Widukind

Story of a rebel

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The rivers and forests of the Saxons

I'll tell you right away, so you don't even think some shining hero is coming along: Widukind was no holy knight, no fine king with a shining sword, and certainly not the type to comb his hair in the morning. If he had any hair at all, it was covered in fleas, sweat, and beer. And if you think that's the beginning of a heroic legend, then hold on tight, buddy, because this is the story of a guy who was so deep in the mud that the most he could do was fart on the moon—and yet, in the end, they still called him a hero.

The Saxon rivers, yes, they were beautiful. Beautiful like a full bottle of wine just before the first sip. Beautiful like a woman who hasn't yet chased you out of your hut with a frying pan. But the truth? Those rivers stank. Algae, rotten wood, animal carcasses – and yet you drank from them because there wasn't a pub on the corner. The forests were dense, dark, so dense that you thought the gods had built them specifically so someone like Widukind could hide there after he'd once again punched a Frank in the face.

And Widukind often woke up in the dirt. Not in silk sheets, not in palaces. But in the mud, next to a horse that was just as hungover as he was. This isn't a fairy tale, but the naked truth: Heroes rarely sleep in beds. They vomit in the bushes, snore on tree stumps, and dream that the whole damned world will finally leave them alone.

The Saxons back then – they weren't philosophers, they weren't poets, but thugs, drunkards, and cutthroats. And Widukind? He was their loudest braggart. He could talk when he was halfway sober, like a market crier with a fistful of arguments. People hung on his every word, not because he preached wisdom, but because he said what everyone was thinking but no one dared to say so bluntly: "The Franks are assholes, the Church is a gag, and if they want to baptize us all, I'd rather baptize them in my own pisspot." That's roughly what it sounded like.

When you imagine history, don't make the mistake of whitewashing it. No noble splendor, no beautiful armor. Everything was filthy: the huts, the rivers, the women, the men. Everything smelled of smoke, sweat, and blood. And in the middle of it all, a man too loud-mouthed to keep his mouth shut and too stubborn to kiss the Franks' knees.

"Heroes," they say, "are born." Bullshit. Heroes are made, and most of the time they're made in shit. Widukind was one of those unfortunate enough to grow

up in a world where everyone was either a victim or a bully. He chose the latter option. And he was damn good at it.

Sometimes I wake up myself—hangover, headache, heart full of pain—and think: Maybe in a previous life I was a jerk like Widukind. Always on the edge, always against the grain, always ready to break someone's nose if they talked too loudly about God. That's perhaps the only thing I have in common with the guy: this deep, bitter feeling that the world is trying to screw you, and that your only chance is to hit back harder than it hits you.

And so it begins: not with fame, not with honor, but with a guy lying in the forest in his own vomit, cursing the sun, laughing at the god of the Franks, and already half-planning how to get the guys to follow him at the next feast. Not because he was the smartest. Not because he was the strongest. But because he was the one with the biggest mouth.

Call us barbarians if it makes you happy. Hang the word like a stinking fish on the door of your fine Roman bathhouse, slap it in your chronicles, have your monks write it with ink brewed from bile and morals. We'll still be out here: in the fog, in wet furs, in huts held together by boards, bones, and bad luck. And if anyone asks what we think of civilization, we'll laugh the way people laugh when the barman puts too much water in their beer—in that tone that says, Friend, you've mistaken us for people who can be duped.

Barbarians. That's what they called us because we didn't wear medals, because our deities weren't inscribed on gold plates, but on the tongue when courage was lacking. Because our laws were shorter than their prayers, and our prayers shorter than a punch. Perhaps we were barbarians. But if civilization means a man with a cross knocking on your door and baptizing your children with cold water by the riverbank while soldiers confiscate your pigs and your wife casts her eyes downward, then take the title. Wear it like a helmet. Let it clang when the spears strike.

I remember a village that in winter consisted only of smoke. Smoke and the voices of the old people, creeping through the cracks as if they were mice. They said, "The Franks are coming in the spring." The old people always say the enemy comes in the spring, as if the enemy has a treaty with the swallows. So we chopped wood as if it were heads and drank as if the barrel were a well containing truth. And somewhere in the middle of it all stood Widukind, with that face that looked like a fist, grinning. Not because he'd seen something funny, but because laughter was the only response that hadn't yet been taxed.

You want to know what unites a people of barbarians? Hunger. Cold. And a shared idea of how much the world has let them down. Take three dozen villages that can't even agree on the name of the same river, put them in a pot, boil them up with stories about gods who live in oak trunks, and give them the spice of news that a man from the West wants to play "emperor" - and out of the mix eventually rises someone who shouts louder than the others. Someone like Widukind. Not the best warrior, not the holiest, and certainly not the most sober. But someone who cuts words like knife blades and throws them so that they stick.

"Barbarians," they say, "eat with their hands." Yes. And? We eat with our hands because hands know what to hold. A spoon has never pulled me out of a river when it was swollen and spewing corpses onto the banks. A fork has never stopped an arrow. But hands have pulled men from the earth it wanted to swallow. Hands have stoked fires when the sky vomited up all its moisture. Hands have held a child's forehead when a fever came. And hands have grasped a sword when the Franks said God had given them the right to teach us how to pray.

Sometimes, when the night was too quiet—and believe me, the nights are never truly quiet; they crack and whisper, they shove old memories between your ribs—Widukind would sit on a fallen trunk and do what he did best: He made noise that made sense. "They call us barbarians," he said, "because they're afraid it's true. And because they hope we'll believe it. But the truth is: we're just people who weren't asked if they wanted to be part of their plan." Then he raised the jug and drank, and in that moment he wasn't just some scoundrel in the forest. He was the mouth of a swarm of flies finally settling on the right meat.

I saw women gritting their teeth in the gap between fear and rage. Old men, who had long since lost their last teeth, were still chewing on revenge. Boys, too young for scars, carried wooden lances as if they were the keys to a lock none of us would ever see. And when someone said we were barbarians, we nodded because it was more convenient than preaching a sermon. Words are cheap, but cheap is enough if you say them loudly enough. And we said them loudly. Perhaps that's the whole trick of a people: that they agree when to shout.

"You have no writing," once said a Frankish merchant who was stranded in one of our villages because his horse was fed up with holy journeys. "That's why you're barbarians." Widukind smiled as if he had a toothache. "We have language," he said, "and knives to defend it." The merchant laughed, too

nervous to stop. He had beautiful hands, soft as stale bread. In the end, he moved on. I hope he found a god who would hold a pillow for him when he stumbled. Most of the time, we only found the ground.

And then there's the forest itself, our worst ally. It eats up sounds and spits them out somewhere else. It doesn't lie, but it rarely tells you the truth. Those who enter it come out changed, and sometimes it won't let you out at all. "Barbarians," they say, use the forest like a wall. Yes. And? Any wall is good, as long as it separates you from the knife. The forest was our church, our tavern, our court, and our cemetery. Those who died in it never needed a sermon. The wind does the talking.

I've seen men singing in battle. It wasn't a heroic warble, more like a howl, somewhere between hunger and mockery. They sang to drown out their fear. Perhaps that's the difference between us and those who call us barbarians: We don't hide our fear in Latin proverbs. We let it out into the air to stink, and then we push it away with whatever hand is free. If you find that uncivilized, then sit down in your scriptorium, friend, and write a pretty line about how neatly you die. We die messily. But we live that way, too.

I won't lie to you: In our villages, there were pigs who received more respect than some husbands. There were nights that were too long, and days that were too short. There were children who were born old, and old people who never learned to be quiet. And hovering over it all was this thick, invisible lid that some call fate and others just dirt. But beneath the lid, something was brewing. Not hope—hope is thin beer that only embarrasses you. More like defiance, hard as charred bread. Defiance that says: If you call me "barbarian," then come closer and say it to my face.

I once saw Widukind face to face with a priest so pure that the air next to him seemed worse. The man spoke of love, of the true king, of salvation, and each sentence stuck in one's hair like a louse. Widukind listened the way one listens to rain: not because one likes it, but because it's falling. Then he said, "If your God is so great, why does he need your soldiers?" The priest blinked as if a twig had poked him in the eye. "Because the world is sinful," he murmured. "Believe me," Widukind replied, "the world won't become any less sinful if you push it into a basin."

Maybe we're barbarians because we're not afraid of getting dirty. Because we know that cleanliness only lasts as long as the rain stops. Call us what you will. Names don't stick if you have to drag them through blood. What does stick is what we do when the hooves beat the paths again next spring. And they will

beat. They always beat. That's the only civilized thing about this world: its repetitions.

On nights when the moon hangs over the trees like a silver tavern key, we tell each other stories. Not to comfort ourselves, but to remind us that we exist at all. Stories in which a man with too much pride and too much thirst becomes the spokesman for a people no one invited. Stories in which "barbarian" is a word too heavy to bear alone, so we share it. One carries the beginning, one the end, and in between, everyone carries their own burden.

And when you ride past us again tomorrow in your fine clothes, with a cross in front and a tax collector behind, then feel free to greet us in your fine Latin. We'll answer in the language the wind understands. And later, when you sit by the fire and yell at your scribe for misdeclining "barbarus," think of us—the unwashed mouths that laugh when others pray and threaten at the same time. We have no marble columns. But we have oaks that stand longer than your laws. We have no hall full of books. But we have stories that can walk. Stories that find you when you think you've left them behind.

Barbarians? Possibly. But when spring comes and the hooves beat the path, you'll learn that there are words that punish themselves. You'll shout them as you run, and they'll sit heavy in your mouth like wet stones. And somewhere at the edge of the forest, there will be someone who has drunk too much and yet still sees clearly. Someone who knows that "barbarian" is just another word for "a person who disobeys you." Call him what you will. We'll call him Widukind. And that's enough.

The Saxons' rivers weren't romantic postcard motifs. No silent shimmer, no swans cuddling to remind you of weddings. The rivers were hungry. They pulled you in when you were weak and spat you out when you stank like a rotten trout. And yet we drank from them, bathed, cursed, and threw our dead in them when the ground was too hard. Rivers don't lie. They carry everything away: blood, beer, tears, horse shit. Don't ask me why we loved them—probably for the same reason you love a woman who regularly beats you: because she's there.

When I think back, I see Widukind sitting on the riverbank as if it were a damn bar. He held the jug in his hand, but it was long empty, and he stared into the water as if he could find more in it. "Do you see that?" he muttered once. I saw only water, swirling like the thoughts of a drunk. "This is our whiskey," he said. "The river doesn't forget. It carries the stories forward." I had to laugh because that sounded like poetic babble, and we both knew that Widukind was about as

gifted with poetry as a stone. But still, he was right. Every sip from the river was a piece of the past, diluted and washed down whether you wanted it or not.

The Franks probably saw our rivers as nothing more than obstacles. Something that could be tamed with bridges, timber, and taxes. But we knew: A river cannot be tamed. You can cross it, you can use it, but eventually it will take what it wants. Maybe that's why we were so stubborn. Because we shared the same logic as our rivers: free, dirty, unpredictable, and always ready to sweep the next idiot away.

In summer, the rivers smelled of life—algae, fish, sweat. In winter, they smelled of death—ice, mold, silence. I remember once seeing Frankish corpses floating in the water. It was said they had been surprised in a battle, arrows still in their backs. The river took them in like welcome guests, let them float for a few days, and then brought them back, half-bloated, as a keepsake. "You see?" it seemed to say. "Your enemies are not gods. They are just food for fish." And we continued drinking, right beside them. No monk, no emperor, no prayer could teach us more than this sight.

Widukind liked to say that the rivers themselves speak. He claimed that if you were drunk enough, you could hear voices in the gurgling, the rushing. "Those are the ancestors," he said, "laughing at us because we're still fighting." I thought that was nonsense, until I once got so drunk that the stream next to me started murmuring in a language that sounded like my mother. Maybe it was just the booze, or maybe it was the only honest prayer we'd ever had: the gurgling of a river that takes everything with it and explains nothing.

Sometimes, when the sun set and the fog came, the rivers looked like whiskey bottles someone had placed on the table of the world. Sometimes half empty, sometimes half full. And just like with whiskey, you never knew whether the next sip would warm you or burn your insides. But you drank anyway, because giving up wasn't an option. Widukind called it courage. I called it stupidity. It was probably both.

The Franks called our rivers "borders." For us, they were the opposite. A river didn't divide, it connected. It carried you from village to village, from battle to battle, from feast to feast. It was the road that no one had to build; it was simply there. And perhaps that's precisely why the Franks wanted to build bridges, mills, and castles alongside them. They wanted to quantify the river. We only wanted to bathe, vomit, drink, and die in it. Two worlds that never fit together.

And every time I think of Widukind standing with bare feet in the water, arms crossed, mouth full of curses against Charlemagne, a thought occurs to me: Maybe he wasn't a hero at all. Maybe he was just a man who had learned to mirror the river—restless, loud, unpredictable. But you know what? That's exactly what makes him a hero. Not the victories, not the speeches, not the stupid songs that were later sung about him. But the fact that he was like the river: untamable, dirty, free.

The Franks. Damn it, just hearing the word sounds like a bunch of heavily armed tax collectors praying and plundering at the same time. A people with iron on their backs and hypocrisy in their hearts. They talked about God while stealing your last chicken. They promised you salvation, and the only thing you got was a dagger between the ribs or a bucket of ice-cold baptismal water in the middle of winter. The Franks weren't missionaries, they were thugs in uniform. They wore crosses like brass knuckles, and every blow was called "faith."

Charlemagne—let's call him by his name. The emperor who wrote himself into legend while his henchmen stomped through our villages, burning everything that didn't pray and baptizing everything that still breathed. And if you think Widukind was a rebel out of idealism—forget it. He was a rebel because he was fed up with some fat guy in the south thinking he could decide which god we should worship.

The Franks were organized. They had military leaders, lists, punishments, even something resembling a bureaucracy. Try putting a Saxon on a list. Good luck. We showed up when we wanted and disappeared when we were drunk. For the Franks, that was treason. For us, it was just everyday life. We wouldn't let ourselves be sorted, counted, or baptized. That made us barbarians in their eyes. But in truth, it was they who marched like machines, dull, blind, convinced of a heaven no one had ever seen.

Once, I swear, I saw a Frankish priest trying to make the sign of the cross on a dead pig, just to show how religious he was. Widukind almost laughed his head off. "You see, this is their God," he said, "so desperate that they even want to save pigs. But us? They don't save us. They beat us."

The Franks had swords of the finest steel, shields with shining designs, banners that fluttered in the wind like the lies in their mouths. We had axes, spears, sometimes just fists. But we had one thing they didn't: anger. Pure, unadulterated anger. And that anger kept us standing longer than their prayers ever could.

When a Frankish army approached, you'd hear them days in advance. The clatter of hooves, trumpets, singing—they loved to make an impression. Widukind, on the other hand, stepped out of the forest like a wolf, silent, grinning, with a handful of men who looked as if they'd just slept in the dirt for a week. And yet the Franks trembled when they saw him. Not because he was the greatest fighter—but because he opened his mouth before the swords were drawn. Words can be deadlier than iron.

"The Franks are like flies," he once roared across a battlefield. "They come in swarms, landing on every wound, but none of them knows what to do alone." The men laughed, and there was power in laughter. That was Widukind's secret: He could make death palatable, as if it were the next beer.

The Franks called us pagan swine. But what were they? Murderers in the name of an invisible friend. And every time they burned down a village, claiming it was God's will, resistance grew. Widukind was the loudspeaker of this rage. He was the guy who stood up when everyone else had long since knelt. He was the dirty face who leaned over the clean mirror of the Franks and said, "This is what you really look like."

And perhaps that's why Karl hated and feared him at the same time. Because a man like Widukind couldn't simply be killed. If you kill him, you make him a legend. If you let him live, he'll continue to rampage. And so they faced each other: Karl, the king with the crown, and Widukind, the king of vomit and laughter. Two men who look completely different in the history books, but at their core, wanted the same thing: not to lose.

The Franks marched like a law. But laws break. And every time one of us split a Frankish helmet with a rusty axe, it was as if we were spitting in the face of the whole damned empire. This was the real war: not just swords and blood, but mockery versus order, chaos versus discipline, whiskey versus holy water. And sometimes, very rarely, the whiskey barrel won.

If you imagine Widukind's youth as a pious idyll, forget it. No lullabies, no golden childhood dreams. The boy grew up amidst dung, cold smoke, and the constant threat that some neighbor would either steal your cattle or rape your sister. This was the "educational environment" in which a brat became a rebel.

Widukind was a child of the huts, not the halls. His toys: sticks, which he hit other boys over the head. His classroom: the forest, where you either learn how to read tracks or become a track yourself. His teachers: men who had

more beer than blood in their bodies and who taught you that the first blow is always the most honest.

Even as a kid, he had this big mouth. If an adult told him, "Shut up, boy," he'd grin and say, "Why? Are you afraid you won't sound any smarter if I keep quiet?" That's the kind of thing that gets you a beating, lots of it. But he took the beating, spat blood, and kept grinning. He was already a big mouth at ten. And in a world where most people were already married and half-rotted by fifteen, that was a damn dangerous trait.

The other children chased rabbits or dreamed of owning three cows one day. Widukind dreamed of the whole world hearing his voice. He didn't just want to live—he wanted to be heard, damn it. And if no one was listening, he would make himself known by pushing someone over or starting a fight. He understood early on: A man who screams lives longer in the memory than one who remains silent.

His mother is said to have cried when he came home—with a bloody lip, mud on his face, sometimes with his pants full of strangers' curses. But every time she slapped him, he just grinned. "If you hit me, Mother, hit harder," he once said. "The others hit harder." She hit him harder, and he grinned even more. That was Widukind's school: pain as currency, defiance as a lesson.

The girls? Oh, they liked him—and hated him. Because Widukind wasn't a romantic hero, not a singer with a lute. He was the type who drank too much at a party, slept with a village girl in a sheepfold, and claimed the next morning he couldn't remember anything. Half was a lie, the other half was true. But the girls laughed anyway. They laughed because he was alive, in a world where most people were just shadows.

He learned early on that strength lies not only in the arm, but also in the mouth. A boy who can talk becomes a leader, even if he loses at arm wrestling. And Widukind rarely lost at arm wrestling, but even more rarely at talking. By the age of twelve, he could already explain to a group of his peers that it was a damn good idea to set fire to the neighboring village's granary—just to watch the sparks fly into the sky. And the idiots joined in. That was the beginning. No throne, no coronation, no divine sign. Just a brat with a big mouth and enough guts to use it.

Once, the story goes, he stood on a fallen tree trunk and preached—not about God, not about the emperor, but about freedom. Freedom back then didn't mean being able to vote or lower taxes. Freedom meant no Frankish soldier

telling you whose ass to kiss. And the boys listened, their eyes wide as torches. To them, Widukind wasn't just a buddy. He was already a leader, someone who created order out of chaos—but only his own.

The elders shook their heads. "That's not a boy, that's a storm," they said. And storms can't be trained. One can only hope they rage in the right direction. With Widukind, it was clear: He would rage westward. Against the Franks. Against Charlemagne. Against everything that meant order.

And so, a braggart became a young thug. A thug became a leader. Not because he was morally superior. Not because he was divinely inspired. But because he was exactly what the Saxons needed at the time: a bastard with a big mouth, a hard punch, and zero respect for authority. A youth who had learned early on that respect isn't begged for, but beaten out of it.

Sometimes you become a hero not because you want to be, but because you're the only one who hasn't fallen to his knees yet. That's what happened with Widukind. He didn't choose the crown, no one officially elected him, no god sent him a golden vision in a dream. He was simply the guy left standing when everyone else shut up.

Imagine a Saxon feast: smoke, beer, sweat, fists. One man boasts, another pukes, one punches another—just normal evening entertainment. And in the middle of it all stands Widukind, his mouth full of mockery, his eyes like two glowing coals. He was never the quietest, never the most peaceful. But he had this damned talent for saying the word everyone wanted to hear before they even thought it themselves. "We won't be baptized like cattle," he once roared to the group, and the boys roared back, because that was what they already felt deep down. He didn't become a hero—he became the voice of a pack.

The reluctant hero—that's how you have to understand it. Widukind wanted to drink, fight, and live. Instead, he was given responsibility as if it were an illness. Everyone came to him with problems: "Widukind, the Franks have plundered our village!" - "Widukind, they want to baptize my children!" - "Widukind, my wife slept with a Frank, what should I do?" And he had to answer, had to decide. Not because he wanted to, but because no one else had the balls.

There's an image that's burned into my memory: Widukind, half drunk, half angry, standing on a tree trunk, a rusty axe in his hand. No golden helmet, no holy banner. Just a man who carried so much defiance within him that he could set an entire horde on fire. And they followed him—not because he was pure,

but because he was dirty like them. Because he was one of them, only louder, dirtier, angrier.

The irony is that he himself often said, "I don't want to be a hero." He spat the word out like spoiled beer. "Heroes die young. I want to die old, with a keg of beer in my stomach and a woman on my lap." But history laughed at this wish. History has a habit of making heroes out of the very guys who least want to be.

The Franks had their saints. We had Widukind. Not a halo, but a smelly fur coat. Not a prayer, but a curse. Not a blessing, but a fist. He was our reluctant hero, and that's precisely why he was real. Not a fairy tale, not a pristine ideal. A guy who puked, cursed, laughed, and fought. And who, damn it, still had more backbone than all the crowned assholes in the South combined.

When the elders sat around the fire, they said, "We need a leader." But leaders always sound like an imposition. Heroes sound like hope. And Widukind was both, without meaning to. He was the guy who stood up when things were hopeless, simply because he was too stubborn to say "no." And sometimes that's all a nation needs to avoid perishing.

In the end, it was simple: Widukind wasn't a hero because he was better. He was a hero because he was worse—dirtier, more uncouth, more authentic. Because he opened his mouth when everyone else kept quiet. And that's exactly what made him what he never wanted to be: a symbol.

If you thought that was the end of the misery—boy, hold on tight. What's happened so far has just been the warm-up. A little drinking, a little fighting, a few big speeches by the firelight. All well and good. But the real drama, the big shit, is yet to come. Widukind wasn't even at the beginning of what would make him a legend. Everything he'd done up to this point was a test run: opening his mouth, stirring up the villages, annoying the Franks. Child's play compared to what followed.

Sometimes you can feel the storm brewing in the air. The trees crack differently, the dogs bark for no reason, the beer suddenly tastes stale, even though it was sweet yesterday. That was the world of the Saxons shortly before Charlemagne struck. It was as if the earth itself held its breath before someone drew a knife. And Widukind stood in the middle of it, with his back to the wall, which wasn't a wall at all, but merely forest.

He knew it, deep down. Everyone knew it. We played heroes, we shouted, we drank, we laughed – but we knew the Franks wouldn't let up. They had too

much pride, too much steel, too much church behind them. You can chase an animal ten times, but when it's hungry, it will come back. And Charles was hungry, not just for land, but for souls. He wanted to break us, not just kill us. That's worse. Killing is clean, breaking is final.

Widukind joked about it. "Let them come," he said. "We have enough forests to swallow them all." People laughed, because laughter is easier than trembling. But deep in his eyes, in that spark that was always there, you saw doubt. Not because he was afraid—but because he knew that you can't stop a storm with ridicule alone.

The shit was just beginning. Baptisms by force. Massacres by rivers we once thought were whiskey. Friendships that broke because some said, "Maybe it's better to give in." Betrayal, blood, exile. It was all in the air, and no one wanted to admit it. We pretended to be invincible, while the ground was already giving way beneath our feet.

Heroic legends always only tell you the end: victory or defeat. But the most important thing is the moment before. That crackling, that stench of inevitable anger hanging in the air. That's exactly where we stood. And Widukind, the big braggart, was at the top—not because he wanted to, but because he was too stubborn to make way.

Later, people would say he was a symbol. A freedom fighter. A saint of resistance. But in that moment, he was just a man shouting into a storm because silence would have been even worse. And as the clouds gathered over the forests, everyone knew: Tomorrow it will rain blood.

The shit's just beginning, my friend. And Widukind? He was right in the middle of it, with whiskey in his stomach, dirt on his face, and a scream so loud even the Franks had to hear it.

Birth in troubled times

Saying someone was born "in troubled times" always sounds like a historian who was too lazy to describe the whole mess in detail. Troubled times aren't a nice metaphor, they're just another name for: everything's burning, everyone hates everyone, and the heavens look on in boredom. That's exactly when Widukind fell into the world—like a stone into a river already full of stones.

Saxony, mid-eighth century. No paradise, no fairytale forest with dwarves and fairies. It was a vast patchwork of tribes, villages, groves, and endless arguments about who had the greater right to which piece of swamp. Sometimes they agreed, sometimes they bashed each other's skulls in. Democracy in "axe mode." And in the midst of this chaos, the news surfaced: In the West, there is a man named Charles who wants to be not only a king, but soon also an emperor. The lord of the Franks. The great missionary with the sword. The nightmare of all who preferred drinking beer to singing psalms.

By the time Widukind was born, the world was already broken. Villages were burned down before the roofs were even dry. The Franks sent their troops as if they were tax collectors with halos. And the Saxons responded with what they had: wooden spears, rusty iron knives, a lot of anger, and the firm belief that their gods were crouching somewhere in the forest, watching them mutilate each other.

His birth was no celebration, no royal child event, no "all bells ringing." There were no bells. Just the scream of a woman in a hut that stank of smoke and goat. Maybe a bone talisman hung somewhere, maybe an old woman muttered a few pagan words. But ultimately, it didn't matter. Widukind didn't come into a cradle of gold. He came into a world that was already screwed, and the only thing he got was a body that had to learn to get hard.

The elders said every child was a sign. Some saw him as a good omen because he cried loudly. Others saw only trouble. "He'll cause us trouble," a neighbor reportedly said as she swept the dirt out of the hut's entrance. She was right. But no one suspected that at the time.

"Unrestful times" back then meant: Any week a foreign army could march over the hills. Any week a neighboring village could decide that your pig looked prettier than theirs. Any week a priest could appear with gleaming eyes and push your family into the deep end while soldiers with swords stood by. Unrestful times are not abstract. They are the bread you don't have, the child dying of fever, the fire consuming your roof. This was Widukind's cradle: uncertainty, hunger, smoke.

And yet—or perhaps precisely because of this—someone grew up in this world loud enough to curse it. Heroes don't arise in peaceful times. In peaceful times, you get civil servants, preachers, philosophers. In turbulent times, you get men like Widukind: big mouth, hard fist, indestructible stubbornness. A child of crisis. A son of chaos.

So he fell into this world. Not gently, not with a blessing, but like a stone thrown, unintentionally, yet still sending ripples. And these ripples grew larger until they reached Karl himself.

A baby always cries. But not every baby cries like a curse. Widukind's first cry wasn't a whimper, not a thin squeak, but an angry roar, as if the brat had already realized at birth that the world was trying to rip him off. They say the dogs in the village howled, the crows flew up, and the midwife growled: "That one's going to cause trouble." Welcome, Widukind. Your first audience already hates you.

Outside, the storm raged. Not a romantic thunderstorm, not a gentle summer ripple, but a giant asshole of a storm that ripped off roofs, snapped trees, and took with it everything that wasn't tied down. Inside, a boy was being born who would later be just the same: loud, destructive, unexpected. Some called it an omen. Others simply called it bad luck.

A scream in the storm—that's a good image for the rest of his life. From the very beginning, Widukind had to be louder than the world that tried to drown him out. Even in his cradle, he screamed more than other children breathed. When he was hungry, the whole village heard it. When he was angry, it sounded as if the gods themselves were rising through the roof. Babies are normally helpless. Widukind was helpless, and yet still an imposition.

His father, a warrior with more scars than teeth, is said to have peeped into the hut only once. He saw the child, heard the cry, and said, "That's not a son. That's a problem." Then he left again. Typical of Saxon fathers: affection in the form of absence. His mother, on the other hand, had no choice. She had to hold him, had to breastfeed him, had to listen to him screaming as if he were about to curse the world right now.

And outside—outside, death rained down. Not from above, but from the west. The Franks. Always the Franks. Even when they weren't there, there was the fear that they would come. People whispered that Charlemagne was gathering armies again, that the Church was making new plans, that spring would bring blood again. A child born in a storm, born under threats—what would become

of such a person? Not a monk. Not a farmer. Not a diplomat. But exactly what he became: a roaring rebel.

The old people said a child's first cry determines its fate. If that's true, Widukind was destined to never stop roaring. He roared against hunger. Against beatings. Against the Franks. Against God. Against everything that didn't suit him. And sometimes, when I'm sitting in a bar today and the world is going to hell again, I hear the same scream in some drunken head. Perhaps that's the only sound that never goes away: the roar of those who know the world is already lost, but still refuse to keep quiet.

And so it began: with a scream that cut through the storm. No blessing, no halo, no hallelujah. Just a curse vomited into the world by a newborn. And the world immediately understood: There will be no peace with him.

The Saxons were not a state. Not a kingdom, not an empire with shining seals. We were a patchwork of tribes, each with its own rules, gods, and peculiarities. Some called it freedom. Others called it chaos. And both were right.

A tribal alliance meant: Today we're brothers, tomorrow I'll rip out your throat because your cow grazed my meadow. Treaties were sealed with beer, not ink. A handshake counted more than a piece of parchment, and a broken promise was reason enough for war, even if it was only over three chickens. But when the Franks came, then – sometimes – yes, sometimes – the tribes would join forces. Like a pack of drunken dogs, suddenly howling in unison.

The gods were everywhere. In the tree, in the stone, in the wind. No heaven full of angels, no hellfire—just a forest full of eyes constantly scrutinizing you. We had Donar, Wodan, Freyja, and who knows how many others. Every grove had its own god, every family its own spirits. And you had to please them all, or it would rain bad luck. Sacrifices? Sure. Sometimes a chicken, sometimes a horse, sometimes a human. Blood was the currency of religion.

Widukind grew up with this belief. He saw how the ancients poured beer into the fire for the gods, how they carved runes, how they questioned the heavens whether the next day would bring victory or defeat. And he also saw how often the gods didn't give a damn about their answers. A storm still came, an arrow still hit, a child still died. And that was precisely when Widukind experienced his first great doubt: Perhaps faith is just another way of being drunk.

But he joined in. He shouted along when the tribes began their battle songs. He raised his cup when Wodan was praised. He did what everyone else did, but

with one difference: He never stopped asking questions. "If the gods are so powerful, why do they need our blood?" he once asked an old seer. The seer growled back: "Because they want it that way." - "Then they're like the Franks," Widukind mocked. And he got a blow with his staff for it. But he grinned.

The tribal bonds were fragile. One day they swore loyalty, the next they betrayed you for a few barrels of mead or the protection of a Frankish army. But someone like Widukind learned how to walk between these cracks. He learned that sometimes words bind more strongly than swords. He could bring tribes to a table who had been bashing each other the previous day. Not because he was a diplomat, but because he was the only one who could curse so hard that everyone laughed.

The god cults provided structure, but they also created fear. Fear of false sacrifices, fear of broken taboos. But Widukind learned to use this fear. He stood up, raised his hand, and shouted: "The gods are on our side!" Whether it was true or not didn't matter. What mattered was that the men at his side believed it. And they did. Because who wants to be the idiot who fights against their own gods?

The Franks had their priests, their churches, their Latin sayings. We had fire, blood, and noise. And honestly, that was more honest. No hiding behind holy books, no altar of gold. Just a bunch of men screaming because screaming was the only thing they had. And Widukind screamed louder than all of them. Even then, it was clear: he was more than just another son of some tribe. He was a mouth that couldn't be silenced.

Perhaps that was our curse. That we had no unified voice, except when Widukind lent it to us. That we believed more in our gods than in ourselves. That we preferred sacrifice to building. But that was precisely what made us dangerous. And that was precisely what made him a rebel, before he even knew what the word meant.

So he grew up, amidst tribal alliances more fragile than an old bone and gods who demanded more than they gave. And he learned that in such a world, one can only survive by shouting louder than thunder itself.

A Saxon boy didn't learn to read. He learned how to break a man's nose before the other could even say "Amen." Reading was for the Franks, who caressed their holy books as if they were breasts made of parchment. We didn't have libraries. We had axes. And if you were old enough to hold a stick, you were old enough to learn how to smash someone's head with it.

Widukind had barely grown out of diapers when they pressed a piece of wood into his hand. "Hit," the men said. And he hit. First the ground, then the trees, then the other boys. And at some point, he understood: This isn't a game. This is school. Anyone who hit too hesitantly got a beating. Anyone who hit hard got respect. The curriculum was that simple.

The first lessons: How to throw a spear without impaling yourself. How to hold a sword without cutting off your fingers. How to stand in a shield wall, even when your knees are shaking. All without theory, all without rules except one: Whoever lives is right. Whoever dies is wrong.

His first fight wasn't a heroic duel. Not a tournament, not an epic skirmish. It was an ambush on a neighboring village. The elders called it "blood trial." They marched off, with torches, spears, angry faces, and then the first hut burned. The fire was the fanfare, the women's screams the chorus, and in the middle stood Widukind, twelve years old, heart pounding, spear in hand. He hesitated. Of course he hesitated. Then he stabbed. For the first time, he felt flesh give way. And he almost vomited. But only almost.

Later, by the fire, the men rubbed his head. "Now you're one of us." "What, because I opened someone's guts?" he asked. "That's exactly why," they said. Welcome to the world.

The lessons of war weren't just for the body. They were also for the mind. Learn to hate, learn not to ask questions, learn that pain is a constant companion. Widukind learned all of that—but he still asked questions. "Why do we have to burn down the villages that haven't done anything to us?" he once asked. The answer: a slap in the face. "Because they would have done something eventually."

He learned that men die more beautifully in battle than in bed. That fame lasts longer than bread. That fear is a poison that you either vomit up or that consumes you. And he learned quickly, very quickly. Because he had to. In Saxony, standing still meant death.

He began to have scars before he even had a fuzz of beard on his face. Every scar was a testament, every scar a chapter. And he began collecting them like other children collect stones. Not because he was proud. But because he knew: Every scar was proof that he was still there.

And perhaps most importantly, he learned that you fight not only with your arm, but with your mouth. A shout, a curse, a taunt—these could turn a battle,

sometimes faster than a sword stroke. Widukind discovered he could do both: strike and scream. A one-two punch that made men laugh, even when they were bleeding.

The first lessons in the art of war were brutal, dirty, and cruel. But they were also the foundation. They turned a brat into a fighter. And from a fighter, eventually, into the man even Charlemagne couldn't break.

The Saxons had no kings, no beautiful crowns, no god-blessed blabber like the Franks. We had chieftains. Men with large beards, heavy fists, and even heavier bellies, who shouted louder than they thought. And beside them were the druids, the seers, the rune-scrapers, who supposedly chatted with the gods, but mostly only drank enough mead to hear voices in the wind. Together, they were what was called leadership—a bunch of squabblers with bone amulets around their necks.

Widukind grew up among these people. He saw the chieftains arguing about whether to attack the Franks head-on or to shit in their camps at night. He heard the druids casting runes and pretending to read bones to predict whether the next day would bring good fortune. Most of the time, it just meant: "We do things as we see fit." And Widukind learned: politics is just another word for drunkenness with consequences.

The chieftains wanted strength, always strength. They measured everything in loot, blood, and beer. Whoever donated the biggest keg had the loudest voice. Whoever mobilized the most warriors suddenly had "wisdom." Widukind observed this, grinned, and said to himself: "So, when I grow up, all I have to do is be louder, tougher, and drunker—and they'll call me leader." And damn, he was right.

The Druids were a different story. They were fear machines. An old woman with a few herbs and a crooked stick could have more influence than a warrior with ten scars. "The gods want blood," they said. Of course they wanted blood—but strangely enough, always the blood of the poor, never that of the rich chieftains. Widukind smelled the deception early on. "If the gods are so powerful, why don't they let you die yourself?" he asked a Druid. The Druid slapped him down. That was answer enough.

But he also learned that you don't set people against their own fears. If they believe that lightning is a sign from Wodan, then you let them believe it. But you use it. Widukind became a master at it. He listened to the druids, nodded, acted like he was the best student—and in the end, he twisted their prophecies

so that they played into his hands. "The runes say we should fight!" he once roared. Did the runes really say that? Who cares. What mattered was that the men heard him, not the old drunks with the herbs.

It was a damned circus: Chieftains puffing themselves up like roosters in the dirt. Druids acting so mysterious that even their own farts smelled like oracles. And in between them was Widukind, a young bastard with too much mouth and too little respect. But that was precisely what made him dangerous. He learned from both sides. From the chieftains, he learned that power must be loud. From the druids, he learned that power must be invisible. Combine those, and you have dynamite.

Later, when he became a leader himself, people called him a mixture of both: a chieftain with the mouth of a druid, a seer who needed no runes, only mockery. He could tell you to your face that your god was a joke—and you still believed he was sent by the gods. That's how strong his mouth was.

But in his youth, he was still an apprentice in this filthy circus. He sat in the huts, heard the arguments, smelled the sweat, saw the barrels tipping, and knew: This isn't where the future is being decided; this is where the dice are being thrown for vanity. The future was out in the forest, with a sword in hand. Everything else was theater. And Widukind knew: When he directs one day, the play will be bloodier and louder than all the chieftains and druids could ever write.

There comes a time when it's no longer enough to just talk big or steal chickens. At some point, it's time to say, "Now, brat, we'll show you how to really die." Welcome to the trial by fire. For Widukind, the invitation came sooner than he would have liked.

It wasn't a solemn oath, nor a knightly ceremony. It was a raid. "You're coming with us," the men said, and before he could protest, he was hanging among them, wielding a spear longer than he was. The night was black, the wind cold, the torches stank of resin and fear. The chief marched in front, the drunken warriors behind, and in the middle was Widukind—young, hungover, half-excited, half-scared to death.

The target was a neighboring village that had supposedly secretly supplied the Franks with supplies. Whether it was true didn't matter. The truth was a luxury we could never afford. The only thing that mattered was that someone burned before winter came. So they burned. The first hut went up in flames, the second right after. Screams mingled with smoke, pigs ran through the fire in

panic, children howled. And Widukind stood there, his fingers clenched around his spear, and knew: There's no turning back now.

His first thrust struck no Frank, no knight, no heroic opponent. It struck a peasant standing in his way, bare-handed, screaming. The spear pierced skin like a wet cloth, and suddenly there was blood, warm, stinking, real. Widukind choked, almost vomited, but he held on. Because everyone was watching him. Because retreating would have been worse than death.

Later, when the village lay in ashes and the men sat around the fire, someone patted him on the shoulder. "Well done, boy. Now you're a warrior." He looked at his hands, still red with blood, and wondered if that was all there was to it. If "warrior" really just meant another bastard who'd learned that killing was the only way to be taken seriously.

The trial by fire wasn't a lesson in honor. It was a lesson in ugliness. You learn that people burn like wood. That fear screams louder than courage. That blood doesn't spurt heroically, but sticks and stinks. And once you've seen that, there's no going back to any kind of innocence. Widukind had lost his before he even understood it.

But that was precisely what made him different. Most boys broke under it—they became hard, dull, empty shells who only followed orders. But Widukind processed it in his mouth. He joked about the blood, laughed at the screams, cursed the stench. He grasped the horror and turned it into mockery. That was his way of staying alive. He turned the trial by fire into a stage, and suddenly the others followed him because he managed to turn fear into laughter.

The young warrior's trial by fire was less a knighthood than a shove into the gutter. But that's exactly where a rebel belongs. Into the dirt. Into the blood. Into chaos. Where you either cease to exist—or start screaming history. And Widukind? He screamed louder as the flames crackled.

They say childhood is a time full of light. For Widukind, it was full of smoke. He came into the world while the world was burning, and every day was a small foretaste of the storm yet to come. Those who looked closely could already see the shadows on the horizon—like a black curtain slowly creeping over the forests.

The shadows had names. Charlemagne. The Franks. The Church. But back then, in Widukind's youth, they were still rumors, still stories. "The Franks are gathering armies." - "Charlemagne swears he will baptize or kill all the Saxons."

- "The priests preach that our gods are demons." Words, rumors, threats. But everyone knew: words eventually turn to fire.

Widukind saw those shadows and laughed. Not because he was blind, but because laughter was the only thing that didn't break you instantly. He mocked the Franks, he mocked the priests, he even mocked his own chieftains when they once again stared into the smoke, waiting for a miracle. "The shadows are coming," they said. "So what?" he replied. "We have shadows too. Every one of us. And mine are uglier than theirs."

But secretly—yes, secretly—he knew that the horizon was darkening. That every raid, every trial by fire, every village reduced to rubble was only the beginning. That the great war could no longer be prevented. It hung in the air like sulfur. Even the gods seemed uneasy when the thunder rolled.

The elders tried to encourage them. "We've always managed it," they said. But that wasn't true. Never before had an enemy like Charlemagne come—with armies larger than our forests, with priests who had more venom in their mouths than any snake, with an order that didn't collapse just because someone had drunk too much. That was the difference. The Franks weren't a neighboring village you could just burn down. They were a storm that wanted to swallow everything.

And Widukind? He was still young, still a braggart, still a thug with too much defiance. But he was also the only one who laughed loud enough to make the shadows seem smaller for a moment. A hero? Not yet. But a promise—a dirty, bloody promise that the Saxons wouldn't simply go down without a trace.

The shadows on the horizon weren't an omen, not a symbol. They were damned reality. And Widukind, that untamed brat with the nimble fists and big mouth, was the Saxons' answer to this reality. Not because he wanted to. Not because he had to. But because no one else had the balls.

This is how his childhood ended: not in peace, not in quiet, but with the awareness that the worst was yet to come. A life that was in the shadows from the very beginning – and yet still had enough fire to cast its own shadows.

The young warrior

They say the first battle makes you a man. Bullshit. The first battle, at best, makes you a wreck. But for Widukind, this was exactly the stage he needed—chaos, blood, screaming, and in the middle of it all, a guy who roared louder than the swords sang.

It started small: a bunch of Franks on patrol, maybe twenty men. Enough to intimidate a village, but not enough to call it a real battle. Our side? Two dozen Saxons, armed with whatever wood, iron, or pure hatred could muster. Widukind was there, young, half-hungover, with a spear that wobbled like his stomach. He stood there, his knees weak, and asked himself, "What the hell am I doing here?" Answer: "Exactly what everyone else here does—hope they don't die first."

The air stank of wet fur and fear. The men growled like dogs before being released. And then – the signal. No trumpet blast, no banner. Just a scream, raw, ugly, Saxon. And suddenly, everyone was running. Widukind ran with them, stumbling, screaming, his mouth full of curses. The spear struck someone, something. Blood spurted, bones cracked. It wasn't a dance, it wasn't a heroic fight – it was a mud brawl, only with more corpses.

He took a blow across his shoulder, the iron ripping his skin. The pain burned, but he roared louder. He kicked, he stabbed, he cursed, and suddenly he realized: He was still alive. Every breath was a triumph, every blow a response. And as one of the Franks fell to the ground, his mouth full of dirt, Widukind felt something he never forgot: that damned tingling feeling when you realize you've survived while another lies dead in the mud.

