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THE WOLF SEA

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A seaworthy *hafskip* was within my grasp and all I had to do was persuade fifty Danes not to kill their captors, to trust me, a barely-shaved boy, and to take on an Arab and all his men. After that, I would have to think up some way of keeping the *hafskip* – and them if possible.

All of which made the Thing we held on board later that night a lively one.

Brother John thought we should find out how many were Christ-sworn and then convert those who were not, so that we all had that faith in common. Sighvat said it did not much matter what gods men believed in, only what men they believed in.

Finn said we should get them to swear the Oath, at which my heart sank. That Odin oath never seemed to weaken – indeed, it grew stronger with every warrior who joined.

Kvasir, of course, slashed his way to the nub of it and, for a man with only one good eye, saw clearer than anyone, save me. I had already seen what had to happen, but just did not want to have to face it.

“These Danes will already have a leader, whether the jarl they sailed with, or one they look to if he has gone,” he said and looked at me. “Orm will have to fight him and defeat him, otherwise all of them will be patient enemies for us, not swordbrothers to trust at your back.”

There was silence – even the incessant chirrup of the night insects had stopped – so that my sigh seemed like the curl of wave on a beach.

“You almost have the right of it, Kvasir,” I replied. “I will not have to defeat him, I am thinking – I will have to kill him stone dead.”

It was an effort to make it sound like I was asking for the mutton-dish to be passed, but I carried it off.

“Just so,” agreed Kvasir sombrely, nodding.

“What if he kills you?” asked Amund.

I shrugged. “Then you will have to think that one out for yourselves.”

It was as offhand a hero-gesture as I could make it, but I was swallowing a thistle in my throat at the very idea of a fight and my bowels were melted.

Sighvat nodded and shifted so he could fart, a long sound, like a horn call in a fog, which broke the tension into fragments of chuckles.

“Still,” mused Brother John. “Five years breaking stones will have dulled this leader’s fighting skills, surely.”

A fact I was grasping at while drowning in fear.

Kvasir grunted agreement, then said thoughtfully: “Just don’t choose to fight with hammers.”

The next day, with Kvasir, Brother John and Finn on either side, I stood in front of the sorry Danes, as husked-out a crew of worn specimens as any seen on a slave coffle in Dyfflin. They were honed by rough work and too little food into men made of braided hawsers, with muscles like knots.

Burned leather-dark, their hair made white by rock dust and sun scorch, they stood and looked at us in the remains of their tunics and breeks, torn and bleached to a uniform drab pale, like the stuff they hewed. Stone men, with stone hearts.

Yet there was a flicker when I spoke to them and told them of what would happen, the chances for plunder on the way, which they could also keep – this last my own invention, for I knew my kind well.

“How do we know these Greeks will honour such a promise?” demanded one.

There he was. Taller than the rest, with bigger bones at elbow and knees to show that, if there had been more food, the work would have slabbed real muscle on him. A glimmer of genuine red-gold showed in the quartz-sparkled stone dust shrouding his hair and beard and his eyes were so pale a blue that they seemed to have no colour at all.

“Because I say so,” I said. “I, Orm Ruriksson of the Oathsworn, give you my own word on it.”

He shifted, squinted at me, then spat pointedly. “A boy? You claim to be a jarl, but if you need us you are short on followers, ring-giver.”

“You are?”

“I am Thrain, who says you should go away little boy. Come back when you are grown.”

“You may say that,” growled someone from the back, to a muttered chorus of agreement, “but I would like to listen more. Five years is a long time and I am sick of stone-carving.”

Thrain whirled, spraying dust from himself. “Fasten that bag, Halfred. We agreed that I lead here. I speak, not you.”

“Did you speak when Hrolf took the steering oar when he was fog-brained with mead?” came the counter. “Did you speak when Bardi ordered him to steer between two shoals, him who was seeing four at the time? No. I am remembering the only noise you made was the same one as we all did – the sound of a man drowning.”

I liked this Halfred. Thrain scowled, but I had the bridle of this horse now, since I had heard the dissent.

“Here’s the way of it,” I said. “You will be free, with arms and your ship, but only if I am your jarl and you take our Oath. We swear to be brothers to each other, bone, blood and steel, on Gungnir, Odin’s spear we swear, may he curse us to the Nine Realms and beyond if we break this faith, one to another.”

They blinked at the ferocity of it, as everyone did, for it was a hard oath and one made on Odin’s spear, The Shaking One, and so could not be broken. It lasted for life unless you found someone to take your place – or fought to the death to keep it against someone who wanted it, which had not happened while I had been with the Oathsworn. That, I suddenly realised, was because so many tended to die and there were always places.

For all that, these stone Danes sucked it in like a parched man falling in an ale vat. They wanted what was offered and I could see them tasting the salt on their lips and finding it spray rather than sweat.

“Those who do not wish to become Oathsworn can remain and dig stones,” I went on. “Of course, anyone can become leader here if the others want him enough and, since it is clear that there will be more of you than my own men, I am supposing you will want this Thrain to take over. So I will save him all the trouble of calling for a Thing and talking round it until our heads hurt, for it will all come out the same way.”

I looked at him. “We fight,” I said, trying to sound as if I had just asked someone to pass the bread.

There was a brief silence, where even the sun seemed loud as it beat down.

“Do you so challenge? Or are you afraid?” I asked and Thrain scowled, for he had been stunned by the speed of all this.

“I am not afraid of you,” he managed to growl, adding a wolf grin.

