

Leif  
the  
Believer

John Slade

# **Leif the Believer**

**John Slade**

Cover and drawing by

**Mary Wiik**

**John Slade Bøker**

# Leif the Believer

Paperback copyright 2009

Ebook copyright 2016

by John Slade

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any manner  
without written permission from the publisher,  
John Slade Bøker.

Paperback ISBN 978-893617-18-6

Ebook ISBN, ePub: 978-1-893617-55-1

Ebook ISBN, pdf: 978-1-893617-56-8

Paperback

Library of Congress Control Number

200 992 2974

Cover and illustrations by

Mary Wiik

**John Slade Bøker**

Moerveien 4

1430 Ås

Norway

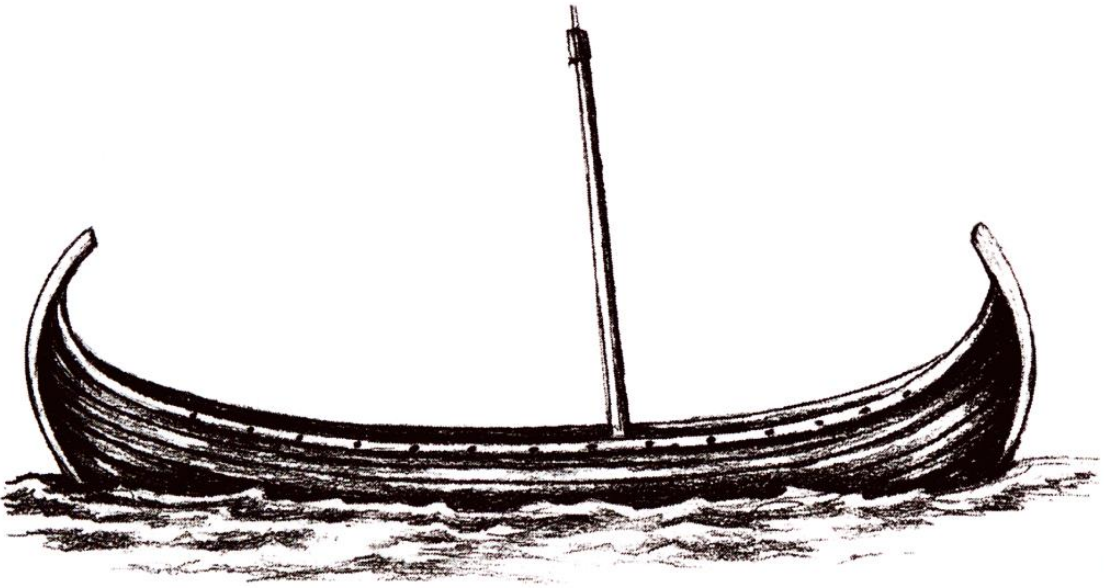
[www.johnsladeboker.no](http://www.johnsladeboker.no)

[jslade@dreamscape.com](mailto:jslade@dreamscape.com)

With a special Thank You  
for expert guidance on the construction of  
Viking ships:

Arild Marøy Hansen  
Bergens Sjøfartsmuseum  
Bergen, Norway

# Prologue



The Gulf Stream is part of an oceanic river that flows beneath the equatorial sun, and thus becomes a reservoir of warmth. After crossing the Atlantic from Africa to the Caribbean, this warm river flows through the Gulf of Mexico, then angles north past the beaches of Florida, enabling tourists from New York to go swimming even in January.

The Gulf Stream flows further north along the American coastline, influencing the weather as far north as Newfoundland. The great river of warm water—roughly a hundred kilometers wide and 800 to 1,200 meters deep, flowing at the surface at 2.5 meters per second—then veers northeast across the North Atlantic toward Europe, losing some of its warmth along the way. But not all of its warmth; the river branches into several smaller currents—flowing northeast, flowing east, flowing southeast—currents which caress Europe with warm moist air, and water that rarely freezes.

The branch of the river heading northeast flows beneath the tall rocky cliffs of Iceland, then, further across the sea, meets a long wall of rock, which sends the river northward. This vast wall of granite contains many fissures which penetrate deep into the rocky land. These fissures, filled with seawater, are called fjords. Because of the warm current flowing north along the coastline of Norway—here the river is called the North Atlantic Drift—the fjords rarely freeze.

Tall jagged mountains stand almost shoulder to shoulder along the coast, and along the shorelines of the fjords. Part of the Norwegian coast reaches far above the Arctic Circle, where winter lays a deep snow upon the land. Even during the summer, the mountains wear patches of old snow and ancient ice. Streams pour abundantly down the steep mountainsides, into lakes, into fjords, into the sea.

With water to drink, and water to travel on, and patches of green grass and berry bushes along the shore, people—eons ago—made this coastline their home. Even in the far north, there were trees enough—white birch, shorter and shorter the further north one went—to build with, and to burn. In the south, there were great forests with many different trees, one of them so strong that its hard wood, when fashioned into a boat, could stand up to the pounding waves of the sea.

It was enough: water and wood and grass, cows and goats and sheep, abundant fish, abundant berries, and the meat of a bear, of a moose, of a reindeer. Yes, it was enough: eggs from islands where the birds laid them by the thousands. Salmon leaping up the streams, easily caught with spears and woven baskets. The wild chickens in the mountains, brown in the summer and white in the winter; they could be caught with a

snare. It was enough, to enable a man and a woman to bring forth children and raise them on this rocky coast where the sea rarely froze, and the streams flowed from the heights even in winter. And where a house built of timber could be wrapped with chunks of turf from a bog, forming walls two meters thick.

A child could be raised here, a family could grow here, a community could weave together. The men honed their axes and built better and better homes, and, especially, they built better and better boats.

They built small boats that could be rowed by a farmer inside the protected fjord. Such boats were good for fishing and trade. A man could transport two or three goats to a neighbor's farm up the fjord, and return with two or three sheep, or a spotted calf.

As a community grew, its boats grew as well, with four pairs of oars, eight pairs of oars, becoming ships that could venture out from the fjord onto the rolling sea.

For building their ships, carpenters valued the hardest wood of all, oak. They cut a long beam from a trunk of oak, a beam which they hewed with their axes until the lower edge was narrower than the upper edge along its length. This was the keel, the foundation of a ship. Both ends of the oaken keel curved upward, for the keel became a runner when the ship was pulled up on a pebble beach, then pulled down again.

Carpenters honed their axes and cut long thin planks of oak. They shaved and shaped the boards into strakes; overlapping strakes, fastened with iron rivets, formed the growing hull. One of the strakes, between the waterline and the gunnel, was thicker than the others, because oar holes were cut into it.

Once the hull of the ship was completed, the carpenters could admire what they had done. A man with an axe in his hand—and shavings on his wool tunic and in his beard—could stand at one end of this oaken vessel, still without its internal bones, and run his eye along the graceful curves of the hull. The strakes at the bow reached up to meet the tall rising curve of the stem. The strakes at the stern reached up to meet the tall rising curve of the stern-piece. Here was a ship that would not plow through the water, but coast lightly over it.

Searching in the forest for branches of oak with a certain curve, or angle, or thickness, shipwrights carved ribs that would fit along the inner hull of strakes, to strengthen them. The carpenters carved crossbeams, then fastened them from inner hull to inner hull, giving the ship even greater strength. The crossbeams would serve as the frame on which the carpenters would lay the boards of the deck.

Oars were carved from pine, a lighter wood. When, over the passage of centuries, a mast and sail were added, the mast would be carved from a trunk of pine, a strong and flexible wood.

Every boat was built a little better. A little stronger, a little longer, a bit more graceful to the eye. The sail was made of woven wool, the work of many women over the course of a winter, strengthened with crisscrossing strips of leather. The lines that supported and controlled the sail were made of braided walrus hide. Sailors learned to use a long rounded spar, carved from pine, to hold one corner of the angled sail ahead of the mast, thereby tricking the wind into the backside of the sail. Thus could they set a course much closer to the wind.

They rowed within sight of land, and they sailed within sight of land. They had no compass, and clouds often hid the sun and the stars. During good weather, they rowed from the shelter of the fjord out to the open sea, where they hoisted the sail and followed the fish, and the seals, and the whales, to wherever the fishing and hunting were best, while remaining always, or almost always, in sight of land.

They learned how best to set their sail to the sea winds. They learned to steer with a rudder lashed with willow roots and leather to the right side of the stern, the steer-board. They learned to bring dried fish, and hard flat bread, and maybe some cheese, maybe some berries, stowed in a pine box beneath the unnailed boards of the deck. They brought water in a tightly lidded barrel. They wore wool tunics and trousers, wool socks inside leather boots, wool caps, wool mittens. In the cold driving rain that sometimes carried more frozen drops than wet ones into their eyes, they wore seal skin coats and walrus hide trousers, and the thickest wool mittens that the missus could knit.

The time eventually came, for such is the manner of men, when the sailors, hearing tales of great islands to the west, began to think of stowing provisions that could sustain a crew for a much longer voyage. They would sail not north or south along the rocky coast, but instead they would venture west, toward they knew not what. Shipwrights began to build ships long enough for a crew of thirty-two at sixteen pairs of oars. Honing their axes and their draw-blades, they built ships able to ride the oceans waves in good weather, able to survive the ocean waves in a sudden storm.

They honed their swords as well. When the Norwegian Vikings plundered the monastery on Lindisfarne Island, off the coast of England in 793 A.D., they showed

no mercy. Some of the priests were murdered, others were bound and taken aboard the warship to be sold elsewhere as slaves. The island sanctuary of Christian thought and history and art was plundered for anything that might have value. The raid was so successful that it could only encourage further raids.

The Vikings found islands scattered across the sea, some small, some large, some that disappeared into the northern mist.

How far west did they ultimately sail? Where did they drop anchor, where did they settle, where did they bury their dead? Their traces are few and scattered.

The old Icelandic sagas and modern archeology piece together a picture of one notable Viking. Around the year 1,000 A.D., Leifur Eiriksson, born on Iceland, now living on Greenland, sailed with a crew of thirty-five men on a journey to the west, to see if he could find the land that had been sighted by another Iclander, who had been blown far off course.

Leifur and his crew sighted a coastline of rock and ice. They sailed south along another coastline of deep forest and long white beaches. Then they sighted a flat tip of land partly covered with grass. A stream came winding through the grassy flats to the sea. Here could their sheep and three cows graze, perhaps through the winter. The shoreline was heaped with driftwood, enough to build with, enough to burn. Leifur Eiriksson dropped anchor.

He and his men, and their livestock, and perhaps a few women unrecorded by history, spent a year on that grassy tip of land. They built houses of timber and turf, smoky but warm during the long winter. Though icebergs drifted along the coast in the current from the north, the snow was light and the livestock flourished. Berries were abundant, and the salmon were bigger than the salmon back home.

On an excursion south along the coast of “Vinland”, Land of Meadow Grass, as they called their home, Leifur and his crew cut timber, tall straight pines, which they would lash to the deck and carry home as cargo to treeless Greenland. They met no other people, though their swords were ready.

Among the crew of thirty-five was a young shipbuilder who had been born in Norway. Wanting to see more of the world, he had hired aboard a ship bound from Norway to Iceland as a carpenter who could repair that ship and any other. He did the same from Iceland to Greenland. He did the same from Greenland to the grassy tip of some New World. Leif Magnussen spent the winter repairing Leifur Eiriksson’s Viking ship with several new ribs, several crossbeams, and a stronger *kerling* to

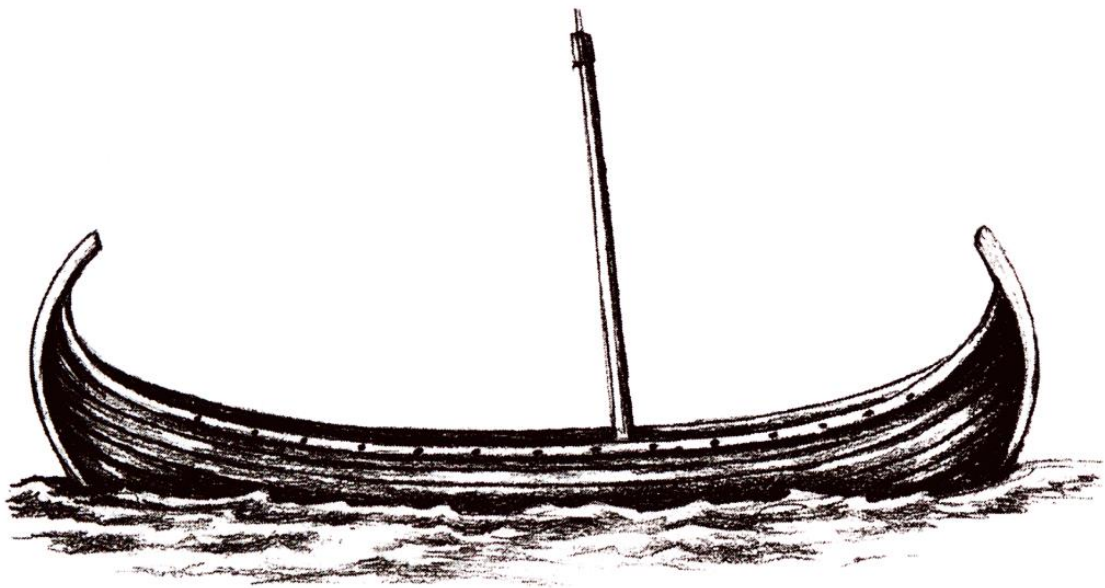
support the mast, made not of Norwegian oak but of New World pine. Using pitch and wool as caulking, he put a patch over a broken strake.

He did his job well, for the ship carried Leifur and his crew safely home to Greenland the following summer.

That was a thousand years ago, an almost unnoticed footstep in human history.

# Part One

## Homecoming



# Chapter 1

Johannes admired the freshly whittled peg, its birch wood strikingly white in the dim boat shed, especially beside the darker peg, the two of them standing like a pair of thumbs, forming an oarlock on the gunnel of a rowboat that was now repaired and ready for Saturday's outing.

Johannes put his whittling knife into the sheath that always hung from his belt. You never know when you might need to cut something.

He patted the starboard gunnel of the old oaken rowboat, as he might have patted the shoulder of an old and trusted horse, then he stepped out of the *naust*, swung the big red door shut and locked it with a padlock.

Standing in rubber boats on the slope of a pebble beach, he ran his eyes along the length of a nearby pier that jutted into the fjord. A seagull was sitting on one of the outermost pilings.

The wind had settled. The surface of the fjord had calmed from whitecaps at midday to a gently rolling sheen that reflected the range of mountains beyond the far shore. The orange sun would soon disappear behind one of the southwestern peaks.

Johannes thought he might walk out to the end of the pier, for he liked to rest his eyes on distant reaches of water. But he had taken only a couple of steps across the sloping beach toward the foot of the pier . . . when he saw, pulled up on the beach fifty meters from where he stood, a long, sleek replica of a Viking ship, its prow and stern rising with proud curves toward the sky.

Was someone making a movie?

But when had they pulled the ship up onto the shore? He hadn't noticed it half an hour ago, when he walked down from the house to the *naust* to whittle a new peg.

There didn't seem to be anyone around the ship. Its mast stood about ten meters tall, braced with rigging fore and aft, but without a sail.

Johannes walked along the upper edge of the beach, his boots crunching through pebbles and bits of shells, his eyes never leaving the graceful ship with clinker-built lines sweeping along the hull. As he approached, he saw that the ship had done a lot of sailing. It was no movie-set replica, but a properly built vessel with green algae and scattered barnacles below the waterline. He could see where the hull

had been dented and scraped. The oarlocks, sixteen pairs of holes cut along the third strake below the gunnel, were well worn.

Stepping closer, he peered over the gunnel. The oars lay in two neat bundles lengthwise, flanking the mast. The rough gray sail, rolled around a spar, lay beside the oars. Otherwise, the ship was bare. He saw no orange life jackets, or radio antenna, or any other signs of modern life. The lines rising from wooden cleats to the masthead were not made of nylon, nor even hemp, but what looked to be tightly braided animal hide.

The ship had been pulled far enough up the beach that high tide would not reach it. The bow was tied with ten meters of woven hide to a stout pine further ashore.

Whoever had guided the ship to this spot along the fjord must have known well the underwater rocks, and the skerries that barely surfaced at low tide, and the narrow but sufficient channel that wove among them from the fjord's deep water into a shallow bay and finally to the beach on which Johannes stood.

Johannes walked along the starboard hull toward the stern, rubbing his hand along the smooth worn oak of the upper strakes. The iron rivets looked solid, with little rust. The rudder had been pivoted back to an almost horizontal position. He looked closely at the rudder's attachment to the hull, but saw no brass swivel, no stainless steel; everything was made of wood, roots and leather. The rudder was battered and scraped, especially toward the bottom of the blade. It had guided this ship into many rocky harbors.

He walked slowly around the stern, admiring the stern-piece that rose above his head, though it did not curl into a dragon's tail. He walked along the portside of the ship, rubbing his hand along a strake warmed by the late afternoon sun. He was not sure what it was that he had discovered on his beach, but the ship certainly did look real. Ancient real. As if it had just arrived from a thousand years ago.

He was running his hand up a curving strake in the prow . . . when he heard something stirring atop the grassy bluff above the beach. Close to the pine tree to which the ship was tied, a man sat upon among the withering wildflowers and yellow ferns of autumn, a man with a full reddish beard, and tangles of dark blond hair that fell to his shoulders. The man stared around him, as if he had awakened in some strange place.

He stood up for a better look. He wore a dark shirt and baggy trousers, and tall leather boots. He barely glanced at the ship in front of him, and seemed not to notice

Johannes at all, only ten meters away, as he gazed out at the fjord, and then at the range of mountains beyond it.

His eyes lit with recognition, and now he laughed. He laughed with surprise, he laughed with delight, as he stared at a flat rocky island near the mouth of the bay; at the slender white veil of a waterfall dropping down a gray-green mountainside across the fjord; and then at the red-orange sun just touching a jagged peak. He pointed at the peak and called out to it, as if saluting an old friend, but Johannes could not understand the strange words.

The man turned slowly in the knee-deep grass, staring at the mountain peaks that flanked the fjord, their lower slopes clad with September-yellow birch, their upper slopes rough-hewn flanks of gray rock, tinged radiant red-orange by the sun.

Now he looked toward Johannes's yellow house, further up the sloping shore in a meadow of grass and heather, overlooking the *naust* and pier.

Thirty meters beyond the home which Johannes had shared with Astrid since their wedding day, stood their son's home, red with white trim.

Johannes's house was a classic old box, two stories, simple roof, built before the war.

Bjørn's house had been built during the prosperity of the 1980s. Its two stories were much broader, especially across the front; the roof was gabled, with five windows facing the sea, and five in back facing the mountains. Best of all, Bjørn's house had, with theatrical elegance, a balcony wrapped around all four sides of the upper floor, so that people could step from inside to outside and still remain under a protective roof while they gazed across the fjord.

The stranger now turned toward Johannes, peered down at him and asked him something while gesturing toward the two houses. The man was young, twenty-five maybe. Johannes could not understand his strange words.

The stranger continued to speak, explaining something about the houses, or, as Johannes gradually understood, about a house that had once stood where these two modern houses now stood. About the house that had once belonged to this voyager from some distant time, who had just come home.

The young and ancient man now slid on the heels of his boots down the sandy edge of the bluff, then he walked down the slope of the pebble beach until he stood beside Johannes. He swept his arm toward the range of mountains across the fjord, pointed at one peak, and then another, his hand movements very definite, as if—

perhaps—he was speaking about the peaks and the sun moving across the sky above them as his daily clock. An Icelander might have been able to understand the Old Norse, but Johannes, a speaker of modern Norwegian, caught not a word. Or if he did catch a faint echo of something familiar, it was all but buried beneath the rolling rrr’s and a strange th- that sounded more like the burp of an oyster than any th- which Johannes had ever heard.

Every now and then, as his story continued, this fellow would pause to marvel that he was actually *here*. It was clear to Johannes that the fellow knew every landmark in this part of the fjord. He pointed at a steep green slope across the fjord, half a kilometer to the east, his finger waving up and up and up; Johannes understood that the fellow knew about the trail winding from the shore up through the spruce and then birch to the plateau highlands.

Johannes reached out his hand. “Welcome home.”

The stranger looked at Johannes with puzzlement; he did not understand these words. But he took Johannes’s hand and the two men shook, one hand young and strong, the other a grandfather’s hand, but strong.

Johannes said, “I am Johannes Jakobsen.” He patted his hand over his heart. “Johannes.”

The stranger nodded with understanding, then he patted his hand over his heart. “Leif,” he said, his blue eyes confident, with a tinge of humor.

“Leif Eriksson?” asked Johannes, ready to believe anything.

The stranger laughed and crisscrossed his hands with denial. “Leif Magnussen.” He patted his hand over his heart. “Leif Magnussen.”

“Well, Leif.” Johannes was just about to say how much he admired the Viking ship . . . when he heard Astrid calling from the front door, “Johannes, supper is soon on the table.”

He looked across the sloping meadow and waved to her to let her know where he was. “We have company, Sweetheart.”

“Well, bring him along. I hope he’s got an appetite.”

## Chapter 2

Astrid knew two things immediately when her husband ushered his guest into the kitchen. One, the fellow needed a bath. And two, once he was cleaned up, he would be one of the most handsome men she had ever laid eyes on.

He reached out his hand, offering to shake hands with her. She took his big hand in hers . . . and felt that it was not so much strong, as gentle, and respectful.

She told him, “Welcome to our home. I hope you don’t mind boiled codfish. Fortunately I put on a lot of potatoes.”

“He doesn’t understand our Norwegian,” said Johannes. “And I sure don’t understand his Old Norse.” He patted his heart. “Just tell him your name.”

She patted her heart as she told this intriguing stranger, “Astrid. Astrid.”

“Astrid,” he said with a laughing smile. Then he patted his own heart. “Leif.”

He was as near to a god as she had ever seen in her life. The humor in those blue eyes told of enormous confidence.

“Well,” she said, gesturing toward the bathroom door, “would you like to wash up before dinner?”

He could wash his face and hands. He could even take a shower if he wanted to. She’d be glad to wait supper until he was ready.

Leif looked at her, baffled. Johannes opened the bathroom door, flipped on the light and beckoned Leif to enter. Leif stepped into the small room, stared at the fixtures on the sink with puzzlement, then suddenly jumped back and almost fell into the bathtub. He had just seen his face in the mirror. For the first time in his life, he had seen his face.

He looked at Astrid and Johannes with a mix of shock and wonderment. Then he looked at himself again in the mirror. Laughter burst out louder than any recent laughter in this house. “Leif!” he said to himself. Pointing a finger at himself, he began telling a story to himself in Old Norse.

“Here’s how you do it,” said Johannes, turning the tap so that warm water ran from the faucet into the sink. “Here’s a bar of soap. Here’s your towel.”

With a polite wave, Johannes closed the door, granting Leif whatever privacy he needed to wash up before supper.

As Leif took his place in a chair at the table—opposite Astrid and Johannes on the other side of the long table—Astrid discretely noticed that he had washed his hands. But not his face. The smudges of soot from a campfire, the salt crusted in his beard, were no doubt acceptable at the dinner table in Leif’s house. She lifted a platter of sliced cod toward him. “Please help yourself.”

He leaned his face into the steam rising from the thick white slices of cod and inhaled, as if inhaling some heavenly elixir. Then his blue eyes fixed on Astrid and he said something effusive and vibrant in Old Norse.

Johannes reached with a spatula and placed one, two, and then three slices of cod on Leif’s plate. Astrid ladled potatoes onto Leif’s place, beside the codfish.

Leif stared at the round white things on his plate, then looked at Astrid, again puzzled.

“Those are potatoes,” she said. “They came to Norway a few hundred years after you were here. Try them with some melted butter.”

He was mystified as well by the green beans.

“They come from France,” she explained. “Maybe some of your cousins, while they were pillaging a French marketplace, discovered green beans.”

Leif watched Astrid and Johannes as they held their fork and knife, then he tried to emulate their cutting into the flaking white meat. When he put the first piece of cod into his mouth, he closed his eyes and groaned.

While Leif was helping himself to a fourth and fifth slice of codfish, and a third heaping ladle of potatoes, Astrid excused herself from the table, went into the living room and phoned next door. “We’ve got company,” she told Bente, her daughter-in-law. “How about we bring him over for dessert. Do you have any ice cream?”

“Who is he?” asked Bente. “And old friend?”

“Someone who might just get Elisabeth’s nose out of her books.”

“Well then.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Elisabeth was upstairs in her office, clicking from south to north long the Norwegian coastline on her computer screen, checking the currents and temperatures in the sea today. Her graduate work was a study of those currents and temperatures: she noted any variations from the norm, although the norm was itself perhaps not

normal. What she really needed were figures from a century ago, with which she could compare the figures today.

Fish liked water of a certain temperature, a certain salinity. Various species moved within their range, following currents of preferred temperature. What effect would abnormal current and temperature variations have on the marine life along Norway's coast? What would be the effects of changing conditions in the sea on the food chain, a complex network still only partially understood?

Elisabeth loved her work, and hated her work. She loved the sea and its almost magical abundance. But she knew that much of that abundance was gone, and that what was left was seriously threatened. She wanted to study life as it flourished; she was forced to study life as it diminished, and in some cases nearly vanished.

"Elisabeth, can you come down, Honey?" called her mother up the stairs. "Your grandmother is bringing a friend over for dessert."

"Uuuuuuufffff," groaned Elisabeth. She had just begun to check the data in her beloved Lofoten Islands. "All right," she called out her office door. "I'll be down in a few minutes."

When she descended the stairs to the living room on the first floor, she saw—through the open glass doors overlooking the fjord—that everyone was outside, standing around a fire that her father had lit inside a ring of stones. In the fading light of dusk, the faces of her family were lit by the fire.

She spotted someone with a beard; his back was toward her, but he briefly turned his head toward her mother. He wore a tunic that seemed to have come from a museum. And he had very broad shoulders.

As she stepped outside and followed the path through the meadow grass and heather toward the fire, the guest sat, at her grandmother's invitation, on one of the smooth logs that formed a square around the fire pit. He sat facing the fjord, with his back to the house and the path on which she was walking toward him. Orange flames silhouetted his shoulders and head; his hair, falling in tangles to his shoulders, caught the glint of the flames.

Her mother and grandmother were seated to his left and right on opposite sides of the fire, their faces lit as they spoke with their guest.

Her father was kneeling, tending the fire.

Her grandfather was not there. He must be off doing something.

As she walked around the outside of the square of driftwood logs, her mother spotted her and smiled. “Elisabeth, you have come. Please, meet Leif.”

He stood up, facing her where she stood behind the empty log that formed the fourth side of the square, the fire between them. His smile of greeting vanished as he stared at her, studied her . . . as if *she* were the mysterious person here, and not this . . . lost Viking. He appeared to be about twenty-five years old, roughly her age, give or take a thousand years.

