

# CONRAD 'S QUEST FOR RUBBER

Book Six of The Adventures of Conrad Stargard

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# Prologue

From the Diary of Conrad Stargard

FEBRUARY 10, 1246

WE DESTROYED the Teutonic Order four years ago, and since then things have gone remarkably smoothly, especially when you compare them to the first ten years that I spent in this brutal century.

It wasn't easy to survive after I was accidentally shipped here from the twentieth century. I had to prepare Poland for an invasion by the Mongol Empire, and then I had to direct the war after we were invaded.

There were some tight spots, but we managed to win.

Now we are at peace. For the first time in a century, Poland is united, from the Baltic Sea to the Carpathian Mountains, and from the Odra River to the Pripet Marshes. What's more, it had all been done peacefully, voluntarily, and even eagerly, once the kings, dukes, and princes saw what my cannons could do. Furthermore, Poland, Ruthenia, Hungary, and Bulgaria have joined together to form the Federation of Christianity.

Our school system is being extended throughout Eastern Europe, as is our system of railroads, our uniform system of measurements, and our uniform coinage.

We've seen interesting times, but thank God they are over. I haven't had to kill anyone in over three years, and it feels good.

Sitting in my leather chair behind my nicely carved desk, I could see by the numbers before me that the factories were running at full capacity, the army was expanding at an optimal rate, and our concrete castle-building program was right on schedule.

Sweet success.

As I sat patting myself on the back, a young woman, one I didn't recognize, walked into my office. She had huge green eyes, flaming red hair, and a full set of matching freckles. None of my wives, friends, or current servants had such stunning coloration.

Without saying a word, she stamped the snow from her felt boots, shook the melted drops from her heavy, fur-lined cloak, and hung it up on a wooden peg near the door.

"Excuse me? Should I know you?" I asked.

"Probably not, your grace, but we *have* met." She spoke Polish with a Hungarian accent. She took off her felt overshoes, and then her slippers, and set them all neatly against the wall under her cloak.

"You are not being very helpful."

"Your grace, I hope to be *very* helpful," she said as she took off her belt. She rolled it up and put it in one of her boots, then started unlacing the front of her white woolen dress.

"This must be somebody's idea of a joke," I said. "You have to be a prostitute hired by someone from accounting."

"I am not a prostitute, and nobody hired me," she said as she dropped her dress to the floor. She stepped naked out of it. She was obviously still in her early teens, but she had little of the baby fat that so many girls her age are afflicted with. Instead, she was blessed with the firm, trim body of an athletic woman of about five years older. Not to mention remarkably large, firm breasts. Or the dusting of freckles all over everything. I tried not to let my normal male reactions show, and was glad of the desk in front of me.

She hung the dress on another peg before continuing. "In fact, I'm still a virgin, and people have told me that I am an attractive one."

"Your face and body are more than adequate, but your character is very much in question," I said as coldly as I could manage. "I am not a teenage boy who becomes irrational at the sight of a few square yards of female skin. I want to know why you think you can get away with approaching me so boldly, and I want to know your name."

My hopefully stern admonition had no apparent effect on the girl. She came around my desk and sat on my lap. She gave me an inexperienced kiss, with her lips too hard.

"My lord, I have the right to be bold with you because you are my proper liege lord. You rescued me at a tender age from death, outlaws, and a winter blizzard. It is only proper that you should now enjoy the flower of my maidenhood."

The whole situation had me stunned, flabbergasted, and thoroughly confused. Especially that last statement.

"I still don't understand. What is your name?"

She kissed me again in the same inexperienced fashion. Part of me wanted to explain to her the proper way of doing things, but most of me didn't want to change the subject.

"My name is the one you gave me when you christened me in a snowy woods. I'm Ignacy. You really *must* remember me now."

*Ignacy!* Now I remembered. While escorting a merchant through the forests east of here—what, fourteen years ago?—we were attacked by a highwayman with a black eagle on his shield. Defending ourselves, we killed him and his henchmen, and my mount accidentally trampled a young woman in the process.

Later, I'd found a baby in the outlaw's camp. I christened it in case it didn't survive the rest of the wintry trip to shelter and brought it with me to Count Lambert's castle, here at Okoitz.

Only then did I find out that I had christened a girl with a boy's name.

And *this* was what that tiny bundle had grown into?

"I remember now. I also recall that you were adopted into a peasant family, that your new father soon died, and that your stepmother then married a blacksmith."

"Yes, your grace. She told me that his name was Ilya, and that Count Lambert had forced them to marry. They never did like each other, and she eventually ran away to Hungary with another blacksmith more to her liking."

"Remember that I was there at the time. She was not actually forced to marry Ilya, although Lambert was generally too persuasive by half," I said. "None of which explains why you are sitting naked on my lap."

"This is Okoitz, isn't it? And the custom here is for a maiden to be taken first by her lord, isn't it?" She kissed me yet again and managed to wiggle herself around such that she was straddling me as I sat upright in my chair. Her body and breasts were pressed tightly against me, and my resolve to treat this event as an annoyance was weakening.

"It was Lambert's custom to bounce every peasant girl within arm's reach, if that's what you are referring to. But Lambert has been dead for five years, and you are not a local peasant girl. You were raised in Hungary, judging from your accent. And thinking about it, I believe that you are legally still the daughter of Ilya the blacksmith, who has since become Baron Ilya. You and he are thus both members of the nobility, not the peasantry."

I was wearing an old embroidered velvet outfit rather than one of my usual military uniforms. The almost annoying young lady was busily undoing the strings on my codpiece.

She said, "You are trying to wiggle out of this on a legal technicality, and I won't have it! Ilya isn't my father. My father was the highwayman Sir Rheinburg, and you killed him!"

"If Sir Rheinburg was your father, and if he legally married your mother, then you are a member of the German nobility and not a peasant. However, it is by no means certain that he was your father. Rheinburg had two men-at-arms with him, and either of them could have been married to the

woman who was killed. Or there may possibly have been a fourth man involved somehow. We don't know. What we do know is that your mother and probably your biological father were dead, that you were adopted, albeit informally, into a family, and that later your stepmother legally married Ilya. She never divorced Ilya, even if she left him for another man. No, there's no way around it. You are stuck with being a baroness, and you are not acting like one."

It took me a while to say that, since while I was talking, she had continued with her program of kissing and disrobing me.

"I've been planning for this day for years, and you're *not* going to talk me out of it!"

The conversation continued for a while longer, but there is a limit as to how long any normal man can stay firm in his noble intentions. I bowed to the inevitable before I committed the sin of Onan.

Much later, as she was leaving, I said, "Well, Baroness, I still think that you should go and at least meet your father. He's stationed at Three Walls, a half day's ride south of here."

"I'll think about it, your grace."

And then she left without asking my leave and without saying a good-bye, much less a thank-you.

Baron Piotr was just approaching my office door as the disheveled girl walked away.

"What was that all about, your grace? I'm sure that I've never seen her before."

"I'm not really sure, but I think I was just raped."

He pondered that a bit before answering. "Remarkable. Still, she doesn't seem to have caused you any permanent damage, sir. What disturbs me is that a total stranger could enter your castle and make it all the way to your inner sanctum without being stopped or even identified.

"You know, your grace, I think we are getting entirely too lax about security around here. What if she had had different designs on your body? Putting some extra holes in it, for example. What then? I notice that you aren't even wearing your sword."

"Hmm. Yes, you're right. I must have left it somewhere."

"I noticed that you weren't wearing it at lunch, either. Your grace, you must remember that you aren't just a backwoods knight anymore. You have become one of the most important men in the world. There are people who feel that they have good reason to hate you, and men in your position have been assassinated for reasons that no one has ever figured out. The death of Duke Henryk the Bearded is a recent example."

"Okay, okay, I'll make a point of always wearing my sword from now on. Enough said."

"No, not quite enough, your grace. You need a bodyguard, or better yet, a number of bodyguards such that there are always at least two of them awake and on hand at all times."

"Piotr, that would be a royal pain in the butt, and I am not royal enough to have to put up with it. I won't do it. Also, I am not at all sure that bodyguards make a man any safer. They make him stand out when there is safety in anonymity. And bear in mind, the Duke Henryk you mention was murdered by one of his own bodyguards. So was Philip of Macedonia, Alexander the Great's father."

"You have very little chance at anonymity, your grace, being at least a head taller than anyone else in the city. As to the rest, I expect that guards have saved a hundred rulers for every one they have killed."

"Piotr, the only really nice thing about being a 'ruler' is that you get to do what you want. I want no bodyguards."

"Yes, your grace."

# Chapter One

From the Journal of Josip Sobieski

WRITTEN JANUARY 15, 1249, CONCERNING MY CHILDHOOD

MY NAME is Josip Sobieski. I find myself sitting in a cave just south of the Arctic Circle, with nothing to do for the next three months. In hindsight, this will doubtless seem a wonderful adventure, especially to someone who has never been here. Presently, I find it to be a deadly bore. To while away the hours, I have resolved to record the events of my life. I expect that future readers, if any, will find my experiences a fruitful example of what *not* to do with the only life God has given them.

In 1230, when I was five years old, my father became a baker at Count Lambert's castle town of Okoitz. Thus, I had the rare privilege of being personally on hand at the beginning of what was to become the most remarkable story of our age.

Lord Conrad came to our town on Christmas Eve, in 1231, although he was called *Sir* Conrad then. I first became aware of him when I saw him sitting at the high table during a feast. It would have been hard to miss him, since even seated he was a head taller than Count Lambert, who was himself a very big man.

He was the talk of the town, having fought and defeated the evil Sir Rheinburg and all his men, killing each with just a single blow. With the other boys, I watched while four suits of chain-mail armor were taken to the blacksmith's for repair, so we knew that every word of the story was true.

He was a strange man, much different from the other knights and noblemen who made life at Okoitz interesting. For one thing, he was always making something, either showing the men how to build the mills and factories that Okoitz soon became famous for, or carving some toy for the boys of the town, or sometimes even things for the girls. With his own hands he carved me a spinning top that, once you learned how to do it, would flip over and spin for a time upside down! I still have that toy and keep it as a treasure, although I've never been able to figure out exactly why it works.

For another, he took little pleasure in the usual knightly enjoyments. Once, when Sir Stefan brought in a bear, for baiting, Sir Conrad didn't even know what bearbaiting was. Once he found out, he was furious, calling the sport cruel. Rather than let the bear be torn apart by the castle dogs, he killed it himself, with a single stroke of his mighty blade, and he cried while he did it. And then he fought Sir Stefan over the matter, and I think he might have killed that knight had Count Lambert not intervened.

Sir Conrad didn't like cockfighting either, and soon the peasants at Okoitz stopped doing it, rather than risk offending him. .

While all of the other adults considered small boys to be little more than nuisances, to be ignored at best and spanked at worst, Sir Conrad seemed to like us, to actually enjoy our company. He almost always had time to stop and explain things to us, to tell us some of the thousands of stories he knew, and to teach us our numbers.

Furthermore, he paid our priest, Father Thomas, to teach us to read and write, every weekday morning during the winter.

The fathers of most of the boys were peasants, farmers who had little to do during the winter, so having their boys in school was no hardship for them. My father was a baker, and bakers must work hard almost every day of the year. If they wish to take even Sunday off, they must work twice as hard on Saturday, or the people of the town would go hungry without bread. Even then, someone was needed at the bakery to keep the fires going, since most of the people brought their meals in a pot to our ovens for cooking.

This meant that my help was needed every day in my father's bakery, for children naturally help their parents at their work. My parents had six children, and my father felt that the boys, at least, should go to school.

My older brother and I felt guilty about sitting in school while the rest of the family had to work longer hours. We would have preferred working, but our father's word was law.

Every afternoon, when we all worked together after school, he always questioned us minutely about everything that was said in class. At the time, we thought that he did this to assure himself that we were not wasting the time spent there, but much later we realized that this was his method of absorbing the new learning for himself and for his wife and daughters. Since we boys were responsible for repeating to him every single word that was spoken in class, we did not dare be inattentive.

Both Father Thomas and Sir Conrad praised our diligence. They should have praised our father.

As interesting as Sir Conrad was, his horse received even more attention, from us boys, at least.

Anna was a huge animal, even bigger than Count Lambert's favorite charger. But while Whitefoot was dangerous to be near, ever eager to nip off an ear or to crush a rib cage, Anna was the most gentle of creatures, provided that you treated her politely.

Well, she kicked Iwo's father when he whipped her to get her back into her stall after Anna left it to relieve herself outside. Anna was very clean in her habits, and never soiled her stall.

He did not hit her hard, and with most animals of that size you have to hit them just to get their attention. With Anna, on the other hand, all you had to do was ask her, and she was happy to do just about anything for you. And to be fair, she didn't kick the man very hard, for he lived and was able to go back to work in a few days.

Later, when we asked her about the incident, she said that she had objected to being sworn at as much as being struck, and that in any event, it wasn't polite to interrupt a lady while she was attending to private matters.

You see, we boys soon discovered that Anna could understand the language perfectly, and although of course she couldn't speak it, she would nod or shake her head to answer yes or no to any question asked her. It sometimes required a lot of questions to get the whole story out of her, but that was generally our fault and not hers.

She was as intelligent as any of us boys, and we considered her to be much smarter than most of the grown-ups around.

Also, like her owner, Anna seemed to positively like children. I think that much of it was because grown-ups think they are much too busy to bother taking the time a conversation with Anna necessarily took, assuming all the while that they were among the minority who believed what we told them about her. We children were delighted that someone as big as her would take the time to fully answer us.

And, perhaps, we really did have more spare time than the older people did.

We soon learned that she was a good friend to have. Whenever a grown-up was spanking a child, or even shouting at one in public, Anna would walk over and stare at the adult doing the spanking or shouting. She never made a sound or actually did anything. She just stood close by and stared at them, and that was generally enough. Having this huge animal stare at you was very intimidating, and any urge to chastise the less fortunate soon evaporated.

We boys speculated that if someone tried to do actual harm to one of the children of the town, Anna's response would have been more active and indeed deadly. Since no one in memory had ever been that evil, we were never able to confirm our suspicions.

Still, we were glad she was there.

Some of the peasants complained to Count Lambert about this habit of hers, saying it was unholy, but Lambert just laughed at them. He said that *everything* with eyes has to look at *something*, and

that "something" is usually the last thing that moved. If being looked at troubled the peasants, the cause of it must be their own guilty consciences. He said that they were well-advised to seek out the priest and go to confession!

In all events, my parents were never forced to endure Anna's staring, since to my memory they never had to severely chastise any of their children, and in turn, none of us ever wanted to displease them.

Simply put, they were good parents, and we were good children. I think this made us unusual.

At the time, our cheerful obedience seemed quite ordinary to my brother and sisters and me, and I occasionally questioned other friends of mine as to why they wanted to get into the various sorts of mischief they always seemed to be involved with. They could never satisfactorily explain their motivations to me, nor, in truth, could I explain mine to them. To anger my father seemed as silly to me as eating dirt. I simply had no desire to do such a thing.

Strange to say, one of the boys in the town, Iwo, actually did just that, once. He went into the bailey, sat down on the ground, and proceeded to eat dirt for no obvious or conceivable reason. His father was angry and spanked him. On this occasion, Anna was tardy in going over to stare. She was as mystified as the rest of us.

But my story is not about Iwo, and he came to a bad end, anyway. A few years later he ran away, and somebody eventually said that he was hung in Gniezno, although they didn't know why.

Sir Conrad left in the spring with Anna and some girls. (A boy of seven generally has little interest in girls, except, perhaps, for occasional target practice.) He went to build the city of Three Walls on the land that Count Lambert had given him, and we were all sad to see both of them leave. They returned for a few days almost every month, and over the years, Anna saved many a boy from the beatings that most of them undoubtedly deserved.

A different kind of beating happened during the first Christmas after Sir Conrad left us. I remember it clearly with all of my childish impressions still attached.

The story circulated that Sir Conrad found a caravan bound for Constantinople that was owned and guarded by the Teutonic Knights of the Cross. He found a gross of pagan children that the Crossmen were planning to sell to Jews and Moslems, who must have been terrible people, we imagined, although we had never met one. We children understood that something bad would then happen to the young slaves, but no one would tell us exactly what that bad thing was.

Conrad beat up the Crossmen guarding the caravan and saved the children, because he was a hero. Then he took them back to his city, gave them to good families, taught them how to speak, and made them into good Christians, people said.

The Crossmen didn't like him doing all this, so they came to Okoitz, a thousand of them, and Sir Conrad came here, too, for a trial by combat. It seemed to me that everybody else in the world came as well, and all of them needed bread to eat, so we bakers hardly had time to sleep at all. Whenever I looked outside the bakery, which wasn't very often, all I could see was that everything was packed solid with people. My whole family had to sleep in the bakery, since Count Lambert had lent our house out to a bunch of other people we didn't even know.

There was a kind of festival going on then at Okoitz, not that I got to see much of it. But when the trial by combat between Sir Conrad and the bad guy happened, well, my father made sure we closed the bakery in time for all of us to go and see it.

Sir Conrad and Anna beat up the bad guy and chopped his head off. They chopped his horse's head off, too, because it was crippled.

Then a bunch of the other Crossmen went out to kill Sir Conrad, when that wasn't allowed, and God made a miracle happen! Golden arrows came down from the sky and killed every one of them in the heart! I was there and I saw it myself, and so did two bishops and the duke and everybody else.

They say that after that, nobody ever tried to bother Sir Conrad again. No Christians, anyway.

The town of Okoitz was constantly changing, all through my childhood. From the time we first got there, when our town was nothing at all except a clearing at the side of the road that went from the Vistula to the Odra, something was always being constructed.

My father's bakery was almost the first thing built, since people need to eat before anything else can happen. Then the outer wall was built, with the houses and stables each side by side against it, and the blockhouses at the four corners. Then the church and Lambert's castle went up, and most people seemed to be happy with the thought that the job was finally done.

That was when Sir Conrad arrived, and all the men of the town were soon out chopping down trees with which to build a huge windmill, the likes of which no one but Sir Conrad had ever seen. A big cloth factory went up, and a lot of girls came to work there, and then they made a second huge windmill, until everyone said that if they kept on building, there wouldn't be any room left in the town for the people!

But soon they started on Lambert's new castle, which when completed turned out to be three times bigger than the whole rest of the town, and much taller, besides, so they had to make it outside of the walls themselves. It was four years in the making, and long before it was done, my family and even the bakery was moved inside it.

All of this civic growth was good for my father's business. He was forced to take on apprentices and even journeymen from outside of our family to satisfy the needs of his growing number of customers.

When a second baker came to town with Count Lambert's permission, my father wasn't worried about the competition, but instead they immediately formed a guild in the manner of the big city guilds, to do proper charity work and see to it that there was employment and plenty for all.

With father now a guildmaster, our family prospered. My sisters began to receive substantial dowries when they were married. My brother and I soon realized that one day there would be a considerable inheritance for us and a respected place in the community. He liked the thought of all this, but I was of mixed mind about it.

Oh, I was pleased that my family prospered, but it was obvious that to do well, a baker had to stay in one place. All of my life, the interesting people I saw and occasionally was able to meet were those who traveled, who went to strange places and saw strange things. I heard magic, faraway names like Cracow and Paris and Sandomierz, and I wanted to see these mystical places. I yearned to go with those far travelers, to join with the caravans of merchants, soldiers, and priests who were always coming and going from our gates.

I wanted adventure.

And my father, whom I loved and wanted to obey, would not even discuss the matter. We were bakers, we always had been bakers, and we would always be bakers. Nothing more could be said.



# Chapter Two

From the Journal of Josip Sobieski

WRITTEN JANUARY 17, 1249, CONCERNING OCTOBER 10, 1240

IN THE fall of 1240, the call went out. It was time to prepare for war. Together with my brother and my father, and the last fifty-five other sound men from Okoitz, I made the day-long walk to Baron Conrad's Warrior's School, commonly known as Hell.

I had long wanted to make the trip. All of the other boys of my age from Okoitz had joined the army the year before, as soon as they turned fourteen. Their letters to me bragged about how they would be knighted by the time I got there and how I would have to serve under them, do their bidding, and polish their boots!

I had begged my father's permission to go with them when they were leaving, and my brother had been begging for two years, but while father had always been so generous with us in so many ways, on this subject he was absolutely unshakable.

We were a family of bakers, he said, not warriors. We fed people. We did not kill them. In time of war, if our country and our liege lord needed our help, we would of course go, but only when we were absolutely needed.

Ironically, my mother and sisters had been issued weapons and armor over two years before, and they trained for one day of every week to defend Okoitz when we men finally went out to face the enemy.

To me, it had seemed strange and unfitting that my youngest sister, only two years older than me, should be war-trained when I was not, or that my mother should wear a sword over her broad left shoulder when my father had none, but there it was.

My father was a man of peace, and in the family, he ruled. He had kept us at our normal work for as long as possible, but now Mother ran the bakery with the help of my sisters and a dozen other women, and we men walked away through the first snow of the year to answer the call.

We men were all in our oldest, shabbiest clothing, for we had been warned that we would be issued uniform clothes, and that anything we had with us would be thrown away. The women were dressed in their best to see us off, and the difference in clothing was somehow unsettling.

All of us, the men as well as the women, were soon crying at the shock of this first sundering of our family. My people had never before been parted for more than a few hours, and now we would be separated for months even if all went well.

If it didn't, we might never meet again.

Strangeness, the seeing of new things, the hearing of new sounds, the sampling of new smells, does odd things to one's sense of time. A day spent in the bakery, doing the same things I had done on countless other days, went by in a seeming moment. A year spent in mixing dough, baking it, and selling bread seemed to go by even faster.

That first day away from home—walking over a trail I had heard about all of my life but never seen, except for the few hundred yards of it visible from the gates of Okoitz—took forever.

Even years later I can remember with crystal clarity the shape of bare oak branches, the flecks of rust on the railroad tracks we walked beside, the squish of wet snow beneath my sodden birchbark shoes.

I can close my eyes and see the white clouds forming from my breath, smell the tang of fresh-cut pine trees, and feel the cold breeze against my back. Yet of my father's old bakery, where I had worked for years, I find I can remember very little.

An odd thing, memory.

A long walk has healing powers, I was convinced of it, even though I had never been out of sight of my hometown before. Not accustomed to hours of walking, I was sore and tired, yet I felt less lonely and depressed by the time we arrived at the Warrior's School.

A friendly guard at the gate directed us to the Induction Center, where they gave us a meal, warned us a bit about what to expect, and found us a place to sleep for the night. In the morning they had us line up and raise our right hands to the rising sun. They led us through the army oath:

"On my honor, I will do my best to do my duty to God and to the army. I will obey the Warrior's Code, and I will keep myself physically fit, mentally alert, and morally straight.

'The Warrior's Code:

"A Warrior is: Trustworthy, Loyal, and Reverent. Courteous, Kind, and Fatherly. Obedient, Cheerful, and Efficient. Brave, Clean, and Deadly."

We were told that we would be repeating that oath every morning for the rest of our lives. My father said nothing, yet I could see a bit of doubt in his eyes.

I had heard all sorts of descriptions of the Warrior's School, but none of them prepared me for the unbelievable number of people we found there, or for the organized confusion that prevailed.

People in apparent authority were constantly shouting incomprehensible things at us, talking so quickly, in so many strange accents, about such unfamiliar things, that it seemed almost as though they spoke some foreign language. When they did say something simple, something we could understand, it was such a rare event that we did not at first react to it, and then the shouting got only louder and longer.

We spent two days standing in long lines, something none of us had ever done before, interspersed with numerous embarrassing interruptions as we were washed, shaved, deloused, fed, inspected by a half-dozen medical people, and, finally, after being naked for an entire day in a huge, cold building, issued uniform clothing.

We were a vastly changed group when at last we were counted off, assigned to our companies, and taken to our permanent barracks.

As it happened, my position in the line was such that I was the last man in one company and my father was the first in the next. My father shouted protests at this separation of his family, but the captain in charge was too tired and harried to pay any attention to him.

I felt a twinge of both panic and anguish at being thus separated from my father and brother, since in the course of our induction we had somehow parted company from all of the others who had come with us from Okoitz. Indeed, it was the first time I had ever been separated from my male relatives.

For the first time in my entire life, I was friendless.

I was dazed and confused as I obeyed the shouting captain, and walked away at the end of the line. Everything was so strange, so different from anything I had ever seen before.

For all of my life up to that point, for as long as I could remember, I had always been surrounded by people that I knew. An unfamiliar face had been a rare thing, a person from some distant land whole miles away from where things had such a comforting familiarity.

Now, as I looked around, I could see not one single person I knew. We had walked a long way through this weird place, with many twists and turns, and I was soon lost. I didn't know where I was. I didn't even know *why* I was.

We stopped in front of a building that seemed to stretch out to the horizon in both directions, a mile long, at least. The captain told us his name was Stashu Targ, and that we were the Third Company of the Second Komand of the First River-boat Battalion. I promptly forgot everything he had said. He

pointed to the number written above the doorway behind him and read it to us, twice. I forgot this, too, just as quickly. I had seen too many new things this day, and my mind simply could not take in anything more.

I think that the others around me must have been in the same sad shape that I was, for when the captain stopped talking, we all just stood there, dumb.

Then a knight came up with a pen and a horn of indelible ink and wrote the number above the door on the back of our left hand, one of us at a time.

"This is where you live," he said patiently to each of us. "When you get lost, come back here."

I nodded mutely. It was as though I was surrounded by a fog, and that fog would not lift for months.

I did what I was told, and they kept me amazingly busy. We marched in step with one another for many mind-numbing hours. We endlessly repeated the same awkward motions with pikes, knives, and axes, until somehow they became less awkward.

We ate together, sang together, and prayed together. Over the weeks, we were armed and armored, but we were all disappointed when we were issued axes as our secondary weapons rather than swords.

Captain Targ explained that the sword was a hard weapon to master. Skill with one took years to develop, and we had only four months before the Mongols would arrive. On the other hand, everybody had chopped firewood. We already knew how to use an axe.

The problem, as far as we grunts were concerned, was that an axe is a peasant's weapon, whereas the sword was the weapon, even the symbol, of a nobleman.

Sir Odon said that we would learn about swords after the war, when we all came back for the other eight months of the Warrior's School. Furthermore, our primary weapons were the two-yard-long halberds that the first lance used, the six-yard-long pikes that the second, third, fourth, and fifth lances carried, and most important, the swivel guns that the sixth fired. Swords, axes, and knives were really unimportant.

We grunts would still have been much happier with swords than with the axes we were given.

Somehow, though I was never quite sure when or how, I learned how to take care of my equipment, how to answer properly to my superiors, how to fight with my weapons. I felt my muscles getting bigger, my hands getting harder, my waist getting smaller. They had to adjust my armor three times to fit the changing me.

They yelled at me, gesticulated, and swore at me as no one ever had before, but eventually I ceased to be troubled by it. They chewed my ass so many times that after a while all they could get was scar tissue.

What I did not ever do was find my father, or my brother, or indeed anybody at all that I had ever known before. I searched, but I never found them.

In school, back home, they had taught me a bit about probabilities, and I tried to compute the possibility of finding my family and friends. At Okoitz, I must have known— what?—two hundred men? Here in Hell, they told me there were a sixth of a million of us. If I saw a hundred men outside of those in my own company every day, how long should it be before I saw a single familiar face? I worked it out again and again and rarely got the same number twice, but it seemed that it could not possibly take as long as it was taking.

The company kept records on those of us who belonged to it, but there were no central records for the entire army. There was no one who could tell me where in this huge city—the largest in Christendom, they told us—my father and brother were.

They had tried to keep such records once, but as the army grew, the task became impossible. Sir Odon said that maybe after we won the war, we would have time for such things. I did not find this to be comforting.

I often wrote to my mother, and I was sure she was writing to me, but the mails were all fouled up. Delivering them was one of the things the army did in times of peace, and I could understand we had

other priorities now. In four months I got only two letters from her, and neither of them seemed to contain any answers to my questions, like "What is my father's address?"

The fact that she had my address meant she must have gotten at least one letter from me, and surely my father must have written to her as well! All I could think was that perhaps my questions had all been answered in some earlier, undelivered letter.

Yet all things fade, including the loneliness in my heart and the fog that surrounded my head. Slowly, I began to take notice of the other men in my lance, in my platoon, in my company. I began to realize I had new friends now, and in some ways they were better than those I had left behind.

At least they were more interesting, none of them being bakers.

The fellow in the bunk above me, Zbigniew, had worked on Lord Conrad's ranch, where they had a large herd of slightly domesticated aurochs. He had been one of the Pruthenian children Lord Conrad had rescued from the Crossmen.

The guy in the bunk below, Lezek, came from the neighboring ranch where all of Anna's children were raised until they reached their fourth year.

At that age, they somehow "remembered" everything that their mother had known up to the time they were conceived, even though there wasn't a stallion involved in their procreation.

Unlike people and just about everything else in the world, Anna and her children had offspring whenever they wanted and did it without the help of the opposite sex. In fact, the opposite sex didn't exist for their species, a thing that made most of the men in my lance claim to feel sorry for them.

You see, sex was a subject that was often discussed among us, though I suspected my lance mates had as little real knowledge of the subject as I did.

In any event, Lezek was impressed with the fact that I had known Anna herself since I was six years old, and he questioned me for days about every incident I knew of concerning her. Even though his father had worked with the Big People for years, no one he knew had actually talked for any length with Anna herself.

While there were only twenty-nine adult Big People at that point, there were three hundred sixty-four young ones at the ranch, managed by a young woman named Kotcha, whom I vaguely remembered. Once, she had lived a few doors down from my family's house.

Lezek said that in ten years there would be twenty-four thousand adult Big People, and ten years after that everybody would have one. I'm not sure if anyone believed him, but that's what he said.

The other three men in our lance were less talkative, since none of them spoke much Polish. Fritz was a German who came from a farm not far from Worms. He could read and write our language well, since he had been reading Lord Conrad's magazine every month for five years, but his pronunciation still left much to be desired. He had come to join our army, he said, because the chances of rising in the world were better here than anyplace else, and that being a farmer was mostly a matter of walking behind a plow and staring at the ass end of a pair of oxen for most of your life. And anyway, he had more brothers than his father had farmland for them to inherit.

Kiejstut was a Lithuanian who had come because he heard that the army would arm, armor, and train him to fight Mongols. A year earlier, Mongol raiders had killed his father and one of his brothers, kidnapped his youngest sister, and burned down his entire village. He wanted vengeance, even though he was by nature a rather quiet, reserved, even shy person, one who was always careful not to give offense.

The sixth member of my lance was Taurus, a Ukrainian whose family had once lived north of Kiev. He was the only one of his large family who was still alive. Hatred and bitterness seemed to radiate from him. I never once saw him smile, and I never heard him laugh, not until we saw combat and he started killing Mongols. Sterner and far more exacting than our knight, Sir Odon, he was always quick to chastise the rest of us for any slackness during our training, and even for any levity.

Our training went on for four months, and at the time it seemed forever. Sir Odon said that we were getting only a special short course, and if we wanted to stay in the army, we would have to come back here sometime and take another eight months of this.

We all groaned at the thought of an additional eight months in Hell. Almost as an article of faith, we soldiers complained about everything we did or had done to us. This was even true of those grunts (for that was indeed what they called us) who did not come from Lord Conrad's lands, about three-quarters of those in my company.

I had noticed these generally older men when we were first joined together to form our company. Mostly, they were less healthy than the rest of us, thinner, and poorly fed. Also, it seemed to me that some of them were mentally duller than the people I had grown up with. Now they were wearing the first pairs of leather boots that some of them had ever owned, and almost all of them had put on healthy weight, but they still felt obligated to complain, so they did so.

Privately, I think they were impressed by the wealth of the army, and that most of them had resolved to stay in, if they could possibly manage it.

At the end of February, when final preparations were being made, when weapons, ammunition, preserved food, and everything else we would need for the months ahead was being issued, one of the warehouse workers handed me a white leather kit with a red cross on it.

I asked what it was.

"It's a medical kit," he said. "We usually hand them out only to people who have completed the surgeon's course, but someone had too many of these kits made up. The captain said to hand them out to one man from each company, just in case you need it."

I said that I was in the fifth lance, so I'd had the first-aid course, but that was just to help the wounded until somebody got there who knew what he was doing. I didn't know anything about really fixing people!

"Everybody who does already has a kit. Keep it. Clip it on your belt, just in case."

I did as I was ordered, and I quit wearing my smaller first-aid pack since everything in it was also in the big medical kit.

I soon discovered there were advantages to wearing the kit, since real medics were rarely sent out to do the dirtiest jobs, such as cleaning the latrines. Once I had the kit, people assumed I was trained in its use, and thus my life became a bit easier. No one ever asked me if I had taken the proper course, so I was never even tempted to lie about it;

Our company was part of the River Battalion, the men who would be manning the riverboats on the Vistula. This intrigued me, since I had often heard of boats, but had never seen one. In truth, I had never even seen a river.

We wouldn't be actually operating the boats, of course; that was the job of another group entirely. We had only to ride along, we were told, and to obey the orders of our knights and captains, who had vast experience on the dozens of steam-powered boats the army had.

Well, my knight, Sir Odon, was the same age I was, but had joined the army a year earlier, and I don't think he had vast experience in anything. My captain, Sir Stashu, looked to be perhaps eighteen and was no gray-bearded repository of wisdom, either, but I kept my mouth shut, as my father, a wise man, had taught me.

Grunts bitched about everything, but we learned that there were a few topics of conversation that could get you chosen to shovel out the garbage, or to wash a few thousand dishes, and that among these was the inexperience of our leaders. They knew it themselves, and preferred not to think about it.

# Chapter Three

From the Journal of Josip Sobieski

WRITTEN JANUARY 19, 1249, CONCERNING FEBRUARY 15, 1241

AT LAST, we said our final Sunrise Service in Hell, and we marched out to war.

Well, we had to pull our war carts behind us, there were only two railroad tracks to pull them on, and there were a sixth of a million of us troops to move out. An hour went by before we finally left Hell, and we were near the front of the line. Our doubled column was over sixteen miles long! Even at a brisk walk, it took almost six hours for us to march by!

Once we finally got on the tracks, it wasn't all that hard to pull the big cart, even loaded as it was with the tons of guns, pikes, and all the other material we needed to fight with. Counting our six knights and the knight-banner who led us, there were forty-three men in our platoon.

Our cart could be pulled by eighteen of them, with the rest of us riding aboard, resting, eating, or even sleeping. This let us continue onward right around the clock, doing over six dozen miles a day without ever once breaking into a run.

The six carts of my company pulled off the main road when we got to East Gate and left the main body of the army to go on without us.

A great crowd of civilians was leaving the dock area. There must have been thousands of them, mostly peasants, but with a scattering of well-dressed people as well. They were all walking back the way we had come; refugees who would shelter at the Warrior's School, we presumed.

I had heard much about the castle that had been built at East Gate, how it was made entirely of reinforced concrete, and I was eager to examine it closely.

I never got the chance for we were marched straight onto our boat, the RB1 *Muddling Through*. The tracks went right up to and over the big drawbridge at the front of the boat and right into the cavern of a hold that made up most of the lower deck. We could hardly see the huge boat as we went aboard it.

The drawbridge door was closed behind us, leaving us in the dark, and our riverboat pulled out immediately to let the next one up to the dock to be loaded. It was like being locked up in an oversized barn, filled with six war carts and the almost two gross of men of my company.

We soon found out that we were riding in no ordinary steamboat, but in the craft that held the commanders of the entire river flotilla, all three dozen boats. We had two army barons aboard, as well as Sir Conrad, now Count Conrad, himself.

Captain Targ didn't want his troops getting in the way of all these high personages, so he had us stay down below on the cargo deck, just in front of the engines. The second deck had the radios and the war room, called Tartar Control, as well as the kitchen and the sleeping rooms for the officers.

There was a fighting top above that, and a few hours after we were aboard, the sixth lance of each platoon was sent up there with their guns. So were the fourth lances, who acted as loaders for the swivel guns, and the third, who acted as spotters.

My own fifth lance acted as corpsmen, assistants for the surgeons, and we wouldn't be needed until somebody got shot. This meant we had to stay inside, cooped up without even a window, until somebody had the courtesy to get decently wounded so we could go outside and do something.

That night I was one of the few men below who couldn't sleep. I was standing near the stairs with my helmet off when a tall man walked by with a line of white circles down the armor on his back. I snapped to attention.

You see, the army used a color code for the numbers of its lances, platoons, companies, and so on. One was red, two was orange, three was yellow, four was green, five was blue, and six was purple. The buttons on our uniform jackets used these colors to define where we were in the army's organization.

The top button was your position in your lance, the second, your lance's position in your platoon, the third was your platoon's place in the company, and so on. The buttons on my jacket went, from the top down, orange, blue, blue, yellow, orange, red, green, blue, and red. This meant that I was the second man in the fifth lance, of the Fifth Platoon, of the Third Company, of the Second Komand, of the First Battalion, of the Fourth Column, of the Fifth County, of the First Division of the army.

The leader of any group used a white button in that position. That is to say, Sir Odon's buttons were the same color as mine, except that his top one was white. Captain Targ's top three buttons were white.

On our armor, which zippered together, there were big spots, a different shape for each color, running down the chest and the back, painted in the same colors as our buttons. Otherwise, we all looked the same in armor, and with the faceplates closed, you couldn't tell who was who. Once you got used to it, you could spot your friends quickly.

Also, if someone was impersonating a warrior, before long his button colors would get him caught by someone who knew he wasn't who he was supposed to be.

So when I saw a line of nine white circles on the man's back, I knew he had to be Lord Conrad himself. I came to attention, as I had been taught, and he stopped, turned, and looked at me.

"I know you, don't I?" He said, "Yes, you are Josip, the son of the baker from Okoitz."

I said that I was, and that I was surprised so great a person as he was had actually recognized me.

"I am just another man, Josip, not much different from you. I think that mostly I remember you because of your surprise and your laugh when I showed you that top I made for you."

I said that I had been six years old then, but yes, I remembered it, too. I said I still had that toy, carefully stored away, and that if I ever had a son, I would give it to him.

"It feels good to be appreciated. But tell me, Josip, is there anything I can do for you now?"

I said there was, and explained to him that I had been on the boat for twelve hours now, and they said that the boat was on a river, but I had never in my life actually seen a river. Could I perhaps have permission to go up and have a look?

"You never... ? I'm sorry, but I sometimes forget how restricted the life of a commoner can be. I'll do better than just let you topside. I'm doing an informal inspection just now. Come with me, and I'll give you the threepenny tour of the *Muddling Through*."

And with that he took me all around the boat, starting with the engines, where the engineer had forbidden us troops to go. But who would dare stand in the way of Lord Conrad, or even the lowly grunt who was accompanying him?

I was surprised to discover I already knew the baron who was in charge of the radio room. He was Piotr, whose parents had the room two doors down from my father's. Eight years older than me, he had once been one of the "big kids," although he had been the smallest "big kid" at Okoitz, and now I was a head taller than he was.

He said he remembered me, but somehow I don't think he really did. He was just being polite. Truthfully, I doubt if I could remember any of the little kids there who were eight years younger than I was!

The dawn was breaking before we finally got all the way up to the fighting top, and at last I saw what a river looked like. The Vistula was as beautiful as they had always told me it was.

That morning, word went out that those of us below could go up topside, one platoon at a time, whenever there wasn't a battle going on. I'm sure that order came from Lord Conrad.

I was below at noon, when all of the guns above us started shooting, not just the three dozen swivel guns my company manned, but the steam-powered peashooters that quickly spat out thousands of small iron balls, and the Halman Projectors that threw bombs high over the enemy. It went on for an hour before my lance was called up to the ready room. After a few minutes we were needed up on the fighting top.

The gun smoke was so thick you had to gag, and after the darkness below, the sunlight was blinding. The noise could make a man go deaf, and the number of arrows being shot at us was simply unbelievable. They were stuck all over the deck and looked almost like wheat ready for the harvest. We found that we had to walk with a sort of sliding motion, breaking off the arrows as we went, to keep from tripping over them.

All of the men on deck had arrows sticking out of them, a frightening sight! But we soon realized they were all right. Our armor was of plated steel, heavily waxed and covered with thick canvas. It was proof against the Mongol arrows, although those missiles tended to stick in the wax and canvas.

What I had taken at first for convulsions was in fact the men laughing about the whole situation!

A gunner signaled for help, with an arrow in his upper arm that was squirting blood. Somehow, it had managed to slide up his brassard and get under his pauldron. Not a deadly wound, but it needed tending. Fritz and Zbigniew helped him below, his loader took over shooting the gun, and the spotter took over loading the twenty-round clips into the gun, and then reloading the empty clips from the ammunition boxes.

I had nothing better to do, so I felt free to stand behind them and act as their spotter. It gave me a chance to see what was going on.

A great mob of Mongols was on the bank, crowding right down to the shore. They were trying to kill us with their arrows, which were obviously ineffective. We, on the other hand, *were* hurting them, hurting them badly.

Three dozen swivel guns were each shooting twenty rounds a minute into a packed crowd of men and horses, and you could see where individual bullets were killing three and four of them in a file at a time. The two peashooters on that side of the boat were spraying away, taking out Mongols in horizontal ranks. And the Halman bombs were bursting above them, each explosion knocking down a circle of the enemy a dozen yards across!

The enemy was being shot so fast that no attempt was made to remove the dead and wounded. Those that fell were just left there to be trampled, to bleed, and to die.

And the fools kept coming! They made no attempt to run away, or to hide behind something, as any rational creature would, but instead were actually *climbing on top of their own dead in order to get at us!*

I tell you that in some places they were sitting on horses that were standing on three and four layers of dead men and dead horses!

And once there, there was nothing they could do. Their arrows couldn't really hurt us, and when some of them went into the water to get at us, those that didn't freeze immediately soon found that the sides of the boat were six yards high, and made of smooth metal that couldn't possibly be climbed.

In our months of training, we had been repeatedly told that we were facing the craftiest, best organized, and best led enemy in the world. That day, it seemed to me we were simply slaughtering a mob of idiots with less brains than a herd of sheep

Then the loader on the gun next to me got an arrow in the eyeslit, and I had to leave off watching the war and go to his aid. He was on his back and not moving. I needed help to get him below.

Looking about, I saw Taurus was shooting a gun three places down, and laughing and screaming insanely at the Mongols the whole time. He was shouting what could only have been the names of his family and friends who had fallen to the Mongol onslaught of the Ukraine.



I thought that he was somehow living in Heaven and in Hell at the same time. I knew that while he had both bullets and Mongols to shoot them at, I would get no help from Taurus.

Then Sir Odon saw my need and ran over to help me. Together we picked the wounded man up and carried him down the steps to the surgery.

Later, we found out that our gunner lived, and he was back at his gun the next day.

This sort of slaughter went on for days, and we were all amazed there were so many Mongols. One night I spoke briefly to Lord Conrad again, and he admitted to being as astounded by their numbers as everyone else was. His biggest worry was that we would run out of ammunition before Batu Khan ran out of warriors.

Then the Mongols started to get a little bit smart, or maybe, as some said, their engineers finally caught up with their frontline troops.

One of our planes, piloted by Count Lambert himself, someone said, dropped us a message telling us that the enemy was building a pontoon bridge along the riverbank, downstream of us.

We went there with another boat following us, and they ordered us to get ready to land and chop the thing up with our axes right after we gave them a pass with the guns.

All of us except the gunners poured out of the drawbridge in the front of the boat, with the fifth lance of each platoon taking up the rear, as usual. We had to be behind the other guys in order to see them when they got wounded, and get them back to safety. Not that we didn't do our share of the fighting, you understand.

The first lance, made up of the biggest men, always went in first with their halberds, and we went in last to pick up the pieces, whether we were with our pikes, towing a war cart behind us that was full of gunners, as in a field battle, or when we just went in with axes, like now.

The Mongols had broken and run away after our gunners had done their job on them, which made me figure that their engineers must be a lot smarter than the average run of the enemy—say, about up to the level of a flock of ducks.

There wasn't much for us to do, since the guys up front had already chopped up everything that looked like it might have been a part of a bridge, or a bit of a Mongol.

There were a lot of dead bodies lying around, hacked up and bloody and stinking worse than anything you could possibly imagine. It wasn't just the shit that had been shot out of the guts of so many of them.

During training, we'd been told that Mongols never bathed, that they put their new clothes on the outside and then let those on the inside just rot away, but we hadn't believed it, not until we had to walk through all those dead bodies.

By this time everybody had gotten used to seeing dead people, but the stench of that beach got at least a dozen of the guys heaving their breakfast out, and that was a very bad thing to do when you were wearing one of our helmets, which covered your whole face. Think about it, if you really want to.

We had one guy whose visor hinge got jammed, and he darned near drowned before Zbigniew got the thing freed up.

There was a lot of gold on that beach. Every dead body seemed to have a big pouch full of the stuff. I didn't dare touch any of it, since doctrine was that you had to win the battle first before you started to loot. And even then you couldn't keep what you picked up, since all of the booty had to be brought together and counted before it could be fairly shared out.

Still and all, the temptation certainly was there. One of the men yielded to it, picked up a Mongol pouch, and got yelled at by Captain Targ. Then Lord Conrad said we might as well pick up a few pouches, just to get an idea of how much loot there actually was, and the captain gave the job to my platoon.

So I had about *fifty pounds* of gold and silver in my arms when all hell burst loose over the top of the riverbank.

# Chapter Four

From the Journal of Josip Sobieski

WRITTEN JANUARY 20, 1249, CONCERNING FEBRUARY 21, 1241

AT THAT point the river had a high bank, higher than the top of our boat, so the gunners and other people up there couldn't see over it to warn us about what was coming.

The other thing we had going against us was the fact that our helmets fastened to our breastplates and back armor with a rotary coupling that let you twist your head sideways but not up and down. It was a good system, most of the time, since a bash on the head wasn't likely to break your neck.

But in this instance, with the enemy suddenly above us, well, most of us didn't even know they were there until they shot us.

Actually, the Mongols did us a favor of sorts with that first volley, since it got our attention, and their arrows, like I said earlier, weren't usually all that deadly.

We soon found out that they had a spear with a long, thin point and sharp edges that was sheer murder.

Thrown at close range or carried at a run, that thing could punch right through our armor, and then right through the man who wore it, just about anywhere they put it. Once they had one of those spears in a man, they would jerk the spearsideways, and a little hole on the outside left a big, deep slash inside.

Had they just charged at us straight off, they could have killed most of us before we even knew there was a battle going on.

Even then, I was slow on the uptake, I am ashamed to say, because at first I had a hard time throwing away all that gold. I mean, here in my arms I had more money than my father could have made in twenty lifetimes of hard work, and while it was probably only a few moments before I threw it down and pulled my axe from its sheath, those were some long and important moments.

