

City of Trade

On boat

White-tipped waves crashed against the bow of the karv and blew salty spray broadside across the transport ship. It was already late fall and the strong wind was swelling the yellow-red striped sail to its limits. Ice Cold drizzle drenched Rolf's face. Small drops of water amassed on his scarcely scattered chin hair. This was how he liked the weather. No burning sun in the sky. Just the mighty elements of wind and water.

Rolf and his crew of ten - most of them still boys like him - were on a trading mission. The oldest, an experienced boatsman, was also a great swordmaster and Rolf's mentor. He was called Heimir the wise. For a long span of his life, he was a thrall of debt. He had already served Rolf's father's father. Although he was not a thrall anymore but a free man, he was still assisting the jarl's family.

Rolf's task was simple: Sell twenty barrels of tar, ten crates of whetstones, tons of timber planks, some polished amber and more natural treasure from the north - like cod liver oil. Then buy some swords, spears, slaves and some wine for the long-awaited return of the king and jarl Rognvald. It already had been months since they had left for the northern isles and Rolf expected them to return before the first snow.

They followed the coast of Danmark. Then they passed Sjølland and steered away from this island towards a fjord - reaching deep into the mainland. Rolf knew that area very well. Several times he had been there with his father.

As they were gliding from the open sea into the calm waters of the fjord the crew reefed the sail. "Rows out! Ready - pull!" Heimir's firm voice sounded over the deck. They had been rowing for a while against the west wind, when a dark shape appeared in the mist.

"What is this long structure in the water ahead?", Arni asked the others amazed. "This -my boy- is the great sea blockade", Heimir answered. "It's a part of the Danes fortified border rampart called Danewerk. The blockade narrows the waterway. That hinders any bigger fleet from crossing these waters fast."

At the end of the remarkably long fjord laid a bay. On its southern shoreline, a large wooden settlement stood out. It was called Haithabu. Entirely encircled by a strong wall with towers, this flourishing trading city of the Danes demonstrated power and

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wealth. Even the harbour was protected by armed guarding walls. Only two narrow openings for approaching ships lead inside. After a tiring rowing session they finally arrived at the docks of the town. It was already getting dark.

Haithabu

"Get some rest in an alehouse nearby", Rolf told his crew. "Now, I don't want you to get too drunk. Stay in groups and close to the harbour. I want men on watch at all times. Osmund and I are taking the first shift. By midnight Arni and Thorstein will relieve us until dawn." Rolf flicked a silver coin to Thorstein. "This is the toll for the harbour master, wish him good health." Over the dock, the crew disappeared between two large halls. Rolf observed the harbour scenery. A dozen other ships were moored to the docks. A soft murmur of voices echoed over the water. The happy laughter and music from the alehouse were drowned out by heavy steps and the ching of armour. "Must be the changing of the guards on the walls" mumbled Rolf. "What did you say?", asked Osmund. Rolf turned around to his mate. Osmund caught a rat between barrels full of dried stockfish. "You've had it now!", he smirked and nonchalantly threw it over board. "Keep your axe at hand Osmund! We might enjoy some unexpected company tonight."

Seagulls were feasting on fish in the bay of Haithabu when the horizon was turning red.

The night had been without incident. The goods were still safely stored on the karv. The crew slowly appeared sleepy-eyed at the pier. "Good morning", Rolf greeted the others, "our goal is to unload all the goods and get them to the market as fast as possible. The timber is to be stacked on the dock. They will build a new dock from those planks. So be careful!" A reasonable stack of planks was already placed on the landing stage, when a voice shouted: "What is this shit? Those planks would even cut a poor figure as firewood." The harbour master, a fat older man with bushy eyebrows made his way through the hustle and bustle of the harbour. "Ha, you must go blind old man, if you cannot see that your king would claim those quality planks immediately for himself.", answered Rolf. "I know a good plank when I see one. Straight and knotless." After a closer look the harbour master was very content with the timber and paid a good amount of silver to Rolf.

Just like that, the work was done and a stall was placed at the market. Now the crew noticed the other tradesmen. Some of them

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wore strange clothes and had brown skin and dark hair. Those foreign people were considerably shorter than them and spoke unheard tongues. They had come all the way from the far distant land of Cordobà in Hispania. Amber and slaves were of great interest to them. At the market stall of Rolfs crew they stopped and mustered the quality of the amber. Osmund took out the weighing scale and the demanded amount of silver as counter weight. The traders of Cordobà balanced the scale with fine silver coins. Both parties were pleased with this deal. Now Rolf had enough silver to buy the needed weapons. He ordered the crew: "Keep selling the goods, stay firm on our asking prices". He took Heimir with him to look for traders from the carolingian empire. They were fabled for forging the best swords of the continent.

