

FIRE WORSHIPERS

written by

Vladimír OLEJ

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dedicated to the Carpathian Mountains
which provided safety for peoples
who were able to tame them

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INTRODUCTION

I had several reasons for writing this book. One reason is related to my background of growing up in the heart of the beautiful Carpathian Mountains with fascinating history, involving not only Slavic people, but also other civilizations that lived here and flourished. It was out of my interest in history and love of several locations that played important roles in the past, that I've decided to promote them embodied in a fascinating tale of our first known ruler that we, unfortunately, know so little of.

Over critical times, tribes with similar cultural background used to choose a leader that would help them overcome an adverse situation and in this case they made a wise decision and chose a foreigner, a simple arms trader that rose to become an important player in Europe. My goal was to spread the story of emerging peoples that are to this day somehow overlooked by history and arts.

Even though information about Samo and early development of Slavic peoples are scarce, Samo's accomplishments, taking all the difficulties into account, can be perceived as admirable. Thanks to leaders like Samo, Slavic peoples rose to become an integral part of European space and historical events. Since information regarding Samo are limited with even fewer facts, I had to write the book from a different perspective and therefore the book is indeed fiction with elements of fantasy.

Curious readers will further research the topic and find out what was merely dreamed up, what most probably was possible and what could be possible. I'll be most pleased if this book motivates people to be more interested about this corner of the world and maybe see the beauty of it for themselves.

Title of the book is derived from an ancient connection between humans and fire. From early on it was considered as a gift from gods and its mysticity persisted within and not only Indo-European cultures. Its purpose is to insert the reader into a place and time of bygone ages, where humans were driven not only by reason and emotions, but also beliefs, myths and superstitions. And they couldn't imagine giving up on their gods.

To summarize it up, this book is about the early Slavic people and their paganism and mythology. It's about their achievements in a time when human life could end with just a snap of a finger and people waited for a great individual that would lead them to progress.

I hope you will enjoy it.

PROLOGUE

Due to the declining power of Rome and Constantinople, tribes all over Eurasia saw an opportunity in an expansion into richer European lands, which led into the Migration Period. Everyone wanted to grab a part of Europe's wealth.

Strong Hunnic tribal formations took over a significant part of Europe and spread destruction everywhere they stepped foot. After the death of Attila, the Empire was crushed to the ground by Germanic tribes, which opened the doors for something new to come.

A significant part in history was going to be played by the emerging Slavic people, in that time called Venedi, who survived all turmoils, waited for their chance, expanded into the mainland of central and south-eastern parts of Europe, while pushing Germanic and other tribes away and mixing themselves with the remnants of local natives.

They settled next to rivers, mountains, fertile lands and created several centers ruled by different tribes, which couldn't stay unnoticed from other prospering cultures in Europe. One of the most thriving tribes settled around the river Morava and it was going to dominate the others culturally, commercially and militarily for many years to come.

But a new threat appeared on the horizon. Nomadic Avars coming from Asia crossed the Carpathian Mountains, conquering nearby tribes, pillaging settlements and trade routes along the river Danube. Word of Avar cruelty spread quickly.

Subjugated Venedian tribes had to fight on the side of Avars literally in first rows, so that Avars wouldn't suffer many casualties during their conquests. Late at night Avar warriors lied down with Venedian women, which caused even more hatred towards the new tyrants.

Avars despised everything that was holy to the Venedian people. Gods were not pleased with the destruction of their temples and holy sites. They couldn't look away from this contempt anymore.

PERUN, also addressed by locals as PAROM, highest god of all gods, had to witness his temples to be burned to the ground and thus he was especially furious. He sent deadly thunderstorms towards lands settled by Avars, but this just multiplied their rage and hostilities.

PERUN found a chosen one, who was worthy of restoring respect for the gods and regaining independence for his people. The chosen one was an arms trader from the Frankish lands called Samo.

CHAPTER I - THE SWORD

Our story begins with Samo returning from Bavaria through the land of Carantania* with acquired arms aimed to fuel the proceeding revolt of Venedian people against Avar rule. His mission is to bring weapons and freshly trained units to the western shore of river Vah, where his fellow Venedian warriors established a temporary winter camp. But first he has to arm new recruits waiting at a fortified city on the river Diya.

He's accompanied by his brother in law Vladislav, a skilled archer and wise military strategist, ten swordsmen on horse-drawn carriages and another brother in law going with the name Drahomir, a dexterous swordsman riding in the back of the caravan.

Vladislav and Drahomir were put by their father, a Venedian chieftain, under Samo's patronage in order to teach them everything and make wise leaders out of them. They both went through an intensive military training going on for years and now they needed to learn to think first and make rational decisions that will be for the benefit of their people.

"Bavaria was exceptionally cold this time," noted Vladislav apparently still freezing from the harsh winter.

"After we deliver these weapons, we need to rest for few days. We fought for a long time, traded lots of gems for weapons and I miss my family" said Samo tiredly.

"I miss Drahoslava as well. I haven't had a good meal for a long time now," replied Vladislav talking about his sister cheerfully.

"Don't be so rude or I will make you eat only bread with water for a week. We should be grateful for what we have. Especially in these difficult times," replied Samo sharply, amazed by Vladislav's poverty of thoughts.

"Forgive me," responded Vladislav a bit ashamed. "What are your next plans in our struggle?" he continued with a question.

* Carantania – land stretching approximately over present Austria

“The key to our success is the city of Nitrava*, center of your tribe, which your family had to leave for Moravia** even before you were born. In order to capture it, we must first secure the hill Zobor, which is overlooking the city. Remember my words, whoever controls Zobor, controls Nitrava and its lands as well. And gods are my witness, we will succeed,” said Samo fully convinced.

“What will happen then?” asked Vladislav.

“Then we will liberate the plains of Pannonia*** where our people must live under Avar rule as well,” replied Samo and they continued their journey thinking of how to achieve their goals.

On their way towards the river Diya, while moving through an oak forest, their caravan got attacked by a group of Avar scouts armed with traditional swords and bows. There were twice as much Avars as there were Samo’s men.

Avars were people that came from distant places of Asia to find themselves a piece of Europe, from where they could loot other tribes and dominate them in all aspects. They had oval shaped faces, long black hair, beards and mustaches, always riding their horses growing up with a bow and sword in their hands.

“Take cover, Avars are attacking!” shouted Drahomir from the back of the caravan. “Form a circle and wait for them to get closer!” he continued and the swordsmen listened to his orders.

The outnumbered group was ready to fight till the bitter end. All the sudden a majestic eagle flew above their heads holding a silver sword in its claws and released it straight into Samo’s hands. “For PERUN and our people!” shouted Samo, he grasped the sword and swung it on an Avar swordsman running towards him. Their blades met and blinding lightnings bursted from the silver sword followed by deafening thunders.

Both the attackers and defenders were in shock due to this never before seen magic. Samo did not hesitate and swung his sword a second time. He hit the surprised Avar swordsman, but no blood was spilled. Instead the Avar got instantly petrified and the remaining attackers, not believing what happened, ran away in horror.

Drahomir and Vladislav inspected the petrified Avar in disbelief, while Samo was looking closely at the magical sword. “Who’s behind this miracle and why am I the one with the privilege to hold this blessed weaponry?” asked Samo confusedly.

* Nitrava – current city of Nitra

** Moravia - land stretching approximately around the river Morava

*** Pannonia - land stretching approximately between the Danube and Sava rivers

The mysterious eagle was watching the whole fight from a nearby oak tree branch. “Kneel before me!” shouted the eagle. “I am your supreme god, PERUN the thunderer, giver and taker of lives. As I overcame VELES, god of the underworld, you will take care of your arch enemy and oust Avars from your lands!” continued PERUN referring to a duel with his counterpart, the god of the underworld, livestock and wealth, VELES.

Samo’s group fell into their knees and lowered their sights. Their almighty god took the form of an eagle and helped them when they needed him the most.

“We the gods have chosen you Samo to lead the campaign against the unbelievers. Hold on to this powerful sword, which was crafted for you by SVAROG, creator of everything, and you will find answers to your questions on a mountain, which was once the center of a long forgotten magnificent culture.“

“Defeat the unbelievers! So I command and so it shall be done!” added the eagle and flew away into the depths of the oak forest.

The group stepped closer to Samo while Drahomir picked up his courage to speak: “Well, every great sword needs a name.” Drahomir tried to grab the sword to see for himself but it shocked him and he pulled his hand back. “Oh, that hurts so much,” he added.

“It looks like it was meant just for me,” said Samo.

“So then we should call it after you,” replied Vladislav. “What about The sword of Samo the Great?” he asked cheerfully.

“We’re not there yet,” replied Samo laughingly.

“What about Samo the Venedian? You know that we consider you ours,” said Drahomir.

“So be it. From now on, it will be called The Sword of Samo the Venedian!” replied Samo and pointed the sword towards the sky.

The group got on their horses and continued their journey towards the land of Moravia. After a while Samo asked Vladislav: “Why so thoughtful? What are you thinking of?”

“What did PERUN, the highest god of all gods, mean with the center of a long forgotten magnificent culture?” replied Vladislav with another question.

“Elders in Moravia use to tell the story of people that lived in these lands even before all the tribes that we know by name. It was a time when there were no steel swords or tools and people moved into uplands to seek protection of hills and mountains. In this period of time, good hunting grounds and fertile lands were not the most important benefit anymore. Only people who settled the highest could survive and a culture evolved around the mountain range with the name Tribech. This must be it! This must be the place our god intended us to go!” said Samo.

“Isn’t that mountain close to Nitrava?” asked Vladislav.

“It’s a pity that you were never able to see your homeland. Once I wanted to see the Tribech Mountain for myself, how it looked like, so I went to the top and I was amazed by its breathtaking view. But it wasn’t possible to see Nitrava from there, because the hills Zobor and Zubritsa blocked the view” replied Samo. “Now we must hurry to Moravia to get these weapons to new recruits. We will stay with Drahoslava for a short time and then we will escort the armed recruits to our winter camp near the river Vah,” he concluded.

After several hours of riding they finally arrived to the shores of river Diya and crossed its branches through a series of narrow fords and found themselves at the gates of a huge city called Diyagrad,* entrance to the fertile region of Moravia.

* Diyagrad - fictional name of the fortress Pohansko near Břeclav

CHAPTER II - MORAVIA

“Welcome home, honorable Samo!” shouted a guard overlooking the palisades. “Open the gates!” he continued.

The main square was filled with people, because news of their arrival spread quickly. People were cheering. Samo jumped off his horse and ran towards his house. Drahoslava was waiting in front of the door.

“Draha, I missed you so much,” whispered Samo gently while Drahoslava smiled. Then they both kissed. It was a while when they were the last time together. Samo was fighting with his armies in the Vah valley and during the siege of Preslav* for a long time and Drahoslava was waiting for him, taking care of their small children and even some city affairs.

“It’s been so long, my darling,” replied Drahoslava. “All of our girls are walking by now,” she explained with a glow in her eyes. They had three daughters altogether.

In the evening Samo noticed that Drahoslava is deep in her thoughts. “Draha, what’s on your mind?” he asked.

“Samko, you can have as many wives as you please. Why are you only with me? Am I really enough for you?” asked Drahoslava referring to the traditional Venedian polygamy.

“As you know, I’m different than all the other Venedian men. I could never be with another woman,” answered Samo. “I’m sorry that I wasn’t here for the start of the fasting season,” he continued.

“It was magical as usual,” said Drahoslava. “As you know, I like animal masks representing bulls, horses, bears, goats and so on,” she continued talking about a holiday where men dressed in costumes and masks performing a ritual aimed at protecting against negative forces and ensuring a fruitful year.

“And you don’t like the masks of ghost,” said Samo with a smile.

“Oh, you know me so well,” replied Drahoslava and smiled at Samo.

* Preslav - current city of Bratislava

After having a late dinner, Samo went to a meeting of the chieftains. He was made responsible for leading the rebellion some time ago, because the old Venedian chieftains were unable to unite themselves and fight the common enemy. Someone from the outside had to come and help them and the one was Samo.

“Now we have just one key goal, liberation of the ancient town of Nitrava,” said Samo, while discussing his next steps with the summoned Venedian chieftains that formed a rebellion council. “Vishegrad on Dunay* and Pannonia will have to wait,” he added.

Venedian people used to name their most important fortresses, lying on edges of a tribe’s territory, Vishegrad. These were well protected key fortresses on higher ground that had to be protected at all cost.

By the time they were finished a guard came to inform him that a messenger from the Kingdom of the Franks has arrived. Samo was surprised. He excused himself from the council and went outside to the main square which was surrounded by burning embers.

Indeed a Frankish messenger was standing in the middle of the main square, holding his horse’s reins in one hand and a written message in the other. “I’m looking for the one who goes with the name Samo, leader of the rebellion against Avars,” said the messenger sharply.

“I’m the one you’re looking for. Whose message are you bringing me?” asked Samo.

“Honorable Samo, I have a message for you from the great King of the Franks, Clothar the second, son of Chilperic,” continued the messenger more decently and passed him the written message.

A fair-haired young woman approached the messenger holding a basket with bread and Samo spoke: “Please have some bread with salt.”

“Strange traditions you have here,” murmured the messenger. “Thank you for your kindness,” he replied shortly after.

Samo looked at him reproachfully and then he broke the seal and started reading the message in the light of burning fires.

* Dunay - Venedian name for the river Danube

“So the King of the Franks wants to support us in our effort against Avars and he’s willing to donate ten carriages full of Frankish swords and pikes of the finest quality and one hundred elite swordsmen from his royal guard. That’s interesting,” Samo mumbled and continued with a question: “Why would he do that?”

“Honorable Samo, the soldiers are protecting the carriages outside the fortress. They will serve you well, fulfill all your orders and when their time comes they will die for you. What is your response towards our king?” asked the messenger.

“Share with the great king Clothar my words of gratitude. I will never forget his generosity!” replied Samo.

The messenger bowed his head, jumped on his horse and galloped away towards the main gate.

“Bring me Drahomir and Vladislav! I need to speak with them right away.” Samo ordered a nearby servant.

“You called us, Samo?” asked Drahomir barely awake, disturbed from his nap. Vladislav was standing right next to him holding a mug of tasty bright mead.

“King Clothar is seeking tighter friendship between our lands. He sent us piles of high quality swords and a hundred specially trained swordsmen to help us in our efforts. Drahomir, you will go outside the gates and bring the weapons into the fortress. Invite their commander into my house. I need to talk to him. His men must stay outside the fortress for now. We have to be cautious, it can be a trap, hence disarm him first. And you, Vladislav, go to the council meeting and tell them, that the meeting is suspended until I deal with these issues,” Samo gave out orders and went to his house.