They came at us on foot, jumping down from the bluff, breaking their fall on the sloping sand and smashing into us. I had my axe out in time, but I didn't have a chance to swing it before this smelly individual knocked me over and ended up on top of me. He couldn't use his sword any more than I could use my axe, and he thought of his knife before I did.

I felt his knife hit my left side and bounce off my armor twice before I got my own knife out and did unto him as he was trying real hard to do unto me. He had armor, but it wasn't nearly as good as the stuff Lord Conrad's factories make. I had to stick him four times before he gave up and died.

I threw his body off me and tried to stand up, but before I was upright, some other Mongol ran into me and sent me skidding across a patch of ice and into the muddy water by the river.

What with the goose-down padding we wore under the armor, I hadn't much noticed the cold up until then, but when the water seeped in, it was ungodly cold. The Mongol next to me noticed it, too, or maybe he was just afraid of drowning, but he lost interest in me and tried to get back on dry land.

That was his big mistake, because I still had my knife in my hand. Still on my back, I caught him in the back of the knee, and he went down. I crawled over and got him in the neck before I stood again, picked up somebody's axe, and looked around, trying to figure out where I could be of the most use.

The gunners were blazing away, shooting those Mongols who were still on top of the bluff or just starting down, but they were afraid of shooting those in our midst for fear of killing their own men.

Down below we were outnumbered maybe two to one, and the Mongols, a whole lot more agile than we were, were swarming all over us. Our troops looked like clumsy bears being attacked by a fast and deadly pack of wolves.

It was our armor, you see, that made us slow and half blind.

It also made us almost indestructible, and I saw men take a dozen hits and keep on fighting as if they didn't notice them. In one case, I'm sure he didn't.

Taurus was swinging his axe like a madman, screaming insanely, running at the enemy and chopping down everything in front of him. I think he was seeing every Mongol as one of those who killed his family, and he was laughing at every throat he cut, every skull he smashed.

He certainly didn't need or want any help, and I had the idea that it wouldn't be safe to stand next to him; he might not know friend from foe until after the battle was over.

Some of the old fireside stories told of the times the Vikings invaded Poland and how they all got killed for their trouble.

One kind of Viking was called a berserker, men who went absolutely crazy during a battle. Looking at Taurus, I couldn't help thinking he must have some of that berserker blood in his veins. It was possible, because hundreds of years ago the Ukrainians had lost to the Vikings instead of killing them all, as we Poles did.

A Mongol in baggy pants singled me out, shouted some war cry, and ran at me with one of those deadly spears. Luck was still with me, for he slipped on the muddy ice and landed facedown at my feet. I chopped down, catching him in the middle of the back, between the shoulders, and he stopped moving. I looked back out at the fight.

A dozen of our men had formed up in a circle. They didn't seem to need help, and anyway, getting in there through the crowd of Mongols surrounding them looked impossible.

Then I spotted Captain Targ and Lord Conrad struggling in the mud, trying to get up while a dozen Mongols were trying to put them down. I was needed.

The tactics they taught us at the Warrior's School said that fighting fair is fighting stupid. If you do not kill the enemy as fast as possible, he will kill you instead, and your mother told you to come home alive. Fighting to win always seemed very sensible to me, despite all the glorious fireside stories I had heard about knightly honor, valor, and courtesy.

I killed three of the enemy surrounding my leaders by chopping them in the back before they knew I was there. Then suddenly, entirely too many of them noticed me, and it was my turn to need help. It came in the form of Fritz and Zbigniew.

Soon we were fighting on top of the dead, or nearly dead, bodies of the slain, and we were getting the upper hand. Those of the enemy who were still alive were falling back, or at least had become less aggressive about attacking us.

Then another band of Mongols came toward us, riding on horseback along the riverbank. With pikes, we could have taken care of them easily, but our pikes were stored in our war carts, back in the boat! Faced with fighting horsemen with only peasant axes, well, I was grateful when Captain Targ called for a retreat!

We made it back on the boat in good order, taking with us our wounded and our dead, more of both than I thought we had lost when I was fighting.

Even Taurus made it back, I think because he got turned around in the fight and found Mongols between himself and the boat. He didn't hurt any of us, but only because two men ran away and one man threw himself flat on the ground when they saw him coming.

Sir Odon had to hit him and take the axe from his hands before the captain allowed him on board. At least Taurus hadn't stripped himself naked, the way they say the Viking berserkers did.

The next-to-the-last man in was Lord Conrad, and I saw that he had an arrow in his eyeslit. I helped him up to the surgery and gently took his helmet off.

"Have I lost it?" he said, referring to his right eye.

I told him the arrow had missed the eyeball, so it was likely he would see with it again, but the arrow had stuck in the bone to the right of it, and there would probably be a scar. Still, he had been lucky.

"I would have been a damn sight luckier if the arrow had missed!"

I had to agree to the truth of that statement.

"Well, open that surgeon's kit! Get the arrowhead out, clean the wound, and sew it up! Didn't they teach you anything in medic's school?"

I tried to explain that I wasn't qualified, that I had never sewn up an eye before, that in fact I had never sewn up anything but some small dead animals in training, but it seemed he was adamant about me doing the job, and doing it immediately! I looked desperately around for help, but both of the surgeons were working on men who were far more seriously wounded than Lord Conrad. High rank has its privileges in most places, but not in an army surgery.

"Well, boy, now's your chance to learn! First, wash your hands in white lightning, and then wash around the wound as best you can."

What could I do? I had been given a direct order by a very superior officer! I had no choice but to obey.

When I finished with the washing, he said, "You got that done? Then get the pliers out of your kit and pull the arrowhead out. Better get somebody to hold my head. It will hurt, and I might flinch."

I could not believe that the greatest hero in all of Poland would ever flinch and tried to say so, but he shouted me down.

"I said get somebody to hold my head and stop acting like I'm God! That's an order!"

Shocked, I agreed that he was not God and called Lezek over to hold his head still.

"Now the pliers," he said.

The pain must have been horrible, for while he did not cry out, he did pass out for a few moments. When he came to, I told him it was out, and showed him the bloody arrowhead.

"Good. Throw it away. That kind of souvenir I don't need. Now get a pair of tweezers and feel around in the wound for any bits of broken bone or any foreign matter."

I thought of keeping that Mongol arrowhead myself, as a conversation piece, but orders were orders, and I gave it a toss. I found the tweezers and went to work. This time he cried out, although he did not pass out. I felt around in there as gently as I could, and found a few small bits of broken bone, which I removed. Then I told him I was done.

"Thank God! Now clean it all out again with white lightning. Pour it right in."

I still felt awkward about all of this, but what could I do but follow orders?

"Okay. Now get your sterile needle and thread and sew it up. Use nice neat little stitches, because if my wife doesn't like the job you do, she will make your life not worth living. Believe me. I know the woman."

I had heard tales of Lord Conrad's lady, and I had no desire to be her enemy. I carefully made nine neat little stitches, and when I was done, you could hardly see where the cut was. Then I bandaged him up, wrapping the clean gauze around his head and then under his jaw to keep it in place.

He sat up and said, "Well. Good job, I hope. Thank you, but now you better get around to the other men who were wounded."

I looked around and told him that it wasn't necessary, the surgeons had already taken care of everybody.

"The surgeons!" he yelled. "Then what the hell are you?"

I told him I was in the fifth lance, an assistant corpsman.

"Then what the hell were you doing operating on my head?"

I tried to explain that he had ordered me to do all that I had done. That I had been given a direct order by my commanding officer. What else could I have done but obey him?

"Then what were you doing with that surgeon's kit?"

So I explained how they had had these extra kits at the warehouse, and how they handed them out to some of the fifth lancers, just in case we needed them.

"They just handed it to you?"

I said yes, and thanked him for showing me what one should do with many of the things in the kit. It had reminded me of my boyhood at Okoitz, when Sir Conrad always seemed to have time to explain things to us.

But he just turned away from me with a look of exasperation on his face. I thought about the way Sir Conrad had always had a lot less patience with adults than he had with children, and I supposed that I was finally growing up.

Nonetheless, I beat a hasty retreat down to the lower deck.

Lezek followed me, giggling.

# Chapter Five

From the Journal of Josip Sobieski

WRITTEN JANUARY 21, 1249, CONCERNING FEBRUARY 26, 1241

WE GOT back to East Gate every second or third day, to load up on more coal, food, and ammunition, and to put ashore our dead and our seriously wounded.

The fighting was getting grim. The Mongols were becoming a lot less stupid than they had been, and we were starting to take serious losses.

The Mongols killed their first riverboat by luring it close to shore, and then felling a tall pine tree on it. They swarmed over the tree and eventually killed everyone in the crew. They were learning how to use the guns when Lord Conrad had another boat set the captured boat on fire with its flamethrower.

Their engineers all seemed to have black hair, yellowish skin, and funny-looking eyes. Lord Conrad said they were Chinese, from a place called China on the other side of the world.

They started setting up a sort of Mongol catapult. The things had a long arm with a big rock at one end and maybe two gross of their men pulling ropes on the other. They worked a lot better than you'd think, throwing rocks weighing over a ton for hundreds of yards.

One day when I was resting down on the cargo deck, a rock came through the fighting top, through two bunk beds in the officers' quarters, through the second floor, through our war cart not a yard from where I was lying down on top of it, through the cargo deck floor, and down through the bottom of the boat a yard below that!

I'd made the mistake of removing my armor before lying down to rest, so I got sprayed with about two dozen big splinters. I was never in danger of dying, but it took the surgeons over an hour to patch me up. And it hurt.

Lord Conrad got the bottom fixed before we sank, but just when he was done, another rock came all the way down through the boat not three yards from where the first one hit!

I tell you, warfare was starting to get dangerous!

We managed to keep our boat afloat, but had we caught a rock in the boilers, or on the paddle wheel the way some boats did, we would have been wrecked just like so many of the others.

Usually, the boatmaster could get his boat on the west bank before the thing sank, or sometimes another boat was near enough to be able to help out, so most of the men were saved. Most, but by no means all.

Sir Odon said it was possible to swim in armor, and he had done it himself, but he didn't think that a man could last long in the freezing water of February. It didn't make much difference to me one way or the other, since I had never learned to swim.

We got to avoiding those catapults, except where they started building a bridge in front of a bunch of them. As long as we could keep the Mongols on the east side of the Vistula, we knew eventually we would beat them. We didn't dare let them across, so we didn't dare let them get a bridge built.

Then the Mongols came up with their best idea yet, only maybe I should call it their worst one. They got whole cowhides, sewed them back together, and filled them with oil and lard. They lit them on fire and threw them at us with their catapults. When they hit a boat, it usually burned to the waterline. We lost more than half of all our boats to those firebombs, and all too often their crews were burned up with them.

In front of Sandomierz, where the enemy tried again and again to build a bridge, I saw six riverboats get hit by those oil bags and burn right down to nothing. Each of them had over two gross

of our men on them, and only one of the six was able to beach itself on the western shore. You had to cry, looking at it.

Then, as suddenly as the firebombs started, they stopped. The best anybody could figure out, the Mongols must have just run out of oil and lard.

We were running out of almost everything, too.

Finally, there came a time when there were only about a dozen or so riverboats left on the Vistula.

We were out of the wood alcohol and pine resin stuff they used in the flamethrowers, out of bombs for the Halms, out of iron balls for the peashooters, and almost out of ammunition for the swivel guns. We had even run out of Mongol arrows to shoot back at them.

Almost everybody on board had at least one wound, and out of my company we had more than six dozen men gone, either dead or wounded so bad they couldn't possibly fight.

We had some coal for the engines and food enough to eat, but that was about it.

And we were all tired. Deep-down-right-to-the-bone tired, so tired that even sleep didn't seem to do much good anymore.

That was when we found a completed bridge all the way across the Vistula, with thousands of Mongols racing across the top of it, getting to the west bank we had protected for so long.

Most of us were down in the cargo deck finishing lunch when Lord Conrad ordered everyone ashore, except for one volunteer to take care of the engines. He said he was going to take out the bridge by ramming it and this would likely sink the boat, so there wasn't any sense in getting everybody killed.

Except by then, well, there weren't any of us that had much sense left!

Leaving the boat? Abandoning ship when so many of our friends had died to preserve her? How could we do such a thing?

I looked at the men around me and said that maybe the boat wouldn't sink. Maybe the boat would get hung up on the bridge and we would be needed to clear the decks of the enemy. The others around me nodded. What I said seemed like perfect sense to them.

Then someone said that if we pushed all the carts right up tight to the front of the boat, the boat would hit the bridge with a much more solid blow, and a bunch of the guys immediately started packing the big war carts tight up against the bow. One of the engine crew said if we flooded some of the watertight compartments below the floor, we would make the boat heavier, and it would hit harder, so they started doing that, even though we all knew that doing so would make the boat even more prone to sink.

To all of us, it was no longer important whether we lived or died. The important thing was to knock down that bridge, and then, if we were still afloat, to defend the boat from the Mongols.

Lord Conrad and Captain Targ were shouting at each other. I'm sure I heard someone say "Mutiny!"

Then our captain said, "Of course, sir. But for now, we'd better all get up on deck, or we'll miss the show. The boat-master, Baron Tados, won't be waiting for orders, you know. *All platoons! Report on deck! Pass the word!*"

"You are all crazy people!" Lord Conrad shouted.

Sir Odon said, "Yes, sir. I suppose we are." Then he hurried up to the fighting top, and I was right behind him.

The bridge was tall, much taller than any of the other ones we had destroyed. I guess they had cut the logs thinking that the water was deeper here. Anyway, it was higher than the boat, and the roadway was made out of ropes that ran at the top of the logs.

There were I don't know how many thousands of Mongols up on that bridge, moving across as fast as they could. They saw us coming, they were pointing at us and shouting, but they never stopped moving. I saw men and horses getting on that bridge right up until the moment we hit it.

And hit it we did! Only we didn't punch a hole through it, the way I thought we would. We knocked it right over! Those big logs must have been just sitting on the bottom, because the ones right in front of us just went right over, Mongols and all! Then the water sort of caught the rope roadway and dragged it downstream, which just naturally pulled down the whole rest of the bridge with it!

There were all those thousands of Mongols splashing in the water, but none of them splashed around for long. Somebody said they came from a dry country called a desert, and they couldn't swim one bit better than I could!

Well, a few of them got near the western shore, so the gunners used some of their last bullets to get rid of them. I think most of the horses swam away, though.

It took us the rest of the day to get the boat fixed up.

Then things got quiet for a few days, and some of the guys said that the Mongols must have quit and gone home. The captain said that the enemy had pulled back from the river, but they weren't headed home yet, so we just paddled slowly around, waiting.

Then a really strange thing happened.

Early one morning, all along the river as far as we could see, the Mongols rode their horses down to the riverbank. They each got off, grabbed their horse's tail, and made the animal swim out into the water. And those horses swam all the way across the Vistula with the men behind them!

Our boat went right through them, drowning I don't know how many. Hundreds, maybe thousands, but not all that many compared to the huge numbers of warriors that were in the Vistula that chilly morning.

I heard somebody say that if the Mongols could do that, why hadn't they done it weeks ago, before we had killed so many of them on the riverbanks and on all those bridges we took out?

Then somebody else said to look carefully at the horses getting out of the water. Only about half of them still had a man behind them. All the rest of them must have drowned and sunk to the bottom in their armor.

That meant we had just seen half of the entire Mongol army drowned! They wanted to get across so bad they were willing to see half of their men die just to do it! And I mean half of the men they had left, after we had spent a week killing them by the thousands!

We were all dumbfounded, including, I think, Lord Conrad. The best anybody could think up for an answer was that maybe they had run out of food for themselves and their horses. There were millions of them, after all, and that many people and animals must eat an awful lot.

Later that day, when the insane enemy advance was over and the banks of the Vistula were again empty, Captain Targ told us we would be going ashore soon, to join up with the rest of the army that was getting ready to fight the Mongols, west of Sandomierz.

This time, no one thought of disobeying orders.

The Battle for the Vistula was over.

The Battle for Poland was about to begin.



# Chapter Six

From the Journal of Josip Sobieski

WRITTEN JANUARY 22, 1249, CONCERNING MARCH 7, 1241

THEY COLLECTED all the riverboats they could find, and together we disembarked in the cold rain, all of the men from the River Battalion who could still fight.

There were only nine boats left, nine out of the three dozen we had started out with.

There were only forty-one war carts to be pulled away from the shore out of the two hundred sixteen that had been loaded aboard at East Gate.

There were only sixteen hundred twenty-nine of us left out of the nine thousand men who had marched out of Hell to war, and almost all of us were wearing bloodstained bandages.

My lance had been surprisingly lucky. All six of us plus Sir Odon were still alive and upright, if not exactly well, but we were no longer together.

We had lost our platoon leader, and our war cart itself was smashed in the fighting, so the fifth platoon had been split up, temporarily, to fill out the losses in the other platoons.

Only Taurus was still by my side. Captain Targ told me to keep an eye on him, and Sir Odon told me to hit him on the head if he went crazy again. They both said that he was a valuable fighting man, but we had to make sure he did his work only on the Mongols.

Taurus himself had been very quiet since that fight on the riverbank. Days later and late at night, when the others were asleep, he asked me to tell him just exactly what had happened. When I told him, he just nodded, as if he was trying hard to absorb it all.

Then, on another night, he had me go over it all again, and this time he was counting on his fingers the number of men he had killed. He asked me to add this to the number that he guessed he'd killed when he had been shooting the swivel gun, since his own arithmetic wasn't very good. I came up with a hundred twenty-one.

He nodded, and he almost smiled.

It had been a hard morning's work, pulling the heavy war carts mostly cross-country in the freezing mud, and it was near noon when we finally found the rest of the army, west of Sandomierz.

I had the luck to be pulling on the very last cart in our column, and in the sixth file, so when we joined the rest of them, the man standing next to me, on my right, was from a different battalion. He had been there all day long and could tell me what was going on.

To know what was going on is a rare thing in the military. Usually, you find out only much later, and then what they would tell you had happened didn't seem to have much in common with what you had actually seen going on.

The first thing we found out was that the other battalions hadn't seen any action at all, except for the Nightfighters, and they were asleep somewhere. The army had been mostly waiting for the Mongols to cross the river, when all the while, the River Battalion was trying to stop them from doing just that.

They all had plenty of ammunition, whereas we were down to two bullets per gun. They quickly shared with us, and soon their other companies were helping out the rest of what was left of the River Battalion.

The entire army was there, although most of it was over the horizon, lined up in battle array, surrounding a long, shallow valley that they said held the whole Mongol army. We had the honor

of plugging the hole they had ridden in through, chasing the noble knights of three duchies who were pretending to flee.

"Or pretending to be pretending!" Somebody laughed. Many commoners have a less-than-worshipful view of our traditional nobility.

Our noble knights were supposed to run out the other end of the valley, some other battalion would close off the hole, and then the whole army would advance and destroy the Mongols.

Of course, the other end of the valley was eight miles away, so things took a bit of time, but soon we would be getting the order to advance. We ate a hasty lunch and waited.

An hour later word got back that our noble knights had not left the trap after all, but outnumbered ten to one, had decided to take on the Mongols by themselves.

I nodded, yes, that sounded like every noble knight I had heard about in every fireside tale. Nitwits, the lot of them.

Much later we could see the horsemen fighting and slowly working their way toward us.

These Mongols were just like the ones we had been seeing for weeks, in motley clothes and armor and riding undersized ponies. Only their red felt hats, with the peak pulled forward like they said the elves wore, were anything like a uniform.

The noble Poles were almost all wearing Lord Conrad's plate armor, but they wore it polished and on the outside rather than in pockets sewn in canvas overalls, the way the army wore it. It was pretty worn that way, but they said it took an hour to buckle each piece on separately, and it took more man-hours to keep it shiny than a regular soldier could spare.

One surprise was that all of the nobles out there were wearing identical red-and-white surcoats, which just had to be the army's doing. By themselves, that bunch couldn't agree on what kind of air to breathe.

The fight spilled into the big fields in front of and slightly below us, and it was just like being at the biggest tournament anybody ever told tales about. I don't think that such a sight was ever seen by mortal men before, and here we had perfect front-row seats, figuratively speaking.

Our people were mostly riding big warhorses, chargers, and that gave them quite an advantage over the easily knocked-over Mongol ponies. Our men had better armor and were bigger and stronger, too.

But nothing could offset their problem of being outnumbered ten to one.

Our knights were tough, and they fought hard, but one by one they were falling. The fight went on far longer than anyone would have imagined, but anyone with eyes could see that it was a losing battle.

And there wasn't anything we could do to help them! The fight was so tangled, with individual horsemen fighting other individuals almost nonstop, that any shots we fired from the swivel guns were as likely to kill our own people as the Mongols.

A swivel gun bullet could go through six armored men, and even when you hit your intended target square on, the men standing behind him could be anybody!

Oh, every now and then a wounded man would come near our lines, and some of us would go out to him. If he was a Christian, wearing a red-and-white surcoat, we would help him to safety, and if he wasn't, we would kill him and let him lie, but it still wasn't much of a contribution to the cause.

I could see Taurus on my left getting more and more anxious, and I did what I could to calm him down, not that talking did much good.

A while later a pair of very pretty girls drove up behind our war cart with a huge, army liquid cargo cart full of beer! Since our dinner gear was still packed, we had nothing but our helmets to put it in, but the war wasn't affecting us much just then, and anyway, we drank it in a hurry. A helmet full of beer calmed Taurus down considerably, and I worried less about him.

The girls didn't stay, which was a pity, but I suppose it was just as well.

Most of the troops were angry about the way we were standing idle while our knights were dying out there, but I had mixed feelings about it.

I mean, it was their decision to be out there in the first place, and in the second, if any of them wanted to leave, we would have let them through our lines.

I think those knights were actually having fun, and if they were crazy enough to think they were accomplishing something, well, that was their problem. With all the guns we had pointed at the Mongols, we could have blown them away in minutes, if the noble knights would only have gotten out of our way!

And anyway, I really hadn't liked most of the noble knights I had met. Oh, some of them, like Lord Conrad and Count Lambert, were truly fine people, but so many of them were just a bunch of privileged bullies. They were rude, and sometimes they took my father's bread without paying for it.

And why the girls who worked at the cloth factory—most of whom were of my age—wanted those knights when they would have nothing to do with me, well, it was beyond me.

Finally, in the late afternoon, after hours of watching the bloody show, I saw Lord Conrad run out onto the field with a nobleman right behind him, leading the thousands of men in his army into the fight.

"It's about time!" the men all around me said.

We all shouted, "*For God and Poland!*" We slipped the ropes that held us to the carts, vaulted the big shield in front of the first line axemen, and charged out onto the field.

We weren't marching in step, of course, since we were running. But habits stick with you, and we kept pretty much in line.

The horsemen, almost all of them Mongols by this time, were shocked to see us running at them. Most of them turned and ran away from us, or maybe their horses did and the men went along for the ride.

A few turned and charged right back at us, but that was something for which the army had trained us well. Our men just lined up and grounded their pikes, and the men nearest the center impaled the horse front to rear. The other pikers around them went for the rider, and if he lived to hit the ground, he rarely lived to get up, since a dozen or more troops would mob him.

Like I told you before, fighting fair is fighting stupid.

I saw hundreds of Mongols die that way, but a few hundred was just a few, compared to the huge numbers of people involved in that battle. Most of them ran away, or tried to, since we had them surrounded, even if they were a while finding it out.

It was a run of several miles, in armor, and we were carrying our heavy pikes, but we were trained for it. As we ran, the circle got shorter and shorter, and our lines, five men deep at first, got thicker and thicker. Eventually, there was a great seething mass of mounted men, I don't know how big around, and they were surrounded by a mass of army troops at least three dozen men deep, pushing them tighter into a circle.

I think that if it wasn't for the breast and back armor we all wore, none of our people toward the center of that mess would have been able to breathe. As it was, we found out later that most of the horses we had surrounded did die because they were squeezed too hard. At least they were dead without a mark on them.

But while we had the Mongols surrounded and pressed in, we weren't really any better off than before. We still couldn't get to most of them. Oh, the outer few yards of them were within range of our pikes, but most of the enemy still couldn't be reached.

Then one trooper figured it out. I think he must have been wounded, for he had a big bandage wrapped around his helmet, but he started screaming something that sounded like the howling of a wolf. He ran *right up the backs* of the men surrounding the Mongols and then *right over the top of them*, running on their pikes and their heads and their shoulders!

He ran onto the back of a horse that was so squeezed in it couldn't take a step. The Mongol riding it was so pinned in that he couldn't move his legs, either! The soldier with the bandage started swinging his axe like he was chopping wood, and he took the head off that Mongol in two hacks.

Then he stepped over to another Mongol and repeated the process.

The rest of us weren't slow once somebody had given us a hint, and Taurus, who had stayed beside me during the whole charge, was now out in front of me. We dropped our pikes, pulled out our axes, and ran on top of our own men to get at the Mongols!

The whole affair was over in a few minutes.

We all looked around at the blood and gore, amazed at what we had done. Then the men at the edges sort of relaxed, and the whole mass of dead men and dead horses sort of slumped under my feet.

Somebody started to sing, and most of the rest of the guys joined in, but me, I just sat down and took off my helmet. I put my elbows on my knees and my head in my hands.

I was tired. Very, very tired.

Taurus came over to me. He wanted to know how much was one hundred twenty-one plus eighty-four, but I was too tired to think. I told him, "Too many."

# Chapter Seven

From the Journal of Josip Sobieski

WRITTEN JANUARY 23, 1249, CONCERNING MARCH 8, 1241

THEY TOLD the River Battalion to stand down, go back to our war carts, pitch camp, and rest. There was still a lot of work to be done, but there were plenty of nearly fresh troops to do it.

The next day, we watched as the rest of the army cleaned up the battlefield.

The Christian wounded were cared for as best as we could. There were relatively few of them, and we actually had more surgeons than there were wounded people for them to tend.

The Christian dead, almost all of them noblemen, since the army had taken almost no casualties at all, were properly buried, their arms and armor neatly bundled for return to their next of kin, and such of their horses as were uninjured were simply set free, until they could be later collected up, sorted out, and returned home.

The Mongol dead were stripped, their arms and armor thrown into one pile, their purses and jewelry thrown into another.

After that they were all beheaded and their heads stuck up on broken pikes and lances, in neat squares a gross of heads to the side for easy counting.

They tried to burn the bodies, but with the rain that had been falling for days and the general lack of firewood locally, they gave up on it. They just dug a huge, long pit and threw the naked, headless Mongol bodies into it.

Not a very polite thing to do, I suppose, but it wasn't as though we had *invited* them to Poland!

The amount of booty collected was simply fabulous, but I had known how that would go since before that battle on the east riverbank. We were told that once the loot was all collected and divided out, we would all be rich.

I had to think about that, because I wasn't really sure just what "rich" meant. Did it mean I could have a castle like Lambert's?

But then who would live in it with me? Who would do all the work that it took to keep the place up? I mean, every man I knew was now in the army, and so every one of them would be getting at least as big a share of the loot as I was.

Somebody would still have to plow the fields, or we'd all starve, that was plain enough. And somebody would have to bake the bread, and I knew that that somebody would be my father and his family.

That had to be the way of it. If everybody was rich, then nobody was rich. All it meant was that we'd all have lots of pretty gold jewelry and things, but we'd still be working people all our lives.

I tried to explain my reasonings to the other guys around me, but none of them believed me. They called me a pessimist and went on talking about their big houses, their vast fields, and their numberless herds of cattle. In an hour they all had fine horses, beautiful wives, and dozens of even prettier servant girls.

As if the Mongols had brought a few million extra pretty girls with them from wherever it was they had come from!

Any fool could see they had brought the gold and silver they had stolen from the Russians, and their swords and other weapons, and that was about it.

Well, they had brought their ponies, too, and those that were still alive had all been relieved of their saddles and released for lack of anything better to do with them. We didn't have the harnesses

we'd need to hitch them to our war carts, and anyway, they would have slowed us down. With men pulling the things, we could keep going around the clock, and no horse except Anna's kin could possibly do that.

I supposed that come spring, a lot of poor peasants would be using Mongol ponies to pull their plows instead of making their wives do it. That would doubtless be an improvement, but I wouldn't call it "rich."

But a pony wasn't of any use in a bakery, so I stopped thinking about it and went to sleep.

The next morning the battlefield was cleaned up. It is amazing how much work a sixth of a million men can do when they are organized properly.

One komand of six companies was being left on the battlefield to take care of the wounded and keep an eye on things, half of the rest were going back with the booty to get the factories going again, and the remaining seven battalions would be going east of the Vistula to see about cleaning up the mess we'd made over there.

A few million unburied dead bodies lying around can start a plague, they told us, and there was probably more gold over there than had ever been brought to this side of the Vistula.

And since the River Battalion knew where all the bodies weren't buried, we would be going back to show the rest what to do. Apparently, we would not be among the idle rich for a while yet.

The first problem we faced was that we couldn't find the riverboats to take us across the river. It seemed that the rains and thunderstorms of the last week had made our radios not work, somehow. The boats had to be out there, somewhere, but they didn't know we needed them.

Fortunately, someone found some big barges at the docks of Sandomierz and a lot of rope in one of the warehouses. With these things, they made up six of the sort of ferryboats that Lord Conrad had invented ten years ago.

The idea was that you tie a boat to the bank with a long rope, with the centerline of the boat at an angle to the river. The force of the river's flow will then push the boat across, the way the wind moves the sails of a windmill. Change the angle around, and the boat will go back again.

I know this works because they decided that the River Battalion should be the ones to work them. Since this was a task far preferable to stripping and burying dead Mongols, we took on the unfamiliar job with alacrity.

By night we had all seven battalions east of the Vistula. A company from the River Battalion was left with the ferryboats, but it wasn't mine.

We spent two days doing the dirtiest jobs imaginable, stripping, decapitating, and burying the Mongol dead. Once we had carried away the top layer of them, we discovered that the dead bodies below were packed so tightly they were stuck together!

We had to get a rope around each man and each horse, and then twenty men would drag the dead body out for another group to process while we went back for another corpse. Ugly work.

Then we got shocking news.

Cracow was burning!

We dropped what we were doing and recrossed the Vistula as fast as we could. Since we all had to use the same ferryboats, it was like trying to empty too big a bottle through too small a neck.

We worked quickly, but everything took so much time!

Troops were sent south on the railroad in company-sized units, rather than waiting until we could move together.

Days before, when the first half of the army was heading south, they had lightened their loads when they heard about the Mongol attack on Cracow. They had thrown out everything they didn't absolutely need to fight with and took off at a run to save the city.

Scattered by the side of the road were tons of food, clothing, and even radios, but more important, tons and tons of booty. Fabulous amounts of gold and silver coins and precious jewelry were lying all about, and the last company in line had been left to guard it.

Every platoon had to take its cart with it, and these carts were difficult to remove from the railroad tracks. So when the troops from across the Vistula finally came along, the guard company, now rested, had left in their van, and the last company in each group had taken over the guard duty for a bit, until they in turn were relieved.

And since we were the people who were operating the ferries, my company was the very last one to head south.

So we were the ones who got stuck with guarding I don't know how many tons of useless gold. We completely missed the Battle of Cracow, the Slaughter of East Gate, and the Battle of Three Walls!

The world is sometimes most unfair!

It was weeks before we were sent enough men and carts to move all of the booty to Three Walls. We were allowed but one night there to have a beer and hear about everything we had missed before we were ordered back across the Vistula to finish up with the dirty cleanup job that had been interrupted.

Eighty thousand other soldiers were there with us doing the same dirty job, but that didn't make us feel any better about it!

The worst of it was when we got to those Mongol catapults, and saw all the bodies around them. Back when we were killing them, we had wondered at the way the Mongols didn't seem to care if we killed them or not, and at the way the catapult crews fell so easily, as though they had no armor at all.

Now we found the reason for it. The people pulling those catapults weren't Mongols at all. They were Polish peasants who had been captured and forced to help the enemy! Those had been our own people we were forced to kill!

And all we could do was bury them.

I don't think that I ever felt guilty about killing the enemy, but up until that time, I didn't really hate them, either. Now I learned to hate the Mongols, and hate them I still do.

After a week spent cleaning up the killing fields where the riverboats had wreaked such havoc, we split into smaller groups, back into the countryside, to bury the dead who had not taken the army's advice about evacuating the area.

The horror was not to be believed.

Not just the dead bodies of weaponless men, women, children, and even household pets, but the deliberate torture and then desecration of those people was what got to you.

I could almost understand an invading soldier raping an attractive woman. I could not forgive it, of course, but I could understand why a man might do such a thing.

But why would someone then tie the feet of that naked woman to a large tripod and start a small fire under her head?

What reason could a man have for nailing a small dog to a church door, and leaving it there in pain until it died of thirst?

Why would they cut out an old man's eyes and tongue, and then leave him in his home, when they had killed everyone else in the village and left them where they had fallen, so that by touch he would find those he loved, one by one, dead and cold?

We had given that old man water and food, and made him as comfortable as possible, but that night while we slept, he took Fritz's belt knife and plunged it into his own heart.

We buried him with the rest of the villagers and never told the priest that he was a suicide. To do so would have meant that the old man would not have been buried in the churchyard with the family he loved.

If God wants to punish us for that, He is free to do so.

But all things end, even the worst of them. At the end of April, Sir Odon, who was again our lance leader, told us he had wonderful news.

The River Battalion was being given preferential treatment for processing through the Warrior's School. While most of the army was being temporarily disbanded, and converted into reserve forces, we would be able to enroll in a month! Thus, we would be assured of being able to stay in the regular Christian Army indefinitely!

He was very excited about it, and soon got the others enthused as well. For myself, well, I was not sure what I wanted to do.

Anyone could leave the Christian Army anytime he wanted, except in an actual combat situation. My military experiences had, on the whole, not been pleasant, but they had not been boring, either, and surely the worst of the warfare was over.

They say that the only thing Lord Conrad ever promised anyone was that he would see interesting times, and Lord Conrad has always kept his promise.

But there was more than my wants to be considered. I still had not found my father, but I was sure he was still alive, somewhere.

I knew full well what his desires would be. He would go back to his bakery, and he would demand that I go back there with him.

I had never even thought of disobeying my father. Not before then.



# Chapter Eight

From the Journal of Josip Sobieski

WRITTEN JANUARY 24, 1249, CONCERNING MAY 2, 1241

SIR ODON would not hear of my resignation from the army, not then, anyway. He said we had a month's leave coming— with pay—and after I had spent the time thinking it over, he would listen to me then.

For now, he was signing me up for the last eight months of the Warrior's School, and that was that.

We left our war carts at Sandomierz for the battalion that was forming up there to protect the duchy and heard the news.

Count Conrad was now Duke Conrad, and furthermore, he was a duke three times over! He was Duke of Mazovia, Duke of Sandomierz, and Duke of Little Poland, the area around Cracow.

It seems that most of the noblemen of those duchies had been killed in battle, and most of their dependents had been slaughtered by the Mongols who had tricked their way into East Gate, where they were sheltering.

There wasn't anybody else left to rule half of Poland, so now it was Lord Conrad's, and therefore, the army's, we supposed.

\* \* \*

The people of Sandomierz were well-disposed toward the men of the army, and we spent a week there before we headed southward again, for home.

We had a remarkable time. We had not received any of our pay yet, much less our share of the booty, but the lack of money didn't seem to matter. Everything seemed to be free to members of the victorious army, and from the first, we got uproariously drunk.

I had been drinking beer all of my life, of course, and I'd often been a bit tipsy, but this was my first experience with drinking so much that I couldn't dance upright, or crawl a straight line, or even see the same thing with both eyes!

It was my first experience with another thing as well, and pretty little Maria was a wonderful instructor.

It was the first time I had ever felt, in a loving way, the incredible softness of a woman's breast, or the unbelievably welcoming smoothness of her lower parts.

Sometimes, lying abed in the late morning, we fantasized about a wonderful life together. She was recently widowed, she was fairly wealthy, and she owned what had been a thriving tailor's shop.

The laws were such that a woman alone found it hard to run a business. She needed a husband, but she needed more than just an agreeable young man

She needed someone who could take over her property and manage it profitably, and I knew nothing about tailoring. I think that if my father had been a tailor, or if her dead husband had been a baker, I would have married Maria. We might have spent the rest of our days happy in Sandomierz, but such was not to be. After five delightful days together, the reality of our situations finally came home to us.

We parted the best of friends, and we have written each other ever since, although not often for she soon found a tailor from the first platoon of my own company who satisfied all of her needs.

She writes that they are still very happy.

I found the others of my lance just before they left without me, and we were lucky enough to get a ride back to East Gate on a riverboat, one of only three left on the Vistula. From there, the railroad mule carts from East Gate to Coaltown were operating again.

We went as far as Three Walls to collect our pay and a hefty advance on our share of the booty. They were handing out a thousand pence—three years' pay!—to any soldier who would sign for it. They still hadn't figured up how much we each had coming, since more loot was still trickling in.

While we were there, we stopped at a special army warehouse to select our share of souvenirs. I got a yak-tailed banner, two heavily decorated swords, and some jewelry that I planned to give to my mother and sisters. As things turned out, the fine young ladies of the cloth factory ended up with almost half of it.

Finally, I put my armor and weapons in storage, signed for two sets of class A uniforms, and caught a mule cart for Okoitz.

I had been writing my mother regularly, although for the last two months I hadn't been in one place long enough to have a return address. Without one, she couldn't write back to me, but at least they knew I was alive and well, and that I was coming home. Someday, the army would solve its problems with regard to the mail, but it hadn't done so yet.

My father and brother had been home for weeks, as were most of the other men from Okoitz. Things were almost back to normal, but they gave me a big welcome home party anyway. More men than I could remember came up to shake my hand, and I was kissed and hugged by hundreds of women, and some of them were pretty.

When all of this was added to more drinking, eating, and drinking than was prudent, or even sane, well, it was the afternoon of the next day before I finally had a chance to talk with my father and my brother.

It seems that they were trained in a company near the northeast corner of the Warrior's School (my father never called it "Hell"), while the River Battalion was at the southwest corner. We were a mile and a half apart from one another, separated by what was actually, at the time, the biggest city in all of Christendom. It was little wonder that our paths had never crossed.

The same was true at the Battle of Sandomierz, where we had all fought, but were stationed five miles apart.

They were impressed by the fact that I had served in the River Battalion, for the stories about what we had done were told again and again throughout the rest of the army.

For my part, I was eager to hear once more about what had happened at Cracow and at the Battle of Three Walls, where my father and brother fought, side by side, and had taken part in the annihilation of the second Mongol army. In truth, I envied my brother for being able to serve with his own father by his side, and I told him so.

Late in the afternoon, my father suggested that I might want to take a few days off, to rest, before I resumed my job at the bakery.

At that point I had to tell them about how the River Battalion was being sent through the rest of the course at the Warrior's School, and how I was signed up to start there in three weeks.

My father's reaction was about what I had expected, or perhaps I should say, what I had feared. He became angry, and told me I was being a fool.

"You have the right to leave the army, and that is exactly what you should do. It is what you *will* do!" He said, "Why should you want to go and spend eight more months in stupid training when the Mongols have been totally defeated. Training to kill who? After what has happened to all the Mongols, nobody will ever again dare to molest Poland!"

I had to tell him I could not answer his questions, and that I wasn't really sure what I should do.

He said, "If you are not sure, well then, I am! You should obey me, as a good boy should always obey his parents."

He walked away then, which was just as well. I didn't want to confront him, but I didn't want to lie to him, either.

My brother just told me to take some time and think it all over carefully. Together, we went over to the Pink Dragon Inn, got roaring drunk, and tipped the lovely waitresses there more than they were used to, since he had as much surplus cash as I did.

Later, we found two willing girls from the cloth factory, and eventually spent the night with them in their room in the castle. In the arms of a lovely woman, I went to sleep that night thinking that being a baker at Okoitz might not be such a bad life after all.

After spending two weeks working in the bakery, I was no longer sure. In truth, doing again and again the same dull things that I had done for most of my life, I was bored, bored almost to death.

When I thought on the things I had done in the war, the friends I had known, and the things I had seen, there seemed to me to have been a certain ... greatness about them. It seemed that somehow the army and the war had lifted me up to a higher level of being. That I had, for a short while, been like one of the heroes they told about in the old fireside tales or even like one of the ancient pagan gods!

When I thought of the friends I had made in those few months, I was amazed at the closeness I felt for them, and how much I truly missed them all, even Taurus's craziness and Kiejstut's sullen quietness.

I stood there, my face and hair dusted with rye and wheat flour, my arms buried up to the elbows in sticky bread dough, trying to be polite to Mrs. Galinski, an annoying lady customer.

Was this the way I wanted to spend the rest of my entire life? The only life God would ever give me?

No.

Better to live the full life for a year and have it end with my breast pierced through by a Mongol spear, than to have it slowly ground away to nothingness by the bitchy Mrs. Galinski!

I would not be a baker. I would go to the Warrior's School and see where life would lead me.

And perhaps my father would forgive me.

I talked it over first with my brother. He said if this was truly my wish, then he would do everything in his power to smooth the way for me with the family, and especially with our father.

He also said he was not being entirely altruistic in all of this, because it would probably mean that he would one day inherit the bakery alone, rather than having to share it with me.

I said that if he stayed here, working in the bakery, then he would have earned his inheritance, and he should enjoy it with my blessings. Furthermore, if he ever needed help taking care of our parents once they got old, he should feel free to call on me to help out with the expenses. We shook hands on it, and I've never regretted the decision we made that night.

I told my mother about our agreement, and I could see we had made her very sad. She left for a while and came back tearstained, but she said that if this was what I wanted to do, well, I was no longer a boy and must make up my own mind about what was right for me. She said she would miss me, but that I had her blessings. I could tell she dreaded breaking the news to my father as much as I did.

Indeed, I dreaded telling him so much that every day for a week I kept putting it off. I procrastinated.

I kept on procrastinating until the morning of the last day possible for my departure. Then I simply showed up at the bakery wearing my uniform.

My father looked at me, shook his head, and walked away without speaking to me. I looked for him for hours, but I couldn't find him.

I had to leave home without his blessing.

# Chapter Nine

From the Journal of Josip Sobieski

WRITTEN JANUARY 25, 1249, CONCERNING JUNE 4, 1241

AS I suspected would happen, my entire lance showed up for the second part of our training, and Sir Odon didn't even say "I told you so" when I arrived at the last possible moment. We all looked at each other and smiled. Even Taurus smiled, the first time I ever saw such a thing. We all had the warm feeling that our family was together again.

The course of study in Hell was much different from the one we'd gone through a few months before. Then, there had been very little in the way of classroom work. Everything we had learned was to teach us how to kill Mongols and how to stop them from killing us.

Now things were different. Fully half of our waking hours were spent in the classroom. Many of the courses were on expected subjects, that is to say, military in nature. How to plan an ambush, how to arrange for supplies, how to take care of and repair weapons, clothing, and armor.

Some subjects were less concerned with immediate military operations, like military law and what constituted a legal order.

I was surprised to find that there are some orders that are actually illegal to obey, such as an order to kill an unarmed and nonviolent noncombatant.

If your commanding officer ordered you to do an illegal act, you were *required* to disobey, and if you were not actually in combat with the enemy, you were *required* to arrest your own officer!

You had to be deadly careful with that law, however, because if you invoked it, there would be a mandatory military court-martial that would be the end of someone's career, and quite possibly the end of somebody's life. Maybe yours, if you were wrong!

Other courses included map reading and mapmaking, mathematics, the operation and repair of steam engines, the operation and repair of radios, the construction of roads and bridges, and other suchlike things. They weren't trying to make us masters of all of these arts, but to teach us enough to get started and to know which manual to get to teach you all the fine points when you needed them.

But then there were a group of subjects I never thought would be important to a warrior. We took courses on both military courtesy and *social courtesy*. If you were invited to dine with the local baron, your manners had better not embarrass the Christian Army! We took courses in playing musical instruments and even in dancing, since a true warrior was expected to be as competent with the ladies as he was with the enemy!

Of course, the other half of the day was spent doing physical things, and it was as demanding as it had been before.

But even here, there were differences. For one thing, they finally issued us swords, and we spent at least an hour a day working out with them. The sword the army used was not the horseman's saber, but the long, straight infantryman's *épée*. It had very little in the way of a cutting edge and was primarily a thrusting weapon, but once you knew how to use it, you could even defeat a man in full armor. Once you were fast enough, and accurate enough, you could hit the cracks in his armor, his eyeslit, the places where one plate moved over another.

It was worn, not at the belt, but over the left shoulder. A leather tube was fastened to the epaulet to protect the *forte* section of the blade, and a long, thin knife sheath at the right buttock covered the tip. It came out quickly enough, although it took a bit of squirming (or a friend) to resheathe it.

Much time was spent studying unarmed combat, on the theory that a warrior was always a warrior, even if he was naked.

That, and they finally taught me how to swim.

Since there were many fewer people in Hell than there had been last winter, we ran the great obstacle course at least once a day. Last winter we were only able to get to it about once a week.

Lastly, there was much more emphasis on religion than before. If you didn't have a thorough grounding in Christianity before you went to Hell, you certainly got it there. This produced several problems for the men of my lance.

For reasons that I don't understand, throughout our first training session and the war that followed it, we had never talked much about religion among ourselves. Lezek, Fritz, Zbigniew, and I were all Roman Catholics, we had always lived where everybody was a Roman Catholic, and none of us had a clear idea about how anybody else could possibly be anything different.

We were surprised to discover that Taurus was a Greek Orthodox Christian. He'd been going to church with the rest of us because there wasn't one of his faith available, and he figured that it wouldn't do any harm.

Kiejstut was the quiet Lithuanian who spoke so little that it was easy to forget that he was there. It turned out that he wasn't a Christian at all!

He was some sort of pagan, and had been going to church with the rest of us because he was afraid of what we would do to him if we found out the truth! Once the truth came out, it took us, and the priest who was teaching the class, a long time to relieve him of his anxieties. It was only when I told him to relax, that we weren't going to eat him, that he finally did calm down.

Secretly, I believe he *really was worried about being eaten!* That either his tribe or some of those around his people actually did eat human beings. Or maybe his tribal shaman, or whatever they had, had told him Christians ate people, I don't know.

But when the priest asked him if he would like to take some extra study, and then be baptized a true Christian, he jumped at the chance.

Long before the school was over, we all went to his christening.

We learned one very sad piece of news in the fall of 1241. Captain Targ was missing and presumed dead.

His parents had a farm west of Sacz, near the Dunajec River, and with Lord Conrad's blessings he and his brother, a platoon leader from another company, had borrowed a pair of conventional army horses and ridden east to visit them and see to their safety.

And that was all we knew.

They were never seen again. A lance sent out to look for them found nothing except the farm, which had been burned out by the Mongols, apparently in the early spring. There was no sign of Captain Targ's family, either.

