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(ALEXANDER NEVSKY)

Russia is devastated during the first part of the thirteenth century by Mongol invaders from the East. "Bones, skulls, burnt fields, charred buildings. Genghis Khan's Mongol and Tartar hordes reach the Caucasus, annihilate the flourishing Georgian civilization, and advance into Russia, spreading terror and death."

The Tartars ransack a village of peaceful fishermen. At the risk of being massacred, the villagers refuse to pay tribute money. Alexander Nevsky, prince of Novgorod, who lives among the fishermen, talks to the Mongol chief and manages to pacify him. When the Mongol has gone, Nevsky delivers a warning to his people: "A much more dangerous enemy threatens us from the West. First we must drive back the German." The Teuton Knights are indeed extending their conquests eastwards and have invaded Russia.

In Novgorod market, Bouslay chooses a suitable axe at Ignatius the blacksmith's. Two friends, Bouslay and Gavriilo, anxiously await Olga's answer. Which of them will she choose? People converge on the great square from all parts of the city. A messenger from Pskov announces that this town has been captured by the Germans. Traitors had been bribed to surrender it. The merchants of Novgorod suggest buying back Pskov. But other voices are raised--the voice of the people: "We must call for Alexander."

The knights Hubert and Dietlieb are crowned princes of Pskov. The new rulers, supported by cruel bishops, spread terror in the conquered city. Surrounded by faceless knights, the women of Pskov watch, horrified and powerless, the massacre of the innocents. The German prince receives the blessing of the black monk as he throws a little child on the fire. Those who dare to resist are bound and tortured. From the gallows, the mayor utters a last cry: "Go to Novgorod! Fetch Alexander!"

In a fisherman's hut, spokesmen from Novgorod ask Nevsky to undertake the defence of the country. "We must arm the peasants and use them to conquer the Germans," Nevsky replies. The people take up arms at the prince's call. Armourers and blacksmiths distribute all their weapons--pikes, sabres, axes. Olga promises the two friends to choose whoever is braver in battle.

At the German camp, the knights attend Mass dressed in white. The sinister black monk is the organist. A messenger interrupts the office: the first of the Russians have just been sighted. The Germans prepare for battle. The opening skirmish gives them the advantage. Among the casualties is one of the finest Russian officers, Prince Domache. Nevsky speaks a funeral oration and promises vengeance.

On the eve of the battle, round a bivouac fire, Ignatius tells the story of the weasel and the little rabbit. Seeing that he cannot outpace her, the rabbit runs between two birch trees planted very close together. The weasel follows and becomes trapped. He takes his revenge by deflowering her! The story inspires Nevsky's battle plan. The battle will take place on ice, which will be to the disadvantage of the heavy Teuton artillery. Bouslay, in the centre, must contain the German attack--the terrifying tactic known as "the boar's head"--and hold out until Gavriilo and Alexander throw themselves on the enemy flank.

The Lake of Peipous (also called Tchoudsk), 5 April 1262. Since dawn the Russian soldiers have been keeping watch on the frozen waste, waiting for the German attack. The Teuton Knights charge at full gallop. A fearful melee follows the first shock of impact. Defending magnificently, Bouslay and his men give ground and draw the enemy further into the trap. Nevsky gives the signal to counterattack. He throws his men on the German flanks. Russian cavalry attack from the rear. Surprised, the Germans fall back. Their units regroup in a square round the Grand Master and the Knights Princes. A wall of shields and helmets known as the Macedonian phalanx is set up to break the Russian assaults. Soldiers rush out from behind the wall for brief, damaging attacks on the Russian ranks and return inside the safety of the phalanx.

After several fruitless attacks, Gavriilo's men pierce the phalanx and it begins to collapse. Always at the most dangerous spot, Gavriilo wards off the lances threatening Alexander's life. To settle the issue, Nevsky takes on the Teuton leader in single combat. The soldiers stop fighting to see the result of the duel.

The Grand Master is beaten and taken prisoner. Heartened by their leader's victory, the Russians attack on all sides. The Germans flee in disorder. Their priests take refuge in their tents. But the Teuton camp is destroyed and the priests executed. Vassilissa, daughter of the mayor tortured in Pskov, kills the black monk. Ignatius captures the Russian traitor Tverdila, but Tverdila takes advantage of a moment's inattention to stab the blacksmith in the back. "This coat of mail is too short," he murmurs before he dies.

The rout of the Germans is complete. Officers and soldiers jostle each other in their scramble to reach the edge of the lake. The bishop, who has escaped the Russian's vengeance, crawls over the snow among the dead. Alexander's theory is correct: the thin April ice gives way beneath the weight of the Teutons. Trapped in their heavy armour, the White Knights are swallowed up by the waters. So ends the famous Battle of the Ice. It has borne witness to Nevsky's tactical genius and marked the Teuton Knights' worst defeat.

Night falls on the icy waste and the thousands of dead and wounded. Broken lances and pierced helmets and useless swords litter the ground. The scavengers are already at work. A falcon takes possession of the dead body of a German. By torchlight the Russians search for their wounded. One of the victims is Bouslay. He is tending Gavriilo, who is even more badly hurt. Olga finds them and they all return to Alexander's camp.

The liberated Pskov gives a clamorous welcome to Alexander and his army. Prisoners and traitors are jeered by the crowd. After the victory parade, Alexander sits in judgment on his enemies. The Teuton leaders are exchanged for soap and their soldiers freed. Harnessed like an ass, the traitor Tverdila is delivered to the judgment of the people. For the young lovers, the moment of choice has come. Bouslay decides to marry the courageous Vassilissa, Olga will become Gavriilo's wife. The musicians blow their pipes and beat their drums. The people celebrate joyously. Alexander Nevsky delivers this warning to the enemies of Russia: "He who comes with a sword will die by the sword."