

THE TALE OF RATIBOR

EPISODE 1 - PRODIGAL SON

Daniil Shkurupiy

Original Screenplay

1. EXT. VILLAGE OF STARODUBSKOYE - EARLY MORNING

RATIBOR

Ratibor wakes up and steps outside. Silence surrounds him. He stretches, approaches a bucket, washes his face, and drinks some water. He looks at his reflection in the water.

2. EXT. FOREST

RATIBOR

Ratibor walks through the forest along a well-worn path. He comes across a bush with berries, gathers a few, and continues eating as he goes. Ratibor finds a snare and sees a partridge caught in it. The bird struggles to escape; Ratibor slowly approaches, grabs it, and presses it to the ground. The bird freezes. Ratibor pulls out a knife and slits the partridge's throat.

3. EXT. VILLAGE OF STARODUBSKOYE

RATIBOR, VELIMIRA, VSEVOLOD

Ratibor returns to his yard from the forest and hangs the partridge by its feet from a beam. The village is already awake; sounds of daily life fill the air—creaking carts, hammer blows, bleating livestock. Ratibor enters the house but finds no one. He steps out onto the porch and sees Velimira embracing Vsevolod. Ratibor smiles and approaches Vsevolod. Velimira lets go of the young man, and Ratibor and Vsevolod look into each other's eyes.

RATIBOR

Well, hello, my blood.

Ratibor hugs Vsevolod tightly.

4. INT. RATIBOR'S HOUSE

RATIBOR, VELIMIRA, VSEVOLOD, SVETOZAR

Ratibor, Velimira, and Vsevolod are seated at the table, eating lunch.

VSEVOLOD

... They taught us everything there! Languages, arithmetic, fencing! I learned so much! Now I want to go to Tsargrad and open a school. But while summer's still here, I need to return

to Romeia; my teachers promised to give me old books... And
it's so beautiful there!

RATIBOR

(looking at Velimira)

My dear, bring us some more bread.

(Velimira gets up, leaves, and returns with bread)

I'm glad your studies went well. But enough of wandering the
world like a stray dog. You'll stay here and help me. We're
going to visit Svetozar's daughter. If the gods will it, we'll
have the wedding today.

VSEVOLOD

But...

VELIMIRA

Vsevolod. Don't contradict your father.

Vsevolod falls silent. They continue eating in silence.

5. INT. RATIBOR'S HOUSE

VELIMIRA, VSEVOLOD, RATIBOR

In his room, Vsevolod struggles to put on a festive coat.
Velimira enters and helps him.

VELIMIRA

Don't be angry with your father. He only wants what's best for
you.

VSEVOLOD

But I don't need this! I...

Velimira places her hands on Vsevolod's cheeks.

VELIMIRA

Hush. It's up to him to decide what's best for you. And you
will present yourself proudly and accept the responsibility
given to you. Understood?

Vsevolod nods silently. Ratibor enters and approaches
Vsevolod, inspecting him.

RATIBOR

Are you ready?

VSEVOLOD

More than ever.

Ratibor places a hand on Vsevolod's shoulder.

RATIBOR

One day, you will stand in my place and pass on everything I've given you to your own son. So pay attention, without closing your eyes.

Ratibor looks straight into Vsevolod's eyes, and Vsevolod gazes back in silence.

**6. EXT. VILLAGE OF STARODUBSKOYE / INT. SVETOZAR'S HOUSE
VELIMIRA, VSEVOLOD, RATIBOR, SVETOZAR, ZLATOSLAVA**

Ratibor, Vsevolod, and Velimira make their way through the village to Svetozar's house. Svetozar waits on the porch, and upon seeing them, he descends to greet them, shaking hands with Ratibor.

SVETOZAR

(smiling)

Well, hello, matchmaker. By tonight, we shall be one family!

RATIBOR

(smiling)

The gods decide all things. I've brought the buyer, so show us the goods.

Ratibor gently pushes Vsevolod forward. Svetozar looks Vsevolod up and down.

SVETOZAR

Vsevolod, is that really you?!

(Svetozar claps Vsevolod on the shoulders)

You've grown strong! You haven't forgotten Uncle Svetozar, have you?

VSEVOLOD

How could I forget? Where is the bride?

Svetozar laughs.

SVETOZAR

Such impatience!

(to Ratibor)

Just like you in your youth! Well, come along! I'll show you
my treasure.

They enter the house. At the table sits Zlatoslava, dressed
beautifully. She turns her head toward the newcomers.

SVETOZAR

Here she is, my Zlatoslava.

Vsevolod smiles. Ratibor leans in to Vsevolod and speaks
softly.

RATIBOR

I've got an eye for the best, don't I?

Ratibor pats his son on the shoulder. Vsevolod enters the room
and sits next to Zlatoslava.

VSEVOLOD

Hello.

He takes Zlatoslava's hands. She looks at him and smiles.

ZLATOSLAVA

Hello, my husband.

Slavic folk music begins to play as the others enter the room.

7. INT. SVETOZAR'S HOUSE

SVETOZAR, RATIBOR, VELIMIRA, VSEVOLOD, ZLATOSLAVA

Slavic folk music plays. Velimira, Vsevolod, and Zlatoslava
are seated at the table, exchanging glances. In the center of
the room, Ratibor and Svetozar stand. Ratibor cuts his hand
with a knife and hands it to Svetozar, who does the same. They
grasp hands, sealing their bond in blood. Velimira watches
from across the table.

