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LUKÁŠ ZELENÁK

The Secret of Epsia

THE FIRST PART OF THE SERIES

THE PRINCES OF SOTHOR

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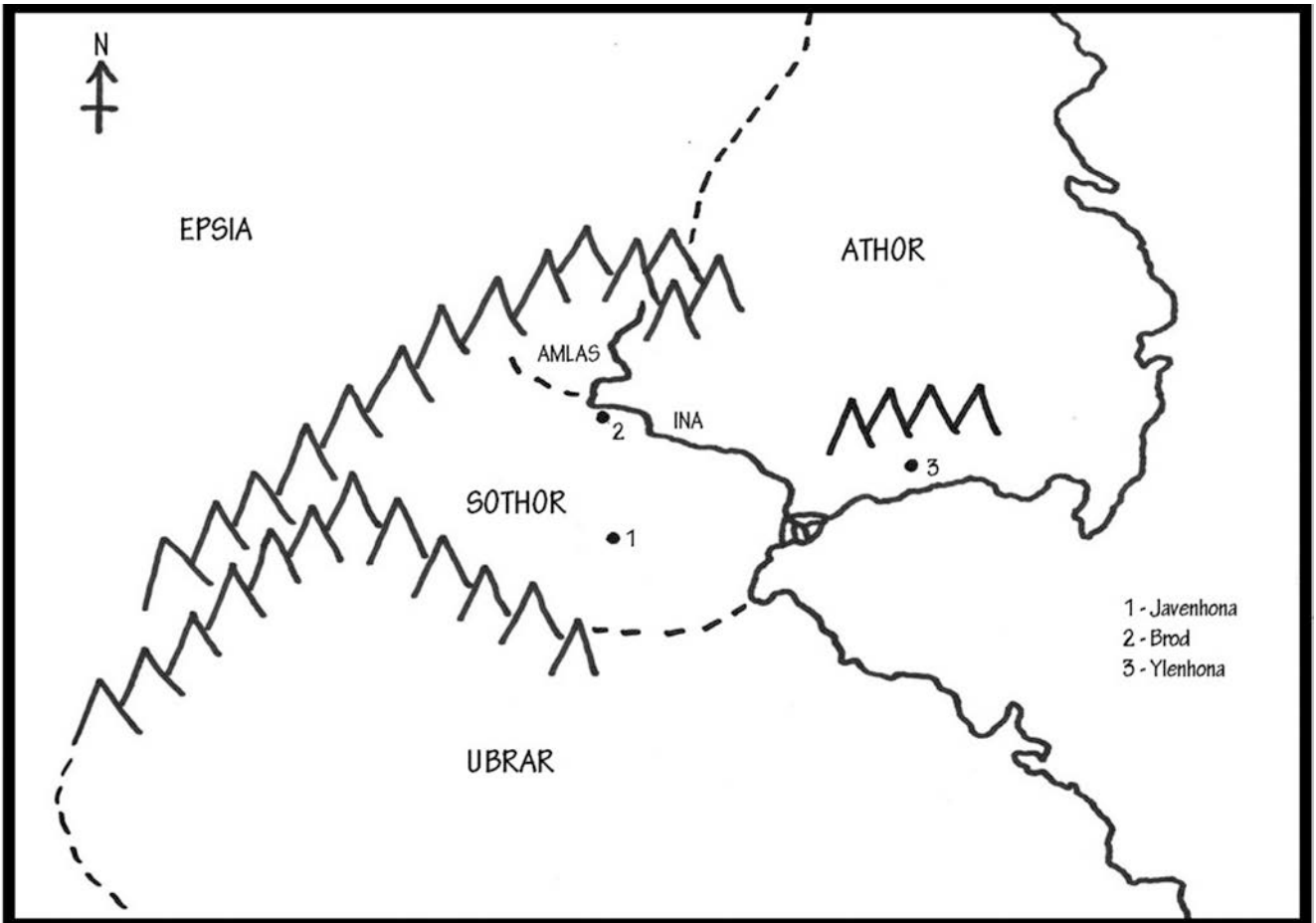
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The Princes of Sothor



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Prologue

“My Lord.”
The young warrior, more of a boy than a man, lowered his dull training sword and shield and nodded to the prince's retainer, with whom he was competing, as a sign that training was enough for the day. At that he turned to the retainer who addressed him.

“Say it, Branimír,” the young man spoke. “Did my father send you with a message?” The retainer nodded.

