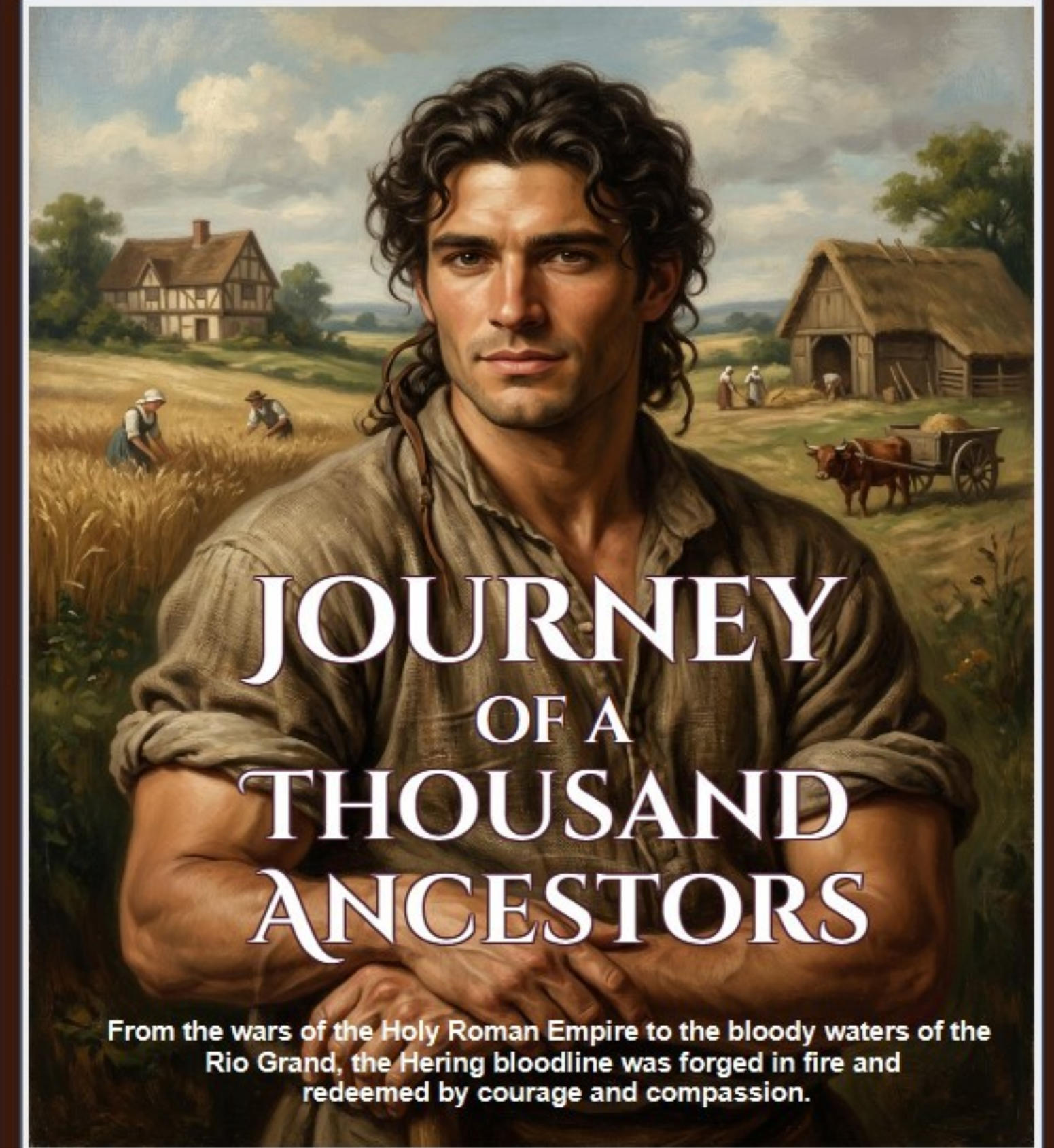




JOURNEY OF A THOUSAND ANCESTORS

From the wars of the Holy Roman Empire to the bloody waters of the Rio Grand, the Hering bloodline was forged in fire and redeemed by courage and compassion.

LISA HERING

JOURNEY OF A THOUSAND ANCESTORS

From the European wars of the Holy Roman Empire to the bloody waters of the Rio Grande del Norte in Texas, follow a bloodline forged in fire and redeemed by courage, compassion, and a love for their land.

This book follows the lives of brave men and women of the Hering dynasty over the past 400 years. From the shores of the Rhine River came a mix of German and French blood, cultural opposites but the human capacity in each to work hard, protect the family, a preference for peace, but willing to heed the call to take up arms for survival. Old European laws were in effect, set up to enrich the rich and to minimize the peasant, a feudal system where it was practically impossible to to ever work your way up. For generations, the Herings competed for scarce positions of rank in a society with fixed ceilings, battling unpredictable weather, crushing taxes, and devastating wars just to protect their king's land.

But when they crossed the Atlantic, the nature of their survival changed entirely. They left behind a world where status was dictated by force, and entered a raw, unmapped frontier where success was built purely by choice. In America, there was no pre-made system to squeeze into—they had to help invent it. Replanting their roots in Texas, their ancestral drive shifted to creation, entrepreneurialism, expanding their farms on land they actually owned, where merit was the only rank you needed. You could make your own fortune, with hard work, smart ideas, and no one ever telling you to stop.

They looked beyond the stars and said, “That’s the limit, and maybe we won’t stop there.” Armed with an unyielding dedication to honesty, moral justice, and relentless labor, they proved that true freedom isn’t about achieving high political titles, but about the right to build your own life, clear your own land, and secure your family’s destiny by your own hand. They were proud, but never boasting, quiet but never unheard, respectable but never demanding. This is the enduring spirit of their bloodline—a generational grit destined to survive for as long as mankind walks the earth.

Dear Cousins and Friends,

There are two main points I hope you will take back with you after reading this book. One is that these ancestors were real flesh and blood, and they lived, laughed and loved just like you and I. Their hardships were different, they lived with different customs, but they loved just the same. They created things that still affect our lives today. And because they loved, we have a change at life itself, we have a chance to make them proud. And we are doing that.

The second thing is to come away with an understanding of the the period they lived in. They thought what they had was the top of the line in technology. When they first began using horses for transportation, they were likely to have figured nothing could top that. And likewise with the train and the telephone. In battle, which the Europeans had a lot of, the Thirty Years War had things the previous wars had not had. The American Revolution had a distinctly different set of tools. And the Napoleonic Wars were again, new and different. But to those who lived during those times, things we have forgotten were their staples of life. We have phrases today that we don't quite realize where they came from or what they mean, like, it's raining cats and dogs. While we know that means it's raining hard, we may not know why they chose those words. And yet they would think you were silly for not immediately recognizing the source. Cats and dogs used to live on the

thatched roofs that leaned against the mountain. When it rained hard, the thatch became slippery, and the cats and dogs slipped off, naturally! To understand they world is a great gift, because it tells you something about the way you live and why. These people are inside of you. You carry them with you. And what an honor to know them and what their lives were like.

And so here is where I say, Happy Reading, and please enjoy getting to know yourself.

And I welcome comments and critiques. So stay in touch.

I have released the first five chapters in this first release, and I will add chapters to it as they are ready.

Thank you for supporting me by reading this book.

Note: Please do not post this anywhere as that will put it in the “published” bracket and that will void my chances of trying to get it published someday by a real publisher, should I choose to do so. Publishers will not publish “published” books.

Thank you!

Lisa Hering

August 14, 2026

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While the narrative is heavily based on the lives of real historical individuals, actual genealogy, and documented ancestral events, the dialogue, private scenes, and certain dramatic timelines are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

This book is dedicated to my father

Henry Lee Hering

a self described Genealogy Nut

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Epigraph

"When evening comes, I go into my study... and step inside the ancient courts of the ancients. I am unashamed to converse with them and to question them about the motives for their actions, and they, out of their human kindness, answer me."

— Niccolò Machiavelli (1513)

INTRODUCTION
Courts of the Ancients

ITALY 1513

It was Niccolò Machiavelli's sacred evening ritual to summon the ghosts of history. Every night, he marched into his library, shedding his dirty clothes for fine courtly robes. This was not a simple act of vanity; it was a show of absolute reverence. He dressed to stand in the presence of the greats. He read their books not just to scan their words, but to map their minds, deciphering both what they shouted and what they left unsaid. Through their triumphs and their tragedies, he came to know them intimately, learning to predict their next moves before they even made them. From these long-dead masters, he extracted the dark arts of strategy, defiance, and absolute power.

Machiavelli did not study the past out of academic curiosity. He did it to save his fracturing homeland. No matter his modern reputation as a villain, his raw observations have withstood five hundred years of scrutiny. Every person who steps onto the stage of modern politics walks a path he first identified and defined.

Those who dismiss Machiavelli as a mere monster fail to understand the desperation of his world. In the 1500s, Italy was being torn apart by foreign armies. The French and the Spanish carved his beloved country into helpless satellites. Machiavelli was a patriot on fire for his nation. Because he had interrogated the great leaders of antiquity—both the noble liberators and the ruthless tyrants—he held the secret keys to freedom. He had the answers because he was the only man alive who had taken the time to ask the ancestors. But the rulers of his day chose arrogance over wisdom. They fought among themselves, ignored the lessons of their forefathers, and left the immense power of history on the table. As a result, Italy remained shackled in foreign chains for another three centuries. Machiavelli may have lost Italy in his lifetime, but through his writings, he won the world.

We hold that exact same power in our hands today. We have the extraordinary opportunity to reach backward, to embrace our own bloodlines, and to breathe fire into the past. Knowledge is the single greatest asset of humanity, and it is the dead who have left us the map. By breathing new life into my own ancestors, I am not just looking backward—I am seeking a truer understanding of myself. We all stand on the shoulders of giants. By retracing the footsteps of those who came before me, I have finally learned exactly who those giants are.

PROLOGUE

A Window on Their World

***Berlin Community, New Wehdem, near Brenham,
Texas 1973***

My father sloshed through mud-filled puddles and wet grass, his eyes locked on the weathered headstones in search of a single name. His nice black work loafers were completely soaked, but he was entirely oblivious to the rain and the chill of another ancestral quest.

“It’ll just be a couple of minutes,” he always promised before we left the house. “Why don’t you wait in the car where it’s warm?”

He routinely dismissed the long, exhausting drives and the suspicious glances of country church administrators who took down our license plate numbers as the unavoidable cost of tracking the dead. The hunt was on, and nothing else mattered.

Inside the station wagon, the windows fogged up in the cool March air. When the downpour finally paused into a drizzle, I stepped outside just to listen for him. The heavy, rhythmic squelch of his muddy footsteps was the only sound

left in the world. The rest was total silence, save for the wind whistling through the bare branches. Surrounded by tombstones and rising mist, my father looked like a ghost himself—a long-lost resident taking a brief break from being dead. In those days, you couldn't just click a button online to trace a bloodline; you had to personally comb the countryside to fill a single blank in the family puzzle.

Suddenly, his excited voice cut through the nasty weather. Neither rain nor sleet could squelch his delight.

“Here it is!” Henry Lee Hering shouted.

Even from the car, the raw emotion in his voice carried across the graveyard. He stood as a solitary silhouette, half-hidden by the mist at the far end of the property.

“What did you find?” I shouted back, pulling my coat tighter. “Is it worth my coming down there?”

The warmth of the car's heater looked vastly more appealing than a trek through the chilling muck, even if it was for our ancestors.

“It's not what,” he called out, his voice ringing clearly through the fog. “It's *who*. I've found Fredericke.”

“Who's Fredericke?” I asked ignorantly.

“Fredericke! Don't you remember the family legend about Fredericke?”

“Well... maybe I do,” I lied, shielding my eyes from the drizzle.

“The legend is true,” he said. His voice dropped into a tone of absolute awe that reverberated across the open space. “Her in-laws are on both sides of her, and her baby is right here with her.”

At the mention of her name and the tragic arrangement of the graves, I felt a sudden, sharp pang in my chest. I didn't remember the story—not yet—but I knew instantly that this was a moment I couldn't witness from a distance. The comfort of the car meant nothing now. I had to see this for myself.

I stepped into the grass and began the long trudge. Every step was a battle against the heavy, sucking Texas clay. My shoes sank deep into the muck, but the magnetic pull of the mystery was stronger than the cold.

When I finally reached his side, I stared down at the three headstones resting in a row. It looked so strange—a daughter-in-law resting eternally between an old married couple. There had to be a remarkable story hidden beneath the dirt.

My father laid his hand on Fredericke's headstone as if he were resting it on her shoulder to comfort her. But he stared past the gravestones, his gaze fixed directly on the past, walking among these people when they were alive, reliving some moment with them that had touched him. I waited in the

quiet until he finally looked up at me. I didn't even need to ask the question.

He began, "All these people boarded a ship in Germany, coming here to live a better life. But they walked right into a war torn Texas. First the Mexican-American War, and not long after, the Civil War. Andreas came as a young boy. Fredericke was his wife. She was eight months pregnant, and childbirth back then could be deadly. Andreas was forced to leave her to fight. He became a gunrunner," my father whispered, his breath pluming in the cold air. "He worried, but his parents gave him their sacred word to surround her with their protection every single day. He had a dangerous mission to perform and needed a clear head.

He paused, looking deeply at me. "Do you feel their pain?"

"Absolutely," I replied, the chill reaching my bones. "I do."

"Then their voices haven't died. They still talk," he said, his eyes filling with a quiet, ancient sorrow. "They tried, but their promise wasn't enough. She and the baby both died before he returned. They failed to protect Fredericke in life, so they chose to do the next best thing. The way they placed their bodies after death is a permanent message. They wanted her to know they loved her, and that she and the baby would never be alone. What happened was never forgotten. It was passed down verbally from generation to generation—from Heinrich to

Charles, to my father, and to me. And now to you. Not only did we hear the legend, but we have irrefutable proof that it is true, just by walking the same path they once walked, our footprints in theirs. Don't you wish you had known them? Don't you wish you could have comforted them with a hand on their shoulders? Don't you wish you could let them know they are not alone?"

I understood then that this wasn't a stagnant hobby; it was a living, breathing recreation of life. These were not just bones—they were kinsfolk I could have loved had time morphed differently.

My father looked at me, a mischievous glint in his eye and a half-smile breaking across his face. "Dear One," he said, using his favorite name for me, "when I finally retire one of these days, I'd like to do some traveling. I've gotten the addresses of the old homesteads of several ancestors, and there are lots of cemeteries and churches we could investigate. It might be rainy, but we can go back so many more generations. That's where we find the old ones, their church records and their graves. Maybe they'll look down upon us and know. Interested?"

He just never quit. I smiled, nodded, and confirmed with absolute finality, "Interested!"

The rain turned to a fine drizzle as we walked back to the station wagon, fairly wet and shivering, but filled with a distinct feeling that we had accomplished something monumental. It felt as if we had let them know someone still cared. I hoped someone would still care about me a hundred years after my own death.

The voices of Maria, Johann, and Fredericke lingered in our heads. It is one thing to hear a story about someone from the past, or to read their names in a faded marriage logbook next to the date of their union. It is something entirely different to touch their tombstone. It makes a real, physical connection with the people of the past—my ancients.

When you know them well enough that you can see them as more than mere bones and weathered headstones, they come to life as the living, breathing mothers and fathers, beloved sons and daughters, inspiring cousins, and fierce friends that they were. You realize they carried haunting emotions no different than ours today, running the entire human gamut from pure ecstasy to utter devastation. What a sweeping history they leave behind as they inadvertently create our collection of family legends. I cherish the walk I took with my grandmother when she admitted to me that she once stole an orange. And my quiet grandfather insisting until his dying day that the first time he saw my grandmother was when she fell off her bicycle. She denied ever doing that. The same goes for

the story of the horse that reared frantically while she was driving home in a buggy, and a man appeared out of nowhere to calm the beast. She never knew who he was. He never asked for any praise or thanks. What if he knew that one act of simple kindness would outlive him? They're all part of a huge love story.

And that is what breathing life into the ancients is really about: understanding the love story that exists underneath all the struggles and sorrow. There was always a love story. Without it, there wouldn't be any reason to struggle or survive.

Since the 1970s, my father and I have marched through dozens of muddy cemeteries, spent months at the Mormon Genealogical Library in Salt Lake City, and risked our lives driving on the left side of the road in England just to find our ancestors. His passion has never faded, and he transferred that fire directly to me. I have passionately written the stories he recounted as we walked together through my grandfather's Texas cotton fields. I have written much of this work through his very eyes, and that is why this book is dedicated to him. Yes, he kept his CPA certificate current until he surpassed the age of one hundred. Yes, he kept his pilot's certification up to date well after he became a centenarian. And the hundreds, if not thousands, of drawings and watercolors he did create and gave out in his later years was cause for the recipients to cheer and see the beauty in his life. But if any one thing defines his

legacy, it's his quest to know, honor, and bring his forefathers and mothers into our lives as the people who directly and indirectly made us who we are. Each one of them is part of a puzzle that would crumble if their input wasn't there. It's that important.

So I watched my father as he touched various grave markers and took a few moments to consider the lives of those in the ground. And without putting a lot of thought into it, I began to do the same, sometimes rubbing the top, sometimes a finger on their name. I read out several memorable epitaphs which told me just a bit more about their life. Those that were marble were cold and smooth. Some were gritty sandstone clearly washing away. And then, a strange, unforgettable thing happened to me that rainy day in the Berlin Community graveyard.

As I knelt in front of a grave marker bearing the name Henry Hering and gently pressed my palm to his worn, faded headstone, I closed my eyes, wondering what he had looked like as a young boy growing up in Germany, and if he wore the typical leather *lederhosen* of the era.

I felt a sudden deep chill. When I opened my eyes, my father was gone.

In the distance, right by the edge of the dirt road, I saw a solitary figure digging in the earth. I spun around, searching

for the station wagon, but the car had vanished. I turned back toward the graveyard, and many of the headstones were gone. Where they had been, the grass was untouched virgin soil. The silence was heavy except for the gardening noises made by the youngster.

Bewildered, I walked over to the young boy. He was carefully planting small green sprigs into the soil. He stopped his work and looked up at me, his eyes bright.

"Hallo," he said, his voice thick with a German accent.

"Hello," I replied, my heart hammering against my ribs. "Have you seen a middle-aged man walk this way?"

"Ja," the boy nodded. "My *großvater*. He went that way," he pointed directly to the empty space where our car had been parked just moments before. "He was tired, so he took the horse. But he'll be back. Just wait here."

"Horse?" I asked. "Horse?" I repeated in disbelief.

"Ja," he said. "You don't know what a horse is? You're not German."

I defended myself, "My ancestors were German." I looked down at his hands. "What are you planting? And why here, in this cemetery?"

"Jasmine," he said proudly. "Maybe some roses, too. Because," he said, I walk past here everyday with my

grossvater, and it looks very lonely. It's a new cemetery, and there aren't many buried here yet. It needs something."

"New?" I asked, remembering that every grave I had seen there was put there before this century and some of the engraving so worn they were no longer readable. The boy looked at me again as if he held all the right cards. I looked up at the massive tree he was working under. They were growing scattered across the landscape, big and old, ancient, so ancient their limbs were twisted and thick, growing horizontal before curving up to the sky. They were towering above him, their thick, sprawling roots casting a deep, suffocating shade over the ground. Not even the wild grass could grow beneath them. All the trees were magnificent and ancient. Why had I not noticed them before?

"What kind of a tree is this?" I asked. The boy looked up, reading the leaves.

"It's a post oak," he said, matter of factly. Then he looked at me as if I was not very smart. "We use them to make posts."

"I knew that," I lied. "I used to make posts all the time."

He laughed and went back to digging.

"Don't you think it's a bit too shady right there for Jasmine and roses?" I asked, remembering my experiment to plant all the same plants in the shade, partial shade, and sun. I

would see what could survive where. I killed a lot of plants unnecessarily.

"Shady?" the boy asked, tilting his head. "No, they'll be fine. Everyone has to make the best of wherever they are."

"But some plants can't grow in the shade," I insisted.

He looked up at the old oaks, his expression stubborn. "But I need them right here by the road, where I can walk past them every morning with my *großvater*. I can bring a fresh rose home to my mother and pick some sweet jasmine for the kitchen. If they are planted far away, I'll never see them. This is close to my home. I think they'll grow."

"What's your name?" I asked quietly.

"Heinrich," he said. "Heinrich Hering."

The breath caught in my throat. "Hering? That's my last name, too. In fact, my father's name is Henry Hering. Henry Lee Hering." The boy was not too impressed. I had yet to sound sophisticated.

"We're probably cousins then," he shrugged, entirely unmoved by the coincidence. "I'm related to almost everyone around here. And everybody has Heinrich somewhere in their name. My *großvater* was the *Obergrebe* back in Oberkaufungen. Christoph Hering. Did you know him?"

"The what?" I asked, stumbling over the word.

"You know," the boy said, a flicker of irritation crossing his face. "The wise man. The one who tells you what to do when you get mad at someone or if you want to do something that someone else doesn't want you to do. If you want to meet him, he'll be back here in just a minute."

The boy patted the dirt down around the jasmine sprig, then turned his head sharply at the sound of a loud horn followed by heavy footsteps approaching from the road. "Oh, there he is! Hallo, *großvater*!"

"Hallo," a man's deep, resonant voice boomed. "Come on, let's go before the rain gets any worse."

I looked to see who it was. It was my father. I turned back to where the boy was. He was gone. I looked at the graves. They were as before. standing in their silent, tragic rows exactly as they had been. I looked for the massive post oak. It was gone. My mind reeled in absolute confusion.

"Did you hear me?" he called out. "We should go."

I stumbled toward the car, opening the door and slipping into the warmth, my hands shaking. "I did hear you... where have you been?"

"I just walked around the cemetery. I was probably just over that ridge," he said, looking at me with concern. "You seem to be in a fog. I don't blame you though, this cemetery is very moving."

"Moving?" I asked. "What do you mean by that?"

"Moving," he said, "emotionally provocative, even life changing."

"You didn't mean like people moving around?" I asked.

"No, that's not what I meant," he said. "But, I could have meant that if you need it to mean that. Did you see anything unusual? Ghosts?"

"I'm afraid to tell you what I saw, dad," I whispered. "I think it must have been one of those stages of sleep where you are so exhausted you have mini-bursts of dreams, even with your eyes open. Um, you didn't see a little boy under that tree, that post oak, did you?"

"What post oak?" he asked. "I thought Post Oak was a street name."

"No," I said, "It's more than a name. It's a tree, a real tree, an oak, but one they make posts out of."

"Oh," he said, "I never thought of it that way. Interesting. Where did you learn that?"

"Well," I said, hesitating, "I saw a little boy out there, right by the... the blank space where there is room enough for a tree... for a post oak. You didn't see him?"

"No," my father said confidently, shifting the car into gear. "I was way across the field."

I paused, trying to pull the strange foreign syllables from the depths of my mind. “Dad... do you know what an *Ober... gr... gr...*”

“*Obergrebe*?” he supplied instantly.

My jaw dropped. “Yes! That's it! You know that word?”

“Sure,” he said casually, navigating the muddy exit lane. “It was the title of a very important man in German villages long ago, an honorable position for a wise and trusted member of the community. There was one in our family back in Oberkaufungen, where these people came from. Why do you ask?”

“How on earth do you know that word? It's old German, isn't it?”

“The only time I've ever heard it used was in conjunction with Christoph Hering,” my father explained. “He was the *Obergrebe* in Oberkaufungen, Germany, back in 1822.”

“1822?” I repeated, a cold, electric shock running down my spine. “1822? Dad... did he just happen to have a grandson named Heinrich Hering?”

My father paused, his eyes narrowing as he mentally calculated the family tree. After a moment, a look of surprise crossed his face. “Yes, he did. Heinrich came over to America when he was about...”

“Don’t tell me,” I interrupted, visualizing the exact height and face of the boy I had just spoken to in the mud. “About twelve years old?”

“Yes, that’s about right.”

I looked back out the window into the misty trees, searching for any sign of the boy, but the hills were devoid of life. I shook my head, suddenly feeling foolish. *I'm imagining entire conversations with ghosts.*

“The strangest thing just happened to me. I swear I just saw young Heinrich digging in the soil right here, trying to plant jasmine under that post oak tree, I mean, where one could have been, I mean, there's nothing there now.”

“Is there any jasmine there now?” my father asked quietly.

“Don’t be silly, of course not,” I muttered.

“Well, look,” he urged, slowing the car.

I leaned across the seat and peered through the rain-streaked glass at the base of the oak tree. The tree was no longer there. It was now a sunny spot. There was indeed jasmine there. And as my eyes drifted further out, I could see there was a lot of jasmine around the cemetery. “There’s jasmine all over the place in the sun.”

A knowing, brilliant smile broke across my father’s face.

“I think you are getting sick, my girl,” he said.

“What do you mean by that?” I asked

“You’ve got the genealogy bug,” he said softly. “Just like me five decades ago. You’ll learn to talk to the ancients.”

“Who are the ancients?” I asked.

“Anyone who has gone before us who holds the knowledge we need,” my father answered, his voice ringing with a deep, ancestral authority. “I talk to them every time I open a book or a certificate or a census where their names are listed. I get lost in the records. Time flies by. I become completely absorbed in the past, in the lives of the ancients. So you see, whenever you want to ask them a question, just let your subconscious lead the way. You’ll see them. You don’t really travel anywhere in body—but suddenly, you have a perfect window into their lives. For a short period of time, anyway.”