8. EXT. VILLAGE OF STARODUBSKOYE - EVENING

SVETOZAR, RATIBOR, VELIMIRA, VSEVOLOD, ZLATOSLAVA, CROWD

Slavic folk music continues. Zlatoslava and Vsevolod exit the
house hand in hand. Behind them follow Ratibor, Velimira, and
Svetozar. A priest greets them on the porch, and they begin
their journey together. The villagers cheer, showering the
newlyweds with grains and poppy seeds, joining the wedding
procession.

9. EXT. ANCESTRAL BURIAL MOUNDS - EVENING

SVETOZAR, RATIBOR, VELIMIRA, VSEVOLOD, ZLATOSLAVA, CROWD

As the sun sets, the wedding party arrives at the ancestral burial mounds. The priest is offered two chickens; he sprinkles blood on the mounds in a ritual prayer. He then blesses Vsevolod, Zlatoslava, Ratibor, Velimira, and Svetozar. Two maidens bring floral wreaths, which the priest places on the heads of the bride and groom. Vsevolod glances at Zlatoslava.

10.EXT. VILLAGE OF STARODUBSKOYE SQUARE - NIGHT

SVETOZAR, RATIBOR, VELIMIRA, VSEVOLOD, ZLATOSLAVA, CROWD

Slavic folk music fills the air. A great bonfire burns, surrounded by tables of food. Everyone eats, drinks, and revels. Young men and women dance around the fire, playing instruments. At the main table sit Vsevolod and Zlatoslava, with Ratibor, Velimira, and Svetozar at their sides. Vsevolod stares into the flames, drinks from his cup, and stands to leave. Ratibor grabs his arm.

RATIBOR

Where are you going?

VSEVOLOD

To relieve myself.

Ratibor lets go of Vsevolod's arm and watches him walk away. Svetozar follows, stopping by Ratibor and placing his hands on his shoulders, leaning down to speak.

SVETOZAR

Why so gloomy, matchmaker? Or did you finally realize there's no escaping me now?

Ratibor smirks as Svetozar watches Vsevolod leave.

SVETOZAR

You'll get used to it. Just give him some time. And for now, drown all your sorrows in honey. Today isn't a day to be sad!

Svetozar picks up a goblet from the table and hands it to Ratibor.

RATIBOR

So be it.

Ratibor drains the goblet. Svetozar smiles and leaves to follow Vsevolod.

11. EXT. Village of Starodubskoye - SQUARE
VSEVOLOD, SVETOZAR

Vsevolod walks away from the fire towards the houses. Svetozar follows behind him.

SVETOZAR

Wait!

Vsevolod stops and turns at the call. Svetozar catches up to him.

SVETOZAR

Let's take a walk and have a chat.

VSEVOLOD

Thanks, but I'm not really in the mood..

Svetozar starts walking.

SVETOZAR

Come on, you'll have plenty of time to walk alone. The night is long.

Vsevolod stands still for a few seconds, watching him, then joins. Svetozar and Vsevolod silently walk away from the fire.

12. EXT. Village of Starodubskoye - EDGE (BURNT HOUSE)
VSEVOLOD, SVETOZAR

Vsevolod and Svetozar reach the edge of the village. The sounds of the celebration are faintly heard in the distance.

VSEVOLOD

Where are we going?

SVETOZAR

I have a place to clear my head.. I'm glad that Zlatoslava is now your wife. You're a good man.

VSEVOLOD

You don't know me.

SVETOZAR

I can see it in your eyes. They tell far more about a person than a fine cloak or a noble horse. And, most importantly, eyes never lie.

VSEVOLOD

My teachers would disagree with you.

SVETOZAR

And that wouldn't end well for them.

VSEVOLOD

Or for you. Most of them are skilled warriors.

Svetozar looks at Vsevolod and smirks.

SVETOZAR

Maybe. Too bad we'll never find out.

There's a brief silence.

VSEVOLOD

In Romeia, a man's worth is measured by his boots, his cloak, and his sack of gold.

SVETOZAR

Just like in Tsargrad.

VSEVOLOD

Yes. But there's a difference - if you're educated, both merchants and emperors, commoners and nobles alike, must take you seriously there. Are we close?

SVETOZAR

Almost there. And where exactly is this Romeia of yours? Never heard of such a place.

Vsevolod smiles.

VSEVOLOD

(excited)

It's a city. The largest among the island cities of the distant south. To get there, one must travel half the world and cross the small sea. Romeia's bay is protected by coral

reefs, and the houses are carved right into the cliffs. There's no city more beautiful in the world, and I hope you get the chance to see it one day.

SVETOZAR

Thank you, but the beauties around here are enough for me.

Vsevolod and Svetozar reach the outskirts of the village near a burnt-down house.

SVETOZAR

Afraid of heights?

VSEVOLOD

I don't think so.

SVETOZAR

Well, then follow me.

Svetozar skillfully climbs up a log onto the roof of the house. Vsevolod climbs onto the log and cautiously walks across it, balancing. Svetozar extends a hand to help him over the last part. They sit on the roof, overlooking a vast field of rye, bathed in starlight. The wind stirs waves through the field. They sit in silence for a few moments, then Svetozar speaks.

