

The Rat Catcher of Hurtzburg

By Martin Lohrmann

PART 1: A NICE STEADY HUM

Chapter 1: The Rat Catcher of Hurtzburg

Slipping off his plague mask and heavy cloak, Wipo Rattenfläger, the rat catcher of Hurtzburg, stepped into his home for a quick lunch of carrots and lard. His wife Ulga had just licked a bit of the mushy gruel off her thumb to see if it was ready.

“Lunch is on!” she yelled. Wipo pulled up a stump and watched as Ulga poured chunks of greasy carrots into his bowl. Their two boys, Einer and Fünfi, eagerly emerged from playing in a dusty corner to wait for their bowls of mushy orange lard, too.

“How’s the plague, today, then?” Ulga asked.

Wipo smacked his lips. “All under control,” he said with much satisfaction. “The infection rate has remained constant. Two households over by the mill died in the wee hours, right on schedule. Another two families that have been awful complainy recently will probably be out of their misery by this evening.”

“It’s great that the rate is staying so steady,” Ulga said proudly.

“I do what I can. Mayor Dunkruger is real happy with how things are going.”

“I’m sure he is.”

“When the plague hits the other towns, they all hunker down in their huts until the people that were gonna die anyway have passed on. Makes no sense! Then they have to start getting back to normal from scratch.”

“Spare me,” said Ulga, rolling her eyes.

“But our Mayor Dunkie had us the great idea of keeping people moving about, with Ye Old Rat Catcher—that’s yours truly,” he said to his boys, “—personally inspecting every domicile in this blessed burg and keeping the rats on the defensive. I check all the houses myself, looking for rats and making a big ruckus to scare ‘em away.”

“It’s like you were born for it. Your father is a real hero, boys.” With grease rings around their mouths, Einer and Fünfi looked up from their mush and smiled.

“And while other towns cower like frightened animals, we keep a nice steady hum of activity going, business as usual. People keep working, barbers keep bleeding folks, rats keep getting scared. Our huts have never been so full of ambitious new peasants moving in from the countryside ready to try their luck in the city.”

“Just this morning the wife from that new family, the Mudbauers, was asking me when I thought their neighbors might die so they could invite some cousins to move up here.”

“It’ll be soon enough, I reckon,” said Wipo, wiping his face with a dirty sleeve. Getting ready for the afternoon shift, he tossed his cloak back on and ambled to the door. “Great carrots, dear,” he said as he tucked his plague mask under his arm. Spotting a flea on his shoulder, he pinched it out between his finger and thumb and ate it. “Nice dessert, too!” he cheered to the boys, who watched with admiration.

Ulga walked over to the door to see him out, giving him a tender hug and briefly resting her head on his shoulder.

"I'm so glad things worked out the way they did, so that I could enjoy this great life with you," whispered Ulga.

"Everything happens for a reason," said Wipo. Two of his wives and three of his children had died of the plague in the years before he married Ulga. He was glad that she could make some sense of it like that. After letting out a contented little sigh, he said, "Back to it. I'm meeting Mayor Dunkruger for a midday meeting at the church. I'll bet he had carrots for lunch, too. I'll have to ask him about that."

"They say it's what keeps his skin so bright."

"The very picture of health, he is! Ah, but now we've got to deal with this new know-it-all minister who thinks that me and my crew are causing more plague than we're stopping."

"What does he know?!" said Ulga with disgust.

"I keep telling him, if it weren't for me, there'd be even more rats and plague. It's just logic."

"Too right!"

"It's no bother," said Wipo with a sense of generosity. "Dunkruger's on my side of things. Honestly, I don't know what that pastor has to complain about. He has a steady stream of burials keeping him preaching and paid: not too many, not too few. He'd be wise to get on the Dunk Wagon, if he knows what's good for him."

"He should be more grateful," said Ulga. "He is a servant of God, after all."

"Amen to that, dear." He leaned over and gave her a kiss. Noticing a flea in her hair, he nabbed it and stuck it in his mouth. "One for the road!" he smiled, before putting his plague mask back on and jauntily setting out down the dusty lane.

Ulga blew him a kiss and waved as he left. Seeing Frau Mudbauer across the way, she called out, "Wipo and I were just saying how excited we'll be to welcome your cousins to Hurtzburg. Any day now!"

Chapter 2: Cemetery Sermons

The Reverend Carl Hugo Waldemar Mathesius steadied himself on two very conscientious feet planted as close as possible to the open grave in front of him. His left foot transferred some of its weight to the gravestone at the head of the pit. The right foot, slightly free of some of the weight of the little pastor's slender frame, traced the sign of the cross in the dust, a habit it had picked up over the months of almost daily funerals. The body of Thomas the baker rested in a coffin immediately in front of the pastor's feet.

Pastor Matti—as the locals had taken to calling him—adjusted his wide-brimmed hat and found his place in the service book. As he looked down past the book, he saw the open grave with the rotting casket lid of a previous inhabitant just visible through the dust. Across the pit, he viewed out at the meager congregation assembled before him: Thomas's wife Maria, their daughter Sara and son Jacob each on the cusp of adulthood, two brothers and sisters-in-law, and a smattering of cousins, nephews, and nieces from the countryside.

Taking a breath that reached down to his supportive feet, he said, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who comforts us in our sorrows so that we might comfort others with the consolation we ourselves have received through the power of the Holy Spirit."

"Amen," said the mourners, making the sign of the cross.

Pastor Matti then read verses of comfort from the Psalms and the epistles, concluding with the Gospel of John. "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even if they die; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die."

Maria wept softly. The children stared back and forth between the casket and the grave. Cousins watched the gently moving clouds change shapes overhead.

"Our beloved Thomas has died, but he did not die alone. He was surrounded in life and now in death by you and your love for him. He was surrounded by the love of God all his life, poured into him in baptism, strengthened in faith through prayer and God's word, and now he is held in the eternal love of the resurrected Christ. He was a dwelling place of the Holy Spirit in this life. In death, he will live in the power of the same Holy Spirit. This life beyond death is a mystery, but we know and trust it to be true that we will live as Christ lives. Thomas belongs to that love. We belong to this love. We grieve as our Lord Jesus grieved his friend Lazarus. And yet, with Job we too can say, "'I know that my redeemer lives, and though my flesh should be destroyed, nevertheless, with my own eyes, I myself shall see God.' Friends in Christ, you are not alone. God has given us to each other as companions in life, just as the Lord so graciously gave us Thomas to know and to love. May Christ preserve us all in love and in faith. Let us pray."

Taking a breath from the work of stringing together some words of comfort, love, and (God willing) truth over an open grave, Pastor Matti was glad to let the words on the page tell him what to say next. He led prayers for those who grieve, for the soul of the departed, and for God's continued blessing on the community through families, laborers, and public servants. Then the congregation said the Our Father together before Pastor Matti pronounced the Benediction, made the sign of the cross on the plain wood box in front of him, and nodded to gravedigger Dirk and Dirk's oldest boy Beni to lower the casket into the pit.

"May the Lord receive him into the tender arms of his mercy: earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

As Dirk and Beni performed the difficult task of lowering the heavy casket into the grave with a profound sense of delicacy, everyone else sang a verse of a beloved hymn of the dear Reformation of the century before: "For You have promised, Lord, to heed, your children's cries in time of need. Through Him whose name alone is great, our Savior and our advocate."

As the song came to a close, things at once felt entirely in order and absolutely in chaos. It was the feeling that Pastor Matti lived with every day, and he said a silent prayer for this family that would be experiencing sharp, fresh grief today and the dull ache of loss for long time after that.

Maria and her children lingered at the grave, while Thomas's brothers and cousins made their way the edge of the graveyard to stand in the little noontime shade provided by the town church. Dirk and Beni gently started to cover the casket with dirt. Holy work, hard to watch.

In a quiet voice, Maria asked the pastor, "What will I do now?"

Pastor Matti said, "Today, sit with your children, feel the breeze on your face, and think about your husband. My wife will bring a little food and drink over for suppertime. Sleep, or don't sleep and just say prayers. Tomorrow the deacon will come and talk with you and make sure you have what you need for the day. He'll do the same thing every day this week. I suppose that Thomas had taught Sara and Jacob enough about his trade that they can do some

baking of their own when they feel up to it. But for today, though, sitting, crying, and grieving with your children is enough.”

“Thank you, Pastor Matti.” He couldn’t quite see her eyes, but he saw tear stains on her cheeks. “God will provide,” she said, as she leaned on Sara’s shoulder. The three of them watched until Dirk and Beni finished filling the grave, paid their respects and took their shovels back to the garden shed. Thomas’s family said goodbye and slowly started to make the walk home without him. The cousins followed, talking a little louder about where they wanted to have lunch.

Pastor Matti had planned to grab a quick lunch of bread, butter, and a hardboiled egg back at the parsonage before having to meet with Mayor Dunkruger in the afternoon. But it was not to be. Weary in his spirit and tired of being on his feet, he saw Dunkruger and Wipo the rat catcher smile, tip their hats to the grieving widow and her children, and continue bouncily up the road to the church. Dunkruger shook hands and made a show of taking off his hat to several of the cousins who were happy to see him.

The Mayor and Wipo then continued to make their way to the church, talking very animatedly between each other until they saw the pastor in the graveyard. Mayor Dunkruger immediately assumed a serious face and Wipo tried to look tough. They turned from the main way to the church and found the path into the cemetery.

“Guten Tag, Herr Pastor,” said Dunkruger with a condescending formality.

“Guten Tag, Herr Burgermeister and Herr Rattenfläger,” the pastor replied as calmly as possible.

“See here, Pastor,” puffed the orange-tinted mayor, making himself as large and loud as he could in the cemetery. “Wipo’s been telling me that he’s heard you saying that people should only call him and his assistants as a matter of last resort, like when the vermin are getting so bold that they’re stealing food from tables as people are eating it. He’s telling me that you’re soft on rats, soft on the plague, and hard on working folks like him. He’s telling me that people who come to your services the most are the ones least likely to call a rat catcher when they need one. Isn’t that right, Wipo?”

“That’s exactly right, Mr. Mayor. This preacher seems to think he knows more about rats and the plague than me who’s specialized in this line of work since I was yea high.” He indicated the height of himself as a child by putting his extended hand down to his thigh, which also happened to be the height of the gravestone next to him. “How is it that you think you know more about my area of expertise than I do?”

Pastor Matti removed his hat and shifted his feet to find some balance and breath before talking to these two men who clearly wanted to be perceived as bullies. He said, “Well, sir, I certainly don’t mean any offense. My wife and I have been glad to get to know the folks of Hurtzburg over the past few months. I suppose that now and again I’ve mentioned some things about how people deal with pests and diseases in other places. In my hometown, we found that the plague seemed to spread more with increased house-to-house contact. In the university, they would deal with cases of the plague by using a quarantine house and maybe suspending classes for a week to two to stop the spread. The nobility who have country estates always go there as soon as people in town get sick, so that seems to be an option that they choose with their wealth. In short, there seem to be plenty of ways to contain the spread of a disease other than to chase rats around town, meaning no offense.”

“None taken,” said Wipo, successfully showing how little of Pastor Matti’s talk had sunk in.

“Pff, university!” said Dunkruger, rolling his eyes. “But you are right to think we should copy what rich people do... except that it only fills the common people’s heads with nonsense about equality and fairness. Better for folks like us to make friends with some rich folks and let other people figure things out for themselves.”

Filled with his own figurings, Dunkruger began to circle around the graves closest to the pastor. Wipo watched adoringly as the mayor warmed himself up to deliver his own speech in the graveyard.

“The problem with people like you, Pastor, is that you don’t respect people like us. You come here with a university education and church robes and stacks of books in the parsonage that we provide for you, and you tell us how we should live our lives. But this is already a terrific town, the best. The people of Hurtzburg are real heroes, and they know that I believe in them. But you don’t believe in them. You don’t know them or care about them like I do. I alone can keep this town great, just the way they like it. Those other towns around here are led by cowards and fools. If you like them so much, then maybe you should go there. I don’t think that even they would want you. But the great folks of this town like Wipo here, they know what’s important to them, and they look to me to keep it that way. And if you’re going to get in my way, then you’re gonna have trouble. I personally can’t fire you, because you were sent here by the church superintendent—a great man, by the way, I met him once and he was very impressed by me—but we will definitely come around again the next time we hear about you not respecting us.”

Pastor Matti was not surprised to be on the receiving end of this fire and brimstone sermon, but it still stung him. He took a breath, traced the sign of the cross on the grass with his right boot. “Mr. Mayor, you can hear what I’m saying for myself any time. I say nothing in secret. I preach twice on Sundays, every Wednesday morning, and offer Bible classes on Tuesday and Thursday. I teach the youth their catechism on Saturdays, and adults—especially community leaders like yourself—are always welcome to come.”

“Don’t get smart with me, preacher!” snapped Dunkruger. “I know what you’re doing. You’re saying I don’t go to church. But I’m very religious. I’m the most religious person here. I talk to the Lord and the Lord tells me I’m doing great. Your services, however, are a waste of my time, because you and your kind keep people weak.”

Not trying to react defensively, the pastor asked, “And how do I do that?”

“You know, with your sheep talk. Sacrifice. Love others more than yourself.”

“The saying is ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

“Same difference,” sighed the mayor with exasperation.

“Okay. As a religious person, what are your favorite parts of the Bible? I’d love to talk about them with you.”

“You know, the blood and soil parts.”

“Like when Cain killed his brother Abel?”

“No, like rah-rah, victory for God’s people, death to their enemies, kinds of parts.”

“Oh, yes... there are those kinds of things in the Scriptures. But I tend to find they’re usually more complicated than that.”

“That’s why you’re a bad preacher and no one likes you.”

“Maybe you’re right. What are your favorite of those passages? We could feature them in some of our Bible studies during the week.”

Having already enjoyed given the rousing talk against the preacher that he had come to deliver, the mayor found himself annoyed to find that Pastor Matti was still trying to engage him. He waved his hand in the air to conjure some words and said, “Oh, I don’t know exactly where to find it. What’s is called, Wipo? Two Corinthians?”

“Which two Corinthians, sir?” asked Wipo.

“Never mind. It doesn’t matter. The Lord and I are on great terms. It’s disgraceful what losers like this so-called elite university-town preacher say about the Almighty and being great followers We know God plenty good here, Pastor, which is what you’ll never understand. And everyone knows it.”

“Amen to that, sir,” said Wipo casting a judgmental nod at the minister.

“Be that as it may, you’re welcome to attend services any time, Mr. Mayor. The people are always glad to see you. You can come and hear me for yourself and I’ll listen to all your corrections afterwards. You too, Wipo.”

“Thank you, Reverend,” said Wipo, with some approval.

“Let’s go, Wipo. We’ve got some more rat catching to do,” said the Mayor. He gave Pastor Matti one last stare and then he and Wipo turned back down the cemetery path towards the church and the main road.

Pastor Matti stood there a moment. He rubbed his face, sighed, and stared up at the puffy midday clouds. “I preferred the funeral,” he said to himself. At the thought of the deceased, he crossed himself, said a prayer for the family of Thomas the baker, and made his way to the parsonage on the other side of the church.

Chapter 3: Fearfully Made

Pastor Mathesius opened the door of the parsonage, took off his hat, and sat down heavily onto the bench in the front sitting room where he held his men’s Bible study and other smaller church gatherings. Resting his head on the wooden table, he closed his eyes and imagined he had been in the assembly on the other side of the grave from him. Who had they seen? What had they heard? Someone pointing to something true? Or another lost soul grasping to make sense of the unknowable by filling the air with comforting sounds, holy books, and pious gestures? He hoped it was at least a combination of the two.

Hearing his wife at the kettle in the kitchen, he got up to join her. Seeing her back turned to him at the stove, he hugged her from behind and smelled the fresh-brewed chamomile tea through her hair. She enjoyed the moment, then reached for a cup to fill for him. They moved to the small kitchen table.

“How was your morning, dear Carl?” That was the question she loved to ask her Reverend Carl Hugo Waldemar Mathesius when he came home for lunch. Together they cracked the hardboiled eggs and buttered the slices of rye bread that waited for them on the table. Pastor Matti set down the butter knife, took a sip of tea, and answered.

“Oh, Katie, I’m sure you can guess. We buried Thomas the baker. Then Mayor Dunkruger and his buddy Wipo came to tell me what a bad job I was doing.”

"If that's what the mayor said, then you must be doing a wonderful job," Katie smiled back. "In this strange little town, pain is pleasure, sickness is health, and idiocy is praised as the wisdom of Solomon. You must be doing exactly right."

"It has been a strange few months. I'm glad I have you to keep me sane," Carl said back.

"That's just assuming I haven't gone insane yet myself," said Katie.

"Your insanity is the best wisdom of all."

"Let's keep it that way," said Katie. "Speaking of which, your crazy little Hausfrau has just finished the last of Kepler's books."

"And what did my genius little Hausfrau learn?"

"The brilliant man was humble and clever enough to correct—of maybe just refine—his earlier theories to show how the elliptical orbits of each planet are predictable and constant even though they vary from each other. It has to do with their respective distance from the sun."

"They all look about the same to me from down here."

"That's where you're wrong, Herr Pastor," said Katie. Holding her teacup steady in front of her face with her left hand, she picked up her egg in the other and orbited it around the tea. "We are the egg. The teacup is the sun. Feel its heat and energy?"

Carl took a sip and said, "I do."

"We orbit the sun, and so do the other planets. Some of them seem to be in an orbit that is closer to the sun than we are. Others are in an orbit beyond our own."

"What is 'an orbit beyond our own'?"

"I don't know, but I imagine it means that we exist in the midst of other heavenly bodies. We are—as the Psalms put it—fearfully and wonderfully made. A *mysterium tremendum*."

"I don't know if that applies to all of us, but I know for sure that you, Frau Pastor, are indeed an awe-inspiring mystery and a heavenly body."

"It applies to all of us," she replied, setting down the tea and egg.

"Fearful and mysterious and heavenly, indeed," said the pastor.

"Speaking of fearsome mysteries, what did old Dunkie say you're doing so wrong this time?"

"Apparently, some of the parishioners told him about the different ways I've seen how people deal with the plague in other places: quarantine, limited personal interactions, and so on. He and Wipo interpreted such stories, of course, as a threat to their preferred policy of scaring rats and effectively letting the plague spread as much as it likes."

"I wonder if he thinks eating so many carrots that he turns orange is the cure? Does he have investments in the local carrot industry?"

"His son-in-law comes from a big carrot growing family."

"Makes sense."

"Anyways, I invited him to church, which ought to keep him away for a good while longer. But he really makes it hard to preach love and compassion."

"No, my dear. He makes it easy to preach love and compassion, because the alternative is shiny orange death."

“Carrots and death reminds me,” said Carl as he finished his bread and butter. “I told Thomas’s wife Maria that you would bring some dinner for them tonight. Had I mentioned that to you before? If not, I’m sorry.”

“No worries, I was planning on this,” said Katie. “I have some extra bread, smoked fish, and a sweet cake to bring them. I’ll throw in a few carrots, too, for patriotism’s sake.”

“Thank you, dear. More than food, you have such a great way of talking to people in their grief.”

“All I do,” said Katie, standing up to clear their plates, “is start to talk about the clouds and the wind, the sun and moon and stars, daytime and nighttime, and see where things go from there.”

“*Mysterium tremendum*,” said Pastor Matti, as he stood up and kissed his wife on the cheek. He grabbed his parson’s hat, patted his cloak to make sure his prayer book was in his pocket, and went out to make some socially-distanced afternoon house calls. Katie waved to him from the door, grabbed her tea, and searched the bookshelves for something new to read.

Chapter 4: Bodies in Motion

Having just finished reading Kepler, Katie decided it would be nice to go back to the source of her interest and reread *On the Revolution of Heavenly Bodies* by Copernicus. Feeling satisfied with an hour’s worth of scientific meditation under a tree behind the house, she went back into the house and to prepare some food to take to Maria the baker’s wife.

As the sun lowered in the sky, she stepped out and enjoyed the early summer view. The town lay about half a mile south down the road. The church had been built near the crest of a gentle wooded hill. The parsonage was on the far side of the hill from the village, so that she passed the main doors of the modest stone church and then the front gate of the cemetery on her way into Hurtzburg. Having found an old handwritten book of local history in a dusty side room of the church, she knew that the hill and its fresh spring had been where people buried their dead and worshiped the gods of nature before some Scottish priests built themselves a monastery here. She wondered what the monks would have thought of an educated Protestant pastor’s wife calling their holy hill her home. Having come to love the place in the few months she had lived there, she suspected they might understand each other pretty well. She also imagined that they would share frustrations at the abundance of superstitions to be found among the locals. And yet, their spring and their cemetery had been there first and would be there long after Katie was gone, so maybe she should not be so quick to judge.

She carried the food for Thomas’s family in a sack over her right shoulder. Katie was careful about her possessions, but she wouldn’t miss it if she never got the bag back. “Don’t let your left hand know what your right hand has slung over its shoulder,” she said to herself, happy to paraphrase Jesus’s words from the Sermon on the Mount. She let her left hand swing widely, just to show how little her left hand was paying attention to the frivolous charity of the right.

The walk into town was smooth, made even more pleasant by the appearance of midsummer wildflowers on the edge of the lane and occasional breezes through the woods and fields that dotted the landscape going into Hurtzburg. As she came closer to the center of town, the dwellings started to get closer together and the wildflowers were replaced by gardens

featuring roses, chamomile, and forget-me-nots. Seeing some plants she didn't recognize, Katie made a mental note to ask about local plants and their uses the next time she needed a conversation starter at church.

As the road gently curved into the main market square in front of the town hall, she was about to turn down a lane to the left when she heard someone yell, "Frau Mathesius! Frau Katharina Mathesius!" She looked right, to see the mayor's wife walking briskly towards her. Narcissa Dunkruger was nearly as tall as her husband, but instead of orange her skin had been tinted yellowish gold, like old straw. "Maybe she eats more squash than carrots? Or lots of mustard?" thought Katie as she turned and waved. Whatever the source of her gilded glow, Katie knew that Mrs. Mayor was about to use her for information gathering purposes, both to tell her husband what the new minister's wife was up to and to have gossip to flaunt to the other women in town.

"Hello, my dear!" said Narcissa. "Where are you doing in town on this fine day?"

Katie patted the lunch sack on her shoulder and said, "I'm bringing some dinner to Maria and her family. They just buried Thomas the baker this morning. The deacons will make sure they have some food tomorrow. It's important to see they have what they need while the grief is so fresh."

"It certainly is, my dear. You really are a sweet one. Perfect for a minister's wife."

"Thank you, ma'am," said Katie, hoping the conversation would end soon.

"Where was it that you first learned to be such a good helpmeet? Where was it that Pastor Matti served last? I seem to have forgotten."

"Saxony," replied Katie.

"Electoral or Ducal?" asked Narcissa.

"Electoral Saxony, ma'am." Katie really just wanted to get to Maria's house. Talking with a grieving widow seemed so much more lifegiving than this interrogation from Narcissa. But it was not to be. Narcissa continued her questions.

"Now that's interesting. We're expecting a delegation from the Elector of Brandenburg to come for an official visit later this week."

"Sound very important."

"It is, dear. It is. Very important. The mayor and I will be sure to have Hurtzburg ready to give a royal welcome. We're very busy with it. In fact, that's what I'm doing today... running here and there to oversee the preparations."

"Then I'll let you to it," said Katie, giving a little bow and swiveling her shoulders as if to start walking away. She really hoped Narcissa would indeed get on with whatever fatuous business she thought she needed to do.

But before she could turn back down the lane, Narcissa said, "That's interesting about Electoral Saxony. Are they allied with the Swedes these days? In the war?"

"I believe so, ma'am," sighed Katie, feeling herself getting pulled into a new phase of this unpleasant interaction.

"And did you know that Brandenburg is now getting tired of working with the Swedes and in further secret negotiations with a variety of powers?"

"No, ma'am."

"You didn't? A smart young thing like yourself? I was certain you kept up with current events better than that."

“Brandenburg has changed sides a couple times now, ma’am, so I’m afraid I’ve lost track.”

“So you think they’re fickle? Disingenuous, do you? That would be the Saxon in you, I suppose.”

“No, ma’am. I don’t think that. And I’m not originally Saxon. I’m from Anhalt.”

“Same difference,” scoffed Narcissa.

“That may be, ma’am. I really mean no disrespect to the Brandenburgs. I’m sure they’re doing their best for their people in these hard times.”

“I’ll convey your support,” said Narcissa, “when I tell the delegation about our new Saxon pastor.”

Once an initial wave of anger and annoyance had passed at how easily Narcissa had found ways to bait and hook her, Katie felt some renewed sympathy for what her husband had endured before lunch. She took a breath, put on a brave face, and looked Narcissa in the eye. “We certainly would be honored to be mentioned in such fine company,” she said. “Please accept our thanks for all the wonderful work you and the mayor are doing on our behalf.”

“You’re quite welcome,” said Narcissa. Feeling quite satisfied about this talk, she prepared to let this uppity minister’s wife get on with her pious work. “I’m sure Maria will love the dinner. God bless you all.”

“Blessings to you, too, ma’am.” Again Katie gave a little bow and turned down the lane. Before she had walked five steps, she heard Narcissa call out another name, having already found another person upon whom she could impose her importance.

“So not only are we outsiders,” thought Katie, “but we’re also suspected traitors.” Thinking of her home on the hill, she realized in a new way that the walk between the church and the town represented more than a short geographic distance. In one way a local center, her home on the holy hill also set her in a different orbit than others in Hurtzburg.

