



# SAGA OF THE RED VIKING

MIKA KRISTIAN AHLFORS





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# FIRST SAGA





## FJORDLAND SOMETIME AROUND 960 A.D.

The eyes of Torvald the Red came almost out of their sockets and his veins were bursting. His temples were trembling as he bit his teeth together and blood started to rush into his head. His heart beat once and immediately his eyes were glowing red, like the sun that was setting behind the iron mountains in the horizon. Did his eyes turn red because of the pure anger or was there smoke in the air? One couldn't be sure, but the eyes of this berserker were red and scary. A loud screech revealed that a tooth must have broken when Torvald had clamped his jaws shut. Foamy wave crests regurgitated from his mouth onto his beard, it was like someone had poured foamy beer from a beer mug all over the place. The white scar that went across his face, made by a Holy Roman Empire cladius in some ancient battle, was now glazing red as Torvald was raging himself into fury. He was a born berserker, one that must not be aggravated and this saga is not suitable for sensitive persons. Torvald stood on the pier and fell into a trance. Every emotion that he had sometimes had, joy, grief, embarrassment and pride, were now trivial, they were now turned into anger. Torvald hated, because he loved. He hit, because he was afraid. But who would have had the courage to tell that to Torvald? Or why should have, he must have known that himself without anyone telling him that. Surely he knew himself, or how could he have been otherwise be able to tear everything into shreds on his path and turn into a monster within a few heartbeats, when the world demanded it?

He awakened from his trance for a while and turned his head to see his son one last time before he would be ready to die. This act was not suitable for children's eyes, but his son was a son of a berserker and no one could save him from seeing what would happen next. As he saw his son his face looked compassionate and the scar on his face turned white again. He whispered: »Be strong and I will meet you again in the halls of Valhalla. « He nodded as to say goodbye or as an encouragement to his son who stood behind him on the boat deck. Rage started to build up again in Torvald's veins and the scar on his face turned red again. »Torvaldsson! Run!« hissed the rabid old man between his teeth. His eyes

continued to bloat horrendously and his head looked like it could explode any minute like a volcano. Barely three heartbeats passed by and Torvald grab the nearest man with sideburns by ears with his big hands and broke his neck.

Torvald was big as a house and was roaring like a bear that had been awakened in the middle of hibernation. Two men who had surrounded him had daggers in their hands and they attacked raging Torvald. One of them plunged his dagger into the bear pelt vest of the berserker. Torvald cried out and roared like someone had slaughtered a bull as the dagger bit into his flesh through the pelt. The man thrust his dagger deeper and Torvald swung at him with his bear claw. It was like someone had hit his forehead with an oak plank. The man loosened his grip on the dagger, tripped over his own feet and even unluckily hit his head to a harbour buoy to which the knarr of Torvald the Red was tied to. The boat was floating lightly on the waves as its captain was grimly in the middle of his latest survival battle on the pier. The one who had hit his head on the buoy fell unconscious into the water. He sank to the bottom like a bullet that is attached to a string when measuring the depth of the water. Torvald grab the last wrist holding a dagger before it would also be plunged into his berserker's pelt. He didn't care about the blade cutting his arm as he blocked the hit. The last assaulter had fear in his eyes as he saw his dagger bending in the grip of a strong seaman. He was panicking like a prey in front of the predator. Like an unlucky bastard who had tried to rob a Berserker who had been awakened from his hibernation.

Torvald yanked the dagger of the drowned bully off his pelt. The other assaulter emptied his bowels, nasty stench spread into the fresh maritime air. Torvald plunged the dagger upwards through the man's jaw and pierced even his tongue. He left the dagger sticking to the blood gushing corpse on the pier. Even the sea water turned red under the pier as the man twitched and wheezed his last sounds with a dagger in his throat. The blood was gushing like it would have been an inexhaustible natural resource. A bit further away stood two men and their swords were trembling in their hands. They thought they had seen something supernatural. In reality though, Torvald was a regular veteran Berserker who could very well die to the next sword plunge. Nevertheless he would probably refuse to believe that and would go on a roaring rampage for a while. He would take anyone he could with him to Valhalla, before his blood would run dry and he would understand to stop breathe heavily.

