

## CHAPTER 46

# NEW LIFE

### LEGEND OF THE LAST VIKINGS

Kyiv. Here we were stepping ashore after what seemed a lifetime of riding. While we crossed the river a light snow had begun to fall, dusting the city as if God had opened a sack of flour in heaven and sprinkled it about. The pure white snow contrasted with the sandstone and brown buildings creating a magical effect.

On alighting I made our first stop at the port office where I was going to make enquiries on where the Hephthalites had been sequestered. The harbour master recognised me.

“My Lord Uspakson. It is indeed a pleasure again.”

Not recognising him, I asked

“Where is Boris?”

“He has been, shall we say, reassigned.”

“Ah. Would you perchance know where my wife and her father are living?”

“No, My Lord. But it shouldn't be hard to find out. But I think you had better present yourself to the Grand Duke first.”

“The Grand Duke can wait. I have travelled halfway across the world and have not seen my wife for almost a whole year. No, it's my wife first, the Grand Duke tomorrow.”

“On your head be it, then.”

“It always is. It always is.”

“Wait here and I'll send a runner for you”.

The runner was promptly dispatched and came back a while later. I found out that the Grand Duke had been generous and given Lydia and Iksander residence in the Upper City.

“Do you know your way M'Lord?”

“Yes, we know our way. Did you perchance ask if Haldor Snorreson was quartered there as well?”

“No, I...”

“Never mind. You weren't to know. I didn't ask you to.”

And so it was with a degree of trepidation in my heart that I rode up to the gate of the Upper City, the last barrier between me and my Lydia. I thought to myself,

“Me? A veteran of a thousand battles suffering from anxiety and trepidation?”

I laughed out aloud. My comrades were mystified at my outburst. A soldier sauntered out of the guard house and stood in the road, his hands on his hips while he eyed up Tsai-Ming and Serakh.

An undisguised look of pure lust was written all over his face. We sat patiently waiting. Eventually he said in a not-too-friendly tone,

“And just what do you want?”

I agreed that after six month of travel, our clothes were not in the best condition and we probably did not look like the most likely residents of the Upper City.

“I would like you to open the gate so that I may go to my wife and family,” I replied as civilly as I could.

“And just who the hell are you?”

I opened my mouth to reply, but a voice boomed from behind us, “He is Lord Ulf Uspakson, you oaf! Newly arrived from travels and adventures in the farthest East. He is the man who, just two winters ago, made sure that the people of Kyiv were fed. Also the man who trained the army of Kyiv that winter. The man who fought with Harald Hadraada and Lord Haldor Snorreson for Grand Duke Yaroslav the Wise in subduing the Pechenegs.”

The guard’s eyes opened wider and wider as the speaker went on.

“Do I have to carry on or are you going to open the gate?”

The guard, shocked at having been so rude, scrambled to open the gate.

During the interlude the speaker came forward, but he didn’t need any introduction. We proceeded through the gate.

“Boris, how are you?”

“My Lord, you remember?”

“How could I forget?”

He laughed and said, “No, of course not.”

“You have been studying up on your history, or rather I should say mine.”

“Better than that. I surprised myself, and Olaf, and proved such an able student that I am now assistant to Olaf. When he retires I am to run the library.”

“Every dark cloud has a silver lining.”

“Indeed they do,” he said, beaming.

“Although, I had never thought of Olaf as the retiring type.”

“Indeed not. He will go on until he dies.”

“And that does not worry you?”

“No. Now that I’ve had a somewhat decent education, I realise just how much he knows and how much I don’t. No, Olaf has a lot to teach me before I take over the reins. Not to mention the cataloguing of all the books and documents that you have sent from the Hidden Kingdom.

There’s a lifetime’s work in that as well. “

“And Iksander?”

“Oh, he and Olaf are as thick as thieves. They spend more time discussing and debating the merits of documents and books than they do cataloguing them. I don’t mind. I am learning all the time. Ah, here we are—this is your house.”

“Thank you, Boris. We are most grateful. Ah, Boris, just one more thing.”

“What is that, My Lord?”

“Even when you are in charge, don’t forget you will always have something more to learn.”

