The Falcon

Formáli til Valsins [1]

This story is about a Danish Viking raiding party which sets out in a Viking Longship called *The Valsins* (*'The Falcon').* It is the Spring of 795 AD. *Thisted* is a small fjord-side settlement of about 200 people living in turf-roofed longhouses clustered around a high shingle beach, with wheat and barley fields and sheep and cattle on the heathland beyond. *Thisted* is located in Jutland, the remote scattering of islands West of North of the Danish mainland.

Twenty-three fishing boats ride at anchor in the safety of *Limfirðavík (*Limfjord Bay), but have been prevented from fishing in the open sea for many months. Fishing catches are their main source of income. Facing starvation and ruin, the population has been reduced to rationing.

Urgent Action is required.

A new Viking Longboat is commissioned, to take a raiding party of Danish Vikings from *Thisted* on a second raid back to *Lindisfarena* (Lindisfarne) on the North Coast of England to steal precious objects from its Abbey Church.

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Mael Dúib (Murdo the dark-haired one) had been captured twenty years earlier in a raid along the Scottish coast. The Vikings had been repulsed during several attempted landings, eventually returning with only a few lengths of newish fishing rope and some serviceable nets taken from a boat which Murdo had been repairing when they boarded it. The other five men aboard had fought back and were killed. Murdo was lucky - he was high in the rigging when the Vikings attacked.

To the Captain of the Longship, the silent Murdo looked like a strong young man he could use as a slave to plough his fields and tend his cows. The Vikings spoke Old Norse: Murdo spoke in his local Fife dialect of Old Scots. Back then, the Vikings did not know Murdo was a skilled shipwright, a man good with his hands with a clear and thoughtful mind.

Soon after the Scot's arrival in *Thisted*, the *hersaraþing* (Council of Leaders) had forced the handsome young Murdo into a marriage to Alfhild Toke-dóttir, an eighteen-year-old orphan girl whose parents had recently died when their home was swept away in a landslip. Alfhild was a feisty, blunt speaking girl and the local men of marriageable age had

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Formáli til Valsins: Old Norse, means ' Prologue to *The Falcon* '

steered clear of her. Unstated, the main idea behind the *hersaraþing* plan was that their daughters would be safe from Murdo the Scot. Nobody wanted the Incomer as a son-in-law, believing he would cause them trouble.

This forced marriage turned out to be a wise move. As Alfhild and Murdo got used to each other, they learned to make a good marriage, living in a new turf-house Murdo built for them on a safe, flat but exposed site no one else wanted, located at a fair distance from other houses so his neighbours.

Despite their initial language problems, Murdo the Scot had quickly established himself and over the years which followed, most of *Thisten's* current fishing fleet had been built or repaired by Murdo and his small team of apprentices.

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Although Murdo the Scot had never built a Viking Longboat, he studied the rotting hull of the previous Longboat lying on the shore and took advice from the men who owned the fishing boats he built and repaired. After making several detailed sketches, he set about his task with enthusiasm and diligence. He was assisted by his three best apprentices - his son Angus, Sveinn Ásbjarnarson and Astrid, the odd, outspoken girl who was full of good ideas and quick and clever with her hands.

After a few false starts (his first two Longships foundered and sank in stormy seas), Murdo and his small team of teenagers kept going and eventually built *The Falcon*.

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Thisted

The Winter period prior to Spring 795 AD had been harsh with repeated gales making fishing hazardous. The heavy rains and high winds had limited the preparations for spring sowings of the crops essential to replenish the stores needed to sustain the *garth* of Thisted (isolated settlement) through the year ahead. Rationing had been imposed and animals culled while they were still plump enough to provide meat for smoking.

Tyrkæl Thyrsson (known as Tyrk) sat opposite his wife Thyra and his fifteen-year-old daughter Astrid, staring into the meagre fire of damp brushwood which filled the room with dense smoke, stinging his eyes. His right arm was missing, lost in a raid to the North coast of England fifteen years earlier (780 AD).

'What are we to do, Thyra?'

'You need to send out a raiding party. If we can get some valuables, we can trade them for food. Our new Longship is ready. Murdo the Scot has been working on it over the Winter. It can carry fifty men, if we can get them.'

'Yes, but will it sink like the previous two he built?'

'No father, *Valrinn (The Falcon)* is completely sound,' said Astrid, an assertive girl, bright, quick-minded and always sure of herself.

'We have been taking her out into the storms over the last few weeks and her hull has proved to be watertight. And we are using a new idea, a cover raised above the *ripr bords* (gunwhale strakes) and raised along the mid-line to shed water in heavy weather.'

'And how do *you* know so much about this?'

'Because I made the tent-covers out of sheepskins sewn together, making them waterproof with seal fat. Surely you must have noticed the smell from my clothes?'

'***Astrid*, that's quite enough!** Do not give cheek to your father or I'll tan your backside. Go and milk the cow and muck out its shed.'

Astrid ignored her mother, persisting:

'Honestly father, it is brilliant and it really works. I went with them in a storm to check the seams and the side fastenings so I know it's almost completely watertight. They bind the oars together to make *tjaldstǫng* (tent supports) then drape the covers across from side to side to make a sort of *tjald* (overlapping tent-covers). Under the covers, out of the wind and rain, it was so much warmer and nearly dry, even in the highest waves.'

'Where did Murdo dream up that idea?'

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'It was my idea, all mine. Angus helped me. We made a model longship and tried it out with that first, just the two of us.'

'Did you go out in that model longship? In a storm?'

'Yes, Angus is grown up, no longer a child. He's almost eighteen. He's been repairing our fishing fleet for nearly ten years, maybe more. It was perfectly safe, honest.'

'Astrid, stay away from that boy Angus, I've heard tales about him,' said Tyrk.

'Father, these horrible stories are just not true. They're lies put about by Erik Bjarnason and his sister Hildr. We all know Erik is as dense as a block of wood but Hildr is a *fala* (an evil witch). She feeds him the stories, claiming all sort of things. She is completely out of control since her mother died last year and of course her father Gunnarr can't see it. He thinks she's wonderful and that Erik's a *snjallr* (genius) when in fact he is a *glópr* (dolt).

'Tyrk, Astrid's right, that Hildr one is a troublemaker,' said Thyra. 'So, will you call a meeting at *Tyrkæl Sarl* (Meeting House) and ask for volunteers? I suppose it will have to be Gunnarr Bjarnason who will be in charge?'

'Yes, he's the obvious choice but I'll send Thorstein Harstyrkr as his *Skipsdróttinn* [2] .

If only my brother Toke [3] had made it back from that raid. I expect they tortured him then crucified him but maybe he is still alive, forced to be a *þræll* (enslaved field worker, wearing heavy chains and dragging a stone everywhere he goes). I have bad dreams about him. They make my missing arm ache.'

'Please Tyrk, leave it be. Toke is dead and we must accept it.'

'Father, send Angus as Thorstein deputy. He knows how to rig the *tjaldstǫng* and the *tjald* and can make any repairs to *The Falcon* if she suffers damage.'

'Why not Murdo himself?'

'Father, have you forgotten that Murdo has a 'slow heart' nowadays. It has to be Angus because even though he is smaller, he's smart and wiry and can fight with speed and

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Harstyrkr is Norse for Tall and Strong.
Skipsdróttinn means Shipsmaster (Helmsman)

3

Toke, younger brother of Tyrkæl Thyrsson, was the side-man for Gunnarr Bjarnason during the 780 AD raid when Tyrk lost his arm. Tyrk was being carried to their Longship unconscious when Toke went missing. There had been a strong rumour that Gunnarr Bjarnason had ran for his life, refusing to stop to rescue Toke.

cunning. Did you know Angus beat all the other *drengir* (young hopefuls) in the *Valkeppni* last week? [4] He won every round and even beat Erik Bjarnason who is even bigger than Thorstein. Being big can be a disadvantage. Big people are often slower in a fight.'

Then Astrid was off, running, probably to tell Angus the news that he was to go on the raid.

'Thyra, Astrid reminds me so much of Toke. Same impulsive and defiant will and the same quick inventive mind. I still miss him.'

'Tyrk, you must not blame yourself. Toke's gone, dead. He died a Viking death. We should remember him with pride, not sadness.'

[4]

The *Valkeppni* (selection contest) was fought using the simpler version of the *blýfyllt klubba* (lead-filled truncheon). Fighting using the simpler un-weighted version was less dangerous. Blows to the head were not permitted, otherwise apart from this rule, anything was allowed and 'hits' when landed on hands and feet were still painful. The first to reach 'ten good hits' won that round. The match was fought over ten rounds.

What Astrid did not reveal was that in a private contest, she had repeatedly defeated Angus due to her fast reactions and fierce strikes.

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Sigrblót [5]

Inside the *Tyrkæl's Sarl* (Meeting House) the air is thick with competing smells of roasted meats, spilt ales, honeyed mead and fruit wines mingled with reek from sweaty bodies and clothing not washed or changed in weeks.

After the feast, a steady rhythm from lyres, horns, flutes, pipes and hand drums strikes up. The musicians are mainly wives, sweethearts and older men. It is the younger men who dance, displaying themselves. Voices rise in chants to the gods and a loose circle forms around the long central hearth. Men's feet are stamping out of step but in time they become synchronised with the musicians' beat and are joined by the clapping hands of the women and children.

Under the influence of alcohol, younger men and early teenagers leap and cartwheel across the glowing embers, singeing their long hair, adding this reek to the stench. There is a short pause as a round of drinks is downed and the crowd eases back from the hearth as mock fights and drunken wrestling matches start, egged on by laughing wives and sweethearts. On the outer edge of the gathering beside the external walls children play tag, forcing their way between the legs of their parents and neighbours and tripping over dogs stealing food scraps from discarded wooden platters.

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Almost out of hearing, near the harbour where *The Falcon* is moored, Angus and Astrid stand in a tackle hut out of the rising wind, its door secured shut with tied cords. It is one of several places they use. They hug and kiss, slipping hands inside layers of clothing to give pleasure and relief. They have been a secret *festuð hjón* (betrothed pair) for over a year, meeting whenever they can, usually late in the evenings when others are asleep.

Astrid, who takes after her parents, is tall and lithe with a strong face, creamy golden skin, a long thin aquiline nose and bright, sky blue eyes. In recent months her body has been changing making her breasts more prominent and sensitive, sometimes weeping with secretions. She has changed from a girl to a woman, feeling flushes of desire bubbling through her body, filling her mind with lewd thoughts.

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[5] *Sigrblót* is 'victory sacrifice', held in mid-April, to secure success in war, raids, and the summer's work.

After her recent growth spurt, she is slightly taller than Angus whose face is heavily freckled under his full reddish-brown beard. He has grey-green eyes which are often dreamy, hard to read, his thoughtful mind working constantly, planning ahead, dwelling on problems, looking for 'best solutions', a trait learned from his father.

Unseen, below his clothes, he has a slight but strongly muscled body, thickly covered with bristled hair which matches his beard. As an early teenager he was given the nickname *Bersi* (little bear) by his swimming companions or, on occasion called *hnýðingr* (porpoise) for his speed and underwater endurance.

'Angus, are you afraid to go on the raiding party?'

'No, just apprehensive.'

'This is about Erik? You think he might try to kill you when he gets the chance, for revenge.'

'That's the rumour, yes.'

'But with so many eyes watching you both, how could it happen.'

'Probably during a big storm, when most accidents happen.'

'I don't think he is smart enough to get away with it, do you?'

'No, but even if Erik gets caught, a blow to the head with a spar could still kill me.'

'What you need is *a Launsóttar-vörðr* (a back-minder), an extra pair of eyes watching Erik all the time.'

'Look Astrid, we should just leave it, please. I'm probably just wound up, because of this.'

He passed her a blood-soaked note.

'I found it in my pocket wrapped around a dead mouse.'

'When?'

'A hour ago, when I went out to pee. I went into my pocket for my damp cloth, to wipe my hands and it was already there. I couldn't figure what it was at first then, when I found a lantern and read it . . ..'

Astrid scanned the crumpled paper.

'It's been written by Hildr?'

'Probably, but we thought she could not read or write because of her jumpy eyes.'

'She might have paid someone to write it for her. She can afford it, now she has charge of her mother's purse.'

'Obviously I can't show it to Gunnarr, he would laugh it off and say it was another of my stories.'

'We could show it to Thorstein, he's a smart guy, he would catch on and make sure Erik and you are kept well apart, yes?'

'No, I don't want Thorstein babying me so please, Astrid, just leave it. These are just words, whoever wrote them. I don't think Erik would risk it. Killing a shipmate is punishable by death. Death by hanging from the mast. After three days the corpse is dragged behind as food for the *Vagnhvalr* (Orca, killer whale).'

'Which means an ignominious death and no chance of reaching *Valhǫll* (Hall of the Slain).'

'You're right Astrid, Erik the Dolt would never risk that fate. Never.'

In the distance there was a clamour of voices as the festivities came to an end.

'Angus, you slip out and mingle. When it quietens down, I'll go back up to *Tyrkæl's Sarl* and help with the tidy up.'