She reached Maria’s little house and knocked on the plain wood door. Daughter Sara opened the door and invited her in. Maria was sitting on bench in the corner by the fireplace, staring at the ashes. Aware that disease might be spread through person-to-person contact, Katie politely declined to sit on the straw couch on the side of the room that probably doubled as a family bed. She would stand, make a little conversation, and then go back home.

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” she said. Setting the sack down on the table, Katie said, “I know it’s not much, but the Reverend and I have brought a little supper. The deacons will come tomorrow and make sure you have what you need for the rest of the week.”

“Thank you,” said Maria.

“I know it can be hard to have energy to do simple things at times like this,” said Katie. “And yet, at the same time, it can also be hard to sleep. Grief is strange like that.” Maria continued to stare into the fireplace, but young Sara was curious about what Katie might be talking about.

Katie continued, aware that Sara was listening. “You know, when I can’t sleep, I like to take a quick step outside and see how the moon is doing. It’s almost a full moon this week, getting bright enough to make a shadow.”

“I didn’t know the moon could make a shadow,” said Sara, with some wonder.

“It really can,” said Katie, especially times like now in the middle of the year when it’s so big in the sky and right overhead.

“Thomas loved to see a full moon when we went out to start his baking before dawn,” said Maria. “And he loved the morning star. He never failed to mention it,” she said. “It always made his day.”

“What a beautiful memory,” said Katie. “And Christ is our dear morning star, who greets us every day, come what may.” Sara stood in wonder at the words coming out of Katie’s mouth. Maria just teared up in her chair.

“You will be in my prayers, Maria. You and Jacob and Sara. Please let me or the deacons know if you need anything. The pastor and I will continue to come around from time to time, too. I promise.” Giving Maria a little bow, she clasped Sara’s hand in a farewell greeting. “God bless you, dear one,” she said. “Your father loved you and the Lord is with you.” Sara started to cry and gave Katie a brief but intense hug. At once wary of the person-to-person contact and thankful for it, Katie gave Sara a little squeeze, bowed, and made her way out the door. Planning to take a different route home than the way she had come, she felt the day’s slight breeze, looked up at the slow summer clouds, and turned towards the little hill with a church on top.

Chapter 5: Love the People

Entirely satisfied about her chance meeting with the young Frau Mathesius, Narcissa relished the rest of her afternoon at the market. She talked with the florist about decorations for the visiting delegation from Brandenburg, she planned an order for meals with the fishmonger, she bought carrots for her dear Dunkie, and picked up some spicy mustard for herself. “You never know when you’ll need more,” she said to the spice merchant, “and it just might give us the local touch to seal the deal with the delegates.”

Although the dignitaries from Brandenburg would be nobility, lawyers, and cabinet members, she felt that they were the ones who should be honored by her presence. There was no such role as queen of Hurtzburg, but Narcissa viewed herself as such. She carried her shopping bags regally down the market street, waved beneficently at passing friends and admirers, and took the long way home past the pond just to bask in her majesty. She felt head and shoulders above the other residents of Hurtzburg, not just because her husband was the mayor or because she was several inches taller than most of the men and women in town, but because she possessed the conviction that this was her town. Other residents? Hurtzburg was her royal residence and the rest of them were guests, mostly uninvited, especially foreigners like the new pastor and his wife. They might speak the same German language and share the same enchanted corner of the European heartland, but this was Narcissa’s home and inheritance. She knew it, and so did everybody else. Even her impressive husband—her heroic Moritz Dunkruger—had originally come to Hurtzburg from Dinkelsdorf (a much less impressive town a day’s walk away) when he was an eager young wagonmaker’s apprentice. Yes, she was the Queen of Hurtzburg, her daughters were princesses, their children heirs apparent, and the beloved mayor her royal consort. Enjoying the breezy sunshine on the pond, as she neared the mayoral house near the city hall, she thought, “The visitors from Brandenburg may have seen more of the world than I have, and they may be sophisticated in ways that I cannot begin to match. But they have never yet seen a town like this or a woman like me.”

She arrived home to find her youngest daughter Ingrid preparing a dinner of stew and sausages. The two older girls, Ilse and Imelda, had leveraged their height and family connections into marriages with boys from wealthy families. Ilse married the son of the town's most successful stonemason and Imelda married into a leading family of carrot growers. One of them had two children with one on the way and the other daughter had three, and Narcissa was already started to get the various grandchildren all mixed up. Ingrid was stubbornly refusing to consider marriage for now, but she made up with it by doing most of the cooking and cleaning. Of the five members of the immediate family, she was the least ambitious. It gave the rest of them someone to look down on, which they greatly appreciated and regularly put into practice.

Setting down her groceries and grabbing a vase for the flowers, Narcissa said loudly, "Do I have news for you!" Ingrid continued to stir the stew and check the sausages.

"I'm sure you do," she said quietly.

"The new minister's wife is from Saxony. Well, they're from Saxony. She's from one of those little Anhalt states, but that's practically the same thing."

"That sounds nice," said Ingrid, still minding the stove more than her mother. "I met some Saxons once. They cooked me some really good dumplings, served with a nice brown sauce. I can still taste it."

"Oh, it's not nice at all! Saxony never cared about our little corner of the world. Then they joined with the Swedes, then they turned on the Swedes to work with the empire. And now it seems they're just in it for themselves."

"In what for themselves?"

"War and power."

"Who isn't?" said Ingrid, who was starting to tidy up the kitchen now that the stew and sausages seemed well underway.

"Your father, for one," said Narcissa. "He loves his people and will do anything for them."

"What side are we on again?" asked Ingrid with mild interest.

"We're an independent city-state governed by a council mostly made up of leading members of the merchant class, proud ancient members of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation with connections to the prince archbishop of Bumblestedt's hereditary lands and scattered feudal obligations to several dukes of the leading ruling families. We're very important to all of them," she added.

"So who's coming to the party we're having this week?"

"I've told you a thousand times, Ingrid," Narcissa said, exasperated with her daughter's ongoing failure to pay attention to important things. "The delegation from Brandenburg."

"And whose side are they on?"

"They love their people, too, which is why they want to meet with your father so much."

"But are they with the Swedes or the Saxons or the empire or what?"

"It's quite simple, dear. You really should keep up with the news." Now that Narcissa had arranged the flowers in the vase, she started to straighten and dust the furniture, talking all the while. "At first they were with the Dutch Calvinists but wanted to keep the Catholic emperor happy. Then they tried to keep the Danes happy by letting them use the land as a staging area in their wars against the empire. They tried to keep the Swedes out of their

Prussian lands, while also making claims against the King of Poland, which is still technically the feudal authority over Prussia. But when the emperor got mad that the Danes were waging their campaign from supposedly neutral Brandenburg, he invaded, which then required the Brandenburgers to make an arrangement with their previous enemies, the Swedes. That was working out pretty well, until King Gustav Vasa died in battle and the imperial army started winning again. This might have led to a re-evaluation of the relationship with the imperial Hapsburgs, except that the French—who have always hated the Hapsburgs—offered to pay a lot of money to use the land as a safehaven for their allies.”

“They’re on the French side?”

“Don’t you pay attention?!” said Narcissa, looking up from her dusting. “They’re neutral! They do what’s best for their own people!”

“What do they want from us?”

“They’re enamored of our abundant resources and strong people. Plus, it turns out that most of their people—far less industrious than us—have died. I mean, one invading army ransacking towns after the next, followed by wars of revenge against those armies by the next one, followed by looting and plagues, and repeat for the last twenty years or so.”

Stirring the stew and turning the sausages again, Ingrid asked, “They love their people so much that most of them are now dead, and they’re looking to rebuild by partnering with little towns like ours?”

“We’re not little, Ingrid. We’re very important. But yes.”

“Does it seem wise to make deals with leaders whose people have all died from war, plague, and starvation?”

“Who better?!” said Narcissa. “We’ll hold the reigns and set the terms entirely.”

“But what happens when the next invading army—Swedes, Danes, French, Hapsburg, Saxon, whoever—come through on their next revenge tour?”

“It won’t happen. We have no strategic value.”

“But you said we’re very important,” wondered Ingrid.

“We are! We represent the soul of all that’s good about our people and culture: the health of our waters and soil, the steadiness of our peasants, the virtue of our civic leaders. We are the living, breathing heart of the German nation.” Narcissa was stirred with pride at this speech, though she was disappointed to see that Ingrid was still busier sweeping the floor than getting swept up in patriotic delights.

“I don’t think soldiers care about things like that, Mother. I think if they came here, they’d pillage and burn and violate us however they want.”

Narcissa huffed, “How can you say that? You’ve never even met a soldier.”

“I’m just going off of what I’ve heard, I suppose.”

“Maybe you’d meet a nice soldier.”

“Don’t be gross.”

“It’s not gross,” said Narcissa. “It’s heroic. It’s romantic.”

“Tell me that after we’ve been pillaged.”

“Don’t take that tone with me, young lady. And don’t pester your father with this negative attitude of yours either. I see you didn’t put any carrots in the stew, so you’ll already be on his bad side for that.”

“Sorry, Mama,” said Ingrid. She turned around to realize that she was looking at her tall mustard-blonde mother for the first time since she’d come home. “The flowers look lovely.”

Chapter 6: A Foretaste of the Feast to Come

Narcissa loved to finally have Ingrid’s full attention. In the faded gold light of the late afternoon, Ingrid was starting to see the fullness of what her mother projected in body and soul. The door knocked. Relishing the attention of Ingrid and feeling her own fullness, Narcissa gave Ingrid a confident smile before turning to the door and saying, “Just a moment.” She set down her feather duster and took a few stately paces to the door, fully composed to greet the visitor. She opened the door. A full-voiced scream came from her before she even knew what she saw.

On her front step stood a tall figure—even taller than Narcissa—wearing a full cloak and hood. A mask like a raven’s beak covered its face. The figure’s arms were extended as if to give a hug, except that each gloved hand was holding the leathery carcass of a suckling pig, dangling head-down.

“Excuse me, ma’am,” said a muffled voice from behind the mask. “These are for you. A foretaste of what is to come.”

Narcissa tried not to show how scared she still was. “Who are you? Why are you thrusting these poor animals at me? What is the meaning of this?”

“It’s Wipo, ma’am,” said the voice from the mask. “Mayor Dunkruger saw me on my way out of a job and asked me to bring these straight over from the butcher’s shop. I’d take off my mask, but my hands are full.” He continued to hold the pigs out to Narcissa, even more insistently than before.

“Oh, Wipo!” exhaled Narcissa. “Ingrid, it’s Wipo, and he’s brought something from your father. Come give him a hand.”

Ingrid had been standing by the kitchen table when her mother had screamed. Since then, she had been tensely waiting to see who it was. Not until her mother asked her to help Wipo did Ingrid realize that she held a kitchen knife in her right hand and a soup ladle in the left. She set these down and walked to the door. Brushing past her mother, who filled most of the doorway, she stepped out and relieved Wipo of his delivery.

With his hands finally free, Wipo took off his plague mask and pushed back the hood of his cloak. “Hello, Ingrid. Hello, Mrs. Mayor,” he said in his usual jovial way.

Ingrid nodded a greeting as her mother said, “We’ve already got dinner on for tonight, but I see these are smoked, so they should last a while. Ingrid, please take them to the cellar and put them in the cold box. Ingrid went to the stairs at the back of the house and Narcissa moved back to the center of the doorway. She was not one of those people who was doubted Wipo’s methods of plague prevention, but she still wasn’t about to invite him in.

“Carrots for dinner, then?” asked Wipo.

“No, not tonight,” answered Narcissa. “Ingrid made the stew, and she forgot to include her father’s favorite ingredient. Sometimes I just don’t know what’s in that girl’s head.”

“Children are a wonder, indeed,” said Wipo. “My boys are always inventing new games out of whatever they find. Mudballs, stick swords, onion eating contests. They keep me on my toes.”

"Please tell your sweet Ulga I say hello."

"I sure will, ma'am. She'll be pleased at that. Honored, even."

"I mean it sincerely."

"Thank you, ma'am." Not quite sure what to do next, Wipo gave a little bow and said, "I guess I'll be going then. Back to the missus."

"All right then, Wipo. Thanks again for your delivery. I'll tell the mayor we got it."

"You're welcome, ma'am. Auf wiedersehen."

"Auf wiedersehen," said Narcissa. She stepped back into the house and closed the door before Wipo had quite gotten himself turned around to leave. Narcissa went to have a seat by the window and found Ingrid back in the kitchen. "Not the sharpest knife in the drawer, startling me like that," said Narcissa. "But his heart's in the right place."

Ingrid just sighed in agreement. Her momentary fright at the local rat catcher had awakened a new idea in her. For the first time in her life, something her mother said had made sense. "Maybe I should find a soldier to take me away," she said quietly to the kitchen fire.

"What's that, dear?"

"Nothing."

Basking in the afternoon light, warm by the window, Narcissa was admiring the flowers in the vase when the mayor walked into the house.

Taking off his hat and overcoat, he said to his wife, "I saw you from the street, sitting there by the window, looking at the flowers on the sill. Pretty as a picture! I just stood there a moment to enjoy it. I'm a lucky man."

"Aren't you sweet," said Narcissa, standing up to greet him with a little kiss, her yellow face next to his orange visage, a cornucopia of domestic bliss.

Slowly coming out of their embrace, the mayor found his favorite lounging chair and sunk his weight into it. "What a day!" he announced. "After my morning with the council, me and Wipo gave the new minister a little bit of what's what. Don't want any trouble from him ahead of this big visit we got coming. Don't think we will, but sometimes you just gotta make sure. Then I spent some time making plans for the guests. I saw the butcher. Did Wipo bring those pigs? That's a taste of what we'll be serving the night of the banquet."

"He did, dear. He came holding them out all hooded and masked like he was the angel of death. Scared me half out of my senses."

"The angel of death?" laughed the mayor. "Don't be ridiculous. That's just Wipo being his regular self. Now what's for dinner?"

PART 2: PEACE AND LOVE IN THE LATE 1630'S

Chapter 7: Sermon on the Hill

Wipo did not often attend Sunday morning worship. He and Ulga came for Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter, which made him feel like a member in good standing. Apart from those major holidays, though, Wipo carried memories with him every time he walked up the hill to the church. His three wedding ceremonies had taken place there, along with five baptisms and the funerals of two wives and three children. Although he was not a sentimental person, Wipo nevertheless made a point of quietly crossing himself whenever he passed the family

grave plot. He had done it again earlier in the week when he and the mayor had spoken with Pastor Matti. He had made sure to do it when Dunkruger wasn't looking, because he didn't want the mayor to give him a hard time or ask any questions. Wipo wasn't sure what he really thought about life and death, faith and salvation, but he wanted those beliefs to be his, without being exposed to the scrutiny of others, including the mayor. Making his way through the crowd walking to the sanctuary, he crossed himself again as he passed the graves of his wives and children, careful to see that no one was watching. Picking up a service book from the usher at the front door, he found a place near the back of the church on the left side, said a prayer in the pew before sitting down, and settled into his spot on the wooden bench.

After finding his starting place in the service book, Wipo remembered his favorite thing about church: people watching. Immediately, his mixed feelings about attending worship vanished. It looked like the day would live up to expectations. The delegation from Brandenburg had arrived last evening. Because they came at dusk, there was little fanfare. They took their lodging and dinner at the town's main guest house before going to bed. With their late arrival, worship on Sunday morning was the first formal item on the agenda between these fellow Protestants. It was also one of the few events open to the public, which made this particular service one of the bigger social events of recent times. Indeed, the church was filling up, with the visiting dignitaries and local officials taking their places near the front and the rest of the townsfolk filing into the rest of the pews and even crowding the modest balcony.

An organ prelude filled the air as the last of the seats were taken. As it ended, the minister and his assistant entered the chancel from the sacristy. Wipo stood for prayers, sat for readings, and followed along in the hymnal as best he could. Most of all, he watched the people. Mayor Dunkruger was easy to see near the front on the right, as his tall bulk radiated a casual but clear disdain at having to sit still, stand up, and listen to other people. Wipo could see that even in church, the mayor wanted to be in charge, a commanding attitude that Wipo found admirable. Dunkruger was surrounded by the other city council members, whose importance was visible in how close they sat to the mayor.

On the other side of the aisle were the delegates from Brandenburg. They were dressed in casual elegance, their clothing announcing a wealth and sophistication that did not need words. They were freshly shaved, with stylish beards and moustaches. Some had entered church with decorative walking sticks. They followed the service with a polite lack of interest, paying more attention to the humble charm of this country parish and its people than to the service. Wipo viewed this, too, as a sign of their moral and social superiority.

Worship continued in this benign vein until Pastor Matti stood up to speak. Wipo had a strong feeling that the minister would ruin the mood. He had only heard the new pastor preach once or twice before, and he hadn't liked the way Matti used his sermons to teach new things. Wipo's view was that if he wanted to learn new things, it wouldn't be by coming to church.

"Our text from Christ's Sermon on the Mount in the fifth chapter of St. Matthew invites us to come to the altar for reconciliation with our brothers," started Pastor Matti. "It also admonishes us to speak kindly rather than harshly about our brothers. As Christ says, 'If you say to your brother, "You fool!" you will be liable to the hell of fire,' a threat that indicates the reality of pain caused by severed human relationships."

Wipo thought that nothing sounded more like a preacher than the phrase "severed human relationships." "Who talks like that?" he thought to himself. Judging by the impatience

of Dunkruger's shoulders as he uncomfortably listened to the sermon, the mayor agreed with him.

"Indeed, this text has many things to say to us gathered here today," continued the pastor. "First, it commends to us a faith in God that comes even before the righteous outward completion of holy ceremonies. The love of the heart is more important even than bringing our gifts to the altar. That is a sign that faith in God truly dwells in our hearts. On this day in particular, we give thanks to God for the arrival of our visitors. This morning we are physically and spiritually gathered at the altar of the Lord for the sake of peace."

At this, the Brandenburgers nodded their approval and exchanged looks of mutual satisfaction with each other. Seeing this, the Hurtzburg council members also shared knowing glances. Wipo himself reluctantly granted that the minister had made a nice point. He continued to listen with slightly less detachment.

"As the Psalmist says, 'It is good for brothers to live in harmony.' And yet, on this day when we gather as brothers for the sake of harmony, the question must be asked which our Lord addressed through the parable of the Good Samaritan: Who is my neighbor? Who is my brother?"

At these words, Wipo wondered to himself, "Why do pastors always do this? Why can't he just let peace be peace and brothers be brothers? Why does there always have to be a problem with the way things are?"

Pastor Matti kept preaching. "These seasons of what seems to be endless war in these German lands have not been marked by an excess of brotherhood but rather by the casual hatred expressed in saying to our brother, 'You fool.' And here, we all fall short. How often in our daily activities do we casually belittle our brothers and sisters with seemingly harmless insults and judgments. How often do we not look for the best in others, but focus on the worst, turning them from fellow beloved children of God to our enemies."

If the guests had approved of the warm words earlier in the sermon, now they grew visibly colder. They had not made this trip out of love of their enemies. Sensing this, Mayor Dunkruger sat up straighter, his face a brighter orange, as he tried to stare down the minister.

"But is this not the love of God for us," continued Pastor Matti, ignoring the momentary looks of dissatisfaction coming from the front pews, "that our Lord Jesus continues to enter our cold hearts, continues to reach out to us in love, invites us over and over again into his peace. Brothers and sisters gathered here today: We pray for peace, we welcome our guests, we are thankful for them and their efforts to serve the common good. May the Holy Spirit bless this community—and those of our neighbors—with peace. Gathered around the altar, may we share the divine gifts of faith, hope, and love for the blessing and enrichment of all our people. Amen."

Pastor Matti returned to his seat as the organist introduced the next hymn. Whatever tension might have risen when the pastor talked about loving enemies had subsided at the word "enrichment." That was a word everyone could get behind. From Wipo's view near the back of the church, Pastor Matti seemed worn from preaching but satisfied. The delegates had the look of rich people who had put a lot of effort into listening to a challenging piece of chamber music that unexpectedly and wonderfully resolved at the end. Mayor Dunkruger and the city council members were just glad the service was nearly over and they could get on with the manly displays of camaraderie and officialness that they were so looking forward to. The

townspeople around him looked like they always did, having just heard one more sermon from one more preacher. Mostly, the congregation regulars just seemed happy to be singing another of their favorite songs.

After the prayers and collection of offerings, the congregation was dismissed. A small group of pious parishioners stayed around the altar to receive communion from the pastor. The delegates and town leaders, however, made their way to the exits and shared directions about where to meet for the upcoming banquet. Wipo looked for the mayor. Making eye contact, he pointed and gestured as if to say, "Can I meet some of the bigwigs?"

In return, Mayor Dunkruger pursed his lips, shook his head slightly side-to-side, and held out his hand in a subtle gesture that said, "Not right now, these folks are busy and tired, and an outstanding citizen like yourself doesn't need to go through the hassle. You'll meet them later."

Wipo understood perfectly. He gave a little salute and started to make his way out of the church. Passing the cemetery, he crossed himself and followed the crowd down the hill. He wondered what his family was seeing from their graves, through the dirt and the trees to the puffy clouds. He wondered what Ulga had cooked for Sunday dinner. Without thinking about it, he hummed the last hymn they had sung all the way home.

Chapter 8: Everything and Nothing

"Congratulations, my dear! You did the impossible this morning. You managed to say everything and nothing at the same time."

Katie took a sip of tea, smiled at her husband, and passed him the butter.

"I know, I know," said Carl, still wondering about the sermon he had preached. "That's the nature of words. They are everything, like when the Lord said, 'Let there be light' or when I say, 'I love you.' Or, in this case, when the scriptures cause us to ask, 'Who is my neighbor?' and then to live according to the truth of that love for others. And yet, at the same time, words are wind, nothing, smoke."

Katie chimed in with a verse from Ecclesiastes. "'Vanity of vanities, says the teacher, all is vanity.'" She took another sip of tea.

"Well said, preacher," said Carl to his wife.

Setting her cup down and really wondering about this morning's experience, she asked, "What did you hope to achieve by asking leaders who care only about increasing their own power about loving their enemies? Were you trying to change them, trying to make them mad, or just trying to let them know that you know they're selfish pigs?"

"All of the above, I suppose, which is also part of the power of words. They can do all of that at the same time. In the end, though, I figure they hear what they want to hear, especially when I say that God loves sinners like them. Maybe I shouldn't say that, but it seems to be an essential part of what Jesus said."

"Does Jesus love their quests for power and schemes about how to profit off of other people's suffering?"

"No. But he loves them beneath those vain pursuits. And maybe if they knew that, they would love others as themselves."

"That might work for pious souls like yours, Pastor," said Katie, "but it doesn't work for most people. Most people can't hear their way into love. They need to be so thoroughly broken

by life and sin that they have no other options than to beg for grace for themselves and see others in the same desperate way.”

“I don’t like that, but I know you’re right. Pharaoh didn’t let the Israelites go until the last plague. Nebuchadnezzar didn’t stop believing he was a god until he was eating grass in the forest like a beast. Only the most lost souls and desperate sinners seemed to hear and believe what Jesus was saying. My calling is to tell them about it and then see what happens. Like you said, it’s everything and nothing, all at once.” He took a bite of bread, with some delightful berry jam that Katie had picked up at the market.

“This is good jam. Are we gonna make some ourselves when the berries come in later this summer?” he asked.

“Ja wohl,” she said. But Katie wasn’t done wondering about the morning service. She wondered, “Isn’t Brandenburg a Calvinist land?”

“The royal family is Calvinist, I believe. But they’re all hanging out far away in Prussia by the sea. They’re waiting to see if anything will be left of their country before they come back. Maybe a couple of the lesser nobility converted, too. I saw a duke and a count, for instance.”

“I thought that the people of a land had to worship the same way as the nobility,” said Katie. “That’s how it was in Anhalt. The princes were Calvinist, so we were Calvinists.”

“I’m glad you passed my father’s theology exam before our wedding.”

“You’re lucky I like to read your books,” she said. “But what about Brandenburg? I doubt they singed onto your Lutheran ‘Formula of Concord’ before coming to worship this morning.”

“You’re right. It’s normally been the way of things that the territory follows the faith of its rulers. That’s how it’s been since the 1550s. But in Brandenburg, the people and pastors revolted when they were told they would have to become Calvinist like the royal family.”

“Really?”

“Yes indeed. Lutherans don’t get mad about much, but if you try to make them change the way they like to worship, they will storm the castle.”

“It seems like there are better reasons to storm castles.”

“There are,” said Carl.

“If I were a pastor, I’d let the local petty tyrants know that I would have my people ready to storm the castle in a moment’s notice if they carried on the way they do, leading with greed and ignorance.”

“And then you could become the petty tyrant,” smiled Carl.

“The pettiest! And I would do it all for the pettiest reason of all: love.”

“Everything and nothing,” said Carl.

With her mind clearly on something else, Katie was using the knife to spread patterns of jam across her rye bread. “Why couldn’t I be a pastor?” she asked.

“It just isn’t done,” said Carl. “I remember a classmate asking the professor a question like this at the university. He replied with something about a natural, God-given order with male leadership and womanly submission. At the time, it seemed like a good answer, but everything I know about you throws that theory out the window.”

“That’s what I thought,” winked Katie. “There were female prophets. Mary Magdalene was the first to tell the news about the resurrection. The Samaritan woman at the well told her whole village about Jesus and then they believed in him. I think it should happen.”

“Are you ready to storm the castle for it?” asked Carl.

“Some days I could,” said Katie. Carl saw the truth of it in her eyes.

“Okay. Some day. We’ll make it happen.” he said. “Until then, please keep me on my toes and tell me what I’m doing wrong.”

“Everything and nothing,” she laughed back.

