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DMITRO  
MISHCHENKO

# THE SIVERIANIANS

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**DMITRO  
MISHCHENKO**

**THE  
SIVERIANIANS**

**A NOVEL**

**KIEV  
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Translated  
from  
the Ukrainian  
by  
Oles Olexiv

The Siverianians were one of the many ancient Rus tribes, which inhabited the north of present-day Ukraine. In the 9th century AD they were the first to confront the Khazar conquerors, who left a deep, but still mysterious trace in local history. Written in succulent, lively language, the novel is an enthralling blend of battle scenes with the tragic story of the Siver Princess Chorna and the bondman turned knight Vsevolod, the heroes of a folk ballad still sung in those parts of the Ukraine.

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## THE FALCONRY

A party of splendid-looking riders emerged, at last, from the thicket of a primeval forest and halted before a clearing overgrown with tall grass. The gallant horses would not stand still; well-grazed on country pastures, they restively tried to rush ahead and reared when reined in. The riders were hardly aware of it, though: they searched with their eyes for the animal trail which had led them there. They had been following it through the thick and cool depths of forest ravines and had not lost it amidst tree roots mired in the mud and entangled with creeping plants. They had been able to trace it when it wound among age-rotten piles of wind-fallen wood, many of which reached as high as the stallion's belly. But as soon as the trail reached this clearing, it vanished in the high grass.

A young girl rode in front. It had been her idea to go to Swan Lake for a falcon hunt. She was a daring girl and had not been discouraged by the prospect of having to follow unblazed trails across thick woods. She had heard from the minstrels about a mysterious lake on the left bank of the Desna River, and the huntsmen were forced to comply with her whim and lead her through the virgin woodland to the peaceful haven of swan flocks. For she was the princess and not to be argued with. Besides, she made few men want to contradict her. Kind-hearted and beautiful, it was not only the steward who now headed her hunting party that she had captivated. The Prince himself indulged her, and every one of his warriors, whether a young lad or a full-grown man, would readily have died for her.

The princess was the pride and glory of the City of Chernihiv. Her beauty was talked about not only in the nearby towns, but also beyond the confines of the Siverianian land. Many an envoy had ridden to Chernihiv from foreign parts to ask for her hand, many a prince had bowed his proud head to this gentle maiden. Yet Princess Chorna remained unyielding: she wouldn't hear of wedlock. Instead, she preferred to roam through the surrounding forests or else go hunting in some remote corner of her father's domain — mostly on horseback, but sometimes also by boat. She could be seen in the upper reaches

of the wide Desna, on the untrodden banks of the Snov, but most often on the Strizhen and the Bilous. To tell the truth, she also liked to go out with other girls to pick flowers in the fields and to spend holidays in the company of young people, both inside and outside the city. Most of all, however, she loved hunting.

Huntsmen who watched her venturesome escapades, kept wondering. It looked as though a son, not a daughter, should have been born to Prince Chorny. A son and a real warrior.

There she sat in the saddle, firmly and confidently like a man. A light purple cloak of precious sheer cloth concealed from the curious eye the slim waist girded with a sash and shoulders that weren't broad or square enough for a man. Her riding boots of soft leather stuck into gold stirrups were half-hidden by the loose trousers so useful for horse riding. Nor did even her fur hat distinguish her from the huntsmen, for such sable-trimmed hats were worn by all high-born courtiers; and its tall blue crown, tilted backward, hid from view her thick maidenly braids. Her horse was prancing under her, and the princess checked it with the reins while she waited for the gamekeepers sent to look for the lost trail to return.

"Well?" she asked the first scout approaching the company. "Have you found it?"

"No, Princess," the man replied. "That trail is old indeed, it must have become overgrown with grass."

The girl did some thinking.

"What shall we do?" she asked the gamekeepers.

"It looks like we should take to the left," one of them suggested. "That way, along the forest. We might hit upon it there."

The princess was hesitant. She cast a long glance about the clearing and finally nodded in consent. However, she had hardly turned her horse when she heard a gamekeeper cry happily:

"Look, Princess! Swans!"

Indeed, two swans had just appeared on her left, flying from behind the thick, dark pine forest.

The girl measured the distance by eye, did some reckoning and then spurred on her stallion, letting loose the reins. Breaking into a gallop, the horse darted along the edge of the forest to intercept the birds. The purple cloak fluttered in the wind, and it seemed that it might be torn

off at any moment, or even unhorse the rider, now bent low over the mane. Presently, however, the princess reined the horse in, took out a falcon and let it loose on the swans.

The pair must have noticed that a killer was after them, for they swerved to the right. However, they were not destined to escape: the falcon was noticeably gaining on them, climbing higher and higher.

The huntsmen did not wait to see the outcome of the chase. The chase had already absorbed and excited them, and nothing could hold them back now. Every one of them strove to be ahead of the rest, to be the first to pick up the downed swan. So did the princess. Her rich-maned steppe horse was flying across the clearing like a gust of wind, trampling the grass and jumping with habitual ease over skeletons of animals defeated in earlier fights. The horse understood its mistress: if she had given it its head and kept urging it on, she did not expect it to lag behind. So the stallion was flying ahead, doing its best, its lush mane streaming in the wind.

A forest brook crossed their path. The princess let go of the reins, and the horse flashed into the air like lightning to clear the narrow stream without slowing down.

The falcon had meanwhile risen high over its prey and swooped down over one of the birds. Apparently, the attack failed, because the swan only lost speed, but did not fall, and kept flying after its mate.

The falcon rose once more and attacked again. After the third attack, it clawed the injured swan and fell down together with it.

The clearing shrank and converged into a narrow pass. This worried the princess, for she realized that if the swan fell in the woods it would be much harder to retrieve it, perhaps impossible. She did not have to worry, though; before long the company galloped out of the pass to find themselves in a big pasture. Herds of horses were grazing nearby, and some men were standing at a place over which the falcon had been hovering.

Princess Chorna was the first to halt her horse beside the men and jumped down, beaming with delight.

"I can see that the young lady is overjoyed," a stern-looking man, well on in years, said casting a hostile glance at her. "She's happy that the bird is dead. Doesn't

she know that there aren't only hunting falcons in this world? There are also hawks that can suddenly stop the joyous flow of her own life."

Taken aback, the girl did not dare pick up the dead swan that was lying flat at her feet. She just stood there, her embarrassment making her even prettier. Then her courtiers rode up, and it remained unclear whether she would have been able to find a fitting riposte to the old man's harsh rebuke.

"Who are you?" the steward demanded loudly, guessing that the stranger had censured the princess in some way.

The old man's countenance became even more forbidding, showing his wrath.

"I'm Osmomisl, if that means anything to you."

"Why, of course it does," the steward grinned spitefully. "I certainly recognize the Prince's outcast and horsekeeper who was banished to these man- and God-forsaken woods."

"And I recognize the hound," the man said in a matching tone.

"What?!"

The steward spurred on his horse and leveled his spear. But the girl sprang between them.

"Don't you dare, Ambal!" she shouted sternly. "The horsekeeper is right. There's little sense in such hunting. Order the men to return home to Chernihiv."

Ambal breathed heavily with anger but had to obey. Reluctantly, the huntsmen turned their horses after him and silently started on their homeward journey. No one bothered to pick up the slain swan.

When the company was no longer in hearing distance, a youth came up to the horsekeeper — the only witness to his confrontation with the princess.

"Who was that?" he nodded toward the retreating riders.

"One of the Prince's hangers-on," Osmomisl replied grimly. "He tried his hand in all sorts of crimes in Khazaria, then had to seek shelter here. Now he's plowing his way to the court with crime and cunning. He's as vicious as a beast, especially toward Slavs."

An uneasy silence followed.

"I didn't mean him, Father." The youth flushed but plucked up enough courage to continue. "I was asking about the girl. Who is she?"

“The girl?” the horsekeeper spun around and looked his son straight in the eye with menacing suspiciousness. “Didn’t you see? She’s the princess.”

In a short while, he mounted a horse and slowly rode to the pasture. His son stood on the same spot for a long time, watching the girl in the purple cloak until she was hidden from view by the thick-growing woods.

As he turned to get his horse, his eyes fell on the dead swan. Taking its head, maimed by the falcon’s beak, from under the wing, he placed it on the grass and fell to thinking.

It was a she-swan. He was struck with the beauty of the gentle-looking bird. She still seemed alive, and with her wings outspread, it looked as though she might wave them and climb into the sky. But no. She would never again see the skies. Life had ended for her.

The green woods loomed around him. It appeared that there was no peace even up there, in the sky. Somebody’s joy could mean the death of somebody else.

## II

### THE PRINCE AND HIS THOUGHTS

The high rampart over the Desna River offered a view of thick forests spreading below. Black and boundless, they marched into the distance to the very horizon. It seemed they had encircled Chernihiv with purpose. Only to the east and to the southwest were they sliced by the beautiful Desna. Flanked by shaggy trees, the wide deep river rolled its mighty waves past the city ramparts before swinging toward the Dnieper, the good, old Slavutich \* River.

Until now the Siverianians had known only one way from Chernihiv: up the Desna and across the Kursk Portage to the wide Don. From there, one could go down to the shores of Lake Surog \*\* and then on to Tmutarakan \*\*\*. Or else one could sail up the Don to Bila Vezha \*\*\*\*, the Siverianians’ outpost which always gave

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\* Ancient name for the Dnieper

\*\* Azov Sea, called so after Surog, an ancient city on the site of present-day Sudak in the Crimea

\*\*\* Ancient Slav city on Taman Peninsula between the Azov and Black seas

\*\*\*\* Siverianian fortress on the Don

them secure shelter. From that fort crews dragged their boats across to the Itil \* and sailed down to the sea, then across it to the Persians and the Arabs.

That route had been known to them since time immemorial. It had also made them known to the outside world. The Siverianians were now known in all the Saracen lands, even in Baghdad and had long been treated there as welcome guests. The Arabs reduced custom duties on the Siverianian furs and had visited Chernihiv many times themselves, often bringing their own goods for sale. If it hadn't been for Itil and the tribute the Khazars had imposed upon the Siverianians, Prince Chorny would have known how to promote his trade.

Had it been only the tribute, it wouldn't have been so bad.

But the Khazar Khanate was already demanding subservience.

The previous rulers had been willing to let things lie. But now the Khazars had their garrisons in Tmutarakan and even in good old Bila Vezha. And these had always been Siverianian possessions, their secure outposts on the trade routes. In fact, the Khazars had penetrated much nearer than Tmutarakan. Their merchants had established settlements on the Seym \*\*, buying up for a song furs — those treasures of the forest — and shipping them off with caravans to the Saracen markets. Unless something was done, they might flood the whole land, like locust, and beggar the Siverianians by cornering their trade.

It was bad... If he had had sufficient forces he could have struck at the odious Khazars and thrown them beyond the Don. To think what immense riches, what enormous areas were at stake! The Siverianian lands extended from the banks of the mighty Dnieper, across the graceful Donets \*\*\* all the way to the beautiful Don, occupying the whole area between the Great Steppes and northern Rus. That was enough to live in and enough land to grow grain on. More and more people now inhabited the banks of the rivers. Before, it took a whole day and a night to travel from one settlement to another, but now plenty of new towns had appeared. On the Desna

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\* Itil was the name of both the Volga River and the Khazar capital located on it near present-day Astrakhan

\*\* Tributary of the Desna

\*\*\* Tributary of the Don

there were Novhorod-Siverske and Oster; on the Seym stood Putivl, Rilsk and Trubetsk, then Kursk at the portage between the Seym and the Donets. Towns had been mushrooming also along the Donets and the Don: Chuhuyev, Zmiyevo, Nezheholske, Katkovske. In the south there were old Lipove and Pereyaslav, in the north Starodub and Lyubech, then Richitsya on the Dnieper and ancient Snovsk on the Snov\*. Not much inferior to the city of Chernihiv, those new towns stood up in the Siverianian land like reliable watchmen guarding its peace.

If all of them could be brought together, they could drive the rapacious nomads all the way to the Itil River. And they could make them stay there.

It was high time the Siverianians realized what was good for them. The time was right for action, too. Before they had to cling to the Itil and the route to the Arabs. But now a new way had opened — the waterway from the Varangians to the Greeks.

Prince Chorny was looking at the broad mirror of the beautiful Desna and its merry, unruly waves, and wished he could follow them down to the Dnieper, to the Rus Sea\*\*. But he knew that that way, too, was closed to him. Kiev was ruled by Oleg, his sworn enemy. Oleg had hardly seized his throne when he grabbed Lyubech, the finest Siverianian port on the Dnieper. The dog knew only too well what that town was worth: now Kiev controlled all the trade in the North. But if Lyubech had remained in Siverianian hands, they would have traded with the northern lands and left Oleg out of it. Then he would have sulked in his Kiev, cut away from the entire Slav world.

This situation was clearly intolerable. He would yet win Lyubech back to its legitimate owners, or he was not Prince Chorny. All he needed was some time to gather his forces.

Excited by his rosy dreams, the Prince jumped to his feet and rapidly paced his spacious apartments.

His reflections were interrupted by a call from the guard posted by the door, who informed him that a delegation was waiting outside.

Chorny pricked up his ears.

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\* Tributary of the Desna

\*\* i.e. the Black Sea



“What kind of delegation? What do they want?”

“Some townsmen, my Prince. They say the *veche* \* has sent them.”

“The *veche*?” The Siverianian ruler became even more surprised. “But who ordered the *veche* convened?”

“I don’t know, my Prince. It must be the custom. Let them tell you.”

Chorny stared at the guard, as if unable to believe what he had heard.

“Hm,” he spoke at last. “All right, tell them to come in.”

The young guard was about to say something, but did not have the boldness.

“Why aren’t you going?” the Prince urged him on. “Go and bring them in.”

“The townsmen said, ‘Let the Prince come out’,” the guard stammered.

“They said what?!”

“‘Let the Prince come’ — that’s what they said.”

Chorny started violently, but controlled himself and said, somewhat more firmly than was necessary:

“Good, I’m coming.”

This time, the *veche* had not been convened on Assembly Square which separated the Kremlin from the huts of the town folk and served as a permanent place for gatherings. Circumstances had caused the city headmen to call it immediately, and therefore it was to be held right in the marketplace, amidst merchants and such lowly commoners as potters and carpenters. There were even peasants from nearby villages. Heralds had been sent to convene the rest of the high- and low-born populace of the capital city of Chernihiv, and by the time the Prince arrived, the market square was crammed with a noisy crowd. According to custom, the wellborn townsmen were on horseback and carried arms. The remainder of the crowd were barehanded, although some had brought sticks and a great many had their sleeves rolled up, just in case.

Prince Chorny was not facing the *veche* alone; behind him, at a spear’s distance, rode the boyars\*\*, and still farther behind followed a large escort in splendid attire, armed from head to foot. The Prince was also dressed for

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\* People’s assembly in medieval Slav principalities

\*\* Top noblemen serving at the court

the occasion. A sable hat with a glistening purple crown adorned his head, and over the kaftan, ornamented with lace and trimmed with gold braid, he wore a light-blue cloak lined with flaming-red foreign cloth. The cloak was so long that it reached the croup of the horse, making the rider an impressive sight to behold.

Checking his steed with his right hand, Chorny stroked his mustache with the other, closely and sternly observing the crowd from under his knitted brows. He sensed the mood of the gathering, but, as protocol demanded, let his heralds speak first. Although the Siverianians had assembled not by his order, the Prince nonetheless sent his herald to convey his respect to the citizens and commoners and the whole of the populace of Chernihiv and its environs.

"Brethren!" one of the heralds intoned. "The Prince sends his respects to the Captain and bows to..."

"Enough!" the commoners' strong voices interrupted him. "May the Prince come out to us. We want to see him with our own eyes!"

Chorny did not listen to the report of the confused and somewhat frightened heralds. He sent forward his prancing gray stallion and silently rode to the *veche*.

A broad-bearded Siverianian, one of the town elders, rode out to meet him. Pointing to a group of men covered with road dust, the elder said:

"My Prince! These men have come to us from the Don and the Donets. The Pechenegs are plundering their land, burning their towns, tying up their people and driving them into captivity. You are our Prince, and it is your duty to protect us from the nomads' swords and outrages."

"Call us to arms, Prince and lead us to the Don!" voices came from the crowd. "We aren't strangers to those people — they are our blood kinsmen!"

"Today the steppe tribes are ravaging the Don, and tomorrow they may show up on the Seym or even the Desna," other voices echoed.

Chorny waited for the proper moment and abruptly raised his sword.

"Brethren!" he began after a pause. "I fully share your concern and your indignation. As your Prince, I do promise to secure peace in the Siverianian land. Not later than today, I shall send envoys to Itil. The Khan takes

tribute from us, so he is obliged to defend us from a foreign invasion."

For a moment, the *veche* was silent, obviously stunned by such an unexpected speech. But the silence lasted only a fleeting moment.

"What?!" the crowd gasped in one voice. "Is that all?"

"That's some news the Prince has told us! And what are we paying tribute to you for?"

The bearded elder came forward.

"My Prince!" he shouted, overcoming the din. "The Khazar Khanate can defend us no more. It's barely holding out itself, weakened as it is by those unending wars — first against the Arabs and now against the Pechenegs. It's high time we thought of how we could defend our lands ourselves."

Deep in his heart, the Prince was pleased. He had not expected to hear such a demand from the assembly. Yet outwardly he remained cautious and reserved.

"I agree, Brethren: it's time we did something about our own defense. But who'll defend us? Only my regiment."

"We have a large country," a man protested somewhat hesitantly. "And our warriors are brave..."

"This is true," the Prince agreed hastily. "But times have changed. Nowadays, anyone who wants peace in his land does not rely upon his militia alone. No, he builds up a permanent force — and a large force at that, not like our guards."

"So, what's the problem?" those in front wondered. "Who's preventing you from raising a big army?"

"Have you forgotten about the Khanate? The Khazars do not allow us, their vassals, to have a large army."

The crowd clamored even louder.

"We advise the Prince not to ask their permission," said the town elders.

"That's right! Well said!" the commoners supported them.

"And for an excuse send a complaint to the Khanate. Tell them we're entitled to our own defense since they're unable to protect us, even though we pay tribute to them," somebody said in a coarse voice.

The Prince grasped at once that the advice came from one of the oldest elders and therefore replied in a polite, if somewhat cautious tone:

"Your words bespeak much wisdom, Father. Yet the Khanate cares only for its own interests. It's useless trying to convince the Khazars with wise words."

"There's another source of strength, our Prince, besides Slavic wisdom."

"Wherein does our esteemed Father see it?"

"In unity with our neighbors, our brothers by kin and blood."

The Prince leaned forward.

"With whom, exactly?"

"With the Kiev Principality."

Chorny drew himself up in the saddle, gripping the reins.

"Never! The Prince of Kiev treacherously seized our town of Lyubech. He's trying to stifle us no less than the Khazars."

A line of supporters formed behind the old man.

"You may be right there, our Prince," one of them said. "But what about a war alliance?"

"An alliance with an enemy?"

"An alliance with the Polianians — the tribe which stood up gallantly against the strangers and has already rid itself of the Khazar yoke."

"It's the wrong time for settling scores, Prince!" voices echoed all over the marketplace. "The Pechenegs are worse enemies. If we don't stand up together now, one and all, they will plunder and burn us. Our whole land will be ruined!"

Chorny looked pensive. He thought he would hardly be able to win the gathering over to his point of view: they were nearly unanimous in opposing it. Nor could he accept their counsel. No, he definitely could not. The elders were shortsighted, for all their wisdom. They failed to see through Oleg's intentions and did not realize what Lyubech was worth as the key to that new route down the Dnieper to the Greeks.

"Let it be known to you, our Prince," the bearded elder's voice thundered over the square, "that we have gathered here not to change our ruler, but to save our country from calamity. Our men are brave warriors. Build up your army, call up the militia and lead us to battle." He paused for breath. "And remember that a victory over the Pechenegs will force both Oleg and the Khazars to talk to you in a different way."

Awaken from his reflections, Prince Chorny heeded the man's words, feeling inner excitement. What was he saying? A victory over the Pechenegs would make both Oleg and the Khazars speak differently with him? That much was obvious. This would be a wise move: the Siverianians should take up arms not against the Prince of Kiev, not even the Khazars, but against their common enemy, the Pechenegs. And if his men were successful in the field, his whole principality would gain in importance, and he, the Siverianian Prince, would be somebody to reckon with. And then... then it would become clear against whom he should turn his army next. An army was not a militia — it was a permanent force at his command.

Chorny again raised the heavy princely sword and, waiting for the din to die down, bowed his head to the *veche*.

“Praise be to God for your wise counsel, brethren! I bow deeply to you and I speak: let it be so. We've made our decision.”

### III

#### UNWANTED GUESTS

First, the Salt Way went through a thick pine wood. Beyond there were pastures, and then forests and more forests stretching all the way to the Donets River. Across that river, the forests were broken by large glades. Finally steppes, green at that season and vast as the sea, unfolded before the eye.

For many centuries the Siverianians had been travelling along the Salt Way, carrying their goods to Itil and bringing salt from the salt lakes along the coast of the Surog Sea. But on that day, the morning silence along the road was disturbed by a noisy party of hunters, unusually numerous and strangely agitated. Chorny rode at the head of it, right with the scouts, as the first among the boyars and other highborn courtiers. His horse was restless, trying, every now and then, to break into a gallop along the hoof-trodden road. The Prince could not sit still in the saddle. He would have gladly spurred on his gray stallion and flown along that solitary road, the only

path through those high-growing woods, away from its oppressive narrowness into the open spaces of the steppes and on to the sea.

Today, Prince Chorny was in high spirits and he breathed easily there in the open, under the clear blue of the sky, amidst the surrounding freshness. Most of all, he was pleased with his princely affairs. With every passing day, Chernihiv was becoming more impregnable, turning into the Siverianians' most formidable fortress. His army, too, was becoming stronger, swelling in number and improving in skill. In another month or two, his men would be ready to take on the Khazars and possibly even the Pechenegs. So far, those steppe predators had been making their incursions in small bands that apparently were led by some plunder-happy chieftains acting on their own authority. Well, he would make use of the situation, smashing one band after another, spreading terror among the Khazars, until his fame reached the Khan. Fear had a hundred eyes: he would be widely talked about both in Kiev and Itil, as well as all over the Pecheneg steppes. The Khan would then have to view Chernihiv in a different light and treat its prince accordingly. Should the Pechenegs send a large horde against him, he would call up the militia. The *veche* would support him. After all, he had only followed its counsel when he had dispatched a large force led by a captain into the steppes against the Pechenegs. If all went well, he would soon lead his army into the field. Let them steel their will in battle, seeking honor for themselves and glory for their Prince. Yet he would not join forces with Oleg. No matter what the *veche* might demand of him, he would not seek an alliance with the Principality of Kiev. Oleg was even more dangerous than the Khazars, who were clearly recognized by everybody as enemies and as a tribe alien to the Siverianians. Besides, they were far away. Oleg, on the other hand, was quite near, and the Polianians were closely related to the Siverianians by blood and kin. An alliance with them would not be difficult to bring about; but it could only mean submission to the Kiev Prince and loss of the forefathers' throne. No, he could not have peace with Oleg, at least until Lyubech, that hereditary Siverianian stronghold on the Dnieper, was restored to him. The merchants insisted on it, and it was a matter of vital importance for the entire principality — and he would not yield.

The sound of a galloping horse reached his ear, and in a short while, a scout appeared from behind a bend of the road and turned the horse straight toward the Prince. The man's face wore a worried expression; he did not look like a huntsman at all.

"What's happened?" Chorny was the first to ask, alerted.

"Khazars, my Prince!"

"Where? How did they get there?"

"Right behind this forest, in the first clearing. They must have stopped for the night there."

"What are they doing now?"

"Getting ready for the road."

The retinue drew closer around the Prince and heaped advice on him. Chorny heard them out but made his own decision.

"The scouts shall observe the Khazars from hiding," he ordered. "Try to find out how many of them there are and where they're heading. The rest shall return to Chernihiv at once. Khazars had better be received in force with plenty of weapons; then they're easier to handle and more amenable to reason."

Upon returning to the Kremlin, the Prince warned his captains of a possible attack, reinforced guards at the outer gates, alerted his regiment but remained alarmed all the same.

Thoughts engulfed him, driving him from one extreme to the other and filling him with anxiety. What if the Khan had already learned from his spies in the city of his intentions to build up the army? Without previous clashes with the Pechenegs and successes won in the battlefield, he would find it difficult to explain his course of action. The Khan wouldn't forgive him such defiance. He wouldn't tolerate it — never. Kiev had taught him to be wary.

The scouts set the Prince's heart at ease for some time: there were not more than three hundred Khazar horsemen in that forest. But now their presence there appeared even stranger: if the Khan did not contemplate a military campaign against Chernihiv, what was that force doing there? What mission had brought them into the Siverianian woods? It was certainly still too early for collecting tribute.

Shortly after lunch, a messenger came galloping from the Desna Gate and reported that the Khazar unit was headed by the Chaushiar, one of the Khan's top dignitaries.



who now requested to be allowed into the city of Chernihiv.

The Prince ordered the gates open and the Khazars entertained with hospitality, as was the Slay custom.

The best men of Chernihiv came out to welcome the Khazars, including the Intendant, the Chamberlain, military commanders and the Prince's counselors. Such a reception obviously pleased the Chaushiar who departed himself correctly and looked rather spry for his years. He would rest later, but first his mission and custom demanded that he bow to the ruler of the Siverianian land, a friend and brother of God's vicar on Earth, the glorious Khan.

Chorny waited for him in the reception hall, sitting on the golden throne in his splendid princely attire. The Chaushiar walked between the two lines of the receiving party and, pressing his hand to his heart as a sign of special respect, bowed to the Prince deeply in the ceremonious Oriental way.

"Praise be to you, the ruler of the Northern Land!" he chanted.

"Praise be to you, too, distinguished guest," the Prince responded. "May I inquire the reason of your visit? Is it some errand or a misfortune that has brought you to our parts?"

The Khazar dignitary inclined his head again, this time with a slight, barely noticeable nod.

"The sun rises in the Orient, in our land," he smiled at Chorny, "and it goes down in the Siverianian country. A bird begins its life in a nest, but when it grows up, it soars into the sky. Will the Prince believe that my wings are strong already and that it is time for me to visit the land where the sun goes to rest?"

"Your intentions are indeed praiseworthy," Chorny smiled, too. "But I still wonder why a statesman of Itil should be desirous of traveling west. For birds prefer to greet the sun where it rises. Don't they like the twilight of sunrise more than dusk?"

"But there are different birds," the Chaushiar joked, and they both broke into a merry laughter.

"It is a pity, though," Chorny went on, "Khazaria's soon will be disappointed to learn that the sun doesn't really come to rest in the Siverianian land but travels on. However, our land is hospitable. He who comes here with

good intentions will have every opportunity to admire its beauty."

"Oh, I cannot express my gratitude to you, fair Prince," the Chaushiar bowed again. "The Khan shall not forget your amicability toward him."

"How's our Protector feel? What news in the Khanate?"

"Praise heaven, all is well. The Khan is crowned in glory and enjoys excellent health. He sends his greetings and begs you to accept his modest gifts from my hands."

The envoy bowed once again, his hand pressed to his heart, while Chorny stared at him in bewilderment, unable to find proper words.

"Gifts to me, his liege? Why?" the thought flashed through his mind.

Recovering from his surprise, he thanked the Khazar.

"I bow my head before the generosity of my Protector," he proceeded cautiously. "But pray tell me: why am I to be honored in this way? How have I deserved this sign of the Khan's kindness?"

"The Khan is God's vicar on Earth," the envoy replied just as cautiously. "He ought to know both his friends and his enemies."

"Thank you," Chorny bowed and, turning to his retinue, knocked his staff on the floor.

A footman appeared in the doorway.

"Bring me the steward and the household manager," the Prince ordered.

"Yes my Prince."

Ambal slipped through the retinue to the throne and humbly bowed to his master.

"I swear by heaven," he whispered to himself, avoiding the Khazars' eyes, "they're eyeing me so intently that they must have recognized me!"

"Make it known to the people of this city," the Prince meanwhile instructed him, "that the closest friend of our Protector the Khan and his high dignitary has arrived in Chernihiv. The Prince desires to share his joy brought by this visit with the townsmen and invites them all to a feast. All of them are invited, young and old alike. And now," he added in a lower and softer voice, "show our guests to the royal apartments and see about their rest."

The steps of the unexpected visitors had long died away, the neighing of horses in the courtyard could no longer be

heard and the bustle of the servants had ceased, but the Prince was still pacing his chambers, racking his brain over the significance of these gifts. What did the Khan have in mind? What did he expect of him? Would he ask for his support in the Khazars' conflicts with Oleg or the Pechenegs? Or was all this some kind of trap? These Khazars were capable of anything. If they brought gifts, he had to be on the alert, for there could be a snake's bite in all that verbal flattery. He wished he knew where and when that snake might bite him.

Voices could be heard outside the door. Before the Prince could recognize them, his daughter burst in.

"Father!" she called from the threshold. "Look how this garment becomes me."

She was wearing a snow-white tunic with a light cloak over it of such an intense blue that it blurred the eye. Across her shoulder ran a broad golden scarf that only princesses were entitled to wear by court etiquette. She was holding a bow and arrows.

The Prince looked at her admiringly. She was so beautiful! The girl made one think of a spring flower. Her thick, dark braids, now let loose, streamed down her shoulders in lush, black waves. Her eyes shone with a merry, star-like glitter, and her face was flaming red.

She twirled before him, demonstrating her attire and then pressed herself to his chest, overcome with emotion. He knew not whether it was the touch of her dark-haired head or her ice-melting joy, but the Prince at once felt warmth and comfort in his heart.

"Where did you get this Oriental clothing?" he asked her in a gentle voice. "Has your nurse bought it from foreign merchants, or maybe..."

"But no." The girl lifted her head. "The Khazars have brought this from Itil. They say these are all gifts from the Khan."

"Gifts from the Khan for you?!"

Chorny looked at her fixedly, then grew pale and sank heavily on a bench, as if in exhaustion.

Frightened with such an abrupt change in her father's mood, the girl fussed over the Prince.

"What's so strange about it? Haven't they also brought plenty of things for you — those silks and velvets? And then those Persian rugs! The steward has shown me all that they brought for you, and for me, too... Let me show

you — here's a golden bow with arrows to match. It appears the Khan knows that I love hunting — I've been told he ordered them to present this bow to me as a personal gift from him. But I'm not going to shoot these arrows, definitely not at swans. A golden arrow must carry love, not death."

"Go now, my dear," the Prince told his daughter, stroking her gently. "I need to be alone for a while."

"Oh no, Father," the girl protested. "You must feel unwell."

"Don't worry. You may go, I'm all right now."

Reluctantly, Princess Chorna left the chamber. Back in her room, she stood by the window, thinking.

What was so wrong about these gifts? Why did they appear to worry the Prince?

#### IV

#### FIRE AND LIGHT

Perun, the God of Thunder, was vexed with the Siverianians. Gathering dark clouds over their land, he had called up winds from seas and deserts and was now rushing above the forests, hurling down his deadly arrows of fire with thunder and roar.

The night was pitch-dark and stormy. As soon as a streak of lightning faded away, one could not even see the tip of one's nose, let alone the trees. Everything merged into impenetrable darkness.

Perun continued to rage. Flashes of lightning flared one after another, and every now and then there would sound such a roar of thunder that the trees seemed to tumble down and the earth itself seemed to plunge, rumbling, into an abyss.

A fire was ablaze in the middle of a solid house made of thick oak logs. The flames would now invade the gloomy corners, now recede, as if unable to challenge the night, creeping up on all sides. In front of the fire sat Osmomisl, the forest horsekeeper. His wide beard reached down to his waist, his mustache stirred from the slight movement of his lips, and his gray, bushy eyebrows were knitted giving him a formidable expression. He was praying to the earthly fire before him, asking it to beg the heavenly fire above to desist. He was praying quietly, although

from time to time his whisper would break into a thick bass which resonated in the large room:

*Oh, God, dear God, please come to our rescue,  
You gave us fire — now save it, we ask you.  
Life you gave to people here on Earth,  
We beg you, dear God, be with us henceforth.  
Don't ever leave us in grief or despair,  
Be merciful, God, your sons need your care.*

Alas, the God of the Siverianians, who, in good times, gave them warmth and light, was now apparently unable to prevail upon Perun. The lightning continued to lash fearsome arrows striking the ground with roar and rumble. The storm would not abate; it twisted and crushed trees in the forest and lashed the windows with streams of rain.

Osmomisl listened for some time, calm and composed. Even the fear of Perun failed to shake his will or break his strong character. Then he got up and went to the pantry.

Several minutes later, he returned, bringing a tall jar filled with a ram's bones. Carefully, with sacrificial humility and piety, he threw these into the fire. Then, kneeling on a hide, he raised his long, still strong arms to the sky. Now he was pleading with the God of Thunder himself, begging him to accept the sacrifice and show mercy by sparing his humble dwelling from the lightning.

His son was also sitting by the sacrificial fire. Yet he seemed unperturbed by the peals of thunder and even appeared not to hear the ravaging storm. He just sat there, engulfed in thought.

His father had noticed this and was waiting for an opportunity to talk to him. Presently, he finished the ritual, took the jar outside and broke it lest anyone else used it again to worship some other god. Returning inside, he went to stand by the window, listening to the rustle of the pine forest. Then he turned around and silently sat down on a log covered with bearskins, facing his son.

"Feeling sad, Vsevolod?" he asked in his fatherly voice that was loud but also filled with warmth.

Vsevolod signed heavily.

"Yes, Father. Sorrow has crept into my heart."

"Sorrow? Why?"

"Today I went back to the place where the young Princess's falcon killed that poor she-swan. Do you know what I found there? The other swan, its mate. The poor thing sat by the dead bird and wept. Then it soared high into the sky, gave one last cry — and swooped to the ground. It killed itself beside its mate. I've been wondering, Father, why it did it."

"It's a custom they have," Osmomisl explained. "Swans are faithful in their love. When one of a couple dies, the other one dies too. Among birds swans are unique, you know. For they are truly beautiful, aren't they? And all that's really beautiful dies in a proud way."

Again there was silence. Each of them was lost in his own thoughts.

"But why did you go there, to the place where that swan was killed?" Osmomisl broke the silence. "It's a fairly long way from here."

"I went because I was feeling so melancholy," the lad sighed, as if to emphasize the sincerity of his confession.

Osmomisl became worried. His son's voice and all those sighs were quite unusual for him; yet they sounded strangely familiar. Silently, he stared at Vsevolod, as though trying to remember where and when he had heard that kind of voice.

Finally he spoke: "Until now you've seemed rather happy here in the pasture. You rode horses, hunted forest birds at your leisure, competed with your friends throwing spears and seemed perfectly cheerful and content with life. Suddenly you say that sorrow has crept into your heart. What's happened, my son? What's disturbed your peace of mind in this forsaken place? Has it been this storm?"

Vsevolod shook his head heavily.

"Oh, not that. It's probably been time." He hesitated. "Maybe people, too."

"People!" For quite a while Osmomisl stared at his son somewhat confusedly. "Is it that then? Well, your time has come, you should now mix with people. Only let me give you a fatherly warning: go cautiously about it and don't open up your heart too lightly."

"To none at all?" Vsevolod sounded surprised.

"Didn't I say 'too lightly'?"

"I don't quite understand. I wish you'd rather reveal to

me the true wisdom of living instead of filling me with hopelessness.”

The horsekeeper frowned.

“You’d find it hard to understand. You’re still too young, you haven’t lived amidst people, you don’t know what misfortune is. But I’ve already burned my wings, like a butterfly that’s been singed with fire as it flies toward the light.”

Vsevolod fell to thinking.

“What do you fear from people most of all, Father?”

“Treachery, my son. You may not find friends, but you’ll certainly find enemies.”

“I might. But ...” The lad stumbled and, after a moment’s thinking, added with sympathy, “I now know that you’ve suffered plenty at the hands of the Prince. But, of course, not all men are princes.”

Osmomisl raised his bushy eyebrows and stared into his son’s eyes closely and inquiringly.

“But some women are princesses,” he said. “And — which is worse — there’s at least one young princess.”

Vsevolod turned red as a beetroot and averted his eyes. In the end, however, his youthful curiosity overcame his confusion.

“For the past ten years you’ve been talking to me in riddles,” he said reproachfully, after a pause. “All that time you’ve seemed to regard the Prince as your personal enemy. Now the Princess, too... Why?”

Osmomisl took his time answering. He thought for a long, unbearably long time. Then he lifted his heavy head and stared, sadly and imploringly, into the stormy night outside the window.

“I can only hope you’ll pardon me,” he finally said in his stentorian voice. “There’s a secret I’ve concealed from you. The Prince was not the sole reason for my suffering. I myself was to blame for much of it. It was not sheer malice though, but infidelity and dishonor that drove me to commit a crime.”

“A crime?”

“Oh, my son,” the old man said bitterly. “You can’t imagine how hard it is for me to utter that word. But I’m unable to bear this burden any longer. You’ve grown up and must know... Tell me,” he raised his voice all of a sudden, “would you ... could you pardon my crime?”



"But what kind of crime was it?"

"First tell me whether you'll forgive me."

Vsevolod was at a loss. Never before had he seen his father so guilty-looking. For as long as he could remember, Osmomisl had been courageous, hard and pitiless. Now he had suddenly turned soft. What had he done? What was that heavy burden he had spoken about?

Osmomisl interpreted his son's silence in his own way.

"You hesitate, I see," he said. "Well, judge for yourself then."

"Why should you say that, Father?" the lad protested heatedly. "I do believe that you never committed a premeditated, cold-blooded crime. But do tell me whose infidelity and what dishonor made you do whatever you did."

The father sighed.

"It all happened a long time ago, my son. I was going on twenty-five then and I was just what you are today — young, brave and handsome. I hunted wild beasts without fear and even took on bears with my bare hands... Oh, my son! I was a young man and had a wife. She was an extremely beautiful woman. We lived in harmony and loved each other. I'd go to the woods for a day or two, sometimes as long as a week, and my Roxana would be restless, looking for her husband to return home. How generously she loved me after my return, how she caressed me at night!

"We lived in Snovsk, right by the rampart above the river. Once a party of fur merchants arrived with a caravan of boats. I, too, brought out my skins, but I wouldn't sell them cheap. So I stood there, trying to make up my mind. Then one of the merchants walked straight to me and asked, 'Are you selling?' And I told him, 'Of course I am'.

"Then I realized that the trader was not even looking at the furs, but instead was eyeing me from head to foot. Finally, he said, 'Your furs are very good indeed. Overseas, they'd pay you as much as you ask, without bargaining. If you like, you may travel with me to Arabia. You can sell your furs there, and I'll pay you nicely for your services'.

"He named a price that made his offer irresistible. So I joined the caravan and sailed with it across the sea, to the Arabs.

"I came back in the fall. Then I left again... Oh, my son! I wish I had never seen those foreign lands. Above all,

I should never have touched that gold! It drove me out of my mind and it ruined me.”

“Did something happen in those Arab lands?” Vsevolod asked.

“Something did happen, but back here, at home. Once I returned with a caravan in the dead of night. The weather was stormy, just like it is now. Of course, I couldn’t enter the city that late — all the gates were closed. But then again, the rest of our jolly company were in no hurry to get in. It wasn’t their home city, so they didn’t care if they had to spend another night in a tent. As for me, I couldn’t sit still, let alone sleep. I could hardly wait till I got back home to my dear wife.

“I didn’t wait till daylight, but made my way into the city there and then. Even though it was pitch-dark and a storm was raging, I still knew those ramparts and walls like the palm of my hand. Of course, now I wish I’d fallen from that wall and drowned in the moat... For there ... in our house I caught my wife with the city governor.”

Vsevolod went numb.

“And you...”

“I couldn’t restrain myself, son. I killed them both.”

Thunderstruck by the horrible confession, Vsevolod looked his father straight in the eye, still unable to believe what he had just heard: “...killed them both.”

“And then? What happened after that?” he finally found his voice.

“I was tried. The Prince imposed a double fine for the murder of his governor. He also made us his serfs.”

“Whom do you mean by ‘us’?”

“Me and you. There were only two of us left: me, a widower, and you, an orphan.”

The lad caught his breath.

“Now I see... But why? Why me too?!”

“I don’t know. You’d have to ask the Prince.” Osmomisil paused. After all, your father was a common townsman, and he was the Prince.”

A wave of wrath and hatred surged in the young man’s heart. However, it immediately encountered obstacles and ebbed away.

He’d have to ask the Prince... But what about the Princess? What about that dove of a girl, as beautiful as dawn? Should he forget her? Should he learn to hate her, too? Oh, Gods! Was that what life was all about? Was it like

fire that gave you light but could also burn you? As long as you admired it from a distance, it lured you with its beauty; but if you touched it, you were painfully burned.

The room was still. The father did not know how to comfort his son, and the son could not make up his mind as to what he should do. Deep in thought, he tried to visualize the tawny face of the young beauty, to peer into her eyes, which were as pure as spring water. Would they soothe him? Would they reveal some mystery to him or give him the end of the thread to help him unravel that entangled knot?

Outside the window, the trees were rustling. Thick rain continued falling down, its monotony broken by gusts of wind. Splashing the windows with water, now it receded back into the night and was barely audible, as if in a dream.

The darkness was as impenetrable as before, and no signs of light could be seen anywhere. Yet the storm had retreated behind the woods and dales, and could only be heard as a muffled rumble. The sound was still thick and threatening, like a voice from an abyss.

Finally, Osmomisl broke the silence.

"Forgive me, my only child," he begged in a broken voice. "Of course, I am to blame that you became a serf while still an infant. But try to believe me, I couldn't bear that unfaithfulness."

"Maybe you couldn't." Vsevolod lifted his eyes and stared at his father, sadly and bitterly. "It's difficult for me to judge... It won't be easy for me either to live with what I've learned... Especially here in these woods."

The lad paused and then added resolutely:

"I'll probably go away."

The horsekeeper became alarmed.

"Where to, my son?"

"The Midsummer Feast is coming. There'll be festivities in Zhuri, near Chernihiv. I have a friend, Mladan, who lives there. I will go to stay with him for some time."

The old man's heart went cold.

"The Midsummer Feast, you say? Near Chernihiv?" Shocked by a sudden insight, Osmomisl remained speechless for a while and then shouted: "You still intend to fly into the fire?"

"I want to see the light," Vsevolod replied quietly but firmly.

Their usual roles seemed to have been reversed. The father was sitting before his son in confusion, dumbfounded by Vsevolod's intentions, while the son was stern, composed and sure that he would permit no one to force him to abandon the way he had chosen once and for all.

"Think it over, son," Osmomisl pleaded. "At least take your father's plight into consideration."

"Oh, Father," Vsevolod frowned. "Who am I to teach you? In such affairs one's common sense is of no use. It's the heart that decides in such matters."

"But she's a princess! You'll destroy yourself!"

"So what?" Vsevolod became pensive. "Come what may. It's worth going through fire to get to the light."

## V

### KUPALO, THE MIDSUMMER FEAST

During the day, girls had picked sky-blue larkspurs, fragrant cornflowers, field poppies and St. John's wort. They had also picked some peppermint that was growing by the fences and gone outside the village to fetch some wormwood to keep away witches and mermaids. Of these they had made themselves luxurious festive wreaths and now walked in a merry procession, carrying in front a ritual tree and an idol effigy of Kupalo. The idol, dressed in a woman's frock and adorned with ribbons and necklaces, was also crowned with a huge wreath that was incredibly colorful. Urged on by impatience or the festive mood, the girls were walking fast, outpacing one another and loudly singing the song which had not been heard since the last summer:

*"Kupalo, Kupalo!*

*Where did you spend the winter?"*

*"I spent the winter in the woods,*

*Nights I spent under warm roofs,*

*Feathers helped to keep cold away,*

*I greeted summer in the glades."*

The village boys had not been idle either. Collecting rags and other garbage, they had piled it all in the village headman's yard. Loading up a wagon with it they carried it to a clearing near the Desna. Then they brought plenty

of hay and brushwood to the same clearing, which they had chosen for the festive bonfire, and stacked it all in bundles — enough to keep the fire going all through the night. But as soon as they spotted the girls, they gathered and held council to decide what they should do to steal the girls' tree.

The girls, however, were well aware of the boys' intentions. Forming a close circle around the idol, they bedecked it with more ribbons, flowers, necklaces, rings and strings of beads — all the simple ornaments of the common Siverianian girl. Then they joined hands and walked around the idol, chanting:

*As girls walked around the idol,  
Rainy clouds sailed by.  
But then it rained on my dear red rose.  
The sea was stormy, the valley was dewy,  
And rainy clouds sailed by.  
But then it rained on my green periwinkle.  
As girls walked around the idol,  
Rainy clouds sailed by.  
But then it rained on my shaggy lovage.  
The sea was stormy, the valley was dewy,  
And rainy clouds sailed by.  
But then it rained on my cornflowers...*

Princess Chorna was also among the girls. Deeply disconcerted by her last conversation with her father, she had been unable to stay at home. She had slipped out of the palace the day before and then fled across the river to Milana. Since Chorna's mother had died, Milana had been more of a sister than a mere friend to the young princess. Together they would go to gather mushrooms in the woods or to pick flowers in the meadows; together they would dance on holidays with other girls. The time she spent with Milana in the flower-carpeted countryside made the Princess forget about her loneliness and her sorrow. Joy and happiness would then grow in her heart as naturally as if they had been brought and sowed by a gentle spring breeze.

Now, on the eve of the Midsummer Feast, the Princess felt particularly happy and carefree. At daybreak they had gathered medicinal herbs and later flowers for the wreaths. They had also gone through many an exciting moment

while searching in the nettle for wolf's bane, under which there was often special coal believed to bring good luck. Besides, Chorna had enjoyed running about the meadows and bathing in the fast-flowing, pleasantly cool Desna with the other girls.

All day long, they had been busy and bustling, getting ready for the feast. Now it was almost time to begin. Two large circles could not accommodate all the girls who wanted to participate. Colorful as poppies, they were now dancing around the ritual tree. The boys have flocked both from Zhuri and from Zarichne, another nearby village, and were also quite numerous. They wore wide pants and their shirts, tied with sashes, were richly embroidered along the hems, sleeves and unfastened collars. Their hats were pushed to the back and seemed to cling to their heads by sheer miracle. These village lads were like young oak trees: tall, sturdy, emanating health and strength. Eager to break the girls' circle and grab their tree, they would not stand still even for a moment.

As the sun sank, the first wave of dusk fell to the ground. The lads left the girls alone and went off to obtain the living fire with which the bonfire was to be started.

By a stack of dry grass piled up near the bundles of brushwood, there lay a thick log in which some holes had already been drilled. Inserted into one of the holes was a spindle-like top which could be rotated by means of leather straps fixed to it. Two hefty lads sat down on the log facing each other and, planting their feet against the log, piously gripped the straps with their hands. A third boy pressed the top from above, pouring dry, fine dust onto the log.

The lads worked deftly. The top spun faster and faster, heating the wood.

Other boys crowded around the log and held their breath, waiting for the living fire to appear. Dusk was thickening. The forest wall up on the clearing had drawn even closer, and it seemed that the trees were standing on tiptoe and peering over the young men's broad shoulders, trying to catch a glimpse of what they were doing. Forest shadows covered the whole clearing, also stretching onto the broad mirror of the beautiful Desna.

The atmosphere became gloomy and disturbingly mysterious. But then the log suddenly began to smoke, sparks glimmered, and almost immediately fire burst out — the

sacred living fire! The youths brightened, but as they fixed their gaze on the trembling barely visible fire, their expressions remained alarmed and anxious. For to them it was much more than a fire. Dwellings had been dedicated to it from time immemorial, and it alone could exercise influence upon the heavenly fire, causing it to bring light to the people and to disperse the darkness which bred and harbored evil spirits. It was owing to the living fire that the sun kept returning to the people from the darkness of night, bringing warmth and light, helping them grow their crops and endowing them with the omnipotent force of life. That fire was their hope and their guardian protecting them from evil spirits, famine and barrenness. And on Midsummer Night it was not only an all-powerful but also an all-purifying force.

At the appearance of the fire, the land seemed to wake up. Bonfires could be seen all along the Desna, Strizhen and Bilous rivers throughout the Siverianian country. Timid at first, barely distinguishable behind forests, groves and ravines, the bonfires then suddenly burst into flames all at once, flooding the surrounding areas with light. It was as if bunches of luxurious flowers swayed over the woods. In the hovering darkness, the fires looked particularly majestic.

The people in the clearing also came to life. Shouts and laughter flew, like sparks, to all sides from the bonfire and, bouncing off the high wall of the forest, reverberated under the huge dome of the sky.

The girls again joined hands and wheeled around their tree. The boys, however, did not like such games. Like a gale, they swept through the clearing from all sides, breaking the girls' circle. Then they suddenly lost all interest in the tree; each of them was instead searching for his long-chosen girl, catching her by the hand and leading her to the fire which would cleanse them of evil spirits and also bless their union.

Laughter would not cease; it only changed in pitch every now and then from an even roar to sudden shrills.

Chorna was rushing back and forth amidst the village youth. She was the only girl whom the boys did not dare touch; therefore all the shy girls tried to hide behind her back. So the Princess kept darting about the clearing rescuing her friends. Her face flushed and her eyes sparkled,



like stars, from under her wreath which was pulled down almost to her eyebrows. Her heart, open to beauty and freedom, was overflowing with excitement and joy.

Presently, a couple ran out from the crowd and, holding hands, jumped over the bonfire. Other couples followed suit. Their unceasing motion stirred up the night air so that the fire could not flame up properly, now barely flickering, now bursting out and casting sparks all around.

The sight was so exquisitely beautiful and the shouts and the bustle so lively that there was no room left for doubts or resistance. Chorna suddenly realized that all of her friends had been whisked away from her, one after another. Even Milana had disappeared. Now she was left completely alone. No one had the courage to invite her to make that jump. Even plain, unattractive girls had found partners, but not a single youth dared to approach the Princess.

Chorna kept looking around and began to feel worried. To jump alone would not be proper, and the idea itself frightened her. On the other hand, it was unthinkable not to jump; if she failed to do it, she would be branded a witch!

She would almost make up her mind to jump, but then her resolve would give way to doubts, fear and despair. It was at one such moment of indecision that she felt her hand gripped by the strong hand of a young man. Then she heard a voice:

“Come on, my Princess! Show some courage.”

Chorna had no time to take her breath. She gave a gasp — whether of joy or surprise — and dashed toward the bonfire, led by the youth.

“Ooh!” Panting, she burst out laughing as she landed on her feet. The fire, that all-purifying force, had removed all her doubts and second thoughts, restoring her usual daring and vivacity. “That was really nice,” she said to the lad. “Let’s do it again.”

Now it was the Princess who led him. Happy and joyous, she pulled him ahead to make another jump.

