

LEGEND ⊕ THE LAST VIKINGS

CHAPTER 35

LEAVING THE PAST BEHIND

Towards sunset of the next day Sven and I made to leave the others in the now empty and somewhat drab and moribund book shop. The vacant shop seemed to have adopted an air of melancholy. We felt it safer for the crew to lie low until it was time to move, so only Sven and I went out on the search for water transport out of Hardzhy-Tarkhan. I closed the door and we walked past the row of silversmiths, who were closing shop for the day. The pungent smell of their labours were still lingering as we moved on towards the Bolshie Izady.

There we scanned the harbour and noticed a few knars still moored to the quay. We casually perched on a few bales of wool and started scanning the crowd for the telltale signs of Black Scorpion activity. Satisfied there was none, we walked around the harbour checking the waterlines on the knars. We selected two which rode higher in the water than the others. I walked up to the quayside, placing a foot on a bale of cotton and resting my elbow on my knee, I called out to a sailor on the deck,

“You there! Sailor! Where can I find your captain?”

He eyed me curiously, and continuing his work, feigning disinterest he drawled back,

“And just who wants to know?”

“Lord Uspakson, that’s who!” snapped Sven his hand moving to the pommel of his sword for effect. “And make your answer quick if you want to see the end of this day!”

“You heard him” I said cocking an eyebrow.

The unarmed sailor’s eyes widened with recognition and a flash of fear crossed his face. He quickly pointed along the quay.

“In the fourth building along. That one there. The tavern” he said hurriedly pointing to a grey, two story stone building.

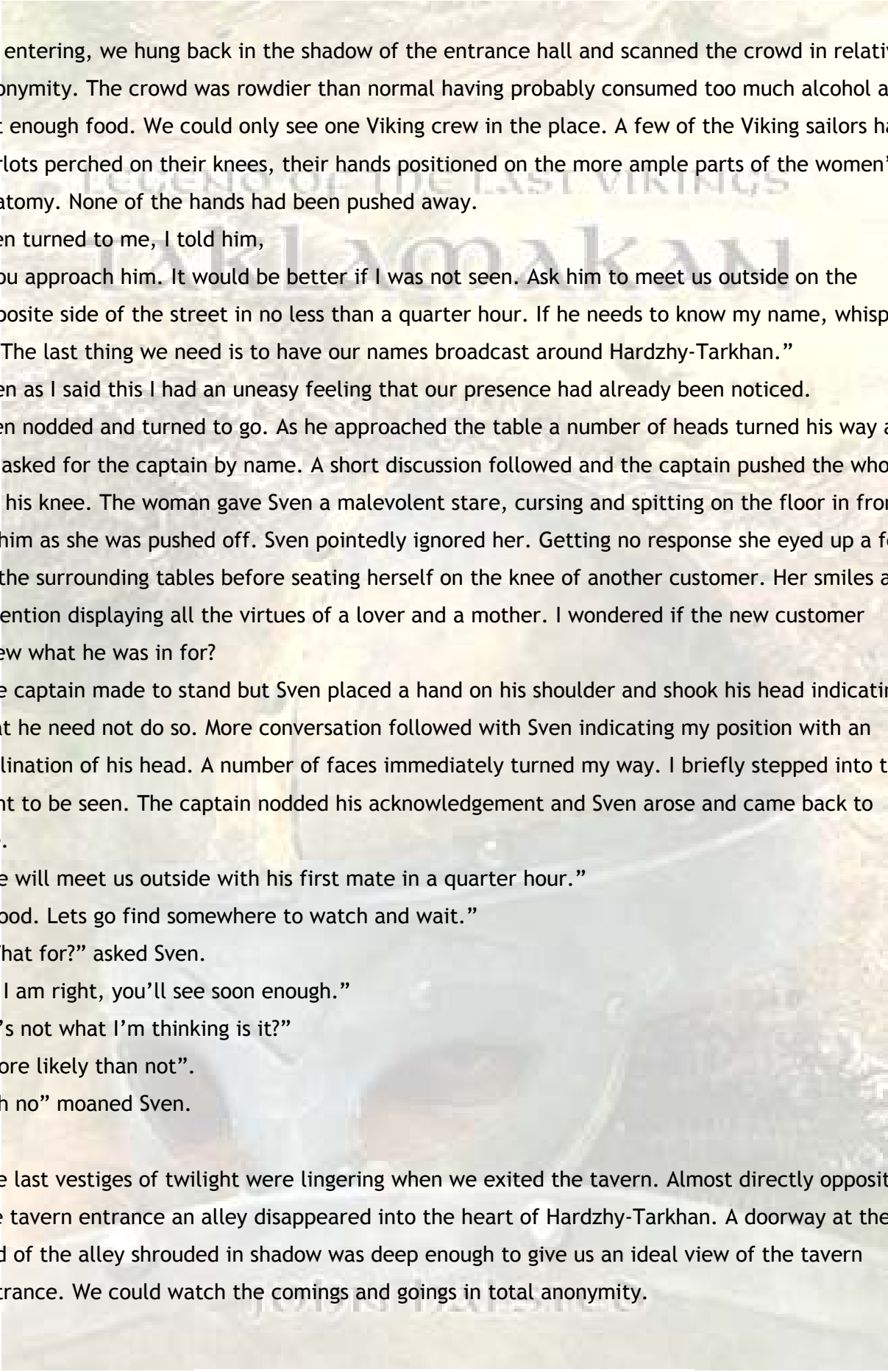
“And what would his name just happen to be?”

