

# THE ROAD TO RUS'



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Michael Hnatyshyn



## FOREWORD

Obviously when writing historical fiction, the author has a lot of leeway to play with the facts and weave the story to better fit his narrative. My main objective when writing this book was to stick as closely to actual events as possible. This proved to be a gargantuan task as there really is not a wealth of information on most of the historical characters involved. A lot of historians also disagree about many of the events and they have been interpreted many different ways. I have added my interpretation after doing an exhaustive amount of research.

I pulled bits and pieces of actual historical events from many different parts of the ninth century world and tried to tie them together plausibly. The main event, so to speak, is the invasion of Constantinople in the year 860. There is also discrepancy here as well, as the Primary Chronicle lists it as happening in the year 865, but most other sources date it as 860 and that seemed to be the most accurate date. There is also a lot of discrepancy about one of the main characters Hoskuldr or as I have named him Askoldir. Some historians say he was two people, and yet others say he never existed. I added my own interpretation that I believe to be as plausible, if not more so, than the others.

The period was confusing and I tried to let that show in the story as well. There will be many unfamiliar names of places, days, months and many date-specific and language-specific terms. I tried to explain them as best as possible within the story but also added an appendix listing all of them to try and ease the confusion. I did

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want to use them, however, so the reader can get a feel for the period and maybe learn a little in the process.

This period of history has always intrigued me and I have dreamed of writing a book about it my entire life. Now, I can finally say I have done so. A huge thanks to: my wife Iryna for putting up with me and my mountain of books and papers; my editor Toni for pointing out my errors and reinforcing the idea that I should have paid more attention in English class; and to my good friend Paul for designing the cover.

I hope you enjoy the tale.

## Spring 858

While most people he knew believed everything was a result of the will of the gods, Vratymyr was more pragmatic and believed everything happened for a reason. That is not to say that Vratymyr discounted the will of the gods or their importance, but he also believed that men had a say in their destinies and that destiny forged their actions.

Destiny had been both kind and cruel to Vratymyr. He was born into a lineage of leaders yet denied the opportunity to continue his bloodline. At first he thought it was his wife that was barren, but eventually he realized it was he who was chosen by the gods not to father any children. Prior to his marriage he was not celibate by any means, and he had also made several attempts to sire a child after his wife had died from illness several years ago. If he could not continue his bloodline, he would at least concentrate on making sure his people would prosper after his passing to the next world.

He paced laboriously, contemplating how events would unfold as he adjusted the belt clasped at his waist over his simple tunic. Vratymyr, though a leader of his people, did not try to separate himself from them too much. He believed he should understand them in order to command them. If the people did not respect him or believe in him, he felt that there would be no reason for them to follow him.

Vratymyr ran his hand through his shoulder-length hair. It shone like wet clay bristling against his broad shoulders as he paced through the courtyard of his meager stead. He had not seen the need to have a large

pompous dwelling but preferred simplicity. After all, he had no family left and did not need much space. Maybe it was better this way, he thought to himself. Without a family, he could dedicate all his effort to governing. He did miss his wife Myrusha though. She had been a good wife and a good friend. She was also a sister to his friend and Kniaz' of the Siverians, Yaropolk.

He remembered her passing as if it were yesterday, though five summers had passed. Myrusha had returned from gathering mushrooms in the woods with a small cut on her ankle. It was an innocent looking cut but the next morning her leg ached and she began to vomit. Her body burned with fever and her skin became blotchy. She could not even sit up in her bed, and everything she tried to eat was regurgitated almost immediately in a fit of coughing. Local healers tried everything from hot drinks with herbs to herbal poultices. Nothing helped. A day later, she was gone. In her fevered delirious state, he could not even wish her a proper goodbye. He rubbed the back of his fist against the corner of his eye as he felt a tear forming. He would not let his people share the same fate. No, they would not die while he stood around feeling helpless.

The Greeks had always been distrustful of the traders from the north, and dealings with them had always been difficult, though prosperous. But this time they had gone too far. The news that Gunnar and Stoyan brought from Tsargrad was disturbing, and he knew that in the coming months there would have to be great changes if his tribe was to survive and prosper.

Vratymyr hoped the representatives from the other Slavic tribes would arrive soon so that he could put his plan into action. Though there had been some cooperation amongst the tribes lately, once again their

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differences had given rise to bickering and raids of each other's holdings that benefitted no one. Over the last several decades, Kyiv had grown into a bustling trade town controlled by the Polians, though they still had to pay tribute to the Khazar Khagan. While the Khazars did not have many soldiers stationed in Kyiv, only if the tribes united could they rid themselves of these overlords.

The Khazar Khagan Zacharias had recently converted to Judaism and was trying to instill this religion throughout his entire empire. Though a small portion had converted, there were still many uprisings among the worshipers of the old gods; there were those that worshipped the god of the Arabs, as well as those that followed the Roman god. Zacharias was tolerant of other religions but the worshipers of these other religions were not always as tolerant as the Khagan himself. The time to challenge the Khazar authority in Kyiv was now. Most of the population of Kyiv was Polian, though there was still a sizeable garrison of Khazar warriors at the customs house in Podol. Podol had become a thriving neighborhood of traders. It was not uncommon to see Varyags, Khazars and Bolghars among the indigenous Slavic Polians bartering their wares.

Vratymyr had been the Polian Kniaz' for several years now and had seen his tribe grow and flourish these last twenty years. His grandfather had lived quite a long life, but his father died at a young age and Vratymyr became the leader of his people at the young age of twenty-five. The neighboring Khazars to the southeast and the Varyag Rus to the north referred to their rulers as Khagans, but the Slavs preferred using the term Kniaz'.



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Bronislav, Vratymyr's grandfather, used to tell him stories of how their ancestor Kyi who was the son of a Khazar Khagan and a Slavic woman founded the city of Kyiv. That had been about three hundred years ago and the names of Kyi's parents had long been forgotten by time. Whether Grandfather's tales were true, Vratymyr did not know, but they made for a great story while hunting. Vratymyr smiled as he recalled his grandfather's raspy voice. He could hear him recounting the story of the mighty Kyi with his brothers Shchek and Khoryv. "They founded Kyiv, naming it in honor of Kyi and believed it would one day be the greatest city the world had ever seen. The hills of Shchekovytsia and Khorovytsia are the burial mounds of Kyi's brothers," Bronislav would say, pointing at them. "And Lybed', which still is a tributary of the mighty Dnipro, was named in honor of their sister of legendary beauty. Her hair flowed like the gentle waters on a calm summer's day, shimmering, as they reflected the light of the sun."

Vratymyr missed his grandfather's stories but both Bronislav, as well as Vratymyr's father, Sviatoslav, were long gone, and the Polians were now his responsibility. He was determined to help his people survive and thrive.

The image of his father and grandfather quickly faded as he heard a ruckus outside. Vratymyr jumped to his feet and rushed out to see several riders dismounting.

"Kniaz'," one of his guards said. "The Siverian delegation has arrived."

Vratymyr immediately recognized the massive Yaropolk with his long, flowing, rustycolor hair and beard.

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"I can see that. It's not possible to miss such a mountain of a man unless you are blind." Vratymyr smiled, glad to see his old friend.

The Siverians were masters of the territories just east and northeast of the Polians, and Vratymyr had known Yaropolk for many years, coming to trust him as a friend and close confidant. They had gone on several expeditions together and had built a good relationship amongst first themselves and later their tribes. Later, Vratymyr married Yaro's sister, so they were family as well. Vratymyr knew that of all the people that were to be present, Yaropolk would be the easiest to convince to agree to his plan.

"Perun be praised," Yaropolk exclaimed as he dismounted. "It is good to see you."

"And you as well," replied Vratymyr as the larger Yaropolk grabbed him in a massive bear hug. "You are looking more and more like Perun every day," he laughed.

"Careful he doesn't hear you, Vratymyr," exclaimed Yaropolk, "or he may strike us both down with a bolt of lightning from the sky." Yaropolk was much more superstitious than Vratymyr, though his belief in the gods had its limits as well. Yaropolk did however believe that Perun guided his arm and gave him strength in battle. Knowing Yaropolk's strength Vratymyr somehow did not doubt this. He once saw Yaropolk split a birch clean in half from twenty paces with a massive throwing axe.

"What is so urgent that you had me ride all the way here from my cozy home? You know how tired my poor Zoryan gets, having to carry me all the way here," the massive warrior said as he petted his horse's cheek in consolation. The muscular horse snorted as if he were agreeing with the big man.

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"Let's wait till the others arrive so I do not have to repeat myself, but I believe you will see the urgency of the news Gunnar and Stoyan have brought from Tsargrad."

Tsargrad was the name the Slavs had given Constantinople since they began sending emissaries there twenty years ago and opened up trade with the Empire. Most trade with the Romans had been conducted along the Volga river route but with the arrival of the Varyags from the North and the establishment of their outposts in Ladoga, Gorodishche and Polotesk, a new route was created along the Dnipro River. Kyiv was slowly becoming a more important hub along this route. The Slavs also called the Romans Greeks, because they all spoke Greek and it seemed like the natural thing to call them.

"Very well," bellowed Yaropolk. "In the meantime then let's fill my belly so I don't starve."

"I'll see what we can muster up, though if the others don't get here soon I'm sure you'll eat and drink me out of my entire stock." Vratymyr laughed.

"Don't you worry, if you run out I'll go and see what the Khazars have down by the docks," Yaropolk said as he grinned and tapped his axe handle with his thick-fingered hand. "They've always got enough to feed three armies with all the tributes they collect."

Vratymyr signaled, and one of his retainers quickly began setting the table in the hall.

"And make sure you bring some mead," Yaropolk boomed as loud as he could to make sure the servant heard him. Yaropolk was quite fond of the mead the Polians brewed using the sweet, thick honey of their bees. Its intoxicating qualities made him feel as if he could take on an entire army. "An elixir from the gods," he would say.

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Soon Yaropolk was able to gorge himself on a feast of buckwheat pancakes and pies stuffed with fish and vegetables. As he was draining the last of the mead on the table, Vratymyr informed him that the rest of the guests had arrived. "Bohuslav from the Derevlans is here and a rider from the Krivichs arrived yesterday who said that Brachislav is indisposed and will not attend. I have heard nothing from the Radimichs."

The Derevlans, thought Vratymyr, would be hard to convince. They were constantly warring with the Polians, but Vratymyr believed that the more tribes he could consolidate to his cause the greater their chance of success. He would have to be careful and see how Bohuslav reacted to the news before revealing anything further of his plans to him. The Derevlans were probably the most xenophobic and proudest of the Slavic tribes. Bohuslav was also probably the most superstitious of the tribal leaders. He would let the gods and not reason guide his actions, or at least he would convince himself that his actions were the same ones the gods would have taken had they been in his position. While Vratymyr had heard some crazy stories about the gods, he doubted any of the gods could be as crazy as Bohuslav.

Slowly everyone gathered in the hall. Vratymyr instructed the servants to bring refreshments for his guests and then to leave and not disturb them unless it was the gravest of emergencies.

The hall, while not grand by any means, served its function well as a gathering place for this meeting. It was sunken into the earth and constructed of timber insulated with mud and clay to keep out the cold.

Gunnar and Stoyan soon joined Vratymyr and Yaropolk in the hall. Gunnar was almost as massive as Yaropolk but had golden hair and a very long beard. He

had been trading with the Slavs and had served as a Varyag emissary to Tsargrad for the last twenty years. During this time, he had learned the Slavic language, Greek, a smattering of Latin and enough Arabic words to get by with their traders.

Stoyan looked almost scrawny next to Gunnar though he was not a small man by any means. His weathered, clean-shaven face and chiseled muscles showed that he too was no stranger to the road and to dealing with danger. Stoyan had been on several dozen trading and diplomatic expeditions with Gunnar over the last ten years. Stoyan was a Polian like Vratymyr, and Vratymyr trusted him to represent his interests in foreign lands. Stoyan, like Gunnar, had picked up several languages during his embassies and trade missions.

The last to enter the hall was Bohuslav. Bohuslav was not a big man but it was obvious that he was no stranger to battle. His face, scarred in several places was missing an eye from what must have been a vicious cut from an axe or sword. His remaining eye seemed to dart from one side to the other, as if compensating for the lack of peripheral vision. He carried his helmet in his hand and refused to part with it.

"Welcome to our hall," Vratymyr said to Bohuslav as eloquently as he could manage given their history.

"With Stribog's wind at my back I have come, though I see not what is so urgent that I need be here," blurted Bohuslav, clearly not at all happy to be there.

"Perhaps you will see that the reason is an important one once Gunnar and Stoyan tell their tale. As you know from my messenger they have recently arrived from Tsargrad and bring news that I felt important to share with all the tribes in person," Vratymyr explained.

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"We shall see," Bohuslav replied. "Let us get on with this. May Dazhbog give you the gift of telling this tale quickly so I can get out of this dung heap." Of all the gods Bohuslav liked to invoke, Dazhbog was his favorite. He was responsible for the sun rising and the giving of life.

Vratymyr sensed that Bohuslav would not make this easy. Most likely persuading him would be impossible, but he was determined to press on and see if he could convince him of the danger facing all the tribes.

"Very well," said Vratymyr. "Let us get on with this. Stoyan, let everyone hear what has transpired."

"I want to hear the tale from the Varyag," interjected Bohuslav. "I know Stoyan is your man and I wish to hear this tale from a neutral party."

"Very well. It matters not who tells the tale, simply that it is heard and its implications discussed," Vratymyr said with an exasperated tone. "Gunnar, would you like to proceed?"

Gunnar cleared his throat with the sound of a bellows coaxing a fire. "Forgive my Slavic as Stoyan is about as good a teacher of languages as I am a goldsmith." Yaropolk laughed heartily, but Vratymyr noticed that Bohuslav's expression did not change. He was obviously not amused by the remark. "As you know Stoyan and I returned from Tsargrad two weeks ago. As you also know, we were charged with returning a party of merchants from Tsargrad to Kyiv that were there on a trade mission from the Polians and Siverians. Unfortunately, those merchants were unable to return with us."

"What do you mean, unable to return?" Yaropolk asked, rising to his feet. "My son was supposed to

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return with them. This was his first mission to Tsargrad."

Vratymyr had no idea that Yaropolk's son had been with the merchants in Tsargrad and quickly interjected, "Yaro, sit down and let the man finish his tale. But you'd better have some more mead for you may not like what he has to say. Please continue, Gunnar."

Yaropolk sat and drained another clay pot full of mead.

"As I was saying, Stoyan and I went to Tsargrad to retrieve the merchants and to escort them back to Kyiv. As we dragged our ships ashore, the harbormaster told us that it might be a good idea if we turned around and returned from whence we came. When we asked why he simply said that all of their goods were confiscated and that they were executed for spying yesterday at noon."

Yaropolk leapt to his feet and screamed, "What? All of them? Executed? Spying? Have the Greeks lost their minds?" Yaropolk's face was beetroot red, and veins bulged at his temples. The clay pot in his fist shattered as he clenched it. He pulled his axe off his back and in one blow cleaved the massive oak table in two. Clay pots, other drinking vessels and bowls flew through the air in a crazed dance, whirring and spilling their contents everywhere as the table disintegrated beneath them. "I'll show them spying by burying my axe in their heads!"

Vratymyr quickly located an undisturbed vessel, poured Yaropolk some more mead and stuck it in his hand before he could do any more damage. "Yaro, please, I know this is hard but let the man finish. If I would have known Dushan was in the party, I would have let you know sooner."

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Yaropolk, obviously angry and distraught reluctantly sat down on the bench amidst the wreckage of the table still gripping his axe tightly with his meaty fingers until they turned purple. It seemed if he were to let go of the axe he would be lost.

Gunnar stared in amazement for a few seconds, wiped some stray liquid off his sleeve and continued, "While we were resupplying in the harbor we tried to piece together exactly what happened. Both Stoyan and I know several people who are willing to part with information for a price and we were able to deduce that the general feeling was that the Emperor's minions think they can do with the backwater peasants from the north as they please.

"We stayed as long as we thought we could without attracting too much attention, but were unable to find out what became of the bodies after the execution. Needless to say, we did not think that we should overstay our welcome and did not stick around lest we suffer the same fate."

"They will pay dearly for his," Yaropolk said in a surprisingly calm manner as if slowly accepting what had transpired. He pulled out a knife from his belt and made a small incision in his palm, allowing his bright red blood to flow forth and collect in his fist. He let several drops fall on the ground, then on the blade of his axe and proclaimed, "By my blood the Greeks will pay for this, this I swear on my blood and the blood of my ancestors as Perun is my witness."

Gunnar explained that the journey back was for the most part uneventful other than spotting a party of Magyar scouts while portaging their boats and supplies near one of the Dniipro cataracts. The Magyar party was small, however, and did not interfere with them. Gunnar and Stoyan were able to move on before they returned



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in force. After he concluded his tale, Gunnar took a seat. The rest of the room sat in silence.

Bohuslav was the first to speak. "So, you asked me to come all the way here to tell me a tale of how you lost some trade goods?"

"Is that all you think this is, Bohuslav?" countered Vratymyr. "You know very well that the Khazars and the Greeks have been strengthening their relations for some time now. This move shows that they are content with their trade routes along the Volga and may be trying to shut us out."

"What has that to do with me?" Bohuslav continued in a matter-of-fact tone. "You are the ones trading with the Greeks not us. We are quite content to live off the forest and not meddle in the affairs of the south."

"You may not want to meddle in the affairs of the south, Bohuslav, but they may very well want to meddle with you," replied Yaropolk. "What if this means the Khazars want to solidify their control over these lands and are planning a more serious expansion northward with the help of the Greeks? Without the trade routes, how are we to continue paying the tribute to the Khazar Khagan? What if this is a plot to get us to default on the tribute and to take a more active role in our territories?"

"Those are a lot of ifs," Bohuslav said. "I do not deal with ifs. If the Khazars and their Khagan want a piece of me and my tribe let them come to my forest and we will show them what a mistake that is. Until that time, we will continue to live as we have always lived and not meddle in the affairs of the south. It is not my affair that they demand a tribute of you and that you pay it, nor is it my affair that they kill your merchants. As long as they stay off my lands, they will not have any trouble from me, and the same goes for any of the tribes. The

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gods will continue to protect us and if they come Perun will strike them down with lightning from the sky."

Vratymyr realized that any hope of an alliance with Bohuslav was lost. He was a stubborn man, but he did care for his people. Perhaps staying out of it was best for them. It was probably best that Bohuslav not be a part of the alliance either. If Vratymyr's plan were to succeed he needed the alliance to be strong and not have unpredictable links.

Bohuslav got up and prepared to leave the hall.

"Will you at least stay till morning?" asked Vratymyr.

"I'd rather be on my way," Bohuslav replied quickly. "Your hall reeks of shit and cowardice."

The Slav Kniaz' noticed the fire in Yaropolk's eyes intensified as the Siverian began to rise from his seat. Vratymyr quickly placed all the weight he could muster on the big man's shoulder to keep him down. "Very well. I am sure your horses are ready by now."

The Derevlian leader stood, headed for the door and without saying another word was gone.

"And good riddance." Yaropolk sighed. "Nothing good ever came of dealing with that man. I don't know why you even asked him to come here."

"I had to try and see if he would listen to reason for once," Vratymyr countered. "As you have heard, these are not ordinary times and this development is most disturbing. If my fears are correct we will need all the allies we can muster."

Vratymyr asked the guards to bring in more refreshments and to find another table to replace the shattered remnants of the one in the hall. As soon as the mess in the hall was attended to and the servants brought in a new table and more food and drink,

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Vratymyr felt that he should continue, as there was much left to discuss.

"While it is a shame that representatives from all the tribes aren't here, I think that the Polians and Siverians make for a good start to my plan," Vratymyr stated as he raised his drinking vessel in Yaropolk's direction. "I am actually glad Bohuslav left in such a hurry. We can now get down to business without fear of my plan going any further than this hall. As I said earlier, I strongly believe the Khazars and Greeks are plotting to make us irrelevant by having the Khazars cut us off from trading with the south. This brazen accusation and murder of our people can only mean that this plot has been put into motion. They consider us weak. As divided tribes we may not be a match for either the Khazars or the Greeks. But if we were to form an alliance of the tribes, we could stand up to them. The Khazars believe we fear them so much that their tribute collectors and guards at the customs post here in Kyiv have grown quite comfortable and complacent. I believe it is time that they found out that they shall no longer grow fat off our labor. It is time for us to send them a message and to stop paying them tribute."

"What exactly are you suggesting?" Yaropolk asked as his eyes grew wider than the mighty Dnipro.

Vratymyr sensed that the time was right. "That we merge forces, starting with the Siverians and the Polians and drive the Khazars from our lands. We will start by taking control of the customs house in Kyiv and drive them out from the rest of our lands. We need to strike before they strengthen their presence here in the north and make it known that as long as they have any demands of us they are no longer welcome in our lands."

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Yaropolk did not think long. The murder of his son and the idea of no longer paying tribute to the Khazars made the decision an easy one.

"Agreed. May the gods look over this alliance favorably and help us drive the Khazars back to the sea," stated Yaropolk sternly as he took a deep drink.

"We will need all the gods' help and more," continued Vratymyr. "My plan entails much more than just stopping our tribute payments to the Khazars. I want to show the Greeks that we are not some backwater barbarians from the north. I want to strike at the heart of their Empire."

"What do you mean?" asked Yaropolk.

"I mean to strike a blow to Tsargrad itself," exclaimed Vratymyr, slamming his fist on the new table before him. "They will rue the day they killed our people and underestimated us."

"But how? Our two tribes? Against the Khazars? Against the entire Greek Empire? That is madness. Is it possible? I have made my oath for revenge but this seems like suicide for all of us."

"Ah, but I do not plan on attacking Tsargrad with only our two tribes. Hopefully we will convince some of the other tribes to join us. But even if they do not, I am sending our friend Gunnar to Ladoga to see if he can convince Roerick to aid us." Vratymyr smiled mischievously. "The Varyags know everything there is to know about raiding and sailing and should relish the opportunity to strike at the heart of the Empire. I believe with the Varyags on our side more tribes will also be willing to join forces with us."



The Khazars had been using Kyiv as a trading outpost for their Khaganate for the last couple of centuries. Up until fairly recently it was under their full control, but they ceded most of the control to the Polians and collected a tribute from them and several other Slavic tribes in the North. The Slavic tribes had become a good buffer against other dangers from the northwest, as the Khazars had to deal with many enemies that were more dangerous to the south and east.

The Slavic tribes spent a lot of time warring with each other in order to be a serious threat to the Khaganate so ceding authority over Kyiv to one of the tribes only helped them continue to be at each other's throats. The Khazars stayed out of the Slavic squabbles and collected their tribute while also maintaining a presence in Kyiv in the form of a customs house where they not only collected tributes, but also did quite a bit of trading of their own and were able to keep an eye on things. It was a logical place to do business with the Varyags from the North, as well as the Bulghar tradesmen who came from the northeast and used the Dnipro route as opposed to the more popular Volga trade route. It was also a logical place to gauge which way the wind was blowing, and they had just the right man in Kyiv for that job.

Itakh had represented the Khazar interests in Kyiv for many years and everyone in town knew him. Like many of the Khazar noblemen, he had converted to Judaism fairly recently, though he could still be caught on occasion calling upon the old gods. To Itakh it did not so much matter which god or gods he worshipped

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as long as he was worshipping the right ones at the right time. Since the Khagan had converted to Judaism, Itakh felt that it would be best to do the same if he wanted to retain his standing and position in Kyiv.

Itakh's position in Kyiv allowed him to live a very good life. His holdings in Kyiv were even larger than the local Polian Kniaz' Vratymyr's. His stead on the hill overlooking Podol was the largest in the town and the wooden wall that he had built around it had led the locals to jokingly call it Itakh's Castle. Eventually the hill became known as Castle Hill, or "Zamkova Hora", as the Slavs called it.

In his youth, before becoming the customs officer in Kyiv, Itakh had travelled with many trade expeditions and was not a stranger to using his saber when necessary, though he preferred to settle his scores with his tongue and quick wit. His eyes were slowly beginning to fail him, however, and while he could still see well enough to count the tributes and send them back to Itil to the Khagan, he had trouble seeing much farther than several arms' lengths before him. This had made travelling difficult and had confined him to the town where it was much safer. The relative inactivity had also led to the expansion of his waist over the last several years, his youthful lust for adventure had turning into a complacency of comfort.

Itakh had always been shrewd and though he liked Vratymyr's honesty, he often used it against him. Whenever there was an opportunity to squeeze some extra gold or silver out of any dealings with the Slavs, Itakh took full advantage. After all, they were technically still subjects of the Khazars, so why not take advantage of the situation? Granted, he applied this philosophy not only to the Slavs but also to everyone with whom he had dealings. This had allowed him to

amass quite a hoard, which he had buried in a secret vault underneath his bed in his cozy “castle”. It was more of a chest in a large dug-out hole under the floor, but Itakh liked to think of it as his treasure vault.

His hoard was something of which he was particularly proud. The large chest buried beneath his bed held a small fortune in gold and silver, containing coins from all over the region as well as from faraway lands. Most of the coins used in the Kyiv region were Khazar dirhams. Itakh’s hoard contained not only the silver dirhams but also the Roman gold solidi, Arabic dinars, silver ora and healfmarcs used by the Vikings of the North. It also contained a few Frankish marks and even some coins from as far away as Egypt. He even had a few gemstones and gold and silver armbands and trinkets, though he preferred his coins. Coins were more easily counted and valued, as many were a similar size and weight. The gemstones were harder to value, and his fading eyesight meant he could no longer tell their quality as accurately.

As a young resourceful trader, Itakh had noticed that there was a distinct difference in gold to silver ratios depending on where the coins were in circulation and where they were actually minted. For example, in Khazaria the gold to silver ratio was one to fifteen, whereas in the Eastern Caliphate it was one to seventeen and three. In New Rome, it was one to eighteen. This knowledge allowed Itakh to make money simply by removing coins here and there as long as the weights were relatively the same depending on where he was trading and whom he was returning money to. Even though Itakh no longer travelled to these faraway lands, as long as the various coins travelled to him, he could make money on their distribution and reallocation.

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His shrewd dealings had allowed him to bribe his way into being the customs official stationed in Kyiv, which in turn allowed him to amass even more coins. It was not so much the money that drove Itakh, but its acquisition. His love for playing the game of acquisition was truly the only love of his life. He had bought the services of women in his youth but never really loved them as he loved to make money. Itakh had never really had a steady companion or any wives and never really had given any thought as to what would happen to his collection of coins once he was gone. All that mattered was growing the collection.

This spring morning had started out like most mornings. After he had eaten his breakfast, he had two of his Khazar warrior guards escort him to the customs house. While he did not really fear for his life here in the town, he felt much more comfortable with his escort. Due to his failing eyesight, the journey from Castle Hill to the customs house took three times as long if he made it alone.

The warriors accompanying Itakh looked like a pair of oversized fish with spears. Even though he had eaten breakfast the sight of the warriors in their scale hauberks made him hungry again. Itakh laughed heartily at the image.

"What is so funny on this morning, lord?" asked one of the guards.

"Bah, it's nothing. Looking at you in your scale armor I couldn't help but think of two nice big fish to be cooked and stuffed in a pie." Itakh chuckled. The guards did not find this as amusing as Itakh did but feigned laughter so as not to upset their lord.

Vratymyr and his men could hear their laughter as the Khazars approached, and when they rounded the corner towards the customs house the Polian Kniaz'



startled them, "Please, enlighten us with the reason for your good humor on this fine morning."

"What's the meaning of this?" Itakh barked, even more startled as he approached the customs house and was able to see what was going on.

Normally, seeing Vratymyr or his Polian guardsmen for that matter would not have startled Itakh, but today Vratymyr was dressed in full battle gear with Yaropolk by his side. Behind them, surrounding the customs house, stood a formation of two hundred or so Slavic warriors dressed for war. Some wore long leather coats held together at the waist with a belt and covered with small scale breastplates. Others were much more frugally dressed, but menacing nonetheless. In their hands, each held a long spear, an axe or some sort of dangerous-looking farm implement.

Vratymyr looked regal in his chain shirt and conical helmet, his deadly double-edged broadsword scabbarded at his side. Yaropolk looked like a beast from the old myths, his mail covered by a huge bear skin cloak held together by a gold clasp. The head of the bear covered Yaropolk's helm, and his ruddy beard and moustache extended beneath it giving him the appearance of a wild wooly beast. In his massive fist, Yaropolk held his oversized axe that, from the looks of it, most men would have trouble lifting, let alone swinging. Itakh had seen Yaropolk before, as Vratymyr and he often went hunting together, but never had he seen him dressed in full battle gear and in ill humor.

"How dare you intercept official representatives of the Khagan?" squeaked Itakh as the wind seemed to eat the last of his words and his ability to speak was silenced by some divine power.

"We dare to do what we please on our lands," Vratymyr stated calmly. "We have come here to inform

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you that you are no longer masters over the Polians and Siverians and that we will no longer pay you your blood money. You have two choices: one, you can all return to Itil or wherever it is you came from and bother us no more; or two, a small settlement with a token guard can remain and continue to do business with us in peace while your garrison returns to your lands. This settlement will from this time forward be under our careful watch and our lands will be tribute free."

"You overstep your bounds," Itakh said, regaining his composure. "You know very well the Khagan will not stand for this. These are his lands, which he has let you administer for a price. That was your grandfather's arrangement with..."

"That, arrangement, as you call it," interrupted Vratymyr, "is no more. It no longer brings us any benefit. You told us your Greek friends would deal with us in good faith but I am sure you know very well what happened four weeks ago in Tsargrad."

"Whatever do you mean?" blurted Itakh, feigning surprise.

"You know very well what I am talking about," continued Vratymyr. "I am quite sure if your merchants did not tell you, you paid one of mine very well for the information. We both know not much goes on in this part of the world that doesn't reach your ears."

Itakh, quickly thinking how to weasel his way out of this, continued, "As I said before, the Khagan will not stand for your ultimatums. He will send an army to put you in your place."

"Your precious Khagan, what is it he calls himself now? Zacharias? Your Khagan is busy trying to turn your empire into Jews while keeping the Arabs from overrunning him in the South and pacifying the Magyars in the West. I doubt he will have the time or the desire

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to muster an army to send north to deal with the united Slavic tribes. You can either go tell your master yourself or send word with your soldiers who are no longer welcome here."

"I only see two tribes," countered Itakh. "I would hardly call that the united Slavic tribes."

"My dear Itakh, Yaropolk can throw his axe farther than you can see." Vratymyr chuckled. "There are two tribes here because we need no more for the moment. What you cannot see here you will soon be hearing of. The Slavic tribes will no longer pay tributes to anyone. If anyone demands tributes, they can come and try to collect them. They will be met with such resistance that they will wish they had stayed home. You are welcome to remain in Kyiv if you behave, however, you will no longer be able to live in your castle on the hill. Those lands have been designated for the building of a fort for our new Kniaz'."

"But where am I to live, and who is this new Kniaz' you speak of?" muttered Itakh. His whole world was unraveling before his eyes.

"You will find out about the new Kniaz' soon enough. As for where you will live, you can build yourself a new hovel here by your customs house. Look at the bright side, you won't need an escort to find it anymore." Vratymyr gave a wry smile as the Slavic contingent within earshot burst into laughter. "And, your precious customs house is no longer the customs house of Kyiv. You can keep it as a trading post for your merchants if you decide to continue doing business here. If not, we will find a use for it."

"And what of my belongings?" Itakh blurted in a panic, thinking of his precious chest of coins.

"Whether you decide to stay or go, your belongings will be brought to you here," Vratymyr said stoically.

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"I demand to be able to retrieve them myself!" Itakh screamed in a high-pitched voice.

"You are no longer in any position to make demands here," stated Vratymyr firmly. "As I said, you can stay or you can go. Your soldiers, other than a few guards for you will have to leave."

Itakh realized he had no choice but to stay if he was ever going to see his precious coins again. Maybe they would not find the chest before he could figure out how to retrieve it. It was well hidden, but if they were truly going to be building a fort on the hill then there was a good chance they would unearth it by accident. Yes, he would have to stay and figure out how to save his treasure.

"Very well," said Itakh dejectedly. "I see I have no choice. I shall stay in Kyiv." Not only did he want to stay to retrieve his coins, he was getting old and could not see well enough to make the journey back to Itil. Besides, if he and his soldiers returned to Itil, Zacharias would probably have them put to death for desertion. Khazars did not retreat, unless ordered to do so. Any soldiers in battle who did not fight to the death would die at the hands of their commander later for being cowards.

"Remember Itakh," Vratymyr said, "from now on we will be watching you very closely. While you are free to come and go as you please, if we see any Khazar force approaching our lands dressed for battle, your homes will be burned with you in them."



"Did you see the look on the dog's face?" Yaropolk laughed. "I thought he would shit himself right on the spot."

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"We need to keep a close eye on him," warned Vratymyr. "He may be half blind and fat but he should not be underestimated. A man does not rise to the position he held for so many years by being stupid. I also find it interesting that he decided to stay. While the man has been a shrewd trader, he has been making most of his money cheating others as well as his Khagan. He must have a tidy sum stashed away somewhere and has enough money to buy a lot of friends."

"True enough," answered Yaropolk. "It was still worth it watching him squirm as he realized his world was crashing around him."

Vratymyr had Itakh's prized possessions returned to him, but there was no sign of the large sum of money he suspected him of having stashed in his home. He wondered where the crafty Khazar could have hidden it. The search would have to wait. There were more important things to deal with first.

# THE ROAD TO RUS'

## Summer 858

As they continued north, Gunnar could not be more pleased with how their spring trek had gone so far. Travelling in the spring was always challenging, but travelling north in the spring and not being able to use the rivers was extremely challenging. Melting snow and spring rains made the roads and trails impassible most of the time.

Gunnar and Stoyan were on a diplomatic mission with many destinations, however, so they were able to take advantage of these many sojourns to wait for the roads to become passable in between the rains and to speak with many of the locals from the other tribes and to their leaders as well.

Their first stop had been at Homiy where they met with Viatko, the head of the Radimichs. Homiy was a small town and it was well-fortified, with a wooden palisade and a ditch in front of it. Though the Radimichs were not Slavs originally, living on the upper eastern Dniπρο and Sozh rivers, they were very well-acquainted with both the Slavs and the Varyags as the trade route from the north invariably coursed through their lands. They were also slowly assimilating into Slavs over the last century. The biggest commonality that the Radimichs had with the Slavs to the south was that they were paying tribute to their Khazar overlords. While Viatko did not make any promises about joining an alliance against the Khazars or the Greeks, he was more than happy to agree to stop paying tribute to the Khazars.

After hearing Gunnar lay out Vratymyr's plan, the decision was quite simple. After all, if the Khazars

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decided to seek retribution they would obviously have to go through the lands of the Polians and Siverians first which would give Viatko plenty of time to send messengers to the Khazars saying he was forced to stop paying the tribute. Not making any real commitments to the Slavs to the south gave him the opportunity to see which way the wind was blowing before making the decision on whether to join this alliance with Vratymyr.

After leaving the Radimichs, Stoyan convinced Gunnar to continue northwest and avoid the Dregovichi, who lived along the river Pripyat and the lands north of it. Navigating the marshes and swamps of the Pripyat in spring was tantamount to suicide, and their proximity to Bohuslav and the Derevlians just to the south of them was a good enough reason not to risk having their plan leak to the unpredictable Bohuslav.

The next stop on their trek was Palteskja, which the Slavs called Polotesk. The Dvina River was slowly becoming a popular alternative route for the Norse to travel east into the Slavic lands, as opposed to going through Aldeigja in the northeast and then south.

Polotesk was the central trading hub of the Krivich tribe situated on the Polota and Dvina rivers. In the last few decades, the Varangians continued to flow into the lands of the Finnish and Slavic tribes. Like Kyiv, Polotesk had begun to grow into a bustling trading center. Now it was the center for resupply along the trade route that continued south on to the Dniipro.

Legend had it that the Krivichs were founded by a Slavic Kniaz' called Kriv whose back was crooked due to a defect from birth. Apparently, this had not stopped him from becoming a great warrior and leader of his people.



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Many Varyags traded with the locals in Polotesk and the town enjoyed somewhat of a free trade status not paying tribute to either the Khazars or the Varangians. Brachislav and his tribe made many a dirham not only trading with the Varyags, as they called the Varangians, but also fixing their boats, weapons and armor. Brachislav and his people would be an important part of Vratymyr's plan if they agreed to it.

Brachislav seemed open to the idea of a campaign against Tsargrad but explained to Gunnar that he could make no commitments unless the Varyags were on board with this plan. This made a lot of sense to Gunnar, as obviously, the lifeblood of the Krivich tribe depended on trade with the Norsemen, and entering into a campaign that would disrupt this would not be in their interests.

Gunnar and Brachislav came to an understanding. If the Rus in the North agreed to participate in this escapade of Vratymyr's, Brachislav and his people would provide all the assistance they could. If, on the other hand, the Rus refused, Brachislav would not do anything that would disrupt the trade route from the northwest to the Greeks and their Empire to the south. This was a victory for Gunnar, as without his people in the north Vratymyr's plan was doomed to fail anyway. Now all that remained was convincing the Rus Khagan Roerik.



A big beaming smile appeared on Gunnar's face, which was visible even behind his big moustache and beard, when they approached Aldeigja. "This, my dear Stoyan is where I was born and raised. It's been too long."

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Aldeigja, or as the Slavs called it, Ladoga, was the central port and main hub of the Rus Khaganate. While the Rus were more of a trading company than an actual Khaganate, Roerik, who had recently taken over, did not mind being called a Khagan as it seemed to give him more legitimacy in the region than that of a mere head of a trading company. Previously, Roerik had been a fierce warrior who gained much fame exploring and raiding, but his keen organizational and administrative skills were put to better use keeping the trade routes operational.

The indigenous Finnish tribes referred to the Svealds from across the sea as the Ruotsi, but over time, with the influx of more of the Varyags from the north and Slavs from the south, the name had slowly changed to Rus. The Vikings who settled here did not seem to mind as it gave them a separate identity from their brethren across the sea. It also gave them a sense of independence and their leaders a greater sense of association with the indigenous tribes.

The Finnish tribes were always at each other's throats, and between their constant wars and disputes and the threat of the Bulgars to the east, they had decided that it would be best if they asked the Varangians to come and rule over them to bring some semblance of peace and prosperity to the region. Since they had slowly been settling and trading in the area, the Vikings were more than happy to provide an overlord and the muscle necessary to keep order. In exchange for this peace, the Vikings also collected a tribute from each of the tribes in the region.

If Kyiv and Polotesk had a wide variety of visitors and inhabitants, then Aldeigja was a virtual melting pot of various peoples. Traders and inhabitants from many different tribes and settlements conducted their

business here. Finns, Slavs, Balts, Turks and Norse all shared the town and all shared in the wealth from the trade route along the Volga to the southeast, and the newer route south along the Volkha to the Dniro and on to Constantinople, which the Slavs called Tsargrad. The first official diplomatic mission of the Rus company from the North took place twenty years ago and since then had led to a very profitable route from the north to the south. Vikings had travelled this route before, but their treks were more sporadic. Now that they had established formal relations, protocols and tariffs had been created, and they had a greater expectation of their sojourns south being more profitable and less dangerous.

Just as the Vikings were more than willing to be called Rus, Roerik was also comfortable using the title Khagan. He also had no problem going by the name the local Slavs called him, Riurik. This was much easier for them to pronounce.

Gunnar had become Riurik's emissary to Constantinople soon after Riurik's arrival in Aldeigja. From the beginning, it was evident that Riurik was different from the previous heads of the Rus Trading Company and that he had more grandiose plans than merely leading a trading company. Within months of his arrival, the Rus had become more of a Khaganate with lordship over the region. The Khaganate stretched as far east as Beloozero, which meant "white lake" in the Slavic tongue. It was the primary eastern Rus settlement and their influence extended via tributary to the Volga, and south to the Khazar Sea where they traded with the Khazars and Arabs in Itil.

Even though Riurik was a successful administrator, he remained a more than capable warlord, and when it was necessary to bring any of the tribes into line, or to

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defend the interests of the company, he had no problem employing the necessary brutality to send a message and get the job done. Crushing skulls was sometimes necessary and made Riurik feel more alive than counting coins.

Gunnar was not sure what to expect from this audience with Riurik, but so much depended on it. While Gunnar agreed with Vratymyr, he was still under oath to Riurik and would need to do his bidding no matter what he decided. Failing to do so would be suicide. He had to choose his words carefully in order to steer Riurik into making the proper decision. Riurik was a bit more pragmatic than most Vikings but he still could let his temper rule his decision making at times. While this generally was not the best of traits for a ruler, in this instance Gunnar felt he could use it to his advantage.

As they approached the grand hall, Stoyan could not help but notice how much more pomp it provided than Vratymyr's meager stead in Kyiv. Riurik's hold made Itakh's castle on the hill look like an angler's hut, even though Ladoga was not the viking's primary seat of power. The one thing that puzzled Stoyan, though, was the fact that such an important town that had so much wealth passing through it did not have many fortifications or even walls.

The guards at the great hall looked vigilant and imposing. All of them wore mail shirts over their wool shirts and covering the mail were blue-colored wool tunics which reached down to just below the knee. They also wore close-fitting, untapered and vertically-striped trousers and soft leather shoes with wooden soles. Over their tunics, they wore cloaks with a clasp on the right shoulder, which exposed their sword arm. All of the guards had similarly pleated beards and braids, which protruded from underneath their helms. Their

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helmets had a metal crosspiece riveted at the forehead to provide a guard for the nose. At their sides were scabbarded swords. Axes hung from their belts. In their hands each held a deadly spear made of ash with a sharp steel blade at the top of the shaft.

Gunnar and Stoyan saluted the guards and quickly made their way through the entry into the large hall. Colorful banners and animal pelts decorated the walls, which also had a row of shields hanging on either side. At the far end of the hall on a small dais, Riurik sat on a large wooden chair behind a massive oak table with his thegns and advisors at his sides.

The only difference in attire between Riurik and the rest of the thegns was his roggvarfelder cloak. It had tufts of unspun wool incorporated into its weaving, giving it the appearance of shaggy fur. Riurik also wore a headband of tablet-woven cloth, patterned in gold thread and colored silk. On his feet he wore rough cowhide boots inverted hairy-side out. While not a large man, he carried himself regally and it was easy to tell he commanded the respect of his thegns. He had a long, forked and golden beard, and his eyes were piercing.

"Come, Gunnar." He motioned for Gunnar to step forward. "Who is this you have brought with you?"

"My liege, this is Stoyan of the Polians of Kyiv, ambassador of Vratymyr and my travel companion to Miklagard," replied Gunnar.

"Well met," Riurik said to Stoyan in broken Slavic. "If you are a companion of Gunnar then you are welcome in my hall. Forgive me as I have yet to master your tongue; there are so many damned tribes here I keep mixing my words."

"If you continue in Norse, sire," Stoyan mustered, "I believe I should be able to follow your conversation

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as Gunnar has had months to practice his Slavic with me while I my Norse with him."

"Excellent." Riurik smiled and continued in Norse. "Now, Gunnar, what news do you bring from down south and where are the rest of our men? Why are they not here with you instead of this Stoyan?"

"About that," Gunnar said, choosing his words carefully, "Stoyan is here with me with a proposition from the Slavic tribes near Kyiv. They had merchants in the trading mission to Miklagard as well. We do not know the reason, but apparently the Romans confiscated all our goods and had everyone executed." While the Slavs called the Romans Greeks, the Norse and most everyone else for that matter called them Romans. The Greeks referred to themselves as Romans, which Stoyan could never understand.

"They did what?" exclaimed Riurik.

"We did not tarry as we were warned by the harbormaster that staying might not be in our best interests, but that is what we were told. Either the Emperor or one of his subordinates decided to eliminate the lot of them." Gunnar paused for a few moments, and then as he noticed Riurik was not answering immediately, decided to continue. "Yaropolk, who is the Kniaz' of the Siverians who are allied with the Polians, had a son on the mission. He too did not return."

"How many men did they kill?" Riurik asked.

"Twelve Rus, ten Polians and ten Siverians. They took all three boat-loads of goods as well. That is all we were able to find out. We were given no reasons and have no idea what happened to the bodies."

"Do they mean to disrupt the Dnipro trade route? What exactly is the meaning of this course of action?" Riurik seemed to be calculating his next move while holding back his anger at the brazen act of the Romans.

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"My lord, if I may?" Gunnar asked. He knew the danger of interjecting before being directly asked for his opinion but felt he needed to take the risk to help steer Riurik's thoughts.

"Go on," Riurik said. He stood and started pacing about the hall.

Gunnar cleared his throat. "Kniaz' Vratymyr believes the Romans have conspired with the Khazars to bypass the Slavs and to deal with the north solely using the Volga trade route. The Polian Kniaz' also has a proposition that you may find interesting and beneficial for both the Slavs and us. He and the Siverian tribe have joined forces and have made it known to the Khazars that they are no longer paying them tribute."

"Ha," bellowed Riurik. "That should sit well with the Khazar Khagan."

"While normally this would be a foolish move," continued Gunnar, "the Khazars currently have their hands full with the Abbasids in the south as well as the Magyars, not to mention that the Khazar Khagan is trying to convert his population to Judaism. On our way north, we also met with Viatko of the Radimichs and he agreed to stop paying tribute to them as well. With the Slavic tribes united against Zacharias in their refusal to pay tribute, Vratymyr believes that the Khazars will have neither the resources nor the desire to come north and expose themselves to attack from the south, east or west to do anything about it."

"He may be onto something," Riurik said.

"Vratymyr believes that there is little to fear from the Khazars," Gunnar said with a smile. "He means to strike at the root of the problem."

"Which is?"

"He wants to strike a blow to the heart of the Empire and to attack Miklagard."

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Virtually all of the jaws in the room dropped upon hearing this and there was a lot of grumbling, for Miklagard in Norse meant "The Great City" and it was their name for Constantinople. They had all heard the tales of the impenetrable walls of Miklagard and how many armies arrived at its walls only to be decimated as Greek fire rained down on them.

"And how does he propose to attack the mighty Miklagard?" Riurik asked.

"With our help and when the right circumstances arise," Gunnar answered. "Vratymyr has sent Stoyan with me here as his emissary to ask you to send your man to take control of Kyiv to help unite the Slavs under one banner, as you have done here in the North. If you agree, he will begin building a fleet in Kyiv and I also have the word of Brachislav in Polotesk that he will aid in this endeavor."

"You know," Riurik mused, pulling on both sides of his beard, "if the circumstances are right it just may work."

After hearing Gunnar's request, Riurik realized that this plan was a great chance for acquiring an enormous amount of booty and glory for the Rus Company/Khaganate. He would attend the Thing of All Svealds next spring and lay out his plan to Ragnarr Lodbrok. The Thing of All Svealds was held yearly since anyone could remember. It was a gathering of all able-bodied warriors to decide who would be raiding with whom and where during the summer months.

First, he needed to see how the preparations would play out with the Slavs and Rus working together and if the Khazars would decide to interrupt their plans.

Riurik charged one of his henchmen, Hoskuldr, with the task of consolidating the Slavs into a unified force based in Kyiv. Hoskuldr was the grandson of Ragnarr Lodbrok and son of Hvitserk. Hvitserk had enjoyed



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raiding in the Southeast and had left his son with Riurik to learn how to raid and how to administrate. Riurik believed this would be his best chance to get aid as well as men from Ragnarr during the Thing.

# THE ROAD TO RUS'

## Fall 858

While Gunnar and Stoyan were away, Vratymyr continued to plot his grand scheme. Stoyan had sent word of their meeting with Riurik via a trusted courier, informing him that they would be going back to meet with the Radimichs and Krivichs to let them know that their meeting with Riurik was a success and that the preparations for an expedition to Tsargrad were to begin. The courier also mentioned that Riurik had chosen one of his thegns, Hoskuldr, to represent the Rus in Kyiv.

The summer months had been fruitful with construction on Castle Hill in full swing. Vratymyr had decided to move into Itakh's stead and build a much more lavish residence for the incoming Hoskuldr nearby on the hill. A Norseman with such legendary ancestors would need a court fitting a Varyag chieftain and not a Khazar custom's officer.

Hoskuldr's residence and court were completed on the southwest side of the hill not far from Vratymyr's, which was to the north and closer to Podol. Vratymyr also had a palisade of large wooden stakes built around the entire hill to provide some fortification in case the Khazars decided to come calling.

The Slavic Kniaz' lay on his bed fidgeting with his grandfather's ring and wondered what he would have thought of his plan. Vratymyr enjoyed laying on his bed in the dark. The solitude allowed him to gather his thoughts and focus his attention on what needed to be done. He believed Bronislav would have approved. The tribes had spent too much time warring with each other. It was time to unite and move on to grander things. The

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Greeks had broken the treaty, providing a good opportunity for the Slavs to rise up and become a force to be reckoned with.

Vratymyr was a very capable swordsman and could lead men in battle. He had done so on many successful campaigns defending his lands from other tribes. He had also repelled the Magyars on more than one occasion, but he knew that he had no idea how to wage war on the sea. Turning to the Varyags was necessary if the Slavs in the region were to take the next step. The Varyags would also bring some stability and order amongst the tribes as they had in the north. If the Rus could keep order amongst the Finns, Turks, Bulghars, Balts and Slavs in the North, maintaining order amongst the Slavs in the South and uniting them for a common goal should not be overly difficult.

