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A VIKING IN DUBLIN

‘So,’ said Ivar Ragnarsson, eyeing his new-found son much as one might a stray puppy presented for inspection. ‘So, this is what I begat all those years ago, is it?’

Sigfrid’s heart lurched. He felt clumsy and tongue-tied. This wasn’t how it was supposed to be. All the way from Denmark he had fantasised about this meeting. Had his imagination cheated him? This man is my father, he reminded himself, the man who gave life to me. Surely he must feel something for me? He searched the older man’s features, seeking some resemblance – some

image of himself that he might recognise – but there was nothing. It was like looking into a mask hacked out of granite.

‘And they call you Sigfrid, eh?’

He nodded.

‘And how old would you be now? Fifteen?’

Another nod – a silent lie.

‘So, almost a man. And I suppose your stepfather has sent you out into the world to make your fortune?’

‘Him? Hah! He would keep me on the farm, working like a thrall. I ran away.’

‘Did you now?’ For the first time a tiny smile chipped the corners of the mask. ‘And, tell me, what directed your feet west-over-seas to Ireland?’

He is mocking me, thought the boy, and despite everything he felt his temper rising. Nobody poked fun at Sigfrid Ivarsson. ‘In Denmark, the skalds make extravagant songs about the deeds of Ivar Ragnarsson,’ he said haughtily. ‘I came to see if they were true.’

There was a silence. For a moment he feared he had gone too far. Then Ivar roared with laughter. ‘Your song-makers speak the truth,’ he said. ‘The ravens who feast where I have passed can tell you that.’ He took a step forward, the granite mask dissolved into flesh and blood, and suddenly Sigfrid found himself embraced in a huge bear-hug. ‘You are welcome in my hall, Sigfrid

TruthSeeker. You are not afraid to speak your mind, and that is good. I do not beget sons to become milksops!’

Ivar went to the door and bellowed for a thrall to bring ale, then waved Sigfrid to a bench. ‘Sit down,’ he said, ‘and tell me of your adventures. I know that Arne Brodirsson brought you here. He is a good man. Where did you meet him? How fares your mother? Does the farm prosper?’

Sigfrid tried to answer the questions but they skipped across his brain like pebbles across water. A drum of triumph was beating in his head. You have done it, it boomed. You have escaped. No more drudgery, no more dishonour. You have journeyed west-over-seas to the hall of the King of Dublin, and he has acknowledged you as his son.

Dazed with happiness, he looked at the banner on the wall above the high seat. It depicted a raven, black and deadly, with wings outstretched in flight. It had a history, that banner. The songmakers said it had belonged to Ivar’s father, the legendary Ragnar Lodbrok, and that its stirrings could foretell victory for its owner. It was at rest now, there was no breeze in the hall to give it life. But one day, thought Sigfrid, one day ... and the hairs on the back of his neck prickled at the prospect. Without his realising it, his hand slid out to touch the sword he had unbuckled and laid on the table when he first came in.

His father noticed the movement and smiled. ‘Your own?’ he asked.

‘Yes.’ Sigfrid did not see the need to elaborate.

‘So.’ Ivar drew the weapon from its scabbard and held it up to the flickering torchlight, squinting along its length. ‘A fine blade,’ he pronounced. ‘Have you blooded it yet?’

Sigfrid shook his head.

‘You will,’ said Ivar. He looked sternly at his son. ‘Sword and axe, let you remember them; they are the weapons of a Viking. But to a king’s son, it is his sword brings greatest honour. The axe is the hammer of Thor. It lusts for plunder. It hacks and slashes like a scythe through barley, and never counts its kills. But the sword is Odin’s. When you give a man to Odin at the point of your sword – when you look into his eyes and see that he reads his death reflected in your own – then you will understand the meaning of victory.’

