Leseutdrag fra "Torn Avenger"

Joyous cheers awoke Alv Gunnulfsen. He opened his eyes and blinked from the morning light streaming through a small window. A head of short-cropped hair blocked his view. Beside him, the bony shape of his slave, Hedin, rose and sank peacefully with each breath.

Alv lifted his head off the mattress of fur and hay and listened.

Outside, someone shouted, "A boat is coming!" Quick footfalls sounded on the earth path that passed his house.

A boat? It had to be his older brother Joar, returning from war. Finally!

Hedin stretched and emitted a lazy moan. "What's going on?"

Alv dislocated from him and immediately regretted losing his lover's bodily warmth. "Joar is back. I think." He gave Hedin a quick kiss on the corner of his mouth, sat on the side of the mattress, and collected his clothes—loose pants and a light coat made of gray fox fur.

"You care more about him than about me," Hedin teased with a grin.

"Pfft." Alv mock-slapped his arm. "You know well there is only man in my life, and that's you."

As the second son of Norse earl Gunnulf Haraldsen, he could live the way he wanted. He wasn't going to inherit anything, so he wasn't expected to do anything either, like preparing for war or marrying a woman. As long as he behaved in a manly enough manner among others—though that wasn't strictly required for a medicine man—and contributed to the village life, no one questioned who he slept with.

His heart raced with excitement at the thought of seeing his brother again. It had been several weeks. Though Joar was the favorite son of their parents, and the two brothers were as different as brothers could be—twenty-three-year-old Joar big and strong as a bear, and twenty-one-year-old Alv thin and lanky—they had always loved and stood up for each other.

Joar was the village champion, a cunning, fearless conqueror on the prowl for more land, more slaves, more food, and more people to pay rent for living on his land. High on previous successes, Joar and his men had decided to attack a new trading settlement north of their village. Some of the people in Bjorgvin had recently emigrated from Europe to exchange goods for dried cod. Seizing their lot of uncommon merchandise would give Joar a solid reputation and esteem among the neighbor earls, and word might even reach King Knútr himself.

Alv didn't care for reputation or esteem. He had always lived in the shadow of his older brother and didn't mind his position of unimportant, second-rank son. Some may consider him a weakling for avoiding fights and conquests, but the truth was he refused to have someone's blood on his hands. He wanted peace, stability. He enjoyed his medicine man apprenticeship, practicing sports, playing games with friends, and drinking *mjød* until long after the big, red sun had descended beneath the horizon in the West.

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