One challenge would be building a fleet. Since the damned Greeks had cut off their trade route from the south, money was no longer as plentiful as it had once been. The new fortifications and palace had been costly, but it was necessary to show Hoskuldr that the Slavs were not merely a bunch of backwater peasants. Obviously, Hoskuldr would bring his own coffers, but if Vratymyr wanted to be taken seriously, he would have to pull his weight and show that the Slavs were ready for glory.

Vratymyr was still fidgeting with his grandfather's ring when it slipped off and rolled underneath the bed. He cursed under his breath and decided he would look for it tomorrow. Soon after, the weary Kniaz' fell into a deep slumber.



When the cock's crow woke Vratymyr in the morning, he felt refreshed. He had slept soundly and awoke with a newfound clarity that what he was doing was right for his people and all the Slavs. Everything hinged on his faith in the Rus, and the belief they would be willing to aid his people.

The Norsemen, though mostly traders, had also begun to get a reputation for their brutality and had been pillaging and burning the West for a few decades now. But here in the East the Varyags seemed different, sticking more to the roles of traders and explorers. They used force when necessary to settle disputes between the northern tribes, but they did not plunder the lands they occupied and had a relatively peaceful coexistence with their neighbors, other than the occasional raids and cultural misunderstandings.

Hoskuldr was due to arrive any day now and most of the preparations for his arrival were complete. Vratymyr felt proud of what he had accomplished so far, but there was still so much work to do and so much uncertainty. So far, the Khazars had left them alone and seemed to be busy with other affairs. This, however, could change at any time. Scouts were constantly patrolling the Southeast so that if the Khazars were on the move they would have ample warning.

Itakh had seemed to adjust to his new status of lowly trader, though it appeared that he was not much worse off than he had been before. While Vratymyr did not fully trust Itakh, he knew that the man was driven by money and not a love for his Khagan or for any particular god. Itakh might still prove useful. He knew

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how to get information and was willing to pay the right price to acquire it, and a better price to part with it. For those reasons, Vratymyr was glad that Itakh had not left. It was true that you should keep your enemies in closer proximity than your friends.

Vratymyr decided he would pay a visit to the Khazar this morning. It was always good to hear what words the winds from the south and east were bringing, and Itakh, being very concerned with accumulating more wealth, had no problems sharing his ideas on how to make Kyiv more prosperous. It would also be good to see if there were any new tidings before Hoskuldr arrived.

The sun was already up for an hour so Itakh would most probably be at the old custom's house-turned-trading post.

"Good morning to you, Itakh," said Vratymyr when he arrived at the custom's house. "I see you are up bright and early."

"Yes, my lord." Itakh waved his arms and bowed deeply in an exaggerated fashion. After his ouster, Itakh had taken to calling Vratymyr "my lord" in a sarcastic manner. If Vratymyr were more ill-tempered he could easily have had Itakh's head removed and placed on a pike for all to see, but they had known each other for quite some time and knew what they could get away with. As long as Itakh did not insult him publicly, Vratymyr did not really see the harm. He actually enjoyed it. Most people would jump when he asked them to do something, and that was good. But one also needed to feel some resistance in order to stay sharp. The game he played with Itakh sharpened his senses and helped him when dealing with others whom he did not know and did not jump when he called.

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"Now, now, good sir." Vratymyr smirked. "Are you still bitter about losing your castle? You look like you're doing quite well for yourself without it."

"I must say, my dear Kniaz', you have actually done me quite the favor," Itakh countered.

"How so?" asked Vratymyr.

"You see, now that I don't have to count the Khagan's money I have more time to make and count my own. Sure, I used to be able to skim some of the tributes off the top but now I don't have any soldiers or other money counters meddling in my affairs. True, the business with the Romans, oh, sorry, Greeks, is unfortunate and I have lost a good flow of goods directly from the Empire, but there is more than enough to go around from the Bulgars and Varangians. It just takes me a bit longer to get my wares from Constantinople through Itil over land as opposed to using the Dniipro." Even though Itakh had lived among the Slavs for nearly a decade, he still referred to Tsargrad as Constantinople and the Varyags as Varangians. While most people in Kyiv spoke a common enough tongue, when dealing with travelers it was sometimes difficult to keep up with who called which city, river, empire or people what. Especially since even the Romans/Greeks also called their capitol both Nova Roma and Constantinople.

"Speaking of your Khagan, what news of Zacharias and the affairs in the south?" Vratymyr pulled up a stool and took a seat near the Khazar.

"As you predicted, he has been too busy to settle any score he may have with the Slavs at the moment," Itakh began. "Ever since Bugha attacked with the backing of the Caliph it has been one thing after another. The Kabars continue to rebel and that requires a lot of his attention. And ever since his conversion

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quite a few Muslims have decided to move on to other lands. There has been quite an exodus east to Shamkur over the last couple of years. In between paying Bugha his poll taxes and losing the tributes from the Slavs, Zacharias has no means to wage a large campaign against either the Polians or the Siverians, never mind the two tribes combined. He needs to keep his border with the Magyars secure and it takes most of his resources to make sure he is not overrun by the Caliphate."

"It appears then that you are better off than your Khagan." Vratymyr laughed.

Itakh could not help but chuckle. "You know, you may be right. At least here all I have is you to worry about. However, I get the feeling things may change a bit with your new master coming to town."

"You may be right," Vratymyr agreed, "but it is the logical next step for us. As a man who values wealth you have seen how the Rus Khaganate in the North has flourished taking advantage of both major trade routes, and they have kept the peace between the tribes. We could do with a little unification here as well. It will be nice to work together against common enemies instead of warring with one another constantly."

"True," countered Itakh. "But the larger and stronger you get, the more enemies you will acquire. The Romans once controlled most of the world in the west and now their Empire has been broken into little pieces. I fear this is the fate of all Empires."

"But what of the Greeks?" Vratymyr hoped Itakh would reveal something new.

"The Greeks?" Itakh thought for a moment. "I am sure they too are doomed to fall one day. The Caliphate grows strong; your friends in the North are not only merchants either. They too like to pillage and destroy."



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While it is true most armies prey on the weak, it is also true that the weak soon fall and the hunters look for better hunting grounds. Yes, they too will fall one day. Gods and gold will be the ruin of us all." He shook his head and fell silent.

"I fear I do not see a world without either," whispered Vratymyr. "The gods created this world and they created the gold men kill for. Now, with the rise of the Muslims along with the Popes in Rome, men will be killing for gold to better equip themselves to kill for their gods."

"You speak the truth, Vratymyr. You are probably right that it is best for your tribes to unite. It may be the only way to survive. For me it is easy, as my god is gold. My people however, they are fighting over which god or gods to worship. Many will die before that decision is made. It does seem easier worshipping only one. How do you keep track of all of your gods? How do you know which one to pray to and for what reason?"

"It is common knowledge. I guess our ancestors teach us. When we need rain we ask Perun. When the shepherds have sick cattle they beseech Veles for help. If the winter is brutal and spring is late we ask Lada to come and to bring with her all that is beautiful. I believe it makes sense that there is more than one. It seems quite strange to me how one god can bring forth both flowers and death," mused Vratymyr.

"Enough about gods," Itakh muttered. His expression changed to a more jovial one. "I am hungry. Will you join me for lunch?"

While it was nowhere near lunchtime, Vratymyr had not yet broken his fast and decided that eating was not a bad idea. "Why not? What have you got?"

Itakh moved like a man half his age when food was mentioned. He did not speak as he shuffled out of the

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room and returned in short order with a large loaf of bread, a wedge of cheese and some dried fish. He placed these on the table, then ran out again and returned with a huge earthenware jug.

Itakh poured two drinks. "Kvas, the best thing you Slavs ever came up with. Now eat." Vratymyr also enjoyed the very popular drink made from fermented bread, with its slightly sour yet very refreshing taste. The Kniaz' was hungrier than he thought, and the two of them quickly devoured everything.

After eating, Itakh seemed much more content and Vratymyr felt he could press him further. "Have you heard anything from Tsargrad?"

"About what happened in the spring?" Itakh assumed.

"Well anything in general," Vratymyr countered. "Not sending merchants to the Empire we have little news of what is going on there other than the second and third hand tales from your friends and the occasional Bulghar." Vratymyr had contacts in Tsargrad, but he did not want to tell Itakh that he had not heard from them in a while.

"My flow of news has also become more sporadic due to the events of these past several months," offered Itakh. "However, I have heard one interesting tidbit recently that you may be interested to know, especially since the topic of our morning's discourse has been the gods. My sources tell me that there will soon be a new Patriarch in Constantinople as Igantios is to be deposed."

Vratymyr did not know very much about the structure of the church and religion in Tsargrad but he knew enough to know that the Patriarch was their spiritual leader and this was a major event since they were representatives of their god on this earth. The

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Emperor and his church could not have made this decision lightly and obviously did so with good reason. "Do you know why?"

"Alas," Itakh said, "my little birds did not inform me why. But I do know that the new Patriarch is supposed to be someone close to the Emperor. And once Emperors start deposing church representatives and appointing others it tends to lead to problems with the Pope in Rome, and that is never good."

While he did not know very much about popes and patriarchs, Vratymyr knew enough that when gods and their representatives were crossed, they got angry, and when they got angry, there was blood spilled and lots of it. This may lead to an opening for our campaign, he thought. If the Emperor is busy arguing with the Pope, that may cause enough of a distraction for an attack from the north. This was a good morning indeed.



As soon as his scouts had seen Hoskuldr's company making their way towards Kyiv, Vratymyr had instructed them to go out to the tribal leaders who were in on the plan and request their presence in Kyiv for a meeting.

Several days later Hoskuldr and his retinue arrived. It was an imposing sight. Vratymyr had been in many battles and with many men, but this was the first time he had seen a full force of two hundred and fifty men all in shiny mail with brightly colored tunics and shields. Vratymyr's boyars were well off enough to own their own set of mail due to his sharing of taxes and profits of the realm with them, but you would have to gather every single member of the Polian and Siverian boyars and both druzhinas in one place to get two hundred fairly well armored and equipped men. Even then, not

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all of them would be as well-equipped as the druzhina accompanying Hoskuldr.

Hoskuldr was of average height but his appearance left one with the impression that he was an important and dangerous man. His long sandy hair braided in the back and his long beard braided neatly in the front both swayed rhythmically to the cantor of his powerful warhorse as they approached the new wooden gate erected just south of Podol leading to Castle Hill. He led his retinue towards the newly-fortified area, and the crowds that had gathered along both sides of the road witnessed his arrival. One little Slavic girl ran up to him from behind the throng and tossed a wreath of flowers at the neck of his horse. The wreath bounced off the horse's face and fell to the ground. The Varyag leader raised his arm, and the entire column ground to a halt. Hoskuldr dismounted, picked up the wreath and placed it gently around his warhorse's head. He then approached the little girl, brushed her cheek with his hand and bowed his head slightly. The crowd roared in approval and then once again fell silent. Hoskuldr's horse snorted in response to the crowd, and Hoskuldr remounted to continue forward.

The peasants and traders had never seen a sight like this, and all stood transfixed as the host of riders entered through the gates. Normally, a crowd this size would make so much noise that one could barely hear himself think, but they were all so amazed that all that could be heard was the rhythmic beat of the horses' shod hooves. The locals had a general understanding of what was happening as Vratymyr had done his best to prepare everyone for Hoskuldr's arrival. He had explained to them that they were about to join forces with the Norse and other Slavs, but mere words could

not have prepared them for the awe-inspiring sight of the Rus warriors.

The regal procession soon ended and the townsfolk began to go about their business, chattering amongst themselves about the spectacle they had just witnessed.

Vratymyr and his boyars waited for the Norse to arrive in the courtyard, in front of Hoskuldr's new residence. The rest of the tribal leaders and their retinues also stood beside Vratymyr. They too were no strangers to battle, some of them even facing off against one another at times in the past. But none of them had seen anything like this. Maybe the tribes in the North had seen a force this size in full battle dress, but this was definitely a first for almost all present.

When the procession came to a halt, Hoskuldr dismounted and approached Vratymyr. His byrnie, which covered his heavily padded gambeson, barely made a sound beneath the grey woolen cloak fastened over his right shoulder with a large silver fibula in the shape of a wolf. He wore simple but sturdy leather boots and a brightly colored headband.

"Well met, I assume you are Vratymyr, the Polian Kniaz'," he said in the language of the Slavs. Hoskuldr had spent most of his life other than his early childhood in Aldeigja, so he had a good command of both Norse and Slavic.

"That would be me," replied Vratymyr. "And you need no introduction, my Lord. We have been awaiting your arrival. Would you care to join us in the hall?"

"I would. But first I need to get out of this metal suit and get the grime of the road off of me."

The Varyags were known for their cleanliness and Vratymyr was prepared for this. "Very well," He motioned to one of his druzhina to come forward.

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"Sviatoslav here will show you your new accommodations and where you can bathe. In the meantime, we will get your men settled and see to their horses. When you are ready Sviatoslav will escort you to the hall."

"Excellent," replied Hoskuldr as he went to prepare himself for his formal introduction to the Slavs.



While nowhere near the size or grandeur of Riurik's hall in Ladoga, the new hall in Kyiv served its purpose. It could hold one hundred men seated on benches behind immense oaken tables and had room for many more to sleep and to be kept relatively warm. It also had a raised dais at the end of the hall with enough space for a large table that would seat a dozen men.

The Slavic leaders and their most trusted boyars sat in the hall awaiting Hoskuldr and his thegns. The importance of this gathering had assured the attendance of all the warlords. It was a unique gathering as this was the first time all of these Slavic warlords were in one room together, not to mention such a high-ranking Varyag representative.

Vratymyr looked around at everyone in the hall as he nervously awaited the arrival of the Rus. At one side of the room sat Viatko with three of his boyars. Vratymyr was not sure what to think of Viatko. Many of the people in his lands were Slavs, and there were also a good number of Lyachs who were forced east years ago. Viatko and his ancestors belonged to this tribe. From everything Vratymyr had heard, he seemed to do what was best for the survival and well-being of his people. Viatko had no physical characteristics which really stood out and was dressed fairly simply for a

Kniaz' except for a large seven-beam, silver necklace. It was quite intricate and showed scenes of artisans at their trades. As opposed to most of the others present, his hair was short, not reaching his shoulders. His boyars wore their hair in this fashion as well, which made them easily distinguishable from the rest of the gathering.

Near Viatko's retinue sat Brachislav with his three sons. In a stark opposition to the Radimich party, they were quite lavishly dressed. Brachislav wore a very colorful tunic and sealskin boots that reached above his knees. Gold rings adorned his hands, and gold earrings lay perched on the sides of his bushy dark beard. He was stocky, and it looked like it would take a bull to move him from his place. The Radimichs were a very important part of Vratymyr's plan, and he was really counting on their support. Polotesk had several blacksmiths who were very experienced, and while Kyiv had its own blacksmith, he usually only did minor repairs and reshod horses. He had nowhere near the amount of experience that the Polotesk blacksmiths had of working with metal and doing the intricate work that would be required for this undertaking. It was imperative that Vratymyr secure Brachislav's aid.

Across from the Radimich delegation next to Vratymyr and his boyars sat his old friend Yaropolk. The last couple of weeks had been quite hard on him, as he had lost his last son Dushan. Three years ago, he lost another son hunting, when he was gored by a wild boar. A year before that, two other sons were killed in a raid by the Mordvins. No matter what happened, Vratymyr knew he could count on Yaropolk, but lately he was a bit worried about the mountain of a man. Losing Dushan had affected him more than the losses of his other sons. The gods had not given Vratymyr the ability

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to sire children, and while he did not directly know the pain of losing one's own child, he had lost many friends in battle, as well as his wife and both his father and grandfather.

Yaropolk had brought with him Borislav and Budymyr to represent the Siverians. Vratymyr knew both of Yaro's boyars and felt they were good and trustworthy men. There had been rumblings, however, that in the past couple of weeks some of Yaropolk's boyars were concerned about what would happen should Yaropolk die, since he now had no heirs. This was a problem Vratymyr knew well. He too had to deal with constant questions from his boyars and with rivals who had their eye on usurping his power. It was precisely for this reason that Vratymyr asked two of his main rivals Sviatobor and Ostromyr to be present along with himself and Stoyan.

Vratymyr had met with Viatko and Brachislav when they arrived and asked them not to mention anything about Tasrgrad to their boyars just yet. He did not want the Greeks to get any advance notice of his plan. He hoped the two men would see the wisdom in this. It would be almost impossible to keep such an expedition a secret for long, but it was of utmost importance to its success that the Greeks had little or no time to prepare.

Loud grumbling gave way to almost complete silence when Hoskuldr entered the hall with five of his men. He had changed into fresh clothing and wore a grey tunic and trousers adorned with bright blue vertical stripes. He had switched his boots for more comfortable leather shoes. His headband remained, as did the scabbarded sword hanging at his left hip, attached securely to his belt. His companions were still



dressed as if for battle and obviously were not only trusted henchmen but his personal bodyguards as well.

There were three distinct dialects of the Eastern Slavs. The one spoken by the Slavs of the North was different from that used by the Polians and Siverians in the areas surrounding Kyiv, but they still understood each other well enough. Hoskuldr, living in the north, had adopted the northern Slavic dialect, and one reason Riurik chose him was because he had a better command of the language than most of his subordinates. The primary reason was that he was the grandson of Ragnarr Lodbrok.

"Well," Hoskuldr began, "now that I have been purged of the stench of the road I think we can get down to business. I have been sent here by my liege the Khagan of Rus Riurik to oversee the lands bordering the Khazars. It is my understanding that you have recently told them that they are no longer welcome here as your masters."

"Yes, that is true, my lord," Vratymyr stated. "As of yet they are busy with other affairs and have not returned to reclaim their status as overlords. I do not foresee them attempting to do so anytime soon. They have been quite busy with the Abyssids and Magyars of late and have had some of their own internal matters to deal with."

"Once they learn that these lands are now under the protectorate of the Rus," Hoskuldr said, "I believe they will be less wont to do so. I was assured that your offer still stands?"

"Yes, my lord," answered Vratymyr. "Both Yaropolk and I have agreed that our people will be under your protectorate and that you are henceforth our overlord and will maintain the peace in our lands." He could see that Sviatoslav and Ostromyr were not very

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pleased but had no objections as of yet. They clearly saw the futility of opposing Hoskuldr with his well-armed men.

Hoskuldr remained standing. "My main goal for the near future is to build this city into a base of operations for trade to the South. However, where there is trade there is gold and silver and where there is gold and silver, there are enemies. Not only do I plan to make Kyiv a trade hub, but I plan on making it secure from enemies. You have already made a formidable enemy in the Khazars and they will not be the only ones who take notice of what is happening here. We will need to shore up our defenses. This little fort is a start but it will do little against a great host. We will also need to expand Kyiv's productive capacity. Brachislav, I understand that south of Aldeigja you have the best blacksmiths. Is that correct?"

Brachislav was a bit startled at hearing his name, as he had assumed Hoskuldr had no idea who he was, but he quickly regained his composure. "Yes, lord Hoskuldur. We currently have three smiths along with their apprentices in Polotesk."

"Good. I was told you were willing to aid in our endeavor here. I will require you to send one of your blacksmiths to Kyiv to set up shop here and to take on more apprentices."

Brachislav did not want to part with any of his blacksmiths, but he realized that crossing Hoskuldr would not be wise. Besides, his cooperation would pay off in the long run. If the Rus set up a base in Kyiv, then more Norsemen would be coming through Polotesk, which meant more prosperity for everyone. "Very well, my lord," he answered simply.

Vratymyr was quite impressed with how Hoskuldr was able to steer the conversation around mentioning

an assault on Tsargrad. He clearly knew the value of not revealing too much information in front of people he did not know and trust fully. This discretion would ensure that none of the boyars would pass on any information to prying ears. Even though an expedition of this magnitude could not be hidden completely, its premise could be disguised.

"In order to adequately expand our means for trade and defense," Hoskuldr continued, "we will need to build more ships and we will need to train men how to fight on the sea. I have brought with me two ship builders. One will remain here, and the other will return to Polotesk with Brachislav. We will begin to build a fleet that will be adequate for these missions. Most able-bodied men will be expected to help in the building of this fleet and will take part in training on how to fight on the sea and how to raid. In order to build a fleet, we will need supplies and silver, and in order to maintain it we will need even more supplies and more silver. We will teach you to fight like Vikings and the world will learn that the Rus of Kyiv are not to be trifled with. Anyone who has a problem with any of this will answer to me and my men."

A loud banging sounded on the double doors of the great hall, interrupting Hoskuldr. "Open the doors!" he shouted. "What is the meaning of this?"

Two of Hoskuldr's guards dragged in Bohuslav, who did not look happy at all. "By Perun's beard," he demanded, "let me go or I will do you in." The guards pushed him forward, releasing their grip on his arms, and he stumbled onto the ground before Hoskuldr. "Who in the name of..."

Hoskuldr rammed his wooden soled shoe into Bohuslav's chest, knocking the wind out of him.

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"Silence!" Hoskuldr roared, as Bohuslav remained on one knee gasping for breath. "How dare you interrupt me? You will be wise to answer my questions and to do so quickly or I shall have your head removed and thrown in the river."

Bohuslav had never had anyone speak like this to him. He was about to reply but thought better of it when his one good eye saw there were a dozen armed men around him with their weapons drawn.

"Ulfric, what is the meaning of this interruption?" asked Hoskuldr.

One of Hoskuldr's guards replied, "This dog and twenty armed men rode into town about an hour ago demanding to know what was going on. He would not shut up about being a great Kniaz' and demanded an audience and told us his gods would strike us all down if he were not allowed to enter. We knew you did not want to be disturbed but decided this was important enough and needed to be dealt with immediately."

"You were right to do so, Ulfric," Hoskuldr reassured his man. "And what of his companions?"

"They are all on their knees in the courtyard," Ulfric answered his liege proudly. "They thought it wise not to draw their blades upon seeing us."

"Now, as to you, you one-eyed rat, who are you, and why have you disturbed me?" demanded Hoskuldr.

As Bohuslav began to stand, he received another swift kick to his chest.

"I did not give you leave to stand in my presence," Hoskuldr said sternly.

"How dare you..." Bohuslav managed to say before Hoskuldr kicked him again, this time squarely on the nose. Blood spurted from his nostrils.

"Are you quite through, or do I need to finish you here and now?" Hoskuldr asked calmly.

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Bohuslav realized that continuing down this path would only get him killed, so he calmed himself and remained on his knees. "I am Bohuslav, Kniaz' of the Derevlans." He spat out the blood that had collected in his mouth.

"I could care less if you were Caliph of the Abyssids from Baghdad," Hoskuldr proceeded. "No one interrupts me when I wish not to be interrupted. I am Hoskuldr, son of Hvitserk and grandson of Ragnarr Lodbrok and I am the new master here. Once again, what is the meaning of this interruption?"

"Forgive me," Bohuaslav said in a much more subdued tone, though he had no idea who any of the aforementioned persons were. "I merely wanted to know what was going on so close to my borders. This upstart Vratymyr has been annoying his neighbors recently."

"This upstart," interrupted Hoskuldr, "is now my loyal subject and you will treat him with respect or you will have me to answer to. And henceforth what goes on here is my business and not yours."

Bohuslav's remaining eye twitched as he tried to digest what was happening. He scanned the room and saw all the players present. His scouts had reported a large host coming south along the Dnipro. He had expected to see Kyiv burning and to come in and finish off what was left of his rival. The last thing he had expected was a Varyag host come to claim the lands here as their own. 'So, this was what Vratymyr was cooking up,' he thought to himself. He should have known that since Vratymyr had no heirs that he would try to protect himself from his boyars. What were all the other tribal Kniaz's doing here though? Did this Norseman come to demand tribute from them all? Would he demand tribute from the Derevlans? This was

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not a good sign. The Rus Khaganate had ruled in the North for some time, but this move south did not bode well for his people.

Hoskuldr had done his best to learn about the local politics prior to his arrival, and Gunnar had informed him about the Derevlians and their leader. Gunnar explained to him that Bohuslav was extremely hot-headed and could become a problem. He was also proud and would not join any alliance with the other tribes. This man had to be dealt with in a way that would insure he would not become a problem in the near future.

"What am I to do with you, Kniaz' of the Derevlians." Hoskuldr circled the kneeling man. "Clearly, you are a very inquisitive and nosy type who does not know his place. How can I trust that in the future you will mind your own business and not meddle in my affairs?"

Bohuslav thought about speaking but decided against it.

"I should have you killed for your insolence," Hoskuldr continued. "However, I am sure if I have you killed there will be no one with the sense to tell your tribesmen not to come back here seeking revenge. No. I will let you live. Nevertheless, I cannot allow this insult of yours to go unpunished. You need to learn that my affairs are no longer the business of your prying eye." He turned to his thegns and gave a signal. Two of them quickly grabbed Bohuslav by the arms and dragged him to his feet.

"Fastgir, hold him steady," commanded Hoskuldr. Another of Hoskuldr's boyars came up behind Bohuslav and grabbed his head between his hands so that his remaining eye faced Hoskuldr. Hoskuldr's long, double-edged sword sang as he slid it from its scabbard. The

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last thing on this Earth that Bohuslav saw was the inscription on the fuller of the blade, "+ULFBER+T."

Hoskuldr poked his blade into Bohuslav's remaining eye, and it popped, sending a small river of blood down the blade and over the inscription in the groove.

Bohuslav let out a loud scream that quickly led to a fit of coughing. Between his shattered nose and the blood now flowing from his newly-empty eye socket down into his mouth, he had trouble getting air. The thegns let him go, and he slumped back to his knees, grabbing his face with both hands as blood trickled from in between his fingers. In another momentary fit of coughing, Bohuslav temporarily removed his hands from his face and the remnants of his burst eyeball fell into the pool of blood on the ground before him.

"Lessons need to be learned and warnings heeded," Hoskuldr said nonchalantly. "As I said, I will let you live, but I have also given you a reminder that you should not return to these lands. Your people shall remain in their forests or else I will be forced to lead a host to kill every one of them and burn down your towns and trees. I will let you take your dead back with you as I will only let ten of your men live. You shall return to your people and will never set foot on these lands again unless you are summoned."

"Dazhboh and Perun will make you pay for this one day," Bohuslav hissed defiantly.

"I would take more care with my words Kniaz'," Hoskuldr retorted. "Your gods have clearly forsaken you. You would do well to heed my warning. To show that I am not without mercy I will not demand tribute from you or your tribe unless you decide that you want to return to avenge the deaths of your men. As I have said, in that case you will deal with the full wrath of Hoskuldr and his host.

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"Fastgir," Hoskuldr barked. "Every second man is to be quartered and tossed in a wagon. You will let the Kniaz' keep his horse and leave two for the wagon but the other horses will remain here. Confiscate their weapons as well, except for the sword of the Kniaz'. Let him keep his so he can defend his people on their way home."

"Yes, my lord," said Fastgir, and he and two of the other guards removed the stumbling Bohuslav to the courtyard as the Slavic boyars sat in stunned silence.

The doors to the hall were shut, but the blows from axes and muffled, chilling screams could be heard inside as Hoskuldr's men carried out his orders.

Hoskuldr signaled for one of his men to bring him a piece of cloth to clean his sword and after doing so, he calmly replaced it into its sheath with a hiss like a snake poised to strike. "Now gentlemen, where were we?"



Most of the townspeople had seen lots of brutality in their lives, but what they saw emerging from the Podol gates that day was a spectacle they would not soon forget. When Hoskuldr's men finished butchering half of Bohuslav's contingent, they placed the bloodied and blinded Bohuslav on his horse at the head of the procession. His ten remaining tribesmen on foot stripped of armor and weapons followed him, and bringing up the rear was the horse drawn cart filled to the brim with the body parts of the other half of the Derevlian party.

Mothers stood in shock covering the eyes of their children who had all run out onto the road to see what was going on. The townspeople of Kyiv who had witnessed such a glorious parade during Hoskuldr's



arrival, now were treated to a convoy of death perhaps being a harbinger of things to come.



After the “viche” which is what the Slavs called the gatherings of their boyars, things quickly returned to a state of normalcy in Kyiv. It appeared Hoskuldr was about to make some major changes as construction of various buildings began in the weeks following the massacre.

The children once again ran out onto the roads to witness the arrival of the new blacksmith Mechyslav, along with a massive anvil from Polotesk. Mechyslav’s wagons also carried an enormous bellows and all sorts of other contraptions which the children ogled, wondering what they could be.

Preparations for the winter months were proceeding at a hurried pace. Livestock was slaughtered, salted and dried. Grains were also prepared for winter storage in the new mill. Huge trees were cut down, covered and stacked to dry. Others were cut down to use as fuel to keep everyone warm. One side of Castle Hill was cleared in order for the Varyags to begin training the Slavs in their battle techniques. The winter months would provide ample time for training, as there was little else to do other than hunt.



Vratymyr realized after the blinding of Bohuslav and the slaughter of his men that things would never be the same. They would not have been the same had the

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massacre not occurred though. In a way, Bohuslav brought it upon himself. Vratymyr also understood the necessity of Hoskuldr's brutality. While Bohuslav would be livid and would want revenge, he was not a stupid man. Hoskuldr's threat would keep the Derevlians in the forest and not poking around in their affairs.

Hoskuldr had allowed Vratymyr to retain the title Kniaz' of the Polians and Vratymyr became his liaison with the Polians. Yaropolk remained Kniaz' of his people as well. Everyone began to refer to Hoskuldr as the Khagan of Kyiv. As with many of the Norse names, the locals had difficulty pronouncing his name, and often Vratymyr heard them referring to their new Khagan as Haskoldir and later simply as Askoldir. This was nothing strange. In the North they referred to Roerik as Riurik, and many of the other Varyag names had new, easier to pronounce equivalents.

Retreating to the comfort of his bed, Vratymyr once again thought of his grandfather and reached for his ring, which he remembered was no longer on his finger. With all the recent events, he had completely forgotten that it had rolled under the bed. He moved the bed over and grabbed a burning twig from the hearth. It was not readily visible so he tried feeling around for it. After several minutes of groping in the shadows he felt his ring which was caught on a well-disguised latch. He fiddled with it for several moments until it clicked and opened a panel in the floor. Beneath it was a dug out hole in which was a large wooden chest held together with metal braces. Thank you grandfather, thought Vratymyr to himself.

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## Winter 858

It had taken some time to orchestrate, but the plan Photios and Bardas had come up with was finally near completion. The merchants from the North, the barbarian Rhos and their Slavic friends were the perfect dupes. This was not the first time Bardas and he had had to remove someone who stood in their way, and it would not be the last. They had become experts at making people who stood in their way disappear, meet an untimely end or take the blame for something they didn't do. The merchants really did not do anything wrong, nor did they deserve their fate; they merely happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. They also were the perfect targets. Since they came from a faraway land, fewer prying friends and relatives would ask questions.

It was all so simple really. Photios had forged the documents from the Varangians to make it appear as if they were here to spy on the Emperor. Then, they had placed them where men loyal to Patriarch Ignatios would find them. Ignatios was all too eager to get in the good graces of the young Emperor Michael and brought the documents to his attention, saying they were found on the slain body of one of the Varangians. The Emperor hastily ordered the execution of the spies. It was then that Bardas had suggested to Michael that something did not seem right about the entire situation with the Rhos, and to have Photios look into the matter.

Photios was well-known in Nova Roma as a preeminent scholar, and his home was a center of learning where he had tutored most of the great city's prominent youths. If anyone could find out if the

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Varangians had indeed been spies or what their purpose here really was, it would be Photios.

Photios spent several weeks "carefully studying the matter" and uncovered that Ignatios had had carnal relations with several men, and that one of the Rhos had witnessed this. The Patriarch must have feared the Rhos would spread the tale and to be safe had framed the whole party. At the time, the Emperor had questioned how Ignatios could have had carnal relations if he was a eunuch. Photios reminded the Emperor that not both men in a carnal relationship needed a phallus. He then pointed out how the documents found on the Varangian were a forgery. They were in Latin and not the runes of the Norse. How would this Rhos trader know how to speak Latin, much less be able to write in the language? The Patriarch, on the other hand, being a clergyman, knew Latin fluently. This was more than enough evidence for the inexperienced Michael to be convinced of the Patriarch's guilt in the matter. How dare that Ignatios use him to get rid of *his* problem? The Emperor's first reaction was to have Ignatios thrown from the sea wall into the Propontis. However, Photios promptly informed the Emperor that it would not be wise to incur the wrath of Rome and that it would be best to have Ignatios deposed and exiled. This would still upset the Pope but less so than an execution.

Michael had agreed. A week ago Ignatios was charged with high treason, deposed and exiled to Terebinthos, one of the Isles of the Princes.

The two conspirators were pleased with themselves as they sat in Photios' apartments. "Serves him right." Bardas laughed. "The bastard wouldn't let me into the Hagia Sophia for fucking my daughter-in-law? She was a widow anyway, so what was the harm? Look at him now, ha. He is the one with his holy reputation

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besmirched and a traitor and exile. Having everyone think he was getting poked in his holy arse just makes it so much the sweeter."

"Now, now," Photios said. "No need to be so crass. Mind your tongue. After all, you are speaking to the next Patriarch of Nova Roma." They both looked at each other and smiled. Bardas burst out laughing.

"My how you have advanced in the ranks of the church lately. Five days ago you were just a scholar and tomorrow you will be the Patriarch."

It had been a whirlwind and a blur of a week. After Ignatios' deposition and exile, Bardas had convinced his nephew Michael that Photios would be the perfect replacement for Ignatios. The only problem was that he was a layman. It usually took years before someone was ordained as a priest but exceptions were made in special circumstances. Photios was tonsured on December the twentieth, was ordained as a lector on the twenty first, a sub-deacon on the twenty second, a deacon on the twenty third, and a priest this afternoon.

"Yes, tomorrow we will celebrate the birth of Christ and the consecration of a new Patriarch," Photios said. "I've prayed more in the last five days than I have in the last fifteen years."

Photios was no stranger to religion. His great uncle Tarasius had also been the Patriarch of Constantinople at one time. It was quite fitting that he would be the one to return the title to his family. He had thought of becoming a monk in his youth but he believed concentrating his studies mostly around the scriptures was a waste. He wanted to learn all the disciplines and spent his entire life collecting scrolls and books on every subject he could find. His personal library was even finer than the royal library, which meant it was the finest in all of Nova Roma. It was quite possible that he had the

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third greatest collection of knowledge in the entire world, behind only the great library of Alexandria and the library of the Popes in Rome.

Photios looked down on people who despised knowledge and the arts. He also looked down upon ignorant people who thought that the arts and the church were separate and could not coexist. Like the damned iconoclasts. Granted they did not despise all art, but he felt their beliefs were silly and misguided. The Empress Irene and his great uncle Tarasios had restored the veneration of icons in Nova Roma at the Council of Nicea seventy-one years ago. His great uncle had once embraced iconoclasm but repented and helped restore the icons. It was quite ironic that Tarasios also had been a layman when the Empress chose him to be Patriarch. Throughout his research Photios had always noticed patterns of history repeating in subtle ways.

Forty-three years ago, iconoclasm had reared its ugly head when the Emperor Leo called a Synod in the Hagia Sophia and rendered it official once again. Photios was just a child of five at the time, but he could remember his father Sergios cursing the iconoclasts. This was the main reason he decided not to become a monk. He could still recall his father repeating the arguments of Theodorus Studita, of how depictions of Jesus and the saints were icons and were to be revered, while idols were all the images that were not of the faith.

"Are all the preparations ready for tomorrow?" Photios asked.

"Yes," replied Bardas. "You will be consecrated prior to Christmas Mass. All the usual dignitaries will be there. It should be a very memorable extravaganza.

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The Pope, however, has not sent any of his representatives."

"To hell with Pope Nicholas," spat Photios. "He has always had a soft spot for Ignatios. I did not think he would be sending anyone for the consecration, and, even if he did, I doubt they would have been able to get here on time. We will probably have to deal with his legates soon enough, as he is sure to send them to find out the entire story behind the deposition of Ignatios."

"Bah," muttered Bardas. "I'm sure you will come up with a convincing story for them."

"We shall see," replied Photios. "Angering the Pope is never a good idea, but there was no other way. At least he has his hands busy calming his flock with all the incursions by the Norse and the Muslims in the West. I hope that that will keep his mind off us for a while. Don't forget he has had it in for us since you got rid of your sister."

"It was necessary, and you know it," replied Bardas. "She and Ignatios would have had the Pope take full authority over our church here in order to solidify their positions."

Photios had always sympathized with Bardas' sister, Theodora, who was the Empress and served as co-regent after Michael's father, the Emperor Theophilus, had died from illness sixteen years ago. The second iconoclasm brought about by Emperor Leo V had cost his family dearly, and his father had lost a lot of influence due to his iconophile views. Theodora had restored the veneration of the icons after the second iconoclasm, which was fully supported by Theophilus. She had had the iconoclast Patriarch John VII Grammatikos deposed and made sure that Methodios replaced him. Methodios was a very learned man, but he was weak. Instead of ridding Nova Roma of the



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iconoclasts for good, he was too lenient in dealing with them. He did excommunicate some of the more vociferous iconoclasts who persisted with their views and had a few others arrested, but Photios felt he should have destroyed their ideological leaders to prevent the hated doctrine from resurfacing again. Nonetheless, Photios did support his anti-iconoclast sermons and had a collection of several of them in his library. Methodios had diplomatically argued for the restoration of the icons by saying they should be venerated and not worshipped, which eventually convinced the council.

Theodora, however, had become a problem. After the death of Michael II, Theodora, her brothers Bardas and Petronas and the influential minister Theoktistos became co-regents of the two-year-old Michael III. Theodora despised Bardas and fully supported Ignatios' efforts against him. But her big mistake was ignoring her son and his education. Apparently, she thought that if she made sure Michael did not get a good education, she could continue to control the Empire. Bardas, on the other hand, had become a mentor to the young Michael, and Photios had begun educating him, gaining his respect as well. This eventually was Theodora's undoing.

While the current Emperor Michael III was very young Theoktistos was effectively ruling the Empire, and it was he who had arranged for the assassination of Leo V, which had brought Michael's father to the throne. Michael II was a close friend of the former Emperor and commanded his elite military unit, the tagma. However, when Leo divorced his sister-in-law, Michael II could not forgive him and started plotting against him. Leo had Michael II arrested and he was to be executed for treason, but Leo had delayed the

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execution until after Christmas. Michael II managed to get word to Theoktistos and his other co-conspirators against Leo that he would reveal their names before his death. Theoktistos then ordered the assassination of Leo, which occurred in the Chapel of St. Stephen during Christmas Mass. Michael II was immediately released from prison and proclaimed Emperor before they even had the chance to remove the prison irons from his legs. The following day he was crowned.

In return, Michael II made Theoktistos a magistros and appointed him as the logothetes tou dromou, making him responsible for the foreign affairs of the Empire. Michael II also made Theoktistos his son's regent shortly before his death.

Unfortunately for the Empress and her close confidant and ally Theoktistos, when young Michael came of age at sixteen he elevated Bardas to the highest rank of Caesar. Shortly thereafter Michael and Bardas had Theoktistos arrested and executed. That was three years ago.

"Good thing the both of them ignored young Michael," mused Photios. "It was a foolish move they both paid for. Have you heard any news about your dear sister?"

"She is still at the nunnery," answered Bardas. "I think it quite fitting that she will live out the rest of her days in a prison built by our mother." Bardas' mother Theoctista had established the nunnery of Gastria on a parcel of land she bought in the city quarter of Psamathia.

"You really need to watch your tongue, Bardas," Photios interrupted. "Referring to nunneries as prisons and fornicating with one's daughter-in-law is precisely what got you into trouble with Ignatios in the first place."

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"Widowed daughter-in-law." Bardas reminded him.

"Semantics. Either way, you need to be more careful. We still have much to do and the less unneeded enemies we make the better."

"I will make sure that my men keep an eye on that place too so Theodora does not get any ideas. There is also a nun there that I have, let me see, how can I put it so as not to offend your patriarchal piety, been helping with her physical needs. I hope that is careful enough for your eminence," he said with a smirk. "She will inform me if there are any visitors or if any conspiracy is afoot."

"Excellent," exclaimed Photios. "She still has allies and they need to be kept away from her at all costs."

"Petronas will keep a very close eye on her," Bardas stated emphatically. "He never forgave our dear sister for letting the Emperor go ahead with stripping him naked and having him flogged in public for building that palace of his. It cost him many a solidus when they tore it down and gave the land and materials to that widow whose house it overshadowed. He has her and her three daughters locked away in there so tight, I am sure they will never again see the light of day. Theodora kept explaining to him that the law was the law, but he would have none of that. A patrikios, commander of the Vigla, flogged naked like a common criminal! No sir, that is something he will never forgive her for. He will see her rot in that nun house."

"But isn't he in Thrace most of the time?" asked Photios.

"That may be true," said Bardas, "but making him strategos of the Theme of the Thracians has really solidified his loyalty. Not that it needed solidifying, but he has his most loyal men guarding that holy prison." The Thracian Theme was one of the most prominent

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military-civilian provinces in the Empire and as strategos or military governor, Petronas had become even more wealthy and powerful than he had been under his father-in-law. "He's doing what he enjoys as well. I swear my brother likes killing more than I do. In that first campaign of his after his appointment I thought he was going to cut his way through to Baghdad. The man is a good leader. He can fight as well as administrate. He is where he should be, doing what he does best."

"Very well." Photios yawned. "Now get out of here and let me get some rest. You get some rest as well. We have a long day ahead of us tomorrow."

"That we do," replied Bardas. He exited the chamber via the hall of the Danube then scampered down a series of staircases. Soon he reached the Church of St. Mary of Blachernae, exited stealthily through a side door, and disappeared into the night.

Photios retreated to his chamber in the Blachernae Palace and tried to get some sleep. Sleep did not come easily. His thoughts churned over the events of the last ten years, then jumped to his childhood and his father Sergios, and then to the past week. He also began to wonder if he would ever have time to complete his Myriobiblon, which he had been working on for years. He was determined to collect all the works of the known learned men throughout the ages in one place. He wondered how the Plinys of the future would perceive him. What would they write of him in future histories of the world? Finally, he succumbed to a restless slumber.



Morning came much too quickly and Photios felt groggy as he began preparing himself for the day ahead.

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He decided to take a little stroll in the chilly air to awaken his tired body and to focus his mind. While it rarely got cold enough for snow in Nova Roma, it still was quite chilly on this Christmas morning. Photios left the confines of the palace and took a stroll along Leo's Wall. The Bulgar King Krum constantly threatened the Empire and even forced Michael I to recognize Charlemagne to avoid war with the Franks. When he ascended to the throne, Leo V decided to fortify the defenses of this vulnerable part of the city in the northwest and built an outer wall with four small towers around the suburb, which housed the Church of St. Mary and the precious relics of the Virgin. Soon the palace in Blacharnae became not only a welcome retreat from the hustle and bustle of the rest of the city but the favored residence of the Emperors.

Photios strolled across the entire wall with its four small towers, first looking out over the city to the southeast and then stopping near the end of his journey to look out over the Golden Horn to the north. Feeling refreshed he returned to his chambers to prepare for the day's festivities.

Bardas soon arrived. "Are you ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," replied Photios.

"Good, Michael is already at the Palace near the Cathedral. I escorted him there earlier this morning. The archdeacon has everything prepared for your arrival and the Christmas Mass and consecration will begin in a couple of hours."

"Very well." Photios sighed. "Let's get this over with."

The trek to the Great Palace was a blur. Photios was in deep thought as they marched past the aqueduct along the Mese, the city's central street, then entered the Venetian quarter and passed the Forum of

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Theodosius and then the Forum of Constantine. It was not until they reached the Hippodrome when he began to focus on the magnitude of events that were about to change his life.

The Hippodrome amazed Photios to this day. It was built over 650 years ago when the city was still called Byzantium and Constantine renovated it to its current glory. It was in his honor that many people also called the city Constantinople as well as Nova Roma. A full five hundred meters long and one hundred and thirty meters wide, it was a marvel that could hold over one hundred thousand spectators to watch the chariot races. As they passed the north end of the stadium, Photios felt as if the four horses of gilded copper standing atop the Hippodrome box were staring down at him. Before they passed through the great bronze portals of the Chalke Gate, Photios looked at the icon of Christ above the gates on the façade, which had been a cherished symbol of his father and all the other iconodules during the iconoclasm. He could not help but smile. His father would have been proud of him at this moment. It was a pity he did not live to see it.

The Chalke itself was an impressive structure. The rectangular gatehouse had a large central dome supported by four engaged piers on pendentives and contained the Church of Christ Chalkites above it. This form of architecture allowed the building of an elliptical dome over a square room. The pendentives themselves rested on four barrel-arches. This new style of building made the room look immense and gave the appearance that the dome was floating in the air without support. Photios and Bardas quickly passed through the vestibule with its multicolored marble walls and intricate mosaics on the ceiling depicting the Emperor Justinian with his

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Empress and the senate and the exploits of the great general Belisarius.

They made their way towards the Theotokos tou Pharou, the Church of the Virgin of the Pharos, named after the lighthouse which stood beside it. It was here, away from the hustle and bustle of the rest of the palace, that Photios was to meet the Emperor. The church was a personal project of the teen-aged Michael and was where he and Photios would meet when they were at the Great Palace. After Photios had begun teaching the young Emperor in waiting about the iconoclasm, the young man took it upon himself to make sure that the finest artists in New Rome restored the small church into a splendid wonder. Work had begun several years ago and was still in progress. It was only a small building consisting of three apses, a ribbed dome, a narthex and an atrium. Since it was not yet consecrated, it was a great place to meet without having any of the usual prying eyes and ears present. Photios also noticed that Michael had spared no expense in its restoration. It would be a thing of beauty when complete.

"A good Christmas to you, my young Emperor," Photios greeted Michael.

"And to you as well, our soon to be Patriarch and spiritual leader." Michael had started to grow a mustache and beard to try to look a little older. The young always want to be old and the old always want to be young, Photios thought to himself.

"Don't remind me," Photios responded. "Give me at least these last few precious minutes without that weight on my shoulders."

"Very well," the Emperor said. "I will leave you to your thoughts and preparations. They have been hounding me to start dressing for the occasion. Do you

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believe that? I am the Emperor; who do they think they are telling me when to get dressed?"

"It may have something to do with the celebration of the birth of Jesus our Christ and savior, my Emperor," replied Photios. "I believe their fear of Him supersedes their fear of you."

"You are right as always, Photios. I will see you at the ceremony." Michael turned and left with his personal guards in tow.

"All right, Bardas, let us get on with it." The two made their way out of the chapel and to the Triconchos Palace where Photios was to get ready.



It seemed like Photios had barely donned his vestments when he was ushered out of the palace. He was taken past the Scholae Palatinae, which was the barracks used by the palace guards, and led back to the Chalke Gate.

An enormous crowd had gathered outside the Augustaion, an enclosed courtyard of the Hagia Sophia. Tens of thousands of people crowded the streets to try to get a glimpse of the procession.

At the Hagia Sophia there were readings from the Acts of the Apostles and the Synaxarion. Then the procession of deacons and presbyters made their way to the palace carrying their candles, censures and crosses as the archdeacon locked the doors to the basilica and awaited the arrival of Photios holding the key in his hand.

At the Chalke Gate, the procession greeted the Patriarch-to-be and made its way back to the basilica. It was arranged in order of seniority so that the deacons were at the head, followed by the presbyters, followed



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by the bishops, who were also organized according to seniority. Photios was at the very end of the procession. In front of the senior bishop, an archdeacon carried the Book of the Gospel and chanted, "The Only-begotten Son, the Eternal Logos, Who for our salvation was incarnate from the Theotokos, the ever-Virgin Mary, and became man, and was crucified..."

As they reached the gates of the basilica, Photios could not help but marvel at its beauty. He doubted there was a more breathtaking structure anywhere in the world. He continued to revel in the glory of this magnificent house of God as the archdeacon handed him the key to the great gates, which he opened. They entered the cathedral, and the ceremony began in earnest. Photios kneeled in front of the sanctuary, and the senior bishop read from the Book of the Gospel. The air was thick with incense and gave Photios the feeling they were all ascending into heaven upon the nubilous clouds of fragrant smoke.

Photios barely heard the petitions read by the bishop and the chanting of the responses by the deacons. All the prayers, including the senior bishop's invocation of the Holy Spirit, seemed very far away. Photios felt himself floating above the fifteen-meter silver iconostasis, higher and higher until he had reached the top of the wonderfully mosaicked central dome. He felt as if he could reach up and touch God.

He quickly returned to Earth as his fellow servants of God began to clothe him in his new white silk sticharion. He received the deed of investiture from the senior bishop. The deacons sang more hymns, and more petitions were recited. Then all the bishops lay their hands upon his head one at a time, while the senior bishop said, "We lay our hands upon Photios the elect servant of God, for the prosperity and peace of the One,

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Holy, Orthodox, Apostolic Church of God, that which He purchased with His Precious Blood." This was done because Photios had not previously been consecrated into the episcopacy. After this, the deacons sang more hymns and his robing with the insignia of his new office began. First, he received his epitrachelion; then the girdle; then the right sleeve; then the left sleeve; then the kerchiefs; then the phelonion; and lastly the miter.

They led Photios to the sanctuary where the cross and pastoral staff were laid out on the altar. The senior bishop then called upon Photios to "receive the Pastoral Staff from the hand of the Shepherd of shepherds, Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God." Then he handed him the staff, which Photios accepted.

