

CHAPTER 36

THE PLAINS ⊕ THE KHAZARS

We took the captain's advice and stopped at the inn for a hearty breakfast. While we were refreshing the horses were also being seen to. The innkeeper did indeed know Captain Ranald. "Ah, Ranald. Yes" he started. His voice was barely above a whisper. A shiny scar across his throat gave away the reason for the hoarse voice.

"He stops here every year on his way to Hardzy-Tarkhan but does not stop on the way back. Where might you be heading?"

"Sarkel" I informed him.

"Ah. The White Fortress. Yes. You will be safe travelling from here."

Despite his whispering he suddenly had everyone's attention.

"And why is that I asked?"

"If you had disembarked further down the river, your route would take you close to the Southern Hills. The area is plagued with bandits. They use the labyrinth of ravines and steep sided valleys to escape and hideout in. That is where I got this" he said pointing to the scar encircling his neck.

"I was lucky to escape. I had been robbed and hanged. Fortunately a traveller was passing and cut me down before I suffocated."

I nodded and studied the man's face while he spoke.

"Thank you for that valuable piece of information." I eventually said.

Our meal over, we saddled up and headed out across the flat and featureless grassy plain. Travelling with Balgichi and Serakh meant we would be travelling more slowly than I would have liked. If all went well, it meant we would probably make Kyiv just as the first snows were falling.

I had thought of taking a more direct route across the plain, but Ibn quite rightly pointed out that this route was more popular and was more likely to be watched by the Scorpions, which could add an unnecessary and unneeded element of danger. So it was to Barjik and Sarkel we headed. We struck out on a more direct course that would take us slightly north of due west, away from the River, across the almost flat plain of the Khazars. On the second day we planned to take a more westerly direction. With Ibn's help I reckoned it would take us at least a month

to get to Kyiv. Then Lydia. Oh how I missed her! And what of our child? Was it born yet? If it was, was it a boy or a girl? I mentioned this to Ibn.

“Would it matter if it were a boy and not a girl?” asked Ibn.

“No, not at all. If it’s a boy I’ll have my heir. Something I had almost given up on. If it’s a girl then she’s bound to be like her mother, and I’ll love her just as much as Lydia.”

“I agree. But Allah forbid that a girl should look like you. I do not believe you need worry about your child. As we in the Islamic world know, the human gestation period is forty weeks, so by my reckoning Lydia has a few weeks to go. Also, as this is her first child, she may be anything up to two weeks late...”

“Late? What do you mean late?”

“Well, our doctors have calculated that conception can occur up to two weeks after the women has her, um, period of bleeding. Therefore there is a two-week window of variance on the calculation.”

“I see.”

“So if we get a move on, we may just be able to make Kyiv in time for the birth.”

“Well then, we’ll have to get moving, won’t we?”

“Yes, but I’m not sure how Balgichi is going to handle the extra distance we will have to do each day.”

“Why don’t you ask him?”

We reined in and waited until Balgichi and Serakh caught up. Peksah and Rat were riding with them.

“Balgichi, how are you managing?”

“Well, I only wish I were twenty years younger again.”

“I know what you mean. This is probably going to be my last such journey. I don’t think I could handle another like it.”

“Oh, don’t be so sure, Ulf. Don’t be so sure.”

“Do you know something I don’t?”

“Only that I see it in your eyes, Ulf. There is still life there and where there is life there will always be a yearning to live. And for you that means travel. But you didn’t wait for me to have me tell you what you already know. Hmmm?”

“No. The seasons are changing and we need to get a move on if we are to make Kyiv before the winter sets in.”

“Not to mention if we are to get to Kyiv in time for your firstborn’s birth?”

“That as well.”

“So how many extra mil do we have to ride each day?”

“You should have been a general. Do you know that?”

“Had the Kahzars not been beaten and pushed back by Sviatoslav, Yaroslav’s father, I may have been.”

I looked hard at him and wondered how much Khazarian potential had not been realised because of that defeat. How much expectation, promise and potential had been shelved, never to be used, because of another man's ambition to extend his empire? This then was the campaign he had never been on; his one and only opportunity to realise his dream of riding on a campaign before he died. Therefore I knew that he would do it, even if it killed him.

"A minimum of ten, a maximum of twenty."

"So fifteen should suffice?"

"More than suffice."

