

IT BEGAN, as things ever so often do, with a chance meeting at the right time.

Anders was walking down the rough-hewn wooden stairs, away from the muddy main street of Tikka's Landing, and down towards the stone jetties where the fisherfolk plied their trade. The odour of fish guts mixed with the salt-smell of the sea, but a strong wind off the water prevented the smells from becoming truly noxious.

It was late afternoon, and soon the small fleet of fishing boats would be back with their second catch of the day. The fishwives would be out shortly with their gutting-knives, to work swiftly at the great long tables where mackerel, herring, and the occasional huge tuna would be piled, but for now the women sat and mended nets, chatting and laughing, picking deftly at the tangled strands lying across their laps.

Anders rested his bulk upon a low stone wall and took his ease. He balanced his long-hafted battle-axe, the tool of his trade, across his knees and let his gaze wander. He had just finished three weeks of duty as a caravan guard, helping to see a diverse load of pots, pans, cloth (mostly wool) and other sundries to the small town of Tikka's landing, a regular run that a trading company out of Ostovo made every few months.

Anders' pay rested snugly in the purse on his belt; although doubtless the first coins would be spent on food, drink, and a bed to sleep in for the first time a nearly a month, for the moment Anders was content to feel their weight in his purse, a physical manifestation of the fruits of his labour.

He shifted slightly, letting more of his weight rest upon the smooth stones of the wall, feeling the afternoon sun warm his large frame. Spring was well along, and he would have to give thought to shearing his hair and his great brown gorse-bush of a beard before the summer heat made such things unbearable. Much sooner than that, of course, he would need to find more work, but that search could lay by for a day or three. A night or two with a roof over his head would certainly do him no hurt, Anders decided.

The warmth of the sun in his bones, and the feel of the fresh wind on his face, were starting to lead Anders into a drowse, when a sudden sharp increase in the volume of chatter from the fishwives caught his attention. He straightened and looked up, and the reason for commotion was plain to see. Tikka's landing was a natural harbour, nestling at the bottom of a V-shaped indentation of coastline. Turning into the harbour, some 800 yards away, was a warship.

Anders stood swiftly and gripped his axe tightly in his hands, but then relaxed. His first thought was that the Landing was being raided, but then he saw the pennon of Prince Castamir, lord and sovereign of the land, flying from the mainmast. The ship's warboards were down, and the crew, clearly visible, gave no sign of hostile intent. Nevertheless, Anders climbed the rough-cut timber steps back up to the main street. Friendly signs or no, he had no intention of being caught at the jetties should things go amiss. These were uncertain times. Reaching the higher elevation of the main street, Anders turned, thrust the butt-end of his battle-axe into the dirt, and rested his arms on the axe's broad head.

The warship was a *snaekkje*, painted black from stem to stern, a shallow-drafted vessel fit for coastline or river, sporting some thirty oars by Anders's quick reckoning. She was sleek, a fast runner that swiftly ate up the distance to the jetties. Already the shipmaster had ordered the oars to be raised, and the *snaekkje* was coasting smoothly, following a straight line to the longest jetty in the harbour. The jade green water swelled and rippled away smoothly before the ship's sharp black bow, and the vessel dropped more and more speed by the simple inertia of its passage. As it reached the jetty, the *snaekkje* was at a bare crawl.

*Neatly done*, thought Anders. No stranger to the sea, he had seen many pilots and shipmasters attempt this simple-seeming maneuver, but very few as well as the shipmaster of this black coast-hugger. Already, the docking lines were being tossed onto the jetty, and some of the few menfolk who were not out with the fishing fleet made the lines fast against the heavy metal cleats that lined the main jetty. Anders hefted his axe and turned away. If he wished fresh food and drink, best he get it now, he thought, before the ship finishes docking and twoscore thirsty sailors are clamouring for ale.

It hadn't taken a genius to predict the nature of the company at Tikka's Rest, the Landing's sole inn, that evening. Anders only just managed to polish off some stewed mackerel and some potatoes fresh from the inn's own garden when the first of the warship's crew began spilling into the tiny inn. It wasn't long before everyone knew that the ship was the *Trakai*, a *snaekkje* out of Gotland, heading north on business for Castamir. They were a friendly enough lot, given to the sort of rough jests and clowning that one would expect for a group of mostly young men who had been shipbound for a time. More than one jack of ale slopped over onto a table, and more than one man stumbled (or was pushed by a comrade) and landed on his backside in the sawdust.

Anders was a little overwhelmed by the sheer press of bodies in the Rest, especially after the relative solitude of his scouting and escort duties through the forest from Ostovo. Although he had originally intended to sleep the night in the common room of the inn, the arrival of the *Trakai* had put that idea to rest. He had already decided to part with a little more of his hard-earned coin in order to have a bed to himself, with a door to shut out the rest of the world. Anders had just gotten up to make his way up the stairs, draining the last of the ale from his jack, when there was a tug on his sleeve. He turned in mild surprise, uncertain what to expect, and found himself looking into the face of one of the sailors.

"My shipmaster would like a word with you, if you don't mind, sir," the fellow said.