'Yes, but just one last *kyssa til farar* (a blessing kiss for the journey ahead).'

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Far-heill

It seemed as if the entire community of Thisted was gathered by the harbour for the *Far-heil* (ceremonial departure, well wishing). Their mood was subdued. The youngest children were wrapped in their mothers' coats against the rising wind carrying spits of rain from the West. Some were chanting songs quietly, others talking in whispers, reassuring each other that *The Falcon's* mission would be a success. Some said the raiders would return within a month, others thought two months at most.

On board *The Falcon*, the crew stood in silence, their oars vertical and the *hólmenn* (sail-handlers) ready to drop the sail when they were clear of the shoals which guarded the entrance to their long narrow inlet. There was a single oarsmen missing, Erik Bjarnason.

> *'Just like the Hálfviti! (*half-wit*) we all know,'* one of the others whispered. *'He thinks he's better than us and will tag along with his father, strutting like a cockerel, just wait and see.'*

A cry went up, greeting Gunnarr Bjarnason who strode down the hill from his house. There was no sign of Erik or Hildr.

'Gunnarr leapt aboard, stood beside Thorstein at the stern, resting his hand on the huge tiller and boomed out:

'***My son Erik has the shits and a fever. It is bad, Hildr is tending him*** [6]***. As you know, she is clever with herbs and potions. But, no matter, we must sail at once, as tradition demands that we do not delay.***'

Beside him Thorstein whispered, *'Pick Sveinn Ásbjarnarson, he's reliable and durable, even though he's smaller, he has the strength of an ox and he is one of Murdo's apprentices at the boat yard. '*

Gunnarr pointed his short fighting sword at Sveinn:

'Come, Son of Ásbjarnar, take the last oar and bring honour on your *frændi* (kith and kin).

Turning to his older sister *Sigríðr,* who with her mother ran the best bake-house in Thisted. They pair hugged and she whispered into his ear:

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With his agreement, Hildr had given Erik a draught of a potent mix of herbs to induce his condition. She had lost her mother and did not wish to lose her twin brother. Now, with their father gone, they could sleep together without fear of discovery.

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'Sveinn, come back safely to us. Think of our Father who was lost on the *Lindisfarena* raid. Be brave and make Mother and I proud.'

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Hidden in the large Bow locker of *The Falcon,* Astrid's mind was thrumming with excitement. She had been onboard since midnight and had used a cord to secure the removeable flap which sealed the locker from the working area of the longship, making her safe from the feet of the oarsmen.

Inside her thick oiled sea-blanket she had a leather bag with food scraps, leftovers from the feast and a second nozzle-bag of fresh water which she had sipped at warily, to avoid overloading her bladder. Her plan was to remain hidden for at least a day, maybe longer. She would say she was on board to make sure the new tent-covers were maintained properly to ensure the vessel did not sink. Her real reason was to act as a *Launsóttar-vörðr* (a back-minder) for Angus, to protect him from an attack from Erik.

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At their home on the hillock above them, Murdo the Scot and his wife Alfhild stood at their door well-wrapped against the rising wind.

It was obvious another storm was coming in from the South-West but Murdo was confident his latest Longship would survive even the fiercest of gales. The addition of side and forward lockers and the reinforced stern space had added both longitudinal and lateral strength, making her more resistant to the twisting forces which had affected the previous two versions causing leaks which, added to the waves shipped over the gunwales had caused them to flounder. Fortunately, with a small fleet of fishing boats on hand as escorts, there had been no loss of life, just disappointment and recriminations.

The couple could see their son Angus at the Bow, the least popular rowing position because of the wave splash when heading into the wind. To his left was Sveinn Ásbjarnarson, his side-man, the replacement for Erik. The two young men were like brothers, with similar temperaments and fiercely loyal to each other and to Astrid Thyrsson, the strange girl with the clever mind, a young girl many feared because of her psychic powers. She also had a reputation as a healer and was much in demand at *fæðingar* (birthings), using her odd whistle to calm mothers and ease the passage of their infants into the world.

From the entrance of *Tyrkæl's Sarl,* Tyrk and Thyra were scanning the assembly, looking for their daughter Astrid. She had not returned home after the clean-up the previous evening. They were not worried, they had assumed she was staying with one of the other girls, chattering through the night as teenagers do. However, they had expected to see her now, knowing how proud she was of her contribution to the new, improved Longship.

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'Tyrk, where can she be? She would not miss the *útferð liðsins* (departure of the raiders), would she?'

'No, she'll have gone along the shore out to the point to wave to them and watch how *The Falcon* copes in the open sea. She'll watch until it's out of sight and come home when the fishing boats return.'

'Do you think the fishing boats will go into the open sea in weather like this?'

'They're going as an escort, not to fish. A guard of honour.'

'Oh, yes, of course. But why leave in a storm, why not delay the departure until the storm blows through?'

'Never. This storm will last for weeks. Either *The Falcon* makes it or she doesn't. We must hope for the best.'

'Tyrk, I'm glad we have no sons. I would hate one of mine to be on that raid. Hate it.'

'Thyra, don't let anyone hear you say those words. Never, ever repeat them.'

They watched in silence until *The Falcon*, now driving forward under sail alone with her tent-covers rigged, disappears into a bank of driving rain. Only when the escort boats had all safely returned to harbour did the people of Thisted make their way to their homes.

The Falcon

Stórviðrit

The Falcon was racing ahead at the speed of a running deer, driven by *Stórviðrit* (The Great Storm).

Thorstein, clad in oiled clothing against the driving rain, stood on the stern platform, his legs apart, his *þéttir hjartaskinnsskór* (tightfitting deerskin waterproof boots) held in a *Táþvengr* [7] (an adjustable toe-strap) which spanned the steering platform to give his body stability.

Standing like a statue of stone, he held the long tiller in a grip of iron, leaning when needed to keep *The Falcon* stable as she climbed Bow first into an approaching roller. In the dim light all that could be seen was a steep wall of dark green water, blocking the low darkening clouds on the horizon.

They had left Thisted an hour after dawn and for ten hours he had fought the storm, pleased to know that his new vessel was coping but unwilling to share the responsibility with *Hrolleifr inn mikl* (Hrollf the Great) his first deputy steersman, his *trúnaðarvinr Þórsteins* (most trusted man), the tallest and strongest crewman aboard, a lefthander who fought at Thorstein's shield-side during battles. While waiting to take over, Horllf's duty was to monitor their *Sveinssteinn* [8].

Over the past hour Thorstein had become uneasy, sensing there was something strange happening, made more ominous as the last of the meagre daylight faded.

His answer came when Hrollf shoved his head out from under the rearmost tent-cover and shouted:

'Thorstein, the wind has shifted, we are running North!'

The wind was rising to a scream. The sail was flapping loose, out of control, in danger of being shredded.

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The *Táþvengr* was another idea from Astrid, allowing footholds to be created by inserting locking pins into slots to create a series of footholds.

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Sveinssteinn: a thin fish-shaped stone (also called a *flatfisksteinn*), a precious Thisted heirloom, found many years earlier on the shore by a boy called Svenn who brought it home as a decoration, hanging it above the door at the entrance to his turf house. His father noticed it always pointed to North to the *leiðarstjarna* (the Guiding Star or Pole Star). From that time onwards if was used by Thisten Longships when making voyages in open seas, out of sight of land.

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Thorstein shouted to Hrollf to get the riggers to furl the sail, adding:

'We'll go on a bare mast and hope we don't run into anything. Pass the word to Angus to rig a vatnþétt tólgarljós (waterproof tallow lantern) so I can see the bow then get up here with me and we'll try to keep her on a straight run.'

There was no need to add that if the Longship skewed and was hit broadside by the following waves, they would be finished.

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Angus was having difficulty opening the bow hatch to access the lantern, muttering:

'Come on! Open you bugger, OPEN!'

Astrid loosed the cord and the flap sprang open. She handed him the lantern and immediately reached out to close the flap and reseal it. Fortunately this encounter went unnoticed as most of the crew were trying to get some sleep, curled inside oiled sea-blankets.

Angus only caught a glimpse of her anxious face but realised at once she had stowed away to act as his back-minder!

How would the crew react to her presence, he wondered.

The *Eflat* (ember pan) was passed forwards and the teenager used a splinter to light the tallow lantern, tied it to a long pole then raised it high above the Bow. He was puzzled why the ember was so small and added a piece of charcoal to the pan then blew on it until it too was glowing. He then sealed the *Eflat's* finely perforated lid and passed it aft to the centre of the longship where it was house inside a water-proof container, secured to the base of the mast, generally considered as the strongest and most stable area of the longship where hot food was prepared - but only in calm weather because of the risk of fire.

> *Unknown to Angus, Sjóðr Hrafnsmiðr, the man responsible for The Falcon's food stores and preparation of hot food when cooking was permitted, had not survived the storm unscathed. He was the chief sail-rigger and because he was small and the weakest man on board, he was the general dogsbody. In fair weather he moved around the longship, tidying up, emptying the shit-pots and checking for damage.*
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> *At the height of the storm Sjóðr he had fallen badly, breaking both wrists, becoming a serious burden rather than an asset. A proud man, he responded to his predicament by wedging his sword against the base of the mast then lowered himself onto its point, piercing his heart, found dead when he did not respond to the request for the Eflat to be passed forward to Angus.*

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The word of his suicide spread like wildfire. It was considered unlucky to keep a dead man aboard or to raise his name in conversation during the remainder of their voyage. Two of the nearest men wrapped him in an old piece of sailcloth, weighted it with stones kept aside for this purpose and eased him overboard.

The corpse was whipped away, plummeting to the depths.

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Mikil-þoka

As the first rays of dawn crept across the Eastern sky, the storm began to ease. Over the next hour the wind dropped to a stiff breeze but still strong enough to keep driving them North.

The sail was unfurled. Thorstein leaned into the tiller and changed course, now heading West towards the distant coast of *Norðymbralandið er ríkt í kirkjum* (North Lands rich in Churches).

The wind dropped further. The rain became a drizzle forming a *Mikil-þoka (*thick mist sea fog*)*. From the Stern the Bow was now invisible.

Hrollf now had the rudder. Kneeling on the lower platform at Hrollf's feet, Stiener Trémaðr, another huge man, monitored the *Sveinssteinn* and called corrections up to Hrollf. Stiener was Hrollf's cousin and second deputy steersman.

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Gunnarr and Thorstein faced each other, kneeling on the lowered area below the steering platform, a part of the longship reserved for Gunnarr, Thorstein and his two deputies, an area normally out of bounds to other members of the crew.

'So, Thorstein, do you think we have seen the back end of the *Stórviðrit* (great storm)?'

'My bones tell me this is a lull, that it will be back again soon.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes. And more bad news. Sjóðr Hrafnsmiðr has fallen and broken both wrists. He did his duty as a true Norseman. He has been disposed of in the usual way.'

Thorstein continued, 'I've put Sveinn Ásbjarnarson in charge of clearing out the *gangr-kop* (shit-pots), he has to learn to do the rough jobs just like any other youngster.

Thorstein added, 'The Ásbjarnarson boy can take over Sjóðr's duties when he's not rowing. As we speak he is helping Angus to check the tent-cover fastenings and renew them as required. Without those tent-covers we would not be here. Did you know it was Astrid who dreamt it up?'

'***That's a lie! Hildr said it was Erik's idea, that Astrid stole it from him.'***

Thorstein looked down, closed his eyes and yawned.

'Right, I'll hunker down in here under the stern platform. Rouse me if you need me.'

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The shallow void below the stern platform was where steersmen who were off duty slept to be always on hand for emergencies.

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The checks on the hull were complete. Everything was sound and in good order.

When Angus had held the lantern into the Bow locker, Astrid was out of sight, curled in a U-shape inside her two oiled blankets. She whispered to Angus that she had checked every part of the inner hull with her hands and that her hideout was entirely dry.

She passed him a small leather bag of her urine which he emptied into the nearest shit-pot and returned it to her. There was no opportunity for further discussion and she pulled the Bow flap closed and re-sealed herself inside.

The tent-cover sections and their fasteners had been check and a few cords replaced but the arrangement had worked and the crew knew from previous experience that Astrid's idea had saved them: without the tent-covers, they would have surely drowned.

The oarsmen gradually increased their stroke, pleased to be able to head West at last.

The Falcon

Róa á grunn

With the wind gone, the sail had been slowing progress and Hrollf ordered it to be furled. Peering into the thick mist he worried that he could not even see the Bow but he was under orders to make maximum speed and kept up the pace, tapping his foot gently and calling out the stroke at every fifth pull of the oars.

Hrollf checked the wake which creamed behind in what looked like a straight line then checked by calling down to Stiener to keep a close eye on the *Sveinssteinn.*

An hour later, disaster struck.

Without warning *The Falcon* shuddered to a halt with a loud scraping noise. In the thick mist-fog , the Longship had *Róa á grunn* (grounded), stuck fast on a hidden shoal.

Angus was the first to react. Lifting his oar from its iron rowing pin, he stowed it, stripped off his clothes, laying his *blýfyllt klubba* (lead-filled truncheon) on top. Grabbing a long length of cord he fastened the ship end to the rowing pin, formed a loop and passed it over his head and under his left arm then slipped into the icy water to inspect the damage.

