

THE HORSE FAIR

It was spring and the horse market in the town of Wiske had opened. It was a merry time after the long winter. For the first time in months nobles and peasants from all over the land came together. Laughter and boasts and toasts filled the air, ale and mead flowed between the corrals where horses were for sale. In the surrounding longhouses and halls smell of fresh bread and roasted meat mixed with the smell of the stables while bronze, salt, corn, silver and sometimes even gold exchanged hands.

Arne looked around with eyes wide open. For the first time now that he was fifteen summers old had his father Gorm brought him to the horse fair where Gorm proudly displayed the young steeds and stallions he had groomed and raised since last year. Like Arne they were old enough now to be exposed to and examined by the althlings who had come from near and far to find new hoofed companions for war and joy.

A soft snout touched Arne's neck and blew a gust of warm air into his corn-coloured hair. Svend had never been far from Arne's side since the day he could walk. With a mane as blonde as the hair of his human companion, red fur and broad hooves Svend looked a bit rotund and plump compared to Gorm's other horses but Arne loved the gelding's gentle spirit and mischievous nature. Svend had watched over Arne as he grew up from child to boy to young man just as much as his human parents had. He followed Arne without the need for reins or a rope and could ridden just as easily with Arne sitting on his bare back, holding on to the man, safe in the knowledge that Svend would carry him without question.

PING - PING – PING

The high-pitched sound of metal striking metal in rapid succession cut through the murmur and ambient noise of the crowd. Svend stomped his hoof in disapproval as smoke and the sharp smell of hot iron assaulted his nostrils just as much as the sound of a smith's hammer assaulted his sensitive ears.

A blacksmith offered his services in a corner of the market where he had turned a rundown shack into a makeshift smithery. Horseshoe piled upon horseshoe beside his anvil. His hammer rose and fell without pause as the huge, strong man with the matted red hair and full beard forced another piece of iron to obey his will and form into a crescent shape, glowing red and white with a heat that was matched by the blazing passion in the eyes and the arm of the smith. This was not work for him. That was him. Every strike of the hammer was an expression of his being and although his eyes were open wide he did not see or acknowledge his surroundings. The burning metal was his world and each fall of the hammer shaped his world.

PING - PING – PING

When a man in a fox fur coat approached him the blacksmith held his arm only reluctantly, almost in disgust over the disruption that drew him away from his passion through the necessity of daily business.

Svend blew another gust of warm breath into Arne's hair, this time accompanied by a disapproving snort, the gelding's gentle nibbling and sleight push of his head nudging Arne to move on. Yes, of

course. Gorm was waiting for his son to return with a sack of salt currently strapped tight to Sven's broad back.

The scream of a woman cut through the air, making the horses throw up their heads and stomp their hooves nervously while the heads of the people all turned into the direction of the scream. Banter, laughter and haggling came to an halt as the screams turned into a loud wailing and the patrons of the fair flocked to the scene of misery, some compassionate and many just hungry for gossip.

Arne had not met the woman who kneeled in front of one of the long houses and cried but he knew from his father that she was the wife of the town's major who herself was known for her skill and cunning in breeding fine horses.

Now she lay in the dirt, screaming and crying, tears flowing like rain and her face distorted by immense pain. Two of her handmaidens tried to comfort her and lead her back into the house but she would have nothing of that. Pain turned into rage as the major's wife pushed her maidens away and buried her face in the dirt, oblivious to the crowd of wide eyes and gaping mouths that had gathered around her.

"What in Thor's name has happened?" someone near Arne whispered. There was no answer. Arne just stood there dumbfounded and numb. Svend stomped by his side as he felt the rage and pain of the crying woman like it was his own.

A stout man with graying hair and dressed in fine linen stepped out of the longhouse. The major kneeled down beside his wife and whispered into her ear. . Finally he put his broad fleshy hands around her and gently, so gently lifted her up from the ground and slowly step by step let his sobbing wife back into their home. The heavy wooden doors closed behind them immediately.

Another whisper went through the crowd, going from mouth to mouth and from ear to ear.

