

CHAPTER 41

THE KOZAK

LEGEND OF THE LAST VIKINGS

We entered the water and the groggy Pecheneg immediately began to stir. In preparation one of the men been carrying his dagger between his teeth and quickly rapped him on the head with the butt of the instrument. Again his head slumped forward. He waited with his dagger poised for a second strike but as the head stayed down he replaced it between his teeth and continued dragging him across the river. Just over half way across one of the men carrying the Pecheneg leader slipped and the Pecheneg's head submerged. He rose spluttering and gasping for breath. There was a quick scramble to silence the Pecheneg. The man with the dagger between his teeth beat his comrade to it.

"Oi! It was my turn" started the second soldier carrying him.

"Shush you two!" I half shouted and whispered. "Carry on like that and you'll give our position away".

"Sorry" they whispered back guiltily.

We exited the water puffing and panting hauled the Pecheneg leader up onto the river bank. After moving a way along the path I called a ten minute rest which was received with a chorus of thanks. We moved off into the lush undergrowth until we were sure we could not be seen. I settled down with my back propped against a tree. No sooner had I done so than my head was yanked back and a knife was pressed hard against my throat. The thought of never seeing Lydia and my unborn child immediately flashed across my mind. It was eerie that while I was held in this position my throat had not been slit nor had anyone spoken. Through my somewhat unusual posture I managed to see that all in the group had been disarmed or were being held in similar positions. Then a voice spoke,

"Once you beat me and held me captive but you released me without any harm. Now I do the same."

The knife slipped lightly across my throat leaving a thin trail of blood. While I had been released my men were still held captive. I simultaneously rubbed my throat and my head. As I did so a blond long-haired man stepped into my vision and stood before me legs astride looking down at me. He had one hand rested on pommel of his sword the other loosely holding a jewel encrusted dagger. While strangely familiar I battled to place him. Then it struck me in a flash, he was the Pecheneg who had led the attack on us as we made our way down the Dnieper's rapids. As he said, I had held him captive then let him go a long way from home.

"I see you made it back home and have recovered your torque. Was it a long swim?"

He laughed as he sheathed his dagger. He nodded at his men who released the remainder of us. "No. No swim. As for the torque I simply had a new one made from all the gold we have, uh, acquired".

"You must really stop doing that" I said with mock seriousness. He laughed again.

"Well now what" I asked him? "This time we are your captives."

"Captives? No. We have just released you" he said with a sweep of his hand.

"You can go anytime you want. But I wouldn't carry on down the path" he said pointing. "There is a band of Pechenegs waiting to ambush you."

"If they are Pechenegs then what are you?" I asked him.

"We are the Kozak" he said proudly. "I am Bodan Hetman and these are my men".

"Exactly who and what are the Kozak? I've never heard of them before."

"Let me" said Ibn. Heads turned towards him.

"The term Kozak is Byzantine and means freed men. They are the slaves, or the children of slaves, freed after serving their time."

"Exactly what he says" said Bodhan indicating with his hand.

"So you're not Pechenegs then?" I asked.

"Pechenegs. Pah!" he spat. "The scum of the earth."

"How did you find us?"

He looked at me and shook his head. "Are we going sit here all night answering questions or are we going to move before the Pecheneg scum find us?"

"You're right of course. Which way would be best?"

Ibn gave me a really concerned look especially that I was placing our lives into the hands of one who had tried to kill us and could have again. I shrugged knowing we did not have much option at this point in time.

"This way he said". Without speaking he pointed to Barjik and the Pecheneg leader. His men quickly moved to take over the carrying duties. My men were clearly relieved and being given a spell off. Bodhan led off into the forest along a barely discernable animal trail that ran almost parallel to the river. After about fifteen minutes of walking he started,

"At this time of year the pickings at the rapids are few and far between. Plus game is also beginning to thin. We had heard that there was plentiful game in this area. We were moving through here when we saw your encampment. I recognised you and decided to watch, wait and then follow."

"....and surprise us".

"Yes. That as well."

"Are you aware of the situation?"

"We have guessed it must be an attack on the town."

"Izyum."

"Izyum what?"

“Izyum is the name of the town.”

“Ah.”

“The Pechenegs have attacked and they have the fort held siege.”

“And you have captured the Pecheneg leader” he said waiving his right hand “ah, for what purpose?”

“Cut off the head of the beast and render the beast harmless.”

“But this beast will grow another head”.

“And while the head is growing we regroup and counter attack destroying it all together”.

“Providing the head doesn’t grow quicker than expected”.

“That is the gamble. I am counting on rivalries, jousting for position and political affiliations to take time”.

“Ah.”

Just then his point man dropped to a knee and gave a signal with his hand which was easily translated as stop and drop, which we did. As silently as possible we scrambled off the track and took cover in the undergrowth. Although why we did this was always beyond me. Any half decent tracker could spot the broken grass, branches and twigs. But then I reasoned that as twilight was all but gone it would be harder to spot where we had left the track and broken the undergrowth.

After what seemed an absolute age, but was probably not more than a few seconds, we settled into our positions to wait. The sudden alarm had raised my heart rate and the short but intense exertion to find cover had caused me to breathe hard. Now my breath sounded like it was roaring through my chest and ears and my heart was thumping like a drum. I took a number of long slow deep breaths and held them for a short period before releasing them in a slow and controlled manner. The pause in-between breaths also allowed me to listen, albeit briefly, for signs of approaching activity. Gradually by breathing eased and my heart rate slowed.