“The prince calls you to him,” he said. The young man nodded, handed his weapons to the servant and took off his training armor made of leather reinforced with thick cloth. Without further delay, he made his way to the palace, which stood at the opposite end of the courtyard. However, he was stopped by Branimír's heavy hand on his shoulder.

“The healer says that things don't look good with him,” he whispered confidentially into the young noble's ear. “Supposedly he tried everything. He poured decoctions into him, put on poultices, even invoked the gods. Nothing worked. Brace yourself boy, this may be your last discourse with your father.”

The scion did not show that he heard the retainer's words. With an expression that didn't reveal anything that was going on in his head, he walked towards the palace door.

The prince's chamber stank. The air in it was unventilated. The smell of sweat, herbs and smoke mingled in it. There was a stench of disease and death.

The young noble barely recognized his father, but he tried not to show it. Not even a week had passed since Prince Mstislav of Sothor the First had lain to his bed, but it seemed that he had aged at least ten years during that time. Although he was only in his early thirties, his hair had gone completely gray and new wrinkles had appeared on his unhealthy emaciated face. The powerful warrior, to whom the scion looked up all his life, became a sick old man.

“Mstislav,” addressed the prince to his son in a weak voice. Mstislav sat on the edge of his father's bed.

“I'm here, father,” he said, taking his father's withered hand in his own.

“Remember, Sothor, it is neither forests, meadows, nor lakes,” the prince spoke. “It is not fortresses, wooden or stone. Sothor, that is not the prince beyond the walls of Javenhona.” Mstislav frowned. After all that the old prince had named, there was nothing left to make up his pryncedom.

“Forgive my foolishness, father”, said the young noble. “If Sothor is none of these, what is it?”

The prince cackled. Immediately he burst into a cough.

“Sothor is the people,” answered the old ruler in a fading voice. Remember this, my son, remember...”

Mstislav sat on his father's bed for a long time, even after the hand in his palm got cold. He was interrupted from his mournful thoughts only by the arrival of the prince's retainer.

Mstislav raised his head and saw that the warrior was holding a broad-bladed sword in his hands. Its handle was decorated with gold, its pommel was a large emerald. The retainer handed him the weapon with the handle facing forward.

It was a sword of a prince, a symbol of the power of the ruler of Sothor.

When Mstislav took it in his hands, it seemed very heavy. He felt like he could barely hold it, let alone rule with that on the battlefield. Even so, he pulled it and stared at its years-worn blade.

“Remember...” his father's voice echoed in his head.

Mstislav gripped the leather-braided handle tighter. He would have sworn the sword was half the weight out of nowhere.



CHAPTER 1

Clouds over Sothor

The bottom of the metal goblet clattered against the varnished table top so hard that its red contents splashed the documents spread all around. The man at the table paid no attention. He had bigger problems than spilled wine.

He was holding a small piece of parchment in his hands, which the pigeon had brought just as he was filling the mentioned goblet. He frowned at the small letters as if he had a problem with his eyesight and couldn't decipher it. However, his eyesight was fine. It was the meaning of the message that made his eyebrows arch. He had crumpled the parchment, tossed it away, and ran his hand over his face.

The report said that a large force of Athor, numbering three thousand men, was attempting to pass the border of his principedom in the east. At the time the report was written, his border troops were trying to hold one of the nameless fords on the Ina River. Who knows if they are still holding the ford, or if the enemy is already passing through?

Although the attack was unprovoked, it was not unexpected. Sothor, otherwise known as Southern Athor, separated from its northern neighbor nearly a hundred years ago. In the south of the country, most of the agricultural land was located. That is because in the north the crops did not do well, both because of the stony soil and the low temperatures and mountainous terrain.

At one point, the nobleman who administered the territory said to himself that he was taking too much grain to the north, in the form of ever-increasing taxes, so he decided to resist. Although the southern fiefdom was not even a quarter of Athor's area, it was very populous.

There was no wonder. If many sons were born on a farm in the north, one or two always chose to move south rather than share the meager barren plots of land with their siblings.

With a little effort and money, a large army could be trained from so many peasants.

The nobleman did so. He rallied his subjects in faith for a common aim and repulsed the royal army which attacked shortly after the grain supply to the north ceased. The victorious nobleman, Baron Bragi, subsequently became Prince Bragi of Sothor the First, the ruler of an independent country and founder of the Sothorian ruling dynasty.

Since then, Athor has made several more attempts to recapture the separated territory. He tried to do this about every twenty-five years, or every time a new king came to the throne

trying to prove that he was better and more powerful than his ancestors. However, the Sothor princes were always able to repel the attacker.

