

Black Strangers

All gone

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."

"Speak out wise man. Where did they go? In the name of King Harald, answer me."

All the sudden a loud female voice interrupted the investigation.

"Leave my móðurfaðir's faðir alone. He is too weak to talk to you."

Hallad and Rolf turned around in surprise.

A tall girl at the age of Rolf stood straddle-legged on the doorsteps of the hall. Her hands confidently on her hips. Rolf was struck by her powerful expression and amazed of her courage to protect her great-grandfather.

"Who are you, girl?", Rolf asked.

"I am Brana Kaðlinsdottir. State your business on our islands!"

"We are looking for our fathir's brother Sigurð. Is he here? The village looks empty", Hallad responded.

"Can you prove, that Sigurð is your kin?", Brana inquired. Hallad smiled viciously: "If we lied, you would be passed around my men and long before we would be done with you, you're crippled relative there, would swing gently in the breeze, a rope lovingly tied around his neck. Just take this as proof." Brana raised an eyebrow in disgust, but with a voice as sweet as honey she replied: "You're as pleasant as an arrow stuck through throat and neck." Rolf laughed out loud. "Thank you for introducing us Hallad. My name is Rolf. Please take my word: Sigurð is our Uncle. I'm sure, now we have set all our differences aside, you would like to accompany us to the man in charge here". "Woman, but yes I will inform her of your arrival. Stay here until my return". Brana turned around and disappeared in the hall.

"Smooth, brother. Very smooth" Rolf remarked. "Relax, it was just a joke."

Warm Welcome

Hallad and Rolf sat quietly at a large table. Rolf's eyes vividly followed Brana, as she was serving food around the room. Hallad starred into nothingness, his forehead deeply wrinkled. "You called for me?", Heimir suddenly interrupted the two brothers. "Ah yes, old friend, we need your advice. Please sit with us for a while" Rolf invited him. Heimir read Hallad's expression, snuffed, grabbed a drinking horn from the table and sat himself. "What happened?" He asked calmly. "Not much." Hallad answered, his mind wandering to other matters. "We have to make a decision. We have met Lady Grelaud, Sigurð's wife."

"How does she look?"

"That's not what we need your advice for", Hallad continued. "It is the Jarl. He and his men are gone. They went over the waters to Pictland. They want to conquer those Picts or Scots or how ever they call themselves. Lady Grelaud told us they wanted to meet with a certain sea king called Thorstein the Red."

"I have never heard of him", Heimir was pondering.

"Me neither. However, they say this warrior is to be an ally of Norway."

"All of this sounds quite interesting to me. But now tell me the reason for your nervousness!"

"You have seen so many summers, but still did not learn to be patient, old man. Jarl Sigurð was supposed to be back long before our arrival. It seems to us that something is foul. I'm sure he would have sent a messenger if he could have."

Heimir did not think for long. "You have seen so few summers and are bursting with strength, young man. So why are you still sitting around like stray dogs? We have to build a search party. Let us venture to those lands by dawn tomorrow."

"He is right!", Rolf shouted. "Let us prepare our ships."

Brana had been listening the whole time. She confidently raised her voice. "Take me with you. You will need someone to prepare your meals."

"Don't even think about it. No girl is to join this dangerous mission. Stay home with your cripple and tend his curved back", Hallad replied.

"That cripple is old enough to watch after himself", she said with a sarcastic undertone.

Heimir cleared his throat and ran a hand through his long beard.

"You summoned me for giving you advice. Let me say this. Why not

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take this girl on our journey? My wrinkled tongue could use some proper food. I'm sick of meals prepared by boys."

The others laughed.

Hallad responded with a broad grin, "It is decided then. Get some rest. But first we pack our things."

Night Attack

Rolf woke up in a pitch-black room. He heard loud snoring and was feeling the urge to piss, he got up. His head was hurting and his stomach felt ill. He staggered over his companions, who lied all around the floor. Some grunted as he stepped on limbs. He reached the heavy ox skin at the door and struggled to find a way through it. "By Loki and all the damned creatures in Niflheim" he cursed, as he grew increasingly impatient. A sharp gust of cold wind took his breath, when he passed through and finally stepped outside. He looked around as if he had seen this place for the very first time. Between hiccups, he tried to orient himself. Slowly it came back to him.

