

Vinland

Wind bit me in the face, and the snow lightly dusted my beard. I flexed stiffening fingers under mittens while my breathing seeped and flowed in a steady rhythm. Since before sunrise I had followed the tracks, always just behind the beast. Always just out of reach. Now, finally, after hours of trudging through the snow and ice, I had it in my sights. The bull stood tall, shaggy brown hair across its body and down four long legs, the fur flipping in the breeze and catching snow. Two broad antlers stood out from both sides of its head like wide wooden planks with ridges along one edge. Its long snout swept the horizon suspiciously, snorts of hot air coming at irregular intervals.

I felt for my bow, but changed my mind. The wind was too strong and I would never get a clean shot. The elg was greater in size than the hests the men in the neighboring villages rode; men who were twice as tall as I am. Killing the beast would bring a feast fit for my entire village. A missed shot could mean no meat for months, and I didn't follow the elg for this long just to lose it at the end. My hand slipped to the axe hanging from my belt, and I could feel the cold of the handle radiating though the hide protecting my hand.

My tribe is small, both in stature and number. We scrape what we can from the frozen land that is our home, but there always seems to be more hazards than gifts from the snow covered hills. The tribes of men in our region are many, but they do not bother us. We are seen as weak, being no taller than their children, but there is a ferocity within my tribe that is not found in any other race of people. We are the fire in the ice, as the víkingr is the thunder upon the sea.

And I will not be put out.

The elg turns its mighty face away from me and I see my opportunity. My body slips over the rise I was perched behind and glides over the snow in soft, quick patters. The beast turns and sees me, its eyes widening and a bray escaping its lips. I scream, and the axe flies from my hand.

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"Tannívarr!" the tribal elder calls. "Tannívarr, my son! What have you brought us?"

I slip from the saddle of my mount and smile at the old man. "Stigr," I reply, embracing him. "I have brought an elg," I announced with a gesture at the sled behind me. The weight of the meat was nearly too much for the ibex, even one so large as Stor. Much of it had to be left behind, but most of the meat and the skin made the trip back.

"The fires are hot and the mead is fresh," Stigr sings. "Come!" he said to me, ordering several others to unload the catch and prepare for a feast.

Stigr had led the Lanc tribe since my father had perished, so many years ago now. It was thought that I would become the head of the tribe, and many pressed me to do so, but I refused. I knew then what I would be now. I am a warrior. I am a killer. I am a creature of the cold. I am no leader of men. I am not a hero, and I am not fit to care for a tribe. I was not born for such things.

“Tannívarr, you björn!” Sovader slapped my chest and shook my coat as he laughed. “Killed an elg? With your bare hands, I don’t doubt.”

I smiled at my friend and slapped him upon his chest. Tallest in our tribe, Sovader was as high as a man’s elbow and far too large for most of the ibex in our drove. “Good to see you, brother,” I said. “Now get me to a fire.”

He led us to the hall, where the fires were already burning for the evening meal. The sun hung low over the sea, and there was plenty of light still in the day, but already the tribe was anxious to celebrate. I found my way to a table, nodding to my tribesmen as they cheered my kill. Choosing a spot I took a seat and set my knife on the table.

“I’ll get a couple cups,” Sovader offered, then halloped for one of the serving girls. “Some of them aren’t much to look at,” he announced, “but a wench who can fetch a cup is always welcome in my hall!”

A knife clattered beside mine and Freyinna sat beside me. “Sovader says that the best of women are those who fetch his cups,” I told her.

“Or are kind to the eyes,” he finished.

Freyinna lifted her knife and jammed it into the wood in front of Sovader. “I’m neither a servant, or kind on the eyes,” she informed him. “May I still stay in your hall, oh great one?” she asked with batting eyes.

“I don’t know, Frey,” Sovader replied. “You’re not that hard to look at.”

She snatched her knife back and set it on the table before her. When the serving girl brought Sovader’s cup, she took that as well.

When he complained, Freyinna answered, “You’re the biggest and mightiest in the tribe. Surely you didn’t just let a woman take something from you? Maybe you were mistaken. I believe this may have just been mine all along.” She tipped the cup back and took a long pull of mead.

He scowled and ground his teeth for a moment before I interjected, “I saw them again.”

Sovader made a small growl at Freyinna and then turned his eyes to me. “Who?”

“The Strands,” I said. “I saw them again.”

“The vikings?” Freyinna asked. “This far south? Why are they down here?”

“Gathering supplies,” I replied. “They’re preparing for something big. Something very big.”