“That I have already learnt—on a dock almost two years ago,” said Boris, paying me a very high compliment. I inclined my head as Boris bade us good night and disappeared up the street. We dismounted and walked the horses around to the stables. Sven took over their care and I rapped on the door. Iksander opened it and uncharacteristically shouted back over his shoulder

“He is here! He is here!” which took us by surprise. Then he said, “Welcome, Ulf. Welcome, all! Quickly, quickly. Come in, come in.”

“Where is she?” I asked.

“In the bedroom lying down,” said Iksander, pointing inside. He led the way down a passage and opened a door. I walked in expecting to have Lydia rush into my arms. Instead my Lydia was lying on a bed, her hair plastered to her head with sweat, her nightdress pulled up around her waist and her naked legs splayed open. She screamed at me, “Ulf Uspakson, where on this damned earth have you been! I have been holding this birth back as long as I could just for you! Ye gods this is painful! It’s like pushing out pumpkins. If I had known that all that pleasure was going to give me this much pain, I wouldn’t have let you lay a hand on me! OW! By the gods, that’s sore.”

An Arab physician, assisted by a plump Kyivian midwife, shrugged. The expression on his face said, I’ve seen this all before and there’s nothing I, nor you, can do. I smiled back, unsure of what I had walked into. The midwife bustled about wiping the sweat off Lydia’s face with a cool cloth. She rinsed it in a bowl of water and placed it next to a panting Lydia.

“Not long now,” said the physician, examining Lydia’s lower abdomen. “The head is engaged. A couple more pushes and we’ll be there.”

“WE won’t,” spat back Lydia. “I will!”

“Now, now, Lord Uspakson,” said the midwife. “This is not the time for men. Could you wait next door ple...”

“Like hell he will!” bawled Lydia. “He was there when it was made. He will be here when it’s born,” she forced out through her panting. “He can see first hand what he’s putting me through. I only wish he could experience it.”

Even the midwife was taken aback by her outburst. Wide eyed, she said meekly, “Yes, My Lady.”

“Oh, God help me. I just want this to be over.”

Less than a third of an hour later Lydia, my Lydia, gave birth to a small, perfect, pink and blue boy.

While the midwife held the child, the physician took a knife off a carefully laid out white towel and cut the child's umbilical cord, which he tied off in a knot. This done, the midwife washed him in a basin of warm water and wrapped him up in a soft cotton blanket. She handed the bawling boy to me.

While I had more than roughly played with children in Nidaros, Novgorod and Holmgard, I had always avoided the smelly and usually screaming infants. As such I had never learnt to hold one. I was all fingers and thumbs.

The midwife clucked and scolded me, "You can wield a sword like it was a matchstick, travel to the ends of the world, defeat all kinds of evil and command armies, yet you don't know how to hold a baby?"

"No. I don't know how. I've never been a father before."

"Never?"

"No, never."

Her demeanour changed immediately and she became soft and caring. "Here, let me show you." Organising my arms and hands, she said, "See, you support his head with your hand and then rest him in the crook of your arm, just like this," and she placed the infant in my arms.

"I see. That simple?"

Looking down at this helpless little life I had helped create, I was fighting to hold back the tears.

"Yes. That simple. Isn't he beautiful?"

"Um, yes." This may have been my child but all I could see was a pudgy, pink face with squinty eyes and a head covered in black hair. I couldn't see any beauty in this. Well at least, not yet. No sooner had she handed him over to me, when a second bawling sound filled the room. Lydia had given birth to an equally small, perfect, pink and blue girl.

"Two? Two? I thought there was only one."

Iksander slipped out to pass on the news.

As Lydia regained her breath, she said, "You weren't here to tell. Doctor al-Dabili was the only one to pick up two heartbeats when he examined me, which is why I kept him on and fired the others. It is over. Thank you, God."

I laughed. This was more like the Lydia I knew. I walked over to the bed and sat next to her on the bed while the physician and midwife repeated the cord, washing and wrapping procedure. I kissed her forehead and said, "I love you."

"After this you had better," she said with a wry and weary smile on her face.

The physician called for a bowl and towels. The midwife hastily gave our baby girl to Lydia, and upon smelling Lydia's milk, the baby turned her head towards Lydia's breast and began making suckling sounds with her mouth.

"Not yet," said the physician. "First we must deliver the sack."

"The what?" I asked.

"The sack. The sack from the womb. It is what your babies have been living in for the past eight months or so."