SVETOZAR

I understand your sorrow. You're young, your blood runs hot, and you want to know what you're worth. But here you are, bound to family and everyday troubles. Or am I wrong? Maybe you simply don't care for my daughter?

VESEVOLOD

Oh, no. Zlataslava is wonderful. But... I didn't spend nine years studying in a foreign land just to wither away in the backcountry.

Svetozar smiles.

SVETOZAR

When I was a bit younger than you, I wanted to become a minstrel.

VESEVOLOD

(surprised)

You?

SVETOZAR

Don't be surprised. I used to play the flute well... But then my father died, and everything he had became mine. A house to maintain, animals to feed - and only a few coins in my pouch.

VESEVOLOD

And what did you do?

SVETOZAR

What could a boy who only knew how to play the flute and wield a sword do? I joined the militia. My point is, the right to choose is granted to only a few. Most have to act according to circumstances.

VESEVOLOD

Is that why you came after me - to teach me wisdom?

Svetozar lowers his gaze.

SVETOZAR

No. I have a request.

Vesevolod turns to him.

VESEVOLOD

What is it?

SVETOZAR

Zlataaslava... she has no one but me. And the time is coming to an end for both your father and me.

(Svetozar places a hand on Vesevolod's shoulder and looks him in the eyes.)

You'll make a good husband. Please, take care of her.

(Vesevolod looks into Svetozar's eyes and nods silently.
Svetozar smiles and pats Vesevolod's shoulder.)

SVETOZAR

Good, that's good.

Svetozar falls silent, his smile fading as he glances back toward the bonfire.

VESEVOLOD

What is it?

SVETOZAR

The music stopped. Let's go!

Svetozar jumps down to the ground gracefully, stands up, and runs toward the fire. Vesevolod clumsily lands, stands up, and follows.

13. EXT. VILLAGE SQUARE, STARODUBSKOYE, NIGHT

RATIBOR, VELIMIRA, ZLATOSLAVA, VESEVOLOD, SVETOZAR, MESSENGER

A messenger sits at the edge of a table, drinking water greedily. Nearby, Ratibor sits on the same bench. Velimira stands slightly behind him, Zlataslava behind her. The rest of the villagers stand still, watching the messenger.

RATIBOR

Drink, drink. There's no need to hurry.

Svetozar rushes over to the fire, with Vesevolod close behind.

SVETOZAR

(breathless)

What's going on?

RATIBOR

The Tsar sent a messenger. Urgent orders.

SVETOZAR

What does he want?

RATIBOR

We'll find out now.

Ratibor turns his head to the messenger. The messenger puts his cup on the table, stands up, and takes out a packet with the royal seal. The messenger hands the packet to Ratibor, who examines the seal, breaks it, and hands the scroll back to the messenger. The messenger straightens up, unrolls it, and begins to read.

MESSENGER

I, Vyacheslav the Great, order: gather men who have held a

sword at least once, and head immediately to Stary Yar. Find the bandits there and retrieve the stolen royal tribute. Leave no one alive.

Ratibor sits, arms resting on his knees. Silence falls as all eyes turn to him, except for Vesevolod, who gazes at Zlataslava peeking over Velimira's shoulder.

RATIBOR

(turning to the messenger)

Today my son marries. Join our feast.

The messenger nods gratefully. Ratibor stands and addresses the villagers.

RATIBOR

You've heard the Tsar's command! We march at dawn. But for now, sing, drink, and dance. There's time to celebrate!

Ratibor raises his cup, and the villagers do the same, shouting in approval. Music resumes, and everyone returns to their places, the merriment resuming. Ratibor turns to Velimira.

RATIBOR

Make sure the celebration is grand.

VELIMIRA

As you wish. Vesevolod, Zlataslava, come.

Vesevolod approaches Ratibor.

VESEVOLOD

Father, I can help.

RATIBOR

It's your wedding day - go and drink. Leave the rest to us.

VELIMIRA

(calling out)

Vesevolod!

Vesevolod follows Velimira, glancing back at Ratibor. Ratibor joins Svetozar, and they walk together.

RATIBOR

Where have you been so long?

SVETOZAR

Strolling, chatting. But that's not what we need to talk about.

Ratibor and Svetozar walk to the largest house in the village. Ratibor knocks on the door. A small rectangular window opens, and a pair of eyes look at Ratibor, then the door opens. A guard with a torch stands in the doorway. Ratibor approaches the guard and takes the torch holder.

RATIBOR

(to the guard)

Stay here. Let no one in.

14. INT. STARODUBSKOYE (STORAGE ROOM)

RATIBOR, SVETOZAR

Ratibor enters the house, followed by Svetozar, who closes the door behind him. Ratibor approaches a table by the wall and lights a second torch on it. Svetozar sits at the table, while Ratibor walks to a massive wooden shelf at the end of the room.

SVETOZAR

Do you know anything about Old Yar?

RATIBOR

It's a small border village.

Ratibor brings the torch closer and pulls one scroll from many made of birch bark.

RATIBOR

Few people, barely enough food, and hardly any young folk. It was like that seven years ago.

Ratibor returns to the table, places his torch on a shelf in the adjacent wall, and unrolls the scroll, which turns out to be a map. Ratibor sits across from Svetozar.

RATIBOR

(pointing to the map)

There it is, Old Yar. Beyond it lies the impassable forest.