Then he looked at her with growing composure—he stood with enormous dignity—and patted his hand over his heart as he told her, “Leif.”

She stepped between the ends of two angled logs and felt the warmth of the fire on her jeans. Facing him, she touched her hand to her sweater, over her heart. She told him, her voice very steady, “Elisabeth.”

His wool tunic had clearly not come from a museum; it smelled of brine and fish oil.

She gestured for him to be seated, then she sat on the log across the fire from him. She shifted a bit on the log, so that she could see him clearly beyond the growing flames.

“Leif speaks Old Norse,” said her grandmother. “We haven’t been able to communicate all that much yet.”

Elisabeth’s father stood up from the fire. “There’s a good blaze. Now how about some ice cream?”

Elisabeth’s mother opened a cooler and a picnic basket. She scooped chocolate ice cream into a bowl. Elisabeth’s grandmother squirted chocolate sauce over the ice cream, set a large spoon in the bowl, then handed the bowl to Leif. He took the bowl into his hands and stared at it, puzzled.

“Where is Johannes?” asked Astrid, looking around.

“He’s starting a fire in the stove in the sauna,” said Bjørn. “The men-folk are going to take a sauna this evening. And a bath.”

“Well, then I won’t serve up his ice cream until he joins us.”

When Leif and Elisabeth, and Bjørn and Bente, and finally Astrid each held a bowl of ice cream, Astrid lifted her spoon. The family always waited for a signal from Astrid, the grandmother, and then they would begin eating together.

Leif held his spoon in the proper way, while he looked at the cold brown something lit by the flames of the fire. Observing Astrid, he cut the edge of his spoon into whatever it was, then put the stuff on the spoon into his mouth . . . and tasted

something as good as the best he had ever tasted. As good as elk meat roasted over a fire, but very different. He liked the coldness. But it was the sauce, as thick and sweet as honey but different from honey, that was so good on his tongue. The cold stuff became soft in his mouth. It was some sort of food, but something more.

He looked again at Astrid, but he could not tell her what he wanted to say. Nor could he ask the questions he wanted to ask. He could not even tell her that whatever it was that they were eating, it was *good*.

Johannes appeared in the firelight. Sitting on a log beside his wife, he announced, "The sauna will be ready in about half an hour." He said distinctly to Leif, "Sauna."

"Sauna!" said Leif, recognizing the word. Then he said something in Old Norse, with booming approval.

Bente poured a mug of decaffeinated coffee for everyone, then set the kettle on a flat stone near the fire to keep the coffee warm.

Leif held the mug with his fingers wrapped around it, enjoying the warmth of whatever it was that steamed with a strange smell. Then he saw that the others were holding their mugs by a half-circle handle, so he held his mug by its handle too.

When he raised the mug to his lips and carefully tasted the hot . . . boiled bark, he took only a sip.

The young woman was watching him. He looked at her inquisitive eyes, and at her cheeks, tanned from the summer sun, and at her lips as she sipped from her coffee mug. He had seen her somewhere before, but he could not remember where.

Elisabeth listened as he spoke to her in his strange language, with a tone of exasperation in his voice. He wanted to tell her something, but he couldn't.

She watched as he set his mug on a stone near the fire, stood up and walked into the darkness toward the fjord. Lifting his hand toward the sky in which the first bright stars were appearing, he called up something vehement and a bit vexed in his strange language.

Then he was quiet, as if listening for some response.

And then he called up again, some word of gratitude.

Suddenly, pressing his hands against the sides of his head, he roared as if making some great effort.

Elisabeth stared at him as he walked back confidently toward the fire. To whom had he spoken?

He took his place on the log, glanced at Astrid to his left and Bente to his right, then he said to Elisabeth in modern Norwegian, “Sometimes, with his head so immersed in the big picture, he forgets the details. If I am going to be here with you, then of *course* I’ve got to be able to speak and comprehend your Norwegian.”

Elisabeth, stunned, wondered who had given him this sudden gift.

“What I am trying to say to you Elisabeth, is that, somehow, I recognize you. I faintly remember you. But I can’t remember where it was, or when.”

“Oh,” she said, still not ready for her first words to this stranger.

She thought: Never mind where or when. Let it begin now.

Gathering her courage, she said, “I think we should introduce ourselves more fully. This is my father,” she gestured to her father, poking the fire with a long stick, “Bjørn Erling Jakobsen, a family doctor at the clinic in town.”

Bjørn Erling Jakobsen gave Leif a nod of hello. “A pleasure to meet you.”

Elisabeth continued, “This is my mother sitting to your right, Bente Sara Anna Toft Jakobsen, a psychiatric counselor at the same clinic in town.”

Bente Sara Anna Toft Jakobsen raised her mug and said, “Welcome, Leif.”

“Sitting on your left is my grandmother, Astrid Maria Eide Jakobsen, farm wife and mother of five children, my father being one of them. And . . . she is the church organist.”

Astrid Maria Eide Jakobsen smiled as she ran her fingers up and down the keys. “Perhaps, Leif, you will come to church on Sunday. I shall play some Bach for you.”

“And I,” said Elisabeth—who was beginning to realize that not only did Leif remember her, vaguely, from somewhere . . . but that she remembered *him*, vaguely, from somewhere—“I am Elisabeth Astrid Bente Jakobsen, student and teacher. I teach biology, especially marine biology, at the high school in town. I have a master’s degree from the University of Bergen in arctic marine biology, specifically on the biosphere of the melting polar ice cap. While teaching, I am working on my doctorate, with research focused on the changes in temperature, salinity, and location of the Arctic currents. Life, you see, depends on those currents.”

She paused, for he looked confused. She wondered how she could ever bridge the great distance between them. “Leif, part of my research involves the sea, and part of my research involves the classroom. How can I enable my students to understand the world which they will soon inherit?”

He nodded with comprehension. “You teach your students to understand the world.”

“To understand the world that they will soon inherit. To understand the future. So that they are ready for it.”

Then she felt a jolt of courage. “Perhaps you might like to visit my classroom. I’ve got some very bright kids.”

“Elisabeth,” he said—she liked to hear him say her name—“it would be a great pleasure for me to visit your classroom.”

“Then, perhaps some day this week. I will make arrangements at school.”

Surprised by her boldness—asking this strange man to enter her life—she said no more. Pretending to gaze into the flames, she watched him.

Turning his head to the left, he stared into the distance, and a little bit up: at the mountains across the fjord. “Elisabeth, do you know what night this is?”

“Yes. The night of the fifteenth of September, in the year 2008. The night of September’s full moon.”

Leif pointed, “Precisely over that peak shall it rise, only minutes from now.”

She turned on the log and looked at the range of peaks to the southwest, black and barely discernible against the night sky. She could just faintly see the glow of the still hidden moon on a snow-dusted peak.

“I have but one month,” said Leif. “Then I and my crew must take to our oars.”

Her grandfather asked, “Where is your crew? I’ve been meaning to ask you that. It must have taken all thirty-three of you to haul that ship so high up the beach.”

“Aaaaaahhhh,” said Leif with confidence. “They will come. They will come.”

Then everyone was quiet, seated so that they could wait for the moon while drinking their coffee.

When the first bone-white limb of the moon peeked out from behind a mountain’s black slope, Leif said something in his old language, with a tone of gratitude and reverence, as if speaking a short prayer.

“Let’s walk to the bluff,” said Astrid.

They all stood together and walked across the yard of grass and heather to the edge of the bluff overlooking the beach and the bay and the fjord. As the moon fully emerged, moving more sideways than upward, it cast a silver sheen across the ink-black fjord.

Standing beside Leif, Elisabeth asked him, “Why have you come?”

He did not answer, nor did she see any response in his moonlit face, as he stared at the moon and the mountains and the sea. She thought that maybe he hadn't heard her, or hadn't understood her, or perhaps it wasn't her business to ask . . . when he turned to her and said, "I know only a little. I am to look around, then to report back. He says he does not like coming here himself. He says that he gets too sad. I am supposed to see if things are as sad as he says they are."

Well, thought Elisabeth, things were pretty sad. But she did not want any of that sadness now.

"A month is not much time," she said.

"Until the full moon of October. A time of harvest. A time of laying in food for the winter. A time of patching the boats. A time of urgent work, a time of gratitude."

She was not sure about many things right now, but she understood that her research had taken a new direction.

"All right, gentlemen," said her grandfather, "shall we try the sauna?"

From her bedroom window, she could hear the three men roaring and laughing each time they emerged from the sauna and ran across the beach and plunged into the cold water of the bay. She had not heard such unrestrained laughter from her father in years. He was so serious about his work at the clinic, at the nursing home, at the hospital. Night after night, he came home tired.

Her grandfather sounded like some teenage hooligan, yelping as he splashed in the September sea.

Though the fjord was broad enough that usually only the shot of a rifle could be heard as a faint echo, she could hear the echo of Leif's booming laughter. A man had finally come whose voice could fill the mountain-clad reaches of the fjord.

Her father announced, "Again!" The three men splashed out of the water back to the beach, then they hurried as merry as three giggling schoolboys toward the sauna. She heard the door bang shut.

Well, she thought, snuggling beneath her blankets, it's about time.

## Chapter 3

When Leif woke up, he could not remember where he was.

Lifting his head from a pillow, he looked at the pale green wallpaper, without knowing what wallpaper was. He looked at pictures on the wall of various people—one of them a boy holding a codfish nearly as long as he was tall—without knowing what a photograph was. He looked at books in a bookcase, and on a desk, without knowing what books were.

Only when he looked out the window and saw the fjord and the mountains beyond it, mountains lit by the morning sun, did he remember where he was.

He saw a set of clothes folded neatly on a chair. As he dressed in a shirt that was not made of wool, a shirt as blue as the sea, and in a pair of trousers that were not made of wool, nor walrus hide, trousers as pale blue as the white-capping sea, he felt truly welcomed into the home of these modern Norwegians. He was wearing what was probably Johannes's old shirt, tight in the shoulders, a bit short in the sleeves, and Johannes's old trousers, with blue patches on the knees.

When fully dressed, with even a pair of leather slippers for inside the house, he ventured downstairs. Holding the railing, he stepped carefully down the wooden staircase—a strange but convenient construction that he had climbed last night—and was met at the bottom by Astrid, who offered him a mug of boiled bark.

“Thank you,” he said, trying, as a guest, to be polite.

Astrid had prepared a pot of oatmeal which she hoped would be enough. Bjørn had been a big eater as a teenager, but this Leif had finished all the codfish on the platter last night. And the potatoes as well.

She ladled oatmeal into three bowls and set them on the table, then she said to Leif, standing politely behind his chair, “Have a seat. There's more oatmeal. Don't be shy.”

Well, he wasn't shy. She scraped the pot clean with his fourth bowl, but that, as he assured her, was fortunately enough. It was almost as if Thor himself had sat down at the breakfast table, ready for his roasted ox.

Sipping his coffee, he said, “In my bedroom,” he pointed upstairs, “I saw an image of a boy with a codfish.”

“That’s Bjørn,” said Johannes. “He was twelve when he caught that fish.”

“We put you in Bjørn’s bedroom,” said Astrid. “Of the five children, he was the best reader. Maybe you saw all those books.”

“I am not sure I know what a book is,” said Leif, “though I have heard of writing with ink on vellum. But I know what a codfish is. Would you two like to go fishing today? Do you have a rowboat?”

Johannes swung open the big red door to the *naust* and glanced at the freshly whittled peg. The old clinker-built rowboat, five meters long, had been built by Johannes and his father when Johannes was a boy. It had two pairs of peg oarlocks, two sets of oars, two rowers’ benches, as well as a bench across the stern for Astrid and a picnic basket.

Johannes stepped into the dim light of the *naust* and laid the fishing gear in the bow: three lines wound around a plug of wood, three sinkers, three sets of hooks with a variety of lures. They would be using hand-lines today.

Johannes and Leif, pulling on opposite sides of the stern, drew the rowboat out of the *naust*, then slid it down a ramp of smooth gray logs half-buried in the beach, until the prow was on the shore while the stern floated in the lapping bay.

Johannes looked at his wife in her sunglasses, “In you go, Astrid.”

“Johannes,” she said, “is that sweater going to be warm enough?”

“Ja, ja, don’t you worry.”

Holding the picnic basket with one hand, balancing herself with the other—while Johannes and Leif braced the boat—Astrid stepped over the gunnel, stepped over the two benches, then sat on the stern bench, facing the two men still on shore, with the basket on the deck beside her feet.

She announced, “I’m going to catch more fish today than the two of you together.”

“Ja, ja,” said Johannes as he and Leif lifted the bow and nudged the rowboat further into the water.

Leif could probably have done the job alone, for he lifted the boat’s oaken bow with surprising strength, and gave the boat so strong a final push into the sea—while holding, of course, a line to the bow—that Johannes really did not need to push at all.

As the boat now all but floated, with just the tip of the prow still on land, Johannes said to Leif, “You take the aft oars. I’ll take the forward oars. The real power should be toward the stern.”

“All right.” Leif stepped into the boat and sat on the aft bench, facing Astrid. He set his feet against a thwart, lifted an oar from the benches and set it between the two pins of an oarlock; one of the pins was new and clean. Then he lifted the second oar and set it between the two pins of the opposite oarlock; both of the pins were dark and worn.

He called over his shoulder, “Ja, captain. We are ready.”

With Leif’s weight toward the stern, Johannes easily lifted the bow and shoved the boat completely into the water, hopping aboard with his rubber boots barely wet.

He sat on the forward bench, facing Leif’s back and broad shoulders. When he leaned to one side to see Astrid, he was greeted by her smiling face. She was ready for a day at sea.

Johannes set his oars in the oarlocks, then he and Leif paddled sternwards a short distance into the bay. Working their oars together, they pivoted the rowboat until the prow faced the fjord.

“All right Leif,” said Johannes, “here we go!”

“Hurrah!” cheered Leif as the two men pulled on their oars. The boat surged forward with every stroke that Leif took. Johannes fit into Leif’s rhythm. The old vessel, blackened with decades of pine tar, seemed to come alive.

When the rowboat reached the outer edge of the bay on which the Jakobsen family had established a farm two and a half centuries ago, and began to roll on the waters of the fjord itself, Leif called over his shoulder, “Which way?”

“You said you wanted to go fishing.”

“Ja, that is right.”

“Then I suggest that we paddle east, toward the shoals of Parson’s Island. That’s usually a good place for cod in September.”

Leif nodded, “The island beyond the waterfall.”

“Yes, just beyond the waterfall to the south.” A thin white waterfall leapt out from a granite cliff, then it disappeared into a forest of spruce, making an excellent marker along the south shore of the fjord. “If we catch a cod, we can make our fire on the beach where the stream comes out from the woods.”

“Ja, as I did with my father.”

“Ja,” agreed Johannes, “as I did with my father.”

With a sweep of their portside oars, Johannes and Leif turned the boat so that it headed east up the fjord, then the two men bent their backs and pulled toward their favorite fishing hole.

While the two men rowed, Astrid had a most wonderful choice.

She could watch this young man in his blue shirt as he pulled his oars with graceful strength. She could lean to one side and watch her husband as he pulled his oars with steady strength. Or she could look at the dark blue sweep of the fjord, stretching off in both directions, beneath the morning sky. Or at the rolling green hills of spruce that flanked the dark water. At the bands of yellow birch bright in the sunshine further up the slopes. And at the bare granite peaks, each one different, a troupe of exuberant dancers frozen in time.

She knew beyond any doubt that after God had created the magnificent world and everything in it, He had returned to Norway . . . and summoned all of His skills as a sculptor of mountains, as a designer of bays, and as the Creator of the mighty cod.

At the edge of the shoals off the northeastern shore of Parson's Island, where shallow water dropped off to much deeper water, Johannes lowered the anchor, then fed out about forty meters of line, which he snubbed to a cleat. He and Leif stowed their oars.

Then Johannes passed out the fishing gear.

Leif held the line wrapped around a block of wood with one hand, while he stared at the red rubber worm attached to his hook. The modern hook was strong and sharp, well designed. But what was this red rubber worm?

He said nothing, deferring silently to his host. Astrid had a blue rubber worm at the end of her line. Johannes had a flashy silver spoon.

Leif and Johannes reached over opposite gunnels while Astrid reached over the stern, letting their lines out until the lead sinkers touched bottom. They each pulled in about a meter of line, then they worked the bait just above the bottom, lifting with the arm, letting the weight sink, and lifting again.

Leif did not believe that without bait from some living animal, they would ever catch a cod. But they did. Astrid caught the first cod. With a whoop, she pulled in her line hand over hand until the yellow-brown fish emerged from the water, then flapped on the deck in the stern. It was a small cod, no longer than from Leif's fingers to his elbow. Out of its mouth protruded the blue rubber worm.

Then Leif felt a tug and gave his line a jerk. He pulled up hand over hand until another small cod splashed at the surface. It was almost a baby. Out of its mouth protruded the red rubber worm.

Astrid tossed her cod back into the fjord. “Too small for lunch,” she said. Leif did the same with his cod.

As the sun rose over the southern mountains toward noon, the three fishermen caught many cod, but none of the fish was as long as a person’s arm. They were young fish, no big breeders among them.

“Where are the papa cod?” asked Leif. “Where are the mama cod? Never with my father did I catch so many little ones.”

“The big guys are pretty much gone,” said Johannes, working his line. “When the trawlers swept up the herring, everything else dwindled.”

“Trawlers?”

“Ships with big nets. Especially after World War Two, when fishing boats became industrial. The nets were huge. They swept the sea, they swept the fjords, until they had caught nearly every last herring.”

“There was a war?”

“Yes. Well, there were several wars.”

“And these ships, they caught the herring,” Leif held his hands about ten centimeters apart, indicating the length of the silver fish, “until the herring were no more. And so the cod are now hungry. And meager.”

“Leif, the fishermen on those big ships, they plundered the sea. The same as you Vikings plundered a monastery. They took and they took and they took, until the sea was empty.”

This, Leif knew, was part of the sadness. Part of why the Creator could not visit Earth very often. So Leif had been dispatched, to look closely, then to make his report.

“They’ve plundered the oceans as well,” said Astrid, working her line. “You ask Elisabeth. She studies it. Fishing ships are as big now as Navy ships were during the war. And they work with spotter planes. Any ripple on the sea, and those boys sweep it up with nets that could sweep up a town.”

“Elisabeth studies this plunder?”

“You ask her. She can talk for hours about it. When she comes home from school this afternoon, ask her why the sea is filled with dwindling schools of youngsters.”

The three fishermen, working their lines, kept a cod that Astrid caught, and a cod that Johannes caught, and decided that those two fish together would be enough for lunch. Johannes hauled up the anchor, then he and Leif rowed to the beach on the southern shore where the waterfall's stream flowed out from the spruce, branched into rivulets as it crossed the broad pebble beach, and then poured into the fjord.

Johannes made a driftwood fire, which he lit, while Leif watched, with a match and some newspaper. The match was something astonishing.

Astrid half-filled an iron pot with sea water, then hung the pot by a chain from an iron tripod standing over the flames. While Johannes cleaned the two fish, Astrid opened the picnic basket and set out a loaf of fresh bread, a block of goat cheese, and a jar of blueberry jam, neatly arranged on a flat rock.

They could hear, high above them, the waterfall thundering down the face of granite.

After lunch, they rowed to various spots that Leif remembered: a meadow along the shore where a log farmhouse had once stood, and where today a two-story, white farmhouse with green shutters now stood. He remembered a finger of rock reaching into the fjord, where a signal fire could be lit. And a skerry where the seals had once gathered, barking with protest if Leif and his father rowed too close; today there were no seals, only a few gulls.

As the mid-afternoon sun swung west, Johannes and Leif pulled toward home. They did not haul the boat up the beach into the *naust*, but tied its lines to the pier.

All three fishermen said, "*Takk for turen!*" Thank you for the trip! Then Astrid and Johannes headed up the beach toward their house.

Leif walked out to the end of the pier.

Astrid had told him that when Elisabeth came home from school, she would tell her that Leif was waiting for her on the pier.

Tired from a long day in the classroom, Elisabeth had grumbled silently through a ponderous faculty meeting. By the time she stepped off the bus at her driveway, she thought she might take a nap before dinner.

But her grandmother popped out her door and called from the porch, "Leif is waiting for you on the pier. He has a question for you."

Elisabeth lifted her hand with a tired wave. "All right."

Entering her own home—the home where she still lived with her parents—she set her book satchel and laptop on the kitchen table. Neither her mother nor her father was home yet. Then she stepped out the glass door facing the fjord and walked toward the figure in blue standing at the end of the pier, his back toward her. The rippling bay beyond him was copper-red from the sun.

He had a question.

She had many questions.

As she walked on the path through the meadow, then down the slope of the pebble beach to the foot of the pier, she took deep breaths of fresh briny air. The air in the room during the faculty meeting had been sucked dry of every last molecule of oxygen by all the endless . . . Now she felt the breeze on her cheeks.

He turned when he heard her footsteps approaching on the pier. “Elisabeth.” His wind-tousled hair was lit copper-gold.

She stood beside him at the end of the pier, and would not have minded if he had put his arm around her shoulder. But he did not. She turned her face toward the low late-afternoon sun and felt its warmth on her cheeks.

Staring out at the fjord, Leif asked with anger in his voice, “Why have people plundered the sea? Until only *survivors* are left.”

Elisabeth stared out at the fjord—at the dark water tinged with green from the spruce, and yellow from the birch, and blue from the sky—the fjord she had loved almost since the day she was born. “Why did your people plunder England, and Ireland, and France? You gloried in your plunder.”

“But we stopped all that. We started with Lindisfarne in 793, and finished with William the Conqueror’s invasion in 1066. We were brutes for almost three hundred years. Then we laid down the sword. We stopped our plundering. We became traders instead.”

“Aaahhhhhh, but that was you, not us. Nowhere in the Good Book does it say, ‘Thou shalt not plunder.’ So we keep doing it.”

Leif said something in his Old Norse, expressing vehement disgust.

Her heart quickened. He understood.

He looked at her. “Your grandmother told me that you study this plunder.”

“Well, I . . . study the wreckage after the plunder. I look at remnant populations. The changing of currents, of temperature, of salinity. I watch the last days of Babylon.”

“The last days.”

“That’s just part of it, the plunder and the waste. We have burned and burned and burned so much of the skin of the Earth that we are warming the sky, and warming the sea. Leif, there is so much that you do not know, and I hate for you to learn it.”

“Elisabeth, I must learn. I cannot hide from it. He wants his report.”

He? Who was this “He” that Leif kept referring to?

Now the teacher made a decision. “Leif, will you come to school with me tomorrow? My kids—teenagers—are very bright. I think they might like to meet you.”

He hesitated. “Elisabeth, I have never been to a school. My father taught me how to build a boat, and then a ship. This morning, your grandmother spoke about books. I know not these books.”

“You come on the bus with me tomorrow. I will show you books, and the screen of a laptop. You will meet youngsters who know that their future has been severely plundered. Ask them how they feel.”

He stared at her for a long moment, studying her . . . then he looked out at the fjord, and up at the mountain peaks, and up further to the sky. He said something in his Old Norse. His voice was vehement, yet with a tone of respect.

Then he looked at her again, with a flash of admiration in his eyes.

She asked him, “With whom were you speaking?”

“The Creator.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I asked him to look down upon *you*. I told him that he must look down upon you in your classroom tomorrow. I want him to see for himself.”

“What do you want him to see?”

“Someone who does *not* want these days to be the last days.”

“Sometimes I feel that it’s hopeless.”

“So I once myself felt.”

They stood quietly beside each other, listening to the small waves from the bay lapping the pilings beneath the pier.

The sun, cinder-red, cast a stripe of blood across the bay toward their feet.

## Chapter 4

Leif was startled awake by a knock on his bedroom door. “Leif,” he heard Astrid say, “Elisabeth will meet you outside on the driveway in forty-five minutes. I brought you a cup of coffee.”

“Uh.” Even Vikings who had been farmers let the cows wait until a decent hour.

“You . . . you . . . you can open the door, Astrid.”

With a groan he sat up in bed; the headboard creaked behind him.

She opened the door, stepped brightly into room, handed him a mug of boiled bark and said, “Your oatmeal is almost ready.”

“Uh.” He nodded politely, “Thank you.”

She closed the door, then he heard her feet hurrying down the stairs.

Apparently, this modern world started every day at dawn.

Astrid had laid out newer clothes than the clothes which Leif had worn in the rowboat, but though Johannes and Leif were roughly the same height, and both trim at the waist, Leif’s shoulders threatened to burst out of Johannes’s old Sunday shirt.

The trousers, though black, were tight in the seat and short at the ankles.

The black socks fit well. The black shoes were definitely tight.

When Leif stepped down the stairs—without holding the railing this time—and walked into the kitchen, Astrid looked at him appraisingly. “We’re going to have to take you shopping.”

During breakfast, Astrid and Johannes were keenly interested in Leif’s trip to school today with Elisabeth. They told him that they wanted “a full report”.

Though Astrid hurried Leif out the door before his third bowl of oatmeal, Elisabeth was already outside on the gravel driveway, waiting for him. She carried two bags, one made of worn leather, one trim and black and looking very modern.

As they walked along the driveway through a woods of pine—the trees had been much taller in Leif’s time, their trunks three or four times as thick—Elisabeth explained to him that her first class was Marine Biology. The students were seventeen years old, seniors in their last year of high school, before most of them went on to a university.

She asked him, “Would you like to speak to them?”

“Me? Oh, no. I am coming to watch *you*. You are the teacher.”

“Classroom evaluation, huh?”

“I shall sit quietly. You just go on with your day.”

He took a deep breath of pine in the morning sunshine.

Standing at the junction of the driveway with a road running parallel with the northern shore of the fjord, they waited for the bus. Leif listened to the chirp of a funny little fat bird that he had liked when he was a boy.

When a big green box on wheels came rolling down the road and stopped in front of them, Leif understood that people had come a long way since the days of the ox cart. A door swung open at the front of the bus. Elisabeth called up to the driver, “Good morning, Mary.”

The driver, a cheerful woman wearing a blue suit, looked at Leif as Elisabeth ushered him up a set of steps. Mary asked, “Who’s that good-looking fellow with you today?”

“This is Leif,” said Elisabeth, handing Mary a twenty-*kroner* coin, Leif’s bus fare. “He’s a friend of the family, visiting us for a while.”

“Welcome, Leif,” said Mary, shutting the door behind him. She looked at her side mirror, then the bus moved forward, soon traveling at a speed much faster than Leif had ever known.

Elisabeth led him along an aisle between seated people—the floor of the bus was moving beneath his feet in a way that was different from the deck of a ship—then they sat together on a soft seat, Leif beside the window so that he could see the forest and the mountains and an occasional glimpse of the fjord. There were many more houses than in his time, big handsome houses, painted many different colors.

