

The Viking

Book 1

(The Viking Series)

By
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At not quite fifteen, Stefan's father finally let him board the longship Sja Vinna to take part in his first Viking raid. Yet, the battle was not at all what he expected, and he soon found himself alone and stranded in Scotland.

Thirteen-year-old Kannak's problem was just as grave. Her father deserted them and the only way to survive, she decided, was to take a husband over her mother's objections. Suddenly she was helping a hated Viking escape. Could Kannak successfully hide a Viking in the middle of a Scottish Clan? And why was someone plotting to kill the clan's beloved laird?

CHAPTER 1

It was near the end of Stefan's fourteenth year that his father, the commander of the Viking longship *Sja Vinna* and its fleet of seven ships, at last agreed to take him aboard. Standing on the beautiful Scandinavian shore, his smile was wide and he was certain no happier laddie ever was or ever would be again. He watched the other men wade into the crisp waters of the bay, toss their gear inside, turn around, lift themselves up until they could sit on the rim of the ship and then easily swing their legs over. It was something he had practiced several times and knew precisely how to do.

Why he failed he would never be quite certain, but he guessed it was because the boat he practiced on was smaller than his father's ship. He managed to toss his extra clothing, a heavy blanket, his warm cloak and even the shield his father had given him the night before into the ship. But when he tried to sit the rim, he was suddenly face down in the water. Just as abruptly, his father hauled him out – one hand grasping the back of his baggy brown long pants and the other taking hold of the back of his red tunic. Stefan was swiftly pulled aboard and abruptly dropped - leaving him wet, face down on the deck and completely humiliated amid roars of laughter and jeers from not only his father's men, but the crowd standing on the shore.

Humiliated indeed, but not enough to set aside his elation at being aboard, even when, none too gently, his father shoved him into a sitting position in the stern, warned him to stay there and took little notice of him for a long time after.

Stefan's father was named Donar after a Norse god of storms most no longer believed in. He had a square face with neatly trimmed facial hair and although his nose had obviously been broken more than once, it was straight and pointed, which all the woman agreed, made him exceedingly handsome. His long blond hair, sharp blue eyes, and height of nearly six and a half feet made him by far the strongest and the mightiest, which earned him the respect, if not the fear, of the other men.

As soon as his son was settled, Donar began barking orders. He needn't have bothered, for

his men were well aware they were expected to be seated facing the stern on the narrow benches that lined both sides of the deck, holding their long oars straight up – which was exactly what they were doing.

It was a proud ship of oak wood carved upward at both the stern and the bow until it reached twice the height of the tallest man. The horn was carved into the fierce head of a dragon and faced outward to ward off sea monsters while the back represented the dragon's tail. Attached to each side of the ship's bow was the golden image of a fierce lion to ward off any animal dangers they might encounter on land.

The large ship could easily hold a hundred men, although Donar chose to take only sixty per ship. Fewer men meant more room for sleeping, supplies and any captives they happened to bring back. In preparation for each voyage there was much to consider and Donar ran a mental check list of supplies, which he always saw to the loading of himself. But when it came to enough food, he searched the face of the man seated to his right until Anundi understood his concern and nodded – they had ample food aboard and Donar's only son, his only living family, in fact, would not taste hunger on this voyage.

Satisfied his ship was ready, the commander took up a position near his son in the stern, took hold of the rudder post, raised his other hand high and looked across the water at the other ships in his fleet. Each man also held his oar straight up and was staring at his ship's stroke, who in turn impatiently watched Donar for the signal.

The race was about to begin.

It was the same each time they left shore and only once had another ship beaten Donar's crew out of the bay, through the narrow fjord and into the open waters of the North Sea. Some said he cheated, for his mooring was at least a hairs-breath closer to the fjord than the other ships. To prove them wrong, Donar had the *Sja Vinna* moved northward several feet and inwardly smiled.

Donar's men were not stronger or more skilled; it was his ship that gave him the advantage. All Viking ships had shallow hulls which enabled the men to beach the ship, strike and make good their escape with lightning speed. But the pride of the Viking fleet was fitted with a hull that was a good six inches shallower than the others, allowing just enough more speed and agility to win nearly every race.