"Oh."

"Ah, here it comes."

The physician pulled a large, bloody, purple, blue and red mass from between my Lydia's legs and dropped it in the bowl with a slurp. She winced slightly as it was removed. The physician and midwife then proceeded to wash the blood from Lydia's lower abdomen and legs, while the babies hooked on and began suckling greedily.

"Ow!"

"That's just the milk coming down," said the midwife. "The next time 'round it won't be as sore, until eventually you'll be so used to it, it'll be like breathing."

"It had better be!" said Lydia, closing her eyes, relaxing and lying back for the first time in hours.

Iksander put his head through the door and motioned for us to go outside. We left the physician and midwife to clear up the mess and settle Lydia in. Outside he said, "Not quite the homecoming you were expecting?"

"Not at all. Was it that obvious?"

"It was written all over your face," he said, laughing.

We walked into the main living area and were met by Haldor, Tsai-Ming and Sven, Ibn, Rat, Balgichi and Serakh. Without a word Haldor and I hugged and slapped each other on the back, held each other at arms' length and then slapped each other on the back again.

"How are my babies?" asked Haldor.

"Your babies?"

"Yes, mine. You only made them and then handed their care over to me. Remember?"

"Yes I do. It all seems so long ago."

"Does it ever? It has been the longest delivery in the world. All the way from the Hidden Kingdom on the Roof of the World, across the deserts of Asia to the steppe of Europe," he said with a sweep of his hand. We all laughed.

"Well congratulations—Father. I never thought I'd hear myself say those words to you."

"And I never thought I'd hear you say them."

"Does it feel good?"

“It does. Although all the planning in the world couldn’t prepare me for this.”

The physician came through. “She’s all settled now. You’re lucky she had twins. There has been a small amount of ripping when they were born, but it is considerably less than with a single baby, and should heal quite quickly. You see, twins don’t grow as large as a single child.”

“Oh, of course.” I wasn’t sure that this was the sort of information I needed to hear.

“However, no sex for six to eight weeks—at least.”

“After nine months apart, that was definitely not what he wanted to hear,” said Haldor bawdily, elbowing me in the ribs. After so long out of his company I was going to have to get used to Haldor again. I then went through a round of congratulations and back slapping from all in the room. Sven lifted Tsai-Ming, who gave me a peck on the cheek.

The midwife came out. “My Lord, she’s calling for you.”

“Excuse me. I am summoned by my Goddess.”

I walked back into the room and Lydia was lying on clean sheets with her eyes closed. A babe suckled on each breast.

“It’s not fair,” I said.

Opening her eyes, she said, “What’s not fair?”

“I mean, here I am wanting you so badly after being apart for so long, and they get the first go at all your parts. And now I’m told I have to wait eight weeks before I get my chance!”

“Ha-ha-ha. Very funny. Anyway, you’ll have the rest of your life to ravish my body.”

“Yes, but I have to wait eight weeks before I get my next chance.”

Sitting next to her on the bed, I put my arm around her shoulders and said, “I do love you, you know.”

“I know,” she said, snuggling in.

“Pooh! Ulf Uspkason, you smell.”

“Yes, I do need a wash. As do the rest of us. Can I bring Tsai-Ming in to see the baby?”

“Tsai-Ming? Who is Tsai-Ming?”

“Oh, she’s a concubine I was given as a gift by the Idiquit of Qocho.”

Her eyes opened wide as she exclaimed, “A concubine? What Idiot? Where’s Qocho?”

“Idiquit not idiot. Shush, you’ll wake the babies. Yes, a concubine. I wouldn’t be at all surprised if she were pregnant by now.”

“Pregnant? Wake the babies! Ulf Uspakson, tell me you’re lying to me?”

“I am. She’s really Sven’s wife.”

Lydia broke out her gorgeous smile. “Sven’s wife! Big Sven has a wife!”

“He surely does.”

“Yes, yes. I want to see her. Send her in.”

“Don’t act surprised when you see her. Rat, Serakh and Balgichi are here as well.”

“Why? Oh, good. Send them all in. We might as well get it over with.”

I returned to the living area and told all that they were welcome to go through and see the newest additions to the Uspakson family. Family, that was a new word to me. The only family I had known for the past twenty or so years was the army and my friends. My closest and most trusted relation had been my sword. Sven, Tsai-Ming, Rat and Serakh went through first. Not long afterwards, a messenger arrived saying that I was required immediately for an audience with Grand Duke Valdimir.