“When will we have finally some time to rest?” asked Vladislav.

“You’ll rest when you’re dead!” replied his older brother, Drahomir, with a smile and started walking towards the gates.

He was expecting to see a bunch of lounging soldiers, tired from all the marching, but instead they were standing in perfect arrays waiting for orders.

“Well I’ll be damned,” thought Drahomir to himself. “Who’s your commander?” he asked the soldiers.

A giant soldier approached Drahomir and said: "I am Ragnahar the Fearless and these are my Alemannian* brothers. We are ready to serve your cause and die for Samo!"

"He must be by a head taller than me," thought Drahomir to himself.

Drahomir let Ragnahar inside the fortress while his soldiers were waiting in front of the main gates and he concluded: "Samo is waiting for you in his house." Drahomir was a bit nervous, because he did not trust Germanic people. His distrust was based on stories from the past when there were lots of tensions and problems between the two neighboring peoples.

"Leave your weapons with me," he ordered Ragnahar who gave him his huge two-handed hammer.

Samo stepped out of his house and said to Drahomir: "Thank you Drahomir, I'll take it from now on." And Samo let Ragnahar inside his house where Drahoslava served them a delicious pea soup.

"Thank you, it tastes like it was made by my mother," said Ragnahar.

"I'm glad to hear that," said Drahoslava.

"Why does Clothar want to support our cause?" asked Samo.

"I'm just a simple soldier and I don't see into politics," replied Ragnahar.

"Tell me what do you think," Samo made it more clear.

"Well, Avars can be easily bought for a military campaign by any side and even in times of peace they're a spiteful neighbor," replied Ragnahar.

"And no one wants someone like this as his neighbor," added Samo.

After they had a meal, Samo let Ragnahar's men inside the city and they all swore fealty to him and the Venedian cause. Nevertheless, Samo was still not convinced that it is safe to trust his new military unit. So he went to the shrine dedicated to PERUN, drew his sight towards the sky and asked the gods in his mind to send him a sign.

* Alemanni – Germanic people from the Upper Rhine

Ragnahar entered the shrine. “Honorable Samo, I am hungry for war. When will we join the battlefield so that we will be able to prove ourselves worthy?” asked Ragnahar.

Samo stepped away from PERUN’s idol and approached Ragnahar. “Winter is nearing its end. We will start an offensive after the Great Night*. But if you and your men want to join our frontline positions then I can arrange that.” explained Samo.

“Nothing would please me more than to soak my sword in our enemy’s blood,” said Ragnahar.

“You’ve got the right attitude,” replied Samo laughingly. “I will send a messenger with you that will hand over my orders to the commander stationed in the winter camp near the river Vah. You and your men will be allowed to perform marauding actions in enemy territory, but you will be prohibited to harm our Venedian people and settle inside the winter camp. You and your men will stay right next to it. The commander will specify a suitable place,” ordered Samo.

“As you wish. Thank you for this opportunity,” replied Ragnahar, bowed himself and left the shrine. Right after Samo prepared the note with orders, Ragnahar sat on his horse, prepared his men and they went east.

With the end of the fasting season, Great Night was coming. The whole city was preparing itself for the celebration. The tradition was to say goodbye to winter and welcome spring.

Vladislav and Drahomir were standing in the main square.

“This fasting season is killing me,” said Vladislav unhappily.

“You’re too picky for someone who ate what the forests provided for several months,” replied Drahomir with a smile.

The celebration was going to start. Young girls were in the forefront of the line of people and the first ones were holding a huge female figure dressed in a traditional local costume. It represented no one other than the goddess of winter and death, the beautiful and sometimes even ugly MORENA.

The goddess of death was feared by the people because sooner or later she would get each and everyone of them. But this was the time and place where people could avenge the harsh winter and be rude to their god under the cover of euphoria so that spring can replace winter. At least they thought they could.

* Great Night - celebration of the spring equinox

People went on towards the river Diya while singing folk songs. Crows were watching them from the nearby trees. Samo was walking side by side with Drahoslava in the back of the line. Vladislav and Drahomir were as usual right behind the young girls.

“Well, beauty wherever you look,” said Drahomir holding a burning torch.

“I love being at home,” replied Vladislav and they both laughed.

People gathered around the edge of the river Diya, Drahomir stood in front of them and started to speak: “Oh, beautiful goddess MORENA, your winter was unusually harsh and even though we look forward to spring, we would like to say one thing to you. Your time has come to... die!” Drahomir started to laugh and people cheered.

Young girls undressed the female figure, Drahomir lit her on fire with its cleansing effect and then the figure was thrown into the river Diya. But someone else was witnessing the ceremony every year besides the participating people. MORENA raged in fury.

“Not only do they condemn me every year, they started mocking me?!” screamed the goddess. “I will teach them to make fun of me! Unfortunately, this boy’s time hasn’t come yet. I cannot just take his soul, but there are always other ways,” she added and went to the depths of the underworld to see its keeper, the god with a bull’s head, VELES.

“Almighty VELES, lord of these vast pastures, those ungrateful people ridiculed me...” began the goddess but VELES interrupted her.

“And you would like to take revenge on that young boy who the mortals call Drahomir? My dearest sister, I cannot deny you your wish. So it shall be done!” said the god. MORENA thanked him and left delighted while awaiting satisfaction.

VELES went down to his stables and opened the gate to a wide cell.

“Come to me my dearest,” said VELES and a white wolf walked up to him. “I’ve got some work for you,” he added and released the best to fulfill its mission.

Great Night came and with it also the tradition of pouring water on all the women together with whipping them with knitted willow twigs so that they stay healthy and pretty all year long.

“Beautiful tradition! And they even have to be thankful for this,” said Vladislav and started to laugh.

“Why?!” a girl was screaming while trying to run away from three boys that were chasing her with buckets full of water. Vladislav and Drahomir were watching the spectacle. As soon as the girl got hers, she had to thank the boys that splashed her with water and give them nicely painted eggs.

“Yeah, I love it too,” replied Drahomir with a smile. “Now that we threw all the young girls into the Diya river and poured water on all the remaining women, we should go to one of the northern cities and try our luck there as well,” he continued. They jumped on their horses and left Diyagrad.

Vladislav and Drahomir were successful. They got something to eat and drink and met beautiful women. It was getting dark so on their way back to Diyagrad they went through a wide oak forest and suddenly they heard a noise. Drahomir saw two red eyes in the distance. It was a white wolf with shining red eyes who stared at them without moving.

“Look at it,” said Drahomir. “Don’t make any sudden movements,” he added.

Then the wolf started running and he went straight for Drahomir. Drahomir’s and Vladislav’s horses were stunned. Drahomir had only time to take his sword out, the wolf jumped high into the air and bit his hand.

The wolf let go right away, bounced on the horse’s back even higher into the air and as he was falling down to the ground a hole opened itself in the ground and the wolf disappeared without a trace.

“That beast, it was so quick!” shouted Vladislav. “Did it harm you?” he asked.

“The wound is tremendously deep, but I’m not bleeding,” and as Drahomir finished saying it, the bite prints disappeared. “It’s a miracle!” shouted Drahomir.

As Vladislav and Drahomir were coming back home, the army was preparing for departure. Thousands of soldiers with spears, swords, shields and bows were marching out of the main gate precisely as the two arrived.

“You’re late as usual!” said Samo accusingly. “As a reward, you will ride in the back of the convoy!” he ordered.

“Step out with your right foot!” shouted Drahoslava.

“Thank you, Draha. I’ll be back in no time!” replied Samo and went away.

The convoy was moving slowly, because most of the soldiers were footmen and they also transported rations, spare weapons and other useful tools and materials. After one day of marching, the convoy came to the fortress Branch where the army wanted to stay the night.

Branch was a small fortress used by Venedians to protect one of the routes between Moravia and Nitrava. Lying at the edge of the Carpathian Mountains, you could get a taste of a mountainous area.

Right after sunset the moon came up in the sky. Unluckily it was a full moon. Drahomir started to feel uncomfortable, itching with increasing intensity.

"I'll have to go for a walk." said Drahomir and walked away into the forest. There his body started to grow. Enormous hairs bursted out of his skin and large fangs grew out of his canine teeth.

He became a creature, severely bloodthirsty creature that was willing to slaughter everything that would stand in its way. Luckily for the people in the Branch fortress, the beast found a deer first, attacked it and ate its raw flesh within moments. Then it made a move towards the fortress, because it has overheard noises coming from that direction.

PERUN couldn't stand the sight, so he summoned a storm. Clouds covered the full moon and the beast fell to its knees squealing, so that the whole nearby fortress froze in fear. Samo ran up to the creature and addressed it as: "Drahomir!"

This caused Drahomir to change back into a human form. Soldiers were sent to the area in question and they brought a passed out Drahomir with remnants of his ruptured clothing. Simple clouds changed into a thunderstorm.

PERUN was outrageously angry. MORENA went behind his back to harm people that protected the gods and VELES helped her. Even though he couldn't change the will of a god, he decided to help Drahomir by modifying his curse.

The thunderstorm intensified. PERUN was unleashing a lightning apocalypse onto VELES hiding underground and thus weakening him. Drahomir, who was carried away to the fortress, opened his eyes. They were glowing in green colour. People around him were astounded. He stood up.

"I can hear what they hear," said Drahomir quietly while looking around.

"I can see what they see," continued Drahomir drawing his eyes on Samo and he went silent for a while.

"Something isn't right. It's not an ordinary animal. It's him. Follow me!" called out Drahomir. He took his sword with him and ran out of the headquarters onto the main square of the fortress. Lightnings were smashing everywhere accompanied by heavy rain. Guards opened the main gate and Drahomir ran out of the fortress. Samo, Vladislav and few soldiers started to follow him. Others ran onto the fortress palisades to watch.

Drahomir came to a meadow and stopped in the middle of it. Samo and others quickly caught up with him, but they were waiting in safe distance for something to happen. A lightning struck few steps ahead of Drahomir and right after that a large black snake with red eyes came crawling out of the ground. Samo was running towards Drahomir, while others were shocked in horror.

The creature began to grin its fangs and jumped off the ground towards Drahomir, but Drahomir caught the snake with his right hand and instantly broke its spine. The creature fell apart into black dust. The thunderstorm has ceased, clouds disappeared into all directions and the sky was filled with stars.

Samo and the soldiers approached Drahomir, who turned himself towards the group and asked them: "How do you feel about having mushroom soup?"

"Mushroom soup? Are you kidding? What happened here?" asked Vladislav still in shock.

"Just something that had to be done," replied Drahomir. "VELES won't interfere with our efforts for a while. But I guess we cannot expect good harvest this year," he continued and a smile grew on his face.

When the group came back to the fortress, bunch of bears were waiting at the main gate. Cubs were sitting on their backs and holding big mushrooms in their arms. Guards at the gate, scared as usual, had drawn their bows ready to shoot.

Drahomir screamed out: "Don't shoot! They are our guests!"

Guards opened the gate, hiding behind its wings. Drahomir ordered: "Bring me four baskets filled with berries!" Then he approached one bear with a cub, took the mushrooms from the cub's hands, handed them to a nearby soldier and caressed the cub's furry head so that it joyfully purred.

Guards exchanged the berries for mushrooms and the group of bears took off with baskets in their mouths.

Early in the morning the whole fortress was up on its feet. The army prepared itself for the march towards the river Vah. After passing the last hill they came to the Vah valley and could see the winter camp in the distance, but it turned out the camp is still too far.

“Look, Avar horsemen!” noticed Vladislav.

"Prepare for battle!" shouted Samo. "At least I'll be able to really test out the sword," he said to Vladislav with a smile. Then he jumped off his horse and tried to get his soldiers to form a defensive line.

"Cover yourself with shields," ordered Samo. Avar horse archers started the attack by spraying arrows all over Samo's forces that were staying in defensive positions. Avars were using the ancient hit-and-run tactic, where they engaged the enemy by attacking him from the distance followed by a retreat. Their combination of mounted archers and horsemen was incredibly effective on flat land.

Avars were strongly connected to their horses, which provided them with food, materials and the ability to be superior as their opponents while fighting on plains. However, even though high mobility and shooting from a distance were significant advantages, because of this they had only light armor and were highly vulnerable against anti-horse archer tactics.

Vladislav stood up on a supply carriage and shot an arrow right in an Avar's bow which then flew away. Vladislav shouted out loud: "Archers, attack!" Archers who took cover behind shields held by pikemen started to strike the retreating Avar horse archers.

Attacking Avars realized that this tactic won't be of great use. Samo's army had the numbers, higher ground advantage and used combined arms of pikemen and archers. The Avar commander ordered a ground assault with horsemen and infantrymen. He was rushed into a bad decision by his own vision of fame.

The two sides clashed and Samo started to slay the Avars who one by one petrified. After a while the scene was filled with statues of soldiers who picked the wrong enemy to fight. The remaining Avars withdrew and Samo's soldiers cheered.

“The sword has amazing powers,” noticed Vladislav. “But it would be better if it would shoot flames though,” he continued laughingly.

“As people say, never inspect a donated horse's teeth,” replied Samo.

“What shall we do with these ones?” asked Vladislav and pointed towards the petrified Avars.

"Raise them along the road and leave them there for everyone to see!" ordered Samo.

Right after Samo said these words a group of soldiers was approaching the army. It was Ragnahar with his men.

"A bit too late," stated Samo.

Ragnahar jumped off his horse and kneeled before Samo.

"Forgive me my master. Avars besieged our camp for several days and we thought they were withdrawing. Allow me to escort you to the camp," replied Ragnahar.

CHAPTER III - MARHAT

Guards opened the winter camp's gate. This was not an ordinary camp, but more like a quickly erected fortress to defend positions gained during previous successful military operations. The river Vah was on its eastern edge and the supply route from Morava together with the gate was on the other side. Down south was a road to one of the most important cities of the united Venedian people called Preslav.

Preslav was situated on the river Danube and together with its surrounding fortresses, it defended an important crossroad between Moravia, Carantania, Pannonia and Nitrava. Samo's forces were able to capture it during the winter period.

The eastern edge of the Vah valley was dominated by the hill Marhat. Being used as a fortress in previous ages, there was no doubt about its importance as a guardian of the mountain passage between the Vah and Nitrava valleys. Avars occupied its long ridge and in order to be able to operate in the Nitrava region, one had to seize Marhat.