After accepting the staff, he was handed a box of incense. He took a pinch out and placed it in the censer. The other bishops followed suit, at which point the senior bishop turned to face east and said, "We glorify Thy Holy Name, for Thou hast done great things to us, and poured Thy rich gifts over thy servant and Patriarch Photios by the descent of Thy Holy Spirit upon him."

The senior bishop then led Photios to the patriarchal seat where his formal enthronement was concluded. After this, the procession once again left the church to escort the new Patriarch back to the Great Palace, this time to a rousing chorus of loud cheers from the onlookers.

Photios was now the Patriarch of Nova Roma. He had just caught his breath when the entire procession turned around again and marched back to the Hagia Sofia for the Christmas Mass. It would be the first mass he ever led.



After all the congratulations and celebrations, Photios was happy to have escaped with Bardas and be back in his quarters in Blancharnae. Thankfully, Michael and Petronas had engaged the other dignitaries and provided a good diversion for him and Bardas to slip away unnoticed. Bardas could be crass but he was a good friend and co-conspirator. Photios was glad Bardas chose him to be Michael's tutor. Since that day they had become very close and now they practically controlled the Empire being masters of both church and state.

Photios should have remained at the Great Palace, but he wanted one last night of peace and quiet before all the formalities of his new office began to be heaped upon him.

His head was still spinning from all the incense he had inhaled combined with the few cups of wine he had at the feast. He was sure the celebrations were continuing and that most of the guests would be wondering where he was, but he had tired of all the toasts and bishops cornering him to curry for his favor. Let them fall over themselves to get his ear later. He was exhausted. The spiritual weight of the Empire's flock had just been placed on his shoulders.

"And so it begins," Photios said, the exhaustion evident in his voice.

"It began a while ago, your eminence." Bardas smiled and bowed, kissing his hand.

"Stop being foolish." Photios was not in the mood for his sarcasm.

"I was just trying to break up the seriousness of a long day," Bardas said. "I don't think I've ever spent

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that much time in a church. The processions, the consecration, more processions, then the mass."

"Well you better get used to it," Photios said emphatically. "Now that I am Patriarch we both will be spending much more time in church and dealing with church matters."

"Well you may be." Bardas shook his head. "But not me."

"Oh yes you will." Photios spoke with a more commanding tone, then softened his voice. "You are the only person I can trust explicitly and I will need you to keep an eye on all those bishops."

"Seems like I'm going to need a lot more eyes."

"That you will, but now with Ignatios out of the way we have sway over both the Emperor and the church. I pray we have the strength to do what's right after all the wrong we have done to get into this position."

"Don't get philosophical on me, Photios." Bardas chuckled. "I'm not here for a lesson. You've got Michael for that."

Photios was silent for a while. "I think Michael is done with his lessons. I believe with most of the intrigue in the palace out of the way he is going to start concentrating more on ruling and making a name for himself."

"Well then," Bardas said. "Let's help him start making the right decisions."



## Spring 859

Askoldir had spent the beginning of the winter laying the foundations for the expansion of Kyiv and the strengthening of its defenses. He wanted it to become more self-sufficient. When he saw that things were progressing nicely, he left Vratymyr in charge to oversee the projects and travelled north with several of his most trusted boyars and Gunnar and Stoyan to meet with Riurik in Aldeigja. Vratymyr was a good man, but Askoldir wondered if he had the stomach for the things to come.

Travelling north in the winter was usually easier than travelling north in the spring. Even the mighty Dnipro would freeze over most winters and it was much easier moving things with sleds along the river than trying to navigate it upstream in ships or boats during the spring rains. It was also easier to travel through the snow than through mud.

After spending a few weeks in Aldeigja, Riurik and a handful of his henchmen, along with Askoldir and his crew, sailed to Uppsala in Svealand. It had been a long time since Askoldir had been on the sea, and he missed it dearly. When he lived in Aldeigja, he would raid every summer, but most of this past year he had lived the life of an administrator rather than a warrior. He longed for battle again.

Uppsala was the most important place in all of Scandanavia. It was here that the god Freyr founded the temple, and it was here that the Sveald kings resided. The current King was Ragnarr Lodbrok. Ragnarr was King of the Danes as well. He was also Askoldir's grandfather. He would be the one leading the

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Thing of All Svealds and being King made him the gothi, high priest of the temple at Uppsala.

They had arrived just in time for the Disablot on the vernal equinox. In order for the disir to provide a plentiful harvest a sacrifice to them must be made. The disir were female spirits who could be very helpful or very cruel, so it was always best to be in their better graces. During the Disablot and the Thing, there was a huge fair where wares from all over the known world were bought, sold and traded.

Askoldir, Gunnar and Stoyan made their way towards the temple, the most important and central structure in Uppsala. It was in the center of a small valley surrounded by hills. It was average in size compared with the massive cathedrals and basilicas of the Christians. The unique feature of its exterior was a huge chain that wrapped around it, giving the impression that the shrine must be anchored to the Earth to prevent it from ascending into the heavens. Beside the temple was a well and a grove of elms. The central, massive elm was the sacred tree of Uppsala.

Inside the house of worship was a large triple throne on which sat statues of Thor, Odin and Freyr. Thor sat in the center, being the most important and held his hammer Mjolnir in his lap. At his sides sat Odin, who wore an elaborate suit of armor, and Freyr, who had a massive erect penis. Smaller statues depicting famous Scandanavian warriors and kings stood along the walls. These men were honored along with the gods because they had become immortal due to their deeds in life.

Each of the three gods had their specific priest and served a specific function. Sacrifices were made to the gods on behalf of the priests, depending on the occasion. During war or prior to a raid the priest appointed to Odin would make a sacrifice to him. If

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someone were getting married, then Freyr's priest made a sacrifice to him on their behalf. In times of famine or plague there would be a sacrifice to Thor.

The Disablot would last nine days, during which there would be twenty-seven sacrifices. Each day one man and two animals would be hung from the sacred trees in the grove, and their blood would be smeared on the trees. If the gods were appeased, then the harvest would be a good one.

Today's human sacrifice was a scrawny thrall who looked Frankish. There was a terrified expression on his face as the faithful chanted and a noose was slipped around his neck. He screamed in his native tongue, probably begging for mercy. His screams ceased when he was hoisted up on one of the branches of the massive elm in the center of the grove. He raised his arms, desperately clawing at the rope. His legs flailed trying to find something solid to brace themselves against or to stand on. At this point Ragnarr approached him with his drawn sword and sliced open his belly. The thrall's bowels emptied out of him like long coiled snakes slithering down to the grass. The priestesses then grabbed the bloody intestines and began smearing the trees in the grove with them. The thrall's eyes bulged as his lungs found no air, and soon his thrashing ceased for all eternity.

The ritual continued, and the same fate awaited first a horse and then a cow. Askoldir glanced over at Stoyan who stared in amazement, having never witnessed something like this before. The Slavs were pagans as well, and many of their gods were quite similar to those of the Norsemen even though they had different names, but they did not perform ritual sacrifices of humans.



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Everyone who knew the hymns chanted along, and most of those present were mesmerized by the spectacle of collective blood lust. When the ceremony was over, the bodies were left hanging on the branches, and everyone went about their business.

The Rus party made their way towards Ragnarr's hall as he disappeared back into the temple. Askoldir browsed the wares along the way. At one of the stalls, a wooden tafl board inlaid with dark glass caught his eye. On it stood a myriad of figurines which were wonderfully carved and painted.

"Nice craftsmanship," Askoldir commended the vendor. "How much?"

"What'll you offer m'lord?" replied the vendor.

Removing a silver ring from his pinky Askoldir tossed it to the vendor. "Will that do?"

"Aye, it will," the vendor answered quickly. He stuffed the ring into a pouch under his shirt.

"What is that?" Stoyan asked.

"Tafl," Askoldir answered with a huge smile. "The only thing, other than fighting, my father taught me. It is a good game to sharpen one's mind."

Gunnar slapped Stoyan on the back mightily. "If you like when we get back to Kyiv I'll have one of the craftsmen make a set and I'll teach you."

"Very well," Stoyan said. "It will be a pleasure finding something else I can beat you at other than throwing bones."

As they continued down the street, Stoyan was amazed at the variety of goods in the stalls. It appeared that if he took enough time, anything he desired could be found here. One vendor was selling fine silk. Another stall was filled with a variety of spices. Yet another sold trinkets from the lands of the Abbysids. Stoyan found himself a nice fur-lined cloak and negotiated a good

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price of four dirhams. "Is there anything they don't sell here?"

"They'd sell the walls of Miklagard here if they found a way to put them on a ship," replied Gunnar laughing.

The great hall at Uppsala was massive. It was made of elm and oak and could probably fit over a thousand men. As they entered, Stoyan could not help but marvel at the colorful scene. All of Scandanavia's most prominent warriors were present. Some of them were dressed as if ready for battle; others dressed more comfortably. Most had their weapons at their sides or strapped to their backs. At one side of the hall, Stoyan noticed one warrior fornicating with one of the young server thralls as several others cheered him on. Mead flowed freely. The walls were covered with banners and standards of many different colors bearing the insignias of lords defeated by raiders. Tapestries of quality ranging from excellent to poor adorned the walls, also spoils of war. Among these hung a multitude of shields and weapons, many of which Stoyan had never seen. One that particularly caught his eye was a massive two-handed sword that must have been two meters long. He could not even imagine what sort of monster could have wielded it.

Most of Askoldir's uncles were present. Well, at least the ones he knew of. Ragnarr must have had many illegitimate children over all of Europe. He had probably unknowingly even killed a few in battle, Askoldir thought to himself. Knowing his grandfather, he may have killed some of them knowingly as well.

As they made their way to one of the long tables where a few of Askoldir's uncles sat, Gunnar asked him, "Just how many uncles do you have?"

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"That's a good question. Ragnarr had three wives and probably well over three hundred concubines, so I would have to say at least one hundred or so."

Askoldir remembered the tales of Ragnarr told to him when he was a child, some by Ragnarr himself and others by the priests and his father Hvitserk. Askoldir's mother had died birthing him so he was raised communally. As a child, Askoldir had always been captivated by the story of Ragnarr and Lagertha. He remembered his father's tale as if it were yesterday. Ragnarr's grandfather Siwardr was the King of Norway. At the time, the Sveald King Fro invaded Norway and killed Siwardr. Fro had all of Siwardr's female relatives put in a brothel in order to publically humiliate his family. When Ragnarr heard of this, he vowed revenge on Fro. Upon arriving with his host in Norway not only did the local men join his side, but the disgraced women also dressed as men and took up arms against Fro. One of the women however did not tie up her hair or do much to disguise the fact that she was a maiden. Lagertha with her flowing locks of hair fought with the courage of many men and cut through at least half a dozen of Fro's warriors. Her courage immediately caught Ragnarr's eye and he had to have her for a wife. After courting her for some time from afar, he decided that he would take a more direct approach. When he arrived at her home to seek her hand he was set upon by two denizens guarding it. The first was a massive bear. As the bear was about to pounce on Ragnarr he thrust his spear through its throat killing it instantly. Immediately after this, he was set upon by the great hound, which he choked to death as it clawed at him.

"Let's see, there's my oldest uncle Fridlief who was the son of Lagertha." Askoldir decided to see how many he could remember. "I never met him and from what I

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was told he died a warrior's death in battle somewhere in Denmark and is in Valhalla now."

One time when Ragnarr was under the influence of too many horns of mead, he told the young Askoldir never to trust women. "They will drive you to your grave as sure as a sword or an axe will," he used to say. "But dying by the sword is a much less painful death, and swifter." Ragnarr never forgave Lagertha for the welcoming committee when he arrived to ask for her hand. They married but he divorced her as he could not get over the fact she made him fight to win her. Ragnarr won glory for himself by recklessly raiding after the divorce as if he were invincible. Witnesses said Ragnarr had fought as if possessed by Odin himself, when in fact Ragnarr merely did not care if he lived or died. His exploits caught the eye of the daughter of the Sveald King Herrauro, Thora Town-Hart and soon after, they were married.

"What became of Lagertha?" Stoyan asked.

"After they divorced and Ragnarr married Thora, there was a civil war in Denmark and Ragnarr felt he needed all the help he could get. He called upon the aid of Lagertha who had married the King of Norway. She still loved Ragnarr and led a fleet of one hundred ships to come to Ragnarr's aid. During the battle, my uncle Siwardr was wounded; there was a lot of confusion and the men began to panic. Lagertha led her men for a sally at the enemies' rear and took them completely by surprise. When they saw a woman at the front of the charge, they panicked and were soon routed. This turned the battle around. After that, she returned to Norway, and still in love with Ragnarr, she decided to kill her husband in their bed."

"So how many uncles from Thora?" asked Stoyan.

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Askoldir thought for a second. "There is Siwardr who is seated over there." He pointed to a table with a host of Danish warriors. "And there were Eirikr and Agnar."

"Were?" Stoyan interjected.

"Yes, they are dead," Askoldir replied.

"And how did they meet their end?" Stoyan asked, now completely enthralled in the tale.

"Well, that is a long complicated story. I'll try to make it as brief as I can. Not so long ago Ragnarr was King of Denmark and his good friend Eysteinn was ruling here in Svealand. Eysteinn's daughter was believed to be the most beautiful woman in all of Scandinavia. Her name was Ingeborg."

"Wait," interrupted Stoyan. "How was Eysteinn ruling Svealand if Ragnarr is King here?"

"I told you it was a long story. My uncles Eirkr and Agnar left Svealand and were winning much glory for themselves. They conquered Reidgotoland, Gotland, Zealand, Oland and all of the minor islands. Ragnarr became very jealous, and to a certain extent afraid they would try and take Svealand for themselves after their successes abroad. He made Eysteinn Jarl of Svealand in order to protect it from his sons while he went across the sea to pillage, to show that he still was a great warrior as well. At this point Thora had died of illness and Ragnarr was to marry Aslaug. Eysteinn suggested to Ragnarr that he marry his daughter instead of the pauper Aslaug. Seeing how beautiful Ingeborg was, Ragnarr agreed, and became betrothed to Ingeborg. Hearing this, Aslaug decided not to let her fate be decided by these men and told one of the priests to tell Ragnarr that she had a vision that she was the daughter of Sigurdr and Brynhildr. When Ragnarr heard this he decided that a descendant of Sigurdr and Brynhildr was

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a much better match than the daughter of his friend no matter how beautiful she was."

"Who in the name of Perun are Sigurdr and Brynhildr?"

"Sigurdr is the son of Sigmundr, who died fighting none other than Odin, and Brynhildr was a god that Odin forced to become mortal." Askoldir exhaled loudly. "I told you this was very complicated."

"And Ragnarr believed this priest?" Stoyan asked amazed.

"Do not underestimate us Nords and our relationship with our gods," Askoldir lectured. "We fight in their name and hope one day to be at their side in Valhalla. To be descended of the gods is an honor that is not taken lightly."

"But she obviously fabricated the story..." Stoyan said.

"If the priest was convinced, then that was good enough for Ragnarr," Askoldir said, cutting him off. "Now, let me continue."

"By all means," Stoyan said. "This is getting more interesting by the minute."

Askoldir grabbed an elaborate gilded horn, signaled for it to be filled by one of the thralls and drank deeply. "Eisteinn was very upset that Ragnarr refused to marry his daughter. After some time, he told Ragnarr that they were no longer friends and declared himself King of Svealand. Ragnarr was busy with uprisings in Denmark and decided he would deal with Eystienn later. Since Eirikr and Agnar realized their father would no longer be upset if they raided Svealand, they proceeded to do so freely along with their half-brother Ivar, who joined their raids at the ripe old age of twelve. Ivar, though young and superstitious, was already a savage warrior at a very young age. They raided for many

seasons and eventually Eysteinn and the Svealds had enough. Eysteinn mustered the Sveald forces with the fiery cross."

"What is that?" Stoyan asked, intrigued at the imagery.

"When there is a call to battle a King or Jarl will send someone from town to town carrying a small burning cross in order to summon the leidang. The leidang is a mustering of the entire fleet of all free men who are obliged to serve when summoned by the fiery cross. For three seasons Eysteinn gathered men and ships and prepared for the next raid of the brothers. Not knowing what was waiting for them Agnar and Eirikr sailed into Lake Malaren and sent a messenger to Eysteinn to submit to the sons of Ragnarr and to bring Eirikr his daughter so Ragnarr could have her hand in marriage. Obviously, my uncles picked the wrong season to make demands and were soon overwhelmed by the Sveald forces. Agnar was killed in the battle and Eirikr was taken prisoner. Fearing Ragnarr's wrath, Eysteinn offered Eirikr his daughter and as much land as he wanted in Upssala od as wereguild. Eirikr simply replied that all he wanted to do after such a shameful defeat was to choose the day of his own death. He also asked that he be impaled upon spears, and for his body to be raised above those of his dead brethren. His wish was granted by Eysteinn."

"I'm pretty sure I can guess what happens next," Stoyan said.

"The what was inevitable," Askoldir retorted. "The how was incredible. Even though Eirikr and Agnar were not Aslaug's sons she had grown fond of them because they had taken first Ivar and later Bjorn, Hasting and Hvitserk under their wing and made men out of them. Aslaug asked her sons to avenge the deaths of Eirikr

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and Agnar. At first, they were a little wary because Ivar, who had been superstitious since birth, knew that Eysteinn was very devout and had heard that when Eirikr and Agnar were killed the Sveald army had forced Sibilja to join their ranks."

"Sibilja?"

"Ah, yes. Sibilja is a holy cow worshipped by the Svealds. In times of war, it is led in front of the army and its magic bellow causes the opposing forces to start fighting among themselves. Ivar was wary of facing this strong magic but when his little brother Sigurdr, who was three at the time, said he wanted Eysteinn to pay for taking away his half-brothers they decided that they would attack. To make a long story short Ivar insisted they take the cow out first. After mustering their forces, which between them numbered about forty full longships, they set out for Svealand from Denmark. Ivar had told everyone to make as much noise as possible before the battle so that it would drown out the cow and proceeded to shoot out its eyes with a pair of arrows. Once the cow was done in, they easily overcame the Sveald force and killed Eysteinn. The brothers decided that killing Eysteinn was vengeance enough for Eirikr and Agnar and spared Svealand from any further pillaging. Ragnarr then became King of both Denmark and Svealand again."

"So wait, how many uncles does that make?" Stoyan asked again.

"Let's see." Askoldir began counting. "First we had Fridlief, then Eirikr and Agnar, that makes three. Then we add Ivar, Bjorn, Hasting, Hvitserk, Halfdan, Sigurdr and Ubba, the youngest."

"Ten," exclaimed Stoyan.

"From official marriages. Yes."



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Just as he concluded the story, Askoldir heard a loud chorus of cheers. Startled for a moment, he thought everyone had been listening to his story but then quickly realized that the roars were for Ragnarr Lodbrok who was just entering the hall.

Though not young by any standards Ragnarr still looked like he could give any man in the room a hard time of it in a one-on-one battle. His long, sandy blond hair was still the same color as it was decades ago, though his beard was beginning to show patches of grey. His arms were as muscular as any warrior twenty or thirty years his junior. He wore many gold armbands and a colorful sleeveless shirt. On his head was a simple golden crown. His pants were something Stoyan had never seen before in his life. Stoyan had seen men wear cloaks of fur and clothing lined with fur but Ragnarr's pants gave him the appearance of being an animal below his torso. They were covered in the hair of some northern creature. When he had asked Gunnar what "Lodbrok" meant, Gunnar simply said, "Hairy breeches." Now he understood how Ragnarr received his nickname. As Ragnarr made his way to his place of honor in the hall, Stoyan saw the fire in his eyes. This was not a man to be trifled with. He walked with a confidence that came from many victories and the knowledge that not only was he powerful but respected as well. The cheers continued as he made his way past the warriors who raised their cups and began chanting his name.

When he reached the dais he grabbed a cup full of mead from the table, drained it and exclaimed, "I officially convene the Thing of All Svealds." This prompted a deafening roar from the crowd. As the din reached a crescendo, Ragnarr Lodbrok raised his arms, and everyone fell silent.

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"I trust everyone has had a prosperous year." Ragnarr confidently projected his voice across the auditorium. "I know I have. This past year the French received a taste of what Ragnarr can do when he gets bored and hungry." This prompted an eruption of laughter and cheers from the assembly. "I envision this coming raiding season will be more prosperous for all of us. It has been quite some time since we have had a gathering of this size and have not been warring among each other. Even the Khagan Roerik has graced the blot with his presence this year." This prompted another outburst of laughter mixed with cheers. "My friends, this coming year I have great plans for us. This summer we shall show the world we are a force to be reckoned with. We will strike fear into the hearts of all men far and wide so that they will all know our names and that all here will have a place next to Odin, Thor and Freyr in Valhalla. This season we shall raid the Islands to the west, the kingdoms in the south and the kingdoms in the east. All of you shall have the opportunity to gain greater glory and to obtain more booty. With the combined might of the Svealds and the Danes we shall coordinate strikes the likes of which have not been seen. The gods will be so jealous of our victories that they will come and join us so we do not have all the glory for ourselves." An eruption of cheers so loud filled the hall that Stoyan thought the walls might explode.

Ragnarr waited for the noise to settle, then continued. "I know many of you have had your eyes set on particular places to raid this coming season but as you have heard I will be asking you to join in this more coordinated effort to greater the chances of everyone's success. As I have said, our attacks this season will be three pronged like a trident striking out to the east, west and south. You must also be prepared to leave

your homes not just for the summer season but for much longer as many of you will be travelling and raiding far from home." Ragnarr paused to see if there was any reaction from the crowd, but to his surprise, they were all listening, waiting to hear what came next. He assumed this meant they had no qualms about leaving on this glorious adventure.

"The three main raiding parties will be led by my sons," Ragnarr said. "Ivar, Sigurdr and Ubba shall go west and raid the Saxons on their Island. Bjorn and Hasting shall sail south all the way to Rome. Hvitserk and Halfdan will go east and south, past the lands of the Gardariki. I trust none of you have any problems with that?"

The first to stand was Ivar, who was the oldest of Ragnarr's sons. They called him Ivar the Boneless because even though he was a large and incredibly strong man, he was extremely lithe for his size. He was able to bend his body in such a way and with such agility to avoid blows that it appeared he had no bones in his body. As he stood, Stoyan saw how similar in appearance he was to Ragnarr. He also wore a gold armband on each bicep and a silver and gold-threaded headband. Unlike his father, however, he wore plain grey cloth pants. "Father, I shall bring glory to our halls and also will make sure Sigurdr and Ubba stay out of trouble." This brought about rounds of laughter and cheers in salute. It made sense that Ragnarr had his oldest and most accomplished son take his two youngest with him to keep an eye on them. Sigurdr was nicknamed Snake-Eye. He got this name from his piercing gaze and his mastery of the bow. Most Vikings preferred up close combat but Sigurdr could bring down a man from one hundred yards if he did not see the arrow coming. Ubba was Ragnarr's youngest son and

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though he had been on several raids with his brothers, had yet to distinguish himself.

After Ivar, it was Bjorn's turn to speak. If his brothers were imposing, Bjorn was a monster of a man. He was nearly two meters in height and was built like a stone wall. He was nicknamed Ironside for good reason. Even though he was so large, he was a handsome man with chiseled features and bore few scars for someone who had participated in many battles, mostly in the front lines. He dressed simply and preferred comfort to extravagance, though he did have a gold circlet holding his mane of hair in place. He wore a simple cloth shirt and trousers and a scabbarded sword on his belt, which, except for the pommel, was almost a twin to the one Askoldir carried. Askoldir's sword had a wolf's head as a pommel while Bjorn's was a simple steel pommel in the shape of a ball. As Bjorn got to his feet, he accidentally knocked over one of his thegns seated to his left. This brought another burst of laughter from the audience. "Hasting and I will be more than happy to cut a path all the way to Rome," he bellowed, heartily slapping Hasting on the back. Hasting was much smaller than Bjorn but seemed to be as broad as he was tall. Not that he was fat, but more built like a solid warrior. His face had grizzled, angled features, and he looked as if it would be nearly impossible to knock him off his feet. In contrast to Bjorn, his outfit was much more colorful, though also fairly simple, and while Bjorn's hair was blonde, Hasting had a mane and beard of reddish brown hair and a freckled face. Bjorn preferred his sword. Hasting, on the other hand, preferred his two-handed axe. "Aye," Bjorn added. "We'll show those Christians whose gods are stronger." Ragnarr chose Bjorn and Hasting for this task because they were probably his best naval commanders. The other expeditions would

do most of their raiding on land, but those going all the way to Rome would probably encounter a fair amount of resistance on the sea.

Finally, Askoldir's father Hvitserk stood. Though Hvitserk preferred gold coin to silver, the opposite was true when it came to his dress. All of Hvitserk's jewelry was silver and his clothes were all grey, from his boots to his cloak. His hair also was grey, as was his beard. The only apparel he wore which was not grey was his white tunic, and thus everyone called him Whiteshirt. "Father," he said stoically, "Halfdan and I will do our best to honor your name."

After Hvitserk sat down, Riurik rose to his feet. "Ragnarr, if I may have a word?" He looked directly at the King.

"By all means," Ragnarr answered. "What does the Khagan of the Gardariki have to add?" The Norse called the lands to the southeast across the sea the lands of the Gardariki. It did not really refer to a specific territory but to that general area of the world. It literally meant "land of towns."

"Your grandson, Hoskuldr," he said, pointing to Hvitserk's son, "has come to me with a proposal that I think will fit in nicely with your plan."

"How so?" asked the King.

"Well, I have recently sent him to take charge of a handful of tribes to the south who wanted our protection and guidance," Riurik continued. "As you know we have been trading with Miklagard and the Slavs have been very useful in aiding us in this endeavor. However, last year the Romans executed a dozen of our men along with theirs and they want some retribution, which is why I sent your grandson to organize them into a fighting force. While they are not ready yet, I think by next year they will be ready for a strike on Miklagard

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with our help. After Bjorn and Hasting sack Rome, they can make their way to Miklagard the following summer and together with Hoskuldr and the Slavs, they can conquer the city. Whatever forces have returned from the raids east and west can join in as well."

After Riurik was done, Ragnarr stood in thought for a while. The hall was silent, waiting for his reaction. "It is an intriguing idea. Miklagard is an enticing prize. There are riches beyond comprehension behind those walls, but they are also said to be impenetrable and protected by the Greek fire. Let us discuss this further as we continue with the details of our plans. But now let us raise our horns and drink to the disir so our people have enough to eat for the rest of the year." Everyone drained their mead and waited for their horns to be refilled. The revelry continued late into the night.



## Summer 859

Askoldir, Gunnar and Stoyan decided not to stay for the rest of the Disablot so that they could start on the preparations for the assault on the Roman capital. The Slavs would raid with Hvitserk in the southeast this summer in order to help train them for next year's voyage to Tsargrad. Hvitserk had lent Askoldir five boats along with a handful of men that travelled back to Kyiv with them.

Ragnarr had agreed to have his grandson borrow two master shipbuilders from Svealand, one of whom would travel to Polotesk to help build ships for next year's voyage there and the other who would travel with Askoldir to Kyiv to help with preparations in the Polian capitol.

Gunnar, Stoyan and about two dozen men travelled along the Dvina route so they could meet with Brachislav in Polotesk. He had agreed to send a handful of his boyars with them for training with Hvitserk in the Khazar Sea.

Askoldir took the safer instead of the more direct route to Kyiv. He decided that it was best not to risk losing his valuable shipwright to a storm. He also did not want to lose any of the three boats. They would need as many as possible in order to train the Slavs.

There was only one way to get to Kyiv from Svealand if you planned to have land in sight for the entire journey. After leaving Svealand they travelled off Gotland's southwest coast, first sailing east past the northern tip of the island of Oland and then past Karlso. Karlso was a small island, but it was extremely important because the Svealds built a cairn on the



highest point, which was used by the seafarers as a navigation mark. Once they reached the bay of Norderham they sailed east on to Grobin, then further up the Gulf of Finland to Aldeigja and then down the more familiar route to Kyiv.

Both parties arrived at Kyiv a few weeks apart and preparations for the coming months as well as next year's trek began. All of the spring planting had been done and the men had gone through rigorous training during the winter and spring months. They were beginning to show signs of becoming a decent fighting force. The Slavs were predominantly farmers but had a fierce spirit and showed a knack for fighting. Having their own land and defending it was very important to them.

Askoldir made his way over to Vratymyr's home and entered without knocking. "Greetings, Vratymyr," he shouted, not seeing him immediately.

Vratymyr poked his head out of the other room, which contained his sleeping quarters. He looked startled. "I will be with you as soon as I get these pants back on," he shouted. A loud slamming noise followed, and then Askoldir heard the scraping of a bed against the wooden floor.

"Are you getting dressed or moving your furniture?" Askoldir chuckled.

"A little of both, m'lord. It seems I always am losing my grandfather's ring and spend more time looking for it than anything else." Vratymyr spoke cautiously, not wanting to reveal the treasure under his bed. Slowly the old Khazar's horde was becoming smaller as building a town and preparing for war were costly enterprises. While Askoldir had taken on the bulk of the expenses for building the infrastructure of the town, Vratymyr had employed several of his tribesmen to travel to the

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south and east and establish themselves as travelling merchants and to report to him as much information as they could gather during their travels. If they were to be successful next year, information would be just as valuable as training and weapons.

Askoldir adjusted his scabbard and sat in a chair just as Vratymyr entered the room. "I see the preparations are in full swing."

"Yes," Vratymyr answered, adjusting his belt as if he were indeed getting dressed. "Crops are planted and the able-bodied men have been working hard at their training. The new blacksmith has been working tirelessly, as have his apprentices, and our old smith has been picking up a lot of valuable tricks from the master smith from Polotesk."

"Splendid," exclaimed the Norseman. "And what of the wood?"

"As instructed, we covered and stored many planks so they would dry properly in preparation for the building of our fleet," Vratymyr replied proudly.

"We shall see if it is satisfactory shortly. I have brought with me Ingvild, one of my grandfather's best shipbuilders. He will let you know how good a job you did. And what of the men's morale?" Askoldir asked bluntly.

"I think morale is quite high. Many of the men are working hard but they are seeing the fruits of their labor. With the completion of the new mill and the smithy working to full capacity, many more people have come to the city. There is plenty of work so Kyiv grows."

"And as to our other little project?" the Varyag asked.

"M'lord, as far as I know it is still a secret," replied the Kniaz'. "The townsfolk believe that we will be

expanding our trade to the southeast and north and are preparing for that. They also believe that defenses are being built and men being trained in order to prepare for an eventual attack from the Khazars. I have not done anything to quell these rumors as they seem a perfect cover for what is happening."

"That is wise," Askoldir said. "You are a good ally and genuinely care for your people. I know you have seen your share of death but I must warn you, the path we are pursuing will lead to a lot more death than you or your people have ever seen. The Khazars may or may not come north with war anytime soon but they will come looking for it once they have the opportunity. Odin only knows what the Ro... sorry, the Greeks are up to, and do not forget the other Slavic tribes who have not joined our new alliance. Not to mention Bohuslav the Blind who I am sure is itching and preparing for revenge."

"But surely he won't come looking for trouble..."

"Any leader of his people who was defeated and embarrassed as he was will look for revenge. If he does not, he will either lose the respect of his people or he will lose his throne. That is the way of the world. If you show weakness, you are eaten alive like any prey during a hunt. Even the strong eventually succumb, but the less weakness you show the better your chances are of staying alive, and more importantly, of avoiding battle."

"That makes sense," Vratymyr agreed.

"A great warrior gains glory in battle and needs to show his strength," Askoldir continued. "But ultimately if a great warrior wants also to be a great leader, his greatness lies in his ability to avoid getting killed. This is the difference between one line on a runestone or having a full runestone of your deeds and accomplishments. For many people this is important."

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For us Norse however, it is important to die well and to be amongst our gods and friends in Valhalla. Do not get me wrong, I want to be a great leader and great warrior but that is only a stepping-stone to the afterlife. My time here is a means to make sure I end up there."

"It seems," Vratymyr said, "that no matter where you go you cannot avoid the gods."

"The gods are unavoidable." Askoldir sighed. "Just as breathing is unavoidable if one wants to live. You can hold your breath for a period of time but eventually you will need to breathe. This is what it is like with the gods. You can pretend you do not need them for a time but eventually when you are in need, you turn to them for strength or pray for them to forgive you. Every wise man I have ever spoken to, regardless of which gods or god they worship say almost the same thing. It matters not what gods you worship, merely that you worship them."

"It seems I had a similar conversation not too long ago with a certain Khazar," Vratymyr said, shaking his head slowly. "Though his choice of a deity was more, how shall I say, material in nature."

"Eh, let us leave this debate to wiser men than ourselves. I have to go make sure everything is ready for this summer's expedition. Have you chosen which of your boyars will be joining my father and me to go raiding to the Khazar Sea?"

"I have," replied the Slav. "They are eager and ready. Some are more eager than others though, as many have never even so much as ferried across the Dnipro."

Askoldir laughed. "Do not worry. We will make sailors out of them. If not us, then the sea will either teach them its secrets or give them a new home."



Mechyslav had set up shop not too far downriver from the new mill. His massive anvil was in the center of his smithy and all of the other tools of his trade had been laid out as efficiently as possible. As soon as Askoldir entered through the open doorway, he felt as if he had stepped onto the sun. "How you can bear this heat all day is beyond my comprehension," Askoldir roared over the banging of Mecheslav's hammer as one of his apprentices shuffled out of Askoldir's way.

"I will be with you in a minute, my lord," bellowed Mechyslav. "I need to finish this sword or else it will be useless and I will have to start all over." Normally no one made Askoldir wait, but he had told Mecheslav not to drop everything when he saw him arrive. The Norseman knew that without decent swords and armor an army was doomed unless it outnumbered its foe by an incredible margin. A sword was deadly but also delicate and needed care both in its making and in its preservation.

As he waited, he decided to watch one of the young apprentices at work. Vseslav was teaching one of the other younger apprentices how to make mail. Askoldir watched as he showed him how to cut thin strips from a sheet of iron and then wind the strips around a cylindrical former.

"When you are finished winding these," Vseslav told the boy, raising his chisel and hammer and yelling over the other noise in the smith, "take this chisel like this and break off these little links about this size. He held out a tiny link to show it to the boy. "When you are done cutting all these sheets and cutting all these links then I'll show you how to compress and overlap

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them. Tomorrow I'll show you which half of 'em to weld shut in the forge and which half you'll have to cut holes in." Vseslav turned to Askoldir. "Tricky business this is but the younger you learn the better you become at making these things." While the young boy cut the links, Vseslav busied himself assembling another mail shirt. He would take one of his pre-punched rings and attach it to four welded ones. Each time he would do this, he would place a rivet in the hole to close the links. He repeated this process with a skill only years of practice could produce.

As Askoldir watched transfixed, he heard a loud hiss. Mechyslav was dunking a sword in the water for a final time. "Not as good as yours, m'lord," he said as he inspected his work carefully. "But it will make its owner proud.

"I'm sure it will," Askoldir replied, looking over Mechyslav's handiwork. "How go the preparations?"

"As you know, m'lord, this is a tedious business. Had we more men, it would go quicker but the lads we have are good honest workers and willing to learn. Sviatoslav, Vratymyr's old smith, has improved a great deal as well, and he has had the opportunity to learn to do more than make horseshoes. By next summer we should have enough to outfit about twenty-five to fifty men in armor, taking into account all the repairs and other work we have. The swords take some work to fashion and the axes and spears are made much quicker, but the mail takes time. You'll have more than enough weapons but not a lot of mail."

"That will have to do," the Khagan said flatly. "From what my men tell me most Slavs like to fight wearing only leather. They think the mail slows them down. Many have not had the time to be trained

properly or have not built up enough strength and stamina to fight in mail. Yes, it will have to do."

After leaving the smiths to their work, Askoldir went further down the bank of the Dnipro to where Ingvild had set up shop near the harbor not too far from where the old Khazar customs house used to be. Ingvild, who spoke no Slavic, was busy barking orders to carpenters through interpreters. Askoldir's men knew some Slavic, but were used to a different dialect and had trouble with specific instructions as needed in shipbuilding. This made Ingvild's job infinitely harder since he had to take more time than usual explaining the process and what he needed done.

"I see things are not going very smoothly." Askoldir was stating the obvious.

"It's like talking to the wind," complained the burly Viking. "I tell them one thing and they do another. Curse this language."

"Now now," Askoldir replied in Norse. "You'll manage. As long as the ships don't sink we will all be fine."

Ingvild seemed slightly offended and puffed out his chest with pride. "My ships never sink unless they are filled with a bunch of idiots. Even then, the idiots sink and my ships make it back to shore. Unless the gods of the sea want to marvel at my handiwork, then they keep them for themselves."

"No offense intended." Askoldir smiled. "I am sure you will all get used to each other soon enough. Hopefully sooner rather than later, as I have a very difficult task for you. I am expecting you to build seventy-five boats by next summer."

"What!" exclaimed the shipwright, his eyes wider than a barn owl's. "There's no way we will be able to

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build seventy-five ships with this incompetent lot in one year."

"Well," said Askoldir, "there is a certain other master builder in Polotesk that said it would not be a problem for him to complete the job."

"Impossible," Ingvild said with a huff.

"Listen to me before you say it is impossible," countered the Khagan. "I simply need you to make them seaworthy and the Slavs are quick learners. Has the wood we had cut dried sufficiently, and is there enough?"

"There should be," replied the builder, "though it will not be enough for so many oars. The oars can be made out of fresher wood during the winter when everyone is bored."

"Listen, I don't anticipate fighting on the sea so my request is to make the boats long and sturdy enough to carry one hundred men apiece," Askoldir said. "We will not need to make them very maneuverable and also most of the men in each boat will not be wearing mail. But I do want the boats sturdy enough to carry back whatever booty we acquire."

Ingvild thought for a few minutes. "They'll have to be about fourteen faomr long and two and a half wide. That should do it. That would give you enough oars to move fairly easily and have two shifts of rowers when there is no wind."

Askoldir tried to imagine the size of the boats. A faomr was about the length of an average person's outstretched hands and Askoldir stretched out his arms to try to visualize just how long they would be.

"Aye," continued the Sveald. "They won't be too big or too heavy and they'll be seaworthy. That's the smallest I can make them to fit one hundred men apiece."



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"It will have to do," Askoldir said aloud to himself. "The portages will be difficult but we will have a lot of men to do the job."



It had been an incredibly busy spring for Bardas. Young Michael wanted to establish himself as a great leader and had him make preparations for an expedition to take the massive Arab fortress of Samosata. Most of the lands along the way were under Nova Roma's control, but many of the defenses still lay in ruins. They had not been rebuilt after Caliph al-Mu'tasim led an Arab campaign twenty-one years ago and destroyed thirteen Roman fortresses in the East.

Raids had been taking place between the Caliphate and Nova Roma for many decades with a few lulls when peace agreements had been signed, after one side or the other achieved some form of success or committed a massacre. Such a truce was agreed to in the year eight hundred and thirty-nine after many losses on both sides. Three years later, in Ianuarius, both Theophilus and al-Mu'tasim died, after which major fighting between the Romans and Arabs in the Western frontier was sporadic. Most of the danger came from infighting amongst local warlords. The New Romans were led by a woman with a child and her chief minister Theoktistus was one of the most incompetent military strategists in the history of mankind. After a while, however, the warlords, with their petty infighting, had weakened themselves to such a degree that it was easier for the Romans to regain their lost territories in the East.

Michael wanted glory and to prove himself an Emperor and not a child. Bardas was glad he convinced Michael that the taking of Samosata should be put off

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until later and that they should first deal with Amr, the most powerful of the Arab warlords in the East who was constantly raiding Roman territories. After seeing many of the fortresses in ruins as the expedition set out, Michael agreed that the people would see him as a hero if he eliminated Amr, who was a visible source of a lot of their misery. Amr of Melitene had plagued the eastern frontier for over twenty-five years, and defeating him would be a huge victory. Marching to Samosata was also much more dangerous, involving treacherous terrain. Arsamosata, where Amr was reported to be, was more easily accessible and mostly through territory under their control.

As their army of fifty thousand men marched east Bardas convinced Michael it might be a good idea to keep the Arabs busy in the West as well and convinced him to send the fleet to Pelousion on the banks of the Nile where the Arabs had been causing much trouble. Three hundred ships led by Bardas' father-in-law Constantine Kontomytes should keep them busy down there. After dealing with the Arabs, they could then proceed to Sicily, most of which was captured by Aghlabid troops after the fall of Enna. All that remained under Roman control was a little strip on the coast stretching from Syracuse to Taromina.

It was a major blow when the fortress at Enna was captured and led to the forfeiture of most of the island. If I ever get my hands on that bastard who helped those scum get into the fortress I will kill him with my bare hands, thought Bardas. A prisoner, one of their own men, had given up all the fortress's secrets, and the enemy was able to breach the seemingly impregnable fortress by sneaking in through a sewer. On the twenty-fourth day of Ianuarius they entered the city, sacked it and slaughtered all of its defenders. Constantine

Kontomytes would make them pay. He was a very capable leader.

Michael's army had stopped temporarily at Ankyra to oversee the strengthening of its defenses. His father had rebuilt Ankyra's defenses after Haroun al-Rachid had torn down the original walls in successive raids on the fortress. Now Michael was cleaning up the mess made by al-Mu'tasim.

Bardas was dripping with sweat as he poured over the parchment one of the engineers was showing him.

"First you need to rebuild these inner walls surrounding the citadel," growled Bardas. "What good was your rebuilding the only the inner fort if it is exposed?"

The Sark Kale, an immense tower which previously was the central link between the inner and outer defenses still stood but the walls that used to be connected to it lay in ruins. While the Arabs found it relatively easy to tear down the rest of the walls, the Sark Kale had walls eight meters thick, so they decided not to waste their time.

"You need to repair the entire citadel, both the inner and outer walls. The Emperor needs a place where he can return to safety if the Arabs prove too feisty," Bardas finished.

Bardas barked some final orders to the engineer and retreated to the fort. It was impressive, built on a ridge of andesite one hundred and twenty feet high, and would be formidable once again.

Michael sat on a makeshift throne eating some figs when Bardas came upon him. "My Emperor, the repairs go well. The inner ring should be repaired completely before we have any need to return. I am not sure however that the outer ring will be completed if we need to make haste back in this direction."

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"Not to worry," Michael managed, swallowing the last fig and licking his fingers. "Our engineers build the best walls in the world. Forty-two towers should be enough to protect any coward if he has the need to hide behind them."

"M'lord, not everyone who retreats behind walls is a coward." Bardas had been teaching Michael about warfare for years, but now he was seeing the young man-turned-Emperor start to acquire a brashness and feeling of invincibility. "One must never underestimate his enemy and a wise man knows that learning to fight another day is better than losing everything."

"Enough of your lectures," Michael hissed at Bardas. "I am Emperor of Nova Roma and you are no longer my teacher. You will do as I command."

"Yes, sire," Bardas said, bowing and biting his tongue. The boy was becoming much more difficult to influence. Bardas decided he must be more careful in his future conversations with him.

"We will start moving east in one week's time," Michael commanded. "Have the men provisioned and prepared to march by then."

"As you wish, my Emperor," Bardas bowed once again and exited to prepare for the journey.



In the end, it was decided that they would take one hundred Slavs and one hundred of Askoldir's Norsemen so that each man could spend enough time teaching his counterpart everything there was about sailing and not getting killed or drowning in the sea. Five ships with a crew of forty each would do nicely.

It was also a long journey east and much of it was overland so Askoldir decided that the smaller the party

the less likely they were to be seen or intercepted. Portaging the boats would be tiring enough without having to fight their way east.

Askoldir found Vratymyr amidst the hustle and bustle of the final preparations for the training mission. "Everything seems to be going very well," he said with a hint of pride. "Most people are convinced we are merely learning how to sail and training the people to fight against the Khazars if they ever decide to come. You have done a great job, my friend. You have proved much more valuable than I expected."

"Never underestimate the Slavs," Vratymyr replied. "We may seem like a bunch of backwater peasants but when the need arises we can be more ferocious than a wild boar. We are slow to anger but our wrath is akin to the thunder of Perun. I believe you worship a similar god."

"Yes, yes. Thor leads us into battle with a vengeance most of the world fears," the Norseman said, nodding his head. "If your Perun is half as mighty as Thor then you truly are a formidable ally or enemy."

Vratymyr sighed then smiled. "I won't get into a debate about the strengths and weaknesses of the gods. I like to leave those discourses to other men. I prefer to do what I can to help my people. If the gods want to help, then I welcome it."

"You truly are a good leader of your tribe." Askoldir placed his hand on Vratymyr's shoulder. "They could not have a better person looking out for their interests. That is why you must stay behind. You must look after them while I am gone. I am leaving one hundred of my men and several thegns with strict orders to help you any way they can with the preparations and against any other threats. I cannot afford to lose you to the sea or to a Khazar sword. You have no heirs and it is hard to

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say how the alliance between us and the Slavs would hold up if anything were to happen to you."

"I appreciate your trust in me," the Slav Kniaz' said, feeling a slight sense of pride. The words of the Norseman were comforting. In the past, he had thought Norsemen mere brutes. But over the years, as he became acquainted with Gunnar and now Askoldir, his opinion had changed dramatically. "I will make sure your trust in me is well founded. Thankfully, Stoyan is staying behind. His Norse will be very valuable in translating Ingvild's colorful rants to my people."

The Norse Khagan laughed. "Ingvild can be crass and seem like a sour puss but he is one of the best at his craft and really does have a good heart. As long as your men do not say anything ill of his boats they will be fine."

Both men smiled at each other and then shared a long hearty laugh.

"Take care and may Odin watch over you," the Varyag said, grabbing Vratymyr's forearm.

"And you as well." Vratymyr grasped the Norseman's forearm in answer. "May Perun watch over you and please, keep an eye on Yaro. He is a good man, but I fear the loss of his last son makes him feel he has not much left to live for."

"I shall try and show him a reason to live, and shall look after him," Askoldir said honestly. "As long as the big man doesn't sink my boat, and me along with it." Both men once again shared a long, friendly laugh.

After Askoldir left to tend to his last minute affairs, Vratymyr searched the dock for his big friend. There was a lot of commotion as provisions were stuffed into packs and final preparations for the expedition were made. Normally everything would be loaded onto the boats, but a good portion of the journey east would be

made by land. There would be a lot of portaging too, so all the supplies needed to be packed so they could be carried for long distances.

Vratymyr finally found Yaropolk near one of the cellars where the salted meat was stored, stuffing his pack full of strips of dried and salted beef and fish. Normally they ate fresh meat during the summer season, but they had specially prepared meat and fish that would not spoil so they would not need to spend too much time hunting or fishing during the expedition.

"I should have known I'd find you here, my friend!" exclaimed Vratymyr, sneaking up on the big man.

Yaropolk jumped and his face turned red as a beet. "Well where else would I be? I need to keep up my strength. They say there will be a lot of walking and you know how cranky I get when I'm hungry."

"You are always cranky and you are always hungry," Vratymyr shot back lightheartedly.

"That's true," said the massive Slav, "but you try carrying this thing on your back all day." He pointed to the huge axe strapped to his back.

"I'm betting your sack of meat will be heavier than your axe." The Kniaz' laughed and Yaropolk joined in as well.

"You know me all too well, my friend." The big man snorted, took a big bite of a strip of dried meat and chewed loudly.

"Yaro," Vratymyr said, taking a more serious tone, "you know I need you, so don't do anything foolish. Your boyars are itching for something to happen to you so they can fight over the scraps."

"Don't you worry about me." The big Slav sighed. "You know I can take care of myself. Those Khazars are half my size."

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"Most men are half your size. You know that is not what I meant."

"I've lost sons before, Vratymyr," Yaro said coldly, trying to hide his grief. "Besides, I am saving my real revenge for those damned Greeks. I do not plan on doing any dying till I have buried my axe in a few of their skulls."

"Do not forget, your people need you as well," the Kniaz' said, trying to get him off the subject of dying and killing.

"You know I care about my people, but my leadership is more symbolic now. Do you really still lead your people? Would you be able to tell them to do something Askoldir was against? I am sure they would follow you," he said, looking into his friend's eyes, "but that would not end well, we both know that. We have made our pallets; we must now sleep in them. Besides, they will listen to you while both Askoldir and I are gone. The boyars may not like this new setup but half of them will be with me and the other half will fear those men that chopped up Bohuslav's retinue like a butcher." Yaro held up his half-eaten strip of meat for emphasis.

"Either way, take care, my friend."

"And you, my friend." Yaro leaned over to whisper. "And make sure that nasty Varyag builds one of those boats big enough to fit me. The one they have me in now is a little tight." They both burst out in laughter and hugged each other.

Vratymyr remained around the docks watching as everything was loaded onto the boats and kept his eyes on them until they faded from view far to the north. He then turned and went back to his administrative duties wondering if he would ever see his friend again.





Riurik walked along the riverbank wondering what the future held. What would become of this expedition to Miklagard and would his involvement in it would make him rich or make him lose face in front of the other Viking leaders for supporting such a crazy endeavor? Riurik could be brutal and bloodthirsty, but he also understood that everything needed careful planning and that the slightest mistake could cost you everything you took years to build. Such were the burdens of leadership. He was only twenty-nine summers but the weight of responsibility added many on top of that. He had spent years building this trading company, and the other prominent Vikings still looked down on him even though he brought them much wealth. Many of them called him Khagan of the Gardariki in a derogatory way, but he was quite proud of what he had built here. He had only been here a few years but he had done more than his predecessors had done in the last thirty. Riurik was an adventurer and a fearsome warrior but was still subject to ridicule behind his back. He spat on the ground. Let them laugh, he thought to himself. I will laugh louder and I will laugh last when I meet them in Valhalla.

