

DAUGHTERS OF TEUTOBOD by Kurt Hansen

EXCERPT

Morning snuck into the kϕngull like a soft-footed invader, its shafts of misty light meandering through the cracks and crannies of Teutobod's hus and rousing him from his deep snoring. He saw that Gudrun was already awake, as expected. He knew that she and many of the other konas could be found standing in the river, washing off the sweat and smells of the prior day and night. Some of the men would be there as well, mostly those who had less tolerance for beer. It was common for männer and konas to share the river in the morning, though the groupings formed gender-specific circles that faced inward and kept a respectful distance one from the other.

Teutobod rose and headed down to the river to bathe. The aroma of beer brewing was pervasive. It was early, but the process of making beer was involved and took time. Those konas who brewed beer were called braufraus, maybe as a taunt originally, but the name stuck and became a title of some prestige over time. It was a highly valued and important position, a daily responsibility involving several steps. Their work began early, cooking the barley and soaking the bitter hops. After cooking down the grain, they mashed it into a paste, adding fresh water and hops and sealing the mixture in skin bags, which were then hung on bone hooks or wooden pegs on the walls of a brauhus. As the bags began to swell from the yeasts growing inside them, each was opened briefly to relieve the pressure. Occasionally, an old skin would give way under the expanding gasses, and the exploding Bang! could be heard everywhere, resulting in shrieks of startled laughter from the jungen. The yeasty, loamy smell of the brauhus wafting in the breeze was constant, like the rising smoke from the campfires. And like the demand for more beer from the men.

At the river, Teutobod found a group of his lieutenants and joined their circle. All the others feared and respected Teutobod, but he knew leadership was always subject to challenge. Teutobod trusted no one. That's why his bone knife, razor sharp and stained with blood, was in its customary place, sheathed in a deerskin holster suspended from a sash around his midriff. Still, he knew from experience that while respect may be born out of fear, it is solidified in fair treatment. So, he took

interest in the well-being of all the men of the sveit, and especially in the lives of those leaders and their skuldaliðs with whom he shared the close community of his kǫngull.

“You all had good reunion with your vifs last night?” Teutobod said with a lusty smile as he glanced around at the other men, temporarily interrupting their lathering and splashing. The nodding heads and smiling, bearded faces gave the answer. “You deserve it!” Teutobod said. “It was a good hunt!”

Torolf kept his gaze downward, saying nothing. “No success in your hus, Torolf?” Teutobod taunted him. Torolf was the one most likely to replace Teutobod as leader of the sveit, or at least to want to try. He was among the fiercest in battle and the most competitive in games of chance and hunting skill. His face was emotionless, his eyes focused on washing his loins as he responded, “My vif did not please me. I killed her. I’ll find another.”

The bathing stopped. All eyes in the circle of men were on Torolf, then on Teutobod. Torolf finally could no longer avoid the strong gaze of Teutobod, and he slowly met Teutobod’s blue eyes with his own steely stare. Everyone knew it was a man’s right to divest himself of a vif if she did not please him. But to kill her was not allowed, except perhaps in cases of adultery.

“What had she done deserving death?” Teutobod demanded. Torolf continued with the challenge of his eyes locked on Teutobod. “As I said, she did not please me.”

Teutobod had long known of Torolf’s penchant for aggression, especially towards women. He took his first vif, Sunga, during a raid on a tribe in the Moravian hills, and after the sveit got settled in that area, she regularly appeared bruised and bloodied, sometimes so much so that she was unable to do her work. The other konas had come to Gudrun to ask that she intervene with Teutobod on Sunga’s behalf, but Teutobod would not interfere in the affairs of another man’s hus. Sometime later Sunga bore Torolf a female child, and Torolf killed the baby in a rage, smashing its head on a rock and tossing it into the woods. Sunga was so horrified she stood in the midst of the kǫngull and slit her own throat with Torolf’s knife.

Torolf soon took a new vif from a raid on another, smaller tribe. Her name was Vilma, and for a time, he seemed to treat her with less violence. Luckily, Vilma had borne a son for him, and Torolf continued his generally benign treatment of her. What had happened last night to cause this sudden murderous behavior toward her, no one could surmise.

Teutobod responded, "Torolf, you are a strong warrior and a great hunter, but I think an evil spirit lives in you. I will have to decide which is more important. For now, you must bring Vilma's body out to the place of preparation." With that, Teutobod left the circle. All the rest of the men followed, leaving Torolf standing alone.