Prince Mstislav Sothorsky the Second, great-grandson of the rioter, was not surprised; he expected the attack and prepared for it for several months. Just as the invasion of the south had become something of a test of maturity for the new king on the throne in the eastern fortress, Ylenhona, so maintaining the independence of Sothor had become a test for the successor of the defiant noble. Another message was causing the wrinkles on his forehead.

On the table in front of him lay parchment splattered with red liquid, but it wasn't the wine that was smearing the crooked, hastily scribbled letters. In addition to the army marching from the north, another, even larger force from Ubrar was arriving at its borders. Apparently, the new king allied with the kingdom south of Sothor, probably under the promise of dividing the conquered territory, and they agreed on a joint simultaneous attack on two fronts.

The blood-stained message came from one of the border forts that guarded the southern border. Mstislav did not know whether his force on the eastern border was still resisting or had already been scattered, but he was sure that the southern neighbor had conquered the borderlands and was marching towards the Western fortress, Javenhona, the seat of the Prince. He sent pigeons to the other border fortresses with orders to leave their positions.

An ordinary border fort, of which there were several in the south, consisted of a stone watchtower and several log cabins surrounded by a ditch and rampart with a palisade.

It was guarded by twenty men. These garrisons served to repel raids and inform the prince about the situation on the border, not for suicidal fights against the thousand-headed military machine. He also sent a message to the troops in the north to withdraw from the river to Javenhona. It was clear to him that the siege would not be avoided and he would rather his men survive and stand on the city walls than fall needlessly in a vain effort to hold their positions.

Mstislav reached for a jug of wine and poured in some more. The moment he brought the rim of the glass to his lips, there was a knock.

"Come in," he said and took a sip.

A panting soldier entered the room. Beads of sweat ran down his face from under the rim of his helmet. Likely he ran all the way from the city walls.

"Prince," he said, taking off his helmet. "A great force is approaching from the south, from Ubrar. There must be at least four thousand of them."

Mstislav nodded and took a sip again. He understood a long time ago that there are situations to which one cannot react better than by drinking.

"What about our men in the north? Have they arrived?"

"They can be seen from the walls, my gospodar, but..."

"But? Don't keep me in suspense, man."

"They are marching on their own and carrying the wounded with them..." said the soldier with his eyes clinging to the ground. It took a while before he voiced his concerns.

"If the enemy sees them, nothing will stop him from killing them before they reach the city."

"Nothing, you say?" the prince smiled, finished his drink and got up from the table. "Help me put on my armor."

"Sir, the enemy is approaching," said the archer, his gaze fixed on the southern horizon.

"I know that without you reminding me," the commander grunted, but he also looked south.

“The injured are slowing us down. Without them, we would have managed to get to the safety of the city.”

The commander sighed. He was aware of the truth of his subordinate's words, but he was reluctant to let his defenseless men wait for the coming blows of the enemy's swords. Although born a subject, he felt a chivalrous sense of protecting the weak. He would be disgusted to leave them to their fate, even if he was not their commander and did not shed blood on the battlefields, along with them.

“You're right,” he said to the archer, carefully placing the wooden stretcher on which he was carrying one of the wounded on the ground.

“Shall I blow the trumpet to march?” asked the archer.

“No,” replied the commander. “Give the command to create a circular formation. Spearmen in front, archers behind and the wounded in the middle. We will defend ourselves.”

The archer nodded, reached for the horn and sounded a tone on it to let the line members know what was required of them. The soldiers stretched the stretchers into a circle and lined up as they were told. Before they did so, a cloud of dust rose in the south.

The marching army noticed the line heading for the city gates, its objective, and decided to stop them before they could get out of their reach. The enemy commander sent the rider's unit.

It was the hooves of their horses that stirred up the dust.

“Nock!” exclaimed the commander.

The cloud of dust was getting closer.

“Draw!”

The deployed defenders were able to recognize individual attackers. More than one of them gasped. It was not a group of mobile scouts, but an assault unit of Ubrar's heavy cavalry designed to break through the ranks of the infantry. Although they did not outnumber them, the spearmen's ranks were too thin to withstand such a crash.

“Hold!” cried the commander. A few archers, accustomed to a different order, released the arrow, but most loosened the bowstrings. They looked around because they didn't understand why their commander didn't give the order for the salvo.

A split second later they saw what he did.

Out of nowhere, another squad of riders emerged from a cloud of dust. They were coming sidewise, from the west.

For a moment, the thought crossed the mind of many of the lancers that the enemy had sent two divisions to attack from two directions and forced them to defend themselves in encirclement. This and other similarly bleak thoughts slipped away from their heads at the moment when one of the cavalry units rammed into the other.