Anders followed the shipman, who gestured silently at the door. Anders stepped outside, and took a moment to breathe in air that was free of woodsmoke and pipesmoke, burnt stew and ale. The sun had set while Anders had taken his meal and sat with the company of the Tikka's Rest, and it was twilight. A few stars were visible in the deepening blue sky, and the crickets had begun their evening song. The sailor pointed to a group of men gathered round a small bonfire, down by the water to the north of the jetties, where the land sloped down to form a beach of sorts.

"Just down there, sir," said the sailor.

"Thank you," said Anders. The shipman nodded and stepped back inside the Tikka's Rest to join his comrades.

It was that time of evening when all the senses seem sharper, and every sound amplified: the rise and fall of talk and laughter from the inn, the dirt scraping under Anders's feet as he walked towards the beach, the snapping of sparks from the driftwood bonfire below, and beneath all of it, the gentle lapping of the sea against the shore. As Anders approached the gathering by the bonfire, he could make out the shapes of four men, and the sounds of their low conversation beneath the crackling of the fire. The light of the blaze ruined any chance of night vision, so Anders had to step quite close to make out any of the men, and they turned as he approached.

One of them slapped his thigh and laughed as Anders stepped into the light of the bonfire. "Damme, foresters are a shaggy lot, but I knew there was only one as shaggy as you! Anders, ye bastard!"

Anders smiled in recognition. Here was an old friend.

"Rugen. Well met," said Anders as he stepped towards his old friend. The shipmaster stood up, and the two of them clasped forearms and smacked each others' shoulders. Anders chuckled in genuine pleasure. "Well met, Rugen, you bloody sea rat."

Rugen was a stocky fellow like his friend, but a bit taller and less broad across the shoulder. The shipmaster's hair was a honeyed blond, bleached out by the salt and the sea. His face was deeply tanned, contrasting sharply with his thinning hair, and a wisp of a beard grew round his mouth.

"Sit down, man," he said to Anders. "Grab a stump." Anders shifted a block of wood nearer the fire and rested his bulk on it, nodding to the others who sat there.

"Anders, that fellow there is Iestyn, an old friend of mine from the Landing." An elderly fisherman tilted his head towards Anders.

"This is Jensen, who up until tonight was the *Trakai's* warmaster," - Rugen gestured at a burly redheaded fellow in a linen shirt and with a wide leather baldric - "and this bugger is Lankin, who's just brought me a load of bother." The last member of the group, a slightly built man in black with a finely trimmed goatee, smiled and shook his head ruefully.

"And this, gentlemen, and I do use that term bloody loosely," said Rugen, "is Anders, the fellow I was telling you about. He might be the answer to our problems, Odin willing." Anders sat up a little straighter. "Easy now, Ru," he said. "I'm not sure I like being talked about, and I'm damned leery about being anyone's answer to anything."

Iestyn laughed and handed Anders a darkened glass bottle. "Wise man. Have a drink."

Anders took the proffered bottle, but his expression was still grim. Rugen laughed. "By the Hammer, man! You look like a fellow on his way to his best friend's funeral. It's nothing as bad as that."

Anders took a swig of the bottle - applejack, local brew - and passed it on to Jensen. He nodded for Rugen to continue.

"Right then," said Rugen. "Well, I've signed on as master of the *Trakai* in the service of Prince Castamir. Jensen here - " he pointed to the fiery-headed man - "is one of Castamir's warmasters, assigned to the same vessel. But when we came ashore here at the Landing, who do I find waiting for me but this bugger?" He gestured at Lankin, who gave a crooked grin. Rugen took a swig from the bottle and passed it on. "Lankin's a herald for the Prince, sent to meet me here. Seems the Prince needs the flame-head for some higher duty. Can't think why, he's a lazy sod." All the men round the fire laughed, Jensen the loudest.

"So here I am, with a bunch of sodding fighters, and nary a man to mind them, let alone drill the sodding crew, most of whom are as fresh as newborn kittens," grumbled Rugen. Iestyn chuckled as he tipped the bottle. "Which brings me" - Rugen grinned evilly - "to you, Anders."

"Aye, well." Of course, Anders had already seen which way the wind was blowing, as Rugen had meant him to, and had been considering his choices as Rugen wound up. "Job?"

"Sail up the coast to Skaggerak, to join with three other ships and take care of a local pirate," replied Rugen.

"Duties?" Anders gave the bottle a greeting and sent it on its way.

"Warmaster of the vessel, with full rights and responsibilities."

"Pay?"

"Guild regular, plus a commander's share in any prize."

"Bonus for pulling a friend's arse out of the proverbial?"

Rugen laughed. "You get to keep the bottle."

Anders eyed the bottle sourly, which had come round to him again. It was much the lighter for its travels. He tilted it back and drained it. "Done, you thieving bastard. But starting tomorrow. I want one bloody night with a roof over my head before I'm off again."

Rugen squinted at Anders. "That's not the lightfoot I remember. You must be getting old."

"Piss off." Anders arced the bottle in the rough direction of Rugen's head. "I'll see you in the morning, you drunken sot." He stood, a trifle less steady for his negotiations. "Well met, the rest of you."

"Well met," came the replies, none too steady either, to tell the truth.

"G'night," said Anders to the air in general, and made his way to his promised bed.