Sigfrid nodded. He thought of Hoskuld, who had never killed a man in his life, and of the honour he would now bring to his stepfather’s cheated sword. What does it feel like, he wanted to ask, to give a man to Odin? How many men have seen their death written in your eyes? But before he could find the right words the door opened and a man entered the room. He was tall and fair – a rangy, rawboned man with blue eyes and a mane of

white-gold hair. He approached the table with an air of arrogant confidence and Sigfrid guessed at once who he must be: Olaf Guthrothsson, sometimes called Olaf the White, leader of the Norwegian faction in Dublin and Ivar's fellow king.

Ivar introduced them.

'So,' said the Norwegian. 'Your son, eh? You are a lucky man, Ivar Ragnarsson.' He ruffled Sigfrid's hair and grinned at him. 'And what adventure has brought you west-over-seas, young Sigfrid – some unspeakable deed in Denmark that has left you outlawed?'

'Certainly not!' The teasing remark was too close to the bone for comfort. Could you be outlawed for stealing the icon of a man's honour? 'I came as any man comes who follows the gulls' path – to seek fame and fortune. I am a king's son. I grew tired of life on a farm.'

'Ah,' said Olaf. 'A king's son.' He smiled again, but this time the smile didn't quite reach his eyes. 'I, too have a son,' he said softly, 'by a daughter of the Irish High King. Did they tell you that?'

Sigfrid swallowed. There was a silence in the room that you could have stuck a dagger into. It occurred to him that his whole future in Ireland possibly depended on what he said next. He took a deep breath. 'Then you, too, are a lucky man, Olaf Guthrothsson, for no doubt your son will make a fine king in Dublin, when the time

comes. As for me ... I mean to make my fortune here at the sword's edge, and return in triumph to Denmark.'

Olaf looked at him intently. Then a broad grin spread across his face and Sigfrid knew he had passed the test. He grinned too, but doubt stuck in his heart. Could he ever go back to Denmark? Might Hoskuld in his rage have had him declared 'wolveshead' – an outlaw whom any man might kill?

The Norwegian sat down 'A shrewd head on such youthful shoulders,' he chuckled approvingly, and poured himself a beaker of ale. 'Your health, Sigfrid Ivarsson, you are welcome in Dublin. But now, you must leave us. I have urgent matters to discuss with your father.'

Sigfrid rose. 'Go and find Arne,' instructed his father. 'Tell him he is to find you food and then show you around the settlement. I shall be busy for the rest of the day, but tonight we shall feast your coming in the hall.'

In the novelty of exploring his new home, Sigfrid soon forgot his anxieties about what might be happening in his old one. The Viking encampment at Dublin was built on a peninsula formed by two rivers that flowed out into a large, sheltered bay. It had started, Arne explained, as a small encampment on the shores of the *Dubh Linn*, the black pool, that had gradually spread northward and westward as more and more adventurers had decided to

make it their permanent base rather than sail back to Scandinavia each winter. Ivar's hall was the original one, built years before by a long-dead warrior named Thorgils. It overlooked the black pool, where the Danish ships were beached. Olaf had established his hall and his own *longphort* on the other river, the Liffey. According to Arne, it was an arrangement that worked well. Each king was a regular visitor in the hall of the other, but by keeping their ships and followers apart, they managed to avoid tensions and rivalries that might otherwise have threatened their alliance.

To Sigfrid, fresh from life on a farm, Dublin was a confusing cacophony of sights and sounds and smells. The warm spring weather had brought a horde of new arrivals and he thought he had never seen so many people crammed together in one spot. He wondered if he would ever find his way around with the easy confidence of Arne and stuck close to his side as the Viking led him through the higgledy-piggledy maze of laneways. He was half afraid that if he lost sight of him he might never find his way out again.