SVETOZAR

Something's off... Why send us there when other villages are much closer?

RATIBOR

I don't know. Maybe a large gang of bandits gathered?

SVETOZAR

How would they get there? The smarter ones stick to the trade routes in the west or around Zlatograd. And those who fled into the forest would tear each other apart before daring to return.

RATIBOR

You're right... This reeks of trouble, only death.

SVETOZAR

Let's wait a day or two, send messengers to Old Yar and nearby villages. See what they say.

RATIBOR

And disobey orders?

SVETOZAR

It's the order of a foolish seventeen-year-old child.

RATIBOR

He's our tsar! No matter what he is like—we obey!... We move out at dawn. If we ride without stopping, we'll reach by evening. Will you go with me to the end?

SVETOZAR

As always, brother. Should we take the young ones too?

RATIBOR

Yes. An order is an order.

Ratibor spits on his fingers and extinguishes the torch on the table with them.

15. INT./EXT. NEWLYWEDS' HUT / STARODUBSKOYE
RATIBOR, VSEVOLOD

Vsevolod lies on the stove with open eyes. A knock sounds on the door. Vsevolod sits up on the stove, glances at the sleeping Zlatoslava, and jumps down. He has an amulet—a small vial of liquid encased in a wooden ring—around his neck. He dresses, hides the amulet under his clothes, and opens the door to find Ratibor standing outside.

RATIBOR

Did I wake you?

VSEVOLOD

No. Are we leaving already?

RATIBOR

Yes. Your horse is ready; only you need dressing up.

Vsevolod steps out of the hut. He and Ratibor head toward the large barn.

RATIBOR

(gestures toward the door)

Not even going to say goodbye?

VSEVOLOD

Let her sleep. We'll talk plenty when I return.

Ratibor looks Vsevolod over.

RATIBOR

You've never shed another's blood, have you?

VSEVOLOD

But I can fight. The best warriors of the islands trained us!

RATIBOR

Your skills are worthless until you've been in the heart of battle.

They stop at the entrance to the barn. Ratibor steps closer to Vsevolod.

RATIBOR

Listen to me. Killing isn't easy, but you'll have to do it.

When the moment comes—fight your fear, forget mercy, and strike until your enemy draws his last breath. Or you'll never make it back.

VSEVOLOD

Understood...

16. INT. BARN

RATIBOR, VSEVOLOD

Ratibor and Vsevolod enter the barn, where two horses stand.

RATIBOR

Yours is the one on the right.

Vsevolod approaches his horse and gently strokes it.

VSEVOLOD

Easy... I won't hurt you.

Ratibor goes to a box, takes out two cloaks, and tosses one to Vsevolod, who drapes it over his horse's back. Ratibor does the same. Vsevolod glances at Ratibor.

VSEVOLOD

What about a saddle?

RATIBOR

We don't need foreign frills to tame a horse.

VSEVOLOD

But it's more comfortab-

RATIBOR

(cuts him off)

Come here.

Vsevolod stops and approaches Ratibor, who pulls a sword from a box, unsheathes it, and inspects it.

RATIBOR

Light and sharp. Well-made. Won't fail you in battle.

Ratibor sheaths the sword and hands it to Vsevolod.

RATIBOR

Use it wisely; don't rely on brute force. There will always be a foe who's bigger or quicker. Be cunning.

Vsevolod looks at Ratibor intently. Ratibor retrieves a chainmail from the box and tosses it to him.

RATIBOR

Wear it under your tunic. It may protect less than plate armor, but it lets you stay agile. Remember, as long as you're fast, you're alive.

Vsevolod examines the chainmail.

VSEVOLOD

Strong...

RATIBOR

Of course—made by the masters of Tsargrad.

Ratibor places a hand on Vsevolod's shoulder.

RATIBOR

Son. I don't know what evil awaits us. I can't protect you the whole way. So be brave. Stay alert. Be merciless if needed. Do whatever it takes to survive.

Vsevolod lowers his gaze.

17. EXT. STARODUBSKOYE

RATIBOR, VSEVOLOD, SVETOZAR, VELIMIRA, ZLATOSLAVA

Ratibor and the other warriors gather in the village center. Wives bid their husbands farewell and place thin wreaths on their heads.

VELIMIRA

(placing a wreath on Ratibor's head)

May Svyatobor protect you in unknown lands. May he bring you back home safely.

Ratibor takes Velimira's hands.

RATIBOR

So be it.

While others say their goodbyes, Vsevolod checks his equipment. Svetozar and Vsevolod are the only ones without wreaths. Ratibor turns to his men.

RATIBOR

(shouts)

To your horses!

Ratibor mounts his horse smoothly and rides forward. Vsevolod struggles to get on his horse but fails. Seeing this, Svetozar runs over.

SVETOZAR

Come on!

Svetozar helps Vsevolod mount, then climbs onto his own horse. The warriors line up in a column (Ratibor, Svetozar, and Vsevolod at the front) and begin to ride. Vsevolod's gaze meets Velimira's tear-streaked face. Embarrassed, he looks away. They ride several meters before he hears a shout.

ZLATOSLAVA

Wait! Wait!

Vsevolod turns to see Zlatoslava running toward him with a wreath. He manages to take it, and the column carries him forward. Vsevolod looks at the wreath, then turns and shouts.

