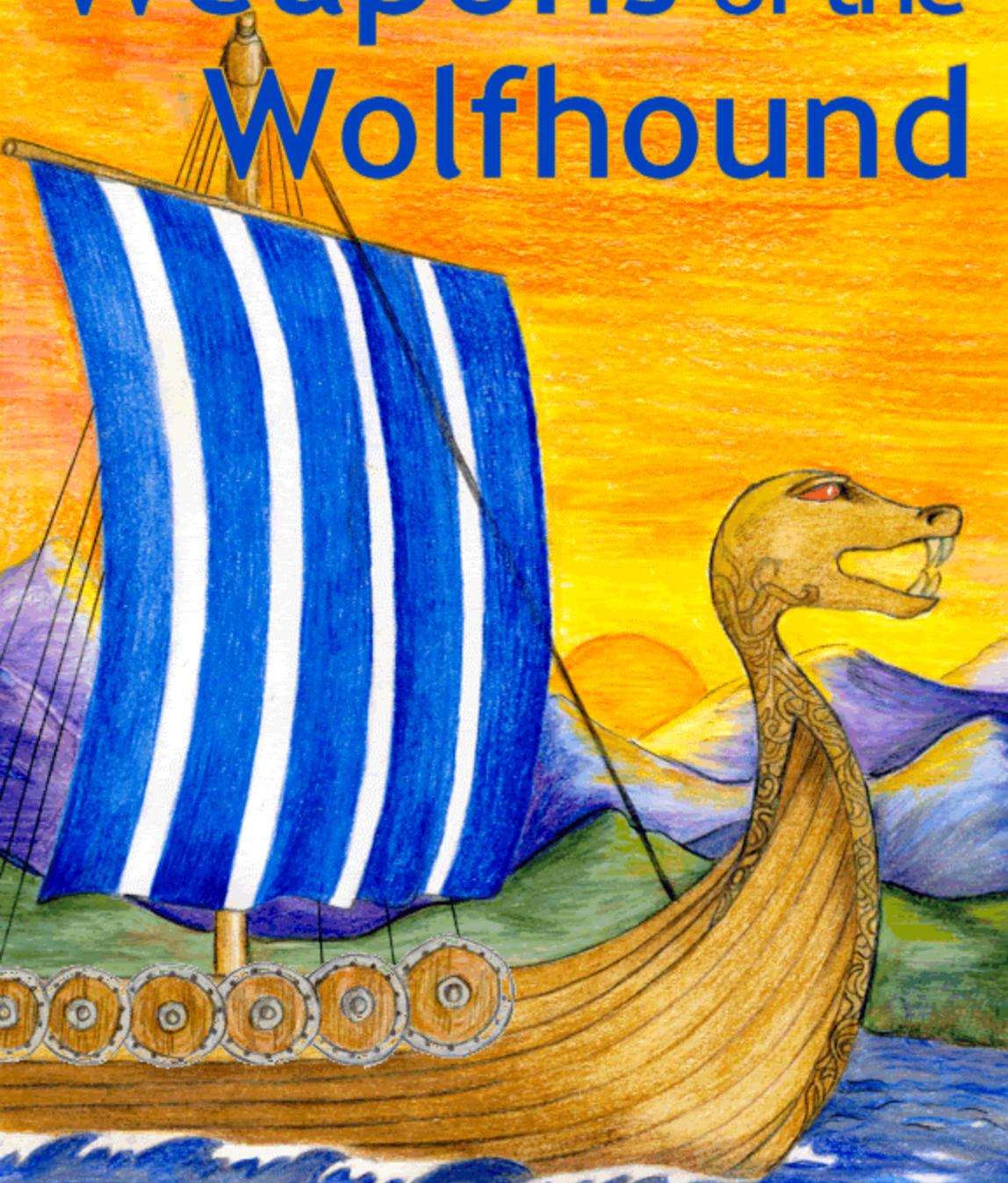


Weapons of the Wolfhound



Moyra Caldecott

**THE WEAPONS OF THE
WOLFHOUND**

MOYRA CALDECOTT

Mushroom eBooks

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Introduction

The inspiration for *The Weapons of the Wolfhound* came to me in the British Museum, London, as I contemplated some beautifully carved chess pieces in a glass case. It seemed they had been discovered at Uig on the Isle of Lewis, Outer Hebrides, Scotland in 1831. The sea had worn away a sandbank to reveal a small stone room like an oven. A peasant working nearby saw it and broke into it. He was terrified to find it full of little figures, which he took to be from the underworld. He ran home in terror, but later his wife persuaded him to return, and he found the figures were carvings.

The British Museum experts identified them as twelfth century chess pieces, comprising more than one set, carved from walrus ivory. How they came to be in the little room no one knows. I was curious as to who could have carved such sophisticated pieces at that time and in that place. It must surely have been someone with a considerable knowledge of ecclesiastical and royal vestments, and someone with a wide knowledge of life in other countries.

I began my research and became convinced it must have been a hermit (common in those days in remote places) who had once been part of the busy ecclesiastical life of some great monastery in Europe. As he became more and more real for me, the other characters and the story began to take shape.

I heard, though I cannot vouch for it, that the guard dogs of the British Museum have been known to growl as they pass the chess pieces, as though something still clings to them from the past. It was hearing this that gave me the idea for the supernatural happenings in the tomb of the Wolfhound.

In June 1995 I heard on the BBC morning news that the people of Lewis were trying to get the chessmen back to the Island, to display there, just as the Greeks are trying to get the Elgin Marbles back to the Parthenon in Athens.

Chess is a game that symbolises the change and movement and conflict of real life, encourages skills in strategy and compromise, tests the wits and broadens the mind. Neil's adventures may have started as a game, but he soon realised that real life has an extra element of danger and the unexpected.

Chapter 1

The hermit

Waking to sunlight in early April so far north is a luxury. Neil stretched and yawned, feeling a kind of relief through all his limbs as the sunlight pressed down on him through the small square of the window.