The battle lasted less than an hour. By the end, there were more corpses in the dirt than the ravens could eat. A few of us were missing, too. One of them, with whom Widukind had been drinking the night before, lay next to him with his stomach open. And Widukind? He was laughing. Not out of joy, but because laughter was the only response that didn't hurt.

Later, by the fire, someone patted him on the back. "Well done, boy." He felt the blood in his hair, his hands trembled. But he grinned. "So that's it?" he asked. "This is a battle?" "That was just a taste," someone said. And he was right.

Widukind was no hero in that first battle. He was a dog who had learned to bite before being bitten. But that's exactly what turns a boy into a warrior. Not honor. Not glory. But sheer survival in the dirt.

There are some things you never get used to. The smell of death is one of them. You can get drunk until your eyes pop out, but it stays. It hangs in the air like a bad joke no one wants to hear anymore. And that's exactly what Widukind learned after his first battles: Death stinks.

Not poetic, not mysterious. No "breath of the afterlife," no sweet angelic scent. Death smells of shit, blood, and fear. Of people who, at the last moment, let go of everything they had in their stomachs. Of iron left in the fire for too long. Of smoke that eats away at skin. You walk through a battlefield, and it's like walking through an alley full of open latrines, only worse. And that stench sticks, in your clothes, in your skin, in your head.

Widukind was young, but not blind. He saw how the men acted as if everything were normal after the battle—laughing, drinking, stitching wounds. But if you looked closely, they were all smelling themselves. Everyone knew that someday they would exude the same stench. Everyone knew they were only one battle away from their own rot.

The dead lay around like garbage bags. Some without heads, some without arms, some so battered you couldn't tell if they had once been human or just a lump of flesh. And the crows? They were having a feast. Black bastards circling the corpses pecked out eyes like grapes. Widukind stood beside them, still holding the spear, and had to vomit. He didn't vomit out of weakness. He vomited because his body hadn't yet grasped that this was now part of everyday life.

"Get used to it," said one of the older men, patting him on the shoulder. "That's the smell of glory." "If glory stinks so much," growled Widukind, "then the Franks can keep it." The men laughed, but it was a bitter laugh. Because they knew he was right.

The smell of death pervaded our own camp, too. Wounded men slowly dying. Men screaming for help while flies devoured their open wounds. No doctor, no miracle. Only a knife to slit the throat if the whimpering lasted too long. "Better this way," they said. Perhaps. But the stench remained nonetheless.

Widukind learned to breathe shallowly, his mouth full of curses instead of smells. He laughed louder when things stank the worst. It was his way of

outsmarting death. Make him the punchline, then he won't eat you so quickly. But deep down, he knew: Death was always there. He crawled through every battle, he lay in every hut, he snuck through the woods like a damned spy.

And at some point, if you're at it long enough, you realize: the smell of death becomes a part of you. It clings to your hair, even when you cut it. It sticks to your skin, even when you bathe. It's in your breath, even when you laugh. And maybe that's exactly the difference between a boy and a warrior: The boy pukes. The warrior makes a joke about it.

Widukind was now a warrior. Not because he fought better. But because he began to laugh at the stench.

They say blood binds people closer than water. Screw it—mud binds people closer. Because someone who lies in the dirt with you, with broken ribs and arrows in their ass, becomes more of a brother to you than anyone who shares your father.

Widukind learned this quickly. His "brothers" were not saints, not noble companions. They were thugs, drunkards, thieves—men who laughed when they had blood on their faces and sang when the world was falling apart. But they were there. And that was enough.

It wasn't a romantic bond. Camaraderie stank of sweat and burnt flesh. They shared beer and loot, but also lice and disease. If someone fell, their belt was sometimes stolen before they buried them. But if you were standing in the middle of the battlefield and someone was watching your back, then he was your brother—no matter if he'd almost killed you the night before because you'd looked askance at his sister.

Widukind found his pack in this pack. One was named Arno, a large bastard with a scar across his face, who smashed entire benches when drunk. One was named Hroth, small, but with a tongue as sharp as Widukind's. Together they were a trio of chaos: a mouth, a bruiser, and a nasty dwarf. Other men hated them. But in battle, they wanted precisely these bastards on their side.

They lay by the fire at night, telling stories that were more lies than truth. "I knocked down three francs with one blow!" - "And I slept with a priest's daughter!" Lies, sure. But the lies kept them alive. Because when you stop telling yourself stories, death starts telling you his. And they never end well.

In that mud, Widukind learned what brotherhood truly meant: not running hand in hand through fields of roses, but standing back to back in the mud while someone nearly splits your skull. Brothers are the ones who pull you up at the last moment when you're already halfway into the grave—and who punch you afterward because you looked weak.

Once, after a particularly bloody brawl, they were all lying in the dirt. Widukind was bleeding from the nose, Arno had sprained his arm, and Hroth was vomiting into the fire. Widukind grinned and said, "Well, brothers, if that's glory, then I'd rather be a pig." They laughed, even though every bone ached. That laughter was worth more than any prayer ever breathed over an altar.

In the mud, that's where you become honest. There are no titles, no crowns, no ranks. There you are just flesh that's still alive—or flesh that will soon be eaten. And whoever laughs with you while he stinks is your brother.

Widukind had no noble family to make him great. He only had brothers in the mud. And there, of all places—amid the blood and dirt—he found the only truth that mattered: Alone you are dead, together you are a storm.

There are two ways to face death: Either you start crying like a child, or you laugh in its face until it's confused. Widukind chose to laugh. Not because he was a clown, but because he understood: fear stinks worse than any corpse, and only laughter can drown out the stench.

Imagine a battle. Screams, blood, severed limbs everywhere. Men crawling in the mud, praying, cursing, dying. And in the middle of it all was Widukind, with a grin as sharp as his spear. "Well, Karl, are you sending us your best butchers again?" he once roared as a Frankish knight charged at him. The men around him laughed—not because it was funny, but because they could suddenly breathe again. Humor was a weapon, humor was armor.

Laughter makes you invincible, at least for a few seconds. It makes fun of death, makes it smaller than it is. Widukind was a master at it. When the arrows rained down, he'd say, "Screw the weather, we were planning to shower anyway." When the priests preached that God was on their side, he'd yell back, "Then he's a lousy tactician!" Every time he mocked, his men's courage grew. They felt stronger, not because they were stronger, but because laughter clears the mind when fear is holding it back.

The Franks hated it. They hated that grin that mocked them even when they outnumbered them. They hated that bastard who did more damage with dirty

words than with his blade. "A braggart," they called him. Yes, damn it. But a braggart who managed to make men laugh while they died. And that's worth more than any brilliant sermon.

There are stories that Widukind once laughed so filthy in battle that even the Franks hesitated. They thought he was mad, possessed, immortal. And perhaps he was. For whoever laughs in hell will become hell himself.

His brothers in the mud loved him for it. They said, "We'll die easier with you." And he replied, "Then hold on tight, boys, it's going to be a damn long death." More laughter, more courage, more survival.

Laughter was his way of making fun of the devil. No pious prayer, no holy hymn. Just a dirty grin that said, "Fuck you, world, you won't get me down." And that was precisely what made him different. Others fought with muscle. Widukind fought with mockery. And sometimes that was stronger than steel.

It always starts the same way: a few quick victories, a few dead Franks, a few villages disappearing into the smoke. You think, "Shit, we're invincible." And at that very moment, the world slaps you in the face until your teeth chatter.

Widukind savored his first victory as if he'd emptied a full jug in one gulp. The Saxons attacked a Frankish camp—at night, chaotically, loudly. Widukind was one of the first to run in. He stabbed, he roared, he struck, and when he came out again, he had blood on his hands that wasn't his own. "This is it!" he cried, "this is what freedom smells like!" And the men howled like wolves, drunk with triumph.

The first victory is like the first woman: chaotic, painful, bloody—but you feel like you own the world. For a moment, Widukind actually believed that Charlemagne and his Franks could simply be laughed at, bled dry, and beaten out of the country. He thought the war was a game, and he had just won.

But no sooner had the laughter died down than revenge struck. The Franks didn't need much convincing. They returned, twice as many, twice as heavily armed, twice as fanatical. They burned down a village that had been drinking with Widukind the night before. And suddenly, the same men who had been laughing yesterday were lying in the dust with their throats slit.

That was the first loss. No myth, no heroic song—just corpses staring blankly at the sky. Widukind stood there, axe still in hand, feeling triumph catch in his throat. "So that's the price," he murmured. And he understood: every victory

comes with a price to pay. And you pay that price with the faces of those you called brother.

First victories make you boastful. First losses make you serious. And Widukind was served both at a pace that either breaks you or makes you indestructible. He chose the latter—but not without a sneer. "Well, Karl," he said, looking at the charred huts, "if that's your god, then he'll drink more blood than all of us combined."

The laughter didn't come immediately this time. But it came. Because even in defeat, Widukind knew: A man who laughs is not yet dead. And as long as he laughed, Karl might have won the battle—but not the damned story.

There are moments when you sense the enemy before you see him. Like an icy draft of air at your back. That's how it was with the Franks. They were never far away. Always on your heels. Like a tomcat that follows you, even long after you've gotten up.

The first few times, there were small groups. Ten riders, twenty. Enough to scare you, not enough to tear everything apart. But you knew: there were more coming behind them. More and more. And once they had their eyes on you, they wouldn't sleep until you were lying in the dirt.

Widukind learned this the hard way. A raid on a Frankish camp, quick and dirty – success. But no sooner had the smoke cleared than the bastards reappeared. First a dozen. Then two. Then a hundred. And suddenly you were no longer the hunter, but the prey. The Saxons ran into the woods, screaming, stumbling, bleeding. And Widukind ran with them, his heart in his throat, his breath in panic.

The Franks were different from the neighboring villages. They were organized. Their blows weren't brawls; they were the bloody mechanical movements of a machine. Shield to shield, sword in time. No chaos, no laughter. Just cold efficiency. Widukind hated that. He hated how clean their violence was. As if killing were a craft that could be perfected. To him, it was filth. To them, it was order.

"They're always there," growled Arno, one of his brothers in the mud. "Like flies on our asses." Widukind laughed. "Then let's set a fire, maybe they'll fly into the light and burn." But deep down, he knew: It won't be that easy. You can burn down a village, slaughter a troop—but the Franks will grow back like weeds.

And worse: They had the Church behind them. Every blow they struck was anointed, every arrow supposedly a gift from God. That's what they called it, anyway. To us, it was just murder with a halo. But that's exactly what made them so dangerous. They believed in something greater than themselves. And a man who believes is harder to break than one who just fights.

But Widukind also had something: defiance. "Let them come," he said, "let them hunt us down. We are the wolves in this forest. They'll hear us long before they catch us." His men laughed because they had to. But everyone knew: the Franks were breathing down their necks, and the breath they felt on their necks wasn't the wind.

From then on, it was clear: there was no peace, no time to relax, no night of peaceful sleep. There was only this constant feeling that the enemy was about to step out of the darkness. And Widukind swore to himself: If they were always breathing down his neck, he would learn to spit in their faces as soon as they tried to bite.

There are warriors who impress with their muscles. Others with scars. Widukind impressed with his damned mouth. He was no longer a boy, no brat with a wooden stick – he was a warrior, one who had smelled blood, one who knew what it felt like when death sneezes in your face. But his sharpest weapon was still his tongue.

After the first battles, he could have retreated, become quieter, more serious. Many do. They swallow death to themselves and fall silent. But Widukind? He grew louder. Every time he survived a blow, he bellowed it out into the world. "You won't get me down, you wankers!" – and the men laughed because they knew: If he's laughing, then we can breathe again.

The chieftains saw him. Not always enthusiastically. Some hated him because he disarmed them with a single sentence. Imagine an old leader talking for an hour about honor and the gods – and then Widukind comes along, half-drunk, and growls: "You can't drink honor." Laughter. End of debate. Someone like that doesn't make friends in "politics." But he makes himself immortal in the hearts of the men who have to fight.

His brothers in the mud already knew: This guy is more than just a fighter. He's a damn mouth that makes you forget your fear. And that was more valuable than any shiny helmet. Because courage is contagious, and Widukind's courage was nothing but pure defiance, expressed in words.

He wasn't in the front row because he was the strongest arm. He was there because he was the loudest. And sometimes that's enough. When everyone's shouting and no one's listening, you need someone who's louder than the chaos. Widukind was that one.

"I'm no hero," he once growled, blood on his lips. "I'm just a mouth with muscles." But that's precisely what made him a hero. Not because he was perfect, but because he was brazen enough to be the opposite.

Thus ended his youth, thus began his journey. No longer a child, no longer a brat. Now a warrior—a warrior with a mouth. And everyone knew: When he opened his mouth, that's when the shit would really start.

Voices of Freedom

Some guys swing swords, others swing axes. Widukind swung his mouth. And sometimes, damn it, that was more dangerous than any weapon made of iron.

He had long since realized that not every blow with a fist or a blade moves a man. A well-chosen sentence, a taunt at the right time, a curse struck right into the heart of fear—that could accomplish more than a hundred spears. And Widukind was a natural at hurling words that cut deeper than steel.

"Karl wants to baptize us," he yelled one evening by the fire, his tongue heavy with beer, his mind sharp with defiance. "Let them baptize me – in the blood of his own priests!" Laughter, shrieks, a few mugs flew through the air. And suddenly there was more than just fun. Suddenly there was a spark, a feeling: We don't have to bend down.

The Franks had their bishops, their sermons, their Latin sayings that sounded like incantations for idiots. We had Widukind. No psalms, no blessings. Just a loud mouth that said what everyone was thinking but no one said: "We are free as long as we shout loud enough. And if Charles doesn't like that, then he should come and cover his ears."

Men who were only farmers by day, with dirt under their fingernails and hunger in their stomachs, suddenly listened. Not because he spoke beautifully—he spoke dirty, coarse, uncouth. But that was exactly what hit home. He spoke their language, the language of men who knew what pigs smell like and what blood tastes like. No fancy words. Just hard words.

His mouth as a sword—that was Widukind's true weapon. He could turn fear into anger, anger into laughter, and laughter into courage. And all with just one sentence that was dirty enough not to hide the truth.

From then on, he wasn't just a warrior. He was a damn loudmouth. One who opened his mouth so wide that even the gods paused. And sometimes, when he grinned at the crowd, I thought: Shit, maybe talking really is more powerful than punching. But don't worry—he could do both.

The first speeches of a rebel don't sound like sermons, they sound like bar noise. Forget grand halls, forget the solemnity. Widukind's pulpit was an overturned barrel lid, his congregation a horde of half-drunk Saxons more attached to beer mugs than to gods. And damn it, that's exactly where the revolution began.

It was always the same: fire, smoke, mead until you're sick, and Widukind in the middle of it all, his mouth bigger than the mug in his hand. "We're free," he roared, "as long as we don't behave like the Franks!" Laughter. One poured beer over his head, another fell into the fire laughing. But out of the laughter grew something. No order, no manifesto—just this feeling that one wasn't alone in the dirt.

He knew that feasts were the true marketplace. No runes, no laws. Just red-faced men who, drunk, swore all the things they would never have done sober. And Widukind was the conductor of this orgy. He turned every toast into a battle cry, every curse into a promise. "To freedom!" – and a hundred fists raised, while the beer trickled down their beards.

The Franks would have laughed if they'd seen it. Or rather, they would have snorted contemptuously. "Barbarians," they would have said, "they confuse laughter with politics." But that was our advantage. While the Franks knelt in churches, we created our politics while drunk. And sometimes, damn it, a drunken oath was stronger than any Latin formula.

Widukind played with this chaos like a juggler. He told stories about Karl that were so ridiculous that the men howled with laughter. "Karl," he once roared, "is so fat he sends his own priests under the table to pray!" Laughter like thunder. And somewhere amidst the jokes crept the realization: We hate this man. We hate what he's doing to us. And we must do something.

The laughter was camouflage. It wasn't harmless. It was a knife wrapped in fun. Every time the men laughed, Widukind hammered the truth into their skulls

without them realizing it. They laughed—and swore, along the way, not to kneel, not to baptize, not to break.

Thus, the feast became a school of freedom. No books, no writers. Just smoke, beer, and a man who spat the truth like curses into the fire. And laughter? It was the first weapon against fear.

There are curses that are just air, and there are curses that are a sledgehammer. Widukind chose the sledgehammer. He didn't curse to let off steam—he cursed to strike sparks. Sparks that fell on men like burning chaff and suddenly ignited entire villages. And the target of his curses bore a name that even sober tongues spat out like a disease: Karl. Not "the Great." In Widukind's mouth, he was simply Karl, like an innkeeper who takes too much money, a neighbor who steals pigs at night, a clergyman who dips into dirty pots with clean fingers.

"Karl," he often began, as if clearing his throat before a sermon, "that man is a bottomless pit—you tip land into it, men, souls, and he just belches for more." Then came the images, as harsh as axe blows: Karl weaving wreaths from strangers' heads; Karl preaching water to blood and then claiming it's a miracle; Karl whispering grace while setting fire to villages with his other hand. The men laughed at first, of course they laughed—but the laughter faltered, became heavy, gained weight. For beneath the mockery lay something that doesn't expire: anger.

"They say he's anointed by God," Widukind spat into the fire. "Then their god is a butcher who likes to work cleanly." A murmur went through the circle, not a pious one, more like a rustling sound like wet straw about to burn. One dared: "Don't say that too loudly, Widukind." - "I'll say it so loudly until the heavens cough," he replied, and his voice jumped, tore, glowed. "If you want me to whisper, then first take my breath away."

He knew the art of belittling Charlemagne. Not as an invincible emperor on a golden throne, but as a man with a cold gaze and warm pockets, stuffed with tributes paid by others. "See him," said Widukind, "behind banners and beards, a king of accountants: counting your sins, counting your sons, counting your sacks of grain, and in the end, he says God willed it that way." He raised his cup. "I know a God who counts less and drinks more." Laughter echoed from the trunks of the grove, but no one forgot the point of the speech: We are not counted.

He cursed Charles's priests, those soft fingers that grasp hearts as if they were inkwells. "They dip you in water," he sneered, "and pull you out again as their own." An older warrior shuffled his boot. "Some say baptism is salvation." "Salvation from what?" Widukind leaned forward, his eyes sparkling. "From freedom? From the forest? From the right to choose your gods like your knife?" He tapped the old man's breastplate. "What saves you sits behind your ribs and has teeth."

But his curses were never just knives aimed at the outside world; they were mirrors aimed at the inside. "You want to hate Karl? Well," he once shouted, "start by becoming like Karl—organized, sober, clean—and then remember why we don't want to be like that!" He grinned. "We're not clean. We're free. And free stinks. That's how it should be." The men roared, and in their roar lay that wild relief of finally having found an answer one could drink and still retain.

He painted pictures, crude and unforgettable. Karl as a miller, turning people into flour. Karl as a fisherman, draining the rivers with nets made of commandments. Karl as a healer, stealing wounds to sell ointments. "Don't believe him," said Widukind, "not even when he gives you bread. He baked it from your grain." A boy laughed too loudly; Widukind grabbed him by the neck. "Laugh, boy, but remember this. Tomorrow you might be standing between shield and sword, and the only difference is whether you know who you're baring your teeth at."

His curses were chain-breakers. Each sentence a blow to a link in the ring. "Karl commands, kneel," he mimicked the voice of a messenger, "I command: Stand." He stood on the barrel lid, raising both arms as if they were scales: "Kneeling is easy. Standing is difficult. That's why standing is the only honest thing to do." He let his arms fall. "If we stand, they'll have to lay us down. And for that, they'll need more than water and words."

Sometimes he abandoned the rudeness and became cold. Then he recited numbers, distances, the names of river crossings, the width of a valley path. "Here he will come," he said, "not because his God wills it, but because his scribes calculate so. And here, precisely here, his calculation breaks, if we calculate like wolves—with teeth, wind, and darkness." That was the other side of his curses: They were maps. Those who laughed with him learned, incidentally, where he would fight tomorrow.

Naturally, doubts arose. A man with a thin face asked, "And if he breaks us? If his armies are greater than our wrath?" Widukind nodded, as if agreeing to a

good toast. "Then he won't break men anymore, but boards. And boards burn." He pointed to the flames. "We are not a house. We are a forest. Whoever falls to us will stand in the shadows again tomorrow." A murmur, then a howl; somewhere, someone beat the time on a shield, and the rumbling turned into the singsong of a pledge, raw as leather.

He never forgot to call Karl by his first name. This took the enemy's crown off the sentence. "Karl makes plans," he growled, "but plans have never broken a nose." He pushed the cup toward the nearest comrade. "You break it. Today. Tomorrow. Always. And if you fall, the next one will break it." That was the rhythm of his speech: no thunder that fades away, but hammers on anvil, blow upon blow, until noise became form.

At the end of one of these nights, he stood still, which was rare. The grove crackled, somewhere a baby wailed behind a hut wall. Widukind looked around, their faces sooty, shining, expectant. "Listen," he said more quietly, "I don't love that man"—the laughter began, he raised his hand, it died down—"but what I really hate is the silence he wants in us. The silence of the baptized, the numbered, the obedient. I'd rather be wrong, loud, and bloody than right, quiet, and clean." Then he stepped down from the barrel. No cheering. Just that deep, communal breathing that a village makes when it has just decided it won't be the same tomorrow.

And as they dispersed, the air remained charged, as before a thunderstorm. One of the old men murmured, "Your curses are worse than arrows." Widukind shrugged. "Arrows can be collected," he said, "mine stay in the head." He smiled crookedly. "And when Karl sends his psalms tomorrow, we'll sing back. Louder."

Some men speak as if they were gargling with gold in their mouths. Charlemagne had such men. Priests, messengers, scribes—all with sharp tongues, schooled in Latin, which sounded like the cawing of ravens who never get their fill. But the Saxons had Widukind. And he spoke not like a book, but like an axe. Simple, harsh, direct. Words that every farmer understood, even if he had never seen more than his field and the smoke above his roof.

"The emperor says God speaks Latin," he sneered one evening by the fire. "Then his god must be a damned idiot, because no peasant understands him." Laughter. And in the laughter lay the nod, the agreement: Finally, someone speaks our language.

Widukind knew people's images. He spoke of sheep when he meant weakness. Of wolves when he implored courage. Of beer when he spoke of blood. For him, a dead man was not a "fallen man," but a sack eaten by the earth. A victory was not "glory," but a full mug. This wasn't poetry; this was everyday life. And that's precisely why it hit home.

When he spoke about Charlemagne, he didn't use courtly formulas. "Charlemagne is like a sack full of stones," he exclaimed, "big, heavy, but full of cracks. Drop it once and it breaks." When he mocked the Franks, he did so with peasant wisdom: "They march like cows to water—well-behaved, orderly, and too stupid to realize that the slaughter awaits at the end."

The old people often said, "Words are wind." Widukind nodded – and spat into the fire. "Exactly. But if the wind blows enough, even the strongest tree will fall." They understood that. No sermon, no instruction. An image they saw when they stepped out of the hut in the morning.

His language was raw. No embellished sentences, no neat phrases. He spoke as he fought: with dirt on his hands and defiance in his throat. And therein lay his power. For everyone who heard him thought, "I could have said that, too." Only no one had. Until he came.

It was the language of the people—not because he glossed over the people, but because he was them. A man who sweated, cursed, laughed, and drank just like everyone else. Only louder. Only harder. Only more brazenly. And that's why they listened to him. Because in his voice, they heard their own for the first time.

Thus, his mouth became a bridge: from the campfire to the heads, from the heads to the fists. The Franks had banners, we had words. But words that everyone understood are more dangerous than banners that merely shine. And Widukind's language was like a rusty chain: heavy, ugly—but strong enough to hold men together.

At first, he was just the loudest one around the fire. A loudmouth, a big-mouthed drunk. Someone the old people shook their heads at and the young people laughed at. "Widukind, he can drink and talk, but can he lead?" – that was the mockery that went around the huts. But at some point, the mockery changed. At some point, they realized: He doesn't just talk – he makes others do things.

It began inconspicuously. A village that was about to be invaded. Normally, people would argue for days about whether to dare. But Widukind stood up, half-puked in the dust, grinned, and said: "What are we waiting for? Until Karl sends us a letter? We're leaving now." And they left. Not because he was giving orders, but because his defiance was contagious. That was the moment the men realized: His mouth was more than just chatter. It was tinder.

From then on, they listened. Not because they had to, but because they wanted to. A braggart entertains you. A leader makes you raise your sword. Widukind went from being a joker to a spark. He turned laughter into seriousness, without the men noticing the transition.

Once, the story goes, he stood by the river with three dozen men. The Franks were on the other side, twice as many. Normally, the Saxons would have cursed, spat, and left. But Widukind grinned, raised his spear, and shouted: "Come on, brothers, if we're going to die, let's at least do it loudly so the gods can hear us!" – and they followed him. Because none of them wanted to die like cowards, while one of them laughed like a madman.

The old chieftains saw this and became nervous. They knew the rules: You become a leader through bloodlines or through strength. But Widukind broke the rules. He became a leader through words, through mockery, through his mouth. This made him unpredictable. And dangerous.

He pretended he didn't care. "I'm not a leader," he growled, "I'm just the guy who reminds you that you have balls." But that was exactly what leadership was. No sword strike, no sacrifice, no ritual. Just the raw feeling: "If he laughs, we can fight."

So the loudmouth became a leader. Not because he wanted to. Not because he asked for it. But because no one else had a mouth big enough to speak out about freedom before it was lost.

Freedom wasn't a pretty word from a book. It wasn't a neat principle nailed to a wall. Freedom was an intoxication. And Widukind poured it out, pitcher after pitcher, sentence after sentence, until the men staggered like drunks, even when they were sober.

He had a way of saying the word as if it were beer. "Freedom," he shouted, and the men raised their mugs as if they'd heard a toast. "Freedom," he repeated, and the voices, the fists, the laughter roared. It wasn't an argument, not a lecture. It was a drug.

The Franks gave their people order. Regiments, orders, commandments. Everything was like taut barrels in which not a drop spilled. We had the opposite: a barrel that overflowed. And this overflowing was freedom. No man was like another. Everyone was a wolf with their own teeth, a tree with their own shadow. And yet, when Widukind roared "Freedom," it was suddenly as if all the barrels had crashed against each other, all the trees a forest, all the wolves a pack.

It was intoxicating, and it was dangerous. Because intoxication is sweet—but it blinds you. Men who never thought beyond the next feast suddenly swore to fight to the death. Peasants who usually only held pitchforks screamed that they would slit Karl's throat themselves. And perhaps, at that moment, they truly believed it. Freedom made them greater than they were. But it also made them careless.

Widukind knew that. He saw how her eyes shone, how they wavered between courage and madness. And he took advantage of it. He poured more, more, even when the cup was long empty. His words were like mead, which he stretched throughout the evening. Just enough to keep her hot. Not enough to sober her up the next morning.

"Freedom," he said, "doesn't mean we win. Freedom means we die however we want." The men howled as if he had promised them eternal life. But it was the opposite. He had mixed the truth into their intoxication: You're mortal, damn it. But you can decide how. And that decision felt like an intoxication, sweeter than any beer.

Thus, "freedom" became not a thought, but a celebration. Not a law, but a song. An intoxication that sustained them, even when the world crushed them. And Widukind? He was the host who kept the cup refilled.

It doesn't take much to set a forest ablaze. No firestorm, no divine lightning. A spark is enough. And Widukind was that spark—small, dirty, barely visible to those in the south who drew maps and crowned bishops. But for us, sitting in the forest, he was the igniter everything was waiting for.

The nights were full of voices, and his was the loudest. It echoed through the trees, mingling with smoke, beer, and the thunder of fists on wood. "We are free!" he cried. At first, just one cry among many, then a singsong, then a scream that leaped across rivers like an echo. It was not a plan, not a treaty, not a pact written on parchment. It was just a sound, but it burned.

The elders said, "Stop that, boy, you're playing with fire." They were right—but they overlooked the fact that we had long been sitting in the woodpile, surrounded by dry brushwood, just waiting for the first embers. Widukind didn't light what wouldn't burn. He only spoke out about what was already crackling.

And suddenly, villages that otherwise fought like dogs over a bone heard the same call: Freedom. Not as a philosophy, not as a fine word, but as roaring defiance. Freedom meant: no Frankish priest in the well. Freedom meant: no messenger counting your name. Freedom meant: an axe in hand, the forest at your back, a bare forehead.

It was dangerous, damn dangerous. A spark could provide warmth or consume everything. Widukind knew that. Sometimes he grinned as he stared into the flames and murmured, "If we're going to burn, let's burn it so that even Karl can see the fire."

The Franks were still laughing, far away, safe behind their walls. To them, he was just a barbarian, a braggart, a shadow on the edge of the map. But we knew: shadows can eat fire and spit it out again. And this fire wouldn't stop until it licked the borders of the empire.

So it ended not with a victory, not with a vow, but with a spark. A spark in the forest, born of curses, laughter, and defiance. A spark that no one could extinguish.

And as night fell over Saxony, as the trees whispered and the wind carried the embers, everyone knew: Freedom was no longer a dream. It was fire. And it had a name. Widukind.

Widukind's oath

Night lay heavy over the grove. No sound, except the crackling of the fire and the gentle whine of the wind through the trees. The smoke rose lazily upwards, catching in the treetops as if listening. Men sat in a circle, furs draped over their shoulders, tankards in their hands. But no one laughed. No toast, no dirty joke. Today was different. Today the night was a witness.

Widukind wasn't standing yet. He was sitting, staring into the embers, as if searching for answers that weren't there. Normally, he would have had half the

camp roaring with ridicule of Karl or a story about a woman in the neighboring village. But this time he kept his mouth shut. And it was precisely this silence that made the men uneasy. A loudmouth who doesn't speak is like a sword that isn't drawn. Everyone knew: something was about to happen.

The grove was no temple of stone. It was merely a circle of ancient oaks, their branches black against the moon. But for the Saxons, that was enough. Here the gods lived. Here they listened. And when one spoke an oath, it echoed through the leaves so that no man or god could ever forget it.

A few elders murmured that one should be careful. "An oath binds," said one with a beard as long as a horse's tail. "You carry it to the grave." Widukind nodded almost imperceptibly, as if he had swallowed the words. He knew that. But that was precisely why he was here. No more fun, no more mere laughter by the fire. Today he wanted to bind something so tightly that even Karl couldn't break it.

The men around them waited. They drank, they stared, they nervously rubbed their weapons. Some were afraid. Others already felt the prickle in their necks when something greater was about to happen. An oath could change a people. Or damn them. And they knew that Widukind wasn't the type for half measures.

Then he stood up. Slowly, as if he first had to fight gravity. The flames cast his face sharply into the light, full of shadows, full of hardness. His eyes sparkled, not drunken, not playful, but serious. So serious that some men held their breath.

"Listen to me," he said. Just three words. But they struck the night like hammers. The fire crackled louder, the wind fell silent. All eyes were glued to him. For the first time, his mouth was not a tool for laughter, but a tool for fate.

The night in the grove belonged to him. And everyone knew: after today, nothing would be the same again.

Silence from a man who otherwise only knows noise – that's more dangerous than any shouting. Widukind stood there, the flames dancing in his face, and he said nothing. No joke, no mockery, no insult against Karl. Just silence. And that very silence weighed more heavily than a hundred curses.

The men looked at each other, nervous like dogs, unsure whether their master was about to feed them or beat them. "Why isn't he talking?" one whispered.

Another growled back: "Shut up. If Widukind stays silent, he's up to something." And they were right.

Because something was seething inside him. He knew he could no longer be the one who just spouted platitudes while others died. He felt the weight in his chest, heavier than any axe, heavier than any chain mail. It was the realization that words alone were no longer enough. That a promise was needed. One that would burn, even if the speaker had long since turned to ash.

His silence wasn't hesitation. It was preparation. Like a warrior who doesn't draw his blade immediately, but waits until his opponent becomes nervous. Every heartbeat in the circle grew louder. The fire crackled like an impatient witness.

Widukind took a deep breath. His gaze wandered through the ranks. He saw the young men, their eyes wide open, hoping he would inspire them with courage. He saw the old men, who had already seen too much blood, but still wanted to know if it was worth fighting again. And he saw the lost, who were almost broken, but still waiting for a word that could bring them back.

Then he slowly raised his hand. No cup, no sword, just his bare hand. So simple, so naked, that it made the men shiver. A braggart falls silent – and suddenly you realize: He's about to turn mockery into seriousness.

And in that very silence, in that damned breath, something arose that was more powerful than any laughter before: anticipation.

It began quietly. No thunderous words, no shouted curses. Just one sentence, as harsh as his breath:

“I don’t kneel.”

Nothing more. Three words, but they fell into the circle like an axe blow into rotten wood. The fire crackled, the men stirred restlessly. One laughed nervously, another drew a sharp breath. And Widukind continued, louder, more firmly, as if he himself were surprised by how the weight of his voice grew.

"I will not kneel before Karl. Not before his God. Not before his priests with their cold fingers. I will not kneel, even if he breaks me. I will not kneel, even if he takes everything from me."

Now it was no longer a sentence. It was a wave. He raised his arm, his fingers curled into a fist, and his voice whipped through the grove as if the trees themselves were witnesses.

"I swear on my blood—I'd rather die with my throat agape in the dirt than be subdued like a dog. I'd rather burn in fire than drown in its waters. I'd rather lose everything than acknowledge its crown!"

The men held their breath. This was no longer a joke. No laughter, no barroom poetry. This was an oath, raw, bloody, inescapable. And it grew, with every word, with every drop of saliva that flew onto the embers.

"I swear," cried Widukind, "that no sword, no cross, no chain will force me. I swear that I will lead my brothers, not in churches, but in battles. I swear that Charles will not see me as a servant—but as an enemy. As long as my heart beats, it beats against him!"

The words thrummed in the men's stomachs. They looked at each other, and suddenly they realized: This wasn't just Widukind's defiance anymore. This was their own. He had spoken what everyone had thought, but no one had dared to say.

The oath was not a piece of paper, not a law, not a seal. It was a living thing, born of fire and breath. And it grew—from one man into a circle, from a circle into a people.

Widukind stood there, his fist raised, his forehead in the firelight. And he knew: Now the way back was cut off. Words are light until they become so heavy that they can no longer be put down. His oath was now heavier than any shield.

And the men sitting around him felt: They would have to carry him – with him, or go down with him.

Words alone are wind. And wind vanishes. But blood—blood remains. Widukind knew this. The men in the circle knew this. Therefore, the oath had to be bound, not in parchment, not in church walls, but in flesh.

He reached for a knife, simple, rusty, but sharp enough to cut open the skin. He held it up, the flame reflected in the blade. Then, without hesitation, he cut across his hand. Blood dripped, thick, dark, steaming. No flinch, no groan. Only the look that said:*It's that serious.*

He held his bloody hand over the cup of mead. Drops fell into it, mingling with the foam, as if the drink itself were turning red. "Here," he cried, "is my oath! In my blood, in my drink. Whoever stands with me, drinks with me. Whoever doesn't drink—let him go."

That wasn't a request. It was a challenge.

For a moment there was silence. The fire crackled, the smoke crept, the wind howled softly. Then the first man reached for the cup. Arno, the big bastard with the scar. He didn't flinch, he drank deeply, the blood clinging to his beard. "I'm not kneeling," he said, his voice like a blow.

The next one followed. Hroth, the venomous dwarf with the sharp tongue. He took just one sip, grinned bloodily, and spat into the fire. "That's how Karl should burn." Laughter erupted, but it was harsh laughter, full of edge.

Then one after the other. Everyone took the cup, everyone drank, everyone tasted Widukind's blood. Some muttered words, others screamed their defiance into the night. And with each sip, the oath became heavier, more real, more inescapable.

In the end, the cup returned empty to Widukind. He lifted it, tipped the last drop—a dark trail over his lips—and roared: "Now it is sealed! Not by parchment, not by priests, but by blood and fire! We are free, or we are dead!"

The men didn't respond with words. They pounded their fists against shields, against earth, against breastplates. A thunder that shook the grove.

Blood in the cup – that was more than a ritual. It was a pact. One that stuck, one that tasted good, one that couldn't be washed off.

And everyone in the circle knew: with every drop they swallowed, the way back was cut off.

An oath is only as strong as the voices that support it. Widukind had done his part—shed blood, spoken words. But now it was up to the others whether it remained a spark or became a fire.

The men sat there, the taste of blood and mead still on their tongues. Their faces gleamed in the firelight, rough, tired, torn—and yet there was something new, a glow that didn't come from alcohol. It was the glow of decision.

Arno rose first. He was a giant of a man, with a voice that sounded like thunder, even sober. "I'm not kneeling," he shouted, pounding his chest with his fist. "Not before Karl, not before God, not before some bastard who thinks he can dictate my life!" A murmur went through the ranks, heavy and approving.

Then Hroth, small, sharp, with that venomous grin that always looked as if he'd just mocked a corpse. "I swear," he growled, "that I won't ask the first Frank I see if he wants to pray—but if he still has teeth after I'm done." Laughter erupted, harsh, evil, exactly what they needed.

After them, the others. One after another stood up, raised their hands, and roared their own version of the oath. Not a unified chorus—but a storm of voices, each different, each raw, each true. One promised to slaughter his own cattle rather than give them to the Franks. Another swore never to have his child baptized, even if it meant watching priests burn in the fire. Each oath was a nail in the coffin of the old order.

And the amazing thing was: the fear that had previously lurked between them dissolved. Fear turned into rage. Rage turned into strength. Strength turned into a choir, as uncouth as it was powerful.

“We will not kneel!” cried one. “We will not be silent!” cried the next. “We will die free!” they all roared.

Widukind stood in the middle of the circle, his face shining with sweat and firelight. He said nothing more. He let them talk, shout, swear. For now the oath no longer belonged to him alone. It had entered everyone's throats, had ignited their tongues.

And when the voices finally fell silent, all that remained was the heavy, collective breathing of a pack that had just decided that they would no longer be dogs – but wolves.

No sooner had the last cry faded than the oath began to transform. It happened quickly, faster than any scribe could have later recorded with pen and ink. Words become wind, the ancients had said—but sometimes, when there's enough fire in the wind, it carries sparks in every direction.

That same night, the oath grew greater than it had been. One whispered at the edge of the fire: "Did you see Widukind slash the hand? He grinned as if he had eaten the pain." Another swore he had seen the blood in the cup glow in the

fire, red like a torch. Yet another murmured that the gods themselves had answered in the wind.

This is how legends are born—not intentionally, but in the intoxication, in the dust, in the overtired chatter after a long night. Each one made the vow a little bigger, a little harder, a little brighter. And before the sun rose, a sentence had become a myth.

The men, who had been farmers, hunters, and drunkards that evening, sensed at dawn that they had become part of something more than a feast. "We swore," they said, "and the trees heard it. The earth drank it. The sky saw it."

And as they returned to their villages, they carried the story with them. Soon it was no longer just Widukind who had spoken in the grove. Soon it was said that all of Saxony had stood in a circle. Soon it was said that the blood in the cup was not from one hand, but from all. Soon the oath was no longer a night, but a covenant for eternity.

This is how people are turned into symbols—not because they want to, but because others need them. Widukind only wanted to defy, wanted to spit, wanted to laugh and swear. But the men made him the oath itself. He was no longer just a mouth; he was a legend with teeth.

And on that night, in whispers, in exaggeration, in retelling, the story of Widukind began not only as a man, but as a myth.

There are oaths spoken in a drunken stupor and forgotten the next morning. But this oath, born of blood, fire, and defiance, could no longer be shaken. It hung in the air, heavy as smoke, and weighed on every man in the grove like a burden.

As the embers burned down and the first shadows of dawn crept through the trees, they felt it: there was no turning back. They had burned the bridge before they had even crossed it. From now on, there were only two paths: fight or die. And both smelled of blood.

Widukind saw it in their faces. The euphoria was there, but so was the silence afterward. That silence in which every man realizes what he's just signed—with his throat, his heartbeat, his life. No one spoke of doubt. No one dared. But in their eyes was it: the knowledge that they had unleashed something greater than any of them.

He felt it himself, too. For the first time, he wasn't just the mocker, the braggart, the bully who laughed when things got heated. For the first time, he was a prisoner of his own words. He had locked himself in the oath—and therein lay his freedom.

"No man who sits here today may ever kneel again," he said quietly as the last drops of embers burned out. "Whoever does so shall be accursed, not only by us, but by his own children."

The men nodded, some with hard jaws, some with glassy eyes. They knew what that meant: No peace with Charles. No peace with the Church. No peace with the world that sought to enslave them. Only war, always war, until someone gave in.

The oath had bound her, harder than any chains Karl could ever forge. And that's precisely why it was more powerful. For a chain can be broken. But an oath—it's in your blood, in your name, in your damned memory.

As they left the grove, each step was heavier, but also firmer. They were no longer men who met to drink. They were a sworn group that had learned to walk.

And in Widukind's eyes lay this cold, dangerous knowledge: From now on, every day was war. And he would wage it, not because he wanted to—but because he had no other choice.

No turning back.

Blood ties and feuds

In Saxony, blood was worth more than gold. More than words, more than any oath sealed by a priest with holy water. Blood was both a bond and a burden. When you were born, you not only received a name—you also received all the enemies and friends of your clan. Whether you wanted it or not.

Widukind learned this early on. Everyone in the village knew whose son he was, whose nephew, whose third cousin. And that's exactly how you were treated. Not according to what you could do, but according to the blood that flowed through your veins. A man could be strong, cunning, brave—if he had the

wrong blood ties, he was still just a peasant. But with the right blood ties, you were already half a chieftain before you could lift a sword.

Family meant: If one fell, everyone had to take revenge. If one took loot, they shared it with their own. If one brought shame upon themselves, everyone bore it. That made you safe—but it also made you unfree. Blood was a net that caught you and bound you at the same time.

Widukind felt the warmth of blood ties on nights when the family sat around him, telling stories, roasting meat, passing mead. He knew he would always have a place in this circle, even when the world burned outside. But he also felt the coldness of this web when he was forced to fight feuds that weren't his own. "Your uncle was insulted," they would say. "Your cousin was beaten." And just like that, he was in it, whether he wanted to be or not.

The Franks had laws that regulated everything, clauses like chains. We had blood. It was more honest, more brutal—but just as merciless. Anyone who evaded blood was a traitor. And traitors didn't live long.

For Widukind, blood initially meant home. Later, it became a bond. And at some point, he already sensed, he would have to break the bond to bind something greater: a people.

But he was still young. Blood was still his only support. He didn't yet hold the axe in the name of all Saxons, but only in the name of his own. And every blow he struck was written into this web—a web that could carry him, but could also strangle him.

Blood gave you support, but it also dragged you down like millstones around your neck. In Saxony, you weren't just yourself—you were your clan. And your clan could be a curse.

Widukind learned this as soon as he was old enough to hold a sword. There was always someone who came: an uncle, a cousin, a brother-in-law, someone with the same blood in their body. And they always had demands. "You are one of us, so come with us." - "You owe it to your blood, so fight for me." - "You are no better than us, so abide by our fate."

