



A Story of
Sinners,
Servants,
and
Saints

*Treachery
and
Truth*

Katy Huth Jones

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Photo of the bust of young Wenceslaus IV, King of Bohemia from the Treasury of
Saint Vitus Cathedral in the Holy Cross Chapel at the Prague Castle by Packare,
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This is a novelized story including Saint Wenceslaus (Václav I, Duke of Bohemia).
While Saint Wenceslaus is real, elements of this story—including some characters,
conversations, the plot, and events—are fictional products of the author's
imagination.

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*This book is dedicated to Pamela Sharp,
my longtime writing friend and fellow bibliophile,
without whom Poidevin's story
would never have been told.*

Cast of Characters

Václav (VAHTS-lahv): Duke of the Přemysl dynasty, son of Dragomíra, brother to Boleslav and Přibislava

Poidevin (POI-duh-vin): A servant of Dragomíra and later Václav

Ludmila (LOOD-mil-ah): Grandmother of Václav, Boleslav, and Přibislava

Dragomíra (DRAH-goh-meer-ah): Mother of Václav, Boleslav, and Přibislava

Boleslav (BOH-luh-slahv): Younger brother of Václav, older brother of Přibislava

Přibislava (PRZHEE-bih-slahv-ah): Younger sister of Václav and Boleslav

Žibrid (ZHEE-brid): A *voyvode* loyal to Václav

Ana (AH-nuh): Daughter of Žibrid

Zbraslav (ZBRAH-slahv): Son of Václav and Ana

Žito (ZHEE-toh): Václav's trusted bodyguard

Father Pavel (PAH-vel): Catholic priest

Father Balád (BAH-lahd): Associate of Father Pavel

Bora (BOH-rah): A washerwoman who befriends Poidevin

Arnost (AR-nost): A shepherd living near Praha

Jan (YAHN): A blacksmith from a village on Bohemia's
western border

Ladislav (LAH-dih-slahv): A *voyvode* loyal to Dragomíra

Tunna (TUH-nah): One of Dragomíra's henchmen

Gommon (GOH-mon): Another of Dragomíra's henchmen

Henry the Fowler: King of Saxony, a Germanic land on
Bohemia's northwest border; a fowler traps and hunts birds

Arnulf (AR-noolf): Duke of Bavaria, a Germanic land on
Bohemia's western border

Radslav (RAHD-slahv): Duke of Kourím (KOO-rheem)

Přemysl (PRZHE-mih-sil): First leader of the Čechs

*Peoples, Places,
and Things in the Tenth Century*

Bavaria (buh-VAIR-ee-uh): A Germanic country bordering Bohemia on the west

Bohemia (boh-HĒ-mē-uh): A land of Eastern Europe now in the Czech Republic

Čech (CHEK): A tribe of people living in Bohemia

Drudge: An unskilled kitchen slave responsible for the lowliest tasks

Fortnight: Two weeks or fourteen days

Levý Hradec (LEH-vya HRAH-dets): Site of first church in Bohemia, about 10 kilometers or 6.2 miles from Praha

Magyars (MOD-yars): People from what is now Hungary

Midden (MID-in): Place where all the human filth and refuse of the castle was collected; someone was required to muck it out once a year

Moravia (moh-RAH-vee-ah): A Slavic country to the east of Bohemia

Praha (PRAH-hah): Capital of Bohemia/today's Czech Republic, known in English as Prague

Saxony (SAX-suh-nee): A Germanic country bordering Bohemia on the northwest

Scullion (SKULL-yuhn): A servant who scrubs floors or kitchen kettles

Tetín (TEH-teen): Castle where the Duchess Ludmila lived

Trencher bread: Bread used as a plate, common from the early Middle Ages

Vltava (VUHL-tah-vah): A river flowing through Praha/Prague. Known today by its German name, the Moldau.

Voyvode (VOY-vohd) : A warlord or chieftain of the Čechs, in later times a noble



CENTRAL EUROPE IN THE 10TH CENTURY

Prologue

*29th day of September
Feast of Michaelmas
Anno Domini 929*

I, Poidevin, write this so that all may know the true story of my master, the Duke of Bohemia, the most noble Václav. Though our enemy is strong, the Most High is stronger still.

God, forgive me! I could not save him from his murderers. But I hope I shall be granted enough time to write the truth, even as my blessed master taught me.