Leif looked at the other passengers. Children and teenagers, chattering and occasionally laughing, rode the bus to school, as Elisabeth explained. Adults, much quieter, rode the bus to work. A mother with her bundled infant was perhaps on her way to visit a friend, or her grandmother, or a doctor like Bjørn.

As the bus drove through a town, Leif stared with astonishment at the modern buildings that stood where a few log houses and a barn had once stood. The bus stopped every couple of blocks; most of the adults got off. Driving beyond the edge of town, the bus drew close enough to the fjord that Leif could see its silver-blue

water through the trees. He spotted a lone boat heading west with a sharply defined wake spreading behind it.

The bus turned into a circular driveway in front of a very large building. Leif could see hundreds of young people, some of them stepping out of other buses, some of them riding . . . “Those are bicycles,” explained Elisabeth.

Children were chasing each other around a lawn sprinkled with bright yellow birch leaves.

Elisabeth and Leif said “Good bye” to Mary as they stepped off the bus.

Mary smiled at him. “Good bye, Leif. Hope to see you again.”

Leif and Elisabeth walked in the midst of a noisy throng of youngsters through a large door into the very big building. Leif stayed close beside Elisabeth as she led him along a hallway and then up some stairs and along another hallway, greeting other teachers along the way and introducing Leif to each one.

Then she unlocked and opened her classroom door, and welcomed him into a big room with chairs and desks, and windows overlooking the grassy yard behind the building.

“Take a seat in the back if you like,” said Elisabeth. “I’ll introduce you as our guest today, and leave it at that.”

“All right.”

Students quickly filled the classroom. They were about Leif’s age when he, without help from his father, had built his first four-man rowboat. The students sat at their desks in straight rows, facing a black wall, with the windows and mountains and the sky to their left. Some of the students glanced at Leif, curious.

Elisabeth rubbed one corner of the black wall with something that made the white writing go away. Then she wrote with new white letters,

WEDNESDAY  
SEPTEMBER 17, 2008

Leif wanted to ask, “What is Wednesday? What is September?” But he did not interrupt Elisabeth while she laid out books and papers on her desk, then spoke with one of the students.

He looked at the shelves of books along the wall opposite the window. He looked at maps—modern, detailed maps—on the front and back walls of the classroom. Then he noticed something round and blue, with patches of green, on a

wooden stand between Elisabeth's desk and the window. The round something was about as wide as one of those baby codfish.

He heard a bell ring. Then Elisabeth said "Good morning" to the students. She introduced their visitor, "Leif Magnussen. He is a friend of the family, and he is interested in the sea. So I thought he might like to visit our class today."

Leif stood up shyly. He said, "Good morning. I am very glad to be with you today." Then he sat down again.

The boys peered at him; one boy nodded a friendly welcome. The girls looked at him more openly; several nodded their welcome.

Now Elisabeth began her teaching. She picked up the round, blue-and-green something, then held it in her outstretched hand for all to see. "I would like to talk today about the currents that flow around the several oceans on planet Earth. I would especially like to examine the currents that sweep along Norway's coastline. Where do these currents come from? What do they carry with them? And then . . . once they have passed by Norway, where do they go?"

As she walked slowly across the front of the classroom, putting her finger on a specific part of the blue-and-green something, Leif called from the back of the room—without raising his hand before he asked a question—"Elisabeth, I'm sorry, but . . . what is it?" He gestured toward whatever it was that she held so proudly.

She looked at him—with her mother's dark eyes, and her grandmother's cheeks—then she said, reaching the blue-and-green something toward him, "Leif, this is the world."

The students were looking at him now, wondering who this guy was who didn't know what a globe of the world was.

Elisabeth explained to the students, "Leif is a Viking. He comes from a time one thousand years ago. Back when people thought the Earth was flat."

The students looked back and forth between their teacher, whom they liked and respected very much, and the Viking seated at a desk at the back of the room, with his beard and long tousled hair. He was shy, and hesitant, but curious, not at all shy about asking such a strange question. And . . . he seemed, somehow, very powerful.

Leif paid no attention to the students staring at him as he looked in wonder at the blue-green world in Elisabeth's hand . . . while she walked between two rows of desks toward him. "Here is Norway," she said, setting her fingertip on a long slender patch of gray-green near the top of the world. She stood at the back of the room

beside Leif's desk, facing the students, who turned in their seats and peered across the classroom to see their Norway.

Elisabeth explained, "If one were to sail west from Norway, as many Vikings did, one could reach Iceland." She moved the tip of her finger until she pointed at Iceland.

Nearly bursting from his desk, Leif stood up, for he had sailed to Iceland. He stared at the green-gray-white island in the pale blue sea.

"And if one were to sail further west," continued Elisabeth, as some Vikings did, one could reach Greenland." She moved the tip of her finger, pointing at Greenland.

Leif stared at the huge green-and-white island, much bigger than Norway.

"And if one were to sail even further west, and then south, as a small number of Vikings did, one could reach a place they called 'Vinland'. Land of Meadow Grass. It was somewhere here," she moved her finger, "along the coast of Canada. Two Norwegian researchers, Helge and Anne Stine Ingstad, along with their daughter Benedicte, have conducted archeological studies at a grassy sight on a peninsula jutting north from the island of Newfoundland. The remains of timber and turf houses, as well as a few key objects, such as a bronze ring pin, indicate that Vikings had lived there."

Leif stared at the tip of the peninsula, close to the mainland, with a narrow strait of water between them. He was laboring now, laboring in his mind to think, to remember . . .

Elisabeth continued, "In roughly the year one thousand, Leif Eriksson sailed west from Greenland with a crew of thirty-five men in a well-provisioned Viking ship. They came first to a coastline of rock and ice. Heading south, they skirted a coastline of thick forest and long white beaches. Finally they came to a spot with grass and heath and a stream, where sheep and cows and goats could graze. Where there was driftwood on the shore for building a shelter, and for burning in a fire. And where turf could be cut from bogs, as it was in Greenland and Iceland and Norway, to insulate the walls of a house."

"And where," said Leif, remembering now the golden orb that lit the restless water, "the sun rises over the sea."

"That's right," said Elisabeth. "Here in Norway, the sun rises over the mountains. But in this new land that Leif Eriksson and his crew explored, the sun rose over the sea."

Leif stared at Elisabeth while she held the world between them. The students stared at both of them. “You were there!” he boomed with his big voice, a voice filled with joy at the remembrance. “I knew that I remembered you, but I could not think from where. Elisabeth, you were with us on that ship, with your husband Thorbjørn the Bloody, who never washed the brains of his enemies from his battle-axe.”

“I . . .” Elisabeth stared at him, stunned.

“You hated him. But you had been given to him by your father.”

“I . . .”

“May I hold it?” Leif asked, reaching out his hands to hold the round world.

“Of course,” said Elisabeth, handing him the sphere as light as a handful of feathers.

He held the world so that the students could see the island with its finger jutting into the sea. “Here we built our camp, on the tip of this finger. We could see land to the west, a few islands to the east, and then the great ocean. We arrived during the summer, stayed through the winter, then departed the next summer. From this camp we explored further south, cutting timber to take back to Greenland. I also worked to repair our long-ship, and the small boat we had brought onboard, for such a trade had I been taught by my father in Norway.”

He looked at Elisabeth, hopeful. “Do you remember our stay in Vinland?”

With sadness in her eyes, as if she were losing him before she had really been with him, she shook her head. “No.”

He had expected so. It was still too early.

“But I interrupt your class,” he said. “Please,” he placed the world back into her hands, “please continue.” He gestured toward the front of the room, then he sat at his desk.

As Elisabeth walked between the rows of desks to the front of the room, the students were absolutely silent. This was so real, it was better than virtual.

Leif did not interrupt while Elisabeth now spoke about the Gulf Stream, a warm current that flowed across the North Atlantic—she traced its flow with her finger—then swept north up the coast of Norway with its warmth.

After a long pause, during which her eyes scanned slowly back and forth across the students, she asked them, “What would happen to Norway if the Gulf Stream were to alter its present course—”

“Wait a minute,” said a girl with irritation in her voice. “You’re going to start now with global warming, aren’t you? You’re going to tell us about the mess we’re

in, because of a century of pollution. You're going to tell us that everything in Norway is going to turn weird. Dead fish and dead birds and dead everything. Well, I don't want to hear about it. I didn't cause that century of pollution, and I don't see anybody doing much about it now. This great country of Norway pumps millions of barrels of oil every week, and somebody's burning it somewhere, every week." The girl stood up from her desk, her books in one arm.

"I'm sorry, Miss Jakobsen, but I can't listen to this stuff anymore."

"All right," said Elisabeth, very calm. "Inger, you are welcome to spend the rest of the period in the library."

Inger glanced toward the windows. "Can I go outside? Can I go out to the playground and sit on a swing in the sunshine and think that maybe, *maybe*, I can grow up and have a family the way I'm supposed to have a right to do?"

Elisabeth said, "Yes, Inger, you can go outside to the playground."

Inger gave a nod of gratitude to her teacher, then she walked with her books out the classroom door, which she closed quietly behind her.

A couple of minutes later, Leif stood up from his desk and walked across the back of the room to the window. While Elisabeth was talking at the front of the room about changing weather patterns, and drought, and insects and blight and various diseases moving north across Europe, he looked down at the slender girl in her pink shirt and yellow trousers, the colors bright in the sunshine as she swung back and forth on a seat suspended by two chains from an overhead pole. Her dark hair swept back as she swung forward, then swept over her cheeks as she swung backward.

Stretching out her feet at the peak of her backward swing, she swung forward even higher.

## Chapter 5

After school, Leif and Elisabeth rode the bus into town, where they went shopping at Arnulf's Men's Wear. Arnulf quickly determined that Leif was extra large in the shoulders, long in the sleeve, unusually trim in the waist, and within the range of normal trouser length. Leif tried on several warm flannel shirts for autumn, and a pair of jeans.

Then Elisabeth selected something more formal: a business shirt, pale blue; charcoal-gray trousers with a sharp crease, and cuffs; black socks, black lace-up shoes; and a belt for the trousers, black with a gold buckle.

No tie. A tie would be too much. Professional, but informal: that was the modern Norwegian way.

Leif stood in front of a full-length mirror. Elisabeth stood on one side of him and a little behind, her hands on his shoulders to be sure the shirt fit properly. Arnulf knelt on the other side, pinning a cuff.

Leif looked at himself in the mirror, a mirror that told him some truth that he wished to understand. The face was from a thousand years ago, a young, determined face, with blue eyes that sought honesty, and a cock of confidence in the bearded jaw.

The face was also from today, with humor in the blue eyes as he watched his outward transformation. Elisabeth was now brushing his hair with her fingers, so that his hair spread evenly across his back from shoulder to shoulder.

He asked her, "Do you think I should trim the beard? I look as if I've just come back from Vinland."

"You could," she said. "I could trim it for you when we get home."

"Ah. And when I walk along the street here in your town, wearing a business outfit, my beard properly trimmed, who will they take me for?"

"Am I with you, or are you walking alone?"

"You are with me, certainly."

"Then they would take you for the guy with the luckiest girl in the world."

"Ah. The honor is his."

She stepped back and studied Leif in the mirror. "Arnulf, thank you so much. We'll take him just as he is."

They visited Elisabeth's father at the medical clinic. Bjørn, appearing in the waiting room with a clipboard in his hand, was stunned at the new look of his Viking guest. Allowing five minutes between patients, he invited Leif and Elisabeth into his office. His desk was cluttered but neat. The walls were lined with books on shelves. Medical journals lay on a table.

Bjørn listened to his daughter's synopsis of Leif's day at school, but soon looked at his watch and said he would be done with office hours in forty minutes. He would then walk across town to the nursing home. Would Leif and Elisabeth like to come with him?

So Leif and Elisabeth visited her mother, in the Office of Counseling next door. Bente admired Leif's new look, as they stood in a room with bright pictures and pale green walls. But Bente had an urgent case waiting.

So Leif and Elisabeth filled the rest of the forty minutes by shopping at the grocery store for a few things for dinner.

While Elisabeth pushed a cart up and down the aisles, Leif stared at the endless variety of vegetables. Many of the plants, and strange fruits, he had never seen before. But though he could not read the sign, he knew that the red apples in a neat pile came from the Hardanger plateau.

He peered into a glass case that displayed a dozen different kinds of bread and cakes. He found a pink cake with green writing on it. Yes, he of course must learn how to read Norwegian.

Walking slowly along another glass case, he marveled at packages of red meat, sitting right there for a person to pick up and place in a wire box on wheels.

How often had his people been hungry, sometimes at the edge of starvation? How often had men launched their boats in rough seas, because families needed fish? How often had men nearly froze in the mountains during a blizzard, while they stalked the elk that climbed higher and higher?

In a glass case containing bins of fish, he found many old friends. But there were new kinds of fish as well. And a new sort of crab. Perhaps they were from outside the fjord, some distance away in the sea.

He examined cheese in a variety of packages, some with images of a goat on them. He picked up a tall box with an image of a cow, and understood that he was holding a box of milk.

He watched as Elisabeth opened a long gray box: it was filled with brown eggs. She put the gray box into her wire box on wheels, then she glanced at him with humor in her eyes. “This is just a little bitty store,” she said. “You should see them in Oslo.” “Oslo?” He could remember something about Oslo, but what was it?

He carried two green canvas bags filled with groceries to the medical clinic, where Bjørn was just stepping out the front door. The three of them crossed a couple of streets lined with houses, until they came to a street that paralleled the fjord. The nursing home, a long, two-story brick building, sheltered in a woods of pine and birch, overlooked the broad blue-black expanse of the fjord.

While Bjørn visited his patients, Elisabeth took Leif to meet a friend. Jens had gone through school with Elisabeth’s mother and father, but now he was in a wheelchair with a sickness that Leif could see had crippled his legs and hands. Jens was delighted that Elisabeth had come to visit him, and he was very glad to meet Leif, a friend of Elisabeth’s family.

“Leif,” said Jens, “let me show you something.”

Jens wheeled in his chair across his room to a table by a window overlooking the fjord. On the table was a little wall, with many buttons in front of it. Jens tapped one of the buttons with his thumb. The wall blinked with colors, then showed an image of a sea eagle—Leif had never seen an eagle so close, so clearly—its brown wings spread, its white tail flared, just at the moment when its talons grabbed a silver fish from frozen drops of dark gray water.

Jens spoke to the image: it changed to many bits of writing that Leif could not read. Jens spoke a word, another word, another word: new words and images appeared on the little wall. Jens now looked up over his shoulder at Leif, who was leaning down beside him. “Siri is waiting for my call at eleven-thirty in the morning her time, just before lunch, which is five-thirty in the afternoon our time, just before dinner. There’s a six-hour time difference, you see, between Newfoundland and Norway.”

“Newfoundland,” said Leif, glancing at Elisabeth, leaning down on the other side of Jens.

“Ja,” said Jens. “Siri’s got skype, so we can—”

The image of a woman’s face appeared now on the little wall, not as clear as the image of the eagle had been, but she was moving, leaning forward with a smile, and

now Leif heard laughter from little black boxes beside the image of the woman from Newfoundland.

“You’re early!” she said. She too was in a wheelchair. She was speaking Norwegian.

“I’ve got some guests here,” said Jens. “Would you like to meet them?”

“Of course!”

Jens introduced Elisabeth, who said, “Hello, Siri. I am so glad to meet you.”

Then Jens introduced Leif, who said, “Hello, I am Leif, and I have visited your Newfoundland.”

“You have! When?” Siri’s voice was filled with surprise and keen interest.

“Oh, some time ago. I remember best of all your coastline: the rocky ledges so easy to walk on, the beaches heaped with driftwood, the meadows filled with grass and wildflowers. Sometimes we watched the seals as they rode the broken ice along the coast in the spring.”

Siri told him, “A bunch of us went to a park on the coast last Saturday. It felt so good just to breathe the air from the sea.”

“Well, Siri, it is very surprising and nice to talk with you. Now here is Jens.”

Jens and Siri talked for several minutes, about a concert they had both listened to last night, broadcast from London.

Leif and Elisabeth rode home on the bus with Bjørn and Bente, the two couples sitting across the aisle from each other. Leif, seated beside a window, watched for glimpses of the fjord through the trees, and admired the huge fields that formed a patchwork around each farmhouse.

Then he turned to Elisabeth and said, “I have seen so much today. And so much of what I have seen, is good.” He repeated with conviction, “There is so much *good*.”

Elisabeth studied him for a long moment, then she asked him, “What happened to me and Thorbjørn the Bloody?”

“Ah. We were all living together in a long house built with timber and turf. Scattered fires burned lengthwise down the middle of the house, giving their flickering light and smoky heat. The sides of the house were elevated platforms build from driftwood, with spruce boughs laid on them, for there we slept.” He paused, as if embarrassed. “There were various arrangements between the thirty-five men and six women. You and Thorbjørn were married, so of course you were his.”

“Ah, the good old days.”

“All of us could hear the way he treated you. We could hear the cruelty in his voice. We heard the slaps. We heard the grunting pig doing his business on you. And when five of us could bear it no longer, we spoke with Leif.”

“Leif Eriksson.”

“Ja. He too had had his fill. He gave us the nod. So one night when Thorbjørn the Bloody, who had swung his axe in Norway and in Iceland and in Greenland, stepped out through the leather flap to piss beneath an autumn moon, we too slipped out the door like five shadows.”

Leif looked out the bus window at a field of freshly cut grass, and at a tractor pulling a wagon laden with hay bales to a red barn. Yes, he too had carried a bow, and a quiver of arrows.

“While Thorbjørn was pissing with his back to the wind, five arrows drove deep into his flesh. He roared and staggered, but the monster did not die. He drew out his sword, shouted an oath to Odin, then raised his blade to cleave one of us from pate to groin, when Frode, from the rear, swung his axe and in one sharp blow severed Thorbjørn’s hand from his arm, leaving the monster to wave his bleeding stump.”

“Serves him right.”

“Five swords plunged into his heart, mine the first. The other four added their measure of justice. When the ogre had stopped kicking, we drew out our five blades and washed the filthy blood from them in a nearby tarn.”

That was the last blood he ever washed from his sword. That was the first and final time he had killed. He had never liked that part of Viking life. He much preferred to be a builder of boats.

“We carried his body to the shore and cast it into the cold black water. The current was strong. We cast his hand in after him.”

After a long silence, Elisabeth asked, “What happened to me after that?”

“Ah. You and I, we were in love, with everyone’s blessing. I can remember walking over the heath with you. The land was red and gold. We stood on a ridge of rock, looking out to sea, and upon that day we made our vows, I from my heart and you from yours.”

“Did we marry?”

“Married on that island we were, the first of the Scandinavian peoples to be there wed. With Leif Eriksson presiding as captain of our ship, and with prayers of gratitude to both Thor and Jesus, were we made man and wife.”

“Then . . . are we still married now?”

“Ah. This is a difficult question. We were married through one autumn and winter on Vinland. I repaired the ship while you tended the cows and sheep and goats. I remember standing outside with you at night, when green and pink ribbons rippled across the sky. Away from the others, we kissed until our feet were about frozen.”

“Ahhh, now I know why my feet are always cold.”

“Yes, and we were married when the springtime sun returned to warm us. We were married in the early summer, while we waited for the broken ice to thin enough that we could launch our ship. We were married on the voyage back to Greenland, a successful voyage, for we survived a three-day storm, then we found our bearings by watching the whales and the birds, until we sighted the white hills of our Greenland.”

Then came the darkness of sleep.

“After that, Elisabeth, I cannot remember a thing. Did we live on a farm in Greenland? Did we sail on to Iceland? Did we sail all the way back to Norway? For your people and my people had both come originally from the country where the great ships were built.”

“So, if we were married once, do we have to get married again, after a thousand years have gone by? Or do our eternal vows really last for an eternity?”

He considered. “Wouldn’t you like to be courted again?”

“Oh, I would quite like to be courted again.”

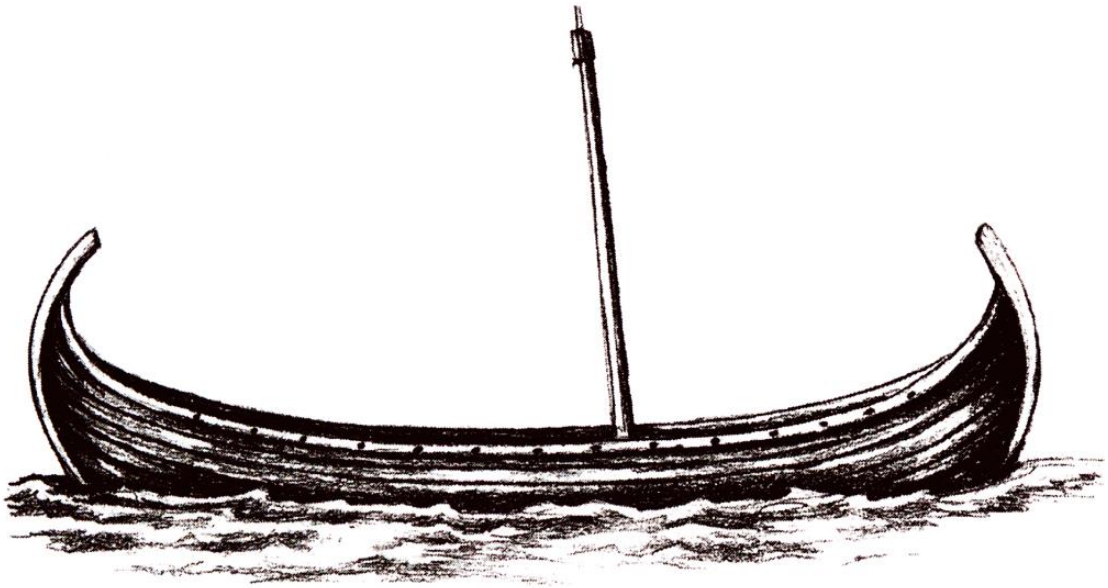
“Well then.” He reached for her hand. Their fingers entwined for the first time. She gave him a squeeze.

“As I was just telling you,” said Leif, “there is so much *good*.”

They rode in silence now, watching the red and gold heather pass by outside the bus window, in fulfillment of some ancient promise made by the Creator to the human heart.

# Part Two

## Courtship



## Chapter 6

While Astrid was busy in Bente's kitchen, where she baked an apple pie that afternoon, and while Bente took a nap after a draining day at work, and while Bjørn and Johannes prepared the coals on the grill in the yard, Leif sat in a chair on the balcony of the red house, his new shirt and trousers covered with a white bed sheet while Elisabeth, walking back and forth in front of him, trimmed his beard.

Weather was moving in: a storm at sea was punching up the fjord. The afternoon breeze was gusting now with spits of wind. Bjørn and Johannes shifted this way and that around the grill as the wind blew smoke into their eyes.

While Elisabeth trimmed Leif's beard, tufts of curly red hair landed on his white lap. Then a gust would toss the tufts into the air and sweep them over the balcony railing. Leif had to hold the sheet tightly over his lap.

Elisabeth stood back and admired her work. "Oh my, the man I'm bringing to dinner!"

Leif remembered her face clearly now. From a thousand years ago, he remembered the happiness in her eyes, for he saw it again now.

A thousand years ago, she had probably sheared his beard with her sheep shears.

She walked behind him, then he felt her flicking his hair.

"How about I trim just a little bit back here?"

"Ah. As you wish."

While she was brushing his hair in preparation for the trimming, he turned his head and looked down from the balcony to where his ship was pulled up on the beach. It lay not only above high tide, but above the waves of a storm surge. The oars were lashed to the deck. The coiled sail was lashed to the deck. The bow was tied by a sturdy line of walrus hide to a large pine. The ship would weather well.

"Hold still!" she scolded.

"Sorry."

He faced forward, watching the whitecaps on the dark belly of the fjord.

"Do you know," she said as she snipped his hair and then flicked it, "we ought to take a picture of you."

"What is it, to take a picture?"

“I’ll show you. A little box with an eye that sees you, is what we call a camera. It can make an ‘image’, as you say.”

“Ja. Then of course it must be an image of you and me together. For such is who I am. Not alone. With you I am.”

“Then Papa shall take the picture. He’s good with a camera. But first, I must change into a dress.”

When she had finished trimming his hair, she unwrapped the white sheet from around him and shook it; the wind snatched the locks of blond hair and cast them among the yellow ferns and red-orange heather in the yard below.

Standing in front of him, she told him, “Go look at yourself in the mirror by the front door. I’ll be back in ten minutes.”

As a wood sprite might suddenly vanish into a forest, Elisabeth vanished into the house.

Leif stood up from the chair, patted his hands on the trim roundness of his beard, then opened a door with a window—the door through which Elisabeth had just disappeared—and stepped into the house: a much bigger house than the house of Astrid and Johannes. And far more open as well, with its balcony upstairs, wrapping entirely around the house, and the wall of windows downstairs, facing the fjord.

He descended a staircase twice as wide as Astrid’s staircase, crossed through the big room on the ground floor—with an iron stove at its center, not yet lit during these warm days of September—to the entryway and front door, with a window facing the road, where he stood in front of a mirror almost as long as the mirror at Arnulf’s Men’s Wear. Arnulf would be pleased with the man that Leif was looking at now. For Leif was not only a modern European, but a Nordic European.

He returned to the big room, walked around the long feasting table with its dozen chairs, then stepped quietly toward the kitchen behind a long counter—a big kitchen with windows looking out at the fjord—where Astrid, her back to him, was taking three pies out of the oven and setting them on top of the stove.

Smelling the hot apple pies, Leif called over the counter to Astrid, “Oh, oh, oh! Never did I know apples to smell so good.”

Startled by his presence, she turned to look at him, then she smiled with approval. “Leif, I’ll be playing the organ in church on Sunday. I do hope you will join us.”

“Astrid, I would be honored. But I do not know this thing, an organ in church.”

“You will hear your first Bach.”

She lifted the lid of a large pot and poked at something inside with a fork.

“Tell the boys that the potatoes are done.”

“All right.”

He slid the large glass door to one side and stepped out into the cool gusting wind. He could smell the brine of churned-up water.

Bjørn and Johannes had laid three large filets of salmon on the grill over the coals, which were fanned bright red by the wind. “Maybe we should put the lid on,” suggested Johannes.

“Good idea,” said Bjørn. He lifted a black half-of-a-sphere, not from a globe of the Earth but from a globe of the night, and set it over the bottom half of the globe of the night, with the coals and salmon inside.

As Leif approached, he told them, “Astrid says to tell you that the potatoes are ready.”

“Good,” said Bjørn. “We won’t be long.”

Leif heard Elisabeth calling his name, “Lief!” behind him. Turning, he saw her step out the door and then walk toward him on the path through the heather. She wore a summer dress, buttercup-yellow. The dress had thin straps; her shoulders were bare. Leif had never before seen Elisabeth in such a womanly dress.

She handed a small black box, a ‘camera’, to her father. “Papa, will you take our picture, please?”