‘Spring!’ he said to himself. ‘Spring at last!’

And, afraid to miss a minute of it, he leapt up and leaned out into the clean, morning air. It was too early for the tall grasses, too early for the flowers, but the blessed pale sun touched everything with a kind of benediction, and everything seemed right with the world. In the marshlands in the centre of the island many of the lakes and pools were still frozen. The marsh birds that had stayed through the long winter went about their business. The first strings of migrants began restlessly to wing northward towards Iceland, the warming sun touching their feathers. The speckled, long-legged redshanks, the pink-footed goose, the greylag goose, the heron, the cheeky meadow pipit, all

on the wing, all as excited as Neil. Summer would not be long in coming.

At the farm, the rough Lewis stone rubble walling of the farm buildings looked honey colour in the light except where the lichen turned them orange. The heather thatching was so overgrown with moss and lichen that it was almost as though the long building was there purely to support a garden. Against the winter wind the thatch had been lashed down and weighted with stones which in themselves were covered with lichen and added colour to the whole. The cold still kept the horses stamping in the paddock and breathing puff-balls of steam. The dogs were out, sniffing about; the hens and cocks pecking amongst the dirt of the yard. One great golden cockerel shook out his gleaming feathers and crowed as though he personally was responsible for the spring.

The winter in the Isle of Lewis is like one very long and very bitter night. Dawn is Spring. Spring is release from the dark stuffy pressure of the house, from the stinging smoke in the eyes, from the damp, dank stone that surrounds you when you sleep. Bed rugs could be aired, clothes could be changed, journeys could be contemplated. Neil bound up the thongs of his shoes, pulled on his clothes and was away, clattering down the stairs, shouting to the dogs in the yard, desperate to get out before the suns' mood changed and the damp hand of the winter choked the life out of him again.

‘Where are you going?’ shouted his mother.

But Neil either did not, or would not, hear and kept on running. He would have breakfast with Brother Durston. Brother Durston would have some dried meat left from his winter store, he might even have oat cakes and porridge. He was a good cook in spite of his appearance. And he would have things to tell him, maybe some more carvings to show him.

