

WELCOME TO THE MEAD HALL

The Neo-Norseman's voice echoed across the vast mead hall and suddenly all eyes were on me. I froze where I stood and observed the unwelcoming stares with a less than admirable dose of trepidation.

I stammered, "Huh?"

"*Jeg sa, 'Hvem faen er du?'*" Trond Trondsen was screaming at me in Norwegian from the comfort of his massive wooden throne.

Even if my own verbal Swedish language abilities didn't suck harder than an Electrolux vacuum cleaner, there's still no way in hell I would have been able to understand his thick *norsk* accent through all the chunky bits of reindeer steak caught in his jowls. It didn't matter, though, because he recognized the expression on my face as one of universally unmistakable stupidity and switched to English.

"Who the fuck are you?!"

Discombobulated from the twelve-odd hours of travel required to reach this remote Norwegian outpost from Oslo, I attempted to remind him that he had agreed several weeks ago to let me interview him. He just stared at me at first, but then a smile broke across his blond-bearded face, which was followed by the most sincerely jovial sound that I have ever heard. Drunken viking laughter is truly a wonder to behold and apparently highly contagious, because everyone else joined in.

Still standing in the doorway with the cold winter wind gusting at my back, I finally slouched inwards and pulled the heavy door

closed behind me. It was covered in ornate Neo-Jelling style carvings of long, twisted animal figures and as I bent closer to admire the artistry in the dim torchlight, my mind drifted towards what little I actually knew about the man whom I had arrived here to interview.

Nicknamed “Troll-Breath” since his youth as the boy with the worst breath in his home city of Trondheim, Trond is a complete throwback to the robust gusto of the original viking glory days of the medieval era. It was his fateful decision, made single-handedly during a fit of drunken rage, that guided his ship and crew of whaling buddies to sail off course towards northern England. The whalers’ subsequent and highly renowned sacking of the Holy Island of Lindisfarne provided both the impetus and inspiration for so many other despondent Scandinavians to follow suit, and as a result the Modern Viking Movement was born. But as is the case with, quite literally, every online report pertaining to the Movement, the rumors about Trond, including his later looting of the Ardbeg Distillery in Scotland and his highly public ritual involving beached whale sacrifice, remained completely unsubstantiated. During our prior email correspondence, he had promised that I could stay with him for a week, and I hoped that length of time would allow me to do a more comprehensive job of uncovering the truth than I had already done in my journey so far.

My thoughts were soon interrupted by the unholy stench of ass mingled together with that of fermentation. The perpetrator, a vicious, little devil dressed all in green, was scampering around on the ground down near my feet. I jumped backwards when he began to grope for my bags and hoisted them out of his reach. He stretched for them in vain, spitting out a harsh string of Irish-tinged profanity. “Give ‘em here, ye muzzy bastard! No feekin’ malarkey, ye hear? I’ll give ye a feekin’ mighty wallop with me shillelagh, I will!”

An unusually lanky modern viking then stepped forward. “Shit’s all right, Rowdy. You can give them bags to that there little fucker. He’ll take ‘em on over to yonder guest quarters for ya.”

I awkwardly relinquished my bags to the little bugger as the lanky viking bent down closer to him.

“Ya git now, ya here?” he admonished. “You git now n' don't ya be messin' nothin' up! I'll be a-comin' right after ya n' there'll be hell to pay if I catch ya causin' any trouble. Now, git!” And with a swift kick to the rear, the diminutive porter scampered away with my luggage.

The viking turned back to face me. “Name's Henrik. I handle the leprechaun wranglin' 'round here. That little bastard ya just met's been assigned to some household chorin' duty for some no good recent mischief. Ya see, we caught his yeller ass makin' some moonshine out in the barn not so long ago. Somehow he'd done managed to smuggle in all them raw materials n' I'll be damned if he didn't set himself up right quick a miniature distillery underneath our very noses. We don't generally keep too close an eye on them bastards once they's been all locked up at night. Hell, he probably coulda even gotten away with all that there hootenanny, too, if he hadn't gone n' started blabberin' all 'bout it soon as he done got himself hammered. So, now's it's all these here chores till he's got himself cleaned up enough to get back on the assembly line 'gain.”

“Assembly line?” I was beyond confused.

The enslavement of numerous leprechauns had been another of Trond's many purported accomplishments, but not one that I had ever suspected of having any foundation in reality, because, well, it had to do with leprechauns for fuck's sake. But as the story goes, the whalers-turned-vikings had been chased out of Dublin after a brazen attempt to lure ordinary Irish citizens into shackles on their vessel for an ensuing life of slavery. Leaving the city ingloriously behind them, they scoured the countryside for pillaging opportunities and coincidentally stumbled upon a pot of gold. A vast leprechaun colony thrived nearby, and the Norwegians subsequently conducted a large-scale enslavement operation.

Henrik didn't seem too surprised by my bafflement.

“Why, a'course.” He smiled. “We got them there little bastards makin' shoes for us on a big ole assembly line down in one of the buildings right here on the property. Sure is lots of booty to be made in the shoe-manufacturin' business, I tell ya what. But I best be gittin' now myself; you have yourself a fine evenin', Rowdy.”

