

## THE KREMIANETS

LEGEND OF THE LAST VIKINGS

Dripping wet I was hoisted off the swing and over the ramparts of the Kremianets in a single movement. The commander introduced himself as Andriy Kucharska and gave me a warm welcome.

“How is Barjik?” I asked.

“As well as can be expected. The doctor believes he will make a full recovery.”

“Ah. Good. At some stage expect a call from two men and two women wanting to come into the fort the same was as I have just done.”

“Ah. The diversionary players. They were so convincing that I almost had to threaten execution to some of my men too.”

We laughed.

“Well it certainly helped us achieve our objective. Oh. By the way, where is the Pecheneg? I would like to interrogate him.”

“We have him under lock and key in the dungeon. As for interrogate? We haven’t had much success - yet.”

“Then it may be time for a softer fist and a harder mind. Lead me to him.”

Ibn and Bodhan had been standing listening to the Commander and me. I called them to follow.

A while later we were led into the dungeon to see the Pecheneg leader spread eagled on a rack. The torturer was straining with all his might to turn the ratchet up a notch and the Pecheneg leader, spread eagled as he was, was pulling against all four ropes. For the moment he was holding his own.

I walked over to the rack and studied the facial features of the Pecheneg. Those parts of his face that weren’t blue were a deep crimson. The blood vessels on his face and forehead were standing out like roads on a map. Sweat beaded on his forehead and ran back through his hair and down into his eyes. I wasn’t sure if his bellows were because of the sweat stinging his eyes or from the pain. I could see him watching me through squinted eyes as I walked around his head.

“Enough!” I said firmly.

The torturer looked across to the commander who nodded his head. He stepped back slowly, easing the ratchet back a notch. Panting he walked across to a pail of water and dunked his head into it.

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The Pecheneg, panting equally as hard, was now relaxed on the rack and the colour was slowly returning to his face. He continued to watch me while I walked to the base of the rack where I stood and studied him in silence. After about 5 minutes of silence he finally said,

“Who are you?”

This was just what I needed to know. His break told me his mind was not sufficiently educated nor disciplined. Had it been me, I would have feigned disinterest and possibly even sleep. I studied him for a further half minute or so and just before he was about to ask again I gave him his answer.

“I am Ulf Uspakson. Formerly Herald to King Harald of Norway, who under Yaroslav the Wise subdued the Pechenegs over forty years ago before becoming a commander of the Varangian Guard where I was second of command. There does that answer your question?”

His eyes squinted as he digested my answer and its meaning to him as a Pecheneg. Before he could ask another question I continued,

“Now that I have been civil enough to answer your question, maybe you could do the same for me? Hmmm?”

His head slumped against the wooden bed of the rack and looking at the dungeon’s ceiling he answered,

“I am Ultinčur, leader of the Qara-Bay. The most powerful of all the Pecheneg Nations”.

“Ah. Are you hungry?”

“Huh?” he grunted. My question purposely inserted to take him off guard.

“Food? Do you want some?” I asked again.

Confusion flashed across his eyes. “Uh? Oh. Yeah” he said stammering his way through an acceptance. I snapped my fingers and pointed at one of the guards and commanded

“Food. Hot. Now”.

He looked to his superior who nodded his acceptance. I then ordered the torturer to wind back the rack. On the third notch the bonds were loose enough to be comfortable but still taught enough to hold him securely.

“Could I have some water?” he rasped. I nodded and walked over to the pail and scooped a ladle and brought it over to him. Lifting his head he strained to get it high so he could drink without spilling. Only half successful the water dribbled out his mouth and down his neck.

“Ahhhhh” he sighed probably from the water soothing his throat and cooling his neck.

“More?”

“Now you’re trying your luck” I said hurling the ladle across the chamber towards the pail. The wooden handle broke as it clattered its way across the flagstones.

He shrugged as best he could, which gave me a clue to the man’s psyche. I too shrugged and walked to the opposite side of the room and sat on a chair engaging the Andriy in meaningless conversation about the fort’s stables. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Ultinčur straining to see and hear what was going on.

A while later a guard entered the room with a plate of steaming food and a tankard of ale on a tray. I took the tray from him and walked over to the Pecheneg leader placing the tray where it could be seen and smelt. He visibly started salivating.

“Now tell me” I said pointedly ignoring the food “why did you attack Izyum?”

His eyes moved between me and the food.

“The sooner you tell me, the sooner you can eat it.”

His eyes now started to dart between me and the food and his salivating became more apparent.

I broke a piece of bread off the half loaf and dipped it into the beef stew. Turning I waived it in front of the bound Pecheneg. He lifted his head in an attempt to snap at the morsel. I withdrew far enough to be just out of his reach. When it was clear his will was winning the battle I popped the gravy sodden bread into my mouth and chewed slowly, exaggerating every chew, making out I was really savouring the experience all the while holding his gaze. When I finished I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand and broke another piece of bread and again dipped it in the gravy. Holding it in front of him I said,

“Now. That was very, very tasty. The longer you leave it the colder it will be and the less there will be for you. Or, you could tell me what I want to know. Hmmm?”

Once again his eyes darted from the morsel to me. This time his eyes stayed on the bread for a longer period and I knew I was winning the battle. Once again I ate the food with exaggerated pleasure. His hunger won the battle on the third round and he caved in. He strained for the morsel in my hand but I withdrew it again saying,

“Uh, uh. Not until you’ve told me what I want to know. Then you can eat.” After a short pause I raised my eyebrows and added “And drink. Now.....”