Someday he would share that secret with his son. It was not cheating so much as it was a

necessary challenge for the men, lest they grow lazy and incompetent. And it was good fun for all. Every man, woman and child came to watch and most hastened to place a wager or two, for or against the longship *Sja Vinna*.

Donar lowered his arm until it was straight out. In precise unison, all sixty men in each of ten ships set their oars in the water and got ready. Stefan's chest swelled with pride, for now he was not just another number in the crowd watching, but was himself aboard ship and about to taste the delights of the entire world. He had only a slight twinge of regret when he leaned out so he could see around the steep upward swing of the carved back and take one more look at the beloved aunt and uncle who raised him after his mother passed.

Then his father dropped his hand, gave a shout and the race began.

In every race it was at this very point that the winner and the losers were determined, for it was not enough to simply lower the oars in the water. They must be lowered at precisely the right angle so that when the shout was given, the men could immediately pull with enormous force at the same moment and the same angle, lift the oars, put them back in the water and pull again in perfect harmony. It was a skill they practiced often at sea.

Not at all his first time on the ocean, Stefan knew enough to hang on, but he did not expect the profound jerk sixty powerful men could create. He lost his grip and went tumbling forward. But then the oars were lifted, which stopped his momentum and he rolled back. It took him two more attempts to get himself upright long enough to grab hold of anything at all, which happened to be an ax handle with the blade driven hard into the deck.

He quickly looked up to see if his father had noticed his blunder, and was relieved when the commander seemed only to care about the competition. Nevertheless, Stefan could not have been more chagrined for they were fast approaching the fjord and he had nearly missed the whole race.

He leaned out again to look back at the figures of his aunt and uncle growing smaller on the shore of his Scandinavian homeland. Then he looked to see where all the other ships were. The *Sja Vinna* was ahead, but not by much. He held his breath. Surely his first race would not be a loss. If it were, it would be a terrible omen, so much so his father might take him back home for fear of what it could mean.

But then the *Sja Vinna* shot ahead and when Stefan looked, a group of men standing as close to the high walls of the fjord as the flat land would allow, judged the winner of the race and held

up Donar's colors of blue and gold.

It was such a short race the men were hardly winded, or so they would have the laddie believe, even though their tunics were completely soaked through with sweat. Thrilled, Stefan joined his triumphant shout to theirs. The race, what he saw of it, exhilarated him and already he was looking forward to returning home so he could boast of having won his first race.

No sooner had the thought passed through his mind than he turned his attention back to the ship and marveled at the way it glided over the smooth blue water of the fjord. Seven of the ten ships dropped back, but he was expecting that. Donar wanted only two ships to accompany the *Sja Vinna* on this voyage. Even after they passed successfully between the two foliage covered high cliffs with cascading waterfalls, the men continued to row, although at a less urgent pace.

At last they entered the North Sea and conquered the first few waves before Donar shouted, "Stow yer oars and set yer shields lads!" Their precision was remarkable as one by one each man lifted his oar, set it inside and then hung his colorful shield over the side facing out.

Stefan watched his father give charge of the rudder to Anundi, and then hang his son's shield next to his own on the port side. Then his father shouted the order Stefan most wanted to hear. "Set yer sail, lads.

It was a monstrous wooden mast made of the same sturdy oak as the ship and set just a bit off center, with a thin golden image of a bird at the top that moved according to the direction of the wind. The massive square sail was as tall as the ship was long and would be used as a tent when the rains came, as surely they would. Made of thickly woven, off-white hemp, the sail was unfurled, hoisted to the top of the mast by several stout men and with a loud pop, the wind snapped the sail taut. As quickly as they could, the men secured the rigging to the ship sides, the bow and the stern.