However, this time something went wrong. Either the lad did not time his jump correctly or the Princess jumped clumsily, but her fingers cracked and slipped from his hand.

“My fault!” the thought flashed through his mind. As soon as he touched the ground, he spun around on one

foot, like a top, and caught her hand, pulling her toward him.

"Were you burned?" he asked.

"No, I've cleared it all right. Look," she pointed to her wide woolen trousers and the gold-trimmed hem of her summer caftan. "Not even singed anywhere."

"But we've failed the test of fire," he sighed.

"That's nothing." She waved her hand, disregarding his hint. But when she looked at his face under the light, she stopped abruptly and stared at him fixedly. "Wait." She tried to remember something. "It seems I've met you somewhere before."

"Yes, Princess, it was in the pasture, out in the woods. I'm Vsevolod, the horsekeeper's son."

"Oh!" The girl was obviously glad. Now she recognized his fair curly hair, the nicely arched brows and intent eyes, which had then been somewhat stern but were now sparkling with fire. She also remembered his face, tanned by the winds and bearing a bold expression.

They walked side by side without even noticing that they were not returning to the crowd but rather going away from the festivities.

"I'm really pleased to have met you again, young man," she told him. "As a matter of fact, I've been hoping to see you ever since the day of that hunt."

"See me?" Vsevolod could not believe his ears.

"That's right. Your father raised a lot of noise then. That look he gave me was so hostile that I still can't remember it without shivers. And then he said... Do you remember what your father said about the swan I killed?"

"It seems he said something about hawks."

"Yes, about hawks, too. His words left a heavy load on my heart, as though they'd been a sinister prophecy."

"That's because it was a female, my Princess. Perhaps even a maiden swan."

"Oh, Gods!" The girl looked frightened. "How do you know?"

"My father said so. He said that was also the reason why it was so difficult to find Swan Lake. For among numerous flocks of birds there are maiden swans which fly to that secluded place specially to hide from human eyes."

Chorna was thinking.

"He'll never pardon me," she said.

“Why should you say that, fair Princess?” Vsevolod tried to reassure her. “Don’t even think about it. Everything living comes to its end — even maiden swans. Besides, Father isn’t vengeful.”

The girl turned sharply to face him.

“Are you sure?”

But the youth did not have time to reply. Loud neighing could be heard somewhere nearby, on the edge of the forest. The Princess started but then smiled and, forgetting about her worries, produced an intricate whistle that was apparently familiar to the horse.

Then came the clatter of hoofs, and a horse with a lush mane and a swan-like neck appeared before the girl. The bonfire was now dying down, now flaring up again, and its flickering light played nicely on the horse’s hide, concealing, rather than setting off, its long, fabulously luxurious mane. Its eyes sparkled and its nostrils breathed heat.

The animal would not stand still; it stamped its hoofs and pranced around the Princess, as though inviting her to mount the saddle. That restlessness and its resolute, daring posture only served to point out the strength and beauty of the young stallion. It struck Vsevolod as a horse that would not only carry you across dales and over hills, but also take you up above the clouds.

“My Falcon is bored,” the Princess explained. “He’s calling me home.”

Leaning against the horse, she tenderly ran her fingers through its mane. Vsevolod could not take his eyes off the two of them. It was hard to tell which was more beautiful: the girl or the horse.

Then the fire flared up again, and the girls’ songs rang even louder and lovelier over the forest:

*Ring, ye land, under Kupalo!  
You’re our life.  
Do take us under your cover...*

Chorna was about to rejoin the circle when all of a sudden a rider sprang out of the darkness and flew right toward the dancing girls.

The shrieks and yells were ear-splitting. However, neither the Princess nor Vsevolod was taken by surprise. It was at that very moment, immediately after the song

that one of the youths was to ride out to try to seize the ritual tree. But as the horseman galloped away from the disturbed crowd a frantic shriek of a girl reached their ears.

Chorna gasped and caught Vsevolod's hand.

"Look!" she exclaimed. "He's stolen a girl — not the tree!"

Then she took another look and rushed to Falcon.

"Where are you going, Princess?" The youth wanted to hold her back, believing that no one, with the exception of relatives, should interfere in such matters. But the Princess explained everything with just one word: "Milana!" and set off in pursuit.

Falcon did not like to lag behind. Whenever he saw a horse ahead of him, he would lay himself out to outrun it. This race was no exception, particularly because his mistress kept goading and urging him on, and her hot breath on his mane heated up his own desire for the chase.

As he approached the rider in front, Falcon became even more excited. He flew like an arrow, slicing the air with his chest and striving forward with every muscle.

Noticing the pursuit, the stolen girl shouted still louder. The rider who was carrying her away was about to turn toward the river, reasoning that once its holy water sealed their marriage no one would dare take Milana away from him. But he failed, for the Princess guessed his intentions, made a shortcut and blocked his way.

An instant later, he and his captive were unhorsed. Seizing the reins of the other horse, Chorna jerked them so violently that the horse spun around, throwing both the unlucky rider and the girl out of the saddle.

The young horseman was enraged with his own failure.

"Don't you dare, Princess!" he shouted, rising to his feet and shielding Milana with his body. "All this is none of your business."

"I'll show you whose business it is, you villain," Chorna thundered angrily as she put a sharp-pointed arrow into her bow. "Let go of the girl!"

The lad stepped back into the darkness, pressing the girl to his chest even closer.

"Well?!"

The Princess began to lift the bow. Suddenly, Milana

freed herself from the young man's arms but did not hurry to flee. Instead, she fell to her knees before Chorna, gripped her stirrup with both hands and begged the Princess to let her go with Mladan.

"You and Mladan?!" Chorna was bewildered.

"My dear friend! My Princess!" the girl was sobbing. "Please let me go with the man I love, because my brothers might show up and then there'll be a fight. They might kill Mladan, and as for me... I'd be taken back to my father then."

"Which means you've done it all of your own free will, doesn't it?" Chorna was still incredulous.

"Why, of course... We planned it for Midsummer Night. We decided to run away together quite a while ago."

Milana's expression was candid enough, and she was pleading like a child, yet the Princess still found it hard to believe. She stared at her friend with wide-open eyes in sheer disbelief.

"Then why did you yell like someone possessed?" she asked finally.

"Didn't I have to?" the girl sobbed. "A girl's supposed to shout when she's being abducted. The custom demands it."

Chorna let loose of the reins. What was the custom anyway? She was thinking Mladan perceived this as a sign that the Princess would not detain them any longer and began to adjust the saddle.

Chorna let him do it. Then as she heard the drumming of hoofs behind her, she swung toward them and snapped: "Run!"

A horseman flew out of the night, and only Falcon's timely leap across his path prevented him from catching the couple.

It was Vsevolod.

Reining in his horse, he stared after the fugitives with such an incredulous expression.

"Was it Mladan?" he finally turned to the Princess.

"Yes," Chorna confirmed. "Don't try to stop them. Let them go."

"He is my friend," Vsevolod explained.

"He's got a friend of mine with him, too," said the Princess. "But wait!" She was suddenly alarmed. "I think I hear a horseman galloping here, more than one as a matter of fact."

For a while she listened intently, then picked up her reins, ordering him: "As soon as they show up, go after me. We'll try to turn them off Mladan's track." She took it for granted he would obey.

## VI

### FOR ONESELF AND FOR ONE'S FELLOW MEN

The sun had not yet appeared over the horizon, but the sky was already aglow high above the forest. It seemed that a resplendent gold-and-blue crown hovered in the air. It was transparent and clear, and the air was cool; one could almost feel how it poured into the lungs, refreshing and invigorating the night-weary body. Fragrance emanated from the earth, and the sweet smells of the fields hovered along the edge of the forest. And there was silence, as if at the first glimpse of dawn everything had hushed up and settled to wait for the sun to appear in its festive attire.

Then the sun rose. It cast its amber-colored, blindingly bright rays all over the forest and the dewy meadows, immediately bringing the woodland back to life. The birds chirped louder and grasshoppers began chirring in a clearing. Even the gentle leaves rustled in the trees and beamed a merry, humanlike smile at the sun. Chorna saw it and could not believe her eyes. She turned to one tree, then to another, then again looked up at the foliage hanging overhead — and it all seemed true. The trees were smiling to her like human beings. The dew lit up by the sunshine sparkled and changed colors like pearls, glowing with a gay, fabulously beautiful light.

Splendid as a bride and rosy as if after a hot bath, the sun climbed higher and higher over the forest.

Whether because the Princess was a late riser or because that particular morning was uniquely lovely, she was impressed so much that she could not take her eyes off the sight. She felt an irresistible, warm wave surge in her heart and was on the verge of tears... Gods! What a magnificent world unfolded before her eyes, how beautiful her Siverianian land was! It seemed that everything there had been created for happiness and that one could not but enjoy living in such a land of beauty and peace. But no: back at home there were some dark secrets, here a girl

had just been abducted. She had specially come to Zarichne to dispel her worries together with Milana and to raise her spirits by taking part in the Midsummer festivities. But look how Milana had treated her! She had just gone and run away with her lover. A good friend indeed: she hadn't even breathed a word about their planned marriage. Why, she hadn't even hinted at it — she had just talked it over with Mladan and off they went, just like that. And she, Princess Chorna, was now left all alone with her sorrow. Now she could only go back home — there was nothing left for her to do in Zarichne.

Because of Milana, Vsevolod, too, would get angry with her. He had wanted to escort her all the way to Chernihiv, but she had not let him; sadness had crept into her heart and she had preferred to be left alone.

Sensing the loosened reins, Falcon picked his way unguided. He crossed a clearing overgrown with tall grass, then went through a grove with a deep damp gully running across it. Reaching a stream, he walked about a hundred paces along it and, crossing it with an easy leap, finally brought his mistress to the hoof-beaten road.

Chorna looked around and, satisfied that the horse was heading for Chernihiv, again dropped her head gloomily and let it nod in pace with the slow gait of the stallion. All of a sudden, she heard rapid hoofbeats ahead of her. Alarmed, the Princess picked up the reins. She was about to dash into the roadside thicket, when amidst trees at a bend of the road she glimpsed riders in poppy-red hats and blue cloaks. The girl calmed down: only Prince Chorny's warriors were entitled to wear those colors.

The first man to rein in his horse in front of her was the broad-shouldered Slavyata, a well-known Chernihiv noble and the Prince's most trusted servant.

"Thank the Gods!" he called out in a low, resonant voice. "I see that our fair Princess is safe and sound. In Chernihiv an alarm has been sounded, for the Prince feared that the Khazars had abducted his daughter."

"The Khazars?" the girl asked in amazement.

"That's right," the man replied without noticing her puzzled look. "Their embassy has arrived to ask for the Princess's hand. Our Lord has sent for you, but we didn't find you in the palace. This made us suspect some kind of dirty trick. We even thought they'd stolen you to put

pressure on the Prince so as to make him give his consent to the marriage."

Chorna turned white as a sheet. So that was the secret her father had concealed from her. That was also why she had felt uneasy those last days. Her heart had sensed the danger. Oh, Gods... The horsekeeper had been right after all: there was a hawk after her. And what a hawk! No one else than the Khan, the ruler of the mighty Khazaria and twenty-five vassal tribes.

Without trying to conceal her anxiety, the girl looked at Slavyata and his men armed from head to foot.

"So what did the Prince order you to do?" she asked.

"To find the Princess wherever she might be."

"And then?"

"Then to bring her home," explained Slavyata simply.

Chorna gazed at him intently.

"Would that mean that the Prince is going to agree? Does he intend to give me to the Khan? But the Khan's already married... and besides he's quite old!.." The girl was on the verge of crying.

Slavyata became gloomy.

"Regrettably, it's his privilege, my Princess. By law, the Khan may have as many wives as there are tribes subjected to Khazaria. From each tribe he may take one princess — of course if it has one. And since you're the only daughter of the Siverianian prince, fate herself points her finger at you."

The girl went numb, not knowing what to say. She had heard of those laws, of course, but had not taken them too literally. She had also hoped that the Khan's old age would save her from such humiliation and coercion unheard-of in her native country. It appeared the Prince had been aware of all this and hadn't told her! What did he hope for? Why had he let her have her way when she had turned down all those Slav princes? Had he been doing it on purpose to save her for the Khan? To get a higher price and a better bargain?

She looked desperately at the men around her, as though expecting from them answers to all those questions. But no answers came, and the girl frowned collecting herself.

"I'm not going," she announced in a resolute voice.

"But why?"



"You've let those Khazars inside the palace, so now rub noses with them yourselves. I've got nothing to do there."

Before the men could exchange glances, the Princess spurred on her horse, wheeled around and flew back as fast as the horse could carry her.

Slavyata was not yet quite sure if she really meant to escape from them.

"Princess Chorna!" he shouted at the top of his strong voice, hoping this would be enough to stop the girl.

But she did not stop. Estimating the distance which separated her from Slavyata, who was already galloping after her, she drove in the spurs even harder. She knew the forest and its hideouts as well as any man. The important thing now was to leave Slavyata's men behind her. She would not let Slavyata capture her single-handed, of course. Should she fail to outride them, she would hide in the woods, but she'd never give herself up.

For some time the horses kept an even pace. Slavyata's horse could not catch up with Falcon, but Falcon could not break away. Soon, however, Slavyata realized that the distance between the two horses was widening, slowly but surely.

Looking back, he saw that his troops were way behind. Ahead of him, the girl was definitely breaking away, increasing the gap with every passing moment. The realization brought a chill into the old warrior's heart.

"She might run away," he thought to himself worriedly. "Then she'd shame me in the eyes of the Prince and the whole regiment."

"Chorna!" he resorted to cunning. "Wait a moment... I haven't told you everything yet. Listen, we've set up a plot — me and the Prince."

His patience was wearing thin, angry tears welled up in his eyes, but the girl was slipping from his hands, like a fish.

"Chorna!" Slavyata yelled even louder, now on the verge of despair. "Stop! Let me tell you about that plot."

Apparently, it was only now that the Princess heard him. She turned in the saddle and shouted:

"A plot against me?"

"But no, against the Khazars!"

For some time they galloped in silence. Slavyata waited, the Princess pondered.

"Swear!" he finally heard her voice.

"I do swear by the honor of a warrior."

"Swear by your life," the girl demanded.

"I swear by my life," Slavyata croaked. He was losing both his patience and his voice.

It looked as though Chorna had agreed to listen to the Prince's messenger. Her Falcon first slowed down his gallop, then made a sharp turn and halted by the side of the road.

Slavyata also reined in his horse and wiped his sweaty forehead.

"If I were your father," he gave the girl an evil look, "I'd have you flogged for such behavior."

The Princess did not say anything. Outracing the chief of her father's regiment, Chernihiv's most celebrated warrior, obviously pleased her, even though this was a wrong time for such feelings.

"Tell your men to stop," she ordered him tersely. She still did not trust him completely, fearing a trap.

Slavyata gave a sign.

"So what kind of plot have you devised with my father?" she asked, now looking at Slavyata, now at his men resting at a distance.

"The Princess herself should give a reply to the Khazars."

"What?!" the girl was amazed. "Is that all — that clever plot of yours? Doesn't my father know what my reply will be? Is there no one in Chernihiv to stand up for me?" she asked with painful reproach.

"The Princess isn't being fair to the Siverianian men," Slavyata said glumly. "Each and everyone of us is ready to give his life for the honor of our beautiful Chorna. But..."

"What do you mean by 'but'?"

"But the time is wrong. For the time being we have to avoid a clash."

The Princess was again silent, trying to grasp the meaning of it all.

"Do you mean my father can't turn them down himself?"

"It would be so much easier if you did it. Say, you're still a child, so if you don't want to marry, there's nothing to be done about it."

Chorna was of the age when adults were still accustomed to her childish pranks and through habit continued to regard her as just a little girl. The girl herself, however, already frowned at her childhood and took pride in her

newly-acquired adult status. That was why Slavyata's words made the Princess particularly angry. "How dare you!" she wanted to shout at the top of her voice. "So many men have proposed to me!" She did not shout it, though. Angered, she swallowed hard and spurred Falcon into a gallop.

"Fine!" she called back. "I'll give my reply to the Khazars. For myself and for our men, too!"

## VII

### PLAYING WITH FIRE

The spacious hall was fresh and cool. The sun had just risen and had not yet dried, let alone warmed, the dewy earth. Also, there were trees around. Thick oaks stood around the palace, and outside the courtyard, right across the Strizhen river, there was a dark-green grove, so dense that the shade it cast seemed black. Woods encircled Chernihiv like a wall. Forests stood guard around the city's ancient ramparts, protecting the peace of its people.

The windows of the palace were tall and allowed plenty of light to penetrate inside. The walls were lavishly decorated. Between the arching front windows one could see deer horns, and on the opposite wall valuable arms sparkled with gold, impressing visitors with their tasteful arrangement and numerous precious stones skillfully inlaid in their handles. In the middle hung two dark-red shields flanked by famous Frank swords; on top, above the shields, there were bows and combat arrows. On either side of the weapons there were more deer and aurochs horns with stuffed birds from Siverianian forests perched upon them.

In the rear corners of the hall there were stone fireplaces. One hearth served as a sacrificial altar, the other was used for heating. However, the Khazars now present in the hall were most fascinated by the paintings skillfully done on the walls by Chernihiv artists. One of them displayed the Prince himself hunting an aurochs, another showed scenes of falconry. The paintings were so well done that the Khazars, accustomed to luxury as they were, could hardly believe they were in Chernihiv, that God-forsaken forest lair. On the murals, horses, lithe as snakes,

leaped across streams, lifelike men raised weapons over their heads, and it seemed that any minute now the hall would be filled with hunters' cries, whistles and shouts. The Prince fought the aurochs, attempting to kill it with a spear leveled against the animal's huge chest.

The Khazars clicked their tongues, praised the painters, but more so the Prince, a gallant warrior and the proprietor of such treasures.

Chorny was pleasantly flattered by the praise but he interpreted it in his own way. Although the Orientals were groveling and toadying to him, their real desire beamed from their eyes: they could not wait till the Princess appeared.

"You're cunning as a fox," the Prince thought about the Chaushiar who courted him most of all. "But you'll never outsmart me. I've been caught in all kinds of traps and I've always slipped free. This will be much easier to do here at home. If only my daughter doesn't let me down."

"They say your daughter is like her father," the Chaushiar read the Prince's mind. "She's known to be just as brave and extremely fond of hunting."

"Have patience, my dear Sir," Chorny smiled. "In a while you'll see her with your own eyes. My daughter is due any moment. And since I'm her father, could you tell me how the Khan came to know about my daughter?"

"My dear Prince," the Khazar appeared to be genuinely surprised. "Why should you ask that? Your daughter is the world's prime beauty. And you can't hide a beauty from the people's eyes, just as you can't hide the sun in heaven. Why, you can't even hide her in the Siverianian forests," he gave Chorny a sly wink. "Was it for nothing that Drevlianian, Vyatichian and even Bulgarian princes came to Chernihiv to ask for her hand? He-he, my Prince, such a beauty would lure men into a bog, let alone a forest."

"However, the Khan hasn't yet seen my daughter with his own eyes. How can he rely on hearsay alone?"

"Eh, my Prince," the Khazar shook his head reproachfully. "There's more to it than just hearsay. Our Khan is the mediator between the heaven and the people. God himself points his finger to the girl destined for him."

Chorny was about to say something when the door opened and his daughter appeared. Clad in a light summer dress, merry and vivacious, she flitted into the hall like a butterfly. Her eyes, dark as the night, sparkled with sweet tenderness, retaining their childishly teasing mockery. Her face betrayed not a shade of confusion or concern. Gentle and pretty, illuminated by a warm inner light, it blossomed like a poppy, set off by her snow-white dress and framed by lush dark hair. And when her luxurious maiden braid slipped forward and a sunny smile touched her lips, the Khazars froze with admiration. They stood in a bunch in the middle of the hall where they were caught by the appearance of this delightful, peerless beauty.

Politely bowing to all sides, Chorna walked up to her father.

"Have you sent for me, my dear Father?" she asked in a lively voice.

Looking at her, the Prince could not believe his eyes. What did it mean? Why was the girl so merry? Hadn't Slavyata told her?

But she had asked him a question and he had to say something in reply.

"Why should my daughter rove through the woods all on her own?" he began with a reproach.

"Am I not allowed?" the girl asked quietly. "Until now you haven't told me not to."

"I don't forbid it, but you'd better tell your father where you go and for how long."

"I've been to Zarichne, at the Midsummer Feast."

"I see," the Prince became kinder. "I have so many things on my hands that I've even forgotten that today is Midsummer Day. All right, my child, I'm not angry with you. You see, I simply wanted you here."

"Me? What for, Father?" she pretended to be alarmed.

But the Prince had already seen her eyes, and that was enough to see through her game.

"You see, my child, our guests—" he pointed at the Khazars who had not dared to straighten their backs and were still bent in humble, almost slavish bows—"well, these gentlemen have arrived to see you from as far as Itil."

"Is that so?" The girl instantly grew merrier as she came toward the Chaushiar who was the most conspicu-

ous among the strangers. "Was it you who brought me those wonderful gifts?"

"Oh, my Princess," the Khazar bowed even deeper, his hands pressed to his chest. "They aren't worth your gratitude. The Khan..."

"Oh, no," Chorna interrupted him. "I'm very thankful to you. I doubt if such treasures could be found even overseas."

"My fair Princess," the Khazar explained hastily, "those gifts are from the Khan himself."

"Is that true?" the girl looked impressed. "For some reason I took you for overseas merchants at first. We once had some Arabs here, and they brought an awful lot of very fine things. Will you come back to us again? If you do, I'll ask you to bring me..."

Falling on one knee and leaning on his scimitar, the Chaushiar inclined his head submissively.

"I and my warriors are at your service, young beauty," he intoned. "Our great sovereign, the Khan of the mighty Khazaria, will not spare for you, heavenly maiden, all his incalculable riches!"

"But no," Chorna protested. "I'm not asking any riches from the Khan. Only should your path lie through Chernihiv again and should you keep your kind attitude to me in your heart, I would ask you to bring me a doll of Arab make."

The Chaushiar gaped at the girl, unable to grasp whether she was talking seriously or making fun of him.

The Princess seemed not to notice all this.

"You know," she came up closer to the Khazar who was about to rise to his feet, "I love to play with dolls so much sometimes, but unfortunately I have but three left; my finest doll, the one the Arabs brought me, was broken by Murko, our restless pussycat."

Prince Chorny finally realized that his daughter was playing a comedy.

"My child," he cut her short, "it's time to forget about dolls and childish games. The great Khan has sent his matchmakers to you."

Baffled, the Princess grew silent at once, staring at her father.

Why had he said that, she wondered. Why had he spoiled this game which had started so nicely? Was this a plot against her?

She looked around for Slavyata, but he was not in the room. As she returned her gaze to her father, he averted his eyes.

"So that's what it was all about!" she thought. "They've lured me into a trap after all."

The treachery was so unexpected and the offense so painful that the girl had to make an effort not to let the Khazars guess that something was wrong.

"What matchmakers? What for?" she tried to play a child once more.

"Like those who have been sent by the Drevlianian and the Bulgarian princes," Chorny explained, thus breaking the last straw on which her trust in him rested. "You're my only child," he spoke in a quavering voice, "and I won't press you to accept. But as your father I should say that I could hardly think of a better match for you. The Khan is the ruler of a great power, and his glory resounds in every part of the world. Besides, he loves you."

The Prince was silent for a while. Then he raised his eyes to Chorna and added:

"Think it over, daughter, and give your reply to our guests. All of us here, the Chaushiar and myself, are waiting for your decision."

It really looked as if they were. As to the girl, she was on the verge of tears. Her father's persuasive words, like drops of poison, fell into her heart filling its most sensitive parts already overflowing with bitter tears.

"You can hardly wait," she uttered fighting back tears. "You are in a hurry to marry off your daughter."

"Why do you say such things?" Chorny protested eagerly. "Didn't I say I wouldn't compel you? But as your parent I advise you..."

"That's enough," she interrupted him curtly, sensing that another word of advice from him would make her burst into sobs. "My answer is ready," she added in a quivering voice. "Princess Chorna does not wish to be the Khan's wife. She will never consent to marry him!"

"But why?" exclaimed one of the envoys.

Chorna turned to face him and gave him a contemptuous glance.

"Because she deserves a better fate!" she snapped without a moment's hesitation. "Your Khan is hardly a match for me. Besides, he's a foreigner."

The arrogant child's insolence amazed the Khazars even more than the disrespect she showed to their ruler. But glancing at Chorna, who in her wrath seemed possessed of an almost unearthly beauty, they momentarily believed that she had spoken the truth. They even felt unable to contradict her at first.

It was the Prince who broke the silence.

"You must be out of your mind," he thundered at his daughter. "How dare you insult such a great man!"

"I dare do it because I'd rather drown myself in the Desna than be the wife of that slimy old man. I'm no slave. I can't be forced to obey you."

"Yes, you can," the Chaushiar found his voice. "The Khan has every right to you. If you don't want to be his wife, you'll be his slave."

"Is that how you speak?" the girl didn't yield. "Then get out of here! Do you hear?" She looked at all of them in turn with a menacing expression. "I'm still the mistress here. And I tell you to leave."

The Khazars fidgeted uneasily. They looked now at the Prince, now at his daughter, trying to understand if they were really being expelled.

The Prince was also at a loss, not knowing how to handle the incident.

"Guards!" he finally recovered his self-command. "Take the Princess to her mansion and keep her under lock and key until she comes to her senses. I'll teach you a lesson, cheeky child!" When she had left the hall, he turned to the Khazars and spread his arms apologetically, as if to say: what can I do with a child?

## VIII

### RELY ON GODS BUT HAVE YOUR OWN REASON

Princess Chorna's mansion stood in the middle of the kremlin which was surrounded by a solid wall and lay on high ground between the rivers Strizhen, Bilous and Desna. The roof of the mansion reached the tops of mighty oak trees, which, according to witnesses who had long passed away had been nursed by the then young great-grandmother of the Princess. She had been as fond of trees and flowers as her great-granddaughter. During their incredibly long lifetime, these strong trees had seen



plenty of things and put down very long roots in the soil of ancient Chernihiv. They had had their own childhood that had lasted as long as the entire life of the girl who had planted them by her windows. Then came adolescence. People were born and, by the will of Gods, departed into the other world, generations succeeded one another, but the oaks reached higher and higher into the sky, growing stronger and stronger. Apparently, the giants would take centuries more to mature. They kept growing: in height, in width, in depth.

The Princess would often peer through the thick foliage outside the windows at the hollow between Boldin Hill and the city ramparts. She liked to look at the waves glistening in the sun, to watch the river as it grew dark and foamy during thunderstorms and see it vanish from sight in the twilight. Something drew her to the Desna, as though she knew that she was to die in those waters, and that those waves, rather than people, would close her eyes and admire her fresh-bloomed beauty on the river bottom.

Chorna remembered the marble-white, gentle face of her mother and felt something heavy and suffocating well up in her chest.

"Oh, Mother," the girl whispered, "why did you leave me? Why did you go away so early?"

Now she could no longer hold back her tears. The image of her mother also became sorrowful, her eyes shone with kindness and warmth, and her full, fresh lips whispered something old, soothing and unbearably painful.

"Did you have to swim to the middle of the stream?" Chorna reproached her, wiping away her tears. "If you were by my side now, you could have comforted your daughter. You wouldn't have let them hurt me. I'm sure you wouldn't have let anyone do it, you would have protected me with your heart and mind."

"Now what about Father?" she asked herself, confiding to her pillow, talking more to herself now than her mother. Well, her father seemed to care only about his principality and his glory. To win and spread that glory he'd be ready to drown his daughter. It would be just fine with him: the Khan would be his son-in-law, the Khazars would become his allies and, who knew, maybe they'd even allow him to increase his army. As for his daughter who would be withering away in a strange land married to a hateful old man, well, that didn't really matter!

"Oh, Father," the girl sighed. "You'll be severely punished for this cruelty. Dazhbog will not forgive you such merciless treatment of his granddaughter: if not Perun, then the Pechenegs will be sent unto the Siverianian country and its prince."

Footsteps could be heard on the stairs. At first Chorna paid no attention to them: all sorts of attendants could walk the stairs of her mansion. But when her nanny fussed outside, Chorna guessed that one of the top nobles had come to see her.

"Are you awake, my child?" the old woman asked, popping her snow-white head through the half-open door.

"Who's there?" the Princess inquired.

"The Prince wishes to see you."

"Tell him I'm unwell."

The nanny was silent, yet would not go away.

"I don't quite understand," she said. "If you're unwell, does it mean that the Prince may come in?"

"No, it doesn't!" the girl snapped, turning her tear-stained face to the old woman. "I'm ill and I don't wish to talk to the Prince. What I need is to be left in peace."

Nevertheless, the Prince soon entered the bedroom.

"I see my daughter has misunderstood me and is still angry," he said sitting down by her bed.

Chorna did not respond. She lay there, facing the wall, and kept silent.

The Prince was unable to sit still and rose to his feet.

"Have you been crying?" he asked in a surprised tone, seeing her tears.

"No, I've been laughing, my Prince," Chorna replied bitterly. Then she abruptly turned to him and, leaning on her elbows, looked him straight in the eye, wrathfully and contemptuously. "I didn't wish to see you. Do you totally disregard the requests of your defenseless daughter?"

"Please, daughter!"

"You have no daughter! You've sold her to the Khazars. You want her to follow her mother into the grave."

The accusation stunned the Prince. He sank in a chair and gazed at the girl with wide-open eyes. But she gave him no respite.

"Oh yes, you want me to follow my mother!" she shouted, swallowing tears. "Have you forgotten how Mother died? Don't you remember how she begged you to sacrifice

your pet pheasants to the vernal waters? But you wouldn't listen to her, you just couldn't spare those birds. Instead, to please the mermaids you forced her to swim to the middle of the river."

The Princess hurled her accusations at him without pausing for breath, while Chorny kept gazing at her with wide eyes and felt he was growing cold with horror. He had regarded the whole story as his private secret, thinking that no one would suspect his true role in it. He had reproached himself with his wife's death only in thoughts, fearing to let a single word slip out lest people learned the truth. Now it appeared that they had known it all along, not excluding his daughter. Why, she even considered him guiltier than he was, suspecting him of premeditation.

Gods... Why did he have to suffer so heavily? Even his own child was accusing him of deliberate murder.

"My daughter," the Prince groaned, his expression changing so much that the Princess, who had worked herself to a high pitch, became confused and bit her tongue. "How dare you touch my most painful wounds?" He was almost crying. "It is true that I didn't listen to your mother. But that doesn't mean I wanted her death. How can you think I wanted that innocent woman to die? If only I'd known... Then I would have sacrificed to the Gods the whole of the Siverianian land and all my earthly riches, let alone those pheasants. I would have given up everything just to keep my dear wife alive. Alas, it appears the Gods needed her; they not only deprived me of joy and happiness but also made me deaf to her words, so that my conscience will torment me until my dying breath... Oh, daughter!" he exclaimed in a voice full of anguish and suffering. "You can't imagine how I torture myself when left alone with my guilt. And you only add to my pain..."

Chorna kept her eyes fixed on her father, and the more he spoke the more she came to share his suffering. His confession seemed candid to her, and his despair sounded quite convincing. And when he spoke about her adding to his pain, she felt she had really hurt him.

The girl again burst into tears, but this time it was not her humiliation but shame that made her cry.

"I didn't mean it, Father." She fell into his outstretched arms.

“My child,” the Prince hugged her gently and delicately, “both of us are equally unfortunate. But that other grief is a thing of the past, now there’s another trial facing us.”

Chorna lifted her head abruptly.

“Then why are you forcing me?” she asked.

“Shame on you,” the Prince reproached her. “You’re such a smart girl, but here you’ve missed the point completely. I simply had to act as I did. Hadn’t Slavyata told you? I had to take the side of the Khazars to show them that it was the Princess, not the Prince, who opposed that marriage.”

“He didn’t tell me that,” the girl responded heatedly. “He only said that you couldn’t afford to turn down the Khan’s proposal and that I myself would have to do it.”

“That’s correct. But was it a proper way to decline a proposal? You treated the Khazars too harshly, as if playing with fire — something which I, as the Siverianian prince, don’t want at all. We have to settle this matter with the envoys in a peaceful manner. It’s quite easy to strike a spark, my child, but it may be very difficult to put out a fire. And our regiment is not large. Actually, it’s very small.”

The Princess still did not understand.

“In a peaceful manner, you say? But what about that law? I mean the law that permits the Khan to dispense with my consent. As the sovereign of this land, he has the right to have me as his wife, doesn’t he? Or do you think he’ll give up that right in a peaceful manner and forget about Princess Chorna?”

“He is unlikely to renounce his claim of his own will,” the Prince frowned glancing at his beautiful daughter. “Which won’t prevent us from trying to outsmart him and maybe even to force him to forget about you in the end. True, the law does permit him to take you without your consent. But tradition, on the other hand, requires that he at least ask for it. For you aren’t a commoner, you’re a princess. Therefore, let us at least invoke tradition if we don’t have our own laws. Only there’s no need to irritate them. We’ll plead your tender age, saying you don’t yet realize where your happiness lies. And later we shall see. These are uncertain times, the Pechenegs are pressing hard against Khazaria. This might cause the Khan to give up his plans of a campaign against Chernihiv... We need to gain time, to build up our army, so that we have an armed

force to put in the field when traditions become irrelevant."

"You won't give me away then, will you?" the Princess brightened up, looking up at her father with her tear-stained eyes which had now become much merrier.

"Never!"

"Oh, good," the girl sighed with relief. "I'm afraid I've been very unfair toward you."

Highly pleased, Chorny was unable to take his eyes off his daughter.

"Maybe it's all for the better," he smiled. "If you believed in my loyalty toward the Khazars, they must have been all the more convinced of it."

"But, as you can see, they aren't leaving Chernihiv yet."

"No, they aren't," the Prince said pensively. "They must be waiting for something."

Neither of them spoke for a while.

"I'm scared, Father," Chorna confessed. "They might abduct me..."

"Don't worry," the Prince reassured her. "I've posted such a guard around your mansion that not even a ghost could slip through, let alone a Khazar."

Chorna thought about it.

"Wouldn't it be better for me to hide in a forest until all this blows over?" she asked.

"Oh, no!" the Prince protested. "How could you? The Khazars are counting on such a move. They've probably posted their pickets along all the roads."

"No, they haven't, Father," the girl livened up. "For I've been across the Desna and haven't seen a single one around."

"They'll show up in due time. Stay here, my child, and don't be afraid. I'll take care of your security."

The Prince put his dear daughter to bed, kissed her goodnight and went toward the door. On the threshold he paused and turned around.

"Tomorrow I will order sacrifices to be made to God Svarog, the patron of our household and your marriage. The sacrifice will be generous this time. I hope the god will show mercy and will protect you from evil. He's had his own wedding feast today, he should be benevolent..."

The sun had long hidden behind the forests, and the forests themselves, flooded with thick darkness, had disap-

peared from sight, but the Princess would not leave the nest by the window she had warmed with her body. Propped against soft pillows filled with swan down, she cupped her flaming cheek with her hand and, dreamy and motionless, peered into the night lurking outside the window.

The stillness lulled her anxiety, comfort took hold of her thoughts and replaced the heavy stone in her heart with a light and pliable dream. It seemed that it would take just a light breath to make that dream soar up and fly to lands unknown. But then, the Princess did not even try to restrain that light cloud of a dream. Like fertile seeds, the words spoken by her father were germinating in her heart, warmed by her rich maidenly fantasy.

Happiness... What was that heavenly bliss after a wedding? What was it like? In this world, many things which happen for the first time are regarded as the best, which is most yearned for is considered most precious. From her own experiences, she remembered how happy she had been when she had mounted a horse to go on her first hunt and what memorable moments had been the first snow, the first vernal grass out in the meadow, the murmur of streams and the twittering of birds in the woods. One could not compare the love of a young lad with that of an ageing man or the first kiss with all that comes later, after the wedding? No, such things bore no comparison. Everything first was the finest, everything desired was also what mattered most to people and, consequently to gods. Small wonder, then, that gods were happy on that day, too...

Happiness made people generous, lenient, sometimes merciful. It was only too bad that they did not stay that way too long. Happy people tended to forget that there were also unhappy people in the world, that happiness and sorrow trod the earthly paths side by side. It would be interesting to know whether God Svaroh was also forgetful or whether this was only a human weakness. And what if he was? What if he would forget about her, a princess besieged with worries? Then her father would not be able to protect her either. Yes, he would be powerless then.

That would be bad indeed. Perhaps she'd better take care of herself and run away from there. Wasn't there

that apt saying: "Lean on the gods but keep your own reason"?

The Princess sprang up and reached for her clothes, but then a sad thought occurred to her: just where would she go? To Milana? But Milana was no longer in Zarichne. She was now basking in her own happiness and would care little about her friend... Or should she take to the woods? Now what about Vsevolod? Didn't he live in the depths of the woods, in impenetrable thickets? Not a single stranger would get there. Few of the Prince's courtiers, let alone foreigners, knew where his horses grazed. Hence, no one would even think that the young princess would venture to go there all on her own, without escort. But she would go. She would find Vsevolod and wait there until the Khazars left Chernihiv.

The Princess tossed aside her light blanket so resolutely that it flew up into the air and slowly wafted to the floor. A thought held her back, though, putting out the momentary spark of joy in her heart. Why, of course! She was being guarded. Her father had posted sentinels all around her mansion, and as for the outer gates, those were probably guarded even closer. How could she fool all those sentinels and slip out of the kremlin at night?

All the same, she put on her clothes, lighted the lamp and paced the bedroom for quite a long time, thinking. Suddenly her glance fell on some lassos plaited of strong horsehair. She had caught a deer on her first hunt with one of them. Her heart fluttered in her chest like an overjoyed bird... She'd escape through the window!

While getting ready, the Princess fussed a lot, unable to make up her mind as to what she should wear for the road. She would need her trousers, of course, as she'd be on horseback most of the time. But should they be warm or light? Then she had to choose a caftan to go with them and a riding cloak. Should she take new things or something she'd already worn? Or should she try to pass through the city gate clad in rags, like a common Siverianian girl? No, she'd better dress like a soldier — that way she would attract less attention from the guards.

Having dressed accordingly, Chorna put on over the caftan a curved Khazar sabre and a bow with a quiver full of arrows. Then she tied together two lassos and fixed one end to the bedstead. Pulling at it to make sure it was securely fastened, she made for the window. Then she

paused: there would be more to it than just getting out of the mansion. There was also the outer gate. Without the commandant's assistance she would never be able to get out of the citadel. The man would probably agree to let her out, but only if offered enough gold. She knew him all right: there was little he wouldn't do for gold.

Taking some coins, the Princess picked up the lassos and put out the light. She stood there for some time, not daring to approach the window. Then she opened it and, straining her ears, slowly lowered the rope.

The night was pitch-dark outside the window. It looked like an abyss to her, but she knew that its bottom was paved with blocks of granite hewed out by Chernihiv stonecutters. Should she fall, her dead body would lie down there by those walls. However, she overcame her fear and, cautious and careful, began to descend.

## IX

### PUNISHMENT FOR FEAR

The arrival of the Khazar delegation in Chernihiv had worried not only Prince Chorny and his daughter. Ambal also could not sleep that night. And it was not his duties as the steward that preoccupied him. He was deeply disturbed by his encounter with the Chaushiar. What was he to do now? Should he go into hiding? Should he keep out of sight? But the Chaushiar had seen him in the Prince's hall. He remembered very vividly how the man entered and how he immediately gaped at him in sheer disbelief. Did he recognize him or was he simply puzzled by what he thought was a striking semblance? He may well have thought so. After all, back there in Itil everybody was certain that Ambal was no longer alive, that he... Hm... What a fool he was not to have used an alias. Ambal... Now he would be discovered for sure. Struck by such a likeness, the Chaushiar would ask the Prince the name of his steward, and the Prince would have no conceivable reason not to tell it. He'd give Ambal's true name and that would be it.

What could he do? Should he stay here to watch the Chaushiar's movements or should he run away before it was too late? But where could he run? Where else, in what other principality would he find such freedom and such



favor? Besides, here he had a wife and children. No, he didn't have to hurry, it would never be too late to run away. So far nothing terrible had happened. Maybe the Chaushiar had already forgotten about him. He had probably only wondered that two men could look so much alike and then hadn't given it another thought. After all so many years had passed. First of all it was necessary to ask around, maybe even ask the Prince himself, whether the Khazars had shown any interest in his person, and only then to contemplate further moves. Of course, it might not be very convenient to ask, but he had no choice — he had to.

Hope encouraged Ambal, restoring to him a fraction of his former self-confidence, and that reborn confidence pushed him to a dramatic decision: instead of avoiding the Khazars, he would get closer to them, hang around before their eyes on purpose and pretend that he did not know them, that he was a total stranger to them and to their tribe. Who could tell? They might even believe him.

However, his fate was decided on that very day and in quite a different manner. Worried by the sudden disappearance of his daughter, Chorny sounded a general alarm. He could not believe that the Princess had run away. Weren't there reliable guards posted by the gates. Besides, nothing in their last conversation indicated that the girl had harbored such intentions. She had rather seemed to believe him, to have agreed to act in league with him. She must have been carried away by the Khazars, of course. But where was her Falcon then? Why had there been those ropes hanging from the window? Were they meant to send him on the wrong track?

It was all guesswork, of course, but the fact remained that his daughter had vanished and had to be found. This reminded the Prince of his steward.

"Where's the Princess?" he snapped, giving Ambal such a look that the steward's blood ran cold in his veins.

"I... I don't know, my Prince."

"Who knows then? Who is supposed to know what's been going on in my court?"

Ambal kept silent. He had nothing to say, really. Hadn't he failed to notice the girl's disappearance? Fearing the Khazars, he had holed up at home and thus let her run away — or worse.

“Forgive me, my Prince.”

“Forgive you? Oh, no, Ambal! I’ll skin your hide off you if you don’t find my daughter. Did you hear that?”

“My Prince...”

“Enough!” Chorny did not want to listen to him. “Saddle the horses and go search for her. Go to all sides, search every road, look wherever you want, but bring the Princess back to her mansion. Did you hear me? Without her do not return to Chernihiv.”

As he was leaving his ruler, the steward sadly concluded that more troubles had come his way. One trouble was not yet gone, and there was another coming upon his head out of the blue. Again, there was nothing he could do to help himself. He really had to find the Princess. Otherwise he’d risk losing not only his Chernihiv home but his head as well.

Ambal left the kremlin secretly lest the Khazars spot him by chance. After crossing the river, he directed his horse along a shady forest trail. He thought this would be safer and, besides, it enabled him to make a shortcut instead of riding all along the winding bend of the main road.

The sun was already high above the forest; out on the Salt Way he would have been exposed to its scorching rays, but here in the forest he could almost relax. Lush boughs densely intertwined overhead made him feel like he was in a shady ravine. It was just as cool and fresh, and not even damp.

In that shade Ambal felt definitely better. For a while he even forgot about the problems that had been eating him. He rode through the forest, looking around and enjoying the twittering and chirping of birds. Now and then he would lift his eyes, trying to spot amidst the branches a woodpecker drumming away at a trunk. But neither that busy carpenter of the forest, nor the chirping birds could be seen through the thick foliage.

He did not believe that the Princess had been abducted; therefore, he had taken no soldiers with him. He did not intend to pursue any Khazars. Even if they had abducted her, he could not mount an effective pursuit anyway. All the same, he was not unarmed. He had taken along his sword, his bow and plenty of arrows. Anything might happen in the woods, and he could run across Khazars any time. He felt safer with his weapons. After all, he was

the best archer in the whole of the Siverianian land. And not only there — he had once been famous for his prowess with the bow throughout Itil. With the forest around he could also make an ambush or circumvent an enemy. He only had to keep his eyes open not to be ambushed or trapped himself.

Ambal realized that his mission was not just a whim of the Prince. Chorna was his daughter and a really fine girl at that. Her father could not be expected to remain indifferent to her fate and fail to mount a search. The search at least provided some hope. And hope brought comfort. However, the steward did not like the Prince's threats. That warning not to return to Chernihiv without the Princess had sounded too harsh for his liking.

The pathway he had been following reached the main road. Now he would have to ride under the scorching sun, risking an encounter with somebody on the way.

Ambal took out a summer cap which had been stuck under his belt and was about to put it on when he suddenly heard a swishing sound behind his back. Before he could look around, he felt a horsehair rope around his neck. "An ambush!" the thought flashed through his mind as he reached for his sword. But at that very moment, the noose gripped his neck so tightly that his eyes bulged out from their sockets. Still resisting, Ambal managed to get out his sword but failed to swing it to cut the taut rope. Somebody lashed his horse so hard that it pranced forward and slipped from under the steward.

Three men fell upon him. Deftly and quickly, they forced his arms behind his back and tied them tightly with a horsehair rope. Ambal tried to fight back but in vain: his assailants were much stronger. One of the attackers noosed his feet, binding them with a lasso up to his thighs. Then he straddled the steward and wheezed into his ear: "Quiet, Ambal, be quiet."

Hearing his name, the steward looked back and grew dumb with fear: glistening before his eyes was the blade of a crooked Khazar sabre pressed against his throat. Standing around him were some olive-faced men dressed in strange outfits.

Ambal recognized them as Khazars and for some reason counted them. Three, four, five. "That's the end of me," he thought. "I'm in their hands."

He instantly recalled the encounter in the Prince's hall, his nighttime doubts and fears — and moaned with despair, cursing himself for his carelessness.

"Does it hurt?" asked the Khazar who was sitting on his back. "In case you think it does, you should know you deserve much worse, you traitor."

After a moment's silence, the man added even more severely:

"How did you dare disobey the Khan?"

Ambal did not say anything. He just wheezed and kept silent. Apparently this made the Khazar still angrier. He rolled the steward onto his back.

"How did you dare, I'm asking? Have you forgotten the laws of your country? Don't you know how we punish traitors?"

That meant they'd recognized him at once, Ambal thought. They had recognized him back at the Prince's reception and had been following him ever since...

"You coward!" the Khazar spat through his teeth. He was apparently one of the junior chiefs in the Chaushiar's party. "For what you've done you ought to be put to a most terrible death. But thank heaven," he lowered his voice, "that our Khan is merciful and may pardon your treason. Provided, of course, you submit to his will..."

Doubtful, Ambal looked the Khazar in the eye. The steward did not trust him and did not even understand what he was saying. In any case, he had not yet grasped the meaning of all the allusions.

"Well?" the Khazar kept his eyes fixed on the steward. "Take your choice: death or cooperation."

"Would they really give me a chance?" Ambal wondered and vacillated even more. But what if Chorny found out about the deal, what if he discovered that Ambal had betrayed him? Anyway, that was a remote possibility, while these men already knew all they needed.

"Death or cooperation, I'm asking you again?" the Khazar shouted.

"What does the Khan desire from me?" the captive asked in a timid voice. "How can I restore his trust in me?"

"Through a service. A small service."

"What kind of service?"

"You help us steal Princess Chorna."

"The Princess?! But she's gone! The Prince is certain that you've already carried her away."

"The Prince is trying to deceive both you and us. He doesn't want his daughter to marry the Khan. He's hidden the girl somewhere and now pretends she's been abducted."

Hidden her? So that was it! And he'd been sent to rush up and down these forests. And on top of it he had thundered at him and threatened him with banishment!

"Rumors have reached us," the Khazar said in a confidential tone, as if he were speaking with one of his own, "that the Prince has resolved to increase his armed strength with the intention of shaking off the Khan's suzerainty."

"At the *veche* the Pechenegs were mentioned as the reason," Ambal objected meekly.

"That was just an excuse. In reality, Chorny wants to follow the example of his neighbors, the Polianians. To prevent it, the Khan wishes to make the Princess his wife. Do you see?"

The Khazar paused for a while, then thrust his hand into his pocket and pulled out a purse full of gold.

"Take this for the beginning," he said. "If you deliver the beautiful Chorna, the Khan will not only spare your life but will reward you for your services."

Ambal swallowed with difficulty.

"Here's some more for those you may hire to help you." The Khazar tossed another purse to the steward. "The Prince has some Varangians in his service. They don't care whom they serve, they'd serve anyone who offers them more."

"He also employs Khazars," Ambal added, working his hands now freed from the rope.

"I know... Tomorrow we'll leave, but not for long. Soon the Khan himself will arrive to have a look at that beauty. So be prepared to meet him. Only don't think you may betray him a second time."

## X

### THE AVENGER'S PLANS

Brandishing a thick whip, Vsevolod was herding young horses. Well-fed in the pastures, the two-year-old colts craned their necks as they swiftly trotted along the edge of the forest, their young, nature-groomed bodies

gleaming in the sun. Neither the yells of the herdsman, angered by their disobedience, nor the whipping could turn them off the route chosen by their leader. Bunched together, they drifted past like dragons, like one gigantic body incapable of being split into separate parts.

Realizing the futility of his attempts, Vsevolod, tried to overtake the herd and reach its head. There the leader would help him regain control of the herd and guide it where the herdsman wanted. It was easier to get hold of the leader alone. The leader would respond to his voice and yield to his whip.

He spurred his horse and like a gust of wind, flew along the forest. Soon he reached Bison's Fang, a narrow wedge-shaped clearing, where he had seen the Princess with her hunters. He wished the unruly leader would not head there. For if he did, Vsevolod would have even more trouble with the herd.

As he was passing the clearing, Vsevolod heard shouts. At first he did not believe his ears: who could possibly have come this far into the woods? Even stray horses seldom come there. But the shouts sounded again, now more distinct. Strangest of all — somebody was calling him by name.

Reluctantly, he drew rein and looked back. There was a rider standing by the edge of the forest, several hundred paces away. As soon as he saw that he had been noticed, the stranger spurred on his white-maned stallion and galloped toward the surprised herdsman.

Vsevolod stood there, gaping, and was finding it difficult to believe his eyes. Both the rider and the horse seemed familiar. He must have seen that luxurious mane streaming in the wind before, and also that inimitable gallop... And then there was the voice. He had heard it somewhere for sure...

“Chorna!”

He whipped his horse, and it reared and dashed, slicing the air toward the steed with the white mane.

It was she all right!

They were getting closer and closer.

“Vsevolod!”

The girl reined in her Falcon, who was always obedient to her will, and stretched her arms toward the lad. He jumped off his horse and ran to greet her.

“Chorna! My Princess... So you've come.”

It seemed to him that she was as light as a feather, and he was ready to carry her all across the pasture, all the way to his cabin. But the girl came to her senses and struggled to her feet.

"You haven't been expecting me, have you?" she asked, adjusting her clothes and putting her hair in place under the hat.

"As a matter of fact I have. But I wasn't sure you'd make up your mind to visit us so soon."

"Bad news made me leave sooner than I expected," the girl told him sadly. "I've come to seek your protection."

"Protection? But who could threaten you in the capital where you have so powerful a father?"

"The Khazars, Vsevolod. They've been trying to arrange my marriage with the Khan. As for my father... The Prince does not dare to turn them down... That's why I had to escape and find my way here all alone. I was awfully afraid of getting lost, of being unable to find the place."

