could have asked for, and the price that Ferdinand had to pay for his lesson had at the same time made Vester more popular than ever,

and he knew this would guarantee him better meals and alms for several days to come.

As Ferdinand picked himself up, his mother, who had watched her son's performance with horror, now came tramping on stage and grabbed him away by the ear, yelling of punishments that would ensue.

Vester found his supper in a tavern where the cheerful men folk treated him to drinks and food in exchange for the good entertainment he had provided, and where Vester inquired as to where the stolen pouch might have come from. On the inner flap, in simple letters, the name "Gerth" was burned, but this was a large town, and finding a "Gerth" would not be easy without a more definite clue of where to start.

One of the men suggested that it looked like the typical pouch of a monk, and so once he had finished eating, Vester thanked the men of the tavern and set out to the nearest chapel on the other side of the town square.

Dusk was settling across the square as Vester entered the chapel and kneeled before a figurine of the holy Virgin Mary. He dipped his finger into the bowl of water at the base of the pedestal and touched it to his forehead.

A foolish ritual, he thought to himself, yet to risk my soul through neglecting it would be all the more foolish, I suppose.

An elderly priest entered, and Vester approached the man. "Pray tell, sir," he asked, "is anyone by the name of Gerth abiding in this place? I have here—"

"Silence, my son, for I cannot speak."

"But why not?" Vester asked.

The priest walked on without another word and then exited through a small side door.

Vester looked around, and then spotted the confessionals. He decided that surely there would have to be someone there who would talk with him. Vester entered the dark closet and sat, trying to peer through

the dividing mesh grate that kept the occupants of either side from seeing each other clearly.

"Father, forgive me, for I have not come here to confess. I am searching for one I believe resides in this order, a monk by the name of Gerth. Would you know him?"

Only silence followed, though Vester could tell that there was a man on the other side of the mesh grate. "I'm sorry," Vester said. "Have I disturbed an hour of silence here, for it seems as if no man in this place will speak to me."

"No, not that," the answer came from the other side of the confessional. "I was just lost in thought. Forgive me. But tell me, what is your business with Gerth?"

"I need to speak to him in person. So you *do* know him, then?"

"Indeed I do. You are speaking to him."

"What? Well good sir, why didn't you tell me right away? I have something I believe is yours, and that with much ordeal did I recover from the hands of a thief."

"Oh! Thank our dear Father in Heaven. Is it a small leather pouch, with the name of Gerth seared on the inside flap?"

"'Tis certain, and here it is."

"Wait there and I will be out in a moment to receive it of you."

Within moments Gerth was on the other side of the confessional thanking Vester profusely for returning the pouch, which Gerth confirmed was missing nothing from its original contents.

In gratitude, Gerth offered Vester a cup of monastery wine, which Vester graciously accepted. So the two men sat down and engaged in a long conversation about each other's history. Though their professions could hardly have contrasted each other more—a devout monk and a raunchy jester—these two men

discovered they had much in common. They had both grown up in poor families from small villages, and had left their homes at a young age—Gerth to become a monk, and Vester to seek fortune in a bigger city. And both had found as good a home and life and calling as they would have wanted, and were content with it.

And so it was that a friendship was born between the young priest Gerth and the kindhearted minstrel and man of the world, Vester.

- 6 -

THE TWENTY-THIRD HOUR

Hamburg, 1499

A full moon shone brightly as Luden made his way through the streets to the tavern Marco had written of. The bells of the Hamburg cathedral were just striking seven o'clock. A cold gust of wind followed Luden into the tavern. The men turned to glance at the newcomer, but seeing only a simple sailor they quickly turned their attention back to the center of their jesting—a tall, slender maid who was new at her job. She was pretty, but not entirely used to the manners of men in such a place, and the men knowing it, teased her all the more.

Luden scanned the dimly lit pub, searching each person, hoping to recognize Marco's friend. One problem presented itself. Nearly everyone around wore long, dark cloaks, and Luden found himself trying to appear casual as he strolled about the place to get a closer look at some of the men's shoulders in his path to an empty table.

As he was doing so, a loud and drunken voice called to the maid for another drink.

The call attracted Luden's attention as well, and drew his gaze to a table in the opposite corner from the one where he was heading.

The man was now standing, still loudly calling and gesticulating towards the maid, who was trying to break free from a group of men who were still taunting her. The man's swaggering, beckoning motion, Luden suddenly noticed, also appeared to be a gesture pointing towards his left shoulder. Luden hesitated a moment, then decided to make his way over to the man's table. When he reached it, the man was again sitting down, his hand around a large empty mug. Luden noticed the emblem of the cross clearly on the man's left shoulder.

"Excuse me, sir," Luden asked tentatively, and in English, as the letter had instructed, "do you happen to know the hour?"

"The twenty-third hour, my friend," the man answered, also in English, looking up at Luden with a knowing smile. "Do you not know the signs of the times?"

"I'm afraid not," Luden answered, then lowered his voice to a whisper. "Behind the inn across the street, at the stables, when the clock strikes eight."

The man nodded, and Luden continued on his way to another table, where the maid eventually set a drink before him. He drank it down quickly and then left, casting a quick glance back at the stranger in the corner. He was still there, and appeared to have dozed off in a drunken stupor.

What sort of man is this? Luden wondered to himself.



The stranger walked up precisely as the clock struck the eighth hour, and cordially shook Luden's hand when he recognized him.

"Good evening, sir. You must be Luden?"

"I am. And you are?"

"Stefano is my Christian name. My friend Marco spoke often of you, and very highly at that."

"Well, I'm sorry to say he never mentioned you

until his last mysterious letter to me. Naturally I am quite curious as to your situation, and how you and Marco became acquainted, and why he asked me to keep this all a secret. It would have been much easier for you to just report to my office or my house as soon as you arrived in Hamburg. It is well known, and you would have found it easily."

"And you would then have been found just as easily," Stefano added. "I can explain more, but I suggest we start moving to wherever we'll be going. ... Um, where exactly are we going?"

"Considering how concerned Marco is for your safety, I could think of no better place to accommodate you than on my own lands. I have a hunting lodge near my estate that is never used. It is not luxurious, but you'll have a bed and food and anything else you might require. And it is remote. Do you ride?" Luden asked, leading two horses out of the stable.

"Yes," Stefano answered.

They both mounted up and were soon making their way out of the city along moonlit roads towards Luden's estate.



"So what brings you to Hamburg?" Luden asked Stefano when they were seated around a small table in the hunting cottage, and in front of a jug of wine, a fresh loaf of bread, some cheeses, and a plate of sausages that Luden had roasted over the fire in the hearth. "And why the secrecy? Who are you?"

Stefano chewed down a large piece of bread before managing his response.

"I'm sorry about the secrecy and any inconvenience it may have caused you. Thank you for providing this place for me, and if you have some time, I shall tell you all. After all, my life is already in your hands, and you deserve to know the full truth, for I would not want to be the one to destroy the friendship and trust you and Marco share."

“Time I have,” Luden answered. “Tell your tale. For my part, I will respect Marco’s wishes for your safety, and do all I can to ensure that your presence here remains undetected.”

“Thank you,” Stefano said, taking another gulp of wine from his goblet. “My adventures and mishaps began a few years ago when I was still a boatman on the canals of Venice.”

“Ah, a boatman, huh?” Luden said, his eyes brightening. “That’s how I started my business.”

“Indeed, so Marco told me,” Stefano answered. “My younger brothers, I have three of them, work on a larger ship. One of them is first mate. I never had the stomach for the open sea myself,” Stefano added with a helpless smile. “So one day I heard word that my brothers, who had been at sea for five years on a long expedition, had returned. Of course there was a great celebration, and our whole family was called together.

“It was the first time I met my older brother since he had left home to seek his own fortunes elsewhere. I must add that, when my brother left, he was a vain man. He cared little or nothing for religion and the restrictions which, as he saw it, the church imposed on ambitious young men such as himself. He was a great disappointment to our very devout mother who was raised in a convent herself.

“It came as a great surprise when, on the first night of his return, my elder brother sought me out and began to speak to me about God, about Jesus, and about the Holy Scriptures.”

“He’d become a monk?” Luden asked.

“Not exactly.”

“A priest, then?”

Stefano shook his head. “No, not that either.”

“So what was he?”

“He was a different man, that much was clear to all of us. His manner was almost selfless—something my brother had never been in all his life, and especially

not to us, his younger brothers. And while he still exercised plenty of charm around the women, he no longer chased and teased them as he used to.” Stefano shook his head at the memory of his own disbelief.

“So that night I asked him about what had happened to him, and that’s when he began speaking of the Scriptures. You see, we had all attended every mass the priest could think up when we were kids. I had never seen much point in them myself, but my elder brother was the only one who became vocal about it as he grew older. He despised sitting there listening to the monotonous chanting of the priest that said or meant nothing to him, and to him it was a vain ritual to appease a God he was not even sure he believed in.

“That night he began to speak of many of the same things—that is, he spoke of the hypocrisy of the church, how they pretend to speak for God, rule for God, expect us to buy our salvation from them rather than seeking it from God Himself. He spoke of the sermons and how meaningless they were, how far the chanting and droning of Latin phrases and liturgies is from the truth of the Word of God presented in the pages of the Scriptures.

“I was surprised at his words, and asked him then what he would know about the Scriptures. Before he proceeded, he swore me to the greatest secrecy. I agreed, and then he pulled out a binding of pages and handed them to me. They were hand-copied portions of Scripture, some in English, some in Italian. My brother was translating the English pages, which he could read, into Italian.

“I was stunned, of course, that he not only took an interest in this pastime, but was most passionate about it. I half understood when he told me that if any man of the church ever stumbled across these pages, they’d be confiscated, and my brother could be charged with heresy. He always rather enjoyed

provoking the ire of priests, but that did not explain why he was so sincerely engrossed and passionate about his work on these words that he'd begun. He refused to tell me where or how he had gotten the English pages, and assured me the Italian ones were his own translations.

"I could not read the English pages, but was of course curious to read the Italian ones. He was very happy to let me, so long as I did not show them to anyone else. I spent most of that family gathering reading the pages in privacy, and found the simple truths and words of the pages I read as amazing as my brother had described them. And like my brother I, too, wondered why, if these words were so wonderful and simple to understand, they had been shrouded behind the mystery of Latin by the church."

"Your brother had translated the entire Bible?"

"No, but many portions of the books that spoke of Jesus' life, and he was working on others."

"So somehow you became involved in your brother's heresy, and now you need a place to hide?" Luden guessed.

"In short, yes. But there is more to the story."

"Go on."

"There is something that happens to a man when he begins to study the Word of God for himself. I began to see God for myself, as if He was introducing Himself to me. It made me wonder why the church hid God behind the veil of their traditions and rituals, when from what I read of these pages, He wished to be known and loved by all men, as He loved and knew them.

"I would read in my brother's presence every night as he continued his labors of writing by the light of a candle, and he would explain many things to me. He obviously knew and understood these words very well. Many passages he could quote word for word from his memory. When it came time for him to depart, I begged him to let me keep some of the pages. But

he would not. He urged me to keep the knowledge of these things secret for his sake, lest his activities be discovered before he had a chance to complete his work. He seemed more ambitious in this venture than he had ever been in his desires to make a fortune for himself. 'I am now managing my investments in a place where thieves cannot break through and steal,' he told me.

"To make a long story short, I did not entirely keep my promise to my brother to keep the knowledge of what I had learned to myself. It seemed too amazing that there was a God who cared about me personally. I spoke of my thoughts of God with one of my friends who worked the boat with me—a delivery barge that often carried passengers and their goods back to their houses from the market we worked. Then I began discussing it with passengers.

"Many were interested, and I began to speak of these things even more. Eventually the church heard of me and my boat-ride preaching, and they charged me to stop speaking of things I knew nothing about, or else to face the punishment of the church. But that couldn't stop me. I was imprisoned, and when my brother heard of it, he and Marco used their influence to have me released. My brother brought me to Rome, I suppose so he could keep a closer watch on me. He took me under his wing, and told me that if I wanted to be helpful, I could assist him with his translations.

"So I did, and I learned my English in the process. While my brother worked on the Italian translation, I busied myself with duplicating his texts as well as the original English ones, which greatly helped me in my command of the language. At the end of a year, I had my own copy of the English Scriptures, which I learned had been translated by an Englishman named Wycliffe a century ago.

"Shortly after, however, things began to get dangerous in Rome. We had heard that several independent

publishing houses had sprung up in Germany using Gutenberg's moveable type, so while my brother went into hiding elsewhere in Italy, they thought it wiser to send me here, and while I was here, to see if I could find a printer who would undertake the printing of the translated Scriptures in both English and Italian. So there you have it, my life story, or at least the part that counts."

Luden interrupted. "If the pages are indeed as heretical as you say, I can tell you right now that no printer will touch them. The church already has its men in every printing house, and nothing gets published that they have not seen first. And since the church has both wealth and influence, the publishing houses are eager to stay on their good side. If that is indeed your purpose in coming, I'm afraid your journey here has been in vain."

"Not entirely. Contacting a printer was only part of the reason. I intend to continue duplicating these scripts so long as my hand can write, for which I need a quiet and remote place."

"You're welcome to stay here as long as you wish. This cottage is never used or visited anymore. I can pass by each day on my way back from the city to bring any food and necessities you should desire."

"Now that you mention it, I shall be needing paper and ink for my work."

"That should be no problem. I shall bring them tomorrow. Is that all?"

"Thank you. Yes."

Luden handed Stefano the key to the cottage and said, "I should probably be getting back to the house now. I wish you all the best with your mission. Until tomorrow, then."

"Till tomorrow," Stefano answered.

Book 2

Encounters

Lower Saxony
Germany, 1502

THE GUEST

Ulrik sat under the shade of a large tree, intently studying a piece of paper. Karsten looked on, unable to decipher what was only a mass of scribbles to him.

“Dear brother,” Ulrik read aloud, “it is a cold afternoon as I sit here, finally having found this hour to write you my first, and I’m sure you will agree, overdue letter. I miss Wittenberge so. I hope you are taking good care of it in my absence. It is certainly very different being by the sea. The past six months here in Kiel have been spent in studying, and I have met many a fine physician whom I hope to take after...”

“Oh certainly, Erik,” Ulrik scoffed. “Imagine, my poor idealistic brother. He could not cure a dog if he tried, and now he wants to become a physician? But if it keeps him occupied, I wish him luck.”

“Hush, man ... continue with the letter,” Karsten urged. Karsten was the son of the steward of this estate owned by Ulrik and Erik’s father, Ludwig Kessler. Though of a lower class, Karsten had nevertheless become a good friend of the Kessler brothers, often providing services and goods for them that they, because of their station and the strict expectations of their father, could not procure for themselves.

Ulrik continued with the letter, assuming a scoffing tone of voice. “The beer here is fine, and the brewery

must surely be near dry, as I have taken great liberty in sampling their produce to see how it compares to our brews back home...

“And no doubt he was in the middle of sampling as he wrote this un-witty letter!” Ulrik interposed again with a tone of disgust in his voice that poorly hid his envy at his older brother’s freedom.

Karsten groaned and said, “But, it is a letter, nevertheless. Continue, please!”

“My time seems all spent in study, and study I fear, leaves me dull, and with little to write you of. Therefore, in your best interests, I shall relieve you from hearing any of it, and will end this letter speedily.”

“End it speedily?” Karsten cried in distress as Ulrik read the last line. “Why, he never started it!”

“I shall forewarn you of my return. Until then, farewell. Your faithful brother, Erik. P.S. Tell Karsten that I have not forgotten him, and I miss him dreadfully, and that he’d love some of the things that can be found in this fine city.”

Karsten sat back, his mouth agape in utter silence, trying to recover from his shock of how so many scribbles could make up such an abruptly short letter. Ulrik did not seem much happier with it himself, and silently but forcefully folded the paper and placed it deep in a pocket.



“Wh-what? *Where is my money?!*” Erik shouted, and the voice echoed through the empty tavern.

Looking around, Erik hit himself sharply on the head in frustration. An old woman, dressed in shabby rags, hovered near an open door, and at hearing Erik’s outburst glanced at him nervously before quickly leaving him alone again.

The burning headache did not help Erik Kessler in trying to recall where he was or what he was doing here. One thing was sure: the money pouch that he always carried on him was gone.

When the innkeeper passed by his table, Erik was still in a daze, but was enough himself to ask for a breakfast after having spent the night at the table. His money, he was sure, was gone for good, obviously having been stolen in one of his many moments of oblivion that night.

He slouched over and touched his forehead. “What are you to do now, Erik?” he moaned aloud to himself. “I fear you have lost everything, and have no way to compensate for your foolishness. No, you are stuck in this city filled with strangers ... strangers and *thieves*—all of them! And you ... you have not a single friend here. Alas.”

He looked up briefly as the innkeeper arrived with a tray containing a single old-looking bun and a dirty cup of milk, as if he knew that this would be all the boy could afford, if that.

“You can’t return to Wittenberge,” Erik continued to himself, as if oblivious to the innkeeper’s presence. “You cannot remain here. What will you do? How will you ever continue your studies now, if you can’t pay for lodging or food? You’ll likely need a physician yourself before too long, and you won’t be able to afford one.”

He looked at the food in front of him, but did not touch it. A thought suddenly brightened his countenance.

“Aaaaahhhhhh ... but I need not fret!” he said, jumping up and turning to the innkeeper. Realizing he had not yet paid for anything, he took a shiny jeweled ring from his finger and tossed it to the innkeeper. “This should be payment enough!” he said, then darted out of the tavern, leaving the old, white-bearded host clutching the ring, and yelling, “Thank you, most gracious sir!”

Erik smirked as he ran and muttered to himself, “Only polished copper, my friend ... copper, and nothing more!”



It took Erik most of the day to get to Hamburg, much of it spent with a friendly traveler on his horse-drawn cart, who also treated the youth to a good lunch along the way.

The sun was just starting to set as Erik walked up the broad pathway towards the mansion in front of him.

“Well, I am here!” he said to himself. “I pray that my uncle was right about this, as if he was not, I am really going to be stuck here.” Erik dusted off his cloak and the knapsack that held his few belongings, then ran his hands through his dark brown, shoulder-length hair in a vain attempt to make himself look more presentable. Finally he approached the ornately carved door and pulled a chain by the doorway.

A bell rang on the other side, and a few moments later a high-pitched voice answered from inside.

“Hulloooooooooow? Who is it?”

The tone made Erik grimace.

“My name is Erik Kessler. I’m here to see the master of the house, the merchant Luden Horstein, I believe.”

“What do you want to see my father for?” the voice, which Erik now perceived as a near-childish one, answered.

“Ah, you are one of his sons.”

“No! I’m his only son!” the voice retorted, and with that the door opened slightly.

Erik caught a glimpse of the chubby-faced child and gained some confidence. “Hello, good little sir. I am pleased to meet you. Now if you would be so kind, I must see your father immediately! Would you please tell him who is calling?”

The boy took a step back, but continued to look steadfastly at the visitor while he called, “Mother!!”

“No!” Eric answered. “I want to speak with your father! I ... oh, good evening, Madam!” Erik managed a curt and proper bow.

“Good evening to you as well. My husband is away presently and will not return until later. I’m sorry that I cannot tell you more precisely when. Is there anything I can do for you?”

“Um,” Erik hesitated.

Marinda, meanwhile, had noticed the man’s somewhat finer, if travel-dirty garments, and surmised from his manner and the way he bowed that he was more than an ordinary tramp. “In any case, I cannot let you wait outside. Please, come in. Have you eaten, or would you like some tea?”

“I must confess I am a little hungry,” Erik answered as he stepped inside.

Marinda had scarcely closed the door when the sound of an approaching horseman and chickens scattering out of the way could be heard.

“Ah, that would be my husband,” she said with a resigned sigh. “He’ll be in shortly. I’ll show you to the study and inform him of your presence.”



“Good evening, young sir,” Luden said as he entered the study. “I am told that you wish to speak with me. Now I am here. So tell me, what is your name, and what can I do for you?”

“My name is Erik Kessler, and I hope I will be of no inconvenience to you. I believe my uncle, a certain Arnold Kessler, who resides in England, is an acquaintance of yours.”

“Acquaintance—the man is well nigh my dearest associate.”

“Indeed. He always spoke highly of you, and when he heard I was going to Kiel to study medicine, he recommended that I pay you a visit sometime when I had the opportunity. And well, this is as good an opportunity as any for me.” Erik cleared his throat nervously.

“Then I am glad you have come. You must stay for supper, and for the night if it does not inconvenience

you. We have plenty of guestrooms, and it will be an honor to have a Kessler in our house.”

“I thank you for your hospitality. I also have a letter for you from my uncle, which he said I was to deliver personally if I ever came to see you. Here.” Erik took a pouch from his bag and opened it to reveal a sealed letter.

Luden took the letter and quickly read it, chuckling every now and again. Then he folded it and put an arm around Erik. “Come,” he said, “let us proceed to the table, where we will speak more of your adventures and wait for our dinner.”



That night as the leftovers of the fine dinner and the dishes were carried away, Marinda continued talking as she had done nearly non-stop throughout the meal. Luden sat slouched with a fixed grin on his face. It was rare that the whole family ate together and they did so this evening only to give the appearance of blissful matrimony. When Luden finally detected traces of boredom and irritation on Erik’s features, he politely interrupted Marinda’s monologue and asked Erik if he would prefer to continue the conversation in the library.

Erik seized the opportunity and rose together with Luden. Marinda fell silent and kept her seat, understanding what Luden had really meant.

“I hope you enjoyed the dinner,” Luden said as they entered the library.

“I did. Please thank your cooks on my behalf for their tasty dishes! You keep an excellent staff.”

“Now tell me truthfully, Erik. You did not only come here simply to pay a cordial visit and drop off a letter, did you?”

Erik was somewhat taken aback. “I ... I’m not sure what you mean,” he said.

“You need a place to stay, don’t you? And from the look of you, you probably need more than that.”

Erik blushed.

“I ... I was robbed. My father sends money to the college where I study, but I’m afraid it will be a good two weeks before any more arrives. Until then, I’m afraid I cannot afford my given place of residence, and was hoping I might stay with you. I am willing to work for my stay—”

“Do not mention it,” Luden answered. “You are more than welcome to stay with us. We have a big house and many rooms that see too little use.”

“Only if it is not an inconvenience,” Erik politely answered.

“Nonsense.” Without further argument Luden clapped his hands loudly. An attendant rushed in. “Please prepare the guest room! Our friend will stay a while, and keep us good company!”

The attendant nodded and scampered out.

“You are too kind, sir!”

“It is nothing,” Luden answered, then lowered his voice and nodded towards the dining room, “and to be frank, I shall be glad for your company.”

Erik wasn’t quite sure what to think, but before he could say anything, Luden spoke again.

“You must come with me tomorrow. I will show you the docks, and my business. Have you been to Hamburg before?”

Erik shook his head.

“Then it’s settled ... oh, unless you have studies you must tend to.”

“I can be quite at liberty for a fortnight,” Erik answered.

REVELATIONS

Vester's pants were striped with emerald green, crimson red, and azure blue. Though they would have fit any normal-sized man, they hung short and loose on him, and clashed terribly with the half-white and half-purple cloak. His pointed cap had a small straw bird suspended from its brim that hung over his orange hair and bobbed up and down as he strode through the narrow and winding streets. His knapsack containing his prized musical instruments was strung over his shoulder. His goatee was almost redder than his hair.

A group of boys ran and gathered around him as he strolled towards the town square, and they begged for a song. But Vester, in a sudden motion, stopped and turned to them with his forefinger on his lips. The boys instantly hushed and waited.

A young woman with a bright yellow dress was walking slowly, carrying an empty basket. Groups of men huddled near their fruit stands and talked. When the woman realized that she had many of those men admiring her, she became more bold in her prance and made quite a show of her beauty.

Vester slowly crept behind her until he was following her by less than two feet. He copied her every movement in exaggerated hip twists that attracted the attention

of all. He shook his head from side to side and blinked his eyes at passersby, while he put one hand on his hip and the other around a pretended basket.

The people held their breath and giggles for as long as they could until one by one they broke out into laughter, and it spread like wild fire. The oblivious woman kept up her gait, although she could not comprehend the stares and laughs.

Vester was in mid-step when he spotted a familiar face in the thick throng. It was his good friend, the priest Gerth. Vester turned to wave at him, and caught Gerth's sudden grimace—but it was too late.

The lady had caught on with the jest and had turned full circle to face the jester just as he had turned to face Gerth, and Vester walked right into the fuming woman, sending both of them tumbling to the dirt—Vester landing on top and then rolling off of his unfortunate victim.

The crowd grew silent, but then, seeing that neither was hurt, they regained their merry cackling.

The woman struggled to get up, and when she had finally regained her composure she looked down and stared at Vester. She was at a loss for words as she looked over the comical, dusty figure still sprawled on the ground with a shameful expression on his face. Finally she extended her hand and graciously helped him up.

"I ... was merely walking down this street, when—" Vester began his justification.

"You *are* forgiven!" the lady quickly interposed.

"What? But madam, I assure you—"

"You don't have to assure anything, fool. I know who you are and what you were doing."

"You do?" Vester asked, surprised.

"Yes. Just make sure it doesn't happen again—and watch where you're going next time."

Vester hung his head and crossed his arms behind his back like a schoolboy receiving a lecture from his

teacher. When he looked up, the woman was walking away, and Gerth was walking up to him.

"My friend, Gerth!" Vester greeted the man.

"I see you are still getting into daily fixes, Sir Jester!"

"Very funny! Why didn't you warn me that she had caught on?!"

"What? And spoil the people's good entertainment? Never!"

"Well, I'm glad to see you still have the people's best interests at heart, Priest."

"And I'm glad to see you haven't lost your gift for humor!"

"Where have you been all week?" Vester asked. "I was beginning to think that you had committed some grievous sin and that you'd been stuck in some dungeon of that monastery."

"You know we have no dungeon," Gerth countered. "You forget that I practically run the monastery now, and unfortunately do not have as much time as you for folly anymore. Father Johan is retiring, and I have already begun assuming some of his duties as assistant deacon."

"Ah ... do you think there'd be a position in it for me, maybe? I could be an assistant to the assistant deacon, or perhaps advisor to the assistant deacon."

"Thank you kindly, but I think I'll do fine with God's divine help!"

"And how is that young monk ... what's his name again? The one who practically worships you?"

"Fredrick, you mean?" Gerth asked. "He's a good lad, and growing well in the statutes of God! He is becoming a fine man, of twenty years. But why do you ask?"

"Because," chuckled the minstrel, "I see him now on the other side of the street. Freddy lad! Come here and say hullo to your favorite uncle!"

"Oh hello, Vester!" Fredrick yelled while waving.

“I didn’t expect to see you today! Father Gerth, I did not know you had left. I’ve been searching all over for you. Father Johan has a matter he’d like to discuss with you.”

“Tell him I’ll be along shortly,” Gerth said. “I just needed some fresh air, and I took the opportunity to get some provisions at the same time. Here, take these to the good cook.” Gerth handed Fredrick some netted sacks of various vegetables and foodstuffs, and the young man left as he was bidden.

“Twenty, you say ... isn’t that how old you were when you found him and took him in as part of your church?”

“Yes, and to think that anyone would abandon such a child! I remember the day he was brought here as an infant. We did not know what to do with him until the nuns agreed to raise him with the other children who came to study, until he was a suitable age to be trained as a monk.”

“Or what you priests consider a suitable age!” Vester joked. “But I suppose you weren’t much older yourself when you first entered the service, were you, Gerth? That’s a story I’ve likely heard a thousand times.”

“I know, I know. But come now, a little repetition never hurt anyone! Would you join us at our table tonight? Then maybe you can repeat one of those stories of yours!”

“A kind invitation, but I must decline, for my mother has insisted I join her tonight. But, if the invitation extends till tomorrow, I will be most willing to take you up on it.”

“Till tomorrow, then. Good night!”



That night after the evening prayers were recited the monks entered their rooms to sleep. Fredrick sat near the window in his room that looked out on the back gate. Sleep eluded him that night, so he decided to busy himself in prayer.

As the bells tolled the eleventh hour he thought he heard something in the corridor. He wondered who else would be up at this hour. The morning bells would call everyone in the monastery to wakefulness at five the next morning, so any activity after dark was most unusual.

Fredrick crept to the door and opened it curiously. A figure dressed in a large, hooded cloak passed quickly and nervously through the dark and empty corridor and then exited out the back of the building.

This was most curious, and Fredrick determined to find out who this person was and where he was going. He grabbed his own cloak and then silently left the room and passed through the corridor and out the back door. He could just make out the cloaked figure in the distance, and before long had gotten closer, though he continued following at a safe distance.

The pursuit led Fredrick through the town and then to its outskirts. His curiosity rose with each step. He had gone a long way, and just as Fredrick was getting nervous about following any further, he spotted the figure quicken his pace and head towards a dim light from what looked like an old woodcutter’s cottage at the edge of a small forest.

As the figure neared the house he crouched low and looked nervously around him. Then, when he detected no movement, he ran to the door and gave three short knocks. The door opened, the figure entered, and the door was quickly shut after him.

For a moment Fredrick thought he saw the shape of a woman through a window, but before he could see more a curtain was drawn.

Feeling emboldened to investigate this suspicious matter more closely so that he might possibly report it, he neared the house and crept quietly around to the window in question. There was a crack in the drapes, and Fredrick peered closely through them to see what he could see.

His suspicions and fears were confirmed. The man, who stood with his back to the window, was conversing—alone—with a beautiful woman. The man then turned to stoke up the flames in the fireplace, and with a mixture of shock and horror Fredrick suddenly recognized the man. It was Father Gerth!

The shock was so great that Fredrick only just managed to stop himself from crying out, and he slumped quietly into a heap next to the window.

How could this be? Certainly the man he had adored from youth could not be committing such a grave error, and letting himself be drawn from the faith! In his mind Fredrick tried to reason with himself to find some excuse for Gerth's actions. He should weigh the matter more thoroughly before passing judgment on the situation—and on this man he regarded as his father in many ways.

Fredrick did not care to linger, and so silently made his way back to the monastery and to his room where he found sleep only an hour before he was awoken for morning prayers.



For the following days the matter remained fresh in Fredrick's thoughts and weighed heavily on his mind. He had tried to find any possible reason or excuse for what he had seen, but he knew none of them were very likely. He had to know for a fact what had taken place that night. Finally he decided to watch Father Gerth very carefully, to see if he would show any further signs of erring from the faith. And he determined that, should Father Gerth leave the monastery again, he would follow him more closely and try to learn the truth of the priest's dealings with this woman.

A few more days passed without incident, though Gerth's every move was under the watchful eye of the young monk.

It was a late Monday night when Gerth once again made his way out of the building with Fredrick close

behind. His route took him to the familiar cottage, which upon seeing, brought back the anger and doubts that had flooded Fredrick's consciousness that first night. But he stuck to his resolves to remain unbiased until he discovered the whole truth.

Once again Gerth knocked thrice in the same uneven rhythm, and as before the door was cautiously opened. This time Fredrick clearly noticed the petite blonde woman who ushered Gerth in and then quickly shut the door behind him.

Fredrick was quicker to take his place by the window—which was partially open this time, so that a soft breeze frequently blew open small gaps in the curtains—and managed to catch the conversation between Gerth and this woman almost from the beginning.

"Here, sit by the fire. I'll have Greta fetch you a warm drink," the woman said.

Gerth sat wearily on the soft cushioned seat, and the woman sat beside him. A well-proportioned red-haired lady wearing a clean white apron entered, carrying a large tray on which were two cups of some steaming brew.

"Thank you, Greta," Gerth said to the maid, who smiled appreciatively and then left.

Gerth turned to the woman. "Now then, I am anxious to hear the latest household news. How is Kristia?"

"I sent Greta the other day, and she returned with a fine report. Kristia is in good health, and fares well," the woman answered.