‘You are not going to that filthy hermit? Neil! Neil!’ His mother’s voice bleated across the yard. The dogs were all barking to greet him. A horse or two came to the fence to have its nose stroked. The chickens scattered, noisily.

He never knew how Brother Durston managed to survive the winter. It was bad enough in the great house and they had roaring fires and plenty of fur and wool to keep them warm, company and torches and good food, strong walls to keep out the scavenging winds and needle-sharp rain. The hermit on the other hand lived in what appeared to be a heap of rubble covered with turf. It was in fact a sturdily built little cell, each stone carefully placed to fit the next, the cracks totally covered by the turf roofing, and it leant against the slope of the hill so that the main blast of the winter wind would blow straight over the top. It was built steeply so that most of the snow would slide off its roof. The thick door of black oak had a curved wall just outside it to break the force of the weather when it was opened, and most of the smoke went up and out through a primitive chimney above the hearth. Most of the smoke. But not all. The walls inside the cell were blackened with smoke and

Brother Durston himself had rings of black around his bloodshot eyes and grease clinging to his rancid clothes by the time the spring came. The smell inside his cell during winter was foul, but as the spring and summer advanced the whole place was aired and it became a pleasant place to be if you were a boy with a restless spirit and anxious to hear tales of the distant world with which Durston had been so familiar before he became a hermit and settled near Uig.

Neil had first seen him when he was eight years old. He had been sent to watch some sheep which were grazing rather too near the cliffs. The sun was high, the pale butterwort flowering, the heather marvellously purple. He had eaten his fill of bilberries and had had the satisfaction of watching a pigmy shrew scuttering about her business. Everything seemed set for an exceptionally good day. At midday he stood and gazed at the sea. It lay in gleaming sheets of silver below him as far as he could see. Where the rocks of the Island cut into it, white foaming cascades of water broke and scattered. He longed to be on it, longed to have a ship like a Viking ship, to sail away and never come back, following the sun, following the call of the nine sea maidens . . . One day . . . one day he would . . . no one would stop him! After a time he grew hungry and, as the sheep were grazing now safely away from the cliff, he started walking down the slope towards the farm, thinking of the good steaming stew his mother would have ready and the cool milk he would drink afterwards. Suddenly he was startled to hear a scuffling noise and

from what appeared to be a pile of turf and rocks there rose a monster, getting taller all the time as he watched. It looked like a man and yet was too big and too ugly for a man. It seemed to have claws and a great beak and eyes as penetrating and as deadly as the eyes of the great golden eagle. He ran screaming from the place.

‘It was something like a ghoul,’ he babbled to his mother, ‘and something like a beast. Like a great eagle, yet it had legs and arms. It lifted its claws and tried to clutch at me! Its eyes can see me!’ He howled, ‘its eyes can see me even here!’

‘Nonsense,’ said his mother.

‘It was horrible . . . it rose up out of the ground, out of a kind of mound . . .’

‘I am sure it was nothing but your imagination.’

‘No. No! I saw it! It had rags instead of feathers or fur. Almost like a man.’

‘You know,’ his mother said thoughtfully, ‘I think you might have seen the hermit of Uig.’

‘Hermit? What is a hermit?’ wept Neil, still thinking it was a creature from the underworld. Had he not seen the thing rising out of the earth?

‘A Holy man, a man of God. One who has chosen to live by himself to pray for mankind and meditate on God. A good man. He would not hurt you.’

‘A good man?’ Neil could not believe that a good man could look so ugly and smell so vile, and be so tall and keep growing taller.

But as he grew older and had spent some time observing the hermit from a safe distance, he grew bolder and one day drew near enough to speak to him.

‘Sir,’ he said, clearing his throat.

The hermit looked up from the carving he was doing, sitting on a slab of stone outside his cell.

‘Sir,’ repeated Neil, with more confidence this time. ‘Are you a hermit?’

