

CHAPTER 38

WEST AGAIN

The following morning more than a few officers and men mingled in the courtyard to see us off.

"I can't help but wonder why we have so many young men coming to see us off" I said rather sarcastically to Ibn. He grinned and replied with mock humour

"Surely it has nothing to do with the fairer members of our company?"

"Oh no never!" I said overplaying the mock seriousness.

"Alright that's enough you two" said Serakh, never afraid to speak her mind.

Across the bailey I noticed the duty sergeant who had challenged us on the bridge was overseeing the tidy-up of the area. No doubt his assistants were the garrison's miscreants working off their extra duties.

We cantered out of the courtyard, down the sweeping road and over the bridge. Riding through the town we passed stalls with some exquisite jewellery. Shining like a beacon on a dark night, a necklace of amber, crystal and mother of pearl took centre piece in one of the stalls. Serakh saw it too and asked if we could stop. I refused the request but knowing she would anyway, I ordered Rat to stay with her and catch us up as soon as was possible.

An hour or so later they caught up. Serakh, looking somewhat smug with herself, was proudly displaying the very necklace I had seen.

From Sarkel we struck out across the steppe in a north westerly direction. A course that Barjik said would converge with the Donets River after four or five day's ride.

The valleys, or rather depressions, where the water was plentiful, were being well farmed. The rich black soil meant the farmers did not have to supplement the earth with rotting vegetation and manure like the farmers in Norway had to. Crops grew thick and high. On the plateau, the steppe was, as always, the steppe. At this time of year the long grass swayed in time with the breeze creating waves of motion that made the grass look like it was flowing. We stayed in this area as much as we could as it made for faster travel.

It soon became obvious just how good our heavenly horses were. The mixed breed European-Arabians that Barjik and the guard used were limited to about thirty to fifty five mil per day, whereas our heavenly horses had been covering at least fifty per day for the past month. Barjik commented on this, hinting heavily that he would like one if ours bred.

"The first foal we breed will be yours" I assured him.

"I would greatly appreciate such a magnificent beast. Even if it is uglier than the ugliest, toothless and whiskered old hag of Kyiv. To do fifty mil per day and not break sweat is quite frankly amazing."

"What if I told the foal what you thought about its looks, even before it was born? It may not want you for its master".

Barjik roared with laughter as did a few who were within earshot.

"But they have certainly sped along our return journey."

"I must admit I had my doubts when you were telling me. But I am now convinced they have" he said.

Almost immediately on finishing our conversation, Barjik raised his left arm and said,

"Ah look. The Donets".

To the south, the river could be seen. A silver ribbon, it threaded its way down the valley in a series of tight twists and turns.

"We are now just over halfway to Izyum" Barjik informed us.

"How far is Ltava from Izyum?" asked Balgichi.

"Izyum is about two thirds of the way between Sarkel and Ltava" replied Barjik giving an approximation of the distances.

"So Ltava is closer to Kyiv than it is to Sarkel?"

"Yes".

"By the way, why are you in control of this project and not someone from Kyiv?"

"Ah" said Barjik. "The reasoning is that I am currently the only one who lives in an active fort and who has first hand account of constant defence against attack from the Pechenegs. Plus Izyum is closer to Sarkel than it is to Kyiv."

"I see" I said pondering the consequences of this situation. Were the aristocracy of Kyiv becoming lazy? If they were not obtaining firsthand battle experience and if it was all being left to Barjik; and what if he were to fall in battle where would that leave them?

"I see this concerns you" said Barjik.

"Yes it does" I said giving voice to my thoughts of a moment ago.

"I have mentioned this in dispatches. But to no avail."

"Even more worrying" I said. "It's exactly this sort of complacency that led to the downfall of Rome."

"Quite so" said Barjik. "My only hope is that it happens after I am dead".

"Oh it will. But let's hope it doesn't happen as a result of your death."

"That's what I meant" he said rather soberly.

Along the way we passed numerous burial tumuli usually set on the higher points of the landscape. Not for the first time they raised comment about their origin.

"It is believed they created and erected by the ancient Scythians and Samartians" said Barjik.

“The who?” asked Sven in typical blunt fashion.

“Scythians and Samartians. The ancient dwellers of this area.”

“Oh.”

The road took us close by one of the tumuli and we could see that flat slabs had been erected onto which simple two-dimensional figures had been carved. In the main they displayed large faces with large eyes. We assumed those with breasts contained the bodies of women. A few of the carved figures had ceremonial daggers and other weapons and on occasion some displayed deer and other animals. On a few tumuli carved full size statues of women had been placed.

“There are a number of those atop of the Kremianets” said Barjik.

“The what” asked Sven?

“The Kremianets. The mountain on which the fort we are going to visit is erected. In effect the mountain of Izyum. It makes for an ideal watch-point because of its height above the steppe, and defensively because it has the river flowing around almost three of its sides.”

“Did you remove the statues to build the fort?”

“No. Local superstition swayed us from doing so. We have simply built the fort around the statues.”

“Ah.”

In the main we camped under the stars eating dry rations. We couldn't be bothered trying to hunt game. We simply didn't have the time to hunt, skin and prepare the meat.

Lying under the cloudless sky gazing up at the heavens it was Sven who surprised us by voicing what we all probably were wondering,

“When I see all those stars up there, I can't help but wonder if there are also any people on them lying on their backs looking at us wondering if there are people looking at them?”

“You could go on with that forever” quipped Rat.

“True” said Ibn. “However, that is a question still to be answered. Over one hundred years ago al-Battani was able to calculate that the year is 365 days, 5 hours, 46 minutes and 24 seconds long. But the one question he could not answer was if there were other people out there”.

“I guess we'll only know this at the end of time and we all stand before God-Allah-Yahweh” said Balgichi.

“How so?” asked Knut.

“Well, while we're standing in line waiting to be judged if we see anyone that does not resemble a human then we'll know that they more than likely lived on a world other than our own”.

“Oh. I'll remember to look out for them” said Knut comically, as he peeled a strip of dry beef with his knife.

“Why” asked Serakh rather naively?

Running his index finger down his knife's blade and widening his eyes he said rather dramatically “Just incase they want to do me in”.

Serakh was initially taken aback by the somewhat morose Knut, until she realised he was teasing her and that almost everyone was laughing as silently as they could. So intent was she on Knut that she had missed the joke.

“What?!” she exclaimed. “He has to be careful of strangers. They may want to harm him!”

“Not when he’s dead they wont” said one of the guards.

“What do you mean” said Serakh.

“My love you obviously weren’t listening well enough” said Rat.

“I was!” wailed Serakh not happy at being the butt of a joke.

“Father was talking about standing before God on judgment day. In other words we’d all be dead and without our bodies. So how could he carry his dagger if he doesn’t have a body”.

I don’t think Serakh had ever before thought about death. But then that is the privilege of youth. She looked at Rat with a puzzled expression on her face. The camp was quite for a moment or two while she pondered what Rat had just said. She replied with a rather flaccid “Oh.”

Before anyone could pass a snide comment in typical Serakh fashion she recovered by rather comically wagging her finger in Knut’s face saying,

“Well anyway Knut Ormison. Always remember what your mother said about speaking to strangers!”

NEXT WEEK

CHAPTER 39 – IZYUM

JOHN HALSTED