Last night, after the provisions had been restocked, under the strict orders by Brana, they had started to exuberantly drink and feast. Rolf smiled when he thought about the night. He had sung, fought and drunk like a real man does. He swayed back and forth while urinating. "Am I still that drunk, or does that sound like some men rowing.", he belched, then narrowed his eyes, stared intensely towards the dark grey sea. The dawn was coming up slowly. Faraway in the mist he suddenly noticed the blurred outlines of two dragon ships. Rolf's mood sank immediately. There would be no adventure, no event to prove himself if Jarl Sigurð returned now. He picked up a stone and drunkenly threw it. His gaze followed the trajectory of the flat stone leaping over the water. "Allfather" he mumbled, astonished he looked at the ships, which were now mere 400 steps away. There were no dragon heads at the bow but wide elk antlers. These ships were not of Jarl Sigurð. It took Rolf a few heartbeat's time to realize the grave significance of that fact. He staggered backward, then ran to their quarters, all the while shaking his head, part in disbelief part to wake up his numb senses. It was not easy to get the others on their feet. So he lighted a torch on the embers in the firepit, then he started to scream. "Get Up, get... - We are under attack. We are under attack."

The others jumped up with widened eyes while grabbing instinctively their daggers and axes.

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"Psst!", Hallad said. "Calm down brother, calm down! What happened?"

"I was down by the sea, taking a piss when I noticed two ships closing in fast", Rolf explained himself. Hallad carefully peeked through the ox skin "Couldn't it just be Sigurð?"

"No way, those Drakkars are unknown to me". Angry comments were muttered by the whole lot.

"Is that so?", Hallad's face turned grim, "Then let us prepare a little surprise for them. Arni, you run to our ships. Inform the night watch to stay put, you must hide as well as you can on the ships. When we attack, board the enemy's ships. Go now. Rolf: Run from hut to hut. Get everyone up quietly. Women and children to the great hall. Men to the stables. Meet us there as well, go. Heimir, take three men, go to the hall, order the women to shout loudly. Make happy noises yourselves as if you were still feasting. When they attack, you must hold the entrance at all costs. The rest, follow me to the stables."

Down at the shore, the sinister noise of grunting planks sounded, followed by heavy steps and the chink of armor.

Rolf saw Brana for a quick moment when he woke up her household. Bravely she supported her great-grandfather walking. Their eyes briefly met, then she disappeared in the hall. He himself arrived at the stables just before a large group of warriors made their way towards the great hall, where for a while now the sound of a feast had arisen. Rolf crouched behind a solid, wooden fence with three other men. He asked himself whether Hallad and his warriors were already positioned inside the stable. Cautiously he dared to peek over the fence. The enemy was now almost at the great hall's entrance. Rolf estimated their count to be sixtyfive. "This would leave our odds two to one", he thought. "May Thor be with us". He flexed his arm muscles to prevent getting cramps. While the others checked their weapons, Rolf peaked again. The intruders stood close to each other, scrambling to get inside the great hall.

Battle Rage

Abruptly, loud screams penetrated the night, when Heimir struck down the first intruder in the Hall's doorway. The stable doors banged open, and in front of a column Hallad sprinted straight towards the hall. In one motion Rolf was over the fence. Nobody shouted, just the sound of fast moving steps warned the invaders. A few men in the back ranks turned around in disbelief. Hastily, they tried to form an improvised shieldwall. It was too late. While Heimir cut down the enemies in the narrow doorway of the