EARLY THE next morning, Anders walked down the main jetty, smiling up at the sky. “Damn me, but it’s a beautiful day,” he said to himself. The sky was the purest of blue, the gulls were crying, and he felt the warmth of the rising sun on his stout frame. He made his way to the end of the jetty, where his ship lay. “Hello the *Trakai*!” he called.

The *Trakai* was a thirty-fived oared *snaekkje*, and on closer inspection, looked fully seaworthy in the open water. Painted warboards were hung along the sides of the ship. “Good morning, Anders!” boomed the shipmaster. “Get your arse on board, you lazy bollocks! I want to be off with the morning’s tide, and the sun’s on the rise.”

“Keep your shirt on, Rugen,” Anders called back amiably. “I’m not the last of the water-rats you need, you grouchy bastard.”

Anders stepped nimbly onto a thick mooring rope and stepped quickly across to the ship, jumping down onto the deck. Rugen winced at the sound. “Careful, bigod! We’ve not even cast off yet, there’s not need for you stove a hole in my ship, you great bloody whale.”

Anders made a rude gesture at the shipmaster, and walked the length of the narrow upper deck that ran through the middle of the ship from bow to stern, surveying the *Trakai*. Although he had sailed with Rugen before, he had not sailed on Rugen’s new command. She was a beauty; sleek, painted black, with a narrow beam and a sturdy mast. The oars had also been painted black, and the space amidships had been packed with stores. Salted fish, water-barrels, and a fair store of arrows were all immediately apparent to Anders’ practiced eye. Some of the crew were already aboard, and Anders nodded to a few men he had sailed with before. “By Odin, they grow them big in Gotland,” he muttered under his breath. Anders himself was not a small man, and these fellows were his equal or better in size.

Within the hour, the *Trakai* had its full crew. Anders kept a close eye on the arrivals, and he was guardedly pleased. They seemed a businesslike bunch, not given overly to talking back and forth, but not moody and sullen either. And then there were the five who were his particular responsibility...

“Well, warmaster,” said Rugen, clapping Anders in the shoulder, “what do you think of your lot?”

Anders turned to Rugen. “Aye, I mind them.” His five *ulfhedinn* – specialist fighters – were of much the same cast as the rest of the crew. Big buggers, silent but not sulking. They were armed as Anders had instructed: shield and spear, axe and bow. “We’ll see how they go. I’ll take my measure of them on the way to Skaggerak.”

“Is all to your satisfaction, warmaster?” asked Rugen, formally.

“Aye, shipmaster,” responded Anders. “Eighty arrows for every *ulfhednar*, twenty arrows for every oarsman. Five extra bowstaves, thirty extra bowstrings. Ten extra spears, an axe and dagger on the belt of every oarsman. Warboards secure. Is all to your satisfaction, shipmaster?”

“Aye,” responded Rugen. “One extra sail, five needles and sail-thread, ten extra oars, foredeck and reardeck secure, salted fish and biscuits for all crew for sixty days, water for thirty days. Launch moored to the rear, keel caulked after the last voyage, and she’s as sleek as a seal.” Rugen grinned. “The *Trakai* is ready to hunt.” He turned to the crew, ready at their oars. “Are you ready, boys?”

“Aye!” came the chorus from two-score throats.

“Cast off!” called Rugen. “Unfurl the sail, port oars push off! Carefully, you bastards!”

The black longship slid smoothly from the jetty, gently moving into open water. Anders stepped lightly from the upper deck to the gunwales, looking over the side and breathing in the sea. He heard the crack as the wind filled the *snaekkje*’s single sail, and felt the *Trakai* pick up speed.

Anders sighed with satisfaction. "Underway," he said to himself.

These were the times that Anders loved best, the times he knew he would carry in his memory forever: the jade green days, where rock and pine climbed out of the deep green water to form island upon island, some so small that four seagulls was one too many, some large enough to hold a single dwelling in comfort, some stretching back into the mist, filling the dark corners and shadows of the early evening.

There was beauty here, but it was a terrible, stark beauty: a man could not live an hour in these cold waters, and the rocks would take you and crush you if you came too close. It was beauty without compromise – that of Nature, not of man.

Rugen manoeuvred the *Trakai* through these waters with ease. The shipmaster had sailed these waters since boyhood, and knew where a break in the surface signalled dangerous rocks, and where it was simply a fallen tree-trunk, adrift in the sea. The *snaekkje* was made for these waters – a longship with a shallow draft, she slipped through the gaps and passages like an otter. Out of sight of the coast, the *Trakai* would have had to be careful amidst the great swells, but these were her waters.

Anders leaned over the gunwales, listening to the slap of the water against the ship’s hull. They were close enough to some of the islands that he could smell the scent of pine needles. Two gray seals had been following the *Trakai* for almost an hour, and he smiled at them as they bobbed up near the side of the vessel. They knew he was watching, and they had been putting on something of a swimming display for his benefit. He gave them a surreptitious wave, and then turned back to the upper deck to inspect his *ulfhedinn*.