“I want to meet Christoph,” I whispered, my fingers still tingling from the touch of the stone.

My father smiled, reaching over to turn off the car's ignition. “Go sit under that oak tree.

“What oak tree?” I asked.

“That one right there,” he pointed. “I believe it’s a post oak.”

I looked straight at the tree. The post oak was there! My jaw must have dropped all the way to the ground. I took in a deep, exhilarating breath, my eyes were wide. I looked at my dad. "How?"

He laughed a gentle laugh, and said, "Put your back against the trunk, close your eyes, and use your imagination. I'll wait."

I stepped back out of the car. The rain had lifted and the sunrays were beginning to poke through the clouds. I walked over to the massive, ancient oak. I sat down among the roots, leaning my head back against the rough bark, and let my conscious mind drift away into the fog. And there was an old man, walking down a dirt road. He was a kindly looking old gentleman, and looked a lot like my father. I kept watching. He was walking with a young boy. It was Heinrich! I opened my eyes in amazement and looked at my dad with excitement.

"It's Christoph, I'm sure of it, and he's with the same little boy I just saw here a minute ago! This is crazy! Crazy fun! And a little crazy scary. I can see them."

"It's our secret," he said. "Don't tell anyone."

Is it real? Is it not real? Is it just a figment of my imagination pieced together from the facts that I know about them and the rest just common sense from my own head?

He replied, "Make Carl Jung one of your ancients. Just mention Active Imagination and he'll tell you all about it.

Between my dad's "bug" for genealogy and Jung's Active Imagination, I had a permanent window into the lives of all my ancestors. For years, I watched them step out of the dust of death and into the space occupied by the living, Like watching an epic movie in a darkened theater. I watched their greatest joys, and I wept through their deepest grief. They stopped being cold names carved into granite; they became flesh and blood, completely real to me.

And all I had to do to see them was breathe a little life into their memory.

"Come on, Lisa. Let's go. The rain is going to start again and we have a window," said my father.

"We sure do have a window," I said. "Let's keep it open."

CHAPTER 1

The Burning of Waldkappel

Waldkappel, Hesse, Germany,

Good Friday, April 1637,

The Thirty Year's War, 1618-1648

Spring refused to come to the valley of Waldkappel in the year of 1637. Instead, the people felt the icy claws of this little ice age bury them in winter deep into the new year.

Waldkappel, literally Forest Chapel, had been vibrant, clattering with the sounds of cottage industry. Being on one of the main thoroughfares through the area, they received enough traffic which brought enough coin to its roughly six hundred inhabitants to live a good life. But no more. The Thirty Years War seemed endless, now in its nineteenth year, and no closer to being resolved than it was in the beginning. The cross-timbered houses were anchored to steep mountain slopes and normally the column of smoke coming from their chimneys would have been, in better times, robust and abundant. But now it left only the thin traces given off by small fires. Their winter supply of wood had been voraciously consumed by every passing army who ate and slept in the homes of the villagers, kicking the owners out into the cold or into a

basement, and took what they wanted. Unpaid by their kings, their own survival depended on what they could get from the people. And if they couldn't give enough, they would often just be killed and their homes burned. This year was even worse. The late summers had been too wet and had rotted the crops on their stalks and stems, leaving nothing to store in the granaries, and no seed for the next year to plant. They had been bled dry by nature and then by three separate invasions of various nationalities participating in this ugliest of European wars. Half the population died, the rest merely didn't survive, rather they merely existed as broken human flesh. In the muddy lanes, a blacksmith's hammer struck with a rhythmic, hollow clang, and women beat rough flax against stone. The only things they could keep were those things they hid well enough not to be found.

Two miles west, the muffled hooves of a thousand horses churned the mud. Captain Matthias von Redern raised a gloved hand, signaling his column of Imperial Croat cavalry men to a halt beneath the shadow of the budding beech trees. These men from Croatia were hired by the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, which had little to do with Rome or with holiness. These men were the best in light cavalry. They were good at weaponry, killing, burning, and torturing. They were the Emperor's favorite, and in the beginning of the war, they were there to stop the spread of Protestantism and reform all of the

German speaking areas back into Catholic. But at his point in the war, after nineteen long years, religion was the least of one's worries. The ruling powers on both sides had long run out of money, and stopped paying the armies. Their job now was to pay themselves by taking entire villages, their gold, their crops, their livestock. Furniture, looms, wooden tools, barns, were torn apart to use as firewood. Thatched roofs were torn down to feed the horses. They moved like ghosts in dirty armor. Their cloaks were stained with the soot of a dozen unremembered hamlets they had already burned, their faces hollowed by winter campaigns for the Catholic Emperor. Martin Luther had posted his ninety five reason why Catholicism needed a hefty revision in 1517, and a hundred years later, it had left a horrible mess. The German state of Hessen was a primary target since its own monarch had declared it to be a Protestant state. Luther had unknowingly set off a future where millions of Christians would kill millions of Christians, a great paradox for a religion whose focus was to spread love.

The army advanced quietly. They were almost there. No one had yet noticed them. Redern peeked through the treeline, his eyes fixing on the church spire of Waldkappel rising in the distance. Though a great chapel by the then standards, St. George did indeed appear as the village namesake, a chapel standing right in the middle of a green forest. But not for long.

"Softly now," he muttered to his lieutenant, his voice dry. "We take them before the midday prayer. If they hear us coming, they hide the grain. And they hide the coin."

Back in one of the village cottages, a child's voice broke the heavy silence. "Mama, look! Kittens!"

Seven-year-old Elsbeth bounded across the threshold, her wool smock splattered with mud. Cradled in her chapped hands was a tiny, wet scrap of fur, its eyes recently unsealed against the harsh world.

Margarethe paused, her hands buried deep in a wooden trough of gray dough. Her spine ached with fatigue. She looked at the creature, then at her daughter's shining face, and a heavy sigh escaped her lips. "Not more mouths to feed, Elsbeth. We have barely enough to keep ourselves alive."

"Don't worry, Mama," Elsbeth insisted, shielding the small, trembling life against her chest. "They will grow fast. They will catch the rats in the cellar."

Margarethe's gaze drifted to the empty rafters where hams used to hang. Her voice dropped to a dry, lyrical whisper. "Dear, child. You know the harvest rotted in the field covered in frost, we may need the rats ourselves to eat before summer comes."

A sudden, jagged cry tore through the valley, shattering the rhythm of the village. High on the eastern crag, the lookout

was running down the goat path, his arms flailing against the wind. "Troops! The army is coming! Get prepared! They're on horses, it's the Croats!"

The word *Croats* acted like a sudden frost, freezing every hand in motion before unlocking a frantic, desperate scramble. But there was so little left to hide. Men buried rusty iron spades beneath dung heaps; women hid wedding rings in the ashes of the hearth.

The town was situated along a major trade and military route. All the marching armies used it as it was the only path through this mountainous area. Margarethe knew the brutal mechanics of their strategy all too well as she had seen armies before. The soldiers would occupy a settlement, devour the livestock, and split the fine family furniture into kindling for warmth. When the village was thoroughly hollowed out, they would poison the wells with manure and rot until the water turned a stagnant green, ensuring no pursuing enemy army could find sustenance there. But the inhabitants were the first to feel the effects. Left with nothing, they simply starved in the cold on top of the remains of their charred homes. The mercenaries left behind a gray wasteland where even the crows found nothing to scavenge.

Margarethe grabbed Elsbeth by the shoulders, her fingers digging deep into the girl's wool coat. "Run uphill," she commanded, her voice tight and fierce. "Run up into the high

pinetrees, as far as your legs can carry you. Do not look back." Margarethe wrenched the tiny animal from her daughter's grip and dropped it onto the dirt floor. She hurried her daughter out the back toward the garden path that led to the cliffs,

"But Mama, the kitten!" Elsbeth cried, tears instantly welling in her eyes.

"Go! Go while I find your brothers!" shouted Margarethe. "Now!"

Margarethe turned back and ran toward the fields. But time was a luxury the valley no longer possessed. Behind her mother's back, Elsbeth returned to the cottage long enough to scoop the tiny kitten from the floorboards and tuck it securely into the thick folds of her heavy linen apron before sprinting into the safety of the uphill brush.

Elsbeth's lungs burned as she climbed through the freezing mountain mist. High on the rocky ridge, hidden beneath the dark canopy of the pines, she finally collapsed into a thicket. Huffing and puffing, her breath rising in ragged white plumes that hung in the bitter April air, she cautiously unwrapped the heavy apron gathered in her lap. The tiny kitten blinked up at her, shivering but whole, its fragile heart beating frantically against her cold palm. She pressed it close to her throat to keep it warm, looking down through the branches at the nightmare unfolding below. They had already been

invaded by several armies. Anything that wasn't hidden was taken or used. And anything that was hidden became a liability for torture to extract the location. In recent years, burning villages had become commonplace, and every village, including Waldkappel, waited in fear of the inevitable.

The soldiers arrived en masse. The invading Catholic Imperial Croat army of the Holy Roman Empire poured into the valley like an evil spirit and filed into the town.

"Bring out the gold!" the Imperial officer roared. He was dressed in finery soiled by the journey, his great warhorse trampling the main street, its hooves churning the unseasonably frozen earth into a mass of mud. Behind him, hardened soldiers kicked in the remaining doors of the town square, the wood giving way to their combined will.

"A full contribution for the Emperor's men, or the match hits the thatch!"

A trembling local magistrate stepped forward from the shadow of the well, his hands raised in empty, bleeding supplication before the rider. "Take what you will Take it all! But we have nothing left to give you, Captain. The late winter rotted the grain we saved, and the wet summers rotted the rest in the fields. The last regiment took our coin, all of it. There is not a single pfennig left in Waldkappel."

The officer's face darkened, turning to granite beneath his fancy helmet. He didn't waste another breath on the wretched of the earth. He wheeled his horse around in a sharp spray of mud and flicked his gloved wrist toward the timber-framed houses.

"Burn it," he commanded.

The execution was brutal and methodical. Soldiers immediately began pulling yellow thatch directly from the freezing roofs or grabbing bundles of dry straw from the barns. They piled the brittle tinder high against the heavy wooden doors and central structural supports of the houses. Kneeling in the mud, they ignited the heaps using glowing, smoldering musket matches and shovelfuls of hot camp embers.

Margarethe's four sons were still inside the main barn, desperately trying to drag their heavy iron plowshares beneath the floorboards to save their livelihood. Through a small back door, she grabbed the hand of one of the boys and with wide and terrified eyes pulled him outside and said, "Run, run!" Before the rest could break for the exit, soldiers piled straw against the heavy timber double doors in front and set them ablaze. The wood caught with a terrifying, hungry roar, sealing the entrance in a wall of blinding orange flame. One more boy escaped before a soldier appeared and slammed the door shut. He piled more hay on it and set it on fire. Trapped inside, the two remaining boys' frantic coughs, their screaming and

desperate hammering against the reinforced walls were swallowed by the crackle of the inferno.

In the streets, a slaughter began. Infantrymen drew their secondary sidearms, hacking down fleeing villagers with heavy, sweeping broadswords and short swords meant for close-quarters butchery. Lower-ranking officers, and personal bodyguards wielded traditional polearms; they swung massive halberds and pointed partisans, using the wicked combinations of axe-blades and long spear points to skew and cut down anyone who ran.

In the chaos, the smoke grew so thick it blinded the killers. Seizing the moments of blinding haze and the soldiers' distraction with looting, a desperate remnant of the villagers—including a weeping, soot-stained Margarethe—managed to slip past the blood-slicked alleys and break into the woods and ran up the hill into the relative safety of the tree line before the army finally packed their wagons and left.

High on the ridge, the night had been an eternity of freezing mist and distant screams. Margarethe stumbled through the dark canopy of the pines, her clothes torn by briars and her skin stained black with the soot of her burning home. She had survived the blood-slicked alleys, but her heart was breaking; two of her boys were gone, swallowed by the roaring furnace of the barn. Her voice, ragged and hoarse from crying and smoke, tore through the quiet forest.

"Elsbeth! Elsbeth, where are you?"

She searched for hours, terrified that the soldiers had hunted the girl down for sport in the biting April cold. Finally, just as the first grey light of dawn filtered through the trees, Margarethe caught sight of a small huddled shape beneath a fallen fir. She lunged forward, falling to her knees in the damp pine needles.

Elsbeth sprang up, and they slammed into a desperate, weeping embrace, holding each other as if the entire world might slip away if they let go. When they finally pulled apart, a tiny, high-pitched mew sounded from the girl's lap. Elsbeth looked down guiltily, peeling back her apron to reveal the shivering kitten.

But Margarethe didn't yell. She didn't have the strength or the heart to be angry. Instead, she gently stroked the creature's small head, a breathless sob escaping her. "Let it stay," she whispered, pulling her daughter close again. "Let it stay. We need anything that is still alive."

Within a day or two, the wind shifted, and the initial fury of the fire finally starved itself out, leaving cold ash on top of hot embers beneath. The air in Waldkappel did not smell of winter anymore; it smelled of lard, wet horsehair, and the suffocating remains of roasting oakwood buildings that had been burned by the invading Imperial army. Every single home

and shop had been burned to the ground, leaving a desolate landscape of soot and bone-white chimneys. Only two isolated stone-walled barns on the very edge of the valley still stood, their roofs partially caved in but their walls stubborn against the heat.

As the town hall's timber frame collapsed into the market square, its charred beams fell like the ribs of an old fish left to rot on a riverbank. The monumental fifteenth century church of Saint George took equal punishment—its late Gothic stones and lofty vaulted ceiling were stubborn, but no match for the intense inferno of burning wooden roof, trusses, and frame. A masterpiece of human labor spanning over a hundred years collapsed in a day.

Looking out across the horizon, survivors saw plumes of thick, greasy smoke rising from the surrounding valleys. The horizon was a jagged ring of fire; they knew then that every neighboring village had been hit simultaneously in a coordinated wave of destruction. And no one would be coming to save them. Armies didn't target armies anymore, they didn't target strategic military installations. They targeted civilians. Nothing was off limits to feed an army of thousand of men and horses. Germany, and especially Hesse, was the central battlefield of a war that filled the continent. Barely a village was spared, even by their own allies who were told by their respective bankrupt kings that "War feeds War, so take

everything they have because you'll get no more pay from us." By now, it was a machine without a goal, eating, burning, and killing to survive one more day. The kings couldn't afford peace. If they signed a peace treaty, the troops would come home and expect back pay. These were seasoned killers. If the king couldn't pay, they would burn the palace. The German rulers had not needed a full time army in the past. Armies would be hastily put together at the start of a war, and dismantled when the war was over. But this war had overwhelmed their resources. The terrible approach to destroy an entire village or a group of villages and their people just to survive one more day could not be sustained. It was a machine that could not be satisfied. And Germany had been caught without a seasoned and trained military. It was from this gut-wrenching loss that Germany determined to never allow this violation to happen again. They would build the greatest army in all of Europe and never have to worry about this kind of destruction again.

But for now, survivors had to remain in the hills until the fires calmed down and coast appeared clear. For several days, they sat high above, watching the fierce sucking blazes burn down to a mass of glowing embers. Then, those whose curiosity was greater than their fear, began returning to a mass of hot charcoal, crumbled stones, and bodies. Margarethe and her three surviving children huddled in the ruins of the town

square, sleeping beneath a lean-to made of scorched timbers. They had no strength to march toward Kassel, the heavily fortified capital city where they might find safety from rogue soldiers and bandits.

Amidst the smoldering ruins and the ash-choked air, a few civilians sat on blackened stone foundations of what used to be the town hall, staring out over the wasteland.

"They burnt everything, Hans," one man muttered, pulling a scorched blanket tighter around his shoulders to shield against the lingering frost. "Every last scrap. They didn't even leave us the scortched timber."

Hans shook his head, staring blankly into the gray smoke. "Honestly, Peter, they weren't really any worse than the others. Remember when the Swedes marched through? They called themselves our Protestant protectors, we share the same religion, yet they drained our cellars dry and stole the horses right out of the stables just the same. Then they tortured us to find every last coin. At the very least, I haven't seen any soldiers trying to hunt us down."

"True," Peter sighed, coughing on the acrid fog. "And at least these Imperial devils put us to the torch quickly. When the Swedes came through the valley last time, they tortured us for the gold, then burnt buildings—and then they hunted us

down in the fields for sport. One army wears a cross, another a crown, but none is more holier than the other."

Margarethe shifted her weight on an upturned salt-barrel outside the ruined forge. Her knees throbbed, wrapped tightly in strips of coarse linen she had cut from a dead trooper's saddlebags—a desperate, stolen compression to keep her own split flesh from festering. Before her, Elsbeth, scraped at the black grease inside an empty tallow tub with a horn spoon, trying to find any remaining beef fat that had not yet gone bitter with mold.

In the shadows of the nearby shed, one of her two surviving boys, Matthias, lay across three empty flour sacks. He had stopped asking for broth two days ago. His skin was the color of a wet turnip, his belly swollen into a tight, hard bladder from eating nothing but boiled nettle-roots and ground lime-bark. The other son, Peter, who'd watched his brothers burn, sat under a tree shivering, his face completely numb to the world.

"The army is coming back again, I hear them," a paranoid voice croaked from the lane. It was the widow Fromm. She had lost her eye to a pike-butt during the second sacking, and the lid was sewn shut with coarse green thread. She carried an ash-bucket filled with gray river-silt, which she used to scour the grease from her pewter dishes before hiding them under the floorboards. But then she laughed and said, "I'll get them this

time. I'll be waiting! I'll throw this silt in their eyes and blind them permanently. An eye for eye, say the Catholics."

"They won't come back through the gap," Margarethe said. Her throat felt as though it were lined with sand. "There is nothing to take. Even the rats have gone down to the fields."

"The mercenaries don't care about the grain, Margarethe. They look for iron. They'll pull the hinges from your cellar door while you're still sleeping behind it," said the widow Fromm. "When they come looking for more, I'll set traps and lock them in! Then we can laugh at them until they die."

A horse snorted somewhere near the old toll-gate. It was a thin, rattling sound—the breath of a beast whose ribs looked like wickerwork. A boy no older than twelve, wearing a blue Swedish coat several sizes too large, was leading it by a hemp halter. He had a great brass kettle strapped to his back and three iron ladles thrust into his belt. He didn't look at the women. He didn't look at the houses. He walked with his eyes fixed on the frozen ruts, his face gray with the camp-fever that had killed more men than the heavy muskets.

"Look at him," the widow whispered, her single eye watering from the wood-smoke that lingered over the ruins. "That's Moritz' child. His family's all dead now. He's alone in the world, like the rest of us. A child with a soup-pot. He'll be dead soon with that fever he's got, the one the soldiers brought

with 'em, you saw it!" She paused, not wanting to say the word in case spirits would hear her. She carefully looked in both directions, hunkered down and then she whispered, "The Bubonic Plague! They've got they do. They brought it with them. I saw it. And that's a more miserable death than fire or battle wounds!"

Margareth didn't want to contribute to the dark conversation, but she had seen it. The army and cavalry brought it with them, wherever they went. It was their parting gift to the destroyed towns, and it was also their own well deserved punishment, the Bubonic Plague. But they hadn't been in Waldkappel long enough to infect them, and the residents who lived hadn't been in contact with the soldiers. But she was secretly glad they would die their own miserable death of disease, and she would not. She would survive.

Across the square, the great oak doors of Saint George creaked open on their one remaining iron pivot. Pastor Gottlieb came out, his black cassock so torn at the elbows that the white smock beneath looked like grease-spots. He carried no book. He carried only a wooden spade with a tipped edge of beaten copper. He didn't speak to them as he walked toward the ditch behind the tithe-barn where three weavers' wives had died of burns. He simply began to dig graves, and they listened to the small, rhythmic thunk of the blade digging graves against the frozen German clay.

Elsbeth, desperate to keep her new pet alive, spent hours exploring the perimeter of the camp the cavalry had abandoned. Near the ruined forge, the soldiers had left behind a pile of damp, discarded saddle blankets and a half-eaten bale of moldy hay where the warhorses had been tethered.

It was there, in the quiet debris of the killers, that the tiny calico kitten curled up to sleep. It returned to Elsbeth's apron that evening purring, as she kept it close to her body heat, its gray fur crawling with dozens of tiny, hitchhiking jumping insects.

"Oh, look at all the fleas," Margarethe said, glancing down. "They're really biting tonight. All the livestock is gone. They have no food. I suppose, like us, they haven't had anything to eat in a few days. I've seen them all over the camp. Please stay away from them, dear. You need to let that kitten go. I can see you're getting bites."

She turned her eyes back to the horizon, watching the distant, grease-thick smoke of neighboring valleys and the villages within lend a deeper, darker blackness to the evening sky. She squeezed Elsbeth's trembling shoulders, and held her close. She checked on her starving son, but it was too late to save him. Humped over, shoulders shaking visibly, she made a resolve to get the rest of them out.

"We cannot stay here to starve in the ashes," Margarethe whispered to her remaining two children over the weeping of the other survivors. "In the morning, as soon as the first light breaks, we must walk to Kassel. It is a fortified city. They will have bread. We can start over."

But as she spoke, Elsbeth didn't answer. The girl's head rolled heavily against Margarethe's collarbone.

"Mama..." Elsbeth whimpered, her voice suddenly thick and laced with a terrifying lethargy. "My throat hurts. It's so hot. The mountain wind is hot."

A cold dread, sharper than the unseasonable April frost, gripped Margarethe's stomach. She reached out with a trembling hand and peeled back the collar of her daughter's smock, shifting her down toward the weak amber glow of the dying camp embers.

Beneath the girl's arm, the skin was already stretched tight, angry, and deep purple.

Margarethe's breath hitched in her throat. She knew the symptoms all too well. She had seen it rip through the regiments in the winter of '35. By midnight, the violent shivering took hold completely as a cold sweat broke across Elsbeth's forehead. A fiery, agonizing swelling—a bulbous, black bubo—fully formed in the tender flesh under her small

arm. The invisible enemy left behind by the Emperor's men had claimed its first victim in the ruins of Waldkappel.

Margarethe froze in the darkness, a breathless sob escaping her as she cradled her daughter. She was filled with anger believing that after surviving the fire, the blades, and the blood-slicked alleys, her girl would die a much more ugly, miserable death.

Then, Margarethe noticed a dark, tender spot forming on her own arm.

It was useless to travel to Kassel now. The city gates would be barred against them the moment a guard saw the sickness on their faces. The best she could hope for was to keep her girl warm, stay nearby, and wait for the end. Matthias was too weak. He wouldn't last. But there was still Peter.

"Peter!" she yelled, turning to the boy beneath the tree who stared blankly at nothing. "Peter, look at me! Focus, concentrate!"

The boy's expression didn't change at first, his mind still trapped in the flames of the barn.

"Peter, listen to me. Elsbeth and I are coming down with the black plague. We can't go. But you—you can still go to Kassel, to the refugee camp, if you haven't developed the sickness yet. Do you feel it? Do you see any spots?"

The boy seemed to snap back to reality at those biting words, realizing with a sudden shock that he was about to lose his mother, his sister, and his remaining brothers.

"Mama," he cried in pure agony, reaching for her. "You can't go! You can't leave me! No! Not you!" He began to weep miserably, the weight of the war crashing down on his shoulders. "I can't lose you all! Look at your arms, your legs, all over, do you have any spots? Do you feel hot or sick?"

Peter looked at himself carefully. "No, mother, nothing. I don't feel hot."

"Then you must go to Kassel, now, tonight!" she said, pleadingly. "I'll follow you as soon as I can, boy. Now go, this moment!" she commanded, her voice tight, forcing a lie she knew he needed to hear. "GO! Immediately, don't wait for the morning. Get away from this place and find a place to hide until sunrise, and then go with all speed to the city! Pass through Oberkaufungen. They may be able to help you. There was no smoke over their village, but they might be garrisoned. If there are soldiers there, keep going to Kassel. The refugees will be there in the walled city of the Landgrave, the man who sits in his palace protected by the best cannons in the land."

"But Mama, I can bring you with me!" the boy sobbed.

"No, son, we cannot go with you. But if this disease leaves us alive, we will find you! Go!" Margarethe cried.

Yes! Mama," he sobbed. He stood up, disoriented and shaking, but he obeyed her command. Crying into the cold night air, he turned and ran blindly into the darkness.

Before the first march of boots had echoed through the valley, Waldkappel had been a beautiful village, boasting six hundred people. After the burning of their village and the looting of their remaining food, survival was almost impossible. There would be months of starvation, exposure to the elements, and the plague, in the end leaving only forty-two women and eleven children to exist almost like animals in the basements of their former homes until the end of the war in 1648. Every home, shop, and timbered frame had been reduced to ash.

History considered Waldkappel to be a complete loss.

CHAPTER 2

Oberkaufungen Garrisoned

**Oberkaufungen, Hessen, Germany,
April, 1637**

When the wind shifted on Good Friday afternoon, seven-year-old Christoffell Hering and his mother walked up the hill from their thatched-roofed, cross-timbered home. Made almost entirely of flammable materials, Christoffell could see the cleared, wide swaths of land circling the town's borders—monitored heavily by the gatekeeper in the two-story gatehouse down on the main road. Because Oberkaufungen lacked a full city wall, his father, as the Landgrave's chosen administrative governor and judge, had established these cleared paths to catch spies and interrogators before they could reach the heart of the village. It was why Landgrave Wilhelm V, safely fortified behind the massive stone walls of nearby Kassel, had hired Christoffell's father in the first place. Oberkaufungen was the final, critical checkpoint for all shipments heading to the capital, and his father was the absolute best man to handle the tense intersections of the citizenry, the law, and the wildly powerful Abbey.

