



FISH IN A BARREL

‘Masks are no good,’ advised the Bishop. ‘We tried it with masks last time and they wouldn’t even let us in.’

‘Wouldn’t even let you in?’ scoffed the Queen. ‘What kind of Vikings are you? Wouldn’t let you in – that’s when you get out the battle-axe!’ She smacked the Bishop round the head. ‘You listen to me - this time we go without masks and we go straight in. No stopping to negotiate. Do you hear me, King?’

‘Yes, dear,’ sighed the King.

‘You hear me, Berserkers?’ shouted the Queen.

‘Aaaargh!’ shrieked the Berserkers, biting their shields and swiping recklessly with their broadswords. ‘We hear you, o! Queen, don’t we!’

‘Are we Vikings?’ demanded the Queen. ‘Or are we Lewis Chessmen?’

It wasn’t a question anyone wanted to answer. They were, after all, both. The Berserkers simply bawled ‘Aaaaargh!’ and battered each other. That was good enough.

‘Now,’ said the Queen, when everyone had settled down to mugs of frothing ale and slices of take-away pizzas (which they had indeed taken away), ‘where do they keep all this Scottish treasure, then?’

‘So,’ said the Bishop, ‘they keep it all in a place they call the Bank of Scotland. All of it, in one place.’

‘More wealth than we have seen in a long time,’ added King Surli Surlison.

‘And what brave warriors do they have guarding this untold wealth?’ asked the Queen.

The Bishop smiled. ‘A handful of women, usually.’ He snickered.

Queen Katrinsdottir looked at the Bishop coldly. ‘And what, karl, is so funny about female warriors?’

The Bishop blanched. ‘Nothing, o! Queen. I was merely laughing at the thought of there being so few of them.’ He was not a good liar. That’s why he was the Bishop.

The Queen gazed at him for several long moments. Then she moved on. ‘So, some bold women stand guard. And is the treasure chamber protected night and day?’

The King knew the answer to this. ‘Our spies tell us that the chamber is sealed off at night. They believe dragons sit over the hoard. Dragons with blinking red eyes have been seen. But during the day, the dragons are asleep.’

The Queen nodded slowly. ‘So a daytime raid would be best.’

‘But not Mondays,’ said a Knight. ‘One of our spies reported today that they’re closed on Mondays due to the Corona Virus.’

At this revelation, the King joked that they’d be closed forever due to the Viking Virus. All the Berserkers roared with laughter and sprayed ale and mouthfuls of dried fish all over the ship. The Queen smiled thinly.

‘Tomorrow is Thursday. Thor’s Day. Good omen, Bishop?’

‘Oh, very good, o! Queen, very good indeed. Could not be better, in my opinion.’

‘So we’ll raid the Bank tomorrow morning, first light.’

‘Ten o’clock,’ murmured the Knight.

‘What’s that?’

‘They don’t open until ten. Because of the Virus.’

The following morning, after a hearty breakfast of spelt-and-sourdough-base pizza with seven

toppings, and a barrel of ale delivered by a sweaty Deliveroo youth on a bicycle, the raiding party set out.

They reached the bank just as it was opening. The bank manager looked at them with some trepidation.

‘How can we help you today?’ she asked politely.

‘Oh,’ said King Surlu airily, ‘we just want to take some money out.’

The Berserkers burst out laughing, unable to contain themselves. Their King was a Joker. As good as the Mighty Loki any day. ‘Take some money out! That’s right! Haar-haargh-hoo!’

‘Well,’ said the manager, ‘I’m afraid we can only admit members of one household at a time, so —’

Queen Katrinsdottir held up a hand to stop her. ‘All of these people belong to my household,’ she said sternly. She glared at the manager.

‘Oh, in that case, of course we can let you in,’ said the woman. ‘But you will all have to put on masks, I’m afraid.’

‘Masks?’ demanded the Queen. She whirled about and looked at the Bishop. ‘You said they didn’t want us to have masks! Was that true or not?’

The Bishop looked confused and tried to think of an excuse. But the manager came to his rescue.

‘But of course you must be visitors to our shores,’ she said, ‘so are perhaps not aware of the new regulations. Everyone has to wear a face-covering or a mask inside the bank premises. Like mine, for example.’ She indicated her mask which was decorated with the logo of the Bank.

The Queen needed no further encouragement. ‘Masks on!’ she commanded. All the Vikings found a rag to wrap round their heads. Those who had no cloth to hand simply wrapped their long beards over their mouths. ‘Now, onwards, Viking Warriors!’ she cried. ‘Death or Glory!’

Ten minutes later, it was all over. The bank was emptied of all available cash. The Vikings rampaged down Portobello High Street, waving wads of banknotes and threatening passers-by with their axes and swords. The passers-by retreated to a safe distance: two metres. The King grinned. ‘*Spydende fisk i en tonne*,’ he said to the Queen. The Berserkers heard the King’s new joke and laughed all the way to order more pizza and ale.

