

*Styrjöld*

*A Noir short Story by Johann Thorsson  
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The last ship to sail up the Exe that day did so in a quiet rush as the last vestiges of daylight could be seen departing over the western hills. Someone standing on high ground might have remarked that it appeared that the sun set unusually early that evening, as if avoiding the dark ship now sailing past the King's sign; as if it knew what was coming.

*Styrjöld* was a rather broad and flat ship, all covered in pitch so it appeared black as night. The sails were full of a wind that no one felt, and appeared tattered and worn. Those standing on the banks as *Styrjöld* sailed past them would later describe the few above deck crewmen as blonde men with pale blue eyes, as if they had been bleached by the sun. Their skin was tan and weathered. The oddest thing though, was that they kept their gaze firmly towards the south. Furtive glances over their shoulders, and a tense realisation: the ship had a particular smell, someone would later remark.

The black ship docked at the Quay, but none of the crew seemed in any hurry to disembark. Michael Trury was the customs officer on duty and he approached the ship with a certain trepidation. It was unlike most ships that docked here - high and broad vessels that took wool and serge over to France. The *Styrjöld* seemed cloaked in the darkest night. It sat high and still in the water. The Exe didn't so much flow around the boat as it seemed to *avoid* it. Like water on a duck's back.

The crewmen looking out at the Quay and up at the hills on the east side of Exeter - towards the cathedral and beyond - had no smiles. They hardly

looked at Michael, most of them stealing glances down the river and speaking to each other in low voices.

"What is your- "he coughed and cleared his throat.

"What is your cargo and destination?" Michael asked the men he could see. Nothing about their clothing or comportment indicated any rank.

One of the men looked down at Michael and then called out to someone on deck in a language Michael didn't understand. After a while, Michael heard a *thwack thwack* as someone approached the side of the ship. The men cleared away and a man walking with a cane appeared, looking down at Michael and then at the city behind him. He had an eye missing but wore no patch and he stared down at Michael with a single pale blue eye and the cave of an empty eye socket. He said nothing.

"What is your cargo and destination?" Michael asked.

"How deep is the river?" the man said. His accent was stark. Rolled 'rs' and sharp vowels.

"Sorry?"

"The river. How deep?"

More customs officers approached the ship out of curiosity and Michael felt put on the spot.

"The river sounds two fathoms," Michael said. "Why?"

"We will only stay for the night. None of my men will leave the ship. We will pay the dock fee but you will not board."

A dozen men of His Majesty's Royal army had been eating at an inn down the way and had quite agreed over ale and pie that their station in Devon was making them lazy and complacent. As fate would have it, they were walking by the quay at that very moment. One of them remarked about the odd look of the *Styrjöld* and they decided to take a better look.

"It is our duty to board and inventory all vessels that dock," Michael said without much conviction in his voice. He did not like the look of the men at all.

Something inside *Styrjöld* made a dull thump as it banged against the hull. It sounded big.

"Oy," one of the army men called towards the one-eyed captain. "Where are you from then? You're not flying any flags."

"And what is that smell?" another man asked.

The captain seemed to chew on the questions. "Norway," he finally said. His words fell dead and flat. "Northern Norway."

A wind creased the surface of the river and threw a bit of cold air at the men on the dock. The sky threatened rain and thunder, but held it in. "Norway, ay?" the army man said. "We've had some Norwegian ships here. None as pretty as this one though. What brings you here?"

The captain gritted his teeth, turned his head towards the south and seemed to be straining to hear something. He then turned his head back towards Michael and the army man. The rest of the soldiers stood silent and more people were approaching to see the strange vessel. Word travelled quickly.

"I was just askin' 'im about the cargo," Michael said to the army man.

"Our cargo is irrelevant. Just food for the crew. We're a whaling ship, heading out and got pulled here by a current."

"Whaling ship?" The army man said. He looked *Styrjöld* over. "This is no whalin' ship."

"We'll leave at sunrise," the captain said. "None of my men leave the ship. None of your men board."

