

HOMeward BOUND

Not long after first light we mounted and rode out of the Kremianets. Barjik and the Andriy were up to see us off, as were my two erstwhile information gatherers. The women were dressed in their leather riding gear and drew more than one lustful stare. This time Serakh did not play up but instead busied herself with checking her saddle and equipment. When all were mounted we gave our last farewells and clattered out of the fort and down to the ferry. After crossing the river we rode through the town which was showing the first signs of repair and took the road west towards Ltava.

Over the next two days we pushed Westwards at a brisk pace heading towards Ltava, from whence the cavalry advanced guard had been despatched. The steppe winds were suddenly noticeably cooler which gave our journey more urgency. The horses, well rested after our sojourn in Izyum, were eager to stretch their legs and have a run. It was also good to be moving towards my Lydia again. Oh how my heart ached for her. Never in my life had I experienced such joy and longing for one person at the same time.

As we rode through the countryside, peasant farmers stopped their labours and lent on their implements as they watched us ride by. Not only did it give them a short rest from toiling the rich black soil, but it also enabled them to assess whether or not there was a potential attack in the offing.

On the afternoon of the third day we dropped from the Steppe into the Vorskla river basin. The river meandered back and forth across a flat, wide floodplain below the town of Ltava. We had to wait for the ferry to make its return. While we waited the horses drank and grazed and I studied the town on the hill across the valley. Immediately across the river the road climbed a small but relatively steep ridge up to the town, which would make it difficult for any attacking force striking from this side of the river. I looked for any other obvious paths up the slopes which were thickly covered in pine trees. Any force getting across could use the slopes for cover. Alternatively if the attacking force was spotted early enough a competent commander could hide a whole garrison in the trees and strike just as soon as the enemy landed trapping them with their backs to the river. I was shaken out of my reverie by Sven who said the ferry had berthed.

After crossing the river we climbed the hill into the town which had a sturdy looking stone built gateway and walls stretching away other side into the forest. I made a mental note to tell Barjik that the forest was probably a little too close to the walls for adequate defensive purposes. On reaching the gate I stopped and asked one of the guards where I could find the garrison commander. The guard, being a good guard, was rather suspicious of this unknown Viking-looking character accompanied by a mix of hard looking well armed men and women, some even stranger looking than the one asking questions. Not to mention that one of the group was an Arab and one of the women had strange, never before seen, slanted eyes.

“Why do you want the Garrison Commander. Hes a busy man you know.”

“Because we have just come from the Kremianets at Izyum and I have a report to give him.”

“How do I know you’re speaking the truth?” he asked eyeing me askance.

“You don’t...”

“And you may never know if you don’t hurry up” chipped in Sven rather menacingly, obviously placing his hand on the pommel of his sword. Sven did not have my patience in these matters. However I was content to play along with his threat.

“That as well” I added.

“And just who should I say wants to see him?” the soldier asked.

“Tell him Ulf Uspakson.”

The soldier could not have narrowed his eyes anymore without closing them completely. He called to a colleague and told him to call the Garrison Commander, choosing to stay and watch us instead.

While we waited a grey haired beggar with an eye patch, his body barely covered with old rags, hobbled up to the gate on an old crutch where the guard was standing. A memory of a face from long ago was aroused but I couldn’t put a name to it. Sven and I looked at each other frowns on both our faces. Proffering a cracked wooden cup the old man quavered

“Alms for an old soldier? Please sir. Alms for an old soldier?”

The guard’s response was vicious in the extreme. He hit the old man in the face with the flat of his hand which sent the beggar sprawling. The contents of his cup spilled into the dirt and mud. He cried out and crawled around in the mud trying to gather his meagre treasure of coppers. The guard still with a snarl on his face took a menacing step towards him and swung his leg back to kick the crawling beggar. Before he could swing his foot back the guard found not one but two swords at his throat,

“Keep that foot where it is or your throat will look like a sieve” snarled Sven.

“That goes for me too” I said pushing the point of my sword into his flesh.

The guard’s face went white with fear.

“Now, help One-eyed Varg up.”

“How, how, how do you know his name?” the guard spluttered.

"I'll tell you after you've helped him up."

The guard a little hesitant at first, quickly got to it after Sven pricked his behind with the tip of his sword. He helped One-Eyed Varg up and turned to us. Pointing to the area in which the money had spilled, I said

"Now, make sure he hasn't left any of his money in the mud."

