

## Of Scouts and Borgs

### Caith

Steaming boar was giving off a truly great smell. Rolf imagined it to be like that in Valhall. Over fifty men were sitting around the fire pit. Hallad, Heimir, and Rolf's friends were among them. The others were Picts. Their necks were adorned with gold necklaces and their defined arms were covered in strange patterns of blue color.

The same morning the Northmen had crossed the sea to the south, they entered the mouth of a river called Thorsà which means Thor's river. The people of Orkneyinga had seen many powerful storms arising in these lands and attributed them to the lord of thunder. Jarl Sigurd's wife Grelaud had described Hallad and Rolf the path to the place she believed her husband had to be. They only had to follow the river upstream until it split in two, then lookout for a near forest. Under those trees, the Jarl wanted to meet this mysterious man, Thorstein the Red. But first, they had to please the clan that lived in those lands. They were called the people of Caith. Their main settlement was conveniently placed next to the mouth of the river Thorsá. The village was encircled with a plain earth wall and wooden palisades. Several round houses built out of flat stones were placed around a communal center. Rolf did not know much about the Picts. Their culture ones had spanned to Orkney and Shetland. Remains of magnificent tall towers and engraved standing stones were still around. Although the Caith were peaceful towards the Norse they wanted some form of payment to enter their territory. Rolf and his friends had already prepared for this event. They had picked some of the best weapons in their possession. Luckily they could add some of the intruders' gear from days before. Those bastards had worn fine chain mails and well protective helmets.

The offering was being put on display in front of the Picts. The eldest was pleased by the extensive gifts: "You are a generous man Hallad. All generous men are welcome in our lands. Please accept this meal and our goodwill in return", spoke a tiny old man. He had introduced himself as Uurad, eldest of the people of Caith. His eyes looked greedily onto the displayed gifts. His wrinkled hands shook almost imperceptibly. It looked like he had trouble containing himself from grabbing the gifts. Hallad cleared his throat: "Thank you Uurad, I praise your.. uh.. wisdom, but we had hoped our gifts will gain us more than just your goodwill. As I

## HOUSE OF NORMANDY

already explained the matter, we are in need of two local scouts.". Uurad thought about his answer for a moment: "Yes, I could provide you with scouts. The two even speak your language very well. But sadly they are not free men. They are- how do you say- thralls. Yes, they are thralls." Uurad leaned forward and lowered his voice, "and thralls do cost silver." Uurad leaned back again with a smug expression on his face. He acted as the negotiation had ended, grabbed a wooden bowl and started to eat. Hallad pinched his own nose bridge. "I will empty my whole purse on the ground and when this greedy rat bends forward to pick up the silver I will split his skull with my ax." He mumbled angrily. "You will do none of these things", Rolf answered calmly. "If we ever want to find Jarl Sigurd, we better cooperate with 'this greedy rat'. He means no harm, just wants to make the best profit."

"I agree", approved Heimir. "Without these scouts, we will spend the rest of our days straying the vast mountain ranges and valleys of this land. We need them, Hallad.". "Alright", Hallad ate a few mouthful of boar. Then he raised his voice again: "Wise Uurad, how much silver can compensate the loss of two men?"

Uurad started to smile and spread his arms in a kind gesture. "My Friend, such profound questions interest me most of all."

## Shelter

Later that day two Drakkars rowed upstream. Heavy rainfall flooded the river. The fast flowing water made advancing even more demanding. Osmund and Arni were scooping rainwater out of the ship's hull. Rolf leaned his weight into the rudder at the stern. He listened intensely to Heimir's indistinct instructions, which penetrated the curtain of rain. Heimir stood on the front deck shouting at the top of his lungs.

"Steer towards the center of the river! Otherwise, we are going to crash into those big rocks ahead."

Rolf rejoiced over steering his own boat. It was the vessel they captured from the black strangers. Crossing the sea to Caith it had proven to be a lightning-fast longship. It was a fairly new build and Rolf knew deep within, that this ship marked the beginning of his career as a Viking. He wanted to be a dreaded Sea-King. The large elk antlers on top of the ship's figurehead will be famous. Lovingly he called it Elgur, the elk. His father Rognvald and Heimir had taught him everything about skipping and Rolf felt in charge. Brana took a short glimpse at him while

## HOUSE OF NORMANDY

filling a bucket with brown water. Immediately, he felt pleasant energy rising in his body.

The rain did not stop and then whole trees came down the river like giant arrows. Hallad on his longship ahead ordered to leave the Thorsá and find shelter nearby. With combined strength, the men heaved the ships on land.

"There", Arni shouted "an old Pictish stone tower".

Rolf had already noticed similar ancient towers on the Orkneys but most of them were mere ruins. This one next to the river seemed still intact. No smoke or other sign of life was to be seen.

Rain-drenched the group entered the Borg. That's how they called such a roundhouse. Hallad was first to step through the thick walls. His hand firmly on his side. Ready to draw his seax. Nobody was to be seen inside. With a sudden screech, some dark flying creatures left the building.