Thorstein took charge of the helm and order the oarsmen to pull astern, insisting they do so gently.

After an age, Angus surfaced and called aft to Thorstein:

'Stop pulling astern, it could make the damage worse. We need to find someplace to land and carry out a repair. Hold steady as you are and I'll swim ahead and try to find a landing place.'

He swam off into the gloom.

In the Bow locker Astrid was sodden from the inrush of icy cold water. She had no choice.

Resting with their oar handles tucked under their knees, the crew were looking forwards over their shoulders in the direction Angus had taken when the girl emerged from the locker and stood upright, her eyes anxious, scanning their faces.

Word was passed aft, whispered from man to man, fearing Gunnarr's reaction, knowing he did not like Astrid and that he was strongly opposed to women being aboard any ship, particularly not his Longship.

When the news reached Stiener Hrolff, he knew he had no choice:

'Captain, we have a stowaway, Astrid Thyrsson has been hiding in the Bow locker.'

Gunnarr Bjarnason was speechless, shaking his head, wondering if he had misheard.

Thorstein took his opportunity:

'Send her aft at once.'

The girl appeared before them wet and shivering, wrapped in a dry oiled sea-blanket given to her by Sveinn Ásbjarnarson.

She stood up onto the lower platform, directly in front of Gunnar and Thorstein who were above her on the steering platform.

Before Gunnarr could react, Astrid took her chance and launched into an explanation.

'Captain, I came aboard in secret. I wanted to be available to mend the tent-covers if required. I made them, as most of you know.'

Raising his short sword above his head Gunnarr Bjarnason spluttered:

'Helvítis vítka!' (Witch from Hell).

Aimed at her centre of her head, the sword came scything down. Astrid leapt backwards and ducking to her left while smashing Angus's *blýfyllt klubba* down on Gunnarr's right foot.

Howling in agony Gunnar hopped backwards.

His left heel caught the steersman's toe-strap.

Falling heavily, his head hit one of the stern oar-spikes [9].

In one long mournful sigh, Gunnarr Bjarnason's death rattle filled the stunned silence.

He lay still, his head impaled on the spike.

Thorstein leaned over him, checking for a pulse.

He turned to face the crew and said in a firm voice:

'Captain Gunnarr Bjarnason is dead. He fell backwards and his head was impaled on an oar-spike. I, Thorstein Harstyrkr will be your Captain for the rest of our mission. Sail-riggers, come aft and deal with his body. At the first opportunity we shall bury him ashore.'

Every man stood and shouted:

9

One of a group of stern oar-spikes used for close manoeuvring with a pair of oars when coming alongside rocky shores or creeping along narrow, shallow fiords.

'Heill Þórsteinn! Lifi hann langan aldr!'

(Hail Thorstein! May he live long!)

When the cheering died down, the men began to talk quietly amongst themselves, passing the story forwards of what had happened and saying to each other that they were glad to be free of Gunnarr Bjarnason and his irrational and vicious ways, adding that the girl Astrid had done well to stand up to him, the first ever person to do so.

The Falcon

Fjöru-grjót

They waited for Angus to return, noticing the mist was clearing a little and the breeze was rising.

The cord attached to the Bow oar-spike began to move up and down violently as Angus's voice called out of the gloom:

'I have secured this end and will return to The Falcon now, pulling myself on this cord to guide me.'

A few minutes later he climbed aboard and wound an oiled sea-blanket around his naked hairy body.

In a jumbled rush, the forward oarsmen brought him up to date with the news of Gunnarr's attack on Astrid and the brute's death caused by his trip and fall, stressing that Astrid was not to blame.

Angus called through the mist to the Stern.

'Captain Thorstein, permission to come aft to give my report.'

'Stay, Angus, I'll come to you.'

More quietly he said, 'Astrid, come with me, *Genta* (lassie).'

As they made their way forward the oarsmen said quietly:

'Well done, lassie.'

'Aye, you're a right good one, just like your father before you.'

'You've done us all a favour, lassie. The man was a brute.'

'This will be a happier voyage now, that's for certain sure.'

00000

Peering over the Bow into the murky water, the little group could just make out the narrow cleft of rock *The Falcon* was stuck fast on.

'Angus, just how bad is it?', asked Thorstein.

'Captain, we are about a five-minute gentle row from the shore where there is a sheltered *fjöru-grjót* (a shingle beach). If you ease her aft just a little, I'll dive under and insert a piece of tent-cover to wrap around the damaged area to reduce the inflow of water to the Bow locker. If we keep our speed down, the Bow locker hatch flap should contain the ingress and, when we are safely ashore, I'll get started on a repair.'

The Falcon

'Angus, the storm is rising as we speak. How long will it take you?'

'Two days minimum, to allow us to re-caulk the *klinkbyggt* (lapstrake clinker-built planks) in the affected area using *furu* (pitch tar made from pine resin) and strengthen their joints affected with new *járnsaumr* (iron nails). The *furu* has to be allowed to cure and strengthen to become watertight.'

'Have you any idea where we are? Are we safe from attack? I don't like the idea of having our backs to the sea without a means of escape.'

'I think it might be *Máeyar* [10] (seagull island). My father Murdo told me it is inhabited by a small group of Christian Monks, hermits who live alone in a loose colony but sworn to a vow of silence.'

'If this is *Máeyar*, we are only a short distance to *Norðymbralandið er ríkt í kirkjum* (North Lands rich in Churches). Good news at last but I'm not sure this can be true. We much be much further North, I feel it in my bones. When we get ashore we will post sentries to guard us. Is there any hope the repairs can be done quicker.'

'I'll do my best.'

Astrid said:

'Captain Thorstein, I will help Angus and Sveinn Ásbjarnarson. We are a good team. We worked together building *The Falcon*. It was my idea to create the side lockers to give extra protection. Now I've spent many hours lying in the dark in the Bow locker running my fingers over the joints, I know how we can repair her in a way which makes the Bow section of the hull even stronger. What we need to do . . ..''

'Astrid, stop, lassie! I don't want the details - just get on with it. But look! Bad news, the mist is clearing and the wind is back. This *Stórviðrit* is not finished with us yet. Right ship-makers, let's get to it.'

00000

It took several hours of strenuous effort but at last *The Falcon* was resting in a depression dug out in advance, in accordance with Astrid's plan. The crew had lifted their Longship bodily from the water and placed her gently on the tent-covers being used as under-sheets to cushion the hull outer surface from the rough shingles. The Bow end section was sitting proud where the shingles had been removed to create good all-round access. The actual damage was minimal, a roundish hole about the size of a large fist.

10

In later times *Máeyar* became the Isle of May, its modern name.

The Falcon

Astrid lay between Angus and Sveinn studying the hull section illuminated by a lantern. They were protected by tent-covers rigged to enclose them from the raging storm and driving rain. *Stórviðrit* had returned with a vengeance. The rest of the crew were sheltering in nooks and crannies trying to find dry places to wait out the storm. Even if the island was inhabited, it was unlikely anyone was out looking for them.

'Angus, we should repair this hole from the inside with a plank pinned and glued over the hole, then fill the hole from the outside. Then we should apply a second skin of sheet timber over the outer surface. Look, I *know* it will take time to steam it and form it into shape but let's face it, we could not relaunch her in this weather anyway.'

'Astrid, this will use up most of our supply of sheet timber.'

Sveinn who had said little until now spoke in his slow and cryptic drawl:

'Could we glue this outer shell in patches or strips? Less need to steam the sheets. Remember, the new outer shell is to protect the inner hull and so it does not need to be fully watertight. I agree we must improve the struts framing the lockers in the Bow area. If we have time, we should do this for every locker, strengthen the whole outer carcass and make *The Falcon* more able to survive another storm. But the priority is the Bow section.'

'*Yes*, yes, **yes!** We must use strips and patches!' said Astrid. 'Sveinn, you are a *spekingr* (a real genius).'

'Yes, a very good idea,' added Angus, 'So let's make a start right away.'

00000

The Great Storm lasted a further eight days.

In the beginning, everyone was wet and miserable but, by exploring in small groups, alert and ready to defend themselves, the rest of the crew discovered four small caves and one enormous one which, in its deepest recesses was inhabited by bats who dropped their shit indiscriminately. It was clear from the remains they found that this 'long cave' had been used in times past by humans. As a bonus, there was a supply of dried out timber allowing cooking and hot food.

Although fishing was impossible, scavenging the higher ledges produced a steady supply of eggs and young birds for their hot meals, allowing them to top up their food stores with smoked sea-bird meat.

Thorstein encouraged everyone to heat water and wash themselves and to rinse out their clothes to get rid of encrusted salt which might cause skin rashes and sores.

This was especially important for their *péttir hjartaskinnsskór* (sea-boots) which must not be worn while ashore, only their *skinnsskór* (tough leather fighting boots).

The Falcon

Austrvegir

It was a miserable and frustrating period for everyone but when the storm finally blew itself out, they refloated *The Falcon* and headed West, rowing at a steady pace, watching ahead for hazards. In the aftermath of the storm the clouds were low, shedding rain in a steady deluge.

The repairs proved successful and the word spread that their new reinforced Bow section was holding up well and that the Bow locker was dry.

They had not been able to see the night sky for weeks and had no real handle on where they might be. Thorstein was relying on his inner compass and his memory of *The Falcon's* headings relative to the ever changing positions of the *Sveinssteinn* during their time fighting the storm. He ran through these memories time after time but remained uncertain, slightly unnerved, a feeling he kept to himself. They had kept a tally stick with a notch for each day. It showed they had left Thisted twenty-seven days ago making in late April, although it felt like they had travelling for much longer.

Looking back through the sheets of rain at what they had thought was *Máeyar* they discovered it was a smallish almost circular island with steep rocky sides, standing alone in a grey-green sea. From her knowledge of the Viking Sagas, Astrid had suggested it might have been *Hirtir* [11] (a remote and mythical island) believed to be far to the West of Pictland. It was speculation, they would never know for certain.

As they had discovered during their visit, it was mostly vertical grey rock with very little vegetation and no place to dig a grave for Gunnarr Bjarnason's corpse. At Horllf's suggestion, they had moved the corpse from the shingle beach to the deepest part of the cave where they covered him with rocks. The stench of his decomposing body was masked by bat shit.

The sailed on, still heading West, hoping to glimpse the coast of the North Lands rich in Churches. AS night approached, Thorstein addressed the crew from the stern platform, his face streaming with water from the downpour:

'Men of Thisted, stop rowing. Reduce to half sail. Rig the tent-covers and we'll move slowly towards whatever lies ahead. Hrollf, keep her steady on a Westwards heading, but go as slowly as you can and keep a good lookout for hazards.'

Hrollf took the Rudder and Thorstein moved to the Bow:

11

Hirtir: believed to be modern day Rockall, located around forty miles West of North Uist in the Outer Hebrides the long North to South archipelago off the West Coast of Scotland.

'Sveinn Ásbjarnarson, with your young, sharp eyes, I'm making you responsible for our safety. Stand in the Bow and be our *náttvörðr* (night-sighter-lookout). Share this duty in turn with Astrid and Angus with frequent changes to keep your eyes fresh.'

'Angus the Scot, how are the repairs holding up?'

'Good Captain, all dry so far.'

'Now everyone, you will have sensed the pitch of the waves is much longer now which tells me we are heading further out into deeper water. We must not sail blind during the dark hours soon to come so we will continue slowly in this direction for the present under sail and erect the tent-covers to give us protection from this rain.'

As this news moved aft, there was a low rumble of thumping hands and stamping feet signalling approval at this order.

Back at the Stern, speaking to Hrollf and Steiner, Thorstein said:

'One grounding is enough. I propose to stay on this Westward course for the dark hours ahead and hope to get a star sighting. My bones and the pitch of the waves tell me we are beyond *Skotaríki* [12] but I cannot be certain without a star sighting. When dawn comes, we will turn *Suðrvegr* (Southwards). If we find land, well and good, if not we will repeat this tomorrow night then, on the following morning we head *Austrvegir* (to the East) and hope to find the riches we seek.'

The word was passed forward and heads nodded. Amongst themselves the crew agreed Thorstein's instinct had been right and that their present Westward coast might be taking them out into the open sea and <u>*not*</u> towards the 'North Lands rich in Churches'.

'Men of Thisted, tonight, if the wind drops, we will hope to eat hot food. Try to get a good sleep.'

There was a low rumble of thumping hands and feet signalling approval at this plan.

00000

Around midnight the rain eased, turned to drizzle then stopped.

The wind shifted and the clouds cleared revealing a bright full moon.

With Stiener Trémaðr taking the helm, Thorstein and Hrollf studied the black velvet sky, searching out the *Lodestar* (Polaris, the Pole Star), confirmed its position from the two pointer stars of *Karlsvagn* (Ursa Major, The Great Bear sometimes called The Plough), and *Kvennavagn* (Ursa Minor, The Little Bear).

12

Skotaríki, the land of the Scots and Picts.

The Falcon

Their star sightings confirmed Thorstein's instinct, they were indeed in deep water, far beyond *Skotaríki* which was now far behind them, to the East.