There were buildings of every type and size; some old and weathered, some new, some still under construction. Many of the larger houses reminded Sigfrid of the farmhouse he had left behind in Denmark. They were stave-built, their walls constructed from long planks pressed

tightly together and set in an upright position. Others were similar, but with planks set horizontally, while many more, particularly the smaller ones, were timber-framed with panels of wattle and daub. They looked as if they had been woven on some giant's loom and then plastered over with mud to keep the draught out. The strangest ones – and there were only a handful of these – were round, with a thatched roof that rose to a steep point in the middle. Arne said they were of an Irish design.

Scattered among the houses were workshops and the small huts, called *bothies*, that were used by tradesmen. They passed a cooper's shop and a carpenter's and a bakehouse where the baker was drawing loaves from a big stone oven. The bread was baked on flat, long-handled pans. The baker pulled them from the oven one by one, tipped the loaves out onto a table, slapped fresh chunks of dough on the pans and slid them back into the oven again. The new loaves were brown and crusty and the smell rising from them was tantalizing. Sigfrid felt his stomach growl. Arne grinned at him.

'Hungry?'

He nodded. Arne fished a small chunk of silver from his pouch and exchanged it for a couple of loaves. He gave one to Sigfrid. 'Don't eat it all at once,' he warned. 'I'm taking you to visit a friend of mine and we'll get a proper meal there.'

‘Who is this friend?’ asked Sigfrid, as they set off again through more winding, wood-paved alleyways, past more rows of tightly packed houses.

‘Guthrum Brusasson. He is a wood carver, and he is making something for me – something very special. He has been working on it all winter while I’ve been away. Ah, here we are,’ He stopped before a large building. ‘Come in and I’ll introduce you.’

He pushed open the door and Sigfrid found himself in a long room, with a bench running down one side. There was a window over the bench, its wooden shutter thrown wide open. Beneath it a man, Guthrum, he supposed, was bent over, working at something on the bench with a chisel and a small hammer. The floor at his feet was covered with woodshavings, and all around the room were the products of his craft: stools, benches, a bedstead, and two huge table tops, all embellished with intricate and extravagant designs. In one corner stood a pile of roughly-dressed timber and beside it, propped against the wall ...

‘Arne! Arne Brodirsson!’ Guthrum had looked up and seen them and was pumping Arne’s hand as if he would pull his arm off. ‘It’s good to see you again, old friend. Now I know the winter is truly over. Have you told Gráinne you are here?’ Without waiting for a reply he stuck his head out of the window and shouted something

in a strange sing-song language. A woman's voice answered him. 'She gives you a hundred thousand welcomes and will have food and drink prepared in no time,' he said. 'We must celebrate your arrival. And who is this with you? Surely not your son?'

'No,' laughed Arne. He introduced Sigfrid and Guthrum greeted him courteously.

'It is an honour to have the king's son in my home.'

Sigfrid shook his hand. 'Arne said you were making something for him. Is it ... ?' He gestured towards the corner.

'Indeed it is. Come, see what you think of it, if it is worth all the gold Arne promised me.' He led them both over to his new creation and Sigfrid felt a shiver of sheer wonder run down his spine. He was looking at the most magnificent dragon-head he had ever seen.

'A gift for *Seasnake*,' said Arne softly, and he too gazed in wonder at the figurehead. Sigfrid saw how perfectly Guthrum had matched his design to the name of the ship. The head he had created was fierce but not overlarge, and set on a long slender neck. The mouth, each fang-like tooth individually carved, gaped in a terrible, frozen snarl, the nostrils flared and the eyes glared from fiercely bulging sockets. Around the head and up and down the neck ran a serpentine pattern of 'gripping beasts', strange creatures with sinuous bodies, thickened fore and hind

quarters, and claws that clutched both themselves and each other and the frames into which they were set.

Sigfrid had seen similar carvings before – the gripping beast was a popular motif – but he had never seen the design so exquisitely rendered. He tried to trace one of the lines with his finger, but so intricate was the interweaving that it was almost impossible to tell where one creature began and another ended. It seemed astonishing to Sigfrid that a piece of work so graceful and delicate when studied at close range could produce so fearsome an overall effect. Guthrum was truly a master craftsman.