Bjørn set down his long grilling fork, took the camera, then he and Johannes and Leif followed Elisabeth to the eastern end of the house and around the corner, where, sheltered from the wind, Elisabeth and Leif could stand with pine and birch and towering mountains behind them. Elisabeth gestured for Leif to stand beside her, then she wrapped her hand around his waist. Leif wrapped his hand around Elisabeth’s bare shoulder.

Bjørn, Elisabeth’s father, in the presence of Johannes, Elisabeth’s grandfather, gave his blessing to his daughter and her chosen man, by counting, “One, two, three,” and then an intense light flashed in Leif’s eyes.

“Two more, Papa, just to be sure.”

The bright light flashed two times more, while Leif felt Elisabeth squeezing his waist, thus making him smile.

Then, stepping forward in her yellow dress, she said, “Thank you, Papa.” She took the camera from him. “How long before the salmon are ready? Should I wake up Mama?”

Her father considered. “Let your mother sleep for another ten minutes.”

The four of them walked around the corner of the house into the wind. While her father lifted the lid and peered into the grill, poking with his fork, Elisabeth pressed the little buttons on her camera. Turning to Leif, she announced, “There we are!”

She showed him a small window on the back of the camera. In the window, he saw a tiny image of himself standing beside Elisabeth, his blue shirt beside her yellow dress.

“I can make it bigger, of course,” she said. “If you’ll help Astrid to set the table, I’ll download our picture and make a print. Then I’ll wake up Mama.”

“A print?” he asked.

“A picture. An image. You wait, I’ll bring it to dinner.”

With her father and grandfather not more than five meters away, she gripped his shoulder with her free hand, rose up on her toes and kissed him.

It was a kiss so real, so firm, so earnest, that for the first time since he had awakened beside his ship in this modern Norway, he knew for certain that he was not dreaming. Elisabeth and her kiss were real.

During dinner at an oval table large enough to seat twelve people—five to a side with two at the ends, but this evening set for a crescent of six at one end—Elisabeth told everyone about Leif’s visit to her class, and his discovery that the world was round. “I put my finger on Norway,” she said, “then on Iceland, then on Greenland, and then on the land that Leif Eriksson called Vinland.”

“For the first time,” Leif said to Elisabeth’s family, “I knew where I had been.”

Elisabeth told her family that during the same class, one of her students, “a troubled girl”, had refused to listen to anything more about global warming. Elisabeth gave her permission to leave the classroom. What she would do at exam time, she was not sure.

“You certainly cannot fail her,” said Bente, “for she’s right and the rest of us are wrong. We have failed her, by slowly destroying her world.”

Leif savored chunks of grilled salmon that reminded him of campfire meals a thousand years ago. Turning to Johannes, he asked, “Where did you catch our dinner?”

“Well, I must admit, Leif, that I did not catch this salmon. It was farmed a couple of kilometers down the fjord. Some say they can taste the difference between farmed and wild, but if farmed will help to preserve the wild, then I’ll eat farmed.”

“Farmed salmon?” asked Leif.

Taking turns to explain, often interrupting each other to disagree on a certain point, the family explained aquaculture to Leif, with all of its hazards and benefits. He understood that this salmon had been raised inside a big net in the fjord. He said to Johannes, “Maybe the next time we go rowing, we could visit this farm.”

“Of course. We know the folks. They’re our neighbors on the waterway.”

While Elisabeth and Bente cleared the dishes, and Astrid cut her apple pie, Bjørn handed his plate to his daughter and asked her, “Where is our Norwegian Family Encyclopedia? The one you and your brothers used when you were kids. Is it up in your office?”

“It’s in a bookcase in my bedroom. To the left of the headboard.”

“My I fetch one of the volumes?”

“Of course.”

Bjørn headed up the stairs.

Leif and Johannes, sitting across the table from each other, listened to the first big drops of rain pattering on the windows. The darkness of the storm clouds had been swallowed by the darkness of night. The big glass windows—Leif marveled that such a thing could exist—were shiny black with streams of water running down them.

“We’re going to take a bath on the way home tonight,” said Johannes.

“We’re going to catch it full in the face,” laughed Leif.

When the others returned to the table, Astrid brought her apple pies and Bjørn brought a book. Elisabeth, who had disappeared for some minutes up to her office, now reappeared with something big and flat in a bag.

First, the pie. When Leif took his first forkful of Astrid’s warm apple pie, he tasted something that not even the Creator had made, at the very beginning. Yes, the Creator had made the apples, but Astrid had made the pie.

“Astrid,” he said, turning to her at the head of the table, “Now I know why I have come back to Norway. Now I know. To taste such heavenly pie.”

After everyone had set down his or her fork with a sigh of profound contentment, Elisabeth took a framed photograph out of a bag and handed it to her

mother across the table, seated beside Leif. “You can stop worrying, Mama. Your difficult daughter has found him.”

Her mother studied the picture. Leif stared at it as well.

Her mother asked, “When did you take this?”

“An hour ago. While you were sleeping.”

Bente held the picture so that Leif could better see it. On one hand, this guest, this stranger, had already told them that he would be with them for only one month. On the other hand, Bente knew that somehow, her daughter and Leif would be together forever.

She handed the picture to Leif, who looked now not at a tiny image of two people no bigger than crickets, but an image that filled his hands as he held it, and filled his eyes as he studied it, and filled his heart as well. There stood Elisabeth with grace and dignity, her dark eyes and smile a testament to her happiness.

He looked at his own face, no longer peering back with astonishment and amusement from Arnulf’s mirror. With his arm around Elisabeth’s shoulder, he looked proud, and peaceful. Here was a couple, man and woman, who felt in their hearts the first blossoming, the first joy, the first understanding of something sacred.

Leif passed the picture to Johannes across the table. He could see the approval in the grandfather’s eyes. And then, as the picture was passed from hands to hands, in the father’s eyes. In the grandmother’s eyes.

Now Elisabeth placed the picture once again in Leif’s hands. “We’ll put it in a plastic bag before you go home tonight.”

Holding the image in its oaken frame as if he held important evidence, he looked up and said in Old Norse, “Behold, here is the flowering of what you first created. Look upon this woman, and see that she is *good*.”

Then he said to Elisabeth, “I will put this picture on my dresser. So shall you bid me good night, and so shall you bid me good morning.”

She looked at him, and knew that whatever was coming, she was ready.

## Chapter 7

Rain was lashing the windows as Bjørn opened his book and laid it on the table in front of the empty chair at the far end of the table. “Leif, why don’t you sit here,” he said, smoothing the pages. “Here’s a map that I think might interest you.”

Leif sat in the empty chair, then looked at a map of many places in a patchwork of many colors. He looked at the many names that he could not read.

Bjørn explained, “This is a map of the Viking world around the year One Thousand A.D.” He tapped his finger. “Here is Norway.” He spread his hand over most of the map. “Here is Europe.”

Leif had no idea that the world beyond his travels had been so complex.

Bjørn continued, “The Norwegian Vikings, the Danish Vikings, and the Swedish Vikings, sometimes independently and sometimes sailing together, encircled Europe with their ships. Such a thing had never been done before.”

Bjørn’s finger followed a red arrow. “From the coast of Norway, we headed south to England, where we plundered the monastery. We sailed south to the Netherlands, where we plundered those rich fat merchants. We sailed to France, where we discovered the wine and the women. We sailed to Spain, and Portugal, and then through the narrow strait at Gibraltar to the Mediterranean itself.”

He paused, not wanting to race ahead of what Leif could absorb.

“We sailed around that great sea between Europe and Africa, plundering less and trading more, learning the use of coins, learning to count with numbers in three, four, five different languages. Some of us reached the harbor at Athens. We traded in the Greek market, then we walked through the crowded streets up a hill until we stood among the pillars of what they called the Acropolis.” Bjørn paused, then added, “Here in Athens were an ancient people, with an ancient wisdom.”

“Ja,” said Leif. “In my time, we heard of these explorations.”

“The Swedes, on the other hand,” continued Bjørn, his finger moving toward the top of the map, “sailed their ships *east*, across the Baltic Sea and along the Gulf of Finland, then up a broad winding river that took them to a large lake, in Russia. There they traded at a village called Staraja Ladoga, for the Swedes were traders, not plunderers, from the beginning. Yes, they plundered a little, and they were especially

adept at capturing Slavic people in remote villages and then selling them downstream as slaves.”

Slaves. Yes, Leif had heard of people sold as slaves.

Bjørn’s finger followed a red arrow. “The Swedes rowed and sailed down the Volga River, traversing from north to south the vast expanse of Russia, until they reached the Caspian Sea. Now deep in the land of the Moslems, they left their ships on the shore of the Caspian and traveled across the great wastes of mountain and desert, to the markets of Baghdad.”

He tapped his finger near the bottom of the map. “Here in Baghdad, on the banks of the great river Tigris, the Swedish Vikings traded with merchants whose caravans reached all the way to the fabled India. Here in Baghdad, for the first time, the Vikings held in their hands the silver coins freshly minted by the Arabs. Coins that made trade possible from one end of the world to the other.”

Leif looked at the picture in the book of three silver coins. Yes, here in Baghdad were an ancient people, with an ancient wisdom.

And then suddenly, a distant door opened in his mind and he remembered.

“Ja,” he said to Bjørn, and to the others in the family gathered around them, “I know of those coins. They are called *dirhams*. The Swedes brought home these disks of silver with writing stamped on them. At the great market on the island of Gotland, to which ships from all around the Baltic sailed, these coins came into the hands of Norwegian merchants. Arab coins joined the coins from Germany and from England.”

With a nod of acknowledgement, Bjørn continued, tapping his finger on the map, “Some of the Swedes paddled south across Russia on the Dniepr River, stopping at the great market in Kiev, until they reached the Black Sea. They sailed along its western coast, sailed past the delta of the Danube River, until they reached the markets of Byzantium. The Swedish Vikings attempted several attacks on the city, until they eventually settled on a trade agreement which specified, in part, how much silk they could purchase from the Far East.”

“This silk I do not know,” said Leif.

Bjørn tapped his finger. “From the straits at the Bosphorus, the Swedes sailed across the Sea of Marmara to the strait of the Dardanelles, from which they emerged into the Aegean Sea. Sailing south in warm sunshine through a multitude of islands, the Vikings explored the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. Where their fellow Scandinavians were also sailing. Swede met Norwegian at the markets of Athens.”

“So,” declared Leif with pride, “we knew how to build good ships.”

Elisabeth said to her father, “I remember when you first showed that map to me. I was about ten years old.”

Leif stood up from his chair, reached into a pocket of his charcoal-grey trousers, took out three silver coins, looked at them on his palm—the printed markings were still clear—then he placed the three silver coins on the dark wooden table.

“These,” he said to Bjørn, “are from Baghdad.”

Bjørn stared at the coins, then he stared at Leif. “Where did you get them?”

“Ah,” said Leif, looking at Elisabeth, “the question is not, ‘Where did you get them?’ The question is, ‘How shall I spend them?’”

The wind shook a window so hard that its rattling drew everyone at the table to stare at the black raging storm outside.

## Chapter 8

Leif spent most of the next day rowing Johannes's boat on the choppy waters of the fjord.

He had asked Johannes at breakfast if he might take the boat out. And would Johannes mind if Leif rowed alone?

When Astrid protested that the water was too rough, Leif assured her that the worst of the storm was over, and that the rain and wind were much diminished, and steady. "I need to pull those oars for a while," he stated.

His hostess acquiesced.

He pulled the oars with his back to the wind and the rain and the chop, while whitecaps rolled along the gunnels. The black troughs were pocked with rain. Warm in his sealskin jacket and hood, trousers of walrus hide, and boots of moose hide, over layers of wool and thick wool socks, he pulled the oars with undiminishing strength.

A short distance down the fjord, he passed a large round net, supported by orange floats, with a walkway leading out from shore, all barely discernible in the steady rain. He guessed that this must be the salmon farm. He hoped he would have time to visit it.

He passed a red farmhouse with a white barn behind it, on a patch of land flanked by steep rock and dark spruce. In his time, a two-story house of logs had stood there, sheltering during the wintertime cows and goats and sheep and chickens and ducks on the ground floor, while a family lived above them on the second floor, enjoying the warmth from the cows and tolerating the stench.

He looked up at the low, dark-bellied clouds above the stern of the rowboat. They hid the peaks of the mountains to the south of the long fjord, and to the north, as if a soggy wool blanket had been laid over their jagged heights.

Leif the Believer, pulling hard on his oars, looked up and called through that soggy wool blanket, "There is *much* that is good. I think that you should come to see for yourself. A school where all children are welcome. Doctors who immediately help those who need them. A store with oranges from Portugal, olive oil from Greece, and chickens with their feathers already plucked."

He had disliked that job as a boy: plucking a chicken for his mother, until every last bit of feather was gone.

“And *she*, foremost of your creation, offers all the beauty and wisdom you had hoped for.”

A wave slapped the bow, sending spray across his sealskin back.

“I know that I must look further still. Yes, I must confront the source of your anger, and of your sadness. But what I see here in my homeland, on the streets of the town and in the hearts of the people, is far more good than I had expected. In my time, we carried our weapons, a knife at least. Today they carry briefcases and laptops. And the women . . . are finally blossoming into what you had hoped they would become.”

He pulled at the oars, swept them through the choppy gray-green water.

“Yes, they have plundered the sea. But even such fools can recognize their folly. Elisabeth told me that she works with an organization in Bergen which is writing what they call a ‘maritime constitution’, declaring rights, declaring sanctuaries. Not just fishing rights, but the rights of the fish. As you intended, during those first days of creation.”

A white gull wheeled in the gray sky above the stern, hoping for scraps from someone cleaning fish. With a shriek of protest, it sailed away on the wind.

“Yes, the whales shall be better protected. I know you are concerned about them.” He rowed, pulling with his arms, pulling with his back.

“This thing they call ‘global warming’ . . . which seems to me to be their incessant shitting in their own barn until they are up to their jowls in it . . . has Elisabeth greatly worried.”

Elisabeth was in her classroom now, trying to give those kids the knowledge and the courage, and the outrage, that they would need to fight for their future.

Leif called up, with a voice that could reach great distances, “I shall finish by saying, ‘Thank you.’ As you have created the seeds of pine and oak and corn and wheat, so you have created the seeds of love, and friendship, and compassion. Perhaps one day, these beleaguered people can truly begin to harvest.”

Watching now over his right shoulder, he hooked into a sheltered bay. As he neared the shore, he pulled especially hard on the oars, until the bow crunched on the pebble beach. He shipped his oars, then stood up a bit stiffly from the bench, facing, beyond the stern, the charcoal-gray rain over the olive-black fjord.

“Amen.”

Leif stepped out of the boat; his moose-hide boot, well greased with bee's wax, stepped ankle-deep into the receding wash of a wave. His next steps, with the bow's line coiled in his hand, took him onshore at the old family campsite. His mother had loved a picnic here.

He pulled the boat as far as he could up the beach, tossed the anchor further up the slope, then unlashd a blue plastic "cooler" from under his seat. He found a suitable driftwood log, sat facing the fjord where the wind and waves would later whisk him back home, rolled his shoulders, and greatly enjoyed being who he had been a thousand years ago.

Then he feasted on Astrid's roasted chicken basted with a red sauce that burned his tongue; and bread fresh from her oven, with a melted sugar glaze over the loaf; and a block of perfectly ripe goat cheese from a farm just up the fjord, and a jar of cool milk from that same neighbor's bountiful farm; and two Hardanger apples, just as red as in his time, but a bit bigger now, all of which Astrid had prepared for his lunch.

He could hear, high up the mountain behind him, the faint roar of a waterfall, muffled by the soggy gray blanket.

Leif sat on the log in the gentle rain, drinking a cup of boiled bark from a thermos, feeling very peaceful.

Yes, he admired Elisabeth. She was there in the classroom with those kids every day, knowing from all her studies and all her research, and knowing too from growing up by the sea, that huge changes were coming to the world . . . the world which those kids thought would just go on forever as it is today.

She had to wake them up, without scaring them too much. She had to teach them to do their *own* research, so that they could learn . . . *how* to learn and learn and learn, and *keep* learning.

She had to give them courage. She had to give them hope. So she taught them about the sun, and about the wind, and about the currents in the sea.

Leif remembered the girl named Inger, who had asked if she could leave the classroom, because she could not listen any more about the horrible things that were soon going to happen. Elisabeth told Inger very gently, "Yes, you may leave the classroom and go to the library."

Inger asked if she could go outside to the playground.

Elisabeth said, "Yes."

Leif had later stood beside the window at the back of the room, looking down at the girl on a swing, her dark hair sweeping back when she swung forward, her hair sweeping over her face when she swung back.

Elisabeth had been worried about that girl. That “troubled girl”.

So, as she later told Leif, Elisabeth met with Inger the following morning, before class.

Elisabeth told Inger about wind turbines, about huge wind turbines floating far out at sea, their fifty-meter blades spinning in the powerful wind that almost never stopped blowing across the North Atlantic.

Inger started her research, looking at online pictures of wind turbines off the northern coast of Scotland. She liked those giant eagle feathers that turned the wind into electricity. How simple, how beautiful, how intelligent.

Leif called up with a booming voice, “Do you see? Do you see this girl Inger? I tell you, there is much *good* in this world.”

He finished the last cup of boiled bark, stowed the blue cooler in the rowboat, set the anchor and coiled line in the bow, then he pushed off from the beach and swung himself aboard.

Out in the belly of the fjord, he swung the rowboat so that the prow headed east toward home. He now faced the last of the storm wind gusting up the fjord, pushing the boat along so that his rowing was easy.

He had no sail in the little boat. But he had a sail on his ship.

A sail that would catch the wind off the open sea.

Well, he would not be alone. And that, most certainly, was *good*.

## Chapter 9

Elisabeth was walking up and down the aisles in her classroom, speaking with her students one by one as they wrote a synopsis of the research they wanted to do. They could pick any topic they found interesting—within the twin fields of Climate Change, the Problem, and Clean Energy, the Solution—and then pursue their research online, in books and in articles from the library, and by interviewing various people who were experts on the topic. The students could talk on the phone with someone in the Ministry of Fisheries in Oslo; they could talk with someone at the Oceanic Research Institute in Bergen; and they could talk with a fisherman while they interviewed him aboard his boat.

The kids, all twenty-five of them, were busy looking up things on their screens, scrolling and touching, scrolling and touching, as they discovered a special kind of shrimp that lived beneath the huge sheets of floating ice that came from the glaciers on the mountains of Antarctica. The shrimp ate the algae that grew on the underside of the floating ice. And a lot of things—an entire food chain—ate the shrimp.

Or they discovered solar power in the desert in California, and in Morocco, where thousands of mirrors reflected the intense desert sun onto a tall round tower. The heat from the gathered sunlight turned water inside the tower to steam, which drove a turbine, which produced electricity.

During the nighttime, the tower continued to produce electricity. Because it contained a great volume of salt, which became so hot during the day that the salt became molten, almost like lava. This molten salt heated the water through the night, so that the water became steam, which drove a turbine, which produced electricity.

Sunshine, mirrors, molten salt, water, steam, electricity. A kid might launch a lifetime career with that.

Elisabeth had spoken with the last student, had read through his rough synopsis, and was returning to her desk at the front of the room, when she heard, very distinctly, a distant voice calling her name, “Elisabeth.”

She turned and looked up toward the ceiling, then caught herself and hoped that none of the students had noticed her odd behavior.

As she was wiping away some old notes on the blackboard, she heard the voice again, summoning her, “Elisabeth! You must gather your crew.”

Gather my crew?

It was a woman's voice, not the old Thunderbolt's voice, calling to her.

Elisabeth whispered, her words faint, her lips almost touching the blackboard,  
"Thank you for Leif."

"You are welcome. But now you must go on a journey."

"With Leif?" she asked hopefully.

"No, first you must journey alone. You both must journey alone."

"Will I ever see him again?" She wanted to be certain.

"Yes, we will do our best."

We?

And then voice was gone.

The clock over the door read 10:57. Three more minutes of class.

Elisabeth listened to the lively murmur in the room as students showed to each other new discoveries on their screens.

## Chapter 10

Late that afternoon, Leif, soaked to his innermost woolen breaches, tied the rowboat's bow and stern lines to the pier. Then he carried the cooler up the trail through the heather to the yellow house where he lived. It felt a little odd, going so quickly from a thousand years ago to the modern present.

Astrid met him at the door; she must have been watching him from a window as he approached the house. She was as cheerful as ever as she took the cooler from him, marveled at his outfit, then sent him upstairs to a hot shower.

Half an hour later, Leif, in his blue flannel shirt and snug-fitting blue jeans, was invited by Astrid to sit at the head of the otherwise empty dining room table. She set before him a plate of hot steaming "*lefse*", as she called the thin flat cakes.

Leif had never before eaten potato pancakes. Astrid sat beside him with her own plate of *lefse*. She showed him how to sprinkle sugar on the pancake, then how to roll it up into something very convenient to eat.

She showed him that he could use strawberry jam as well, and blueberry jam, or a thick cream much like the cream that his mother had made, for the porridge.

Astrid brewed some sort of special tea, with lemon and honey, "because we don't want you getting a sore throat," as she told him.

After Leif and Astrid had finished all the *lefse* that she could make from her big bowl of batter, Leif felt enormously sleepy.

"Thank you, Astrid," he said to her. "Now I think I will take a little nap."

"Yes. I'll tell the others that you're back."

He climbed up the steps on stiffening legs. In his bedroom, he tossed back the comforter, then lay down on his bed and stretched his back with a sigh. He pulled up the comforter, heard a gull cry outside the window—a gull in the distance, perhaps sitting on a piling of the pier—and then, feeling the roll of the sea, he slept.

He slept through dinner, he slept through the night, and awoke only when the morning sun was well up in the sky.

He shuffled down the steps wearing Johannes's old blue bathrobe. Astrid handed him a mug of boiled bark and told him that his oatmeal was ready.

He spent the day helping Astrid and Johannes in their garden. He learned how to use a large fork to dig up potatoes. He carried baskets laden with dirt-smearred potatoes down concrete steps to the basement beneath the house, where the potatoes were stored for the winter.

After the last basket of potatoes had been stored, the three of them each took a shower, Astrid first, Leif second, and Johannes third with whatever hot water was left in the tank.

By five-thirty, the three of them were dressed and ready to walk next door for dinner. It was Friday evening. Johannes carried a bottle of red wine. Astrid carried a small basket filled with potatoes which she had just cleaned in the kitchen sink. Leif carried a piece of smooth, beautifully curving driftwood which he had found on the beach yesterday, and had brought back in the rowboat, for Elisabeth to put in her office.

Bente met them at the door. Bjørn was reading a newspaper spread on the dining room table. "Look at this," he said to his parents. "*This* is the culmination of a week-long earthquake in New York."

Bjørn pointed at a political cartoon of the Statue of Liberty, copper green, cringing with her arm over her eyes as a row of banks behind her, tall and black, were collapsing. "September, 2008," read the caption. "The beginning of the end?"

Astrid had heard on the radio news through the week that the American economy was having troubles, but she had paid little attention. It was the American war in Iraq that she hated, and if the Americans were making less money this week, she had no pity.

Johannes asked, "Will it affect us in Norway?"

Bjørn shook his head. "I don't think it will hit us as hard as it will hit some others. We cleaned up our banks a couple of years ago. We don't gamble on secret packages of bad mortgages."

Leif asked, "What is New York?"

"New York," said Bjørn, "is a market city like Kiev, or Athens, or Byzantium, but much larger. It is a city built on the mouth of a river in America, further south along the coast from where you wintered with Leif Eriksson. The banks in New York do business with banks and companies around the world. When the banks in New York go bankrupt, the whole global system is ruptured."

Elisabeth added, “It doesn’t necessarily mean that the wars will stop. Wars can always go black market.”

“Wars?” asked Leif, baffled by so many things mixed together.

“Of course,” said Bjørn, “there’s no telling what the price of Norwegian oil will do. If the collapse becomes a recession, which becomes a depression, . . .”

“How about some dinner?” asked Bente. “Leif, have you ever had spaghetti?”

After dinner—Leif had learned how to twirl spaghetti with his fork pressed against his spoon—everyone gathered at the other end of the living room to watch the news on television. Leif sat in one of the rocking chairs—he greatly enjoyed the smooth rocking back and forth—and watched the moving images that were big enough for everyone to see. He had difficulty understanding the news announcer, for the man spoke very quickly, in a slightly different Norwegian.

Leif saw images of people in business shirts shouting and waving their hands inside some big room, where prices had been “in free fall” all day.

And then suddenly the images were in some other place. Leif saw a burning car—a car like the cars he saw in Norway, but burning with heavy black smoke—and then he saw a man lying dead on the street. Red blood was seeping like a fat snake from beneath the man’s chest.

In the flow of rapid Norwegian, Leif heard the word, “Baghdad.”

He turned to Bjørn in the rocking chair beside him. “Baghdad. The market city on the Tigris River?”

“Ja,” said Bjørn while he stared at the image of a woman wailing as she shook her hands at the sky, “somebody set off a bomb in a marketplace in Baghdad.”

Leif looked at the broken walls of what had once been a family’s home, for he could see a chair, covered with dust, standing in the rubble.

For a brief moment, he saw the face of a terrified little girl staring out her broken doorway, her dark eyes asking, Why?

Then the images were in some other place, and he saw a big machine picking up earth and rock and dumping it into a different kind of big machine.

“Landslide on the Oslo-Bergen line,” Bjørn explained. “They’ve got to clear the tracks.”

Leif did not like this news. It was too much in just a few minutes.

But what was happening in Baghdad?

He felt an enormous restlessness.

He had no desire to visit this war. But the little that he had just seen was not enough for him to make a full report.

And then, he reconsidered.

No, this time there would be no report. This time, he would demand that the Creator come with him. So that he could see for himself.

## Chapter 11

On Sunday morning, Leif went to church with Elisabeth and her family. Astrid had driven into town early, “to run my fingers up and down the keys,” as she had said, “warming up the organ.”

Bjørn drove the others in his car; Leaf was seated in the front passenger seat, while Johannes sat in the back seat with Elisabeth and Bente. Leif wore his blue business shirt and creased charcoal-gray trousers. He had no idea what to expect in a church.

He had heard of Christianity, for Norwegian King Olaf Trygvasson had become a Christian. Leifur Eiriksson had spent a winter with the king, who commissioned Leifur to take this new belief to Greenland, and there teach it to the people. Leifur was able to speak with his mother about Christianity, and she eventually built a church. But his father, Eirikur Raudi, who had been banished from Norway because of the work of his sword, and who had been banished from Iceland because of the work of his sword, remained loyal to his Odin and Thor.

During the year that Leifur Eiriksson explored Vinland, he did not speak much with his crew about Christianity. He spoke with them about the business of sailing a ship, and the business of surviving in this strange new land. When they first arrived at the grassy meadow with a stream running through it, they had to cut timber and sod as they built their longhouse; otherwise they would freeze when autumn came. They had to bring meat to the campfire every night, either red meat or fish. They had to keep the peace among each other, for every man was armed, and some were quick to take offence.