He had come to know them better over the past few days, although he did not yet have a full sense of them. Brynn and Owain, good archers both, although hunters who had too little experience of sea-war; Volund, who followed orders well enough but didn’t do anything until you told him to; Carl, who was an idiot; and Sigurd, a mountain of a man who (if Anders was any judge) noticed a lot more than he let on. Sigurd was no archer, and Anders was unhappy about this, but he had given up on the idea of training Sigurd with a bow after the huge man

broke one. All in all, only Sigurd really seemed to qualify as a true *ulfhednar* – a sea-wolf, a specialist fighter on ship – but Brynn and Owain were handy, and hopefully Carl was not as hopeless as he seemed.

“Okay lads,” said Anders, “formation drill.” He increased the volume of his voice. “Repel boarders to port! On my mark, you have a count of ten. NOW!”

“Shields up! Spears up!” Swiftly the five men brought their shields together to form a wall, cross-hafted spears poking through the gaps. ...three...four...ran through the back of Anders’s mind.

“Advance and THRUST!” The five men, still in formation, moved swiftly to the gunwales and all thrust their spears forward in time. ...eight...nine...

“Hold! Spears up.” The five men stood at attention, the butts of their spears resting on the deck and the heads pointing towards the sky.

Not bad, thought Anders. Aloud, he said, “Carl, keep your shield square when you thrust, or you open your whole body to attack!” Carl looked owlshly at him. “Keep that shield square, dammit, or I’ll use my axe to show you what I mean!” Anders ignored the chuckles from the oarsmen below him. “Brynn and Owain, give Sigurd more space or he’ll knock you over the side! Return to your starting positions and be ready on my mark!” Anders’s eyes gleamed as he surveyed his men, tensed to spring. “Repel boarders to starboard, NOW!” Sigurd, Volund, and (surprisingly) Carl pivoted, but Brynn and Owain were caught wrong-footed for a moment.

“One of you just died!” shouted Anders, his eyes blazing. “I’m not losing you bastards to any pirate scum, so if anyone goes, it’ll be ‘cause I’VE GONE AND DONE YOU MESELF!” More chuckles from below, but thankfully the *ulhedinn* could not hear them. “On the ready line,” said Anders in a lower tone; having revved his men up, he did not want to embarrass them (too far) in front of the sailors.

The *Trakai* lay up in a small cove late that afternoon, close enough to shore that the crew rowed the launch to the cove’s little beach. Anders took to the woods, and was lucky enough to bag a wild pig within an hour. Anders smiled as he hauled the heavy carcass over the rocky slopes. “This will spice things up a bit, no doubt,” he said to himself.

Anders was right – he got a roar of approval from the crew when he hit the beach with the beast over his shoulders. “This’ll go a treat, lads!” he said as he slung his kill to the ground. “Have you got a firepit ready?”

Rugen chuckled. “You’re still more luck than skill, you hairy beastie,” he said affectionately to Anders. “I think you must be half pig yourself.”

Anders grabbed the pig’s legs and swung him up again. “We’ll then I’ll just be off to commune with my brother by myself then, shall I?” The crew laughed, and Anders shook his head, throwing the carcass at Rugen’s feet. “Time for you to do some work for a change. For the sake of Frey, get a firepit ready!”

“I’ll do more than that, bigod,” replied Rugen. “Tonight’s a night for the good stuff, methinks. Time for a round of akavit, boys!”

If Anders had thought his arrival had brought a roar, it was nothing compared to the response this news brought from the crew. He and Rugen stood there smiling at each other. “Good times, ye bastard,” said Rugen.

Anders nodded. “Aye. Good times.”

THE NEXT day came, as the next day always does. The crew were up just before dawn, at Rugen’s very vocal urging. “He’s not human, that man,” Anders heard one of the crew mutter. By the time the sun was over the horizon, the sail was up and the oars were out. There was a heavy swell, and Anders decided to forgo any further drills for the day, as he feared an injury.

“If this wind holds,” said Rugen, “we’ll be in Skaggerak before midday.” Anders nodded. Last night had been a good break from routine, but he wanted to see the disposition of the other forces that were at the port town already.

“Did Castamir’s envoy give you an idea of how many of us there will be?” Anders asked.

“Aye,” replied Rugen. “Us, two *snaekkjes* out of Skaggerak itself, and a *drakkar* from Castamir. One of the Dragons.

Anders whistled, his eyebrows raised. “Castamir must want these reavers’ heads on pigpoles.”

Rugen nodded. “Well, they’ve hit Skaggerak’s fishing fleets for two seasons running. That’s a lot of tax revenue for the Prince to kiss goodbye.” Rugen paused to call a direction to the tiller-man, and then turned back to Anders. “They’ll be tough buggers to catch, as well. Crews are all local boys, commanded by Harald’s own brother.”

Anders shook his head ruefully. Harald Longbeard was the jarl of Skaggerak, and had ruled the town and surrounding territory for over twenty years. Harald’s brother Ulrik had broken with the jarl some five years ago, in a fierce dispute over fishing rights that Prince Castamir had been unable to resolve. Ulrik, who earned the name Oathbreaker over the incident, had taken two ships and crews loyal to him and gone rogue, raiding shipping far and wide.

It appeared that the prodigal brother had come home with a vengeance.

"How many ships does Ulrik have?" asked Anders, sitting down against the mast and pulling out a whetstone from his belt pouch.