‘That is true boy,’ the hermit said in a voice reassuringly rich and friendly.

‘May I talk with you?’ Neil asked curiously, coming nearer.

‘You may,’ the hermit said.

Neil stood in front of him for some time at a loss what to say next. At last he said: ‘I thought hermits were not allowed to talk to people.’

‘Hermits on the whole avoid talking to people. It interrupts their contemplation.’

‘What is contemplation?’ Neil asked.

It was the hermit’s turn to look momentarily at a loss. He did not reply at once, then slowly, after a long pause, he pointed to a patch of moss.

‘Look at that . . . now . . . properly.’

Neil looked puzzled but did as he was told. At first he saw just what he had always called moss, green stuff, rather like velvet. But under the hermit’s guidance he began to notice each leaf, each exquisitely formed leaf arranged in intricate patterns with other leaves. He noticed there were different types of moss, variations in patterning, star shapes and spear shapes, and some like

minute fronds of fern. Leaves laid on leaves to make a pad of considerable depth. Shades of green, unimaginably subtle in variation. Within that small area, no bigger than his hand, such splendours of design that would take a man days just to count and more than a lifetime to figure out for himself.

‘That is the beginning of contemplation,’ Brother Durston said quietly, ‘but it is not the end.’

Neil thought hard about what the hermit had shown him.

He came back time and again to see the man and gradually they became friends. The hermit knew a great deal and taught Neil many things. He taught him to read and write much of the Latin of the Holy Book. Neil loved to hear the blood and thunder stories of the Old Testament and frequently asked for tales of battles between the ancient peoples of the earth when Brother Durston would rather have told him of Christ’s teaching that all men are brothers and should learn to understand and forgive one another. He questioned him about the Vikings and even learnt a little of their language. He hoped one day to have need of it. He learnt from the hermit how to reckon, to play chess, to know the names and positions of the stars and constellations, and a great deal about the tides and currents of the sea.

Neil was never bored with Brother Durston as he was with his father’s house and the endless care of the animals. At home he enjoyed riding the horses, but he was not always allowed to do that. He was more often than not sent to clean out the cowsheds, swill out the

pens or chase the sheep. And whenever anyone went on a journey, he was always left behind.

One year a Norse sea captain, called Baldur, had come to the district seeking provisions. Brother Durston, knowing something of his language, befriended him and the two men found pleasure in each others' company playing chess for many hours together in the summer. Neil never visited Brother Durston when his Norse friend was with him, but occasionally spied on them from behind a crowberry bush, awed and amazed by the Norseman's great hulk, his mighty laugh and the deadly gleam and glint of the sword resting at his side. Baldur was as tall as Durston, but built like a fortress. His blond hair was long and flowing, his beard fear-somely red. Together his beard and his moustache so covered the lower area of his face that it was only rarely one caught a glimpse of his large white teeth.

One of Neil's own distant ancestors had been Norse, and it was a source of secret pride for him. At every opportunity he questioned Brother Durston about Baldur. He was determined to go to Norway one day. He would sail in a Viking ship. He would leave the quiet fields and comfortable buildings of his home and sail away to adventure and excitement. He would wield a sword. He would throw a spear. Men would tremble at his name as they did at the name of Baldur and Baldur's father, Karl, the Wolf-Hound.

One of Neil's favourite stories was how Baldur's father had won his name.

One day when he was fifteen Karl had been sent into the forests to gather wood. He was a huge boy, nearly six foot tall and very broad. Strong as an ox. When he was on his way home bearing what was almost a whole tree on his back, he heard a noise and found a wolf, a male wolf, the leader of a pack, standing over him on a high rock. Karl put down the tree, very quietly, so as not to alarm the wolf. And then he waited. The wolf waited too. But the wolf grew tired of waiting and suddenly sprang at the boy. The boy sprang at the wolf. Together they rolled and fought. The wolf had his talons and his teeth, Karl his hands and one small knife, a boys' knife.

