

The King

Piglet Brawl

Pain, it was. Pain, he felt when another clenched fist landed in his twisted face. The blood ran thick from his nose, leaving a metallic taste in his mouth. Bitter tears of anger filled his eyes. His heartbeat drummed the sound of wrath, of untamed hate. His opponent was at least a head bigger than himself. Nonetheless, losing this brawl was not an option. A great lust for winning befell him. The older boy had wronged him badly and he felt like changing that bastard's face forever would ease his anger.

Earlier this day he had found his fine hunting shoes pissed over in front of his father's house. After the adventurous boar hunt the day before, he had put them there to let them dry in the long lasting summer sun. He had checked if the leather was dry enough to work some wax into the skin, when he had noticed this distinctive smell. It hadn't smelled like cat piss nor a mark from the farm hound. After examination, it had seemed more possibly a human doing. But who in the eyes of the Allfather could have done such an act? Those shoes were his favourite possession. Last summer his father had gifted them to him. Made out of deerskin, they were light yet robust. With them he proudly felt as fast as Thor himself, rushing through the vast Scandinavian forests in search for prey.

At this moment, he heard the neighbour boy shouting, "Rolf, Rolf I have seen the evildoer. This morning Hakan Harulfsson walked by your house and took a piss on your shoes." In a few quick steps, Rolf reached the young boy, grabbed him by the neck and pointed an accusing finger in his face: "Why didn't you stop him?". "I, I..", the boy stuttered, "I'm afraid of Hakan. He is so big, and.. and they say the Harulfssons turn into wolves whenever the moon is blood red." "Idle vulgar gibberish", Rolf replied with a declining hand gesture, turned away and started to run.

He knew exactly where to find Harulfssons farmhouse. It laid at the entrance of the village. "Hakan must have passed our house after visiting the market and certainly would have taken the opportunity to piss me off again" Rolf mumbled to himself while rushing through the small fishing village he called home.

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Onsight of the gate he changed his pace into a serious sprint. The farm was now very close. Hakan was feeding the pigs when Rolf arrived. Huffing and puffing Rolf wanted to shout, but was not able to do so. The taller boy couldn't help himself but to grin sardonically. "Look who's here", Hakan scoffed, "the little bastard Rognvaldsson. Or should I say little pisser." His evil laugh became bitter.

Rolfs face turned red. Then he jumped over the low pigs fence and tried to nudge him right off his feet. To Rolfs surprise Hakan didn't even stagger a bit. To make it even worse Hakan punched him so badly in the gut he forcibly remembered what he had eaten for breakfast. Rolf exhaled his pain and focused on his own attack. As he kicked Hakan's shin, he got hit right on his nose. With his leg extended all the way, he fell backwards in the stinking mud. Hakan was over him in two heartbeat's time. Rolf rolled away quickly, still he felt Hakan's shoe tip streak his temple. He jumped on his feet and tried to circle his opponent to attack his back. But Hakan knew his way around not getting hurt and was not ready to let that happen. He quickly reached out, grabbed Rolfs cloak near the neck with his left hand and immediately started pounding Rolfs face and chest. The pain made Rolf even more angry. He lifted his shoulders to protect his chin. Then he hacked with his fist at Hakans elbow. Simultaneously, he stepped his foot between Hakans legs and headbutted him in the jaw. Hakan staggered backwards, tripping over Rolfs foot, he left conveniently behind Hakans right shoe. Now Hakan landed on is back. Leaving him no chance to get up, Rolf started to kick brutally into Hakan's crutch. Over and over and over again. "Pissing over my belongings, you pile of shit? I will smash your little pigtailed prick for that!" He screamed and spat. Suddenly a strong hand grabbed Rolf and pulled him away from the curled up miserable heap in the mud. "Are you mad? Stop this idleness at once!", a powerful voice demanded. It was Ivar, the much older brother of Rolf. "He.. he just attacked me without reason", Hakan whispered pain stricken. "I'm sure he had his reasons. Come now boy. We're late for the feast." Ivar heaved his younger brother over the fence, not even losing a brief moment for the Harulfsson scum.