The silence rang in our ears and after a while we could hear voices drifting through the forest towards us. Unable to accurately detect the direction they were coming from, I looked to the trees and for the area in which the birds were taking flight. Slowly through the gloom I could see figures creeping their way towards the village. I touched Ibn on the shoulder and pointed. He nodded and silently passed on the observation. From their progress I could tell they were not practised woodsmen. Despite their desire to be silent they were making a lot of noise. They would have made faster and more silent progress if they had stayed on the footpath. No, these weren’t Pechies. They were more than likely townsfolk who had been living rough since the attack and were wanting to creep back into town to retrieve some personal belongings or were trying to increase their wealth while others were away from their abodes.

Bodhan slipped in next to me and I gave him my assessment of the situation. He agreed with me and we decided to creep along behind them waiting to see which of our theories was true. They

were making so much noise that hiding our following was not hard, even dragging the Pechie and with Barjik on his stretcher.

On the edge of the town the group ahead of us paused and, commendably, waited a good while to see if there was any activity ahead of them. They had obviously given some thought to what they would do when they had reached this point. We watched as they huddled in a short discussion before separating and vanishing into the shadows between the houses.

“Now what do we do?” asked IBN. Bodhan had the same question written on his face.

I hadn't given the situation much thought but knew immediately what to do.

“Ibn. I need you to lead a detachment across the river to the fort with our erstwhile Pechie leader and Barjik. Bodhan and I will stay here to see what comes of this lot ahead of us.”

Ibn and Bodhan nodded in agreement and soon Ibn's detachment had also disappeared into the darkness. I hoped they would make it without being intercepted. We were close enough to the river to hear should an interception take place and could rush to their aid.

“What do you think?” asked Bodhan in a very open-ended question.

“I think that all things being equal and that no other force is encountered our friends will come back this way.”

Bodhan stared at me and then just as it was becoming uncomfortable he said,

“Now I know why you beat me at the rapids. You plan for all eventualities ahead of time.”

“As a leader you are responsible for a great number of things, not last of all is your men for at some point, sooner or later, you will have to rely on them to do the right thing and maybe even protect your back. So it is only right that you as leader at least have some semblance of plan for every eventuality”.

He nodded and said “I am learning”.

Just as it seemed that our shadowy fiends had slipped out of town using another route we heard a roaring coming from the direction of the fort. At the sound most of the men sat upright and wide-eyed looked at me.

“Ah. I would guess that Ibn has made it across the river and that is the sound of a Pechie leader being hoisted up to the battlements”.

The men visibly relaxed and chuckled. Just then a number of figures emerged from the shadows and scurried directly towards us. One could be heard complaining,

“I told you we should have left sooner”.

“Shut it” a voice replied.

I gave the palm-down hand sign for waiting and just as the first person entered our area I stood up and commanded them to stop. His five comrades were so intent on fleeing the town that they did not see me and rather comically the first in the group walked into the now stopped leader.

Those at the back realised their predicament, paused and turned to flee but found that they were surrounded. The high pitch of a female's voice began to sob

"I told you we shouldn't have come. Now we're caught by the bloody Pechies. It's all right for you...."

"SHUT UP!" I commanded.

Her head snapped up.

"Oh Gawd" she moaned.

All eyes were upon me.

"We are not Pechies. We are representatives of Duke Valdimir of Kyiv".

"Oh Gawd" she moaned again.

"What were you doing in Izyum?"

Guiltily they looked at each other.

"We was going to get some of our stuff" the leader started. The women chipped in

"We've been living rough in the forest since the attack and was missing"

"Alright" I said. "Lets see what you have. Put what you have on the ground in front of me" I said pointing to a spot in front o me.

"You first" I said to the lead man who had a rather full bag slung over his shoulder.

He stepped forward unslinging the bag and tipped the contents out onto the ground. Mugs, knives, forks and an assortment of kitchen utensils poured onto the ground. Most had been wrapped in cloth to avoid clinking while they made their way back through the forest. I nodded and said, "Good. Pick them up and put them back in to your bag".

One by one I went through the group all had taken the basic requirements needed for a half-decent existence. If that's what you can call a temporary forest-based existence. Then came the only woman of the group. She unceremoniously dumped the bundle at my feet and stepped back with her arms folded across her chest.

"Open it" I said looking directly into her eyes.

"You wanna see. Open it yerself!" she spat back haughtily.

Bodhan stepped behind her and pricked her buttock with his dagger.

"Oi! Watch that. That's sore" she cried half turning and swatting his hand away. The men in her group chuckled. She shot them a mean look.

"Its not all that'll be sore if you don't open the bundle" I told her.

She thought for a moment and before Bodhan could prick her again she capitulated with an "Oh awright then". As she bent over I could see Bodhan was tempted to prick her fat backside just for the fun of it. I smiled and shook my head. He shrugged and moved away.

The bundle understandably contained a number of adults and children's garments.

“Thank you” I said. “You can wrap the up again”.

“Izzat all?” she complained bending down to rewrap the clothes. “Put ‘em down. Unwrap them. Wrap them up. Yessir, no sir, three bloody bags full sir...”

This time I did not stop Bodhan’s dagger from finding its target. Her reaction made everyone laugh and when the woman realised her situation, blushed, bit her lip and wrapped the bundle in silence.

I said to her, “Imagine if I had apprehended some people who had just looted your home. Would you be cursing me then?”

She shook her head and joined her comrades in silence. I continued,

“All is not lost. We have a plan to drive the Pechies back. Commander Barjik Semantov is here from Sarkel and reinforcements are on their way. Wait for the word telling you to come back. Go and tell this to your friends and family”.

Seemingly brighter and in better cheer they went on their way back to their temporary lodgings somewhere in the forests surrounding Izyum.

After this somewhat amusing interlude we walked around the edge of the town to the river and started our swim across to the shore below the high ramparts.

NEXT WEEK

CHAPTER 42 - THE KREMIANETS

JOHN HALSTED