"Still the two, by all accounts, but they're tough buggers." Rugen remained standing, his eyes on the channel which the *Trakai* was about to enter. "The *Hugin* and the *Munin*. Same crews he left Skaggerak with, give or take a few bodies."

Anders nodded, running the whetstone along the length of his axe's blade. "I heard of them a year or two back, down around Quester's Rock." He looked down the length of the blade for spottings of rust, and was pleased to find none. "Sharp bunch."

By midmorning, they began to pass the first of Skaggerak's watchtowers, a timber construction atop a spur of rock that ran almost straight down into the water. Rugen got Sigurd to wave the banner of Castamir, and they saw the blue-gold banner similarly waved by the men of the tower. A minute or so later, the tower was sending up signals of white smoke.

Rugen grunted. "Bloody efficient, these... Skaggerakians." He scratched his beard. "Skaggerakites?"

Anders laughed. "You can stop waving, Sigurd." The huge man stopped. "So how much longer, shipmaster?"

"Perhaps an hour, warmaster," Rugen responded. "At least, as long as this wind continues fair."

The wind did not hold, but it was still less than two hours before the *Trakai* came in sight of the outlying dwellings and structures of Skaggerak. But that was not what held their attention. Everyone's eyes were focussed on the massive vessel floating in the distant harbour.

"By the black wains of Olaf..." said Carl, standing behind Anders.

Rugen whistled. "Castamir's sent the *Red Dragon*."

It was a magnificent ship, perhaps twelve or fifteen feet higher above the waterline than the *Trakai*, painted from stem to stern in a deep blood red. The port side was facing them, and both Rugen and Anders were silently counting oars. Rugen got there first. "Thirty-five. Bloody hell, that monster ships seventy oars!" He turned to Anders. "Let's take a look at her decks."

The two men climbed the mainmast of the *Trakai*, until they were hanging on the swaying mast some thirty feet above the vessel. Both Rugen and Anders scanned the distant ship carefully. "Bloody great warboards make it hard to see," said Anders.

"Aye," said Rugen. "Raised foredeck and reardeck. Looks like... yes, a bloody great spear-tosser mounted on the foredeck."

"Something on the reardeck as well," said Anders, squinting to reduce the glare off the water. "Not a ballista, though. Not sure."

Anders began to climb back down, and Rugen followed him. The shipmaster clapped Anders on the shoulder. "Well, it looks like we'll be playing poor country cousins on this hunt." Rugen called out in a much louder voice, "Smooth strokes and strong, lads! We've a whole town watching us come to port!"

JARL HARALD Longbeard laid on a mighty feast in his hall. Anders and Rugen sat at the head table, and had an ample view of the proceedings. Many of Harald's kinsmen and warriors had turned out to welcome the officers of the *Trakai*, and both Anders and Rugen had also been introduced to Carloman and Dansik, the captain and warmaster of the *Red Dragon*. They were both tall men, black-haired, with hard countenances. *Probably Castamir's kin, looking like that*, Anders thought. They kept themselves at a deliberate distance, as befitted officers of the Prince. *Or maybe they're just pompous asses.*

Anders raised his jack to have it filled by a thrall, and drank deeply of the jarl's ale. Not bad at all. He tore off a chunk of bread, wiping the beef-juice from his plate and popping it into his mouth. It had been a long time since he had enjoyed good cattle-flesh, and like any wise soldier, he took advantage of what opportunities came his way.

Jarl Harald's chief adviser, a slender, sharp-eyed man named Thialfi, turned to Rugen. "How do you think the weather will break, shipmaster?"

Rugen set his cup down. "The weather looked seeming well to me; I saw no cloud on the horizon when we were in open waters. Nevertheless, these are your waters, master chamberlain, and doubtless you know them best."

There was a burst of laughter from the jarl and his men sitting at the head table. "Wise man he may be, but do not look to Thialfi for counsel on nautical matters," said Harald, chuckling. "A more capable manager I have never met, but..."

The chamberlain shared in the general mirth. "Keep me off the deck of a ship, for the love of Freyja!" he laughed, waving his hands. "I know the price of a fish, but I've no need to visit one in his home."

Anders laughed, but also kept half an eye on Castamir's officers. They sat with stiff spines and square shoulders, their faces carefully neutral. *They're not comfortable here at all*, thought Anders. *Is there something about the relations between Castamir and his lord of Skaggerak that I should know?*

Just then the doors of the great hall opened for a new arrival, and all other thoughts and speculations were driven from Anders's mind.

Later, he heard from Rugen that her name was Brigid. At the time, Rugen could have told him that her name was Magnus Marlinspike, and he wouldn't have paid any attention. She was a vision, an absolute vision. Tall and willowy, with a quiet presence that commanded attention, she moved into the hall. "Odin's beard," breathed Anders, unaware that he had said this aloud. She was unlike anyone whom Anders had ever seen.

Brigid walked gracefully to the head table, smiling at the men as they stood and waited for her. Anders's heart started to race as she walked closer to him, taking a seat only two away from Anders himself. Carloman courteously pulled out the chair for her, and she smiled and took her seat. There was a general rustle as the company took their seats again.

Anders tried not to stare, but found himself glancing at her again and again. Her hair was a pale blonde, almost white. Her face looked as if it was carved from ice, pale skin over fine, elfin features. Anders followed the line of her neck, unconsciously tracing her shoulders...