Preparations

The brothers passed the harbour where two days beforehand a new fleet of ships had joined the already numerous drakkars. Those fifty new ships were King Haralds. Sun-darkened men were loading

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provisions on the dragon ships while chanting folk hymns. "Hurry up", Ivar said, "mothir is waiting for you. You have to get cleaned up and dressed properly for today's occasion. And Rolf," Ivar looked strictly in his eyes, "do you really think a bear cares for the bee's sting as it is eating all the bee's honey?"

Their mother received them with a worried look. "Your face Rolf, you look terrible, and why do you stink like a piglet?", she asked with her heart-warming voice. "Ha, I keep asking him this very same question everyday", said Rolf's younger sister Hilda mockingly, while she examined Rolf's face. "Go get cleaned up, my son", his mother sighed. Rolf just looked at his feet, ashamed to be seen like this by his own mother. She was a woman of outstanding beauty. Her face was as pale as the everlasting ice in the mountains and she was as tall as an oak tree with long bright hair. Hild she was called by her kin. Born as Ragnhild Hrolfsdottir she has brought forth three sons and a daughter. The eldest was Ivar, then came Rolf, then Hilda - she was alike her mother, both in name and beauty - and the youngest son Thorir. They also had three half brothers from different thrall mistresses of Rognvald. Hallad, Hrollaug and Einar were their names. They were already fully grown men; warriors of great reputation and fierce berserks like Rognvald. Finally, Rolf was washed, wrapped in a light linen cloak and his shoulder long blond hair combed. "Let us go now to the great hall". Hild dragged him out of the house.

The great hall

The magnificent hall was packed with people, Rolf estimated one hundred. Some of them were seated on long poky wooden tables to the left and right of the centered fireplace but most were patiently standing near the entrance of the hall. The richer warriors were placed next to the high seat of the Jarl. Before the full assembly a tall man was speaking with a deep voice. It was the Mørejarl, Rognvald, Rolfs father. His yellow tunic and his arm ring reflected the flames of the fire and gave him the attention of the others. Dark grey short hair and a big mustache marked his friendly but authoritative face. He talked with utmost ambition of yet another raid far away to the north isles and of the wealth they would acquire in these lands far away from the great hall. Men were applauding with excitement, slapping their chest and thighs. Then Rognvald demanded silence.

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"People of Møre and Raumsdal we await royal guests from Trondheim. Let us welcome the king of all Norway - King Harald Hårfagre"

The Hird

The great doors were opened and myriads of men entered. First in line strode a prideful man with a magnificent head of blond curls and on his hand: an alluring woman with a magnetic personality. Rolf was surprised by the king's youthfulness, he seemed barely twenty five winters old, what meant that he was about twenty winters younger than Rognvald. Nevertheless it was a sensational scenery to watch. Harald wore a red short tunic - decorated with golden trimmings - and linen baggy trousers to his knees. On his dark belt with metal fittings, there hanged a fat ornamented leather pouch. His face showed a mix of bold but also delicate features. Only a small scar on his left cheek reminded Rolf that the king was an experienced warlord. Around his neck dangled Mjolnir - Thor's hammer - as big as Rolf's fist. His gem-bearing arm ring looked as if it had been made out of pure gold by magical dwarfs.

The woman in his company was certainly a sensation herself. She was fully dressed in dark green silk. Her waist was tied up with a broad leather girdle which greatly enhanced her ample female curves. She had cold features with piercing green eyes. Her long red hair was tied to a big knot behind her head and adorned with colourful ribbons.

