

Axe of Iron: Confrontation



Halfdansfjord, Vinland, late summer, AD 1008

Out of long habit, the Northman, Gudbjartur Einarsson, carefully examined his surroundings every morning. He climbed a ladder to the palisade parapet and circled the settlement looking out over the bay, the fen, and surrounding countryside. Alert for the slightest danger or anything that did not belong in his world, the daily ritual, and a wave from the two tower guards assured him that all was well. He turned back toward his longhouse, his immediate thoughts being the coming adventure for his sons, Ivar and Lothar, and their small friend Yola.

He entered the house to find his sons finishing their morning meal. “When you have finished your meal, go and get Yola. Yesterday, I spoke to his mother about the hunt. He will be ready to go,” Gudbjartur said.

Watching his sons run excitedly from the house, Gudbjartur shook his head at such exuberance on a full stomach. He rubbed his stomach at the thought of food, and smiled a greeting to his wife as she moved the kettle from the hearth tripod to the stone warming ledge.

She ladled the steaming fish chowder into a bowl and handed it to him. “They are really looking forward to this, Gudbj,” Ingerd said.

Gudbjartur sat down in his high seat and began to eat. “It is time. This is their right of passage to manhood.” He noisily slurped the thick liquid from the bowl, leaving a few chunks of cod in the bottom, which he ate with gusto. Suddenly he stopped chewing, pulled a long rib bone from his mouth, and examined it ruefully. “I could have choked on this, Ingerd.”

She chuckled at him. “That is why we should *chew* our food instead of bolting it down in chunks. Honestly, you are as bad as the boys.”

Grinning at her, he got to his feet and placed his empty bowl and spoon with the other dirty utensils. “Thank you, the chowder is delicious.”

“It should be we made it with butter and milk. You ate so fast I am surprised you could taste it.”

“I tasted it all right. I am in a hurry, the boys are anxious to get going.” He watched her for a moment. “They will be men soon, Ingerd, whether we want them to or not,” he said gently, mindful of her feelings on the subject.

She leaned against the wide shoulders of this man she loved so much, warm and content as he put an arm around her, she gazed up into his pale blue eyes. “I know. I know. But they seem so young.”

“They are young. But soon they will be men. You were only two years older than Ivar is now when you birthed him.”

“And well I know it. The birthing was very hard for me and that is why we have had no more children. Something came loose in me.”

“I know, Ingerd. I think that is why the gods sent us Lothar. He is our son, too, as if you birthed him.”

The boys rushed in with Yola in tow, effectively shattering the moment, much to Gudbjartur’s relief.

He gave Ingerd a final squeeze, released her, and gave his attention to the three boys. “I have told you what you can take with you, and I see you have your packs and weapons in order. The only food we will have is dried meat. We will use it if the hunt is unsuccessful.” His glance played over the

three boys. A slight smile pulled at the corners of his mouth. Their barely checked exuberance, as they listened intently to him, caused a flush of pleasure through his chest. "Say goodbye to your mother, and we will be off."

The best the boys could manage was a perfunctory peck on her cheek before they ran from the longhouse. Gudbjartur hugged and kissed Ingerd, examined her appreciatively at arms length, and then hugged and kissed her again. Then he picked up his gear and walked from the longhouse to begin the much anticipated hunting expedition.

Ingerd watched him go, a heat rose in her, she smiled, and hugged herself with pleasure. She began to clean up the mess from the morning meal, whistling softly as she worked.

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As Gudbjartur walked into the settlement commons he saw his chieftain, Halfdan Ingolfsson, talking to the two men tending the charcoal kiln. He joined them, not interrupting the conversation beyond a nodded greeting.

"It takes all day for the charcoal in the kiln to cool enough to shovel it out when we open it up in the morning," Grimir said, glancing from Halfdan to Gudbjartur. "After we empty the kiln it takes a short time to fill it back up with wood and light the fire. We throw the wood in through the vent hole on top until the kiln is full then we light it at the bottom opening." He gestured as he spoke. "After it catches fire we place the flat rock over the vent and roll another rock in front of the bottom opening. By dawn the next day we have a kiln full of charcoal." The man grinned through the grim that covered his face.

