

CHAPTER 39

IZYUM

“Ulf. Have you seem them.”

“Yes Ibn. I have. Barjik, Sven?”

“Uh-huh” were the answers in the affirmative.

Obviously our sixth senses had kicked in at about the same time and not long after we had felt the stares of hidden eyes hiding in the shadows of the forest.

“Alright reign in” ordered Barjik.

Our party stopped and the men deployed in a line facing the forest. Barjik stood in his stirrups and called out

“I am Barjik Kustenov, commander of the fort at Sarkel. Come out and show yourselves or face the wrath of my men!”

Silence. Not a thing moved in the forest. We knew there was something or someone in there for even the birds had fallen silent. Barjik nodded to two men and indicated they should go left and then dispatched another two to his right. They galloped off up and down the road.

“Now what” said Serakh?

“Now we wait” said Barjik

“For what” asked Serakh again?

Suddenly a squeal and wail erupted from the forest.

“For that” said Barjik as the four horsemen herded a group, of adults and children from their hiding places in the forest at sword point. It looked like two families.

“Who are you” ordered Barjik?

The two men of the group looked at each other in silence.

“WELL? Someone speak or I’ll cut your heads off” roared Barjik.

“W-w-we hail from Izyum sire” offered one man.

“And what are you doing out here?”

“Fleeing the Pechenegs sire”.

“Say what?”

“Izyum sire. It’s under attack.”

Barjik sat in his saddle saying nothing. Staring silently, the peasant offered more information,

“And we managed to escape”

“...and hide here” volunteered one of the women.

“Why didn’t you come out when I asked you to?”

“We wasn’t sure if’n you were who you said you were”

“Oh? And why not?”

“Well, the soldiers uniforms we recognised, but the others we didn’t, and weren’t sure if’n you were Pechies in disguise - sorta”.

Barjik nodded “Fair enough”.

Barjik was about to dispatch one of his men back to Sarkel to get reinforcements when I suggested we were close enough to first appraise the situation before deciding on what action to take. He thought about this for a moment and then agreed. I also suggested he tell his soldiers to stow away their uniforms, as if the area was active with Pechenegs the last thing we would want would be for the element of surprise to be removed. Again he agreed.

As we approached Izyum we could see a dark smoke haze in the north east which could only come from burning buildings. To the east of the town the haze was lighter indicative of camp fires. Nodding in the direction of the lighter haze, Sven said

“The Pecheneg camp”.

I nodded while straining to catch the sight of movement in the terrain.

“Where” asked Serakh? “I cant see anything”.

“Over there” said Sven still pointing. “Where the light smoke haze hangs in the air. The dark smoke over there is burning buildings.”

Serakh looked in the direction he was pointing and nodded in silence.

As we crept slowly closer to Izyum we purposely drifted south towards the river making the best use of the terrain and the natural camouflage to disguise our approach, which wasn’t much benefit. When movement was seen we melted deeper into the woods and waited until the danger had passed. Soon the Kremianets was clearly visible, standing proud above the almost flat landscape. At this point we hid the crew deep in the woods and Ibn, Barjik and I left the crew in the capable hands of Sven and scampered and crawled the last few mil getting as close as we safely could. We spotted a small hillock and making sure no one was posted upon it we made for it. Lying prone on the summit we surveyed the scene before us.

It was clear that the Pecheneg force was made up of irregulars. Their camp was a disarray of tents and fires. That their commander was inexperienced was testament to our position. Any good commander would have put a sentry or two on the hillock on which we were now prone. That he had no-one watching the approaches from the south and east was also proof of his inexperience. I mentioned this to Barjik.

“True. But it is not their style to stand and fight like a regular army. They prefer to strike hard and disappear. Although having said that, the scene before us indicates a change in tactics.”

“I see. Lets hope their commander’s inexperience at set plays will play into our hands.”

If the Pechenegs were not in camp cooking, eating, sleeping or drinking, they were up near the fort chanting, taunting and jeering at the defenders, uselessly firing the odd arrow up at the ramparts.

“How many do you make?” I asked no-one in particular.

“About two-hundred” said Ibn.

“Likewise” said Barjik. “Although I would have said closer to two-hundred and fifty”.

“How many in the fort?” I asked Barjik?

“The garrison is fifty plus whatever civilians were able to get in before the attack.”

“Well then I have an idea which may tip the scales in our favour. It would seem that most of the action seems to be happening around the central part of the camp. I’m guessing that’s where the commander’s tent will be”.

Ibn and Barjik concurred.

We lay for a while longer watching the movements to and fro in the camp, waiting to see where the other areas of activity were. We were about to depart when Ibn placed a hand on my arm.

“Ulf, look”.

Out of the trees on the north side of the encampment came a sight I really did not want to see. The Pechenegs had cobbled together a makeshift battering ram. They had lashed a large log to a four wheeled cart. Its trimmed root was the bona fide head of the ram. We watched spellbound as it was wheeled ponderously into the camp. Like children the Pechenegs ran from all corners of the camp cheering, shouting and whooping. A Pecheneg had mounted the ram and was astride the log, riding it like a horse and shouting orders and encouragement to those who were pushing and pulling the machine. The ram was slowly wheeled to the centre of their camp and stopped outside the tent we had previously noted.