Chapter 9: Time to Shine

Narcissa Dunkruger had not attended Sunday worship, because she was overseeing the final preparations for the lunch with the diplomats in the great room at city hall. Her efforts were paying off. The hall was beautiful. Sunlight streamed through the windows, glistening off of the chandeliers, and sparking in the glass centerpieces of each table. Bottles of local white wine stood ready to entertain. Silverware shined. Porcelain plates glowed. Narcissa herself felt like she was radiating a particularly wonderful golden light.

Behind the head table, a painted mural depicted the town’s mythical founding by Sir Wolfhart von Rauberstein. In the foreground on the left, a wounded knight rested next to his horse. Sir Wolfhart looks up across the canvas, where he sees the holy hill with its healing spring. A ray of light shines from that upper right of the picture, casting its grace down from the hill to the desperate and tired knight. Deer, boars, eagles, and foxes warmly watch on from the woods and meadows all around. There was no sign of the existence of the semi-nomadic people who had often made their dwelling near the spring in the hill. Beneath the painting, a caption shares the knight’s noble intention to settle in Hurtzburg: “I am wounded and have no home. God help me, this is it.”

These words always filled Narcissa with a warm sense of pride. This was her town, founded as a refuge for the weary and a home of divine blessing. Once, a skeptical teacher she had from a neighboring village had suggested to her class that the knight was probably wounded and homeless because he was a horse thief or adulterer or both, on the run from the authorities somewhere else. That teacher did not last long in Hurtzburg. Narcissa could see no sign of immorality or wickedness in the man’s face or in the gothic wonder that filled the painting. No, his chivalrous refuge had become her noble home, too.

Ulga and some of the other local women had helped Narcissa decorate. They were allowed to take some dumplings and glazed carrots home with them for their troubles. Narcissa walked over to them and their wrapped lunches, making sure they didn’t take too little or too much. She waved them off as the next crew of servers and waiters was trickling in. Feeling like church should be about over, she peered out one of the hall’s third-floor windows towards the holy hill. Between the fields and outlying farmsteads, Narcissa could see groups of people making their way down the lane. The new minister might be obnoxious, but at least he had a good sense of punctuality. Her mayor would be somewhere in that river of people, leading the visiting dignitaries—real noblemen—as they made their stately way to city hall and its sturdy wooden stairs and hallways. She had heard from Moritz that the delegation included two dukes, three counts, seven lawyers, a medical doctor, and a court jester who doubled as a secretary when his joking and tumbling skills were not needed.

“This is it!” she said excitedly to one of the girls near her who would be pouring the wine. “Our time to shine!” She smiled at the girl and made her way down to the front of the building to greet the visitors as they arrived at the square.

Mayor Dunkruger led the visitors into city hall, a stone and wood construction with a plaster exterior. It looked like a small-town imitation of a Viennese office building. It had enough elements of Renaissance architecture to look like it was supposed to be a laudable civic landmark but without any of the embellishments that might actually succeed in impressing anyone. Built almost hundred years earlier, it was showing signs of needing some attention. Windows were dusty, paint was fading, some roof tiles were missing or chipped. But for Mayor Dunkruger, it was the center of the known world.

He welcomed people up the steps and into the foyer. To the left were clerks' offices. To the right was a courtroom. Immediately ahead was a large open staircase. Normally not one to show excitement, the mayor bounded up the stairs and indicated for the guests to follow.

"My offices!" he announced. Wood beams and stuffed boar's heads gave the visitors the initial impression of having entered a hunting lodge. Arriving at the second floor, Dunkruger led the assembly into a meeting room with a large conference table. With less light than the staircase, this room felt more like a tavern than a hunting lodge. "This is where the council and I conduct business. The table and chairs were made right here in Hurtzburg with local wood by local craftsmen." He rapped his knuckles on the tabletop. The visitors guessed that they might have enjoyed seeing the swirls of a locally-produced wood table, if they were able to see clearly enough in the dim room.

Dunkruger then led them back across the landing, past some smallish council member offices, to his own chambers. Unlike the rest of the floor, this room sparkled. The first thing the visitors saw was a nearly life-sized portrait of the mayor wearing a fur coat and top hat. To the left was a gold-plated mirror, some brightly framed paintings of dark woodland scenes, and a deeply-cushioned lounge chair and matching velvet couch. The other half of the room was dominated by a large desk and office chair decorated with bright yellow (or maybe light orange) trim. It looked out imperiously over the town to the hill and the church they had just come from. In the shadier corner of this side of the room, yet somehow still clearly on display, was a gilded porcelain chamber pot.

Mayor Dunkruger beamed, "Welcome to my *bureau*," he said, speaking the French word with a very un-French pronunciation.

"Very tasteful," said the court jester, who had introduced himself earlier to the mayor only as the group's secretary. Without speaking, Dunkruger gave back a confident nod and patted the secretary on the back.

"Now to lunch," said the satisfied mayor.

He led them up the staircase to the great hall, which was bright with the midday sun shining through the open windows and clear glass. Here the plaster on the walls appeared to have been freshly painted, with decorative flourishes along the edges where it met the wood beam ceiling. Tables garnished with vases of flowers, porcelain plates, and cloth napkins filled the room, with a long head table set up in front of the painting of Sir Wolfgang for the mayor and the nobility. At the far end of the room, the head of the largest wild boar ever hunted in Hurtzburg stared out across the tables.

"What will we be eating, Mayor?" asked the secretary.

"Pork," said the mayor.

"I wondered," deadpanned the secretary, gazing at the boar's head.

Waiters began taking people to their seats. The mayor sat at the head table with the dukes and counts. He somehow managed to slouch forward and look extremely stiff at the same time, with unoccupied hands resting awkwardly in his lap. Despite this unorthodox posture, the mayor was clearly impressed with the noble company surrounding him, a pride conveyed through the smug scowl that he cast across the room.

The court jester secretary was taken to his seat, a place in the middle of the room, separated from the head table by seats reserved for the lawyers and council members, but ahead of local people who seemed like they might represent the most obsequious members of Hurtzburg's business community. Sitting down, he was surprised to find himself next to a woman who reminded him of nothing so much as an elegant jar of mustard.

"Guten Tag, Herr Secretary," she said. "I am Narcissa Dunkruger, the mayor's wife."

"Guten Tag, Mrs. Mayor," he replied. "My name is Lorenz Laurentius. It is a pleasure to be here."

"The pleasure is ours, Mr. Laurentius." They began to eat the first course, a cabbage salad consisting of at least five different kinds of sauerkraut. As the onion soup was coming out, Mrs. Dunkruger continued the conversation. The other people at the table, representatives from the archbishop and a neighboring duchy were entertaining each other with stories of bureaucratic tedium.

"You are the delegation secretary, I believe, Mr. Laurentius?" she asked.

"Yes, Mrs. Mayor. A secretary who writes, not a secretary who speaks. I am their amanuensis, if you will."

"Of course," said Narcissa, as they began the soup course. As the last sips of onion, crouton and broth were being consumed, Narcissa set down her bowl, wiped her lips with the napkin, and asked, "I'm sure I heard that you had some other role at the Brandenburg court, as well."

This revelation of his double identity caught Lorenz by surprise. "Spicy mustard!" he thought to himself without changing his expression. Calmly, and with some amused uncertainty about where the conversation would go, he said, "Yes, ma'am. I have training in the liberal arts and law, which I gained at the university and which I use in my work with delegations like these. But my main job in Berlin is as a court jester to the prince elector, his highness Friedrich Wilhelm of Brandenburg-Prussia. Or, as I call him, Sir Willy-Fritz."

Impressed with her own proximity to power, Narcissa asked, "And how does one find a job like that?"

"We were friends in college," said Lorenz. "After university, I was having trouble finding work and he was getting bored with how terrible it was to wait to rule a land that was falling apart before his eyes. I can do some gymnastics—cartwheels and back-flips—and I have a good mind for reciting plays and poetry. The prince also likes how I make fun of the nobility. He has to treat them nicely, but I can say whatever I want. It's all fun and games, though, until a duke threatens to murder you."

"Does that happen often?"

"Every few months. So far, so good."

"If you're so close to the prince, then what are you doing here?" Narcissa was in prime gossip gathering form, and Lorenz clearly didn't care what he said about others.

“The prince and his immediate family are all off in Prussia. The situation in Berlin is just too depressing. War, pillaging, famine, plague, repeat. They’re waiting it out by the sea. I spent a little time there, but the prince wanted me to keep an eye on things in Berlin. He doesn’t trust his father’s friends.” At this, Lorenz gestured to the dukes, counts, and lawyers at the tables ahead of them.

“And what will you be telling the prince about your first impressions of our little town?” asked Narcissa innocently.

“Typical little burg,” said Lorenz. “An earnest minister, hearty country food, orange-tinted burgermeister.”

“He is very healthy,” said Narcissa with some defensive pride.

“I’m sure,” said Lorenz. “Not everyone gets to shit in a gilded chamber pot.”

Narcissa wondered for a second if there might be any malice in the fool’s words, but she could not see any joke in something being gold. “He has worked hard to get where he is,” she said.

“I just hope he doesn’t work too hard over that chamber pot,” said Lorenz.

Narcissa laughed. Whatever the fool might have meant in his previous comment, that was funny. They shared a smile and then looked over at the mayor, who was trying to look both imposing and relaxed for the guests around him.

“He does look constipated,” Narcissa noticed about her husband for the first time.

“You’re so right,” laughed Lorenz. “He had the same expression all during church.”

Waving to the barmaid, he asked, “How’s the wine here?”

“It tastes like licorice and shoes,” said Narcissa, daring an insult about the local winemakers.

“So you’re saying it will pair well with the main course,” said Lorenz with a smile, earning another laugh from his hostess, and holding out his wine glass for a fill. They clinked glasses, and started to eat the pork roast that had just been brought out.

Wondering about the personal life of this well-connected fool, Narcissa cast an open question. “What is the wife of a court jester like?”

“Disappointed,” said the secretary a little too quickly. He leaned back and chewed some pork, thinking about the question some more. For someone used to telling the truth about others, he was not used to telling the truth about himself. Narcissa could see the change in his expression, even as she made sure not to show her delight at this revelation.

“We’re not married, but I am engaged to the most wonderful person. She met me when I was finishing law school. I think she expected me to get a good job in local government, something like these guys here,” he nodded at the table of lawyers efficiently eating at the table next to them. “But city councils and state governments haven’t really been hiring newcomers while there’s a war on, which there has been for most of my life.” Narcissa put on her kindest listening face.

“The job I have is much better what I would have found in some clerk’s office. But it’s hard for her to tell people what I really do. She hates hearing me try to describe a long day’s work of revelry and jesting. She tells her family I work for the prince, which is true. But, alack and alas,” Lorenz finished with a dramatic flourish, “she doesn’t find it funny. She refuses to marry me until I get a new job.”

Narcissa gave him a sympathetic pat on his arm. Lorenz couldn't think of anything comical to say, so they continued their meal by making small talk with the officials around them. Narcissa couldn't have been happier. The fool had delivered.

Chapter 10: So Terrific

With his most officious scowl of greeting, yet still unsure what to do with his hands, Mayor Dunkruger stood up as the dessert ended and announced, "Gentlemen, now that this terrific meal is just about over—and I mean, it really was terrific, wasn't it?—we'll be moving to the second-floor council chambers to conduct our business. World class, just like this meal. I would like to thank my wife Narcissa for organizing this event." Narcissa waved and gave her husband an adoring smile. "Absolutely delicious, all locally sourced. We have the best farmers, the best craftsman here. And you're really gonna like how we do business here, too. All the best people. We adjourn for now and I'll meet you in the second-floor chambers."

Radiating self-satisfaction, the mayor turned to the guests next to him and said, "That was great. You're really in for a treat."

After a heavy meal and some desperate attempts to find privies and outhouses, the delegates found themselves even sleepier and confused once they reassembled in the council room. The air was stagnant and dark, nowhere near as bright as the great hall. Candelabra in the corners of the room provided more light than the midday rays that snuck into the chamber through a single high, dusty window. The Brandenburgs immediately sensed that they were in for a long late afternoon meeting, which would undoubtedly induce sleep without permitting it.

Normally, the dozen council members luxuriated in ample space around the conference table. But today, with about double the usual number of people fitting into the same space, the room felt tight. A second row of chairs circled the table, so that no one had enough space to get in or out of their seat or to move their arms or legs once they sat down.

Taking his place at the head of the table surrounded by his council members, Mayor Dunkruger seemed oblivious to the discomfort. Lorenz, pinched in the narrowest part of the room, suspected that Dunkruger might have arranged things this way specifically for this effect. Sitting opposite the mayor, the dukes and counts with their lawyers behind them showed no emotion at all. They might have preferred more comfortable arrangements, but now it was time to do what they had come for.

Duke Elmer of Immerunterwasserfeld stood up. With a calm dignity, he said, "Honored Mayor and Council Members of the City of Hurtzburg, we heartily thank you for your hospitality and your time. As you know, we have been sent as envoys of His Majesty Georg Wilhelm the Elector of Brandenburg and Duke of Prussia. He sends his greetings in this signed certificate, suitable for framing. It would look lovely in the foyer." The duke passed an elegantly rolled and tassled document down the row of council members until it arrived in the hands of the mayor, who barely managed to unseal it without tearing the heavy paper. Examining the royal signature and wax seal, Dunkruger gave his dour smile approval and held it up for the council members around him to see. Smoothing it out in front of him, trying not to touch the royal signature, he said, "Thank you very much. This is terrific. Absolutely terrific, right guys?" The council members nodded, satisfying Dunkruger's sense of importance.

The duke continued, "As you know, His Majesty the Elector has pursued a steadfast policy of putting Brandenburg first. We have not beholden ourselves to any foreign powers but have instead made a variety of strategic alliances across religious and dynastic lines to ensure the greatness of our people. This has been so successful that His Majesty now feels safe with his family at the royal residence in Königsburg on the Baltic Sea."

"That's a beautiful place, I've heard. Never been, but I've heard. Great views," said the mayor. Duke Elmer cast a look that almost expressed annoyance at the interruption. But before his face might betray any emotion, he reached for another document, which he held gently, unopened, between his hands. This new document now consumed the attention of the mayor and his council. If the first document had been signed by a master of Europe, suitable for framing, they wondered, what glories might the next ones hold?

Trying to fulfill his secretarial duties from his cramped position in a chair between the wall and the thighs and shoulders of several sweaty, overdressed men, Lorenz took notes in a thin stenographic notepad. He marveled at the duke's ability to describe a generation's worth of failed opportunism as a principled stand taken on behalf of the populace. In truth, Lorenz's homeland had become a playground for foreign armies. Half of the boys he grew up with had died in battle or run off as mercenaries never to be seen again. Most of the women he knew had endured several layers of trauma: the deaths of loved ones, hunger, disease, assault, more death. His friend the prince wasn't taking in the sea air in Prussia. He was an exile, waiting to see if there would be anything of his lands left if the wars ever ended.

For his part, Lorenz had coped by immersing himself in literature, memorizing bawdy poems, and telling jokes. But this duke was putting the jester to shame: spinning a tremendous yarn in front of them all with an absolutely straight face. "Brandenburg first!" thought Lorenz with amazement. Of course! First in suffering, first in short-term solutions, first in death and misery upon misery. Until this moment, Lorenz had viewed the old men around court as hopelessly out of touch and out of date. But now he saw that they weren't out of touch at all. They were masters and kings of turning other people's pain to their own advantage. These men's sons hadn't been lost to the tides of war. Their wives and daughters had not fallen into the possession of nameless, faceless marauders. As a professional satirist, Lorenz found himself in wonder at the duke's performance. As a human being, however, he felt a level of dread even deeper than he had known possible. Trapped in the sweaty somnolence of the council chamber, he wanted nothing more than to run back to Berlin and save his girlfriend from the next winds of destruction whose whispery beginnings he could feel stirring in the thick air around him.

The duke carefully unsealed the document and set it on the table. "You will find that His Majesty is offering the council and citizens of Hertzburg his protection in case of attack. He will also pay at 33 percent higher than market prices for a guaranteed percentage of your annual production of grain and pork. He asks in return for the conscription of a yet-to-be-determined number of male citizens into an army that he may or may not decide to raise."

After finishing his address, the duke slid the treaty across the table, where Mayor Dunkruger and those closest to him examined the document. They paid more attention to the swooping calligraphy and royal stamps than to the text itself. Lorenz noted the council's acceptance of the document.

Duke Elmer continued, "We will look forward to your formal response in the coming days. Until then, we have no further items to discuss today. We heartily thank you for your gracious reception and for the uplifting worship and fellowship that we enjoyed this morning. If you please, we will now retire for the evening. We understand that there are some tours of the town and countryside. Some of our retinue will indeed attend, but I cannot promise that all of us will be so unoccupied as to be able to participate. We will await your instructions with respect to the treaty before you and will be ready to negotiate at that time. Good day."

Mayor Dunkruger hunched forward, lips pursed in surprise this time at having nothing to say. Collecting himself enough to respond, he said, "Terrific. We'll be in touch." He stood up, gave a stiff bow, and invited the guests to exit the room. After the visitors had all left, the mayor turned to his council and said, "Gentlemen, get ready for some terrific times ahead."

Chapter 11: A Splash of Destiny

Secretary Jester Lorenz Laurentius did not feel like joining the elder members of his delegation as they went back to their lodgings for schnapps and an early bedtime. He wanted a walk and to see the town whose future he could so well predict. Bidding adieu to the rest of the party in the market square, he decided to go left, which felt like south. He'd see as much of the village as possible before surrendering to schnapps and a bed.

At the edge of the market square, he saw a plain well. If this town was like the village he grew up in, then this was a public well and most of the families would get their water from it during the day. The richer people would have private wells. He could still remember the chalky flavor of the water in his hometown. It made for good bread and a nice hazy beer. He hadn't tried the beer here yet, but the wine really had tasted like licorice and boots. Maybe he'd stop at a pub for a pint along with way, if he found one that looked halfway welcoming. He had thrown a couple coins into his pocket in the morning and still had some after giving a small offering at church. He could splurge on a local brew. If he wrote about it in his report to the prince, he might even be able to include it in his expense account.

He set off down the lane, which was accompanied by a little open stream. It smelled like mud and shit. Indeed, just as he was registering the smell, he had to stop himself from getting doused with excrement. A woman had just emerged from her house and, without bothering to look up, had tossed the contents of a chamber pot into the water. A spot of yellowish mud landed on Lorenz's shoe, but otherwise he had managed to avoid a more complete dousing.

"Sorry about that, sir!" waved the woman. "My eyes aren't what they used to be. My mistake!" With a sense of having fulfilled her apologies, she went back inside her dusty brown home.

Bowing to the closed door, Lorenz announced loudly and formally, "Apology accepted, ma'am. But maybe in the future you might be more careful about where, how, and on whom you fling your shit." Public acts of buffoonery like this were why the prince had hired him. Lorenz was always performing for an invisible audience. In this case, the cosmos deserved to know more about the great and tragic humor of a visually impaired woman emptying a chamber pot into the street, trusting both its flight and destination to the accidents of space and time. "Life is theater," said Lorenz to the sky, "and I am but a prop." He dabbed the soiled spot on his shoe with dust from the other one and continued on his way.

The little houses of wood, brick, and plaster shared walls with each other. Most had two stories, with perhaps evidence of a root cellar. Every once in a while, a house had dared to grow into a rickety third floor, likely a finished attic. But the street felt friendly, like it was home for people who generally liked where they lived. He passed a flower shop, a bakery, and a smithy, all closed on a Sunday afternoon. He passed a pub with an open door, but the sound of shouting kept him away. It seemed like the kind of place that men went to so that they could either get into a fight or watch one. He kept walking.

At an intersection with another street, the stream he was walking along was joined by another one from the left. He hopped over the familiar little shit-filled stream to walk upstream with the other one. It was another winding lane, this one slightly drabber. There were no shops on this street, only a few warehouses, stables, and chicken coops. The homes slouched more, shoulder-to-shoulder with their sunken neighbors, with only an occasional house sporting a modest second floor.

Lorenz noticed black curtains hanging from about every third home, an outward sign of inward mourning. Someone in those homes had died in the past months. He looked at his fresh clothes, his mostly clean boots, and felt like a stranger. His shoe had been barely splashed by shit, but other people got doused with it constantly. He had grown up on a street like this. He didn't have to go into one of the houses to know the wooden benches, straw bedding, and smoldering stoves they contained. He missed that life, but—seeing another black curtain—he also remembered its pains, the struggles of learning why he couldn't play with the neighbor boy any more, of trying to absorb the lesson everyone kept trying to teach him in their words even as their faces betrayed them: that living and dying and surviving didn't hurt.

The lane seemed to be taking him in a roundabout fashion back to the north and east side of town. With the sun getting further along to the west, the lane was mostly shaded and shadowy. It seemed like it was about to open out into a little park, but before Lorenz could find out, he heard shouting and the clanging of pots and pans coming from a little hut with an open door and windows. Three rats rushed out and took cover in a stable a few lots up the road. Shouts of triumph now emerged from the house.

Lorenz peaked in and saw a man in a dark hooded cloak wearing what looked to be a raven's beak, holding a ladle in one hand and a copper pot in the other. By his side was a smaller version of the same costume. They would have looked right in place at a Carnival parade or an All Hallow's Eve party but here in the dusky glow a ramshackle street, even the jester was not sure what he had just witnessed.

"Nice work, son," said the man as he took off his mask and lowered his hood.

"Thanks, Dad," said the youth, still enjoying his full costume.

"We got three more of 'em out. The new Mudbauers will be able to move in as soon as they please." Looking up out at the lane, the rat catcher saw the secretary jester peering into the open window and shouted a greeting.

"You must be one of the royal visitors, sir! I saw you all in church this morning. Welcome to Hurtzburg!" The man and his son stepped out of the house and into the street. "I'm Wipo Rattenfläger and this is my son and assistant extraordinaire, Einer."

Lorenz gave a polite bow to the pair and introduced himself. "I am indeed a member of the delegation from Brandenburg. My name is Lorenz Laurentius, secretary to Prince Friedrich Wilhelm of Brandenburg-Prussia. It's a pleasure."

“Wow! Secretary to the prince! Take a look at that, Einer: a real nobleman.”

“Not quite, sir. I grew up on a street just like this one, with folks like yourself. I was just wandering the streets and remembering my own hometown. Though I must say, I’m not familiar with the work you two were doing.”

“Scaring rats, sir!” said the boy.

“That’s right, sir,” said Wipo. “We’ve got a new family moving in from the countryside this week. As a matter of public hygiene, it’s my job to scare out the rats.”

Intrigued, Lorenz asked, “And how does scaring rats promote public health? I haven’t heard of that before.”

“I’m surprised that a noble fellow like yourself doesn’t know this, sir,” said Wipo with an honest sense of dismay. “You see, we’ve found that people get sick when the rats aren’t afraid. But when the rats feel like you might scare the bejeebus out of them at any moment, then people stay healthy. Sometimes I catch the vermin and take them out into the country, but mostly I find that scaring them away does the trick.”

“So people aren’t getting sick here?” asked Lorenz.

“Oh, they do, but at a nice steady pace. You can’t have an outbreak if a few people are sick all the time.”

“That’s only logical,” replied Lorenz.

Wipo proudly turned to his son, and said, “See! It’s only logical, like I always say.” Even though he was still wearing his mask and hood, the admiration Einer felt for his father was clearly visible. Wipo soaked it up, then turned back to Lorenz. “How do you like Hurtzburg, sir? Did you like church this morning? We’ve got a fancy new minister. And I bet you had a great lunch. I helped deliver the food and my wife helped set up before and clean up afterwards.

“Please tell her the service and the décor were wonderful. The meal was quite filling. And worship this morning was heavenly.”

“It was heavenly, wasn’t it,” said Wipo, recalling vague memories of sunshine and organ music. “We’re glad you’re here. With folks like you around, good things are definitely in store for Hurtzburg.”

“I certainly hope so,” said Lorenz. Not sure that he could sustain a conversation about the healthy future of Hurtzburg much longer, he bid farewell to the pair. “Herr Rattenfläger and Young Master Rattenfläger, it has been a pleasure. My greetings to your wife. On behalf of myself and the Prince Elector of Brandenburg-Prussia, I wish you a good night.” After taking a short bow to Wipo and his still-fully-costumed son as they waved good-bye, Lorenz walked briskly towards the park but he would not be stopping. He wanted to get back to his room and write a letter to his friend and employer Sir Willy-Fritz about his day. Nothing but church had gone as he imagined.

Chapter 12: Katie among the Church Ladies

Sunday afternoon in Hurtzburg was time for walks, picnics, and getting life’s loose ends in order. Out at the church, the pastor led a simple afternoon service that was mostly attended by the grandparents, aunts, and uncles who had watched children while the other adults worshiped in the morning. Pastor Matti, the townspeople felt, had correctly grasped the mood of the afternoon service. Instead of preaching the moral razor’s edge of life as he tended to do

on Sunday mornings, in the afternoon he told Bible stories, pondered nature, and explained important moments of ancient history for the edification of his hearers. The grandparents loved it.

Similarly bucolic activities filled the hill after the service. In nice weather, the deacons sat around some shady benches under the trees with Pastor Matti to discuss who in town needed food, firewood, or some little spending money. The made a list of people for them, the pastor, or the town doctor to visit. A couple of them joined later after counting the offerings and making a report of available funds. The congregation's money was always tight, yet seemed to stretch well enough. Other men in the congregation would find things to mend around the church, the parsonage, and the cemetery. Most recently, they had cleared away some brush after Katie noticed nice blackberry and elderberry bushes peeking through the edge of the woods. They would be repaid with some snacks of jam and bread throughout the summer.