"The woodcutters haul the dry wood in for us," Barthur, his companion, said. "We would rather do this than cut wood, but I know we will be swapping jobs soon. As you told us, Gudbj, it keeps us from getting bored."

Gudbjartur acknowledged with a nod, and spoke to Halfdan. "The boys are waiting for us."

They took their leave of the kiln tenders, shouldered their packs and weapons, and headed for the landing beach to meet the boys.

“They gave me a report on the winter charcoal supply,” Halfdan said, as he and Gudbjartur strolled slowly along the log walkway toward the main gate. “The bins in each longhouse are almost full. Then they will pile the excess charcoal under the shed roof next to the kiln until they judge there is plenty for winter. I left that up to them, they know more about it than I do.”

“I spoke to them several days ago. Since they started using the new kiln their job is much easier. The charcoal is all made of dry birch wood. Birch will give us better heat than the pine we normally use,” Gudbjartur said as they walked through the gate and down the hill toward the landing beach.

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Further conversation about the charcoal supply ended when the three boys saw the men and ran to meet them.

“Which boat are we taking?” a breathless Ivar asked.

“This one,” Gudbjartur said. He swung his pack aboard. “Your mother has already put a pack of dried meat aboard in case you boys do not kill us fresh meat.”

“We will not fail, father,” Lothar said, a determined look on his thin face.

Gudbjartur could not remember the boy ever calling him, father, before. He was taken aback.

“I never thought you would, Lothar,” the big man said, his hand on the boy’s shoulder in a rare display of affection. Gudbjartur glanced at the smiling Halfdan, and turned away, unaccustomed to the feeling one word had brought to him. He carefully laid his bow, quiver of hunting arrows, and axe across the boats thwarts. “Load your gear boys. We will launch the boat and get underway,” Gudbjartur said.

The boys gathered their scattered gear and loaded it aboard. The two men, eagerly assisted by the chattering boys, pushed the boat’s bow off the beach and all clambered aboard.

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They sailed up a wide river until the wind off the bay became too variable from the dampening effect of the forest

to be of any further use. The three boys had taken turns at the steering oar as the hunting party progressed inland. At the moment, Ivar had the helm.

Gudbjartur pointed ahead to the mouth of a tributary stream that issued from a small lake partially hidden back in the forest. “Steer for that stream, Ivar. Beach the boat anywhere along the left hand bank. Lothar, you, and Yola lower the sail just before the boat reaches the shore.”

The two boys craned forward to watch the shoreline, the tag end of the halyard clenched in their hands, ready to jerk it loose from the cleat and lower the sail. Lothar glanced anxiously at Halfdan, who watched them from his seat on the bow thwart. He smiled and nodded at him, but said nothing.

Ivar put the helm over and the boat headed into the shore.

“Now Yola,” Lothar hollered, as he jerked the halyard loose. The small sail plummeted down the mast as the boys lost their grip on the halyard, covering them as they lost their footing and fell in a heap when the boat ground to a halt on the stones of the stream bank.

“See, there is nothing to it.” Halfdan said, as he and Gudbjartur pulled the sail off the two struggling boys. “You dropped the sail at just the right time.”

Ivar, hands on hips, stood at his place in the stern with a smile on his face as he watched his brother and Yola regain their feet.

“What are you grinning at?” Lothar asked.

“I saw the whole thing,” Ivar said, his superior attitude coming to the fore. “That was a pretty funny way to lower the sail. You are supposed to lower it hand-over-hand, not just turn loose of the halyard.”

“We know that. It was heavier than we thought and the halyard slipped through our hands.”

The grinning Gudbjartur caught a wink from Halfdan as the two men, barely able to keep from laughing aloud, enjoyed the moment with their young charges.

