

# LEGEND ⊕ OF THE LAST VIKINGS

## CHAPTER 37

### SARKEŁ

The sun was past its zenith as we made haste for the fortress. Soon its turrets were seen poking above the forest canopy. Surprisingly the track swept down towards the river and ran alongside a swamp. Clever I thought. Barjik had thought this one out quite well. An enemy coming along the road could be ambushed from the thick of the forest and would only be able to retreat back along the road or into the swamp, which was far more dangerous than a river. Given the choice, a well armoured soldier would choose to jump into a river. A river at least gave him a chance, the freedom and time to unstrap his armour, make the surface and swim to safety. But a swamp was an absolute no go.

I was brought out of my reverie by the sudden appearance of the fortress which was now glowing gold in the amber hues of the afternoon sun. Flags flew proudly from the towers. Poles had been evenly spaced along the ramparts from which banners fluttered in the breeze. The road turned North West and ran alongside a moat which in turn ran parallel to the fortress wall. The road was well within the reach of any competent archer up on the ramparts. I noticed that the moat had running water and I looked back to see it emptying into the Don. The fortress was in effect on a man-made island.

On our left and ahead of us the town stretched away to the west and the north. I noticed that front line of houses and dwellings were set well back from the road thereby creating a wide no-mans-land around the castle. This way any enemy could only make limited use of the houses for cover before having to advance across an area open to fire from the ramparts high above.

The road swung right and we came upon a bridge which crossed the moat. A number of armed soldiers in dress uniform stood guard. Just as we approached the bridge a soldier separated himself from the bunch and held up a gauntlet covered right hand. In a deep voice he commanded,

“Hold”.

We reined in but did not dismount,

“Phew! You must be hot in that getup” I said to the soldier.

“Too right. One, who might you be? And Two, just where do you think you’re going?”

“I am Ulf Uspakson and this is my crew” I said with a sweep of my hand.

“We are en route to Kyiv and I am here to see Commander Barjik Chernetsov”.

“The Commander is busy right now what with the tournament and all.....”

and then the realisation set in. He turned his head slightly and his eyes narrowed a little

“Are you *THAT* Ulf Uspakson....?” he enquired.

“Who famously embarrassed Captain Kutarev” Sven said finishing the sentence for him before I could answer.

“Sir my apologies. I should have recognised you. Ah, you weren’t in your boats. Ah, ah, please pass” he said stepping back and indicating with a sweep of his arm.

I nodded my acknowledgement. Before moving on I asked the guard,

“What’s going on?”

“There is a tournament today sir. Things have been so quiet, the Oghuz and Pecheneg mercenaries have been at each other’s throats for weeks. So the Commander set up a tournament so they could beat the crap out of each other - sort of official like.”

“I see. One more thing. Is Captain Kutarev still here?”

“No sir. He has fortunately been posted back to Kyiv.”

“Oh dear. I was hoping to have some fun”.

We all laughed and clattered across the bridge. Serakh asked Rat,

“Who is Captain Kuta-whats-his-name?”

As Rat began to tell her, Balgichi reigned in next to her and listened to the story.

A paved roadway ran up to the fortress gate in a graceful left hand sweep. Barjik had certainly thought it out well. The sweep of the road up to the gate would open the flank of an enemy advancing on the gate and would give the archers on the ramparts a wide field of fire. Had the road run straight up to the gate the field of fire would be constrained to firing on the narrow head of the advancing column, with limited effectiveness. Archers on the extremities of the ramparts would be able to fire on the flank, but the acute angle would mean that most arrows would most certainly be spent by the time they reached their intended target.

In one corner a number of spits had been erected over pit fires and the aroma of pork, beef and lamb wafted our way.

“Ahhhh” groaned Sven. “I could eat one of those right now.”

“Sven” exclaimed Tsai Ming elbowing the gentle giant in the ribs.

“Ow!” he complained wrapping his arms around the diminutive woman in a giant bear hug. She squealed and seemed to almost disappear in his giant arms. Surfacing she said,

“Don’t be so greedy. Anyway it wouldn’t taste good without my herbs and spices!”

“Don’t be so sure about that!” Sven visibly watering at the mouth.

Again my thoughts were interrupted by loud cheering coming from within the fortress walls. High overhead more uniformed guards watched us approach. We entered the gatehouse and could see the tournament was being staged in the bailey. A page hurried up and made to take my reins.

“In a moment” I said to him as I took in the scene.

Stands had been erected on two sides of the bailey with the official podium at the far end. It had been draped in as much finery as the fortress could muster. It all made a splendid sight. A man at the centre of the podium stood and shielding his eyes against the now low sun stared towards us. I too squinted and stared back and almost simultaneously Barjik and I waived to each other. I gave my reins to the page and dismounted, as did the others.

Shortly after dismounting a smartly dressed officer approached bowed and said,

“Good day Lord Uspakson. I am the Commander’s equerry. The Commander extends an invitation for you and your party to join him at the podium.”

“We accept” I said returning the bow. “Although in our current condition I’m not sure we should.”

“Oh. Don’t worry about that. The soldiers smell an awful lot worse. This way please.” He said making sure we were all following him.

We followed the equerry down the west side of the bailey to the official stand. While we walked to the official stand more attention was focussed on us than on the two contestants battling it out in the arena. Serakh and especially Tsai Ming received more than just stares of interest. Serakh’s green eyes were accentuated by her auburn hair and Tsai Ming’s flowing long black hair and Asian features brought many a wolf whistle. Sven, showed a great deal of restraint and did not react to the whistles. Instead he instinctively put his massive forearm across diminutive Tsai Ming’s shoulders. I couldn’t blame the young bucks who were whistling, for it wasn’t often that these men had seen two beautiful exotic, women clad in leather trousers. Ideally we would have changed into something more presentable before presenting ourselves to anyone. But needs must.