But Christoffell knew the invasion of Waldkappel was coming long before the smoke rose over the ridge. Even a boy of seven in 1637 understood the geometry of war. He knew it by the way his father wouldn't talk and had an unusual scowl on his face that wouldn't come off. And how they were now being herded up the hill inside the walls of the monastery. He saw the older boys sitting on the high stone walls of the imperial Kaufungen Abbey keeping watch of the happenings.

"Mama, may I sit with the other boys on the stone walls of the abbey?" he asked.

"What are they doing, boy? Sitting on the walls?" Liesel looked out the front door and sure enough, like a line of pigeons, the village boys watched the goings-on from above. Liesel gasped. "Where are their mothers? That's the most fool-hardy thing I've ever seen. No, you may not go. They'll be the first ones get pulled off by those horrible fighting men!"

"No, Mama, they're fast. Before the men can climb up, they'll jump down into the monastery grounds and vanish like rats!" said the little boy.

Christoffell's breathing heightened as he could feel that something very bad was about to happen.

"Mama, where is father?" Christoffell asked.

"He's with the treasurer of the church and several of the pastors," said Liesel.

"Are the bad guys coming, the ones burning down Waldkappel?" he asked.

Liesel looked over his head at the black smoke rising and filling the air with the smell and taste of ash. There wasn't just one fire. She could see several clouds of smoke from village after village. In those villages lived people she knew. She pulled Christoffell close to her and wiped his hair back, mostly because she just wanted to touch her son before the impending doom. Her breathing was heavy because she did not know if her family would be the next to go.

"Listen very carefully," she said, "for the next few days, you must do everything you are told, regardless of what it is. You'll do it or they'll kill you, or they'll kill one of us. We can count our blessings if they garrison here and don't burn us down."

The boy looked at her anxiously, but nodded in agreement.

"I'm going to be blunt with you because you need to know. You may have to save yourself. If they do something to me or your father, and you have a chance to run or hide without them seeing, you must do it. The men are headed this way, the soldiers, the army, the cavalry, like the ones that have been here before. Your father is going to try and get them to be lenient on us."

"How is he going to do that?" Christoffell asked.

"He's going to go with the Ritterschaft and offer them what they want – gold."

"Why does he have to go, Mama?" the boy asked.

"Because he's the Obergrebe, and it's a very important job."

Along the main road to Oberkaufungen, horse after horse trotted at a quick pace. The Croatian light cavalymen wore the heavy wool uniform of the Imperial Croat Light Cavalry. They were lean and mean and fast. They distinguished themselves by wearing blood-red cloaks or scarves around their necks. When anyone saw the red scarf, they knew to be afraid. However, they were filthy, wild, and extremely dangerous. Their nerves were battle-hardened and they do not think twice about killing. It's part of their jobs as mercenaries.

The cavalry numbered in the thousands. They were led by a jaded colonel who had seen war too many times. His heart was hard and he wanted to get his job done without delays. Therefore, he was not amused when four tiny dots emerged on the road in front of them from the town. The cavalymen were war-weary from having burned numerous villages that day, and did not take kindly to anyone who interfered with their quest. The punishment was usually something along the order

of death and destruction, general pillaging, rape, and lighting the village on fire.

"Do you see something ahead of us in the road?" asked one of the trusted guards to the colonel's right.

"It appears so," said the colonel.

"You think it's people?" asked the guard.

"I think a better word is idiots, annoying idiots," said the colonel.

"We can start our job early, get done early, more time to drink!" said the guard.

The cavalry continued and the four dots became four men, dressed in plain clothes, carrying no visible weapons. They carried a small trunk.

The colonel observed this. "Perhaps they aren't idiots after all. They're starting to look a little smarter now that I can see their clothing, and baggage. Go meet them," he paused, "before they get too close for comfort."

The aide coaxed his horse into a trot and paused when he reached the foursome. The colonel watched closely. The men from the village bowed their heads in supplication. That was a good sign. Killing was not on the immediate menu. And so, what were they here to offer in exchange for leaving their village intact?

The small trunk was opened and the armored guard removed something. He turned and raced back to the colonel.

"They want to give you gold," said the guard, holding out the two coins he had retrieved.

"We'll have to invite them over for dinner, at their house, with their food, with their wives cooking it, and their daughters in the bedroom, if we haven't killed them."

The cavalrymen within hearing range began to laugh. It was important to do so, as this was a very delicate moment. And one single horserider who felt threatened could cause the horses to stampede, killing their own men, if not the colonel himself. Having a thousand men on horses stand still was a danger in itself.

"Well, go back and ask them what they want in return for their gold," said the colonel. He looked at the coins and felt their weight. The guard rode back to the four villagers, exchanged words, and returned.

"They will speak only to you," said the guard.

"I'm sure they would. They want to buy their way out," said the colonel. "They're from the church. The knights. They've got money. Their religious beliefs tell them to spread love and kindness, and what do they do? Keep their tenant farmers just one notch above starvation. They extract every ounce of work out of them they can without killing them. A dead farmer can't

pay those extortionists anything. Oh, they've got lots of gold, if the Swedes haven't taken most of it yet. Come, we'll meet them head on, but keep them at a distance."

Twenty men on horses advanced until they were within twenty feet of each other. The colonel held his hand up high and they stopped. He frowned at the four men who bowed in front of him. "What do you want?" he asked.

A very large, but affable looking man introduced himself as the Obergrebe of Oberkaufungen, the advisor and chief financial overseer of the town. He also stood as the Landgrave's chosen administrative governor and judge for the district, managing the tense intersection of the citizenry, the law, and the Abbey. Beside him stood the town pastor and the town treasurer, and a knight, not in armor.

"I am the Obergrebe of Oberkaufungen, Frederick Hering," the large man said, his voice steady despite the wall of iron horses before him, "and we welcome you."

The colonel was slightly stunned, and then a slow grin broke through his beard. He laughed. "The honor is completely mine," he said. "Do you know who we are and what we plan to do?"

"We are quite aware, Colonel," said Obergrebe Hering. "We've come in a spirit of peace and hospitality."

The colonel's smile vanished, his eyes turning cold. "Only gold will make us... shall we say, become peaceful guests." There were some smiles at the absurdity, the laughs dry and menacing. "We are tired and plan to garrison in your town over the Easter weekend. We will do as we please."

"But, Colonel, we bring you gold!" said Frederick.

At the Obergrebe's signal, the knight stepped forward. On bended knee, he handed the box to one of the aides who unlocked the highly decorated brass box. Inside, the sharp, heavy clink of gold coinage echoed in the quiet valley. The colonel showed obvious surprise, leaning forward over his saddle. "Well, let me see that!"

One of the staff officers near him jumped off his horse, seized the small trunk from the aide and handed it up to his commander. The colonel examined it closely, pulling out several coins, testing the edges with his thumbnail, and feeling the weight.

"Count it!" commanded the colonel.

While his officers counted the coin, the colonel looked past the four men toward the village nestled against the dense, sprawling Kaufungen Forest and the shallow, crystal waters of the River Losse. Unlike the charred ruins of Waldkappel, this town was a jewel. Steep-roofed, half-timbered houses rolled out before him, decorated with intricate wood carvings that

had stood for centuries. He knew the history of this place; every mercenary commander carried a mental ledger of the richest targets in Hessen.

Six hundred years prior, the widowed Empress Kunigunda had built the massive monastery and its cathedral-like church to live out her final days. Not wanting to ever have to fear the rich local nobles, she endowed it with tens of thousands of acres of timber and river to keep it independent. When Hessen broke its Catholic chains in 1526, the nuns were replaced by the unmarried spinsters and widows of Protestant aristocrats, protected by an elite class of secularized knights. When the Landgrave tried to seize it, those furious knights fought back until a compromise was struck: they called it the Noble Knightly Monastery Guild. The knights, the Ritterschaft, managed it. They made the money. And it had made them the richest entity in Hessen.

The colonel looked back down at Hering. He knew exactly where this gold came from. It was squeezed from a total monopoly. The knights owned the forest, charging top dollar for the firewood that heated every hearth. They owned the Losse River, forcing peasants to pay fees at the watermills to grind their grain. They controlled the freight wagons, the charcoal furnaces, and the massive sheep ranches worked by forced peasant labor. They even owned the breweries, ensuring that every drop of safe, uncontaminated beer drunk in the

district lined their pockets, while foreign luxuries like coffee were banned to keep the silver from leaving the realm.

While the colonel's treasurer continued counting gold, the colonel addressed the Obergrebe again, his tone conversational but dangerous. "What is it that you expect from us for this nice donation?" He specifically did not mention the contracts he was authorized to sign, hoping to slip into the city limits with his pockets full and no written obligation at all. But the Ritterschaft knew exactly how the mechanics of extortion operated.

"Please leave our town intact, our citizens unharmed, and while we gladly feed your men while they are here, we must have some food remaining after you are gone. That is all. We will give you the best beds in town, feed you our best food, serve you with our best drink, and give you no trouble at all," said the Obergrebe. "We would like to have your safe-guard contract."

The colonel retained a bored, almost insulted expression on his face. He, like all the commanders, kept official parchment documents pre-signed by General Isolani which stated a minimum price in gold and what that would purchase the civilians. It was a standard form with blank spaces for the name of the town and the date. It was legal blackmail, and the colonel was required by military law to comply if the terms were met. However, the wealthy knights who operated the

church knew that the only thing they were actually buying was a guarantee that the buildings would not be burned. The paper would not protect the citizens from the cruelty of individual men; it protected only the physical infrastructure.

"Get a charter," ordered the colonel to his staff officer. The man immediately signaled to a supply wagon, and a subaltern brought up a blank charter. Once the parchment was laid out against a saddlebag, the colonel said, "Fill in the blanks with April 1637 and..." He looked down at the Obergrebe. "What's the name of this town?"

"Oberkaufungen," said Hering.

"Ober... whatever," said the colonel, spitting into the mud. "Why don't you peasants get reasonable names for your pitiful villages?" The filled-in document was handed to the colonel along with an ink horn filled with iron gall ink and a goose-feather quill pen. He scrawled his name at the bottom. "We won't burn your town," he said, "but be careful what you expect from us otherwise. We are hungry, tired and bored."

He passed the crackling parchment to a special protection guard unit. The four village men bowed respectfully and stood out of the way. The cavalry passed into the town, a long, deafening column of thundering hooves and clinking stirrups. The protection guard unit marched directly to the entrance of the monastery church, planting their pikes. The rest of the

cavalry swarmed into Kaufungen to occupy the peasant homes. The presence of those church guards signaled to the common soldiers that the Abbey buildings were strictly off-limits for looting and arson under penalty of death.

Because the extortion was paid up front and top-tier food and wine flowed into the officers' tents, a razor-thin veneer of military discipline was maintained. In most German villages, quartering was an unmitigated nightmare. Decades of sectarian religious propaganda had eroded human empathy; soldiers viewed civilian populations as heretics who deserved whatever savagery befell them. Unpaid for months by bankrupt kings, mercenaries used psychological terror and brutal beatings to unearth hidden wealth. They tore down doors and smashed family heirlooms for firewood. But in Oberkaufungen, the officers issued a strict command: the civilians were to be treated decently. Any soldier who broke the treaty would face death.

It was several hours before Frederick made it into the inner walls of the abbey. Christoffell and several of his brothers and sisters were playing games as Liesel watched the gate where Frederick would have to enter. Upon seeing him, she ran to him, hugging him tightly around his broad shoulders.

"I was so worried," she said, tears streaming down her face while at the same time laughing. Once they embraced for a moment, Liesel asked, "What's the plan?"

“We’ve got to go back down to the house. Three or four men will be garrisoned with us. They will have our bedrooms. We will have the cellar,” he said.

“Will we have blankets?” Liesel asked. “It will be freezing down there.”

“Let’s go home fast, maybe we can secure one, but one at the most,” he said. Liesel gathered the children and walked out the gate. Christoffell watched as the Imperial soldiers walked the town. The slaughter of the livestock was already happening. Berta’s best cow was hanging from a tree. Herr Merkel’s three pigs had already been sliced open.

“Let’s hurry,” said Frederick. “We may be able to find a few scraps of food before they come too.”

The family hurried down the hill and into their home. “Here, Christoffell, take this blanket down into the cellar. Liesel, grab some small scraps of food, anything and hide it downstairs.”

“Darling,” said Liesel, “where shall I put my wedding ring?”

But it was too late. They heard the horses sloshing in the mud. The cavalymen rode directly up to the cottage door. They did not knock. Instead, a heavy leather boot kicked the wooden door completely off its latch, slamming against the interior wall. The men crossed his family's threshold. They had been

ordered to keep the peace, but they were terrifying, towering men with sun-bleached hair, wild beards, and skin calloused deeply from the pikes. They had no armor, prioritizing speed over brute strength. Their coats were dirt-stained and underneath they wore tunics mismatched and grease-stained. Yet, to Christoffell's astonishment, they could speak but their German was minimal. One of them smiled and said, "When... dinner?"

Liesel was not prepared with an answer. She didn't really understand the finer details of what she was supposed to do. "Uh..." she stumbled over her words, "give me an hour if you would,"

"One hour?" the men groaned, while one of them piped up, "We have meat."

"You...you have meat?" Liesel asked, worried she might recognize whatever it was they killed and it might be someone or something she knew.

The man flopped a rooster on the table, dead. Then a hen, their best egg-layer. He looked straight into Frederick's deep blue eyes, and said, "Where's the beef?"

At that precise moment, another soldier entered carrying the head of their milk cow. Blood drippings followed him. He smiled, proud of his work. His teeth were crooked and filthy.

“They already slaughtered it. They milked her first. Better get some big pots out. Dinner’s on us today.”

Frederick knew this was likely to happen, and he had prepared himself. But Christoffell had not.

“You killed Betty?” he asked.

The men laughed. “Yes... kill Betty! But meat, not for you. Thousand men out there, no food two days. Need big pot... put cow head in, for soup. Where is?”

Liesel sprang into action. “I’ll find something,” she said. “I don’t know that I have a pot big enough.” She pulled out two pots, both small. She hung her head and began to cry. “I’ll keep looking,” she said. “Maybe outside, maybe in the barn.”

The cavalryman threw the head angrily into the fireplace. His face was weathered and scarred from years of fighting. “Find it!” he ordered harshly. “Something better be cooking when I come back! I’ll take this boy here with me. No pot, no boy.” The soldier grabbed Christoffell and pulled him outside with him.

Liesel responded with, “Yes, I will have something! I promise, don’t hurt the boy. His name is Christoffell. Please, call him Christoffell.”

Frederick said, “Please don’t take the boy!” But the soldier pulled out a curved saber.

“That boy comes with me with your hand or without. That’s your last warning.” The cavalryman turned revealing a short carbine rifle slung across his back. As he dragged the child out the door, they could see two massive wheellock pistols jammed into holsters on each of their saddles. The horses were small, wiry, aggressive Balkan ponies, but they were fast, which was their trademark, the light cavalry of the Croats.

“Frederick,” Liesel whispered, “we have no metal pots. They’ve been gone for years for all the previous plunderings. What do I do?”

One of the soldiers grabbed her arm and pulled her outside. “I’m sure you’ve got something hidden out here somewhere. Just start looking. You might as well find it before we get rough.”

“I can make something,” she said. “I can dig up some clay, and make a clay pot.”

“Look Mama,” said Christoffel. He was returning with his captor dragging a large iron pot. He kept dropping it and picking it up again. He was breathing hard. “I got a pot!”

The soldier who’d taken him was returning with him. “You’re lucky I didn’t feel like waiting until we extracted the location of your kitchenware. Grabbed this from the baggage train.”

In truth, the soldier knew that the area had already endured nearly two decades of military occupation. They had been milked dry of mobile wealth followed by years of heavy extortions, quartering, and “donations” demanded by friendly and foreign forces. Metal pots were one of the first things to go, as they were liquid currency, easily melted down into bullets or traded for alcohol and tobacco.

“Meat outside,” said one mercenary. The other two drew their swords and walked outside. By this time, Frederick had a fire in the fireplace going. The mercenaries came back inside with a chunk of meat weighing over five pounds each. They thrust the sabers in the fire, sat back at the table, and waited.

Driven by a child’s desperate curiosity, Christoffell asked one of the men who smelled of old sweat and animal lard, “Where do you live?” The Croat did not understand. He replied, “Wohnen? No place. On the road. My home...Croatia. Is most beautiful country... yes? Lakes... like emerald, one thousand islands, frozen waterfalls.” The man laughs. “You go someday, yes?” He laughed hard again. “But, maybe we eat you first.”

Christoffell's eyes were wide just trying to imagine an island. “Why are you fighting?” he asked.

“Money,” said the Croat. “But, now king has no more. So we take from you. We are Catholic, You are heretic. Good reason to kill.” The Croat’s hand flashed to his belt, drawing a

heavy hunting blade in a blur of steel. "If we didn't have orders to be on our best behavior, I would slice you through right now!"

The blade stopped an inch from Christoffell's chest. The boy shrieked and threw himself backward, falling and hitting the floor boards. Christoffell's mother froze by the hearth, her knuckles white around her wooden stirring spoon, terrified to move. The table erupted into coarse, roaring laughter as the soldier slid the knife back into its sheath. Embarrassed, his heart hammering against his ribs like a trapped bird, Christoffell crawled back up. He swallowed hard, trying to reclaim his courage.

"So why was Waldkappel burned?" asked the boy.

Liesel looked hard at Frederick, who in turn said to Christoffell, "Son, no more questions."

The soldier's laughter died instantly. "He can ask," said the man. The room grew heavy. "They didn't pay. They didn't have anything. So we were hungry and cold and that made us angry," said the soldier softly, leaning over his wooden bowl. "We have to eat, sleep, and get paid. The emperor has no money left. So the villages must pay instead. War feeds war. They must give us food and let us rest. Your village has been very good to us. You are in luck because of that monastery.

Rich people gave us a lot of gold. Without that money, little one, I am afraid you wouldn't be very happy with us."

"What would you be doing?" the boy asked.

The soldier was unemotional outwardly as his face did not give away his thoughts. He picked his saber from the fire as did the others and began ripping off big chunks of meat with only their teeth. "You will be lucky if you never have to know. We have been paid. That is all you need to know."

Christoffell stayed quiet after that. He and his family ate scraps, but were not allowed to touch any of the remaining meat.

That evening, the boy and his family were relegated to the basement, forced onto a dirt floor with no blankets. They piled together in the dark to keep warm, listening to the heavy footsteps of the mercenaries pacing directly above their heads. The Croats' boots were heard much of the evening and night, and they seemed to be going in and out of the cottage. Through a small window, Frederick could see the many campfires blazing in the mud between the houses.

The family sat there in horror. There would be no sleep for them as long as the cavalry was there. They couldn't sleep as they heard occasional shrieks of pain from locals who were being persuaded to give up secret locations of stored goods. Maybe there were valuables around somewhere, but maybe

there was not. Then they heard one quite close to the house. It was Farmer Bauer. A shriek pierced the night's silence. Christoffell sat up, hearing the voices of the men staying in his home who should have been asleep by now. Christoffell listened intently. Herr Bauer, his good neighbor, was screaming and pleading for his life.

"I have nothing more!" the villager cried, his voice muffled by the thick stone foundations but filled with terror. "I would give it to you if I did!"

"Well, the Swedes have invented a nice drink. Have you heard of it?" a soldier asked from the street. "We'll fill your belly with manure! Then we stomp."

There were noises of pain and terror, the sharp clank of iron buckets, and then the sickening sounds of physical brutality. The boy could not tell exactly what was happening in the pitch blackness of the cellar, but he knew it was not good. Soon, there was complete silence and a heavy body dropped to the ground. The soldiers laughed as they walked away. But, before the killers could flee into the darkness, a lantern flared. The Croat officers had arrived.

The next morning was a dark, gray morning. An officer ordered the villagers to come to the market square. The treaty had been violated and three soldiers were waiting their fate. They stood bound in the mud, stripped of their weapons. One

by one, an officer stepped forward and thrust a long partisan spear deep into their chests until they slumped forward, lifeless.

The crowd watched in silence as the blood pooled and froze in the ruts of the road. Christoffell stood pressed against his mother's side, staring at the bodies of the men who had eaten at their table the night before, and the neighbor who had died for gold he didn't have. Those images would haunt him for the rest of his life.

On the fourth day, the boots of the Imperial garrison finally marched out of the square, their drums beating a rhythmic, hollow retreat that echoed off the hills of the Kaufungen Forest. Only then did the village dare to breathe. But it was a shallow, collective breath, tasting of cold iron and the copper tang of spilled blood.

In the center of the lane, the mud had frozen solid around the four bodies. The neighbor, Farmer Bauer, lay a few yards away from his executioners, his face twisted into a permanent mask of agony. The three mercenaries sat slumped against each other like discarded sacks of gray wool, the dark stains on their tunics frozen into rigid, black crusts where the spears had found their marks.

"Don't look, Christoffell," his mother whispered, her hand tightening so hard against his shoulder that her fingernails bit through his sleeve.

But he couldn't look away. The Croat soldiers who had sat at his table, the ones who had spoken of islands in emerald water and laughed at his fear, were now just meat. The hunting knife that the man had teased him with lay useless in the mud at his side.

Meanwhile, Pastor Gottfried had walked from Waldkappel hoping to be useful to the village of Oberkaufungen, since there was nothing else for him to do in his own village. He waited in the forest until the Croats were gone, and then he walked up the hill to the gatehouse and the wall that protected the monastery.

The local civil guard, the Bürgerwache, would have desperately wanted a known, surviving pastor to help get the village back on their feet in not only a spiritual way, but also in an administrative capacity, recording the damage, and to help record and bury the dead. The townspeople believed the Croat brutalization was a literal manifestation of God's wrath. A pastor was needed immediately to perform emergency burials, and deliver sermons to convince a traumatized population that they were not entirely abandoned by God.

To the men at the gatehouse, anyone wanting to get in was a problem to investigate. What they saw was a lone figure in a tattered, dust-caked black cassock slowly ascending the steep hill from the village below. He leaned heavily on a wooden walking stick.

Hans lifted his voice sharply. "Halt! Stand clear of the shadow of the arch! Another step and we prime the pan!"

The pastor stopped, his breath coming in ragged gasps. He raised a trembling, dirt-stained hand, keeping his palm open. "Hans... it is I. Pastor Gottfried... from the parish at Waldkappel. Do not loose your powder."

Dieter squinted, leaning over the stone ledge. "Hans, look at the face under the grime. It's Pastor Gottfried. He wed my cousin Marta in the valley three winters ago."

Hans was unmoved and kept his tone rigid. "I know his face, Dieter. But the devil wears many masks, and the Croats only marched East yesterday." He shouted down from the gatehouse, "Pastor Gottfried, why are you alone? Where is the flock from Waldkappel?"

Pastor Gottfried replied with cracking in his voice, "They are scattered to the hills, or sleeping in the ashes of the churchyard. The Imperials left us nothing but smoke. I have walked six days through the forest. My boy has come this way,

Peter, and I am searching for him. And I offer my services to your village.”

Hans leaned forward, his eyes scanning the pastor’s exposed skin. “Six days in the woods? Show me your hands, Pastor. Pull back your collar. Let me see the throat.”

The pastor sighed heavily, using his stick for balance as he untied the linen bands at his neck, pulling the black cloth aside to reveal pale, sweat-slicked skin, free of swelling. “Look all you wish. There are no boils. No black pestilence. Only the dust of the road and the hunger in my belly. My blood is clean, by the mercy of Christ.”

Dieter urgently whispered to Hans, “Let him in, Hans! Old Bertie died in the crypts two days ago during the siege. His body is still wrapped in sackcloth down there—we have no one to read the Latin or bless the earth. The people are losing their minds.”

Hans stared down at the pastor for a long, silent moment, calculating the risk. He finally lowered his halberd. “If you bring the sickness into this citadel, Gottfried, I will throw you from the wall myself.” Then he shouted behind him, “Open the wicket! Just the small door! Keep the iron bar ready!”

The heavy wooden gate groaned as a narrow pedestrian door slipped open just enough for one man. Dieter scrambled

down the stone steps, offering a hand to pull the weary pastor across the threshold.

Dieter softly pulled the door shut behind them. "God be praised you live, sir. Come inside. The Obergrebe is in the tithe barn... he has a ledger full of the dead that needs your hand."

Pastor Gottfried went straight to the Obergrebe, Frederick Hering, who knew him personally. There was a great reunion and a sharing of information about the brutality experienced by each village. Gottfried didn't offer a prayer; words of comfort had run out years ago. He said, "We'll bury Bauer in the churchyard, but those three, they go in the ditch to be eaten by the wolves they pretend to be."

As village men moved the bodies, Christoffell's own father tried to clean the blood from the street with a bundle of frozen straw, as if he could erase what had just happened.

Christoffell walked back to their cottage, his boots crunching on the frozen grass. Inside, the fire had gone out. He stood in the center of the room, looking at the empty wooden bowls on the table. The Croats had kept their promise to the Abbey; they had not burned Oberkaufungen. They had kept their discipline under the threat of the blade.