Vsevolod was both pleased and puzzled by what she was telling him.

"She's fled from there! She's come to me!" he thought.

"I've lost my friends," the Princess said. "I've got no one in the whole world but you."

Could it be that she really had no one but him he wondered?

"This is why I've come. You're my only hope," she said.

"My Princess!" the lad exclaimed passionately. "It was wise of you to have remembered our pasture. No one will think of looking for you here. And I won't let anyone bring you harm. Do you hear me?"

Vsevolod took her hands in his and, without realizing what he was doing, pressed them to his heart. The girl let him do it. She just stared at him with her painful, but already hopeful eyes and did not speak.

"I know," she then said emotionally, "that you won't let anyone hurt me. But what about your father? Will he forgive me?"

"My father?"

The youth remembered his father's wrathful attitude toward the Prince and hesitated. What if his father really refused to help them? After all, he had not yet forgotten his disgrace and still entertained thoughts of revenge.

"You aren't certain, are you?" she asked.

"Why do you say that? Father will also..."

"No, you aren't sure about him," the girl concluded sadly. "Well, I have no choice. I will have to talk to him myself. My misdeed was not too serious. I hope he'll forgive me."

Chorna understood the horsekeeper's anger in her own way. She was sure it had been caused by the swan she had killed. That was why she did not fear his anger too much. In any case, Vsevolod was glad of her decision.

"You're right," he said. "Let's go to my father right away and tell him everything. He's a kind person, he'll understand."

Tall and powerfully built, Hrivan was a giant of a horse. Riding him, Osmomisl could observe his herds as if from a watch tower. He could see everything, especially in clear weather — from one forest to another, from horizon to horizon.

Over there, a herd of young horses emerged from a forest clearing. The restive colts flew along, arching their backs. The herdsman had wanted to lead them to the watering place, but was apparently unable to handle the horses.

From the distance Osmomisl could see that the herdsman was no other than Vsevolod. He was about to shout some advice to him, but realizing that he was too far to be heard, just waved his hand in disappointment.

Suddenly, he noticed one more rider near the herd. He stared at him for a while but didn't recognize him.

The herd stubbornly followed the beaten path. Vsevolod once again caught up with the leader trying to divert it with a whip, but it was to no avail. The colts would not leave their chosen route.

Meanwhile, the unknown rider was getting closer; in a short while he would join Vsevolod at the head of the herd. Perhaps together they would manage to guide the colts to the pond.

But what was this giving Vsevolod a sign, the other rider dashed to the front. Instead of trying to divert the herd, he led them even farther ahead.

Hrivan was accustomed to obey his master. Now he stood there, without stirring, and peered into the distance, at the herd which had run several hundred paces more. Hrivan's tail reached down almost to his hoofs, and his neck was swan-like — long, strong and proudly arched.



When he shook his neck, gold waves of his lush mane would sparkle in the air. He was an impressive sight to behold as he stood frozen with his head raised proudly and his strength and beauty displayed for everyone to see.

Now the two of them — Osmomisl and his horse — were closely watching the herd and both seemed to be equally pleased with what the unknown rider obviously intended to do. However, for some reason the rider turned back and led the herd back to the pasture. Vsevolod followed behind... What could the stranger have in mind? Aha! Well done! Who could expect that of him — trying to trap the herd in a sort of noose? In fact, he proved smarter than both he, Osmomisl, and his son. He kept turning the herd in a spiral, bunching the horses together and leaving them no way out... That was a clever boy! Just where had he sprung from?

The grooms were the first to return from the pasture. They had watered the horses and could have some rest before the midday meal.

“Hey, brothers!” Osmomisl called to them. “Who was that lad that handled the colts so well?”

“Vsevolod, who else?” they replied proudly.

“Oh no, there was someone else riding up front.”

“Why, yes,” they remembered. “Your son has found some help — the Princess has come for a visit.”

“The Princess? Princess Chorna?”

The horsekeeper picked up the reins and stared at the two riders.

Was it possible that those two had become real friends, he wondered?

He saw that Chorna was merrily chatting with Vsevolod, apparently asking what she was to do next. Osmomisl was motionless, frozen to the spot.

Friendship... If it were only friendship... So his son must have met with her near Chernihiv after all. Blinded with love, he might have made his way even into the princely chambers. As for the Princess... They had hardly parted and here she was back again. She had come here through the woods, across marshlands and through that impenetrable thicket.

He could not quite believe it. Could it be that she had fallen in love with a commoner? Oh, God Svarog! This was sheer madness! A princess and a serf — what insanity! Their love would vanish like a dream and their hearts

would be smashed like a block of ice. Princesses didn't care about love. Their pride was above all else. They held their princely honor higher than life.

No, no! He had to stop it. Should the Prince learn about it, he would destroy Vsevolod; he'd never let him get away with such insolence. Never! Before it was too late, before the seeds gave off shoots, that young growth should be nipped in the bud. And he, Osmomisl, would have to do it with his own hands. The father's hand was more delicate, he would make it less painful for them. The main thing was to send the Princess away, to tell her to leave quietly and to forget about his son. After that, time would heal the wounds. Time reduced stones to dust, so it might grind away this love as well. And then, of course, there would be others to help the process.

When Vsevolod and Chorna entered the log cabin, Osmomisl was sitting on a log covered with bear skins, silently staring at them. His face with its coarse beard looked so stern and forbidding to the Princess that it seemed to have turned into stone. Only his eyes glared under the bushy eyebrows. Struck by his stony silence, the girl cast a side glance at Vsevolod. But the youth had seen his father in such a mood before.

"Father," he said firmly, almost merrily, "here's Chorna..."

"I can see her," the old man replied in a loud, displeased voice. His face remained as frozen as before, betraying not a shade of emotion.

Vsevolod was annoyed. Would his fears come true? Was his father...

"My son," the horsekeeper interrupted his train of thoughts, "go see to your work. I'll talk to the Princess alone."

The lad went numb.

"Why should I go?" he protested. "I've done everything."

"Go, I said," Osmomisl thundered even more severely. "The grooms are awaiting you."

Vsevolod's face showed plainly that he did not like it at all. However, he did not dare to defy his father and turned around and left the house without a word.

Chorna felt frightened.

What did that awesome man want from her? Why did Vsevolod leave her alone with him?

She caught his heavy, steely stare and felt her legs give way under her. She wanted to move closer to the door but was unable to move a step, as if paralyzed by the horse-keeper's gaze.

"Tell me, Princess, did you find your way here on your own?" she finally heard him say.

"Yes, I did," she replied eagerly. She had been waiting for an opportunity to talk, to hear her own voice, if only to make sure she had not lost the power of speech. "It's not the first time that I'm here."

"I know," Osmomisl cut her off curtly. "For this you deserve praise. In this thicket one may get lost even after the tenth visit, and you've found the place after coming here just once. I also liked the way you handled that herd. However, you should keep in mind, Princess, that..."

"Please don't do it!"

Chorna stretched her delicate, pale arms toward him, folding her hands palm to palm so humbly and giving the old man such a pleasing glance that he stopped abruptly and lifted his eyebrows, which had been knitted since their conversation had begun.

God! The girl was really beautiful. For some reason she reminded him of Roxana. She had the same marble-white face, which was just as graceful in sorrow, and the same pleading, painfully gentle velvety black eyes. Then there was also her hair, slightly out of place, which enhanced the impression of sadness... What was it? Why did she resemble his late wife so much? Could there be anything behind that likeness? Certainly, she couldn't be related to Roxana. They were worlds apart.

Presently, Chorna sank to her knees and kept her tearful eyes fixed on the old man.

"I implore you," she begged, "not to conjure up the spirit of that swan. That ill-fated hunt has been haunting me."

Osmomisl did not understand her.

"What swan? What are you talking about?"

"Don't you remember?" The Princess wept. "I killed a swan when I last came here for a hunt. Then Vsevolod said it was not an ordinary she-swan but a maiden."

"So what?"

"She's been taking her revenge on me," Chorna sobbed. "Everything has happened as you foretold: a hawk has been sent upon me."

"I'm afraid I don't understand," he confessed. "What kind of hawk?"

"It's a Khazar hawk. The Khan has sent his envoys and claimed his right to me. My father promised he would protect me, but I don't believe him: such a marriage would suit him fine. He won't be able to resist the temptation and will pack me off to Khazaria."

Her father? The Prince? The horsekeeper was wondering. Would he really send her away?

"This is why I've fled here," the girl explained. "If I had a mother, I would have felt protected. But my mother is dead, and I have no relatives or friends. There's only Vsevolod."

"Only Vsevolod..." Osmomisl repeated. So that was why she was here, he thought. It meant her father was at one with the Khazars. He wanted to force even his own daughter. What for? To derive some advantages for himself, most likely. "Oh no, my dear foe," the horsekeeper thought. "That won't go. The girl is now in my hands, and I won't let you get hold of her."

Chorna sensed the old man's iron-hard resolve and cried even more desperately.

"You won't chase me away, will you?" she asked. "You certainly aren't going to refuse shelter to a poor girl?"

No, he wouldn't refuse her shelter, he decided. He would shelter her to harm the Prince. Osmomisl rose to his feet and called loudly: "Vsevolod!"

"I'm here!"

The lad flung the door open and stormed into the room. He had obviously been listening to the conversation, but this time his father let it pass unnoticed. A happy idea was taking shape in his mind and he did not care about trifles.

"Prepare the living room for the Princess," he ordered in a lively, resolute voice. "We'll somehow manage through the summer."

On hearing these words, the girl beamed with joy and wanted to hug the old man, but, still not quite believing her ears, she restrained herself and paused hesitantly. Osmomisl took the opportunity to tell them both to go outside.

Left alone, he stood for a long moment in the middle of the room, looking severe but feeling elated. Then he turned to the window and stared at the blue vistas beyond the forest.

“What will you say now, my foe?” he thought bitterly, his thoughts reaching far beyond the surrounding woods and penetrating the princely apartments. “The time has come, it seems, to avenge myself on you. It seems that fate has turned her better side to me, even if I am just a humble serf. I’ve been waiting for this chance for more than twenty years, and it’s finally arrived. If not you, then your daughter has fallen into my hands.”

For a moment, the horsekeeper imagined the Prince rushing about his Chernihiv. How enraged he must be at the very thought that he might never have such a son-in-law because of his foolish daughter. The vision overjoyed him, and he smiled into his mustache.

“I’ll purposely keep her here as long as possible, do you hear, Prince?” His face again turned into stone. “That’s right — as long as possible. I’ll detain her until the Khazars are satisfied that the girl has vanished without a trace, until your cruel heart turns black from grief. Then the gods will decide. Later it’ll become clearer how I should handle this matter. Perhaps the friendship of the two young people will be crowned with love. That will be revenge in itself. The girl is a trusting soul — she came here herself. These forests go to one’s head, the nights of Nature make one dizzy. There’s freedom for all and everything here, even for an enterprising young man.”

He was certain that a better opportunity would never come his way. Therefore he did not hesitate to think of the consequences of his far-reaching plans. He had a chance to avenge himself and he had to use it. There would never be another.

His intoxicated imagination conjured up before his eyes the frightened face of Prince Chorny. At this vision, biting, triumphant words built up in his throat.

“You don’t like it, son of evil, do you? You wonder why revenge is so cruel. But wasn’t your offense cruel enough? I killed the two of them, so I did. I may regret it, too. But that’s my concern. I was guided by the laws of blood, and you had no right to judge me. But you did. You disregarded the law. So now you’ll suffer for your governor. Osmomisl is not one to forgive such an outrage: blood for blood, humiliation for humiliation.”

## XI

### THE POWER OF HUMAN BEAUTY

Days passed by. The winds seldom brought heavy storm clouds; they mostly rested behind the Hungarian Mountains and the Yatvyagians' forests or went down to the sea where they played with the pearly waves and toyed with the seafarers, threatening to sink their boats. Then morning songs resounded through the forests. Quiet and melodious at first, they soon grew louder, yet without losing their charm, as more vociferous birds joined the chorus and late risers began to chirp as well.

Then the sun — rosy, fresh and dazzling — rose above the forest. Warming everything, its rays found their way amidst branches into the room of Princess Chorna. Tender and caring, the sunshine stroked her pale cheeks and tried to steal a kiss from her trustingly proffered, yet untouched lips.

The Princess would not wake up at once; nestled comfortably in bed and warmed up by the sun's caresses, she kept smiling in her sweet dreams. Meanwhile, the sun enjoyed her extraordinary beauty, fondling her throat and neck. Then it warmed up her partly uncovered bosom and finally waked her up.

Rising from bed, the girl opened the window and looked to see if there was anyone around. Then she made her modest bed and ran outside to wash herself with the fresh morning dew lest her body ached and her maidenly beauty faded away prematurely. Beetles, humming in the foliage, sprinkled her with dewdrops, small birds gladdened her heart with their twittering, and the cuckoo foretold how long she would live. The forest morning seemed to be a continuation of her fairy-tale night dreams.

Above her head, squirrels wiped their eyes with their paws, as if aping the Princess. Chorna smiled at them and, agile like a goat, rushed back into the house. She felt vigorous and healthy.

Dressed for the day, she came out onto the porch and looked around. There was still no one in sight. Everybody was out in the pasture tending the horses.

Stiffening her full lower lip, she whistled into the dew-washed space.

A thundering neighing echoed from the edge of the

forest. Then the earth moaned under hoofs, and Falcon galloped to the house, his lush mane streaming.

The Princess saddled her pet and rode out of the yard. The horse knew where to take his mistress. Prancing, he floated along the forest toward the winter stables.

Not far away, Osmomisl sat astride his rich-maned horse like a permanent sentinel. Tall and broad-shouldered, he was as motionless as a rock, and so was the horse.

Halting Falcon before them, Chorna greeted the horse-keeper:

"I bow to you, Father! May the new day bring you luck."

"Thank you, young lady. How did you sleep?"

"Better than at home," the Princess replied happily. "The birds were singing, adding sweetness to my dreams... Is Vsevolod there?" she asked nodding toward the pasture.

"Yes, he's taken the young horses to Herald's Horn. Are you also heading there?"

"Yes, I am."

Spurring the horse, the girl galloped against the wind, and Osmomisl looked after her, thinking his thoughts.

His Roxana had been just as young and beautiful. She had a marble-white face and tender eyes, and her hair was as lush as a mermaid's. She also radiated joy, and her heart was just as pure and always open to people. And what did he do to her, to his dear wife? It was just one stab, and then everything faded away — the face, the eyes, everything.

Gods, would he have to raise his hand again? Would he have to destroy the Princess to take revenge upon the Prince? And it wouldn't be just the Princess either. There would also be his son. For Chorny would never forgive him such insolence. What would happen then to him and the Princess? Would he, Osmomisl, ruin their young hearts? And for the sake of what? For his own peace of mind? But would he gain it? Had he gained it when he had slain his wife?

He dropped his eyes to the ground and ran his hand across his thought-weary forehead.

What was to be done? Should he send the girl away? But this would hardly be the right decision. This too would break their hearts. Or, even worse, this could bring about their ruin and death. For the Princess would have to go to Itil and enter into a loveless wedlock, and Vsevolod would stay here. He would never forget her beauty. Life

without her would be death to him — worthless vegetation like his father's.

Osmomisl stood there, following the girl with his eyes, and kept thinking his thoughts. The Princess, meanwhile, was flying away on her Falcon, almost without touching the ground. Her fluttering cloak looked like a pair of wings that seemed to lift her from the saddle. Falcon's mane was streaming in the wind, almost brushing her face. But for the girl even that speed was not enough; she kept spurring the stallion — on and on against the wind.

Vsevolod saw her from the edge of the forest.

"Chorna!" he called out, and a merry, ringing echo reverberated across the pasture.

Now only a short distance separated them. A moment later, they met and stood there together.

"A very good morning to you, Chorna!"

"Same to you, Vsevolod."

She was out of breath. It seemed as though she had absorbed so much of the forest air during her flight that she now needed some time before she could let it all out.

"It's really nice here, Vsevolod," she finally said. "This must be why the birds wake up so early. There's hardly anything better than dawn in a pasture."

"I ought to know it, Princess," the young man smiled. "I've grown up here."

"Oh..." she laughed. "I keep forgetting. But... but you don't know how good it all feels after days of anguish to realize that I'm out of danger. It's... how should I say..."

"That's called feeling free."

"That's it. That's the freedom they wanted to take away from me." Her face darkened. "They intended to take me to a strange land, far from home and these woods I love so much."

"You don't have to speak about it now," Vsevolod tried to calm her. "Forget about the Khazars. You're safe here. Just look — there are woods and more woods all around us. Nobody will ever find the way to this place."

"All right, I won't speak about it," the girl agreed, giving him a happy, grateful look.

As they rode past, young horses scattered over the clearing, the Princess stopped suddenly and exclaimed in the voice of a thrilled adolescent:



"Look, Vsevolod: a grown stallion has gotten among your colts!"

"That's their leader," the youth explained. "He's two years old, like all of them. It is only in height and general appearance that he differs from the rest of them."

"But I don't think I saw him yesterday. The herd was led by another horse."

"You're right, Princess. Yesterday they had a different leader. This one was in the stable having his hoofs cleared. All of us together barely caught him. He's fast as a deer and wild like a snow leopard."

"Has he got a name?"

"That's what we call him — Leopard."

The girl could not take her eyes off the horse.

"I'd like to have a closer look at him," she said.

"Let's go then."

Vsevolod tapped his Blackie lightly and silently followed her.

"Let's stop here," he halted her. "You'll have to look from here, because he won't let you come closer."

Leopard raised his head, straightened up and cautiously studied the riders. It seemed he was proudly displaying his beauty for them to admire: a slim body, long, slender legs with white tassels on the fetlocks and a watchfully curved neck, glistening in the sun. His rich white tail reached to his knees, and his mane covered his neck on both sides with a shaggy crest that ran from the straight, slightly sagging back up to the forehead, which had a small bald spot on it. Because of the full mane, the head looked rather small, and the general impression was of a fascinatingly attractive horse that had just stepped out of a fairytale.

"Oh, Vsevolod!" the girl cried out excitedly. "How beautiful he is! Let's get closer still."

"We can't, Chorna. He won't let us."

"What do you mean we can't? Come on."

"Chorna, wait..."

But the girl did not listen to him; she touched Falcon and slowly rode straight toward Leopard.

Noticing that he was being approached, the horse raised his head even higher and became still more watchful. Then he let out a snort, bent his neck, pranced and ran to the herd.

The girl's curiosity remained unsatisfied, so she tried to approach Leopard from another side, then made one more attempt.

"Let him be, Chorna," Vsevolod told her. "Didn't I tell you he wouldn't let you near him?"

There was no stopping her, though. If anything, her failures only fanned her determination to see the colt at a closer range. What use was there in being a princess if she could not approach a horse? It was unthinkable that that wonderful animal would not let her touch it.

Leaving her Falcon with Vsevolod, the Princess tried to steal up toward Leopard on foot. The lad became anxious as he thought about what would happen if the girl came close to the hoofs. What if the horse kicked her!

Chorna wouldn't give up. Picking a bunch of grass, she got closer and closer to the horse. Her voice was so soothing and her eyes so entreating that the horse finally let her approach him to a distance of two spears. But each time Chorna took another step, he snorted and drew away.

Still the girl did not resist. Now that she had had a closer look at the colt she was determined to touch his hide, to feel his silky mane in her hand. The temptation to stroke or at least to tap his neck was irresistible for her. But the horse kept away from her.

Then the girl took off her arms: a curved Khazar sabre, a bow and a quiver of arrows. She even discarded her riding cloak and her hat and resumed her efforts.

"Leopard, dear," she begged him, smiling. "Be a good horse. Don't be afraid of me. Don't you see I'm coming to you with bare hands? I won't do you any harm. I swear I won't hurt you."

The colt looked at her with his clever brown eyes and cautiously moved his ears. From time to time, he even stretched out his neck, trying to sniff the girl from a distance.

"My dear colt, don't be afraid to take some grass from my hand, come on," the Princess cajoled him.

Vsevolod was amazed as he watched them. Would the horse allow her to come up to him after all? But the girl was already only one step away. She would reach his mane any moment. He prayed that the horse wouldn't kick her.

She stood there holding out that grass to him. Leopard was sniffing it, and then Chorna was stroking his hide. Presently, she took something out of her pocket and gave

it to him. Much to Vsevolod's surprise, the horse accepted it. Then the girl ran her fingers through his forelock and tickled him under the neck...

How had she done it, Vsevolod wondered? How had she won his favor? Was it her kindness, her frankness or her beauty?

When Chorna and Leopard had finally become good friends, she picked up her things and mounted Falcon. She was beaming with joy and satisfaction. As she was about to ride off, she told the herdsman in a commanding voice:

"Save Leopard for me!" Then she turned to Vsevolod. "Did you hear that? Don't give him to anybody — not even to the Prince himself. Keep him just for me."

## XII

### THE ENTANGLEMENT OF DOUBLE TREASON

Ambal's reconciliation with the Khazars failed to bring him peace of mind. After returning to Chernihiv and regaining his senses, the steward realized in what entanglement he had let himself be caught. He locked himself up in his room and stayed there for a whole day and night. No one knew what he was doing there, and only the sound of his monotonous, continuous pacing suggested that he was thinking over something. His self-imposed isolation did not surprise anybody, though. Hadn't he failed to find the girl? And hadn't the Prince threatened to behead him if the other search parties came back without the Princess? The steward had only managed to convince the Prince that it was not the Khazars who had abducted the girl, since they themselves were searching for her everywhere. They were enraged, he said, being sure that the Prince had hidden his daughter and now pretended to be a suffering father. Fortunately for Ambal, his account tallied with the reports of the Prince's agents who had been spying on the Khazars. The Chaushiar himself, they reported, had expressed the same version of events in a fit of rage.

All of this had comforted Prince Chorny a little and softened his anger. However, his threat stood; he only delayed the execution until the return of the other parties that had been dispatched to look for the girl.

Something had to be done to appease the Siverianian ruler. The steward suddenly remembered that the Khazar embassy was due to leave shortly. And as soon as they were gone, the girl would most likely come back of her own free will. For somebody must have helped her to slip out of the city walls, and that same person would let her know that the Khazars were no longer in Chernihiv and help her to return.

Happy with this version, Ambal ran to the Prince. It was now in his interests to share such ideas with the Prince, and he even decided to leak to him his inside information about the Khazars' planned departure. Alas, the Prince refused to see his steward and remained adamant.

This plunged Ambal back into his depression, making him flee to his room again and think hard to try to find a way out of the whirlpool into which fate had hurled him.

When had it all started? What had it begun with? In childhood? No, his childhood was only to be envied. His father was a governor, famous throughout Khazaria, who had won innumerable battles against the enemies of Itil. He had spent all his life in campaigns and had done his best to bring up his son in the same martial spirit. Ambal had been on a horse for as long as he could remember: first he was taught to ride, then made to study archery and sabre fencing. Finally, his father took him with him on campaigns against the Pechenegs where the boy saw some real fighting.

No, there had certainly been nothing bad about his childhood. That and his adolescence remained unforgettable. Not even the high rank of Kender-Khakan, the peak of his fame in Itil, could dim the memories of early springtime and those fine days on the river, broad as the sea. They were those first lovely days after the boring winter when all Itil — both the western and the eastern parts of it — and the whole Khazar people left their homes. The long winter had made them thoroughly restive and they sailed along the Itil River to their vineyards and boundless steppes. Then everybody was merry and happy, and plenty of songs were sung over the wide river and in the steppes. With the exception of merchants, everybody left the city. For some people it was time to fish in the spring-swollen river, for others it was the season to sow

rice in the flood plains, and still others had to tend horses, cattle and sheep.

Oh yes, those were truly wonderful days, particularly for them, the children of the Itil nobility. They left the city for the whole summer, till late fall, to spend that time in open plains under the starry sky. Fine horses awaited him there, the best in the herd, and so many other things he dreamed about during the winter.

Old Ibrahim taught him horsemanship. He would put the boy on a horse, without a saddle, and drive the horse round and round on a lariat. Noticing that the boy sat firmly and was not afraid of riding, he made the exercises more complicated. Ambal would then hang on the horse's side or under its belly. He would jump off a galloping horse and would mount a galloping horse. His heart would beat with fear, but he also felt intoxicating joy as he saw that training came easy to him and that he was the first among his peers.

At night, they would build a fire, form a circle around Ibrahim and, holding their breath, listen to his fascinating stories about old times and battles with the Arabs. And Ibrahim was an excellent story-teller. He would close his eyes, like a magician, and would lead them to unknown lands onto blood-flooded battlefields. No matter what story the old warrior told them, he would reduce everything to feats of war, to encounters of brave Khazar soldiers with strange giants in a mountainous land, no less strange for them, the people of the steppes.

Oh yes, old Ibrahim certainly knew how to tell stories. He also had much to tell about: he was more than a hundred years old and every scar on his body was a legend in itself — a legend wonderful as a dream and attractive as light for their young eyes.

The boys went to sleep with the names of brave warriors on their lips and the yearning to accomplish feats of valor in their hearts. They relived those stories in their dreams — fighting and all.

Once a horse broke loose and carried Ambal into the steppe. It was an unbroken three-year stallion. Old Ibrahim had not dared to let Ambal ride it, because it was too wild, but the fifteen-year-old son of a governor could always get what he wanted. Anybody could ride a tame horse, but breaking a horse was a test of strength and courage. Not all men could pass it, and few took the risk.

The colt carried him on its back until noon, when heat broke it down. No matter how it rushed and pranced, trying to throw him off, Ambal stuck to it, clinging to its back like a tick, his hands clutching its rich mane. When the foamy, exhausted horse was finally brought to bay, delighted Ibrahim kissed the boy and said: "Now you're a real warrior, Ambal. Now you can join the regiment. You must have heard our saying, 'If a horse fails to cast you off, fate won't bend you down'. Go off to your father, my boy. I can teach you no more."

The old man had been a very good teacher indeed, but as a prophet he proved to be less successful. For it was during his army service that fate began to turn against Ambal. To begin with, it led him to Kiriya, the son of the old Khan Ovadiy, and that turned out to be his undoing.

At first, everything was just fine. They became real friends, sharing the dangers of battles and joys of victories. As time went on, they became closer and closer. The would-be Khan confided many of his secret ambitions to Ambal and even drew him into a conspiracy. And what a conspiracy it was! Only his youthful zeal, boldness and inexperience could explain his participation in such a reckless enterprise. It was incredible: they, youngsters of just twenty-two, dared to come out against the all-powerful Khan Ovadiy and his elder son, the brave Bulan, Kiriya's brother. Ovadiy was quite old, and Bulan, who was very popular in the army, was to succeed him as Khan of Khazaria. Kiriya was envious, of course, and was looking for a chance to get Bulan out of the way. He wanted to seize his father's power and to become the Khanate's absolute ruler. This could be achieved, however, only over his brother's dead body.

He did achieve it in the end, with Ambal's assistance. They cast Bulan into the thick of an uneven battle with the Pechenegs, leaving him to die. As for the father, they got rid of him in an even crueller way.

Why did he trust Kiriya? He, a governor's son, could reasonably expect to go far under the former regime, too. As a matter of fact he received enough honors under Ovadiy. But he always wanted more, he couldn't wait to get that governorship... What a fool he was! He failed to understand where Kiriya was heading, he failed to realize what cruel treachery was hidden behind that mask of a face. Ambal believed Kiriya's promises and relied on

their friendship. And Kiriy used him, used his childish gullibility and his youthful inclinations toward blinding daydreaming... The wicked beast! In the end he managed to deceive even Ambal, his closest accomplice. He frightened him by telling him that Bulan would not give him his father's rank of governor after the old man died. This was probably true, after all. For Bulan had his own friends and comrades-in-arms. Quite naturally, he must have promised them ranks and titles. But Bulan was a true warrior — courageous and honest. He would not have persecuted Ambal and at least would have left him in command of a large troop of battle-tested cavalymen. He would have let him keep both his wealth and his honors. How different Kiriy turned out to be! He not only failed to give Ambal that governorship, but also sentenced him to death — him, Ambal, his friend and accomplice.

To think that Ambal had risked his life for Kiriy. For his father, who commanded all the Khazar forces, only pretended to believe what his son and Kiriy told him. Of course, it never occurred to him that this was treason, that Kiriy and Ambal failed to defend that river crossing on purpose, so as to make it possible for the Pechenegs to cut off Bulan's troop beyond the Ural River and mow it down to the last man. Such thoughts never entered his father's head. Oh no — he simply took their withdrawal for a cowardly flight. He could have punished them by death, but he said nothing. In fact, he ought to have done it. But he couldn't bring himself to do it. He wavered — probably for the first time in his life — and thus broke the rigid code of conduct of the Khazar army.

Kiriy must have counted on something like this, which was probably why he had chosen the commander's son as his accomplice.

Ambal stopped by the window and peered into the distance, to the east, as if trying to see Khazaria beyond the surrounding woods and dales. But he tried in vain: only thoughts could reach so far, only they could fly freely over the steppes, over the city of Itil and along that free-flowing river.

Had he ever thought that one day he would have to leave it all and give up all his power and possessions to become an exile seeking shelter in the Siverianian woods? No, he had never even dreamed of anything of the kind. If somebody had told him this would happen, he would

have laughed in the madman's face. For back then he had had everything going for him. He was powerful and rich. In addition to what he had in his own right, there was the property of his father and even his forefathers. Who could have thought that he, Ambal, would become a miserable outlaw? Who could have predicted such a turn? There was that saying about a bird in the hand being better than two in the bush. He had wanted to get more than he had, and he ended up losing all that he had. It was all because of Kiriya and his own stupidity. As if he hadn't known what kind of man he was getting involved with, as if he hadn't known that such monsters usually became terribly cruel when they achieve power. Cruel without measure or exception! Especially Kiriya. That beast with a pock-marked face was not content with the death of his brother and he soon raised his hand against his father as well. He could not wait, as if pretending not to know that before long the people themselves would oust Ovadiya. For Ovadiya was old, and old men were not allowed to rule in Itil: their senses withered away and they had to make way for younger men. In no more than some three or four years, Kiriya would have become Khan anyway. But he did not want to wait even those three years. Instead, he started another conspiracy — this time against his own father.

There was famine then. For the second year running, the rice crop was meager, the orchards and vineyards lay barren, the cattle in the steppes were dying in herds, and there was neither fodder in the pastures, nor water in the wells. The heat was incredible, and even the Itil River became shallow and narrow.

Once, when they were returning from a campaign, Ambal found himself alone with Kiriya. They were sitting in a camp tent, sadly observing horses worn out by the lack of fodder and water.

"Where do you think all these troubles have come from, Ambal?" the would-be Khan asked him. "And why have they hit only our lands? The Arabs have been getting fine harvests, the Polianians and the Siverianians don't even know what drought is. Why is only our country suffering? What for and because of whom?"

Then Ambal did not understand what Kiriya was driving at. But these questions did surprise him.

"What do you mean because of whom?" he asked. "All



of us must be guilty. We must have angered the gods, and they are punishing us for our sins.”

For a long time, Kiriya was silent. Then he took out a leather pouch full of gold and tossed it to Ambal.

“You’re my friend, Ambal,” he said. “And it’s to you alone that I’ll entrust this secret. Our troubles have been caused by God, sure enough, but not everyone is guilty. Far from all, Ambal. There are people on earth who envy our happiness and maintain secret intercourse with the gods, invoking evil upon us. And we don’t protect ourselves with prayers. What with all these campaigns we’ve no time left to pray. So give this gold to the Imam of the Kazeran mosque and ask him to pray for me. Tell him that I wish my people well.”

At that time Ambal did not give a second thought to the words of his friend Kiriya. He took them for normal piety and fear of the Heavens. Nor did he ask himself why Kiriya, who like the entire Khazar nobility professed Judaism, should donate so much money to a Moslem cleric. But several days later he experienced a shock as he grasped the true meaning of that conversation: Itil filled with rumors that all the misfortunes of the Khazars were caused by no one else than the Khan himself. For wasn’t he the intercessor between the people and God and His vicar on earth? And if so, then he must have asked God to punish his people by sending a famine.

Think of it! The Khan bringing calamity upon his own people!

The people did not believe it at first and avoided discussing the rumors with strangers, talking them over only with their relatives. Then they grew bolder and started saying openly that Ovadiy was already too old, that he had one foot in the grave and envied all those who were to outlive him. That was why he wanted to send younger men to their graves before he was buried in his own.

Whispered by one mouth, the rumor spread like a fire. From the predominantly Moslem Kazeran it crossed to the eastern bank of the river and found its way into the palace of the Khan himself. It spread particularly rapidly among the soldiers who were dissatisfied in those lean years and who were of the Islamic faith, as were most of the Khazars. Then the rumor went round all the surrounding steppes, and when on the marketplace, which was always full of magi, a wizard had a vision of Ovadiy in heaven

whispering another of his calumnies into God's ear, the crowd crossed the river and rushed to the Governor's palace.

The troops, once loyal to the Khan, were also infected by the general unrest. Everybody demanded Ovadiy's death. Neither promises, nor threats could hold the crowd back. The mob would be content with nothing short of the Khan's death.

"This Khan brings us misfortune!" the front ranks chanted. "Death to him! Death!"

The Governor did not know what to do. He had come to like the old man for his kindness and intelligence, and had become quite close to him over the many years of administering the state. But now all of Itil had come to his palace, and it seemed that the entire Khazar people was demanding the Khan's death. And the people's will was the supreme law. Besides, there was little he could do in the face of the mob, almost all of which was armed.

No matter how hard the Governor tried to persuade or outwit them, in the end he was compelled to deliver Ovadiy to the enraged crowd.

At that moment, Ambal was standing in his father's palace, at an open window facing the square. He stared at the spectacle nothing like which he had ever seen, and could not believe his eyes. Not so long ago everybody trembled before this man, and whenever he appeared in the streets of Itil or in the fields, people would fall flat and lie until he passed out of sight. This was the man whose person had been regarded as sacred and whose power had known no limits. Now he was being tossed from man to man, trampled, grabbed by the gray hair and mercilessly dragged through the mud, and then again tossed up and again trampled down, until the once all-powerful Khan turned into a lump of bleeding flesh. It seemed that the people were taking vengeance on him for his former inviolability and his holiness. Everybody tried to push his way to the Khan, to hit him or, at least, pull at his beard; everyone wanted to take part in the nationwide execution.

Ambal was unable to watch the bloody spectacle any longer. After all, it was he who had passed the gold to the Imam, and the cleric knew him as an accomplice to the plot. Oh, heavens! It had been such an ill-considered and thoughtless action. And what if the Imam had refused to

accept the money. For he could well have refused the bribe and delivered him to the Khan. Then nothing would have implicated Kiriy. Ovadiy would have spared his son, and he, Ambal, would have been turned into such a bloody mess as the Khan's body.

That event marked the beginning of important changes in the Khanate. Kiriy became Khan, while Ambal became his highest dignitary with the title of Kender-Khakan. As if by miracle, rains began, so that the young Khan gained general favor almost instantly. Everyone looked merrier and happier: the old Khan's blood had not been shed in vain. Only the old Governor, Ambal's father, took to heart the unexpected violent death of his longtime comrade and friend. He pined away and soon lost his authority in the Khanate. Not even Ambal's new title of Kender-Khakan raised his spirits. He just waved his hand contemptuously at the news and silently retired to his room. Before long he became so weak he had to be put to bed. He never rose up from that bed and died from grief.

Days went by. The enemies of Itil had apparently heard about the death of the two elder statesmen, for they resumed their offensive. For some time, Khazar outposts on the Ural River fought them back with great difficulty. Then they started to retreat. A strong hand was needed at that decisive moment to lead the troops. But Kiriy kept silent. He neither appointed Ambal to the promised post of commander, nor went to the army himself.

Dignitaries rushed back and forth in the palace, like shadows. What was to be done? How should they handle the problem? They were afraid of taking steps themselves and did not dare to go to the Khan. For who could tell how Kiriy would react? If they went to him, they would have to speak of the threat of an invasion for the second time. How would he take such a reminder, which could be interpreted as interference in the ruler's prerogatives?

The men discussed everything among themselves, weighed various proposals and viewed the situation from different sides, still they did not dare to go and speak to the Khan. Then the Chaushiar, this damned matchmaker, pursued him, whispering into his ear that he was the only savior of Khazaria. As Kiriy's closest friend, it would be proper and even beneficial to remind him of the Pechenegs' offensive and the threat of their invasion, including the possible capture of Itil.

Ambal probably would not have let the Chaushiar persuade him, had it not been for that promise Kiriy had made. For he had once assured Ambal that in due time he would make him his governor. So Ambal decided that his time had arrived: Kiriy was the Khan, his father was in the grave. Wouldn't it be only natural, he reasoned, if of all men he, Ambal, the Khan's friend and comrade-at-arms, became Khazaria's Governor and army commander, inheriting also his father's rank and authority?

The temptation to stand at the head of the regiment and bring all of Khazaria under his power overcame his doubts, and he made up his mind to go to the Khan. He purposely put on the same clothes in which his father had used to present himself to the Khan, and, as he entered Kiriy's chamber, he did not fall to the ground, as any other dignitary would have done, but instead lighted a splinter and stood waiting until it burned out.

For some moments, there was dead silence. The Khan could not comprehend what it all meant, and Ambal did not dare lift his eyes and study Kiriy's reaction. Barefooted, he stood there, dumbly staring at the floor and waiting till the fire went out and the decisive moment came, hoping that before long he would be invited to sit down by the Khan, as was the Governor's right.

That moment never came, though. Instead, he heard such a terrible shriek that he dropped the splinter and fell down, like a sack, to the Khan's feet.

He did not remember what the Khan shouted. He only understood that he was being expelled from the palace — forever.

In a daze, he dragged himself down the granite stairs and out of the palace. At home he wanted to take his life but was unable to do it: something held him back, some spark of hope was still smouldering in his heart.

However, that hope turned out to be deceptive. In the afternoon, the Khan sent for him and calmly, as friend to friend, advised him to commit suicide. Where and how he would do it was up to him, but for the unsanctioned assumption of the governor's title Ambal was to kill himself.

Ambal did not contradict or beg for mercy. He did not even remind Kiriy that the title had been promised him. The Khan's orders were sacred in Khazaria, and everyone was expected to obey — silently, without complaints. But when he rode out into the steppes and saw the majes-

tic glow of a setting sun, his hand involuntarily took away the sabre he had pressed against his throat. His arm dropped to his side.

Could it be that he was seeing all this for the last time, Ambal asked himself? Would he never again see this steppe with its waves of grass and that beautiful sunlit horizon? But why? Why did he have to die? Because of the Khan's order? But who was the Khan? Indeed, what was he? God's vicar on earth? Kiriy with his pock-marked face, the murderer of his father and brother — was he really God's vicar on earth? Oh, no! For he ought to know what Kiriy really was better than anyone else. Had that order come from Ovadiy or somebody else, Ambal might have obeyed it. But he wouldn't obey Kiriy. That man was not worth it.

Ambal resolutely thrust the sabre, sharpened for his own throat, back in the scabbard and strode to his horse. Some time later he was galloping toward the glowing sunset, as if trying to chase the sun, which had sunk beneath the horizon.

Now the Khazars had tracked him down and were again pushing him into a labyrinth of lie and treason. How would it turn out for him this time? Would the Khan pardon him for the violation of the holy order? Wouldn't it be wiser to run? But the Khazars had warned him, and it had been a no-nonsense warning, too. That could only mean that there was somebody in Chernihiv. Not only he, Ambal, was supposed to spy on the Princess — somebody must be there to follow him as well... Anything was possible. Then as soon as he tried to escape, they would put a noose round his neck. This would be the end of him.

To make matters worse, Prince Chorny was after him, too, threatening to cut off his head. How in heaven's name would this game end?

Ambal put his hands in his pockets and suddenly felt a purse. This reminder made him freeze with fear.

Back there, in Itil, a miserable purse of gold had turned Khan Ovadiy into a bloody mess. Now another one was thrown into his lap — like a bone to a dog. No, this time it had been two purses. Was it an omen of more bloodshed? Heaven! Whose blood would it be this time?

### XIII

#### A LEGEND OF LOVE

The cabin in the pasture was probably inferior to the poorest dwelling in the village of Zarichne. Small, with age-darkened and therefore grimy-looking walls, with a low soot-blackened ceiling, the cabin at first seemed to the Princess to be the frame of a large well in which two tiny windows had been cut to connect it with the evergreen outside world. But after several days, the walls seemed to step back, and the room brightened and changed beyond recognition. The Princess talked Vsevolod into cleaning it up. She herself washed the windows, which greatly surprised Osmomisl who had never thought she would want to do such dirty work. Then she covered her bed with a quilt, specially obtained for the purpose, and decorated the walls with flowers. The result surprised even her: the living room and her sleeping place seemed now quite suitable, even for a princess.

However, Chorna did not spend much time inside; she would rush out to the pasture almost as soon as she got up in the morning. If it hadn't been for rain, she would have found something to do there on that day, too. The drizzle started in the afternoon and wouldn't stop, sprinkling the earth monotonously on and on.

Taking some unfinished embroidery from her saddle sacks, she made herself comfortable on the bed and began her needlework to the soft drumming of the rain. It was good she always carried needlework with her, she thought. When she got tired of riding, she would let the horse graze around, sit down on the grass in the sun and embroider, humming a song. Now her embroidery certainly proved useful. It fell into her lap as if by the gods' will. Without it, she would have had nothing to do. To be sure, Vsevolod did not leave her alone for long. He would sit nearby, telling stories. Or else he would listen silently to what she had to tell him.

Now he had just disagreed with something she said, but did not rush into argument.

"Has it ever occurred to you, Princess," he spoke after a moment's pause, "that the time will come when you'll have to leave Siverianian country?"

"Why?" she was surprised. "Hasn't my constant refusal

to marry all those foreign princes convinced you that I don't want to leave?"

"Well," the youth was confused, "it has convinced me, though not completely."

"Why not?"

"I don't believe that you won't share the fate of Olexich."

The Princess stopped her work and stared at him quizzically.

"I don't quite understand what you mean. Who is Olexich?"

"Haven't you heard about him? I'll tell you then." And he began.

"In these same parts, not far from us, there lived not too long ago a very old magus. His head was white, his beard reached to his waist, and his eyes were so pale and faded with age that they were terrible to look at. He probably didn't know himself how long he had lived in these forests. But then it didn't seem to matter to anyone.

"He lived in the hollow of a tree and I visited him many times there. First I went with my father and later on my own. I was fascinated by that wizard who seemed to know all earthly mysteries and all heavenly signs, and I was attracted to him, especially when my mind was filled with sorrow or when I failed to understand something.

"It was he who first told me about Olexich. Once upon a time, he said, when concord reigned in the world and the earth was wide and plentiful and covered with vegetation from one end to another, when birds sang freely in woods and dales, yet unaware of what human cruelty was, a son was born to a couple who had settled in our forests. He was handsome beyond description. His mother was certainly proud of him and so were all the other people. All living creatures did their best to please the baby, to do something good for him. As he went to bed, birds would sing tender lullabies, and as he awoke, animals would crowd around his bed to entertain him. They all tried to look good, to make young Olexich happy and to keep him that way until his parents returned from the forest. Bear cubs would stand on their hind legs, grab one another and start wrestling. Or they would dance on fallen trees. Squirrels were particularly resourceful in entertaining the boy, doing all sorts of tricks on branches above him.

“It was no wonder then that the boy came to like and understand the world around him from the moment he was born. And as he grew up, he fell completely in love with his native land and these beautiful forests.

“Olexich could not be kept indoors. He was on a horse almost as soon as he rose from bed. His stallion would take him all over the woods and dales, flying like the wind. The boy never had enough, though, and kept riding and hunting, admiring the richness of the world and the luxuries of Mother Earth.

“As years went by, Olexich grew up, becoming more handsome by the day. His mother was completely infatuated with him. She would give him a meal and then sit down nearby and admire him, unable to take her eyes off him. In the morning, she would comb his hair and walk with him to the forest, giving him motherly advice. As night came, she would put soft grass under his head, sing a song and watch over him, guarding his sleep.

“At that time Olexich lived with his parents in thick virgin woods on the banks of a swift river. He liked to welcome sunrise, especially in spring, and enjoyed living in this blessed world of green grass and morning dew. He seemed to have nothing else to desire. The world’s beauty and freedom were all his, to say nothing of the love which his mother did not spare for him, her one and only child.

“Once, when he was hunting, Olexich reached Blue Lake, the same one which is now called Swan Lake. He looked at it and was immediately enthralled by its crystal-pure water and green shores.

“There he sat for a long time and did not even realize that night had arrived. When he finally noticed it, he decided not to go back that day, since it was late and he was too far from home. So he had something to eat, placed some soft grass on the ground and lay down by the fire not far from the shore.

“He was half awake when he heard a splashing sound. At first he paid no attention to it but simply opened his eyes and, seeing that it was still too early, dozed off again. Sleep is sweetest at dawn, you know. Then the splashing became louder. The youth woke up and lifted himself up on his elbows to have a look. He could not believe his eyes at first: a girl was bathing in the lake just several paces away from him. She would jump up, splash the water all around her and plunge back again up to her



neck, as though she was hiding from human eyes and at the same time knew that somebody was watching her from the forest. But it only seemed so to Olexich; she bathed freely, as must have been her habit.

"The lad rose to his feet and, in total enchantment, walked to the shore. He had scarcely made several steps, though, when the girl let out a yelp and squatted in the water, gazing at him with her large, strangely beautiful eyes.

"For some moments she sat there, frightened by the youth's sudden appearance and not knowing what to do. Then she jumped out of the lake and, covering herself with her long hair, which reached almost to her ankles, dashed to the shore. Only then did Olexich notice her clothes lying by a tree. He also saw that they were white as snow. He wanted to run after her but it was already too late: the girl had grabbed her clothes and tore along the shore, looking back every now and then. Having covered a considerable distance, she threw on her clothes and — believe it or not — suddenly turned into a swan. She waved her white wings, gave a farewell shriek and flew away. The youth stared after her and could not believe what he had seen. 'What was it?' he kept asking himself, rubbing his eyes. 'Was it a dream or a ghost? Was that swan really a girl?'

"Since then Olexich seemed to be possessed. He turned sour and sad. All day long he would sit grim-faced by the house and as night came, he would mount his faithful horse and ride to Blue Lake along the path he had beaten. There he would sit until dawn at the place where he had seen her, without a wink of sleep. But it was all in vain: the girl never reappeared on the shores of Blue Lake and never again stirred its tear-pure water. The mornings there were quiet and sad.

"It was then that Olexich decided to look for the fair maiden. He thought there might be another Blue Lake in the world which she now chose for her bathing. As soon as he made up his mind to go, he set off in the direction in which she had flown away.

"He rode for one day, then another, but he found no Blue Lake. To be sure, he did come across some lakes, but those were entirely different — muddy and unattractive.

"Yet he did not lose hope and kept on riding. Then one day he saw an orchard sloping down one side of a hill.

The trees were sagging with fruit. He tasted them and found them delicious. He tried some more, from another tree, and these were even better. Then he picked some from a third tree and they were as sweet as honey, melting in his mouth.

“As he tasted all that fruit, Olexich wondered where the delicacies had come from. Why hadn’t he come across anything like them before? He had traveled all over those boundless forests and had thought he had eaten everything they contained. And yet, he had never tasted anything like that.

“Higher up the hillside, the trees were laden with even more fruit, and the grass underneath was sprinkled with flowers. They were white, red and blue — a riot of colors! And they were so fragrant that his head went spinning from the air thickly permeated with their scent.

“For some time, Olexich admired those flowers and then began feeling drowsy. He tried to shake off that sleepiness but it was to no avail.

“It was then that the youth suspected that something was wrong about that orchard. And if it was enchanted, and if the hill was guarded in this way, it meant that there was somebody on top of the hill.

“He reined in his horse and took in his breath. In a short while, however, the horse stumbled and fell, overcome with sleep.

“Undaunted, Olexich continued climbing the hill on foot. He would run up a few steps, pause for breath and then keep on from tree to tree, from one cluster of flowers to another.

“Everything seemed to be petrified, and it was so still that the leaves did not stir in the trees. All things around him appeared to have caught their breath, as if waiting to see how his venture would end.

“As he walked up the hill, he came across bones here and there — both human skeletons and those of horses. Nevertheless, Olexich trudged on and on, higher and higher. He stopped by an apple tree to breathe and felt that he was suffocating. Next he realized that he was tumbling down on the soft flaming-red flowers, saw how they shook, whether broken or just crushed by the weight of his body, and passed out. The scents had eventually overcome him, wearing him out and putting him to sleep when he was halfway to the top.

"It's hard to tell for how long Olexich lay in the flowers under that apple tree. He woke up at night and found himself not outdoors but in a luxurious palace of untold beauty. A song came from afar. It was a sweet, luring and exquisitely tender melody. His heart throbbed, he wanted to rise to his feet, but his body did not obey him. He was lying in a bed, motionless like a log. Some time later, when the song had died away, someone's timid hand touched his forehead and he felt strength returning to his body. Propping himself up on his elbows, he turned around and froze with amazement: right there by his side sat the same swan-maiden who had bathed in Blue Lake.

"She was clad in a fine silk cloak which became her very much, graciously draping her slim figure. The bright-colored fabric, which seemed to be woven of fairytale rays of sunshine, cast soft shadows upon her, adding beauty to her face and setting off the lush golden waves of her hair reaching down to her feet.

"Olexich stared, as if spellbound, at the girl, unable to take his eyes off her. He wanted to speak to her, to say something, but, realizing that he did not even know her name, bit his tongue. Only the admiration and happiness reflected in his eyes and his face glowing with joy revealed to the girl his unspoken thoughts.

"'Are you angry with me?' she asked in a soft, gentle voice.

"He wanted to rise from the bed, but the girl stopped him. Her hand touched his forehead ordering the youth to lie back on the pillows.

"'I know,' she bent over him even lower, 'that you've been searching for me in all the nearby forests and especially by the lakes. I also know that I have been haunting your dreams and that you have suffered and tortured yourself because for a long time your search was fruitless. You must have thought that I did not care for you.'

"'Oh, no!' Olexich protested. 'I never thought about that. Only sometimes I was afraid that you deliberately avoided us, the forest folk. That's why, I decided, you were hiding from me as well.'

"'Weren't you angry because of this?' the swan-maiden insisted.

"'I couldn't be. Our meeting that morning planted such a seed in my heart that it could bear only one fruit — and that was pain.'

“For a while the girl did not speak. She just looked at Olexich with eyes that were brimming with happiness and was silent. Then she let out a joyous cry and threw herself on his chest.

“That very moment lights went out in the room, and then only her hair, shining faintly in the dark, illuminated their passionate kisses.