Those men who got this Berserker to this mad were originally five. They had

been pressuring fishermen and captains to pay tithing to the mightiest bandit leader of the harbour. He offered a kind of fire and theft insurance to every ship that was floating in the harbour. Torvald had refused to pay though, and he had lost his temper. His heartbeat had started to calm down and he stimulated his heart to beat like it should in Berserker's rage. He took in his hands a huge double-bladed axe that he had carried on his back under the red cape. One couldn't hold it with just one hand. It was a berserker's war axe and it could split a man into halves from head to toe with just one hit. Nobody dared to doubt its juggernaut. As Torvald's heartbeat accelerated, his breathing got heavier and he breathed wheezily through his nostrils. He looked gloom and he took one step forward and swung his axe towards one swordsman. The swordsman tried to block the strike, but the axe of Torvald the Red was too heavy and Torvald's strike had as much power as a whole crew on a Viking ship. The axe made its way through the blockage, the hand holding sword gave in, and the axe bit the man on the shoulder. It didn't split him up though. But at least the sword fell down on the cobblestones at the harbour. The last bandit ran away. Torvald put the heavy axe on the ground and fell exhausted onto his knees breathing heavily. Blood was gushing from the wound on his side, and it got mixed with blood of the attackers. Torvald the Berserker fell over to his side the blood pool and laid there on his cheek on the cobblestones.

## VALHALLA

Torvalsson climbed to the pier and ran to his father as rigid as a wild horse colt with his long legs. He tried to pick his exhausted father from the blood pool but didn't succeed. He didn't have enough strength but luckily some men from the nearest ships came to help him. »Are you dead father?« Torvalsson asked. Men who had run to his help started to console him and told him that his father wouldn't die, his wound just needed bandaging. Berserkers always fell on the ground after battle. The trance took all their strength and all that was left was a beaten up animal breathing heavily on a battle ground. Sometimes berserkers could die due to the exhaustion, but it would take heck of a lot more men than four against one berserker. »Is he coming to his senses already?« asked one young seaman who had come to help. The man holding Torvald shook his head. »Nope, sleeps like a log. He won't wake up tonight.« The young seaman had another troubling question: »Will the bandits come again with more men tonight?«

Pale-faced captain Ingeborg Glass-Eye came to the pier. He had already a rugged voice of an old man although he wasn't that old at this point. He was still already a skilled captain, whose glass eye was valuable war injury that awed. As soon as he stepped on the pier with his boots he had the control. »Carry Torvald to my ship to recover and bind his wounds. My crew will guard his ship tonight. From now on, nobody pays tithing to Finnbog. You all saw how Torvald killed four men out of five. The Earl Olav himself can send his guards to this pier to suppress our rebellion that nobody has seen for a long time. Every man on this pier must take a sword or make a spear out of oar. Those bandits will not blackmail us, the time of intimidation and gathering tithing of the Finnbog family is now over. If Torvald manages to kill four men by himself, then some of you can kill the fifth man!« Ingeborg roared as the sunset reflected from his glass eye. It made him look spooky. He yanked the dagger from the corpse lying on the pier, from its jaw. The dagger was a fine-looking one; one could fight with it against sword although the consequences would be daunting.

»I want to fight too! Give me my father's axe! I'm Erik Torvaldsson!« shouted the leggy redheaded boy who was about nine years old. He was tall for his age, even for a boy from fjords. He grabbed his father's axe to pick it up in the dusk, but he couldn't raise Berserker's axe from the ground no matter how he tried. Men were laughing at boy's defiance. Ingeborg signalled men to quiet down and glared cunningly at the boy with the dagger in his hand. »Take this dagger. You can sting ten times with it before even the most experienced man can swing that axe.« Torvaldsson took the dagger, it was the same dagger which had bitten Torvald just moments ago. The dagger was like a sword in Torvaldsson's hand and it was covered in sticky blood. The blood of Finnbog's brothers and Torvald's caused a war with the help of this dagger.

