

STRENGTH OF LEADERSHIP

by

A.R.R. Ash

Valrok crested a hill overlooking a swarded descent that led to an unwallled town built along the coast of the sparkling blue-green water of a fjord. He had never before traveled this far north, into Nordgard, an ungoverned region along the fringes of the trackless tundra.

Valrok took a moment to appreciate the air—clean, fresh, and quiet compared to the miasmic, cacophonous atmosphere of the cities to which he was accustomed.

The brief season of the sun was turning cold and the days short, and the gentle smoke and light from hearthfires already burned in the structures below the descending sun. Single-masted dragonships sat moored along the wooden piers extending into the water.

Yes, he could remain here for some time before those pursuing parties would find him. And, by then, he would be long gone.

Valrok hefted his gunny sack over a shoulder and put a hand to the scabbarded blade at his waist to keep it steady as he descended. The slope near the crest was of higher grade, and Valrok studder-stepped until he reached the gentler include halfway down the hill. From there,

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the walk was easy, across an expanse of planted fields and on to the packed-dirt streets of the town.

What sort of town had no wall? Not even a rampart or palisade? Valrok shook his head at the quaint naivety of the place.

“Hail, stranger!”

Valrok turned his head toward the speaker to see a man, hand raised, attired in breeches and fur coat. Then he glanced back over his shoulder and looked about in the likelihood the man addressed another.

“Welcome!” the man said and went back on his way.

Valrok stood shaking his head. *Who addressed strangers in such a manner?* In the southern cities, at best, such behavior would have marked the man as soft-skulled. More likely, it would have earned him a dagger between the ribs and his possessions dispossessed.

The air was brisk, yet a number of fur-clad townsfolk were about, all looking at Valrok with wide eyes and facile smiles. Even among the cosmopolitan cities of the south, Valrok’s physique often drew attention to him, but this level of attraction was unnerving, and he put a comforting hand to the hilt of his blade.

At sudden, hurried movement to the side, Valrok spun, the sound of metal sliding along metal as he began to pull his blade from the scabbard. Yet he paused, nonplused, sword still half-sheathed, at the unexpected sight. A woman, her head hidden within a fur-lined cowl, hurried toward him holding a cloak out before her.

“You’ll catch a death of cold, young man,” she said as she approached.

Valrok could see that she was not quite old enough to be of his mother’s age, yet too old to be an elder sister.

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“Take this,” she said, her nose and cheeks ruddy. “It’ll warm you.”

As if the cloak still possessed the maw of whatever beast from which it came and might clamp its jaws upon him, Valrok reached out hesitantly for the cloak. He glanced at the woman’s hooded face for any sign of malice or deception but was met with only an ingenuous smile.

Though he would never admit to feeling the chill, his light tunic did nothing to protect against the cold. Donning the cloak, fitting snugly over his burly frame, he felt the soft touch and warmth of the fur.

“Thank you, good woman,” Valrok said, wariness still clouding his tone. He reached to his waist to pull a coin to pay for the cloak.

“Oh, no, young man!” the woman said, throwing up her hands and taking a step back. “I cannot accept payment for a gift.”

A gift? Who gives a gift to a stranger? What sort of mad place did he find himself? Perhaps he would be better off quitting the queer town and facing his pursuers.