It wasn't a voluntary alliance; it was coercive. Blood law meant: If your brother stole a sheep, you were suddenly part of a quarrel. If your uncle was abusive at a feast, you were obligated to defend his teeth. And if one of your cousins was killed in a fight, you had no choice—you had to pay blood with blood.

Widukind hated it. He hated how the Blood drove him into battles he hadn't chosen. He hated how he was forced to answer for the mistakes of others. But he did it anyway. Not because he was blind, but because he knew: whoever betrays the Blood will be dead long before the sword strikes them.

And so he carried the burden. Every feud, every quarrel, every guilt of a relative clung to him like iron. Even at nights when he himself hadn't sought a quarrel, the blood found him. "You are Widukind's nephew, so help me." - "You are Widukind's son, so don't be silent." - "You are Widukind's brother, so die with me."

Sometimes he wondered if this was even freedom. These bonds provided security, yes—but they bound him just as tightly as the Frankish chains. Perhaps even more tightly, because he felt them in his own flesh.

But despite all the burden, despite all the anger, he bore it. Because he knew: blood was the only currency that mattered back then. And whoever didn't pay was lost.

But something was already beginning to ferment inside him. A thought that wasn't yet ripe, but was growing louder and louder:*If I ever want to become greater than my clan, I must tear myself out of this net.*

He still remained silent about it. He still swallowed the burden. But he knew: blood was not only a bond. Blood was also a burden. And at some point he would be forced to exchange this burden for a greater one—or break under it.

Feuds were the pulse of the Saxons. Not a week without revenge, not a harvest without blood. It was a cycle as old as the forests: one insults another, one steals an animal, one hits the wrong man while drunk – and then the torches rolled through the night.

Widukind was still young when he was dragged into his first feud. It wasn't about him; it was about his cousin. During a feast, the cousin had called a man from a neighboring village a "son of a bitch," and the son of a bitch hadn't survived. Now the dead man's clan was out for revenge—and Widukind was right in the middle of it.

No code of honor, no fair duel. Feuding meant raiding at night, setting fire to huts, strangling men in their sleep, stealing cattle, scaring children. It was dirty work, not a heroic song. But it was a duty. "We will not let blood go

unpunished," the elders said. And so Widukind marched off, spear in hand, heart full of resentment, but eyes burning with defiance.

The first torch burned brighter than the moon. The screams came fast. Men stumbled from their huts, women dragged children into the darkness, dogs howled. Widukind threw his spear, struck one, watched him fall—and understood: This was not a fight for freedom, not a war against Charlemagne. It was just dirt against dirt. One dead man for another, and in the end, no one had won.

But the system held. The next morning, when they returned, his relatives patted him on the shoulder. "Well done, boy. Now you're one of us." He grinned, knowing that anything less than a grin would only bring him a new feud within his own blood.

From then on, violence flared up again and again. One blow prompted another, one murder prompted a counterattack. Feuds were like fire in dry grass—once ignited, they consumed everything until nothing remained. And everyone in the country knew: It's only a matter of time before the fire takes you.

Widukind hated this logic, but he played along with it. He had to. Because anyone who didn't go along with it wasn't a man, but a traitor. And traitors found their bones in the forest faster than any enemy.

So he learned: feuds aren't slip-ups. They're the law. And the law was: blood pays blood. Always.

A feud never ends. It doesn't stop when one man falls. It doesn't stop when a village burns. It only ends when both sides have turned to ash—and even then, the embers linger in the stories of the survivors.

Widukind soon realized that feuds were not a cure, but a disease. A perpetual cycle that fed on itself. Today you slay a man's brother, tomorrow he slays your cousin, the day after tomorrow both clans burn each other down. In the end, no one knows who started it – only that no one is allowed to stop.

He saw villages crumbling in this vortex. Men who spent their lives seeking revenge. Women who raised children only so they could grow up to strike the next blow with their swords. Even children knew the rules: "If they kill one of us, we'll kill two of them." That was the first saying you learned, even before you could speak.

Once, after a particularly bloody feud, Widukind stood among the corpses. Two of his cousins were dead, three men had been slain by their opponents, and no one had won anything. The village was poorer, the ground was red, and yet the elders still said, "Honor is preserved." Widukind laughed, bitterly, mockingly. "If that's honor, then I don't give a damn." But he immediately fell silent again, because he knew: All that mockery would only have triggered the next feud.

The cycle of violence spun inexorably. Every attempt to break it only made it accelerate. If you say "enough," you are weak. If you fight back, you keep the machine running. And so Widukind grew up in a world where revenge was as natural as breathing.

But something stirred within him. A defiance that differed from the blind rage of his relatives. He saw that the Circle wasn't just destroying clans—it was weakening everyone. And while the Saxons were busy tearing each other apart, Charles stood in the west and laughed.

The circle of violence was like a millstone, slowly grinding the people to pieces. Widukind knew: If he didn't break it at some point, the oath in the grove would be worthless. For what good is it to be free of Karl if you smash yourself to pieces?

He still remained silent about it. He was still part of the circle. But something began to glimmer in his eyes: the thought that he wouldn't dance like this forever.

Amidst all the blood and smoke, in all the endless feuds, a pattern began to emerge: Widukind was no longer a follower. He was the one people looked to when the torches were lit. Not because he was older, not because he was already chieftain—but because he was louder.

He had a talent that was stronger than muscle power: he could channel hatred. Where other men merely cursed, he turned cursing into a battle cry. Where others despaired, he turned despair into defiance. After just a few years, the word in the village was: "If Widukind comes with us, we have a chance." And sometimes that was enough to get men to stand up in the first place.

This was new. Usually, it was the eldest of the clan who set the pace. But Widukind stole the stage—not with command, but with his presence. He stood in the circle, grinned, spat a spell into the embers, and it was immediately clear that he held the fire in his hands.

But that also brought him trouble. The chieftains growled when they realized their orders only gained weight after Widukind had commented on them. Some hated him silently, some loudly. "A braggart," they said, "someone who talks more than fights." But everyone knew: His words made fighters brave—and that was more valuable in those days than any sword.

And Widukind himself? He sensed he was growing. Not only in the eyes of his clan, but beyond its borders. Other tribes knew his name, first as a source of mockery, then with respect. "The Braggart of Engern," some called him. But soon it was called "The One Who Defies Karl."

Feuds had made him a fighter, yes. But they had also shown him that he could be more. He wasn't a pawn carrying out his cousin's revenge. He was someone who began to question the whole game—and at the same time, played along, harder than everyone else.

His position was still fragile, still insecure. But every battle, every speech, every laugh in the face of blood made him a little taller. And he knew: Soon he would have to fight not just for his blood relatives, but for all Saxons.

There are times when blood becomes a trap. Widukind realized this when his clan's demands grew louder – and at the same time, his name echoed beyond the villages. He was no longer a simple fighter, no longer a cousin who just went along with the crowd. He was the man everyone looked to when decisions had to be made. And suddenly, two powers were pitted against each other: family and people.

The clan called to him. "Help us, Widukind, avenge the insult!" – "Your uncle has been slain, you must atone for the blood!" – "Your brother-in-law is in trouble, you must not be absent!" Each of these calls was old, familiar, urgent. But at the same time, voices from outside came. Peasants who had no blood ties to him begged: "Stand up for us too. We have no one but you."

Thus, a rift developed. Blood versus freedom. Duty versus vision. A man who stood by his cousin could save the village—but what if the land was lost in the process?

Widukind saw it clearly: feuds tied him to petty wars, while Charlemagne was already gathering a large army. Every dead cousin drew him into a spiral that kept him from the real enemy. But could he simply abandon the clan? Blood was law, and whoever renounced blood lost honor, lost home, lost protection.

One night, after a particularly senseless feud, he sat alone by the fire. Two dead bodies lay outside, both relatives. He stared into the embers and murmured, "How many more brothers must I lose before I fight for everyone?" He knew the answer would divide him—either make him a traitor to the family or a traitor to the people.

His brothers in the mud, Arno and Hroth, were the first to say it: "We are your family, Widukind. But not because of blood. But because we fight with you. Perhaps that is the only bond that matters."

And with that, the idea took root: Family wasn't just what flowed through your veins. Family was who stood by your side when the enemy came. Whether cousin or stranger, uncle or farmer—loyalty was blood enough.

But this thought was dangerous. For if he spoke it aloud, he would question the old law. And the old law was the only order the Saxons had.

Thus, Widukind stood on the verge of a decision that was greater than any feud: either he remained the son of his clan – or he became the voice of an entire people.

From blood grows hatred, and from hatred grows revenge. It was always this way with the Saxons. But in Widukind, something else began to grow. Something greater than the next feud. A seed that sprouted within him—the seed of the rebel.

He had seen feuds tear entire villages apart. How brothers killed brothers, while Charles laughed in the West. He had drunk blood, stood sword to sword, seen houses burn. And again and again, the same realization came:*We kill ourselves while the real enemy waits.*

In the nights after such battles, he couldn't sleep. He stared into the embers, still heard the screams, still smelled the smoke. But instead of thinking only of revenge, he began to ask: "What for? What for? Who does this benefit?" Questions no man of his clan ever asked aloud, because they sounded like weakness. But they echoed in his head, stronger than any war song.

The seeds grew in his speeches. At first, only mockery: "We're so stupid, we're doing Charlemagne's work ourselves." Then, in earnest: "If we don't pull ourselves together, we'll be dead before the Franks even touch us." And slowly, very slowly, the men began to listen. Not just his blood relatives, but also those who didn't know him.

He sensed it: The men wanted more than endless feuds. They wanted a cause greater than a stolen sheep or a drunken insult. They wanted to fight, yes—but for something that made sense. For land. For freedom. For the right not to be drowned in Charles's church water.

So he began to sow words like seeds. Not all of them germinated immediately. Some laughed, some shook their heads. But others picked them up, carried them forward, recounted them around the fire, in huts, in fields. The rebel's seed spread among the people, invisibly and inexorably.

Widukind himself was hardly aware of this. He only wanted the feuds to end, for energy to no longer be wasted in circles. But that was precisely the beginning. The beginning of a new feud—not against neighbors, not against cousins, but against Charlemagne and his empire.

And as night fell over the land, he knew: the circle of violence was no longer the end. He had drawn a new circle—larger, harder, more dangerous. A circle that encompassed all Saxons.

The seed had been planted. And it would grow, whether he wanted it or not.

Encounter with the Franks

You hear a lot about an enemy before you see him. And every rumor makes him bigger. The ancients spoke of the Franks as if they were demons: disciplined, cold, with swords so sharp they could fell trees, and with priests who would turn your head before the sword even slit your throat. But talk is just smoke. Only when you see the enemy does he become flesh.

Widukind saw his first Franks on a gray morning by the river. No army, no storm, just a dozen riders appearing on the far bank. They sat like statues on their horses, armor shining, shields in even alignment. No laughter, no cheering. Only silence, which seemed heavier than any war cry.

The Saxons at Widukind's side murmured. "Look how silent they are. Like dolls." One spat into the grass. "How can men fight if they don't roar?" But that was precisely what made it eerie. The Franks stood there, unmoving, and their calm screamed louder than any Saxon howl.

Widukind stared at them. His fingers itched for his spear, his mouth itched for mockery. But for the first time, words failed him. Not out of fear—but because he understood: These men were different. They weren't neighbors you could attack when the beer had gone to your head. They were shaped, sharpened alike, like blades from the same forge.

One of the Franks raised his hand. No greeting, no threatening gesture. Just a sign – and the entire group turned their horses in unison, as if they were a single body. Dust rose, hooves thundered, and in a few heartbeats they were gone.

"What was that?" Hroth murmured beside him. Widukind grinned crookedly, but his voice sounded unusually serious: "That, brothers, was our enemy. Not a man, not a village. A damned beast with a hundred heads."

And as he stared at the empty horizon, he knew: The stories hadn't exaggerated. They had said too little.

After the first glimpse of the riders, it wasn't long before the Franks began to appear more and more frequently. First like shadows at the edge of the forests, then like flies on the flesh. Sometimes a troop of soldiers, sometimes a merchant with goods that gleamed like sin, sometimes a priest with a tongue so slippery you'd want to sprinkle salt on it.

They didn't come with fire and sword—not always. Sometimes they came with coins. Gold pieces that sparkled in the sun as if the gods themselves had dropped them. Some farmers stared at the gold for so long they almost forgot who they were. "One sack of this, and we could feed an entire village," one murmured. Widukind laughed harshly. "One sack of this, and you'll sell your daughters for it."

Then the priests. Strange men with fringe of hair and eyes that pretended to have seen heaven. They spoke of a God who loves everyone—and of an emperor who happened to be his favorite son. "Baptism," they said, "is salvation." And when they said that, they meant: salvation from ourselves. Widukind listened, grinned, and once asked aloud: "If your God is so powerful, why does he need your stupid mouths?" The priest turned pale, the men laughed—and the seeds of hatred against the strangers grew deeper.

But the most dangerous weren't the soldiers or the priests. It was the traders. They brought fabrics softer than any Saxon hide. Knives sharper than our blacksmiths could ever make. Wine that burned sweeter than our mead. Some

were tempted. Some said, "Perhaps trade is better than war." But Widukind spat on the ground. "Today they give you wine, tomorrow they take your land. Only fools act like that."

The strangers in the land seemed harmless, but they were harbingers. Every sack of gold, every drop of wine, every cross nailed to the wall was a nail in the coffin of freedom.

And Widukind knew: If the strangers were allowed to do as they pleased, they would soon no longer be guests – but masters.

The Saxons fought like wolves. Each for himself, wild, unpredictable, with tooth and claw. But the Franks – they fought like machines. And that's precisely what made them so dangerous.

Widukind experienced it for the first time when a Frankish army marched through the border region. It wasn't a major battle, just a passage, but what he saw was etched in his memory. Rows of men, shield to shield, step by step. Not one stumbled, not one sang, not one laughed. They moved like cogs, lubricated by blood and obedience.

"Look at them," whispered Arno next to him, "no one's dodging, no one's running. As if they were made of stone." "No," growled Widukind, "stone breaks eventually. These ones are worse. They won't stop until someone tears them apart."

It wasn't just their discipline, it was also their equipment. Iron helmets that gleamed in the light, shields with crosses, swords longer and heavier than ours. Each of them was better armed than three Saxons combined. They had wagons full of supplies, they had messengers who passed on orders without objection. Order like a river that never stagnates.

Widukind felt his men's heart sink as they watched. They were used to chaos, battles like raging storms. But here was no storm. Here was a masonry marching. "How do you fight against something like that?" one murmured.

Widukind laughed, harshly and crookedly: "By showing them that we are not a wall. We are fire. And fire devours walls if it burns long enough."

But deep down, he knew: This was different from any feud, any raid. The Franks had a weight that couldn't simply be blown away with ridicule. Their order was so heavy that it could crush entire countries.

And that's exactly why, he thought, you have to learn to burn louder than they can march.

Not every battle is fought with swords. Some begin with words—and sometimes words are sharper than any blade.

The first person to truly confront Widukind was not a warrior, but a priest. A Frankish envoy, thin as a candle, but with eyes that burned as if he had swallowed the sky itself. He came into the village with a few riders, his head shaved except for his crown, a cross shining on his chest. And he spoke as if every word were an order.

"Charles," he began, "is God's chosen one. He comes not to destroy you, but to save you. Whoever is baptized is free from sin. Whoever refuses is an enemy of heaven."

The people in the village listened, embarrassed, with bowed heads. No one dared to laugh. But Widukind stood up and stepped forward, his mouth already full of venom.

"Save us?" he growled. "I've seen how Karl's men rescue: They rescue grain from our fields, they rescue cattle from our stables, they rescue women from their huts. If that's salvation, then your god has a big mouth and empty hands."

A murmur went through the crowd, a few men grinned despite the danger. The priest raised the cross as if to ward off the words. "You blaspheme. God sees you."

Widukind laughed loudly. "Then let him look me in the eye. And if he's truly all-powerful, let him break my neck while I laugh. But I tell you: your God is just a name. And your Karl is just a man—with too much land and too little sense."

The riders reached for their swords, but the priest raised his hand to stop them. His voice was cold: "Your people will bleed for your tongue."

Widukind stepped even closer, so close that he could smell the man's breath. "Then let him take me. But first, he'll learn that our tongues can strike harder than his swords."

The village boiled, men roared, fists pounded against shields. The priest retreated, the riders trailing behind him with rigid faces. They rode away, but everyone knew: these words would not be forgotten.

But Widukind grinned. "A war doesn't begin with steel," he told the men. "It begins with words. And today we shot the first arrows."

Words are good, mockery is sharp – but at some point things will crash. And then it's no longer the tongue that decides, but the iron.

The first real clash with the Franks didn't come as a major battle, but as a clash, raw and unintentional. A dozen Saxon warriors, among them Widukind, encountered a Frankish patrol in the forest. No time for speeches, no time for banners. Just eyes fixed on each other—and then the drawing of swords.

It was chaos. The Franks immediately formed their damned shield line, as they always did. Shields together, spears extended, like a wall marching through the forest. But the forest was no parade ground. The trees stood thick, the undergrowth tore the formation apart. And that's when the Saxons plunged in—wild, roaring, unpredictable.

Widukind leaped at one of the riders like a wolf, half-pulled him off his horse, and rammed his spear into his side. Blood spurted, the horse neighed, and the rider fell. It wasn't a beautiful fight, nor a heroic poem—it was a savage brawl.

The Franks held their ground, better than expected. Every blow they threw was clean, trained, and rehearsed. But the Saxons didn't fight by the rules. They bit, they kicked, they dragged men into the mud by their hair. One of the Franks screamed as Hroth gouged out his eye with a dagger. Arno ripped the sword from another's hand and split his skull with the same blade.

It didn't take long, maybe a dozen heartbeats, maybe half an eternity. In the end, five Franks lay dead in the grass, three Saxons beside them. The surviving Franks fled in an orderly fashion, so orderly that it almost infuriated Widukind. Even in flight, they still kept their damned rhythm.

The men gasped, laughed, and screamed with adrenaline. One shouted, "We beat them!" But Widukind knelt beside a dead brother and murmured, "That wasn't a battle. That was just the beginning."

He knew: If a patrol was so difficult to break, what would it look like when the entire Frankish army arrived?

The collision had cost blood. But it had also shown one thing: the Franks were not ghosts, not invincible demons. They bled. And when someone bleeds, they can die.

After the collision, the forest lay silent. Only the rustling of leaves, the dripping of blood, the gasping of the survivors. The air smelled of iron and sweat, of death and smoke. And in the middle of it all stood Widukind, his sword still dripping, his eyes wide open.

He had understood. Finally. The Franks weren't neighbors like the Westphalians or the Angrivarii. Nor were they a feud that could be settled in a drunken stupor and settled with cattle. No – they were an empire. A machine that kept rolling, no matter how many cogs were crushed.

The men celebrated, taking the first sip from the dead men's skins, laughing loudly as if they were invincible. But Widukind remained serious. "You saw it," he said. "They lose men—and keep marching. They fall—and get up again. We can beat them, yes. But we can't stop them."

Some looked at him in confusion. "What are you talking about, Widukind? We chased them away." He laughed harshly. "Chased them away? Tomorrow, Karl will send ten in their place. The day after tomorrow, a hundred. And each of them looks the same. Everyone marches the same. Everyone fights the same. We kill five – and don't realize they have five hundred more."

This was the realization: The Franks were infinite. Not because they were gods. But because they had order. Discipline. An iron will that held them together like a river. The Saxons were free as the wind—but the wind scatters. The Franks were a tidal wave that swept everything away.

Widukind gritted his teeth. His mockery, his quips, his defiance—all of it was powerful, but he knew: that alone wouldn't be enough. They needed more. They needed solidarity, greater than any clan, stronger than any feud.

The realization was bitter. It meant that the war would not be short, not fun, not heroic. It would be long, dirty, and full of sacrifice. And if they wanted to fight it, they would have to become more than just wolves in the forest.

Widukind looked at the dead Franks in the grass. "They are not men like us," he murmured, "they are an army. And against an army, a single shout is not enough. We need thunder."

There are moments when one look, one smell, one drop of blood is enough – and suddenly you know who your enemy is forever. For Widukind, it was right here, among the corpses in the forest.

The Franks had faces like stone. Even dead, they still looked as if they were obeying. No trembling, no pleading, nothing human in their features. That made it worse. Widukind felt a chill in his chest that wasn't just fear. It was hatred. Pure, clear hatred. Not the quick hatred of a feud that dissipates after a night. But a hatred that eats into the bones like fire and never goes out.

The men beside him grinned, celebrating the victory. But Widukind stood still. He saw the Franks and thought:*You are what wants to devour us. You are the noose around our necks. And as long as I breathe, I will break it.*

It was a hatred that wasn't directed solely at the soldiers. It was directed at Karl, the man who sent these machines. It was directed at the priests who poisoned the villages with their slippery tongues. It was directed at the order itself, which tried to turn free men into cogs in the wheel.

Widukind spat on the ground next to a corpse. "I'm not kneeling," he muttered, this time not to the fire, not to his clan, but directly to the corpses. "And you'll hate me for it, just as I hate you."

From that day on, there was no longer any question of whether he would fight. No longer any question of whether mockery would suffice. No turning back, no hesitation. The hatred was there—and it was purer than any vow.

He burned like a spark that couldn't be extinguished. And that spark spread. To his brothers in the mud, to the men who heard him, to the villages that sensed that Karl was more than just a distant name.

Thus began the true war—not with a battle, but with an emotion. A spark in the heart of a man who laughed louder, cursed harder, and hated more fiercely than any emperor could ever understand.

The first battle

It didn't begin with trumpets, nor with banners, nor with the grand gestures that writers would later paint into their chronicles. It began with dust on a forest path.

Widukind and two dozen men crept through the thicket, returning from a raid. They were tired, they stank of smoke, their shields were dented, and their

mouths were sticky from the last of their mead. Then they heard it: the dull beat of hooves, the steady clang of armor, the creaking of wagon wheels.

The Franks.

A small unit, perhaps forty men, more than the Saxons, but not enough to qualify as an army. Yet it was enough to make hearts race. They marched into formation, neat as a row of trees placed in the landscape by a ruler. Shields gleamed, spears protruded, the crosses on the banners sparkled in the sunlight.

The Saxons ducked into the undergrowth. One whispered, "Too many." Another, "We're retreating." But Widukind stood erect, his eyes blazing, his hand already on his spear. "Retreat?" he growled. "And then what? Wait until they catch our village asleep?"

The men looked at him, uncertain, full of fear. And then he grinned. That damned grin that had already sparked half-feuds and saved just as many men. "Listen," he said quietly, "those who think they're marching through our land like they're marching through their own yard. Time to show them that no one just walks around here."

Arno, the giant, growled in agreement. Hroth spat into the leaves. One by one, the men stood up. Fear still clung to their faces, but it slowly gave way to defiance.

The Franks marched on, unsuspecting. Steadily, disciplined, unstoppable like a river.

And Widukind knew: Here, now, it truly begins. No priest with his stupid sermons, no spy in the shadows. This was flesh against flesh. Order against chaos.

He raised the spear, took a deep breath – and the world held its breath for a moment.

The Franks advanced, their marching pace like the beating of a giant drum. No song, no shout, just this endless pounding. It unnerved men who usually laughed at the sight of blood.

The Saxons cowered, every breath heavy, every finger twitching on the spear. They were not organized, not ready, not uniform. They were like a pack of hungry dogs suddenly encountering a bear.

And then Widukind raised his voice. Not with a beautiful speech, not with long words. With a roar so raw that it cut through the fear like a blade.

"Brothers! We have two options: We die quietly in the forest like pigs—or we make so much noise that the gods themselves have to cover their ears!"

A few men laughed, nervously, harshly, but the laughter turned into something else: a snort, a gnashing of teeth, a howl.

Widukind stepped forward, straight out of the thicket, spear raised high. He spat in the dust and roared: "Come and get us, you accursed sons of God!"

The Franks stopped. Heads turned, shields raised, order didn't waver a step, but their eyes were now alert.

Behind Widukind, the Saxons burst out of the bushes, bellowing like animals finally released. "For freedom!" one cried. "For blood!" another. But most simply screamed, raw, brutal sounds that spoke louder than any words.

Widukind ran ahead, his mouth open, his spear like an extension of his rage. His voice was louder than all the others, a thunder that drowned out the fear of his men.

"Come on, brothers! We won't die silently—we'll die roaring!"

And then they crashed into each other.

The initial impact was like the collision of two storms. No plan, no rhythm—just iron on iron, flesh on flesh, screams drowning out everything.

Widukind plunged into the front line of the Franks. His spear smashed into a shield, splintering wood and sparking iron. A Frankish soldier, as strong as a tree trunk, rammed him back. Widukind staggered, recovered, roared louder, and struck again.

Chaos raged around him. Arno yanked a rider off his horse as if he were dragging a sack of grain and crushed his skull with his bare fists. Hroth leaped between the shields like an enraged fox, stabbing his dagger into gaps barely large enough for a blade.

The Franks held the line. Their shields formed a wall, spears protruding from them like teeth. Every blow from the Saxons rebounded, every leap ended in

blood. One of the Saxons was impaled, his scream cut off mid-throat as the iron pierced him.

But order didn't last long against madness. The Saxons roared, bit, and spat blood into their opponents' faces. One tore a Frank's helmet from his head and smashed his nose with a stone. Another grabbed an enemy's sword with his bare hands, cutting himself deeply, but managed to wrench it from his grip.

Widukind himself suddenly found himself eye to eye with a Frankish captain. The man was taller, heavier, his armor shining like a mirror. Her first blow snapped Widukind's spear in half. He laughed—in the middle of the fight, blood on his lips. "Then with my teeth!" He threw himself against the man, ramming his shoulder into his breastplate, feeling the ribs crack beneath.

Chaos was everywhere. No one knew who was in charge, no one knew who was still alive. Only blood, screams, blows, breaths filled with iron.

It wasn't a dance. It wasn't a song. It wasn't a heroic song. It was choking, beating, biting. It was survival in the mud.

And Widukind knew: Right here, in the dirt, was the true battle. Not in chronicles, not in prayers—but here, where men died like cattle and laughed when they could still breathe.

Chaos raged, but the Franks did not break. They wavered, yes. They bled, yes. But even as men screamed, as their ranks staggered, they held fast to their damned order.

Widukind saw it with his own eyes: Where one shield shattered, another immediately stepped forward. Where a spear broke, it was replaced by a new one, as if they had inexhaustible reserves in the bowels of their formation. Each of them seemed less a man than a cog—and the machine kept running, even as teeth broke loose.

The Saxons, on the other hand, raged like animals. They fought like a storm, but the storm eventually crashed against the wall. One after another, they collided with the shields, slipped on the blades, and were pushed back. A peasant from Widukind's troop ran blindly into the gap—and was pierced with three spears at once. His scream was short, his body hanging like a piece of meat on a spear.

"Damn it!" roared Arno, the giant, when he saw the man fall. "They'll eat us like pigs!" He swung his axe, split a shield, and smashed the arm behind it—but as soon as one fell, the line closed again.

Hroth cursed loudly as he stabbed between the legs and shields: "Those bastards are like a fence! You punch a hole in it, and it immediately grows back together!"

Widukind felt his anger boiling. He hated this cold discipline, this damned, unwavering march. They weren't better, they weren't stronger—they were just relentless. And that was precisely what made them so dangerous.

The Saxons began to gasp. Their screams became shorter, their blows heavier. They had burned like fire—but fire quickly consumes itself. The Franks, on the other hand, were like stone, which even the flames couldn't easily break.

And in the midst of this madness stood Widukind, his face bloody, his eyes wild. He saw the ranks of the Franks still standing, and he knew: If they continued like this, they would all die here—roaring, laughing, but useless.

He had to find a way to do the impossible: break order with chaos.

There are moments when a fight tips – not because one is stronger, but because one is crazier. And Widukind was crazier enough.

He saw the Franks, that damned wall of iron that wouldn't break. Every blow rebounded, every scream faded away. The Saxons grew weary, the Franks still stood their ground. But then Widukind's gaze fell upon the terrain: the forest, the stream, the uneven ground that forced the Franks to march in a confined space. Order needs space – chaos only needs courage.

"Brothers!" he roared, "don't go for their shields! Tear their legs out from under them!"

He grabbed a stone and hurled it at the knees of a Frank. The man fell, taking two comrades with him. Immediately, a gap appeared—small, but real. Widukind leaped into it like a wolf, spear first, his mouth full of curses. He stabbed, roared, almost bit. Arno followed, like an angry bear, tearing shields apart as if they were thin wood.

The Saxons understood. They stopped thundering blindly against the wall. Instead, they threw stones, sticks, even dead bodies at the Franks' legs. Some crawled on all fours into the ranks, stabbing from below, into stomachs and thighs.

Chaos devoured order. The wall shook. Shields burst apart, men stumbled. Hroth shrieked with laughter as he severed a Frank's hamstrings, sending him screaming to the ground.

Then came the breakthrough. A scream, a crack, a storm, and the Franks were no longer a wall, but a retreating herd. Widukind stood in the middle of the gap, bloodied, laughing, wild-eyed. "See?!" he roared. "They're bleeding, they're falling—they're just men! Men like us!"

The Saxons raged, leaping into the breach, tearing the formation apart. The sound was no longer the pounding of an army, but the crashing of individuals fighting for their lives.

The Franks still held out, retreating in an orderly fashion, but the spell was broken. They were no longer an impregnable wall. They were flesh—and flesh could tear.

Widukind was breathing heavily, blood dripping from his forehead. He knew this wasn't a victory. But it was a start. Proof that even order can be broken if you're crazy enough to leap into the heart.

The ground was red, so red that even the grass no longer seemed green. The stench of iron, sweat, and ripped intestines hung heavy in the air. Ravens were already perched in the branches, as if they had sensed that a feast awaited.

The Franks retreated, step by step, still disciplined, even in retreat, like cogs in a wheel that slowed but didn't fall apart. Widukind watched them go, roared a curse after them, but there was no triumph in his chest—only a dull ache.

For his men were lying everywhere. One with a split skull, his brain in the moss. One with his stomach impaled, his intestines spilling out like snakes. Another was still wheezing, trying to catch his breath, blood gushing from his mouth.

Arno knelt beside a fallen soldier, his head bowed. Hroth stood with shaking hands, his knife still red, but his eyes glassy. They had survived—but at what cost?

Widukind trudged through the mud, stepped over corpses, and picked up a jug of mead that had spilled in the battle. He raised it, empty, and growled: "That was our victory. An empty jug and a pile of dead brothers."

No one laughed. No one answered. They knew he was right.

A victory on paper, perhaps. The Franks had retreated. But the price was high, too high for a battle that changed nothing. Tomorrow, new Franks would come, fresh, strong, numerous. And the dead here would still be dead.

Widukind squatted down, dipped his fingers into the blood of a fallen soldier, and rubbed it over his face. "Don't forget," he murmured. "Every drop here cries out for revenge. But don't forget that revenge also consumes us. We must be wiser, tougher, louder."

The men nodded, slowly, silently. They knew: they had survived today. But the price of blood would remain in their bones for a long time to come.

And as the ravens devoured the first dead, Widukind knew: This was not a victory, but a warning. War eats, and he had only just begun to chew.

As the sun crept over the forest, the ground was still wet with blood. The air hung heavy, as if the sky itself had held its breath. Men gathered their dead, hoisted them onto shoulders, and tied them to branches to carry them home. No singing, no tears. Only gnashing teeth and quiet curses.

The Franks had disappeared, but their trace remained: trampled grass, broken spears, a few dead bodies they hadn't taken with them. Even in defeat, they seemed orderly—while the Saxons seemed like a pack that had barely survived, but was now torn apart.

Widukind stood in the middle of the battlefield, his hands bloody, his eyes red. He sensed that something greater than a minor clash had happened. Today, the line had been drawn. Not on a map, not with chalk—but in blood.

He knew: From now on, there would be no more foreigners marching through the land as if it were their own. From now on, every Frankish footstep on Saxon soil would be a declaration of war. And every Saxon who had still doubted now knew that there was no business to be done with Charles. Only with swords.

"Brothers," Widukind cried, his voice harsh, "look at this. This is the border. Patience ends here, war begins here. Every drop of blood tells us: Either we stand together—or we will fall one by one."

A murmur ran through the ranks. Some raised fists, others nodded silently. The fear was still there, the fatigue, the pain. But now there was also something new: clarity.

It was as if the first battle had torn off their masks. The Franks were no longer myths, no longer stories of the ancients. They were flesh, iron, and fire—and they would return.

Widukind looked west, spat, and muttered: "Then let them come. We now have an order too—our order. The order of defiance."

The men didn't shout. They didn't scream songs. They looked at him, breathing heavily, and in their eyes burned the same spark that blazed in him.

The line had been drawn. And no man, no emperor, no priest would ever be able to make it invisible again.

The Shadows of the Cross

It didn't begin with an army. Not with drums, not with banners, not with blood. It began with a piece of wood.

A morning, as quiet as any other. Fog hung over the fields, the women drove cattle, the men mended shields. Then they came—not many, just a few Franks with a priest in their midst. No sword in their hands, just a stake with two beams nailed to it. They drove it into the middle of the village square as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

The first cross.

People stood around, staring, silent. Some scratched their beards, others spat in the dust. No one really understood. "What is this?" someone murmured. "A sign," said the priest, his voice as soft as oil. "The sign of salvation. The sign of your salvation."

Widukind happened to be in the village. He saw the children curiously running around the cross, the old people restlessly shuffling their feet. Something inside him was seething. This was worse than swords. Swords kill you. But this piece of wood—it ate into people's heads.

He stepped forward, his chin defiant, his voice harsh: "A stake in the ground doesn't make you masters. You stick wood in the ground like a farmer sticks beanstalks. And we're supposed to kneel for that? Ridiculous."

Some men laughed, relieved that one of them opened his mouth. But the priest just smiled, that blissful, disgusting smile. "We don't make ourselves masters. Your God rests here. The true God. He sees you now."

Widukind spat into the dust, right at the man's feet. "Then he'll see that I'm shitting."

The crowd roared. But the laughter was nervous. For the cross stood. And it remained standing, even after the Franks moved on. A piece of a foreign world, right in the village.

Widukind stared at it, long and silently than usual. He knew: You can break a sword. A cross? That will take root if you don't pull it out immediately.

And in his gut burned the certainty: This was the beginning of something that would be worse than any battle.

The Franks knew their craft. They knew that you can't subdue a people with swords alone. So they sent their priests, those men with soft hands and hard tongues.

Soon they were back in the village. No army this time, just the priest, the cross behind him, and a few guards silently clutching their sword hilts. He stood in the dust, raised his arms, and spoke as if he were talking to children.

"You are lost," he began, "lost in darkness. But our Lord loves you. He wants to save you. All you have to do is kneel. All you have to do is take the water that cleanses you."

People listened. Some laughed, but their laughter was faint. Others lowered their gaze, as if afraid to look the man in the face. A few children even nodded, because they understood nothing except:*Someone says he loves us.*

Widukind stood in the background, his arms crossed. He watched as the words seeped into the crowd like poison. No blows, no threats—only promises. "Peace," said the priest. "Eternal life," he said. "Protection from the Emperor," he said. And some began to believe it, not out of conviction, but out of hunger, out of fear, out of weariness.

"Why shouldn't we let ourselves be saved?" whispered a farmer next to Widukind. "Perhaps it's better to dip our heads in the water than to have them severed by a sword."

Then he was boiling inside.*That is exactly their weapon,* he thought. Not the swords, not the banners – the words. Words that fell like nets and slowly tightened.

The priest spread his arms as if to embrace them all. "Kneel down, and you will be free."

Free? Widukind clenched his fists. For him, free meant opening one's mouth, brandishing one's sword, living as one pleases. For the priest, it meant being silent, obeying, and bowing one's head.

And as the dust swirled in the sun, Widukind knew: these sermons were more dangerous than any patrol with swords. For he could fight against swords. Against words, he had to shout.

Widukind could endure a lot—hunger, cold, blood. But he couldn't bear the fact that these men in coats and with hair wreaths treated his people like sheep. And so he did what he did best: He ridiculed them.

At the priest's next sermon, he pushed his way through the crowd. No respect, no hesitation. He stood right next to the cross, so close that the priest took a step back. Then he raised his voice:

“This God you’re talking about—does he really love everyone?”

“Everyone,” answered the priest, too confident to smell the trap.

Widukind grinned crookedly, showing his blood-crusted teeth. "So he loves me too? With my mouth, my spear, my bloodlust?"

“Yes,” said the priest, more hesitant now.

“And does he love Karl too?”

"Naturally."

Widukind laughed loudly, so that even the children giggled. "Then your God is worse than an old sack of mead. He loves everyone, too, as long as he's full."

Laughter erupted, harsh, dirty, but genuine. The priest blushed, the Frankish guards nervously gripped their swords. But the man raised his hand, trying to maintain his dignity. "Your mockery is a sin."

"Sin?" Widukind spat in the dust. "If sin means living loudly, then I want to be the greatest sinner. If your God can't stand that, he's a weak dog."

The men in the circle nodded, some laughed, others pounded their fists against their shields. The priest struggled to maintain his composure. He spoke of forgiveness, of light, of redemption—but his words were now drowned out by the laughter, by Widukind's mockery, which stabbed like a dagger again and again.

Mockery was his weapon, and he used it as mercilessly as the sword. He didn't just belittle the priest—he made him ridiculous. And a ruler must never appear ridiculous.

But Widukind also knew: mockery won't last forever. Today they laughed, yes. But tomorrow some would eavesdrop again, secretly, quietly, out of fear or longing. Laughter dispels fear—but it doesn't erase it.

Still, he won that day. And sometimes one day is enough.

It happened quietly. No sword, no scream, no fire. Just a bucket of water and a few words spoken in a foreign tongue.

The first baptism in the village.

Widukind arrived too late; he heard only the murmuring as he pushed through the crowd. There knelt an old farmer, his hair gray, his hands wrinkled from plowing. The priest poured water over his head, made the sign of the cross, and muttered his formula. And the man stood up again—but not the same.

People whispered uncertainly. Some nodded as if it were nothing special. Others looked at him as if he had just betrayed his own flesh. Widukind fumed.

"What are you doing, you old fool?" he cried. "You're giving your life away like a sack of barley!"

The farmer shrugged, his eyes tired. "I'm old. I want peace. If this water protects me, so be it."

Peace. A word that sounded like poison to Widukind's ears. "Peace doesn't mean kneeling! Peace means standing, even when the sword is at your neck!"

But the farmer turned away, the cross gleaming on his forehead. And at that very moment, Widukind knew: This was more dangerous than any battle.

For swords kill the body. But water killed the will. A baptized man was no longer a warrior, but a tool. He could laugh, he could work, he could drink – but he no longer fought. He no longer belonged to his own people.

“The poison,” murmured Widukind, “the poison is in the water.”

Many still laughed at the priests. They still mocked them. But the first one had already fallen, not in battle, but in spirit. And the first was always the beginning.

Widukind swore to himself: As long as he breathed, he wouldn't let a drop of that water spill over him. He would rather drown in his own blood.

The baptism was the carrot, but the stick came not long after. For the Franks knew: words alone aren't enough. If a smile isn't enough, they simply set fire to the roof.

It began with a village further west. They had refused to leave the cross standing, had cut it down at night, burned it, and laughed at it. As the sun rose, the Franks stood there. No priest with gentle words this time, but riders, swords, and banners.

Widukind heard the stories before he saw the plumes of smoke himself. Men being tied up, women being driven into the huts and then burned with them. Children being pushed into the river for screaming too loudly. And afterwards, when everything had turned to ash, the Franks planted a new cross in the middle of the charred earth.

A sign. A curse. A mockery.

Widukind later stood before the charred square. The air still smelled of meat, the earth was black, the sky gray. Only the cross stood out brightly, fresh, as if it had survived the fire itself.

"That's how they do it," he murmured. "Water for those who bend. Fire for those who stand."

The men beside him spat into the ash, growled, and clenched their fists. One wanted to tear down the cross immediately, but Widukind held him back. "No. Not now. If we do it, they'll come back with a hundred men. We'll tear it down when we're ready."

But he knew the message had been received. A cross meant more than just faith. A cross meant power. Whoever accepted it received grace. Whoever refused it received fire.

And suddenly it became clear: this wasn't just a war for land, but for souls. And the Franks were prepared to buy them with blood.

But Widukind felt his hatred grow stronger. A hatred not only against Charles and his warriors, but against the cross itself. This wood that stood like a silent enemy in the villages, immovable, indestructible, more poisonous than any blade.

He swore: As long as he lived, no cross would remain unattended. If they planted wood, he would cut it down with fire. If they poured water, he would repay them with blood.

It wasn't just Widukind's anger that burned—it was the anger of the entire people. Fire had convinced them more than sermons. For everyone who saw the smoke knew: the Franks didn't want to convert, they wanted to break them.

The men no longer talked about hunting or feuds around the fire. They talked about crosses, about burned huts, about children who had never returned. The old men murmured that the gods had been offended. The young men swore they would never see another cross without splitting it.

Widukind took advantage of this ember. He stood in the villages that were still untouched and mocked loudly: "The Franks bring you peace—the peace of the grave! They bring you love—the love of fire! They bring you salvation—with ropes around your neck!"

The men laughed, but this time the laughter was hard, full of edges. It was no longer boisterous laughter. It was the laughter of men who wanted to taste blood.

And Widukind continued to shout: "They burned our brothers, drowned our children, and mocked our gods. I tell you: No cross shall stand in our land except the one on which we hang the Franks!"

Then the voices howled like wolves scenting blood. They pounded their fists against shields, against wooden tables, against the ground itself, until the earth rumbled.

The anger was there. It was no longer a spark, it was a fire. A fire that could no longer be extinguished with ridicule.

Widukind knew: anger alone isn't enough to defeat the Franks. But anger is a start. And anger makes men do things they would never dare to do sober.

The priests continued to preach, and the cross continued to stand in some villages. But now it was no longer just a symbol of faith—it was a red rag. Every wooden beam driven into the ground was a slap in the face to the Saxons. And every blow made them angrier.

And Widukind, the braggart, the mocker, the drunkard, became the mouthpiece of this rage. His curses against Charles, his mockery of the priests, his contempt for the cross—all of this was now not just laughter. It was war.

The night after the burned village was difficult. No song, no laughter, only the crackling of the fire and the faces of the men staring silently into the embers. Even Widukind, usually always with a saying on his tongue, remained silent for a long time. He drank, he snorted, he chewed on a piece of meat that no longer tasted good.

For he had understood: This was not a war that could be ended with victory. Not with one skirmish, not with one battle, not even with ten. The Franks didn't want land—they wanted souls. They didn't want to defeat the Saxons. They wanted to change them.

And that was worse than death.

"Listen to me," he said finally, his voice rough with smoke and mead. "A sword can kill you. But a cross? It makes you alive and dead at the same time. You live on, but no more than yourself. You are then Karl's man, Karl's dog, Karl's property. And that, brothers, is worse than if he burns us all down."

The men nodded, heavily and gloomily. One growled: "Then this isn't a war for villages." "No," said Widukind. "It's a war for us. For who we are. For our gods, our blood, our damned right to curse freely."