But Christoffell realized then that the peace they had bought with their gold was just a thin pane of ice over a deep,

dark well. The soldiers hadn't been on good behavior because they liked them; they had been good because they were paid to be, and threatened harsh discipline, even death, if they didn't. But the moment the coins ran out, or the dark took over, the beast would wake up again.

Christoffell picked up the saber and felt the blade. It was heavy and sharp. He looked toward the smoking horizon where Waldkappel used to be. He was only seven, but the quiet, desperate determination of the valley had just taken root in his bones. If the world was a place where men hurt others for no apparent reason, he would grow up to be unyielding. He would never be soft. He understood now why the Germans were a reserved and stoic people. Christoffell held the sword high and let out a blood-curdling cry. This was also his destiny.

CHAPTER 3

*The Seeds of Life***OBERKAUFUNGEN 1637**

After three tormenting days, most of the cavalry left. Several hundred troops were left behind to try and break the city of Kassel, the capital city and location of the Landgraves palace. Inside this walled city they were certain to find many treasures. They were unable to break the wall of cannon fire, and so formed a circle all the way around about half a mile away. Up close to the city walls were cannons that kept the marauding Croats at bay. But German refugees from the burned villages filled the area hoping for protection and any food the city could offer. But they did not have enough for their own people. So the scraps they threw at them caused a stampede and some were killed just trying to get a bite of bread.

Because the soldiers had consumed the seed-grain meant for the spring planting, Christoffell's father and the remaining men had to scavenge. They walked miles into the surrounding hills, dodging rogue bands of deserters, to dig up wild ramp bulbs and the starchy roots of marsh reeds.

Inside the Hering cottage, the daily routine became an exercise in masking hunger. Christofell's mother kept a massive iron pot simmering over the hearth twenty-four hours a day. It was filled with what the locals called *Hungersuppe*—a watery, gray broth made from boiled nettles, wild mustard greens, and whatever bones could be salvaged and re-boiled until they turned soft.

To stretch the remaining scraps of real rye flour, she gathered dried acorns and the inner white bark of young birch trees. Christofell watched her pound them into a bitter dust using a heavy stone mortar. When baked, the loaves came out heavy, black, and smelling of damp earth. Eating it made the boy's belly ache, but it stopped the hollow gnawing that kept him awake at night.

"Chew it slowly, Christofell," his mother would whisper, pressing a small, hard wedge of the bark-bread into his palm. "Hold it in your mouth until it turns soft. Do not waste a single crumb."

The most striking change in the valley was the absolute silence. The occupying forces had slaughtered every pig, cow, and chicken that hadn't been successfully hidden in the depths of the Kaufungen Forest. The morning rooster crows that used to wake the village were gone. Even the stray dogs and cats had vanished from the lanes, ending up in the soup pots of the poorest households.

Security became an obsession. The controlled quartering had proven that laws only existed if there was an army nearby to enforce them. The men of Oberkaufungen formed a crude, revolving night watch. They no longer relied on the distant garrison at Kassel for protection. Every night, Christofell's father would take a heavy iron pitchfork—its tips filed to razor points—and sit by the shuttered window, watching the road.

Christoffell did his part by helping the older boys watch the ridgelines. From the high stone walls of the Abbey, they looked for the telltale signs of approaching troops: a distant plume of dust on the road, or the sudden, panicked flight of crows from the treetops down the valley. They coped by turning inward, trusting no one outside the valley, and treating every stranger as a potential murderer.

"Go Peter, go! You must!" The words that haunted him day and night, his mother's last breath was to save him.

The shadows of the Kaufunger Forest did not merely fall; they seemed to reach out from the twisted oak boughs, heavy with the suffocating weight of the fog. For a day and a night, Peter ran. His boots, stiffened by the unseasonable frost, bit into his heels, but he felt the pain only as a distant, rhythmically dull ache. Inside his head, the roar of the burning barn still trapped his brothers' final screams, and his mother's

desperate lie echoed over and over: *GO! Immediately... If this disease leaves us alive, we will find you!*

He knew better. He had seen the dark, angry purple blooming under Elsbeth's arm. He knew the gray turnip-color of a corpse. He was running from the fire, running from the steel, but most of all, he was running from the invisible death crawling on the backs of fleas through the ashes of Waldkappel.

By the second twilight, hunger had reduced his vision to a blurred, pulsing tunnel. The forest grew steeper, choked by jagged limestone outcrops and treacherous ravines. He was trying to keep the western ridges to his left, aiming for the valley of Oberkaufungen, but the ancient trees grew so dense they blotted out the stars.

A sudden, sharp snap of a dry pine branch shattered the silence behind him.

Peter froze, his heart hammering against his ribs like a trapped bird. Before he could turn, a heavy, grease-stained wool cloak slammed into his back, throwing him face-first into the damp pine needles. A brutal weight crushed his spine, and a hand smelling of rancid lard and stale beer clamped violently over his mouth.

"Quiet, boy, or I'll open your throat from ear to ear," a ragged voice hissed in his ear.

Peter rolled his eyes back, catching the glint of a chipped iron hunting knife pressed near his neck. His attacker was a hollow-cheeked specter of the tracks—likely a deserter from one of the passing regiments, wearing a tattered buff coat held together by twine.

The man wrenched Peter over, pinning his shoulders with a filthy knee, and began tearing at the boy's linen shirt with his free hand. "Where is it? The coin. The silver. Your people always hide it in the linings."

"Nothing..." Peter gasped, choking on the dirt in his mouth. "There is nothing. The Imperials took every pfennig before they fired the town."

"Don't lie to me, rat!" The bandit slammed Peter's head back into the earth, his yellow teeth bared in the gloom. "Nobody survives a burning unless they bought their way out. Give me the purse, or I'll take your boots and leave you for the crows."

As the bandit leaned in closer to rip at the collar of his smock, a desperate, wild instinct flared to life in Peter's chest. He looked at the man's terrified, sunken eyes—eyes that had seen the same horrors of the war—and realized the one weapon he possessed that was more feared than any Imperial broadsword.

Peter let his limbs go suddenly slack. He opened his mouth and let out a wet, rattling wheeze, coughing violently directly into the bandit's face.

"Take it then!" Peter shrieked, his voice rising in an unhinged, feverish wail. "Take the shirt! Take the boots! My mother is rotting with the black boil right now in the ruins! The blood-fever is in my chest—can't you feel how hot I am?! The fleas are crawling all over me!" He grabbed the bandit's wrists, pulling the man closer instead of pushing away. "Take it all! Take the pestilence to your own bed!"

The word *pestilence* acted like a lightning strike. The bandit's face went bone-white. The superstitious, visceral terror of the plague—the one enemy no soldier could fight—overcame his hunger. With a strangled cry of horror, the rogue threw himself backward, releasing his grip to wipe his face frantically with his sleeve.

Peter didn't waste a heartbeat. He scrambled to his feet, lunged sideways, and threw himself blindly down the steep, rocky slope to his right. He tumbled through briars and sharp shale, tearing his hands and knees, but he didn't stop. Behind him, he heard the bandit cursing in panic, fleeing in the opposite direction into the deep woods.

Peter ran until his lungs tasted like copper.

As the sky turned the color of cold slate at dawn, the trees finally thinned. Below him lay the Kaufungen valley. Rising through the morning mist were the stubborn stone walls and intact timbered gates of Oberkaufungen. Unlike Waldkappel, no thick plumes of greasy smoke hung over its roofs, though the fields outside looked trampled and neglected.

Pantingly, his clothes torn to shreds and his face streaked with dried blood and mud, Peter staggered down the final slope toward the heavy oak gates of the village. Two town guards stood atop the wooden palisade, holding long, rusted partisans.

"Halt there!" one of them shouted, leveling the spear-point down toward the road. "Not another step, beggar! The gate is barred."

Peter collapsed against the outer wooden barrier, his hands trembling as he reached toward them. "Please... I am a refugee from Waldkappel. I am the son of Pastor Gottfried. The village is gone, burnt to ash. I am heading to Kassel. Let me through the town to take the high road."

The second guard, an older man with a hardened, suspicious face, peered over the timber wall. He took in Peter's torn clothing, his wild eyes, and the blood on his skin. "Waldkappel? We heard the fires two nights ago. If you come from the ashes, you carry the camp-fever or worse. The Obergrebe's orders are absolute: no strangers enter the gates

without a legitimate trade permit or a direct summons from the magistrates."

"I have no permit!" Peter cried. "I only need passage to the city!"

"Then go around," the older guard said coldly. "Take the rocky gorge path to the south. We aren't opening these doors to let the plague walk into our kitchens."

"The gorge path is choked with rockslides and marsh! I'll freeze before I reach the Kassel road!" Peter slammed his fist against the heavy oak gate, the absolute injustice of the world breaking something deep inside his spirit.

He stepped back into the middle of the road, looking up at the high stone walls of the Abbey rising behind the village palisade. The sheer, blinding anger of a boy who had watched his brothers burn and his mother die gave him a temporary, terrifying strength. He raised his arms to the sky and screamed in open defiance at the silent town.

"Keep your gates shut, you cowards!" he roared, his voice echoing off the stone arches. "Die of your hunger behind your high walls! You think you are safe because you have no smoke? Your bins are empty! I know what the winter took! *I could save this whole miserable town if only you would let me in!* I have the keys to life, and you leave me to rot in the mud!"

The guards laughed grimly, waving him off as if he were just another war-crazed lunatic wandering the hills. Defeated, bitter, and burning with a deep, boiling hatred for the gatekeepers, Peter turned away. Clutching his bruised ribs, he dragged himself toward the brutal, broken terrain of the southern ridge, forced to skirt the perimeter of a world that had barred its heart against him.

Obergrebe Frederick Hering stood at the head of the table, his fingers pressed firmly against the rough oak. As the senior magistrate appointed by the Ritterschaft, the weight of the entire district's survival rested squarely on his shoulders. Gathered around him were three desperate estate farmers, their faces hollow with hunger and grief. Pastor Gottfried from Waldkappel was also among them who had left the burned out village after having done all he could do there.

The heavy wooden shutters of the Schultheiß's estate were barred tightly from the inside, sealing out the bitter night air and the terrifying silence of a plundered Oberkaufungen. Their meeting was secret as there were still Imperial forces stationed at various points in the village for the purpose of spying to find anything of value. Inside, the room was suffocatingly tense. They kept the lighting low. A single tallow candle flickered on the low wooden table, casting long, dancing shadows across the stone walls.

"The Imperials stripped us bare," one of the farmers muttered, his knuckles white against the table. "They dug up the barn floors, they cleared the tithe stores. We have nothing left to plant. If we do not find seed, there is no spring. There is only a slow death."

Obergrebe Hering sighed, looking at Pastor Gottfried, who sat with his hands tucked into the sleeves of his dark robes, staring intensely into the candle flame.

"I have thought of attempting to get into Kassel to speak with the Landgrave," Hering said heavily. "Although the city is heavily fortified, and the bulk of the Imperial cavalry has moved on to plunder new victims, unfortunately, they've left a couple hundred men to try and break into the walls of Kassel. They have staged a siege all around the perimeter. But there's half a mile or so between them and the walls of the city from where the cannons fire. They can't get close, but they can prevent us from getting through them. They patrol the roads heavily, as well as what they can reach of the forest. But even if we could get through, it would be difficult to get out with seed, and buying enough winter rye from their tight reserves would require more silver than this whole room possesses."

Pastor Gottfried finally looked up. His eyes, usually clouded with the heavy grief of a wartime pastor, were suddenly sharp.

"We do not need to buy it from Kassel," the preacher said, his voice a low, steady whisper that commanded the room. "I know where there is seed—a small stockpile."

The farmers leaned in. Hering frowned. "Where, Pastor? The whole valley has been picked clean."

"In Waldkappel," Pastor Gottfried revealed. "Before the Imperial vanguard marched through and put the church to the torch, the elders there managed to secure the last of the harvest. It is hidden in the vault beneath where the church stood. It was packed into sealed tin boxes—small enough to be carried, light enough to smuggle past a checkpoint if hidden beneath firewood or rags."

A collective breath caught in the throats of the farmers. Waldkappel was a perilous journey, but a stockpile of sealed, dry seed was a miracle.

"Wait," said the farmers. "Surely they would have tortured your people for the location of it and your silver. I find it hard to believe you still have such a stash."

Pastor Gottfried looked grim. "We thought it would be our bargaining tool, like the cash offered to save Oberkaufungen. But an old villager who didn't know about the seed stores told them we had nothing, and they believed him, or decided they could hunt for it after the village burned. They didn't wait. They immediately torched the entire village and started cutting

down the people in the streets. There was no more explaining. There was only time to run—some were run over by horses, some burned, some managed to flee into the hills."

The preacher had to sit in silence before he could go on. He pondered, "They didn't ask again. They just burned."

The grim news filled the room with horror. Silence ruled for a dignified period.

Then the Obergrebe asked, "Do you have a son?"

The pastor looked at him. "Yes, I do. I have one left, but I don't know where he is. I had four. Two burned in our barn, one died of starvation. One ran towards Kassel to avoid the plague and look for safety behind the walls. It's almost certain he would have come through here to put him on the road to Kassel. I've been looking and inquiring, but I haven't seen him. I hope he made it to Kassel."

"What was his name?" asked Hering.

"Peter," said the father. And then with a sudden almost deranged interest, "Why? Have you seen him?"

Before the excitement could take hold, the Obergrebe's expression darkened. He looked at the preacher, a sudden, troubling memory clicking into place.

"Pastor Gottfried," Hering said slowly, his voice dropping an octave. "I've heard a rumor. Two days ago, a young man

came to our gatehouse wanting to come through Oberkaufungen to get to Kassel to find refuge. When the guards found out he was from Waldkappel, they turned him away because the plague is there. He said if we let him pass through, he would give us a secret that would save us all from starvation. The guards laughed, they thought he was lying. What homeless beggar could save us all? Besides, there were strict orders to bar anyone from Waldkappel. They sent him away to go around. Now I suspect he was telling the truth."

Pastor Gottfried froze. The color drained completely from his face. A heavy, suffocating silence fell over the room. The farmers looked at one another in dawning horror.

"God forgive us," Hering breathed, slumping slightly. "The guards thought he was just a rogue peasant spinning tales to save his skin. And he truly knew, as he pledged, how to save the village because he knew about the seed."

Pastor Gottfried stood up so violently his chair scraped harshly against the stone floor. Tears of panic welling in his eyes, he looked toward the door. "He's my only surviving family, and rogue soldiers are a plenty in the woods around Oberkaufungen. He's likely not able to get through. They'll cut down anyone they find."

Hering's administrative mind, hardened by years of crisis management, worked fast. He held up a hand to calm the room.

"Listen to me. We must divide our forces. We cannot lose the boy, and we cannot lose the seed."

The Obergrebe turned to the farmers, his voice ringing with absolute authority. "You three know the back trails to Waldkappel better than any soldier. Take the draft horses hidden in the forest. Go to the ruined church vault, find those tin boxes, and bring them back. Come back only under the veil of darkness. Do not stop for anyone."

The farmers nodded grimly, the mission clear.

"And what of Peter?" Pastor Gottfried asked, his voice shaking.

Hering strapped his heavy leather ledger and his official seal of office to his belt. "You and I are going to Kassel, Pastor. I am the Obergrebe of this district; the Imperial commanders still have to negotiate with me for local supplies. We will use my authority, whatever silver we can scrape together, and every favor the Ritterschaft is owed to get some seed, just in case, and get your son out of that garrison alive."

Hering blew out the candle, plunging the room into darkness. "Move quickly," his voice commanded from the shadows. "Before the sun rises, we must all be on the road."

Several days earlier, Peter had left the gatehouse of Oberkaufungen in anger. *How dare they send me away! I could*

have saved them. The seeds won't be of any use to us unless we have strong, healthy men to plow. And we certainly don't have that, Peter thought to himself. *But now I'm alone, trying to get through this damn forest filled with bandits just to get to Kassel, where my secret will go to waste. No one will believe me.*

The dense pines of the Kaufunger Wald finally gave way to a scarred, muddy wasteland. Peter pressed his back against the rough bark of an ancient oak, his chest heaving, his breath frosting in the bitter 1637 night air. Behind him, down the valley, lay Oberkaufungen—a village he had been forced to abandon.

Looking out across the valley, Peter saw the suffocating perimeter of the Imperial siege. The army under General Götz had completely encircled Kassel. They hadn't breached the walls, so they were starving the city out. Perhaps there was no food in the city. What was he even doing trying to get there? The enemy could breach the walls. And then what? The thought of going back crossed his mind more than once. A mile from the fortress, a sprawling constellation of Imperial campfires choked the horizon. Peter could hear the distant, terrifying laughter of Croatian cavalymen patrolling the main roads, their heavy horses churning the freezing mud.

To survive, Peter had to become a ghost. He waited for the "blind hours"—the dead of night when a thick, freezing fog rolled off the Fulda River, blinding the enemy sentries.

Crawling on his belly through the frozen thistles, avoiding the roads entirely, he slipped through a massive gap between two Imperial pickets. The soldiers were huddled too close to their fires, their damp matchlock muskets useless in the mist.

Suddenly, the ground sloped quicky, and Peter tumbled into a deep, frozen ditch. He scrambled up, gasping, and looked skyward. Rising directly out of the fog, looming like a black mountain, was the massive stone bastion of Kassel. Above him, the iron snouts of the Landgrave's heavy cannons pointed aggressively into the darkness. He had made it into the "No-Man's Land"—the half-mile perimeter under the fortress guns where the Imperial cavalry dared not ride.

But he was not alone. The ditch and the sloping banks beneath the walls were a human catastrophe. Thousands of rural refugees who had fled the valley were crammed into makeshift tents made of frozen rags and pine branches. There was absolutely no food. The surrounding fields had been stripped bare by the army months ago. Peter watched a hollow-eyed woman chewing listlessly on a strip of boiled leather from an old boot; nearby, two men fought viciously over a dead crow.

For two agonizing days, Peter starved in the mud under the shadow of the cannons, begging for entry. On the third morning, a heavy iron-studded postern door in the gatehouse cracked open an inch. A squad of the Landgrave's domestic

Hessian garrison stepped out, pikes leveled. The starving crowd surged forward in a desperate, weeping wave, but the guards were ruthlessly efficient.

"Back! Stand back or we fire!" a sergeant roared.

The guards began their brutal screening process. They were terrified of Imperial spies or disguised saboteurs trying to infiltrate the city. Peter watched as the guards dragged a man out of the line—the man wore civilian rags, but the guards had spotted the distinct calluses of a professional pikeman on his hands and the telltale chafing of a heavy sword belt on his shoulders. He was slammed against the wall, accused of being an Imperial scout.

When Peter reached the front, a guard shoved a pike near his throat. "Name and district!" the guard barked.

Peter could barely speak, his throat parched. "Peter... son of Gottfried. From the parish at Waldkappel. I don't know if he is still there."

The guard narrowed his eyes, listening intently to the distinct, soft cadence of Peter's North Hessian dialect. He asked a sharp geographical shibboleth: "If you walk from the Oberkaufungen gatehouse to the river, which mill do you pass?"

"The lower paper mill," Peter rasped, his voice cracking. "Near the willow grove."

The guard nodded, satisfied by the perfect local accent and flawless knowledge of the district. "Do you have any coin?"

"No," said Peter, "but I have good leather boots."

The guard examined the boots. They would definitely keep a man's feet protected. "Leave them here and pass through. But there is no bread for you inside, boy."

Peter was shoved through the dark, stone tunnel of the gatehouse and into the crowded streets of Kassel. The fortress city was a pressure cooker. Thousands of refugees packed the alleys, and the whisper of the Bubonic Plague was already drifting through the crowded tenements. Exhausted, delirious from days of starvation, Peter collapsed into a narrow alleyway just off the main market square, curling up against a damp timber-framed wall as his consciousness slipped away.

Hours passed in a dark, feverish blur.

Just twenty paces away, two men walked with a hurried, intense stride, flanked by a scribe wearing the livery of Landgrave Wilhelm V.

"The Landgrave understands the gravity of the situation, Obergrebe Hering," the scribe was saying, his voice tight. "But the city's grain reserves are strictly for the defense of the garrison. He cannot grant you seed for Oberkaufungen when Kassel itself may face a winter famine."

Frederick Hering, the Obergrebe, walked with his jaw clenched, his heavy leather ledger tucked under his arm. Beside him, Pastor Gottfried looked older, his eyes scanning the crowded, miserable faces in the gutters. They had bypassed the enemy in much the same way Peter had, and then used Hering's administrative status to gain entry to the city, desperate to plead for their village's future, but Gottfried's heart was breaking for another reason—he still had found no sign of his son.

"If the Landgrave does not authorize emergency seed, the entire Fulda valley will be a graveyard by spring," Hering argued masterfully, his booming voice echoing off the alley walls. "We are not asking for Kassel's bread. We are asking for a loan of future tithes!"

In the filth of the alley floor, Peter did not appear as a live human being. He was covered in dust, with others almost on top of him. Face down, he unobtrusively matched the cobblestone road. The preacher was looking at several faces on the other side of the aisle as the men passed Peter without so much as an ounce of recognition as to who he might be. Ten, twenty, thirty paces away they walked.

The distance between them was growing with every hurried footstep. The heavy thud of Hering's boots and the frantic scratching of the scribe's quill on parchment threatened to drown out the fragile thread holding the family together.

Suddenly, Peter's chest heaved. Through the fog of Peter's delirium, he heard the familiar voice of his father. He dreamed of the green pastures of his youth. He began rampant mumbling: "Father, take me to green pastures." First it was barely audible, low and whispering. But then he murmured it louder. The men were still discussing seed. But Peter was insistent. "Father!" he said loudly. The man sitting next to him had no patience for a delirium, and promptly hit him in his belly with his foot.

A sharp, wet cough tore from his parched throat, as he doubled over in pain. He screamed right before his head hit the dirt. It was a sound no father would even forget. Those around him listened, thinking he was saying his last prayer. They all looked at him, knowing he was probably healthy just a week ago.

Pastor Gottfried stopped dead in his tracks. He turned his head in each direction almost like a bird, listening intently.

To the scribe and the Obergrebe, it was just another sound in a city dying of the plague—the wretched cough of a nameless refugee destined for a mass grave. But to a father, the specific pitch of that voice, even broken by starvation, struck like a thunderbolt. Gottfried turned his head, his eyes scanning the heap of gray rags and dust curled against the damp timber-framed wall thirty paces back. He saw a man falling down.

"I have to go help that man," said the pastor. "He needs help."

"Gottfried, have you got something," Hering asked, a hand resting on the preacher's shoulder. "The council meets at noon, and the Landgrave's advisors will not wait for us."

"Look at his feet," Gottfried whispered, his voice trembling as he broke away from Hering's grip.

Through the filth covering the boy, Gottfried saw the bare, bloody bandages wrapped around the youth's feet. The fine leather boots were gone, but a small cross of twigs made by a child's hands were not, —the one Peter had made on his confirmation day.

"Peter!" the preacher cried out, abandoning all dignity as he fell to his knees in the frozen muck of the alley. He grabbed the boy's shoulders, rolling him over.

Peter's eyes fluttered open, glassy and unfocused. The grand stone spires of Kassel swamed in his vision, replaced suddenly by the tear-streaked, familiar face of his father. For a terrifying second, Peter thought he had died in the ditch and slipped into eternity.

"Father...?" he rasped, his cracked lips bleeding. "The church... they burned it..."

"I know, my boy. I know," Gottfried wept, pulling Peter's head against his dark robes. "But you are alive."

Obergrebe Hering strode back, his imposing frame casting a shadow over the reunion. The administrative hardness in his eyes cracked, replaced by a profound, solemn relief. He looked down at the boy who had tried to give the seeds of life to Oberkaufungen's survival.

The Landgrave's scribe frowned, looking anxiously at the sky. "Obergrebe, this is touching, but the grain reserves—"

"Quiet," Hering commanded, his booming voice cutting the scribe short. He knelt beside Gottfried, placing a heavy, warm hand on Peter's shoulder. "Peter, listen to me. I am Frederick Hering, the Obergrebe. Your father and I know about Waldkappel. We know about the vault."

Peter blinked, the fog in his mind clearing just enough to comprehend the words. "The... the tin boxes? The winter rye seed?"

"Yes," Hering said in a whisper, leaning closer. "We sent the estate farmers east to retrieve them."

"Oh you did?" mumbled Peter. "Oh good, good of you. Good of you..." his voice drifted off. But as his father lifted his head, he said, "Could be a problem. I overheard some of them talking about moving it after the fire. The vault was exposed."

The heavy silence that followed Peter's whispered words was more suffocating than the freezing fog rolling off the Fulda.

Pastor Gottfried's grip tightened on his son's shoulders, his heart dropping into a familiar, wartime hollow.

"Moving it?" Hering's voice dropped to a low, urgent hiss. He knelt back down, his eyes locked onto the boy's glassy stare. "Peter, focus. Who was talking about moving it? The village elders? When?"

Peter's head rolled listlessly against his father's chest. The fever was clawing its way back to the surface, bringing with it fractured images of smoke, blood, and the terrifying thunder of Imperial muskets. "The elders..." Peter muttered, his teeth beginning to chatter. "The night before the vanguard came. Herr Reinhardt said the vault wasn't safe... said if the church fell, the masonry would crush the tin boxes or seal them away forever. And the vault would be open to rain water. They argued in the dark. We heard them through the floorboards..."

"Did they move them?" Gottfried pleaded gently, brushing damp, sweaty hair from his son's forehead. "Peter, did you see them carry the boxes out?"