“Ranald. Ranald Christianson”.

“Thank you” I said flipping him a coin, which I followed up with “If anyone asks, be sure to forget we were ever here”.

“Aye, aye sir” replied the sailor with a grin from ear to ear.

At that we turned and headed in the direction of the tavern.



On entering, we hung back in the shadow of the entrance hall and scanned the crowd in relative anonymity. The crowd was rowdier than normal having probably consumed too much alcohol and not enough food. We could only see one Viking crew in the place. A few of the Viking sailors had harlots perched on their knees, their hands positioned on the more ample parts of the women's anatomy. None of the hands had been pushed away.

Sven turned to me, I told him,

“You approach him. It would be better if I was not seen. Ask him to meet us outside on the opposite side of the street in no less than a quarter hour. If he needs to know my name, whisper it. The last thing we need is to have our names broadcast around Hardzhy-Tarkhan.”

Even as I said this I had an uneasy feeling that our presence had already been noticed.

Sven nodded and turned to go. As he approached the table a number of heads turned his way as he asked for the captain by name. A short discussion followed and the captain pushed the whore off his knee. The woman gave Sven a malevolent stare, cursing and spitting on the floor in front of him as she was pushed off. Sven pointedly ignored her. Getting no response she eyed up a few of the surrounding tables before seating herself on the knee of another customer. Her smiles and attention displaying all the virtues of a lover and a mother. I wondered if the new customer knew what he was in for?

The captain made to stand but Sven placed a hand on his shoulder and shook his head indicating that he need not do so. More conversation followed with Sven indicating my position with an inclination of his head. A number of faces immediately turned my way. I briefly stepped into the light to be seen. The captain nodded his acknowledgement and Sven arose and came back to me.

“He will meet us outside with his first mate in a quarter hour.”

“Good. Lets go find somewhere to watch and wait.”

“What for?” asked Sven.

“If I am right, you'll see soon enough.”

“It's not what I'm thinking is it?”

“More likely than not”.

“Oh no” moaned Sven.

The last vestiges of twilight were lingering when we exited the tavern. Almost directly opposite the tavern entrance an alley disappeared into the heart of Hardzhy-Tarkhan. A doorway at the end of the alley shrouded in shadow was deep enough to give us an ideal view of the tavern entrance. We could watch the comings and goings in total anonymity.

Over the next few minutes a number of locals entered and a few inebriated customers staggered out. And then an all too familiar figure stepped out of the tavern and stood in the fading light examining the immediate vicinity. His boots immediately identified him. For the second time that day Sven's hand moved to the hilt of his sword. I placed a restraining hand on his forearm and said,

"Not now" I whispered. "Wait a moment. I think a dagger will be the weapon of choice here."

We continued to watch the Black Scorpion from our hiding place. He continued to scan the street and after a moment or two began walking directly towards us.

"We must not kill him. Only knock him out."

In the now almost dark the Scorpion did not see us until he was almost upon our hiding place. On spying us he checked. Jumping forward I cried,

"Now Sven!"

Sven leapt forward drawing his dagger in a fluid movement and rapped the fast turning Scorpion on the crown of his head. His head snapped back and he crumpled into a heap at Sven's feet. I was always amazed at how fast a big man like Sven could move.

"Nicely done. Quickly drag him in here" I said to Sven indicating our hiding place. Sliding his hands under the Scorpion's armpits, Sven dragged the man into our niche and propped him up in a corner of the doorway. He tore a sleeve off the man's shirt and gagged him with it. He then used the other sleeve to bind his hands. The black, multi-faceted scorpion tattoo with its unique number was clearly visible on the man's left shoulder.