Hrollf cleared his throat and said quietly:

'Thorstein, we need Astrid. She can read the night skies and she knows all the Sagas, and can recited the *Norðrvegsleið* (oral traditions of North-way sailing directions).'

Thorstein sent a message forward, to tell Astrid to come aft.

She had also been studying the night skies and had reached the same conclusion.

'I will try "mind-calling" '.

Astrid lay on her back inside the resting area below the stern and closed her eyes.

After a long period of silence, voicing in a high-pitched eerie voice, she said:

> *'We are West of the Suðreyjar* [13]*, two days rowing in these long seas.*
>
> *'To the East, there is a long string of islands. Their western shores of this long string of islands are sandy and white, safe for a landing in light seas.*
>
> *'The coastal land is good for crops but inland it is boggy, riddled with lakes, large and small. Some lakes are open to the sea.*
>
> *'The people are Christian, fishers and farmers, docile, not fighters. They owe allegiance to* ***Kirkjan á Í*** [14] *(the Church of Great Wealth). This church is said to be dripping with gold and silver and precious jewels.*
>
> *'It is hard to find, far to the South.*
>
> *'On an island without a name, a man is calling out to us.*
>
> *'He is a friend.*
>
> *'He will guide us to him.*
>
> *'Follow the Sveinssteinn wherever it leads.'*

After a long period of silence, Hrollf whispered:

13

Suðreyjar: Norse for the Southern Isles nowadays known as the Outer Hebrides.

14

Kirkjan á ***Í*** **:** the Church at Iona founded by St Columba in 563 AD. In Norse Iona was called **"I"** meaning small island).

The Falcon

'She has fallen asleep.'

Thorstein reached forward and covered her with a sea-blanket.

'That lassie has a wonderful wealth of knowledge. She reminds me so much of Toke, he had the same gift.

Hrollf added:

'I've heard her recite folklore stories for an hour of more, in just the same weird voice and then, like this, she falls asleep and later says she remembers nothing she has recited.'

Thorstein shuddered:

'It is no wonder people fear her.'

'But do you believe what she said?' asked Hrollf.

'Yes. She has a gift that cannot be denied.'

'*Look Thorstein!* Look, the *Sveinssteinn* has swung from North. I can hardly believe what I'm seeing. By the stars it is pointing just South of East!'

'It is proof enough for me! Furl the sail, rouse the men and start them rowing. I will take the rudder and tell Stiener Trémaðr to follow the *Sveinssteinn* South of East.'

'Thorstein, who is this man Astrid spoke about? She said he is a friend. Can he be *ættingi* (kindred, one of us) ?'

'Perhaps. Perhaps. When we meet this man, we will judge him for ourselves. But first we must do as she says. We will approach him in the dark and try to judge what is happening. It might be a diabolical trap.'

'Should we risk it, try to raid *Kirkjan á* ***Í***, take their wealth?'

'We must try Hrollf, that's what we promised to do before we set sail on this voyage. The people of Thisted are depending on us.'

'But she said it is difficult to find, far to the South.'

'However long it takes, we must try.'

'Thorstein, are you afraid of their *Guð* (their one *Gooth*, the one who saves them)?'

'No, we will call on Odin and Thor and Freyer to help us. So, three against one, eh? Us against a bunch of Monks on the knees praying? No contest, eh?'

The Falcon

Landtaka

Two days of sailing and hard rowing had brought them far to the East.

Thorstein spoke to Astrid and Hrollf:

'My bones tell me we are very near to our *Landtaka* (landfall). It would be better to approach this man and his supporters when they are asleep. We should take advantage of the clear skies and use moonlight to guide us to them.'

Using oars, they crept slowly forwards until the saw a shimmering white beach. It looked like a safe place to land. It was early evening. The wind was filling their sail taking them towards it. They shipped their oars and dropped a sea-anchor bag then set the tent-covers to preserve their strength for the coming encounter. They drifted nearer, but very slowly.

As the sun set behind them Astrid whispered to Thorstein:

'Captain, I did not have a memory of my *spádraumr* (prophetic dream) but Angus has explained. I see we are following the *Sveinssteinn*. I believe our *leiðsögumaður okkar* (path-leading man) will know we are near and I believe he will have made a plan for us and that all will go well.'

'Even so, a nighttime approach would be best.'

Standing at the Bow, scanning ahead, occasionally moving aft to check the *Sveinssteinn*, Astrid remained silent, feeling the psychic tug on her mind.

When the stars came out, they confirmed *The Falcon* was heading South of East.

00000

It was two hours after midnight.

The sail was furled and their oars were dipping quietly and pulling softly to maintain gentle forward motion. Thorstein was on the rudder with Hrollf by his side. Stiener Trémaðr was calling corrections according to the *Sveinssteinn*.

The oarsmen were tense, keyed up, ready for action.

How many supporters would this man have? Hundreds?

The crew were at full readiness with their short swords and shield at their feet which were now clad in fighting boots and their *blýfyllt klubba* held in decorated leather waist pouches attached to their belts.

Astrid, Angus and Sveinn Ásbjarnarson stood side by side in the Bow, scanning ahead.

The Falcon

Sveinn said:

'I hear waves heaving onto the shore.'

Angus said:

'I see a light swinging, over there, to our right.'

Word was passed aft in whispers and *The Falcon* responded, heading for the signal lantern.

A shore of white sand lay ahead.

A tall slim man stood in the surf, holding a tallow lantern, dressed in knee-length breaches and wearing a tight-fitting woollen jacket.

It was agreed that he seemed to be unarmed.

Thorstein ordered the oarsmen to hold *The Falcon* at twenty paces offshore.

Sveinn Ásbjarnarson used a plumb line to measure *sævar-djúp* (sea-depth) and signalled aft showing a single open hand to indicate five *faðmr* (fathoms).

The man on the shore called to them in Norse:

'Thorstein Harstyrkr, are you Captain of this fine Longship? Where is my brother Tyke? And where is the coward Gunnarr Bjarnason?'

Astrid replied in her normal voice:

' Uncle Toke, I am Astrid Thyrsson, your niece. You spoke to me in my *spádraumr*. You look so like my father except he has only one arm. Gunnarr Bjarnason is dead, and good riddance. In Thisted we are starving. We built *The Falcon* and set out many weeks ago to raid the *Norðymbralandið er ríkt í kirkjum'.*

'Your navigation needs improving, Captain Thorstein. Any chance you could come closer so that I can come aboard? It's bloody cold standing here.'

'Why not swim out to us? I remember you were good at swimming.'

'So, you think I have a small army of armed men hidden in the dunes behind me?'

Hrollf whispered:

'Captain, the dunes are more than one hundred faðmr (fathoms) from the sea. We could be in and out long before they reach us, if they are even there.'

Toke Thyrsson turned and waved his lantern towards the dunes, shouting:

'Right my brave fighting men, as soon as they land, come and get them.'

Of course no one came.

The Falcon

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Standing below the steering platform, Toke Thyrsson unhooked the *Sveinssteinn*, spat on it then rubbed it dry on his bare chest to release his psychic pull. When it was reattached to its hook, it swung freely and pointed North.

Toke first explained about the old lady and her sheep and suggested that Thorstein send a few of his fastest runners to kill a few fat yearling lambs for food.

Bombarded by questions, he promised to answer them later, when he had recovered although he did reveal he had hidden maps which would lead them to the Monastery of Hy with its great wealth , adding these maps were on *Sauðey* (Sheep Island) many hours of hard sailing West of South, the place where he had been marooned for fifteen years after the raid on *Lindisfarena* [15] .

Mentally exhausted from the long hours of psychic effort required to control the direction of the *Sveinssteinn*, Tork crawled into the steersmen's' sleeping chamber, wrapped himself in a sea blanket and fell into a dreamless, catatonic sleep.

00000

The weather was calm which meant the sail was furled.

With the good news buzzing in their heads, pulling hard to the fast tempo set by Hrollf, with their oars rising and dipping in perfect unison, the crew of *The Falcon* drove her South towards Sheep Island to collect the maps which promised to lead them to wealth and glory.

15

In 780 AD *Lindisfarena* was regarded by Danish Vikings as a rich and mysterious island protected by the sea and accessible from the mainland by a causeway, a Christian Holy Island off the Northumbrian coast, known chiefly by report as a place of silver, books, cattle, and unarmed monks. Its fame as an undefended Christian sanctuary made it a tempting place to plunder .

The raid led by Tyrkæl and Toke Thyrsson had been repulsed by a large contingent of soldiers who were visiting the Holy Island, seeking a blessing from the Prior of Lindisfarne ahead of a battle against the Picts and Northumbrians who were edging south to threaten the Anglian kingdom of *Deira* (present day Yorkshire).

The Falcon

Vestanhafs [16]

After Toke Thyrsson had been abandoned by Gunnarr Bjarnason, he lay hidden in the sea-pool, shocked back to awareness by his cold water plunge. Lying still under a thick mass of weeds, he pushed his head up to breathe from time to time, listening to their voices. When the soldiers returned to their camp, he crawled out, hid in the sand dunes until dark then made his way to the mainland wading chest deep close to the tidal causeway, ducking under when he heard people passing in either direction.

Using the night stars as his guide, he moved North at first but encountered many soldiers camping in a loose straggle stretching far to the West and East. He retreated South until he was clear of them then headed West. As dawn rose behind him, he found an isolated shepherd's hut high in the hills, where he hid until the following night.

When it was fully dark, he crept North and saw many camp fires below him. Creeping closer, he heard soldiers laughing and shouting.

Starving, he sneaked close enough to steal food and beer from a store tent.

Keeping clear of these encampments he ran Westwards for many days, hiding and dodging the local shepherds and their dogs and younger boys watching cattle.

The weather turned foul and he no longer had stars to guide him. However the poor weather meant less people to avoid and made it easier to steal food.

He now had a small knife and an axe.

In time he reached the Western sea where he lay in the heather on a cliff high above a thriving fishing village in a sheltered bay, watching men sail out by day with nets, returning later with salmon which they gutted and smoked.

On the second night, he raided the smokehouse and stole a huge batch of smoked salmon then launched a small ferry boat and rowed through the heavy waves to a larger fishing boat moored in the bay, the smallest of the three vessels moored furthest from the houses. After a period of studying the rigging, he decided to take a chance and set sail heading North out of the bay to the open sea, hoping to find a way back to Thisted by keeping the shore to his right side, haunted by the fear of hitting a hidden reef.

The wind got up and it started to rain. He saved the rain water in a bucket, catching the runoff from the sail. Preventing a capsize was hard work. He could not rest, washing down mouthfuls of salmon whenever he could.

16

Vestanhafs: Escape to the Sea of the West

The Falcon

The storm was unrelenting.

Days and nights merged into one another. He lost track of how many.

In time the winds abated but the waves were high and he was rolling and yawing down into deep troughs, shipping water when he climbed up over the next wave which meant bending to bail-out with one hand while steering with the other.

It was pitch dark when he came to a sudden stop, grinding into a steeply sloping sandy beach (at a place he later called Sheep Island).

The higher shelf of the beach was inhabited by dozens sheep who ignored him.

The fishing boat was too heavy to drag out of the water and he had to walk it along the shore to a place where he could moor it by tying its Bow rope to a rock. Apart from his small knife and axe, his best weapon was a long thin gutting knife found in the boat.

For the first time since he boarded the stolen boat, he was able to examine it, feeling his way around it in the dark. It was slow work, checking every nook and cranny, hoping for something of value.

Inside a box tied firmly to the mast, he found a sealed leather bag.

(Later he discovered this bag contained a survival kit with a flintstone and a large ball of wadding to allow him to light a fire, together with a few fish hooks, lead weights and a tough, oiled handline, the sort of set-up he had used fishing from the rocks as a boy in Thisted).

The Great Spring Storm began to build again, with strong, gusting winds and heavy rain with spits if ice in it.

Exhausted, carrying his meagre haul wrapped in a length of spare sailcloth, Toke staggered up from the shore into the dunes, scattering a small group of sheep from a narrow crevice which he took over, wrapping himself inside a sea-blanket under the length of sailcloth to protect him from the heavy rain and gusting wind.

While he slept, the wind increased, returning to its previous fury.

00000

Suddenly Toke was wide awake, filled with fear, certain he had been discovered.

Had there been shouting?

He did not know how long he had slept but it was bright daylight (maybe noon). The rain was steady but had lessened, gusting on the wind which had changed direction, blowing offshore.

Inside his sailcloth hideout there was an eerie silence, no sound of wind, no sound of rain.

(Later, when he could think more clearly, he realised he was in the calm eye at the centre of the Great Spring Storm which had been driving him North since he first escaped in the stolen fishing boat.)

He leaned outwards and peered downwards.

The fishing boat was gone!

Had the men hunting him taken it?

He scanned the horizon and saw nothing, no islands, no shapes, just huge white-topped waves in a jumbled fury. He felt lonely, helpless and dispirited. Stealing the boat had been a mistake: it had brought him bad luck. In the morning he would be discovered by the inhabitants, captured and tortured.