Horsemen are almost invincible if facing an enemy head on. If they are suddenly struck from the side, they are unable to change the direction of the attack quickly enough and become vulnerable. For this reason, the attacking unit passed through the horsemen from Ubrar practically without losses, while the attacked unit lost its attack speed and formation.

Mstislav changed the direction of the ride with the prince's sword high above his head so that its shine would also let the riders behind know in which direction they should gallop. The whole formation turned around and again struck the shattered ranks of the enemy in such a way as to drive them in the direction from which they came.

It turned out that there was no need to push them. They were sent on a quick raid to prevent reinforcements from arriving in the city. The counterattack surprised them. They were sure of their superiority and the fear that flowed from it.

They galloped off like puppies, tails between their legs.

The prince trotted up to the infantry, which was slowly dissolving the defensive formation. He removed the tufted helmet from his head, causing golden strands of hair to spread over his shoulders and back. An old soldier approached his horse and knelt.

“Thank you for the rescue, my lord,” he said, his eyes stuck to the horse's hooves. “Without your intervention, none of us would have survived.”

“I'm the one thanking you,” answered Mstislav. “You could have left the wounded at the mercy and fled to the safety of my walls.”

The prince sighed and jumped off his horse.

“I wouldn't blame you,” he continued, motioning the old man to stand up. “This would ensure the survival of at least a few defenders for Javenhona, and one could say that it would also rid it of unnecessary hungry necks.”

The soldier opened his mouth, but did not manage to say anything.

“However, the wounded can heal and raise their arms again for our cause,” he said, placing his hand on the commander's shoulder and looking into his eyes. “You made a good decision.”

Tears surged into the commander's eyes, but the prince did not notice it. He began issuing orders to speed up the transport of the wounded. The enemy was driven away for now, but the threat has not ceased yet. Before night fell on the city, it was surrounded by hundreds and thousands of tents and campfires of the besiegers.

Heavy clouds hung so low over the city that it seemed as if one could reach out to touch them. Lightning crossed the night sky, thunder rumbled, and raindrops began to tinkle on the helmets and armor of the warriors standing on the ramparts.



CHAPTER 2

The Siege

Ubrar did not attack that night, but the defenders of Javenhona did not regret a sleepless night. None of them rushed to die, and it was clear to them that when the enemy moves, they will not bring anything else, because even without the help of the Athor army they outnumbered the defenders four to one.

Gods only know what kind of warriors the southerners were. The inhabitants of Ubrar made a living mainly by fishing and piracy. Sothor was not strong enough to threaten it militarily, and its only other neighbor was Epsia, an empire covering half the continent, the state to which Ubrar, like Athor and Sothor, surrendered, was therefore under its protection and paying taxes. These fishermen were not strengthened by fire and steel, like the defenders on the walls who were born, lived and died knowing that the prince could call them upon at any time to defend the country against the threat from the north.

Although the southerners were superior in numbers, they were in no hurry. Having known that their victim has no way to escape, they decided to wait until the troops from Athor arrived so that they could strike a crushing blow to the fortress together to avoid a lengthy siege.

It was nearing noon when the flags of the northern kingdom appeared on the horizon. A horn blew in the camp and there was a general rush. The men put away their pipes and tankards, which they used to kill boredom, and cast around their weapons and equipment. The incoming army did not even set up camp; only the officers gave the soldiers a moment to rest and refresh themselves after the march. The young king of Athor was hungry for glory, he could almost hear the roar of the crowds that would greet him when he returned home as the conqueror and unifier of the kingdom. He was impatient and relied on his superiority so much that he refused to wait until the next day when the soldiers would be rested.

“Anyway, they’ll just be drinking and fucking the camp whores all night long,” he told his officers. “That way I’m sure they’re all sober and their guts are not twisting after a night of drinking.”

The sun was at its highest point as the combined armies formed battle lines and blew war horns. Although they outnumbered the enemy six to one, they were not so numerous that they could surround the entire city, so they decided to attack the two gates standing on opposite sides of the city. They thus forced the defenders to also divide their attention and create greater spacing so that they could protect longer sections of the walls.

Both attacks started at the same time. Athor, though attacking with a more modest force than Ubrar, attacked the main gate, which was defended by the prince himself. Ubrar attacked the gate on the opposite side of the square fortification. It was not protected by an advanced rampart with a moat, like the main one, but had a strong gate tower and bastions protruding from the fortifications, so that the defenders could fire at the enemy from three sides at the same time.