Arne was delighted with his new purchase. He paid Guthrum with an arm-ring of plaited gold and said he would send some of his men to carry it down to his ship. Then they all went into Guthrum's house, next door to his workshop, to celebrate the transaction.

The woman, Gráinne, was waiting at the door to welcome them. She was small and pretty with dark hair, smooth milk-white skin and the deepest blue eyes Sigfrid had ever seen. Arne whispered to Sigfrid that she was Irish. Guthrum had bought her as a slave two years ago but had since married her. She seemed an unlikely wife for the brawny, blonde Scandinavian, but they were clearly very happy together. At Guthrum's insistence she showed them the beautiful piece of woollen cloth, half finished on her loom, which she told them was going to

make a cloak for Guthrum, a special gift to mark the second anniversary of their marriage.

She spoke in Irish and her husband translated for her. He explained that although she understood most of what was said to her, she still could not speak the Norse tongue with any fluency.

‘But I learn,’ Gráinne said carefully. Then, with a smile and a gesture, she indicated one of the benches running the full length of the wall. When they had seated themselves, she brought them bread and cheese and bowls of mutton broth which she ladled from the big cauldron hanging over the hearth in the centre of the room.

Sigfrid ate eagerly and listened while Arne and Guthrum caught up on all their news and exchanged gossip about mutual acquaintances. ‘So,’ said Guthrum, ‘when we last met, you told me that it was in your mind to build a hall for yourself and your ship-companions and make your base here. Is that still your plan?’

Arne grinned. ‘It is. My father died last winter, and my brother has the farm. There is nothing now to keep me in Denmark. I have decided to throw in my lot with Ivar.’

‘Then we must drink to that.’ Guthrum spoke to Gráinne and she fetched drinking horns into which she poured measures of a strange-smelling, tawny-coloured wine.

‘To new adventures,’ said Guthrum, ‘and to *Seasnake* and her new dragon-head. May she carry you to fame and fortune.’

He tossed off his drink in one gulp, and Arne followed suit. Not to be outdone, Sigfrid copied them. It was like swallowing liquid fire. His mouth stung, fumes seared his nose and throat; he thought his head was going to explode. He coughed and spluttered and tears streamed down his face. Gráinne had to run and fetch him water.

‘Loki’s beard!’ he gasped when he could speak again. ‘What is this stuff?’

‘Usquebaugh,’ said Guthrum. He was laughing so hard he could hardly answer. ‘It is an Irish drink. They make it from barley and its name means “the water of life”.’

‘Water of life? It tastes more like dragons’ blood!’

‘You’ll get used to it. It is excellent for keeping out the winter cold. Here,’ he poured another measure, ‘try some more, only this time drink it more slowly.’

Sigfrid sipped tentatively and found that once you got used to its fiery bite the drink did indeed leave a very pleasant glow. My first taste of Dublin, he thought, and wondered what other surprises this new life held for him.



Ivar’s hall had been transformed for the evening feast and

nothing at home could have prepared Sigfrid for such magnificence. Torches and candles infused the long room with a rosy glow. Banners and shields hung from the walls, silver dishes and real glass beakers graced the high table and every man seemed to be dressed like a chieftain. The hall was crammed to bursting point – noisy, smoky, flowing with ale, and smelling of hot bread and roast pork. Thralls ran to and fro with jugs and platters, men laughed and shouted to each other and the air was thick with humour and good fellowship.

And it was all to honour him! It's as if I'd died and gone to Valhalla, Sigfrid thought blissfully. From his place at his father's side, he looked across the central hearth to where Olaf sat among his own followers. The Norwegian smiled and raised a cup to him and Sigfrid thought his heart would burst with pride. He lifted his own beaker and felt the ale run down into his belly, then up to his head in a warm, muzzy glow.

