

# STAYER AND VASSILISSA



Grand Duke Vladimir sat banqueting in the hall of his castle, surrounded by princes and warlords and all the heroes of his realm. The feasting continued for many hours, with plenty to eat and drink, and music to lighten the saddest heart.

After the heroes had eaten and drunk their fill, they began to boast, and no one boasted louder than the grand duke himself. Nowhere, he insisted, was there more gold, nowhere more silver, nowhere greater heaps of pearls than here in his fine palace. And where could one find a woman more beautiful than his own wife, the lovely Apraksiya?

This was too much for young Prince Stayer. "Listen to him boasting," he murmured to his neighbor. "He thinks this stone box of his should be called a castle. My own castle is so large, it's better to ride through it on horseback than to walk. The floors are paved with silver, and the walls are built from bricks of gold. I have so many chests of pearls and diamonds and rubies, they could fill a room as big as this hall. But my greatest treasure of all is my wife, Vassilissa. Her hair is like that of a fox, her eyes as sharp as falcon's eyes. Not only is she a superb housekeeper, she's also stronger than any man in this hall."

While Stayer was speaking, the hall grew quiet, and he looked up to see the grand duke's eyes upon him. His face was red with anger, and he bellowed like a wild boar, "So, Stayer Godinovitch, you think you can insult me and humiliate me here in my own hall? Enough of your empty talk, you blithering idiot. Throw him in the dungeon! Then ride to his castle, seal it up with all his treasure chests within, and bring me the beautiful Vassilissa. Bring her to me, Grand Duke Vladimir!"

Staver was seized and thrown into the dungeon. Then ten of Vladimir's warlords rode off to seal up his castle and bring back Vassilissa.

But Staver's friend Mikhail Kolosov rode ahead of the others to warn Vassilissa of the grand duke's order.

Vassilissa tucked her long red hair under her helmet and dressed herself as a man. She took a stout sword from Staver's armory and sharpened her quiverful of arrows. Then she mounted her black stallion and, with twelve of her men, set out for the grand duke's castle.

Halfway there, she met the warlords who had been ordered to take her prisoner. They didn't recognize her and asked her where she was going.

"I've come from the Khan of the Golden Hordes," Vassilissa answered. "My men and I are here to remind Grand Duke Vladimir that he owes the khan tribute for the last twelve years. We have orders to take many chests of gold back to the khan. And where are you riding?"

"We're going to Staver's castle, to seal it up and carry his wife, Vassilissa, to the grand duke," said one of the warlords.

"We have just passed Staver's castle. Vassilissa is not there. She has ridden away," she told them.

So the band of warlords galloped back to the grand duke's castle and reported that Vassilissa was missing and that the ambassador from the Khan of the Golden Hordes was on his way to exact tribute. When Vassilissa arrived at the castle, everyone assumed she was the ambassador and treated her with great courtesy.

But Vladimir's wife, Apraksiya, was watching the new arrival carefully. "That's not the ambassador from the khan," she whispered to her husband. "Can't you tell that it's a woman? I think that's Staver's wife, Vassilissa. Look at how he walks!"

The duke observed the young ambassador carefully. Perhaps his wife was right. He decided to hold a wrestling contest to test the ambassador's strength. If this was a woman, she would surely lose.

"In this country, it is our custom that all visitors be given the opportunity to test their strength against my warlords," Vladimir told the ambassador. "If it pleases your excellency, we shall now hold a wrestling contest." Seven of his warlords immediately rose from the banqueting tables to challenge the disguised Vassilissa.

The first man stepped forth. Vassilissa threw him so hard that he had to be carried from the hall. The second had seven of his ribs broken by a single blow of her fist. The third had three of his vertebrae dislocated and had to crawl from the hall on his hands and knees. The rest of the challengers fled, not wishing to be humiliated before all their comrades.

Vladimir trembled with frustration and spat on the floor. "Your hair may be long," he

muttered to his wife, "but you haven't a brain in your head. Why did you tell me he was a woman? My court has never seen a hero with such strength!"

Apraksiya raised her eyebrows. "Look at that skin," she urged her husband. "Is that the skin of a man? And why does she always wear a helmet? Could she be hiding her long hair beneath it?"

Vladimir glared at his wife angrily. He blamed her for making him look like a fool. But he couldn't help wondering if she might be right, and he decided to put the khan's envoy to another test.

"I see you are very strong," he congratulated Vassilissa, slapping her heartily on the back. "Now perhaps you would like to prove your skill at archery."

With these words, he led his court to an open meadow behind the castle. All of Vladimir's men shot their arrows into an old oak that stood at the far end of the field. Each time it was hit, the oak tree swayed as if it were caught in a gust of wind. But when Vassilissa shot her arrow, the bowstring sang and the mighty oak shattered into a thousand pieces.

The men were dumbfounded.

Vladimir spat for the second time. "Look at that oak tree," he hissed at Apraksiya. "We've never seen such an archer before, and you believe he's a woman. I shall challenge him myself and see if he's also supreme at chess."

Vladimir and Vassilissa now sat down at the grand duke's chess table and played chess with chessmen carved from the finest marble. Vassilissa won the first game, and also the second, and the third. She laughed, for the duke had played for high stakes. Then she pushed the chessboard aside.

"Enough of this foolishness," she declared. "I didn't come here to feast with you or to waste my time playing games. What about the tribute you owe the great khan? You haven't paid for twelve whole years. I demand two chests of gold for every year. Produce them here and now! The Khan of the Golden Hordes refuses to wait any longer."

Then Vladimir began to whine. "Times are hard, you know. The harvest was poor this year and last. Merchants are doing little business, trade is slow, and we haven't collected much in taxes. How can I pay? Couldn't the great khan wait another year?"

Vassilissa tapped her fingers impatiently on the chess table. "He's already waited twelve years. I can't go back empty-handed. If you don't have gold, you must send something else."

"Perhaps he'd like my wife, Apraksiya," the grand duke suggested jokingly.

"What use would she be to the Khan of the Golden Hordes? He has many beautiful women. Have you someone who plays the lute?"

Suddenly Vladimir remembered that Staver was an excellent lute player. "Indeed I do,"

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he replied promptly, "the finest lute player in the land. His name is Staver, one of my favorite princes. You are welcome to take him as a present to the great khan."

So Vladimir had Staver brought out of the dungeon, and Staver rode back to his castle with Vassilissa, where they lived happily ever after. As for the grand duke, he was pleased as could be that he'd managed to avoid paying tribute to the Khan of the Golden Hordes for yet another year.