“‘I was really afraid of you,’ she confessed in a hot whisper. ‘That’s why I didn’t dare show myself to you. But don’t think I didn’t care. I also fell in love with you. I, too, couldn’t sleep at night. Come morning, I’d soar into the sky and fly toward the forests to see you at least from above. But I was afraid of meeting you. I didn’t trust you, the people of the earth. Your treacherous ways put me off. But when I saw you in the orchard, as you struggled uphill and fell, overcome by the enchantment of that place, forbidden for people, I forgot about my fears. I became oblivious to everything and hurried to you, my love.’

“‘Was it you who brought me up here?’

“‘I ordered you be brought here. Everything living on this hill rushed to my call. So I told them to carry you from the Realm of Sleep to my palace. Here we are together. And I won’t let you leave me — never!’

“Days went by. Olexich’s mother waited for him, but he had vanished without trace and wouldn’t come back. At first she thundered at her husband, asking why he didn’t search for their son. And when the father’s search came to nothing, she went to the woods herself. Mothers in grief trust no one. Then they are guided solely by their motherly love.

“Olexich’s mother went through all the forests and many foreign lands but failed to find her son. She didn’t even come across any trace of him.

“One day the poor woman became tired and sat down to rest by a riverbank. There she was sitting all alone, grieving, when something cracked nearby. She raised her head and froze: an old woman was plodding toward her from the forest. She was a real old hag, looking so terrible that she was almost repulsive. The sight of her sent shivers down the mother’s spine.

“The woman came up to her, leaned on her stick and gave her a malicious grin.

“‘Feeling sad, eh?’ she asked.

“Olexich’s mother wanted to stand up but was unable

to do so, as though she had been immobilized by the old woman's cold, piercing stare.

"'A witch!' the thought flashed through her mind, and some dim glimmer of a hope stirred inside her. Smiling to the old woman, she rose to her feet.

"'A misfortune has befallen me, Granny,' she said in a low, shaking voice.

"'He-he!' the witch chuckled. 'A misfortune, you say? But it's not as grave as you think, poor creature. Your son isn't far away.'

"'Do you know where he is?' Olexich's mother rushed to her. 'Can you tell me where he is?'

"'Yes, I know,' the witch told her. 'Why raise such a fuss? He's not in the claws of a wild beast but in the embrace of a fair maiden.'

"'Really?' the mother rejoiced. 'Then where is he and why doesn't he return to his parents' home? And why did he leave us at all?'

"The witch looked at her closely and said:

"'Have you already forgotten how you, too, one day left your dear parents and set off into the world following the man of your choice? If you no longer remember that, come with me and I'll remind you.'

"She took Olexich's mother by the hand and led her through the woods and up the forbidden hill toward the swan-maiden's palace. As they approached the enchanted orchard, they stopped and looked around.

"'See?' the witch pointed to the hilltop where the palace stood buried in the trees. 'That's where your son is.'

"The mother wanted to rush up there, but the witch held her back.

"'Don't hurry,' she said, frowning. Then she reached into a long sack hanging at her side and took out two small bags with dried herbs. 'Take this,' she said, giving one to the mother. 'You'll need it in case you'll have to return alone. And with this one we shall now try to make our way to that palace.'

"Saying this, she stepped into the orchard. The mother followed at her heels. When they reached the place where the flowers grew, the witch untied her bag, stirred the herbs in it and went on. At the old, shaggy apple tree she halted, took a handful of the herbs and poured them in front of her. And then she continued up the hill, throwing the herbs before her every now and then.

“Finally, they left the dangerous place behind them. The witch put away the herbs and winked to Olexich’s mother, as if to say that the worst was over.

“They had hardly had time to look around when they heard laughter. Someone was laughing in a merry, ringing laughter, its echo reverberating amidst mighty oaks whose thick branches intertwined above their heads.

“The two women stood there and listened, trying to guess where the laughter was coming from. Then they stepped back into the trees and watched from there. Suddenly they saw a girl, clad in blue, run out onto a clearing. A youth was running after her. He obviously wanted to catch the girl, who was slender like a chamois and as beautiful as a rose, but she ran faster.

“‘Olex...’ the mother began, but the witch jumped forward like a cat and pressed her bony hand to the woman’s mouth.

“‘Don’t do it!’ she bared her few broken teeth and hissed at the mother so fiercely that she went numb with fear and obediently withdrew into the thicket. ‘Didn’t I tell you we mustn’t show ourselves. Just wait for the proper moment, otherwise you won’t see your son ever again. Or do you think he’ll listen to you and exchange the love of a beautiful girl for your motherly love? Vain hopes, poor woman. Do as I say or you won’t see your son again.’

“Apparently, the girl did not hear the mother’s call and did not notice anything. Now she was running straight at the two women. Her luxurious golden braids were streaming in the wind, and her face, flushed with the happiness of love, was indescribably tender and beautiful. The mother, however, did not notice the girl’s beauty; as a matter of fact, she did not even look at the girl. All she saw was her son, he only and nothing else!

“At night, the witch led Olexich’s mother to the bedroom and hid her behind a curtain.

“‘Here you are,’ she said in a whisper. Then she led her to a place from where they could see better and nodded toward the sleeping maiden. ‘Look how sweet her sleep is... He-he... She must be tired, poor girl.’

“The old witch kept muttering and laughing at something, but the mother did not listen. She was looking from that dark corner at the comfortable bedroom and couldn’t believe her eyes: the bed on which the young lovers were sleeping in each other’s arms was illuminated by a golden

light emanating from the maiden's hair. Bright rays of that light fell on the snow-white sheets and on their faces, trustingly pressed to each other and smiling in their sweet dreams. Their faces were so beautiful and illuminated with the bliss of their union that the mother involuntarily admired them, even softening toward the girl who was sharing her son's dreams.

"'Go ahead,' the witch pushed the mother forward, thrusting into her hand heavy scissors with sharp blades. 'Go and do as I told you.'

"'I'm afraid,' the woman shrank back. 'I can't do it... Look how happy they are, what a nice couple they make.'

"'Don't you want to do it?' the witch frowned. 'Then why have you been bothering me? And why did you wander about those woods, pretending to be grieving, in the first place?'

"'I... I just wanted...'

"'It now seems you didn't want anything. If that's so, farewell. And you'd better bid farewell to your son too — for good.'

"'To my son?' the mother came to her senses. 'To my only son? And she shouted: 'No, wait.'

She held the witch back who was standing in her way and pressing the snake-cold scissors to her chest.

"'I'll go... Only wait a bit, and I'll do it.'

"The witch snorted contemptuously but stayed. She stood at the exit of their hiding place and stared from under her knitted brow, urging the mother to hurry with her stern, merciless gaze. The mother cast a glance at her, then another, and went into the bedroom. She took a step and paused. Then she took another step and stopped again, looking around. Finally she approached the nuptial bed, bent over the sleeping beauty and, taking the shining braids into one hand, cut them with the scissors at the back of the neck.

"What happened next was rather unexpected. The maiden cried out in a pain-stricken voice and dashed to the door, followed by the witch's chuckles, which sounded very much like the hissing of a snake.

"'What will you say now?' the witch scoffed at the girl. 'Have you shown off enough of that pretty face of yours? Have you learned what the love of a young lad is like? Now have your own share of suffering, watching him from above, and try to live the way we poor ugly creatures

live! He-he-he... I've finally revenged myself on you, wise maiden.'

"The witch burst into a satanic laughter and then suddenly her voice was heard no more. She disappeared as suddenly as if a gust of wind had blown her out of the palace... Only now did Olexich's mother see that her son had also jumped out of bed and dashed after the girl, trying to understand what had happened. Now he was looking for her and calling her name. But she did not reply and only his voice echoed under the high ceiling. Then something swished past the windows, and when the youth ran outside, he heard her voice calling from above:

"'Farewell, Olexich! Farewell!'

"Then there was silence. The bedroom and the whole palace became empty and sad.

"That silence frightened the mother and brought her to her senses. It occurred to her that her son had not yet seen her. What if he disappeared again, running after the maiden?

"Not realizing what she was doing, she ran out of the bedroom. But as soon as she had crossed the threshold, she stumbled against the motionless figure of her son.

"'Son,' she called, unaware, in her state of confusion, that she was still holding the snake-cold scissors and the lush braids, which were still shining, casting their light on Olexich and herself. 'Son, I'm here. I...'

"The lad spun around, glanced at his mother, then at the golden braids and grew even paler.

"'You?' he asked in disbelief. 'Have you cut off Horislava's hair?'

The mother was silent. She realized only now that her motherly love had been used to perpetrate a crime and that she had done a terrible, irreparable thing. She felt completely at a loss. Her eyes wandered from Olexich to the braids which she didn't know what to do with, just as she didn't know how to explain her action to her son.

"Her son was silent, too. Rock-still, he gazed at his mother and didn't speak. Then, as if remembering something, he snatched the braids from her hand and, without saying anything, ran away."

"Why did he do it?" Chorna asked Vsevolod. "Was there some magic power in those braids? Did that power help him to get through the enchanted orchard?"



"No," Vsevolod smiled. "He now knew all the ways to and from the hill, because the girl had taught him how to avoid all the dangerous places. Olexich rather hoped he could still save his beloved. He knew from Horislava that the braids enabled her to assume the human image. That is why he went to search for her to give them back to her. He must have failed to find her. Or probably he found her too late for the braids to be of any use to her. And then he may simply have failed to recognize her amidst the hundreds of swans he must have seen on his way.

"This is what happened to the young lad," Vsevolod sighed. "He went into the wide world and vanished. His parents waited and looked for him for a very long time, but it was all in vain. Olexich forgot both his family and his land which he used to love so much. Blinded with love, he forgot everything. He may have given up his search, but he saw her every night in his dreams. He was also visited by her at night. She would fly to his side, sit on his pillow and start caressing him, drawing close to him. But when he awoke, she was always gone. However, he'd often see signs of her presence. Sometimes, he even found bits of her down on him."

The room was quiet as if after a thunderstorm.

"Maybe he simply perished somewhere," the Princess suggested doubtfully. "He may well have been killed by a wild beast or drowned in a bog."

"No," a thick, confident voice said. "He didn't forget his land and he didn't perish."

Only now did Vsevolod and the Princess notice that the door to the living room stood open and that Osmomisl had been sitting there, listening to their conversation.

"How do you know?" Vsevolod was the first to speak, probably in order to hide his confusion. "Was it the magus who told you?"

"He didn't tell me," the horsekeeper explained quietly, "yet in a way I did learn it from him."

"In what way?"

"It was very simple. I was the one who cremated him. And as I washed him, I found on him the same golden braids that you spoke about."

The Princess let out a cry and excitedly jumped off the bed and ran barefooted to the other room.

"Did you say you found them on him? Were they really golden? How long were they? Did they shine in the dark?"

She knelt before the old man, beaming with joy.

"I'm not sure if they shone," Osmomisl said in a softer voice, "because it was daylight when I burned them together with his body. But the hair was surely long enough. The braids spun the old man's body several times. They were lush and golden, exactly as Vsevolod described them to you."

"Oh, Gods!" the girl clasped her hands, looking now at Vsevolod, now at the horsekeeper. "That meant that the magus was no one else than Olexich himself, didn't it? So he must have returned to his native land after all."

The horsekeeper's curious, now much warmer, glance lingered on her for a long moment. Then he raised his callous hand and gently stroked her trustingly offered head — something he had not done in twenty-odd years.

"Have traveling merchants ever told you a story about the way elephants die?" he asked the Princess.

"No," Chorna replied, not understanding what elephants had to do with it.

"Overseas there's a legend about elephants," said Osmomisl, now addressing both of them. "They say that those animals roam about forests all their lives, but always return to die in the place where their ancestors died. It's the same with some people. They wander all over the world. Some pursue glory, some try to make a fortune, others look for beauty. But all of them eventually bring their bones to be buried in their native land."

"But they do it only after their hopes have been scattered by the winds, and the flame in their hearts is already extinguished," Vsevolod argued.

"It may be so," the horsekeeper agreed.

"Of what use are they then to their homeland? Why should it receive those spent, burnt-out souls at all?"

"You want to know why?" Osmomisl asked vigorously. "The homeland accepts them if only to dissuade the young from following their example. Life, my son, is like a hunt: one mistake is a better lesson than a hundred lucky turns you don't even think about in your elation."

The Princess did not interfere with the argument. She looked now at the one, now at the other, not daring to put in a word. But when she saw that Vsevolod's arguments were exhausted and that the old man was, in fact, echoing her own thoughts, she jumped to her feet and hugged Osmomisl affectionately.

"May the gods thank you for your wise words!" Her breath was hot against his skin. "It appears we hold similar views. And I thought so badly of you and was so much afraid of you those first days."

The girl was sincerely looking at him with her warm and gentle eyes, and the old horsekeeper knew that that glance and especially the kiss that he still felt on his cheek were melting away the ice in his heart and shattering his solid and unswerving will power.

Strange as it was, he did not resist her, nor did he intend to do it.

"Roxana, Roxana!" he tortured himself in his thoughts. "What did I do to you!"

#### XIV

#### NEW WORRIES

Returning one night from making his usual round of the pasture, Osmomisl saw Falcon tethered outside the house and felt uneasy. That meant that the Princess had not gone hunting. This was strange, because she was usually very enthusiastic about those risky hunts. Why had she stayed home? Was she sick or had she quarreled with Vsevolod?

Touching his horse with his spurs, Osmomisl hurried home. He did not know why he was worried about the Princess, just as he did not know when he had first begun to worry about her. The girl seemed safe enough there: she was well protected and treated with due respect.

At home his anxiety increased even more. For a long time, Chorna did not respond to his calls, and when he finally decided to open the door to her bedroom, she buried her face in the pillow and started crying.

The horsekeeper felt completely at a loss and did not know what he should do. He had not mixed with people, especially women, for a very long time. Over the twenty-odd years of his solitary life in the seclusion of the woods, he had forgotten how to handle women and certainly had no idea how to go about comforting them. Besides, he had to deal not with just a woman but with a young girl, and not merely a girl but a princess. However, the need to find out what had happened prevailed over his doubts, and he forced himself to say a few words:

“Has the Princess been harmed or has she heard bad tidings?”

Obtaining no reply, he raised his voice:

“Has some bad news been brought from Chernihiv?”

The Princess remained silent. Sobbing, she wrapped herself in the quilt, but did not say anything.

Something must have happened, the horsekeeper decided and sank heavily on a log near the open door. His worries now seemed well justified, and a misfortune was definitely in the air. But he still did not know how to approach the girl and did not dare ask her another question. He stared at the Princess from under his brow and hesitated. Only some time later, when Chorna had calmed down a little, he lifted his head, heavy from the sleepless night, and, trying to sound as gentle as he could, asked:

“Well, what has happened? Why are you crying so bitterly?”

“It’s... it’s time for me to go home,” the girl said at last. “I fear for my father. For he doesn’t know where his daughter has been all this time. He knows nothing! And he must be suffering terribly.”

Osmomisl rose to his feet, shocked both by what the Princess said she was going to do and by the fact that all his guesses had turned out to be so wide off the mark. For a while he could not believe his ears. It did not last long, though. Very soon, the Princess, who had suddenly recovered her usual talkativeness, persuaded him that she was indeed planning to leave.

It was then that Osmomisl became really afraid. If Chorna went back, she would eventually be delivered to the Khazars. But what about Vsevolod? Then there was also the Prince. Would he go unpunished? Would he slip out of the trap he, Osmomisl, had set up for him?

Meanwhile, the girl turned to face him and, pitifully and without pauses, began to tell him how her dear mother had died, how she, the Princess, had insulted her father before her flight and how she later had wished she hadn’t, crying and all. But then the decisive moment had arrived and she found herself unable to trust him and fled to the woods. And to think she had done it — secretly, without telling anyone!

She talked for a long time, with tears in her eyes. Osmomisl stared at her tears and sorrowful face and did not know what he should say or do. He wanted to argue with

the girl, but he felt confused and knew he wouldn't dare try to stop her. His accursed heart was too weary and ready to yield.

Fearing that this would really happen, Osmomisl stood up, indicating that he was leaving.

"You... you don't have to hurry, my child," he said, trying to sound reasonable. "Let's discuss it when Vsevolod comes back. Perhaps he'd better go to Chernihiv before you to find out what's been going on there. Then it'll be clearer what you should do. Or else, if you wish, we could pass word to your father."

He was not sure he would do it. But he had to say something to calm her down and to keep her there at least a little longer.

Outdoors, his uneasiness would not leave him. His anxiety pursued him like a ghost, giving him no respite. Finally he went outside the fence and headed for his favorite tree — a mighty, thousand-year-old oak. There he sat under its thick, long branches, cast a glance over the pasture, peered into the sunlit, early-morning vistas and fell to thinking. This is what he thought:

"Oh, wide world, the beautiful world of ours! How vast you are and how strange. I have seen you in the Siverianian forests, in the Khazar steppes, beyond the wide ocean and high in the mountains. You've amazed me with your wonders, you've frightened me with your horrible beasts, but you have never revealed to me the truth of life, which is the biggest of all your wonders. Why have you been hiding it from me? Do you consider that truth too dangerous for your own existence? Or, maybe, you don't want us humans to become wholly human?"

"But I want to learn the truth, because I want to know what you really are like. I'm also curious to know why things happen and for what reason I, for one, was not born with a serpent in my heart. Didn't I nurture dreams of happiness back in those days when Roxana and I loved each other? But you sent upon us a prince and his governor, reared a snake in my heart and lead me to commit a crime. And it wasn't just a crime either! I killed the woman I loved and through this I destroyed my own happiness.

"Now, twenty years later, another girl has come to me. And she's the daughter of the very same prince. But even

though she is his child, she has planted a different seed in my heart and has stirred different feelings. Why has it happened? Why? For I withdrew from the world and learned to hate all and everything. For more than twenty years, I carried this hatred in my heart. I dreamed of revenge, but then I met this girl with the heart of a dove, and her candor, her beauty. I cannot understand what's happening to me. In her presence I forget about revenge and melt like wax. Why, I'm almost ready to admit that I was wrong, that not everything is as bad and wrong as I thought it was after Roxana's unfaithfulness and the Prince's judgement. Now it seems that life is not without good people.

"Why is it so? Has her beauty awakened a human being in me or has my past suffering helped me to understand her beauty? And what about my plans of revenge? Will I be able to harm this girl for the sake of them?"

Vsevolod returned from his hunt well after breakfast and immediately noticed that something had happened at home. His father came to meet him at the edge of the forest and, without asking him a single question about the hunting, started telling him what had happened to the Princess.

"Did Chorna tell you anything before you went?" he asked Vsevolod.

"No," his son became alarmed. "She'd told me the night before that she would not be going, so I didn't disturb her in the morning."

For a while, Osmomisl was silent, thinking. Then he lifted his gaze on to Vsevolod and said, sadly and worriedly:

"She's going home."

Vsevolod did not go pale, as his father had feared, although the news certainly did not make him happy. Silently and slowly, he rode to the house. It seemed to Osmomisl that it did not occur to Vsevolod that her departure might be very dangerous for her, even that he did not really care whether she would leave or stay.

He cast a glance at his son and could no longer restrain himself.

"You must tell her that it will be dangerous, that if she's seen by the Khazars, it will be the end of it — she'll never escape again. Then her father will be fully satisfied..."

"Chorna won't listen to me," the youth finally replied. "She's made her decision, and that will be it."

The horsekeeper was so struck by the certainty in Vsevolod's voice that he even reined in his horse.

"Try to understand one thing: she's still a child, she can't imagine what kind of trouble awaits her in Chernihiv. You, more than anyone else, ought to try to steer her thoughts away from this silly idea. Arrange a contest, for example; aren't you good in spear fighting?"

"To steer her thoughts away..." Vsevolod was thinking hard. "Wait, we could really try to do just that."

He became merrier and, casting a glance at his father, confided to him conspiratorially:

"All right, I'll try."

After dinner, he ran out of the house in the best of moods and went to Osmomisl, leading the Princess with him.

"Father!" he shouted from a distance. "Chorna and I are going to the lake. To Swan Lake, I mean."

Osmomisl stopped carving a spoon from a piece of pear wood and, happy and surprised, did not know what to say about their plan.

"I've agreed to go with him," Chorna explained, sitting next to Vsevolod opposite the old man. "Before returning to Chernihiv, I'd like to ask a swan-maiden about my future. And then, it shouldn't take long. We'll leave tonight, and if all goes well, we'll come back tomorrow."

"That's fine," Osmomisl finally found his voice. "It's good that you've remembered the lake. Otherwise the Princess could have left us without seeing that wonder. And there you might also surprise one of those swans and learn your future."

He knew, though, that it was no simple thing to steal up to a swan-maiden. Ever since he had come to live in these parts, neither he nor his grooms had been lucky enough to find a maiden's clothes or see one bathing at sunrise. These had been only tales and hopes to nourish his imagination when he was young. But now he was glad that his son had remembered the lake and the swans who could tell fortunes. This venture would divert the girl's thoughts from her plans and would make her delay her departure. She had a stubborn nature and was easily carried away, so a failure wouldn't discourage her. Besides, the lake was fascinatingly beautiful. And the girl's heart was open and

responsive to beauty. She wouldn't be able to leave that place for some time.

He helped them prepare for the road, but almost as soon as he had seen them off, he suddenly felt some deep, barely noticeable anxiety. For a long time, he could not understand where it had come from, and when he finally did, he went cold inside.

What if Vsevolod failed to restrain himself this time? What if his involuntary, ill-considered prophesy would come true this very night? It might well happen in those out-of-the-way woods with the nights as intoxicating as they were. There was nothing like those woods and that lake to make one's head go round. A man would feel free to do anything there, even to indulge in the pleasures of passion.

What would happen then? How different would everything be after that?

Suddenly, Osmomisl wanted to call them back. He was about to send a groom after them, but realizing how silly he would then look in their eyes, decided against it.

He did not stop thinking, though. He spent a sleepless night praying to the gods that this should not happen. He thought that maybe, eventually, the whole story would end well; maybe the Khazars would go away, and the girl would really fall in love with Vsevolod and would make the Prince learn to live with it. Love was omnipotent. And the Prince also loved his daughter; there was little he wouldn't do for her.

Indeed, wouldn't Vsevolod make a good warrior in the prince's regiment? After all, he was brave, strong, had a nice carriage and a handsome face. And wouldn't Chorna and Vsevolod make a nice couple? Oh, this would surely be as good a couple as any other!

He kept tossing in his bed, which seemed very hard that night, and cursed himself for having let them go. But self-reproach brought no relief, and the horsekeeper started a mental conversation with his son.

"She's unhappy as it is," he wanted to tell him through the omnipotent gods. "Unhappy — do you hear me, Vsevolod? And we... Who are we to claim the laws of blood? If we can't be human in happiness, let's at least try to be human in sorrow."



## THE MAGIC OF A DARK NIGHT

The night was still and starry. It was also quite warm. One could stretch out on the bare ground and go to sleep as if in a warm bed and not in thick, primeval woods with a forest lake somewhere nearby. For it was summer, and the sun had shone all day long, not a scorching sun, but warm and gentle. Maybe later on, toward morning, it would grow cold, and a wind would probably blow from the clearing. But now it was still and warm without being sultry; and it felt good to lie by the campfire and stare at the dancing flames struggling to keep back the enveloping darkness.

Sweet scents of flowers and hoof-trodden grass flowed from the clearing, tickling Vsevolod's nostrils and intoxicating his heart. He wished he could close his eyes and succumb to the temptation of a sweet sleep. But Vsevolod chased the temptation away: the Princess was sleeping in a tent under a nearby oak, and he was the watchful guardian of her sleep.

Slowly, as if playing, he broke the dry wood he had gathered earlier and threw it into the fire. Then he lay down again on his back and peered into the remarkably clear, star-studded sky, if only to keep awake and occupy his mind with something. The stars were so numerous up there, and they looked so beautiful. Their light seemed to enshroud Dazhbug Path in a silvery milk-white mist. The forest loomed darkly around him. High, age-old oaks spread their wide green crowns to all sides, and, intertwining their branches, formed a dark, impenetrable wall.

Vsevolod rolled over and looked at the horses. Reassured, he relished in the forest smells. He had known them since childhood, having spent much of his life in woods and pastures, and he could easily tell them apart, unerringly recognizing pasque-flower, comfrey, even rare herbs and flowers that smelled quite similar.

Suddenly, he sensed a new smell that seemed unpleasant, although he failed to recognize what it was.

Alarmed, he lay still for a while, then pushed himself up on his hands and, peering hard into the dark wall of forest on the far side of the clearing, drew the air into his widely opened nostrils. This time, however, he did not feel the unpleasant smell.

Finally, it occurred to him that the smoke and resin might have dulled his sense of smell, so he stood up, walked a few steps away from the fire and sniffed again, first directly in front of him, then turning left, then some more to the left...

Then he guessed what it was. There had to be a wolf prowling nearby.

He stood there for a while, thinking, and then went toward the horses.

When he returned, the Princess lifted her head and asked in an alarmed voice:

"Where have you been, Vsevolod?"

"I've been looking at the horses," the youth replied quietly. "They've grazed enough already, so I've tethered them closer to the fire. Now you go to sleep, Chorna, because I'll wake you at the break of dawn."

The girl sank back onto her soft, thick pile of grass and closed her eyes. The fire cast reddish reflections on her face, revealing the barely discernible outline of a smile on her lips. It seemed to Vsevolod that the Princess was smiling not merely because she approved of his intention to wake her early, but because she was ready to burst into silly, girlish laughter. He was almost ready to play along, to find a stalk and tickle her full lips. He even prepared to stand up look for that stalk, when all of a sudden a burst of loud laughter pinned him to the ground like an unexpected blow. The echo was still reverberating in the forest when another guffaw followed, even louder than the first one.

The Princess jumped up, trying to understand what had happened and where the wild laughter was coming from. She rushed to the opening of the tent to look outside, but Vsevolod blocked the exit and seated her back on her bed, smiling.

"Don't be afraid, Princess. Those were the wood nymphs."

His smile was so reassuring and his face so confident that the girl felt ashamed of her fears and made an effort to pull herself together. But she did not calm down for long: another peal of insane laughter broke out right overhead, making her cringe from fear, huddle up to the young man and tremble like a leaf in the wind.

"I'm scared. It really frightens me," she told him in a startled whisper. "They are up on the oak, right there over our heads."

"It's all right, Princess," Vsevolod soothed her. "There's nothing to worry about. We've got a fire going here, and the wood nymphs wouldn't dare come near it. You shouldn't be afraid of anybody: as long as we have that fire burning, neither beasts nor spirits will do us any harm."

But that wild laughter had obviously given Chorna a good scare, and it was not easy to calm her down.

"I want to get out of here," she begged the lad. "I'm really afraid, Vsevolod. We'll be safer out in the clearing. You can at least see something there..."

"No, no," Vsevolod held her back. "We shouldn't go out there. We must wait it out here in the tent. The nymphs won't keep it up for long, they'll play around for a while and then go away. That's probably because we've taken their place: they're angry because they have nowhere to dance. But when they see we aren't leaving, they'll have to move someplace else. Now listen, they're already going."

The laughter was indeed fading away in the distance, and Chorna calmed down a little, although she still kept straining her ears. Instead of ordering Vsevolod out of the tent, she continued to cling to him, seeking protection. The young man gladly held her in his arms, as if she were a treasure against his chest, enfolding her with infinite care. Yet at the same time he was somewhat timid and hesitant, as if he could not quite believe in his happiness or even feared it.

But the girl did not notice his hesitation; she was anxious to see his smile and meet his eyes, hoping to find in them certainty that the wood nymphs were not to be feared and that the danger was over. Reassured at last, she heaved a sigh of relief and shyly buried her face in his chest.

"See what a coward I am?" she whispered from her hiding place. "Fancy getting scared by wood nymphs. As if I hadn't heard about them before and hadn't known that they lived in forests."

Smiling, Vsevolod adjusted her disarranged hair.

"Do you know why I didn't let you out of the tent?" he asked later, after she had overcome her bashfulness and made herself comfortable in his arms.

"You thought I'd run away, didn't you?"

"No," he breathed into her face. "I didn't want anything

bad to happen to you. You see, when wood nymphs see somebody in the forest, they grimace, swing from the trees or dance. Their games look so alluring that people can't resist the temptation and join in. And then they remain cripples for the rest of their lives, with their faces permanently contorted in grimaces and their bodies shaking like in a dance."

Vsevolod saw fear lurking in the girl's eyes again and felt her drawing closer to him.

"But you shouldn't be afraid, Princess," he changed the tone. "We've got a fire here that will keep them away. Look how quiet it has become: they must have gone to some other clearing."

He spoke in a calm, convincing voice, and the Princess gradually forgot her fears. She let her imagination soar, and dreamed about other things. Meanwhile, Vsevolod began to tell her about the swan-maidens, relating some half-forgotten story, which, however, bore close resemblance to their present adventure. Then he casually spoke about the secrets known only to the men of the pasture: when and how to lie in wait for these fortune-tellers and what to do when they, already in human image, plunged into the clear, cool water at dawn. He spoke in an undertone, his voice grave and mysterious, and the girl listened, spellbound, eagerly devouring his every word. She was imagining how she would wait for the sibyls in the thicket and how she would then jump out onto the bank to snatch their clothes. And then she would wait, triumphant, for them to come to her and beg her: "Have mercy on us, fair maiden, give us back our robes and we shall reward you generously by telling you what fate awaits you in the future."

But the Princess wouldn't yield so easily. First, she would make them tell her if the Khazars had already left Chernihiv and find out whether she would succeed in getting the Khan off her back. And when and if they assured her that she would overcome all her present troubles, she would question them about her future love, to learn who the young man would be and from where he would come.

As time went on, she gradually succumbed to drowsiness. Her thoughts began to wander, straying from the mist-enshrouded lake to her father's kremlin, and from there back to the lake which now seemed at the same time strange and familiar. Then her thoughts faded away, and

the girl no longer heard Vsevolod's voice, sleeping quietly and trustingly in his arms.

Vsevolod, too, fell silent. He gazed at the sleeping Princess and tried not to stir. He even held his breath lest it should wake her or disturb her sleep. This had to be avoided at all costs, because the girl needed good rest before the dawn, sleeping away her fears. When she went with him to lie in wait for the maidens, she should not be afraid of being surprised by them instead. Now she was fast asleep, cuddling up to him. This was the first time she had let herself be embraced and fallen asleep in his arms.

He wondered how she would react when she woke up in his arms in the morning. Would she be surprised, would she draw away from him, or would she become more affectionate toward him, realizing, at last, that he was the knight destined to be her defender?

He even felt awe. He could hardly believe this was not a dream, that his wild hope of folding that girl to him heart to heart had come true.

The fire was dying, and as its glow faded away, the darkness thickened around them. And in that wonderful faint light, the girl's face seemed even more attractive in its uncommon beauty. It seemed that some magic powers had crept, together with the shadows, out of the dark corners of the tent, covering the girl's tender cheeks and alluring, un-kissed lips.

Vsevolod felt that he was losing his head, that the darkness had awakened in him secret desires that reason and daylight had kept in check. He felt that he was powerless against those desires and did not even try to resist them. Dazed, he leaned, time and again, to that dark-enshrouded, lovely face, to those tender lips which seemed to be willingly offered to him.

For a while, the Princess was unable to grasp what was happening to her. She blinked her frightened eyes, and then her body twitched as she tried — and failed — to struggle free. Someone big and strong gripped her in a bearhug of an embrace, pressing his burning lips to hers. Panic-stricken, she felt herself going limp and cold with fear. She wanted to scream, but the scream died in her throat, and her memory failed her; she could not even remember where she was or what she was doing there. Some time passed before she made out the face of the lad who

was smothering her with kisses, and recognition flashed, like lightning, through her mind.

Freeing herself, she stretched out her hand and slapped Vsevolod hard across the face, then again, sending echoes that rebounded off the tent walls.

The slaps had an immediate sobering effect on the young man. Surprised, he let his arms go limp and eased his hold. The girl snatched the opportunity to slip out of his hug.

"Scoundrel! Miserable serf!" she snapped at him and rushed out of the tent.

Vsevolod was burning with shame, sure that he would not dare to face her ever again. That is why he made no attempt to stop or pursue her. Confused and angry with himself, he sat there, his shoulders drooping under the weight of his guilt, until he tumbled down onto the girl's soft bed.

He himself could not tell how long he lay there, his body outstretched, his face pressed against the grass gathered by his own hands. It was his Blackie's loud neighing that brought him out of his stupor. Vsevolod jumped to his feet and rushed to the clearing where he had tethered the horses frightened by wolves. But as he reached the clearing, he stopped in his tracks. There was only one horse — his own Blackie — tethered there.

"Princess!" he shouted desperately, struck by a premonition. "Chorna!"

But Chorna did not shout back, and he heard only the echo of his voice, reverberating far in the forest.

And then everything became silent again — and empty.

## XVI

### THE WOLVES

Chorna had no idea where she was heading. She had chanced on a trail and was now racing along it at full speed. Her only desire was to leave Vsevolod as far behind as possible.

She was not even sure it was a trail. It had looked like one when she had ridden out of the clearing, but here, deep in the woods, she could no longer tell whether it was a real trodden trail. She could hardly see where she was galloping. She feared her head would strike a branch or

smash into a tree any moment. If it did, that would be the end of her. Nobody would ever find her in the primeval woods, in the middle of nowhere. It was all up to Falcon now. He was her only hope: he should see in the dark. He'd better!

The thought did nothing to dispel her fear, though, and she felt cold shivers running down her spine. The Princess clung closer to the horse's neck, gripping his mane as hard as she could.

Finally, she mustered enough courage to grope for the reins with a shaking hand. Feeling the bit, Falcon immediately slowed down and, after leaping a few more paces ahead, sank onto his hind legs.

The Princess looked cautiously around and then dismounted, feeling the ground under her feet to determine whether it was a trail or only a semblance of one.

Her heart throbbed happily: Falcon had done very well indeed and had not lost his way in the dark. The trail itself seemed well-trodden and leading to a definite place. There was no way of telling, though, where exactly it might take her.

After some consideration, Chorna tried to get her bearings by the stars; huntsmen had once taught her how to use them to find her way out of a forest. However, this turned out to be more difficult than expected; she had relied on Vsevolod and had not been paying attention to the direction they had followed from the pasture. The path which led them to the lake was rather uncertain, twisting and turning among trees all the time. Nor did she remember which way she had gone from the lake. She had been far too frightened to think of stars. All that had mattered then was to get away from Vsevolod — and fast.

Now she could not even tell which way Chernihiv lay and, of course, she did not know whether the trail would lead her to a beaten track or deeper still into the thick of the forest.

There she stood, looking around and not daring to go ahead or turn back.

It was then that she heard what sounded like a dry twig being broken by a foot. At her side, Falcon pricked up his ears, moving his frightened eyes to all sides. Startled by the sound, the Princess stepped back away from it, but at that very moment the grim howl of a wolf hit her ears from another side. It sounded as if it came from afar, in

any case not from the nearest thicket, but the girl felt her legs grow weak under her from that wild cry which had so suddenly torn the silence of night. She spun around, glancing nervously to all sides — and froze to the spot as she saw numerous shifty green lights twinkling at her from the forest.

Shuddering, Falcon snorted and took off at a gallop as soon as he felt the rider back in the saddle. Terrified by the wolves, the strong horse raced among trees like the wind, barely touching the ground with his hoofs.

The Princess dropped the reins, desperately clutching the mane. She sensed the chase not far behind, felt the hot, vicious breathing of the hungry pack, but was too frightened to look back. The girl clung to the horse's neck, mentally urging him to go faster still, but did not dare look behind her. Something inexplicable, some base fear permeated her whole body, leaving her totally powerless.

Everything comes to an end, though, even fear. Often, the vicious circle of frenzied thoughts is broken by a sparkle of an idea that soon burns down the entire foundation of fear, releasing the body from its incapacitating grip. It was something Chorna remembered that served as such a spark: in a lucky moment she realized that she had her bow and arrows with her! As she recalled this, she brightened, immediately reaching for the weapons fastened to the saddle. As soon as she felt them in her hands, she regained much of her self-confidence and finally risked looking behind her.

As a matter of fact, she did not need do that, for the wolves were running side by side with Falcon apparently waiting for the slightest opportunity to leap on him and tear his throat.

The Princess fitted an arrow and shot, without taking aim, at the nearest beast. The wolf howled in pain and rushed into the thicket.

That first success encouraged the girl. Swiftly, she snatched one more arrow from the quiver and sent it into the snarling muzzle of another beast. She kept shooting her arrows, one after another, until she was sure that the danger had passed, at least temporarily.

But that feeling of security did not last long. At the next bend of the trail, she again heard the now familiar hot breathing behind her. The Princess glanced back and gasped: the forest behind her seemed to be swarming with



those angry greenish lights. She was again being pursued by a large pack.

Meanwhile, there was still no sign of a road. It seemed that in the time which had passed since she had left the lake she should have gone as far as Snovsk, let alone Salt Way or Zalozny Road. It could only mean that Falcon was heading in the wrong direction and that all his efforts were in vain. The trail now seemed unlikely ever to lead her to a major road and thus save her from the famished beasts.

Yet she continued to hope against all hopes, and her thirst for life made her believe that a miracle would happen and rescue would come from somewhere. And when the miracle did happen she trembled with joy. Not all was lost yet: she must have reached Salt Way after all, because the trees were getting sparser and sparser all the time.

She boldly looked around and drove the spurs even harder into Falcon sides.

But the wolves, too, had now gained a certain advantage: with fewer trees along the way, nothing prevented them from running at full speed.

And run they did. Hardly had the Princess and Falcon left behind a coppice when the wolves again caught up with them, and the girl had to resort to the bow once more. She shot her arrows right and left, almost never missing, but the wolves pressed on, getting bolder and more desperate with every moment. Chorna almost did not have to take aim, since the beasts were too close to miss. Like that one ahead of her with gleamingly vicious eyes, which was all ready to leap and sink its teeth into the horse's throat.

The Princess, too, was now furious. Hurriedly she reached for the quiver and went cold with fear: there were no more arrows in it!

Using the girl's momentary confusion, the wolf shot up into the air, aiming at the horse. But she managed to thrust the bow in its muzzle and ward off the attack.

Now Falcon was her only hope — he alone could still save her life.

Chorna urged the horse on and on, clinging desperately to his neck, as if she hoped to hide behind that lush, disheveled mane, as if it could in some way protect her. And Falcon tore along the beaten path, barely seeming to touch the ground. He hardly needed any spurring, well

aware of the danger and no less eager than his rider to escape the pack.

Around them, the forest stood hushed, as if it were holding its breath, waiting to see the outcome of the wild chase. And when Falcon's loud, woeful neighing broke that silence, the Princess caught her breath and huddled herself up, expecting the last attack.

This was the end, she thought resignedly. When a horse neighed in such a situation, it had to be because he felt his death was near. And that would be her death, too.

Presently, Falcon neighed again, and this time his neighing was louder and livelier, or so it seemed to the Princess. That inexplicable liveliness immediately alerted her senses and bolstered her spirits.

What was it? The neighing of other horses sounded ahead, apparently in response to Falcon's call.

Chorna was still doubtful, unable to believe she had heard correctly. "I must be dreaming," she whispered to herself, not daring to lift her eyes and look ahead. But then somebody jumped across Falcon's path and, seizing the bridle, reined him in to a halt.

It was all too unexpected for the Princess; she was striving forward with all her thoughts and her entire body, and the sudden halt catapulted her out of the saddle.

Later she could not remember who carried her to the fire and was unable to recall how long she lay there, battered and unconscious. She only came to when someone forced open her clenched teeth and poured in some strong drink.

"What a beauty!" she heard an enraptured voice. "What a lovely face!"

For some time, however, she was unable to fully regain her consciousness, and something heavy continued to press down her eyelids. It took some time before the cool drink cleared her head, and after taking a deep breath of the invigorating night air she finally opened her eyes.

She found herself surrounded by warriors wearing helmets and armor. They were all rather young, especially the fair-haired man, who was holding her in his arms.

The Princess darted a frightened glance around and made to rise to her feet, but the fair-haired warrior restrained her.

"Lie still, beauty," he advised her gently, almost imploringly.

Confused and distrustful, she again surveyed the strangers, failing to understand where she was or to remember what had been happening to her.

"Who are you?" she asked at last.

"We're Kievans," the fair-haired young man smiled. "I'm the Prince and these are my men."

"The Prince? Prince Oleg?!"

Wide-eyed, Chorna gazed at his manly, handsome face.

"And who are you?" he asked. "How did you happen to be here in the dead of night? Did you lose your way or did the wolves chase you deep into the woods?"

"It was the wolves," the girl replied and, peering into the night, she pondered over that word, speaking more to herself than to the Prince. "God Polisum has sent the wolves upon our land — in summertime. It means there's going to be a bloody war. Maybe it will be all because of me."

## XVII

### STATESMEN CROSS THEIR SWORDS

Having crossed the Desna, Oleg sent two messengers to the city gates, ordering them to demand a private meeting with the Prince of Chernihiv. To speed up the audience, but chiefly to win the favor of Prince Chorny who was known to be much prejudiced against the Kievans, the envoys were told to use Princess Chorna's name to bait the guards and the Siverianian ruler himself. They did not have to tell the guards that the girl was with Prince Oleg's party, since the mere mention of her name was sufficient to open the gate. All the details were saved for Chorny. He alone was to be told that Prince Oleg by sheer miracle had saved his daughter from imminent death and was now waiting this side of the river for Chorny's kind permission to enter the capital city of Chernihiv.

The bait worked splendidly. Chorny not only granted his permission but also hurried immediately to welcome his guest in person. But their meeting took place without the ceremonies that the Kievan's status called for. Chorny was worried about his daughter who had been seen among Oleg's warriors and was apparently ill. She was not on

horseback but lying on a makeshift bed made from the prince's tent and carried between two saddles. He was too eager to see her to think of protocol. Nevertheless, Oleg's party was welcomed and escorted to the kremlin by Chorny's closest counselors and top courtiers.

Oleg was not offended by his host's apparent lack of attention to his person. He well understood Chorny's feelings: the Princess was his only daughter, and he must have suffered enough searching for her. And now that he had found her, she was not exactly in excellent health. That is why even later, when he had been accommodated in the palace specially prepared for him, he was in no hurry to remind his host of his presence. He was willing to wait until the Chernihiv ruler had spent enough time with his daughter and remembered her rescuer.

Oleg was invited to Chorny toward dinnertime, only a short time before the feast ordered to celebrate the happy occasion. Chorny realized that the Kiev prince had hardly arrived for a mere visit and most likely intended to have a private audience with him. That is why he received his guest alone, without his retinue.

"God bless you, Prince," he thanked Oleg warmly. "It's not just my daughter you've saved from death — you've saved my own life as well. I was out of my mind with worry, and if she had perished, I wouldn't have survived the loss."

"But now your troubles are over," Oleg said comfortingly, "and you don't have to worry anymore. But then again, there was never any need to worry." He tried to make light of it. "Your daughter is a girl that wouldn't let herself be insulted by men, let alone be devoured by wolves."

"Oh no, you aren't exactly right," Chorny disagreed. "My daughter has assured me that if it hadn't been for you, she would never have seen her father or Chernihiv again."

Oleg seized the opportunity to change the subject.

"So how does the young Princess feel now? Is she better? Has her mood improved?"

"Oh yes, she's feeling much better and looks merrier. Home is always the best, especially for Chorna. She draws strength from this place, it cures her of all ills."

"I'm happy to hear that." Oleg looked sincerely glad. "For on the way here she seemed rather hesitant as to

whether she should go back home at all; she was afraid that she would fall into the hands of the Khazars."

Chorny frowned. The mention of the Khazars fell on his heart like the shadow of a cloud.

"They surely frightened the girl," he said just to say something, also trying to conceal his own guilt.

Wishing to avoid an unpleasant subject or maybe intrigued by his guest's being so well informed, Chorny was quick to seize on the words Oleg had dropped so carelessly.

"Just how did you know that they had left? They were still here not so long ago."

"I happened to see them on their way home," Oleg explained calmly, pretending not to notice the other man's curiosity.

"Oh, did you now?" Chorny was skeptical. "You must have kept a keen eye on them not to miss them."

If Oleg noticed Chorny's distrust, he did not show it.

"I wish I'd known how much evil that party carried with it," he continued. "For if I had, I could have stopped it."

"The party?" Chorny asked.

"Both — the party and the evil."

For a while the two men were silent.

"Don't you think," Chorny spoke at last, "that by so doing you would have brought still more evil upon us. For the Khan would probably have thought that it was I who destroyed his men."

"Oh, why would he?" Oleg said easily. "The party had a long way to travel and could have met many enemies along that way. The Pechenegs are swarming right across the Don. I suppose you know about it."

"I know," Chorny frowned. "But I don't think their presence there would have made any difference."

"Quite true," the Kievan prince agreed. "It wouldn't have averted a Khazar invasion, but it could have delayed it. And this could have made a difference. It would have given us time to prepare."

Chorny was greatly surprised, hardly believing what he was hearing. Was this just a coincidence, or had this young man in princely attire already gotten wind of his intentions to build up his army?

Oleg preferred not to notice Chorny's surprise.

"And it's time to start preparations anyway," he calmly

told Chorny. "This would have to be done even if we had not expected any trouble from the Khazars."

"Aren't you exaggerating the Pecheneg threat?" Chorny blurted out, driven by a subconscious desire to contradict his guest. "You also seem to forget that the Khazar army faces the Pechenegs and that the Khan would hate the idea of seeing the Pecheneg trampling over his lands."

"Still it doesn't prevent the Pecheneg tribes from plundering Slav settlements," Oleg replied in the same reserved tone. "And not only on the Don — settlements are already burning along the Donets as well."

The fact that Oleg seemed well-informed on everything and his concern about Siverianian settlements irritated Chorny.

"I say, have Kievans already begun to settle along the Donets too?" he asked sarcastically, unable to resist the temptation to taunt his oversolicitous guest.

The sneer cut Oleg to the quick, and for once he failed to maintain his calm tone.

"Not Kievans — Slavs, my Prince," he said in an offended voice.

Chorny felt embarrassed. After all, his guest had rescued his daughter and he owed him a debt of gratitude.

"Forgive me, Prince," he said in a humbler tone. "I forgot in the heat of the moment that you were my guest. We had better speak of other matters, for the affairs of state might make us quarrel. This would be highly undesirable, especially now."

"Very true, Prince," Oleg seized on his words. "It's the last thing we need now, of all times. And yet we shouldn't overlook state affairs."

This put Chorny on his guard again.

"But why not? There are many other topics we might discuss."

"If only because I've come here expressly to speak about state affairs," the Kiev prince answered meaningfully.

"Really?" Chorny did not even try to conceal his surprise. "Have you found out something about the Drevlians' intentions? Or have evil tidings reached you from the East?"

Oleg shook his head.

"Kiev has nothing to fear from the Drevlians any longer. And from the East I've heard nothing more alarming than the Pecheneg raids which I've already mentioned.

Anyway, have had enough of those raids. The Khazars can no longer contain the Pecheneg steppe tribes which aren't content with the lands along the Don now. The promise of an easy conquest will lead them further on, to the Seym, the Desna and even to the Dnieper and our capital city of Kiev."

Chorny hid a smile in his mustache.

"As I listen to you, Prince, I almost get the impression that you are going to make it up with the Khazars and perhaps even conclude a military alliance with them."

"Not with them," Oleg denied promptly.

"With whom then, may I ask?"

"With the Siverianian Principality."

This caught Chorny by surprise, and he hesitated not knowing how to reply to Oleg.

"Would you like to have me fall out with the Khazars?" he asked at last.

"Haven't you fallen out with them already?"

"I haven't defied them yet," Chorny muttered, well aware of the uncertainty of his position. "But if I join forces with the Kiev Principality, an avowed enemy of the Khazars, the Khan will not let me get away with such defiance. He wouldn't be convinced by such an alliance being ostensibly directed against the Pechenegs, the deadly foes of the Khanate."

"No, he wouldn't," Oleg agreed. "The Khazars, like the Pechenegs, cannot be convinced by good words. But swords can prove so much more convincing."

"You mean they would convince both the Pechenegs and the Khazars?"

"Yes, both of them."

Chorny suspiciously surveyed Oleg from head to foot.

"Your youthful bravery is praiseworthy, of course. But your intentions are too daring and, excuse me, wholly unfeasible. They are even dangerous. Both for Kiev and for Chernihiv."

Annoyed, Oleg rubbed his forehead.

"Would you have a better suggestion, perhaps?" he asked.

Their eyes met and remained locked, neither man wishing to be the first to yield.

Chorny broke the silence, "I might go to the Khazars and tell them that since we pay tribute to them, it's their duty to protect us from these incursions."

"But they are *not* protecting you!" Oleg almost shouted. "You'll have to admit it, Prince: they've been giving you no protection at all. I'll tell you more: they can't do it, they just aren't strong enough to protect you. The Itil River is virtually cut off from here, which means that your whole principality is practically cut off from Khazaria. Why then do you keep holding on to the Khazars? Or do you simply want to pay tribute to somebody?"

Once again, Chorny's eyes glinted with anger. He was about to shout something like "Would you promise not to exact any tribute from us?" but checked himself and bit his tongue. Oleg took the opportunity to finish what he was saying.

"Our disunity only plays into their hands," he went on. "The Khan realizes only too well what advantages he'll derive from his marriage with your daughter, and he'll force you to give her to him. His army is still big enough for that, even if it's no good for anything else."

"That's exactly the problem," Chorny stood up and started pacing up and down the hall, thinking. "Even if we joined our forces, his army would still be too big for us to fight off."

"Oh no," Oleg denied. "I can assure you, Prince, that by uniting our forces we could keep the Princess in Chernihiv and our lands to ourselves."

Oleg argued so heatedly that Chorny wondered if it was not his daughter who was urging Oleg to work for that alliance. Could it be that she was behind all that eloquence? And he suddenly felt an urge to cut the young prince down to size, to punish him for all the embarrassment this conversation had caused him.

"No, Prince," he said gravely and quite seriously. "I will try to improve relations with the Khanate. And I will do it by peaceful means."

"Through marriage, you mean?"

Chorny spun around, as if he had been stung by a wasp, and glared at the impertinent youth.

"I see the Prince takes advantage of the fact that I'm favorably disposed toward him. And generally speaking—" He stood up abruptly and resumed his pacing. "And generally speaking, the Prince must realize that the Siverianians cannot trust your sweet talk too much."

"I don't understand," Oleg said warily. "Why can't you trust us?"



"If only because of Lyubech," Chorny blurted out. "Wasn't it the Polianians and the Prince of Kiev who perfidiously seized the Siverianians' finest city and port on the Dnieper? And aren't you now aiming at Chernihiv, making it all look likē you're concerned solely with the Slavs' interests?"

Oleg started to protest but Chorny interrupted him.

"No, Prince. We have learned our lesson and we won't be fooled twice."

Now it was Oleg who felt he was losing ground, not knowing how to make Chorny see that his intentions were really honest.

Lyubech... So that was the main obstacle!

"If the Prince wishes to be on friendly terms and enter into a military alliance with us," Chorny spoke up again, "he must return Lyubech and recognize that the Siverianians are the sole legitimate owners of that port on the Dnieper."