Olaf's son was not in the hall tonight – too young, so Ivar said, for such occasions – and neither was the boy's mother. Instead, Olaf had at his side a man whom Sigfrid had not yet met. He wasn't sure he wanted to meet him. The man was dark and dour and sat like a curse inflicted on the company. He did not smile or speak, only looked around the hall with baleful eyes and scowled into his drink, as if he suspected someone had dropped cow dung in it.

Sigfrid nudged his father. ‘Who is the angry wolf sitting next to Olaf?’

Ivar chuckled. ‘That,’ he said grimly, ‘is our friend Audgils. He has only been here a few weeks. He is kin to Olaf, and they hate each other.’

‘So anyone can see. But, why?’

‘There is blood between them.’

‘Blood!’

‘Yes, Audgils was foster son to King Harald of Agdir.’

‘So?’ Sigfrid tried to remember what he knew of King Harald.

His father explained: ‘Harald had a daughter, Asa, who was reputed to be very beautiful. When Olaf’s father, Guthroth, was widowed, he took a fancy to Asa and asked Harald for her hand in marriage, but Harald refused him. Guthroth decided if he couldn’t have her legally he’d have her by force. He raised a warband and invaded Agdir. It was a bloody business. Harald was killed along with most of his sons, and the bride was carried off. Audgils has never forgiven Olaf’s father for the death of Harald and the shaming of his foster-sister. The families have been at blood-feud ever since.’

A blood-feud! Sigfrid caught his breath. This was the stuff sagas were made of. Nothing like that ever happened where he came from. ‘And yet Asa continues to live with Guthroth!’ he said, shaking his head. ‘I wonder

she has not put a knife in his back.’

Ivar laughed. ‘She probably will one day. But she has a son by him and she has to think of the boy’s future. He is not yet old enough to seize power and she wouldn’t want to make Olaf a present of the kingdom.’

That made sense. ‘She must pray every night that the Valkyries will carry Olaf off in battle over here,’ Sigfrid chuckled. A sudden thought struck him. ‘Do you suppose that is why Audgils is here? Do you suppose Asa sent him to kill Olaf?’

‘It is possible. But I think the man is simply an adventurer with an eye to anything he can grab. He calls himself a king’s son and already he is demanding a share in the leadership of Dublin.’

‘Will he get it?’

Ivar snorted. ‘He can carve himself a slice of Olaf’s power if he wants, but there will be blood spilt if he sharpens his knife for mine.’

Sigfrid could believe it. He looked admiringly at his father. Ivar was not tall, but he was built like a menhir and, with fifteen years of fighting experience behind him, it would take an incredibly brave, or foolish, man to cross him. He wondered whether Audgils had the wit to realise that.

The next few weeks passed in a whirlwind of exciting experiences for Sigfrid. Dublin was like nothing he had

ever known – a purely masculine world, noisy and dirty, dedicated to the industries of war and thrumming like a bowstring with undercurrents of rivalry and bravado. It was a warrior society, and it existed to serve the ships, the strong, sleek, exquisitely beautiful craft riding at anchor or beached around the shores of the Liffey and the *Dubh Linn*, the black pool which gave the place its name.

Sigfrid loved the ships with a passion he could not put into words. There was a beauty in their lines that satisfied his eye, an aura of menace that fuelled his thirst for adventure. He spent hours watching them glide in and out of the pool, and dreamed of the day when he too would own one. *Storm-Rider*, he would call her and he could already see her in his mind.

For a time, life seemed perfect, but inevitably the novelty wore off. Life in a Viking stronghold was not all feasting and fighting, he discovered. There were still chores to be done and orders to be obeyed. And then there was sword practice. Ivar had instructed Arne to teach Sigfrid all he knew of the art of fighting and the big Viking took his job seriously. Each day he drilled Sigfrid in the use of sword and shield, pushing him until he stumbled from exhaustion and then driving him to his feet to fight some more.