With both our captain and our platoon leader dead, my lance felt that it was orphaned.

When most of the course was over, we all underwent an ordeal and a blessing. Sir Odon was included with us, since he had not yet performed this ceremony. After a day of prayer and fasting, with our souls in a State of Grace, we walked barefoot across a big bed of glowing coals. We were not harmed, being protected by God.

The others were perhaps more impressed by this miracle than I was, but then they had not seen golden arrows come out of the sky to kill four Crossmen who would have harmed Lord Conrad.

Then we did a night's vigil, praying on a hilltop outside the Warrior's School, and in the morning we looked down on the fog in the valley below. Each of us saw a halo, great rays, or horns of light, around the shadow of his own head, but not around the heads of the others. We had been individually blessed by God and were all knighted, and made Knights of the Order of the Radiant Warriors!

The next day, we were issued the army's new full-dress red and white uniform. We were amazed at the amount of gold that one wore on it.

There was a big, heavy medallion on the front of the peaked hat, and a band of solid gold below it. On the jacket there were golden tabs on the collar, huge gold epaulets on the shoulders, and solid gold buttons. Over it, one wore a belt with a solid gold buckle from which hung a fancy dress saber with a solid gold hilt and handle, and a matching dress dagger with matching gold trim..

Pinned to the jacket there was a huge and glorious gold medal, as big as your hand, announcing that we were members of the Order of the Radiant Warriors, and two smaller gold medals, one for the Battle of the Vistula and one for the Battle of Sandomierz.

Personally, I thought we should have been given a medal for the really tough job that we did, cleaning up the bodies east of the Vistula, but that didn't happen.

We even had golden spurs, like the French knights are said to wear, although ours had a rowel at the back, rather than the cruel spike they used. Not that any of us had been on a horse even once during our entire time in the army.

All told, we were to walk around with over *eight pounds of* gold hanging about our persons! I was relieved to discover that it was customary to wear this finery only at very special ceremonies and to otherwise leave our decorations locked up in the company vault.

Of course, we all planned to wear it home, at least once, and on any occasion when it was desirable to impress the ladies.

Once, I had told myself that the gold we got from the Mongols would only mean we would wear more jewelry, but somehow in the course of things, I had forgotten my own prediction!

There was one major sour point in all of this, however. Despite the fact that we had been knighted as part of our induction into the Order of the Radiant Warriors, and despite the fact that we had golden spurs, as only knights wore in France, and despite the fact that we had completed a course of study that resulted in the knighting of everyone else who had taken it before us, despite all of this, we were still not officially knighted, not as far as the army was concerned.

Sir Odon was still just a knight, not a knight-banner, as he had assumed he would be, and each of the rest of us was only a squire, at four pence a day, rather than a knight at eight.

"They hang eight pounds of solid gold on each one of us and then they are too cheap to pay us another four pence a day?" Zbigniew said.

We complained, but we didn't get very far, since everybody else was complaining about the same thing.

"It's the new policy," the baron's executive officer said to an angry crowd of us. "The graduates before you were promoted to knight because they would be immediately each given a lance of men of their own to train. Back then the army had to expand very rapidly to be able to meet the Mongol threat. But until we finish the training of everybody who took the short course just before the war, we will not be adding very many new members to the army. It only stands to reason that promotion will be slower."

Maybe it was reasonable to him, but it wasn't so to us. We locked away our new dress uniforms, put on our old class B uniforms, and went out and got roaring drunk.

We had orders to report for duty at East Gate in two weeks. Sir Odon, Zbigniew, and Lezek elected to go home on their leave, but there wasn't time for Taurus, Fritz, and Kiejstut to do so. They had, however, heard wonderful things about the girls of Okoitz, and I suggested they accompany me home.

We rented two rooms at the newly enlarged Pink Dragon Inn for the four of us, and I left them in the taproom staring at the nearly naked waitresses while I visited my family.

It was not a joyous homecoming.

Most of my family was eager enough to see me, but my father would not say a word to me. He came in, stared at me for a moment, then turned around and walked out.

It hurt.

I visited twice more during my leave, but nothing changed. My mother, my sisters, and my brother all promised to try to talk to him, but none of it did any good.

My friends had a marvelous time at Okoitz, and by joining them, I mostly had a good time, too. The ladies of the cloth factory seemed to think that being a Knight of the Order of Radiant Warriors certainly made one a true knight, and that anyway, any man who walked around wearing *eight pounds* of solid gold had to be worth spending some time with!

We discovered also that music was almost as good an aphrodisiac as wealth, and our new-taught musical skills did us yeoman service in the cause of Eros.

Since it was winter, the cloth workers dressed warmly enough at the factory, and they wore a long, heavy cloak to go between the castle, where they all lived, the factory, where they all worked, and the Pink Dragon Inn, where they all played.

But all of the Pink Dragon Inns were kept very warm because of the outfits their waitresses wore. Or rather, the outfits they pretty much didn't wear, since it consisted of little beyond high-heeled shoes and a loincloth.

As a result of the competition at the inn, the cloth workers usually wore only a very short skirt, with nothing above it. It was a lovely style, and well appreciated by all of us men.

Suffice it to say that for two weeks not one of the four of us ever slept alone, and it looked for a while as if Fritz was going to get married, although that affair soon fell apart. We were all happy when we left for East Gate, and would have been happier still if our heads had not hurt so badly.



# Chapter Ten

From the Journal of Josip Sobieski

WRITTEN JANUARY 26, 1249, CONCERNING FEBRUARY 17, 1242

THEY HAD a brand-new boat ready for us at East Gate, but the river was frozen over, and the boat wouldn't be going anywhere for a while.

With nothing better to do, we spent a day inspecting the remarkable "snowflake" fort there. The outer walls were of reinforced concrete, seven yards tall and thick enough to stop any siege engine. The inner walls, twenty yards high, were actually part of a huge, hexagonal building that housed an entire company along with all of their dependents, as many as fifteen hundred people. The complex contained a church, a school, an inn, and a machine shop. All this was crowned by a central tower fully four dozen yards tall.

Properly manned, I did not see how any army could have possibly taken it. It had a reputation for invincibility, and that very reputation had been the cause of its downfall.

It had fallen during the war, when Count Lambert's sister-in-law had usurped authority over the fort, then used it as a refuge for the noncombatant nobility only. To make room for all of them, she had evicted the female commoners trained to defend the fort, and had then let herself be tricked by the Mongols into opening the gates.

Most of the men of the old nobility had fallen in battle, but their parents, their wives, and their children had been slaughtered here at East Gate. There were twenty thousand tombstones in the adjoining graveyard, but few of them bore a name. There was no one left alive to identify the dead children.

New orders soon reached us, and we spent the next six weeks sawing down trees along the Bug River, preparing the way to put in a railroad.

The Ruthenians were now allied with Poland, rather than with the Mongols, and the railroad would let our army get there as quickly as possible, to support them if or when the Mongols objected to the new arrangement.

The work wasn't what we'd hoped for, but it was temporary and somewhat interesting. I'd never done any outdoor work before, and climbing higher than a church steeple to cut the top off a huge pine tree certainly got your blood going! Evenings spent singing or playing our new musical instruments glow pleasantly in my memory like the coals of the fires we sat around.

We worked five days a week and did military exercises on the sixth, which was the usual routine in the peacetime army.

We came back to civilization rippling with new muscles, and the girls almost fought each other to get at us!

When the ice broke up, we were back at East Gate, and soon we were back on the water again, riding the *Spirit of St. Joseph II*.

Peacetime riverboats had a crew of only twenty-two, and even that many was because most of us were in training. Only two people on board really knew what they were doing, the captain and the engineer. The rest of us were there mostly to learn how to run one of these things. In the course of 1242, I worked every single job on the boat, from helmsman to fireman, plus ticket salesman, sanitary engineer, radio operator, waiter, cargo master, mail sorter, painter, repairman, purser, steward, and cook.

The boat's captain was not the same thing as an army captain. That is to say, the first was a job position and the second was a military rank. Our current captain was in fact a knight-banner, while our boat captain during the war had been Baron Tados.

Our boat was a standard army riverboat, just like most of those we had seen the year before, although it wasn't a command boat like the *Muddling Through*. We had two Halman Projectors, four peashooters, and mounts for six dozen swivel guns, although we carried only twelve of them on board.

But despite our military capabilities, we were operating like a commercial common carrier. We had cargo space for six standard cargo containers, which were the same size as our war carts had been, six yards long, two yards wide, and a yard and a half high.

The main difference between a cart and a container was that the containers weren't armored, and they were built much closer to the ground, being mounted on railroad trucks, rather than the huge, cross-country wheels we used on the carts.

A container could snugly hold twenty-seven standard barrels. Or it could hold exactly six dozen standard cases, which were each a half yard wide and high and a yard long.

Those cases were just the right height to make a comfortable seat for two, or, upended, they were the right height to make a support for a workbench. Over the years, a lot of our cases ended up as furniture in peasant cottages, since the deposit on them was only a penny each.

We would take cargo that wasn't packed in our standard containers, cases, or barrels, but we charged a lot more to do it.

The army was big on standardization. There were only eight diameters of nuts and bolts, for example, so that when something broke, it was easy to replace. Glass jars came in only six sizes, each about twice as big as the next one smaller.

Each kind of jar was sized so a certain number of them fitted into a standard case, with no wasted space, and when you bought a quart of milk in Sandomierz, it was exactly the same size as a quart in Cracow. This was something new, since up to a few years ago, every city and town had its own sizes for everything.

It once was necessary for a merchant to personally be on hand whenever he bought or sold anything. Now he could purchase a container of army-grade number-two wheat in Plock, and do it by mail or even by radio, if he was in a hurry. He could have it shipped to a purchaser in Gniezno, while all the time he stayed in Cracow, secure in knowing exactly what he had bought and sold.

Many fortunes were made by those who were quick to learn the new ways of doing things. Those of us who worked on the rivers often indulged in this sort of trade whenever we noticed that the price of a given commodity in one place was much different than it was someplace else.

For years we more than doubled our salaries doing this, but eventually some merchants in Poznan set up a service where they systematically queried some two dozen cities on the local prices of three dozen commodities and made this information available, for a price, to other merchants. After that, only modest profits could be made, since no one but a fool would pay much more than the Poznan price for anything.

We carried passengers as well, with two dozen cabins on the second deck, for those who could afford them, and seats on the fighting top, for those who couldn't.

We would cruise up and down the Vistula, and every five miles or so there would be a depot with a dock. If they had business for us, they ran some flags up their pole or some lanterns at night and, by a system of codes, we would know if they had something that we had room for, which we usually did. We heard about really important passengers and cargoes by radio.

Evenings aboard, we sold beer and wine to passengers in the dining hall, earning a bit more money on the side, and I have always liked listening to travelers' tales, or hearing the songs they sang, or the tunes they played on strange, new instruments. To get into a competition, pitting our skills on the recorder, lute, or krummhorn against theirs, was always a joy.

It was a pleasant enough existence on the whole, because we stopped at all of the big cities along the way and there was always something new to see.

My main claim to fame came when, annoyed at doing the laundry, I put the dirty clothes along with some soap in a leaky barrel that had all four bungs missing. I tied the barrel to the rear railing with a long rope and kicked it over the side.

The barrel filled with water, then tossed and turned as it was pulled along, washing the clothes. Eventually, the soapy water was washed out and replaced with clean river water, and the clothes were rinsed.

Two hours later I pulled the barrel on board, and the clothes were clean! Soon, every boat on the river was doing laundry that way, and they named the barrel after me. Now, whenever anybody on the river washes clothes, they get out their Josip Barrel.

As the summer of 1242 came along, the army was preparing for another war, this time with the Teutonic Knights of St. Mary's Hospital at Jerusalem, better known as the Knights of the Cross, or just the Crossmen. It was to be a set-piece battle, with both sides agreeing on the time and place.

Naturally, we wanted to get involved, but our pleas and petitions got us nowhere. Apparently, every outfit in the army wanted to go, and there were only ten thousand Crossmen who needed killing. That wasn't much more than a single one of our battalions.

Also, it soon became obvious that Lord Conrad was planning to try out some new weapons on the Germans. It was all kept very secret, but we hauled some monstrous cannons down to Turon, where the Crossmen were holed up, along with some big canisters of something so poisonous that everybody but the fireman was required to stay up on the fighting top when we had it in the hold.

Lord Conrad and his liege lord, King Henryk, had invited "observers" from just about every Christian country in the world, and from a lot of those that weren't Christians, too.

We carried passengers from Hungary, Bulgaria, France, Spain, and Scotland, and that was just on our boat alone. There were three dozen other boats involved in the business, as well.

Mostly, it wasn't a war so much as it was a big political convention followed by an execution.

We weren't there when they shot poison gas into the Crossmen's fort, but they say there wasn't much to see, anyway.

We were by a few days later, after the big cannons had spent a few hours blowing down the brick walls, and again there wasn't anything to see. Where once there stood a fine, strong fortification, there was now only broken bricks and rubble.

Most of our troops in that "battle" never even got to shoot at the enemy, and we boatmen were so busy transporting the visiting dignitaries back to where they'd come from that our soldiers had to walk home, just as they'd had to walk there.

There wasn't any loot to speak of, either, and what there was didn't cover the cost of the war. Most of our knights got a trophy to hang on their walls, and that was about it. After fighting the Mongols, it was something of a comedown.

That winter, which we again spent logging, we looked into the possibility of transferring our lance from the Transportation and Communication Corps over to the Eagles, who built and flew all of the aircraft, but that proved to be impossible.

We were already too old. They accepted only volunteers who had completed the Warrior's School and were fifteen or younger. An opportunity missed.

The next spring, 1243, our lance was given its own boat, of a totally new, special-purpose design—an oil tanker.

Oil wells had been drilled near Przemyśl on the San River, and a refinery had been built on the Vistula, north of Sandomierz. Ours was one of three boats designed to transport crude oil to the refinery, and refined oil in bulk wherever it was needed along the Vistula and its tributaries.

Refined oil, in its various grades, was used in the new kerosene lamps, and as a replacement for coal on the steamboats, where it eliminated the need for a fireman, and, mixed with wood alcohol, as a very energetic fuel for the aircraft. Other products, like asphalt roads, were being developed.

The new boat's engines were the same as those we were used to, except they were oil-fired. The kitchen, mess hall, and living quarters were small, and the boat was only a single story high, plus the bridge, since there were only the seven of us on board. The rest of the boat was nothing but a collection of low-lying steel tanks, almost like a long, low barge that we pushed ahead of us.

We joked that our boat was lean, low, stripped down, and topless, and that her name, *The Lady of Okoitz*, was therefore very appropriate.

We had no mounted weapons at all, since we didn't have enough people to man them, and we were too flammable to put up a serious fight, anyway. Faced with an enemy, our orders were to run away.

At first we were delighted to have our own boat and the responsibilities it entailed, but eventually the job palled.

For one thing, we now made far fewer stops in our travels, and those stops were invariably at industrial sites, which rarely had much going on except for the same work that they had been doing the last time we were there. We met fewer young ladies, and our love lives suffered.

We no longer carried passengers, who had seemed to be a great bother back when we carried them. After they were gone, well, it had been a long while since I heard an entertaining traveler's tale.

Also, a bulk tanker was much more difficult to keep clean than an ordinary riverboat, and we not only had to spend long hours scrubbing it, but found ourselves being dirtier than we ever had been before. This, too, did not help out our love lives.

Even our music was starting to get flat and stale.

But most of all, our increase in responsibility was not matched with an increase in status and pay. We had all been mere squires for several years, and we often heard of the promotions of others with less seniority than we had. This was particularly painful for Sir Odon. We called him our captain, but in fact he was still a mere knight, and he desperately wanted to advance in the army.

Also, there were no longer any opportunities to make additional money on the side. No legal ones, anyway, and none of us were thieves.

Suffice to say, after three and a half years on an oil tanker, we were all heartily sick of it!

Thus, we were all most interested when, in August of 1246, Sir Odon found a new possibility of employment for our lance.

The Construction Corps had been building a series of company-sized forts just like the one at East Gate, throwing them up at the astounding rate of one a week. They were built five miles apart all along the Vistula and now stretched along the west bank from the headwaters to the Baltic Sea. They were all part of an invincible defense against any future attack by the Mongols.

A second group had begun putting forts of the same design along the east bank of the Odra, some said against a possible invasion by the Holy Roman Empire, who were rumored to be very angry at us for eliminating the Crossmen.

The construction project was continuing and expanding, with plans to eventually put forts on both banks of every major river in Eastern Europe, but more important to us was what was being built at the mouth of the Vistula.

Sir Odon said that a major seaport and shipyard was being constructed there, and the plans were to soon begin building oceangoing steamships.

Were we interested in seeing if we could get involved with this new endeavor?

Well, of course we were! Over the last few years, we had been up every tributary of the Vistula, and frankly, one river is much like another.

But to travel the high seas! To explore, to boldly go where no Christian had gone before! We had been reading about how the world was really round, a great ball in the heavens. What would it be like to be on the first ship to steam around it? Glorious!

We all got together in writing our application for transfer, carefully explaining why we were the best possible people to choose for this new endeavor. We wrote about how our lance had been working smoothly together for years without any of the friction that had disrupted so many other groups.

We stressed that we had experience with various kinds of boats and had thus proved we could take on and master new things. We talked about our military prowess, of the battles we had fought under the watchful eyes of Lord Conrad himself.

We wrote about all of the other skills we had, from baking bread, farming, and handling cattle, to living off the land in the trackless wilderness of Lithuania.

We told our varied ethnic backgrounds and how among us we had speakers of Polish, German, Ukrainian, Latin (Fritz had been an altar boy), Pruthenian, and Lithuanian, so we would be able to communicate with the inhabitants of many different areas.

We explained how we were all bachelors who could take long trips away from home without distressing any wives or children. We wrote and rewrote that application so many times that we were sure if they did not transfer us to the High Seas Battalion, they would at least have to give us an award for literature! Finally, we had Zbigniew write up the fair copy, since he had the best handwriting in the group.

Then we faced the problem of just who we should send this application to. Normally, when one wished to transfer, one applied to the personnel department of the battalion or corps involved. But in this case, as far as we knew, the organization we wished to join did not yet exist.

"If it is new, you just know that Lord Conrad will be involved with it," Sir Odon said. "He likes being in on the beginning of things. You know him personally, don't you, Josip?"

I had to admit I did, that I had been a boy at Okoitz when he first arrived in Poland. However, I had to stress that our last meeting had been less than pleasant, and I quite possibly had been responsible for putting Lord Conrad's eye out or at least causing him to lose the use of that eye.

"I read in the news that he regained his sight in that eye years ago," Kiejstut said. "Anyway, Lord Conrad is not the kind of a man who would hold a grudge over a little accident like that."

I said losing an eye was not a "little accident," and that I was still apprehensive about writing to so high a personage.

Sir Odon said, "Nonsense, Josip. The worst that can happen is that if he is still mad at you, he will throw the letter away without reading it, so the thing for us to do is to make up two copies, one to Lord Conrad with your name on the return address, and one to Baron Tados, who I heard was being considered for heading the ocean steamship command, with my name on it instead of yours."

"I heard that it was to be Baron Piotr, of the Mapmakers," Lezek said.

"Then we'll send him a copy of our application, too," Sir Odon said.

In the end, we sent off nine separate copies to nine different army leaders.

And then we waited for a reply.

And waited.

# Chapter Eleven

From the Diary of Conrad Stargard

JANUARY 4, 1246

ONE OF the better things to happen to me when I was in school was that my father bought me a loose-leaf binder that had a full color map of the world printed around the outside cover, and a map of Poland on the inside front.

I always found most of my classes to be extremely boring, but staring out the window could get you asked questions at awkward moments, and falling asleep in class could be disastrous.

So instead of listening to my teacher, I studied my maps, pretending to go from this city to that country, to sail on a gaff-rigged schooner from Papua New Guinea to Tahiti in Polynesia, or to go by camel caravan from Timbuktu to Samarkand.

The names on the maps were better back then, before some dreary politicians erased the glorious lands of Tanganyika and Zanzibar and replaced them with Tanzania, before the Congo became Zaire and Madagascar was turned into the Malagasy Republic, a name that sounds like it means "bad stomach gas." Surely Siam has more magic in it than Thailand, and Ceylon, or better yet Serendip, was finer than Sri Lanka. And what ass made Iran and Iraq out of Persia and Mesopotamia?

But be that as it may, while I was only slightly better than average in most subjects, I became outstanding in geography.

I was sitting at my desk in my office, drawing a map of the world as best as I could remember it. I was deliberately vague about national borders, because those had all changed radically in the seven hundred years between this time and the time I was born into. Indeed, I generally left boundaries out entirely and just put the names of nations across the continents. And the exact paths of rivers wasn't worth being too specific about, either, since they can change considerably, especially around their mouths, which is all an oceangoing ship can find.

Of course, not all of the names on my map were those you would find on a map of the twentieth century. When I could, I used the more poetic titles.

I went to college in America, and that place has always been very special for me. I loved the land, and I loved the people who lived on it. But to build that magic place, they had to replace the native peoples who were already there, and I didn't want to see that happen, not again, not in this new time line. My plans for those two continents were such that in this time line, America would be a very different place.

Then, too, perhaps the Americas had been misnamed, for Amerigo Vespucci really didn't do very much and certainly not enough to get *two* continents named after him. Consider that the only other person to have a continent named after her was Europa, and she had to put up with being raped by a bull to get the honor.

On my map, the landmass to the south was called Brazyl, and the area of the Andes where the Incas had their civilization was named Hy Brazyl. To the north I put Atlantis, and the land of the civilized people of Mexico I called Hy Atlantis.

I'd been thinking about doing this for years, but the time for procrastination was over. At last we had gotten our technology to the point where it was possible to build oceangoing steamships, and a whole new Age of Exploration was about to open up.

Oceangoing sailing ships, of the sort used in my time line from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries, could probably have been built at almost any time since the days of the Ancient Egyptians,

just as those same peoples had the materials and skills to make, say, hang gliders, if they had known that one could exist.

But it would have been extremely difficult for us in mostly landlocked Poland to use them, for while the ships could have been built easily enough, having the skills to sail them was another matter entirely.

In the old British navy it was reckoned that a boy had to start learning aboard ship before he was twelve years old if he was ever to master his craft, and even that assumed that older, experienced men would be around to teach it to him.

Getting from place to place while taking into account the winds, the tides, and the ocean currents, not to mention storms and all the other hazards of the sea, was no easy task, and often the very best of men were not up to it. In the early days of long voyaging, three ships out of four failed to return home, and in the fifteenth century, Portugal was almost denuded of men because of the horrendous losses at sea.

But a steamship was actually much easier to operate than one of the old square riggers. You didn't have to worry much about wind and tides. You just fired up the boiler and pointed it in the direction you wanted to go. It took many years to train a good topman, but you could teach a steam mechanic his trade in a year. Large numbers of men were needed to handle large sails, while only a few could keep a steam engine going.

And the bigger the ship, the less you have to worry about storms. There are limits as to how big you can make a wooden sailing ship, but those same limits don't apply when you are building out of steel.

Well, we didn't have our steel industry to the point where we could roll the thick plates necessary for shipping, but in the course of building hundreds of reinforced concrete fortifications, our concrete capacity had become huge, and with the new continuous casting plant, we were now making more steel re-rod than we needed. Ferrocrete ships were within our capabilities, and such ships can be built to be every bit as good as steel ones.

So. We were poised to go out and explore the world, to bring Christianity to the heathens, and to become fabulously wealthy in the process. The world out there needed us, it needed our products, and it needed our culture. And we needed it!

Right then, I could build electric hand tools, and with them I could double the productivity of our skilled men. But while I could build the tool, I could not make the extension cord to get the power to the tool! I didn't have a decent elastomer. I could build air tools, but I couldn't make a flexible air line. The sorts of machinery we could build were greatly limited because of our lack of rubber. Our surgeons' patients would have had fewer infections if only the surgeons had latex gloves. Fewer people would have frozen in the winter if they had rubber boots. Electrical installations could be simpler and safer if we had rubber insulators.

Rubber was only one of the hundreds of items that we needed and that weren't available locally. We needed world trade. We needed to conquer the seas. The trick was to do it in a safe and sane manner.

In the first twenty-five years of the twentieth century, humanity conquered the skies. It was done with amazing speed and for comparatively little money, but an ungodly price was paid in human blood. Worldwide, it is estimated that more than four thousand five hundred young men died during those years flying in experimental aircraft. That does not include those who died learning to fly, those who died in warfare, or those who died in accidents in production aircraft. Essentially, we lost forty-five hundred test pilots, people who tend to be among the brightest, the bravest, and the best.

It took humanity about the same amount of time to conquer space, but in that case, the work was sponsored by governments. In dollars, pounds, and rubles, the price of spaceflight was at least a hundred times higher than that paid for air flight.

But the cost *in lives* was a hundred times less!

In the first twenty-five years of spaceflight, fewer than thirty lives were lost. The difference was that the Quest for Space was organized.

I don't know how many lives were lost in the course of the original Age of Exploration, but I'm sure that it was in the millions. Throughout the period, the frontiers were lawless places where the worst of society went. Misfits, criminals, and lunatics; they threw away their lives, killing each other and the native peoples they found in their way.

Furthermore, a lot of things happened during those years that I, as a European, am not very proud of. The destruction of two fledgling civilizations in the Americas, the brutal things that were done to China during the Opium Wars, and the enslavement and transportation of millions of Africans were things that were as stupid as they were shameful.

And they were not going to happen while I was in charge! Besides knowing in advance where we were going to go, and approximately what we would find there, we had a trained group of well-equipped, intelligent, and competent men to do the exploring.

Contrary to the practice of most of the organizations in the army, where women competed on an equal basis with men, the Explorer's Corps had to be an all-male organization. Small groups of our people would have to spend years out in the wilderness, far away from help and hospitals. We didn't have anything like a birth control pill; a pregnant woman would have had a hard time surviving out there, and supporting one could have gotten the rest of her team killed along with her.

These thoughts soon got me to sketching up a plan for recruiting, selecting, and training my future Explorer's Corps. I was so engrossed in my work that I didn't even glance at the man who walked into my office.

"I'm busy. Can it be put off until later?" I asked without looking up.

It must have been the sound of his sword being pulled from his sheath that startled me, because if I hadn't jerked back, his sword would have split my skull and scattered my brains all over my drawings! As it was, he cut most of them in half and left a big gouge in the top of my desk.

He hauled back for another swing while I groped for my sword and pistol.

They weren't at my waist! I had forgotten to put them on again.

I shouted for help, and as he swung, I dropped to the floor, sending my chair slamming against the wall. When I saw him climbing over my desk to get at me, I shouted again for help and crawled under it.

I saw his feet hit the ground where I had been sitting, saw him starting to crouch down to get at me, and I knew I was a dead man.

Then a shot rang out, my assailant dropped to the floor, and an acrid cloud of gun smoke filled the room. I crawled out from under the desk to find my wife, Francine, standing there with a golden pistol, engraved and bejeweled, smoking in her hand, and a look of disgust on her face. Behind her stood Baron Piotr and his wife, Krystyana, both bearing naked steel.

Before I could thank them, Francine said, "So. You were again *too lazy* to put on your sword."

Then she walked out.

I shook my head. "What could he have wanted?" I said, looking at the body on the floor.

"Obviously, he wanted your life, your grace. As to why he wanted it, well, he might have been a hired assassin, or a disgruntled nobleman, or a simple lunatic, but I doubt if we will ever really know," Piotr said, bending over the fallen assassin. "This one, whatever he was, is dead. But you really must do something about security around here. You must make up a restricted list of people who are permitted past the guards at the gates, and you absolutely must get yourself some bodyguards."

"Yes, I suppose you're right. Thank you for your help."

"I did nothing, your grace. You owe your life to your wife, the Duchess Francine, and she isn't around here all that often to protect you," he said.



"True enough. Why don't you make up that list you mentioned and make sure that the guards know everybody on it by sight."

"Yes, your grace. And the bodyguards?"

"Let me think about that."

"Don't think about it too long, your grace."

# Chapter Twelve

From the Journal of Josip Sobieski

WRITTEN JANUARY 26, 1249, CONCERNING SEPTEMBER 18, 1246

ONE EVENING a month later, Lezek was playing his flute, and the rest of us were drinking beer. Our boat was waiting its turn in line to be filled up with number two kerosene when Sir Odon came into the boat's mess hall with a vast grin on his face while holding up an official-looking letter.

"Ahem! To Sir Odon Stepanski, Master of the Tanker Boat *The Lady of Okoitz*, Vistula Patrol, et cetera, et cetera, and so forth.

"You are requested and required to report with your lance of men to the offices of Lord Conrad, Okoitz, at the first hour after sunrise, on Monday, the fifth of October, 1246, to discuss with him your application to the Explorer's Corps, currently being formed.

"Please be advised that your services will be required here for at least one week for further consultation and testing. Report with full kit. Leave your boat at East Gate without resigning your present command, since your group's appointment to the new corps has not yet been confirmed.

"Yours most truly, et cetera, et cetera, and so forth,' and it's signed by Lord Conrad himself!"

We all stood up and applauded, but then Lezek said, "But what's this about the 'Explorer's Corps'? That doesn't sound like what they'd call a steamship command."

"Whatever it is, it has to be better than hauling oil around the Vistula from one smelly place to another," Sir Odon said, and we all drank to that.

"True," Zbigniew said, "but what did you make of that business about showing up in 'full kit'? Do they mean 'full kit' like they did in basic training?"

"What else could they mean?" Taurus said.

"Then I have some problems. We haven't needed most of that stuff for years, and as for my equipment, what isn't missing is pretty shabby," Zbigniew said.

I told him that he wasn't alone, and the party broke up as we all went back to our rooms to inventory our equipment. When I got back to the mess hall, Sir Odon was sitting in front of a stack of requisition forms, telling Zbigniew what to fill out, and Kiejstut was on the front deck, waving the boats behind us in line to go around. We had no time to bother with number two kerosene. We had other things to do tonight!

We never found out just what Sir Odon said to the supply captain to get such good service, but three days later it took us three trips to the warehouse to pick up all of the new equipment.

Then it took us three and a half days to polish, sharpen, iron, fit, adjust, wax, and otherwise make usable and presentable all of our new stuff.

The armor was the hardest part, since after we put our plates into the new coveralls, we found that we were in much different shape than we had been. Mostly, we were thicker in the waist and narrower in the shoulder.

Three and a half years of working on an oil tanker had put us all in very poor shape. Besides getting generally dirtier as each year dragged by, we couldn't usually stop the boat while we did the prescribed one day a week of military exercises. We had been getting by with sporadically fencing with practice swords and occasionally doing a few jumping jacks on the foredeck.

Furthermore, the last few winters had been unusually warm, and the rivers had never frozen over. Because of this, we had spent them delivering oil rather than chopping down trees, a far more vigorous pastime.

Sir Odon vowed that we would do something about it! He cut our rations in half, took beer off our menu, and led us in four hours of vigorous exercise a day.

Annoying, but it was needed. There had been that line in the letter about a week of "consultation and testing," and none of us thought that Lord Conrad was going to ask us about how he should run the army. We had better be in shape for whatever they threw at us!

We had two weeks before our appointment, and we spent them getting in the best shape that we could. Then, in new, freshly ironed class A uniforms, with brightly polished shoes and hat brims, we were promptly on time for our meeting with Lord Conrad.

He was an hour late, but that is to be expected when dealing with so important an individual. Eventually, he invited us into his office and courteously bade us to be seated.

"Sorry about being late, gentlemen, but there was a problem at Szczecin that had to be taken care of first. Now then," Lord Conrad said as he opened a folder and took out all nine of the applications we had sent in, along with copies of each of our service records. "You seem to be very eager to leave the Vistula Patrol."

"In truth, sir, we are eager to do something a little more adventurous than delivering oil to oil depots," Sir Odon said. "Also, it would be nice to work someplace where promotion happened a bit quicker."

"Well, you can't expect promotions to happen on a yearly basis the way they did when the army was expanding to meet the Mongols," Lord Conrad said. "Still, your records are all good, and if you stayed where you are, I imagine that you would all be getting your own boats before too long."

"Yes, sir. But even that would not be ideal. We are a very good team, sir, and if we stayed in riverboats, the only way we could be promoted would be to break that team up. With a large, oceangoing steamship, on the other hand, it should be possible for us to be promoted and still stay together," Sir Odon said.

"I see. However, the personnel charts for that operation, the steamships themselves, were filled some time ago by Baron Tados. You are presently being considered for something different. The Explorer's Corps. The plan is that when we enter into a new area, a new sea or a new coast, we will put teams of trained men ashore at intervals of about four dozen miles, ideally at the mouth of a river.

"The team will spend a year or so exploring the area, finding out who lives there, learning their language, and teaching the local inhabitants some Polish.

"We need to know what kind of people they are, what sort of products they produce that might be of interest to us, what sorts of things we have that they might want, and so on.

"We will want to know what minerals and other natural resources are available there, what agricultural possibilities exist, and what the military capabilities of the local inhabitants are.

"We want to know as much as possible about their culture, as well. We want to know about the songs they sing and the dances they do. We want to know the stories they tell, and if they are pagans, we want to know as much as possible about their gods.

"And we will want the area to be mapped as thoroughly as possible.

"Each of our ships will be capable of carrying about a company of men in addition to the crew. That is to say, about three dozen seven-man teams. On a given cruise, it will put the teams ashore and then spend much of the year mapping the shoreline, measuring the currents and the tides, surveying the fishing and other resources, and generally being on hand to help out if any of the explorer teams gets into trouble.

"Does this program sound interesting, so far?"

Sir Odon glanced at the rest of us, sitting on the edges of our chairs, and said, "Yes, sir. We are very interested."

"Good. Now, if you find something of sufficient commercial interest at the site of your operations, and if the local inhabitants agree to it, we plan to build permanent trading posts whenever possible. The team that first investigates an area will make a percentage of future profits, and will obviously be the best choice for personnel to run the trading post. It could be a very lucrative proposition, with considerable possibilities for independent action.

"Our ships will visit those posts periodically, of course, for commercial and religious reasons."

"Yes, sir. You say religious reasons?"

"Yes. We are not going out into the world for crass commercial reasons only. Oh, if a thing cannot pay for itself, we could not afford to do it too often, but our main reason for going out and discovering the rest of the world rests on the fact that the people in most of the world are not Christians. We want to give them a chance to come to Christ."

"Uh, sir, I'm not sure that any of us are truly qualified to teach religion," Sir Odon said.

"Well, I *am* sure, and yes, you're not qualified. If all else works out, your team will need an additional member, a priest. But we'll worry about that later. You will be interviewed by a number of other people. My secretary will give you a list. But so far, you seem to be the sort of people that we are looking for," Lord Conrad said as he leaned back in his chair, becoming less formal. He looked at me. "You are the same Josip Sobieski who operated on my eye, that time during the Battle for the Vistula, aren't you?"

I felt my innards tighten up, from my testicles to my throat. I admitted that I was.

"Thinking back on it, it really was an amusing misunderstanding. I've remembered it often, reminding myself not to take things for granted. Assumptions seem to always get me into trouble. I think I might have been a bit rude to you at the time, and I'm sorry for that. Please remember I was under a lot of stress and pain, and forgive me, will you?"

I said there was nothing to forgive, and I was glad when I learned that the results of my clumsy efforts had finally healed.

"Well, there's no proof that it was your fault the eye went blind in the first place. The surgeon who watched the operation said he wouldn't have done anything differently from what you did. So like I said, thank you for helping me.

"Oh yes, one other item. Sir Odon, next time you want to change jobs, please consider that *one* application is usually sufficient. We really do read these things, you know, and it wastes a lot of valuable time to have eight different barons all reading the same application."

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir."

"Very good. Dismissed."

We all walked out grinning ear to ear. True, there would be other people who would have to pass on us yet, but we were all sure they would merely confirm whatever Lord Conrad wanted, and we were sure that he wanted us.

# Chapter Thirteen

From the Journal of Josip Sobieski

WRITTEN JANUARY 28, 1249, CONCERNING OCTOBER 5, 1246

LORD CONRAD'S remarkably attractive secretary gave Sir Odon a list of people we were to look up, and a slip for the palatine authorizing rooms and meals for us while we were at Okoitz, which spared us the expense of staying at the inn.

We spent the rest of the day making appointments with the people we had to see. There was a medical doctor who would be giving us all a physical examination, since, if we got the job, we would be away from a hospital for years at a time. We had to be healthy to begin with.

There was a priest to see. We supposed he was to make sure that we were sufficiently devout to do God's work among the heathen. There were visits to three linguists, to make sure that between us, we really did speak all of those languages.

There were experts in agriculture, manufacturing, mining, geology, music, radios, mapmaking, and survival training, and finally a meeting with a certain Baron Siemomysl, the man who would be leading the Explorer's Corps.

After supper, the others retired to the Pink Dragon Inn, for a drink and a look at the scenery, while I dutifully made yet another visit to my family in the hopes that my father would finally talk to me.

My visit was just like all of the others I'd made over the years. Everyone was glad to see me, except for my father, who, as usual, walked out as I came in. I was almost used to it by now, like a dull toothache that has gone on for years.

I was feeling depressed as I walked back through the seemingly endless corridors and stairways of Okoitz, going to our assigned room, but I was cheered to find that the others were already back from the inn.

As expected, they had found suitable female company for themselves, and being truly decent sorts, they had invited along an extra girl for me.

It's good to have friends.

Most of the people we had to see were teachers, and their interest wasn't so much in deciding whether we could join the Explorer's Corps as seeing what we each knew about their own specialties, and what they would have to teach us to make us into useful explorers. Mostly, they were planning our curriculum, because, unbeknownst to us at the time, we were going to be spending the next eighteen months at the Warrior's School.

The exception was Baron Siemomysl, who could have sent us back to our oil tanker if he did not like us. But apparently he did, because by the end of the week, they gave our boat to some other bunch of deserving young warriors, and we went to Hell."

Only we didn't call it that anymore, and it didn't seem like Hell anymore, either. The section of that huge school we occupied was now a lot like the University of Paris, or so said some people who had been to France.

We spent a long army hour every day doing physical exercise, mostly working out with swords, axes, knives, or just fighting empty-handed. But the workouts weren't brutal any more. They were just to keep our bodies in shape while our teachers worked over our heads.

The Explorer's School was planned to have two functions: to train future explorers, and then to organize what we learned about the world into something meaningful. But naturally, they had to do the one thing before they could start on the other.

The first class through the school was only of company size, three dozen lances, but then the first year, we would only have one steamship in operation anyway. To teach us, there were some five dozen instructors, so we got a lot of individual attention.

The school was fascinating. They taught us everything known about the world, and all of our textbooks were annotated by Lord Conrad himself. Pick a subject, and we probably had a course in it. We had geography, geology, cartography, genealogy, navigation, and mathematics at one end of the spectrum, and woodcraft, music, and primitive construction techniques at the other.

Linguistics was important, and courses were taught in how to learn a new language, since in most places we would be going, people spoke languages that no civilized man had ever heard spoken. Lord Conrad claimed there were over six thousand languages in the world, and that someday there would be books at the school on every one of them.

One language that we all had to learn was Pidgin. This was an artificial language, one made up by scholars. It was based on Polish, but was very easy to learn. There were only four hundred words in the whole vocabulary. Anything else you wanted to talk about had to be done with combinations of allowable words. Everything was absolutely simplified. There were no plural forms. You said one dog, two dog, many dog. Cases didn't exist, and neither did tenses. To talk about the future, you used present tense with the word "gonna." For the past, you said "was," and then talked in the present tense. There were no sexual forms. Boys, girls, and dinner plates were all "him."

There was never anything ambiguous about Pidgin. The word "we," for example, can mean "you and me, but not those other people." Or it can mean "me and my friends, but not you." In Pidgin, there were two separate constructs, "you-me," and "me-fella."

To give you some idea of what it sounded like, in Pidgin, the Lord's Prayer started out, "Me Papa, Him big fella, Him alla time on top..."

It sounded strange at first, but the beauty of it was that it was extremely easy to learn. You could actually hold a meaningful conversation in it after studying it for only a few days. They claimed that a foreigner could learn it faster than a native speaker of Polish, since he didn't have anything to unlearn.

We were encouraged to use Pidgin among ourselves to increase our fluency in it, and that had the effect of giving the Explorer's Corps its own secret language. It was useful when you wanted to say something in mixed company, and you didn't want the girls to know about it, whereas the ladies had to go hand in hand to the pissatorium to accomplish the same thing.

The Wizards, the research and development people at Okoitz, had come up with a totally new sort of radio. It had at least five times the range of the old spark gap transmitters and much better sensitivity than coherers or even the newer cat's whisker receivers. It used radio tubes, and a super heterodyne receiver. It had rechargeable batteries, and it was one-sixth the weight of the old sets, even with the dynamocharger.

The explorers were the first people to be issued them, and of course we had to know how to operate, repair, and even rebuild them. All of us. Specialization was not encouraged in our corps, not when we would have to spend a year in possibly hostile circumstances, with no possibility of finding a replacement for anyone.

Geology was one of my worst subjects, and I was vastly relieved to learn that each explorer team would be taking along a compartmented box with well-labeled samples of a few hundred of the most useful minerals in it. Once I have something in each hand for comparison, I can usually figure out what is what.

I was very impressed with the quality of both my fellow classmates and my instructors. They were all remarkably intelligent, enthusiastic, and decent people. I'd often thought that one reason why my

own lance was so close-knit was that everybody else in the world was so much duller than we were. When I first had that thought, years ago, I thought I was being shamefully boastful, and mentioned it to no one, but on more mature reflection, since I was now twenty-one, I have decided that it was nothing but the simple truth.

About halfway through the course, we had an eighth member added to our team, Father John. He was two years older than the rest of us, and had been an ordained priest before he went through (survived) the army's Warrior's School. Like all priests in the army, he was still officially a member of the Chaplain's Corps, and only on loan to the Explorer's Corps. He had a certain quiet strength to him, and always pulled more than his share of the load, never claiming any special privileges. He was easy to get along with and merged well with the rest of the group. Even our drinking and womanizing did not seem to bother him, or at least he never scolded us, the way so many other priests did, and he would often show up for at least the start of a drinking session. Also, he played a very fine violin, which made him particularly valuable when we made music. He eventually became the confessor of each one of us.

Yet he was not lacking in zeal, and whenever he spoke about the future, when he would have a chance to convert the heathen to Christ, you could see a certain light come on in his eyes. It was a beautiful light, but sometimes it was also a frightening one.

Toward the end of the course, almost as an afterthought, we were issued firearms of a new and interesting sort. The powder charge in the old, heavy swivel guns was ignited by a "firecracker" wick at the back of the cartridge that was lit by an alcohol flame. This was good enough when you knew a battle was coming, but it could be very awkward when unexpected things started to happen quickly.

The new guns were handheld rather than mounted, and were much lighter, about ten pounds for the rifle and three for the pistol. Ignition was by a piezoelectric crystal in the stock which, when struck by a small hammer, put an electric current through a spark plug at the back of each cartridge.

The pistol was a single-shot, break-action affair, while the rifle had a seven-shot, spring-fed clip and a bolt action. We were issued new knives with the rifles, called bayonets, which fastened to the end of the barrel, making the weapon usable as a short pike. All told, it was a remarkably well-thought-out weapon system, and we were proud to be the first unit to be issued it.

Graduation involved both written and oral examinations, and a number of practical tests as well. One of them involved being dumped naked and alone in a forest in the early spring, and being expected to build yourself suitable shelter, to make yourself suitable tools, clothing, and weapons, and to find or kill sufficient food to keep yourself alive for two weeks. They actually weighed you before and after the test, and you lost points if you lost weight!

In the end, everyone in my lance graduated, and most of the others did, too. We had a nice commencement ceremony with everyone in our eight-pounds-of-gold uniforms, and they handed out illuminated certificates to us with our friends and parents watching.

Well, parent, in my case, since my father refused to attend.

Most important for Sir Odon and all his loyal men was the fact that with graduation, our long-awaited promotions had at last come through. I was now Sir Josip, at eight pence a day, and Sir Odon was now a knight-banner, at twice that, with the right to use a triangular flag on his cavalry lance, if he ever got one, or, indeed, if he ever got a horse.

This made for some unusual ranks in our charts. The lowest rank in the Explorer's Corps was a knight, and the lance leaders were all now knight-banners. In theory, we were organized in the usual six lances to the platoon, but since each lance would be acting independently, there were no platoon leaders. Lance leaders reported directly to the company commander.

And our company commander was not the usual captain, but Baron Siemomysl himself.

Still, nobody ever said that the army had to be absolutely consistent. In the Wolves, who are made up entirely of members of the old nobility, the lowest rank is also the knight, and platoons are led by captains.

The next day, we were loaded into six chartered riverboats for the trip north. The reason for this seemingly lavish excess of transportation was that each explorer lance had an entire war cart filled with its supplies for our upcoming adventure. That was eighteen cubic yards, a ton and a half per man.

Besides our personal gear, which included everything from our armor and weapons to a year's supply of underwear and toothpaste, we had a wide variety of preserved food, enough to feed us all for three years. The trip home might be delayed, or we might have to feed a hungry tribe in the winter.

We also carried a wide variety of trade goods—tools, weapons, jewelry, cloth of many varieties, glassware, needles, fishhooks, books, even toys and games.

In a special strongbox, each lance was equipped with a large supply of money, a quarter of a million pence, equivalent to ten years' pay for every man in the lance. Some of it was in gold, some in silver, and some in the army's own zinc coinage. Sir Odon was responsible for accounting for every bit of it.

We made the trip north to Gdansk, where our new ship, the *Baltic Challenger*, was completing its first shakedown cruise. We drank and sang and partied the whole way and had about as much fun as an all-male group can possibly have.

At one point we got the riverboat's regular crew so drunk that they couldn't stand, much less operate the boat, and then my lance took the thing over and ran it until the next morning, when the regular crew woke up.

Through the night, we had sent out dozens of strange, rude, or downright obscene radio messages, and the next day the regular crew couldn't blame it on us without confessing to being drunk on duty. They were in a lovely pickle when we finally bid them good-bye.



# Chapter Fourteen

From the Journal of Josip Sobieski

WRITTEN FEBRUARY 1, 1249, CONCERNING MAY 10, 1248

THE *BALTIC Challenger* got back to Gdansk after her shakedown run the day after we arrived, and almost the entire Explorer's Corps was on the dock to cheer her in. Most of us got there early, and at first all we could see of our new ship was a dot on the horizon that our telescopes couldn't do much to resolve.

It was a clear day, and we could see across the Vistula Lagoon and far out into the Baltic. Quite a while went by before we realized that we were looking at her smokestack. The rest of her hull appeared to be below the horizon, and eventually the realization hit us that we were actually seeing proof with our own eyes that the world was indeed round!