He saw the faces in the firelight. Men who had previously thought only of cattle, fields, and families. Now he saw something else in them: the beginning of a people who understood that it was no longer just about possessions—but about being or not being.

"The cross is not just wood," he continued. "It is a weapon. Sharper than any sword. And if we don't break it, it will break us. Do you understand?"

A muffled murmur, then a howl, a roar that thundered through the forest. They pounded their fists, spat into the fire, and swore loudly that no cross in Saxony would stand unpunished.

Widukind smiled crookedly. Not out of joy, but out of defiance. He knew: Now the war was final. No longer a series of feuds, no longer a resistance to taxes or patrols. But a war of the gods, a war of souls.

And this war would not end until one of them was gone – the Cross or the Saxons.

Alliances with the Saxon tribes

The fires burned deeper into the villages, and with each day a new cross stood somewhere in the ground. Some were immediately felled, others remained standing like silent threats. The Saxons fought, but each tribe fought for itself—as always. And that was precisely their curse.

Widukind had known this for a long time. He had seen enough blood to understand: A village can burn and live on the next day. But a people that remains divided dies slowly. Feuds had made them weak, pride had torn them apart. Each chieftain believed he was his own ruler—until Charles came and rounded them up like cattle.

So one evening, Widukind stood on a hill, the wind in his hair, the glow of the fire in his eyes. Men from several clans had gathered. They wanted to hear why he had called them. Some suspiciously, others curiously, some just to laugh at him later.

He didn't roar immediately. He waited, letting the silence sink in until the murmuring died down. Then he raised his hand as if to grasp the entire country.

"Brothers," he began, "we have long believed that our feuds make us strong. That blood binds us, that each tribe is enough for itself. But look around you! Your brothers are burning. Your children are being baptized like lambs. Your

fields bear crosses instead of grain. And while you still quarrel, Karl laughs and counts your bones."

A murmur went through the crowd. Some nodded, others folded their arms. But Widukind continued, his voice rough but firm:

"One tribe alone is a spark. Charles extinguishes it before it burns. But when we all blaze together—Engers, Westphalians, Eastphalia, North Albingians—then it is a fire that even the emperor cannot extinguish."

The chiefs exchanged glances. They heard the words, but they also saw the man who spoke them—the man who was usually known for mockery now stood before them, serious, with blood in his eyes.

“I tell you,” cried Widukind, “either we are one—or we are nothing.”

And in that moment, something was in the air that was greater than all the old feuds. No oath, no treaty, just a feeling: the call for unity had begun.

Negotiations are worse than battles. A sword either breaks or remains intact. But with words? The knife slides invisibly into your ribs.

The first meetings took place in gloomy halls, amidst smoke and stench, furs, beer, and mead. Each chieftain arrived with his entourage, legs apart, proud, chests full of stories and hands full of suspicion. Everyone wanted to hear what Widukind had to say—and everyone hoped he could ultimately bring him down.

"Why should we gather under your snare?" growled one, a fat Westphalian with eyes as cold as stones. "We have our own weapons, our own men."

Widukind grinned, that sharp grin that had sparked more wars than any bugle call. "Because your weapons will be useless tomorrow if Karl takes them away from you. And your men will lie in the dirt if they stand alone. Do you want to be chief over ashes?"

Murmurs. Unrest. Some laughed in agreement, others scowled.

Another rose, a North Albingian, wiry as a whip. "And what will you give us, Widukind? Everyone wants something. Whoever unites us must pay. With land, with loot, with blood."

Widukind leaned forward, his eyes burning. "I'll give you the one thing none of you has on your own: a chance that Charles won't make you his dogs tomorrow. Do you want land? Then fight. Do you want loot? Then take it from the Franks. Do you want blood? I swear, it will flow. But you'll never do it alone. Only together."

The men looked at each other. Some murmured, some frowned skeptically. It wasn't a yes, it wasn't a no. But it was a start.

This is how the first negotiations went: no handshake, no contract, just glances, threats, and lies. Widukind spoke, the others listened, some snorted, some grinned. And in the end, they parted, each with the thought:*Maybe. Maybe, if necessary.*

Widukind knew: A seed had been planted. Still small, still brittle, but it would germinate—or it would suffocate them all.

Saxon alliances weren't formed in halls with pen and parchment. They were born in smoke and fire, in feasts that smelled of blood and sweat. Anyone who wanted to win a man had to first quench his thirst—and then his mistrust.

Widukind knew this. He sat in the circle of chiefs, passed the mead around, laughed loudly, and mocked even louder. Laughter was a weapon: it softened men who actually wanted to act tough. But beneath the laughter, there was always a knife. One wrong word, and the hall could end in a brawl that left dead.

This is how the conversations went: One raised a mug, roared a toast, and in the next breath demanded plunder, land, or allegiance. Another swore he was ready to fight—as long as his neighbor marched first, not him. Everyone wanted to make themselves important; no one wanted to take the risk first.

Widukind played the game. He drank with the loudest, taunted the hesitant, promised loot to the greedy, and mocked the timid until they almost reached for their swords in rage. And when one of them became too defiant, he placed his hand on their shoulder and squeezed—hard enough that the other felt how quickly laughter could turn into a grip around their throat.

"We're talking about freedom," Widukind shouted in a hall resounding with voices. "But freedom isn't a word you can drown in your jugs. Freedom means giving blood. Your blood, my blood, and the blood of your men."

Some cheered, some remained silent. But even those who mocked weren't doing so so loudly anymore. For everyone sensed that Widukind wasn't just talking. He meant it. And he was ready to prove tomorrow morning, with sword in hand, what he had sworn last night by the fire.

Thus the first alliances were formed: between mead jugs and knife blades. Fragile, messy, full of threats. But real. Men who had just been snarling at each other now struck each other with bloody fists and called it unity.

And Widukind knew: This was exactly how it had to begin. Not with contracts. But with mead – and knives.

Unity was not a gift. It was expensive. Every chieftain who sat around Widukind's fire demanded his share, as if he were a merchant at a market. They didn't just want a fight, they wanted payment—in land, in booty, in power.

One spoke of pastures that would belong to him after the war. Another demanded that his son be accepted into Widukind's retinue. A third wanted his tribe to be the first to plunder once the Franks were defeated. And no one spoke of sacrifice—only of gain.

Widukind listened to everything. His mouth was grinning, but his thoughts were dark. He knew he was promising things he might never be able to keep. But if he didn't promise anything, they would turn away—and then there would be no unity at all.

"You want land?" he once shouted into the middle of the feast, his eyes flashing. "Then take it with me! You want loot? Then take it from the Franks' pockets! You want power? Then first show that you deserve it!"

Some cheered, some grumbled. But in the end, they nodded. They had heard what they wanted to hear.

But Widukind felt the shackles. Every handshake was a promissory note. Every oath around the fire was a stone in his backpack. He accumulated debts, not in gold, but in promises he could never fulfill.

That was the price of unity: It was not a pure alliance, not a heroic decision. It was a dirty bargain, fought between men who cared more about their honor and their cattle than about the people.

But Widukind swallowed it. He knew he had to lie to preserve the truth. And the truth was: without unity, they would all burn.

So he built his net. With words, with promises, with half-lies. A net that held—but the tighter it became, the more he knew that in the end, he himself would be caught in it.

Not every chieftain could be bought. Some were more stubborn than rocks, others more slippery than snakes. And some had long since made their decision in secret: they would rather kneel under Karl than stand beside Widukind.

There were some who spoke openly. "Karl is strong, Widukind," said an Eastphalian, an old dog with more scars than fingers. "Whoever submits to him lives. Whoever resists him dies. So why die?"

Widukind laughed at him so loudly that even the fires crackled. "Then die on your knees, you old fool. But don't be surprised if your children don't even know how to stand upright anymore."

Others weren't so honest. They drank the mead, laughed loudly, clapped hands—and rode secretly to the Franks to tell them of Widukind's plans. Rumors flew like crows in the wind. Sometimes it was said that a chieftain had already paid tribute to Charlemagne. Sometimes that someone had sold his own village to the enemy so that his clan would be spared.

Widukind sensed the betrayal in the air. He smelled it, like one smells blood before it's shed. But he couldn't always prove it. Traitors often sat around the fire, clinking cups, shouting "Freedom!" louder than anyone else—and secretly counting the names they would pass on.

The Saxons were a people full of pride, but also full of greed. Some chieftains thought not of freedom, but only of saving their own skins. For Widukind, this was the toughest battle: not against Charlemagne's soldiers, but against the weakness in his own ranks.

"It's easy to kill a Frank," he once murmured to Arno and Hroth. "But how do you kill a man who smiles in your face and simultaneously stabs you in the back?"

They didn't know. And the truth was: there was no answer. Betrayal was like poison—invisible until it was too late.

But the more resistance he encountered, the more betrayal he sensed, the harder his will became. For now he knew that he had to defeat not only Charles, but also the cowardice that was embedded in his own bones.

And that made him more dangerous.

Despite all the arguments, despite the mockery, defiance, and betrayal, something slowly emerged that had never existed before. Not a document, not a law, not a Reichstag. But a bond.

It wasn't a clean bond. It consisted of mead stains, drops of blood, false promises, and hard looks that said:*I hate you, but I hate Karl even more.*And that was exactly enough.

In the halls of the Westphalians, in the camps of the Eastphalia, among the North Albingians on the coast, and among the Engers in the heart of the country—everywhere the same name appeared: Widukind. Sometimes as an insult, sometimes as a symbol of hope. But everyone spoke it. And that alone was a victory.

Alliances weren't sealed with seals, but with fists. Two men would beat each other until both bled—and then they would drink together. That was the Saxon law: Only those who could beat you could fight alongside you. And Widukind hit hard.

One after another, they joined. Some voluntarily, some reluctantly. Some because they believed in freedom, others because they saw that Karl wouldn't leave room for them. In the end, it didn't matter why they came. What mattered was that they came.

And Widukind stood in the middle of it all, his mouth full of wisecracks, his heart full of defiance. He felt that the net was holding—still loose, still fragile, but strong enough to withstand the first blows.

"We are not friends," he once said openly, "and we never will be. But we are brothers in hatred. And brothers in hatred are bound more tightly than brothers in blood."

The men laughed. Harshly, angrily, in agreement. And for the first time, the laughter wasn't laughter at Widukind, but laughter with him.

The bond was tied. Not pretty, not clean, not secure. But real. And real was enough when the storm came.

There was a moment when Widukind realized that it was no longer just about him as a man. He was no longer just the mocker, the braggart, the bully who made fun of Karl and humiliated priests in front of everyone. He had become

an image. A name that walked around the fire in the villages, even before he himself appeared there.

When he entered a hall, men who had cursed him only yesterday stood up. When he spoke, they listened—not always in agreement, but silently because his words carried weight. Even those who distrusted him knew: This dog has more bite than all the others combined.

One of the elders, a chieftain with a voice like creaking wood, told him straight to his face: "You are not just Widukind. You are the mouth of the Saxons."

He meant it as a taunt, but Widukind just grinned. Because he knew: that was precisely his strength. His tongue cut deeper than swords. His sayings made men brave. His laughter in the face of the Franks made them less overpowering.

And so, whether he wanted to or not, he became a symbol. A rebel who fought not just for himself, but for everyone. A man who laughed louder, swore harder, and hated more fiercely than anyone else could.

It was a burden, yes. But it was also a shield. Because whoever said Widukind meant freedom. Whoever said Widukind meant defiance. And whoever said Widukind meant:*We do not kneel.*

By the end of the tenth chapter, he was no longer a mere warrior, but a name that burned. A symbol even more powerful than the crosses the Franks planted.

And the symbol would soon no longer just walk through halls and villages – but would stand on the battlefield, with sword and mockery at the same time.

The Franks strike back

It was a messenger who brought doom. No hero, no warrior—just a ragged scout with blood in his beard and dust in his lungs. He came panting into the camp, nearly falling from his horse, and before he even got a sip of mead, he stammered the words that struck everyone like a club:

“Karl… collects… everything.”

The men fell silent. Even the dogs didn't bark. Widukind stepped forward, grabbed the messenger by the collar, and pulled him up until the man's eyes almost popped out of his head. "Speak, dog! What do you mean?*everything*?"

The messenger wheezed, coughed blood, and replied: "Not just his Frankish warriors. He's summoned vassals from all directions. Bavarians, Swabians, Franks, even mercenaries from across the Rhine. It's not an army—it's a damned flood."

A murmur went through the ranks. Some men spat, others instinctively grabbed the hilts of their swords, as if they could cut through their fear.

But Widukind stood still. His jaw clenched, his eyes burned. He had known it, he had always said it: every Saxon victory, however small, would arouse Charlemagne's anger. And Charlemagne wasn't one to turn a blind eye. Charlemagne was one to strike back until only ashes remained.

“How many?” asked Arno, his voice deep, as if he were uttering a curse.

The messenger shook his head, too weak to count. "Tens of thousands. More than I have eyes to see. A wall. An army marching as if it were endless."

The silence that followed was heavy. Everyone in the circle knew: a single village, a single tribe, even all the Saxons together—they weren't made for such numbers.

Widukind laughed. Hard, cold, without joy. "Good. Let him come with his whole damn world. We'll see if they can all scream when they're burning."

But deep down, he knew: The storm was coming. And this time it was big enough to swallow everything.

It came faster than they had expected. No endless waiting, no time to bind the logs even more tightly together. The Franks marched like a storm, and the first thunder struck a small village, barely larger than a few huts and a cattle shed.

They came at dawn. No warning, no messenger. Just the pounding of hooves, the clang of iron, and then the shout of orders. The men leaped from their huts, barefoot, half asleep, and saw the army break through the fog like a black wall.

The Franks didn't even have to struggle. They threw torches into the roofs, struck down men who couldn't even grasp their spears, and drove women and

children into the village square. The straw immediately caught fire, flames licked high, and smoke rose.

Widukind arrived far too late with a handful of men. From the edge of the forest, he saw the village burning. He heard the screams, the shrieks of children, the roars of the Franks, the cracking of the beams breaking in the fire. His men wanted to rush forward, blind, full of rage. But Widukind held them back. "No. Not now. We'll die like dogs if we run head-on into them."

And so they stood in the shade of the trees while the village crumbled to ash. They saw the Franks slaughter the men who resisted too late. They saw women dragged by their hair. They saw children pushed into the smoke to suffocate before they reached adulthood.

Then, when the fire had consumed everything, the Franks planted a cross in the center of the burned-out square. Tall, bright, untouched in contrast to the black earth. A sign: This wasn't just a victory, it was a brand.

Widukind's fists trembled. He wanted to scream, to run, to die with his sword in the enemy's belly. But he bit his lip so hard that blood flowed. "Look at it," he growled to his men. "Look closely. This is their message: Where we are, only their cross reigns."

His men were silent. Some wept quietly, with anger in their eyes. Others pounded their fists against the tree bark until blood flowed.

But Widukind swore to himself at that moment: This fire, this cross, this shame – they would not go unanswered.

Fire alone wasn't enough for the Franks. They didn't just want to see villages burn—they wanted to break souls. And for that, they had their new tool: water.

Widukind first heard about it as a bad joke. "They take men, strong warriors, tie them up, and dip them in a trough like piglets in mud?" One of his men laughed bitterly. But no one laughed for long, because the truth was worse.

He saw it himself a few days later, in a village occupied by the Franks. In the square stood a tub large enough for a man. The Saxons were dragged forward, one by one. Their hands bound, their mouths full of curses.

A priest stood beside him, with that blissful smile that Widukind would have loved to crush with his fist. He murmured his words, raised the cross, and then

the Franks pushed the prisoner's head into the water. The man thrashed, wheezed, and kicked around—and everyone had to watch.

Some resurfaced, coughing and panting, and the priests declared them "clean." Others stayed underwater too long, drowned, and were dragged aside like garbage.

Widukind stood in the shade of the huts, his eyes filled with embers. He saw a young warrior from Engern being pushed into the trough. The boy yelled, "I won't kneel!" before his head was forced under water. When they pulled him up, he coughed up blood and water. The priest made the sign of the cross over him, and everyone saw: something in his eyes was broken.

That was worse than death. Because death was swift, honest, and final. But this? This was humiliation, raw and cold. A man who had raised sword and shield yesterday now stood there like a beaten dog, "saved" by a god he had never invoked.

Widukind's fists trembled. He wanted to rush in, drown the priests in the water, fill the vat with blood. But he held back. "Not yet," he whispered. "Not yet. But they shall pay for this—double."

And as he walked, he knew: these forced baptisms would drive more Saxons into rebellion than any fire ever could. For no warrior forgets what it feels like to be forced to kneel.

He had known rage before—rage in feuds, rage at betrayal, rage at the cross in the village. But what he felt after the forced baptisms was different. There was no longer heat, no blazing fire. It was cold. Ice cold, deadly, like a knife waiting quietly.

Widukind saw the faces of the baptized. Men who had just been brothers now stood there like broken oxen. They were alive, yes—but empty. Their eyes had lost their defiance. No more laughter, no more cursing, no more roaring. They were alive, but dead inside.

That was worse than losing them in battle. The dead could be mourned. Broken ones were a disgrace.

That night, after the performance in the village square, Widukind sat by the fire. His men muttered, cursed, some wept with rage. But he remained silent for a long time before finally speaking:

"They want to show us that they don't just have our flesh. They want our heart. Our defiance. Our freedom. They want us to live—but as dogs."

He reached into the embers, grabbed a burning piece of wood, and held it up until the smoke filled his eyes. "Listen to me: I swear, for every one they push into the water, we will throw ten of them into the fire. For every one they make kneel, we will hang one franc. For every cross they plant, we will tear down two. I swear this on my blood."

His voice was quiet, but it cut like steel. And the men sitting around him raised their fists, roared, and pounded the earth until the ground shook.

Widukind's anger wasn't uncontrolled fire. It was a weapon. And from that day on, it became sharper, harder, deadlier.

Because he knew: You can't win a battle with anger alone. But with anger as a blade, sharpened and targeted, you can cut through even the iron flesh of an emperor.

Anger alone does not make a nation steadfast. Anger burns hotly, but it also quickly consumes everything. And that was precisely what was beginning to happen: the Saxons were wavering.

News of burned villages and forced baptisms spread like smoke in the wind. Some tribes clenched their fists, vowing they would rather die than ever kiss a cross. But others… others began to tremble.

In the halls of the Eastphalians, men were heard murmuring: "Charles is too strong. We cannot stand against him." An old chieftain said openly: "Perhaps it is wiser to dip one's head in the water than to let it be severed by the sword."

Widukind was furious when he heard about it. He shouted at the meetings, banged his fists on tables, and cried: "Do you want to be dogs? Do you want to live on all fours so Karl can throw you bread?" Some men cheered, but others remained silent. Fear was there, and fear has sharper teeth than courage.

Even worse, some chieftains who had previously extended their hand to him disappeared. Rumors circulated that they were secretly meeting with Frankish envoys, that they were taking silver, that they were tolerating crosses in their villages. Traitors—not out of malice, but out of fear.

And so the unity that Widukind had painstakingly forged began to crumble again. Every new fire, every new baptism, weakened the network. Men asked themselves: Are we truly fighting for freedom—or just for Widukind's defiance?

Widukind felt it like a knife in his ribs. It wasn't just Charlemagne's army that threatened him, but the wavering within his own ranks. He could fight the Franks, yes—but how do you fight the doubts in a brother's mind?

In quiet moments, he chewed on this question. Then he spat into the fire and growled: "We have no choice. Either we hold on—or we perish, piece by piece, until only crosses remain."

And he swore to himself: He would tighten the bond again, with mockery, with blood, with fear if necessary. For he knew: The wavering was worse than any Frankish blade.

Widukind knew: If he wanted to keep the Saxons in line, he needed blood. Not his own, not that of his people—Frankish blood. A sign that Charlemagne was not invulnerable. A slap in the face of the emperor, who spoke louder than a hundred speeches.

So he gathered a troop. Not a large army, just a pack: 30 men, wild, hungry, more rage than armor. No banners, no trumpets—just axes, spears, bows, and the dark laughter of men who had nothing left to lose.

They were lurking at the edge of the forest, where a Frankish supply party was marching. Wagon loaded with grain, barrels, and weapons—guarded by perhaps fifty soldiers. Orderly, heavily armored, arrogant. Just right.

Widukind cornered them. A narrow path, densely treed, a stream beside it. Then he gave the signal.

The Saxons fell like wolves on sheep. Arrows hissed, axes crashed, screams shattered the Frankish order. Men fell, horses neighed, wagons tipped into the stream. Chaos—and chaos was Widukind's realm.

He himself leaped from a rock into the middle of the ranks, spear first. A Frankish officer raised his sword—too late. Widukind rammed the blade into his neck, roaring as blood spurted: "This is what your peace looks like!"

The battle didn't last long. Fifty Franks against thirty Saxons—in an open field, the Franks would have won. But here, in the forest, in the chaos, they

crumbled. In the end, their wagons burned, their supplies went up in flames, and the few survivors fled screaming.

The Saxons howled in triumph. They danced in blood, bumped fists, and roared the names of their gods. For a moment, fear was forgotten, anger was fed, and unity was strengthened.

But Widukind stood still, his face bloody, his eyes dark. He knew what this meant: Karl would hear of it. And Karl would respond—not with a troop, not with fifty men, but with an army that would darken the sky.

But for now, for this night, they had won. And that was enough to keep their courage alive.

The fire from the captured wagons was still burning as the men camped. They drank, they cheered, they swore that Karl would tremble if he heard of this blow. But Widukind remained silent. He saw the corpses floating in the stream, saw the sparks rising into the sky—and he knew this was not a victory, but merely a scratching at the lion's fur.

"We showed them they bleed," one said proudly. Widukind nodded slowly. "Yes. But they showed us they can fight back. And when Karl fights back, it won't be with fifty men and a few wagons. He'll come with everything."

The men fell silent. They knew it, even if they didn't want to hear it. Every spark they ignited brought back a fire—a fire that consumed entire countries.

Widukind sat down, stared into the fire, took a sip, and let the embers dance in his eyes. "This is our war," he murmured. "Every victory is only a shout. And their answer will be thunder. But we would rather die screaming than kneel."

Arno growled in agreement, Hroth spat into the fire. The men pounded their fists into the ground, quietly this time, almost solemnly. It wasn't a song of triumph, but an oath hanging in the ashes.

The conclusion was clear: They could win, yes. But never definitively. Every victory would provoke a counterattack, harder, bigger, more merciless. And yet – that was precisely their strength. For as long as they were willing to get up again and again, to scream again and again, Karl would never completely break them.

Widukind looked westward, where the darkness lay, and murmured, "Come on, Karl. We have nothing but hate—and hate never dies."

The men looked at him, and in that moment they knew: The war would be endless. But they would fight it. Not because they had hope—but because they could do nothing else.

Betrayal in one's own camp

It didn't begin with a sword thrust, not with a fight, not even with a loud word. It began with a whisper.

A young warrior came to Widukind late at night, his face pale, his eyes like shadows. "Sir," he said quietly, "there are voices..."

"Voices?" Widukind growled. "If I want to hear voices, I drink mead, then they talk right into my head."

The boy swallowed. "Not those voices. Men say... some chieftains have spoken to the Franks. Secretly. They say Charles is offering silver. And... protection."

Widukind stared at him for a long time without saying a word. Then he laughed—harshly, loudly, so that even the dogs in the camp howled. "Silver? Protection? What kind of dogs must they be, who would rather kneel at Karl's table than stand upright in hell!"

But there was no laughing in his gut. Because he knew rumors were like smoke. When you saw him, a fire was already burning somewhere.

The next day, the men carried it on. "I heard the Eastphalians are talking to Frankish envoys." - "No, the Westphalians, they're soft." - "A chieftain from the north has silver in his purse." Everyone had a different story, and yet they all sounded the same.

Widukind listened, mocked, cursed, and spat into the fire. But inside, it gnawed at him. He had seen crosses burning, villages in ashes, brothers drowned in water—and he knew: This is precisely how a people breaks. Not only by the enemy's sword, but by the doubt in their own gut.

A rumor. A whisper. That's all it took to make men suspicious of one another. And suspicion was worse than any sword.

Widukind clenched his fists and murmured: "If one of us has truly sold his heart—then he should know that I will tear it from his chest with my own hands."

Rumors are like smoke: when you see them, you know there's a fire burning somewhere. But Widukind soon realized that the fire wasn't blazing outside—it was smoldering right in the middle of his own circle.

It was most evident around the campfire. In the past, the men had laughed, rudely, loudly, dirty. Every taunt was a blow, every quip a shield against fear. But now… now some sat there in silence. They stared into the fire, drank silently, avoided glances. It wasn't just tiredness. It was the silence of men who knew too much—or wanted to say too little.

Widukind sensed it immediately. He had a sense for faces, for the quiver in the corner of a mouth, for eyes that looked away for too long. And he saw it everywhere. Not all of them, not many—but enough to leave the taste of poison in the air.

He tested them. He hurled taunts around the group, harsher, more biting than usual. About Charlemagne, about the Franks, about the priests with their crosses. Most laughed, roared in agreement. But a few—just a few—didn't bat an eyelid. One even glanced nervously away, as if afraid his words would be carried as far west.

Then Widukind knew: The poison was there. It crept not with swords, not with banners, but in minds. A man who laughed was a brother. A man who remained silent was a hole in the wall.

That night, Widukind wandered through the camp, kicking men who lay snoring in the dirt, only to see them start. He saw fear in their eyes, real fear—not of the Franks, but of someone knowing their secrets.

He grinned coldly. "We are warriors," he murmured, "but we sleep in the straw with snakes."

And he knew: The poison wouldn't disappear on its own. Poison has to be burned out.

Rumors are cheap. But proof costs blood.

It happened during a raid. Widukind and his men had confronted a Frankish patrol in the forest, just as they had practiced hundreds of times. Everything was planned: traps in the undergrowth, spears in the darkness, an ambush as tight as a rope around the neck.

But the Franks didn't come in blind. They came with raised shields, arrows already nocked, as if they had written the plan themselves. Before the first Saxon could draw his bow, Frankish arrows crashed through the trees. Two men fell, one gasping, the other screaming so high that even the ravens flew away.

It wasn't a coincidence. That wasn't a damn coincidence.

Widukind fought his way through, as always, yelling, laughing, spitting. He cut down one Frank, crushed another's face, but the matter was clear: They had been waiting. They were prepared. Someone had told them where and when.

When they finally retreated, half lost, their eyes filled with anger, Widukind stood panting in the shade of the trees. Blood ran down his hands, his own and others'. He saw the dead, saw the bodies in the moss—and he knew: One of us had spoken.

He roared into the darkness, his voice hoarse: "One of you sold our brothers! One of you used your tongue like a dagger!"

The men looked at each other, some offended, some fearful, some with that flickering look that spoke louder than words. Widukind grinned bitterly, a grin without joy.

"Good," he growled, "then we know. There's a dog in the pack. And dogs that eat at Karl's table, we kill like rabid beasts."

It was the first proof. No more rumors, no more whispers. The Franks had been prepared. This meant treason. The clear, naked truth, stinking like an open intestine.

And Widukind knew: From now on, no fire, no cup, no oaths were safe. The war wasn't just coming from the west. He sat in a circle with them.

Distrust burns faster than fire. And suddenly, the camp smelled of burnt trust everywhere.

Widukind didn't sit still. He trampled through the ranks like a vicious dog, ripping open tents, kicking men awake, staring into their eyes as if he could read the guilt right there. "Who did it?" he roared, his voice so harsh that even the horses pawed nervously. "Which of you opened his mouth for silver?"

No one spoke. Of course not. Traitors don't like to talk when the knife is already flashing. But silence was also a confession—at least in Widukind's eyes.

So he took tougher action. He pulled men out of the circle by their collars, stood them in front of everyone, and held his sword to their throats. "Was it you? Was it you? One more wrong word, and your entrails will hang like lamps over the fire."

One swore by the gods, another howled like a beaten dog, a third spat in his face – and yet Widukind was still not safe.

He had Arno and Hroth interrogate the weakest. Arno, the one with the paws that broke bones like twigs. Hroth, the one with his love of knives, which no one could endure for long. Screams echoed through the camp, so high-pitched that even the ravens fell silent. But no clear confession. Only blood, teeth, broken mouths—and the poison still in the air.

Widukind laughed bitterly, without joy, when he heard the wailing. "You see, Arno? They'd rather die than tell the truth. That's how betrayal works. Once they get a whiff of the silver scent, they keep quiet until the blade is in their stomach."

The mistrust grew. Men who had just been brothers suddenly looked at each other as if they were strangers. Anyone could be the dog. Anyone.

And Widukind, who usually always found his words, sensed that mockery wouldn't suffice this time. Betrayal silences even the loudest braggart.

So he swore to himself: If he found the dog in the pack, he wouldn't simply kill it. He would tear it apart in front of everyone, until no one dared even smell Karl's silver.

It was bound to blow up at some point. You can't let mistrust simmer forever without the pot exploding.

The truth didn't come through a confession, not through a grand spectacle—it came through a damned coincidence. One of the scouts found a few coins in the forest, Roman silver, shiny as fresh ice. No Saxon owned such a thing. Not in such quantity. Only someone who had chatted with Franks.

Widukind summoned the camp. He stood in a circle, the silver in his fist, sparkling in the embers. "Do you see that?" he roared. "That doesn't smell like mead. It smells like betrayal."

The men murmured, staring at each other, until one of them turned pale. A chief, not even the weakest, but one who had always talked big. Widukind approached him, slowly, like a wolf staring at a lamb.

"This is yours, isn't it?" he asked quietly, almost kindly. But there was a knife-like coldness in his voice.

The man sweated, stammered, and shouted that he was innocent. But the coins suited him like blood suited a blade. And when Widukind punched him in the face, not only did his nose break, but also the last silence.

"Yes," he wheezed, "I took it. Silver. Protection. They promised to spare my village."

A murmur went through the crowd. Men spat, others cursed. Betrayal—not out of greed, but out of fear. But that didn't make it better. It made it worse.

Widukind grabbed the man by the collar and threw him to the ground. "You sold us for a few shining stones. You let brothers die while you thought you were buying peace. But you know what?" He spat in his face. "There is no peace. Only blood. And yours will be next."

The circle raged, men screamed for revenge, stamped, and hammered. The traitor whimpered, but it didn't help him anymore.

The revelation was there. The poison had a face. And Widukind knew: Now the verdict had to be passed – brutal, unequivocal, so that no one would ever dare to bring Karl's silver home again.

Betrayal cannot be erased with words. It calls for blood.

Widukind stood over the man who lay whimpering in the dirt. A chief, one who had called himself brothers, who had laughed around the fire. Now he was just a wretched heap with trembling hands and silver in his belly.

"Karl spared your village?" Widukind growled. "Perhaps. But he didn't spare us. For every piece of silver your fingers touched, one of our men died. Tell me, how is that going to be paid for?"

The man begged, promised to improve, and swore he would never speak again. But Widukind laughed coldly. "A man who sells his mouth once will sell it again. It's like a whore—pay once, and you're in business forever."

He reached for the axe. Not solemnly, not honorably. Brutally. He held it high for all to see. "This is how traitors pay," he cried, "with blood. So that no one forgets the value of silver."

Two men grabbed the traitor and held him tight. He screamed, kicked, and cried for mercy. But there was no mercy in the eyes of the others. Only hatred.

The blow fell. Hard, brutal, without hesitation. Blood spurted, the scream died away, the head rolled into the dust.

For a moment, it was silent. Only the crackling of the fire, only the dripping of blood. Then the men howled. A roar, wild, cruel, that cut through the night like thunder.

Widukind stepped on his head, spat again, and said: “This is how everyone ends up who trusts Karl more than his brothers.”

It wasn't a solemn verdict. It wasn't a court of law. It was an example. And it worked. The men felt the chill in their bones, the clarity in their minds. Betrayal meant death. Instant, brutal, final.

And Widukind knew: He had to be tougher than Karl, tougher than any doubt. Because that was the only way he could keep the pack together.

The traitor's blood had long since seeped into the earth, but the scar remained. A scar that was invisible, but that burned on every face.

The men acted as if everything was fine. They laughed louder, drank deeper, and roared more wildly. But something was gnawing behind their teeth. Everyone wondered:*Who's next? Who's carrying silver in their purse again? Who will sell my skin for their own roof tomorrow?*

Mistrust is worse than any sword. It makes men lonely, even when they sit shoulder to shoulder. It makes every fire colder, every laughter hollower. Widukind sensed it acutely.

He knew he had acted correctly. Treason could only be atoned for with blood. But he also knew the wound was open. It wouldn't heal quickly. Some might have thought:*Today it was him. Tomorrow it could be me.*

Widukind sat alone at the edge of the camp, the night cold, the stars still. He stared into the embers and murmured: "Karl doesn't just beat us with armies.

He beats us with fear. With mistrust. He sows doubt, and we do the dirty work ourselves."

He took a branch and thrust it into the embers until it burned. Then he held it aloft, his face in the red glow. "But listen, gods," he whispered, "I swear: He may divide us, he may set us against each other, but I will strike him with the same weapon. I will turn his silver to fire."

The open wound burned. It wouldn't heal for a long time. But sometimes, Widukind thought, a wound is also a memory. And memories can make you harder.

The next morning, he stood in the circle again, grinning, mocking, spitting into the fire. The men laughed and roared as if nothing had happened. But deep in their eyes, they knew: treason was no longer a rumor. Treason was blood.

And the poison remained.

The army from the West

At first, it was just a sound. Deep, dull, like thunder that wouldn't stop. At first, the men thought a storm was brewing. But the sky was clear, not a cloud in sight. And yet the earth trembled beneath their feet.

Scouts returned, their faces white as ash. "It's coming," they said, more stammering than speaking. "An army. Large... too large."

Widukind growled. "There's no such thing as big. Anything with legs can be knocked down." But when he listened for himself, he heard it: a steady rumble that didn't stop, no matter how long they waited. Not a storm, not a river, not a cattle drive. It was the tread of thousands of boots, the thump of a hundred wagon wheels, the stampede of horses marching in step.

The villages sensed it even before they saw it. Dogs howled, cattle ran loose, children cried for no reason. Women looked west and made signs against evil, as if gods could stop this noise.

Widukind stood at the edge of the forest, arms folded, listening. "That, brothers," he said, "isn't a thunderstorm. That's Karl, the sky playing."

He laughed harshly, without joy, and spat into the dust. But the men beside him just looked down, knowing that a storm would pass. But this rumbling was coming closer. Closer and closer.

And Widukind thought:*This is what an emperor sounds like when he marches.*

They saw it before they could believe it.

Widukind and his scouts climbed a hill, the trees dense, the sky wide. And there, in the valley below, something moved that no longer looked like a human, but like an animal with a thousand legs.

Rows upon rows. Shields that shone like water, spears that towered like a forest, banners with crosses that cracked in the wind like whips. Men marched, endlessly, in orderly lines, the clang of iron in a rhythm that made the heart stutter.

"Holy gods," muttered Hroth, never at a loss for a curse. "This never ends."

And he was right. It didn't stop. Behind the rows came wagons, entire columns, with barrels, with grain, with metal, with spare weapons. Behind them came horsemen, heavily armored, their horses like bulls, their hooves like thunder. Behind them, men again, priests, even artisans, marching as if they too had a sword in their hands.

Widukind stood still, his eyes narrowed, his teeth clenched. He made a joke because he had to: "Look, they're bringing their own graves with them. Saves us the work." Some laughed, harshly, briefly, but the laughter didn't last long.

For the army was too large to be belittled with jokes. It was a stream, a flood, a mass that crushed everything in its path.

Arno growled. "How do you fight something like that?"

Widukind didn't answer immediately. He stared until his eyes burned, then murmured, "Not head-on. Not like them. You bite into their flesh when they can't see. Like wolves. Otherwise we'll be dead before we can even scream."

But deep down he knew: Even wolves drown when the tide comes in.

The army wasn't just mass, not just men with spears. It was order. An order so heavy that it lay on the land like a stone crushing everything.

Widukind saw it as he watched the lines for a while. Not just warriors—entire detachments, like cogs in a machine. There were priests waving crosses as if they were the banners of an army. There were blacksmiths already setting up anvils behind the lines to ensure no sword remained blunt. There were heavily laden wagons rolling not with loot, but with supplies—enough to feed an army for months through foreign lands.

And then those damned machines. Siege engines, wooden towers, catapults. Huge things pulled by oxen. The Saxons had never seen such tools, built not for the field, but for killing.

“This is not an army,” murmured one of Widukind’s men, “this is an empire on legs.”

Widukind growled, his fist gripping the spear so tightly his knuckles turned white. "An empire only shits blood if you cut it open." But he knew it wasn't that simple.

For above all stood the emperor himself. Not that Widukind saw him at that moment—Charlemagne rode further back, protected, surrounded by his bodyguard. But the mere certainty that he was there made the army heavier. It wasn't just a parade of warriors. It was the fist of an emperor determined to break a people.

The emperor's weight was more than steel and horses. It was the will to destroy everything that didn't kneel.

Widukind looked at the mass and felt it in his bones: Here stood not just an army. Here stood a damned thought, marching, stamping, endlessly—and it wanted to crush the Saxons until nothing remained but dust.

News of the army spread through the villages faster than any fire. Even before Charles's men crossed the first river, the Saxons had already heard of it—and their faces told the story.

Some men fell silent. Too silent. Their hands trembled as they held their axes, their eyes stared into the void. "Tens of thousands," they murmured, "whole forests of spears, mountains of iron..." Their voices sounded as if they were already half dead.

Others raged, screamed, and spat into the ground. "Let them come!" one yelled, "we'll tear the crosses from their hands and smash them into their skulls!" But even in his eyes, fear flickered.

Women wept secretly as they clutched their children to their breasts. Old men cursed, shook their heads, muttered that the gods were angry with the Saxons. And the boys—the boys grinned harshly, drew daggers, and acted as if they could single-handedly dismantle an army. But Widukind knew that behind the grin lurked sheer panic.

The tribes split. Some cried loudly for battle, others whispered of flight, and still others of negotiations. And these whispers gnawed worse than the thunder of Frankish boots.

Widukind stood in a hall, voices surging like a storm. One shouted: "We must yield, or we'll all die!" Another: "To yield means to be dead before you fall!" Fists flew, men grabbed knives, unity was as fragile as glass.

Widukind climbed onto the table and roared over the chaos: "You're behaving like dogs barking while the wolf is already in the yard! Stop your barking. We can't flee, we can't kneel. There's only one thing: We must fight like wolves. Not against the army, but against its weaknesses. Otherwise, we'll all be history tomorrow."

The hall fell silent. Unconvinced, ununited—but still. They knew: The wolf had spoken.

Fear clung to their faces like dirt that wouldn't come off. Men stared at the ground, chewing their beards, looking like they were half dead even before the first Frankish spear had been fired. Widukind knew: You can't wage war like that. So he did what he always did when the knife was at his throat—he mocked until the men bared their teeth again.

He stood in the middle of the circle, slammed his fist on a table so that the cup tipped over, and shouted: "You're complaining because Charles is sending an army? What did you think—that he'd come alone, with a stick? That he'd ring the bell, ask politely, and then leave again when you said no?"

A few laughed, rough, uncertain.

Widukind walked on, his eyes wild, his voice like thunder. "Yes, he's bringing tens of thousands of men. Yes, he's bringing priests, wagons, banners, everything. But you know what? Every one of them shits in the forest in the morning. Every one of them screams when their throats are slit. They act big, but they're just men. And men bleed. I saw it."

Now more people were laughing. Harsh, dark laughter.

"And if they think they're a mountain," Widukind continued, "then let us be the damned landslide! If they think they're the storm, then we're the fire that burns brighter in the storm. Karl can come—we'll show him that we enjoy dying more than he'll ever enjoy living."

The hall howled. Fists pounded against shields, men screamed, women cheered along. Fear was still there, yes, but it was drowned out—by defiance, by laughter, by anger.

Widukind grinned, that evil grin that gave more courage than any prayer. Mockery was his weapon, sharper than a sword. And today he had unsheathed it again, right into the heart of fear.

Mockery could break fear, but mockery alone didn't build shields. So the Saxons had to arm themselves—as best they could.

Widukind sent messengers, swift runners through forests, across rivers, to every tribe that hadn't yet given in. "Come with weapons, come with everything you have! Whoever hesitates is already dead!" These were the words that flashed through the land like lightning.

In the villages, men began to make weapons out of everything. Plowshares became spears, axes from the stables became battle axes, old chains became clubs. Women hammered straps onto shields, children collected stones for slings. It wasn't an army like the Franks had—it was a pack, raw, wild, patched together.

Widukind called the chieftains. He drew lines on the ground, explaining where they had to use the terrain. "Not in the fields! There they'll eat us like bread! We'll attack in the forest, in the swamp, along rivers, wherever their numbers stagnate." He spoke of traps, of ambushes, of fire from behind.

Some grumbled. "This isn't an honorable fight." Widukind laughed at them. "Honor? Honor is for men who are already dead. We don't fight to die beautifully—we fight so we don't have to kneel."

He had scouts check the paths and had trees felled to block the roads. He ordered supplies to be hidden so that the Franks would find nothing but ash in the country. "If they want to eat, let them chew earth," he growled.

The preparation was chaotic, uneven, and full of stumbling blocks. But it was real. Everyone knew the storm was coming, and they had only their own fists, their own gods, their own cries.

Widukind stood among the men preparing their weapons and sensed it: They weren't an army. But they were wolves. And wolves fight even when the forest is burning.

The Saxons had prepared as best they could. Wooden shields, blunt spears, dented helmets—compared to Frankenstahl, everything looked like child's play. And yet they stood there, their teeth bared, their eyes full of defiance.

But as night fell, Widukind felt that courage alone was not enough. He heard the rumble in the distance, deeper than thunder, steady as a heartbeat that did not belong to their land. Karl marched, and with him marched something greater than men. It was like destiny, trudging through forests and rivers.

The men laughed around the fire, harshly and artificially. They told stories, boasted, and shouted that they would rather die than kneel. But Widukind saw the hands trembling when the jugs were set down. He saw the eyes staring into the fire for too long. Everyone knew what was coming—and no one could stop it.

He went out, alone, up the hill. From there he looked west. No light, only darkness. But in the darkness there was dust, a shimmer of banners, the dull rumble of chariots. The emperor was there.

Widukind spat into the ground and murmured softly: "Then come, you bastard. Bring your army, bring your cross, bring your gods. We are here. And when we go down, we'll make it so loud that even the gods in heaven will hear it."

The premonition of doom hung heavy over the land. But that was precisely where the strength lay. For those who know that death is at their door have nothing left to lose.

And Widukind knew: tomorrow the country would no longer be the same.

Arson and blood sacrifice

It didn't begin with a fight. No horn, no shield against shield, no heroism. It began with fire.

Charlemagne's army advanced across the fields like a wall of iron, and wherever they went, nothing living remained. A small village was the first

victim—a few wooden huts, a few fields, pigs in the filth. Nothing of any significance to an emperor. And that's precisely why he chose it.