Yet how can I write these words without baring my heart? Even now the emotions of the past eight years fill my thoughts, as if I were living them again.

Chapter 1

DARKNESS GRIPPED BOHEMIA, an evil born of fear: Fear of the goddess Morana and her demand for human sacrifice; fear of the nomadic Magyars who had destroyed Moravia on our eastern border; and fear of the mighty Germanic army to the west.

During those dark days, I bathed my mother's burning face with my tears and listened to her incoherent mumbling until the fever consumed her. For three days and nights I sat beside her, until she followed my father in death. As soon as her body lay cold in the ground, I was sold into bondage to pay my father's debts.

Eight years ago . . . I was only twelve winters old and small for my age. Nonetheless, a soldier shackled my right ankle and joined me to a chain of other slaves. The rough metal scraped at my skin with every step until I felt a warm trickle of blood.

I did not look at the other slaves or the soldiers. I concentrated on putting one bare foot in front of the other as the dirt road carried me far from my village, the only home I'd ever known. The other slaves never spoke to me. I suppose they were as afraid as I was to draw the attention of our captors, especially when we passed a sacred grove with an idol protected inside a wooden shrine. As the smallest of the captives, I would be the one to be sacrificed, had the guards felt the need to appease the local god.

But on the third day of our journey, as we stopped for the night, I heard the oldest man among us say, “We will see Praha tomorrow.”

Praha! My parents sometimes talked about the Duke of Bohemia who lived there. He had been killed in a recent battle with the Magyars, so now his wife, the duchess, ruled in his stead. *Why were we going to Praha?* I wondered. *What would we do there?*

The following day I laid aside my grief. While I still ached for my mother, I knew I could not bring her back, not with all the tears in Bohemia. I had to be ready to meet my fate. My heart filled with dread at my first sight of the fortress on a hill above the walled city of Praha. The wooden castle appeared massive enough to house all of Bohemia’s gods.

I climbed the winding road up the hill with the other slaves. Our escort of soldiers whacked us with the shafts of their lances whenever we slowed down. As we reached the top, I stumbled, and one of the soldiers growled and jerked me to my feet. A vile stench reached my nostrils, and I glanced up to see rotting heads and skulls on pikes along the castle wall. My empty stomach heaved.

What demons lived here? Was I purchased to be sacrificed to one of the gods?

We entered the castle yard, and the soldiers lined us up for inspection. A nobleman looked each of us over, as if we were horses for sale.

Stables, he said, pointing to an older man. Laundry. He indicated a young woman. Kitchen, to a boy not much older than I.

The nobleman grabbed my chin with one gloved hand and pushed back my shaggy hair with the other. He turned my head

first one way and then the other. Then he forced open my mouth and checked my teeth. “This one,” he said, “is for the duchess.”

My heart skipped a beat, for I was certain the duchess would use me for a sacrifice. But a woman took me to a room where I was given a plain but nearly new tunic made of soft fabric, a rag, and a small basin of water.

“Wash,” the woman commanded. “Then dress and report to the steward in the hall.”

I did so, trembling as I entered the hall. The high ceiling and the lack of windows made the room seem like a cavern. Torches burned in brackets set in the walls. Their flickering light made every shadow dance.

Another man, wearing a fine embroidered tunic, stepped toward me from the shadows. “Boy,” he said, straightening my own shorter tunic. “I will present you to the duchess. You must bow to her, not speak unless you are spoken to, and do whatever she bids you.”

“Yes, sir.” My whisper was barely audible. My legs felt like water. I followed the steward to the other end of the hall where an elegant woman sat at table with several richly attired noblemen. I stopped when the steward did and tried not to stare at the men and woman as they conversed. I hoped the fact that they’d just given me a new tunic meant that they would not offer me as a sacrifice. Unless they wanted their sacrifices clean and well fed first. . . .

“Your Highness,” said the steward with a bow. He slapped my shoulder and I fell to my knees on the rush-covered flagstones. “I bring you a new servant, just arrived.”

The steward did not move, and neither did I, so I could not see the duchess’s face.

“A new servant? What was wrong with the old one?” Her voice was husky and conveyed disdain. The noblemen chuckled at her words.

I heard the rustle of her skirts as she stood and walked around the table. Into my field of vision came a length of heavy fabric with the toes of two slippers just visible at the hem.

“Stand up, boy, and let me look at you.”