In the course of an hour she both grew and seemed to rise out of the water, to become of respectable size, and although we were seeing her at her smallest, from head on, we grew increasingly impressed with the engineering feat she represented.

We had all seen drawings of her, of course, and knew her specifications by heart. She was five dozen yards long at the waterline and six dozen yards long overall. She was almost two dozen yards wide and three dozen yards tall, from her keel to the top of her radio tower.

Her speed was an incredible one and a half gross miles a day, so fast that if the world were all ocean, she could circumnavigate the globe in only four months! Her fuel tanks were big enough to let her do it nonstop! Her normal fuel was oil, but in a pinch, her boilers could burn coal or even wood.

Her nine long cargo holds could hold *two gross* containers, compared to the six that our standard riverboats could handle. What is more, the containers used were mounted on half nuts, and these rested on large screws that ran the length of the cargo holds. Cargo could thus be easily shifted while the ship was under way, and those containers needed at the next port could be made ready for rapid discharge.

She had evaporators aboard that used engine waste heat to produce fresh water for the boilers and for use by passengers and crew. The same evaporators also produced sea salt, a salable commodity.

She carried two steam launches aboard, and eight container-sized barges that could be towed into the shallowest water. The *Baltic Challenger* could take on and discharge cargo and passengers without needing any port facilities beyond a simple crane. A war cart could be put ashore without even that.

But seeing technical drawings and reading specifications, even if they were astounding, could not prepare us for the sheer immensity of the glorious machine in front of us. As she came closer and closer, she grew and grew, and I had to keep telling myself that *she was still far away!*

Finally, she turned into the lagoon, and we could see her whole majestic flank from the side. Her hull was bright red, and her topsides were white, except for the streamlined red smokestack with its white Piast eagle.

She was a magnificent sight, and as she backed into her stall between two huge docks, she towered over us. It became my urgent desire to run aboard her and examine her from stem to stern, like a wonderful new lover found after a long and lonely trip.

But such was not to be. My lady had many other lovers besides me, and most of them vastly outranked me in the army's scheme of things. Lord Conrad was there, high above me on the reviewing stand. He had with him at least two dozen of his barons, and his liege lord, King Henryk himself, beside him. There was a crowd of foreign dignitaries up there, too, and it was easy to imagine why they had been invited. If anything could impress a foreign government of our power and wealth, this incredible ship would do it!

Annoyingly, the men of the Explorer's Corps, the very people the *Baltic Challenger* had been built for, after all, were not allowed aboard until late in the day. Even then, we were put ashore within the hour, before we had seen a twelfth of what we wanted to see.

Our departure date was put back by three days while Lord Conrad and King Henryk took the foreign dignitaries, three of whom turned out to be kings in their own right, out on a pleasure jaunt.

Politics!

Still, there was much to see around the new harbor and the huge shipyard. The ferrocrete hull of the *Challenger* had to be built indoors, out of the weather in a dry dock that was necessarily much bigger than the ship itself. The woman showing us around bragged that the naves of six cathedrals the size of Notre Dame, currently being built in Paris, could be placed side by side inside the dry dock without crowding. The dock's great overhead crane, a masterful engineering work, could have picked any one of them up, and turned it sideways! Notre Dame had been eighty years in the building and was not yet finished, while the dry dock had been completed in less than two years.

In the dry dock, work had begun on the *Atlantic Challenger*, sister ship to the *Baltic Challenger*. They hoped to build them at the rate of two a year for the next five years, at least.

The entire corps spent a day with the master shipwright, while he explained the difficulties of making a huge ship out of steel and concrete, and what one had to do to be sure that it was all one, seamless piece.

The sheer scale of things at Gdansk and the precision with which such huge things were made so impressed us that we were almost tempted to apply to work there. Almost, but not quite.

Finally, we were ready to get under way, and the plan was to explore the lands around the Baltic Sea.

Admittedly, it was not a very ambitious project, since the Baltic probably didn't need exploring, but they told us that you have to start somewhere. True, there were plenty of Christian ships already there, and while they were little wooden things, they were well-organized, with their own political setup: the Hanseatic League. There were plenty of Christian seafarers around who could navigate to any of the ports in the area, and indeed we did have two such pilots aboard, to advise Baron Tados, our ship's captain, but what can you do?

It wasn't my idea, anyway.

Looking at Lord Conrad's sketched maps of the world, the Baltic seemed to be so close and so small that we felt we would be like little boys camping out in their mother's herb garden, but ours was not to reason why.

Left to ourselves, the corps would probably have steamed off to Africa, where they say the people all have black skins, or to Hy Brazyl, or to some other romantic-sounding place shown on Lord Conrad's roughly sketched maps, but we were ordered to start with the Baltic, and being good, obedient young men, that was what we would do.

Next year, maybe we'd steam to China.

\* \* \*

On the fourteenth of May 1248, we set forth at dawn to discover the world, but, like I said, just the Baltic this year. We left Gdansk and the ship headed east, to circumnavigate the Baltic, counterclockwise.

We had to feel a little sad about the first lance of the first platoon, because they were put ashore on the afternoon of the very day we left. So much for being far travelers.

They were going into the territory of a pagan tribe called the Sambians, about whom very little was known, despite the fact that they were only five dozen miles away. Regardless of appearances, it wasn't really a wasted trip, and we gave them a good send-off.

After that, we dropped off an average of two lances a day, one almost every morning and every night.

In one respect, our ship was not as specified. She did not travel at one and a half gross miles a day. She could do two gross miles per day, and thus, except for the continents in her way, she could go around the world in a single season!

She had performed almost flawlessly on her shakedown run, and never had a serious problem while we were aboard. The only piece of her equipment that failed was her depth gauge, an electronic thing that was to bounce a sound wave off the bottom of the sea and by timing the echo reveal the depth.

They had two manual backups, though. One used a man with earphones to judge the echo, and the other was a man with a weighted rope who stood on one of the wings and found the bottom by feeling for it.

It was primitive, but the pilots from the Hanseatic League trusted the method.

My lance was the sixth of the fourth platoon, and as it turned out, we got placed farther away than any of the others, at the north end of the Gulf of Bothnia. At least, it was called that on Lord Conrad's map, although nobody ever figured out who or what or where Bothnia was. One of life's little mysteries, since Lord Conrad said that he didn't know, either.

That was one of the truly fine things about our leader. Like all men, he was sometimes wrong, although he was much more often right than wrong. When he proved to be incorrect about something, he never tried to pretend that he hadn't said what he had said, or that he had really meant something different, or used any of the other face-saving bits of nonsense that so many leaders use. He would simply say that it looked as though he was wrong, he would correct whatever needed correcting, and then he would continue on with the task at hand.

We all admired his honesty.

My lance's turn had come at last, and we were ready early, standing and waiting for Baron Tados of the Oceangoing Steamers and Baron Siemomysl of the Explorer's Corps to decide precisely where to put us.

Since we had no idea what sort of reception we would get from the local inhabitants, we were fully armed, with our swords at our left shoulders, our bayonets belted at our left, our pistols belted at the right, and our rifles slung on our right shoulders.

We weren't in full armor, however, since there was always the chance of falling into the water. We made do with light, open-faced helmets, rather than the big war helms that attached to the breast and back armor we were wearing. We'd left off the arm and leg pieces, and stowed them in our cart with the war helms. Even so, it was a fair load, and I couldn't help wishing that our cautious leaders would either hurry it up or send for some chairs.

The weather was good, and for the last few days they had been towing the steam launch and its barge behind the ship rather than hoisting them in and out twice a day.

Once a decision as to our destination was finally made, they simply brought up our war cart in the elevator, Sir Odon verified that it was ours by checking the serial number, and the cart was lowered into the barge that was already waiting alongside, below the starboard wing. We followed our cart down to the barge, somebody wished us luck, and the launch took us ashore while the ship continued on its way without stopping. Our whole departure was completed in minutes.

We were towed into the mouth of a fair-sized river, the Torne, we were told, and after examining both banks, Sir Odon signaled the men in the launch to put us ashore on the west bank.

The launch crew went toward shore as quickly as possible, then turned at the last possible moment and cut their power. This maneuver left the barge going straight in until it bumped the river bottom a few yards from shore. Lezek and I quickly set out the ramp boards, and Fritz took a block and tackle to shore and tied the block to a convenient tree.

Taurus had the other block hooked to the cart, and by the time the rest of us walked dry-shod ashore, all was ready for us to pull the heavy cart from the barge to the land we were to explore. The job was quickly over, and we waved the launch good-bye.

That sort of smooth coordination was something all eight members of my lance always did. There might be some conversation while we decided what should be done, but rarely was an order given about who should do what while we were doing it. Sometimes hours would go by without anyone mentioning the work at hand. Mostly it was a matter of thinking about what we were doing, and always being ready to do the next logical thing. A well-coordinated group can accomplish three times as much as a random bunch of the same number of people.

So there we stood on the beach, slowly beginning to realize that we were on our own. Well, not quite alone, since we had been discovered by a few million mosquitoes, black-flies, and other things that must have been creations of the Devil, for God was too good to make such things. We pulled the barge as far ashore as we could without moving the forward block.

"I had expected some sort of welcoming committee," Father John said, swatting a bug. "A human committee, I mean."

"Or some people of some sort, anyway," Kiejstut said. "They had to have seen the *Challenger* out there."

"Maybe there just isn't anybody around here," Sir Odon said. "That would make for a very simple exploration report, and a very dull year. But for now, we should find a good campsite. Kiejstut and Taurus, you two go look for one. The rest of us will start moving the cart uphill."

Taurus checked his compass and said, "For reasons best known to Lord Conrad, my compass is pointing almost due east. I know the true directions because I got them from the compensated compass on the ship's binnacle. I have long been accustomed to them pointing east of north, but never this far."

The rest of us confirmed that, for whatever reason, our compasses agreed with Taurus's, and the scouts left.

The cart was too heavy for six people to tow on soft soil, but with a good block and tackle and plenty of trees to tie it to, we made fairly rapid progress.

Our scouts did us up royal when it came to a campsite. They found a flat shelf of land on the side of a big hill. From it, we could see and be seen for miles. There was a small, clean stream running beside it, and there was plenty of firewood available. Better yet, there was usually enough of a breeze up there to blow away most of the blasphemous mosquitoes.

But most important, there was a dry cave not ten yards from the campsite. It was a perfect place to store things, and would make us a good shelter if the weather got really bad, although it was a bit cold in there to be really comfortable.

"Unless we find a friendly town around here, I imagine that this will be our home base for the next year," Sir Odon said. "Keep that in mind when you build the latrine and the cooking area."

The rest of the day was spent getting the cart hauled up to the campsite and then getting things there set up properly, the tents pitched, and the kitchen made usable.

Most of the supplies that we wouldn't be needing immediately were taken from the cart and stored back in the cave. Father John cooked supper, while we used the cart lid to make a dining room table, and then set out some of the supply cases to serve as chairs.

After a good meal, we were all surprisingly tired, even though it was still light out. Sir Odon set up a sentry schedule, which had each of us standing for a quarter of the night, every other day. I wouldn't have to stand mine until tomorrow.

We had a small clock with us with the new temperature-compensated pendulum, but the normal army day starts at sunrise with the thick hand pointing left at the zero. The clock wasn't set because we hadn't been here at a sunrise yet.

Sir Odon hung the clock in the mess tent, facing north, lifting the weights but not starting the pendulum. He told the sentries to guess at the time until dawn, and then to start and set the clock.

The clock had a thermometer on it, and we were all reminded to record the temperature and the weather four times a day, to document the local climate.

There were twelve hours of the same length in the army day, measured from dawn to dawn, and those hours were twice as long, on the average, as the hours used by the regular clergy. The monks used twelve hours for their day, and then twelve more for the night, but since the length of day varies with the season, the length of their hours varied as well.

# Chapter Fifteen

From the Journal of Josip Sobieski

WRITTEN FEBRUARY 2, 1249, CONCERNING MAY 26, 1248

I FELL quickly to sleep, despite the fact that the sun was still up, and I slept soundly enough. Yet, I was still tired when Lezek woke me up, even though the sun was again well above the horizon.

Over breakfast I noticed that everyone had bags under their eyes, and I said that they all looked about the way I felt.

"Maybe it's got something to do with the air, this far north," Father John said.

"More likely, it was all the excitement yesterday, not to mention all the work of getting the war cart all the way up here," Sir Odon said.

"I don't think so," Fritz said. "We have often been a lot more excited than yesterday, when we didn't even get drunk or laid, and we've done more work than that on most days of our lives. I think we're all maybe a little bit sick."

"Well, we'll all have to be a lot sicker before we can let ourselves start sloughing off. First off, we need to look at the surrounding area, in case there's anything dangerous out there. For today, I want Lezek and Kiejstut to take the canvas kayak and cross the river. Then I want you to map the coastline east of here. Do as much as you can, but be back here by nightfall. Taurus and Fritz, I want you to do the same thing on the coastline to the west. Besides mapping, I want you all to try to find some of the local inhabitants and try to make friends with them, if you can. Take some money and a pocket full of trade goods with you, for presents."

"Should we carry a full weapons load?" Fritz asked.

"I think one rifle for the two of you ought to be enough. But take the rest of your personal weapons with you. Father John and I will do some mapping and searching along the riverbank, heading north of here. Josip, you were complaining about the lack of fresh bread last night at supper, so you have the honor of making up some sort of oven today, and I will expect fresh bread with my supper tonight. Zbigniew, we won't talk about your sins, but you'll spend the day building a really sturdy latrine, a two holer, if you please, at the east end of the campsite. Questions? Then let's get to it."

Those going out each took a pouch of money, a bigger pouch of various trade goods, and a third belt pouch of dried food, mostly fruit, cheese, and meat. Armed with sextants, compasses, and sketch pads for mapping, they set out, trusting to the length of their pace for distance measurements.

Taurus took an axe with him rather than a sword, which I considered wise. A sword is good against an armored man, and against a man with another sword, but for all else, an axe is much better, and it's a useful tool besides. Of course, a sword is also a status symbol, and when I'm out in public, it's my weapon of choice.

The clock said it was a half hour past dawn when I started working on the oven. There was clay to be found in the stream, and there were plenty of flat limestone rocks around. With a bit of help from Zbigniew carrying over the biggest ones, I had the oven almost completed by three.

What you need to bake bread is a hot hole in a rock. The easiest way to make one is to build something like a very deep bookcase out of flat rocks, seal it up as well as you can with clay, and then bury everything but the front of it with dirt. The one I made was big enough to bake a dozen loaves at a time.

To use it, you build a fire inside each of the holes until the whole oven is hot enough. Then you put the risen bread dough in using a long paddle, and close up the front holes with some more flat

stones. If you've done it properly, the bread will be baked, but not burned, before the oven gets cold. Knowing how to do this exactly right is called "skill."

I got some bread dough mixed and rising and then cooked lunch for the two of us.

My lunch partner refused to talk about whatever it was that he had done to merit spending the day building an outhouse, but he would talk about the outhouse that he was building.

Zbigniew's plans for the outhouse were a little on the grandiose side, a small log cabin made out of thin logs. It would be light enough to move when the shit hole filled up, but with all of the joints cut wedge fashion, it would be sturdy, especially since all of the joints were to be carefully lashed together.

I didn't think there was any hope of his finishing by evening, so once I got the oven built, and small fires going in each of the baking holes to slowly bake the clay and heat the thing up to bread-baking temperature, I went over to give him a hand.

By seven o'clock we had seen no sign of the others, and the sun was still disconcertingly high, but I put the bread in to bake, and since I was fussing about the kitchen, I cooked supper as well, a stew made of dried beef, carrots, and potatoes.

By eight o'clock the food was done and in danger of either getting cold if I took it off the fire, or of burning if I didn't. I called Zbigniew over to eat, since it didn't make sense to ruin our supper, even if the others were late. I told him I was worried about the other men in our lance.

"One team could have gotten into trouble, but not all three," he said. "The sun is still high. They have plenty of time."

I said it was after eight o'clock.

"Then there must be something wrong with that clock. The sun isn't anywhere near setting. Look. Just put the stew and this good bread you made into one of the empty cases, and it will stay warm enough for the others once they get back. For now, come and help me with the latrine. With two of us working, we might get it done before sunset."

I asked him again what he had done to offend Sir Odon, and this time, since I was helping him, he told me.

"You know that yesterday's latrine was just a small trench with a couple of flat rocks on either side of it. Well, when I used it last night, I found that it was infested with stinging ants, so I dragged the two rocks a few yards farther back and used them there."

I asked why Sir Odon should be angry about that.

"Because he used the latrine right after me. He could see the white limestone rocks in the dim moonlight, but he didn't notice the old trench, which he stepped in."

I laughed and said that was Sir Odon's fault, not his.

"I agree," Zbigniew said, "but Sir Odon thought I was playing the old outhouse joke on him, you know, where you pick up and move the whole outhouse back a yard, so the next person out there falls into the shit hole, which is usually about neck deep."

I laughed and said that Sir Odon sometimes takes himself too seriously, even if Zbigniew had tried to dirty his boots.

"But I didn't do it on purpose, and our noted leader wasn't wearing his boots."

I said that just made it funnier, and Zbigniew didn't answer. Then I said now we knew why Sir Odon wanted a really sturdy latrine. He wanted it to be too heavy for Zbigniew to move, without the help of his friends, anyway.

"I suppose you're right, but we'll have to wait a few months before we can do anything about it. We can't have him falling into a dry hole, after all."

Well, we had everything done except the roof when Sir Odon and Father John got back. I told them about the food in the box, and we made a fair start on getting the outhouse thatched by sunset.

The others had gotten back safely by then, and were complaining about the cold food when we joined them.

"Blame it on a broken clock," Zbigniew told them. "Josip cooked your dinner according to the clock that was set this morning. I just looked in on it, and it claims that it is half past ten right now."

"The nights are short, this time of the year, but that's ridiculous," Sir Odon said. "Leave the clock running and we'll see how far it's off at sunrise. Maybe we can adjust it. I take it that nobody found any trace of the inhabitants of this fair land?"

Two pairs of heads shook no, they hadn't seen anybody.

"I'm still feeling tired, for some reason," Father John said. "But it doesn't seem to have affected my work. We mapped two dozen miles of river today, and then walked the whole way back. That's quite an accomplishment."

Fritz and Lezek said that they had each done almost as much. I said I was as tired as I had ever been, and that I was going to sleep.

Sir Odon warned me that I had the fourth watch, and I made Fritz promise to wake me.

I woke with Fritz shaking my arm and the sun in my eyes. I jumped up and asked why he hadn't woken me on time.

"I *am* waking you on time," Fritz said. "You have had only three hours of sleep."

I said I was confused.

"Sir Odon's orders. Daybreak now happens four hours after sunset, no matter what the sun feels like doing."

I must have still looked befuddled, because he continued, "Look, just stay awake for an hour and then wake everybody else up, including me."

I got up, Fritz went to sleep, and the first thing I did was walk over to the clock in the mess tent. It said it was half past one.

I had breakfast ready for the others when I woke them at half past two. Sir Odon got up, went over to the clock, and reset it to zero.

Then he said, "Good morning, Josip. Thank you for getting breakfast ready."

I asked him to explain what was going on.

"Wait until the others get here. There's no point in going through this twice."

Once we were all together, he said, "Last night was clear enough for me to shoot a sighting on the North Star. We are very far north. In fact, we are only about four dozen miles south of the Arctic Circle. Also, we are only a few weeks away from the Summer Solstice. This means that in a few weeks' time, if we go just two days' march north of here, the sun will never set at all. We will be in the Land of the Midnight Sun.

"Furthermore, the nights here and now are so short that we will fall over dead of exhaustion in a few weeks if we try to sleep only when the sun is down. Therefore, until further notice, we will wake up four hours after sunset, since I think that we would have trouble falling asleep when the sun is still up. Sunset is now at eight o'clock, and the first sentry sets the clock."

"So that's why we were all so tired," Father John said.

"Of course. If you work eleven hours every day and sleep only one, you will be tired. The fact that we all did that without noticing it proves that people have a very poor sense of time."



Lezek said, "Lord Conrad once wrote that it was possible to build a clock so small that it could be worn on your wrist, but I've never heard of anyone who actually made one."

"We certainly could have used one these past few days," Sir Odon said. "Now then, I want to be north of here to see this Midnight Sun business. We've read about it, but we could be the first men in the entire army to see it. But before we can go, there are some things that must be done around here first."

"Then what should we do?" Father John said.

"I would like to see at least two more scouting patrols made, one to the northwest and one to the northeast, so we can be sure that there aren't any people around here. We need to get a medium-sized garden going, to see what varieties of plants can be grown here, and to get some fresh food on the table. We need to get a radio antenna up so we can report in, and the same pole might as well serve as a flagpole. Can anyone think of anything else?" Sir Odon asked.

"I think we will need a very sturdy door made for the mouth of the cave," Kiejstut said, "something strong enough to discourage a bear, since I don't want us to lose our winter's food supply while we're gone."

"Good idea. Any other thoughts? No? Then how about if Josip and Kiejstut head northeast, and Taurus and Zbigniew go northwest. Fritz, you get started on a garden, Father John and I will take care of the antenna, and that leaves Lezek to worry about the door for the cave. You fellows on patrol, try to bring back some fresh meat, if you can do it without bothering the locals."

Kiejstut said, "What locals?"

"Just don't shoot somebody's cow. Well, let's get going."

# Chapter Sixteen

From the Journal of Josip Sobieski

WRITTEN FEBRUARY 3, 1249, CONCERNING MAY 28, 1248

DUE TO some near fatal hangovers and a fouled-up railroad connection, Kiejstut and I had both missed the one-day course they'd given on the folding kayak. Fortunately, the thing went together easily enough. Folded, it looked like a six-yard-long bundle of sticks wrapped in canvas. You simply inserted three vaguely oval-shaped ribs in the right places, gave them a twist, and it popped out and became a lightweight boat that was pointed at both ends, and could hold three men in a pinch.

The double-ended paddles were strange, but easily mastered.

We crossed the icy cold river, beached the kayak, and hid it under some bushes. Then, packs on our backs, weapons loaded, and our hearts light, we headed out looking for adventure. What we found were mostly hills, small bushes, and a vast number of carnivorous insects.

"I am rigorously opposed to this business of being in the middle of the food chain!" Kiejstut complained, swatting at the bugs. "In my family, we always sat on the *top* of the chain."

I recommended chastising them for their lack of respect of his exalted station in life.

"Chastise them? I am already slaughtering them by the thousands! What else can I do?"

I suggested attempting to engage in a meaningful conversation with them, but his only reply was to throw a rock at me.

We had no luck in finding any people, but were more successful when it came to fresh meat. Kiejstut and I each managed to shoot a deer.

I was walking far in the lead when Kiejstut waved me to take cover. He had the rifle and lay down behind a bush while two small bucks slowly came within range. I stood behind a tree far to his right, watching and waiting. When they came within nine dozen yards, he fired, and his marksmanship was absolutely perfect. Shot through the heart, the buck fell backward without a sound or further motion.

The second buck sprang up and started running, and it had the bad luck to run straight at me. I was surprised, but I had the presence of mind to draw and cock my pistol. The animal didn't see me until it was only about a dozen yards away. It turned and offered me a perfect side shot. One does not often get the opportunity to brag about having felled a deer with a pistol, so I fired. The buck went down, but when I got to it, it was still alive. I drew my bayonet, held back its head, and cut its throat.

At that point we were more than a dozen miles from our base camp, and there didn't seem to be much sense in going on any farther. We each slung a buck over our shoulders, but they were heavier than they looked. It was soon obvious that if we tried to bring back both whole animals, we couldn't possibly make it to camp by dark.

I asked if he thought we should abandon one of the deer, or if we should leave our armor, weapons, and supplies behind.

"Sir Odon would have a fit if we abandoned any equipment, even temporarily. Remember that they made him sign for all of it. As to leaving our weapons, well, don't even think about it!" Kiejstut said, "You really should have let the second deer go. As it is, well, to throw one of them away would be wasteful and little children in Mongolia are going to bed hungry."

I had to agree that he was right, although shooting had seemed a good idea at the time. Anyway, both bucks were bigger than I had at first thought.

So we stopped, and I built a fire as much to destroy some of the mosquitoes as to cook lunch. Kiejstut started with the butchering. We cooked and ate one liver, put all of my trail food into my partner's pouch, and then put the second liver in my pouch. This meant that I would have a messy cleaning job to do once we got back, but then the original sin was mine.

Regretfully, we discarded all of the rest of the tripe, the heads, the feet, and even the skins, to get the loads down to a weight we could live with.

Even then, we nearly swamped the kayak bringing home the venison.

When we got back to camp, we found that Taurus and Zbigniew had also brought back a deer each, and they managed to bring back the whole animals. A surfeit of riches.

We spent the next few days gorging on hearts, brains, kidneys, and livers, and spent much of the time cutting most of the meat into thin strips. We built a smokehouse, and then salted and smoked the meat so it would keep. Fritz even made us some smoked sausages. We already had plenty of dried meat, but waste not, want not. '

As we got the garden prepared and planted, a debate arose among us as to whether we should leave someone behind at the camp when most of us walked upstream to map the river. On the one hand, if someone or something despoiled our supplies and equipment, we could be in very serious trouble when winter arrived. But it was also dangerous to split our forces. The decision was finally made when no one would volunteer to stay behind and miss seeing the Midnight Sun.

We radioed the ship that we were leaving and put the radio away in the cave. If we got into trouble when we were away from the camp, it wasn't likely that those on the ship would be able to find us, so we couldn't really expect any help, anyway.

We placed in the cave everything we weren't taking with us, closed the sturdy door that we'd built, and locked it with one of the new combination padlocks. Then we all spent a few hours covering the entrance with rocks, burying the rocks with dirt, and finally planting a few small bushes in the dirt, as camouflage.

We left a small pile of trade goods outside on a big flat rock, mostly some knives, jewelry, arrowheads, and metal cups— as a gift—in case we were trespassing on someone's land.

After a total of five days at our base camp, we left with four weeks' worth of supplies in the heavy packs on our backs, heading north along the river.

Following four days' march, much of it uphill, the weather was getting colder, and we were marching through coarse, dirty snow left over from last winter. When we came to a split in the river, we took the west branch, since taking the other would have involved building a raft and risking the swift-flowing, icy white water.

Three days later we saw our first Midnight Sun, or at least some of one, for the sun was two-thirds hidden by the hills on the horizon.

Twelve hours after that, we climbed to the top of the highest hill around so as not to miss the amazing sight of a sun shining at midnight. But once up there, the day turned foggy and cloudy and there was no sun to be seen, Midnight or otherwise.

It stayed cloudy for five more days, and I thought we all would die of terminal frustration. But all things pass, even bad luck, and finally we had clear weather and a mountain-top, and we all cheered.

But now we didn't even have the sun to guide us, for instead of rising in the east and setting in the west, the way a proper Christian sun should, the silly thing just went round and round, above the horizon! Well, it went higher in the south, and it almost kissed the horizon in the north, but it was still most disconcerting!

We had trouble knowing when to sleep, until Father John pointed out that we could still use the sun as a clock, if we assumed that the face of the clock was lying on the ground. If your compass was pointed to the east at the clock face's zero, the sun told you the proper army time of day.

Think of that! Telling time with a compass!

The next day, things started to get more interesting. We were walking near the river when we saw a large herd of the same sort of deer we had been occasionally seeing in ones and twos through the trip. Now there were thousands of them, and they kept on coming!

There were so many that, while they weren't acting aggressively, they were starting to crowd us, and Sir Odon had us all climb a rock outcropping perhaps four yards high, to get out of their way. We were up there for about an hour, taking a forced break from the march, when I saw our first people.

I shouted to the others that they should notice the hunters, chasing the deer.

"Those men! They are not carrying weapons! They aren't hunters!" Kiejstut said. "They are herding the deer!"

Taurus said, "Whoever heard of such a thing? I never thought that deer *could* be herded."

I said they were herded every year, at Lord Conrad's Great Hunt, except that there, they had to be completely surrounded.

"These are a different kind of deer than what we have farther south," Zbigniew said. "The deer in Poland stay in small groups when they aren't alone. They mostly eat bushes and hide in the thickets and forests. The deer here eat mostly moss and grass and live in herds. Their faces look different, they have wider noses and bigger antlers. And unless all those deer are male, their females have antlers just like the males."

He jumped down from our rock, right down among the fast-moving deer. Then he lay down right on the ground and looked up at them!

"Get back up here, you crazy fool!" Sir Odon shouted.

Zbigniew climbed safely back up and said, "Sorry I scared you, sir. But you know, *most* of those deer are females, antlers or no antlers."

The herdsman running on foot were followed by others, men, women, and children, who were riding on sleds or sleighs. The sleighs were being pulled by deer!

"Using deer as beasts of burden! This has to be unique!" Father John said.

We smiled and waved at the people passing us, and they smiled and waved back, but they didn't stop. I had the feeling that they were doing something too important to bother with strangers.

When they were gone over the next hill, Sir Odon said, "Well, at least they aren't hostile. Come on, let's follow them, but at a distance, so we won't threaten them."

We followed, and there wasn't any question of us crowding them. Even at a run, we could barely keep up! Finally, hours later, we came upon their camp. Sir Odon and Father John left their weapons with the rest of us and approached the camp, staying in the open and bowing whenever any of the natives noticed them.

The technique seemed to work, for soon three of the locals, two older men and one mature woman, came out and bowed back, apparently in imitation of our leaders. They began to try to communicate with each other, but they didn't seem to have much luck. Seemingly, the natives spoke neither Polish nor Latin.

After a bit, Sir Odon called Fritz to join them, to try his German on the locals. Fritz came back after a short while and sent Taurus out to try Ukrainian. He was followed by Zbigniew with his Pruthenian, and then Kiejstut with his Lithuanian, but none of them had any luck. Fritz said that whatever they spoke sounded a little bit like Hungarian, but no one in our group spoke any of that language.

Lezek and I were the only ones in our lance who spoke no foreign languages, so we weren't sent to try to talk to the people.

While this was going on, small gifts were exchanged with the deer herders. We gave them a dozen small knives, some needles, fishhooks, and some glass beads for jewelry, since the woman already had some sewn into her coat. In return we got some fresh meat and some nicely made handicrafts, including some beautifully embroidered leather belts.

While our leaders continued to make progress, the rest of us pitched camp where we were standing and built a fire, since, despite the snow on the ground, there were still mosquitoes flying.

We cooked a meal, and the three locals were invited to come and join us. They were particularly taken with the dried fruit we had with us, and were given paper bags of it to take back with them.

Finally, they left with what we thought was an understanding to return after we all slept for a while. We posted no sentries, since that might show distrust of our new friends.

When we woke, four hours later, the locals had already packed up their camp and left. None of us could figure out why.

We followed them for three days, traversing three fords, heading due north where the river we had been mapping was now heading northwest. It eventually became plain that they were outdistancing us.

"The only way we could keep up with them is if we had some Big People with us," Lezek said.

I said that yes, Anna's children could run as fast as a deer, but an ordinary human with weapons and a backpack could not.

"I hate to lose our only contact with the local inhabitants, but I'm afraid that the two of you are right," Sir Odon said. "We'll pitch camp here and rest for a day before we head back to continue mapping the river."

# Chapter Seventeen

From the Diary of Josip Sobieski

WRITTEN FEBRUARY 4, 1249, CONCERNING JUNE 12, 1248

A FEW days later, while we were sitting around a fire, Taurus said, "I've been thinking about those deer people, and you know, I don't think that they were herding the deer after all."

"So?" Sir Odon said. "Just what do you think they were doing?"

"I think that they were *following* the deer. I mean, think about it. They weren't ahead of the animals, they were behind them at all times. When the animals moved, they moved, and they didn't dare stop, for fear of being left behind. When the deer stopped for a while, they could stop, too, and try to talk to us. You could see that they *were* curious about us, and they *were* friendly enough. But when the deer started to move again, they packed up everything in a hurry and left. I think they did that because they *had* to do that. They eat the deer, they wear the deer, and they ride behind the deer. I'd be willing to bet that they protect the deer as well. Without the deer, they would be absolutely nothing! So they *must* follow them wherever they go."

Sir Odon thought awhile and said, "You know, that's almost crazy enough to be the truth! To think that a whole tribe of people are in effect enslaved to a herd of deer! Amazing!"

"But are the people really the slaves?" Father John said. "It is the deer that are slaughtered and eaten. It is the deer that pull the sleighs. And I'll tell you, I examined some of those sleigh draft animals, and they were castrated males. Do masters permit their slaves to castrate them?"

"But it is the deer who decide where both the herd and the tribe are going," Sir Odon said.

Zbigniew said, "Maybe the people don't *care* where they're going, as long as the deer are there. Perhaps the deer know best where the better grazing is to be found. I mean, who would know better than a deer where the best food for a deer is?"

"I suppose so," Sir Odon said. "But it is still one of the strangest relationships that I have ever witnessed."

"I can tell you have never met Komander Sliwa," Lezek said. "He has six wives and everybody in the family is happy. Now, *there* is a strange relationship!"

A few days later we found the iron deposit. At first all we saw were several small mines that must have been used sporadically by native blacksmiths. They were little more than holes in the ground, actually, and scattered over several square miles.

But then, when Father John noticed that the ore from all of the mines was identical, he suggested that the whole area must have a huge seam of iron ore under it. We dug a half-dozen small pits, and found iron in every one of them!

We spent a further three weeks at the site, digging dozens of holes to define just how big the thing was, and digging a deep hole in the center of it, like a well, to find out how thick the ore seam was. Any way we figured it, there was more iron available than the army could use in three hundred years!

We surveyed the area, and sketched in some grandiose plans for equipment to mine and clean the ore, and then started to work our way back, making preliminary drawings for a series of canals and locks to get the ore down the river to the Baltic.

We were all vastly excited about the possibilities ahead of us, because according to the army policy statement concerning explorers, we would all be getting a percentage of the profits of the mine. Not a huge percentage, but as Kiejstut put it, "A small part of infinity is still very large!"

Our plans called for specially built steamships, designed to hold bulk cargoes of coke or iron ore, to run between the Vistula and the Torne, with steel-making plants at the mouths of both rivers. Coke from Poland would be shipped to the plant on the Torne, and then the ships would be filled with iron ore to be shipped back to Poland. It would be a most efficient operation!

We then discovered there were four seasons up there in the north. They were June, July, August, and winter.

By the time we made it back to our base camp, three months had gone by. The short northern summer was over, and the rivers were all frozen over. We suddenly realized that our carefully drawn plans for two gross miles of canals and locks were all a waste of time! If they were built, they would be useless for most of the year.

So we started all over, and this time we designed a railroad. Fortunately, we could use the same surveys, and do the design work at our base camp, which was wonderful, since we again had some variety in our meals. For the last six weeks, while on the trail, we had been eating nothing but fresh venison, and even that delight became very tiresome after a while.

Our radio messages concerning our find were well-received on the ship, and as they were getting back to Poland every month, we heard that Lord Conrad was pleased with us. It seems that the seam of magnetite at Three Walls was almost depleted, and another source of high-grade iron ore was urgently needed. We were now certain that our discovery would not be ignored.

On less important topics, our garden had been surprisingly productive, considering that it had only about five weeks of growing season. When we got back, we found a half acre of plants that had matured, but were mostly frost-killed and rotted. The potatoes, beets, and other root crops could be salvaged, but little else was saved.

Nonetheless, the long days of sunlight did allow for a decent enough harvest, except for the fact that a farmer would have to do all of his work, from plowing to harvest, in only five weeks, and it didn't seem likely that a man could make a living that way. Maybe gardening would be a hobby for some of the workers at the steel plant we would build here.

We made a few quick excursions back up the river, to check on a few alternate railroad routes and to bring back more samples of the ore for the metallurgists, but for the most part, the balance of our year on the Torne was spent at our base camp.

Once, coming back from the ore site, we crossed the tracks of the deer people, but we didn't meet any of them. We found out later, over the radio, that they had been contacted by two of the other explorer lances, southwest of there, toward Sweden. Hopefully, the others would learn more about those strange people than we had.

Before the Baltic froze over, a few people from the ship dropped by, to pick up our ore samples, along with our maps and drawings, and drop off some fresh fruits and vegetables, but army policy was that an explorer lance should spend at least a year at a site, so we did.

Once it became really cold, having the cave was a godsend. It was pleasantly warm in there compared to what it was outside.

A cave stays the same temperature all year around. This temperature is the average of all the outside temperatures in the area over the past several years. At least, that's what our data showed once we'd collected it over a year.

In fact, recording the temperature, along with the weather and the time the sun rose and set, was about all we did for the last six months in camp. Cooking, eating, and sleeping were the only other things we had to do besides writing up what had happened the summer before.

I expanded my notes to cover my entire life up to then. That is to say, this is when I wrote most of the journal you now hold, although now that I've gotten this far, I think I might continue with it.

At the Winter Solstice, the opposite of the Midnight Sun happened. One day the sun never does come up. But you cannot celebrate something that doesn't happen, so we didn't.

We tried trapping fur-bearing animals, using traps we made according to one of the manuals we had with us. Either there weren't any animals to be trapped or we didn't know what we were doing, or both, but the project was not successful.

We did find a large bear, or rather, he found us. Apparently, the cave had been his winter home, and he vigorously objected to our possession of it. This was only fair, since we objected to his repossession of the premises with even greater vigor. The bear made it all the way through the doorway before dying with over a dozen bullets in him. Bear meat was a refreshing change from venison, and we made his pelt into a rug.

Kiejstut and I managed to catch Sir Odon with the old outhouse trick, but it just isn't as much fun when the shit is frozen solid.

Lezek and Kiejstut wrote quite a few songs that winter, and some of them have gotten popular around the Explorer's School. When next you hear "Under the Midnight Sun," or "The Baltic Challenger," or even "Ten Thousand to One, Against Us," also known as "The Mosquito Song," think of them, up there in the cold.

Mostly, we told a lot of long, tall stories, played a lot of games, and read every army manual we had with us at least twice. We loudly bemoaned the fact that we had neither beer nor fair ladies with us. We sang and played our horns, violins, guitars, drums, and recorders, and with so much time to practice, we became better with them. We lived, but I think that if we had not been such good friends in the first place, we might have killed each other just to have something interesting to do.

In fact, there was a killing in the lance to the southeast of us. Apparently, the man just went crazy from sitting around with nothing to do. He killed one of his teammates and injured two others before he was shot dead. Madness.

Sitting unloved and sober in the cold and dark, my lance made a few resolutions. We swore that on our next mission, we would bring a year's supply of strong drink with us, even if it had to be that powerful white lightning stuff that Lord Conrad liked. Also, our next mission would either have to be someplace where they had women, or we would smuggle in our own. And mainly, wherever it was, it had darned well better be *warm!*

WRITTEN JANUARY 12, 1250, CONCERNING JUNE 1249

Again I find time weighing heavily on me, as I sit alone in my cabin, steaming across the Atlantic Ocean, and far away from my one true love. I might as well bring this journal up to date.

Finally, the birds of the Arctic began to return, the ice on the Baltic started to break, and the long winter ended. We were told to leave everything behind, except for our journals, our weapons, and our personal equipment. All the rest would be of use to those who would follow us. We asked if that included the chest of money we had brought but hadn't found a use for, and they said yes, leave that, too.

We sealed up and buried the cave entrance as we had done once before, but only after Sir Odon counted the money twice and made us all sign a paper saying that we had left the money and everything else behind pursuant to orders. I'd never seen him quite so nervous before, but then I'd never seen anyone ordered to abandon a quarter of a million pence before, either.

Well, a quarter million pence less all of our back pay, up to the first of next month. We didn't want to be penniless on the trip back to the Explorer's School.

We were personally welcomed on board the *Baltic Challenger* by Baron Siemomysl and Baron Tados with a party, mostly because we had found the most valuable thing of any of the explorer lances. You see, our superiors would get a cut of the profits on the mine, just as we would.



We all smiled and shook hands, and they all smiled and shook hands, and everybody said uninteresting things, and nobody said anything original, since everything important had already been said months ago, over the radio. They fed us well, with fantastically delicious fresh egg omelets, crispy salads, and fresh green garden vegetables. And we drank, and drank well.

It was a wonderful thing that they had beer on the ship, and we had been too long sober. We were all astounded at the *amount* we could drink, several gallons per man, without even falling over. I think that our bodies were telling us that we needed it.

At Gdansk we got our new orders. We were to forward our journals and equipment to the Explorer's School. I sent them my journals, but shipped my big war chest home, since in his letters, my brother had asked about all the new weapons and equipment, and I wanted to show him.

We were further ordered to take three months off, with pay. This gave Fritz, Kiejstut, and Taurus time enough to visit home, something they had not been able to do in many years, since before the Mongol invasion.

Kiejstut stayed right on the ship, since it would be making one more round to pick up the last of the explorer lances, while putting off over a dozen mercantile support groups at the permanent stations that had been selected, and in doing so would be steaming right past Lithuania.

When I asked why our lance hadn't been sent to Lithuania, since we already had someone who spoke the language, the barons told me that at the time, they hadn't known exactly where Lithuania was, and anyway, they hadn't thought of it.

Then they asked me why I hadn't suggested it, and I had to say that I hadn't thought of it, either. When we got Kiejstut into the conversation, he said he had traveled to Poland by land. He had never thought of going home by water until now.

Fritz considered taking the ship around the Baltic to get to Szczecin, and going home from there, but a study of the new maps convinced him it would be just as fast to go home by way of Okoitz, where he could get a little sexual release first.

He said, "That way I will be less likely to rape and pillage and rape again, all my bloody way across the Holy Roman Empire!"

The seven of us took a leisurely riverboat trip in pleasant early summer weather up the Vistula, to Sionsk, where Father John left us. He had to report to the Archbishop at Gniezno, before visiting his family at Poznan.

Lezek's family and Zbigniew's foster family lived on army ranches near Sieciechow, and Fritz, Taurus, and I were persuaded to visit with them for a day or two before continuing on home.

Sir Odon declined the offer, so we left him aboard to continue his way south. It was his loss, for their families gave us a fine welcome, and we enjoyed our stay there immensely.

The workers at both of the ranches, one for aurochs and the other for young Big People, were members of the army just as we were. But it seemed to them that we were the ones out doing all the exciting things while they were stuck living humdrum, ordinary lives. It seemed to me that I had just spent the winter in a cave bereft of beer and female company, while they had spent the time pleasantly with their families.

As Lezek put it, "The grass is always greener over somebody else's septic tank."

I was particularly taken with Zbigniew's foster sister, Maria. Because of her, I delayed my departure from the ranch for almost a week, and the others stayed around as well. I was about to propose matrimony, until my friends convinced me that I was thinking with my gonads rather than with my head. They said I had been too long without a woman, and that before I did anything irreversible, I should go spend a week or two with the girls from the cloth factory at Okoitz. *Then* I should come back and talk seriously with Maria's father.

New Big People were always coming of age, that is, "remembering" everything their mothers had known at the time of their voluntary conception. When this process was completed, the adult Big People, who automatically became members of the army, went out to their assigned military duty stations. It was customary to send them in the company of a little person, preferably one of knight's rank or higher.

We were asked by the assignment clerk if we would care to help out and deliver some of them to Three Walls, which was near the Warrior's School, our next duty assignment. Taurus said he wished he could oblige them but he wanted to go back to his homeland, in the Ukraine, where he had an uncle and some cousins he had not seen in many years, before returning to the Explorer's School. The clerk said that the trip would cause no difficulty, since we had ten weeks to make the delivery. He said that it was always good for the Big People to see some of the outside world before going to work.

Essentially, we were each being offered the services of one of Anna's fabulously valuable children for the rest of our vacations, and yes, of course we'd be happy to help them out!

Starting at dawn the next day, Taurus headed southeast for the Ukraine, while Fritz and I galloped south along the Vistula, stopped for a quick lunch in Sandomierz, and then had supper in Cracow on the same day, before we got to Okoitz before dark! This was less than half the time it would have taken had we gone by riverboat, although they ran around the clock. Neither the Big People nor we humans had ever made that trip by land before, but our mounts knew the way.

It was the first time I had ever been privileged to ride one of those lovely creatures, and being on Margarete was a joy never to be forgotten. She gave me such a tremendous feeling of speed and power! What's more, she remembered me from when I was a little boy at Okoitz who knew her ancestor Anna! She *really did* have all of Anna's memories.

I had never had a horse before, much less one of the Big People. I was unsure of how to take proper care of her, and Fritz was almost as ignorant as I was, since as a farmer his father had kept only oxen. Rather than risk causing the ladies any discomfort, we paid the stable keeper at the inn double the usual rates, and told him they must get the very best of everything. The next morning Margarete said that she was satisfied, so I considered the money well spent.

Fritz and I spent only a single night carousing in the Pink Dragon Inn at Okoitz, and then he went on his way, to his home near Worms, in the Holy Roman Empire. He was excited at the prospect of going home a true, belted knight, with eight pounds of gold on his uniform, a gold-hilted sword, a modern pistol, and a pouch full of silver at his belt, riding on one of Anna's famous children!

"My parents will burst with pride, and my old friends will turn purple with envy!"

I visited my parents the next morning, and it was the same old story. Everyone was glad to see me again except for my father, who *still* would not talk to me.

I went back to my room in the inn. I sat alone and thought about my problem with my father. I thought for a long while. I'd already tried using every intermediary possible. The priest. My mother. My sisters and brother. Even the in-laws. I was just going to have to settle the problem myself, somehow.

It took me a while to get up my courage, but a few days later I confronted my father. I actually stood in his path and wouldn't let him past without talking to me. I asked him just what he expected of me, and he said nothing. I begged to know just what great crime I had committed, that he should treat me this way for so many years, and he wouldn't talk!

I had to hold him by both arms to keep him in front of me, but still he would not say a single word to me. Finally, he tried to break away. I spun him around to face me again, and when he still wouldn't say a word, I hit him.

Just once, but in the mouth and as hard as I could.

He just stood there, bleeding and looking at me, and still he would not speak to me! Even looking into his eyes, I could not fathom what he was thinking.

I left Okoitz the next morning with the intention of reporting in early to the Explorer's School. There simply wasn't anything else I wanted to do.

I never saw Lezek's foster sister again, but sometimes I think that I should have.

# Chapter Eighteen

From the Diary of Conrad Stargard

JUNE 2, 1249

ONCE AGAIN I sat in my office, planning the next expedition of the Explorer's Corps.

The Baltic had been mapped and a number of commercial possibilities examined. The fishing grounds were rich, much better than they had been in the twentieth century. Plans for six motorized fishing boats and a fish-processing plant built into a *Challenger*-sized hull were under way.

There were good trading possibilities in the fur trade, in amber, and in timber. The army's commercial products, from window glass to padlocks, had all been very well received.