Ingeborg looked at Torvaldsson and saw a future warrior, maybe even a future chief, who would be an honour to follow if the boy just would make through the night without any serious injuries. Ingeborg's thoughts wondered further to some important decisions. How could he protect the pier, he would have only seamen when the Finnbog brothers came with their green-caped Varangians. You couldn't have any hesitating nor fearful gestures. Feelings had to be hidden from the face. If you were a captain, you had to look like one. There was always a man behind you who wouldn't hesitate to take your place. If you were happy, you couldn't show it. A smiling captain was always hated on long journeys, when sailors had it tough and captain had some reason to smile. Captain couldn't also ever ask for too many advices from the experienced first officers. Captain was trustworthy only then if he could make quick decisions and stood firmly by them. Ingeborg noticed that he had wasted too much time already on these thoughts. He raised his voice so that it could be heard everywhere in the harbour. He took the easy way out and decided to play some time and organized first the watch. »Count to three. I want to have three watches tonight. When Finnbog brothers arrive at the pier, everyone must be ready and armed in a row.« Ingeborg seemed to be again a worthy captain to command the pier. Basically Ingeborg had just a big mouth and nobody believed he could ever be a great chief. As a captain he probably would be the most honourable and would amass a nice fortune. More than those silver earrings and valuable glass eye. He didn't have more war skills than an average peasant, although he had a valuable sword on his sheath. He didn't even trust himself on his own war strategies, he expected sailors to fight with their axes as good they can and didn't make any defensive plans. He realized that maybe



he had stepped into too large shoes by organizing a rebellion against thugs, just on a whim. Ingeborg's posture and bearing attracted his crew's attention and festive feeling of Torvaldsson getting his dagger disappeared. Nobody saw this young man anymore amongst the men. Torvaldsson was astonished and held the dagger which almost had killed his father the mighty Torvald. Here and there men were counting to three. »Well!« said Ingeborg and frowned as it was Torvaldsson's turn. The man next to him wearing helmet poked him and whispered: »Two.« twice before Torvaldsson could mumble the word: »Two.«

»Ok, number ones will start the first watch and it lasts until the North Star has moved half a span.« said Ingeborg and tried to think like Finnbog. What would he do if he was Finnbog? No, Ingeborg couldn't think like a bandit leader. He tried a different approach. How would the chief of Finnbog clan claim the pier back to under his protection? So far as everybody knew Finnbog clan, they would most certainly come and burn the ships. So the main thing to do was organizing how to extinguish fire. Ingeborg ordered men with his ragged voice: »Bring water barrels near the ships, deck boys must extinguish fires every time they see any fire.« Ingeborg was satisfied, he was doing pretty good so far as war chief. And oh well, the satisfaction could be seen on his face for a moment, before it changed into a sour face expression of an experienced captain. Torvaldsson was disappointed as he heard that boys just should carry water. Or wait a minute, he had gotten the dagger, maybe he wouldn't have to run around extinguishing fires. He didn't dare to ask about it, he could end up to the extinguishing patrol if he would ask about it. He would follow the men tonight. Ingeborg decided to speak further. »All available guards need to rest, we need your strength and well-rested men.« Two thirds of the crowd disappeared from the pier. Torvaldsson was still standing when Ingeborg the Cyclops turned his back on him and started to stare the sea with his one good frog eye. The light reflecting from the sea made captain's other eye look like a dark blue diamond.

Torvaldsson's thoughts were wandering. What if father won't wake up? What will happen to me then? Questions larger than life wandered around in Torvaldsson's head. He couldn't think of sleeping and stayed on the pier walking around, even though he was on the second patrol. He watched as the first patrol had gathered itself on the pier. Was everything worth the silver coins that would be saved? Wouldn't it be more reasonable to pay than lie on the bottom of a ship with a stab on your side? Those men were truly incomprehensible stubborn with

their principles. Torvaldsson couldn't avoid nor understand these thoughts, no matter how he tried. Time seemed to have stopped and Ingeborg had disappeared from the pier without Torvaldsson even noticing that.