Javenhona, like its sister fortress Ylenhona, was not the capital of the country because it was the largest, but because it was the easiest to defend. Both fortresses have been the pride of Athor for centuries and were built to guard the southern border should Ubrar decide to expand.

Although the enemy had great superiority, with stone throwers and siege towers, he was unable to break through the city's defenses and withdrew before sundown as the casualties were greater than he had originally anticipated. The hope of a short war and a clear victory disappeared. Sothor once again proved that it can manage to defend against its more powerful neighbors. It was clear to both sides of the conflict that the city would be besieged for a long time.

Mstislav was satisfied with the development of the situation. The emperor of the Epsian Empire did not bother with conflicts among his vassals because he was busy expanding the empire in the west. He was not interested in the skirmishes in the east, as long as the taxes that financed his own wars flowed into his coffers. If Athor and Ubrar quickly conquered Sothor and divided it, the three vassals would become two, making it easier for him to rule over them. However, as soon as the quick conflict escalated into a lengthy, devastating war, it would affect the economy of all three states. Men would not be able to work in the fields, mines and sawmills, the market would stagnate and this would mean the inability to pay high taxes. Then the emperor would join the conflict and could force both conquerors to withdraw, thus confirming the independence of the small principality.

Open, devastating war, it was the only thing that could save the free Sothor.

The siege dragged on for over two weeks.

Morning after morning, at sunrise, the prince went out to the walls, dressed in full armor, to encourage his warriors with his presence, who were depressed by the sight of the huge enemy camp, which they had been observing for days and watching out for another attack. He realized that even the best walls in the world would fall if they were defended by men whose spirits were broken by the psychological pressure that was put on them day and night. He felt it himself, and only wine got him to bed night after night. He would stay awake day and night with his head full of dark thoughts until he passed out from exhaustion.

For the same reason, the soldiers had daily rations of ale or wine with each meal, although in every other army, if the men wanted to drink, they had to get alcohol themselves and drink it secretly, so that their superior would not notice and punish them.

After the initial attack, the combined enemy forces attacked only once more. They used the same tactics, although they pushed it to the extreme. They attacked all four city gates at once, hoping that the defenders would be few and they would manage to break into the city through at least one of them. They actually succeeded, but a hundred spearmen were waiting outside the gate, who pushed them out of the city.

The enemy then stopped attacking, although one might argue that if he had managed to break through the walls once, he would surely succeed again. But the two kings agreed that the losses they had suffered were too great, for they had already lost a tenth of the army, and feared that if they lost too many men, they would not be able to continue the siege. They decided to change tactics and force Sothor to surrender by starving it.

They risked a lot, because the longer the conflict dragged on, the more the threat grew that Epsia would join the war and end it resolutely. Nevertheless, both kings invested a lot in this quest and did not want to leave empty-handed. If Sothor repulsed both kings at once, he would prove himself invincible and they would lose political support at home to finance further wars.

Sothor would become independent once and for all.

Yet, neither of the kings was a great warrior. King Athor was eighteen years old, and thus, although he was only three years younger than the Sothor prince, he did not have extensive combat experience or enough courage to make a decisive blow. He was afraid that if his men were repulsed once more, they would lose hope of victory and with it their fighting spirit. King Ubrar was a chubby merchant who carried a sword only for decoration. More often, he used a table knife.

Instead of an open attack, the besiegers tried to break the morale of the townspeople. Whether it was night or day, out of nowhere they started shelling the city with volleys of burning arrows. The prince ordered his subjects to water their straw and shingle roofs, but occasionally one of the arrows fulfilled its purpose and several times there was a threat that a fire would break out in the city.

At other times, they threw dead animals into the city, hoping that this would spread the disease, and ordered their men to roam the surrounding countryside in groups, looting, burning and raping. They obtained provisions to feed their men and at the same time put pressure on the besieged prince. They made him hate himself for hiding behind stone walls, feasting every day on fresh bread, salted meat, and pickled vegetables from the city's abundant supply, while his people, unprotected by stone walls, are robbed of basic food and a roof over their heads. They wanted to provoke him into doing something rash that would turn the outcome of the war in their favor.

However, Mstislav did not respond to their teasing. He watered the roofs, burned the dead animals and continued to remain barricaded behind the walls with his men. As a ruler, he felt an obligation to take care of his subjects, but he believed that the best way to do this was to remain undefeated. He was the sword and shield of his people. If he fell, they would become serfs. They would have to beaver away day and night, just to hand over most of the harvest to the usurpers. The burned down cottages could be rebuilt, the degraded land fertilized again. At least that was how he justified his inactivity while he tried to fall asleep.