They fought for an hour. Neither would give in. Both had pride. Several times they drew apart for breath. Several times sprang together again. At last Karl gained the upper hand and with every strength in his body felled the wolf.

But when he saw the proud wolf brought so low tears came to his eyes. He felt the wolf was his brother and its blood was now mingled with his. When he returned home he insisted on a mans' knife and a mans' name. 'Karl, the Wolf-Hound, he was called, and to this day that is his name.'

What a man! No wonder Baldur was as he was with such a father. All Neil's own father did was look after cattle and sheep, keep tallies and go to market once a month.

The first thing Neil asked his friend Durston on that early spring morning nearly nine hundred years ago, was when Baldur would be coming again.

Durston did not know. Baldur was not bound by any laws of time or tide that man could impose. If he wished to come, he would come. If he did not, there would be no sign of his ship pointing round the rocky promontory where the grey seals lived.

‘He must come this summer,’ Neil said passionately. ‘You promised me that when he came again I could meet him. I have been practising all my Norse words and I can almost talk the language. I must see him!’

‘He will do you no good. Nearly all his talk is of death and of killing.’

‘You like him!’

‘I see in him something beyond what he sees in himself. Besides . . .’ he added, ‘I enjoy playing chess with him.’

‘If he comes this summer he will take me with him when he goes. I am sick of the farm and the Island. There is nothing here but wind and sheep and cows.’

‘Have you not seen the lichen and moss more beautiful than the finest tapestries, heather crisper and richer than the thickest carpet, butterwort and flowering cotton grass, the gentle bog asphodel, the cunning sundew? Have you not seen the marshland and the green coastal hills teeming with birds: the winchat, the whitethroat, the neat sandpiper, the agile dipper turning pebbles over at the bottom of clear running streams? The rocky crags, castles of the golden eagle, the merlin and the buzzard? What sickness of the eyes has blinded you to the beautiful golden plover, the dark raven, the red grouse and the courageous storm petrel? The

thickets are teeming with animals, the sleek otter, the swift hare, the proud red deer, the rivers with brown trout and salmon . . .’

‘Stop! Stop!’ Neil held up his hands to shield himself from the barrage of words. ‘It is enough! But I want more than these things. I want adventures in far away places . . . I want to be anywhere . . . everywhere . . . away from here with Baldur.’

‘If he comes . . .’

‘He will come. I feel it in my bones. Finish the chess set he has asked you to make for his father and then he will come!’

‘I have finished it,’ Durston said with a small quiet smile of satisfaction and he held up a little pawn shaped like a runic stone. ‘This is the last one.’

‘It is beautiful,’ said Neil with pleasure, taking the small piece of carved walrus ivory from him and turning it round wonderingly in his fingers. ‘You make beautiful things. How can you bear to give them away?’

‘The only way to keep something is to give it away.’

‘That does not make sense.’

‘You will understand one day.’

‘I want to understand now.’

‘Try possessing something that you cannot bear to think of losing. When it is taken away the pain is terrible, the loss wounding. But try giving it away. The pleasure of giving is great and there is no feeling of loss. You are conscious only of having gained something inside yourself.’

‘I think I understand,’ said Neil hesitantly, ‘but I still could not do it myself.’

Durston was silent.

Neil stood turning the little pawn around and around in his hand. He had seen the other pieces Durston had carved, each piece had character and presence. There was the bearded knight sitting squarely on a squat little Shetland horse, his eyes staring fiercely out from under his stiff pointed helmet, a spear and long Norman shield gripped in either hand, knees tight against the embroidered saddle cloth, a solid dependable fellow without much imagination, and there was the warder, or foot soldier,[\[1\]](#) looking as though he had too much imagination. His eyes appeared to be starting out of his head, he was biting the top of his long shield and his teeth were clearly visible. Durston had explained that he was a ‘Berserk’[\[2\]](#) one of those famous warriors of the Norsemen – violent, half-crazed men who possessed fearsome strength while they were under the influence of battle fever, thought to be divinely inspired, common folk laying offerings before their doors but passing fearfully away before the doors were opened.