As he walked, he looked at his town. Gorodishche. It was an interesting name for a town, meaning simply “small city.” It had been here when the Vikings first arrived. It was not as large as it was now, but it was a very well-positioned settlement if you wanted to increase your chances for survival in a harsh environment. The town itself was built on a rise above Lake Ilmen, between the Volkhov and the Volkhovets rivers. The Volkhov was the main river, and the

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Volkhovets branched off not far from the lake, conveniently forming an island about twelve kilometers long. Gorodishche - small city, Volkhovets - small Volkhov, these Slavs were a very simple people. Riurik had decided that Gorodishche was too simple a name so when he took control of it he had it changed to Riurikove Gorodishche. The Slavs would have no trouble remembering that it is his little town now.

It was from here that the first emissaries were sent to Miklagard twenty-one years ago. He remembered his father telling him about it. It was those tales of adventure that lured Roerik to the lands of the Gardariki to seek his fortune. His father told him in detail about the riches of Miklagard and its impenetrable walls. The Hagia Sophia - whose beauty was unmatched anywhere in the world. The Hippodrome - where men raced in chariots attached to horses around an immense track in a stadium that held tens of thousands of people. Then he explained about their return journey through the west. How they met the Frankish Emperor Louis in his lavish palace in Engilinheim. Louis, the son of Charlamagne. His father had said they were at first considered spies, but the emissary from Miklagard that travelled with them helped them convince the Emperor that they were merely ambassadors from Svealand visiting the great city. These tales were all Riurik needed to hear to know he would spend his life trying to see the world, make a name for himself and earn his seat by the gods in Valhalla.

Riurik decided that he too will build a great city. He too will be famous, like Charlemagne, Louis and the Romans. Riurik strolled further down the riverbank. He grabbed a large stone and lugged it up the embankment. When he found a place that suited him,

he placed it on the ground. Here. This is where he would build his city. This is where Holmgardr will stand.



The plan Askoldir came up with was quite simple – one Sveald, one Slav. Each one of his men would have a counterpart from the Slavs who he would take the time to individually train as a sailor and seafaring warrior. The one hundred of his men he had selected were the ones who best knew the Slavic tongue. They were not well-versed in it but knew enough to get the job done. One summer on the sea would not make expert sailors out of the Slavs, but they did learn quickly. He was confident they would learn the craft adequately enough to be useful in next year's campaign.

Their route east first took them north, as they wanted to take advantage of the river ways as much as possible. Once they reached the point where the Desna flowed into the Dnipro, they rowed east and continued on to another tributary, which allowed them to travel further southeast.

Askoldir chose Yaropolk as his apprentice on this journey for several reasons, the primary of which was because he was Kniaz' of the Siverians and he knew the lands east of Kyiv as well as he knew how to handle his axe. He had also promised Vratymyr to look after him and felt that he would not mind having the big Slav looking after his back either.

Taking into account that Yaro was big and strong, Askoldir decided he would teach him to operate the rudder. This would keep him constantly occupied with little time to dwell on the events of the recent past. The Viking-turned-Khagan's ship was large. It was approximately twenty-two meters long and over five

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meters wide. She was a thing of beauty with a magnificently carved wolf's head on her prow. Full of Varyags and gear she was stable and seaworthy and took quite a bit of strength to steer properly.

"This, Yaro, will be your wife for this journey," Askoldir explained to the Siverian Kniaz', patting the rudder. "You must treat her gently and with love but also at times you need to show her that you are in command."

The rudder was located at the starboard side near the stern of the ship. It looked like a large blade and was made of oak. A leather, flexible withy was threaded through the rudder and a coneshaped block, which in turn was threaded through holes, which were bored through the rudder rib inboard. A leather plaited band also held the rudder in place at the gunwale by its neck.

"As you can see," continued the Norseman, "there is a solid block of oak here adding additional support to the gunwale. Steering a ship this large and fully-laden exerts a lot of stress."

"Yes, just like my wife." Yaro laughed. "She exerts a lot of stress." He had mostly avoided Plaksa after the news of Dushan's death as she was true to the name her parents had given her and cried most of the day. It was a constant reminder that he was gone. Leaving for the entire summer was a relief.

Eventually Yaropolk got the hang of working the rudder, and he and Askoldir took turns working it as they made their way east.

"We both may be leaders of men," Askoldir explained frankly to the Slav, "but on the ship everyone is equal. Everyone has their duty to fulfil, and each person's duty is equally important no matter how menial it may seem. Without each crewmember working in unison everyone's life is put in danger, whether they are

a kniaz' or a thrall. The sea does not differentiate. Aegir will claim anyone who does not respect his power."

"Is it the power of Aegir that makes me feel so queasy on this boat?" moaned the big man.

"No, my friend. That is you finding your sea legs. In time the feeling should subside. The more time you spend in a boat the more you get used to it. I must warn you however, the feeling will get worse once we actually sail on the sea. The waves on these rivers are nothing compared to what you will see and experience on the sea."

"Wonderful." Yaropolk said dejectedly as he strained to keep the contents of his stomach at bay.

As the river became more shallow, they rowed to its bank so as not to damage the boats. Yaropolk listened to the rhythmic song of the oars splashing in unison as he held the rudder in position. Prior to rowing to shore, they had lowered the mast. He was amazed how easily this was done and how sturdy the mast was when it was in place. A pair of cleats supported the keelson, which extended over two of the ribs of the ship on either side. The keelson itself rested on the ship and was not attached to it. In it was a socket, which the mast fit into with its boot at the lower end. The socket was rounded and the keelson had a timber vertical arm at its front, which guided the mast into the socket. This arm also acted as an additional supporting brace for the mast. At the aft of the boat there was a deep groove where the mast would rest when it was lowered, and it was fit with a tight-fitting oak block when the mast was raised. Though the mast was sturdy, the forces exerted on it when the sail was unfurled were immense, especially when the wind was very strong.

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When they reached the eastern bank of the river, they secured the mast, sail and oars and loaded their packs. Yaropolk had only been this far east once in his youth, when his father had led a war party against the Khazars. He recalled fondly how he fought side by side with his father. It was in that battle that he had killed his first man. It was much different than killing a boar or a deer. It was, however, necessary. Had he not done so, he himself would have been killed. He had hesitated for a moment and almost lost his life, but his father's loud roar brought him to his senses and the Khazar's blade just nicked him before he plunged his axe into his opponent's skull, splitting his helmet along with his head. After that, Yaropolk never hesitated in battle again.

Happy to be on land again, he enjoyed the portage east to the Don River, even though he and his compatriots had a large boat on their shoulders for most of the journey. They took turns carrying the ships, scouting and providing protection to those doing the carrying.

When they stopped for the night, it felt nice to finally sit by a fire and warm his old bones. Yaropolk rummaged in his pack and pulled out a small wooden figurine resembling the torso and head of man. He smiled as he ran his fingers over its grooves.

After several minutes, Askoldir joined him and asked, "What is that you have there?"

"This is my didushka domovyi."

"Is that one of your gods?" asked the Khagan curiously.

"It is more of a guardian," Yaropolk replied. "It has been in my family for generations. The domovyi is a spirit that lives in the hearth of your home. He protects it and brings it warmth. Each home has its own guardian

which protects that particular home, and you pray to the guardian year round so that your home is safe. The female head of the household tends to the fire in the hearth. Only once a year during the summer solstice is the fire extinguished, and fires from new sparks are kindled, giving new strength to the domovyi. The domovyi gets his strength from Svarog."

"Svarog?"

"The god of fire. On the summer solstice we sacrifice a cock to Svaroh under the grain-kiln. Then we carry it to the threshold of the home, cut off the head and legs and throw them over the roof."

"Why over the roof?" the Norseman asked genuinely intrigued.

"This is done so that the fowl remain healthy and bring eggs and meat throughout the year." Yaropolk rubbed the domoviy. "This particular domovyi has been protecting my family and their home for many years."

"If it is supposed to protect your home, why are you carrying it with you?" Askoldir asked. "Shouldn't it be in your abode?"

"Usually, yes," replied Yaro as his stomach grumbled. "And there is one at home. This particular one travels with me everywhere I go so the strength of my homestead and my family and ancestors are always with me no matter where I am."

"That is a good talisman to have!" Askoldir exclaimed, looking at the domovyi with respect for the symbol. "I shall have to keep you and your domovyi close to me on this journey and maybe some of his protection will be bestowed on me as well."

"And you?" the big man queried. "Do you have someone or something that protects your home?"

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Askoldir thought for a moment and pulled out an amulet shaped like a tree from beneath his tunic. "I suppose this is my protection."

"What is it?" Yaropolk asked, examining the amulet. It was made of wood as well and depicted an entire tree along with its roots snaking out of the bottom of the trunk.

"This is Yggdrasil, the World Tree."

"The World Tree, whatever is that?"

Askoldir slid the amulet back into his tunic. "Men and women come from trees. The first man Askr was born from the ash and Embla, the first woman, was born from the elm. They sprouted from the acorns of Yggdrasil. It is thus that every human is born of the fruit of Yggdrasil. He is then collected and brought to his mother-to-be by two storks."

"My wife never mentioned any storks," interrupted Yaro. "Neither did my mother."

"Well, in your case they must have been very large storks." The Varyag chuckled. "Every human has a tree in him and every tree in turn has a human in it. Every homestead has a tree at its center, which protects it, feeds the soil, cleans the air, and works with the winds to bring fortune to the house. This tree is a small representation of Yggdrasil. It watches every generation grow and protects them as it grows along with them."

"But what of fire?" interjected the Slav. "Aren't trees susceptible to fire?"

"Yes," answered Askoldir matter-of-factly. "That is why Odin created the Norns."

"What are the Norns?"

"The Norns are the three guardians of Yggdrasil. Every morning Yggdrasil produces dew. This shiny, sweet dew is the memory of days that have passed.



This liquid memory is collected by Urd in the Well of Memory. The liquid memories are called Aurr. Two sacred swans dwell in the center of Urd's well. They face each other and their necks form the shape of a heart. This well is full of love and nurturing. If you forget your past, then the roots of the tree will dry up and you will not have a future. The second protector, Verdandi makes sure the flowers bloom and is the caretaker of life. Skuld then aids the flowers on their path to the future. You cannot have a future without a past and the future owes a great debt to the past."

"That is true," Yaropolk agreed. "Let us get some rest and on the morn' Yggdrasil will bless us with some sweet morning dew."

### Fall 859

Itakh's death had been sudden but not surprising. His health had been fading for the last several years and as with all life, his had reached its end. Vratymyr had learned well from his adversary and friend. Itakh had taught him the value of information and espionage and being a good student. Vratymyr had been paying the old Khazar's servant Kubrat to keep him abreast of what he was up to. The venerable, cagey master of espionage had not even realized that his own servant was spying on him. It was not difficult for Vratymyr to get Kubrat to do his spying for him. Itakh paid him nothing and forced him to work hard for room and board. Such was the life of a slave. While the Slavs did not keep or trade in slaves, Itakh had no problem with the slave trade, which was very lucrative. The Varyags also captured enemies during their raids. Those who were of noble birth or whose families were wealthy merchants were ransomed, and the rest were kept as thralls.

After Itakh's passing, Kubrat immediately found Vratymyr and informed him before anyone else found out. They quickly made their way to the docks. Seeing that Vratymyr was accompanied by the slave, the old Khazar's two remaining guards Boghatur and Chorpan let them through without any questions. Khazar traders occasionally came and went, but there were far fewer of them than before. Itakh had decided there was no reason to keep paying more as he was no longer a custom's officer or representative of the Khazar Khagan. Instead he gave the appearance of being a

middle-of-the-road merchant who no longer attracted much attention.

Itakh had just passed about an hour ago, and there was no stench from rot yet. Vratymyr noted how peaceful the Khazar looked laying on his bed as if he was sleeping. His chest, however, did not rise and fall, and his skin was becoming cold to the touch.

Itakh's stead was modest but not small by any means. It would take some time to search it, and the Kniaz' did not want to attract too much attention from Itakh's guards.

"Kubrat," Vratymyr whispered. "Do you have any idea where he kept his papers?"

"No, m'lord," the slave replied. "I spent most of my time in the kitchens. That is where I prepared all his meals and slept." Kubrat found that sleeping in the kitchen was not so bad, as it was usually warm there. "He did spend most of his time in the room where he now lies though."

"Thank you, Kubrat." At least it was a start. It made sense as well. Vratymyr figured the crafty Khazar would want to keep his valuables close, though hidden. While he was interested in what kind of valuables Itakh had left behind, his main interest was in the list of contacts the former representative and crafty old adventurer must have hidden somewhere. Information would be vital, and though Vratymyr had started forming a network of informants and spies of his own, having Itakh's list would help him expand his circle and find out who was working for the man abroad. Even if he did not utilize the contacts, he would know whom he and his allies should avoid. This information would be more valuable than any amount of gold or silver Vratymyr would find here.

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He decided the first spot to check was under the bed where the Khazar lay lifeless. That was where Itakh had his hiding place in his castle on the hill. The elderly man's arm hung limp at the side of the bed, and Vratymyr carefully moved it up onto his torso to get a look underneath. After rummaging for a while, it was evident that there was nothing to be found. No trap doors, no hidden latches, nothing.

The Kniaz' and the slave searched the premises for over an hour with no luck. Itakh was clever. Obviously, after losing his life savings once, he had no plans to have his hoard found as easily again. Vratymyr would have to try another approach.

"Very well," Vratymyr told Kubrat. "I do not think we can spend much more time without arousing suspicion so here is what we will do. I will take my leave and after a few hours, let the guards know that your master has passed to the world of the gods so it does not appear that we had anything to do with the old man's death." He was sure if he could not find anything then the guards would be even less likely to find the deceased Khazar's stash.

The Polian Kniaz' took his leave, nodded acknowledgment to the guards and made his way over to Ingvild's workshop to check on how the ship construction was coming along. It was amazing to see the small fleet that was forming in the courtyard of the Norse master builder's workshop. Most of the able-bodied Slavs who had not left with Askoldir were either learning the shipbuilding craft or becoming apprentice blacksmiths. Much work had been done this summer and more needed to be done in the fall before everyone had to start preparing the town for winter.

Many mighty oaks were cut down, stacked and covered. They had planned for the shipbuilding to

continue through the winter and spring seasons so that they could meet their quota. Askoldir had left him in charge and he wanted to make sure everything was completed on time.

"Hail, Ingvild," Vratymyr yelled over the din of hammers. Logs were being split by placing metal wedges into them and then hammering them until they split evenly along the grain. The Varyag instructed the Slavs not use saws when cutting, so that the planks would be stronger and much more flexible. No part of the tree was wasted. Each oak produced approximately twenty planks and the remaining wood was used for other parts of the shipbuilding process, such as rakes, trenails or rigging blocks.

Ingvild ignored him and kept working. The Norseman was on a tight schedule, and Vratymyr was used to this. Vratymyr had also heard from one of Askoldir's men that Ingvild had made a bet with the shipbuilder in Polotesk to see who could finish more vessels before next summer. This sort of friendly competition only served to help their plans.

"More tar, you little bugger," the shipbuilder roared. "This first strake is the most important. This is where the most leaks occur if you are not careful. Here let me show you." Ingvild shoved the Slav worker aside and grabbed a handful of rope, dumped it in a tub of pine tar and stuffed it between the strake and the keel. "You need to pack this tight and don't be cheap with the tar or else this boat will leak. If any of my boats leak I will drown you all in that river." Ingvild pointed at the Dnipro.

Vratymyr decided not to interrupt and watched the man work. The long, sturdy keel was propped upright with heavy rocks on either side. After they had shaped, bored and nailed the first strake, or as the master called

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it, garboard, to the keel and sealed it, they then continued the process, overlapping and sealing subsequent strakes. Each strake was individually cut and trimmed so that it aligned perfectly with the one below it. After they were all lined up, they were nailed and riveted together forming a tight secure bond. Ingvild was a master of his craft and was measuring, cutting and fitting the strakes by eye without the use of any tools. He had taught the less proficient Slavs who showed some promise as shipbuilders to use a stick with measurements already marked on it and align it with a rope knotted in intervals extending from the stem of the ship to its stern, to make sure the position of each strake was perfect.

Seeing that everything was moving along nicely, Vratymyr continued on his way back to Castle Hill. Next to the shipyard, many of the town's women were busy making rope out of horsehair while others were busy weaving sails from coarse wool. Everyone had a job to do and the entire town was busy contributing to the expedition in some form or other. Vratymyr smiled, satisfied that everything was proceeding according to plan.



When Michael left with Bardas to go East in search of Amr, he left Ooryphas as Patrician of Nova Roma. Ooryphas dealt with the day-to-day mundane administrative duties of the Empire and city. This freed up Photios to go about his duties and continue his plots.

Ooryphas looked average except for his eyes, which were piercing and always seemed to follow you wherever you were in the room. His keen eyesight and good tactical sense made him a very capable naval

commander. Photios thought he would be much more useful on a ship in the current campaign against the Arabs in Egypt and Sicily, but he was capable and harmless enough that Photios did not mind his appointment.

Though Photios had been freed from many administrative duties, he also had much less influence over the day-to-day operations of the Empire now. Had Bardas stayed behind they would be able to control everything in the city, but it was best that he had gone to keep an eye on Michael. In any case Michael had commanded Bardas to accompany him, so the point was moot.

Photios spent his time getting his church in order. Ignatios still had many priests and bishops who were loyal to him, and Photios worked on reassigning them to isolated outposts to make them less of a threat. He also had his duties as Patriarch to attend to and all the administrative baggage that came with that position. While he despised most of it, the power and freedom it provided him to execute his plans were a small price to pay.

This business with Ignatios was not going to go away. He and Bardas had known the Pope would be angry, and angry he was. Photios was sure that Ignatios was communicating with him somehow from his little island retreat, but killing him now would raise too much attention and suspicion. He would have to keep sending his own letters to the Pope, flattering his eminence and providing more proof of the former spiritual leader's carnal escapades.

The last delegation Photios sent had returned and the Pope himself had sent him a letter with the Papal seal stating that he was very concerned about this business and that an official Papal investigation of the

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matter would take place. Next year Papal legates would arrive and look into the matter of his appointment. Photios would have to figure out how to deal with this Papal delegation. It would be a tricky business, but Photios felt confident he could outsmart them.

As the Patriarch contemplated these matters Ooryphas entered the room and interrupted his train of thought startling Photios, "Your Grace, I thought you would like to know that our fleet has returned from Pelousion and after they resupply they will set out for Sicily to deal with the problem there. It may be a good gesture if you give them God's blessing before they depart."

"Yes, thank you," the Patriarch replied. "I will make sure that I do. And Ooryphas..."

"Yes, your Grace?" The Patrician gazed intently at Photios.

"Next time you enter my chambers you will make your arrival known first. You are not the Emperor."

"Yes, your Grace, my apologies." Ooryphas scowled and left.

I shall need to get some initiates to do some penance and guard my chambers from unexpected interruptions, he thought to himself.

Photios had known the fleet would be returning soon but had been so busy he did not even realize they were already back. He would need to find Constantine. Before he could finish his thought, he saw Kontomytes approaching.

"What a coincidence," he said. "I was just about to go looking for you."

Constantine Kontomytes had obviously had time to freshen up after his journey and wore a bright red dalmatic with silver lining at the neck, cuffs, hems and upper arm seam. It was belted over his gold Coptic



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tunic. "No need, I accompanied that tiresome Ooryphas here after his long-winded speech on ship battle tactics. The little shit is capable but I am not leading the fleet because I have no idea what I am doing."

"Let him play at being faux emperor, Constantine," Photios interjected. "If necessary I will put him in his place. For now, let him think he is running things."

"Any news from my son-in-law?" the admiral asked. "Nothing of note," replied the Patriarch. "They have spent most of their time making sure that the defenses in the cities along the way are repaired and improved. There has been no news of any major battles other than several small skirmishes. And what of your expedition?"

The admiral smiled. "We annihilated them. They were completely unprepared and after our initial volley of naphta they were quick to surrender. Five hundred officers just walked out and gave themselves up. We held onto them for a bit and then got a King's ransom for them in return. The ho genikos will be counting all those dinars and for quite some time."

Photios looked pleased. "Excellent, but do not get overconfident. Sicily will not be so easy. They have fortified their positions there and will be tough to defeat."

Kontomytes nodded. "I know. I shall see what is left of our forces in Syracuse and then figure out the best course of action. I am sure Ooryphas will give me a long explanation of which tactics I should employ and which route I should take."

"I am sure he will." Photios adjusted his robes. "Damn, I still can't get used to wearing these. Either way take care. I am sure your nephew Bardas would be devastated should something happen to you."

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"The only thing that would devastate Bardas would be forcing him to attend all your sermons." Constantine laughed.

"God speed to you." Photios smiled. "And God protect you," he said, making the sign of the cross and giving the admiral a blessing.

"Thank you, your Grace." The admiral bowed from his waist and took his leave.

Photios sat in his chair and thought to himself that filling the Empire's coffers was never a bad thing.



The summer had been good for Askoldir and his men. After portaging to the Don they sailed as far east as they could and then disembarked before the river broke south to avoid Sarkel. Twenty-six years ago after the Vikings from the North began to start exploring the lands of the Gardariki and made their way to the lands of the Khazars and the Khazar Sea, their Khagan decided he needed to protect the portaging route between the Don and Volga Rivers and had asked his allies in New Rome for help. Theophilus obliged and sent his chief engineer Petronas Kamateros to help them build a fortified capital on the west bank of the Don near the point of disembarkation for portaging to the Volga. In return, the Khazars ceded Khersones and other territories on the south coast of the peninsula, on the north side of the Euxine.

Most of the time traders would take full advantage of the water routes and sail all the way to Sarkel before portaging. Then they would make the shorter journey to the point where the Volga breaks to the east before flowing southeast into the Khazar Sea. In order to avoid the Khazars, Askoldir's father Hvitserk instructed him

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to meet his party at the tributary that branched away from the Volga at a slightly more northern point. It too flowed straight into the Khazar Sea and was much less travelled. This way was optimal in order to avoid detection and would also allow them to avoid the Khazar stronghold at Itil and the toll.

By the time they had reached the sea, most of the Slavs had learned to row in unison and how to work the rigging on the sails. They also took turns raising and lowering the mast until they could do so quickly and without any effort. The Rus would make sailors out of this bunch of peasants by the time they were done. Once they were on the sea, Askoldir taught Yaro how to turn a ship's bow into the wind and have the wind fill the sail from the opposite side in order to turn about quickly. He also showed him how he could sail against a heavy wind by using this maneuver, like a snake slithers through the grass. While he was still clumsy, Yaro had eventually understood the principle and was getting better.

In order for the Slavs to get better accustomed to the sea, Hvitserk told his son that they would sail south first and pretend they were here to trade, and then do some raiding later on the northern coast before making their way back up the Volga. This way they could get their sea legs first before worrying about having to fight as well.

Hvitserk was very familiar with this route and spent most of his summers here either raiding or trading. Lately it had been mostly trading and he came prepared with a huge batch of furs from Beloozero. He had tried trading them to the Bulgars further north on the Volga, but they had more furs than they knew what to do with. For the Arabs, however, they were a commodity they did not have and would fetch a higher price. While the

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Arabs did not have much need for furs to protect them from the cold, they were still very valuable as they bartered for everything and traded the furs for other goods along the Silk Road to the south.

Hvitserk had decided to amaze the Slavs and his son by showing them the great city of Drebend. They would be able to move their wares there, and the Slavs would have the opportunity to see the most impressive city they had ever laid eyes on.

As they approached, even Askoldir stared in disbelief. Drebend was situated on a narrow strip of land between the mountains and the sea. The walls were massive and larger than anything the Slavs, or Askoldir for that matter, had ever seen. They were twenty meters high and the North facing wall alone had thirty towers.

"This," Hvitserk shouted, "is the Gate of Gates. Or at least that is what the Arabs call it. Many peoples have fought over this city and route for many years. Long ago, the Khazars and Arabs fought for more than one hundred summers for control of these gates. As you can see, the Arabs won. They have controlled this city for the last one hundred summers. It is the only way to get to the kingdom of the Arabs by land, and that is why it is so important to them. He who controls these gates controls the access from the north to the Silk Road in the south."

When they finally made port and moored their ships, Yaropolk asked Hvitserk, "What is the Silk Road?"

"The Silk Road is a wonder of wonders and a highway of gold," Hvitserk replied. Seeing the confusion on Yaropolk's face, he continued more bluntly. "It is the greatest trade route known to man. It is where the East meets the West and everything and anything can be and is exchanged. The wonders one can find on the Silk

Road are limitless. As are the dangers. This is where the steel that forged my son's sword came from. I spent an entire winter's worth of furs to purchase enough to make one sword. But, as Hoskuldr can attest, it was well worth it. Very few can work it properly. Luckily, when we were raiding the Franks many moons ago we captured a smith named Uthbert who is quite proficient in making magic with this wondrous metal. The steel bends but does not break. Stronger than anything in the West."

Hvitserk, Halfdan and some of their men knew enough Arabic to conduct trade. They had been here several times before and had dealings with the Arabs along the Volga trade route. While they concluded their business, Askoldir's men and the Slavs roamed through the streets of the wondrous city, exchanging whatever they had of value other than their weapons for some sort of exotic trinket. Every one of them was amazed that a city like this could function with over fifty thousand souls living within its walls.

Hvitserk managed to trade his furs for a small chest full of silver coins with strange exotic symbols on them that someone had brought from the Far East. He had no idea where they were struck, but the weight was right and that was good enough. The men admired the city for a while longer and then set off back north.



When Vratymyr returned to Itakh's stead, the guards normally posted out front were nowhere to be seen. He entered and found Kubrat digging a grave in the courtyard.

"Where did the guards go?" the kniaz' asked.

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"They took whatever they could and left," Kubrat stated somberly.

"Did they find anything?" His voice quivered slightly.

"Not really, m'lord. They grabbed some expensive clothes and took his fancy curved sword and his armor and a bunch of provisions from the kitchen. They searched for quite some time looking for coins but found none."

"Itakh loved that sword. It is a shame he will not be buried with it by his side. It always reminded him of his youth."

Covered in sweat, Kubrat finished digging the hole in the ground. Vratymyr approached him. "Let me help you put him in the ground."

They went inside and Kubrat grabbed the heavy Khazar's legs while Vratymyr raised him up under his arms. He could feel the old Khazar was completely cold to the touch now, and his muscles were beginning to stiffen, making him seem heavier than he appeared. As they began to lift him, he rolled to the side and fell to the ground. They tried to roll him back over, and Vratymyr noticed something sticking out of his robe. It was a long tube made of carved out bone. Upon further examination, Vratymyr noticed that inside were several rolled up sheets of parchment. This must be what I am looking for, he thought.

He slid the tube into his tunic. "Let's get this heavy man to his final resting place. I do not know the Khazar ways of reaching the afterlife, do you?"

Kubrat shrugged. "No, m'lord, but he did tell me if anything were to happen to him to merely place him in a hole here in the center of his stead and cover him with the dirt."

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"Very well." Vratymyr sighed. "That is what we will do then." They dropped Itakh in the hole. Vratymyr took one last look, and then they covered him with dirt. *Farewell and may your journey be swift*, Vratymyr wished his old friend. "What will you do now?" he asked the slave.

"I hadn't thought about it, m'lord," Kubrat replied. "I've been here since I was a young boy."

"Well, you have been working for me a while now. You are more than welcome to continue to do so as a free man," Vratymyr suggested.

"A free man?" The slave smiled.

"Yes, a free man." Vratymyr grabbed him by the shoulders. "How does it feel to be free?"

Kubrat looked around and let out a loud breath. "I don't know, m'lord. I don't remember ever being free."

"Well, then you'll learn." Vratymyr smiled. "You can sleep here for now. If you don't want to sleep in a dead man's bed you can sleep in the kitchen and we'll figure something out tomorrow."

"Th-th-thank you, m'lord," Kubrat stammered.



The return journey back north on the sea proved to be much more difficult than the journey south. An unexpected storm caught Hvitserk, Halfdan and Askoldir in the open sea as they were teaching their sailing techniques to their Slav counterparts. They had to lower their masts for fear they would snap in the gale force winds which also threatened to tear the sails to shreds.

Yaropolk watched Askoldir working the rudder intently, and his stomach felt as if butter was being churned inside it. The waves crashed into them, and

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water filled the boat with each wave. The Varyags and Slavs took turns bailing out the seawater as the boat undulated on the rough waves. Many of the Slavs, experiencing their first storm, were pale as ghosts, and some retched uncontrollably but continued working as they feared for their lives.

An uncharacteristically large wave picked up one of Hvisterk's boats and brought it crashing down onto its side, snapping it in two. Those who managed to avoid death after the initial impact bobbed in the sea helplessly and were quickly swallowed into the abyss. The other crews were too busy trying to stay afloat themselves to help those that were in the water. Not that they could have provided much help. The strong winds and unpredictable waves scattered the ships in every direction.

Askoldir barked instructions, as did the other commanders, but they were barely audible above the sounds of the waves, wind, and creaking strakes. It was every boat and crew for itself. It was actually better that the boats had been scattered far from each other as this meant there was less of a chance of them crashing together.

After hours of struggle, Yaropolk relieved Askoldir on the rudder. Askoldir's palms were raw and blistered. Yaro felt the strength of the sea as he attempted to steer the boat. The boat surged drunkenly through the waves, and he didn't think there was much he could do to affect their course. The drizzle had turned into a downpour and then back to a drizzle, but this made no difference. The wind was so strong that even a drizzle felt as if each raindrop was a pebble. Seawater sprayed the crew, and the men's lungs burned as they inevitably swallowed the salty water while attending to their laborious tasks.



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The chaos seemed to last forever. Yaropolk was convinced they all would die. He bellowed as loud as he could and called on Perun to stop the madness. "Perun, if you hear me you bastard stop this madness. You have taken from me all of my sons, do you wish to take me too before I can get my revenge. Are you that cruel? Would you deny me my final wish?" Miraculously, several minutes after his rant the seas began to calm and the wind all but disappeared. Yaropolk stared at the heavens wondering if the god actually heard him and then fell heavily onto his buttocks, his legs sapped of all their strength.

The rest of the crew slumped into their seats as well, exhausted. Thankfully, no one on their ship was lost. Askoldir's ship was a fine, sturdy vessel and had made it through virtually unscathed. As they assessed the situation, they realized that they could not see any of the other ships.

"Where is everyone else?" Yaropolk asked in a daze.

Askoldir was somber and tremendously tired as well, but calm. "In heavy storms like this it is normal for ships to drift apart in many directions. We will need to regroup and then we can assess our losses. Hvitserk and the rest of the boat captains know where we should rendezvous. We shall sail for the eastern part of the mouth of the Volga."

Half of their oars had snapped during the storm when the pine shafts splintered against the mighty waves. This made the journey north a little slower but no one was complaining as everyone was exhausted and this gave the rowers more time to rest between shifts. Yaro's hands and lungs were on fire. It felt as if he had been swinging his axe felling trees for hours, and his muscles ached. But that meant he was alive. He could still pay back the Greeks for his son's death.

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Vratymyr had to make his rounds anyway, so he met up with Kubrat personally.

"How was your first night of freedom?" the Kniaz' asked.

"I'm not sure, m'lord," the newly freed slave said. "So far it does not feel any different, though I didn't have to make anyone other than myself breakfast."

The Slav leader thought for a while and figured that yes, one day would make little difference. The young man had known nothing other than servitude and had not yet had the opportunity to experience what freedom really meant. "Walk with me, and I will see if I can try and give you an idea of what it feels like."

They walked past the town limits and along a path on the banks of the mighty Dnipro. The sound of the river coursing provided a calming effect as they strolled through the trees, which were vividly changing colors and made the entire landscape appear like a giant smokeless, heatless fire swaying back and forth in the breeze, the leaves licking the bright blue sky.

They walked for about an hour and then Vratymyr asked, "Do you feel that?"

"Feel what, m'lord?"

"Freedom," said the Kniaz' plainly.

"I do not understand, sire." Kubrat's eyes revealed his lack of comprehension.

"Freedom, my boy, is being able to stroll through the woods and appreciate their beauty uninterrupted."

"But I have strolled through the woods many times and appreciated their beauty," the young man answered still confused.

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"That may be true," Vratymyr countered, "but were you able to keep going and not have to worry that you would be scolded upon returning?"

"No, m'lord," Kubrat said. "But do you not also need to return and check on your subjects? Will they not be expecting you?"

The Kniaz' thought for a second. "Yes they are expecting me, but I return by my own choice. There is a difference. It is my responsibility, which I choose to fulfill. In a way, it may seem I am a slave to my birthright, but if I chose I could give it up and let someone else take over. Fate does play some role in your life, but the life of a free man is based mostly on the choices he makes."

"I still am not sure I understand," Kubrat continued. "I too made choices as a slave. I had to choose which spices to use in the kitchen, which road to take to get from one place to another. How is that different?"

"Well, you were making your choices in order to please the wishes of your master," Vratymyr explained.

"But do your subjects not make their choices based on your wishes?"

"Yes, they do, but they do so because they decided that they wished to follow me and to have me make decisions for our tribe as their leader. If any one of my subjects was dissatisfied, he could easily take his belongings and try to find his own way. People follow me because they want to, not because I force them to."

They began to make their way back to town. Vratymyr changed the subject. "Did your master teach you how to read markings?"

"A little, m'lord," replied Kubrat. "His eyesight had been failing and the last few years he had trouble seeing so he taught me a little."

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"Excellent!" The kniaz' beamed. "I will have a job for you. You will stay in my stead in my service for a time and in turn my men will build you a home of your own."

"A home of my own?" The young man could not believe it.

"Yes," Vratymyr replied. "Payment for a service. You will help me interpret these scribbles of Itakh's and your reward will be a new home. That is what it means to be a free man. I will not be your master but you will be in my employ. Do you agree?"

"Yes!" he exclaimed excitedly. "Yes, m'lord."

"When we are done with these parchments then you will be free to do as you like," Vratymyr continued. "You can choose a profession you want to apprentice in, you can leave if you wish, or maybe I will have more work for you."

Kubrat smiled. "I am beginning to understand what freedom means. I think I am beginning to like the sound and feel of it."

They made their way back to town, and as they approached the Podol Gates one of Vratymyr's druzhynnyky informed him he had a messenger. Vratymyr led Kubrat to his stead and introduced him to the two druzhynnyky on guard duty. "Zhdan, Balko, this is Kubrat. This is his first day of freedom and I would appreciate it if you found him a sword and led him to someone who can begin to teach him how to defend his freedom."

Vratymyr disappeared inside and made his way to his stable where the newly arrived messenger was seeing to his horse. "You should have had Milda look after your horse."

"Begging your pardon, sire," the messenger replied, "but my horse is my life and I spend as much time with him as I can." The horse whinnied approvingly.

"I understand but let Milda finish," the Kniaz' commanded. "We have business to discuss inside."

Vratymyr had spent the last year and a half setting up a network of informants in distant lands. They were there to observe and gather information and report it back to him. Khud'ko travelled to all the places where the informants were located and gathered their information for the Kniaz'. They would always meet in discreet locations so that they would not be spotted together. Some of the informants were locals and others were minor officials in the employ of lords or merchants. Khud'ko also always stayed at inns and taverns in the various places he visited, where he listened to the stories of the travelers. You could learn much sitting in a tavern or inn, sipping on some watered down wine and listening. Itakh had taught Vratymyr the value of information. Information could help you win a battle, or it could help you avoid a battle. Not having enough information led to Itakh losing his power in Kyiv. The Polian would not let that happen to Askoldir and himself. Knowing what your friends and enemies were up to enabled you to stay one step ahead of them. Vratymyr hoped that the Khazar's papers would provide him with a list of the crafty man's network of spies, or little birds, as he liked to call them.

"What news do you bring me?" the Kniaz' asked impatiently.

"I have been on the road for over a moon now and have learned many interesting things," Khud'ko began. "The first leg of my journey as you commanded was to Polotesk. I met with Brachislav himself as you wished so as not to reveal any of your plans. He told me the

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Varyag expedition to the islands in the north was successful. They destroyed many settlements and eventually the Saxons agreed to pay them a geld of one thousand and five hundred Roman pounds of silver just to leave them in peace."

"They must have done a significant amount of damage to have secured such a small fortune," Vratymyr mused.

"Aye. And that does not take into account all the booty they collected while destroying a good portion of the northeastern coast of the main island. While there, I also heard news of Bjorn and Hasting's expedition. There are many Varyags in Polotesk these days and information about their exploits is not very difficult to come by."

"I would imagine so," the Polian added. "Please, continue."

"They said that the expedition started poorly and that they lost about a third of their men in two separate battles. The first was with someone called the Asturians who chased them from their lands and then they were also repelled by the Muslims."

Khud'ko pulled a rough map out of his sleeve, unrolled it and began pointing out the areas to his lord. "They also lost two of their sixty-two longships. After those defeats, they decided to change tactics and stick to the coastlines instead of venturing inland. This brought them more success. They sacked some Muslim city called Algeciras," he said, pointing to where it was located on a crude map, "and a few others, here. They then looted and sacked some settlements on the northern coast here and also sacked settlements on these islands." He pointed to the Balearic Islands. "Then they sailed north here, sacked a city called Narbonne and will spend the winter there."

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"It appears that things go fairly well for our allies." Vratymyr paced across the room. "And what of the Greeks?"

"I met with my contact from Tsargrad in Khersones," the messenger continued. "He says that the Emperor and the Caesar Bardas are out campaigning in the East and may be tied up there most of next year as they are also overseeing the rebuilding of their fortresses and defenses along the way."

Vratymyr beamed. "Excellent, I could not have asked for better news than that. What about the Greek navy? Have you heard anything about their movements?"

"Well, sire, all I was able to learn was that they had sailed west on some sort of campaign and had not yet returned. I do not know how long the campaign is supposed to last, or its purpose. I do know, however, that three hundred ships sailed west."

The report continued until the sun had set but none of the subsequent news revealed anything else that interested Vratymyr at this time. "Khud'ko, I need you to stay here in Kyiv for a few days. I have found something that may lead to your next mission. Take a little break and get some rest. I fear your next trip will be much more dangerous than this last one, but also much more important."



The battered expedition made camp east of the Volga Delta. Miraculously all five of Askoldir's ships made it back, though three were significantly damaged. Of the fifteen ships Hvisterk set off with, only eleven returned. The sea had claimed four ships and over one hundred men. They spent a few weeks patching up the

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ships as best they could and quickly fashioning new oars. Many of Hvitserk's ships were in even worse condition than those of Askoldir.

"The sea can be cruel just as she can lead you to riches," Hvitserk said, surveying the progress on the repairs of his ships. "You look to be almost ready to sail back to Kyiv." He turned to Askoldir.

"Aye, we will need to sail soon if we don't want to risk any parts of the route freezing over. What will you do?"

"I am afraid a few of our ships will not be able to make the journey north in the condition that they are in. I think we will need to find a settlement to sack so we have a place to camp for the winter without having to build shelters. There are plenty here on the coast. We will need more time to make several of these ships seaworthy. I will not leave any more of my men behind." His father thought for a moment and continued. "I will do my best to make it back north in the spring and bring whatever forces I can to help with your little excursion in the summer. It will be tough going on the Volga upstream in the spring with many makeshift oars but we will manage. You had better get going."

"It was good sailing with you again, father," the Rus Khagan said. He drew his father in for a hug.

"And you as well, son," Hvitserk replied. "May the gods watch over you on your journey back."

"And may they watch over you and guide you safely home. I shall see you in the summer."

Askoldir found Yaro finishing a fish he had cooked on a stone near a campfire. "Are we ready to go?" he asked the big man.

Yaropolk wiped the juices off his beard with the back of his massive fist. "As ready as we will ever be.



Let us hope these leaky buckets get us back to Kyiv in one piece."

They said their goodbyes to Hvitserk's men and made their way to the delta for the trip north. Luckily, the current was not too strong, and they retraced their route up the easternmost tributary. They decided they would row straight through to the portage point and not camp on the riverbank.

When they found an area they deemed safe near the portage point, they rowed to shore and disembarked, exhausted. They quickly made camp, set up the watch and retired for the night.

Askoldir fell asleep almost immediately. He dreamed no dreams until early morning, when suddenly he began to envision a torrential downpour. The dream was so vivid he could hear the whooshing of the wind and the massive droplets hitting the ground all around him. Something was wrong. He forced his eyes open and realized that his dream had become a nightmare in reality as arrows rained down all around the camp.

Askoldir had settled in beneath his boat, propped up by a row of oars providing shelter. He quickly rolled up to a seated position and heard missiles thudding into the hull of the ship behind and over him. Most of their party had taken cover beneath the other ships as the rain of arrows continued. Several Slavs and a few of his brethren lay pierced and motionless on the ground, struck down before they knew what had happened.

When the onslaught ended, the song of arrows whistling through the sky was replaced by the hoof beats of hundreds of horses. As they began to emerge from beneath the cover of their boats, they could see they were encircled by a mass of Khazar warriors mounted on their small but sturdy horses.

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One of the Khazars raised his arm, and the host ground to a halt, encircling the battered party. Askoldir emerged from beneath the prow of his ship and approached what appeared to be the Khazar warlord. Most of the Khazars wore no armor but the warlord wore a breastplate over his thick leather hide tunic. He also wore a triangular hat, which was covered entirely by fur at its base. A strong aroma of dung filled the air as an easterly breeze picked up. The warlord motioned for Askoldir to stop, and he did so. The entire Khazar host held their bows at the ready and a semicircle of personal guards brandishing short javelins formed behind the Khazar warlord as his horse edged slowly towards Askoldir.

The warlord barked and motioned to one of his men who quickly dismounted and approached the Kyivan Khagan. The Khazar interpreter wore a colorful knee-length kaftan of gold and red threads. Underneath he wore a pair of white breeches with intricate designs on them, and on his feet he wore black leather riding boots. He muttered in a broken Slavic with a thick Khazar accent, "My lord would like to know why you are trespassing in our lands."

Askoldir without hesitation replied, "We do not mean to trespass, merely to pass through. We are explorers returning from the east. We encountered a great storm on the sea and some of our brethren are no longer with us for the long journey home."

The Khazar warlord eyed Askoldir intently as he spoke and grunted a retort to this story.

"My master says he saw you cross through our lands on your way east but received no word that you had paid a tariff or toll in Itil in order to continue on your journey." The diminutive Khazar translator smirked. "We will extract our toll from you now."

The Vikings from the North had been trading with the Arabs in the Southeast for decades now and it had become customary to pay a tariff as they crossed the Khazar lands to reach the riches of the Silk Road.

"My apologies." Askoldir thought quickly. "We are not traders and do not have any goods to pay you with. We were merely travelling east to see what the lands there hold."

"This does not excuse you from paying the toll," the Khazar translator conveyed his master's sentiments. "Our master in Itil is quite displeased that you have stopped paying your tributes as well."

The Norseman stood tall and calmly but sternly replied, "I am Hoskuldr son of Hvitserk and grandson of Ragnarr Lodbrock, king of the Danes and Svealds. I pay no tribute to anyone. Whom do I have the pleasure of speaking with?"

The Khazar adjusted himself gracefully on his horse, making himself look surprisingly tall, as his translator quickly relayed Askoldir's words. His brow furrowed and he spoke loudly, addressing not the translator but Askoldir directly in fluent Norse.

"I am Temyr and unless you want to be held for ransom it matters not who your father or grandfather are. You are in no position to barter and must pay a toll for crossing these lands. You travel with the Slavs and they owe us tribute. You can either pay or die." The Khazar waited for Askoldir's reply.

"As you see," the Viking replied, "we have nothing to pay you with. Everything we had we lost in the storm and we are merely trying to return to our lands."

Temyr examined the campsight from his mounted position. "Then you should have paid the toll on your way east instead of trying to sneak through our lands. As for a tariff, you are not as poor as you profess. You

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have five ships and four of them will be sufficient payment for you to continue on your way."

Askoldir gazed at the Khazar warlord and realized that bargaining would be useless. They were outnumbered at least ten to one, and they were surrounded by a host of archers whose arrows pointed directly at them. This was not the time to be a hero. "Very well, it seems we have reached an agreement. My only demand is that you allow me to choose which four ships will be used as payment."

"I will honor this request and you have till the sun rises to its highest point in the sky to be out of my sight.

Askoldir nodded. "I don't think that will be a problem." He pointed to his ship. "This one goes with us and the rest are yours."

The Khazar warlord motioned with his arm and quickly dozens of men dismounted and grabbed the four remaining ships. They carried them away as other mounted warriors took the reins of their horses.

As the Khazar host slowly moved away, the party assessed their situation. The initial volley of arrows killed five Slavs and three Varyags. Several others were also wounded, two of which had severe wounds that needed to be tended to. Since they were pressed for time, they burned the bodies of the dead on a makeshift pyre and were on their way. Askoldir decided that the wounded would accompany him and Yaro on the ship along with as many others as they could fit. Of the two hundred men who had set out one hundred and ninety-two remained. They managed to squeeze eighty-one onto Askoldir's ship but did not dare take any more for fear the ship would not be able to handle the weight in her present condition. They left most of the supplies for the party that would have to return by land. They

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said their goodbyes, and began their journey back home.

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## Winter 859

With the Emperor and Bardas out campaigning and Ooryphas taking on the tedious administrative duties of the Empire, Photios finally had a little time to work on a few projects he had put aside earlier. Being Patriarch, he had many responsibilities, but he had also found that he had an army of lackeys to which he could delegate various tasks.

Autumn had brought the bad news that Arabs in Sicily had routed Kontomytes and the fleet. One third of the three hundred ships were lost at sea, and a good portion of the army that accompanied them was destroyed in a battle at Cefalu. The expedition had started on a promising note. A few of the settlements which had earlier surrendered to the Arabs rose up against them when they saw a large army arrive from Constantinople. However, the new Muslim governor Abu'l-Aghlab al-Abbas ibn al-Faldi had proved to be a more than capable leader and quickly took care of the insurrection, crushing the newly arrived armies. Catapults from the Muslim shalandi heavily damaged the fleet before the dromons were able to employ their Greek fire, and many soldiers went down with the crippled ships.

Ooryphas had sent a messenger to inform the Emperor of the defeat, but Photios had one of his trusted men intercept him and make sure that it did not reach its intended ears. The brash Michael, he thought, could look to seek revenge in Sicily and abandon his campaign in the East. No, better that Bardas keep an eye on him with their large host and citadels to retreat to if anything happens.

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Photios had slowly settled into his role as Patriarch and in between the many tedious functions, he began to concentrate more on his intellectual pursuits. While there was obviously no way that the Muslims could be converted to Christianity, he did see other opportunities to spread the glory of God and His word north. The Khazars were currently in a bit of upheaval and seemed to be ripe for conversion. Ever since they had asked for help with the construction of the fortress at Sarkel and ceded Kherson to Nova Roma, it seemed they had been searching for a new identity. This was the impression his contacts in the newly-formed theme of Kherson had been giving him. The Khazar Khagan and some of the population had recently converted to Judaism. But many also worshipped the Muslim god and still others remained pagans. Photios saw an opportunity there. If he could strengthen Christianity's influence in the Khazar territories, it could only bode well for the future. They were allies in a sense, and it would be much easier to have influence over them if they converted. This was an opportunity to expand his flock. If he could convert the Khazars to Christianity, he could seal his place in history and it might even get the Pope off his back.

He would need a very capable envoy in order to fulfill this mission. It would need to be someone who was an intellectual but also a diplomat. He had just the person in mind. He believed his former pupil Constantine of Thessalonica would be perfect for this job. Photios was anxiously awaiting the arrival of his new envoy, who was being escorted to the capital at this very moment.

Constantine had also been a former pupil of Leo, the famous philosopher and mathematician, and had a brilliant mind. Before he came to him to expand his knowledge, he had already had a firm grasp of geometry



and had learned all of the works of Homer. With Photios he learned all the Greek sciences, including arithmetic, astronomy, philosophy, dialectic, rhetoric and music. At first he was wary of the young intellectual because his original benefactor was Theoktistos, but his fears were soon allayed. When Photios became Constantine's teacher, he quickly realized that the boy cared nothing for intrigue and only yearned for knowledge.

Photios fondly remembered when Leo introduced him to the young son of a droungarios from Thessalonica. Leo had told him that the boy had an insatiable mind and would accomplish great things. When Photios had convinced Bardas to form the Magnaura School four years ago, Leo had returned to Constantinople and become the director of the university at the urging of Photios. He could think of no one better to shape the young minds of the Empire. While Leo was a cousin to John Grammatikos, he did not share his iconoclast views. However, when John was deposed for his opposition to the veneration of religious images Leo lost his position as Metropolitan of Thessalonica. It was rumored that long ago one of Leo's students had been taken hostage during the wars with the Arabs. Leo had gone personally to the Caliph al-Mamun to petition for his release. The Caliph, amazed by his knowledge of mathematics, invited him to come to his court in Baghdad and offered him wealth beyond imagination to do so. Leo refused. After learning of this, Emperor Theophilos granted Leo a school at the Church of Forty Martyrs.