Leif had heard of this Christianity, when he was a boy, living here on this fjord. He knew that someone in a faraway country, a thousand years before his time, had spoken of some new spirit among neighbors.

Bjørn parked across the street from a tall white building with an even taller white tower. A bell was ringing in the tower. People greeted each other, then walked through a large door into a room that was very big, and long, and high. People sat shoulder to shoulder on long benches.

Now Leif heard something unlike any sound he had ever heard before: a lively rumbling, an almost singing.

“That’s Astrid on the pipe organ,” said Elisabeth. She led Leif about half way along the church’s big central aisle, then they turned around and looked up at Astrid in the balcony. With her back to them, she was doing something with her hands while the silver pipes rising up the wall poured out their strange exuberant sounds.

As Leif and Elisabeth continued walking up the aisle, Leif stared ahead at a wooden sculpture, cut with great skill, of a man in horrible pain, for his hands were nailed to a beam of wood. His feet were also nailed to a beam of wood, so that the weight of his body caused him hideous pain that would not end until he was dead.

Leif pointed at the sculpture as he asked Elisabeth, “Who is he? And why have they done this to him?”

She walked with him to the end of the aisle, beyond the seated congregation. A red carpet rose up three steps to a table in the center of an elevated floor. On the table were three vases of red flowers.

Behind the table, tall enough that everyone in the church could see it, was the wooden sculpture of the man in agony, his face in anguish, his body slumping.

Leif asked again, “Why have they done this to him?”

Elisabeth could have told Leif what she had been told as a girl, first in Sunday School, then while preparing for Confirmation. Instead she said, “He spoke Aramaic. The language was already nine hundred years old when he spoke it. Aramaic was a commercial language, and the language of government, through much of south-west Asia. When Jesus spoke, many could understand him.”

“And what did he say?”

“That we could do better. That we had it in us to get beyond our present sorry state.”

“He believed in us.”

“He believed in what was inside us: seeds bestowed upon us by the Creator. Waiting to sprout, waiting to blossom, waiting to bring forth fruit.”

“And do you believe in this?”

“I most certainly do.”

Leif and Elisabeth sat with her family in a “pew”. Leif saw red books standing on a little shelf along the backside of the pew in front of them. At some point, he was going to have to learn how to read.

He turned in his seat and looked up again at the silver pipes that rumbled and trilled and sang. They made him feel something that he had never felt before: a very strong sort of joy.

During the service—a man in a black robe talked, then people sang, then he talked again—Leif stared at the iron nails that pierced the carved hands. He stared at the fingers that were stretching out around a nail, begging for help, begging for death.

No Viking had ever done such a thing to another man. An enemy in battle was to be swiftly killed, with a chop of the axe or a stab of the sword. No opposing foe, whether English or Irish or French or Slavic, was ever made to hang in helpless pain. Either they submitted to capture, or they were dispatched from the world of the living.

Even wolves were quick to kill their prey. A cat would perhaps play with a wounded rat. But to force a man to live through an eternity of unnatural pain?

No, this was not intended by the Creator.

When the service was over, Leif and Elisabeth walked again to the foot of the red steps and looked at the sculpture.

“It’s very old,” said Elisabeth, “carved in the late 1300s, after the Black Death had ravaged Norway.”

Leif asked, “Who did this to him?”

“At that time, a thousand years before your time, Palestine was occupied by Rome. Jesus was tried in a Roman court. While he was on the cross, Roman soldiers kept the crowd away. A Roman soldier was posted to guard his tomb.”

“How long did they torture him before he died?”

“He gave up the ghost fairly quickly. Some prisoners lived on the cross for days.”

“I ask my question again,” said Leif, increasingly angry that this sort of thing could exist. “Why did they do this to him?”

“Leif, the real question is, ‘Why do we continue to torture people today?’”

“Do we?”

“Well, I am sure you could find those who would tell us that Jesus is in a ‘stress position’.”

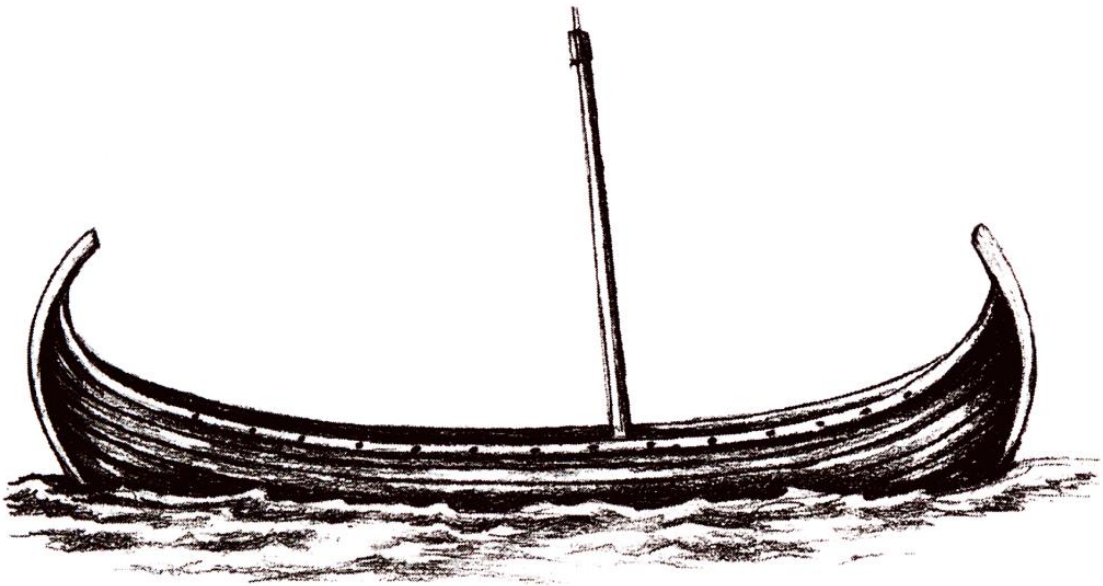
Leif was shocked by this cruelty, stretching over two thousand years. Had people learned nothing?

Outside in the sunshine, Leif thanked Astrid for her “sounds rumbling down from the heavens.”

“You are welcome, Leif. Now you know a bit of Bach.”

# Part Three

## Three Silver Coins from Baghdad



## Chapter 12

On Monday, Leif spent most of the day in the school library.

Elisabeth introduced him to the librarian, Anna Maria, who stood and came out from behind her big desk and shook Leif's hand.

Looking at her watch, Elisabeth told Leif what time they would meet for lunch in the cafeteria. Then she hurried off to her class.

Leif said to Anna Maria, "I want to read about wars."

"Which wars?"

"Have there been many?"

"Do you mean small wars, or world wars? Do you mean civil wars?"

"I have heard from Elisabeth's grandfather about World War Two. And I saw images on television from a war in Baghdad."

"All right."

Leif followed Anna Maria into a maze of many shelves with many books. "This is the history section," she said, framing a section of the shelves with her hands. "This shelf is Twentieth Century history. The shelf below it is the beginning of the Twenty-First Century. Whether we make it to the end of this century is another question."

She pulled out several books from the two shelves. "The photography will initially be in black-and-white. It changes to color during the war in Vietnam."

"Photography?"

"Pictures." She opened one of the books to a black-and-white photograph of a frozen German soldier in a trench on the Russian front, his face half hidden by drifted snow, his hand still gripping his rifle.

"Ah. Images."

Anna Maria led Leif to a table near a window, laid the books one by one across the table, then gestured to a chair. "If you need anything, please ask."

Leif stared at the titles of the books. He needed to know how to read.

"Thank you, Anna Maria. Maybe I'll go outside for a few minutes before I begin to read."

"Fine. The table is yours all day." She added with a smile, "If any of the kids get noisy in the library, you're welcome to shush them."

She returned to her big desk.

Leif followed a hallway that led to a door to the playground. Noisy ten-year-olds were scattered about, chasing each other, climbing on things, rising and dropping at opposite ends of long green boards. And they were swinging on the seats held by chains, where Inger had swung alone.

One swing was free. Leif walked over to it, sat tentatively on a wooden board, gripped the heavy chains and gave a little push with his foot.

After some practice, he was able to swing back and forth beside the boy on the next swing. They rose equally high, and so swung as a pair.

Leif called to the boy, "Do you know how to read?"

The boy looked at him and laughed. "Can I read? My teacher says I'm one of the best readers in the class."

"Ah. Good work."

Now, near the end of a forward swing, the boy let go of the chains and sailed off his seat for a short distance . . . then he landed squarely on his feet. He looked back and gave Leif a quick wave, and now dashed after another boy, whom he punched on the shoulder.

Leif swung gracefully back and forth for a few more minutes. Then at the top of a back swing, he looked up at the cloudless blue sky and said, "I must be able to read Norwegian. And if I really must go where you want me to go, I must be able to speak both Arabic and English."

Now he closed his eyes and grimaced at the effort of what his brain was forced to do in such a short time. But he kept swinging.

When he opened his eyes—as if awakening from some very intense dream—he discovered a girl beside him, kicking higher than he had dared to kick. Her blond braids tied with red ribbons swung back and forth in the wind.

Returning to the library, he sat at the table and stared at images of dead men and dead horses. He stared at images of dead children and dead water buffalos.

He looked at the faces of soldiers, exhausted faces, blank faces.

He looked at women wearing different sorts of clothing, all of them shrieking the same shriek, weeping with the same devastation, staring with the same hopelessness.

He studied airplanes as they grew bigger and bigger. He studied orange-black clouds that reached up from the Earth and punched the sky.

He saw villages burning, and villages turned to rubble. He saw dead people in boxes, dead people in trenches.

Now he stared at something tall in the sky—he had taken the book to Anna Maria's desk; she explained that it was a "skyscraper in New York", where people worked every day—a skyscraper that suddenly was burning with massive orange flames because an airplane had crashed into it.

He stared, unbelieving, at tiny specks in the air: people who had jumped from the windows above the flames.

Another building, a twin skyscraper, was also suddenly burning. He stared at images of a skyscraper collapsing into billows of ash. People were running on a street, with a cloud of ash sweeping toward them like a wave on the sea.

All of this had happened in a city south along the coast from where Leifur Eiriksson and his crew had spent the year on Vinland.

Now he opened a book with images from Baghdad. After half an hour, he got up and walked to the cafeteria to get a mug of boiled bark.

Then he read about Iraq for another half-hour.

He went out to the playground a second time. He did not sit on a swing. He sat on a bench beside a teacher who was watching noisy children in perhaps their first year of school. He watched the children busily driving small trucks in a sandbox. He watched them climb a ladder, then slide down a curving sheet of silvery metal. He watched a girl skipping rope, as girls in his time had done.

After they had all gone inside and the playground was quiet again, he looked up at the blue sky and stated firmly, "If Baghdad is where you want me to go, then I will go on two conditions. *One*, that you give me sufficient courage. And *two*, that you are there with me, looking over my shoulder every step of the way."

He watched a cluster of sparrows on the worn ground outside the sandbox. They were pecking at the crumbs of somebody's snack.

"You have told me about your sadness. You have told me about your anger. I am sorry, but I insist. Because the final decision is yours."

He sat on the bench, waiting.

Then he looked up, pleased. "Thank you. As my ears shall hear and my eyes shall see, so *your* ears shall hear and *your* eyes shall see this cruelty. Cruelty which, even after a thousand years, they seem unwilling to give up."

He heard the bell ringing. Elisabeth would meet him in the cafeteria.

As he walked across the playground toward the school door, he was struck by a sharp sadness. He did not want to leave her. He had been with her less than one week, and now he must journey to Baghdad.

They had only one month together, from the full moon of September to the full moon of October. And now he had to leave her. He did not know for how long.

That evening, after his day in the library, after her day in the classroom, they rode the bus home together. When he told her about his impending journey, she told him about the voice that had called her name. Elisabeth told Leif that she had been instructed to “Gather your crew.”

“Your crew?”

She asked, “Shall we be gone at the same time?”

He shook his head. “I do not know.”

“Shall we come back at the same time?”

“Elisabeth, I know only the broad guidelines that I must follow. Although I see now that we are both charged with gathering crew.”

“For your ship?”

He stared at her, beginning to hope, beginning to believe. “For *our* ship.”

When they stepped off the bus, they walked not to either of the two houses, but on the path between them down to the pier. They stood at the end, in the cool breeze off the water. Waves from the bay slapped the pilings beneath their feet.

She held his hand—their fingers wove tightly together—as they stared out at the dark mountains ranged as a barricade around the sanctuary of their safe world. Beyond, wars like an uneradicated pestilence still raged.

“Safe journey,” she said to him.

“Safe journey,” he said to her.

And then they kissed, knowing not when, or if ever, they would see each other again.

On Tuesday morning, Astrid, holding a cup of coffee for Leif, tapped tentatively on his bedroom door. When she heard no answer, she turned the knob and opened the door. Johannes peered over her shoulder.

The bed was empty.

On Tuesday morning, Bente, holding a cup of peppermint tea with honey, tapped loudly on Elisabeth's door. She called, "Elisabeth, you're going to miss the bus, Sweetheart."

When she heard no answer, she turned the knob and opened the door. Bjørn peered over her shoulder.

The bed was empty.

## Chapter 13

Leif Magnussen, Leif the Shipbuilder, stood now in his blue shirt and dark trousers on a strip of land once occupied by his Viking compatriots from Norway and Denmark, land given to them by the leading families of Paris, if they would promise not to attack the city.

From Normandy, William the Conqueror had launched the last of the great Viking invasions. In 1066, his troops sailed in Viking long-ships across the Channel to the shores of England.

In June of 1944, the troops came from England to France; some of them died on the beaches below the grassy bluff where Leif now stood. He looked down at the long curving sweep of beach; he looked out at the blue sea rolling toward shore; then he looked up at the grey clouded sky where a lone gull wheeled on its white wings. He asked, "Are you ready?"

He listened to the long rolling splash of a wave as it broke from one end to the other along the beach.

"All right then."

Leif turned around and faced the land itself: an enormous green lawn covered with white headstones, thousands of them, standing in perfect rows. As he walked among these headstones, reading the names on them, he could hear voices calling to him.

"Mister, I'm worried about my old mother and father back home on the farm. I was going to take over, you see, and then the war came along. Would you know if they . . ." And then the voice vanished.

"Sir, I had a girl back home. We sang in the church choir together. I would just like to know . . . I would just like to know whether Susan married someone, and whether she was happy. I want so much to know that she was happy."

"Suh, the war in Europe warn't my war. The battle on the beach warn't my battle. The German machine gun fire that killed me . . . Ah ain't never had no argument with any Germans. So Ah'm askin', Suh, Why Ah got to fight a war in France, when we got police shootin' at us back home in New York?"

"White Man, know that we are here too. The Lakota Sioux are buried here. Cherokee are buried here. Arapaho. Hopi. Iroquois. Oneida. We are here."

Leif walked for many hours among the headstones in their perfect rows, listening to the voices. Every now and then, when someone had spoken especially well, Leif would call up over his shoulder, “Did you hear that? That did *not* sound like a man who wants to fight another war.”

Yes, he was gathering crew now. He was gathering people who knew about the reality of war, because a war had killed them. They did not march in flag-waving parades down Main Street back home. They did not need any more speeches to know what was really true about war. About war.

Now he stood in another cemetery, a short distance north of the river in Russia along which the Vikings from Sweden had sailed into that vast country. He stood in what might have been a large park, for around him were scattered white birches, at the peak of their autumn yellow, and clusters of dark spruce.

It was not a park, however, for grassy mounds a meter high and three meters wide stretched parallel to each other for fifty meters or more, marking the mass graves in trenches below. There were so many long parallel mounds that the land looked like a huge green washboard.

At the end of each mound stood a stone, with no names on it, only a year: 1941, 1942, 1943, 1944, 1945. Most of those buried below had died in their homes. They died of the cold, for the siege of Leningrad had gripped the city through three horrid winters. Or they died of starvation, for a person could hold the daily bread ration . . . in the palm of his hand.

A daughter had pulled her father’s body, lying face-up on her childhood sled, his feet dragging on the ice, across the frozen Neva River. She pulled him through snowy streets clogged with rubble, to the place where trenches had been dynamited in the frozen ground. There she spoke aloud a few words, to her Papa, or to the God who had been banned by the Soviets a quarter of a century ago. Then she tipped the sled and watched her father roll down the bank to join the other frozen bodies.

Leif swept his arm across the vast expanse of this Russian cemetery. Then he asked over his shoulder, “When is it enough?”

He stood beside a stone memorial with a long pane of glass running at eye level along one side. He was in a Baltic country, not far from the coastline where Viking ships from Sweden and Denmark and Norway had often stopped to trade. Around

him now were the red brick buildings and barbed wire fences of a prison camp. People had been brought here from all around Europe.

Leif looked through the pane of glass—a horizontal window fifty meters long—and saw ashes almost a meter deep, and fragments of charred bones. Sitting atop the ashes, like a denizen of an ashen desert, was a skull whose empty sockets stared out at Leif.

He began to walk. Looking through the window, he saw ashes and ashes, and every two or three meters, a skull staring out.

He heard their voices, asking, asking, about families, about mothers and fathers, about little sisters . . . And then the voices faded.

Now he stood in another country, one beyond the reach of the Vikings, for although the Norsemen had encircled Europe with their ships, this country was at the very heart of Europe.

He faced a brick gate with a sign over it, “Work Makes Freedom.” As he walked through the gate—there were other people around him now, visitors to this museum—he inspected the double fences of barbed wire. He looked at sturdy brick buildings along a neat grid of streets. He looked as well at the faces of schoolchildren and their teachers, who had come to visit this little town.

Merging with a group of tourists from Japan, he entered one of the red brick buildings. As he walked into a room, he saw a life-size image of a man in striped pajamas, hanging by a rope tied to his wrists bound behind his back. His arms were wrenched up high behind him. Leif cringed, for the man must be in the most horrid pain, like the endless agony of Jesus nailed to that beam of wood in Elisabeth’s church.

Leif began to feel the anger, the outrage. This picture had been taken only decades ago.

Quietly, for he knew that the Creator was peering over his shoulder, Leif said to the prisoner, “We will not leave you hanging there forever. I promise.”

Now he was in a marketplace, an ancient marketplace that even with its modern electronic merchandise would have looked familiar to its Viking visitors a thousand years ago. He saw onions tied in bunches, as they had been tied by Mohammed’s grandmother. He saw scales with weights in the pans. He saw baskets of oranges, neatly heaped lettuce, and many kinds of food that he did not recognize. In some of

the booths, boys were helping their fathers. He could smell exotic spices as pungent as a Norwegian meadow in summertime.

He saw a small yellow bird in a cage made of wooden sticks. He saw gray kittens scampering across the dirt floor of one booth. He heard the voices of barter, for potatoes and carrots and beans.

Leif reached into his pocket and took out one of the three silver coins from Baghdad. For now he could spend it.

He noticed a little girl peering at him from behind her mother's black robe. The girl was six, maybe seven years old, shy but curious, wearing a yellow dress with green flowers printed on it, a dress she might have worn to school.

Leif could understand some of the words in Arabic that the vendors and their customers called back and forth. But the noise of the traffic—a swarm of cars around the marketplace—blanketed much of what he heard. He could distinguish numbers within the rapid conversations. He heard a man with a white beard and a round hat say, “SHUkran.” Thank you.

He was just about to purchase an orange, for such a fruit he had never tasted, and was offering his silver coin to a man his own age, a man who wore a rumpled and dusty blue business shirt, when . . . a flash behind him rebounded off the city windows around him, and a roar sounded as if the very Earth had been ripped open. Leif was thrown over the table of oranges and into the booth, where he and the vendor lay on the ground in a cloud of red dust.

Leif heard shouts, the noise of people uninjured . . . and screams, the noise of people badly injured. Rising to a crouch, he could see a car burning in the center of the market; boiling orange flames spread a growing plume of black smoke across the dusty blue sky.

He heard a loud “Pang!” from a window of a nearby building.

He glanced at the vendor, who was calling frantically into the next booth, then he climbed over a toppled table and stood among vegetables strewn in the dirt. He had been sent here to witness, so he ran toward the burning car and the hundreds of people strewn across the ground around it. Some lay without moving. Some raised a face, a hand, from the dirt, beseeching. He saw an arm lying in the street, with a girl's hand, a girl about sixteen years old, for the hand was nearly as large as an adult hand, but the skin was fresh and smooth.

He saw the yellow bird, freed from its cage, flapping on the ground with a broken wing.

He watched a dog, yelping madly as it dragged its limp rear legs toward some place of safety.

The yellow dress caught his eye, a burst of yellow beneath a robe of black.

She was looking at him, peering up from where she lay, beneath her mother's body. Something sharp had cut through her cheek, so that the skin hung loose on one side and he could see her teeth. Stepping over plastic shoes and bloody clothing, he reached beneath the mother's robe at her shoulders and lifted her so that he could lay her down again beside her daughter.

Then he knelt and picked up the girl in his arms. Her yellow dress was splattered with blood dripping from her cheek. Staring down at her mother, she began to wail with a voice that pierced the heavens.

Leif turned away from the burning car and began to run. Though he called out "Hospital! . . . MusTASHfa!" as he stepped over rubble and bodies, no one answered him. Only when he was running in a chaotic street behind the market, shouting "MusTASHfa!", did a woman wave her arm toward a branching street. She called after him something urgent and incomprehensible.

As he ran, he glanced down at the girl with the torn bloody cheek. She was looking up at him, and no longer wailing.

An ambulance raced toward him with a siren blaring and a red light flashing. Moving to a broken sidewalk along the edge of the street, Leif was running past several tethered donkeys as the ambulance screamed by on its way to the marketplace.

## Chapter 14

Leif was crossing a boulevard, wary of the traffic swerving around him—car after car blared its horn at him—when he heard and then saw a convoy of military vehicles racing toward him. He dashed toward the far curb. The trucks roared behind him as he merged with pedestrians who stared with apprehension at the Americans passing through their neighborhood.

Before he could ask for further directions to a hospital, an explosion in the convoy lit the boulevard with an orange flash. The blast was not as loud as the roar at the marketplace; Leif was not thrown from his feet. He crouched behind a parked truck, surrounded by a crowd of people taking shelter, while massive gunfire from many directions filled the boulevard.

Some of the shooting came from buildings on the other side of the boulevard. Some came from scattered positions along the street. Leif could hear shouts in English, someone calling for a “Medic!”

He saw a soldier in camouflage carrying the limp body of another soldier in his arms as he dashed across the sidewalk and through the open door of a shop. Several Arabs disappeared as well through the door. The one-story shop was made of yellow bricks; the windows had been filled with brown bricks. Only the front door was open. Leif could see that he and the girl would be far more protected inside that small building, than they were out on the street.

He hesitated, while gunfire rattled all around him, to run, though the door was only thirty meters away. The soldier in camouflage ran out the door—leaving the soldier whom he had carried inside—and now dashed toward a burning truck in the convoy.

When the truck that sheltered Leif and the girl was struck by a burst of bullets, the crowd around him fled. He ran as fast as he could with the girl toward the open door. Perhaps because he was not wearing camouflage, but his bloody blue shirt and dusty trousers, no one shot at him. Or perhaps it was because he carried a bleeding girl in his arms.

Two Arab men dashed just ahead of him through the door, a brick frame with a scrap of wood hanging from a hinge. Leif found himself in a shop with a dirt floor; he saw an empty counter, empty shelves. Then he saw people crouching along the brick

walls on both sides of the room, some of them clutching children. Hurrying away from the open door, he stepped to the left and then crouched with the others. People shifted when they saw the girl, so that he could sit with his back against the brick wall, cradling her.

Leif stared at three soldiers in camouflage who were also in the shop. One lay on the dirt floor, on Leif's side of the rectangle of sunlight cast by the open doorway. The African soldier was breathing with short gasps; otherwise, he lay very still.

The second soldier lay on the dirt on the opposite side of the shop, with his head in the lap of the third soldier, who was leaning against the wall opposite Leif. The second soldier's clothing was burnt, as was much of his exposed flesh. His breathing was through a charred mouth in a completely burnt face.

The third soldier stared across the room at Leif; he looked alert, though his face was taugth with the pain of some wound.

Perhaps the soldier looked at Leif because Leif was the only non-Arabic face in the terrified crowd along the wall. Above the noise of the war that raged outside the door, the soldier shouted at him, "He was two weeks short of the end of his fourth tour." He looked down at the melted face in his camouflage lap, the nose gone, the eyes seared closed, the blackened lips open and gasping. "His *fourth* tour. This guy has a wife and two kids at home. Those kids are really going to like Daddy's melted nose."

A burst of bullets through the door spat up dirt from the floor, ripped through a closed wooden door at the back of the shop and tore through whatever was in the next room. Leif heard the frightened shriek of some animal.

"And that one," the soldier pointed with his chin at the African soldier lying in the dirt on Leif's side of the shop, "he's been here only three weeks. He's just a baby."

Leif stared at the dark brown face clenched with pain. He had never seen anyone from Africa before, though he had heard tales brought home by Vikings who had sailed the African coast. He wondered why someone from Africa would be fighting in America's war in Iraq.

"I love these guys," shouted the soldier. He spoke as if he were addressing not only Leif. He spoke as if somebody had handed him a microphone, so that his voice was now speaking from a hundred million televisions from Maine to California.

"I love these guys as much as I love my wife and little boy." He stared at the charred face in his lap, and at the brown face that was now trembling with spasms. "I will never love anyone more than this captain loves the guys in his company."

The captain shifted with a grimace, carefully holding the head cradled in his lap while he straightened out one of his legs on the dirt floor. Leif could see now that the leg was bleeding at the knee, where the camouflage was torn and the flesh was glistening red.

“And you know what else?” shouted the captain. “I was watching the news, on a TV at the base, watching CNN to see what they had to say about us today, and I see that’s it’s not much. Because you know what? Wall Street was collapsing. Suddenly the banks, overnight, are bankrupt. I guess the experts weren’t experts after all. So Joe America is worried now about his wallet and his pension. That’s the big news. And the war in Iraq? Well, I guess we’re on the back burner now.”

Leif could hear artillery firing in the distance.

“The cavalry’s coming,” said the captain, as if he had heard the cavalry coming about five hundred times.

Looking down, the captain raised the charred head, to ease the breathing.

Then he looked at Leif, his eyes burning with outrage. “Do you know what these guys go home to? A backlog of over half a million veterans at the VA, waiting to get the care they were promised. The Stonewall Boys hand you a form what’ll take you a week to fill out. Then they’ll get back to you, sometime months down the road. Meanwhile, ain’t nobody helping you with wall-to-wall nightmares. Ain’t nobody monitoring your pain meds. So you know what happens?”