Moving back into his den, still wrapped in his sea-blanket, his mind racing, his eyes darting everywhere, he tried to spot those hunting him but everything was out of focus.

His stomach heaved but nothing came up.

He had not eaten anything substantial for many, many hours.

His entire body was aching from tiredness, he felt weak and light-headed, as if he was drunk then realised he was probably <u>porsti</u> (parched, dehydrated).

Although it was no longer raining, the wind had changed direction and was driving the waves across the shore and out towards the open sea. The incoming waves, held up by the strong offshore wind were enormous, bigger waves than he had ever seen in his life.

As he watched, the wind direction changed again and storm clouds came racing towards him across the waves. It came at him in huge fists, battering him with tiny particles of ice mixed with salty rain.

Defeated, he retreated fully into his tent den, ate the last of his stolen salmon, curled into his sea-blanket, pulled the sail cover down, tucked it around him, sealing himself deep down into the crevice.

Seconds after closing his eyes, Toke began to fall, plunging down and down and down with no hope of being saved.

00000

When he wakened for the second time, the storm had passed and the Sun was high in the sky, baking him inside his den.

As he lay snug and warm, he became more hopeful, wondering if he might be back on the mainland again and would not need a boat. Had the men hunting him taken the boat and drowned in the storm. This thought made him hopeful,

The Falcon

If this was the mainland, he would hike back to the East shore of Alba and try to find a way back to Thisted.

He began to explore and quickly discovered he was on a small verdant island crowded with sheep and lambs scattered in family groups.

Over the remainder of the day, gutting knife in hand, he explored the island concluding there were no human inhabitants, only sheep.

He named it Sauðey (Sheep Island).

On the South end of the island there was a largish cave in a south-facing cliff with a crafted wooden door which made it waterproof and windproof, more or less. Twenty paces from the cave, there was a tiny stream coming from an opening in the cliff face high above him.

Later he would find other wells and pools where the sheep sipped.

The discovery of this cave and its tight fitting door, filled him with hope. Some day someone would come and he might be able to escape and get home to Thisted.

00000

Toke hunted down a lamb, slaughtered it, lit a fire with driftwood, roasted the meat in chunks, filled his belly and drank water from his stream.

In the days which followed, he made stews and added herbs he recognised. It became a familiar pattern varied by adding fish caught by throwing out his line from the rocks.

In the early days he was constantly alert to the possibility of visitors. During his second week, he initiated a routine which would become a major part of his life – climbing at first light to the highest point on the island and scanning round, checking, half expecting to see a boat approaching, an action he repeated every hour or so.

As each day passed towards night, he relaxed.

Well-fed and secure in his cave, he was sleeping soundly.

Within a few weeks of settling on Sheep Island, Toke Thyssen was fully recovered from the head injury suffered at Lindisfarena and the rigours of his long trek from the East to the West. He knew he was lucky to have survived the Great Spring Storm, grateful he was fit and healthy with plenty to eat and plentiful fresh water.

At night, when it was clear, he lay outside and studied the night skies as he had often done in Thisted. Hopefully the people who made the cave door would arrive and he would find a way to return home, find a sensible wife and settle to his previous life and raise children.

This thought became another obsession: each time he opened or closed the door to his cave, he thought of Thisted and a good wife and children.

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As the weeks became months, he learned the best spots to fish from the rocks.

Summer arrived and on days when the weather was warm and sunny, he was reminded again of home, of Thisted. Toke had always lived outdoors, living a solitary life, hunting deer and setting catch-pots for lobsters, crabs and prawns. He had never been a farmer of any kind, had never wanted a fishing boat, concentrating on deer hunting and fishing from the rocks for shell-fish, his speciality, using his catch to trade for other things he needed, like bread and vegetables.

On Sheep Island, he crafted his own version of shellfish catch-pots from driftwood, using twigs to bind the pieces together. Although his catch-pots looked slightly odd, they worked well enough. As he did not have any ropes, he swam around the seabed in rocky areas on the East of the island, placing his pots in places where he thought the shellfish might be.

In his daily routine, during good weather, Toke still spent long hours at the highest point of Sheep Island, scanning the seas, worrying what he would do if visitors came to check on their sheep. Time after time he thought if he had not found the cave with its well-made door, he might have easily believed the sheep had been abandoned.

His first Autumn arrived and with it his anxiety increased but no shepherds arrived to claim and cull their sheep.

In late Autumn the gales returned and he hunkered down in his cave making tallow oil and fishhooks as they used to do as teenagers in Thisted.

On clear nights, he studied the skies and by tracking the times of the rising and setting Sun he concluded Sheep Island was somewhere off the coast of Alba of the Sagas, (the Gaelic-Pictish realm) located at roughly the same latitude as Thisted but far, far out to the West.

The Winter days became shorter then after the <u>*sólhverf*</u> ('sun-turning' – Winter solstice) *the days began to grow longer again. On this small island it was never truly cold, never as cold as Thisted. There was no sea ice and only occasionally very thin ice on puddles if the sky was clear overnight.*

On the shore to the South, there was an abundance of driftwood which he harvested and stored, arranging it in log piles near his cave to dry out in the wind as he had done back in Thisted.

The Falcon

Occasionally on this wood he would find a length of twine or rope, items which he hoarded and used to make a noose for catching lambs and sheep. After time he had enough to make a tether for two of his catch-pots which meant he could continue harvesting shell-fish in rough weather.

While fishing from the rocks he had seen dolphins, porpoises and (once only) an Orca patrolling inshore close to his original landing beach. In high Summer, from his viewing point, he sighted the occasional Basking Shark in the far distance.

The seabirds were familiar and in the nesting season he garnered their eggs and culled their nestlings to add variety to his diet. He learned where to find herbs and plants which he knew were edible to mix with his stews and garnish his roasts.

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At nights, particularly in Winter, wrapped in his sea blanket, the wind howling outside and a single tallow lamp flickering, casting glints on the walls and roof of his cave-home, he began to recount in his mind the various Sagas he had heard down through years in Thisted. One night, to make them more real he began to recite them to himself. Because he had not spoken for about two years he found the words difficult to form at first but they soon came back.

Talking to himself became a way of making sense of this new life of isolation he was forced to endure. Singing to himself also became important and when singing part-remembered songs, if there were missing words or phrases, he invented his own, sometimes making up entirely new variants.

In the way of the ancients, he sent his mind out to search for "a listener", a person who like himself was blessed with the gift. Although this proved unsuccessful, he persisted, becoming convinced that it would be this "mind searching" which would lead to his rescue.

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In this way, his early years in isolation on Sheep Island merged one into the other.

Each Autumn he stood on the highest ground and kept a close watch for approaching boats, always expecting shepherds to come from the mainland to claim their harvest of lambs and yearling ewes.

Using markings scratched on the ground from star sightings, he used these lines and fashioned pointed stones and set these into the ground to indicate North, East, South and West, making himself a rudimentary compass

By the sixth blank year he concluded that whoever had landed the sheep here must have died. However, each Autumn he kept up his daily vigil from early until late, just in case.

The Falcon

One day Toke started to count back over the years, trying to distinguish one year from the next. He had always thought of himself as someone with a good memory but had to admit he was struggling.

In the end he decided he had been on Sheep Island for at least thirteen years, maybe a few longer.

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The following Spring, in what he had finally decided must be his fifteenth year, Toke was standing on the high ground scanning the horizon. As he always did, he started by facing East before moving slowly to look South then briefly West then North to complete his circle before starting again.

At his fourth or fifth rotation, he spotted a small sailing boat approaching from the South.

He closed his eyes and used "mind-calling" but there was no reply.

As it grew nearer, he saw a single occupant, kneeling in the rear of the tiny boat.

Nearer still, he saw the man's head was shaved in a strange way, bald from ear to ear and to half way back on his scalp.

Nearer still, he saw the man had shoulder length hair at the back of his head. He wore a greyish cloak of undyed wool and below it dark brown tunic, both garments wet from waves broaching his gunwhales. From time to time, this man was forced to turn his small craft head to wind, leaving the sail to flap while he let go of the rudder to scoop out water with a bucket.

This small, skinny man was clearly a novice sailor. He seemed unarmed and Toke judged his visitor as harmless.

Moving to the sandy shore in front of his cave, Toke stood still, waiting, his gutting knife held by his side.

When the man saw Toke, he waved and called out but his words made no sense.

Standing, the visitor revealed leather sandals secured by leather ankle strappings up to his knees. (Toke no longer had serviceable shoes but his feet had hardened over the years).

Taken together with his garments, Toke identified him as a Monk, similar in appearance to those he had seen at Lindisfarena in 580 AD.

As he neared the shore, the Monk dropped the sail too soon and his sailboat foundered in the waves, rocking violently it nearly capsized.

The Falcon

Toke dropped his knife point down into the wet sand and ran forward to grab the Bow and haul the boat ashore, causing the Monk to fall backwards. There was loud crack when the back of his head hit the stern.

Th Monk lay unmoving, apparently unconscious. Toke checked by squeezing his right earlobe fiercely while punching his testicles with a fist.

The Monk was not feigning.

Toke easily lifted the small man, carried him to the dunes and eased him down to lie adjacent to the open door to the cave.

To check if he might be drunk, Toke leaned forward and sniffed.

The stench was ripe causing Toke to step back in alarm.

Checking, Toke saw the man's neck and lower legs were covered in ulcers and lesions.

LEPROSY!

(The most feared of diseases with no apparent cause and made even more mysterious as some people seemed immune.)

Toke retreated to the shoreline to think about what to do.

If the man only had a few days or weeks to live, why not slice his throat and be done with it?

Behind him to the side, Toke heard clucking sounds. Tied to the mast were six small cages, five hens and a cockerel. Toke released them ashore and they scattered into the dunes. There was a wooden box with a few grain seeds. He recognised wheat, feed for the chickens. A longing for bread filled his mind.

From the highest dune, the cockerel crowed loudly, establishing his new domain.

The Monk groaned and sat up, staring wide eyed at Toke. From under his coat he removed a heavy golden Christian Cross, scrambled to his feet, held it aloft and began to speak in a slow, sing-song fashion.

This incantation went on for a long time.

Toke waited.

After a pause, the Monk laid down his cross, looked to the sky, raised both arms, shouted a final incantation. The Monk's arms were cover by suppurating ulcers.

Looking at Toke, his eyes glazed over as he sank to his knees and fell forward onto his face.

The Falcon

Toke moved to his left keeping his back to the shoreline so that he was fully upwind of the Monk.

The small thin man pushed up onto his knees, tried to stand again but failed to remain upright. Kneeling again, he rolled over onto his left side and lowered his cheek to the sand. Blood seeped from his lips. Rolling onto his back, he fumbled for his Christian Cross. Kissing and pressing it to his chest, he gave out a long muted sigh. His eyelids fluttered and closed. His body relaxed and his head twitched for a final time.

The Monk lay still.

Was he actually dead or just unconscious?

Toke walked to the far end of the beach well clear of the Monk and waited.

When he returned, the Monk lay as he had left him.

Keeping upwind, Toke moved nearer and studied the man.

The odd thing about him was that his thin face and shaved head were clear of blemishes which probably meant he had been able to conceal his condition for a while before being banished.

Had it been the head blow which had killed him?

Toke retreated again to the far end of the beach and thought about what he should do with the infected corpse.

Once again the cockerel crowed defiantly. The first of the hens emerged, pecked its way along the edge of the dunes and was soon joined by the others.

Toke went back to examine the small sailing boat, checking it over in detail. It was in good order, with newish sails, good rigging, well-tarred inside and out, everything suitable for fair-weather sailing in competent hands so long as it kept close to the shore.

Near the rudder, he found a long thin box fixed to the gunwhale by oiled cord ties. Inside he found three tubes with tight fitting ends to make them waterproof. He took these tubes across to the flat rock he used as his work table and for dining outdoors in better weather and wiped it clean with a piece of damp sail cloth.

Opening the tubes he unrolled three scrolls made of kálfskinn (high quality vellum) securing them flat on his table using small stones.

One scroll was an indicative map of a sea route from a small island marked by a Christian Cross and the words Ioua insula (Island of Iona), plotting a passage to its North past many other islands and ending at Sheep Island with the small inset drawing of a Gröf (Cave).

A second map showed Iona was itself located beside a much larger island called Malea insula (Island of Mull). This map had been drawn in very fine detail and as he studied the outline of the coast of Malea insula he saw to its East a thin sketchy outline of what Toke took to be the Mainland. Tracing South with his finger, he found the wide curve of protected bay where he had stolen the fishing boat which had brought him to Sheep Island.

The third scroll showed two men dressed in long robes and wearing tall pointed hats. Each man held a long pole in his right hand. On top of each pole was a large Christian Cross. Both poles and Crosses were identical in design and height.

Inscribed below the taller, stouter man, were the words "Sanctus Columba". Below the shorter, thinner man, the words "Sanctus Aidanus".

Toke closed his eyes and raked back through his store of folkloric tales until gradually his mind revealed long ago stories of a Christian Holy Man called Kolumba (St Columbus) who had established a very rich religious house on Ioua insula, and a second Holy Man called Aedan (Saint Aidan) who had founded the religious house on Lindisfarena, the island where he had almost died during the raid back in 780 AD.