"I don't know..." Peter wept softly, his voice trailing off into a delirious murmur. "Mother told me to leave, to go right then. Nothing had been moved when I left. But it might be."

"Peter," said the paster almost helplessly, "Who was with you? Who was we? Who else might know?"

Peter's eyes closed completely, his breathing turning shallow and rapid as he slipped back into an unconscious fever. But not before he said, "Elsbeth would know."

Pastor Gottfried looked at Peter. "But Elsbeth is dead; she had the plague bad."

"Elsbeth knows everything," Peter repeated.

Hering stood up slowly. He looked down at the sketch of the north transept. If the farmers dug through tons of scorched timber and collapsed stone only to find an empty vault, the delay would kill them—and ultimately, the village.

"This changes everything," the Obergrebe whispered, looking over the pastor's shoulder. "If the seed is split, or hidden in a different ruin entirely, your men are wandering into an Imperial hornets' nest for nothing."

"No," the pastor said, his jaw tightening into a hard, stubborn line. "I believe the seed is there somewhere."

Hering didn't panic when the terrain changed. "Scribe," Hering commanded, "We need two horses saddled."

"For horses, you'll have to have payment," said the scribe. "A gold coin, or something worth even more... the two bags of seed we just sold you. And you'll have to return the horses in good condition. I'm risking a lot for you just to do that."

Frederick looked at Gottfried. "We have to go. And we will find seed there, I know we will," said Gottfried. "And we need horses. The farmers will never find it. I know every hiding place there. The only one who knows better than me is the widow, Frau Fromm. But she won't tell them. She's gone half mad. Help me get my son up."

Peter groaned, "Listen to the widow. She is half mad, yes, but her memories are deep. Do not let her out of your sight. She is the key if they have moved the seed. Follow her if she leaves."

Hering tossed his ledger aside and hooked his thick arms under Peter's shoulders. "We find an apothecary, we get this boy stable, and then we go to Waldkappel."

The three farmers from Oberkaufungen made their way through the forest as they moved like ghosts to Waldkappel village, leading their two hidden draft horses by their bridles, their hooves muffled with wrapped rags. They tied the shivering beasts behind a standing stone wall and crept toward the highest point of the ruins—the parish church.

The ruins of Waldkappel loomed out of the freezing afternoon mist like a graveyard of blackened wood and shattered stone. It was a dead zone. The vibrant market town that had once anchored the valley was gone, replaced by an

eerie, suffocating silence. There were no people on the streets. The few survivors who hadn't fled to Kassel were scattered, living like animals in hidden earth-huts or deep in the surrounding brush. Even the dead had been cleared away, buried hastily in a long, shallow trench near the village edge, the freshly turned mud already hardening under the winter frost.

The church was completely gutted. The massive wooden roof had collapsed inward, leaving charred, jagged beams pointing toward the gray sky like broken ribs. Stepping over chunks of fallen masonry and frozen ash, the farmers navigated the ruined nave until they reached the east end. There, right beneath the scorched expanse where the grand altar had once stood, they found it: a heavy, rusted iron door set flat into the stone floor.

"This is it," the lead farmer whispered, his hands trembling with a mix of cold and adrenaline. "Pastor Gottfried's vault."

Together, the men gripped the frozen iron ring. With a harsh, scraping shriek that made their hearts leap into their throats, they threw the metal door backward. It clanged heavily against the stone floor, revealing a dark, yawning square. A blast of frigid, stagnant air hit them.

But as they peered down, their hope withered. The pitch-black darkness of the vault was absolute, save for the pathetic,

dying glow of a single tallow candle the farmers had managed to light. Around them, the suffocating reality of their situation pressed in. With the church roof gone, weeks of downpours and winter sleet had turned the underground vault into a cistern. The stone chamber below was half-filled with murky, freezing rainwater.

"We didn't come this far to turn back," the second farmer muttered fiercely.

He lowered himself through the opening, dropping into the dark gap. A sharp gasp tore from his throat as his boots hit the bottom. "God's blood, it's freezing!"

The other two joined him, splashing heavily into the chest-deep, icy water. They slogged around blindly, their breath coming in ragged, panicked gasps as the numbing cold began to leach the life from their limbs. It was pitch black, save for a single, stark square of gray daylight cutting through the open metal door above. They kicked and reached into the dark corners of the flooded vault, their hands scraping against raw stone and submerged debris.

"Nothing!" the third farmer cried out, his teeth chattering violently. "There are no tins here! It's empty!"

Above them, a soft, steady patter began to echo off the stone walls. It was starting to rain again. Looking up, they could see the ripples expanding across the rising water. The

rain was turning into a downpour, and the water in the vault was steadily creeping up their chests.

SLAM.

The square of gray daylight vanished instantly. The heavy iron door crashed shut with a deafening, metallic boom that echoed like a cannon blast in the enclosed space. Before the farmers could even scream, the horrific, scraping screech of a heavy iron bolt being thrown home cut through the darkness. They were locked in.

A sharp, hysterical, and thoroughly evil laughter echoed down through the iron seams of the door.

"You bastards!" a ragged, screeching voice howled from above. "Caught you red-handed! Die, Croats, die!"

The farmers lunged upward, scrambling up the wet stone steps, their freezing fingers clawing at a small, rusted iron viewing grid set into the center of the door. Peering through the narrow bars, the light from the storm illuminated a face that looked entirely unhuman.

It was Frau Fromm—the local crazy woman driven mad by the horrors of *the Kroatenjahr*, year of the Croats. Her skin was caked in ash, her hair a wild, matted nest of gray. But most terrifying of all was her face: one of her eyelids had been brutally mutilated, and she had crudely sewn it shut herself using thick, vibrant green wool thread. She pressed her

grotesque face right against the grid, her single, manic eye glaring down at them with absolute, vengeful malice.

"You plundered my home! You killed my kin!" she shrieked, entirely blind to the fact that the men below were local Hessian farmers, not the hated Imperial mercenaries. She let out another skin-crawling laugh. "You'll either die of the cold in that freezing water, or you'll drown when the rain fills it to the top! The Lord has delivered the wolves into my trap!"

The water was a slow, agonizing killer. It was nearly a foot deep, black as oil, and so bitterly cold that it felt like hundreds of tiny needles piercing their shins. Within minutes, the farmers' teeth began to chatter violently, their muscles locking up as the early stages of hypothermia crept into their limbs. They had no tools to force the heavy iron grate above them, and the water was rapidly sapping what little strength they had left.

High above, silhouetted against the gray, ash-choked sky peeking through the church ruins, the old woman stared down through the bars. The green thread stitched crudely through her left eyelid twitched as she bared her rotting teeth in a manic grin.

"Fools! Imperial dogs! Traitors to the valley!" she shrieked, her voice cracking like dry kindling as she stomped her foot on the stone above. "You come to steal from the dead? You come

for the silver? The fire took the silver! The fire took everything! Now the vault will take you!"

"Good woman, listen to us!" shouted Jonas, the eldest of the three farmers, his voice shaking so hard he could barely form the words. He held his numb, dripping hands up toward the grate. "We are not Imperials! We are from Oberkaufungen! We are farmers, just like your people were! We are starving!"

"Lies!" she screamed, spitting down through the iron bars. The spit splashed into the dark water near Jonas's face. "The soldiers wore boots, and you wear boots! Bandits! You killed my goats! You burned the rectory!"

Down in the freezing dark, the youngest farmer, a boy named Lucas, collapsed to his knees into the freezing pool, his chest heaving with silent, terrified sobs. "Jonas... I can't feel my legs," he whispered, his skin turning a sickly, translucent blue. "We're going to freeze to death in the dark."

The third farmer, a burly, quiet man named Klaus, grabbed Lucas by the collar, hauling him back to his feet. "Stand up, boy! If you sit in this water, you die," Klaus barked, though his own jaw was tight with pain. Klaus looked at Jonas, his eyes wide with desperate urgency. "Jonas, she's completely mad. We can't reason with her. If we don't break that lock or find another way out, we won't last another hour. Our hands are already freezing shut."

The freezing, stagnant water in the pitch-black vault had risen past their shins, its icy grip paralyzing the muscles in their legs. Klaus held tight to the youngest farmer, Lucas, whose head was slumped heavily against Klaus's shoulder. Lucas's shivering had stopped—a terrifying sign that his body was giving up the fight against the hypothermia.

"Jonas," Klaus whispered, his own jaw locking so hard he could barely force the words out. "The crazy old woman... she's really left us. She's not coming back."

Jonas didn't answer. He was pressed against the rough stone wall of the crypt, his fingers entirely numb as he stared up at the barred iron grate. The gray light of the late afternoon had faded into the brutal, ink-black dark of the Hessian winter night. If help didn't arrive soon, the cold would claim them before midnight.

Suddenly, Jonas stiffened. "Listen," he breathed.

Through the narrow opening of the grate and the skeletal ruins of the church above, a faint, rhythmic sound traveled down. *Thud-thud. Thud-thud.*

"Horses," Klaus rasped, his eyes widening in the dark.

The farmers froze, holding their breath despite their chattering teeth. In 1637, the sound of hoofbeats on frozen mud didn't mean rescue; it meant the Imperials. It meant Croatian cavalymen looking for blood, or roving mercenaries hunting

for whatever the vanguard had missed. They pressed themselves as flat as they could into the freezing pool, hoping the shadows of the vault would swallow them.

Jonas began to snivel and weep, with a squeaky voice saying, "We're doomed! After all this!"

Above, the horses slowed to a halt somewhere near the shattered nave. There was a tense, agonizing moment of silence, followed by the muffled scuffle of boots over loose brickwork. Then, a low, urgent voice drifted down.

"The vault should be near the north transept. Look for a clearance in the masonry."

Lucas's heart hammered against his ribs. The voice was deep, authoritative, and carried a distinct, educated cadence that no unwashed mercenary would possess.

"Jonas! Klaus! Lucas!" another voice roared out into the dark, echoing through the broken stone arches above. "Are you down there?"

"The Obergrebe!" Jonas yelled, his voice cracking with a sudden, frantic explosion of joy. He lunged forward through the water, splashing wildly as he reached his numb hands toward the ceiling. "Herr Hering! Pastor Gottfried! Down here! We're down here!"

"Get us out! For the love of God, get us out!" Klaus shouted, a desperate, hysterical laugh tearing from his throat as

tears of pure relief cut through the grime on his face. "The grate is locked! Lucas is freezing!"

Heavy, hurried footsteps sprinted across the stone tiles above. Obergrebe Hering's imposing silhouette appeared over the iron bars, a newly struck pine torch in his hand casting a brilliant, dancing amber light down into their flooded prison. Beside him, Pastor Gottfried knelt, his eyes wide with concern as he took in the sight of his shivering parishioners.

"Hold on, men! We need the key!" Hering called out, his administrative composure anchoring the room as he knelt and threw his weight against his iron crowbar to position it near the padlock. Pastor Gottfried reached down, his hands grasping the cold iron bars, ready to heave the heavy grate open the moment the lock snapped.

But they never got the chance.

The sudden, stinging blast of coarse river sand hit Hering and Gottfried square in the face.

It filled their mouths with grit, choked their nostrils, and scraped agonizingly across their eyes. Hering stumbled backward, dropping his heavy iron crowbar onto the stone grate with a resounding *clang*. He swore loudly, clawing at his eyes as he tried to clear his vision. Beside him, Pastor Gottfried fell to his knees, coughing violently and rubbing his face with his sleeve.

From the shadow of a collapsed stone buttress, that eerie, wicked laugh echoed through the skeletal ruins of the church once more.

"Ha! Got you! Imperial swine! You think you can steal from the vault?" Frau Fromm cackled, clutching an empty wooden bucket to her chest. Her one good eye gleamed with manic triumph, while the green thread stitched through her closed eyelid twitched violently. "I told the elders! I told them next time the soldiers came, my bucket would be ready! Blinded! Blinded by the righteous earth of Waldkappel!"

Down in the black water below, Jonas's teeth chattered so hard his words were barely intelligible. "Herr Obergrebe! Pastor Gottfried! Get us out... please! The water... Lucas is losing consciousness!"

Hearing his own name through the fog of sand and pain, Gottfried's breath caught. He wiped a layer of grime from his streaming eyes and squinted at the hunched silhouette of the old woman. The voice, the manic laugh, the desperate defense of the ruins—it all clicked into place.

"Frau Fromm!" Gottfried shouted, his voice cracking as he held his hands out, palms up. "Frau Fromm, stop! It is I! Gottfried! The parish preacher!"

The old woman froze. Her evil laughter died instantly, replaced by a low, suspicious growl. She leaned forward, her

bare feet padding softly over the scorched timber, bringing her face mere inches from Gottfried's. She examined him with her single, piercing eye, tracing the familiar lines of his face, the dark fabric of his ruined pastoral robes, and the unmistakable cadence of his voice.

The madness in her expression suddenly receded, leaving behind a hollow, tragic clarity.

"Pastor... Gottfried?" she whispered, dropping her wooden bucket. It rolled away into the ash. "You... you didn't burn?"

"No, Frau Fromm. I am alive. And these men down there are our brothers from Oberkaufungen," Gottfried pleaded gently, nodding toward the grate. "They are freezing. Step away, woman!"

With a trembling hand, Frau Fromm pointed to a heavy iron key hanging from a leather cord around her neck. Hering, his eyes still bloodshot and watering from the sand, snatched the key, shoved it into the padlock, and threw the heavy iron grate wide open. Together, Hering and Gottfried hauled the three shivering, blue-skinned farmers out of the icy depths. Klaus and Jonas dragged a barely conscious Lucas onto the dry stone floor, wrapping him in their own damp cloaks, trying desperately to fend off the hypothermia.

As Hering tended to the freezing men, Gottfried turned back to the old widow. "Frau Fromm, listen to me," he said

urgently, gripping her frail shoulders. "The vault is empty. Peter told us the elders spoke of moving the winter rye. Do you know where it is? Where did they take the tin boxes?"

Frau Fromm's eye rolled wildly. The moment of lucidity vanished as quickly as it had arrived, and she slipped back into the chaotic safety of her delusion. She began to pace in a circle, muttering incoherently under her breath, injecting sharp, bitter bursts of evil laughter.

"The boxes... oh, the pretty tin boxes!" she cackled, waving her hands in the air. "The mice wanted them, yes they did! But the fire... the fire has a big stomach, Father! It eats wood, it eats flesh, it eats the tithes! *Hehehe!* Under the roots, over the stones, where the beer turns to vinegar... they hid it from the crows, but the crows have eyes of thread! Green thread! *Hahaha!*"

"Frau Fromm, please! Make sense!" Hering groaned in frustration, rubbing his temples. "We don't have time for riddles!"

"Father?" The voice was tiny, fragile, and seemed to drift out from the dense, silent pines at the edge of the churchyard.

Gottfried froze. The world around him—Hering's frustration, the groans of the freezing farmers, the mad mutterings of the old widow—all faded into absolute silence. He slowly turned his head toward the tree line.

Emerging from the shadows of the woods was a small, gaunt figure. It was a little girl, no more than seven years old. Her clothes were tattered rags, her face smudged with soot, and her hair matted. When Peter had fled the village weeks ago, this child had been doomed—afflicted with the horrific swellings of the Bubonic Plague, caught from a stray kitten, while her mother Margarethe had just begun to show the terrifying symptoms. Margarethe had forced Peter to run, leaving them behind to die in the quarantine of a burning village.

But against the cold and the hunger and the wrath of an imperial army, the child was standing.

"Elsbeth...?" Gottfried whispered.

The little girl took a hesitant step forward into the ruined nave, her wide, dark eyes locking onto his. "Father!" she cried out.

The recognition was instantaneous and overwhelming. Gottfried sprinted across the cracked stone tiles, throwing himself to the ground and catching his daughter in a desperate, weeping embrace. He buried his face in her hair, sobbing uncontrollably. She was alive. The plague had broken, her fever had passed, and God had spared his little girl."

Hering stepped forward, his administrative urgency cutting through his own relief. He knelt beside the child.

'Elsbeth... your brother Peter sent us. He said you know everything. He said you might know where the elders hid the seed. He said you knew everything.'

Little Elsbeth blinked through her tears, looking at the Obergrebe with utter confusion. She shook her small, matted head. 'The seed? No... I don't know anything about the seed, Herr Obergrebe.'

Hering's face fell, his heart sinking. *Peter was delirious*, he realized bitterly. *The boy didn't know what he was saying.*

Seeing the despair return to the men, Frau Fromm stopped her manic pacing. She stared at the father and daughter clung tightly to one another in the center of the ruins. The profound, undeniable purity of the reunion seemed to pierce right through the thick fog of her madness. The wicked smirk left her face completely. Her posture straightened, and the frantic, twitching energy left her body.

She looked at Gottfried, then at the desperate, freezing farmers, and finally at Obergrebe Hering. For the first time, she truly trusted them.

"I saw them move it to the old brewery cellar," Frau Fromm said, her voice completely calm, steady, and entirely sane.

Frau Fromm's sharp, wicked cackle tore through the fragile peace of the reunion. The moment of absolute clarity

vanished, and she was once again rocking on her heels, her single eye gleaming.

As the men eagerly reached for their tools, she leaned in close to Gottfried's shoulder, her voice dropping to an almost inaudible, raspy whisper. 'But the iron-men came with their wagons, Pastor. I saw them. The thieves took it all... *hehehe*... took it right out of the dark.'

Gottfried barely heard her over the clatter of Hering's crowbar. He gently brushed her off, assuming it was just another wave of her tragic delusion. 'Stay here with the child, Frau Fromm,' he murmured, his mind already racing toward the valley slope. 'We must see for ourselves.'

Frau Fromm's sharp, wicked cackle tore through the fragile peace of the reunion. The moment of absolute clarity vanished, and she was once again rocking on her heels, her single eye gleaming.

Gottfried, holding his daughter tightly, felt a cold dread replace his joy. "Elsbeth..." he choked out, looking down at his daughter. "Where is your mother? Where is Margarethe?"

Elsbeth buried her face into her father's damp robes, her tiny shoulders shaking. "She didn't wake up, Father... she just went to sleep."

A heavy, suffocating grief settled over the ruins. Gottfried softly cried, his shoulders shaking. He closed his eyes and

pressed a kiss into his daughter's matted hair. But there was no time to mourn.

Frau Fromm began mumbling, completely indifferent to their sorrow. "When I was a girl, the sun always shone on the high ridges," She gestured vaguely toward the dark peaks of the Kaufunger Wald. "The boys would chase the goats, but I could run faster. Oh, yes! Faster than the wind!"

The men didn't pay attention to her rambling. Obergrebe Hering was already moving, his jaw set as he led Jonas and Klaus toward the slope where the old brewery stood. They tore through the blackened, collapsed timbers, digging frantically with their bare hands and Hering's iron crowbar until they managed to pry open the heavy, buried oak doors of the brewery cellar.

Hering, holding a newly lit pine torch, stepped down into the darkness. A moment later, his voice echoed back up, hollow and defeated. "It's gone."

Gottfried and the farmers crowded around the entrance. Inside, the deep vaults were empty. "Stolen," Hering growled, kicking an empty, rusted tin frame. "The Imperials must have found it during the purge."

Jonas sank against the stone wall, his face pale. "Look here," he whispered, pointing to the floor. Scattered in the dirt were a few loose, shriveled grains of rye, crushed and

punctured as if the soldiers had carelessly ripped a few tins open to check the contents before hauling the rest away.

A profound, shattering depression took hold of the group. Lucas was still shivering, their horses were hidden in a dangerous forest, and the miracle seed that was supposed to save Oberkaufungen was sitting in an Imperial supply wagon headed for Kassel. They had risked everything for nothing.

Behind them, Frau Fromm began to chant a nonsense rhyme, hopping from one foot to the other in the mud. "Stupid, stupid iron-men! Big boots, little brains! *Hehehe!* Thinking they found a gold mine! Thinking they took it all! Stuuuupid crows!"

Hering snapped, his administrative patience entirely spent. "Woman, hold your tongue! We have lost the seed, the village is doomed, and we have freezing men to tend to!"

"Why do you say that, Frau Fromm?" Gottfried interrupted, his pastoral instinct overriding his despair. He looked at her closely. "Was it not a lot of seed in the brewery?"

"A lot? Compared to what?" she cackled, waving a thin, dirt-caked hand. "A drop in the bucket! A single teardrop in the Fulda! *Hahaha!*" She turned away, staring back up at the high ridge. "The boys from the eastern valley couldn't keep up with me. We used to run all the way to the top. From Nieste, from Helsa, from Kaufungen... we all met where the sky touches the trees."

"She's completely lost her mind," Klaus muttered, turning back to Lucas to help him stand. "Come on, Herr Obergrebe. Let's pack up, get the horses, and head back. We have to find another way."

"So much seed," the old woman muttered, her voice dropping to a vivid, rhythmic whisper. "There was... oh, so much of it. Still there, ah yes, still there in the dark..."

Hering froze. He slowly turned around, his sharp eyes locking onto her. "What did you say? What is still there?"

"On the hill," she smiled dreamily, her single eye clear and focused on the distant summit. "The sun is up. I am going to go play on the hill. I know everything."

The men turned and looked at each other. "She knows everything?" asked the Obergrebe.

"Yeah, she does," shrugged the paster. "She's been here forever, but not just in Waldkappel. She knows all the villages. She's from up on the hill."

"Remember what Peter said, not to let her out of our sight?" said Frederick.

"She just said the seeds have been stolen. Now she's going off on a trek into unsafe woods, slick and muddy, exhaustive labor, for some daydream she's having," said Jonas.

Without waiting for them, the frail old woman turned and began trekking up the steep, muddy incline toward the mountain crest. Hering and Gottfried exchanged a long, desperate look. They had absolutely nothing left to lose.

"Follow her," Hering commanded.

They marched for about a mile, a grueling, uphill climb through the dense, snow-dusted pines. The three farmers dragged their numbed limbs forward, while Gottfried carried Elsbeth in his arms. The entire way, Frau Fromm spoke vividly about her childhood, her voice dancing as she described playing tag with a local boy named Peter, the boy who would one day become her husband before the wars took him.

Then, as she neared the clearing at the very top of the hill, she muttered a specific word: "Pitt."

The men kept walking. A minute later, she said it again, clearer this time: "Clay pitt."

Hering and Jonas stopped dead in their tracks, their eyes widening in sudden, electric comprehension. In the ancient agricultural traditions of Hesse, a "clay pit" (*Erdbirne* or pit silo) wasn't just a hole in the ground. It was a massive, ingeniously designed subterranean storage chamber. Shaped like a giant, upright bottle or pear, these pits were dug deep into the earth. The creators would line the dirt walls with clay and pack them with charcoal, burning a fire inside to bake the walls into a

hard, moisture-proof shell—almost like a piece of giant fired pottery hidden completely underground. Once filled with grain, a small wooden plug was driven into the narrow neck at the top, covered with a layer of earth and leaves, and rendered entirely invisible to passing armies.

"My God," Hering breathed, his heart hammering against his ribs. "An old regional emergency cache."

They reached the crest of the hill. Frau Fromm began to meander through the clearing, using her bare feet to shove away decades of fallen pine needles and rotting leaves. "Look! Look for Peter's mark!" she commanded.

The men dropped to their knees, frantically clawing at the frozen earth, kicking away debris.

"Buried several summers ago," she murmured, watching them. "Before the big fire. When the clouds first started gathering."

Suddenly, her foot struck something solid. "Here!" she chirped.

Hering lunged forward, brushing away a thick layer of moss to reveal a heavy, circular oak plug bound with iron, sealed tightly into the earth. Working together, Klaus and Hering wedged the crowbar beneath the rim and heaved. With a deep, echoing pop, the seal broke.

Hering thrust his torch over the opening. The light illuminated a cavernous, perfectly dry clay chamber. Inside, stacked neatly by the hundreds, were pristine, untouched containers of fine, golden winter rye. It was beautifully preserved, completely safe from the damp, and entirely untouched by the Imperial army.

"There are more!" Frau Fromm laughed wickedly, clapping her hands. "Many more! The whole ridge is full of them!"

"Get up. Hands where we can see them. Now."

The harsh, metallic click of wheel-lock pistols and the scraping of iron pikes shattered the joy of the discovery. Out from the thick brush of the surrounding forest stepped a dozen men, their faces gaunt, their clothes a patchwork of ruined civilian cloaks and boiled leather armor. They held their weapons leveled directly at Hering's chest.

Before Hering could draw his sword, Frau Fromm stepped right between the two groups. She squinted her single eye at the leader of the armed men—a gray-haired, weathered man holding a heavy hunting spear.

"Hans?" she asked, her green-threaded eyelid twitching. "Hans Berten? You grew a beard, you old goat! You still owe me three copper pfennigs from the autumn festival!"

The leader's spear wavered. He blinked, staring at the manic old woman as a lifetime of memory crossed his face. "Elsbeth...? Elsbeth Muller?"

"Elsbeth Muller Fromm," said the widow, letting out her old, familiar cackle. "You had a thing for me back then. Remember...?"

Pastor Gottfried and Obergrebe Hering exchanged a sudden, breathless look of absolute shock. The world seemed to tilt on its axis as Peter's delirious words echoed back to them from that dark alley in Kassel: *Elsbeth knows everything*.

They hadn't been looking for the little girl at all. Peter had been talking about Frau Fromm. The old widow was the true keeper of the valley's secrets.