I swallowed and struggled to my feet, though I would not raise my head. The duchess jerked my head up by a hank of hair. I gasped as she gazed into my eyes. Hers were black and cold, serpent’s eyes.

“He’s small,” she said to the steward. “Will he work or will he end up like that insolent wretch you brought me last time?”

“Your Highness, the boy will grow. And upon my life he will work for you.” The steward bowed even lower.

The duchess turned away. “Take him to my rooms and have him clean them.”

The steward led me up a narrow staircase to the duchess’s spacious rooms. The disorder I found there seemed at odds with her personal appearance. Someone had scattered dozens of embroidered cushions. Goblets and platters littered the floor, along with spilled wine and food.

“What happened to the last servant?” I managed to ask.

The steward threw a menacing look at me. “His head greeted you at the gate.” He indicated the mess. “Get to work.”

Thus began my service to the widowed Duchess Dragomíra. From the other servants I discovered that she was not Čech, but the daughter of a chieftain from the north. She was cruel, they said, like her father. Having seen the grisly row of heads outside, I had no trouble believing it.

Though the servants whispered to me about the duchess, always glancing over their shoulders before doing so, they also spoke of Prince Václav.

“He is coming back to Praha,” a scullion said about a month later as we scrubbed the floor of the great hall. We were to make it ready for the Feast of Midsummer.

“Who is *he*?” I asked.

The boy scowled as if only I could be so dense. “*He* is the duke’s heir, once he comes of age.” Then he leaned closer. “Prince Václav scorns the gods of Bohemia and makes no sacrifices of blood.”

“What? Does he not fear their wrath?” I stopped scrubbing for a moment, shocked at the boldness of this prince.

The boy shrugged and wrung out his rag. “They say he worships only one high God, but the duchess has outlawed his religion.” He lowered his voice. “Have you seen the heads?”

I nodded, swallowing. They haunted my dreams.

“They were followers of Václav’s God.”

I shuddered and applied myself to scrubbing the floor.

Chapter 2

AT THE FEAST that evening, I stood before the head table pouring wine for my lady Dragomíra; her younger son, Boleslav; and her only daughter, Přibislava, when the door to the great hall flew open with a crash. All sounds of revelry faded away. The song the bard plucked from the harp he held on his lap ceased, though a faint echo of music hung in the air as a young man strode in.

“Prince Václav,” I heard someone mutter.

I stared at the prince as he approached the head table. He wore a black woolen robe under a coarse mantle, and his dark hair was cut short. His face was beardless, his build slender and youthful. Yet he was, I had to admit, more of a commanding presence than I had imagined.

Václav stopped at the table and bowed to the Duchess Dragomíra.

“Greetings, Mother, and greetings to you, my brother and my sister.”

Prince Boleslav was my age, about twelve years, but looked older because he had been well fed all his life. He did not smile at his elder brother, though young Přibislava did.

“We are glad you have come to our feast, Václav,” said Dragomíra.

“I don’t care to feast, Mother,” Václav said. “I’ve just learned of your new laws.”

“And are you offended by laws set down by the rightful regent of Bohemia?” Boleslav asked, crossing his arms.

“You know that I am.” Václav turned back to their mother. “Why would you forbid the priests, on pain of death, to teach children Latin and music? There are no better teachers in all Bohemia.”

“They teach what is not prudent for children to learn,” Dragomíra said through clenched teeth.

“They teach truth.” Václav laid both hands on the trestle table. I noticed he wore no jewels, unlike his brother. “Would you kill a man for teaching truth?”

“What you call ‘truth’ is an outrage to the ancient gods of Bohemia,” Boleslav sneered.

“Truth is truth for all,” said Václav. “I will not allow these persecutions to continue.”

“You will obey me,” Dragomíra said with growing anger, “and stay well away from those accursed priests. Would that I had never allowed you to live with your grandmother! She filled your head with empty words.”

Václav leaned forward. His eyes blazed with fervor. “My grandmother opened my eyes to the truth, the Gospel of our blessed Christ that you so stubbornly resist. For that I shall always be grateful. She is a devout and kind woman, and she still wields much influence from the days of her husband’s reign. Or have you forgotten that my grandfather also followed the Most High God, as did my father?”

Dragomíra stared coldly at Václav.

“And as you once claimed to do,” he added.

The duchess did not answer. Přibislava turned her head away as if she were ashamed.

“You *will* change the decree, Mother.”