When Constantine had successfully finished his exams at Leo's school, he was approached by the Logothete Theoktistos, who offered him the hand of his niece in marriage. The logothete also told him that he believed in his abilities and talents, and that it should

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not be long before he rose to the rank of strategos. Eventually he could be a governor of his own theme. Constantine was very flattered at this offer, but he informed Theoktistos that he did not wish to be married. His only love was for the acquisition of more knowledge, and he believed that marriage would interfere with this goal. Realizing the value of Constantine's knowledge, Theoktistos petitioned the Empress Theodora to appoint him as the Director of the Patriarchal Secretariat. She agreed, and Constantine was ordained a deacon and became Cartulary. This position and the mundane administrative duties that came with it, however, quickly bored the young scholar who was thirsting for knowledge. He resigned and tried to distance himself from the capital and engage in pursuits that were more intellectual. He spent six months at the Kleidon Monastery near the Bosphorus simply for the purpose of trying to convert John Grammatikos, who conveniently lived not far from the monastery, from his heretical iconoclast position. Though he was unsuccessful, his discourses with the heretic stimulated him intellectually. Constantine always wanted to understand people who had views that opposed his and to learn why they believed in what they did. This helped strengthen his own position. Photios remembered many of their exercises as he made Constantine defend a position he opposed personally. This was precisely why Photios believed he would be perfect for the task he had in mind.

Constantine had not been easy to find as he had disappeared from public life after his diplomatic mission to Samarra several years ago. With the death of Theoktistos and the removal of Theodora as Empress, Constantine had lost his primary benefactor and might have feared that he too would lose favor. A little

digging and a bit of luck however, had helped Photios locate him. While listening to a boresome report on religious affairs of the themes he had heard the name Methodius mentioned and remembered that Constantine's brother was named Methodius. Could it be him? It was after all a common name. It turned out that it was his brother who was the patrician and komes of the theme of Opsikion in Bythinian Olympus. It would be logical that this was where Constantine would have retreated to.

Photios had sent an official church representative to Opsikion to observe and report on secular matters in the theme and had discovered that Constantine was in fact in a monastery there with his brother. It was then that Photios began his plans for the mission to convert the Khazars in earnest. Not sure that he would come of his own accord, the Patriarch had sent an official escort along with a letter bearing his seal and representatives of the Emperor approved by Ooryphas. It did not take much convincing of Ooryphas that a mission to convert the Khazars was highly beneficial for the Empire, and it would be much more difficult for Constantine to disappear knowing that both the church and the state requested him in Constantinople.

As he was reminiscing about his student, Constantine arrived with his escort. "Leave us." The Patriarch dismissed the accompanying deacons, and they exited the chamber.

Photios recognized the intellectual immediately, even though Constantine was no longer his young bright-eyed student of so many years ago. He retained the same sandy, short-cropped hair but had added a beard, which gave him a more aged and scholarly appearance.

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"Please, have a seat, philosopher." The Patriarch motioned to a chair and sat in the one beside it.

Constantine eyed him inquisitively, trying to get a read on why exactly he had been summoned to the capital.

"Thank you, your eminence." He adjusted his robe before seating himself. "Theoktistos used to call me philosopher," he stated nonchalantly, seeing if it would reveal any expression from the man. The Patriarch's face remained stoic, but then he smiled.

"And rightfully so. You earned that title. You were the brightest in your class at the university and proved many a time that your intellect has few rivals. It is a shame he is no longer with us." Photios could sense the unease in his former pupil. "Listen, that was an unfortunate business. Michael is a very impulsive young man and his desire to control the Empire was insatiable, even at fifteen. Theoktistos and Theodora underestimated him and made a fatal mistake selecting Eudokia Dekapolitissa as his bride. They knew very well that he fancied Eudokia Ingerina and he never forgave them for that." While most of what Photios said was true, he left out the part about himself and Bardas prodding Michael to free himself of their clutches and the role they played in helping this come to pass.

"I was sure I was also a target, being on such good terms with the logothete," Constantine stated emphatically.

"I can assure you Michael has no idea who you are. To him you were merely another face around the palace. If he had wanted you gone, trust me, you would have heard of it. Or, not heard of it, but then you likely would not be here sitting and talking to me today."

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"The intrigues of life here in the capital are too distracting," professed the young intellectual. "I abhor the entire quest for power and all it brings with it."

"No one understands you more than I," Photios agreed. "It too leaves a bad taste in my mouth," he lied. The Patriarch had once shared his former student's view but had succumbed to the allure of power. Who better to pull the strings than an intellectual rather than a barbarian? "I can assure you, you have nothing to fear while you are here."

"Then why the royal escort?"

"Well, I wasn't sure you would come. You were not easy to find so I assumed that you did not want to be found. I would not have found you were it not for the soporific reports I have to endure in this new position of mine. One of my bishops was reviewing a list of eparchial leaders and I overheard the name Methodius."

"So, it was my brother whose name betrayed me," interjected Constantine.

Photios smiled again. "I had recalled you mentioning him during one of our discourses and decided that it could very well be him. Once that seed had been planted it did not take long to find you in the monastery."

"Which leads to the inevitable question, why were you looking for me? If it wasn't to eliminate me then obviously there was another purpose."

"Yes, obviously," Photios replied. "I have a task that requires your unique talents which I believe you will be interested in as well."

"I am quite happy being immersed in my studies at the monastery," the deacon countered. "What makes you think I would be interested in this task of yours?"

"While it is true that this was my idea," the Patriarch began, "the mission is one of great importance

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to the Empire. It is even more important than your last mission to Samarra which I am sure you remember."

Now Constantine was intrigued. Samarra had been an incredible learning experience. While he had been there as a diplomat and translator he also had the opportunity to engage in many scientific and theological discussions and quickly learned that the Arabs were not the barbarians that everyone in the Empire had made them out to be. Their knowledge of mathematics and medicine rivaled that of the great thinkers of Rome, and he had learned many new things while he had been there. The Arabs were in a unique geographical position and had the opportunity to learn from both the West and the East. Not only did traders travel the great Silk Road, but it was also a highway for knowledge. The Arabs had translated many of the great Greek writers into their language, and he was able to have many fruitful discussions with them about the works of Aristotle and Plato. Constantine had tried to convince his counterparts of the threefold hypostasis of God and though unsuccessful, still left with a respect for their dedication to learning.

"Now you definitely have my attention, your eminence."

"Photios, please." The Patraich sighed. "You have no idea how difficult it is not hearing your name for weeks. I was just plain Photios as your teacher and Photios I remain no matter what office I hold."

"Very, well. Back to this mission," the deacon interjected excitedly.

"I am sure you know of the Khazars."

"Yes..."

"Well, their Khagan Zacharias has recently converted to Judaism. Their people are currently in a state of, how should I say... religious flux. Some have

converted to Judaism, some are leaning toward the Muslim faith and many remain pagans. I believe we have a great opportunity here to help convince them that the Christian faith is the one true faith and our God is the one true God. And you," Photios emphasized pointing at Constantine, "I believe that you are the one person who has the best chance of convincing them."

"That will not be easy," countered the Thessalonian. "Especially since the Khagan has already converted to Judaism."

"If it were easy I would not have sent for one of the greatest minds I know." Photios knew he had Constantine hooked. He could see the young man's eyes widen and the corners of his mouth rise ever so slightly.

"You flatter me."

"My intention is not to flatter you but to get results from the man best equipped to get them," Photios said.

"Why not send Leo?" asked Constantine.

"Leo is old and he does not have the gift of languages you do. I need someone to try and convince them in their own language."

"But I don't know the Khazar language."

"Which is why I am sending you to Kersoneses first, to learn their language. Have you ever been there?"

"No, I have not yet had the opportunity to travel across the Euxine."

Photios straightened himself. "No matter, you will travel to Khersoneses, learn the Khazar language and acquaint yourself with the culture as best you can. When you feel your command of the language is strong enough, then you can continue north to the lands of the Khazars and your mission will truly begin. I will be sending a retinue of clergymen with you to use as you see fit."

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"I have one request, teacher."

"Yes?"

Constantine looked the Patriarch in the eye. "I would like to take my brother with me."

"Why would a patrician want to accompany you? Doesn't he have his hands full in Opsikion?" Photios was confused.

"Like me, Methodius is bored with the life of an administrator. Not only that, but there is a more practical reason I want him to accompany me. No one in the Empire knows more about the Slavs than he does. His insight will be invaluable on this mission. In addition, my brother and I have grown quite fond of each other's company again over the last few years. It would be nice to go on a great adventure like this together."

Photios saw the merits in the young man's argument. Almost two hundred years ago the Emperor Justinian II had conquered many regions occupied by the Slavs and Bulghars including Thessalonica. He had taken many Slavs as slaves, and many others had decided to follow the Emperor willingly, not having any strong leadership of their own at the time. Many of these Slavs settled in Opsikion. So many Slavs had migrated there that Justinian was able to form a Slavic horde of thirty thousand men under the command of the general Nebulus. The general, however, became a traitor when he was bought off by the Arabs, and two thirds of his Slavic horde defected with him. In order to exact revenge Justinian had all of the families of the defectors executed. Tens of thousands of Slavs had remained in the region and though most had assimilated, some remained pagans to this day. Being the patrician of this theme Methodius would have a strong insight into the Slavic mentality and culture and would be invaluable as Kherson was teeming with Slavs as well as Khazars.



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"Agreed," the Patriarch concluded. "Now if only you can convince the Khazars to convert to Christianity as easily as you just convinced me to take your brother along with you on this mission."

"When do I leave?"

"I would prefer you not delay long as time is of the essence."

"Very well," the newly appointed missionary replied. "I shall pay a visit to Leo and be on my way to inform my brother that he is no longer patrician. We will return as soon as possible."

"I'll have all the paperwork ready with the appropriate seals before you leave." Photios grabbed the young man's shoulder. "It has been good to see you again, Constantine."

"And you as well, teacher, and not only because I am not in a jail cell." Constantine took his leave and went to find his other mentor.



When the news came that Askoldir's lone ship was spotted approaching down the Dnipro, Vratymyr's mind raced with likely disastrous scenarios. He assumed the worst as only one of the five boats that had set out was returning. Were the others lost at sea? Had they been attacked by raiders and killed? Was it the Khazars? All of these events were plausible. A journey like this posed many dangers. He wondered if standing up to the Khazars was the right thing. Vratymyr calmed down and tried to reassure himself that he was doing what was best for his people. Vratymyr took a deep breath and waited with anticipation for the ship to reach shore. A large crowd had gathered on the riverbank. The minutes passed like hours amid the din of mothers and

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wives crying and rumors quickly spreading that the expedition was doomed.

Finally, Askoldir's boat made it to the wooden dock, and the wounded were unloaded first. Several women rushed to the pallets recognizing their husband or son as one of the wounded. The rest of the crew took to the menial but necessary tasks of arriving at port before they disembarked. Vratymyr could hear several of the locals wailing after their lost loved ones.

Looking tired Askoldir barked his final orders to the men on his ship and disembarked. He raised his arm to try and calm everyone on the shore. "Kyivans, fear not. The expedition was not a disaster. The rest of the party is travelling by land and should be here in a few weeks."

"Why are there wounded then?" someone from the crowd screamed.

"We were met by a storm on the sea and were later attacked by a host of Khazars. Sadly, nine men in all were lost of the two hundred who set sail. However, you shall hear from your husbands of wonders beyond your imagination." When Askoldir finished his very brief speech, it seemed to have allayed the fears of most of the gathered crowd.

Vratymyr sighed in relief as he saw his massive friend emerge from the ship carrying the body of one of his men who had died on the boat. Of all the wounded that returned on the boat only one had died from an arrow wound that pierced a lung. Yaropolk had insisted that they bring him home. He handed the body over to his tribesmen and proceeded to where Vratymyr was waiting.

Yaropolk lifted Vratymyr off the ground with a big bear hug. "It is good to see you, my friend. I have many stories to tell you."

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"I am sure you do," Vratymyr replied, glad to see his friend as well. "When I saw that there was only one boat I was sure you sunk to the bottom of the ocean like a large boulder."

"Bah." The big man laughed heartily. "This large belly floats."

"That very well may be," countered the Kniaz', "but I know you would never let go of that heavy axe of yours and that is what would drag you to the bottom of the sea. Come, let us retire to Castle Hill and exchange stories."

Askoldir made his way towards the two men, "I shall go clean up. Let us meet in an hour to discuss matters."

"Very well," answered Vratymyr. "We shall join you in your hall then."

Yaropolk's idea of freshening up was removing his bearskin cloak and dunking his head in a trough of freezing water in front of Vratymyr's abode. He kept his head submerged for about a minute and a half and then shook it vigorously like an animal letting out a thunderous yowl. "You have no idea how I hate the sea. The salt water has a stink that I fear I will never get used to. When the wind picks up during a storm it feels as if you are breathing salt and it stings your eyes as they dry out."

"Are these the wonders Askoldir was referring to?" The Polian laughed.

"Ahhh." The big man waved his hand. "Do not mock me. My legs were made for the land. I am too old and weary to be learning to sail."

"I am sure you did fine."

"Working a rudder is not as easy as it looks," Yaro continued. "I would have been better served sticking my axe in the water and using it to steer the boat. Thankfully I was not expected to fidget with the sail."

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Boats are all about ropes. Everyone is playing with ropes all the time. And you always have to clean everything. The salt water gets everywhere and if you don't scrub everything all the time it eats it away. Scrub, scrub, scrub. It's maddening."

"Enough of your whining," interjected Vratymyr. "Tell me of these wonders."

"Very well, but pour me some mead first," the big man said, rapping his friend hard on the shoulder. "I need a lot of mead to wash away this taste of the sea." Vratymyr poured him some mead and they sat by the fire. Yaro took a deep draught. "Getting to the sea was easy enough and we met up with Askoldir's father and uncle and snuck past the Khazars. Hvitserk took us across the sea to a city called Drebend. This, my friend, you could not imagine in your wildest dreams. The walls of the city are so high that when you stand at their base and look up you can barely see the top and your head feels as if someone hit you with a club because your knees go weak. Come to think of it, it is a similar feeling to being on a ship. Except on a ship, your stomach goes weak as well and you want to retch over the side even when you have nothing left to retch."

"You were talking about the city." The Kniaz' felt he should interrupt before the big man started complaining about the sea again.

"Yes, yes. The walls... incredible. So many towers. I do not see how anyone could ever conquer such a fortress. The walls extend from the sea to the mountains and prevent anyone from passing via land. Hvitserk told us that the Khazars had tried to take the city a long time ago but failed. And the people. There are so many. Thousands upon thousands. I cannot understand how so many people can live so close to one another. Most of them had dark skin as well, though

there were people from all over. They traded everything. Speaking of which..." He reached into his pocket and brought out a piece of cloth. He unraveled the cloth and pulled out a small, strange-looking creature made of green stone. "I brought this back for you. The stone is called yashm, and the monster with the big long nose with horns is called a feel. The man who sold it to me said the creatures roam free in the Far East and some people even ride them though from what the translator told me he said they were about two or three times the size of a zubr."

"Amazing." Vratymyr ran his fingers across the incredibly smooth stone. "You will need to tell me more but I think it is time we met with Askoldir. I am sure he wants to hear of what is going on here."

The two friends made their way over to Askoldir's hall, where a large fire had been stoked and a meal prepared. Askoldir joined them quickly and they all sat. Yaro attacked his meat pie as if he had not eaten in months, and though more reserved, Vratymyr could tell Askoldir savored the freshly-prepared food as well.

"Nothing like a good meal after a long journey," the Kyivan Khagan exclaimed. "I trust Yaropolk filled you in on our journey."

"We got as far as Drebend. Most of the time was spent discussing the finer points of seawater and seafaring." The Kniaz' chuckled.

"Ah, yes." Askoldir laughed. "I noticed our friend here has a real love for sailing and the sea. I will let him finish his tale later. Suffice it to say, that we had a little run in with the Khazars and they are the ones that relieved us of four of our ships. Normally, traders from the north pay a tariff in order to trade in the south but we figured since we were not traders we could avoid this tariff. Obviously, we were mistaken. The Khazars

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are not too happy that they are no longer receiving tribute from the north so they decided they would relieve us of some of our possessions. If we had decided not to agree to their terms, we would not have returned. That is the short version. And what of Kyiv?"

Vratymyr got straight to the point, "Things here have been going quite well. The two master shipbuilders have a friendly little competition going on which has been keeping them busy."

"I'm sure you had nothing to do with that." Askoldir flashed a wry smile.

"Who, me? No. Both are proud men and I believe there is quite a significant wager as to whether Polotesk or Kyiv will have the most ships ready for the summer campaign. The blacksmiths have been working feverishly as well and with all the work many people are flocking to Kyiv. I think our population must have doubled this summer. I am confident the loss of the four ships will not be noticed. At the rate construction is going there should be more than enough ready."

"We shall see," the Khagan said as he swallowed a mouthful of bread. "A lot can happen between now and the summer."

"True," Vratymyr said, "but everyone is working in tandem and remaining busy. The men are building the ships and working the forges and the women are making sails and helping tan hides. The city is ready for winter. More trees have been prepared and it looks like the building of ships and the working of forges can continue throughout the winter."

"And what of the Derevlans?"

"They have not been heard from," the Kniaz' answered quickly. "I believe they will be licking their wounds for a while but I am sure one day they will want their revenge."

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Askoldir stabbed a piece of meat with his knife and brought it up to his mouth to take a bite. "That is the way it always is with proud people. They always want their revenge. One day we will have to deal with them. Let us hope it is not this coming year."

"Oh, one more interesting piece of news I have learned," Vratymyr remembered. "The Greeks suffered a pretty significant defeat at the hands of the Arabs."

"You mean the Emperor?" Askoldir asked, hoping.

"No," replied Vratymyr. "The Emperor is still on his campaign in the East my sources tell me. One of their admirals led a large portion of their fleet with another army against the Arabs on an island called Sicily. They lost about a third of their ships and over half the army that set sail."

"That is good news," the Norseman mused. "That means they will have less resources to bring to bear against us. If the Emperor continues pushing East, it appears we will have an enormous opportunity to strike at Miklagard. Let us hope things continue to go well for the Emperor in his campaign at least for another six months. That should keep him occupied and away from the capital."

"Yes," Vratymyr agreed. "It appears that at least for now the gods are being kind to us. The real purpose of our campaign remains a secret to those who do not need to know about it."

"Good. Now, I would like to get some rest. Let us hope fortune continues to work in our favor."

"Aye," Vratymyr whispered.

"Aye," Yaro joined in, spilling some mead in the process.

They bade each other a good night and Yaro accompanied Vratymyr to his stead. "Get some rest, friend; I will see you in the morning."

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Yaro made his way to the guest quarters and passed out immediately. Vratymyr took up his favored position in the dark on his bed and contemplated the future, as was his wont. Things were going exceedingly well. There had been some setbacks, but it appeared that they were all relatively minor. The Polians and Siverians were slowly becoming a decent fighting force, and if things continued to work in their favor, everything just might fall into place. Sadly, he never found where Itakh left the last of his coins. It had been many months since the Khazar had passed on to the next world, but he still tormented him. Vratymyr had his men dismantle most of the Khazar's holdings but still found nothing. All that remained standing was the building where they found the dead man, and Vratymyr had gone through every nook and still found nothing. He sighed, and fell asleep.



The army continued to move eastward, stopping along the way to make sure more defenses were shored up. Huge plumes of dust followed the massive columns of soldiers and horses as they slowly trudged forward. Though Michael's impatience was growing, Bardas had been able to keep it in check so far. He was not sure how long he could do so, however, before the need for the young Emperor to prove himself overtook caution. Bardas continued to explain the importance of making sure that the defenses in these cities were ready. They had overseen the reshoring of Charsianon and were just now arriving in Sebasteia. Many of the themes were poorly-administered, and much of the monies that were supposed to go to rebuilding after Arab sorties were being embezzled. So they also had to make sure that



they dealt with local corruption during this expedition. Several praetors had been relieved of their duties and made examples of.

While many of the soldiers in the eastern themes constantly had to deal with Arab incursions and raids, the army they led consisted of many part-time soldiers and the long march east with stops in each city gave Bardas the opportunity to train them as an army, as opposed to a rag tag band of mercenaries. It was one thing to look like an army but another to fight like one. Slowly they were rounding into form. Hopefully, they would be ready when they faced their first major test. The fact that they had an entire arsenal of catapults and ballistae meant their movement was also slowed considerably. If they were to lay siege to a city the size of Arsamosata however, these were necessary weapons.

The nucleus of their army was the tagmata. The tagmata was comprised of six thousand regular soldiers and six thousand auxiliaries. They were the best armed and the best trained and were tasked with not only being the backbone of the expeditionary force but also with protecting the Emperor. Along with the tagmata, units from several themes comprised the rest of the expeditionary force. An expedition of this size was costly and a nightmare to keep organized and prepared for battle. Prior to their departure, the Emperor had ordered several tourmarchai from the central themes to muster and bring their forces along. The tourmachai were divided into two. The first part was the prokritoteroi, who were the superior, more seasoned fighters, and the second was the elattoteroi, who were less experienced. Each of these was in turn divided into three droungos, each commanded by their own droungarion. Each droungos was divided into two to

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five banda, which consisted of around two hundred soldiers. In a force this size the chain of command was of utmost importance or else chaos would ensue. The bandon each had their own commander called a komes and each had their own banner so that they were easy to recognize. There were also differences in the organization of the infantry and cavalry bandons, but, generally, they each were divided into sixteen lochagiai with sixteen men apiece commanded by their own lochagos. Heavy infantry units also had different divisions, as did the units of archers. Maintaining order and keeping everyone fed and supplied was a massive undertaking. While they were in friendly territory this was relatively easy, but the further east they travelled, the more difficult this would become. This was why Bardas demanded strict discipline throughout the entire journey and that constant training and drills took place as they moved forward.

All the drills and training bored Michael immensely, but he knew they were necessary in order to have a superior and battle-ready force. Caesar Bardas had spent years teaching Michael the finer points of military tactics and organization, and he hoped that they had paid off. The key was making sure Michael did not make any rash decisions in his quest for glory. This is usually what led to defeat of armies even when they had superior arms and numbers.

Many of the locals in the themes were happy to see their Emperor and greeted him with shouts and flowers as the army entered each town and city. Even locals from several towns over would make the trip to see the spectacle. This posed its own security risks, and Bardas had to make sure that the tagmata and the Emperor's personal guard were always on high alert.

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They would not be staying long in Sabasteia, since the town's fortified walls looked to be in good repair, but it was an important stop on the journey. They would pray and pay their respects, for this was the home of Saint Blaise, as well as Saint Peter of Sebaste five hundred years earlier. This was also where forty Christian soldiers confessed their faith and were sentenced by the prefect to strip, make their way out onto the frozen pond near the city and freeze to death. Later a cult of the forty martyrs was formed, and many monasteries and churches sprang up bearing their name.

Bardas rode up next to the Emperor. "Your highness, we shall be expected to stop at the holy area of the martyrs before entering town."

The young Emperor sighed heavily. "How I hate these formalities."

"And I as well," replied the Caesar, "but they are necessary. You want to make sure the local population thinks you care about them deeply and have their interests at heart. Such is the burden of leadership no matter how divine in nature."

"Yes, yes," Michael interrupted. "I know, that does not mean I have to enjoy it. I have been groomed for duty since I was three and realize it is a necessary part of being Emperor. If I do not show them I care for them the people will not speak well of their Emperor, or be as willing to follow him. I shall wave and smile and do my best to look like a temple statue."

"Your highness." Bardas pulled a parchment out of his sleeve. "I have prepared something which I think would be a nice touch and should make the people think you care deeply for the martyrs."

"What would that be?"

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"Here," Bardas said, unrolling the scroll, "is a list of all of the martyrs. I thought it would be a nice touch if you mentioned them. It should go over well with the locals and the pilgrims gathered here."

"Very well." Michael shrugged. "It seems a tedious task but should be uplifting for the masses."

As they approached the pond, they saw thousands of pilgrims gathered and many people kneeling in prayer for the martyrs and their souls. The Emperor dismounted and approached a small dais that had been prepared for his arrival by the pond. He grabbed the parchment from Bardas, who accompanied him to the foot of the dais. The Emperor faced the pond, got on his knees and recited a prayer. When he was done, he rose and began to speak in a booming yet somber tone.

"Almost five hundred years ago forty members of the Twelfth Legion under General Lysias in the service of Emperor Lucinius professed themselves to be Christians. These brave souls of the Thunderous Legion, though all from different lands and of different backgrounds, stood together in defiance professing their love for Christ and proclaiming that no torments shall ever make them abandon their holy religion.

"They were promised many favors by the Emperor and when this did not sway them, as they said that no favors could replace their souls which they had offered to Christ, the governor ordered them flogged and flayed. Even as the whips equipped with hooks tore the flesh from the bodies of the men they stood fast and did not forsake their Lord.

"They were then chained and thrown in jail, yet they still would not renounce their faith. Neither the governor nor general Lysias could change their minds. The governor, offended at their courage, decided that their fate would be extremely cruel. If they would not

renounce their faith, then they would suffer greatly. In the freezing temperatures of early Martius he had them stripped down and paraded onto this very pond beneath these great walls." The Emperor pointed to the walls of the town not far away for greater effect. "Then he had them all exposed naked to the elements on the ice. Being exceptionally cruel and wanting to torment them further the governor had prepared warm baths near the pond, to entice them to give up their martyrdom. The devil claimed one of their souls, and the man, overcome with fear, cast aside his beliefs and jumped into the warm baths. As soon as he slid in the warm water, he was struck down dead, and claimed by the master of darkness. Upon seeing this, one of the soldiers warming himself from the chill near the warm baths was overcome by the Holy Ghost and proclaimed his faith removing his clothes and joined the others.

"The next morning the judge who had pronounced the sentence of the governor ordered those who had frozen during the night along with those who were still breathing all to be thrown onto wagons and then cast into a fire. One of the young men was still breathing and hoping he would recant his profession and come to his senses the guards left him behind. The young man's mother, seeing in his eyes he wished to join God in eternity with the rest of the martyrs, lifted his frozen body herself and placed it on one of the wagons.

"Once all the bodies were reduced to ashes the governor had the ashes thrown and scattered in the river. Some of the ashes were rescued and remain with us to this day in the many houses of the Lord dedicated to these brave young men whose souls are now with Christ in the heavens.

"Let us take a moment to remember all these brave young men." Michael unrolled the parchment and began

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to read their names, bowing his head after each name. "Flavius, Domnus, Valens, Priscus, Claudius, Helianus, Meliton..." He continued until all forty had been read. The crowd was silent in prayer and awe at their young Emperor.

As he climbed down from the dais, Bardas stared at Michael dumbfounded. "How did?.."

"Never underestimate your Emperor, Caesar." The young man smiled. "I may have been bored but I paid attention when Photios taught me. This particular story was in the discourses of St. Gregory of Nyssa."

"I am sure the pilgrims here will remember this day fondly, your highness."

They then proceeded to the city where there was a feast in honor of the Emperor's arrival. While the higher ranking officers joined the Emperor and the Caesar at the feast, the other officers organized the resupply of the troops and got them camped for the night outside the walls.

They stayed in Sebasteia a few days, and when the horses and men were rested and resupplied, they broke camp and set out north to shore up defenses in the Armeniac theme.



The Kyivans decided to throw a huge feast when the remainder of the expedition to the Khazar Sea returned. Everyone had been busy for many months with little respite, building ships or making ropes, sails, armor, weapons or tending the fields and clearing the forest. It had taken the Slavs who came home via land much longer than expected to return because of heavy snowfalls, which began earlier than usual and made the

journey not only treacherous, but painstakingly tedious and slow going as they made their way west.

They returned in the middle of Prosynets, as the Slavs called the first month of the year. It was the month after the winter solstice when people waited with anticipation for the coming of spring and asked the gods for favors for the new year. The gods had answered their prayers and the rest of the expedition returned safely, so Kyiv celebrated. They lit large bonfires and danced with glee. The children frolicked merrily, trying to see if they could catch a glimpse of Svaroh, who was able to turn himself into a great white wolf during the winter months. The men hunted for a week prior to the feast to make sure there was enough fresh game, and large spits were set up where the deer and wild boars that were caught were roasted over the open fires.

The Slavs and Varyags exchanged stories and celebrated together. The expedition during the summer and fall had done much to build close relationships between the two peoples and they interacted easily, as opposed to sticking to themselves like they did before the expedition. The men who just arrived had really become close, as they had spent months counting on each other for survival. They truly began to consider each other as kinsmen.

Even Askoldir seemed to be enjoying himself. He had grown fond of Yaropolk, and Vratymyr was glad his friend had made a new friend also. Vratymyr found the two of them near one of the spits sharing some boar and mead and decided to join them.

"The wolf and the bear eat together I see." The Kniaz' laughed as he approached them.

"The bear will eat with anyone," Yaropolk joined in. "Even a sly fox like you." He found an extra cup, filled it with mead and handed it to Vratymyr. "Join us."

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"With pleasure. It is good to see everyone enjoying themselves and relaxing after such a taxing year."

"I was just explaining our traditions to this heathen from the North." The Siverian was obviously a little tipsy and slurred a bit, raising his cup to Askoldir. "He was just about to tell me how they came to naming their months."

"Well, don't let me interrupt you." Vratymyr sat near them. "Please continue."

Askoldir thought for a moment. "Where was I? Oh, yes. Every year at midwinter there was a great sacrifice called the Thorrablót led by the heathen priest Thorri. It was in his honor that the first month received its name. The second month was named Goi after Thorri's daughter. Thorri had two sons and a daughter. I have already told you her name but the sons were called Gor and Nor. One winter during the Thorrablót Goi went missing. They searched and searched but she was nowhere to be found. Thorri even prepared a great sacrifice in the hope that the gods would reveal her whereabouts. This they called the Goiblót. Unfortunately, the gods revealed nothing further and for three long seasons, they searched for her but to no avail.

"The brothers then swore an oath that they would search for her till she was found. Nor would search for her on land and Gor would search for her at sea.

"Gor set sail with many men following to help in the search. He searched the gulf and all the islands in the Baltic Sea. He searched both the Svía Skerries and the Elfar Skerries. He sailed all the way to Denmark and though he found kinsmen of his descended from Hler the Old he found no trace of Goi."

The two Slavs sat enthralled with the tale.



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“Nor waited for the first large snowfall and set out from Kvenland on his snow shoes. He travelled far beyond Finnmark to the lands of the Lapps who decided not to let them pass through their lands. This angered Nor and his men, and through their superior strength and magic they caused the Lapps to flee before them. They crossed the Kjolen Mountains to the fjords and encountered more hostile forces whom they were forced to rout as well. They spent the summer in a great valley and continued on after the first snowfall. On the other side of the mountains, Nor was also forced to fight a great King called Sokni after learning he had defeated many of Nor's men. Even though his magic did not affect the King, Nor still managed to cut him down.”

Whisps of steam from Askoldir's breath passed through his lips as he continued. “At this point Gor met him here and explained to Nor that he had conquered all the islands but had found no trace of their sister. Hearing this news, Nor decided to press onward to Uppland where he encountered King Hrolf of Bjarg, who was the son of the giant Svadi from a place called Dovre Fell in the North. It was here that Nor learned Hrolf had been the one who had spirited their sister away. Nor challenged him to single combat and they fought for a very long time but it appeared they were equal in strength and neither one could wound the other or gain an advantage. It was then they decided to reconcile and Nor married Hrolf's sister while Hrolf married Goi. Nor then decided to return to the kingdom that he had conquered in the North and called it Norway.”

Askoldir took a deep pull of mead. “I seem to have usurped the conversation. Well, that is the story of Thorri and Goi, which are the first two months of the year.”

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They continued to swap stories long into the night until Vratymyr noticed Khud'ko trying to catch his attention from the shadows. Vratymyr excused himself, explaining how the mead and the cold had given rise to a need to relieve himself, and made his way towards his spymaster.

With Kubrat's help, Vratymyr had been able to decipher the parchment containing most of Itakh's old network of informants, as well as merchants who could be bought to provide information. He had sent Khud'ko out to see if he could recruit them to become informants and providers of information for him.

"Walk with me," the Kniaz' whispered. They walked towards the forest till the clamor of the celebrations was barely audible in the background. "What have you learned?"

"Well, m'lord I have just returned from Khersones and there was an interesting new arrival. Two men arrived with a large retinue from Tsargrad and seem to be on some very important mission. One is a monk named Methodius and the other is some sort of philosopher named Constantine. It appears that they have been sent by the Patriarch himself and from what I have heard they are supposed to have dealings with the Khazars."

"I do not like the sound of this." Vratymyr was worried. "I hope the Khazars have not asked the Greeks for aid against us. That would ruin all our plans. Return to Khersones and see what you can find out about their mission. I need to know the precise reason they are there and what business they have with the Khazars. As soon as you learn anything important, I need you to report to me immediately. This could ruin everything."

"Very well," the spymaster answered. "I shall leave in the morning."

Vratymyr made his way back to the festivities. He decided that he would keep this news to himself for now. There was no reason for Askoldir to start second-guessing this expedition just yet. The business in Khersones with the Khazars might amount to nothing. He needed to be sure before he approached the Khagan.

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## Spring 860

The Roman army made its way toward Dazimon to check on the state of the defenses at the fortress there. The fortress was situated on the plains near the Iris River. As they slowly trekked north, Michael's scouts reported that they had seen an army of Saracens moving through the area. Here was Michael's first opportunity for glory and he decided he would pounce on it. The Emperor gave the order to track the Arab army, but to stay out of their sight until they camped and then rout them while they were unprepared.

Bardas entered Michael's tent with the rest of the strategos'. A crude map of the area was set up on a table in the center of the tent and they began planning the attack on the Saracen army.

"We should camp here, near Chronarion." The Ceaser pointed with a long stick towards an area on the map. "I advise not coming too close to the city. The Arabs are sure to have scouts there. This way they will not know that we are in the area." He moved his pointer further northeast. "They will most likely camp here on the plain near the river. This will also limit their options for retreat."

The strategos' all agreed that this was the best course of action. Michael observed the map. "Very well, we shall wait until they camp and then march through the night along the river and attack them from the west and the south before dawn."

The army prepared all their provisions and slept from noon until nightfall so that they could march under cover of darkness in order to arrive before dawn. Bardas had decided that the pace would be methodical

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but slow, to make as little noise as possible. Hopefully whatever noise the army made would be masked by the river.

When they arrived at the Saracen encampment, everything seemed to be going as planned. The scouts had said it appeared that most of the Arabs were comfortably sleeping in their tents, and there was very little movement in the camp. There were very few fires, and it appeared that not many men were on watch.

"Excellent," Michael exclaimed. "We shall take them completely by surprise and destroy them. Get the men in formation."

Bardas motioned to the rest of the strategos to proceed with the battle-plan.

Once the command was given, everyone began to act like a well-oiled machine. Each strategos barked orders to his tourmarches who in turn passed them on to the droungarions, then on to the komes and all the way down the line. The cavalry dekarchias would lead the battle. Each dekarchia consisted of ten men in five lines. They were followed by the infantry, then the archers, and then by another wave of cavalry who would finish off up what was left.

The men slowly moved into position and came as close to the enemy camp as they could without being detected. The Emperor gave the order for the battle to commence. An ouragos waved the proper flags to signal the unit commanders, and the cavalry began to charge towards the tents of the unsuspecting Arabs. The Saracen camp was approximately one thousand five hundred meters away. They had been unable to get any closer without being detected, as there was not much cover other than some rolling hills. The Arabs would have time to wake up and maybe grab a spear or

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scimitar before they were cut down by the cavalry, while the enemy was still groggy from their sleep.

The horses charged, tearing up the turf with their thousands of shod hoofs. As they were about halfway across the field, the sun began to slowly rise. The helmets of the cavalry glistened with the first rays of the sun, as did the dew on the grass before them. The tents of their opponents were becoming clearer and immediately they noticed something was wrong.

Out of each tent, Saracen soldiers emerged, fully dressed for battle. The tetrarchos and ouragos could barely be heard screaming to the formations to hold their lines. They were surprised but charged on as the Arabs rode out to meet them. The sun continued to rise and began to slightly blind the onrushing cavalry as Saracen lancers galloped towards them. For a second the rays of morning light seemed to dim and reappear as arrows were loosed from behind the Arab lancers skyward. Several seconds later, the arrows began to find their marks, biting deep into the onrushing forces. Horses and men began to tumble to the ground. Those behind them became entangled with the bodies and also went down in a heap of broken bones. Men were crushed beneath horses as the line continued their charge. When the opposing lines of cavalry were about one hundred meters apart, the onrushing Arab crescent formation began to split in two initiating a pincer. Their cavalry proved much more maneuverable, for they wore lighter armor and used a curb bit, which gave them greater control of their mounts. As the enemy riders peeled away, the Emperor's charging forces noticed they were headed straight for a line of waiting spearmen who had planted the butts of their spears into the ground. The front line could not avoid them and spears

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pierced the chests of the onrushing horses, throwing their riders violently.

The Saracen cavalry that had peeled off now circled in and began to close on the infantry from their flanks, lances bared. They tore into the line of infantry and archers. The Romans fought as valiantly as they could but they were completely surprised. They had expected little resistance and were met by a well-prepared foe that had outmaneuvered them.

All the blood made the wet grass slick, and staying upright became extremely difficult. The noise of hooves beating on the earth and screams of wounded and dying men was deafening. The Arab cavalry had switched from their lances to sabers and attempted to cut down what remained of the Roman first wave.

Behind the lines, Michael and Bardas had a hard time making out what was going on until a rider with a deep gash on his left arm charged into their midst.

"Sire," he panted as blood poured down his arm from his wound. "They were waiting for us. They were not sleeping in their tents but merely concealing themselves. They attacked as soon as we closed in. Our men are being butchered."

"We must sound the retreat," Bardas bellowed.

"No," Michael said. "We need to press on and defeat them."

"Your highness." Bardas stared at the young Emperor. "If we do not sound the retreat they will destroy a good portion of our army and there is no way we will be able to move on to Arsamosata. We must retreat to a better defensible position."

"What do you suggest?" the Emperor asked, his eyes afire with anger.

Bardas had thought of several possible scenarios. While he did not expect they would be routed here, he



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still had a plan for that contingency. "We passed a hill about ten kilometers back that seemed to be the most rugged terrain for miles around. I suggest we send our best rider to have the catapults and other siege equipment we left behind brought there while we retreat to this position. Let them come to us there.

"Have we no other choice?"

"No, your highness," the Caesar stated plainly. "If we do not do this we will lose too many men."

"Very well, give the order." The Emperor cursed under his breath. Someone would pay for this disaster.

"Sound the retreat!" Bardas screamed as loud as he could.

Trumpets were quickly blown and flags waved frantically as the ouragos' signalled the retreat. The front lines were in complete disarray, but upon hearing the horns they seemed to rally. Archers took up positions to lay down swaths of arrows to cover the retreating forces. The Saracens pursued them for about a kilometer, cutting down the stragglers and remaining infantry that could not withdraw quickly enough, but then stopped.

Bardas took one last look at the field where a few thousand of their men and hundreds of horses lay dead and dying and retreated along with the Emperor's guard. It did not take them long to get to Anzes, which is what the hill they decided to defend was called. It was only a matter of time before the Arabs would reform and come after them. They needed to be prepared.

They set up their catapults and ballistae on the hill facing east. The wounded were given field dressings and bandaged up as best as possible. Anyone left behind was most probably dead by now. If the Arabs planned on pursuing them, they would have killed anyone too

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wounded to retreat, not wanting to worry about prisoners.

As night fell, there was still no sign of the Arabs. The Emperor had ordered all the strategos to his tent. "Who is responsible for this fiasco?" he roared. "How in the name of all that is holy were they ready for our arrival?"

The strategos muttered and shrugged, all at a loss over what to say. Bardas took charge. "Sire, the plan was sound. We did all we could. They must have had scouts that went undetected and saw us coming. It was a perfect trap."

"This does not happen to me!" The Emperor was furious. "Why did our scouts not notice they were ready for us?"

"The deception was flawless," Bardas continued. "They all entered their tents appearing to retire for the night but prepared for battle while they were in their tents. As we charged, they merely peeled back their tents and were ready for us. Now we need to be ready for them."

"How many men have we lost?"

One of the strategos named Philus reported, "Your excellency, it appears that we have lost about four and half thousand men at best count."

"That is over a tenth of our army," the Emperor said.

"It could have been worse," countered Bardas. "Had you not ordered the retreat many more would have died. The front lines were surprised and in disarray. At least here we are in a defensible position and when they attack us we will be ready for them."

"How do we know they will attack?" The Emperor seemed to calm down.

"I know these Arabs, sire," the Caesar said, adjusting his lamellar armor. "They have tasted blood; they will want more. They will want to finish us for the glory of their god. This time however it will be our turn to exact some revenge. They most certainly are unaware of our intent to take Arsamosata and it does not appear that they have any idea we have siege weapons here. This will be a great advantage."

"Very well," the Emperor conceded. "We shall wait for them here."

The next morning there was still no sign of the Arabs. The men were becoming antsy and a silence permeated the camp as everyone contemplated what was to come next. Some men prayed while others sharpened their swords with whetstones. Around mid-afternoon the silence was broken by the thunder of hooves, and the Saracen cavalry came into view. At first, they appeared as a small line on the horizon, but the line thickened as they approached.

The officers quickly got their men ready. Archers were told to get into their positions and to nock their arrows. Bardas then gave the order to move the ballistae into position. As soon as the Arabs were in range, Bardas gave the order to fire. The massive bolts shot through the sky and whistled wickedly as they approached the enemy. Even at this distance, Bardas could see the fear in the Saracen's eyes as the projectiles approached them, twisting tightly as they flew towards their marks. The first ranks began to break, but there was nowhere to flee. The large bolts tore through man and beast alike.

Bardas signaled for another volley to be loosed. The massive projectiles tore men in half and impaled horses to the ground. Limbs flew through the air spraying blood everywhere. Men and horses alike

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screamed in agony. A second wave of cavalry appeared behind the first and they too were torn to pieces by the ballistae. A third wave did not arrive. Men could be seen scurrying onto the field to drag away the wounded. Most, however, had been killed instantly. Those that weren't bled to death fairly quickly.

After the wounded were dragged from the field, the Romans waited for another line of attackers to appear. Night fell and there was no sign of the Arabs. Bardas sent out scouts and they returned saying that the army had retreated.

"Let's follow them and finish them," Michael told Bardas.

"Do you think that wise?" The Caesar tried to reason with the young Emperor. "It appears we are fairly evenly matched and have a larger goal in mind. They will not fight us again on our terms knowing we have the siege weapons and they can outmaneuver us in the field with their cavalry. If we had greater numbers, their maneuverability would play less of a roll but with armies approximately the same size it gives them a distinct advantage."

"What do you suggest we do?" The Emperor seemed to be angry but willing to listen to reason for the moment.

"Let them leave," Bardas advised. "They will not want to fight us again and will go looking for easier targets. This will give us an opportunity to go see if anyone survived yesterday's battle and to tend to our dead and wounded. Then we move on to our main goal. We go and find Amr and cut off the head of this beast. He will probably be in Arsamosata. His banner was not seen at the camp here."

"Very well," the Emperor conceded. "We can return to Sabasteia and find men to replenish the ranks before continuing on to Arsamosata."

The Emperor was becoming more impatient but thankfully, he was still listening to reason, Bardas thought to himself. It did appear though that controlling him would not be easy at all from now on, moreso without the aid of Photios to help influence the rash young Emperor. Together they stood more of a chance. Photios did after all represent God on this Earth. This campaign could not end soon enough for Bardas.

The next day they burned the dead of the enemy after placing them in a large pile. The stench was overpowering, and the task was tedious. The men had spent most of the morning not only collecting bodies but their limbs as well, so as not to spread disease among the local population and their livestock. They did the same with the horses.

After they finished burning all the bodies, they made their way to the site of the original battle. The scene there was no less grisly, and the stench was much worse as the midday sun had accelerated the process of decomposition. Birds had already begun helping themselves to eyes that remained open upon death, and wolves too had had a feast the night before. The creatures tore hungrily at the meat, pulling it out of rended flesh. The priests prayed over the bodies as they were gathered and placed in a large pit and burned. As Bardas had feared, the Arabs left no wounded. Many of the bodies had had their throats slit. The Arabs had obviously wanted no part of dealing with them.

After they had tended to their fallen brethren, they made camp several kilometers away. The next morning they broke camp for the return journey to Sabasteia.

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Khersonesos was an old city on the western shore of the Taurican Peninsula. It was founded by the Greeks of old and later came under control of the Khazars, who installed a tudun to oversee the area. When the Khazars had asked New Rome for help building Sarkel, they transferred full control over to the Emperor Theophilos. Khersonesos was a bustling city where many people from all across the Empire came when they did not wish to be found. It was also a place where the Romans used to exile and imprison their more famous inmates because of its remote location. It became the prison for two Popes, Clement and Martin. New Rome followed this tradition and exiled Emperor Justinian II after he was deposed.

Constantine was ecstatic that he had the opportunity to serve the Empire in the newly-formed theme of Kherson. He would be able to learn about new cultures and also help spread Christianity. He could fulfill his duty to the Empire, and not be bored out of his mind in the process.

His main goal was not simply to prepare himself for his eventual attempt to convert the Khazars, but to make the Tauric Peninsula a base for the spread of Christianity further north. Though there were churches in Khersonesos, most of the people in the city and peninsula were not believers in the Christian faith. It was a melting pot of various cultures and peoples from all around the region. The first leg of his mission would be to reestablish the authority of the church here on the peninsula. His brother Methodius would prove invaluable, as he already had served the Empire as a representative of both the church and the state.

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As their dromon approached the dock, Constantine was amazed at how large a city it was. He knew it was founded ages ago, and, generally, a city that survived this long would probably be well-developed. But when thinking of a secluded outpost, one always had the impression that it was small and dilapidated. A defensive wall surrounded the city about ten meters high, and at specific intervals there were towers that rose a few meters higher than the wall. From the deck of the ship, he was able to see an old Greek temple and an amphitheater in the distance. Beyond the wall were the farms, as well as vast vineyards.

The two brothers docked and disembarked. The local bishop Gregory was waiting there to greet them. "I trust your journey went smoothly," the venerable bishop said cordially.

"As smooth as the Euxine in spring can be, I suppose," Constantine replied. "Nonetheless, we have arrived safely and that is all that matters."

The bishop led them through the streets to their quarters in the administrative district. "I will leave you to rest after your journey and we shall get to work on the morrow."

"Excellent!" the philosopher exclaimed. "We shall take some time to get acquainted with our surroundings and retire for the evening."

The city seemed to be laid out in a very organized manner, taking up about thirty hectares and built outward from the seashore. The buildings were all made of a white local stone, giving the city a neat, unique appearance. After centuries the stones seemed to have taken on the scent of the sea, no doubt from the waves and the wind working in tandem. The salt from the seawater seemed to make the naturally light color of the stone even lighter.

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They settled in for the night and in the morning went to meet Gregory. Methodios presented him with the batch of papers Photios had provided him before their departure, and the old man began to sift through them, unfurling them and rerolling the parchment as he muttered and grunted. "HmMMM, everything seems to be in order here. I see I am to provide you with everything you need by order of the Emperor."

"Yes, it would appear that way," Constantine replied. "Though we will not need much. Most of our time will be spent studying the local languages and customs at first, but we will also be taking part in missions and expeditions throughout the peninsula making sure that the sanctuary of the church reaches the local populace. I trust it will not be too much trouble to provide us with provisions and transportation for these excursions."

"Not at all. I am at your service, as are the resources of the church. As for the theme's resources you will need to discuss that with the patrician."

"I am sure we will come to a mutual understanding." Constantine smiled. "Now, explain to me a little about the work of the church here in Kherson."

"Well, it is not easy," Gregory said. "There are not many monks here and for centuries, this place has been a prison and haven for exiles and undesirables. Now, do not get me wrong, these are precisely the types of people the Lord and Savior says we should target and many have been shown the light. But not all are easily convinced their souls need saving."

"Not to worry. That is precisely why we are here. We shall help you in your duties as shepherd for the flock here. I find, however, that knowing the local language will help in discourse with others so I would like to find teachers who can help me master the Khazar



language as well as the local language of the Slavs. Do you know where I can find adequate teachers of these languages?"

"As a matter of fact I do," answered the bishop, stroking his long white beard. "There was a pair of travelers who came with merchants from the North recently asking if anyone needed the services of a guide or translator. Both know the Slavic language, and interestingly enough one of them speaks Khazar and the other seems to know Greek well enough to get by. I shall get in contact with them and have them sent to you."

"Splendid, in the meantime we shall learn the layout of the city and see what your library contains in the way of books and scrolls." The brothers exchanged pleasantries with the bishop, bowed and took their leave.



The preparations in Kyiv were in full swing. Vratymyr was amazed at how much had been done. Seventy ships were completed and it appeared that ten more would easily be finished by summer. All of the work on the sails and rigging was done. They had made enough to outfit one hundred ships. The women and children took it upon themselves to plant the fields this year so that the men could continue working on the ships and in the smithy. There was only room for so many men at at the shipyard and the three smithys whose forges were working constantly. The leftover men helped in the fields and spent the rest of the day training tactics with the Varyags.

Though he never found the remainder of Itakh's treasure, the parchment of contacts that Kubrat helped

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him decipher proved more valuable to Vratymyr than any amount of silver the old Khazar could have accumulated in his final months. The most valuable of these contacts for the time being turned out to be Gregory, a Greek bishop in Khersonesos. Khud'ko had spent several weeks getting in his good graces and found he did not even need to offer him any silver. Northern furs for his bedding or to help ward off the winter chill from the sea breeze was enough to have the old man keep them informed of what the Greeks were up to on the peninsula.