VSEVOLOD

I'll come back! I'll come back to you!

18. EXT. COUNTRYSIDE

RATIBOR, VSEVOLOD, SVETOZAR

The heroes ride through fields, forests, and rivers, reaching a small village by sunset.

19. EXT. STARY YAR

RATIBOR, VSEVOLOD, SVETOZAR

The heroes enter Stary Yar. They're met by an old gray-haired guard. Ratibor rides up to him.

RATIBOR

Greetings. We're here by the tsar's orders.

GUARD

I know. Everyone's gathered, just waiting for you. You'll stay overnight in those houses over there. Leave the horses in the barn—they'll be taken care of there.

RATIBOR

And where are the elders gathering?

GUARD

Just go straight, don't turn anywhere. You'll come to a big hut. That's the one you need.

RATIBOR

Thank you.

GUARD

(speaking with disdain)

Move along quickly.

Ratibor and his warriors ride towards the houses. Ratibor stops at a small hut and dismounts. Vsevolod and Svetozar do the same.

RATIBOR

(to Svetozar)

Go to the village elders right away. Tell them I'll be there soon. And make sure they don't kill each other.

Svetozar hands his reins to Ratibor.

SVETOZAR

Do you think they'll listen to me?

RATIBOR

They'll have no choice.

Svetozar smirks and leaves.

RATIBOR

Vsevolod! Take the horses to the barn.

Ratibor hands the reins to Vsevolod, who looks around.

VSEVOLOD

Is it safe here?

RATIBOR

Yes. But stay alert. Trouble always comes when you least expect it.

VSEVOLOD

Will you tell me what happened at the meeting later?

RATIBOR *(harshly)*

Go on.

Vsevolod takes the horses away. Ratibor approaches the small hut and knocks on the door. An old woman opens it.

OLD WOMAN

Come in.

Ratibor follows the old woman inside and glances at her modest dwelling.

OLD WOMAN

Hungry after the journey, I suppose?

RATIBOR

Thank you, Mother, but I'm not hungry. My son, however, might not refuse.

Ratibor places his travel bag on one of the benches, removes the wreath from his head, and puts it in the bag.

OLD WOMAN

That's right. The young need to regain their strength.

RATIBOR

Have bandits been troubling you for long?

OLD WOMAN

What bandits?

RATIBOR

The ones who stole the tsar's tribute.

OLD WOMAN

Ah! They only recently showed up, the parasites. As you can see, there's nothing here worth stealing; that's why we've lived in peace.

Ratibor sits down on a bench.

RATIBOR

Tell me about your lands.

20. EXT. OLD YAR BARN

VSEVOLOD, STABLE BOY

Vsevolod leads the horses into the barn.

VSEVOLOD

Anyone here?

STABLE BOY

Coming!

A young stable boy runs up to Vsevolod from the far end of the barn.

STABLE BOY

Give them here.

Vsevolod hands the reins to the stable boy, who leads the horses to the stalls. Vsevolod surveys the barn.

STABLE BOY

Are you from Starodubskoye?

VSEVOLOD

Yes.

STABLE BOY

Have you been to Tsargrad? It's so close to you.

VSEVOLOD

Not yet. I plan to go after summer. Why?

STABLE BOY

We rarely get visitors. I only learn about the world through them. I thought you might have news. Have you been to Zlatograd? A wandering jester once came here and said there's no city richer than Zlatograd. Even the capital can't compare.

VSEVOLOD

I haven't been, but now I definitely will. If you're so eager to see the world, why not leave here?

STABLE BOY

Seeing the world is nice, but I'm content here. And who would take care of the old folks if I left? Almost all the young people are gone, and the farm needs to be maintained.

VSEVOLOD

It's a sad fate you have.

Vsevolod notices a small idol resembling a bearded, human-like creature (a Leshy) on a shelf at the far end of the barn and approaches it. The stable boy, after tying up the horses, comes over to him.

STABLE BOY

What's sad about it? I'm fed, clothed, got my hands and feet. I wouldn't dare ask for more.

The stable boy approaches Vsevolod. Vsevolod points to the idol.

VSEVOLOD

Who's that? Doesn't look like a god.

STABLE BOY

That's... the forest guardian. Don't point at him too much - or he'll punish you.

The stable boy gently covers the idol with a cloth, glancing fearfully at the barn entrance.

VSEVOLOD

How would he punish me?

STABLE BOY

Well... You'd go into the forest and never come back. Please, don't tell anyone about the idol, and in return, I'll tell you a secret. Deal?

Vsevolod thinks for a few seconds and looks at the stable boy, then nods.

VSEVOLOD

Deal. Tell me your secret.

STABLE BOY

When you find yourself in the forest, don't be afraid. The guardian is kind. Show him respect, don't harm the animals, and you'll be fine. But if you do evil to the forest, a terrible death will await you.

Vsevolod asks cautiously.

VSEVOLOD

How do you know that?

The stable boy grins slyly.

STABLE BOY

One secret at a time, friend. Now go, I have work to do.

Surprised, Vsevolod turns and heads towards the exit. The stable boy calls out to him.

STABLE BOY

If you break your promise, I'll tell the guardian everything!

VSEVOLOD

I won't break it.

Vsevolod leaves the barn, looking at the distant forest.