A barrage of artillery shells slammed into buildings across the boulevard. Their concussions punched through the door of the shop; sitting against the wall, Leif felt the hand of war lightly slap his face.

An Arab crouching against the wall near Leif now stood up. He took off his jacket and spread it over the chest of the soldier from Africa, who, aside from the shaking of his face, lay absolutely still. The Arab now unwound his red-and-white checkered head-cloth, rolled it up into a small pillow, then lifted the African soldier’s head and set the pillow beneath his curly black hair.

The African soldier looked at the Arab for a moment, then his face clenched with a deep and stabbing pain.

The Arab crouched again against the wall.

The captain said to the Arab, “Thank you.”

The Arab nodded as he said in English, “Thank you. Thank you.” He held his hands up, indicating that he could say no more in English.

“Mister,” said the captain, “I wish to hell I could speak your Arabic. They had one word that they couldn’t emphasize enough at boot camp, but they never taught us to say ‘Good morning.’ ‘How’s your family?’ ‘Can we help you to rebuild the village school?’” He shook his head. “I can’t even say to you, ‘You’re welcome.’”

The captain looked at Leif, as if this man with a Nordic face and a red-brown beard could somehow carry his message out of one small corner of the war zone to the rest of the world. “So you know what happens? Do you know what happens to my guys when they go home? First they get split up. After training together and patrolling Baghdad Boulevard together and eating MREs together and learning more about each other’s families back home than we ever bothered to learn about our own, they get split up. One to Jersey, one to Tennessee, one to Oklahoma, where they’re with folks who mean well, but who never set foot on Baghdad Boulevard.”

Shots through the front door tore through the back door until that door too was blown from its hinges. When the clatter of bullets had ceased, Leaf could hear several frightened animals in the back room, horses in stalls maybe, stomping hooves and shrieking in an animal way.

“So you know what? You know what happens to the guys who go home? According to some very fine research done during the year 2005, on the average, eighteen veterans committed suicide in America *every day*. Eighteen guys a day! Leaving behind eighteen wives and girlfriends and mothers. Leaving behind eighteen families, some of them kids who heard the shot.”

If there were animals in the back room, then there had to be a rear door to a street. An Arab boy, gripping the hand of his little brother, took a chance and dashed through the shop’s back door into the dim, dusty back room. Then light entered from the rear: they had opened a door and escaped.

“Eighteen a day. That comes to a total, for just the one year of 2005, of more than six thousand, five hundred soldiers who killed themselves after they got home. These were soldiers who fought for freedom in Iraq, then went home to a nation that could barely be bothered to watch the news. These were battle-battered soldiers who went home to people whose idea of stress is a bad day at work. Whose idea of a tour of duty is . . . well, I guess they don’t have one.”

A cluster of Arabs, a family perhaps, now dashed through the back door of the shop. Clearly they did not expect the shop to remain a refuge much longer.

Soldiers on the street outside were close enough that Leif could hear them shouting in English.

The captain said, “Fucking good. They’ve called in an air strike. Now watch. The shooting from across the street will trickle to nothing. By the time the planes launch their missiles, every sniper will be gone. Out of the buildings and gone, leaving families like,” he gestured toward the remaining Arabs huddled along the walls, “these good folks. How the fuck are we supposed to fight them, when they set up their snipers in Granny’s bedroom?”

As if signaled by someone’s nod, the Arabs sheltered along the walls of the shop rose to their feet and dashed in robes and blue jeans and sandals and sneakers through the back door, until none were left.

“They know an air strike’s coming,” said the captain. “You ought to get your ass outta here too. You and that girl looking at me from somewhere deep in shock. You get her to a doctor. Never mind us. We’re paid to get our face melted. We’re paid to take a sniper’s bullet in the neck. Although I’m not exactly sure why.”

The captain stared at Leif with fierce determination to have his say.

“Because you know what? To my knowledge, not a single person from Iraq, in the entire course of American history, ever set foot on American soil and threatened to hurt a single one of us. The same as not a single person from Vietnam ever set foot on American soil and threatened to hurt us. But we went right ahead and attacked them anyway. Just to show ‘em who’s boss. We came here, as our commander in chief has told us repeatedly, ‘to kick butt.’ Now that’s a great foreign policy, don’t you think? We gotta kick butt.”

The captain sat up a little taller against the wall, cradling the head with a black gurgling mouth. “Because you know what? When my two buddies here and I signed up to defend freedom, the freedom we had in mind was not the freedom of a few fat boys to make their big bucks while waving the flag that I love. We didn’t come here to boost the earnings of Halliburton’s shareholders. We didn’t come here because we think that oil is God’s sacred blood. We came here—we *thought* we were coming here—for the same reason that our grandfathers stormed Utah Beach in Normandy. We came here because some Marines before us had helped to clean up the Pacific. We came here, silly as it sounds, because a bunch of soldiers who didn’t even have decent boots slept in the snow in some place called Valley Forge, because they believed in this thing called a republic.”

The captain paused, then he added, for he knew his history well, “*And* because they believed in their Commander in Chief. Who slept in a fucking tent in the snow right there with his men . . . until the very last soldier was housed in a log hut with six

bunks and a fireplace. Only after his troops were properly sheltered . . . did General Washington move his headquarters into a farmer's stone house."

The captain spat into the dirt. "*That's* why we signed up. That's why we said good-bye to women whom we love, and kids whom we love, and the dumpy little towns that we love. We signed up because of an America that we deeply believe in. Maybe not a place that is perfect, but a place that is . . . a country that is based on a dream, that everybody should be . . . equal."

The captain looked at the quivering African soldier, and at the gasping burnt soldier, then he stated again with absolute conviction, "Equal."

Leif nodded. Yes he was listening. And the Creator was listening too.

The captain shouted above the growing roar of shelling outside the door, "Yup, and what's more, my buddies and me . . . we believed in sharing our freedom, we believed in sharing our democracy, with folks who had lived under the boot of a dictator. But somehow . . . all that good stuff got turned into counting the fucking days until we can go home."

Leif could hear planes in the distance, rumbling and fast approaching.

"Now get the fuck outta here," said the captain. "Take that little Arab girl and find someone who can help her. Because after five and a half years, we've proven for all the world to see that we haven't the slightest idea how to help her."

"Thank you," said Leif, standing up with the girl in his arms. "I will let them know."

He hurried through the back door, entering a large dusty room where not horses, but donkeys, were tethered. As he ran toward the light of an open door at the rear, he jumped over the hindquarters of a donkey that had been hit by a bullet and lay thumping its head in pain on the dirt. He paused for a moment in the open doorway to glance up and down the deserted street, then he dashed, clutching the girl tightly, toward an alley on the opposite side.

## Chapter 15

With the endless maze of streets ahead of him, and the city exploding behind him, Leif ran with the child who he could feel was weakening. Several people responded to his shouting by waving an arm toward this street or that, and thus he found a large building with throngs of people pouring in and out through its large front door. He carried the girl inside, saw a woman in a white uniform like the uniform that Bjørn's nurse wore, stepped toward her and showed her the injured girl, who stared with dull eyes. "Please, can you help?"

The nurse quickly examined the girl's facial wound. "The bleeding has all but stopped. Any other wounds?"

"I don't know. I found her in the marketplace."

"The doctors are busy now. If I give you some water, can you wash her face?"

"Yes. Yes." It was urgent to *do* something.

The nurse led him along a crowded hallway to a small damp room, even more crowded, with a faucet jutting from a concrete wall, a bowl on a table, and a drain in the floor. She gave him a clean rag and a bar of soap. "If her pain becomes severe," the nurse studied the eyes of the child, "call me. The doctor will see her as soon as he is done helping the worst."

She touched the girl's arm. "Be brave, my sweet." Then she hurried out of the room.

Leif laid the girl in her bloody yellow dress on the wooden table, watched her closely as he slowly filled the bowl with a trickle of water from the faucet. He was afraid that she might jump off the table and run. But she lay still . . . and closed her eyes for the first time.

He washed the cheek that had been cut as if with a jagged knife from the corner of her lips almost to her ear. She cried at the pain, tears seeping from her clenched eyes, but she did not try to stop him. He filled the bowl several times, cleaning the blood out of her hair, and from her neck, and from her hands. He did not touch the bloody yellow dress.

When he had cleaned her as well as he could, he picked her up—people were waiting to use the table—and found a bench out in the hallway where he could sit with

her cradled her in his arms. People were coming and going, delivering good news, delivering bad news, wailing, praying, and staring in numb silence.

When he looked down at the girl again, he saw that her eyes were closed but not clenched, her torn mouth was slightly open, and her breathing was peaceful.

She was sleeping, the first child in his life who slept cradled in his arms.

He said quietly, looking up over his shoulder at dusty pipes beneath a vaulted ceiling, "Are you watching?"

Leif could hear, above all the other clamor in the hallway, the distant siren of an ambulance approaching the hospital.

"Are you watching?" he asked again. "Are you listening?"

Men in white gowns pushed a stretcher on wheels past him, shouting as they made their way through the crowd. One man was pumping a green rubber bag with his hand above the patient's face, helping the old woman to breathe.

"All right, then," said Leif. "This was not your dream. This was *not* your original dream, bestowed upon them in those early days with such hope."

Finally, hours later, the nurse appeared in front of Leif. "You may bring her now." She led him along the corridor, crowded with people calling out urgent questions. She waved him into a room with a metal table and a bright light, and a doctor who looked utterly exhausted.

Leif laid the girl on the table. She raised her hand, shielding her eyes from the bright light as she stared at the doctor in his white gown, white cap, white mask.

"What is the girl's name?" asked the nurse, ready to write the information on a form on her clipboard.

"I do not know," said Leif. "I found her on the ground at the marketplace. Her mother did not survive the blast. I picked up the girl . . ."

The nurse asked the girl, "What is your name, Sweetheart?"

The girl tried to answer, but her severed lip marred the sound beyond recognition.

"All right," said the nurse. She set down the clipboard, readied a syringe of anesthetic. Leif stared at the odd tool with a long needle.

The doctor washed the cheek with alcohol, then pricked the needle into the skin along the gash, while speaking to the girl with a voice that had not yet lost its compassion.

Now the doctor worked, slowly and meticulously, with a curved needle and black thread, stitching the cheek from the ear toward the corner of the lips. Every stitch was even with the others, and tied with a tight little knot. The girl did not seem to feel any pain. Leif admired her, for she was enormously brave.

When the doctor had finished wrapping white gauze over much of the girl's face, so that her eyes peered out over a white veil, he looked at Leif and said, "I invite you to come home with me. She is my last patient today. We cannot simply release the girl. She will need further observation."

Leif asked, "You invite us to your home?"

"Yes. She has no family with her. I don't want to keep her overnight in the hospital alone. Besides, we have no beds."

As the doctor took off his rubber gloves, he studied Leif. "And you, you with your blond hair and beard, who are you?"

Leif was not sure how to explain. "I come from Norway."

"A journalist?"

"No, I visit Baghdad to see . . . to ask . . . to try to understand . . ."

"Are you an NGO?"

"What is NGO?"

"Are you from some church?"

"No, I live on the other side of the mountains, where we have peace. But here you have war. I want to . . . I want to witness this war."

"Ah. Then perhaps one day you shall speak in a court. Yes, please, the both of you: please be my guests at dinner. The girl shall need some help eating."

Once again, Leif carried the girl through the streets of Baghdad, walking beside the tired, quiet doctor. When they arrived at the doctor's home, a small house among other small houses in a quiet neighborhood, the doctor's wife met him at the door. The doctor explained to her that he had brought guests for dinner, and that the girl needed washing and a new dress.

With a nod of welcome to Leif, the doctor's wife took the girl into her arms and disappeared with her into a back room.

Half an hour later, while Leif was having tea with Dr. Abbas Farhan, the girl appeared standing in a doorway, wearing a pale blue dress, her hair brushed, her bandage stained with a spot of red. Dr. Farhan's teenage daughter stood behind her.

Leif stepped toward the girl and knelt in front of her. "Al-saLAAM aaLAYkum." Hello. "Isme Leif." My name is Leif. "I am very glad to see that you are doing better. Tomorrow we shall find your family."

She stared at him. He could tell by the silent grief in her eyes that she was thinking of her mother.

She sat beside him on a low couch covered with a carpet. Her eyes darted around the room. She was in an Arab home. She watched the doctor's daughter bringing a bowl of rice and mutton into the room. She looked at a younger brother, holding a book.

Then she closed her eyes when the doctor spoke a prayer before dinner.

## Chapter 16

Dr. Farhan adjusted the bandages, making an opening for the girl's mouth, then he fed her spoonfuls of soup, which she could swallow without chewing. The pain was returning to her cheek; she could open her mouth only slowly. Dr. Farhan gave her two pills with her cup of tea, one for pain, and one to help her to sleep.

When she had finished her dinner, and looked very sleepy, Leif stood up and took one of the two remaining silver coins out of his pocket. He had lost the first coin when the blast in the marketplace had thrown him off his feet. Perhaps it was lying on the dirt floor of the orange vendor's booth.

He knelt beside the couch where the girl was seated and handed the second silver coin to her. "You have been very brave. This is for you."

She took the coin, staring at him with eyes that could comprehend nothing, beginning with her mother's dead body on top of her.

"Tomorrow," he told her, "we shall find your family."

She stared at him, then she left with the daughter Zayna, to sleep.

Leif took the third coin from his pocket and handed it to Dr. Farhan. "SHUKran." Thank you. "Thank you for helping her."

Dr. Farhan accepted the coin with a nod of gratitude, but then he shrugged, "I do what I can do. You saw the conditions at the hospital. We live in a war zone."

Dr. Farhan now looked at the coin, and laughed. "Did you steal this from a museum?"

"No, it was earned by honest trade, between my people and yours."

They shared another cup of tea with Dr. Farhan's son, Sameer, fourteen years old, at the head of his class in mathematics.

When Zayna and the doctor's wife Fatima returned to the room, Fatima announced, "She sleeps."

Sameer unrolled a thin mattress, gave Leif a wool blanket and a satin pillow. Then the boy laid a mattress on the floor beside Leif's mattress. He did not say so, but he was being polite. The guest should have someone nearby, if he should need something.

Leif said, “SHUkran.”

Sameer said, “MaSAA al-khayr.” Good night.

Leif stretched out on the adequate mattress, pulled up the blanket against the chill of the desert at night, rested his head on the smooth pillow, closed his eyes and thought of Elisabeth.

He said quietly in Norwegian, “Good night, Sweetheart.”

Leif was startled awake by someone shouting in English, “Open up! Unlock this door and open up!”

He sat up on a floor, wrapped in a blanket, and could not remember where he was.

Then someone was kicking the door. “Open up or we’ll fucking blow the lock off!”

Sameer sat up beside Leif and stared at the door, his terrified face lit by the pale glow of a streetlamp outside the window. He whispered to Leif, “It’s the Americans.”

Dr. Farhan ran into the room, his hands tying the belt of his bathrobe. “Wait! Wait!” he called. He turned on a light, unlocked the door, and was swept backwards by a dozen soldiers pouring into his house. Laden with equipment, each camouflaged soldier carried a heavy rifle.

“You on the floor, get up. Get up!”

Leif and Sameer stood up from their mattresses.

“Stand over there, the three of you. Brady, they’re your detainees. Dress ‘em down.”

“Yes sir.”

Leif stood with Dr. Farhan and Sameer in a corner, behind the menace of Brady’s rifle, while the shouting soldiers searched every room in the house. They shone the beams of their flashlights into the face of Zayna, and Fatima, and the girl with her terrified eyes staring out over the veil of white gauze. The women were herded into a corner of the room opposite from the corner where the men were guarded with guns. Furniture was torn apart, drawers were dumped. Dr. Farhan’s medical journals were glanced at and tossed.

Now the soldiers crowded the men further into the corner, grabbing, pushing, twisting. Leif had no axe, no sword. Two men grabbed his arms. His wrists were bound behind his back. A hood was pulled down over his head, a hood with a stink in it from those who had worn it before.

“All right, out they go.”

Leif heard Dr. Farhan protest, “No! No! Do not take my son!”

“Let’s go, Rag-head. It’s father-son weekend, don’ cha know?”

As Leif was jostled across the room and out the door—struggling not to stumble on the steps, he bumped into either Dr. Sarhan or Sameer—he heard Fatima screaming behind him. Her husband and her son were being snatched from her in the middle of the night. Leif did not know what sort of country this America was, did not know what sort of people now lived on the land that he had visited a thousand years ago, but he knew that in every home in America, the image of what was happening right now in Iraq should be on every American television, and Fatima’s unrelenting scream should be rattling the dishes in every cupboard.

The Creator heard that scream. Though not a single soldier knew that he was in the room.

Leif was shoved into some vehicle. He heard a door slam. Now they were moving along a street. Then he heard Dr. Farhan calling, “Sameer! Sameer!”

Sameer was not in the same vehicle with his father.

Other people were crowded around Leif, some cursing, some in prayer, some moaning with pain.

“Hey, Flapjack, let’s dump this load in the river and call it a day. I been up since dawn. Since fucking *before* dawn.”

“No man. We got to make our delivery.”

“Shit. This is my third tour of making deliveries. And they ain’t found ol’ bin Laden yet.”

Leif was pulled out of the vehicle by soldiers who seemed enraged that no one understood English. He was marched, with a soldier gripping each arm, through a maze that he could not see, to a place with a stench that made him gag. His hood was pulled off. He was in a large room, with over a hundred men standing in clusters, or lying on the floor, all with their hands bound, some with their feet shackled.

A naked man squatted unsteadily on two boards across the top of a barrel, while his guards hooted and whistled at him as he shat into the barrel.

In less than an hour of asking questions inside the prison, Dr. Sarhan had determined, as he reported to Leif, that there were five cases of broken bones; diarrhea was widespread; several men had been severely beaten; one man had lost his hearing

from the blow of a rifle butt; and though there were about twenty boys among the hundred prisoners, his son was not among them.

Dr. Sarhan had also determined that the prisoners with whom he had spoken were shopkeepers and teachers and electricians, men like himself who had been taken from their homes in the middle of the night. He had not met a single man who spoke Arabic with a foreign accent. He heard no political slogans. "These are people from the neighborhoods. They have been running their shops for years."

The building had no windows; Leif could not see when night gave way to dawn. He was hungry, but people told him that the guards often spat in the food. Clusters of men gathered around those who read aloud from a Koran which had been brought from home.

Suddenly two soldiers stood in front of Leif. "Let's go, Tarzan." They gripped his arms and led him out a door into daylight, then hurried him across a dusty yard bounded with barbed wire. He had seen such wire in Poland, in Germany.

They hustled him into another building, hurried him along a corridor, then yanked him into a room where they made him stand in front of a soldier sitting at a desk.

The soldier said, "Identification papers."

"I am Leif Magnussen, from Norway."

"Yeah? So show me your passport."

"What is passport?"

"Right. I hear that you speak Arabic."

"I am in their country. As a guest, I try to speak some words of their language."

"And maybe you were a guest in my country on 9/11. You melted into the crowd at Logan Airport. Made sure all your boys had their tickets."

Leif asked in English, "What sort of American are you?"

"Shut the fuck up. I ask the questions. And I want to know: What is Goldilocks doing in Baghdad?"

Leif asked in Arabic, "What sort of American are you?"

"Sorry, I don't do Sand-nigger Talk."

Leif asked in Old Norse, "What sort of American are you?"

The soldier glared at Leif. Then he said to the two guards who had brought the prisoner into the room, "Let's introduce our guest to his first stress position."

The guards hauled Leif by his arms backwards from the desk to a wall, then they grabbed him around the waist and lifted him. A third guard standing on a chair yanked

Leif's bound wrists as high as Leif's arms would allow, then yanked them higher, until, though he could not see it, his wrists were fastened to a hook high on the wall.

Then the guards let go and his weight dropped, wrenching his shoulders so that he could feel the bones torn away from where they belonged. He shouted through pain beyond any pain he had ever known, "Stop! You cannot do this! Stop!"

"All right, Tarzan. We'll come back to see you sometime later."

If he moved, the pain only worsened. If he hung limp, the pain was unendurable. No Viking had ever caused a man to live with such pain. Prisoners were guarded, but rarely harmed.

He could take only tiny breaths against the pull of his arms. He could not fill his lungs. The soldiers put another hood over his head. It stuck against his lips and he had to bow his head and twist his jaw to breathe.

Now he heard the next prisoner brought in, heard the questioning in English, heard the man pleading in Arabic. Leif heard the scuffle as the guards lifted the man and hung him from a hook. He heard the scream of pain, the gasping, the prayer to Allah.

Nearly unconscious with pain, Leif whispered, "Look upon them. Look upon them, and judge them, for they know exactly what they do."

He heard the man beside him moaning, "Dee-ah-BED. Dee-ah-BED."

"Hey, Dooley," laughed one of the guards, "Mohammed wants to sleep in a nice soft bed."

"Yeah, with one of his harem girls. Well, we're fresh out of beds."

"How about a picture of me between these two sacks of shit?"

A guard now stood beside Leif, bumping him as if he were a side of meat hanging from a tree. Leif heard a click and saw through the hood a flash of light.

Then the soldier lifted the hood off Leif's head. The soldier faced the camera and said brightly, "Everybody say 'Cheese!'"

A light flashed in Leif's eyes.

The prisoner on the other side of the soldier, with gray hair and a bloody white shirt, muttered, "Dee-ah-BED!"

"Shut up, motherfucker, or we'll wire your balls to a truck battery."

Leif felt them lifting him, felt someone wrenching his arms until his wrists were free from the hook. They lowered him part way to the floor, then dropped him.

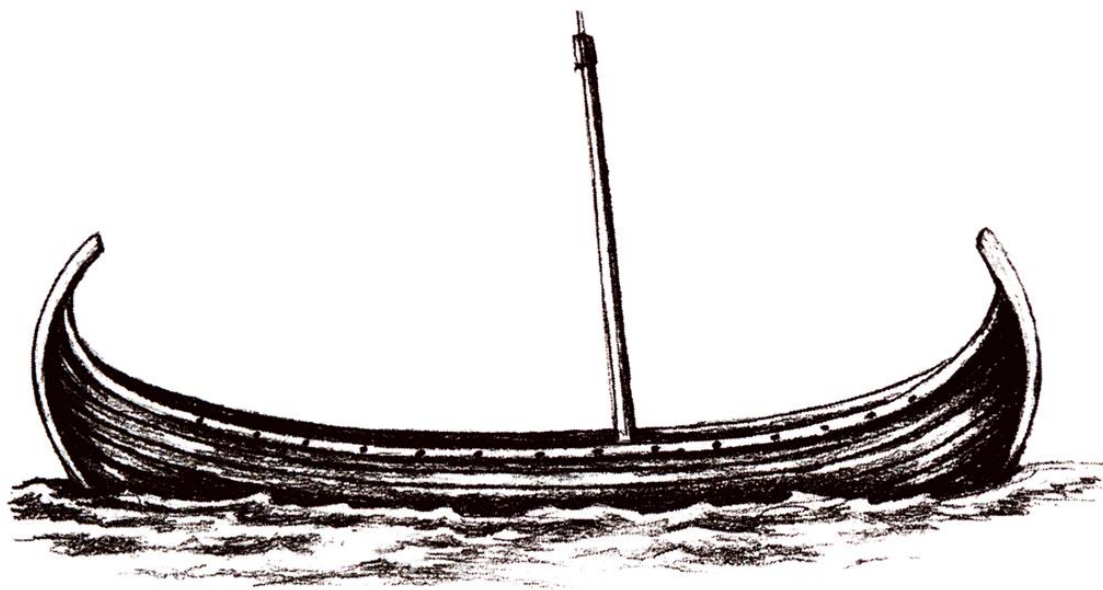
“All right, Tarzan. On your feet.”

Lying on his side, Leif drew his knees up to his chest. His wrists were still bound. The pain in his shoulders was less fierce. He could breathe better now.

“C’mon, Norway, you’re taking up floor space.”

# Part Four

## A View From Above



## Chapter 17

Elisabeth Jakobsen, Elisabeth the Teacher, found herself in the palm of a giant hand, of which she could see only the faintest outline, for it had no flesh, and thus she could see right through it . . . but she *could* see the hand well enough to know that it was a woman's hand, with a woman's gentle fingers curled over her, as if protecting her.

Looking down over the edge of the palm, Elisabeth could see the two family houses beside the fjord, and the pier reaching out into the bay, and the Viking ship pulled up on the beach. She was not at all surprised that she was up here on the palm of a hand—much like a frog, she thought, perched at the edge of a lily pad—looking down at her home on planet Earth.

The hand was rising, gaining altitude, and now Elisabeth could see mountains beyond the mountains that wrapped around and sheltered her little valley and fjord.

Now, looking to the west, she could discern in a mist of light clouds the blue-white gleam of the sea, reaching to the north along Norway's coast, reaching to the south along the coast, and reaching west to where it would join the vast Atlantic.

And now, as the hand continued to rise, she could begin to see the curve of the Earth. Elisabeth was facing north, facing the ice cap that curved over the top of the planet, the ice cap which, she knew, had capped the world for three million years, reflecting most of the sunlight that shone on the polar north. Now the ice cap was melting, shrinking each summer to a new record of smallness, of thinness. As the ice melted, it revealed more and more open dark water, which absorbed the sunlight, becoming warmer. As the Arctic Ocean grew steadily warmer, it melted the ice cap from below, thus accelerating the rate of melting.

That was the first step: the melting of the polar ice cap. That was the first step toward major and long-lasting changes on planet Earth. That was the first domino which would topple a dozen more.

The hand held her high enough above the polar ice cap—now in October when the ragged sheet of ice was nearly as small as it had been in mid-September, the point at which the shrinkage during the summer stopped . . . and winter could begin to add ice again—so that Elisabeth could see open water around all of the ice cap.

She could see as well, looking around the circular horizon, a bit of northern Norway, a bit of northern Russia, a bit of Greenland, a bit of Canada and a bit of Alaska.

The sun, now that she was no longer looking up at the sky, but was *in* the sky, had become a distant neighbor. The light that traveled, as she knew, one hundred and fifty million kilometers before it reached the Earth—taking eight minutes, twenty seconds to do so—shone now on part of the ice cap, bright white, with its broken, meandering edge. The other half of the ice cap was gray in shadow, for the axis of the Earth was now, in autumn, tilting further and further away from the sun.

Elisabeth wore her yellow summer dress, bright yellow toward the sun, subdued yellow on her shadowed side. She thought of herself and Leif in their picture together, she in yellow, he in blue, and wondered how he was doing on his journey.

“Elisabeth,” called a woman’s voice, high above her. She looked up but could see no arm, no face.

“Yes?”

“As the ice cap melts, the ocean warms.”

“Yes.”

“Many currents pass through the Arctic Ocean, including the Gulf Stream, or as it is called up here, the North Atlantic Drift.”

“Yes.” Elisabeth knew this from her early research.

