

When you die

Homecoming

Rolf and his crew sailed before the wind along the shores of Norway. The snowy white mountain peaks at the horizon were remembering every one of the coming dark and shivering cold time. Maybe his father, brothers, and uncle had already arrived at home from their endeavor on the northern isles.

Rolf felt like life was going according to plan. Still there was something missing. A strange lust for adventure and conquest was coming up for the first time. Perhaps it was the influence of Sigfred or maybe he was still jealous of his older brothers. Either way, he couldn't forget the stories about legendary Vikings like Ragnar, that the King of Danmark had told him.

"Get ready for rowing", Heimir's voice woke up Rolf's daydream. The Fjord leading to the halls of his ancestors was in arms reach. Finally, at the dock, they were not alone. Many ships laid docked alongside each other. Rognvald's gracious Drakkar was amongst them but uncle Sigurð's and others were missing. Rolf was thrilled about the long-anticipated reunion with his kin. "Unload all the goods carefully!", he commanded before he took both feet under his arms and ran to the hall, leaving his friends behind.

At the great hall, he found his mother and other wives of Rognvald working on new sails and darning clothes.

The chattering women went completely silent.

"What is it? Are you not pleased to see me coming back in one piece?", Rolf cheerfully said. His mother raised from her work and looked her son deep in the eyes.

"Mothir, speak! You are creeping me out."

"I do not know how to tell you", she shakily responded. "Your brother Ivar, he.. he did not return."

"Where is he then? Still on Orkneyjar?"

"He is in Valhall."

"What? H..how?", he stuttered in disbelief.

She hugged her son with a heavy heart then sent him to Rognvald.

Mixed tidings

At the clan owned fisher's hutt there was a small assembly of Rolfs kin. Rolfs brothers sat around on folksy benches next to the

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walls. Rognvald was walking up and down the room. It was silent. Only the creaking of Rognvald's nervous footsteps disturbed the peace. The air smelled strongly like fish, but not in an unpleasant manner. The Ronvaldssons had always been meeting at this place for extensive private conversations, for it was in a secure distance from the town. Rolf had even brought girls there in the middle of the night quite some time. But now was not such a fun time. He felt a heavy burden on his heart and his head was full of questions.

"Perfect moment to attend our gathering", Rognvald said. "We have been awaiting your return for days."

"Fathir where is Ivar and uncle Sigurð?", Rolf stammered. "I cannot believe what mothir just told me. Is he really..?"

"Easy son. One thing after another. We are baffled enough. No need for stirring up more drama than needed. Let me explain. But I will make it short. We have many other things to speak about."

The jarl took a deep breath.

"We fought many bloody battles on the northern isles. First we bashed all our enemies on Shetland. Then cleared Orkneyjar of those viking whackers who had been raiding Norway's coasts for years. Our bloody encounters eventually led us to the Hebrides and south to the isles as far as the Isle of Man. But the vikings there had flown over to the kingdom of Dál Riata, some even to the land of the pict's. Dál Riata is a mystical place where we discovered many fjords. Dense fog is covering the extensive ridges of hills all fall around. The people there are christian, or so they say.

One day we were camping at the foot of a mountain, protected by a deep forest. At night, we were attacked by Dál Riatan warriors. They caught us by surprise. But we are experienced fighters and we slaughtered them all. Then we tended our wounds. Only then I noticed that Ivar was missing. Hallad finally found him on the edge of our tents. Ivar laid on fern. His axe still clasped. A knife had been rammed deep in his chest. The dirt around him was full of blood and dead enemies."-- "The time I reached him. He was still breathing. I took his cold hands and praised his heroic deeds. Ivar smiled at me when he took his last flat breath."

Rognvald halted and looked Rolf in the eyes. Rolf had never seen them bleary before. A good piece of his vitality seemed to fade away. He pulled himself together then carried on.

"We buried him properly. He died a warrior's death. I'm sure he is feasting in Odin's hall as we speak. His place of death is marked by stones in the form of a drakkar. Never forget this my sons: Cattle die, friends die, and the same with you; but I know of something that never dies and that's a dead person's deeds."