He started immediately.

“I won the right to be leader of the Pechenegs. I had to give a show of my strength and leadership so I decided to attack Izyum.”

“Hasn’t gone to well. Has it?” I said waiving the bread back and forward. He shook his head.

“Now before I release you we need to have an agreement.”

I brought the bread to my face and his gaze followed. “Hmm?”

He looked from me to the bread and back again.

“An agreement?”

He nodded.

“Good. You must agree to never attack this fort or any buildings or possessions in Prince Iziaslav’s realm. Understood?”

His gaze was still firmly fixed on the bread. I moved it behind my back and he looked at me with pleading in his eyes.

“An agreement to not attack any of Prince Iziaslav’s land, buildings or possessions. Understood?”

He nodded. I said to him “I need you to say you agree”.

He looked at me and I brought the food from behind my back long enough for his hunger to raise its head again. When his focus changed I moved it behind my back gain. He looked at me and said

“I, I, I agree.”

“Good. We are making progress. I also need you to tell your people tomorrow that the Pecheneg nation that the attack is over and you will be returning to your homes.”

The morsel came out from behind my back again. This time I held it out a little longer before moving it behind my back again.

“Well. Do we have an agreement?”

Knowing he was defeated he sighed and said

“Alright. You have my agreement.”

“Now Ultinčur I sincerely hope that in future we will be able to meet and negotiate agreements. Fighting and killing is not honourable. It is stupid and a waste. Women are left without husbands and children are left fatherless.”

A thought of my Lydia, heavily pregnant flashed across my mind. I continued,

“In addition to which rebuilding burnt and destroyed towns and villages is costly and time consuming. I would like to believe that we can each build wealthy, healthy and peaceful nations. If you don't want to do this then know this, under Yaroslav the Wise, Harald subdued the Pechenegs. I was part of the army that did this. If we have to, we'll do it all again. Only this time there will be a two pronged attack. One for Sarkel and the other from Kyiv and the Pecheneg nation will be caught in the middle. Do you want to be remembered as the leader who brought defeat and destruction to the Pecheneg nation - again? Or do you want to be remembered as the leader who brought wealth and prosperity to his people?”

His eyes told me what I needed to know. I nodded in acknowledgement.

“Then we must agree to meet here, not in the walls of the fort but in the open, in the area where your army is now camped, four times a year to discuss our needs and our differences. If we don't we both know what will happen.”

He nodded again.

“Good. Alright you can eat.” I said to the guard “Release him and give him his food. We have an agreement.”

With a flick of my head I indicated that we should leave and Andriy followed me out. I pulled the door closed and said to the him,

“I need ten men in two ranks of five either side of this doorway. We have but a quarter hour before he finishes eating. You'd better get to it.”

He turned to his sergeant who second guessed his Commander by saying

“I'm on it sir.”

“Sergeant, Before you go, tell them to come quietly” who nodded and hurried off to arrange the men. Andriy turned to me,

“And there I was thinking you had gone soft in the head.”

“We can pat ourselves on the back if he doesn’t get away. A cornered man is a dangerous man. And he has a lot to lose.”

Presently the ten guards could be heard approaching. I walked forward and indicated them to be quiet. They followed me as silently as they could to the door to the torture chamber. The sergeant arranged them in two ranks of five either side of the door. I ordered the men to draw their swords and stand ready. The commander and I stood behind one set and the sergeant took up post behind the other. And we began our wait. If my reading of his personality was correct our wait wouldn’t be too long.

Voices could be heard behind the door. I guessed Ultinčur was speaking to the two guards we had left behind. It was the classic manoeuvre of gaining trust before assaulting and overpowering your foe. One of the men began whispering to his mate alongside him,

“Quiet” I growled.

He nodded his head and immediately ceased talking. Our wait continued.

The talking was suddenly broken by a few laughs and I knew it was about to start.

“Ready. It’s almost time.” I whispered.

After a few more moments of talking there was a crash and shout followed by a thump. Another shout and it was clear that it was the sound of a fight underway.

“Steady, steady. Wait for him to exit.”

A few more thuds, thumps and crashes followed and then silence.

“Steady. He’s arming himself right now. Wait for it. Wait for it.....”

And then the door burst open and Ultinčur, sword in hand, dashed out and turned left only to be confronted by a phalanx of swords. He stopped, spun around and took two steps before he realised his bluff had been called. The sergeant called,

“Ranks advance one pace”

Both ranks advanced one pace and Ultinčur’s freedom was proportionately reduced. He slumped his shoulders in what seemed like inevitable surrender. I called

“Careful. Don’t let him fool you.”

No sooner as I’d said it than Ultinčur’s sword was up and he took on the front ten men simultaneously. The sergeant stepped through the ranks and waited for his moment. When Ultinčur’s turned his back to him he rapped him on the head with the pommel of his sword. Ultinčur swayed.

“Again!” I cried, and the sergeant repeated his action. This time Ultinčur went down in two.

“Take him back in and tie him up as before. Sergeant I think you may have two damaged soldiers in there who will need attention.”

He chuckled, “Yes. I think you maybe right.”

We waited until Ultinčur was firmly bound and left instructions for the sergeant to set two guards in the room, one outside the door and one at both the ends of the passage.

“Well now Commander. That’s that. Lets go and get our dinner. After that show I am hungry. We have some planning to do.”

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NEXT WEEK

CHAPTER 43 - THE BATTLE BEGINS TO TURN

TAKLAODAKAN

JOHN HALSTED