Deadly swords

There were several frankish tradesmen full-throatedly advertising their weapons. Most of them offered spears. Only one had swords. "Where is the rest of the Franks?", Rolf whispered.

"I have no idea. The last time there were four times more of them."

They stepped towards the swords.

"Hail, lovers of blades", the trader greeted with a west frankish accent.

"I see you are interested in only the best quality of weapons."

"Indeed we are."

"Excellent. For you we have two very special items from the best swordsmith of the realm." He turned and pulled two leather scabbards out of an exotic trunk. Then handed one each to Heimir and Rolf. "Have a look, my tall friends!", the trader said with a subtle smile. "I'm sure, you will like those sublime blades." Rolf drew the sword and marveled at the masterpiece. On the blade was an inscription. It said "ULFBERHT". The reverse side was inlaid with entwined patterns. On the guard and pommel were decorations of pure gold. "We buy them", Heimir said in a heartbeat. "Trust me, Rolf, those swords certainly are the best on the battlefield". "How much?" Rolf asked.

The trader hesitated, then said, "10 ounces of silver or 1.25 ounce of gold".

"This is madness!" Rolf shouted out. "This is more than double the price than last time. What is the reason for that boldness?"

"Well look around my Lords. Why do you think there are only a few Franks at the market? Our king Carle outlawed the selling of weapons to norse people. It is punishable by death. So, in this

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circumstance I consider it a fair price. Do you want the swords now or not?

"We take both for 2 ounces of gold," Rolf said through his teeth.

"2.25 ounces and we call it a deal," the trader countered.

"Agreed", Rolf mumbled.

Heimir took out a small gold ingot of a fat pouch. Then he precisely hacked off a piece with his axe. It didn't exactly match the demanded weight, so they added a golden ring. Now the frankish trader had a broad smile on his face.

Strangers

"Good taste you strangers have," an unknown voice ringed from behind. Rolf had not become aware of the small crowd that had stopped by during their trade. All of a sudden he noticed a noble dressed man with his followership.

"Who are you?", Rolf spitefully uttered.

"I am Sigfred - the King of Danmark. Who are you outlander?", the noble man replied.

"This is Heimir - my loyal attendant. And my name is Rolf, son of Rognvald - the protector of the king of Norway."

"Lo and behold. A jarls son. I heard of your fathers heroic deeds. You have balls, coming here at your tender age and throwing around with lumps of silver and gold on the market. Our people are enemies of yours."

"I have my trusted friends with me. I don't have to fear anything", Rolf threw in carelessly.

"Well spoken, warrior. If you have some spare time, I would like to show you around my flourishing city."

"Why not. We just have to get four thralls and some wine from the market first though. And I want to buy a gift for my brother Ivar."

"Very well. Get the thralls and the gift then. I will give you some of my finest wine. My mother is Norwegian and she taught me how to be generous. When your done with your business meet me at the church."

"What in Odin's name is a church?", Rolf asked bewildered.

"It is the house of the christians. You can hear the bell from far away. Just follow the clang", Sigfred responded.

At the church

Finding some slaves at the market was not hard at all. Quickly some irish boys and girls were chosen after examining their health. Then Rolf got hold of a wonderful comb, made out of elk antler. He commissioned to carve in the name of Ivar in runes. While the well versed craftsman was working on the comb the group heard an unfamiliar tone.

"This must be the bell Sigfred had spoken of", Heimir noted. The sound came from the the distant end of the village next to the surrounding wall.

After packing all their things at the market and placing a guard at the ship, the group roamed through Haithabu. They followed a small water stream when they heard the clang of the bell again. This time, they were very close. The church was a plain wooden structure with a small tower. Rolf and his friends entered the building and found Sigfred and his men sitting on benches, whisperingly chatting.

"Ah. There you are, Sigfred", Rolf shouted.

"Psst. Turn your voice down!", a strange man with a large red cloak and a weird hat demanded, "This is the House of God."

"Which God?", Rolf boldly asked. "Just kidding. I know you mean Jesus."

Sigfred couldn't resist to chuckle while patting on Rolf's back.

"Haha. Let us go outside. Thank you for your hospitality brother Rimbart."