The riders stormed in, torches in hand, and the first roofs were ablaze before the inhabitants had even crawled out of their huts. Old men were struck down, still in their dressing gowns, women screamed, children stumbled barefoot through the mud, and above all rose the roar of the Franks, as if the burning itself were a religious act.

The flames quickly devoured the dry wood. Sparks shot into the sky, and smoke settled heavily over the fields. And in the midst of this inferno, one could see the priests blessing the torches as if they were sacred weapons. They stood there with raised crosses, while behind them men perished like cattle at the slaughter.

Widukind arrived too late with his scouts. From the hill, he saw the village burning, saw the huts collapse like candles, saw a small child stumble at the edge of the square, trampled by a rider. His heart pounded, his fists trembled. But he couldn't intervene. Not against this mass. Not against Karl's rage.

"Look at it," he growled, the smoke burning his eyes. "This is what the Kingdom of God looks like. A kingdom of ashes."

His men were silent. Some bit their lips until they bled, others wept, silently, their faces hard, their hands on their weapons. Everyone knew: If they rushed down, they wouldn't just die—they would die uselessly.

And so they had nothing left to do but watch as the first village went up in flames. It was not a victory, not a battle—just a sign. A sign that Karl burned deep into the land:*Where I come, nothing remains.*

Widukind spat into the ground. "Then he'll see that we're not something that perishes easily."

Fire eats silently, but people die loudly.

When the village burned, the worst thing wasn't the crackling of the beams, nor the howling of the flames—it was the screams. Those damned screams that went right through your bones.

A farmer ran into a horseman with his bare hands because his wife was still in the hut. The sword's blow nearly severed him in half, and he was still screaming

even as his body lay in the dust. His wife emerged burning, her hair a torch, her arms outstretched, and she fell with a scream that lasted longer than the fire.

Children screamed the loudest. Some cried for their mothers, others simply screamed, screaming so shrilly that even the horses shied. The Franks laughed, some grabbed the children and threw them back into the flames. "Better sacrifices for their god," they sneered.

And as the village faded, the priests stood by. Crosses raised, lips murmuring, eyes turned to heaven. They blessed death, blessed the fire, blessed the screams.

Widukind heard them from afar. Every scream was like a dagger in his gut. His men grabbed their weapons, wanting to leave, wanting to run, wanting to die, just to stop those screams. But Widukind held them back, with a clenched fist, with a gaze so cold it hurt.

"Not yet," he growled. "Not yet. We'll tear down more if we wait."

But in his heart, he knew: No victory, no revenge, no triumph would ever erase those screams. They were burned into the night, burned into their skulls.

And that was precisely what made them stronger. For the screams of the living were louder than the thunder of Karl's army. They were a cry for blood. And Widukind swore to himself that he would answer that call.

Widukind wasn't the man who stood by. He was the one who mocked, who screamed, who ran into the fray, even if it cost him his life. But this time he had to watch a village burn—and he could do nothing.

From the hill, he gritted his teeth so hard his jaw cracked. Below him, women ran burning from their huts, children were crushed under horses' hooves, men died with curses in their throats. The Franks laughed, the priests blessed, and the smoke drifted into the sky so black that it looked as if even the sun was closing its eyes.

His men wanted to leave. Arno was already halfway down the slope, his axe high above his head, his eyes red as fire. Widukind grabbed him by the arm and pulled him back. "No!" he yelled. "Not like this. Not today."

"We can't just let them scream!" Hroth cried, tears and anger streaming down his face. "We're not cowards!"

Widukind stared at him so coldly that Hroth recoiled. "Cowards die senselessly. We die properly, when it counts."

But as he said it, he knew how empty it sounded. For in his heart, everything roared:*Run down there! Kill them! Die with them!*But his head held him back. A dozen men against an army wasn't a fight; it was a massacre. And he knew that was exactly what Karl wanted: to make him a dead hero, so that the resistance would die with him.

So he stood there. With clenched fists, blood on his lips from almost biting his own tongue in anger. He watched the village burn and felt as if he himself were standing in the fire.

"Look closely," he growled at his men. "Burn this into your memory. Every hut, every corpse, every damned cross. We'll pay it back. Not today. But we'll pay it back."

Powerlessness ate at him like rats in his stomach. But this powerlessness transformed into something else: a rage so cold and clear that it never went away.

There are moments when rage tears you apart so much that you'd rather die than watch for another breath. For Widukind, that moment came when the Franks in the burning village began to drink and cheer as if the fire were a celebration.

"Now!" he roared, and before the men realized it, he had already stormed down the slope. No plan, no horn, no tactics. Just rage, spear, and shout.

The Saxons followed like wolves sniffing out the scent of blood. They crashed into the fringes of the Frankish army, right into the drunkards who thought victory was already sealed. One fell, still holding his cup, as Widukind's spear pierced his throat. Blood spurted over the fire, men screamed, order shattered for a moment.

Arno swung his axe so wildly that horses shied; Hroth laughed like a madman as he ripped a cross from a priest's hand and smashed his teeth with it. For a moment, there was chaos—pure, naked chaos. Exactly what the Saxons excelled at.

They laid down ten or twenty francs, burning their own cries into the smoke. The victors' laughter turned to panic, shields clashed, blood spurted into the flames.

But it didn't last long. The army was too large, too heavy. Like an animal that stumbles, it quickly recovered. Lines closed, shields were raised, orders echoed. The Franks grew into a wall again, and against walls, even the fiercest wolf dies.

Widukind saw men on his side fall, one with his stomach slashed open, another trampled under horses' hooves. The chaos he had unleashed began to tear them apart.

"Back!" he yelled, and with difficulty, with blood, they dragged themselves back into the forest. Behind them, the village continued to burn, and their dead burned with it.

It wasn't a victory. It was a slap in the face, raw, bloody, but dearly bought. They had shown they could bite. But Charles's army laughed again, harder this time, and marched on as if they had only shaken off a mosquito.

Widukind cursed, his voice as rough as ash. "We caught them. But damn it, we're paying for every bite with our own flesh."

After the chaos, after the blood and smoke, the Saxons retreated into the forests. They were exhausted, filled with anger and grief, and each of them knew: That alone isn't enough. Against an army like Charlemagne's, you need more than spears and courage. You need the gods.

So they gathered in a grove, deeply hidden, where oaks stood, as old as their ancestors. The Druids had already lit a fire, high, blazing, reaching for the sky like a fist. The smell of blood hung over the fire—fresh, metallic, bitter.

Widukind stepped forward, threw his spearhead into the flames, as a sign that even steel was consecrated to the wrath of the gods. Then he nodded, and the men offered sacrifices. First pigs, then goats, then—a warrior, captured during the last raid. A Frank.

The man cursed, screamed, promised silver, promised life. But the Saxons grabbed him, laid him across the altar, and without hesitation, the knife plunged through his throat. Blood spurted into the embers, the fire hissed, sparks flew as if the gods themselves were drinking.

The men howled, drummed on their shields, and called out the names: Wodan, Donar, Ziu. Their voices echoed through the forest so wildly that even the ravens took flight.

Widukind stood there, his hands bloody, his eyes full of fire. He knew what he was doing: he was giving blood to demand blood. He was not a priest, not a servant, he was a warrior. But he also knew: on this night, his men needed a sign that they were not fighting alone.

"You see?" he cried. "They have their cross, we have our gods. And our gods only hear us if we shout loud enough!"

They screamed until their throats burst. They stamped until the earth shook. Blood flowed until even the stream shone red.

And Widukind thought:*If the gods don't listen now, they've long since forgotten us.*

The next morning, with the smoke of the sacrifices still hanging among the branches, Widukind and his men came across a place that lay like an open wound in the forest. It was what remained of a village. Charred beams, ash, the stench of burnt flesh. No life, no laughter, only silence.

And in the middle of it all stood it. A cross. Freshly erected, immaculate, as if it had fallen from heaven, not planted by men's hands. It towered above the ashes, defiant, clean, like a foreign body in a scorched world.

The men froze. Some lowered their eyes, others spat into the dirt. Hroth growled, "The bastards plant it in our bones. So we can see who owns the land."

Widukind stepped forward, slowly, step by step. He placed his hand on the wood, rough, still covered in resin, untouched by the fire. He felt what the Franks meant:*Your village is dust, your life is dirt – but our cross remains standing.*

He clenched his fist, drew the knife, and carved a line into the wood. Deep, rough, bloody, until the blade splintered. "If that's their god," he growled, "then he should know that even gods can bleed."

Arno stepped beside him, swung his axe, and split a piece of the beam. The men yelled, hammering on the wood until it shook. But Widukind raised his hand, holding them back. "Not yet. We'll cut it down when it counts. We'll leave it standing so it reminds us: every blow against us will be paid for."

He spat at the cross, hard, full of hatred. "And when we tear it down, let it not be secret, let it not be silent. Let it be in the light, in front of all eyes, with so much blood that the earth will remember it."

The men nodded, their eyes full of fire. The cross remained standing—not as a symbol of the Franks. Rather, it was a target.

The smoke still hung in the air, thick and black, like a shroud over the land. No one spoke. Even the birds held their beaks. All that remained was the stench of burnt wood, blood, and that damned ash eating into every pore.

Widukind stepped into the center of the square, the cross still behind him, the village destroyed all around him. He raised his arms, not like a priest, but like a man with nothing left to lose. His voice was rough, broken, but loud:

"Look around you. This is Karl's peace. Fire, ashes, corpses. This is his gift to us. But we won't take it. We'll pay back. For every scream, for every burned roof, for every cross—blood. Our blood, yes. But also theirs. Above all, theirs."

He grabbed a handful of ash and rubbed it over his face until he looked like a ghost. "I swear on my flesh, on my bones, on my damned mouth: This land will not die silently. We will die loudly. And every step Karl takes here will be soaked in blood."

The men screamed, harshly and hoarsely, like wolves scenting their prey in the smoke. They pounded against shields, against the earth, until even the cross shook.

Arno raised his fist, Hroth laughed madly, the others roared until the smoke itself seemed to tremble.

But Widukind stood still, his eyes full of fire. He knew this was not a victory, but an oath. An oath born in the smoke, in the blood, in the ashes.

And this oath would carry them. Not to a quick triumph—but into a war that could only become more brutal.

The smoke rose, the oath remained.

The Great Battle of the Weser

The Weser flowed lazily, as if it had no idea it would soon turn red. A wide, gray river winding through forests and fields. For the farmers, it was a path, for the children, a playground. For Widukind, it became a border—between life and death, between Saxony and Charlemagne.

They had been streaming for days, men from all tribes. Westphalians, Engerns, Eastphalia, North Albingians. Farmers with axes, warriors with spears, shepherds with clubs. Some barefoot, some in armor passed down from fathers and grandfathers. Each with hatred in their stomachs, each with a story about why they were standing here.

They set up camp on the shore. Tents, fires, shields placed side by side. It wasn't an army like the Franks, with banners, drums, and order. It was a pack—restless, loud, wild. Men laughed too loudly, drank too deeply, and fought out of boredom. But there was the same spark in their eyes: Today they wouldn't strike in the shadows. Today they would stand openly.

Widukind walked through the rows, examining them. He saw men with scars, who had already seen more blood than any human being should bear. He saw boys, barely bearded, brandishing daggers as if they could topple mountains with them. And he saw the old men who swore they would rather die here than take another step back from Karl.

That evening, he stood by the river, his feet in the mud, staring into the water. The current was strong, sweeping branches and foam with it, as if the river itself were greedy. "It will eat more," murmured Widukind. "Men. Shields. Meat."

Hroth stepped beside him, grinning crookedly. "Then the Franks should learn to swim first."

Widukind spat into the water. "No, brother. We'll all swim tomorrow. In blood. The only question is: who will sink and who will resurface."

The Weser River roared. And she waited.

The next morning, the ground shook. First softly, then like thunder that never stops. Men jumped to their feet, grasping shields and spears as the first dust rose above the trees.

Then they saw her.

Charlemagne's army advanced like a storm. Lines that seemed endless. Banners with golden eagles and those accursed crosses fluttering in the wind like a mockery. Shields marching in step, spears like a hedge marching. Behind them, columns of wagons, entire villages on wheels, and even further back, the horsemen, heavily armored as if cast from iron.

“Gods,” murmured one of the Saxons, “those aren’t men, that’s a flood.”

Widukind stood at the front, his face hard, his eyes narrowed. He laughed—not out of joy, but because he knew he would scream otherwise. "Look, brothers," he cried, "Karl is bringing us everything he has. It's as if we'd invited him to the feast. It's nice that he's coming—then we don't have to ride to him."

A few laughed, harshly and briefly. Others spat in the dirt, their fingers nervously on their weapons. But the laughter helped, at least for a moment.

The Franks lined up on the opposite bank. They didn't build campfires, they didn't sit down. They stood there, in ranks, shields against each other as if they were a wall. The sun broke through the haze, making iron flash so brightly that the Saxons squinted.

It wasn't a simple army. It was an empire on the march. And it now stood directly opposite.

Widukind felt his fists itching. "So this is what the enemy looks like when he thinks he's a god," he muttered. Then he spat into the Weser and grinned. "Time to show him that gods bleed too."

The men stood on the shore, shields in hand, spears trembling, and not just from the weight. In front of them were the Franks, arrayed like a mountain range. Behind them were the forests, the flight, the shame.

Widukind knew that if he didn't say anything now, they would fall apart before the first spear flew. So he climbed onto a rock by the river where everyone could see him and opened his mouth like only he could.

"Look at this!" he roared, pointing across the Weser. "There they stand, Karl's dogs. Nicely arranged, shining, with their crosses high in the air. They think they're a mountain. But brothers—mountains can be blown up! Mountains can be split! And when they fall, they bury their own men!"

The Saxons laughed, a harsh, hoarse laugh.

"Stop shitting your pants!" he continued. "You're not children! You're wolves! And wolves don't kneel, no matter how large the herd coming at them! Let them hold up their crosses—we have our gods, and our gods laugh at fire and blood!"

He drew his sword, holding it up high so the sun glinted off it. "Today, many of us die. I know that. You know it too. But what matters isn't that we die. What matters is that we scream while we do. That every damned Frank who runs home carries our scream in their bones until they rot."

The men now roared. Some hammered spears against shields, others shouted the names of the gods so loudly that they echoed across the river.

Widukind grinned broadly, his face covered in dirt, full of anger. "So, brothers, look them in the eyes. Let them see that we are not peasants to be trampled down. We are Saxons! And today we will show them how loudly a people can die!"

The roar grew louder until it drowned out even the Frankish drums. Widukind felt it in his bones: fear was still there, yes—but it was now covered by defiance. And defiance was better armor than any iron.

Then came the signal. A horn on the other side of the Weser, deep, drawn-out, like the howl of a monster. The Franks moved, row upon row, as if heaven itself had given them legs. Shields raised, spears forward, banners waving in the wind.

The Saxons roared back. No organized horn, no drumming—just a wild, raw cry, so loud that even the ravens took flight. Widukind was the first to enter the river. "Come on, you dogs!" he roared, the water splashing up to his chest. "Let's see if your god can swim!"

The Saxons followed, like a pack, smelling blood. The waters of the Weser became a battlefield. Men slipped, shields slid, arrows hissed through the air, some stabbing in chests and necks before the fighters even reached the other bank.

Then the ranks clashed. Iron on iron, wood on flesh. The dull cracking of bones mingled with the clanging of shields. Men bellowed, horses neighed, blood splashed into the water.

A Saxon with an axe leaped into a Frank's face, knocking him to the ground. Both sank briefly in the floodwaters until only red water splashed up. Another

was pierced by a spear, fell gasping into the stream, and was immediately swept away as if he had never been there.

Widukind himself struck like a madman. His spear crashed into shields, his sword slashed through chainmail. Even amidst the chaos, he mocked, laughing bloodily: "Come on, you bastards, show me how your crosses will save you!" A Frank came too close, and Widukind plunged his dagger into his stomach, roaring: "Is this what your heaven looks like?"

But it wasn't an orderly battle. It was a maelstrom. Men slipped in the mud, drowning even as they fought. Shields broke, scream after scream was drowned out by the roar of weapons.

The battle was unleashed. And the Weser River began to do what it did best: consume.

The river was not a spectator. It fought alongside him—and it was a more ferocious enemy than Charles himself.

The Weser swept away men who were still alive, roaring, with swords in their hands. One stumbled, fell in the mud, and three brothers jumped after him to pull him up – but the current grabbed them all and pulled them down as if they were pebbles. Within seconds, all that remained was a whirlpool, red and brown at the same time.

Shields became useless. In the water, they were as heavy as stones. Men who held onto them were pushed down, drowning with rage-contorted faces. Those who threw them away might have lived longer—but without a shield, they were just flesh.

The dead swam alongside the living. Bodies drifted against legs, faces stared upward, eyes wide open, mouths still screaming. Some were pressed against rocks by the river, skulls shattered, limbs twisted like dolls'.

Widukind saw it while he himself stood in the water, waist-deep, sword in hand, blood on his face. "The Weser doesn't eat Franks," he growled, "it eats us all."

But the Franks also suffered. A heavily armored horse slipped and plunged into the water, taking its rider with it. The Saxons roared with triumph as they watched man and beast disappear into the water. For a brief moment, it felt as if the gods themselves were fighting alongside them.

But the truth was harsher: The river was neutral. It took whomever it wanted. And it took many.

Blood stained the water dark. The Weser River no longer flowed gray—it flowed red, heavy, and viscous. Those who drank drank blood. Those who screamed swallowed blood. Those who fell drowned and became part of the river.

On that day, the Saxons weren't just fighting against Charlemagne. They were fighting against the Weser River. And the Weser was an enemy no one could defeat.

Widukind was no longer a military leader, no longer a man with plans or speeches. In the maelstrom of the Weser, he was merely an animal—teeth, sword, scream.

He stood in the middle of the water, the blood warm around his legs. The mud sucked at his feet, men crashed against him, the current tore at everything. A spear grazed his ribs, he bellowed like a bull and pushed his attacker beneath the surface. The water boiled, red bubbles rose, then there was only silence.

A heavily armored Frank rammed him from the side. Widukind staggered, the river almost dragging him away. But he yanked the man by the chain that ran across his chest and bit his ear, tearing it off as he plunged his sword into his stomach. Blood, screams, mud—everything mingled until no one knew where the river ended and the man began.

Arno roared beside him, swinging his axe in a circle, so wildly that even the Franks recoiled. Hroth laughed maniacally as he waded into the water, grabbed a priest's cross, and drowned him with his own symbol.

Widukind even mocked him here. "Well, you dogs! Is this your kingdom of God? Then he'll drown with us!" He spat blood into the water and continued hacking, his body a single weapon.

He no longer knew how many he had killed. Faces came and went, screams mingled, hands grabbed, he hacked, kicked, and bit. The river was full of bodies floating, pushing, and sinking. Every blow could be his last—and that's precisely why he hit harder.

For a moment he thought:*Maybe I'll die here, in the river, between mud and blood.*And he grinned. Because if he was going to do it, he was going to do it

loudly. Not quietly, not kneeling—but roaring like a wolf, until even the gods had had enough.

That's what Widukind was like: a braggart, a bully, a warrior. And in this maelstrom, he was all of these things at once—a symbol of flesh and fury.

As the sun set, the river was no longer a river. It was a grave.

The Weser River carried corpses like driftwood, faces upturned, eyes wide open, mouths full of water and blood. Shields floated like abandoned boats, spears jutted crookedly from the mud, and the roaring had died down. Only the cracking of armor pieces colliding in the current and the cawing of ravens over the battlefield remained.

The Saxons stood on the shore, battered, dripping, their bodies covered in cuts, their hearts filled with rage. They had fought like wolves, biting, scratching, killing. And they had survived. Not all of them, not many—but enough to still be standing there, fists clenched, teeth bared.

On the other side, the Franks were gathering. They, too, had lost lives, men who would never march again. But they still stood, orderly, disciplined, banners high. They claimed the day—as always.

But Widukind grinned, his face covered in blood, his voice hoarse. "Let them say what they want. We're still here. We screamed, we bit, we bled—and we're alive. That's enough. That's our victory."

Arno grumbled, Hroth laughed through broken teeth. The men nodded, tired but with fire in their eyes.

The Weser roared, dark and heavy, carrying the dead away. But defiance remained on the banks.

Widukind looked west, spat into the bloody water, and murmured: "Come back, Karl. Bring your army, bring your crosses. We will scream again. As long as we can scream, we are not defeated."

The day was over. No triumph, no glory. Only blood, ashes—and defiance. But defiance was enough to keep living.

Victory and pride – a brief triumph

The news came not like a triumphal procession, but like a drunken messenger who could barely stand. Dust in his beard, blood on his boots, eyes wide, mouth full of screams.

"They're not standing anymore!" he cried, panting, coughing, half dead from the ride. "The Franks—they're bleeding! They didn't manage to break us on the Weser. We drove them back, we ate them, we—" He collapsed, the foam at his mouth smelling of fear and sweat.

But the men around the fire didn't need any more. At the very first words, they jumped up, screamed, howled, and threw cups in the air. "We beat them!" one shouted. "Karl got a slap in the face!" another roared. Fists pounded on shields, feet stamped the ground until the earth shook.

The news spread like fire in the summer grass. From village to village, across rivers, through forests. The same story everywhere: Charlemagne and his army are not invincible. The Saxons still stand, the gods are with us.

Women wept, but this time with joy. Children ran through the streets with wooden swords, shouting, "Widukind! Widukind!" Old men raised their gnarled arms to the sky as if they had just seen Donar himself swing the hammer.

It was as if someone had broken the chains that bound every heart. No whisper of betrayal, no murmur of fear—only cheers, laughter, roars.

And in the middle of it all was Widukind. He grinned, his mouth bloody from the last battle, his hands still sore from the sword grip. But he raised his arms, let the cheers fall upon him like rain, and thought:*Screw Karl. Today belongs to us.*

The victory was no lie—they had survived while the Franks had to carry their dead back. And that alone was enough to make the land tremble.

The night after the news was not a night of silence. It was a frenzy.

In the forest, between charred tree trunks and muddy meadows, the Saxons lit fires as if they had captured the sun itself. Jugs circulated, mead flowed like blood from slashed veins. Men sang in hoarse voices, women danced, children recited battle stories they had never seen.

They called it a celebration, but in truth, it was a collective howl. A pack that had tasted blood and now couldn't stop baring its teeth.

Arno jumped onto a table, axe in hand, and roared: "We scratched the emperor! Did you hear that, dogs? The emperor bled!" The cheering that followed was so loud that even the owls flew away.

Hroth, already half drunk, tipped the rest of a priest's mug over his head and shouted: "Wodan drinks with us, brothers! Donar laughs at us! Even the gods wanted to be part of the feast today!" The crowd roared, and someone beat the drum until it broke.

Widukind sat still at first, his mouth full of meat, his heart full of fire. Then he stood up, dropped the jug, the mead splashed into the dirt, and laughed. He laughed so loudly that everyone fell silent. "Look at you! A pack, wild, stinking, bloody – exactly what we are! And Karl? Karl's sitting somewhere chewing on his cross because he can't believe a few peasants drove him through the water like a pig!"

The hall—if you could call the cobbled-together planks that—exploded with laughter, roars, and fists pounding on tables. The feast of the wolves was unleashed.

Mead dripped into beards, blood still clung to their hands, and yet they drank as if there were no tomorrow. And maybe there wasn't. But that night, it didn't matter.

The fire crackled, mead flowed, men lay half in the dirt, half intoxicated – then Widukind rose up. Not like a prince, not like a priest, but like a dog leaping up in the middle of a pack because it can't keep its mouth shut.

He stepped onto the table, blood and grease still on his fingers, and yelled, "Look at you! You stinking bastards! You've done the impossible—you've pulled Karl's teeth!"

Cheers. Fists pounded on shields. One threw a pig's leg into the fire as an offering to the gods.

Widukind grinned, his face red from the smoke, his voice rough as gravel. "They call him Charlemagne. But only his mouth and his army are great—and what's an army if it's drinking water? A pile of bones for the ravens! A pile of shit in the river!"

Laughter, hoarse, dirty, wild. Men tipped over jugs, mead flowed like blood, the pack roared.

"Listen to me," cried Widukind, "we are not a small people, not a bunch of peasants who have to pray lest a god trample them down. We are Saxons! We drink, we curse, we strike—and we're still standing! Charles can come with twenty armies, he'll still hear us laughing while we break his bones!"

The crowd went wild, a chaos of blows, jeers, and hoarse screams. Women howled with joy, men stamped their feet until the ground shook.

And Widukind, half-drunk, filled with hatred, raised his sword to the sky. "I swear to you, brothers – this was not our last victory! We'll tear his cross from his hands and drive it up his ass so he'll never forget it!"

Then the party exploded. A pack of wolves in a frenzy, wild, bloody, invincible—or at least they believed so that night.

The night consumed mead, meat, and voices, and in the firelight something happened that hadn't been seen for years: the Saxons forgot their feuds.

Westphalians drank with Engers as if they'd never burned each other's villages. North Albingians put their arms around Eastphalia, who would otherwise have greeted them only with an axe. Old scores were erased for a moment because they all sang the same song:*We are alive – and Karl is bleeding.*

A young warrior, barely a beard on his face, shouted into the crowd: "We are one!" And the men howled back. Not out of politics, not out of reason, but because the pride in their bones was finally greater than their fear again.

Widukind saw them dancing, shouting, vowing that no more crosses would stand in their land. He knew it was fragile, that envy and mistrust would creep in again tomorrow. But tonight, it was real.

"Look," Hroth murmured, his eyes glazed over. "They've forgotten. Everything. Feuds, blood, betrayal. Just one pack now."

Widukind nodded, grinning broadly. "That's how it has to be. At least once. At least today. Tomorrow we'll disperse again. But today—today we are one damned people."

The drums pounded, feet stamped, shields clashed. Pride had returned, not like a quiet song, but like a frenzy that swept everyone along.

And Widukind absorbed it like smoke. Because he knew: Pride was the only weapon Karl couldn't break instantly. At least not that night.

But behind the cheering, behind the mead, behind the stomping feet, the shadows lurked.

For the fires burned not only for victory—they also burned for the dead. And the seats where brothers had once sat were empty. No laughter, no voice, only silence, which, if you looked, struck the heart like a blow.

Women stood on the sidelines, their eyes red, while their men danced in a circle. They saw the gaps that would never be filled. They knew what pride was worth: cold beds, empty hands, children without fathers.

The wounded lay in the shadows, groaning and screaming, while the celebration raged. One bit a piece of leather because the healer pulled the arrow from his stomach. Another screamed the name of his wife, who had long known he would not see the morning. And above all the laughter, there was a smell of blood, of pus, of death that refused to celebrate.

Widukind saw it. He saw the voids, he heard the screams, he smelled the stench. And he knew: the victory was real, yes. But it had been bought, more dearly than anyone around the fire wanted to admit.

"They laugh because otherwise they'd cry," he murmured, more to himself than to the others. "And tomorrow they'll cry because they laughed today."

He grinned, spitefully, full of defiance as he said this. But the bitter truth burned in his gut: every victory left scars, and the Saxons were collecting them faster than the wounds could heal.

The party was loud, but the scars were louder. Only no one was listening. Not yet.

Amidst the stench, amidst the screams, amidst the scars and corpses—they laughed. Like dogs who've grabbed a piece of meat, even though they know the butcher will strike again.

Widukind sat by a fire with Arno, Hroth, and a few others, a jug passing from hand to hand. Blood still clung to their fingernails, dirt in their hair, and yet they grinned as if they were kings.

"Did you see it?" slurred Hroth, half-drunk, his teeth red from the mead. "That fat priest, praying as if his god were deaf—and then he fell over with my knife in his stomach! That was his amen!"

Laughter, hoarse, dirty, painful. One person coughed up blood, but laughed nonetheless.

Arno slammed his fist on the table, making the cups crack. "Karl calls himself the Great. I call him the Wet! Did you see how his dogs were kicking in the river? Like pigs in mud!"

Laughter erupted again. Men shed tears, not of joy, but because they needed it—laughter as a weapon, laughter against fear, laughter against pain.

Widukind grinned broadly, his mouth full of mockery. "Karl is sitting somewhere now, with his banners and crosses, rubbing his ass raw because he doesn't understand how a bunch of smelly peasants could ruin his day."

The men laughed even louder, as if they had just won the world.

In truth, they had only survived. But on this night, that was enough. On this night, survival was a victory. And the laughter of the victors echoed through the forest, raw, dirty, defiant—louder than death itself.

The laughter still echoed as the fires slowly burned down. Men lay in the dirt, snoring, hugging their shields like women. Women gathered the children who had fallen over from exhaustion. It was the calm after the intoxication—but not silence. For in the darkness, something else began to speak.

An old man, with a gray beard and eyes that had seen more than all of them combined, sat at the edge. He didn't drink, he didn't laugh. He just murmured, quietly, but so that Widukind could hear:

"Pride is a fire. It warms you tonight. But tomorrow it burns you."

Widukind turned to him, his face still full of mockery, his tongue ready to taunt him. But he didn't. For deep down he knew: The old man was right.

The men slept, drunk, happy, numb with the euphoria of victory. But the night spoke differently. In the crackling of the embers, the howling of the wind, the rustling of the trees, it was as if the land itself whispered:*Karl doesn't forget. Karl will come back.*

Widukind stood up, stepped to the fire, and looked into the embers. He grinned, but it was a bitter grin. "Let them come," he muttered. "Let them bring everything they have. We may be a pack of mad dogs—but we bite. And a dog that bites lives longer than one that cowers."

But even as he said this, he could still feel the aftertaste of the high. The victory was sweet. Too sweet. And he knew the hangover was coming.

The whisper of the future blew through the night. Quietly. Persistently. And Widukind heard it, even though he was still laughing.

The Emperor's Revenge

The morning after the victory stank. Not of triumph, not of freedom—of blood, of excrement, of sweat.

The fires of the night were only smoldering, men lay in the dirt like cattle, drunk, bloody, with open wounds that no one cared for. A few snored, a few wheezed, and still others were silent—too silent. The dead were among the living, and no one noticed the difference.

Widukind thrashed through the mud, his head pounding, his heart filled with bile. He kicked a man who lay motionless. No reaction. Only staring eyes. "That's what victors look like," he muttered, spat on the ground, and moved on.

At the edge of the camp sat the wounded. Some with bandaged arms, others with open stomachs that smelled of pus. They groaned, screamed, begged for water, for mead, for a quick end. Victory had many fathers, but the pain belonged to the sons.

The supplies were almost gone. Barrels emptied during the night, bread devoured in a frenzy. And the horses? Half-dead, lame, many dead from thrashing around in the blood of the Weser.

Then the first scouts returned. Dust on their boots, dust in their eyes. "Karl is marching," they said, as if they'd seen the devil himself. "He has new troops. Fresh troops. And he's burning everything he sees."

The men who were still laughing fell silent. Those who were still drinking spat. The intoxication disintegrated faster than a jug in flames.

Widukind grinned crookedly, bitterly. "Well, brothers. The cat's here. We celebrated like we'd slain the emperor. But he's still alive. And now he wants to show us."

He looked into the tired, scarred faces and knew: waking up after the intoxication was worse than any defeat. For now came revenge.

Karl didn't roam the land like a robber. Robbers take whatever they can carry and disappear. Karl came like an avalanche, burying everything beneath him, whether valuable or not.

His army marched with a precision that was foreign to the Saxons. Lines that never broke. Drums that beat like the heartbeats of a dead god. Priests led the way, crosses raised high, as if they weren't marching, but performing a ritual.

And what they were doing wasn't war. The Saxons knew war: men beat men, one falls, one stands. But this was systematic. Cold. A machine.

One village after another was wiped out. Not because it resisted—but because it breathed. Men were killed, even if they had no weapons. Women were rounded up, children dragged away. Fields were trampled, granaries looted, livestock slaughtered and abandoned.

There was no greed, no chaos, no frenzy like the Saxons. The Franks didn't burn because they wanted to—they burned because they were ordered to. Every torch was disciplined, every fire planned.

Widukind watched from afar, and he knew: This wasn't anger. This wasn't revenge in the human sense. This was order. Charlemagne's order. An iron fist that slowly crushed the country until nothing remained but ashes and crosses.

"You see?" Widukind murmured to his men. "That's not how a king marches. That's how an executioner marches."

And the men remained silent because they knew he was right.

It wasn't just villages that fell. It was the land itself.

The Franks swept through the fields like a fire that knew no bounds. Ripe ears of grain were trampled down, wheat burned until the smoke crept like a cloud

over the hills. Livestock was slaughtered, not to satisfy hunger, but so that no one else could survive. Entire herds lay mutilated in the grass, bellies ripped open, eyes still open.

Widukind watched from a hill, his fist clenched around the hilt of his spear. "They don't want to fight," he growled. "They want to starve."

Because that was it: hunger as a weapon. The granaries were emptied, the grain burned, and wells poisoned. Peasants who tried to defend themselves were crushed as if they were mosquitoes. Old women who pleaded on their knees were ridden down by horses.

And as the flames blazed, the priests stood by, singing their psalms, blessing the fire as if it were holy.

The Saxons who survived fled into the woods, barefoot, hungry, with children in their arms. They looked like shadows, more dead than alive. They whispered Widukind's name, hoping he would strike back. But Widukind only saw how thin they were becoming, how hollow their eyes were.

"This is war?" one of his men asked bitterly. "No," Widukind spat into the grass. "This is murder. But murder with rules, and that makes it worse."

The fields were burning, the harvest was gone, and the land smelled of ash. The Saxons had always believed they could survive off the land in winter. But now they saw: Charlemagne wanted the land itself to fight against them.

The fires alone would have been enough to break a people. But Charles went further. He didn't just want land, he wanted souls.

The prisoners were not treated like warriors. No barter, no ransom, no honor. They were herded together like cattle, bound, tied together with ropes. Rows of men, women, children—anything they could lay their hands on.

In the squares of the destroyed villages, the Franks erected gallows. Not one, not two—entire forests of stakes. There dangled those who had resisted, mouths open, tongues blue, eyes wide. Below them, the survivors scratched in the dust, forced to watch.

And then the forced baptisms. Priests with cold eyes submerged prisoners in water, pushing their heads under until bubbles appeared. Some rose again, coughing, broken, and were declared "redeemed." Others never rose again. They were simply dragged aside, as trash that no longer disturbed the heavens.

Widukind saw such a scene from the forest. Men who had been brothers yesterday were now kneeling before the cross because the Franks had left them no choice. Some were alive, but they were no longer warriors. They were shadows, creeping through the dust like empty shells.

Arno growled beside him, axe clutched tightly in his hand. "We have to save them." Widukind shook his head, his eyes filled with embers. "Too late. Once you're broken, you can't stand straight again."

He knew these images were worse than any fire. A man who dies is a martyr. But a man who lives broken is a memorial. Charles knew this. That's why he set up the gallows, that's why he blessed the baptisms. It wasn't war—it was education with blood and ropes.

And Widukind swore to himself: Anyone who does such a thing deserves no mercy. No peace. Only retribution.

Widukind had seen a lot. Blood, fire, death. But what he saw now was more than that. It was the end of a people slowly crumbling into rubble.

He stood on a hill, the men silent behind him, and looked down at what had once been a village. No scream, no struggle, no resistance—only ash, smoke, crosses, and a few figures creeping barefoot through the ruins, thin as shadows. Women with empty eyes, children searching among the remains for something edible. Old men staring into the flames as if waiting for the gods themselves to emerge.

The Franks had already moved on, but their work remained. Destruction that was systematic. No roofs, no grain, no livestock. Only emptiness.

Widukind felt himself seething, but it was no longer hot rage. It was cold. A bitter, biting cold. "This is no longer a battle," he said quietly. "This is an annihilation. They don't just want to defeat us. They want to erase us, from the land, from people's minds, from the world."

His men were silent. One wept, another spat in the dust. But no one objected.

Widukind clenched his fist so tightly that his nails drew blood into his palms. "Then they should know: You can't extinguish a people with fire. Fire only makes us blacker, harder, sharper. They think they're burning us—but they're forging us."

But deep down, he knew: Karl wasn't fighting like an enemy. Karl was fighting like damned nature itself. Like frost, like hunger, like plague. And no sword can fight against the laws of nature.

He continued to stare at the dead village and swore to himself: If the Saxons perish, they won't do so quietly.

The villages lay in ashes, the fields in smoke, and the streets were littered with gallows. There was no room left for open fighting, no hope of a winnable battle. So the Saxons retreated—not like cowards, but like wolves who know it's better to bite in the shadows.

Widukind led them deep into the forests, where the light barely touched the ground. There, in moors and swamps where even Frankish horses sank, they found refuge. No tents, no fires, only darkness, cold, and hunger.

The men slept in the mud, weapons in their hands, always on guard. Women and children who had fled huddled together, quietly so no spies could hear them. It wasn't a life—it was a survival.

From here they struck. Small squads, silent, swift. They attacked stragglers, ambushed supply wagons, and cut down trees to block roads. No open battle, no heroic songs—just short, brutal stabs, and then back into the darkness.

But the darkness was no friend. Hunger gnawed, disease crept, children died quietly in their mothers' arms. Men grew weaker, even the strong looked hollow-eyed.

Widukind saw it and knew: As long as Karl marched, there would be no victory. Only this game of hide-and-seek. But he kept the men alive with mockery. "Well, you see?" he growled, "we're ghosts now. And you can't kill ghosts."

The men laughed, tired, hard, but they laughed. And in this darkness, every laugh was a victory.

The night in the moor was cold, damp, full of mosquitoes and death. The men lay in the mud, the women clutched children who were barely breathing, and the dull thrum of hunger hung over everything.

Widukind stood in a circle of his warriors, his face hard as stone. No one spoke, no one dared to curse. The defeats, the burned fields, the gallows—they hung like millstones on everyone's necks.

Finally, Widukind opened his mouth, his voice rough, hoarse, but unbroken. "Listen to me, you dogs. We have lost blood. We have lost land. We have lost brothers. But one thing we have not lost: ourselves."

He grabbed a handful of mud and smeared it on his face until he looked like a demon. "Do you see that? We don't belong to the Franks. We belong to this land, this dirt, this forest. As long as we stand here, we are free. Even if we starve, even if we die, we are free."

The men stared at him, empty, tired, but something flickered in their eyes again.

"Karl thinks he can break us because he has numbers, crosses, fire. But he forgets one thing: We're too damn stubborn to kneel. We'd rather die here in the moor, with dirt in our mouths and blood in our hands, than kiss his damned cross once."

Arno raised his fist. "Yes!" Hroth laughed, a mad, hoarse laugh. Others struck their spears against their shields, quietly but resolutely.

Widukind raised his hand as if speaking to the gods themselves. "This is our oath. No victory, no triumph—only this. We will not die quietly. We will die roaring. And as long as we roar, we are more alive than any kneeling dog."

The men repeated it, like an echo. Not a song, not a prayer. A curse, an oath, a defiance.

And so the war began again – not for victory, but for sheer survival.

The forced baptisms of Verden

They herded them together like cattle. Not a hundred, not a thousand—more. A mass of faces, pale with hunger, scarred by war, numb from too much suffering. Men with bound hands, women with children clutched to their breasts, boys who could barely lift their first sword, old people who could barely stand.

The Franks stood around, shields raised, spears pointed inward. No escape. Verden was no longer a place, but a cage.

The prisoners stood in the dust for hours. The sun burned, the air stank of sweat, blood, and fear. Children's screams mingled with curses, prayers with

howls. Some still roared defiantly, others had already collapsed, broken, before the verdict was passed.

And above all this, the priests rose. High on pedestals, crosses in their hands, their voices like whips. They cried out about salvation, about the Kingdom of God, about the grace that lies only in baptism. But everyone heard what they were really saying:*Kneel or die.*

The Franks called it order. For the Saxons, it was a slaughterhouse.

Widukind wasn't there. He was fighting elsewhere, striking, fleeing, living like a wolf in the shadows. But the news came quickly. A messenger, bloodied, hoarse, panting. "They have our people," he stammered, "thousands... in Verden. Tied up. Like cattle before slaughter."

Widukind froze. He looked at the man, heard the words, and his stomach went cold. "Thousands?" he asked. "All of them?" "All they could get," the messenger wheezed. "And Karl himself is there."

Then Widukind knew that Verden wasn't just a place. It would become a grave.

The prisoners stood huddled together, dust in their throats, hunger in their stomachs, fear in their eyes. Then the priests stepped forward.

They weren't like the warriors, drenched in sweat and blood. No, they wore white robes that fluttered in the wind as if they were clean. Crosses held high, voices loud and confident. They didn't speak to the Franks—they didn't need a sermon. They spoke to the bound.

"Children of God!" one cried, arms outstretched. "You have lived too long in the shadow of false idols! Today is the day of your redemption!"

Laughter erupted, hoarse and desperate. One of the Saxons yelled back: "Salvation? All I see are ropes and swords! If this is your heaven, fuck your heaven!"

The priests were not deterred. They raised their voices even louder, preaching about paradise, about the one true Lord, about eternal life—but everyone knew that behind these beautiful words there was nothing but death.

Another priest stepped forward, his voice ice-cold: "Baptism or death. That is what the Lord wants. That is what Karl, his servant, wants."

A murmur went through the prisoners. Some wept. Some growled. Some even collapsed, looking at the ground because they could no longer bear the sight of death in their eyes.

And while the priests swore that this was mercy, everyone knew: It wasn't a baptism. It was a judgment. An executioner in a white robe, washing the knife clean with water before striking.

Widukind's name was whispered, again and again, as a last resort:*Widukind is coming. Widukind won't leave us alone.*But Widukind wasn't there.

And the priests continued preaching as if they had already won.

Then it began. No drumming, no horn, no solemn announcement. Simply a command. Short, cold, like a knife.

The Franks grabbed the first men from the crowd. They were dragged to a trough filled with water up to the brim. Priests stood beside it as if it were a holy well. But everyone knew: it was nothing more than a bucket for pigs.

A man, broad, bearded, and covered in scars, yelled, "I won't kneel!" Then they pushed him down, jerked his head back, and plunged him into the water. Hands flailed, legs thrashed, bubbles rose. The priest murmured his words, calmly, while the man gasped for air.

They pulled him up, gasping, blood and water pouring from his mouth. "Baptized," the priest said, as if he were a finished piece of cattle. The man coughed, his eyes bruised. He wasn't dead—but he was no longer himself.

Others followed. Some screamed, some spat, some wept. Some died immediately in the water, drowning while the priest made the sign of the cross over them.

The children were the worst. Small bodies, too weak to defend themselves. They were pushed into the water, pulled up, and pushed again. Some were alive, coughing, whimpering. Others were dragged lifeless from the trough, like wet rags.

The prisoners screamed, raged, and pulled at ropes, but the Franks held them down, beat them with sabers, and crushed their teeth.

And the priests spoke, incessantly, unmoved, with blissful smiles. As if they didn't see that water here was not a blessing, but a rope hanging in the throat.

It was the beginning of the horror. Not a massacre with swords, not a battlefield—worse. A slow, orderly suffocation, disguised as redemption.

And the river rushed beside it, indifferent, as if it were just waiting to swallow all the blood.

Things changed. At some point, it was no longer about baptism or conversion, but simply about battles.