Samo and his army entered the camp. The camp's commander Slavomir was waiting for them in the main square. Slavomir was a well known planner of fortresses and fortifications in general. As a commander he specialized in military defense.

"Welcome, Samo. Long time no see," Samo was greeted by Slavomir.

"Slavo, how are you?" asked Samo.

"I'm all right. Mainly thanks to the help you sent us," replied Slavomir. "Back then we were under the attack by Avars. Five days they besieged us. Ragnahar and his soldiers were defending the most vulnerable southern wall. Where did you get these Germanic beasts?" he continued.

"Actually, they were a gift from the King of the Franks. But still, we should be really cautious in relation to them." replied Samo.

"I see... When would you like to start the attack?" asked Slavomir.

"We have no time to waste. We've got high quality weapons and the manpower to succeed. Prepare your men for the morning!" ordered Samo.

"As you wish," replied Slavomir as the horns at the main gate roared. "There must be a messenger incoming," he continued.

As the two rushed to the gates the messenger approached them and handed the message directly to Samo.

Samo started to read the message. "Preslav is under attack and is requesting support!" shouted out Samo. "If we lose Preslav, then we also lose these positions," continued Samo.

Losing Preslav would mean that Avars would get easy access to the supply chain of the Venedian army. Having enemies in the rear would cause problems, the campaign would be delayed and Preslav would have to be eventually recaptured.

"How many lives would it take?" asked Samo himself. Such developments would slow down the campaign and Venedians could face serious troubles.

"Should we support Preslav with all our strength?" asked Slavomir.

"No, we must capture Marhat right away or else we could lose our momentum, explained Samo. Prepare your troops, we will attack early in the morning as I ordered," he continued.

Samo went down to the barracks to have a word with Vladislav and Ragnahar. They were both inspecting the armory and talking about Germanic and Venedian women.

"And this is what I hate most about them," Vladislav was finishing a sentence when Samo entered.

"Women, right?" said Ragnahar laughingly.

"I have an important task for you two. Ragnahar, you will take your soldiers and together with Vladislav you will go as quickly as possible to Preslav and defend it against an ongoing Avar assault. Vladislav will be in charge. Prepare your soldiers right away," ordered Samo.

"As you wish, master, I will fulfill my mission with honor," replied Ragnahar and went straight to his men.

Samo turned to Vladislav. "At least we will get a chance to finally test him out. If he's truly so powerful then it's all Preslav needs now," said Samo referring to Ragnahar. "When there's any problem along the road just move to the hills," he continued.

Ragnahar mobilized his men and left with Vladislav for the city of Preslav. They wanted to avoid swampy areas along the river Vah and Venedian settlements under Avar rule, therefore moving along the hills was a much wiser choice.

In the evening they reached the edge of the woods and decided to spend the night there because it was not safe to ride during the night. When hunters came back with some freshly caught rabbits, they all sat down round the bonfire and started talking.

"You will like Preslav. It lies on the largest river far and wide," said Vladislav.

"I can't imagine how it looks down here," replied Ragnahar that as an Alemannian knew the river Danube well but only its upper parts.

"It's so enormous that there are only few places where you can cross it on a horse without a problem. I've heard that once in the past there was such a drought that the whole Dunay dried out and you could move across it without soaking your shoes," continued Vladislav.

"Amazing that such a river can vanish so easily," replied Ragnahar. "What about the rebellion in Preslav? Can you tell me more about that?" he asked.

"Of course. But first have some dark mead," said Vladislav and both poured some mead into the fire to please the gods.

"Everything that we accomplished started precisely in Preslav, where the local nobility organized an attack on stationed Avar forces. They were finally too fed up with the endless Avar conquests, which cost so many lives of their sons. People then threw dead bodies of their enemies into the river, so that it would flush them away to their land. After this the Venedian people even from furthest away rose up and pushed Avars away from their lands," explained Vladislav.

"Avars are a pain for so many peoples. I've heard about the atrocities they committed in Bavaria. That's why my king has put me into your services. We the Germanic people usually deal with problems of this corner of the world forsaken by gods. And as we dealt with the Romans, we were also able to unite ourselves and crush the Huns. But unfortunately, this was possible only after their invincible leader Attila finally died," replied Ragnahar.

"The grand battle in Pannonia where Germanic tribes defeated the Huns. Every child has heard of that one. Our revolt maybe isn't that extensive, but it will change things as well. I feel it, said Vladislav. "Did Slavomir tell you about his mother and sisters?" he asked.

“He did. An Avar harnessed them to his carriage and let them drag it till they died from exhaustion. Just for the fun of it,” answered Ragnahar.

“That’s just sick. Many people had to witness their brutal ways. Our retaliation will be cruel!” said Vladislav. “Tomorrow we have to reach Preslav,” he added and they all went to sleep.

When the sun was rising the group woke up to the sound of incoming horsemen.

“Quickly, let’s retreat to the hills!” shouted Vladislav.

As the group was gaining an elevation advantage, the Avar horsemen decided to not follow them because they wanted to avoid such a disadvantage.

“From now on we will have to move through hill ridges of Carpati*,” said Vladislav.

Meanwhile Samo was preparing his army for capturing the hill Marhat. Thousands of swordsmen and hundreds of pikemen and archers crossed the river Vah through a nearby ford and disappeared in the beech woods south of the mountain.

Avar soldiers stationed on the Marhat fortress didn’t know what was coming. They were prepared for encirclement and a longer siege but not for a quick, overwhelming and devastating assault.

The army moved towards the fortress of Gaida**. Avars used it as a secondary fortress and stationed only a small amount of troops there.

“All of these hills were once covered with fortresses,” said Samo looking around while riding his horse. “If they had enough space, they built them in the shape of a spider web, so that if an outer wall was breached, the defenders could shoot at the attackers not only from the next defensive line, but also from the sides,” he continued explaining.

“So why is it that after time people moved into lower areas?” asked Drahomir.

“There’s one simple answer. They were too comfortable. You see, it’s much easier to trade goods, travel and access crop fields when you live on flat land,” answered Samo.

“We exchanged safety for convenience and that’s why we are in this whole mess,” replied Drahomir.

* Carpati – Slavic name for the Carpathian Mountains

** Gaida – hill south of Marhat

“Well, never forget that even if you work hard on your defense and build up a strong army, there will always be someone who’s stronger and who will overwhelm you with his numbers,” said Samo and looked at the Gaida hilltop.

“Are you ready to fight?” he asked.

“Of course and I’m looking forward to it,” Drahomir replied.

“What about the strange things that happened to you?” Samo asked.

“It looks like gods gave me incredible powers. I can see what animals see, I feel their pain, their desires and I can control them if I want. But otherwise I feel all right,” replied Drahomir.

“I hope you’ll make good use of it,” concluded Samo.

Avars stationed in the two fortresses could now clearly see the incoming army, so they reinforced the Gaida fortress, because they knew that it’s more vulnerable to attacks and the thin Marhat fortress can be easily defended with a handful of soldiers.

“Drahomir, you will lead the attack on Gaida and I will do my job according to our plan. See you later,” said Samo and together with some soldiers he left for the northern woods.

As Drahomir was preparing the army for attacking Gaida, Vladislav and his group were moving through hills towards Preslav. But first, Vladislav wanted to make a short stop to show something interesting to Ragnahar.

“This is what I wanted to show you. This was once a center of a thriving culture. Built on an important crossroad over a thousand years ago. You can still see remnants of its stone walls and record of a tragedy that had befallen this place,” explained Vladislav.

“What is this place and what happened here?” asked Ragnahar.

“It’s Molpir*. People still tell stories about the Celts that lived here and the power struggle that went on and ultimately destroyed this fortress. Destruction came so fast that people didn’t even have a chance to flee,” explained Vladislav. “Most of them were slaughtered in their sleep,” he added.

* Molpir – fortress near Smolenitse

“But now we should move on. Let's try the road alongside the mountains. This way we'll be in Preslav within few hours and if we're attacked, we can easily retreat back to the hills,” he continued.

In the meantime Samo separated himself from the army. He took seven swordsmen and four archers with him and went to a nearby cave north of his army's positions. The cave was cleverly hidden, but Samo knew exactly where to find it because he had this information from retired Venedian soldiers. At first, men moved some tree branches and uncovered the main entrance. Then they all lightened their torches and went deeper into the cave.

“This stone indicates the entrance,” said Samo and pointed at a black stone, which was in an inconspicuous part of the cave. He pulled the stone and the stone structure started to fall apart until it created a window. “Clear the entrance!” Samo ordered his men.

The soldiers uncovered an ancient tunnel, which was used by Celts to connect the wider Gaida fortress with the main Marhat fortress. In case the Gaida fortress fell to the enemy, soldiers could easily recapture it during nighttime using this secret tunnel.

As the group moved through the tunnel, they found themselves in a crossing right under the main Gaida fortress. There was a secret exit from the tunnel going right into the heart of Gaida. Only some digging would be needed to get into the fortress, but the defense concentrated there was too strong to handle. That's why they went further towards the other end of the tunnel. It was easy to hear that the attack already started.

The Venedian army blew their horns and hundreds of soldiers stormed the palisades covered by archery fire. After one hour the army was still not able to penetrate the main wall and Drahomir grew impatient. As if that wasn't enough, storm clouds were coming from the north-west and the whole attack was endangered.

Drahomir ordered some of his men to circumvent the fortress and attack it from the back from the so called Hanging Rocks, however without success.

Samo was able to get to the end of the tunnel right under the Marhat hill top. His men started to dig their way out. After few meters they finally saw some light. They digged their way right to the main tower at the top of the acropolis* and waited for a few moments to be sure whether the air is clean. Then they moved the wooden floor boards and jumped out of the tunnel right into the ground floor of the tower. Samo led the way to the top.

* acropolis - highest point of a fortress or city

There were only two guards at the top of the tower overlooking the fortress and the scrimmage happening at the Gaida fortress. Samo sneaked up behind the two guards and slashed both at the same time. They petrified instantly making a quiet rifting noise.

“Look, there are only few of them at the walls,” said Samo to his men. “We will take them out one by one and in complete silence,” he continued.

First the group attacked archers who didn't expect a thing. Then the last swordsmen overlooking the main gate noticed that something's going on. Samo's group attacked with a full frontal attack. Air was filled with waving swords playing the song of death.

As they finished off the remaining Avars a swordsman blew his horn signaling to Drahomir, that the attack was successful and Marhat is once again in Venedian hands.

Soldiers from both sides looked at the majestic Marhat hill. Avars were shocked about what was going on, but they reacted fast and sent some men towards Marhat who got struck down by Samo's archers. Clouds covered the sky.

Drahomir realized that he's struggling with his attack and he became furious. If he only could smash them away with one blow. Maybe even behind the Dunay. Drahomir raged in fury. Suddenly he realized that soldiers standing next to him started to look at him with fear in their eyes. He has seen this before. A strong wave of heat hit him so he ripped away his vest and saw that his body was covered by huge and thick hair. His body was growing.

The horse on which Drahomir sat got frightened and threw him in panic to the ground and then galloped away. A huge werewolf, twice as tall as the tallest soldier, stood up from the ground. The soldiers retreated several steps back and were not able to make a sound. They just stared with their mouths wide open.

The beast started running towards to main wall. It jumped over the palisade and right into the Gaida fortress. It smashed some bystanding Avar soldiers away, looked onto the sky and screeched out loud so that both Avar and Venedian soldiers fell into their knees from the pain in their ears.

Then the beast rushed to the main tower on the acropolis while attacking Avars with its claws. Archers on top of the main tower started shooting their arrows and hitting it, but this made the creature even more furious. It pushed the main tower till it collapsed and then it ran back towards the main gate. Avars focused their attention and firepower solely on the beast so the Venedian army was able to climb over the palisades and attack them inside the compound.

In the meantime, Vladislav and Ragnahar arrived at a high hill* with a fortress on it overlooking the city of Preslav, river Dunay with Carantania and Pannonia in the background. They were shocked to see that Avars were able to penetrate the walls protecting the city, capture the central fortress** and were now attacking all the remaining Preslav's fortresses. Smoke was coming from several parts of the inner city and storm clouds started to cover the sky.

“Storm clouds are coming from the northwest,” said Vladislav to Ragnahar. “It’s Thursday, PERUN’s day so our god probably wants to celebrate it,” he continued with a smile. Vladislav and Ragnahar with his soldiers approached the main gate.

“We’ve been waiting for you, noble Vladislav,” a female voice came from the main gate. It was the leader of Preslav’s defense, the beautiful Miloslava, who was a skilled archer as well. They both knew each other from their childhood, playing all the time, shooting from bows and simply having fun.

Miloslava was a bit younger as Vladislav, so he was now pleasantly surprised to see her develop into a beautiful woman. She didn’t dress like an ordinary woman. Wearing lots of leather armor made her look more like a soldier. At least from the distance. Vladislav had to focus his sight.

“Mila, is it really you?” asked Vladislav. “Where have you been so many years?” he continued.

“Preparing myself and my city for this,” answered Miloslava with a smile. “Come inside and rest for a while,” she showed her hospitality and when they got inside the fortress she continued explaining: “Avars came from the east and attacked the city of Preslav first in order to cut off the fortresses south of Dunay from supplies. They were able to sack the city and now they want to capture its acropolis hoisted on the banks of the river Dunay. Their current positions are right between us and the acropolis, at the central fortress. Southern fortresses behind the Dunay, Devin and we as well are preparing everything that’s left for an assault,” explained Miloslava.

“We’re here to help in any way we can,” said Vladislav getting a headache after going through so much explanation.

“In one hour we’ll attack. Try to rest for a while,” said Miloslava and smiled at Vladislav. Then she went to prepare her army for the assault.

* fortress on the hill Kamzik

** fortress on the hill Slavín

Vladislav couldn't stop thinking of Miloslava and that smile. Does she like him or not? These were the questions that tormented him. He couldn't even rest, so he went to check out what she is doing.

Miloslava was overseeing the preparations when Vladislav approached her and started speaking with a mocking tone but still with a smile: "I see that you're an archer as well?"

"Shouldn't you sleep or something like that?" answered Miloslava in irritation while she was hooking up a horse saddle and barely looking at Vladislav.

"We both know that out of us both, I'm the better archer," replied Vladislav laughingly.

Miloslava got angry, she turned herself towards Vladislav and said: "Do you want a bet?"

"Sure, why not," replied Vladislav.

"What do you want to bet?" asked Miloslava.

"If I win, you have to kiss me and if you win, then I have to kiss you," said Vladislav and saw the rising smile on Miloslava with sparks in her eyes. He leaned forward and kissed her.