Gerth remained silent for some time before he spoke again. "Dina, there's something I have to tell you ... about my visits here." Gerth shifted his gaze to the flickering flame and then continued solemnly, avoiding the woman's gaze. "As you know, I've recently been appointed head deacon of the monastery. I have been far more pressed with matters that consume much of

my time. I miss you so much, and wish to God that I could see you more often, but I would be missed, and suspicions, which I cannot afford, could arise.”

“But then how often *can* you visit?” she asked. There was a slightly concerned edge in her voice.

“I will come as often as time permits, and I pray that will be frequent.”

“As do I.” The two tenderly embraced and held each other for some time. The woman, whom Gerth had called Dina, broke the silence and the embrace with another question. “And how is Fredrick?”

Gerth stroked the woman’s hair. “Our son is well, and in good health. He grows stronger in the faith day by day, and I have no doubts that God will be able to use him mightily one of these days.”

“Like He has been able to use you,” Dina said. “I thank God my son has such an upright father to train him.”

Fredrick had watched and listened the whole time, first with curiosity, then anger. But the mention of his name, and the realization of what this was all about, had so disarrayed his thoughts that he stood frozen like a statue, staring with mouth agape at the partially concealed window.

He slunk back against the wall to recollect his senses, but in so doing slipped on something at his feet and fell, creating a clamor as he knocked over a metal bucket. He quickly got up and dove behind a bush.

The noise, however, caused Gerth and Tundrinna to jerk apart and hurry to the window where the noise had come from. Greta soon ran outside to inspect the situation.

Fredrick heaved a sigh of relief as he heard Greta enter the house again, saying, “Must’ve been some cats getting into milk left in the pail.”

Only moments later, however, Fredrick spotted Gerth leaving the house quickly and nervously.

Fredrick stayed in his hiding place and remained motionless until Gerth was out of sight and the house had become silent. Then he slumped down on the moist grass and covered his head. He could not think on what he should do. As he tried to compose himself, he heard the sound of voices in the house again, and approached the window in the hopes of catching what they might be saying in Gerth’s absence.

“Come now, Tundri. You shouldn’t get so sulky after every visit! Your twins were a blessing from God, and He’s taking care of them.”

“Yes, I know,” the woman answered. “I just wish I could see them—be with them as a family should be, together. I know that it is for their own good that they are not with me, or even with each other—but to think of poor Fredrick not even knowing he has a sister, or Kristia not realizing who her true parents are.

“But you’re right, I shouldn’t be thinking about these things. It’ll do me no good. Come, Greta, let us get some sleep. Tomorrow is another big day.”

“Indeed, madam. A long day this certainly has been. Good night then.” After some sounds of shuffling, the house grew quiet again.

A sister? And ... Gerth, my father? This woman my mother ... and I have a twin sister?! Fredrick did not know how long he stood by that window, dumbfounded by the revelations the evening had brought.



Gerth paced anxiously up and down the hall. The corridor was a plain walkway with no ornaments, save a large carved crucifix which hung at the farthest end. There were doors lining the hallway, and each one led to a room where one or two of the monks would spend their cherished hours of sleep. Finally he stopped by one of the doors and knocked lightly on it. When a voice from inside welcomed him in, Gerth entered and spoke to the young man sitting inside. “Mark, my son, have you seen Fredrick?”

“Ave Maria! But no. I thought he was with you, as he was not here when the call for morning prayers came. Then he was not present for chores either. I was sure he was on an errand for you. When I think of it, the last time I saw him was late last night, before I retired. Are you sure he is not on some errand for one of the other elders?”

“I am pretty sure. They usually request me to assign errands. This is most unusual! He has never been absent from prayer or his duties before.”

“Well, if you need me to search him out, I would be most willing. I pray he hasn’t come to any harm.”

“Yes, yes. Please do that for me. And, Mark ... let me know as soon as you have found him.”

With that Gerth left the room, and Mark quickly donned his overcoat and put on his sandals.

Mark took to the general direction of the market where, sure enough, he soon spied Fredrick among the throngs, slowly strolling about aimlessly, with a fixed stare at the ground. He seemed totally unaware of the commotion that surrounded him.

“Fredrick, where have you been?” Mark asked once he reached the youth. His manner was almost frantic. “Gerth has sent me to look for you. Nobody knew anything about where you were!”

“I was at my mother’s,” Fredrick replied carelessly.

“This is no time for jokes, Fredrick! Father Gerth is deeply distressed over your disappearance, and wants to see you as soon as you get back!”

“Then tell him I had trouble sleeping so I went out for a walk before prayers, and couldn’t tell anyone because no one was awake to tell it to. And I was so deep in thought that I forgot the time and found myself quite far from town when the sun finally rose.”

“I believe it would be best for you to tell him yourself. He wants to see you.”



Once Fredrick had repeated his ruse, Gerth excused Mark and several other concerned onlookers from the room.

“My son,” Gerth began, “you well know the monastic rules that expressly forbid any brother of our order to leave the premises without permission. The wicked one walks about like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. The moment we leave these holy walls, we make room for sin to enter, and a path through which the evil one would seek to contaminate us. Though it pains me to say this, I cannot let this pass unpunished.”

Throughout the whole of Gerth’s lecture, Fredrick wore a blank expression and kept his eyes fixed on the wooden desk in front of him.

And who reproves me for my disobedience? Surely the unholy thought of leaving these premises for an unannounced purpose has never entered your mind! These were the thoughts that Fredrick entertained, yet he answered with a hypocritical bow, and a humble apology.

“If what I have done seems to you cause to give me punishment, I will accept whatever chastisement you deem appropriate. It vexes my soul that I should have done a thing that seemed righteous and innocent to me, but that you fear has put my soul in danger, and I am ready to give whatever penance God will require of me.”

The words were so tactfully spoken that they reminded Gerth of his own actions of the night before without letting on that Fredrick knew of them. A sudden feeling of sympathy came over Gerth and he paced the room in order to collect his thoughts so that he could answer Fredrick without betraying his true feelings.

“Fredrick,” he said at length, “you have always been one of the stronger brothers here, and since this is your first such offense of disregard for our established rules

that comes to memory, I feel your motives warrant me to handle this case with leniency. Your penance will be three days of prayer and fasting in the solitude of your chambers. You are excused.”

Fredrick exited, and went quickly to his small room, bolting the door behind him. He rather appreciated the idea of being left alone to collect his thoughts.

- 9 -

THE MERCHANT'S WIFE

The inside of the small wood cabin was filled with the musty light of the rising sun shining around the edges of the closed drapes. A rhythmic set of raps from outside the entrance aroused the inhabitant of the simple shelter from his desk. Stefano hastily cleared the items from the small table in front of him, throwing them into a leather sack, which he then stuffed beneath a loose plank on the floor. The knocking continued with the same beat, but in a more urgent manner.

“Who is it?” Stefano called.

“Stefano, open the door! It’s me, Luden.”

The bolts were immediately removed, and Luden entered, shaking the mud from his leather boots.

“What took you so long?” Luden asked.

“I’m a heavy sleeper, friend, and to drag myself from sleep is a noteworthy feat, whether or not it is done with speed.”

Luden chuckled, and set a small iron pot onto the table.

“What have you brought me this fine morning?” Stefano asked, lifting the lid.

“My chef’s best venison stew, which I must admit, is a prize difficult to part with. You can judge for yourself. I’m sorry, but my visit will have to be rather

short today, as I have Erik waiting at the edge of the forest. He's an inquisitive young man, and had this stew not been as good as it is, I would not have risked bringing it here at this time. But he believes I just came to fetch something, and so I shall." Luden grabbed an old hat from a hook by the door, and then continued, "And I shall return before he ventures too far in this direction."

"He sounds like a good lad," Stefano answered.

"Certainly he is! Well, I'd best be off. I shall bring more provisions this evening, and return for the pot before the cook discovers it missing."

"Very well," Stefano answered. "I hope the rest of your household is faring well."

"Everything's fairly ordinary, save that my wife has a mild case of the fever. She started feeling ill a few days ago, and the doctor has now confined her to bed. But the doctor is sure that with some rest it will pass soon. Until this evening, then," Luden said and then exited.



Stefano sat by the blazing fire, eating the stew Luden had brought earlier that same day. On the desk in front of him lay his papers which he had just been working on. He paused his supper to scribble a correction that had been brought to mind during the course of his meal. He was just about to resume his dinner when he caught the sound of footsteps nearing his abode. He jumped to his feet and ran to peer through the window. Through the trees he could see the light of several torches approaching the cottage.

In terror, he straightway ran to where his papers lay scattered, and repeated the morning's process of hiding his manuscripts, leaving only an innocent, half-finished personal letter on the table as reason for the ink and quill that remained there. He donned his cloak, and tightened his sandals in case he would need to make a sudden flight.

He opened the door a crack to see if he could make out who the approaching figures were. He was relieved to see that it was Luden leading the small band.

But who does he bring with him? He promised my stay here would be kept secret! I pray he has not betrayed me!

Stefano did not have long to wonder. The band stopped a short distance from the house and Luden moved closer on his own. "My friend, fear not! It is an exigency! Can we approach?"

Stefano exited the cottage cautiously and studied the group. There was a man dressed in servant's garb, and another man dressed far finer. Between them they carried a stretcher on which a still figure lay.

"What has happened?" Stefano called out into the darkness.

Luden stepped further forward and approached Stefano. "It ... it's my wife. I ... I told you that she was ill, but it is much worse than the doctors at first suspected. When I returned home from my work there were several doctors at my house and around my wife. They fear my wife is dying. This fever and her condition is unknown to them, and they can do nothing for her. They say it is only a matter of time before she will pass away. ... I have a son." Luden struggled to hold back his tears. "We ... we have grown cold and become distant from each other over the years. Oh, how I regret my unfeeling actions towards her. It's all my fault."

Stefano, still a little shaken from the sight of the approaching torches, said, "I am sorry to hear this, my friend. But why bring her here?"

"Stefano, I had no idea what to do. I remember the story you told me once of a friend of yours who was wonderfully healed. I thought that perhaps ... that you could help."

Stefano hesitated for a moment, casting another glance at the silent form on the stretcher.

"I ... I'm not sure if I will be of much help," Stefano answered. "But she should not be in the cold evening air like this. Bring her inside!"

The two bearers entered with the stretcher and placed the pale figure of Marinda on a couch near the hearth.

Stefano walked to where the woman lay as the others watched his every move with wonder and curiosity. Her face was pale and she lay deathly still, barely breathing. Then he turned back to his onlookers.

"I am no priest, and certainly no healer. The only thing I can do is what I know from the Scriptures, and that is to pray for your wife. But you..." Stefano paused, looking at Luden. "...you must have faith that God can heal her. According to your faith—not my abilities or even my prayer—God will answer. You must believe."

"Believe what? Stefano ... you know I am hardly a man to be seen in church if I can at all help it. I know nothing of these things. Is she then doomed?"

Stefano placed a hand on Luden's shoulder. "There once was a time when a wealthy man came to Christ, begging Him to heal his daughter, who was dying. Before they arrived at the house, one of the man's servants met him and Christ, and told them that the child no longer lived, and that it was too late. The father despaired, until Christ calmed him, saying, 'She is not dead, only sleeping!'

"Those who heard Christ's words laughed. It was impossible, they said. Christ told the unbelievers to depart. Only the parents were allowed to follow Christ into the girl's room. And at the words that Christ spoke to this girl, she came back to life, rose from her bed, and ran to embrace her parents. Faith is simply choosing to believe that God can do what He says He can do. Do you believe that God can do for your wife what the doctors cannot?"

The merchant remained silent. "Once, when my child was only a year old, and still the apple of my eye—before he grew distant from me—he fell ill. I took him to God ... that is, I took him to the church. They did not require any faith from me ... only monies as a token of my penance before God—and I gave it cheerfully. And in exchange, the priest had some monks pronounce several chants over the child."

"And was the lad cured?"

"Not until several weeks later, when I grew tired of waiting and called a doctor," Luden answered. "So if you ask if I believe that God can heal my wife, I ... I am not sure I can believe anything."

"But you believed that I might be able to do something," Stefano answered.

Luden hung his face. "Then you cannot." He collapsed wearily into a chair and buried his face in his large hands.

"By their fruits you shall know them," Stefano said.

"What do you mean?" Luden asked.

"I cannot heal your wife. The doctors can do nothing for your wife. There is a good chance that Latin prayers chanted by monks will do nothing for your wife. But God Himself can do something. You just need to believe that He is, and that He is ready to reward those who diligently seek Him."

"Then I am afraid she is doomed, for I fear I cannot believe or show any measure of faith great enough to cure what the doctors could not."

"But faith does not come in measures. Faith is faith, and faith as small as a grain of mustard seed can move mountains."

At this, Erik—who was one of the men who had carried Marinda to the lodge, and who had until now remained silent—broke into the conversation.

"Luden ... what is the matter with you? Isn't it a simple thing that this man is asking? Can't you at

least try it? If he would've asked you for money, you would've gladly given it to him. If he would've asked you to send a ship to a distant island to procure a rare spice, you would've ordered it done immediately. All he's asking is that you believe that God can heal your wife. If God is God, and if Christ did all the things He did and said all the things He said, is it so difficult now to try to believe that He can cure whatever strange ailment your wife has contracted? Can you not at least believe for her sake?"

Erik looked over at Stefano for his approval of these words, only to see that there were tears in the man's eyes.

"Out of the mouths of babes," Stefano whispered, giving Erik a nod to continue.

Encouraged, Erik enthusiastically stood before Luden, who was pondering all these words. "Luden, if even I can see that the words this man speaks are filled with truth, how can you deny them? You have heard the words of the priests, of the church, and have seen that their hunger is after the purses of men, and that this is where they take their power from. They do not speak for God any more than you do. But here is a man who speaks simply and plainly. Why can't you believe?"

Luden shifted his eyes around the room where the few occupants were anxiously waiting, and then lowered them to the ground again. After a few moments of tense silence, he rose and stood before Stefano. "Please, my friend, forgive my doubts. I do believe that the words you speak are true. Please, I beg you, pray for my wife. Pray for her healing. I believe God will hear you, and that He will do what seems best to Him."

"Well said, my friend," Stefano answered. "Now then, let us beseech God for a miracle, and see how He will answer."

The small gathering shuffled over to the couch

where Marinda lay, forming a semi-circle around her. Stefano asked each one to kneel beside her and lay his hands on her. Then, placing his hand on the woman's forehead, he bowed his head and earnestly beseeched God for her healing.

The prayer over, all eyes remained fixed on the patient in anxious expectation, but Marinda remained silent and motionless.

Stefano stood up. "The Lord will answer our prayers in His good and perfect time. Until then, it will be of no avail to wait around. We have done all we can. Now it is up to Him."

Erik nodded his head in agreement with Stefano's speech, and rose, along with the servant. Luden lingered by Marinda's silent form a few minutes longer, and stroked her hair silently. Finally, he too stood up.

"May I suggest that you all pass the night here," Stefano offered. "It is late, and we are all tired. There are two extra beds in the side room. Luden, you can have the main bed."

"No, thank you," Luden answered. "I will lay some blankets on the floor here and will sleep next to my wife. It is the least I can do for her."

Minutes later the men had all retired and soon drifted into a deep slumber. Luden placed several blankets next to the couch where his wife lay, and fell asleep holding her hand, which hung limply over the side of the couch.



Bright light streamed through the closed drapes. Luden sat up quickly. The majority of the night had been spent nervously tossing, and checking on the frail form beside him. Now he sat up with a start.

"What?!"

His shout startled the other three men into wakefulness, and they soon rushed to the main room and the couch Luden had slept next to.

“What is it?” asked Erik, nearing the spot, and finding the couch empty, its sheets and blankets all askew.

Luden could barely speak. “S-s-someone has taken her!” he stammered. “Who would do such a thing?”

Stefano came up behind Luden and tapped him on the shoulder. When Luden turned to face him, Stefano pointed towards an open door that led to the back porch. A smile came to his face as he answered, “Perhaps no one.”

Luden raced outside to find his wife, rosy cheeked and smiling, seated on the wooden bench swing. He uttered a cry of joy as he fell at her side, embracing her joyfully through his tears.

“How do you feel?” he finally managed to ask, though in his heart he knew the answer far too well.

“Wonderful!” she exclaimed, a radiant smile lighting up her face.

The two were soon joined by the others.

Espying Stefano, Luden stood up and said, “I can never thank you enough, nor can I ever again doubt what you told me last night.”

“Praise be to God!” returned Stefano.

“Erik, good man, it would not be fair to forget you in my praise, for though it be a shame to admit it, I owe it to you that I at last believed what Stefano spoke. If you had not been so generously trusting, perhaps my wife would still be lying there, sickly and wan or perhaps even worse. Thank you, my dear friend.”

Luden paused as he once again looked with gratitude upon his restored wife, and then continued, “But more than anything, I feel in greatest debt to God and the Lord Jesus Christ. Last night I simply believed. Now I know Whom I have believed in.”

- 10 -

KRISTIA

Dusk was beginning to settle over the grassy hillside. Flocks of sheep dotted the rough pasturelands. A small fire blazed inside a natural cove formed between several large outcroppings of rock. Two husky-looking men sat around it as comfortably as was possible on the stone ground. Their rude vestments were made of coarse fabric, and on each one’s left wrist was clasped a thick metal brace inscribed with writings.

Although alike in their stocky appearance, one fellow owned a yellow bushy beard which covered the majority of his burly face, while his partner hid his countenance beneath an equally large bulk of fiery orange hair.

One of the two shuffled over to poke the coals, and then returned to his prior spot. Glancing at his partner he noticed the man’s eyes drooping, and his slumped position proved that he was beginning to fall into a slumber. Laying hold of the coal stick, he used its edge to poke the man’s side.

“Slothful hog, you are, Wurst—attempting to doze, while the dusk sets upon us and it’s near time to bring them sheep back to the folds.”

“Ach, Lipzug ... you’ve no reason to complain. This whole day it was you who took the opportunity to make

every oak that provided shade your excuse for a nap, while I tended the master's sheep. An' now I take a try at a little rest for myself, and you poke me with a fire stick. One ungrateful brother you are!"

Lipzug made no attempt at a retort, but rather slumped back against the stone. Wurst, on the other hand pursued his advantage. "And look at you—all fat and filled with our lunch bread, and you hardly left a crumb for me. Since you ate most of the food, and slept most of the day, at least let me have a little doze, will you?"

"Doze indeed," muttered Lipzug. "Fine time you picked too. The sun is setting, in case you haven't noticed! If we don't bring these stupid sheep in soon, there'll be a penalty for both of us."

"Penalty ... ha! A little slap on the wrist compared to what Lord Hugert does to his serfs. Did you hear of the servant he hung on a tree just because a pig went missing? Sometimes I wish you worked for him. But no, we're fortunate to have a good master. Or *you* are. But since you've now solidly woken me up, we'd best be on our way. Besides," he added with a growing grin, "I am suddenly starving, and can't wait to get back home to whatever meal Mother and Sister have prepared."



The door opened, and three bulky fellows rushed inside. A short, graying woman turned and smiled as she recognized her husband and two sons.

"I see you're starving." She laughed, and then turned back to stir the liquid inside the large iron pot which hung suspended over the fire on an iron chain. At that point an interior door opened from the corner of the room, and a tall, slim young woman entered, carrying a piece of fabric in one hand and a needle in the other.

"Wurst, Lipzug, you're home," the girl cried and ran to embrace them. "Father, how was your day?"

"All is well, my bloom. The horses behaved, and our master was well pleased with the cleaning I gave them. I see you've been mending my garments. What a fine girl you are."

Kristia smiled, and approached her brothers. "You look tired."

"Tired as any day. Is dinner ready?"

"Ready and waiting," their mother answered. "Come, sit at the table. There's a good hot soup coming to you in a second."

Once the meal was over, Kristia cleared the wooden bowls, and headed outside to the washbasins. She rounded the corner of the house to the nearby well and lowered the basin into the pit. Just as she was beginning to withdraw it, she was startled by a noise from behind. She spun around, dropping the bucket. There, standing in the dark, was the outline of a man walking towards her.

"Who's there?" she asked.

"Good evening," answered the stranger. "My name is Fredrick. And yours?"

"Kristia," she returned.

"I'm sorry if I startled you."

Kristia shrugged her shoulders and turned to pick up the bucket.

"Kristia," the man continued, "there is a reason I came here. There is something I have been meaning to speak to you of."

A slight laugh escaped her lips. And she answered with a somewhat amused grin. "Sir, I think you mistake me for someone else. I live in that small hut over there, and I am but a serf to a good lord. What business would someone like you have with someone like me?"

"I know who you are, and that is exactly what I'm here to speak to you about." Seeing the puzzlement on Kristia's face, Fredrick continued, "I know we have never met before, and yet I feel that what I have to say would be of great interest to you."

Kristia crinkled her brows, angled her head, and began to study this young man more closely. Finally she said, "I still think you are mistaken. That place, right over there..." Kristia pointed this time, as if that would help the man realize his error. "...that's where I live."

Fredrick persisted. "I know. But please, let me say what I must say. You will understand when I am through."

"Very well," Kristia answered, then sighed, and sat herself on the stone edge of the well. "But should you make any strange move towards me, I'll scream, and my brothers will be out here before you can move one foot to turn and run."

Fredrick let out a chuckle. "I thank you for the warning, and assure you I have no such intentions. Now, before I continue, do you mind if I ask you some questions?"

"If I like them, I'll answer them."

"Of what name and house are your parents?"

"We are chattels to the good Lord Franz Kubelsen. My father's name is Thomas. My mother is Gretel."

Fredrick was silent for a moment, then continued. "Allow me to more properly introduce myself. My name is Fredrick, as I said before, and I belong to the monastery of Saint Paul in Adendorf."

"So you are a friar?"

"Yes. I was brought to the monastery as a suckling, abandoned by my parents—at least, that is what I've always been told. My guardian in the monastery has been a goodly father by the name of Gerth." Fredrick paused again. "Kristia, I must ask you to swear to secrecy on what I am about to tell you. You will understand, once I have explained what I know, the severity of this matter."

"If the secret is good, I will keep it."

Fredrick was about to continue when a loud voice calling Kristia's name interrupted the conversation.

Kristia turned, then looked back at her visitor. "You have made me curious, I must confess. But I'm afraid I don't have time to hear anything further right now. Please, return to this place just before sunset tomorrow, and I will listen to all you have to say."

"I shall do what I can," Fredrick answered. He bowed politely, then turned a corner and vanished into the night.



The following evening the two met as previously agreed. This time, however, Kristia beckoned for Fredrick to follow her, and she led him to a small handmade shelter.

"We can talk here. My father is working in the stables, and my mother thinks I am on an errand, which I have already done." She triumphantly pointed to several baskets of fruits and vegetables in a corner of the room. "So, tell me everything you have to say, because I've been dying with curiosity about what I have to do with any of this."

"And it is a curious story, but let me begin, as I do not have much time."

Fredrick went on to explain the complete tale of his recent discoveries, taking care to elaborate on each minute detail, and then coming to a stop at the first mention of Kristia's name.

At this Kristia almost burst out laughing, but then stopped herself. "My dear Fredrick," she said, still suppressing a giggle, "you are a man of the order, and probably knowledgeable in many more matters than I am. But I am sure you must have me confused with another Kristia. There must be hundreds of damsels in this region who share my name. How you came to suspect me as your supposed sister, I do not know, though I am probably honored. But I can remember my life with this family to my youngest years, and know for a certainty that the mother I know today is the same one who gave birth to me. I can see that you are an

honest man, and that this is all very difficult for you. Please do not waste any more time with me. I do hope, for your sake, that you can find your true sister.”

Fredrick sighed. “Kristia, do you think I came to you simply because of your name? I would never risk telling this tale to anyone if I was not completely sure of who I was speaking to. No, after all this happened, my absence from the monastery was discovered. I was reproved—by my own unsuspecting father, mind you—and sentenced to three days of solitary prayer, during which I weighed all these matters deeply in my thoughts. The only certain conclusion that came of it was that I should seek out my sister and discover who she was.

“So I again risked discovery and more certain punishment if not a closer questioning if I would be caught. But I had to do this thing. I returned to the house as often and as early in the evenings as I could. One evening I overheard the woman—our mother—telling her maid something about going to see you. Shortly after, the maid left. I followed her, and it was no small distance that she walked. She came to this very place, and I watched her meet with your mother. The two spoke at length, and at the end the maid handed your mother a basket and left. I stayed and watched. Then, when I saw you, and last night, when you said your name was Kristia, I knew you were the one ... you are ... my sister.”

Kristia looked stunned. “I still cannot believe it,” she said, trying to make sense of it all.

“I know you may find this ridiculous or even impossible, but it is the truth.”

Kristia shook her head, still confused, and wiped a tear from her eye. “No, I am sorry. This makes no sense to me, and it is impossible to believe. But it was a good story. I hope you can make some other girl very happy with it.”

Kristia stood and turned to leave.

Fredrick, growing desperate, grabbed her by the shoulder and turned her to face him. “Very well, if you will not believe my words, believe this!” He pulled a piece of paper from his pocket.

“What is it?” Kristia asked.

“It’s a map,” Fredrick explained.

“I ... I cannot read,” Kristia said, looking at the various inscriptions on the paper.

Fredrick sighed. “Okay, then I will explain it to you. This is your house. This is the road leading to the village. You will pass two crossroads. Take the second crossroad here. It leads to Handorf.”

“Oh, I know where that is,” Kristia said, her face brightening. “I have passed by it at times on the way to the market and Lüneberg.”

“Good. This is the square at Handorf, and the church. Follow these paths to the outside of the city. You’ll come to a house that looks like this one.” Fredrick pointed to a drawn house on the map. “This is the house of our mother. Go there. See her, and ask her whether or not my story is true—whether or not you are her daughter, and if a priest by the name of Gerth is your father. Even if she denies it, watch her expression when she sees you. This is not just a story I am telling you. It is as difficult for me to believe as I know it is for you ... and ... and I don’t know what to do about it either.”

Kristia took the paper and examined it closely. “Very well, I shall do as you say.”

Fredrick exhaled with relief. “One last thing,” he said, “please do not speak of these things with anyone else. Father Gerth is a good man, and our mother, from what I have seen, is a simple and kind woman. I do not know what would happen to either of them if any of this became known to others. All I want...,” Fredrick paused, thinking his words over carefully, “all I want is to know the truth, for both of us. Our father ... that is, Father Gerth, is not at the monastery

right now, and will not return for a month. I cannot risk making many of these trips. You must discover what you can from our mother—the woman in the house on this map. I will try to return in a week to see what you have learned. Until then, I must show myself faithful to my duties at the monastery. Please, consider everything I have said—and be careful.”

With those last words Fredrick hastily left the shed to return to the monastery. Kristia was left standing motionless, holding the piece of paper.

- 11 -

THE WAY IT WENT

Three days had passed since Kristia’s encounter and it had been difficult for her to concentrate on much else than the strange meeting. Her mother had noticed her melancholy and pensive mood, yet remained silent on the subject. Her father and brothers had now left for their duties, and her mother was occupied creating wool quilts for their lord.

“Mother,” spoke Kristia, breaking the silence, “do you need me for anything right now?”

The woman looked up from her work, and glanced at her. “Well, you could always help with one of these quilts if you want to. Why do you ask?”

Kristia lowered her head and muttered, “Oh, I was just wondering.”

“I know what it is,” the elderly lady answered, with a smile on her face. “It’s such a beautiful spring day that you just feel like taking a walk in the morning sunshine. Is that it?”

“No, Mother. Really, I can help.”

“Not today you won’t! Off with you. I can finish alone. I really don’t need you sitting around here, getting old before your time. No girl, enjoy the day. Just be back in time to help me put out supper.”

“Oh, thank you, Mother!” Kristia planted a kiss on the woman’s cheek before dashing out the door.

Once outside, Kristia pulled out the wrinkled and folded map to study it once again. Then she set out, following the road to Handorf, to find the house where, according to that strange young man, her real mother was supposed to be living.

It was high noon by the time Kristia arrived at the place and the house that looked like the one drawn on the map. Kristia halted, undecided as to whether or not she should finish this strange quest. Finally she decided that, before knocking, she would look in through a window to see if anyone was even home.

She was just in front of the house when the door flew open and Greta, carrying a large wooden tub filled with washing, came bounding out of the house.

Greta stopped short and in mid-step when she saw Kristia standing there, and the shock was so great of seeing one so unanticipated that she dropped the tub and let out a short high-pitched cry.

Tundrinna, hearing the shriek, was at her side in a moment.

“What’s the matter?” Tundrinna began, and stopped suddenly upon seeing what had caused her maid so much distress. She, too, turned suddenly pale, but regained her composure quickly—so fast that, had Kristia not been watching the woman closely, she might not have noticed it at all.

Realizing that everything Fredrick had told her could very well be true, Kristia now fell into a shock almost greater than that of Greta.

Tundrinna, now fully composed, took a step towards Kristia. “Good afternoon. You must forgive my maiden for her shriek. She is easily excited, and we did not expect company. Is there anything we can do for you?”

Kristia hesitated, suddenly doubting why she had even come here. “Um ... my name is Kristia. I was told that I could find you here. May I ... perhaps ... could I please ... I would like to speak with you.”

Tundrinna cast a quick glance around, then somewhat nervously answered, “Please, come in. Greta, would you bring our guest some refreshments. Make yourself comfortable, and tell me what has brought you here.”

Once Kristia was inside, Greta disappeared through another door, leaving Kristia and Tundrinna alone. They both shifted uneasily in their seats, until finally Tundrinna found words to start a conversation.

“So, Kristia, you look like you have walked some distance to get here. I am most curious to know what I might do for you.”

Kristia looked around nervously, glancing at the window she guessed Fredrick must have been looking into this room through. The curtains were drawn, but light still entered through them.

“I ... I’m not sure what I’m doing here. I guess I wanted to know for myself if what I have heard is true ... and if it isn’t, you’re going to think me mad. But still, I have to know.”

Tundrinna swallowed. “Know what?” she asked, trying to sound casual.

Kristia took in a deep breath and bit her lip until she finally blurted, “Are you my mother?”

The very direct question took Tundrinna by shock, and she could not keep the fear from registering in her eyes. “What ... how ... who sent you?” she finally managed to stammer in response.

“I ... I was told by a young man who claimed he was my twin brother. He sent me here to see for myself if what he told me was true, as I could not bring myself to believe such a strange story.”

“Fredrick ... but how could he have known?”

“So it *is* true?” Kristia asked.

Tundrinna fell silent for a moment, and tears came to her eyes. She was about to answer when the door that Greta had left through opened and Greta entered, carrying a mug of fresh milk for the visitor.

She quickly took in the scene before her and realized what was happening. After setting the cup down in front of Kristia, Greta left without speaking a word, leaving mother and daughter in silence before each other once again.

Kristia moved closer and placed a comforting arm around the woman, whose tears were now flowing down her cheeks in a steady stream.

After a few minutes Tundrinna calmed herself and dried her tears. “I suppose you must be wondering what this is all about, and how it came to be, and why your father and I had to do what we did.”

“All I know is what Fredrick told me.”

“And did he tell you how he learned of these things?”

“He said that one night, at a very late hour, he discovered our father leaving the monastery. He followed him to this house, and through your conversations learned what he told me—simply that we are your children.”

“Who ... does anyone else know?”

“I don’t think so. Even ... our father knows nothing of our knowledge. And Fredrick has sworn me to utter secrecy, believing that there is great danger in this knowledge.”

“Then at least he is as wise as he is curious,” Tundrinna said, more to herself.

“So ... how could this all be?”

“It is a long story, but it is obviously time for you to hear it. I was born to a very wealthy family. I was even educated by a private tutor. My father was a retired shipmaster and advisor to the navy in Bremen. When I turned eighteen my parents arranged an engagement for me to a young man of an even wealthier family. It came as a shock to me, as I had not been told of the engagement beforehand.