Sovader smiled at the serving girl who brought him another cup, and leaned to watch her walk away. "Why the fuck do we care?" he asked, still gawking at the girl. "They do us no harm, and they never ask anything of us. What does it matter what they are doing out here?"

"It matters," I answered, "because I want to know. "What are they planning?"

"You said they were gathering supplies," Freyinna said. "How do you know?"

"They had large sleds laden with bundles, and they were heading back in the direction of their village, as though they were returning from the southern markets." I pulled at my beard and let my gaze wander to the rafters.

Sovader chuffed and emptied his cup. "What do we care of them? And what do we care what they do?"

"And if they have found a richer land?" I asked, still examining the inside of the roof. "And if they have found a place where men do not starve, or die of want?"

"We have all that we need, Tannívarr," he argued. "We have plants in the fields in the summer and meat year-round."

"We are starving, brother," I reminded him. "We do nothing but scrape by, and there must be more. There has to be. And if the Strands have found it, then I mean to go with them."

Sovader laughed, but Freyinna became serious.

"You can't mean that," she declared. "You can't mean leaving your tribe, your home, your people, to go off and die in the sea." I began to defend myself, but she pressed on before I had the chance. "Ships leave and never come back, Tannívarr. They sail into the fog and the storms, with never a word from them again. Entire tribes have been lost. There is nothing out there but death, else, why would they never return?"

"Perhaps they have found Valhalla," Sovader chimed with a drunken smile.

"Perhaps they have," I said in a more serious tone. "And if the land is so rich that they never wished to leave? What then?"

Freyinna slid her cup in small circles upon the table before her, refusing to answer.

Sovader let out a great belch and announced, "Well by the gods, if Tannívarr sets to the sea then I mean to follow him."

My eyes lowered to meet Sovader's steady gaze. "Do you now?" I verified.

"Lands of plenty means plenty of women," he reasoned. "I'll not be missing out on that."

I reached across the table and slapped my friend upon the chest. He nodded, then let his gaze fall the Freyinna. I turned my head to find that she was still drawing circles with her cup.

“We have taken from this land until nothing remains, Freyinna,” I said in a low voice. “To the east, people are as poor as we. There is no raiding to the south...”

“Unless we wish to start a war,” Sovader finished.

“We are the north,” I continued. “That leaves the west, and I will not let the Strands take it for themselves.”

At the head of the hall, an axe hammered against a table and men called for quiet. Stigr stood and looked across the faces in the room. When he found mine he paused for a moment before looking away. “Men and women of Lanc,” he cried. “As some of you know, Tollak answered the call from the Earl of Strand.”

I sat up a little taller at the mention of the tribe.

“They are looking for men, for a voyage into the sea,” Stigr announced.

Around the hall came a low hum of discontent. We were outsiders in the world of men. Why would they call for us, unless the voyage was a fool’s errand?

“And why have they called upon us?” one man asked.

“They are calling upon all of the tribes along the sea, searching for anyone who is willing,” Stigr explained. “They are counting us along with all of the others. Tollak says the Strands are will to accept the hands of all that would join them.”

“Do they not have enough hands of their own?” Freyinna called.

“Aye,” Tollak called. “And more than any short voyage could need.”

“So?” Freyinna pushed. “Why do they call upon us.”

“Because it is no short voyage they are taking,” Stigr answered.

“Iceland?” one called, and Stigr shook his head.

“Greenland?” another called, clearly impressed by the length of the voyage.

Still, Stigr shook his head. “They mean to land on Vinland,” he announced, and a dark quiet fell across the hall.

“Vinland?” someone called. “Are they mad?”

“It doesn’t even exist,” claimed another.

“There’s naught but death waiting for that lot,” promised a third.

“No one is being ordered to do anything,” Stigr reminded the hall as tensions rose and voices took a fevered tone. “The Strands have been kind to us, and they ask only for those who would volunteer.

I had watched Stigr the whole time, and had noticed that once he had located me in the hall, he had refused to look my way again.

It was as though he knew my heart before I myself had.

The voices in the hall were not tempered by the words of Stigr, and questions flooded the tables. Men cried out, damning all who would join the Strands while women wept openly.

The scene made me sick.

I rose under the stares of Sovader and the gasp of Freyinna, and marched to the front of the hall. I climbed a chair and stood upon a table. The hall fell silent under the display, and Stigr still refused to look upon me.

“The gods grant that every man may choose his fate,” I called out to my tribe. “Anyone of you may live and die as you please.” I paused, reading the faces of my brothers and sisters. “If such a place exists, then mean to see Vinland. I will go with the Strands. I do not ask that any of you should come with me, but for those who truly desire it. For the rest of you, I leave you here, with no ill will disappointment. Every man should choose his fate. Choose yours, for I have already chosen mine.”