From the shadows of the trees, more figures began to emerge—not soldiers, but surviving villagers. There were elders and farmers from Nieste, from Helsa, and from the surrounding valleys. Years ago, before the war had turned them into desperate ghosts, these neighboring villages had secretly come together on this very ridge to construct the hidden clay pits, pooling their emergency reserves in a pact of mutual survival.

The tension in the clearing dissolved into a solemn, breathtaking realization. There was enough seed in the high ridges to save them all.

"The valley is ruined," Hans said softly, lowering his spear as he looked at Obergrebe Hering and Pastor Gottfried. "But the hills are still here. We must plant it soon."

"But we cannot plow the main fields," Hering stated masterfully, his administrative mind already calculating the logistics. "The Imperial cavalry will spot the turned earth from miles away. They will harvest it for themselves or burn it out of spite."

"Then we don't use the fields," Jonas suggested, a fierce, resilient spark returning to the Hessian farmer's eyes. "We take only what we need. We carry it by hand into the deepest, hidden patches of meadow within the forest. We clear the brush, we plant in secret patches where the trees shield the growth from the roads, and we protect it with our lives."

Hans nodded grimly, reaching out a hand to Hering to seal the alliance. "In the hidden woods, then. Together."

Frau Fromm let out one last, soft chuckle, wandering back toward the edge of the ridge where the sun was finally breaking through the heavy gray clouds. Beneath them, the land was scarred and bleeding, but high on the hill, buried deep in the ancient clay, the future of Oberkaufungen was waiting to grow.

CHAPTER 4

The Growing Season

Christoffell Hering, 1637–1642

The Aftermath of the 1637 Siege of Kassel

The survival of Oberkaufungen did not depend on the fields visible from the abbey towers, but on a secret cartography known only to the desperate.

To the west, the heavily fortified city of Kassel languished under a choking siege, surrounded by a detachment of two hundred Imperial cavalymen whose horses patrolled the main trade roads like iron-hooved wolves. To the east lay the blackened, ash-strewn ruins of Waldkappel, burned to a absolute loss by General Isolani's marauding Croats. Having lost everything, Pastor Gottfried, his teenage son Peter, and the half-mad widow Frau Fromm had fled the destruction. They journeyed all the way west to Oberkaufungen, finding refuge under the crowded roof of Frederick Hering, the Obergrebe. They agreed to be quarantened in the basement until proof of health was established.

By late spring of 1637, the imperial forces encircling Kassell finally left. But they had consumed the two things required to bring life out of the earth—the seed-grain and the draft animals. In normal years, the heavy, wet clay of the Hessian fields required teams of four sturdy oxen to pull the iron-tipped plows. Now, the village possessed only one blind, rib-bare mare that the soldiers had abandoned because her hooves were splitting with rot.

Christofell watched from the edge of the ditch as the village adapted with grim, agonizing creativity. His father, along with five other men from the lane, stepped into the heavy leather harnesses usually reserved for the beasts.

"Pull!" Frederick shouted, his voice hoarse as he gripped the wooden handles of the plow, guiding the blade into the stubborn earth.

Christofell's father leaned forward, his face turning a dark, dangerous crimson as the thick leather straps bit deep into his woolen coat and the flesh beneath. Beside him was Farmer Bauer, who dug his bare feet into the mud. The plow moved in agonizing, jerky fits. But the plow moved.

Because the adults were entirely consumed by the brutal physical labor of pulling the plows and guarding the perimeter with sharpened scythes, the task of planting fell entirely to the children. Christofell, Elsbeth, and several other children of the

village, walked the long, muddy lines with a small canvas sacks tied around their waists.

"Don't just drop them, Christofell," his mother, Liesel, called out from where she stood, her hands bloody from the harness straps. "Push them deep into the furrow. If the crows get them, we die in the winter."

The winter lingered and the cold would not seem to go away. This made planting all the more difficult. Christoffell's fingers, cracked and raw from the spring frost, dipped into the grains. Each seed felt like a tiny piece of gold. He dropped three seeds at a time, then used the heel of his boot to press the cold Hessian clay over them. He no longer looked at the sky; his eyes were permanently fixed on the dirt, calculating the distance between each hand-drop. The only thing that made it bearable was the companionship of Elsbeth and his other mates. They shared in the misery but somehow rejoiced in their close kinship which deepened through shared trauma.

But the valley fields were exposed to public eyes, and thus not safe. There were too many rogue bandits and starving deserters from the Imperial cavalrymen lingering near Kassel. Frederick Hering had to keep them from finding their mother lode. They could not store all their grain in one place.

The primary store of seeds had to come from the hidden clay pits on a high ridge east of Waldkappel—the bottle-shaped

caves Frau Fromm remembered from her youth. The trek back to those hills was a gauntlet of terror. While the troops had left the towns, the vast forests between Oberkaufungen and Waldkappel were crawling with displaced, starving survivors living in the woods like feral dogs. Frederick led the silent convoy back across the twenty-five miles of wilderness under the cover of night. When they reached the hidden pits, they met hollow-eyed survivors from Bischhausen and neighboring hamlets who used the same communal stores. They divided the winter rye by the cupful in desperate, whispered silence.

Back within the safety of Oberkaufungen, they hid the plantings. Peter and the older boys tore up the consecrated earth inside the walled courtyard of the Stiftskirche (Kaufungen Abbey), transforming the sacred grounds into a hidden sanctuary of rye. Meanwhile, Christofell and Pastor Gottfried's seven-year-old daughter, Elsbeth, were sent into the shadows of the Kaufungen Forest. Together, the children cleared tiny, isolated patches of meadow hidden deep within the briars, pressing the seed-grain into the dirt where no passing scout would ever think to look.

The years bled into one another in a blur of paranoia, midnight harvesting, and unblinking vigilance. Yet, amidst the suffocating gray of the war, Christofell found his eyes wandering away from the mud.

By the early 1640s, his childhood days began to melt into something agonizingly beautiful. Elsbeth was no longer just the terrified child who held his hand in the secret forest meadows. Her hair had taken on the deep, rich color of the autumn rye they so fiercely protected, and her eyes held a fierce, sharp intelligence that the war had failed to crush. When they walked the hidden forest paths to tend the secret patches, her laughter—quiet and carefully guarded against the ears of rogue scouts—was the only sound that didn't promise death.

She noticed his lingering glances. When he handed her a bundle of green straw to tie a sheaf, her fingers lingered against his, a flush of color rising in her pale cheeks. In a world stripped of grace, they were growing into each other, their roots tangling deep in the soil of their birth.

By the late summer of 1647, the great, bloody wheel of the war was finally grinding toward its absolute end, though nobody in the Losse Valley dared to believe it. Ten years had passed since General Isolani's Croats had left the region a smoking wasteland. For ten years, Christofell had known nothing but the hard labor of survival—the twenty-four-hour watches behind the sharp hawthorn *Verhack*, the midnight threshing inside the fortified tithe-barns of the Kaufungen Abbey, and the secret, exhausting treks to the clay pits of Waldkappel.

But on this crisp September evening, Christoffell's mind was entirely detached from the threat of rogue mercenaries. He was seventeen years old, possessing the broad shoulders of a man who had pulled iron plows in place of oxen, and his heart belonged to the girl who had walked those muddy furrows beside him.

He and Elsbeth headed to the barn after the day's long hours of work. It was time to put the tools away and feed the milk cow. Their routine was well established. As Elsbeth's hands went up to hang a pail, she could sense Christoffell's eyes watching her as he casually leaned on the stall wall.

"Why are you lazing there as if there was no work to be done?" asked Elsbeth, her blue eyes shining.

"It is work," he said, "to carve every feature of your face into my brain," he replied. "I do not want to miss one tiny bit, for all if it fulfills my deepest desire,"

Christoffell walked over to Elsbeth and took her rough, working hand in his.

Elsbeth wiped dust from her face and smiled, a soft tired smile. "We have changed much from the day we met. We don't resemble the children we were, and our thoughts have changed too." She stepped closer to him, her eyes telling him what her words could not.

Christoffell bent down hesitantly, their lips meeting in a soft, sweet and simple kiss in the shadows of the old barn. He knew this was the only woman for him.

After a silent moment of bliss, they parted with Elsbeth saying, "The old witch Fromm will know. She knows everything! I must not delay getting back."

Christoffell smiled gently as he let her go. "You are the woman I want, and I pray you want me too, for our full lives filled with children and good, honest work once this war is done."

Elsbeth giggled and replied, "I can't think of any other way to spend the rest of my life." Then she dashed off running and laughing all the way to the Hering residence where she shared a bed with the old woman who looked like a witch, but had a heart of gold.

Later, Christoffell walked to the Abbey knowing both his father and Pastor Gottfried would be there.

"Ah, it is well that I have caught you both," said Christoffell. "You are exactly the two people I have a most pressing question for. You first, Pastor."

"I'm all ears," said the pastor. "How can I help you?"

"It is the young, but nearing marriageable age, Elsbeth, your daughter. I am in love, we are in love, and love each other dearly. I'd like your permission to marry her."

“Well well,” said the pastor. “What’s taken you so long to ask? It’s been in your eyes for years. And I know you better than anyone in this county. And I have considered it many a time. My answer is yes, so long as you wait until you are both of the appropriate age, eighteen.”

“Absolutely, pastor, and thank you!” said Christoffell. “I will do proud by you.” Then he turned to his own father. But Frederick had walked out of the room.

He found his father, Frederick Hering, standing at the edge of the abbey's stone courtyard. As Obergrebe, Frederick looked older than his years, his hands permanently calloused, his eyes still restlessly scanning the high ridge lines for the glint of enemy steel.

"Father," Christofell began, his voice steady despite the hammering in his chest. "The harvest is nearly secure. The rye is threshed and decentralized. I am a man now, and I have proved my worth to the village."

Frederick didn't turn around, but his shoulders shifted. "You have, Christofell. You survived the frost and the wolves. What is it you want?"

"I want to marry Elsbeth," Christofell said. "Pastor Gottfried has given his consent for next year when we turn eighteen and are of legal age to wed. We have grown up in the

shadow of this war together, and our roots are tangled in the same soil. I am asking for your blessing."

For a long, agonizing moment, the only sound was the rhythmic *thump-thump* of a distant threshing flail. Finally, the Obergrebe turned to face his son. His expression was not angry, but heavily weighed down by a terrible, bureaucratic grief.

"You cannot marry the pastor's daughter, Christofell," Frederick said quietly.

Christofell felt the blood rush to his ears. "Why? She loves me, Father. We have tended the secret forest patches together since we were seven years old. Is it a question of dowry? In these times, no one has silver!"

"It is a question of the land, and a decree from the Landgrave," Frederick countered, his voice hardening with the cold reality of statecraft.

He stepped closer, placing a heavy, scarred hand on his son's shoulder. "Look across this valley, Christofell. What do you see? Half the villages in Hesse are gone, perished from the war, from starvation, from illness. Fields that used to harvest enough grain to fill our barns are not weeds and thorns. We are a weak community. We do not want to be overrun again. We must become self sufficient and hardy. We must join together with the other villages and grow strong together, each looking

after the other as we do on the hill with the seed we share. The fields are turning back into wilderness because there are no men left to work them. The Landgrave of Hesse-Kassel cannot tax a forest, and he cannot feed an army with empty land. A new mandate has been handed down to every Obergrebe from here to the Rhine."

Frederick paused, the words tasting bitter. "The decree dictates that every widow left with expansive, empty fields must be married to an able-bodied man immediately. The land must be plowed, and the state must have its yield. If the fields remain barren, the crown will seize them, and our village will starve under the winter taxes."

"What does that have to do with me?" Christofell demanded, shaking his head. "Elsbeth's family—"

"Elsbeth is the daughter of a landless pastor," Frederick interrupted sharply. "But the widow Eva Muller, sits on the largest, most expansive tract of arable soil on the northern lane. Her husband, Stephen Donor, was cut down by Swedish deserters three winters ago. She owns a full Hufe, one hundred and thirty five acres of prime rye-land, and not a single horse or man to turn the soil. The land is ideal with some meadows but mostly ripe for crop planting with rights to the common woods. You can at last live a comfortable life. You know we all love Elsbeth, and if I had my way, she'd be the first I'd bless. But there's the law. And I don't have any way around it."

The realization hit Christofell like a physical blow. "You want me to marry a widow? For her land?"

"No, I don't want you to. I'm told you have to. Life's about surviving. You have to marry a widow. Now there's the one on Buckner's plot. She's got land, ten acres. But it's remote and she makes Frau Fromm look like a gem. I am the Obergrebe, and you are my son," Frederick said, his eyes drilling into Christofell with an unyielding, desperate intensity. "The village looks to us to enforce the law that keeps them alive. If I exempt my own blood from the Landgrave's mandate, the entire system collapses. You will marry Eva Muller this month regardless of the age as I can give my consent. You will harness yourself to her plow, you will drop your seed into her furrows, and you will ensure Oberkaufungen pays its tithe."

"And Elsbeth?" Christofell's voice cracked, the ghost of the seven-year-old boy in the woods flashing through his eyes. "Will she have an arranged marriage as well?"

"Elsbeth has nothing, not even a home of her own. She and her father have lived with us these past years and she has no dowry. She is in a difficult position. If no one stands up for her, she may have to become a household servant. If she can find a good position at one of the Knight's estates, she may do well."

“Well?” asked Christoffell sharply. “Behind those castle walls, she will find only abuse. You know what those deceptive knights do to their young women servants! They take them to their beds! Father, do you understand what you are asking? I’ve seen the way one of those predatory knights fancies her, teases her, and tries to foul her work to get her in trouble and to force her into work for himself. If she is married to me, he cannot take her. She needs my protection!”

“Elsbeth will understand,” Frederick said, turning back to face the cold stone walls of the Abbey. “In 1637, we learned that survival requires us to break our own bodies. In 1647, it requires us to break our own hearts. Prepare yourself, Christoffell. The wedding is set for the feast of Saint Matthew.”

The Law of the Saber 1647–1650

The feast of Saint Matthew arrived with a mocking blue sky. True to his father’s command, Christoffell stood before the altar of the Stiftskirche and bound his life to Eva Muller. She was a quiet woman, five years his senior, with hands hardened by the same soil that had broken so many before them. Christoffell became a dutiful husband. He did not mistreat her; he labored in her sixty acres of arable northern lane, repaired her stone fences, and shared her hearth with a grim, respectful tenderness.

But his soul remained buried in the secret forest patches of his youth with Elsbeth. The peace that had finally come to the land at the end of the war brought a different kind of predator to the valley.

In the winter following his wedding, the iron might of the Ritterschaft slammed forcefully on the Hering household. Two armored retainers wearing the colors of a powerful noble knight—a proud member of the Old Hessian Knighthood whose ancestral estate bordered the Söhre forest—stood in the snow outside the Obergrebe's door. Inside the cramped kitchen, a devastating storm was raging.

"They cannot do this!" Pastor Gottfried shouted, his hands slamming onto the heavy oak table, scattering his theological texts. "She is a daughter of the parish! A free woman of the church! Under Holy Roman Imperial law, the landgrave cannot seize the child of a clergyman to pay a personal or state debt. Pastors and their families are exempt from such physical subjugation."

"Under the *Gesindeordnung*, she is a landless dependent," Frederick Hering countered, his voice a tense, strained whisper as he glanced toward the frost-covered window. As Obergrebe, his authority stopped where the nobility began. "The Landgravine Amalie Elisabeth is a staunch defender of the faith. Handing Elsbeth over to the knight as a "servant", which we all know what that means, will destroy her own reputation.

But the knight has invoked the servant ordinance. He claims the parish owes a labor debt for the wartime protection of the Abbey walls. He has the magistrate's signet, a signed decree ordering Oberkaufungen to surrender her to satisfy the knight's demand. He has been offered grain, livestock, timber, but he needs none of it with his wealth. He specifically wants Elsbeth, no other unmarried woman will do. He knows that Christoffell cannot marry not fight for her honor now. And his power is vast, with many knights owing allegiance to him. Gottfried. If we refuse, his men will drag her out by her hair."

"We have the *Carolina*!" the old pastor wept, his voice cracking with terrifying realization. "The Imperial code forbids *Stuprum*—the coercion and violation of a maid by abuse of power! Frederick, you are the Obergrebe! Go to the district court! File the grievance!"

"I went to the magistrate at dawn, Gottfried!" Frederick barked back, his face flushing a dangerous crimson. "Do you know what he said? The knight holds *Patrimonial* jurisdiction over his private estate. Within his walls, he is the judge, the jury, and the executioner. A servant's word holds no weight against a nobleman's oath of innocence. The law does not see a violation, pastor. It sees a maid going to scrub pots. It is no longer your choice, pastor. It is mine. But I am caught between two masters. If I go with the Landgravine, I alienate the clergy. If I go with the clergy, I alienate the Landgravine. She could

force us all out of Oberkaufungen without compensation, or assign us me to endless military leaving you and my family unprotected and an enemy of the state. As a byproduct of his scheme, he is trying to humiliate the Hessian government, test the Landgravine's absolute authority, and break the local spirit. Then he will be the primary law of the land, he and his men. Their law will rule."

In the corner of the room, Elsbeth stood perfectly still. At seventeen, she possessed a fierce, sharp intelligence that the war had failed to crush, and she knew exactly what layout of horror awaited her behind those estate walls. She was not being taken to clean kitchens; she was being taken to be made a noble's private mistress.

Christofell stepped toward her, his breath coming in ragged, suffocating gasps. His fingers instinctively curled as if searching for the handle of his war-scythe. "I will kill him," he whispered, the manic desperation of a lifetime of trauma boiling to the surface. "If he touches her, I will take the scythe and sever his legs at the knees."

"And you will hang from the abbey gallows before sundown, Christofell!" his father roared, grabbing his son's jacket and shoving him back against the hearth. "You are a married man! You have Eva's land to plow! You strike a knight of the Ritterschaft, and the Landgrave's regiments will burn what is left of Oberkaufungen to the bedrock!"

The kitchen door creaked open, letting in a bitter blast of winter wind. The lead retainer stood on the threshold, his hand resting casually on the hilt of his heavy cavalry saber. "The carriage is waiting," the soldier said, his voice entirely detached from their agony. "Bring the girl."

Pastor Gottfried collapsed into a chair, burying his face in his stained vestments, his shoulders heaving.

Elsbeth stepped forward. She did not cry. She looked directly at Christofell, her eyes burning with a terrifying, unblinking clarity. She reached into her apron pocket and pulled out a small, dried stalk of green winter rye—a relic from the secret meadow patches they had planted together when they were children. She pressed it into Christofell's calloused palm.

"Live, Christofell," she whispered, her voice steady but laced with a profound, breaking grief. "Plow the fields. Keep the village alive. Do not let them hang you for my sake."

"Elsbeth..." his voice was a choked, broken thing.

"I will survive them," she said, her gaze shifting to the armored soldier at the door. "They think we are sheep because they have the steel. But we are the clay. We do not break."

Before Christofell could speak another word, the retainer grabbed Elsbeth's arm, pulling her out into the blinding snow. Christofell rushed to the window, his chest heaving as he

watched the heavy black carriage door slam shut. The whip cracked, the horses thundered down the lane, and she was gone—hidden behind the unyielding stone walls of the Söhre forest estate where no peasant law could ever reach her.

The great, bloody wheel of the world kept turning. The Peace of Westphalia was finally signed in 1648, officially ending thirty years of slaughter, but it brought no magic remedy to the broken hearts of Oberkaufungen. Christofell poured his rage and grief into the earth, throwing his weight into the plows, working Eva's expansive fields until his muscles screamed. He was a good husband, a reliable provider, but a part of him had gone down the southern path with the carriage.

Yet, life, like the rye, insisted on breaking through the hardened earth.

In the late summer of 1650, the sharp, frantic cries of a newborn infant shattered the heavy silence of the Hering cottage. Eva lay in the bed beneath the hearth, her pale face slick with sweat but softened by a weary smile. Christofell sat beside her on the floorboards, his large, calloused hands gently cradling a tiny, fragile bundle wrapped in coarse linen.

"He has your broad shoulders, Christofell," Eva murmured, her voice weak but full of a quiet, hard-won pride.

Christofell looked down at the boy. The child had survived the womb in a world that was only just beginning to stop burning. He felt a profound, unexpected wave of paternal fierce pride wash over him. Survival had given him a son.

"His name is Hans Jacob," Christofell said, his voice thick as he traced the infant's tiny, smooth brow. "Hans Jacob Hering."

As the baby yawned, Christofell looked out the small window toward the distant, dark ridgeline of the Söhre forest where Elsbeth was trapped. He had a son now. He had land. He had survived the wolves of the empire. And though his heart remained buried in the secret forest patches of his youth, he swore a silent, iron vow into the child's soft skin: *Hans Jacob would grow up strong. And the Herings would never be helpless again.*

The winter of 1669 did not come with a creeping frost, but with a sudden, suffocating fever that tore through the Losse Valley in a matter of days. Eva was standing at the kitchen loom on a Tuesday night; by Friday morning, her breathing was wet and rattling beneath the heavy wool blankets. She was soaked in beads of sweat and her face a fiery red. Before the winter sun could clear the ridge of the Meißnerberg, she was gone, taken by an illness without a name.

Because Eva had no children from her first marriage, the sixty acres of prime, arable land on the northern lane passed instantly and completely into Christofell's calloused hands. At thirty-nine, Christofell was no longer just the Obergrebe's son. He was one of the wealthiest independent landowners in Oberkaufungen.

He did not mourn as a hypocrite, but he buried her with the utmost respect, paying the church tithe in full. The moment the last spade of frozen earth was thrown over Eva's grave, however, a twenty-two-year-old dam broke inside Christofell's chest.

He did not go back to the fields. He went straight to the heavy iron-bound chest beneath the hearth, prying up the floorboards and dragging out his accumulated coin and grain ledgers.

"What are you doing, Father?"

Christofell swung around. His nineteen-year-old son, Hans Jacob, stood in the doorway of the cottage, his broad shoulders blocking the winter light. The boy's face was dark, his jaw clamped tight with a simmering, dangerous anger.

"I am checking our liquid reserves," Christofell said, his fingers flying through the silver thalers. "The grain notes from the last three harvests. The gold we hid from the tax collectors. It is enough."

"Enough for what?" Hans Jacob stepped into the room, his boots slamming against the wood. "Mother is not even cold in the churchyard, and you are counting coins to throw at the pastor's daughter!"

Christofell stood up straight, his height matching his son's. "Mind your tongue, Hans Jacob."

"I have ears, Father! I have lived in this house for nineteen years!" Hans Jacob shouted, his voice echoing off the stone walls. "Every time the wind blew from the Söhre forest, you would sit by this hearth and mutter about the *Constitutio Criminalis Carolina*. You dragged me to the assemblies to listen to grandfathers talk about *Stuprum* and the abuse of noble power! You drilled the laws into my head until I could recite the *Gesindeordnung* in my sleep! You didn't do that to teach me the law. You did it because you were obsessed with a ghost!"

"She is not a ghost," Christofell hissed, his eyes narrowing into cold slits. "She is a woman of the church, held illegally behind stone walls by a bankrupt knight who thinks his blood makes him untouchable."

"She belongs to the Ritterschaft now!" Hans Jacob yelled, stepping directly into his father's space. "You are an independent landowner now. This land—this sixty acres—is our bloodline! It is my inheritance! If you take these coins and challenge a nobleman, the Ritterschaft will crush us. They will

tie us up in the patrimonial courts until we are beggars. You are throwing away my future for a woman who hasn't looked at you since 1647!"

"I am the master of this house, and I am the master of this land," Christofell said, his voice dropping into a terrifyingly calm, low vibration that silenced the boy. He stepped past his son and grabbed his heavy leather riding cloak. "For twenty-two years, I did my duty. I broke my body for your grandfather, I broke my heart for the Landgrave's decree, and I gave you a safe, wealthy home. Now, I am a free man. And I am going to use every thaler, every legal loophole, and every scrap of authority the crown gives a landowner to tear down his gates."

Christofell slammed the iron chest shut and locked it with a heavy click. He looked his furious son dead in the eye.

"Get the bay mare saddled, Hans Jacob," Christofell commanded, the absolute authority of the Hering line ringing in his voice. "We are riding to Kassel to see the Landgrave's magistrate. The war with the knight begins today."

Christofell did not approach the iron-studded gates of the Söhre forest estate as a suppliant peasant, but as a man bearing the heavy armor of the state and the church.

At his side rode a heavily resentful Hans Jacob, their horses kicking up the grey, brittle crust of the December mud.

Tucked firmly into the breast of Christofell's leather riding waistcoat was a formal ecclesiastical mandate. It had been written by Pastor Gottfried on his deathbed two winters prior, sealed with the heavy red wax of the Oberkaufungen parish and co-signed by the regional Superintendent in Kassel. It legally demanded the release of a "daughter of the manse" illegally withheld from church fellowship under the guise of an expired *Gesindeordnung* labor contract. With Eva's sixty acres now providing him the social gravity of a prominent tax-paying landowner, Christofell finally possessed the leverage to force the patrimonial magistrate to look up from his ledgers.

They were not allowed past the stone courtyard. Two retainers with rusted breastplates kept their hands on the pommels of their broadswords, but the sheer weight of Christofell's legal and financial posturing forced the aging master of the house to concede a brief, supervised meeting between Christoffell and Elsbeth under the stone arcade of the stables.

When Elsbeth stepped out from the shadow of the granary, Christofell's chest seized.