The king sat upon his richly carved throne, his face anxiously human beneath the pomp of crown and formally ringletted hair, his hands gripping the sword across his knees too tightly, knuckles showing. His Queen leant her cheek upon her hand and gazed out in despair at the world she was supposed to rule. Only the bishop seemed unmoved and immovable, clasping

crook and book, sure of his place in the heavenly hierarchy.

The raw hunks of walrus ivory Baldur had brought to Durston had become something more than a chess set as a present for a much respected father. To Neil they had character and peopled his world of bare hills with the bustle and interplay of Court and Church and Battlefield.

When Neil had gazed enough at the finished pawn Durston took it gently from him and put it with the other pieces in a box carved of sandalwood, there to wait for the return of Baldur.

Neil shook himself in the sunlight like a dog shaking water from its back. Winter was over and he was back with his friend and all the possibilities of summer were before him.

'I am hungry!' he cried, suddenly remembering how he had run from the house in the early sunlight with no breakfast inside him. Durston smiled. Winter with its savage darkness was over. Neil and the sun had returned.

He fetched out oat cakes and they sat happily on a rug of seal fur and consumed them.

Above them and around them the gulls, the kittiwake and guillemot, wheeled and called, dived for food in the sea, circled and coasted on the air currents, then settled down on the rocky ledges for a rest before they dived and spun again.

Chapter 2

The arrival of Baldur

It was at the end of May that Baldur came to the Isle of Lewis.

Neil knew of it before Brother Durston. The hermit was in his cell but Neil was at the top of the cliffs, sitting on a stone, watching the sea. Over its long, liquid fields lay other lands, other people, other speech and other deeds.

This day his dreams were interrupted by what at first appeared to be a small nick in the horizon which grew as he watched to be a minute protuberance. His heart stirred. Ships that came from over the horizon were very rare. He shut his eyes tight and then opened them slowly again, staring to the limit of his eyes' capacity at the horizon. It was still there and growing larger as he watched. He fancied now he could see the characteristic curve and tall prow of a Viking ship.

'It is Baldur,' he said to himself, trying to stop the rise of excitement.

‘Baldur! Baldur!’ he chanted in his head. He felt strange and almost numb. He had waited so long for him and now he was afraid. What if Baldur would not befriend him?

But he pushed back the doubts and the fears and went whooping and yelling down the slope of the hill towards the hermit’s cell. The ship was unmistakably coming towards the shore. It had been growing larger every minute Neil had been watching it.

Out of breath, he arrived noisily at the hermit’s cell.

Brother Durston pulled his long lean length out of the cell and looked at him.

‘Draw breath lad!’ he said, seizing him with his bony hand and holding him at arms length. ‘Draw breath.’

‘Baldur!’ gasped Neil. ‘There is a ship! Baldur is here!’ He pointed frantically towards the sea.

Durston’s amusement at the boy’s wild excitement was snuffed out. He looked towards the sea and his face was thoughtful. He had rather hoped Baldur would not come so soon. Although he himself enjoyed his company and he had completed the chess set and was anxious to deliver it to him, he had grown a bit alarmed at the effect his own stories about the Norseman had had upon the boy.

But Neil was impatient and began to tug at Durston’s arm. Together they ran up the long slow slope from Durston’s cell to the edge of the cliffs, the hermit holding up the ragged strands of his monks habit to prevent himself tripping, Neil gripping his arm and forcing the pace.

The ship was nearer now and unmistakably a proud Viking vessel.

Durston recognized it.

It was Baldur's.

The sail appeared to be the blue of the skies Durston had known as a small boy in the south of France, but when the ship was closer it became clear the fabric was striped, broad blue bands alternating with narrow white ones. Above the rows of sixteen oars the shields were strapped, painted designs upon the wood adding a glint of gold to the overall impression of dark purposefulness.

Durston could not help catching something of the boy's excitement. The memories of old journeys stirred in his veins.

'We must go and meet him!' he said, unable to disguise the emotion in his voice. His eyes were fairly sparkling. Neil laughed and hugged him.