“The warming ocean will warm the currents passing through it. The warming currents will take that unnatural warmth all around the world, even to the dark cold depths at the bottom of every ocean. When the ice cap is gone, the oceans of the entire planet will become warmer and warmer.”

“Yes.”

“And the polar winds blowing over the Arctic Ocean, they too will become warmer. The winds will carry their unnatural warmth across the northern lands: over tundra, over forests, over frozen lakes. The warmth will reach down into the tundra, where it will thaw the permafrost which wraps like a scarf of ice around the top of the world, ice thousands of years old, ice from the last ice age. The heat in the warming world shall melt that ice, shall thaw the tundra, around the top of the planet. And then shall planetary amounts of methane, trapped before beneath the ice, now bubble up.”

“Yes.”

“And that will be the end of life on planet Earth. Methane is the monster. Some remnants of life will perhaps survive, here and there in scattered patches, a thousand years from now. But most life—in warming seas, in acidic seas, in parched forests, in burning forests, on parched farmland, on the banks of dry rivers—most life will be gone.”

“Yes.”

“Plague shall overtake the world, until the world is so parched with drought, and ravaged by floods, that even plague becomes dormant.”

“A thousand years from now.”

“Yes. Because the melting permafrost shall wrap a blanket of methane around planet Earth. Now the heating of the planet will greatly accelerate. No life will be able to adapt fast enough. Certainly not you,” she spat out the word, “*people.*”

The voice paused, then scolded, “You bring this plague upon yourselves.”

“Yes. I know. I try as a teacher in the classroom to . . .”

“Can you tell me *why*? Why do you do this to yourselves? Why do you do this to life on planet Earth? To *life!* Do you have any appreciation at all for this gift which I have given you?”

Elisabeth could only look down at the wreckage of a once healthy ice cap, its edges crumbling into an increasing number of ice bergs, where an increasing number of white bears were searching desperately for a home.

“Yes,” said Elisabeth, “even now, we are still burning oil in millions of cars that were manufactured and sold this year. Yes, even now, long trains filled with coal slither like black snakes over the poisoned land of countries around the world. Yes, even now, we pump chemicals into the Earth—never mind the aquifers, never mind the water that we drink—so that we can coax to the surface the last of the burnable gas, the last of the burnable oil. Yes, even now, we fight our wars, as we have fought them for a century, for control of cheap oil.”

The voice thundered down, “I am not going to allow it any longer.”

Elisabeth felt the hand shake beneath her, dropping her to her knees.

The stern voice declared, “I am *not* going to let them kill the miracle of life on this planet. I shall stop them. Very soon.”

Elisabeth stood up, for the hand beneath her was firm now. She looked up; she was listening.

“Elisabeth.”

“Yes?”

“May I show you the refugees?”

“No, please. That would be too much. I haven’t even told my students about the refugees that will wander the land in desperate swarms, seeking water from dry rivers, seeking food from the parched earth, seeking shelter, seeking refuge, from the growing multitude of scattered wars. No, please, I cannot look at the refugees.”

But the hand took her, moving south over the curve of the Earth, to northern Russia, where the permafrost had melted and all the water in the lakes and in the sandy glacial soil had drained deep into the earth, leaving the surface dry, parched. And then a thunderstorm—a giant thunderstorm born over the warming ocean—swept over the parched tundra and forest. The rain could do little to wet a land so vast, so deep, so dry, but the thunderbolts could stab down and pierce through forest and bog and the ancient organic remnants underneath, igniting all of it on fire.

Northern Russia burned; northern Norway burned; northern Sweden and Finland burned. And from the burning land fled growing crowds of refugees, seeking to survive somewhere to the south. In the crowded cities, around the crowded lakes. Beside rivers that were becoming battlegrounds.

The hand brought Elisabeth closer and closer to the smoke, roiling across an entire continent into the sky of day, the sky of dusk, the sky of night. The hand brought Elisabeth closer and closer to the flames that boiled up from vast forests, flames that formed a fiery ring around the northern lands of planet Earth.

The hand brought Elisabeth closer and closer to the faces of people—to the faces and faces and faces of children—who walked and stumbled and staggered in long lines down endless roads toward something less awful than the hell they had left behind them.

Elisabeth held her hands up over her eyes. But she could see through her own hands. She could see desperate, dying people. And more. She could see the end of an extraordinary journey, an extraordinary dream.

A human journey, a sacred dream.

## Chapter 18

“Elisabeth, shall we visit some schools?”

“Oh yes, I would very much like to visit some schools. Yes, I would like to be in a classroom with the students. Yes, please.”

“Then let us go to a Russian school.” The hand lifted Elisabeth higher and higher as it moved across northern Russia. The forests below were partly green and partly black, for Elisabeth had returned almost to the present. She approached a city built where a great river flowed into a protected bay at the edge of an arctic sea.

“Let us visit a Russian school . . . five years from now. Before the ice cap has vanished. Before the permafrost has thawed. Before methane has wrapped its deadly blanket around the world. Before the great fires have further darkened the sky. Yes, let us visit School Number Six in Arkhangelsk, on the bank of the Northern Dvina River, where the students and the teachers have greatly expanded their classrooms.”

The hand swept down close to the great river—a river so polluted by the pulp and paper industry of Arkhangelsk that no one could swim in it—then the palm of the hand became level with a white sandy beach along the river’s shore. Elisabeth stepped off the hand onto the beach—she heard a seagull cry above her, as she might hear a seagull cry back home—then she walked across the sandy beach and up some stone steps to the top of the granite wall of an embankment.

She followed a sidewalk along the embankment—the broad river to her right, the city to her left—then, knowing exactly where to go, she walked through a park with yellow birch trees and dark spruce, to a quiet residential street. A short distance further, and she stood in front of School Number Six, a yellow, dignified, four-story brick building, with many classroom windows.

Without any hesitation, for this was part of her journey, Elisabeth walked up the school steps, passed through a large brown door, then explained to a woman in the reception office that she was a teacher from Norway who would like to visit the classrooms of Russia.

The receptionist smiled and genuinely welcomed her. Then she phoned up to a teacher, who came down from her classroom to meet Elisabeth at the office. Natasha shook Elisabeth’s hand, welcomed her warmly, then led Elisabeth up a flight of stairs

to her classroom on the second floor, where the tenth graders were working on their special project.

Natasha let her students explain to Elisabeth what they were doing.

“Well,” said Andrei, “since we have drought and wildfires now in northern Russia, our class has connected with a tenth grade class in Sacramento, California, where they also have droughts and wildfires. We show them our pictures, they show us theirs. We talk back and forth—skype is best, but we also trade essays with each other—about precipitation over the year, about wind velocities, about wildlife and farm animals trapped by the drought and the fires.”

Liudmila added, “We talk about the politicians too: what they do, or don’t do. You see, Elisabeth, we’re not waiting any longer. I’m just a fifteen-year-old kid, but I’m part of the generation that is taking over.”

“Here, look,” said Julia, turning a laptop screen on her desk toward Elisabeth. “Last week, we did a link-up with kids in West Africa, at a school in Bamako, Mali, where they’ve got drought too.”

Elisabeth watched a series of pictures taken by tenth graders in Mali, of dry irrigation ditches along the Niger River; of barren trees standing above parched ground; of a new well, powered by the wind, which drew up water from deep in the earth for the school’s gardens . . . by day and by night.

Elisabeth could hear, in this international YouTube, the voices of the Malian students, speaking their best English. And now she could hear voices of the Russian students, answering back in their best English. With a lot of laughter mixed in.

Victor explained, “We practice our English with the Californians, and the kids in Mali practice their English with the Californians. Then we all practice with each other. We are learning some words from Mali, and they are learning some words from Russia. Anyway, we are learning about the different forms of drought.”

The hand lifted Elisabeth from the beach outside School Number Six, carried her up the river along the edge of the city for about a kilometer, then enabled her to step onto the wharf where the ferry would dock later today. Elisabeth walked across the wharf, walked around a large restaurant and ticket office, and passed through a cluster of chugging buses. Then she walked a short distance along a busy street to the wooded yard of Arkhangelsk State Technical University, a stately, cream-colored, five-story building with a semi-circle of pillars rising above the front door.

She spoke with a group of students—smoking cigarettes outside—and once again found herself heartily welcomed. The students escorted her upstairs, where they introduced her to Grigori, professor of agrarian economics.

Grigori was delighted to meet Elisabeth. He invited her to join the students as they spent the class hour doing their research. “This research, on a subject which they themselves choose, comprises half of their work in the course. Yes, I give them lectures, to provide some background. But then they choose their topic . . . and learn everything than can about it. On lecture days, I speak for half of the period, and then we use the other half for vibrant discussions. On research days, the students work in groups of four, busy at their laptops, while I walk around the room and offer guidance . . . and encouragement.”

Elisabeth had long thought that her students should be doing more research in her classes, learning on their own—learning *how* to learn on their own—rather than rely on the lectures of one teacher, and the chapters of one thick textbook.

“The study of agrarian economics,” explained Grigori, “is the study of how to grow food under difficult conditions, in a sustainable manner, so that people can eat, and farmers can earn a profit. Sounds simple, huh?”

“In the old days, the central factor in food distribution was a market based on pricing. People who had money were able to eat, whereas people with limited money were left to slowly starve. Supply and demand. The sacred market.

“But today, the central factor in food distribution is the intelligent sharing of food . . . to where it is most needed, from where it is best grown. Before, we ignored Africa, while we focused on the price of feed corn for livestock in Omaha. Now our priority around the world is to take care of each other. Much better.”

Grigori asked a student, Elena, to show Elisabeth her project.

Elena showed Elisabeth a map on her laptop screen. She pointed with her finger, “We are working with university students in Brazil, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua, and on the island of Puerto Rico. They want to know, ‘What can we grow other than coffee beans and soy beans and sugar and hamburger meat?’” She paused, then added with a smile, “What can we grow, not for the fat white boys, but for the world?”

Now she moved her finger to areas of drought in Sub-Saharan Africa. “We also work with university students—*students*, not government officials—who are on the cutting edge of African solar power, but who are short of corn and beans. If we can provide enough food to keep the Africans going for a decade, then *one*: they do not

become refugees, and *two*: with solar, they can build up a modern, prosperous economy. By helping with food, we give them time to get on their feet.”

Elena smiled with anticipation. “This is a long-range project, one which will encompass at least a decade. Some of the students here in Russia, and in Africa, in Brazil, in Costa Rica, in Nicaragua, and on the island of Puerto Rico . . . they will become government officials in a few short years, and they will *know* what global problems we face. Global problems that require global solutions. It’s very exciting, I think.”

Elisabeth the Teacher had long been ready to progress beyond the dull sort of teaching which prepared students for exams. How much better to prepare them to build a better world.

She said to Elena, “So you are weaving schools together.”

“Da!”

“You are weaving students around the world together.”

“More and more every day.”

“And you learn from each other.”

“KhanYESHna! Of course. We learn about agriculture, we learn about economics, we learn about weather, we learn about drought . . . *and* we learn about each other. That’s the secret. We learn about each other, so that *together*, we can design an entirely new economic system . . . which does not have even one dusty office on Wall Street.”

“And, if I may ask,” Elisabeth wanted confirmation, wanted to hear the reassuring words from Elena, “Do you have hope for our world?”

Elena recalled the past for a moment. “A few years ago, I had no hope. No hope in the politicians, no hope in the oligarchs, no hope in all the lazy people who were ‘in denial’. But then we in my generation simply moved past them. We said, ‘Step aside, please, we’re coming through.’ And so we did. Students have a *purpose* now. We are not waiting to see if we got a B-plus on the last exam. We’re looking *ahead*, to our own century, a century unprecedented in all of human history.

“We brought the sun and the wind into our classrooms. We look at things now from a planetary perspective. We look at things now from the perspective of an entire century.

“Our generation already calls it a Renaissance. In Arkhangelsk, in Africa, in Brazil, in Costa Rica, in Nicaragua, in Puerto Rico, in countries all around the world, our generation calls it the Renaissance of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.”

Elisabeth shook the hand of this enterprising student. “Thank you, Elena.” She looked with admiration at all of the students in the Russian classroom—economists, entrepreneurs, and visionaries—then she looked with pride at their emboldened teacher. “When I return home to my classroom,” she promised, “I will take with me your message of hope.”

## Chapter 19

She was back on the hand again, rising into the night sky. In the distance, on the far side of planet Earth, she could see the moon, three-quarters full. The moon was perfectly balanced in its orbit between the gravitational pull of the Earth—a dark orb lit with patches of city lights—and the wayward tug of the vast expanse of bright stars, dim stars, and a dust of stars, behind the moon.

“Look there,” said the voice, and now a finger pointed at an object some distance below the hand, a tiny object, built of many branching parts, which Elisabeth recognized as the International Space Station, orbiting the Earth. Its solar panels, arrayed on delicate wings, caught the sunlight that passed over the top of the Earth.

“The first components of the Space Station were Soviet. Later, many other countries added on various parts, including a dome with Italian windows, where cosmonauts and astronauts from a dozen countries can sit and gaze out at mysteries they will probably never understand.”

Elisabeth watched the Space Station as it dimmed and then vanished, for it had passed into Earth’s shadow.

“Of course,” continued the voice, with a tone of weariness, “down on the ground, they all squabble. While up here, for decades, they have been working together . . . wonderfully.”

Elisabeth knew that just north of Arkhangelsk was a Russian navy port, where submarines were docked. Submarines armed with nuclear missiles.

“Just think, Elisabeth, what you *could* do, if you managed to stop burning oil and coal. If you managed to weave a network of clean energy around your world. If you managed to save a patch of ice at the top of the world, which, once the world began to cool again, would begin to grow.

“Think what you *could* do, if you freed yourselves from the shackles of poverty and pollution and plunder and war. Think what the human mind, the human heart, could finally do . . . if you were free to become what you *could* become.

“Elisabeth, will your people be ready to use that great moment? What new cities—of enlightened design—will you build? What new architecture will embrace the sun and the wind? What medical research could you pursue . . . with money formerly spent on weapons and war?

“How can you best nurture the oceans back to health? How can you best nurture the forests back to health? How can you best nurture the farms of the world back to health?”

“What new music will you listen to? What new cathedrals shall you build?”

The voice paused, then added with encouragement, “What part of the grand mystery of the universe shall you explore?”

For a long minute, the voice was silent. Elisabeth listened, listened, listened to the vast silence of the universe.

“Elisabeth.”

“Yes?”

“By the year 2100, either a few starving survivors will hate you, or legions of flourishing pioneers will thank you.”

“We can do it.”

“Yes, you can do it. But wouldn’t it be nice if you finally got started?”

The hand now moved westward, over the top of Scandinavia, until Elisabeth, looking down from the night sky, could see the lights of the small city at the mouth of her fjord, could see the lights of tiny villages along its shores, and now could see the lights of her two family homes: her parents and her grandparents had left the outdoor lights on, shining on the paths, and lighting the red and yellow doors . . . in case she or Leif might be coming home tonight.

And then the hand merged with the end of the pier, so that she could step onto the worn boards . . . of home.

“Thank you,” she called up. “Thank you for taking me to the schools.”

The voice called down, “Bring the sun and the wind into the classrooms. Weave the schools together. Give every kid an equal chance.”

The voice paused, then added vibrantly, “I believe in those kids. I gave them *life*.”

Her final word echoed, faint but clear, from the mountains across the fjord, “Life.”

Then the hand was gone. The voice was gone.

Elisabeth stood alone on the end of the pier, looking across the dark fjord at the jagged black mountain peaks silhouetted against the silver glow of stars.

## Chapter 20

“Ooooh.”

Elisabeth heard a groan behind her. Turning around, she saw Leif lying on his side on the pier, with pain in his clenched eyes, and died blood staining much of his blue shirt.

“Leif!” she cried, running toward him.

Hearing her voice, he opened his eyes. As she knelt in her yellow dress beside him, he looked up at her and smiled as he told her, “Mission accomplished.”

She discovered that his hands were bound behind him with plastic straps. Cupping her hands toward her grandparents’ house, she called, “*Bestefar*, bring your knife!”

Then she cupped her hands toward her parents’ house, “Papa, bring your medical bag!”

To both houses, she called, “*Bestemor!* Mama! Bring wet towels, bring dry towels. We are home. We need you.”

Her grandfather came running down the path, running along the dock. He knelt behind Leif, took his knife from its sheath—the knife with which he had whittled a new oar lock peg—and cut the plastic straps, releasing Leif’s hands from their bondage.

Her father came running down the path, running along the dock. As he knelt beside Elisabeth, facing Leif, still lying on his side in pain, he asked, “Leif, what did they do to you? Where are you hurt?”

Leif tried to move his upper arm. “They hung me by my wrists. They ripped my shoulders apart.”

“Let me help you to sit up.” Bjørn gripped the sides of Leif’s chest beneath his arms and gently lifted him up until he sat, leaning forward over his legs. Leif bent his knees and spread his feet for balance.

As Bjørn lightly touched Leif’s swollen shoulders, he asked, “Where did the blood on your shirt come from? Are you injured?”

Leif shook his head slowly. “No. The blood is from a little girl in the marketplace in Baghdad. She . . . I left her behind. The American soldiers took the men to a prison. The girl . . . I hope she is safe in the house.”

Bjørn asked, “The American soldiers?” He opened his medical bag, took out a hypodermic and a bottle of morphine. “First we’ll ease the pain. Then we’ll get you into the car and to the hospital. I want some X-rays before I flex your arms any further.”

Once again, Leif stared at the needle of this strange tool.

Bjørn gave Leif a shot in each shoulder.

Elisabeth stood up now, stepping away, so that Bente—her mother kissed her on the cheek, “Welcome home, Sweetheart.”—could kneel and wash Leif’s face with a wet towel.

“Leif,” said Bente, “I am afraid to ask you what you have seen. You must hate us now. You must hate what we have become.”

His eyes, relaxing as the pain eased, looked at her. “Bente, we laid down our swords a thousand years ago. We became merchants, traders, sailors of ships laden not with battleaxes, but with cargo. So I cannot understand why, a thousand years later, people are still butchering and torturing each other. Bente, you are a mental therapist. Please tell me *why*.”

Bjørn handed his medical bag to Elisabeth, then gripped Leif under the shoulders. “Try to stand up. Dad, can you brace Leif from behind?”

The two men helped Leif to his feet, then the group of six—Astrid had joined them now; she gripped Elisabeth’s hand as if she would never let go—walked along the pier to the upper beach, and then along the path around the larger house—the red almost black now in the night, the trim around the windows and balcony pale white—to Bjørn’s car.

Leif eased himself into the passenger seat. Elisabeth fastened the seat belt over him, then sat with her grandmother in the back seat.

Bente would follow with Johannes in her car.

On the way to the hospital, Leif looked over the seat and asked Elisabeth, “Did you find your crew?”

“Yes. Did you?”

“Yes. We will have an abundance of crew.”

At the hospital, Leif looked at an image of the bones inside his shoulders while Bjørn pointed out where ligaments had been stretched and torn. “I don’t see any stress fractures,” said Bjørn, “but it will be a good six months before you’ll have your flexibility and strength back.”

“Hmmm,” said Leif, remembering the full moon of October. How many more days, how many more nights, did they have before they launched the ship? He would have to look at the moon when it rose tonight above the mountains to the east.

With bandages wrapped tightly around him, holding his arms and shoulders in a stable position, Leif walked with the others to the hospital cafeteria, still open for the night shift. Elisabeth held a cup of hot potato-and-cod soup so that he could sip from it.

He remembered the Arab prisoner hanging from a hook beside him.

When the cup of soup was empty, he thanked Elisabeth. The two of them leaned forward and, right in front of everyone, touched their lips in a long, gentle kiss.

Sitting back in his seat, Leif looked at everyone around the table and told them, “They hung a man beside me by his wrists. He kept saying a word that I did not recognize. Some word of Arabic that I do not know. He said, ‘Dee-ah-BED. Dee-ah-BED.’ Is it a word from a prayer?”

“Dee-ah-BED?” asked Astrid. “Perhaps something from the Koran.”

Bjørn thumped his fist on the cafeteria table. “He was trying to tell the Americans that he is diabetic. He needed his insulin.”

Leif did not know what it was, this “insulin.”

He closed his eyes, profoundly tired. He wondered who would help the girl from the marketplace to find her family.

When they returned from the hospital, Elisabeth and Leif said good night to the others, then walked together—wrapped in Astrid’s blankets against the night chill—to the end of the pier. The moon was just rising over a mountain peak across the fjord to the east, a pale orange moon slightly more than three-quarters full.

“We have four nights, four days, until the moon rises full,” said Leif. The two of them stood beside each other at the end of the pier in their blankets . . . like two creatures in cocoons. “That will give them time to come to a decision. And to gather our crew.”

“Leif, you and I, we sail together,” stated Elisabeth with conviction. But she wanted to hear his words, wanted his confirmation.

He looked at her with a love that had lasted a thousand years. A love that had survived his journey, and her journey. A love that had brought them this night to the beach where the Viking ship—they both looked at it, a dark hull in the moonlight—waited for them.

“Yes, Elisabeth, we sail together.”

“Do you know yet where we are sailing to?”

“Not yet. They must make their decision. They must decide . . . what to do with us.”

“With us. With all of us, around the world.”

“Yes, they must decide what to do with us. Then we shall gather our crew on board, and the tide shall rise to lift our ship from the beach, and we shall be on our way.”

They watched the moon just a little bit longer, as it spread a yellow-orange stripe toward them across the black water of the fjord.

Then they walked along the pier to the place in the meadow where two paths diverged toward the two houses.

“I think I shall sleep until noon,” said Elisabeth.

“Ah. Then please, when you come to awaken me, bring a mug of boiled bark.”

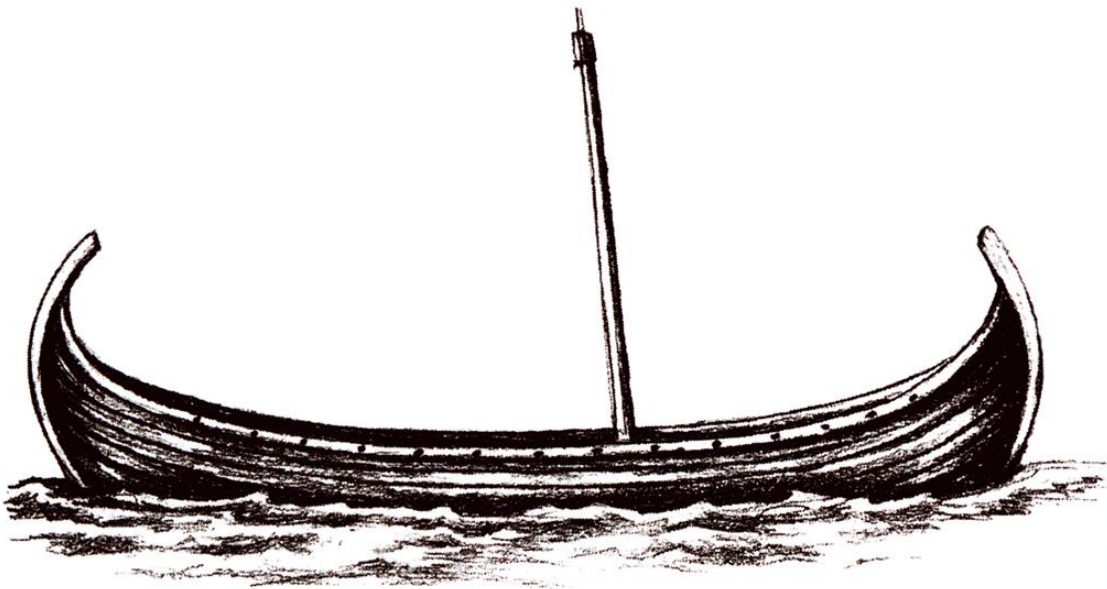
They kissed, leaning forward in their blankets.

They nodded to each other from the lit yellow door and the lit red door.

And then they closed the doors behind them, separate from each other for a few nights more.

# Part Five

## Emigrants to the New World



## Chapter 21

Elisabeth and Leif sat on a driftwood log on the beach, facing the bay at low tide. Elisabeth had come home from school right after classes, for she wanted to talk with Leif. He told her that his shoulders were doing better. He could move his arms a little now. The pain, surprisingly, was almost gone.

They had an after-school snack together on her balcony—goat cheese on thick Norwegian crackers, washed down with Hardanger apple cider—then they walked down to the beach and sat on the smooth log, its bark worn away by storms off the fjord, its wood bleached white by the sun.

Elisabeth liked low tide, when the fringe of the bay was exposed: she could smell the wet rocks and glistening kelp. Crabs skittered across the shallows. Birds pecked and poked, searching for dinner.

“Elisabeth,” said Leif, “in my time, a man was ready to fight. We carried weapons, and we were quick to use them.”

A pair of oystercatchers—handsome black-and-white birds almost as big as a crow—were feeding on the exposed bottom near the beach. Their orange legs and long orange beaks were lit by the late afternoon sun. The two birds dug and pried with their beaks, now and then calling out, “Kweeeeeeeep! Kweeeeeeeeeeeep!” when they found something especially good.

“But that was a thousand years ago. Today, there is so much *good* in the world. You have schools for the children, doctors for anyone who is hurt, and food! You have more food in one store in your town than any Viking could possibly eat in a lifetime. So why are people still fighting?”

He looked at her, baffled.

She remembered reading somewhere, ‘And war begat war, and war begat war, and war begat war.’

He continued, “I understand from reading in your school library that for a thousand years, people have progressed. They have developed the books that they write, telling many different kinds of stories. They have developed their music from a choir of a dozen voices singing somber hymns . . . to a symphony orchestra playing with powerful exuberance. People have developed their architecture from

thatched huts to cathedrals. And what your father can do as a doctor in a modern hospital is, for me, astonishing.”

The late afternoon sun, golden-red over the western peaks, shone full on his face as he looked past her at his ship pulled up on the beach.

“In my time,” he said, “we bartered what little we had with someone else who had no more than us, but something different. Today, you barter codfish from Norway for oranges from Morocco. In my time, we rowed a boat. Today, you fly somehow through the heavens. I understand, while I sit at a table in your school library with children around me, each one reading a book, that the people who lived here in Norway a thousand years ago have become a very different sort of people. Your progress astonishes me.”

He shook his hands—on stiff, uplifted arms—with frustration as he asked, “But why then are people in this modern world still fighting with each other?”

A white tern with long slender wings and a deeply forked tail swooped over them, dipping and hovering on the breeze.

“I wonder how much the need for war comes from the profits of war.” He paused. “I wonder how much the need for war comes, as it did in my time, from the quick anger of men who have little in the world but their honor.”

He added, “I wonder how much the need for war comes from knowing only one way to say, ‘Good morning.’”

Leif reached down and picked up from the sand a long slender shell: one of the two shells of a razor clam. He held it so that the mother-of-pearl inside caught the light from the copper-red sun.