“In a fit of despair, after discovering their plans for me, I left the house and walked for miles, not caring

where I went. My journey led me to a poorer section of the city where I chanced upon some men and women of the order who were set out on a goodwill mission of distributing food and goods to the needy. I joined them in their effort that day, and found distraction from my troubled thoughts.

“But when it became clear that I could not dissuade my parents from their intentions to wed me to this man, I took my most prized belongings and ran away from home. I went to the only place I knew, the convent—on the pretext that I wanted to help them with their missions, and in truth I did. So the next day I again joined those of the order on a similar mission to another village, and that’s where I first met your father. He was a friar who had joined another nearby order as a child to escape poverty. From our first meeting I knew he was a wonderful and sincere man. I knew, of course, that as a man of the order, he had taken certain vows, so I did not imagine more from him—at least not at the beginning.

“Because I was now of age, and partly also because I had become impressed with the dedication of these nuns and monks who served God without thought for themselves, I made the decision to join the abbey. Not any abbey, mind you, but one that I knew was near to and often worked together with Gerth’s order. I became an apprentice to the abbey. I was taken under their wing, and worked with them, though without any obligation as yet to take their vows. But it was not quite how I had imagined it would be. I saw Gerth at times, but we hardly spoke. Even though I had not yet taken any vows, the rules we had to observe were strict.

“By and by I grew weary of my confined life at the convent, and thought it best to depart. I made my intentions known to the mother superior and gathered my belongings. I knew I would deeply miss Gerth, but I was missing him there as well—and because I would

at times see him, it wasn't that much more difficult. I would return to my parents—I did not have any other choice—and hope that perhaps they had repented of the marriage they had planned for me. I did resolve to write Gerth a short note before I left, and did so on my last night at the abbey, instructing another sister who I knew well and trusted to deliver it to him when she would next see him.

“The following day, after the carriage that was taking me home had traveled a ways, it stopped. I peered outside to discover that we were in the middle of some forest, and none but one figure—one of the escorting monks—remained. I called out to him to ask the reason for the sudden halt, and where all the others had gone. You can imagine my surprise when the monk turned around to answer, and I saw that it was Gerth. One of the wheels had been squeaking, he said, and so he had sent the other monks back into town to bring back some grease. They would be gone for an hour, and he apologized for the delay.

“We began to talk, and spoke of many things that we had not been able to speak of until now. He asked how I had come to join the convent, and why I was now leaving. He asked of my parents, and I told him of the wedding I had run away from, but that now I had no further choice to return to them. Then he pulled out a piece of paper which I recognized as the letter I had written him. I had no idea that the sister had already managed to deliver it, and I now blushed to realize he had known of my true feelings all this time we had been speaking.

“When I realized he knew all already, I spoke more freely of my reasons for leaving. It was of no avail to me to stay at the convent. Yes, it provided an opportunity to see him at times, but we remained separated by the vows and rules of our orders, and I could not bear to be so close and at the same time so far from him. He said the same, and then confessed his own feelings for

me, and that even if we could do nothing about those feelings, it felt good just to know that I was nearby, and that just knowing that he might catch a glimpse of me at certain times was so much better than knowing we would never see each other again.

“I was touched by his words, and more so by the fact that he confessed to his feelings for me, as even when I had seen him in the convent, I suppose his discipline was better than mine, for his gaze, whenever it would happen to catch mine, never betrayed any emotion or feeling above a simple and cordial nod of greeting. But I had already grown weary of convent life, and reiterated the fact that there was really no other choice for me but to return to my parents.

“Gerth looked disappointed, but he understood, and even encouraged me that I would likely have a better future with my parents, and even with the man they had chosen for me. It was then, somehow, that we kissed—to Gerth it was a kiss of fond farewell. And yet, after that kiss, I knew I could not leave him, ever. I just knew it, in my heart. I told him this, and said that I wanted to go back to the convent—that I wanted to be near to him, that we could find ways to meet in secret, that I would rather live a difficult life for God close to him than an easy life for myself with someone I could not love.

“Gerth was hesitant at first. A life of service and devotion to God could not be chosen on the basis of love for a man. But I could not be dissuaded. I had made up my mind. I would return to the convent, explain to the mother superior that I had had a change of heart, and would do my best in my given service and duties if that meant I could continue seeing and being close to Gerth. I did not give him any room to argue or preach with me, and said that I would walk back if he would not turn the carriage around. Gerth finally relented, and so when the men returned from the village, I returned with them to the abbey.

“Throughout the following months I continued to keep in discreet communication with Gerth. First we just shared notes back and forth. Then once we met in a corner of the central cathedral after mass, where he had been assigned some duties. We kissed again, and then knew we had to find other ways of meeting each other in secret. Such meetings were not frequent, and we cherished every moment together. Every time we met and when we were apart, our love for each other grew. I know not what thoughts or reasons Gerth pondered in his own heart about our trysts, but I would soon learn of them. For my part, I knew what I had returned to the abbey for—and it was not for the cause of God or the church, though I worked with and towards those causes willingly.

“Then once we were to meet at a certain spot on the convent grounds after midnight. I was at the place at the appointed hour, and waited nervously when I discovered he wasn’t there yet. I waited for nearly half an hour and was about to return, disappointed, to my quarters, when I heard a noise on the other side of the wall, and I nearly jumped when Gerth dropped down and landed right in front of me. And the first words he said when he was standing again were, ‘Dina, I love you! Will you marry me?’

“I couldn’t help but laugh at his words, yet his face remained earnest, and he repeated the question. I told him that he was dreaming. There was no way we could be married. But Gerth persisted. He had obviously given this matter much priestly thought. He did not want to entertain thoughts of sin in his mind, but he could not pull himself away from our love for one another, and so his solution was for us to leave the convent, to escape to another country, and there live as man and wife before God, start a new life, and together raise our family.

“And when I asked who would marry us, he knelt down before me, crossed himself, and exclaimed, ‘But

my dear, I am the priest, and I vow to care for you in sickness and in health, till death do us part. Will you marry me here, in the presence of God, and with only ourselves as witnesses?’ And so I, too, vowed to return his love for as long as I lived. And so Gerth pronounced us man and wife, and we spent our wedding night right there in the sanctity of the convent garden. It was the happiest night of my life, but it was only the start of a beautiful dream that we would both soon wake up from.

“I had never told my parents where I had gone, and they knew nothing of the first convent I had run away to, much less of the abbey I later entered, which was a much greater distance from my home. And as it was a remote place, I had been safe there, and had made up some story or another so that the superiors never asked regarding my parents. I was of age, and it had been my choice to enter the abbey, and they never questioned me further concerning them.

“It had already been half a year since I had run away, and I believe my father had given up hope of ever finding me again. But the day after our tryst in the convent garden, while I was out on another goodwill mission, I bumped into Rupert—the man my parents had originally intended for me to marry. I tried to avoid his gaze, but he positively remembered me, though I tried to deny that I was who he thought I was. Nevertheless, he carried the news of his discovery to my family, who were overjoyed to learn that I was still alive, even if I had become a nun.

Upon hearing of my whereabouts, my mother set off at once to persuade me to return home, and of course there was no small stir among the superiors when they learned that I had hidden the truth of who I truly was from them all this time. I was extremely disappointed at the timing of this, as Gerth was making arrangements for us to depart by ship from Bremen that very week.

“And now that my family knew of my whereabouts, I knew that my mother would not rest until she had persuaded me to return to our home in the countryside. Nor could we go to Bremen anymore, as my father knew many people there.

“Gerth was of course as disappointed as I was when he learned of this, but he did not give up hope. ‘Let’s wait a month,’ he said. ‘Perhaps your parents will calm down and simply accept and respect the decision you have made to be a nun. Then, when things have settled, and you are not news anymore, we can disguise you and make good our escape by ship.’ But even that was not to be. Before the month was over, Gerth was given a more prominent teaching position in the monastery when another elder was reassigned, and he could not now leave as easily, for more was expected of him. Shortly after, I discovered that I was with child, and knew that this was a secret that could not be hid for very long.

“Gerth was both overjoyed at the news, and anxious that my condition not be discovered. After much deliberation, we settled upon a plan. I bid farewell to the nuns, telling them I had decided to return to my parents—which I did. And as we had anticipated, they immediately insisted that arrangements for the marriage be renewed, for Rupert had vowed that, if he could not marry me, he would not marry. Poor Rupert. I still do not know why he was so smitten by me, when there were plenty of young ladies who would have made him just as good a match.

“But that was beside the point. My parents began making new arrangements for the wedding, and after only a week I used that as reason to leave once again, this time leaving behind a letter saying that I was now a grown woman and that I wished to live my own life, that I was leaving for Portugal—it was the furthest place within reason I could think of—and that it would do them no good to come after me.

“But, of course, I did not go to Portugal. I came here, and with the small means I had at my disposal when I left, I bought this house. It was remote enough that I knew if I was careful my parents would never learn of my presence here, and yet it was still close enough to the monastery for Gerth to visit whenever he could manage it. For the first several years, I never left this house very far behind me, just to be safe. I hired a good, helpful midwife, and we became best of friends. She has remained with me throughout the years. When you, my twins, were finally born, it became painfully obvious that you could not stay in the house. Not only did I not have the means to care for you, and there was little that could be done to change that, but the risk of inquiries after your father, and the papers I would thus be unable to provide for you, was too great.

“And so it was that Gerth took Fredrick under his wing, bringing him to the monastery under the pretense that the child had been discovered abandoned. So Gerth and I selected a family who could take you in. We could not send you to a rich family, and having known the abbey life, I did not want you growing up in such a place. And so we eventually found a home for you among some acquaintances of Greta, who were not rich of themselves, but served a good lord who provided well for them. And so you came to the home where you grew up, and to the parents you know as your own.

“I have, over the years, often sent goods and monies to this family to help them in what ways I could. As the years have passed, your father and I have continued to love each other, and to keep one another informed of the welfare of both of you.”

Kristia was by now kneeling in front of Tundrinna, and she reached up and hugged the woman she now knew as her mother. “I have been very happy, Mother. You chose a fine family for me. But now I am also very glad to have found you.”

A PLAN CONCEIVED

A month had passed since the miraculous healing of Luden's wife. On set evenings since then, Erik, Luden, and Marinda had gathered in Stefano's cottage for the purpose of learning more about the faith that had raised Marinda from her deathbed. Measures of utmost secrecy were still taken lest others of the household should discover Stefano's presence. Luden was not so worried about any of the servants discovering, but he feared above all that Tillone, with his loose mouth and brazen manner, should discover, and then breathe word at some wrong time that could endanger them all.

Erik bounded up the decaying wooden steps to Stefano's abode and made an enthusiastic leap for the door, which he then pounded on rapidly with his fists. "Stefano, open this blockade. Hurry up in there. I don't see why you must always keep this door locked."

Within seconds Erik heard the sounds of bolts being loosed. The door soon opened and Stefano's face peered out.

"Erik," he said with a laugh, opening the door wider and motioning inside. "You seem vigorous today. What's the hurry? You are nearly an hour early."

Erik plopped himself on the nearest couch.

"Sad news," Erik said, "at least, in a way."

"What is it?" Stefano asked.

“A note from my father has caught up with me. Seeing as I have not been continuing my studies, he has called me to return to Wittenberge immediately, where he can keep a better eye on me and ensure that I am devoting myself fully to my lessons.”

“I suppose that it is a good thing for you, though I shall miss you. When do you leave?”

“The barge leaves from Hamburg in four days. Mighty soon, if you ask me, especially as I just heard of it myself. There is barely time to pack—not that I have that many things to pack, anyway. But I say, Stefano, what is this?” Erik pointed to one of the floorboards. “There seems to be a page growing from underneath your floor.”

For an instant Stefano looked alarmed. He had not told Erik about the writings and translations. He attempted to distract the youth with another question.

“I suppose it’ll be one of Luden’s ships you’ll be sailing on?”

But Erik was not that easily deterred, and Stefano’s hesitancy only aroused his suspicions further. In a single bound, Erik was at the spot, and when he discovered the plank was loose, an impish grin spread across his face.

“Ah ... I knew there had to be more to that ‘I’m just a hermit’ story you keep telling,” Erik taunted. “What treasures do you keep hidden here?”

“Erik, it is nothing. Please, leave it alone.”

“Nonsense. It is not every day we see pages sprout from a plank. Perhaps it is a long-lost map to some buried treasure that could make us both rich.” Erik bent down to retrieve the sheaf.

“Stop!” Stefano shouted, then he heaved a sigh. “Very well, you torturous lad. Step away, and I will show you what you are so anxious to see.”

Erik stepped back meekly, surprised by the sudden change in Stefano’s tone.

Stefano gently lifted the plank from its place and retrieved the sack of papers and manuscripts.

“Just papers?” Erik scoffed, disappointed. “Why would anyone hide simple bits of paper? Are you writing a book, perhaps, hermit?”

“No, indeed. I couldn’t write anything longer than a page if I tried. This is no work of mine, but a copying.”

“Well, it must be an uncommon book if you feel compelled to copy it when you obviously already possess it.”

Growing suddenly sober, Stefano stood and then placed his hand on the youth’s shoulder. “Erik,” he whispered, “this is no mere book. This is a copy of the Holy Scriptures in the English language, and the Italian one.”

“But are not the Holy Scriptures given only in Latin?”

“In fact, they were given in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, and translated into Latin in the time of Rome, when every man could speak and understand it. Now Rome is no more, and Latin is no more, save in the church and the colleges. Yet the churches preach the same sermons in a language that only the oldest bones of their cemeteries might understand, and they consider any other preaching to be heresy.”

At this, Erik grew more serious as well, glancing curiously at the otherwise harmless-looking bits of paper.

“Do you see now the importance of keeping this a perfect secret?”

“So this is why you have been in hiding,” Erik answered, keeping his voice low. “Does Luden know of this?”

“Yes, which puts him at almost as much risk as it puts me.”

“But why? I mean, why risk all this merely for pages filled with words.”

“Erik, you have been coming to me to hear the things I teach—things you have never heard from any priest, at least not in language you could understand for yourself. All that I have taught you, all that I have spoken of, are but mere portions of these texts. And this is why the church fears the common man—and perhaps even more the rich and educated nobles—understanding these things for themselves, because if they did, they would see that they did not need the church, and the church would practically lose its meaning for existence, and certainly lose its income.”

“You have the English Scriptures, you said? Might I read them?”

Stefano hesitated a moment. “If you read them here. I cannot allow them out of my sight.”

“Agreed.”

For the next three days Erik hardly ventured from Stefano’s cottage, so deeply engrossed was he in reading, from morning until the late night hours, the pages before him.

By dusk on the third day, Erik laid aside the pages and glanced over at Stefano, who sat with quill in hand copying pages. “Stefano, you are right, and more!” Erik cried, rubbing his tired eyes as he rose from his seat. “I have learned more about God in these past few days through these pages than I have learned from a thousand masses in church.”

Stefano smiled and nodded his head.

“My father needs to read this ... and my brother. My mother would want to hear it too. My God, the world would want to hear it!”

“Calm down, Erik,” Stefano said with a laugh. “I know the whole world would want to hear it, but not only is that quite impossible, it is also very dangerous.”

“But ... if enough people knew the truth. Such pages should not be kept hidden under floorboards. These words ought to be copied and sent out to any

man who can read. They should be translated into German as well as English and Italian—and into French, Spanish ... all languages of the civilized world. ‘Preach the Gospel to every creature’—isn’t that what it says?”

“Erik, I can see that you have a good heart, and that your intentions are pure. But you are presumptuous to even consider such thoughts. You obviously have much to learn about the wicked ways of the world. All you would accomplish by zealously attempting what you speak of would be to have your works burned, and yourself killed.”

“I disagree,” Erik answered. “What of you? You sit here in hiding, but you are also risking your life for the same cause that I suggest. Is what you are doing not just as presumptuous?”

“I am not trying to save the world, Erik. I am only starting a work that I pray will last for many years, and reach those whom I have carefully judged are in the most need of it, and who can keep such sayings wisely to themselves for the protection of all.”

Erik grew apologetic. “I understand,” he said. “And I thank you for sharing this knowledge with me.”

“You’re welcome,” Stefano grunted.

“You say that you have been copying these texts, right? You must give me one of your copies, an English one. Please, as friend to friend?”

“Ah, now your sudden change of heart becomes clear. Never to you, dear Erik.” Stefano laughed. “The moment these pages get in your hands, you would set all Germany ablaze, yourself included.”

At this point the door swung open, causing the two to nearly jump from their seats. Luden entered, carrying a sack.

“Luden, how did you get in?” asked Stefano. “The door was bolted.”

“No it wasn’t,” Luden answered, setting down the sack and taking out fresh provisions of meats, cheeses,

and bread for Stefano. “You two look as if you are in some deep discussion. Mind if I join? You know how I enjoy some good theological debate, if that is what you are discussing.”

“We were speaking about the copies and translations of the Scriptures Stefano has been working on here all this time,” Erik answered.

Luden looked at Stefano curiously, and Stefano nodded.

“And Erik is adamant that these pages and words be disseminated indiscriminately to any and all who can read,” Stefano added.

“Is that not their purpose?” Luden asked.

“What do you mean?” Stefano asked, wondering how both these men could so misunderstand the nature of what he was doing.

“Why else translate and duplicate these pages? Is it not so that the common man everywhere may read them for himself?”

“Yes, perhaps someday. But not today. Not now.”

“Why not?” Erik asked, encouraged to have Luden on his side.

“Because—” Stefano paused, then sighed. “It does not matter, I know you will not be convinced. Believe what you will, but know that these words and pages could cause as much harm as they do good. The time, the place, and the plan must be just right.”

“And who is looking for this time and place, and thinking of this plan?” Erik challenged. “It doesn’t seem that you are. You are content to live like a hermit and share but a few morsels a few nights a week with the few of us. Does not this truth deserve a greater audience?”

“It does,” Stefano answered. “But who is willing to preach it to them? I used to speak freely of these things, and was thrown in prison for it. So will others, and much worse, if they know not how to wisely deal with the knowledge these pages impart.”

“Who said anything about preaching?” Luden asked. “Why not simply give them the pages?”

“Because it takes many months to make a single copy. In all my time here, I have managed only two full copies of the Scriptures, and another of the New Testament Scriptures. Now, if there were a printing house that would accept such a dangerous undertaking, that would be different. Then, if there was funding for them, many more copies could be quickly produced, and more easily distributed. But that is not at this point a possibility, so it remains for us to be careful in choosing who these Scriptures are to go to.”

“What if,” Erik began, choosing his words carefully, “what if not all the pages are needed? What if only portions are copied, small portions, of a few pages worth? I have read many shorter stories and passages that would be quite enlightening on their own. I am sure you would know of many more that could be read on their own in this manner.”

“And I,” Luden chimed in, “I have many barges that travel up and down the Elbe delivering goods. We could hide these pages in the merchandise for others to find.”

“Yes,” Erik continued, growing more enthusiastic as he spoke. “Even if we only hid a few pages a day—as many as could be copied—they would quickly spread far and wide, like seeds of faith scattered by the wind, from where they could grow in the hearts and minds of any who come across them. The plan is perfect.”

“And what of the many who would come across them who cannot read?” Stefano asked.

“I would wager that just as many will come across them that can, and those that cannot will find someone to read it to them, and then the word will spread even further!”

“I see there is no dampening your enthusiasm,” Stefano said, relenting in his questions.

“So you will do it?” Luden asked.

“I have a better idea,” Stefano answered. “That is, if you are both committed to such an endeavor.”

“What?” Luden and Erik asked.

Stefano looked at Erik. “You will be returning to Wittenberge tomorrow?”

“Yes,” Erik answered.

“And that is a trading place along the route of your barges, if I am correct, Luden.”

“It is—a fairly major one,” Luden answered.

“Then this is what I propose...”

Book 3

Seeds and Soldiers

Lower Saxony
Germany, 1503

ON THE TRAIL

The waves lapped rhythmically on the sides of the huge wooden barge. A second barge passed perilously close as the barge was maneuvered into position beside the village docking station. The master boatsman stood up on the roof of the low helms cabin shouting orders to the workers. The men were busy throwing ropes and tugging the barge nearer to the dock. Then he turned to the loadmaster, instructing him to open the hatches and ready the holds for unloading.

Soon the work was begun, the workers from the barge and the docks going back and forth over several gangplanks unloading the bags and barrels that filled the four separate holds. The master boatsman was in the merchant's office tending to the papers of payment and delivery.

As dusk settled over the scene, the dock cleared as the workers from the docks went to their homes, and the workers from the boat went to a cheap inn to spend the night before starting back for Hamburg.

But in a dark corner of one of the storerooms, a lone worker was busy at work with a small knife and a bag of grain. Thrusting his dirty, cupped hands deep into the bag, he began to shovel the grains into a small sack at his side, when he jerked his hand back suddenly, and then cautiously put it back in. There

it was ... some sort of hard object among the grain. The man let out a chuckle at his own tenseness, and pulled the tube-shaped object from the bag.

“What sort of hidden goods would this hold?” he mused to himself, struggling with a rope that held a cap over the tube, and finally pulling out a neat collection of handwritten pages. “Ah ... scripts ... perhaps for money!” As the room was dark, the man could not quite make out exactly what the papers were, but he ventured a guess that they must be of considerable value.

“Tell me, good sir, what have you there?” a deep resonant voice suddenly boomed behind him.

The sound made the man jump and turn suddenly, so that he tripped and fell to the floor beside his bag of goods. When he looked up, he saw a uniformed soldier staring down at him.

“I ... I was merely inspecting the quality of the new goods that came in today,” the man stammered.

“I see one of the bags is ripped.”

“Th-that’s what I was inspecting, s-s-sir! I think it was unloaded that way.” The worker quickly noticed that his small knife had slipped out of his grasp beside him, though it was still hidden by the relative darkness of the room. He steadied himself on his hands and stood up, in the same motion secretly scooting the knife behind him.

“Something tells me that it must have been a rat getting into that bag,” the soldier answered. “I don’t recall seeing any damaged bags being unloaded, and I was there the whole time.”

“Y-you were?” the worker answered.

“So are you going to tell me what you’re really doing here?” the soldier asked, pointing his sword toward the man’s throat.

The man squirmed and scooted back, then gingerly pushed the edge of the sword away with his finger. “Have mercy, sir! I will tell you all.”

“That’s what I like to hear,” the soldier said, withdrawing his weapon. “But tell it quickly, for I have little patience, and if I do not like what I hear, you will soon find that my superior has even less.”

“Yes sir! I’ll speak fast. I was, as I said, merely inspecting the merchandise, when my hand felt something hard inside that bag of grain. I thought I should investigate it for smuggled goods. So I opened the bag, and was about to inspect what I had found when you so gallantly disrupted my investigation.”

“So you found a smuggled object among the grains. What sort of object?” the guard asked, once again bringing his sword close to the man’s chin.

“A-a-a roll, sir ... with papers, nothing more.”

“Do not jest with me, man! What need would any man have to smuggle papers?”

“Please!” the worker pled. “I do not jest. Here ... see for yourself.” With that, the worker tossed the capped roll to the soldier.

The soldier caught it deftly, and pocketed it just as quickly, paying no further attention to it.

“So what else did you discover in your investigation?” the soldier asked.

“N-n-nothing, I tell you. You did not give me time to discover more.”

“Then what is in that bag behind you that you seem so eager to conceal?”

The worker, realizing that he was not going to outsmart this soldier, decided to make a run for it. In a fit of desperation, he grabbed his bag, sprang to his feet, darted past the guard, and through the open doorway. He urged his weary feet onward in a desperate effort to escape certain punishment. It took the soldier only seconds to catch up with the man, and, all pity gone, grab the man by his hair and pull him effortlessly to the floor.

Without wasting any more time on the man’s far-fetched tales, the soldier ripped the bag from his

whimpering prey, and pulled it open. In confirmation to his suspicions, it was full of the shipment's fine quality grain. Another soldier, hearing the commotion, now joined the first.

"Look, I found someone who wasn't quite finished unloading the cargo!" the first soldier scoffed, at which they both grabbed him by his arms and dragged him to their horses, where they bound his hands tightly with some rope and then tied him to a post to bring back with them when the shift changed.

The first soldier decided that, for the moment, he would just keep quiet about the mysterious roll the thief had tossed him until he could privately investigate its contents.



The plush room was decorated with a multitude of fineries, and deep crimson carpets covered the marble walkway which led to a large cushioned chair at the end of the huge hall. The corridor was lined with fine velvet curtains, and three small steps protruded just before the elaborate chair at the end of the room. Overhead, and hanging just opposite from the entrance, dangled a grotesque wooden crucifix, which was stuck to a platform of gold inlaid with colorful gems, and inscribed with a few words in Latin.

The room was structured with sturdy marble pillars, and man-sized arches lined the long hallway, by each of which stood an elaborately dressed guard.

Seated pompously upon a throne-like seat was an obese, brightly dressed man of obvious religious rank. He fidgeted with a gold chain that hung around a neck that would have intimidated any hangman. The man's head carried a circular black hat which only barely covered his graying hair. His pallid gray eyes were accented by upwards-slanting eyebrows, further framed by thick bags that drooped beneath them. His sharp nose was such that it detracted much attention from his thin lips, even when he was

speaking—which was a good thing, as the mouth seemed curled into a permanent sneer, and his teeth were an assortment of odd shapes and colors. In all, he was not the kind of man who inspired a lot of face-to-face conversation.

A frail but finely dressed page entered the room, quietly announcing that a visitor had arrived claiming to bring "fascinating news" for the archbishop.

The archbishop's high-pitched voice burst out loudly, echoing along the vaulted ceiling, as if it were meant to be heard by an entire congregation. "Let him in, then," he said. "We certainly would not care to miss any 'fascinating news!'" At this, the man clenched his large belly and burst into a fit of laughter at his own "witty" mimicking. His attendants dutifully chuckled and laughed with him.

The page quickly exited through the door and returned moments later, followed nervously by a uniformed soldier, who looked around as if he felt most out of place in the presence of this company. He came to a halt at what he considered a respectful distance from the archbishop.

"Come closer man—there is no need to fear me," the archbishop called grandly, managing to stifle his chortling. "What is this 'fascinating news' you bring? I am quite in the mood to be 'fascinated' today."

The man approached, but not too closely, and then bowed meekly. He had heard much of Archbishop Tutz—one of the most powerful figures of the church in all of Lower Saxony. Not wishing to court the archbishop's impatience, the man quickly began to speak.

"Your eminence, about a year ago you proclaimed an edict against certain heretical papers that were being reported found in several towns of your see."

"And so I did," Tutz answered, his demeanor suddenly growing serious. "I hope you did not interrupt me only to say that you have found more of them."

The soldier was about to reach into a pouch on his side when he pulled back his hand.

“Uh ... I have found more, but I believe I have discovered where they might be coming from—something which I believe has until now remained a strange mystery.” The man paused, watching the archbishop’s face for a reaction. There was none.

“Well, out with it then, man!” Tutz bellowed, clapping the arms of his seat to raise himself from his sitting position. The action was truly threatening, and the soldier hastened to resume his speech.

“I’m captain of a regiment of guards. There had been reports of thievery in a clearing house by the docks of the town of Winsen, just outside of Hamburg, along a tributary of—”

“I know where Winsen is, you fool. But what have you discovered?”

“As I was saying, we were watching this house when I discovered a thief rifling among certain bags of merchandise. When he saw that he was caught, he handed me this.” The soldier pulled out the leather roll that held the papers. An aide took it from him and handed it to the archbishop. “The man said he had found it in the sack he had been in the process of robbing. I took the liberty to discover where the cargo had come from, and learned the barge belongs to the fleet of a certain Luden Horstein.”

The name sounded familiar to Tutz, and with a glance, one of his aides came over and whispered something in his ear.

Momentarily distracted, the soldier picked up his tale again. “As I was going to say, I believe that a more thorough investigation into this merchant’s operation should be made to discover—”

“You shall consider no such thing,” the archbishop interjected.

“Your eminence?” the soldier questioned.

“Luden Horstein is a loyal subject of the Mother

Church, and is beyond any reproach such as you suggest.”

“But your eminence, I myself saw the manifest. The barge came from—”

“I do not care if the barge came from the Pope himself. You have obviously misjudged this situation. Tell me, what did you do with this man you caught stealing?”

“He was flogged for his theft, and discharged from his duties at the clearing house.”

“That is all?”

“Yes, your eminence.”

“You mean to say you let him go?”

“Uh ... yes, your eminence,” the soldier answered, hesitating at the anger he saw building in the archbishop’s eyes. “It was but a petty crime ... and he was summarily discharged.”

“Summarily discharged,” the archbishop repeated mockingly. “Sir, you are not only a fool, but a blind fool!” The archbishop’s face was starting to turn purple, and he had already risen out of his seat and was now walking right up to the trembling messenger-soldier. “That man was not the thief ... he was the smuggler—about to plant those pages. He merely pretended to have found them when he knew he was caught. And now you have let him go!”

The soldier remained silent. He had hoped to collect a reward for the information he brought, but he now faced sure disgrace, if not some worse punishment.

“You should be summarily dismissed from your own post, Captain, for your gross failure.”

“Dear God!” the soldier cried, and fell to his knees, bitterly weeping. “Please, your eminence, I beg your mercy. I swear, I shall do all within my power to seek out and apprehend this thief, and any who are in league with him.”

“Swear not! Neither to man nor to God, my son,” the archbishop said, calming himself a little. “Very well. I

shall have mercy. It is not your fault that your mind is so carnal that you could not recognize the workings of Satan as they were taking place directly in front of you. But perhaps now you shall understand more fully the severity of this situation, and the cunning with which Satan is spreading these pernicious heresies to weaken and distort men's trust in God and the Holy Mother Church. So, I will see to it that you are summarily dismissed from your post as captain."

"But ... but I thought you said—"

"Yes, I cannot afford to leave these matters in the hands of some small city guard. You shall now work for me instead, and if you do well, I will see to it that you are rewarded accordingly." Tutz pulled a small but heavy leather pouch from a fold in his garments. "Here, take this. It is only a small token of God's blessings, and they shall only grow as you do His bidding. What is your name, my son?"

"Zalman Huber, your eminence."

"Zalman Huber, my son, you are now a called and chosen vessel of the church, and I shall see to it that you have all the men and authority you need to discover and overthrow this nest of heresy in Winsen. And if you are successful in taking care of God's business, I assure you that I shall more than take care of yours."

- 14 -

THE RAID

Kristia made her way carefully along the muddy pathways leading to her lord's castle. The sun shone softly although a slight spring rain was falling. Basket in hand, her mind wandered back to her last visit with her mother, Tundrinna.

The past three years had been uneventful ones for Kristia. After discovering the truth of her past, she had continued living with Thomas and Gretel. Tundrinna had insisted that this would be better and safer for both of them, though she saw no harm in Kristia continuing to visit, which she did regularly.

But while mother and daughter had grown closer, Fredrick had grown silent and distant towards his father, who now also knew that his children knew the truth and had tried repeatedly to explain his own feelings and regrets to Fredrick, but to no avail. Fredrick could not see past the fact that his father was the priest he had looked up to all his life, but who had broken his vows so long ago and kept it hidden all this time—so that his son was raised as an orphan, and his daughter as a peasant.

It was Fredrick's love and concern for his sister and mother that kept him from saying anything about these things to anyone else. But he would not speak of them with Gerth, or hear his answers. Kristia sighed.

She felt sorry for Fredrick in many ways. Why could he not just accept and love as she had? Why was it so difficult for him? Maybe it was different between men, she mused. After all, she had not yet met Gerth. There were only certain times when it was convenient for Kristia to visit Tundrinna, and these were not the times when Gerth visited. And Tundrinna thought it more prudent that it stay that way.

Rounding a corner and approaching the gate, Kristia waited patiently until the gatekeeper saw her and opened the gate for her to enter. She made her way through the servants' entrance to the kitchen, where she now worked in the afternoons, and was sent to the cellar to refill the pots of salt.