It was one of Michael's first evenings manning the customs' service by himself. He would really like, more than anything, to let *Styrjöld* be. The captain seemed a man of his word. If they didn't want to be boarded maybe it was best.

But the law was the law, and if it was discovered that Michael let a ship dock in the King's harbour without taking a look at the cargo, without having them pay the small duty requested, he would lose his post. His children had been eating properly for the first time after he got this job and were coughing less. He *needed* this.

"I'm sorry," Michael said. "We have to come aboard and look at your cargo."

"What have you have got on there anyway?" The army man said.

"Some of my men are sick," the captain said. "We wouldn't want it to spread. Just leave us be, and we will be gone in the morning."

"You haven't even got a harpoon," the army man said and then, to Michael.

"They haven't even got a harpoon."

Michael swallowed. His mouth was dry but his palms were sweaty. He wondered what Alice was making the children for their tea.

"You must pay a duty on what you-"

"We are not importing anything," the captain interrupted. "We are not leaving the ship and not buying anything from you. We will leave in the morning."

"The law is the law, captain," the army man said. "You will do as the customs officer asks of you or we will have no choice but to commandeer the ship and its cargo completely. You agreed to this the moment you sailed past the King's sign."

The captain of *Styrjöld* looked down at Michael and at the growing group of men now assembled on the dock. He delivered curt orders to his men in a language Michael didn't recognize and then stood in silence.

"Well?" the army man asked.

Michael thought of the way Alice kissed him that morning.

The crew of *Styrjöld* could be heard moving things around inside the ship, sounds of chests being dragged and doors shutting, barrels rolling and again something heavy thumped against the side. After a tense silence on the docks, someone arrived at the captain's side and said something for his ears only.

"One of you can come aboard," the captain said over the side of the ship.

"You," gesturing at Michael.

And so it was that a gangway was placed between the ship and the quay and Michael, customs officer of his Majesty the King, took slow furtive steps onto *Styrjöld* and into her holds.

A provisions supplier from Frankwraithe&Lewden joined the army regimen at the dock and looked at the black ship, through which Michael was now being led. Down deep and cramped corridors, into tight cargo holds and cramped living quarters, Michael was allowed to walk under supervision, told to look and record in his ledger but not touch. Much of the cargo Michael didn't understand, and he was offered no explanation. The men leading him through the ship were generous with the light from dirty oil lamps but in a storage room they had tried to keep Michael from entering, they kept the lamps well to themselves, allowing only glances at what appeared to be bales of oily black wool.

And it was this the King would be most interested in.

"What, erm... What is this?" Michael asked.

The man standing next to Michael shook his head.

"I need to know what this is. Are you carrying wool through English waters? What is your destination?"

Nothing Michael had seen on board made him think the ship was a whaling vessel, but he couldn't for the life of him figure out what the ship's main purpose might be. The holds were many but small, so it was not meant to carry large amounts of anything. He was sure the roundabout way they had walked through meant that they deliberately avoided some rooms, but Michael was dizzy and confused. He was not sure if he had missed anything, but to move wool through Exeter, of all places, and to avoid paying a duty was criminal. He might have overlooked the crew holding slaves - he had suspected that this was what he would find on board: a mass of black bodies in some large hold - chained and quiet with pleading eyes in the unlit darkness.

"We will need to get a sample of this," he said and pointed at the bales. "I need to take," he said. He reached out to show them what he meant and they grabbed him to keep him from touching the bales.

"Enough," one of the men said. His jaw was broad and his hair long and unwashed. Pale blue eyes shone in the light of the lamps and held Michael in the gaze of wide black pupils. "Enough! You go."

Their hands on him, dragging and pushing him through the tight corridors of *Styrjöld* put a flame in Michael. They let him go at the gangway and as he walked down, humiliated, he looked at the crowd gathered.

"Board it," he said to the army men, who grinned. "Arrest the men and confiscate the cargo. They have black wool aboard."

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Christopher stuffed small bales of what appeared to be tobacco into the furnace of the King's Pipe in the Custom House, the chimney sending slow plumes of black smoke into the air. The embers at the base of the furnace had still been glowing from the day's work, like angry eyes staring back at him from the ash.