The boy fell into deep thoughts, he stood there as in a shock without noticing the cold sea wind. He didn't even realize it when first patrol ended their shift and men on the pier changed. Hours went by and Torvaldsson started to doze off while still standing. He opened his eyes and wasn't sure if he was still asleep or was it time for third patrol shift. He watched as men were running towards the Northern end of the pier. A lot of folk had gathered there. Some of the men turned back. They started to wake up rest of the sleeping men who stormed to the pier from their ships. Suddenly the pier was crowded as it would've been the New Moon's festival. All of a sudden a ship caught on to fire on the Northern end of the pier. »They have Greek fire!!« shouted someone a bit further away, near the fire. Immediately as another ship went on fire and as two men on the pier were burning like torches, the chaos was ready. Fresh breeze from the sea spread sparks to other ships and suddenly the whole harbour was lit up. The fire swallowed, even gorged ships into its vortex. The judgement day of Ragnarök.

Others attacked those pyromaniacs, deck boys tried insistently to extinguish fire on ships, but all their efforts were useless, because Greek fire couldn't be extinguished with water, it burned even on surface of the sea. Sailors were cutting ropes to prevent fire from spreading. They cut the ship ropes with axes and knives in the same time as boys were desperately trying to flip over their water barrels. Torvald stood on the pier with his axe and without his shirt. His side was bound with xanthic toe rags, through which the blood was still dripping from the wound. He ran growling towards the Northern end of the pier. Torvaldsson was relieved seeing his father running towards the danger, fires and murderers. Everything would be like it used to be in his world, even for a while. He squeezed the dagger harder in his hand and ran after his father.

## DOOM

On the following morning there were only charred half-sunken shipwrecks everywhere. Six of earl's Varangian guards marched to the pier. They asked for information on what had happened from some of the people who were standing there and look grim and worried. One of the former ship owners pointed to Torvaldsson, who had a dagger in his hand. The blood had already dried and was slowly falling off from the steel blade. Guards started to walk towards Torvaldsson. They reached him and asked: »Torvaldsson, where's your old man?« Torvaldsson didn't answer immediately, and one older Varangian guard became irritated and snapped: »Whatever, orders apply to you as well. Take the boy with us!« They took Torvaldsson's dagger and promised to give it back later. Guards helped Torvaldsson to stand up by supporting him from his armpits. Torvald stood on the pier couple of yards away with his shiny and bloody berserker's war axe in his hands, shaft standing on the ground. He had a red scarf on his head. Red beard made him look like he was made of the colour red. The sun had already high in the sky and it warmed up slightly the spring morning. Seagulls were screaming in the sky. The sun gleamed on the water and waves swept over charred shipwrecks. The sound of the waves was calming. The air smelled like tar and smoke. Like an ancient pine forest was burning in the neighbouring village. Torvald didn't say anything, but he was smiling tiredly. He didn't think it was necessary to hide his feeling nor weariness. He didn't have actually any reason to smile, and the smile didn't express anything else about his feelings but the fact, that he had given up the battle for his life long time ago. He was tired of this world of everlasting wars.

The Varangians flinched as they saw Torvald and the oldest of them encouraged himself and said: »Torvald, hand over your axe and come with us to the Thing.« Torvald's face lost all expression and he clenched his war axe on which he leaned with both of his hands. »You just had to go and rage like a berserker. Torvald, you've been given a subpoena. You know what it means. Don't make this any harder for your family as it is already.« said the older Varangian. He couldn't

HE HAD TO TRAMP IN KNEE-DEEP SNOW with buckets hanging from the pole on his shoulders, in the darkness that felt like eternity where only the pale moonlight and stars illuminated the path. The diamond-like snow emitted starlight and Northern lights were dancing in the sky, they were said to be made by Lappish witches. If only he could've enjoyed the moment, the incoherence was beautiful, how the smoking wells in the horizon and the sulphuric vapours that rose from the cracks in the earth core didn't go out although the island froze up in the winter-time. This volcanic island lived and pulsed somewhere beneath the frost. Bones of this growing young man evolved and adapted according to hard labour. His thighs thickened and shoulders broadened, his back stayed straight and his chest was strong. It was hard labour that made the best men. There was no point of whining in the middle of the winter, it was already too late.



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