"Right we are then." Sven said.

Just as he stood the tavern door opened again and a narrow beam of light played across the now dark street. It was the captain and his mate. They too stood for a moment and then seeing us made their way over.

"My Lord Uspak....." the captain began.

"Captain Christianson" I said cutting him short. "It's a pleasure" I beamed.

"How can I be of service" he asked coming straight to the point.

"You can take me and my crew up river tonight and put us ashore somewhere north of Itil."

"Tonight?" he said rubbing his chin looking at me almost sideways.

"Why?"

"We want to leave Hardzhy-Tarkhan unseen, for reasons I shall make known once we are underway."

"Does it have anything to do with the Black Scorpion you have in the doorway" asked his mate pointing to the unconscious Scorpion?

I sighed, "Yes it does. Quite a lot in fact."

The captain's face lit up. "Well then we'd be only too glad to help. Those damned Scorpions have cost me a lot of money. Getting rid of that accursed Dromon has made trade in this area a lot safer."

"...and more profitable" interjected the mate.

"Are you not waiting for more cargo to take back?"

"No, no. We have what we want. Anymore and it'd make the ships too damned heavy at portage. No. We're ready to go now. How soon can you be at the quay?"

"In about half an hour." I said smiling.

"Ahem" coughed the mate. "There's just the question of our fee."

"Of course" I said. "I propose three gold coins on boarding and three when we disembark?"

I left the question hanging. The captain and his mate looked at each other and in unspoken agreement they nodded. The captain turned to me and said,

"Agreed."

"Very well we'll meet you at the quay within the half hour."

"What are you going to do about the Scorpion?" asked the mate.

"Oh leave him to us. He won't be bothering anyone or any ships again."

Smiles crossed their faces.

"Sven bring the Scorpion" I ordered turning towards the direction of the shop.

Sven hefted the Scorpion like a sack of corn. The Scorpion grunted and a muffled cry came from behind the gag as he was flung across Sven's shoulder. I removed my dagger and rapped him on the crown again. The Scorpion again cried out before sagging limply. The captain and his mate were positively beaming at our treatment of the Scorpion.

On entering the empty shop Balgichi said,

"My, my. And just what has the cat brought in?"

"A scorpion to play with sire" retorted Sven.

"Yes indeed. All we need now is a spider. This one is well known in Hardzhy-Tarkhan."

"We gathered as much. He was responsible for tipping off the Dromon which we tangled with, oh, a lifetime ago now."

"Well he won't be known for much longer" said Sven. "What shall I do with him?"

"Strip him and tie him tightly to a chair in the back room".

"Totally strip.....? There are women present!" he exclaimed.

"Very well. To his undergarments then."

Satisfied with the compromise, Sven and the other men got on with the job of stripping and securing the Scorpion.

The securing complete we returned to pick up our packs. We traipsed through the back room again and on unspoken command stood around the now conscious Scorpion. The cold on his near naked body was already making him shiver. As he watched us the malevolence in his eyes was plain to see. I addressed him,

“Now listen here you” I growled waiving my dagger under his nose.

“I know who you are and I know your evil purpose in life. We are leaving now and I pray I will never lay eyes on you again. For if I do, nothing, not even the Horsemen of Valhalla will be able to stop me from gutting you. If you manage to get free and escape, go to Baku and stay there - forever!”

Turning to Sven I said, “Bring his boots.”

Now fear and panic mixed with pleading flashed through the Scorpion’s eyes and across his face. We turned our backs on him and started exiting the shop. Rat and Peksah already had the horses ready outside. Sven dangled the boots in front of the Scorpion as we left. The thump of the chair tipping over onto the wooden floor could be heard over the closed door.

“That’s going to make it doubly hard to free himself” said Sven a-matter-of-factly.

We arrived at the boats which were already crewed and waiting to push off. We split our party between the two and boarded. The crew took to settling the horses and I crossed the mate’s palm with three gold coins. He grinned broadly and nodded before going to the second boat.

“What do you want me to do with these” said Sven holding the expensive boots up.

“Toss them overboard” I instructed.

One of the boat’s crew started to ask for them.

“No” I said. “These are awash with evil”.

“Pity” said Sven as he hefted them into the dark water. The boots splashed into the water and floated for a short while. Slowly they filled with water and slipped below the surface. A ring of ripples spreading outwards was the only evidence of their ever having existed. I hoped the passing of the Scorpion would be as insignificant and his presence forgotten as quickly as the ripples disappeared.