“Elisabeth, I would like to read more about the prisons of the world. I would like to know why cruelty has worsened since my time. I would like to know why, in such horrid places, young soldiers are taught to be savages. I especially want to know: Who are the old men, teaching them?”

Elisabeth reached down and picked up an empty snail shell, recently occupied, for the inside was still shiny.

“Elisabeth, I try to understand this thing called Democracy. I think that it means: Everyone has a voice. The word ‘Parliament’, as I have learned, comes from the French language, *parler*, to speak. In the Parliament which governs a Democracy, everyone can speak.”

He looked at her; she nodded that she agreed.

Again he shook his hands with frustration, “But how does a young soldier speak when he is buried in a cemetery in Normandy? *He* knows what war is all about. He knows about war a thousand times more than some cocky politician. Yet he cannot speak.”

Yes, she thought, how much experience, how much wisdom, how much aching in the heart, is buried in military cemeteries around the world.

“How can a young mother speak if she is buried with her child in a trench with a thousand other frozen corpses? Who heard her voice beneath the roar of artillery during the siege of Leningrad? Who hears her voice now?”

He spoke with growing anger. “How does a young violinist speak from the ovens of Auschwitz?”

He shook his hands with conviction, “*These* are the people whom I would invite to speak in a new Parliament. People who carry the terror of war in their hearts. People who have watched precious life taken from their trembling hands. People who would *scream* in that new Parliament. And people who, eventually, we hope, would sing.”

Yes, how nice if, once in a while, people could just, together, sing.

“These are the voices of wisdom which I would invite to speak. And I would invite other people as well. Those who have lived as slaves and died as slaves, would I invite to speak.

“And those who were butchered as they walked upon the land where their grandfathers had walked—the butchery slowly crossed an entire continent—yes, those people of the buffalo would I invite to speak.”

He stared out at the water for a long moment, then he added, “The people buried in the rubble of Iraq, the people buried in the rubble of Afghanistan, the people buried in the rubble of Palestine, yes, those people would I invite to speak.”

He swept one stiff hand toward the fjord. “I would as well invite to speak those much closer to the days of creation, the salmon and the seals and the whales.” He gestured toward the mountains, “The bears and the moose and the wolves.” He gestured toward the bright yellow sky in the west, from which the blazing red sun now stared at them, to—sweeping his hand—the darkening turquoise sky in the east, where night was approaching, “The eagle and the sea gull and the ocean-roving tern.”

He called out to the fjord and the mountains and the sky, “For *every* creature has a voice, if we but listen.”

Lief and Elisabeth could hear the distant wash of waves breaking over the exposed outer rocks of the bay. The wind must be picking up on the fjord; the wind from the sea must be punching up the length of the fjord, pushing waves that lifted their dark backs. Until some of them crashed on the exposed rocks at the outer edge of the bay.

“This Parliament,” said Leif, “must have a home, somewhere apart from the brawls and the plundering that plague humanity like old sicknesses.”

Elisabeth and Leif stared at the highest peaks across the fjord, where patches of last winter’s snow on northern faces of granite—snow which even summer’s deep warmth had not melted—were tinged pale red by the sun now touching a black jagged peak far to the west.

Elisabeth said, “Honored shall be the home of this bold new Parliament.”

## Chapter 22

The red sun flattened against the black slope of the mountain. The sun became a shrinking red cap. And then it vanished.

A few clouds in the west glowed with a crimson tinge, until they too said, “Good night.”

Leif looked around, listening. “It’s so lonely.”

“Lonely?” asked Elisabeth, a little disappointed.

“Well, for example,” he raised his left hand and pointed at a broad flat rock fringed with drooping kelp, just inside the mouth of the bay, “On that rock out there, the seals used to gather. In my time, I would bark to them.” He barked toward the grey skerry fifty meters away; Elisabeth was stunned by how much he sounded like a seal. Clearly he had listened to them, and had practiced replicating them.

He laughed. “They would call back to me, the moment I called to them. The bull complained about his harem, and the harem complained about the bull.”

He looked up. “And the sky! It was not one bird and another bird, but *flocks* of hundreds of birds, *thousands* of birds, weaving across the sky. And above them, *high* above them, eagles circled on the winds blowing up the highest mountain slopes. Elisabeth, there were sometimes as many birds in the sky as there will be stars tonight.”

Looking out at the olive-black fjord, he said, “Your grandfather told me that ships with enormous nets caught all the herring. Caught every silver penny in the sea. And so they earned gold coins in Bergen. They left in their wake an unprecedented poverty. The sea is so empty now. A stage without dancers. And old Leif, he feels so lonely.”

Yes, she had felt that loneliness without even knowing that it was there. Of course, there should be more birds. Of course, there should be more fish, more crabs, more lobster. And the seals! The spouting breath of whales, which she had heard only rarely. She had missed the life that was not there, though she had never known how much she missed it.

She asked him, a little embarrassed, “Do you know what I would love to do?”

He looked at her with humor in his eyes, “What would Elisabeth love to do?”

“I would love to swim in the sea in January, when the codfish are migrating from Russia to Norway, where they will spawn. Leif, people have learned how to swim underwater in the sea. We carry a tank made of steel on our backs, filled with air under great pressure, so that we can breathe underwater. We wear rubber suits that keep us warm in the cold, cold, awful cold sea.”

She held up her hands, forming an oval frame in front of her eyes. “We wear a mask with a glass plate, so that we can see clearly all the fish in their underwater world.”

“Ah. Excellent progress.”

“Leif, I want to dive with this breathing apparatus as part of a team of marine biologists in the waters of the Lofoten Islands in January, at the beginning of cod season. I want to swim at the same depth as the cod are swimming, while they migrate past me like a great river of silver-gray fish. I want to see that abundance. I want to see *life* almost as it was before we came along.”

She grinned at him. “And then do you know what?”

He laughed. “What?”

“I want to swim with the codfish while they are spawning. I want to swim in that vast underwater soup of eggs and sperm.”

“Ah. Then you will not be lonely.”

They watched the darkening turquoise sky, looking for the first stars to appear.

“What happens now?” she asked.

“We wait. When they have made their decision, they will let us know.”

She wanted to hear his words once again, needed once again his confirmation, “We shall sail together on your ship.”

“Yes,” he said with conviction, “we shall sail together on my ship. But I know not where.”

Elisabeth took a breath of cool briny air. Never before had she felt so keenly alive.

## Chapter 23

After a quiet dinner on the evening of the fourth day—quiet because everyone knew that something was going to happen that night—the family gathered in front of the television to watch the news.

The financial collapse in New York was spreading to cities around the world. Iceland was especially hard hit; the other Scandinavian countries would do what they could to help.

The price of oil was dropping. Oil-producing countries would most likely reduce production to drive the price back up.

And then Leif watched a man wailing in a street, with a donkey in the dusty background, because his son's wedding, in a mountain village in Afghanistan, had been hit by a volley of missiles fired from American fighter jets. Twenty-six people were dead, including the groom and the bride. Dozens more were injured. Some of the injured had been taken to an overcrowded clinic in the nearest town. An American spokesman claimed that the village was a "terrorist stronghold".

The villagers were taking pictures of every person killed, before the dead were buried, to prove that these people were not terrorists or Taliban or militia or al-Qaeda, but family and friends who had gathered for a wedding. The television screen now showed image after image—taken with somebody's digital telephone and then emailed to the world—of the groom with half his face blown away, and of the bride in a bloody dress. Of women, of children, and of an infant, shredded by shrapnel.

The American spokesman said that "the incident would be investigated."

Leif stood up from his chair and quietly walked outside. In the darkness of night, he followed the path to the grassy bank overlooking the beach. He glanced at his ship. Then he looked up at the stars in the crystalline night sky.

For a long moment he listened. Then he called up, "I agree. Enough! It seems that otherwise, they shall go on forever."

Leif listened again, then he called up, "A very wise decision. I never would have thought of it myself. But I think you may be right."

Then he asked, for he could not deny his curiosity, "And where exactly shall it be that we land . . . when we come to this New World?"

He listened. "Ah. Perfect."

Then he added, as he fully felt the boldness of the plan, "Thank you."

When he returned to the house where the television had been turned off, and six bowls of chocolate ice cream had been set out on the table, Leif joined the family—his family—for one final time.

No one spoke. Dinner had been quiet, but dessert was silent.

When the bowls were empty, and the spoons licked clean, Leif stood up from his chair and addressed the people around the table. “Astrid and Johannes, Bente and Bjørn, and Elisabeth, I thank you. You have taken me into your homes, and I am profoundly grateful.”

Then he held out his hand to the woman seated across the table from him, beckoning her to rise and join him. “Astrid and Johannes, Bente and Bjørn, I ask your permission for the hand of your Elisabeth. I ask your blessing upon our marriage, which shall take place in the New World.”

As Elisabeth now stood beside her Leif, they heard the four blessings, bestowed with sadness—for they knew that she was leaving with him now—and yet bestowed with love.

Sweeping his arm toward the beach, Leif invited the parents and grandparents, “Will you come down to the beach with us?”

And so it came to pass, that Elisabeth and her family followed Leif on the path through the heather in the faint light of the stars. They followed him on a path down the slope of the bluff, then they followed him along the upper edge of the beach.

Their shoes were suddenly filled with water when a wave—unusually high—washed up to their ankles.

They kept walking toward the long low sleek ship, its prow and stern reaching gracefully upward into the luminous black sky.

Elisabeth saw that the oars lay lengthwise on the deck. The woolen sail had been readied on its spar beside the mast; the halyard that would hoist the sail was cleated and ready.

Thirty-two benches, sixteen to a side, were ready for the rowers. A barrel was lashed to the deck forward of the mast. Crates were lashed to the rear of the mast.

The rudder was swiveled up on its joint made of roots, ready to be lowered.

The long tiller waited for the captain’s hand.

And then . . .

They appeared, spirits barely visible at first, as if they lacked confidence in what they were about to do. Elizabeth and her family watched as Leif spoke quietly to them, sometimes in English, more often in a language which Elisabeth could not understand. There were about thirty of them gathered on the beach: a young man in uniform; a woman wearing an old-fashioned dress, her hair tied up in a bun; a well dressed boy with alert eyes; a woman wearing a black robe and veil; and peering from behind the black robe, a girl wearing a yellow dress. The girl had stitches across her cheek from her ear to the corner of her lips.

Now Elisabeth found herself speaking in Norwegian to Inger, the student who had walked out of her class. Wherever this ship was sailing, Inger wanted to be on board.

Leif spoke, in such a manner that all who were gathered on the beach could understand him. "For five centuries, people have journeyed from around the world to set their feet on the sacred earth of America. For five centuries, Americans have been living off the fat of the land, and the fat of the planet. Others have followed their example. And yet, as I have read in a history book, America was to have been an example of a very different sort."

He regarded his crew with approval. "Keepers of the Earth, Keepers of the Peace, I welcome you."

He looked from face to face. "We shall launch tonight with a crew of emigrants who bring with them no swords, no axes, no muskets. They bring with them no strange diseases. They are the victims of your modern world, who bring with them both their suffering and their wisdom. These are the people who shall be pioneers in the New World."

Leif looked deeply into the faces of his crew, their clothing as disparate as the countries they came from.

"Among our crew are those who would abide by the commandment, 'Thou shalt not kill.' And among our crew are those who would abide by the commandment, 'Thou shalt not plunder.'" He paused. "In our new home, so shall it be."

Leif swept his arm toward the fjord. "Soon we shall launch. We shall pull our oars and set our sail toward the shores of an old America . . . to which we bring the spirit of a new America.

"We, from the battlegrounds of Europe, from the prisons of Baghdad, from the muddy tents of refugee camps, from the forests that are burning and the farm land that is parched, yes, *we* shall arrive in the New World not as Vikings, not as conquerors,

nor as missionaries. We shall arrive as people who would build not an empire, but a sanctuary.

“We shall arrive as teachers, bringing a new spirit into our classrooms. We shall arrive as entrepreneurs, putting the sun and the wind to work. We shall arrive as visionaries, who see so much that is *good* in all of us.”

A wave washed over Elisabeth’s shoe. The tide was rising.

“Perhaps, though I do not fully understand yet, we shall somehow sail to many parts of the world, bringing our refusal to fight any more. Bringing our refusal to plunder any more. Bringing, instead . . .” He gestured toward Elisabeth, inviting her to speak.

“Bringing instead,” she said with confidence to the gathering of spirits around her, “the beginnings of a renaissance. Bringing instead, belief in our bright and bold children. Bringing instead, the courage to place the world into *their* hands.”

A murmur rose from the spirits, a murmur of agreement.

“Perhaps,” said Elisabeth, “we shall reach a time when we no longer need trench warfare and poison gas. Perhaps we shall not need another siege of Leningrad. Perhaps we shall not need bombs which borrow their power from the sun. Perhaps we shall not need to bury the targeted members of a wedding party in a mountain village in Afghanistan.”

She swept her hand toward the dark fjord. “And perhaps as well, we shall not need the harpoon and factory ship. Perhaps we shall study more deeply this creation which embraces us.”

In a quickening breeze, the ship’s halyard rattled against the mast.

## Chapter 24

Elisabeth and Leif said good-bye to Bente and Bjørn, to Astrid and Johannes, the four of them already becoming spirits . . . as the spirits settling onto the benches aboard the ship became more real. Elisabeth's heart was breaking, but she had made her decision. Many before her had sailed from the shores of Norway for the shores of America. She would take what she could to this New Beginning.

She and Leif climbed the ladder that he had lashed together from driftwood, stepping from the beach to the top of the hull. Climbing over the gunnel, Elisabeth set her feet on the deck. Looking around, she spotted an empty bench near the bow. She walked up the center of the ship, between the twin sets of rowers' benches, to the empty bench on the starboard side. She sat facing the stern, ready to row.

In the stern, at the far end of the crowded boat, Leif stood beside the tiller, talking with an African soldier in camouflage.

Elisabeth looked over at the bench on the port side. The woman wearing a black robe and veil looked at Elisabeth. In her robe, she was darker than the night that gathered around her. Beside her sat the little girl in her yellow dress. The girl's cheek was healing well. She no longer stared in shock, but peered around the ship at the other passengers.

"Hello," called Elisabeth to the woman in the black robe. "I am Elisabeth." She tapped her fingers over her heart. "Elisabeth."

The little girl tapped her fingers over her heart. "Shahid."

Now the woman tapped her fingers over her heart. "Saara."

Elisabeth could tell from Saara's eyes that behind the veil, she was smiling.

Now Leif called from the tiller, "Welcome. We are forty-three on board, including ten children. We are a full crew of thirty-two at the oars. Once we are afloat, we shall row across the bay to the fjord. I shall guide us through the rocks. Out on the fjord, unless the wind has shifted, we shall row westward to the mouth of the fjord. Once we are out on open sea, we can hopefully find a wind from the southwest. With such a wind, we can unfurl the sail."

Elisabeth felt the ship shudder as a wave washed beneath it, lifting it slightly. A low, excited cry went up from the crew and passengers.

Leif explained, “Our first job is to ready the oars. Working together, we must distribute the thirty-two oars to the thirty-two rowers. Lay your oar across the gunnel at your bench, with the blade toward the side where it will swim. When the thirty-two oars lie parallel to each other, sixteen to a side, we will be ready for the next step.”

The thirty-two rowers, some of them with help from their children, lifted the thirty-two oars from the deck and passed them fore and aft. With much awkward banging, the rowers swung the oars perpendicular to the length of the ship, then laid them athwart the gunnels, sixteen blades to a side.

Leif called to his crew, “You will see in the gunnel beside you a hole for the shaft of the oar. Draw in your oar so that the blade comes over the oar-hole. You will see a notch cut at the edge of the oar-hole. The hole is narrower than the blade, so pass the blade through this notch.”

Elisabeth drew her oar to the right, while Saara and Shahid drew their oar to the left, until the two blades were inside the hull. Elisabeth fit her blade through the hole with its notch, then slid her oar to the left, so that the blade hovered over a foamy wave sweeping up the beach.

When all thirty-two oars were properly extended, Leif called to his crew, “Good work. We won’t be waiting long, I think.”

He jumped down in his moose-hide boots from the gunnel to the beach, then splashed through a wave reaching up the slope as he walked around the readied oars to the prow of the ship. He gave the bow a slap, as a man might slap the shoulder of his favorite horse, then he followed the line made of braided walrus hide to the pine tree where he had tied it a month ago. He loosened the three hitches, coiled the line as he walked toward the bow, then handed the coil to a soldier whom he had met in the cemetery in Normandy, a nineteen-year-old kid from Omaha.

Leif told him, “Thank you.”

The young man, who had been through two invasions already—in Africa and then in Italy—when machine gun fire ripped through his chest while he was wading knee-deep toward Omaha Beach, littered with bodies . . . the healthy young man now nodded with a grateful smile, “I thank *you*.”

Leif and the soldier hoisted themselves aboard. The soldier stowed the coil of line, then he sat on a bench and took hold of his oar. He was ready.

Leif took his place beside the tiller.

“*Farvel, Norge!*” he called to the mountains around him, jutting black beneath the stars. “*Mange takk!*”

Farewell, Norway. Many thanks.

Water lifted the stern of the ship. Elisabeth felt the water tugging at her oar. When the wave receded, setting the stern back down on the beach, she whispered to Shahid, “Maybe the next one.”

Leif looked from the stern toward the southeast: he could see the pale glow of the moon behind the mountains, though he could not yet see the moon itself. He looked up at the stars that would guide him across the sea this night.

“Thank you. With all of my heart, thank you.”

Now the sea reached beneath the ship and lifted it stern and prow from the beach. As the sea carried the ship stern-first into the bay, a small cheer went up from the passengers and crew.

“All right,” called Leif. “First we are going to *push* our way further out from shore. Ready your oars . . . and *push . . . push . . . push.*”

Banging the blades of their oars as they tried to get a grip on the water, the rowers, listening to Leif’s easy cadence, learned to lean back, dip the blade and then *push* the oar, all of them together, so that the ship—with a stern as pointed and sleek as the prow—glided smoothly away from shore, toward the open water of the bay and the fjord beyond it.

The moon peeked over a mountain, as if it would see the launching of this brave ship. While the rowers pushed and pushed with increasing synchrony in their arms and backs, Elisabeth watched the bright ivory disk grow larger as it slowly emerged from behind a mountain ridge . . . and set sail into the night sky.

Glancing at Shahid, she saw that the girl’s moonlit face was completely healed, and at peace.

As the ship sliced through the black rippling water of the bay into the black rolling water of the fjord, Leif called to his crew, “Good work.”

He raised his left hand over the rowers on that side of the ship. “All portside rowers, hold your oars.”

He raised his right hand. “All starboard rowers, keep rowing.”

The ship turned a long graceful curve to the left—toward the moon, then past the moon—so that the stern faced east, and the bow faced the mouth of the fjord, many kilometers to the west.

“All right. All rowers, hold your oars.”

Gliding straight, the ship quickly lost speed. Leif unlashd the big blade of the rudder, set the blade deep into the water, then gave the rudder a wag with his tiller. It was ready.

The captain called to the moonlit crew, “Now *pull* those oars . . . *pull* those oars . . . *pull* those oars.”

The long sleek ship glided forward over the black water with increasing speed as the thirty-two rowers pulled and lifted and swung their oars, pulled and lifted and swung, pulled and lifted and swung. Leif tillered lightly. He would tiller through the angles of the fjord, and he would tiller in a dance with the wind when the sail was unfurled on the open sea.

As he looked now upon the faces of the rowers, and the faces of the children, and the precious face of the woman—rowing steadily with all of the others—who had chosen to come with him, he hoped that what they together would bring to this New Beginning . . . would be worthy of the gift they had been given tonight.

## Chapter 25

Elisabeth rowed with surprising strength, sweeping her oar so smoothly that only rarely did she bump the oar in front of her, or the oar behind her. The black water swirled with a moonlit sheen where the thirty-two oars dipped . . . and dipped . . . and dipped.

About halfway to the mouth of the fjord—as Orion and his bright-eyed hound came striding and bounding behind the moon across the southern sky—Elisabeth heard singing in the distance. Peering into the night, she spotted another Viking ship, just emerging from an arm of the fjord. Yes, the crew on that ship was singing; perhaps the song was Polish, perhaps Russian.

By the time Leif's ship approached the mouth of the fjord, it was one of seven Viking ships in a small fleet, each one crewed by people from many cemeteries in many lands.

Each one crewed by people who had watched as drought had withered the corn and parched the soil.

Each one crewed by people who had watched a great river become a trough of mud.

When Leif's rowers propelled their ship from the shelter of the slender fjord out to the winds of the open sea, the hull began to roll and bob.

"All right. Good work," called the captain. "Stow your oars."

The oars were pulled onboard; the blades slid once more through the slotted holes. The oars were laid lengthwise along the deck, then lashed to cleats.

Without needing anymore to explain each maneuver, Leif called out to his crew, "Hoist the sail! Set the spar to the portside clew!"

Several men jumped to the task. They unwound a line that spiraled around the furlled wool sail, binding it tight, so the wind could not catch the sail too soon; this line they loosened and removed. They uncleated the halyard, then two men hauled arm over arm. The dark square sail rose among the stars.

A man attached one end of a long slender wooden spar to the lower left corner of the sail, then he secured the other end of the spar to the port gunnel, so that the sail reached forward and caught the steady wind.

Lines from the yard supporting the top of the sail were cleated to the stern gunnel, to brace the upper corners of the sail. The starboard clew was cleated aft of the mast. Catching moonlight in its belly, the sail brought the hull to the speed it was built for. The Viking ship cut through the waves at full gallop.

“Good work!” called the captain. He listened to the water racing along his hull. He felt the deck lean and roll beneath his feet. The month on land had been good, but he could have whooped out loud to be back at sea.

As the ship sailed westward away from the coastline, Elisabeth looked to the south, then to the north: she could see, as if she were the moon peering down, a great number of ships hoisting their sails. Every fjord along the coast of Norway was delivering a small fleet of Viking ships, crewed by people who were tired of war, tired of ancient hatreds, tired of tattered flags, tired of allegiances to this or that God, while creation itself was dying.

Now Elisabeth could hear someone on her own ship singing. She searched among the moonlit crew—they were resting now, while the wind did the work—until she spotted a woman seated amidships, singing with a bright and joyous voice. The man seated beside her began to sing with equal joy. Others fore and aft in the rolling hull joined in, and now Elisabeth heard Leif’s voice singing what she understood to be—for she was singing now as well—an Afghan wedding song.

She understood that this fleet of hundreds of Viking ships, launched from the protective fjords this night, would sail westward while the moon arched westward, gaining on them. The moon would set in the west over the New World, while the sun rose in the east over the sea, enabling the emigrants to discern beyond their bows . . . the coastline of the old America, today’s America in these beleaguered times.

Within ten years, after she and her crew had stepped ashore—after the crews and passengers of hundreds of Viking ships had stepped ashore—people, especially young people, would look back upon America today as the last vestige of the Dark Ages.

The voyage of the Viking ships would be a journey of one night; their arrival would launch a journey through the twenty-first century.

The ships were free to explore the coastline of the New World. Some would look for rivers that reached deep into the land; some would look for protected ports. Some might anchor as far north as Newfoundland; some might anchor as far south as Brazil.

Elisabeth understood that many more ships would emerge from the fjords of Norway tonight. Some would sail south past the western coast of Europe, then veer east through the mouth of the Mediterranean, where they would seek the shores of countries where peoples had long battled with other peoples over ancient hatreds, ancient grievances. Some of these Viking ships would shove their prows onto the beaches of Tel Aviv, onto the beaches of Gaza.

Elisabeth understood, as if she were the moon peering down, that some of the Viking ships which would emerge through the night from the fjords of Norway . . . some of them would sail around the curve of the Earth to even more distant ports. Some would arrive at dawn in the busy harbors along the coastline of China. Some would arrive in the harbors of Burma, and Thailand, and Cambodia, and Viet Nam.

Viking ships would sail south along the coast of Norway, then they would hook east into the Baltic Sea, and the Gulf of Finland, until they sailed on the Neva River through the heart of Leningrad—now Saint Petersburg—where they would moor broadside to the granite embankments. And where—by people who knew deep in their hearts, deep in their souls, about the reality of war—they would be welcomed.

Viking ships would sail north along the coast of Norway, then they would hook east and sail over the top of Norway into the Barents Sea, and to the White Sea, and to the mouth of the Northern Dvina River, where they would moor broadside to the ferry wharf in Arkhangelsk. Where they would be welcomed.

In many places around the world, the passengers and the crews of Viking ships would become teachers, so that the young people in schools could learn to speak well, when one day they spoke in the growing number of Parliaments.

The Creator had told Leif the destination of his voyage tonight. Leif had told Elisabeth, and she, after much hesitation, had finally agreed.

She had read about a long green island, centuries ago, an island sheltered behind a much larger island, where a great river poured into the sea: a perfect harbor.

People who arrived in ships, centuries ago, started farms on the southern tip of that long green island, growing corn and beans and squash—as they had been taught by the people already living there—to grace the table beside platters of venison and salmon and grouse.

On that island today, skyscrapers stood along busy boulevards. Elisabeth wanted the people who worked in those buildings to treasure in their hearts what the emigrants

brought in their battered hearts tonight . . . from the battlefields and the prisons, from the gulags, and the chains of chattel slavery.

She wanted a different answer to the question, “Where did you come from, America?”

Now Elisabeth could hear singing from a nearby ship. Her Norwegian ears immediately recognized a Sami *yoik*, a song which a herder would sing to his reindeer as they crossed the frozen tundra. Never had the Sami plundered their reindeer to extinction. Let the whales know, thought Elisabeth, let the buffalo know, let the cod and the salmon, let even the turtles know, that the Sami are coming as keepers of this new America.

Leif called from the stern to Elisabeth in the bow, “Elisabeth, come join me.”

Elisabeth looked at Shahid, asleep in her mother’s lap. She reached out and held Saara’s extended hand.

Then she stepped carefully along the deck toward the stern of the rolling ship, greeting passengers to her right and left along the way, until she stood beside her Viking in his old woolen shirt and walrus trousers, and his moose-hide boots.

“Ah,” he said. “The bride has come to steal a moment with the groom.”

“It was the groom,” she replied, “who beckoned.”

He watched the sea, he watched the sail, he watched the lines. He watched the other ships sailing beside him in the near and far distance. Looking up, he watched the stars.

“Elisabeth, I shall miss your family.”

“Oh, we shall see them again, when the world is a better place.”

“Ah. And meanwhile, for this first generation anyway, I have you.”

“Yes,” she said, “this first and most extraordinary generation.”

She faced him now, her feet spread on the rolling deck, her hands on his strong shoulders, then she rose onto her toes in her moose-hide boots and kissed his briny lips.

His one hand on the tiller, he wrapped his other arm around her and squeezed her with all his Viking strength.

Then she turned and faced forward, leaning against his chest while he wrapped his arm lovingly around her . . . and steered toward the land where the Creators awaited a new beginning.