The women of the congregation had their own Sunday afternoon rituals. Most of the year, they gathered in the front parlor of the parsonage. The official purpose was to reflect on the sermon and to plan meals for families suffering from illness or grief. The real activity was to talk.

Upon arriving to Hurtzburg, Katie Mathesius had found that she was implicitly obliged to host these Sunday afternoon meetings. At first, she felt it to be an unfair expectation. As the weeks had unfolded, however, she saw it as a gentle and unobtrusive way simultaneously to include her as a woman of status in the congregation and to work around her. She was like a fly on the wall who made tea. As an eager observer of people and customs, this suited Katie perfectly. She would much rather watch than talk.

On this particularly fine day, Katie first brought some quilts to use for the ladies to use as picnic blankets and then she went inside to make tea and arrange some cookies she had made between services. The rest of the women started on their afternoon business, sitting on the blankets or wooden benches gathered from around the church yard.

"Did you visit the family of Thomas the baker this week, Frau Anna?" asked the group's unofficial leader, Emma Kleinschmidt.

"Yes, we brought three meals during the week. Eva also went to visit and just talk to the poor woman."

"I brought tea and cookies, too," said Eva.

"Thank you both," said Emma. "The Mueller family who lives by the mill had two deaths last week, and that older couple who lives down by Wipo and Ulga passed on, as well."

"I'll visit the Muellers," said a younger woman named Susanna.

"I'll go, too," said Anna, not ready to share too much of the work.

"Wonderful. Anna and Suzi will visit the Mueller family. I'll leave you two to work out the details." Katie had just arrived with a tray of tea and cups. Before she could go back inside to get the snacks, Emma asked, "Frau Katie, do you know when the members of the Mueller family will be buried? Is it tomorrow?"

"Yes, ma'am. I believe so. Pastor Mathesius already asked me to have some dinner ready for them tomorrow night."

"That Pastor Matti... so thoughtful!" said Anna. The other women made sure to show their agreement to Katie.

“Yes, he is,” said Katie, feeling at once proud and protective of her husband. “I’ll be right back with the cookies.”

“You didn’t have to do that, dear!” said Emma, as Katie went back towards the house. As soon as she was out of earshot, Emma continued, “I heard that Pastor Matti really let the bigwigs have it this morning, talking about peace to men of war.”

“That’s just minister talk,” said Anna. “He has to say that, the bigwigs have to listen, and then they do what they want anyway.”

“What do you think will happen with these visitors?” asked Suzi.

“I think Old Dunkie will strut around like cock of the walk for a few days, and then we’ll go back to normal,” said Emma.

“Do you think the war will come here?” asked a quiet widow named Liesl. Her husband had been a mercenary in the early days of the war, decades ago, when it seemed like only a few soldiers would be needed to help keep the peace around Bohemia. Instead, the war kept raging, eventually swallowing up her husband and all of his companions.

“There’s no reason for the bigwigs to want anything from us, dear. I’ve seen it before. I think they’re just here to show off their styles and boost their own egos about being from a big city with fancier clothes, more cynical ministers, and better-looking women,” laughed Emma.

For the first time, Sophie spoke up. She had been sitting on a bench just outside the group, a position reflecting her marginal status. She had never married, not because she wasn’t eligible but because she hadn’t wanted to. Her father, a longtime councilmember, had engaged her to a promising young man when she was still practically a girl. The young man had died of the plague while finishing his university studies in Tübingen. When her father tried to arrange another marriage, Sophie clung the vows she had made to her deceased fiancé and refused to marry another. To her, the death of her betrothed was deliverance from a life attached to a husband. She had lived with her parents until they died, then lived on her own in the large house by the pond on the edge of town. She joined the rest of the townswomen in their visits and meal preparation, but always on her terms, in her time.

“The war will come,” she said. “It’s amazing we’ve escaped it so long. The fancy men from the big cities have run out of other towns and lands to fight over and rob from. Pastor Matti was right to say that peace is fragile. But there’s nothing that he or we can do about it. The idiots are in charge. Powerful, selfish, cruel, idiotic men.”

Sophia’s words cast a pall on the bright day. The chirping of birds and the fresh movement of the breeze took on a new, ominous holiness. Katie returned with the cookies.

“Gingersnaps!” she announced. The women immediately tried to shift into a more pleasant mood but true words of warning had been spoken and struck deep. Katie could feel the worry. As she started to share the cookies, Emma asked her, “You’ve lived in other places, Frau Katie. What do you know about the war?”

“My God, too much!” said Katie, not given to invoking the Lord’s name. She set down her tray, sat on the corner of a blanket, and stared up at the sky through the trees. “I grew up in a town that belonged to the old Protestant Union. Our prince sent our people to war right away. We lost a generation of men in two years. Half the kids in my village had no father. After we lost our own soldiers, the armies of our allies would come through, taking what they wanted and leaving the rest of us to pick over what was left. Then, enemy armies would learn that their adversaries had stayed in town and take even more from us as punishment. My best friend was

kidnapped by one of these armies. She was a smart, sweet girl, and her family was devastated. I still miss her. When I got old enough, my family sent me to the university town to work in the household of a wealthy family there. That's where I met Carl."

With a new sense of attention and connection, she looked at the women around her. Many of them had tears in their eyes or were looking at her as if for the first time. Katie continued gently. "Carl's first church was in a town in Saxony that had lost almost everything, nearly a ghost town. His job there was more like rebuilding a village from the ground up—homes, schools, gardens—than like preaching. We came to love it, but it was so much work for us that we requested a transfer. We would have killed ourselves working there much longer. Someone else needed to come and keep it going." She looked again at the women, the blankets, and the slanted afternoon sunlight filtered through the trees. "And so I'm thankful to be here with you, on this hill, eating these cookies. It's starting to feel like home."

"Bless you, child," said Emma, patting Katie on the shoulder. "I hope it stays that way."

PART 3: VICTORY

Chapter 13: The News from Hurtzburg

His Royal Grace the Most Reverend Prince Archbishop Gotthilf the Third of Bumblestedt and Surroundings arose before dawn, splashed some water on his face, and changed from his nightgown into his weekday clerical robes. Donning his soft leather clogs, he made his way down the circular staircase from his room in the castle tower through the dining hall, and down another dark set of steps. He was now in the crypt under the sanctuary, passing with ease between the sarcophagi in the dim light cast by one pale candle.

"Good morning, Uncles," he called out to the bones. Reaching the far end of the basement, he took another staircase up and found himself in the chapel sacristy, right on time to step out and lead morning prayer in the chapel. He called it a chapel, because it felt like a cozy family worship space to him. It was, in fact, the Bumblestedt Dome, one of the largest cathedrals this side of the Danube.

As he stepped into the chancel, a choir of monks silently and piously greeted him. He looked out to see a handful of local businessmen, grandparents, and nuns in the front pews. He led the prayers and psalms, the brothers chanted, the congregation stood and sat and crossed themselves at all the right times, and the day was begun. The sisters made their way to their classrooms, the businessmen left for their offices, and the grandparents waved to him from their conversations as he walked through the sanctuary back to his chambers for breakfast.

Changing from church robes into day robes without taking off his soft shoes, His Royal Grace moved to the desk near the eastern window overlooking the woods of the Bumblewald. The sun was shining a gentle, already warm midsummer's light into the room. His Royal Grace opened the windows and sat down, pleased to see that his servant, Brother Heinz, had already set out his breakfast of one soft-boiled egg, a cup of mint tea, and two slices of bread with a side of liverwurst. Steadying the dainty little chalice that held the egg, the prince archbishop cracked open the shell with a crisp tap of the spoon across its top. Gently removing the lid, he sprinkled a little pepper into the gooey warmth and delicately began eating with the spoon.

Birds chirped. A breeze visited the room. The egg was perfect: not too cold yet, and neither too runny nor too thick.

His Royal Grace took a sip of tea and furtively eyed the morning correspondence that Brother Heinz had left next to the breakfast tray. He did not trust the mail. He leafed through the little pile with his finger, then took another sip of tea and looked outside. He loved to get letters from his sister and nephews in Munich. Those always made his day, but none of these letters had looked like they came from those dear people. Short of receiving a letter from his family, he enjoyed writing to them. The townspeople had just celebrated the anniversary of the cathedral's founding, St. Bumble's Day, and his sister would enjoy reading about the latest pastimes of the peasantry.

Still suspiciously contemplating the pile of letters, he reached for the knife and started spreading the liverwurst on the bread. Most letters he received were entirely innocuous and inconsequential: notifications from the city council about proposed budget revisions, bland updates from his brother bishops around Germany, Poland and Austria, and half-hearted greetings from lesser local nobility who would be traveling past town on his turnpike and who invariably concluded by making vague requests for a letter from His Royal Grace they could show that might wave their toll.

Letters like those were mere annoyances. Far worse were the ones that told him about worldly troubles that he was supposed to act upon. Anything from the court of the current emperor, for instance, was bound to contain disasters. First, he had been called upon to support the emperor's push for supremacy in Bohemia. Then he was supposed to support the wars of the Catholic League against the Protestants. His Royal Grace responded by making a more generous donation to the cause than usual. Having declared victory a short time later, the emperor then commanded all Catholic governments in the Holy Roman Empire to reclaim Protestant churches and lands, restoring them to the One True Faith.

The prince archbishop was all in favor of restoring the lost sheep of Europe to the true fold of the two Good Shepherds: Jesus and the pope. But it was more complicated than that. For countless generations, the prince archbishops of Bumblestedt had held political administrative privileges over outlying towns like Dinkelsdorf and Hurtzburg. Charismatic preachers, enterprising merchants, and independent-minded city councils of the previous century, however, had brought a so-called Reformation to those places. To keep the peace, His Royal Grace's predecessors had allowed them to keep their Protestantism, as long as they continued to keep paying their taxes and tithes to Bumblestedt. Trying to reclaim those lands in the name of the church would certainly result in a loss of revenue for the church, not to mention the hassle—and potentially the violence (also expensive)—of overturning decades of mostly agreeable policies and practices. His Royal Grace had responded to that imperial request by pretending like it never arrived. Brother Heinz had lit the fireplace with it that very evening. Prince Archbishop Gotthilf the Third believed that Jesus would approve of that particular expression of plausible deniability, under the rubric of divine forbearance.

Taking another bite of his liverwurst, His Royal Grace was pleased not to see any mail with an imperial stamp on it. The correspondence would be mere annoyances today. He opened one from a merchant family requesting a scholarship for their son to attend the university in Ingolstadt. He would tell Brother Heinz to promise the normal stipend. Another letter came from one of his priests, letting him know that the parish had completed a building

project, including the installation of a new water closet. The priest politely requested his presence for the dedication. His Royal Grace was pleased. In over thirty years, this would be his first dedication of a latrine. He would have Brother Heinz put it on his schedule.

The last letter he opened came from Hurtzburg. "Probably a business report," mused His Royal Grace. Bored before he even opened it, he read the single page. Instead of council minutes or requests for funds, the council was notifying him in a *pro forma* way of the recent visit to Hurtzburg by a delegation from Brandenburg, which had resulted in a modest agreement concerning trade and mutual aid. The letter, its signatories noted, was meant to honor the prince archbishop's ancient claims over the town while asserting the council's legal right to oversee its daily affairs. "The driest, most provincial legalese," sighed His Royal Grace. He wondered what it was in the human condition that had resulted in such flavorless forms of communication. Surely the Lord God had envisioned greater splendors than drivel like this when creating humans in the divine image through the power of His Holy Word. Letters like these were merely a sign of how far humanity had fallen through sin. His Royal Grace wished he had read the letter inviting him to dedicate the new latrine last. It would have set a better tone for the rest of his day. He would need to read some good poetry as a remedy.

Still, he thought as he finished his liverwurst and tea, his sister would be glad to learn about both the latrine dedication and about how far down the Protestants in Brandenburg were forced to stoop if they were making visits to villages like Hurtzburg. Setting his breakfast tray on the serving table next to his desk, he reached for paper and quill.

To my dearest sister, the Lady Isabella,
Life in the Bumblewald retains its bucolic splendor. The peasants gave a lusty celebration of St. Bumble's Day, replete with an archery competition, apple bobbing contest, and goat parade for the children.
One of our parishes just completed a building renovation project, featuring the installation of the most modern style of water closet. I have been asked to preside over the dedication ceremony, an invitation I plan to accept especially due to the uniquely earthy nature of this architectural accomplishment.
In other local news, it seems that the Protestant powers-that-be have fallen so far in recent days that they must make trade deals with rural outposts like my little band of heretics in Hurtzburg. They notified me of such in a letter today, which I found tedious in its language but amusing in its unintentional news about the degradation of one of our hereditary rivals, the Hohenzollerns of Brandenburg. Lord knows, one should not gloat. I will pray instead for the welfare of my farthest flung subjects.
I look forward to doing some hunting in the coming weeks. Please let me know if your sons, my dear nephews, would like to join me. I always love their company. Please greet them for me with an avuncular kiss.
Your devoted brother,
His Royal Grace, the Most Reverend,
Prince Archbishop Gotthilf III of Bumblestedt, etc. etc.

Chapter 14: Honored Guest

Pastor Matti was enjoying the walk down to the town schoolhouse for Saturday catechism lessons. Most of the year, he taught from Martin Luther's *Small Catechism* and its discussions of the commandments, creed, Lord's Prayer, and the sacraments. During the summer, though, he thought it was nice to spend more time on stories from the Bible, especially the ones relating to the Sunday morning readings. Because the summer church readings often included stories of Jesus teaching, Pastor Matti was spending some time in his first summer here in Hurtzburg with the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew 5-7. "Consider the lilies of the field," the pastor mused as he past the midday flowers. "They neither toil nor spin, yet Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these."

Saturday afternoon was not an ideal time for teaching core tenets of the faith to young teens. By this time, most of the youngsters had worked most of a full day in the fields, shops, or homes where their family needed them. They had just had lunch and sitting in the warm classroom only reminded them of how tired they were; tired, or ready to do something fun that had nothing to do with church or school, let alone church school. But they mostly paid good enough attention to make the time worthwhile. It helped that Katie sent him with snacks most days. Today she sent some fruit tarts, which he carried in a small basket. He had tucked his Bible in next to it. It would smell like cookies for a few days.

Pastor Matti entered the village and walked down the lane to the two-story schoolhouse. Lessons took place in the hall to the left of the front door, whose windows looked north back to the church and the wooded hill he had just come from. He entered the room, nearly stopped cold in his tracks by the cold piercing stare and hulking orange figure sitting at the end of the table opposite the door. He managed to keep walking and smiling, however, and waved a greeting to the room. The young folks had gathered close together on the side with their backs to the door, clearly not sure about how to politely keep a distance from such an unexpected and imposing guest.

"Good day, everyone!" he said to the youth, as they stood and turned, relieved, to see him. "Good afternoon, Mayor Dunkruger!" The mayor had not stood up at the pastor's arrival, but Carl gave him a bow. The children sat down in their chairs to the pastor's left, and Carl himself took a seat near the middle of the long table, setting his basket on his lap. A nice breeze was blowing in and the cookies smelled wonderful. Carl asked a girl named Gretchen to open them in prayer, which she did in a quiet, sincere voice.

Pastor Matti gave a firm Amen, and then said, "Again, good day, children. As you see, we have an honored guest with us. A short time ago, I invited Mayor Dunkruger to visit our class, and I am glad to see that he is able to join us today. If you would, please introduce yourself with your name and your parents' names." After the completion of their lessons and their Confirmation ceremony, Pastor Matti would introduce them by their family name and call them Herr and Fräulein. But until then, they were still children known by their first names. Pastor Matti gave a nod to begin to the boy sitting across from him.

"I'm Einer, son of Wipo," he said.

"Your father's a great man," said the mayor. "He does a lot of good for this town. Is he teaching you the trade? Are you a good helper?"

"Yes, sir," said Einer. Through pinched lips and squinty eyes, Mayor Dunkruger nodded his approval and turned his gaze to the three girls opposite him.

"My name is Gretchen, daughter of Oliver and Irene Wagner."

"I'm Lucy Schumacher. My parents are Hans and Paula. They make shoes."

"I'm Caroline, daughter of Georg and Henrietta Mudbauer."

"I'm Jacob Becker, son of Maria and Thomas the baker. He died," said the boy. This was the first time that Jacob had been back with the group since the death of his father. Mayor Dunkruger was clearly uncomfortable at the mention of death but did not have any words to say. Pastor Matti gave him a warm look across the table and pulled the tarts out of the basket.

"Jacob, I'm so glad to see you. I've heard from your mother that you and Sara have been great helps at the bakery, even in these sad days. Would you like the first fruit tart? Mrs. Mathesius made them fresh this morning." Jacob nodded and Pastor Matti set the berry treat into his extended hand across the table.

"Gretchen, thank you for this morning's prayer," said the pastor as he shared the cookies with the rest of the youth. "This really is a remarkable group of young people," he said as he turned to the mayor and offered him a fruit tart. The mayor declined. He really wanted one, but he didn't like eating in front of people he viewed as his inferiors.

Pastor Matti continued. "Gretchen was the first in the group to memorize the *Small Catechism* of Dr. Martin Luther. Lucy is becoming a master shoemaker herself, just like her parents. Jacob and Sara are working with their father's former apprentice to help run the bakery. Einer helps his father, as you heard. Caroline is relatively new to town, but we're finding more and more that she likes to tell funny stories and pays very close attention to fascinating details." Caroline smiled while chewing her cookie.

"While we're finishing our snacks then, Mr. Mayor, I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about why you chose to visit us today. And maybe you could tell these young folks what you remember about your confirmation instruction."

Dunkruger was glad to have the floor but wary about sharing too much in front of the minister. "I don't remember too much about my confirmation time. I just went because you had to go. I got confirmed and that was that." The mayor was pleased at this offhanded belittling of the minister's work. Without gauging the minister's response, he said to the class, "It's important to support your church, children. It's one of the pillars of society and part of what makes our town so great. We've had lots of great ministers over the years, inspirational preachers who spoke the word of God to the people of this blessed town with power and conviction. And now we have Pastor Matti."

Pastor Matti did not show any sign that the mayor's words bothered him, remaining outwardly gracious. "And I know I said you were welcome to join us any day, but is there any reason you chose to join us on this fine afternoon?"

"Actually, yes. I heard what you were saying about peace and love in your sermon when we had our royal visitors last week. I was wondering if you say similar things to our young people."

"You're right that I talk about peace and love now and again. I'm glad to hear that you noticed," said Pastor Matti. "When it comes to the meaning of peace and love, though, let's have Jesus and the young folks be the judge here today. Who would like to read our passage, starting in Matthew 5 where we left off last week?" He pulled his Bible from out of the basket, setting the book on the table and the basket on the floor under his chair.

Lucy raised her hand and Pastor Matti slid the Bible over to her. "Can you find the Gospel of Matthew?" Indeed, she could. Reading the text upside down so he could show her where to begin, Pastor Matti pointed to the latter part of chapter 5. "Begin here," he said.

Lucy read aloud in a clear voice, "You have heard it said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, 'Love your enemies; bless those who curse you; do good to those who hate you; pray for those who insult and persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, for He makes His sun to shine over the evil and the good, and sends rain to the righteous and the unrighteous.'"

"Thank you, Lucy," said the pastor. "What do you think of this?"

Gretchen said, "It means that God is nice to everyone, even mean people, so we should be nice to everyone, too."

Jacob added, "I like what it says about sun and rain."

"What do you like about that?" asked Pastor Matti.

Jacob thought for a moment. "I like that God sends what we need. Sometimes rain seems sad, but we need it."

"Lovely! Thank you, Jacob. God indeed knows what we need, better than we do ourselves."

Caroline was staring out the window. She pointed to a puffy cloud, "Did God make that cloud? Did God send it to be a puffy curly cloud instead of a rain cloud? Does that mean we didn't need rain today?"

"Ach, what good questions, Caroline!" said the pastor. "I confess that I do not know what the good Lord thinks about those particular clouds. And I don't know why sometimes it seems we get too much rain or too little rain. What do you think about it, Caroline?"

Caroline made a thinking face, still staring at the clouds. "I think God mostly knows what kinds of clouds we need."

"Then that's good enough for me, too," said Pastor Matti. "Einer, what caught your attention in the reading?"

Einer squirmed in his chair and played with his hands. "I don't understand why someone would be nice to their enemies," he said earnestly.

"Excellent point, Einer! Why would someone be nice to their enemies?" Pastor Matti was aware that Dunkruger was staring at him with a quiet rage, but he kept his attention focused on the youth.

"Rain doesn't care if you're good or bad. It just comes," said Lucy.

"Same with sunshine," said Gretchen. "So maybe God just loves people no matter who they are, like sunshine. Then it's like there's no such thing as enemies."

"What a brilliant idea! God is love for all people," said Pastor Matti. "Einer, does that answer your question?"

"Kind of," said the boy, squiggling in his chair and talking to the table. "But if someone hurts me, why should I be nice to them? Won't they just hurt me again?"

"What a wise thing to ask," said the pastor. "Here's something I've noticed about Jesus: when someone needs help, he helps them. And when someone is mean to others, he tells them to stop. And when people were mean to him, Jesus sometimes spoke up with wise words. Or sometimes he just walked away."

"What about when he was crucified?" asked Lucy.

“Even then,” said Pastor Matti, “he was acting out of love rather than hate. What does he say on the cross? ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.’”

“Will we have to do that, too?” asked Caroline.

“If a time like that comes, you’ll know,” said Pastor Matti. “But before then, think about how many loving things the people around you do for you all the time. Your parents work hard so that you have food and shelter and learn to grow up as the bright young people you are. Town leaders like Mayor Dunkruger here work selflessly for the good of the town, so that we stay healthy and safe and have what we need. Lots of people show their love for you and for each other by being kind every day.”

Mayor Dunkruger was surprised to be mentioned as a positive example, but he relished it and his expression changed to one of benevolent acceptance of the compliment. The pastor and the children knew who was in charge here. He spoke to Einer, “The council and I really are making sure that everything in Hurtzburg stays great.”

“What if someone attack us?” Einer asked.

“Then we’ll do what we need to do to defend ourselves and protect the people,” said the mayor reflexively.

“Is that loving enemies?” Einer innocently asked, looking up to the pastor.

Dunkruger again stared hard at the minister, who said, “That’s why adults send delegations to talk about things, like we had with our visitors last week. Talking to each other about what’s good for everyone is a way to love our enemies and protect the people we love. So you see how important it is to pray for our leaders, because they have such an important job.” Einer nodded and went back to staring at his hands. Again, the tension emanating from Mayor Dunkruger subsided at Pastor Matti’s deferential words.

“Mayor, does that sound like the kind of work you were doing last week when our visitors arrived from Berlin?”

“Yes, Herr Pastor,” said the mayor. “We made some great deals that will be very, very good for our town. The best deals.” Dunkruger could tell that the children were impressed. He was glad he had come.

“Thank you, Mayor,” said the pastor. “Children, I thank you for your wisdom and your great questions and ideas. Let’s sing our *Te Deum* and close with the Lord’s Prayer. That’s how we end every week, Mr. Mayor. Let’s stand and sing.”

The circle stood and Pastor Matti led them in the hymn:

We praise, we worship Thee, we trust, and give Thee thanks forever,
O Father, that Thy rule is just and wise and changes never.
Thy boundless pow’r o’er all things reigns,
Done is whate’er Thy will ordains:
Well for us that Thou rulest.

Together they prayed the Our Father and the children made their way out of the class. After they left, Mayor Dunkruger said, “You can’t really expect people to believe that nonsense about loving enemies. It would never work in the real world.”

“Those are Jesus’ words, not mine, Mr. Mayor,” said Pastor Matti, careful again not to appear defensive. “And yes, I believe that they work in the real world, as often as they are applied.”

“Your head is in the clouds, Herr Pastor,” said the mayor. “Be thankful that real men like me and the council are watching out for you.” He sized up the minister and then walked past him to the door.”

“Indeed, Mr. Mayor. You and the council are in my prayers every day,” said Pastor Matti. Now alone in the room, he looked out the window at the puffy clouds in the blue sky and said to the room, “Every day.”

Chapter 15: The Queen of Summerfest

Each year, Hurtzburg celebrated Summerfest with a parade, craft fair, music, and dancing. The parade started at church, with musicians in front, carriages decorated with flowers and costumed locals following, and the Queen of Summerfest showering her blessings and handing out trinkets and toys to children at the parade’s conclusion. Around the time of her church confirmation, someone had suggested that Narcissa might put some flowers in her hair and hand out the treats to children in the annual. She never stopped. Her role came with no civic or cultural meaning. It was not an elected position or a symbolic status. But in her mind, Narcissa had crowned herself Hurtzburg’s eternal Queen of Summerfest. This year again she was beaming her golden rays, having put flowers in her slightly graying hair and filled a sack with wooden animal figurines, tops, cloth dolls, and dried braids of grass.

This year’s parade was fancier than most. A payment to Hurtzburg from their new patrons in Brandenburg had arrived. The council members were using it to pay for court musicians from Bumblestedt, who would lead the parade and the dance music in the marketplace all day. In addition to the normal kegs of lager and barrels of local wine, this year’s festival would include mead, Rhenish wine, and heavier beer. A troupe of jugglers, tumblers, actors, clowns, and their trained animals would entertain the crowd when the musicians needed a break. Narcissa had planned many of the details. The mayor kept the funds flowing. This Summerfest was the triumph of the Dunkrulers.

Narcissa looked out at the crowd that had gathered around the start of the parade and would follow along into town. She waved to Katie, who had just stepped out of the parsonage to mingle with parishioners before the parade got underway. Wondering where the pastor was, Narcissa saw Pastor Matti lingering in the cemetery with Dirk the gravedigger after a morning burial. Narcissa resented the minister for standing there, for inserting death into her day of celebration. Turning her eyes back to the procession coming together in front of her, she told herself that the minister merely represented a momentary sign of sadness that would soon be washed away through the beneficent glory of her Summerfest.