She was thirty-nine years old now, her hair—once the vivid hue of early-summer rye—streaked with premature silver at the temples. Her hands were raw, calloused, and smelled of lye and boiled cabbage. Yet, as she looked at Christofell, the fierce, sharp intelligence in her eyes was entirely

unextinguished. She walked with her chin high, her posture straight, a woman who had spent twenty-two years refusing to be broken by the architecture of her cage.

Hans Jacob watched from the horses, his jaw tight, his young mind torn between bitter anger over his mother's recent grave and the sudden, undeniable gravity of the woman standing before them.

"You should not have come, Christofell," Elsbeth said, her voice lower now, seasoned by decades of silence. "Your thalers and your pastor's ink are a thin shield against these walls."

"The mandate is legal, Elsbeth," Christofell insisted, his fingers twitching toward her, though the guard's halberd remained crossed between them. "The Landgrave's courts are reviewing the estate's tax debts. I have offered to buy out whatever imaginary labor contract they claim you owe. You are coming home."

A ghost of a smile touched her lips—bitter and sharp. "They do not keep me here because of a labor debt, Christofell. They keep me here out of hatred."

She leaned in slightly, her gaze flicking toward the high mullioned windows of the manor house. "The old knight has a younger brother. You remember him? A captain of the imperial horse who returned from the Rhine when the peace was signed. They hate each other with the ancient, rotten malice

that only noble blood can breed. They have spent two decades disputing every inch of this estate—every timber, every tenant, every horse."

Elsbeth's voice dropped into a tense, rhythmic whisper. "And they both wanted me. But neither one would ever allow the other to have me. Oh yes, they have kept their eyes on me, as well as on each other. Their hatred has saved my honor.. And I have and still intend to use it to leverage my exit."

The memory rose in her mind like smoke from a damp hearth. It had happened seventeen winters ago, during the freezing January of 1652, when she had been a maid of twenty-two.

She had been carrying a basket of dried flax into the vaulted undercroft of the manor when the elder brother—the master of the estate—had cornered her behind the flour barrels. He had thrown his heavy, fur-lined cloak around her shoulders, pinning her arms against her ribs, his breath hot and sour against her neck.

"You've scrubbed enough pots, little bird," he had hissed, his fingers tearing at the linen strings of her bodice. "You will sleep in the north tower tonight, or I will have the guards throw your father out of his parish by sunset."

Elsbeth had bared her teeth, driving the heel of her shoe into his shin, but his weight was massive, pressing her down into the cold stone floor.

"Let her go, brother."

The voice had cut through the vaulted dark like an iron rod. The younger brother stood at the foot of the stone stairs, his leather riding boots caked in slush. He didn't look at Elsbeth with mercy; his eyes were black with the venomous rivalry that defined their entire lives. Slowly, deliberately, the captain reached to his hip and drew a heavy, single-edged German *Hirschfänger*—a noble's hunting sword, its steel blade etched with stags and hounds. The long blade caught the dim torchlight as he stepped into the undercroft.

"You touch the maid, and I will drive this through your throat," the younger brother murmured, his voice entirely devoid of hesitation. "She works my quadrant of the kitchens. You will not lay a finger on her."

The elder brother snarled, releasing his grip on Elsbeth's collar. He spun around, his hand flying to his own hip, pulling a long, ivory-hilted dudgeon dagger from his sash. "This is my estate! My jurisdiction! I am the firstborn, you mercenary dog!"

They had circled each other in the suffocating dampness of the cellar, two beasts of the same litter, their blades held low and steady. Elsbeth had scrambled backward into the shadows

of the timber supports, her chest heaving, watching the two nobles keep each other at bay.

The elder brother had lunged, the dagger snapping out in a short, vicious arc that sliced the air inches from the captain's throat. In response, the younger brother had brought the heavy hunting sword down in a violent parry, the steel clashing with a deafening, echoing ring that shook the dust from the beams.

They stood chest-to-chest, their blades locked, their teeth bared in an identical expression of familial loathing.

"If I cannot have her," the elder brother hissed, his face inches from his sibling's, "you will never touch her. She will stay a maid in the kitchens until she rots to the bone."

"Agreed," the captain countered, his eyes boring into his brother's with absolute parity of malice. "The moment she leaves the common kitchen for either of our chambers, the other's blade will find its mark."

They had stepped back slowly, their weapons still raised, their mutual hatred creating an unbreakable, invisible cage around her.

Returning to 1669

"For seventeen years, that is how I survived," Elsbeth whispered, her eyes returning to Christoffell under the stone arcade. "They watch each other like wolves over a carcass. If

one brother takes a single step toward me, the other draws his steel. They do not protect my virtue, Christofell. They protect their own pride."

Christofell looked at her, his calloused hand clenching the parchment church mandate until the red wax cracked and crumbled into pieces between his fingers. The raw, absurd cruelty of her captivity made his blood run cold. She had not been a mistress; she had been a living trophy of a multi-decade blood feud, kept safe only because her violation would mean a fratricide.

Behind them, Hans Jacob shifted on his horse, his eyes wide as the reality of the nobility's madness finally penetrated his youthful anger. The boy looked from Elsbeth to his father, the resentment in his face slowly replaced by a grim, creeping understanding of the war his father had been fighting in his mind for twenty-two years.

"Then the circle breaks today," Christofell said, his voice ringing with the iron-tipped certainty of a man who had waited half his life. He turned back toward the manor house doors where the estate bailiff was descending the stairs. "Because I am not here to negotiate with one brother or the other. I am here with the Landgrave's law, and I have enough gold to make their hatred of each other completely irrelevant."

The estate bailiff, a hollow-cheeked man named Schreiber, descended the stone steps of the manor house with a heavy ring of iron keys clinking at his belt. He looked at Christofell's leather cloak and the mud-spattered horses with the natural condescension of a noble's bureaucratic servant.

"The Master of the House has no interest in your parish squabbles, Hering," Schreiber said, barely glancing at the parchment in Christofell's hand. "The woman remains under our jurisdiction."

"She remains here under a lie," Christofell said, his voice flat, cutting through the freezing courtyard air. He did not yell; he simply stepped forward until his large frame forced the bailiff to a halt. With a deliberate movement, Christofell reached inside his riding waistcoat and pulled out a second document—a formal deed from the princely treasury in Kassel, stamped with the Landgrave's supreme seal.

"This is a record of the outstanding tax arrears on the Söhre forest timber mills," Christofell stated, tapping the crisp paper. "The Ritterschaft is six hundred thalers in debt to the crown for the last three winters. The Landgrave's collectors have already authorized the seizure of the estate's grain yields to satisfy the balance."

The bailiff's eyes narrowed, his arrogant posture stiffening. "What does a clod-breaker from the lane have to do with the treasury?"

"I have the sixty acres of the northern lane," Christofell said, leaning in. "And I have three years of uncompromised grain reserves sitting in the fortified tithe-barns of Oberkaufungen. Yesterday, I went to the treasury in Kassel. I bought the knight's debt. I paid the Landgrave his six hundred thalers in full."

Schreiber gasped, his hand dropping from his key-ring. "You... you bought the estate's tax notes?"

"I did," Christofell replied, his face hard as flint. "Which means I am now the primary creditor of this manor. If you do not sign the *Manumissio*—the absolute legal release of Elsbeth Gottfried under this church mandate—I will return to Kassel tomorrow with the high bailiff. We will begin the legal foreclosure on the timber mills before the frost thaws."

The realization hit the bailiff like a blow. Behind the mullioned windows of the manor house, the two noble brothers were likely watching, trapped in their own unbreakable stalemate of hatred. But Christofell had bypassed their swords entirely. He had used the modern, calculating machinery of the post-war state to outmaneuver the old feudal world.

“I will summon the master,” said Schreiber, and quickly vanished up the stairs. In mere moments, the two brothers clambored loudly down the stairs with anger in their eyes and steel in their pursed lips.

“What is this invastion!” asked the older brother. “Life has been calm and peaceful since war’s end. Now you bring lies and deceit into the household?”

“We should strike you dead before you can leave these walls,” said the other. “It is our word against, the two brothers looked at each other and laughed a callus laugh, “against nobody! Will you risk your life for this old hag?”

Elsbeth spoke out. “Which of you would like to have me in his room tonight? Shall we finally break the spell? Or shall I choose secretly whom to visit? And in the morning, you may know if you were not visited, it is your oath to kill the other.”

The brothers thought again about this, and looked upon the frazzled countenances of their sibling. “If she came to your room, would you take her, dear brother?” asked the older.

“If I did, I would never say,” he replied. “Would you take her to your bed should she enter your room quietly tonight?”

The older replied likewise, “I would never say, because then you would be forced to kill me as per your oath.”

“But then how would either of us know if the other was actually visited and broke the vow?” asked the younger. “If I

wasn't visited and assumed you had been, and I asked you, you would say no, but I wouldn't believe you because you just said you wouldn't tell. And you would never say yes, because then I would have to stab you precisely at that moment. Either way I would have to stab you."

"But," said the older, "If I woke first, and realized I had not been visited, I would have to go immediately to your room and ask you the same. So it really would entirely depend on which one of us were to rise in the morning first."

"We could agree to share," muffled the bailiff.

"He who took her first would die!" shouted both brothers.

"But we could agree to a duel in the morning instead of sudden death," said the younger.

"Yes, but then one of us would have to die without having had any pleasure at all," said the older. What a tragic way to end a couple of decades of hate."

"Well," said Christoffell, "there is one other solution that easily solves the problem."

The brothers glared at him but calmly waited. "If she remains, one of you will die tomorrow. If she goes home with me, both of you will live, and your taxes will be paid in full."

The brothers looked at each other again, eyebrows raised. Christoffell handed the papers to the bailiff.

Schreiber looked at the church mandate, then at the treasury deed. His hands shook slightly as he pulled a small ink-horn and a goose-quill from his leather pouch. Using the flat seat of a mounting block as a desk, he hastily scribbled his signature across the bottom of the parchment and pressed the estate's lead seal into the black wax.

"Take her," the bailiff spat, thrusting the papers into Christofell's chest. "She has brought nothing but curses and drawn steel to this house for twenty-two years anyway."

Christofell did not answer. He turned to Elsbeth, extending his hand. For the first time since the winter of 1647, her hand met his without a soldier or an iron gate between them.

Behind them, Hans Jacob watched in absolute silence. The nineteen-year-old boy looked at the signed release papers, then at his father's unyielding profile. The anger over his mother's recent grave did not vanish, but it shifted into a profound, heavy respect. He saw that his father was not a madman chasing a ghost; he was a man who had waited half a lifetime for the precise moment to execute a perfect ambush. Without a word, Hans Jacob dismounted from his mare, stepped forward, and helped Elsbeth up onto the saddle behind his father.

In the spring of 1670, under a canopy of greening oak trees that had finally stopped sheltering scouts and snipers, Christofell Hering married Elsbeth Gottfried in the Stiftskirche of Oberkaufungen. It was a quiet affair. The village elders looked on with a mixture of awe and disbelief; they were witnessing the final resolution of a tragedy that had begun in the horror year of 1637.

They did not have the wild, youthful passion of teenagers, but a deep, fiercely protective devotion that had been forged in the clay pits of Waldkappel and preserved behind stone walls. They lived with a quiet, breathless urgency, knowing every day was a stolen victory against a century that had tried to destroy them.

The ultimate fruit of that hard-won defiance arrived in the late autumn of **1671**. Inside the very same Hering cottage where Hans Jacob had been born twenty-one years earlier, Elsbeth gave birth to a healthy, loud-crying boy.

Christofell sat by the hearth, his hair now turning a distinguished gray at the temples, cradling his second son. Hans Jacob stood by the window, his arms crossed over his chest, his face no longer angry, but softened as he looked at his new half-brother.

"He will need a name that remembers where we came from," Christofell said, his voice thick with emotion as he

looked up at Elsbeth, who lay pale but smiling in the linen sheets.

"His name is Hans Ludwig," Elsbeth whispered, her voice tired but filled with an incredible, peaceful warmth. "Hans Ludwig Hering."

The child was a bridge between the old world of the war and the new world they were painstakingly building. For five years, the cottage was filled with a peace that Christofell had never known in his own youth. He farmed the sixty acres with Hans Jacob, while Elsbeth taught little Hans Ludwig how to read from her father's old theological texts.

But the cold Hessian soil never gave anything without eventually demanding a price.

The trauma of twenty-two years of confinement, lye-smoke, and deprivation had left a permanent, invisible scar on Elsbeth's lungs. In the winter of 1676, a heavy, suffocating chest-cough settled into the valley. She did not linger in agony; like Eva before her, the cold took her quickly.

Christofell buried her on a gray, rain-slicked morning in November, right beside the abbey walls where they had once planted secret patches of rye as children. He stood between his two sons—Hans Jacob, now a stalwart man of twenty-six, and Hans Ludwig, a wide-eyed boy of five.

As the dirt fell over the coffin, Christofell reached into his pocket and pulled out the small, dried stalk of green winter rye that Elsbeth had given him when the soldiers took her away in 1647. He dropped it into the grave.

He was forty-six years old. He had lost his childhood to the Croats, his youth to a forced decree, and now his great love to the winter damp. Yet, as he looked at his two sons standing shoulder-to-shoulder beside him, he did not look like a defeated man. He looked like the clay itself—unyielding, heavy, and impossible to break.

CHAPTER 5

French Huguenots in Hessen

PARIS, FRANCE 1685

Metz, France, 1685***The Burning of Heidelberg, 1689******Christoffell Hering 1630-1700******Arrival in Waldkappel, 1691***

The parquet floors of the Hall of Mirrors caught the amber glow of a thousand beeswax candles, but inside the King's private cabinet, the air was cold with the scent of melted wax and damp ink.

King Louis XIV, the Sun King, did not look up as his quill scratched across the heavy vellum of the Edict of Fontainebleau. His face, pitted by childhood smallpox, was set like stone beneath his towering black wig. Behind him stood the Catholic bishops, whispering of a unified France—one king, one law, one faith.

"The heresy is cured," the King murmured, pressing his heavy gold signet ring into the boiling red wax. "Let the temples be pulled down to the bedrock."

Three hundred leagues to the south, in a stone cottage outside Metz, the decree arrived not as words on paper, but as the boots of four royal dragoons guarding all of the roads leading to and from the town. They watched at night for those trying to escape and beat them. They culled the woods and the plains and tried to force the town's citizen to sign papers documenting their allegiance to Catholicism and to King Louis above God. Those who did not sign were hunted down. Jean Villon was one of the few remaining who had not capitulated. After four months of scare tactics, it was time for more action. The dragoons came breaking through Jean's oak door.

They did not want the Villons to leave; too many Huguenots were skilled workers. France needed them to stay in France. But they wanted them broken. They wanted them Catholic so they would obey only the king whom they believed was chosen by God. But the Huguenots obeyed a different sovereign first—God—and the king second. The dragoons would convince them to sign.

The sergeant threw his mud-spattered leather coat over the family's dining table, knocking a loaf of rye bread into the hearth. For three days, the soldiers lived in the house like wolves. They slaughtered the family's milk cow in the courtyard, burned the loom for firewood, and kept the family awake for seventy hours straight by beating brass pans next to the children's ears.

"Sign," the priest whispered, thrusting a parchment of Catholic abjuration toward the father, Jean Villon.

"No, I will not sign today. Try again tomorrow," replied Jean. "Today be merry and drink."

That night, while the dragoons slept off a cask of stolen apple wine, the Villons took nothing but a single iron kettle, a handful of dried peas, and the French Bible hidden beneath the floorboards. They slipped out through the drainage ditch into the freezing autumn rain. If they were caught before the Rhine, the father would die chained to a galley bench. They ran toward the east, toward the rumor of a German prince who promised a sanctuary he called Heidelberg.

The Saar mud didn't squelch; it sucked.

Jean Villon hauled against the damp hemp rope looped across his chest, the gnarled fibers chewing straight through his threadbare coat into the skin of his collarbone. Behind him, the heavy wooden wheel of their single baggage cart groaned, tilting dangerously into a deep, rain-slicked ditch.

"Keep moving!" Jean hissed over his shoulder, his breath flowering into thick white steam in the gray December chill. "Do not stop. If the children sit, they freeze."

Behind the cart, his wife, Marie, shoved her weight against the raw timber frame, her face slick with cold sweat and rain. Twelve people—the surviving remnant of the fifteen who had

slipped out of Metz—shuffled in a silent, shivering line. Their feet were wrapped in rags and bound with rotting twine.

"Jean," his brother whispered from the rearguard, his hand dropping to the heavy iron spade he carried like a weapon. "Look west. The ridge."

Through the skeletal winter oaks, the gray ribbon of the Rhine River glinted like a blade. Nestled along the eastern bank stood the stone tower and timber-framed silhouettes of a fortified checkpoint.

Rastatt.

The small band froze. Across the road, less than a quarter-mile ahead, the iron-studded gates of the Catholic stronghold loomed. A pale plume of woodsmoke rose from the guardhouse. On the stone parapet, a sentry wrapped in a heavy wool cloak paced, the long barrel of his matchlock musket shining under the dark clouds.

"Catholic territory," Jean's brother muttered, his knuckles whitening on the spade. "If the Margrave's patrols catch us without a transit pass, the men go to the galleys. They'll send the women back to France."

"We don't use the road," Jean said, his voice flat, stripped of fear by sheer exhaustion. He unlooped the rope from his shoulder and pointed toward the marshy riverbanks to the

south. "We go through the reeds. If a child cries, cover their mouth.

They found the skiff where the smuggler had promised it—a rotting, waterlogged hull half-buried under a shroud of dead willow branches. It was too small for twelve, and entirely too small for their transport. Jean stared at the heavy baggage cart. He had known this moment would come when they left Metz; the cart had served its purpose, preserving the children's legs over a hundred miles of French mud, but the Rhine would take no wheels. With trembling, numb fingers, Marie unstrapped the iron kettle and handed the handful of dried peas to the oldest boy. Together, the men tipped the cart onto its side, heaving it deep into the sucking black swamp mud until the dead cattails swallowed it whole. Everything else—the spare rags, the wooden tools, the comfort of a rolling wheel—was left to the marsh.

Jean squeezed the children and the elderly into the center of the skiff, their knees knocked against the iron kettle. He and the grown men waded waist-deep into the biting shallows just long enough to heave the heavy craft off the bank, before scrambling over the gunwales as the floorboards groaned under their combined weight. The Upper Rhine didn't just flow; it pulled with a glacial, indifferent malice. The boat sat perilously low in the black water, icy waves lapping inches

from the brim. They clawed their way across the deep, roaring expanse, rowing frantically with bare hands and a single broken oar to fight the swift current that threatened to sweep them downstream. They were completely at the mercy of the river until the hull finally scraped the frozen gravel of the eastern bank, where Jean tumbled back into the shallows to drag the vessel safely into the reeds.

They dragged themselves up into the shivering brush, their clothes already stiffening into sheets of ice. Nestled along the eastern bank stood the stone tower and timber-framed silhouettes of a fortified checkpoint. Rastatt. The small band froze. Across the road, less than a quarter-mile ahead, the iron-studded gates of the Catholic stronghold loomed. A pale plume of woodsmoke rose from the guardhouse. On the stone parapet, a sentry wrapped in a heavy wool cloak paced, the long barrel of his matchlock musket shining under the dark clouds.

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"We run when the sentry turns his back," Jean whispered. They moved like ghosts through the freezing muck, the tall, dead cattails scraping against their faces. Every crack of a breaking twig sounded like a pistol shot. Jean held his breath as they passed close enough to hear the German guards inside the

Rastatt outpost laughing, the scent of roasting salt-pork drifting over the stone wall. For two miles, they crawled through the swamp, their boots filling with icy water, until the hostile shadow of Rastatt finally receded into the mist behind them.

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The road to Heidelberg was forty-six miles of hostile German territory. To avoid the Margrave's mounted patrols, Jean led the remnant away from the flat valley floor, pushing them along the lower, jagged fringes of the Black Forest hiding in the misty pine forest. The landscape was a dark, brooding labyrinth of towering pines that blocked out the pale autumn sun, the forest floor choked with black slush and rotting needles. They walked for three agonizing days, sleeping standing up against tree trunks to keep out of the frozen mud, drinking from streams and freezing through the nights. By the fourth night, hunger was a physical pain; the handful of dried peas was long gone, and the children were chewing on bits of pine bark.

"Jean," Marie whispered as they paused beneath a canopy of dripping hemlock, her knees buckling under her. She pulled her threadbare shawl tighter around her chest, trying to shield the youngest girl from the biting wind. "My hands are too

numb to hold her much longer. If we do not reach the prince soon, we will sleep in these woods and never wake up."

Jean knelt before her, his breath a ragged white cloud. He reached beneath his sodden wool coat and pulled out the French Bible, its leather cover warped and dark with river water. He pressed it into her frozen hands. "Feel the weight of it, Marie," he hissed, his voice cracked and raw, but fierce. "We carried this across the Saar mud. We carried it through the deep currents of the Rhine. Louis XIV wanted it burned, but it is here. We are here. We do not stop until we see the castle."

The next morning, the suffocating forest finally broke.

When the Villon caravan crested the northern hills of the Neckar Valley, Jean called a halt, his mouth slightly open, the cold wind whipping his hair across his face. The trees rolled back to reveal the dramatic, red-sandstone cliffs of the Neckar Valley.

"Jean, look," Marie whispered, stepping up beside him and resting her trembling hand on his arm. "Is it real?"

"It's a fortress," Jean's brother muttered, kicking a stone down the path. "The King's army will never break a place like that."

"It is a sanctuary," Jean corrected him, his eyes reflecting the amber light bouncing off the river. "Let's get the children down to the bridge."

The city did not just sit in the valley; it glowed. Spanning the Neckar River was the great city bridge—a massive superstructure of timber walkways and covered galleries resting securely upon ancient stone pillars. At its southern end, guarding the entrance to the Old Town, rose the *Brückentor*, its ivory-white, twin-towered medieval gates topped with sharp slate spires.

High above the rushing river, nestled against the dark green slope of the mountain, the great castle of Heidelberg loomed out of the morning mist like a mountain of solid flame. Built from massive blocks of red neckar-sandstone, its sweeping terraces, fortified towers, and rows of grand, arched windows caught the first pale rays of the autumn sun, glowing a deep, warm amber against the gray sky.

Its pristine palace facades—the intricate early-Renaissance carvings of the *Otttheinrichsbau*—blazed in hues of crimson and gold under the low winter sun. Below the fortress walls, the manicured terraces of the *Hortus Palatinus* gardens descended the mountain like a staircase of green velvet.

A massive plume of woodsmoke rose from its high chimneys—a promise of warmth, hearth fire, and bread that seemed almost miraculous to people who had lived in the freezing dark for weeks.

Down in the valley below, the timber-framed roofs of the city clustered safely beneath the castle's shadow. Jean stopped, his breath catching in his throat as a single tear cut a clean path through the black soot and river mud on his cheek. They had crossed the borders of fear.

In Heidelberg, they found what they believed was eternity.

The Elector welcomed the French weavers with open arms, desperate to inject new life into his recovering textile guilds. For nearly four years, the Villons knew the sweet rhythm of peace. Jean and his kinsmen built three heavy oak looms in a small tenement along the riverbank. Life was good and they were happy and healthy.

"Slower on the treadle, Pierre!" Jean called out one crisp morning in 1688, the sharp, rhythmic *thwack-clack* of the flying shuttles filling the warm air of their shop. The room smelled of boiled flax, sheep's wool, and fresh German rye bread cooling on the windowsill. "The tension must be perfect if we want the guild-master to pay top coin for this linen."

Pierre, his eldest son, smiled, his foot pumping the wooden pedal with practiced ease. "The local Germans are already calling it *Villon-cloth*, Father. They say our weave holds tighter against the winter frost than anything made in the valley."

Marie walked over, wrapping a warm woolen shawl around Jean's shoulders. "We have a roof, Jean. The children are learning the local tongue. The dragoons will never find us here."

Jean kissed her forehead, looking out the window at the peaceful stone facade of the castle above. "They won't find us, *mon cœur*. We are home."

Then, the world burned again.

King Louis XIV, terrified of a German invasion on his eastern border, wanted to push his borders to the Rhine River, a barrier that neither country could get past very easily. Instead of Germans being on both sides of the Rhine, Louis fully intended to take away that military advantage. It was too easy for the Germans to march into France without any obstruction. But the Rhine was an excellent obstruction, one which the French could defend. Louis' greatest enemy was the Holy Roman Empire, and Austria was locked in a massive war against the Ottomans. If the Emperor won, his army would be battle-hardened and he would most certainly lead them toward France's newly won territories. The timing had to be now. Burn all the villages on the east side of the Rhine. If France could not hold the Palatinate, the French war ministry decided no one would. His armies were ordered to turn the paradise of the

Neckar Valley into a scorched-earth desert, leaving no food or shelter for the German forces. It was supposed to be a brief high-stakes window of opportunity and bloodless show of force. But his plan backfired and turned the land grab into a long world war that eventually lasted nine years. It was given the lackluster name of The Nine Year's War, 1688-1697.

In March 1689, a deafening, earth-shaking boom shattered the midnight silence in beautiful river town of Heidelberg. Jean was thrown from his bed as the floorboards bucked.

"Jean! The windows!" Marie screamed through the darkness.

The glass pane in their bedroom had shattered inward, showering the floor with sharp shards. Outside, the sky was not dark; it was a violent, pulsing crimson. High on the mountain, a second massive explosion ripped through the *Ottheinrichsbau*. A brilliant sheet of white fire erupted as French demolition teams blew the great castle apart from the inside, its ancient sandstone towers buckling and collapsing down the cliffs into the valley.