21. INT. OLD YAR CHIEFTAIN'S HOUSE

SVETOZAR, BERISLAV, RATIBOR, VELEDAR

Svetozar and several village elders (around five) stand around a table in a large hut, dimly lit by a few torches.

SVETOZAR

We'll leave early in the morning. We'll go around the marsh, and by noon, we'll be in the living forest. With the cart, they'll have to take the old roads leading to the settlers. We'll catch up with them before they get too deep into the forest, defeat them, and retrieve the tribute.

The elders begin murmuring.

BERISLAV

It's a good plan. But don't you think it's all a trap? Look here! Someone's trying to lure us into uncharted land and kill us there. Better we send scouts. If there's no enemy, which I'm sure there isn't, there's no need to drag ourselves into the wilderness. And if there is an enemy, we'll quickly destroy them and return the tribute to our foolish little tsar.

ELDER 1

Watch your tongue!

ELDER 2

Don't order me around! The lad's right—I'm not about to die for the whims of a child on his father's throne.

The elders start arguing.

SVETOZAR

Quiet! Quiet! Why are you bickering like market women?!

All the elders fall silent and look at Svetozar.

SVETOZAR

I understand your discontent. But we were ordered.

Ratibor enters the hut and walks toward the table. All the elders turn their gaze to him.

SVETOZAR

And we have no choice.

Ratibor places his hand on Svetozar's shoulder.

RATIBOR

I'll take it from here.

Ratibor steps closer to the table. Svetozar stands behind him.

RATIBOR

Here's what we'll do. There's a footpath through the marsh.
Can your scouts lead us along it, Veledar?

Veledar hesitates.

VELEDAR

No one's used that path in ages. It'll be dangerous...

RATIBOR (*interrupting*)

Can they, or can't they?

VELEDAR

They can.

RATIBOR

We'll go through the marsh and end up here, on the edge of the living forest.

(Svetozar turns and leaves the hut, discontented. Berislav watches this.)

Heading east, we'll catch up to the bandits, cut them down, and be back by the following evening. So, are we done chattering?

The elders look at Ratibor in silence.

22. INT. OLD YAR - OLD WOMAN'S HUT, NIGHT
VSEVOLOD, OLD WOMAN

Vsevolod sits at the table, eating. The old woman brings him bread.

VSEVOLOD

Thank you. It's very good.

OLD WOMAN

Eat, eat. Here, take some bread.

Vsevolod takes the bread from the old woman, who busies herself with household tasks.

VSEVOLOD

Were there many bandits?

OLD WOMAN

How would I know, lad? The nights are dark these days.

VSEVOLOD

But no noise? After all, they didn't just steal a cow.

OLD WOMAN

It was quiet. But what difference does it make now? They went into the living forest.

VSEVOLOD

It's okay, we'll find a way.

The old woman turns to Vsevolod with a stony expression.

OLD WOMAN

No one returns from the Living Forest.

Vsevolod looks at her, surprised.

VSEVOLOD

Why?

The old woman approaches the table and sits across from Vsevolod.

OLD WOMAN

(whispering)

The Living Forest takes all who enter it. They say it has no end. And those few who, by sheer luck, reached its edge and managed to return... say the forest spoke to them. That's why they call it "living."

Vsevolod listens to the old woman, mesmerized.

VSEVOLOD

Amazing. I'd like to see it myself.

The old woman suddenly grabs Vsevolod's hand.

OLD WOMAN

(frightened)

Don't go there. Don't go.

Ratibor enters the hut. The old woman lets go of Vsevolod's hand, then rises from the table. Vsevolod looks at her.

OLD WOMAN

It's late; time for me to sleep. There's food on the table.

Ratibor silently sits at the table and begins eating. The old woman goes to the stove and climbs onto it. Vsevolod watches her.

RATIBOR

Eat quickly. We have an early start tomorrow.

Vsevolod turns back to Ratibor and continues eating.

23. EXT. OLD YAR, OLD WOMAN'S HUT - NIGHT

VSEVOLOD

Vsevolod lies on a bench, tossing and turning in his sleep. He dreams of the past.

24. EXT. RATIBOR'S HOUSE

RATIBOR, VELIMIRA, YOUNG VSEVOLOD

Young Vsevolod sits under a table, watching Ratibor and Velimira argue (Ratibor and Velimira appear younger than they do now).

VELIMIRA

No!

RATIBOR

How dare you defy me?!

VELIMIRA

I won't give up my child!

RATIBOR

I've made my decision! He's going to Romea, and that's final.

Velimira falls to her knees and grabs Ratibor.

VELIMIRA

Please, reconsider! Do you want your son to grow up without a father? To forget our voices?

RATIBOR

So be it. He'll thank me for it one day.

Velimira releases Ratibor and begins to cry. She notices Vsevolod sitting under the table, crawls over, and strokes his head.

VELIMIRA

Don't be afraid, my son. Everything will be okay. They'll take good care of you there. Just remember—Mama and Papa didn't abandon you!

Ratibor approaches Velimira and puts a hand on her shoulder.

RATIBOR

Enough.

VELIMIRA

I won't give him up! No!

25. INT. OLD YAR, OLD WOMAN'S HUT

RATIBOR, VSEVOLOD

Vsevolod is lying on the bench, asleep. Ratibor wakes him.

RATIBOR

Wake up, hear me?

Vsevolod opens his eyes.