The Franks led out rows of prisoners, tied them to stakes, or forced them to wait on their knees in the dust. Priests still muttered their incantations, but even they could no longer make it look like mercy. It was an execution, and everyone knew it.

One after another they were struck down. Swords fell, heads rolled, blood spurted across the square, staining the earth black. Screams echoed, shrill, full of panic, full of pain. Some cried out for Widukind, for Wodan, for Donar—but the only answers were the clang of steel and the cracking of bones.

The crowd dwindled. First men, then women, then children. Charles wasn't tired of the warriors—he wanted to destroy the seed himself. No new risings, no new enemies. Only silence.

The Franks worked like a slaughterhouse. Push, tie, behead. Next. Push, tie, behead. No anger, no joy. Just cold discipline.

The ground of Verden became an altar. Blood flowed in rivulets, seeped through the dust, and collected in puddles that reflected the cross.

And whoever was still standing, whoever was still alive, watched. Had to watch. That was the worst: not dying, but watching as brother, sister, child, and father fell one after the other, and being unable to do anything.

As the day drew to a close, piles of bodies lay there. A people in pieces. Verden was no longer a place. Verden was a mass grave.

The Franks called it order. The priests called it God's will. But for the Saxons, it was just one thing: a massacre in the name of a cross that smelled more of blood than heaven.

Widukind wasn't in Verden. And that was precisely what bothered him more than any sword.

The news came in fragments. First, scouts riding too fast to form complete sentences. Then, peasants fleeing, barefoot, bloody, with children in their arms. Finally, an old warrior, his face burned, his eyes empty. He delivered the words that were like daggers: "They killed them all."

Widukind laughed first. A bitter, harsh laugh that sounded more like a cough. "All of them? Nobody kills*all*. Not even Karl."

But then more came. More and more. Everyone told the same story. Row after row of Saxons, baptized or beheaded. Thousands. Men, women, children. Verden was no longer a place – only blood and corpses.

Then the laughter broke out. Widukind sat by the fire, staring into the embers, not saying a word. Arno placed his hand on his shoulder. "We'll take revenge, brother." But Widukind shook his head. "Revenge? Against what? Against an emperor with an army greater than heaven? Against priests who carry God in their mouths and blood in their hearts? Revenge is a drop. Charles is a sea."

His men looked at him, silent. They had never seen their leader like this before: not roaring, not laughing, not mocking. Just silent.

The powerlessness was worse than any defeat. For what use is a spear if the enemy destroys not only your warriors, but your entire people?

Widukind clenched his fists until blood dripped from his knuckles. "If I'd been there," he muttered, "they would have slaughtered me too. Perhaps it would have been better that way."

But he lived. And that meant he had to bear what had happened in Verden. Bear it like a curse, heavier than any iron.

Verden wasn't just a massacre—it was a message. And the message raced through the country faster than any army.

Messengers were hardly needed. Every survivor was a messenger, whether they wanted to be or not. Women with empty eyes who no longer carried their children because they had been forced to leave them in the pits. Old men who stumbled silently through the forests as if they had lost their ability to speak. Children who didn't speak a word but screamed in the night as if the blades were still falling.

The villages heard the stories, and they were all the same: thousands bound, thousands killed, baptized, or drowned. No heroic song, no battle, just a slaughterhouse. And everywhere the same cross stood over the corpses.

Some collapsed, wanting to submit, wanting to seek Charles's mercy. "If we are baptized, we will survive." - "If we kneel, our people will live." The whisper spread through the huts like mold infesting everything.

Others only grew tougher. "If they want to kill us all, then we'll take as many of them as we can." Farmers grabbed axes, children grabbed stones. Even the weak suddenly wanted to bite before they died.

And everywhere a name was mentioned. Widukind. People whispered it, shouted it, almost sang it. "He will avenge us." – "He will strike back." – "He will make the emperor himself bleed."

Widukind heard it. And it was as if a burden had been placed on his shoulders, heavier than any sword. He knew: They were all waiting for him. One man against an empire.

The news of Verden wasn't smoke that vanished. It was a fire that consumed everyone, that continued to burn in every mind.

And Karl knew that. That's exactly why he did it.

The night after the news was heavy as lead. No laughter, no mead, only silence, interrupted by whispers and the crackling of the fire.

Widukind stood in a circle of his men, his face sooty, his eyes red. No one dared to look at him. Finally, he spoke, slowly, in a voice deeper than the river itself:

"In Verden, they didn't just kill men. They slaughtered a people. They drowned our children and held their heads high as if they were trophies. They showed us that Charles doesn't wage war—Charles exterminates."

Arno growled, Hroth spat into the fire, others clenched their fists.

Widukind took a step forward, grabbed a spear, and plunged it into the ground, causing the earth to tremble. "Then the gods will hear it now: We swear. We swear by blood and mud, by smoke and ash – Verden will not be forgotten. Never. As long as one of us lives, this day will remain a scream that haunts Karl until he himself lies in the dirt."

The men repeated it. First quietly, then louder. A vow, not a song. Not a prayer, not a ritual. Just rage, pressed into words.

"For every child who died in the water," roared Hroth. "For every man who was beheaded," roared Arno. "For Verden!" roared everyone.

The voices echoed through the forest, wild, harsh, like a wolf's howl. It was not a victory, not a hope—but it was a vow.

And Widukind thought:*Karl thinks he's broken us. But he's only bound us. With blood. And blood never breaks us.*

Thus, Verden became not just a massacre. It became a curse. A stigma that never faded.

Exile in Denmark

He didn't flee like a beggar. He fled like a hunted man, still baring his teeth.

After Verden, the land was dead. Smoke, crosses, gallows everywhere. Karl everywhere. Widukind knew: If he stayed, he'd be next on the rope. So he rode, day and night, through forests, across swamps, his eyes watchful like a wolf.

The Franks were searching for him. Scouts, troops, entire bands. Everywhere he heard horns, the clanging of iron, the stamping of horses. But he knew the land better than they did. He rode in zigzags, went into hiding, slept in the mud, ate roots and raw meat. A king without a court, a warrior without an army—but not yet dead.

Sometimes he encountered survivors. Farmers in hiding, women with children, warriors without weapons. They saw him, whispered his name, and wanted to go with him. But he shook his head. "Go deeper into the forest. I must go on. I am not your protection—I am the target."

And on he went, ever north. The land became more barren, the air saltier, the nights colder. He saw seagulls, heard the sound of the sea. The North. The end of his country—and the beginning of a foreign one.

By the time he reached the border into Denmark, he was emaciated, his beard wild, his eyes red from smoke and lack of sleep. But he was still Widukind. Not broken. Not yet.

He looked back at forests engulfed in smoke. "Screw it," he muttered. "You think you drove me away? No. I'm just catching my breath."

Then he turned north.

The north was a different beast. No soft land with fields and villages like in Saxony – here everything was harder, colder, more ferocious.

The air burned with salt, the sea thundered against the coast as if it wanted to devour the land itself. The wind was a knife that constantly cut across the skin, and the nights were so black that one would think the gods had forgotten fire.

Widukind saw men living here and knew immediately: These weren't farmers. These were men with shoulders like tree trunks, beards like rat nests, eyes as bright and cold as winter ice. They looked at him like a stranger, scrutinizing, suspicious. Not brothers, not yet. More like wolves, considering whether he fit into their pack—or whether he'd become their dinner.

The women were no different. Broad, strong, with gazes harder than spears. Children ran barefoot across the frost, screaming, laughing, falling, getting up without crying. Widukind thought:*No wonder warriors thrive here. Those who survive here can fight anywhere.*

The halls smelled of smoke, fish, old beer, and blood. Not much different from Saxony, only colder, chewier. And over all of it hung that northern sound: deep laughter, loud yelling, but always with an undertone, as if there was a knife behind every joke.

Widukind entered this land, a stranger, hungry, and dirty. But he laughed crookedly, spat in the sand, and muttered: "It's okay. I'm not a saint either. I'm one of you—even if you don't know it yet."

Widukind came into their halls not like a beggar, but like a wolf entering a foreign territory, bleeding. And the Danes looked at him just like that.

The hall was filled with smoke, mead jugs clinked, voices boomed, and there he stood – alone, ragged, but with that look that said:*One more step and I'll bite your throat out.*

A prince, broad as an ox, sat on the high seat, a fur over his shoulders, his eyes cold as ice. He looked at Widukind and grinned crookedly. "You're the Saxon Beater," he said, his voice deep. "The one who spat in Karl's mouth."

Widukind laughed dryly. "I'm the one who's still alive. And that's enough."

The hall roared, half laughter, half mockery. A few Danes banged on the tables, others spat in the dirt. One shouted: "If you're so strong, why are you here and not in your own country?"

Widukind took a step forward, drew the knife, cut his palm, and let the blood drip. "Because my land is burning," he growled, "and Karl thinks he drove me out. But I'm not driven out. I'm here to bite again. And I swear, if any of you think you can call me a dog, we'll see whose blood flows faster."

Silence. Then loud laughter thundered through the hall. The prince raised his cup and nodded. "Good," he said. "You're not a dog. Perhaps a wolf without a pack. But we like wolves."

Widukind grinned. He knew they didn't respect words. Only blood, courage, and teeth. And he had all three.

Widukind found them on the edge of the Danish world—Saxons who, like him, had made it across the border. No longer proud warriors, no longer chieftains, no longer brothers with raised spears. They were remnants. Shards of a people.

Tents made of rags, fires of wet wood, faces hollow like hollowed-out skulls. Women breastfeeding their children while their milk barely flowed. Old people staring unblinkingly into the embers. Men sitting empty-handed, having thrown away their weapons when the Franks were breathing down their necks.

Widukind walked through the camp, and everywhere they whispered his name. Not loudly, not like before, when they roared. Now it was a weak, brittle whisper:*Widukind… he's still alive…*

A boy ran toward him, his face covered in dirt, his eyes wide. "You're Widukind?" Widukind knelt down and placed his hand on his shoulder. "Yes," he said. "And you're a Saxon. Never forget that."

The men who still had strength gathered. Some wanted to hug him, others looked at him with a bitterness that was almost hatred. "You ran away," one hissed. "You left us alone." Widukind grabbed him by the collar and pulled him

closer. "I didn't run away. I'm here because I'm still breathing. Those who breathe fight. Those who fight don't die like dogs. So shut up and stand up."

The man stared at him, about to curse – but then he grinned crookedly. Because he knew: The bastard was right.

The camp of exiles wasn't an army. It was a shadow, a mass of broken souls. But Widukind saw in their eyes: the fire was still there. Buried deep, small, but glowing. He just had to stoke it again.

Widukind hated it. Every breath, every damned day in the north.

He wasn't a man for stagnation. Not the type to sit in camps, stinking in smoke, and watch children starve. He was a wolf who needed to taste blood or he'd go mad. And now? Now he was sitting in Denmark, far from his rivers, his forests, his land. A king without a crown, a warrior without a battlefield.

He often stood by the sea, the spray in his face, the waves crashing against the rocks. He roared into the water, cursing Karl, the gods, and himself. "Do you see that, you fucking emperor?" he once shouted, while the seagulls screeched. "I'm still here! You can have my land, but not me! Not my damn mouth!"

The Danes saw him doing this and laughed. One said, "The Saxon talks more to the wind than to people." Widukind just grinned. "The wind listens better than you."

At night, when the children in exile were asleep, he sat with his men by the fire. They barely spoke. Everyone thought about what they had lost. Then Widukind broke the silence with this mockery that was more liquor than medicine: "Well, brothers, we're sitting here like rats in a stranger's cellar. But even rats survive when dogs roam the streets."

Some laughed, others spat in the dirt. But they knew: His anger was the only reason they didn't completely disintegrate.

Widukind hated exile. But he knew that hatred leads to hardship. And hardship was the only thing left for him.

Widukind knew he was nothing on his own—just a howling dog on the beach. So he had to talk. Talk to men who didn't laugh because they were having fun, but because they were sharpening their knives while they listened.

The Danish princes received him in long halls, dark, cold, and filled with smoke. Bear skulls on the walls, the stench of fish and mead in the air. Men with gold in their beards, swords they held like toys.

The prince he was sitting with leaned back, cup in hand, and grinned. "So you want us to help you, Saxon? Why should we shed our blood for your country?"

Widukind drank, wiped his mouth, and laughed. "Because Charles is your enemy too. Today he's devouring Saxons. Tomorrow he's devouring Danes. Ask the Frisians, ask the Lombards—they know what it means when his army marches through."

Another prince, smaller but with eyes like daggers, leaned forward. "Perhaps it's better if he eats you whole. Less competition for us."

Widukind slammed his fist on the table, making the mead spill over. "Fuck competition! Karl doesn't want an alliance, Karl doesn't want borders. He wants everything. And when you think you're safe, you'll wake up and realize you're feeding his dogs."

The hall fell silent. Some laughed mockingly, others nodded slowly. Widukind had captured their voice: fear and pride.

"So?" he growled. "You give me ships, weapons, men—and we'll show Karl that the North doesn't kneel. Or you wait until he rams the same cross up your ass that he gave us."

The princes drank, remained silent, and reflected. No one immediately shook his hand. But Widukind saw in their eyes: they had begun to see Karl as their problem—not just his.

And that was the first step.

The night was clear, the wind bit, and the northern lights flickered above the Danes' halls. Green and red, like a sky itself at war.

Widukind stood outside, alone, his coat tight, the sea thundering behind him. He felt the cold in his bones, but something burned in his belly that was hotter than any fire.

He thought of Verden. Of the screams. Of the children who died in the water. Of the men who were beheaded like cattle. He thought of the villages that

burned, of the fields that turned to ash. And he knew: This was not the end. This could not be the end.

He drew his knife, slashed his palm, and let the blood drip onto the cold ground. "Hear me, you gods," he growled. "Or don't hear me. It doesn't matter. I swear it anyway."

He raised his bloody hand to the sky, the northern lights reflected in the drops. "I'll come back. I'll take back my land. I'll take back my people. And if I have to burn for it, then all of Saxony shall burn with me—but we burn louder than Karl can ever extinguish."

Behind him, Arno and Hroth stepped out of the darkness, their faces hard. They didn't say a word, but they also cut their hands and let blood fall into the sand. One by one, men joined them: refugees, exiles, the weak, the broken. All let their blood drip, and all silently sworn along.

Widukind looked into their faces and knew: They had nothing left. No land, no home, no peace. But they had the oath.

And an oath, born in the north, in blood and frost, was harder than any sword.

The return to Saxony

The way back was no triumphal procession. No army, no banners, no drums. Just a few men, damned tired faces, and Widukind in front, like a dog smelling the stench of his old territory.

They came from the north, through swamps, forests, over bare hills. Nights in the dirt, days filled with hunger. Some were exiles like him, others Danes who preferred to seek adventure rather than rot in their halls. It wasn't an army. It was a bunch. But a bunch that bit.

Widukind didn't speak much on the way. Only sometimes, when the men became too quiet, he turned around, grinned crookedly, and said: "Well, don't complain. We're not going into a grave, we're going home. And even if it is a grave – at least we'll die where our blood belongs."

They laughed, briefly, harshly, and moved on.

He smelled the border with Saxony before he saw it. No longer a salt sea, but smoke, ash, and sweat. The ground was black, burned, fields dead, forests

empty. Crosses protruded from the ground, some still fresh, with ropes attached, creaking in the wind.

The men fell silent. One whispered, "This is no longer our land." Widukind spat in the dust, clenched his fists. "Wrong. It's exactly our land. Only scarred. And scars belong to us more than anyone else."

And so they marched on. No victory, no fanfare. Just footsteps in the dust. But every step was a kick in the face of the emperor.

Widukind was back.

Saxony welcomed him not with open arms, but with scars.

The first villages he reached were no longer villages. Black beams protruded from the ground like bones, roofs were missing, the earth was covered in ash. Where children had played, thistles grew. Where fields had been green, there was only scorched soil.

And these crosses everywhere. A hell of a lot of them. Crooked into the ground, some with ropes that still smelled like freshly cut throats. Others already rotten, but still like scars on the land. It was as if Charlemagne himself had carved his divine symbols into the skin of Saxony.

The few people he met were shadows. Women with hollow cheeks, children with stomachs so empty they looked as if their ribs were turned inside out. Old men who staggered as they walked, as if they were already half dead.

Widukind walked through this misery, his fists clenched, and people stared at him. Some recognized him immediately—whispering his name as if he were a ghost who had returned. Others didn't believe it, shook their heads, murmuring, "Widukind is dead. This is just a shadow."

He stopped, looked at her hard, and growled, "If I'm a shadow, you'll shit your pants when I become flesh again."

A boy stepped forward, not even ten winters old, barefoot, his eyes dirty but bright. "Are you really Widukind?" he asked. Widukind grinned crookedly and bent down. "I am. And I'm back. So get your father, get your uncle, get every man still breathing. We have work to do."

The burned land was no longer home. But that's precisely why he knew it had to be reclaimed.

He found them in a forest, off the roads, hidden like rats in the undergrowth: a pack of Saxons who hadn't yet broken. Not proud warriors in shining armor—but men with emaciated faces, women with knives in their skirts, children with stones in their fists. Survivors.

As Widukind entered the camp, silence fell. Heads lifted, eyes widened. One stared at him, rubbing his eyelids as if dreaming. "Widukind?" he whispered.

Widukind grinned crookedly. "Are you expecting Karl? Sorry, you only have me."

Then the murmuring erupted. Women pulled their children closer, men stood up, uncertain, torn between joy and doubt. One rushed forward and grabbed him by the arm. "We thought you were dead." Widukind spat in the dirt. "Only he who is silent is dead. Have you ever seen me silent?"

A murmur, then the first laugh. Rough, hoarse, but genuine.

An old warrior stepped forward, scars across his face, his eye gone. "We prayed for you to return." Widukind growled, "Then you're lucky the gods weren't drunk today."

A boy approached, his fist clenched around a stick bigger than himself. “Will you lead us again?” he asked.

Widukind placed his hand on his shoulder and looked him straight in the eyes. "I don't lead you. I just roar louder than you. But together—together we are a pack again. And packs don't die quietly."

Men raised their fists, women screamed, children laughed. For the first time in a long time, there was more than hunger, more than fear. There was hope. Raw, fragile, but alive.

Widukind was back. And this time he wasn't alone.

They sat in a circle, the fire small so no Frankish scouts would see the smoke. Men with emaciated faces, women with eyes that had more steel than the knives in their hands. Children who didn't play, but listened, as if they were already part of the war.

Widukind stood up. He was no priest, no king—he was just a man with a voice that struck harder than a sword.

"You thought I was dead," he began, his grin crooked, his mouth full of defiance. "But look: I'm still alive. And as long as I live, Saxony lives too. It doesn't matter how many crosses Karl hammers into our earth."

A murmur went through the crowd.

"I saw it," he continued, "villages burned, fields destroyed, children drowned in Verden. And yet—you're still here. I'm still here. So ask yourselves: If Karl is so strong, why do we still have to breathe? Because he can't break us. He can kill, yes. But break us—never."

He laughed harshly, full of mockery. "They call him Charlemagne. To me, he's Charles the Hangman. And let me tell you something? Every rope he hangs eventually turns on his own neck."

The men laughed, rough, short, but genuine. Women nodded, children clenched their little fists.

Widukind spread his arms as if he were clasping them all. "I tell you: We are not dead. We are wolves. And wolves don't kneel. We eat, we bite, we howl—and Karl shall hear us until the blood rushes in his ears."

A chorus of voices answered, first hesitantly, then louder, then like thunder: “We are wolves!”

Widukind grinned. He had them back. Not as a host, not as an army—but as a pack. And a pack is enough to smell blood.

It began with small fires. Here a dozen men in the forest, there a few women in a barn, somewhere an old druid whispering that the gods were still listening. Everything was dark, always in shadow, for Karl's scouts roamed the land like wolves on foreign borders.

Widukind traveled from place to place. No banners, no horns—just his mouth. He spoke, and the people came. At first hesitantly, then like rivers finding water again.

"They beat us," he growled in a cave that stank of sweat and smoke. "They burned us, beheaded us, baptized us, betrayed us. But look at you: You're still alive. And that alone is an insult to Karl."

A laugh went through the crowd, quiet, dangerous.

In a dilapidated hut, between rotten beams, he spoke: "Every blow you endure makes you harder. Every death they take from us cries out for revenge. We are fewer, yes. But fewer doesn't mean weaker. Less only means: each of us counts twice."

And they believed him. Not because he told fairy tales, not because he promised victory. But because he himself looked like what he said: scars on his face, blood on his hands, his eyes wild like an animal.

The gatherings grew. Always secret, always fearful, but also with sparks in their eyes. A pack that was finding its way back together.

Some said Widukind was more than a man. A ghost, a shadow, a demon who couldn't be killed. Others said he was just a braggart with too much luck. But everyone came. Everyone listened. Everyone swore they would fight again.

Thus, the secret gatherings became something greater: the heartbeat of a people that should already be dead – and yet pulsed again.

But as loud as the secret meetings in the forest became, the emperor's fist was ever present. One only had to step out of cover and one could smell him.

Franks patrolled everywhere. Small troops with spears and crosses, marching through the villages as if through strangers' farms, as if everything belonged to them. They beat peasants if they didn't greet them, they took women when they felt like it, they hanged men if they looked in their direction for too long.

And everywhere stood the damned crosses. Newly erected, freshly carved, sometimes with blood still on the base. As a warning. As a branding mark.

Widukind saw them and spat into the dust each time. "Shitty sign of a shitty god," he growled, while his men nervously peered for the Franks.

But the worst weren't the soldiers or the priests. They were the traitors. Saxons who had been baptized and were now speaking for Charlemagne. They marched through the country with the Franks, pointing out hiding places and naming names. Brothers who kissed the cross and received silver in return.

"Look," Arno whispered once as they lay in the shadows. "That's Karl's true weapon. Not his swords. But our own dogs, which he keeps on a leash."

Widukind clenched his fists. His gaze burned. "Then we'll tear the leash from their mouths. But not today. Today we wait. For when we strike, it shall be so bloody that even their dead souls will regret the betrayal."

Karl's shadows lay everywhere. Like a net that was constantly tightening. But Widukind was a wolf. And wolves bite even in a net.

The night was black, only a small fire smoldered in the forest. Widukind stood before it, the men and women around him, children pressed close to their mothers. Above them, the wind rustled, and somewhere in the distance, dogs barked—perhaps Frankish, perhaps hungry.

Widukind stared into the embers. He remained silent for a long time. Then he growled, so harshly that even the silence heard.

"Karl thought he would wipe us out. He thought he would turn our land to ash, our souls to dust, our names to dirt. But look: From ashes, fire can grow again."

He grabbed a glowing branch and lifted it high, sparks flying into the night. "We are this fire. Still small, still weak. But wait until the wind blows. Then we'll burn so hard that even Karl's heavens will squint."

A murmur went through the crowd. Hands clenched into fists, teeth flashed in the flames.

"We have nothing," Widukind continued, "no castles, no treasures, no banners. Only us. But that's enough. Because we are hungry. We have hatred. And hunger and hatred burn harder than any wood."

He threw the branch back into the fire, the sparks shooting up like stars. "This is our vow: We will no longer howl quietly. We will burn. We will burn until Karl himself realizes that he doesn't own the land, but that the land is devouring him."

Then the men and women raised their voices. No singing, no prayer—a howl, raw and dark, that ripped through the forest like thunder. Children screamed along, their small voices shrill like arrows.

And Widukind grinned. Because he knew: The new fire had been ignited. Not big enough to overthrow Karl – not yet. But big enough that he would feel it.

The spark of resistance

They weren't an army. They were a dozen men, starving, dirty, with axes, spears, and knives who knew more rust than steel. But they had anger. And anger is sharper than any blade.

The Frankish patrol rode confidently through the countryside, five men, shields shining, crosses on their saddles, as if they owned every damn blade of grass. They laughed as they passed the burnt huts, spat into the ash field, and shouted jokes to each other.

Then the forest broke loose.

Widukind leaped first. No horn, no shout, just a scream that burst from his throat like an animal smelling blood. He tore one of the Franks from his horse and plunged the knife into his throat so fast that the bastard couldn't even open his mouth to pray.

Arno smashed another man's helmet off his head with his axe. Hroth grabbed the reins, bit the rider's ear, and threw him to the ground. The Saxons fell upon them like wolves, spears crashed, knives stabbed, and within heartbeats, the proud patrol smiles were nothing more than a gurgle in the dirt.

A horse screamed, reared, and kicked a man to the ground. But before the Frank could escape, he was already lying in the mud, Widukind's dagger in his back.

It wasn't a fight. It was a slaughter. Fast, brutal, bloody. A sign.

When it was over, the Saxons stood panting over the corpses. Blood on their hands, sweat on their faces, wild eyes. Widukind laughed harshly, spat into the grass, and growled: "There you go. The Emperor sends dogs—we'll turn them into wolves. Dead wolves."

The men roared, their voices hoarse but full of triumph.

The first blow had been struck. Small, but loud. A spark that struck the darkness.

They stood in a circle around the corpses, their swords still dripping, their lungs burning. For a moment, there was silence. Only the wind rustled through the trees, only the blood seeped into the ground.

Then Widukind raised his head. Like a wolf howling at the moon. A scream, raw, hoarse, full of rage. Not a word, just a sound. Wild, piercing, a sound that tears the heart apart and then puts it back together again.

Arno followed. Hroth too. One by one, their throats were ripped open, and soon it was no longer the scream of a man, but the howl of a pack.

It echoed through the forest, sent birds into the air, made horses shy, and made even the dead Franks seem to be listening.

"Do you hear that?!" roared Widukind as the howling died down. "That's what freedom sounds like! Not in laws, not in crosses, not in books – but in your throat, when blood is on your hands!"

The men hammered shields with spears and chests with fists. Children in hiding heard this and began to cry out in small voices. Women wept, not out of grief, but because for the first time in years they heard something that wasn't silence.

The howling in the forest wasn't a song. It wasn't a prayer. It was a message. To Charles. To his Franks. To his own people.

We live. We bite. We'll be back.

And the wind carried it further, out over forests, over rivers, into the villages where people whispered: “Widukind is howling again.”

The howling didn't stay in the forest. It crept out, like smoke after a fire, and the villages breathed it in.

A farmer who was just digging the meager field heard about it: "The Franks have fallen, by night, at Widukind." He dropped his hoe, clenched his fist, and for the first time since Verden, he felt not only hunger, but rage.

A woman holding her child in her arms whispered the news as she ground grain: "He's alive. Widukind is alive. He's fighting back." Her voice was shaky, but something long gone flashed in her eyes—hope.

Children ran through dilapidated huts, screaming the name as if it were a magic spell. Old men who had already lost everything spat into the ashes and muttered, "Good. Finally."

The land was sick, burned, and exhausted—but that little spark burned like liquor in an open wound. It burned, and it was addictive.

Not everyone was brave enough to stand up immediately. But they whispered. And whispering is more dangerous than Karl thought. Whispers creep into every hut, every stable, every heart.

"They slaughtered patrols." "They left their bodies like cattle." "They howled like wolves."

And soon it was no longer "they." Soon it was "we."

The people began to lift their backs a little. Not yet straight. Not yet proud. But just enough for Karl to realize: his rope was no longer pulling as tightly as it used to.

The Franks pretended they weren't afraid. They marched on, their crosses high, their shields shining, their lips full of prayer. But their eyes betrayed them.

At night, they huddled closer together. Sentries suddenly saw shadows everywhere. Sounds in the forest—a cracking, a rustling—made them raise their spears, as if demons were lurking behind every tree. Some no longer dared to fetch water alone.

One cavalry troop never returned. Disappeared without a trace. Only their horses were found, bloody and riderless. Another troop returned – but only one survived, with a wound in his face, and he kept muttering the same name: "Widukind... Widukind... Widukind..."

Priests tried to calm them. "Don't be afraid! God is with us! They're just savages, just peasants!" But the men weren't really listening. They knew that peasants don't wipe out patrols, don't make riders disappear, and don't howl blood-curdling screams in the nights.

One of the captains, a tough, scarred man, was asked at the fire: "Aren't you afraid?" He laughed harshly. "Not of men. But of shadows, yes."

And that was the truth. The Franks didn't fear open combat—that was their game. But Widukind had changed the rules. He was no longer a military leader who could be defeated in battle. He was a shadow, a wolf in the forest.

And that made her nervous. Very nervous.

The men sat around a small fire, their faces sooty, their eyes still wide with adrenaline. They had dismantled the patrol, made the forest howl, and now they waited for Widukind to open his mouth.

He made them sweat. He sat there, chewed on a piece of meat, spat the bone into the fire, drank from the jug, wiped his mouth. Then he grinned crookedly.

"Well, brothers," he growled, "did you see? Karl is bleeding. And if he bleeds, he might as well die."

A murmur went through the group, fists clenched.

"We are few," Widukind continued. "A pack, not an army. But wolves don't need an army. Wolves need teeth. And our teeth are sharp enough to feel even the emperor's dogs."

Arno laughed hoarsely. "We slaughtered them like cattle." Widukind nodded. "Exactly that. And you know what? That was just the beginning. A dozen francs today. A dozen more tomorrow. The day after tomorrow, their camps will burn. And soon Charles himself will realize that his empire isn't made of stone, but of flesh. And flesh rots."

The men hammered their spears against their shields, the fire threw up sparks as if it itself were rejoicing.

Widukind raised his cup. "Listen to me: We are few—but we are louder than they can ever be. We shout in their mouths, we bite their hearts, we laugh in their faces. And at some point, when they wonder why they can't sleep anymore, a word will come to them. A name."

He thrust the cup into the fire, and the flames flared up. "Widukind."

The men shouted along, so loudly that the forest heard it.

It started small. A few men from the villages who traded their hoes for spears at night. Old warriors who had long since believed they would never draw their swords again. Young lads, barely bearded, who said: "Better to die with Widukind than live with the cross of Charlemagne on their necks."

Widukind moved from forest to forest, and everywhere new shadows joined him. Hesitantly at first, then with sparkling eyes. They weren't armies, not battalions—they were packs. Small troupes that appeared in the night, struck, and disappeared again.

Farmers came with scythes, blacksmiths with hammers, hunters with bows. Even women stepped forward, carrying knives under their clothes at night. Some brought their children with them, knowing there was no longer a safe hut—only the fight.

And suddenly it wasn't just Widukind and a few crazy people. Suddenly it was a network. A network of wolves roaming the land. A pack that no longer just howled, but bit.

The Franks felt it first. Wagon wagons disappeared. Supply depots burned. A lone rider never returned. A priest found his cross thrown into the river.

Widukind grinned when he heard of it. "You see, brothers? This is the beginning. No army, no banners—just sparks. But sparks eat wood. And this land is full of dry wood."

The pack grew. Not orderly, not clean, but wild, tough, and bloody. And that's exactly how it should be.

The nights in Saxony were no longer silent. There was crackling in the undergrowth everywhere, small fires blazing everywhere, and someone screaming everywhere. A priest who never returned. A Frankish horse staggering bleeding through the villages. A storehouse ablaze while the sky was filled with sparks.

Widukind saw it and grinned, his teeth dirty, his eyes bright. "See?" he called to his men, "that's how it starts. A knife here, a fire there. A scream in the forest. Nothing major, nothing that Karl finds on his maps. But it eats into the bones of his dogs. This is worse than any battle."

The men nodded, laughed, and roared. And it wasn't just roaring—it was conviction. Every little blow was a triumph. Every dead Franconian was a sign. Every fire was a piece of freedom.

The people began to stir. No longer just whispering, but taking action. A farmer who stabbed a scout with a pitchfork. A woman who overturned the Frankish crosses at night. Children who threw stones when they saw soldiers.

The spark had ignited. And now it was more. Now it was embers.

Widukind stood at the edge of a burnt supply depot, his hands black with soot, and raised them to the sky. "Karl, listen to me!" he roared. "You can plant

crosses, build gallows, burn villages—but now we're burning back. And our fire will burn longer than yours ever can."

The men shouted along, the echo thundered through the woods.

And at that moment, Widukind knew: the war wasn't over. It had just begun again.

The last uprising

They came from the forests, from the swamps, from the dilapidated huts where they had lived like rats. Men with scars on their faces, women with knives under their clothes, boys with eyes that had grown old too soon. All with the same spark in their eyes.

Widukind stood on a hill, his hair disheveled, his hands bloody from the never-ending fighting. He spat in the dust, looked at them—hundreds, soon thousands—and knew: Now or never.

"Listen to me!" he roared, his voice scratchy like gravel. "Karl thinks he's got us down. He thinks we're just shadows, just wolves in the undergrowth. But look—we're still standing! And if we're still standing, that's not the end. That's the beginning."

A murmur went through the crowd. Fists clenched, shields raised.

Widukind laughed crookedly, full of venom. "They call him the Great. To me, he's just a butcher with too many knives. But you know what? Even butchers slip in blood when you throw enough meat at their feet."

Laughter, harsh, dirty. But behind it all: hunger.

"I tell you: We've whispered enough. We've bitten enough in the dark. Now we're no longer howling quietly. Now we're howling in the light. We're all going out, and we're going to show Karl that you can't behead a people without them spitting in his face!"

A roar went through the crowd, raw, bestial, so loud that the crows flew away.

Widukind raised his fist, blood dripping from his knuckles. "This is the call. Perhaps our last. But if it is the last—then the world shall hear us. We will not die silently. We will die roaring."

The crowd exploded, shields hammered, spears raised, and for a moment it was as if the whole country itself was crying out in revolt.

The days that followed were a constant stream of sharpening, grinding, and gathering. Everyone who still had teeth sharpened them.

The old men pulled armor from crates that had long since gathered dust, leather that was already rotting, helmets with dents from previous wars. They no longer fit properly, but that didn't matter—iron was iron, and pride was stronger than any mail.

The women forged arrows, mended shields, and sharpened knives. Some didn't sew clothes, but tied red scraps of cloth around their husbands' arms as a sign that they would die free. Others quietly handed their children into the arms of the elderly—one look, not a word, and everyone knew:*Maybe we won't see each other again.*

The boys practiced in the yard, using sticks instead of swords, but the blows were hard and full of anger. "We'll fight," they shouted, "even if we die!"

Widukind walked through the ranks, nodding, grinning, and mocking. "Well, look at you," he growled, "a bunch of scoundrels who think they're warriors. And damn it—that's exactly what you are!"

Arno laughed, Hroth roared, and the men shouted back, hammering iron on iron until sparks flew.

They had no horses in numbers, no shining banners, no golden crosses. But they were hungry. Hunger for blood, hunger for revenge, hunger for one last great bite into the emperor's flesh.

And there was more power in this hunger than in any army that Charlemagne ever raised.

They came from all directions. From forests where they had hidden like ghosts. From swamps where they had lived in the mud for months. From villages that were half-burned down but still had smoking chimneys.

Men with hazel spears and axes meant for splitting wood. Women with daggers on their belts, eyes that showed no mercy. Old people with crutches who nevertheless dragged their rusty swords along. And children—yes, children with stones, with sticks, with anger in their bellies.

They all gathered in a clearing as big as a field, and suddenly it was no longer a crowd. It was a people. Not an army, not an organized battalion like the Franks—but a thundering, wild sea of faces, voices, and teeth.

Widukind stood on a fallen tree, arms crossed, grinning broadly. He looked at her and knew:*That's it. That's all we have. And that's enough.*

Arno raised his axe. "Look at you!" he roared. "A pack as big as the forest itself!" Hroth laughed and spat in the dust. "If Karl wants us, then let him come—but let him know: We're not hiding. We're standing here. And we'll bite back!"

The crowd roared. Shields clashed, spears were raised, throats roared. It wasn't an organized roar, but chaos, wild, hoarse, like a storm that needs no direction.

And in this noise there was something that even Charles could not extinguish with fire, with crosses, with gallows: pride.

The assembly of the people was not a beginning. It was a cry. A thunder. A final*Here we are.*

In the morning, the crowd set out. No more sneaking, no more whispering in the dark, no more hiding in the undergrowth. They went openly, loudly, with bare teeth and sparkling eyes.

The sun hung low over the fields, and the Saxons marched out like a storm that could no longer be stopped. No banners of gold, no crosses, no shining armor—only scraps of cloth, red rags, skulls on spearheads. Drums of skins thundered dully, as if they were the heartbeats of a single, gigantic body.

Widukind led the way. Not on horseback, not with pomp, but on foot, spear in hand, mud on his boots. "Look," he growled, "that's how men march who have nothing to lose. And you know what's even better? Men like that are the most dangerous."

The crowd laughed, screamed, roared.

Farmers put down their hoes and fell into line. Women waved goodbye to the men, tears in their eyes but pride in their faces. Children ran alongside, some carrying stones in sacks as if they were treasure.

It was not an army – but it was a people that rose up.

And the Franks? They heard it long before they saw it. The thunder of drums, the roar of throats, the clang of iron. A sound that reeked not of order, but of chaos. Of a people who had decided:*We don't die in the shadow. We die in the light.*

The march into the light wasn't a parade. It was a threat. A final salute to Karl: "Here we are. Eat us if you can."

They encountered the Franks on the outskirts of a burned village. Smoke still hung in the air, the earth was black, and a few crosses stood mockingly above the charred beams. A small unit, not the entire army, perhaps three dozen men—heavily armed, but unprepared for a people marching openly.

Widukind didn't stop. No plan, no orderly formation. He simply raised his spear and roared: "There they are! Take their heads before they think they've bought our land!"

Then chaos broke out.

The Saxons stormed like a flood. Peasants with scythes hacked at shields, women jabbed knives into gaps in armor, children threw stones so hard they rattled helmets. It wasn't a battle, it was a daylight raid—raw, loud, merciless.

Arno cut a rider off his horse with his axe, Hroth jumped onto a Frank's back and bit his face until the man fell screaming. Widukind himself rammed his spear through a shield, knocked the bastard to the ground, kicked him in the mouth, and growled: "That's the sound of your prayer, dog."

The Franks shouted, prayed, and fought. But they were used to encountering orderly armies, not a pack of frenzied men unafraid of death. Lines broke, shields fell, horses fled.

In the end, they lay in the dirt, their shining armor smeared with blood and mud. The Saxons stood panting over them, covered in sweat, covered in scars, full of triumph.

Widukind raised his fist and shouted: "Look! We have defeated them in the light! No more shadows, no more escape! This is our land, and we will take it back!"

A roar went through the crowd, so loud that even the dead beams of the village cracked.

The first confrontation was a victory. Not a big one—but loud enough that even Karl had to hear it.

After the battle, they sat among the corpses. Victory tasted of blood, smoke, and sweat. The men grinned, women laughed hoarsely, children plundered helmets like trophies. But beneath all the cheering lay something else. A silence that weighed more than any shield.

Because everyone knew: This was just the beginning. A small blow, a drop of blood in the ocean. Charlemagne still had armies, thousands of men, drums, banners, priests, machines. And them? A pack. Strong, wild, loud—but finally.

Widukind chewed on a piece of meat, spat out the tendon, and said, "Enjoy it. Today we won. Tomorrow? Tomorrow the bill will come."

Arno stared at his bloody axe, muttering, "They'll hunt us down." Widukind nodded. "Of course. But better hunted and bitten than gagged in a stable."

An old man, barely able to walk, laughed dryly. "We're dead, we just don't know it yet." Widukind looked at him, grinning crookedly. "Perhaps. But if so, we'll die louder than any emperor lives."

The men were silent. Some nodded, others swallowed hard. They knew: this uprising was not a path to victory. It was a path to fire.

But therein lay the truth. A people that should have already been broken still stood. And if it fell, it would not fall quietly, not invisibly—but roaring, biting, spitting.

Widukind looked into their faces, battered, tired, and full of anger. He knew: They were all ready. Not because they believed they would win. But because they knew that silence was worse than death.

The night after the battle was silent. No more cheering, no more shouting. Only the crackling of fires and the crunching of bones in the forest as animals came to feast on the dead.

Widukind stood in the center of the camp, the men and women around him, faces hard, eyes burning. He held aloft a sword, blunt with blood, and spoke not like a chieftain, not like a king, but like one of them—one who knew that the morning might be their last.

"Listen to me," he growled, "we roared today, and Karl heard it. Tomorrow he'll come. With all his dogs, his crosses, his banners. Perhaps he'll wipe us out. Perhaps nothing will remain of us but ashes in the wind."

He grinned, crooked, full of venom. "But if that's how it comes to be, then let the wind carry us—into every ear, into every throat, into every heart. Then, a hundred years from now, they'll still be saying: Those bastards didn't die quietly. They roared until the heavens themselves were deaf."

Arno slammed the axe into the ground. "I swear." Hroth ripped open his chest, drawing a mark on his forehead with blood. "I swear." One by one, they stepped forward, placing their hands on the spear, on the sword, on the fire. "I swear."

The voices grew louder, like thunder. Men, women, children—everyone roared, screamed, swore. No prayer, no litany. Only defiance, only rage, only the will not to die quietly.

Widukind saw them, his pack, his people, his pile of broken pieces. And he knew: Perhaps this was their last rebellion. But it would burn. Burn like hell.

And Karl would see the fire.

The alliance breaks up

The rebellion had roared, but the howler had betrayed the wolf. Charles returned—with more men, more horses, more crosses. And with every defeat the Saxons suffered, the pack splintered apart like rotten wood in a fire.

Widukind saw it first in the eyes of his chieftains. The gazes grew longer, colder, more suspicious. No more loud oaths, no more angry fists against the sky—only silent calculations:*How many men do I have left? How many children are lying in the dirt? How long until my village has nothing left?*

A chief, who had roared during the last oath, now sat silently by the fire, his fingers in his beard, his eyes in the dust. "Perhaps," he murmured, "enough blood has been shed. Perhaps it's enough."

Widukind spat into the fire, the hissing louder than his voice. "Only death is enough. Everything else is just a pause."

But the men remained silent, and the silence was harder than any battle.

Another dared more: "Widukind, we bit. But we're not wolves anymore. We're bones. Karl breaks bones. Maybe we should talk before he breaks us all."

Widukind gave a crooked laugh, but it sounded more like a cough. "Talk? With whom? With the man who slaughtered our children in Verden? You're welcome to talk—but he only talks with the sword."

The men looked away. He knew what they were thinking. The pride that had bound them together for a moment began to rot again.

The first cracks were there. Still small, still invisible from the outside. But Widukind felt them. And he knew: cracks grow. Always.

It began quietly. No outcry, no cry for peace—just this damned whisper.

In the camps, in the huts, at the edge of the fires. Men leaned forward, their voices lowered: "Perhaps... perhaps it is better to follow Charles." Others nodded, eyes full of weariness: "He has the cross, he has the armies, he has the time. We have nothing."

Widukind heard it. He didn't even have to look for it—the whisper crept into his ear of its own accord. And it stank worse than any wound.

"If we kneel," murmured one, "our children will live." "If we fight," growled another, "we will all die." And then the word Widukind hated more than Karl's name: "Baptism."

A few dared to say aloud: "Perhaps this is the way. A little water, a little God in our mouths—and we'll live."