“Tell His Majesty that I humbly beg his pardon. Tell him I have just ridden half way around the known world, and have been attacked a good number of times, almost losing my hand in the process. Tell him I have just witnessed the birth of my firstborns, a boy and a girl. Tell him I am tired, weary and absolutely famished. Tell him I smell like the sewers of Cairo and that I will be in attendance first thing in the morning—after I have eaten, washed and seen to my wife and children.”

Colour drained from the messenger’s face as I spoke. “I can’t tell him that.”

“You can and you will. If you don’t I will separate your head from your body. Come to think of it, if you do he probably will as well. Now be gone with you!”

Not having eaten since midday, I suddenly realised just how famished I really was.

“Where’s the food?” I asked. “I’m starving.”

Iksander clapped his hands and a servant girl came out.

“Bring His Lordship some ham, cheese and bread. And bring some ale as well.”

“Make that as much as you can muster. The others will be hungry too.”

She nodded and left. A while later the food was delivered and we sat down to eat. Iksander sat watching us and said, “I guess some information on where you went and what you got up to will have to wait?”

I laughed. “Stop fishing, Iksander. Yes it will. Anyway, it will take more than one evening to recount our story. And I dare not start without Olaf and Balgichi.”

“No, I guess you had better not.”

I walked up to the Grand Duke’s palace before breakfast and was immediately shown into a morning room to breakfast with the Grand Duke. He invited me to sit, with a smile on his face.

“I believe congratulations are in order.”

“Thank you, sire.”

“I trust that you are now clean and refreshed, Ulf?”

The use of my first name took me by surprise.

“Indeed I am, sire.”

Taking a bread roll, he broke it and said, “Your response aged my messenger by years. I must ask you not to do that again. Good staff are hard to find.”

I laughed and promised not to. Following suit, I took some bread and chicken and we ate in silence while we sipped strong Arabic coffee. Finishing before I did, he sat back and studied me, before saying, “Tell me about the Black Scorpions.”

He had cut straight to the one issue that could have the greatest effect on Kyiv. Over the next half hour I filled him in on the limited knowledge of the Scorpions and of our run-ins with them. I concluded, “I fear that my interaction with them has led them to Kyiv. I am not sure what that will mean for Kyiv, yourself, me and my family.”

“Come, come, Ulf. You know exactly what it will mean. What do you propose?”

I outlined a basic strategy for dealing with the threat from the Black Scorpions.

“Good, I was counting on you having something prepared. Do you intend returning to Norway?”

“With your majesty’s permission I would like to settle here in Kyiv.”

“Why?”

“Well none of us is getting any younger and Kyiv definitely offers a more comfortable retirement than does Nidaros. Also, I now have a family and Kyiv is fast overtaking Byzantium as a centre of learning and what with the library from the Hidden Kingdom...” I shrugged and raised my hands, leaving him to finish the sentence for himself.

“Good. I was hoping you would say that. Although, don’t think you will ever retire in Kyiv. There is too much to be done. Now tell me about the Kozak.”

He was well informed. I filled him in on the details I knew, recounting our initial contact with them on the Dniepr and again at Izyum.

“Your first order of business will be to try and set up an alliance with the Kozak. A mobile force on our southern frontier will be of great benefit. Heaven only knows that Kyiv needs every ally it can get at the moment. The second order of business will be to recount your travels to the court, one month from today.”

“Of course, sire. It will be our pleasure.”

“Good. Now excuse me I have matters to attend to.”

I rose as he got up to go.

“No, stay. Finish breakfast at your leisure,” he said, before leaving the room.

I finished a hearty meal at leisure, attended by the Grand Duke’s servants. To not take advantage of such luxurious setting and attendance would have been a shame. I asked one of the attendants to call the chief cook through. A flustered middle-aged woman came through, clearly anxious at being summoned.

“Cook, thank you for an excellent morning meal.”

She broke her frown and her face lit up like a single candle in the dark of night.

“However, I must insist that next season you try and get your hands on some cha.”

“Cha, My Lord?” she said with a puzzled look on her face.