As we walked the entire length of the courtyard Serakh began playing to the crowd by rolling her hips a little more than was necessary. Rat noticed this and gave her rump a firm smack with the flat of his hand. The smack sounded more like the crack of a whip which resulted in a slight raising of voices. Her head snapped around and she flashed him a look. She started to raise her hand in response, which brought even more comment, but the look Rat gave her made her think again and instead she slipped her arm in his and walked the remaining distance with a little more poise. My Rat was growing up.

“Ah well” I said to Ibn who was walking besides me, “Word will certainly get out about our entrance here today.”

“It most certainly will.”

“I was hoping that we would be firmly ensconced in Kyiv by the time the Scorpions worked out what route we had planned.”

“Hoping or gambling?”

“A bit of both I think.”

As we mounted the podium Barjik stood, opened his arms and shouted

“Ulf! Welcome. We had heard you were dead. Come, sit. Tell me all.”

When I got to him he gave me a great big bear hug.

“It is so good to see you are not dead” he said slapping my back.

“And I’m glad I am not as well. Although there was a time or two when I thought we would not make it.”

“Come. Tell me all.” He said indicating a seat alongside him.

“Have you heard of the Black Scorpions” I asked?

“Only rumour.”

“Well believe me they are more than just rumour. They are the most insidious, evil and vile organisation of criminals.”

Barjik looked at me with narrowed eyes.

Before I started welcome refreshments were served which certainly washed the day’s dust from my dry throat. I drank deeply and on finishing nodded my thanks to the equerry who had arranged this. He was good. While we half-watched the jousting and mock fights I recounted our story. Barjik interjected now and then with questions of clarification.

As the sun sank lower, torches were brought out and placed around the arena. I noticed that during the sword fights, instead of metal ringing on metal, there was the sound of wood clunking on wood. I asked Barjik about this,

“That was my one stipulation.” Said Barjik. “I could only allow training swords. Things have been so quiet here that they started fighting each other. So to help them let off some energy I arranged this. But in case they were suddenly needed I would need them to be in one piece, more or less, so I stipulated training swords only.”

“Very wise indeed.”

The final engagement was predictably between the Oghuz and Pecheneg champions. Both had traditionally and chosen sword and shield. The two circled each other, feinting left and right and giving mock charges, looking for that opening that would deliver victory. The engagement was slow to say the least. Soon the audience began shouting for action. Amidst booing, cabbages and assorted fruit were thrown at the men, which they avoided without taking their eyes off other. Suddenly an apple flew across the arena striking the Oghuz on the head knocking him slightly off balance. Seeing his opportunity the Pecheneg charged. The Oghuz threw up his shield to fend off the slash of his opponent’s sword, but the additional shift in weight threw him even further off balance and he tripped over his feet and fell backwards. He tried rolling to get up quickly but the Pecheneg pounced and sat astride the Oghuz who couldn’t shake off his opponent. With arms raised the Pecheneg claimed the victory. Barjik leap the balustrade and entered the arena

holding up his hands. He took the Pecheneg by the hand and bad him stand, saying something to him as he did so. In a never before seen gesture of sportsmanship the Pecheneg extended his hand and helped his opponent to his feet. Holding the Oghuz's hand aloft, together they turned in a circle with hands raised to rapturous applause. Barjik stood back and applauded them both as well.

The tournament over, tables and benches were brought into the arena and arranged in uniform rows. The competitors then marched in, in two rows and filed past the podium acknowledging their fealty by lowering their weapons and bowing their heads. They then took their places at the assigned tables.

Just as efficiently bread, meat, poultry and ale was brought out and distributed amongst the warriors. Food for the audience the food we had seen earlier was being served in the outside bailey. Just as quickly as they filed out they started coming back in to the places they had occupied with plates of steaming food and tankards of ale.

An area in front of the podium had been kept clear and musicians and entertainers now filled the space. Very soon the audience and some of the warriors began singing along with the musicians.

As the evening wore on the younger and more dashing officers were disappointed to find that Serakh and Tsai Ming had already been spoken for. As scoring with the women was out of the question Barjik and the officer core surrounded us and milked every last detail about the journey from us.

People had begun to drift away to their homes and the warriors were either to drunk or too tired to care about bent pride. Some had fallen asleep at the long tables their heads resting on their arms, others, exhausted, lay spread-eagled on the ground. Tsai Ming and Serakh had cuddled up closer to their husbands in now cooler night air.

It was late and the torches had burned low. In fact one or two of them had gone out. I took this as a cue.

"I think I will turn in now" I said to Barjik. "It's been a long day. In fact it's been a long few days".

"Yes, of course. But a better result than I expected" said Barjik.

"I daresay. You'll be surprised what a little robust activity can do to defuse a tense situation."

"Quite. When will you leave for Kyiv?"

"Tomorrow. I want to get there before the Scorpions can arrange any form of interception or ambush".

"You really are wary of these people aren't you?"

“Absolutely. That their reach extends from Hardzhy-Tarkhan to Baku to Wulumqi is frightening enough. While men play politics and fight each other for the crowns of Europe and Asia, they quietly carry on creating their own evil underground empire, gaining more and more control. It is definitely wise to be wary of such people”.

“Then I will join you. I have to go to Izyum anyway to review the progress of the fort we have under construction there. We can take a small guard just in case these Scorpions or Pechenegs decide to try an ambush”.

“Excellent! In the morning then” I said slapping my thigh and standing.

“In the morning”.

The equerry appeared as if from nowhere and asked us to follow him to our quarters.

**NEXT WEEK**

**CHAPTER 38 – WEST AGAIN**

For more information on the book, route, author bio and bibliography

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