Brigid turned and caught his gaze, her icewater blue eyes appraising, with a hint of amusement. Anders turned a deep shade of red and looked down, but a moment later lifted his eyes to return her gaze, his own expression clearly measuring her in turn. A slight smile, mischievous, lifted the corners of his mouth. She did not look away. Anders felt his pulse quicken. He noticed a slight flush appear beneath her high cheekbones.

Suddenly everyone was standing. Anders stood hurriedly. Longbeard was lifting his cup. "To the commanders and crew of the *Trakai*! Welcome! Wass hail!" The company lifted their cups and jacks. "Wass hail!" Rugen and Anders received their salutes, and drained their jacks. Everyone sat. Anders, his body humming with the tension of the previous moment, did not dare to look at Brigid, but somehow found himself glancing at her anyway. She was glancing at him as well, but looked away hurriedly.

It was at this point that Anders realized that, somewhere in the last five minutes, he had completely lost himself.

TWO DAYS later found Anders walking with Brigid on a hillside above Skaggerak. The wind blew through the grass, whipping up Anders's cloak behind him and blowing Brigid's hair about her head. She was clad in green velvet with gold brocade, a simple gown bound at the waist with an embroidered belt. She moved smoothly across the face of the hill, a smile upon her pale lips, gazing mostly at the ground. Anders walked beside her, moving at a gentle, easy pace, taking in the landscape around him, taking in the town and seaside below, taking in the beautiful woman at his side. He didn't want to say a word to disturb the moment, so he said nothing. He was lost in a mental tangle, but he wouldn't have traded his place with any man in the world.

"So you sail in two days' time," said Brigid. It was difficult to tell if this was a statement or a question.

"Aye, Brigid. We all do. The *Trakai*, the *Red Dragon*, the *Kisping*, and your brothers on the *Belgard*. It had turned out that Brigid was a member of the extended family of Harald Longbeard; her mother was sister to Harald by marriage. Brigid's brothers, Jasper and Henrik, were both young men of ability who had risen to the posts of shipmaster and warmaster, respectively.

They continued to walk. "Did you know Ulrik at all?" asked Anders as they strolled. It was perhaps an impolitic question, but Anders had been wondering about the nature of the man whom they were soon to hunt.

Brigid smiled. *Breathtaking*, thought Anders. "Not really very well. He seemed a big man, almost larger than life. He laughed a great deal." She sighed. "The hall was a happier place then, I think."

“The families of the powerful are not like other families,” said Anders, “as much as they might wish to be. My brother was a bit of a turf-brain, but I never had to worry about him poisoning my broth to make himself Lord of the Isles, or some such thing.”

Brigid laughed. She stopped, and looked at Anders. “Why did you leave your family?” she asked, pushing wisps of hair from her face. Anders smiled ruefully, and shrugged. “There was no life for me there. My father is a farmer, and a good man. My brother is a fisherman, and an idiot, but a good man. I like to believe that I am a good man, but I had no wish for these futures. Nor did I wish to be a smith, or a crofter, or a cooper, and any other such thing. So what was I to do?” He lifted his hands. “I wanted to see the world, and I’m not done looking yet. I miss my kin, sometimes, but I know where they are. They think I’m mad, but there’s a spot for me by the fire should I return.” He shrugged his shoulders. “And that’s the way of it.”

Brigid smiled at Anders. “I agree with you on one thing, Anders of Hestur,” she said. “I believe you’re a good man, too.” She stood on her toes and gave him a kiss on the cheek, swift and sweet. She laughed and took his hand. “Now take me back to town, before the old folk talk even more than they are already.”

RUGEN GRINNED as Anders came aboard. “Ah, it’s good to find a safe harbour, milad.” The tall captain clapped Anders on the shoulder. Anders smiled ruefully, and shook his head. “It’s not like that, Ru. We haven’t, for one thing. And there’s not exactly an understanding between us, not... exactly. It’s just...well...”

Rugen, his hand still on Anders’s broad shoulder, looked closely at Anders. “Save me, Anders,” he said at length. “You’re done.” Anders turned a deep shade of red. “Could be,” Anders admitted, raising his eyebrows. “Could be I’m lost, my friend. Just lost.”

The shipmaster’s smile broadened. “You poor bugger.” He chuckled. “Freyja help you. She’s a bonny wee lass, and a fair catch, if it comes to that.”

Anders nodded. “Aye, she would be a fair catch indeed. But I’ve no idea what happens now...”

Their leavetaking had been painful, awkward. They had sat in a corner of Jarl Harald’s hall, across a table from each other. Their eyes rarely left from gazing at the ground.

“I’m sorry I have to go,” Anders said, and he truly meant it. He had a duty to perform, and he had given his word to see it through, but he wished that his duty was a little further off.

“I know you’re sorry, just as I know that you must do this. It’s only...” she looked up, clasping his hand. “Well... just be careful, that’s all.” She looked up at him. “Don’t do anything foolish.”

There was something more on the tip of her tongue, Anders could tell; but she was not saying it. He was not one to push – let her say what was on her mind when it was right for her. Nothing blooms before its time.