"What about the Khazars?" interjected Oleg. "What will you do with the Khazars then? Your lands are under their authority, aren't they?"

"We only pay tribute to them."

"And also allow them to settle on your lands and to ship out your pelts."

Chorny shot a sullen look at Oleg but did not say anything: it was the truth, however unpleasant, and there was no use arguing the point.

"Is the Prince sure," Oleg continued meanwhile, "that the Khazars would not besiege Lyubech after the Polianians have left it?"

"Don't let the fate of the Siverianian country concern you unduly," Chorny snapped.

"I am concerned about the fate of the Dnieper and the future of the trade waterway from the Varangians to the Greeks."

Chorny looked Oleg steadily in the eye.

"It still remains to be seen if that waterway is going to be convenient for us."

"There can be no doubt about it, Prince. It will pass through most of the Slavic lands—from Novgorod to Byzantium. And believe me: the Khazars will be drawn to Lyubech as flies are drawn to a chunk of meat. They are now shipping out your furs even by way of Itil, so

they'll seize the opportunity to send them down the Dnieper to the Greek markets."

Chorny fell silent, obviously thinking it all over. After a while he went to stand at the open window, gazing at the Desna, the Dnieper's wide tributary.

Sensing Chorny's mood, Oleg drew closer.

"Does the Prince know that this summer a deputation from Kiev visited Byzantium?"

"And what came out of it?" Chorny was curious.

"Some pretty good trading, Prince."

Oleg paused, apparently waiting for Chorny's reaction. Then he added:

"We just don't need the Itil anymore, you can take my word for it. The time has long passed when we had to cling to the routes connecting us with Arabia."

"That time may be over for you," Chorny argued obstinately. "But for us the old route will still be useful."

"But what for? You've got to understand one thing: the Pechenegs are prowling in the steppes. They will not let your caravans through, sooner or later they'll block your way. But on the Dnieper —"

"It'll be Kiev that will block our way there," Chorny interrupted him. "Sooner or later you will do it."

Oleg paused but did not look confused.

"So far Kiev's only purpose has been to open it up for you," he said in an offended tone, taking a few steps aside.

For a while the two men remained silent. Oleg did not deem it necessary to continue to try to persuade Chorny, and Chorny had no reason to dispute Oleg's last statement.

"All right," he said at length, his thick voice sounding conciliatory this time. "I will consult with the *veche* which has the power to pass decisions on such state affairs. Then we shall let you know. We'll send somebody to Kiev... And now let's join the feast," Chorny courteously invited his guest, as if there had been no bitter argument between them. "The whole of Chernihiv has gathered in the hall. The Siverianians will be delighted to greet the courageous warrior and savior of Princess Chorna whom they all love so much."

## XVIII

### A PRINCELY ERRAND

After returning from the banquet, Oleg opened the window and stood there for a long time, musing over the unfinished, or, rather, unsatisfactorily finished, conversation. He had set out for Chernihiv full of high hopes, anticipating an easy success and now he would be going back, his mission a complete failure. For what could the *veche* do if the Prince did not want to have any dealings with the Kievans, if he was dead set against them? The promise of "sending somebody to Kiev" had, of course, been meant as a tactful hint to leave. For all practical matters, Chorny had ordered him to go back home post haste, without waiting for the *veche*'s decision, even giving him to understand he should not expect it to be favorable.

And all this had happened because of Lyubech! That was the price he had to pay for that city, the key to the northern Slavic lands, to the entire Dnieper. But he couldn't give it back now. The Khazars would waste no time in cutting the Slavs off from the sea. They would force the whole of Northern Rus to its knees. And then they would be but a step away from Kiev, threatening that city as well.

No, he wasn't going to relinquish Lyubech, even if it meant that the Siverianians would remain outside the fold of Mother Rus.

The pinkish crescent of the moon rose from beyond the forest and timidly looked down on the flickering waters of the river and the wind-eroded crest of the hilly Desna bank. From the palace, which stood on high ramparts, the Prince could see a deep breach in the dark wall of the woods. That was the Desna making its way southwest toward Kiev. Oleg could not see the river clearly, but imagination helped to visualize all its grandeur and even its likeness to the sea-like expanses of the Dnieper. The Prince once again felt regret that he had not been able to come to an agreement with Chorny and make his host trust him. He felt annoyed: because of Lyubech, the Siverianian Prince was losing an excellent opportunity to get rid of the Khazar yoke for good. Now was the time to act: first, because the Khazars were in great trouble themselves, and, second, because the old trade route to the Arabs would shortly be replaced by the new one to the

Greeks. That would be an important change, indeed. There was no comparison between the new way and the old route along the Itil River. The new route was better in every respect, more convenient and much shorter. There were no tributes to pay, no steep portages to negotiate and no barbarous raids to fear. All one had to do was sail down the Desna and then the Dnieper all the way to the rapids, and from there on to Byzantium.

However, Chorny, refused to trust him, which was too bad. If Kiev had really wanted to conquer the Siverianian country, it would not have been necessary for him to come all the way to Chernihiv and waste time on pleasantries. Why couldn't Prince Chorny understand that the Polianians stood to gain nothing from an armed conflict with Chernihiv, and that they preferred to have the Siverianians as their allies rather than foes. For as soon as the Polianians decided to conquer these lands, all their inhabitants — warriors and common folk alike — would turn into bitter enemies.

The Siverianians were not like the Drevlians. Their principality was a densely populated, rich country which had to be reckoned with; it was no good trying to plot against it or set any traps. To be sure, Oleg had no such intentions — especially after meeting Chorna. He probably would not have been able to go to war against Chernihiv now even if he had had to. He just could not do any wrong to the Siverianians because it would have meant hurting the Princess as well.

He wondered what she had thought about him in the forest. And what was she thinking now? She had seemed to be glad to have met him, especially after he had assured her that the Kievans would protect her not only from wolves but also from the Khazars. And what if... Now then, what if he did take her under his protection? The Chaushiar had made his threat quite clear: once insulted, the Khan would immediately take up arms... So maybe the girl could be helpful in resolving the problem? Perhaps it would take a clash with the Khazars to persuade Chorny that Oleg did not mean to cheat him, that his intentions were honest. But how would the Princess react to such an offer? Would she agree to accept his protection? That was crucial. That could solve all the problems!

Oleg turned round, walked briskly to the door and summoned his young guard.

“At your service, Prince!” the youth reported to him at once.

“Sneak into Princess Chorna’s quarters and arrange for me a secret meeting with her. If you find her servants uncooperative, don’t hesitate to reward them generously.”

## XIX

### THE CONSPIRACY OF TWO HEARTS

The Princess had indeed come to life under her father’s roof. Perhaps it was due to the healing powers of the potion she was administered or her nurse’s tender ministrations, but in any event that evening the girl was already in high spirits recounting animatedly her adventures in the forest and describing the feat of the brave Prince. She so captivated her audience that her girl companions could have stayed until morning to hear the story all over again, especially the part about the Prince’s unexpected appearance, which to them seemed to have been a sign of Fate. But the nurse saw to it that her charge would not overtax her strength: at the appointed hour the guests left and the Princess soon dropped off into a deep, untroubled sleep.

In her dreams she saw the Kievan prince again. Not in the forest, though, but at a noisy, crowded feast. He sat at the table, silent and sad. He hardly drank anything, and his food was almost untouched. Then he glanced up and suddenly caught sight of her face at the end of the hall. He stared at her, not believing at first that it was the girl whom he had met in the forest the night before.

Presently he smiled, got to his feet and headed, tall and mighty, directly to where she was standing. Merry sparkles replaced the surprised look in his sky-blue eyes, the stern features of his handsome face lit up with joy, and with every step he took in her direction his smile broadened. He was already not far away from her, reaching out his hands. She felt drawn to him and was about to run to him, when all of a sudden something black and vile fell from the sky and landed between them. The Princess screamed from fright and woke up.

In the morning she lay on her back for a long time, staring out of the window and thinking about the Prince.

Why had he come into her dream like that? Was he unwell or just feeling lonely and sad?

The nurse seemed to guess Chorna's secret wish: the old woman sat down by the bedside with her knitting and began talking quietly about yesterday's feast given in honor of the Kievan prince. When the conversation naturally centered on Oleg, the nurse asked again and again how he had saved the Princess from certain death and what he had told her on the way through the forest to Chernihiv. Chorna was only too glad to repeat her story and, of course, in her excitement she spoke of how courageous and handsome the Prince of Kiev was. Hearing this, the nurse nodded knowingly, a mysterious smile playing on her lips.

"You know, dear, he's been asking since last night to see you. Just for a moment, he says."

"The Prince himself?!"

Chorna sat up in bed, frightened and happy at the same time, looking the nurse in the eye.

"Not him." The old woman waved her hand, as if to express annoyance. "His servant."

She dropped several stitches, but after stealing a glance at the girl, who looked disappointed, added casually:

"He was sent here by the Prince. What a strange type!" The nurse laughed. "You see, he tried to bribe me. 'I'll shower you with coins,' he said, 'if only you arranged that meeting'."

"And what did you do?" Chorna demanded anxiously.

"I told him that there was no less gold and silver in our treasury than in Kiev," the nurse answered earnestly, "and that our Princess was so dear as to be invaluable."

"Oh, nanny," the girl was on the verge of tears. "What did you say that for?"

"Now take it easy, my child. Don't try to teach an old woman like me," the nurse rebuked her. "I know better what to do. It's not proper for a girl to agree at once. Let your prince cool his heels, let him worry a little."

"But..."

"There shouldn't be any buts," the nurse countered. "Absence makes the heart grow fonder, as the saying has it. The longer a man courts a girl, the fairer she seems to him. Your prince isn't going to run away from you. I'll call him in now, if you want me to, and he'll be here on the double."

“Oh, nanny...”

The old woman stood up and made to go to the door.

“Wait a little,” cried the girl, alarmed by the nurse’s intention. “I’m not dressed yet.”

The Princess began fussing about, not sure what to do first. She was trembling and her hands disobeyed her; started to braid her hair but then changed her mind and took up some ornament only to drop it and begin braiding her hair once again.

“What if I leave it as it is?” she hesitated after a while. “What do you think, nanny? Would it spoil my looks if I left it unbraided?”

“Of course not, my dear,” the old woman reassured her. “You are like a swan maiden, looking too beautiful for words. Why don’t you take a mirror and see for yourself?”

The Princess again hesitated as she stared at the pale face in a frame of fluffy hair that she saw reflected in the mirror. Then, like a child, she hid her face in the old woman’s bosom and confessed:

“I’m frightened, nanny. I don’t know why I’m so scared.”

The nurse meanwhile was beaming with joy, glad that the girl’s heart had melted at last. She had feared that the Princess would never fall in love with anyone.

“There, there,” he said soothingly. “That’s good fear. It’s the mean fright you’ve got to beware, but now that’s surely a good kind of fear.”

“Maybe I’d better get dressed and meet the Prince at the table?” Chorna lifted her head again.

“No, darling, you shouldn’t do this. It’s too early for you to rise from bed.”

“But there’s nothing wrong with me, nanny,” the girl protested. “Believe me, I feel strong enough to sit in the saddle, let alone at a table. Just fetch me my finest dress and let me get ready to receive the guest.”

She began to get out of the bed, but her nurse would not allow her to stand. With much pleading and a bit of force, she finally managed to make the girl lie down again.

“You’re unwell,” she explained, “which means that it is quite all right for you to receive the Prince in bed. Now put on your tunic and wait.”

The Prince entered quietly, making sure to step lightly.

"I hope I didn't wake you." He stopped halfway across the room. "The Princess seems to be —"

"No, no," Chorna hastened to dispell his doubts which he had not yet had time to express. "I wasn't sleeping."

The sincerity of her smile, the warmth of her eyes and the sheer beauty of her face, framed by well-combed hair, had such an effect on Oleg that for a moment he forgot the purpose of his visit to the girl's chamber. He froze in the middle of the room and stood there not knowing what he was going to do next or how he should conduct himself with the Princess. Even in the forest by the light of a campfire he had been struck by her fairness and the liveliness of her incomparable eyes. But there had been no smile then and her eyes had lacked in the present tenderness and warmth; also he had not noticed then or just had not payed attention to her rich raven-black hair and her small childlike hands. Now he clearly saw all this and felt utterly spellbound by the girl's beauty.

"Sit down, Prince," she said, pointing to a chair at the bedside.

"Thank you for your kindness," he replied, awakened from his reveries. "Is the fair Princess feeling any better? I hope she isn't too angry with me for my clumsy handling of her horse."

"Oh no, Prince," Chorna denied. "I'm so grateful to the gods for our encounter in the forest. If it had not been for you and your courage, it would have been the end of me. The wolves were hard on my heels."

Oleg could hardly restrain himself.

"Princess!" he exclaimed, overwhelmed by emotion. "Do I deserve this praise? Had I only known who the rider was I would have found some other way to stop your Eagle."

"Falcon, you mean," Chorna corrected him.

"Let it be Falcon then. I could have brought my horse up alongside yours to pick you up and place you into my saddle. But what's done is done and I'm afraid you were badly hurt as a result."

"Not at all," Chorna reassured him. "It was all right. The pain is gone already. It's my nurse who insists that I stay in bed, but if it were up to me, I'd be back in the saddle by now."

"Is that so indeed?" Oleg smiled. "I'm glad to hear that, Princess. I'm delighted that you are getting well. What a pity I won't be able to join you in hunting."



"The Prince is in a hurry?"

"Yes." Oleg felt impelled to tell her the truth, to confess that he would have liked to spend a week or even two in Chernihiv — but for her father who was against it. But he did not yield to the temptation. "I must hurry. Important matters require my presence in Kiev."

Surprised and even frightened, Chorna could not take her eyes off his face.

"But what about me?" she asked Oleg with childlike frankness. "The Khazars will come here. I'm sure they will. And they'll bring a huge army with them. My father won't be able to protect me. No, he won't be able to do it by himself."

She looked at him pleadingly, and Oleg felt that he was losing his head... So she was confident that he could protect her from the Khazars. But why? What made her so sure? Was it that casual conversation they had had in the forest? Or had Prince Chorny hinted at something like that talking to her here in Chernihiv? This was unlikely, though. Chorny would rather give his daughter away to the Khazars than agree to receive help from Kiev.

His decision was made. He would deal with the Princess and not her father. And he had better do it in secret, behind Chorny's back.

"If the Princess will allow me to defend her," he said, elated, "I will raise not just Kiev but the entire Slavic land against the Khazars!"

"Oh, my Prince!" she exclaimed joyfully. "It is not a question of *allowing* you — I'm begging you to. Honestly, I'm scared to death of those Khazars. They have a great army and there's no one to defend me from them but my father."

Oleg had not expected her to agree so quickly and thus bring his plans to such speedy fruition; for a while he found it hard to believe that he had scored, or was about to score, two victories at once, winning both the eventual alliance with the Siverianian prince and the Princess herself.

Exhilarated but also somewhat confused, he smiled at the girl in silence, got up from the chair and sank before her on one knee, inclining his unruly head as if to take an oath.

"May the gods be always with you, fair maiden. It's a great honor for me. I would lay down my life readily to prevent the enemy from doing you any harm."

"So you are staying," Chorna cried happily, trying to sit up in bed.

"I'm sorry," the Prince restrained her, "but I have few men with me. My army is back in Kiev. And at any rate I can't just wait for the Khazars here. I will lie in wait for them closer to the borders, perhaps down by Olzhichi. As for you —"

Oleg paused thoughtfully, then remembered something and quickly took a diamond ring off his little finger.

"Take this ring," he said. "Keep it with you, and if there's an emergency give it to a loyal messenger and send him to me in Kiev. Or to Olzhichi. It will be a way of saying, 'I am in danger, hurry!'"

Oleg stood up, took her delicate hand and carefully, almost timidly, it seemed to the Princess, put the ring on her finger.

"Take care of it," he said softly and tenderly. "Also be careful yourself. I'll be back in Chernihiv yet, for sure."

He stayed in the room for some time, admiring the girl's beauty, made even more pronounced by her joy and confusion, then bent down until his lips touched her cheek and went out of the bedroom without saying a word.

The Princess did not see him close the door nor hear the sound of his footsteps growing fainter in the distance. Happiness struggled with embarrassment within her as she shut her eyes tightly and held her breath, reveling in the sweet fluttering of her heart. At length she became aware of the silence, opened her eyes and, touching the burning place on her cheek where Oleg had kissed her, spoke out in wonder:

"So that's what love is like!"

## XX

### THE ELDERS

The high-ceilinged, well-lit hall could easily accommodate all the military chiefs of the principality, but this time Chorny had summoned only the most eminent of them, noted for their battle experience and statesmanship. The majority of those present were, of course, men-at-arms, mostly from Chernihiv. From outlying cities and townships came only captains and influential elders, as well as several governors. For the most part they

represented cities which boasted reliable moats, high dirt ramparts and strong walls with embrasures.

The unusually small number of those invited and especially their selection could not but arouse suspicion and even half-muted disapproval. This, however, had not shaken the Prince's resolve to go ahead with the conference. Now he took his place at the table, glanced over the Siverianians dispersed in groups around the hall and, pausing until there was complete silence, addressed the gathering.

"Hail, fellow warriors, brave men of the Siverianian land! I greet you here in this famed assembly hall in the house of my forefathers in the capital city of Chernihiv. May you always be sound of health and staunch of spirit."

The Prince bowed his head to greet all those present, surveyed his counselors once again and promptly got down to the business at hand.

"The affairs of the state and of the people have compelled me to call you here from all outlying settlements so that we may take counsel together. Grave times have come to our country. Hordes of Pechenegs have appeared across the Don. Like wolf packs, they are roaming the steppes, venturing even into the forests in search of easy spoils. They have already laid waste many a Slavic settlement on the Don and even on the Donets. More and more often, the high winds bring to us the smell of smoke from fires, this sign of people's grief. In the howlings of those winds at night I hear the screams of our brothers. There are grieving and sorrow throughout the land of the Siverianians. And but for us, there is no one who can defend its peace and prosperity."

The assembly was listening to the Prince in thoughtful silence.

"And this is not the extent of our misfortune," said Chorny, sensing that he had caught the audience's attention. "The Khazar Khanate, to which we have been paying tribute for two hundred years for protecting our lands from foreigners, has not only neglected its duties in recent times but is now preparing to march against us."

The silence was broken by low whispering which gradually rose to a loud, angry hum, like that of a disturbed beehive. Finally, a strong voice sounded above it:

"The Khanate marching against us? It's impossible! Who's brought this news to the Prince?"

Chorny raised his hand calling for order.

"The townfolk here know," he spoke in a calm voice, "that an embassy from Itil was in Chernihiv not long ago. It laid down the Khan's condition plain and clear: either I give my daughter Chorna in marriage to the Khan, or the Khazars will go to war against us."

The news shocked the assembly.

"So that ugly Khazar is after Chorna! He wants to take her by force!" muted voices were heard in the hall.

Their indignation swelled, roaring like a forest before a thunderstorm, and it filled Chorny's heart with joy. Not quite content with this initial success, he decided to take advantage of the assembly's mood and to add some more fuel to the fire.

"If our honor is still sacred to you and your loyalty to your prince is unshaken, there is but one choice: to stand by him in his struggle against the Khazars. If not..."

"We'll go anywhere under your banners, Prince!" somebody shouted from the assembly.

"The honor of the Princess is the same as the honor of Siveriania. We won't let anybody encroach on it!" other voices were heard.

"Never! Never!" the men called out in unison, beating the scabbards of their swords loudly against the floor.

But the meeting was not yet over. A tall, broad-shouldered man rose from the midst of the gray-bearded elders who were sitting versing somberly a little apart from the Prince's regiment captains. When the hubbub subsided, he addressed Chorny:

"You have spoken the truth, Prince: evil times have come to Siveriania. Bloody battles are unavoidable. And so those who wish to defend the honor of our land and that of the young lady are confronted with a formidable task. But there is something else that deeply concerns us, the elders: how does the Prince plan to cope with these two foes who are numerous and — we'll have to admit warlike and brave as well? What forces is he going to use against them? For we'll have to take on both of them at the same time."

The Prince recalled that several days ago he had posed the same question to Oleg who had not been able to convince him then that one could successfully deal with

two such strong and fierce enemies at the same time. But Oleg had meant to join forces with the Siverianians and fight together against the common enemies, while Chorny... What could he tell this old and wise man now? How was he to convince this veteran militia chief that the Siverianians alone were capable of overpowering both the Pechenegs and the Khazars?

The uneasy silence that followed was hardly to Chorny's advantage. He well understood that he had to say something because with every moment of delay he was losing ground, but no matter how hard he tried, the saving thought eluded him.

"That is precisely why I am holding this counsel," he replied at last, not yet sure if he had struck the right note. "We should all confer on how best to defend Siveriania and its people from the enemies."

"But you are our Prince," disagreed the elder, a descendant of the gray-bearded men of olden times who used to decide the fate of the land at tumultuous general *veches*. "You should be the first to think about the salvation of the Siverianians and their country."

The uncalled-for rebuke made Chorny lose his temper.

"I do have some ideas," he said sharply. "But I wanted to hear the opinions of Siveriania's most prominent warriors first."

That was a fitting, if unexpected, reply. The hall resounded with cheers and shouts of approval, which drowned out all other voices and restored the Prince's prestige.

"First of all," continued Chorny, encouraged by the audience's response, "I believe it necessary to continue building up our army. It should become equal to those of our enemies both in strength and in skills."

This brought on another round of cheers from troop captains, while the elders listened guardedly, waiting for what the Prince would say next.

"My army alone, however, will not be able to cope with both enemies," Chorny proceeded, guessing what was on the elders' minds. "It will need help. And I expect that help to come from you," he turned to the gray-bearded men. "The people's militia must be called up to fight against the Khazars."

For a moment, the assembly fell silent, either simply considering the Prince's request or having doubts about it. Chorny was apprehensive of that silence, fearing that

he had failed to convince not only the elders but his own men as well.

"Maybe the Prince will tell us some more about his plans for the campaign and explain the roles which his army and the militia will have to play?" the elder spoke again. "Where and how are we going to engage the Khazars and the Pechenegs?"

Chorny was ready, almost eager, to answer this question right away; he had had it all figured out long ago and could now speak about his plans in detail.

"The Khazars will definitely head straight for Chernihiv, and that is where we shall meet them. They may attack unexpectedly any time now. That is why we should muster our forces in Chernihiv and the sooner the better. And while the army prepares for battle, the troop captains will assemble militia units and station them in all major fortified towns, but mainly in Chernihiv. If need be, they will leave those towns and attack the Khazars from the rear."

While the Prince was drawing this picture of his all-out war, the elders held a brief consultation and, having apparently come to an agreement, now waited till they could contradict Chorny. Although the Princess's honor was indeed tantamount to the honor of Siveriania and even though the Khazars were, in all probability, most likely to attack Chernihiv first of all, the elders resented the fact that the Prince planned to limit the struggle only to the defense of Chernihiv and his daughter. Also, they did not like his intention to wait behind the Chernihiv ramparts for a Khazar siege and had not failed to notice that he had not even mentioned the Pechenegs who were plundering lands along the Don and the Donets, the regions where their fellow Siverianians also dwelled. While the Khazars were only preparing to invade, the Pechenegs were already on the loose, laying waste the lands along the Don River and bringing untold suffering to the people there. Naturally, Chorna was his daughter and the elders did not deem it proper to reproach the Prince with his paternal feelings. Nor could they agree with him, for his decision was designed only to save himself but did nothing to help the Siverianians as a whole.

"We will put your plans before the people, of course," the broad-shouldered elder began from afar. "But we aren't sure they will support them."

"What do you mean?" Chorny asked suspiciously, uneasy about the implications.

"What I mean," the elder raised his voice, "it that the Siverianians are used to discussing such things at general *veches*. Without the *veche*'s decision they probably won't follow the Prince."

Chorny went pale: a general *veche* was something that he feared now most of all, for it had long demanded that he move to defend the lands along the Don. And he had done nothing about it. What practical measures could he hope to impress his people with? There was only that militia troop which he had dispatched purely for the sake of appearances. And they would surely press him on that point. They could even deny him their confidence and refuse to follow him. Or else they could force him to march against the Pechenegs. Indeed, they would probably do precisely that. In which case... No, now, of all times, he should avoid convening the *veche* at all costs.

"This is hardly the right time for the *veche*," Chorny said, trying to keep his voice as calm as possible. "The Khazars may show up outside the walls of Chernihiv any day now."

This explanation obviously did not satisfy the elders. On the contrary, they sensed in it a hint of insincerity which antagonized them still more against Chorny.

"This is no answer, Prince!" shouted one of them, a younger man this time. "A *veche* convened here in Chernihiv is actually the militia in full strength ready for battle."

The Prince wanted to object, to argue that there might be disagreements and disputes, but checked himself, not wishing to give himself away. Meanwhile the elders took the opportunity to rally around the broad-shouldered man.

"We repeat once again, Prince," he announced resolutely, "that a final decision should be adopted by the *veche*. Without it the people won't march with you against the Khazars. That is the custom of the Siverianians, that is also their law."

"I'll manage somehow without your militia!" shouted Chorny, exasperated by the elders' stubbornness. "I shall lead my own army against the Khazars."

"Whatever you wish, Prince," said the elders. They stood up from the table and began leaving the hall. Chorny realized that he had made a grave mistake by losing

his temper, but it was too late now to do anything about it. Also, he knew he would not be able to overcome his princely pride in any case.

## XXI

### THE BAIT

Hard as he tried, Ambal was unable to learn anything about the problems discussed at the Prince's war council. His troop chiefs who had attended it kept their mouths shut no matter how drunk. Sober, they stayed aloof, treating him as a Khazar and a lackey.

The difficulties, however, only whetted Ambal's appetite, and he persisted doggedly in his efforts to unearth the secrets of the court and find out what had been the assembly's decision. They must have deliberated some very important issues, judging by the emphasis on secrecy. And besides, it was a poor steward who did not know his master's secrets.

So Ambal did not lose hope. He kept his eyes and ears open until he hit upon a clue.

One evening he received an unexpected visit from a pair of tipsy duty collectors. They were notorious for their shameless fleecing and hard drinking, and had come with the purpose of soliciting a drink or two out of him. In the past, Ambal had quite often driven these scroungers away from the Prince's wine cellars, but that day he decided to have a talk with them. The rogues had been around and usually were not among the last to learn about all that was secret or simply interesting in the city.

To make sure that nobody would intrude on their privacy, the steward invited his guests to an out-of-the-way room close to the wine cellar, produced a jug full of excellent foreign wine and poured each of them a quarter of a mug, increasing it to half a mug the next round.

"I can see you're in high spirits today," he remarked cautiously. "You must have had a fine day collecting duties at the ferries, eh?"

"There's no job to speak of there," the sturdy, bull-necked Mstislav waved his hand contemptuously. "Trade is going to the dogs from what I can tell. They say the Pechenegs have cut all the routes, and so now merchants can neither come up here nor sail down to the Arabs."



"Then perhaps you're drowning your sorrow," insisted Ambal, pouring more of the sparkling golden wine into the mugs.

"Sorrow you say?" grinned Mstislav, winking at his taciturn companion. "Ha-ha. Did you hear that, Vseslav? He says we've been drowning our sorrow."

Mstislav pushed his chest forward and spread his broad shoulders even wider.

"It's high time we stopped drowning our sorrows," he yelled. "From now on we are warriors of the regiment. How d'you like that?"

The news brought Ambal fast to his feet.

"Warriors, you say? Of whose regiment?"

"Don't you know?" asked Mstislav, surprised. "Listen, Vseslav, he knows nothing. He-he... Our Prince's regiment of course," he blurted out drunkenly. "The Prince is mustering an army. And a mighty big one it's going to be. Anyway, Vseslav and me are already in it. Understand? Now we'll drink and have a good time and never know any sorrow. So let's have another one."

Ambal, however, was in no great hurry to pour them another round.

"Have you been in the regiment for long or are you just planning to join it?" he asked.

"What d'you mean — planning? Vseslav, you tell him... Planning, my foot. We've already emptied a keg of mead to celebrate, and here you speak of planning. Slavyata himself..."

"Slavyata, you say?" Ambal broke in impatiently. "The chief of the Prince's regiment?"

Mstislav looked at him with drink-bleary eyes and nodded.

"And what does the Prince need such a big army for? Is he going to attack someone or what?"

"Attack it is," Mstislav confirmed sleepily and all of a sudden banged his heavy fist on the table. "You bet we're going to fight. Which means we'll get ourselves plenty of silver and gold and then we'll buy this whole wine cellar from you. You follow? So pour us more of that wine."

He broke deafeningly into a merry song, embracing Vseslav and urging him to sing along.

Meanwhile, the steward was deliberating his next move: should he kick the drunkards out or, better still, get them completely drunk and leave them there to suffer in the

morning from hangovers. They'd want to cure themselves with the hair of the dog, of course, which could help in loosening their tongues some more.

Ambal fetched a mug for himself and filled all three with the amber-colored wine.

But in the morning, neither Mstislav nor Vseslav told him anything new. It became clear to Ambal that they had told him all they knew. Disappointed and annoyed, Ambal, for some reason, was in no hurry to drive them away.

Nor were the two ex-customs men eager to leave. They sat at the table and glared now at Ambal, now at the jug they had emptied the night before.

Noticing their glances, the steward purposely steered the conversation away from the subject of hangovers until they brought it up themselves.

"No more," Ambal stated firmly. "Do you have any idea how much it will cost you to pay for what you guzzled up yesterday?"

"You tell us."

"A whole solidus — no less."

"Hey, are you crazy?" Vseslav protested, trying in vain to remember how much they had drunk yesterday: a jug or two or maybe even three.

Ambal took note of his hesitancy and pressed on.

"You'll get nothing from me until you pay your debt — not a single drink," he announced.

"Let God Perun be our judge," Mstislav cried in desperation. "We couldn't possibly have drunk that much. You must've been drunk yourself, so you made a mistake counting."

"Me drunk?" Ambal exclaimed indignantly. "Now tell me honestly: did you see me drunk?"

That was a good point: Mstislav had not seen Ambal drunk. But then again, he had hardly seen anything at all yesterday. Still, a solidus was a lot of money.

"Ah, damn it," he said, deciding to make it up with the steward. "Let it be neither your way, nor ours. Just give us one more drink and let it be a solidus then. We'll pay you as soon as we get something in the Prince's service. What do you say, Vseslav?"

"We'll pay, sure we will," agreed Vseslav.

But Ambal stood his ground.

"That won't do. It isn't my wine, it's the Prince's."

"You can take my jacket," suggested Mstislav and started to take it off.

Ambal broke out laughing. Funny man, Mstislav. As if his jacket was worth a gold solidus!

"Won't that be enough?" asked the customs man and, realizing that it was indeed not sufficient, scratched the back of his head in annoyance.

"Did you hear, Vseslav?" he turned to his companion. "He says it won't do. Take off yours too then."

The steward saw that his scheme might not work out the way he had planned it and decided to back down. It was no good quarreling about such a trifle as a few mugs of wine. The rascals were a greedy lot, and having them as friends might yet prove to be of use.

## XXII

### FATHER DOBROGOST AND HIS FAMILY

Like most villages on the Desna, Zhuri nestled cozily under the crowns of age-old trees. From the river it was separated by a narrow strip of thicket, and to the east and south lay spacious glades with a scattering of small wooded areas and swamps. The glades used to be carpeted with supple waist-high grass dappled with scarlet poppies, but now the whole area was sown with rye and millet, and winds sent waves rolling across the rich, thick crops.

The gods had been as generous with rain that spring as they were lavish with sunshine. Svarog shone warmly from the sky, and the pale ears of rye grew larger with every passing day. Within two weeks at the most, the villagers would come with sickles, and a different song would then ring out over the spreading glades.

It was a fine day out in the field, and Dobrogost was in no haste to return to his house, admiring the silvery rustle of the ripening rye and enjoying the tender breath of the wind. He had a big family numerous enough to do the reaping, work in the forest and do the household chores. He had as many sons as he had fingers on both hands, to say nothing of his daughters-in-law and grandchildren... His clan had once been even larger but, regrettably, had since broken up. While his father, Borislav, had been alive, they had all stuck together, but as soon as he had died,

everyone decided he wanted a house of his own, and a separate house meant a separate field. He was the only one who had remained true to the old custom: everything there belonged to the family and everybody had to stay together. After all, father Borislav had named him the Elder, the keeper of the ancestral hearth.

His sons, gods be praised, had grown into bright boys. Five of them were already married but lived together in peace; no one had even thought of moving out of his father's house. There was nothing much to do at present, so he had sent them all to the forest: some to look after the cattle, others to draw honey from beehives. The season had been good for bees, and the forest abounded in flowering plants. Their sweet fragrance made one's head spin.

Dobrogost arrived home sometime after noon. Feeling content and happy in his peculiar old man's way, he strode into his farmstead where an unpleasant surprise awaited him: his sons had returned from the forest earlier and struck up a fight.

"Stop it!" the old man shouted, seeing the brothers huddled together trying to tie up somebody's hands with a rope.

Nobody paid any attention to him at first, for his voice was drowned out by the screams of the women, who milled around their husbands. Some of them wept, others cheered their husbands on, snapping angrily at those who protested, still others were scolding everybody else.

"Stop it at once!" he shouted menacingly and, walking swiftly to the fighting men, pushed one of them aside with his staff. "Have you gone crazy, impudent boys?"

Even as he spoke, the brothers halted in embarrassment and began shuffling away from Mladan who lay on the ground, his arms bound.

Hearing the voice of Father Dobrogost, the women vanished as if into thin air. Only Milana had not been frightened away by his shouts; she sat down, sobbing, next to Mladan and started wiping dirt from his cuts and bruises.

Stern-faced, the elder eyed the bound man speculatively, then shifted his gaze to those who had just tied him up with straps of raw hide.

"What's been going on here?" he turned to his eldest son who stood close by wiping his bloody nose with his shirtsleeve. "Why is Mladan bound?"

"He started a fight," the young man answered maliciously.

"A fight?"

Milana lifted her sorrowful, tear-stained eyes to the elder and hastened to explain:

"He was not to blame, Father. I swear by the gods he wasn't."

Dobrogost's face grew even grimmer.

"I'm not asking you, Milana. Go back to the house. You go too," he glared at the women who reappeared from the behind the door, ready to butt in. "Go and find something to do, all of you!"

Intimidated by his tone, the women hid in the house. After a pause, the old man turned again to his eldest son.

"Suppose you tell me, Stemid, what has happened here?"

"But I told you already: Mladan started a fight. Actually, he raised his hand against his eldest brother."

"Raised a hand you say? Why?"

"He didn't seem to like it that his 'princess' was asked to do some work."

"You'd better explain what kind of work she was supposed to do," Mladan flared up. "You see, Father, they have all set up on Milana, making her toil like a slave."

For a while, Dobrogost stood in silence, apparently thinking about what he should do next. Then he glanced at his sons reproachfully and, pointing at Mladan, ordered:

"Untie him."

"Why?" asked Stemid, puzzled. "Are you forgiving him such a wrongdoing?"

Dobrogost gave his eldest son another stern look.

"You, Stemid, should already know when and how a proper trial is held. First of all we've got to calm down, think it all over carefully and only then judge the guilty."

For several days Dobrogost's family plunged into an uneasy silence, pregnant with hidden hostility. The women did not dare express their grievances out loud, and the men regarded it unacceptable to speak to their brother who had violated the age-old rule of deference to his seniors. Dobrogost also kept to himself until his two neighbors, Elder Vlast and Elder Semius, returned from the forest. He then gathered everybody in his house, seated the neighbors next to himself, ordered his sons and their

wives to occupy the benches by the walls and, asking for silence, addressed the gathering:

"My good neighbors Vlast and Semius. An unfortunate incident has happened in my family: my sons Stemid and Mladan have broken the peace and concord in the house of our forefathers. You are outsiders here, so pray be witnesses and also advisers at our family trial."

The neighbors nodded their gray heads in assent, and after a pause, Dobrogost went on:

"You, Mladan," he turned to his middle son. "You were the first to violate our family custom by raising your hand against your eldest brother. Tell us why you did it. What evil spirits drove you to commit this crime?"

Mladan rose from the bench and strode to the middle of the room.

"Please forgive me, Father, and you, our neighbors, elders of well-respected families. I know that I did a bad thing but, to tell the truth, Stemid should also share the blame."

"Speak for yourself," his father reminded him.

"On that day," Mladan continued, "we came back from the forest rather early. All my sisters-in-law were already home resting but I couldn't find Milana among them. 'Where's my wife?' I asked Miroslava, Stemid's wife. 'Down by the Desna bleaching linen,' she said. 'Is she there alone?' I asked. 'All by herself,' Miroslava told me.

"I didn't like what I heard but said nothing and hurried to the river to give a hand to Milana. I'd covered less than half of the way when I saw Milana sitting right in the middle of the path, crying bitterly. I rushed to her and asked her what had happened. She didn't say anything, but continued to weep even louder. Then I looked at the bundle she'd dropped. There was plenty of linen. When it had been dry, Milana had managed to carry it from the house to the river, but after she had washed it, she could hardly lift the bundle, let alone carry it. This, naturally, made me very angry. I brought the wash home and in the heat of the moment gave Miroslava a piece of my mind, pointing out that as the eldest woman of the house she had no right to do a thing like that. Milana wasn't a slave she could order around any time she liked. Miroslava, as you well know, isn't the type to let it pass, and so she went off calling me all sorts of names. This

made me even angrier and I said that whether Miroslava liked it or not, Milana would never wash her things again.”

“You tell them what were the exact words you used,” Miroslava broke in.

The elder banged his staff menacingly and, after a brief pause, Mladan continued his story.

“At that moment, Stemid turned up: he’d overheard our quarrel and, of course, took his wife’s side. And he not just spoke for her but also threw me out of the house, pushing me so roughly that I banged my head painfully against the doorframe. You can take a look if you want, the lump is still there. So, as you see, I was not the first to strike — Stemid struck me first.”

Dobrogost understood that Mladan had said all he had meant to say and ordered him to sit down.

“And what is your explanation, Stemid?” he turned toward his eldest son. “Is it true that Miroslava took advantage of her position in the household to maltreat Milana?”

“No offense was meant, Father,” Stemid protested. “Milana is the youngest and she’s supposed to do what she’s told.”

“Even if it’s more than she can possibly cope with?” asked Elder Vlast caustically.

“But it was all women’s work,” Stemid grumbled. “It couldn’t have been too hard for her.”

“What do you mean — it couldn’t?” interjected Mladan, seething with indignation. “Didn’t you see how heavy that bundle was?”

“Mladan!” Dobrogost shouted angrily. “You’ve had your say already, so keep quiet now, will you?”

“No, Father,” Mladan rose from his seat bravely. “I won’t keep silent. If that’s the way we’re going to be treated here, we’d better leave.”

Utterly bewildered, the elder and the neighbors stared at Mladan without saying a word. Mladan went on before they could interrupt him.

“Give us a plot of land, build us a house and let’s part our ways. It will suit Stemid and Miroslava just fine — they’ll have more space for themselves then.”

“Have you gone crazy or something?” his father recovered at last. “Have you forgotten that your family belongs to the noble clan of the Borislaviches? As long as I live, I won’t let anybody break the ancient traditions.”

"They've already been broken, Father."

"Hold your tongue!" Fuming, Dobrogost rapped his staff on the floor. Apparently, Mladan's words had struck a sensitive note.

"Shame on you, son," the neighbors admonished Mladan. "Your father means you no harm and he'll settle your dispute justly. And he won't let anyone offend Milana anymore. That's what he's your elder for, after all."

"That's true," Dobrogost agreed quickly. "You have yet to hear what I have to say about Stemid and Miroslava."

"As you wish, Father," Mladan persisted, "but I can't stay here anyway."

"Can't you now?" The elder couldn't believe his ears and that made him even more furious. "In that case you can take your Milana and go with her anywhere you like. But you're getting no land from me."

Mladan realized that it was hardly the right time to reason with his father and let it go at that. The jury took his silence as a sign of obedience to the elders and spent the rest of the time chastizing Stemid and his wife, rather than condemning Mladan. However, two days later Mladan once again reminded his father about the plot of land.

"So you still want to act against your father's will?" the elder asked in amazement.

"We'll never be able to get along with Stemid, Father."

"But so far I am the elder — not Stemid."

"That's why I want you to give me my share."

For a long moment, Dobrogost stared at his son in silence. Wrath was suffocating him, but he could not find a way of venting it at his ungrateful son.

"This is how it will be then," he said, his voice faltering with emotion. "You're one of the youngest of my children and you have as yet worked very little in our family fields. So I'm not going to change my mind: you're not getting any plot from me. If you want to have a home and a piece of land of your own, go and live in the forest — there's plenty of it all around, but farming land is scarce. Go sweat for it if you want to."



## THE EARTHLY FIRE

Another night came, but Vsevolod had no idea how many had already passed, for he had long lost count. He only knew that since he had returned from the lake they had all been alike — quiet and gentle and soothing. The sky looked as if it had just been washed. And the stars were merry and whimsical. They seemed to him like children, playing games high up in the sky and throwing down their toy arrows, thin and hardly discernible from afar. The forest was still. Not an animal moved in the thicket, not a sleepy bird flapped its wings in the trees. As if enchanted by some mysterious power, everything was sound asleep. Even the pine trees, those vigilant forest guards, stood swaying their crowns sluggishly and seemed to have dozed off.

Vsevolod lay face up on the ground, watching the star-studded sky through gaps in the foliage above him. At length he turned over on his side, rested his head on the palm of his hand and gazed at the moonlit clearing, straining his ears to catch the distant sound of horses' neighing in the pasture. He decided they must be having a wonderful time under the clear, cool sky, out in the wide clearing flooded by moonlight. They could rest now from the scorching sun and the sultry heat of the day and from the irksome mosquitoes and flies which plagued them. There were wolves lurking in the woods, of course, but the watchdogs would take care of them. Besides, at the moment, the wolves were hardly of great concern to the horses. They were just grazing in the pasture without a care in the world. Later on, they would go to sleep. They would huddle together, head to head, and fall asleep peacefully.

Vsevolod, though, would not sleep. Many nights had passed since his return from the lake and none of them had brought him any relief or comfort. His heart was filled with sorrow which had been gnawing at him day and night. He wished he could dismiss his thoughts from his mind altogether and hoped that they would be dispelled by the stars, twinkling merrily in the sky. But it was all in vain; the gloomy memories kept popping up like floats on the water, driving sleep away until early hours of the morning when he would finally doze off, totally exhausted.

What was he to do now? Should he leave everything and everybody — his father, his homeland, his serf's fate — and strike out on his own? And where could he go, really? Where could he find peace of mind, if there was such a thing at all? Foreign lands wouldn't heal the wounds, nor drive away his sorrow. Away from home the pain would only get worse. Foreign lands could break you or burn you, but heal and comfort they could not.

If only he could be sure that everything had indeed been lost, that Chorna didn't love him and would never come back to him. If only he could be absolutely sure of that! Then it might have been easier to forget her — and he might have tried to forget. But he did not have that certainty and would probably never have it. For he was in love, he loved the Prince's daughter so much there were no words to describe his feeling. Let her say just one word and he'd follow her to the end of the world. If she ordered him, he would have fought the Khan himself and defeated him not by physical strength but by sheer force of love.

Oh, Princess! Why hadn't she understood him that night, in the middle of that out-of-the-way forest? Why hadn't she tried to understand? Had she been frightened or had she simply spurned him? But if she had spurned him, why had she been so sweet and close and sympathetic before? For she had confided in him and trusted him.

No, the Princess's moods were still a mystery to him. He was a shepherd and was thinking like a shepherd, obviously failing to comprehend many things. Or maybe there had been a grave mistake somewhere. Perhaps love had been the last thing on her mind — love for a serf... Yes, that was probably the answer: she couldn't possibly have fallen in love with a serf.

Good gods! So the fire of the earth didn't pass him by. It had made itself felt so early!

What would it all come to? What end awaited him? Was he, too, destined to burn his wings? Was he to share his father's fate?

He remembered his father's words on that stormy night: he had flown toward light only to fall down, his wings singed... That was life, like it or not — a promise of light and a danger of getting burned, and burned painfully at that. It hurt so much he wanted to scream. And yet he could not quench the flame in his heart and give up his quest for light. For he was a human being, and he still

had a reason to carry on, that was his belief in light and his longing for it.

But he was a serf... That was undoubtedly the cause of all his misfortunes and of this untold suffering. For she was a princess and contemptuous of an underling like him. But Vsevolod wasn't going to let anybody push him into an abyss. He was quite capable of standing up for himself — and he would fight.

If he could only meet her just one more time, just once more. Then he would know what to tell her. But where and how could he meet her? The Princess would never come here again and for him to show up in Chernihiv was out of the question. Meanwhile, by the next Midsummer Feast the Khazars would have forced the Prince to give his daughter in marriage to the Khan. Or, if he refused, they would take her by force anyway. They certainly were strong enough to do it, too. If only... Oh, really, what if the Prince decided to defend his daughter? Chorna, it seemed, had said something to that effect. In that case, they might meet after all.

Excited, Vsevolod felt an upsurge of fresh strength and sat up abruptly in his makeshift bed under a pine tree.

His father, also awake, noticed the movement and turned to him with a look of concern in his eyes. Hard as he tried to conceal his feelings, Vsevolod did not succeed in deceiving his father who knew that something had gone wrong down by the lake. The youth had been sad and gloomy since the day he had returned home. His father saw that not even nights brought Vsevolod any relief, and this made him ponder. If only Vsevolod would tell him, if only he would explain what had happened and why the Princess had not come back with him. "She left," had been Vsevolod's sole explanation, and Osmomisl had been unable to squeeze another word from him.

Maybe they had quarreled. Or maybe worse. Perhaps the thing he had dreaded lately, especially after they had left, had come to pass, after all, down there by the lake. But then why was Vsevolod so downcast and, at the same time, so angry? Was he troubled by an uneasy conscience or was it some insult that was tearing his heart apart now? Yes, the latter was more likely. For only an insult could frustrate a youth so much.

The horsekeeper also sat up in his bed, rustling the hay, which had dried up during the day.

"Are you awake, Vsevolod?"

"Yes."

"It hurts, doesn't it?"

Silence.

"Didn't I warn you to keep away from princesses. But you didn't follow my advice and now you torment yourself like somebody who has committed a crime out of sheer foolishness."

"It's all right."

"No, something must be very wrong. Or do you think I don't see how hard it is for you, how it hurts your heart — all because the Princess deceived you or offended you?"

"Let it hurt," the young man said resolutely. "I'm not going to give up so easily."

"Give up what? What have you got left anyway? Your only consolation was peace of mind, but that, too, now seems to have been taken away from you."

"There's strength left," insisted Vsevolod. "And where there is strength, there is hope. I won't give up — I will fight on, Father."

"For the Princess?"

"For my honor first of all, for my dignity as a human being — and only then for the Princess. Or, rather, by defending my honor and dignity I'll also be fighting for her."

Osmomisl sat there in silence for some time staring at his son.

"But who are you going to fight, with?" he asked at length, impatiently and loudly. "There's something I don't understand."

"I'm not too sure myself I understand everything. But I'm leaving tomorrow for Chernihiv, Father."

"To Chernihiv? What for?"

"There might be fighting there soon. The Princess told me that the Khazars were expected to go to war against the Siverianians. If that is really so, the Prince will be recruiting warriors. I'm going to volunteer."

"For the Prince's army? But you're a serf. You'd be —"

"Am I really?" Vsevolod interrupted him indignantly. "It wasn't I who killed that governor. Who'll be there to say that I was tried, that I was sentenced to serfdom for life?"

Osmomisl did not even flinch under his son's questions. But his words resounded painfully in his heart.

So that was the way it had turned out. Vsevolod remembered his father's guilt and it weighed heavily on his heart and tortured him. Maybe it also offended him, especially now that he had met the Princess. This was also why Vsevolod had been so sad lately: he now experienced himself what it meant to be a serf and it proved too hard a yoke for him to endure. He couldn't wait to break free from the hateful bondage.

"But that's good," it occurred to Osmomisl suddenly, and the thought cheered him up. "That means that his father's blood is stirring in his veins. That's very good indeed. Vsevolod will make a fine warrior, maybe even a knight. He's been keen on learning warrior's skills from me. Here in the pasture he's clearly the best: even I am no match for him in jousting, let alone the grooms. In swordsmanship he's even better, wriggling like a worm in the saddle while dealing crushing, well-aimed blows. If only he is lucky enough to be accepted into the regiment and admitted to court."

Vsevolod seemed to guess his father's thoughts.

"These are troubled times, so I don't think Chorny will be too inquisitive about who I am and where I come from. Good warriors, that's what he needs now and needs badly. But if he starts asking I'll say I'm from Zasullya and that I've come to Chernihiv to join his army."

"But the Princess is there," Osmomisl protested. "She may give you away."

"She won't. Besides, some time will pass before she sees me. She doesn't attend feasts and she's even less likely to mix with the warriors. The main thing for me is to hold out till the first battle. Then I will show what I am worth. The sword and the spear will pave me the way to the people and then to her."

Osmomisl saw no point in arguing any further. He knew that it was all mostly youthful dreams and wishful thinking. Yet he was pleased that his son was going to Chernihiv to help defend the Princess. Sooner or later, he was bound to confront those who would try to block his way to her. No doubt he'd face them in the end. For Love was the sister of Hatred and, at the same time it was a law of the blood and a faithful companion to Beauty. It would never allow the lad to give up Chorna and the struggle

for her. Through his love Vsevolod would make enemies. And the chief one among them would be the Prince, the very man whom he, Osmomisl, hated for the unfair judgment passed on him.

Would Vsevolod be able to stand his ground in that struggle where the odds would be against him? Would he cope with those who pursued Chorna and those who wanted to protect her? But it could not be helped: there was probably no other way. And there was no sense in waiting. To wait any longer was out of the question. He himself was too old now to seek opportunity for a personal encounter with the Prince. Let his son avenge the outrage committed on him. For Osmomisl that would be satisfaction enough. In that way they would be quits.

#### XXIV THE OATH

When Mstislav came again to visit Ambal one evening, he had other company with him besides Vseslav. As he opened the door, Ambal saw three or four dark-eyed soldiers trooping behind the duty collectors.

Worried, he considered turning the uninvited guests away claiming ill health, but the intent look one of the warriors gave him made him change his mind and bring the wine Mstislav ordered.

The same unease and a growing premonition of something untoward and even menacing compelled Ambal to pour a second round of drinks. But when Mstislav, emboldened by the wine, ordered yet another, Ambal called him aside.

"You owe me so much already," he said in an undertone, "that it'll take you till the day you die to pay me back. Do you have any idea about the size of your debt?"

"You can forget about that debt," Mstislav replied rudely and loudly, letting everybody hear the conversation Ambal had wanted to keep secret. "We are the Prince's soldiers, and everything that's in his wine cellars is ours, too. Is that clear?"