Fighting at Gaida ceased, the ground was covered with bodies and Drahomir in his human form was leaning against the palisade in complete exhaustion. His clothes were torn apart due to the transformation into a werewolf.

A soldier brought him fresh clothes and said to him: "Thank you, you saved many of our lives!"

"You're welcome. Be so kind and bring me some water," replied Drahomir.

The soldier went away to get some water from the supply carts just when Samo entered the fortress. He went straight to Drahomir and asked him with a grin on his face: "So now you're like our pet or what?"

"Yeah, just make fun of me. I'm exhausted," replied Drahomir.

"It seems like you're able to control your newly obtained powers," continued Samo.

"I've never been as angry as today and then it happened. And look, those bizarre clouds are moving to the south," said Drahomir and closed his eyes from fatigue.

“That’s strange. I’ll leave you to rest and send you someone with food,” concluded Samo and went to check the state of his army. He met Slavomir near the destroyed part of the palisade and gave him orders to repair the wall as soon as it will be possible.

Capturing the fortresses in the mountains between the Vah and Nitrava valleys gave the Venedian army an advantage point in having a base from where to launch attacks on the key target which was the city of Nitrava. But first they had to defend Preslav from an ongoing assault. If Preslav would fall, all the territorial gains from past would be endangered. Fate of Preslav was in the hands of Vladislav and Ragnahar, who were now prepared to lead an attack on Avar positions.

Avars were constantly attacking the acropolis of Preslav and this way they prevented any reinforcements and supplies to reach it. The plan of the Venedian army was to use forces stationed behind the Dunay and the remaining soldiers in the Devin* fortress and other fortresses to push the Avars back to the central fortress, surround them and crush them.

Preslav’s acropolis was in flames. Avars were using inflamed arrows to attack it. In order to get closer to the palisades, they used large wooden shields that could provide cover to several soldiers. In return Venedian defenders poured resin onto these structures and inflamed them with arrows.

These slower attacks were alternated by full frontal attacks using ladders and lots of swordsmen. Arrows were filling the air and swords played once again their song of death. A fortress cut off from supplies could never stand this for a long time.

Vladislav, despite the situation, was able to listen to his heart and kiss Miloslava. She fell for him pretty quickly, because Vladislav’s special ability, which he possessed from birth, was that he had absolutely no problem to seduce women. But he knew that she was different than the others.

For Miloslava, it was from this moment on only about him. She looked at him all the time, thought about him all the time and wanted to be with him all the time. They both found their missing halves which is always rare, but when it happens it seems so natural.

Under different circumstances this would be the best thing that ever happened to them, but now it was time to wage war and not to lose concentration and think about someone else’s safety.

* fortress on the hill Devinska kobyla

Venedian forces from southern fortresses passed the Dunay's ford and joined forces with the Devin garrison. Avars ceased attacking the acropolis and started moving towards the approaching army to find some terrain advantages and attack them in the open.

As the two armies collided, Avar commanders realized that the central fortress under their control is being attacked by a group of Venedian warriors. So far they didn't consider it as important. Miloslava, Ragnahar and their warriors stormed the central fortress. Vladislav was covering them, firing arrows from the distance.

Ragnahar and his men reached the palisades. Their shields were studded with arrows. The most vigorous one of them kneeled down, Ragnahar jumped on his shoulders and got catapulted above the palisade right into the fortress.

Other soldiers came with ladders and started to enter the fortress as well. By that time, Ragnahar was converting the fortress into hell on Earth. Avar soldiers were flying into every direction. Ragnahar was blasting them off with his two-handed hammer.

The situation became critical for Avars, so they blew their horns signaling their army outside the fortress to retreat back into the central fortress. Miloslava also signaled to retreat, because they would not be able to hold the fortress against such a force. Ragnahar and all the others were climbing back the palisade and running away from the fortress. Everything was going as planned.

Avars sent their horsemen to attack the Venedian archers. Ragnahar and his men were rushing back to the rescue and as one Avar horse archer was trying to shoot at Vladislav, Ragnahar threw his hammer right into the horseman's head throwing him down from his horse and thus saving Vladislav's life.

Unfortunately, Vladislav realized that one arrow hit Miloslava right in the shoulder and she was unconscious. She saw that Vladislav was in trouble and rushed towards him as well, which made her neglect her own safety.

When Vladislav pulled out the arrow from Miloslava's shoulder, the arrowhead was covered with a greenish tincture. "Poison!" thought Vladislav to himself. In the meantime all soldiers from the Avar army retreated to the central fortress.

Anger grew inside Vladislav. He closed his eyes and prayed to all gods to punish those who are oppressing his people. Dark clouds thickened in the sky and put the land into darkness. They brought a huge thunderstorm with them.

Strong wind was blowing and circling around the central fortress. It looked like it will rip it off the ground and then lightnings started striking the fortress. Louder than the whole thunderstorm were the screams of terrified Avars that were one by one perishing by the hands of PERUN.

“DONAR*!” said Ragnahar in disbelief thinking of the thunderer god.

“He will punish them for destroying his shrines and temples,” replied Vladislav.

As the spectacle ceased, dark clouds started to disappear and the fortress was left lifeless. The smell of burned meat spread across the area and after a while the smoke was visible even from Marhat.

The defenders of whole Preslav gathered before Vladislav as he spoke: “Let us thank the greatest of them all, let us never forget his assistance in this time of need. Let us celebrate our thunderer god! Long lives PERUN!”

“Hurrah!” cheered the crowd.

“To venerate PERUN, we will build him a temple right on this central fortress and here we will celebrate and glorify him, our highest god!”

“Slava!” shouted the crowd.

“From now on this hill will be called Slavin, a place for celebrating Preslav’s guardian!”

* Donar – Germanic thunderer god equivalent to Perun and Thor

CHAPTER IV - TRIBECH

Vladislav brought in medicine men from all around to help Miloslava, but they were helpless. Miloslava fell into a deep sleep and Vladislav understood that she needs a miracle. He ordered Ragnahar to prepare his men and everything for leaving Preslav in the morning.

Vladislav went to the acropolis, found himself a suitable place to rest and fell asleep the second he closed his eyes. He was dreaming that he's in the mountains. Surrounded by beautiful rocks and looking at endless forests beneath him.

Then PERUN visited him in his dreams and said: "Go into the heart of the mountains. There you will come to a hill where the mountain spirit dwells. On top of the hill you will find a chasm that will lead you to a cave lake containing the sacred waters of life and death inside of it," PERUN spoke.

You will need just one arrow. Soak its arrowhead in the sacred water and bring it back to your army," added the god.

"You will meet a guide along the road and he will bring you to the sacred waters," concluded PERUN and then simply vanished.

As the morning came, Vladislav left Preslav for the Marhat fortress. He took the still unconscious Miloslava with him and Ragnahar with his men were leading the way.

They came to their destination at noon. Samo was greeting both Ragnahar and Vladislav. After a short update on the events, Ragnahar went on to rest because he did not get much sleep while preparing his men for departure. Miloslava was taken care of by local medicine men and Vladislav was discussing future steps with Samo.

As they both drank a bit of dark mead, Vladislav confided to Samo: "I had a strange dream last night..."

"Involving an arrow," said Samo.

"How do you know that?" asked Vladislav.

"PERUN visited me in my dreams and told me what to do. But he didn't say what will the arrow be good for," replied Samo. Vladislav just nodded.

“Avars are expecting a direct attack on Nitrava. We have to go to the mountains to meet PERUN’s will, but first we need to secure the hill Tribech, which was once an impregnable fortress and now it’s just used by Avars as a lookout. We will build our main base there, from where we will start our attacks on Nitrava,” continued Samo.

“As you command,” replied Vladislav. “By the way, Ragnahar saved my life back in Preslav,” he continued.

“So he proved himself loyal. I’m pleased to hear that,” replied Samo and both went to rest a bit.

In the meantime, Drahomir was alone in the woods north of Marhat. He found a group of wolves that immediately laid down around him like he would be the leader of their pack. Drahomir sat down, closed his eyes and just inhaled the ambience of the forest. This was filling him with energy that he desperately needed.

In the evening all of them met at a feast and were enjoying a cloudless, kind of magical night. Soldiers opened their beer and wine reserves, hunters caught a variety of animals and prepared them for dinner. Some food was offered to the gods by throwing it into the fire while others sat quietly with closed eyes and thanked the gods in their own personal way. Drahomir did not touch the prepared meat, nor did he complain. He remained faithful to the wine brought from Moravia.

Vladislav came to the feast and greeted Drahomir: “My brother, I’m glad to see you!”

“Likewise,” replied Drahomir. “Sit down and tell me more about the sick puppy that you brought home,” he added.

“Don’t be so rude. I fell in love with her and her name is Miloslava,” said Vladislav.

“Don’t worry, she’ll be all right. We’ve got the favor of gods on our side and we’ll do something about it,” said Drahoslav.

“I guess,” said Vladislav sadly.

Drahomir wanted to cheer him up so he used his unique sense of humor: “And what about her? Did she fell for you as well? Did you use your legendary, or should I say magical skills of seducing women?” he asked laughingly.

“Oh, brother, I missed you,” replied Vladislav with a smile and both drank some more wine.

After a night of gaining strength, morning came upon Marhat. The sky turned red and after a while it turned into a yellowish glow. Each day was getting warmer and warmer. The time was right to continue with the campaign and everyone knew it, even the Avars. The army was ready to march at noon.

“There’s no activity among the Avars,” said Drahomir who was watching the enemy across the valley on the Zobor and Tribech fortresses since the morning.

“We will move right away through the mountains as planned,” replied Samo. The plan was to attack Avars from behind by moving the army along a wide detour through the mountains. This way Avars couldn’t see the approaching army and annihilate it on flat land.

The strength of Avars lied in their horse archers, who used several ancient tactics like flanking, encircling, parting shot, feigned retreat or shooting from circles. But the most effective one was the hit and run tactic, where by performing cycles of attacking and retreating, while shooting arrows at the opponent all the time, they were able to inflict devastating results. Therefore if it was possible, it was better to avoid a direct confrontation with them on flat land.

As the army descended from Marhat to northeast, Samo said to Drahomir: “One day we will have to strengthen these mountain passages between Nitrava and Vah valleys, because even though Nitrava is our golden egg, we should never forget about the heart of this land and that are mountains filled with ores and other resources. We need to think of the future without Avars commanding our lives, where trade can grow thanks to safe trade routes.”

The army was passing a hill which was hiding the remains of an ancient fortress*. “All of these high hills once protected the people and people couldn’t imagine a life without them. They were filled with fortresses with key importance,” said Samo.

“Vladislav and Drahomir, join the scouting unit and check out the hill for yourself,” ordered Samo. The army used mounted scouts to look for enemies from higher ground and thus preventing potential ambushes.

“As you wish,” replied Vladislav and they both took off and joined the scouting unit for a reconnaissance mission.

After reaching the top of the hill, Vladislav spotted the remains of fortress walls and he said: “Samo was right again. There they are.”

* fortress on the hill Uhrad

“Isn’t it a magical place?” asked Drahomir.

“Yes, indeed. Look at the steep slope on its eastern side,” pointed out Vladislav.

“The fortress had to be highly vulnerable from the direction where we came from,” noticed Drahomir. Then they both went downhill to the north and reunited with the army.

The Venedian army marched for another several hours and rested at the edge of the forest till nightfall. Then it moved through the valley to the east. Avars were not able to spot them at nighttime, so this was the safest way to get across the valley without being attacked by Avars who had the numbers. But rivers coming from the mountains were enormous this spring and flooded some areas which caused delays, therefore this safe cover of the night lasted only till dawn.

Avars stationed at Tribech alarmed the Zobor fortress and its army went on a mission to hunt down the Venedian forces.

“They are coming!” screamed out a soldier from the back.

There was only one possible chance to avert a disaster and that was to retreat to the north to a relatively small hill called Khotoma. The Venedian army crossed the river Nitritsa and started to climb the hillside. This is when Avars struck.

Venedian swordsmen covered the retreat and with every slash of their sword they made a step back towards the hill top. Venedian archers were spraying arrows on Avar horsemen and this madness lasted for several minutes till the whole Venedian army gained an elevation advantage and Avars regrouped and were thinking through what to do next.

Samo knew that the Venedian army has to avoid Avar horsemen and horse archers and get to the Tribech mountains in one piece. There was no other way than to pray to their gods for help. The army fell to its knees and called upon PERUN to perform a miracle.

So it happened. A wave of thick mist was falling from the northern mountains covering everything in sight. As the mist came close to the Avar army, Avars decided to retreat to their fortresses, because it wouldn’t be wise to risk a close combat attack of the opponent in an area which they know far better than the Avars do and with this mist helping them.

The whole valley was covered with a dense layer of mist and only the hilltops had clear view. Suddenly a rider on a horse appeared before the Venedian army. It was the daughter of a northern tribal chieftain called Kvetoslava that was leading the northern army.

“I’ve united the northern tribes and came here to join the fight for independence! You can see my army up on the Chihots and Rokosh hills to the north,” said Kvetoslava. She wore a purely white dress with primroses in her blond hair. Drahomir was amazed when he saw her. His heart started to play the rhythm of love.

Kvetoslava didn’t look like a warrior, or like a woman from the rough north. She looked like she was out of this world. Something intangible sent down to Earth to caress it with her beauty.

Kvetoslava raised her left hand to signal her army. Horns roared from the mountains and thousands of soldiers were put into motion.

Samo approached Kvetoslava and spoke: “Honorable Kvetoslava, your positive reputation is well known to me and I admire what you and your father have done for your people. Please feel free to rest in our supply carriage and have some food until your army reaches us.”

Drahomír interjected Samo’s welcome speech and spoke: “It won’t be necessary. I’ll take it from here.”

“Dear Kvetoslava, would you like to have a walk in the woods with me?” asked Drahomir.

Kvetoslava nodded with a glamorous smile. Drahomir approached her horse, helped her down and they disappeared before anyone could say a word.

As they were walking down the hill, noise from the approaching army was getting closer. They both entered the woods and Kvetoslava spoke: “We don’t need this mist anymore.” The thick layer of fog started to disappear around them and they could easily see the depths of the forest.

Surprisingly, Drahomir was not amazed by the things that were going on. He had his own secret to worry about, but now he just wanted to get to know Kvetoslava. So he asked her about her past and how she got to lead such a huge army.

Kvetoslava started explaining: “My parents were unhappy for a long time, because they weren’t able to conceive a child. Father was so in love with my mother that he couldn’t leave her to simply find luck elsewhere. So they stayed together for a long time and... it looks like gods wanted to reward them.”