“All right, boys. You all did well. Roll the sail up on the boom, like we showed you, and secure the boat to a tree. Then

we will go find a good place to hunt around yon lake,” Gudbjartur ordered, gesturing inland.

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They walked in single file, with Halfdan and Gudbjartur in the lead, around the shoreline to the north shore of the closest of the several small lakes in the area. Moose tracks seemed to be everywhere. Well-used game trails naturally funneled animals to the shoreline of the lake the men had selected for the hunt.

Gudbjartur briefed the boys on his plan. “There is no wind so the moose will not smell you. You all saw the deep game trails winding down here from the forest. The moose use these trails every evening when they leave their bed grounds to water and feed on bulrushes on the lake bottom. Halfdan and I will find hiding places for you that will allow us to drive the animals to you. If we spring the trap at the right moment the moose will come right by your positions when they run away from Halfdan and me.”

“How will we know when to shoot?” Lothar asked.

Ivar snorted at the question.

“That is a good question, Lothar.” Halfdan entered the conversation to show Ivar that questions were a part of learning. “Each of you knows your range limit for accurate shots. Your quarry is a big moose. Even the calves are big, as you all know. The target you are shooting at is an area in the chest that is as big around as your mother’s stew pot. About like so.” He held both hands out in a circle to demonstrate a diameter equal to the length of a man’s forearm. “The arrow must hit that target to kill him. If you hit him anywhere else, he may die, but he will run away and be lost to us because we probably will never find his carcass.”

“Try to wait until your target is quartering and head away from where you are.” Gudbjartur demonstrated the proper angle with his hands. “If you get that angle, aim for the paunch, just back of the short ribs. There is no heavy bone there and all his vital organs are lying low in his chest cavity when he is on his feet. Your arrow will slice forward into his

chest cavity, hitting a tub full of guts, the liver, at least one lung, and maybe the heart. It will be a killing shot.”

“Aye that is the best shooting angle on any game we kill with an arrow. Another important thing to remember when you get an arrow into him and he runs away: let him go, wait for Gudbj and me.” Halfdan looked at each of the boys. “Yola, why should you wait?”

Yola looked at his two friends and then back to Halfdan. “Because we should give him time to bleed to death.”

“That is right!” Halfdan exclaimed enthusiastically. “If the animal has not seen you he will not know what happened. Maybe the wound will only burn. He will feel secure because you have not scared him. As he weakens he will lie down. Why do we want him to lie down Ivar?”

“So he will bleed to death quietly rather than run away in a panic until he finally drops dead. We would probably lose him then. And the meat would not be any good if he was all heated up when he died.”

Halfdan smiled and nodded. He winked at Gudbjartur and stepped aside.

“Good, Ivar,” Gudbjartur said, looking from boy to boy. “Remember, we will all be focused only on animals coming to the lake from this game trail. There may be others but ignore them unless they are about to step on you.” The boys laughed. “You will see the moose before they get to the lake. They will be nervous. Their senses will be on full alert. Stay still and do not take a shot no matter how tempting it is. Wait until they relax and Halfdan and I decide the time is right to drive them to you. You may get only one shot so take your time. Make your shots count. All it takes is one well placed arrow and the moose is meat on the board.” He grinned at them. “All right, I think you all know what to do. Now, check your arrows and knives. Make certain they are sharp. You will have need of them, I think. Are there any questions before we lay our trap?”

The boys shook their heads. They busied themselves giving each arrowhead a final swipe or two with their whetstones. All were understandably nervous.

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A short time later the boys were well concealed and the trap was laid. The men separated and each walked to a position across the lake from each other and with the targeted game trail roughly centered. When they sprung the trap each man would cover half the shoreline as they converged on the quarry, thereby ensuring the flushed animals would have to make their bid to escape right by the three hidden boys.

While he waited in concealment Gudbjartur cut a short piece of green willow shoot, chewed the end until it frayed and softened, and used it to scrub his teeth. For him it was a daily ritual. He watched the scene unfold much as he and Halfdan had told the boys it would. All three were concealed in the underbrush well back from the game trail.