The quay side oarsmen used their oars to push us away from the wharf. On command they dipped their oars and silently and slowly we made our way along the canals. Soon the houses began to thin and give way to fields and the fields gave way to reeds. Balgichi, Peksah and Serakh Simantov all stared silently at the receding skyline of Hardzhy-Tarkhan, taking in as much detail as they could, knowing they probably would not see their beloved city again. Balgichi broke the silence by saying

“Ah well children that’s enough. Remember what happened to Lot’s wife when she stared back at Sodom and Gomorrah. Not that I’m saying you’ll turn into a pillar of salt, that is”.

One of the oarsmen asked “Does anyone know Lot’s wife’s name? You never hear it spoken.”

“Neither is it written in the Torah, nor the bible” said Balgichi.

“God meant for it, and her, to be forgotten. She was turned into a pillar of salt as a reminder of what happens if you lust after luxury and debauchery and not after God himself. She was not meant to be a memorial which is why no-one can find the pillar today”.

“You still haven’t answered my question” said the oarsman.

Ibn chipped in here,

“In the Quran, we call him Lut, which is a transliteration of the name Lot. However we believe Lut left the city while his wife stayed behind not wanting to leave her luxuries and belongings.

We believe she died when the city was destroyed. Either way, she died for the same reasons.”

“Yes, yes, yes” retorted the oarsman, frustrated at the evasions he was receiving.

“Lets keep it simple then. Does either of you two know what Lot’s wife’s name was? For a start, a simple yes or no will do.”

He looked at Balgichi who nodded and Ibn who shook his head.

“Well.....” He said to Balgichi, who took a big sigh and said

“It is thought her name was Ildeth.”

“Ildeth” said the oarsman. “It certainly was an ill-death for her then wasn’t it?” he punned.

“Oh Lord. Hear we go again” said Captain Ranald.

“He’s like this from the time we leave until the time we get back. We can’t stop him”.

As we continued to discuss one of the most famous events in the history of Islam, Christianity and Judaism, the canals became a braided river and the braids slowly began to merge into a single channel. All the while a crewman stood in the bows calling out directions which the helmsman and rowers followed with precision. As the delta gave way to the river, the little artificial light from the city deserted us and our eyes adjusted to the dark. The splash of the oars and the wash from the prow was accompanied by chirping of cicadas from the banks and the squeaks of bats as they flitted overhead.

We rounded a sweep of the river and the darkness of the night was divided by flickering fires. Jagged silhouettes flitted across the flames and the smell of smoke and humanity rolled in from the west bank of the river, giving away the presence of the ruined city of Itil and its shadowy residents. Holding our course we rowed on by.

It was too dark and hence too dangerous to hoist sail, so after about two hours we spelled the oarsmen and continued to row in shifts through the night. The fortitude and stamina of the men always amazed me.

With the false dawn we came across a large island in the river. The captain gave instructions to take the left channel. Shortly we approached a riverside village. A few woman at the river drawing water looked up and in silence watched us approach. As we drew nearer a few dogs barked their acknowledgement of our presence. The captain gave instructions to put in to the bank just above the village which, on closer examination proved to be the point where the ferry to the island and opposite bank also put in.

Captain Ranald jumped ashore and said “Here you are then. This place is called Stavka. Head west to Sarpa and you should pick up the main routes which will lead you to Sarkel.”

“Thank you Captain” I said passing him the balance of our agreed fee.

We disembarked and the horses pawed the ground, making sure it did not feel as hollow and fluid as the boats did.

Before boarding Captain Ranald again pointed to the track and said,

“If you follow the track, at the far end of the village you will find an inn which should be open at this early hour. Mention my name to the landlord and you’ll be sure to get good service. For an extra fee you will also be able to have the horses rubbed down, fed and watered.”

“I will most certainly take advantage of that advice. Thank you again Captain. If you’re ever in Kyiv, be sure to look us up.”

“I most certainly will” he said. He touched two fingers of his right hand to his brow, and with a final

“luck Lord Ulf”,

he gave the command to cast off and continue his journey home.

Home. What exactly would that be now I wondered to myself? I had left my home two years ago on a quest and during this time I had not had a home in the strict sense of the word. I would now try and make a home in Kyiv. But what exactly home was going to be remained an unanswered question. I guess I’d have to wait until I got there, and then I’d have to play it by ear as my new home would have been selected by my wife without any input from me. Needless to say I would need tact and wisdom while finding my way.

NEXT WEEK

CHAPTER 36 – THE PLAINS OF THE KHAZARS

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