“I’ll be careful. I’ll do what needs be, but I’m too fond of this skin to wish to lose it for no damn good reason.”

Brigid’s face was like a statue. “I’m glad, Anders.”

“Oh, lass.” He squeezed her hand. She leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. He felt her press against him, and then felt her slip away, like a wave drawing back from the shore. When he opened his eyes, he saw her walking away rapidly, her back straight and her shoulders square. Anders clenched his fists and stood. He felt something in his left hand, and opened it up to see.

Brigid had pressed a small brooch into his hand as she left. A golden love-knot, with a green stone at its heart.

“GENTLEMEN!” Harald Longbeard’s voice boomed across the harbour, and brought Anders back to himself. The jarl of Skaggerak stood at the end of the central quay, a great fur mantle draped over his shoulders. “Good hunting! The blessings of my lord Castamir and my own house go with you.” Harald raised his arm. “A pair of golden arm-rings to the man who brings me Ulrik’s head. Wass hail!”

“Wass hail!” came the answering cry from more than two hundred throats. The drums of the oarmasters began to sound, as the fleet loosed their slips and cast off, out of the harbour and down the coast.

Within the week, they had reached the great eel-yards off King’s Head. Row upon row of fencing stretched out from the headland into the ocean, and Anders watched as men and women scurried from their huts on shore onto the walkways above the eel-fences, checking and unloading the nets. It was just after spawning, so the yards were full of busy activity.

The crew of the *Trakai* had ample opportunity to sample the fruits of the villagers’ labour that evening. “Fresh stewed eel,” exclaimed Carl, smacking his lips in appreciation. “Say what you like about the meat of the land, but nothing beats the flesh of the sea.”

“I don’t know about that,” said Owain, idly waving a piece of dripping eel-meat about at the end of his dagger. “I could’ve done with a little more land-meat before we left Skaggerak.”

“I think the warmaster got his fill of land-meat, mind you,” said Carl slyly, winking at the others. There was a moment of shocked silence. Anders made to rise, but before he could do anything more than lean forward, Sigurd had stood up. In a single smooth motion as he rose, the huge man lifted Carl by the belt and jerkin and simply heaved. Carl disappeared into the night. The company heard a surprised yell, and then a splash. Sigurd sat down again in the sudden silence. “Sorry, warmaster,” Sigurd rumbled. “I get a bit of a nervous twitch sometimes. I don’t mean no harm.” The entire company erupted into laughter, drowning out the sounds of Carl’s cursing and splashing.

The small fleet stood off the eel-yards for a few days, waiting for word on the current location of Ulrik Oathbreaker and his *snaekkjes*, the *Hugin* and the *Munin*. Anders spent the time profitably, drilling his own small band of *ulfhedinn* (including a suitably contrite Carl), and coordinating his drills with Danask and the larger component of sea-wolves aboard the *Red Dragon*. The *Kisping* and the *Belgard* had no specialists, relying solely on their fighting crews. Anders watched Brigid's brother Henrik put the oarsmen of the *Belgard* through combat drill. They weren't bad, to Anders's eye; but his own experience had taught him that there was no real replacement for a dedicated contingent of sea-wolves in those vital first few moments of hand-to-hand fighting.

Still, Henrik's drills reminded Anders that it was time to integrate the *ulfhedinn*'s combat practice with combat drills for the rest of the crew. Although the specialists could buy the *Trakai* those first few moments, if the crew was not ready to crash in shortly thereafter, the *ulfhedinn* would pay for those first moments with their lives.

Although some grumbled, the majority of the crew fell to it with a will, and those who complained did so quietly, out of the hearing of Anders, Rugen, or (strangely enough) Sigurd.

BOTH ANDERS and Rugen had become tired of waiting. It was obvious that Ulrik was never going to hit the eel-yards, not with four ships anchored off King's Head. In fact, it appeared that Ulrik had gone to ground; the fleet had no word of any sightings of the raider or his ships anywhere.

Carloman held a commanders' meeting aboard the *Red Dragon*, and the impatience of the general company was beginning to show in its leaders.

"He's a crafty old fox," said Rugen, "and he's holed up in some comfortable burrow somewhere. He can afford to sit tight longer than we can. Our only chance is to flush him out." Byrntooth, the morose captain of the *Kisping*, shook his greying head from side to side. "Ulrik's been up and down these coasts since we were all boys. If he wants to hide, we'll never find him. And if we go a'looking, he'll slip out of his hiding spot and raid the eel-yards." Sterken, Byrntooth's warmaster, nodded in approval of his shipmaster's observations.

"And what of the mackerel grounds in Jensen's Bay? And the salmon traps up the Peipus River?" asked Carloman, shortly. "The seal station off Linder Rock? Who protects them from Ulrik while we sit here?"

Anders privately agreed with the captain of the *Red Dragon*. However, he did not, in truth, know what the answer to their puzzle was. Ulrik certainly knew these waters better than anyone, and they couldn't protect every area at once.

"When the obvious strategies are found wanting, it's time to turn to trickery." The officers turned their heads in surprise towards Jasper, Harald Longbeard's nephew and shipmaster of the *Belgard*. Jasper's eyes gleamed, and his brother Henrik had the smile of the

badger who ate the mole. Jasper continued: “My brother and I have a plan that we think might snare our wayward uncle...” The rest of the officers leaned in closer to the two young brothers.