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As the shadows lengthened toward day's end, a trio of moose stepped from the dense forest surrounding the lake. The lead animal, an old cow, paused and carefully surveyed the lake environs. Her sensitive nose tested the still air while the huge ears turned this way and that listening to the cries of birds and the buzz of insects. Her senses told her that all was well. She continued down into the willow scrub along the lake shoreline. She and her calves nibbled at the tender tips of willow before stepping into the shallow waters of the lake. Their kind did this same thing, just before sundown every day, when hunger and thirst drove them from their bedding grounds to begin another night of foraging.

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Gudbjartur watched the cow moose and two large calves walk with caution from the cover of the forest. The quarry grazed slowly through the thick willows along the shoreline before wading into the lake. The animals began to relax as they grazed along the lake bottom on an abundance of bulrushes and other underwater forage plants, oblivious to the threat lurking nearby.

Gudbjartur waved to Halfdan and the two men began closing in from both sides of the boys' position. They walked along the shoreline making no attempt at stealth. Gudbjartur

figured that he and Halfdan would be almost up to the animals before they became alarmed. If everything worked as planned the three moose should pass the boys' hiding place as they ran from the lake.

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Five hundred sea leagues to the northeast of Halfdanskjörd, the four ships of the settlement's trading flotilla to Greenland rolled and plunged in the heavy swells of the strait separating Helluland and Greenland. The flotilla had sailed from the strait between Markland and Helluland, through the southerly current flowing along the Helluland coast the preceding morning, and into the open ocean area of relatively slack currents between Helluland and Greenland.

Seabirds had recently joined the ships, diving and swooping in their constant quest for food, indicating land was not far off. Estimating there were some fifty leagues remaining in the voyage for the ships bound for Eiriksfiörd, Greenland, Björn Kjetilsson, flotilla commander, signaled the ships to heave-to into the wind as they approached a bank of thin fog and sea mist.

Fog banks of varying thickness and the pervading sea mist had been their constant companion during the twelve days of the voyage. Although it had not been necessary to heave to, the Fog Giant and reduced visibility preyed on Björn's mind. Command of more than his own ship weighed heavily on him. He thought the cargoes of green timber would be most welcome in both Greenland settlements and should induce the local farmers to part with all manner of trade goods from both Iceland and Vestfoldland. The ships had managed to stay in contact while running in the thin fog by sailing in close company and frequently sounding their bullhorns. The sound of the horns reverberating from ship to ship lent a surreal quality to the damp blanket as the ships alternately appeared and disappeared within its shroud.

After turning into the wind to heave-to, the heavily laden ships remained close together, as they paid-off slowly downwind, their unfettered sails flapped loosely, and the crews shouted back and forth.

“If the visibility was not so poor the masthead would have the clouds of Greenland in sight to leeward. We will part company when the coast is sighted. As agreed, Athils and Sweyn will steer for Lysufjord and Brodir and I will make for Eiriksford,” Bjorn shouted across the narrow expanse of water separating the ships. “Good luck trading with the Tornit on your return voyages. I hope you kill many walrus with them. We will see you at Halfdansford before winter.”

“Brodir,” Sweyn shouted through cupped hands, “I hope you fill your ship with the trade goods we need in Halfdansford. Good luck trading with the Thalmiut on your return voyage, Bjorn. Trade them out of another pair of those big dogs.” He waved and turned back to his waiting crew to get his ship underway.

Shouted farewells drifted across the water as crews bid their opposite numbers farewell and sails were sheeted home. A freshening wind out of the northwest began to blow the tatters of fog away and the flotilla rapidly gathered way as each ship answered her helm and steadied on course.

The ships would shortly come under the influence of the current sweeping into the north along the coast of western Greenland, speeding them toward their individual destinations. This fast-moving current would be especially useful to the two ships bound for Lysufjord, more than one hundred leagues north of Eiriksford.

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