The guard looked at me with consternation on his face. Once again Sven's sword got the man moving. Varg stood aside watching the soldier crawling around in the mud on his hands and knees searching for the lost coppers.

"Sir is it really you?" said Varg.

"It is Varg. It is I. Uspakson."

At which point Varg began to cry. I put an arm around the old man's shoulder and I felt his back stiffen. He started wiping the tears from his eyes.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry sir. I shouldn't cry. Really I shouldn't."

"Varg. If a soldier can't cry then he has no compassion. Without compassion he has no passion and therefore no mercy. It's alright old man. It's quite alright."

A crowd had gathered and many were passing snide comments about the soldier receiving his come-uppance. I turned to Serakh and Tsai Ming and passing them a handful of coins said, "Ladies. Please size up Varg here and go into town and buy him some clothes."

The guard stood up, his hands and knees caked in mud and stood silently looking at me with admonition written all over his face.

"Before you take One-Eyed Varg inside and scrub him from head-to-toe, let me tell you this: there was once a campaign on the Island of Sicily. Do you know where that is?"

The guard shook his head in silence.

"Well Varg does. He was there with me when we were members of the Varangian Guard. Do you know what the Varangian Guard is?"

His eyes widened and he nodded his head.

"Good. Well Varg had two eyes then. When we were driving the Arabs out of Sicily for the Byzantine Emperor, Varg lost his eye in an heroic stand. If ever I wanted a man at my back with an axe, it was Varg. He could heft and swing an axe like it was a stick. The long and the short of it is you would not be standing here now without the sacrifice of Varg and men like him. Just remember, that one, five or ten years hence it could be you begging on the streets of Ltava having lost one eye, and possibly a few fingers or an arm, in a battle with the Pechenegs. Now off you go."

The soldier swallowed and led Varg by the hand through the silent crowd into the gatehouse and the barracks.

The Garrison Commander, who had been watching the spectacle stepped forward and said, "Lord Uspakson. A thousand pardons for this scene. I am Folkvar Háklász, commander of the Garrison."

“How do you do” I said extending my forearm.

“I have just come from Izyum, where I am pleased to say the fort has been held and the Pechenegs driven off.”

Although the last part of my report was an exaggeration, it did sound good.

“Ah.....So soon?”

“Yes. They lacked strategy and unity. A situation I was able to exploit.”

“And exploit it he did” quipped in Ibn.

The commander’s focus temporarily shifted to Ibn and a brief frown crossed his face.

“I see” he replied.

I could hear Rat quip quietly,

“No you don’t. You never will.”

That Rat was learning to read people quickly was a good sign. But he would have to learn how to stay silent and watch and listen. A lot could be learned that way.

“Please come in for refreshments.” Before leading us in he ordered a soldier to take the horses around and have them fed and watered.

Over refreshments I appraised the Garrison Commander of the situation and he filled us in on the town of Ltava. Before dinner a spic-and-span, well heeled and proud looking One-eyed Varg was presented. Before he left I shook him by the hand and made him promise to start looking for gainful employment.

Over dinner Folkvar Háklász informed us that the town was almost three hundred years old and had started life as a ferry crossing, much in the way that Byzantium had done millennia ago. From the crossing it had grown into a bustling town. Defensive reasons had seen it eventually move up from the plain to the semi-fortified position it was in now. We discussed the layout of the town and its defences and I brought up my note about the proximity of the trees which led to a discussion about the benefits of having dead ground around a fort’s walls. The Commander made a note to start clearing a wider space. Winter would be the ideal time to do it because it would keep the men active, fit and occupied.

A small military academy had been established at Ltava to give farmers some military training so they could defend themselves and also be called upon to defend the town in case of Pecheneg attack. I mentioned that maybe gainful employment could be found for Varg here. The Commander promised to see what could be done. We also discussed the number of old soldiers and beggars in the town. I proposed a bazaar once a year to raise funds and finding ways of turning their hands to work in .

We talked late into the night. Too late in fact. By the time I turned in there would only be a few hours left in which to sleep.

On waking we found that the Kyiv column had arrived late in the night. I asked Commander Háklász who was in charge of the column.

“Oh. It’s Captain Kutarev.”

“Oh shit!”

“I take it you know him?”

“Too well. We, ah, met at Sarkel just over a year ago. Have you told him I am here?”

“No. Not yet.”

“Well we had better get this over with.”

“Ah. That bad.”

“Yes.”

We entered the officer’s mess and four officers were up having breakfast.