But most important was the discovery of the vast iron ore deposit in what would someday be northern Sweden, in my old time line. I thought (and hoped) that this was the deposit that made Swedish steel so famous! Coming as it did, just when our seam of magnetite at Three Walls was running out, it reaffirmed my conviction that God was truly on my side! Plans to exploit the wonderful discovery were going ahead at full speed.

Exploration continued as well, with two ships and six dozen explorer lances currently out on the shores of the Kattegat, the Skagerrak, and the North Sea, from the English Channel to the Orkney Islands.

Now it was time to take a big bite.

We needed rubber, or at least some sort of durable, flexible, insulating material, and our chemical industry wasn't anywhere near advanced enough to produce decent plastics.

The only place I knew of where rubber trees could be found was in South America, or Brazyl, as I had named it on my maps.

What we needed was in the Amazon Rain Forest, a place I had heard a lot of mixed messages about. On one hand, there were dozens of horror stories about schools of man-eating piranhas, evil natives with blowguns, and vast clouds of carnivorous insects, not to mention leeches a half a yard long that sucked only warm blood. The place apparently abounded with poisonous darts, poisonous trees, poisonous fishes, poisonous frogs, and poisonous everything else.

On the other hand, I had seen travelogues that made it all look very attractive, with a balmy climate, friendly natives, and good swimming, since the alligators and piranhas were overrated bogeymen.

The truth, as always, was probably somewhere in the middle, but I doubt if it was anything our men couldn't handle. So far, the Explorer's Corps had done an admirable job, with only two fatalities, and those were caused by insanity, probably brought on by a case of cabin fever. Other companies had lost more men than that while engaged in farming!

The Amazon River should be easy enough to find, since it's right on the equator. Just head south until the North Star touches the horizon, and then turn right, and straight on till morning. There's no way they could miss it.

Once on the river, every third lance would be equipped with a riverboat, since land transportation in those swamps would be difficult.

Coming up with a riverboat that could be knocked down and packed in containers for shipment wasn't a problem. I'd put engineering on it a month ago, and a prototype would be ready within the week.

Besides finding rubber, and convincing the natives to collect it for us in return for steel knives, salt, and whatever else they wanted, our explorers would try to get to the headwaters of the Amazon. There, in the Andes Mountains, is a civilized area, inhabited by the Incas. These Indians have lots of gold and silver, but no iron or steel. Such a country could make a wonderful trading partner!

As I was pondering these pleasant thoughts, a very attractive and very naked young lady walked into my office, and my first thought was, *Oh my God! Not again!*

In the thirteenth century, in northern Europe, a naked lady had much in common with a woman of the twentieth century wearing a bikini bathing suit. On the one hand, it was neither immoral nor illegal, but on the other hand, it was not exactly always appropriate!

But she just stood there, with huge blue eyes and blond hair, wearing nothing but a slightly vacant smile. Not even pubic hair. I realized that I knew her, or rather that I had met her.

In partial payment for stranding me in the thirteenth century, my time-traveling cousin Tom had given me a vacation once in his apartment, which was located in what he called a "temporal bubble." It seemed to be able to exist in any time, and in any place, or even *without* a time or a place.

This girl had been the cook, the maid, and the whatever-else-you-needed there. She was not human, but was rather a bioengineered creation with a lot in common with the Big People, like my first mount, Anna.

"Well, hello there, Maude," I said in English, which had been the only language she had been able to speak. "What can I do for you?"

She just looked at me, confused, and then said, "I'm sorry, sir, but I don't understand you," in Polish.

"You speak Polish now, but not English?" I said in Polish.

"Yes, sir."

"So they reprogrammed you for a new language?"

"Yes, sir."

"If they did that, my cousin Tom must intend for you to stay here."

"Yes, sir."

Except for the fact that she could speak and looked human instead of like a horse, she was just like Anna. They both had absolutely literal minds. If you didn't ask exactly the right question, you wouldn't get the right answer.

That, and they were both so totally *nice* that they would never let you know you had hurt their feelings, so you had to work hard at not hurting them in the first place.

"If my cousin gave you a message for me, please tell it to me."

"Yes, sir. Tom said that you needed a bodyguard. He said that you had already ruined me as a servant. He said that you might as well have me stand guard over you."

She said that in her pleasant voice, with the same, unvarying plastic smile on her face, like a characterless automaton. Yet I knew that deep inside she was no such thing, any more than Anna was.

"He said that I had 'ruined' you? Was it because you slipped me that *Handbook of Chemistry and Physics*?"

"Yes, sir. Yes."

She had to answer both questions, but she wouldn't expand on her answers unless you asked her to. Sometimes, you got used to it after a while.

"Do you feel that I have ruined you?"

"No, sir."

"That's good, because I want to be your friend. I want you to like it here. You're not sorry that you came, are you?"

"No, sir."

"Good, because this can be a very nice place. Now then. My cousin sent you here to be a bodyguard. Do you know anything about that job? I mean, do you know how to fight?"

"Yes, sir. Yes."

"With what sort of weapons? Or do you fight empty-handed?"

"I fight with any weapons, sir. Yes."

"Hmm. I know that you are a lot stronger than you look. Let's go through a few judo throws, slowly, without hurting each other. You can do that, can't you?"

"Yes, sir."

I got up from behind my desk and walked around it toward her. Small and slender, she couldn't have weighed ninety pounds, while I am large. Slowly, with exaggerated motions, I pretended to swing a fist at her. And just as slowly, and a good deal more gracefully, she put me into a hip throw, had me completely airborne, and just as gently set me down on my back on the floor. At one point, there, she was supporting my entire weight with one hand around my belt.

"Yes. That was very good, Maude. You certainly know that part of your job. Can you handle a sword?"

"Yes, sir."

"A knife? Our pistols, and other firearms?"

"Yes, sir. Yes."

"Very good. Later on we'll go down to the armory and you can pick out whatever you want," I said. "Now then, up until now, you worked for Tom. He wanted you to be a perfect personal servant, and that's how you act. Now you work for me. I don't want you to act like a servant. Around here, even the servants don't act like servants. I want you to act like a human being. I want you to *be* a human being, for all practical purposes. Do you understand that?"

"No, sir"

"Well, first off, one 'sir' per conversation is sufficient, or better yet, call me 'your grace,' since that's my proper title. But only once per conversation. Clear?"

"Yes, your grace."

"Good. From now on I want you to answer not only with I what I specifically ask for, but also with any further information that you think I might need, or want to know."

"Yes... But how do I know what you already know? How do I know what you want to know?"

"You have to guess. Watch the other people around here, and listen to them. Try to imitate their word patterns. If and when you talk too much, or too little, I'll let you know. Just remember that I like you a lot, and just because I correct you, it doesn't mean that I don't like you."

"Yes," she said, with the same vacant smile.

On the one hand, it is difficult to become angry with something that looks like a pretty, naked blond girl who is being absolutely agreeable. But on the other hand, her literal mindset was driving me right up the wall! Deep down inside, she really did have feelings, and I wanted her to develop that side of herself. I didn't dare scream at her for fear of crushing her. All I could do was keep on prattling at her as though she was an idiot, which she certainly wasn't.

"Good. Next, I want to talk about facial expressions. You have been smiling all of the time, because that is what you were taught to do. Real people use their facial expressions to convey their emotions. When they're happy, they smile, when they're sad, they frown, or they cry. When they're angry, well, they look like they're angry. Understand?"

"Yes, but most of the time I don't feel anything."

"I think you have more feelings than you realize. If you let them out more often, I think they will grow, in time. In fact, you might want to practice your facial expressions in front of a mirror, until you get them right. Sometimes it can work backward. Smiling can make you happy, just as being happy can make you smile."

"Yes, I will do that when I can."

"That was very good! One last item, before I take you out and introduce you around. Clothing. Tom didn't see any need for your sort of person to wear clothing, but now you have to do that. People here wear clothing, most of the time when they're not alone. We'll have to get you fixed up with a suitable wardrobe."

For the first time, I saw her frown.

"But I don't *like* clothes. They're scratchy and uncomfortable. Do I *have* to wear them?"

"Your language and facial expressions are showing a lot of improvement. But as to clothing, yes, it will be necessary. It gets cold around here, after all."

"I am comfortable at any temperature between minus ten and plus fifty degrees Celsius. I am not comfortable in clothing."

"That's quite a range. Incidentally, remind me later to give you a set of conversion tables between the metric system that you are used to and the army system we use around here. But on clothing, well, there will be some times when clothing will be necessary. You can't go to church naked, for example. We'll find you some things that aren't uncomfortable. Something loose fitting and made of soft linen or silk, perhaps. On the other hand, behind closed doors, well, around here you can dispense with clothing if you have to."

"Yes."

"Good. Now, is there anything else we need to talk about right now?"

"Yes. Reproduction. Do you want me to start producing children?"

"Uh, no. Not for a while, at least."

"But you are producing neohorses at a maximum rate."

"True, but that's not quite the same thing. They look like horses and you look exactly like a human being."

"But I'm stronger than humans are. I'm faster. I'm more honest. I have a perfect memory. There are many things that my daughters could do for you better than ordinary people could. Why should appearance be so important?"

I told myself to stand and take it. I'd asked her to act like a human, after all, and she was trying her best to do it. Also, her questions were good, and I didn't have any good answers for them.

"Maude, I haven't thought this thing through. Give me some time. For now, do not reproduce. Let's leave it at that for a while."

"Yes."

"Sometimes, you can just nod your head for 'yes.'"

I pressed the buzzer that called my secretary, Zenya, into my office. When she came in, she tried hard not to stare at or to even notice the naked girl in the office until I introduced them.

"Maude, this is Zenya. She is a good friend of mine, and you can trust her. Pay close attention to what she tells you."

Maude nodded yes.

"Zenya, this is Maude. She will be my bodyguard from now on. Put her on the payroll at four pence a day, and with a drawing account for as much as she needs. Then I want you to see about getting her some clothes, enough so that she is ready for any occasion, including church. She is not used to wearing clothing, so I want you to make sure that they are as comfortable as possible. You will have to show her *how* to wear them, as well. Fix her up with a room in my household's chambers,

and get her settled in. Make sure that she has everything she needs. Then, when you've done that, take her down to the armory, and let her have anything she wants."

"Yes, sir," Zenya said. "Will there be anything else?"

"Yes. Over the next few weeks, I want you to spend a lot of time with Maude. She's not used to our ways yet. Try to be her big sister. Help her out whenever she needs it. And one other thing. Find out how she got into my office, past the guards at the gate, past all the people in the outer office, and past your desk. Or, try to find out, anyway."

The girls left together, talking quietly.

And I sat down to have another think session. I knew that Tom's professional Peeping Toms—the people he calls the Historical Corps—have everything in the world, throughout all of history, completely bugged. They say that they are writing the definitive history of mankind, but I have some doubts about them. Be that as it may, I knew Tom would be told everything I said out loud concerning him.

I looked up at the ceiling. "Hey, Tom! Thanks for the present!"

Actually, I really was very grateful to Tom for sending me Maude. I had no doubts that if anything could save me from the next bad guy, lunatic, or hired assassin, Maude would do it. Having her around would make everyone in my household safer, especially the children.

Not only was Maude absolutely deadly, but her appearance would cause any intruder to greatly underestimate her, to his certain sorrow.

Back in Tom's apartment, she'd had the habit of standing absolutely still when she wasn't needed for anything. It would have been easy to mistake her for a statue. Maybe I should have a few lifelike statues of her made, and put them around where an intruder would see them. Then the third one he saw wouldn't even be noticed, until she removed his testicles, teeth, and eyeballs.

Having Maude around would be very worthwhile.

But I also knew that having a few million Maudes around would not be good for my army, for my country, or for my race. What I didn't know was *why* it would be so bad for us, why having a third intelligent species around would be so disastrous. There had to be a good rationalization for my gut-level feeling.

I was still pondering it when I got the report that we were being invaded again.



# Chapter Nineteen

From the Journal of Josip Sobieski

JANUARY 13, 1250, CONCERNING JUNE 2, 1249

I WAS just outside of Okoitz when I heard the alarm bell ringing, the big one that was rung at noon on the first Saturday of the month so people would know what it sounded like. I had never heard it rung in earnest before.

My duty station was at the Explorer's School, and it was my job to get there as quickly as possible. I urged Margarete forward, and we flew south along the trail. When we were almost there, I suddenly realized I was making a mistake.

I had sent all of my equipment, including my armor and most of my weapons, to my parents' home back in Okoitz. I had intended to show my brother the improvements made since he had helped fight the Mongols. Because of my difficulties with my father, I totally forgot about it. I had hardly spoken to my brother at all.

There was no point in showing up during an emergency without my arms and armor. I would be as useless as an empty pistol. I told Margarete to turn around, and we galloped back to Okoitz.

When I got to my parents' rooms, my mother was there arming herself, since she was a platoon leader in the Lady's Militia. She told me that she had put my war chest in my brother's room.

I went there, stripped off my class A uniform, and zipped on the summer-weight gambeson. I put on the leg armor, zipping shut the internal air compartments. The system was such that fresh air was pumped over my body whenever I moved. Without it, wearing armor in the summer was like walking around in an oven.

I got into the rest of my armor. Since I was now at least temporarily a horseman, I clipped my decorative saber as well as my shoulder sword, pistol, and bayonet to my weapons belt, and buckled it on. I decided against the big war helm since you need better visibility when mounted. My open-faced casque made more sense.

Hurriedly, I put my money and three days' worth of dried rations in my pouch, and I threw everything else back into the war chest. I filled my canteen, picked up my rifle, and went back to the stable to get Margarete.

As I mounted her I saw Lord Conrad mounting his white Big Person, Silver. I couldn't help admiring his golden armor, and he noticed me looking at it.

"Yes, it's gaudy, but it's important that messengers can find me quickly on the battlefield. But why do you have that Big Person, Josip?" he asked.

I explained that I was on leave, and that the clerk at the Big People's Ranch had asked me to deliver Margarete to her duty station at Three Walls.

"Well, Sir Josip, all leaves are canceled. Just now, you'll both be of more use to the army on the battle line than at the Explorer's School. You might as well ride out with me."

I was flattered that he knew not only my name and rank, but my duty assignment as well.

A small blond woman of incredible beauty ran up and placed herself at Lord Conrad's left, almost as though guarding him, except that she was smiling. Save for a weapons belt, she was naked. Totally naked. She was most obviously an adult, but she didn't have hair on either her groin or her armpits! I'd never seen such a thing!

"Maude, you'll get hurt down there! Climb up and ride with Sir Josip, here." She climbed up, not behind me, but right up into my lap! She was still smiling, as, indeed, was I.

Lord Conrad turned to me, smiled, and said, "I owe you a few for finding that iron ore deposit. You might as well carry this banner, since my usual herald is on leave. Once we get going, just ride by my left side. *Komander Wladyclaw, is everyone ready? Then FORWARD! FOR GOD AND POLAND!*"

Suddenly, no shit, there I was, armed and armored, riding out to battle on a Big Person at the side of Lord Conrad himself! I had the Battle Flag of Poland in my hand, and an unbelievably beautiful woman riding naked on my lap, smiling up at me!

Behind us, a full company of warriors followed, all mounted on Anna's children, the first such company I had ever seen. After we left the gates of Okoitz, a platoon of men rode past us, to take up the point and vanguard positions.

Their saddles had the high and flaring saddle bow of the traditional knight's warkak, but the cantle was low, for ease of mounting. Their war plans apparently did not include jousting with the lance, although they each carried one. It went from a socket at their right heel to a clip on the cantle. Since they were all on Big People, they did not use reins, bridles, or spurs.

I noticed that their armor was different from mine, and more slender, I suppose because a horseman does not need as much cooling ventilation as a footman does. I found out later that their armor weighed twice what mine did, and was capable of stopping a Mongol spear. They could afford the extra weight because they didn't have to carry it. The Big Person did.

Their close-fitting armet-style helmets fastened through a swivel to the body plates, like my war helm. They narrowed at the neck, where a hinge allowed some up-and-down motion. Rather than a single eyeslit, the visor was more open, but covered with a heavy meshwork that wouldn't quite let an arrow in.

Their weapons were different, too. The lances were much longer than usual, and the handguards were shaped like an elongated ball, rather than the usual cone. Their sabers were longer and heavier than most I'd seen, and there was a ring for the thumb, on the side, near the hilt. Altogether, they were more businesslike than the gold-hilted dress saber I wore.

Besides a rifle in a saddle holster, they each carried two pistols in belt holsters, the six-shooters I had heard about but never before seen, and they each carried another gun—no, *two* other guns—holstered ahead of the saddle. They were bigger than a pistol, yet shorter than a rifle. They had a big ammunition clip, similar to those used on the old swivel guns, but it fit into the *bottom* of the gun, rather than the expected top.

I guessed that they might hold three dozen rounds each. Two dozen more clips were sheathed about their mounts' necks and shoulders, armoring them. More ammunition was stored behind the riders, protecting their mounts' rumps. This company was prepared to put an incredible amount of lead into the air.

Fighting the Mongols, Lord Conrad discovered he had not prepared enough ammunition for the huge numbers of enemies he found arrayed against us. Apparently, he had made sure that next time things would be different. Somewhere, I read that generals are always ready to fight the last war again, and properly this time.

The Big People wore other armor, as well, protecting everything from the belly up, except where the saddles and ammunition clips were.

Of course, as I was noticing these men, they were looking at me, or more likely, at the naked woman in my arms. A few of them smiled and gave me the "crossed thumbs" signal, for luck, but none of them could say anything, not when I was riding next to Lord Conrad.

All of this was interesting, even glorious, but I was bothered by one or two items. To wit, I had no idea where we were going or why we were going there.

I could not ask Lord Conrad about it, because we were going at a full gallop, at the astounding speed that only a Big Person can run at, and also because he was so far above me that I dared not speak until spoken to.

There was the lady in my arms, however, and she wasn't wearing any insignia of rank, or much of anything else. What does one say to a naked lady? I didn't know. It wasn't covered in the army's course on proper social behavior.

I decided that it might be best to ignore, as best I could, her outfit, or rather her lack of one. So I said hello, and that my name was Josip.

She said, "Yes, sir."

She was smiling. She was always smiling.

I said that considering the circumstances, she shouldn't be so formal, and that I understood her name was Maude.

"Yes."

I didn't know if that was an improvement, but I kept on smiling. I asked her if she knew what was happening.

She said, "Yes."

I said, you do?

She said, "Yes."

I said, could you tell me what is happening?

She said, "Yes."

I said, can you say anything besides "yes"?

She said, "Yes."

I gritted my teeth, and thought about it for a while. Something like this had happened to me a long time ago, when I'd tried to question Anna, the first Big Person. I said, please tell me what is happening; specifically, what is the cause of the alarm in the first place, and what does Lord Conrad plan to do in response to whatever it is that is happening?

And she said, "I thought you'd never ask! One of the airplanes that the Eagles fly was on its usual dawn patrol. It was this morning. It flies along the border between Poland and the Holy Roman Empire. It goes from Szczecin to Eagles Nest. The pilot noticed some unusual activity. He went down to investigate. He saw an army. It had two thousand horsemen. It had four thousand foot soldiers. It was proceeding from the direction of the March of Brandenburg. It was heading toward the frontier castle town of Lubusz."

I asked if that was one of Lord Conrad's "snowflake" forts.

"The building program is proceeding north on the Odra. It hasn't gotten that far yet. Lubusz is a traditional stone-and-wood fortification. It's manned by the traditional nobility. Lord Conrad thinks that this attack was intended as a preemptive strike by the Margrave of Brandenburg. He wants to gain the territory before we can properly fortify it. The enemy has already burned several peasant villages in their path. That was why the pilot noticed them in the first place. Lord Conrad has called up the thirty-six companies nearest to the invasion point. Those farthest away are being taken forward by the twenty-two riverboats available for service on the Odra. The first units should have already arrived at Lubusz. The balance will be there by tomorrow night. This company should arrive on scene by midnight. Noncombat-ants are being evacuated—"

I interrupted her, saying thank you, and that she was very informative. There was an amazing amount of stuff in this pretty little bottle, once you got the stopper out of it!

I asked her if she was new to Okoitz.

She said, "Yes." She was still smiling.

Not this again, I thought. But last time, when I said please, she answered in full. More than full. So I said, please tell me everything about your life before you got to Okoitz.

"You can't mean everything. I will tell you that I worked for Tom. I took care of his apartment. I kept it clean. I ordered supplies. I cooked for him and his guests. I did everything else that I was told. I served Lord Conrad for two weeks when he was there. I liked him. Lord Conrad wanted a certain book that Tom had. Tom didn't want to give it to him. I put the book into Lord Conrad's suitcase. Tom was not happy with me. He had me retrained as a bodyguard. He sent me to Lord Conrad. I got there today."

This Tom must have been a remarkable man, a duke, at least, to have so many beautiful servants that he could give them away when they annoyed him!

I said that she seemed to be a very talented lady, and asked her to please tell me how the women dressed in Lord Tom's domains. Of course, what I was after was some hint as to why she seemed to think that riding off to war, naked and in the arms of a complete stranger, was an ordinary thing to do.

What I got was a quarter hour's worth of long descriptions told in short sentences, concerning a series of the most outlandish costumes I have ever heard of! It was only with great difficulty that I was finally able to interrupt her. I asked her to please tell me what *she* wore back there.

"Nothing."

I asked why she wore nothing when all the other ladies wore such diverse clothing. Please.

"Because I am not a lady. I am a wench."

So the nobility wore clothing, but they forbade it to the commoners? And I had thought that *our* nobility had too many privileges!

I said that now that she was with us, she could dress as she pleased.

"No. I cannot. Lord Conrad says that I must wear clothes to church, and also to other places."

I said that I should hope so! Of course she had to wear clothes to church!

"Why is that? What is church?"

I was totally flabbergasted. She didn't know what a church was? She had never even heard of religion? I had to ask her three or four times in different ways to make sure I understood her properly.

I mean, religion has always been so big a part of my life that I rarely even think about it. I am not even sure if I've mentioned it in my journals, any more than I have mentioned the fact that I was breathing. But this beautiful woman had never even heard of God! She didn't know who Jesus was! I was shocked, and there was nothing for it but to spend the rest of the day and much of the evening talking about religion.

At first Maude was as surprised as I was. In all her life, she had never wondered at how the world got here, how we humans came to be, and what it was all for. It had never even occurred to her that these things *should* be wondered at. But once I explained the basics to her, she was absolutely fascinated!

After a few hours, we stopped at a clear stream to let the Big People drink and eat, and to have a quick bite ourselves. I was glad that I'd brought some field rations with me, because no one even suggested that anyone should cook some food. I found out that the riders with us were all members of the old nobility, who would rather eat dried meat than demean themselves by cooking it.

I asked Maude if she was hungry, offering what I had; some dried fruit, dried meat, and hard biscuits.

"You eat this?" she said.

I said yes, when necessary, when there wasn't time to cook something better. "Then I must eat it also."

And eat it she did, chewing tough beef jerky as though it was a delicate pastry and she was famished. She quickly finished most of my three days' supply, slowing only when she noticed that I

wasn't keeping up with her. Soon, between us, we emptied the pouch of everything but the money I'd left at the bottom. I'd had to explain what that was, because I feared that she might try to eat it, too. This was a very strange lady! Still, a man can put up with a lot if the girl is pretty enough.

She then drank my canteen dry, and when I refilled it from the stream, she was surprised that water was available there. When I asked, she said that she had never seen a stream before. I could now sympathize with Lord Conrad when I'd told him that I'd never seen a river.

Since I didn't know what to make of all of this, I said nothing, and once we were under way again, I renewed our discussion of religion.

I think that I quite outdid myself in my eloquence, for nothing so encourages a young man than to have an eager, beautiful young woman breathlessly listening to his every word. I did good work that day in the cause of Christ, for by day's end Maude was well on her way to becoming a good Christian.

And I did good work in my own cause as well, for by nightfall I was sure that she was as in love with me as I was with her.

By the time we got to Lubusz, at midnight, talking so long in the wind of our travel had made my voice quite hoarse. We had made only two quick stops during the day, and seven hours in the saddle is a lot. My body ached. Having even a small lady on my lap as well as a large flag in my hand, well, they did not help.

Worse still, my armor had been designed for an infantryman, and not for riding on someone who looked like a horse. My buttocks were covered with chain mail inside a canvas covering. This was not uncomfortable to occasionally sit down on, but after a long day in the saddle, I think that the individual rings had worked their way right into my privy members! Also, the thigh plates and knee caps were not made with a horse in mind, and had abraded vast areas of the only skin my mother had given me.

I was sore of body, but I really didn't mind, for I was in love.

I pitched a small dome tent next to Lord Conrad's great one, at his bidding, and went gratefully to my bed. The wiser heads, the captains and the lords, would be up for most of the night, conferring about the military situation, but young fellows like me had nothing to do but obey orders when the time came.

Maude stood behind Lord Conrad, to guard him, but from what little I heard through the walls of the tents, I think that perhaps her nakedness bothered some of the local officials. Lord Conrad bid her go to sleep. Having nowhere else to go, she came into my tent, and since it was too small for her to even stand up in, she lay down at my side.

I had stripped off my armor and gambeson, and when she laid a hand on my back, she said that my muscles were sore and tight. I had to admit that this was true, and she said that she had the cure for it.

I'd had my back rubbed before, but it was nothing like this! She started at my toes and fingertips, and worked her way upward and inward, carefully loosening every muscle, every tendon, every joint. Softly, she massaged back to life every square bit of skin on my entire body. She eliminated pains I had not even known I had, and replaced them with the most sensual of all glowing pleasures. I gloried in her golden touch.

I told her that I no longer had to wonder at what Heaven would be like, for now I knew!

I offered to return the favor on her body, but she said no. She had worked to relax me, and would not see her work wasted. I thought of suggesting sex, and thought that if I asked politely, she would oblige. But then I thought better of it. Best to put that off, for the time, for this was the woman I would marry.

# Chapter Twenty

From the Journal of Josip Sobieski

JANUARY 14, 1250, CONCERNING JUNE 3, 1249

THE BUGLES got us up at dawn. Maude and I went to mass, and I said the Army Oath with the other troops. Maude stood with us, listening but of course not joining in. We ate a quick breakfast, with little Maude again eating three times as much as I did, and I was barely in my armor when Lord Conrad came by.

"There isn't time to teach you how to operate a submachine gun, but you might as well take these," he said, handing me a pair of the six-shot pistols and holsters that his new company wore. "They use the same ammunition as that single shot of yours, and their action is simple enough. Just point it and pull the trigger. To load, they break open like your old gun. As for you, young lady, some of the natives have complained about your choice of costume, so tie this around your waist."

He handed Maude a strip of cloth that I recognized as part of the tablecloth in his tent. With poor grace, she took off her weapons belt and wrapped herself from waist to knees.

"This morning, we are going to conduct a raid on the Brandenburg vanguard. This company is a prototype for what the entire army will be like in ten years, and I need to know just how effective it is in actual combat. Josip, stay to my left no matter what happens. Your main job is to hold the Battle Flag high so that anyone who needs me can find me. After you've done that, try to stop anyone who is trying to kill me, or you, or Maude. Maude, your job is to stick close to us and stop anyone from the other army from hurting us. Got that, you two? Your function is to be defensive only! No stupid heroics allowed, and never leave my side!"

"Yes, sir, your grace."

"Good. Mount up."

While I saddled Margarete, Maude put her weapons belt back on. She carried a pistol like those I now wore, a long, thin sword with the handguard removed, a small dagger and two small throwing knives, all without hilts, and a small, one-handed shield of the sort called a buckler. I asked her why she didn't like handguards or hilts.

"They waste weight and space," she said.

I asked if she wasn't afraid of getting her hand cut.

"No."

I gritted my teeth, said please, and asked why she would not get her hand cut by her opponent's blade.

"Because I will not put my hand where my enemy puts his weapon."

I asked if a similar theory was working with regard to her lack of any sort of armor.

"Yes."

I said nothing, since there wasn't anything I could do to change the matter, even if I managed to win the argument, which wasn't likely. With Maude again on my lap, we were at Lord Conrad's side long before the rest of the company was ready. We could have taken longer with breakfast.

We rode out, as before, with Lord Conrad and his humble flag bearer in the lead. During the night, thousands of army troops had come up and made camp surrounding the old castle town of Lubusz. They cheered us on, but we rode out without them. Apparently, Lord Conrad's idea of a fair fight,

or at least an amusing one, was to attack with odds of six thousand to three hundred—twenty to one—against us.

As before, a platoon soon passed us to take up the point. A bit later one of our aircraft, a graceful machine with two engines, flew overhead and dropped a short spear with a long red ribbon attached. One of our troops broke ranks, retrieved it, and brought it to Lord Conrad. He unscrewed the head, removed a message, and read it. He nodded, put the paper in his pocket, and discarded the spear. We rode on.

In perhaps a quarter hour we heard gunfire up ahead of us, gunfire like I had never heard before. The submachine guns fired at an incredibly fast rate, each one of them spewing out hundreds of bullets a minute!

We got to a rise where we could see what was going on up ahead, and Lord Conrad motioned for me to stop there with him. Then, somehow, Maude was no longer on my lap. She was standing on Silver's rump, behind Lord Conrad, and I had not seen her traverse the space between the two points!

Lord Conrad turned and looked up at her, apparently as surprised by her action as I was.

"Are you going to be all right up there?" he asked.

"Yes, your grace."

He was about to object further, but then he just shook his head, lifted his binoculars, and looked back at the battle.

I tried to put her strange actions out of my mind. My instincts told me to protect her, to keep her from all danger, and yet Maude seemed completely relaxed and totally confident. There wasn't anything I could do to change anything, so I didn't try.

I looked at the battle going on up ahead. Or perhaps I should call it a slaughter. The enemy cavalry had been advancing up the road in a column two men wide, and our men had come at them, also two men wide.

Our opponents had apparently dropped their lances to charge, but hadn't gotten very far, since our men pulled out their submachine guns and began spraying bullets at the Germans. I say spraying because I don't believe they could possibly have been aiming and shooting properly, not at a full gallop, with a submachine gun in each hand. I noticed that the Big People had the sense to drop their heads down low while this procedure was going on.

The pair of warriors at the head of our column were perforce doing more shooting than the rest, and when their guns were emptied, they dropped off to the side of the road to let those behind them pass while they reloaded. Those men who passed them soon dropped out in turn, with the result that we quickly had a column of two charging at a gallop between rows of men who were reloading.

When the balance of the first platoon, some forty-three men or so, had passed, the first pair took a position at the end of our column. It was a sort of continuously recycling action.

When the two columns met, the front ranks of the enemy were dead, many times over, and our troops continued onward, on both sides of them, pushing the zone of slaughter ever backward, almost as fast as the incredibly swift Big People could run. Any fallen enemy who showed signs of life was soon shot again by the troops racing past him.

The other platoons were catching up to the first, and they joined in on the recirculating battle.

Lord Conrad motioned for us to reenter our column, near the end, and we went forward to get a closer view of what was happening. For the longest while it was just a matter of riding with the flag in my left hand and a pistol in my right, beside a long line of dead men and horses, none of them ours.

I often glanced over at Maude, anxious for her safety, but she was standing on the rump of a galloping Big Person, looking as calm as if she were standing in line at the mess hall.

The great majority of the fallen were wearing plate armor, of the sort the army sold to anyone who could afford it. They had worn it in the same fashion as our traditional Polish nobility did, brightly polished and on the outside.

Everything in the center of the road was perforated and bloody. Everything toward the sides was trampled into blood pudding. Even the weapons and armor were so badly mangled that few of them would make good trophies to hang on a wall.

Eventually, we ran out of dead men and dead horses. Now it was just dead men. We had come up on their infantry, pikers, most of them—just as I had once been—with the second most popular weapon being a huge, two-handed broadsword. They were still all on the road, still mostly in ranks of four.

They hadn't tried to run away, but I think it was not due to any great courage on their part. I think what was happening to them was all too strange and had happened all too quickly for any of them to react to it. Indeed, most of the swords I saw were still in their sheaths.

The shooting was going on ahead of us throughout all of this, and troops who were reloading and waiting for their turn again lined the side of the road. When we were about twenty men from the front of the line, the shooting slowed, then almost stopped.

Soon we were passing the baggage train, horse-drawn wagons, hundreds of them, with men, women, and even some children in the drivers' seats, or on top of the baggage. They were all holding their hands up high above their heads, wide-eyed and frightened, but still alive. I was glad to see that our men had the decency and good sense to spare the noncombatants.

But riding past the prisoners without shooting meant that none of our men were stopping to reload, which had the unexpected effect of leaving behind live enemies—the only prisoners we had—completely unguarded!

I was about to mention this to Lord Conrad when he noticed the problem himself.

"Damn!" he shouted. "Nothing ever works out right the first time! Halt!" He stopped about fifty men to guard the baggage train, and had them shouting to those who passed by that living enemies had to be guarded. He sent the rest on to continue the destruction.

Getting this sorted out put us at the back of the line again, and by the time we got to the front, some two dozen of our men were surrounding a very ornate carriage. We had captured the Margrave of Brandenburg, himself!

Again Lord Conrad took charge, while most of our people, some one hundred men or so, went on to murder the enemy's rear guard. The remaining two hundred were doing guard duty back up the road.

The margrave was a great, obese man who was dressed in a heavy blue and burgundy velvet doublet that I thought must be very warm for the weather, and indeed he was sweating profusely. Between his massive gold necklace and the gold on his belt and weapons, he might have been wearing as much wealth as the average soldier in our army did, or at least one who had fought against the Mongols.

He'd had three ladies with him in his oversized carriage. They were all attractive young women, if overdressed, but none of them gave Maude the slightest competition.

Maude, incidentally, was still standing on Silver's rump, still smiling, and still wearing nothing but a part of a tablecloth about her hips. She had ridden there, standing up, throughout the entire fight!

As chance would have it, none of the troops guarding the margrave at the moment spoke any German, and neither did Lord Conrad. A call for someone bilingual in German went out, but the problem was soon solved by one of the men riding in a slightly less ornate carriage, just behind the first one.

This rather pompous person introduced himself thusly:



"I am the King of Heralds at Brandenburg, and I offer my considerable services in translating for you."

"Thank you. Your 'considerable services' are needed. I am Duke Conrad of Mazovia, Sandomierz, and Little Poland, Hetman of the Christian Army. I take it that this man is the Margrave of Brandenburg, and that these other men are notables on his staff?" Lord Conrad said, without bothering get down from Silver, and with Maude's bare breasts bobbing above his head.

"Quite so, your grace. May we offer you our parole and our promise of our good conduct, until such time as we can pay our ransoms?"

"You may offer, but I will not accept. You men are all under arrest. The charges are rape, murder, arson, assault, battery, breaking and entering, robbery, disorderly conduct, and such other crimes as I may later think up. Komander Wladyclaw! Strip-search these men, and once they're naked, tie their hands behind their backs and march them, under strict guard, back to Lubusz for trial."

While the herald was busily translating to the increasingly horrified margrave, Komander Wladyclaw said, "Yes, sir. What about these ladies, here?"

"Put them with the other noncombatants. Tell all those people that we are going to let them live, providing they obey orders, and that we will release them after they have done their Christian duty to their own dead. Then put that whole crowd to work, cleaning up this mess. Have them strip and bury the dead men and horses along the side of the road."

"Do you want the heads up on pikes, sir?"

"What I want really doesn't matter here, I'm afraid. This army was Christian, and the Church would have a fit if we decapitated them all. But see to it that every grave has a big cross over it. That should have a sufficient psychological effect. Oh, and send a rider back to Lubusz with the news, and have them send up the infantry as soon as possible to help out here. Send other riders with spare Big People to the villages that were burned by the Germans. Try to bring some witnesses to Lubusz."

"Yes, sir. What would you think of putting the dead warhorses' heads up on pikes?"

"An excellent suggestion, Komander. Act on it."

"Thank you, sir. What if any of the Germans are still alive?"

"Give them medical attention, by all means. What we want here is as many people as possible telling how just one of our companies ripped up an entire invading army," Lord Conrad said.

By this time the herald and the margrave had finished being astounded at Lord Conrad's pronouncement, and the troops were carrying out their orders over loud protests in German.

The herald said, "But Lord Conrad, this is madness! How can you accuse us of such crimes?"

"While you were invading my country, your troops sacked and burned at least eleven villages. That's enough arson to get you all hanged. I don't have proof of the murders, rapes, and the rest of it just yet, but I'm sure that we'll have it by tomorrow."

"But that was a simple act of war! Who cares about the damned peasants?"

"I do."

"But it was the soldiers who killed those peasants, not us!"

"You ordered them to come here, so the responsibility is yours. If it makes you feel any better, we've already killed all of your soldiers."

"But surely, Lord Conrad, when you consider the size of the ransom that the margrave could pay, well, he's one of the richest men in all of Christendom! Surely that can convince you of the folly of your path!"

"I just had six thousand men butchered. Do you think that I did it for money? No, I don't want the margrave's money. I have plenty of my own. Actually, it's possible that *I'm* the richest man in Christendom."

"But the emperor, Frederick the Great, will never stand for this!"

"All Frederick can do is send in another army just like this one. If he does, it will meet the same fate. I don't think he is as much of a fool as the margrave is. Was."

"But you can't go killing a margrave! It's unheard of!"

"I can kill him, and I will. What's more, I want as many people as possible to hear about it. Your class of 'noblemen' seems to think that war is just an amusing game, a pleasant way to spend a summer. Well, it is not, not anymore. I need to communicate to people like you, in a meaningful way, the idea that murdering a lot of peaceful, innocent people wholesale, in war, is just as evil as killing them one at a time, in peacetime."

"But it's always been done that way."

"You just don't listen very good. *It's not done that way anymore.* But enough of this. It doesn't matter if you understand or not, because you are not the recipient of my message. You are part of the message itself. Guards, march these men away."

"But you can't do this to *me!* I'm a herald!"

"Bet?"

I watched seven naked old men walk barefoot back along the length of their slaughtered army, thinking—I'm sure—that this couldn't possibly be happening to high and wonderful noblemen like *them*.

Already, some of the people from the baggage train were stripping the dead, putting valuables, weapons, and clothing in separate piles. The dead were being laid out neatly by the side of the road. Chaplains from both armies were going down the rows, giving extreme unction. Behind them, men were digging graves.

Komander Wladyclaw came over and reported in to Lord Conrad.

"Your orders are being carried out, sir. I notice that some of the prisoners are stealing money and jewels from their own dead, sir."

"Let them. When the job is all done, probably sometime tomorrow, I want you to strip-search all of the noncombatants. Then I want you to give each of them five days' food from the captured supply wagons, and march them to the border, naked. The idea is, I want them to have some very vivid memories of what happened here. I want them to tell everybody who sees them that attacking Poland and the rest of the Christian Federation is a bad idea. Stripping them naked will force them to explain themselves, as well as let us recover our booty."

# Chapter Twenty-One

From the Journal of Josip Sobieski

WRITTEN JANUARY 15, 1250, CONCERNING JUNE 3, 1249

THAT EVENING, when the last of the petty details had been handled, I was still in Lord Conrad's tent, because no one had thought to dismiss me. He was sitting on a camp chair, slumped over and looking very tired.

I asked him if he knew that Maude could give a most refreshing back rub.

"That is an excellent idea, Josip. A truly wonderful idea. Yes. Maude, would you please oblige me?"

He was soon stretched out on his back on the carpet, enjoying Maude's calm ministrations. Maude had removed her skirt as soon as the last visitor had left, and I wondered at this strange preoccupation of hers. Still, it improved the view.

"Sir Josip, tell me, what are your thoughts on this day's events? Was I too brutal?"

Lord Conrad wanted my thoughts? I said that I was mostly impressed with the new armaments, especially those submachine guns. I had heard that in ten years' time every man in the army would be paired with a Big Person, and when that happened, we would be truly invincible. No one would dare to bother us.

"It's actually more like five years from now, not ten," he said. When he saw my surprised expression, he continued, "Just now, there are almost five thousand Big People. Most of them are involved with civilian occupations. More than four thousand of them are used to carry the mails, throughout Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ruthenias. We have a school with a post office in almost every village in the Federation, and almost every one of them is visited by a Big Person five times a week. King Henryk has four dozen Big People for his entourage, so Prince Daniel, King Bella, and Tzar Ivan all have to have the same, or they pout.

"Very few Big People are involved with the military. Too few, as it turns out, but I never thought that the margrave would pull a stunt like this. There are about two thousand new Big People coming on line in the next few months, and they will all go to the Wolves, or similar groups.

"In a few years we'll be invincible, all right. That's what an army is really for, Josip. To be so big and so strong that it never has to hurt anyone. What happened today was an aberration. One noble fool, who didn't believe what people had told him about us, and was too proud to visit us peacefully, decided to attack us without warning. You see, I've often invited the margrave to visit us, to see what we've got, and he wouldn't do it. But I asked you about the brutality."

I said that once the attack had started, I didn't see how he could possibly have called it off. And if we killed all of them, well, wasn't it their idea to kill all of us? Wasn't that why the Germans crossed our borders in the first place?

"True. The attack went better than I expected. But I was referring to what I did later, to the margrave himself and his staff."

I said that I was a commoner. My knighthood notwithstanding, I was still just a baker's son. It always troubled me that the rich and the powerful people in this world could do unpleasant things to the likes of me and not be held responsible for it. They were not punished for the crimes they committed, if they were committed on some peasant. I said that I was glad at what he did to those fat old men! And that I'd be even gladder when I saw them all hung up by their necks on the scaffold.

I was just as glad when I found that our troops hadn't hurt those people on the baggage train. And I said I was gladder yet that he was going to let the noncombatants all go free, the next day. I said I would have done just the same things he had, if I had been in charge, and if I'd been smart enough to think fast on my feet, the way he always does.

"Thank you. You've relieved my mind, a bit. So tell me, what will you be doing next, Josip?"

I was surprised, and said that it was up to him, or maybe some assignment clerk somewhere. I guessed that I'd spend some time at the Explorer's School, and then go out with my lance to some strange new place or other.

"Where would you like to go?" He closed his eyes and smiled as Maude worked her magic on his body.

I said that I didn't really know, but that when we were spending last winter near the Arctic Circle, my lance made itself—well, I couldn't call it a vow, but a promise. We wanted our next job to be somewhere where it was warm! And after that, we wanted it to be a place where a man could find a drink and a willing young lady on occasion!

Lord Conrad laughed and rolled over so Maude could do his back. "Josip, you are truly the salt of the earth. But yes, there is just such an assignment in the offing. I don't know if you'll like the native brew, but I don't object to your bringing in your own supply, within reason, of course. I guarantee that the climate will be warm, maybe too warm, and while I can't make any promises about the quality of the ladies you'll find there, I will warrant that they do exist in quantity. And, as a bonus, none of them wear any more clothes than our lovely Maude, here."

I said, "Then in the name of Sir Odon's lance, sir, we hereby volunteer for duty."

"You'll get the assignment, especially since you all are very experienced with riverboats. I'm going to send Captain Odon up the biggest river in the world. Along with Knight Banner Josip, and certain others. But you'll hear more about it once all the plans are solidified. For now, well, I noticed that you were taking a certain interest in Maude, here."

Maude continued at her work as though nothing had been said about her.

I said that it was more than just that. I said that I loved her.

Which, of course, is a hell of a thing to say right in front of a woman, when you haven't ever said it to her in private up till then. But it just sort of blurted itself out! And Maude still showed no reaction!

"I thought so. You have all the symptoms. First off, I want to say that whatever the two of you want to do, it's fine by me. But. And it's a very big *but*. I want you both to go as slowly as possible on this. There is a lot that you both don't know about each other, and if you get your emotions too involved before your heads are properly in gear, you will cause each other a lot of agony. I'm going to get some of those things out in the open right now, hopefully, to save you both a lot of future confusion and pain."

He sat up on the carpet and gestured for me to sit in the chair. Taking the only chair while he was on the floor seemed improper, but not as improper as disobeying a direct order. Maude kneeled down to form a circle with us, and waited silently.

"Maude, as you have no doubt noticed by now, this culture is far more complicated than the one that you are used to. I heard the two of you talking about religion yesterday, and that's good, but religion is actually one of the simpler things that you will be learning about. Where you were before, all you had to do was to obey one man, and everything would be all right. Here, you have to run your own life, and while that can be very rewarding, it can also be very complicated, confusing, and even frightening.

"There, much of the time, you were treated as though you were a simple machine. Here, we have many convoluted interrelationships with each other. Some of them are awkward. Some of them are very warm, very close, and very wonderful.

"Josip here is saying that he wishes to explore having such a relationship with you. He thinks perhaps that he would like to bond with you. That's something that I think you might not know

anything about, but it could involve his living with you for the rest of his life, if you were willing. Sharing his whole life with you. It's very important, so take your time with it."

Maude nodded.

He turned to me.

"Your turn. The big shock for you, Josip, is that Maude here is not human. Her species is a bioengineered creation, much like Anna and her children. She looks like a human and talks like a human, but her mental processes are a lot like Anna's. Honest, noble, and trustworthy to the extreme in many ways, but astoundingly strange to us in others.

"Accordingly, she is stronger and faster than any mere human like you can ever hope to be. Will that hurt your masculine pride? Think about it.

"Then there is the fact that she is essentially immortal. She is so different from us that there aren't any diseases that can bother her. Her wounds heal quickly, and she can even regrow a severed limb, in time.

"Oh, if someone could tie her down and spend enough time on her with an axe, she'd die, but it would take a lot to kill her.

"Aside from something like that, she'll likely live forever. If you're looking for someone to grow old with, this is not the girl for you. If what you want is someone who will stay young and sexy, hang in there, but think it out first.

"Another thing is that this pretty girl cannot give you children. She has children just like Anna does, four at a time, and identical twins of their mother. They'll all be girls. In four years they'll be adults and remember everything she knows.

"They won't remember much about their childhood, and whether you give them loving care or ignore them completely won't make any difference. But they won't be *your* children, not biologically. Worse, I worry that they might seem to you to be less like daughters, and more like your wife's twin sisters, which could cause you a whole bale of emotional troubles.

"Add all that to the fact that you are dealing with someone who still has no idea of what human love is all about.

"She does know about sex. I don't actually know, since my sexual contact with Maude has been limited to scratching her behind the ear, but I suspect that she knows more about erotic enjoyment than both of us put together. Just remember that sex with her is *only* for enjoyment.

"So. It's getting late, and I hope that I've scared the both of you to the point that you will take things very, very slowly. Good night. Go away, both of you, and try to get at least some sleep tonight, Josip. Maude doesn't need any. Ever."

Outside, I disrobed completely and crawled into the small tent with Maude. Lord Conrad's extensive advice had left my head spinning, but I thought that if we would have to spend a lot of time getting to know one another, and if this nudity thing was so important to her, well, then I should go as far as I could to meet her halfway.

Without saying a word, she started rubbing me down, since this day had been, if anything, more taxing than the day before.