Carefully opening a new sack, Kristia began pouring the contents into the various stone pots. Suddenly the bag of salt burst a seam at the bottom, and its entire contents poured onto the damp stone floor.

Kristia let out a small, high shriek, then quickly stifled her cry and knelt down to scoop as much of the salt as was still good into the pots and back into the bag.

Her hands suddenly stumbled across something hard in the pile of salt. She dug it out to discover it was a strange roll, which opened easily. Inside were papers with writing on them, though she could not read, so could not tell what it was about. She wondered what these pages were doing in the salt, and what was written on them. She'd never seen anything like this in a bag of salt before, and guessed they must be about some kind of secret. She wondered who they were intended for, and how they had gotten in that bag of salt.

She hid the roll in a deep skirt pocket, finished scooping up the salt, and returned to the kitchen and her work, while she thought of a safe way to discover what these papers were about.



"Kristia! What are you doing here?" Fredrick whispered through closed teeth.

"I've come to see you," she answered.

"But how did you know I'd be here?"

"I asked Mother to ask Gerth when you'd be going on one of these missions of mercy. Since that's how she met Father, I figured it was a good way for me to meet you."

"So that's why he insisted I was the man for the job," Fredrick grumbled. "So what did you want to see me about?"

Kristia pulled out the leather roll and took out the papers from inside. "I showed these to Mother. She wasn't sure what they were, but thought that you might know."

Fredrick took the papers, nervously looking around to see if any of the other monks or nuns who were around the square tending to the tables were watching him. Satisfied that they were not, he returned his gaze to the papers and studied them carefully. Fredrick's face suddenly grew pale as he realized what he was holding.

"Where did you get these?" he asked.

"They fell out of a sack of salt in Lord Kubelsen's kitchen. What are they? Mother has started to teach me how to read, but I can't spend too much time at her house, and so it's going very slow."

"Kristia, these pages are dangerous," Fredrick answered, looking around again and quickly putting the papers back in the roll. "These are heretical pages—supposedly translations of the Scriptures, forbidden by the church. If these were found in your possession, you could be thrown in prison, or worse. Let me take them to the bishop, and report them properly. I will be sure not to mention your name, or your lord's."

"No!" Kristia answered, grabbing back the roll that held the pages. "These are the only thing I have to learn reading with, and I will not let you take them."

Fredrick sighed. “Kristia, you’re an ignorant woman. Very well, keep the pages if you want to. But keep them hidden, and keep them secret. Don’t show them to anyone else or speak of them with anyone else—and tell Mother the same. Now, I must return. I suggest you leave quickly, and ... be careful, Sister. It was good to see you again.”

Kristia noticed a faint flicker of emotion in Fredrick’s eyes before he turned and went back to one of the food tables. Then she, too, turned and left.



“What report have you for me?” Tutz asked, beaming magnanimously at Zalman.

Zalman hesitated as Tutz looked him over carefully. Zalman had obviously made good use of the monies Tutz had made available to him. He wore a bright red cape, symbolic of the authority of the church. It was decorated richly, and held in place by two large turquoise clasps. Underneath the cape, and clearly visible, the man wore armor of polished brass that looked as if it could have been made of gold. An equally shiny helmet was tucked smartly under the man’s arm.

“Out with it, man! I don’t have all day,” Tutz said, raising his voice with a note of impatience when Zalman remained silent.

“Your eminence, we have been watching the docks of Winsen and several surrounding towns for two weeks, and we have not found any further evidence of smuggling. That thief has disappeared without a trace, and we have not seen any sign of him anywhere in the region, though we have offered a goodly reward.”

“Then do you have anything to show for your investigation and the resources I have so generously been putting at your disposal?” Tutz asked, an obvious note of disapproval in his voice.

“We are stepping up the investigation, your

eminence. I only did not want to disgrace the name of the Holy Church by using forceful—”

“I don’t care if you have to kill them!” Tutz hollered. “I want you to get to the bottom of this!”

“K-k-kill, your eminence?”

Tutz caught himself, and sighed once he had regained his composure. “I mean, just bring them to me for judgment—any who are caught with these pages in their possession. We must question everyone until we discover where these pages are coming from. I do not care in whose possession you find them. You have my warrant to search any and every house in Winsen and any village near it. You will bring the guilty to me personally, and I, with the divine wisdom that has been granted me, will judge the matter according to God’s will.”

“Yes, of course, your eminence,” Zalman answered, bowing low.



The foggy night was thick and silent as death, and not a sound could be heard. There was no moon in sight and the low clouds forbade any glimpse of the stars. A shrill, short blast was suddenly heard and at the instant it sounded the doors of the mud house were brutally forced down and a troop of haggard men rushed inside.

The room had no furniture save a plain wooden table with chairs, and in an adjoining room a single large mattress of sorts held a wakening family. The fire which burnt constantly was quickly put out and as the men stormed inside, the sleeping men of the house were rapid to arise.

Although they were quick about it, only Lipzug and Wurst managed to draw their short daggers in time to delay their own capture. Meanwhile two soldiers had taken the father as captive, and now forcefully dragged him to the floor as another hit him hard on the back, causing a loud groan to escape his lips.

Gretel and Kristia hugged each other tightly and screamed in terror, only adding to the confusion of the moment.

The soldiers, who were at first put at bay by the two stocky brothers who glared so fiercely at them that the veins on their neck protruded, now approached them cautiously. Realizing that the short knives they held were no match for the long swords of their oppressors, the brothers resorted to simultaneously falling to the ground, and in a swift maneuver they lunged at the soldiers' legs, dealing them large deep cuts.

Catching them unawares, the wounded soldiers now fell back, grasping their wounds.

But though Lipzug and Wurst had disabled the nearest two soldiers, the others quickly surrounded these brothers and rained a slew of obscenities and curses on them. The two brothers were quickly forced to give up their weapons and place themselves at surrender.

As two of the brutes bound the terrified mother, another laid hold of Kristia. He laughed roughly. "Hey, take a look at this one!" he called to the other soldiers. "Maybe this job isn't so bad after all."

His partner came to his side within moments, and grasped Kristia's other arm.

Kristia began to scream again, and at the same time swung at the men, twisting every inch of her body to release herself. But she was soon bound along with the others. They were then led outside and thrown, face down, into the cold dirt.

"Did you find any heretical writings?" a hooded man on a tall horse questioned.

"Yes, my lord. Bound in a neat leather roll," one of the soldiers reported.

"Very well, take them to the prison," the leader ordered. "We'll question them later."

"Wait!" Kristia cried out, realizing what this was about. She still lay stretched out on the cold ground

and, unable to arise with her hands and feet still bound, she lifted her head and spoke as loudly as she could.

"Do not harm my family!" she pleaded. "They have nothing to do with those pages, and know nothing about them. I found them and I am the only one with any knowledge of them. Please, do them no harm!"

The closest soldier looked at the girl with a sneer and was about to strike her, but stopped when he noticed the officer dismounting and approaching.

When he reached Kristia, the officer knelt down and looked at this girl's face, and stared silently for several moments. Then rising to his feet again, he commanded the soldier, "Stand her up!"

Two men rushed to obey, and, each laying hold of a slender arm, pulled her to her feet.

The commander again studied Kristia's face, which was slightly bruised from the handling of one of his men, and though her thick blonde hair was tangled, it haloed her face in the glow of the bright moonlight behind her. Her eyes looked imploringly on him, and her lips quivered with fear and distress.

It was a good while before the officer could gather his senses to speak. He pulled back the dark hood and spoke in a near whisper. "What is your name?"

"Kristia, chattel to Lord Kubelsen," she answered. A tear rolled down her cheek as she added, "I implore you, do not harm my family for my sake. I ... I had no idea these writings were heresy. In fact, I could not even read them."

The officer turned to his men and barked out his order. "This girl is the only one we want. I'll take care of this. Move on to the next house."

The men obediently tromped off to their next destination, leaving the officer alone with Kristia and the rest of the family, all of whom were still bound.

As the eyes of his captives followed him uncertainly, Zalman unsheathed his long sword and, one

by one, cut through the binds of all except Kristia, who nevertheless sighed with relief that her family was being spared.

Zalman ordered the rest of the family inside. Thomas and Gretel quickly obeyed, but Lipzug and Wurst stood defiantly in their places.

“You shall be sure Lord Kubelsen will hear of this!” Lipzug growled. “You have no right to barge into our houses like this.”

Zalman did not bother to answer the allegation, but instead repeated his order. “I said go back into your house!”

Lipzug was about to utter another outburst when Wurst interrupted him in a quieter tone.

“My lord, we will return to our house quietly once we have received your word of honor that no harm will come to our sister.”

“I am not in the habit of making promises to peasantry,” Zalman answered haughtily, and at the same time a sob escaped from Kristia’s lips. The sound made Zalman reconsider. “Very well, this once I will promise what you ask. You have my word of honor that your fair sister shall be returned without harm. But you will understand that she must be properly questioned.”

“Yes,” Wurst answered for both of them, then motioned his brother inside. Once they were gone, Zalman was left alone in the damp night air with Kristia, and he was suddenly unsure of how to handle this prisoner. His promise had been made out of sincerity, but at the same time he needed results from his investigations or his position would be in danger.

His uncertainties were cut short by the sound of his men returning. Without a second thought, he grabbed the girl, who let out a shriek. “This is for your own sake,” Zalman answered as he stifled her shriek with his hand. Then he lifted her onto his horse and

galloped off into the night before his men reached the scene.



Just over an hour later they arrived at Zalman’s new abode, a large house which appeared magnificent even in the dark. Before the horse had reached the gate, a guard rushed to open it, and Zalman rode straight through and dismounted in front of the house. Followed by several curious servants, Zalman led Kristia, whose hands were still bound, around to the main hall and into a small room. Turning to one of the servants, he ordered the man to stand guard at the door that Kristia was now pounding and kicking furiously against.

“It will be your life if this prisoner escapes,” Zalman said, then turned and left to rejoin his band of men, who he found waiting for him at the prison house in Winsen.

“Did you find any more of those pages in any of the houses?” he questioned.

“No—only the ones we found in the possession of that servant girl.”

Zalman sighed. “Are you sure? Perhaps news of these raids, as loud as you men are when you conduct them, has spread, so that anybody with more of these pages has found time to hide them.”

One of the other soldiers snickered. “I doubt it, sir. We thoroughly questioned everyone in that neighborhood in your absence. I can assure you that nobody had any knowledge of what we were searching for. If anyone in that neighborhood knew anything about anything, our tactics would have gotten it out of them, but all we got were screams and curses, even from the youngest of them. They’re innocent, even if they aren’t any better for it now.”

A disgusted groan escaped Zalman’s lips, but before he could comment, the soldier spoke again.

“So what about that girl? Anything to report?”

Zalman had an answer ready, and he raised his voice in anger. “Yes, there is something to report—you men are a lot of incompetent twits! I was in the very process of bringing the girl to the archbishop himself, when, out of curiosity I inspected the roll of papers you found, and discovered the roll contained nothing more than some harmless pages accounting for her lord’s kitchen. Which of you fools discovered it?” Zalman paced to and fro in front of his squad, who now grew fearfully silent. The guilty man had boasted plentifully that he had made the only good find of the night, and was quickly singled out and nudged forward by his comrades.

“I ... I was sure I had seen it clearly,” the man said in his own defense.

Zalman circled on his horse until he was directly in front of the man. “You idiot! Do you realize what a shriveling fool I would have made of myself going before Tutz with this first find? Do you know what the repercussions could have been, not just for me, but all of you?” Zalman let out a sigh. “You are all dismissed. We shall move on to the next village tomorrow, but I caution you to be careful. Should an incident of this sort happen again, the offender will have good cause to fear.” Thus saying, Zalman turned and galloped away.



Kristia had spent her solitary hours weeping, shouting, begging, and finally, exhausted, had fallen into a fitful sleep. Hardly had she done so, when she heard voices outside her door, one of which she recognized as that of her original captor. Seconds later he entered.

“I am sorry for my hasty departure,” Zalman said, as he approached the bed on which she had thrown herself. “I had to bring you here for your own safety, or my men would have taken you to the prison house and there would have been nothing I could have done

for you. I’m afraid, in my haste, I forgot to untie you, and so had to bring you in as a prisoner. But perhaps it was better that way. In any case, you no longer need to consider yourself my prisoner.”

Kristia made no reply, but eyed him warily.

Zalman pulled out a short dagger, then reached around to cut her ropes.

“Are you hungry?” he asked.

Kristia did not reply, but only rubbed her wrists to bring some feeling back into them.

Zalman clapped his hands, and a servant immediately appeared. Zalman ordered the man to bring refreshments at once, and then the servant was gone.

Zalman sat himself down on the bed beside Kristia, and spoke in a low whisper. “I do not know why I’m doing this for you. I set out tonight on a commission to find the forbidden pages and capture anyone having anything to do with them. I had no intention of straying from these orders, because finding someone—anyone—would only bring me favor with the church. So far, you are the only guilty person we have caught, and my only chance for a good reward.” Here Zalman paused, and lowered his eyes. “But when I saw you, and heard your words, I knew you were innocent in this matter. So I have given my promise to your family to return you safely, and I intend to keep that promise. But I implore you to tell me, that my efforts not be in vain, how and where you came to find these pages?” With these words, Zalman peered deeply and intently into Kristia’s eyes.

Kristia, for her part, broke out into a sob, and began to cry silently.

“I ... I discovered them in a bag of salt. I did not know it was such a great offense to have them. I was so frightened when your soldiers stormed our house, and I was afraid that my family would be harmed because of me.”

Zalman moved his hand to the girl's cheek, and softly wiped away a tear that was rolling down her face. Kristia now nervously turned to catch Zalman's gaze, and they stared into each other's eyes silently for a few moments.

For the first time Kristia noticed Zalman's rather handsome features. His hair was curly blonde and shortly cropped, however a portion at the back was long enough that it was tightly pulled into a short tail. His face was unshaven but a beard was not grown, and his swarthy face was complemented by the rough look and hazel eyes that seemed to pierce Kristia's very soul.

The silent exchange was interrupted by the knock of the servant, who entered carrying a tray of food.

Zalman's gaze quickly turned hard as he ordered the servant to place the tray on a nearby desk. The servant obeyed and then exited the room again.

Without looking back at Zalman's piercing gaze, Kristia mumbled, "So now that I have told you all I know, will you return me to my family?"

"I have promised it, and I will," he answered.

"Then please, I ask that you return me quickly, for they will be concerned," Kristia said, still avoiding his eyes.

Zalman stood up, disappointed that his time with this attractive prisoner was over. He saw no choice but to abide by her wishes, and hoped that by doing so he could somehow abide in her good graces. "Follow me, then," he said.



The ride back to Kristia's house was made in silence, but once they had arrived, Zalman said, "Should you be questioned about the events of this evening, the pages were but an accounting of your lord's kitchen."

"I thank you, kind sir," she whispered once Zalman had helped her off the horse. Then she added, "And the pages, where are they?"

Zalman hesitated, glancing momentarily at the leather pouch that had hung at his side all evening. "That is no business of yours," he finally said. "You must forget they ever existed."

Kristia nodded, and pulled a small scarf from around her neck. "Please take this as a token of my gratitude for what you have done to save me and my family tonight."

Zalman took the scarf in his hand, and as he did, Kristia impulsively embraced him—at the same moment reaching into his pouch and feeling for the roll of pages, which she quickly located. She pulled away from the momentarily stunned Zalman, and with a kiss on his cheek slipped the roll into her own pocket. Then she turned to open the gate into the small front yard of the cottage.

She looked back at Zalman and smiled at him. He smiled back, lifting the scarf in farewell. Then he trotted silently away, musing on what this, and his further lack of results in this region, would mean for his investigations.

COURTED

“News of your raids have reached the ears of several authorities, and I’m afraid they are not pleased.” The Archbishop Tutz was gazing over some papers as he spoke the pronouncement to an anxious Captain Zalman of the church guard.

“But your eminence, I was only carrying out—”

“Your orders are from henceforth changed,” Tutz continued, interrupting Zalman’s sentence. “It is obvious that your tactics have not been working, for while we heard news of these pages springing up in several places before your investigation, since your investigation we have heard nothing. Your raids have driven these heretics and their followers further underground. We must find a way to lure them out instead.”

“What do you have in mind, your eminence?”

“A reward. Half a silver crown for every page given into the hand of a deacon of the church.”

“But your eminence, there could be hundreds, if not thousands of pages that could come forward. Will the church be able to make good such a reward?”

“Do not question the bounty of God, my son. Whatever we give them shall be taxed from them again, and God’s silver shall return safely to its fold. Let this proclamation be made in all villages, and I shall dispatch messages and silver to all churches,

convents, monasteries and chapels so that they may be ready to offer this reward.”

“Forgive my ignorance, your eminence, but how will this help us to catch the perpetrators of this heresy?” Zalman asked.

“That is a simple matter. For every page turned in, in order for the reward to be collected, the bearer of the pages must give his name and place of residence. By collecting this information, we shall be able to see just how widespread this web of infection might be, and where it radiates from.”

“I see that God has truly granted you wisdom, your eminence, in carrying out His work. I am your grateful servant, and God’s humble tool.”

Zalman had learned well how to speak to Tutz in a language the archbishop liked to hear.

With a wave of his hand, the archbishop dismissed Zalman, whose mind quickly turned to another matter he desired to tend to once he had passed out of the cathedral doors.



It was late in the afternoon. Kristia had finished her day’s work in the lord’s kitchen, and was now helping her mother to prepare supper for when her father and brothers would arrive.

She was surprised, on looking out the window, to see Zalman approaching on his horse. Though over the past few days this man had entered her thoughts, she had not anticipated that he would return. Her pleasure at seeing him soon turned to apprehensiveness. Not only was this man the leader of those who had caused pain to her family, but she knew that he must long have discovered the missing pages that she had secretly taken back from his pouch. Perhaps he had come to get them back.

Kristia quickly begged Gretel to not let this man speak to her, and then quickly left the room to hide herself in the bedroom.

Gretel dried her hands on her apron and went to the door of the house, opening it to the stranger who now waited on his horse outside their gate.

“Hallo. What want you here?” Gretel asked the man, dimly recognizing him as the hooded man who had been present when their house had been raided several days ago.

“I have come to speak with Kristia,” Zalman replied. “Is she home?”

“No. She is working! Shall I tell her something for you?”

“It is a private matter.” Zalman paused for a moment and then added, “On second thought, there is something you can tell her for me. Tell her that I would like the opportunity to speak with her, and if it pleases her, to have her join me at my table for supper tomorrow.”

Gretel, obviously pleased with such an offer from a respectable and obviously rich potential suitor, clapped her hands and smiled widely. She shouted behind her, “Kristia! You must come here, there is someone who would like to speak with you!”

Cringing and furious at this betrayal, Kristia, realizing there was no more purpose in hiding, soon emerged and joined her mother outside the house, who excitedly repeated Zalman’s invitation. Kristia thanked Gretel and waited for the woman to enter the house and leave the two of them alone.

Gretel was obviously disappointed that she would not get to partake in the conversation, but considerately returned to the house and closed the door behind her.

Kristia looked up at Zalman, her eyes betraying her doubts as to his sincerity.

“So what has brought you from your mansion in Hamburg to this lowly house again, and made you look so kindly on me when just a few nights ago you were ready to throw me and my family into some dark dungeon?”

Zalman bent forward so as to keep his voice low. "If you would know what has brought me back, my lady, it is your beauty. I had to see you again, and I only hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me for what took place that night. The circumstances were unavoidable, but may I burn in Hell and more if this hand ever moves to cause you or your family harm again. Will you not extend your hand of mercy to me, and accept my offer as perhaps a small token of my apology, and a greater token of my love?"

Kristia blushed deeply before quietly making her answer. "I'm sorry, sir, for my harsh words. I ... I just can't imagine how someone like you would invite someone like me. But I will, of course, accept your gracious offer. How could I refuse after your great kindness in sparing myself and my family?"

"Then it is agreed. I shall return tomorrow at this selfsame hour and to this selfsame place to bring you to my house."

"I shall be waiting," Kristia answered.

Zalman turned his horse and then, with a wave of the scarf Kristia had given him, galloped off.

Kristia returned to the kitchen in a daze, not even noticing the knowing smile Gretel wore as she watched Kristia enter the house.

"Well, speak up, girl! What did you say?"

The words startled Kristia, and a bashful grin came to her lips when she noticed Gretel's excited expression.

"I ... said yes," Kristia muttered, avoiding Gretel's gaze.

"Good, good," Gretel answered. "Kristia, you know that something like this is most unusual, and a good opportunity for you. Just think, a man of such influence showing such a great kindness to one such as yourself. Do not waste this chance, child. He could be your key to a better life than what we have been able to give you." Gretel's eyes grew misty.

"Oh, Mother!" Kristia still called Gretel mother, both out of affection and out of habit. "You and Father have given me a great life. I have always been happy with you, and we are well taken care of. Oh look, here comes Father and the boys."

Kristia's change of conversation had the desired effect, for Gretel quickly dried her eyes, and sprang to her feet, mumbling exclamations of the dinner that had to be set out.

That evening's conversation, to the dismay of Kristia, turned back to the invitation, and although Thomas was as happy about the news as Gretel was, both Lipzug and Wurst had their doubts about this man who only a few nights before had had them bound and thrown in the dirt.

Throughout the conversation and arguments that were being tossed back and forth, Kristia remained silent. Finally, when she had had enough, she spoke up and said that it was her own decision to accompany this man. There was a good side to him. Had he not returned her unharmed as promised?

When Lipzug and Wurst realized that Kristia herself was persuaded, they left off their arguing and retired for the night.



"Zalman!" Kristia exclaimed as the man's steed trotted up the path towards the house. A quarter of an hour before the appointed time, Kristia had situated herself on the doorstep anxiously watching for Zalman's arrival. As she sat there, doubts came to mind that perhaps Zalman would not follow through, and thus her relief and joy when she finally saw him approaching.

"You look radiant this evening," Zalman said, dismounting and extending his hand to take hers.

She wore Gretel's finest dress, which was a faded crème-colored garment, patched in a few inconspicuous places, and reaching to her ankles. Her thick hair was

combed and hung loosely down to her waist, while Gretel's best scarf served as a sash of sorts.

Zalman raised Kristia's hand to his lips and kissed it. Hearing a stifled sigh, Kristia turned to find Gretel spying on the two from the door, which was partially closed in a futile attempt to hide her presence.

"Farewell, Mother," Kristia called out as Zalman helped her up in front of him onto the horse.

Zalman, in turn, raised his hand in a salute towards Gretel, and said, "Good day, madam. I shall return your daughter before the sun sets."

Kristia recognized the route he rode towards the city of Hamburg and his abode. She found this ride far more pleasurable, with Zalman's muscular arms encircling her waist as they held the reins in front of her. It seemed much too short a time before they reached the same gate and building that she had been brought to before. This time, however, in the daylight, it could be plainly seen.

It was a large, well-structured house. As Zalman helped Kristia from the horse, a servant rushed up to return the horse to the stables, while another servant opened the door for the two to enter.

This time, Zalman led her up a winding staircase and into a richly decorated bedchamber, which was adjoined to a spacious sitting room of sorts. "I shall send up some maids to assist you in your bathing and preparations for the meal," Zalman said, and then left Kristia to herself in the two large rooms.

The sitting room itself was bigger than the house Kristia had lived in all her life. And as she had never seen the main rooms of Lord Kubelsen's mansion, she spent several minutes simply walking about the two rooms, feeling the silks and materials that covered the furniture, and marveling at the size and richness of these rooms, until the maids arrived to prepare and dress her for her appearance at Zalman's table.



At long last the door flew open, and Kristia entered with a train of maids behind her, and advanced towards Zalman, who stood upon seeing her.

He looked at her in awe, and raised his brows. She wore a pure white dress fit for a noblewoman of highest rank, and her hair was washed and combed, and fashioned in a long, loose braid. Zalman extended his hand to her, and led her with a most gentlemanly air to her place at the table.

During the course of the meal, Zalman attempted a few times to nudge the topic of conversation towards the heretical pages, and whether or not the reward that would now be offered for the pages would be an effective way of collecting them and stopping their spread and influence. But seeing that Kristia remained reluctant to speak on the subject, he eventually moved on to other matters.

Finally, when the meal had come to an end, Kristia thanked Zalman for his gracious hospitality, and stated that she was quite tired, and wished to return home. Although he endeavored to prolong her stay, she politely insisted, and so he sent her an escort to take her back, after insisting that she keep the white dress as a gift. As she thanked him again for the banquet, and said her *adieu*, he took her hand, and told her that he would like to see her more often. She agreed to a second meeting, and then said farewell.

THE WARNING

It wasn't long before every city, town, and village in Lower Saxony had heard about the reward, and pages were being brought back to the church—most of them by people who had not been able to read them. Others went so far as to start making and even selling their own copies of such pages for others to hand in as found.

Throughout the weeks that followed, more and more pages were being found and traded in for reward. Zalman's list of names and locations began to grow, and was in turn distributed to central churches throughout the affected regions.

It soon became obvious to Zalman that the infestation of these pages was much greater than anyone had at first anticipated. He also saw that the most affected regions were all along the Elbe River, confirming his initial suspicions that there were tradesmen, most likely based in Hamburg, behind the dissemination of these pages.

He remembered the name of Luden Horstein, the merchant in whose cargo that "smuggler" had found the pages. It made sense. Luden Horstein was the only merchant with a fleet large enough to have covered so vast an area along the Elbe and its main tributaries.

He also remembered the archbishop's insistence that Horstein could not possibly be behind the smuggling, and that he was a loyal and generous son of the church. He would have to tread carefully, and be sure to find proof—if there was any to be found—before reporting any of this to the archbishop. He determined he would have to investigate this matter personally and quietly.

During this time, Zalman continued seeing Kristia, often bringing her back to his residence, and growing fonder of the maid with each visit. For Kristia's part, she thought the captain not only handsome, but a fine man, and a friend.



Luden was at his desk perusing some papers when Winthro walked in.

"Ah Winthro, how are things going?"

"Excellent. I was just inspecting a new shipload of goods that has come in at the docks. All looks well." Winthro lowered his voice. "The bags are also such that our extra 'kernels' can easily be added to them before they are shipped."

"Excellent," Luden answered. "Still, I fear we may have to let the kernels rest for a while. The church is obviously more intent than ever to find out where they are coming from. It is a rich reward they are offering."

"A reward that will surely tempt the poor, but I have heard other tales of richer men offering a full silver crown per page, and others are starting to translate and sell such pages as well, for I have seen men bring pages to churches that are not ours. And while those doing it may be after their own rewards, the kernels are still being spread further through it, to areas that we have been unable to reach. So this move by the archbishop may be serving our purpose more than it is hindering it."

"But we must still be careful," Luden cautioned. "If

they start putting the pieces of the puzzle together, it is quite likely that we will come under suspicion."

A knock on the door interrupted the two men's conversation.

"Enter," Luden called.

One of the workmen came in. "Sir, there is a soldier here who insists he must see you."

Luden and Winthro exchanged glances, and with an almost imperceptible nod from Luden, Winthro made his way to his own desk as Luden instructed the workman to let the soldier in, and then reclined comfortably in his seat.

Winthro was just reaching into a pile of papers on his own desk when the sound of heavy footsteps could be heard approaching, and soon a man dressed in regular soldier's garb entered.

"I trust you are the merchant Horstein?" the soldier asked in an accusing tone, looking directly at Luden.

"I am. However I am presently pressed for time, so if what you have to say is important only, than please say on."

"I bring news that..." Here the man looked around and spotted Winthro at his desk. "...that would best be discussed privately."

Luden turned to Winthro, who nodded, and silently exited.

"Very well, speak on."

"I was present at one of the docks, in Winsen, to be precise, when one of your barges arrived and was unloaded but a few days ago. We had received reports of thievery at this dock, and I made it my business to watch the place secretly. The night after one of your barges was unloaded, I caught a fellow rifling through the cargo. When I apprehended him, he produced this."

The soldier pulled out a roll of papers, and carefully studied Luden's reaction.

Luden, who already suspected what was coming, was ready.

“The heretical pages!” Luden said, his eyes growing wide with horror.

“So you recognize them?”

“Who would not?” Luden answered. “They have become quite a trophy for any man who finds them.”

“Indeed,” the soldier answered, still carefully eyeing Luden.

“And you say this thief claimed to have found it in my cargo?” Luden questioned, eyeing the soldier back suspiciously.

“Uh ... yes.”

“And I trust, of course, that you have kept this thief for questioning?”

At this, the soldier hesitated and grew nervous.

“The ... the man escaped,” the soldier finally answered.

“Ah, the man escaped. That must have been unfortunate for you.”

The soldier quickly recovered from being put on the defensive. “Sir, your company has been implicated in the spread of these heretical writings, and I am here to inform you that a full investigation is to begin. I trust, as a loyal son of the church, that you will cooperate freely with this investigation?”

“And I am to assume that this investigation is to be carried out under the auspices of the church?”

The soldier hesitated again, then answered, “Yes, it is.”

“Then, if I may ask, why is it not an official of the church that comes bearing this news?” Luden asked, unimpressed with this soldier’s comportment.

“Sir, I am captain of my regiment and servant of the church, and in this matter I speak for the church and have the trust and ears of the archbishop himself.”

Interrupting this self-glorification, Luden stretched his arms and declared loudly, “I am pleased for you!

Now, as I have already stated, I am a very busy person, and am most occupied! If you wish to investigate, I shall not stand in your way. I pray you will not stand in mine!” Luden began to move towards the door himself.

“So ... you do not object to an investigation?” the soldier asked, a little puzzled.

Luden stopped for several moments, and then reached into his pocket and pulled out three gold coins. He approached the soldier.

“Naturally, I would appreciate it if you could keep this investigation a silent one. It would not be very good for my business if this were to become common knowledge, and I believe the archbishop would likely be even more displeased with a lack of revenue. And do report any findings directly to me as well, so that I can take appropriate action to purge my company of any workers of iniquity.”

“Y-yes, of course,” the soldier answered, quickly pocketing the coins. “Thank you, sir! Good day, sir.”

So saying, the soldier gave a curt bow and left the room.

Winthro entered immediately, and when he was certain the soldier was out of earshot and on his way out of the building, he closed the door.

“What was all that about?” Winthro asked.

“I’m not sure. He claimed to be here on church business, and said that he had found a copy of the heretical pages in some of our cargo in Winsen some days ago.”

“But we have not had any barges deliver to Winsen for the past two weeks,” Winthro added.

“Precisely, which is why I suspect there was something fishy about him.”

“What did he want?” Winthro asked.

“He said he spoke for the church, and that our company was to be investigated for involvement in the smuggling of these heretical pages. I’m not sure who

he was speaking for, but we'll have to be very careful from now on."

"What do you think he'll do?"

"I'm not sure. I hope I was convincing enough in my support of his investigation that he won't suspect me. I suppose we'll have to wait and see if he comes back or not. Until then, keep a close watch on any new hands applying for work, or any workers requesting a change of routine. And let's not bring any further kernels into our storerooms for now. This may end up being a wind that will just blow by if it finds nothing to grasp onto."



"Winthro!" Erik called out when he opened the door to his familiar friend. "How good to see you again, my friend. How is everything back in Hamburg?"

"It's getting dangerous," Winthro answered as he stepped inside and looked cautiously around. The door was quickly shut behind the thin, lanky fellow.

"It's alright," Erik said, showing Winthro into a room where Ulrik and Karsten were just finishing the evening meal. "It's just us here."

"Is something the matter?" Ulrik asked, seeing the concern on Winthro's face.

Winthro pulled up a seat at the table, and lowered his voice to a near whisper before continuing. "It's possible that they've traced the kernels to our warehouse. We've had to stop packaging them."

"But how?" Erik asked, keeping his voice as low as Winthro's.

