



## CHAPTER

# 1

**“The folly of heretics seeks to rend the  
seamless garment of Christ.”**

*Pope Gregory IX, 1231*

It was an ordinary February afternoon. In the northern foothills of the Harz ranges bordering the Duchy of Thuringia, snow fell over the city of Blankenburg, blurring its sheet of tiled rooftops into the mountains. The heavy white sky itself seemed to be disintegrating and settling down, thick and soft, until there was nothing but the lumpy whiteness below mirroring the smooth whiteness above.

Blankenburg’s gnarled roots ran back into the unrecorded centuries before the Roman Empire. Its stone fortifications constricted a maze of ancient streets. Beam-and-plaster buildings rubbed their neighbors’ walls. Front doors dumped their occupants right onto the street, making the city feel like one vast house, its crooked hallway-streets roofed with strips of sky.

A stranger, marked by his clothes as a low-class laborer, was passing through. A man of the fields and mountains, he appeared quite out of place among Blankenburg’s feathers and noise. Townsmen eyed him scornfully. Some called him a dog.



The odd thing was, the jest was almost accurate. He was a rugged sort of man, with a measured pace, keen eyes, and a hound's look of tolerant cheerfulness.

The street opened into a square. A channeled spring, with a greenish figure spouting water into a trough, stood in the square's center. He paused beside it; a mounted nobleman was just reining his horse back. The man cupped his hands under the icy stream and slurped the water, paused for breath, and drank again. He wiped his face with the back of his hand and turned away.

The chapel stood just across the square, its high doors half-open and a bell tower pointing skyward. A little group of townspeople crowded the steps, studying a sheet of parchment tacked to the right door. The chapel doors served as the bulletin board for the town and its surrounding countryside.

The man turned aside to see. A huge red seal hung by a short ribbon from the bottom of the parchment. Two well-dressed and well-fed men, in bright checkered tunics and calfskin boots, were arguing loudly in front of it. They were pretty fair samples of this city—blusterous and merry, jumping headlong into arguments for the fun of the squabble, colorful and shrewd. Any traveler passing through would meet dozens like them.

“You always boasted you could read!”

“So I can,” the other man growled. “So I can! I can read when I can tell one letter from another. These legal scribes use letters with tails like birds’!”

“Just tell us, if you can, is it only a new law from the magistrate, or is it from His Majesty? Can you not tell us that?”

The man took the edge of the parchment between two fingers. “Vellum. Finest I ever touched. And finer than anything that ever crossed the table of our magistrates!” He squinted at the words, leaning in with his hands clutched behind him. “This first letter—it must be an *I*, and the next—”

“Can no one here read?” the second man shouted into the street.

Heads in the square turned, but no one moved or answered. This was a city built more on witnesses than certificates. Their stores of knowledge came from folktales and stories told around an evening fire, not from marks scratched onto a page.

The serf glanced around. Then he smiled dryly and pushed through the crowd. “I can read it.”

The townsmen jostled aside to let him in. Then they looked at him.

He knew what they saw. Among their checkered tunics and silver buckles, he was a clay jar on a shelf of blown glassware. There was something subtly but unmistakably Saxon about his broad face and keen eyes. He wore the clothes of the empire’s poorest—heavy boots, dark trousers, a knee-length tunic—all squarely cut and dyed dark with walnut hulls. He expected the mirth that crackled over the crowd and met it with a laugh.

“Who are you?”

“They call me Jurian,” he answered in the slow, guttural dialect of the mountains. “From Rosenthal.”

“Rosenthal. That’s the little Berlens estate. Well, I’d wager the king’s crown, you can’t read anymore than—any more



than—” he waved toward an itchy hound sniffing among a pile of garbage, “anymore than that dog can!”

There was another ripple of laughter.

Jurian met the man’s sneer without embarrassment and said, “It’s well for you that His Majesty’s crown isn’t yours to gamble, or your goose would be cooked.” He turned to the edict.

The magistrates’ scribes used blocky capitals; a work of cursive art like this could only come from the higher courts. It had been written with good black ink and a pen that did not sputter. It was highest quality parchment, so expertly scraped and stretched that he could see the outline of the door’s carvings through it.

As he scanned the first few words, his face turned white, then hardened. Those nearest him sensed he had told the truth about his literacy.

“Read it out loud! Read it to us!” A crowd began to gather in, suctioned by the noise. “Read it! Read it! Are you deaf, man?”

For a few seconds, it seemed he was. He turned and looked, not at but past them, into nothingness, his face like a man trying to shake a nightmare from his eyes. Some of the crowd turned their heads to follow his gaze but saw nothing but the snow-laden sky sagging gray over the powdered rooftops.

A sly elbow in his ribs turned him back to the decree. He cleared his throat, and his voice was the cry of a herald. “‘Given by His Imperial Majesty the Emperor Frederick II!’”



Strangely, his accent changed. He no longer clipped and spliced his words. Now he sounded more like a courtier than a laborer. The clamor hushed and the people crowded in. They trampled the snow on the steps into slushy mud and turned the air cloudy with their breathing. “Hush!” everyone said to everyone else. “Hush! It’s from the emperor!”

“... King of Sicily, King of Cyprus and Jerusalem, King of the Romans, in the year of our Lord 1230: It is the will of the Emperor that the heresy of the Patarini, also called Waldenses, shall be considered as more abominable than offending the Imperial Majesty. These heretics are not called by the name of any ancient heretics, but after the example of the ancient martyrs, they likewise call themselves Patarini, that is, delivered unto suffering.’”

“Another decree against them?” grumbled the man at his side. “How many has it been now, three or four?”

“This is the third,” Jurian said, switching back to the mountain dialect for this parenthesis, “but this one is different.” His hand closed around the handle of the church door, his knuckles showing white through the dirt and ink on his fingers.

“But these are estranged from the holy faith of the eternal Godhead. Therefore, we cannot refrain from drawing the sword of vengeance against them. The officers of the Emperor, when they have found them, shall keep them in bonds, in order that they may be called before the Inquisition. After their apprehension, if any shall desire to return to the Catholic faith, they shall be imprisoned for life, to do penance.’”

The stillness was so thick now that it was almost a presence.