The steward gaped at him in utter amazement. What brazen impudence! A drunkard, a miserable duty collector not so long ago, he now considered himself the master

of the Prince's property. He'd guzzled up plenty of wine here and now refused to pay.

Ambal's disbelief reached its limits, after which it quickly turned into sheer rage.

"Maybe you want to be hauled up for trial before the Prince," he hissed. "All you're entitled to as a warrior is to eat and drink when the Prince gives a feast, but here you've got no right to anything."

The other men seemed completely oblivious of the altercation. They sat around Vseslav engrossed in drunken prattle. Not all of them, though. One of them was silent, listening attentively to Mstislav's indignant protestations and Ambal's arguments. When the debate took too heated a turn, he got up from the table and strode confidently straight to where the steward stood.

"How much does he owe you?" he asked in a low voice.

"Six grivnas."

The words had an immediate sobering effect on Mstislav, which was hardly surprising considering the size of the sum. Such a debt could easily downgrade him to a serf. Should the steward report the matter to the Prince, Mstislav's hopes of victorious battles would go up in smoke, as would the rest of his life: he'd finish his days laboring somewhere in the woods.

In an instant his head cleared up, and he felt his thoughts flowing like a river in springtime — a wide, strong, fast river. Mstislav struggled to find an excuse but, sadly, none seemed to be forthcoming: he had not, of course, counted the number of mugs he had emptied here before. At the same time he was sure that the steward was lying, slandering him and Vseslav in public.

The protracted silence was obviously to Mstislav's disadvantage. The soldier grasped it at once, even before Mstislav did; without waiting for his explanations he fished out a leather pouch filled with gold, counted out several coins and threw them carelessly on the table in front of Ambal.

"Here's your money," he pronounced triumphantly. Then he took out one more coin and added in a flippant tone: "That's for tonight's drinks — and an advance payment as well."

It only then dawned on Mstislav that luck had unexpectedly turned his way, and in the next instant his savior found himself in a vigorous bearhug.

“Baglai! Friend! Brother! How can I repay you for your generosity? Just tell me how!”

Baglai did not shun Mstislav's manifestations of gratitude. He too embraced his companion attempting to return the affection, but seeing that Mstislav was too broad-shouldered for it, he gave up trying and laughed contentedly.

“I don't know, Mstislav. But, well, perhaps these shoulders of yours may come in handy.”

“My shoulders?” repeated Mstislav pensively, casting a guardedly curious glance at Baglai. “But why not, after all!” He raised his hand impulsively and slammed it with all his might against the hand proffered by Baglai. “That's a good idea — let's swear to be brothers! You can be sure of Mstislav's shoulders out in the battlefield — have no doubt about it.”

Baglai had clearly not counted on having Mstislav as a sworn brother, and his face betrayed his concern. However, he quickly recovered and hastened to dispel any suspicions this may have caused.

“Ha-ha-ha,” his laughter rang out with a slightly unnatural quickness. “So you say I may rely on you.”

The former customs man again started assuring Baglai of his reliability, but the soldier did not listen. Instead, he took a few long, overly confident steps toward the table where Ambal had already placed a jug of wine, pulled from the sheath a double-edged Saracen dagger and raised it high over his head.

“Shall we swear to that?”

“Let's take an oath.”

Mstislav was the first to roll up the sleeve on his left arm, and he held it out bravely before the glittering point of the dagger.

Baglai let a few drops of blood fall into his mug, then handed the dagger over to Mstislav who repeated the ritual.

Having thus exchanged their blood, the two men filled the mugs with wine and drank them in silence to the last drop. Then they embraced and kissed each other in token of eternal friendship and loyalty.

The other soldiers, who had been rather subdued by the ceremony, livened up and burst into loud shouts of approval, chasing them with mugs of sparkling foreign wine.

They celebrated late into the night, merrily and loudly.



The steward, however, paced nervously up and down the room, biting his nails to the quick. His vexation was quite natural: he had spent so much time and effort trying to lure that bear of a man, Mstislav, and also Vseslav who was a close-mouthed man but obviously a good soldier, and now that dark-eyed scoundrel had ruined with one stroke the intricate trap Ambal had been carefully setting up.

What was going to happen now? Who would help him to carry out the great Khan's orders? Who would save him from sure death? Time was running desperately short, hordes of Khazars, swimming behind their horses, could cross the Desna any day now and storm the walls of Chernihiv. And he was all by himself and totally unprepared. He had pinned all his hopes on those two drunks, strong as bulls and drawn to wine like flies to molasses. But those hopes were shattered when the drunkards were snatched out of his hands. His trap has worked — almost. He had only to apply a bit of pressure, to threaten them with serfdom, and they would have done all he commanded them. Two such strong fellows, who were also court guards, could have been of great help in fulfilling his task, which, hopefully, would have been made still easier by the general commotion following the Khazar attack.

But it was all finished now. His plans had gone awry and now his future looked bleak, to say the least. The Khan would never forgive Ambal his flight. Ambal's only chance to survive lay in helping the Khan lay hands on the Princess, in kidnapping her for him. Otherwise the Khan would crush him like a cockroach. There would be no running away from his revenge then.

Meanwhile the wine was having a visible effect on the guests. Mstislav's sworn brother, however, made a point of staying sober. Presently, having made sure that his companions were too far gone to pay attention to anything but their drinks, he left the table and headed straight for Ambal's corner.

"Are you in low spirits, my good man?" he addressed Ambal familiarly.

Ambal sized him up grimly but left the question unanswered.

"Don't you worry your head about it," the soldier said soothingly, almost affectionately. "Mstislav won't slip out of our hands."

Baglai rummaged in his pocket and produced from it a black kerchief with a red edging.

Ambal gaped at it in bewilderment. He had exactly the same kerchief himself. It had been given to him by the Chaushiar, the man who was behind this whole conspiracy. It was exactly the same! It served as a symbol of the blood-sworn oath and of the death penalty for its betrayal. This was also a prearranged sign to facilitate recognition between a Khazar and his fellow tribesman, a conspirator and his accomplice.

"Mstislav won't slip away," Baglai repeated in a whisper. "He's under my thumb now. Both he and Vseslav. As well as some others, including these warriors here, who are also Khazars, in case you're interested."

A clap of thunder out of a clear blue sky would have stunned Ambal less than this revelation. He stared at the stern, weather beaten face and just could not pull himself together. Befuddled, he stood in front of the man who held the strings of his luckless fate.

So he was a Khazar, this generous soldier. One of those men charged to keep an eye on him and the Princess.

"There you are, Ambal," the steward mused despondently. "That's your end, you may say. Nothing can save you now. If they don't even give you a chance to vindicate yourself before the Khan, it means your days are numbered."

Baglai seemed to guess what troubled him and put an end to the torments of the frightened steward.

"Stop worrying," he gave Ambal a good-natured shove. "Not everything is lost yet. As a matter of fact, nothing is lost. The Khan trusts you and places great hopes in you. Do you hear? He relies on you. For you are the only one of us who has direct access to the Prince and thus also to the Princess... As far as help is concerned," he added after a pause, "don't let it trouble you. We'll have enough men on our side to carry out our holy mission."

## XXV

### FATHER AND SON

At the appearance of dawn the woods hushed, as if admiring the first blush of morning. But it only seemed so. In reality, everything around was fast asleep. Even

the trees slept, overcome by the magic power of the all-engulfing night.

It was said that in the early hours of the morning the beautiful Goddess Dawn put every living thing on Earth to sleep. The story was that she did not want anybody to see how she returned, naked and weary from love, from her husband's bed. As a goddess, she wielded unlimited power and forced even the most curious eyes to shut while she put on a thin blue cloak and hid in her heavenly temple until the next night.

On other occasions, she would take a bath in the clouds. Then thick dew would cover the ground, its beads tiny as teardrops. Woodcocks, Dawn's heralds, would be the first to wake up from this bath, not all at once but one by one. A grouse would unfold its wings and crow, waking up the sleepy forest, which would then again plunge into a still silence. The quiet, however, would be short-lived. Here and there turtle doves would flap their wings enthusiastically as they washed their eyes with the dew. Once their eyes were washed clear, they would burst forth into loud, contented cooing. Up in the sky, swans would trumpet their arrival, heading for the blue waters of the lake. The thicket would suddenly explode with a boisterous chirping of birds, whose voices would grow louder as the morning gradually came into its own. This day, too, the dew had fallen lavishly and the birds had woken up early, but Vsevolod, tired out by his nightly thoughts, was still sleeping, oblivious to the cool dew that covered his hands, face and even his closed eyelids, and deaf to the merry singing in the forest, as melodious as a chorus of heavenly maidens. Actually he dreamed that those sweet songs reached him from high above, and the music soothed his troubled heart and lulled him to sleep. Only later, when a cool breeze wafted from the thicket, did he wake blinking sleepily.

Vsevolod found himself enveloped in milk-white fog. For a moment he thought that this fairytale vision was still a dream: all around him was not a forest but a sea, calm and boundless. Tall pine trees resembled masts of sunken ships. Those farther away were barely discernible, their crowns shrouded by the mist. But the branchy oak tree under which he had made his bed, brought the young man back to earth.

"Aha," he mused, "the Goddess must have overslept a bit. Look how much fog she's sent down here. She must have

driven all the clouds from the sky down to earth to make sure people don't see her in the nude."

"Are you awake, son?" he heard his father's voice. "What a fog! You'll have a hard time riding through the forest — you can't see a tree more than a few steps ahead."

Looking at Osmomisl from a distance, Vsevolod had the impression that his father was wading rather than walking through the mist. However, it was not so much the fog that occupied Vsevolod's mind. He wondered at the tone of his father's voice and the meaning behind his remark. "Hard time riding through..." That could only mean that he agreed! It meant he approved of Vsevolod's decision to go to Chernihiv and vie for the Princess.

The father appeared not to notice his son's joy; he sat down by his side on the fog-dampened hay.

"I've sent the grooms to look for the horses," he said. "The weather is uncertain and anything may happen at the pasture. Wolves may get them in the fog. Most of all I'm worried about the colts."

"The fog will soon go away," Vsevolod consoled him. "The haze will disappear with the first rays of sun."

They talked on and on, jumping from one subject to another, yet their conversation had a warmth and spontaneity that neither the father nor the son could remember for many years, at least not since the time Vsevolod had come to regard himself as a grown-up. This alone indicated that they were about to part.

As soon as the sun rose over the forest, the fog began to disperse, melted away by the gentle warmth of the newborn day. The mist remained only along the edge of the forest, roofed by the spreading crowns of oak trees, or lingered, in white, milky pools, in hollows out in the pasture that was barely visible in the distance. From out of that milk-white haze emerged the figures of wary-eyed horses: first their heads appeared, adorned with long manes; then, slowly, their bodies took shape. The scene had an unreal, fairytale quality.

Vsevolod stopped at the edge of the forest not far from the house and for a while stood gazing at the pasture and the misty creeks he had known from his childhood; he felt as enchanted by the spectacle as if he had never seen it before. Presently, he made his way to where the horses were grazing, trampling the dew-covered grass. He could have called his Blackie — it would not have been difficult

to fill his lungs with air and give the fancy whistle known only to his horse. Yet Vsevolod did not do it. Lost in his dreams, he strolled pensively through the tall grass, leaving in his wake a wide dewy path. It was strange that yesterday the prospect of going to Chernihiv had excited him so much that he had been unable to sleep; in fact he had been ready to set out in the middle of the night. For now he could not bring himself to do it. He had a feeling that he was leaving these pastures and those woods, so dear to his heart, forever.

What had he known here? What would he miss in the city? His loneliness, or those who had shared his loneliness and helped him to endure it? These mist-covered expanses and the birds flying in the sky and twittering in the thicket? Perhaps most of all he would miss the woods... If he could only talk to them! He would have told them everything, he would have bowed before them in gratitude. And he would have kissed them before parting. For they had done him no wrong, they had been his only solace in life and had kept him from perishing in loneliness. Their beauty and their songs had saved him from despair.

Suddenly, somewhere to his left, a shrill neighing came from the forest, its echo rolling easily over the wakening expanses. Jolted out of his reverie, Vsevolod stopped in his tracks and turned in the direction of the sound, moving his eyes along the edge of the forest, whose sparse jags jutted out here and there onto clearings. He immediately recognized Blackie's neighing. Unable to see him among the trees because of the mist, Vsevolod took a deep breath, put two fingers to his mouth — and a wild whistle rent the fresh morning air, resounding deep in the forest.

Blackie knew that it was his master calling him: the modulating whistle was as familiar to him as his own neighing had been a moment ago to Vsevolod. Obeying the call, the horse swiftly turned and took off at a gallop to his master, flying low over the grass.

When they reached the house, Vsevolod began harnessing Blackie. Slowly, he put on the best bridle, covered the back with a well-worn lining. As he was already strapping on the saddle, he remembered that his father had a much better, even splendid, harness stored away somewhere. It seemed some knight had bartered it for one of Osmomisl's horses. He remembered he used to admire the beautifully decorated saddle as a boy. Later, how-

ever, his father had hidden it somewhere in the stables or maybe sold it, because he never showed it to his son anymore. That saddle, or the whole harness, would have looked very well on Blackie indeed! It was so much better than the one he had. No wonder: it had once adorned the horse of a real knight.

Lost in his daydreams, Vsevolod stopped harnessing his horse. Osmomisl concluded that his son had lost his resolve at the last moment and was about to put off his departure. For no reason he could define, it frightened Osmomisl and he hurried to help Vsevolod overcome his vacillation.

"Getting ready?" he shouted from the porch, anxious to begin a conversation as quickly as possible and thus bolster the lad's determination.

Vsevolod started and hurriedly resumed tightening the girth.

"It's about time," he said absently. "The fog's almost gone."

Osmomisl, who was already close by, gently tapped Vsevolod on the shoulder.

"Wait, son, don't harness yet. I've sent for another saddle. The one I got for a horse, remember?"

"Of course I do," the lad said happily.

"That's the one you'll put on Blackie. I've also sent for silk reins and a better bridle. I've got some armor and weapons for you too, son. There's a helmet and a spear and a fine shield. I've been waiting for this day, you see. And now it has all come in handy. Such a handsome young man as you should present himself to the Prince as a real warrior. You must impress him with everything: your horse, your armor and your face."

Vsevolod was deeply moved by the unexpected concern and help.

"May the kind gods reward you, Father," he said impulsively. "Forgive me," he added in a sad voice, "that I hid my intentions from you. I didn't think you would give me your consent."

Osmomisl gave his son a hard measuring look and immediately turned his eyes away.

"I've changed my mind, Vsevolod," he said. "The way things have turned out there's no other choice for me. I've got to agree. You were right: the quest of light is worth plunging into the fire.

“And I mean really plunging into it instead of waiting until it challenges you. Sadly, I have waited too long — twenty years. At first I did it because you were too small, then because... well, I don’t know why. In my old age I seem to have forgotten that nothing ventured means nothing gained. That was a big mistake, and it’s too late to do anything about it now. So I won’t try to stop you — go and fight for your happiness. But you must keep in mind that Chorna is a very beautiful girl and that you’ll make more enemies because of her that you can imagine. The most dangerous of them will be the Prince. If you win his favor and affection with your battle feats and he agrees to your marriage, go ahead. I won’t be against it. But if the Prince deceives you, remember your father was also betrayed. Then avenge us both in a fair fight. You’ll be the winner, I am sure of that.”

## XXVI

### “THEN GET OUT OF HERE”

Days came and went but peace and quiet did not return to Siveriania. As if swept by the wind, the alarm spread through the woods and fields, from house to house, from settlement to settlement, to all corners of the land. It had been a long time since the Siverianian country had last witnessed such human turmoil caused by an ever growing, all-pervading premonition of evil things to come. Not only soothsayers but common folk as well knew that if the entire land spoke about something, then it was definitely bound to happen. This was especially true of evil things. Predictions of impending disasters had so far proved to be uncannily accurate.

While the rumors had centered on the raids by the steppe tribes of the Pechenegs and the smell of burned villages, the people had not been unduly alarmed. The Siverianians felt sorry for their Slav brothers along the Don and waited to see what the Prince would do to protect them from the plundering Pechenegs. But then rumors began circulating about a meeting of military chiefs that had been held in Chernihiv. It was said that Siveriania was now threatened by not only the Pechenegs but by the Khazars as well. That proved to be the last straw. Alarm turned into astonishment and astonishment into fear. The Pechenegs

were bad enough, but the Khazars, the very same Khazars who were supposed to be their defenders, to whom they had payed tribute for hundreds of years to ensure protection of Siveriania from invaders. That was pure treachery! A knife in the back! What was going to happen now? What had been decided at that meeting? What did the Prince think about it all?

And when the elders finally spoke and word got out of the treatment they had received from the Prince and Chorny's intentions, fear gave way to wrath, and the wrath restored strength. The time for fussing and gossiping was over; the Siverianians' indignation now boiled over into outright threats. For it was unthinkable indeed: throughout the history of Siveriania no prince had been known to flout the opinion of his people. Their grandfathers and great grandfathers had decided matters of war and peace at tumultuous general *veches*. Everybody, be he valiant warrior, elder or poor peasant, had had his say and not infrequently had used his fists to ram down a point. But now the Prince simply ignored them all, having decided the fate of their land all by himself. Just look at what he had done: instead of heading the people's militia, he had rejected it, brushed it away. He had chosen to rely only on his regiment. But that was pure madness. It was also treason. The Prince was not performing his duties. He had forgotten about the ancient agreement between the Siverianians and their princes, and about the land already being plundered by the Pechenegs and threatened by the Khazar Khanate. He had forgotten about all that and had taken refuge behind the city walls built by common people; he had surrounded himself with his warriors thinking only about his daughter and his capital. But they still had strong fists and also some weapons. They would be able to stand up for themselves and would convene a *veche* **without** the Prince's help and consent and would force him to respect their rights.

Decisions arrived at in one settlement traveled on to another, quickly spreading throughout the surrounding area, and, after being discussed, changed or amended, rushed further on. The news traveled fast through forests and swamps, relayed by village messengers and spreading alarm all over the land.

"Everyone to the *veche*!" volunteer messengers would shout as they spurred on their horses through villages.



"Pride and arrogance have come over the Prince. He's betraying us!"

That was all that was needed: the messengers confirmed the rumors and that was enough. Gray-bearded family elders put on their armor, saddled their horses and, together with all the other elders of their village, settlement or town, set out for Chernihiv. They were followed by their sons—vigorous young men made strong by hunting who were not entitled to vote but, if need be, could support their fathers by sword or fists.

On the appointed day the Market Square filled with a noisy crowd of Siverianians. The first to arrive were men from Chernihiv itself, all on horseback and in full armor; they were soon joined by the folk from nearby villages, and then winding files of horsemen, coming from distant townships, began descending toward the capital from surrounding forests like rivulets flowing downhill after a rainstorm. At the drawbridge over a deep moat, those rivulets joined the wide human stream which flowed from across the Strizhen down the well-trodden Zalosny Road. There they were slowed down by the bridge guards asking them to wait for their turn and not to bunch together. Predictably, the guards' appeals fell on deaf ears, and the horsemen pushed on stubbornly toward the open city gate.

Finally, passage became all but impossible: the Siverianians thronged the whole square, jamming the gate so tightly that the guards were forced to draw the bridge and stop the crossing. But this did not help much. Those on the other side of the moat raised a hubbub demanding to have the site of the *veche* transferred out of the city to the spacious War Field which was well suited for such an assembly. However clamorous, their protests and threats had little effect on the bridge guards; after the battering they had received they wished they had not opened the gate in the first place. Besides, those who had already crossed the bridge and disappeared behind the city walls, were hardly in the mood to support the demands of their less fortunate comrades. They were now chiefly interested in what was going on in Market Square and were irresistibly drawn there like a tree reaching out toward the sun.

Meanwhile, the square roared and whirled. Peasants and city laborers were complaining to one another and arguing

back and forth, some, having reached agreement on some matter, tried to elbow their way to elders to persuade them to talk to the Prince in a certain way and to insist on the demands of all the Siverianians, of the entire country.

At long last three horsemen rode out of the gate of the kremlin. The townsfolk were surprised to recognize in them the Prince's courtiers and indignantly informed the whole assembly of it.

"Look, look," they pointed at the horsemen. "The Prince has sent his men. He wants to control the *veche*."

Their indignation being already at the boiling point, the peasants and especially the townspeople met the Prince's heralds with such an uproar that they, confused and frightened, did not dare to relay the Prince's greetings. This encouraged the assembly even more. They had their weapons handy, they were together, and they felt strong in their unity.

But the Prince seemed unperturbed. After his messengers had returned, he set out for the square himself, stately and poised, and heedless of the tumult. One would have thought that the Siverianians had listened with all due respect to his salutations and were now waiting obediently for their prince to appear in person.

The one indication of Chorny's misgivings was the unusually large number of warriors who rode with him to Market Square, giving the whole procession a rather martial appearance.

Whether it was fear in the face of heavily armed troops or wrath that overtook the gathering was hard to say, but the din gradually subsided, its waves rolling away toward the city walls. But when the Prince rode closer to the silent wall of horsemen facing him and, halting before them, held up his hand, one of the elders broke the wary silence and rudely interrupted the Prince even as he began the customary address.

"Prince," said the man, riding forward from the tight row of his comrades, "the Siverianians want to know why you are not defending them from the invaders. Why have you deserted them at this time of trouble, why are you not fulfilling your duty to your people and to your land?"

The accusation caught Chorny by surprise and he faltered, groping for a reply worthy of his person. That

momentary hesitation was enough to provoke the gathering into an uproar of indignation.

"The Prince cares only about himself," came shouts from different parts of the square. "He's planning to defend only Chernihiv, as if the rest of Siveriania did not exist! He doesn't care about us!"

"It's a lie!" countered one of the elders, his gruff voice drowning the shouts of the nearest opponents. "By defending Chernihiv we're defending the whole land."

"All of it?" a young voice queried derisively from the crowd. "And what about the Don area? Does the Prince think that a handful of militiamen is a big enough force to be sent there? Why hasn't he sent his troops to the Don as he promised he would?"

"Because his warriors live in villages around here," remarked somebody caustically.

"Tell us, Prince! You've promised us to march out with your regiment and defend the Siverianians on the Don. Why haven't you gone there? What are you waiting for?"

That was the saving thought. Chorny sensed that it could offer him a way out and gestured for silence, but the *veche* paid no attention to his signs.

"Shame!" The scathing word echoed up and down the square. "The Prince has betrayed his people. He's a traitor!"

"Traitor!"

"Shame!"

"Traitor!"

"Shame!"

The clamor was deafening. It was probably heard not only throughout the kremlin but outside the city walls as well. The Prince glared helplessly at the gathering and had no idea how he could calm it down. Using troops, even such a force as he had in the kremlin, was out of the question: the *veche* was well armed and firmly united. Those men were well aware of their strength and their advantages. Otherwise they would not have shouted so loudly and opposed their prince so fiercely.

Chorny scowled at their insolence but kept silent, biding his time. Abruptly, sensing a letup in the crowd's angry hubbub, he pulled out his heavy, gold-incrusted sword from its sheath and raised it high over his head.

It was a sign for everybody to listen. The Siverianians knew that their princes rarely resorted to it; the square

grew quiet and, defiantly but silently, waited for what would come next.

"My fellow Siverianians!" Chorny began. "Men of our good towns and villages! It causes me great pain to hear your reproaches and just grievances. But it hurts even more when I come to think of the weakness of our forces."

"That's not true!" several voices protested from the crowd. "Look what a mighty army we've got here!" Men pointed to the multitudinous gathering which filled the square spilling onto the War Field outside the walls.

Chorny waited for the protests to subside and then resumed:

"True, I have promised to lead my troops against the Pechenegs to protect the Don people from the raids of the steppe tribes. But there's almost no one to lead yet, brothers! It so happened that hardly had my captains finished recruiting warriors for the army when the Khan of Khazaria threatened to make war on us."

"And so the Prince has decided to wait for him in Chernihiv? But what about our other lands? What's going to happen to the rest of Siveriania?"

"The Khazars won't go raiding our forests," argued the Prince.

"But the Pechenegs will! Today they are on the Donets, and tomorrow they may well be on the Seim or the Desna," persisted the elders. "A handful of militia detachments won't be able to hold them back."

"So what do the elders suggest to do?" Chorny was apparently losing his temper. "Am I to leave Chernihiv and my daughter and march out to meet the Khazars and the Pechenegs? Has it ever occurred to the elders that this is exactly what the Khazars are waiting for? Neither my regiment nor the militia can defeat them in the open. Only here, behind the city walls, can we defend the Princess's honor and the freedom of Siveriania."

That was the truth. Shouts of approval broke the silence: the Siverianians were now ready to take the Prince's side.

Chorny noticed the change and pulled in the reins, preparing to put a finishing touch to his victory.

But before he could speak, a strong voice, sounding very loud in the general silence and coming from somewhere quite close to the Prince, rang out in the square:

"Would the Prince tell us about Oleg's mission to Chernihiv?"

It struck like a bolt from the blue. Confused, the Siverianians glanced in the direction of the speaker and then back at the Prince. Really, why had Chorny kept silent about it? Oleg had indeed visited the city and the two men must have talked. Why hadn't the *veche* been informed about it? At this time an alliance with the Kievans would have been highly desirable. Together, they could stop the Khazars and teach the Pechenegs a good lesson. Such an alliance would have been very timely indeed; in fact it could have saved them from a disaster.

"Speak up, Prince!" demanded those standing in the front rows. "Why did Oleg come? What did you talk about with him here in Chernihiv?"

The *veche* again buzzed and stirred. The Prince made use of the din to figure out his next move.

"Perhaps the Prince will then remember the promise he gave to Oleg?" shouted the same powerful voice.

This time Chorny noticed who the voice belonged to, and his face grew even grimmer.

"The rogue," he swore to himself. "How did he get wind of it?"

Aloud, he explained:

"I gave Oleg no promises. I could give him none."

"He's lying!" The man whom the Prince had spotted raised his voice even higher. "Oleg advised you to unite in the struggle against the invaders and you promised him to put the matter before the *veche*."

That was a heavy blow: Chorny had not expected anybody to know all the details of his conversation with the Kiev prince. There had been nobody in the room except Oleg and himself, and who could have imagined that those casual words about the *veche* would become known to that man and now to all the Siverianians? How had he learned about them? Had he been eavesdropping or had Oleg told him so that he might act as his agent in Siveriania?

Twitching at the reins in irritation, the Prince made it appear as if he were calming down his horse. But he could not keep silent for long: the gathering was waiting impatiently and any further delay could be fatal.

"We didn't discuss anything the *veche* doesn't already know about," Chorny said at length, groping for an explanation. "We talked about Kiev at the last *veche* and then we decided —"

"We decided to fight the Pechenegs. But who says we pledged not to enter into an alliance with the Kievans?" the same man demanded stubbornly. "Why does the Prince think he may resolve matters concerning Siveriania's vital interests all by himself? Why hasn't he told the *veche* about Oleg's proposal?"

"Because I didn't think it necessary," Chorny snapped. "What?"

"I mean — " Chorny began, but he was given no chance to explain what he meant.

"He means he ignores our rights! He doesn't want to confer with the *veche!*" voices were heard everywhere.

"Shame!" Those who stood farther away, on the edges of the Market Square, supported the elders. "The Prince must be getting too big for his boots! He has broken the agreement he concluded with the people!"

"Traitor!" The shouts rose above the general din.

"Traitor!" The angry chant reached the walls, rebounded from them, and the throng swayed and rushed forward, pushing toward the Prince's troops which stood lined up behind Chorny. But at that moment the dignified-looking, broad-shouldered man whose high repute among the elders the Prince remembered from their previous encounter rode out from the crowd. He turned his horse around and gestured to the crowd to halt.

Slowly and unwillingly, the front ranks obeyed, holding back the pressure of the angry folk behind them.

When the din died down, the elder turned his horse again to face Chorny and demanded in a peremptory voice:

"Tell us, Prince: why did you say it was not necessary?"

The Prince shot a sullen look at him but held his tongue. He was obviously regretting his earlier outburst and searching for a way out of the quandary his quick temper had landed him in. So far, however, he could not find any: the blunder he had made at the heat of the moment had cut off all lines of retreat and now pushed him on an even more dangerous course.

"I've told you once already," Chorny replied sharply. "As you well know, Oleg treacherously captured Lyubech, our finest city and important port on the Dnieper. He now wants to lay his hands on Chernihiv as well and to put a yoke on our necks."

"How can the Prince be so sure of this?" asked one of the elders finally.

"I've told you: Oleg seized Lyubech by deceit."

"Is that your only reason?" persisted the same voice.

"Isn't that enough? He got the route from the Varangians to the Greeks under his full control and pushed us away from the Dnieper."

Somebody broke out into good-humored laughter:

"Do you mean to say that the way from Chernihiv to the Greeks passes through the Varangians?"

The remark sent the whole square laughing, and for a while pacified the *veche*.

"Prince," the broad-shouldered elder spoke again, calmly and reasonably. "We believe this is not a proper time for nursing old grievances. What's the use remembering an old evil when a new one is knocking on the door? We've got to think about unity if we don't want to see our lands devastated."

But the Prince held his ground.

"I'd rather see devastation than such an alliance. Both the Khazars and the Pechenegs are foreigners. The Khazars will come and go, but once Oleg gets a foothold in our land, that will be forever. You shall yet remember my warning: an alliance with Kiev will put an end to the Siverianian Principality."

"But it will save its people!" shouted someone from the group of horsemen who stood facing the Prince.

The *veche* cheered him enthusiastically, roared and pressed indignantly closer toward the Prince and his warriors.

"Is that how the Prince speaks to us? Is that how he cares about the Siverianians and their land?"

"Why should we put up with him then?" a sharp voice carried across the whole square. "The Prince is worried only about his principality and not the people. He's broken our agreement, too!"

"Shame! Traitor!"

The broad-shouldered elder rose in the stirrups and once again motioned for silence.

"Prince," he told Chorny firmly. "You have promised to protect us from enemies. Either you keep your promise —"

"Or what?" the Prince interrupted him, smiling maliciously.

"Or leave!"

A tense silence followed. The Prince hesitated to take the decisive step; the *veche* waited for his response.

"You better change your mind, Prince," advised some horsemen from the front ranks. "Join forces with Kiev and lead us against the enemies."

"This I will never do," Chorny blurted out, feeling the reassuring strength of his warriors behind him.

"Then leave!" the assembly responded in one voice, and the men reached for their weapons without waiting for a signal from the elders. Angry shouts and oaths mingled with the clang of swords and the shrill neighing of horses. Those in the front ranks rushed forward toward the Prince and came up against armor-clad troops. Others pushed from the sides, and in no time at all the Prince and his retinue found themselves within a tight, unyielding circle.

The elders no longer restrained the younger men but, on the contrary, encouraged them with bitter words, sowing the seeds of discontent. That was exactly what the young had been waiting for. Brave and strong, they dashed forward, defying the soldiers' spears and swords. The human circle was tightening as they pressed on fiercely, driven by the spirit of a real battle.

Such an impetuous onslaught obviously caught the princely escort by surprise, and the warriors drew back under the mounting pressure. A horse stumbled and fell under one of them, another horseman toppled over to be trodden down by hoofs; and amid screams of pain and rage the smell of blood became almost tangible. Chorny started looking back nervously at the kremlin gate, wondering whether to send for reinforcements or hide behind the safety of the kremlin walls.

At that instant his ear caught someone's desperate cry in the general commotion: "Stop it! Stop it! Shame on you all!"

The men standing closest to the horseman who had shouted those words turned to look at him and quite unwittingly obeyed his appeal. Their mood passed on to their neighbors and then rapidly spread over the entire square.

"Brothers!" the same horseman called out again. He now commanded the undivided attention of both the Prince and the *veche*. "It is the wrong time to be raising swords against one another. Hordes of Khazars are already approaching the Desna!"

The horseman stood some distance away from the Prince and his retinue in the company of two guards of the Desna



Gate — a position which gave him prominence among other horsemen and drew everybody's eyes to him. It was unclear whether it was because of the unexpectedness of the evil tidings he brought or due to the presence of the gate guards, but the Siverianians followed the stranger's advice and put down their weapons.

The Prince made use of the momentary confusion to get away from the dangerous circle. Nobody tried to detain him; the crowd even made way for his men.

Riding up to the man, Chorny looked him up and down.

"Who are you, young man?" he asked.

"My name is Vsevolod and I come from a borderline settlement out in the steppes. I have come to Chernihiv to join your regiment, Prince, and on my way here I spotted Khazars in the forests across the Desna."

"May the gods be thanked for directing you to our city," said the Prince sincerely. "You have arrived at the right moment. Now tell me, are there many Khazars there?"

"When I said hordes I meant it. The largest clearings along the Salt Road are packed with their horses."

Chorny kept silent, looking intently at the handsome young man. It would have been proper perhaps to appear shocked or, at least, saddened by the news, but instead he was now admiring the stranger, feeling happy and grateful for his timely arrival and for the information he had brought. It was only natural; the young man had saved him from disgrace or perhaps even death. What lay ahead remained to be seen, but now that horseman had saved the Prince.

"Can you prove what you told us?" Chorny asked just to make sure, for he had no doubt that the information was true. "I take it you are aware that this is no joking matter."

"If the Prince does not believe me," Vsevolod answered boldly and firmly, "he can send some of his trusted men with me and I'll show them where the Khazars are."

Chorny nodded his head approvingly. Then he turned to the *veche* and demanded in a triumphant voice:

"Have you all heard? The enemy is at the walls of Chernihiv. Another moment of hesitation or internecine strife and Siveriania will be doomed. The Khazars will take advantage of our discord and raze our capital and then all the other cities to the ground."

He cast a brief glance at his hushed audience.

"Brothers!" he spoke again after a short pause, his voice ringing with heartfelt concern. "Let us be reasonable. Let us unite at this time of danger."

Now he was almost entreating them. But the *veche* remained silent. At length, the broad-shouldered elder rode forward and, casting a brief glance over the crowd, said:

"This is true: there could hardly be a worse time for raising swords against each other. Discord in our ranks is just what the Khazars need to bring untold suffering to Siveriania. But it is also true, Prince," he turned to Chorny, "that you have offended your people and broke your agreement with us."

At these words, the assembly stirred again, and the elder had to raise his voice.

"Brothers!" he cried, now addressing the *veche*. "Warriors of the Siverianian land! Captains and elders! The laws of our forefathers tell us not to forgive treachery or humiliations. But the same laws do not allow us to be heedless of the suffering which the Khazars will bring. So let us be reasonable, brothers. Don't let pride blind our warriors and statesmen. We shall yet talk with the Prince — after the battle. But now there must be only one thing on our minds: Siveriania is our homeland and it is our primary duty to defend it."

The square grew still. Not daring to disagree, the Siverianians listened to the man with thoughtful attention.

## XXVII

### THE WAR

Mladan settled on the northern edge of Zhury, in the thicket which separated village houses from the Desna. There was plenty of work to do there; the trees were thick and mostly leaf bearing, unlike the surrounding pine woods. But the soil was good, and the river was much closer. Even if for several years they had no harvest to speak of, the woods and the river would feed them. He was young and strong, thank the gods, and Milana and he did not need too much to carry on.

Following tradition, they started with building a hearth and then the dwelling. Their new hut was a far cry from the spacious houses under steep roofs that both of them

had lived in since childhood; it looked more like a box of thin logs and was covered with broad strips of bark from the trees felled by Mladan. Still, it offered sufficient protection from rain, wind and wild animals. And like any house, it had a hearth to keep the precious gift of the gods, the fire which protected them from all things evil that one could meet on the ground, in the water or in the woods. Fire allowed the young couple to hope that they were not defenseless and that they were being protected by the omnipotent God Svarog.

To be sure, they had nothing to offer the god in sacrifice (something which greatly worried them), but they certainly made up for this by their profuse prayers and generous promises.

In the morning, they left their hut early and went to work on the plot they had chosen for their farmstead. Then Mladan would take an ax and fell and hew one tree after another, while Milana would pick up branches and carry them to the edge of the clearing. She felt uncomfortable as she compared her husband's hard work with her own unimpressive efforts. This is why she took every opportunity to ask Mladan not to overwork.

"Why don't you take a rest, dear," she would say timidly. "You could overstrain yourself the way you're going."

"Don't worry," Mladan reassured her. "I've got enough strength to go on like this for a long time."

"Enough strength," Milana made a wry face. "You haven't yet cleared the land for the yard, but you already look worn-out. Just try to imagine what will become of you when we begin felling trees to clear the field. There'll be plenty of work to do then: cut down the trees, haul the trunks away, pull out the stumps and then —"

"And then, and then, and then," Mladan mocked her merrily, beaming with joy. "Don't let it worry you, my love. We aren't going to do it all in just one summer. We've got plenty of time ahead. Now we're just starting out. And then I'm sure that we won't be working by ourselves when it comes to pulling up those trees. If the family doesn't help, other people will. We're not alone in our situation, Milana. Boguslav and Dobromir also want to leave the family home. Together we will be able to do the job easily. And then we'll build a real house, you'll see."

"If it could really work out like that," Milana leaned closer to him. "But I'm afraid it's only wishful thinking. So far we're all alone."

"It won't last long, Milana. It's no simple matter to leave your ancestral hearth for good. But as soon as they see I'm getting my feet firmly on the ground, they'll be begging up to let them join us."

For a while, they worked in silence.

"If we could only build a house," Milana spoke her thoughts aloud. "Clearing up a place for the field could wait a little, couldn't it?"

"It sure could. We need to have a home to spend the winter in. The forest is teeming with animals. By the time spring comes we'll have enough good pelts to sell. And then the river will feed us; maybe I'll even venture to sail down the Desna and on to the sea."

"Gods forbid," Milana waved her hand disapprovingly. "I swear I won't let you go to those foreign countries."

"What are you — scared?"

Mladan stopped working and looked smilingly at his wife.

"Yes, I am," Milana admitted frankly. "Those trips could be very dangerous, Mladan. And besides, what would I do here alone without you? You'd be gone the whole summer, wouldn't you?"

But Mladan had only been joking to tease Milana.

"Don't be afraid, dear. I'm not going away anywhere from you. We have our hearth now and we'll have enough work to do here as well. I'd rather go to work for the Prince as a beekeeper, if I have to. It wouldn't be far from here and I could even make as much as a whole *grivna* during the summer. And with that kind of money we could clear the forest faster. We won't do it all in just one summer, of course, but in some five years we'll have our own plot of land to work."

"Then I'll be a true mistress of the house, won't I, Mladan?"

"Yes, and a fine mistress, too."

"And I'll be able to invite Chorna to visit us?"

Mladan's ax froze in midair.

"Chorna? You mean the one who chased us the night of the Midsummer Feast?"

"Yes."

"But she's the Princess."

“So what? We used to be close friends. My aunt has been her nurse for a long time. Chorna came to visit us with her once and she liked me and Zarichne so much that she’d visit us almost every holiday. She’s been living without a mother and she kind of pines away; that’s why she needs a friend so badly.”

Mladan wanted to say something but at that instant the village seemed to explode with some kind of excitement and a few moments later a horseman appeared from among the houses and galloped straight toward their freshly-built hut.

“Bad news, Mladan,” the man shouted without halting. “Khazars are marching to Chernihiv. Saddle your horse and hurry to the village.”

Mladan couldn’t believe his ears. He stared at the man, then turned his glance to Milana, then back to the man.

“Why should I saddle my horse?” he asked finally. “It’s not the first time that Khazars have come here.”

“They are going to war against us!” the messenger interrupted him and, turning his horse, headed back for the village.

Stunned, Mladan remained frozen at the same place where the news had found him. He could not believe that Chernihiv would indeed be soon attacked by the enemy.

“What are we going to do now?” Milana was the first to recover.

Her words jolted Mladan out of his trance, and he thrust the ax in his belt.

“Well, what else is there to do?” he said. “If the Khazars have come as enemies, all our men will be going to the militia to fight them back.”

“What about me?” Milana grabbed him by the arm. “What will happen to me? Where will I go?”

Mladan felt confused. He really had no idea where he could leave Milana. His family had disowned them while others would certainly have enough to worry about without Milana.

“Let’s saddle the horse and go to the village,” he told his wife. “There we’ll see what can be done.”

“I’ll go with you wherever you go, even if it means going into battles,” Milana decided suddenly.

“What are you talking about?” Mladan exclaimed. “Fighting is none of women’s business.”

"But where else can I go if there are enemies all around?" Milana insisted. "We were united to be together forever and we'll be together no matter what."

Mladan looked at his wife with admiration, then stepped up closer and took her by the hand. Her eyes, sad and imploring, met his.

"All right," he finally agreed. "Let it be so. We'll go to the village and I'll do my best to convince the elders to take you on. Yes, Milana, I'll try."

Zhury was a scene of undisguised alarm and frenzied preparations. The villagers were digging deep pits, lining them with sheafs of straw and hiding their belongings inside. The remainder of last year's grain harvest and jars with honey were bundled up and strapped to the saddles. To all appearance, the men were getting ready for a long journey.

The square was slowly filling with armed villagers. Elders on horseback were solemnly conferring with their men, pointing to a path in the forest which led to Salt Road. Having received instructions, several horsemen headed in that direction, apparently to post patrols so that the Khazars would not catch the villagers by surprise.

After everybody had assembled, elder Dobrogost raised his sword and asked for attention.

"Brothers!" he addressed them in a calm but firm voice. "Evil tidings have reached us from Chernihiv: the perfidious Khazars have attacked our capital city and are laying waste the land of Siveriania. The Prince and his captains have called on us to join them in the struggle against the Khazar Khan. Let us be worthy of the Prince's trust in us and do our duty to our people. Since the Khazars have come here as enemies, our place is in the ranks of the militia. Have all of you heard me, brothers?"

"We've heard you!" the assembly answered in one voice.

"Elder of the Bortnik family," Dobrogost turned toward an old man who stood nearby. "You know well all the secret paths in the neighboring woods. You shall lead our women and children deep into the thickets. Hide them there in a safe place so that our men will not have to fear for their families."

"Everything will be all right, Dobrogost," the old man assured the elder. "I do know a place where the Khazars won't find us. Our forests are thick and boundless and the enemy won't dare to go deep into them."

"Let the people go there on foot," Dobrogost recommended. "Use the few horses we're leaving you to carry provisions."

"All right."

Bortnik picked up the reins, said goodbye to the remaining villagers and set off to attend to his task. The men who were charged to protect the families followed him.

Dobrogost once again surveyed the gathering, took a deep breath of clear forest air and addressed the men in the authoritative voice of a leader.

"For us, brothers, it is now time to get down to work. Before the Khazars arrive, collect all the bronze and iron in the village and take it to the forge as fast as you can. The time has come to forge plowshares into swords!"

The men stirred and started toward their homes. At that very moment Dobrogost noticed Mladan among the other horsemen, remembered something and raised his voice again:

"Wait! I have something else to say."

The villagers stopped and waited.

"My sons Mladan and Stemid," he addressed the Dobrogost brothers who were standing in the crowd separately, as if they were strangers, "come to me, I want to tell you something in front of all these men, your comrades-in-arms."

The brothers dismounted, approached the elder and stood in front of him.

"My sons, you have had a quarrel of late and your hearts are filled with anger for each other. Drive it away. Forget your offenses! At this time of danger you shall have to stand shoulder to shoulder, to fight and maybe die for each other. I say again: free your hearts from the feud and swear before our village warriors that you will go to war as brothers, not as foes."

The brothers stood frowning for a while, hesitating to face each other.

"Mladan!" the elder said more sternly. "You were offended, that is true. But you are younger and you will be the first to speak the words of apology."

Mladan took a stealthy glance at Stemid and lowered his eyes again.

"Forgive me, brother," he said at last. "I should have submitted to you as my senior."

"It was my fault, brother," Stemid replied. "I should

have been fairer as the elder brother. Forget the offense and forgive me if you can."

Their father stroked his beard contentedly as his sons hugged and kissed each other three times in front of all the men.

"Now, time to act!" Dobrogost commanded. "Take the women and children to the woods and all men go to the anvils."

"And what about me?" Milana asked in a confused voice, having elbowed her way through the crowd to the front.

Elder Dobrogost knitted his brows discontentedly. Noticing this, Mladan hastened to explain:

"Milana wishes to follow me, Father."

"Follow you?" the elder asked in surprise. "What for?"

"We married to be together forever, and that's what we're going to do."

Dobrogost thought for a moment, not knowing how to reply.

"Do you you really want that, Milana?" he asked in a low and sympathetic voice.

"Yes, Father," it is my wish. The gods united us for life and we want to defend our lives together. I will take care of the wounded if you let me."

The elder was lost in thought. A long while had passed before he spoke again.

"All right," he said. "Let it be as you wish. I only hope that you, Milana, won't be the only woman there."

## XXVIII

### THE SIEGE

Prince Chorny did not expect the Khazars to assault the city from the Desna. From that side, Chernihiv was protected by steep banks and further fortified with an impenetrable, high rampart. However, the presence of the enemy in the forests on the left bank had not failed to arouse his suspicions. Could it be that Khan Kiriya was planning an attack from the river, after all? Of course, it would have been much easier to cross the river upstream, reach the Zalozny Road and follow it all the way to the ford across the Strizhen. Neither the banks of the Desna nor the river itself presented such a formidable obstacle



there as they did near Chernihiv. Besides, one of the city gates was located on that side, and the Strizhen ford offered easy access to the Northern Gate of the outer wall. Yet for some reason or other, Kiriya stayed clear of the ford. Which probably meant he had something else on his mind.

"The cunning beast!" Chorny swore to himself. "He knows I'll be expecting him on the Strizhen and so he has plotted something unexpected, some sly and treacherous move."

Lost in guesses about Kiriya's intentions, Chorny ordered the gates and the parapet running on top of the city ramparts reinforced with guards. There were more warriors in Chernihiv now than the Prince had expected. Those who had come to attend the *veche* were not the only ones who had chosen to stay within the city walls. Seeking protection of the troops and of the fortress, all residents from the nearby villages had flooded into Chernihiv, bringing with them their horses, cattle and even their grain. This calmed down Chorny a little. At least he would have enough men to defend the city. Besides, the city walls were strong, especially those of the kremlin.

His calm, however, did not last long. Before the day was over it occurred to him that the Khazars might use the dark of night to attack from where they were least expected — right across the river and then through the Desna Gate. It was now clear to him why the Khazars had been spotted near the Desna crossing and why they had not undertaken anything during the day. They must have been waiting for the night, planning a sudden frontal assault on the kremlin, the stronghold of the Chernihiv fortress. Kiriya would not want to encounter the Siverianians' strong and numerous militia. He wanted Chorna and would try to seize her by surprise in a sudden attack on her palace.

At first Chorny wanted to take his daughter from the kremlin to a friend's house in the outer town, but then he decided against it. He called back nearly all of his warriors from the outer town into the kremlin, leaving only some guards at the gates and towers, as well as some strong militia units.

As soon as a blood-colored dawn heralded a new day, Kiriya did launch an assault on Chernihiv at a place where he had been expected least of all. The Khazar horses crossed the Desna below Chernihiv, at a place where branches of the Boldin Mountains sloped toward the low-

lying and often flooded shores of the Bilous River. From there they rode on the left bank of the Bilous, which was exposed by the low water level, until they reached Lyubech Road, which was paved in marshy places. It was an extremely audacious, almost impossible move and for this reason it had not been foreseen by anyone, except Kiriya himself. This stratagem opened a safe way to Chernihiv for the Khan's troops and made it possible for them to take sleepy guards at the Lyubech Gate by surprise.

An incredibly tall forest, called Black Grove for its impenetrable thickness, came up here to the outer walls, casting pitch dark shadows on them and especially on the moat. Under that cover, a dismounted detachment of Khazars approached the water-filled moat and, dividing into two groups, swam across it to the opposite steep bank in complete silence, without a single splash. The gate loomed in the darkness, to the left for some and to the right for the rest. Yet, warned by Ambal and Baglai, the Khazars did not hurry there; they knew for sure that the guards were on the other side and that the gate was closed from inside with strong sliding bars. Therefore they also realized they would have to get inside to unbolt the gate and to lower the drawbridge for their horsemen. For this they would have to scale the wall at some distance from the gate and kill the guards who, as the Khan had been told, were the least numerous and watchful there.

The attack had been planned down to the last detail, and the Khan expected it to end in the indiscriminate slaughter of the defenders. Yet both the Khan and his spies in Chernihiv had failed to take into consideration a mere trifle, one of those seemingly insignificant details which so often reduce efforts of whole armies to naught. Overconfident and, perhaps, even proud of their plan, the Khazars had forgotten that the outer town was defended by the militia, mostly commoners who ignored the laws of warfare and thus were capable of wholly unpredictable and often improbable actions.

It was the militia that dashed the Khan's hopes and thwarted his promising scheme.

The perfect silence of dawn reigned on both sides of the wall, and the Khazars also counted on the usual Slavic carelessness. But as soon as their ladders touched the parapet, a rain of deadly stones poured down on their heads.

The rumble of the falling stones and screams of the wounded split the silence waking up the warriors of the Chernihiv militia. These men, who only a few days before had been serfs, beekeepers, blacksmiths and tanners, had been sleeping, as peacefully as in their homes, on a plank flooring near the gate closed for the night. Lifting their sleepy heads, they could not understand for some time where they were or what was happening around them. But then somebody shouted, "The Khazars are here!" and the defenders rushed to the walls to light the torches prepared there beforehand. And then they launched such an avalanche of stones from the ramparts that the assailants gave up trying and jumped back into the moat. The Khazar archers hidden in the forest could do little to help the assault party.

Kiriy was furious. In his rage he kept lashing his underlings with a whip and stabbed to death the terkhan who had led one of his finest detachments in the assault. Yet nothing could quench his fury. The surprise attack on which the Khan had staked so much and for which he had crossed the Desna downstream and struggled through the marshy shores of the Bilous River, had brought no results.

Chorny arrived at Lyubech Gate much later, when the morning sky was already gray over the ramparts. The war cries had died down and only the neighing of many horses came from the depths of Black Grove outside the city walls. This distant whinny seemed to move and roll on slowly deeper into the forest and then to the right, in the direction of the vast War Field located outside the northern wall of the outer town.

The Prince had sensed this movement with the ear of an experienced warrior, and it made him uneasy.

"Hey, you there on the parapet!" he called to some warriors on top of the rampart who, for some reason, had paid no attention to their ruler and were staring with merry curiosity at the swarming mass of Khazar horsemen.

"What's going on down there?" he asked them. "Why is there such a commotion outside?"

"Nothing much is happening, Prince," they told him. "The Khazars are leaving the forest."

"Leaving, you say? Where are they going?"

"Toward the War Field, my Prince. They seem to be headed for the Northern Gate."

Chorny did not ask any more questions or waste time trying to learn more details; he spurred his horse and, turning it around, galloped up the narrow street to the main tower which dominated the whole Outer Town.