With the warmth of the late-morning light streaming through the oak trees, the musicians made a toast, took swigs from their wineskins, and started their jaunty, tuneful march down to town. Carriages followed, the last of which pulled Ingrid, wearing her best dress and holding a bouquet of flowers. The Queen of Summerfest took her place behind them, surrounded by little girls in sun dresses and braided hair. Her people followed in her wake,

linking arms and singing along to the music coming from the front. "A triumph," said Narcissa aloud, beaming a smile down to the happy little girls at her right and left.

The parade followed the lane down the hill, gathering more people as members of households along the way joined the procession into town. Every now and again, Narcissa passed a sullen home with black curtains in the windows and the occasion sad face peering out, but she hardly saw them, focusing instead on finding children to give toys and dolls to. She didn't look behind to see Katie Mathesius stopping at each of those homes, handing out little jars of fresh jam from the large cloth purse that hung across her shoulder.

The procession came to the market place, newly decorated with banners and flowers. The smells of roasted sausages and smoked meat filled the air. The faces of local merchants, as well as those of craft vendors from the surrounding area, peered energetically from their booths. The crowd made way for the procession, welcoming the musicians, wagons, marchers, and the Queen of Summerfest into their midst. The musicians kept playing as they made their way up onto the raised stage, where they played one more rousing number for the crowd gathered around them.

Mayor Dunkruger stood giving his officious approval at the side of the stage, Wipo and his family by his side. As the tune was reaching its crescendo, he readied himself to get on stage and open the festival with a speech. Unfortunately, the dense crowd had blocked the stairs after the musicians went up. He nodded to Wipo and pointed from his boots to the stage. Wipo got the hint and leaned down to give the bulky mayor a boost. Grabbing the stage platform the mayor struggled to get first his chest and then a knee onto the stage. He felt Einer and others in the crowd joining in to push him up. Most people were still watching the musicians or dancing with friends, but a quiet rage filled the mayor as a handful of people pointed and laughed at his inelegant entrance. Annoyed, but even more ready to claim his moment, he narrowed his eyes and folded his arms, waiting for the musicians bringing their song to a raucous close.

At the last loud note, the crowd burst into applause and the musicians took their bows. Mayor Dunkruger gave them shallow smiles and pats on the back as they waded down the stairs back into the adoring throng. Mayor Dunkruger begrudged the musicians their popularity, comforting himself with the thought that they probably spent the rest of their lives toiling in poverty and obscurity.

Making himself as tall as possible and filling the barrel of his chest with air, he bellowed, "Hello, Hurtzburg!" Turning their focus from the musicians to the mayor, the crowd cheered back in response. Now glowing with the attention, the mayor benevolently gestured, "Thank you to this terrific band, who have come all the way from Bumblestedt to play for us today!" The crowd again yelled their approval, which Dunkruger impatiently granted.

Once all the eyes were back on him, he continued grandly, "My fellow Hurtzburgers! Today we celebrate our annual Summerfest, a tradition that goes back to the great Sir Wolfhart and the founding of this beautiful town!" The mayor didn't know if this was true, but he had started saying it several years ago and since had come to believe it. "As you've no doubt noticed, this year's festival is bigger than ever, thanks to the work of your terrific city council and myself, who have made a great deal with some of the most important people in all of Germany!" The crowd cheered, impressed by the new significance and wealth of their town and its leaders.

“That money paid for these musicians, brewers and vendors!” Dunkruger liked reminding people that they worked for him. The related notion that he, as mayor, might work for the townspeople had never entered his mind.

“We’re going to have a terrific day, the best Summerfest yet for the greatest city in the world!” Gesturing to a ceremonial beer barrel parked next to the stage, Mayor Dunkruger gave the command everyone was waiting for: “Now tap the keg!” The crowd erupted, the musicians launched into a festive song, and the brewer poured himself a first frosty mug of beer.

Scanning over his people, the mayor found his golden wife in the middle of the crowd. She, in turn, beamed to her radiant orange husband. They locked eyes and exchanged an intimate, knowing, satisfied look, their faces proclaiming one thing together: Victory.

Chapter 16: Wipo’s Best Day

Wipo the rat catcher of Hurtzburg enjoyed one of the best days of his life at this Summerfest. They had skipped joining the parade so that they could sleep in on the holiday. He and Ulga had a bed made of hay. They quietly rolled in it, while the boys played in the front room. They enjoyed a rich breakfast of ham and eggs, toast and jam. They slowly made their way to the market square for the festival, stopping at the pond to throw rocks into it and watch the ripples. They waved at friends, chatted with neighbors, enjoyed the late morning sun.

Reaching the crowd that was waiting to greet the parade, Wipo saw Mayor Dunkruger’s wispy blonde hair near the stage. Ulga always loved to see him, so he guided his family that direction.

“Guten morgen, Herr Burgermeister,” said Wipo, removing his wide-brimmed hat in front of the mayor’s vacant face. “Waiting for the parade, then?”

“Guten morgen,” nodded the mayor. “Yes, Narcissa is handing out toys again and Ingrid is on one of the carriages.”

“You remember my wife, Ulga?” The mayor looked down, with a quizzical look on his face.

“Have you gotten shorter?” asked the mayor.

“You’re thinking of my dear second wife, Ulrike. Fünfi’s mother. She was a tall one. Ulga and I have been married about a year now.”

“Always a pleasure to see you again, sir,” Ulga said shyly. She was genuinely pleased to be in his company.

“Congratulations,” the mayor said. “We’re going to have a great day. We spared no expense. We hired the best musician, brought in the best vendors, and some great entertainers. It’s going to be tremendous. You’ll hear about it in my speech.”

“You’re giving a speech! How wonderful,” said Ulga. “I can’t wait to hear it.” Mayor Dunkruger accepted the compliment without speaking, and then turned his face back to the street where the parade would be coming.

“I can hear the band coming,” he said. “I should get myself ready.” He turned to go, but he found that while he’d been talking to Wipo, a crowd had formed so tightly around him that he couldn’t get to the stage. “I guess I’ll stay here,” he said.

“We can watch the parade come in together!” said Wipo, as he grabbed Fünfi and lifted him up on his shoulders so that the youngster could see better. They watched as first the

musicians, then the people in costumes and the decorated wagons came down the street and into the square. Mrs. Dunkruger and a group of helpers brought up the rear, handing out toys to children they passed.

Wipo and his boys were too far away from the end of the parade to get any trinkets. Wipo said to his family, "I bet the mayor and Mrs. Mayor will have some toys left over for us." He looked to the mayor for affirmation, but Mayor Dunkruger was starting to look worried, watching the band get up the stairs on the other side of the stage, while he felt increasingly boxed in. Wipo set Fünfi down and got ready to help his dear mayor, in case his assistance would be needed.

As the music was ending, Wipo saw a veiled look of panic and anger pass across the mayor's face. Wipo knew that the mayor had an important speech to give and was ready. He tapped Einer on the shoulder and said, "Get ready to help." Sure enough, the mayor turned to Wipo, pointed from his boots to the stage and grabbed the edge of the platform. Wipo immediately bent down, cupped the mayor's bootheel in his hands and lifted. The mayor's other boot found Wipo's knee. Einer was pushing the bulk of the mayor's left leg from behind. Other hands joined in, as the mayor kept pulling upward and finally managed to crawl onto the stage. Trying to reclaim his dignity and preparing for his speech, Mayor Dunkruger did not look down to thank the helping hands that had boosted him up. But he didn't need to. Wipo was receiving congratulations and applause from everyone around him for his heroic civic service.

The day just kept getting better for Wipo. He and his family had a fantastic lunch of pork hocks and sauerkraut. They all said it was the best meal they'd ever had, as they sat on a bench watching the dancers who filled the stage in the early afternoon. The boys played some carnival games and bought some wooden toy swords. They dueled through the market square as Ulga and Wipo held hands and perused the booths. They snacked on berry tarts and shared some mead. Wipo tried a mug of the heavy beer. He didn't really enjoy it, but it gave his head even more lightness on this bright day. Occasionally, friends would come and tell Wipo how impressed they were by the calm strength he had shown in helping the mayor earlier in the day. Wipo would point to Einer and proudly share credit with his son, saying, "This young man did a good deal of the heavy lifting, too."

They never found Mrs. Dunkruger to see if she had any toys leftover for Einer and Fünfi. But they did run into Pastor Matti and his wife. Feeling full of good cheer, Wipo greeted them.

"Hi, Reverend! Are you enjoying your first Summerfest with us?"

"Very much," said the pastor. "We were just watching the band play again. We even did a little dancing."

"I didn't know ministers could dance," said Wipo.

"He can't!" teased Katie.

"I know how to dance a little," replied the pastor, smiling at his wife. "Allow me to introduce you to the real dancer in the family, Mrs. Katharina Mathesius.

"Please call me Katie," she said.

"A pleasure," said Wipo with a bow. "This is my wife Ulga." Ulga smiled and put out her hand. Katie took it and they exchanged a friendly handshake.

Besides Suzi in the Sunday afternoon meeting, Katie hadn't yet met many women who seemed to be around her own age. She asked Ulga, "Would you like to join me for some berry picking next week? Some men of the church recently cleared out some of the brush in the

woods near our house so that I could reach some berry bushes more easily. I would love the company.”

Ulga was surprised by this invitation. A minister’s wife was no Narcissa Dunkruger, yet somehow that particular social role felt just as far away. It had never occurred to her that a minister’s wife might be a person who would be interested in her, or she in a minister’s wife. But Katie seemed genuine and friendly in her invitation, and Ulga would be glad to have something new and urbane to tell her new neighbor Mrs. Mudbauer about.

“That sounds nice,” said Ulga.

“How about next Wednesday, after the morning service?” asked Katie.

“Perfect,” replied Ulga with a smile, surprised to find that she remembered there was church on Wednesdays.

Catching herself, Katie reached into her purse and said, “Before I forget, here are some jams for your boys. Do they like some jam for a treat?”

“Of course,” said Ulga. “Thank you very much.” Turning to Einer and Fünfi, she interrupted their swordplay. “Hey boys! See what the pastor’s wife has given you.” The boys put down their swords just long enough to say some polite thanks and then went back to their jousting. Ulga put the two little jars in her dress pockets.

More of Wipo’s neighbors walked by and started to congratulate him on his heroics. Seeing this new conversation start to develop, Katie gave Ulga a pat on her shoulder and said, “I can’t wait to see you on Wednesday.” Then she and the pastor continued their stroll through the square. With a sense of excitement and happiness that comes from maybe making a new friend, Ulga joined her husband as he retold the story of his morning adventure with the mayor. They mingled through the square a bit more, ate some roast sausages with mustard for dinner, danced to the band as the sky turned to dusk, rested with some more mead as night came on, and finally prodded their tired boys back home, where they fell asleep immediately on their bed in the front room. Ulga rolled Wipo one more time in the hay before he fell asleep. It was their best day ever.

Chapter 17: Extra Honey

As he had been getting ready for the morning service, Pastor Matti was startled to find the superintendent knocking at his door. Pastor Bibfeldt was the head administrative pastor of a passel of small towns. While Hurtzburg came under the political jurisdiction of the Prince Archbishop of Bumblestedt, the local Protestants looked to Humberg as their connection to the wider Protestant church. The superintendent had helped them find Pastor Matti after their previous pastor died of old age. In normal times, a superintendent might make a visit—planned or surprise—once every year or so to check on the parish, hear the pastor preach, and make sure things were in decent order. By that pattern, the superintendent’s visit was ahead of schedule. Carl hoped something wasn’t wrong. He hadn’t heard from Pastor Bibfeldt since his installation service in the Hurtzburg church the previous autumn and had no reason to think that anything was going wrong.

He politely invited the superintendent in and called to Katie who was in the kitchen at the back of the house. “Katie, please pour another cup of tea,” he said. “Superintendent Bibfeldt has come for a visit.”

Katie entered room. "Guten morgen, Herr Superintendent. I hope your ride was pleasant."

"Not bad, Frau Mathesius," the elder gentleman said, as he took off his riding hat and gloves. "I stayed overnight with some friends in Dinkelsdorf and left at daybreak. One of the deacons already set me up with some water and oats for my horse. Beautiful day for a ride, and for morning worship in Hurtzburg."

"It certainly is," said Katie. She sent a very brief questioning look over to Carl, who was still standing at the door with his hat in hand. "I'll go get the tea. The kettle should still be warm. Excuse me," she said, going back to the kitchen. She poured some of the fresh tea they had just enjoyed and brought it to the superintendent, who graciously accepted it.

Katie then went back into the kitchen, and paused to wonder why the superintendent had come. Unexpected visits from officials like these usually meant there was some sort of problem. She clanged some pots louder than usual, so that the men might think she was too distracted to listen. Then she listened hard to the conversation starting in the front room.

"Please have a seat, Herr Superintendent," said Carl, gesturing to the table and chairs where he and Katie took their lunches, surrounded by books, the cozy heat stove that got them through their first winter in town, and the large front window.

"Thank you very much," said Pastor Bibfeldt, setting his riding hat in his lap. He then invited Carl to sit, as well, taking a deep sip of tea. "As you have services starting soon, I'll be direct," said the older man, using one of his favorite phrases. He loved being the one who was direct, who could get to the point, present a case forthrightly, and either solve a problem or terminate it. Bibfeldt had been in the role so long that delivering bad news in a direct manner had become a specialty of his. "I recently received a complaint about your doctrine, Pastor Mathesius," he said calmly.

Sitting there in his own chair, Pastor Matti felt like he'd been punched in the stomach. After the stresses and burdens of his previous parish, he thought things had gotten off to a smooth, even slightly dull, start in Hurtzburg. For the first time in years, he woke up most days feeling like it might bring something other than pure trouble and misery.

The superintendent could tell that Carl was surprised both by his visit and by this announcement. He took another hearty sip of tea. As someone who also enjoyed being a voice of compassion and reassurance, he continued with another of his favorite expressions. "I can tell that you're concerned about this. Please do not be overly worried."

He took another satisfied sip of tea and returned to his comfortably direct manner of speaking. "I can't tell you yet what the exact nature of the complaint is. But the standard way to deal with complaints like this—a method commended by the blessed reformers of the University of Wittenberg themselves—is to ask you to preach extemporaneously on one piece of Dr. Luther's Small Catechism."

Leaning back, he drank more tea and then announced, "In this case, you will preach on the petitions "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done" from the Lord's Prayer. Then you and I will have a talk after worship, and I'll go into town and talk with some of the parishioners. You and the concerned parties will each receive a written report from my office with recommendations and next steps to take, if I determine that any seem necessary."

"Yes, I understand," said Pastor Matti softly.

"This is wonderful tea," said Bibfeldt.

“We grow the herbs here in our plot by the church. Katie loves to garden.”

“Please give my respects.” The superintendent drained his cup and stood to go, putting his worn hat back on his thinning gray hair. “If you don’t mind, I think I still know some of the old deacons here, and I’d like to say hello.”

“Certainly,” said Carl. “I’ll see you in worship.”

“Until then,” said Bibfeldt, tipping his hat and making his way through the door. “Wonderful tea!” he said again as he left.

Katie quickly emerged from the kitchen. “A visit from the superintendent about a complaint! What does it mean, Carl?”

“It means I need to say a prayer and get my heart ready to preach on the kingdom of God.”

“You can do that standing on your head,” Katie encouraged.

“Yes, but given the circumstances, I’ll think I’ll stay on my feet this time,” he smiled weakly. He gave her a kiss and prepared to go to the church for worship. “He loved your tea, by the way.”

“I put a little extra honey in it,” Katie laughed.

Chapter 18: Thy Kingdom Come

When Ulga arrived at Wednesday morning church as she said she would, she was given a songbook by the deacon at the door, whom she recognized as a friend of Wipo’s named Christoph. She found a seat near the back as the small congregation finished singing a morning hymn. There weren’t many people in church, mostly a smattering of grandparents who had brought their older grandchildren and some of the more established farmers who could take time away from the fields. Katie was sitting near the front with an older gentleman dressed in a fancy summer coat. This was more people than Ulga had planned to see. She had worn her regular daily dress and braided her hair a little, and she wondered if she was dressed nice enough. She had grown up in a tiny village half a day’s walk away and still hadn’t shaken some of her insecurities around the city people of Hurtzburg. She thumbed through the hymnal when she saw other people doing the same, but reading didn’t come easy to her and she preferred to listen anyways.

Pastor Matti and the congregation chanted some lines, which sounded nice. He read a passage from St. Paul about having patience with one another, which struck Ulga as both kind and dignified. But instead of continuing with a sermon in his usual calming voice, Pastor Matti looked up and gestured to the older man sitting by Katie.

“Meine Damen und Herren, we have today an important guest in worship, Herr Superintendent Franz Bibfeldt, pastor in Humburg, who—as head of our regional Lutheran church—is conducting a visit of our parish today. He has asked me to set aside the normal sermon text and to preach on the petitions “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done” from the Our Father.

Ulga had not ever seen a pastor be anything but bored by the words he was saying. The previous pastor had been a tired and pale old widower, who took a nap between Sunday services last summer and never woke up. She was intrigued that Pastor Matti had stopped the service to introduce the superintendent and then started to preach not from any written

sermon but from the top of his head. She didn't come to church enough to know for sure that this was not normal, but she could see an unusual amount of concentration on Pastor Matti's face as he paused, clearly thinking about what to say and how to say it. He scanned the congregation, and smiled when he saw her, which made Ulga feel like they were friends, a thought she wouldn't have had before that very moment.

"Beloved in Christ," he began. "Our Lord Jesus gave us these words so that we would know what to pray when our hearts were confused, so that we would know what to look for when we felt lost. Amid the hardships of this life, Jesus invites us to look for the things of God, the kingdom of God, when we need help and guidance. What is the kingdom of God? It is love and compassion. It is healing and grace. Jesus announced God's kingdom with these very things in his ministry, bringing the love of God to earth as he healed the sick, forgave sinners, and taught from the law and the prophets, as when he quoted Hosea 6, saying, "Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'

"As Dr. Luther of blessed memory teaches, God's kingdom comes when we hear and learn this good news and share it with others in word and deed. God's will is done on earth as in heaven when sinners repent and are set free from their sins, when the lost are found, and when the lowly are lifted up, as Mary the Mother of Our Lord sang when she was visited by the Angel Gabriel: 'the Lord has cast down the mighty from the thrones and exalted those of low estate.'

"One may then ask," continued Pastor Matti, taking a glance at the superintendent before looking back over the congregation. "Did our Lord Jesus come to tear down and destroy?" At this, the preacher paused and—as Ulga saw it—maybe even gulped.

"That is indeed the crime for which he was crucified under the authority of the Roman governor Pontius Pilatus. But Jesus seems to have something else in mind. He knows that no earthly kingdom is the same as God's kingdom. And so he has given us, his followers, the task of being leaven, being yeast, that transforms the rest of the dough, just as he changed the world and brought healing through love and compassion rather than through swords and armies."

Pastor Matti paused and took a breath, as if not sure he should say the thing that had come to his mind. He looked at Katie, sitting next to the superintendent. He looked at Ulga again, smiled, and thoughtfully rubbed his clean-shaven chin.

"Sometimes I wish," he said. "Sometimes I wish that Jesus had been clearer about how we are supposed to work for his kingdom and his will. Some Christians have used armies to convert others in the name of God. That is indeed part of our own history in this part of the world, going back to Emperor Charlemagne so many centuries ago. Some Christians have declared holy war against the Turk, connecting our earthly battles with the fight against Satan. They say that part of the reason for our current wars is to protect true religion. Both Catholics and Protestants say this. In my view, the mercenaries probably don't care, as long as they get paid.

"None of these things sound or look like Jesus to me, though I must admit that I have not been put in a position to make such important decisions about war and peace. And I do care about true religion and the gospel faith that sets us free. To me, nothing is more precious than faith—what we believe. And yet, when I look at Jesus, I hear him condemning those who hurt others, rather than judging those whose belief is somehow academically incomplete. Quite

the contrary, Jesus blessed the little children and those with childlike trust in God and love of others.

“And so, my friends, as much as I wish that Jesus had been clearer about what it means to share his kingdom and to enact it here on earth in word and deed, I find he really could not have been clearer: God’s kingdom comes when we hear and learn this good news and when we live it out every day. When love feels too impossibly weak and far away, I take great comfort from knowing that in this prayer Jesus has not put the weight of the world on my shoulders. Instead, he has invited me to pray that God do this work of bringing the kingdom, of making God’s will done. As Dr. Luther put it, God’s kingdom comes whether or not we pray for it, but we pray that we get to keep being part of it. Amen.”

Pastor Matti sat down. After a short silence, the organist introduced the next song, the congregation shifted themselves into singing positions, and Ulga listened to them sing a vaguely familiar and very pretty tune. She had never listened to an entire sermon without her mind wandering before, but something about how Pastor Matti had taken time to see her and had spoken from his heart made this experience different. After some short announcements, the collection bag was passed around. Wipo had reminded Ulga to take a couple groschen to contribute, and it made her feel good to give the donation, small as it was. One more prayer, a short organ postlude, and worship was over. It had been more enjoyable than she had remembered church being. She waited for Katie in the back, nodding to familiar and unfamiliar faces filing by.

Katie and the older man next to her had stood up and were talking. Ulga was not sure she would know what to say to a distinguished elder pastor like that, but Katie clearly felt at ease. After having put out the candles, tidied up some books, and taken off his worship robe in the sacristy, Pastor Matti joined them. Ulga watched Katie say goodbye to the two men and turn towards her with a smile and a wave. Ulga could not believe that she was being treated like a friend to this impressive woman, who seemed probably about as old as Ulga was, but who seemed so at ease and confident around important people.

“Ulga! So good you came!” said Katie. “May I hug you?”

“Sure,” she replied, a mixture of happy and surprised. Before she knew what exactly to expect, Katie threw herself into a real hug, putting her head on Ulga’s shoulder in the same way that the boys did when they had hurt themselves. Without knowing why, Ulga felt needed. She had never seen Katie hug anyone before, even touch them. She had seemed so standoffish before, and now here she was in a full-hearted embrace.

Still holding Ulga’s arms, Katie leaned back out of the hug and said, “It’s not even lunch time, but today has been a long one. I’m so glad you’re here. Let’s go pick some berries.”

Chapter 19: One Bungler

“Let’s walk through the cemetery,” said the superintendent to Pastor Matti. “Cemeteries always make me feel so peaceful. When I think about my own death, I have to admit that I’m still afraid of it. It’s so unknown. But when I walk through a cemetery, something about dying makes a little more sense to me and it all starts to feel right. I can’t help feeling that the people here are somehow at ease.”

They greeted Dirk, who was digging a grave for tomorrow, and kept walking.

“I’d like to pay my respects to your predecessor, Pastor Altmann,” said Pastor Bibfeldt. “We served together in this area for a long time. Do you know where he’s buried?” Pastor Matti led the way. When they reached the former pastor’s tombstone, Bibfeldt took off his hat, said a quiet prayer, and crossed himself.

He put his hat back on and turned to Carl. “He was an exceeding average pastor, Herr Altmann was. A sleepy man in a sleepy town. It suited everyone quite well, which is not always good for a church.” Pastor Matti continued to contemplate the headstone of his predecessor, wondering what people might say about him someday. Pastor Bibfeldt spoke again.

“The complaint against you came from the city council and was signed by the mayor. In many ways, you work for them, because the city funds the congregation, including your salary. In another equally important way, however, they have no theological authority over you. In fact, they are the sheep and you are their shepherd. They owe it to you to listen to you and learn from you as a spiritual guide. They certainly can’t judge you on matters of doctrine.”

Bibfeldt surprised Pastor Matti with a laugh. “That’s my job, and mine alone, and I’m not going to give it up! There’s nothing more satisfying than making sure the pastors—as the great Dr. Hippocrates said—“do no harm” through their preaching. I love the look of a minister who knows I’m listening for the gospel of Jesus Christ and will let him know if I don’t hear it.” Pastor Matti nodded.

“You had that look today, young man,” said the superintendent. “And I was glad to see it. I know you care. I know you have seen the worst of these recent wars and diseases, and I appreciate your concern for these people, a flock who is all-too eager to follow some bad shepherds into disaster.”

Pastor Matti was amazed that Bibfeldt had heard all that in his sermon. “I’m just trying to listen to Jesus and guide people in his paths,” he said.

“Yes, son. I know. But you were also right to say that Jesus did not make this easy for us. We have no power of coercion. We can preach, teach, forgive, bless, and pray, and then trust God to give the growth. And sometimes you can see the growth, even in times like these.” They starting walking again, quietly pondering seed of faith and springs of life.

Breaking the silence, Pastor Matti asked, “What was the council’s complaint specifically?”

Bibfeldt chuckled again. “They accused you of preaching insubordination, giving comfort to Hurtzburg’s enemies, and corrupting the youth with these kinds of ideas, as well.”

“Corrupting the youth!” said Pastor Matti. “That’s what Socrates was executed for!”

“Yes, you know that. I know that. But I’m afraid your city council thought they were being original in assigning that particular symptom of paranoia to you.”

“Mayor Dunkruger came to one of my recent confirmation classes,” recalled Pastor Matti. “We’ve been reading the Sermon on the Mount. We talked about praying for those who persecute you.”

“There’s the ‘giving comfort to enemies’ bit,” said Bibfeldt. “In this instance, Pastor Mathesius, the fault belongs to Jesus and not to you, which is what I will put in my letter to the council, after I have a brief chat with the mayor over a lunch that will indubitably include overcooked carrots.”

“What should I do?” asked Carl.