Stefan's uncle had taken him out to sea a time or two, but only on a small boat fit for fishing. Fascinated, Stefan studied every inch of the sail, and watched exactly how everything was done. It was only after the sail was set, that he realized his father had walked the length of the ship and was now in the bow. He could only see his legs under the billowed bottom of the sail, his father said to stay put and Stefan knew not to disobey. But he sorely objected to such a barrier now that he could at last spend more than a day or two with his father.

"'Tis safer here, laddie, till ye've the hang o' it." said Anundi. Like all the men, Anundi Spörr was dressed well. He wore leather shoes, long pants with attached socks that insured warm

legs and feet, a tunic and a floppy long-sleeve under tunic made of linen. The undergarment hung several inches below his red woolen outer tunic and was belted with a leather belt and a bronze buckle. Being able to wear linen, and more of it than necessary, especially if it was brightly embroidered or decorated with colorful cloth braids, which his was, signified great wealth.

All the Vikings brought back plunder and their families prospered because of it, but everyone said his father and Anundi were the wealthiest of the lot. An abundance of weapons was also a sign of wealth and the Vikings in his father's command had them all. They each had a long handled axe, a three-pronged spear with iron tips for killing and for fishing, a helmet with a nose protector, a sword, and a dagger. Anundi's sword had a gold plated handle and a wide, flat blade.

Now that the hard work of rowing was ended and there was a nip in the sea air, Anundi handed the rudder off to yet another man so he could put on his long, sheepskin cloak. Once he had it around his shoulders, he held a round, gold brooch steady at the neck, pinned the two layers of material together and then moved the opening to one side, freeing his sword and the hand needed to wield it.

It was the first real notice Stefan had taken of his father's longtime friend and second in command. He nodded his understanding and waited for Anundi to sit down beside him before he asked. "To where do we sail?"

"Scotland, laddie, Scotland – the land o' delights." His smile made the boy smile too. "Laddie, do ye intend to die this day?"

Stefan was shocked by the question. "Nay."

"Then ye best get out o' those wet clothes afore ye freeze solid."

*

Donar stood squarely in front of the long, dragon-shaped neck of the bow with his legs apart for balance. He folded his arms and nodded his approval to his men. He was pleased with winning the race and the precision with which they carried out their tasks. It was a sign of great respect for a man who wanted to impress the son he hardly knew.

His son, however, was even more inexperienced than he suspected and with the sail between them, he at last allowed himself to laugh at Stefan's ungainliness. "The laddie be none too steady," he whispered to the men nearest him. Soon he was joined in laughter, leaving Stefan puzzled as to what the joke might be. But the eyes near him left no doubt – they were laughing at

him. No sooner had he concerned himself with that, than he was diverted by a dolphin in the water on its back beside the ship, eyeing him as though it too was laughing.

Stefan rolled his eyes and defiantly folded his arms.

He did not know why, but the boy suddenly leaned out and looked back at the land he was leaving behind. For a moment he feared he would never see it again, but he shook off the foreboding and continued to marvel at the diminishing size of the place he knew to be a beautiful, vast land with pleasant meadows, fine fishing and snowcapped mountains. He watched it for as long as he dared, then turned back to face his father.

All the men seemed to have a particular chore save him and he hoped he would not remain idle for the entire voyage. “What am I to do?”

Minding the rudder again, Anundi smiled. “Yer father wants ye to watch, listen and learn. There’ll be work aplenty afore long.”

That too made Stefan happy. He wanted to be a part of them, not a guest aboard their magnificent ship. Yet the foreboding that he may never see home again returned twice more. He spoke not a word of it for fear the men would think him childish and weak. He simply could not risk their bad opinion of him, not now, not when he was so close to becoming what he dreamed of being – a Viking.

It was a decision he would regret the rest of his life.

CHAPTER II

It was Anundi who would do most of the teaching and the first lesson was to make it from one end of the ship to the other without stepping on anyone or falling overboard. He explained how to either slip under the sail or hold on to it and swing out to reach the other side. Stefan chose the latter. The first couple of times, he nearly fell overboard, but with a little more practice, he excelled and his father was pleased, not so much that he had mastered it but that he was willing to try.