"Ugh.. little bastards scared me to hel", Arni exclaimed.

At first, it was pitch black but Heimir accomplished to light a torch. They marveled at the sight. The Borg was a multi-story building. The floors were made of wooden planks that were still mostly intact. Over a stairway between the outer double walls, the higher stories could be reached. The first floor appeared to be a room for cooking and gathering. Brana instantly started to prepare ingredients for a warm meal. Rolf looked at her longingly. She smiled: "Would you like to help me?". Like an arrow leaving the string Osmund, who stood next to Rolf, answered: "Anytime, my dear", he made a step forward but was yanked backward by Rolf's firm grip on his tunic. "Nah, nah. I'm sure she meant me, Osmund". "You may both help me, we have a lot of hungry mouths to feed", Brana interrupted the two young men before they could raise a quarrel. Heimir shook his head and went after Hallad to explore the rest of the Borg. "Rutting like elk, Elgur indeed."

The flame of the fire was fanned in no time. Then the two soaked friends helped Brana cooking grain and some fish. While preparing Rolf intentionally touched Branas hands a few times. He was already lost for her.

After a lush meal and warming by the fire pit, the group looked for places to sleep. There were a lot of separated rooms in the hollow walls, perfect for resting. Amongst so many men Rolf found it hard to find sleep, he still heard the battle cries from nights before. After a while of unsuccessfully finding a comfortable position he got up and headed upstairs to the roof.

The wooden roof had some big holes where Rolf could see patches of dark sky and falling rain drops. He observed the spectacle for a while and did not become aware of the shadow that sneaked up from

## HOUSE OF NORMANDY

behind. Suddenly a warm hand touched his arm. He almost shouted out loudly. "Who dares to..?" He whispered in the dark.

"It's me", Brana's voice came back.

"Damn, I almost wet myself."

"Me too", she said with a broad grin.

"Alright, you get right to it." He smiled and touched her arm as well, while their eyes met in a lovestruck gaze.

They almost tripped over a beam from the moldering roofing. They bursted into a short laughter. Then their eyes met again while their faces slowly came closer. Finally Rolf pressed his lips on hers. Brana returned the kiss full heartedly. With a tight grip he embraced her waist. Then his hands smoothly wandered down.

## Reunion

The weather had cleared overnight. Hallad was standing right outside the borg when Rolf joined him. "Good morning little brother, did you sleep well?", asked Hallad with a smirk. "Shut Up, that is none of your business to know", answered Rolf.

"Maybe not, but it is my business to get us going. See to it that your crew is aboard ship fast." Rolf looked at his ship Elgur. There it laid in the mud, fierce and horridly beautiful. He laid a hand on Hallad's shoulder. "I'm a happy man, Hallad. If only Ivar could see us now." A brief expression of sadness flashed over Hallad's face. "I miss him too", he admitted. Right at this moment, a Drakkar rowed around the riverbend 200 steps further upstream. Shouts became audible. Then another ship appeared. Loud sounds of a horn called. Then two more appeared. "Sigurd!" shouted Hallad as soon as he recognized the white planks of Jarl Sigurd's Drakkar. "By all the gods, do you see that too, or am I going a bit fuzzy between the ears?" Osmund stumbled through the doorway. With widened eyes, he watched ship after ship appear. Rolf already counted 28 ships and there were still rowing more downriver.

"Truly a magnificent sight, isn't it? It's like watching a forest grow right out of the water" Hallad commented, "Let's greet our uncle appropriately before he mistakes us for some rotting bastard sons of whores. If they let off one volley of arrows you'll get fuzzy between your ears alright." Hallad marched resolutely down to the river bed. He was waving both arms, then he shouted again "Sigurd!". There at the steering oar of his mighty drakkar he stood. Straddlegged he lifted his thick muscular right arm to greet. "Hallad, get your two ships on the river and follow us. We won't rest until dusk, then we talk.". The sight of this large army and their uncle leading them, lifted Rolf's and Hallad's

## HOUSE OF NORMANDY

spirit. They started to scream out their unarticulated joy. The ship's crew didn't wait long with their answer. They joined in a thundering roar. A tingle ran down Rolf's spine. He knew, now he belonged to something great. His life would change forever. Before he turned away to summon his crew, he caught a glimpse of a lean man on the drakkar right behind Sigurd's. Rolf stopped dead in his tracks to gaze at this appearance of a man. His long red hair was tied with golden rings on top of his head, then fell back down passing his shoulders. His countless golden arm rings reflected the rising morning sun. His friendly face exuded calm superiority. He must have been around thirty years old, Rolf estimated. "Move man, we have some work to do until we're sailing right after this lovely parade", Hallad prompted.