Widukind laughed, but it was an evil, cold laugh. "Yes, exactly. Baptism. Then you'll be alive. But no longer as men. Then you'll be just dogs, running through the village with a collar on, praying that the Lord will throw you a bone."

But the whispering didn't stop. It crept on, eating through the ranks, through the hearts. Men who once swore never to kneel began to bend their knees in the darkness—not before Karl, not yet, but before fear.

And Widukind knew: A people doesn't die only by swords. It dies first in whispers.

The meetings that once smelled of fire now stank of distrust.

The chiefs sat in a circle, shields in the dirt, their eyes hard, their voices loud. One roared: "We've lost too much! My fields are ashes, my men dead—I want peace!"

Another jumped up and spat in the dust. "Peace? With whom? With the butcher who baptized our children in Verden? You want to shake Karl's hand? Then cut it off first, you dog!"

Screams, curses, fists on tables. Old feuds they had once buried resurfaced like festering wounds. "The Engern have betrayed us!" - "The Westphalians are cowards!" - "The North Albingians are hiding while we bleed!"

Widukind sat there, looking at them, his lips curling into a bitter grin. "Well, look at you. A pack of wolves who suddenly think they're roosters fighting over dung. Why don't you invite Karl yourself so he can take your heads off while you argue over who owns the biggest piece of shit?"

Some laughed, others cursed, and still others were on the verge of drawing their swords – not against the Franks, but against each other.

Thus, what they had so painstakingly joined together shattered. Not a sword, not fire, not a cross from outside – but their own mouths, spewing poison into their own flesh.

And Widukind knew: This was worse than any defeat. A people fighting against itself no longer has the enemy outside, but inside.

Widukind jumped up, his fists on the table, his face red with anger.

"You damned bastards!" he roared, his voice so harsh that even the birds in the forest fell silent. "You cry for peace, for baptism, for Karl—but have you already forgotten Verden? Can't you hear the screams anymore, the heads in the dust, the blood in the river? Or have you all gone deaf from sheer cowardice?"

He spat into the circle, right between the chieftains' feet. "You want to follow Karl? Then go now. Kneel before him, lick his cross, eat his filth. But don't call yourselves Saxons anymore. Call yourselves dogs. And if you really want to be honest: call yourselves dead dogs who only bark when the master commands."

A murmur, a growl, hands slid to swords. One shouted: "Shut your mouth, Widukind! You're not the king of us all!" Widukind laughed coldly. "Correct. I'm

not a king. I'm just the bastard who still has enough balls to spit in Karl's face. If that's too much for you, go away! But don't be surprised if he shuts you up before you can even say your first prayer."

He looked at them, one by one, his eyes wild, his voice like a knife. "I don't need a thousand men kneeling. I need ten standing. Ten wolves are worth a hundred sheep. So make up your mind—today. Here. Now."

Silence. Only the crackling of the fire. Some stared at him with hatred, others with respect, still others with fear.

Widukind knew: He had insulted her, he had kicked her – but if they ran away now, it would be over.

It happened faster than Widukind could curse.

A tribe—small but loud—packed their weapons and disappeared. No farewell, no argument, just a brief announcement from their chief: "We've had enough. Karl will give us peace. You can continue to rage like wolves, we want to live like humans."

Widukind laughed, crookedly, venomously. "Humans? Call it what you will. I call it: dogs who put chains on themselves."

They went anyway. With women, children, and livestock. Some of Widukind's men shouted after them, others tried to stop them with force. Widukind simply raised his hand. "Let them go. Karl will show them what peace means. And when he's done, they'll wish they'd died here in the dirt."

Days later, the news came: the tribe had been baptized. Entire families had been drowned in the river, others "redeemed" with water in their mouths and a rope around their necks. Charles had promised them silver – but he had only brought crosses.

The news hit like a ton of bricks. Men cursed, women wept, children asked, "Why?" Widukind growled, "Because they thought Charles would bring peace. But Charles only gives graves."

And yet, the damage was there. Once broken, trust doesn't grow back like grass. The pack sensed it was weaker. Not because of Karl's sword—but because of its own betrayal.

Widukind saw it and clenched his teeth so tightly that blood seeped from his gums. "The first betrayal," he murmured. "And not the last."

The more men left, the wilder those who remained became. It was as if the betrayal only made the rest harder.

They sat by the fire, their faces emaciated, their eyes hollow, and swore: "Then we will fight to our last breath. Screw peace. Screw baptism. We will not kneel, even if we are alone."

Arno hacked at the wood with his axe, sending chips flying. "If I die, it'll be with a Frankish skull in my hand." Hroth laughed hoarsely and spat into the fire. "If I die, it'll be so loud that Karl himself will wake up."

Widukind looked at her, his grin crooked, but his eyes dark. "Good. But remember one thing: If you run blind, you stumble. If you only have revenge in your mouth, you'll eat the dirt faster."

But they barely listened anymore. They were broken men who had nothing left but their hatred. No future, no home, only anger as their last possession.

Some went out alone, raiding Frankish wagons, only to be hanged in the next village. Others attacked patrols, screaming Widukind's name before they died. Every blow hurt, but it also drained energy.

It was as if the pack broke into two halves: those who served Karl and those who preferred to fall screaming into the grave.

Widukind knew: Both sides were destroying his people. The traitors slowly, the desperate quickly. And he stood between them, angry, alone, unable to save either side.

In the end, Widukind sat alone. Not really alone—men were still there, women, children, entire families. But his mind felt like emptiness.

The pack he had built from broken pieces was split. One part had defected to Karl, with crosses on their necks and silver in their hands. Another part had run blindly to their deaths, screaming but useless. A remnant remained. Not enough to fight a battle, too many to simply disappear.

Widukind crouched by the fire, spear beside him, his eyes fixed on the embers. Arno and Hroth sat silently beside him. No one spoke, no one laughed. The silence was worse than any howling.

"Well," he finally murmured, "that's it. Once we were a people. A pack. Today we're just a pile of bones scattered in the forest."

Arno wanted to object, but he couldn't speak. Hroth just shook his head and spat into the fire.

Widukind grinned crookedly, full of venom, but also full of weariness. "Screw it. Then I'll just go it alone. I don't need an army to hate Karl. I don't need a thousand men to spit in his face. I only need one thing: my mouth and my sword."

He stood up, picked up the spear, and looked into the darkness. "They call me Widukind. But maybe I'm just a fool who doesn't know when to shut up. No matter. As long as I'm breathing, I'll keep howling."

And that night he truly became lonely. No king, no leader, no savior. Just a man with anger in his stomach, mockery on his lips, and a shadow behind him that kept growing larger.

Imprisonment and humiliation

It wasn't a heroic fight. No thunder, no scream, no final dance with a sword in his fist. It was dirtier, more banal. The way most wolves fall: not by the greatest sword, but by betrayal.

Widukind had fought his way through the woods with a few men. Emaciated, tired, eyes red, stomachs empty. For weeks, nothing but hunger, sweat, and blood. They slept in the mud, fought in the filth, and lived like animals.

And then came the blow. Not from the front, but from the side. A "brother" who showed him the way led them straight into the arms of the Franks. One of their own people, who believed that a few silver pieces and a safe village were worth more than Widukind's freedom.

"There!" the bastard had screamed. "There he is! The wolf!"

Before Widukind could react, they were surrounded. Heavily armed Franks, crosses on their shields, chains in their hands.

Arno and Hroth screamed, lunging at them like raging dogs. Blood spurted, a spear pierced Hroth, and Arno fell with a scream that shook the forest.

Widukind fought, yes—hitting, biting, spitting, tearing a man to the ground, crushing his skull in the dirt. But there were too many.

They grabbed him from behind, pulled him down, threw nets over him, and kicked him in the ribs until he was out of breath. One knocked the spear out of his hand, another tied his arms so tightly that his flesh turned blue.

He spat in their faces, bloodstained, baring his teeth. "Well, have you been waiting long for me? Feels good, doesn't it? Ten men against one hungry man—you heroes."

They laughed, but it was nervous laughter. Because even imprisoned, in chains, with blood in his mouth, Widukind was not a broken man. Not yet.

The chains weren't iron; they were humiliating. Iron only cuts into the flesh—chains eat into the heart.

They placed the shackles on him like a wild animal. Heavy, cold, clanging. The rings chafed at his flesh until blood glistened on his wrists. Every step was a clang, a reminder that he wasn't free.

They dragged him through the camp, pushed him into the dirt, and stepped on his back when he walked too slowly. He still laughed, hoarse and full of mockery: "Well, men? Is that your glory? A wolf in the net? Should I howl for you to make it sound more real?"

A blow to the face with the knob made his mouth bleed. But the grin remained.

At night, they locked him in a cage barely larger than a coffin. Cold, wet, with straw that stank of urine. Rats crawled over his legs, and he kicked them away, growling, laughing bitterly. "Well, brothers—at least you've got me some company."

Hunger gnawed, thirst burned, the blood from his wounds dried hard on his skin. But his eyes—those damned eyes—remained bright. Every Frank who passed by felt the gaze as if it were a blade. Some spat at him, others struck at the bars. But no one dared to look any longer.

Because Widukind was in chains, yes. But he didn't look like a prisoner. He looked like an animal waiting. And everyone knew: an animal in chains bites harder once it's free.

On the third day, they dragged him out. Not to kill him—not yet. Karl had other plans.

The chains rattled as they led him through the camp. Men kicked him in the back of the knees to make him stumble. Children of Franks laughed, pelted him with dirt and stones. Priests held up crosses as if they were banishing the devil himself.

They placed him in a square, in the middle of the Franks, in the middle of the Saxons who were already standing on the other side – broken dogs with crosses on their necks, their gaunt faces rigidly bowed to the ground.

Karl wanted a play. And Widukind was the main attraction.

"There he is!" cried one of the captains. "The Wolf of Saxony! The great rebel! Look at him—in chains, in the dust, like a dog!"

Laughter. Cheers. Whistles. A few Saxons looked up, recognized him, their eyes full of shame, full of longing—and full of fear.

Widukind grinned crookedly, bloody teeth flashing. He spat into the dusty light, turned his head, and growled: "Dog? If I'm a dog, then you'll eat all my fleas, you bastards."

A lance strike to the back made him stagger forward. Laughter grew louder.

But he stood up again. Straight. With chains, with blood, with dirt in his mouth – but straight. His gaze cut through the crowd like steel.

And those who knew him, those who still thought freely, felt something in their hearts. Shame, yes. But also pride. For even in chains, Widukind stood higher than anyone who knelt.

They placed him on a pedestal like a circus animal. The Franks all around roared, the priests raised their crosses as if they had captured the devil himself.

"Look at him!" cried one of the captains. "That's Widukind, the great leader, the wolf of the Saxons. Now he's just a dog on a chain."

Laughter, jeers, mockery. One threw a piece of bread at him, which landed in the dirt. Another spat in his face.

Widukind didn't wipe himself. He grinned, bloody lips, eyes full of scorn. "So, are you having fun? Feels good, huh? Ten against one, chains and knobs—you're heroes. I'd have your balls gilded, if you even had any."

The Franks laughed, but their laughter turned nervous. For he was in chains, yes – but his voice cut harder than any sword.

A priest stepped forward, his cross held high. "Bow down, Widukind. Bow down before the Lord as your people have done. See, they live—while you suffer."

Widukind laughed and spat on the ground. "Life? You call that living? Kneeling in the dust, mouth full of psalms, while you kick their asses? Why not call it dying with your eyes open?"

The jeering grew louder. Some Franconians shouted, "Hit him! Smash his mouth!" Others roared, "Make him kneel!"

Widukind raised his head, grinning broadly, despite the shackles, despite the blood. "You can knock out my teeth, you can break my bones—but my mouth will remain. And believe me: my mouth is harder than your entire empire."

The crowd went wild. Some laughed, some screamed, some cursed. But no one could look away. For even in shame, Widukind was not small.

They didn't just want to break him - they wanted to show him as a warning example.

The Franks dragged Widukind to a large cross erected in the middle of the camp. Priests in white robes murmured their incantations, and the crowd milled around as if it were a spectacle.

“Kneel!” one commanded.

Widukind laughed and spat blood onto the floor. "I only kneel when I pee."

A blow from a pommel hit him in the stomach, and he fell forward, gasping, blood in his mouth. Two soldiers grabbed his shoulders, pushed him down, and forced him to his knees.

The crowd roared, priests raised their hands, chanting louder. Another soldier pressed his head down until he was almost in the dust.

"Look!" cried a captain. "The wolf is kneeling! Before God, before Charles, before the Empire!"

Yelling, laughter, mockery.

Widukind slowly raised his head, his eyes flashing, his lips filled with blood. He growled: "You think this is kneeling? Screw it. I'm not kneeling. I'm spitting." And he spat, right in front of the cross.

The cheering died down, the crowd went wild, some Franconians laughed, others shouted angrily. A priest struck him in the face with a cross, the wood splintering on his forehead. Blood flowed, but his grin remained.

"Come on," he yelled, "force me deeper! You can bend my back, but not my neck. It will stay straight, even if it breaks."

The humiliation was meant to break him. Instead, it only made him louder.

The blows came, but they bounced off like rain on stone. Widukind's body bent, yes—but his mouth remained open.

A captain grabbed him by the hair and jerked his head up. "Say it! Say you submit!" Widukind grinned, bloody teeth flashing. "Submit? Me? I'd rather let your maids milk me than kiss your cross."

Laughter. First nervous, then rude. Even a few Franks couldn't help but laugh. But the captain slapped him in the face, again and again, until the blood flowed like water. Widukind spat it out, red in the dust, and just laughed hoarsely.

"Well? Do you feel great when you beat a man in chains? Should I stroke your balls so you feel like winners?"

The crowd went wild. Some wanted him dead, immediately. But Karl wanted something else: him alive, broken, as a symbol.

But Widukind understood: his body didn't matter to them. His mind was their goal. And that was precisely what he guarded like a treasure.

He later sat in his cage, his lips torn, his ribs broken, and muttered: "You can bend me. You can kick me. You can take everything from me—except my defiance. And as long as that remains, I am freer than all of you."

Defiance was his last weapon. No sword, no spear—only his mouth, his posture, his gaze. And he used them like blades.

Because a man who no longer fights can still bite.

After the mockery, after the blows, after the jeering of the crowd, night came. And with it, silence.

Widukind lay huddled in his cage, his ribs burning, his lips split, his body covered in bruises. The stench of sweat, iron, and rotten straw filled his nostrils. Rats scurried through the darkness, searching for crumbs, nibbling at the ropes of his sandals.

No more cheering, no more screaming, no more priests' voices. Only the distant sound of soldiers snoring and the crackling of the fire in the camp.

Widukind stared into the darkness, the chains heavy on his arms, and thought:*So this is what imprisonment feels like. It's not the pain that's the worst. It's the silence.*

But even in this silence, something glowed within him. No heroic song, no pious consolation. Only defiance. Only this rusty nail in his heart that said:*You have my body. You have my blood. But you don't have me.*

He laughed softly, a throaty, hoarse laugh that sounded more like a cough. "Screw you," he whispered into the darkness. "As long as I can still laugh, you're lost."

And so he fell asleep—not like a broken man, but like one waiting for the next day to give him another opportunity to spit in the mouths of the bastards.

The silence in the night wasn't the end of him. It was merely the pause of a caged wolf who still had teeth.

Baptism in Attigny

They led him like a circus animal across half of Europe.

Widukind was in chains, his hands behind his back, his neck sore from the iron biting into his skin. Franks led the way with shields, crosses, and banners.

Behind them, priests bellowed psalms as if trying to convince heaven that this spectacle was more than a stinking triumphal procession.

The streets were lined with peasants staring, whispering, laughing. Some spat at him, others bowed reverently—not to Karl, but to the man who still held his head high.

"That's him," they whispered. "The Saxon thug. The wolf. The one who spat in Karl's face." "And now? See? Now he's eating dirt."

Widukind heard this and grinned crookedly, his mouth full of the taste of blood. "You only eat dirt when you're alive," he muttered. "And as long as I'm still chewing, I'm not dead."

The Franks poked him with the butts of their spears, laughing when he stumbled. But he always got back up. Straight. Upright. Chains clanging, but unbroken.

The journey took days, weeks. Rain, dust, hunger. In every village, the same show: the great rebel, now a dog in a rope. But every time they paraded him, he stared back, his eyes like knives, saying:*You don't celebrate me as a prisoner. You celebrate me because I was your nightmare.*

And deep within him, mockery grew. He knew where this was going. Attigny. Karl. The big show. But he thought:*Let him. Let him pour water over my head. Maybe he'll drown himself.*

Attigny shone as if Charles wanted to bribe the sun itself.

The streets were scoured as if God himself were coming to the festival. Banners fluttered, golden crosses reached into the sky, and priests ran around like turned-on faucets, sprinkling each other with holy water. Everything smelled of smoke, perfume, and politics.

Widukind was led into the courtyard, his feet chained, the guards grinning broadly. Around him: halls of splendor, walls hung with cloths and symbols, as if heaven were to be bought with fabric.

"For you, Saxon pig," sneered one of the Franks, "that's more glory than you've ever seen." Widukind grinned bloodily and spat on the ground. "More glory, yes. But it stinks of shit just like your camp."

The priests rushed back and forth excitedly, as if rehearsing a play. Chalices were polished, the baptismal font gleamed, banners were straightened. Every movement a sign: This was not just a baptism. It was a crowning victory.

Charlemagne himself would be there. Charlemagne, the butcher with the cross in his mouth. He would personally bring the Wolf of Saxony to his knees.

The Franks whispered, laughed, and toasted each other. "He will be baptized. He will kneel. He will be our dog."

Widukind looked around, his chains heavy, his hands sore—and grinned. "Well, if you're going to so much trouble, I hope the water's at least cold. Otherwise, I'll put you to sleep during the whole show."

The men laughed, but nervously. Because even in this splendor, in this triumphant procession, Widukind looked like someone who wasn't broken—just pissed off.

The court was packed. Franks, priests, nobles, even a few Saxons who had already sold themselves to the emperor, stood shoulder to shoulder. Everyone wanted to see it: the great wolf, the rebel, the terror of the borders—broken, tamed, in chains.

Charlemagne sat enthroned on a chair so tall and heavy he seemed to have been carved from stone. Golden embroidery, a sword at his side, a cross high above him. An emperor who possessed everything—and yet still needed that one triumph.

Widukind was pushed inside, stumbled, and the chains rattled. Laughter erupted. "There he is!" they cried. "The Hound of Saxony!"

Priests held the cross aloft, shouted psalms, and the crowd cheered. Children were lifted up so they could see the great enemy lying on the ground.

A captain stabbed him in the back of the knees with his butt, and he fell to his knees. There was yelling, clapping, and cheering. Karl leaned forward, his face cold, but with that little twitch that looked like victory.

Widukind slowly raised his head. His face was covered in blood, his hair covered in dust, his lips chapped—but his eyes burned. He grinned, bloody, crooked, full of mockery.

"Well?" he called out loudly, his voice scratchy but clear. "Did you pay enough for the show? Is this what a wolf looks like? Then you've probably never heard a wolf laugh."

A murmur went through the crowd. Some laughed nervously, others spat, priests shouted, and Charles remained silent.

But one thing was clear: Widukind was on his knees, yes. But he didn't look broken. He looked like a man cursing everyone in the room—and grinning while doing so.

The priests approached like vultures, unable to share the carcass. Everyone wanted to be the one to "redeem" the Wolf of Saxony.

The baptismal font stood ready, filled with water that glittered in the candlelight as if it were a treasure. But Widukind saw only a bowl. "You have some nice soup there," he growled. "Are you hoping I'll drown in it?"

The crowd laughed, half amused, half indignant. A priest held the cross aloft, his voice like thunder: "Widukind, in the name of the Lord you will be cleansed today! You will cast off your old life and begin a new one. Your pride, your sins, your rebellion—all fall into this water!"

Widukind raised his eyebrow and spat out a red clot of blood. "If water is so powerful, why don't you wash away your stench?"

A murmur, gasps of indignation, cries for punishment. Karl simply raised his hand, and silence fell like a knife over the courtyard.

The priests grabbed Widukind by the shoulders and pushed him toward the basin. He knelt, his chains heavy, and they poured water over his head. Drops ran into his eyes, over his lips, and through his beard.

“In the name of the Father… of the Son… of the Holy Spirit…” they murmured.

The people cheered, crosses were raised, psalms swelled like a storm. For them, it was a triumph, a miracle, God's victory over the last rebel.

But Widukind grinned beneath the water. He laughed hoarsely as it flowed over him. Because he knew: This wasn't a miracle. This was theater. And he was the leading actor, playing the role—but never believing the script.

Water was still running from his beard, the priests cheered, the crowd clapped as if they themselves had tamed the heavens. Charles sat on his chair like a god on earth, cool, content, proud.

Widukind knelt in the dirt, his chains heavy, his hair dripping – and grinned.

"Well, Karl," he growled, his voice hoarse but loud enough for everyone to hear, "so now I'm a Christian. Feels damned similar to before. Only wetter."

A murmur went through the crowd. Some laughed nervously, others screamed in outrage. Priests made a crucifixion with their fingers in the air, as if they were banishing the devil.

Widukind laughed, hoarse and full of venom. "Tell me—was that all? A little water? That's what you burned villages, drowned children, and beheaded men for? If you'd just put the bowl in front of me, I would have dipped your head in and spared us all the fun."

Laughter and shouts mingled, the crowd roared, priests yelled. A captain stepped forward and punched him in the face, knocking his head to the side. Blood dripped, but Widukind only grinned wider.

"Just hit," he wheezed. "Every blow proves you're afraid. Afraid that a man with water in his hair is still more important than your emperor with all his gold."

Karl remained silent. But his jaw clenched, his fingers tightly gripping the armrest.

And Widukind knew: He had lost, yes. But he had spoiled their victory. With a mouth that, even in the dust, was louder than all their psalms.

The crowd went wild.

Some screamed in rage, priests shrieked as if the devil himself had entered their stage. "Blasphemy!" "Blasphemy!"—their voices erupted, crosses flung wildly through the air as if they could smother Widukind's mockery.

Others laughed. Rough, dirty, subdued. A few Franks couldn't suppress a grin while pretending to cough. Because that was Widukind's mouth: even in chains, it still caught sparks.

And then there were the Saxons. The baptized, the broken, those who had long since kissed Charles's cross. They looked at him with eyes full of shame. For

they knew: He had been forced, yes. But he still mocked, he still bit, he held his head high. While they had long since fallen silent.

A child in the audience, a Saxon boy, turned to his mother. "If he laughs," he whispered, "why are we crying?" The woman pressed him to her as if trying to silence him, but her eyes shone.

Karl raised his hand, and immediately silence fell over the courtyard. The emperor's words were louder than any jeers. He rose, tall, heavy, his gaze fixed icy on Widukind. It was clear to the crowd: the emperor had won.

But in their hearts, some knew: No. A man who was baptized and laughed afterward wasn't defeated. He was just wet.

The crowd was gone, the priests disappeared, and Charles was enthroned in his hall once more. Widukind lay alone in his cage, wet and cold, his chains heavy. The smell of incense still hung in his nostrils, mingled with blood and iron.

He pulled his knees up, feeling his wounds throbbing. He ached everywhere—ribs, hands, skull. Every breath was like a knife.

And yet he laughed. Quietly at first, a croak, more cough than laughter. Then louder, hoarse, rusty, but genuine.

"Holy shit," he muttered into the darkness. "So this is what salvation looks like. A little water over my head, a few psalms in my ear, and suddenly I'm clean. Ha! If they only knew what's still burning inside me..."

He continued to laugh, even as blood trickled from the corner of his mouth. He laughed at the priests who thought a few drops would turn a wolf into a lamb. He laughed at Charles, who believed an emperor's word was stronger than defiance. He laughed at the crowd that cheered while he silently cursed them all.

"They baptized me," he whispered, "but they didn't wash me. The dirt remains. The anger remains. I remain."

His eyes sparkled in the darkness, wild, defiant, full of venom. And the laughter continued to echo in his head. Not triumph, not victory—but a refusal to be broken.

Because a wolf remains a wolf, even if you pour water over its head.

A new name, a new life?

The priests stood around him as if they had just given birth to a new calf. Broad grins, eyes shining with self-satisfaction. One stepped forward, fat, red-faced, his voice full of pathos:

"Widukind is dead. Today a new life begins. Today your name is..." – he drew out the word as if heaven itself had to bless it – "...Karl."

The crowd cheered. Franks clapped, priests made the sign of the cross, even some Saxons stared as if they had seen a miracle for the first time in years.

Widukind laughed hoarsely, full of scorn. "Karl, yes? Of all people. You take my name and give me your butcher's. Nice symbolic. Should I drink his ass water too, so you can really celebrate?"

A blow to the face made him stagger backward. Blood poured from his nose, but the grin remained.

"That's your new name," hissed a priest, "forget the old one." Widukind spat blood onto the ground. "Forgotten? My name is engraved deeper in this land than your crosses. You can call me whatever you want. Dog, Christian, Karl—it doesn't matter. In the minds of my people, I'll remain Widukind. The one who didn't kneel, but spat."

The crowd murmured. Some laughed, others shouted indignantly. But something flashed in the eyes of some Saxons—a sparkle, a brief glimmer of pride.

Widukind thought:*You can take away my name. But you won't get the teeth behind it.*

They didn't just want to rename the wolf, they wanted to dress him up like a new pet.

A priest arrived with fabrics, fine, clean, and bright. White linen, shining, without stain, and a cloak with embroidery that cried out to heaven. A garment for a "new man."

Widukind stood there, the chains still on his hands, while they ripped off the old rags. Blood, dirt, sweat—everything fell to the ground, as if they were trying to dispose of the past.

"You see," said one of the Franks, "now you are purified. A new name, a new garment, a new life."

Widukind grinned, naked except for his wounds, and growled, "A new life? Feels like an old asshole trying to give me new pants."

They forced him into the clean fabrics, tying his garments tightly as if knots of linen could bind a man who would not break in chains.

The crowd cheered as he was led out. The great rebel, now in a white robe, like a lamb to the altar.

But Widukind felt the fabric, soft, light—and laughed hoarsely. "So soft," he murmured, "that you can hardly get properly drunk or fight anymore. Maybe that's your trick: putting men in clothes until they forget they once had balls."

Some Franks laughed, others turned red with anger. But the Saxons in the audience saw something else: a wolf in sheep's clothing—who remained a wolf nonetheless.

The hall was filled with smoke, incense, and chants. Priests stood in a row like puffed-up geese, their chests puffed out, their voices rising as if they were about to burst through the walls.

"A new life!" they cried. "A new person! Led from the shadows of barbarism into the light of God!"

They preached as if they themselves had tamed the wolf. Every sentence dripped with self-satisfaction. They spoke of grace, salvation, peace—words so sweet they tasted rotten.

Widukind stood there, in his white robe, his chains still clinking, his face full of mockery. He listened, but only halfway. The rest of his thoughts were on the fields of Saxony, on the rivers, on the voices of his people. And he thought:*If this is the light, then our darkness was more honest.*

One of the priests raised his hands, his voice trembling with pathos: "Behold, the greatest of all heathens is redeemed! Behold, the rebel has become a brother!"

Widukind laughed loudly, dryly, briefly silencing the hall. "Redeemed? Me? You just poured water on my face and dressed me in a dress. If you call that redemption, then my last drunkenness in the forest was holier than anything you'll ever preach."

The murmuring grew louder, a mixture of indignation and nervousness. Karl watched, motionless, his fingers grinding quietly on the armrest.

The sermons continued, about grace, about obedience, about the cross being stronger than any weapon.

Widukind just thought:*You talk a lot. But in the end, it's just spit that evaporates into dust.*

The sermons were still echoing when Widukind was led out – the new Christian, the supposedly “redeemed wolf.”

The Franks cheered. They shouted his new name, clapped, and toasted each other as if they themselves had conquered the heavens. For them, it was a triumphal march, proof that no rebel could hold out forever.

The priests were drunk with pride. "Look! The greatest of all pagans has found the light!" They raised the crosses as if they themselves had put the devil on a leash.

But the Saxons reacted differently.

Some bowed their heads, tears in their eyes. Not out of joy, but out of shame.*When even Widukind kneels,*they thought,*what do we have left then?*

Others whispered softly, as if they couldn't believe the spectacle: "Look at his eyes. He's kneeling, yes. But he's still laughing."

And there were those who saw hope. "If he submits," they said, "perhaps we too can finally find peace. Perhaps the killing will end."

Widukind felt their gaze. He saw the broken faces, the burning eyes, the empty mouths that refused to speak. And he grinned—a grin that was more defiant than joy.

He thought:*They cheer, they cry, they whisper. But no one understands. A name, a dress, a little water – that doesn't change anything. I remain who I am.*

And when I smile, it's not for them. But for myself. Because I know they didn't win.

That evening, they placed him in a hall, surrounded by Franks and priests, as if he were a trophy to be shown to everyone once more. The white robe clung to his body, wet with the baptismal water, which already smelled of sweat and iron.

One of the priests leaned toward him, his voice dripping with false warmth: "Do you see now, Brother Karl, how good it is to bear the yoke of Christ? You are born again. A man of peace."

Widukind laughed, dry and harsh, with a cough that brought blood to the surface. He spat red blood into the cup in front of him and grinned: "Reborn? I feel more like I've been drunk – everything's sticky, my head is pounding, and I feel like someone puked into my soul."

The Franks laughed nervously, some indignantly. The priest blushed and raised the cross higher, as if wood could silence him.

"Guard your tongue," he hissed. Widukind leaned back as far as his chains allowed and growled, "My tongue is the only thing I have left. If I hold it, I'm truly dead."

A captain stepped forward and punched him in the chest. "You're one of us now!" Widukind spat out blood and grinned. "If I'm one of you, you're shitty company. And that's the nicest thing I can say."

The hall fell silent for a moment. Then it erupted into a mixture of jeers, curses, and laughter.

Widukind knew: They wanted him as a model convert. But all they got was the old bastard in a white suit – with a mouth that bit even louder than ever.

That night, when the jeering had died down and the priests had gone to their clean beds, Widukind lay alone. The white robe clung to him like a second skin he couldn't get rid of. The smell of incense still hung in his nose, sweet and rotten, like a mockery.

He stared into the darkness. And for the first time since wearing the chains, a thought crept up that he hated:*Maybe it's over.*

He thought of the men who had fallen. Of Arno, of Hroth, of the faces he left lying in the dust. He thought of the fields turned to ash, of the children who had been drowned in Verden. All of that—and now he sat here, with a new name, in a dress that was meant to stink of purity.

*Am I still the wolf?*he asked himself.*Or just a cur in the emperor's stable?*

He clenched his fists, the chains cutting into his skin. His head sank forward, heavy, full of fatigue, full of rage.

But then he laughed. Softly, raspily, almost like a cough. "Screw it," he muttered. "Even if they put me in their holy robe, my mouth will remain my mouth. And as long as I can spit, I'm free."

The inner struggle was there, yes. A shadow whispering that he had lost. But above it all, defiance still burned. Small, stubborn, like an ember among ashes.

And Widukind knew: A spark is enough. Always.

Morning came, bright and blazing, as if the sun itself were celebrating the triumph. Priests streamed through the aisles, singing and praying, as if they had truly given birth to a new saint.

Widukind stood there, the white robe over his skin, his chains clinking. A new life, they said. A new name. A new person.

He grinned. Wide, bloody, full of venom. "A new person? Screw it. I'm the same bastard I always was. Just with better-washed hair."

The Franks laughed, but it was a nervous laugh. For they saw in his eyes that nothing had been washed away. No guilt, no anger, no rage. The water hadn't erased anything—only wetted his skin.

Some Saxons saw him and whispered, "Perhaps he's broken." But others recognized the glint in his eyes. A wolf in sheep's clothing, but still baring his teeth.

Widukind sensed it himself. The dress, the name, the priests—all theater. A play he participated in, but never believed. They could take away his old name, dress him in strange garments, sing their songs in his ear. But they couldn't change what burned inside him.

He was Widukind. The rebel. The wolf.

And even with his new fur, he still howled. Only quieter. Only more patiently. But still deadly.

The calm after the storm

The villages lay there like open graves. No screams, no songs, no children's laughter. Only the creaking of doors, the cracking of old beams, the calling of ravens.

Where fires once crackled and horns sounded, there now reigned a silence that ached in the bones. Men walked bent over as if their backs were broken forever. Women gathered wood, not for the feast, but for sheer survival. Children no longer walked; they crawled, hungry, silent, with wide eyes that had long since grown old.

Crosses stood in the village squares. Not one, not two—dozens. Some new, others rotten, all with ropes that swung in the wind like a mocking song. They were no longer a threat. They were part of everyday life.

An old farmer was chopping wood, saw Widukind as he passed, and simply murmured, "All quiet now. All calm." No anger, no pride—only resignation, as if the war were not lost, but forgotten.

Widukind felt the cold.*So that's it,*he thought.*No thunder, no outcry. Only silence. This is worse than any sword.*

He stood there for a moment, staring at the faces that no longer looked up. Once, they would have called his name, clenched their fists, and hoped. Now—nothing.

The villages were not dead. But they were no longer alive either.

It was silence. And silence consumed more than any fire.

Once, the forests were full of voices. Men meeting to make plans. Women lighting fires. Children playing as if even the trees were part of the pack. And at night, the howling—the howling of the Saxons, which Charles himself must have heard in his palaces.

Now? Nothing.

Widukind crept through the undergrowth, hearing only the crackling of his own footsteps. No flames, no songs, no wolves. Only the wind rushing through the bare branches and the cawing of crows feasting on forgotten bones.

He knelt down and reached into the ground. Cold, damp, heavy. No more smoke to suggest secret fires. No trace of gatherings. Only silence.

"A forest without a pack," he murmured, "is no longer a forest. Just wood."

He remembered the nights when the roar of his men made the forest itself tremble. He remembered the sparks in the darkness that glowed like stars between the trunks. Now nothing glowed.

The forests were empty. Not because Charles had burned them—but because the people had fallen silent. And a silent forest was worse than a dead one.

Widukind felt the silence creeping into him, like cold smoke in his lungs. But he coughed, spat into the dirt, and grinned crookedly. "Empty forest, yes. But even empty forests can catch fire."

Widukind saw them everywhere: people who lived like shadows.

Farmers who rose at sunrise and worked their fields even though the earth was scorched. Not because they had hope—but because they would otherwise starve. Faces sunken, backs bent, hands covered in calluses, eyes empty.

Women who met at the well barely spoke a word. Once, they would have laughed, gossiped, argued. Now, only silence. A nod, a sigh, then they dispersed again, as if even words had left the land.

Children no longer played. They sat quietly, their knees drawn to their chests, watching with wide, dry eyes as the world passed by. No laughter, no running, only silence. Children who were born old.

Priests stood at the churches, preaching about "peace," "humility," and "grace." People nodded. Not because they believed—but because it was easier. A silent nod was easier than resistance.

Widukind watched her, and it hurt more than any blow he had ever received. "A people can die," he murmured, "without a sword touching them. They die when they cease to show their teeth."

He wanted to yell, to shake them awake, to hurl his old defiance in their faces. But he knew it wouldn't have done any good. They weren't angry. They were just tired.

And tiredness is worse than fear. Fear makes you fight. Tiredness makes you silent.

He stood on the outskirts of the villages, observing them like a stranger in his own country.

The faces that had once celebrated him no longer looked up. Once, they would have called his name, surrounded him, as a sign of hope, as a sign that the fight continued. Now they looked right through him, as if he were a shadow among many.

He saw women at the well, filling their pitchers, silent, their gaze lowered to the water. He saw men plowing fields, silent, without the songs that once sung while working. He saw children not playing, but sitting quietly next to each other, as if waiting for someone to tell them how to laugh.

Widukind leaned against the post of a half-burned hut, his hands in chains, his face in shadow. No one came to him, no one whispered his name. The silence was harsher than any mockery.

"So this is what peace looks like," he murmured. "A land full of dead people who are still breathing."

Some saw him, fleetingly, with eyes that said it all: shame, fear, a remnant of hope they no longer dared to express out loud. And he knew: they hadn't forgotten him. They had simply learned to be quiet.

He grinned crookedly, full of bitterness. "You think Karl won. But as long as you look at me like this, you haven't quite swallowed it yet."

And in that look he caught, he sensed that his name was still there. Not loudly. Not shouted. But whispered. And whispering could grow.

Charles called it peace.

He had it written into every sermon, into every letter his scribes sent out into the world. "The Empire has triumphed. The Saxons have submitted. Faith has triumphed." Words like gold, polished and shining, but hollow inside like a rotten tooth.

In its halls, people drank, laughed, and sang. Priests proudly told of the great wolf who had now become a lamb. Nobles praised Charles as the emperor who made barbarians brothers.

Widukind heard all this and laughed hoarsely, deeply, like a dog with blood in its mouth. "Peace?" he murmured. "Peace is when no one has the courage to scream anymore. That, Karl, is not victory. That is silence. And silence is just the lid on a pot that will eventually boil again."

But Karl enjoyed it. For him, the silence was music. No more riots, no more howlers in the forest, no more burned patrols. Only silence, empty and cold.

Widukind knew: This was Charlemagne's greatest trick. Not the sword, not the cross. But the silence. He hadn't just broken bodies—he had stifled voices.

And yet, in this silence, Widukind heard something. Not cheering, not howling. But a whisper, quiet, barely perceptible. His name. Suppressed, swallowed, but there.

And that made him grin. "Peace," he mocked, "is just the mask you wear when you're afraid of the next scream."

Widukind looked more closely. Behind the empty faces, behind the bent backs, behind the kneeling shadows. There was something else.

Not big. No fire, no riot, no roar. But sparks.

A farmer who clenched his fist while plowing while the priest preached. A woman who overturned the cross by the well when no one was looking. A child who secretly wrote his name in the dust before taking his mother's hand.

Small gestures. Tiny acts. Almost invisible. But Widukind saw them. And he knew what they were: embers.

"You have trampled us down," he murmured, "but you have not extinguished us. Embers remain. Embers wait. Embers eat deep into the wood until the wind comes."

The Franks didn't notice. They saw only the silence, the kneeling, the nodding. They believed the war was over. That the land now belonged to Charlemagne.

But Widukind realized that Saxony wasn't dead. Just silent. And silence is only camouflage.

He smiled, crooked, bloody. "One spark is enough. And if one is enough, Karl, then you'll realize that your 'peace' is just dry grass."

The embers were there. Invisible to the victors. But obvious to the wolf, who never stopped sniffing.

The years would pass, and the world would believe the Saxons had been tamed. That Charlemagne had won. That the wolf in white had become a lamb.

But Widukind knew better.

He walked through the land, a prisoner in the garb of a Christian, and saw the people. Silent, yes. Broken, seemingly. But in their eyes lay something that said more than any prayer: remembrance.

He thought:*They can silence us, but they cannot make us forget.*

The calm that Karl celebrated wasn't the calm of peace. It was the calm after a storm. And after every storm, something remains: trees leaning crooked, earth torn open, traces that don't disappear.

Widukind was no longer a ruler, no longer a leader of a pack. But he was a name. A shadow that never disappeared, a whisper that went through the huts even when no one opened their mouths.

And he laughed hoarsely, bitterly. "You want me to be quiet? Fine. I'll be quiet. But my silence will be louder than all your shouting."

Because he knew: Sometimes a legend doesn't begin with a roar, but in the silence that follows.

And this silence wasn't the end. It was the beginning.

Legends and songs

It began quietly. No roaring, no howling in the forest, no oaths around the fire. Just a whisper.

In the huts, when the doors were locked. At the hearth, when the last light went out. In the woods, when the men pretended they were just chopping wood.

"Do you remember when Widukind attacked the Franks?" "Do you remember how he slaughtered them at night, like a wolf in a pen?" "Do you remember how he spat in the emperor's face?"

The voices were quiet, barely audible, but they went from ear to ear, from house to house. And with every whisper, the deeds grew bigger, harder, wilder.

A lost battle became a victory. An ambush gone wrong became a ruse. A bloodbath in Verden wasn't forgotten, but poured into the stories like fuel on a fire: "He swore it would never end, that he'd come back."

Widukind himself sometimes heard it as he walked through a village, in a white robe, in chains of "salvation." Children stared at him, men lowered their eyes, women murmured his name, barely audible but clearly:*Widukind.*

He grinned crookedly, inwardly.*All right then,*he thought.*If you need stories, make them dirty, make them bloody. Don't tell stories about redemption. Tell stories about wolves.*

And the whispering continued. And whispering eventually becomes a song.

The women carried the legend forward, without drums, without swords – with songs.

In the huts, while they kneaded bread. At the well, while they drew water. In the evenings, as they rocked their children to sleep. The voices were quiet, almost like a hum, but the words burned into their memory:

“Widukind, the wolf who never knelt, who bit, who roared, who came and comes again.”

Some sang of a hero who had gone far away and would one day return. Others whispered of a spirit who roamed the forests, invincible, invisible, stronger than any sword.

The children listened, wide-eyed, absorbing the words like milk. They learned his name not from sermons, not from books, but from their mothers' mouths. And so he was not forgotten.

Widukind himself once heard it while being led through a village. A woman held her child, singing softly, barely audibly, while the Franks stood beside her: "Sleep, my child, the wolf is watching, Widukind watches in the night."

He grinned, bloody, full of mockery, and thought:*Well, you see – they’re singing my songs while I’m still breathing.*

The priests didn't notice, or didn't want to notice. To them, they were lullabies. To the people, they were oaths.

And so the wolf they wanted to baptize became a song that could not be silenced.

It didn't take long for the stories to become bigger than the truth.

An ambush in which Widukind lost men was transformed in the songs into a victory in which he was said to have killed a dozen Franks alone. An escape in which he crawled half-dead through swamps became a fairy tale about a wolf who disappeared into the fog and reappeared invulnerable.

"He spat in Charles's eye and the Emperor blinked," they whispered. "He freed the children himself at Verden," others said, although everyone knew no one was saved. "He's still alive, he's waiting. And when the moon turns red, he'll come back."

Widukind heard some of this, and it made him laugh. Bitterly, but also proudly. "Great," he murmured, "now I'm a hero who's never lost. And yet I've messed up more battles than these singers have hair on their asses."

But he understood the trick: People needed lies. Not bloody truth, not the stench of burned villages. They needed stories that were stronger than their fear.

And so his defeats became deeds, his spit became swords, his name became a curse.

Widukind grinned. "Let them lie. Lies live longer than men. And if I'm going to become a fairy tale, then at least I'll become one that haunts Karl in his sleep."

And so he grew, not as a man, but as a myth.

The songs not only strengthened the Saxons, they also undermined the Franks.

In the camps, soldiers whispered as they sat around the fire: "Widukind is still alive. He was only feigning baptism." Others claimed: "He was seen at night in the forest. A shadow with yellow eyes." Still others said: "You can't kill him. He always comes back."

Even priests who had "redeemed" him found no peace. Some slept badly, swearing that Widukind had laughed at them in their dreams, wet with baptismal water, with bloody teeth.

A captain recounted how his men held onto their weapons at night because they heard howling in the wind. "Wolves," one murmured. "No," another said, "Widukind."