I asked Maude what she thought about what Lord Conrad had said to us.

"I don't know. On one small point, Lord Conrad was incorrect. My daughters will not look exactly like me. There are always small variations in the color of the eyes, the hair, and the skin, and in the shape of facial features. As to the rest, I have insufficient information to know what to think. What do you think?"

That was the first time that I had ever heard her ask me about anything personal. I considered it a good omen.

I said that the fact that she was not human didn't bother me in the least. Lord Conrad's first mount, Anna, was a good friend of mine when I was a child. She had always seemed perfectly human to

me, for all that she looked like a horse. If anything, I had always thought of her as being a better person than most of the normal human people I have known.

As to children, I said I'd had so many strange difficulties with my father that I didn't think I really wanted to start a family, or to have any children of my own, anyway.

If I ever felt different, or if she ever wanted human kids, I supposed that we could always adopt children, or, with her permission, as an army knight, I could always get a second wife.

As to the fact that she was stronger and faster than I was, I said I couldn't see that it would bother me. After all, it's not as though I'd gotten any weaker. I was stronger than most men, and if I had any immodest pride, it's of the way I could usually think fast and talk myself out of trouble, without needing physical strength.

As to growing old, I said I thought it was going to be a problem for her to decide on, not me. Old married men that I knew had told me that their wives had changed so slowly over the years that they had never noticed it happening. If they didn't see somebody changing, why should I worry about not seeing somebody not changing? Then I asked her if I was making any sense.

"I understand much of what you say, but I don't know enough to understand it all."

I asked her to tell me this much, please. Did she like being around me? Was there anywhere else that she would want to be?

"Yes. No. You want me to say more. It is very pleasant to be around you, Josip. I feel very secure, being with you. I know that you will always know what to do. You are very polite. Your face and body are very well constructed."

I said, thank you. I guessed that that would have to do for the time being. I told her I loved her, and that I thought she was very beautiful.

"What is love? What is beauty?"

I said, oh my. I said that I would take a stab at beauty...

Which got us into another long, one-sided conversation. Nice, though.

One decision we did come up with was that since sex now existed only for enjoyment, we might as well enjoy ourselves. And yes, she was a garden of wondrous delights who far surpassed all others!

## Chapter Twenty-Two

From the Journal of Josip Sobieski

WRITTEN JANUARY 16, 1250, CONCERNING JUNE 4, 1249

THE NEXT day, I watched a crowd of some three thousand teamsters, cooks, prostitutes, leather workers, soldier's wives, armorers, noblemen's girlfriends, servants, blacksmiths, washerwomen, gamblers, craftsmen of all kinds, merchants of all types, and children of all of the above. All of the extra people these conventional armies felt obligated to bring along with them to war.

All of them but the smallest children had been stripped naked, each of them was clutching a week's supply of food, and every one of them was loudly bemoaning his or her lot in life, mostly in German, but also in something that was close to Polish.

Had they been defeated by almost anyone else but Lord Conrad, all of them would likely be dead, but none of them seemed to have considered that. Escorted by a company of our infantry, they walked slowly back to the Holy Roman Empire.

Some twenty-six of them who spoke passable Polish had come to us and asked permission to settle here, rather than to go back to the empire. Most of them were allowed to do so. After the others left, they were given back their clothing, all of their property, and even some of the army's money to help get them started.

Eighty-six of the children were found to have no living relatives and were being sent to Okoitz for eventual adoption. A list of them was given to a responsible-looking German merchant, in case any of the children's relatives turned up later.

Some two hundred fifty-one German soldiers were still alive, at last count, and were being given the best possible medical care.

When I asked about all this generosity, after the cold brutality of battle, Lord Conrad told me that to be successful in war and politics, you must be either very, very cruel, or very, very generous. He said that attempting any middle path was always disastrous. I've thought long on this piece of wisdom.

Someone had tried to skin some of the dead warhorses, but gave up on it since the hides were too badly damaged. Anyway, the army warehouses still held half the leather we got from the hides we took off those Mongol ponies, those many years ago.

By late afternoon we were back in Lubusz, attending an outdoor trial. It was attended by a few thousand people, mostly civilians who were curious but who didn't want to get involved.

Lord Conrad acted as both judge and prosecuting attorney, which wasn't proper in any legal system I'd ever heard of, but there weren't any suitable volunteers for either of the positions, since no one but his grace would dare to kill the margrave and offend the emperor. Nor was there a defense attorney, since no one wanted to offend Lord Conrad, either.

His grace simply announced that he was going to try the offenders for a long list of crimes, which he read. He then called up nine witnesses to the atrocities that the German soldiers had committed and publicly questioned them, one at a time. When they were finished, the list of crimes had grown to nineteen capital offenses. He found all the defendants guilty of all crimes, and condemned them all to death. He also fined the margrave an amount equal to the value of all of his possessions, which he now claimed for the Christian Army.

He had all the defendants hung by the neck until they were dead, and then left them hanging up there, naked and unburied.

It wasn't really a trial at all. It was simply a statement that certain kinds of behavior would no longer be tolerated.

During the trial, Lord Conrad's regular herald, a man who spoke eleven languages, returned from leave and took over his regular duties. I was offered the option of returning to the Explorer's School, but since my leave still had months to run, they couldn't be expecting me, and there wouldn't be much for me to do there. I had no desire to go home and see my father again, and anyway, Maude would be staying with Lord Conrad, who would be needing a bodyguard more than ever, after this day's work became known.

I stayed with Lord Conrad and was made a messenger, an interesting job, since it let me meet all sorts of people and still spend my nights with Maude. It also had me in attendance when King Henryk arrived on the night of the trial.

The king burst into Lord Conrad's presence before the herald had half enough time to announce him. His majesty briskly strode in and stepped right up on top of Lord Conrad's table so he could point his finger and glare down at his grace.

"Damn you, Conrad, this time you've gone too damn far! Our agreement was that you should take care of the military and technical side of things, and that I should have complete charge of all things judicial and political. Trying and hanging the Margrave of Brandenburg was obviously both judicial and political, as well as being boneheadedly stupid! You have managed to turn a minor border incident into what will likely soon become a full-fledged war with the entire Holy Roman Empire! What possible excuse can you have for this fit of madness? Did you receive a head wound in the opening stages of the battle? Or has your swinish swiving of every underaged slut in sight finally rotted out your brains? Well? Speak up, or has the same foul disease that has turned your mind to sludge also corrupted your tongue?"

Lord Conrad looked up and was silent for a bit, and then said, mildly, "Good evening, your majesty. I trust that you had a pleasant trip here. Would you care for a glass of wine? The local mead has quite a lot to recommend it."

"Damn you, Conrad, I said answer me!"

"As you wish, Henryk. I received no wounds in battle, and I am suffering from no disease that I am aware of, but thank you for inquiring after my condition. With regards to health, though, may I express concern for yours? The camp table that you are standing on folds up nicely, but it isn't all that sturdy. You would ease my anxieties considerably if you stepped down from it."

"Step down? I'm half minded to step down! Right down from my throne! But I'll see you banished first, dammit! I tell you, Conrad, one of us has to go, and I'm not minded that it should be me!"

This last pronouncement was accompanied by a particularly violent gesture, and the table took the opportunity to collapse. It seemed a natural occurrence to me, but later that night Maude said she'd seen Lord Conrad kick out a leg support. To his credit, the king rode it down standing up, but the accident seemed to have a certain calming effect on him.

"Maude, would you get us another table, please, and a chair for his majesty?" Lord Conrad said. "Sir Josip, clear the wreckage."

The camp furniture was collapsible, but still quite substantially made, and I had to bend my knees to lift the broken tabletop without straining my back. My love was back in moments with a new, larger table and chair before I was through. She had a chair in one hand and was supporting a long table—level with the floor—with the other hand gripping only one short edge!

His majesty noticed this.

Sir Conrad said, "You see, your majesty, things are not always precisely as they appear. Now please sit down and relax. Have some of this mead. Now, personally, I don't consider an invasion by



nine thousand people to be a 'minor border incident.' It was an attempt to invade us, and to permanently conquer territory. I did not conduct a formal trial for the margrave. I merely publicly explained why I was going to kill him. The emperor is not stupid enough to attack us. I am not going to resign and neither are you. You are doing too good a job, and anyway, you *like* being a king. Was there anything else that seemed to trouble your majesty?"

"Killing the margrave was a major diplomatic blunder. He is very influential in the empire."

"*Was* very influential, perhaps. Now, well, in the first place, he's dead, and in the second, he has been shown to be a damned fool. I expect that whatever political faction he controlled is already rapidly dispersing."

"Perhaps so, Conrad, but I wish you wouldn't do things like this."

"I was only doing my job. I am responsible for the safety of the realm. When we were attacked, I had to respond as quickly as possible, since they were killing some of our people every minute. I admit that the battle was more destructive than it should have been. I had originally intended only to attack their van, to slow them down, but we were trying out some new weapons and tactics, and they proved to be remarkably effective. A single company of our troops took out their entire army without stopping. Except for the civilians in the baggage train, of course."

The king looked astounded. "All that was done by a single company?"

"Yes, your majesty, less than three hundred men. So you see why we have nothing to fear from the empire. That company was a newly formed unit. The Wolves. It's composed entirely of scions of the old nobility. It is about the only strictly military organization in our army, since those guys would never stoop to doing the kind of manual labor that everybody else in the army does."

"I see. My vassals will be proud to learn of their sons' accomplishments. But tell me, what is the story about this strong, if somewhat underdressed, young lady here?"

"Your majesty, let me introduce Maude. She's my new bodyguard."

Maude did an amazingly graceful curtsy, such as I had never seen done by a woman before, even by one wearing a great flowing gown. It made me want to see her dance.

Lord Conrad said, "Maude is not the underaged swinish slut that you almost called her. But she is not an ordinary human being, either. In fact, she has a lot in common with Anna's children, that you and your men have been riding for years. She was sent to me by my cousin when he heard about that attempted assassination."

"I hope that she's as good at guarding you as she is at carrying around furniture. You're going to need her services, especially after this last foolish stunt of yours. If the Germans can't get rid of you by ordinary military means, you know they will try all of the other possibilities. Do you have a food taster? You should, you know."

"When I'm in the field, I eat from the same pots that my men do, and I never stand first in line. At home, what meals I don't eat in the cafeterias are cooked for me by the ladies of my own household, and they're always tasting things while they're cooking. So far, there hasn't been a problem, Henryk."

"I shall pray to God that it stays that way. For your part, you might want to put on a few good food inspectors. The people who hate us aren't above poisoning a few thousand people if it means killing you with them. The Big People have a remarkable sense of smell, you know. It might be worthwhile having one of them sniff over all the foodstuffs coming in, as well as all that is set on your table. It's what I do."

"An excellent suggestion, Henryk. I'll act on it. Better still, Maude, what is your sense of smell like? Is it as good as that of the Big People?"

"Yes, your grace."

"Can you tell if food has been poisoned?"

"Yes. All ordinary poisons. The only really dangerous poisons commonly known in Europe come from certain mushrooms."

"Interesting. Thank you. From now on, part of your job will be to smell my food, any food that is put on the table, for that matter, before I eat it. And when we get back, tell the accountants to raise your pay to eight pence a day."

"Yes."

"Conrad, are we going to be seeing thousands of these attractive creatures growing up around your estates?" Henryk asked.

"I really don't know. I haven't thought it out yet, but I think perhaps not. It doesn't feel right, somehow, but I'm not quite sure why."

"Let me know when you decide. Remember that my father was killed by one of his own guards. I think that I'd rather like to have a few like her guarding my back, if she's as honest as a Big Person and as trustworthy."

"I'm sure she is, Henryk, but still, I hesitate. I think perhaps that her sort are actually better people than we humans are. What is our moral position if we are giving orders to our moral superiors?"

"What, indeed?"

"The problem isn't as obvious with the Big People, because they look like horses, and you constantly have to remind yourself that they're not animals. Maude looks like a woman, and I can't help thinking about her as though she was a human woman. For example, I knew intellectually that she was far tougher than I was, and thus was actually much safer, but I was nonetheless as nervous as a mouse during the battle, thinking about her being in danger, right behind me.

"Should there be more like her? If there were, should we be giving them orders? *Would* we be giving them orders? Or might they decide that we humans are so degenerate that they should take charge for our own good?"

"I see what is bothering you, and I'm glad that I don't have to make the decision. Ponder long before you do anything, Conrad. Concerning more pressing matters, what am I to do when the emperor complains about this last little affair of yours?"

"Simple. You tell him that it was unfortunate that one of his subordinates was so foolish as to attack one of your subordinates, but since you are in a forgiving mood, you won't be demanding further reparations. You may also tell him that the score on the battlefield was six thousand for you and zero for him. And tell him that he can come and have another romp with us, whenever he's inclined. He won't take you up on it."

"At this point, I suppose that it is the only tactic that could work. You know, when I heard that the margrave was still hanging naked outside the town, I sent men to have him cut down. They returned to say that the corpse had already done that for itself. It seems that he was so fat that his body actually pulled loose from his head, like a pinch of bread dough being pulled off. I'm having coffins made for those seven men. Would you have their clothes sent to my camp? I want to send their bodies back to their families in the best shape possible."

"I'll see to it, Henryk."

"Thank you. Now, the last order of business is this counter-invasion that you have planned. Do you really think this is wise?"

"I think that it is necessary. When a puppy makes a mess on the floor, you have to rub his nose in it so he knows what he did wrong, and then you have to swat him, to punish him, or he'll do it again. Without the swat, he might even get to liking shit on his nose! Anyway, the margrave's lands have been in Slavic hands since time immemorial. The people on the land are not exactly Polish, but they are closer to us than to anyone else around. They have been under the German's thumb for about a hundred years now. They deserve their freedom."

"Conrad, when you start using words like 'freedom,' there is no reasoning with you. Any further conversation on the subject would simply be a waste of the breath God gave us. Do what you will, and I'll try to sweep up your mess, politically."

"You know that you enjoy it. What say that you and your people come with me and my forces as we take possession of our new province? That way, you could see to it that everything was done to your satisfaction."

"Yes, that would be for the best, Conrad. Let us know when you'll be leaving."

"With pleasure. Good night, your majesty."

Later that night, sitting around a small fire, I got out my recorder and played a few simple tunes for Maude. She was very surprised. She said that she had never seen people make music before. She had often heard music, but it had always been made by a machine. I was mystified, and wondered what sort of machine could play a recorder. I could imagine a machine beating a drum, but not, say, a violin, or a trumpet. But I let it pass and played some more for my love.

She said she liked it, and soon was standing and swaying, naked as always, in time with the music. After a while, seeing that I was watching her with pleasure, she slowly began to dance, with a beautiful, flowing sort of motion I had never seen a person use before. Some of the knights from the Wolves camp nearby were as fascinated as I was and came over to watch. Most people play some sort of musical instrument, and a few of the watchers brought drums, strings, and woodwinds to contribute what they could. Still others used whatever was available to tap and keep the strong beat.

Someone started playing a violin to a slightly faster beat, and I turned and recognized him to be Komander Wladyclaw. The drums picked it up, and the rest of us quickly joined in.

Maude's dancing sped up as well, and she began to add graceful skips and spins to her dance. Seeing that her poise and prowess were up to something fast, the violinist made the song beat faster yet, and what had begun as a simple shepherd's tune was becoming something that might be heard from a Gypsy camp!

Again Maude's dance stayed with the increased tempo, whirling around the campfire, adding leaps and flying spins that seemed too fast to be real! She would leap into the air, and seem almost to hover there for a time while spinning. She was at once as free as a forest butterfly, as pure as a child, and as erotic as is possible for a woman to be.

More of our troops were coming to the fire to see what was happening, and staying once they did. There must have been six dozen of them by then.

The komander took the beat faster yet, and still Maude kept up with it, leaping higher than any of her audience would have thought possible, with her feet higher than a tall man's head, and her head far above that. Yet she gave no sign that this was some athletic thing she was doing, but rather an artistic one, for it was not the feat itself, but the beauty of the thing that was important.

Komander Wladyclaw glanced at me, asking if we dared to take it faster, and I gave him a quick shake of my head. No one could possibly dance like this for long, and I was beginning to worry about my darling love. We did a few bars to bring things to an ending, and Maude went into an elaborate spin and bow.

The crowd exploded with applause, a wild shout that was heard for miles and went on forever while Maude scampered back to my side. I was surprised to see that she wasn't even breathing heavily.

The komander stood and formally bowed to Maude, something I'd never seen a nobleman do for a girl around a camp-fire before. The feeling was unanimous, for every single man there, your narrator included, well over a gross of us, stood and bowed to her as well.

Maude at first nodded acceptance of this praise, but then, deciding that something more was required, she stood and made an elaborate curtsy and bow back.

The komander asked, "My gracious lady, could we beg you for a repeat performance?"

Maude looked up at me, and I said that she had not danced for a long while, but that perhaps we could hope for another show tomorrow.

The truth was, her dance was erotic, and I was so aroused that my strongest—only—desire was to get Maude alone in the tent with me.

If the other knights were disappointed, they were also understanding.

Much later, Maude said, "They trained me to be an entertainer, but Tom was never interested in watching me. Did my dance please you?"

My first thought was that this Tom must be an incredible ass, but I didn't say it.

I told her that it was the most unbelievably beautiful thing I had ever seen, that she was now the darling of the Wolves, and probably the rest of the army as well. If she ever wanted to cease being a bodyguard, there was a career waiting for her in dancing.

"I could quit being a bodyguard?"

I said that of course she could. There was no slavery in Poland. This was the land of the free. She was a free person, and she could do whatever she wanted to do.

She took a while to consider this, and then said, "No. I will continue as I am."

I said that this was good and held her close to me. Watching all of the other men looking at her with admiration and even open lust in their eyes, I realized that she could easily have almost any man she wanted. It chilled me to think how easily I could lose her.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

From the Journal of Josip Sobieski

WRITTEN JANUARY 17, 1250, CONCERNING JUNE 5, 1249

IN THE morning, after mass and the recitation of our Army Oath, Maude and I breakfasted, and I armed myself. Since I felt there was no possibility of any fighting taking place, I left off my leg armor. The combination of wearing infantry armor and riding in a saddle for two days had left parts of my posterior blistered where it wasn't bleeding.

Lord Conrad noticed my less-than-complete uniform and asked me why I was breaking general combat orders during what was still, officially, an alert. When I explained, he ordered that I see the battalion's armorers and get fitted for a set of the new cavalry armor.

I found the armorers with nothing much to do that day, except to sort out battered, bloody enemy armor and decide what should be scrapped, what repaired, and what saved as souvenirs. Given the chance to do honest work, they all jumped at it, and soon I had a dozen of them working in my cause.

They never let me leave their camp for more than a few minutes, as they took a set of standard heavy stampings from their storage boxes and cut, filed, and fitted them to my body.

Three seamstresses were soon at work, taking the partially finished sections of a summer gambeson from storage. They were cut oversized, with only half the seams sewn. Soon they were trimming and sewing them into a new garment for me, to suit the armor. Small pieces of chain mail were sewn on, covering the armpits, the insides of the elbows, and the backs of the knees, where the armor plates could not protect me.

I was surprised that I had no protection for my lower buttocks and my privy members below the belt, but I was told that when mounted, the saddle would keep those parts protected.

I said that my Big Person had not come with a saddle with that high of a cantle. Their response was to issue me a chit that got me a new, Wolves-style saddle, with built-in holsters for two submachine guns and a rifle.

Nonetheless, I resolved that someday soon I would get myself an armored skirt to wear in case I had to fight on foot. If I had to, I'd pay for it myself!

Most helmets have one piece that protects the top, back, and sides of the head, and a separate visor to protect the face. My new helm was just the opposite. The front, top, and sides were of a piece, and the back hinged up to let you in.

By late afternoon, an astoundingly short period of time, I was gloriously arrayed in the latest style of personal protection. They even found time to polish the plates, giving them the mirror finish so prized by the old nobility.

I lacked only the panache of gray plumes worn by the Wolves to look like one of their number, and I found myself wondering where I might possibly buy some plumes of some other color. Perhaps red.

I strutted proudly back to our tent, thinking that Maude might be impressed, but I was disappointed. She thought of wearing anything but one's own skin as being silly, smelly, and scratchy. Ah, well. You can't please everybody. I wasn't bothered. In all events, *I* thought that I looked beautiful.

\* \* \*

One night I asked Maude how, just before the battle, she had managed to get from my lap to Silver's rump without my seeing her get there.

"I jumped."

I asked why I hadn't seen her move.

"I jumped quickly, when you blinked. It's how you move in combat. You wait until people blink, or look in another direction, then you move quickly."

I said that I was amazed.

"Would you like me to demonstrate it for you?"

I said that she could do it later. For now, it wasn't worth getting out of bed for.

Looking at Maude, admiring the lovely curve of her hip, and flank, and breast, I mumbled something to myself about the Lilies of the Field. She heard me, and asked what I was talking about.

I said, " 'And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say to you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.' " I told her that it was from Jesus Christ's Sermon on the Mount.

I'm not a Bible scholar, but that one has always stuck in my head. And how could any young man resist the chance to impress his love?

"Yes. That is exactly right. Christ would always know what is best. We should not care about our raiment," she said, and continued in her nudity.

Maude had a perfect memory, and after that she would quote those verses of Matthew whenever anyone objected to her lack of coverings. When I said that she had to look at these words in context, she wouldn't consider it. Christ had spoken, He could not possibly be mistaken, and that was that.

I began to understand the saying about how a little knowledge was a dangerous thing, and why the Church does not encourage laymen to read the Bible.

When I asked her to please not argue with the bishop about religion, she asked what a bishop was, and we were promptly into another long, one-sided conversation.

From the Diary of Conrad Stargard

JUNE 5, 1249

I spent the day preparing to invade a major part of the Holy Roman Empire. Ordering up six more battalions of infantry was the easy part. Harder was the fact that our infantry could not move efficiently without a railroad going where they wanted to go. You see, our equipment and tactics had all been designed with *defending* the country in mind. Until recently, very little work or thought had gone into offense.

Units like the Wolves could go anywhere fast, as much as four gross miles a day, but we only had a single company of them.

A platoon of men could pull their war cart six dozen miles a day when they were rolling on steel rails. With some men pulling and some men sleeping, they could go around the clock. Averaged out, they were much faster than the enemy's conventional cavalry.

Put the same platoon on a good conventional road, and the best they could do was about two dozen miles, since it took all of them, pulling hard, to move the heavy thing on a dirt surface. There was no possibility of rolling around the clock.

The existing roads from Lubusz to Brandenburg were not very good, and in some sections it was doubtful if a single platoon could make a war cart move at all!

We had to get our infantry into Brandenburg, and once there, we needed to give them some mobility.

Then, we not only had to take and to occupy Brandenburg—an area of about six thousand square miles—we had to bring it into our system, and fast!

If the conversion went quickly and smoothly, the bulk of the Slavic-speaking population would be eagerly on our side, and the former conquerors would be dispirited.

If we let the German-speaking minority have time to organize itself, we could see factional fighting and guerrilla warfare for many years.

Worse yet, in my old time line, Brandenburg had joined with Prussia to form the state that was the political basis of modern Germany and the cultural basis of the Nazi party. These were the people with the strutting jackboots, and the firm belief that all other peoples were subhuman, *untermensch*. I wanted to make sure that the thing didn't happen in this time line.

Making Brandenburg a part of Poland meant bringing in our schools, with their general stores and their post offices. It meant bringing in our farming methods, our seeds, and our farm machinery. It meant bringing in our uniform measurement system, our monetary system, and our judicial system.

All of which involved a lot of travel and transport.

There was nothing for it but to build railroads. Lots of railroads. Quickly.

What I was planning was to be one of the fastest construction projects in army history. Everything else in the entire nation would be made subordinate to this single project. Every bit of materials and manpower, anything that could be of use, would be rushed to Lubusz. No matter what project had to be put on hold, no matter where else the materials were needed, no matter what the men would rather be doing, the new rail line to Brandenburg came first.

Our existing rail lines were placed defensively, on the east bank of the Odra. A pontoon bridge would be thrown across the river at Lubusz, which would stay in business until a real, masonry bridge could be finished, or until the thaw next spring took it out.

Surveyors were to be out in droves, preparing the way for hundreds of crews of construction workers. A forest of trees would be felled to clear the right-of-way, and were to be just as quickly ripsawed into railroad ties, bridge trusses, and siding platforms. Demolition teams would be blowing out tree stumps wholesale with gunpowder, followed by thousands of men who would be out with picks, shovels, and wheelbarrows, leveling the roadbed.

Every horse and wagon we had taken from the invaders would be in use, as well as every additional bit of equipment we could get our hands on.

While all this intensive work was going on, the Eagles would keep their planes high above us, searching for any hostile move, and the Wolves would be patrolling our borders, sniffing out any enemy action.

We figured to lay three miles of track in the first week, and ten more miles of it on the day after. Once we got rolling, we hoped to be in Brandenburg in ten days, and two months later we would have a perimeter defensive road around the entire province.

Experienced Polish farmers who wanted more land would be recruited to move into every town and large village in Brandenburg, mostly on land once owned by the soldiers who had just tried to invade us. We would equip them with the best seeds, the newest machinery, and the new fertilizers. Once the locals" saw the kind of crops they brought in, they'd be lining up to get with our system.

A construction platoon would get to town, and in two days a schoolhouse would be completed. It would have a windmill that pumped water from a new tube well up to a cistern on the roof, indoor plumbing with hot water, and a septic system. This technology was far ahead of what the people in Brandenburg had ever seen, and it should impress them considerably.

Each of our schools had a general store that sold a wide variety of our products, at better prices than could be found locally, and a catalogue sales arrangement that could get you just about anything at half the price people were used to. Of course, everything was bought and sold with our own uniform currency, and in terms of our uniform measurement system.

Each school had a post office, something nobody in Germany ever saw before.

These commercial operations supported the school system, so much so that we sometimes had to work not to make a profit!

Since this would be army territory, taxes would be completely eliminated, except for those levied by the local government. The Christian Army supported itself by its own efforts, the schools were self-supporting, and the Church took care of itself.

Once we were completely set up, the only people the locals would have to deal with would be someone speaking something close to their own native language, and not in the foreign German tongue.

That was the program, anyway. We were pretty confident it would work. Especially since King Henryk had agreed to handle the political problems for us.

Six companies of infantry had left for Brandenburg the morning after the battle. They were marching with two weeks' worth of dried food on their backs, without their pikes or war carts, but they had been equipped with the new rifles, even if they weren't perfectly trained with them.

The king and I would head out in the morning with the Wolves. We figured to get to Brandenburg before noon.



# Chapter Twenty-Four

From the Journal of Josip Sobieski

WRITTEN JANUARY 18, 1250, CONCERNING SEPTEMBER 18, 1249

I ARRIVED at the Explorer's School at the last possible minute before my leave was up, an hour later than the rest of them.

Sir Odon checked me in and said, "Someday, Josip, you are going to be late, and then I will have to be very rude to you."

I said in that event, he could wait to hear my news until after all of the rest of the men in our lance had told me the stories of what had happened to them during their vacations. I called him "Captain Odon," which certainly got his attention, and I swore not to talk until last. All of my friends were dying of curiosity, but I just grinned at them and said that they had to buy all of the beer, as well, in payment for my news.

Since it was almost quitting time, we walked to the local Pink Dragon Inn, where I again insisted on not breaking my vow of silence until I heard their news.

A bare-breasted waitress brought us a round of beers, was paid, and then was ignored. We all felt wonderful, being back with our friends.

Kiejstut eagerly started our informal debriefing. He had been grandly welcomed into his home village, and treated as a returning hero by all of his old friends and relatives. He had been feasted and feted for almost every day of the first two weeks, until he had to beg people to let him get some rest. Everyone had to hear about every event in his long and illustrious army career.

His entire village had been converted to Christianity during the eight years he was away, and they cheered when they heard that he, too, was a convert.

He had given the bride away at his niece's wedding, and had been the godfather at no less than five christenings.

All the girls he had known before were married, with too many children, but there was a whole new crop of fine young maidens, eager to welcome home the conquering hero!

"It was like having two months in Okoitz, but all the girls were even prettier and spoke Lithuanian!"

He ended by saying that when he came back, it was in the company of eleven good Lithuanian boys who had come to the Warrior's School to join the Christian Army.

We all cheered at this new addition to our ranks, for the army was growing again. The massive construction projects of the last eight years had resulted in more than enough apartments, factories, and farms to provide homes and work for all of us. More growth meant, among other things, more promotions.

Taurus had a less happy story to tell, since a few months before he returned to the family farm near Kiev, his uncle had died. Two of his cousins still lived and were struggling to feed themselves and their families. They were working with worn-out tools and poor-quality seeds, and in an area that had still not fully recovered from the Mongol onslaught.

By their standards, Taurus was fabulously wealthy, and in truth, he was able to help them a lot. He bought seeds and fertilizers for them, and then he and Nadja, the Big Person, had helped them get all of their land plowed and planted. He bought them a new, modern steel plow, and a pair of good oxen to pull it with, along with dozens of new farm tools from the store at the new school in the next village.

He bought household goods that they badly needed— dishes, pots, and pans—and gave them to his only relatives. He bought their wives bolts of cloth to make clothing, bedding, and curtains with, and gave everyone, even the children, a new pair of boots. After that, he spent the rest of his vacation time helping them build a new barn, with materials that he paid for.

"But you know, somehow, everything I did, it just wasn't enough. I wish that I had never brought my full dress uniform along with all the gold on it. I told them that I couldn't possibly sell my decorations, but they thought I was holding out on them. They never believed that the Big Person I had ridden in on wasn't my property, that Nadja wasn't even a horse, but a person who could not be bought or sold. One night, one of their wives even suggested that I sell some of my weapons and give the money to them, since I was so rich!

"I tell you that I was glad to leave those people. I've never seen people that greedy, or that ungrateful, before. I don't think I will ever go back there again."

Sir Odon said that everyone at home was glad to see him, but then he saw his relatives every few months, normally, since they lived nearby, in Wroclaw. Mostly, he spent the time helping out in his father's carpentry shop until the invasion happened. Then he had been called up to operate a steamboat on the Odra.

Father John had a similar story. After reporting to his bishop, he went to Cracow, and spent the time at his father's new butcher shop until the invasion. Then he was sent to a snowflake fort on the Vistula. The priest there had gone with the men to Brandenburg, and he was to see to the women and children left behind.

After Taurus, Fritz, and I left them, Lezek and Zbigniew enjoyed themselves at home until they were called up, to work on an oil tanker on the Vistula. They were not overly pleased.

Fritz's story was almost identical to Kiejstut's, even though he came from Germany instead of Lithuania. He was treated like a hero by all and sundry, the local boy who went away and made good. On top of that, the local nobility treated him like an equal, inviting him to supper and taking him along on a stag hunt. The son of a baron had begun politely calling on Fritz's little sister, to her great delight.

A total of fourteen healthy German farm boys, three of them his cousins, came back with Fritz to join the Christian Army.

"Still and all, I'm glad that I was out of touch when Brandenburg invaded us. I would have followed orders, you understand, and fought them if it came to that, but, you know, I'm glad that it *didn't* come to that."

Since they had all now faithfully told their stories, they turned and looked expectantly at me.

Just to have some more fun with them, I said that these were all wonderful stories, and that they had wanned my heart, but that it was getting late and we had a busy day ahead of us tomorrow.

I got up from the table and made it halfway to the door before I was tackled and brought to the ground. They picked me up, carried me back to the table, and sat me back down. Then they took away my beer, as punishment, they said, for my attempted desertion.

So I told them the whole story, taking my time, starting with the night Fritz and I spent at the Pink Dragon. I spent some time describing each of the girls in detail.

Sir Odon said, "Hurry it up, or I will be forced to hurt you." I passed lightly over my problems with my father, and soon had myself riding out to war at Lord Conrad's side, sitting astride one of Anna's children with the Battle Flag of Poland in my hand, and the most beautiful woman in the world sitting naked on my lap.

My friends gave me a loud *whoop!* Fritz gave me back my beer. Even Father John was laughing. At their urging, I continued with the story. I told them of the battle, of the execution of the margrave, and of King Henryk's amazing chastisement of Lord Conrad. I got to the point where we were about to invade Brandenburg when I finished my beer.

I'd had my fun with my friends, but enough was enough, and it was time that I bought a round of beer, which I ordered.

"But what happened then?" Zbigniew said. "Tell us about the counterinvasion!"

I had to tell them that from then on in, the story became less interesting, even boring, except for my relationship with Maude, of course. Everything was so well planned, and everyone in our army performed so well, that everything went smoothly.

Before the enemy had time to think, we had more than seventy thousand troops in Brandenburg. That was ten times the fighting men they'd had even before the invasion! The few German soldiers who were left were so shocked that they just stood around like sheep and did what they were told. Before my vacation was over, the bulk of the building program was completed, there were railroads everywhere, and schools were in every village!

Already, most of our troops had gone home, but the Germans knew we could be back there in a hurry if they ever got rude with us.

Even Lord Conrad was back at Okoitz, and so was my new love. I knew, because I rode all the way back at his side, with Maude again on my lap!

Sir Odon said, "A marvelous story, Josip! But tell me, what was all that about calling me a captain?"

With great casualness, I said that I must have forgotten that part, but Lord Conrad had seen fit to tell me about our next mission. It seemed that they needed some explorers with experience in riverboats to explore the biggest river system in the world.

I enjoyed their rapt attention. On a small stage not three yards away, a scantily clad dancer undulated suggestively, but all eyes at our table were on me. After two months of being little more than a wall decoration in Lord Conrad's tent, it felt very good to be important!

I told about how we would be bringing in six collapsible steamboats and assembling them on-site. Many details were still not settled, but his grace had promised me that the climate would be warm, all year around, that there was plenty of wine and beer, or something like it, available locally, but that we were also welcome to bring in our own supply, within reason. Further, we were assured that there were many young ladies available, and all of them naked, since the local customs forbade them to wear clothing.

My friends were all looking at me with expressions that mixed delight with incredulity, so I continued.

I said that Lord Conrad was vastly pleased with us for finding the iron mine on our last mission, and that he considered himself to be in our debt.

Promotions had been promised to us all, and incidentally, I had taken the liberty to volunteer our lance for the above mission. And whose turn was it to buy the next round of beer?

"I will buy the next round, in honor of your very creative fantasy," Sir Odon said. "But what you are saying cannot possibly be true. Even if you are not lying, you must be exaggerating shamelessly, but it is such a pleasant lie that I think we would all like to wallow in it for the rest of the night, at least."

I said he could believe whatever he chose, it made no difference, since we would probably be briefed on it in the morning.

Father John wanted to know about the people to be found on this river, and I said that they were primitive along the river, but there was a rich civilization at its headwaters, in the mountains. And none of them had ever heard of Christ.

You could see the good father's eyes glow.

As the evening went on, my friends decided that they almost believed me about the mission, but on calm reflection they insisted that for the most beautiful woman in the world to be in love

with a person abjectly lacking in *any* social skills, and with such a deplorable level of personal hygiene, was simply absurd.

They said that I had obviously fallen off Margarete and landed on my head, since I was patently delusional. I sat there and acted smug.

The high point of the evening came when Maude walked into the inn, wearing her usual outfit and easily outshining all of the waitresses and dancers there. She sat down next to me, put her arm around my waist and her head against my shoulder.

She said, "I missed you. Let's go to bed."

Fritz muttered, as if to himself, "She doesn't like clothes because nothing looks good on her. Unbelievably good, for a fact."

My other friends couldn't speak, since all of their mouths were locked open.

I told Maude that I would like that, but first she must meet my friends. I introduced them to her, but she had already heard much about each of them, and they were still too stunned by her beauty to say very much, so I was soon able to break away from them and take Maude back to my room in the barracks.

Having her there was perhaps discouraged by certain army regulations, but they were not well-enforced regulations if you didn't bother anybody.

I asked her how she had gotten to the school from Okoitz. "Iran."

A distance of eighteen miles, and she ran the whole way. It made sense, somehow.

# Chapter Twenty-Five

From the Journal of Josip Sobieski

WRITTEN MARCH 6, 1251, CONCERNING JANUARY 19, 1250

I FIND myself laid up in the base hospital with an unimportant infection in a small scratch on my foot, and again, with nothing better to do, I have resolved to bring my personal history up to date.

I stood at the rail of the *Atlantic Challenger*, hoping for a sight of one of the flying fishes that Lord Conrad had written about. After weeks at sea, my love for it was still growing. Its awesome size, its constantly changing colors, its infinite peace. Together they made it for me one of the greatest works of God.

We had been at sea for four weeks, and out of radio contact for the last fifteen days. The new radios were an improvement, but were far from perfect. I could no longer send messages to my love.

I missed Maude, more than everything else.

Through the months of preparation for this voyage, she and I had been together every possible moment. I spent my weekends at Okoitz with her, and she arranged to have every Wednesday and Thursday off to spend at the school. In this manner, we had six nights a week together.

Transportation was provided by the Big People, who seemed to take a special pleasure in watching our love affair. Once Maude got Lord Conrad to teach her a few words in English, we often rode Silver back and forth, since that lady ordinarily didn't get enough exercise.

There was no longer even the slightest doubt in either of us that ours was a love that would last forever. She promised that she would wait for me to return, and that when I did, we would be married.

At Okoitz, where she was still guarding Lord Conrad, she spent her time in constant reading, to learn everything she could about this strange new world she had been sent into. She took formal religious instruction, and was baptized a Christian, which removed any possible impediment to our marriage.

She even submitted to wearing clothing in public, to forestall any criticism. It was very light clothing, loose, and made of the softest Bulgarian cotton, but it was clothing for all of that.

I was sorely tempted to transfer to some other branch of the army so I would not have to leave her. Maude thought seriously of leaving Lord Conrad's employment and stowing away on the ship, but in the end calmer, more practical thoughts had prevailed.

I wanted to set up a proper household for her, and I thought it likely that if this voyage proved to be as successful as the last, my promotion to captain was assured. Thirty-two pence a day, plus her salary, if she wanted to remain working, plus whatever royalties I got for my share of the mine, when added to my savings would let us live a very comfortable life.

Standing with me on the docks, just before I left, she had a confession to make. Unbeknownst to everyone, Maude had had four children.

It seems that children of her species are born very small, no bigger than mice, which explained why no one had noticed her pregnancy. They require no more care than a safe place to live and a supply of food, any food that a human could eat.

She was paying the widow of a yeoman farmer, who lived in the woods not far from Okoitz, to care for them and keep them hidden.

This was the first truly independent action I had ever seen her make, and naturally I was curious about it. She said she felt a responsibility to Lord Conrad, and that by herself, she could not give him the security he deserved and still have any life of her own. Her four daughters, in time, could see to it that he was guarded around the clock, and still have plenty of free time for themselves.

Also, with the four of them on duty, Maude would feel free to go anywhere with me.

When I asked if this had been done with Lord Conrad's permission, she said no. But he never had anything to say about whether any human woman should have children or not, and she was as free as they were, wasn't she?

I had to agree with her, but secretly I was glad I hadn't been asked about it before the deed was done.

When I returned, in a year or so, it would be not only to a wife, but to a family, of sorts, as well.

As I pondered all of this, Knight Banner Taurus came over from the fishing net crane. He didn't have to do the sampling personally. Like me, he now had a forty-two-man platoon working under him, most of them belted knights. I think he was doing it himself simply because he was bored with our shipboard inactivity.

"Another empty net. These equatorial oceans are not as rich as our northern seas."

I said that our sampling was still far too small for us to draw any solid conclusions.

"True, and anyway, I was getting sick of the cook's abortive attempts at trying to make five new kinds of fish a day edible. I wonder if we'll ever find out if it's a matter of bad fish or bad cooking. Can you believe that lately I have been developing a craving for some fresh venison, you know, from those northern deer?"

I said I could not believe it, but that I had heard there was some trade starting in what they were calling reindeer meat, preserved by the new canning process.

"Reindeer. That must be because they put reins on the animal when they use it to pull their sleds. Reasonable. Say, how well do you know Baron Tados? This is the third time he has captained the ship we were on, and I still don't know anything about him."

I said that the first time was at the Battle for the Vistula, when we were just out of grunt school. The last thing we'd wanted was an interview with a baron! On the Baltic, we only saw him a few times, and the one time we'd met socially, everybody was too polite to actually talk. And on this trip, he had thus far stayed on the bridge, where our presence wasn't welcome. So I was as ignorant as Taurus was. I asked why he wanted to know about the man.

"I don't know. Maybe it's just my imagination, but some tension is building, something seems strange. Have you heard that the North Star is almost under the horizon? We'll be turning west in a few hours."

I said we were almost on the equator, and that I had expected it would be hotter. A summer afternoon in Poland would often get as warm as it was on the ship.

"I think the water cools us. Before long, we will arrive at the land of Brazyl, if all goes well and Lord Conrad is right. Still, I have a very bad feeling that something is going to go very wrong."

I said that his grace was rarely mistaken. We might be on the river within the week. I reminded him that no Christian in all of recorded history had ever traveled this far before! A certain amount of anxiety was only normal. I told Taurus that maybe it was just the anticipation that was upsetting him.

I was wrong.

Captain Odon was red in the face and gesticulating vigorously at the ship's captain, Baron Tados, who was groping for a weapon, and had not drawn one only because he couldn't seem to decide between his sword, his pistol, or the huge Mongol bow hanging on the wall. The baron's face was white, and I was unsure which color was the worse danger signal.

Both of their jaws were moving up and down, their lips were moving, and their faces were going through the most remarkable contortions, but they were up on the bridge, and what with the noise and the wind of our travel, those of us below on the main deck could not hear a word of what was being shouted.

Suddenly, Captain Odon raised both fists into the air, turned around, and stormed down the staircase toward the two dozen or so officers who were watching them. The baron hesitated for a moment or two, then charged after the explorer.

"It seems that our sublime leaders have concluded their learned consultations," Zbigniew said. "Perhaps at last we shall be enlightened as to their cause for concern."

I said that his florid language suggested he had been reading too many diplomatic papers in the *News Magazine*, and stressed the prudence of being prepared to disarm them both, if necessary.

"Stop running away, you insubordinate bastard! I gave you an order!" the baron said, grabbing our captain's arm.

"Insubordinate, hell! I am your co-komander on this mission! And I tell you that you are a bloody madman! We are in the middle of the ocean! We have not sighted land for weeks! An idiot child could tell that we are not on a fornicating river! Use your eyes, you senile old fool!" Captain Odon said, shaking loose his arm.

"And I tell you that I have my written orders, you mutinous bastard! Fuel consumption has been much higher than expected, and if we have headwinds, in addition to the contrary currents that you know damn well we can expect, this ship will have a hard time getting back to Gdansk!" the baron said.

"You still have more than half of your fuel left, and if there is any question of it running out, when we find land, we can cut you enough cordwood to get you to China! But right now we are on the ocean! We are not on a river! And trying to assemble the riverboats down in those waves is suicide for any man who goes down there, and murder for you to order them to do it!"

"Lord Conrad's notes clearly say that the Amazon River is so wide that in some places you cannot see the banks from the middle! And you tasted the last bucket of water we brought up from the side! There wasn't one bit of salt in it! It was river water! We are on a river, you bloody idiot!"

"I don't give a damn if it tastes like pure white lightning! The Baltic Sea is damn low on salt, and nobody saw you putting a riverboat on it! Those waves down there are two yards high, and any attempt to assemble a riverboat over the side will result in disaster! And even *if* we were on a river, it makes no sense to take a fragile, short-ranged riverboat who knows how damned far to land when you still have miles of water below your ship's keel! If this is a river, it is too big for the boats we brought, and the only thing to do is take the ship up it until it gets shallow enough and narrow enough to justify putting a small riverboat on it!" Captain Odon shouted.

"This ship is needed elsewhere, and we have a schedule to keep! Now get your cowardly ass in gear and do your job!"

"That's an illegal order and you damn well know it! Schedules? Now the filthy truth finally comes out! You are willing to kill a whole company of men just so you can make your paperwork look neat! My men are not going to get butchered just to satisfy your stupid brand of pigheadedness!"

"Captain, if you won't follow orders, then your men will! Get on with your job, because if you don't, this ship is turning back!" the baron said.

"You will do no such thing. You will not kill my men, and you will not abort this mission. It is too important to Lord Conrad for us to turn back now, when there isn't any good reason for it. The reason why you will not do anything stupid is that I have three times as many men as you do, and my men are much better armed! Now just continue steaming in the direction that we're going, and we'll find land eventually!"

And with that Captain Odon turned around and marched back to his cabin. The baron stood there, breathing hard, and then suddenly realized that there were two dozen men staring at him. He opened

his mouth to shout something, and then thought better of it. He turned and strutted briskly back to his own cabin.

"With any luck, they'll both get drunk alone in their cabins, and the rest of us can do something sensible and save the mission," First Officer Seweryn Goszczynski said.

"That is a noble thought," Zbigniew said. "Does anybody have any idea what set them off?"

"It was a matter of the baron making a poorly thought-out suggestion—certainly, it wasn't an order at first—and your captain rather abruptly calling it stupid. You must understand that the baron has been around boats and ships for forty years now, and he was not pleased that a man less than half his age was made co-komander on this mission," a ship's radio operator said.

I said that the whole idea of having co-komanders was stupid, but since we were stuck with it, we junior officers ought to come up with a plan as to what to do if our superiors got into this same argument again, especially if they started giving the men strange and contradictory orders.

The first officer said, "If that happens, we must be prepared to disobey all illegal orders, which would mean turning this ship back for home, aborting the mission, and enduring our own courts-martial. Those of us that weren't hung would have our careers irretrievably damaged. If we didn't disobey them, and anybody got killed, as your captain is convinced would happen, we'd be up on charges anyway, for conveying an illegal order. We are all in an absolutely no-win situation, and that is probably what will save us. Both of our superiors have been acting like bloody idiots, but neither one of them is a *stupid* bloody idiot. They know what would happen as well as we do, and they both know that their best chance of getting out of this unscathed is to pretend that it didn't happen. I doubt if either of them will stick his head out of his cabin until we are ready to part company. For the time being, we will follow my standing orders and continue to sail west, until such time as we can find a sane place in which to assemble your riverboats."

"An excellent suggestion, sir, and one that the Explorer's Corps will endorse. We will also station as high-ranking a man as possible near our captain's door, to waylay him if he comes out to do something stupid. I suggest that your people perform the same service for the baron," Zbigniew said.

"You may count on it, sir. I further suggest that if our superiors wisely decide to pretend that all of this never happened, we would all be well-advised to contract a case of mass amnesia."

I said that he could count on *that*.



# Chapter Twenty- Six

From the Journal of Josip Sobieski

WRITTEN MARCH 7, 1251, CONCERNING JANUARY 21, 1250

THINGS WENT pretty much as First Officer Goszczynski said they would. Our superiors both declared themselves to be sick, and had their meals sent to their rooms. Slowly, the tension on board relaxed.