Vratymyr was extremely relieved when he learned that the Greek delegation was merely trying to convert the Khazars to their religion and had not learned anything of their plans for this summer. He would miss not having Kubrat around, but when the opportunity arose to have both Khud'ko and Kubrat get close to the envoys sent by the Emperor, Vratymyr could not believe their luck. They would now be able to follow all of the movement of the Greeks on the peninsula and learn what they were up to. Since the Greeks planned a mission to try to convert the Khazars, Khud'ko and Kubrat would also be able to gather some intelligence about the Khazars. It was as if they had shot two pheasants with one arrow.

Vratymyr was giddy with joy as he approached the Kyivan Khagan. Askoldir looked at him quizzically. "Why are you so happy this afternoon? You look as if you are about to burst."

"It is a good day." The Kniaz' beamed. "I am sure you remember the old Khazar Itakh I told you of."

"Yes?"

"Well, it turns out that he had an entire network of people he paid for information and upon his death I found a parchment with a list of these names. His slave

Kubrat whom I freed helped me translate this little treasure and it revealed to us the name of a Greek bishop on the peninsula down south." His smile grew wider.

"And?" Askoldir was waiting for him to get to the point, not understanding why Vratymyr was so happy about this discovery.

"And, my dear Khagan," Vratymyr blurted out, "my spymaster and his companion Kubrat are now language teachers and interpreters to the leaders of an official Greek delegation in Khersonesos. We shall now know all their movements."

Askoldir's eyes shot open as wide as they possibly could. "That is amazing. Why did I not know of this earlier?"

"I did not wish to burden you with bad news until I was absolutely sure," the Polian explained. "When I learned that the Greeks were sending a delegation to Kherson I assumed they were on to us or were conspiring with the Khazars to launch their own attack on us, or at least to support the Khazars in doing so. Instead I learned that they merely want to expand their religion throughout the Khazar lands."

"But hasn't the Khazar Khagan converted to Judaism?" Askoldir asked, confused.

"He has," the Kniaz' continued excitedly, "but there is a lot of confusion in the land and he wants to show that the religion he chose is best for his people. He is also receiving pressure from the Muslims and there are still a lot of worshippers of our gods in their lands. He apparently wants to show that he is a tolerant Khagan and accepts everyone, but is cunningly trying to steer them towards Judaism. Anyway, now we shall know the exact movements and hopefully the motivations of both the Greeks and the Khazars."

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"Excellent!" the Norseman exclaimed. "Are you sure they do not know your men are spies?"

"I am sure." Vratymyr let out a wry smile. "They are posing as merchants, but I informed my man Khud'ko to give this envoy Constantine the impression that he is interested in converting to their religion."

"You sly bastard." Askoldir slapped him on the shoulder. "That is brilliant. You are the rope that keeps us all lashed together."



"Damn it to hell!" the Emperor fumed. "Can nothing go right on this expedition?"

Bardas tried to calm the young leader. "That is the nature of things here out East. The Arabs are always stirring up trouble and if it is not one thing, it is another. The people here have learned to deal with this style of life but for people who are not used to constant flux and invasions it is difficult to comprehend."

"Watch your tongue, Bardas," Michael scolded him. "Do not presume to know what I comprehend."

"Sire, I did not mean it that way," the Caesar muttered. "All I am trying to point out is these people that live here on the frontier have grown used to having their lives disrupted."

"Once we round up Amr we shall make their lives a bit easier and they will love me even more," the Emperor stated.

As they were leaving Sebasteia for the last leg of the journey to Arsamosata, a courier brought news that the entire garrison of the fortress at Lulon had inexplicably surrendered to an Arab captain and handed over the patrician of the theme to them. They were threatening to execute him. Lulon was at the south end

of Cappadocia and was a strategic area as the fortress guarded the pass south to Cilicia through the Tarsus Mountains.

The Emperor bellowed, "Not another setback! At this rate we shall never get to Arsamosata."

"Perhaps we can arrange for some sort of prisoner exchange to get the patrician back and find out what happened and why the garrison had surrendered," Bardas suggested.

"Yes," the Emperor agreed. "We need to know why the traitorous scum gave the enemy such a strategic post. Then we will execute every last one of them."

"I believe that will have to wait sire," Bardas recommended again, risking the Emperor's ire. "If we are to continue on to Arsamosata there is no way we will have either the time or the necessary forces to lay siege to Lulon first. Lulon is virtually impregnable and we would lose a significant amount of troops and resources if we were even successful."

"Very well." The Emperor sighed dejectedly. "We will find out what happened from the patrician and shall enact our punishment later. Round up whatever prisoners you can in the cities along the way and we shall bring them with us in chains to the walls of Lulon."



With Khud'ko and Kubrat in Khersones and Askoldir back in Kyiv overseeing the final preparations for the assault on Tasrgrad, Vratymyr decided it was his turn for a little sojourn. He had spent most of the last two years cooped up making sure everything was running smoothly in Kyiv, and he was getting a little antsy. He needed to feel the wind flowing through his hair and a strong horse between his knees. Since he would not be

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joining the expedition to Tsargrad he decided he would take the opportunity to visit Polotesk and see how the final preparations there were going.

The journey to Polotesk would not be a very easy one in the spring, but he longed for the feel of mud and grime after these last few years. He felt if he did not go now he might never get another opportunity. It was hard to envision how this expedition to the mighty Empire of the Greeks would end. If the Greeks decided to retaliate and come North with their armies there would be little Vratymyr could do to stop them. It did appear, however, that the gods were working in their favor and that fate was on their side as well. The Emperor was out for glory in the East, and the Varyags were providing support and distractions from the West. There was no doubt the Greeks had heard of the raids of Bjorn and Hasting along the southern coast of the Cordoban Caliphate, and with the start of spring, the Varyag brothers should have begun their journey east.

The Kniaz' decided not to take a large party with him to Polotesk to make the journey more manageable and only took five of his dryzhynnyky. They would travel light and as swiftly as the spring thaw allowed. The winter had been mild so he did not anticipate the journey to be overly difficult.

As his sturdy warhorse beneath him galloped through the wind, the Polian leader felt young again. The sound of iron-shod hooves along the turf reminded him of riding into battle in his youth. He felt complete. When they camped, he decided they would hunt, and he recalled how his father taught him as a boy. He strung his sturdy old bow just as his father had taught him. He ran his fingers along the birch shaft of an arrow down to the four multi-colored duck feathers and recalled how his father used to say, "The birch arrows are stronger

and do not break as easily.” They hunted just as he used to with his father. Now it would be his turn to flush out the boar towards the waiting spearmen who had set themselves up in a semi-circle amidst two ancient oaks. He stilled his breath as the mist exited his nostrils in the cold night air.

Relax, breathe slowly, and move even slower. Do not anger the boar until you are almost certain in which direction he will bolt, the Kniaz’ calmed himself. Vratymyr was vulnerable, as he did not wear his mail so as not to make any unnecessary noise. If the boar charged in his direction and gored him, he could easily be finished. That was part of the thrill of hunting, and of battle as well. When he was in position and saw the boar sniffing in the dirt for a meal, he slowly knocked his arrow. The wind was blowing northwest, which meant two things. First, the wind was blowing their scent away from the boar, and, second, it meant that he would need to adjust his aim accordingly. He slowed his breath, as time seemed to slow around him as well, and let loose the arrow. It flew true and caught the boar in the right rump. The boar immediately bolted away from the danger and fled toward two oaks in the distance. As the boar bounded through the brush, snorting and squealing, spears were shoved in the muddy ground by the ambushers forming a semicircle to meet his charge. The centermost spear impaled the boar almost directly in his chest. It snapped as the boar bowled through it, and one of Vratymyr's men barely rolled out of the boar's path as he let go of the spear. Vratymyr heard the screams of the boar and the slurping of the spears as the remaining men yanked their projectiles out of the thick mud and loosed them at the beast. Two spears found their mark and imbedded deeply into the majestic beast.

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The boar rolled to a halt and panted, blood oozing out of its wounds. Vratymyr carefully approached the beast from behind and slit its throat so it would not suffer needlessly. The hunters' adrenaline slowly began to recede, and the men went about the arduous, methodical task of skinning and gutting the beast. They hung the skin to dry and had a royal feast that evening. The Kniaz' felt alive again.

It took them almost two weeks to reach Polotesk, but they were two weeks Vratymyr enjoyed immensely. Brachislav greeted them as they entered through the southern gate. Polotesk was surrounded by a wooden palisade and had three gates and twenty-five towers evenly spaced providing protection. "How was your journey?" the Krivich Kniaz' boomed loudly over the racket of hammering.

"I have not felt this alive in years, Brachislav," the Polian warrior replied honestly. "If only I could spend all my days more simply."

"That, my friend is the burden of being a Kniaz'," Brachislav answered and led him through the wooden streets. Logs were laid in the muddy turf to make movement easier. They were not as necessary during the summer months, but in the spring they prevented horses and carts from being bogged down in the mud.

As they traversed the city, Vratymyr could see that just like Kyiv everyone was busy getting the final preparations ready for the coming expedition. The metallic ringing of hammers on anvils reverberated through the town, and peasants and soldiers alike hustled back and forth with bundles. "It appears everything is almost ready."

"Yes, we've been quite busy this past year." They reached a hill where Brachislav had his little keep. "You can clean up here and then join me for some dinner."



Servants quickly grabbed their horses and led them to a stable to tend to them. The Polian party removed their mail and cleaned up, feeling relieved of the burden of their metal outer skins. Servants came and took their armor, explaining they would clean it. When Vratymyr and his men were ready, they joined the Radimich leader for dinner.

"So, any news to share?" Vratymyr asked, breaking off a huge chunk of bread and stuffing it in his mouth.

"Well, one of my dryzhynnyky told me a marvelous tale the other day that he overheard in the inn." Brachislav smiled. "I think you will enjoy this story."

"Please continue, by all means, while I get some more of this food into me."

"Very well. A table full of Varyags at the inn were discussing an expedition of two prominent Varyag chieftans called Hasting and Bjorn. Now my dryzhynnyk is by no means fluent in the language of the Norse but he gets by well enough. Our city has quite a few visitors from those parts year round.

"Well, as I was saying, one of the Varyags began to relay a most interesting tale. I will try to repeat it as best I can. Not too long ago, the two brothers Hasting and Bjorn sacked an Italian city called Pisa and had overheard that the great city of Rome was only a short distance away. Not being able to pass up an opportunity to raid the riches of the most famous city in the world, they travelled towards its great walls. Finding them barred they realized that it would take an extremely long siege in order to force the rats out of their burrow, and since they lacked siege engines and, more importantly, patience, the one called Ironsides concocted a plan."

Brachislav grabbed a horn, which sat in a gilded holder with two small feet, and drank deeply. "You are

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going to enjoy this. The sneaky Varyag had his messenger send word to the bishop inside the city that their warlord the great Bjorn Ironsides had died. He also instructed him to tell the bishop that before dying, upon seeing the wonders of the Christian faith in their lands, he had decided to convert to Christianity and requested to be buried in consecrated ground within the city. Now, the bishop, being the holy man he is and not wanting to pass up the opportunity of being able to say he was the one that converted the great Bjorn Ironsides to Christianity, allowed a small honor guard along with the dead warlord to be brought into the city for a proper burial. Once they were brought into the church the crafty Varyag leapt out of his coffin and their small group hacked and slashed their way to the city gates. Before anyone could realize what was going on they managed to open the city gates and let in the rest of the army which proceeded to sack the city."

Vratymyr was completely enthralled by this tale. "Surely you jest!"

"No!" The Radimich let out a loud roar, spitting out some mead in the process. "But that is not the best part of the tale. It turns out the Varyags were also deceived and the city they sacked was not Rome but some city called Luna."

The Polian Kniaz' clutched at his stomach laughing so hard he could hardly breathe. "Really?" he managed to ask.

"Yes!" Brachislav answered, laughing hysterically. When he was finally able to catch his breath, he continued. "They sacked the city and then another and got back in their ships with their booty and continued southward. Maybe they have made it to the real Rome by now." He began to laugh uncontrollably again.



After adding some reinforcements from the neighboring themes and rounding up as many Arab prisoners as they could find in the dungeons along the way, the New Roman army finally arrived at the fortress protecting the Cilician Pass. As they approached the mighty walls, Michael immediately realized that Bardas was right and that there was no time to lay siege to this mighty fortress if they were to have any hope of striking a blow to Amr.

"Bardas," the Emperor commanded. "You are to parley with the Muslim representatives."

"Very well, sire," Bardas replied, relieved. He had hoped the inexperienced Michael would not take this delicate task upon himself.

Bardas took a dozen of his men and rounded up the long column of Arab prisoners. They shuffled forward, and the chains on their feet and hands clanked. The prisoners were brought in front of the New Roman army and several bands of cavalry were positioned behind them in case the Muslims decided to try to free them. Once everyone was in position Bardas and his men slowly made their way up the hill to the gates of the fortress.

When they were about a hundred meters from the gates, they heard the loud groans of winches turning, lifting the gate guarding the fortress. Once it reached a height allowing a mounted man to pass, out rode the Arab representative flanked by five of his men. When they were within a distance that allowed them to speak without shouting, the representative said in almost flawless Greek, "I am Al-Mutawakkil. What brings you to these gates?"

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Bardas eyed the Muslim, who was dressed in extremely fancy attire of colorful silk with an equally colorful turban. At his side was a scabbarded scimitar with what appeared to be an eagle's head encrusted with jewels as eyes for a pommel. "We have come as our messenger explained to you to exchange prisoners. I hope you have not changed your mind."

The Muslim did not change his expression. "I have not. I thought to kill your Logothete when he refused to accept Islam but when your messenger arrived and said you were willing to offer one thousand of my men in return for this useless worm it was an offer I decided was more than fair."

"Very well," Bardas stated in reply. "Let us proceed then. Where is our man?"

The Arab raised his hand and waved once. Several seconds later, the Patrikios slowly exited from behind the gates and made his way towards the parley area. In turn Bardas nodded to one of his men, who waved a banner, and the massive column of Arabs shuffled forward. A small army of men accompanied them, methodically unshackling them ten at a time.

"As soon as half of the prisoners are through," Al-Mutawakkil said plainly, "then I will release our prisoner." The entire process took an extremely long time but eventually it was over.

When the last prisoners entered through the gates, the Arab began to turn his horse and said over his shoulder, "I trust you will turn and leave as we agreed. Please remember we now have a thousand more defenders." He passed under the gate, and it slammed to the ground, raising a cloud of dust.

Bardas and his men also turned and escorted the Patrikios, who did not look like he was mistreated, back to the Emperor.

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When they reached Michael, the Emperor immediately asked, "What in the name of St. Peter happened?"

"Sire, as you commanded me I brought the silver and paid the rebelling citizens but they turned me over to the Muslims anyway and let them into the city," the Patrikios stammered. "There was nothing I could do."

"No matter." The Emperor sighed. "What is done is done. Unfortunately, we do not have the time or the resources to deal with these traitors now, but when the time comes I shall return and show them the wrath of the Emperor of New Rome."

With the parley and exchange concluded, the army made its way down the pass and continued northeast marching towards Arsamosata to engage Amr and teach him a lesson. Bardas hoped no other surprises awaited them along the way.

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## Summer 860

Constantine was very pleased with the progress he had made in the spring. During the first month, he had mastered the basics of the Hebrew language. He had a gift for languages and his own methodology for mastering them. He tried to compare and model each language to Greek, which in turn helped him understand and learn it more quickly. This did not work with all languages, but he was able to use this technique with most languages he encountered. He did the same with Hebrew by dividing the grammar into eight parts. His introduction to the language and subsequent mastery came by studying the Bible. Already being familiar with the Greek translation, it was much easier for him to break down the Hebrew text, compare it to Greek and to come up with a model that would aid him in learning non-religious texts where he was less familiar with the subject matter. Knowing Hebrew would be the key to studying the religion more deeply and preparing arguments for Zacharias and the Khazars.

He had also managed to learn quite a bit of Slavic from his lessons with Khud'ko, though these were slightly more difficult for him as the Slavs had no formal written language. The Slavs used runes and symbols to get basic concepts across. This meant that to learn Slavic he would need to do it hands-on, solely in conversations with Khud'ko and local Slavic speakers. With no formal grammar or writing, it was harder to break down the language logically and could only be mastered by constant practice and having someone explain the terminology. Nevertheless, with his experience learning other languages he quickly began to

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formulate a basic grammar in his mind, even though a formal one did not exist. This new language fascinated him, and he decided that in the future it would require deeper study.

By going through town records and talking to locals he managed to piece together a little of the history of the peninsula. He discovered that the Khazars had been masters of the land here for a few hundred years. About a hundred years ago the Slavs and Varangians were becoming more and more of a presence and around seventy years ago they had formed their own little state on the peninsula led by a Kniaz' named Bravlin. Much of the information was third-hand oral tradition, and many of the written records in Khersoneses seemed to contradict the oral tradition of the local populace. This was natural, as history seemed to always be written by whoever was in charge and the truth was rarely reflected in this history. Either way, Bravlin was no more, and after he was overthrown, removed, or chased away, the Khazars took full control of the peninsula and later ceded its control to Constantinople after the building of Sarkel.

Now possessing a basic knowledge of Slavic and Hebrew Constantine decided that during the next few months he would master the language of the Khazars which was a dialect of Chagatai, and travel extensively throughout the peninsula to its established towns and villages to spread the word of God. With his brother Methodius and Kubrat in tow, they set off for their next adventure.



Khud'ko had made it back to Kyiv just in time for Vratymyr's arrival from Polotesk. It was a grand sight.



The harbor in Kyiv was already filled with over one hundred longships as Vratymyr and the contingent from Polotesk sailed downstream on the Dnipro with ninety-five more. Colorful shields were draped over their sides and the masts jutted out of the ships giving the appearance of limbless tree trunks bounding down the river on colorful wheels. Vratymyr stood on the prow of the leading ship. Slowly, one by one the ships approached the bank and were tethered to prevent them from floating away or damaging each other. Some were brought up on the sandy banks while others were tied together in the shallow waters. With the arrival of the second part of the fleet, the final tally was two hundred and one ships in the harbor. Everyone in Kyiv stood on the banks of the mighty river and marveled at a scene they were sure they would never again witness in their lifetimes.

As Vratymyr disembarked, his face beamed with pride at the massive success of the preparations for this undertaking. He could not believe that his idea of uniting the tribes in a common goal could result in such amazing results in so little time. Kyiv's harbor was full of ships for what seemed as far as the eye could see. A small trading town had begun to grow into a Slavic center. Once all the ships had been completed, Askoldir had given the order to start felling trees and to start on fortifications and the building of a large palisade around the entire city. This work was just beginning.

"Well met." Vratymyr grasped Askoldir's forearm.

"And you as well," the Khagan replied. "It is a grand fleet you have helped muster. This shall be the biggest raid I have ever been a part of. You should be very proud. You have put your people, no, you have put *our* people on the map. This will be the beginning of great things for Kyiv and it could not have been accomplished

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without your vision. I had my doubts, but now I truly believe there is a good chance this mission will be successful."

"I thank you for your high praise." The Polian Kniaz' placed his hand over his heart and bowed. "But this could not have been done without you either. It was your shipwrights," he caught himself, "*our* shipwrights and *our* combined numbers that have made this a success so far and will see this adventure to its fruition."

Both men turned to look at the fleet with admiration. After taking it all in for a few moments Askoldir turned to his friend and clasped his shoulder. "Come, let us make our final preparations." They made their way to Castle Hill and Askoldir's hall.

As they approached, an incredible commotion could be heard from inside. They entered and made their way to the dais at the far end. The noise quickly subsided, and a silence filled the room. There were over two hundred men packed into the hall, the captain of each vessel present along with a few of the most important boyars of each tribe. Vratymyr noticed his old friend Yaropolk with a large smile on his face. Beside him stood Gunnar and Stoyan.

Askoldir slowly looked around the room, seeming to capture everyone's gaze individually. "My friends, I realize that there are many of you in this room who are a little confused as to why we have amassed so many men and such a large fleet. I am sure some of you have heard rumors. I have heard many of them as well over the last year. Today I shall put all these rumors to rest and the reason for our journey shall be revealed. I have heard many tall tales about us going to destroy the Khazars or to claim new lands. Others have said we will sail to sell goods or ships in distant lands. Well, the

seeds for this adventure were planted two years ago. I am sure you all remember our brethren who went to Miklagard or, as many of you say Tsargrad, and did not return. These last two years the Slavic Kniaz's along with the Rus traders have decided to unite and prepare to strike a blow of revenge for this heinous act. Our brothers were murdered and our trade routes disrupted. Tomorrow we set out to exact our vengeance for these crimes." At first, there was a deafening silence. It took several minutes for the sheer audacity of this endeavor to sink in, and then, one by one, those present in the hall began raising their weapons over their heads and cheering loudly until it was impossible to hear oneself think.

Askoldir raised his arms to quiet the boisterous crowd. "My friends, my kinsmen, we shall embark on a long dangerous journey. Those of us who do not return shall be assured a seat next to the gods in Valhalla. Those of us who shall return will immortalize these deeds in songs and tales." Though some of the Slavs were familiar with the Norse pantheon after spending much time over the last two years with the griseled adventurers from the North, others had no idea what Valhalla was. Still, they figured that a seat next to the gods was not a bad place to find oneself after dying. "Spend the night saying farewell to your families for it is hard to say when or if you shall see them again."

After a few moments of deliberation among those present, the gathered host left to make their final preparations and to spend some time with their families. Remaining in the hall were Askoldir and a few of his thegns, Vratymyr with his two boyars Sviatoslav and Ostomyr, Yaropolk along with his most trusted boyar Veleslav as well as Cheslav who was Viatko's eldest son and Radymyr, the son of Brachislav.

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Askoldir paced a bit gathering his thoughts. He fidgeted with the circlet on his head, removed it, ran his fingers through his hair and replaced the circlet. When he was ready, he began. "When Vratymyr's envoy first arrived in Aldeigja I thought the proposition mad. My people have been trading with the Gardoriki for at least a century and we knew of your resilience though we have also witnessed your constant squabbles amongst each other. I never believed that you would be able to put aside your differences and unite for a greater cause. I have been proven wrong." He paused for several moments, staring at Vratymyr. "Kniaz' Vratymyr is a man of great vision. He has managed to unite several of the Slavic tribes, as well a good number of my people as well, for a common purpose. I doubt any sane person would have thought this possible. Yet, here we are, on the threshold of greatness. Tomorrow we sail for Miklagard. Two hundred ships and over ten thousand men united in their quest for glory. Make no mistake this will be no easy task. Vratymyr informs me that the Emperor of New Rome is fighting in the East with most of his armies and that their fleet is out West dealing with other troubles. This does not mean this will be an easy task. Miklagard is the most fortified city anyone of us has ever laid eyes on and taking it will not be easy. It may very well be impossible. However, we have set events in motion that need to be seen through to the end."

After Askoldir was silent for a few moments, Vratymyr stood and spoke. "I too am amazed at what we have been able to accomplish in such a short time. I think everyone in this room will agree that none of us would have imagined it possible. Kyiv is twice the size it was a year ago and soon will begin to look like a major city. While the Slavic tribes may not all be at peace with

each other I think we have made great progress in the beginning of a new and prosperous future. I believe that this adventure will show the rest of the tribes that working together we can achieve great things. However, I have no illusions. I know capturing Tsagrad will be next to impossible. What we can do, though, is make them understand that we are not a bunch of barbarians that they can do with as they please. We shall not be an afterthought. The Khazars underestimated us and we have grown stronger. We shall grow stronger still. The Greeks too shall see that our people are not for them to kill on a whim. We shall strike a blow and show them that they can either respect us, or suffer the consequences. Much of the world fears our friends from the North. Now, united with us and working together we shall give the Greeks and Khazars much more to fear and think about."

Vratymyr approached each man and put his hands on their shoulders, one after the other. "My friends, I wish I could join you on this great adventure but Askoldir has told me my place is here in Kyiv making sure our defenses continue to be expanded and that Kyiv is defended in case of an attack from the Khazars or the Derevlans. I wish you a safe journey and a swift return. May Striboh fill your sails with favorable winds, and Perun guide your swords to their targets."

When he was finished, they spent a few more hours going over final details of provisioning and routes. Finally, they retired for the evening. Yaropolk accompanied Vratymyr to his stead. The Polian started a fire in the hearth and grabbed a loaf of bread, which he broke in two, giving half to Yaropolk. "And so, my friend, it begins."

"Yes," replied the big man. "It is a shame you shall not be by my side."

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"I agree, but Askoldir does have a point. I will need to coordinate everything from here in Kyiv. My spies will be coming here to share news and it is from here that it will be guarded and distributed more easily. Besides, who else will protect our people?"

"You always cared for your people more than yourself." Yaro sighed.

"It was not always so, my friend." Vratymyr felt a tear well up in his eye and quickly wiped it away with the back of his hand. "I used to care only for Myrusha. After she was gone, it took a long time but I replaced her in my heart with our people. I thought I would be lost after losing your sister, my wife, but she speaks to me sometimes in my dreams. I believe that is one thing the gods have granted me, her advice, as well as that of my grandfather. They may no longer walk amongst us but I still feel their presence. It is to preserve their memories that I want our people to live on. I only wish they can see me as well, wherever they are, and that they are proud of me."

"I think of that there is no doubt," the mighty Siverian said as he chewed his bread. "I too shall do something for my family. I will avenge my son. The Greeks will pay for killing Dushan."

"Whatever you do," Vratymyr said quietly, "do not throw your life away. You do not need to die to avenge your son."

"Do not worry," Yaro said, running his finger along the blade of his axe. "I do not plan on dying. I am not planning to give my life away needlessly. I plan on making Greeks die. I plan on showing them the big mistake they made when they angered a Siverian Kniaz'."

"I have no doubt they will find out what a big mistake that was." Vratymyr stood and patted his

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friend on the shoulder several times. "Get some sleep, you have a long and difficult journey ahead of you."

"Yes, yes," Yaropolk said. "One more thing, friend."

"Yes?"

"If I do not return, please see to it that Plaksa is taken care of and take care of my people as well." He turned and made his way toward his pallet to retire.

"I will, my friend, I will," Vratymyr murmured more to himself and retired as well.



By the end of Maius the Greek army had made it into Amr's territory after crossing no man's land north of the Antitaurus Mountain range. They decided to steer clear of Malatya which was under Amr's control in order to avoid an unnecessary battle there. If their trek had been difficult to this point it would now become much harder. There were no longer any friendly cities at which to stop and rest or resupply the army along the way. Bardas had explained to Michael that they needed to leave small parties of scouts along their route in order to keep them informed of any danger and to make sure that they had a clear path to retreat if necessary, and that there were no ambushes being set up to entrap them.

The men were tired after the long journey, but spirits were still high. After all, not many men had the opportunity to have their Emperor lead them on the battlefield. This would be a tale they could tell their children and grandchildren, and winning fame on the battlefield here could lead to better opportunities back home.

In the beginning of Iunius they had finally reached Arsamosata. Though they travelled on a level plain, its

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elevation was over one thousand meters, so they found that breathing was much more difficult than normal. This was the uppermost Euphrates valley and it resembled an inland peninsula, which made it a very defensible position.

Seeing the Roman army approaching, the Saracens in the area retreated inside the city and barred its gates. A direct assault on the city would cost Michael a large portion of his army.

The heat in the summer sun was brutal and the army stopped near the Euphrates River to cool off and to water the horses.

The Emperor called together his closest advisors to decide on a further plan of action. They set up a tent to get out of the heat and when everyone had gathered, they waited for the Emperor to speak. Michael sat on his portable throne and addressed the gathering of military leaders. "Well, we are finally at the gates of Amr's stronghold. How do we flush the rat out?"

After a short silence Bardas stood. "Sire, it will not be an easy task. The city has a mountain at its back so they cannot retreat, but their walls are sound and their gates are strong. I would suggest laying siege to the city, not allowing anyone in or out and see how long they can last before coming out to fight. They have had time to prepare. An army our size is visible for quite some distance and I am sure that the force we encountered earlier warned them as to our numbers and the fact that we were travelling east."

The Emperor sighed. He was itching for a glorious battle. "Can we take the city without a prolonged siege?"

As usual, the other strategos muttered incoherently under their breath afraid of offering a strategy that could fail, so the Ceasar was forced to



answer the Emperor's question and take responsibility for the outcome. "It would appear not. A direct assault would weaken us considerably and we are in enemy territory. Our best course of action is to surround the city with our siege engines and to try and starve them out. Their catapults are at a higher elevation than ours and probably have a greater range so I suggest setting up a perimeter just beyond the range of their catapults to prevent any sorties from inside and wait."

"As God is my witness I hate waiting." The Emperor was clearly not in a good mood. "What are we to do in the meantime?"

"Well, sire," Bardas stated, "the men will have plenty to do as they need to make sure they are prepared for an assault at any moment and will be rotating from sentry duty to supply duty. They will also need to dig latrines and make sure the camps are kept as sanitary as possible so we are not hit with disease, which could cripple our forces. However, a siege is mostly sitting around and waiting. Unless they ride out or reinforcements come at us from the west, there is not much else to do other than wait."

"If we must," the Emperor said dejectedly. "Then we wait. If Amr is inside those walls it will be worth it to bring his head back to Constantinople and display it on a pike as we ride home."



On the first day of Kresen', or Solmanudur as the Norse called it, the fleet departed Kyiv. Even though Vratymyr was not joining them on the expedition, he still decided to don his armor and in full battle dress he mounted the highest point along the banks of the Dnipro and watched as the massive fleet set sail. Below

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him the entire city of Kyiv along with people from many miles around gathered to see the expedition off and cheered as the flotilla made its way south out of the harbor and down the river. As the ships rowed out into the middle of the river, they began to raise their sails. All the sails unfurling looked like blooming spring flowers. While most of the sails were fairly uniform, either being plain white or having simple horizontal red stripes, it was easy to make out Askoldir's ship. Not only did the prow have a carved wolf's head, but the sail of his ship also bore his symbol on it.

Vratymyr wondered if he would ever see any of his friends again. He wondered if this would be the beginning of something grand or the end of his people. But they had prepared as best they could, and this was not a time for second guessing. There was still plenty of work to be done. He would need to make sure that his network of informants was working flawlessly so that no surprises arose that could ruin all their careful planning.

Though travelling south along the Dnipro saved a lot of time, it was not without its dangers. There were eleven cataracts along the way, which the Slavs called porohy. Seven of them were especially dangerous and needed great care to navigate, especially with a fleet this large.

It did not take very long for the fleet to arrive at the first cataract. Stoyan and Gunnar had joined Askoldir and Yaropolk on the Khagan's ship for the journey. As they approached the cataract, Stoyan warned his compatriots, "Be very careful here. There is a good reason we Slavs who travel the river call this first cataract ne spi, which means 'do not sleep.'"

Gunnar joined in the conversation. "We too have a name for this cataract but we call it supandi, which in

your tongue translates as slurping. It is the sound the river makes as it tries to break apart and swallow your ships."

Askoldir had one of his henchmen wave a flag, and the ships slowly made their way towards shore. While they did not need to unload and portage the ships, to avoid this cataract they did have to wade in the water guiding the boats along the shore to reduce the weight inside the boats.

The remaining cataracts were of varying difficulty. They not only had to watch out for the treacherous rocks in the rapids of the river but also had to keep an eye out for Khazars, Pechenegs and other denizens who might try and take them by surprise on the shore while portaging. There was not much threat that anyone would try and attack an army this size, but it was better to be prepared.

The second cataract, which the Slavs called ostrovnyi prah, was also tricky. They had to navigate two waterfalls with an islet in between them. The third was aptly called dzvonets for its sound was as thunderously loud as that of a bell and could be heard for miles drowning out most other sounds.

The fourth cataract was the most dangerous. They knew they were approaching it when Stoyan pointed out the pelicans flying overhead. "When you see the pelicans it means you need to drag the boats to shore and portage around the upcoming cataract." This was the most grueling part of the journey. The pelicans made their nests in the rocks along the riverbanks. The rocks extended throughout the entire river making navigation extremely difficult and nearly impossible for a large craft. With a fleet this size and fully-laden, they would all need to disembark and carry their ships around if they wanted to make it past safely.

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It was starting to get dark, and they decided they would make camp. Gunnar and Stoyan quickly made a fire on the riverbank, ate and sat down to a game of tafl. They had struck up a very intense competition playing the addicting board game. Askoldir decided to let the rest of the men go about their duties and settled in by the Norseman and Slav to watch their friendly competition. Yaropolk sat beside them as well. "Bah, I do not see the fascination with these games of yours." He used his whetstone methodically on his axe.

So as not to force one of the players to lose their concentration Askoldir decided to engage the big Slav. "Do not underestimate the usefulness of such a game. It sharpens the mind and helps one formulate strategy. It is an invaluable tool for a leader as it teaches you how to attack and counterattack as well as when to retreat. It also gives you a valuable insight into your enemy."

Yaropolk grunted. "I shall leave the insights to those smarter than me. Me, I like to strategize with this." He shook his massive axe.

"I would definitely not want to be a participant in one of your strategy sessions." Askoldir laughed.

"I will lay these old bones down on the ground now because I have no idea when they will be able to feel solid ground again," Yaropolk stated. He curled into a ball near the fire and began to snore heavily, like a saw sawing through a mighty oak. Askoldir laughed when Gunnar and Stoyan scrambled away to a quieter place to concentrate.

In the morning, the army moved south carrying their ships and supplies with them. When they were satisfied that the most dangerous part of this cataract was behind them, they repacked everything including themselves onto the ships and sailed on.

Soon the cataracts named wave's fall and wolf's mouth were behind them, and they approached the seventh and final difficult cataract. This one was called shkola or "the school" as it was a great test of a ship's captain to navigate it. While most of the other cataracts allowed them to hug the banks to navigate through them, here the banks of the river were steep and high and they needed to steer their ships through the center of the river course to avoid them. They took this last treacherous cataract very slowly, for practically all of the ship's skippers were navigating it for the first time. Thankfully, they all made it through successfully and soon they were past the difficult parts of the journey on the Dnipro and had made it out to sea near the Taurican Peninsula.

Once out on the sea they had decided it was imperative that they stick close to the southwestern shore on the mainland and avoid the peninsula. The Greeks had outposts there, and they did not want to be spotted. Travelling along the shore, though longer, was also much safer than travelling out on the open sea. Since many of the host were not experienced sailors, this was doubly necessary.



On the third day of the siege, the Roman army was still in the process of getting their siege weapons in position and was setting up a schedule for patrols. They erected tents and cut down trees for firewood. While everyone was busy going about setting up camp for a long and drawn-out seige, suddenly the gates of Arsamosata opened, and a slew of Saracens began to spill out on the unsuspecting Romans. There seemed

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to be no end to the forces that galloped out of the fortress.

The Saracens attacked the Romans from all sides. Two columns of cavalry took opposite routes out of the main gate and began to encircle the Roman forces in a pincer maneuver. A third column charged straight towards the middle of the Romans. Then a swarm of foot soldiers emerged.

In the confusion soldiers began to desperately take up their weapons in order to defend themselves. The Roman cavalry did not have time to mount their horses, and as the Saracens descended upon them from both sides they first cut loose the horses, which began to bolt in every direction, adding to the pandemonium in the camp. The Saracens set tents on fire and cut men down as they hastily tried to arm themselves.

A Saracen horseman was bearing down on Bardas, and he ran for the Emperor's tent. The Arab rider swung his scimitar at the Caesar, who ducked just in time. The heavy blade nicked his shoulder, opening a small wound. A second rider was quickly bearing down on him with his scimitar also raised ready to cut him down. Bardas managed to grab a spear from the ground while rolling away and thrust it between the onrushing horse's legs, twisting it masterfully so the horse's front right leg buckled and broke in two from the strain. The rider flew forward off the horse, and his neck snapped violently as he hit the ground.

Covered in dirt and sweat, Bardas made his way through the maze of tents. After what seemed an incredibly long period of time, he finally reached the Emperor's tent. The Emperor's personal guard surrounded the tent with their weapons drawn. Bardas rushed in and saw the Emperor gathering some things. "We need to go now, your Grace."

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"Do not tell me what to do, Bardas," the Emperor replied sternly.

"Sire, if we do not go now you will be killed or captured."

"This is all due to your incompetence," Michael hissed.

"It does not matter at this time whose fault this is. We need to get you out of here." The battle outside was getting louder and the fighting closer. Arrows were already beginning to pierce the tent.

"Let's go then," the Emperor said hurriedly. "I shall deal with you later."

They ran out of the tent, and the sight of the carnage was stunning. Arrows and spears flew from all directions. The Romans were scrambling about chaotically, chasing down horses and looking for any means to escape as they were being cut down.

The cavalry banda of the Emperor's personal guard had a horse waiting for their liege, but as Bardas helped him mount it, a spear pierced the horse's flank and it reared violently. Michael was thrown from the horse, but Bardas managed to catch him and prevent him from injuring himself. Bardas quickly helped the Emperor mount another horse, slapped its hindquarters and screamed for the guards to get him to safety. The Emperor and his entourage galloped away into the distance, and Bardas turned to survey the situation.

Things looked bleak. The entire army was in total disarray. Half were running for their lives. The other half tried to stand their ground and fight, but too many were unprepared and easily overtaken. A good portion had already surrendered and were being rounded up by the Saracens. Bardas grabbed a torch and ran towards a group of large barrels stored not far from the Emperor's tent. The tent was on a hill, and he ordered

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some of his men to begin rolling the barrels down the hill as the Arab cavalry was quickly approaching. As the barrels rolled down the hill towards the approaching horses and riders Bardas had his men take the prepared arrows and instructed them to light them and fire at the barrels. Soon the barrels were riddled with burning arrows. One after another they began to explode violently, letting Greek fire loose on all in the area. Men and horses alike screamed in agony as the fire burned them.

Bardas and the remaining portion of the army used this distraction to try and reform and retreat. Bardas looked over his shoulder as he rode off and saw a field of death and a long column of prisoners being taken into the city. "Damn," was all he could manage to keep repeating to himself as he and the remainder of the army ran for their lives.



Photios hurried to the palace as a messenger scurried out of his way to avoid the Patriarch's wrath. How in the name of God had a fleet this size managed to make it to the Bosphorus undetected? Two hundred ships full of warriors. Most of their army was out East with the Emperor and the fleet was either West or South with Kontomytes. What were they going to do? How could this have happened?

The walk was a blur as scenarios of doom raced through his mind. Without even realizing it, he was already at the palace and entered hastily. Ooryphas had gathered the remaining strategos and they were hurriedly trying to prepare a strategy.

"The barbarian fleet should be here by nightfall," Ooryphas said fairly calmly considering the



circumstances. "Diodoros, go and make sure the chain is raised barring access to the Golden Horn." The strategos acknowledged the order and rushed off. In order to protect the city and not allow ships into the waterway a massive chain had been made that could be drawn across the harbor preventing any ships from entering it. This prevented the city from being surrounded and allowed the defenders to use valuable resources in other places, as the walls there did not need to be manned.

"What in the name of the Holy Trinity is going on?" the Patriarch roared as he entered the chamber.

"It would appear, your Grace, that we are under attack," Ooryphas said. "The Rhos and the Slavic barbarians seem to have decided that it would be a good idea to test our defenses."

"But how?" Photios mused aloud. "How could we have not seen or anticipated this? How did our sentries in Kherson not see anything?"

"It appears that they have been carefully planning this for quite some time," stated the man who was temporarily charged with the defense of the capital of the Empire and its outlying areas. "Two hundred ships do not just magically appear in the Euxine without a long coordinated effort."

"Have you sent word to the Emperor?" Photios asked. He wondered if this was retaliation for the scheme he and Bardas had arranged to get rid of that pesky Ignatios.

"Yes, I sent a messenger as soon as we confirmed the enemy fleet was headed our way. I would suggest that you gather your priests and try and calm the populace. Word is starting to spread," the lanky leader intimated.

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"I will tend to my flock as needed," Photios interjected, not appreciating the dismissive tone of Ooryphas. "What are you doing to protect the city?"

"The city will be fine," Ooryphas stated emphatically. "It is the outlying areas that are in danger."

"How do we know that the fleet is hostile?" asked Photios. With them being so exposed, he hoped to avoid a conflict.

"Well, for one they have begun to lay waste to the northern suburbs," the Roman said as he scratched his nose. "I believe they mean business and are quite prepared to exact some damage. I can only assume this is in response to the treatment of their people a few years ago."

"Why would you assume that?" Photios was genuinely surprised that Ooryphas figured it out so quickly.

"Well it was not so difficult to come to that conclusion considering that both Rhos and Slavs were among the group Ignatios supposedly had silenced," he replied somewhat sarcastically.

"The evidence in that matter was quite overwhelming. Do not presume to make assumptions about matters you were not privy to." The Patriarch realized that Ooryphas probably was sympathetic to the previous Patriarch and that he would need to tread carefully around him. Things were becoming more tangled by the minute.

"No matter." Ooryphas said. "Either way, without much of an army there is little we can do to help the people in the surrounding countryside. I have ordered all the remaining troops to retreat to the city."

"But what about the people in the suburbs?" Photios asked. "They will all be slaughtered!"

"Many will," Ooryphas said plainly. "But that is not a reason to give up the city as well. How do you think the Emperor will feel if he returns to Constantinople and it is full of barbarians? I am sure he would not be too pleased. No, he will agree that some people had to be sacrificed in order to save the Empire. The barbarians will do some killing, will take what they can carry, and they will be on their way."

"And what if, as you say, they are out for revenge?" the Patriarch countered. "Will they be on their way so quickly?"

"We shall see," was the only reply Photios received.



It was on the eighteenth day of their journey that the Kyivan expedition arrived at the entrance to the Greek lands called the Bosphorus. They entered the promontory and passed the Genoese castle situated near the narrow section of the straits. The villagers on the shore near the waterway were clearly concerned at the sight of such a large war fleet. The expedition saw defenders rush to posts. Most likely they had already sent messengers to Tsargrad as soon as the fleet came into view. They ignored these outposts and sailed on to the big prize.

As the fleet approached the city from the north, they could see people on the banks running with possessions in hand trying to find safety somewhere. As they approached the city itself, most of the unannounced attackers were in awe at the sight of Tsargrad. The walls were massive even from a distance, and they seemed to rise straight out from the water. As they got even closer, they noticed that access to

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the waterway north of the city was denied by a massive iron chain across it.

"What in the name of Dazhbog is that?" Yaropolk yelled. "What kind of a forge was needed to make that thing?" The big man was in awe of the huge chain and began to think they might have made a grave mistake.

Askoldir, seeing the apprehension on the Slav's face, quickly intervened. "Do not worry, my friend. That small chain will not stop us. Let them hide in their city for now. I know just the way to drag them out." With a quick signal to one of his thegns a series of flags began to be waved from ship to ship. They had carefully gone over what all the flags had meant because that was the only way to communicate with other ships on the water.

Soon the entire fleet began to row towards the northern suburbs. "If they will not fight we need to give them a reason to," Askoldir bellowed. As the ships neared land shields were removed from their resting places and gripped tightly. Half the men remained on the ships while the other half jumped into the shallow water and made land. As they formed on land they could see the battlements of the city filling with defenders across the Golden Horn, but here on the other side there were no defenders other than in the heavily-fortified tower complex containing the other end of the massive chain.

They went from house to house and took whatever booty they could. When they were finished looting, they set the houses on fire.

"Is this really necessary?" Yaropolk asked.

"It is the only way. They will sit inside their walls unless we give them enough reason to come out. Even then they may not come out. In that case we will have

to make them think they are cowards for not defending their people."

"But they are innocent people," the big man countered. "These are their homes."

"Was not Dushan an innocent trader?" Askoldir reminded him. "These innocent people are the reason he is no longer alive."

A fire appeared in Yaro's eyes and he grabbed the torch from Askoldir's hand and began to burn the homes of his enemy.

The sun had set, but there was a glow above the northern suburbs of Constantinople as Tsargrad began to burn.



A servant had informed Basil that a messenger from Constantinople had arrived in Ankyra. Eager to hear what news came from the capital, Basil rushed to greet rider.

Basil had been fascinated with Constantinople since early childhood. His father was Armenian and his mother was Slavic, from Charioupolis in the Macedonian theme. When he was fifteen his father had died and the responsibility of taking care of his mother and brothers fell upon him. He begged his mother to let him go to the capital so that he could make more money to take care of them. For the longest time his mother refused, citing her long illness and saying that he needed to be at home with the family. Eventually, after a year of continuous begging, she finally let him go.

As a peasant, the journey to Constantinople was not easy. He gathered whatever food could be spared and made out for the capital on foot. Though he was a strong young man, travelling such a great distance with

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not much for sustenance was a grueling endeavor. Along the way he scavenged what he could and even resorted to pilfering foodstuffs in the night to maintain his strength. By the time he had arrived at the Golden Gates he was delirious with exhaustion. His eyes blurred and his head spun as he stumbled through the maze of streets. When his feet could not carry him any further he fell to the ground.

After laying for a few hours unnoticed on the steps in the forecourt of the monastery of St. Diomedes, in his delirium he heard someone calling his name. "Basil? Basil? Basil?" When he opened his eyes and came to his senses, to his great disbelief, he realized that someone had actually been calling his name. "How do you know my name?" he had asked. The old man helped him to his feet and led him into the monastery where he fed him and made sure he had a place to rest comfortably.

In the morning, when he had regained his strength and felt refreshed, he thanked the old man and asked him once again, "Who are you and how do you know my name?" The old man replied that his name was not important and that he was the hegoumenos of the monastery, which is what the eastern Romans called the abbot. The wrinkled, robed cleric explained that that night he had had three dreams. In the first, Diomedes the Martyr appeared to him and told him that he must go outside and call out for "Basil". Whoever responded was to be cared for and aided, for God had proclaimed that he was the true Emperor and would restore the monastery to glory. The hegoumenos explained that he thought nothing of the dream and went back to sleep. A while later he had the same exact dream and figured that in his half-awaken state he just remembered the dream that he had had earlier. However, after that,

Diomedes appeared to him a third time. This time he had lost patience with the venerable old abbot and brandished a whip in his right hand. Snapping it violently overhead, he commanded him to go outside and find the man whom God had commanded him to find. The hegoumenos recounted that he had then gone outside and called out the name "Basil" and found him lying there on the steps of the monastery.

Basil remembered thinking that the old man had gone soft in the head after being cooped up for too long and inhaling the thick incense daily. However, when the hegoumenos asked how he could further serve him he asked the old man if he could introduce him to any of the nobles in the city who needed someone like himself as a servant. It was then that the holy man had introduced him to Theophilos, which was a stroke of luck. Theophilos was kin to the Emperor himself and his Caesar, Bardas.

Theophilos was a man of specific tastes and liked to surround himself with young, muscular men whom he dressed in the finest silks. Many of the services he had them perform were not of the kind that the church looked kindly upon, but Basil assumed that they overlooked these matters as he had a full purse and was a great benefactor of the church. Everyone took to calling him Theophilizes when he was not around, as the name aptly described his short stature. While the young Macedonian was not fond of the services he had to provide for the man, they were a means to an end.

While in Theophilos' service, he was charged with overseeing the rebuilding of the walls at Ankyra. He displayed an ability to learn quickly and was good at administration. He had been here for the last year and the rebuilding of the walls was almost complete.

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Basil panted, dripping with sweat as he reached the keep. "Where is the rider? What news from Nova Roma?"

Theophilus and the Patrician were startled seeing Basil burst into the chamber as only a few moments ago, a messenger had done just the same thing.

"Slow down son." Basil's benefactor tried to calm him.

"I was told there was important news from the capital." Basil was still panting heavily.

Theophilus handed him a cup of wine. "Drink this and calm down."

Basil accepted the cup and drank greedily. "Well?"

"Yes, yes. A messenger did arrive. He brought grave news. A large host of barbarians and Varangians from the North have descended on Nova Roma. Four days ago they sailed past the Bosphorus and began to lay waste to the suburbs of the capital."

The Macedonian could not believe what he was hearing. "Where is the rider now?"

"He was exhausted and needed a few hours rest before continuing east to inform the Emperor."

Basil prided himself on thinking quickly and seemed to always be in the right place at the right time. "This news can not be delayed. A few hours could mean the life and death of thousands of Romans. Let me ride out now and take this message to the Emperor."

"Are you mad?"

"The fortifications are almost complete. I am no longer needed here."

"You are my servant. You are needed where I tell you you are needed." Theophilus was getting angry at this insolence.



“Listen to me, master. You are a relative of both the Emperor and the Caesar but you are not at the palace or even in the capital for that matter.”

“Get to your point quickly before I have you flogged.”

“It is quite simple. Let me go as your servant to bring a message of vital importance to the Emperor. I will tell him that the original messenger had stopped to rest and you decided that this news could not wait and immediately ordered me to continue in his stead so the message would not be delayed. This will show the Emperor how invaluable you are to him.” Basil was rambling, but making a point in the process.

Theophilus pondered this crazy scheme for a few moments and decided it was not a bad idea. “The news should reach the Emperor as quickly as possible. You are to leave as soon as you can.”

“Thank you!” Basil was amazed his argument worked. “I shall leave within the hour.”

It was time for him to begin to fulfill his destiny.