“Where is Captain Kutarev?” I asked.

A number of looks passed between the officers. Eventually one replied,

“He’s still asleep.”

“Well wake him for me will you.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. Not if you value your life, that is.”

“Oh. And why is that?”

”Because Captain Kutarev does not like to be woken before half of the ninth hour.”

“He WHAT! Now I’ve heard it all. Show me to his room.”

“I really.....”

“HIS ROOM. NOW!” I bawled.

“Yes sir” the officer said standing.

“This way” he said leading off.

“This I must see - again” said Rat leading, Sven, Ibn abd Commander Háklász.

The officer stopped outside a door and pointed saying

“This one.”

I kicked the door in and bawled “KUTAREV! Get your sorry arse out of that bed now!”

The captain sat bolt upright his eyes wide and he jumped out of the bed and stood upright as stiff as a board.

“Why aren’t you dressed and seeing to your men?”

“I, I, I” stammered Kutarev.

“One day I hope you will surprise me and show that you have some *intelligence!*”

“yes, yes, yes.....” continued Kutarev.

“Not get dressed and get out there. As an officer you are the LEADER! You should be up first seeing to your men’s every need before you see to your own!

Now. What are your plans?”

“We were going to rest today and in the morning return to Kyiv.”

I could hear the sniggers coming through the doorway behind me. I couldn't pick out if it was my men or Kutarev's men doing it so I ignored them.

"Return to Kyiv? What the hell for? Izyum has a far greater need for you and your men than does Kyiv."

"But the situation at Izyum is resolved....."

"The situation at Izyum has only just been resolved. You have to restore the town. Put out patrols to deter any opportunist Pechenegs. Let them know who's in charge. No man. It's Izyum for you. I'm sure Commander Chernetsov really going to enjoy seeing you."

"Chernetsov's at Izyum?"

"Oh yes. By the time you get there you had better have a plan of action agreed with your officers."

"Uh. Yes M'Lord."

"Good. Now I'm going to Kyiv. Is there anything between here and Kyiv that I should be aware of?"

"No M'Lord."

I stared down at the pathetic officer and turned on my heel and exited the room. I called Kutarev's officers together and said to them

"I am Ulf Uspakson. Former Herald to King Harald Hardraada of Norway and former Captain of the Varangian Guard in which Barjik Chernetsov, Commander of the Fort at Sarkel, served under me. You have my express orders to ensure Captain Kutarev is woken by the seventh hour every morning. If he complains you are under orders to advise Commander Chernetsov or me. I am not sure what my role in Kyiv will be. But rest assured it will have something to do with the armed forces. So be prepared to answer to me when you get back to Kyiv. Understood?"

I received a chorus of yessirs. I looked around at the men searching their eyes for signs of arrogance or disobedience. I could see none. These were good men being led by a less than mediocre leader. However once in Izyum Barjik would make sure they were led well.

I was so furious with Kutarev, we exited the barracks, mounted and rode out with the shortest of farewells. In retrospect I think Kutarev's officers were in shock at the treatment of their commanding officer. But that wasn't the first time and probably wouldn't be the last.

Once again we make haste across the Steppe. The morning breeze even cooler on our faces and forearms as our horses covered mile after mile of the undulating countryside. If we didn't ride through the villages we rode around them. Almost without exception our passage was watched and, if I'm not mistaken, well noted.

On the third day it became apparent that we had entered a major river catchment area. All the rivers and streams flowed in a west or south-westerly direction. After breakfast Bodhan advised that he and his comrades would be heading further South.

“How do I contact you?” I asked him.

“Send a message to the Isle of Khortytsia.”

“Where is that?”

“Down river from Kyiv.”

I knew better than to ask how the message would get to him. Then amidst much back slapping and farewells we went our separate ways.

On the fourth day we had woken to a light dusting of snow on our blankets. Even the horses had huddled together during the night. As we dropped down through low hills to the Dniepr river, the signs of increased habitation were all too obvious. We made the river in late afternoon and just made the last crossing. The city of Kyiv loomed large and welcoming on the far side. Oh, how I looked forward to holding my Lydia again. Holding her, kissing her and caressing her. Even now I could smell her hair. It wasn't hard to imagine holding her, and she holding and hugging me back. Nor was it hard to imagine the hug turning into a long and lingering kiss. The jolt from the ferry grounding brought me back into reality.

NEXT WEEK

CHAPTER 46 - NEW LIFE

JOHN HALSTED