“What happened?” asked Drahomir.

“They found me on a walk through the woods like this one. I was still a baby lying in a wicker basket near a really old tree. I love to return to that tree. He’s my oldest friend,” said Kvetoslava smiling like it wasn’t a big deal.

“That’s amazing,” said Drahomir. “What about you snapping the finger and the mist was gone? How’s that possible?” he asked.

“Well...,” Kvetoslava looked at Drahomir and she smiled like never before. Even her eyes were smiling. “My father once told me that I’m a gift from the gods. I don’t know about that, but there were some indications even when I was still tiny. Everytime I was sad, it was raining all the time. Guess what weather there was when I was happy?” asked Kvetoslava and smiled at Drahomir.

“I understand,” replied Drahomir and smiled back at Kvetoslava. “But now it looks like you’re able to control your powers. Am I right?” he asked.

“After some time I learned how to control them and use them as I pleased. But some things are beyond my will. It looks like everywhere I go the plants around me feel the same what I feel,” said Kvetoslava.

“They look all right to me. They’re blooming and...,” said Drahomir and as he looked back he realized, that the grass where Kvetoslava walked on was covered with instantly grown and exceptionally beautiful flowers. “You’re truly special. I’ve got some powers myself,” he said.

“You too? What kind of powers?” asked Kvetoslava.

Drahomir closed his eyes. He was able to hear animals that were even far away.

From all the sudden a pair of grey wolves approached Kvetoslava and Drahomir. Behind them were six beautiful white and grey pups that immediately ran towards Kvetoslava. The pair of wolves just laid back and rested while she played with the younglings.

In the meantime Samo and Vladislav were discussing their next steps.

“I need you here, Vladislav, you cannot just leave us and go to your loved one,” said Samo.

“Let me just send a messenger so that I know how she is doing,” replied Drahomir.

“Sure, we can arrange that, but now let’s focus on getting to the Tribech mountain ridge. The easiest way will be through the Maple tree hill,” concluded Samo.

As the both armies merged and Drahomir came back from the walk with Kvetoslava, they all moved south through the mountain passages to get to the Maple tree hill and attack Tribech from its most vulnerable side, the mountain ridge.

As they were approaching the eastern edges of the Maple tree hill, they spotted lots of Avars waiting for them on the hillside.

“We need to bypass them. Let’s continue through the forests down south!” ordered Samo and the army continued their movement southwards thus avoiding the confrontation.

At the end of the mountain pass there was an inconspicuous hill fully covered with a variety of leaf trees. The united Venedian army settled for the night in the ruins of a huge ancient fortress* that was hidden there.

Even though the hill was covered with trees, it was possible to see the surrounding areas and the Lower Nitrava plains that were just to the south. Noone would attack a place with such elevation advantage and there were still enormous earth walls surrounding the former fortress with bastions to the south and east and a rocky acropolis on the north-west. Samo gave his army some time to rest, but early in the morning, when it was still dark, the army moved westwards towards the Tribech mountain ridge.

“We’re lucky that these mountains aren’t used by people as they were in the past and therefore they are covered by forests,” said Drahomir. In older times central fortresses were placed upon the highest hills and they had auxiliary fortresses around them. All of such hills were cleared of trees and they had all sorts of barriers on their hillsides instead so that they could slow down enemy advances.

“Don’t worry, you’ll get a chance to prove yourself again in combat,” replied Samo.

Quietly and without any traces they moved through thick woods till they reached another ruins of an ancient fortress**. This one was smaller but part of the ancient Tribech fortress complex. Its outer earth walls were still visible and there was a second wall surrounding the top of the fortress. This fortress was used for defending a passage to the Tribech mountain ridge.

* fortress on the hill Hrusov

** fortress surrounding the Black castle near Zlatno

The Venedian army didn't have time to feel the magical beauty of these places. They proceeded through an ancient fortified ridge. Rocks from destroyed walls could be seen everywhere. The ridge was covered mostly with beech trees and bushes, therefore even though Tribech was only a stone throw away, Avars stationed at Tribech could not see the approaching danger.

At the end of the rocky ridge was a relatively wide square with ruins of the huge Rocky Gate located at the edge of the mountain slope. "This gate was used as one of many entrances to the Tribech mountain ridge," said Samo while feeling the pain this place has experienced when everything was falling apart. After a short while they reached the Tribech mountain ridge.

"No Avars in sight," said Vladislav quietly while securing the area.

"Maybe they retreated to Tribech," thought Drahomir aloud.

"Probably," said Samo. "Now we will move to the Bear's mountain," he continued.

As the forefront of the army reached the Bear's mountain, Samo explained to his scholars: "This mountain is named after a gigantic bear that lived here long time ago. The legend has it, that this bear helped the locals to defend themselves and when he died of old age, the whole civilization that lived here was lost."

"I feel his presence. He's putting on his skin," said Drahomir.

"What are you talking about?" asked Vladislav.

Drahomir closed his eyes and as all the others were looking at him, the earth started shaking and it sounded like rocks would be ripped apart. Suddenly a huge black paw arose from the ground. Soldiers that were closest to the scene stepped back in shock. Only the subcommanders stood firm and waited for what was going to happen.

The long lost warden of these mountains has awakened. With his black fur and red eyes he rose from the ground, stood up on his rear legs and bawled out so loudly that even the Avars stationed far away in Nitrava could hear it. The soldiers stopped covering their ears and were looking at the giant bear as he was approaching Samo and all of his subcommanders.

The bear came to Drahomir and stretched his nose towards him. Drahomir reached out his hand and the bear licked it gingerly with his huge tongue which was several times bigger than Drahomir's hand. All the others realized that the bear is on their side.

"What does such a pet eat?" asked Vladislav and started laughing.

The bear looked at him seriously and Vladislav went silent.

The army had only a short distance to go and the black bear led the way. VELES, god of all livestock and wide pastures of the underworld, could not stand by and watch how a simple mortal disturbed the dead and resurrected such a monster. So he decided to cast a deadly disease on the whole army by poisoning their food supplies.

As the army reached the Small Tribech hill, which is only across the main Great Tribech hill, Samo and his subcommanders started discussing tactics on how to attack. Unexpectedly the bear started running towards the enemy, broke through the palisade and before Venedians realized what was going on, the enemy soldiers were flying in all directions.

The beast was in his element. When it was still alive, it used to feast upon its enemies, protecting the people who controlled these mountains. Now it couldn't even taste the blood of the living. That's why it just used its enormous power to smash the Avars away and pick the remaining ones in its jaws and throw them even further away.

The Venedian army stormed the enemy positions and overran the relatively small numbers of Avar defenders. After a short while the fighting was over and thus Samo spoke in front of the whole army: "From now on these mountains will be just ours. They will belong to the Venedian people and the black bear will defend them against our enemies!"

Samo sent a messenger to Marhat with an order to bring Slavomir to Tribech. He was the best specialist for refortification of the fortress and therefore Samo's first choice.

Half of the soldiers had their first meal on Tribech. Unfortunately the food was poisoned and they became sick right away. Samo gave orders to the remaining healthy soldiers to find new food sources, take care of the sick ones and work on reconstructing the fortification. He knew that he's got a mission ahead of him, so he went to his tent and fell asleep right away.

PERUN appeared to him in his dream again. "On your way to the sacred waters of life and death, you will find an arrow specially crafted for you by SVAROG. Dip the arrow in the water of life and death and it will help you to defeat your enemies. You will need just this one arrow. The water of life and death will poison your enemies," explained PERUN and Samo slept deeply till the morning.

CHAPTER V - THE ARROW

Early in the morning, Samo was inspecting the extent of poisoning among his soldiers. He summoned his subcommanders near the remnants of the famous Tribech's southern rock tower to explain them why he has to go on a mission right away.

“Even though we captured the ancient fortress of the People of Tribech, half of our army is poisoned and I was ordered by PERUN to go on a journey. Vladislav and Drahomir, you will accompany me on my mission. Our goal will be to find a sacred chasm deep in the highest of the mountains and use its sacred waters of life and death to poison one single magical arrow,” said Samo.

“One arrow against the whole Avar army?” asked Drahomir.

“One will be enough,” answered Samo.

“Sacred waters of life and death... Does it mean that it can heal as well?” asked Vladislav thinking of saving his beloved Miloslava.

“I guess we will soon find out,” replied Samo.

So they went on another journey and it wasn't going to be an easy one. Thanks to having rested horses, they were able to get to the Upper Nitrava's impregnable Vishegrad fortress within hours. There the stationed Venedian soldiers informed Samo that they are preparing another army of reinforcements from the north.

As Drahomir was walking through the lively fortress, he sensed something unusual in the area. A deadwhite rooster showed itself staring at him unflinchingly and then it started speaking to him in his thoughts: “You're thinking right. I'm the highest of all gods and I've taken this traditional shape to guide you to the sacred waters of life and death.”

“Sacred waters of life and death... does this mean that it can heal our poisoned army?” asked Drahomir.

“It can heal whatever is sick and poison whatever is healthy,” said the rooster in Drahomir's thoughts. “The unbelievers have destroyed our temples, burned our shrines and effigies. That's why we the gods acceded to radical measures to support your fight,” he continued.

“What about the arrow that we’re supposed to find? What shall we do with the arrow poisoned by the sacred waters of life and death?” asked Drahomir.

“Your best archer will take it near the Zobor fortress, point it towards the skies and hit the water reservoir of the fortress. But this must be done without being sighted by the enemy. SVAROG is currently crafting the special tip for the arrow. Now prepare yourself for the journey and get going!” said the rooster in Drahomir’s thoughts and simply disappeared.

Samo was still resting and had a quite interesting dream. It was about a time when tribes moved through Europe chaotically like ingredients in a soup and Venedian tribes one by one settled central and later south-eastern parts of Europe. Settling of new areas did not occur randomly. Venedian tribes always chose their neighbors wisely. They settled near tribes who they got along the best.

One good example were the Hrvati and Srbi, who settled Dalmatia mostly along the river Sava. Two strong tribes that swore to protect each other and coexist in mutual cooperation for eternity. Two brave tribes that decided to settle right in the middle of Europe’s superpowers and simply survive. Two persistent tribes that fought Avars long before our struggle here even began.

In that moment Drahomir came to the tent and woke Samo up: “We have to move on! A rooster explained the mission to me.”

“A rooster? Are you kidding me?” asked Samo laughingly.

“Yeah, funny. PERUN took the form of a rooster and he will be the guide on our journey,” replied Drahomir.

Samo stared at him for a while but then he realized that stranger things happened in the last weeks and they simply moved on.

Samo had to explain to his scholars: “Beware of the woods we’ll soon have to cross. They’re full of creatures and demons that will try to trick you into what they want.”

As the night was falling, Samo and his companions entered the Fatra Mountains. They decided to make a camp near a tiny creek deep in the forest. After they fell asleep, Drahomir was woken up by a shrill singing. He started following the singing upstream the creek.

The singing was getting louder and louder until it was deafening. It was then when Drahomir realized, that there’s a small forest lake in front of him with a spring near the lake that’s filling it

up with crystal clear water. Right next to the spring were twelve beings singing and dancing around in a trance.

These were forest fairies with light green dresses, long golden hair adorned with flowers, dancing around barefoot and singing in an irresistible manner. Drahomir was extremely attracted by their tones and he wanted to run towards them. This lust grew and grew inside him. In that moment all the fairies stopped dancing and turned their heads towards Drahomir who was still hiding in the bushes.

Drahomir was a bit frightened but the never-ceasing singing was drawing him towards the fairies. So he stood up and walked towards them. When he was close enough, one of the fairies approached him and they started to dance, faster and faster. Drahomir was not able to stop nor was he able to stay fully conscious.

He knew that it was too late for him to do anything. Fairies were once young women that died before their wedding. Therefore their souls were wandering through the world and were seducing young men to a lethal dance. There was no way out of this. Only a miracle could help him.

MORENA showed up near the lake with several crows flying above her. She took the form of an old woman in a black cloak and a jagged scythe. As she was approaching Drahomir she started laughing out loud. Vladislav said to himself: “Now Zubata* is coming for me. I’m doomed.”

In that moment a greatly glowing fairy dressed in white appeared before Drahomir. She ordered the other fairies to leave him alone and Drahomir fell on the ground. The fairies didn’t mind and continued dancing with each other. Drahomir looked around and realized that MORENA was gone. So he dusted himself off and ran away.

As he was running into the camp, he woke up Samo and Vladislav and explained them everything that happened. Samo had a strong feeling about going to the lake. He ordered the young men to stay in the camp and went there to see for himself.

Only the young fairy dressed in white was waiting for him at the lake. She had a beautiful long but wavy blond hair that was glowing in the dark. And thus she spoke: “Come closer, I won’t harm you!”

“It’s you, it’s definitely you!” she said cheerfully.

“Do you know me?” asked Samo.

* Zubata, Smrtka, Death – other names for MORENA

“I’m your mother,” said the fairy while Samo was speechless. “I’m so overjoyed to finally see you,” she continued but thereupon she felt sorrow. “I wasn’t gifted to be able to see you grow up, nor to be with the love of my life.”

“Who is my father?” asked Samo.

“You will find out when the time is right and it will be soon,” answered the fairy and started to fade away. “Goodbye my son. You’ll always be in my heart!” whispered the fairy and disappeared.

MORENA was angry that she didn’t succeed the second time to get her revenge. She started preparing an unpleasant surprise for Samo and his companions for the next night.

Early in the morning the group continued their journey. Samo did not tell Vladislav and Drahomir what happened at the lake. So they crossed many valleys and around noon they found a ramshackle cottage surrounded by a thick forest.

Vladislav knocked on its door three times. Noone answered. So he knocked some more until he heard whining laments. “Who’s waking me up during my break?” asked the whiny voice.

“Good day to you, we’re travelers and we would like to pay for your hospitality,” replied Vladislav.

The door opened and out came an old and extremely ugly witch. She had a long pointy nose, her dirty face was covered with enormous wrinkles and she was jawning loudly as if she had no class what so ever.

The witch realized that there are three well built men standing in front of her and she thought to herself: “They would make a great dinner and there would be enough left for days to come.” This was not an ordinary witch. It was the dreaded mistress of forests going with the name Jezhibaba.

“Well, well, well, you want my food but your gold is worth nothing here,” she said.

“Can we repay you in a different way?” asked Samo.

“You could chop wood I have stored next to my house. I’m planning a feast in the evening,” she replied.

