Father Dietrich and the *elektronikos*

Oberhochwald village, Germany, 1348

Robing in the sacristy for the morning Mass, Dietrich paused with his cincture half tied. There was a sound, like that of a bumble-bee, at the edge of his hearing. Drawn toward the window, he saw in the distance, above the Herr's forest, woodleafsingers and acorn-jays flying in mad gyres above the place where earlier had glowed the pale luminescence. The glow had either faded or was now insensible against the brightening sky. But the vista seemed odd in some indefinable manner. There was a pinchedness to the outlook, as if the forest had been creased and folded on itself.

At the base of Church Hill, a knot of people milled as witlessly as the birds above. Gregor and Theresia stood by the smithy in agitated conversation with Lorenz. Their hair was wild and unkempt, sticking out from their heads, and their clothing clung to them like iron filings to a lodestone. Others were about as well, but the usual morning work had come to a standstill. The smithy's fire was unlit and the sheep bleated in their pen, the sheep-boys nowhere in sight. The pall of smoke that usually marked the charcoal kiln deep in the forest was absent.

The humming grew distinctly louder as Dietrich approached the window. Touching the glass lightly with a fingernail, he felt - a vibration. Startled, he pulled away.

Dietrich passed a hand through his locks, only to feel his hair writhe like a nest of snakes. The cause of these curiosities was waxing in strength, as the sound and size of a galloping horse grew with its approach - which analogy would argue that the source of the impetus was drawing nearer. *There can be no motion in a body*, Buridan had argued, *unless an actor impresses an impetus*. Dietrich frowned, finding the thought disturbing. *Something* was approaching.

He turned from the window to resume vesting and paused with one hand on the red chasuble.

*Amber!*

Dietrich remembered. Amber - *elektron*, as the Greeks called it - when rubbed against fur impressed an impetus to the fur that caused it to move in much the same way as his hair. Buridan had demonstrated it at Paris while Dietrich had been in studies. The master had found such delight in instruction that he had foregone the doctorate - and had become from his fees that great anomaly: a scholar never in want. Dietrich saw him now in memory, rubbing the amber vigorously against the cat's-skin, his mouth pulled back in an unconscious grin.

Dietrich studied his own image in the window. *God was rubbing amber against the world*. Somehow, the thought excited him, as if he were on the verge of uncovering a form previously occult. A dizzy feeling, like standing atop the belfry. Of course, God was not rubbing the world. But something was happening that was *like* rubbing the world with amber.

Dietrich stepped to the sacristy door and looked into the sanctuary, where the Minorite was finishing the altar preparations. Joachim had thrown his cowl back, and the tight black curls ringing his tonsure danced to the same unseen impetus. He moved with that lithe grace that betokened gentle birth. Joachim had never known the villein's hut or the liberties of the freetowns. The greater wonder when such a man, heir to important fiefs, dedicated his life to poverty.

Joachim and Dietrich locked gazes for a moment, before the monk turned to the credence table to fetch two candlesticks used for the *missa lecta.* As the Minorite's hands approached the copper prickets, sparks arced forth to dance on his fingertips.

Joachim jerked and reared his arm. "God's curse on this wealth!"

Dietrich stepped forward and seized the arm. "Be reasonable, Joachim. I have had these prickets since many years and never have they bitten anyone before. If God is displeased with them, why wait until now?"

"Because God has finally lost patience with a Church in love with Mammon."

"Mammon?" Dietrich gestured around the wooden church. From beams and rafters wild faces looked down on them. In the lancet windows, narrow saints in colored glass scowled or smiled or raised a hand in blessing. "This is hardly Avignon."

He stooped to squint at the chased metalwork of the candlesticks: the chi-rho emblazoned on the Mother Pelican. He stretched a tentative forefinger toward the candlestick. When it came within a thumb's-length of the base there was a snap, and a spark appeared in the air between fingertip and candlestick. Though he had known what would happen, he pulled away as quickly as had Joachim. His fingertip felt as if pierced by a hot needle. He stuck the digit in his mouth to soothe it and turned to Joachim.

"Hngh." He took the finger out and inspected it. "A small hurt," he announced, "seeming greater only through surprise." It had felt much like with the aquamanile, only stronger. Further argument that the mover was drawing nearer. "But it is entirely material. A moment ago, I recalled a trick with amber and fur that creates a similar effect."

"But, the small lightnings…"

"Lightning," said Dietrich. A new thought had struck him. He rubbed his finger absently. "Joachim! Could this essence be of the same species as the lightning itself?" He grinned broadly and touched the candlestick again, drawing another arc from it. Fire from earth! He laughed and the Minorite drew away from him. "Imagine a waterwheel rimmed with fur," he told the monk, "rubbing against amber plates. We might generate this essence, this *elektronikos* and, could we but learn to control it, we could command the very lightning!"

Portions extracted from “Eifelheim” by Michael Flynn, 2006, Tor, p12-14