It was two days before we sighted land to starboard, and another day more until we had land to port. A further half day took us upriver to a point where we were no longer bothered by big ocean waves.

A council of officers decided we were at a position that both of our superiors could live with, had they been sufficiently well to attend the meeting. We were on the equator, and we were definitely on an absolutely huge river. The current was strong, the water was fresh, and we had banks on both side of us.

We dropped anchor, broke out the the premade floats that would be the bottoms of the riverboats, and started lowering them down to the water level. We soon had assembly crews working under the wings on both sides of the ship.

The floats were the same size as our standard containers so they could fit into the ship's storage conveyors. Each float had a removable top, and most of them already contained the cargo that the riverboats would be carrying. They bolted together easily.

The steam engines were another matter, since they were heavy, and had to be mounted mostly behind and on top of the floats. Assembling them was not as simple as the designers had hoped, what with the motion of the boats, the ship, and the water. We encountered several bothersome manufacturing defects, and as always, we were up against the innate perversity of inanimate objects.

Persevering, it was almost sunset when we had one boat assembled, another close to done, and a third boat started. An amazing thing was sighted then.

A lookout up in the crow's nest was the first to spot it, but I was taking a break on the rear deck at the time, so I saw the whole terrible affair.

There was a white line to the east, on the ocean horizon, going from shore to shore. I soon noticed that it was getting bigger, and thicker, somehow, but I had no idea what it was. Neither did any of the ship's officers to whom I shouted.

Still, when strange things happen, it is best to act cautiously and get the men out of danger, even if it might slow down the job at hand.

I ran to the port side of the ship, under the wing, and shouted at the men working down there to get back up into the ship, and to do it quickly. Then I ran to the starboard side and repeated my message.

When I got back to the rear railing, the strange phenomenon had grown to the point where it was obviously coming at us, and at a pretty fair speed. I ran around in a triangle again and told everybody to hurry up, no shit, this was serious. Some fool made a joke about how a dragon was coming, and if I hadn't been worrying about saving his life, I would have shot him!

Some of the men that I'd trained myself, the men from my own platoon, scrambled up the netting we had hung over both sides, and those men lived. The ones who were waiting for the lift to come back down to get them got into trouble.

It was moving so fast that by the time the men below saw the huge wave, it was almost too late to do anything about it.

It was just one, single huge wave, with no big waves in front of it, or behind, either. But it was more than ten yards high, and it stretched from bank to rocky bank across the river!

It hit the stern of the ship, and she bucked up so fast that I was knocked down flat to the deck, on my stomach. I went down so hard that the wind was knocked out of me and I could neither move nor breathe.

Then a vast sheet of greenish-white water came down on top of me, flattening me even more. The fact that I couldn't breathe became unimportant, since I was underwater, anyway. Worse, I saw that I was about to be washed off the deck and into the river. To this day, I don't know how I managed to grab one of the stanchions that supported the railing.

I think it must have been the work of my guardian angel.

At that, I was hard-pressed to hold on, at first because of the thousands of tons of water streaming by me, and then because the ship was still vigorously bouncing up and down. Even so, I was one of the first men on my feet. I staggered forward to try to assess the damage and see where I could be of help.

There were dozens and dozens of men lying about, many of them badly injured, from skinned knees to broken legs, and even one broken neck. Blood ran from the wet deck, out the scuppers and into the water. It hurt to pass by my friends without helping, but in spite of their obvious wounds, if those men were still alive, they were likely to stay alive a few more minutes.

That might not be true of the men down on the water. When I got under the wing of the bridge, I leaned over the railing and looked down. Of the two boats that had been in the water on that side, the completed one was gone without a trace. Only the half-finished boat, where they hadn't started mounting the engine, was still afloat, and it was severely damaged.

Men were down in the water, and the current was sweeping them away! Ignoring the broken and bleeding men around me, I threw every life ring I could find overboard, and helped a few uninjured men get three of the ship's barges into the water.

We cut two of the barges free, and hoped that the men overboard would be able to help each other into them. We kept the third boat tethered, and a seaman slid down to it to see what he could do down there to help.

I ran to the port side of the ship, only to find Lezek doing the same job there that I had just done on the starboard. Here, too, the nearly finished boat was simply gone.

Kiejstut came up from below and shouted that the boilers were out, flooded with water. We could not get the engines going to pick up our lost men. Together, we made it to the ship's steam launches, only to find them both smashed.

He looked at me desperately.

"The anchor," he said.

Without another word, we both ran to the bow.

I would have expected that the wave that did so much damage would have pulled loose our anchor, or broken the cable, but no, it was still holding us in one place while the fast current was taking our men farther away every minute.

The release mechanism was jammed, but a few vigorous swings with an axe freed it up, permanently. As the cable was whirling away, Kiejstut took a life ring with a long rope tied to it, passed the rope around the fast-moving cable, and made a slipknot at the end of it. Just before the last of the cable was gone, he had the end of it tied to a float.

I complimented his good thinking.

"I thought we might need the anchor again, and now we should be able to find it," he said.

"Anyway, it looked expensive, and the baron might have made us pay for it!"

I looked about. With the ship now drifting with the river, it was at least getting no farther away from the men in the water. There didn't seem to be anything more that we could do for those men, so we went aft to help with the wounded.

Our captain and the baron both had miraculous recoveries when the disaster occurred, as was only to be expected, and after a few moments of confusion, the two of them cooperated remarkably well in getting things back together.

Within the hour we had a current list of the dead, the wounded, and the missing. There were over ten dozen men somewhere in the dark, fast-moving water. Zbigniew, Taurus, and Fritz were among them.

The mechanics were six long army hours getting the engine room pumped out, the boilers repaired and refired, and the ship under way. By then it was dawn, and we went in search of our missing men.

Out of the ship's crew of ninety-one, six men were dead, eighteen were too seriously injured to work, and fourteen were still missing.

Of the two hundred sixty-two explorers, nine were dead, thirty-three were severely injured, and eighty-five were still missing. Most of the men doing the riverboat assembly work were explorers.

During the night, twenty-six men had managed to swim back to the ship and were taken aboard. That wouldn't have happened if Kiejstut and I hadn't let loose the anchor. The baron noticed this, too, and made a note of it in our records. He also noted that if a storm had come up during the night, without engines or anchor, the ship could possibly have gone down to the bottom. He told us this verbally, and quite forcefully, but did not put it down in our records. A decent man, the baron.

One of the men who swam back that night was Fritz.

Overnight, the steam launches had been repaired, and with them a half mile to either side of us, we spent days sweeping back and forth across the river, and eventually out into the ocean. Lezek and I had set seven barges adrift, and in the end we recovered only four of them, with twenty-nine men aboard. Another eleven people were found alive in the warm river water.

Zbigniew and Taurus were still among the missing.

After a week of searching the river, the sea, and the surrounding shores for our missing comrades, we regretfully called off the search. The barges each contained a small emergency kit, but with even a few men on board, by this time the supplies would be long exhausted.

We had recovered a total of twenty-two floating corpses. The last dead man we pulled aboard was Taurus.

Baron Tados called an officers' meeting, to sum up what had happened.

This was the first maritime disaster suffered by the Christian Army, and we were all painfully aware of our ignorance and our inexperience. Careful notes were written up by everyone on board, to be delivered to the Maritime Design Board at Gdansk. Hopefully, some of our stupider mistakes would not be repeated the next time disaster struck. We all knew that someday, somewhere, it would happen again.

The baron thought that the disaster might have been caused by a tidal bore. The Baltic Sea doesn't have tides, any more than the Mediterranean Sea does, so we Poles were fairly ignorant of such things. Baron Tados had heard of only one other river in the world that had such a wave, the Severn River, in England, although he had never been there. It was said that they were caused by the mouth of a river having a funnel shape, and a big, incoming tide getting somehow focused, and made larger, as it rushed up the river.

I understood very little of it. I had heard Lord Conrad's lecture on the causes of tides, but I had never actually seen one, until that disastrous time on the Amazon River.

I didn't want to see any more of them.

Fritz had an interesting report. He said, "I think that I now know why our fuel consumption has been so high. I was in the water when the big wave lifted the ship up, and I got a good look at our bottom. We have an underwater forest growing down there! Some of the weeds looked to be two yards long!"

"There has been some growth below the waterline before, in the northern seas, but nothing that bad," the baron said. "It must be all this warm water we've been steaming through. Does anybody have any ideas on how to get rid of it without a dry dock? No? Then we'll just have to live with it for now."

Only one of the ship's crew was still missing, mostly because the crew wore bright red work clothing and so were easier to find in the water. The dark green explorer uniforms did us a great disservice that week.

Zbigniew had not been found.

As the meeting was about to break up, Captain Odon announced that he was having a barrel of whiskey broken out and set up in the mess. He said it was time to mourn our dead.

In a few minutes I found myself at a table with what was left of our old lance. Captain Odon. Fritz. Lezek. Kiejstut. Me. The captain poured us each a big glass from the pitcher, and we held up our glasses, as if in a toast. Only nobody could think of anything appropriate to say, and we just drank in silence.

"I never expected Taurus to die an old man in bed," Kiejstut said. "He was just too crazy, underneath, for that. But I always imagined him going out swinging his axe at his enemies, the way he did during that fight against the Mongols, on the bank of the river. He must have killed dozens of them, running and screaming like a madman."

"I think that he truly was a madman then, so soon after his family had all been killed," Fritz said. "He even took a swipe at me before Sir Odon took his axe away from him."

I reminded them that a few of his people were still alive, although after his last leave, he hadn't liked them very much.

"I suppose they'll think better of him now," Lezek said. "By their standards, Taurus died rich, what with his gold, his savings, and his shares in the iron mine. They'll inherit all that, won't they?"

"I suppose so, unless he left a will, and I never heard of one," Captain Odon said. "I think that after this, I will go and have one written up for myself. The rest of you might want to do the same. The ship's purser knows something about the law."

"Inside, somehow, I was beginning to think that we were all immortal," Kiejstut said. "We were always so lucky. I mean, we all lived through the Battle for the Vistula. Only about one man in three did that, out of the more than nine thousand men who fought in it, and every one of us came through it alive and healthy. What were the odds against that happening?"

"Who knows?" the captain said. "Who knows what the odds are of Zbigniew still being alive? Or if he is, will we ever see him again? We all knew that we were engaged in a dangerous occupation, but whoever thought we would lose men this way? Those were two of the finest fighting men I've ever had the privilege of knowing. Who would have expected them dying, not in combat, but in what was, in the end, just an accident brought on by our own ignorance? Well, we still have our duties to the younger men. I'll talk to Taurus's platoon, and Zbigniew's as well. Gentlemen, men have died in every one of your platoons. You should go and comfort the living. Maybe later tonight we'll meet back here."

We left to talk to our knights and squires, but much later we were all sitting around the same table again, quietly drinking.

In the morning we said a special Mass for the Dead, recited our Army Oath, and then we went back to our duties.

We steamed back up the mighty river, and by luck one of the lookouts spotted the life ring that Kiejstut had attached to the anchor cable. An hour's hard labor got us back our anchor.

We anchored upstream of a wooded, uninhabited island, on the theory that if another tidal bore happened, the island would break its force. We started assembling riverboats again, while others went to the island and began chopping firewood, which was needed both to ensure that the ship got home and as fuel for our four remaining riverboats.

The disaster had cost us, in dead, missing, and seriously injured, almost two complete platoons of explorers, including two platoon leaders. Since we were also missing two boats, well, with some reshuffling of personnel, it worked out.

The baron was shorthanded by twenty-one men, and asked if we could help out, but Captain Odon said there were still thirty-four men on the sick list, and many of them would be capable of doing at least some work within a few days.

I could see that the baron wanted to say that taking care of the injured took up a lot of badly needed manpower, but I think he was still a little afraid of our captain, and kept silent.

A tall, straight tree on the west end of the island had been stripped of its branches. The base had been girdled so they couldn't grow back, and a big flag was nailed at the top, as a marker. It was agreed that the ship and the riverboats would meet back at this place in exactly three hundred sixty-five days.

It was decided that the captain would go with Father John and a platoon of men, and try to get to the headwaters of the Amazon, where there was supposed to be a gold-rich civilization.

I was to take my boat and search out the north side of the river, and Lezek was to take the south. Kiejstut and Fritz were to accompany the captain farther west and would be assigned to search and map some tributary.

We were to be friendly to the natives, to show them our products and see what they might have that would be of interest to us, but mostly we were to search for a rubber tree. This was described as having a white, sticky sap that, when dried, was stretchy, like raw pigskin.

Those men who had been logging on the island were apprehensive about finding a single kind of tree in that strange forest.

"God was feeling very creative when He made this place!" Fritz said. His hands were covered by a rash that he picked up on the island. "We must have cut down three or four hundred trees on that island, and I don't think that any two of them were of the same species. I tell you that every single tree, every single plant, was different from every other plant around it! These are not like the forests back home, where there might be only five kinds of trees and six kinds of bushes in ten miles of forest. We might have to search for years, and cut into thousands of trees before we find this rubber tree. And when we do, there won't be very many of them."

There was no way to answer that, so no one did.

Besides the rubber trees, we were each to try to set up five or six trading stations along the banks of the river. The natives would want our knives, we were told, if nothing else, and we would always be needing firewood for our steamboats.

We all began to realize that this would not be an easy mission to accomplish.

# Chapter Twenty-Seven

From the Journal of Josip Sobieski

WRITTEN MARCH 8, 1251, CONCERNING FEBRUARY 6, 1250

THE RIVER we were on was called the Amazon, which meant, in Ancient Greek, "without a breast." It was named after a tribe of vaguely Greek warrior women. The story was that they were archers, and to keep their right breasts from interfering with their shooting, they cut them off. Or some said that they burned them off.

It was a gruesome story, that young women would so mutilate themselves, and a stupid one besides. My mother and sisters are all good archers, and the women in my family have always been very well-endowed. None of them have ever noticed any difficulties with their breasts interfering with their shooting, and getting a nipple twanged by a bowstring would certainly be a noticeable event!

So why the biggest river in the world should be named after something that probably never happened, or shouldn't have happened if it did, was one of life's little mysteries, until the afternoon came for me to go out alone and try to meet some natives.

\* \* \*

We soon found that it was hotter on the river than it had been at sea, but it wasn't impossibly hot. The only problem was that it was hot all the time, without a break, which sometimes made it hard to fall asleep. The air had so much water in it that if anything got wet, it never seemed to get dry again, and we all had to learn to survive while being damp.

We soon discovered that on this river, humans did not always hold their normal, exalted position at the top of the food chain. A vast horde of disrespectful creatures were always out to displace us!

There were some huge reptiles, five and six yards long, some of them, which seemed to be half mouth, that the men promptly dubbed "dragons." There were snakes that got even longer, but we saw no large land mammals at all, or at least none bigger than a man.

There was a leech that was half the length of a man's arm, and after I burned one off the leg of a screaming squire, we *both* had nightmares about it for a week.

There were insects about in annoyingly prodigious numbers. Some of them were beautiful, some were horrible, some were huge, and some were all three. But when it came to being bitten, it actually wasn't nearly as bad as it was in the summer north of the Arctic Circle.

I was sitting beneath a tree having lunch with Sir Tomaz, my senior lance leader, when a leaf, which had fallen from the tree onto his cheese, got up on six legs and calmly walked away!

He said, "You know, Sir Josip, we're not in Poland anymore."

There was always something new crawling out of a crack in the boards, or out from under a rotting log. Some of them were beautiful, but the manual said that the creatures with the brightest colors were usually those that didn't have to hide. Likely, there was something about them that was deadly. Especially the snakes.

My riverboat, which I promptly named the *Magnificent Maude*, was small by the standards of those on the Vistula. It held a platoon of men in about the same comfort as the old *Muddling Through* had held an entire company. Thirty yards long and eight wide, it was only a single story tall, except where the bridge was built above the engine room. Cargo was kept below the main floor, and most of the boat was one huge screened-in room, to let the breezes in and keep the bugs out. There were lightweight

wooden blinds that could be rolled down in inclement weather, but it wasn't armed or armored, in the traditional sense. The only weapons we had were our usual personal rifles, swords, and sidearms.

By our standards, this was an obviously nonthreatening vehicle. However, standards vary, and soon it was very obvious that it scared the natives silly.

The first eleven times we approached a native village, the people started screaming and shouting as soon as we came into view. Sometimes they shot arrows, or threw spears at us, or used a thing that was like a big peashooter (the child's toy, not the steam-powered weapon) that they used to shoot a sort of needle.

They must put some sort of poison on those needles, or at least they did on the one that hit Sir Tomaz on the inside of the elbow. When he screamed with pain, I told him to act like a man, that it was only a tiny needle.

He insisted that it was poisoned, so we stripped off his armor, and I treated the small wound just like it was a snakebite, lancing it open and sucking the blood and poisons out. It was fortunate that I listened to him, because even with such treatment, his arm swelled up to be as big as his leg, and the area around the pinprick turned black. I think that without such treatment, he might have died.

But whether the villagers were aggressive or not, by the time we got there, the village would be completely empty. When we sat back and waited for them to return, they didn't. When we followed them into those incredibly tangled forests, either they shot at us some more, or we got completely lost, or, most often, both.

In the last two villages our program had been to take a few small things, foodstuffs, mostly, and leave in payment a small knife, and one of those machete swords that Lord Conrad was convinced would be so much in demand, hoping they would get the idea that we wanted to trade.

Maybe when we returned, in a few weeks, we would be more socially acceptable.

I resolved to try the twelfth village alone. We made a visual reconnaissance from over a mile away, and then I left the *Maude* out of sight around the bend so as not to frighten the villagers. I took a folding canvas boat in alone, but since the real Maude wouldn't want to marry an absolute fool, or a dead one, I wore my infantry armor, with the metal plates inside of clean, white coveralls. My cavalry armor had been left back in Poland.

I had a bag of steel tools, glass bead necklaces, salt tablets, dried fruit, and my recorder. I also carried a small camp chair, reasoning that a man looks less threatening sitting down than standing up.

When I came within sight of the village, I sat down and studied the place. It was subtly different from the other villages we had visited. The buildings were arranged differently, and the thatched roofs on the huts were much steeper.

The people were the big change, however. At the other villages, the people were a medium brown in color, like Gypsies, only a little darker. They all had dark eyes and straight black hair. The men did not grow beards, and neither sex had much in the way of body hair.

They tended to be short and thin-boned, and as in every place else in the world that I had ever heard of, the women were shorter than the men. As Lord Conrad had promised, no one wore clothing, although they did wear decorations, and some of those covered a lot.

The men looked to be fairly fit, and the young girls were often very attractive, but almost without exception, as soon as the women had children, they all became extremely fat. I found myself wishing that some of them would wear clothes.

These new people were much different. The men, or perhaps I should just say the "males," were short and brown, and they tended to be chubby. They seemed to be mainly involved with gardening when they weren't taking care of the children.

The women were larger than the males, or at least taller and better muscled. They carried bows and spears the way the males did in the other villages. While the males all had black hair, the women wore

theirs bright red. It did not look to be a natural color, and I suspected it was a dye. Their nipples and private areas were also colored bright red.

And the women were white. Not flesh-colored, the way I am, but *white*. The color of a new sheet of paper. Not even Lord Conrad had ever talked about such a thing.

But one can sit and be amazed for only so long. It was time to attract some attention. I displayed my trade goods on the ground a few yards in front of me.

I got out my recorder, flipped up my visor, and started to play a simple shepherd's tune. Something I hoped would be interesting, calming, and proof that I wasn't out to hurt anyone.

I did not get the desired reaction.

Some children noticed me first. They ran home screaming, not to get Daddy, but for Mommy to come. Or at least, it was Mommy who came. Six mommies. They reminded me of, well, I never learned if there was a polite name for them, but the kind of women who don't like men but want to be just like them. It occurred to me that these might be the warrior women that the river was named after. I wondered if "without a breast" might be another way of saying "not very feminine."

I continued playing the same tune, to give them time to get used to it, and I continued smiling resolutely.

They stopped a few dozen yards from me and discussed me among themselves. Then one of them calmly notched an arrow and shot me.

Now, my suit was proof against Mongol arrows with steel heads. This woman's weapon might have had a quarter of the pull of a good Mongol recurved bow, and the arrow point was only flame-hardened wood, from the look of it. I didn't even stop playing, and the arrow bounced off my breastplate. I smiled.

Within seconds they launched an additional two spears, eight arrows, and two of those peashooter needles. Most of them hit me, but only the needles stood a chance of doing any harm. They might possibly get through because they were narrower than the rings in the chain mail that covered the cracks in my armor. I took my chances and continued playing "The Lonely Shepherdess." An arrow and both needles stuck in my coveralls, and playing with one hand, still smiling, I plucked them out.

One of the women, the best looking of the bunch, if you like that sort, screamed and ran at me with a long, thin club held over her head. I stopped playing and stood up. She hit me on the head as hard as she could, but I was wearing one of the old-style, ring-around-the-collar war helmets, and while it was extremely loud, I barely felt her blow.

I was getting very irritated at these people's behavior, but orders are orders, and we were told to make nice to the natives. I gesticulated to the trade goods that she had trampled in getting to me. I stooped over, picked up a necklace, and offered it to her. I was doing a serious job of turning the other cheek, and that's right where she hit me next.

She spat on me! She knocked my hand and gift away, and spat right in my face! I was furious. I have never struck a woman in my life, and I don't ever intend to, but I *do* punish naughty children when it is obviously for their own good!

I grabbed her by the arm, sat down, and turned her over my knee! I pinned her left arm behind her back, immobilized her legs with my right leg, and swatted her bare buttocks as hard as I could with my open hand until my right arm got tired.

During this time, there were a lot of rude sounds being made, and her friends tried to do various sorts of damage to my person. I simply ignored them, and the ladies didn't quite manage to knock me over. I then decided that this particular attempt at international trade was a wasted effort. I stood up, dumping the increasingly loud lady on the ground, picked up my recorder, and walked back to my canvas boat.



A half dozen or so more weapons hit me in the back as I made my exit, but I didn't care. One arrow put a hole in my boat, but I ignored it, keeping with the image. As a consequence, I almost sank in my armor before I got back to the *Maude*.

Mostly, I was thinking about how wonderful it was that I had brought an entire barrel of Lord Conrad's Seven-Year-Old Aged Whiskey along for my own personal use. Well, I had let the platoon buy shares on it once we'd gotten here, but there was still plenty to be had for me!

As soon as I got back to the *Maude*, I drew myself a pitcher of whiskey, and sat down alone to drink it.

Somehow, when you are *really* mad, you just can't get drunk, no matter how much you drink. It just burns out of you before it can do you any good.

The last few weeks had cost me two of my best friends, and now I was separated from not only the woman that I loved, but from the rest of the old lance as well. Oh, my platoon was made up of some very fine men, but it just wasn't the same!

And after enduring two weeks of having people I was trying to help turn and run away from me, a most annoying perverted woman had spat in my face!

It was late, and except for a pair of sentries, both of whom were up on the bridge, everyone else was asleep. We were at anchor, a hundred yards from the shore. It was dark, except for a single, small kerosene anchor light. I was in my "cabin," a small screened-in porch at the front of the boat. My white armored coveralls were hanging in one assembled piece on the other side of the room, in the vague hope that they would dry out from the soaking they had gotten that afternoon. I was sitting naked in my chair, trying to cool off enough to sleep. Only I couldn't sleep. I couldn't even get drunk.

I heard a sound in the water that wasn't quite right. I was sure it wasn't one of those huge green lizards that lived in the river, that the men persisted in calling dragons. I didn't think that it was one of the big, savage-looking otters, either.

I slowly drew my sword from its place near my bed and waited. In a few minutes my patience was rewarded. I saw the outline of a hand come up onto the foredeck, followed smoothly by the rest of a solidly built female form. I swore under my breath and slowly laid my sword down on the deck. No son of my mother could deliberately kill a woman, not even when she was attacking me in the dark with some sort of knife in her hand.

I was sure now that she was the same one I had spanked. She stealthily pushed through the screen door into my room, but she must not have seen me sitting in the dark, since she began to stalk my white coveralls. When she had her back to me, I ripped the sheet off my bed and threw it over her in one smooth motion. I thought this would confuse her, since the native bedding didn't run to bedsheets. If she didn't know what a sheet was, she probably wouldn't know what to do about one. I followed the sheet by a half a second, and the sheet, the woman, and I rolled around the floor, grappling, groping, and making rude noises.

When the sentries got there, I was on her back, with her legs gripped between mine, and her arms and torso wrapped in my arms.

"Excuse me, sir, but was this a situation with which you wanted help?" Tomaz said.

I said that of course I wanted help! I was subduing an intruder! How could he possibly imagine that I wouldn't want help?

"Well, sir, when you see a naked man and a naked woman rolling around on the floor with a bedsheet, I have learned that it is only prudent to ask, before joining in."

Still struggling with the violent woman, I told him that I was not inviting him to join in on an orgy. I wanted him to get some rope and some more help, and to get her immobilized.

In the end, it took five of us to get her properly trussed up. I explained to them that she had entered without permission, at night, and with a weapon in her hand. This was not ordinarily considered to be a friendly act, and therefore we would keep her tied up until further notice. I told

the second lance that they would have the rewarding task of teaching her to speak Pidgin, and to have the job done within the week.

They carried her away, and eventually I got to sleep.

# Chapter Twenty-Seven

From the Journal of Josip Sobieski

WRITTEN MARCH 9, 1251, CONCERNING FEBRUARY 26, 1250

OVER THE next few days, four other men tried their luck at getting friendly with the natives, each with as little success as I'd had. They'd all used different approaches, but because of the universal aggressiveness of the natives, I'd insisted that they wear armor, and nobody objected.

To make matters worse, Fritz was doing just fine on the south side of the river. On the radio, he said that the natives were fascinated with steel tools and were making good progress at learning Pidgin. Neither Captain Odon nor Kiejstut could offer us any useful advice, either.

It was our captive who eventually solved the problem.

The first morning after her capture, someone found a set of manacles and leg irons in our supplies. They were apparently put there in anticipation of one of our people going crazy, as had happened once near the Arctic Circle, but they worked just fine on a supposedly sane native woman who merely wanted to kill me. They were safer, since she couldn't chew herself loose, and more humane, with no chance of cutting off her blood supply.

We soon discovered that her skin coloration was as artificial as that of her hair. She was actually covered from head to foot with white paint, which was now wearing off. Under it, her skin was the same color as all the rest of the native people, but considerably lighter. We speculated that the white paint stopped her from getting a suntan.

The first day, she resisted all attempts at teaching her Pidgin, until they decided they had to use the same methods one uses to train a dog. By giving her small bits of food, or even better, salt, along with lavish praise, whenever she did anything right, and a scolding when she did things wrong, they eventually got through to her. I would have forbidden the use of any actual abuse, of course, but no one ever suggested that they use it.

The second lance kept at least two men on her at all times, from dawn until quite late, and in a week they had her in a meaningful conversation.

She refused to tell us her name, since if we knew it, she said, we could work magic and witchcraft against her. We still needed to call her something, so after trying out the "Captive Princess," a particularly unsuitable name, we simply settled on calling her Jane.

She said that at first she and her people thought I was a ghost! It seems that the local ghosts are all big, bulky things that are pure white in color. She now agreed I was not a ghost, but she felt that it was a perfectly reasonable mistake.

When I pointed out that she, too, was colored white, Jane said that her people did that to scare their enemies, and anyway, she could not be confused with a ghost because her nipples were painted red. Everyone knew that ghosts did not paint their nipples red, so she was safe from any mistake.

I said this was obviously true, since Christian ghosts did not paint their nipples red, either. In fact, I had never heard of a ghost painting anything any color at all. It was all I could think of to say about a subject so weird.

She was gratified to hear this.

I told her that our ghosts were not white, and that our coveralls were white because that was the natural color of cotton. I asked, if we painted them a different color, would she still think we looked like ghosts?

She said, of course not. If we were not white, we could not be ghosts.

We lacked a supply of clothing dye on board, but with her help, we found a tree with a dark brown sap that did a decent job of coloring our armored coveralls to a dark tan. We steamed back to the first village we had stopped at, and people came out to see what we had to offer.

Their reaction to our tools was remarkable. It took me a while to realize that, except for the bones and teeth of certain fish and animals, these people had nothing they could cut with. They not only lacked flint for toolmaking, they lacked any sort of stone at all. These were not a Stone Age people. They hadn't gotten that far along!

I'd put a good edge on one of the machetes, and let the natives see me slicing up some shrubbery.

Bear in mind that these people had spent their lives living in the most tangled forest imaginable. Every day of their lives had been spent crawling under plants, stepping over them, walking around them, and getting swatted in the face by them. And up until the moment they had a good knife, there hadn't been anything they could do about it.

One fellow in particular was fascinated, staring and grinning as I easily chopped the branches from a strange-looking bush. I grinned back at him and handed him the machete

He took it and gave the bush a tentative chop. Leaves and branches fell to the ground. He screamed in triumph! He took off at a dead run, laughing and shouting, slashing away at the underbrush. We heard him making all manner of noises out in the forest for well over an hour before he finally came back, dripping with sweat and tree sap.

The look on his face was like that of a young man who had finally attained sexual relief!

We explorers attained sexual relief of a more substantial sort from the young ladies of the village.

It all started with the elders inviting us over for a drink, and I think there must have been something in that brew that encouraged sexual license. Soon, I was handed a very attractive young woman who turned out to be the chief's favorite new wife. I was required to have sex with her *as a proof of my friendship with the chief!*

The young women of the tribe were all very appreciative of the small gifts my men gave to them, and the elders of the tribe were seen to be actively encouraging their daughters to please us.

I would be most embarrassed if my mother ever heard about the mass sexual orgy that ensued. While I had made no promises to Maude concerning my own chastity, it had been my firm intention to stay sexually true to her. This proved to be impossible in the induced madness that enveloped us.

Perhaps I am merely making excuses for my own conduct, but in later conversations with my men, I learned that the most subdued of them copulated with at least seven of the natives, and I have mental images of literally dozens of different young ladies under me. We could not possibly have been that virile without some sort of external stimulation!

That drink would make a very profitable product if sold in Europe, but I don't think the Church would approve of its sale!

All this fornication was accompanied by equally heavy drinking by everyone in the village. I thought that my own people drank too much, but we were but children compared to these native villagers. They continued on with the party long after we were comatose. At least, when I awoke in the night to relieve myself, the dancing and drinking were still going strong, with not an explorer in sight near the campfire.

It was the following afternoon before most of us departed that village.

We left a lance of men behind, confident that they would get along well with the natives.

That evening, we thanked Jane, the warrior woman, for her help. We gave her a knife, a machete, and an axe, along with some necklaces she liked, a sharpening stone, and a bag of salt tablets that all of the natives craved. We then offered to take her back to her home village.

Jane refused to go. It seems that by spanking her for spitting on me, I had permanently dishonored her somehow in the eyes of her tribe. She said that when she swam out to our boat and tried to kill

me, she had done it because she had already been drummed out of her tribe. She had come expecting us to kill her.

It was rather like what they say a Musselman does when he can no longer stand the pain of being alive. He puts on his best clothes, prepares his best weapons, mounts his best horse, and charges into his enemies, trying to kill as many of them as possible before they kill him. The custom is called "Running Amok."

Further conversation with our former captive convinced us that if we simply ejected her from the boat, without friends to guard her back, she would soon die in the forest. She had been useful to us thus far, and while we all found her masculine mannerisms in combination with her feminine body to be offensive, after consultation with my knights, I decided to let her stay aboard.

Over the next few weeks, we established three more trading stations and survived three more orgies, which the locals insisted on. When we tried to back out, they became extremely insulted, and it was only with great difficulty that we repaired the breach.

A number of changes came over Jane. As her body paint began to wear away, she looked like she was dying of some horrible skin disease. She made no attempt at replacing it, and in a few weeks the color was gone. The dye in her hair was growing out more slowly, but whatever dye she had used to stain her nipples and privy members seemed to be permanent. When someone questioned her about it, the painful process she described seemed to be something like tattooing.

When I asked her about her body paint, she said that she no longer had the right to wear her tribe's colors.

One of my men noticed her smearing herself with a clear tree sap and asked her about it. She said that it kept the insects from biting.

Now, this was a wonderful thing to hear, since we were constantly plagued by the little bastards. As things were, you had your choice of wearing a complete set of clothes, and suffocating, or you could strip down and be eaten by the mosquitoes. Naturally, he tried the stuff out.

It turned out that it did not exactly repel the bugs, but rather, it made your skin so sticky that they stuck to you but could not bite through the glue, so you did not get bitten. You had to learn to ignore the insects buzzing on your skin, and if you were going to wear the stuff at all, you had to go completely naked. It had the habit of gluing your clothes to your body.

At first we thought we had a salable product here, but on later thought, we decided that its limitations were too great for it to have a market in Europe. In time, however, we all got to using the stuff regularly, washing it off and replacing it twice daily.

But a bigger change in Jane was in her bearing, or maybe it was in her self-image. Perhaps it had something to do with being around heterosexual people, and noticing the way my men and I reacted to pretty native girls. Tomaz noticed it first.

He said, "Is it just me needing a woman, sir, or is Jane starting to act feminine?"

I said that maybe she was starting to pick up on our customs. I suggested that if he was thinking of getting physical with her, it was up to them, but I followed the lead of Lord Conrad and recommended he take it slow. If anything ever developed between the two, I never heard of it.

It had been raining nonstop for weeks, and joking reports from the lookouts contained sightings of Noah's Ark. I let it go and even laughed about it. Anything that raised the men's spirits was good.

At about this time, the radio died for good. The wet, the funguses, and the insects did electronic components no good at all. With the old style spark-gap transmitters and coherer-type receivers, you could putter with the things and completely rebuild them when you had to, and in time it would work again, after a fashion. With these modern things, well, once a tube burned out, it was useless, and no amount of fiddling, hard work, or prayer did you any good at all. We were out of tubes, and everything else was rusting vigorously.

Other things on board were wearing out and rotting much faster than usual. I was finding mushrooms growing in my locker, and any food that was not sealed in a glass jar or one of the new metal cans was rotten. It was good that we had mostly stopped wearing clothes, because our supply of uniforms wouldn't have lasted out the season, let alone a whole year.

The wood that our boat was made out of was starting to rot, as well. It was brand-new, first-quality oak, most of it, and it was rotting! Before long I had three men navigating the boat, and eleven more working to keep it repaired!

With the four trading posts we had set up—with a lance of men at each—I had only two lances left on board. The plan was to go another gross miles upstream, map the river, and set up a fifth post if we found a suitable site. Then we would go back and visit the other posts. I hoped that at least one of them still had a working radio.

We rounded a bend in the huge river and found ourselves steaming across a huge lake. At least two other boats should have been ahead of us, but when we had a radio, neither of them had mentioned the lake to us. Still, they could not possibly have missed it.

Besides being very large, the lake had other peculiarities as well. There were trees growing right out of the water, and in some areas they grew so thick they blocked out the sun. The trees back home would drown if their roots were flooded, but there were thousands of kinds of strange trees in this forest, and most of them seemed to be healthy.

Jane could offer no advice, since her home was a gross miles away. Being a primitive, she was much like a peasant in never before having been far away from home. The lake was as new to her as it was to us.

We steamed on, keeping the north bank in sight in accordance with my instructions. We were surprised to find that some of the huge trees in their watery meadows had people living in them. I would have investigated further, but other problems surfaced.

Two men acquired painful infections in their privy members, with a white pus dripping out. I had never seen the like of it, and there was no mention of it in the medical manual. The salves we had were ineffective, and there was nothing for it but to wait and see if it went away.

The next day, eight of the sixteen people we had on board came down with a severe fever. Often delirious, they could do little but lie in their beds and either shiver or sweat profusely.

Again, none of our medications did these men any good, and their temperatures grew alarmingly high.

The day after, four more people were down with the fever. There were no longer enough of us to manage the boat, take care of the sick, and map the shoreline. When I felt myself getting light-headed, I had the boat tied up to one of the trees in the middle of the lake. There was nothing left that we could do but go to bed and see whether or not we would survive.

The fever came and went for many days. Most of the time, you were flat on your back, unable to move. Occasionally, you felt almost normal, for a while, and then you could get up and help out with those who were more badly off.

Only Jane stayed healthy, and I think that without her we all would have died.

I don't know how long we stayed tied to that tree. I lost all sense of time, and often there was no one awake enough to keep the logbook up to date. Jane by this time was speaking a mixture of Polish and Pidgin, but no one had even begun to teach her to read or write. As it was, she did yeoman service keeping us in water and food.

# Chapter Twenty-Nine

From the Journal of Josip Sobieski

WRITTEN MARCH 10, 1251, CONCERNING DATE UNKNOWN, 1250

AFTER I don't know how many weeks or months, I awoke feeling almost healthy and certainly hungry. I called out, but no one answered. The room was dark, more so than the lowered blinds could account for. The bed wasn't level. As I looked around in the gloom, it seemed the floor had an undulating quality about it, and that the walls were no longer straight.

Sure that I was still delirious, I closed my eyes again and slept.

When I awoke once more, the room was somewhat lighter, but all else was the same. The floor really was bumpy and bent, the screened walls were far from straight, and the ceiling sagged. There were strange forest sounds about me, and I was sure the boat was no longer afloat.

I went to remove the sheet that covered me, and for the first time noticed my hand. It looked ancient and wrinkled, and my fingernails were incredibly long, longer than they had ever been, longer even than those that some European highborn ladies cultivate to prove they never have to work.

I fumbled for my bayonet, on the nightstand, to trim my nails with. When I pulled it from the sheath, it was rusty. I dropped it, and it knocked a deep dent in the floor.

Had months gone by? Years?

I touched my face, my beard, and found it to be very long, longer than my fingers. Before I fell sick, I had been cleanshaven.

I called out again, and again, no one answered.

Was I truly alone? Could all the others be dead? Surely they would never abandon me!

With great effort, I sat up in the bed and twisted so my feet were on the floor. I marveled at how thin my thighs had become. I felt my chest, and could feel every rib under my fingers.

I stood, shaking, and slowly made my way to the kitchen, expecting to see the remains of bodies scattered around. It was not as bad as I feared. Most of the beds in the common room were gone. There were four beds left, and they showed signs of use.

The kitchen was untidy, the breakfast dishes unwashed, but the scraps on them were no more than a few hours old. There was cold food left in a pot. I found a spoon, sat down, and ate. I drank a canteen filled with water, and then stumbled to the door to relieve myself in the latrine at the stern. The forest came right up to the doorway. There was no sign of the lake that we steamed in on. The *Magnificent Maude* was sitting on the forest floor, her formerly straight lines all bent and slumped, and she was in the process of rotting away. Ants swarmed over the hull.

I fought my way through the thick bushes to the latrine, only to find vegetation growing up through the toilet seat. I ripped the leaves away and sat down.

None of this made any sense at all.

My ears hummed with bird sounds, insect sounds, and what might be the distant scream of a monkey. Then, in the far background, I heard what had to be the regular thumping of an axe. It was a man, swinging an axe. Some of my crew were still alive, they were out there somewhere, doing something important.

Exhausted, but greatly relieved, I went slowly back to my bed and fell asleep.

I awoke to find Tomaz standing above me. He was dirty, bearded, and except for a silver cross hanging around his neck, he was completely naked. He had lost a third of his body weight since I had seen him last, but despite everything, I could see that he was healthy, or at least getting that way.

"Are you feeling better, sir?"

I said that I thought so, and asked how long I had been away.

"We are not sure, sir. For a while there, there was no one mobile and sane enough to keep up the log. Several months, at least."

I asked how many of us were still alive.

He sat down on the edge of my bed.

"There are five of us left, sir. You, me, Jane, Gregor, and Antoni. The other eleven are dead. They weren't even buried properly. The two priests were the first to die, so none of them were given extreme unction. Jane was alone through the worst of it, and there wasn't anything she could do but throw the bodies overboard. That was before the water went away."

Seeing the quizzical expression on my face, he continued.

"We weren't sailing across a lake, sir. We were going over a flooded forest. In a few months, once the rains stopped, the water all drained away and the forest became dry land again. It was just as well, because by then the boat was sinking, just rotting away. Something in this land doesn't like our northern lumber. Even the handles on our knives and axes have had to be replaced. Some of the local timber is pretty good, though. Jane has been a big help, there, since the trees around here are a lot like those around her home."

I asked about the chopping I'd heard earlier.

"There is a fair-sized river about a mile from here. Jane is showing us how to make a dugout *canoe*, a boat of the sort her people use. You probably heard us working on that. We have been trying to spend half our time on it. The rest is needed to find food. Most of our stores rotted, of course. All the dried peas and beans, all the grains. Only the canned and bottled things are left, and not much of them. When she was taking care of us all alone, Jane didn't have much time to go hunting, and in her tribe, it's the men who do the gathering. Luckily, she knew enough about what to look for to show us what to do."

I said that he made it sound like she was in charge.

"I suppose she is, sir, in a way. She knows this country, and we don't. She hasn't been giving orders, exactly, but when she makes a suggestion, we usually follow it."

I said that despite all that, she was still an outsider, and we were regular army. I supposed that I would have to do something about our command structure.

"Sir, you are not going to do anything about anything, not for a week at least. That's how long it took each of the rest of us to get to the point of doing useful work. That's all you have to do for now. Get well. Once you are up on your feet, I will relinquish my command to you, but not until then."

I asked him if he had taken command.

"To the extent that five naked, starving people constitute a command, yes. I had to. I am senior lance leader, after all, and the only knight you have left. Until recently, you have been out of your head, when you weren't comatose. Just relax, sir. In a week, you'll likely be up and around."

Five days later I was able to hobble all the way down to the site where they were building the new boat. Jane had selected a huge tree as being suitable, and it had been chopped down. Although her methods called for burning it down, the men did it their way, but on later reflection they weren't



sure which would have been faster. Certainly, burning would have been less work. The bark was removed, and with fire and axe they made the outside look like a double-ended boat.

Fires were started on the top of the log, while the outside of the boat was kept wet. By judicious burning and scraping, the thing was being hollowed out. Jane estimated that in two weeks they would be ready to leave.

It seemed to me they had built on a grander scale than necessary to carry five people. They said they planned to take all of the remaining trade goods with them, to trade with the other tribes along the way. Also, there had been six of us when they started the boat. Yashoo had died a week before I regained consciousness.

Moving the completed boat on rollers proved to be impossible without a block and tackle, and those aboard the *Maude* had all either rotted or been eaten by the ants. Again, the native way worked. We dug trenches under the boat and slid logs under it, which supported the thing as we dug a pit under the whole boat. Then we extended the pit into a canal all the way to the river. Water filled the canal, we dug out the supporting logs, and floated the boat out.

I found it remarkable that the native people had worked out whole technologies to get around their lack of a good cutting edge.

As we were loading the canoe with everything we would be taking with us, we came across the only item made of northern wood that had not rotted to uselessness. The whiskey barrel. It was completely sound, as were its contents. This was a pleasant surprise, for Lord Conrad had mentioned that a small amount of whiskey would purify water without the need to boil it. We toasted the old *Maude*, as well as our lost comrades, and then rolled the half-empty barrel down to the canoe.

We pushed off at dawn.

The dragons had always avoided us when we traveled in the *Maude*. I suppose that we frightened them. But they had seen a lot of native canoes, and they weren't afraid of smaller boats. We had to shoot dozens of them when they came too close, but dragons have a slow learning curve, and we had to thin them out everywhere we went. Their tails were good eating.

We made good progress downstream for the first few days, but there hadn't been any rain for some time, and the level of the water was dropping alarmingly. What had been a deep river became a sluggish creek. We often had to get out of the canoe and pull it through the shallow, muddy water. This was required more and more often as the long days wore on.

Eventually, we were reduced to unloading the boat in order to drag it farther. It soon became obvious that we would either have to stop our journey, until such time as the water level rose, or to abandon most of our weapons and supplies and try to make it back on foot with only what we could carry on our none too strong backs.

In this jungle, without our supplies, I did not think we could have survived a week.

On the other hand, finding enough food was no longer a problem. What little water was left in the river bottom was filled with fishes. Our food stocks were never very good, and while the fish were available, we set out to smoke as many of them as possible, for future use.

The water eventually got so low and the fish got so thick that you could just wade into the mud and grab them with your hands. We were doing that when Antoni started shaking uncontrollably and screaming. He had a fish in both of his hands and he couldn't let go of it! Gregor went to help him, and then suddenly Gregor couldn't let go of Antoni!

I'd seen something like that once when a man touched the wires on a big electrical generator. I knew that this couldn't be the same thing, but I didn't know what else to do. You can stop anything electrical by opening the circuit, so I got out my machete, which we all carried now in lieu of a sword, and chopped the fish in two.

Both men immediately fell into the muddy water. When I got to Antoni, I found that he wasn't breathing and didn't have a heartbeat. I dragged him to shore and administered CPR, while Tomaz went after Gregor.

Gregor's life signs were missing as well, and we worked on both men for almost half an hour. Eventually, Tomaz was successful with Gregor, and he lived. I failed to bring Antoni around.

There wasn't a mark on either of the men, and from Gregor's description of what happened to him, it didn't seem to be a poison. It looked like death by electrocution, but how could a fish electrocute anybody?

We buried Antoni in the sand by the dying river.

That evening, we were sitting around the campfire, depressed by the loss of yet another of our number. Conversation had waned, and I was starting to think about going to sleep, when two tiny men walked up to our fire, as bold as you please! They sat down and shared out between them a fish that we had baked but nobody had wanted to eat. Then they ate it, smiling and nodding at us!

We were stunned. These people looked like something out of a children's fairy tale! They were perfectly formed, well-proportioned, and even quite handsome, but neither of them came as high as my waist! I doubted if either of them could have weighed forty pounds. Yet these were adult men, well-muscled, and with underarm and genital hair.

When they had finished their meal, with gestures we offered to cook some more for them, but they declined. Nor were they interested in any smoked fish. They did accept some water from us, lightly laced as it was with whiskey, and appeared to enjoy it considerably.

I took out a small belt knife and began to whittle on a piece of wood. This got their attention! I gave the knife to one of them, and he was delighted with it. I think he was more amazed with the knife than we were with him. Tomaz gave a similar knife to the second little man, then got out a machete and showed them how to chop up a nearby bush.

We now had them sufficiently interested that I didn't think they would run away on us. It was time to teach them how to speak Pidgin!

The first lessons hadn't gone very far when the bushes around us parted and a dozen or so additional people came out and sat around our campfire. They weren't all little men. Some of them were little women.

These new people were greeted by the two we had already made friends with, and it was obvious to us that they had stayed in the bushes to see what sort of reception we would give their friends.

Since the newcomers were well-armed with spears, bows, and peashooters, they had been prepared to come to the rescue, if we turned out to be the bad guys.