"The major's eldest son is dead. Two days ago he was fresh and rosy and alive like a blooming flower and now he is all cold and dead."

"They say a fever got him and ate him up in less than a day, burning him like cinder."

"But he was so young, so healthy and strong."

"It's a bad omen, yes. Let us see the voelva."

"Yes, I've heard she is here."

Right before Arne's face a man stretched out his arm and pointed at a figure who slowly walked towards the major's house.

"There she is already."

"Where there is a corpse the ravens gather."

"Sssh. Or you may be her next meal."

Arne stood and looked at the one they had called the voelva. Never in his young life had he seen a seeress or sorceress.

Her hair was grey, almost white but there was hardly a line on her face. Her pale blue eyes were bright and sharp like those of an eagle. She dressed in simple grey robes, simple except for the intricate symbols stitched into the, some angular, some swirling shapes, lining the cuffs and the seams of her hood. She carried a stave just over six feet long of polished wood with a thick knobby head from which beads and pieces of wood tangled. Although she seemed to lean on that stave she walked with such vitality and strength that Arne could not believe she needed it in the first place to support her.

As the voelva came close her eagle eyes fell on Arne. Their eyes met for only a moment but that moment sent a shiver down Arne's spine. It was not fear. Yes, it was a tiny bit of fear but mostly it was awe as Arne felt like she could look right through him into his very soul. Then she smiled just a little bit, just enough to tug the corners of her mouth and Arne's fear was gone. The seeress knocked on the door of the majors house with her stave and waited. She barely had to wait though. The door opened and the strange woman was hushed inside.

Svend got restless behind Arne. Yes, the salt. Arne's horse friend knew that Gorm was waiting and he would not have much patience for his son who minded other people's business.

Arne turned to leave and nearly bumped into a thick hairy chest covered in the smell of hot iron and cold smoke. The blacksmith stood next beside him, his hammer still in his hand, his burning gaze fixed on the house that had just seen so much tragedy with the same single-minded passion he had shown earlier in his forge. Now from close up Arne noticed the scars on his arms and chest and the deep lines on his face and rings under his passionate eyes. But he couldn't be that old. His hair and beard were still bright red and he looked so strong that he could have passed for Thor himself at any time, only his face looked so aged. Even more strange, although Arne and Svend stood right before him, just inches away he did not seem to see them at all.

Arne shook his head like he was waking up from a dream. The salt. His father was waiting. Arne moved on then stopped. Svend had not followed him as it was the gelding's habit all the time.

"What is wrong with you? Come!"

Arne pulled a little on Svend's mane. Then a little more until his friend finally followed him. As they went their way again while the market slowly returned to its usual buzz Arne cast one last glance back at the blacksmith who stood tall in the middle of the crowd like an unmoving rock

"WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN YOU GOOD FOR NOTHING LITTLE STABLEHAND!" Gorm's voice had a booming voice even when at ease and friendly. Now he was impatient and the volume of the greeting he had for his son reached up to the green fields of Asgard.

"I'm sorry father." Arne lowered his head, "But there was this woman..."

Gorm raised his bushy eyebrows. A mischievous smile danced around his lips.

"Aren't you a bit too young for that fledgling? Barely fifteen and the first time I show you the world you already look for girls..."

“No!” Not like that It was the major’s wife...” And Arne told his father what had happened but not about the voelva or the blacksmith. Gorm’s face became darker and darker as he listened to his son and full of sorrow. He signed deeply when Arne had finished his tale.

“Poor people, “ Gorm muttered, “Good people. No one should bury a child but they deserve it least.”

He violently shook his head to chase away the glaze that began to cover his eyes.

“Put the salt on the cat quickly. I have another errand for you to run.”

Arne unloaded the salt from Svend’s back and put it into the wagon that was home away from home for his father and him while Gorm rummaged through the other end of the wagon, searching for something.

“Arne, I want you to take this back to the major and his wife with the condolences of out family.”

What Gorm placed in the hands of his son was a wooden log about the length of Arne’s forearm and still covered in its reddish bark. In the middle of the log was a small hole with a tiny copper candle holder, one that could hold only the smallest of wax candles.

