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The Return

'I have wielded a blood-stained sword
and howling spear; the bird
of carrion followed me
when Vikings pressed forth;
In fury we fought battles,
fire swept through men's homes'

(Egil's Saga, 76)



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Norway, AD 880

With the sun in her eyes, Freydis could not see the distant ship skimming down the fjord like a many-legged spider towards a fly. She sat in the doorway of the farmstead enjoying the spring air, an embroidery frame on her lap. Bent over it in concentration, tongue tucked between her teeth, she bathed in the warm light that spilled into the hall. It made her hair shine like the creamy butter on the cool, dark shelves of the dairy and brought the design on the frame to life with vibrant colour. The canvas was almost finished, the product of a long winter on her home island of Bjarkoy, a season when the sun disappeared and the snow reached the roof. Gold knot-work wove through a border of animals—a red serpent, a black wolf with snapping jaws, a white-furred fox, a brown bear, a sea eagle with a fish in its beak—pictures inspired by her life here in the north.

As well as a few extras from her imagination, she admitted, smiling to herself. Something to make Toki laugh when he spotted them. She had included two dwarves with grumpy faces and a dragon with a curling tail among the other creatures.

'Freydis, come and see the newborn!' her brother called from the paddock. A loose-limbed reindeer calf staggered to nuzzle for milk like a drunkard at the Midwinter feast.

Only eighteen but already tall and broad-shouldered, Toki looked in silhouette against the shining water of the fjord very much like their father, thought Freydis as she pulled the thread taut. But his warmth, thank the gods, was all his own. He was delighted by the new addition, yet another proof that the herd was flourishing under his care. When their father returned—if he ever returned—it would be almost double the size it had been when he left.

'Come on, snail!' Toki called again.

'I'll come in a moment,' answered Freydis. 'Just two more stitches.'

With a final snap of woollen thread, she completed the pattern, a headrest for the jarl's chair, the seat of the lord of these lands. Mumbling rare words of praise, her old nurse, Magda, took it away to back with fine linen, ready to decorate the hall for that

evening's meal. Freydis imagined Toki sitting at the head of the table, the embroidery, her gift to him, in pride of place.

'I'm ready now, Toki!' Freydis ran swiftly down the path worn between home and paddock, jumping the old drift of snow that sagged against the north wall in a dirty sprawl.

But Toki was no longer looking in her direction. He was staring out to sea at the square white sail of the longboat sweeping down on them from the iron-grey horizon.

'To arms!' he shouted.