RATIBOR

Time to get ready.

Ratibor moves away from Vsevolod, takes his travel bag, and starts packing. Vsevolod sits up, rubs his eyes, then takes a wreath from his bag and rummages through it.

VSEVOLOD

I'll go prepare the horses.

RATIBOR

No need. We're going on foot.

VSEVOLOD

But it would be faster with horses.

RATIBOR

(gruffly)

This isn't up for discussion. Take only what's necessary. And fasten the wreath to your belt. Maybe the gods will protect us.

Ratibor takes his bag and exits the hut. Vsevolod slings his bag over his shoulder and looks at the old woman sleeping on the stove. He picks up the wreath from the table and follows Ratibor outside.

26. EXT. ROAD

RATIBOR, VSEVOLOD, SVETOZAR, BERISLAV

The group is walking in a column along a road through the field. A heavy leaden sky looms above. Ratibor and Vsevolod walk in front, Svetozar is slightly behind. Vsevolod glances at the somber faces of those behind them, then approaches Ratibor.

VSEVOLOD

Is everyone so anxious because we're heading into the Living Forest?

RATIBOR

It's not the trees that worry them, son. It's the enemy lurking somewhere in the shadows.

VSEVOLOD

The old woman from the village told me about the forest. There...

RATIBOR

(interrupts)

It's just the gossip of lonely elders. Don't clutter your head with it.

VSEVOLOD

But listen! There could be dangers far worse than bandits.

Ratibor grabs Vsevolod's hand.

RATIBOR

Don't you dare question me, especially in front of the others! Instead of talking, focus on what's happening around you. Do you understand me?!

VSEVOLOD

Yes.

Ratibor releases Vsevolod's hand and moves ahead. Svetozar approaches Vsevolod and pats him on the back.

SVETOZAR

Don't take it to heart. He has a lot on his shoulders.

Svetozar walks ahead. Vsevolod turns his head and meets Berislav's gaze. Berislav looks away. Vsevolod catches up to Ratibor and Svetozar.

27. EXT. CLEARING BEFORE THE FOREST

VSEVOLOD, BERISLAV, TRAVELER 1, TRAVELER 2

The group arrives at a grove. Ratibor sends scouts ahead to investigate. The others settle for a break. Vsevolod sits on the ground, exhausted. He watches the travelers, each occupied with their own tasks, and focuses on two examining the trees.

TRAVELER 1

Good timber—dry, strong..

TRAVELER 2

If we had such a grove in our village, imagine the benches we could make from a single tree. And the quality! Praise Perun, our craftsman could supply all of Tsargrad with ease.

TRAVELER 1

Think bigger, brother. With this wood, even the desert

merchants would snatch up our wares, and caravans west would flow like rivers.

TRAVELER 2

(nods)

True. Let's gather some acorns? Maybe they'll take root at home...

Traveler 2 bends down to gather acorns. Traveler 1 joins him. Berislav approaches Vsevolod, also watching the travelers.

BERISLAV

They're among the finest woodworkers in all of Slavia. They say even foreign merchants eagerly buy their work.

Vsevolod turns to Berislav.

BERISLAV

A craftsman remains a craftsman, no matter where he is. I'm Berislav.

Berislav extends his hand to Vsevolod, who shakes it.

VSEVOLOD

Vsevolod.

Berislav sits beside him.

BERISLAV

First time on an expedition, isn't it?

VSEVOLOD

How did you know?

BERISLAV

You're too calm, not fearing every rustle. You look at everyone around you with the curiosity of a child.

VSEVOLOD

You're calm, too.

BERISLAV

(smiling)

Only on the surface. I don't know what awaits us in the forest. I don't know if I'll survive.

Vsevolod looks at the grove.

VSEVOLOD

Well, the forest isn't as scary as I thought.

Berislav laughs and places a hand on Vsevolod's shoulder.

BERISLAV

This is just a grove. The Living Forest is further, beyond the swamp.

(whispering)

There are many rumors. And to be honest—it frightens me to the core.

VSEVOLOD (TIMIDLY)

The grandmother from Old Yar told me stories about the living forest...

BERISLAV

(exclaims with interest)

Tell me!

Vsevolod turns to Berislav.

28. EXT. MEADOW IN FRONT OF THE FOREST

RATIBOR, SVETOZAR, TRAVELER 3, TRAVELER 4, ELDER 1, ELDER 2

Ratibor is drinking from a flask away from the others. Svetozar approaches him.

SVETOZAR

Yes, we've been brought here by fate... Ha, I thought our expeditions to unknown lands were long over.

Ratibor offers the flask to Svetozar, who takes it and drinks.

RATIBOR

Why did you leave the meeting?

SVETOZAR

I'm not an elder.

RATIBOR

That doesn't matter.

(Ratibor glances at the travelers)

I trust you more than all of them combined.

SVETOZAR

And rightfully so. Only Perun knows if they see more of an enemy in the bandits or in each other. It's not far from a bloodbath.

RATIBOR

None of the elders will dare go against me as long as I show no weakness. And I'll make them obey with blood if needed.

SVETOZAR

(smirks)

And I'll have to watch your back again?

Ratibor smiles.

RATIBOR

It won't be a burden on you.

They both laugh. Svetozar looks at Berislav, who is talking with Vsevolod.

SVETOZAR

I don't like that one. He assumes too much.