“This is a piece of a yew tree, the fire’s keeper. Your mother and I got it from a friend a long time ago before you were born. I wanted to pass it on to you one day but now... I ask you to take this piece of your inheritance and give it away to the major’s family.”

Arne felt the importance of the act although he did not understand any of it. Maybe the wood was part of his inheritance but it did not matter. He remembered the crying mother and that mattered so much more.

“I will father, Right now.”

Gorm only nodded and for a moment it seemed like his father’s eyes glazed over for a moment.

Arne hurried back through the busy market with the yew log under his arm and Svend following him like a very oversized dog.

On his way Arne thought over time and again what he wanted to say to the lady and the lord of the house or their bondsmen for that matter.

“I am Arne, so of Gorm and I bring you a gift from my father. I do not understand what it means but perhaps you will.”

NO!

“I am Arne son of Gorm and I bring you a gift from my father. I do not understand what it means but we feel for you. My father does and so do I...”

NO!

“I am Arne son of Gorm and I bring you a gift from my family. We feel for you and your loss. Somehow this wooden log seems important and perhaps helpful...”

Arne reached the door of the majors house and stopped, still unsure of the words he wanted to say. Everything seemed so inadequate and senseless. That piece of wood under his arm, what could it possibly mean other than an insult on top of the pain? Had his father lost his mind? But not, that could not be. Arne had seen pain in his father's eyes too. So Arne stood there before the great hall as the busy horse market flowed around him not knowing what to say or what to do.

The decision was finally made for him.

Oak scrapped against oak as heavy latches were moved on the other side of the door. Arne staggered back almost in panic but Svend's solid, steady form kept him from running or falling.

Arne looked into a pair of eyes sharp and bright like those of an eagle. The voelva towered over him. Her sharp gaze softened after a moment, the sharp edges around her lips and chin became a little looser as she looked at Arne, then Svend and finally the piece of yew in the boys hands.

"Fire's keeper" she said, "Yes, I was waiting for you. Come in Arne. You are here at the perfect moment."

"How do you know my name?" Arne asked, again part fearful and part utterly confused and even somewhat flattered.

"I know things." The voelva replied, "That is what I am. And the piece of yew you brought holds a significance. Your feelings are right. Now do come. We have things to do."

"We, mylady?"

"Mylady was my mother. Call me the voelva. Everyone does. And yes, we because you hold significance too. And now by Odin's eye come in."

Arne entered the great hall but no one was in a mood to greet him. On the tables left and right men and women althings and bondsmen alike sat grieving, sadness written all over their faces. Some were drinking but out of despair with no joy and laughter in it. The met merely washed down their despair for a moment.

At the end of the hall where the lady and lord of the house sat quietly with their heads hanging down two benches had been moved together covered with the furs of wolves and bears to serve as the final resting place for a young man.

Arne twitched in fear and repulse. The boy was his age. He had the same blonde hair. The small face was white as snow, already taking on the bluish hue of those on their way to Helheim as the skin began to stretch taunt over the delicate cheekbones and the jaw.

"Halfdan died of a fever. Or rather of the evil intent of the one who sent the fever." The voelva said.

So it was true after all. Foul magic had killed the major's son.

"Yes," the voelva said like she had heard Arne's thoughts, "but we can preserve some part of him if we act fast."

And the voelva started to sing. It was a sound that came out of her belly and her throat but most of all it was a sound that came out of her soul.

“Eeeeeiiiihhwwaaaaahhz...”

“Eeeeeiiiihhwwaaaaahhz...”

“Eeeeeiiiihhwwaaaaahhz...”

Arne’s hands began to tingle, the yew wood log in his hands warmed up although no flame had touched it and it began to vibrate along with the voice and the body of the voelva. . The wood responded to what seemed to be both a prayer and a calling. Fiery sparks appeared out of nowhere, fireflies dancing between the dead boy, the voelva and Arne and finally settling into the yew wood but without igniting it. Arne felt every hair on his body rise and his spine tingle. Again it was not fear. It was just that his body reacted to the power that the voelva called forth with her voice even if he did not understand anything of what was going on. It was awe he felt deep inside, a deep instinctive respect for the power he felt around him.