Like a huge black cloud, the Khazars were coming out of the forest, flooding the vast War Field from the forest all the way to the city walls. More and more waves of mounted troops moved up from Lyubech Road, and it seemed there would be no end of them.

Oh, no, Chorny thought, they weren't just going to break through at the gate. They had enough men to besiege the whole city. Apparently, the Khan had brought not only his guard: a great number of the Khakan-Beg's horses had to be there as well.

The earth groaned under the Khazar hordes, and the city walls trembled from the thudding of thousands of hoofs and the clamor. Clouds were coming from the sea to threaten the Siverianian land with thunder. There would be a violent storm, and also a fierce, bloody battle. For Kiriya this whole thing was no joking matter. He had come to Chernihiv determined to seize the Prince's daughter. But Prince Chorny had no intention of yielding. Nor were his men cowards who would bow their heads — they would sooner die in battle than let the enemy put them in the stocks and bond them into slavery. Now was the time for deafening thunder to ring out and for a great, unheard-of battle to rage! For days Slavic swords would crush Khazar helmets and many a spear would break against Siverianian purple shields. Arrows would rain from these walls onto the field, and more arrows would fly from the field, and no one could tell how this bloody feast would end, who would rejoice and who would mourn.

However, the day went and the night passed, and the Khazars made no attempt to storm Chernihiv. They pitched camps on the War Field, a good distance from the walls, and waited for something, perhaps for more troops from Itil, perhaps for the Princess to be delivered to them.

The Prince's courtiers in the kremlin began to wonder. What was behind this delay? What did Kiriya hope for? Why didn't he send any demands? Did he wait for the Siverianians to calm down and lose vigilance or was he at a loss after his surprise attack from behind had failed?

Meanwhile, the Khazar camp remained silent. Only the smoke of their fires hang low over the field, and the smell

of roasted horseflesh tickled the nostrils of warriors both within and outside the walls.

Something unexpected, and therefore dangerous and frightful, was about to happen.

Finally, next morning, three riders left the Khazar camp and, displaying the flag recognized by all tribes, headed for the Northern Gate.

This caused quite a stir among the Siverianians posted on top of the walls, who immediately passed the news down. From there it was relayed to their chiefs and finally to the Prince.

At a close distance, the Khazars did not look as peaceful as they may have seemed from afar.

"Hey you there on the wall!" they shouted to the guards at the gate, pretending not to notice the hundreds of curious eyes staring at them from the parapet. "We are heralds of Great Itil. The glorious Khan of Khazaria, the sovereign of twenty-five tribes, has sent us to convey his latest wishes to his subject, the Prince of Siveriania."

"All right, tell us," a warrior called out to them from the parapet.

"I'm the Chaushiar," the chief herald made a wry face and cast a fierce look in the direction from where the voice had come, "and I wish to talk to the Prince immediately and in person."

"Oh, that's who you are!" a man exclaimed derisively from the other side of the gate.

"There's the famous matchmaker," a third voice added with a laugh. "Don't you hurry! Matchmakers are supposed to be patient. Why don't you tell us a tale while you wait?"

All along the parapet, the warriors burst out laughing.

"I demand that you immediately open the gate and lower the bridge," the Chaushiar shouted. "Do it before it is too late."

"There's an impatient fellow!" a man said in a caustic voice. "Haven't we told you to wait. We don't know yet what the Prince wants us to do."

However, it did not take the Prince long to make a decision. While the Chaushiar wrangled with the warriors at the gate, a man arrived from the kremlin with orders to let in the Khan's heralds to the Outer Town.

"What comforting news have you brought us this time, distinguished herald of the Khazar land?" the Prince asked in a restrained but unfriendly voice.

"The Khan tells you to avoid bloodshed," the Chaushiar retorted sharply. "The Siverianian forces aren't very numerous so that in any case the Princess will be brought before the eyes of our magnificent ruler. And then... then it'll be worse, Prince, for you and for your daughter and the entire land of Siveriania."

Chorny frowned but kept his voice even.

"But the Princess hasn't changed her mind; she still does not want to become the Khan's wife."

"I hope you remember, Prince, that both you and your daughter are subjects of the Khazar Khanate," the Chaushiar was losing his temper. "And the law of Taura allows the Khan to ignore the will of his subjects. Will is strength and strength is with the Khan."

"This is not true!" the Siverianian Prince also raised his voice. "Beside the law there's also the custom which says one should propose to a maiden — all the more so if she's a princess."

"The custom has been observed, Prince," the Chaushiar did not take his malicious eyes off Chorny's face. "The time has come to recall the law — the very law under which the Princess must belong to the Khan as the daughter of a vassal prince."

"Our law says we must protect our kin."

The Chaushiar grew silent, not knowing how to parry this argument.

"Do you wish to disobey the Khan?" he found his voice. "You'd better think again..."

"I've thought everything over," Chorny interrupted him. "Tell the Khan that either he forgets about the Princess and goes back to Itil in peace, or I'll be no longer subject to him. Nor will the Siverianian land."

The Chaushiar realized that the Prince's will was unshakeable and hastened to leave Chernihiv.

## XXIX

### THE LONG-AWAITED KISS

As could have been expected, the main thrust of the Khazar assault was directed at the Northern Gate. While they had been camping outside the city, the Khazars had managed to prepare countless assault ladders, and their columns, advancing now toward the city walls,

bristled with a whole forest of fresh-hewn wood. In the middle, opposite the gate, the Khazars carried on their shoulders thick oak logs. Those were battering rams or "tusks" as they were generally called. The ram carriers were followed by sword fighters and then archers who would cover the scaling of the high Chernihiv walls, especially at the gate, with a rain of arrows.

Confused in their dismounted ranks and hurried by fear, the Khazars now resembled a herd of scared deer, driven by some terrible force and blind with fright.

The Siverianians were bustling, readying for the battle. Tar melters, black with soot, were fanning their fires that had been kept barely going until then to be ready to pass buckets of water-thin boiling tar to the pourers on the parapet. Stone throwers had piled crushed stones at the foot of the walls and, having heaped enough of them on the flooring, made themselves comfortable at places chosen beforehand, confident that it was they who would decide the outcome of this battle, the like of which Chernihiv had never seen before.

It was the Siverianian archers, however, who were excited most of all; they were to open the battle, trying to thin out the enemy lines, or, better still, stop them. Swords would be used only as the last resort, when and if the fighting reached the top of the city walls. But now their chief weapons were their bows which they would keep using until the enemies scaled the walls — those thick and high Chernihiv walls of oak frameworks filled up with earth, with a parapet and a wide flooring on top. These walls were the Siverianians' advantage over the Khazars, their main protection and hope.

The enemy was approaching. Sabres flashed, columns swayed and, before the first bow was drawn on the parapet, thick clouds of Khazar arrows flew from the field onto the walls. The din of the fighting spilled over into the city crowded with warriors, drowned the moaning of the wounded and combat cries and, blending with all other noises, filled the whole suddenly small battlefield.

The Princess strongly believed that she should be among those who were fighting and dying to protect her honor. Yet the entreaties of her father, who had enough worries without her adding to them, kept her from breaking her promise and plunging into the whirl of battle. She did not

want to hurt her father. She certainly did not want him to lose the battle because of her. In war, moods counted for much.

At the same time, she just could not sit idle and wait. Perhaps the Khazars had already crashed the gate and broken into the Outer Town, trampling the inexperienced and rather small number of militiamen. Perhaps she was needed there to boost their fighting spirit, restore their confidence and give them hope. Perhaps...

All of a sudden, the distant din of the battle, muted until then, burst through the windows with renewed force. Frozen to the spot, the Princess stared in the direction of the intensified but still blurred uproar of thousands of voices.

"Oh, gods!" the girl cried. "Have they broken through the gate and rushed into the Outer Town?"

After a moment's hesitation, she darted to the door and out to the stable where she kept Falcon.

Although the Prince's equerries did not dare to argue with his daughter, they still could not let her out of the kremlin in her indoor clothes. While several grooms got busy saddling Falcon, others went to bring the chain mail, helmet and rest of her combat outfit, which had been made to satisfy one of her whims.

Feeling a rider on his back and hearing the whinny of war horses, Falcon took off at a gallop and carried the girl to the Outer Town.

Khazar arrows buzzed all around like bumblebees, sinking in the soft ground and thatched roofs, and Chorna had to cover herself with her shield and ride close to log houses and high fences. She did not stop, though. Curious and scared at the same time, she urged her obedient horse on and on, all the way to the gate and the safety of the city walls.

Passing round clusters of warriors, Chorna came across a rider who was galloping in the opposite direction and involuntarily reined her horse to a halt. The man also stopped his horse and stared at her with wide-open, surprised eyes.

"Vsevolod?!" the girl was the first to speak, as yet unable to believe that facing her was the young man from the pasture.

But the lad was silent. He would neither ride away nor say anything. Silently, he kept holding back his horse.



Some horsemen rushed past him, pushing him off the road to a fence. She pushed her way through to him.

"Let's go away from here," she said. "This place is too crowded, and plenty of arrows are falling, too. The Khazars are shooting them continuously."

"But I've been told..."

"Never mind," the girl interrupted him. "Over there, behind those buildings, it'll be both safer and more convenient to talk."

She took his horse by the reins, as though she were afraid that he might spur on his Blackie and gallop away, leaving her alone amidst the crowd. When they had ridden into an alley and stopped, she looked at him with frank, gentle eyes and said:

"As you can see, your father's prophesy has come true. The hawks are hovering above my head."

"Don't believe it, Princess..."

"Yes, it's true," Chorna wouldn't listen to him. "I know I won't escape some disaster. Only..."

"They won't succeed," Vsevolod tried to reassure her. "The Khazars won't break through. They're dying like flies at the walls."

"Really?" the girl cheered up. "Then why was there such a clamor at the gate? So they didn't crash it after all."

"No," Vsevolod smiled. "We treated them to some boiling tar. They climbed like ants up the walls, thinking that stones and arrows were our only weapons. But our men let them near and then suddenly poured down the tar, right onto their heads. They screamed and fled like rats from a sinking ship."

"But there are so many of them, Vsevolod. They say the whole field is crammed with them, and also the forest."

"It's all right, Princess. We also have enough men. Besides the walls will help us."

"So I hope," the girl smiled uncertainly. Suddenly, she was aware of his tall figure, which in armor appeared even stronger, and couldn't help admiring it. Vsevolod now looked older, a true warrior. There was hardly another such well-built and handsome fellow among her father's men. She wondered why she had not noticed it before, on the pasture. If she had, she might have advised him to join the regiment. She just might... The Prince would

have taken him on, of course. There was nothing he wouldn't do for her.

She stood there, suddenly oblivious to all that was going on around her, admiring the handsome young man.

"And you..." she began, as if intending to express her feelings aloud, but then checked herself and changed the subject. "How have you become a kremlin guard?"

Vsevolod remembered his father's advice and suddenly lost his tongue.

"It's because of the Khazars..." he stammered. "And I... I did something for the Prince. But I would like to ask... If you are no longer angry with me, if you..."

"Oh, no, Vsevolod, don't say that," Chorna stopped him. "Let's forget it all." The Princess stepped closer to the lad and looked him in the eyes, frankly and trustingly.

"I remember no evil. And you, too, please forgive me my insult. You see how many troubles have come down on my head. I don't want anybody's curses or old grudges to weigh upon me at this unhappy hour. Do you hear, Vsevolod? Forgive me that... that unfortunate word."

The Princess had apparently understood only now that it had been unfair of her to throw his serfdom back at him, because her face blushed with shame and she dropped her eyes. But Vsevolod did not say anything, and this silence lasted for an incomprehensibly long time.

"You... you don't forgive me?" she asked in a hurt voice. "Does that mean that you, too, want me to perish?"

"No, it's not that, Princess," the lad awakened. "As a matter of fact I've come here to defend you. It was I who first spotted the Khazars in a forest and alerted the Prince, the *veche*, all the Siverianians — a whole day and night before their attack!"

The girl stared at him in disbelief, her eyes sparkling with joy, surprise and admiration.

"So that was you?!"

"It was I." Vsevolod's face brightened, too. "If I had borne malice, if I had thought of revenge, would I have galloped like a madman all the way to Chernihiv to warn the Prince?"

"You did it because..."

Chorna did not finish. Her sensitive heart suddenly filled with gratitude and perhaps even more — affection, love... These feelings overcame and intoxicated her and, forgetting who she was and where she was, the girl im-

pulsively embraced the young man and kissed him in the lips.

"Here you are!" she said, taking breath. "Here's the kiss you wanted!"

Vsevolod stood bewildered before her, still unable to believe that it had really happened. Then he collected himself, and lifted his unsteady right hand as if to smooth or tuck in a lock of her raven-black hair that stuck out from under her helmet. But the Princess checked his movement and tenderly, not to hurt him, told him in a low voice:

"And now go where you were told."

He adjusted the saddle on Blackie, picked up the reins and, casting another glance at her, climbed onto his horse.

Spurred on, the horse reared up before Chorna and took off at a gallop. But Vsevolod did not let him gather full speed and, reining him in after a while, spun him around in the narrow alley. Then he galloped back to the girl who stood there admiring his horsemanship.

"Don't be afraid, Princess," he shouted as he rode up to her. "As soon as the battle is over, I'll challenge the Khan to a duel. Then I'll defend your freedom and honor in a fair man-to-man fight!"

Blackie again raised his front legs, turned around and carried the rider along the wall and rows of excited men.

The Princess remained where she was, her eyes fixed on Vsevolod.

"A fight?" Her whisper was barely audible. "But such a fight is governed by custom. It will be good if Vsevolod wins. But what if the Khan wins? For then he'll demand that I be delivered to him without further resistance. And Father will have to do it. Such is the custom."

Astonishment, fear and desire fought in her heart for a long time, quenching the slightest sparks of hope. In the end, however, trust and hope won. After all, she had no reason not to trust Vsevolod, and it was all far from hopeless. Vsevolod was young, brave and strong. He could very well win that fight. The Khan was a scarecrow, and Vsevolod was a true warrior. Also, the latter would have much to fight for. If he won, he would cover himself with glory and become the most celebrated warrior in the Prince's army and therefore of the whole Siverianian land. The Prince would then reward him with land grants and

titles. Hope bred joy and joy bred hope, but this did not last long.

What about Oleg? What would she do about him? For if Vsevolod defeated the Khan he would have the right to demand her hand. What would she tell him if he did?

### XXX

#### THE CHALLENGE

The rest of the day passed in constant worry. The Khazars now rolled away, now came back in waves, scaling the walls like madmen and showering the city with deadly arrows. Many a Siverianian warrior fell with his sword raised above his head, in some cases from the wall down onto the heaps of killed or wounded Khazars. It was only toward the evening that a lull in the fighting came down and the Khazars began withdrawing in the direction of the forest. But the defenders did not sleep for long, expecting a sudden attack or some dirty trick.

The Princess did not sleep either. Late into the night, she paced up and down her palace, listening to the disturbing silence that had fallen inside and outside the city. Sometimes she sent men to see how things were at the gate and to find out if the gate and the wall, which had been damaged in several places, had already been repaired.

One of her guards suggested that the Khazars had deliberately retreated so far in order to deceive the Siverianians, dull their vigilance and dig a passage under the wall at night. The thought did not leave her mind, keeping her nervous and driving sleep away. Only the Prince's return to the kremlin reassured her somewhat. And when he had described the Siverianians' successes, she calmed down completely and before long she was fast asleep in her soft bed.

She was awakened by a loud conversation outside the windows. Looking up, she froze in surprise: it was a fine summer morning. The sun had already climbed high over the forest and now seemed to laugh merrily at her. The birds were twittering away in the trees, as if ringing the countless silver bells of dewdrops hanging from the leaves. She had a momentary impression that peace and quiet reigned in Chernihiv and that yesterday's battle had been a terrible dream.

She wondered what it all could mean. Had the Khazars gone away? Something must have happened, for that silence and the voices she had heard were somehow too peaceful to be true.

No immediate explanation occurred to her, and she did not try to guess. Throwing on a robe, she hurried to the stairs without doing her hair or even washing her face.

"Has the Prince agreed to it?" a man was asking somebody on the floor below.

"He has ordered a tournament to be held," another voice replied. "He who wins it shall be entitled to challenge the Khan."

Chorna paused on the stairs, listening, but did not dare to approach the men in her disarray. Instead, she ran to her nurse.

"Nanny! Nanny!" The girl burst into the room, startling the old woman. "My dear, dear nanny!"

"What's the matter?" The nurse looked wide-eyed at the Princess. "May the gods protect you — Tsur, Pek and Svarog. Tell me what's happened."

"Down there two men are telling each other some interesting news." The girl was breathless with excitement. "Go and ask them what it is, please. I'll need time to get dressed, and I'm dying to know all about it."

The nurse looked into the girl's burning eyes. Then she sighed deeply, smoothed her hair, stood up and silently left the room.

The Princess darted to her bedroom. She had already guessed what was in the offing and hurried to change her clothes.

The nurse returned to confirm her guess: Vsevolod had asked for the Prince's permission to challenge the Khan. The Prince had so far neither granted nor refused the young man's request; he wanted to see what kind of fighter Vsevolod was and for this he had ordered a tournament.

That meant Chorna had better hurry there!

Almost the entire Siverianian army had gathered in Market Square, where only several days ago the Prince had faced the *veche*. The Prince did not believe in the newcomer, but his daring idea sank deep in his heart. It might well spell salvation. Since the Khan wanted to take his daughter for wife, he could not but accept the

challenge. And he was not much of a fighter, of course. He was as cunning as a fox and as fierce as a wild boar; but all his cunning and ferocity would not count for much in a fight. The outcome would be decided by prowess and sheer strength.

Chorny had plenty to think about during that night. But early in the morning he announced his will.

His best warriors now waited in the square. Vsevolod, as the challenger, stood apart from the rest, open to all eyes. So did Slavyata, who was to announce the rules and call out the contestants.

The first man to accept the challenge was Gallyard, a hefty, big-boned Varangian. He had once saved Prince Chorny's life by shielding him with his body from a ferocious wounded aurochs. His arms were short but as thick as logs, and his manly face was cruel and stern.

The two horsemen took their places, spurred on their horses and met at full speed, aiming their spears at each other's purple shields. But the spears glanced off the shields, and the galloping horses carried them apart again.

The crowd drew even closer around the field, impatiently awaiting the outcome.

Vsevolod glanced round the circle and froze: Chorna was standing in the square beside the Prince! He noticed that she gave him an encouraging smile and said something with silent lips, the very same lips whose fire was still burning inside him, making his blood boil with desire.

But the Varangian was coming at him again. Vsevolod drove his spurs even harder into Blackie's sides and, bracing himself, struck Gallyard's shield with such force that the Varangian did not even know what threw him out of the saddle.

For a while, the crowd was silent, apparently stunned by the unexpected end of the single combat. Then it burst into shouts of approval that seemed to shake the entire city and the forests all around it.

"Who is he?" Baglai asked softly as he pushed his way to Ambal.

"A newcomer, I hear," the steward replied in an even lower voice. "Must be the same fellow who warned the Prince about the approach of the Khazar horde."

"We must pass word about him to the Khan," Baglai whispered into Ambal's ear. "He might be dangerous to fight with."

"Wouldn't it be even better to prevent any fight between them?"

"Try," the Khazar nodded toward Vsevolod. "Stop him if you are still strong enough."

Baglai looked around surreptitiously and casually eased back his horse lest somebody should notice their conversation.

Meanwhile, another contestant rode into the circle. Then two more came forward. But none of them fared any better than the Varangian.

It was then that Mohuta came forward to face Chorny, the very Mohuta who used to lead the Prince's caravans across the seas all the way to Arabia and had gained the fame of an invincible warrior in encounters with the Pechenegs.

"Allow me, too, my Prince, to break my spear against the shield of this brave young man," he asked Chorny.

The Prince sized up the man's huge frame astride a giant horse that was playing impatiently under him and fell to thinking.

"I'd rather spare that boy," Chorny said in a low voice lest Vsevolod should hear him. "He'll make a really good warrior. And you could cripple or even kill him."

"But I want to try, Prince," Mohuta persisted. "He has defeated the finest warriors of Siveriania."

"Anyone but you, Mohuta," the Prince snapped angrily. "I tell you he's no match for you."

"What do you mean he's no match?" the Princess broke in, offended by such a low opinion of the young man. "Hasn't Vsevolod defeated the strongest?"

Displeased, Chorny glanced sideways at his daughter, and under his stare she cringed and grew silent. But now some courtiers started speaking. Vsevolod wanted to know what they were telling the Prince and rode closer to them.

"Let him try, Prince," the men pleaded. "Why should the Siverianians remain defeated? Let Mohuta show what we are worth."

"That's surely strange," a man mused. "A mere boy and a newcomer at that has dared to challenge the best men of Siveriania."

"But Vsevolod is also a Siverianian," the Princess broke in again, this time arguing not with the Prince but with his courtiers.

The hubbub suddenly died for some reason. The men exchanged curious glances and looked at the Prince.

"Who has told you that he is a Siverianian?" the Prince demanded, surprised by the revelation.

The girl was about to explain but Vsevolod was quick to interrupt her.

"My Prince!" he shouted at the top of his voice in order to distract the Prince and thus to avoid an embarrassing interrogation. "My honor is at stake. I demand that the proposed fight take place so that these men here should have no doubts left."

Chorny did not quite understand why the young man's honor was at stake and whether it was his warriors or the Princess who had hurt the boy's feelings. But before he had time to figure it out, the situation took such a turn as to make him forget all about his daughter's revelation.

"Let them fight, Prince!" men were shouting to him from all sides. "Hasn't the young man said he wants to?"

"You shouldn't stop them," others insisted. "Everybody would like to challenge the Khan to defend the Princess's honor."

The shouts now appeared to express general indignation, and Chorny had to raise his sword. When silence had again been established in the square, he said:

"All right, brothers. I allow this young man to fight with Mohuta, the famed warrior of our land. But you, too, will have to fulfill my will."

"Announce it, Prince!" his warriors voiced their agreement.

"I see that besides Mohuta there are others who would like to win the right to challenge the Khan. For this contest not to drag on and on without end, let us select four of you who will fight with Mohuta. The winner will then take on the young man. After all, he has already fought four men. Let his opponent do the same."

The square became silent. The Prince smiled into his mustache and raised his voice triumphantly.

"Now who wants to fight Mohuta? You may now come forward."

No one rode out of the crowd. A tense silence hung over the square for several moments. Even the horses seemed to have pricked up their ears waiting to see who would dare to accept the challenge. Then, all of a sudden, the square burst into a roar of laughter.



"Long live the wise Prince!" voices were heard.

"Long live the Prince!!!" hundreds of voices picked up the shout, drowning their shame and confusion in that din.

But Vsevolod would not yield.

"I am very grateful to my Prince," he said in a voice full of humility, "but I do not want to hide behind his wisdom."

Pleased with the unexpected success of his ploy, Chorny now regarded the young man's words as a merry joke.

"It's all right, young man," he said. "Today you hide behind my wisdom, and tomorrow I may hide behind your shield. That way we shall be quits."

"No, Prince," Vsevolod insisted. "I have come here to fight for the right to challenge the Khan and I'd rather fight for that right to the end. Otherwise I won't deserve the privilege to fight the Khan."

Chorny frowned. This was a stubborn young fellow, he decided. He had barely been accepted into the army but thought he could already defy the Prince himself. Also, he seemed to be asking for trouble.

"Well, it will be your trouble, you fool," Chorny said to himself and, continuing to play the part of a benevolent mediator, withdrew his proposal.

Suspense now hung over the square, and everyone was gripped by that peculiar curiosity which so often dominates all other human feelings. Everybody understood that this fight would be different, as it would probably end with one of the two contestants being crippled and perhaps even killed. So each man tried to push his way to the front to see the fight with his own eyes. Yet few were able to advance even a single pace, so they rose in their stirrups or even climbed to stand on horsebacks, towering over the crowd.

Attention was mainly centered on Vsevolod, of course. Even though he now had several impressive wins behind him, nobody believed he could defeat Mohuta. The crowd was waiting to see how the young man would withstand Mohuta's thrusts, which had so far been remarkably precise and invariably deadly. It was not without reason that not a single Siverianian had dared to challenge the man. This giant of a warrior was the terror of all the steppe tribes that had ever dared to attack Siverianian convoys on their way to Arabia.

Meanwhile, the young man let his horse prance freely

around the square and seemed to give no thought whatsoever to his rival. Calm and collected, he adjusted his chain mail, set his helmet straight, took a better grip on the shield, weighed the spear in his hand and then finally raised his horse on its hind legs as soon as Mohuta started toward him.

Vsevolod gave a short whistle to urge Blackie on, and the horse rushed forward, his nostrils flaring.

The thrust of his spear went right into the middle of Mohuta's shield and it was harder than ever before, yet, unlike the Varangian, Mohuta stayed in the saddle. Pressing against the shield with all his weight, he managed to slip past Vsevolod, although without returning his thrust.

"He's testing me," a thought flashed through Vsevolod's mind as he tried hard to think of a way to make the other man stop and fight at close range.

There was no time left for thinking. Blackie reared at the other end of the field, where Mohuta had stood only a short while before, and, turning around, carried his rider again along the hushed crowd.

This time Mohuta was coming closer and Vsevolod understood that they would not merely pass each other; only one of them would remain in the saddle. He drove the spurs even harder into Blackie's sides, summoning all his youthful strength.

Both blows were so powerful that the galloping horses spent the whole momentum of their flight and reared in front of each other, as if colliding with a wall that had emerged suddenly from a mist. But the rivals stayed in their saddles, and their steel-headed spears did not break. Sharpened at leisure and well-tempered, they stuck with their ends into dents on the shields but did not break and did not bend. The men strained their bodies and each yearned to prevail. Standing almost upright, their horses danced on their hind legs, neighing with pain, bloody foam dripping from their mouths, as the fighters pulled the reins even harder and sank the spurs even deeper into the horses' bleeding sides.

The crowd was watching the combat in total silence. All eyes were glued to the two contestants, and no one wanted to miss the slightest detail of the fight. Whenever a horse set a hoof wrong or one of the two made an incautious move, everyone on the square held his breath

with fear of what might follow and waited with even greater suspense for the final outcome.

Suddenly, Blackie retreated a pace, and Vsevolod swayed in the saddle. Mohuta hurried to take advantage of it and urged his horse forward, raising him even higher on his hind legs to press against the arrogant fellow with all his weight. But he did not succeed; Vsevolod managed to rise in his stirrups and pressed so hard with his spear that Mohuta's horse could not keep balance and tumbled on his back, crushing his rider.

This was something unexpected, even frightening, and the men in the square realized at once that this young man was the man of Destiny, chosen by that omnipotent force which ruled them all but favored very few.

Everybody, from the Prince down to the lowliest guardsman, hailed the winner, and their shouts were so loud and unanimous that Vsevolod became confused and did not know how he should respond: should he thank the men or keep silent, reaping the fruit of his fresh-won fame. He was about to leave the field and hide among the other warriors, but the Princess prevented him from doing it. Spurring her Falcon, she rode forward, dismounted and respectfully bowed to the victor as custom required. Then she took a colorful silk handkerchief from her pocket and blushing tied it around his right hand, the very hand which had won him the right to fight the Khan for her.

"Just look there!" a warrior nudged his neighbor. "Did you see the Princess giving him that kerchief?"

The neighbor looked over the shoulder of the other man and said, after a pause:

"That means she has chosen him for her private guard. Well, it's a good choice: he'll make an excellent guard. But her smile says even more than that."

The first warrior glanced skeptically at his companion.

"Do you mean to say that the man of Destiny may also win the heart of our beautiful Princess?"

"Why not? He would make a much better husband for her than the Khan. Look what a fine fellow he is. He's also a true warrior."

"That's true," his neighbor agreed. "They would make a nice couple. Only will his patroness like it?"

"Do you mean Destiny?"

"That's right. Like any woman, she may get jealous. Then the young man is definitely not of princely blood."

“He’ll win titles for himself — don’t you worry. Remember what famous men he has defeated. And this is only the beginning. He who can use weapons shall always acquire.”

### XXXI

#### ON THE WAY TO HAPPINESS

Not all the news from the outer gates found its way across the high walls of the kremlin. The Prince forbade his guards to disturb his daughter with alarming news. However, the young guards could not — and would not — hide from Chorna the fact that two days after the tournament a herald had left the city by the Northern Gate to inform the Khazar Khan that he was challenged to a fair fight by a Siverianian warrior. After all, that particular warrior would shortly risk his life for the Princess. Therefore she would have to be there to encourage the brave youth, find the right words to strengthen his fervor. The guards did not fear they would be punished for breaking the Prince’s orders, for they were sure this was encouraging rather than alarming news.

The princess knew that Vsevolod would challenge the Khan to a fight, although she wasn’t sure exactly when. As soon as the guard told her the news, she asked him no more questions, but immediately jumped into the saddle and galloped along the narrow streets of the Outer Town.

Some armor-clad warriors had crowded by the Gate. Apparently, they were going to accompany Vsevolod and witness his fight. She tried to push her way to Vsevolod to tell him something encouraging before he left, but the men did not make way for her and none of them paid the slightest attention to her.

“Vsevolod!” she called him from afar.

He heard her shout and turned toward her. But he did not see her and stood there, looking in the direction her voice had come from not saying anything. Finally he saw her and waved his hand.

“Good luck, Vsevolod!”

Chorna realized that the Prince was not there among his warriors. She guessed where she could find him and rode to the nearest tower. But there her hopes were suddenly dashed.

"He's a coward! A miserable coward!" shouted some warriors who were climbing down.

Chorna grew pale.

"Is Vsevolod a coward?" she asked her father.

"Oh, no," Chorny frowned. "The Khan has refused to accept the challenge."

"How do you know? Has somebody..."

"The heralds are coming back empty-handed," the Prince explained gloomily and climbed into his saddle.

This time not only the warriors assembled in the square; the Prince had ordered all the men with the exception of those who were keeping watch on the walls to gather. He addressed them with what he thought would be a timely speech:

"Brothers! Warriors of the Siverinian land! For four days you have stood upon the walls of the Chernihiv citadel, and all this time enemy attacks have been breaking against your valor like stormy waves break against a rocky shore. The Khazars have begun to fear you and regard these walls as their death and destruction. And now their Khan, our mortal enemy, has not dared to accept the challenge of a Siverinian warrior by the name of Vsevolod. The Khazars are vicious and cunning enemies. They will not lift their siege unless and until we ourselves drive them away."

"You've spoken the truth!" the men shouted. "No more hiding behind the walls — lead us to the field, Prince!"

Chorny wanted to go on, but no one was listening to him anymore.

"To the field! Lead us into battle!" the warriors roared, shaking their tempered swords over their heads. "The Khazars are cowards. We don't want to hide in the fortress."

After many year of dealing with his people Chorny had expected some disagreement, and he found it hard to believe that the Siverinians had needed so little persuading. For as long as he could remember, both in his years as Prince and before, he had never seen such unity and unanimity displayed in this square. He wondered whether it was their country's calamity or the Khan's cowardice that had achieved this accord. He decided it must have been both, although deep in his heart he was inclined to explain his fellow countrymen's unanimous resolve only by the unmanly conduct of Khan Kiriy.

Overwhelmed by joy and excitement, Chorny straightened up in the saddle and raised his sword.

“Brothers!”

But the din did not die down right away, and the Prince had to wait until the last, most enthusiastic warriors finally grew quiet.

“I am glad that the will of the Prince and the desires of his warriors coincide as they have never done before,” Chorny said cheerfully. “But as to when and how we attack the enemy, let us think it over and discuss at the war council.”

As he slid his sword into the scabbard, the air filled with shouts of joy and unanimous approval of his stand and intentions.

As soon as the shades of the summer night descended over the earth, the high walls of the kremlin immediately plunged into thick dusk. However, one could still have noticed a dark figure walk away from the Prince’s stables, cross the yard and disappear amidst the squat structures clinging to the wall foundations. After some time it appeared in front of the chamber of the Prince’s steward.

Overstrained by the tensions of the last few days, Ambal jumped in fright from the window where he had been standing when he heard a cautious but totally unexpected tap on the door. For a long time he stood there, listening but not daring to answer.

“Who’s there?” he asked finally.

“It’s me.”

The steward was relieved to hear the voice and ran to open the door.

“At last. How are things? What have you found out?”

Without a word, Baglai threw off his cloak, sank on a bench and did not lift his eyes for a long time. Silent and concentrated, he sat there, thinking about something.

The steward was impatient.

“Haven’t you found out anything?”

“No, Ambal, I haven’t,” Baglai said confidentially, as friend to friend. “That old fox called only his most trusted men to the war council. You just can’t get anything out of them as you well know... They were told to get ready, but no one has breathed a word about when, where and with what forces they plan to attack. It looks like they’re going to make a night sortie.”

"Really?" Ambal was surprised. "Do they have enough courage?"

"It seems they mostly count on the dark. And if this is so," he added after a pause, "I'll have to leave Chernihiv."

Ambal did not understand.

"Why?"

"I'll have to go with the Prince's party!" Baglai explained angrily. "Then I'll try to break away from them. I only hope they set out at night."

For some time neither of them spoke.

"Wouldn't it be better for you to stay in the city?" Ambal asked. "We might take advantage of the Prince's absence to abduct Chorna."

"Are you crazy?" Baglai opened his eyes in surprise. "Who'd let you out of the kremlin? The guards on the walls will be strongly reinforced. The main thing now is to warn the Khan. If Chorny wants an unexpected attack, he'll have it. And he'll never come back to Chernihiv. You will take care of the Princess. Just don't forget you'll answer for her with your own life. If you keep her safe for the Khan, you'll live; if not, you'll have only yourself to blame."

After everybody had left, Prince Chorny sent for his daughter. Chorna appeared almost at once. She looked tired and sad and even cried a little as he hugged her.

"How you have wilted over the past days, my darling!" her father pitied her. "Are you afraid that the Khazars may break into the city, that our warriors will not hold out against them? Don't be afraid, dear," he comforted her, stroking her head lovingly and carefully. "Our military affairs have taken a turn for the better. You know that Kiriya refused to come out and fight. And that means the time has come for us to attack him."

Chorna lifted her head and looked with disbelief and fright into his eyes.

"So it's true then? You will lead your warriors outside the city?"

The Prince smiled at her astonishment.

"I will, daughter. You heard them urging me to do it. And if warriors demand to fight, victory is certain. It is not up to me, their Prince, to restrain that noble impulse."

"I'm still afraid," the girl confessed. "The Khazars are yet very strong. And our army is not too numerous. Be-

sides, you will have to leave enough men here in Chernihiv."

"I'll lead not only my regiment but the militia as well. There will be enough warriors both to fight in the field and to guard the city. For that matter, I'll tell you a secret: last night I sent my heralds to Snovsk. By morning the governors of the neighboring towns will have brought more men to Chernihiv. We'll attack the Khazars from two sides."

"Are you sure the heralds will make their way to Snovsk?" the Princess asked. "The city is surrounded, isn't it?"

"Not quite so. The heralds know a trail that the Khazars will never think of blocking."

Chorna fell to thinking.

"When are you going to set out, Father?"

"At cockcrow. But remember it's a secret."

The girl promised, but she was thinking her own thoughts.

"There's something I want to ask you," she spoke at last. "Leave with me that young man who challenged the Khan."

"Vsevolod? Why him of all men?"

"I'm afraid of remaining alone," the girl said evasively, "and he would be a really reliable guard."

The Prince regarded her distrustfully and, understanding her request in his own way, said, "It's a pity. Vsevolod would be of use to me on the battlefield. We don't have many men like him. But if you're afraid, let it be so: I'll post him to guard your palace."

"To head the guards," the Princess prompted.

Chorny was astonished, not knowing what to say.

"I don't understand. Is it so important and necessary?"

"He's courageous. His courage will be an example for the rest. And I'll be sure of having sufficient protection."

The Prince shrugged but did not refuse.

"Let him head them then," he said. "After all, this may be for the better. I'll be easy in my mind if I know that you are safe. He really is a dependable guard."

He lovingly hugged her before she left. She was so beautiful and looking already so much like her mother.

"I coddle you too much," he said jokingly. "You know that your father can refuse you nothing and you take



advantage of this. Come on, come on," he added hastily before she had time to object. "I told you we'd be able to do without your Vsevolod."

He deliberately stressed the word "your," but Chorna failed to notice this and spoke about something else:

"I'll come to see you off, Father. I'll have my maid wake me up on time. And now good night. Thank you for granting my request. I'll feel safer with Vsevolod."

The Prince noted how naturally she spoke the words "with Vsevolod." He wished her good night but then paused at the threshold.

"Daughter," he began in a hesitant voice. "Do you... like him?"

Blood rushed to her face.

"Why do you ask? We are just friends."

"Friends? When did you have time to befriend him? He came to Chernihiv only a short time ago."

The Princess cast down her eyes.

"I used to hide at their place. And before that, too..."

Chorny was struck dumb. He did not understand what she was talking about.

"I don't quite understand," he said at length. "Just where and when did you hide? Whose place are you talking about? Vsevolod is not a Siverianian, is he?"

"Who told you he wasn't?"

"Why, Vsevolod himself!" The Prince spread his arms. "He said he came from some place beyond the Sula."

"The Sula?" she thought frantically. "Why the Sula? What did he say it for? Maybe... Oh, yes!"

Guessing what could have made Vsevolod tell a lie, the Princess was about to explain everything to her father, but thought better of it.

"Maybe he was afraid you would not admit him to your regiment," she said hesitantly. "We trust strangers more than our own."

Chorny did not like her answer, but it must have convinced him, because he asked her no more questions and told her to go to her rooms.

The Princess did not wait till cockcrow. When she saw her father send for Vsevolod and then for the captain of the guards, she put on a suit of armor that was plain but not very rough. Slipping past the men who kept watch at her palace, she made for the quarters of the Prince's guards.

"I want to see the captain," she said to the lad who appeared before her outside the door.

"I'll call him right away," he said eagerly, recognizing the Prince's daughter.

The man whom she had just seen with the Prince came out to her. Chorna was surprised and wondered why her father had not appointed Vsevolod to head the guards that night. The wrath and disappointment which suddenly overcame her almost made her run to the Prince to force him to fulfill his promise with reproaches or with tears. But some remnants of common sense prevented her from doing it and helped her to cool down.

"Has the Prince told you to include Vsevolod among the palace guards?" she asked gruffly.

"Quite so, Princess."

"Where is Vsevolod now?"

"In the stables. He's gone for his horse."

"All right, I'll find him there. By the way, I almost forgot to tell you I'll need Vsevolod tonight to accompany me about the Outer Town."

"All right," the man shrugged. "Vsevolod is a good guard. Only I'm not sure you should ride about at night."

The hint was not lost on Chorna, and she tried to think of an explanation.

"I hope you understand why I have to go to the gate. Hasn't the Prince told you?"

"Yes, he has. But he has also told me to take utmost care of you. And if you do venture to go there, I'll detail a few guards for you."

"Oh, no!" The girl was frightened. "That won't be necessary. Vsevolod will do. I rely upon him. Besides I'll go not now but later on." She did her best to reassure the overzealous warrior.

Vsevolod did not rejoice at seeing her. Making sure nobody was around, he reproached her:

"What have you done this for, Princess?"

"Done what?"

"Why have you forced me to remain here in the kremenlin?"

Chorny looked at him serenely and even smiled.

"Aren't you... satisfied?"

"Certainly not. In the morning the Khan rejected my challenge, and in the evening you made sure I'd stay away

from real action. As a matter of fact, I'd been looking forward to combat as if it were my salvation."

"Since when have you had such a thirst for battle?" she asked slyly.

Vsevolod sensed something mocking, even acid in that question and frowned even more.

"It all may look funny to you, but I'd still like to know why I've been kept here."

Now Chorna, too, felt angry, but she hastened to extinguish the spark before it kindled a big fire.

"It is really necessary, Vsevolod. I have a very important mission for you. That's why I persuaded the Prince to leave you behind."

"Why me of all men?"

"This is hardly a suitable place to speak about it. Saddle your Blackie and let's go and look for a better place. There I'll tell you everything."

But Vsevolod did not move. He stood there, deep in thought, apparently thinking over her words.

"Don't you... believe me?" she asked.

"It's not that," he hesitated. "I think that the most important mission of all is to do what the Prince intends doing."

Chorna paused, thinking.

"Well, do as you like," she said. "I won't insist and I won't beg. I'll just go alone." She sounded hurt.

The Princess made for the door, but then Vsevolod came and stood in her way.

"Wait a minute, Princess. I may be wrong, of course. I'll be ready right away."

He got busy saddling his horse, quickly, as befitted a Prince's guard, and led it out, ready for riding, before the grooms had finished preparing the Princess's Falcon.

Chorna had not yet forgiven him his momentary distrust.

"Are you going for a pleasure ride?" she asked with displeasure. "Where are your weapons and armor?"

"We should...?"

"Take everything: helmet, chain mail, sword, shield and even bow and arrows. It's going to be a long and dangerous ride."

Now it all looked like a mystery, and Vsevolod fidgeted, not knowing where to put the reins.

"Hold then a minute, Princess," he thrust the reins into

her hands. "I'll be back in no time." He disappeared in the thick dusk.

When they found themselves in a safe place, the Princess was the first to dismount and tether her horse. Vsevolod followed suit.

"All right, now you may tell me where I am to go and on what mission," he urged her.

Chorna explained.

"If the Prince leads his regiment and other warriors against the Khazars, do you believe he'll be able to defeat them in the field?"

"Certainly. We have enough men, and each man will eagerly go into battle and fight for two."

"Well, I don't believe we'll win," she said simply and firmly. It was clear that this certainty had come to her as a result of much thinking. But Vsevolod was astonished.

"What do you mean by that?" he exclaimed. "Why?"

"I'll tell you why. We do have many men, but not as many as the Khazars. Our warriors will certainly go eagerly into battle, but they just don't have the experience of the Khazar cavalry. The Prince lays great hopes on a surprise attack and he'll set out before sunrise when everybody will be asleep. This is his only advantage and it stopped me from arguing with him. But I don't think he will win. Not all of the Khazars will be sleeping like logs, they'll certainly have guards and pickets. Can you imagine what will happen if they get wind of Father's intentions and lay an ambush?"

"What about the militia?" Vsevolod persisted. "Won't the Prince call more of it?"

"There won't be that many men. Some will come from Snovsk and other nearby towns. But that won't add up to much. Those from faraway towns won't be able to arrive on time. And not all will come from the neighboring towns because they'll have to leave garrisons behind."

"What you planned then?"

"You see, shortly before the Khazar attack Kiev's Prince Oleg was here in Chernihiv. He proposed that Kiev and Chernihiv join forces to drive the Khazars away forever from the Siverianian land. But Father did not agree, because he did not trust him. He said Oleg had seized Lyubech and now laid claims to Chernihiv and the whole of Siveriania. But that wasn't true — Oleg had honest intentions."

"How do you know?" Vsevolod asked. "Perhaps your father was right after all."

"Not at all!" the girl objected. "There was a big row over that at the *veche*. Father was all but dethroned."

Vsevolod fell to thinking.

"All right," he said at length. "I will go. But do you think Oleg will believe me and bring his whole regiment here by daybreak? There was no preliminary agreement, was there?"

"There was, Vsevolod! I am even sure he is not in Kiev now. He must be somewhere near our borders waiting for a word from me."

"From you? Why from you? I don't quite understand."

"Because Father refused to enter into a military alliance with him. But I... I insisted. I knew we would need Oleg. And Oleg also knew it. That's why he left me his ring. That's also why I have to act in secret from the Prince."

"What if he learns about it?"

"Never mind, the main thing is to repulse the Khazars. The rest will sort itself out later. Here it is," the Princess showed the ring to Vsevolod. "He told me that if anything happened, I was to send him the ring and he would show up in no time."

Vsevolod looked at her, then at the ring, but said nothing, being unable to see it in the dark.

"You alone know all the secret trails in the forests," the Princess went on. "Therefore you alone will be able to slip past the Khazar guards and reach the main road to get to Oleg's camp at Olzhichi or Kiev itself if need be. Do you understand? You are my only hope."

But Vsevolod remained silent.

"Why don't you say anything?" The girl was confused. "Are you afraid or what? Haven't you said you are from the steppes beyond the Sula?"

These words immediately put him on the alert.

"Why, do you know this too?"

"I do," she said cheerfully. "Secrets have a way of making themselves known."

Vsevolod stood there blinking, not knowing what to say next.

"How did you learn about it? Did the other guards say so?"

"No, not they. It was Father who told me how you presented yourself to him."

“The Prince?” The lad was frightened. “Did you tell him where I really came from?”

On some other occasion the Princess might have teased him and enjoyed his confusion and fears. But this was not the time for jokes.

“Oh, no,” she said reassuringly. “I didn’t tell him. I don’t even know how I guessed not to, but I didn’t tell him who you were.”

Vsevolod was touched and was ready to hug and kiss her, she looked so beautiful in the dusk of that memorable August night. But he did not do it. He had learned a lesson and he did not dare share with her the joy which filled his heart and went to his head.

“She did not tell! She guessed and did not tell!” he thought. He felt the intoxication in him give way to vigor and his arms and hands filling with tremendous strength. It seemed to him he could fly up and sweep like a bird over the land. But he did not even know how to thank her. To say something would not be enough, and to hold out his hand to her, as men did as a sign of reconciliation, would be ridiculous.

Then he recalled her request and it awoke new hopes and old desires lulled to sleep by his former failures.

“I’ll carry the ring through the forests and bogs. You can be sure that nothing will stop me. I’ll bring Oleg with his regiment... You’ve thought it up well. It’ll be a deciding move, a sure thing!”

When they reached the Desna Gate, Chorna gestured to him to stop.

“I’ll show you down to the Desna,” she said under her breath. “There I’ll give you my Falcon.”

“Why should you do that, Princess?” he was surprised.

“I can return on foot just as well. And you may need him. You’ll be able to change horses on your way. But please hurry. Ride at full speed, Vsevolod. They must be here by daybreak — after that it may be too late.”

She was about to start but then remembered something and held Falcon back.

“By the way,” she said after a pause, “you should no longer fear the stigma of serfdom. From now on you are free, you and your father.”

Vsevolod did not believe his ears.

“Was it... was it the Prince who said so?”

"I say so," the girl said firmly. "The Prince will listen to me."

This was something Vsevolod had not even hoped for. This was too much. Although he could not yet claim to know much about life, he heard that happiness was not something you met with frequently. Many people did not experience it at all in their lifetime. Here he had it presented to him on a silver platter... And it all happened so suddenly... It was probably too good to be true. All the same, nothing would stop him now!

As he set spurs to his horse, Blackie rose upright on his hind legs until it seemed he would fly up and dash off like a streak of lightning into the dark, hushed night.

## XXXII

### BETTER DEAD THAN CAPTIVE

Chorna did not tell the Prince where and on what business she had sent Vsevolod. The captain of the guards was told that the Princess had decided against a night ride after all and that Vsevolod had gone off on her mission and was not expected before morning.

She did not need a bodyguard to see off her father, for she did not ride with him to the outer gate but only accompanied him only to the kremlin gate. She did not stay there too long either. After the Prince was gone, she stood there for some time, listening to the last sounds of the disturbed night dying away outside the kremlin baileys, and then returned to the palace. She was worried, pensive and anxious as never before.

The captain waited for her at the entrance and escorted her up to her tower chamber. He did not leave until he made sure she had entered her bedroom.

Sleep would not come to the Princess, although it was quite late. Without undressing, she wearily sank into an armchair which her nurse had covered with a soft cushion and plunged even deeper into her thoughts. She tried to imagine the Outer Town, where the dangerous sortie must have begun already, but could not concentrate. Something else, strange and unwanted, intruded into her thoughts, distracting her attention more and more.

She peered into the corners, glanced at her bed and suddenly realized that it was the silence that depressed

her, that dead silence that made everything appear empty — the bedroom, the world, herself. Until then, she had not known that such a feeling could exist, that the world could be so empty, and now she was frightened. For only now did she understand how lonely she was and what a horribly sad thing it was to feel lonely, especially at such an uncertain, troubled time.

She was about to call her nurse but then remembered that it was late and that the old woman must have long gone to bed. But at the same time she did not want to remain alone in the bedroom. She felt so oppressed that she would sooner cry than keep on listening to that maddening silence.

Still brooding, the Princess gazed at the window. Immediately she brightened up and, taking a few steps, threw it open. Now she felt better. At least, she no longer felt lonely; she was now somehow connected, if only in thought, with the outer world — that silent and dark world which nonetheless was alive and stirring. The oak, her nearest neighbor, was the first to respond. The wind was not blowing; it had settled down somewhere beyond the sea or in the mountains. But the oak was awake, whispering something in the dark and obviously happy to have found somebody to speak with. Farther on lay the Prince's garden, beyond it was the rampart, tall and formidable, yet unable to stop the girl's thoughts, let alone imagination. The fresh breeze from the Desna reminded her of the green woods and the swift river, and she basked in it like a sprout basks in the sun. Emboldened by these images, the Princess sat on the windowsill and let her thoughts drift to the paths she had trodden up and down the slopes of Boldin Hills and in the fragrant meadows beyond the Desna... She had felt so good there, among her friends. On holidays, Milana used to gather all the girls from Zarichne. Together, they danced, sang spring songs and played hide-and-seek in groves, trembling with joy or fear of being found and taken captive. Having run about as long as they wanted, they would come to the edge of the wood, sit in a circle and make wreaths with the flowers they had picked. Those wreaths were luxurious, colorful and as fresh as this night and air.

Where were they now, those fair maidens? Had they taken to the woods with all their relatives and possessions, or had they been captured by the Khazars and at this



moment being violated and abused on the enemy-trampled land? Where was her dear friend Milana? How was she getting along with her husband? Had she managed to escape this calamity? Had the Prince's heralds warned them in time? They must be all right. Her Mladan was a real man who would take care of her; he must have taken her to a fortress or hidden her deep in the forest.

But she herself had no place to run. Her fate would be decided in battle. And no one could tell how it would all end. Still, it was all frightening and painful. What wrong had she done? Why were the gods punishing her? Why were they so merciless? Was it because she was a princess and because her mother had endowed her with extraordinary beauty? Were these the only reasons?

This was a strange world. Some were unhappy because they were not beautiful, and some suffered only because of their dazzling beauty. Who was really happy then? Those favored by fortune or those who plodded along, trying to make ends meet? Were there any really happy people at all? Maybe happiness was an illusion, a dream that awaited you at the end of an endless bridge, an unsafe, rickety bridge over an abyss. But what made everyone try to attain it? Were they all deceived? But it couldn't be. Everybody could not be wrong. There must be people who attained happiness. If everybody strove toward it, it was probably possible to reach it. Only everybody was going along his own bridge. Some bridges were quite steady, others were dangerously shaky. It all depended on what kind of bridge each person had built.

Chorna closed her eyes, trying to banish these distressing thoughts from her mind. But it was not easy to get rid of them; like annoying flies, they kept buzzing in her head.