Looking at the pathetic remains of the small thin Monk he recalled old tales of Leprosy back in Thisted. These recollections led him to his plan.

Holding his breath and working quickly he looped the Monk's ankles with the longest of his catch-pot tethers and retreated to its full extent then tied this rope to his second catch-pot tethers, putting him almost ten fathoms from the corpse.

It was slow work dragging the corpse across the sand into the sea and then floating it along behind him until he reached the far end of the beach where he dragged it ashore and on through the low dunes to an area of deep bogs where he untethered the corpse. Using a long pole to sink it into the muddy depths, he weighed it down with around a hundred heavy stones.

On his return to the cave, he dragged the long tether rope through the waves hoping this would cleanse it of Leprosy then draped it over the high dunes to dry out in the Sun.

Returning to the part of the shore where the Monk had died, Toke lit a huge pile of brushwood, feeding it with logs until it was blazing brightly. (The cleansing fire lasted well into the evening.)

Toke then returned to the man's sailing boat and dragged it high above the high tide line and anchored it with its Bow rope tied to a huge mound of stones. Having lost the stolen fishing boat years earlier, he was keen to ensure the safety of the Monk's sailboat while he figured out whether he would risk sailing out from Sheep Island in search of the Mainland which he was sure was over the horizon to the East.

The Falcon

With darkness came spits of rain which soon turned to a steady deluge. For the next two nights Toke avoided using his cave because of its nearness to the contaminated ground, hoping the fire followed by the rains would completely remove the last traces of Leprosy.

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Early on the third morning after a good breakfast of hen's eggs, Toke resumed his normal routine, sitting at his high viewing point for several hours, taking time to study each compass sector, trying to decide if he should take his chance as the Monk had done by sailing out into the open sea and heading East towards where he was convinced the Mainland mut be.

Although the Monk's small boat was still in good condition, Toke judged the man had been very lucky to have made it to Sheep Island without foundering. The tiny boat was much more suited for short voyages - perhaps it had been used to make short crossings between Ioua insula and Malea insula.

From years of watching from this high spot, Toke knew that the worst of the weather usually came from West of South. The aftermath of any storm was unpredictable. He also knew Spring storms might last only a day but they could also last a week or more. After a bigger storm there might be a few calmer days but this could not be guaranteed. After any storm short or long, another further storm could arrive almost at once.

Toke settle to wait and try to judge from experience when it might be calm enough to set out in the Monk's boat and sail due East. The other worry was that once he was out of sight of Sheep Island, he would have to use the Sun and the night sky to guide him.

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After a few weeks of watching and waiting, he became impatient and decided to take the risk. During these weeks, he had enjoyed the hen's eggs but this did not stop him from killing them one by one to eat them, roasting or stewing them with herbs and using their bones to make a herb broth.

On the first clear night of calmer weather after a three day storm the weather settled with a steady breeze from West of South. Toke made his decision. Working through the night he completed his preparations to sail at first light on a course before the wind, heading East of North, hoping the wind remained favourable and that he would reach a landfall before the seas became too rough.

After a brief early morning rain shower, the weather cleared again and he loaded the small craft with smoked fish and meats from lambs and the last chicken, filled three leather water bottles (made from sheepskin scraped then cured with sea salt), tying their necks tightly closed with oiled cord.

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The Falcon

Although he was on constant alert to keep the small craft stable in big seas, he survived without serious incident until around noon on the second day when the skies behind him filled with dark low clouds and the wind picked up. As they approached from behind, the clouds became darker and lower. By mid-afternoon it felt like dusk.

The tiny sailboat scudded along, riding high, almost surfing on the following waves but when the wind came in gusts he was swamped and forced to drop the sail quickly and bail out. When he was fully afloat, he rigged his sail to one third and tried again.

On three further occasions he was broached and had to bail-out. On each occasion he had feared he was doomed. Trying to sail in the open ocean in such a small craft had been a huge mistake. He was soaked through. His skin was like ice and he began to shiver uncontrollably. His head was fogged, making his movements erratic.

As true darkness fell the wind eased and sailing was more manageable. As the wind abated, the rain increased to a downpour.

He was sailing blind.

Without warning he struck a reef.

The tiny craft shattered under his feet.

Toke was pitched forwards into the sea.

As the sailboat cartwheeled, his head was struck by the mast and he blacked out momentarily, losing his bearings.

Disoriented, he tried to swim clear of the wreckage but one ankle was trapped by the rigging. He dived under, felt for the cord, wriggled free and began swimming frantically until he was clear of the wreckage.

After a few more strokes he was heaved onto a sandy beach then sucked back by the undertow.

Fighting the storm, Toke Thyssen been sailing non-stop for many hours with no chance to rest and little opportunity to eat or drink.

Scrabbling on all fours he climbed up a steep beach into the dunes where he found a spot to rest up, burrowing down into the wet sand.

Physically and mentally exhausted, he collapsed and fell asleep.

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When he woke the next morning the Sun was high in in the sky.

He scanned the white sandy beach. The Bow of the Monk's sailboat and a few scraps of wood from its hull were scattered along the waterline. He dragged the Bow clear of the

water and walked backwards and forwards along the beach searching for anything he could use.

He found nothing except two of his three self-made water bottles, half buried in the sand. The long drink of fresh water was welcome but there was no food and his two knives and axe were lost. The Monk's valuable Christian Cross of gold was also missing, an item which he had hoped to melt down into nuggets to use to buy himself a passage home to Thisted.

On the positive side, Toke congratulated himself on his decision to leave the Monk's scrolls behind on Sheep Island, hidden in a deep, dry hole five paces to the right of the cave entrance and concealed by a heavy rock patterned by yellow lichen.

As dusk approached, he dragged the Bow section up into the dunes and fashioned a skjól (a makeshift Hut) by upending it, facing the open end East of North to provide shelter from the prevailing wind coming from West of South.

He had also collected several jagged splinters of wood to use as swords and daggers and saved the rest of the wood to use when he could find a way of starting a fire.

As an afterthought, he returned to the far end of the beach and collected a few dozen smooth fist-sized stones which he carried back inside his jacket, storing them in several mounds near to his Hut, ready to hurl at attackers.

That night he slept fitfully, aware of the rising wind and the rain lashing against the Bow, glad he was wearing all his clothing, even though everything was threadbare, in tatters.

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As the first lights of dawn crept towards him from the East, Toke set off to explore, armed with three sharp stick-daggers for his belt, his best 'sword' in his right hand, carrying both water bottles filled with stones in his left hand. Moving inland with his back to the beach, keeping low at a crouch, darting forward a few paces at a time, using the dunes to conceal himsel. At each stop, he raised his head slowly and searched for signs of habitation.

Without warning, he slipped into a grassy crevice, landing on top of a sheep with two lambs. He grabbed a lamb by a hind leg, used a bag of stones to stun it before stabbing it with a dagger. He drank warm blood from its neck then gouged a chunk of belly flesh, chewed it then lay back and let the food settle.

> *Had the bleating and sudden movement of the ewe and its other lamb caused someone to question what had caused this commotion?*

Rising slowly from the crevice, he saw a thin trail of smoke escaping from a grass roofed house built to a design not unlike those at Thisted but much lower. To protect itself

from high winds, the house had been built along and East to West axis with a low door facing North at the East end. About three fathoms to the North of the house a cow was tethered to a large wooden trough which provided rainwater for the animal.

Toke estimated the house was about a hundred fathoms away, about two or three minutes of fast running over rough ground.

He scanned slowly and saw a few sheep and lambs scattered over a deserted field of rough grass. Near to the house he saw a fenced off area. It was weed-infested but he could see a scattering overgrown vegetables he recognised from his neighbours plots in Thisted including broad beans, cabbage, onions, leeks and carrots.

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After a long wait, an old woman emerged from the house and opened a hænsnahús (chicken coop) and released a small flock of chickens. She was bent over, leaning heavily on a stick. Trailing behind her, an elderly dog limped after her, picked a spot, sat then flopped and lay on its side as if asleep.

The woman re-entered the house and returned with a small stool and a bucket and milked the cow then took the bucket inside. She then untethered the beast and led is slowly to another rainwater trough where she tethered it with a much longer rope.

There were three other rainwater troughs, one with a ewe and her lamb drinking from it.

The old woman and her dog made their way slowly back to the house.

Toke waited.

After about an hour, he concluded she was probably alone. 'Had her husband died?', he whispered to himself. 'Does she have a son or daughter indoors or living nearby, hidden by the dunes but within shouting distance?'

He must wait and see.

By mid-afternoon the old woman had emerged on only two occasions, once to collect hen's eggs and once to collect peats for her fire from a huge stack behind the house. On that occasion, she was absent for a long time and Toke surmised she was peeing and shitting.

There was no sign of another person, no man about, no visitors.

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By late afternoon, driven by hunger and thirst, Toke decided to make a first move.

He emptied his bags of stones and ran at a crouch across the rough ground to the cow. Kneeling behind he put the mouth of his water bottle over an a udder teat and expressed

milk into his bottle. He drank it dry and refilled it from another udder and drank half before topping it up, sealing the mouth and repeating the process to fill his second bottle.

He stayed crouched behind the cow, watching and waiting.

As the Spring day came to a close and the light began to fade, the old woman and the dog emerged and began the difficult exercise of rounding up her chickens into their coop. While she was distracted, Toke ran in a wide circle and approached the house from the rear, waiting beside the peat stack where he peed into her shit-hole.

When she left to bring her cow back to its overnight tether point, Toke ducked inside the house with his splinter sword and a dagger at the ready.

The house was empty.

There were two beds.

One bed was tidy, made-up, unused, the other with is bedclothes ruffled.

Their mattresses were stuffed with dried grass.

Toke decided he would face the old woman down and waited just outside the open doorway.

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When she had tethered the cow at the trough near to the house, she turned and saw him. Leaning on her stick, shielding her eyes with her other hand she stared at him, through dim, cloudy eyes.

After a long period, she smiled broadly and began to speak in a loud but pleasant sing-song voice uttering a long string of words which made no sense to him.

Pointing in the direction of the beach hidden behind the dunes and using his arms to make a swimming motion, he said:

'My name is Toke. I was shipwrecked.'

The old dog approached, sniffed him and lay at his feet, rolled onto its back. Toke kneeled and rubbed its belly.

Now Toke was closer to her, he realised she was very old, very wrinkled, that her teeth were missing, most definitely the oldest person he had ever seen.

The woman nodded and spoke again, moving towards him and ushering him inside, pointing to a chair to the right of her hearth.

He spoke again:

'My name is Toke, what is your name?'

The Falcon

The old woman cupped her ears with both hands and shook her head from side to side.

Toke realised she was deaf and probably half-blind.

There was an iron pot hanging over the fire. She spooned chicken broth into a large deep wooden bowl and handed it to him with a bone spoon then sat opposite him in her own chair, nodding and smiling. The soup was tasty and filling. She re-filled his bowl twice.

He went outside into the overcast night to pee and empty his bowels, using her shit hole to wash himself clean with water from rain trough beside it.

As the evening outside became darker, the pair dozed in the gloomy silence for a long time as she rocked back and forth singing to herself. After a while, the old woman rose, shuffled across to the door, roused the old dog who went outside to pee the n came back in and lay down and was instantly asleep. The woman closed the door, using three thick wooden bars to seal it tightly shut. She placed three lumps of peat on the fire, sprinkled them with water, smiled, crossed herself in the Christian way then lay down on her bed, pulling the bedclothes over her head. After a few minutes she began to snore.

Toke relaxed. He felt safe, secure, well fed and optimistic.

Outside the wind increased with vicious gusts of rain and the low, undulating whine of air leaking through the old walls and roof.

The Great Spring Storm had returned.

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Toke lit her tallow lantern from the fire and began a close inspection of the meagre contents of the low, narrow dwelling.

> *Wrapped in a rough woollen blanket he found a thick book with a leather cover. It had a Christian Cross impressed into it. It looked very old and was filled with parchment pages of neat hand-written words in a language he could not understand.*
>
> *There was a small cloth purse with nine tiny silver coins.*
>
> *There was an iron dagger with a bone handle. There was a sheath with a loop for a belt.*
>
> *In a wooden chest there was a neat pile of men's clothes and a small pair of well-made cow leather shoes (much too small for his Toke's long feet), a round woollen hat and a string of small bead with a wooden Christian Cross on woollen toggle.*

By the hearth there was a bucket containing knifes and spoons fashioned from bone.

There was a small wooden shovel and a box with a handline and bone hooks for sea fishing which meant he could add fish to their diet.

(Toke surmised that the old woman probably lived on chickens, unable to catch a lamb for the pot. He would use rocks to stun a lamb to add variety to their diet).

There was close-fitting food cupboard containing blocks of cheese and a few small slabs of butter. He cut a slice of cheese – it tasted good, creamy and fresh. There was an empty container with a few remaining grains of wheat – once again, no bread.

There was a wooden bucket containing a mixture of vegetables and another smaller bucket containing a few handfuls of rough brown salt made by boiling off sea water.