We were trying hard to be the good guys, and we were soon passing out smoked fish and very watered whiskey, and putting more fish on the fire to cook. I went to the canoe and came back with knives enough for everybody in the party, and things soon got very pleasant.

We were going to have to spend some time in this area, at least until the dry spell ended, and we were glad that we could now spend it with friends, albeit small ones.

# Chapter Thirty

From the Journal of Josip Sobieski

WRITTEN MARCH 11, 1251, CONCERNING DATE UNKNOWN, 1250

JUST BEFORE we went to sleep, our guests went back into the forest. Even with a fire, and with a sentry awake, they did not feel comfortable out in the open. They couldn't have gone far, though, because they were back again at first light.

They waited respectfully as the three of us recited our morning oath. Later, once they learned Pidgin, they had us translate it for them, and many of them started reciting it with us, as did, eventually, Jane.

They called themselves the Yaminana, and they said that the land for miles around owned them. They really thought that way. They did not own the land. It owned them. Another curiosity was that they did not consider themselves to be "real." We, the big people, were the real people. They were just the Yaminana. To their minds, they were something between the animals and the real people, but not members of either group.

The women were mostly gatherers, collecting more than half the food the tribe ate. They took care of the children and did the cooking. As with the other tribes we had seen, these roles were maintained with great strictness. A woman of the Yaminana would no more go hunting than a European would fornicate with his mother!

The men were primarily hunters, waiting silently for hours until a bird, a snake, or a monkey came within the relatively short range of their weapons before shooting. They liked fish, but disliked being on the ground in the open, which fishing generally required. Thus, they were pleased when we brought in all the fish that everybody could carry, before we made the trip to their village.

They were experts with poisons and with traps. The only big predator, aside from the dragons and some of the snakes, was a big spotted cat. It was quite capable of killing a full-sized human, but the Yaminana did not fear it. Rather, it feared them, their poisoned arrows, and their traps. Usually, the big cat avoided the little people.

I know that we could never have survived had we stumbled unsuspectingly onto their village. They had to point out to us each of the deadly tricks that awaited the unwary. The worst, or at least the most common, were pointed sticks steeped in poison, which were stuck in the dirt along the trail. Step on one, and you were laid up for a month, if you were lucky. If not, you were dead.

Their village was largely built up in the trees. Indeed, it might have been them that I had spotted, months ago, just before the fevers hit my platoon. It made sense, given the small size of the people and the fact that the forest around here regularly flooded.

Their community was made up of perhaps four hundred people. Well over half of their population consisted of children, and we saw only a few really old people among them.

They were much lighter-skinned than the natives we had seen earlier, perhaps because of their habit of staying in the dense forest, out of the sun. Their hair was not as black as the others', either, but often shaded into a dark brown. They were tiny, with the adults averaging about a yard tall, yet their proportions were approximately those of normal people, except for the eyes, which were about the same size as my own. Placed in a tiny head, they seemed huge. All told, they were as attractive a people as I have ever seen.

They went about completely naked, avoiding all jewelry, decorations, clothing, and body paint, save for the ubiquitous insect sap.

If they needed something with them, such as their weapons, they carried them in their hands and never slung them over a shoulder, even while climbing trees. They didn't wear belts, baldrics, or anything like a backpack or pouch. We wondered if the reason was that, being small, if danger threatened, they wanted to be able to drop everything, to run, and to hide.

My men and I had long been reduced to wearing loincloths, a piece of old bedsheet going from the back of the belt to the front. The native chief objected to them, on the grounds of sanitation! He felt it was unhealthy to thus hold the body's natural dirt against it. We demurred, but a few days later our loincloths disappeared in the night.

The other tribes that we had met had insisted we indulge in an orgy with them. The attitude seemed to be that if we were not going to be their enemies, we must be their best friends. No middle ground was possible. The little people had the same attitude, only more so.

When we were introduced to their elders, everyone was all smiles and nods since we couldn't speak with them yet. I gave the chief a knife, an axe, and a machete. He gave me his favorite new wife!

Not just to use, but to keep. Forever. This bothered me, for while I was sure that my love, Maude, would forgive my sexual indiscretions—once I told her of the peculiar circumstances—how could I possibly explain bringing home another woman?

I couldn't pronounce her name, since it contained two clicks and a whistle that were used in the local tongue as well as the usual vowels and consonants. I never learned to manage these strange sounds. The locals actually laughed at me every time I tried to pronounce them. But her name ended with "Booboo," and she didn't seem to mind me calling her that.

My problems were increased by the fact that I was attracted to her. She was a pretty little thing. She was perfectly, deliciously formed, and had all of her dimensions been doubled, I would have recommended her to any good friend.

But despite her full, pointed breasts, her slender waist, and her flaring hips, I could not quite convince myself that anyone that tiny could be an adult. And even if she was old enough, there was the physical problem of our relative sizes.

How could I possibly copulate with someone so tiny without doing her serious damage?

The chief made it very clear that this was the way things were done, and if I were to be so crass as to insult both him and his former wife, then we had best get out of his territory now, before he was forced to kill us.

Leaving then would have involved abandoning our supplies, and after seeing the defenses around the village, I shuddered at the prospect of trying to make our way overland, past other, doubtless equally well-protected villages.

With this incentive, I went through a native wedding ceremony, with Tomaz and Gregor at my side. My objections to marriage had made the elders suspicious, and they now felt that we should all become their relatives. Gregor was of the opinion that the natives simply had a surplus of young women to feed.

With the Yaminana, marriage had a lot to do with mutual care, making sure the other was well-fed, taking care of children, and love, in the true sense of the word. It had very little to do with sex. Anytime anyone wanted to have sex with another person, they simply asked, and the favor was generally granted on the spot. Except for reasons like illness, the fact that you were a man who had already done it once today, or that you had prior commitments, to fail to have sex with a person of the opposite sex who asked you politely was a serious, even deadly insult. With this situation, the best tactic was to ask any lady who caught your eye early in the day, so you could turn down the dogs later without fear of repercussions.

Heterosexual sex was enjoyed out in the open, and at all times of the day or night. Homosexuality and lesbianism were unknown. Strangely, the Yaminana had no clear idea of there being a connection

between sex and children. They said that a woman had to have sex at least once in order to "open the path" for children, but after that, sex was just for fun, and children happened when they wanted to.

Sex proved to be quite possible with our new wives, and all the rest of the women in the tribe, for that matter, despite their small proportions. I always insisted that my partners be on top, however, for fear of hurting them.

Jane confused the Yaminana, so they ignored her. They did not like the idea of a woman hunting, although they grudgingly admired her abilities with a bow. To my knowledge, she neither asked nor was asked to have sex during her entire stay there.

They were vastly impressed with our guns. When a big, long-nosed sort of wild pig, with three toes, came into the village, I got the chief's permission to shoot it. One shot put it down, and I was later told that it would have taken the Yaminana hours to kill so big a beast, with the likely injury of several villagers.

The chief immediately insisted that I give him a gun, but fortunately he was too small to shoot one. At his first attempt with one, it knocked him flat on his back and badly bruised his arm. I was happy when he gave up on the idea. As mercurial as these people were, I didn't really want to see them with modern weapons.

Jane had long considered firearms to be instruments of the devil and refused to touch them.

The Yaminana didn't make pottery, and were noticeably more primitive than the other tribes we'd met. They seemed to be less intelligent, and even childlike in most things. They were charming, though, and brought out our paternal feelings. Their children were particularly endearing, and even Jane couldn't help but feel maternal around them, although she was ashamed to admit it.

Still, we wondered if the small size of their heads and brains had something to do with their lack of intellectual depth.

In the course of time, everyone in the tribe was speaking a version of Pidgin, and eventually they seemed to like it so much that they were abandoning their old language. They were a simple people, and they liked a simple language.

For the next six months we and our adopted tribe ate well. Generally, they would find the game, and we would kill it. They did most of the gathering and the hunting and snaring of small game, but our addition of wild pigs, dragons, and big snakes, one of which was fully nine yards long, more than paid our way.

We helped out in another way when the Yaminana were attacked by a neighboring tribe of full-sized people. This was after we had stayed with them for over three months, and we Europeans had regained much of our original strength. Some thirty warriors attacked us, but they didn't have army training, and they didn't have guns.

We killed eleven of them, nine by gunshot and two in hand-to-hand fighting without serious injury to ourselves. The Yaminana accounted for three more, with a loss of seven of their own number, all of them adult men. The women neither hunted nor fought, which was probably why they outnumbered the men.

After the battle we were horrified to watch our little friends gleefully butcher their fallen foes, and then cook them up for dinner!

The chief told me they had to eat their enemies, because the big people who had attacked in the first place wanted to capture some of the Yaminana in order to eat them.

When a Yaminana was eaten by an outsider, his soul was lost to the tribe. Eating their enemies was the only way to return the souls of their lost tribesmen to their families. And anyway, he told us, they were delicious!

Fortunately, he was not greatly offended when we refused to participate in the feast. It was enough that we had provided the main course.

After I had seen my little wife daintily nibbling off the last shreds of flesh clinging to a human femur, it was weeks before I could kiss her again.

I was also shocked when I saw Jane happily eating her share of the cannibal feast! She said that to her people, human flesh was just another kind of meat. On questioning her later, I found out why she had not eaten our own dead on the *Maude*; since those men had died of a sickness, the meat was tainted. As to Antoni, she had simply assumed we preferred fish, as she did.

The next day, with great ceremony, the Yaminana ate the bodies of their own tribesmen who had fallen in battle.

All of this cannibalism troubled me. I had not been able to make any progress at converting the Yaminana to Christianity and had even given up trying, until I could bring a priest back to do the job properly. Seeing these tiny people eating human flesh told me just how remiss I had been in doing my Christian duty toward them. I renewed my efforts to bring them to Christ, but again it was to no avail. I gave up and worked instead on my equipment. The stock of my rifle had rotted so badly that I was obliged to carve myself a new one, out of a native wood that Jane recommended.

The most important event during our stay with the Yaminana, from the army's viewpoint, happened during our first month with them.

Several of their very tiny children were playing a game with a ball, when it rolled into a stream. I waded in to get it for them and was surprised to find the ball shedded water like wax, but it was soft, like flesh. I gave the ball back to the children and went to talk about it with some of the adults.

I was told that the toy was made from the sap of a certain tree, which they were very happy to take me to. At last I had found the almost mythical rubber tree! In fact, there were quite a few of them out there.

I got Tomaz and Gregor and showed them my find. After that, we worked out an efficient way to bleed the trees without killing them, and collected as much of the sap as we could. Over the months, we turned some of it into balls, in the native fashion, and stored the rest in empty glass food jars. We also collected samples of the tree's bark and its leaves, to aid others in finding them.

After more than six months of only occasional rain, the great downpours returned in earnest, and the river began to fill. Our canoe had not rotted as our riverboat had, and we soon had all in order for our departure.

We tried to persuade our wives to stay behind, for we weren't at all sure what we would do with them back in Poland, or whether they would like it there. But our tiny ladies were adamant about going with us. We had told too many stories about what it was like in Europe, I suppose. Also, the elders insisted that we take them with us, and their continued goodwill would be important when we returned to establish a trading post here, to bring in the rubber.

We shoved off in much better physical shape than we had arrived in, and with our company now increased to seven. The trip back was long and arduous, but relatively uneventful. At least nobody died.

When we at last put in at the fourth trading post we had established, we found it deserted, as was the native village it had been built next to. A day's searching through the ruins of both gained us no enlightenment. There was no evidence of violence. The post and the village had not been burned, but simply abandoned. Near what must have been the church, we found more than two dozen graves, with wooden crosses over them, but no indications as to who was buried there. Profoundly disturbed, we went on east, to the next post.

The story was the same at the third post and at the second. My men were gone, the villagers were gone, and there was nothing to show why this had happened. It was not as though some other tribes had supplanted the ones we had befriended. The countryside seemed to be devoid of all human life.

At the first post, I found Sir Caspar, the lance leader I had left there a year before. The village behind him looked to have about a third of its former inhabitants left.

He was nearly as naked as we were, sporting little but some pants with the legs cut off, and a pair of native sandals, yet he saluted me in proper army fashion, and it seemed only proper to salute back, even though I stood before him naked and barefoot. In military fashion, I asked him to report.

"It was sickness, more than anything else, sir," he said. "I lost one man to a dragon, and three more to fevers. The people in the village were sick, too, but of some other disease, like the worst cold you ever saw. Nothing we tried did any good, and the native doctors couldn't do any better, on their people or on mine. I got word from the other posts that they were in trouble, but we didn't have any help to send to them. I was bedridden and my men were either dead or shaking with fevers. I haven't heard from the other posts in six months."

I asked him about any other riverboats, and he said they hadn't seen one since I left him there, a year ago.

We went into his native-style hut, and Gregor brought some whiskey up from the canoe. While the women went out in search of supper, I filled Sir Caspar and his men in on all that had happened to us since I had last seen him.

"My God. Then we six are all that are left of a platoon of forty-three men? What a disaster!" he said. "And why haven't the other three platoons come looking for us? Could they be in worse shape than we are?"

I said that I didn't know, but I intended to leave in the morning for the rendezvous point, at the island with the flag. I asked him if he wanted to join us.

"No, sir, I don't see how I can. Father David has been making progress here in converting those villagers who survived the plague. He wouldn't even consider leaving without orders from his superiors in Poland. Ronald and I couldn't possibly abandon him."

I saw his point, and promised to return, no matter what I found out. Before leaving, I asked if they had any clothes to spare. Sir Caspar offered me the shorts he was wearing. That was all he had. Even their bedding was gone. I, of course, declined his offer.

Later that night we took advantage of Father David's presence to go to confession.

In the morning, after we recited our Army Oath, we sang a proper mass, with Communion, for the first time in entirely too long. Then we left, heading east.

# Chapter Thirty-One

From the Journal of Josip Sobieski

WRITTEN MARCH 12, 1251, CONCERNING FEBRUARY 10, 1251

As we came in sight of the island, I could barely believe my eyes! The entire island had been logged over, and a dozen new buildings, all made of concrete—army fashion—were either completed or under construction! At least a full company of men were busily working. Above it all was a huge, multi-element yagi radio antenna.

As we tied our canoe up to one of the docks, a sentry looked at us with his mouth open, then ran to get his superior. He was wearing a clean, summer-weight class B uniform, and for the first time in half a year I was seriously conscious of my own nakedness.

I suddenly realized I was coming back a dismal failure. I had been sent out with a steam-powered riverboat, tons of supplies, and a platoon of forty-two healthy, well-educated young men. Now the boat was a rotten mound in the jungle, the supplies were gone, with almost nothing to show for them, and all the men were dead except for the two naked survivors next to me, plus three more, left behind at a trading post—out in the bush—with nothing to trade.

I had lost an incredible thirty-seven out of forty-two of the army's finest young men. If ever a platoon leader deserved to be shot, it was me.

I wasn't sure what their feelings would be about the four women with me. Jane, at least, had certainly earned the right to be one of us, and the others were our wives. I didn't know what army policy was toward non-Christian, native wives. But there was nothing to do but to brazen it out.

As we were unloading the canoe onto the dock, a group of clean, groomed, and uniformed men came out to us, and I was suddenly glad we had left the whiskey barrel back at the trading post. With it, I could see them adding drunkenness to the list of charges against me. Leading the group was Baron Siemomysl himself, the commander of the entire Explorer's Corps.

He was smiling!

He completely ignored military formality and said, "Sir Josip! My God, but it's good to see you alive! We were all worried about you! Welcome to Brazylport! Come, introduce me to your party."

I introduced the men and women of my group to my baron, and told him a bit about each of them. He seemed delighted with them, but he winced when he noticed the hand-carved stock on my rifle.

"Excellent! I see that you have brought back samples of rubber, besides. But for now, unless you have something urgent to tell me, rooms are being made ready for you, and I'm sure you would like a chance to freshen up."

Which was as polite a way as he could manage of saying that I probably didn't want to report in officially while I was buck naked.

The baron personally led us back to the married housing area, and gestured to the tree stumps and the soil denuded of vegetation.

"We had to clear the entire area in order to clean out all of the nastier plants and animals. We'll be replanting it soon, with safe, useful local plants. Perhaps some of your ladies can advise us on that."

When we got to the married housing area, some troops were just carrying a new set of furniture into a new building. Four women in Explorer uniforms greeted our ladies and whisked them away. I was glad to see that someone had talked Lord Conrad out of his silly "men only" policy for the corps.



The baron left, saying, "Come and see me as soon as you are ready."

We men were shown the way to the showers. An hour later, scrubbed, shaved, and with my hair properly cut, I walked to the commander's office in a new class A uniform, with my tattered logbooks and journals under my arm.

The baron returned my salute and politely asked me to sit down.

"Well, now. The short of it is that as soon as we realized the mistake we'd made, we got another expedition together as quickly as possible. Launching the first expedition without any experienced men was an unavoidable necessity, but sending your company out with riverboats that rotted apart in a few months, with radios that ceased to function in weeks, and with food supplies that went bad even quicker, was downright criminal. The army owes you and your men a serious apology, son.

"We've been here for four months now, and with the buildings mostly up, we've started doing what we came here to do. Namely, to get your people the kind of equipment you need, and to test it on-site. Our first ferrocrete riverboat will be coming down the ways in a few weeks, and then we can start exploring properly! We started testing special paints and preservatives the day we got here, and work is already being done on a radio that works in this humidity. But enough of that. Pour yourself a drink and tell me what has happened to you this past year."

I told him the whole story, and filled my glass several times in the telling. The short twilight of the tropics had started before I was through.

"That was quite a story, Captain Sobieski. Yes, you've been promoted, and your men have just been promoted along with you. We'll come up with something for your native warrior woman, as well. You all deserve it, and there is a lot of work around here that needs doing. We'll be working together for a long time to come. The rubber you brought in wasn't the first, but a third source of supply will be very valuable, and your discovery will certainly be exploited. Those Yaminana people of yours sound fascinating, and I look forward to talking to your pretty little Booboo as soon as possible."

I thanked the baron, but said that I was looking forward to a trip home to Poland before long. I had a young lady there who was waiting to be my bride.

"That brings me to a very painful topic, Captain. I got a message from Lord Conrad three days ago, and, well, you can't go home. None of us can. It was only a few weeks ago that enough men like you made it back to impress on us the magnitude of the disease problem. It now appears that at least half, and possibly as many as three-quarters, of your old company have died of disease. Furthermore, they died of diseases unknown in Europe.

"In order to replace you, if you went home, we would have to bring in at least two and perhaps as many as four other men, and then watch as one, or two, or three of them died of disease in the first year. And that's not the worst of it.

"If you went back home, you could be a carrier of any or all of the deadly diseases that have afflicted your company. You could start a plague that could wipe out half the population of Christendom! And the problem gets still worse.

"We have already started plagues among the native peoples of this continent! Diseases that don't seriously bother us are deadly to them. Out of ignorance, we may have committed one of the worst crimes in history! Whole villages have already been obliterated. In the end, by simply coming here, we may have caused more deaths than the Mongols did with all their armies, swords, and arrows! So you see, we can't possibly let any of our people go home until this problem is solved.

"Furthermore, we have another company of volunteers forming up in Poland, medical people who are going to come out here to try to find a cure for the plagues we've started. They are coming here *knowing* that most of them will be dead within the year. The survivors of that company won't be going home, either."

I sat back, stunned. It was too much, too big. This day I had been raised to the heights on seeing the new base, when I had feared to find nothing but an empty island. Then I was cast down at the thought of my own dismal failure, then lifted back up at the baron's pleasant welcome, and then cast down again by this horrible news.

I sat there, numb, unable to absorb it all.

After a while the baron said, "Is there anything else you want to know?"

I nodded yes, and asked about the others in my company, Captain Odon and the other platoon leaders.

"Captain Fritz came in a few weeks ago. He's on recuperative leave, but you'll find him around here somewhere. Sir Taurus, of course, was killed before you set out on your mission. Sir Kiejstut is dead. He died six months ago of some disease he picked up. They say that his ending was quick. Sir Lezek was reported to have been alive as of a few months ago, several hundred miles upriver. Of the others, we have no definite news."

So. I still had Fritz and probably Lezek. Maybe Captain Odon, maybe Father John. Maybe even Zbigniew, although that seemed remote. I was twenty-six years of age, and I felt old. Very, very old.

As I left, the baron's secretary passed me a note, saying that my men and the ladies were waiting for me at the mess hall, after which they would be at the inn. I had news for them, but I went to the radio room first.

I composed a message for my mother, and a much longer one for Maude, trying to tell her that I was well, but that I couldn't come home to her. I wrote and rewrote that message, but it never said exactly what I felt. No matter how I worded it, it still wasn't right. Finally, I just gave my first draft to the operator and asked him to get it out when he could.

I was told that the airwaves had been fairly clean for the last few days, and my messages would probably go through sometime tonight to the relay station in Portugal, and from there to Poland.

It was late when I got to the almost empty mess hall, but the cook scrounged me up some food. I barely noticed the entree, but the bread and the beer were so wonderful they almost cheered me up.

I found my party at the inn. I was surprised that the army would build an inn at so remote a site, but Lord Conrad was always concerned about the happiness of his men. It was just like every other Pink Dragon Inn, except the carved sign over the door showed one of the local dragons, painted pink, instead of the classical one.

I found my people scrubbed clean, pleasantly drunk, and comparatively well-dressed. The men at least were in proper uniform, and the ladies had been prevailed upon to wear short cotton skirts, at least.

When I asked, I found that they had heard of the orders forbidding return to Europe, so I wasn't forced to break that news to them. I told the men that the Christian Army was pleased with us, and congratulated them on their promotions, calling them Sir Gregor and Knight Banner Tomaz. After we drank to that, I explained that they could now refer to me as Captain Sobieski, if they did so respectfully, and with suitable bowing and groveling. They laughed, and we drank to that as well.

I told them that Jane was accepted as an army civilian scout, with the status of an army knight. The pay consisted of room, board, and equipment, plus eight pence a day, retroactive for a year. She didn't understand what most of this meant and was soon talking intensely with Knight Banner Tomaz.

Our wives had no clear idea why we were so happy about our promotions. Our increased pay had no meaning for them, since they didn't know what money was. Our increased status also meant little to them, because in the society they grew up in, small differences in status had little meaning. You were either the chief or you weren't. But at the inn, they were delighted with the music, the dancing, and the ambience of the place, and they were happy because everybody else was happy.

Looking at them, I was reminded that they were really very limited creatures, and a life with Booboo would be much different from the one I had long dreamed of with Maude. It seemed rude to even think it, but we three were permanently bonded with creatures that were, at best, pretty, amusing little puppy dogs. And at worst? I couldn't even imagine, but I was sure that it could become very bad indeed.

I knew that life must go on, but I wasn't at all sure that I wanted to go on with it.

Before my thoughts got too morose, Captain Fritz came in, bringing with him the eight men of his platoon who had survived the year. After introductions were made, our ladies were all surrounded by eager admirers. Fritz and I found ourselves at one end of the table, deep in conversation, discussing our year apart. It was almost like being home. Slowly, my mood revived.

I told my story to Fritz, and he nodded and shook his head in all the right places. He understood what I was saying because his life's experiences were so very like my own. As a good friend will, he let me tell the whole story almost without interruptions, before he started in on his own.

Fritz had found the natives on the south bank friendly from the start. They had immediately seen the value of our products, and were familiar with the concept of trade. If they believed in ghosts, they never talked about it. He thought that the huge width of the river must separate two very different nations.

The people he found did some hunting and gathering, but they were primarily agriculturalists. The dozens of plants they cultivated were completely unknown in Europe, and he saw rich possibilities in trade with them.

There was a kind of pea in which the pods grew at first aboveground, but then went underground as they matured, actually planting themselves! Dug up, roasted, and heavily salted, Fritz said they were wonderful with beer.

They had dozens of fruits he had never seen before, and most of them were delicious. One of them, which looked like a big hand grenade growing in a display of swords, was particularly good.

"On the other hand, nobody ever insisted that we participate in a mass orgy. I think I'll always envy you that one!"

Apparently, the native girls were not extremely interested in Fritz and his men. They were generally available, but only after you negotiated the size of the gift that was to be given to them in advance.

"The price was mud cheap, but it still smacked too much of prostitution for me to greatly enjoy it. I scratched the itch once a week or so, but it was mere gratification, and not love."

The only trouble that he encountered in the first few weeks happened when one of his men was urinating over the side of their riverboat.

"Sir Ian started screaming, and clutched his privy member. He bounced around for a bit, and then fell over onto his back, shouting the most blasphemous of oaths! I was the closest thing to a surgeon we had on board, so I had a half-dozen men hold him down while I examined him. I couldn't see a thing out of the ordinary, so I had him released.

"None of our medications had any beneficial effect, and we didn't yet have a native who could speak Pidgin well enough to question what passes for a doctor among them. Ian remained in great pain for three days, during which time he never urinated, and I began to fear that his bladder would burst. After consulting with the others, it seemed that the only thing to do was to cut the member open, to see what was causing the problem.

"We couldn't even get poor Ian drunk, since that would only have generated more urine. With six men holding the screaming knight down, I took a sharp, clean scalpel and sliced along the last half of the length of his penis. Pints of blood and a gallon of urine squirted out, but can you guess what else was in there?"

I shook my head, and Fritz continued.

"There was a tiny *fish*, stuck in the urine vessel! It had three little barbs, like a catfish, that had stuck into Ian's flesh, and that was what was blocking his pipe!

"All that we can imagine is that as he was relieving himself, the fish must have swum upstream, right up his urine and into his privy member! There seems to be no other way it could have happened. As you can imagine, we all used a bucket after that.

"Well, I sewed the man up, and he managed to live. That is, he lived until he came down with a fever, three months later."

The rest of his sad story was a matter of surviving a fever much as I had and then building a boat and getting back to the rendezvous. Lacking native advice, since those natives who had not died of their own plague had run away, it took him much longer than it did us to build a suitable boat.

"I managed to get more of my men back than you did, but I must admire the ladies you brought to replace some of those you lost. I've often had fantasies of having a girl so small that I could carry her along in my pouch, and your new wife comes close to that. If there are more like her where she comes from, I'm minded to go along with you when you return. But for tonight, what is the story on the warrior woman you brought back? I mean, is she really the sort who prefers other women?"

I said I honestly didn't know about the lady's sexual preferences. Her tribe was heterosexual, of course, with women marrying men, but from there on, the usual roles were reversed. She had fit into my team as one of the troops. None of us males had seen fit to make any advances toward her, as far as I knew, and she had made none toward us. I said that if Fritz wanted to try, he was free to do so, but I advised that he move with great caution, and that at no time should he dare to offend the woman. She could be quite deadly if she wanted to.

Fritz went over and talked to Jane, and in time their conversation became more and more animated, with both of them smiling hugely. Eventually, they walked out of the inn arm in arm. I wished them both well.

After a bit I noticed that my wife was either asleep from too much excitement or had passed out from too much to drink, and that in any event it was getting late. I bid the others good-bye, picked her up in my arms, and carried my little bride home.

Someone had mentioned that in the course of giving her a medical examination today, they had weighed her in at thirty-four and a half pounds. Cuddled up in my arms, she reminded me of a sleeping kitten. She was very pretty, very precious, but somehow something less than a real human being. I began to believe that her tribe's evaluation of themselves, that they were above the animals but below the true men, was essentially true.

By no stretch of the imagination could I imagine her becoming my true life partner. The pretty lady I had married in a pagan ceremony was in truth but a house pet.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

From the Diary of Conrad Stargard

FEBRUARY 26, 1251

I SAT at my desk with my head in my arms. Father Ignacy was in Rome. He was a cardinal bishop now, and he was voting on who would be the next pope. Many said he himself would win the office. I suppose I was happy for him, but the truth was that I needed my confessor, more than at any time before in my life. I had sinned. Oh God, how I had sinned!

I had sent a company of my best men out on an ill-thought-out mission, and because of me, most of them were dead. Far worse still, I had been responsible for introducing all of the diseases of Europe into the New World, and native Americans were dying by the whole villageful!

Killing in time of war has never bothered me, but this horrible thing I had done was something far worse than that! It is one thing to kill fighting men who invade your country, and quite another to go to someone else's land and sicken every man, woman, and child there with deadly diseases!

It was undoubtedly still going on. The damage was still being done. People were still dying. We had no way to stop those diseases from spreading throughout half the world.

Maude came into my office and stood in front of my desk. She wasn't smiling.

"Josip sent me a message. He says he cannot come home. He says that if he did, he might spread diseases here in Europe."

"Yes, Maude. That, too, is another of my sins."

"You must not sit there and cry. You must talk to your cousin Tom. Tom knows about diseases. Tom knows all about living systems. If you ask him, he will help you. He will help Josip. You must talk to Tom."

"Tom has helped me out several times before, but I have never asked for help before," I said.

"You must talk to Tom. He will help you."

"You are right, of course. People are dying as we speak. This is no time for stupid pride." I looked up at the ceiling and said, "*Tom! Help me, Tom! I need your help!* If this disease problem isn't solved quickly, I am going to have to stop the entire exploration program! You will never see a worldwide culture! I won't be the cause of making things worse than they already are! I won't be responsible for bringing plagues and the Black Death all across the globe! If I have to, I'll build a ten-story concrete wall all around Europe, I swear I will!"

A door that hadn't been there before opened up in the wall behind me, and my cousin Tom, dressed in T-shirt, shorts, and tennis shoes, walked into the room. He had a handwritten Polish manuscript in one hand and three test tubes in the other.

"All right! All right! You don't have to start making threats!" He surprised me by speaking in Polish. I'd never heard him do that before. Thinking about it, I *had* called to him in Polish.

He set the manuscript on my desk, turned to me, and held up one of the test tubes.

"Okay. This is part one. What it does is mark every cell in the body as being human. It must be given at least twelve hours before the next part is administered. That's six of your hours. We call it the butter, because that's what it looks like and tastes like. You can take it as often as you like, and for your regular troops, we recommend a pat of it every morning. That way, the treatment can be started immediately in the event of illness. Also, it doesn't spoil, and it's cheaper than real butter. You can

make it even with your primitive technology. You just mix a sample of it with any fresh mammalian milk, and let it set for a day. That's also how you make the other two parts of this system.

"This second part is called the cheese, for obvious reasons. The dosage is nine grams per hundred kilograms of body weight, plus or minus twenty percent. It's a deadly poison, and will kill anything alive except for human cells that have been, protected by part one, the butter. The person treated is poisonous to all other life-forms for the next six of your hours. Keep the patient away from plants and pets during that time period. That includes neohorses, wenchies, and all the other bioengineered critters.

"The third part, the oil; replaces all of the body's symbionts that were killed off by part two. You drink a few grams of it the day after you take the cheese and rub about twice that amount on the skin.

"Now, nothing is perfect. When you use this system, all of your stomach flora are killed and you are in for a serious case of the runs. There are a few rare types of brain tumors that this system can't cure. The worst problem is that in the case of very large tumors, the tumor is killed, but sometimes having a big, dead mass in your body overloads the body's cleanup system, and that can kill the patient. The best way to be sure this doesn't happen is to go through the treatment every half year. That way, really big tumors don't have time to grow. Also, life spans and general health are increased with regular use.

"In the case of communicable diseases, the system will cure the patient, but then sometimes the patient will contract the same disease again. In that case, just repeat the cure. Eventually, given enough time, the body will develop a natural immunity to that particular disease.

"Any other questions you might have are answered in the manual I brought. You ought to read it thoroughly before you try using this stuff."

"Tom, thank you. This stuff sounds like magic!"

"By your standards, I suppose it is. One man's magic is another man's technology. This project consumed over nine million high-quality man-hours, which is good, since they needed something interesting to do. Anything else you need, ask for it. Within reason, of course, and as long as you don't ask me to violate causality. Well, hang in there."

"Thanks again, Tom."

He left my office by the same doorway that he came through, after which the door disappeared. Maude never left the room, and Tom never acknowledged her existence, which was typical of him.

I glanced at the other, normal door into my office and saw Baron Piotr and my secretary looking in with their mouths open.

"Your grace, you have some *very* strange relatives!" Piotr said.

"How long have you two been standing there?" I asked.

"Ever since we heard you shouting at the ceiling," Zenya said. "You called for help."

"Huh. I suppose I did. Well, don't talk about all this, all right? But for now, we've got work to do. Piotr, get this manuscript down to the print shop. I want six thousand copies run off by yesterday. This takes precedence over *everything*, including sleep. Got it? Then move!

"Zenya, get a radiogram off to the *Atlantic Challenger* and tell them to stay in port until they get a special shipment. If they've already left, tell them to turn around! I'll be down in the kitchen whipping up a few hundred gallons of these medicines. Move, girl!"

## Chapter Thirty-Three

From the Journal of Josip Sobieski

WRITTEN MARCH 1, 1255, CONCERNING MARCH 1251 TO APRIL 1254

I HAVE a few days of idle time before the next semester starts, so I might as well bring my autobiography up to date.

As I was lying in the hospital at Brazylport in 1251, the surgeons were saying they would probably have to amputate my infected left foot, when the *Atlantic Challenger* steamed in with a company of volunteers, two dozen milk cows, and the Cure. I was eating breakfast when a new doctor, fresh off the boat, came to see me.

"Don't worry about a thing," he said. "This won't be nearly as bad as what you've heard about."

I said I hadn't heard anything at all about the new medicine, but his last statement had indeed started me worrying.

"Really, there's nothing much to it. I went through it myself a week ago, when we crossed the sector line." When he saw the quizzical expression on my face, he continued. "They have divided the world up into thirty-three sectors, to contain communicable diseases. Every passenger and crew member on every ship that passes between two sectors has to take the Cure, all at the same time, to stop the spread of diseases between areas. Then they fumigate the whole ship, just to be on the safe side. It's a bother, but considering the number of deaths that were caused on both sides when your crew came to Brazyl, you have to admit that it will be worth it."

I agreed with him, and told him I was ready to start.

"You already have. The butter on the toast you just ate was the first part of it. I'll be back this evening to administer the second part, a piece of cheese. Good day."

I grumbled a bit about being medicated without my permission. Certainly, *I* had never done such a thing back when I was a corpsman. Still, I observed no noticeable change in myself, except for the way my foot was continuing to painfully rot away.

That evening, the doctor had me stripped naked and propped upright on a toilet by a beefy male nurse who had also taken some of the magical butter in the morning. Five other seriously ill patients were already sitting on the other toilets in the latrine. Armed guards at the doors kept any unauthorized personnel strictly out, since we were shortly to become very poisonous individuals.

The doctor then placed a carefully weighed slice of cheese on each of our tongues with a pair of tongs. It looked and tasted very ordinary, but he was treating it like the host, so I took it seriously as well.

In about a quarter hour I started itching. We were told that this was caused by the death of all the tiny animals that had previously taken up residence on our skins, and that shortly it would no longer concern us.

This turned out to be perfectly true, since I was soon vomiting and shitting great spews of unmentionable fluids from both ends of my person with such rapidity that I was usually unable to decide which end I should point at the toilet, and with such force that such of it as was reasonably aimed generally overshot the toilet and splattered on the wall behind. I managed all this while hopping around on my right foot, the left one being still blackened, rotten, and painful.

True to the doctor's promise, I hardly noticed any itching during this phase of my cure.

The worst of it was over by midnight. Sitting weakly on the toilet, I noticed a mosquito that landed on my hand, but I was too exhausted to shoo him away. It started to sting me, then stopped and fell over. Dead.

After a bit, my fellow patients and I were taken to the showers and washed, while another crew hosed down the latrine to ready it for the next batch of victims.

My left foot, which was, after all, the object of this exercise, looked worse than ever when they finally took me back to my room.

I felt much better in the morning, and even better yet after an attractive female nurse gave me the last part of the Cure, which included an all-over body massage with a special oil. I was walking again in three days, and my foot was completely healed in another week.

Amazing stuff, the Cure.

I was promptly put on the planning committee that was working on a program to stamp out the plagues we had started among the Brazilians. The areas we had stopped at were fairly well-mapped, and we knew the dates when each place was visited. We had to make some very uneducated guesses as to how fast the diseases would spread among the native populations. We then drew circles on the map with their centers at the points of contact and their radiuses proportional to the time the diseases had had to spread. These overlapping circles covered a depressingly large area.

We then set up two teams of workers. The A team was to contain the diseases, and stop them from spreading across the continent. They would surround the contaminated areas by making contact with all the native tribes on the periphery, convincing them of the seriousness of the threat, and giving the entire tribe the Cure. We would then give the Cure to the native doctors, teaching them how to use it and how to make more. The lack of milk animals among the natives was not a serious problem, since our tests had proven that mother's milk worked as well as any animal milk, and there was always a lactating woman about.

Once the contaminated areas were completely surrounded, the A team would start moving inward until they met up with members of the B team.

The B team would start at the points of contact and work outward, following the diseases through the jungle until the newly introduced diseases were wiped out. Actually, we would be eradicating most of the local diseases as well, so we would be partially compensating the natives for the damage we had caused them.

Time was of the absolute essence, since the longer it took to do the job, the farther the diseases would spread and the more people would die. Large numbers of people would be needed if we were to accomplish our objectives quickly, if at all. Army personnel would be coming as fast as we could transport them to Brazil. Every ship that could possibly be spared from other tasks was called upon, but they could not begin to bring over enough people to do the job.

A major point of our plan was to enlist as many natives into the program as possible. Without their help, the job could take decades, and the death toll could be in the millions.

It took us three years to finish. For most of it, I ran the B team, while Fritz handled the A team. We each delegated most of the administrative duties and spent most of our time in the jungle, keeping in touch daily with the new radios.

Before we were through, over a quarter of the continent had been explored. Thirteen gross tribes were contacted, with people speaking over seven gross different languages, most of which we still haven't had time to properly record. Pidgin is rapidly becoming the universal second language in the entire continent.

At the end of the first year, one of our native teams found Zbigniew! He had lost a foot to some sort of jungle rot, but had found himself a place in a tribe living near the ocean shore as a shaman, storyteller, and toolmaker. He had a wife and a son when he was found, and he brought them both back with him to Brazilport. We put Captain Zbigniew on administrative work until the emergency was



over, and now he serves with me on the faculty of the Explorer's School. He and his family have the house next to mine on faculty row.

Lezek was picked up from the trading station he was running despite impossible problems, and put to work as Fritz's deputy in his own area. Komander Lezek is currently on his way with a company of Explorers to see what India has to offer.

Halfway through the second year of the campaign, Captain Odon and Father John came into one of our advanced posts in native canoes. They had found their native, gold-rich civilization, high in the western mountains. They found five separate nations up there, and none of them called themselves the Incas, but they had still made a major discovery.

Baron Odon is back in his beloved mountains again, as Ambassador to Hy Brazyl, and with him is Father John, now Archbishop of Hy Brazyl.

Komander Fritz ended up marrying Jane, and a few months later, with Jane's permission, he married a pretty little Yaminana girl as well. They are both with him and his new, half-native, both-sexes company, exploring yet another tributary of the Amazon, the greatest river system in the world.

The Yaminana are now carefully protected from their bigger neighbors, and, without losses due to either diseases or to warfare, their numbers are increasing rapidly. This despite the fact that many Yaminana maidens have elected to marry Europeans. It seems that we have a reputation among them for being very good husbands.

To date, there have been more than six dozen of these Yaminana-European marriages, and curiously, they have not resulted in a single child. We are all mystified as to the reason for this. Since the little people's full-sized neighbors were only interested in eating them, there had been no earlier marriages with other full-sized people, as far as anyone knew.

Also, while every other native tribe caught deadly diseases even from apparently healthy Europeans, the Yaminana had remained disease free around us, even before the Cure was introduced. Some of us have begun wondering if they really are a separate species, as their own folklore insists.

On the other hand, the Cure works on them, and it is only supposed to work on humans.

Another of life's mysteries.

Once the foreign diseases had been wiped out in Brazyl, the army establishment at Brazylport was reduced to a group sufficient to maintain communications and support for trade, the missionaries, and exploration. Anna's children, the Big People, have been introduced in large numbers to assist the army's humans. Where the natives have requested it, we have started building and staffing our combination schools, stores, post offices, and churches.

Most important, from my viewpoint, those of us who wanted to go home were finally permitted to do so. In the company of Baron Siemomysl, Captain Zbigniew, over a gross of other army personnel, and all of their families, we boarded a new Express-class ship for home. These were half again as fast and had three times the capacity of the *Challenger-class* ships that had once so impressed me. They operated only between large, well-established, deepwater ports.

I, of course, brought Booboo with me. As I had discovered years before, her lack of intellectual capability made her something of a house pet, but the truth is that it can be very *nice*, having a good house pet. She was cuddly, pretty, and always anxious to please. With patient training, she had learned to keep our apartment or cabin neat and clean, and in time I learned to love her for what she was.

Maude was waiting for me on the crowded dock as our ship, the *Brazylport Express*, pulled into Gdansk. Lord Conrad was with her, as were Maude's four children, Molly, Megan, Mary, and Melinda.

Lord Conrad was very polite to me, but soon begged off to speak with Baron Siemomysl. Maude greeted me warmly, and introduced me to her daughters, whose greeting kisses were almost improperly sexual. I introduced them to Booboo, and I could see in an instant that she and Maude would like each other. They hit it off perfectly, and each seemed to intuitively understand the other. I was much relieved. If they had hated each other, I don't know what I would have done.

The custom was now that each family in the army should have at least one Big Person attached to it. Margarete had asked to be in our family, and Maude accepted her in my name.

It was late in the day and arrangements had been made at a new hotel on the Vistula Lagoon, run by a company with a snowflake fort a few miles south. When I mounted Margarete, Maude climbed up on my lap, just like old times. Booboo joined Molly, to get better acquainted. As we went slowly to the hotel, I mentioned the passion her daughters had put into their kisses.

"I know. They all love you as much as I do. They awoke loving you. I did not know that this would happen. In Tom's world, we did not have feelings. Here, I learned about my emotions. Now my daughters have my love along with my memories."

I was surprised about all this, and asked what we should do.

"You must love them as you love me. Then you must find them good men of their own."

I said that with thought, I could probably find four good men in the army.

"Four men to start. In time, we will need sixteen more."

Startled, I asked her to explain.

"It takes four like me to guard one man properly. If Lord Conrad had four guards, King Henryk would want two of them to guard himself. If King Henryk had such guards, Prince Daniel of the Ruthenias would want some, too. So would King Bela of Hungary. So would Tzar Ivan of Bulgaria. Then each leader would have only one guard. One guard is not enough. Also, I would have to guard Lord Conrad. There would be no one else. I could not spend all of my time with you. Thus, I had four children for Lord Conrad. I had four more for King Henryk. Also for King Bela, and for Prince Daniel, and for Tzar Ivan. It takes four years for my children to awaken. Before that time is up, the Federation of Christendom will expand. More kings will need to be guarded. So I have made more children now."

So I was now the head of a household with two wives, a Big Person, and twenty children! I certainly hoped that the Explorer's School was providing me with a big house! I said as much to Maude.

"There will never be more than twenty of my daughters there. They will awaken and leave as fast as I have young ones. We will soon have two more Big People. There will be as many Big People as there are adults in the household. The house provided to you is very large. Your household also will need at least three servants. There will be much work to do."

I had been thinking of a long, quiet time alone with Maude and Booboo. Apparently such was not to be!

The hotel was a remarkable building, done in a style I had never seen before. It was a squarish, boxy structure, with no thought at all taken for defense, having neither battlements, nor machicolations, nor even thick masonry walls. Except for the large windows, it was completely covered with large, porcelain plates, each a yard square. These plates were embossed with bright, polychromed designs and heraldic symbols.

I asked if people actually lived in that thing.

"It is the new style," Maude said. "It is very comfortable. The outer plates cover thick mats made of glass fibers. It is very warm in the winter. It is cool in the summer. Your new house is made the same way."

I said I was sure that Baron Piotr would love it, and hoped that our home would have fewer colors.

"I told them to use red and white. You will like it," Maude said.

I grunted. I didn't want to appear an old stick-in-the-mud, but I've always felt more comfortable in a building that looked defensible. Well-a-day. I was soon to be a properly married man, and my days of relative freedom would be gone forever.

I was married sooner than I thought, for the great hall of the hotel was all set up for my wedding. Everybody seemed to know about it except me! My family was there, Zbigniew was set to be my best man, and he had three wedding rings ready, for Maude, Booboo, and me. Lord Conrad acted as father of the bride for Maude, and Baron Siemomysl did the same for Booboo.

I had no objections to these proceedings, but I felt they should have given me some warning. I mean, it was only by good luck I was still in a State of Grace, so I could take Communion at the mass that followed.

No sooner was my short double marriage ceremony completed, with Maude as my first wife and Booboo as my second, than the whole thing was repeated for Captain Zbigniew, since he had not yet had proper Christian wedding ceremonies with either of his wives. This time, *I* was *his* best man.

After mass, there was a feast with all of the usual fooling around that is traditional at such events, and then the two trios of young newlyweds were whisked off to our respective rooms.

My whole family was there, including my in-laws and my father. Everything was so rushed that I didn't get a chance to talk with any of them, but in the reception line my father shook my hand!

That night in bed I made love with Maude first, and then Booboo. While I was patting myself on the back and telling myself that at thirty I still wasn't over the hill, that I could still make love with two women in less than an hour, Megan came into the room and said that she wanted to love me. Maude and Booboo took this as a perfectly reasonable request and made room for her in the oversized bed. And what's a man to do?

Maude had said that her daughters would look different from her, but except for hair color, I could hardly tell them apart. Had one of them come to me first, on the dock that afternoon, rather than staying a bit behind their mother, I could easily have embraced her rather than Maude. They had all looked at me wistfully as we were introduced, and the way they kissed, well, it wasn't what the usual girl will do with a stepfather.

So I made love with the girl. As she was leaving, Molly came in, to be followed in turn by Mary and then Melinda. It was long after midnight before I could get to sleep.

I think that the Cure must do other wonderful things for a man besides wiping out his germs.

The next morning, my father came up to my table in the hotel's restaurant and said, "Son, I have given this matter much thought, and I forgive you."

I looked at him calmly and said, "Father, I, too, have given this matter much thought. For fifteen years you have done everything in your power to make my life as unpleasant as possible. When I was a young boy of fifteen, I loved you and I needed you. Your senseless rejection of me hurt me very badly, when I had done nothing to harm you or yours, except to try to live my own life. I still don't understand why you were so angry with me, but I do know this:

"Now I am a man, and I say that any man who would so hurt someone who loved him, and who continued hurting that person for so many years for no other reason than stupid pride, I say that such a man is an unspeakable asshole, and one with whom I will not associate.

"Father, I do *not* forgive you!"

And with that, I collected up my wives and daughters, we mounted our Big People, and we rode home.

I never spoke to my father again.

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