### Meeting spot

Along the shores their fleet sailed. By dusk they stopped in a sheltered bay. Jarl Sigurd was standing on the shore and barked loud orders to every skipper arriving. They beached the ships in a surprisingly ordered manner. With great effort, Rolf and his crew placed Elgur between two other drakkars in a line. The line formed one side of a rectangle shaped barricade. Already a large amount of warriors were wrapped up in pitching their tents, unloading goods from the ships and making fire. Rolf involved himself working until an envoy invited Hallad and him to join Sigurd. The envoy led them across the encampment to a large tent. Jarl Sigurd was embraced them then thundered: "Welcome Hallad, Rolf. This is Thorstein Olafsson." , while pointing to a man sitting comfortably on a stool. Rolf recognized him instantly as the wealthy man he saw this morning on one of the drakkars. "I welcome you as well, the kin of my allies shall be my allies. Besides, I know of your father Rognvald. You surely inherited his courage and loyalty." Rolf bowed his head. From the corner of his eye he saw Hallad gesturing the same respectful nod. "Please, sit and drink with us my friends." Thorstein's voice sounded smooth and sophisticated. He spoke with an accent, Rolf had never heard before. Jarl Sigurd, Hallad and Rolf sat themselves at the richly laid table. "It was a surprise finding you two so far away from your home." Sigurd commented. "Please eat, drink and then tell, how we came to find us in your company." he invited. "Long story short, father wanted us to support you in your reign in Orkneyinga. You were not there. So we came to find you.", "-and we encountered some 65 intruders on Orkneyinga. They were dark

## HOUSE OF NORMANDY

skinned and very concealed." Rolf complemented Hallad's remarks. "Black Strangers, yes they are a plague.", answered Thorstein. "My father, Olaf Guthfrithsson, former King of Dublin and ruler over Vestfold, all honour to his name, tried to negotiate a lasting peace with them. But they broke their agreement every single time. It might be because they are descendants from nothing but dogs. Tomorrow morning Jarl Sigurd will send two ship's crew back to Orkneyinga." Sigurd nodded agreeingly and sent his envoy away with a quick hand signal. Thorstein continued: "We cannot afford to lose Orkneyingar, this would not subserve our mutual plan. We will engage in quite a difficult undertaking, in the next couple of days. Jarl Sigurd and I are going to get rid of our biggest rival Causantin. One wouldn't think a man with such a ridiculous name could be such a fierce enemy. Soon we will crush him once and for all. And you Rolf made it all possible." Rolf couldn't believe what he just heard: "Me? What did I do?" "You made a friend, that is by birth very influential. He is the brother of the King of Jorvik, and himself the King of Danmark." "Sigfred", the truth dawned slowly upon Rolf. "Yes, Sigfred. Apparently, you made quite the impression on him. He now regards your whole family, including your uncle as his- friendly acquaintances- for a lack of a better word. His goodwill must have infected his brother Halfdan Ragnarsson. Although Halfdan and I are bitter enemies, he has offered me a very lucrative cooperation agreement. You must know, ever since Halfdan's brother Imar was killed when King of Dublin, he himself is claiming the crown. But there is only one true heir to the throne. You my friends, are right now hearing him speak." Thorstein paused his speech and looked for a moment at every dinner guest. Rolf felt as if Thorstein challenged anybody to speak up and defy his claims. Nobody said a word. "As matters stand. Halfdan campaigns against Causantin. They are stuck in a standoff. While Halfdan camps south of the river Forth, Causantin fortified its northern shore. Neither side will risk the river crossing. Your uncle and I now get the formidable chance to tip the scale to our liking.". Thorstein allowed Sigurd to speak: "And our liking is to grind Causantin to powder. We will enslave his people, steal his treasures, oppress his noblemen. We will squeeze Dal Riata until the last piece of silver changed into our hands." Rolf listened attentively. "Dal Riata?" "Dal Riatans, Rolf. Causantin is their King. For Hallad and you it will mean revenging Ivar.", said Sigurd. Thorstein lifted his cup. "Skål!". "Skål" they answered.

## Landfall

On the second day on sea, Sigurd proclaimed to see the river that lead to Causantins headquarters. He knew this area well from earlier trading expeditions to Jorvik. His long ship steered towards the river Tay. Causantin's encampment was to the south of the settlement Perth. There was no royal enemy fleet or someone else who dared to stop the viking ships in their track. On the north bank near Perth they made landfall.

As previously agreed upon, they built a large camp in view of Perth, ready to move against Causantins Capital Scone. Rolf could only marvel at the ingenious plan Thorstein and Jarl Sigurd had developed. He and his crew tried to get some rest before the great gambit. At midnight most of the ships were ready to cross the river in total darkness. Rolf wished Brana good bye. He felt an urge to stay behind with his love but the lust for adventure was bigger.

"Come now, Rolf", Thorstein demanded. "It is time to spring the trap."

Rolf nodded and boarded his ship. He admired Thorsteins sense of tactics. The whole day he had been wearing a blindfold. He took it off as soon as the night settled. His eyes were so used to the darkness, that he could see clear enough to guide his ship across the river, and then to savely lead the troops further south on the landway. Rolfs men were firmly holding on to their oars.

They had tied all the boats together. Thorstein's vessel was the first in line, that glided quietly across the stream.