

CHAPTER 34

⊕ LD FRIENDS

The masses of reed beds gave away the fact that we were approaching fresh water. That they stretched out for mil upon mil indicated it was a large river. Islands of reeds could be seen out in the river. Slowly but surely the smell of fresh water intermingled with the smell of human habitation until the latter superseded the former.

Just as the smell of human habitation increased, so did the occurrence of fishermen's shacks, then houses, until at last we were well and truly back in this eastern city of canals and bridges.

We meandered our way through the city, overwhelmed at its size, business, noise and bustle. It was at total odds with the quiet, open expanses of the desert and steppe. Not even Otrar and Tengi Kent were comparable in size or activity.

Finally, after a few wrong turns, we found ourselves in the silversmiths' row. It felt as if I were being reacquainted with a long-lost friend. Eventually we came to Balgichi's shop, although it could never be called a shop. I rapped on the door and a female voice from the inside called out,

"Ver iz dort?"

"I don't profess to understand what you're saying, young lady, but I believe you have a young man of mine..."

The door flew open and Serakh, Rat and Pesakh burst out. Rat flung his arms around me and thumped me on the back and shouted,

"ULF! At last! We have been waiting and waiting and had almost given up. We have ridden the approaches day after day and scoured the port looking for you..."

Then he realised his predicament and withdrew all embarrassed. Not one of the crew laughed, but the grins on their faces told me that they understood.

"Come in, come in," said Pesakh.

We entered the shop and it struck me that what had before been choked with books, maps and manuscripts, was now totally bare. Only a light layer of dust covered the floor.

"What...? Where is everything?"

Balgichi Simatov came out from the back, "It is all gone to Kyiv."

"Kyiv? But why? You said that it was your books that kept you here."

"And so it was. Well, I want to be near my grandchildren. When they arrive, that is." He gave Rat and Serakh a soulful look.

“Am I missing something?” I asked.

“No,” replied Rat with a grin plastered over his face. “Only that Serakh and I were married two months ago.”

“So now we have a Missus Rat, eh? Ah, I know what it was, you couldn’t wait to dip your wick, eh?”

“No, it’s not like that...” he started.

Blushing, Serakh tugged his shirt.

“Oh, you’re teasing again,” said Rat.

“I surely am. Do you mean to say that I missed your wedding? And a feast?”

“Yes. Sorry.” he said, looking like a scolded child. He then added quickly, “But Lydia and Iksander were here.”

“Ah. Well then, we’ll just have to have another celebration. We have a long and interesting story to tell.

Sven, are you going to introduce Tsai Ming or what?”

“I think ‘or what’ should about do it” said Sven.

“Who is Tsai Ming?” asked Rat.

“Sven’s wife, of course.”

“Sven’s wife! Sven has a wife? Where is she?”

Little Tsai Ming was brought forward and Sven placed a protective arm about her as best he could.

“She is Sven’s wife!” exclaimed Rat and Pesakh together, staring at the diminutive but beautiful Tsai Ming.

“But she is so small,” said Rat.

Serakh elbowed Rat in the ribs and he winced. Serakh and Tsai Ming had made eye contact and both smiled broadly. Now they could look forward to the journey to Kyiv in company other than that of ten boorish men.

“Rat, when did they leave for Kyiv?”

“Seven weeks ago, tomorrow.”

“Well they should be there by now,” said Sven.

“Yes, they should. Well, why are we standing here? We have just crossed the world and are thirsty and hungry.”

Teasing Serakh, I said, “Well then, are you going to just stand there or are you going to cook for us... or... are we going out?”

“I think we’ll go to a tavern,” she said. “There’s too many to cook for at this late hour.”

“Just as well,” said Sven. “I don’t think there’s enough beer here for a double celebration. Or is it a triple celebration?”

“Who cares?” said someone. “It’s a celebration whichever way you look at it.”

Tsai Ming whispered something in Sven's ear.

"Tsai Ming would like to change into something more comfortable before we go out."

"Alright. Make it quick, though—we're all hungry."

Tsai Ming and Serakh disappeared into the back of the shop and emerged a short while later in splendid female attire. A few whistles emanated from the crew.

"That's enough of that," chorused Sven and Rat, which brought on a reply of "Woo-hoos".

As we walked into the tavern the sight of a diminutive but beautiful oriental woman clad in shimmering green silk turned just about every man and woman's head in the place. She instinctively moved close to Sven, who draped an arm across her shoulder.

While we ate Ibn led the recounting of our travels in, around and across the Taklamakan and the Kingdom of Qocho, with the help of his diary. Like most young men their age, Pesakh and Rat were visibly upset on having missed out on so much high adventure. I had to remind him that he had caught a wife instead of desert sand in his nostrils, which pacified him a little.

The recounting of the story led to others in the tavern taking an unusually high interest in what was being said. As the night wore on, eavesdropping turned to blatant interest in proportion with the amount of beer being consumed. Eventually we found ourselves the centre of a fairly large crowd. The beer flowed as quickly as the story, and commentary on what was being told was not withheld. As with any story, there were those who didn't believe a word of what was said. Unsurprisingly it was discovered that most of the doubters had never been beyond the boundaries of Hardzy-Tarkhan. Nevertheless they stayed for the duration of the tale.

Now that we were in closer proximity to the Black Scorpion headquarters I had tried to scan the crowd that night for anyone who may give the slightest indication of being a Scorpion. I noticed that Kalas was also doing the same. Despite my efforts I did not identify anyone who showed signs of being one.

When we left the tavern that night, we left with many looks of admiration and the tavern keeper did not charge us for our meal, saying that never before had he had such good business and could we come again tomorrow. I told him that tomorrow we would be gone, on our way to Kyiv.

Once outside, I called Kalas over. "Did you pick up anyone who had the telltale signs of being a Scorpion?"

"No. But news of our storytelling will undoubtedly spread. If a smart Black Scorpion should hear of it he would not take long to come to the obvious conclusions."

"Unfortunately true. Oh well, we'll just have to keep our wits about us."

A few of the more inebriated crew had linked arms and were marching down the centre of the street singing an old Viking song.

He smiled and said, "With this lot?"

I smiled and said, “I know, I know.”

That night we slept the sleep of the dead.

NEXT WEEK

CHAPTER 35 - LEAVING THE PAST BEHIND