She wondered how her father was doing, turning her thoughts to something else to dispel her melancholy. She visualized the dark woods beyond Boldin Hills toward which the Prince's party was making its way. The girl's relatively untroubled existence in Chernihiv and nearby woods had never made her particularly interested in the city's defenses. The walls had been there ever since she could remember, surrounding both the kremlin and the Outer Town. As for the moat, it had been cleaned and filled with water a few years back. That seemed to be all. She had noticed nothing else. But it seemed the Prince

had not been sitting on his hands. Now he had revealed to her the existence of an underground passage which would lead his party to the thicket along the Bilous River. From there, they would reach the rear side of the Khazar camp to launch a surprise attack against the enemy just before dawn when they were dead asleep.

Where was that secret place where an iron-covered door would open to let out the Chernihiv warriors armed from head to foot? Had it remained undiscovered? Would the Prince be able to deploy his men and attack the enemy before the Khazars noticed them and raised the alarm? Oh gods! Have pity on her! Help her father to carry out his daring and risky plan. Better that her doubts be false rather than the Prince's expectations.

It was long past midnight now. If everything had gone all right, if Vsevolod had slipped through the Khazar lines and reached the main road, he would be at Olzhichi now. He had the fastest horses, Falcon and Blackie. They would leave behind the birds and wind. All they needed was a good road, and once they had reached it, they could easily carry their rider all the way to Kiev, let alone Olzhichi. Then everything would depend on Prince Oleg. He had promised, he could not fail her now. Besides, Kiev stood only to gain. Hadn't the Prince said he wanted to unite the Slavs and have them fight the Khazars together.

Encouraged by these thoughts, the girl made herself more comfortable on the windowsill and peered toward Olzhichi, a place she had never seen. Now she thought nothing of the long distance and the pitch-black darkness, because her heart was filled with a hope that fired her imagination.

She was staring into the night and was seeing Oleg. As if in a dream, he appeared before her, looking stately and stern. His words sounded like thunder, and his stare flashed like steel. A word or a look from him made grass, let alone people, bow before him... There he was, standing in the middle of his camp and peering into the distance, toward Chernihiv. It was hard to tell whether he was just angry or aiming an invisible blow at somebody. Then he jumped on horseback and darted out onto the road. Behind him, his men flew black, menacing like a cloud, piercing through the disturbed darkness.

The Prince's white horse flew through the night like a firefly, his luxuriant mane streaming. Behind Oleg's

shoulders, a long cloak was waving like a pair of wings. It seemed that at any moment the man and the horse would rise into the air and fly over the dark-shrouded woods straight to the Chernihiv kremlin.

Lulled by her vision, the Princess shut her eyes, listening to the sweet flutter of her gladdened heart. Now she could see the Kiev Prince even closer and clearer. But this time he was dismounted and without his helmet and weapons — just as he had been at her bedside. His hair was soft, like a girl's, and luxuriant, fluttering in the wind, gently tickling her face. The touches of his hair made her heart throb, and if it had not been for the desire to keep on looking into his warm, tender eyes, she might have fallen on his chest, giddy and helpless.

Nor could she deny herself those desires. For they were more important for her than anything else. Only now had she realized how kind he was and how strong were the feelings he had awakened in her during his visit.

"I love him," she whispered. "Gods, do you hear me? He is the man whom I saw in my dreams and for whom I turned down all those princes. I've always known he was not like the others, like all those whom I've seen so far. I've always been sure he is somewhere and will come to me, sooner or later... Now he has come. Fate had me meet him in the forest and then in this palace."

The girl's heart was overflowing with joy, and she opened her eyes. Now she was sure she would be rescued from all the dangers which had beset her. She was no longer afraid of anything. She was about to jump off the windowsill and go to bed, when a new thought struck her.

What about Vsevolod? What would become of Vsevolod? He placed all his hopes in her, and it was because of her that he had joined the Prince's regiment, challenged the Khan and, finally, was on his way to Oleg. He loved her and believed in his happiness. Would she shatter all his hopes and burn them to ashes — the only hopes that he probably had ever had. Why then had she encouraged him by nurturing his hopes, especially here in Chernihiv? Had she been doing it for no particular reason or following the call of her heart?

The girl frowned, trying to understand the truth. But all of a sudden, a muffled cry came from outside. It sounded somewhere just below her, then suddenly died,

as if it had been interrupted by somebody. The Princess started, but before she had time to figure out who could have shouted, the palace filled with the noise of tussle, clanking swords and heavy footfalls.

Alarmed and stunned at the same time, the girl jumped to her feet and rushed to the door. But before she reached it, it was suddenly opened from outside, and her nurse, palefaced and barely dressed, burst into the room.

"Run, my child... Khazars!" the old woman gasped. Then she grabbed Chorna's arm and silently pulled her toward the door. But the next moment she recoiled from the door and pushed the girl to the bedroom.

"They are already here!" she whispered in a frightened voice, hurriedly bolting the door. "What are we to do now? Oh gods, what can we do?"

The nurse's frightened eyes roamed around the room as she helplessly asked what they should do. But this time the Princess herself could not say what was to be done. She was still unable to come to her senses and could not bring herself to believe this was not a dream. Only a few moments ago everything had been perfectly quiet. How could the Khazars have arrived so suddenly? How had they reached the palace across two circles of walls without encountering any opposition?

Yet they were there. Across the wall, they could hear fighting and the clanking of swords. Someone was stubbornly resisting, defending her at the door, at the threshold of death.

The Princess understood: there was no hope, the courageous guards would not hold out for long. She herself had to find a way out of this situation. Desperate, she looked around and noticed the open window. Then a recollection flashed through her mind, filling her heart with determination.

She would escape through the window, just like when she fled after the conversation with her father about her betrothal and the Khazars. Full of hope, the girl dashed to the wall where her weapons and lassos hung. Suddenly, she stopped in her tracks and grew cold with terror. Everything was there: the bow presented to her by the Khan, the quiver with gold arrows which Ambal had advised her to use only for rare birds, and many other things. But the most important thing, the lasso, had disappeared!

Growing pale, the girl turned to the nurse:

"Have I gone blind?" she asked. "My lasso must be here, the same lasso my father allowed me to hand on the antlers of the deer I caught at my first hunt. Where are they? Only they can save me now!"

For a while, the old woman stared at her uncomprehendingly. Then she understood and sadly shook her head and said:

"Yes, they were here, all right. But after you'd fled, the Prince had ordered them to be taken away."

"The Prince? So it was he who ordered them to be removed!"

The Princess was about to shout, "Father!" but at that moment the door cracked, and her despair died, drowned by that noise. Resolutely, she rushed to her weapons. She had hardly put an arrow to the bow, when the bolts gave way and the door was thrown open.

Like a tigress, the nurse darted to shield the girl with her body.

"No!" She spread her arms wide. "No, I tell you!"

No one paid any heed to the nurse, though. Without a word, Ambal thrust his sword into her chest and burst into the bedroom. He was overconfident and therefore not sufficiently cautious. Taking advantage of this, the girl shot a gold arrow at him, using the very same bow and arrow which he had handed to her as a gift from Khan. Perhaps she aimed the arrow deliberately or perhaps she missed, but the arrow hit Ambal in the belly five fingers below the heart. All the same, it was a lethal hit; the arrow had gained the necessary velocity to plunge into the man's stomach almost to the feathers. Ambal cried out and, dropping his sword, seized the feathers with both hands. He seemed to be trying to pull the arrow out, but his efforts were to no avail. The steward stared at the girl with his frightened, bulging eyes. His face, contorted with fear, looked so miserable that the Princess knitted her brows with disgust.

Encountering unexpected resistance, the band of assailants drew back. The conspirators watched the agony of their leader, saw a new arrow in the girl's bow and did not dare to fall on her. Ambal was writhing in pain. Cold sweat stood out on his forehead and he was trembling, trying again and again to pull out the arrow. This caused such terrible pain that he began to howl, moving his eyes

wild with fear and pain about the bedroom and writhing on the floor like a wounded snake.

The steward was suffering terribly, and not only because of the pain. He was also cursing himself for having been so brash. Nobody had asked him to abduct the girl, and he hadn't had to risk his life, especially before the outcome of the Prince's sortie became known. He had wanted to please the Khan and to outdo Baglai. He had thought he would avail himself of the Prince's absence, grab the sleepy girl and whisk her out of the fortress right to the Khazar camp and Khan Kiriya. That way the Khan would have gotten what he had come for from his faithful servant, without unnecessary losses and fighting. But the girl had met him with arrows. Kiriya's arrows!

Was it all over with him? He had clung to life so tenaciously and now he was dying so ignobly and senselessly. Why? What for?

Chorna caught his desperate look and, holding it for a while, asked: "The path of treason is hard, isn't it?"

It was like a verdict, it was the winner triumphing over the loser, and Ambal could not stand it. Mustering his waning strength, he rushed to the girl, like a wild boar, trying to seize her by the throat. He had failed to use her to pay off the Khan but he hoped that strangling her would give him at least some consolation before he died. This would also be his revenge upon the Khan and his bitter, treacherous fate.

But another arrow shot by Chorna forestalled that motion. Ambal straightened up, staggered and fell heavily on the floor, right at the feet of his band.

The Princess, however, had run out of arrows, which meant she was now totally defenseless. For she was not particularly good at swordsmanship. Besides, she faced quite a numerous band of assailants — all of them tall and strong. They saw she had no more arrows, but, to be on the safe side, they held their shields in front of them as they moved toward her. Chorna stepped back to the window.

"No tricks, Princess," the front man called to her. He was either trying to joke or was still afraid of her. "Nothing's going to happen to you. We'll just wrap you up in a cloak and that'll be all. Of course we'll have to make sure you can't shout or try to run away."

"At least as long as we're still in the city," added another man, shorter and sturdier than the first. "Once

we are out, though, you go straight to the Khan's tent. He'll be waiting for you."

The men grinned, exchanged glances and burst into laughter. That laughter stung the girl.

"He's waiting in vain!" she snapped and jumped on the windowsill.

Outside it was night, a dark night before dawn with not a single ray of light that would herald a new day and give some hope.

Back in her bedroom there was a band of hostile men, or rather beasts, ready to grab and bind her and to carry her out to the woods for abuse, humiliation and death.

She paused for a while, making her choice. The conspirators did not believe she really meant it and kept moving toward her, sure of themselves.

Only a step and a decisive instant separated them now. She drew back again. She felt the cold breath of the night on her back and sensed the somber abyss, but the tenacious hands reaching out for her were even more frightful... No, she would never be a captive, she would never leave her homeland, she...

One of the men made an abrupt movement. The girl gasped and jumped. Involuntarily, she spread her arms, as if trying to grab hold of something, but felt only the cold void under her feet and then soft touches of dew-sprinkled foliage. She disappeared amidst it...

The conspirators were stunned with surprise, but even more with fear of the Khan and what awaited them.

### XXXIII

#### THE DECISIVE BATTLE

Having mounted his horse, the Prince paused for a long moment, watching the daybreak glow in the murky morning sky. The sky in the east was gloomy and blood-red. It had to be a bad omen. Plenty of blood would probably be shed on this field outside the Chernihiv walls. And no one could tell whose blood was most likely to be spilled — those who were now fast asleep, lulled by the scarlet-clothed Goddess of Dawn, or those who were now watching this omen.

A prince, however, should not muse over omens for long. It was also hardly the right time; this dawn was to

be the sign for all the detachments scattered along the edge of the forest, for all the warriors of the Siverianian land, including the troops of militiamen which were to arrive from the nearby towns. At that sign, they were to take the places assigned to them and wait for his orders. He would shortly have to give these orders. Picking up the reins, the Prince turned his horse to the War Field.

The suddenness of their attack seemed quite assured. The horses were moving in silence, without neighing or snorting. His men were battle-seasoned and obedient to his will. Like leopards, they were following their prince, silent and watchful, ready to draw their swords and plunge into fighting at any moment.

They were approaching the enemy from two sides: from the west and from the north. The eastern side was left to the militiamen who were to finish off the retreating enemy and, if need be, to come to the assistance of the Prince's regiment.

Leading his men, the Prince was prepared to be the first to pin a sleeping Khazar to the ground. However, things turned out somewhat differently, or rather entirely differently. The Khazars were not sleeping at all, they had been waiting for the Siverianians. It was true that they had not quite assumed battle formations, but they were certainly not asleep. A miracle, or maybe Providence, sounded alarm in their camp just before the Siverianian attack.

Chorny was stunned and for some time did not quite know what he should do next. Should he attack? But what would come of it? The surprise on which he had counted had been lost, and now the forces were far from equal... Should he retreat? But this would look more like ignominious flight... And would he be able to pull out in time? As soon as he began to withdraw the Khazars would fall on his party and smash it to bits.

His men stopped and waited. They, too, were confused and hesitant. But suddenly a childishly joyous voice rang out over the field:

"They are running! Just look! Our men are attacking them from the north..."

The voice belonged to Topchak, a warrior famous for his valor and excellent sight. And that was enough, whether the man had or had not actually seen the Khazars waver before the attacking Siverianians. The Prince's men



spurred on their horses, trained their spears and rushed with battlecries at the confused Khazar camp.

The Khazars could not resist the impetuous onslaught and rolled back. But their confusion did not last long and affected only their front lines behind which stood the Khan with the solid ranks of his bodyguards.

The Prince realized that bravery alone would now decide the outcome. But he could not tell this to his men; the battle was already in progress with the Siverianians trampling the Khazars, and he could only encourage and enhance his warriors' fighting spirit by giving them an example to follow.

...The night had long dissolved in mist, the sun had climbed over the forest, and on the War Field near Chernihiv fierce fighting was still raging. Swarms of Khazars pressed against the front ranks of the Siverianians, showering arrows upon them, and although many of them were trampled to death by hoofs, it seemed there would be no end to them. Pressed to the Strizhen river at daybreak, they now seemed to be extending like a compressed spring, pushing to the front fresh forces out of their midst. The Prince sent some heralds to the Governor of Snovsk to tell him to leave the ambush on the Nezhatina Field and to lead his militiamen to the Khazar rear. Those forces were not very numerous, but they made the Khazars turn about and weaken their pressure against the Prince's men. This encouraged the Siverianians even more, filling them with fighting spirit that was worthy of their forefathers.

The ground moaned under hoofs, swords clanked against steel helmets, and clouds of dust raised by the warriors hung low over the field, blotting out the sky, the sun and everything else. Only the shouts of the victors, the groans of the dying, and especially the neighing of wounded horses told the men frozen on the city walls that the feat was not over and that the Siverianians were still treating their guests to more of their own blood.

The militiamen did not hold out, though. Some died on the bank of the Strizhen, and others threw themselves into the churning river. The Khazars recovered, concentrated their forces and threw them against the Prince. It soon became clear that they were trying to push him back to the forest, leave him no room for maneuver and make him lose control of the battle. But Prince Chorny saw through

the Khazars' intentions and rallied his regiment and hunt-seasoned militiamen even closer around him.

"Brothers!" his voice blared, drowning out the clanking of swords and the cries of the Khazars. "Remember the behest of your forefathers, sons of the Siverianian land: 'Better dead than captive! This is our land, and the victory must be ours, too... Forward, warriors! Fight for our honor and glory and for the freedom of Siveriania!"

His words fell upon their hearts like seeds fall onto plowed soil and had immediate effect. The Prince's men bristled up with weapons, strengthened their reason with force and their hearts with valor and, inspired by their ancestors' glory, charged at the hateful nomads.

More time passed. The sun seemed to have stopped, lost in contemplation of the battle. But no matter how curious it was, it soon began to climb again — higher and higher.

Late in the morning, a man from Chernihiv fought his way to the Prince's forces. Reining in his foaming horse near the wounded, he shouted in an anxious, broken voice:

"Where's the Prince? A misfortune has occurred in the kremlin!.."

"Shut up!" an elderly man snarled at him. "It's not milk and honey here, either: there are plenty of Khazars and the Prince has been wounded."

"Oh gods!" The young fellow sounded dismayed. "What's going to become of us?"

"Whatever will be will be," the older man frowned even more. "Instead of whining, you'd better give us a hand." Warming a little, he added: "We're expecting fresh forces from Putivl, Siversk and even from Snyatin and Starodub. And our swords are still sharp enough. The battle will go on, young man. And quite a battle it will be!"

But the fellow would not calm down.

"It doesn't matter now," he said sorrowfully. "The Princess is no more."

All those who heard those incredible words spun around and stared at the fellow in disbelief.

"What did you say?"

"Someone tried to abduct the Princess but she jumped out of the window and fell on the stones."

For some time the men were speechless. Apparently, they could not bring themselves to believe what they had heard. They exchanged glances, as if looking for a solution

to this mystery. Having found none, they again turned their frightened eyes to the young man.

"Did you say abduct? But who could have done it? No Khazars have gotten into the city yet."

"They didn't have to," the fellow from Chernihiv said bitterly. "The Khan had his men there; Ambal was found killed in the palace."

"Ambal?!" the wounded men exclaimed in one voice. "Impossible! Maybe he died defending her."

"Not likely. Do you remember the gold arrows the Khan's matchmakers brought to the Princess? Both of them were in Ambal's body."

The men raised no more objections. They sat or lay in silence, stunned by the sad news. Only later, when the young fellow was about to resume his search for the Prince, did they awaken from their stupor and block his way.

"Are you going to tell the Prince?"

"I must. That's what I've been sent for."

"Go back," one of the wounded said calmly. This was the old man who had first met the messenger. "The Prince must not be told."

"Why?" The fellow was surprised. "It's a tragedy, his daughter has died."

"But the Siverianian land still exists!" the old man shouted. "And this news will certainly do it no good. And then nothing can help the Princess, can it?"

The man paused to make sure the import of his words had sunk in. Then he turned toward the wounded and shouted:

"Siverianians! Have you all heard what the lad here said? It's not the time to nurse your wounds. Those who can still carry weapons mount your horses and go fight. Let our swords punish the Khazars for what they did! Death for death and blood for blood!"

And the Siverianians again repulsed the Khan's horsemen and pulled together their forces which the Khazar wedge had all but torn apart. They charged boldly, fought courageously and died like men should: facing the enemy, silently, without cursing their fate or asking for mercy.

Severely wounded, Prince Chorny could not remain in the saddle but did not leave the battlefield. Helped by his bodyguards onto a bed stretched between two horses, he

was in the front ranks, encouraging his warriors with his strong voice and his mere presence.

But fighting spirit alone did not suffice. The Siverianian ranks were melting away, and the Khazar superiority increased. Finally, the Prince realized that he would be forced to retreat.

Obeying his orders, the Siverianian forces narrowed their front, covering the withdrawal with the least battered detachment to give some rest to the exhausted men and enable the wounded to leave the battlefield.

The Khazar understood Chorny's intentions and tried to cut him off from the city or drive his depleted forces into the forest. But before they could do that, the Northern Gate opened, and some horsemen rode out onto the War Field. More and more of them came out in a fast and seemingly endless stream.

The fighting immediately ceased as warriors on both sides stared in surprise at the mysterious forces pouring out of the city. Presently the horsemen charged straight at the Khazars. They were armed from head to foot and it seemed there was no end to them.

Chorny made his way among his men trying to get a better view of the field. He could not understand who those fresh horsemen were — warriors of the garrison or some new-arrived militiamen. But why were they so heavily armed and so numerous?

The charging column was approaching, and the dust kicked up by the front horses screened the rest, enhancing the impression of innumerable strength.

Then Chorny noticed two men who were galloping at the head of the column, rapidly approaching the stunned Khazars, already beginning to back down. The first rider in a purple cloak was on a white, rich-maned horse; the other one rode a black horse, just as rich-maned and fiery as the first.

The Prince stared at them overwhelmed by curiosity. The two men seemed familiar; he also had seen the two horses before.

The first man raised his sword high over his head and, turning back, shouted something to the horsemen several dozen paces behind him. Chorny strained his ears. Then he heard the voice — and his heart filled with elation.

"Oleg!" he shouted at the top of his voice. "The Kiev Prince has come to our assistance!"

"Hurray!" The Siverianians stirred back to life and, like floods bursting a dam, rushed at the Khazars. Their cries were echoed by the Kiev horsemen and resounded all over the battleground.

The Khan was taken aback. He had not expected this sortie nor had he anticipated encountering such forces and such stubborn resistance here at Chernihiv. On top of that, there were these horsemen, a host of them. Where did they come from? Could it be that those walls contained the entire population of Siveriania? How had Prince Chorny managed to raise such an army?

There was something wrong, some treachery in all this. He had been assured that taking Chernihiv would be easy, that Chorny was helpless — and now this.

The horsemen were approaching fast; any moment they would crash into the confused and disorderly lines of his troops. Something had to be done.

With frightened eyes, Kiriy looked at his commanders. Seeing their confusion and undisguised fear, he flew into a rage.

"Why are you standing, jackasses?" he barked at them. "Come on! Forward, now!" He whipped the one nearest to him. "You yourselves lead those cowards! Understand? In person!"

The appearance of their senior commanders had some effect on the Khazars and they started to form ranks. Oleg, though, did not give them time to deploy. Parrying a spear aimed at him, he charged into the Khazars, who had just turned to face him, and began to slash right and left. The Khazars recognized a commander in him and hurried to close a ring around him. Then they fell on him. But hardly had they raised their sabers, when the warrior on the black horse attacked them. He cut off a few Khazar heads and shielded the prince.

"Well done, Vsevolod!" Oleg cried cheerfully, appreciating the helping hand.

At that moment, the bulk of Oleg's men caught up with them. The Khazars wavered and began to retreat. They ran farther and farther, trying to save themselves in the forest or in the rapid waters of the Strizhen.

## XXXIV

### A LONELY SWAN

The spacious hall of the Prince's palace was in mourning. In the middle, the Princess's body lay in state on a wide plank platform. Her marble-white face was even paler, and her black arching eyebrows and thick lashes were more expressive than ever. She looked gentle and breathtakingly beautiful. Women had attired her in a thin dress embroidered by her old nurse and covered her with a white shroud of Arabian silk. Girls had brought flowers from the forest and made a colorful wreath, a sign of her maidenhood.

They had not braided her hair, leaving it as Chorna had liked to wear it at her leisure: luxuriant and fluffy, parted in the middle. This accentuated the colors even more and made her look almost alive, tender and as beautiful as a swan or a dew-washed flower.

At her head, at some distance from the platform, stood the choir. It was made up of girls her own age, those with whom Chorna had roamed the nearby meadows and woods, those who were to sing at her wedding and had now come to her funeral. Their faces and clothes expressed deep mourning. Their singing was soft and sorrowful. Even a stranger could not have held back his tears, passing by the dead body. Chorny seemed to have forgotten about his princely dignity and appeared unaware of the endless stream of people passing by him. He sat beside his daughter's body, sad, broken-hearted and weeping.

"My dear daughter!" they heard his hoarse, broken voice. "My only joy, my only consolation. Why did I leave you here, in this nest of snakes that I'd built with my own hands? Where were my eyes and my reason? I'd cherished a snake in my bosom... Gods! Why have you punished me so terribly? My wife died through my fault, and now you..."

Chorny lowered his grizzled head onto the platform of yew planks, clutching at his hair. More and more Siverianians passed by the bier: warriors, townsmen, plowmen. They all brought flowers — those fine fresh flowers which their incomparable princess had been so fond of.

The body and platform were drowned in flowers, and even the windows were covered with them. There were delicate lilies, colorful lychnises and fragrant cornflowers.

Yet they were unable to revive this small world enclosed by the walls of the palace, drive sorrow away and dispel the mood of mourning. Mourning had made its way to the very bottoms of people's hearts and it would not be dislodged.

Some Kievans, led by Oleg, entered quietly, trying not to disturb the mourning atmosphere. The Prince of Kiev brought a large purple shield, a sword of Damask steel and a bow with arrows. Stopping before the platform, he placed the weapons at the feet of the maiden warrior as a tribute to her valor. Then he went to Chorny and bowed his head over him. Chorny did not respond at once; he could not suppress the sobs that were choking him. Finally, he pulled himself together and said, sorrowfully and a bit too loudly:

"All right, go ahead."

The Kievans understood their prince at a glance; quickly and unobtrusively, they formed a guard of honor beside the platform and froze in mournful silence.

Oleg fixed his gaze on the Princess and could not take his eyes off her for a long time. Then he sank on one knee beside Chorny, and his manly, sad voice sounded in the hall:

"Farewell, my dear girl, my first and last true friend. I've failed to protect you from the perfidious Khan. But I swear that I shall never forgive him your death. I will drown my sorrow and sadness in the blood of the Khazars, the hateful enemies of Rus."

Rising to his feet, he kissed the Princess's cold brow. Chorny broke down and burst out sobbing again.

"Calm yourself, Prince." Oleg touched his shoulder. "You are wounded, you must not torment yourself so much." Realizing that his words would hardly have any effect on Chorny, Oleg tried to lead him out of the hall.

"Let's go," he said softly, as son to father. "The funeral won't be soon. There'll be time to mourn for her. Now you must rest. It was an anxious night and a gory morning. And now this grief, too... A healthy man would find it hard to endure, and you are wounded."

Chorny did not resist; submissive and resigned, he let his servants take him to his bedroom. Yet there was no peace for him.

"I alone am to blame for everything," he confessed to Oleg. "I did not listen to you, Prince, and would not

accept your offer of help. I myself destroyed my dear child. Gods! What have I done? Why did I treat her life and future so lightheartedly?" He tossed about, unable to rid himself of these obsessive thoughts.

"Stop it, Prince," Oleg tried to comfort him. "Your tears won't help her, won't bring her back to life. That was just her fate."

"No, it wasn't," Chorny disagreed. "Her fate has got nothing to do with it. I alone am responsible for her death. Our salvation was in unity. That was the only right way. But I cherished my pride instead of heeding the voice of reason. Now I have paid a terrible price for that. It could have all turned out differently, if... if... Oh, woe is me! Did she have to die to make this truth self-evident?"

Oleg was thoughtful.

"Well," he said at length, "apparently the road to happiness and accord is hard indeed. I'm not sure about roses, but there are certainly plenty of thorns on the way."

For some time only the laments of the bereaved came from the bedroom. Oleg was silent. The longer his silence lasted, the more composed Chorny became. At last he quieted down.

Oleg smiled sadly. They said there was nothing like people to give one consolation. But time healed wounds so much better, he decided, at least judging by the effect his silence had had on the Chernihiv Prince.

Soon, however, the silence became awkward, and Oleg had to start talking about something inconsequential in order to keep his host's thoughts away from his dead daughter. But then the door opened and a servant entered the bedroom.

"A messenger from Kiev wishes to see his prince," he said to Oleg.

"A messenger?"

Curious and disturbed, Oleg rose, looking at the servant. Then he turned to Chorny to excuse himself. The arrival of a messenger, he said, could only indicate there was some really pressing matter. When he returned, he was animated and even improperly joyous.

"Good news, Prince," he said. "The Radimiches\* have sent their envoys to Kiev. They say the time has come for the Khazars to be driven away and ask for my help."

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\* Group of Eastern Slavic tribes living between the Dnieper and the Desna



Chorny looked at Oleg with a sad but also curious gaze. But the Kiev Prince did not notice that. Excited, he crossed to the window and stood there, deep in thought, casting his mind's eye beyond the forests, far into the mist-shrouded expanses.

"So the Slavs seem to be getting together," he said, as if to himself. "This can only be good for the Rus people, and it spells danger for their enemies. And that's the way it must be. The unification of all our tribes would lay the foundations of an invincible state — the state of all Rus."

"This is good, of course," Chorny agreed. "Almost anything can be done by joint effort. I'd recommend to lose no time now that you have a chance to take the Radimiches away from the Khazars."

Oleg listened attentively but warily. In Chorny's expressly emphatic voice and fine words he sensed some false note.

"I have a chance?" he asked. "Aren't you going to join me?"

For some time the bedroom was quiet.

"Your assistance must be reciprocated, of course," Chorny answered calmly. "However I... such a campaign would be beyond my power."

Oleg's face reddened. He felt as if he had just received a slap in the face. Curiosity, though, made him continue the conversation.

"I understand," he said after a pause. "Of course, you cannot march with us. You mean your warriors..."

"There's no one to lead my warriors but me," Chorny hastened to explain. "Besides, they'd rather go in a different direction. The Siverianians have fought under me at the walls of Chernihiv and they have fought well. As you saw, they followed their prince. Now it is my turn to follow their wishes — and lead them to the Don against the Pechenegs."

"That's true," Oleg agreed.

"As I already said," Chorny continued impatiently, "this death has removed scales from my eyes, and I'd be the last man to erect obstacles in your way. I'm all for unity, provided it is truly fraternal unity of equal and free partners."

The period of mourning was nearing its end. According to a time-honored tradition, the body of the late Princess was to be committed to the flames. Only fire, the all-

powerful and all-conquering master of the earth and the heavens, could free a human body from the evil spirits which became implanted in it immediately after the first breath and stayed until they finally destroyed all life in it. But every human being should depart from this world in the same condition in which he or she had first arrived in it — pure and innocent. Life originated from fire, and what was left of a body after all life had gone from it had to be returned to it. And although Chorny did not want to watch his daughter's body being consumed by flames, the customs of the Siverianian land could not be departed from.

While Chorna's body was prepared for cremation, carpenters built a platform outside the city walls, close to the edge of the Black Forest. The platform was not very high but quite broad, for besides the girl's body it had to accommodate two of her finest horses (the grooms had prepared Falcon and Vsevolod had brought Leopard from the pasture), her jewelry which she had not had time to admire enough during her lifetime, her finest clothes, several sheep, roosters and other foods — all this to supply her with everything necessary on her way to the other world. Should somebody come forward to accompany the Princess to the beyond, there would be room for him and his horse.

Sun-dried logs were piled under the platform in such a way as to ensure adequate draught for everything on the platform to burn properly.

The preparations had hardly been finished when the Lyubech Gate was opened and the Siverianians poured in. At the head of the procession, the Princess's body buried in flowers was carried on a sleigh, then came wagons loaded with barrels of mead, fine foods prepared in the Prince's kitchens, colorful carpets to be set with all this and more foods from the Prince's cellars and everything else that would be necessary for a crowded funeral feast.

The funeral was attended by all and everybody, not only the townspeople but also many farmers from the neighboring villages. For the Princess was well known in every household and under every roof. Besides, her death had been totally unexpected and had come as a terrible shock. Nobody had thought that her delicate body contained the heart of a true warrior, just as nobody had expected the seemingly pampered and carefree girl to display such valor and show them all how one should fight for one's dignity and honor. In the Siverianians' eyes, her heroic death had

raised the Princess to unbelievable heights, and her image lured them like a mysterious fire that was about to be extinguished forever.

The feast was celebrated around the platform, amidst the sparse trees of the Black Forest. The Prince was unable to address the gathering as the realization of his loss left him brokenhearted and sobbing. Therefore, the ceremony was conducted by one of the city elders.

"Brothers!" he addressed the people sitting quietly on the carpets. "The Princess was a merry and kind child. May she remain in our memory as such. Help yourselves to the food and drink offered by the Prince. Fill your cups, brothers, and ask the deceased to stand before God Svarog and plead with him to grant us many years on this good earth. Drive sorrow away from this body and thus also from yourselves. Death for the dead and life for the living!"

The first cup was poured into the fire so that the Princess would not be sad while departing from this world. The Prince was persuaded to drink the second cup. The rest needed no reminders and drained their cups with relish. Then the wagons creaked and barrels rolled between the carpets; and amber-colored mead and foreign wines foamed and flowed, filling and refilling the cups. And the sorrow-dimmed eyes sparkled and faces brightened. Sorrow dissolved into intoxication as shadows melt in the light. As more and more cups were filled and drunk, silence gave way to chatter, then to laughter, until somebody broke into a song. Picked up by dozens of tipsy voices, the song drowned out the men's sensuous laughter and the screams of the women. The younger ones formed circles, and dancing began here and there. Before long, the older people also joined in the dancing and the air filled with laughter and shouts that could have awakened the dead girl.

There were those, however, whose sorrow had not been dispelled even by spirits. The two princes were among them. Silent and downhearted, they sat by the fire, their eyes fixed on the beauty still visible in the smoke.

A third man came up to them. Neither Chorny nor Oleg paid any attention to him; they were too deep in thought and their eyes remained glued to the pyre.

"Prince," the newcomer said in a toneless, yet strong, voice. Chorny looked up and froze.

"Vsevolod?!"

"I want to go with the Princess," the young man said quietly. But Chorny did not listen to him.

"Gods!" he said in a surprised, breaking voice. "So you fled! Everybody else was killed, and you ran away, betrayed her!"

He made an attempt to get to his feet, but Oleg held him back.

"What are you saying, Prince?" He tried to calm Chorny looking in his eyes. "He was the messenger she sent to me, don't you know?"

"He's a coward! A traitor! I left the Princess under his protection, relying on his courage and strength. But he ran away and now he dares show up alive and well before my eyes."

"Wait, Prince," Oleg pleaded. "This is the warrior who brought word from the Princess and fought against the Khazars by my side."

"I don't care!" Chorny was beside himself with rage. "He was ordered to stay with the guard. He was a body-guard and had no right to leave her, no matter what she may have ordered him."

Attracted by the shouts, drunk men came running and clustered around them.

"Have you heard?" they asked one another. "This is the fellow who challenged the Khan and then got scared and ran, leaving the Princess to the Khazars."

"What shame!" indignant voices were heard. "Just imagine — running from the battlefield! And he had talked big, too..."

Vsevolod made no attempt to justify himself. He just stared pleadingly at Prince Chorny with tearful eyes. He seemed to be waiting for Chorny to rage himself out.

"I'm guilty, Prince," he said, seizing a momentary pause. "I did obey her... If I had only known what would happen... Now it's too late for recriminations. I love Chorna and I want to die with her and be her servant there."

Hearing this, Prince Oleg shuddered.

Undoubtedly, this boy really loved Chorna if he wanted to follow her to the other world. But by doing so the young man would disgrace him, Oleg. For everybody knew that Oleg had been in love with the Princess and had wanted to marry her. Now this boy wished to die with the girl and thus prove that he had loved her more than any other

man. What was he to do? He, the Prince of Kiev, could not afford to depart from this world. For behind him was the whole Rus land and he had so many pressing matters on his hands. No, he just couldn't die! But the young man would. He had nothing to lose. All he needed was Prince Chorny's consent. And he who offered to accompany a dead woman to the next world must not be denied, for that meant he loved her more than anybody else. Such was the custom.

Thinking hard, Oleg leaned over to Chorny and whispered something to him. But the Prince of Chérnihiv was silent, looking at the heartbroken warrior. Suddenly, he broke into sobs, burying his grief-distorted face in his hands.

Another chance like this might never come again, Oleg thought. Immediately forgetting his fondness for Vsevolod, excited by jealousy, Oleg glowered at his rival.

"What are you waiting for?" he shouted to the men crowding around them. "Don't you see what he's done to your Prince? Drive him away!"

The Siverianians had been scowling at Vsevolod even before Chorny's breakdown. Now they gave vent to their fury.

"Get away, coward!" They rushed to Vsevolod. "Go away!"

Vsevolod still did not believe he was being driven away and stood there, looking at them in bewilderment. But then some men reached him and gave him a violent push in the chest. Reeling, he realized that the men had set upon him in earnest. He wanted to say something; but before he could utter a word, a stone struck him, then another, then one more. A furious throng of armed and unarmed men reached for him with strong, claw-like hands, and he saw beastly, hostile faces. They spat at him and heaped curses and terrible insults upon him. Those behind, unable to reach him, hurled stones and sticks.

Their rage knew no limits, their clamor deafened him — and Vsevolod had to back away. He did it instinctively, though, guided by his emotions rather than reason. The calm and resignation with which he had faced the Prince only a short while ago had given way to astonishment and panic — that base feeling which made people lose their heads and strength and courage and all desires except one, the desire to live.

When he had nowhere to retreat, Vsevolod turned round and, ducking his head, ran to the forest.

But instead of saving him, his flight infuriated the men even more. Instead of stones, weapons flashed in the sun, and curses gave way to threats. Finally, the young man was knocked down by the dull blow of a heavy Siverianian sword.

More blows and kicks left him strangely indifferent, and shouts seemed to be coming from across a thick wall. And then there was mute, incomprehensible silence.

## EPILOGUE

It was again summer. The high burial mound beyond the city walls was overgrown with lush vegetation, and the oaks had shed their sun-bleached attire to don fresh foliage that made them look so much younger... A well-trodden footpath ran from the moat to the mound: the Prince and Chorna's friends did not forget her and on every holiday came to lay flowers at her grave. A memorial feast was due to be held the following day, the first anniversary of the Princess's death. Chorny had had it announced everywhere, and people from the entire Desna valley had been invited to attend. Already the roads filled with village plowmen, musicians and wandering crippled beggars. Only at night did the roads become quieter as some of the travelers stayed at their friends' and others went to sleep in the woods, in the hollows of old oak trees.

Now the woods seemed to be listening to the silence that reigned in the city. The trees loomed tall and gloomy, looking as though they had a presentiment of some unfortunate events. They cast shadows not only upon the walls but also on the whole Outer Town, making it look smaller and sometimes obscuring it completely and leaving only the kremlin in sight.

Not everybody, though, was asleep on that quiet night before the funeral anniversary feast. Shortly before dawn, the silence at the walls of Chernihiv was disturbed by the snorting of a horse. Then deadwood cracked under hoofs, and a horseman appeared at the edge of the forest. Looking around, he strained his ears, as if trying to catch some

faint sounds, and sniffed the air. Turning to the left, he soon reached the grave. There he dismounted and stood for some time at the foot of the mound. Then he sat on a big stone lodged in the ground near the grave and fell to thinking.

He thought that the night was dark and oppressively silent. The same darkness and silence must reign underground in the mysterious great beyond where there was neither light nor life — only silent shadows and dead quiet.

The wayfarer tried to imagine what awaited the dead in that world of shadows, but his imagination failed to penetrate the mysteries of the unfathomable and in spite of himself his thoughts turned to the familiar world of the living.

No, he told himself. His decision had been made and there was no turning back for him. Besides, he would never have another chance like this. The first anniversary feast was his last opportunity to prove his innocence. As for his life, it was no longer worth living anyway. With his torment and disgrace he was already very much like a shadow. All his hopes were also dead, buried in that tomb.

For some time he looked at the mound, thinking, as if engaged in a mute conversation with the dead girl. Then he rose to his feet and, slowly but resolutely, went up to the top of the mound.

He would do it there, on the very top, he decided. Then they would see him from afar, before the feast began. And they would understand that he had taken his own life.

Looking around, he brushed away a small stone. Before he understood where the noise had come from, a loud, somewhat startled voice rang out below:

“Who’s there?”

Curiosity immediately restored his strength, dispelling his involuntary fear. The voice also sounded familiar.

“Who are you?” the voice on the other side of the grave sounded louder and clearer.

The Prince! Recognizing the voice, although still unsure, the young man rushed down the slope toward a dark, shadow-like figure.

“Prince Oleg?” he asked startled. “I’m surprised to find you here, of all places.”

The prince took a step toward the young man, trying to make out his face.

"Vsevolod?!" he cried out after a long pause. "So you... you are alive?"

His words instantly brought back the events of the last summer, and Vsevolod's voice sounded cool.

"As you can see, Prince."

His thoughts flowed like a rapid river while his heart filled with unavenged pain and wrath undulled by time.

Should he settle the score? His hand involuntarily reached for his sword, and he felt a strong temptation to step back for a better position and to remind the ungrateful prince of the day when he had urged the mob, "Drive him away! What are you waiting for?" He would certainly like to settle that account. But he could not: their dead bodies would not tell the Siverianians the true story. If anything, that would add to his disgrace and make him, Vsevolod, look even guiltier. They would not believe he had taken his life. They would naturally think he had tried to get even and had died by Oleg's hand.

"Let's sit down and talk," the prince interrupted his train of thought, motioning him to a bench nearby.

Vsevolod cast him a distrustful look but followed him none the less.

"How did you get over that brutal beating you got from that crazy mob?" Oleg asked.

"Well, I've survived."

Vsevolod's unfriendly tone was not lost on Oleg who did not know what to say next. Yet to say nothing would be just as embarrassing, for Oleg knew he had wronged this young man.

"I had no idea then that those men would push their anger so far," he said at length. "I thought they would simply drive you away and that would be all."

"If they had just driven me away, it would've been all right with you, wouldn't it?"

A gloomy, heavy silence followed.

"Believe me, I did not bear you malice," Oleg said guiltily. "On the contrary, I wanted you to survive."

Vsevolod did not appear to be surprised by such an explanation. Or maybe he simply did not believe the prince. He sat there, staring in front of him and thinking intensely, as older men do, until in the end curiosity prevailed over his wrath.



"Have you come to pay tribute to her memory?" He pointed to Chorna's grave.

"You have guessed it," Oleg replied. "This is exactly what I am here for."

"Then why come at night?"

"Because the days are too busy for such things. In the morning we are setting out to fight against the Khazars. It has turned out that Kiriya escaped and has been gathering forces for another campaign against us."

"Will you go away without attending the feast?" the young man asked in a surprised voice. "It's due to begin in a very short time and almost all the Siverianians will be here."

Turning to him, Oleg said sternly:

"Our feast will be battle and our wine the enemies' blood. Remember: the Khazars will pay dearly for her death — we'll sow their steppes with their bones."

The Prince grew silent and hung his head even lower. Vsevolod, too, was silent.

"What about you — have you come for the feast?" Oleg asked coldly. Vsevolod shot him a glance but did not say a word.

"Why don't you answer?" Oleg snapped.

"I'm not one of your serfs, Prince," Vsevolod said.

Oleg did not like that reply and especially Vsevolod's angry tone. But he knew Vsevolod as an excellent fighter and, remembering they were alone, contained himself and said in a softer voice:

"You don't have to get angry with me. It's not a matter of being or not being a serf. I'm just wondering why you roam in the woods instead of coming back to the regiment."

"Which regiment?"

"Mine, for example. I know you wouldn't want to return to Prince Chorny, but there's no reason why you shouldn't come to serve me. I'd accept you willingly. For I know you're a good warrior and a true knight. Besides, you should hate the Khazars because you loved the Princess. Why not avenge her? Why not drown your pain in the Khazar blood? You should know that campaigns and battles are the best remedy for such pain. They would help you wash away your suffering and dispel your sorrow. With time you would again win fame maybe ever greater than before."

"What do I need fame for?" Vsevolod asked indifferently.

"Doesn't everybody?"

The prince was about to start to explain to Vsevolod why warriors sought fame but failed to find the right words and did not say anything. Only later, when he was leaving, he said:

"It's up to you, of course. But I recommend you to take my advice. It's much better to spend your life in campaigns than here in the woods."

He walked away a few steps, then stopped and again turned to Vsevolod.

"Think about it. You have till morning to make up your mind. If you decide to join me, go straight to Salt Way. With a horse as good as yours you'll catch up with us easily."

Having said that, he disappeared in the dark. Vsevolod, though, did not turn a hair. He remained sitting — silent, pensive and oblivious to everything.

"It's much better to spend your life in campaigns..." Oleg's words still rang in his ears. Well, this was probably true. For many others it might be better. But he would not be able to find consolation even there. Besides, he could not just disappear without vindicating himself and walk away to strange lands without proving his innocence. No, he would not go. What did he need all that for — fame, consolation? Why should he escape if he would have no hope of ever meeting the Princess, if he was certain he would never find her among the living — neither here, nor there, nor anywhere in the world? And to live without her would be intolerable. Without her... Well, it was all clear enough. The only way for him was out. If he could not go on living, that meant he had to die. But he must depart in such a way as to dispel his dishonor and convince the Siverianians that he was not guilty of anything and had loved the Princess more than anything in the world and more than anybody else.

And this was what he would do. This feast offered him a unique opportunity to be reunited with her. It would help him to end it all: life, suffering, disgrace... One stab would do it. When the Siverianians found his body on the mound, they would understand and believe. For such was the tradition handed down from generation to generation: he who died on the day of a commemorative feast on a

grave had always been devoted and faithful to the person buried in it. "He was not guilty of anything," they would say. "He loved her so much that he could not live without her. Like a lone swan."

A lone swan! Vsevolod held up his head, and his thoughts flashed back to the pasture, the dear spacious pasture where he had felt so free and where a swan had died so suddenly. And then its mate.

How simply and resolutely had that bird killed itself! It had risen high in the sky, cried, as if to say goodbye, and plummeted down to the ground. It had not hesitated nor paused to think that nearby there was a quiet lake with fine mates and that the sky was so clear and blue. It just folded its wings and down it went.

Now what about himself? Would he be firm enough to take his own life? Would he be able to do it as resolutely as the swan? "Everything beautiful dies proudly." Who had said it? Father?.. But that was true. Everything beautiful did die proudly, like the swan, like the Princess... But why did a beautiful being have to die, especially before its time? Was hopelessness the reason? Was it because of hopelessness that both the swan and the Princess had died — the bird because it had lost all hope of love, and the girl because all her hopes of rescue were gone?

Wide-eyed, Vsevolod pondered over this revelation, unable to collect the thoughts it had stirred in his mind.

What if Oleg was right? What if not all was yet lost for him? The swan had lived for love alone. It had only one mate and life was worthless after that mate was lost. But unlike the swan, he also had a duty — the duty to avenge the Princess's death on the Khazars. He also had his father and his country... Wouldn't it be too early for him to leave this world? Should he remain alive and go with Oleg to fight the Khazars?

No, no! He should drive such thoughts away. Now, up there, to the top of the mound! He had delayed it long enough as it was: soon it would be dawn and the feast would begin.

Vsevolod rose to his feet, looked around and ascended the mound.

"Farewell, my dear Father," he said, looking to the east, where the sky over the horizon, beyond the Desna, was already turning gray with dawn. "Forgive my leaving you so early and breaking your heart with the blow I will

deal myself with my own hands... You haven't seen your disgrace avenged on Prince Chorny. Now you'll probably never see that day, for he sits too firmly on his throne. Besides, your youth is gone, and hope will soon be gone, too, gone to the grave with your son. Without any hope left, your hatred will eat away at you like rust... So try to forgive me. You, too, forgive me, vast woods, my only true friends and consolation."

Blackie must have heard his master's voice, for he neighed plaintively from the edge of the forest.

"Oh!" Vsevolod remembered the horse. "How ungrateful I am! I've almost forgotten about you."

He ran down the slope and patted the horse.

"Excuse me, my dear friend! Forgive me — and farewell. Your master is leaving you forever. He will no longer ride you through pastures and woods. He won't whistle to you in the morning to make you carry him along Salt Way, across the cold Desna to the capital city of Chernihiv. No more! For that lovely girl who attracted him day and night, giving him sweet hopes and wonderful dreams is no more. Do you hear, my dear friend — she's gone and will never return."

Vsevolod peered into the horse's eyes looking for understanding and sympathy. And the horse understood and thrust his head under his master's arm and snuggled up to him, as if imploring him to stay.

But the young man was afraid of softening up and refused to accept the horse's caresses.

"Farewell, friend. If you find the way, go back to our pasture. Let Father know that his son will never return. If not, look for a new master in these woods, this side of the Desna."

He hugged Blackie as a man hugs his friend and went back to the grave. At the foot of the mound he paused again, looking back. He was about to start his climb when a bird sang in the forest nearby. It was so sudden and the twittering was so sweet that the young man could not resist the temptation to turn in the direction where the sounds came from. And then he wanted to hear that trilling again and again.

Presently, it came again. This time it came from a different place and sounded even lovelier. Then more birds joined in, closer to where he was standing, almost over his head. Suddenly, birds could be heard all along the

edge of the forest, and the somnolent clearing filled with vigorous trilling that reverberated from the city walls. These sounds thrilled him and gripped his heart and, like some balm, they revived his senses deadened by sorrow, reminding him of those simple pleasures which he had always taken for granted and which had suddenly become immeasurably desirable. His imagination filled with memories of long-ago mornings, sweet, untroubled dreams. And then of furious galloping across the meadow — toward freedom, his face bathed by the wind.

Vsevolod fell to thinking and involuntarily sank onto the already familiar stone by the grave. And then a thought struck him.

What would it be like in the other world? Would nothing of all this exist there? Neither the wonderful trilling of birds, nor sunny mornings — nothing? They said that the other world was the evergreen valley of the God of Sun, Dazhbog. Then why did they call it the realm of shadows, of non-existence?

He was terrified. He remembered what a soothsayer had once told him: do not hurry there, you will not find there any of the familiar earthly things! There would be just shadows hovering in gloomy catacombs. And they would look like somber ghosts. The Princess, too, would be but a shadow. She would not smile or talk to him, or even look at him with those radiant eyes which had so attracted him here on earth... And he would not be able to utter a word, to tell her that he had followed her to the other world obeying the inviolable law of his tribe: to be together even after death... Also, he might not find her at all: he would probably be unable to recognize Princess Chorna amidst countless shadows resembling one another. What would he do then? Was it really worthwhile to take his life and leave these woods and all this beauty called life?

Turtledoves in the trees began cooing, squirrels awakened and, jumping from branch to branch, shook off droplets of cool dew, and Vsevolod still sat there, petrified, immersed in his thoughts.

Suddenly, he shuddered. How would he go on living? Where? Amidst Oleg's warriors? In the pasture?.. No, he would probably be unable to live in the woods. After he had met the Princess and had mixed with people, he would not be able to confine his life to forests and horses. But what was he doing? How dared he think about life after

the Princess had died and departed for the great unknown? That swan had been just a bird but it had had courage to die, to leave his azure sky. Was he afraid to do it?

Pausing some more, Vsevolod pulled himself together and hurriedly climbed the mound. Even as he walked up to the top, he took out his well-sharpened knife from its sheath. But before lifting it, he cast a last glance toward the east. What he saw there left him breathless: from the top of the mound, which was as high as the city walls, he could see the glow of sunrise. It now covered a quarter of the sky and looked like a palpitating living being. It grew before his eyes; and as it grew, the night melted away, and colors became brighter. His determination waned, and his momentary uncertainty gave way to a new excitement, to some morbid, farewell elation.

He saw light... Light! That meant the sun would appear soon. If there was light, there was hope to see the sun! At least one more time! At least a tiny part of it.

Vsevolod rushed forward and stopped.

But what if somebody came and prevented him from killing himself? This could happen after sunrise...

He fell to thinking again and stood there for a long time, undecided. At last he braced himself and tried to lift his knife but his hand failed him, stopping halfway. His legs were trembling and he knew he was spent.

"Come on now..." he whispered with stiff lips. "I have sworn to go to her — and now I can't? I can't fulfill my oath..."

He made one more attempt — and fell on the grave. Hiding his face contorted with anguish in the grass, he wept, violently as men do. For he had finally understood that he would not be able to overcome the omnipotent force of life and cut short his never-ceasing quest of light. He realized that he was making a fresh beginning, that more than once he would have to fly into fire, dreaming of happiness, only to burn his wings without attaining it.

For that was the supreme law of life: to go from joys to sorrows and from hope to hope, but to go on and on.

*The end*

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