“Not good news” I said.

“No. That they have the technology to build such a machine quite astounds me” replied Barjik.

“Yes. You have to wonder who has given it to them?”

“Maybe one of Sviatslav’s enemies.”

“That would make sense. What better way to destabilise your enemy. Get someone else to do your dirty work for you. Saves on resources.”

“Until the war is won” said Ibn. “There is an old Persian saying, Once the genie is out of the bottle it is very hard to get him back in.”

“Meaning” asked Barjik looking at Ibn?

“Meaning, now that the Pecheneg expectations have been raised, managing them after the war is won will be very difficult.”

“Ah. However there is one thing they have overlooked.”

“What is that” I asked?

“The approach to the fort’s main gate is uphill. Getting and maintaining the momentum to break down the gate with that machine is going to be very difficult”.

“Yes that does seem to have been overlooked, doesn’t it?”

In the meantime the machine had stopped. The Pecheneg who had been astride the log now stood and with arms open wide seemed to be calling someone. A host of the Pechenegs had gathered in a semi-circle around the machine. A large man exited a tent and stood surveying the machine with arms crossed. He then advanced a few paces and slapped the log and raised his hand. Shortly after we heard the Pecheneg cheer.

“He obviously said something to cheer them up. But I think we have just found what we were looking for” I said.

We watched for a while longer and seeing no further action we slithered backwards off our knoll and paused to dust ourselves off. Ibn said

“Now I know why Allah made Shaytan slither on his belly. There is nothing worse.”

“I couldn’t agree more” said Barjik.

Keeping as low as we could and using all possible cover we made our way back to the crew.

On arrival at our hiding place it was Barjik who spoke first “Alright Ulf, you’re always the schemer. What do you have in mind?”

“First I need some information. We can see the river until it disappears around the Kremianets . Then what course does it take after that?”

“Ah I’ll show you” said Barjik clearing a space on the ground of leaves and twigs. When he had a clear palette he explained as he drew. “Here we are” he said poking the ground. “The river, to our left, runs north-west, swings north around the base of the Kremianets, here” he said indicating the fort with an X, “and then loops south, back on itself, before turning west again. The town is mainly here in the loop with some settlement around the outside of the loop as well.”

I studied the rough plan for a while, and pointing to the west side of the fort asked

“What is the terrain like where the fort I adjacent to the river?”

Barjik responded, “Almost sheer cliff”.

“Ah. Then we will move west of the town and make our moves from there. The Kremianets will hopefully shield us from view. Plus if anything goes wrong it gives us a better chance of escape. In order not to be seen, we will circle around the town from the south. I think it will be safest to go the long way ‘round, over the river and then west. Anyone seeing you will think we are fleeing the scene. Right? The exceptions will be Sven, Rat, Serakh and Tsai-Ming.”

Serakh began to object. I held my hand up and stopped her midstream with one of most meanest military commander’s stares. Seeing my glare she stopped in mid sentence. Her sigh and the dropping of her head and shoulders showed she was finally accepting my authority as leader. I reassured her,

“All will become clear my dear. Please bear with me.”

She looked rather put out, but I was learning to ignore her pouting.

“Now, Barjik I will need one of your men who will be known to the commander and men in the fort”.

“You have him” he said. And in the same breath yelled “Sergeant!”

“Yes sir” the burly sergeant dutifully replied stepping smartly forward,

“Knut” I called, and he unquestioningly stepped forward.

Oh what for an army of men like these I thought to myself.

“Right. I need you to get into the fort and deliver a message to commander.”

“Right” they chorused.

“You will have two options. One, you may have to circle west of the town and float down and across the river or two, you could go direct through the town and try and cross at the ford. If there aren’t any Pechies in town, that is. Either way you will have to find a log, or some debris to camouflage yourself when you cross the river. Your best bet will be to make the far shore at base of the Kremianets . Then you will have to scale the hill and somehow identify yourself and find your way into the fort.”

“And that is why I have the sergeant with me” said Knut.

“Correct. I would suggest you start your crossing at sunset, or shortly after dark, as you will be less likely to be seen. I leave that up to you. Likewise scaling the hill in the dark will give you more chance of making it to the walls without becoming target practice for the Pechenegs. You will find some soot in the town to darken your faces and bodies.”

Barjik grimaced when I said this. Knut and the sergeant examined the makeshift map, nodding their understanding as they did so. I then explained my plan to Knut and the sergeant so that if only one got through he would at least be able to pass it on. The others listened as I explained. I then carefully and slowly outlined to Sven, Rat, Serakh and Tsai-Ming what I wanted them to do as their tasks would act as the signal for the whole show to start. I couldn’t tell if Serakh was pleased with me or not. Probably not. Tsai-Ming listened attentively and nodded her understanding without comment during my monologue.

NEXT WEEK

CHAPTER 40 – THE RAID

JOHN HALSTED