Behind the royal pair walked the hird, the heavy armored personal guard. They were elite warriors who followed the king wherever he went. Rolf shuddered at this view. All of them wore blackened steel lamellar armour above their long riveted chain mails. Their shoulders were draped with intimidating grey wolfskins. No one could see their heads for they were protected by enclosed helmets with a neck chainmail attached. Only the two holes for the eyes were human like. Every helmet was unique to one another. Some were polished and round others were matt and conical shaped. Some had a spike on top or bronze brows as decoration above the eyes. One man who walked directly behind Harald had a helmet with a bushy long horse tail on top. He was certainly the leader of the hird.

Harald took his woman to Rognvald and they greeted another like brothers whilst the rest placed themselves amongst the respective ranks. The guard of ten men stayed close to the king and they took their helmets off out of respect. Rolf could now see that they were short haired but all of them wore their beards full and

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neatly combed, some even had had silver beads woven in. Then he also discovered the golden shimmering of their sword hilts. One day he would possess a mighty sword like theirs. Harald took the floor and addressed the keen assembly, "Brothers, it's been quite a while since my last visit to this hall. It is a pleasure to see you all again in good health." A servant handed him a horn full of sweet mead. With relish, he took a large sip. Visibly deeply satisfied he carried on, "I wanted to show you Gyda. Who wants to hear the story how this beautiful woman came to be my wife?" The men answered with raising their mead cups, affirmatively shouting. "So be it", Harald said with a light smile on his face.

A bride to conquer

Suddenly the room was eerie quiet. With his thumb, Harald wiped mead off his mustache, cleared his throat and then began to tell his story.

"Many winters ago, I and my men went to Bjorgvin in the south for trade. There, we were invited to a fine meal with King Eirik of Hordaland. In his hall I first laid my eyes upon a face made by the gods themselves. I was certainly overwhelmed by her glowing aura and those green eyes, in them flames of the northern lights. Her beauty struck me like Thor's lightning. A kingsguard told me it was the King's beloved dottir."

"That same winter I could not forget that cheerful face. So as soon as the ice was gone I sent for her whereabouts. My messenger told her that I wish to make her my bride."

"Gyda", Harald said, "tell us what you answered then and there to my messenger!" Everybody glanced eagerly to his wife.

"As you wish my King", Gyda replied. "I did let you know that I was not to wife a King who had only such a small realm to reign over. Furthermore, I said I would merely marry a King who subjected the whole of Norway for himself. Like King Horik who ruled over all of Danmark and Eirik who was King of the Swedes in Uppsalir. Or I will not give my virginity to someone else entirely."

"Indeed, this you told me. You have always been a bold one", Harald added and gave her a gentle clap on her buttocks. The hall broke into laughter. Harald raised a finger and the room went quiet:

"See, I liked her idea of uniting Norway under one king very much. The Danes had been a pain in our arses for quiet some time, for

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they wanted to claim our lands for themselves. Right then I made an oath to myself to never cut nor comb my hair until I was sole ruler of all Norway."

Battle of Hafrsfjord

"So I gathered all forces immediately", Harald carried on after a good sip of his drinking horn.

"My good friend Rognvald here was one of the first to join. We fought many battles together and conquered numerous Kingdoms. I vividly remember the decisive battle that made all Norway my subject. It happened two summers ago near Stavanger."

Men, women, children and slaves waited eagerly to hear the story of the last big battle. They sat there with great tension in their backs as if they heard it for the first time. Of course every child already knew it inside out. Rolf softly punched his brother Ivar in the shoulder the latter smiled back at him.