‘There’s no rest in battle,’ he would say grimly, as his pupil struggled and gasped for breath. ‘The last man

standing wins. Now, shield up again. Strike and block, strike and block. Harder! Put some guts into it! Crowd me. Don't give me room to swing. Keep your arm up or I'll come in over the top of you – like this.' And he would demonstrate, with a flat-bladed wallop that wrenched the boy's weapon from his fist and frequently knocked him off his feet.

Whenever this happened the audience that had inevitably gathered to watch would hoot and laugh and make ribald comments on Sigfrid's prowess. Then he would lose his temper and lash out at Arne in a volley of wild and ill-judged lunges that never came anywhere near their target. Arne would hold him off, chiding remorselessly. 'Shield up. Control your rage, let it work *for* you, not against you. Watch me, anticipate. Use your brain, boy, that's what it's there for.' And so the torture would continue until red mists swam before Sigfrid's eyes and Arne finally judged that he could take no more.

There were days when Sigfrid hated Arne Brodirsson, nights when he lay on his pallet, aching in every muscle, and half wished the past undone and himself safely back in Denmark. They soon passed though, and he never asked for respite. He was Sigfrid Ivarsson, son of the greatest warrior-king of the western seas. One day he too would be a warrior. He would give a man to Odin and know the meaning of victory. And if this was what it took,

then so be it. He could bear it. He was a Viking.

And slowly things did improve. His muscles hardened, his body accustomed itself to the punishing exercise, and he grew cunning, learning to fight with his mind as well as his arm. Before long he was beating many of the younger men and even pressing Arne every now and then. Arne acknowledged his progress. He was as generous with his praise as with his criticism, and Sigfrid began to revel in his new-found skills.

All he needed now was an opportunity to use them. He was growing restless. When he had dreamed of the Viking life, he had imagined ... well, he was not sure exactly what he had imagined, but certainly not the long days of boredom and inactivity that seemed to be the pattern of life in Dublin. Weapons had to be forged, boats needed careening, defensive ramparts had to be maintained and repaired. He could understand all that, but where was the adventure he had dreamed of – the fighting, the lightning raids along the coast, the desperate hand-to-hand struggles that would bring him fame and riches and immortality in the mouths of the skalds?

He complained to Arne, but Arne only laughed. ‘You’ll have your fill of fighting before the year is out,’ he promised. ‘But raiders need a safe base to return to, and we are not in Denmark here. This is a hostile country. Besides, Dublin is more than a camp now, it is becoming a market.

You cannot eat gold or prisoners, you need to sell them, and merchants won't risk their vessels in an unsafe port.'

'But surely we should be safe here, of all places,' protested Sigfrid. 'After all, the High King of Ireland is Olaf's father-in-law.'

Arne laughed again. 'Ah, Sigfrid, you still have much to learn. Olaf changes wives as frequently as most men change their shirts, and besides, when he married Aed Findliath's daughter, Aed was not the High King but only the *tánaiste*, or expected heir to the previous king, Maolseachlainn.'

'What difference would that make?'

'The Irish have some strange customs. Their High King and his *tánaiste* are traditionally enemies. The title alternates between two branches of the same family and I think both sides fear if they do not prove their strength their branch will be excluded.'

'Ah,' said Sigfrid, beginning to understand. 'So while Maolseachlainn was High King, Aed Findliath needed our help to oppose him, but now ...'

'Now he must turn on us to show his people he can defend them. Already his nephew, Flann mac Connaing of Brega, who was one of our staunchest allies, has turned his back on us and carried his sword to his uncle. I think before the summer is out your father and Olaf will lead a warband into Brega to teach him manners.'

A warband to march against Flann mac Connaing! Were these the ‘important matters’ Olaf had wanted to discuss with his father on the day of their first meeting? Sigfrid felt a prickle of excitement run down his spine. He slept that night with his sword under his pallet and dreamed of honour and glory and the man he would one day give to Odin.