"We received a somewhat suspicious visitor claiming to speak for the church, and stating that an investigation into the activities at our warehouse was to begin," Winthro answered. "I've come here in part to tell you that, and inform you that we will not be transporting any of your kernels back to Hamburg for the time being. Hopefully this investigation will turn up empty. Did you hear the church has offered

a reward of half a silver crown for every page found and brought to them? Many have been turned in. It's possible that the information they have gathered this way may have pointed to our business."

"Half a silver crown, you say?" Erik asked.

"And many are collecting it," Winthro continued. "Some are even going so far as to make their own copies to sell to others."

"But then all our efforts are wasted!" Ulrik cried in dismay.

"Not entirely," Winthro answered. "There are some, not in the church, who have become curious, and are offering a full silver crown for every page given to them. These kernels are becoming highly sought after, and they may only be spreading further for this reward. But the fact remains that we will have to be careful how we conduct ourselves from now on. And I say this for your benefit as well. You may be safe from the reaches of Archbishop Tutz and his forces here in Wittenberge, but you can never be too careful. Watch your words, wherever you are."

"And how fares Luden in all this?" Erik asked.

"So far it appears he remains above suspicion himself, and he has kept himself in good standing with the church through his tithes and offerings of monies. When our visitor came, Luden gave the man every appearance of wanting to cooperate with this investigation and make sure that, if any smuggling was going on from his warehouse, the evildoers would be found and punished. Of course, there won't be any 'evildoers' around when they come looking, but for the same reason we've had to clear out most of our stock of kernels, and I have brought the few we had not yet shipped out back with me for safekeeping here."

"Then we can only pray that the kernels that are still out there will be found by those who will benefit most from them," Erik said.



“Enter!” Zalman called at the knock on his door.

A servant opened the door and walked in. “A messenger from the archbishop has just arrived,” the servant announced, motioning to somewhere outside the open door.”

“Well then, what are you waiting for?” Zalman asked. “Show him in!”

The servant gave a curt bow and exited the room. A few moments later the messenger entered.

“You are Zalman Huber?” the messenger asked.

“I am,” Zalman answered.

“I was instructed to deliver this message to you personally.” The messenger held forth an envelope sealed with the large red seal of the archbishop. Once Zalman had accepted it, the messenger gave another curt bow and left, obviously not expecting to carry back an answer.

Zalman broke the wax seal and read:

To the honorable Captain Huber of the Ecclesiastical Guard

I am pleased. The rewards are working excellently. Already some three hundred pages are safely in our possession, but the fight is not finished. We must continue to purge ourselves of these treacheries. I hereby summon you to an audience at noon tomorrow. We have details that must be discussed in person. I shall be expecting you.

There was no signature, but rather another stamp of the same insignia that had been on the wax seal.

Zalman folded the letter. That would give him enough time to stroll by the Horstein warehouses at the docks in the morning. His first meeting with the merchant had not been quite as successful or conclusive as he had hoped, but he was beginning to suspect that Luden was himself indeed as innocent

in this matter as Tutz believed him to be. Still, the evidence pointed towards Luden’s extensive business enterprise, and if not Luden, it was likely that somebody working there was involved in all this, and Zalman would find out who.

Still, he knew that before noon tomorrow was not enough time to gather any conclusive evidence that he could bring to the archbishop, so he resolved to remain quiet about this part of his investigation for now.



“What is it now?” Tutz bellowed when a servant walked in, interrupting the archbishop’s meal.

“The captain of the ecclesiastical guard reporting to see you, your eminence. He says you requested an audience?”

“Oh yes, so I did.” Tutz wiped his hands and straightened his cap. “Show him in then, and do it quickly!”

Once Zalman was inside, the door was closed behind him.

“Ah, Zalman, it is good to see you again, my friend.”

“I am at your service, your eminence,” Zalman answered as smoothly as he could.

“Good, good. And how goes your investigation? Have you been able to make out anything from the gathered lists of names?”

“Only the most obvious, your eminence—that the most affected areas are all along the Elbe, and other locations spread further from there.” Zalman chose his words carefully. “It seems clear that, whoever is behind the distribution of these pages, has access to river barges, or perhaps a boat of his own.”

“And I trust you are doing all within your power to discover who is behind this?” Tutz asked.

“Yes, your eminence, but I believe there may be many involved in this matter. These pages have reached much too far to be the work of only a few men.”

“But surely there must be a leader of this treacherous work! Every weed has a root, captain, and I am trusting you to find that root, to dig it up, and to burn it.” As he spoke, the archbishop clenched his fist and pounded it on the table.

“Yes, your eminence,” Zalman answered.

“Oh, and speaking of burning,” Tutz added, a smile coming to his face, “I would like for you to preside over the ceremony of burning the pages we have found in the town square after mass tomorrow evening. It will be an excellent opportunity to expose these works of Satan before the eyes of all the people, and to show them that the church will not stand idly by when the enemy seeks to come in like a flood.”

Zalman’s face dropped. He had planned to invite Kristia for dinner that evening.

“Is there a problem?” Tutz asked.

“No, your eminence, tomorrow evening will be fine,” Zalman answered.

“Good. I shall expect to see you at mass, then. Then I want you and your men to bring out the pages and see to their burning when it is done.”

- 17 -

GETTING CLOSE

Winthro stood on the helms cabin of the barge that was being loaded from the docks. He sniffed and breathed deeply of the salt-tinged evening air that wafted in from the ocean along this portion of the river. He had started out as the captain of one of these barges. Now he was in charge of Luden’s entire fleet, and mostly worked at his desk in the warehouse. He missed the barge life, even if he was able to make occasional trips on them.

Another barge passed close by, preparing to berth at the next pier. Winthro caught sight of the other boatsman, and out of habit tipped his hat towards him in salute, then returned to his own thoughts. But his reverie was rudely interrupted by the sound of crunching wood grinding against the hull of the barge, followed by the sound of screaming and splashing somewhere in the darkness.

“Help! Help me! I can’t swim!” a voice gurgled from over the side.

The other boatsman had already shouted out the order to pull to starboard, and Winthro instantly ran to the side of the boat to see what had happened. A small wooden rowboat had somehow gotten caught and crushed between the two barges, and a man was frantically splashing about in the water.

Without a moment of thought Winthro jumped in and within seconds, reached the man. Moments later the two of them were hoisted aboard the barge by the men who had been unloading it.

“Are you alright?” Winthro asked once the man was safely on deck.

“I th-th-think so,” the man said, between the sound of his teeth chattering.

“Get the man a blanket!” Winthro ordered. One was quickly brought over, and Winthro wrapped it around the man, who looked close to Winthro’s own age.

“Can you walk?” Winthro asked when the man had calmed himself somewhat.

The man nodded, and before long Winthro had escorted him off the loading gangplank and into a small waiting room heated by a fireplace.

“Thank you,” the man said when Winthro returned with a warm mug of tea.

“Think nothing of it,” Winthro answered.

“Think nothing of it?” the man exclaimed. “But you saved my life!”

“I was just in the right place at the right time when you just happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. You should consider carrying a light in your boat when you traverse the river in the darkness.”

“If I ever get in a boat again, I shall certainly consider that,” the man answered, then took a sip of the tea.

“What brings you on the river at this hour of the night?” Winthro asked, more for the sake of conversation than because he was curious.

“I ... I was only crossing from one bank to the other. I’ve done it often ... but the current or something must have pulled me wrong. All I know is, one moment I was rowing across, the next moment I was being crunched between these two giant barges.”

“I’m sorry about your boat.”

“Oh, it is of no consequence. It was my uncle’s, and he’s not exactly poor. He’ll get another. For my part, I think I’ll stay with crossing the bridges on my horse from now on. I’ve never had much tolerance for water anyway, and after this, well, my ‘seafaring’ days are certainly over.”

“Is there anything I can do for you?”

The man now stood up, and lay aside the blanket. Color had returned to his cheeks, and he looked to have recovered from his little mishap.

“I think I’ll be fine. I can make my way home from here.”

“Are you sure?”

“It’ll be good to feel solid ground beneath my feet, and now that I am on the right side of the river, at least, it is not as far as it otherwise would have been. But allow me, good sir, to invite you to dinner one of these nights at my house—that I might properly thank you.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Winthro answered.

“Oh, but I insist,” the man continued. “I am a man of means, and I could not abide leaving you with nothing for all that you have done for me. When shall I arrange for a carriage to bring you, and what is your name?”

“If it will help you to feel better, then I shall gladly accept your hospitality. How about Friday evening?”

“Yes, excellent. And your name is?”

“You need only ask for Winthro.”

“Thank you, then, Winthro. I am forever in your debt.”

With that, the man turned and left, and Winthro gave a little chuckle at the man’s grave reaction to a mostly harmless accident.

In the back of his mind, something seemed familiar about the man, though Winthro couldn’t quite place it, and he shrugged the feeling off.



Zalman rode up the now familiar path to the cottage where Kristia and her family lived. When he reached the house, he tied his horse to a post and knocked on the door.

Gretel answered.

“Oh, Sir Zalman. We weren’t expecting you!” Gretel blushed as she quickly tried to straighten her dress and her hair.

“I am sorry I have come unannounced, but I have only a few moments. Is Kristia here?”

“No, my lord. But she’ll be ready to accompany you to dinner this evening.”

“That’s what I needed to talk to her about. I’m afraid I shall need to postpone tonight’s dinner, for other matters have come up.”

With perhaps a little too much enthusiasm, Gretel answered, “Oh, Kristia will be so disappointed. She’s been looking forward to this dinner all day.”

“I was hoping that she might come tomorrow night.”

A shadow fell over Gretel’s face.

“Is something the matter?” Zalman asked.

“Only that she has evening duties tomorrow night. But she can come Friday night.”

Zalman paused. He would be hosting Winthro for dinner that night. The circumstances under which Zalman had managed to invite Winthro were precarious enough that he did not want to risk changing that arrangement now. But perhaps having Kristia there would help the atmosphere appear a bit more natural. Winthro would have to feel comfortable if Zalman was to get any information out of him. He made up his mind.

“Yes, Friday will be excellent, at the usual hour. I trust you’ll tell her these things?”

“She will be most disappointed, my lord, but I will tell her.”

Zalman waited at the entrance to the large and finely furnished dining hall, as the scent of a sumptuous feast wafted through the air and servants and maids strutted about carrying trays and accessories to the table. He soon spotted the carriage bringing Winthro, and walked out to greet his new “friend” personally.

“My friend Winthro, how good of you to come.”

“How good of you to have invited me,” Winthro replied.

“Please, call me Zalman, and my house is your house.” With that, Zalman motioned for Winthro to follow him. “Supper shall soon be ready, but it is waiting for another guest of mine who is preparing herself and will be down presently. Then perhaps you can entertain us with tales of your own seafaring adventures.”

Winthro’s eyes lit up at the mention of a “her.” Already the free dinner had been an offer he was now glad he had accepted, seeing that this man was of substantially better means than Winthro had at first imagined. He nodded his consent, and soon the two were seated in a large study.

While they waited, Zalman took the opportunity to strike up a conversation about the kind of work that Winthro did for Luden, and how he came to work for the man. He was treated to a full story of Winthro’s earliest days learning to pilot a barge with his father.

Some time later their conversation was interrupted by the announcement that Kristia was coming down the stairs. Both men left the study to greet her. Winthro fixed his eyes on the girl with wonder as Zalman extended his hand to her, and led her with a most gentlemanly air to the dining room and her place at the table.

Winthro, ever talkative—and encouraged by Zalman to continue the tale of how he came to work



for Luden—carried most of the conversation. Zalman appeared only casually interested, though he watched carefully for any words that might link this man to the business of smuggling. But his main aim for the moment was to secure Winthro’s casual trust and friendship, in the hopes that this might somehow lead him to discovering more about the inside operations of Luden’s business.

When Kristia finally mentioned that she needed to get back home, Zalman agreed to take her. Winthro mentioned that he should be getting back himself, and so the three said their farewells and parted for the evening, with Zalman determined to learn more of Winthro, and Winthro determined to learn more of the beautiful maiden who had graced them with her presence at the table that night.



With a few well-placed questions, Winthro had learned that Kristia lived in Winsen. This fact only served to confirm what Winthro had already begun to suspect—that what had seemed familiar about Zalman that night at the docks was his voice. He had heard it before—the soldier who had come to speak to Luden of the church investigation. The soldier had spoken of being on guard duty in Winsen, and here Zalman’s beautiful guest was a maiden—and a peasant maiden on top of everything—from Winsen. It made too much sense to be a coincidence, and Winthro resolved to be careful around Zalman if he should see him again.

But his more immediate concern was finding a way to meet Kristia again. He had already requested Luden’s permission to accompany a barge to Winsen and attend to company business there, and ensured that it would take him at least a few days.

Now he was standing in Winsen, partly concealed behind a stone wall near the main marketplace where Zalman, according to his conversation at the dinner that night, had first met Kristia.

Then he saw her—making her way to several stalls and filling up baskets that she carried at her side. When it appeared that she had finished her shopping and was leaving the market square, Winthro spotted the street she started walking down and quickly mounted his horse and rode by another way to a corner of that street for a “chance” meeting.

When he reached the corner, confident that Kristia had not yet reached it, he dismounted his horse, tied it to a post, pulled a brush out of the saddlebag, and began brushing the horse’s coat, sure that this would attract the girl’s attention and cause her to recognize him. And it worked.

“Winthro? Captain Winthro? Is that you?”

Winthro spun around at the welcome sound of the most beautiful voice he had ever heard.

“Why, it is the Lady Kristia. What a pleasure to meet you again,” Winthro answered, bowing low.

Kristia blushed at the title. “I did not expect to see you here,” she finally managed to say. “Don’t you live in Hamburg?”

“A boatsman, my lady, lives everywhere.”

“So you’re living here now?”

“I’ve been here for a few days tending to some business. I stay and eat at the inn.”

“Oh, but that will never do. You must come with me. My home is a humble one, but I can assure my mother cooks much better than any innkeeper.”

“That is too kind of you, but I couldn’t impose.”

“You wouldn’t be imposing at all—especially if you can help me carry these baskets.”

“Oh, but of course,” Winthro answered, immediately grabbing the two heaviest ones that Kristia had by this time put down. He would return for his horse later.

At length, Kristia’s cottage was visible, and as they neared it, Winthro suddenly stumbled over a large stone, and—with his arms still hooked in the

two large baskets—he was unable to catch himself and fell, hitting his head on another rock that was jutting out.

Kristia ran to him, and found his forehead bleeding. “Oh, no!” she cried. “I fear you are hurt badly, for it bleeds heavily.”

“Do not concern yourself,” Winthro said, picking himself up and feeling his head. “It is not half the scrape it looks. Head cuts always bleed the worst.”

“But you are hurt! Come inside. I’ll bandage it.”

Realizing that Kristia would not be dissuaded, Winthro relented, and followed Kristia.

“You will have to excuse the house,” she said as they entered. “We are but peasantry.”

She led him to the single bedroom with a large bed, where the entire family slept. “My mother is probably fetching water. My brothers and father will be arriving soon from the day’s labor.”

Kristia sat Winthro down on a cushioned chest by the wall, and started to clean the wound. It was nothing that would not heal easily.

“I must go fetch some water and bandages,” she said. “I will return presently.” Thus saying, Kristia headed for the door.

Winthro watched as she left the room, and when she was gone, studied his surroundings. This only took a minute, seeing as the room was very plain, and aside from the bed and the chest he was sitting on, there was little in the way of furniture or decorations.

He locked his hands behind his head and leaned back against the wall. As he did so, he felt a bit of rock give way and drop. He turned around to inspect the damage, and was surprised to see that it was a perfectly chiseled piece of brick that had fallen, and that there was a visible hollow in the wall at the place it had dropped from. He tried to put the piece of brick back, and when he did so, noticed what looked like a familiar object in the small hiding place.

Before he could inspect it further, however, he could hear Kristia returning. He quickly put the piece of brick back in its place and resumed his former position.

As Kristia continued cleaning the cut, Winthro wondered whether she knew of the hiding place, or whether it was a secret of her parents. He watched her eyes closely to see if they ever lingered on that spot of the wall, or if she would notice anything about the hastily returned piece of brick.

“There, that should do for now,” Kristia said when she’d finished tying a bandage around his head. “Now, if you’ll excuse me for a little while, I should be gathering some wood and starting up the fire.”

“Let me help you,” Winthro offered.

“No, no! You need to rest. I do this every day. Please lie down for a moment.”

“Thank you. You are most kind.”

When Kristia had left the room again, Winthro saw his chance. As quietly as he could, he moved the piece of brick again and pulled out the familiar-looking leather roll. His suspicions were confirmed when he pulled out the translated pages. Not knowing who in this family this hiding place belonged to posed a slight problem, but as he lay on the bed resting, he conjured up a test to see if Kristia knew anything about them.

Winthro soon heard Kristia returning to the house and starting the fire. Before long she was back in the room with him.

“How are you feeling?” Kristia asked.

“Much better, thank you,” Winthro answered with a smile. Then growing suddenly sober, he blurted in a whisper, “Kristia, I know of the pages which you conceal!”

Kristia looked up at Winthro with a terrified expression, and was about to reply when the main door opened. Kristia begged Winthro to be silent.

“Kristia, are you home?” Gretel’s voice called from inside the next room.

“Yes, Mother, and I have brought a guest,” Kristia answered as she stood and entered the room where Gretel was.

“You invited Zalman in here?” queried Gretel, with a worried look on her face.

“No, Mother. But a good friend of his.”

At this point, Winthro entered, and bowed his bandaged head to the woman.

“Your daughter most kindly invited me for supper. My name is Winthro. I’m a boatsman on the Elbe, and am staying at an inn here in Winsen.”

“Oh my,” Gretel exclaimed, seeing the bandage. “What happened to you, my boy?”

“It’s nothing, really,” Winthro answered. “Just a scrape, and Kristia’s taken good care of it already.”

“Good. So you are a friend of Zalman?”

“Yes, in a manner of speaking,” Winthro said.

“Well,” Gretel answered, “any friend of Zalman is most welcome here. I’m sure Kristia can entertain you whilst I prepare the meal. The menfolk should be back in an hour. We shall eat then.”

Kristia nodded and returned to the bedroom, followed closely by Winthro.

“Your mother is a gracious woman,” Winthro said, sitting beside Kristia on the bed.

Kristia remained silent, fidgeting nervously with a corner of the quilt.

“I am sorry that I startled you—about those pages, I mean,” Winthro continued.

Kristia attempted a smile. “You really must explain yourself. I know nothing of what you speak.”

“Kristia please, it is no use to deny it. What if I told you that I have my own secret regarding the pages which you hide behind that brick in your wall?”

A cloud passed over her face at these words, and she broke out into a sob. “Please, I implore you, do

not tell a soul—especially not Zalman. He ... he is the chief investigator, you know.”

“I suspected as much,” Winthro said. “You have nothing to fear from me. I will guard your secret with my life if you so desire.”

Kristia studied Winthro’s face for a moment, and then thanked him earnestly. “What, then, is your secret?” she asked.

Winthro glanced around the room, and lowering his voice to a whisper, said, “I know you are an equally good friend of Zalman, but I also must ask that, as I have promised to keep your secret, you must promise to keep mine with equal care. You might stand in danger of losing your pages if your secret is discovered. I could be in danger of losing my life.”

“I promise,” Kristia said.

“Well then,” Winthro continued, further lowering his voice to a near inaudible whisper, “the pages you have, and many others like them, were packaged and hidden by my own hands. For I have learned the truths written in them, and know how great the need is that these truths be known.”

Kristia broke out into a huge smile. “Oh,” she cried, “but this is wonderful! Then you are just what I need. I have so wanted to be able to read these pages, but have had so little time to learn. Would you ... please ... help me learn how to read them?” She looked at Winthro with such a piteous imploring face, that he could not help but say yes. And so Winthro spent the next hour reading over the pages with her, and expounding on the truths and significances of the text.

They were finally interrupted by the sound of a door opening. “My father and brothers ... they’re home,” Kristia explained.

Winthro quickly came back to reality, and as he smelled the savory aroma of food he was reminded that he was hungry, and followed Kristia into the main room.

“Kristia has brought us a guest for supper,” Gretel was announcing to the men when Kristia and Winthro walked in. “He’s a friend of Zalman’s, and works on the river.”

Lipzug and Wurst eyed Winthro suspiciously, while Thomas motioned for Winthro to seat himself, and began to converse with him.

The meal—which Winthro found satisfying, though he took care not to accept too many servings—proceeded simply, and Winthro’s friendly manner had soon won over Lipzug and Wurst. Kristia’s thoughts, meanwhile, seemed afar off.

When the meal ended, and the family had bid their farewells to Winthro, Kristia saw him to the door, and led him outside and out of earshot of any of the others.

“You must come again—and bring more pages with you. Please? I want to learn everything that you can teach me.”

“I promise, my lady, that I shall take advantage of any and all reasons to come see you again.”

- 18 -

ZALMAN'S PROPOSAL

The next few weeks had been busy ones for Zalman as he traveled to various regions collecting evidence and following the most promising trails of reported pages and where they had come from. The few trails he did manage to follow led back to storehouses along the Elbe—and to at least one record that proved the cargo had come from one of the Horstein barges. Zalman knew he would need more proof than just a single record, and was still hoping to learn more from Winthro. But the man had disappeared for a time to tend to matters of business at several trading points along the river—or so Zalman had learned from workers at Luden’s warehouse—and no man knew just where he was or when he might be returning.

Now Zalman was back in Hamburg, and his first thought was of Kristia. He clapped his hands twice, and an attendant immediately rushed into the room and stood rigidly at attention.

“Dispatch a message to the house of the woman Kristia in Winsen, and ask if she will be ready to be my guest this evening.”

Without a word, the small fellow rushed to execute his orders.

An hour passed before there was a timid knocking at Zalman’s door, and the attendant reappeared,

wearing a most piteous countenance.

“Well man, speak! What is it?”

“I’m afraid the woman in question was not home, sir, nor could her mother say when she would be returning.”

“But this is her day off,” Zalman muttered. “She is always home at this time. Did her mother mention where she might be found?”

“She did not know, but she bade me tell you that she would inform her daughter that you had called on her, and that if you returned tomorrow at this same time, she would be waiting for you.”

“Very well. You may go.”

The attendant gave a short bow, and then left the room.



The next day Zalman decided to be his own messenger, and arrived at the planned hour. Dismounting his horse, he tied the animal to a nearby fence post and went and knocked on the door. Gretel opened it, and smiled somewhat nervously upon seeing the fine-looking captain.

“Good noble sir,” she said, “I fear I have provoked anger on your part.”

“Why, woman? You puzzle me. But where is your daughter? With your permission, I should like to see her.”

She continued to smile, though her voice trembled slightly. “I fear that, in my absence, she received an unexpected visitor.” She thought it wiser, for the moment, to conceal the fact that this visitor was someone Zalman knew. “You know how impulsive youngsters can be,” Gretel added in an attempt to shrug off the matter.

Yet Zalman persisted. “Then if she is not here now, may I inquire when she will be here?”

“I would think that she would return within the hour. Would you care to wait for her?”

“I do not know that I have the time,” Zalman answered, a note of agitation in his voice. “But I shall return this evening. When she returns, please inform her that I hope she will accompany me this evening.”

“I imagine she will be most pleased to hear it.”



Gretel had attempted to occupy the captain once he arrived, for Kristia had not yet returned. An awkward half-hour had passed as they waited. Just as the sun was starting to set, the sound of laughter could be heard down the path, which the two recognized as Kristia’s laugh.

Zalman instantly rose to his feet, but Gretel stood in front of him, trying to convince him to wait inside.

“I’ll inform her that you are here,” Gretel said, but Zalman had already stood up and was on his way outside.

He reached the gate just in time to see a twosome rounding the bend in the path before the house. With dusk settling over the scene, Zalman did not immediately recognize Winthro, but instantly walked up to Kristia, clasping her hand.

“Kristia, at last you return,” he said. “I had hoped to see you yesterday, but you were not here, and today I again tried, only with the same results, but at last I see you again.”

Before she had a chance to reply, Zalman’s gaze turned to the person beside her, and he suddenly realized who it was. An embarrassed smile came to Winthro’s lips, while Gretel, who stood by the door observing the unfolding scene, cringed.

Kristia, meanwhile, decided to speak for him. “Zalman, you remember Winthro, do you not? By chance I met him in town, and he has been entertaining me with his tales of boat life in your absence. I’m sorry I kept you waiting.”

Zalman turned to Winthro and grasped his hand in a firm handshake. "How good to chance upon you again, my friend," Zalman said, then turned back to Kristia. "I was hoping that you would accompany me tonight. I have gotten us seats at the theater. I hear there's a good play."

"Thank you, Zalman, I would like that more than anything," she replied with a warm smile, glancing over at Winthro with a hint of a question in her eyes.

Winthro cleared his throat. "I do believe I must be getting back. It was pleasant to have met you again, Kristia. I hope we shall meet again sometime soon. And Zalman, you must come visit me at the docks again sometime. Only don't come by boat!" With that, and without waiting for Zalman's reaction to his last words, Winthro turned around and headed down the path back towards town, and the inn in which he was staying.



It was a few nights later that Zalman again arranged a meeting with Kristia. He arrived with two horses this time.

"I have decided it is time for you to learn how to ride," Zalman said when he greeted Kristia at the door. "Come, I will show you your horse."

"My horse?" Kristia asked, her eyes wide, then they dropped. "Oh, you mean the one I'll be riding."

"No, I mean your horse. He is yours to do with as you will, and I have already spoken to Lord Kubelsen, and he has agreed to care for the horse for you in his own stables. But you can come at any time and take her for a ride."

Kristia stood for a few moments, stunned into silence. "But that is much too generous of a gift," she finally managed to say.

"It is a gift for me and you both," Zalman said. "As now I shall be able to go riding with you, and that shall be a great gift to me."

Kristia blushed.

"Come, I'll show you." Zalman excitedly grabbed Kristia's arm and pulled her to where the two horses were tied.

Zalman spent the greater part of the afternoon helping Kristia to feel secure in the saddle. Being a fast learner, it wasn't long before she had mastered the basic movements needed to control the horse.

"Now then," Zalman exclaimed, "from now on we shall be able to ride together, and go even more places than I have thus far been able to take you to."

"Oh Zalman, I don't know how to thank you," Kristia gushed.

"Thank me by riding home with me," Zalman answered.

Kristia nodded.

Zalman looked more excited than usual as they rode to his house together. He did not say much, but cast frequent admiring glances her way that were more than merely seeing how she was managing on her horse.

At length they arrived at Zalman's mansion, and he gently lifted her off the horse. His pace was quick as he led her by the hand down the corridor. As he passed his attendant, he gave orders that they were not to be disturbed, and after seating her on a rich chair, closed the door, and knelt in front of her.

"Kristia," he began, "I know that we have seen each other hardly at all these past two weeks, and this I regret greatly. During this time, however, I have thought often of you, and it was during my moments away from you that I had time to think."

Zalman paused, and Kristia looked at him with a smile.

Taking her hand in his, he fidgeted with her fingers as he spoke. "With your consent, I wish to pay a good sum to your lord for your freedom, and, if you so desire, your family's as well. In fact, I have

already spoken to Kubelsen regarding it, and he has agreed to a price.”

Zalman looked back up at Kristia to see her reaction, expecting a joyful outburst. But to his surprise, she remained silent, and quickly turned her gaze away.

“I ... I don’t know what to say. It’s such a huge offer. You are too kind to me. But there is something important I feel I should tell you.” Here she paused, in obvious discomfort, and Zalman crinkled his brows, eyeing her questioningly. She forced a smile. “You remember Winthro, do you not?”

“Indeed, but what of him?”

“Throughout these past few weeks, I have seen him often, and grown quite fond of him.” She paused slightly, swallowed hard and looked past him as she continued. “He ... he proposed to me just yesterday ... and I accepted.”

The words caused such emotion in the man that he looked as though he had been crushed by a stone wall. He looked deep into her eyes, as though attempting to read her heart. Speechless, he rose from his knee and slumped into a chair, where he remained, silent, for a few uncomfortable minutes.

At length he said, “Then there is no hope for me to have your love?”

“You do not understand,” she cried. “I love you dearly, as a just, good, and honest friend. But I wish to marry Winthro.”

He nodded, rose, and escorted her outside. The ride home proceeded in total silence. Kristia, trotting on her horse beside Zalman, tried a few times to engage Zalman in conversation. But her attempts were met only with a stone-faced silence.

For the next week, Kristia neither saw nor heard from Zalman, and he disappeared from her life as though he had never been a part of it.

Book 4

A Meeting of Paths

Lower Saxony
Germany, 1504

- 19 -

THE LIST

Gerth entered his sparsely decorated room and instantly noticed the sealed message from the archbishop on his table. He quickly sat down and opened it, then started reading.

To all the holy churches in the region, by our superior lord, Archbishop Tutz

The investigation into the spread of the heretical pages is proceeding with haste. With God's divine guidance, and the lists which you continue to provide, we are getting closer to the nests from which these heretical pages are spreading.

Though, upon inspection, these pages may seem to be literal translations of the Holy Scriptures, this is only a disguise for the very cunning evil these pages are designed to perpetrate on the minds of those who stumble across them. It is only God's providence and fortune that many to whom these pages fell could not read them, and thus is proven again the great blessing of the common man's illiteracy, and the responsibility that has fallen to us to preserve the Holy Writings in their purest Latin form, that only those properly

trained by the church to discern the word and doctrine of the Holy Writings might learn the higher mind and will of God.

His Holiness the Pope has been made aware of these doings, and is sending members of the Inquisition to assist in the questioning of those deemed most suspect. A list is herewith provided. Any person on this list, man or woman, old or young, is to be apprehended and brought in for questioning and to stand trial for assisting this great work of heresy.

My emissary of the ecclesiastical guard, Zalman Huber, shall begin taking these persons into custody, and every church is to provide such assistance and cooperation as he shall deem necessary. May God help us to rid our lands of these works of Satan.

Gerth sighed and glanced casually down at the list of names on the page, when suddenly his heart stopped. There, at the top of the list, in clear letters, was inscribed the name: *Kristia, peasant, chattel to Lord Kubelsen, Winsen.*



“Fredrick, we need to talk,” Gerth said as he came into the young monk’s room.

“You are the priest, Father Gerth. I am bound to obey your word,” Fredrick answered.

“No, not as priest and monk, but as father and son.”

Fredrick stood and turned his back on Gerth, and looked blankly out of the window—a narrow slit in the wall that pointed towards the sky.

“Fredrick, I am sorry that you had to learn about me and Tundrinna the way you did. I regret that I could not just leave this life before you had to know it, to raise you as a normal son, in a normal house, as part of a normal family.”

Fredrick merely shrugged his shoulders.

“But I have not come to speak of myself, or of you. This is about your sister, and I need your help.”

Fredrick turned around.

“She is on the list, Fredrick—the list of heretics that will be tried by the Inquisition. We ... you must warn her, before it is too late. I cannot go, but you can. You have before.”

“What am I to do?” Fredrick asked.

“She must leave the place. You must warn her at once. Take two of our horses, and arrange to bring her to her mother—if it is not already too late, and I pray to God that it isn’t.”

Fredrick could see the tears starting to well up in Gerth’s eyes, and for the first time was hit with the realization of Gerth’s pain and the sacrifice he had endured these many years in seeing his own beloved children being raised as strangers to himself.

“I will go,” Fredrick said, eager to leave the awkward moment of seeing this man about to cry.

Gerth said nothing, but sat himself on Fredrick’s bed as Fredrick stood.

Fredrick paused at the door and looked back. Gerth had his head buried in his hands, his shoulders shaking. Fredrick quietly turned again and closed the door behind him.



“You are certain?” Kristia’s eyes were large and moist.

“Gerth ... our father told me himself. He received the letter from the archbishop just this morning. Your name was at the very top of the list. I thought you were now friends with this Zalman?”

“I thought so too,” Kristia said with a sob. “I never thought he would do anything like this.”