"I had heard of an uprising in the south with both ships and weapons. In the region of Sør-Jæren gathered King Eirik of Hordaland, Sulki King of Rogaland and King Kjotve "The Wealthy" of Agder and his son Thorir Haklang - who was a famous berserk warrior - and more men from Telemark. They wanted to shatter our dream of a united folk. Many of you came to aid when I launched the drakkars to sea. We followed the coast south to Stavanger one hundred and ten ships and five thousand warriors strong. Close to Hafrsfjord we caught the enemy by surprise and they inverted and fled immediately. We did not bother to chase them. On the contrary we decided to take position in the Fjord and face them like men. The way into Hafrsfjord is very narrow, as some of you may know. Only one drakkar after another can make its way in. We had plenty of time so we aligned our ships close to the shore and set up a camp at the beach. Then we waited and rested for two days until we finally saw the first enemy drakkar rowing into the Fjord. It looked like the boat of Haklang the berserk. In lust of battle our men boarded the ships. My drakkar was in the center and the rest around it. We could have just attacked one enemy after another. By the gods, where would have been the honor in that? So we howled like wolves and daunted them with mighty drum rolls. As soon as their last drakkar was in line we engaged without hesitation. My wolfskin guard stood at the ship's rail, covering the men who pulled the rows. I was standing at the bow throwing javelins towards the traitors. Finally both fleets clashed in foamy white water before turning red with blood of many honorable travelers to

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Valhall. Accompanied of my berserks I sprang onto Haklang's ship. It was man against man. Axe against sword. We slayed them all but lost many of ours as well. Then I faced Thorir Haklang with only my sword, for my shield was already broken. So I had to wield my sword without hesitation towards my foe, as Haklang was still armed with both sword and fully planked shield. He could barely keep up with my pace. Knowing that he was not able to beat me he became infuriated. He hit me with his shield then swung his weapon against me with great force. I dodged backwards, but the tip of his sword wounded my cheek. Like a dying beast he was scratching me. Then I leaped forward, ramming him with my shoulder. He staggered and I seized the moment and slashed my blade deep into his unguarded neck. Gurgling he fell on his knees. In one motion I hacked off his head. Blood was everywhere.

I finally looked up and saw King Eirik's boat burning and King Solki's had already sunk. Haklang's old man Kjotve fled like a dog to a small island nearby and hid behind the shieldwall. Rognvald and his men mercilessly chased him, broke the wall and his son Hallad planted a spear in Kjotve's heart. This was the end of the great battle. Many abandoned their ships and fled to the shore. Victory was ours!"

The hall rejoiced.

"Thank you, brothers!"

"In this very hall, Jarl Rognvald personally cut my hair after ten years of no tending and gave me the surname <<Hårfagre>> because from then on everybody could see my fine and abundant hair."

Future plans

"But let us discuss our mutual plans for the future. That is the reason for our assembly", Harald continued. "Rognvald my friend come forth and tell us what we have spoken of."

"It is an honor, my King".

"You may already have heard of the vikings from the northern british isles raiding our coasts. Most of them are traitors who dare to oppose the King and our Norway. Tomorrow we finally put an end to their treacherous behaviour. We will set sail for Shetland and Orkney and vanquish them all."

"Our joined forces are constituted of King Harald's troops, my brother Sigurð and his sons, myself and four of my sons. My

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youngest Rolf and Thorir shall look after my estate with their mother."

Generous gifts

"Now", Harald stepped in, "let me show to you how everyone is becoming richer by joining our united cause. Step forth, Ivar Rognvaldsson. This will be your first battle in my ranks." Young Ivar approached the king with confident steps. Then Harald handed him a fine silver arm ring. Ivar's face lightened up and he put the ring on his arm.

"Do you pledge to fight for your kingdom and only for your kingdom?", Harald asked.

"I do", Ivar humbly answered.

Harald offered his greeting arm. Ivar grabbed it with delight. The king lifted the young man's hand. The hall cheered.

Feasting

"Now let us feast", Harald proclaimed.

"Thralls, serve the meal and bring more mead!", Rognvald demanded and slaves brought steaming boars, fish and bread and liquid honey for the soul.

Rolf rejoiced the company of his brothers and half brothers. In truth he was envious he could not sail with them. But soon, soon he would be a honorable warrior like them. Until then he would train harder than ever before with the village swordmaster.

Four hundred people of all age and rank celebrated that night with dancing, games and music in the great hall and many under the red summer sky of the never setting northern sun.