For the remainder of the day, the boy watched the men adjust the sail according to the wind, watch for sea monsters or unfriendly ships, sharpen their swords and break out the food for their evening meal. Then as the sun began to set, they lowered the sail, stowed it, dropped anchor and began to settle in for the night.

It was not until after the rest of the men were settled that Donar motioned for his son to join him in the bow. Both wore their warm cloaks and as they sat down, Donar reached for his son's blanket and handed it to him. "I am pleased to have ye with me, Stefan. I have dreamed o' it often."

Stefan's jaw dropped, "Ye would have taken me to sea even without all me beg'n?"

"Aye, but I enjoyed yer beg'n. As soon as ye learned to speak ye began to demand it. When ye were five, ye threatened to kill me if I dinna take ye."

Stefan smiled. "I meant it too."

Donar scooted back until he could comfortably lean against the large cloth sacks stowed in the bow. "For these many years ye have had questions and I have had no time to answer them. Now there be the time...ask, my son."

Stefan had to think about it for a moment. There were thousands of questions, or at least seemed to be, but he could only think of one just now. "I want to know..."

"Go on, I will answer any question ye ask."

"Ye will think me still a wee laddie."

"If ye are, the fault be mine for not having helped ye become a lad."

Stefan quickly glanced at the exhausted men laying between the benches and taking up every inch of available space on the deck. Only four of them were still sitting upright with their eyes held out watching for other ships and the dreaded sea monsters.

“‘Tis that my aunt will not speak o’ her and I dinna even know my mother’s name.”

“Ah, well yer aunt loved her sister very much and ‘tis painful to speak o’ her. ‘Twas painful for me too, but I dinna mean to neglect telling ye about yer mother. Her name was Sheena and she asked me to give ye this.” He tossed one side of his cloak over his shoulder, found the thin strap around his neck and pulled a pouch out from inside his tunic. All the men wore small pouches to carry a scrap of clean cloth, coins, flint, tinder and a small piece of “c” shaped metal with which to strike the flint. But Donar’s pouch was larger and from it, he withdrew a gold medallion.

Stefan’s eyes grew wide. “Never have I seen such a treasure.” He leaned forward so his father could slip the long leather string over his head and then lifted the medallion with his hand to study its beauty.

“Scotland has many great treasures. This was a gift to yer mother from her father.” He watched the boy admire the medallion for a while longer and then decided he might as well tell him all of it. “Yer mother made me promise not to let ye go to sea.”

Stefan was stunned, “Why?”

“Because she loved me.”

“I dinna understand.”

“Then I will explain it. She was the most beautiful lass I have ever seen. Ye have her eyes, I think, and her shade o’ yellow hair. Sometimes, particularly when something dinna please ye, ye look exactly like I remember her when she was riled.” Donar paused to take a breath. “I love her still and there be not a day goes by I dinna think o’ her.”

“Ye were not there when she died.”

Donar winced at the pain his son’s words brought. “I stayed away too long and yer mother was already in the ground by the time I came back, she and the bairn with her. ‘Twas a daughter, or so the seer said. Yer aunt swore she would never forgive me for that as well as the other, but she did agree to keep ye until ye were grown. Ye were treated well?”

“Aye, very well. What other?”

Donar smiled at the memory, took a deep breath and slowly let it out. “It was a glorious

battle, the best I have ever seen. The Scots put up a fierce fight and we might have lost had we not been better trained. Out o' the corner o' my eye, I saw a lass running from the village. I feared she would bring other forces against us, so I chased after her."

"Was it my mother?"

"It was."

"She was Scottish?"

"To the bone. Did yer aunt not teach ye Gaelic?"

"Aye," Stefan answered with a smile. "'Tis not so different from our language."

"I too had a Scottish mother and we will practice it now. The lads dinna speak it and this way we will have privacy." He pulled up his sleeve, showed a scar and then pulled his cloak back around him for warmth. "When I laid hand on Sheena, she bit my arm hard and drew blood. I let go and she nearly escaped, but I grabbed her again and pulled her to the ground. She thought I meant to force her."

"Did ye?"