There was a larger bucket containing fresh water but only one third full - she would be too frail to heft it full.

(This bucket was near the door and collect rain water from a run-off shelf from the edge of the roof, a method used in some of the older more remote houses in Thisted which did not have easy access to a well or stream.)

The clothing was a tight fit on him but much less worn so he chose an outfit of breeches, a thick woollen undershirt and a tightly fitting knitted woollen jacket. He then burned his own tattered clothing on the fire but it would not catch alight and smouldered, forcing him to unbar and open the door to release the acrid smoke and fumes. The old woman and dog snored through this episode. He checked the cow who was hunkered down behind the trough, sheltering from the wind and rain. He retreated, closed the door and slid the bars into place.

With his inspection over, Toke dowsed the lantern, moved to the empty bed and lay down with the dagger at his side and pulled the rough blanket over him. Smiling at his good fortune of making a safe landfall.

In her sleep the old woman began to cry out, distressed by a violent dream. This wakened the dog who sat up and began to howl. Their racket continued for several minutes and then subsided.

Her snoring resumed and the dog settled.

Outside the storm increased and the gusts tugged at the edges of the grass roof but it held firm, keeping the old house dry and warm.

The Falcon

Toke resolved to take each day as it came and hope for the best. When the storm had passed through he would range further and see what lay inland and along each coast.

He drifted off into a deep sleep.

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The next morning the old woman did not wake up.

The dog sensed her absence and began to howl.

Wrapped in her bedclothes, Toke carried her into the rain and placed her in the sheep crevice in the dune where he had killed the lamb. Its remains had been taken by scavenging birds, he assumed.

He placed her at the base of the crevice and covered her with buckets of stones, building a make-shift grave.

The dog refused to come back to the house and lay in the rain by the graveside.

When Toke checked the next day, the animal was also dead. He placed it on the burial mound, on top of his mistress.

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The following day it was dry, calm and bright with only a slight breeze.

While he was fishing from the rocks beside his landfall bay, Toke experienced a powerful psychic tug on his mind, connecting with a girl who was reaching out to him in a spádraumr (prophetic dream).

He stopped fishing, sat down, closed his eyes and 'spoke' to her, giving her words to entice her to come to him.

In return, he learned from her she was aboard a Viking Longship which had been blown off course in a huge storm.

He visualised its Sveinssteinn and made it spin until it was pointing at the centre of the bay.

Keeping part of his mind on the Sveinssteinn, Toke walked back to the smallholding, milked the cow then set her free, driving her away by throwing small stones at her rump. Once she sensed she was free of her tether, she started to canter inland and was soon out of sight.

He collected the coin purse and dagger, attaching its sheath to his rope belt.

He made a small feast of the remaining food, dowsed the peat fire, filled both water bag with milk, closed the door, secured it from the outside with a tether rope then headed back to sit in the dunes above the centre of the landing bay, closed his eyes and again

focused his mind on the Sveinssteinn, directing it to bring the girl and her Longship to him.

The Falcon

Farðu aptr til Kirkjunnar á Hy[17]

It was already dawn when Toke finished his personal Saga.

He refused to answer any further questions and crawled again into the space under the steering platform and fell fast asleep, exhausted and relieved, surrounded by people who knew and respected him, feeling both safe and wanted at last after years of living alone and in constant fear of capture.

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Toke wakened in the late afternoon and immediately checked the *Sveinssteinn* to assure himself they were on course for Sheep Island. On his way forward to the Bow, he noticed some men stopped rowing, holding their noses with the mouths pursed shut as he passed by them.

At the Bow he stood with Astrid who was on duty, watching for hidden reefs.

'Uncle Toke, the men know about the Monk who died of leprosy and are worried they might catch it from you.'

Toke turned to face aft, staring at the backs of the crew and raising his voice a notch:

'*The poor man was almost dead of it when he arrived at my cave. He did his best to protect me. When he passed over, I tied his feet together with a long rope and dragged him about 300 fathoms from the shore where I buried him in a deep, muddy bog. I then lit a bonfire on the part of the beach where he lay down to die. During the whole of this time, I hardly touched him and made sure I did not breathe the same air. In any case, all this was over a week ago and I think if I was going to get it, it would be showing by now.*'

'But you must go ashore again to get the scrolls, yes?'

'*Without the maps, we might not find our way to the riches of Ioua insula. But spread the word that I will ask Thorstein to hold off The Falcon at thirty fathoms while I swim ashore, consult the scrolls and make ferskr (fresh and clean) copies of the Monk's maps to guide us to the wealth we seek.*'

'Uncle Toke, some are saying that by going ashore you are putting yourself and therefore all of us at risk of catching leprosy?'

Raising his voice another notch he replied:

17

Farðu aptr til Kirkjunnar á Hy: Heading back to the Monastery of Hy (Ioua insula)

The Falcon

'***Astrid, if I was open to catching leprosy, I think I would have it by now. Some people are resistant. I think I might be one of them. And anyway, are we not all Vikings? We could all die at any time. During the raid or in a storm. Tell them if they don't want to take risks, we'll put them ashore and they can take their chances without us.***'

The crew were muttering quietly as Tork passed aft to discuss with Thorstein what he had discussed with Astrid.

A following breeze allowing the sail to be unfurled. Toke offered to take a turn on the rudder, a role he had held on the outward journey to Lindisfarena in 780 AD;

After a while he said, quite loudly:

'Thorstein, you have a fine ship here, she handles well and cuts through the waves with *færni* (great assurance).'

This statement was greeted by a long line of smiling faces and the resounding thud of feet from the crew.

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During the night the wind dropped and they reverted to rowing.

It was noon when Sveinn spotted Sheep Island in the distance. The breeze took them directly to the small landing bay in front of Tork's cave.

True to his word, Toke Thyrsson swam ashore with a waterproof bag containing parchment sheets and writing tools and stood sat naked in full view at his work table, with *The Falcon riding at anchor* ten fathoms offshore while he made his careful copies of the both maps before returning the originals to their hiding hole.

The fact that the breeze was blowing inshore made everyone on board feel safer.

On Toke's return they set sail again, with their new destination as *Ioua insula.*

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Three days later, just after dawn, Astrid spotted *Ioua insula.*

Thorstein gave the order to furl the sail and turn West, giving their destination a wide berth to avoid alerting anyone who might be watching for invaders.

Two hours later with their distinctive *Falcon* sail still furled, the Longship returned, rowing from West of South where they landed on the larger island noted on the map as *Maile* (modern day Mull). Nosing along the shoreline, they had picked a narrow high-sided inlet which led to a small sandy bay below a steep rocky cliff, a perfect hiding place.

The Falcon

Wearing *skinnsskór* (tough leather fighting boots) borrowed from Sveinn, Toke led Thorstein and Hrollf up a steep goat path to lie on the clifftop. From this spot he pointed East of South at the wide Bay about five hundred fathoms distant where he had stollen the fishing boat which took him to Sheep Island.

From this spot they studied the Monastery of Hy which had been first established by *Kolumba* in 563 AD, comparing its layout with the map copied from dead Monk's scroll.

They lay watching gathering information as the planned their raid.

What surprised the Vikings was how few Monks were visible outdoors compared with the total number of men, women and children working in the fields (hoeing weeding and planting), tending animals (cattle, sheep, pigs and goats) and repairing walls and paths. These manual workers did not have shoes and wore an odd mixture of clothing with some of the children in loose fitting coats trailing in the dirt, adult cast-offs tied at the waist with cords.

The Monks were easily distinguished by their strange bald heads, lack of beards and their grey and brown robes and leather shoes and leg strappings. It was clear the Monks were supervising and directing the activities of the others, not actually doing manual work of any kind.

There was no evidence of soldiers or armed men although it was possible they might be based on the larger island of *Maille*. At the North end of Iona, three largish ferry boats plied the narrow strait to and from *Maile*, sailing from a sprawling port about an hour's walk North of where the Viking trio lay watching.

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At midday, Thorstein offered his plan for the raid:

'We should go over to that small bay with the sandy beach, just South of the large stone building arriving at midnight and raid the church immediately.'

Toke replied: 'I agree, but we should use stealth, no *berserksgangr* [18], no war cries, no unnecessary sound, we must be as quite as possible. We must learn from our failed raid on *Lindisfarena*.'

Hrollf added: 'I agree. If we had kept control of our heads back then, we could have grabbed what we were after and escaped before they realised what was happening. It was our own fault. Our recklessness roused the soldiers. Gunnar was at the root of all that shouting, he just went mad. Fear, I say.'

18

Berserkering: loud shouting and cursing used to frighten the enemy.

Thorstein replied:

'I agree. We need to go in quietly and we must take only the most valuable items, especially anything with jewels, gold and silver. Nothing bulky. No paintings, no glass bowls, nothing breakable. No food or wine or anything we can buy when we get home to Thisted.'

Toke then added:

'I propose we send Astrid with Angus and Sveinn Ásbjarnarson ahead as spies to discover where the best items are stored.'

Hrollf said:

I agree, Astrid is a natural schemer and like Sveinn, she also has amazing hearing. Angus is a quick as lightning on his feet and with his *blýfyllt klubba*. Although they are young, they are wise and good calm thinkers. And, as we all know, Astrid has the gift of *spádómr* (prophecy, second sight).'

Thorstein closed the discussion:

'We are agreed. We go tonight.'

The Falcon

Náttar-rán [19]

During the long period of waiting for night to arrive and the raid to begin, Thorstein called the crew together on the beach and told them of the agreed plan for the raid, emphasising his orders, trying to drive it into their adrenaline filled minds, ending with a summary:

We will eat a large meal while we are here, cooking hot food under the tent covers to minimise the release of smoke. Fortunately there is a steady breeze is blowing to disperse it. Keep the noise down, voices carry in still weather.

When we land, I will send Angus and Sveinn Ásbjarnarson ahead to spy out the best way to get into the Monastery and to locate the most precious items. Astrid will accompany them as their back minder using her owl calls to send them messages and warnings. As we all know, she has special powers which we hope will keep them safe from discovery and help her to lead us to their best treasures.

We shall not take daggers or shields. We need to keep our hands free to carry our loot. Instead we shall carry only blýfyllt klubba (lead-filled truncheons) but we must not use them unless it is necessary. My hope is this raid will be a success without bloodshed on either side.

We want their wealth, not their lives.

We will make double thickness sacks from our sea blankets to carry our treasures back in silence to The Falcon in silence.

We will not wear any war paints and we will ***not*** *drink alcohol before we attack. We will be successful and we shall only allow ourselves to celebrate only when we are safely out to sea again.*

We will not wear body armour. The Monks are talkers, not fighters and the ordinary people carry no weapons.

We will wear our béttir hjartaskinnsskór (sea-boots), not our skinnsskór. This will encourage all of us move quietly and slowly and to remind us that our prime advantage is quietness.

19

Náttar-rán : Night raid

The Falcon

We will avoid small talk entirely and use Hvíslum okkur í millum einvís (whispering ear to ear only).

We will move slowly, like a fox stalking a mouse.

Thorstein waited for silence.

'Are there any questions?'

The men looked around at each other, smiling and nodding their heads in agreement.

'Toke will now to speak to you. Concentrate on his every word.'

Toke spoke quietly, almost whispering, a deliberate ploy to get their full attention:

'Men of Thisted, on a night like this we must keep our heads, move slowly and carefully and avoid making noise. No running, no coughing, no pissing or shitting in the bushes. Make sure your bowels and bladders are clear before we go ashore.

'We judge this raid will take a maximum of two hours from the minute we arrive at the chosen landing spot until we leave, laden with their most precious objects.

'We will operate in four groups with Angus, Sveinn and Astrid foraging ahead while we wait at the shore in three raiding groups led by Thorstein, Hrollf and myself until Astrid returns to lead us forward.

'We will follow her S-L-O-W-L-Y, taking care with every step. Remember the rules. SILENCE and STEALTH will lead us to WEALTH.

'Stiener Trémaðr and three men he has selected will remain with *The Falcon* and take charge of your bags when you return and stow them on the side lockers. You will do this in COMPLETE SILENCE, not one word will be spoken. Astrid will record every man's arrival to be sure we have not lost anyone.

'Only when we are all present will we leave. Do NOT leave an injured or dead man behind even if it means leaving a bag of precious objects. A Viking is worth more than a bag of gold.

'Any man breaking our code or Thorstein's instructions will be punished, that I promise on my oath.

'We leave here at two hours after midnight.

'I expect us to be heading North to safety three hours later, while it is still dark.

'No talking as we row away. No talking until Thorstein allows.

'Remember this rule above all others - we will arrive and leave in COMPLETE SILENCE.

'SILENCE and STEALTH will lead us to WEALTH.'

Are there any questions?'

After a short period of silence, Thorstein repeated:

'Yes, SILENCE and STEALTH will lead us to WEALTH.

'Let's do it!'

This brought a murmur of agreement as the men repeated Toke's catchphrase quietly to each other, nodding their heads. They knew they were lucky to have Thorstein, Toke and Astrid aboard. *The Falcon* herself was testament to that.

They were glad to be rid of Gunnar Bjarnason and Erik, his boastful, idiot son.