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Stor’s hips rocked back and forth, bearing me across the hills. The breadth of the sea unfolded before me, great and mysterious and deadly. Caps of water were flashing and crashing against the rocky shores, and the sounds of the village drifted over the snow. It occurred to me that the world I had always known was about to be a memory. When I stepped upon the deck of that ship, I would be turning my back to these familiar shores and embracing a world I had never known.

A world that may not even exist.

“I hear their women are massive,” Sovader hollered over the breeze. “Monstrous females,” he continued with a growl and a smile, “Towers with breasts!”

“Easy,” Freyinna warned. “Any female that can be called monstrous is as likely to eat you as let you mount her.”

A wide smile blossomed over his face followed by a wicked laugh. “If you’re trying to convince me to mount every Strand female I find then keep talking, Frey,” he replied. “If I was dissuaded from taking a woman merely because of the threat of violence then I would be a very lonely man indeed.”

“You will be the scourge of Vinland, Sovader,” Freyinna decided aloud.

“I’ll settle with being the scourge of the Strands first, sister,” he replied.

“We’ll do no such thing,” I announced, breaking the mood. I didn’t turn around, but I was sure that I had the full attention of both my companions. “We will soon be guests upon their ship, and completely at their mercy. I for one have no intention of defending my life from the jealous brother of a woman you have ravaged, Sovader. We will treat them as we do our own, and pray that they return the favor. Otherwise, I fear for our safety during the voyage. The sea can be a mighty foe,” I added with a sigh, “but that is nothing compared to the madness it can make in men. We are already different, and already at risk on this voyage. Let us not give them any other reasons to throw our dead frames overboard.”

“I understand, Tannívarr,” Sovader huffed. “No entertainment on this trip.”

“Just nothing that would make them regret our invitation, brother,” I corrected.

“Then let us force Sovader to turn around and return home,” Freyinna suggested, “lest the Strands regret out company.”

“If I offend them,” he recommended, “you could open yourself to the Strand men and I am sure that all would be forgiven.”

“I would sooner feed you my spear, brother,” she replied, venom dripping from the last word.

“Not after I feed you mine,” he answered, grabbing himself.

“Enough,” I warned them. “I’ll cast you both in the sea before any men have the chance.” I nodded to the looming village. “Do you see? There are many tribes here.”

Sovader and Freyinna scanned the crowds gathered outside the Strand’s great hall.

“We are but three of many. This voyage will not be a simple raid and return. The Strands are taking our world with them. Every corner is represented, and if Tollak was correct, then all the tribes received the same invitation we did. The Stands are not exploring,” I declared, “they’re forming a new colony. We are to represent our tribe in Vinland, and I will not have that opportunity wasted because you two cannot keep to yourselves for a night. Now there are none in our tribe that I would have chosen before you, but do not test my fidelity.”

“Brother,” Freyinna said to Sovader.

“Sister,” he replied.

Down the rise we rode, the hooves of the ibex crunching the snow beneath us. The Strand’s men came to meet us upon the path, welcoming us to the village. Men stared at us, most never having seen a person as small as us.

“Lanc?” one of them laughed.

“It doesn’t me tall,” Sovader answered, grasping the front of his belt. “It means long!”

The man roared with laughter and demanded that we join him for wine in the hall. “I’ll not travel upon any craft but the one with my long friends!” he promised the crowd that had gathered around us.

We were led to a seat and a warm fire, our mounts being cared for alongside the horses of the other tribes. Old Strand himself came to our table, thanking us for volunteering and wishing us a safe and quick journey.

We ate, and drank, and feasted into the night. Sovader cursed the men and harassed the women and was everyone’s friend before retiring for the night. Freyinna and I wandered back to our tents, Sovader being nowhere in sight. The next morning we rose to find Sovader eating in the hall, surrounded by four women all taking turns feeding him.

“If I am to die on the seas,” he informed us, “I aim to do it with a warm heart and a full belly.”

That day we prepared for the journey, and the next morning we were on the water, pulling away from the coast.

The compass was drawn for west, and the ships held our course true. Frozen nights and cold days brought us to Iceland where we took on supplies. When we landed in Greenland we landed again for three nights, before we sailed into the unknown. The cold took some of our crew, and fighting broke out on one of the other ships. But after weeks of travel, and misery on the sea, land rose on the horizon. We were there. We had made it to Vinland, and the next adventure.