“Be a good shepherd. Speak in a voice that they can hear. Keep following Jesus yourself, and let him take care of you and your dear wife. Based on the tea she served me, I can tell that she has a knack for sweetening things up.”

“What about the mayor?”

“There’s not much to do about him. Hurtzburg has a long history of listening to loud, empty braggards. It’s a small town, so it makes people feel important and nothing ever has to change. But you might watch out. He’ll probably keep looking for ways to make things hard for you. This particular mayor seems more ambitious than most, and news of his deal with Brandenburg has even reached me in little old Humberg. I hope nothing comes of it, but it’s the kind of nonsense that has continued to feed the war.”

Pastor Bibfeldt got lost in thought for a bit. Then he said, “It’s amazing to me that the people who swear they love their homeland the most are often the ones most eager to lead it into ruin. It reminds me of something King Solomon said, ‘Wisdom is better than weapons, but one single bungler destroys much good.’”

They made their way to the superintendent’s horse. He put on his riding gloves, gave it a loving pat, and saddled up. “Pastor Mathesius, it has been an honor to worship with you. I go now to explain over carrots why one of my sharpest young ministers is not corrupting the youth or fomenting rebellion any more than Jesus himself has over the past sixteen centuries. Auf wiedersehen!”

“Auf wiedersehen, Herr Superintendent. Thank you very much for your visit.” Pastor Matti waved goodbye. He was exhausted. He went back to the parsonage looking for Katie, before he remembered that she was berry picking with Ulga Rattenfläger. He was glad she had a new person to talk to. Not feeling hungry enough for lunch yet, he decided to spend a little more time in the peace of the cemetery.

PART 4: UNFORESEEN CONSEQUENCES

Chapter 20: Jester and Spy

Lorenz Laurentius, jester and statesman, was again on his way from Berlin to Hurtzburg. This time he was traveling with a company of soldiers drafted from neighboring provinces to support the Elector of Brandenburg’s relatives further south. They would stop in Hurtzburg to add more soldiers to their number, as well as requisition the grain and meat that had been stipulated in the agreement made over the summer. Lorenz well imagined that they would not be greeted as heartily as last time. The advance payment from Brandenburg to the little town had probably already been spent and the city officials would scramble to deliver, resentful that their debts were actually being called in.

In his years at the prince’s side, he had seen the elector’s noblemen, lawyers, and advisers play this game many times before. A bankrupt aristocracy stayed afloat by continuously bleeding its own cities and provinces so that it could pay for wars against equally desperate nobles on the other side who were financing their wars for supremacy in the exact same way. A variation on the pattern was to invade the territories of their bankrupt enemies and despoil their lands instead. In addition to temporarily relieving the plunder against the local people, this brought the added benefit of directing the patriotism, anger, and fears of the

impoverished citizens against an enemy rather than against their own leaders, who were in truth the ones who did far more damage. This was the story of Western Civilization, as Lorenz the Fool had frequently acted out to his friend Sir Willy-Fritz over the years, sometimes with bells on his head, sometimes not. It's not exactly what he learned from history classes at the university, but Lorenz felt like he had accurately expanded upon his formal education with clinical observation from the school of life.

"Those who do not know history are doomed to inflict it upon us!" he had jested.

This latest excursion south was one more chapter in the desperate plans of petty despots, only this time was Lorenz was a participant instead of a satirist. "Nobility," said Lorenz to his horse as they trotted along. "There's nothing noble about them."

Even so, Lorenz held out hope for his friend the prince elector. Maybe Willy-Fritz would be different. Maybe he could find a way to build prosperity rather than steal it. Maybe when the old men who played the same old crooked game got out of the way, they could change the rules.

Maybe then his Brigitte would marry him and be proud of him again. She had given him a half-hearted farewell, impressed that he was employed again as a serious representative of the state and not as an official clown. But he could tell she didn't think much would come of it. To her, he would always be the prince's fool. Lorenz did not expect she would keep the engagement for much longer. The early sparkle between them was gone. Her parents were already on the lookout for someone more promising, and he could see that Brigitte was making the move in her heart, too.

She hadn't even been impressed when he embellished his role in this new venture. "I'm a spy for the Prince Elector," he had told her. "His father is in poor health, and Prince Friedrich Wilhelm is getting ready to lead Brandenburg in a different direction. He wants me to spy on his father's representatives and see which of them will likely oppose his new plans."

"And he thinks you're the perfect person for the job, because no one takes the court jester seriously," Brigitte had said, rolling her eyes.

"Yes!"

"He's right," she snapped back. "No one does take you seriously and no one ever will."

"What are you saying?" Lorenz had asked.

"I'm saying that unless you come back with a new role that is neither court jester nor a spy playing the role of a court jester, I will tell my parents that we are done and they can set me up with someone who won't make me and them look forever ridiculous."

"I will not fail you, mein Schatz. I promise."

"The promises of a fool. What do they mean?"

"Fools are the only ones who tell the truth," he replied. "Brigitte, I promise you that I am on my way to better things."

"I'll believe it when I see it," she said, giving him a goodbye kiss on the cheek. "Until then, I just see a fool going off to war."

"That's true, too," he had said, touching the place on his face where she had kissed him.

"I know," she said. "Be safe. Farewell."

"Until I see you again," he said hopefully.

"Maybe," she had said.

Lorenz gave his horse a tender pat on the neck. Maybe it was over. He looked ahead and saw Duke Elmer's retinue. Men like that would never give up their hold on power. Prince Friedrich Wilhelm would become the Elector after his father's death, but the cancerous mass of men like Elmer would remain in the body politic, keeping everyone sick so that they could thrive.

He looked around and behind at the soldiers who were walking near him. Poles, Latvians, and Pomeranians from the Baltic, some Swedes and Danes left behind by the armies they had first ventured out with, bulky and broody Norwegians who had been conscripted by the Danes, grizzled mercenaries from Bohemia and Moravia who had been at war for so long that they had forgotten they ever had other jobs, and some local Berliners mixing with the farm boys from Mecklenburg. The youngest of them looked to be about the age Lorenz had been when he went to gymnasium, maybe thirteen or fourteen years old.

Except for the old mercenaries, none of these soldiers were here because they cared about whatever territory they were supposedly protecting. They were here because their farm jobs had disappeared or their families in the city couldn't support them. Some were drafted against their will. Some wanted to get away. Others longed for the chance to be praised for doing things in war that would get them hanged in normal circumstances.

Lorenz was there because he was fool. "Worse than a fool," he said to his horse, "a fool pretending to be something other than that." Regardless, he would keep his word. Even if Brigitte didn't care for his promises anymore, he would keep the vow he had made to his friend Sir Willy-Fritz: he would take good notes.

Chapter 21: Fancy Parties

The crisp air of a perfect September morning greeted His Royal Grace the Prince Archbishop Gotthilf the Third of Bumblestedt as he sat down for his post-worship breakfast of a soft-boiled egg, liverwurst, toast, and tea. Brother Heinz had set the letters on the desk, to be read in the order of the archbishop's mood. Fortunately, there was a letter from the archbishop's sister in Munich waiting for him on top, bringing him some anticipatory joy as he cracked the egg and started to scoop out its delicious warmth. Finishing the egg, he reached for his silver letteropener and gently undid the seal. He was so happy to receive a letter from his sister that he leaned back to bask in the morning light, take a deep breath of the autumnal breeze, and say a prayer of thanksgiving. His joy, however, would not last long.

To my dear brother, His Royal Grace the Prince Archbishop of Bumblestedt, etc.,
etc.

Greetings and love from your sister in Munich.

It appears that your little corner of the world has recently become the talk of the Empire. Everywhere I go, I hear whispers, rumors, and plans concerning the goings-on related to that Protestant outpost of yours, the village of Hurtzburg in the Prince Archbishopric of Bumblestedt.

I am sorry to say that I might have had a hand in the escalation of potential controversy. As best as I can reconstruct it, I was at a party with several of the counts, bishops, lesser nobility, and artisans of the city and surrounding

countryside sometime in the peak of the summer. A forgettable count asked me about my family. I mentioned that we were planning another hunting trip to see you this fall in the Bumblewald. Did I mention the laughable treaty that your Hurtzburgers had made with the desperate House of Brandenburg? I honestly don't recall. If so, I beg your forgiveness. Most likely, however, the news was already spreading through various channels.

I do know, however, that this count later talked to Bavarian duke, who was close to several archbishops, who bragged that the Protestants who had lived in their territories were now either Catholic, exiled, or dead. This caught the attention of an ambassador to His Imperial Majesty, who talked to the generals, who were in turn deeply offended that one of their Protestant enemies was making treaties in a region overseen by a Prince Archbishop of the Holy Catholic Church. They then conceived a plan to march on Hurtzburg in order to assert imperial and churchly rights over the area. They put it on the agenda of a recent imperial gathering, where it was routinely approved amid many other seemingly higher profile matters of state.

I say "seemingly," because I am afraid an even larger conflagration might be in the works.

At another party attended by the usual Munich society types, I heard whispers and rumors that the House of Brandenburg was in the process of supporting noble relatives further south. These rumors sometimes guessed that the Brandenburg army would be restocking their supplies and adding to their number by visiting a number of their smaller allies, including your own little Hurtzburg.

Dear brother, I know that you have been nothing but benevolent and fair to all your citizens. Your domain has been an island of calm amid the decades of war and chaos that have defined the years of our adulthood. In part, such peace has been due to the remoteness of your home, a mixed blessing that I know you have sometimes lamented because of the distance it has put between us. But I also know that the relative prosperity of your lands is also the result of your steady and compassionate leadership. You have aimed to serve rather than dominate, to shepherd rather than fleece. In that sense, you have been a true bishop and prince to your people, a credit to our faith and to our ancestors. But, my brother, I fear trouble is coming. I also fear that you will not know about these plans until it is too late—if indeed anything can yet be done prevent the destruction of your lands—because I have heard that the generals and imperial advisers falsely interpret your wisdom and benevolence as weakness and disloyalty. I do what I can to speak well of your reputation and the prosperity of your lands, but I fear that this too only provokes ambitious men to jealousy, confirming them in their desire to profit at the expense of you and your people. Gotthilf, I am praying tirelessly for you and your land. I pray that you experience the blessings of your name: that God will be your helper and that you will help others with the love of God. I am sorry for any role that I might have played in these events, even as I trust God to see us all through.

Alas, this situation also means that we will not be coming on this year's hunting trip with you. Safety first, for us and for you.
Praying that this letter finds you well,
Your devoted sister,
Bella

The archbishop had lost his appetite. Brother Heinz would know that something was wrong when he saw the liverwurst uneaten, but he was a trusted servant who would not start rumors about poor health or inauspicious political developments. The archbishop would have some time to work with his advisers before people panicked that an imperial army would be challenging Protestant forces in their homeland. He tried to be angry at the actions of the Hurtzburg city council for striking their bargain, or at himself for allowing it and mentioning it to his sister, but mostly he just felt sad. For twenty years, he had kept Bumblestedt out of the gaze of the powerful forces laying endless waste to communities like his.

He glanced at the pile of mail still waiting for him to open. He would tackle it in the afternoon. "No hunting this fall," he said to the letters. "I really must pray like never before." He turned from his chair by the window and walked to the opposite corner of the room, where he lowered his aging knees down onto the kneeler. He looked up at the crucifix on the wall and prayed for a miracle.

Chapter 22: Trouble at the Mill

Ulga and Katie stood next to the stove in the parsonage, with light streaming into the room through the a side window. Outside the window, Pastor Matti was reading a collection of Johann Arndt's sermons in the light of a fall afternoon. In the kitchen, Katie's big brewing pot was boiling with some beer wort. Ever since their day picking berries, they had started sharing recipes and baking together. They had baked some onion cake, tarts, and apple strudel. Today, they were making the kind of table beer that most families in town brewed themselves, improving the local water's taste and healthiness. These homebrews could use ingredients likes fruits and herbs that were forbidden to the professional breweries for the sake of public health and industry standards. Katie's usual table beer recipe called for honey, but today Ulga was teaching her to make the Rattenfläger family specialty featuring juniper berries and spruce needles.

"I can't wait to see how this recipe comes out with the water from your well up here," said Ulga. "I always heard that the spring that starts here on the hill had healing powers."

"I don't know about that," said Katie. "But it is definitely better than the water where we used to live."

"I usually have to brew using water from the little stream that passes our house. It's where people empty their chamber pots most days. They're not supposed to empty them into the stream on Thursdays and Fridays, because that's when families use the water for cooking and brewing, but I know some people do. The older people forget, and some neighbors are just nasty. I can get water from the town well, but it's extra work to do the walking and hauling, especially if Wipo or Einer aren't around to help."

"Wherever it comes from, your table beer always comes out great," said Katie. "Thanks for teaching me your recipe."

They were enjoying the smells coming from the pot when Ulga said suddenly, "I'm pregnant."

"That's wonderful!" said Katie.

"I'm nervous about telling Wipo."

"Why's that?"

"Because I'm afraid it will remind him of his other children, the ones who died, Zwo, Trey, and Viertl. Zwo and Trey died of the plague with their mother. Viertl and Fünfi were twins, but Viertl and his mother died in childbirth. That left Wipo to raise Einer and the baby by himself. He's such a kind man. He loved them all very much. I didn't know his first wife, but his second wife, Walpurga, was like a big sister to me. We called her Purgie. She taught me to sew and cook. She even taught me this beer recipe, now that I think of it!" Ulga started to cry.

"Oh, my Ulga," comforted Katie. "It will be okay. These are good memories, even if they are sad, because they're of people you and Wipo and the boys have loved." Katie put one arm around Ulga's shoulders as they contemplatively watched the wort lightly boil in the pot. In her mind and heart, Ulga had gone from being someone she would have been afraid to touch to someone she couldn't imagine being without.

"We've been so happy these past months," Ulga said. "Einer is growing up and helping more. It's like he has gone from being a little boy to a man over the summer. Fünfi follows me around like a puppy wherever I go in the house, to the neighbors, to the market, everywhere. We're all so happy. I'm afraid to change that with another child. I'm afraid to make Wipo sad if something goes wrong in the pregnancy or the delivery."

"Don't be afraid, Ulga," said Katie. "Eva is a wonderful midwife. She often comes to the women's gathering on Sunday afternoons. If you come, I will introduce you and you can ask her all the questions you want. She has seen it all. Based on what I've heard, she's a real miracle worker. You could ask Suzi about how it went for her, too. Suzi had a very difficult pregnancy, and Eva saw it through all the way to a healthy delivery."

"I'd like to meet her." Ulga had lived in Hurtzburg her whole life, growing up on a street near where she now lived with Wipo. But she was amazed at how many new people she was meeting since she had started spending time with Katie. She also couldn't have imagined that she would have anything to teach someone like Katie, who had grown up around educated people, was married to minister, and read all of the books that her husband had collected at the university. But these past weeks she had shown Katie new parts of the town and the countryside. And now here she was in the church parsonage of all places, teaching the pastor's wife her favorite way to make table beer.

Enjoying some thoughtful silence, the women were just getting ready for the next step in the brewing process when there came a knock on the door. Katie went to open it.

"Guten Tag, Frau Herr Pastor," said a shy young man, unsure if that was really how one ought to address the minister's wife. It was Jacob, the son of the late Thomas the baker. "Is Pastor Matti at home? Pastor Mathesius, I mean."

"Yes, Jacob. He is reading in the garden. Please come inside and say hello Frau Rattenfläger. We are brewing some new beer, but I can give you a small glass of what I still have of the older batch if you are thirsty."

“Yes, please,” said Jacob. He quietly greeted Ulga, then drained the cup as soon as Katie gave it to him. Katie could tell he was in a hurry.

“Let’s go see the pastor,” she said. She led him out the back door into the garden. “Carl,” she said to her husband. “Jacob, the son of Maria and Thomas of blessed memory is here to speak with you.” Jacob was embarrassed to hear the minister called by his first name, adding to the shyness he conveyed as he prepared to speak to Pastor Matti.

“Thank you, Katie,” said the pastor, setting down his book and standing up to meet Jacob. “Herr Becker,” he said, using the formal pattern of speech to greet this young man. “So good to see you. What brings you to the parsonage today?”

“My mother sent me,” said Jacob. “She wanted to know if the church deacons still rent a granary to store wheat to share with the poor.”

“Yes, we do,” said Pastor Matti. “It’s part of the church budget to store some grain to have on hand for people in need. I can check with the deacons to see how much we have at the moment, but I’m sure there is some in store.”

“That’s good,” said Jacob. “My mother is worried about the town’s grain supply. She says that much of the grain going through the mill is spoiled. She thinks that too many of the skilled people who used to work there have died, so that there aren’t enough workers and they don’t know what they’re doing. The mill owner himself refuses to admit there’s a problem.”

“Has she told the city council?”

“Yes, but the owner of the mill is on the council and Mayor Dunkruger refuses to believe us.”

“What can the church do?”

“My mother is begging you to fill the emergency church granary with grain from the Ackermüllers’ family mill in the countryside. She thinks people will start to get very sick if they use the spoiled grain being milled here. We feel very helpless and don’t know where else to turn.”

“Thank you, Jacob. I will tell the deacons. Some of them are very close to the church council members, so they might not agree with this advice. But I will present it as a matter of caring for the poor. Can you give the names of some families that need extra grain these days? It will help if I can give examples of people who will need grain for the coming winter, especially of families that might be related to the council members or work for them. Some of those deacons don’t approve of spending money until it affects someone they know.”

“Yes, Herr Pastor. My mother can make a list of families who have come to the bakery in extra need these days. I will bring it tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Jacob. Please tell your mother that I will do everything I can to fill our church stores with grain from that mill.”

“Thank you, Pastor. She is very worried, and this will be very good news to her.”

“I’m very glad. Before you go,” said the pastor, “come get some parsnips from my garden. They’re delicious this time of year.” Pastor Matti walked over to the garden to find some of the better-looking stalks and started digging out the tender roots. Jacob had never seen a pastor do any work besides talking before, so he was still somewhat surprised when Pastor Matti returned to him with dirty hands and a sack of a dozen fresh parsnips.

“Thank you again for coming to me, Herr Becker. Please give my greetings to your mother and sister. I will send a message to her as soon as the deacons have made a decision about the grain.”

“Thank you, Herr Pastor,” said Jacob. “Please give my farewell to Frau Pastor and Frau Rattenfläger.”

“I will. God’s blessings to you.” Pastor Matti watched Jacob leave, paying his respects at his father’s grave before making his way down the lane back to town. He went back to his chair in the garden, realizing that the name Jacob reminded him of the stories from the First Book of Moses about Jacob’s sons, and how the castaway Joseph warned Pharaoh of a coming famine and then welcomed his brothers when they came to him in desperation.

“What you meant for evil, God meant for good,” the pastor quoted aloud. “Yes, Lord. May something good come from all this trouble,” he prayed before picking up his book again. In some ways, all things felt right to him: he was reading a book in the garden, his wife was brewing beer with a friend, and the September day was as majestic as could be. At the same time, the warning from Maria was working on his mind. He would call the deacons together as soon as possible. If they objected to spending the extra money, he would remind them of the story of Joseph saving the people from hunger by being well prepared. Even so, he would have to be ready for his parishioners to ignore good lessons from the Bible. It wouldn’t be the first time, and it wouldn’t be the last.

Chapter 23: Bloodletting

Ready for the invigoration that would come with a fresh bloodletting, Mayor Dunkruger energetically entered the shop of Peter the barber.

“Good morning, Mr. Mayor!” greeted the barber. The mayor didn’t really have friends, but he and Peter always got along well, respecting each other’s line of work.

“Good morning, Mr. Barber,” said Dunkruger, with the pouty scowl that his face had learned to substitute for a smile. He hung his coat on a peg and settled his bulk into the barber’s solid chair. A stool next to the chair held the delicate bronze pot that would soon catch his blood.

“The usual today, sir? Looking to relieve some of the phlegmatic humours?”

“Yes, Master Barber. My spleen is feeling good. I feel very strong and determined. But a man can always be stronger. You’re welcome to bleed some of those weaker humors away.” Rolling up his cotton sleeve, the mayor exposed his thick orange forearm. The tender skin on the inside of his elbow hadn’t yet scarred since his last visit. Peter would have an easy time reopening the wound.

The barber gave his knife a few passes over a whetstone and then wiped his nose. Centering the mayor’s arm over the bronze pot, he lowered his knife, broke the skin, and held the mayor’s wrist in such a way that the blood flowed right where it was supposed to. They would take a healthy pint from the mayor today.

Dunkruger was enjoying the rush that came with the initial flow of blood and felt properly lightheaded. “Yes, that’s nice,” he said, sinking a little into his chair.

Just as the mayor was about to close his eyes, a man yelled and the back door of the barbershop flew open. A rat with a body the length of the mayor’s open forearm dashed over

the mayor's feet, jostled the stool with its bloody pot, and zigzagged around the room, before finding the open front door and running through it into the street.

Still managing to bleed into the saucer, Mayor Dunkruger turned his head to see Wipo standing triumphant in the back of the shop, wearing his full cloak, his face hidden by giant goggles. Peter, who had backed up to the wall when he heard Wipo yell, remembered his patient and went to lend his support to the mayor's still-bleeding arm.

"Sorry if that caught you by surprise, Mr. Mayor," he said. "Wipo's been hiding in my storeroom all morning, so quiet that I almost forgot he was there. I knew that some critter was getting into my swabs and bandages, but I wouldn't have imagined it was as big as that fellow."

Wipo removed his goggles and gave both men a look of great satisfaction. He was surprised to see that while Peter was contentedly returning to his work, the mayor was giving him a cold sneer.

"What's the matter, Mr. Mayor? Is the bloodletting not agreeing with you?"

"No, you fool," said Dunkruger. "The bloodletting was going fine until you ruined it with your stupid rat catching." The mayor was so mad about the peacefulness of his bloodletting being that he was fully venting at Wipo. "Why do they even call you a rat catcher? Rat chaser is more like it. I've never seen you catch and kill anything. What are you? Afraid of them? Friends with them?"

Wipo and Peter looked at each other in confusion and embarrassment, as the mayor stared at his arm, willing the blood to flow faster so he could leave.

"Sorry, sir," said Wipo. "Like he said, Master Peter wanted me to relieve him of this giant nuisance, which I have done according to my word." He looked at Peter, who gave him a polite little nod. "Regarding my methods, sir, I have found that killing rats only seems to lead to more baby rats, whereas chasing them from their homes quiets 'em down and keeps them away for longer. The public health, it seems to me, is better served by keeping the rats from bothering folks than trying to get rid of them altogether."

"Next time I hire you, Wipo—if I hire you—," the mayor spoke into his bloody arm, "I will demand that you kill them."

"I can do that, sir. But I'm afraid you'll be disappointed in the results."

"Dead rats is exactly the result I want."

"Yes, sir," said Wipo, nervously clutching his goggles, aware that the mayor was refusing to even look at him. Master Peter broke the silence by saying, "I'll send my apprentice around to your place with a payment this evening, Wipo. Thanks for your work."

"My pleasure," said Wipo. "Auf wiedersehen, Mr. Mayor," he said as he left the barbershop, fully aware that the mayor neither looked up to see him go nor returned his goodbye. "Must have bled the wrong arm," Wipo laughed to himself as he pushed back the hood of his cloak and walked down the street.

"Must have bled the wrong arm," said the barber softly in a modest attempt to joke with the mayor.

"What did you say?" asked the mayor.

"Nothing," said Peter. The two men resumed their silence. Peter hoped he hadn't lost a regular customer, until he remembered that no one needed their spleen vented more than the mayor. He'd be back.

For his part, the mayor was having a hard time remembering what he was angry about. Wipo had disrupted his calm. The barber was also to blame for hiring the rat catcher this same morning of his scheduled appointment. The mayor's earlier pleasant lightheadedness had turned into a feeling of unease and disorientation. Judging by the amount of blood in the pot, he guessed that he was getting close to the end of his session. He worried, though, that he might feel wobbly if he stood up, so he sat there in silence while Peter pattered with his tools.

"Will you be wanting a shave today, too, sir?" Peter asked.

"No."

"Then we'll close this up, and I'll look forward to seeing you again next month."

"Hm," grunted the mayor. Once Peter finished wrapping some cloth around the mayor's arm, he rolled down the sleeve and put out a hand to help him up. He could tell from the mayor's reluctance to claim his full weight that the big man was feeling dizzy. Relishing the moment, he let go of Dunkruger's arm just a second before the mayor was totally steady. It delighted Peter to see a slight wobble in the mayor's knees as Peter moved across the room to get the mayor's coat. He stood there holding it, gesturing for the mayor to walk over so that Peter could put it on for him. With more effort than he liked to show, Dunkruger took the few steps across the room and let the barber slide it over his shoulders. He fished in his pockets for some coins and paid the barber what he hoped was the lowest acceptable amount.

Peter quickly counted the coins and smiled. The mayor had underpaid him, which made his satisfaction about Dunkruger's discomfort all the more rewarding.

"A pleasure as always, Mr. Mayor," he bowed. Without expecting any reply, the barber showed him to the door and waved good-bye. "Auf wiedersehen, Herr Burgermeister!" Returning to the shop, he emptied the blood-filled pot into a floor drain and went to inspect his newly rat-free storeroom.

Chapter 24: Feeling Strong

Walking into the Hurtzburg City Hall for the second time in a year, Lorenz Laurentius felt foolish. His parents had hoped he would become someone important. His friend the prince had given him a secretive job that promised excitement but turned out to consist mainly of keeping a diary. His fiancée had written him only once, a cursory note explaining that her parents had declared her engagement with him to be over so that she could marry the son of a war hammer manufacturer. She sounded happy in her letter. Walking up the stairs to the mayor's second-floor office with Duke Elmer, Lorenz supposed that carrying out a dull bureaucratic task in a nowhere town with a know-nothing major was the best he deserved.