“Yes, cha. I’ll send a young lady with a sample. She is from Qocho and is very small and very beautiful. She will make you a cup. It is most refreshing and I’m sure the Grand Duke will be most grateful for this addition to the royal pantry.”

“Uh, yes, My Lord. Will that be all?”

“It will. Thank you, cook.”

“Thank you, sir,” she said, curtsying before exiting.

I arrived back at the house in time to see Lydia and the midwife settling the babies down after their morning feed.

“Well, my husband, how did it go?”

“Extraordinarily well. I have been given two tasks. One is to set up an alliance with the Kozak and the other is to present a tale of our journey to the court a month from today.”

“The Kozak? Who or what are the Kozak?”

“Now, now. You’ll have to wait a month to find that out.”

She playfully threw a heavily embroidered cushion at me, wincing as she made the effort.

“Well then, you’ll have to wait even longer for what you want.”

“You wouldn’t do that, would you?”

“You’ll have to wait and see, won’t you?”

“Alright, I give in. You are most persuasive. I’ll arrange for a retelling with Olaf and Iksander. But it will have to be here.”

“Why here?”

“Well, until your condition has improved, you’re unlikely to be travelling very far.”

“But...”

“No buts. That’s final. I saw you wince when you threw that cushion.”

She pouted and said, “You see too much.”

“I see what I need to. Now lie back and enjoy the rest.”

“I’m not an invalid!”

“I know that. I need you better so that I can have someone to spar with, and not just with swords.”

Later that morning I dropped by the library. Iksander and Balgichi were there. An unusually unrestrained Olaf welcomed me, tears running down his cheeks. Hanging onto a thread of his usual reserve, he clasped my hand and forearm, and I drew him into an embrace.

“Ulf, how can I ever thank you for sending me such a magnificent collection of books and manuscripts?”

“Well you may start by forgiving me for losing the spyglass you gave me.”

“It was nothing but a trinket. What is important is that you’re back. With a wife and now children. Oh, congratulations.”

“Thank you, Olaf. Shouldn’t you be getting on with cataloguing the items instead of sitting around and debating their merits with Iksander and Balgichi?”

“What has Boris been telling you?”

“Nothing that I would not have expected to hear about three overly wise old men.”

“Ha ha. The three wise men, I like that. You know, we have much to discuss and talk about.”

“You mean you three have not already done that?”

We laughed.

“I need to borrow Boris for a while.”

“Why?”

“Because I need to send a message south to the Isle of Khortytsia and I need him to help me identify a trustworthy trader.

“The Isle of Khortytsia? Why? What is there?”

“Never you mind. If I told you I would have to kill you, or at the very least cut your tongue out.”

“Very funny. Very well, you may borrow Boris.”

“Thank you. Come on, Boris, let’s go to the docks.”

At the docks Boris used his old contacts and his new-found authority to find a trader returning late to Byzantium and I arranged for him to deliver a message to Bohdan Hetman on the Isle of Khortytsia, saying that the Grand Duke was interested in exploring an alliance with the Kozak and that I would meet with him at a place of his choosing in the spring. Although, I had the feeling that he would probably pay me a visit in Kyiv before the winter was over. This way he would have the advantage of surprise, which would minimise the risk of ambush.

When our mission at the docks was over, Boris returned to the library and I walked over to the barracks. Haldor was training a cohort of Kyivian infantry in battle manoeuvres, a difficult task to achieve in a quadrangle. Everything had to be done on a very limited scale rather than on the usually vast scale of a battlefield.

Surprisingly the whole crew was present and watching. Not surprisingly, because of the lateness of the season, those who wanted to return to the Viking kingdoms of the north had decided to winter over in Kyiv. Starting north now would have meant wintering in Novgorod, and I knew which city I would rather have wintered in. I offered the crew as a pretend enemy and we practised the move a few times before Haldor released them to practise their swordsmanship. Over the next few weeks I divided my time between the library and rehearsals for the retelling. I spent my mornings in the library. While Boris and his assistants laboured away cataloguing the thousands of new books and manuscripts, Iksander, Balgichi and Olaf continued to debate a range from Greece and Aristotle to Arabia and al-Khayyami’s Rubyat.