“I can change that,” I told him and the grin faded. He licked dry lips and wondered about me now, this steel-smooth, cocksure boy. If he had known the effort it took to breathe normally, keep my voice from squeaking and my legs from shaking, he might have been less uneasy when he finally issued his challenge.

I had never fought a *holmgang* before, though I had seen it once, when Pinleg and Hring, two of the old Oathsworn long gone to Valholl, had stepped in to the marked-off square to fight. Hring had lasted no more than the time it took Pinleg to froth at the mouth and Hring to see that he had ended up in a fight with a berserk. There had been barely enough time for him to widen his eyes with the horror of it before Pinleg charged and hacked him to bloody shreds.

Pinleg, last seen surrounded by enemies on a beach far north in the Baltic, saving us even as we sailed away and left him.

We went to a sheltered, level spot, away from prying eyes when the Danes were unshackled. The others, especially Finn, were full of good advice, for they knew I had never fought *holmgang*. Come to that, no-one else had either – it was a rare thing, most fights being unofficial and settled without such formal fuss and seldom ending in death.

I remembered what my true father, Gunnar Raudi, had told me while he taught me the ways of war, including the *holmgang*; see what weapon your opponent has and if he has more than one, which is permitted. Make your own second one a good short seax, held in the shield hand and, if you get a chance, drop the shield and surprise him with it – if you can let go of the shield and still hold the seax, which is a cunning trick. Doubly cunning for me, who was short in fingers on that hand as it was.

Keep your feet moving always, don't lead with the leg too far forward and attack legs and feet where possible. A sea-raider's battle trick, for a man with a leg wound is out of the fight and can be left.

But the best piece of Gunnar Raudi's advice I hugged to myself, turning it

over and over and over in my mind like a prayer to Tyr, god of battles and I thanked him for that day, when it seemed he had looked past the haer of time to this moment.

Finn and Short Eldgrim marked out the five ells, which was supposed to be a hide, secured at each corner by long nails called tjosnur, which we didn't have. Finn managed to get four old Roman nails from the garrison stores, almost eight inches long and square-headed, which he then put in with the proper ritual. That meant making sure sky could be seen through his legs, holding the lobe of an ear and speaking the ritual words.

Brother John scowled at all this, though the nails interested him, for it was with such as these, he told us, that Christ Jesus had been nailed to the cross.

Each of us had two weapons and three shields and the challenged – me – struck the first blow. I had made sure to craft that part carefully enough.

If one foot went out – going on the heel, as we called it – the fight went on. If both feet went out, or blood fell, the whole thing was finished.

Thrain had not been in a *holmgang* either, had not been in a fight with weapons for five years, so he was nervous. He was grinning the same way a dog wags his tail – not because he is friendly, but because he is afraid. His top lip had dried and stuck to his teeth and he was trying to boost the fire in his belly by chaffering with his Danes about how this boy would not take long.

He had a shield and a sword and a leather helmet, same as me, but you could see the sword hilt was awkward in a hand that had held only a pick and hammer for years and he knew it, was fighting the fear and needed to bolster himself as Kvasir shouted: "Fight".

He half-turned his head, to seek the reassurance of his men once more, before bracing for the first stroke – but I was fighting with Gunnar's best advice ringing in my head.

Be fast. Be first.

I was already across the space between us, that perfect, water-flowing blade whirring like a bird startled into flight.

It was as near perfect a stroke as I have ever done, took him right on the strap

of the helm and cut the knot of it, sliced into the soft flesh under his chin and kept going, even after it hit the bones at the back of his neck.

I almost took his head in that one stroke, but not quite. He must have seen the flicker of the blade at the last, was trying to duck and draw back in panic, but far too slow, for the blade was through him and he dragged it out by staggering back.

Then his body fell forward and his head fell down his back, held by a scrap of skin. Blood fountained straight out of his neck, pulsing out of him in great gouts, turning the dust to bloody mud as he clattered to the ground, spattering my boots.

There was a stunned silence, followed by a brief: “Heya...” from Finn.

One stroke.

My crew cheered, but I felt nothing, heard nothing but the drumming of Thrain’s heels, the slush-slush of his life ebbing away and the thunder of my own breathing, made louder under the helm.

“He should have talked less and looked more,” Kvasir noted, then nudged me. “Now is the time to swear the Oath. A *holmgang* death - this is the best sacrifice Odin will get from us this year.”

So, as jarl and godi both, bloody blade still in my hand, I called on the Danes to swear the Oath and they did it, still stunned. Then I had Thrain taken and buried in a good boat-grave and, because he had been Thor’s man, they told me, spoke words over him to the Thunderer and put a decent silver armring in it – my last – which everyone noted. Brother John wisely kept tight-lipped.

“It was well struck,” Finn growled later, coming with food to where I sat apart from the others at the fire. He thrust the food at me, but it tasted of nothing in my mouth and I could not stop the shaking that rippled me, despite a cloak against the night chill.

“The Danes are annoyed,” Finn went on, “but only because Thrain lost so easily. They all agree you struck an excellent stroke.”

“And?”

Finn shrugged. “And no-one disputes that you are jarl, which is what was wanted. By the time we have defeated these goat-humpers, they will be one crew

and not sitting on opposite sides of the fire.”

I came to the fire later, into the quiet talk about home and where the Danes had been and our own exploits boasted. Though no-one spoke of Thrain, I could feel him, lying cold under his stones, weapons on his breast. Five years breaking stones, to end like this.

I could not get warm all night.