"Then fifteen it is."

"Thank you, Balgichi. Pesakh, Rat, it is your responsibility to see that Balgichi and Serakh are as comfortable as possible."

"Ulf, if we are going to slow you down then you must push on ahead without us."

"That is not an option. We started this together, we'll finish it together."

"That is an admirable..."

I rudely interrupted and said firmly, "There will be no further discussion on splitting up. Is that understood?"

I received a varied mixture of nodding heads and mumbled "yessirs" from the group.

We continued our trek. It still felt extremely good to be going west instead of east. Each footfall was another closer to my Lydia.

Our route continued to be slightly north of due west and we soon lost the rich green of the river basin over our right shoulders. The plain of the Khazars was like all steppe – open, flat and vast - and to the untrained eye, boring. It was dotted here and there with small lakes, some of which were salty. Even so there was grass, water and a variety of wildlife. At this time of year the plain was a carpet of olive green, tinged with soft yellow and punctuated here and there with splashes of barren red earth. Because the plain was so flat, we could see all the way to the horizon. Any would-be attackers would have to be very good not to be seen. And after our scrapes with the Black Scorpions, we were always on constant look-out for anything unusual. Just as I was being lulled into a sense of false security Tsai Ming suddenly gave a cry and set not only my heart racing. She pointed as a few steppe Antelope galloped away at our approach leaving a trail of dust. While they had stood and grazed their coats had made them all but invisible. Their cloak of invisibility broken by their sudden move to escape.

Overhead a buzzard circled in search of prey.

"He'll have to be heading south soon" said Ibn.

"Who will" asked Tsai Ming?

"The buzzard. Up there." said Ibn pointing.

"Oh" said Tsai Ming craning her neck and squinting into the bright blue sky. A few others followed suit. Ibn continued,

“Soon it will be too cold for him. Plus, his food will have hibernated so there will be nothing to hunt. Hence his move southwards to warmer climes. Probably Greece or maybe even Egypt.”
“Sort of like us” said Serakh wistfully. The move from Hardzhy-Tarkhan to Kyiv still tugging on her heart strings. Without saying a word, Balgichi touched his daughter’s arm and she bowed her head and bit her bottom lip.

Here and there we came across large round felt tents which Balgichi informed us were Yurts. These he said his ancestral Khazars used when they were nomads on the Asian steppe. Young boys shepherded herds of sheep and goats. Some Yurts were brightly decorated but most were a dirty brown-green. The dust of a dozen generations and the sunlight of equally as many summers having faded the original colours. The residents of the yurts were unlike the colour of their dwellings and we were waived on by running and shouting children. Old women standing over steaming pots of food waived and smiled too.

The sunset was spectacular. For some reason it seemed as if the horizon was on fire. I concluded that it must be the dust as the only other places I had seen similar sunsets was in the desert. I scanned from the horizon to the sky directly overhead. It turned from brilliant orange through red, pink and then to light blue then the deepest darkest blue and finally black.

While we scoured the desolate landscape for dry roots and foliage, the sun sank and the sky changed from brilliant orange to deep red. Trees became stark black silhouettes. A single hillock protruded through the flat horizon like a pimple on the face of a youth. The darkness of the silhouette accentuated its height over the surrounding terrain. Eventually only the few clouds in the otherwise clear sky were lined with gold and silver and for a brief while shone orange, red then pink until the light show altogether faded into black. The cold descended just as quickly as the light faded and a million stars of varying intensity continued the light show.

Our labours had turned up a meagre stash of dry material and we managed to get a small fire going. All too soon we had used up all our small supply of combustible material and because of the lack of fire and warmth we turned in early.

The following morning no-one could be bothered searching for more dry material so we had a quick, cold breakfast after which we rubbed down and watered the horses. The sun had not been long above the horizon when we were on our way again. The cold air of the night lingered and most of the crew chose to ride with their blankets wrapped around their shoulders. Balgichi and Serakh did not show any signs of discomfort. At least not outwardly.

We snacked frequently during the day which meant we did not have to stop to eat. Not wanting to gather attention we bypassed a village and headed for the town of Sarpa. As we approached

the town, the drab browns and yellows of the plain suddenly gave way to a carpet of rich greens. Balgichi informed us that the town of Sarpa was located on the Sarpa river which fed a string of narrow lakes strung together like beads on a necklace called, naturally enough, the Sarpa Lakes.