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hall, with the efficiency of a butcher the night before Yule, Hallads formation - twelve ranks deep and two wide, formed like a spear with Hallad at its tip and crashed into the unaware foe. A jerk went through the column, as it slowed down on impact. Rolf turned to his right. Made a few quick steps and felt the men in his back following. They now formed a line. Hacking, stabbing and pushing they pressed on. Right in front of Rolf, an abnormal big man winded himself to get some room. But the pressure from all sides made it impossible. So he resorted to headbutts. With his helmet, he struck down his own man to his right. The clamor all around Rolf rose to a deafening level. He starred his opponent in the face and a shiver ran down his spine. Astonished, he observed the rich engraved helmet. From behind the faceguard, dark eyes flashed wickedly. Rolf lifted his shield to protect himself from the heavy sword blow that followed instantly. The sword scraped across his shield and with the sound of an axe chopping wood, hacked into the unprotected face of Rolf's neighbor Thorstein. Blood splattered all over as Thorstein sagged on his knees. Rolf's heart contracted. He watched his friend fall. Inadvertently, his thoughts wandered to his dead brother Ivar. "How would it be to join him in Valhall?" His opponent had just lost his blade with the last deadly strike. Quickly the giant drew his seax - a large deadly knife meant to effortlessly hack off heads. With widened eyes, Rolf was still standing in shock. The attack aimed at Rolf's unprotected body, for Rolf had lowered his shield in horror. Intuitively he raised the sword arm, but it was too late. The rusty iron blade of the seax cut his arm. Swiftly leaping backward he lost his temper. His blood started to boil. Ungodly enraged he stabbed the giant right in the face. The pointy dagger found an eyehole and sunk deep into the head. He let it stick, kicked away the dying man's knee. Picked up Thorstein's axe, and with wild screams chopped his way through the masses of sweaty men. He started to slip on puddles of blood on the ground. Nevertheless, he hacked on, until the shaft of his axe broke. So, he carried on to bash in pain wrenched faces with his shield in both hands. He only came to his senses when he reached the great hall's wall and the enemies were so decimated, he was surrounded only by familiar warriors. He let go of his shield, that he apparently last had used to sever an intruders jaw. Rolf examined the body littered ground. The smell of entrails and excrements made him vomit. He wiped his face and tried to find Hallad. His brother was nowhere to be found. On his search he passed his friend Thorstein. The sword still stuck firm in his face, he had gripped the hilt with both his hands. Either in an attempt to pull out the blade or to make sure to be welcomed to Valhall. "Greet Ivar from me, my

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friend. Tell him I will revenge his honor before I'll join him.", Rolf sighed. He collected his dagger from the giant's eyehole. Only now he noticed the oddly brown skin color of the strange man. He pulled off the helmet. Rolf caught his breath. A dark face, adorned by a splendid black mustache, black almond eyes and bushy eyebrows stared hateful at him. "Don't worry, I will grow into the size of your helmet and chainmail very soon." he said mockingly to the dead stranger.

"Rolf, how are you?" Heimir's familiar voice guided Rolf back to full awareness. He glimpsed down to his bleeding arm. The seax of the giant had struck him badly. "I'm fine, how are you doing? Where is Hallad?". Rolf examined Heimir.

"Well, I've got some scratches, but I'm still alive. Hallad is hunting down the rest of the fleeing cowards with some of his men, they can't get far if..."

Heimir was interrupted by the shouts of young Arni.

"Rolf, Rolf we did it! We captured one ship, the other tried to get away, but we were able to set it on fire. It's still burning, if you want to come and watch."

"Thank you, but I'm needed here. Go back, tell the others to stay alert. There might still be some of those black strangers roaming around." Rolf replied.

Cleaning Up

It took a day's effort of many villagers and Rolf's companions to collect all the valuables the dead were carrying, to bury the bodies and finally clean all the equipment. Hallad was able to hunt down five fugitives so far, but still continued the search well into the night. Rolf spoke a few words with him when he returned with his men to the village to bring a prisoner. But Hallad was suffering a bad case of hunting fever. He wasn't hearing of their further strategy. So Rolf decided on himself to commission a long iron chain from the village's blacksmith. In a distance of one step to each other, there were to be attached twenty iron collars. Rolf paid in hacksilver and demanded the chain to be finished early next morning. "We're probably not going to use every single collar, but you never know", he later told Osmund. In a shed, they were watching the prisoners together. "You know if the village was protected by strong walls like Haithabu has -em, those stinking shits could not have surprised us a bit", commented Osmund, while he used the end of his spear to vaguely poke one of the prisoners. All of them had their hands tied behind

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their back. They were kneeling and facing towards the walls, which made it very easy to control them. "Yes indeed" Rolf answered, "Aren't you curious where they came from and who they are?". Osmund furrowed his brow: "I wouldn't worry. You know Hallad better than I do. He will pull their scalps back over their ears one by one. They will chirp like sparrows on a warm summer morning. After that we will know more about their life than about our own."

Rolf chuckled. He always enjoyed Osmund's company. The total lack of concern, which that young man displayed, spread contagiously everywhere he went. "You're right, I should relax. Tomorrow we are going to get heaps of answers". Rolf leaned back in his chair, moved his head from side to side to release some tension in his neck. He listened to the nightwatch patrolling through the village down to the pier, as he glanced around the room. One of the prisoners turned his head to the side and stared with his black eyes directly at Rolf. His dark face was cut and swollen, but still his teeth shone white when he whispered almost inaudibly: "Hel- We come from Hel"