The cove for which the ship was heading was not far from the hermit's cell, but as there was only one way down that was safe and easy, and that was on the far side, it took them a good while to get there. As they approached they could see the ship negotiating the shallow water and the breakers.

Neil saw a huge man in the prow, bronzed and red bearded, in leather jerkin and trousers, embossed leather bracelet on his upper arm, sword at his side, battle-axe in hand. He raised his arm in a salute to Brother Durston and his teeth flashed white in the sunlight. Brother Durston hurried forward to meet him.

Neil followed close behind, determined not to be left out of anything. From the height of the ship looking down at them the Norseman shouted something out. Neil did not catch what it was. Although he had been learning the language of the Norsemen from Brother Durston, he was not yet proficient in it. Brother Durston evidently understood and shouted back. They carried on a conversation for a while and Neil was chagrined to realize he understood very little of what was said. He had been so sure he had learnt the language well. When he spoke to him in Norse Brother Durston spoke slowly and enunciated carefully, but this great bull of a man roared out the words in a vast guttural flood, and Neil was lost. The slap and rattle of the sea on the pebbles and against the hull served to make it even more difficult to catch what he said.

Some of the men had come ashore. Neil was aware that sailors were securing ropes, were fastening oars, were shouting things to each other and bustling about. He felt wild. Here was action at last! Here were men who had been to the far ends of the earth and back, anchoring in his cove, their carved and beautiful boat beside a rock he had sat on many times dreaming of just such men. There was a mood of gaiety, of festivity about the landing as though the men were glad to be ashore.

Baldur had come down now and he and Durston were standing close together, talking. Neil's heart sang. Any minute now Brother Durston would introduce him to Baldur and the great man would take Neil's hand in his and crush it in a wonderful iron grip.

But suddenly there was a shout from the cliff top and Neil saw Baldur's face darken. Instantly the mood changed. Weapons were produced from nowhere, shields were put up. Men who had been laughing were scowling, and Baldur put out his great hand and gripped Neil's shoulder, pulling him towards him and holding him fiercely in front of him like a shield. There was nothing of friendship in his grip. Bewildered, Neil's eye went to the cliff top and there he saw the reason for the change. Along the entrance to the cove were ranged his father, his elder brothers and all the male neighbours they could muster. Evidently Neil had not been the only one to observe the approach of the Viking ship. Each man on the cliff top had a weapon, most had bows and arrows, some had swords. The metal glinted in the sun. It was then that Neil realized he had been seized as hostage. His father would not do anything while Baldur held him. And Baldur was hurting him with his grip and his knife was at his throat. From such close range his tanned skin was coarse and bristling, his eyes bloodshot and fearsome. Neil felt sick.

Durston was the first to recover his wits. He moved at once towards the path leading up to Neil's father and shouted out to them that the Vikings had come in peace and there would be no trouble if Neil's father caused none.

'Since when did Vikings come in peace?' jeered his father.

'For many years,' Brother Durston shouted back. 'There is no war between the Vikings and the men of the

Hebrides now. This man here,' indicating Baldur, 'is my friend.'

'Ask him why he holds a knife to my son's throat!'

'Why do you stand on the cliff top with your weapons drawn?'

'Tell him to release my son.'

Brother Durston turned to Baldur and said something to him in Norse.

Baldur growled something back. Brother Durston was silent. His face was worried.

'What did he say?' shouted Neil's father.

Brother Durston spoke again to Baldur. Baldur replied with the same few words. Brother Durston sighed deeply and turned to the cliff top again, but not before he had given Neil a solicitous and anxious look.

'He says,' he spoke clearly, 'he says he will kill your son if you do not throw your weapons down the cliff within the count of ten.'

Baldur started to shout and all his men joined in with him. A kind of dreadful chanting consisting of single words filled the cove. Neil recognized the numerals.

'Five . . . six . . . seven . . .'