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Rolf was deeply shocked. Hrollaug saw his pain and grabbed him with both hands by the shoulders. "You still have us, young brother. We will always be there for you."

Life must go on

"I need some fresh air", Rolf said after a long pause. He stepped outside on the pier; sat down and let his legs dangle. Hallad - the oldest of the brothers - placed himself next to him. Although there was a piercing wind driving above the water surface; Rolf was not cold. His heart was racing like never before.

"What about Sigurð and his sons?", Rolf finally expressed after a long time of heavy silence. "Are they in Valhall as well? I did not see their ship amongst ours."

Rognvald began explaining; "After the death of your beloved brother; King Harald gifted me the lands of Orkneyjar and Shetland for compensation. He wanted to establish a jarldom for the folk living there. So enemy vikings would never again find shelter on those islands. Since I am already possessing Møre and Raumsdal; I set my brother as Jarl over the island people. His kin and some more men stayed behind to serve and protect. Now we are getting to the reason of today's gathering. We were discussing the next summer. We have enough riches for winters to come. The King paid us plentiful for our services. Therefore we do not need to go raiding over to the Baltic. Harald has asked us for yet another summer helping out his cause. I could not promise him anything. We also have to protect our folk in Norway. The enemy could be anywhere. I do not trust many people. Not even in our halls." The sun had already sunken. It was pitch black. Hallad stood up and fetched a torch from inside.

"Look the Valkyries are dancing on the sky", Thorir yelled. The youngest of the brothers was normally not a boy of many words. Mother even called him "The Silent". However it was truly a spectacle high above their heads. Red dancing flames covered the firmament. The group was stunned for a good moment.

"That means it's about time for you to go to bed", Rognvald demanded while ruffling Thorir's hair. "Einarr, please accompany him back to the hall. We will follow shortly after. Then we drink some of that wine that Rolf hopefully brought from Haithabu..?"

Rolf couldn't help but to grin. He was proud to have such a respectful but also fun father, who tried to cheer him up.

"Now let us conclude the plan for next season. I need to stay here and govern. Einarr and Thorir will support me, they have still

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much to learn. The others are free to choose whether to aid Harald or my brother, Jarl Sigurð."

"I will join the King's hird", Hrollaug said without further thought.

"Very well. That means Hallad and I will aid Sigurð then", Rolf contributed. "And I will bring my friends and Heimir with us." Everybody agreed and they headed back to town.

A barrel of fine frankish wine was already prepared. Rolf's mother Ragnhild and the other wives of Rognvald had prepared a small meal. Some roasted reindeer meat, fresh fish and some leftover vegetable stew. It smelled delightful. Heimir, Arni and Thorstein joined the group. The transport ship had already been unloaded. Rolf's sister Hilda and some half sisters were also present. They toasted to Odin - the giver of life. Although they were sad to have lost a son and brother; they were deeply grateful to be still alive. Life would go on.

Rolf could not find piece that night. He took out the comb he had bought as a gift and pressed it against his chest. "Dál Riata", he mumbled repeatedly. He would never forget. Finally his eyelids were becoming heavy.

The statement

Early in the morning Rolf jumped out of his bed. He wanted to look for Heimir. It was about time for another sword lesson. This old man was a cunning fighter. Many life saving lessons Rolf had learned from him already. But he felt a fire inside him. An urge to train harder than ever before. The early death of Ivar frightened him heavily. But he wanted to conquer the world and then pay those Gaels in Dál Riata a visit. Just to see how much blood the land there can soak up before it turns into a swamp. Rognvald stopped him at the doors. "Where are you going?"

"Going to the swordmaster."

"First you state your trading accounts to me", his father demanded. "How much silver did you get and what of the needed goods were you able to acquire?"

They both went to the storage chambers at the back of the great hall.

Rognvald directly cut to the chase, "So, how much did we earn?"

"We made even. Those two swords were as expensive as all the other weapons together. But you really have to see them. I have never faced such mighty blades before."