THREE NIGHTS later saw the *Trakai* and its crew nestled into a bend of the Peipus River. The night was cloudy, with next to no moonlight, which suited Anders and Rugen. They wished to remain concealed, or at least appear to have that intention.

Although they were supposed to alternate watches, they were both awake. Neither could sleep, both in anticipation of what was to come, and because of the uncertainty which surrounded Jasper and Henrik’s plan.

“Like a salmon in a laxakar,” Jasper had said, referring to the V-shaped traps which fisherfolk used to catch the salmon on their spawning runs. And, in truth, Jasper’s plan did fit this closely. The *Trakai* was the bait; it had the appearance of a single ship sneaking up the Peipus River to spy out Ulrik and his boats. The opportunity to pick off one of the fleet hunting him was a temptation Ulrik was unlikely to resist. However, the *Kisping* and the *Belgard* had slipped quietly upriver two nights ago, using all of the stealth at their disposal.

When Ulrik’s ships attacked, then, the *Kisping* and the *Belgard* would come racing downriver. “Ulrik is a canny captain, and he’ll likely break off and flee for the ocean,” Byrntooth had protested. Jasper had nodded his head, smiling, and Henrik had said, “That’s where the *Red Dragon* will be – right at the mouth of the river. Ulrik’s ships will have nowhere to go, caught between three *snaekkjjes* and a great *drakkar*.”

Of course, all of this was predicated on the idea that Ulrik actually was somewhere on the Peipus. Under his blanket in the cold night, Anders observed this to Rugen, not for the first time. Rugen sighed. “One guess is as good as another, lad, and you know it as well as I.”

Anders nodded. True or not, it didn’t really make him feel any better.

In the near-total silence and darkness, the movement next to Anders was startling. Despite his surprise, Anders kept his voice to a low whisper. “Who in the Nine Worlds is fidgeting about at this hour?”

A huge silhouette blocked out what little moonlight there was. “Oh. Good eve, Sigurd. What is it?”

Sigurd’s rumble was as soft as the huge man could make it. “Carl has something to tell that you really need to hear. You and the shipmaster both.”

Anders sat up straight, and nudged Rugen to get his attention.

“Understood,” he whispered to Sigurd. “Where is he?”

“Right here,” came a whisper from somewhere in front of Sigurd. Anders hadn’t even seen the man in Sigurd’s shadow. “I’m sorry to bother you, Warmaster, but...”

Anders brushed this away impatiently. “Never mind that. What is it I need to hear?”

Carl coughed nervously. “Well, Warmaster, it’s like this... I spent my time in Skaggerak with a few of the boys down at the Bay’s Bounty, one of the dockside inns,” Carl began.

Rugen snorted. “One of the dockside slutshacks, ye mean.”

There was a pause. Then, “Well, mebbe so, but I wasn’t doin’ no harm to anyone,” protested Carl. “Ow – okay, Sigurd, okay! Anyways,” Carl continued, “I was there in the common room, sizing up the fancies, when I hear two of them chatting away in Thieves’ Cant. I doubt they were aware that I know the trick of it – “

“And I don’t want to know how you know it – “ interjected Rugen.

Anders gave him an annoyed glance, realized the ineffectiveness of this in the darkness, and muttered, “Belay it, Ru, or we’ll be here all night.”

“So, anyways,” Carl went on, unaware in his nervousness of the muttered exchange, “they was sayin’, ‘I hear Lady Brigid’s got her hooks into one of the warmasters...’”

Anders felt himself flush scarlet. *Good old darkness*, he thought.

“...and the other one says, ‘Or this outlander’s got his meathook into her, more likely’ – leave off, Sigurd! Ow! You told me to say it as I heard it!”

“Thank you, Sigurd. Leave him be,” said Anders, his voice firmly under control. He was almost certain that he had heard a snort from Rugen.

“So anyways, the first one says, ‘The Dodger will give her a right thrashing when he gets back. He’s a right strict one for that sorta thing, worse than his brother.’”

Anders felt the hairs on his neck rise up. “The Dodger?” Surely that didn’t mean...

Sigurd interjected. “Carl had no idea what it meant. I do. The Dodger is an old nickname for Ulrik himself.”

Rugen said slowly, “The Dodger will give her a right thrashing when he gets back...”

There was silence. Then Rugen said, “Thank you, Sigurd, you’ve done the right thing. Very much so. Please take Carl with you.” Anders and Rugen waited for the two *ulhedinn* to depart.

Anders sighed, deeply, feeling as if he were being deflated. “Oh, Loki’s mother...”

“Then you think the same as I,” said Rugen flatly.

“Of course I do,” replied Anders hoarsely. “It’s Ulrik they were talking about, Ru. He and Harald only pretended to fall out. They’ve been playing the old game to fox the Prince. Ulrik ‘steals’ his brother’s goods, so no tax need be paid on them. And Harald can claim the damage against Castamir’s pledge of protection. He turns a neat profit, without paying a bloody dime.” He sighed. “And then we show up to spoil the party...”

“Aye, Anders,” said Rugen. “We’ve been set up.”