Dragomíra stood up and smacked her hand on the table. “*You* will obey me, Václav, or I’ll have your head!”

The prince turned on his heel and left the hall. A few of the chieftains and courtiers followed him out.

As I scrambled down the stone steps to the kitchen to fetch my lady a fresh piece of trencher bread, I realized that this son of hers was not at all what I expected. He was not much older than I was, no more than fourteen, yet he had confidence and presence of mind that I had never seen in one of his years.



Later that evening while serving my lady in her private quarters, she accepted Boleslav and five local *voyvodes*, or warlords, into the sitting room where she received visitors. A cool breeze blew through the open window. Flickering candlelight reflected in the gold threads of the stag tapestry on the wall. As soon as the men sat down on wooden stools, Dragomíra glanced my way.

“That is all,” she said, dismissing me.

I turned to go as they began speaking in hushed voices. Before I reached the door, I remembered a pile of rags that needed washing, so I went into the next room to get them.

“It is imperative that young Václav not come to power at this time,” said a deep voice.

I inched closer to the doorway to hear what was said.

“With the dowager Duchess Ludmila’s influence, he would put us under Germanic power,” said another.

“My loyal *voyvodes*,” Dragomíra said, “if Ludmila’s influence over Václav were to end, it would solve many problems. And without his grandmother, my eldest son will not have the backing he needs to press his claim to the throne.” I stifled a gasp when I realized what they were plotting. “I plan to

encourage our pious prince to pursue a monastic life, one that better suits his religious convictions.”

There was low laughter, and they began to discuss how to do away with Ludmila, the old duchess who used to bring food and firewood to our village every winter. “She is so kind, Poidevin,” Mama often said to me. “Though she has wealth and power, still she cares for the least of us poor villagers.”

I became frightened, not only for Duchess Ludmila, but for my life as well. What if the conspirators found out I was listening?

Dropping the soiled rags, I climbed out to the balcony and down the thick vines that clung to the wall. Once in the courtyard, I pondered what to do. Undoubtedly I should warn Prince Václav that his grandmother was in danger, but I had no idea where to find him or how to tell him. The only person I knew I could trust not to behead me for my knowledge was the old washerwoman, Bora, who had been kind to me from the day I met her. She remained loyal to the memory of the recently departed duke and his parents, and she was the only person in Praha who knew my name or even cared that I had one.

Holding my head high, I strode past the guards at the open castle gate. I felt their stares at my back, but they did not question me. As soon as I saw the thatched roof of Bora’s wooden hut just outside the castle wall, I ran toward it.

“Bora,” I called as loudly as I dared when I reached the doorway of the hut. She lived with her husband, who had a wasting disease, caring for him as she had their nine babes. The stench of his illness in my nostrils assaulted me, though Bora never seemed to notice.

“What is it, Poidevin?”

I took a moment to gulp a deep breath from the outside air and then leaned toward her. “The old duke’s wife, Ludmila, is in terrible danger,” I whispered.

“Danger?” She caught me by the arms. “What do you mean? How do you know?”

“I heard the duchess speaking with some men just now. They were planning to kill her!”

“But why?” Bora said. “Why would they want to kill a good woman, an old woman?”

“Something about Prince Václav. I don’t understand it, but we’ve got to warn him, and I don’t know how.”

Bora frowned. “The prince will see me,” she said, patting my hand.

Now I was puzzled. “Do you know him, then?”

Bora stared at me, her tired eyes reflecting wariness. But then she smiled, and her eyes glowed with something I’d never seen before. Was it peace?

“Yes, Poidevin, I do know Prince Václav, because he is my brother in the faith.”

I gaped at her. Before speaking I made sure no one stood near the doorway, but still I whispered, “You don’t mean you are a follower of his God?”

She nodded. “Yes, I am a Christian too.”

I swallowed as I realized the great trust Bora had just shown to me. After all, I served Duchess Dragomíra, who would behead both of us—Bora for being a Christian, and me for not reporting what I knew. “I will never tell my mistress.”

Bora patted my hand again. “I know you won’t, Poidevin.” She smiled again, that peaceful, glowing smile. “I will speak to the prince. Now don’t worry.”

I ran back to the great hall, trying very much not to worry. I now knew that my mistress was as cruel and ruthless as I’d heard she was. If she would plot the death of an old woman, her own mother-in-law, what could she do to me?