Outside, Rolf mustered the King in the sunlight. He was not very tall but unusually muscular. His arms were as thick as a pine stem. The hair appeared almost white from decades of bleaching and his shrewd eyes shined in a bright green. Rolf had never seen such eyes before.

"The gods have gifted you with a truly impressive appearance", he said wonderstruck.

"Thank you. Some call me snake eye."

"Now. Let me show you Haithabu and its greatest achievements."

"For a start; what place do christians have in this settlement?", Osmund asked adversely. "They dispute our gods."

"We have made peace with the east franks. A church in our town brings christian traders to our shores and adds frankish silver to our purses. Some christian blacksmiths even live here peacefully with our people."

Fortifications

"Have you already seen our mighty walls?", Sigfred went on - harshly changing the topic.

"Are you talking of the towns fortifications?", Rolf asked.

"Yes. But this is only the beginning. Just follow me."

The men walked out of the west gate. Fully loaded ox carts were slowly approaching them.

Suddenly Rolf saw what the king was talking about. There was a man made hill - running westward - that did not seem to end at the horizon. They climbed the hill. To Rolfs amazement laid in front of them a stone wall with wooden battlements on top stretching as far as the eye can see.

"We call it Danewerk. It's foundation was laid hundred of summers ago. That wall is protecting the land way between east and north sea where goods are being transported by ox and cart. It is the fastest way to Frisia and West Frankia", Sigfred proudly explained.

"Legendary King Guðfrøð - fathir of Horik I. - expanded the fortifications greatly sixty summers ago after raiding slavish territory. He destroyed Reric, this stinking pesthole of a slavish trading town - and forced the local traders to resettle in Haithabu. Karl the great of the Franks was furious to hear of this. For Reric was in his realm. Guðfrøð did not fear this dog of a king. Guðfrøð's own father Sigfrøð spat in the Karl's great face when he supported the saxon's chief Widukind's campaign against big old Karl. This was, of course, when a honest man could still trust a Saxon. Look there, our forefathers were standing firm on these walls - day and night. Armed to the teeth. Ready for any attack. Mmhh, good old times", Sigfred sighed. "Anyway. Let us return to the town. I'm as hungry as a horse."

"I could eat a horse too", Arni added.

The others bursted into broad laughter.

"Don't eat too much young man. Tonight is the harvestfest. You are all invited to sit amongst my kin."

They all humbly thanked the King for his generosity and parted ways.

Festivities

The market halls were crowded with thousands of people. The meat-scented air was filled with folklore and hearty laughs. Kins were sitting on deer skins on the floor - gathering around separate fireplaces. Sigfred waved his arm at Rolf and his journeymen. A lot of women were enmeshing the King with their soft voices.

"Come and sit." Sigfred invited them. "The boar is almost ready. Drink some mead until then." A female slave handed them horns filled with honey wine.

Sigfred raised his cup and shouted, "Hail to Frey who is blessing us, hail to our guests and hail to my brother Halfdan who is raiding in Bretland."

The night slowly carried on. Rolf was having the time of his life sitting and feasting among so many women and his friends. When his belly was filled and his tongue was becoming looser of all the drinks he joined the King. He was eager to hear more about Bretland and the King's brother. Sigfred - always proud of danish accomplishments - started telling the legendary tale.

"Seven summers ago my brothers went on a mission to revenge the murder of our great hero Ragnar Loðbrok. My oldest brother Halfdan led an army to Bretland - so numerous - the Anglo Saxons trembled like rats in their fortresses. First they subdued East Anglia. Then conquered Northumbria and established a danish territory called Jorvik, where Halfdan acts as King. They acquired riches beyond measure. Some saxons don't even have the balls to fight back and pay them large sums of silver to leave them alone. In fact this is so popular, they even invented a word for it. It's called Danegeld. Meanwhile I was staying behind to rule the danes. But I'm sick of being the house bitch. I want adventure and honor. Next summer I will start my one journey. It is a shame your people don't go viking any more. All you do is engaging in petty quarrels with your King's opponents. There is no glory in that. A real Norseman is a Viking and dies a Viking."

Sigfred paused, then stared Rolf directly in the eyes.

"You will always be welcome to join me. You know that, right?", he asked.

"Only the gods know if it comes to that", Rolf said. But in his heart he wanted it to become true.

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"Ah, I almost forgot to mention", the King carried on. "The wine you need will be delivered to the docks early morning. I personally made sure of that."

Rolf thanked him like a brother. Suddenly he was starting to feel tired. He wished Sigfred the best for his coming campaign and then started to look for his friends among the crowd. They needed to rest before the hard journey home the next day.