I found I would have to refine my area of study. I had learnt a great deal over the years since I first met Olaf and had covered a great many subjects, all of which interested me. After

discussing it with Lydia, it was she who suggested that I compile a works, cataloguing the feats of the great seafaring nations of the world. She knew that, coming from a seafaring nation, not only would this keep me interested but would be something I could understand and appreciate. And so I embarked on a research project in the now vastly expanded library.

In the afternoons the crew and I met in a disused storeroom. Using Ibn's book, we practised the retelling of our adventure. We soon decided that we would need a narrator. While the men could act out their parts, albeit rather ham-fistedly, none really had the ability to speak eloquently, not to mention that most were rather scared of speaking in front of a large audience. So we co-opted Olaf, who was overjoyed at gaining first-hand knowledge of our journey. I knew that it also made him feel a part of the adventure and the team. Serakh and Tsai-Ming sewed the costumes and took their parts at the appropriate times. During the third week we were surprised when Lydia and the twins, supported by Balgichi, Iksander and the midwife, appeared at the rehearsals. Everything came to a stop as everyone crowded around Lydia and the twins and I gave up trying to get rehearsals started again. Thereafter Lydia and the twins became a regular feature at our sessions. It was amusing to watch my wife trying to sew in between feeding the twins. In the words of our midwife, she could wield a sword like it was a matchstick, but came away from sewing with bloodied fingertips.

A week after Lydia's visit we had our final rehearsal and spent the next few days building a makeshift stage in the great hall of the court. Iztaslav was intrigued, but not at all put out by having to shift his court into smaller chambers.

Word had got out and about and anyone who had claim to rank or importance was vying for an invitation. Some had even travelled to Kyiv through the early winter snows for the event.

On the evening of the event, the whole hall was buzzing with anticipation. Iztaslav and his family were in the front row, and his court in the rows immediately behind. Palace staff packed the side aisles, some standing on boxes to see over the heads of those in front. A drum roll brought about an immediate silence, and the play commenced.

Over the next three hours the audience were taken from the sadness of losing a king and friend to the hilarious laughter as Sven chased Rat around the knarr. The emotions dived into the pits of despair at the mine and rose to the heights of excitement and romance at the Hidden Kingdom. It also covered the tedium of traversing the Taklamakan to Qocho and the anticipation and fear of our first meeting with the Lang Ren. The audience experienced the joy at finding Ingvar's mummified remains and the shock of seeing Lydia's aunt lying in that state. They experienced the pain of my wound, the amazing discovery of finding sharks' teeth in the middle of the Kyzyl Kum Desert, then the despair when the Black Scorpions found us yet again. Again they were taken through the fear and anticipation of the night ride and the rage at losing Larz at Cherkassy, when we were so close to home.

At the end Lydia and the twins were a surprise request from the audience and she received a standing ovation when she walked onto the stage with one twin in each hip. On the spur of the moment I gave her a full kiss, which brought the house down.

Then Iziaslav stood and came forward. As he did, silence descended over the audience. He turned and faced them. "Tonight what we have seen has been a spectacle. If it were not for the fact that Ulf Uspakson, Haldor Snorreson and Ibn al Arslani were the three main characters, most of us would undoubtedly dismiss this as just another story. A fable from a far-off land. But then consider the first-hand account by a captain of the Kyvian Guard of the burial of an innkeeper and his family and the inn, which was burned to the ground on Ulf's command in Cherkassy only but a month ago. Then you realise just how much these men, and women, have been through. In addition, Ulf Uspakson has decided to make Kyiv his home..."

Applause broke out, which Iziaslav allowed to continue for a short while. Then he raised his hands, before continuing. "Ulf Uspakson, come forward."

Still wearing my Lang Ren elders' robe I broke from the players and walked forward.

He motioned Lydia and the twins forward as well. My heart swelled with pride as my wife and family came to stand next to me.

"Almost two hundred years ago, at the start of the Rurikidernas dynasty, a position was created which has, for a while, been void. It has been void because there was no one fit to bear the title and responsibilities. Until now. The position of Defender of the Realm requires that person to have absolute integrity, to have compassion, to be utterly trusted by the people he leads and above all to be absolutely trusted by his sovereign."

He paused to let the words sink in.

"Ulf Uspakson, I now confer on you the position of Defender of the Realm. Please kneel."

I knelt on one knee, head bowed before Iziaslav.

"Ulf Uspakson, I now appoint you Defender of the Realm of Rus. From now on you will answer to no one in the kingdom except me."