When they realized that the Greeks were not going to come out of their hiding place in the city, the Kyivan raiding party decided to lay waste to the settlements on the banks of the Bosphorus. After they had plundered all they could they made their way back toward Tsargrad. When they saw that the Greeks were still in no mood for a fight, they entered the Propontis and made their way for the Isles of the Princes.

The Isles were nine islands of varying size in the Propontis. The raiding party split up, sending two ships apiece to the smaller islands while the rest of the fleet concentrated on the four larger islands.

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The islands were plundered quite easily, for there was very little resistance. Askoldir ordered all of the inhabitants to be captured and imprisoned in the monestaries after they were looted. The booty was to be placed on the ships and would be divided later. Each rower's bench on the ships also served as a chest and when the seat was lifted there was ample storage room underneath where the rowers kept their belongings. Soon all of these chests were full of plunder, from silver crosses to various coins, jewelry and fine cloth.

Within a matter of a few days, the Slavs and their Norse allies controlled the four large islands of Porti, Antigoni, Halki and Prinkipio, as well as the five smaller islands of Pita, Oxia, Plati, Niandros and Terebinthos.

They did run into a little trouble on Terebinthos. A messenger informed Askoldir that the ships taking the island had signaled for assistance. He decided to see what was the matter and took five ships with a contingent of five hundred men to the island. Terebinthos was a small island about two miles east of the largest island of Prinkipio.

When they landed ashore, they made their way towards the area of disturbance. The Norseman who was the skipper of the lead ship of the capturing party went out to meet Askoldir and Yaropolk on the beach.

"What seems to be the problem here, Thorunn?" Askoldir barked.

The Norseman pointed to the monastery his men had surrounded. "Well, the men here seem to have barricaded themselves inside and will not come out."

Askoldir looked at Thorunn quizzically. "And why haven't you burned them out?"

"Well, m'lord, we were about to, but one of them started waving his arms and screaming something in

Greek and sounding all important so we figured we would get someone here who knows their language."

"Gunnar," Askoldir howled. "Get over here and see if you can figure out what this mad man is ranting about."

As Gunnar spoke with the man behind the locked monastery entrance Askoldir surveyed the situation. The island was quite small. It was approximately three hundred meters wide and six hundred meters long and though the northern half was wooded, there really were not many places to hide. There were several huts strewn across the island, but the only semi-fortified structure was the monastery itself, situated on a hill in the central part of the island.

When he was confident there would be no further surprises, he returned to the monastery. "Well?" he asked Gunnar, "What do these Romans have to say?"

"They claim to be innocent monks residing here with their Patriarch," replied the Norse envoy.

"What does he mean residing here with the Patriarch?" the Khagan queried. "Shouldn't the Patriarch be in the city in one of their churches?"

"That is all he revealed, m'lord," replied the stout Scandanavian. "That and they would only open the gates for God himself."

Losing patience Askoldir called over some men and ordered them to cut down a large tree and make a battering ram to break down the gates. "Very well. If they will not open the gates, we will break them down. Something here does not seem right. Either they are hiding some sort of treasure or they are protecting some other secrets. Either way we shall soon find out."

After about an hour a hastily-made battering ram was ready and ten warriors, five on each side, lifted the massive tree trunk. Askoldir gave the order, and they

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charged towards the barred double doors forming the entryway to the monastery. The wooden gate offered less resistance than expected. The bar behind the gate snapped loudly as if Thor himself had begun to hammer amidst the clouds with Mjolnir, and it gate inwards, showering splinters of wood in all directions.

When they entered the courtyard, all they saw was twenty-three robed men huddled in the center chanting some sort of prayer. Askoldir gave the order to search the premises. After a few hours, his men informed their liege that there was no one else to be found. They removed everything of value they could find. Sacks were filled with golden crucifixes, gilded frames with paintings of people with halos over their heads and runes by their faces, coins, silver boxes and other trinkets.

Askoldir approached Yaropolk. "Something here does not seem right. They said they were protecting their Patriarch yet there seems to be no Patriarch here." The Patriarch of Miklagard would be a valuable prize they could use to bargain with the Romans.

Yaropolk thought for a moment. "Perhaps one of them is the Patriarch and is hiding amongst his servants."

"Yes, that thought had also crossed my mind. Gunnar." He motioned to the envoy as he lifted one of the scrawny monks to his feet. "Ask this man which one of them is this Patriarch they speak of."

The Greek stood proudly and answered Gunnar's question. His bald head glistened in the sun as beads of sweat dripped from his brow.

"M'lord, he says that he only answers to the Lord."

"Tell him that at this moment I am his lord and I decide his faith."

Gunnar passed on the information to the bald Greek but was greeted with silence.

"Very well." Askoldir sighed. "It seems we will need to do this the hard way. Get all of these prisoners onto my ship."

The Greeks were herded onto the prow of Askoldir's vessel. "Bring the ram. I do not wish to damage my ship," Askoldir bellowed. Yaropolk was a little confused as to what he needed the ram for, but he scooped it up and heaved it onto his shoulder. Two Norsemen scrambled behind him to grab the other end.

When they were all on board Askoldir had them place the ram crosswise across the prow of his ship. Askoldir then ordered two of his men to hold the proud Greek against the huge tree trunk. "Gunnar, ask him one last time where the Patriarch is."

When Askoldir was once again greeted with silence, all that could be heard was the hiss of the wolf's blade leaving his scabbard. He raised the sword, and the sun glistened and reflected off its fuller with a bright flash. He brought the blade down powerfully, and it met the Greek's arm just below the shoulder, severing meat, tendon and bone effortlessly. The monk screamed as blood spurted from his shoulder. The Viking holding the severed appendage tossed it over the prow, and it spiraled as blood leaked out of it, hitting the water with a splash. An instant later the blade came down again, and this time the right arm was severed from the man's torso. The blood spurted with less vigor this time, and Askoldir's blade got stuck in the ram for a moment. He pried it loose and whirling in one motion brought the blade sideways across both of the man's legs at the knees. The Greek fell to the deck of the ship, the blade easily slicing through both flesh and bone severing the appendages. The remainder of the dismembered body

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was tossed overboard as the Roman monks stared in horror at what was transpiring.

Yaropolk too stared in horror and amazement. He was horrified because while he had seen men die in battle, this was different. Deep down he felt this was not right, but he also felt a sense of satisfaction. These were the people that had taken his last son from him. He was amazed because while he knew his axe could easily sever limbs from a body, he never figured a sword as light as the one wielded by Askoldir could hew through two legs in one blow. This truly was a magical weapon with the strength of the gods imbued in it.

When the Khagan saw that this was still not enough to loosen the tongues of the remaining prisoners, he ordered for the ship to set sail. The men grabbed their oars and to the count of a drummer at the rear of the ship began to row towards the largest island. They circled the island while four more prisoners were hacked to pieces and thrown overboard.

This process was repeated as they circled all of the Islands of the Princes, and with five remaining prisoners, they made their way towards the walls of the city. As they sailed from north to south out of range of the city's defenses and their greek fire, they repeated the show for all on the battlements to see.

After the first four of the remaining monks were slaughtered, the fifth broke down and began to scream, "I shall tell you everything!" He had been left for last because he was the oldest and appeared to be the frailest.

Gunnar relayed this information to Askoldir and he ordered his men to leave the old man alive. Yaropolk breathed a sigh of relief when he saw that the old monk would be spared. Askoldir's ship turned and sailed back through the Propontis towards the Isles, tossing the

rest of the body parts overboard. Greek soldiers on the walls watched as human remains bobbed listlessly for several moments before they sank into the sea, and the ship vanished beyond the horizon.



After several days riding with little rest, Basil finally made it to the encampment where the remnants of the Roman army were licking their wounds. They had retreated to a hill that provided a strong defensive position. Basil quickly found the tent of the Emperor and upon showing the Imperial seal was immediately allowed inside.

"What is the meaning of this interruption?" the Emperor fumed as Basil unexpectedly entered his tent.

Bardas quickly drew his sword and intercepted the new arrival. Then, seeing a familiar face, he lowered his blade. "Are you not the engineer who was overseeing the rebuilding efforts at Ankyra?"

"Basil, Caesar," he replied, catching his breath. "I am not an engineer but my master Theophilos, your kinsman, had put me in charge of making sure the defenses there were rebuilt and fortified."

"And what brings you here, then?" Bardas asked.

"A rider came to Ankyra with grave news for the Emperor and I took it upon myself to make sure it arrived safely." The muscular Macedonian extended his hand with the parchment in it conveniently omitting that Theophilos had sent him.

Bardas snatched the parchment from his hand and examined the seal closely. Seeing that it had not been tampered with and that it was indeed the seal of the overseer in Nova Roma, he handed it to the Emperor.

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"It would appear that everything is in order, your eminence."

Michael stood and grabbed the parchment from Bardas, wondering what was so important that it came with such haste. He broke the thick red wax seal and quickly examined the contents. His eyes widened in horror, and the parchment slipped from his fingers as he slumped down onto his throne. "Has God forsaken us? First Amr, now this."

"What has transpired, sire?" Bardas asked. He wondered what dire news could have shaken the young Emperor so.

"Read it yourself." Micheal motioned to the parchment on the floor, disheartened.

Bardas snatched it up and scanned the contents. My God, perhaps the Emperor is right and God truly has forsaken us. Or perhaps he is punishing me for my sins, he thought. "This truly is grave news." Before the remaining strategos in the tent could enquire what was the matter, he continued. "The barbarians from the North have descended upon Nova Roma like locusts with a fleet of two hundred ships and thousands of men."

"It would appear your counsel is not as valuable as it once was, Bardas," the Emperor said. "How could you not have foreseen this invasion from the North? What have your strategos and sentries been up to?"

Bardas bit his lip so hard he tasted warm blood in his mouth. He held his tongue, fearing the Emperor might do something harsh. "You are right, sire, I have failed you. We have been routed in the East and now have been attacked back home."

"What do you suggest we do, oh wise Caesar?" the Emperor chided sarcastically.



"We should return to Nova Roma at once and drive these locusts from our lands," he replied immediately, angered that the barbarians had defiled the Roman capital.

"Yes, that is exactly what they would want us to do," the Emperor continued in a demeaning tone. "They would love for our crippled army to hobble back to Nova Roma. They would destroy us on the way, killing the Emperor."

"Sire, that was not my intention," Bardas muttered.

"Silence," the Emperor commanded. "I need to think." He sat on his throne and interlocked his fingers, placing them on his head. He closed his eyes. The tent was quiet for what seemed like an hour.

"Before we even attempt to march back home to repel the rabble from the North we need to secure the release of our prisoners," Michael finally said. "There is no way we can attempt to drive the barbarians off with most of our commanders in a Saracen prison." He turned to Basil. "You, you seem to be a capable man. Since the incompetence of my Caesar has led to this current situation, I would like you to parley for the release of our prisoners. Accompany Bardas to Arsamosata, and see if you can negotiate the release of our men."

"Yes, your Grace." Basil bowed as low as he could without falling over.



Things had been very quiet in Kyiv and though Vratymyr welcomed the respite, he was worried about his brethren in the South and missed the hustle and bustle of preparing for the expedition. It had given him a purpose. He was still busy overseeing the building up

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of Kyiv's defenses, but most of the able-bodied men had gone with the raiding party and the construction was slow with those that were left.

With most of the Varyags occupied this summer and his own people mostly on the raid there was little trading going on and very few people coming in and out of Kyiv. This meant that news was scarce as well. Khud'ko was a week late, and the Kniaz' was worried. But he also knew that his job was a difficult one and sticking to a schedule when you were trying to gather information or trying to remain hidden was not an easy task.

He was relieved when he saw his friend arrive that morning. Khud'ko had been knocked off his horse by an unseen branch while riding in the dark and managed to break several ribs. He rasped and wheezed while breathing, and talking was difficult. Fortunately, it did not appear that the ribs had cut his insides since the accident happened several days ago and he was still among the living.

Vratymyr implored Khud'ko to rest for a few days, but the grizzled traveler said he was late for an important rendezvous and could only stay for a few hours to let his horse rest. An amazing beast that horse of his. Vratymyr was not sure which one of them was more stubborn, or more hearty.

They sat near the Dnipro on a bank far away from any prying eyes or ears. Vratymyr tossed stones into the river like he used to when he was a child. He waited patiently for his friend to catch his breath after their trek to the riverbank.

Finally, Khud'ko wheezed, "Things go well, my Kniaz'. While in Khersoneses I heard much to rejoice about. There were rumors that the Emperor and his army in the East suffered a significant defeat. They lay

siege to some fort and while they were setting up camp, a good number of their men were killed or captured. They say that the Emperor barely made it away alive and that the army is trying to regroup."

"That is good news indeed." Vratymyr smiled. "Hopefully they will be delayed for a while and will not be able to make it back to Tsargrad with a significant enough force to place our men in danger. What did you hear about our fleet?"

"Most people in Khersoneses are afraid," he said, wincing as he grabbed for his ribs.

"Careful," Vratymyr advised.

"I will be all right." He smirked, avoiding laughing. "If you think this is bad you should see me bouncing up and down on my steed." He pulled out a piece of wood from his sleeve and showed it to his lord. "I ride with this between my teeth to bite down on it so I don't scream in pain. Coughing also feels like being hit in the mid-section with a blacksmith's hammer. It will pass. The Greeks are mustering whatever defenses they can, thinking that we may invade them overland. They sent messengers to Tsargrad for aid but did not receive any reply. I did learn our men set fire to some settlements on the northern shores and plundered them but did not enter the city because the walls are too strong and the Greeks and the rest of their army are hiding within. They then set sail for a chain of islands in the sea east of Tsargrad to set up a base."

"What of the Greek fleet?" asked the Polian, his brow furrowed.

"Another bit of fortune," replied the weary Khud'ko. "They had heard that the Varyags passed Rome and were moving towards the Greeks. They sent them to track down Hasting and Bjorn."

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"That is good. It means that there are fewer forces in Tsargrad to impede our success. Let us hope fortune remains on our side. What of Kubrat? I grew fond of him in our short time together."

"He continues with the two brothers Constantine and Methodius," Khud'ko said. "He is currently teaching the younger brother who is the official envoy how to speak Chagatai. It is amazing how quickly that man learns languages. In the few months he has been on the peninsula he has learned to speak Hebrew, Slavic and has now almost mastered the Khazar tongue as well. I shall meet with Kubrat next time I go back to Khersoneses. I am meaning to ask him about a story I heard regarding his current employer. People in Khersoneses are saying how a Khazar host came to attack a Christian town to plunder it and somehow Constantine went out to greet them all by himself, unarmed, and they turned and rode away. There was another story how a horde of Ugrians howling like wolves also descended upon their delegation and were about to kill the envoy when he began chanting a prayer and pacified them as well."

"What sort of magic is this?"

"I know not, which is why I mean to inquire of our friend as to the truth of these events."

"Very well, my friend." Vratymyr extended his hand to help up his injured tribesman. "Let's get you into a bed for a few hours before you are on your way."

"Yes let's," was all Khud'ko could manage to say. He winced in pain when Vratymyr helped him to his feet.

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"Just because the Emperor is in a foul mood, do not presume that you are in charge here," Bardas sneered.

"I would never, Caesar," Basil replied calmly. "However the Emperor did say that I was to lead the negotiations for the release of the prisoners, did he not?"

"Aye, that he did." Bardas pulled sharply on the reins in his hand and brought his horse about to stop in the path of the young upstart. "Have you ever negotiated the release of prisoners before?"

"No," the young man answered simply.

"Have you ever parlayed with a Saracen before?" he continued.

Once again as expected, "No".

"Have you ever done anything of note other than suck the cock of a well-positioned noble to get ahead in this world?" The Caesar growled through his teeth so those in their vicinity could not hear. After not receiving an answer he said, "Well then, if you want to curry favor with your Emperor, which is obviously what you desire, then you would do well to follow my lead and tell the Emperor nothing. I shall secure the release of the prisoners and you can tell the Emperor that it was you who did all the talking, if you so desire. I, however, am in charge of making sure the army is functional and that the Emperor is protected. In order to do that I need to make sure that the scores of commanders and officers captured by the Emir are returned to us safely, or else this expedition will turn into more of a disaster than it already has."

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Basil did not get this far by being stupid, and he was well aware that one has to pick and chose his battles if one is to win a war. He saw that Bardas was a capable leader. The Emperor probably respected him and his decision-making, even though he publically showed his displeasure with the man after recent events. If Basil wanted to drive a wedge between the Emperor and the Caesar, he would have to do it in a cunning fashion so that neither was aware that he was doing so. Letting Bardas do all the work and later taking credit for the release of the prisoners would be a good start. After all, Bardas was right. He knew nothing of negotiating with Emirs or the customs and procedures involved. He agreed to let Basil take charge and would observe and learn.

The party they took to Arsamosata was small and consisted of a dozen men and a few open wagons, in case there was a need to cart away any injured prisoners. Though the summer was over, the intense heat still radiated from the plains, causing everything on the horizon to distort before their eyes as if they had drunk to much wine. The elevation also made their breathing more difficult and they found they needed to constantly drink water to keep their wits about them.

When they finally reached the gates of the city, a tiny door which was part of the massive gate opened enough to allow Basil and Bardas through. The rest of the party was asked to wait outside. To the surprise of the Romans the Saracens brought out trays of fruits and fresh water for them.

As Bardas and Basil entered the city, they couldn't help but notice that it contained just as many tents as it did actual fixed structures and everyone was going about their business barely paying them any mind. Horses as well as camels were being groomed, and their

musty odors filled the air. Combined with the higher altitude, this made it even more difficult for the Romans to breathe. They were led into a large tent decorated inside with many rugs of various designs, though they all looked very intricate and of excellent craftsmanship and quality. Silk pillows were positioned in a circle on the floor, in the middle of which was positioned a tray with a pitcher, several drinking vessels and a silver tray filled with dates.

"Please, sit." A tall Arab whose face seemed leathery and worn from many days in the sun and heat motioned to the pillows. He was dressed simply in a silk robe, and his head was covered with a plain turban. Though the Saracen's Greek was not very good, it was understandable enough. "I apologize for my tongue, yours it not learned yet so well."

The two Romans shuffled towards the center of the tent and plopped down onto the pillows. They were exhausted, but doing their best not to show it. "Thank you for your kindness, Sire," Bardas answered in Arabic as the Emir's eyes widened. "I am Bardas, Caesar of Nova Roma, and am here on behalf of my master, the Emperor Michael. This," he said, motioning at Basil, "is a young whelp who thinks he can be useful as a diplomat yet knows nothing of your customs." Bardas shot a glance at Basil and saw that, as he had suspected, Basil did not know any Arabic other than a few basic words. "Though he is not really needed here it is my lord's wish that he be present to see if there is anything useful he can learn from the experience."

"I see. As you may have already deduced, I am Amr. Can I offer you some water?" The Emir replied in Arabic and picked up the pitcher and poured two cups for his guests.

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"Thank you," Bardas continued the conversation in Arabic, raising one of the cups to his lips and taking a small sip. Basil followed Bardas' lead. Bardas could see that Basil was seething with anger not being able to follow the conversation, no matter how hard he tried to hide it. "Let us get down to business then."

"Alright," Amr replied, appearing very tall even though he was seated with his legs crossed opposite the two Romans. "It would seem that some of your men have become our guests and we grow weary of feeding them. Since we have been feeding them for quite some time now and realizing their value, I believe it is customary that you will pay for their ransom."

"Yes," replied Bardas. "We are here to secure their release. How many men do you hold and what are your terms?"

"Well, it would appear that men of rank and lesser officers number one hundred and eight. The rest of the men that were captured were taken east to be sold as I am sure you would not have been able to pay for all of them, and it would be quite foolish for us to give back a good portion of your army so you could attack us again."

Bardas held back his anger as best he could. The fate of a slave was not a good one, and they probably would have been better off had they died in battle. "Very well, what value do you place on the heads of the men you have here?"

"They are officers, and many of them seem to be quite high ranking and well bred. I am sure their families will miss them dearly." The Saracen leader smiled wryly. "Let us say twenty-five thousand dinars for the lot of them."



Though Basil did not understand much of what was being said, he did understand the sum requested and spat out some water as he was sipping.

"Forgive my young friend here," the Caesar said. "His throat is obviously still parched from the journey. I shall agree to your terms but we will need some time to bring back the sum required."

The Emir smiled once again, knowing that the Romans probably did not have the sum requested with them. His men had captured most of their wagons along with the one which carried the soldier's wages. "As a show of good faith I shall release half of your officers to you as they do eat quite a lot. The higher ranking men will remain as our guests."

"Thank you," Bardas answered. "I believe that it should not take us more than two weeks or so to return with the required sum."

"Excellent," the wiry Saracen exclaimed, getting to his feet. He snapped his fingers and the two guards at the entrance to the tent stepped out for a second and brought in a prisoner. Bardas immediately recognized him as Priskus, the commander of Seon who was quite close to the Emperor, having served at the palace for years. "He says he knows your Emperor personally. I am sure the he would like to see him again so he will be our guest along with the rest until you arrive with the agreed ransom."

"We shall return as soon as we are able." Bardas stood and bowed. Basil quickly followed suit, and they exited the tent. Two guards with vicious-looking scimitars escorted them to the door within the gate, and, followed by about sixty of the lesser officers in tow, they made their way out of the fortress city.

When the door shut behind them Basil fumed, "You could have spoken Greek with him."

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"I could have, my boy, but we would have received much less favorable terms. My main goal was not to appease your desire for being informed, but to get our men released for the least possible amount of coin. Having a pretty face and nice muscles may get you far with the ladies, and the old rich men," he chided again, knowing the master he served, "but when dealing with the delicacies of diplomacy you need to please your counterpart in other ways most of the time."

Basil once again bit his tongue. One day you will get yours, that I promise you, he thought to himself.

"Oh, and since you did such a good job securing the release of our officers you may want to explain to your Emperor how a good portion of his army was sold into slavery." Bardas shot a demeaning stare at Basil and turned his horse back to the camp and the Emperor.



Since Terebinthos was now devoid of any inhabitants, Askoldir decided that he would make it his base of operation. It was a small island, and it would be easy to defend. Any activity or approaching ships would be easily spotted.

Ignatios was fed and Gunnar joined Askoldir in order to translate for the old man. The deposed Patriarch's hair was white, and he had a rather long white beard. He was less frail than he had originally appeared, though he still was a tangle of loose skin and bones beside the muscular Norse and Slavs.

Askoldir instructed Gunnar to translate word for word to the best of his ability, and Gunnar replied that he would do his best. His Greek was passable enough, but a lot would depend on the terminology used by the venerable Patriarch.

Askoldir decided to stand to appear more imposing and paced around the seated Ignatios. "So, you said that you would tell me everything. Where would you like to begin?"

The old man coughed and tried clearing his throat. At first he wheezed but then found his voice. "My name is Ignatios born Niketas, son of the former Emperor Michael Rhangabe and Prokopia."

As Gunnar translated for Askoldir he could see his eyes widen ever so slightly. He was obviously very surprised they had captured such a man.

Ignatios waited for Gunnar to finish his translation and continued, "When my father's army was defeated at the battle of Versinikia and he was humiliated, he feared he would be assassinated by his opponents. In order to prevent this, he abdicated the throne to Leo. This did save my father's life. He was allowed to become a monk and took the name Athanasios, living the rest of his life in peace as a servant of God. So that neither myself nor my brothers had any ideas of reclaiming our father's throne, we were all castrated and also relegated into monasteries. Since a eunuch cannot be Emperor this was the best way to be sure that we would not have any aspirations to the throne."

Noticing that the old monk's voice was still dry, Askoldir handed him a skinful of wine. Ignatios drank deeply. "Thank you. I shall get to the part you want to hear soon. I shall not bore you with too many details, but suffice it to say, that for quite some time there was a serious debate about holy idols and many of our bretheren felt that God should not be depicted in statues and icons. I was opposed to this view. Eventually those of us who believed that we should portray God's image prevailed. With the support of the Empress Mother Theodora, this, if you are not aware is

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the current Emperor Michael's mother, I was appointed Patriarch of Constantinople."

He coughed and continued, "Several years ago I refused to give the Holy Sacrament to the Caesar Bardas due to his unholy behavior and in order to get rid of me he and his co-conspirator Photios concocted a story to have me deposed and install Photios in my place. This is where my story becomes relevant to you. In order to get rid of me they decided to blame me for the murder of your compatriots."

Once again, the Norse Khagan's eyes widened in amazement at the old monk's story. He listened intently as Ignatios proceeded.

"I was meeting with your kinsmen and trying to explain to them the graces of the Lord and the benefits of following him and found them an interested group. However, after our meeting I noticed a piece of parchment that one of them apparently had dropped. At the time, I believed it to be authentic and a fortunate occurrence, as it revealed that they were here to spy on the Emperor and I immediately revealed this plot to him thinking I was doing God's work. Unfortunately for your friends, they were innocent victims of a plot to depose me because the parchment was a forgery. They were executed and then Photios, the current Patriarch, then a layman and friend to Bardas the Caesar, was made head of the investigation into the deaths of your friends. Once again, evidence conveniently appeared that showed your friends had discovered that I was having carnal relations with other men and that I had set them up to be executed. The fact that I am a eunuch did not seem to sway the Emperor from the influence of the conspirators. Needless to say, I was deposed and exiled here to this monastery where you found me."

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After Gunnar finished translating Askoldir paced for several moments before speaking. "So, if I am to believe you, the current Patriarch and the Caesar Bardas are responsible for the deaths of our men merely to get rid of you?"

"Yes, that would appear to be the short of it," Ignatios replied.

"Hmph," Askoldir muttered. "With your large walls and cathedrals you are not as civilized as you would pretend to be."

Ignatios replied dejectedly, "There are those among us who believe power on this Earth is more important than the power of God in the heavens. They eventually will be damned by God."

"Your kinsmen being damned by your God does nothing for my dead kinsmen." Askoldir fumed. "They were denied a seat in Valhalla next to our gods by being murdered by your people. Look at the results of the actions of your people. In order to attain power, you have brought destruction upon yourselves. Your Patriarch may hide in his city along with your armies like cowards, but it is your people that will suffer because of this. And you, you let twenty-two people die before opening your mouth. You are a coward as well. What will you say to your god when you meet him? That you tried to save yourself by letting others die? Is that the way of your god and your people?"

The old man looked truly saddened and wept "I do not condone my actions. I had no idea who you were when you came to this island. It is you who chopped my men into pieces not I. How was I to know that you were not sent here by someone to use me as a pawn in some game? I have been petitioning the Pope to try and get me reinstated and to depose Photios so that God's work can be continued properly and not this

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blasphemy that is occurring now." The monk placed his face in his hands and sobbed uncontrollably.

"Very well," Askoldir said calmly. "We shall leave you here in your holy house to contemplate your decisions and those of your people. It is you who have brought this suffering upon yourselves and maybe it is your god who believes you deserve it."

The Rus party left the old man alone in his monastery and went to plan their next course of action.



Though there were plenty of people left in Kyiv, most of Vratymyr's close friends had gone on the expedition and even though he was extremely busy supervising and also helping with the building of the walls of the city he was sad that he didn't really have anyone to talk to about anything other than the task at hand.

When he saw Kubrat ride into the city, he practically knocked him off his horse and gave him a great big hug. Kubrat thought that the Kniaz' would crush him.

"It is great to see you, my friend." The Kniaz beamed.

Kubrat had never seen Vratymyr this excited and it startled him a little. "And you as well, sire."

"You have no idea how monotonous the days are. Everyone is away doing something interesting and I am here doing menial tasks." The Polian was rambling. "Chop down the trees, make a wooden tower, fill it with earth, extend it, fill it, repeat the process. I am at my wits' end."

Kubrat let him go on for a while as they walked and led his tired horse to the stables. When they were sure

that his horse was being tended to, Vratymyr grabbed the former slave by the shoulder and said, "Come, you must tell me all about your adventures down South."

Vratymyr led him to his holding, and they sat near the fire trying to warm themselves from the evening chill. "We have just begun to butcher the cattle to prepare the meat for the winter months. There should be plenty of fresh meat." The Kniaz' called for one of his servants to bring them some meat and some mead. When he was satisfied that his guest had everything he needed he said, "So, tell me about these brothers you have been travelling with."

"I must first thank you, sire," Kubrat began. "You have opened the world for me. My entire life had been cooking and fetching a smelly old man's slippers and now I am a guest at the table of a Khazar Khagan and seeing things most men never get to see in their lives."

"I am glad you are enjoying your newfound freedom." Vratymyr smiled.

"Khud'ko sends his greetings as well. When we parted ways in Khersones he was on his way south to see how things fare with the Greeks. There had been very little travel from the south to the peninsula and little news so he decided to go and see for himself what is going on." The weary traveler took a big bite of a hunk of beef and wiped his chin with his sleeve. The juices flowed freely from his lips and down his arms.

"My travels have been more amazing than I could ever have imagined. Khersones is a wonder of a city with a unique aroma. The smell of the seawater permeates the entire city and even the walls are stained with the salt from the sea.

"Constantine and his brother Methodius are also incredibly learned men. I doubt that I will ever meet anyone with the talents of Constantine ever again in my

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life. No offense intended, m'lord, but I mean his gift for languages. While we were in Kherson, in the span of five months he managed to learn three languages well enough to be able to converse on topics I will never understand. I have also learned much about his God." The young man stopped just long enough to take a sip of mead to wash down his meat.

"We spent a lot of time travelling the peninsula and learned many great things. He was spreading the word of his God to the people there. Well, I should say my God as well, but I will get to that later. I learned that the Khazars had given control of Khersoneses and most of the peninsula to the Greeks in return for helping them build the fortress on the Don river. We also travelled to many settlements filled with worshippers of the old gods. There were also many Khazaras and Slavs among the Greeks who have begun to inhabit the peninsula more and more. I also learned that a lot of very important and famous people from the west including some Popes from Rome itself were exiled there."

The young Khazar caught his breath, took another sip of mead and continued. "Constantine is a very persuasive individual and is probably the most learned man I have ever met. It seems he knows everything, and could convince most anyone he is right. I guess that is why the Greeks chose him to try and convert my people to their religion."

"And did he?"

"I was just about to get to that," Kubrat replied. "We set out from Kherson and travelled what they referred to as the road to the Khazars." He drew a rough map in the dirt to show the journey. "We went through Theodosia and travelled to Panticapaeum here near Lake Maeotis. From there we set sail up the Don to where it is nearest the delta of the Volga. Then we



went overland through the Great Gate to Drebend where we were told the Khaqan of the Khazars was spending the summer and it was here that he would meet with the delegation."

Vratymyr smiled recalling Yaro's description of the city. "I know of this gate and city. Our people were there and Yaropolk described it to me in detail." He pulled out the little green statuette from his tunic and showed it to the Khazar. "This was bought there. Please, continue." He held Yaropolk's gift tightly in his fist and wondered how his old friend was faring so far away.

"I wasn't present at the debates but Constantine told me of them later. I spent most of the time roaming the city and taking in everything I could, listening to stories from the seafarers about distant lands." He realized he was rambling and got back to the main point of the story. "Well, Constantine explained to me that the Khazar Khagan was a very wise and learned man as well and had a tolerance for other customs and religions. He said that he listened to everything Constantine had to say and that they had a great discussion on the differences between the virtues of Christianity and Judaism. In the end Zacharias explained to Constantine that he had already converted to the Jewish faith but that their discussion intrigued him so much that if anyone present at the symposium desired to convert to his religion they were free to do so."

"And, did anyone convert?" Vratymyr asked.

"Amazingly, two hundred of the people present were so moved by the arguments of Constantine that they decided to convert to Christianity, myself included. Constantine later explained to me that this was quite a significant accomplishment as most of the attendees of the symposium were from the ruling class. The Khazar

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Khagan allows anyone to worship any faith they like, as long as they remain loyal to him and to the Beg. From what I overheard from many people, the Khagan is now more of a figurehead and the Beg is the real ruler of the Khazars. The Beg controls the army."

"That is good to know," Vratymyr said, thinking out loud. "It may come in handy in future dealings with the Khazars."

Kubrat stopped for a while to eat a little more and then continued. "When it was over the Khagan gave Constantine a letter to pass on to his Emperor and thanked him for a very enlightening debate. We travelled back the same route that brought us to the wondrous city on the sea and when we reached the peninsula, we stopped at an old Khazar city of Phullae. Since the Greeks now controlled the city, the people there had converted to Christianity but a lot of them still retained a lot of their old traditions. One of these was the worship of a tree called Alexandron. Only the men of the city were allowed to approach this tree and the people believed it to be divine in nature. Constantine gathered the faithful near the tree and read them a sermon about the one true God, after which the people were so moved he convinced them to cut down the tree and to burn it so that it no longer interferes with the worshipping of the true God."

"Come to think of it," the Kniaz' mused, "Khud'ko told me some tales about Constantine he had heard and I myself wondered if they were true. He mentioned one about calming a hoard of angry men howling like wolves."

"Ah yes." Kubrat nodded. "I was present so I can definitely say it is the truth. There was a hoard of what we later learned were Ugrians who lived in the Far East and were being chased off their lands and forced west.

They were very angry and attacked everyone in their path. They were scary-looking and had faces covered with mud and were screaming and baying like wolves. Our party was not large and they could have easily killed us all. Constantine calmly asked us to stay still and walked a distance in front of us, sat before the hoard and began to chant a prayer. Just like that the barbarians lost interest in attacking us and continued on their way."

"Amazing," Vratymyr said, shaking his head in disbelief. "The man truly sounds like a very persuasive individual. Maybe he does have some power of his god residing in him."

"As Constantine told me, sire," Kubrat added, "we all have a little of God in us and were made in his image. I witnessed many amazing things while on my journey with him. When we returned to Khersoneses we attended a great banquet that was arranged by the archbishop in honor of the mission. During the banquet, Constantine told the archbishop that God had shown him in a dream that the archbishop would die soon. Several days before Constantine was to leave the city, surely enough the archbishop died."

"Maybe he poisoned him himself," the Kniaz' reasoned.

"I don't think so, sire," Kubrat countered. "Constantine is not the type of man who would commit a sin."

"A sin?" Vratymyr asked.

"Oh, sorry. A sin is an evil deed that God frowns upon."

"I see," the Polian warrior conceded. "You say he left the city?"

"Yes, m'lord," Kubrat continued. "He was to bring back the letter of the Khagan to the Emperor and he

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also had relics of St. Clement that the Patriarch had asked him to return to Constantinople."

"So, now that your mission is over what do you plan to do next?" Vratymyr asked the former slave.

"Well, I thought I would stay here in Kyiv," Kubrat answered. "I can help with building the walls and as penance for spying on Constantine I shall teach a little about my new religion to the people here."

"Penance?"

Kubrat thought for a second. "It is a sort of punishment for committing a sin."

"I'd be glad to have you." The Kniaz' gripped his shoulder. "I will caution you however to be careful. People do not give up their beliefs easily. Most people here like their gods and their gods have been good to them lately, so tread lightly. Especially if you do not possess the talents of persuasion your former travelling companion does."

"Agreed." Kubrat could not argue with that wisdom. "Now I'd like to get some rest."

"You do that." Vratymyr smiled. "Tomorrow you will be carrying dirt and logs and not teaching missionaries to speak different languages."



## Winter 861

Bardas was furious, but he had no choice. When the Emperor gives you an order you either obey or your life is over. That little shit Basil immediately told the Emperor that he had purposely kept him out of the negotiation process and was responsible for a good portion of the army being sold into slavery. The Emperor had then ordered Bardas to go to Nova Roma and fetch the ransom for Amr so they could secure the release of the rest of the prisoners. They could have easily secured the coins from neighboring themes and then repaid them later, but the Emperor wanted to show his displeasure with Bardas and made him an errand boy.

Not wanting to waste too much time making the journey overland, Bardas decided to go north to the Theme of Chaldia where he boarded a ship in Koloneia. They sailed via river to the Euxine and along the coast to the Bosphorus. There Bardas decided to disembark and travel overland as he did not want to take any chances running into the invading fleet or their armies.

As they travelled south towards the capital, Bardas saw the extent of damage to the northern suburbs of the city on the northern side of the Golden Horn. Most of them lay in ruins, and many refugees were set up in tents or had fled, fearing the return of the invaders who he learned had made camp on the Isles of the Princes.

Bardas took a ferry near the northwestern part of the city and entered through the Gate of St. Anastasia, avoiding the Blachernae Gate so that fewer people would know of his arrival. As soon as he entered the city, he made his way to the Blachernae Palace and sent

one of the servants to inform Photios of his arrival. He instructed the servant not to let anyone other than Photios know that he was there. Once he dispatched the servant, he decided to take a little rest from his journey.

Bardas slumped on Photios' bed exhausted and immediately fell asleep. It seemed like he had just put his head down when someone shook him awake. "Get up." It was the Patriarch's voice.

"How did you get here so soon?" Bardas asked and then realized that the sun had already settled beyond the horizon for the night. The candelabras in the chamber were lit, and their flames danced and dispersed shadows along the walls like figures darting to and fro. "Oh, I must have been more tired than I thought."

"So it would appear." Photios pulled up a chair and sat beside him. "What in the name of the Holy Trinity are you doing here?"

"That, my friend, is a long story." He recounted the trek east along with the Emperor's speech about the martyrs. He told Photios that Michael obviously had a much keener mind than they gave him credit for. He ended with the defeat of the Emperor's forces at Arsamosata.

Photios sat in silence, absorbing the tale, nodding every once in a while until Bardas was about finished. He then stood and began to pace about the room near one of the windows. A slight breeze entered through the opening and made the shadows from the candlelight dance with greater frenzy.

"When we finally got back after negotiating the release of the prisoners, that little cocksucking bastard Basil betrayed me to the Emperor and said that I openly defied his wishes by taking over the negotiations myself," the Caesar spat. "Michael knew that little shit

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couldn't secure the release of anything other than semen from the cock of Theophilos yet sent him to spite me."

"Bardas," the Patriarch scolded. "Hold your tongue. Do not speak that way in my presence in case we are overheard. Anyone hearing you speak like that to your Patriarch would raise suspicions."

"Don't worry, your eminence. There is no one here. I sent all the servants away. I am sure you must have noticed no one was around when you entered this chamber."

"Regardless," the clergyman continued, "we must get used to being more careful. You never know who is around a corner."

"Mark my words, that Basil shall be the end of us," the grizzled warrior stated ominously. "He has lofty ambitions for a peasant. He also now seems to have the ear of the Emperor. Ever since he has come of age, Michael has been letting the power he wields cloud his judgment. He is obviously not stupid, but his inexperience makes him very dangerous. As Emperor he also sees himself infallible and blames all his failures on those around him. Maybe that will change eventually as he matures but for now it makes him quite unpredictable. I seem to have become his scapegoat for the failures in the eastern campaign though those failures were more misfortunes and due to the cunning of our enemy than anything else."

Photios sat back in the chair. "Either way, we need to be careful and give the appearance that we are doing his bidding. I seem to have had a much easier time here with Ooryphas who, though I cannot control him, is a capable enough leader."

Bardas realized that after recounting his story he had not even asked about what was going on in



Constantinople. "My apologies, I have been self-absorbed with my miseries. What of this invasion? I saw the northern suburbs in ruins. It is a mess over there."

"It is not good but it is also not as bad as it seems," the Patriarch stated. "Yes they have burned and looted the suburbs and decimated the Isles of the Princes but they cannot enter the city. While their fleet is large and they have many men, they do not have any siege engines and fear our Greek fire. The chain blocks their entrance to the Golden Horn and they have decided not to sail further south to make landfall to our west and attack from land. I can only assume they want to have an easier and quicker route of escape north if necessary. They may also be waiting for the arrival of another Varangian fleet of about sixty ships from the west which Kontomytes spotted and has been chasing around."

"You mean they are attacking from the west as well? God help us."

"It appears that they tried," the Patriarch said, "but the remainder of our fleet has been in those waters and has been diverting them. Our ships outnumber them two to one and though not as maneuverable, our ships have the capability to fire projectiles at a distance while theirs do not. So we have successfully blocked their passage towards the Propontis. The last I heard they were being chased back west as they feared being destroyed without being able to offer a response."

"Well, that is good at least. Maybe we were fortunate and they have strung up Ignatios." Bardas yawned, finally feeling strength returning to his tired limbs.

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"That would be a stroke of good fortune. On top of everything the damned delegates from the Pope are here as well."

"You mean in Constantinople?" Bardas was surprised.

"Yes," Photios quickly answered. "They were on their way to the palace, but with the invasion I could not risk them being killed and incurring even more wrath from the Pope. As soon as they entered the Propontis, I had them diverted to Rhaedestos and then had them come via land through the Golden Gate. I have isolated them in the Ta Elebichou at the Monastery of the Holy Martyrs Menodora, Metrodora and Nymphodora near the Seventh Hill. I do not know how much longer I will be able to keep them cooped up there however. I have already had to give them many gifts to placate them. Chasubles, pectoral crosses, it is amazing how the sight of silver opens the eyes of the servants from Rome. The synod is in Martius so we will need to settle this business with the barbarians before then. I think I will be able to keep the delegates busy at the monastery until then."

"I need to leave soon and bring the ransom for our officers back to Amr," the Caesar said, stretching his legs. "I'll go see Ooryphas and get some of the spoils from the Egyptian expedition to take to the Saracens. Then we can march back here and take care of these barbarians."

"Yes." The Patriarch seemed to have a revelation. "The spoils from Egypt. You have given me an idea. God speed, my friend, and be careful. Do not aggravate the Emperor and watch out for that peasant. If he does indeed have the Emperor's ear, there is no telling what he is capable of. Remember how we were able to get

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Michael to do what we needed. Let us make sure those same methods are not used to create our downfall."

As always Photios had a point. "I shall try and control my temper as best I can around those two. I have become accustomed to licking the boot of the Emperor. Minding my manners around a cock-sucking peasant is what I shall have more difficulty with."

"Good luck," the Patrairch said, disappearing through a doorway.

"Good luck," Bardas muttered under his breath as he too went on his way to the palace. "I think we are both going to need plenty of it."



"Senseless," Yaropolk muttered. "They killed my son just so they could play their little games amongst themselves. If I ever get my hands on either Photios or Bardas, I shall break them in half."

Askoldir did his best to try and calm the big man. "Senseless it was, but we must keep our wits about us and not let our anger rule us. I am not telling you not to be angry, just do not be rash. Do not let your anger make your decisions for you but use it to help you achieve your goals after you have made your decisions."

"I shall leave the decision-making to you," the Siverian deferred to his Khagan. "However, I cannot answer for myself as to what I would do to either of those two if in their presence."

"Very well," Askoldir stated. "Maybe it is best you stay behind then." Yesterday a ship had arrived at Terebinthos under escort. It had approached the Rus fleet under a flag of truce. Miklagard wanted to parley. A small party would be allowed into the city to try and reach terms to end the siege. They were guaranteed

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safety. Askoldir had agreed, but he told the Greeks that if any harm came to any of his men, they would sail to the suburbs in the north and kill every person they encountered.

"Maybe that is best," Yaropolk agreed. "I do not think I could stand the presence of such vile men pretending to be servants of the gods."

"I shall do my best to make sure they pay dearly for what happened to your son," the Scandanavian stated firmly. It appears they do not have the stomach for a fight so we will hit them where it hurts more. We shall destroy their pride and their coffers."

"Do what you have to do," the brawny warrior replied. "It appears neither my axe nor my oath will get their satisfaction."

Fifty ships left for Miklagard while the rest of the fleet stayed behind anchored at the islands. About one thousand meters from the walls Askoldir's ship rowed on as the rest of the fleet remained behind. They passed the tower of Belisarius and were led into the Harbour of Sophia where they docked and disembarked. Askoldir, Gunnar and Stoyan were to take part in the parlay while the others who accompanied them were led on a small tour of the city.

The parlay party was led past the Hippodrome into the Great Palace. Gunnar and Stoyan had seen the Hippodrome before, but Askoldir had not and was clearly impressed by the massive structure no matter how hard he tried to hide it. When in the Great Palace they were ushered through the Palace of Daphne to the Stepsimon also known as the triklinos Augusteus or the Hall of Augustus, as Gunnar explained to Askoldir. It was in this hall that imperial weddings were held, and it was here that they would be meeting with their Roman counterparts.

As they were led into the hall and escorted to their seats at a long table, they were greeted by Ooryphas. "Welcome to Constantinople. It is a shame it could not be under more pleasant circumstances. I am Ooryphas, representing the Emperor Michael in his absence." Askoldir said nothing and sat in the large chair provided for him. Stoyan and Gunnar followed suit. As they sat, Ooryphas moved his open hand in Photios' direction. "This is Photios, Patriarch of Constantinople."

Askoldir stared with disdain at the priest in his holy robes and funny hat, but said nothing. Photios could sense that the man disliked him immensely.

When he realized that Askoldir was not going to say anything, Ooryphas adjusted his dalmatica and stood with his hands on the table in front of him as if trying to keep himself upright. "It seems we are at an impasse here. You are disrupting the peace in the Empire but cannot capture our city. There is no way you can win. The Emperor is on his way back from his campaign in the East and our fleet will soon be returning from the West." While Ooryphas knew both of these things to be true, it was also true that the Emperor's forces were greatly weakened and the fleet, though still formidable, was also greatly depleted. "We have therefore invited you here to give you an opportunity to leave peacefully. If you get back on your ships and go whence you came, we give our word that you will not be followed and no harm will come to you."

Askoldir had heard enough and burst out in laughter. He glanced at Ooryphas, who looked completely shocked. Photios sat unmoved, studying his opponent. "No harm will come to us? Like our brethren that you murdered for your silly internal politics? Your Emperor is not here to defend the city and while we may not capture Miklagard, we can destroy everything

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around it. What will you eat then? Who will you rule over then? Do you think your cowardly Emperor would enjoy returning to an Empire laid waste with only these walls and what remains standing within them? I think not." As Gunnar translated, the Greek representative's jaw dropped. He could not believe the audacity of this barbarian. He was about to speak but Askoldir did not let him as he was not finished. "It is you who need to make concessions here, not us. It is you whose fields and houses and people shall burn and die by the sword if you do not give us a good reason to go home. We did not want to come here with war. We had a nice arrangement trading wares with you until you decided to destroy all that. So we decided to show you what destruction really is. If you do not give us a good reason to leave, then here we shall stay until your Emperor arrives and we shall destroy whatever remains of his army after his defeat by the Arabs. Yes, do you think us foolish barbarians who came here at a whim not knowing what is going on in the world? Your fleet is also busy trying to catch our fleet coming in from the west. I know about that too. My kinsmen Bjorn and Hasting come to our aid. The only fleet coming from the west is ours."

When the Norseman finished, Ooryphas was red and his hands shook. The others seated at the table could see he was at a loss. He began to stammer, but nothing resembling words came out of his mouth.

Photios, on the other hand, calmly stood. "If I may interject here. Yes," he said, looking at Askoldir, "what you say is true. The Emperor's army is depleted, but the Caesar Bardas just left several days ago to ransom most of it back and the Emperor will gain numbers from the themes on the way back to the capital as people have heard of the invasion and have begun to rally to

repel the invaders. I can tell you truthfully that the army that will return with the Emperor will be more than you can handle and they will be returning fairly soon. As to your fleet and your kinsman to whom you referred, they are already sailing back west and our fleet will be returning quite soon as well after they have chased them further away." Photios was overstating the facts but not really by much. "I think we can come to a mutually beneficial arrangement."

"You are obviously an intelligent and learned man," Askoldir spoke confidently, "but you are a snake. I know how you came to power via the death of our kinsmen." He could see a hint of fear in the eyes of the Patriarch and pressed the matter further. "I had a conversation with an old man on one of your islands who told me a very interesting story. I think you know what I am referring to."

Photios cursed his luck. I knew we should have killed that old man instead of exiling him, the Patriarch thought to himself. "Yes," he replied, "I am sure everyone has heard this story. The old man you refer to told it before the Emperor, who did not believe a word of it."

"What your Emperor believes or does not believe concerns me not," Askoldir said. "It is what I believe that matters to me."

Photios was prepared to make major concessions to rid himself of these barbarians. Thankfully Ooryphas proved to be useless as a negotiator, so he was able to usurp the lead role. He needed to get rid of these invaders before the synod, or else the legates would return to Rome and inform the Pope that all bedlam had broken loose in the East and that he would need to tend to his flock here more closely. He and Bardas had worked too hard to come to power, and he would not

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let these upstart barbarians ruin that. "Very well, you believe what you want to believe. However, we still need to resolve this dispute. I am sure you and your men want to go home, and obviously, we want you gone. Those are the facts before us. Judging from the looting that has gone on in the suburbs it is also obvious that you would like not only revenge, but to enrich yourselves in the process. While I cannot offer you the lives of your men back, what we can offer you is this."

The Patriarch waved to the guards at the back of the room, and they quickly barked orders through the doorway. In a few minutes, men began lugging a bunch of heavy chests into the room. It took about thirty minutes for all of the chests to be brought in, and when the last chest was placed on the floor practically the entire hall was filled with them. The Patriarch clapped his hands and the soldiers began to open all of the chests. Askoldir, Gunnar and Stoyan all gazed in wonder at the staggering amount of treasure. The chests were all filled with coins; though mostly silver they could see some gold, as well as trinkets, and colored glass as well.

When Photios was satisfied that the desired effect was reached he proceeded. "This is what we offer you to go home. We shall sign a treaty that trade is to resume and that you will not attack us anymore. We will vow not to attack you either. It will not bring back your men and it will not bring back our people that have died this past year, but it will settle this matter without further death and destruction. I think we owe it to both our peoples to put an end to this. What say you to these terms?"