“Kristia, all day I have been enduring the mental picture of our father grieving for you. I warned you. By keeping your pages you have now branded yourself

a heretic in the eyes of the church. There is no telling what they will do with you. The Inquisition is not exactly known for their tolerance. Any proof of guilt, however small, could mean your death. And now here I am, risking my own life to bring you this news, and to take you away from here. We are an accursed family, and these are probably the just judgments of God that we deserve.”

“Fredrick, stop!” Kristia said, tears welling up in her eyes. “You must not speak this way. You know Mother and Father, that they are good, and have done nothing but good for others. You looked up to Father until you discovered he was your father. Does that one secret, that one decision of his past that has been so difficult for him to live with, make him a bad man?”

“I don’t know,” Fredrick answered. “But I do know that I need to get you out of here, and now. How long will it take you to gather your things?”

“But what will I tell my family?” Kristia asked. “And will they not be endangered as well?”

“Their names were not on the list, and if they honestly do not know where you are or where you have gone, there is not much that Zalman will be able to do against them, for he will have no cause against them, and would have to answer to Lord Kubelsen for his actions.”

Kristia suddenly broke into a sob. “What about Winthro?”

“Who’s Winthro?” Fredrick asked.

“He ... I ... we were going to get married!” Kristia answered.

“Married?” Fredrick gasped.

“Yes. He’s ... he’s a good man, but works for a shipping company.” Kristia decided to be silent about Winthro’s involvement with the pages for now. “He’s on a voyage of business, and is returning in a week. We were going to wed once he returned.”

Fredrick placed a comforting hand on her shoulder, but then retracted it again. “We’ll have to see what we can do about him once you’re safe. Now go gather your belongings speedily. We must be on our way.”

“Where shall I tell my family I am going?”

“Tell them nothing, only that you must go. It is for their own safety—and yours.”



There had been a violent storm for the whole of the day, and it showed no sign of ending soon. The lightning flashed seconds apart from loud rumbles of thunder. Meanwhile, rain poured down in torrents. The door to the hut flew open, and three soaking figures rushed inside, and collapsed on various chairs and benches around the room. Gretel had already stoked up a warm fire in the fireplace.

“Ah, what a day to be working,” she said with a sigh, whilst assisting her men in removing their soaking outer cloaks.

“What a day indeed,” Lipzug muttered. “Covered in mud up to my knees ... and I had thought summer was here.”

Another round of lightning flashed, and a sudden gush of rain ran down the walls of the chimney and hissed as it touched the few burning branches in the fireplace.

“By the heavens, my fire,” Gretel groaned as the flames instantly began to smolder, and then went out.

Thomas tried to comfort her, and attempted to find some remaining spark with which to revive the fire by poking the ashes with a burnt twig.

Another round of lightening lit up the sky for a split second, and suddenly, with a terrible splintering noise, the door came crashing to the ground.

A dark silhouette stood in the doorway. The intruder was mounted upon a steed, and a few shouts were heard from outside the shack. The family stared in silence

as the figure rapidly extended his hand to the side, and grabbed a torch from one of his men. As he held it up, his face was partially illuminated by the flame, and the family instantly recognized the unmistakable features of Zalman, twisted into a cold stare.

Eyeing the four inside the small hut, he glared at each for a long, hard minute. His eyes seemed cold and lifeless. A sudden betrayal of emotion came to his stone mask when his eyes stopped in front of Gretel and she offered him a nervous smile.

An involuntary shudder made him wince, and he quickly turned his horse and went back outside, where he lifted the flaming torch he held and, with a forceful, angry thrust, plunged it into the hay roof. The rain, however, quickly extinguished the flames, and his eyes narrowed in anger.

“Arrest them!” he growled to his men.

Several soldiers marched inside, only finding the elderly couple. Gretel was terrified at the attempt to burn the house, and now stood whimpering, and clinging to her husband.

“Come on, you hag,” laughed one brute, grabbing a handful of her hair.

She screamed, and Thomas, not a small man by any means, angrily pushed the soldier beside him to the ground and ran to help his wife.

“Leave her be,” he cried, standing in front of the two men who were dragging Gretel outside.

“Get back, you idiot of a worm,” snarled another soldier, who dealt the man a heavy blow to his head with the hilt of his sword.

Thomas fell to the floor, nearly unconscious. Two others quickly came and tied his hands, then pulled him to his feet.

As the group headed outside, a blood-curdling howl came from a nearby doorway, and the soldiers turned to see two husky, livid men rushing straight towards them.

It happened so quickly, that before they knew it, two soldiers were already being flung violently to the opposite end of the room, where they landed with a terrible crash.

Still the brothers yelled in ferocious voices, and ran straight ahead, without any lessening of their speed.

The next three soldiers, having witnessed the fate of their fellows, were somewhat more prepared. Swords drawn, they watched the advancing twosome uncertainly. It appeared as though the two could not see the ready weapons the soldiers held, since they continued with their charge. But they came to an abrupt halt only inches away from the drawn swords. The leader of these thugs, thinking they had gained an advantage, thrust out his sword towards the brother closest to him.

Wurst proved quicker still when he jumped back just far enough that the sword never touched him. The perpetrator of this blow, however, had dealt it so quickly and forcefully that the unchecked momentum of his movement sent him stumbling to the floor in front of Wurst, who knocked the man unconscious with one swift blow.

Meanwhile, one of the two remaining guards had lunged for Lipzug when he noticed that neither of these two men held any weapons. But he was stopped when Lipzug lifted his huge arm and grasped the descending wrist of his adversary in a firm grip. Although the brute squirmed to release himself, his arm proved too weak to match the daring peasant's. The soldier cried out as Lipzug crushed his wrist, and was finally forced to drop his blade.

Spying some coiled rope on the fellow's belt, Lipzug took hold of it and proceeded, with Wurst's help, to tie the cursing brute and his unconscious fellow together by their feet, neck, and hands, leaving the two helplessly tied together and wriggling on the floor.

By this time the remaining soldier—the youngest and smallest of those who had gone in—had quickly left the room to rejoin his fellows outside, who were securing Thomas and Gretel in chains.

Having finished with the men inside, Lipzug and Wurst each grabbed a sword and rushed outside in search of their parents. They found them surrounded by six men, bruised and bound. Blood rushed to their cheeks as they saw the two tied by their hands with ropes connected to Zalman's horse.

Before they could do anything, the remaining soldiers of Zalman's troop had surrounded the brothers, who were not very adept with the swords they had taken, and quickly found themselves bound like their parents.

Zalman stepped over to where the two brothers stood. They stared at him defiantly.

"Where is your sister?" he demanded in a cold and unfeeling voice.

"You traitor. You coward. You want to know where our sister is? Well, we don't know! So there!" Lipzug said while squirming incessantly.

"And even if we did," Wurst added quickly, "you would be the last one we would tell!" He spat on the ground near Zalman's feet with disdain.

Zalman took his sword and rammed the hilt of it into Wurst's stomach, causing the man to double over on his knees in pain.

"You will soon wish that you had something to tell!" Zalman told Wurst. "But you shall have plenty of time to change your mind. Take them away, now!"

Zalman's men obeyed instantly.

- 20 -

SENTENCED

The two were sleeping soundly though the sun was already high in the sky, shining brightly on them as Karsten rapped on the door. Finally he entered unwelcomed and awoke Ulrik and Erik.

"Is it already morning?" Erik mumbled as he arose and sprinkled his face with some cool water from a tin basin.

"Morning is long past. It is now noon! I fear that you have been staying awake far too late into the evening copying those pages, and sleep finally overpowered you!"

"The pages!" Erik said, suddenly standing up.

"What about them?" Ulrik asked, raising himself sleepily.

"I ... I just remembered a dream I had last night," Erik said in a near whisper, more to himself. "It was about the pages. We were visiting Luden for some reason, and it was something important, but I can't remember what. Only that it was very important that we were there."

"The investigation of these pages is now in full swing, isn't that what Winthro told us when he was last here but a few days ago? It would be a dangerous time to go to Hamburg."

"But we have to go. I feel it," Erik announced.

“That’s poor timing,” Karsten added with a grin. “If you were really meant to go, your premonition would have come in time for you to go with Winthro.”

“I am not in jest.” Erik continued. “And if for no other reason, I would simply like to see my good friend Luden again. Winthro did say that Luden was not under suspicion, so that is good. And as they cannot currently ship any pages, we do not need to take any with us. There will be no reason for anyone to suspect that this visit is anything more than a simple one of friend to friend.” Erik began to pace the floor while composing out loud a list of things to be done in preparation for the journey.

“You mean to go today?” Ulrik asked in surprise. “You don’t plan to inform him first that you are coming?”

“Why send a messenger when I can deliver the message of my arrival personally, and get there at the same time.”

Karsten shrugged his shoulders.

“So are you fellows coming with me? I’m sure Luden would be fascinated to meet the two of you. And he has a great house, and serves excellent food.” Erik looked enthusiastically at the other two.

“I suppose, if you really want to surprise him with the arrival of all three of us at the same time,” Ulrik answered.

And so it was that, after settling all their affairs for a fortnight, and seeing to it that all excuses for their journey were made, the three carefully hid their papers and writing materials, and set off for Hamburg.



“What?!” Luden’s expression was less than ecstatic as he opened the door to his office and saw Erik. He quickly ushered him inside.

“Erik ... I ... what are you doing here?”

“Then you are not pleased to see me?” murmured Erik, putting on a most piteous face.

“Er ... no, Erik, lad. It ... it is good to see you. But ... are you sure you were not followed or seen coming here?”

“I came into the city by horse, after first stopping by your house. I’ve brought my brother and our good friend Karsten. They are currently being entertained by Marinda. They are equally anxious to meet you and Stefano—that is, if he is still with you. But I thought I’d drop by here and announce our arrival personally.”

Luden looked as though he would collapse, but made a heroic effort to remain amiable and courteous. “I’m glad you could come, and that I get to share your company once again. I trust that your friends will conduct themselves circumspectly?”

“Oh, they will,” Erik answered. “And how is our good friend Stefano?”

Luden lowered his voice. “He is well, and still with us, but I am not sure for how much longer. We have had to be very careful, and there is no telling how far this Zalman will go in his investigations. I have heard reports of some of his methods, and they are not exactly lenient.”

“I did not see Winthro,” Erik said. “Is he here?”

“No, he is still away on business, but I expect his return any day now. But he is well, and soon to be married, as he may have told you.”

“Ah yes, so he did.”

“Now tell me,” Luden said, “why you have really come. Because I know that you never visit just for friendliness’ sake.”

Erik smiled, remembering the circumstances under which he had first come to Luden. “If you must know,” Erik began, “it was a dream. I have forgotten most of it, but I remember clearly that when I awoke there was some important reason for me to be here. I don’t exactly understand it myself. But I hoped at least that my friends and I could avail ourselves of your kind hospitality while we are here.”

Luden nodded. "Very well. What's done is done, and I look forward to meeting your friends."



A week had passed since Kristia's family had been captured. They were being held in separate cells, where, although they were not with their family, they were also not alone, but rather left abandoned with ruffians and folks of a baser sort.

A tray of food was brought once a day to the cells, with a bowl of soup and a chunk of dark bread for each, but otherwise little attention was paid to the uncomely groups.

Despair had set in on Kristia's family, and especially her father, Thomas, who found himself in a cell alone. He could not help but wonder what his family had done to deserve this tyranny, and what had become of Kristia. Had she, too, been captured, or had she managed to stay hidden?

Thomas was startled at the sound of approaching men, and the clang of the door as it opened. Zalman stood there, tall and imposing. He took a torch from someone behind him and came and stood in front of Thomas, ordering the fettered man to stand up.

Thomas tried to rise, but pain shot through his body. He let out a cry and slumped back to his place. "What do you want from me? I'm but a poor man. I've done nothing to you."

Zalman did not reply, but rather raised his hand. A large soldier stepped out from behind Zalman and raised an arm as if to strike Thomas. Zalman stopped the man and spoke in a calm and irritatingly passive voice. "All I want is what you've been keeping from me. Tell me where your daughter is, and you'll all go free."

Thomas folded his hands imploringly. "I have told you in all honesty. I swear. I came home one day and she was gone. She told no one where she was going. Have mercy! Please!"

"Quiet! I have no mercy for workers of evil. When you are ready to come clean before God, I will hear your pleas, and not before. Or else you will die here, and it will not be a light thing in that day when your soul is weighed and found wanting." Zalman spoke methodically with no trace of feeling, and then left, leaving Thomas in bitter despair.



The thick rope was tossed overboard and caught by a worker on the docks, who tied it firmly around a post. A few ropes and posts later, the barge was docked securely, and a gangplank was lowered for the men to disembark.

But before anyone could, the dock was suddenly swarmed by soldiers who appeared as if out of nowhere from the morning mist, and formed a closed half-circle around the gangplank, where they stood with weapons drawn.

The workers on the ship hesitated, unsure of what to do. Winthro finally stepped forward to the edge of the gangplank, and looked at a mounted officer who appeared to be the captain of this squad.

"Sir, I pray, tell me the reason for all this."

"Are you the captain of this vessel?"

"No. I am the manager of this company's fleet. What seems to be the problem?"

"Ah, are you the man called Winthro?" the lieutenant asked.

"I am," Winthro answered.

The officer gave a smirk and then replied loudly, "Then you are hereby placed under arrest in the name of the Holy Mother Church!"

Winthro's politeness faded and a shadow came over his face as he spoke. "For what cause am I to be taken?"

"I need not answer a prisoner!" the haughty guard taunted while digging his heels into his horse's flanks so that the horse jerked forward, and at the same

time pulled on the reins so that the horse stood on its hind legs, neighing powerfully. His men obeyed this signal and immediately boarded the barge and bound Winthro, who made no effort to resist.

He was led through the town, his hands tied by a long rope to the lieutenant's saddle, and taken to the jail, where he was thrown into a cell with another man, bound and fettered. Without speaking, the jailer left, locking the iron gates behind him.

As Winthro's eyes adjusted to the darkness, he suddenly recognized the other prisoner and gasped, and rushed to his side. It was Thomas. The broken elderly man was a piteous sight to behold. He looked as though he could scarce move a limb, yet his feet were chained to a pair of heavy iron fetters that were bound to the wall.

Kneeling at his side, Winthro lifted the old man's head and attempted to shift him to a more comfortable position. Fury mounted inside of him at the cold-hearted beast who could so torture an innocent soul. He was interrupted by the sound of loud voices and heavy footsteps coming down the hall and approaching the cell.

His eyes had barely adjusted to the dim room when they were blinded again by the torches the approaching guards carried with them. He could make out the sound of keys tingling, and then a deafening screech as the rusty gate opened. Before he could see what was happening, both his arms were grabbed hold of and he was dragged from the tiny dungeon room.

Attempts to question the guards which surrounded him proved futile. Without a word to him or each other they threw him into the back of a horse-drawn cart, which then departed in the direction of the town square. When it came to a halt, Winthro found himself being pulled off the cart, his hands still bound, and led inside a building. One of the guards left the room through an inside door, and seconds later the door

was flung open again. Winthro gasped when he saw Zalman on the other side of it, his face covered by a rough beard, and his eyes looking red and hollow.

Zalman smiled at seeing Winthro, but the bitter coldness that emanated from the man sent an involuntary shudder down Winthro's spine.

"How good of you to have come," Zalman said, the thirst for vengeance obvious in his tone.

"I preferred your dinner party invitation," Winthro replied with a hint of irritation in his voice.

"Ah, yes, the dinner party. But come, this is hardly the time for bringing up the past," Zalman answered sarcastically. "Nevertheless, I am pleased to have met you. You may yet prove more useful to me than I had at first imagined. Now, shall we?" he asked, motioning towards the door he had just come through.

"Shall we what?" Winthro asked.

"My cloak!" Zalman ordered to one of the attendants, ignoring Winthro's question. When it was given him, Zalman strode through the door, and two guards grabbed hold of Winthro and pulled him along behind Zalman.

Winthro suddenly found himself in a large and elaborately decorated side chamber of the cathedral filled with various official-looking figures of the church.

"Just think—you, a public example," Zalman muttered with a sly glance back at Winthro. "I couldn't have planned it any better myself."

The small crowd stirred, then quieted as an officer of the Inquisition pounded a gavel.

As Winthro tried to figure out what was happening, a herald began reading off the charges against him, pausing after each one so that the crowd could gasp and mutter accordingly.

"Heresy ... blasphemy ... Satanism ... sorcery ... attempting to subvert the doctrine of the Holy Mother Church..."

There were several other such vague and obviously conjured-up charges. When the herald had finished, Winthro could hardly conceal his outrage at what he realized was happening.

“What is your answer to these charges, young man?” the Inquisitor asked gravely after he had again silenced the room.

“Lies!” Winthro exclaimed loudly. “They are all lies!”

There were further mutters, as well as a few snickers of laughter, from the crowd.

The Inquisitor’s face grew grave. “Then,” he said, “seeing as you will not confess and cleanse your own soul before God, you leave us with little choice but to purge it with the righteous fires of judgment before man. For these works and the many other uncovered sins of your soul, you shall be burned at the stake. And may God have mercy on your soul.”

The gavel pounded again, and the Inquisitor stood up wearily from the central throne on which he had been seated, then left the room.

Winthro stood, rooted to his place, with a look of utter incredulity on his face. Zalman turned and grinned triumphantly towards him. Then the same two soldiers who had led Winthro into the room grabbed him again and led him out, followed closely by Zalman.

“Leave me with him!” Zalman ordered when they were back in the room together.

The soldiers nodded and quickly left through the outer door.

“I don’t understand,” Winthro said. “How can this be? Those charges are completely groundless.”

“Oh, but are they?” Zalman asked with an evil glimmer in his eye.

“You have no proof of any of these things.”

“Proof can be hidden, but when it comes to the emissaries of God Himself, truth cannot. Do you deny

that you have had anything to do with the spread of these heretical pages?”

Winthro looked down, avoiding Zalman’s gaze, and grew silent.

“Ha! Just as I thought,” Zalman exclaimed. “But you were a fool to help them. Oh yes, I know you are not the one I am *really* after. There are others, and I am prepared to be reasonable. Give me the names of those who are behind this, and your sins shall be forgiven, and you shall go free.”

A pang of fear went through Winthro’s stomach, but he remained silent.

“You have three days to consider my offer, and it is a generous one. The archbishop himself would rather just have you burned right away as an ensample to the people, but I persuaded him otherwise, because you are still my friend, and you saved my life once. Now I am trying to do the same for you. Think carefully on these things.”

So saying, Zalman left the room, and the two soldiers returned, and escorted Winthro back into the cart, and back to his cell.



There was a knock on the door, and it opened at the same instant. Fredrick looked up to see Gerth.

“Father Gerth, what is it?” Fredrick asked.

“You said Kristia had mentioned a man by the name of Winthro, whom she was to wed?”

“Yes,” Fredrick answered.

“I just returned from a meeting that was called by the archbishop. It was a trial by the Inquisition of this same man. He was condemned to be burned at the stake, but they offered no evidence against him. I can only see the hand of Zalman’s vengeance in this, perhaps in retaliation for having lost Kristia—twice now. I know this man, and he will be ruthless. He will doubtlessly try to use Winthro to find her, and in the end kill both of them.”

“Does Kristia know this?” Fredrick asked.

“I do not think so—nor should she, for now. She would likely turn herself in to Zalman in an attempt to save Winthro, but that would not do her or Winthro any good.”

“But then *we* have to do something,” Fredrick stated.

“I was hoping you would say that,” Gerth answered. “Now listen, we have two days. Here’s what I’ve been thinking...”

- 21 -

THE ATTEMPT

Winthro had been moved to a deeper, solitary cell of the prison to await his execution. He turned at the now familiar sound of the squeaky iron gates being opened, and squinted at the light of the intruder’s torch. Zalman had visited him several times over the last day—or at least what Winthro thought was the last day. Alone in the darkness, far from the tolling of any bells, and with no one bringing him any food, it had been impossible to know how much or how little time had passed.

Zalman had been his only visitor since he had been thrown into this dungeon, repeating his questions about who he had been working with. Zalman had even offered to drop all charges and questions in exchange for a single answer of where Kristia was. Winthro knew from Thomas that Kristia had disappeared, and that she was out of Zalman’s reach. He hoped she would not do anything rash when she discovered he had been imprisoned.

Winthro stood up in surprise at seeing two men enter the cell, rather than just Zalman alone as in the past. First was the jailor, followed closely by a man whose features Winthro could not make out, as he wore a heavy cloak and hood that enveloped him and his features.

The jailor pointed at Winthro, uttered a groan, and tromped away, locking the heavy wooden door behind him.

Speaking in a low voice, the cloaked fellow said, "You are the man Winthro, sentenced to death in the space of one day?"

Winthro tried to make out the stranger's face, but to no avail, and nodded his head in reply.

"Then I am come to hear your last confessions and administer the last rites for your soul."

"I have nothing to confess," Winthro muttered, looking down.

"Even if it would mean that you could see Kristia again?"

At that, Winthro jerked his head up, and strained even closer to see the priest's face. "What do you know of Kristia?" Winthro asked.

"She is well, but knows nothing of your imprisonment—not yet, in any case. Her love for you is so great that she would give herself to Zalman in order to save you. But we both know Zalman would never honor such an arrangement."

"Who are you?" Winthro whispered, realizing that this man was not here for any ritual of last rites.

"I am a friend, come to help the man who is to marry my sister."

"You lie, friend. I know both of Kristia's brothers, and you are not one of them."

Fredrick bit his tongue.

"Listen, you will just have to trust me. I know where Kristia is. I myself took her to the place where she is now in hiding from Zalman's wrath. Here, she gave me this to give to you upon your return, that you might know I spoke truly. I never imagined it would be under these circumstances." Fredrick reached into a pouch at his side and handed something to Winthro.

Winthro took it, and immediately recognized it as

the leather band and pendant he had given to Kristia just before his last voyage.

"It is hers," cried Winthro, ecstatically, but then paused. "How do I know you have not stolen this from her? How do I know you are not using this to try to trick me? Why are you here? What do you want from me?"

Fredrick sighed. "Look, I understand your hesitation, but I'm afraid we don't have much time. I want to help you because I believe you have been unjustly condemned. But there is little I can do on my own. I'm afraid I know little about you. I went to Kristia's home first, only to discover that it had been burned to the ground, and her family taken prisoner like yourself. I need to know if there is anyone you know and trust who could help you—all of you."

Winthro glanced pensively at the pendant in his hand, and then looked up.

"I care nothing for myself. But if you would help her family, speak to Luden Horstein. They are truly innocent, and if there's any man who can help them and plead their case, it is him."

Fredrick nodded, and turned to leave, realizing he would not be getting much more information from this man.

"If ... if you do see Kristia again," Winthro suddenly added.

"Yes?" Fredrick asked, turning towards the prisoner again.

"Tell her that I love her." Winthro's voice broke with this last sentence, and he turned away from the priest and slumped silently to the floor.

Fredrick stopped and knelt in front of the despairing man. "I will," he said, pulling a small wrapped bundle of fresh bread, fruit, and cheese from under his cloak and leaving it in Winthro's lap. Then he stood up and returned to the door, and knocked on it. The jailor's face appeared through a small, barred window.

"I am done here," Fredrick said. "The man is incorrigible."



"Sir, you have a visitor, a man from the church."
Luden looked up at the worker from his desk.
"Well, show him in," Luden answered.

Fredrick entered the room, and once he was inside, removed the hood that covered his head.

"Hello, good friar. How may I help you?"

Fredrick looked around a little nervously, and then spoke.

"I come with a message for you from the prisoner, Winthro."

Luden looked at this priest suspiciously, but said nothing.

"What do you know of Winthro?" Luden asked.

"Only that I was to administer his last rites."

"So it is true," Luden said with a sigh.

"What?" Fredrick asked.

"That he is already condemned."

"And unjustly," Fredrick answered.

At this Luden looked up, scrutinizing his young guest. He decided to ignore those words, and to choose his own carefully.

"You say you come with a message from this man?"

"Yes. He said that the family of his intended bride has been unjustly imprisoned by the church, and that you are the only one who can help them now."

"Their whole family, imprisoned?"

"Yes, by Zalman. All except for your man's intended, the girl Kristia, who escaped to safety before this happened."

"And how do you come to know all this?"

"Because I helped her to escape."

Luden was momentarily stunned, and unsure what to believe or to think of this young man, and the information he so freely offered.

"Why are you telling me these things, young man?" Luden finally asked.

"Because I'm hoping that you believe in Winthro's innocence as much as I do, and that for the sake of Kristia, you can help me find a way to rescue him."

Luden grew silent and pensive for some time.

"By your garb I see that you are a man of the church," Luden finally said.

"I am."

"Then you must know that Winthro has been tried and convicted as a heretic."

"There was no evidence presented against him. His conviction was the work of Zalman, not of a proper trial."

"So you do not believe the man to be a heretic?"

"I only know that Kristia loves him, and considers him a worthy man. That is reason enough for me to want to help him. Please, is there anything you can do?"

"I can speak to the archbishop regarding the girl's family. You are right regarding Winthro. He is a good and worthy man. However, Zalman has made himself very powerful, and has his eyes and ears everywhere. I shall have to tread carefully. And so must you, young man. Be careful of the zeal and enthusiasm of youth that could blind you to the dangers of what you are involving yourself in. But if you are truly serious about helping Winthro, there may be something you can do." Luden pulled a piece of paper from a drawer, scribbled something on it, then handed it to Fredrick. "Come to this address tonight, after dark—but I warn you, come alone, and see to it that you are not followed. The same when you leave this warehouse and return to wherever you have come from. Now, if you will excuse me, I must prepare to go see the archbishop."

With that, Luden rose, and showed his young guest to the door.



With Luden's words of warning still ringing in his ears, Fredrick approached the given address and wondered what he'd find. It was a tavern, but its doors were already closed and locked for the night. As he stood there, wondering what to do, a group of three drunk men staggered out of a nearby alley, singing as they stumbled along, arm in arm.

Fredrick looked at them nervously, wondering if it was some sort of trap, and drew himself back in the shadows of the tavern hoping that perhaps these drunk men had not yet noticed him. They continued on, oblivious to his movements, and looked as though they would pass on by. But they suddenly turned and began sauntering towards Fredrick.

Still unsure as to their intentions, Fredrick held his place and remained silent.

The men approached closely, still singing some drunken dirge, which grew louder as they drew near to Fredrick and the tavern he was standing in front of. They passed about an arm's length from him, and as they did, Fredrick heard a distinct whisper from one of them. "If you are Winthro's friend, follow us!"

Fredrick hesitated, and watched the men go by. They vanished down another alley before Fredrick decided to follow them and see where they might be going. He remained in the shadows as much as he could, and kept his cloak over his head. He followed them through several alleyways, and finally along a dirt path. Their singing had now abated, and Fredrick caught sight of one of the men looking back to see if anyone was following them.

When the men had spotted him, Fredrick noticed them turning aside. He approached the place and saw them huddled under a tree by the side of the road.

Fredrick stepped closer gingerly, and the three men eyed Fredrick just as suspiciously.

"You're the church boy who came to Luden today?" one of them asked.

"I am," Fredrick answered. "My name is—"

"There is no need to tell us your name, and we will not tell you ours. Let us rather discuss what we can do for Winthro. You said you have visited Winthro in prison?"

"I have, and spoke with him for several minutes under the pretense of administering the last rites," Fredrick answered.

"Do you think you could get inside to speak with him again?"

"I am not sure," Fredrick answered. "Last rites are only given once. But perhaps another pretense can be found."

"Good—we shall need one, for all four of us. And church robes as well. Can you get those for us?"

"Yes, I believe I can. But what are we going to do?"

"Rescue Winthro, and spirit him away before anybody realizes what has happened to him. Now, here is what we will do..."



Zalman rode past the main square with a sense of excited anticipation in his stomach. This would be his first public burning—and his greatest adversary of the moment would be at the stake. He reined in his horse and looked at the large, pitch-soaked pile of wood in the center of the square.

"Too bad you could not save your life, Winthro," Zalman muttered to himself. "I have made sure that the news of this burning has been spread far and wide, and doubtless your darling little love has heard of it. And if she comes, I will find her. You can be sure of that. And no matter what she does, she will not be able to save you from your fate."

Zalman furtively scanned the gathering crowd for any sign of Kristia, but to no avail. "No matter. She'll reveal herself soon enough when she sees her Winthro being led up the pile." He spurred his

horse and continued on towards the prison, where he found the prison wagon and two soldiers ready and waiting.

Zalman dismounted from his steed and motioned for the two soldiers to follow him as he entered the side door of the prison and was met by the jailor.

"I have come for the prisoner Winthro," Zalman said.

The jailor said nothing, but simply nodded and motioned for Zalman to follow. He led the man down a long flight of damp steps, through several corridors, and finally to the cell where Winthro was held.

"Open it," Zalman commanded.

The jailor did so, and Zalman stepped in, alone.

"Now lock it, and don't open it until I tell you to."

The jailor nodded again, and closed the door behind Zalman.

Winthro kept his head down.

"This is your last chance to save yourself, Winthro," Zalman said. "The wagon is here and ready to take you to a death that we both know you do not deserve, but which I am powerless to do anything against unless you give me what I am asking."

Winthro said nothing, and refused to look at his unwelcome visitor.

Seeing that Winthro was determined to face his death, Zalman grew weary of his pretense of friendliness. "As for Kristia, we shall catch her soon enough."

At this, Winthro looked up at Zalman, fear evident in his eyes.

"Oh yes," Zalman continued. "I have made sure that news of your execution today has been noised abroad far and wide, and she is sure to have heard of it, wherever she is hiding. If she is as loyal to you as you are to her, she will doubtless come, and when she does, we will catch her, and she will be mine."

"That's what this has all been about, hasn't it?" Winthro said, breaking his silence before this man for the first time since he had been captured. His voice was dry and husky from lack of water.

"Ah, the man still speaks. I was beginning to wonder if the jailor had not been trying out his torture devices on your tongue. But yes, once you are out of my way, Kristia shall have no choice but to give in to my demands—at least if she wishes for her family to be spared from the same fate."

"Her family shall be saved without your help," Winthro said.

Zalman's gaze flickered for a moment before he stared back hard into Winthro's eyes. "They are my prisoners, being held under my authority, just as you are."

"Reassure yourself all you want, Zalman. But your plans will come to naught, and as for Kristia, even though she may give you her hand, you will never have her heart after all that you have done."

"Enough out of you," Zalman said angrily. "I liked you more when you didn't speak. But at least I won't have to tolerate your presence much longer. I shall relish watching you burn at that stake as the heretic that you are. And we shall catch your friends soon enough. Mark my word. Your silence may have bought them some time, but that is all. They will be found and caught, just as you have been, and they shall share in your fate, and be none the better for your foolish nobleness."

"The blood of my innocent soul shall be on your hands, Zalman," Winthro answered. "I pity you on the day that you shall stand before your God. I go to Him gladly, and with a clear conscience. But you, even if you could buy all the absolutions and indulgences of the church, shall still stand before God naked and guilty in your sin. You have dared to poke your finger into the apple of God's eye. And though you may say

to yourself that you are doing God a service in all this, someday you shall know the truth, and be condemned by it as surely as you have condemned me.”

“I pity you, Winthro,” Zalman said in a tone of mock sympathy. “But at least you did not have time to start a family that you would have had to leave behind. Unless, of course, you have already dishonored this girl before God as you have dishonored yourself, in which case the church will have to condemn her and her fatherless child to the same fate as you shall suffer.”

At this, Winthro could not contain his rage any longer, and he rose and lunged towards Zalman, only to be jerked back by the chains that held him bound to the wall.

“Something tells me this conversation is over,” Zalman said with a smirk. “A pity,” he added insincerely. “I had hoped it could have ended otherwise, but you leave me no choice.”

So saying, Zalman stepped back towards the door, and with a shout, commanded the jailor to open the door again.