The wind was blowing a soft firm north-east and the smoke that rose from the pipe did so slowly. It slid into the air like an eel, up and searching over the city itself. As Christopher fed the contraband from *Styrjöld* into the pipe, his belly rumbled and he tried not to think of the work he had yet to do before he could eat and go to sleep. The sun had long set but the orders were to burn the contraband that very night.

They had thought it was black wool, which was the reason for the furore that evening. They said the ship was from Iceland but what few crewmen

Christopher had seen were quite tan, so it had probably been sailing from somewhere far south.

The captain of *Styrjöld* and most of the crew had protested the second boarding of the ship, but particularly the taking of the contraband tobacco. It ended in bloodshed, and most of the crew were now in His Majesty's gaol and the ship detained until such time as the Icelandic crew paid their tariffs. Two of the crewmen died fighting for the cargo and an English soldier was missing.

He'd rather like a bit of bread and ale, Christopher thought as he fed the contraband into the pipe. Maybe a slice of apple and onion to go with it. The contraband was a few bricks of thick and tarry tobacco and stank like a horse dead from disease and left out in summer heat. Why anyone would smoke that was beyond him.

It burned hot and slow. Christopher didn't see it, but the plume of smoke that rose from the chimney of the Custom House was moved by the wind over the city and resembled ink in water. The people of Exeter would be getting ready for bed and Christopher dearly longed for his own. It would be too late to bother Emily once he was done stuffing the odd tobacco into the furnace.

After the fight on the dock and aboard the ship, dock workers had been called out to move the cargo into the holds by the river itself.

Christopher heard that part of the cargo included wild animals in cages, chests of silver and a number of books and artifacts from the furthest ports in Asia.

As the people of Exeter fell asleep, the smoke from the King's pipe curled and crawled along the streets and slipped between door and brick to find the people sleeping. The gray silk of the smoke entered the homes of the wool trade-rich and the piss-poor and it mixed with the air that sleepers breathed.

No one slept well that night. Children mumbled furtive pleas for help and adults woke, shaken and wide-eyed staring into the darkness of a bleak night, from nightmares that spoke the truth of their lives. They had seen how their future looked, and not all of it was pleasant. Knowing the path of your life meant knowing it would end and robbed it of all mystery.

The crewmen aboard *Styrjöld*, now in gaol, had fought like animals once they got started, and had really not wanted the King's men to board their vessel. They only relented when soldiers had shot two of them.

As Christopher heard it, they had only sailed up the river Exe to avoid something worse what was giving them chase, though the captain would not elaborate beyond a mention of a devil in the sea.

Christopher took a deep breath, just as a wind pushed against the smoke rising from the chimney and a plume shot out from the flames into the room. Fingers of hot smoke slid into his lungs. Christopher coughed.

Of all the people who breathed in the mysterious smoke that night, Christopher got the worst of it. He inhaled a pure and undiluted dose of the black tobacco, more than any eastern seer had ever dared partake of at once. He staggered backwards into the wall and fell down, muttering nonsense. He was no longer in the furnace room of the Custom House in Exeter, in his mind he was seeing the most fantastic visions.

He watched as a sickness struck the people of Exeter. He saw great metal carriages on rails travel up and down the country and the end of the wool trade. He saw the western colonies, massacring and pushing the natives westwards. Christopher saw a war, men in long trenches, frightened and hungry and shot down as they ran and then again, another war, starving men in stripes as bombs rained down, impossibly, from ships in the sky. Explosions in Exeter, destroying much of the city. Christopher saw an explosion so terrible that it seemed to contain the fury of the sun itself, destroying a city far in the east.

He had no capacity to interpret or understand the visions assailing him and tears ran down his cheeks as he saw men in an iron tube speed towards the moon. He saw the earth itself heating as the deserts expanded and the

oceans rose and battered cities of millions and terrible storms that  
tried to wash the humans away.

Christopher saw it all and cried in despair.

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Image: Johann Thorsson, photographer Heida Helgadottir