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Rolf showed his father the ULFBERHT swords. Rognvald was content with the quality. After all; they really were the best swords of the known world.

"Well thought through, Rolf", he said with a proud face. "Could you sell all the goods we had?"

Rolf nodded. "All of them. Nothing left. We were fortunate. Otherwise we could not have bought the ULFBERHTS. Fathir why don't we go viking anymore like Olaf the White or Ragnar Lodbrok?"

"Ha. Who put you that bug in your ear? This Lodbrok is most certainly a myth. The Danes sell that tale to their children in order to get them to become plunderers and murderers."

"But I believe Sigfred. He is an upright man."

"I did not say he did not exist. There is just no evidence to believe that such a figure ever walked on midgard."

"To me it sounded truthful. I want to become a viking", Rolf stubbornly said.

"Are you sure? I know this Sigfred back from my younger days. He and his brothers know nothing else but the lust for blood. I heard, they summoned a large army to invade Bretland. This is madness. In the past we were regularly going on viking. But we just looted what we needed and always came back to the lands of our forefathers. This is where we belong."

"I believe we belong where ever we want to. Have you not seen the riches in Haithabu? In comparison our folk are peasants."

"Hold your tongue now, boy! Or I cut it loose. We have more than we ever could have dreamed of. King Harald made me Jarl. You should be thankful!"

"I am thankful. But I want to see the world and make a name for myself. Not be servant for somebody else my entire life."

Rognvald started to chuckle. "Haha. You are a just a dreamer. Have you ever been in a real fight or seen your brothers die next to you. I tell you now. You must not die before you have given life to multiple sons and daughters and protected them until their old enough. This is our highest duty."

Frustrated Rolf shook his head and walked away.

Winter

In the following moons Rolf spent much time with Heimir and his practice sword. His friends were also drilled by the old man. On some days they came home cluttered with bruises. Ragnhild and Rolfs sisters always tended the injuries. They also had to patch his clothes. The winter was long, cold and dark. The Rognvaldssons often gathered around the fire pit in the hall for feasting and

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playing games. It was a large household. All of them lived at the great hall; Hallad with his wife and an infant son, Rolfs many siblings and half siblings and some slaves to serve them. Hunting in the cold season was very risky. But the brothers loved it. One day they tracked elk marks through a vast forest when the hunters were attacked by a bear. Einar nearly got killed. But they were able to vanquish the beast. Einar was lucky with his wounds. And the hall was content about the variation in nourishment. Rolf despised winter and was glad when it was finally getting warmer again.

Orkneyjar

Preparations for the following journey got along smoothly. On the next full moon it was time to say goodbye. They numbered fifty men. Some of the wives of the warriors came along. Hallad even took his whole family with him. Jarl Rognvald held a long speech about the duties to Norway and its King and he demanded for everybody to return every winter. The Jarl bestowed Rolf a trunk and said. "I send my brother good luck and my remorse for my absence. Please give him this gift as a symbol of loyalty. In it is one of the ULFBERHT swords."

Rolf promised to deliver the sword. Then the travelers said goodbye to their loved ones. While the dragon ship slowly left the harbour Rognvald's numerous wives and daughters were waving at the pier until they disappeared on the horizon.

After a few days on the ocean they reached some strip of land. Rolf was told it was Shetland. They followed those islands to the south to another group that the northmen called Orkneyjar. Rolf was amazed by the diversity of the landscape. Some isles were flat and low, others had dark sharp cliffs. There was something even more strange. Not one tree was to be seen on any of the islands. Heimir steered towards a bay with stone houses on the shore. Many sheep were freely running around the buildings. A big house on a slight elevation seemed to be the hall of the Jarl. The sailors were welcomed; not by warriors but by playing children. The brothers went straight to the great hall.

An old crippled man was sitting on a stone bench in front of the building.

Hallad greeted the man, "Blessed be you by Thor - the defender of Midgard. Where can we find Jarl Sigurð and his sons?"

"They are gone", the man replied.

"What did you say?", Hallad asked unbelieving.

"Gone. They are all gone."