“Untie this man. His time has come.”

The jailor nodded and stepped in with his ring of keys, followed by one of the soldiers who carried a rope in his hands.

Within a few moments Winthro had been released from his fetters, bound by his hands with the rope, and was being led back through the corridors to the waiting prison wagon.

Winthro squinted as he stepped out into the sunlight.

“Where’s my horse?” Zalman called out when he did not see the beast.

The two soldiers, who were beginning to load Winthro into the large cage of iron bars on the back of the wagon, looked at him, surprised.

“Where’s my horse?” Zalman repeated.

“Are you sure you tied it down, Captain?” one of the soldiers asked.

“I don’t think you did, Captain,” the other soldier replied.

“Maybe it was scared off by a cat or something,” the first soldier replied again, and at that the two men snickered.

“Enough!” Zalman said, not wanting to lose his composure. “I will ride with you on the cart.”

“As you wish, Captain,” the first soldier answered, drawing a more serious expression.

When Winthro was secure in the back, the two soldiers took their seats beside Zalman on the front of the wagon and spurred the four horses forward. Even with four horses tied to the front of it, the wagon moved slowly for the weight of the iron cage on its back.

Zalman was a little disappointed that he would lose the opportunity of making his own triumphant entry on his magnificent horse, but he did not want to delay the execution by hunting for his lost horse at this moment. He appeased his disappointment with visions of the waiting crowd pelting Winthro through the cage with rotten vegetables, and then there, among the crowd, spotting Kristia, and seizing her. *Ah, sweet revenge.*

Suddenly he looked up. “Fools! This is not the way to the square! Where do you think you are going?”

“Not to the square,” the soldier who held the reins said. “Erik, I think it’s time to get rid of the Captain.”

“Good idea,” the second soldier responded, giving the man a shove so that he tumbled off the wagon and into the dust beside it.

“Traitors!” Zalman shouted at the top of his voice as he jumped up, drew his sword, and rushed after the lumbering wagon.

He stopped short when he noticed two prisoners in the back cage, and before he realized what was

happening, the wooden roof of the cage was tossed off the wagon and splintered into a hundred pieces as it hit the road.

Zalman quickly came to his senses, and ran after the wagon, only to be pelted with one iron bar after another as the two men on the back of the wagon quickly lifted them out of their place and tossed them into Zalman's path.

Once the wagon had been freed of this weight, the four horses—now spurred into full gallop—spirited the wagon and Zalman's prized prisoner away.



The wedding was a simple one, held in secret right in Tundrinna's house. Gerth presided over the ceremony, and Tundrinna and Fredrick were the only other witnesses present. It was when Winthro saw Kristia and Fredrick together that he suddenly realized that Fredrick could very well have spoken the truth about being Kristia's brother—and now that he was part of the family, when he questioned further, he was told of the secret behind Gerth and Tundrinna and their two children. Winthro, in turn, told of the secret that he and Kristia shared together, of his knowledge of the pages. This generated much conversation, and they all spoke until late in the evening of these and many other things.

It was also decided that Fredrick should meet again with Luden to try to arrange passage for Winthro and Kristia on a ship to England, where they would be safe from the reach of their persecutors, and where Winthro could work for Luden's acquaintance there, Arnold Kessler.

- 22 -

THE LETTER

Zalman paced back and forth in the stone-walled room, looking like a ferocious tiger in a cage. The three other men in the room crouched silently in the furthest corners, not daring to move even the slightest bit for fear he would direct his attention or fury towards them.

"Idiots!" he shouted, banging his fist against the wooden desk in front of him. "How could those guards have been so incompetent as to allow themselves to be so easily overcome? How could that fake prison wagon have made it all the way into the prison grounds without any man noticing? How could those strangers in church robes have entered the prison grounds in the first place? I'll tell you how. Only because you are all incompetent idiots, that's how! You!" he said, pointing to the fattest of the three. "You have until tonight to bring me a detailed report on every man who was on duty at the time this rescue took place, their names and ranks! They will pay dearly for their failure!"

The man quickly saluted and left the room.

"And you two," Zalman said, turning to the remaining men, "I have a special task for you that you will have to perform in utmost secrecy. I have a suspicion as to who may be behind all this, and who

could lead me back to this escaped prisoner. But my hands have been tied, and my holy superior distrusts me, so I will need concrete proof before I can take any further action. I am placing the responsibility of getting this proof in your hands, and I will not tolerate any more failures! Now listen closely..."



Fredrick waited anxiously at a table in a tavern. Winthro had told him that Luden often frequented this place, and that it would be safer to meet him here than to risk going to his office again.

After nearly an hour Fredrick spotted the man entering, and Luden instantly recognized the youth, even though he was no longer wearing his church robes.

Luden cast a few quick glances around, and apparently deciding that all else was fairly normal, he strode over to the table where Fredrick was seated, and greeted him loudly.

"My good friend, what brings you here? If I would have known you were coming, I would have greeted you at the docks. How is everything in the Low Countries?"

Fredrick played along, and stood up to embrace the man as if they were old friends. "Good to see you too, old friend—and the Low Countries are wet as always," Fredrick answered, then both the men sat down.

Luden lowered his voice. "What news do you bring, then, my good friend?"

Fredrick looked at the man. "Winthro is safe, but we need to find a way to get him out of Germany."

"God be praised. I had hoped so."

"What do you mean?" Fredrick asked.

"I was present at the execution yesterday, but there was a delay in bringing out the prisoner. Finally a report was brought that Winthro had hanged himself in his own cell. But even that did not stop them. They brought out the body, its head covered with a black

bag, and burnt it on the stake anyway. I suspected from the beginning that it was not really Winthro, but I am relieved to hear it for sure."

"He's not safe yet, nor is his wife. He was hoping that you'd be able to find a ship for him on its way to England, to an acquaintance of yours—a certain Arnold Kessler."

"I'm afraid the ports and ships here are being very closely watched. Winthro would have a better chance if he could make his way to Bremen to find passage there. I can provide him with monies for such a voyage. Return with me to my house. It will appear normal in the eyes of any who may be watching us. There we can speak more of these things, and I can send you away with the monies for my good friend."

"And what of Kristia's family? Winthro was insistent that I ask you about them."

"The mother and father have been released, and are back in the care of their lord. What is more—and now that I hear the execution was a failure, I can understand it—Zalman's authority has been curbed, and he may no longer make arrests or conduct any raids without the express permission and warrant from the archbishop himself. So I believe her parents are safe. Her brothers, however, are still being held for crimes of assaulting members of the guard, and are no longer under the jurisdiction of the church. I do not know what will become of them, but at least the sentence for assault is not as grave as being sentenced for heresy."

"That is good news. I'm sure Kristia and Winthro will be glad to hear of it."

"Come, let us go. And now you must tell me how you, a man of the church, have come to be involved in all this."

"That is a long story," Fredrick answered with a smile as the two men stood up and left the tavern.



As Fredrick headed down the dusty path towards Luden's stables, he walked at a quick pace. Reaching the place, he quickly found the stable keeper and handed him the paper Luden had given him, instructing the stable keeper to saddle and ready a horse for the young man. The stable keeper led Fredrick to a stall with a fine, strong-looking mare, and proceeded to saddle it.

"You have ridden before?" the man asked.

"Yes, a bit—but never before on so fine a horse."

"She's easy, if you are. If you're not sure of what you're doing, just take her slow, and you should get where you're going alright."

"Thank you," Fredrick said as he mounted the mare, and then he was off, back to Tundrinna's house, where Winthro and Kristia would be waiting for him.

He had been riding at a comfortable trot for almost an hour when he became aware of the presence of another mounted rider some distance behind him. As he continued along his path, he cast several glances backwards when the turns of the road afforded him the opportunity to do so without appearing obvious. Still the rider was there, apparently keeping the same pace as Fredrick, and always staying the same distance behind him.

When half an hour of this had passed, Fredrick decided to pull his horse to a halt and take a rest by the side of the road, to see whether or not this stranger would pass him by. But he had a distinct feeling this rider was purposely following him, and had most likely been following him all the way from Luden's house.

Fredrick had soon dismounted his horse and tied it to a branch of a tree, as he took the liberty to pretend to be sleeping under another tree in a spot that afforded him a good view of the path and the distant rider. Even though he was a ways off, it should only

be a few minutes before he would pass the spot where Fredrick was resting, and while there was a seed of fear in his chest, Fredrick held to the expectation that he was simply allowing himself to imagine too much, and that this rider would likely pass him by, and that that would be the end of it. Still, he kept a wary eye on the man.

When the rider had covered about half the distance to Fredrick, and obviously noticed the tied horse, he slowed his horse and hesitated.

Fredrick's heart began to pound a little harder in his chest. So this man *was* following him—there was no doubt about it. And now he was looking around, pondering his options and trying not to be obvious about it.

Finally the man turned and disappeared down a small side-path into the forest that Fredrick remembered noticing near that spot.

Fredrick nervously fingered the sword at his side that had been part of his disguise, and suddenly felt bold—perhaps because of the fear and nervousness he had detected in his follower. He stood up and got back on his horse, then spurred it back down the path he had come, and towards the place where the lone rider had disappeared. He found the path easily, and as he turned into it, saw the rider's horse tied neatly nearby.

Quick as a flash, he spied a figure scampering behind the cover of some trees.

"Who goes there?" Fredrick called, trying to sound confident.

There was no answer, but Fredrick heard further scampering.

Dismounting his horse, he ran towards the spot, but when he reached it, found no one.

As he glanced around him, suddenly and without warning he saw the man lunging towards him with a dagger poised and ready.

Fredrick barely managed to jump out of the way, and quickly realized that his attacker would stop at nothing to kill him in order to conceal his identity.

Having gained a momentary advantage, Fredrick ran for cover around the man's horse. The assailant was quick to follow, dodging under the horse's head and swiping his knife towards Fredrick again. But the sudden movement startled the horse, which strained against the reins that held him tied to the tree, and neighed frantically as he lunged upwards on his hind legs.

Fredrick jumped back in fright at the horse's neighing, as he was very close to it, and stumbled to the ground. He quickly got back on his feet to parry whatever blow the assailant was about to give him, but was startled when he wasn't there.

Then he saw him—sprawled on the ground a short distance in front of the horse, unconscious, with a trickle of blood coming out of his mouth, where the horse, in its lunge, had apparently hit him.

Fredrick ran over to the man and inspected him. He was still breathing, and while his mouth was bleeding, and there was a visible lump on the man's forehead, he seemed to be otherwise unhurt.

"You're going to have one big headache when you wake up, my friend," Fredrick said as he inspected the man to see if he could tell where he had come from, or who he might be working for.

Underneath the assailant's cloak, Fredrick recognized the uniform of Zalman's ecclesiastical guard.

Searching the man's vestments for any further signs of his identity, Fredrick found nothing.

"But your horse could sure come in handy for some friends of mine," Fredrick said as he moved over to where the man's horse was tied. He untied the horse and tied its reins to the saddle of his own horse. Then he mounted up and continued on his way, hoping that the assailant, when he came to, would

be too ashamed to admit his defeat and not mention anything of the encounter.



Fredrick paced nervously in front of an abandoned shack. He turned with a start when he heard a noise behind him, and was relieved to see that it was only Vester, standing with a somewhat amused grin on his face.

"Thank you for coming," Fredrick said.

Vester answered with a laugh. "My dear Fredrick," he said, throwing a lengthy, frail arm over Fredrick's slumped shoulder, "you looked startled, and almost guilty. I dare say you've committed some crime, and feel the need to confess to someone other than your saint of a guardian, Gerth."

"You are a good friend of my father, are you not?" Fredrick asked.

"Your father? Oh, you mean the friar Gerth—that father. Yes, I am."

Fredrick hesitated a moment, realizing his mistake, then continued. "I must ask you, in his name, and for my sake, to deliver this letter to the man and place I instruct you."

Fredrick began to pull the roll out of a bag at his side.

"Fredrick, Fredrick, my boy. It is hardly appropriate for a young monk like yourself to be asking men about their daughters. For that, you'd have to become a minstrel like myself first, and somehow I don't quite imagine you singing."

Fredrick did not laugh at the man's jest. Instead, his face grew sober.

"What is it with you, lad?"

"If you knew what this letter contained, and all that hinged on its safe and secret delivery, you would not jest about it."

"Now, now, Fredrick," Vester answered, "you must know by this time that I jest about everything, but

that inside this laughing frame hides the heart of a true and good man. I shall do as you request, and you need not fear that any man other than he who it is intended for discovers your secrets. ... Though you have made me immensely curious.” Vester held out his hand eagerly.

Fredrick hesitated, then realizing that Vester was only pretending to want to open the letter, gave the envelope into his hand.

Vester inspected the envelope carefully, and his face showed obvious disappointment that it was closed with a wax seal.

“Very well then,” Fredrick said at the man’s prolonged charade of curiosity. “If you must know, it is about a man and a woman. And its safe delivery could mean the difference between a happy ending or a sad one for the tale of their love for one another. I’m sure you, as a minstrel, can understand that.”

“Ah,” Vester said, his face lighting up with understanding. “Now I shall guard this envelope with my life, my good friend, for love is always worth protecting. Now, tell me the time and place, and I shall be on my way quicker than a monk can say his prayers.”

Fredrick gave a smile at the man’s jest, then gave him the necessary instructions.

- 23 -

THE MEETING

Wurst was jolted awake by the sharp point of a boot rammed into his side. Growling furiously at this maltreatment, he glared at the burly jailer who stood looking down upon him.

Slightly taken aback by the fierceness of the prisoner, the jailer backed away a few steps, but quickly regained the brutal courage he had momentarily lost. As he poised his foot for another jab, Wurst foresaw the man’s intentions and struggled to his feet, despite the heavy chains which bound him to a pair of iron fetters.

Satisfied that Wurst had arisen, the jailer moved on towards Lipzug, who lay still sleeping upon the stone floor. However, before the man had reached Lipzug, Wurst decided to spare his kin from the same rude awakening, and called his name loudly, so that Lipzug jumped to his feet before the astonished keeper had the pleasure of rousing him.

Agitated that he had been outdone, the jailer was all the more satisfied to deliver his message. Sneering gleefully, he proclaimed loudly, “Well, how good. You both seem eager to be up today, and all very well, for it has been decided to put your energies to better use. I have the pleasure of informing you that your actions have won you a five-year stay at a prestigious

labor-camp, where you shall have the opportunity to engage in more useful activities than just sleeping all day. Instead, you'll get to enjoy backbreaking labor in rat-like conditions. But fear not, there are bugs to eat, and they say they are very tasty!"

The jailor's stirring oration was cut short when a small garrison entered the putrid cell. A stern officer pushed the keeper to the side, and signaled to his men to unfetter and then bind the brothers.

The two brothers exchanged glances once outside the prison—the first time they had seen a blue sky or breathed clean air since their arrest.

They were hustled onto the back of an open wagon, and then tied back to back onto the wooden benches in the center of it. Five guards sat around them, and another was up front at the reins. With a crack of the whip, the wagon began rolling over the dusty roads.

Throughout the journey, the guards watching the prisoners seemed fully aware of the brutal strength of these prisoners, whose deeds against their comrades had often been retold and exaggerated, and so they kept a wary eye on the two.

Lipzug and Wurst, in turn, kept a wary eye on each of their guards, and also on their surroundings, looking eagerly for any chance to secure an escape. Yet it was obvious that, tied as they were, there would be little they could do on their own.

The wagon now entered a dense forest. The trees successfully obscured much of the sun's light, engulfing the path they were on in complete shadow. As they continued still deeper into the forest, the wagon suddenly came to an abrupt halt, and the driver began screaming obscenities.

The other guards stood up to see what was happening, and saw an old hag standing in the middle of the narrow path. As she shifted her legs with obvious struggle towards the side of the road, the

driver sighed impatiently. But his sigh was cut short by the sound of a shrill blast that set all the guards on edge. Before they could react, they were surrounded by nearly twenty rugged thieves, each holding some crude object or knife, which nevertheless seemed more than adequate to serve as a weapon.

Looking over the filthy mass, the captain of the guards uttered an angry shout as he stood up in his place and pulled out his sword. The other guards followed his example, and at the captain's signal jumped off the wagon and surrounded it in a circle of their own, their swords drawn menacingly.

At the sight of this well-organized defense, the brigands seemed momentarily frightened, but quickly realized that the numbers were on their side. A shout came from the leader of the band, and with a roar the brigands were upon the guards. Wounds were inflicted and blows were exchanged on both sides, and within several minutes the guards were overtaken and disarmed, and the brigands proceeded to search the pockets of their victims. Nobody seemed to notice the two bound prisoners until Wurst called out to the men.

"Friends, I thank you for your gallant ambush of this escort, for in harming these, you have achieved a double victory, one for your noble selves, and one for us. And now if you would be so kind as to untie us, we would be ever so grateful."

Flattered by the kind address, the leader of the ruffians bowed and stepped towards the men.

"Have you any monies then, to grant us that we might release you?"

"In all truth, good sir, we would love to repay your kindness. But alas these rogues, who call themselves worthy soldiers, have taken from us any monies we would have had to give you. I hope you have found an adequate reward on these men, who you have now adequately rewarded for their own actions."

The leader of the band allowed himself a chuckle at Wurst's words, and nodded to one of his men to cut the heavy ropes and unchain the two prisoners from their fetters with a ring of keys that had been retrieved from one of the soldiers.

"You two look like you could be right at home with us," the leader said.

"That is very gracious of you," Wurst answered. "But I'm afraid we have unfinished business elsewhere that we must attend to."

"Very well," the leader answered. "And in recompense for all that you have suffered at the hands of these men, why don't you take the wagon and horses with you. You'll travel faster, and we have little use for them. In fact, we may be able to provide you with some other items we have little use for."



"Heh, look! I know that man—would recognize him anywhere! But what's he doing here?" the young guard asked, hidden in some bushes and watching the walkway up to Luden's estate.

"Oh come on, he's a total stranger. How could you know him?" the other asked.

"I'll tell you who he is. He's a minstrel, spends all his time bumming the streets of my hometown not too far from here."

"So what's a minstrel doing here?"

"Look, he's pulling out some sort of paper—a message, I'll wager. Now is that suspicious or is that suspicious?"

"I'm not sure. It could be nothing. Just because you happen to know the guy doesn't mean I'm going to go off telling Zalman that this man is receiving suspicious visitors. Now if we could get our hands on that paper, that might be a different story. We'd have something to know or not know. But he's already at the door and going in. Just forget about it. If anything more comes of it, we can say something. But until then, I'm not

risking Zalman's anger over something so inconclusive as a minstrel you happen to recognize."

The young man merely shrugged his shoulders and watched helplessly as the minstrel disappeared inside the house.



"What can I do for you?" Luden asked as he stepped into the study where Vester waited.

The tall minstrel turned from the painting he had been inspecting, and greeted the man.

"You are the merchant Luden?"

"I am."

"I bear an urgent message for you from a young priest, who bade me deliver it in all haste and all secrecy."

"I see, and where is the message?"

Vester reached into the large bag at his side, fumbled for a moment, then looked up, shocked.

"What is it, man? Are you going to tell me you have lost the message?"

Vester looked down again, then suddenly pulled the page from the bag.

Luden looked at the minstrel blankly, not appreciating the jest.

Vester cleared his throat, and the growing grin from his face, and handed Luden the letter.

Luden opened it and read.

Dear friend,

I am sending this message at the hands of a trusted messenger. I have relayed your message to your good friend, who insisted he would not leave without an opportunity to say goodbye. As such, his three friends have arranged to travel with him and his bride to visit you at the place of letters tomorrow night. They shall stay but a few hours, and depart that same night. I trust your hospitality shall see to them kindly.

*I am eternally grateful for your assistance in all these matters, and pray God's blessing upon you, your business, and your family.
Sincerely, a brother.*

When Luden had finished reading the short but informative letter, he turned back to Vester. "My good friend, I know not where you come from, and perhaps it is better that way. But if you have traveled long or hard to reach this house, then please take time to rest and be refreshed from your journey, and even to bide the night and take your leave in the morning."

"That is very kind of you," Vester answered. Even if it was only noon, and Vester could have made it back to Adendorf by nightfall if he kept a good pace, the offer of two potentially substantial meals and a rich bed for the night was one he would not pass up. And, after all, there was no immediate hurry to return.

"I shall inform my wife, then," Luden said. "In the meantime, make yourself at home."



Luden knocked quickly on the door to Stefano's hut. Moments later the door was opened, and he entered hastily.

"Good evening, Stefano. But, what is this?" Luden asked, staring at some neatly wrapped bundles on the couch before him. "You look as though you are preparing for a journey."

"And so I am, my good friend Luden."

"But why?"

"God has shown me that it is time to move elsewhere. The arrest of your good friend, even if by God's grace he managed to escape, shows that they are getting close to your household. If they were to investigate here, my presence would only cause you trouble. But if I leave, you will be able to maintain your innocence, and perhaps in time, continue your good ministry with the help of your friends. It is no

longer needful for me to stay."

"But then, where will you go?" Luden asked.

"Perhaps to Portugal, to join my brother there."

"It will be difficult to leave now. They are watching the ports very diligently."

"Ah, but I won't be traveling by way of the sea. I shall go by land. I may have been a boatsman in my youth, but that was of small vessels on the canals of Venice. I'm afraid I have never been able to stomach a voyage on a bigger vessel," Stefano added with a chuckle, "which is another reason I never followed the occupations of my seafaring brothers."

"That is certain to be a long and perilous journey!" Luden exclaimed.

"Is it really that much longer and more perilous than going by ship, my friend? But God shall be with me, as He has been with me until now."

"When do you intend to leave?" Luden asked, looking around at the obviously packed belongings.

"Tonight, by foot," Stefano answered. "I believe I shall be least likely to be noticed that way."

"My friend, I shall truly miss you, as shall my wife and friends. It seems that everyone has heard the call of God to leave at the same time."

"What do you mean?"

"I have just received news that Erik, Ulrik, and Karsten will be dropping by tonight, bringing Kristia and Winthro with them to bid goodbye. They are on their way to England, where, by God's grace, they will be safe from those who seek them here. You must stay until then, and I shall see you all off with whatever additional provisions you shall require. Perhaps you can even ride part of the way with the others when they leave. Then you shall have the benefit of their protection on the roads at night as well."

"Very well, you have convinced me. And I must thank you for your generous kindness and gracious hospitality all these years. I can truly say that I have

lacked nothing here, and I shall miss you and your family.”

“What I gave is but a small repayment of the great debt I owe you for Marinda’s life, and for the faith and truth of God that you have so diligently and willingly imparted to us and our friends.”

A short while later, as Luden rode from the hut back towards the docks, little did he guess that two pairs of eyes were watching him intently from behind a row of thick shrubbery.

“What was he doing in there?” one of the men whispered to the other.

“Shh!” the other replied in a low voice. “Don’t you know anything? It’s almost hunting season. He was probably just stocking up this place.”

“But then why is he leaving by this dirt path instead of through the gate?”

“Probably because it’s a shorter way, you fool.”

“But I thought I heard—”

“You think too much. Now just be quiet and concentrate on what counts.”

The first man shrugged and the two turned back to watching the main house.



The cart rolled to a halt in front of a small group of soldiers. A wrinkled and toothless hag sat beside her hideous husband. The woman was wearing a large, bulky dress, dotted with rough and colorful patches, and a coarse working woman’s apron over it all. Her large rump rested comfortably against a high barrel, and several other goods and baskets filled the rest of the cart.

The man held the reins and was driving the two horses along at a steady pace. A shedding straw hat rested upon his filthy head, and covered a good portion of his face. He pulled the horses at the front of the cart to an abrupt halt, nearly too late, barely missing a stationed guard.

“What’s this? Can’t a man and his woman get into the city without being stopped by guards?” the man said, slurring his words.

The captain of the guard, seeing that these folks were obviously peasantry, and of the lowest sort, decided himself too high to answer the man’s question. Rather, he ordered the odd couple to unload themselves, and stand by for searching of their cargo.

“Cargo? What cargo? It’s only my things!” the old hag suddenly rang out, the words coming shrill and sharp.

The husband, having spied the weighty weapon upon the officer’s belt, quickly stepped down, but his wife remained seated and stubbornly refused to move an inch.

“Do we look like scum to you? What’s this all about?” the woman’s tirade continued. “We’re just coming to the city to see our son, and all we have with us is a few of our things, and it’s almost dark, and now you want to unload it all and search it? How long is that going to take?”

The captain, a little taken aback by the woman’s forceful words, nevertheless reasserted his authority over these low people. “I have the right to order you about as I wish—that is, if you still wish to enter this city. And I order you to step down,” he said in a menacing tone, hoping the woman would yield to his authority.

“You’ll have to drag me down,” the woman answered, “because I’m not moving. Herman, get back on this wagon.” She added the last part with a menacing glance of her own towards her husband.

Herman looked at his wife, then back at the captain, and shrugged, remaining in his spot.

The other guards exchanged uncertain glances. The woman looked as if she would be very heavy to move, and none of them were eager to get very close to her.

"I'm sorry, sir," Herman offered apologetically, and in a low voice. "I don't know what gets into her at times, and I'm afraid when she gets like this, I'm powerless to change her mind."

"Quiet!" the captain ordered.

Herman obeyed with another shrug as the captain himself strode purposefully towards the wagon to take this woman up on her challenge. He mounted the wagon and pointed his dagger towards the woman. "Woman, get up and off this wagon!" he ordered.

The woman looked stunned to see the weapon, but instead of moving from her place, she instead glanced at the captain.

"Erik?" the woman said. "My little Eriky? I didn't know you had become a guard!"

The captain looked around uncertainly, then realized the woman was speaking to him.

"Madam, I don't know what you're talking about. Now please step off—"

Before he could finish his sentence, and before the poor man knew what hit him, the bulky woman had wrapped her arms around his neck, and buried her sobs in his shoulder.

The captain pulled violently away, and could hear snickers of laughter coming from the other guards. But the woman held on to his collar, and now began to wail only inches from his disgusted face, revealing a mouthful of assorted smells, shapes, and colors.

"My little Erik! We have missed you so! Now Mommy will be able to take proper care of you again. Oh, I didn't recognize you in this dusk, but how handsome you have become. Oh, Erik, you make Mommy so proud. Come, give your mother a big kiss, Eriky."

The captain quickly broke himself loose, and was looking for a way out of this highly embarrassing situation. Fortunately he spotted one—another wagon had just pulled up behind this one.

He jumped off the wagon and walked back over to the woman's husband.

"Take your cart and your woman and begone!"

The man instantly obeyed, and within moments was back at the reins, spurring his horses on. But the husky harridan turned from her place and looked back towards the captain as the cart pulled away, shouting out, "My good little Eriky, you will see us for dinner, won't you? I'll be expecting you! Oh, Erik!" And the woman ended with another loud and emotional sob that brought another bout of laughter from the other guards, until the captain turned to them sternly, and they all fell silent, and went about their business of inspecting the next wagon.

As the cart rounded a corner, the couple remained silent for a ways longer, but once they were a good distance away, and further into the heart of the city, Lipzug clutched his stomach and began to laugh uncontrollably.

Wurst, who wore the disguise of the unbecoming husband, joined in the cackling, and congratulated Lipzug on his fine acting. "I'd say you play the role of a woman becomingly."

"You should have seen his face when I called him little Eriky. I almost burst out laughing right there, and quickly had to bury my head in his shoulders and pretend I was crying."

"And that only scared him even more, I'm sure," Wurst said. "But come now, we must see if we can find this Winthro fellow. He did say he worked at the docks, right?"

"Yes. I believe I remember him saying something about the Horstein Company. But you'd better be the one to ask directions. I think some pieces of this disguise are starting to slip," Lipzug said, fumbling with some objects that were meant to pose as breasts.



A few hours later, as darkness was starting to settle over the city, Lipzug and Wurst arrived at the largely deserted and unlit docks. Lipzug had discarded his disguise into the baskets on the back of the wagon, and now the two brothers walked along the docks, trying to locate Luden's company.

They had already been back to their old home, but like Fredrick, had found it burned to the ground. And not feeling like they could safely report to their lord, the two had decided to try to locate Winthro instead, and now here they were.

"Fine day to be out in the dark," Wurst muttered, crossing his bare arms tightly and stomping his feet in an effort to retain some warmth.

"Do you suppose we'll find him?" Lipzug asked, scanning the many buildings and warehouses along this part of the river.

Wurst shrugged. "All we can do is try." He pulled the tattered remains of what had once been a large cloak tighter around himself, then stopped abruptly and dealt a stealthy but harsh shove in Lipzug's side.

"What?" Lipzug asked.

"I heard something behind us. I think we're being watched. Let's continue in some quiet conversation, and if there is someone there, they'll probably try to get closer to hear us. Then, when he's within reach, we'll jump on him and find out what he wants."

Lipzug nodded, and began to ramble some words of little meaning. As Wurst had guessed, they again heard some movement, and cautious steps nearing the spot where they stood. Moments later, and in the middle of a sentence, the two brothers simultaneously turned around and prepared to pounce on their victim, but were surprised to find an older and dignified man standing before them.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" Wurst demanded menacingly.

"Peace, strangers. I was about to ask you the same thing," the man answered.

"Then what did you mean, trying to sneak up on us?" Lipzug demanded.

"I wanted to make sure..." The man paused for a moment. "I just wanted to make sure you weren't up to any mischief."

"And what if we are?" Lipzug answered.

Wurst restrained his brother. "Good sir, we are seeking a man by the name of Winthro, whom I believe works for the Horstein Company."

"It's a little late to be looking for workers now, isn't it?" the man answered. "But you must have come from afar. The man you seek was executed a week ago in a bonfire."

"Winthro? Dead? But how ... that can't be!" Lipzug began to protest, obviously shaken.

"Why, what is the man to you?" the man asked.

"He ... was to marry our sister," Wurst said.

"Kristia?" the man asked.

"You know her?" Wurst asked.

"Ah ... but then you must be Wurst and Lipzug," the man said, at the same time looking around nervously. "But, how is it that you are here? I thought you were both still in prison?"

The two brothers looked at each other and then back at this stranger in alarm.

"And who are you, that you would know of these things?" Lipzug asked, laying hold of the man's collar.

"Please, peace my friends. I mean you no harm. My name is Luden, and I know where Winthro and Kristia are."

"You just said he was dead," Wurst said.

"Yes, so I did, because I did not know who you were. But he is in fact still alive, for I happen to know that he escaped. But this is no place to be speaking of these things. Come with me."

Lipzug, who still held the man's collar, now gripped it even tighter. "To our deaths, no doubt."

"Do you want to see your sister or not?" Luden asked, his voice growing impatient. "This may be your last and only chance."

Wurst again nudged his brother, and Lipzug let go of the man.

"We will go with you," Wurst said.

"Good. Have you horses?"

"A wagon, tied but a short distance away."

"Good. Take it and follow the path along the river. You'll come to a point where the path splits in two. Wait there, and I shall meet you on horse, and from there we shall be able to talk more."



"Psst ... Jenssen—come quickly!"

"What is it now, you fool?"

"I ... I was watching that dirt path. I just saw Luden come back that way, with two large men. I ... I swear they're the two brothers of that girl we were looking for."

"You're crazy—those two are securely imprisoned."

"Not anymore—it's them, I tell you! Come, see for yourself—quickly!"

The man grunted and quietly followed his young companion to a hidden spot just in time to see the two men disembark from their wagon and enter the cottage with Luden.

"So, was it them or was it them?" the young man asked.

"For once you just may be right. Stay here and keep watching. I shall report this to Zalman at once."

- 24 -

HIS FURY

Zalman stood tensely before the archbishop, impatiently waiting the man's reply to his findings and request for a warrant.