Duke Elmer had instructed Lorenz to speak as little as possible. Lorenz would read the letter from the Elector of Brandenburg and take notes. There really was nothing, Duke Elmer had said, to discuss. They had come to enforce, not negotiate.

A boy of about sixteen, probably the son or nephew of a clerk, guided them down the hallway to the mayor's door. The youth gave the door a tap and then opened it. They found Mayor Dunkruger pretending not to have just been awoken from a nap, something he appeared to be quite good at, as he cleared his throat and patted down his desk as if he were looking for an important document.

Wiping any hints of drool off his face, Dunkruger stood up to greet the pair. The sudden change of altitude, however, only made him more lightheaded and he had to steady himself by grabbing the back of his chair. Looking down at his arm, he noticed that the bandage Peter had put on his arm had bled through, so that his sleeve was stained red.

“Good day, gentlemen,” he said, trying to hide his wounded arm behind his back. “I’m surprised to see dignitaries like you back in Hurtzburg. But not too surprised, because this is such a wonderful place.”

Dismissing the young guide with a nod, Duke Elmer entered the room the better to command it. “Mayor Dunkruger, I see you have been to the barber for a bloodletting. I trust you are well?”

“Yes, I am,” said the mayor defensively. “It’s part of my health regimen. I am very strong and visiting the barber only makes me stronger.”

“Clearly,” said the duke. “You must be wondering why we are here. You will recall receiving a payment from us after our last visit. That money was a retainer for services we would be requiring in the future. We have been sent by the Elector of Brandenburg to collect on that arrangement.”

It had not occurred to the mayor that the Brandenburgers would ever actually need anything from his little town. They had spent the entire amount on Summerfest and on bonuses for the city council members and himself. By law, a modest donation had been made to the church’s social fund, but he and the council had worked hard to minimize any such frivolous spending on anyone other than themselves. Standing woozily behind his desk, he was starting to worry about what might be required of them.

Having seen this look countless times in the faces of his inferiors all over Germany, Duke Elmer continued coolly. “His Majesty the Elector requires provisions for an army currently bivouacked to the north of town. That will include several dozens of whole pigs, two wagonloads of grain from your mills, one week’s worth of kegged beer for the soldiers, and the conscription of at least one unit of local men into our army. We will also require the services of seamstresses to mend our clothes, cobblers to mend our boots, and blacksmiths to shoe our horses and sharpen our blades. As we have already paid in full, we expect these services to be rendered by the end of tomorrow, or we will requisition them by force on the following day.”

“The people aren’t going to like this,” said the mayor, looking out the window overlooking the town. Gaining courage, he said, “I don’t think you’ll take things by force anyways. You’re supposed to be our allies. You can’t risk attacking your own partners.”

“Quite the contrary,” said Duke Elmer. “It’s you who cannot risk disappointing your allies. Sir Laurentius here has drafted a public letter that describes our agreement and suggests that your citizens be informed of how you spent the money we gave them. We can only assume you made a good investment of it.”

Feeling cornered, the mayor was about to lash out at the duke. Then he recognized Lorenz. He would channel his anger that direction.

“The fool!” he said. “You’re serving me papers from a fool! I refuse to take orders from you and your clown.”

“I beg your pardon,” said Duke Elmer.

“This man is a court jester. My wife told me all about him. You insult me with his presence. I’m not going to tell my people anything, except that the Elector of Brandenburg

thinks we're dumb enough to deal with his clowns." Warming himself up to give full offense, Dunkruger looked straight at the duke, pointed a chubby orange finger at him and said, "Both of his clowns."

Lorenz was glad that the duke had told him not to talk, because he had instantly composed and delivered a scathing piece of satire in his head in response to the mayor's insults. But he remembered his orders and saw that the duke was not bothered by the mayor's calumnies in the slightest.

"Sir," began Duke Elmer. "I cannot speak to the previous employment status of the prince's secretary. But can tell you that I am related by blood or marriage to the crowns of Brandenburg, Prussia, Mecklenburg, Courland, Hesse, Württemberg, the Rhenish Palatinate, Bohemia, Denmark, England, and Scotland, among others. I can order my troops to level this town tonight, with the full weight of the law on my side and without hesitation or regret. I am no clown. I trust you will reconsider. The goods will be delivered by tomorrow evening. Thank you, and good day."

The duke gestured for Lorenz to hand over the request to fulfill of the agreement that had been signed only a few months ago. Dunkruger stared icily at Lorenz as he set the document on the mayor's orange desk. The duke left the room as soon as he saw the paper delivered. Seeing the nobleman leave and unable to stop himself any longer, Lorenz returned the mayor's withering glare with a smile. Reaching down to his right, he picked up the mayor's gilded chamber pot.

"Here you go," he said. "In case any other unforeseen consequences arise."

Chapter 25: The Dunkruger Effect

That evening, the city council held an emergency meeting. With several leading millers and landowners on the council, they found ways to provide Brandenburg with grain and most of the meat by selling their worst products back to the city at inflated prices. They could not, however, think of a way to find soldiers, so they decided to interrupt the town market the next morning and see how many men or boys might volunteer. They and their sons certainly would not be fighting, but they were hoping that several of Hurtzburg's less essential citizens might self-select.

The next day, just before noon, everyone in town knew that the market would be closing before lunch for an important message from the mayor. With more people than usual gathered in the market square on a warm fall morning, the bell at town hall was rung and Mayor Dunkruger climbed onto a wagon.

"My people," he began, "our allies from Brandenburg have called on us to assist them in their heroic effort to bring peace to Germany and to defend the true religion."

"The Elector of Brandenburg is a Calvinist! We're Lutheran!" someone yelled.

"That's not important," hushed the mayor. "To do our part, your city council has raised up enough grain to supply their army for weeks and enough pork to sustain them on the next leg of their heroic march to the south."

"Most of our grain is spoiled or spoiling!" yelled a millworker.

“No, it’s not!” Dunkruger yelled back. “Herr Obermueller from city council is standing right here. His grain is the best in the region. Are you going to stand here and tell him that our tremendous Hurtzburg grain is no good? To his face? You’re a traitor!”

“The grain is spoiled!” The voice yelled again. “Everyone will get sick! It’s called ergotism... look it up!”

“You lie!” rebutted the mayor, wildly waving his arms. “Everything about Hurtzburg is always the best. If you don’t agree, then you can march to war with the Brandenburgers.”

At this the crowd hushed. They were not expecting an invitation to join the army. Little did they know, it was not an invitation but a command.

Sensing a shift in the crowd’s concern, Dunkruger gave the announcement he most needed to make. “In addition to grain and meat, we have promised Brandenburg fifty soldiers for their campaign. The council is now requesting volunteers.” The square went entirely silent.

“We’re not leaving here until we have fifty brave new soldiers!” Dunkruger yelled.

Hundreds of people stood rooted to the marketplace paving stones in shock from the request, until one person yelled, “You should go!”

Dunkruger was momentarily stunned that someone might dare to suggest he go with the army. “What are you talking about?! I’m the mayor! I’m too important to leave.” He heard whispers and murmurs from the crowd. “And besides, Peter the barber told me I have a thing with my feet that would make it impossible for me to march that far.”

“I never said that!” yelled a voice from the back of the square.

“In any case, Hurtzburg is full of heroes. We only need fifty of you.” Scanning the crowd, Dunkruger saw a bunch of burly laborers who had come together before taking their usual extended lunch in the pub. “Jörg!” he yelled. “you’re always talking about how strong you are. Here’s your chance to show the world!”

“I can’t go,” Jörg shouted back, embarrassed to be singled out. “I have three little girls at home to watch over,” he said.

“And three girlfriends!” one of his buddies teased.

“You’re all cowards!” yelled Dunkruger. “Cowards and traitors and weaklings!” Looking for a friendlier face, he saw Wipo standing in the crowd with Ulga and their boys.

“Wipo, my friend!” yelled the mayor. “You’re getting a little long in the tooth. But maybe you and your oldest could have an adventure together.”

“He’s only twelve, sir,” Wipo said. “He’s just a boy. And we’re expecting another. Begging your pardon, but I can’t leave my family right now, sir.”

“You don’t get my pardon, rat catcher! Your contracts with the city are through, as of right now. Your pest control services—such as they are—are exterminated! And that’s more than I can say for your sad skills as a rat catcher!”

The mayor continued to fume on the back of the wagon, huffing and pacing and waving his arms, yelling out the occasional “Cowards! Traitors! Weaklings!” In the midst of the crowd, Ulga held Wipo’s hand and quietly said, “It’s not true, dear. He’s just mad. He doesn’t mean it.” Wipo heard her words, but they didn’t erase the sting of being humiliated by a man he admired in front of the whole town. He couldn’t tell if the people around him were embarrassed to defend him or worried that they might be the mayor’s next targets for standing too close to the disgraced rat catcher. Still, no one from the crowd volunteered: not the macho laborers, not

the drunks who spent their days by the pond and their nights in the pub, not the reckless youths.

“You cowards!” yelled the mayor again. “You don’t understand anything! If we don’t find fifty soldiers, the Brandenburg army will invade us! They’ll take what they want and who they want! Only I can save you!”

The crowd remained silent. No one moved. No one spoke. Suddenly, a tall, golden woman confidently climbed up the wagon. Narcissa stood next to her husband and addressed the people.

“Dear friends and neighbors. Our city council has earned our respect and obedience through years of leadership full of nothing but prosperity and pride. Is it too much to pay them back this one time? I think not. We owe it to them. We owe it to ourselves.” Turning to her husband, Narcissa gave him a look that said she knew what to do and that he should support it. “Tomorrow at this same time, we will hold a draft. Every able-bodied man between the ages of fifteen and forty-five will be eligible. Fifty men will be chosen at random. In this way, we will satisfy our obligations to our allies and prove our bravery and commitment to freedom.”

Lorentz watched as Narcissa proudly stepped down from the wagon. Mayor Dunkruger followed after. They quietly huddled together, joined by a young woman who looked like she might be their daughter. The crowd slowly started to disperse, neighbors talking to neighbors as they returned to their daily business. Lorentz saw Wipo staring across the market to the mayor, with his wife and boys supporting him—maybe even physically holding him up—by his side. Lorentz remembered the rat catcher and felt sorry for himself that he had any part at all in this sad farce. At the bottom of the page on which he was taking notes, he concluded his observations to the prince: “Such, dear Willy-Fritz, is the Dunkruger effect: ignorance and pain. As one who might yet be tempted to spend my best years in your employ, I wonder: What kind of leader will you be?”

Chapter 26: Cowards and Traitors

Based on Lorenz’ report of the ad hoc town meeting, Duke Elmer agreed to give Hurtzburg an additional day to produce fifty soldiers. The grain and pork had already arrived. Not failing to mention any of the heckling against Mayor Dunkruger, Lorenz had described the accusations of spoiled grain, but the duke was not one to worry about such things. “Our soldiers could subsist on tree bark and pine cones if they needed,” he had said. “Some mediocre backcountry rye will be a luxury for them.” Like a cat playing with a mouse it had already caught, Duke Elmer was happy to assert his authority and watch the people of the small town scramble. He could spare a day or two for such fun.

The next day, the entire town gathered again in the market square. Clerks and their assistants had stayed up all night going through the town registers, church record books, and tax returns to make sure they identified every possible male citizen between the ages of fifteen and forty-five. The only resident not added to the list was Pastor Matti, who was deemed something of a foreign national. But he was there in the crowd, watching and praying, not knowing that he had been pre-emptively discharged from service.

The mayor, aged forty-six, had returned to the familiar costume of his outsized persona, convinced that the mockeries he had endured the previous day hadn’t really happened like he

remembered. In his mind, he had delivered a rousing speech, Narcissa at his side, leading his people into a glorious future.

Narcissa, however, remembered things more accurately and watched her husband for signs of slippage as he clambered back onto the wagon that would serve as his podium. All of a sudden, he seemed old and slow to her. For the first time, the distinct thought that she should be the mayor filled her head and gave her perfect clarity for how she would have handled this moment, as well as all the ones leading up to it. Unlike her husband and the puffed-up suits on the city council, she wouldn't have been tempted by the desperate money of spent nobles like the leaders of Brandenburg. She would have taken care of people, like a true queen ought to. Unsure of what might soon happen, she turned to Ingrid next to her, squeezed her hand, and said, "We're going to be okay."

Lorenz, having found a solitary perch on some crates at the edge of the market, saw Narcissa with her daughter. "Damn," he mused aloud. "I wish I could rescue that girl. Damsel in distress if I ever saw one." His memory of Narcissa roasting him over dinner all those months ago only convinced him further that the daughter would be both interesting and interested in leaving.

Mayor Dunkruger filled his chest with air and began to give what he imagined would be the rousing sequel to the previous day's inspirational appeal to God and homeland. "My people! We are gathered here to defend our homes, our religion, and our sacred honor. Fifty of you will have the privilege to represent this blessed burg on the frontlines, in a battle for our very soul and the souls of our children and descendants. Your city council has worked tirelessly to compose a list of the names of all our brave men, aged fifteen to forty-five, fifty of whom will carry our honor abroad. Each man has been assigned a number. Each number has been put here on slips of paper in this basket. May God bless our heroic troops."

Mayor Dunkruger paused in anticipation of a massive wave of applause that never came. Again, the people were silent. Had he cared to read the mood of the crowd, it would have been a feeling of total despair and fear. But he didn't care. He was only mad that he didn't get credit for delivering what he assumed was the greatest, most patriotic speech ever wasted on the people of Hurtzburg.

"I will now choose the first number, and our town clerk will announce the name of that hero," he proclaimed. A clerk surrounded by other town hall staff nervously nodded back to him.

"Number 37!" Mayor Dunkruger yelled. He turned to the clerk, eager to learn the name of the first newly conscripted hero. Before the clerk could answer, however, a trumpet blew from the main road into the market square. The crowd turned to look.

A royal carriage with the banners and shields of the prince archbishop of Bumblestedt was making its way through the square, parting the throng of people surrounding it. Again, the trumpeter next to the coach driver blew the horn. It stopped next to the wagon where Mayor Dunkruger was standing. The trumpet blew a third time. Out stepped an old man wearing luxuriously purple priestly robes and a silver tiara. No one had ever seen him before, but he carried himself as if he belonged there. Behind him was a monk carrying a stool, which was immediately put into use as a makeshift staircase, allowing this prince of the church to ascend the wagon as elegantly as he liked.

“My dear citizens of Hurtzburg,” he announced. “I am your God-given sovereign, Prince Archbishop Gotthilf the Third of Bumblestedt and other territories. I regret that I have not seen you in happier circumstances. You are about to come under attack!”

“We know!” yelled the crowd.

“You do?” puzzled the prince archbishop.

“Yes,” said Mayor Dunkruger. “Our ally, the Elector of Brandenburg, represented by Duke Elmer of Immerunterwasserfeld has come to fulfill a treaty we signed. They’re going to attack us if we don’t deliver fifty soldiers to them.”

“Your allies are going to attack you?”

“Yes. I made a really good deal with them, and it’s just hit a little snag. The people love me. I make the best deals.”

“I wonder,” said the prince archbishop, amazed and frightened that a town in his fold was led by such an obvious lunatic.

Returning his focus to the crowd, Gotthilf announced, “My people, I regret to inform you that not only is an army from Brandenburg apparently encamped nearby, but the imperial forces of the Holy Roman Empire and his allies are assembling against you to the south. I am suing for peace. I pray they accept. We will begin negotiations tomorrow. In the meantime, the emperor’s officers are demanding provisions for them and their men. These must be delivered immediately.”

“But the grain is spoiled!” yelled a voice from the crowd.

“That’s not possible, you traitor!” the mayor yelled back.

“Please!” asserted the prince archbishop. “I will take lodging here in town. I expect provisions to be delivered today. I will meet with the city council now to devise a strategy for the peace talks.”

“But what about drafting our brave army of Hurtzburgers?” objected the mayor.

“My poor man,” said the prince archbishop. “Have you learned nothing in the past twenty years? This is total war. You are all about to be soldiers, medics, officers, and casualties. Now move aside.” Turning to the crowd, the prince archbishop yelled in a booming voice, “Go to your homes immediately! Prepare food that will last and say your prayers! Now!”

The crowd started to thin with the kind of careful energy brought on by a doom that was starting to feel like it just might be impending. Lorenz hurried off to inform Duke Elmer of the arrival of imperial forces to the opposite side of the town. He had hoped that he would never really see war, that he might just chronicle the waning days of a war waged by tired old officers and jaded, broken soldiers. But this was to be the real thing. “No joke,” he said to himself, as he found his horse and bolted out of town.

Chapter 27: Religious Roundtable

A Lutheran, a Catholic, and a Calvinist walk into a tavern. “It was meant to be,” said the Calvinist.

“I have invited you here,” said the prince archbishop, settling into a glass of mead, “because we are at the worst of impasses. Brandenburg is prepared to besiege Hurtzburg until the terms of their treaty are honored. The imperial army, whose troops are gathered now to the south, is also going to cut off traffic in and out of the town as a way to punish it for making

a treaty with Protestants. Their goal is to subdue the town into renouncing its rights as an independent Lutheran city within my territory and returning its allegiance to the Church of Rome, as well as bringing it under the direct oversight of Holy Roman Empire itself. Finally, it may well happen that the armies get tired of starving this poor little town and decide to invade it, fighting each other and whatever doubtlessly pathetic defenses the town might manage to raise.”

“What does this have to do with us?” asked Pastor Buchholz, the Calvinist chaplain of the Brandenburg army. “We pray with the officers and soldiers. We don’t make policy.”

“My own city council tried to get me sacked just a few months ago,” added the Lutheran Pastor Mathesius.

“This is my land,” said the prince archbishop. “It’s people are my people, Protestant or not. Furthermore, as much as I disagree with the foundations of Protestantism, I detest the notion of religious coercion. I have read no such thing in the scriptures we share. I hate seeing our common religion used as a prop for these godless warriors. I want you both to tell me what you know, so that we might—God willing—find a solution that does not end with the decimation of Hurtzburg, and very likely ourselves.”

“Loving your neighbor as yourself has never felt quite so relevant,” said Pastor Matti.

“It is what it is,” said the Calvinist, sipping his wine.

“Pastor Mathesius, what do you know about the situation in town?” asked the prince archbishop.

Pastor Matti took a sip of his beer and said, “Since the failure of the city council to raise the number of soldiers, morale has been very low. The people feel like their leaders sold them out. They seem more ready to surrender to either invader than stand up with their city council leaders for the town. The church has been stockpiling grain. We usually keep a little on hand for our local poor, but a little while ago I got a tip to buy some more.”

“Providential,” added the Calvinist.

“Yes it was, Brother Buchholz, so I don’t think we’ll go hungry for a couple weeks. But again, the city council had already sold off most of the town’s supplies of meat and other foodstuffs. I think we’re in for some days of thin bread and weak tea.”

“Will the town be raising an army? Do they have the will to fight?” asked the prince archbishop. “Some defense might be necessary, even if just to prevent a mass slaughter.”

“The people have stopped listening to the mayor and council members,” said Pastor Matti. “But they don’t want to give up entirely, I think. They’re suffering from a complete absence of leadership, which I can’t fill. I can minister, I can console, I can help with things like distribution of grain and firewood. But I’m not the one to muster troops.”

“How are things among the Brandenburgers?” the archbishop asked the chaplain.

“The soldiers are losing some of the little calm and civility they had managed to maintain on their journey here. I’m afraid the worst kind of behavior is in store.”

“It’s the same with the imperial troops, I’m afraid,” the archbishop said. “They’ve been marauding for so long, they have no idea how to act anymore. It’s an international army of rogues: Austrians, Hungarians, Bavarians, Croatians, Italians, Spaniards, Belgians, just to give an example of the continental scope of our collective fall into depravity.”

“We, too, have an army of transnational boors: Englishmen and Norsemen, Danes and Bohemians, Frenchmen and Dutch mercenaries, along with all manner of German citizens,” said the chaplain.

“Honor and brotherhood were early casualties of the war. We have raised a desperate generation,” said Pastor Matti. “It would be nice to say that the Lutherans behaved, or the Protestants in general held their honor, or the German politicians and city councils. But instead we have seen the worst of our civilization, if we can even call it that. We have fallen beyond what we ever thought possible.”

“God alone is our help and comfort in times of trial,” said Pastor Buchholz. The men finished their drinks. The prince archbishop paid the tab.

They said their farewells at the tavern door. “And don’t forget to pray for a miracle,” said Prince Archbishop Gotthilf. “I doubt that the Lord God is either a Catholic or a Protestant, rather than neither or both, but I hope He’ll hear the prayers of at least one of us, little though any of us deserve it.”

PART 5: SO MUCH DISTRESS

Chapter 28: The Mayor at Work

Narcissa had not seen her husband Moritz all day. He had awoken as normal, shared some breakfast, and then he left the house with an especially vacant look on his face and vague words about needing to get something done. He had not returned for lunch. Narcissa saw several of his work associates around town, each busily stocking up on food and beer as the siege was getting underway, and none of them had seen Mayor Dunkruger either. The town hall had been locked for several days, as the council members were more concerned with securing supplies for their families than gathering for the mundane work of leadership.

It was therefore with a sense of desperation that Narcissa walked the full perimeter of city hall, searching for any sign of Moritz. She and Ingrid felt adequately prepared for the siege, and she was worried that in his current absent minded state he might not take advantage of this crisis as well as he should. Hurtzburg needed its mayor, a chance for Moritz to add to his status as a local hero.

With dusk falling and the town square nearly abandoned by people getting ready to endure the coming storm of a double siege, Narcissa looked up to one of the windows of her husband’s second floor office. It was dark, but—unlike the cold darkness emanating from the other rooms in the building—it seemed as if it might hold the warm light of a single candle. For what felt like the fourth or fifth time, Narcissa tried opening the locked front doors of town hall. Hastily walking around the building for what felt like a third time, concerned that people sheltering in their homes might be watching her unusual behavior, she noticed a small walk-down service entrance in the back of the hall that she had never paid attention to before. It was unlocked. She went in.

Without a candle of her own, she couldn’t tell exactly where she was. It smelled like old paper. Tapping around with her feet, she confirmed that crates of loose paper were distributed unevenly around the floors in scattered stacks and rows. Operating mostly on speeches and favors, it was evident that the current council was not much for documentation. Being herself a

person who liked to know as much detail about everyone and everything as possible, she decided should do some reading in this room when the siege was over. Before then, however, she had to get to Moritz. With the little light coming through the door that she had left open, she tiptoed her way around the clutter and found the entrance into the main body of the hall. Footsteps echoing through the staircase, Narcissa walked through the hollow darkness of the empty public building to her husband's second floor office.

It looked to be as dark as everything else. The promise of candlelight held true, but she could not see where it was coming from. To the left of the room, the sitting areas were empty. In front of her, the portrait of Moritz hanging on the wall glowered in a darkness she could only feel but not see. To the right, the mayor's desk and chair were empty. Was the candle beneath the desk, she wondered?

"Moritz?" Narcissa quietly called out. "Herr Burgermeister, dear? It's Narcissa. Are you here?" No reply. Peering around the mayor's massive desk, she heard someone exhale, releasing breath as if finishing a task that required effort and concentration.

"Moritz?" she asked again.

Peeking up from the candlelit cave of the space under his desk, Mayor Dunkruger smiled at Narcissa. Standing up from the squat position she had found him in, he was wearing his dressiest shirt, overcoat, and boots. His pants, however, were around his ankles. "Here, my dear," he said politely, holding out his arms as if to offer her a present. "I've been working all day. Take a look." It was his gilded chamber pot, filled to the brim. He beamed with pride, as Narcissa—knowing there was no place to vomit—did everything she could to suppress her repulsion at the sights and smells sights in front of her.

"Thank you, dear, but let's set that down for now," she said in her most motherly way. She sensed that her tall bulky husband, who was not just a pillar of the community but its very foundation, had somehow become a child again. "Let's get you home." Holding the outside of his full hands, she guided the chamber pot to the floor. "We'll deal with this tomorrow."

"But I worked so hard," Moritz said dejectedly. "The people will want to know what I've been doing."

"Perhaps," Narcissa said convincingly. "But right now, folks are getting ready for bed, and for a war, and they need their mayor to get some rest." Picking up the candlestand from the floor, she helped Moritz pull up his pants. She grabbed him by the wrist and pulled him out of his office like a mother leading a boy away from his favorite toys. The mayor didn't say a word on the entire walk through city hall and down the street to home. Narcissa had shared a couple polite "Good evenings" with neighbors she passed, and Moritz had just smiled.

Ingrid met them at the door. "You found him!" she said, leading her father into the house. "Father, how are you?"

Mayor Dunkruger gave her a hug. "So good to see you, Ingrid," he said. "Now, if you please, your mother said it's time for me to go to bed." Giving his wife a kiss on the cheek, he walked up to his bedroom, still wearing his boots and overcoat.

"That's a bit odd," Ingrid said to her mother, watching him disappear up the stairs. "Where was he? What was he doing?"

"He was in his office. Working," Narcissa replied obliquely. "I'm afraid he's not well. I shall have to speak with the prince archbishop about it tomorrow. You'll need to stay home with your father tomorrow. If anyone asks, just say that he's sick and resting."

“Is that true?” asked Ingrid, worried that there was more to the story than her mother was telling her. “He looked healthy to me.”

“It’s all too true, my dear.”

Chapter 29: Rat Catching

For the past several days, Ulga noticed that Wipo had lost the spring in his step since the mayor had yelled at him during the town meeting. He went to work with less vigor than before. He played with the boys half-heartedly. He went to bed early and still woke up tired. Trying to engage him as he came home for lunch, she said cheerfully, “How was your morning? Successful, I’m sure.”