Ratibor looks at Berislav.

RATIBOR

Just a cocky boy.

Traveler 3 and Traveler 4 (both young) begin shouting and fighting. Traveler 3 throws Traveler 4 to the ground. Everyone gathers around the fight.

TRAVELER 3

I found it first!

TRAVELER 4

No, I did!

Elder 1 and Elder 2 approach and pull the fighters apart.

ELDER 1

(to Traveler 3)

Stop it right now! What is this nonsense?!

ELDER 2

(to Traveler 4)

How dare you embarrass me?!

Elder 2 cuffs Traveler 4. Ratibor steps forward.

RATIBOR

What happened?

ELDER 2

Someone needs a reality check!

TRAVELER 4

It's mine by right! I found it first!

TRAVELER 3

Yeah, right! I saw it first!

RATIBOR

Shut up, both of you!

Everyone falls silent.

RATIBOR

What did you find?

Traveler 3 points to the ground. Ratibor approaches, looks down, bends over, and picks up a gold coin, examining it with surprise. The others gather around and start whispering. Svetozar steps forward and addresses everyone.

SVETOZAR

Nothing to see here! Check your gear, rest while you can!

The group disperses but keeps murmuring. Only Vsevolod and Berislav remain still, watching Ratibor.

29. EXT. MEADOW IN FRONT OF THE FOREST

RATIBOR, SVETOZAR, ELDER 1, SCOUT 1

Ratibor is seated on the ground, inspecting the coin. Svetozar sits nearby.

SVETOZAR

Let me see.

Ratibor hands the coin to Svetozar, who examines it and then bites it.

SVETOZAR

Gold. Freshly minted. How did it end up here?

RATIBOR

I don't know. Maybe one of ours dropped it?

SVETOZAR

And hasn't noticed the loss? Unlikely...

RATIBOR

Then maybe the bandits split up, and some passed through the marsh. Either way, it doesn't matter. If we're here, it's because the king believes in us. And so do I. We'll handle everything else somehow.

SVETOZAR

Hope you're right.

Elder 1 runs up to Ratibor.

ELDER 1

The scouts are back.

RATIBOR

It's about time.

Ratibor stands up and approaches the scouts, with Svetozar following him.

RATIBOR

What took you so long?

SCOUT 1

Couldn't find the trail.

The scout takes out a flask and drinks from it.

RATIBOR

No tracks?

SCOUT 1

None. No one's been near the marsh in ages. It's as silent as a graveyard.

Ratibor looks over at Svetozar.

RATIBOR

Rally the people. Time to move.

30. EXT. GROVE

RATIBOR, VSEVOLOD, SVETOZAR, BERISLAV

The group marches through a grove along a trail. Vsevolod and Ratibor walk near the front. Vsevolod glances around nervously.

VSEVOLOD

Too quiet.

RATIBOR

That worries me too. But our scouts found no enemies, so relax a bit. Remember, on a march, these moments are worth more than any gold.

VSEVOLOD

(timidly)

You never told me about your campaigns...

RATIBOR

Not much to tell. The king recruited a retinue, promised gold and glory—so I went.

VSEVOLOD

Where did you go?

RATIBOR

West.

VSEVOLOD

You went with Borimir the Merciful to the desert?!

RATIBOR

Yes.

VSEVOLOD

What was it like?

RATIBOR

Sand everywhere.

VSEVOLOD

And the sandstone people? How do they live?

RATIBOR

They're dark-skinned, good fighters. I don't know about their lives.

VSEVOLOD

Why did Borimir lead you to the desert?

RATIBOR

I don't know.

VSEVOLOD

Maybe he told you something?

RATIBOR

(harshly, irritated)

A soldier doesn't ask questions; he follows orders. Enough about that.

Vsevolod falls silent. Suddenly, Vsevolod notices movement among the trees on the right. He sharply turns his head.

Ratibor raises a hand, stopping the group.

VSEVOLOD

Father.

RATIBOR

I saw it too.

Ratibor spots figures moving between the trees on the left. He turns and shouts.

RATIBOR

To arms!

A spear flies out of the bushes, piercing the chest of one of the travelers near Vsevolod. Bandits charge from their cover. The group rushes to meet them, and battle ensues.

RATIBOR

(SHOUTS TO VSEVOLOD)

Stay close!

Ratibor plunges into the fight, cutting his way through the bandits with fierce intensity. Vsevolod duels with Bandit 1, who forces him away from Ratibor toward the center of the fight. Using his skills, Vsevolod eventually overpowers Bandit

1 with a sweeping strike. Blood spatters on Vsevolod, who is momentarily stunned. Bandit 2 attacks, not giving him time to react. They fight, and Bandit 2 disarms Vsevolod. Vsevolod scrambles after his lost sword, navigating the chaos. Another bandit tries to attack him, but an ally intercepts and kills the attacker, only to be struck down by an ax.

Vsevolod grabs his sword and fends off Bandit 2. Bandit 2 knocks Vsevolod down, but they both fall, losing their weapons. They roll on the ground, exchanging blows. Someone nearly steps on Vsevolod's head. Vsevolod pushes the bandit off and crawls away. Bandit 2 catches up, grabbing his leg. Vsevolod rolls over, trying to resist, but the bandit pins him down, raising a knife.

END OF EPISODE ONE.