And with that, he abruptly nodded farewell and headed after the short miscreant.

I remained standing there, too dazed to move, when an incredibly attractive woman appeared beside me. Her clothing constituted a modern spin on traditional Norse garb—a colorful apron dress supported by two glinting brooches, only much more form-fitting and low cut than would have been the case in the ancient past. It was as if the outfit's designer couldn't decide to prioritize genuine historic authenticity or ludicrous video game sex appeal and consequently decided to split the difference instead. The result effectively distracted all further thoughts on my part away from folkloric Irish imps, though.

“Would you please follow me?” She smiled.

I just nodded the affirmative and speechlessly trailed after her.

I noticed plenty of other attractive women circulating the length of the great table, attentively satiating the modern vikings' needs so that no mead horn need run dry. Surprisingly many women, actually, considering that Norway is a nation famed for its supposed progressiveness, but I wasn't about to complain; the abundant cleavage felt soothing to my tired eyes. My guide motioned towards a seat near the foot of Trond's throne.

“Would you like a drink?” she inquired. I couldn't tell if she was saying it flirtatiously or if it just seemed that way because of the particulars of her trade and the generally mysterious nature of Neo-Norse Hooters girls.

“I guess,” I answered.

My lack of expressive enthusiasm derived from sensory overload and chronic jet-lag. This functioning mead hall, full of life and activity, on the Edge of Nowhere, Norway provided a stark contrast to both Olafur Shitty-Pants' solemn cottage in Iceland and the juvenile behavioral institute in Geithus. It almost seemed more like the type of immersive experience that tourists would pay top dollar to visit rather than a genuine, authentic thing. It looked and felt like a retreat for medieval enthusiasts to get away from it all and take their minds off of the relentless, downward spiral of human progress.

Personally, I was both frazzled and exhausted. The past few days had been spent traveling solo, wandering the streets of Scandinavian cities alone and occasionally engaging in very limited interaction with baristas, bartenders, and, of course, my previous interview subjects. I had just completed another grueling leg of travel, combining train, bus, and taxi, to reach Trond's remote home in Norway's central Trøndelag region. I had just encountered a supposed leprechaun and a leprechaun wrangler. And I had just given my drink order to a beautiful modern day shield-maiden. I was both simultaneously overstimulated and in the process of shutting down both mentally and physically. If now wasn't the time to throw caution to the wind and go all-in with a gigantic horn full of sweet, sweet mead, then when would be?

The centerfold-worthy lady returned and set my frothy beverage down on the table with a delightful, "*Varsågod.*" I looked from her to it, then back to her, and felt my loins quiver as she walked briskly away.

I stole a glance at Trond on his throne beside me. A large man with long, blond hair and a prominent amulet of Thor's hammer hanging from his neck, he sat unmoving, looking down at me, his face unreadable. Intimidated, I gave a quick grin and turned back to my mead, but before I even had a chance to sample the brew, he suddenly cleared his throat and stood up.

"Be still, my friends. I have a few words I'd like to say," he announced, his voice booming across the entire hall.

The silence was immediate. He surveyed the hushed crowd and began: "A few years back, we endeavored to perform some noble deeds—and perform them, we did! We wrought much honor and glory, not only for ourselves, but for our forefathers as well, who watch over us now from their seats at Odin's hall up high." He paused for dramatic effect. "Most of you know the story of how this all began, but not all of you." His eyes shifted downward to glower at me as he said this. "So, let me tell it from the beginning once again!"

There was a low hum of approval as the men all murmured their agreement.

"I fell into a dark and mournful era," Trond continued. "Prior to that sorrowful stretch, life had been bountiful as it was wont to be in those early days, but the fates rarely allow such high fortune to persist unbroken. First came the untimely demise of my sturdy Saabsteed. 'Arise!' I commanded it, but my words were powerless. It lay stricken where it was, and I had no choice but to call upon the car healers for mending. That cost me a great fortune.

"Not long after that, I received word from one of my closest companions, Rune the Deep-Minded, that he had decided to heed the call of post-graduate study in the realm of the Danes. He soon departed to pursue his degree in maritime law. I lamented the loss of his companionship and felt no small sense of betrayal because maritime law and commercial whaling only seldom make for good allegiances. I counseled him otherwise, but his mind was set. So, we parted as best of friends, but I knew I would sorely miss his quick wit and sharp tongue at our late night feastings.

"And shortly thereafter, the time once again came for us to conduct our whale-raids, and so we set sail. First we plowed the Norwegian Sea, and then we plowed the North Sea, searching for the seed of the minke in all its fertile soil. And as we neared the island of the Anglo-Saxons, I received a most unwelcome electronic communication from my former flame. 'We are no longer together,' the wretched one wrote. 'And when you return from your voyage, I will be gone.'

"Later, when I emerged from my cabin freshly fortified by a bottle of aquavit, I ordered the ship to head to the nearest coast."

His tone was utterly somber and a heavy silence permeated the room.