“What does it matter?” Wipo said as he took off his cloak and slumped down at the table. Propping his head up in his hands, he sighed, “Most of the rats followed the grain out of town anyways. I’ll be lucky to have any work in a week or so.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” said Ulga. “Fewer rats will just mean more mice, moles, shrews, and cockroaches. Katie was just telling me that the bats are getting to be a bit thick in the church again. Maybe you can help them with that! There’s always need for a good rat catcher in this town, even when there’s not many rats around.”

“I suppose,” Wipo replied. “Where are the boys?”

“They’re down at the market, making some money helping set up for the prince archbishop this afternoon. I heard he’s gonna tell what kind of chances we have with this siege. Katie said he’s been desperately talking to everyone: Pastor Matti, the city council, the deacons, the armies... everyone. I don’t know what’s going to happen.”

“What’s going to happen is that we’re going to be attacked. No matter who wins, we lose. I’d say we’d be lucky to still be alive, but I’m not sure we’ll be lucky at all when there’s nothing but hunger, homelessness, disease, and destruction to be alive in.”

“It might not be that bad,” said Ulga, bringing Wipo some stew.

“It will be,” he said, swirling his spoon through the bowl without eating. “The mayor sold us out.”

“I’m sorry he said those things to you. It wasn’t right.”

“No, it’s not just me. When I was working in city hall at the end of the summer, I was hiding out in a basement room that the rats like. It’s full of paper and boxes and plenty of things for them to chew on. It was the morning, so some sunlight was coming in. I started reading some of the papers. It was receipts from the money the mayor got for signing that treaty. Did you know he used that money to buy a hunting cabin in the woods? And to get new furniture for his house, fancy winter coats from Munich, and porcelain from Meissen? Meanwhile, we got one Summerfest and a war on our hands.” He continued to stir his soup absently.

“I hardly believe that, Wipo. The mayor has done nothing but make Hurtzburg a great place all his years.”

“I may not be a smart book-learning man like your new best friends Pastor Matti and Katie,” said Wipo, “but I can read. I can add numbers. I’ve seen it.”

“Someone should know about this, Wipo,” Ulga said, sitting down next to him.

“Know what? All there is to know is that we’re slowly starving—down to rationing church grain, for God’s sake—and are about to be attacked by two powerhouse armies that hate each other and don’t care about us.”

“Still. Someone should know.”

“Why? I loved that man. I admired him. He made me feel good about my work and my hometown and our life here. And he was a crook. It was all a lie. So what does that make me? A fool? An accomplice?”

“It makes you a rat catcher, dear,” Ulga said, suddenly swelling with a new sense of pride. “You caught the rat that was trying to eat away our home!”

“The rat got away with it, and now it’s too late.”

“It’s not too late,” said Ulga. “The mayor has been hiding away sick, so they say. Mrs. Dunkruger has been making plans with the archbishop about what to do next. Probably just lining her own pockets so she can make her own getaway. But it’s not over yet, Wipo. Come to the town meeting with me.”

“I don’t want to. You saw what happened last time.”

“This time will be different. Eat, and then let’s go. The boys will be there. You can make them proud.”

At this, Wipo sat up, stared into Ulga’s face. A couple tears started to flow from the corners of his eyes. “You think I can really make a difference? You think we can make things right?”

“I don’t know what will happen, but I know you’re a hero. You’re the rat catcher of Hurtzburg, and this town is lucky to have you.”

“I’m lucky to have you,” said Wipo.

“Not lucky,” said Ulga. “Blessed.”

Chapter 30: Battle Plans

Once again, the town square was full of people. This time they were not celebrating as at Summerfest or being surprised by a military draft as they were the week before. This time everyone in town knew that they were coming to hear pure, unadulterated bad news.

Wearing the secular attire of the nobility instead of his church robes, His Royal Grace the Prince Archbishop Gotthilf the Third of Bumblestedt and surroundings gingerly made his way up the step to the stage in front of city hall, assisted by Brother Heinz, who promptly disappeared back into the crowd once the archbishop was secure at his makeshift podium.

“People of Hurtzburg,” he said to this sad, silent, and yet curious assembly. “I am sorry I have not been here more. I am sorry that religion, distance, and apathy has made me a stranger to you. And yet, in the mysteries of His infinite wisdom, the Lord has joined us together now. I had not imagined that my last days might be spent as a guest in the modest inn of a Protestant town, but I do not regret it. I am glad to be with you, come what may.

“Here is the situation. Duke Elmer of Immerunterwasserfeld, representing the elector of Brandenburg, is prepared to invade this town to take what he needs to continue his march to the south. Imperial forces to the southeast of town are also prepared to invade Hurtzburg to punish it for making a treaty with a Protestant prince and an enemy of his royal majesty, the Holy Roman Emperor. They will then reclaim this land for the Church of Rome and insist that I

impose religious conformity upon you all, something that neither I nor my predecessors have thought wise or necessary, lo, these many generations.

“With the advice and consent of the mayor and city council, especially as mediated through Mrs. Mayor Dunkruger in her husband’s illness, I therefore recommend that we surrender immediately.”

“Surrender to who?” yelled a voice from the crowd.

“That’s the problem, friends,” said the prince archbishop. “If we surrender to Brandenburg, then the imperial army will likely attack. If we surrender to the emperor, then Brandenburg will attack. Even so, Mrs. Dunkruger has assured me that a deal can be arranged with both sides, which will prevent our destruction.”

“Will she get another hunting lodge out of this deal, too?” yelled Wipo.

“What’s that?” asked the archbishop.

Wipo made his way to the stage, until he stood on the ground in front of the archbishop’s podium.

“The mayor and his buddies on the council got rich from their deal with Brandenburg. I’ve seen the receipts in the town hall basement. The Dunkrugers bought some land in the country and other luxuries with it. The other city council members did the same. I’m not going to trust any deal that any Dunkruger makes ever again.”

“Narcissa, is this true?” the archbishop asked, surprised that he couldn’t find the tall woman in the crowd. Not seeing her, he looked down again at Wipo.

“And what is your name, sir?”

“I’m Wipo Rattenfläger. I love my town. I love keeping rats and other pea-brained critters from spoiling what’s good about it. The biggest rats of all, though, were the ones right in front of us: the mayor and his cronies. And I’m afraid I’m too late to save what they’ve spoiled.”

“Oh, dear,” said the archbishop. “I’m not sure how this changes our situation, but it certainly has turned my understanding of things upside down.” Scanning the crowd again, he said, “Has no one seen Narcissa? Councilman Obermueller? Anyone?” The prince archbishop had been prepared to die in this little town, but now he felt as if his companions in the fiery furnace had just proven themselves to be faithless. He felt lost, standing there with no plan for how to go forward.

Just then, Pastor Mathesius stepped onto the platform. Seeing his fellow cleric in distress, he tapped the archbishop on the shoulder and whispered, “If I may, Your Grace.” The prince archbishop stepped back and yielded the floor.

“I’m not from here,” he began, more awkwardly than he would have liked. “My wife and I arrived just about a year ago, uncertain how we would fit into your quiet town. Many of you have been exceedingly kind and welcoming, but we still don’t know how well we fit in here. I was called here to preach the gospel of Christ, and I’m not sure how well I’m doing at that, either. So I have no idea what you’ll think of this next, very unreligious, suggestion of mine, but please listen.” Looking down, Pastor Matti took courage from the expectation he saw on the face of Wipo in front of him.

“Last week, the mayor asked for a volunteer army. In my view, you rightly refused to be drafted into a war that was not of your own making, against your own interests. Today, however, I suggest that you become a fighting force, that we become our own battalion. If these forces lined against us want our blood no matter what, then we will offer it. We will not

run from our home. We will defend it with our lives. We don't have soldiers, cannons, or swords. We don't even have a town wall to provide the slightest protection. But I propose that everyone—man, woman, child, and, yes, even this clergyman—gather on the field of battle between the two armies tomorrow. You can bring a weapon if you have one, or a farm tool, a kitchen knife, or just your bare hands. We remember that David vanquished the giant Goliath with just a rock and a slingshot. Even if such victory is not ours, then we will still stand there and force these armies to kill us in the open, if they dare."

The crowd stood silent. They had been expecting bad news. They had not been expecting their pastor to march them into the field like lambs to the slaughter.

"I'm with you, Pastor," said Wipo.

"Me, too," yelled the big men from the tavern.

"Us, too," said several women.

Slowly, the will of the people became clear. Some would stay in their homes, tending to children and the elderly, while preparing for the battle to come to them. Others would form an army, standing up for their lives and the lives of their family, friends, and neighbors against and between two of the most advanced and ruthless military forces the world had ever seen.

"Please send messages to both armies that we will fight them in the morning," Pastor Matti said to the prince archbishop.

"Yes, Pastor," he replied.

Addressing the people again, the pastor said, "I will lead a prayer service at the church tonight. I will see you on the field outside of town tomorrow morning. Peace be upon you. Amen." Pastor Matti stepped off the stage, somewhat amused that he didn't know how to end any public address with anything other than an amen.

He found Katie, who hugged him, and said, "I wasn't ready for this, but it feels right."

"I know," he said, recalling a psalm. "God is our refuge and strength."

"A present help in times of trouble," said Katie, finishing the line.

Chapter 31: The Battle of Hurtzburg

After worship, Ulga, Wipo, and their boys stayed in the guestroom of the parsonage. Katie didn't want the pregnant Ulga to be alone. Combinations of fear, love, grief, confusion, and lust led to the rolling of many hay beds, both in the parsonage and across town. Unable to sleep much as the night wore on, Pastor Matti gave Katie a kiss goodbye, got dressed in his graveside burial clothes, and went to make tea in the muted blue and green predawn light.

He was joined by Wipo and Einer a short while later. Einer quietly sipped his tea, a simple boy wondering why his life and the lives of so many others was often so short. Wipo, however, was feeling bold. In a voice almost too loud for the time of day, he said, "I haven't stepped foot in this parsonage since I was Einer's age, making my confirmation. Pastor Altmann would invite us here for toast and jam while we finished some of our lessons in the winter when the schoolhouse was too cold. I never figured I'd spend the last night of my life here."

"We don't know if it's the last," said Pastor Matti.

"Probably will be," said Wipo. "But I'm with my Einer, and I know Ulga is in good hands."

They sat in silence, until Wipo said again, "Back then, the war was new. We thought it was noble: fighting for God and country. But the war never peaked and ended, it just peaked

and plateaued. It got to be where we stopped caring about it, cursed the other side for not quitting, and got used to a world where war and disease could take anyone at any time. I can't believe it took so long for the war to reach us here. I used to think it was the mayor that kept the war away. But now I see he's the fool who invited it. And where is he now? Sick in bed? We're all sick and about to be sicker. I wish that me and the whole town had had the sense to keep away from his nonsense. He and the council weren't thinking about us. They were little tyrants, envious of the big tyrants at the top who keep the war going by paying for it with other people's blood." Patting Einer on the shoulder, he said, "Sorry I let you down, son."

"That's okay, Papa. We're doing what we can today," the boy replied. They ate bread, butter, and smoked sausage in silence. They walked out the door, past the church and cemetery, and down the gentle slope of the lane into town. Wipo and Einer carried clubs they used in their rat catching work. Pastor Matti prayed all the way, carrying nothing but his faith and the prayer book. Wipo held Einer's hand, head held high, taking in the air and morning light of his hometown. As they walked, they were joined by fellow citizens. Some brought swords and knives, others had pitchforks and harvesting blades. A couple people owned muskets with pouches of gunpowder. Pastor Matti figured they were more likely to blow up in their own faces with it rather than those of their enemies.

The group continued to grow in numbers as they made their way down the hill into town, pausing for a moment at the market square to give people a chance to catch up and congregate. Pastor Matti saw the prince archbishop, who beckoned him over. Wearing his robes for morning prayer, the archbishop said, "My son, I'm sorry I haven't known you and that we find ourselves in this position as relative strangers. I want you to know that I am praying for you and your people. I thank God that you have been called to serve in this place at this time. The Holy Spirit goes with you."

"Thank you, Father," Pastor Matti said.

"And keep praying for that miracle," the prince archbishop smiled.

"Yes, Father. God bless you, too."

Pastor Matti returned to the group, an assembly that now included the big men from town, women with kitchen knives (including a few of the church ladies from Katie's Sunday afternoon group), boys and girls as young as Einer, and grandparents ready to give their last for the ones they loved. As dawn was cresting over the hills to the east, he found Wipo at the head of the pack. "Hurtzburg! Move out!" Wipo called. They walked through the lower end of town, waved on by people remaining in their houses getting ready for whatever might come next. As Hurtzburg's ad hoc militia passed the mayor's house, many noticed it was dark. Some hissed and cursed as they went by. No one noticed Ingrid Dunkruger slipping out a back door and joining the group, armed with her favorite kitchen knives.

They stopped in the field on the outskirts of town, where the town's main north-south road met the highway leading to the armies on either side of them. Pastor Matti found that the church organist had brought his trumpet. They decided to play first one verse of a hymn and then to announce the battle with a fanfare. After that, they would await the onslaught of their enemies: the Brandenburgers from the northwest and the imperial army from the southeast. The Hurtzburg army readied itself by forming rows of a circle facing outward, with Pastor Matti and the church musician in the middle.

Wipo was leading the group faced to the northwest. Big Jörg and his friends from the pub led the group facing the rising sun to the east. The hymn was played and many sang along. The fanfare blew and the people of Hurtzburg waited.

A minute passed. Then another. The trumpet sounded again. But no moment came from either direction.

"If they will not come to us, we will go to them!" Wipo yelled.

"Let's sing again, one more time together," Matti said. The trumpeter played the hymn, neighbors said their goodbyes, and the people of Hurtzburg parted ways.

Cautiously and bravely, Wipo's group followed the highway up the ridge that separated Hurtzburg's little valley from the next one. As they walked through the woods at the top of the hill, Pastor Matti found it surprising that a professional army would be ambushing a citizen militia in the dark, but even that ambush never came. Now descending the hill, they started to see the lights of a camp, but still there was no attack.

Pitchforks, knives, swords, and muskets at the ready, the people of Hurtzburg entered the camp. They heard nothing but a few moans coming from some of the tents. Stopping just inside the edge of the camp, they waited in confusion. A well-dressed man was walking towards them, himself unarmed and unphased by the sight of a village mob.

"Are you the army we were supposed to fight?!" he called out. "You're beautiful! Your energy is so strong: I see blues and greens and purples."

"Where is your commander?" asked Wipo.

"Dying of the plague," said the man calmly.

"Where is your army?"

"I'm right here."

"The rest of them?"

"If they don't have the plague, then they're in their tents with limbs that are turning green, shitting themselves like mad. If they don't have the plague or the green fire, then they probably ran away."

"That's the ergotism... the spoiled grain," young Jacob Becker whispered to Pastor Matti.

"What about you?" the pastor asked Lorentz.

"Me? I'm having visions of heaven. Everything is the way it should be. You're all just so beautiful," said Lorenz Laurentius, starting to cry with joy.

"That's the spoiled grain, too," said Jacob. "Mass hallucinations."

Wipo turned to Pastor Matti. "Let's check it out."

"Yes, but if this place is full of the plague, we'll need to be careful."

"I know how to stay away from the rats," Wipo replied, patting his club.

"Of course you do," said Matti. He still wasn't sure the plague worked that way, but he wasn't about to say so now.

"Hurtzburgers!" the pastor yelled. "It seems our adversaries are either sick or hallucinating."

"Please don't talk so loud," Lorenz said quietly. Matti continued.

"This army has been touched by the plague, so do not touch their tents, skin, or clothing. We can come back with medical help for them later. For now, though, let's each grab as many of their weapons as we can carry, so that they're not tempted to use them against us when they start to feel better."

"I wouldn't hurt you," said Lorenz to Pastor Matti. "We're all one. Don't you know that?"

Lorenz gazed back at the faces of the villagers increasingly illuminated by the morning light. "I can hear your heartbeats," he said. "I can see your heartbeats filling the air with color and sound. The heartbeats of people in love with each other and the world."

Despite his loving demeanor, the people of Hurtzburg kept their distance from Lorenz, afraid of catching whatever spiritual or physical diseases he might have. They dispersed themselves around him, continuing to look for weapons to take back to town. Lorenz found himself getting worried that people were leaving him. Why were the beautiful people afraid of him? Tears, which had earlier come from joy, now came from loneliness and fear. And then he saw her.

"It's you!" he yelled. "Beautiful you, the damsel in distress!" Ingrid did not know why this raving soldier had singled her out, so she stood still.

Lorenz continued. "Please help me, kind lady, for like you, I too am a damsel in distress, a clown in regress, a fool in excess, a stool in egress, a full pool of cess. Help me! I'll take you to my castle."

"You have a castle?" Ingrid asked.

"No, but my friend Willy-Fritz does."

"Are you the prince's jester?" said Ingrid, recalling things her mother had told her about the group from Brandenburg.

"Yes. I am his fool. I am *the* fool. I am earth's fool. I am such a fool. I want to be *your* fool."

"You live in Berlin. Is it pretty?"

"Not especially. But the river's nice, the parks are great, the food is incredible, and there are lots of places to go dancing."

"Come with me, Fool," said Ingrid. "My mother always wanted me to run away with a soldier. You are definitely not what she meant, which makes you even better. Let's see if we can help get you and some of your other visionary friends to a quiet place where you can sleep this off."

"Thank you, my lady!" said Lorenz. "Thank you for saving this damsel in distress. I have been in so much distress! You and your army of beautiful souls have saved me. I am surrounded by their heartbeats. All is well."

Chapter 32: The Peace of Hurtzburg

To his most serene Imperial Majesty, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation,
and to his illustrustrius Majesty, the Elector of Brandenburg-Prussia,
From your most devoted servant, Prince Archbishop Gotthilf III of Bumblestedt and Surroundings,
Grace and peace to you in the name of Christ. Amen.

The recent victory of my local army, raised purely for self-defense, against each of your forces has won us great renown in every part of Europe. It has also gained us the following concessions from your respective representatives.

First, your soldiers—those who remain after the war and its related cases of desertion, bubonic plague, and the gangrene and hallucinations caused by ergotism derived from the defective foodstuffs you provided them—are being released back to your care. Neither the Prince Archbishopric of Bumblestedt nor the City of Hurtzburg are responsible for their maintenance. Any disturbances they cause locally will not be reserved for military courts but will be punished by local civil jurisdictions.

Next, claims from either of you upon the Prince Archbishopric of Bumblestedt or the City of Hurtzburg are hereby considered null and void. All religious and secular rights of both the Prince Archbishopric and the City of Hurtzburg shall be restored to status quo ante, in perpetuity. Treaties or declarations made in the past year by one or more of these parties are similarly declared null and void. They are dead letters.

Third, neither the Prince Archbishopric of Bumblestedt nor the City of Hurtzburg will be party to further international armed conflicts. These lands will remain free examples to godliness, peace, reason, and the rule of law. Should any larger power attempt to overtake us by force, we will—again—plead to the Lord to hear our case, who will once again deliver us. Be thee warned. “The Lord is our refuge and strength,” etc.

Humbly submitted,
His Royal Grace, the Prince Archbishop Gotthilf III of Bumblestedt, etc., etc.
Signed in the presence of
General Helmut von Burgenberg, on behalf of his Imperial Majesty,
Herr Lorentz Laurentius, esquire, envoy of his Majesty, the Elector of
Brandenburg-Prussia,
and,
Herr Wipo Rattenfläger, commander of the victorious Army of Hurtzburg

Chapter 33: The Ways of the Righteous

In the dark of their stuffy meeting chamber, the city council members gathered once again, trying to pretend that they had not been found guilty of conspiracy and embezzlement. They had paid their fines, made public apologies both in church and in the market square, and been promptly re-installed into their offices. No one in town could imagine anyone other than the previous city council members serving as future city council members.

“I am about to return to Bumblestedt,” said the prince archbishop from the head of the table. “My time here has greatly changed me. I care more about you Protestants than I ever

thought possible. I also will pay better attention to your local governance. Without infringing on your historic rights, I will not leave you orphaned. For as many years as I have left, you will be hearing from me and seeing me with greater frequency.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” said Pastor Matii.

“Most of you have been found guilty of betraying the public trust,” the archbishop continued. “You have paid your debts, but neither I nor your fellow Hurtzburgers will fully trust you again. That goes for you, too, Mayor Dunkruger.”

“I know, your Royal Grace,” said the mayor.

“As the first psalm tells us, there is a difference between those who sit the seats of scoffers and those who follow the way of the righteous. I pray you remember the distinction in your future service.”

“Yes, your Grace,” said the mayor.

“Herr Rattenfläger?” call the archbishop, struggling to make out faces in the room’s dim light.

“Here, your Grace,” said Wipo.

“Although you are the newest at-large member of the city council, your work is the most Important of all. You have been a faithful rat catcher and protector of this city. In a way, you will continue to serve in that capacity as auditor, making sure that these fellows do not fall into their old ways and abuse their authority. Before, we called you Herr Rattenfläger. Maybe now we shall call you Herr Bürgerbeauftragter, Mr. Ombudsman. That has a nice ring to it, too.”

“I think I’ll stick with Rattenfläger, sir.”

“Very well, dear man.” The old prince archbishop smiled at Wipo, before getting serious again and turning to the mayor sitting next to him.

“Mayor Dunkruger,” he said.

“Yes, your Grace,” said the mayor.

“You and your husband took extravagant advantage of your status in this town, leading it nearly to war and ruin.”

“I know,” said Narcissa.

“You only retain your leadership because Wipo refused to take the position as long as a Dunkruger was around to lead.”

“I know,” Narcissa said again. “Thank you for your confidence, Wipo.”

“You’re welcome, Mrs. Dunkruger. Everyone makes mistakes. How is Mr. Dunkruger today?”

“He said goodbye to Ingrid and Lorenz this morning, but I don’t think he understood that she was leaving for good. He just smiled and waved as his little girl eloped to a distant land with an almost total stranger.”

“She’ll be all right,” said Wipo. “I met that fellow the first time he came, and he was a perfect gentleman.”

“But a court jester?”

“Sometimes the fools are the only ones who see the truth, ma’am. And Ingrid has enough common sense for the both of ‘em anyways.”

Narcissa sighed. Her family was disgraced. Something in her husband had snapped just before the war started. He could go through the motions on the outside, but any hint of his former strength was gone. Without Ingrid, she would be part-time mayor and part-time

caretaker for an infirm spouse. While people remained superficially respectful and friendly to her, she could tell that they looked down on her and Moritz. It would be a long climb back to her queendom. But she would get there.

“Thank you, Wipo. Thank you, Archbishop,” said Narcissa, returning to business. “Before Your Royal Grace leaves, I hope you can stay to hear our plan for rebuilding our grain supplies, providing fair working conditions for mill employees, and reimbursing the church for the grain reserves that sustained us through the siege.”

“Indeed,” said the archbishop. “Brother Heinz, please prepare my carriage. I will hear these reports and then be on my way.”

Epilogue: Wednesday Morning Preaching Service, the First Week of Advent

The preacher finished reading the gospel and said, “The Word of the Lord.”

“Praise to You, O Christ,” said the collection of grandparents, retired farmers, mothers, and shopkeepers on break who made up most of the Wednesday morning congregation.

“The evangelist has told us to be prepared for the coming of the Lord,” said the preacher. “To be like the wise bridesmaids who kept their lamps filled with oil and not like the foolish ones who were not prepared to wait patiently.

“Naturally, it is better to be ready than not. And it is better to seek the Lord than to forget Him. But the question for us is why: Why do we have to wait at all? In our times of trial and need, where is God?

“As the Apostle told the Athenians, ‘the Lord desires to be sought and reached for, though He is not far from any of us.’ The Lord is near.”

“And where is this Lord who is so near? Even when we fear His absence, he is in the wonders of creation, sustaining life through the power of the Holy Spirit one day at a time. He is in the love shared between neighbors. He is in the risen souls of our dear ones in the cemetery next to us. Indeed, He is in our own souls, leading us through the struggles of this life into the glories of the next.

“In short, my brothers and sisters, there is no doubt where our saving Lord is and where we can look for him. And, as Christ said in the Sermon on the Mount, when we seek, we will find. He is in acts of kindness in a cruel world. He is in moments of peace in times of warfare. He is in the broken cries of our hearts in the dark of night, just as he cried from the cross in his time of abandonment. In that cry, he sanctified even forsakenness and despair. In his suffering and death, he sanctified our pain and death. In the moment he lost everything, he gave us everything, because his death is the death of death. It is life for us.

“We wait for the Lord, knowing that God has gone before us, goes with us, and walks ahead of us. We are never alone. We are His and we are one with each other in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

The preacher sat down. After a time of silence, the organist led the congregation in a favorite Advent hymn. A deacon led the prayers and the congregation was dismissed. Ulga waited for the Sunday afternoon church ladies to greet the preacher on their way out before she went to pay her respects, too. Several months pregnant, she slid her way through the pews and carefully joined the line of well-wishers.

When it was her turn, she hugged the preacher and said, "That was a great message, Katie. I'm so proud of you. God goes behind us, ahead of us, and with us. I loved it. Thank you."

"I'm so glad you were here, Ulga. It meant so much to me to see you. I was very nervous for my first sermon."

"You did great. I'm so glad the deacons went along with Pastor Matti's idea. How is he?"

"He seems fine. I got a letter from Bumblefeldt yesterday. He'll be back in time for Sunday services, after he finishes his meetings with the Prince Archbishop and Superintendent Bibfeldt."

"What are they talking about?"

"I don't know. Peace, love, and the common good, I imagine. What else is there?"