“Yeah sure, a feast,” thought Vladislav to himself. The group agreed simply to help an old woman and started to cut Jezhibaba’s wood into smaller pieces.

“This will keep them busy until my sisters return,” thought Jezhibaba to herself.

Jezhibaba continued cooking her mushroom soup. She formerly planned to sleep till it's ready, but because her plans were ruined she got pretty angry and hexed the soup with a sleeping spell.

When Samo and his companions were finished with cutting the wood they entered the cottage, ate two bowls of soup each and after a short while they fell asleep. The two younger witch-sisters flew back home on their brooms from an unsuccessful children hunt. As they entered the cottage, it was lifted into the air. The cottage was standing on one chicken leg and the second one was bent.

Horses that were waiting tied to trees got scared and started neighing. Samo and his scholars opened their eyes, jumped on their feet and surrounded the witches.

“So you wanted to eat us? Now you're going to pay for this,” said Samo and started throwing them out of the cottage one by one.

“How... how is this possible? The soup was hexed,” said the surprised oldest witch lying on the ground.

“We assumed that you'll try to deceive us, so we ate lots of peppermint while we were cutting the wood,” answered Samo. Peppermint is a plant that effectively repels magic and of course Samo knew it.

“What are you going to do with us?” asked the youngest but probably the ugliest sister.

Samo took their brooms that were resting on the furnace and broke each one of them while throwing them out of the cottage towards the witches. “This way you'll have it more difficult to do harm to people,” said Samo. He and his companions jumped off the cottage, got on their horses and moved on.

Later in the evening they laid a bonfire and wanted to spend the night on a wide meadow. Before they went to sleep they wanted to honor their gods with the fire ritual, jumping over the bonfire and singing traditional songs.

Early in the morning when it was still dark, Vladislav got up, stoked the bonfire and went for a walk. After a while he heard a loud hooting. He followed the sound to find out what's going on.

Then he saw a silhouette of some huge creature approaching him. The hooting was getting louder and louder. Vladislav stepped back and the creature showed itself in the light of the moonlight.

“Grgalitsa,” said Vladislav and stepped further back. Grgalitsa was a huge hairy female daemon with long messy hair, bulged eyes and a big bosom. Deep down she was a cursed soul of a woman, whose child died of negligence. Her punishment was to wander the world in this form and she misused it to seek out and kill people by choking them with her bosom.

He ran back to the bonfire but the creature was following him. “Help me! Grgalitsa is after me!” screamed Vladislav. Samo and Drahomir got up and took out their swords. They didn’t know that Grgalitsa is drawn to sounds and fires and can leave you alone by simply putting out the fire and being quiet.

As she was getting closer her golden eyes started glowing and she grew bigger and bigger. The men were like frozen. Suddenly they heard a crowing. Their rooster guide came to the rescue and Grgalitsa started retreating back to the woods. Crowing of a rooster always deterred demons.

The rooster didn’t say a word and started to march in one direction. So Samo and his companions put out the fire, jumped on their horses and followed it.

As they started climbing the southern Tatra Mountain range dressed in their winter clothes, Drahomir spoke to Samo: “I can feel the presence of so many animals that I’ve never seen in my life. This is incredible!” On the left side they could see the breathtaking northern Tatra Mountains and on the right side other mountains of the Carpathians.

“There in the distance is Nitrava,” Samo pointed his finger to the south-west and added: “And to the left is the heart of the Avar Empire. Right in the middle of these two places is our fortress Vishegrad on the river Dunay, which suffers under Avar occupation the longest. That’s our ultimate goal.”

After a while they reached the highest peaks of the mountain ridge, where there were no conifer trees or bushes around, only rocks with grass here and there. Vladislav spotted their guide right on the top of Khopok hill. Something was shining right next to him. So Vladislav and the others started to climb the rocky peak and as they reached the top the rooster was gone.

“Look! There’s the arrow!” shouted Vladislav and picked it up in his hands.

Samo and Drahomir came closer to have a better look.

“I’ve never seen such a material,” said Drahomir.

The arrowhead was white with a texture that was out of this world. Samo has seen such a material before. It was like a stone that fell right from the sky when he was still a child.

“It’s so light,” said Vladislav.

“Just put it away and let’s move on,” ordered Samo and the group continued walking to the east.

“We’ve passed the Khopok hill and now we will turn before the Dhumbyer hill to the left. There you can see our destination, the sacred hill of the guardian Krakonosh who guards all mountains in the world,” spoke Samo pointing to the northern peak.

“What is this region called?” asked Vladislav.

“It’s Liptovium. When there’s winter, even words coming from your mouth freeze and fall to the ground,” answered Samo and everyone laughed.

“Look at those sharp peaks. What’s the name of the one in front of us?” asked Drahomir.

“People living in the valley call it Poludnitsa, because the Sun is right above it at noon,” answered Samo.

“So it acts like a sun clock?” asked Vladislav.

“Something like that,” answered Samo. “Forgotten impregnable fortress that also showed the time,” he added with a smile.

As they were reaching the top of the mountain, their guide appeared in front of them once again. The rooster started running towards the dwarf pines so the group followed him. After a while they weren’t even able to see him and it was then when they found a deep chasm.

Samo and his companions lit their torches and descended to the depths of the chasm as far as it went. Then they used a rope to abseil even deeper. When they reached the ground, an entrance opened within the walls of the chasm. A wide cave opened itself in front of them.

“It’s sssso cold in here,” said Vladislav.

“Hang in there. We’ll be out in no time,” said Drahomir who didn’t feel coldness due to his curse.

“There it is!” said Samo and moved his torch towards an opening in the wall. The water was coming out of a small hole in the wall. Two female figures were engraved in the wall. These were the goddesses of life and death, ZHIVA and MORENA.

The water went down a duct carved in stone directly to a cave lake. Vladislav directed his torch to the lake and said: “You can’t even see the end of it. That’s so scary!”

They didn’t want to lose time, so they filled up all their leather bags with the sacred water, dipped the arrowhead of the magical arrow in the lake and continued with their journey back.

“Look! The arrowhead is changing its colour,” said Vladislav and showed the arrow to Samo and Drahomir.

“It’s changing to black,” said Drahomir.

“The color of death. Maybe this time MORENA will be on our side,” said Samo with a smile.

When they descended from the mountains, Samo gave some of the sacred water to Vladislav and told him: “Go to Marhat and save your loved one. I’m sure there’s still time to help her.” Vladislav thanked him and promised that he will join the army as soon as it will be possible.

Samo and Drahomir had another important task to fulfill and it couldn’t wait because they managed to anger the god VELES and they had to make everything right. On their way towards Tribech they decided to spend the night on a hill south of the Fatra Mountains. This hill was even higher than Tribech. Samo and Drahomir took out their axes and in the light of the bonfire they carved a wooden idol of VELES and placed it on top of the hill.

“From now on these mountains will be dedicated to our horned god VELES and this hill will be called Velestur,” shouted Samo out loud referring to the bull horns of VELES and then he poured some of the sacred water of life and death on the idol. Even though VELES was the god of the underworld, he was also the god of livestock and abundance and therefore people had to honor him. Early in the morning Samo and Drahomir continued towards Tribech.

Vladislav did not stop for the night. He was riding his horse as fast as its breath was lasting which was enormously dangerous during the night, but he reached the Marhat fortress in no time. Miloslava was lying in bed with a fever. Her eyes were slightly open but she was hallucinating and didn’t recognize Vladislav right away.

Vladislav approached Miloslava and told her: “Drink this sacred water!”

“Go away you demon!” she shouted.

“It’s me, don’t you recognize me?” asked Vladislav.

Miloslava opened her eyes wide open and she smiled. "My love," she said and drank from the sacred water.

Miloslava's condition improved instantly and she continued smiling at Vladislav who felt something he never felt before. He felt peace in his soul. His beloved Mila was alive and he couldn't be happier.

By the time Samo and Drahomir came to Tribech, the fortress was refortified. Its main wall was fully restored with wooden stakes stuck into the slopes beneath the walls with sharp edges facing out. In case of attack, the system slowed down the enemy and made it easier for defending archers to target him. Samo gave orders to Slavomir to defend the fortress.

Kvetoslava was greeting Drahomir from the distance and when they both met she kissed him. Healthy soldiers redistributed the sacred water and the Venedian army was saved.

CHAPTER VI – NITRAVA

“Samo, the army is prepared for the assault!” shouted Drahomir.

Soldiers were screaming and knocking swords on their shields. The main attack on the Zobor fortress was about to happen. The Venedian army moved out of the Tribech fortress at night and completely overran the Zubritsa hill between Tribech and Zobor, which was used for defense ages ago but not anymore. The reason was that the thunderer god got fed up with peoples living there and he made their stay there unbearable and so they moved out of Zubritsa.

But time has passed and now the area looked like a normal hill with trees growing everywhere. From there it was easy to spot enemy troops not only on the mountain ridge between Zobor and Zubritsa, but also in the city of Nitrava, the key objective of the liberation struggle.

“My fellow soldiers, my brothers, today we will capture Zobor and Nitrava and we will regain our independence!” Samo addressed his army. “Don’t forget that who controls Zobor controls Nitrava! And by PERUN we will succeed!” he added.

The army attacked the central fortified positions between Zubritsa and Zobor. Thousand years ago it would be extremely difficult to hack their way along the ridge filled with fortresses, but Avars were stationed mainly on Zobor and in the city of Nitrava and they used mounted units to attack Venedians on the mountain ridge. After capturing the hill Haranch, it wasn’t so difficult to push Avars back through another three hilltops until they had to fully retreat back to Zobor.

So after two hours the Venedian army reached the edge of the Zobor fortress. The plan was to stabilize the front line by encircling the fortress and making it look like the army wants to get into the fortress from two directions, the mountain ridge and from the north.

Another thing happened during the night. Reinforcements from the northern Venedian lands arrived and maybe Kvetoslava’s army didn’t have larger numbers than the remaining part of the Venedian forces, but her soldiers were definitely more skilled, dedicated and truly prepared to die for their beautiful leader. Kvetoslava was preparing her northern army for attack.

“Are you ready to crush our enemies and end their tyranny?” shouted Kvetoslava riding her horse in front of her army that started cheering. Avars stationed in the Zobor fortress began to worry.

Nevertheless, defenses of the Zobor fortress were too strong for a full frontal assault. As the attack started, vast amounts of arrows that were coming from the fortress made it look like it was raining and that this battle could not last long.

After about an hour of fighting, Samo sent Drahomir to get Kvetoslava and when she arrived, Samo told her: “Dear Kvetoslava, we could use some cover for our mission.”

“As you wish,” replied Kvetoslava and closed her eyes. Thick mist started to come out of the ground. It was like a smolder coming from an underground fire. Both parties stopped fighting because they couldn’t see the enemy and the Venedian army retreated to defensive positions.

As soon as the whole hill was covered with thick fog, Samo moved out with Vladislav and left Drahomir with the others to hold their lines.

“We have to move quietly but quicky as well,” said Samo and he led the way. After a short while they reached the southern rocky side of the fortress. They could not see a thing.

“Vladislav, don’t forget to just shoot the arrow in the sky and it will find its target,” whispered Samo. He already explained the dream about poisoning Zobor’s water reserves to Vladislav.

Vladislav took the arrow from his leather case, stretched his bow aiming into the sky and shot the arrow. The bizarre thing was that the bow didn’t even make a noise and the arrow was flying in complete silence somewhere to the northern part of the fortress. Samo and Vladislav didn’t know where it was really flying nor if it even hit something.

So they both went back to their army’s positions. Drahomir asked Samo: “Now what?”

“Now we have to wait,” Samo replied. And so they waited. After hours and hours it was still awfully quiet and the mist was still holding its ground around the whole hill. This way the Zobor fortress was not able to communicate with Nitrava.

Nitrava consisted of a slightly elevated city center with three hills, branched river Nitrava and several marshes surrounding it. These natural conditions provided important defense to the city, but the true key to its defense was always the Zobor fortress complex. Without it, Nitrava would never rise to this kind of importance. The Zobor hill predispositioned Nitrava for greatness.

Avar soldiers were tired from the assault from early in the morning. One by one they went to the fortresses’ water reservoir and drank from its water reserves. They did not realize that the magical arrow went directly into the reservoir and slowly poisoned them all.

In the evening they were all dead. Samo got impatient, so he sent scouts to the main wall and they were able to climb inside the fortress and witness the effects from first hand. The Venedian army captured the Zobor fortress quietly and waited out the whole night to perform their next step.

Avars stationed in Nitrava thought that the fortress is still surrounded by Venedian troops and that Venedians are waiting till the morning to perform a new attack. They were hugely mistaken.

Early in the morning the mist fell and with it the Venedian army stormed the ancient city of Nitrava with its main fortress on the banks of the likewise named river Nitrava. They completely overran the surprised Avars and liberated the city that meant so much to Venedian people. And its shiniest years were ahead of it.

After the turmoil passed and the situation normalized Drahomir asked Samo: “What shall we do with the Avar prisoners?”

“Give the women, children and elderly some food and let them go home to the south, so that they can tell the story of our victory,” replied Samo.

“And what about the men?” asked Drahomir.

“For their enslavement of our people, for all the hardships, terror, abuse and desecration, they will pay the ultimate price. We will reinstate an old Celtic tradition of constructing a wooden cage in the form of a human and we will burn them alive in it. Symbolically on Nitrava’s Execution Hill where Avars used to execute our fellow Venedians,” said Samo. “Fire will cleanse their crimes,” he added.

And so it happened. The burning wooden cage could be seen from Preslav and even from Avar lands in the south. Screams could be heard far and wide and even by the freed Avars fleeing Nitrava, who later ensured a strong echo of this act in all corners of the Avar Empire.

CHAPTER VII - BOGATYGRAD

Nitrava was slowly returning to normal. Samo ordered his soldiers to help the locals to build PERUN's temple inside the Zobor fortress. While inspecting the works, he wanted to discuss next steps with his two scholars Drahomir and Vladislav.

“I have a simple task for you. Prepare messengers who will invite all the chieftains to a meeting in Diyagrad in ten days as it was agreed in the beginnings of the revolt,” ordered Samo referring to an important meeting which was intended after the liberation of Nitrava. “In the meantime, I will oversee the construction works on the new temple and prepare our army for the assault on Vishegrad on the river Dunay,” he added.

Samo knew that although the Venedian army won many battles, the war was not won yet. So he sent mounted scouts to the river Dunay and the southern mountains where the Vishegrad fortress lied well protected. Their goal was to inspect the situation and bring back information about the probability of a successful assault.