Again Donar smiled. "My mother made me take a pledge not to and I have honored that pledge. Mother dinna say, but as I grew up not looking at all like the man I called father, I believe she was forced." He paused, giving his son a little time to absorb the revelation. "The lad I called father was unkind, so when I was o' age I killed him and took to the sea."

"Did yer mother scorn ye for killing him?"

Donar nodded. "At first, but when I brought back gold and silver from England, I was quickly forgiven and in the end, she confessed she was grateful I killed him."

"Then I am pleased too."

"Aye, he deserved to die for what he did to her."

"What did he do to her?"

"Whatever he wanted. A lass who be forced has few choices. She, and the child if one be conceived, will starve if she dinna marry the first lad who will have her, even if she knows him to be unkind. For a lad, pleasuring himself takes but a few minutes. For the lass he forces, the misery dinna end until the day she dies." Again he kept quiet for a time, hoping his son was old enough to grasp the true meaning. "Now I will have yer pledge never to force a lass. Do ye give it?"

He waited for Stefan's nod and then continued. "As to yer mother, I held her to the ground,

made her promise not to hurt me again and let her up. It was then I saw how beautiful she was and I believe it was then she began to love me.”

“Because ye did not force her?”

“Aye, she said as much later. There was little time, so I picked her up and carried her toward the ship. When she realized what I was doing, she folded her arms and glared at me. ‘I’ll not go without me sister,’ she said. I only meant to take her away from the fighting and talk her into going with me. But she told me which was her sister and then hid behind the rocks until I returned.”

At first Stefan was astonished, but then he began to smile. “Ye took them both and for this my aunt hates ye.”

“She does indeed. Sheena said she was pledged to marry a deceitful lad and if I wanted her, I had to spare her sister a dreadful marriage.”

“But my aunt dinna see that?”

“Nay, she believed she was in love. Even now that she loves her husband very well, she still thinks I robbed her o’ the life she was to have. Her betrothed was a laird and she would have been his mistress.”

“His miserable mistress.”

“True. A lad must learn to know what be best for those he cares about. He must be stronger and wiser even when everyone else disagrees.” Donar studied the worried look on his son’s face for a moment, found a more comfortable sleeping position and closed his eye. “Fret not, I will teach ye.”

*

Stefan did not keep count but believed crossing the sea took more than a month. His days were spent sailing, watching for sea monsters, learning to row in sync when the wind was slack, eating and sometimes slipping over the side to bathe in the ocean. He learned to read the stars and to discern the placement of the sun by watching the shadow cast beneath a round disk affixed to the top of an iron peg in the deck. His chores included taking a flask of water from man to man quenching their unrelenting thirst and seeing that not a drop was wasted. His was also to open the water barrels to catch the rain during storms.

In times of lull when the wind was lax and the men tired of rowing, they delighted in telling Stefan stories about the years of Viking conquests in places as far away as North Africa and the

Middle East. They described fierce battles, the weapons used against them and how they managed to stay alive. Yet they all agreed the plight of the Vikings was becoming more dangerous and less rewarding, which was why they preferred destinations closer to home.

Invariably, the discussion turned to a debate between the men who preferred a plump lass to a thin one, and then to the abilities and attributes of all women, half of which Stefan was not at all certain he believed. Occasionally, he looked to his father to see the truth of it and welcomed his slight nod or the shake of his head.

After that, the men struck a more somber note as they remembered the fallen and told of carving their names in the Snoleved Stones back home so eternity would remember them.

It all sounded glorious and Stefan was mesmerized. But when he and his father spoke Gaelic, Donar was careful to tell his son the truth about war, death and dying in great detail so he would not find it quite so enchanting. “A lad must know what be worth dying for and what be not. Wealth be not.”

Stefan wrinkled his brow, “But we are Vikings.”

“We are lads afore we are Vikings. Only the protection of yer family be worth dying for. Everything else comes and goes like the tide. Today yer wealthy, tomorrow yer wife dies and ye have wasted yer life trying to bring her treasures – when all she wanted was more time with the lad she loved.” He crossed himself in his wife’s memory and then looked up at the brightest star. “Soon ye will see Scotland. Many a Viking lives in Scotland and so will we.”