The audience applauded. The first minister came forward with a chain of gold medallions laid out on a red velvet cushion. Each medallion had a giant blue sapphire set in its centre. A medallion, larger than those on the chain, with an extremely large sapphire, hung from the centre by a number of links, forming a triangle. Each medallion was encrusted with fine gold filigree. Iziaslav took it off the red velvet cushion and hung the clinking chain about my neck. It weighed heavily about my shoulders. Still kneeling, I looked up straight into Iziaslav's stare. A moment of understanding passed between us. He extended his right arm and I kissed the ring of state on his third finger. He nodded and smiled and with the same arm bade me rise. The audience roared their approval.

Standing on his right, I bowed to Iziaslav and then bowed to the audience. I held out my right hand and Lydia and the twins came forward. Again the audience cheered loudly. The noise was so loud that the twins began crying. I kissed Lydia on the cheek, quickly whispering some instructions. She looked at me, initially without comprehension. Then realising what I had said, she curtsied to Iziaslav and exited with a crying baby on each hip. Iziaslav then returned to his seat and to thunderous applause the crew took a bow, and another and another. Eventually I called a halt to the encores, thanking everyone for their attendance and support.

Just as we were leaving the stage I caught sight of a blonde-haired man at the extreme rear of the room. Bohan Hetman had lived up to my expectations. I caught his eye and bowed my head slightly. He raised a hand in acknowledgement and slipped out of the room.

Immediately after the applause had died down, benches were rearranged and tables brought out. The crew and I mingled directly with the audience, receiving many slaps on the back. While this was going on the stage was dismantled and the head table laid out. I was rescued from a boring official by a page advising me that my attendance was required by Iziaslav at the head table.

I took my place and was soon joined by Lydia. She asked, “Did you know that this was going to happen?”

“No. Did you?”

“No. It has come as big surprise.”

“To me as well.”

“What does it mean?”

“We’ll have to wait and see.”

“Ooh, I hate that.”

“Hate what?”

“Waiting and seeing.”

I chuckled and the first course arrived. Lydia was about to tuck in but I placed a hand on her wrist and she abruptly stopped.

“You must wait for the Sovereign to start.”

Embarrassed, she blushed and replaced her spoon, glancing at Iziaslav, who smiled.

“I love it when you blush.”

“Why?”

“It makes you seem all naive and maidenly.”

“Oh it does, does it?”

“Yes it does. Not that you claim to be all naïve and maidenly anymore.”

“And whose fault is that?”

“Tell me you didn’t enjoy it?”

“This soup is absolutely delicious. I’ll have to ask the cook for the recipe.”

The rest of the evening passed off in a heady mix of wine and laughter. Later in the evening troubadours and acrobats entertained us. Long after midnight we stumbled back into the house.

Twice a week I was required to attend court. In the summer I was to tour the kingdom and deal with any insurgency that threatened the realm. In the meantime I set about creating a network of informers and agents. If the Black Scorpions could run such a network then so could I. I divided the work up between a few hand-picked men, Rat and Sven among them. I was saddened by Haldor’s announcement that he would be returning to Norway in the spring. I would sorely miss my dear life-long friend when he was gone.

In my spare time, which was now considerably less, I continued my research on ancient seafaring nations. I came across an ancient Phoenician document, which turned out to be one of the first works Balgichi had sent Olaf.

Olaf, Balgichi and Iksander sat down to translate it for me.

Olaf provided a literal translation as he read, “It says that the Phoenicians sailed the seas of the world for trade. Hmmmm. Probably means the Mediterranean and the Pontus Euxinus and probably the Sea of Azov.”

“I agree,” said Balgichi.

“And I concur,” said Iksander.

“Could we just get on with it, please?”

“Patience, my boy, patience,” said Olaf, wagging a finger.

Iksander chipped in, “He’s not a boy anymore. He’s a man now. Has children as well, you know...”

Before Balgichi could start, I stopped him, “Alright, alright. I get it. You can stop now.”

The grins on their faces were wonderful to see.

“The document, Olaf?”

“Oh yes. It mentions something about Brzl and sailing beyond the Pillars of Hercules to get it.”

“What is this Brzl?”

“Not just what, but where?”

“What do you mean where?”

“Well...”



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