Finally, when the voelva ended her song and the last spark had disappeared the wood still hummed the song of life in Arne’s hands. Gently the voelva took the yew wood out of Arne’s hands and placed it on the benches, just above Halfdan’s still head.

“Now sleep well, dear.”

Arne suddenly noticed that the major, his wife and all the other guests in the hall had gathered around them to watch and stand in awe just like he did.

The major cleared his throat and while he wrapped his arm around the shoulders of his wife he proclaimed with a hoarse, broken voice:

“Bring drink and food for all of us. Light the candles and the torches until the hall shines like Odin’s golden hall. We bid farewell to a warrior going forth and coming home.”

“But we got something else to do.” The voelva whispered as she took Arne’s hand. She led him to the door as the servants began to mill around to carry out the instructions of the major. But no one questioned or tried to stop the odd pair as they left the hall.

“What...? Arne began but the voelva placed a finger on his lips, sealing them.

“No what now,” the seeress said, “We still have things to do. Today is the time to do. You will have plenty of time to understand later.”

Svend was still waiting outside. Of course he had not moved even an inch while his human friend was away. Svend looked at the voelva, their eyes met for a moment then he followed her and Arne. The crowd in the market place parted before them like the sea parted before the bow of a dragon boat and soon Arne could see where they were heading – the smithery.

The blacksmith stood outside his shop like a tower, like he was waiting for them. He was. Covered in black grime and sweat with his hammer in hand he had been waiting for them. His eyes gleamed in his lined face, they gleamed with the same fire as the eyes of the voelva.

“They behind me.” The voelva said to Arne and Svend. Arne nodded without thinking. Now he noticed that the area was strangely empty and vacated. Only the four of them were still around.

The seeress stopped about ten feet in front of him and drove the tip of her stave into the ground.

“Why?” was all she asked.

“Because an old score needed to be settled. All of my family have always repaid their debts.” The smith replied.

“So you cursed a boy, almost a child?”

“A punishment is supposed to be just that. A punishment that hurts.”

“Yes, it is. And for the boy whose life you took you shall now have yours.”

The blacksmith roared and spit forth a pointed flame at the voelva but she deflected it with the head of her stave. And in turn released a flame of her own from her wand, only to see it blown apart into tiny sparks by a blow of the blacksmith’s hammer.

A battle of fire erupted between the two sorcerers, red flames from the smith and bright yellow and golden ones from the voelva, flying back and forth, hissing, crackling, heating up the surrounding air until it became almost unbearable to breathe.

“STOP!” Arne cried out. He stood helplessly, unable to end this senseless fight. Svend rose on his hind legs, his neighing a battle cry, a call to arms and a call to reason at the same time. A moment ago Arne had felt helpless and alone. The next moment it all changed. He felt one with the voelva and with Svend. HE could feel the drumming heartbeat of his horse friend and the arcane power in the voelva’s blood and for a moment that lasted only a second and forever the three of them were one.

A burst of golden flames passed by the swirling hammer and hit the blacksmith in the face, entered his body through his mouth and filled him from the inside. HE staggered back, his cry muffled by the cleaning fire that now ran through his veins to burn away the hatred and the craving for revenge.

The blacksmith fell like a tree, crashed to the ground and lay silent.

“Now he can rest and heal. I will see to that.” The voelva spoke.

The moment of complete union passed and Arne was back being Arne, separate from Svend and the wise women no matter how much he yearned for the connection to continue.

“Did you .. did you ... kill him?” he stuttered.

“No, “ the voelva shook her head wearily, “ He spoke of punishment. His own already lasted too long. He needed to be stopped, not killed.”

“But he is a murderer. The murderer of a child.”

The voelva looked at Arne, “Yes and a victim at the same time, Leave that to me young friend. Your father awaits you. Return home until we meet again. And give the regards of Vadra to your father and to your mother Helga.

Arne opened his mouth to ask how she knew his parents but Vadra the voelva again sealed his lips with his finger.

“Not this time. This is a story to be told another day.”

THE END

(and the beginning)