By the time PERUN's temple was finished, the scouts came back with bad news. The thing was that Vishegrad lied in the north-eastern part of Pannonia, ideally covered by the river Dunay and mountains as high as Tribech.

The attacking army would have to cross the river Dunay through a ford far away from Vishegrad and then, while on flat land, it would be exposed to devastating raids by Avar horse archers. Such a campaign would claim many lives.

Avars knew that by loosing Vishegrad they would be fully exposed to Venedian attacks, because Avar heartland south of Vishegrad was merely flat land, and it would be only a matter of time until they would loose their empire. That's why they acted fast and concentrated their strength in the mountains around Vishegrad.

“We should have never lost Vishegrad. Together with Preslav it forms the only effective defense against southern influence,” thought Samo to himself.

Samo and all the subcommanders of the Venedian army attended the lightning the fire ceremony at PERUN's temple. This was accompanied by animal sacrifice. The Zhrets* lit an eternal fire that had to burn constantly. He was the only one that was allowed to add wood to the fire and he was fully responsible for the fire. Then the Zhrets killed several types of animals and threw their guts but also good meat right into the fire to please the thunderer god.

The temple consisted of a circular wooded palisade with PERUN's idol right in the middle of the circle. In front of the idol was the eternal fire.

"From now on PERUN will protect our city of Nitrava and we will worship him not only as our highest god, but also as the patron of our city!" shouted out the Zhrets and the ceremony ended with a feast.

The next day Samo ordered Slavomir to strengthen Nitrava's city walls, but also to focus on two hills south of the town center, and he left with Drahomir, Vladislav and Kvetoslava for Diyagrad to attend a meeting with all the chieftains that joined the revolt against Avars.

On their way they had to stop on Marhat. Vladislav was eager to see Miloslava again. She was already healthy and full of life. Drahomir and Vladislav agreed to ask their loved ones to marry them and so it happened. They got engaged right on Marhat.

After resuming the journey, as they were crossing the river Morava, Samo noticed elevated places forming islands within branches of the river. "This looks interesting," whispered Samo.

"What do you mean?" asked Drahomir.

"I had something on my mind for a longer time. Let's just have a short break here," replied Samo.

So they left the horsers by the river with Miloslava and Kvetoslava and went for a walk. Samo was trying to get to the highest point within the river branches. It wasn't that easy, because the area was extremely bushy. Samo had to use his sword to cut his way to a small mound.

"It's very close to Diyagrad, but that could be beneficial. After all this is an ideal site for what I was going for," he thought to himself.

At the same moment Vladislav came to a small grove. He was somehow drawn to this place. In the middle of the grove was a tiny lake. Vladislav sat on the ground next to the lake and just enjoyed the silence.

* Zhrets - Venedian pagan priest

This idyll did not last long. A thick ray of light came down from the clear sky heading directly into the lake. Water in the lake started to boil instantly and out of it came a huge figure dry as if the lake wasn't even there. It had a large hammer in its hands and steel pliers attached to its belt.

Vladislav was in a shock, but still able to get at least one word out of him: "SVAROG!"

SVAROG was the blacksmith of the gods, creator of the world and all living beings. Probably the ugliest of all gods who had paradoxically the most beautiful wife, the goddess of love called LADA. His working tools were the hammer and pliers, which he gave to mankind and taught it the craft of metal casting using the much needed fire.

"PERUN asked me to reward you for your bravery and for the restoration of his patronage over Nitrava. That's why I made you this bow and quiver. Noone else will be able to use them," said SVAROG.

"Thank you, almighty keeper of the fire in the sky," replied Vladislav.

"One last thing. Other gods including me are displeased with you bulding only temples for PERUN. This has to change! Do you understand me? Never forget that if your people will believe in us, we will protect them and when they stop, they'll be doomed," said SVAROG seriously.

"Of course. It was wrong of us to neglect other gods," replied Vladislav.

SVAROG nodded, turned around and disappeared in a glaring ray of light.

Samo and Drahomir came running towards Vladislav. "What happened?" asked Samo.

"Not much," replied Vladislav smiling. "I just got some godly presents," he added with a smile and all of them moved on.

It seemed a long time they left Diyagrad and now they were in front of its gates again.

Samo came to the main square as quickly as possible, he jumped off his horse, ran towards his house where his beloved Drahoslava was hanging washed clothes on a string. Samo surprised her completely and gave her a warm and long hug.

Chieftains from all corners of the revolting Venedian lands came to the meeting. They had time to chat a bit during a splendid dinner. These were the times of cooperation between Venedian tribes, an important heritage from hundreds of years ago, when they lived together in their old homeland to the east.

The eldest chieftain stood up, raised his glass and called out: “To all our successes!”

“Hurra!” shouted the others.

The eldest chieftain had a sip of wine and started talking: “My dearest Samo, without you all of this wouldn’t be possible. We owe you so much, therefore we, the chieftains of Venedian tribes that revolted against Avar tyranny, decided unanimously that we want to lead our new Union.”

He had another sip of wine and continued: “You must understand that we love our freedom and this offer is not for a lifetime. We would meet every year to decide whether you stay in your position. We would elect you only upon complete satisfaction. So it’s up to you. Do you want to take our offer and rule us wisely and fairly?”

“I humbly accept the proposal,” replied Samo.

“So it’s done. I’m pleased with your decision. What’s your first order as our ruler?” the eldest chieftain asked.

“I have a vision of building the greatest city our lands have ever seen. It will be large, strong, oriented on production of high quality goods and the most important trade crossroad which will make it wealthy. Wealthy as no city in our lands before. People from all over Moravia, Bohemia, Carantania, Silesia, Vistulania and from the mountains will trade there in huge amounts and they will call it the wealthy city,” explained Samo his vision.

“Bogatygrad*. That sounds so stunningly,” replied the eldest chieftain. “And where should it stand?” he asked.

“Right between the branches of river Morava. To the north-east from the city of Diyagrad so that they can help each other out and cooperate closely,” replied Samo.

And thus the meeting did not only allow a born foreigner to rule Venedian people, but it also laid the foundation stone for a great city that would play an important role for Venedians in hundreds of years to come.

Venedian chieftains did not agree with a campaign into Pannonia and the heart of the Avar Empire. They were tired of endless wars and Samo understood them. As he was leaving the meeting, Vladislav tried to speak with him.

* Bogatygrad – Wogastisburg as mentioned in the Chronicle of Fredegar

“Have you thought about who’s going to be the patron of the new city?” asked Vladislav.

“Not yet. Do you have something in mind?” replied Samo.

“We have neglected our many gods besides PERUN. If this city should become a great trading point, then its patron must be a skilled craftsman. SVAROG would make a great protector of the city,” explained Vladislav.

“You’re right. So be it,” agreed Samo.

“Samo, you wanted to speak with me?” asked Drahomir who was also coming out of the meeting room.

“Boys, and I can still call you boys, because only tomorrow you’ll become real men. You will marry your loved ones and then I will leave for Nitrava. I must be as close to our enemies as it is possible. This will ensure that Avars won’t have a grasp at our lands again. Ragnahar will assist me,” said Samo moved by the changes.

“I have assignments for you two. Drahomir, you will stay here and supervise the construction of the new city. I will send you the best builders from our lands to make it happen. Vladislav, you will go to Preslav and defend it together with Carantania from possible Avar attacks.

Next day was Saturday, LADA’s day, the day of love. Everything was prepared for the weddings. Drahomir with Kvetoslava and Vladislav with Miloslava approached the Zhrets. The men were dressed in newly made leather armors and the ladies in long white dresses with freshly cut flowers in their hair.

The Zhrets started with singing praises towards the goddess of love LADA. He asked her to accompany the two couples through life so that their love never fades.

The men gave apples to their ladies as a symbol of fertility and got decorated daggers in return as a symbol of strength. Then the Zhrets grabbed Kvetoslava’s hand and put it in Drahomir’s hand, the same with Miloslava and Vladislav.

“You’ll be forever bound by this promise. From now on you’re one. Now go and celebrate!” said the Zhrets and the two couples started walking away from the Zhrets while others were throwing dried grain onto them to bring them luck on their journeys.

The celebratory feast was taking place in the largest house in the city. According to tradition, the newlywed wives could not touch the threshold of a house, so the men had to carry their wives into the house.

After all the guests sat down the newlywed wives started cutting a huge honey cake. Only after everyone tried it the feast could start. And it was a big one. Piles of food, barrels full of wine and mead with music and dancing till the morning. Only around midnight some of the guests put on masks and played the tales of brave heroes that liberated their lands.

The next day in order to strengthen their love and honor the goddess LADA, the newlywed helped to plant a birch grove near the river Morava. It would symbolize their growing relationships and beauty that it would bring them and at the same time make LADA happy, because birches are her trees.

CHAPTER VIII – CLOTHAR

Years have passed and Samo came to Bogatygrad to oversee training of his daughters. They were still young children but they already knew their bows. A routine training of archers within city walls was planned for today. Soldiers cleared out a quarter of the city while young and older archers trained how to defend the streets while retreating. Young archers shot only at targets attached to buildings and older ones also trained shooting while a swordsman with a target shield was running towards them and screaming obsessively.

This kind of training taught them to use the environment they knew to their advantage. The girls were handy and learned fast. Later on, standard shooting from a city wall was on the programme. Archers stood firm on the palisades and shot at markers outside the city that were equally spaced from each other. The trick was to get a feeling in their hands and to aim at the right angle and hit the target or at least get the distance right.

This is how superior archers were selected out of the newcomers and they earned the right to get special attention within their new profession. Samo had in mind to use this system in other corners of his empire as well. He knew that if people focus too much on trade, agriculture and farming, they'll be too vulnerable in case of a foreign threat.

More and more Venedian tribes joined the Union. Whole historical regions like Bohemia and Carantania enriched the Union, which grew into an important player in Europe. Chieftains of all the tribes were satisfied with Samo's leadership and it was once again time to prove it in a vote.

Samo was travelling with Ragnahar, escorted by Samo's personal guard, to the Bohemian fortress Vishegrad lying on the river Vltava. It was an important center in the heart of Bohemian lands. Samo was welcomed exquisitely by the locals. Later he dressed more discreetly and took Ragnahar to a local tavern to have a beer or two.

“To our health!” said Samo followed by Ragnahar: “To our health!”

After one gulp Samo stated: “Aakh, you simply need to go to Bohemia to have the best beer. Czechs really know how to satisfy their desires by food and beer.”

“And beautiful women,” added Ragnahar looking around. After having another one, both went to prepare themselves for the evening meeting. The meeting went without any surprises. Samo was re-elected as ruler of the Union and a sumptuous feast followed.

As all the chieftains were drinking and talking to each other, Ragnahar approached Samo: “A Frankish messenger came and he would like to see you.”

So they went to a quiet room and the messenger handed over the message. Samo realized that the message comes from the King of the Franks, Clothar II. The Frankish messenger spoke: “Our dearest king died and his final wish was for me to bring you this message.

The message stated:

“Honorable Samuel,

I have done many cruel deeds in my life. Only God will judge me for my sins, but I would like to make up for at least one of them.

When I was young I fell in love with a Venedian slave who was toiling away at our court. She died during childbirth and left me alone, only with you. I couldn't let anything happen to you, so I arranged for a local merchant family to raise you as their own.

You're my eldest son and part of the House of Merovingian. I always followed your achievements. You were able to pull down the Venedian people into action and thus indirectly protecting the Kingdom of Franks from barbarian attacks. You've proven yourself even though you have more of your mother in you.

I would never tell you about your roots, but I assume that Dagobertus found out about you and he sees you as a threat. I want my empire to stand the test of time and not fall into the hands of some barbarians like it happened with great empires in the past. Protect my legacy.

My final wish is for you to not speak about this to anyone, to not claim any titles in the Kingdom of the Franks, to not harm my son and successor Dagobertus and to burn this message after you read it.

Take my final wish as sacred.”

“Signed King of the Franks, Clothar II. of the House of Merovingian,” said Samo to himself.

Samo stood up and threw the message into the fire. He thanked the Frankish messenger and offered him food and something to drink for the ride back. Then Samo returned to the meeting of chieftains where a heated discussion was going on.

One of the chieftains spoke out fearfully: “I truly hope that we won’t be faced with them in our lifetimes.”

“They won’t reach Europe in a thousand years,” replied another mockingly.

Samo asked the bystanding Ragnahar: “What are they talking about?”

“There’s a new religion emerging in Arabia. In my opinion, it’s truly necessary to talk about it right now,” replied Ragnahar sarcastically.

“You’re right. I need to talk to the chieftains,” said Samo and interrupted the not so fruitful discussion.

“Dear chieftains of Venedian tribes, we need to discuss urgent matters. I’ve got a message saying that an important change happened with our neighbor, the Kingdom of the Franks. Its ruler Clothar the second died,” explained Samo and the room went quiet.

“As you know, every such a change brings new circumstances to the table. We want to maintain friendly relations towards our neighbor, but we also need to be prepared for anything. Dagobert, King of Austrasia, will become the new King of the Franks and only time will show what he will be like,” continued Samo.

“How can we prepare ourselves for the changes that will come?” asked one of the chieftains.

“You all will build military training centers in your largest cities as the one in Bogatygrad on the river Morava. Each year you will hold contests for young boys and girls and the most skilled ones will receive the best possible advanced training. Others will receive standard training so that everyone is prepared for the worst. Even your children,” answered Samo.

“I object! My daughters won’t be forced into military training!” shouted one angry chieftain.

“You’d rather for them to be defenseless when it comes?” asked Samo and the chieftain went silent.

“We need to prepare ourselves for anything that’s coming to us. I will do everything in my powers to protect our lands and our people. Now let’s have a toast to our future!” said Samo. He raised his glass and so did others.

CHAPTER IX - DAGOBERT

Another two years have passed. Drahomir's and Vladislav's sons reached seven years of age. They were not children anymore and this required the ceremony of trimming of their hair. With this ceremony they shifted from their mothers' care to the upbringing by their fathers.

Samo was discussing matters with Nitrava's nobility when Ragnahar approached him. "Samo, Dagobert's envoy is requesting an audience. He's waiting for you in the throne room," said Ragnahar.

"So we shouldn't let him wait," replied Samo and both went to the throne room. Frankish envoy Sicarius was waiting for them together with the young Fredegar as his accompaniment.

"I welcome you to Nitrava, one of my many seats. With whom do I have the honor?" asked Samo and sat on the throne.

"Honorable Samuel, I go by the name Sicarius. King Dagobertus sent me to discuss serious matters with you," replied Sicarius. "Your people attacked, slaughtered and robbed several Frankish trade caravans! Our king demands restitutions for such crimes!" he continued.