Charles knew he had defeated him—at least in the flesh. But he realized that the legend had more sting than the man. And that made even the emperor nervous.

Widukind grinned when he saw the fear in their eyes. "Well," he growled softly, "you wanted to baptize me. But instead, you gave me wings. Now you no longer fear me. You fear my name."

And a name, he thought, can cut deeper than a sword.

Widukind heard the songs and stories for himself. A priest once proudly approached him, smiling broadly as if he had good news. "Look," he said, "even your people now sing Christian songs about you. You have become part of the faith."

Widukind grinned crookedly, his face covered in scars, his teeth yellow with blood that never completely went away. "Christian songs, eh? Then listen carefully. They don't sing about your God. They sing about me. And that pisses you off more than anything else."

The priest blushed, stammered, and fled. Widukind laughed loudly, hoarsely, a laugh that cut through the room like a rusty blade.

Some Saxons told him their own stories: of battles he was supposed to have won, of miracles he never performed. "You slew ten men with your bare hands," said a boy, his eyes gleaming. Widukind winked, spat in the dust, and growled, "Ten? Screw it, make it a hundred. Sounds better."

He knew half of it was a lie. But he understood the mechanics: Lies taste better than the truth. And as long as people kept mentioning his name, he wasn't dead.

"They can call me Charles, they can dress me in white, they can force me into crosses," he thought, "but as long as they make my stories bigger, I live more than any emperor has ever lived."

And so he laughed at the songs – mockingly, but also proudly.

Because even if they glorified him, it was still his mouth that lived in people's minds.

The Franks wrote books stating that Widukind had been baptized, redeemed, and now a brother in the faith. They portrayed him as a trophy—the wild wolf finally tamed.

But among the people it was different.

In the huts, they didn't whisper about Karl, the baptized one. They whispered about Widukind, the Wolf. His old name remained, as if carved into the earth. No one spoke it aloud in church, but outside, by the fire, in the field, by the river—there it was the only name that still carried weight.

"Widukind is watching," they said when children were frightened at night.
"Widukind is coming back," they murmured when Franks rode through the village.
“Widukind does not forget,” they whispered when priests spoke too loudly about grace.

The name had become more than a man. It was a secret prayer addressed not to God, but to defiance itself.

Widukind heard it. And he grinned, crookedly, full of scorn. "You can give me new clothes, you can call me Karl, you can pour water on me—but in the end, you'll still call my name. And that is my victory."

For if a people remain silent and yet keep a name on their lips, then the war is never completely lost.

Widukind sat alone, his chains still clinking, his white robe clinging to his skin. A man, tired, marked, in shadow. And yet – outside, something lived that was greater than himself.

He heard it in the songs, in the whispers, in the stories that were passed down. Children who knew his name even though they had never seen him. Women who put him in their songs as if he were a protective spirit. Men who encouraged themselves by painting his victories bigger than they ever were.

He thought:*This is how a legend begins. Not with what happened, but with what is told.*

The Franks had thought they had broken him. But by humiliating him, they had magnified him. By baptizing him, they made him immortal. By silencing him, they gave him a voice louder than any sword.

Widukind grinned, bloody and crooked. "Very well. Then let them make me into a song, let them make me into a fairy tale. Let them say I'm immortal. A wolf who never dies."

And he laughed hoarsely as night fell upon him. For he knew: A man dies. But a name—a name lives longer.

Thus, Widukind became not just a prisoner, not just a rebel, not just a wolf. He became a legend.

And legends never die.

The shadow over Karl

Charlemagne sat in his halls, surrounded by gold, brocade, priests, and flatterers. Everything glittered. Chandeliers hung heavy as suns above his head, the tables bent beneath meat, wine, and bread. Men sang hymns, women danced, and the scribes recorded every gesture as if it were divine.

This is what victory looked like. This is what power looked like.

But Karl never seemed relaxed. His back was straight, as if he were a sword itself that couldn't rest. His gaze remained hard, cold, as if he were searching for an enemy in every shadow. Even in his jubilation there was a heaviness he couldn't shake.

For no matter how loudly the singers sang of the emperor's triumph, another song echoed in people's minds. The name Widukind – whispering, defiant, invincible.

Charles knew it. He heard it in the markets, in the living rooms, in the corridors of his own palace. Stories, songs, mockery—all underground, but all alive.

And so he sat there, amidst the splendor, with the world at his feet – and felt that somewhere, behind the gold, a shadow was bigger than himself.

He had won, yes. But he knew: It wasn't a victory that set him free. It was a victory that bound him to that name forever.

Widukind.

A name like a thorn in the side of an emperor.

It was like a poison eating its way through the empire. The further Charlemagne's banners flew, the louder the priests babbled about victory and mercy, the more the rumors crept out from under the surface.

“Widukind lives.” “Widukind is not broken.” “Widukind waits.”

It was said that he had secretly escaped from the baptism by a miracle. Others swore he had gone north, to the gods, and would one day return. Still others claimed he had become invisible, a shadow himself, wandering through the forests and watching Karl's every step.

The stories grew, spreading through the huts and markets. Even street vendors hummed songs in which the wolf once again howled through the forests.

Charles heard about it. Always. A messenger brought a report, a priest warned, a courtier muttered too much. No matter how hard he tried to ban the name, it came back.

Widukind was in people's minds. And that made him immortal.

Karl sat on his throne and gritted his teeth. "I have his land. I have his men. I baptized him." But quietly, very quietly, the hall whispered back:*But you don't have it.*

The empire was large, splendid, and powerful. But in the shadow of its walls lived a ghost. And this ghost's name was Widukind.

At night, when the festivities died down and the halls were empty, Karl stayed awake. The bed was large, the blankets heavy, the wine strong – but sleep never came.

He heard it. Not outside, not in the courtyard, not among the guards. But inside his skull. A howl. Deep, long, piercing.

Sometimes it was just a sound, an echo in the wind. Sometimes it was voices—men roaring, children screaming, women singing of Widukind, the wolf. And sometimes he saw him himself: naked, bloody, but grinning, in the middle of his hall, his teeth yellow, his eyes wild.

“Karl,” growled the dream wolf, “you baptized me, but you didn’t tame me.”

Then Karl woke up, drenched in sweat, his breath short. He reached for the sword beside the bed as if defending himself against a shadow.

The priests said, "Dreams are only weakness, Lord. Pray, and they will disappear." But Karl knew: This wasn't a dream. This was an echo. A shadow that followed him, even though it was clad in gold.

He had crushed entire armies, crushed countries, and overthrown kings. But in his nights, he was alone—and the wolf laughed at him.

That was the price of victory. Not peace, but a shadow in one's sleep.

At Charlemagne's court, some dared to play the game. Never openly, never loudly—but in the shadow of the columns, in the roar of the festivities, behind heavy cups of wine.

One chamberlain whispered to another, "They say Widukind spat in Charles's face, even at his baptism." A servant chuckled, "Perhaps he's still laughing in the woods." A young knight whispered, half-drunk, "I'd be more afraid of his name than of thirty Saxons with spears."

They laughed—quickly, nervously, like men playing with a knife. Because everyone knew: anyone who mentioned the wolf would invoke Karl's wrath.

And the emperor heard it. Always. A whisper, a giggle, a name that pierced the facade like a needle.

Once, during a festival, a singer stood up, foolish enough to start singing an old song. Not a Christian hymn, but a raw piece that reeked of blood and freedom. Widukind's name was heard, loud and clear, in the middle of the hall.

The hall froze. Karl stood up, his fist on his sword. The singer fell silent, the blood draining from his face.

"Never again," growled Karl. And the man disappeared—whether into the dungeon or the grave, no one asked.

But the message was clear: At court, the name was a curse. And yet, the more forbidden it became, the sweeter it tasted in the mouths of those who secretly whispered it.

Widukind wasn't just a shadow. He was also a mockery—and mockery eats away at kings more slowly, but more deeply.

Charles sought refuge with his priests. When the nights became too difficult, when the howling in his head wouldn't stop, he called upon them.

They came with crosses, with incense, with psalms. They spoke of victory, of grace, of salvation. "Lord," they said, "you have accomplished the work. Widukind is baptized. The wolf has become a brother. His name is blotted out."

Karl listened, his hands pressed to the arms of his throne, his jaw clenched. Then he growled, "If his name has been erased—why do I still hear him?"

The priests exchanged glances, murmured incantations, and sweated beneath their robes. One dared to say: "Sometimes, Lord, the devil remains in a person. But the water has cleansed him. Trust in God."

Karl slammed his fist on the table, making goblets crack. "Trust in God? I trust in my sword. And my sword didn't kill him."

Silence. No one dared to answer.

Because everyone knew: They had thrown the man down, yes. They had forced him, baptized him, broken him. But the name? The defiance? The shadow? They hadn't caught that.

And Karl sensed that even the priests didn't believe it. They prayed louder, afraid that Widukind's spirit was stronger than their psalms.

Widukind was not only in the songs of the people. He was also in the silence of the priests. And that made the shadow even heavier.

Widukind lived – no longer as a man of flesh, but as a ghost that everyone saw according to their own standards.

For the Saxons, he was the wolf that still howled in the forests, invisible, immortal, a fist in the shadows that would strike again someday. For the Franks, he was the devil in dreams, the rebel who didn't disappear even in baptism and white.

His body was broken, yes. His hands were sore from chains, his face scarred. But the image people carried within them was greater than any hall, greater than any cross.

You can't defeat a ghost. You can't beat it, behead it, or baptize it. It lives in whispers, in songs, in glances. It is everywhere and nowhere.

Karl noticed this. He could humiliate Widukind, he could humiliate him, he could give him a new name. But he couldn't erase him. Instead of shrinking, he grew larger. Instead of weaker, he became more powerful.

Widukind sometimes grinned himself when he felt it. "Well, then," he thought, "I'm just a ghost. A shadow in your minds. You haven't converted me. You've multiplied me."

And so it happened: Widukind was more than a man. He was a ghost.

And ghosts don't die.

One evening, Charles stood on the wall of his castle, his hands behind his back, his gaze fixed on the distance. The empire lay silent before him—villages, fields, forests, all seemingly tamed.

And yet there was this weight. Invisible. Heavier than any crown.

He thought of all the victories he had won. Of kings who had knelt before him. Of lands that belonged to him. But then he heard it—not outside, not in the wind, but in his head. A name.

Widukind.

He pressed his lips together as if he could bite the sound to pieces. But the more he suppressed it, the louder it became.

Widukind in the whispers of the people. Widukind in the songs of women. Widukind in the dreams of his own men. Widukind in his sleep, in his blood, in his bones.

He had won, yes. But the victory was not the end. The victory had only given birth to a shadow.

Widukind no longer lived as a warrior. But he lived as a thought. As defiance. As a curse that never left Karl.

And the emperor knew: A sword kills a man. But no sword in the world kills a shadow.

The shadow remained. And it was greater than any throne.

The memory of the Saxons

In the villages, when the nights were long and the fires were barely smoldering, the elderly would sit down. Crooked, toothless, covered in scars, half already in the grave—but their tongues still sharp.

They pulled the children toward them, their eyes wide, their knees to their chests, and began: "I saw him. Widukind. The wolf. He stood there with blood in his beard and fire in his eyes. He spat in Karl's face while the whole damned yard was silent."

The children gasped, holding their breath as if listening to a fairy tale. "He never yielded," said the old people. "They put him in chains, they baptized him, they dressed him like a lamb—but he remained a wolf. A wolf who bit, even with his teeth half-knocked out."

Some exaggerated, of course. They turned a small victory into ten. A single spear blow turned into a storm that he had unleashed alone. But that didn't matter.

The ancients knew: Stories don't have to be true. They have to burn.

And so they burned. In the minds of the children who had never seen Widukind, but knew him as if he were their neighbor. In the hearts of the women who had lost their husbands but continued to find strength in the name of the wolf. In the fists of the boys who secretly swore:*When my time comes, I will not kneel.*

The old men grinned, coughed, and spat into the fire. "Remember the name," they said. "Remember Widukind. For as long as you know him, he lives."

And the children nodded, their eyes glowed, and the fire in the stories was stronger than the fire with which Karl had burned down their villages.

Memory lived not only in stories, it lived in signs – small, hidden, but persistent.

On the doors of the huts, men carved runes that had nothing to do with the cross. A "W," crooked and lopsided, but everyone knew what it stood for. Widukind. The wolf.

Women wove patterns into cloths that looked like simple ornaments, but upon closer inspection, it was always the same symbol: a tooth, an arrow, a line that reeked of resistance.

Children scribbled his name in the dust, then quickly wiped it away whenever a priest passed by. But they had written it, and that was enough.

Some men secretly tore down crosses in the dead of night. Others placed stones in the shape of a wolf's head at the edges of forests. Anyone who saw it knew:*We are still here.*

The priests pretended they didn't notice. Or they saw it, but they couldn't burn everything. Because even if they destroyed a symbol, it would reappear the next day—on a fence, on a door, on a stone.

Widukind was everywhere without being visible.

He lived in the silent signs, which were quieter than a scream—but more dangerous. For screams could be stifled. But signs kept reappearing, like weeds in stone.

And so the name was passed on secretly. No song, no prayer—just scratches in the wood, patterns in the fabric, stones in the dust.

Silent. But indestructible.

Just as they secretly honored Widukind, they spat out Karl's name.

In the churches they had to sing, “Charlemagne, the chosen one of God.” But outside, when the priests were gone, it sounded different:

“Charles the Butcher.” “Charles the Dog.” “Charles the Christian King with Blood in His Beard.”

The farmers cursed while plowing when the earth was too hard: "Damned Karl!" Women cursed when the water in the well froze: "Karl should die in the ice!" And men, drunk, growled quietly: "Widukind would have bashed your head in if the gods had been fair."

They weren't hymns of praise, they weren't open rebellion. But they were memories wrapped in poison.

And the children listened. They learned not only Widukind's name, they also learned Karl's—not as a ruler, but as a curse.

So both remained alive: Widukind as a wolf, Karl as a shadow hunter who was repeatedly cursed.

Widukind grinned when he heard about it. "Well, Karl," he murmured, "your churches stand, your crosses shine. But your name lies in the peasants' dirt. Mine lies in their song. Guess which one will last longer."

Thus, memory lived on. Not in monuments. In curses.

Over the years, truth and lies became so blurred that no one could say where one ended and the other began.

The ancients recounted how Widukind had defeated entire armies single-handedly. That he had impaled three Franks at once with a single spear throw. That he roamed the forests at night in the form of a wolf, invulnerable and invisible.

Others swore that he had challenged Charles himself, man to man, and left the emperor prone – he had only lost through betrayal.

And then there were those who said he was never baptized, that it was a trick, an act, that he secretly continued to serve the old gods.

The children heard it, the women sang it, the men repeated it. And no one asked again:*Is that correct?*

Because it didn't matter.

Truth was dead. Memory lived. And memory is pliable, like metal if you forge it hot enough.

Widukind knew this himself. He heard the stories that were bigger than him and laughed hoarsely. "I was never as big as you're making me out to be now," he muttered. "But if it helps you, keep lying."

For lies, when they carry a people, become stronger than any truth.

And so Widukind was no longer the man who made mistakes, who lost, who mocked. He became the hero who never knelt, who always bit, who laughed forever.

Blood and sweat had become a myth. And you don't ask for evidence from myths.

Over time, his name became not just a song, not just a whisper, but a warning.

If a boy bent his back before a Frankish captain, his father would hit him on the back of the neck: "Stand up straight! Do you want to forget Widukind?"

If a woman at the well spoke too quietly, if she kept her mouth shut even though she saw injustice, the others whispered: “She has forgotten the wolf.”

And when a priest preached too loudly about humility, when he praised kneeling, there would be someone sitting at the back of the church who would murmur: “Widukind didn’t kneel.”

The memory wasn't a consolation. It was a thorn. A constant reproach that one was becoming weak, losing courage, forgetting.

Widukind wasn't just a hero, he was a benchmark. One by whom others were measured—and by whom many failed. But that was precisely what kept the fire alive.

"Don't forget the wolf," they said. And that meant: Don't forget that you can defend yourself. Don't forget that you're allowed to spit. Don't forget that you don't have to swallow everything.

Widukind was no longer just a man. He had become the conscience of the Saxons.

And conscience does not die with swords.

The children who grew up beneath the crosses no longer knew war. They saw no battles, heard no horns, and knew only the silence of their parents and the harsh sermons of the priests.

But they knew Widukind.

They knew him from songs sung in whispers when the night was deep. They knew him from the stories of the ancients, which contained more smoke than truth. They knew him from the runes they secretly scratched into the dust while the priests preached.

To her, he wasn't a man of flesh. To her, he was an image, a shadow, a wolf always lurking in the forest. A defiance that never died.

When they played, the Franks were the enemies, and one of them was always Widukind—and he was never allowed to die. When they fought, they said, "I fight like Widukind!" And when they swore secretly, they didn't say "by God," but "by Widukind."

The new generation carried it forward, not as a memory of defeat, but as a symbol of something greater than victory or loss: resistance.

They were too young to have seen the battles. But old enough to feel the legacy.

Widukind was their myth, and myths are stronger than any story.

The Franks had the land. They had the crosses, the castles, the taxes, the priests. But the Saxons had something that wasn't chained: memory.

It was invisible, silent, without banners or drums. But it was there. In every curse, in every song, in every name a child scratched into the dust.

And that made memory dangerous.

Because you can defeat an army. You can behead a man. But a memory? A memory never dies. It grows, is passed on, transforms, adapts.

Widukind had become a weapon—one not made of iron, but of defiance. One unseen until it suddenly struck.

The Saxons lived quietly, yes. They knelt, they plowed, they nodded. But in their heads they held a sword that Charlemagne could not break. And that sword was called Widukind.

He knew it himself. He sensed that he was no longer just a man. That he was sharper in whispers and songs than he had ever been with a spear in his hand.

And he grinned. Crooked, bloody, full of mockery. "Well, Karl," he thought, "you have my people. But I have their memory. And in the end, it will outlive your damned empire."

The memory wasn't comforting. It was a blade. And it remained.

Widukind – Rebel and Symbol

Widukind was no saint. He was no flawless hero carved from clean parchment. He drank, he cursed, he hit. A man who laughed as quickly as he spat blood. One who led his people because he was louder than everyone else, not because he was always smarter.

He was a bully, a mocker, a bastard with more defiance than reason. And that was precisely what made him dangerous. Because people don't follow the saints—they follow the fools who shout when everyone else is silent.

The truth was filthy: He lost battles, he led men to their deaths, he made costly mistakes. But the truth didn't matter.

Because the man became a myth.

Blood became song. Mockery became legend. Defeats became memories.

And so, bit by bit, he grew from a rebel of flesh and scars to a symbol greater than any sword.

Widukind the man could be captured. Widukind the myth could not.

And when someone talked about him around the fire, when a child wrote his name in the dust, when a woman smuggled him into her lullaby – then he lived on.

A man passes away. A myth remains.

And Widukind was no longer a man.

The people carried their history not like a banner, but like a scar.

Every burned farm, every child drowned in Verden, every woman who left her husband in the dirt—all of this was etched into the skin of the Saxons. Scars that never healed.

And Widukind was the greatest of them.

When a farmer worked the field with a hunched back, he felt it. When a woman carried water and thought of the crosses in the village squares, she felt it. When children played and secretly cried "wolf," it was this scar that continued to bleed.

Widukind stood for all of that. Not as consolation, but as a reminder that one fought back. That one bit. That one didn't die silently, but screaming.

The scars made the people harder, but also quieter. And in this silence, Widukind was like a thorn, reminding them: You have lost, yes. But you have not forgotten.

A people without scars is soft. A people with scars is dangerous.

And so the Saxons carried Widukind with them, not as a hero, but as a wound that never heals – and for that very reason never goes away.

From the beginning, it was a fight against windmills, only the mills carried swords and held up crosses.

Charlemagne came with endless armies, with gleaming steel, with an empire that spanned lands. And Widukind? He had squabbling tribes. Men with more pride than armor. A pack of wolves who often bit each other more than the enemy.

It was impossible. Everyone knew it. Even Widukind.

And yet he fought.

He stood up, roared, rallied, fell, stood up again. Again and again. Not because he believed he would win—but because he couldn't do otherwise. A wolf doesn't bark because he thinks he's going to bite the moon. He barks because he must.

And that was precisely where his greatness lay. Not in victory—but in resistance.

People saw that. They knew he was running into a wall that would crush him. But they also saw that he was running anyway, that he was mocking, that he was laughing, that he was biting.

That made him immortal: He had fought the impossible and failed – so loudly that the world heard.

Some men win and disappear. Others lose – and stay forever.

Widukind was one of the latter.

Widukind was no longer a man; he was a symbol. And this symbol lived in silence.

The silence in the villages when priests preached and no one contradicted them—but no one really listened either. The silence at the well when women drew water and their looks spoke louder than words. The silence in the huts when children asked, "Who was Widukind?"—and the old people just grinned crookedly and stared into the fire.

His name wasn't called out loud, it was whispered. Barely audible, barely tangible, but everywhere.

Charles could erect crosses, build churches, and have entire books written. But he couldn't break silence. Silence is more powerful than any sword because it is invisible.

And so Widukind was no longer a leader, no longer a king, no longer a warrior. He was a symbol lurking in every lowered gaze, in every fist unconsciously clenched when a Frank passed by.

Silence was more dangerous than uprisings. Uprisings could be burned down. Silence remained. Silence gnawed. Silence was the soil from which another outcry would eventually grow.

Widukind had become that ground. A symbol that didn't roar, but remained silent—and that's precisely why it never disappeared.

The Franks had won. At least, that's how they told it. They had erected the crosses, filled the churches, and pacified the country. The chronicles recorded:*The Saxons are tamed.*

But even in their songs of victory, the rift was audible.

Because they knew: As long as people whispered the name, the victory was not complete.

An emperor can defeat an army. An emperor can bring a country to its knees. But what does he do with a shadow that dwells in people's minds?

The soldiers told each other around the fire that Widukind roamed the forests in wolf form. Priests preached louder when they noticed that people believed more in the wolf than in their psalms. And Karl himself woke up in the night, drenched in sweat, because he thought he had heard a howl in the wind.

That was the fear of the victors: not the sword in their backs, but the echo in their ears.

Widukind had become a name, an echo, a mockery that would not let her go.

And the victors, who boasted, who drank, who prayed – they knew: they had broken a man, but not a myth.

And myths have no bones that can be broken.

Widukind lived on – not in flesh, not in blood, but in minds.

He was the wolf who crept through dreams at night, whom children heard in stories, whom the elderly conjured up with sparkling eyes.

No one knew exactly what was real anymore. Whether he had really killed so many Franks, whether he had really spat in Karl's face, whether he had really disappeared into the forest, half human, half animal. But that didn't matter.

In his memory, he had become larger than he had ever been in life. A wolf who couldn't die because he was no longer a body, but a thought.

And thoughts are tougher than flesh.

When a child said "Widukind," a priest trembled. When a farmer secretly carved a "W" in the dust, it was as if he had drawn a sword. When women sang around the fire, it was as if the wolf itself had howled through the night.

This was the new form: no longer a warrior, no longer a leader – but an animal in the memory that bit when needed.

Widukind grinned when he thought of it. "A wolf in the head," he murmured. "They eat harder than those in the forest."

And so he remained – no longer a man, but a wolf who roamed through people's minds.

Widukind had nothing in his hands when it was all over. No army, no empire, no crown. Only his name. But the name was enough.

Because he wasn't forgotten. He burned himself into the memory like a scar that can't be scratched away. He lived in songs, in curses, in silent signs. He lived in minds, in hearts, in anger.

And so he became more than a man. He became a symbol.

A symbol that one can lose – and still remain greater than the winner. A symbol that defiance is louder than prayers. A symbol that even a caged wolf can howl until the walls burst.

Charles had won, yes. But Widukind had created something stronger than Charles's empire: a legacy that could not be subdued.

He was the rebel who became a symbol. The wolf who never truly died.

And as long as someone whispered his name, as long as someone clenched their fist, as long as someone laughed in silence – Widukind lived.

A man passes away. A symbol remains.

And Widukind was both.

Echoes of the centuries

The monks were the first to try to capture him in ink. Quill pen on parchment, psalms on their backs, incense in the room.

They didn't write of a hero. No—they called him a heretic, a rebel, an enemy of God. A barbarian who opposed the light, who insulted the emperor, who mocked the cross.

“Widukind,” they scribbled, “the great adversary, finally broken, finally baptized, finally redeemed.”

But that was the irony: Even while they condemned him, they kept his name alive. Every sentence describing him as a demon was simultaneously a monument.

And so he remained in their books, between lines about saints and kings, a dark figure who never completely disappeared.

The monks wanted to bury him under their Latin, but they forgot that words are double-edged. Once written, they cannot be taken back.

They thought they were immortalizing him as a warning. But what they really did was give the wolf a second life.

For every child who later read the chronicles heard not only about Charlemagne's victory. They heard about the name Widukind – and asked:*Who was this bastard who stood against the emperor?*

And this question alone was enough to keep the embers alive.

While the monks in their monasteries busied themselves with ink and parchment, a different version circulated among the people. No neat writing, no Latin phrases—just fire, beer, and voices harsher than night.

There, Widukind wasn't the heretic. There, he was the wolf.

Farmers told it around the hearth, as the wind whistled through the cracks. "He came back," they said, "again and again. No one could catch him, no one could kill him. Not even the emperor." Singers carried him from village to village, with songs as crooked as their teeth, but burning with defiance: "Widukind, who never knelt, Widukind, who laughed, Widukind, who bites."

And the children heard it while their parents knelt in the churches. They learned both—the prayer to the new God and the secret prayer to the old wolf.

The stories grew with each year. The more the monks condemned him, the greater his popularity among the people. Because people don't listen to the victors. People listen to the voices that breathe fire into their hearts.

So Widukind did not live in the golden books – but in the dirty songs that were sung at night when the wine ran out and someone opened a mouth that was supposed to be silent.

And sometimes, when the chorus got too loud, someone would growl, "Quieter! The Franconians can hear us." But that didn't matter. The name was already out.

And names, once spat into the night, never die again.

Over the years, Widukind became a plaything for those who came after him. Everyone wanted a piece of the wolf—sometimes as a warning, sometimes as a role model.

The kings after Charlemagne said he was the barbarian who was rightfully subjugated. An example of how resistance is futile, how the empire endures forever. They portrayed him as defeated—and didn't realize that one doesn't mention a name without keeping it alive.

Later, princes came who suddenly saw him as a hero. "Look," they said, "our ancestors had courage. They had Widukind. We are of his blood." And suddenly he was no longer a barbarian, but a banner with which to conduct politics.

Poets wrote poetry, painters painted, preachers preached. One made him a heretic, another a saint, a third a freedom fighter.

And Widukind? The real Widukind, the one with dirt in his beard and blood in his mouth? He was long gone. But his shadow bent like a branch—and everyone bent with it.

But no matter how they twisted him, the core remained. He was the one who said "no" when everyone else shouted "yes." The wolf who bit, even with a rope around his neck.

And so it was reinvented again and again. Not because they knew it—but because they needed it.

The monks' books gathered dust in monasteries, but the songs remained on their lips.

They were sung in the markets when the wine was too strong. In the huts when the fire was small. On long hikes, when the men kept their footsteps in time with a refrain.

"Widukind, the wolf who didn't kneel. Widukind, who laughed in the dust. Widukind, who comes back."

The melodies changed, the words shifted, verses came and went. But the core remained the same: defiance. Show your teeth. Don't bend.

And every time a singer called the name, it was like a wolf howling in the night. Children laughed, women hummed, men clenched their fists—regardless of whether they were religious or not.

The Church banned the songs, calling them pagan and dangerous. But the ban only made them sweeter. The more priests tried to silence the voices, the louder they sang them at night when no one was looking.

And so Widukind wandered on – not on horses, not with swords, but in songs that leaped like sparks from village to village.

A wolf that howled as long as humans breathed.

The church didn't know what to do with him.

Sometimes she made him an example of victory: "See, the wolf was tamed, the heathen was baptized. This is how everyone ends who stands against God." Then again, she tried to incorporate him into her own story: "Widukind was enlightened, he became a brother in faith, he is a sign of mercy."

But the more they took control of him, the more he slipped through their fingers.

For among the people, he remained a wolf. Not a saint, not a model Christian, not a tamed dog—but the one who had spat and roared, who laughed even in chains.

The church preached: "Widukind has been redeemed." The people whispered: "Widukind has been betrayed."

The church painted pictures of his baptism. The people painted runes in the dust that spoke not of water, but of blood.

And so the tension remained. The church wanted to possess him, hold him, define him. But the tighter it pressed, the more he slipped away—and the louder he became in the songs it couldn't control.

In the end, he was neither the saint, nor the heretic, nor the brother. He was what people wanted: defiance with teeth.

And that is precisely what no priest could ever drive out.

A name can die if no one speaks it anymore. But Widukind was called again and again.

Centuries passed, rulers came and went, empires fell to dust. But somewhere, in a hut, in a song, in a story, the name was spoken. Quietly, defiantly, as if it were biting through the dust of time itself.

Sometimes it was a call to freedom: peasants rebelling against new masters shouted it as if it were their banner. Sometimes it was a threat: children were

admonished – "Don't forget the wolf, don't forget Widukind." Sometimes it was simply a curse against the powerful, who continually brought new crosses and chains.

He was an echo that never completely fell silent.

Even when generations forgot who he truly was, the sound remained. Widukind. Two syllables like two teeth.

And that was true immortality: not in the body, not in the blood, but in sound. A sound that continued to roll through the centuries, like a wolf that never stops howling.

Charlemagne's empire crumbled. Its walls crumbled, its chronicles faded. But the name remained.

An echo. Persistent. Unyielding.

Widukind.

The centuries gnawed at everything—at walls, at crowns, at churches. But they gnawed at Widukind's shadow in vain.

He remained. Not as a body, not as a ruler, but as a figure that ate its way through time. A shadow that looked different in each generation—sometimes a hero, sometimes a heretic, sometimes a wolf, sometimes a liberator. But always the same sting.

Charlemagne was gilded in the chronicles. His deeds, his churches, his victories. But how many peasants sang a song about Charlemagne? How many mothers whispered his name at the child's bedside?

Widukind, on the other hand, wasn't cast in gold. He was in the dirt, in the song, in the mockery, in the curses. And that's precisely where he survived.

A shadow is harder to grasp than a man. You can't bind it, baptize it, or kill it. You can only live with it.

And so Widukind lived on. Immortal because he was no longer flesh. Immortal because he didn't need an empire. Immortal because he lived in people's minds.

The immortal shadow over Charlemagne, over the Franks, over the centuries.

A man passes away. A name echoes. And Widukind echoed – like a wolf that never stops howling.

Between myth and truth

You asked a hundred people and you got a hundred Widukinds back.

The monks saw him as a heretic, a wild dog finally put in the chains of God. The singers made him a hero who won a hundred battles, even if he lost half. The peasants saw him as the wolf who never died. The Franks painted him as a demon who laughed even in the emperor's dreams.

And somewhere in between was the real Widukind – a man with dirt in his beard, scars on his skin and more defiance than sense.

But this man disappeared. Buried under writings, songs, curses, prayers. Everyone wanted a piece of him, everyone bent him to suit their needs. For the victors, he was proof that even wolves can be tamed. For the losers, he was the eternal beast that can never be caught.

The truth dissolved like blood in rain.

Was he a hero? A bastard? A traitor? A martyr? The answer was: everything, nothing, something in between.

Widukind didn't become a clear figure. He became a blurred figure, a face that changed depending on the mouth that told it.

And that's precisely why he survived. Because what's solid breaks. What's blurred remains.

Some portrayed him as a shining freedom fighter. A man without blemish, who always fought for what was right, who never doubted, never erred, never lost.

But that was bullshit.

Widukind was not a hero of stone. He was flesh. He stumbled, he screamed, he lost. He led men into battles that ended in bloodshed because he was too loud, too stubborn, too proud. He had blood on his hands—not just that of the Franks, but also that of his own people who followed him and died.

And yet they needed him as a hero. Because heroes are pure, heroes give hope. Heroes are easier to love than bastards.

So he was polished to a shine: the noble wolf who always knew what he was doing. The hero who fought for his people and never for himself. The man who pitted light against darkness, not dirt against dirt.

Widukind would have laughed at that. Loudly, snottily, full of scorn. "A hero? I was a braggart, nothing more. I spat when I didn't have a weapon. I roared when I was already lost. Call it heroism if you like—to me it was just defiance."

But that's the thing: Sometimes defiance is enough. Sometimes defiance makes more of an impression than victory. And out of it grows a hero—even if the man never was one.

Thus Widukind became the hero who never was.

And that is precisely what made him immortal.

Others told the story the other way around. For them, Widukind was not a hero, but a traitor.

"He was baptized," they spat. "He knelt before Charles. He tamed the wolf and turned it into a dog."

And they told it as if he had sold his people at that moment. As if he had betrayed the gods, the blood, the freedom.

But that was bullshit too.

Because yes, he knelt. But he laughed while doing it. Yes, he let water be poured over his head. But he spat in the mouths of the priests, right in the middle of their show. Yes, he got a new name. But among the people, he remained Widukind—and not a damned Karl.

A traitor? No. A prisoner, yes. A man who knew when the fight was lost, sure. But one who still grinned in the dirt when everyone else had already fallen silent.

The people who called him a traitor wanted a martyr—someone who would rather die at the stake than kneel. But Widukind wasn't someone who would burn quietly. He was someone who continued to curse loudly, even when they wrapped him in white cloth.

Betrayal is silence. And Widukind never remained silent.

So he wasn't a traitor. He was just a wolf whose teeth had been pulled out—but who still bit as long as he could open his mouth.

Behind all the stories, songs, and curses, there was ultimately a man. Not a hero of bronze, not a ghost of songs—just a human being with hunger, anger, and weaknesses.

Widukind sweated, froze, and bled like everyone else. He roared louder, yes, but often because he had nothing else to do. He wasn't invincible—he stumbled, he fell, he doubted. He wasn't a perpetual wolf, but one who sometimes whined when his bones broke.

And yet that's exactly what made him real.

He was not a monument, but flesh. Not a preacher, but a mouth full of scorn. Not a saint, but a bastard who refused to be silent.

Perhaps that was his greatest victory: that he never truly allowed himself to be made into a mask, even though the world repeatedly painted over him. The Church wanted the converted brother, the people the eternal hero, the victors the broken dog. But Widukind himself? He remained the guy who lay in the gutter, spitting out blood and grinning: "Screw it."

That was the man behind the mask. Not pretty. Not pure. But real.

And it was precisely this authenticity that made him stronger than any statue.

The truth is a weak dog. It dies quickly if no one feeds it. Lies, on the other hand, eat their way through the centuries, fat and tough as a rat.

Widukind became a victim of this rat – or rather: he rode on it.

People lied about him, making him seem greater than he was. They lied about victories where he had suffered defeats. They lied about cunning where there was only chance. They lied about greatness where there was only defiance.

And damn it – it worked.

Because a people doesn't need the naked truth. A people needs stories that warm them when the world is cold. Lies that give them courage when the truth hurts too much.

Widukind himself would have understood that. He would have spat on the whole spectacle and grinned at the same time. "The world can lie to you as you please," he would have said. "It doesn't matter if I killed a hundred men or just one—the main thing is that you sing my name."

That's the power of lies: They kill facts and turn them into monuments. They write books, they fill songs, they keep names alive that would otherwise have long since rotted away.

And Widukind, whether he wanted it or not, became immortal precisely because of these lies.

Because no one lives forever. But a good lie does.

Widukind would have heard himself in the stories and shaken his head.

"Slaying ten men with my bare hands? Ha! I could barely hold three beer mugs without dropping one." "Invulnerable in combat? Screw it, I have more scars than an old plow." "Never knelt? I've lain in the dirt so often I can still taste it in my sleep."

And then he would have laughed. Hoarse, bloody, full of mockery. That laughter that infuriated the Franks and emboldened the Saxons.

Because he knew: The lies were bigger than he was. But he also knew: They were useful. They kept his name alive, making him something the victors couldn't get rid of.

"Just laugh," he would have said. "Sing your shit. Paint me as a wolf, a hero, a demon, whatever. I don't care. As long as I don't disappear."

And in that laughter lay the truth. Not that he was really the way they portrayed him. But that he understood: Legends are stronger than men.

So he laughed. At the Franks, at the Saxons, at the chroniclers, at the singers. And most of all, he laughed at himself.

Because he knew: He was never as big as the stories. But the stories needed him – and that was enough.

In the end, it didn't matter whether he won a hundred victories or suffered a hundred defeats. It didn't matter whether he was a hero or a traitor, a wolf or a dog, a heretic or a brother.

Because the truth in the myth lay not in the facts, but in the core.

And the core was defiance.

Widukind was the one who never remained silent, even when he was lying on the ground. The one who laughed, even with blood in his mouth. The one who spat when others knelt.

That was the truth that survived the lies. Everything else—the numbers, the victories, the defeats—was mere gimmicks, smoke, theater.

People needed myth, but myth needed truth, that one core. Without it, it would be hollow. With it, it was indestructible.

And so Widukind survived not as the man people knew, but as what he stood for. Not for purity, not for victory—but for the naked, filthy "no" that one still screams out even in the dirt.

That was the truth in the myth.

And that was enough to last forever.

The last howl

The world had become silent.

The horns had long since fallen silent, the drums broken, the shields rusted. No more cries, no more bellows, no more pounding hooves through the forests. Only wind, only dust, only the creaking of old beams in huts that were more like memories than home.

The victors had long since celebrated other battles, other crowns, other empires. Charlemagne was gilded in the chronicles, his name was emblazoned in the churches, and his priests babbled of greatness and grace.

And yet – there was a residue in the silence.

No one saw him, no one heard him directly, but he was there. A twitch in the eyes of the elderly, a murmur in the songs of the women, a scratching of runes in the dust of the children.

Everything else was silence. But this silence wasn't empty. It was heavy, charged, like a sky just before a storm.

Because even if the world acted as if everything was over – Widukind was not yet completely silent.

He lurked in the silence. In the silence of the world, the wolf waited.

No army behind him. No banners, no horns, no men with spears at his side. Only him.

Widukind stood alone, just as he had always suspected. The ground cold, the air still, the sky gray as ash. A man without an army, without a country, without victory.

But also without knees in the dust.

He had grown older, his bones heavy, his muscles scarred. The scars spoke of defeats, not triumphs. But something still burned in his eyes—small, wild, indomitable.

The wolf was alone, yes. But a wolf alone is still a wolf.

And so he grinned, bloody, crooked. "You took my pack, you took my land, you took my name. But here I still stand. And I still have teeth."

He was alone—but being alone made him greater. For he no longer needed an army. He only needed the defiance that had always sustained him.

And in the silence that was enough.

Widukind felt the fatigue in his bones, the burning of years, the weight of all the defeats. But before he could shut up, he had to do what he always did: spit.

Not into the water as at baptism, not into the dust before the sword, but into the face of the victors – invisible, but hard.

"Charles," he murmured, "you have crowns, churches, and scribes who gild your name. But I have my mouth. And as long as I spit, you'll never be fully victorious."

He coughed, blood running over his lips, dripping onto the floor. He grinned. "See? Even my blood makes more dirt than your gold shine."

He thought of the priests who wanted to make him their brother. "Brothers?" he growled. "I don't give a damn about your family." He thought of the Franks who wanted him as a trophy. "A wolf is not a trophy. A wolf is a curse."

And he spat. A red drop on the cold earth. Small, inconspicuous. But in this drop lay the defiance of a people who refused to forget.

The final spitting wasn't an act of despair. It was a sign. A sign that he never fell silent—not even in death.

The night was silent. No wind, no bird, no sound except the pounding of his own heart. Widukind knew: This was the moment. Not for a victory, not for a battle—those were long over. But for the final sound.

He raised his head, despite the weight in his bones, despite the blood hanging heavy in his throat. He sucked in a sharp, cold breath, and then it burst from him: a howl.

It wasn't a beautiful song, not a heroic cry. It was rough, brittle, full of pain, full of anger. A sound that carried everything it was: defeat, mockery, defiance, blood, fire.

The howl cut through the darkness like a rusty blade. It echoed between trees, across fields, into huts, until children pricked up their ears, women closed their eyes, men clenched their fists.

The Franks heard it too. Some laughed nervously: "Just a wolf in the forest." Others fell silent, sensing: This wasn't an animal. This was something bigger.

Widukind howled, and it was his legacy. No sword, no kingdom, no crown—just a sound that ate into the darkness.

And in that howl lay a promise: that it could not be buried, broken, or erased.

It was his last howl. But it sounded like it would never end.

The howling didn't subside. It was gone, but it lingered, like smoke that won't go away.

In the huts, children stopped breathing, their eyes wide, as if they themselves had heard the wolf. Women held their breath, the water in the jugs trembled. Men nodded silently, as if an old oath had returned.

Far away, in the halls of the Franks, the guards felt a chill. One muttered, "Just wind." But the other shook his head: "No. That was him."

And Charles, in his palace, tossed and turned in his sleep, wet with sweat, because he heard the howling in his dreams.

The echo continued, over villages, forests, and rivers. It clung to the beams of churches, to crosses, to swords. It crept into people's minds, so deeply that it could no longer be extricated.

It was no longer Widukind's voice alone. It was the people who shouted along. It was memory that roared along. It was a sound that belonged not to a man, but to an attitude.

And this reverberation ate into time.

A man cries. A people listens. A legend grows.

There it was. The moment a person ceases to be human. Widukind's body was old, tired, and battered. But his sound was fresh, wild, and raw—and that made him immortal.

Because bodies rot. Names can be erased. But a howl that lingers in people's minds survives everything.

Widukind died sometime, somewhere. No golden death, no hero's monument, no sword in his hand. Perhaps in a hut, perhaps in chains, perhaps alone. But that didn't matter.

Because his howling remained.

It was in the songs of women who sang their children to sleep with it. It was in the fists of men who let it echo in silence. It was in the nightmares of the victors who could never quite shake it off.

And right there, in that sound, his immortality began.

Not in the flesh, not in the crown, not in the blood. But in the defiance that ate into souls like a poison that never heals.

The wolf died. But the howl was born—and no one could kill that.

Night swallowed everything—the villages, the forests, the rivers. But in the midst of this darkness, a sound still hung. Not a song, not a prayer, not a scream. A howl.

It was Widukind's last.

Rough, brittle, full of blood and anger. Not a beautiful swan song, but a sound that hurt like a broken tooth. But that's precisely why it stuck.

The children who heard it would pass it on. The women would weave it into their songs. The men would silently imitate it with their teeth. And the victors—they would hear it again and again in their dreams, until their own brilliance shattered.

Widukind was dead, yes. But his final howl lived on. It crept through the centuries, biting itself firmly into every succeeding generation.

And as long as someone somewhere clenched their fist, as long as someone somewhere spat in the dust, as long as someone somewhere didn't kneel - it echoed.

A wolf doesn't howl to eat the moon. A wolf howls to keep from disappearing.

And Widukind's final howl never disappeared.

It lives. Today. Tomorrow. Always.

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