“What?” Stefan swallowed hard. “Why?”

“Because I promised yer mother. The only way to prevent ye from going to sea be to let the ships leave without us.”

“But father...”

“Stefan, ye dinna have my rage and rage be what it takes for a Viking to stay alive. Ye are a gentle soul with yer mother’s kindness. I would have ye live free o’ war, loving a good lass and giving me lots o’ grandsons. Do ye agree?”

Stefan did not agree. His mind was filled with the excitement of fierce battles, women and plunder. But he loved his father and so he reluctantly relented with the slightest of nods.

For three days, the men used the sail to shield themselves from driving rain while a massive storm tossed the ship around. If they were to be eaten by sea monsters, a storm was the most dangerous time and all the men worried – all but Stefan, who would have been delighted to see at

least one.

On the fourth day, the heavy fog lifted, the sun broke through the clouds and Donar was relieved to see they had not lost a single ship. They were, however, off course. He studied the disk shadow on the deck, corrected their course and headed them once again toward Scotland.

When he could, Stefan stood in the stern hoping to be the first to sight land. Like most of the men, he wore a braid on each side of his face and then tied the two together in the back with twine to keep his long hair out of his eyes. He wore his dagger, sword and sheath proudly. His boots that laced up the sides were nearly too small, but it meant he was still growing and that was a good thing, especially for a Viking.

Being a Viking was a dream he had not yet given up. He fervently hoped his father would change his mind, perhaps when he saw how completely boring living on land day after day could be. He hardly paid attention when his father came to stand next to him, but when Donar pointed to a bird, Stefan took notice.

“The gulls tell us we are near land.” Donar pulled another string from around his neck, put it over his son’s head and dropped the heavy pouch inside his son’s tunic. “They will expect me to have this instead o’ ye. We will trick them.” He winked and then folded his arms. “When the commander o’ a ship dies, he be put out to sea and the ship set afire.” He playfully nudged Stefan and leaned a little closer. “‘Tis a waste o’ a good ship.”

Stefan smiled and went back to keeping a sharp eye out for land. The death of his commander was not something he wanted to contemplate now...or ever.

CHAPTER III

Kannak needed a husband.

She did not want one and was not at all convinced she would know what to do with one, but now that her father neglected to return, life promised to be extremely difficult for a mother and daughter trying to survive alone. Marriage was Kannak's idea and her mother flatly refused to consider it, but in the end Kannak could think of no other answer.

There were stipulations of course, for the two had talked of the man she would marry. "See that he has the strength of an ox, does not take to strong drink and has good teeth," her mother instructed. As she mounted her horse, Kannak wondered just how she could ask a man to show his teeth before she married him. But she decided she would puzzle that out later.

They were members of Clan Macoran and lived in a cottage on the north side of the river that separated clan Macoran from Clan Limond. Clan Macoran's land lay in a wide "L" shape at the foot of the gradual slope of a high hill. Small farms dotted the longer part of the bend that bordered the river while the other end stretched north along the eastern coast of Scotland. Clan Limond owned the flatter land to the south of the river.

For the most part, the two clans were peaceful, although there were disputes from time to time over livestock, fishing and women. Mostly they fought over the salmon in the river but sometimes over women, of which there never seemed to be enough. Women died in childbirth and men died in battle, but when there were as few wars as there had been lately, the men outlived two and sometimes three wives.

Kannak wore her long, auburn hair in a loose braid down the middle of her back and for this occasion, she looked as best she could in her woolen, ankle-length, unbelted frock. It was a pale gray with wide sleeves and since it was such a special occasion, she also wore a long under shirt of soft linen. The under garment was a gift from her uncle who lived in the far north. Her shoes were clean, her face scrubbed and she guessed that would have to be enough to attract a husband.

She considered herself to be exceptionally strong of heart and mind, but as she turned her horse and rode away, a sickness stirred in her stomach. She was, after all, but thirteen years of

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