"We made landfall at Lindisfarne," he continued with a slight smirk. "And we sacked the souvenir shop!"

A cacophony of cheers erupted from the gathered vikings as they uniformly raised their horns to the man speaking.

"The norns wove us an unusual thread," Trond resumed as the noise subsided. "The raid on Lindisfarne was simply the first of many. Our destiny took us far and wide over the whale-road to places of wondrous beauty and unimaginable wealth. And, my friends, we shared some excellent adventures together, too. I, for one, will never

forget the time that old Ture over there nearly got himself smothered to death by a damned walrus in heat when we were up near Baffin Island hunting for ivory!"

Chuckles resounded throughout the hall while a grizzled, old viking seated about midway down the length of the table nodded and grunted. The women nearest to him oohed and ahed in admiration.

"Then there was that time when we were camped out near the banks of the River Shannon in Ireland and ran out of mead," continued Trond. "Knut, being the accomplished drinker and man of quick action that he is, decided to march all the way to Bunratty Castle by himself to acquire more. A good plan, perhaps, except that he forgot his sword, failed to plunder the meadery, and was forced to return empty handed!" Everyone laughed heartily, including a viking who beamed beet red. "There's no doubt about it, we had a good run, a really good run...till that disaster at Stamford Bridge when the wily Lord of Battle decided to favor our Anglo-Saxon enemies...but our fate had been fortuitous before that woesome day.

"And yet, the story of our deeds has gone almost completely unnoticed in the outside world. But that is all about to change. As you all saw earlier, our new guest today, this here Rowdy Geirsson as he calls himself, don't know Norwegian." A murmur of disapproval at this. "But we will forgive him that transgression. You know why he is here. It is the same reason I called for this little reunion to be held in the first place. The weavers of fate have chosen him for the mighty task of recording the glory of our deeds and making them known to the rest of the world!"

Waves of cheering erupted, effectively raising my already heightened sense of self-consciousness. Personally, I liked to think that I had arrived at the mead hall of my own volition, that it was my own impetus that drove me to seek what truth, if any, could be divulged from the rumors of reincarnated viking activity.

With the cheering still shaking the rafters, Trond looked over at me and said, "Drink up, *fremmed*."

I rose to my feet, doing my best not to spill my mead, and looked around. Not knowing what else to say, and desperately hoping to avoid being coerced into giving some dumb speech that I would

surely ruin, I said the first thing that came to mind, and it was probably the best thing that I could have possibly said: “Skål.” The all-purpose Scandinavian word for “let’s cut the shit and start drinking.” I looked at everyone in the room and they all looked at me and then at one another, and in unison, we all lifted our horns and drank deeply.

Or at least I thought we drank deeply. When I lowered the horn, I noticed that my effort was, in fact, completely pathetic. Now, to my defense, I’d like to make it clear that this was a very large horn. It had to have held at least two and a half pints when full, and this was no chugging mead. This wasn’t watered-down, frat-boy horse piss; this was a carefully crafted nectar of the gods. Nonetheless, embarrassment and disappointment, which are never really ever very far away in the game of life, quickly reentered mine with a crushing victory and reaffirmed the fact that I am no viking.

Trond put his arm around my shoulder as I stood gaping at my sorry performance. “Not bad for a *nothing*,” he said curtly.

The crowd hushed and I could feel the color drain from my face. This word, *nothing*, is not a compliment, and a thousand years ago it certainly wasn’t a joking matter to call somebody one. But this wasn’t a thousand years ago and things were obviously done differently now. A thousand years ago, the host wouldn’t have forgotten or disregarded that a guest of honor was even on the way. But then maybe I’m not considered an honorable guest. I don’t really have a whole lot of honor. Maybe he thought of me as more of a glorified, talking pet than anything else.

I just looked up at him, my mouth agape.

His face twitched and then he burst out laughing. “Ah, I’m just messing with you!” Even the gorgeous mead maidens thought that this was hilarious, so I pretended to share their sentiment. “Skål!” he shouted, and all around the drinking began anew.

Trond introduced me to a few of his closest companions and we chatted about the unique advantages of viking diplomacy in international relations, the future challenges presented by locally proposed legislation concerning the heretofore legally undefined, folkloric shoe-manufacturing industry, and the recent, interesting

developments occurring within the viking metal musical sub-genre's unique Sápmi-focused variant. But as the night wore on, the men's attention gradually drifted away from conversation and towards the various mead maidens hovering in ever-increasing proximity.

They tended our mead needs with excellent service and several even exchanged a few polite words with me during those inopportune moments when competition for the attention of Trond and company was at its fiercest. Despite this, my initial thoughts of cavorting gave way to total apathy. The endless deluge of alcohol had dulled my senses and I no longer cared. Besides, unlike the men surrounding me, I didn't flaunt any impressive arm rings or any other blatant symbols of status and wealth. And so there, under the protection of the wooden serpents adorning the mead hall's pitched roof, finally in the company of some real-life modern vikings, and with only the vague ponderings of what the next day might bring, I slipped into the firm grip of drunken darkness.