“Not much imagination used here then” said Sven.

“Do you see much that inspires the imagination” asked Ibn?

“Not really”.

“Well then. Now you know why.”

Twilight was fading when we forded a stream and entered the town. We took refuge from the cold in a small caravanserai, which turned out to be the only one in the town. Because we were off the main trade routes we received special attention from the innkeeper’s wife who fussed over us like a mother hen over her chicks. The hot stew and bread was devoured and the ale consumed at an alarming rate. They must have thought we had not eaten for a week, when in reality it was barely a day. The innkeeper engaged us in friendly conversation,

“It is not often we have travellers here at this time of year” he said. Then he beamed and shrugged,

“In fact we do not have many travellers through here at any time of year. Most of the trade goes up the west side of the lake and then across to Sarkel. I assume that’s where you are heading?”

“Yes” I grunted, nodding through a mouth full of bread and stew.

“Ah. It is many years since I’ve been to Sarkel” reminisced the Inn Keeper.

“Ah. Sarkel” said Balgichi wistfully. “The third Khazar city.”

“Third” said the innkeeper questioningly?

“Oh yes, three” said Balgichi.

“I only know of two” said the innkeeper. “Itil and Sarkel.”

“Ah but you forget our first capital Samandur”.

“Samandur? That’s only a place of legend.”

“Noooooo” said Balgichi shaking his head and wagging his index finger. “Samandur was on the coast. South of Itil and north of Baku.”

“I concur” said Ibn. “The Arab traveller Al-Istakhri wrote that Samandur had vineyards and gardens as well as markets. He reported that Jews, Synagogues, Muslims and Mosques were bountiful and all lived together in harmony. Even later Ibn Hauqal, wrote too, that there were people of multiple religions living there, with mosques, churches and synagogues. So Samandur was real”.

“So it was” concurred Balgichi. “When the Khazar khanate extended northwards, oh, about three-hundred years ago, the Khan moved his capital further north to Itil, so as to be at the centre of the khanate which made for more efficient government. When that happened, Samandur ceased to be the great city it was as most trade either went north to Itil or south via

Baku. Then Sviatoslav I sacked what remained of the city probably not long after he sacked Itil. The site that Samandur once occupied is now a village called Tarkhu.”

“Ah” said the innkeeper. Not sure if he was thankful for the history lesson or not. However he did give us directions for the best route to Sarkel.

A boy came in and spoke to the innkeeper. He laughed and turned to us.

“My son has just fed, brushed and watered your horses. But he says they are the most butt ugly horses he has ever seen.”

This brought a round of chuckles from the crew.

“Yes they are ugly, aren’t they? I thought that the first time I saw them too. As much as they are ugly, they are fast and have amazing endurance. They are called Heavenly Horses and they are from Tianxia many, many, many mil from here.”

“Heavenly horses huh? Never heard of them before” said the innkeeper. His son standing a little way off listening.

“Well now you have” quipped in one of the crew from the other end of the table.

The innkeeper’s son tugged on his father’s jerkin again and whispered something in his ear. His eyes on Sven as he did so. His father laughed and said

“He wants to know why they are called Heavenly Horses?”

“Because they can ride like the wind” said Sven sweeping his right arm wide and gazing off to a point in an imaginary distance.

“Just how far can they go in one day” he asked?

“They have been recorded as having done one hundred and fifty mil per day for a whole week”.

The innkeeper’s eyes widened in disbelief.

“One emperor of Tianxia did this with a whole mounted battalion and arrived so far ahead of when his enemy expected him that the enemy were totally unprepared and he won the battle without a sword being drawn.”

“Nooo?” said the innkeeper disbelieving.

“Oh yes” Sven replied. “The horses are so good that they are the only steed that the army of Tianxia uses. And even then they choose only the best.”

“My, my” said the innkeeper shaking his head.

By now the fire in the hearth was low and one by one we began to turn in for the night. As we did so the innkeeper hefted a large log onto the fire which would probably burn until morning.

After an even heartier breakfast, we were waived off by the innkeeper, his wife and son. Almost immediately on exiting the town the fauna and flora began to change.

The morning sun was warm on our backs and soon the blankets were being removed and rolled in situ. Within an hour of starting our ride, all the blankets had been rolled and stowed behind our saddles.