"Out! Out of the tenement!" Jean roared, his voice competing with the screams echoing from the street below.

He lunged through the smoky workshop, grabbing his youngest daughter by the waist and tossing her into the back of their small baggage cart. His kinsmen frantically threw their

hidden French Bibles over the wooden slats as embers began to rain down upon the thatched roof.

"The French are at the bridge!" a neighbor shouted, running past their doorway with his clothes half-singed. "General Mélac's men are torch-happy! They're burning the lower ward!"

Jean rushed to the horse, frantically bucking the leather harness into place. Pierre ran to his side, his face white with terror. "Father, the looms! We can't leave the oak looms!"

Jean grabbed his son by the collar, pulling him close until their noses touched. "The wood can burn, Pierre! The family stays alive! Get behind the cart and push!"

As they crested the northern ridge, joining a desperate, choked column of thousands of fleeing Protestant refugees, Jean stopped and looked back across the valley. The destruction was total. The beautiful city of their sanctuary was a roaring furnace, its great timber bridge collapsing into the black waters of the Neckar.

Two days later, their retreat dragged them past the Upper Rhine territory a second time, and the sheer malice of the French war ministry laid itself bare before them.

"Look there, Jean," his brother whispered, pointing a shaking finger through the trees toward the riverbanks.

Rastatt—the fiercely Catholic stronghold they had evaded four years prior—was gone. The French army had shown no religious mercy; the town's timber-framed houses were reduced to blackened chimneys, and the Margrave's ancestral hunting lodge was a hollow shell of melted stone.

Jean stared at the smoking ruins of the Catholic town, his knuckles turning white on the cart's wooden frame. "The Sun King spares no one," he whispered, the bitter smoke of a burning Germany settling deep into his lungs. "Catholic or Protestant, we are all just ash to him. Keep moving. We walk north."

For two brutal years, they became ghosts in a warring empire. With the Rhineland reduced to ash, Jean led his family north, moving only by night to avoid French raiders and imperial recruiters. They begged for scraps in fractured principalities, sleeping in abandoned barns and frozen ditches. But hope lay northward. Word had reached the desperate columns of refugees that Landgrave Karl of Hessen-Kassel had built a sanctuary—a whole new French district with stone houses and free trade rights—specifically for those who spoke their tongue. In the bitter winter of 1691, starved but unbroken, the twelve Villons made their way toward the fortified gates of Kassel.

When the Villon caravan rolled down the final, pine-scented ridge of the Losse Valley, Marie collapsed onto her

knees in the wet grass, burying her face in her mud-stained apron. She did not sob; she gasped, a sound of pure, fractured relief.

"Jean," she whispered, her finger trembling as she pointed down through the morning mist. "Look at the roofs. Look at the stones."

Oberkaufungen was beautiful. The twin stone towers of its great medieval abbey rose proudly into the grey sky, completely untouched by the fires of the Rhine. The cross-timbered houses lining the tidy lanes were stout, wealthy, and whole. Perfect curls of white oak-smoke drifted peacefully from the stone chimneys. It looked exactly like the paradise they had been promised on the Landgrave's printed handbills.

The small band of fifteen refugees let their heavy baggage ropes slip from their raw shoulders. The children dropped into the dirt of the market square, too tired to look around, their hollow cheeks smudged with soot. Jean leaned heavily against the wooden frame of the lead cart, his chest expanding with a deep, shuddering breath.

"We stop here," Jean said, his voice rasped thin by the long mountain trek. "Pierre, unhitch the mare. Let her drink from the stone trough."

"You cannot unpack those wagons here, Monsieur."

The voice was like a heavy stone dropping into a still pool. It didn't come from a soldier, but it carried the absolute weight of a man who owned the dirt beneath his boots.

Jean snapped his head up, his hand instinctively dropping to the worn wooden handle of the axe tucked into his belt.

Standing at the edge of the abbey courtyard was a stalwart man of forty-seven. His broad, square shoulders were wrapped in a heavy leather riding cloak, and his jaw was set like a block of iron. His boots were caked in rich, dark loam, and his grey eyes held a hard, steady glare. It was Hans Jacob Hering.

"Who calls the halt?" Jean demanded, stepping in front of his wife and pulling the creased, ink-stained handbill from his waistcoat. He thrust the paper forward, his knuckles white. "We have the invitation. Signed by the Landgrave's councillors in Kassel. We are master weavers, French Calvinists."

Hans Jacob didn't take the paper. He didn't even look at it. He stepped directly into the center of the lane, his tall frame casting a long shadow over the shying Villon children.

"It is the Landgrave's signature, yes," Hans Jacob said, his voice low and rumbled in the quiet square. "But Oberkaufungen's lanes are full. Our weavers' guilds are closed to outsiders, and every foot of this valley clay is already spoken for. I farm sixty acres on the northern lane, Frenchman, and I tell you, there is no room for a single foreign loom in this town."

Too many others have come before you. They have taken every spot."

Marie let out a sharp, heartbroken cry, burying her face against the rough wood of the cart. Pierre stepped up beside his father, his chest heaving, his fingers tightening around a wooden wheel-spoke. "We have the law on our side!" the boy shouted, his voice cracking with youth and anger. "The Landgrave promised!"

Jean stepped directly into Hans Jacob's space, the toes of their muddy boots nearly touching. The smaller French weaver had to look up to meet the German farmer's eyes, but his gaze didn't waver.

"We have been running for two years, Master Hering," Jean hissed through cracked, bleeding lips, his teeth bared in desperation. "My youngest child was born in a freezing ditch outside Frankfurt. My eldest daughter died of the flux while we hid in the ruins of Mannheim. We have survived the dragoons, the burning of Heidelberg, and the total destruction of the Rhine. We have nowhere left to walk. We stay here."

Hans Jacob looked down. He didn't look at Jean's angry face; he looked at the man's hands. He saw the missing fingernail from a winter crossing, the gnarled knuckles, and the deep, raw, unhealed purple scars on the Frenchman's wrists

where the heavy baggage ropes had bitten into the flesh over hundreds of leagues.

The hard flint in the German's eyes shifted. It didn't soften into pity—pity was useless in Hesse—but it deepened into a profound, generational recognition. He knew that look. He had seen it on his own father, Christoffell, who had watched this very valley burn sixty years before. He knew what it looked like when a family refused to break.

"I didn't say you had to walk alone," Hans Jacob said quietly, his voice dropping its defensive edge.

He turned toward the large courtyard of his own tithe-barn and raised a hand, shouting a command in German to his servants. Two heavy timber baggage wagons, pulled by stout draft horses, rumbled out into the lane.

Jean blinked, lowering his axe hand. "What is this?"

"Your patents aren't registered for the Losse Valley," Hans Jacob explained, walking over to the lead wagon and hoisting a massive burlap sack, slamming it onto the floorboards with a heavy thud. "You belong in the Wehre valley, twenty miles east over the high ridge. The town is called Waldkappel. It is a rugged, broken place, but the land there is yours by right."

Hans Jacob reached into the back of the wagon, pulling out a heavy, double-bitted iron felling axe and tossing it to

Jean. Jean caught it by the ash handle, surprised by its perfect weight.

"These sacks are filled with winter rye seed from my own fields," Hans Jacob said, tightening the leather cinch on his bay mare. "There are iron nails, measurement chains, and thick wool blankets from my mother's chests in the back. My younger brother, Hans Ludwig, is already standing in the mud at Waldkappel waiting to map your boundary lines."

Hans Jacob climbed into his leather saddle, looking down at the stunned French weaver with a faint, grim smile.

"The road over the ridge is rough, Monsieur Villon, and the forest is full of winter wolves," Hans Jacob said, turning his horse toward the eastern mountain pass. "But the Herings do not let a neighbor march into the wilderness empty-handed. Move your carts into line behind mine. I am taking you to your town."

The next two days were hard travel days, the women sleeping in the wagons and the men sleeping under the wagons. On the third day, they arrived at the once beautiful village of Waldkappel. But for sixty years it had been nothing but stones on the ground and ash turning to soil that sprouted weeds.

Jean looked at the handbill in his raw, blistered fingers, then down at the ruined town. There was no bread here. There were no roofs. But there were no dragoons.

"We have the axes," Jean said, his voice flat with a survivor's grim resolve. "And the Landgrave gave us the timber. We build."

Then a voice came from the shadow of the ruined gatehouse. "You will need more than axes, Monsieur Villon. The Hessian frost eats steel if you do not bury it in a proper hearth."

A young man stepped into the gray rain, leading a heavy pack-horse laden with iron measuring chains, a bundle of rolled vellum maps, and a crate of iron nails. He was twenty years old, built with the broad shoulders of a valley farmer, but he wore the stiff, blue wool coat of a low-ranking administrative official of the Landgraviate of Hesse-Kassel.

His name was Hans Ludwig Hering.

Six decades earlier, on a terrible Good Friday in this very valley, Hans Ludwig's father, Christoffell, had stood as a terrified seven-year-old boy watching the smoke rise over Waldkappel as it burned to the ash they now walked upon. Christoffell had survived the hunger years by turning his heart into stubborn grit he had beaten directly into his son. When Landgrave Karl called for capable, bilingual men from the Losse

Valley to manage the incoming French colonies, Hans Ludwig had volunteered. He knew the land better than anyone; his family had bled into its soil.

Hans Ludwig pulled a heavy brass watch from his waistcoat, checked the time, and then looked kindly at the exhausted French family. He spoke in a formal, carefully practiced French—learned from the Calvinist preachers who had taken refuge near the Abbey years ago.

"I am Hans Ludwig," he said, extending a calloused hand to Jean. "The Landgrave has appointed me to be your *Grebe* here—your conductor. I am to register your names, measure your plots, and see that you do not starve before the winter planting."

Jean blinked, his hand frozen on the handle of his axe. For four months, authority had meant a dragoon's boot or a border guard's demand for a bribe. To hear his own tongue spoken by a German official holding building nails felt like a dream. He stepped forward and gripped Hans Ludwig's hand. The skin was rough, but the grip was steady.

"We were told there would be stone houses, Monsieur Hering," Jean's wife said, her voice trembling as she gestured to the briar-choked foundations.

Hans Ludwig looked at the ruins, his expression softening with a generational solemnity. "My father told me of the day

this town died," he said quietly. "The Swedes left only two barns standing. The people who remained were too few, too broken to pull the forest back. But the Landgrave has cleared the ducal forests for you. I have three wagons of oak timber arriving from the Kaufungen woods by noon tomorrow."

He walked over to the broken wagon wheel, knelt in the mud without a care for his fine blue coat, and inspected the split wood.

"We will fix this first," Hans Ludwig said, looking up at Jean with a sharp, practical glint in his eye. "Then, Monsieur Villon, we will divide the market square. You French know how to weave linen and work leather; our local Germans know how to coax rye out of the clay. I have a young fraulein I am courting, and I promised to bring her a fine pair of shoes made from Waldkappel leather before the year is out. Let us make sure you have a roof over your workbench before the winter snow flies."

The leather flap of the lead wagon parted, and an old man climbed down into the Hessian mud with painful, deliberate slowness. He was seventy years old, his back curved like a mountain pine under the weight of a heavy sheepskin coat. His hands were gnarled, the knuckles swollen from a lifetime of pulling plows when the horses were dead, and his left shoulder sat permanently lower than his right—the lasting mark of the leather harness he had worn during the bitter planting of 1637.

It was Christoffell Hering.

He had refused to stay behind in the warmth of Oberkaufungen when his son was sent to Waldekappel. He had told Hans Ludwig that his old bones wouldn't let him die until he saw the sky over the Wehre valley without smoke in it.

Christoffell stood in the center of the ruined lane, leaning heavily on a cane carved from Kaufungen oak. His pale gray eyes, watery with age, scanned the blackened stone foundations, the hollow chimney of the gatehouse, and the wild elderberry bushes choking the old market square.

Jean Villon watched the old man, noting the profound solemnity on his wrinkled face. "Sir?" Jean asked softly, stepping closer. "Do you know this place?"

"I know every stone under this mud, young Frenchman," Christoffell murmured, his voice sounding like dry leaves scraping across a stone floor. He pointed his cane toward the crumbling, roofless shell of Saint George's church. "On Good Friday, when I was a boy of seven, I stood across the ridge and watched the Croat cavalry throw torches into those high windows. The lead melted from the glass like silver tears. I remember the smell of the lard and the roasting timber. I remember thinking God had turned his back on Hessen forever."

The French refugees fell silent, the children gathering close to Jean's wife as they listened to the old German.

He looked up at his son, Hans Ludwig, a fierce, protective pride flashing in his old eyes.

"My son is a man of ink and measuring chains now," Christoffell said, resting a heavy, trembling hand on Hans Ludwig's shoulder. "The Landgrave gives you the wood, and Hans Ludwig will give you the law. But I give you the memory. This soil is stubborn, Monsieur Villon. It takes a heavy toll before it gives anything back. But it will feed you if you do not blink."

Jean looked from the old man's gnarled hands to the strong, capable shoulders of Hans Ludwig. For four months, the Villons had been outcasts, hunted like wolves across the borders of France. But standing here, between the patriarch who had survived the destruction and the son who was mapping the reconstruction, Jean felt the first true anchor drop into the earth.

Jean shifted his grip on the iron crowbar Hans Ludwig had unstrapped for him, his knuckles white in the gray rain. He looked at Hans Ludwig, then down at the elder Christoffell, whose pale eyes seemed to read the heavy history written in the lines of Jean's weathered face.

"Six years," Jean said, his voice dropping into a raspy whisper that barely carried over the wind. "Louis signed the damn paper in the autumn of eighty-five. Six years we have been running, Monsieur Hering. My youngest was born in a ditch outside Frankfurt; my eldest died of the flux while we hid in the ruins of Mannheim."

Christoffell nodded slowly, resting his gnarled hands heavily on top of his oak cane. He understood the math of a long escape. "The King's dragoons locked the gates, didn't they?"

"They did more than lock them," Jean spat, a flash of old, bitter fire returning to his eyes. "They watched the roads like hawks. We spent four months after the Edict pretending to be good Catholics in Metz, bowing to their priests while hiding our Bibles under the pigsties, just waiting for the winter when it would be cold enough to freeze the border rivers. And when we finally crossed the Rhine, we thought we were free."

Jean let out a hollow, humorless laugh that turned to vapor in the cold air.

"We built a small life in the Palatinate," Jean continued, gesturing vaguely toward the southwest. "Four years of peace. Then Louis's armies crossed the border again. The French generals burned Heidelberg. They burned Mannheim. We had to flee our new homes while they were still warm, and flee

again, deeper into the heart of Germany like beasts chased by hounds. For three, the whole world has been on fire and it is not near fini, the war is not finished."

"I'm afraid it will be another long one, I pray it is not as long as the last. We cannot survive another one like the last," Hans Ludwig murmured, adjusting the leather strap of his surveying chains. But we will build, war or no war. It is time. And we will put our faith in God first."

The elder Christofell stepped closer, his heavy sheepskin coat brushing against Jean's muddy sleeve. He reached out and touched the raw, scarred flesh on Jean's wrist—the unmistakable mark of a man who had pulled his own baggage carts across Germany when the horses were stolen.

"You took six years because the monster followed you," Christofell said softly, his watery eyes locked onto Jean's. "It is the same monster I saw here in thirty-seven. It wears a French coat one decade, a Swedish coat the next, and an Imperial banner the year after that. But it always eats the same things: your grain, your houses, and your children."

The old patriarch looked out across the ruined market square of Waldkappel, where the young Frenchmen were already beginning to haul the heavy oak logs from the Landgrave's wagons.

"Do not apologize for the time it took to get here, Jean Villon," Christoffell whispered, placing a trembling but steady hand over Jean's scarred wrist. "You survived the Sun King's wrath, and you survived the fire of the Palatinate. You are six years late, yes—but you arrived exactly when this valley needed men who refuse to die."

Jean looked at the old man, the heavy weight of a six-year flight finally lifting from his chest, replaced by the solid reality of the Hessian mud beneath his boots. With a deep nod, he turned back to the broken wagon wheel.

"Hans Ludwig," Jean called out, using the young conductor's name for the first time without a formal title. "Bring the jack-screw from the second cart. Let us see if we can make this town stand up before the sun goes down."

Christoffell nodded, a faint, wry smile touching his lips as the rhythmic thunk of an axe finally echoed against the stone foundations of Waldkappel. For sixty years, the ghost of Good Friday had haunted the valley. But as the first French timber was unloaded into the mud, the old man took a deep, clear breath. The air did not smell of winter, or of wet horsehair, or of burning oak.

It smelled of rain, turned earth, and a beginning.

The sound of the Wehre Valley changed on Monday morning. For nearly sixty years, it had been a place of heavy, suffocating silence, broken only by the caw of crows or the rattle of the wind through empty stone window frames. Now, the forest echoed with the rhythmic, biting *thwack* of thirty steel axes biting into green Hessian oak.

Hans Ludwig Hering stood at the edge of the ruins of the original market square, a long vellum scroll unrolled across the flat top of a salt barrel. He held a piece of charcoal in his fingers, his boots sunk ankle-deep in the cold clay. Beside him, his father, Christoffell, sat on a low stool wrapped in his sheepskin, his eyes tracking the perimeter like an old hawk watching its territory.

"The Frenchmen cut differently than our people," Christoffell observed, his voice a low rattle. "They swing shorter. Fast, like they are fighting the tree instead of felling it."

"They have to cut fast, Father," Hans Ludwig said, his eyes never leaving his map. "The frost is coming early off the Meißner ridge. If we do not raise the principal rafter-frames for the first six workshops by Friday, the clay-straw mix for the walls will freeze before it sets."

A sudden shout arose from the edge of the clearing. Jean Villon and three other Frenchmen were straining against a massive oak log, their leather boots slipping violently in the

muck. The log—intended as the main sill-beam for the new weavers' quarter—was wedged tight against a hidden, half-buried foundation stone from the old 1637 destruction.

From the shadow of a nearby cellar door, two German locals emerged. They were haggard men, their faces gray with decades of subsistence, wearing coats patched with coarse hemp sacking. One of them, old Klaus the blacksmith, carried a heavy iron crowbar, its tip scarred from years of clearing stones.

For a moment, the two groups simply stared at each other across the log. The Frenchmen stood frozen, their breathing ragged, their hands raw. The Germans looked at the newcomers' fine-boned faces and the strange, high-collared coats they wore. To the Germans, these were the people of the French King Louis who had just spent nine years burning the Rhineland; to the French, these were the sullen specters of a land that felt mostly like a graveyard.

Jean Villon wiped the rain from his forehead, his jaw tight. He didn't speak much German, and Klaus knew no French at all.

Klaus spat into the mud. He stepped forward, jammed the tip of his iron bar beneath the trapped log, and leaned his entire skeletal weight against it. The iron groaned.

Jean blinked, then a sharp understanding flashed in his dark eyes. "Ensemble!" he shouted to his men, slamming his shoulder against the rough bark. "Heave!"

With a collective, guttural grunt—half-French, half-German—the log shifted, cleared the stone, and dropped into the mud with a heavy, satisfying thud. Klaus didn't smile. He merely pulled his bar from the muck, gave Jean a short, stiff nod, and pointed toward the timber framing.

"Good oak," Klaus grunted in his thick dialect. "Stronger than French pine."

Jean didn't understand the words, but he understood the nod. He reached into his coat, pulled out a small, dried plug of tobacco—a rare luxury smuggled all the way from the Palatinate—and held it out. Klaus looked at the dark leaf, his eyes widening slightly. He took it, tucked it into his cheek, and for the first time, the line between invader and host began to blur in the common language of labor.

By Wednesday, Hans Ludwig had laid out the footprint of the new settlement. He didn't just scatter the houses; he used the Landgrave's strict, modern blueprints for a *Colonie*—a specialized industrial village.

"Here," Hans Ludwig explained, tracing his charcoal line across the vellum as Jean Villon and the *Obergrebe* looked on.

"The Landgrave wants the weavers together along the Wehre stream. The water is clean here; it hasn't run through the tanneries yet. You will need it for washing the linen warp."

Hans Ludwig walked the perimeter of the first workshop, stepping out the precise dimensions: forty feet long, twenty feet wide, with high ceilings to accommodate the massive, upright French looms that would be built during the winter.

"Monsieur Villon," Hans Ludwig said, looking up from his measuring chains. "Your people are skilled in the high-warp weaving. The Landgrave is exempting you from the timber-tax for three years, but by the fourth year, the tax must be paid in fine linen cloth sent directly to the court at Kassel. Do you understand?"

Jean nodded, his eyes scanning the stakes driven into the dirt. "We understand the price of a home, Monsieur Hering. In France, the price was our souls. Here, it is only our sweat. That is a cheap bargain."

On Sunday morning, the axes fell silent. The rain had cleared, leaving the valley cold, crisp, and pale under a bright October sun.

The church of Saint George still had no roof, and the high Gothic windows were still empty black arches gaping at the sky, but the villagers had cleared the fallen timber and rubble

from the nave. A temporary altar had been fashioned from two oak logs and a clean piece of French linen cloth.

The German locals sat on the left side of the nave, their worn woolens dark and smelling of wood-smoke. The French refugees sat on the right, the women with their heads covered in clean white linen caps, the children sitting rigid and silent.

Pastor Gottfried stepped behind the log altar. He was an old man, his black Lutheran cassock frayed at the cuffs, his hands trembling. He looked at the split congregation—two peoples who could not speak a word to one another, separated by language, liturgy, and decades of war.

He opened his book, but he did not read the standard liturgy. Instead, he spoke in a loud, slow German, which the French Calvinist pastor, Monsieur de la Roche, translated sentence by sentence from the opposite side of the altar.

"We are not here today as Lutherans or as Reformed," Gottfried said, his voice echoing off the bare stone walls. "We are not here as Germans or as Frenchmen. We are here as the fragments of a broken world that God has saw fit to gather up into one basket."

The elder Christoffell sat in the front row, his gnarled hands resting on his oak cane. He looked up at the empty stone vaulting above them. Sixty-years ago, he had watched the village burn from twenty miles away. Pastor Gottfried held a

different memory. He watched the lead melt from those very windows. Now, he looked across the aisle and saw little Elsbeth Villon holding the horn spoon he had given her, her small face bright in the autumn light.

The French pastor raised his hand, and the refugees began to sing. It was the 124th Psalm, the old Huguenot battle-hymn of deliverance, sung in the rhythmic, haunting French of the western provinces.

“If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, when men rose up against us...”

The Germans didn't know the words, but they knew the melody. It was the same rugged, defensive music that had carried them through the hunger years of the thirty-years war. One by one, the low, guttural voices of the Hessian farmers joined in, singing their own German translation against the soaring French vowels.

The two languages clashed and mingled under the open sky, rising through the roofless church like the smoke of a fire that had finally stopped burning.

Three years passed like the turning of a heavy wheel.

By the autumn of 1691, Waldkappel was no longer a scar on the hillside. The great stone gatehouse had been rebuilt, its steep roof covered in bright red clay tiles. Along the Wehre

stream, twelve timber-framed workshops stood in a neat, whitewashed row, the rhythmic, musical *clack-clack-clack* of the French shuttle-looms filling the valley from dawn until dusk. The fields were wide, green, and heavy with the late harvest.

Christoffell Hering sat on the bench outside his son's new office within the town's main administrative building. He had a thick wool blanket tucked around his knees. He was sixty-four years old, and the breath came shallow and whistling in his chest now.

Hans Ludwig stood beside him. "Look at the ridge, Father," Hans Ludwig said softly, pointing toward the eastern gap where the old trade road wound down from Thuringia.

Christoffell raised his head with great effort. The sun was setting, casting a long, amber glow across the valley. The wind shifted, blowing fresh off the Meißner hills.

The old man closed his eyes and breathed in deeply. His mind drifted back to Good Friday of 1637—to the smell of the lard, the wet horsehair, and the terrible, roaring heat of the flames. For years, that smell had lived in the back of his throat, a permanent soot that no amount of valley water could ever wash away.

But tonight, the air was different.

It smelled of clean, unwashed sheep's wool from the weavers' stalls. It smelled of freshly baked rye bread drifting from the communal ovens. It smelled of damp earth, fallen oak leaves, and the sweet, sharp tang of apple wine fermenting in the cellars.

"The smoke is gone," Christofell whispered, his gnarled fingers finally loosening their grip on his oak cane. A faint, peaceful smile touched his old lips, settling into the deep wrinkles of his face. "The sky is clear, Hans Ludwig. Time has done its work."

He let his head rest back against the whitewashed pine of the houses his son had helped build. He didn't blink as the darkness finally rolled down from the Kaufungen Forest, because he knew that this time, the dark was just the night, and the morning would bring nothing but the sound of the looms.

"Father, look at the last rays of the sun going down. That's the best part of the day. Maybe it means the best part of life, too," said Hans Ludwig. He looked at his father whose head had dropped to the side.

Hans Ludwig laughed. "Come on, old man! Let's put you to bed before you catch your death of cold." He touched his father whose body seemed to be rather cool.

“Father!” cried Hans Ludwg. He shook his father’s shoulder, but there was no movement. “Father!” he cried again. He got down on his knees in the mud and looked up at Chrstoffell’s presence. It was devoid of life. “Father!” he creid one last time, then he buried his face into the man’s chest and he cried.

“Good bye, old man,” he managed to gasp. “Your life was well lived.”

Chapter 6 will be posted as soon as possible.