Thorstein and Hrollf and Toke had brought them safely to this great opportunity and each in their own way had always been always successful in the past.

Later, in small groups, they discussed what they had been told and agreed that it was good plan, allowing themselves to dream of arriving home at Thisted as heroes.

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The *Náttar-rán* (night raid) went well, more or less according to plan.

Two shepherds and their dogs had been bludgeoned when Angus and his team stumbled across them, Angus and Sveinn leaping on the two men as they rose from their slumbers, silencing them with single head blows from their *blýfyllt klubbas*. It was Astrid who had killed the three dogs as they crouched in submissive silence before her under the influence of her quiet low-pitched melodious whistle, afraid to attack because of her psychic power over them, each dispatched with a single blow to its skull.

The raiding party returned intact apart from two men from Toke's group who had picked up minor injuries, one with a sprained ankle, the other with a twisted knee. One of Thorstein's group had a bleeding foot caused when he stood on brambles which pierced his lightweight sea-boots.

They returned in silence carrying their loot in the padded bags made from their sea-blankets which they handed to the men waiting at *The Falcon* who emptied them, stowing

their gleaming contents into the hatches before re-sealing them, making them watertight and restoring added strength of their Longship.

Each man then took back his empty carry bag, removed the thin cords the had used to form it, returning the double carry bag into their own two water shedding sea-blankets.

Throughout this stowage routine, Astrid stood on the upper shore above the Longship, quietly naming and counting each man in her head as he clambered aboard at her nod.

Satisfied that all of the raiders had returned safely and looking aft to Thorstein standing at the rudder, Astrid gave a quiet triple Owl hoot to signal everyone had returned before taking a short run from the shore, leaping up onto the Bow where Angus caught her in his welcoming arms.

Both were smiling broadly, the raid had been a huge success. As soon as they reached Thisted, she would insist that they get married, sure Uncle Toke would help her to persuade her parents to allow it.

Under the power of oars, *The Falcon* moved astern and swung around to head South into the strong breeze, reversing the route they had used to approach their landing beach on *Maile*, with Angus, Sveinn and Astrid spelling each other as lookouts, standing at the Bow, wrapped in a sea-blanket against the cool night air and Bow spray.

When *The Falcon* was well clear of the shore, Thorstein gave them his permission and a series of excited but quiet conversations rippled through the Longship as the men congratulated themselves on the success of the raid, a rich haul with no loss of life or serious injuries, telling each other that when they returned to Thisted, they would be welcomed as heroes.

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The night was clear and the moon was out, almost full. The sky was ablaze with stars.

Staring ahead West of South to gain seaway before turning Northwards, Thorstein saw a darkening on the far horizon, the sign of approaching rain. In his bones he could feel another storm rising, a *Snemm-sumarstormr* (early summer storm), the kind that usually blew through quickly. The breeze was picking up too, a mixed blessing and if the storm came with the rain, it would probably be gusty and variable in direction making for tricky boat handling, probably needing the men to keep their oars at the ready, making for a wet and miserable first day of their journey home.

Leaning on the rudder he brought *The Falcon* around to head West of North, checking time after time the Longship was well clear of *Ioua insula* (Iona) on his right, glancing back as the island disappeared slowly as they powered onwards, heading towards Sheep Island and beyond.

The Falcon

With no stars to steer by because of the clouds, Thorstein was determined to keep the coastline in sight, hoping to find a way home around the top of the Land of the Picts.

If necessary he would find a lonely beach where they could rest up overnight, provided they could make a safe landfall. Perhaps they might find the beach where they had picked up Toke and kill a few more sheep to supplement the fish they could easily catch by trailing a hook from the stern.

He called down to Hrollf:

'I feel in my bones we are in for another big storm. Rig the sail at half and erect the tent-covers before the rain arrives.'

'Pass the word, there will be no hot food as the sea is too lumpy and no alcohol as everyone must stay alert.

'And put the Bow watch team on a fifteen minute rota.

'And keep calling out the heading from the *Sveinssteinn*.'

The Falcon

Snemm-sumarstormr

The *Snemm-sumarstormr* (short lived summer storm) arrived with a series of intense gusts. Thorstein had prepared his crew with forward and aft groups of six oarsmen to help him. The rain came mixed with hailstones, stinging the oarsmen's' faces, partially blinding them. But they responded instinctively, keeping *The Falcon* stable.

In the stern Thorstein was grateful to receive a series of '*all clear ahead*' messages from the Bow team but was uneasy, sensing they must be guessing. He sent Toke to join them telling him to take extra food for them and make sure they kept alert.

The spectre of running aground again was still haunting him. He hated not being able to sight land, especially in bad weather with reduced visibility.

As Thorstein had expected, the wind veered steadily, point by point, taking them to the West which although safer, was likely to take them back towards the tiny island Astrid had suggested have been *Hirtir*, the mythical island from the Sagas. Although the likelihood of running into a second time seemed remote, it was still a possibility.

After a few hours, the wind settled, becoming steadier with less gusting. The sky was dark overhead with low clouds. According to the *Sveinssteinn* they were heading almost due West to an area not charted on the Monk's map. The word was passed forward to Angus on duty as Bow watcher.

'*Not ideal but probably safer*', he told Astrid at the changeover.

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After many long and tiring hours of using the oars to keep the Longship stable, the wind force eased and became much less gusty. Throughout this ordeal, the men manning the oars had been rotated meaning every oarsman had been exposed to the heavy rain for long periods. Their sea-blankets were sodden and they had been snatching mouthfuls of cold food and gulps of water. Thorstein knew they were exhausted, as he was himself.

He called down to Hrollf:

'I sense in my bones that this storm is easing. Pass the word to unfurl the sail by one third and we will see it we can manage without the oars. Get ready to take over from me if she remains stable and we will rig the tent covers and let the men dry out. I need to get a sleep too so you and Stiener will be in charge.'

The men held their oars at the ready but as Thorstein had hoped - *The Falcon* sailed fairly smoothly under the reduced sail and the second order was passed forward to the crew to rig the tent-covers and take a break, dry out and eat and try to sleep.

The Falcon

They sailed on into the night, still heading almost due West, further out into the deep seas, sailing blind into the heavy rain as the last of the light faded into a blustery rain-filled darkness.

Just before dawn, without any warning, the wind veered sharply taking the Falcon on a new course, heading East of North. Once again the wind increased in strength, gusting fiercely. The Longship canted wildly submerging the right hand gunwhales. The tent-covers did a good job shedding this water although the bottom of the Longship was ankle deep in water. Everyone was awake and alert, Toke moved from the Bow to the stern, checking on each man for injuries, making sure they were ready to act if the tent-covers were to be removed and the oars were called for again.

Thorstein was now back at the rudder, steering the Longship.

He shouted to Hrollf:

'Furl the sail and keep the men busy bailing out. I sense in my bones that land is near. Could it possibly be *Hirtir?* Tell Astrid to join me here in the stern.'

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Toke and Astrid lay in the stern compartment, on their sides facing each other.

'Uncle Toke, would you allow me to enter your mind and combine our powers. We must find a safe place to land out of this storm. If we can find *Hirtir* perhaps we could ride out the storm in its lee. If we could land at our shingle beach and lift *The Falcon* out clear of the waves, we could take shelter in the deep cave we told you about.'

'Go ahead Astrid, I am ready.'

'Lie on your back and close your eyes. Listen to my whistle. Follow the notes up and down and don't fight the feeling of floating out of control. Yield to me. I have used this power to help mothers when they are having difficulties during birthing. Maybe I can transport your inner mind to that shingle beach on *Hirtir* so you can guide us using the *Sveinssteinn* as you did before when we found you that night two weeks ago.'

Toke did as she asked. Under the influence of the quiet, high-pitched undulations, his mind slowed.

His body became lighter, he spread his arms and legs wide.

He felt himself float upwards and move at high speed towards an unseen destination.

On arrival at the shingle beach, he spoke in an odd monotone, a deeper male version of the voice Astrid had used in her *spádraumr* (prophetic dream) two weeks earlier:

The Falcon

'Follow the Sveinssteinn wherever it leads. I am waiting for you on the shingle beach. It is in shelter. Take extra care not to hit the reefs which guard it. I am waiting for you.'

Thorstein, who was standing at the entrance to the stern area where Astrid and Toke were lying, heard this and turned to look at the *Sveinssteinn* which moved to point due West of North.

He stood up and shouted up to Hrollf at the rudder:

'Hrollf, bring her head round a quarter. Astrid has projected the spirit of Toke to the shingle beach on Hirtir. We must follow the *Sveinssteinn*.'

'Steiner, pass the word we must return to the oars. Then furl the sail. If we can get into the long cave, we can rest up, dry out and eat hot food again while we wait out this *Snemm-sumarstormr'*.

The Falcon

Heim til Thisted [20]

The *Snemm-sumarstormr* raged on for six more days, with many changes in wind direction.

It was agreed by all that if *The Falcon* had not found a safe haven on *Hirtir*, she would have surely been sunk, all hands lost and the treasure from the *Náttar-rán* (night raid) on the *Kirkjunnar á Hy* (the Monastery of Hy (Ioua insula) would have been lost to the deep seas far to the West of Pictland.

Everyone on board was in high sprits when the seventh day dawned bright and sunny with a good stiff breeze from West of South. They sailed from *Hirtir* with their fully bellies and a good stock of smoked seabird meat, smoked fish and leather bags filled with fresh water.

Everyone had bathed and washed their clothes and re-oiled their sea-blankets.

Every part of the rigging and the tent-cover fastenings had been carefully checked and repaired where required. Every hatch had been opened, checked for leakage (all were dry) and every hatch cover re-sealed with new caulking to ensure its watertightness. The external hull of the Bow was checked and a few of Sveinn's patches and strips re-glued.

The Falcon was a good as new, better even, now her outer Bow was strengthened.

Prior to boarding on their final morning, standing on the single beach, ready to lift their Longship back into the sea, Captain Thorstein Harstyrkr addressed the crew:

'Men of Thisted, I am proud of you, every single one of you. Not only have we overcome the wild seas and other setbacks but we now have the treasure we set out to find. It is now early in *Sólmánuðr* (the summer month (June). I am hopeful we will arrive in Thisted in time for the *Miðsumarsblót* (midsummer festival (solstice).'

'It is important to say that we would not have succeeded with out Astrid and Toke. They have demonstrated how their special powers have saved us and led us to glory. Together with Angus and Sveinn Ásbjarnarson, Astrid has given us the best Longship we have ever sailed in. Without her tent-covers we would have been swamped and sunk. Without her side-lockers I doubt that *The Falcon* would have withstood the monstrous seas we survived.'

20

Heim til Thisted : heading home to *Thisted*.

The Falcon

Men of Thisted, I demand you offer *Þrír skálar fyrir Ástríði* (Three shouts) for Astrid!)

When the cheering and shield thumping eventually died down, Thorstein added:

'Men of Thisted, let us be very clear about what happened when Gunnarr Bjarnason swung his sword at Astrid. As she dodged his swipe, Gunnar became unbalanced and fell backwards and his head fell on a stern spike, dead by his own actions. Astrid is entirely innocent. Entirely innocent.

Toke added:

'If I hear anything contrary to this official version, I will punish those who dare to raise it. I repeat, Astrid is entirely innocent. As you know, Gunnarr Bjarnason was a wild brute who was also a coward who could have rescued me in the 780 AD raid on *Lindisfarena*, but instead he ran away and covered up his cowardice with a pack of lies.'

'Men of Thisted, are we agreed? Tell me!"

'YES! Astrid is entirely innocent!'

'Men of Thisted, are we *ALL* agreed, every one of us?

'***YES! ASTRID IS ENTIRELY INNOCENT!'***

'Men of Thisted, be warned, I will be watching and listening, till the day I die.'

Thorstein said:

'Men of Thisted, Astrid has asked to be allowed to address you:

'As many of you have guessed, Angus and I are a secret *festuð hjón* (betrothed pair). When we arrive in Thisted, we plan to get married and we want everyone here today to bring your families to our *brúðlaup* (wedding feast). We will draw lots for five of you to join with Sveinn Ásbjarnarson to make the six men require to witness our *Sængargangr* (bedding procession - to witness the consummation of the marriage).'

The Falcon

Eptirmáli [21]

The day after *The Falcon* returned to Thisted, Erik Bjarnason and his sister Hildr claimed their father's share of the plunder, sold up their turf house, animals and equipment and moved away from Thirsted, sailing off in their father's fishing boat, never to be heard of again.

Toke satisfied his yearning for bread, buying it from Sveinn's sister *Sigríðr*, then wooing and marrying her in a joint wedding ceremony with Angus and Astrid.

The entire population of Thisted attended their wedding.

Under the leadership Tyrk and Toke Thyssen the population eked out the great wealth from their *Náttar-rán* using it to ensure a steady supply of food and other necessities over the years ahead, making sure everyone benefitted according to their needs and without favouritism.

Over the decades which followed the population of Thisted thrived.

When problems arise which cannot easily be solved by the , Astrid and Toke combine their minds and usually find a good solution.

21

Eptirmáli : good outcomes