"I feel sorrow while hearing these news. However, I did not give orders to perform deeds that you're accusing me of and I was never informed that these acts occurred in our lands," stated Samo.

"You're lying!" shouted Sikharius so loudly that even Fredegar looked at him surprised.

"That's an extremely rash assumption. Weigh your words, honorable Sicarius," replied Samo.

"We should investigate the matter and ..." he continued and was interrupted by Sicarius.

"No! You will pay our king what you owe him! You and your people are bound to our king!" shouted the Frankish envoy in anger.

"Ha ha," Samo laughed. "Even the ground we're walking on and air we breathe belongs to Dagobert. Even we belong to him," replied Samo sarcastically. "Only if he's willing to maintain our friendship," he added with a serious tone.

"There's no way for Christians, servants of the one true God, to live in terms of friendship with dogs like you and your followers," replied Sicarius losing his senses.

“If you are servants of God and we are God’s dogs, then we dare to tear you up with our teeth,” replied Samo and he let Sikharius to be expelled from Nitrava.

As Sicarius and Fredegar were leaving Nitrava, Samo said to Ragnahar: “He came here to start a war. Now we can expect the worst. Ragnahar, I’m grateful for your service, but if you wish to return home, I will understand that.”

“This is my home and I will serve you till I die,” replied Ragnahar. “I never really respected Dagobert and now, according to information coming from Frankish lands, he even disrupted relations with the Austrasian nobility. If he continues with his approach, he will lose everything,” added Ragnahar.

When Dagobert found out about Samo’s words towards his envoy, he allowed his armies that were already prepared for an invasion near the borders, to attack Venedian lands. It wasn’t so difficult to gain support for a campaign against pagans and everything was prepared before Sicarius even set foot onto Venedian land.

The full-scale invasion took place in three main streams. Northern army consisting of Austrasians, central army consisting of Alemannes and southern army consisting of Lombards. Half of Europe’s strength trying to conquer its neighbours, the fearless Venedians.

The attacking powers were simply too overwhelming. Invading forces pillaged settlements, destroyed whole fields with crops and took numbers of Venedian people into slavery. They advanced deep into the heartland and soon they stood in front of the gates of Bogatygrad and Diyagrad.

Frankish and Lombardian forces encircled these cities and thus started the siege that would get down in history as an important turning point of the conflict. At this moment, however, no one knew the outcome.

Right before the surrounding, Vladislav, together with few of his horsemen coming from Preslav, was able to slip through and reach Bogatygrad. Vladislav had to defend Preslav earlier from the invading Lombards, who advanced through all of Carantania and when they turned north towards Moravia, Vladislav couldn’t just stand by and wait for what was going to happen and he left the defense of Preslav in the hands of Carantania’s chieftain Valluk.

“This is it. Now our fate is going to be decided,” said Samo.

“Defenders of our lands!” shouted Samo towards the soldiers prepared to wage the battle of their lifetime. “Today you won’t fight for glory or fortune. Today you’ll fight for survival of your loved ones and everything your ancestors accomplished. It’s either this or slavery!” he continued.

“So bring out everything that’s left. Have no mercy because they won’t have mercy with you and your families. Gods stand on our side and we will defeat these invaders!” Samo finished his energizing speech and the soldiers screamed: “Hurraa, Hurraa, Hurraa!”

As the attack was going to start, Alemannian soldiers carried a body to the forefront and dumped it on the ground. Samo and his scholars realized that it’s the body of their fellow comrade in arms, Ragnahar. “They must have captured and killed him,” said Samo out loud and he added: “We will revenge his death!”

Ragnahar was lured out of Bogatygrad the night before by one of his trustworthy soldiers with false information regarding the capture and holding of Ragnahar’s parents hostage. Ragnahar’s plan was to free them and in the heat of the moment he forgot to inform his superiors. This mistake proved itself fateful. Ragnahar rushed into a trap and his journey ended there.

Franks used wooden walls on wheels to get closer to the main wall of Bogatygrad. The archery fight started. Both sides sprayed vast amounts of arrows on the other side. Clouds started to cover the sky as Vladislav climbed up the highest tower, prepared his miraculous bow and quiver given to him by gods. He reached for the empty quiver and a glowing arrow appeared in his hand. As it was glowing it changed its blue colour into bright white and back to blue.

Vladislav stretched the bow and shot a long arrow over the attacking Frankish soldiers, right into the Frankish reserves waiting to get some action. Frankish soldiers were surprised that this arrow is flying such a distance but they were able to avoid it and the arrow hit the ground. As the soldiers were laughing, thunderbolts started to hit them in a wide radius. After a while the smell of burned meat hit Bogatygrad and other Frankish and Lombardian forces that were shocked with what they saw.

Drahomir did not want to slob around. So he turned himself into a werewolf, jumped over the city’s main wall and ran towards the Austrasian troops. They were prepared for anything except a huge beast, which was in their minds most probably immortal, attacking them and throwing their helpless bodies around the place.

The werewolf pierced the first line of soldiers and advanced deep in the army’s center. There it took a soldier in its jaws and threw him into a group of shocked soldiers. Panic broke out and Austrasians started running away from battle. The attackers retreated for now.

Second day of the battle went on more or less the same way and the attacking armies were rapidly losing their morale and numbers. But Dagobert kept on pushing his commanders to unreasonably risky actions and the battlefield was filled with dead bodies.

During the night Samo organized a counter-offensive, where Venedian forces attacked enemy army camps which further undermined their morale.

On the third day of the battle there was silence everywhere. Samo sent scouts to check out enemy positions and they found out that the army camps are empty. Their enemies left lots of supplies on the spot. They were in a hurry to get away from this nightmare. And from those that retreated a large part deserted the ranks and thus further weakened Dagobert's options.

MORENA was looking forward to this siege. She saw lots of souls for her to take care of. And now she was furious. "Again they fooled me!" she thought to herself and decided to get her retribution a different way.

After the siege was lifted, there was no time and place for celebrations. People mourned those that didn't survive and the city was preparing itself for an important burial. The whole city gathered at the main square where Ragnahar's body was lying on wooden logs. The Zhrets lit the logs on fire and people waited in complete silence until the mighty force of the fire took Ragnahar's body.

As the people focused on the burial, MORENA opened a portal in the middle of the city and went after Kvetoslava, because she had a wicked plan with her. Drahomir sensed her presence right away and when she came to the place of celebration, she approached Kvetoslava, grabbed her and dragged her away. Noone was able to see this except for Drahomir. People only noticed a large number of crows on nearby buildings. Drahomir got angry, transformed himself into a werewolf and started to chase the mad goddess of death.

MORENA quickly opened a portal to the underworld and as she wanted to leap inside the gate, the werewolf jumped on the goddess and bit her scythe. However MORENA was able to get away even though without her scythe. The portal closed itself right away. People of Bogatygrad surrounded Drahomir as he changed back into a person and mourned after his Kvetoslava. "Why did you take her away!" he shouted into the ground.

The goddess brought Kvetoslava to VELES and told him that the mortal is a gift and she will serve him for eternity. VELES accepted the gift and ordered Kvetoslava to take care of all the animals in the underworld.

Drahomir knew that nothing is lost yet. He wanted to pick up MORENA's scythe but he wasn't able to do it. The scythe was usable only by gods. PERUN sent the goddess of love, LADA, to help Drahomir.

As the beautiful goddess appeared in front of Drahomir, all the people of Bogatygrad were astounded. LADA picked up the scythe, slashed the ground wide open into a new portal and said to Drahomir: "Follow your heart." Drahomir jumped inside the portal and disappeared.

PERUN was still furious. MORENA went behind his back and took a human whose time did not come yet. So he summoned the goddess of death in his palace.

"You broke the rules that have been laid down for you and for this you have to be punished!" he spoke and MORENA listened without making a noise. "You'll be forbidden to take any souls of believers till three winters pass," he ordered and MORENA nodded totally ashamed. Then PERUN took the scythe brought by LADA and broke it on his knee.

"SVAROG will craft you a new one when the time comes," concluded PERUN.

Drahomir came down the stairs that had thousands of steps and found himself in a place covered with pure darkness. It was awfully quiet. He looked around and saw something in the distance. As he got closer he realized that it's the gate to the underworld and became happy to see it.

But that moment passed quickly. NIY, guardian of the underworld appeared in front of him. NIY took the form of a three-headed beast that looked like a wolf. The beast was huge and had red eyes with enormous jaws and claws. Drahomir changed into a werewolf and a bloody fight emerged. It had no end. Both were hurt really badly and it was then that Drahomir bit into one of NIY's necks, lifted him into the air and tossed him into the darkness.

The gate to the underworld opened, Drahomir stepped inside and found himself in a wide pasture. There was no Sun but the pastures had plenty of daylight. Lots of animals were walking by and it looked like the pasture had no end. And indeed these pastures were endless. It was the underworld ruled by the god VELES.

Drahomir walked around a bit and then he saw a pathway heading to a small forest. So he followed it and as he was entering the forest, he saw a shiny lengthy palace which stunned him. Wild animals guarded the entrance. As Drahomir approached them the doors opened and he stepped inside a huge throne room. Sitting on the throne was no one else than VELES himself and right next to him was Kvetoslava.

“Drahomir, come closer. You’ve proven your bravery and love. I had to accept MORENA’s gift, but I cannot keep your wife here. Her and your time will come but not now. Your curse will be revoked as well. Go and live a long and fulfilling life,” said VELES aware of Drahomir’s strength and therefore relieved because of his decision to revoke his curse.

“Thank you, mighty VELES,” replied Drahomir, bowed down and left the palace with Kvetoslava. While standing in front of the main gate, Drahomir turned to Kvetoslava and kissed her.

CHAPTER X - RETALIATION

Ragnahar's ashes were put into an urn and buried underneath a larger cairn in the sacred grove right next to Bogatygrad. This place was dedicated to heroes that the people adored.

Tensions between Dagobert and Austrasians were rising like never before. One of the reasons was the transfer of the center of the Kingdom of the Franks from Austrasia to Paris two years ago. Austrasian nobility was enormously displeased with their King and after the shameful defeat at Bogatygrad, their anger knew no limits. And yet none of them knew what was coming.

Venedian lands were significantly weakened and had a lot of rebuilding ahead. Drahomir had the responsibility to defend Moravia and rebuild what was destroyed and Vladislav was given the task to defend Nitrava and the south-east from Avars.

Samo tried to get support from the chieftains for a revenge campaign and liberation of enslaved Venedians and he got their support.

After a short period of time, Samo was standing at the head of his army in Thuringia on Frankish land. In front of him were Frankish forces that called their Sorbian subordinates for support. Sorbs were approaching the battlefield from the north.

"There are our servants. We will use them to feed these Venedian savages," told one Frankish commander to the other. "And after they kill off each other we will finish the job and destroy Samo's army.

But Sorbs did not side with the Frankish Empire.

Dervan, leader of the Sorbs, approached the Venedian army, jumped off his horse and kneeed before Samo. "Honorable Samo, I'm not willing to serve the foul Franks anymore. My people want Sorbia to join your Union and be under your rule. In order to confirm our pledge of allegiance, we will fight for you today and in the future," spoke Dervan, chieftain of the Sorbs.

Venedians defeated Franks with the help of Sorbs and they continued with victories over the following years. Rumors of their invincibility and immortality quickly spread all over Europe. But they never tried to conquer the Kingdom of the Franks and instead took what was previously taken from them and liberated Venedians that were taken into slavery.

Dagobert feared the worst. The Kingdom of the Franks was on its knees and that was thanks to Samo, his half brother who was posing a threat to the throne. At least Dagobert thought so.

Austrasian nobility lost the will to defend the border regions and wanted nothing else than Dagobert gone and so they revolted against his rule.

Dagobert in his paranoia had his half brother Charibert II., King of Aquitaine, murdered and shortly after even his infant son Chilperic. One empire was damned, while another was flourishing. A truly fruitful year when among other things, it also witnessed the death of Muhammad, who planted the roots of a powerful empire that would pose a threat to the Kingdom of the Franks sooner as they expected.

It took Dagobert three years in total to realize that his rule is over and if he wants to keep the crown in his family line, he has to step back and cede Austrasia to his three year old son Sigebert. Austrasians were pleased with this decision and started to pay more attention to the border areas and thus the revenge campaign of Venedians ended.

Dagobert I. continued ruling over Neustria and Burgundy till his death in 639. The Merovingian dynasty was greatly weakened because of two child-kings ruling over parts of the former Kingdom of the Franks, weakening its strength and role in Europe. This decline accounted for the beginning of the end for the Merovingian dynasty.

After years of disunity, weak kings started ruling the Kingdom of the Franks and were overshadowed by their Mayors of the Palace*, the de facto rulers of the Franks. One of the most known Mayors of the Palace, Charles Martel, proved himself worthy by defeating the Umayyad Caliphate in the Battle of Poitiers and by fighting off further expansions of Muslims into the Kingdom of the Franks. Thanks to his son, Pepin the Short, the Carolingian dynasty replaced the Merovingians while becoming the de iure ruling family.

Samo's unending love towards Drahoslava moved even ordinary people and her shortened name Draha acquired the meaning of the word darling. Gods blessed them with happiness and their love never faded.

Samo ruled Venedians till his death in 658, when Venedian tribes returned to their former independent style of ruling and started transforming into principalities. Samo fought Avars all those years and they remained a threat even long after his death, until Charlemagne, King of the Franks and Pepin the Short's son from the Carolingian dynasty, crushed them and the Avar Empire was wiped off the world map for good.

* Mayor of the Palace – executive office in the kingdom

EXPLANATORY NOTES

Acropolis – highest point of a fortress or city

Alemanni – Germanic people from the Upper Rhine

Bogatygrad – Wogastisburg as mentioned in the Chronicle of Fredegar

Carantania – land stretching approximately over present Austria

Carpati – Slavic name for the Carpathian Mountains

Diyagrad – fictional name of the fortress Pohansko near Břeclav

Donar – Germanic thunderer god equivalent to Perun and Thor

Dunay – Slavic name for the river Danube

Gaida – fortress south of Marhat

Great Night - celebration of the spring equinox

Molpir – fortress near Smolenice

Moravia - land stretching approximately around the river Morava

Pannonia - land stretching approximately between the Danube and Sava rivers

Preslav – current city of Bratislava

Venedi – pre-Slavic tribes

Zhrets – Venedian pagan priest

Zubata – other Slavic name for MORENA

written by: Vladimír OLEJ

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