“Ah that feels good” said Sven.

“What does?” Ibn asked.

“The warmth of the morning sun on my back”.

“Ah yes. I have always found it to be a strange phenomenon that while I too enjoy the morning sun on my back, I curse the blazing heat of the sun at its zenith”.

I chipped in “The sun, like fire and water, good servants but bad masters”.

“Never a truer word spoken” said Ibn. “I must remember to write that down. Who said that by the way?”

“My grandmother” I replied.

“Ah. The wisdom that comes with age.”

“And experience” quipped Balgichi.

“Ah yes. But you only get experience with time and age” said Ibn

“And you don’t often find a wise head on young shoulders” retorted Balgichi. And just as quickly he added “Except, of course, in the case of Alexander the Great”.

“Here we go again” said Sven. “You two make my brain hurt. I think I’ll ride just far enough away so I don’t have to hear this debate.”

And with that he and Tsai Ming cantered off to the left a little. Serakh and Rat joined them. I could see a strong friendship was developing.

The western edge of the plain was marked by a low ridge of hills which Balgichi informed us were, unsurprisingly, the Sarpa Hills. He also said they were jokingly referred to as the Sarpa Highlands. He had ridden out here a few times as a boy and young man to fish and hunt wild sheep with his friends.

As we approached the hills, I put the crew on alert for a possible ambush, for it was the ideal place to stage one. The plains could lull the unwary and inexperienced traveller into a sense of false security. Thankfully we passed through the hills without incident and soon crossed a sluggish stream which meandered its way in a westwards direction.

No-one knew the name of the stream but as it was a consistent source of water and generally going in our direction so we followed it on a parallel track making sure we circumvented areas of population.

This being our third day in the saddle, I knew that Balgichi and Serakh were probably feeling quite sore. I also knew that it was important to keep going and that tomorrow or the next day the soreness would begin to recede as their bodies hardened to riding.

As we progressed the valley continued to widen. Eventually joined by other streams and rivulets, the stream grew into a small river that continued to meander in even more widening loops and switchbacks across the wide, flat valley. Here there were fewer yurts and more permanent

dwellings around which we continued to take wide berths. Even at the distance we were from the villages, people suddenly materialised on the outskirts and stood watching us pass in mute silence, only returning to whatever it was they were doing when they were sure we had definitely passed on.

“It never ceases to amaze me how people suddenly materialise when there was no-one before” Ibn remarked to no-one in particular, although he was riding beside me.

“You have noticed as well” I replied.

“Yes. I wonder what Aristotle or Plato would have made of it?”

“No doubt they would have found some philosophical premise or theory for the occurrence.”

“Or would make one up to fit” chipped in Balgichi. “After a lot of thought, study and debate - of course” he added comically.

Which made us all laugh.

At night we camped in the open. At least here near the river there were more trees and dead wood was more plentiful which allowed us build a half-decent fire at night. For two days we travelled thus. On the third day the river began to widen indicating we were nearing the Don. We struck the Don just after midday and Balgichi told us that he thought we should turn upstream, but admitted his memory of the area was not as current as it used to be. A small way off a fisherman had anchored his skiff midstream and was casting his nets. I rode over and called out asking him which way Sarkel was. He stood and stared at me for a moment while the sound carried out to him, then confirmed Balgichi’s recollection by pointing upstream. I called my thanks and after calling the others we began riding towards Sarkel.

It was not always possible to ride alongside the river, so we tracked the river by riding a short distance inland. Soon the virgin steppe began to show the tracks of goats, sheep and cattle. These in turn turned into foot paths which in turn joined to form a road. Correspondingly human habitation began to become more dense and presently we found ourselves in a village. Halfway through the village we came across the ferry landing. The ferry was berthed and deserted. After a bit of a search, we found the ferryman at the inn replenishing his energy after a morning’s vigorous toil. We enquired about the crossing fee, which was acceptable and after buying some bread and meat for the crew we departed the inn to wait for the ferryman to finish his meal while we had ours under the spreading branches of a tree.

The crossing was uneventful except for the stares the locals gave us. One old woman was so terrified of Sven she moved to the other end of the raft and clutched her chicken to her breast so tightly we thought she would suffocate it.

NEXT WEEK

CHAPTER 37 - SARKEL