Tutz remained silent a long time, then finally spoke. "Well, my son, you have certainly proved your worth in this case. Yet I caution you to not let your zeal run away with you. If we attack at this very moment, we may well catch these two brothers, and perhaps implicate Luden in harboring them. But that shall be the end of our victory. No, rather let us wait, and keep watching. If Luden was involved in the escape of these two brothers—for I have today also received news that their escort to a different prison never arrived—he is just as likely involved in Winthro's escape, and Kristia's disappearance. And by waiting and exercising patience, you might yet have your chance for revenge on these as well. And if Luden is indeed part of this network of nefarious allies who have been doing Satan's work among us, we may yet have a chance to trap all our fish in one cast of the same net."

This entire speech was made with hardly a pause for breath, and so Tutz ended in a pant, falling back into his cushioned seat. When he had caught his breath, he let out a quiet laugh and chuckle. "God has

a way of getting justice, and this time we shall be His hands to execute judgment on the unrighteous.”

Zalman strode closer to the seat upon which the archbishop sat.

“With all respect, sir, I suggest we strike immediately and catch Luden while the stains of guilt are upon his hands, lest he maintain his innocence. If we wait, the fish within our grasp may swim.”

At the statement, Tutz rose quickly to his feet. “No!” Tutz shouted. “You shall do no such thing. There have been too many complaints pertaining to your searches and arrests already. We shall move slowly, and wait until the net is full before we draw the strings around them. Luden is a well-to-do man with connections in many high places. We shall arrest him, yes, but we shall catch and arrest as many with him as possible.”

“Yes, your eminence,” Zalman muttered.



“Come in, come in!” Stefano exclaimed, eagerly greeting his visitors and ushering them inside, not wanting to have any more commotion at the entrance to the cottage than necessary.

Ulrik, Erik, Karsten, Winthro, and Kristia entered the main room, where they were again greeted by Luden and Marinda and—to Kristia’s great surprise, her brothers, Lipzug and Wurst.

They spoke for a long while. Kristia and Marinda served and offered refreshments that Luden had especially stocked up the cottage with for this occasion, and finally joined in the conversation when the menfolk urged them to seat themselves.

Many stories and histories were exchanged. All had a good laugh at the tale of Lipzug and Wurst’s disguised entry into Hamburg. Kristia and Winthro were congratulated for their marriage, and many happy wishes were showered on them. Erik, Ulrik, and Karsten told a great story of Winthro’s rescue, and

Kristia was pleased to learn that it was Stefano who had brought the first translated pages with him.

Finally it was getting late, and the moment of farewells that none had been looking forward to arrived.

Stefano took the lead in closing the evening. “My dear friends, it has been good to meet with you all. I fear, with things being as they are, that it might be the last time any of us will see each other for a good while. Our paths have come together in fortune and misfortune, but the hand of God has guided them all to this moment, and He shall continue to guide our paths, though they now must separate, as we follow Him. Let us all keep one another in our prayers, as well as in our hearts and memories. I shall miss you all greatly.”

“And we you,” the others answered.

“Then let us now pray and commit our ways to the Lord, that He may bless and keep us all from this night forward, and even unto the end of the world, as He has promised.”

The group bowed their heads as Stefano closed his eyes and prayed.

“Dear Jesus, we thank You for the many great works that You have done on our behalf in protecting us from the wrath of man. We thank You that we could share the blessing of Your truth and Words with many, including these dear ones here. We thank You for how each of us have come to know You, not as we knew You in the churches of our youth, but to know You personally, as One Who loves, cares, instructs, and guides each of us in Your will.

“Now it is time to leave one another and the fellowship we have shared together, some of us for years, and some of us for merely hours. But we pray that as we leave, we shall each carry with us that which has bound us together, and treasure Your Words and Your presence in our hearts forever. Amen.”

“Amen!” the others echoed in unison, and then the room fell into silence, as each looked at the other, wondering if they would ever see each other again after this night.

Luden was the first to break the uncomfortable silence. “I shall go out first, since Kristia has said that her brother believes this place is being watched, and I well believe it. When I return, we can load up the carts with the additional goods that Lipzug and Wurst have graciously helped me carry here today. I intend to see you all well on your way.”

With that, Luden stepped outside.



“Ah, young man, perhaps you can tell me where your father is?” Vester asked, bumping into Tillone in a hallway of the house.

Tillone shrugged his shoulders.

“Can’t you speak, boy? I can’t hear your shoulders rattle.”

Tillone looked at the lanky stranger with an amused grin. “You must be from very far away if you don’t know that that means I don’t know,” Tillone said, repeating the gesture of the shoulders.

“Ah, but it can mean a lot more than that—for example I don’t care.”

“Maybe I don’t,” Tillone countered, and turned away.

Vester sighed, and was about to walk away as well when Tillone stopped and turned around.

“I do know one thing,” Tillone said.

“And that is?”

Tillone hesitated. “Well, I don’t know that I’m supposed to tell you. *I’m* not even supposed to know, and he was being very secretive about it.”

“Yes?” Vester asked, starting to get curious.

“I suppose he never told me *not* to tell anyone,” Tillone continued.

Vester turned as if he was about to leave, as if

he was bored rather than in suspense by the young man’s delays.

“He was bringing lots of stuff to the hunting lodge earlier today,” Tillone blurted out. “And two large strangers with him. Don’t know why he was being so secretive about it though. I just happened to be downstairs in the storerooms when I saw him come in and start directing these two men to carry things out, and doing it very quietly, as if he was stealing it or something. So I went out by another way and saw them bringing all these things to the hunting lodge. Perhaps he is doing something there.”

“Then why aren’t you there, spying on him again?” Vester challenged.

“Maybe because I don’t really care,” Tillone answered. “But if you want to, go right ahead.”

“Maybe I will, then,” Vester answered. And with that, the young man turned and went on his way.



“What’s taking him so long?” Wurst asked when Luden still hadn’t returned.

“I’m not sure,” Stefano answered. “He should have been back by now.”

“I’ll go outside and check,” Wurst offered, but Kristia protested.

“Wait. We don’t know what happened. Maybe he met somebody, and it would be suspicious to return to us right now.”

“If we are being watched, he may have been captured,” Stefano said.

Marinda let out a gasp of horror.

“So what are we going to do?” Lipzug asked. “Just sit here not knowing anything?”

“Shh!” Winthro said, and all the others went instantly silent. He took off his shoes, and slowly crossed the wooden floorboards on his socks. He extinguished the candelabra that had been the only light in the room, then crept over to the nearest window.

He carefully lifted a corner of the heavy drapes and peered outside. Seeing nothing, he proceeded to do the same at several other windows.

“Anything?” Stefano asked.

“Nothing,” Winthro answered. “Only our carts and horses exactly where we left them. If somebody is out there, and they’ve taken Luden, they doubtlessly already know that we are here also, so then why haven’t they come for us yet?”

“Maybe it’s only one man, or a few, and we outnumber them,” Lipzug answered. “Maybe they’re hoping we’ll keep coming out one by one. That way they can get us. I say we all go out, get on our horses and wagons, and see what happens. All together we may even be able to help Luden if he’s in any trouble.”

“If we are being watched,” said Winthro, “and they are serious about apprehending us, they would have known long ago that we outnumber them, and would have had plenty of time to call for reinforcements.”

“But maybe those reinforcements aren’t here yet, which is all the more reason for us to make our move now!” Lipzug insisted. “I’m not waiting around here for them to come get me again!”

“What if we pray?” All turned to Karsten, standing near the hearth.

“Karsten is a sample to us all,” said Stefano. “Let us ask Heaven for guidance, seeing we are incapable of making a decision on our own.”

The group all bowed their heads. This time it was Karsten who led the prayer.

“Lord, we don’t know what to do,” Karsten whispered. “We may be surrounded by the enemy, or it may be that Luden had to distract someone and lead them away from this place so that we could make good our escape. We don’t want to make the wrong move, but we do need to move and leave this place. Please give us a sign, and help us know clearly what we are to do.”

Hardly had Karsten finished his prayer when all became aware of a loud voice a short distance from the cottage that wasn’t Luden’s.

“Hello ... and what are all you men doing here?” There was a muffled shout, a thump of some sort, and then silence.

Winthro returned to the windows, repeating his earlier procedure.

“I still can’t see anything out there,” he said.

“But there’s obviously someone—or someones—out there, and they know we’re here, and they don’t want us to know they’re there!” Lipzug said.

“What are we going to do?” Marinda cried. “And what have they done to my Luden?”

The question was met with silence. Finally a voice spoke out of the darkness. It was Stefano, who had remained silent since the prayer.

“While Karsten was praying, I very clearly heard the words of the apostle Paul, to ‘fight the good fight of faith.’ But I am not a man of war, and I was resisting these words in my mind, until another Scripture came to me. There is a time of peace, and a time of war. Even Jesus’ disciples carried swords at times, and I feel the time has come for us to do the same.”



A troop of ten armed horsemen followed Zalman as he thundered down the path that led to the cottage. When he reached the cottage, he dismounted and approached one of the soldiers. He instantly spotted Luden and another stranger bound side by side on the ground beside the man.

“What’s this?” Zalman demanded. “I told you not to make a move until I got here!”

“Th-th-this man came out, alone,” the soldier stammered, pointing to Luden. “We had to take him, or he could’ve warned the others.”

“And this fellow?” Zalman said, pointing to the lanky man sitting back to back against Luden.

“He came out of nowhere, sir, making a loud noise.”

“Any further movement in the house?” Zalman asked.

“None, Captain. We’ve been watching all sides. Nobody could have gotten out of this place without meeting us first.”

“Excellent, then let’s go make some arrests.” Zalman motioned for the riders with him to lift their torches and position their horses around the cottage, and in full sight of its occupants. Their costumes were designed to be both frightening and imposing. Over their coats of mail, the mounted guards wore red robes that shimmered ominously in the light of their torches, and a pointed hood that covered each one’s face, leaving but two holes for the eyes to look through, so that they looked as ghosts of flame on dark horses.

Zalman himself retained his regular armor, and took up his position in front of the main entrance. Then he chose two foot soldiers and directed them towards the door.

The two large men, wearing white robes and pointed hoods, nodded, and when the first reached it, he pounded hard on the wooden door. “Open up in the name of the church and the name of the law.”

There was no response.

“We know you’re inside,” the soldier bellowed. “Come out with your hands over your heads. Give yourself willingly into the hands of the church and your sentence shall be lenient. Resist, and the power of God shall fall upon you in all its fury!”

The house remained silent, and the two soldiers looked back at Zalman, who nodded.

With a quick motion, the two soldiers took a step back, then with all their might kicked against the door. It splintered right off its hinges and landed on the floor with a thud. The two soldiers found themselves staring

into the gaping hole of darkness that was left, but there was still not a sound from inside the house.

The first soldier looked back with a stunned expression on his face. “It looks empty and deserted, sir,” he said.

But Zalman was not convinced. “Then go inside and make sure!” he ordered.

The two men nodded and stepped inside one by one. The others watched with bated breath. Two muffled thuds came from inside the house, then all was silent again. The soldiers did not return.

“Empty and deserted—as a rat’s nest!” Zalman muttered. He unsheathed his sword and lowered it towards three white-hooded archers standing nearby. At his signal, they each stretched their bows, then lit the tips of their arrows on a torch that was stuck in the ground in front of them. An instant later, three flaming arrows shot towards the straw roof of the cottage, and plumes of smoke began to billow from them. The horsemen all drew their swords, and the remaining footmen did the same, ready to catch and slay anyone who emerged from the burning house.

Zalman suddenly looked up when a single drop of rain struck his hand. Within seconds the drops had turned to a steady drizzle that beat down the small flames on the roof of the house until they sizzled out completely.

The three archers, seeing what had happened, quickly lit another volley of arrows and fired them into the roof. The flames again caught a few patches of straw, but were again just as quickly put out by the continuing drizzle.

Zalman fumed inwardly, and gave another signal. The remaining six footmen, along with six of the horsemen who now dismounted and joined their pedestrian comrades, gathered in front of the main door—or the hole that was left. With the remaining four horsemen watching the other corners of the cottage, Zalman

closed in and positioned his horse next to the open door. He took his torch, held it high in his hand, and then threw it inside the building. At that signal, the men rushed in.

No sooner had the foremost two crossed the threshold than they fell dead to the floor, having been pierced from the side by Erik and Ulrik, who were positioned out of sight next to the entrance.

Those charging in behind them had little chance to react, and two more stumbled to the floor over the first two. The others had their swords ready, but before they could walk in they were driven back by three ready swordsmen who held their weapons pointed forward, at the ready, and formed a tight half-circle in front of the door.

Thus the fight began in all earnestness. Erik, Ulrik, and Karsten defended the doorway for their lives and the lives of their loved ones, while the white- and red-hooded soldiers in front of them merely fought because they had been ordered to—and a full-scale armed battle at this hour of the night, and in the rain, was not exactly what they had been expecting, and they were not too pleased to suddenly find themselves in it.

Winthro, meanwhile, had grabbed the nearest weapon he felt comfortable with—a large, cast-iron frying pan—and stood guard inside the door, ready to knock down any who might pass the three swordsmen who now guarded it.

Lipzug and Wurst, meanwhile, had quickly taken care of the last two soldiers who had stumbled over their dead fellows, and taken their weapons. Wurst picked up the torch that had been thrown into the room, and disappeared into a side chamber, followed closely by Lipzug.

The sounds and commotion of battle had served to set the horses of the remaining four horsemen on edge, and the riders struggled to keep control of their horses while at the same time trying to carefully watch,

through their awkward red hoods that were growing heavier from the rain, that nobody escaped.

Lipzug and Wurst caught the first rider by surprise as they stormed out a back door waving their swords and the torch directly in front of the horse, and shouting at the top of their lungs.

The horse reared up in fright, and the rider dropped his torch to grab onto the reins.

Lipzug picked up the torch, so that both brothers now brandished swords and torches, swinging them about in a fearful manner.

Though neither Lipzug or Wurst were very skilled with swords, the tale of their exploits against the ecclesiastical guard had by now reached almost legendary proportions, so that this rider was suddenly struck with fright. When Lipzug's sword managed to give the guard a simple graze on his leg, the guard let his horse turn itself around and run away from these two madmen.

A second horseman had heard the commotion and ridden over, jumping off his horse to help his companion, when he suddenly found himself confronting the two menacing brothers alone.

In the meantime Vester, who had been bound a little more hastily than Luden, took advantage of the fact that the two of them were now unwatched to work his nimble hands out of their bonds, and then remove his gag.

"What is all this about?" he whispered to Luden as he proceeded to free the man from his bonds as well. "I hope it's not because of that letter."

"Can you fight?" Luden asked.

"I've used a sword in my day, though I don't have one now. How about you?"

"I'm afraid the only weapon I ever mastered is my hunting musket, and even if I could get to it now, it wouldn't do us much good—especially in this drizzle."

“Then you remain here, and pray nothing happens to you, old man. I shall try to find myself a sword, and will be back to protect you as best as I can.”

As Erik, Ulrik, and Karsten defeated their first attackers, the miniature battle moved from the front door of the cottage to the clearing in front of the house, where they were each afforded a bit more space for movement.

Karsten fought perhaps more grimly than the other two. He had been struck in his right shoulder, and blood now streamed from the wound. But though not born of nobility himself, he was as practiced in the art of swordsmanship as his two noble friends, Erik and Ulrik, who had often practiced with him. And since he was naturally left-handed, the wound did not prove as debilitating as it might have been, though the pain and loss of blood forced him to take a defensive stance rather than an offensive one.

The man he fought now pulled the white mask from his face, seeing it only served to block his full degree of vision, and Karsten noticed that the man's face wore an expression of desperate impatience. Each thrust of the man's sword was met with a calm and effective parry from Karsten's weapon, but the brute was not as casually natured, and opted for hastier and heftier blows, which in turn quickly tired him.

Karsten waited patiently for the perfect moment to strike, and it soon presented itself, for his persecutor had grown faint and tired in his attacks, and relented in his thrusts for a short moment. At the same instant Karsten sprung forward with more energy than he had shown until now, and with a swift movement had pierced the man in his side. The man let out a scream of pain and slumped to the ground.

Not having the heart to kill the man, Karsten raised his boot and with all his strength made the man quite unconscious.

Ulrik, meanwhile, was engaged in combat with a

tall red-robed soldier, and another short white-robed soldier who kept trying to come at him from the side. The two kept Ulrik quite busy, though he found time throughout the entire encounter to recite a psalm he had once put to memory.

At first the short man had laughed at this narrative, but after a while he became irritable and thoroughly agitated by the words spoken. He began fuming obscenities trying to get Ulrik to stop the endless chanting, and found himself unable to focus on his own battle quite as well.

The taller red-robed soldier was better trained, and narrowly eyed Ulrik's movements constantly, not letting the chant of the psalm or the passionate curses of his fellow soldier distract him.

Ulrik's weariness became apparent in his voice, and his recitation became more labored. The red-robed soldier decided to seize the advantage and in a movement had circled around Ulrik's back and forced him to move to a more open spot, where he was now directly between the two fighters.

Ulrik turned towards the more dangerous fighter to parry the man's blows, fully aware that the white soldier was at that same moment rushing in for his back. At precisely the right moment he ducked and rolled out from in front of the red soldier, who was about to deal a blow. The red soldier, seeing the movement, attempted to strike Ulrik as he rolled to the side, but was suddenly struck through the belly by the white soldier, who had not seen Ulrik's sudden movement in time.

Ulrik stood up, and with a final verse of the psalm, finished off the short white swordsman, and then turned to help his fellows.

Vester seized the moment to run over to the dead men, thinking he could grab himself a weapon here, but the swords of both these men were buried under the rather heavy body of the red-robed soldier. He

suddenly heard a soldier approaching, and so quickly examined the red-robed man for any object he might use as a weapon. The only thing he saw was a small, round shield fastened around the man's limp arm.

He quickly pulled it off, at the same moment grabbing the dead man's red hood, and held the two items menacingly in front of him.

The approaching guard, somewhat younger than the others, but by no means smaller, stopped and uttered a loud laugh at the sight of this lanky man before him.

"My good man," Vester began, looking at the muscular youth standing in front of him, "I will not hold you as a coward should you decide to honorably surrender, and leave this place at once."

"What?" The guard let out a chuckle. "Think you that a stork such as yourself could even scratch a trained soldier of the ecclesiastical guard?"

"You asked for it," Vester said, and suddenly lunged forward and flung the round shield towards the youth with all his might.

The guard had not anticipated this, and quickly ducked to the side to avoid the blow to his face. At the same moment, Vester jumped towards him with the large red hood ready, and in a deft movement had lodged the hood over the guard's face, sending them both rolling to the ground. Before the guard could stand himself up, Vester had already seized his sword, and was standing over him, the sword's tip resting sharply on the youth's throat.

"Pride comes before a fall, isn't that what the Holy Scriptures say?" Vester said with a laugh, gloating at his moment of triumph.

It was short-lived. Vester suddenly found himself flat on his back, his garments soaking up water, and his muscular young foe pinning his wrists to the ground. "And I've always heard that he who laughs last, laughs best!" the guard retorted.

Vester could only respond with a small groan, for the full weight of the guard's knee was on his stomach. "How'd you do that?" he finally managed to whisper.

"Training—lots of training. Something you obviously lack," the guard retorted with a smirk. "But rather than kill you with the rest of your comrades, I shall leave you to a greater shame—that of being my own living prisoner when this is over. And then I shall have you put in the stocks, and I shall make you sing for my crowd, as you once made me sing for yours."

Vester looked at the young guard in shock. "I can't believe it. Little Ferdinand?"

"In person," the guard said proudly. "And after all your lecturing, look who's fallen on the wrong side of the law! But justice shall be served, and shall have never been sweeter."

With that, Ferdinand released his hold on Vester, who quickly glanced around to be sure that none had witnessed his humiliating defeat. Ferdinand then grabbed his sword back from where it had fallen harmlessly to the ground, and dragged Vester to a distant corner of the field, where he bound him to a tree, and rejoined the battle.

While Stefano had taken the women to the kitchen with him, Winthro had effectively used his pan against two other unsuspecting soldiers who had stormed into the dark house uninvited. Then, as things had been pretty quiet for a while, he went around making sure that any soldiers who had already been knocked senseless stayed that way.

Luden, meanwhile, grew restless waiting for Vester's return, and with the attention still focused on the battle, and little he could do to help, crept quietly further from the scene.

Erik had picked for himself a difficult opponent, choosing a white-robed soldier of odd proportions, who he thought would surely be easy prey. However, once

the duel between the two had begun, Erik realized the man was a better fighter than expected, and found himself quite occupied parrying the man's skilled and rapid advances, leaving him no room for taunting. However, he soon noticed that the man must have recently been wounded, for after several minutes of the fight Erik noticed a small but growing stain of blood on the shoulder of the man's tunic.

Thinking the man would soon begin measuring his thrusts more sparingly, Erik was surprised that the man continued to fight with the same vigor and skill, and without much agitation at Erik's unwillingness to let himself be vanquished. Erik became a little restless at the fact that he was neither winning nor losing, and started to move about more rashly, hoping to find some opening to deal this man a final blow. But with one wrong move, his foot caught on a piece of root that was sticking up out of the ground, and he stumbled.

For the first time since the fight, his opponent showed emotion as he burst into laughter, and walked over to where Erik lay face down in the mud. A firm kick in Erik's side did no good as far as reviving him went, and the soldier sheathed his sword and knelt over Erik to check for a sign of life.

No sooner had he done this than Erik swung out suddenly with a small dagger, and buried it deep into the man's thigh. The man let out a scream of pain, and before he could recover his senses Erik had dealt him a hearty blow to his cheek, knocking the man into a welcome senselessness.

Having left the second rider in an unconscious heap, Lipzug and Wurst now found themselves facing the remaining two riders. But rather than suffer the fate of their fellows, these two riders kept to their horses, and spurred them into a careful walk of circles around the two brothers, intending for the moment to merely guard them and keep them from the rest

of the battle rather than engaging them directly in conflict themselves.

In response, Lipzug and Wurst positioned themselves back to back to keep a close eye on both of them, plus watch for any others who might approach them. And seeing as this position left them temporarily bored, they took up a harmonious duet, as had been their family tradition to engage in after meals. Only this was a raunchier song that would not have been tolerated at the table.

The song had four verses, and each was sung with stamina, Wurst taking the lower harmony, and Lipzug singing at an extremely high key that would have been thought impossible for so large a man who normally spoke in a deep voice.

The song served not only to agitate the two riders, but their horses as well. Nevertheless, the riders remained right by the two brothers as they dashed from one part of the clearing to another in an apparent attempt to rid themselves of these bothersome horsemen. Eventually the two brothers found themselves standing over a senseless soldier. The two riders continued circling them, watching nervously as Lipzug untied a length of rope from the soldier's belt, and swung it over his arm, then resumed the aimless waving of torch and sword with his brother.

In between stanzas of the song the two brothers now began whispering things to each other, which made the riders even more nervous. Then the brothers suddenly bolted off, out of the clearing, and into the woods.

The riders spurred their horses into the darkness after the two brothers, when the first horse suddenly fell under its own weight, tripped by the rope that the brothers had suddenly pulled taut in the horse's path. With an audible crunch and a shout of pain, the rider was pinned underneath the horse. The second rider

did not have time to rein his horse in, and it stumbled heavily over the first.

The two horses were back up on their feet within seconds, and bolted away in fright.

The first rider groaned in agony from his broken leg, and the second rider was quickly at the man's side, only to receive a heavy blow to his head that slumped him, unconscious, into his companion's lap.

Meanwhile Luden stumbled across Vester, who was still tied to the tree. "Vester! I thought you were going to rescue me!" Luden whispered with a grin.

"I tried, my friend. I fought gallantly, but there were just too many of them. They overwhelmed me and tied me here."

"But of course," Luden answered as he looked quickly around and then began fumbling with the rope and trying to undo its knots.

Seconds later Vester was free again.

"You ... you won't tell anyone about this, right?" Vester asked.

Luden only gave a chuckle, then disappeared back in the direction of the cottage, closely followed by Vester, who decided he preferred to stay close to someone who was familiar with the property.

Stefano, Kristia, and Marinda, meanwhile, remained inside the cottage, safe enough for the moment in the darkness of the cottage from the battle that was raging outside.

"You must hide!" Stefano told the two women. "There's no telling what way the battle shall go, and no telling what your fates might be if these angry men come upon you."

"But where can we hide?"

"You must climb up the chimney."

"The chimney?" Marinda gasped, horrified.

"I have done it myself, and chiseled out holes where you can grasp with your hands and rest your feet. It is the only place they will hopefully overlook in their

search. I prepared it in case I should ever need such a way of escape, but now you must use it."

The sound of the outer door opening caught their attention, and they heard the voice of Zalman cursing as he stumbled over a piece of furniture in the darkness. All at once Kristia urged Marinda into the fireplace, and they both tried to make their way up the chimney as Stefano had instructed.

Only moments later the door to the room burst open and Zalman stood there, holding a torch that illuminated the entire room. He instantly caught sight of Kristia, bent over in the ashes of the fireplace waiting her turn to climb up the chimney.

Kristia shielded her eyes from the bright glow of the torch in Zalman's hand. Realizing there would be no more hiding now, she stood up and tried to straighten her garments and dust off the ashes as best she could.

Zalman removed his helmet and placed it on the table, as if to formally greet the woman in front of him. "Kristia, Kristia, look at what you have brought upon yourself. If only—"

Zalman never finished the sentence. In his surprise and delight at seeing Kristia, Zalman had failed to notice Stefano's presence. And Stefano, who had never been a violent man or given to fighting, had grabbed hold of a skewer and brought it down on Zalman's exposed head with all his might.

Zalman turned, stunned and in shock from the blow, but he only had a moment to catch the face of his attacker before a hefty fist struck his chin.

With Stefano's final blow, Zalman slumped to the floor. Stefano quickly put out the man's torch and then slumped to the floor himself to cradle his hand from the pain of the blow it had dealt to Zalman.

It was only moments later that Winthro came running into the kitchen, gasping for breath before announcing, "It's over. We won."

They had all soon gathered in the kitchen, and Kristia and Marinda did their best to tend to and wash the wounds of the men with some rags and water.

“We need to leave,” Vester announced.

“I agree. Let’s load up the wagons and—” Winthro began.

“No, you don’t understand—we need to leave now!” Vester said. “I ... I heard from one of the soldiers that more troops are on the way. Zalman was expecting a simple arrest, but there are more troops coming to give us a royal escort to the prisons. They could be here any minute.”

The words caught in Vester’s throat as the steady tromping of marching soldiers reached everyone’s ears.

“Quick! The back door! Everyone!” Luden whispered emphatically. “Follow me!”



The soldiers reached the spot where the battle had taken place, accompanied by Archbishop Tutz himself, seated proudly on a white horse.

The sight of their comrades strewn about on the ground and in the cabin was unexpected, and ten of the soldiers instantly combed through the cottage only to find it empty.

“There’s nobody here,” the captain of the men reported when they emerged. “It’s empty and deserted—Zalman’s inside. He looks ... dead.”

“Then where have they gone?” Tutz asked. “And how in God’s name could they have inflicted such a terrible slaughter on our men?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

“Of course you don’t, you fool!”

“Their wagons and horses are still here!” a soldier suddenly shouted from around the side of the cottage. “They can’t be far!”

Tutz barked out his orders. “Fan out! All of you! Search these grounds, and leave nothing alive! And

you!” He pointed to a small group of men standing nearby. “Pick up these men and tend to their wounds.”

The men quickly moved to obey the orders, and Tutz dismounted his horse to inspect the cottage and damage for himself. Hardly had he reached it when the sky, which had grown steadily darker, rumbled with thunder, and the drizzling drops of rain turned to pelting drops of hail. Tutz quickly moved inside.

Within seconds, the hailstones grew in size and speed, and the soldiers looked uncertainly around themselves as to whether it was intended for them to continue their search. But once the hailstones grew to the size of small fists and began to pound upon them all, they abandoned their mission and retreated into the safety of the cottage, which was quickly filled with the nearly fifty men, all dripping and soaking wet, and their dead and wounded comrades of the first fight.

A single bolt of lightning suddenly shot from the dark clouds, and the house that had refused to burn for our heroes now burst into a giant ball of electric flame, from which none who were inside escaped.

EPILOGUES

Two days after the attempted arrest and subsequent battle, Winthro and Kristia made their way to Bremen, from where they set sail to England. Lipzug and Wurst accompanied Kristia as far as the ship, and then returned to Lord Kubelsen's estate, where they once again served him as chattels along with Thomas and Gretel.

Erik, Ulrik, and Karsten returned to Wittenberge, where they continued to translate pages of Scripture and find ways to distribute them.

Luden and his family remained at their estate. All pending charges and investigations against his family and his business were forgotten by the church and by history.

Gerth and Tundrinna eventually eloped to England at Kristia's invitation, where they were formally married and lived in a small cottage on the Kessler estate.

Fredrick remained in Adendorf, where he eventually became the head of his order in Father Gerth's place, and remained a good friend of Vester, who returned there with him.

Stefano made his way to his brother in Lisbon, Portugal, where he continued to translate and copy portions of the Bible, and shortly after became involved in printing and distributing Bibles—helped by secret funding from Luden and other wealthy benefactors throughout Germany who had found salvation in the simple and handwritten pages.

Church officials never determined what happened at the Luden estate. There was no report on the incident or the many strange circumstances that surrounded it. The disappearance of Archbishop Tutz was covered up by a simple announcement of his sudden death by a heart attack, and a ceremony in which a sealed coffin filled with dirt was buried with all the pomp and circumstance of a true pontifical burial. No one marked or mourned the death of Zalman.

In the year of our Lord, 1529, the people of Hamburg accepted the Reformation, and the city became a haven for Lutheran, Calvinist, and Jewish refugees from all over Europe.

September 5, 1508, Lisboa.

Received a letter from Kristia and Winthro today. Kristia has given birth to twins—a boy and a girl—and her mother, in the same week, gave birth to a daughter. That makes for two happy mothers, two proud fathers, and one set of extremely pleased grandparents. Certainly a newsworthy item. Kristia has named her firstborn son after her brother, Fredrick. The daughter she named Victoria. Both respectable names in England, apparently. The newborn aunt has been named Ester.

The letter came with Erik, who arrived today from Hamburg to check out some opportunities for trade here on behalf of Luden. Luden and his family fare well, and Tillone has now been appointed to fleet manager, and looks to be serious about his business, and one day inheriting it from his father.

The change never ceases to amaze me—that this once young and brash child has grown into a responsible young man who has become so instrumental in the business of his heavenly Father as well as his earthly one. His youthful fascination for illegal writings has matured into a deep knowledge of these Scriptures and a sincere desire to help others.

That is the kind of transformation that makes these labors worthwhile—to see even one heart changed, one life directed to a better path, one soul brought into a closer communion with God. But I know that it has not stopped there, and only God can know how many have been reached through our humble efforts.

September 5, 1998 - Volgograd.

The story is told. The tale is ended. Wow, what an adventure. I still remember how it began, almost a year ago now ... that dream of the pages, the boats, the red and white hooded riders. Then Ester's visit right after the "Releasing the Spirits" GM. She kept me guessing the entire story what part she played, and then ended up being Gerth and Tundrinna's daughter. That, of course, is how she came to know the story. They must have told it to her a thousand times.

I guess in a place like this it's easy to see how some people would have considered those simple words of Jesus that I've known all my life precious enough to risk their lives for. How many times have I been helped by some verse or story from the Bible? How many times have I lifted up my heart to Jesus in prayer because I knew that I could, and that He would hear me no matter where I was, no matter what hour of the day or night? How often has He encouraged my heart when it was feeling low, given comfort in a time of loss, given healing in time of pain, or direction in times of darkness?

That's why I'm here! What's that verse? "Who comforteth us in all our tribulation" ... You have comforted me times without number, Jesus—so often that I don't know a time when You weren't there for me. And there are still so many people in this city without that hope, without that comfort, without that precious eternal gift that just one of our simple posters or tracts could give them. And I don't even have to write them out by hand ... though who knows, maybe one of these days I will.

I should send this story in.