"Though I do not like you, your terms are fair and I am inclined to accept them," the Khagan spoke. "However if the terms are breached an army ten times



the size of this one will return and destroy not only your suburbs but your city as well."

"Agreed," Photios stated. "However, I do have one more condition to release this treasure to you. You must let us save face with our people so we can give them the impression that we were not defeated. This way you can tell your people about your great victory and we too can say that we were not defeated."

Askoldir looked at the holy man puzzled. "And what do you propose our defeat will look like?"

Photios approached the Rus Khagan and whispered to him, "Walk with me." He led him back through the Palace of Daphne to a staircase that led all the way up to the kathisma, the imperial box at the Hippodrome. Gunnar and Stoyan followed them at a distance, as Ooryphas remained seated. Gunnar and Stoyan could not hear what the two men discussed, but it seemed that they had come to an arrangement that satisfied both men.

"I shall draw up the treaty and we can sign it tomorrow," Photios said to Askoldir. "All of these chests will not fit on your ship so I will ask that you ferry them to your fleet at night out of the sight of prying eyes so less questions will be raised. You can then return here tomorrow and we will finalize our deal."

"Very well," Askoldir agreed and he and his men left and got to work.



When Bardas returned, he learned that the army had already begun to move west. He could only assume that this was another slight from the Emperor and his new friend Basil. Since he was travelling with a wagon full of silver and an appropriate guard for protection, he

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decided that he would go and complete his mission and secure the release of the rest of the officers.

When he arrived at Arsamosata the massive gates were opened to let his wagon through. The rest of his retinue waited outside the city for him. His wagon was unloaded by Saracen servants, and they brought the chests with the ransom into the tent of their Emir. Amr looked over the chests full of silver and motioned to one of the servants. Soon after a large scale was brought into the tent and the silver was weighed. While this was taking place the Emir offered the Caesar some refreshments which he gladly accepted. After the counting was done, one of the servants whispered something in Amr's ear and left the tent.

"It would appear that the terms of our agreement have been met," the Emir said plainly. "I shall release your officers to you, however this one that knows your Emperor, he shall remain here in our prison."

Bardas looked at the Emir puzzled. "But we agreed that he would be released as well."

Amr grabbed a handful of the coins from one of the chests and thrust the fistful of coins in Bardas' direction. "Do you see these? Do you recognize them?"

"No," Bardas answered truthfully.

"These are coins which I had sent to Pelousium myself." The Emir raised his voice, clearly disturbed. "How did you come by them?"

Bardas was at a loss as to how to answer, knowing he could not say that they had defeated the Arabs there and looted the coins. "I do not know, they were in the treasury and were given to me to take as ransom."

"Very well." He calmed down. "If you will not answer me than I will provide an answer for you. Now begone."

## MICHAEL HNATYSHYN

Bardas was escorted out of the tent, and the rest of the prisoners were rounded up. They were all ushered out of the front gates.

When they had left Amr called in one of his riders. "The Romans think they can make a fool of me paying me a ransom with my own coins. They shall pay dearly for this. Send three of our best men and we shall strike a blow for Allah and his Prophet by destroying the major center of knowledge of the infidels and their false god. Have them sneak into the library at Alexandria and burn it to the ground." The Muslim bowed deeply and left to fulfill his mission.

The trek to Sebasteia was slow as the released prisoners had no horses and had to travel by foot. Most of them were higher-ranking officers and were used to riding horses and not participating in a forced march, which made the journey even slower. By the time they reached the city, they learned they were three days behind the Emperor and the rest of the army. The army, however, would be travelling slowly and now that they had secured horses for themselves in the city, he figured they would be able to reach them before they made it back to Constantinople.

Indeed, they caught up to the army half way on the journey from Ankyra to Malagina. The army was camped for the evening, and Bardas approached the Emperor's tent. The guards did not immediately let him pass, which infuriated the Caesar even more. In about ten minutes, one of the guards emerged and told him he could enter.

As he entered the tent, he saw Michael and Basil sharing some wine and laughing. The Emperor drank deeply. "Well, well, look who has decided to join us. My Caesar is here. Bardas, please come in and have some wine." The Emperor and his new companion laughed

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again. Seeing that Bardas did not help himself to some wine, Michael repeated, "I said, have some wine." Bardas reached over and poured himself a cup from an ewer on a table and sipped it slowly.

"There." Michael chuckled. "That's better, now tell us what took you so long."

"Sire, the trip was not an easy one and the horses could only pull the wagon with the ransom money so quickly," Bardas answered. "We arrived as soon as we could."

"And did you secure the release of the rest of our men?" the Emperor asked.

"Yes," the Caesar answered honestly, as there was no point in delaying the inevitable. "All but one."

"What do you mean all but one?" Michael rebutted.

"Amr decided to keep the commander of Seon as his prisoner because he noticed that the coins provided as ransom were his own from Pelousion."

"I am surrounded by fools. Now leave us. Tomorrow we continue on to Nova Roma and hope to be there two days from now. Make sure the-ransomed officers are reunited with their units, and that everyone is ready for battle. Two days hence we shall free the Empire from the northern barbarians."

Bardas bowed and left. "Yes, my Emperor.". As he exited the tent, he could hear laughter emanating from within. Bardas realized the little bastard had gotten his hook into the Emperor already. He hoped that Photios could help talk some sense into him before all was lost.



Photios had given many sermons during the past months about the invading barbarians and how this was a test from God and that they would eventually be rid

of them with His aid. This morning, however, he had a great surprise in store for the faithful. Today they would witness a miracle of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Two hundred and thirty-five years ago on this very day, the twenty second of Martios, during the reign of Heraklios, an army of Persians and Scythians had attacked Constantinople. According to the Synaxarion, through the divine intervention of the Holy Mother, a hurricane arose from nowhere and sent the fleet of the invading enemy crashing into the shore near the Great church of the Theotokos at Blachernae. The people were so grateful that they composed a hymn in her honor and every year on this day celebrated her miracle with a great feast called the Acathistus. Today they would relive that miracle, and their faith in the power of the church would soar.

Dressed in his Patriarchal finery, Photios removed the sacred vestment of the Virgin from the church of St. Mary of Blachernae, and the long procession all the way to the Hagia Sofia began. A throng of faithful gathered, singing the Akathist as they followed Photios and the rest of the clergy. The Patriarch held the holy garment in both hands above his head so everyone could get a glimpse of it. Due to recent events, and not knowing what the future held, practically the entire city had joined in the procession, and the hymn resonated throughout the city louder than it ever had in the previous two centuries.

The procession would be long and tiring but it would be well worth the result. Whatever troubles Bardas was having with the Emperor, Photios believed he would be able to regain some influence over the young ruler by being part of a miracle.

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The Rus had spent the last several days getting their ships ready for the journey home. Most of the men were very surprised they were leaving. They had expected heavy fighting and a huge battle for the city. But other than some pockets of resistance in the suburbs of the city which were easily dealt with, most of their time was spent on the Islands of the Princes enjoying the weather after the initial burning and looting in the suburbs.

Throughout the entire eight months, they had only lost a total of thirty-five men, mostly to disease, illness or accidents. They were now ready to return home. There was no way for Askoldir to address the entire expedition at once, so he gathered all the skippers of the boats. They could pass his words on to their crews later.

Askoldir was in his full battle regalia and looked regal as he addressed his men. "My kinsmen, I realize you did not expect to be here this long, though I know many of you have been on expeditions that have lasted even longer. I also know many of you expected to capture and burn the great Miklagard. You have all seen those walls, and have all by now heard the tales of the Greek fire that they spew from them. We would never have had the chance to take the city. Nonetheless, you can be proud because we have achieved a great victory. The mighty Roman Empire has cowered behind its walls from us and refused to meet us on the field of battle. They have even paid us an incredible ransom to go back home. As you can see, our ships are overflowing with treasure and it will be difficult to sail home with all the silver and gold that fill them. That is our victory. We

shall use this booty to make Kyiv an even greater city and one day we shall return here and truly conquer this Empire." A huge cheer went up from the gathered ship captains. "Now go to your ships, we sail within the hour."

Askoldir turned to Gunnar and Stoyan. "My friends, you will be staying behind as envoys to the Romans. As part of our arrangement, we will be reestablishing trade with them and you will work out all the details. We also agreed to let them send some of their priests to teach our people about their god. I do not see the harm in this. They will probably be spies but we will keep a close eye on them. When they have selected their delegation and you have worked out the details of the trade agreement I will entrust you to escort them to Kyiv." Both men nodded, honored to be entrusted with such an important task.

After he had finished with his two envoys, Askoldir went to try and find Yaropolk who had been in a strange mood the last few weeks. He found him in the monastery with Ignatios sharing some bread and cheese. "Are you ready, my friend?"

"Nay, sire," replied the warrior. "I shall not be returning to Kyiv with you."

"What do you mean?" the Khagan asked.

"I feel like my work here is not finished," he stated somberly. "I do not feel I have avenged my son and I swore an oath to the gods."

"And how do you plan on avenging your son?" Askoldir asked astonished. "Do you plan on fighting all the Romans by yourself?"

"No." Yaropolk grinned. "I believe I have found another way. This man here whom we spared, wants to see that Photios is brought to justice. I believe I shall

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avenge my son by seeing that the false Patriarch responsible for my son's death is brought to justice."

"That is your choice," Askoldir said sadly. "I shall not stop you if you feel this is what you need to do."

"I do." The big man sighed. "Oh, and before you go." He reached into his tunic, pulled out the figurine around his neck and handed it and its leather strap to the Khagan. "Take this and give my domovoi to Vratymyr and ask him to return it to Plaksa. Have him tell her I avenged our son. Tell my old friend farewell from me as well. I believe the history of the Slavs will go on without me. The Siverians and Polians are now joined under you anyway so I am not needed."

"Your decision is yours to make." Askoldir embraced the big man though he could not get his arms around him. "You shall always be welcome back home should you decide to return."

"Thank you." The burly warrior actually wiped a tear from the corner of his eye with the loaf of bread in his hand. "I do not think I shall return though. I shall do what needs to be done here and then I shall make my peace with the gods."

"Farewell, my friend," the Norseman said. "And may the gods grant you your vengeance." Askoldir left the two men and made his way to his ship. There was one last stop he had to make before they began the journey home.

A good portion of the fleet had already set sail towards the Bosphorus, but Askoldir had to make sure that the final condition of his agreement with Photios was met. Askoldir took five ships along with his own and sailed to meet up with a rag tag fleet of Roman ships made to look like the ships of the Rus. They all had a very minimal crew, and each ship had just enough people to be able to steer them towards the walls of



the great city. There were about 40 of these barely seaworthy vessels and each was equipped with sails that resembled those of the fleet of the invaders. They also placed colorful rounded shields over the sides of these ships to make it appear that they were full of men.



The Patriarch and his procession had nearly reached their destination. As they approached the center of the city Photios could not believe his luck. The sky had darkened and the wind was picking up a little. If he could stall a little longer it appeared that darker clouds would move in from the east. He decided to take the procession around the Hagia Sophia and sing the hymn there again. Hopefully, they would pick up more people and be able to waste a little more time. When the hymn was finished they began to march towards the Hagia Eirene, then through the Acropolis and past the Column of the Goths. He looked at the eighteen-and-a-half-meter marble column which was centuries old and commemorated a victory over the Goths by the Romans, and thought it was quite fitting that they would soon be celebrating another great victory.

The wind picked up even more. The sacred vestment began to flutter and became harder to hold in his fingers. His arms ached from carrying the garment for several hours now, but he only needed to do so for a while longer. As they passed the church dedicated to St. Barbara he ordered the Gate of St. Barbara opened. As he exited the gate, the soldiers, as previously instructed, sounded the alarm by blowing massive horns. Photios had picked his spot well. Very few people would actually be able to see what was going on other

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than the clergy that was directly behind him and the soldiers loyal to Bardas that manned the battlements atop the walls on this day.

Everyone knew that when the horns sounded that meant they were under attack. In a show of incredible bravery Photios approached the sea and dipped the Holy Vestment into the water. Many people ran in the opposite direction, and others tried to get to the gate to see what was going on. Rumors began to spread down the line of the procession that the barbarian fleet was attacking the walls and gates of the city. To the sheer joy of Photios it began to rain heavily. This truly is a miracle, thought Photios as he smiled to himself.

Though almost no one could see what was happening, everyone heard the rag tag ships crash into the walls just outside the city. Through the din of the breaking timber, a loud burst of thunder roared in the sky. Photios screamed with joy as the rain splattered on his face, "It's a miracle, a miracle! The Virgin has heeded our call and come to save us again." The hand-picked men from Photios' fake fleet had jumped from their vessels before they crashed into the rocks at the foot of the walls, and a smaller vessel rowed about fishing them out of the water. They then rowed stealthily at the base of the wall all the way to the Kontoskalion Harbor where they disappeared into the crowds.

More people rushed out through the gate to try to get a glimpse of the miracle as the story began to be repeated down the line of worshippers. Everyone could be heard shouting for joy. "It's a miracle!" "The Virgin Mother has saved us again!" There was not much room past the gate, but those that were able to squeeze through and catch a glimpse of what transpired were able to see the wreckage of many boats in the water

blazing from the Greek fire that was directed at them from the battlements. They also were able to see several boats through the flames and smoke, especially the one with the dreaded wolf's prow and sail, as the Varangians fled for their lives.

The smell of naphta filled the air, and rumors spread throughout the city. Everyone prayed, sang and danced with joy that the Blessed Virgin had once again saved them from invading barbarians by conjuring up a storm that blew the invaders within range of their Greek Fire.

Photios could not have wished for a better outcome. He entrusted an archdeacon to return the Holy Vestment to its resting place and made his way back to the Great Palace. He found Ooryphas in his chambers. "I trust you have heard what has transpired."

"Yes." The admiral scowled. "I heard you put on a great show."

"Don't be so glum." The Patriarch smiled. "Just make sure you put on a good show for the Emperor when he returns and I will not mention how you froze in front of the barbarians. If you decide to tell him your own story, I will make sure you are excommunicated and exiled to the worst hell you could imagine. Look at it this way, you presided over the city when the barbarians were defeated. I am sure the Emperor will give you a very prestigious command when he returns."

# THE ROAD TO RUS'

## Spring 861

Riders had informed everyone of the fleet's arrival in Kyiv the day before, so they had had plenty of time to prepare for its return. Vratymyr waited at the harbor with anticipation, like a little child waiting for the first snowfall. The winter had seemed to drag on. Most of the building had ceased because of heavy snowfalls which kept most of the Kyivans indoors, doing their best to try and stay warm. It was the fourth day of Berezozl' or Harpa as Askoldir and the Norse called it. The snows had mostly melted and only the remnants of the largest drifts stubbornly refused to retreat into the ground and give way to the green grasses.

There still was a chill to the air, and Vratymyr felt alive. From the looks of it, the expedition had been a success. The riders had informed them that almost all of the ships that set out were returning, and they appeared to be full.

As the sun rose to its apex, the first ship came into view. The mast was lowered as they were rowing upstream with no wind, but soon it was easy to make out the wolf's head carved on the prow of Askoldir's ship. After it, more and more ships appeared seemingly all rowing in unison, their oars dipping into the mighty Dniipro, forcing their way forward against the strong spring current.

The crowds roared their approval, and children threw wreaths and flowers into the river. One by one, the ships began to arrive. The first few were tied to the dock, and the rest were pulled up onto the riverbank, the dock nowhere near large enough to fit so many ships. Vratymyr could see the men straining to pull the

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heavily-laden ships onto the shore. Women and children rushed to greet their husbands and fathers and there were many tears, much laughter and a lot of rejoicing.

Vratymyr made his way to the lead boat and saw Askoldir barking orders, but there was no sign of Yaropolk. He started to trot and then broke into a run. He panted as he made it to the Khagan. "Yaro? Where? Is he, is he...?"

"Calm down, my friend." Askoldir grasped him by the shoulder. "Walk with me." When they were a distance away from all the noise and merriment on the shore, Askoldir explained Yaropolk's absence. "He decided to stay behind."

"What do you mean stay behind?" The Kniaz' did not understand. "Why?"

"We found out who was responsible for the death of his son and the opportunity to fulfill his oath did not present itself. Our friend decided to stay behind and help someone who has the same goal as he." Askoldir pulled Yaropolk's domovoi from a pouch. "He asked you to give this to Plaksa and to tell her he will not be returning. He asked that you tell her that he avenged the death of their son. It may be wise to tell her he fell while avenging him or she may decide to sail after him and drag him back by the ears."

The Polian laughed. "Yes, I could see her doing that. And him complaining the entire way back." He became a little somber. "I had a feeling I would not see him again, though knowing he is alive and still trying to fulfill his oath is comforting nonetheless."

"Join me for a drink." Askoldir placed his arm around his shoulder. "I will tell you all about the great adventure you sent us on."

They reached Zamkova Hora and sat in front of a fire until the early morning as Askoldir recounted the

entire year's tale. Vratymyr listened in amazement and when the Norseman finished, he smiled. "I cannot believe everything worked out so well. Our people will live well, and we have enough loot to continue to build our great city. This great victory will no doubt bring more of the tribes under our banner too. I see great things in our future."

"As do I, my friend." Askoldir smiled. "And none of this could have been done without your vision and your belief in your people."

"Oh." Vratymyr remembered some news. "I thought you would like to know that your uncles Bjorn and Hasting live. Khud'ko was here last week after returning from the land of the Lombards. He heard that they fled to the west from a much larger fleet and then were accosted by another large fleet of Saracens. They fought valiantly but were defeated. Only twenty ships managed to escape. He is not sure where they escaped too though."

Vratymyr got up and grabbed another jug of mead, and they celebrated until they could celebrate no more.



The Emperor and the Roman army arrived a day after the miracle and the routing of the barbarians. The city was still celebrating and celebrated even more when they saw that the Emperor had returned.

Ooryphas recounted the events as Photios sat nearby hoping the temporary protector of the Empire stuck to the story of the miracle and omitted his failure at the negotiations as they had agreed. The Emperor was glad that the people were happy and that the miracle overshadowed any defeat he may have suffered at the hands of Amr.

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The delegates held their council in Nicea and on the twentieth day of Maius concluded with seventeen important canons of the faith. More importantly for Photios, after the miracle and his participation in it, very few questions were asked about the issue of Ignatios and his deposition. The delegates left for Rome satisfied, though Photios was convinced that this was not the end of the matter. At least it would not be a thorn in his side in the near future. Photios was, however, saddened to hear of the burning of the library at Alexandria. This was a tremendous and irreplaceable loss. He still had his vast library, and he took some comfort in that.



## 879

Vratymyr was tired. His old bones felt as if they were twisted. His joints burned when he bent them, and it was painful to move. Still, he enjoyed walking. He would walk until he could walk no more. He had witnessed much in his sixty years. It was hard to believe that nineteen years had passed since the expedition to Tsargrad. Much had happened since then.

In the year eight hundred and sixty-three, Amr went on the offensive. His Saracen army caused much destruction on the southern coast of the Euxine. They marched to Amisus, which they sacked. The Emperor Michael never fully regained his faith in Bardas. Basil now had his ear fully, and he sent the Caesar's brother, Petronas, to deal with the Emir instead. Petronas and a large Roman army intercepted the Arabs just west of the River Halys near the city of Poson. On the third day of September, they surrounded the forces of Amr and completely destroyed them. The Emir himself was killed in the battle, which brought much relief to the eastern flank of the Empire. Petronas' victory caused the Emperor to have even less faith in his Caesar, and he rarely came to him for any sort of counsel.

Bardas, however, was still the heir to the throne. The Emperor and his wife Eudokia Dekapolitissa were childless, and Bardas was still Caesar. Everything changed when Michael's mistress bore him a child. After the barbarians were chased from the Empire by the Holy Virgin's miracle, relations with the Slavs and the Varangians normalized. Trade was restored, and many of the former invaders visited on diplomatic and mercantile missions. It was on one such mission that a

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Varangian by the name of Inger came to the imperial court and was hired as a guardsman.

The Varangians were fierce warriors and the Romans had begun to see the usefulness of employing them to help defend the Empire. The Emperor soon took a fancy to Inger's daughter Eudokia Ingerina, and she became his mistress. Though he loved her more than he loved his barren wife, he did not want to risk a scandal by marrying her and discarding his wife before God. When Michael learned that Inger had decided to go back North when his commission was over and take his daughter with him, he devised a plan to keep her close. He ordered Basil to divorce his wife Maria and marry Ingerina so that she would not leave with her father.

In return, the Emperor gave Basil his wife's sister, Thekla, who was brought from the monastery she was in to keep him satisfied. Basil continued to get closer and closer to the Emperor and have more and more influence over him. No matter what Photios or Bardas tried, their influence with the Emperor waned and Basil the Macedonian's increased.

Basil continued to be extremely ambitious and slowly built a network of loyal conspirators. In order to get close to the Emperor, Photios and Bardas, Yaropolk had also taken a commission as an imperial guard. He was easily accepted on the recommendation of Gunnar and Stoyan, who were permanent envoys of the Rus' in Constantinople. The Slavs had begun to call themselves the Rus' from Kyiv which became a Slavic derivation of the name Rus that was used by the trading company further north. The Greeks referred to them as the Rhos so there was less confusion. In time, Yaropolk became part of Basil's network.

## MICHAEL HNATYSHYN

By the year eight hundred and sixty-six, Basil had so poisoned the Emperor's mind against Bardas that he convinced him the Caesar was out to assassinate him and usurp his throne. Michael readily believed this story and gave Basil his blessing to do away with Bardas. Yaropolk volunteered his services to do the deed and in the month of Aprilis, Yaropolk received some measure of revenge for his son Dushan by burying his axe in the skull of Bardas as he skulked in an alleyway about some secret business.

Since Michael was still married to Eudokia Dekapolitissa, he decided to legitimize his son Leo so that he could eventually succeed him as Emperor. In order to do this, he made Basil Co-Emperor. This proved to be Michael's biggest mistake.

The Co-Emperorship did not last long. A year and five months after killing Bardas, Yaropolk was able to witness the assassination of the Emperor Michael. After a night of celebration, when the Emperor had clearly had too much wine, his guards were conveniently given the night off and the locks to the Emperor's chambers were left open. That night Basil's group of conspirators entered the room and acting on the orders of Basil, one of his men from Chaldia named John did the deed. As John raised his sword to slay the Emperor, Michael rose from his bed to either relieve himself or to retch, and was able to raise his hands above his head in defense. The sword came down, severing both his hands. As the blood spurted uncontrollably from the severed appendages, John, instead of swinging again thrust his sword into the Emperor's chest, and Michael slumped lifelessly to the floor. That makes two dead and one to go, Yaropolk thought to himself, watching the grizzly scene from the shadows.

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After Michael's death, Basil became the Emperor. Amazingly, the vision of the monk all those years ago came to pass. At the time, Basil had thought nothing of it. He remembered thinking what a silly old man the monk was who called out his name as he lay half dead on the steps of the monastery. Maybe I was chosen by God, the Macedonian mused.

Constantine and Methodius had been very busy as well. The Emperor Michael the Third had once told Constantine that long ago his grandfather Michael the Second, along with his father Theophilus, had tried to bring literacy to the Slavs so they could read the scriptures. They had tried to compose a Slavic alphabet, seeing that the Slavs only used basic runes. Michael had told Constantine that this was a project worth pursuing and asked him to take the lead. Constantine informed the Emperor that he had already learned how to speak the language of the Slavs while on the Tauric peninsula and had begun preliminary formulations of a grammar based on Greek. He also told the Emperor that he had already thought of embarking on this project during his time in Bythinia, which had a large Slavic population. He had always wondered how much easier it would be for the Slavs to learn the word of God if they could read it for themselves instead of teaching each one of them Greek or having to send missions with clergy who learned the Slavic language.

An opportunity to move this project along arose when Photios received a request from Rastislav, the Prince of Moravia, to send missionaries in order to replace their Latin clergy with his Slavic subjects. The Prince wanted to distance himself from the Roman Church so he turned to the Patriarch in Constantinople for help in evangelizing the Slavs in Moravia.

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Constantine and Methodios spent over three years in Moravia. They brought with them the relics of St. Clement that they had found in Khersoneses, and a special church was built there to house the relics during their mission. While in Moravia, the brothers created a Glagolitic alphabet for the Slavic language, and it soon became used to teach all students in the Great Moravian Academy, which Constantine founded. At first, all religious documents were written using this alphabet, and soon it was used in all of the government documents and secular books as well.

Teaching the Slavs the word of God in their own language, however, did not sit well with everyone. Many of the local rulers and churches wanted to keep their influence over the people and to have the liturgy and religious teachings done exclusively in Latin. Slowly the Greek liturgical rite and the new Slavic language were phasing out the influence of the Latin masters.

These disputes became so contentious that Pope Nicholas invited Constantine and Methodius to Rome in the year eight hundred and sixty-seven. They arrived the following year, and a great debate took place. The fact that they arrived a year late was fortunate for them, as Pope Nicholas wanted to suppress the expansion of the Greek rite because of his disdain for Photios and his deposition of Ignatios. However, on the thirteenth of November, the Pope died and was replaced by Hadrian who was more sympathetic to the two brothers. The fact that they also brought with them the relics of St. Clement and returned them to Rome, which Photios had so cleverly asked them to retrieve all those years ago, did much to help their cause.

Constantine brilliantly defended the Greek rite and the right for all people to celebrate God in the language

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of their choosing. His detractors said that there are only three languages in which God should be praised, and that they are Hebrew, Greek and Latin. They lambasted him for coming up with a language that did not exist in the time of the apostles nor during the reign of any of the previous Popes of the church or its saints. Constantine disputed these assertions, arguing that many people used their own scripts to relay the word of God. Among these were the Sogdi, who also created their own alphabet close to Aramaic when Christianity began to expand in the years after the crucifixion of Jesus. The Copts in Egypt used their own language as well, as did many others.

Swayed by Constantine's arguments the new Pope decided to recognize the Slavic language as worthy for liturgical purposes. Even though many of the clergy in Rome opposed this measure, the Pope would hear none of it, and to cement his authority on the matter he himself ordained Methodius a priest along with several other monks in their party. Afterwards they all went to the Basilica of St. Peter and celebrated a mass there in the Slavic language. Masses were said in other prominent churches in the days that followed, including the Churches of St. Petronila, St. Andrew and St. Paul the Apostle.

All of the hard travel and missions had taken a heavy toll on the health of Constantine, and he felt his strength fading. He was sure that he was not going to live much longer and decided to receive the tonsure and become a monk. The troubles of the world were no longer his to bear. He would spend his last days as a servant only of God. He was no longer beholden to Constantinople or the Emperor. He was no longer a diplomat, a missionary, a professor or a philosopher. He

was also no longer Constantine, as he chose the name Cyril upon receiving his tonsure.

Feeling his life flowing from his body, he prayed to the heavens, "Hear my prayer oh Lord and tend to Thine faithful flock Thou has entrusted to me, Thine vile unworthy servant. Deliver it from the heathen wickedness and profanity and from all who would speak against Thee with blasphemous language." He then turned to his brother. "In this field I am now fallen, it is now up to you to take the plough and continue my path." Then the simple servant of God went to join Him on the fourteenth day of Februarius at the age of forty-two.

After Bardas and the Emperor had been killed, Basil wanted to strengthen his ties with Rome. Yaropolk had felt guilty about being part of the conspiracy to end the lives of the two men, and upon the urging of Ignatios decided to accept the religion of the Greeks and was baptized by the former Patriarch. Yaropolk, however, saw an opportunity to fulfill the third part of his oath by convincing Basil to depose Photios and to reinstate Ignatios as Patriarch. Ignatios was always favored by Rome over Photios so this was an easy decision for the usurper. In September of the year eight hundred and sixty-seven, Yaropolk had completed the oath he had uttered almost ten years earlier. He felt like a weight was lifted from his shoulders.

Strangely enough, Ignatios and Photios reconciled. Both had more in common than not and wanted to advance learning in the Empire. Seeing this, Yaropolk too, in the tradition of his new religion, forgave Photios for his sin against his son. Photios was made tutor to Basil's children. In gratitude, he used his old contacts and conspiratorial skills to forge documents on the lineage of Basil's family which stated the Emperor's

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parents were descendants of the Arsacid Dynasty of Armenia. He had these conveniently placed in the library, where they were later found by researchers.

Askoldir's father Hvitserk was killed by the Khazars while raiding in the southeast. He was captured, and they offered to ransom him, but he said he would rather be burned alive among his dead bretheren. His wish was granted. Askoldir's grandfather Ragnarr was also captured, by his enemy the King of Northumbria Aella, and thrown into a pit of snakes where he perished.

Over the years, Riurik had grown jealous of Askoldir. The head of the Rus Trading Company had completed his new keep at Holmgardr, but he had his sights on much more. Kyiv was becoming large and powerful, and he wanted it. He summoned Askoldir to Holmgardr, and even though Askoldir knew of Riurik's growing ambitions, he decided to go and see if he could talk some sense into him so that they could coexist peacefully.

Riurik ordered Askoldir to step down and relinquish Kyiv and the united Slavic tribes who had begun to call themselves the Rus' to his authority. Askoldir refused, and Riurik began to raise an army and allies against Kyiv. Before he could gather his strength, however, Askoldir decided to lead his men in a preemptive attack on Riurik and burned Riurikove Gorodishche and Aldieggia to the ground.

Ten years later Riurik seemed to have given up his ambitions and spent his time rebuilding the two towns. He had a son and named him Ingvar, or as the Slavs called him, Igor. As Riurik's strength faded, he gave more and more responsibility to his trusted henchman and brother-in-law Helgi. On his deathbed, he asked Helgi to make sure his son would become ruler of the Rus'. In the spring Riurik died. Helgi sent word to



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Askoldir that Riurik had passed and that he was now Khagan of the Rus in the North. He wished to meet with him to settle their differences. Askoldir had agreed.

"Come on, old man." Askoldir helped the old, ailing Vratymyr up the hill. They had agreed to meet Helgi by the Ungrian hill. Both men had said they would be alone. Askoldir figured Helgi would not mind if Vratymyr joined him. He was respected by everyone and was revered for his contributions to the expedition against the Greeks. He also no longer posed any physical threat to anyone.

"I am going as best I can, Khagan," Vratymyr panted. "These old bones ache with every step these days."

"You do not fool me, Kniaz'," Askoldir chided. "You are just looking for sympathy."

"Bah." Vratymyr was cranky and did not take to joking as quickly as he used to. He also missed the friendly banter he and Yaropolk used to have. Askoldir was a friend, but he was also his Khagan. They were not equals as he and Yaropolk had been. The morning dew soaked their leather boots, and he was wondering how in the name of Perun he was going to get them off his feet when they returned to the city.

As they made their way to the base of the Ungrian hill, they saw Helgi was seated on a tree stump waiting.

"Greetings, Oleg." Askoldir decided to call him by his Slavic name. "I hope you have not been waiting too long."

"No, Hoskuldr," he replied. "I arrived with my men a few hours ago. They wait for my return by the river."

"Very well." The Rus' Khagan helped Vratymyr sit. "I hope you do not mind that I brought Vratymyr. I enjoy his company."

"No, not at all." Helgi smiled. "It will be a difficult trek back for the old man though."

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"I'll manage, don't you worry about me," Vratymyr said in as commanding a voice as he could muster. He was insulted.

"Let us get down to business then." Helgi stood and started pacing. "As I told you through my messenger, Roerik has died. He left behind a son Ingvar, who is still just a baby, and asked that I settle this dispute so that when he grows up he does not have to worry about fighting with the Khagan of Kyiv. I told him I would do everything in my power to make it so."

"I too wish for this to happen," Askoldir stated honestly. "I never wanted to fight with Riurik. It was he that began to gather forces to move against Kyiv."

Helgi started to walk away from the two men. "You seem to have misunderstood my intentions. When I said I meant to ensure that Ingvar never has to fight the Khagan in Kyiv I did not mean that I wanted to make peace with you." Helgi let loose a loud whistle and dozens of arrows flew through the sky from several directions.

Before Askoldir could pull his sword from his scabbard, three arrows struck him. One bit into his thigh, a second his shoulder and a third ripped into his stomach. Vratymyr did not fare any better. The old man fell prone and Askoldir slumped to his knees.

Helgi kept walking. "Kyiv will be ours," was all he said as he walked away.

Askoldir crawled on his hands and knees to Vratymyr's side. The venerable warrior was barely breathing. He coughed and blood trickled past his lips down his chin. "Stay still, let me go get help." Askoldir tried to stand and fell.

Vratymyr coughed up some more blood. "I believe both of us are beyond help," he managed to say, growing weaker.

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"You may be right as always." The Khagan felt very lightheaded. He was losing a lot of blood. "Look at us two great warriors, a Khagan and a Kniaz' dying in a field alone."

"We are not alone. We are together, just as we were when we gave birth to the idea that the Slavs could bring the Greek Empire to its knees. We may die here but Kyiv shall live."

Askoldir managed to slide his blade out. Putting aside the pain, he grabbed the hilt with two hands and thrust the sword into the ground at the foot of the Ungrian hill. "Kyiv shall live!"

He rolled onto his back exhausted, feeling the life leaving his body. Both men lay on the ground, their blood mixing with the morning dew as it flowed out of their wounds and onto the wet earth.

Vratymyr looked up at the sky. "I shall see you in Valhalla, my friend."

Askoldir too looked at the sky. "I shall be honored to meet Svaroh with you."

As they expired, a solitary black raven swooped down and perched on the pommel of Askoldir's sword. It let out a loud scream and flew up towards the heavens.

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## APPENDIX

Names, places, terms and foreign language words:

- Abbasids – Islamic Caliphate
- Abu'l-Aghlab al-Abbas ibn al-Faldi – Muslim governor in Sicily
- Acathistus – feast in honouring the Virgin Mary's
- Aella – King of Northumbria; killed Ragnarr Lodbrok
- Aghlabids – Muslim dynasty
- Agnar – brother of Eirkr, son of Ragnarr and Thora Town-Hart
- al-Mamun – Abbasid caliph
- al-Mu'tasim – Abbasid caliph
- Al-Mutawakkil – Muslim commander at Lulon
- Algeciras – port city on the southern Iberian Peninsula
- Aldeigja – Norse name for Ladoga aka Staraya Ladoga
- Alexandria – Egyptian city, site of the Great Library
- Alexandron – tree worshipped by pagans in Phullae
- Amisus – Byzantine city on the southern coast of the Euxine
- Amr of Melitene – last Arab Emir of Melitene (Malatya)
- Ankyra – city in Byzantine Empire, now Ankara
- Antigoni- one of the Isles of the Princes
- Aramaic – Semitic language
- Arsacid Dynasty – ruler of Armenia from 54 to 428 AD
- Arsamosata – city near the Euphrates
- Askoldir – First Khagan/Kniaz' of Kyivan Rus', aka Askold and Dir
- Aslaug – daughter of Sigurdr and Brynhildr
- Athanasios – Emperor Michael I name after taking the tonsure
- Aurr – liquid memories from the Well of Memory
- Banda – a Byzantine unit of around two hundred soldiers
- Bardas – Caesar of Eastern Roman Empire, brother of Theodora
- Basil I – Byzantine Emperor 867-886
- Beg – Khazar warlord
- Beloozero – easternmost town in Rus in the mid 9<sup>th</sup> century
- Bithynia – part of the Opsikian theme in Byzantine Empire
- Bithynian Olympus – highest mountain in Greece
- Bjorn – son of Ragnarr Lodbrok
- Blachernae Palace – a palace in the north eastern part of Constantinople
- Boghatur – one of Itakh's guards

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Bohuslav – Kniaz' of the Derevlans, fictional character  
Bolghars – a tribe on the northern Volga region  
Bosporus – waterway, entrance to the Euxine from the Propontis  
Boyar – a member of of Slavic aristocracy  
Brachislav – Kniaz' of the Krivichs, fictional character  
Bravlin – a Slavic Kniaz' from the Taurican Peninsula  
Bronislav – Vratymyr's grandfather, fictional character  
Brynhildr – shieldmaiden and valkyrie  
Bugha – Turkic general who served the Abbasids  
Byrnie – a long chainmail tunic  
Caliph – ruler of a Caliphate  
Caliphate – form of Islamic government  
Chagatai – extinct Turkic language  
Chariouspolis – city in the Macedonian theme  
Cheslav – oldest son of Viatko, fictional character  
Chorpan – one of Itakh's guards  
Cilicia – Byzantine theme  
Constantine Kontomytes – Bardas' father-in-law; a strategos  
Constantinople – capital of the Byzantine Empire  
Copts – North African Christian group  
Cyril/Constantine – inventor of Glagolitic/Cyrillic alphabet  
Dalmatic – a wide-sleeved, long, loose vestment open at the sides  
Dazhbog – Slavic god of well-being and fortune  
Dekarchia – Byzantine military unit  
Derevlans – a Slavic tribe North East of Kyiv  
Diodoros – Byzantine soldier, fictional character  
Diomedes the Martyr – beheaded by order of Diocletian at Nicea  
Dnipro – river in Rus', now Ukraine that flows into the Black Sea  
Domovyi – Slavic pagan idol, protects one's home  
Don – river, tributary of the Dnipro  
Drebend – city on the Caspian Sea, gateway to the Silk Road  
Dregovichi – a Slavic tribe near the Pripyat River  
Droungos – part of Roman army, made up of two to five banda  
Droungarion – commander of a droungos  
Druzhina – a retinue in the service of a Kniaz'  
Druzhinnyky – members of a druzhina, a Slavic form of knight  
Dushan – son of Yaropolk, fictional character  
Dvina – a river currently in Belorus  
Eirkr – brother of Agnar; son of Ragnarr and Thora Town-Hart  
Elattoteroi – less experienced fighters in a tourma  
Emir – title of a Muslim ruler  
Enna – city in the center of Sicily was a fortress in antiquity

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Eudokia Dekapolitissa – wife of Emperor Michael III  
Euxine – old name of the Black Sea  
Eysteinn – ruled Sweden for a time  
Fastgir – one of Askoldir's thegns, fictional character  
Feel – Arabic for elephant  
Finnmark – territory in the extreme north west of Norway  
Franks – Germanic tribes in the Lower and Middle Rhine region  
Freyr – Norse god of virility and prosperity  
Friedlief – son of Lagertha  
Fro – Sveald King  
Gambeson – a padded defensive jacket  
Gardariki – Scandinavians name for the lands of the Rus,  
Glagolitic – original alphabet used by Slavs devised by Constantine  
Gregory – bishop in Khersoneses, fictional character  
Goi – second month of the year in old Norse  
Golden Horn – inlet of the Bosphorus north of Constantinople  
Gor – son of Thorri, Nor's brother  
Gorodishche – main seat of Riurik (Roerik) also called Riurikove  
Gorodishche  
Gunnar – Viking Emissary, fictional character  
Hagia Sophia – the Saint Sophia in Constantinople  
Halki – one of the Isles of the Princes  
Halys – river near the Byzantine city of Poson  
Hasting – son of Ragnarr Lodbrock and Aslaug  
Helgi – also known as Oleg; a thegn of Riurik; regent for his son  
Igor  
Herrauor – King of Gottaland  
Hippodrome – huge arena where chariot races were held  
Hler the Old – one of the sons of the mythical King Fornjot  
Holmgardr – Scandanavian name for Novgorod, founded by Riurik  
Homiy – capital of the Radimich tribe  
Hoskuldr – Scandanavian name of Askoldir aka Askold and Dir  
Hrolfr – legendary Danish King  
Hvitserk – father of Hoskuldr/Askoldir  
Ignatios – Patriarch of Constantinople 847-858 and 867-877  
Igor – son of Riurik  
Inger – Varangian; father of Eudokia Ingerina Michael III's mistress  
Ingvild – Viking master ship builder, fictional character  
Irene – Byzantine Empress 752-803, wife of Emperor Leo IV  
Isles of the Princes – an archipelago in the Sea of Marmara  
Itakh – Khazar customs officer, fictional character  
Itil – Khazar capital also know as Atil

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Ivar – son of Ragnarr Lodbrok and Aslaug  
Jarl – a Norse or Danish chief  
John VII Grammatikos – Patriarch of Constantinople 837-843  
John of Chaldia – assassin of Emperor Michael III  
Justinian I – Byzantine Emperor 527-565  
Justinian II – Byzantine Emperor from 685-695  
Kathisma – imperial box at the Hippodrome  
Khagan – ruler of the Khazars; Rus leaders also called themselves Khagans  
Khaganate – form of Khazar government  
Khazars – Turkic people from steppes north of the Black Sea  
Khersones – Byzantine theme on the Crimean Peninsula  
Khersoneses – city in Kherson  
Khoriv – one of the original founders of Kyiv  
Khud'ko – Vratymyr's spymaster, fictional character  
Kjolen Mountains – mountain range in Scandanavia  
Kniaz' – leader of a Slavic tribe also later used as leader of Rus'  
Koloneia – port city on the southern coast of the Euxine  
Komes – commander of a banda  
Krivichs – a Slavic tribe from the area of the upper Dniro River  
Krum – King of Bulgaria around 800-814  
Kubrat – Itakh's slave, freed by Vratymyr; fictional character  
Kvas – Slavic drink made from fermented bread  
Kvenland – old name for an area in Scandanavia  
Kyi – one of the original founders of Kyiv according to legend  
Kyiv – main city in ancient Rus' and current capital of Ukraine  
Ladoga – Slavic name for Aldeigja aka Staraya Ladoga  
Lagertha – shieldmaiden and second wife of Ragnarr Lodbrok  
Lapps – a Scandanavian tribe  
Leo V – aka Leo the Armenian, Byzantine Emperor 813-820  
Lochagiai – Byzantine squad of soldiers consisting of sixteen men  
Lochagos – commander of a lochagiai  
Louis the German – Louis II; grandson of Charlemagne  
Lulon – fortress city in Byzantium  
Lybed' – one of the original founders of Kyiv according to legend  
sibling of Kyi, Shchek and Khoriv  
Magyar – a clan from the Ural mountains  
Malagina – Byzantine city  
Malatya – also known as Miletene, stronghold of Amr  
Maria – first wife of Basil the Macedonian  
Martin, Pope – Pope from 649-655 exiled to Kherson  
Mechyslav – Rus' blacksmith, fictional character



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Methodios – brother of Cyril  
Methodios I – Patriarch of Constantinople 843-847  
Michael I – Byzantine Emperor 811-813  
Michael II – Byzantine Emperor 820-829  
Michael III – Byzantine Emperor 842-867  
Miklagard – Viking name for Constantinople  
Mordvins – tribe from the middle Volga River area  
Myrusha – Vrsatymyr’s wife, fictional character  
Niandros – one of the Isles of the Princes  
Nicaea – Byzantine city where ecumenical councils took place  
Nicholas I – Pope 858-867, consolidated Papal authority  
Niketas – birth name of Patriarch Ignatios  
Nor – brother of Gor, son of Thorri  
Norns – protectors of Yggdrasil, the World Tree  
Nova Roma – what the Byzantines also called Constantinople  
Ooryphas – Byzantine admiral  
Opsikion – a Byzantine theme (province)  
Ouragos – part of the last line of a Byzantine military unit  
Ostromyr – a Polian boyar, fictional character  
Oxia – one of the Isles of the Princes  
Patriarch – head of Eastern Orthodox Church  
Patrikios – high honorary title in the Byzantine Empire (patrician)  
Pelouosion – ancient battle site in Egypt  
Perun – highest god of the Slavic pantheon  
Petronas – Bardas’ brother, Byzantine strategos (general)  
Petronas Kamateros – Byzantine engineer, helped build Sarkel  
Philus – Byzantine strategos, a fictional character  
Photios I – Patriarch of Constantinople, 858-867 and 877-886  
Phullae – old Khazar city on the Taurican Peninsula  
Pita – one of the Isles of the Princes  
Plaksa – wife of Yaropolk, fictional character  
Plati – one of the Isles of the Princes  
Podol – a commercial neighborhood in Kyiv  
Polians – Slavic tribe around the Kyiv area  
Polota – a tributary of the Dvina River  
Polotesk – Slavic town on the Polota and Dvina Rivers, aka Polotsk  
Porti – one of the Isles of the Princes  
Poson – Byzantine city on the Halys river  
Prinkipio – one of the Isles of the Princes  
Pripyat – a River currently near the Ukraine-Belorus border  
Priskus – Byzantine official held captive by Amr  
Prokitoterioi – seasoned fighters in a tourma

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Prokopia – wife of Emperor Michael I Rhangabe  
Propontis – the Sea of Marmara in classical antiquity  
Radimichs – Slavic tribe from the upper  
Radymyr – son of Brachislav, fictional character  
Ragnarr Lodbrok – Viking King  
Rastislav – Prince of Moravia  
Riurik – head of Rus Trading Company, Viking explorer and founder of the Riurikid dynasty, father of Igor  
Roerik – Scandinavian name for Riurik, Viking explorer and warrior  
Roggvarfelder cloak – a shaggy Viking cloak  
Rus – name of ancient traders from Scandanavia, also known as Ruotsi or Rhos – Greek name for the Rus  
Rus' – name of the united Slavic tribes with main seat in Kyiv  
Samarra – Abbasid capital founded by al-Mu'tasim in 836  
Samosata – city on the Eupharates  
Saracen – generic term for Muslims  
Sarkel – Khazar fortress built with Byzantine help  
Shchek – one of the original founders of Kyiv according to legend  
Sebasteia – holy city in Byzantine Empire where  
Sibilja – a holy cow worshipped by the Svealds  
Sigurdr – hero of Norse mythology  
Siverians – Slavic tribe North and North East of Kyiv  
Siwardr – Ragnarr Lodbrock's grandfather, King of Norway  
Skuld - one of the Norns, protectors of Yggdrasil the World Tree  
Slavs – indo-European ethno-linguistic group  
St. Clement – considered t First Apostalic Father of the Church  
St. Gregory of Nyssa – theologian in the 4<sup>th</sup> century  
Stoyan – Polian Emissary, fictional character  
Strategos – a Byzantine general  
Stribog – Slavic god of the winds, sky and air  
Svarog – Slavic god of fire and blacksmithing; father of Dazhbog  
Svealand – currently Sweden  
Sviatoslav - Vratymyr's father, fictional character  
Syracuse – city on the Isle of Sicily  
Tarasios – Patriarch of Constantinople 784-806  
Taurican Peninsula – what is now the Crimean Peninsula  
Taromina – city in Sicily  
Tarsus Mountains – mountain range in southern Byzantium  
Temyr – Khazar warlord, fictional character  
Terebinthos – one of the Isles of the Princes, where Photios exiled  
Ignatios – Patriarch of Constantinople 847-858 and 867-877  
Tetrachos – part of the last line of a Byzantine military unit

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Theme – Byzantine military and political administration  
Theodora – Byzantine Empress 842-855; Michael III's mother  
Theoktiste – mother of Bardas  
Theoktistos – father of Theophilos, Michael's regent 842-855  
Theophilos, Byzantine Emperor 829-842  
Thessaloniki – administrative in central Macedonia  
Thorunn – a Scandanavian warrior, fictional character  
Thegn – a Viking form of knight  
Thekla – sister of Eudokia Dekapolitissa, became Basil's mistress  
Theodorus Studita – Byzantine monk and abbot, anti Iconoclast  
Thor – Norse god of thunder and lightning  
Thora Town-Hart – third wife of Ragnarr Lodbrok  
Thrall – Scandanavian for slave  
Tourmarchai – military leaders in Byzantine themes  
Tsargrad – what the Rus' called Constantinople, aka Miklagard/Nova Roma  
Tudun – a Khazar governor  
Ubba – son of Ragnarr Lodbrok and Aslaug  
Ulfric – one of Askoldir's thegns, fictional character  
Uppland – province in Svealand (Sweden)  
Uppsala – main pagan center of Svealand or Sweden  
Urd – one of the Norns, protectors of Yggdrasil the World Tree  
Uthbert – possible blacksmith of famous swords in the 9<sup>th</sup> century  
Valhalla – hall ruled by Odin where Viking warriors go after death  
Varangian – Byzantine term for Viking  
Varyag – Slavic term for Viking  
Verdandi – one of the Norns, protectors of Yggdrasil  
Versinikia – where Byzantines led by Michael I lost a major battle  
Viatko – Kniaz' of the Radimich tribe  
Viking – Scandanavian explorers, travelers and warriors  
Volga – longest river in Europe, flows into the Caspian Sea  
Volkhov – river that flows out of Lake Ilmen into Lake Ladoga  
Volkovets – tributary of the Volkhov river  
Vratymyr – Polian Kniaz', fictional character  
Vseslav – blacksmith's apprentice, fictional character  
Woden – also known as Odin, prominent Norse and Germanic god  
Yaropolk – Siverian Kniaz', fictional character  
Yashm – Arabic for jade  
Yggdrasil – the World Tree in Scandanavian mythology  
Zacharias – Khazar Khagan around 860  
Zamkova Hora – Slavic tern for Castle Hill  
Zubr – Slavic for buffalo

# THE ROAD TO RUS'

In the 9th Century, the Byzantine Empire was on the rise. The Vikings were also well on their way to influencing most of the known world with their spirit of adventure and quest for glory. Slavic tribes led by the Polians and their leader Vratymyr with the aid of the Vikings and their representative Askoldir organize a brazen attack at the heart of New Rome – Constantinople. Their goal is not only revenge but the formation of a new empire. There are battles, political plots, sea voyages, treachery, bravery and death. This is a story of adventure. This is the only historical novel to date about this event. This is the story of the birth of Kyivan Rus'.

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