There was confusion on the top of the cliff. The men were all gabbling amongst themselves. Neil tried to twist himself out of Baldur's grip, but it was like an iron band around him and he was helpless. Baldur's hold tightened and almost strangled him.

Then his father threw down his bow. It came clattering across the rocks.

There was a pause as the Vikings reached the count of ten and for one sickening moment the rest of the men on the cliffs held on to their weapons.

Brother Durston called out.

‘For the love of God!’

One by one they responded.

Gradually Baldur’s grip loosened. He was still held, but not at strangulation point.

The men on the cliffs came down silently. Neil’s father came first and faced Baldur. He looked incredibly small beside the giant, and his lip trembled slightly. His voice almost squeaked when he tried to demand the release of his son.

Baldur laughed and flung Neil from him. Then he spoke, with a mixture of anger and of sorrow.

‘We came in peace,’ Brother Durston translated, ‘to see our friend. We brought gifts for the islanders. We wish to sojourn and break bread, but we are greeted like thieves with drawn swords and arrows.’

‘Tell him,’ Neil’s father said, ‘from the last Viking ship to put in at the northern bay,’ pointing to an inlet along the coast, ‘came a man who took the wife of my friend,’ indicating one of his neighbours. ‘She died in childbirth of his bastard son. How now should we trust Vikings?’

Durston translated.

‘What was done by others was not done by us. We come in friendship now. We will take nothing but what is given. We are on our way to Iceland in the far north.’

But Durston added in his own quiet voice, 'He comes for a chess set of walrus ivory I have carved for him. He takes it as a present to his father in Iceland. Truly they come in peace and will not stay long.'

Neil's father was relieved but found it difficult to know what to do next.

'Perhaps,' said Brother Durston quietly, seeing his predicament, 'if you were to invite the Vikings to sample your hospitality at the Great House all would be well. I do not think it would be wise to make an enemy of this man,' he added, lowering his voice still further.

The man behind Neil's father stirred uneasily from foot to foot.

Neil's father looked genuinely troubled, but he knew that Brother Durston's counsel was reasonable.

'Tell him,' he said, lifting his head for the first time with a show of dignity. 'Tell him and his men that we will be glad to entertain them as our guests this night. We see that Vikings are as other men, some good, some bad.'

Brother Durston joyfully translated, but there was an undercurrent of murmuring among the islanders that suggested they did not all share their spokesman's forgiving nature.

Baldur looked hard at Neil's father, and then after what seemed a very long time, extended his hand. Neil saw his father trying to hide a wince as the great fingers crushed his. Neil wished his father was a foot taller. Neil himself was almost as tall as his father and he was only fourteen. It would not be long before he outstripped

him, but he would never outstrip Baldur. Baldur was at least as tall as the hermit, but looked taller because he carried himself like a pine tree, stood squarely and held his head with pride. Beside him the hermit looked like a marsh reed that had stooped to many winter winds.

‘Good,’ Baldur said in a big, deep voice. ‘When the moon rises we will be there.’

And then he turned to Durston.

‘Meanwhile, my friend, we have much to talk about. It is a long time since we last broke bread together.’

Durston smiled.

Neil tugged at his arm.

Durston smiled again, warmly, looking at the boy.

‘Indeed,’ he said to Baldur. ‘I hope you will be my guest for as long as you wish. This is a young friend of mine who has been most impatient and anxious to meet you. His name is Neil. He is descended from a Norseman.’

Neil seemed to swell up with pride. He could feel the Norseman’s penetrating eyes upon him and he drew himself up to his full height. When Baldur gripped his hand he used every strength in his body to return a manly handshake. The Norseman smiled.

‘A good lad. I notice he did not tremble when he was near to death.’

Neil flushed, knowing how nearly he had.

‘Yes,’ said Durston, ‘he is a good lad. A good friend of mine.’

‘Come,’ said Baldur, ‘let us go to your hut. I long to test my wits against you at chess. My men are good

sailors but bad chess players. I have not had a good game since I left you.'

He shouted instructions to his men and left them attending to the ship.

Neil's father and his sons and neighbours had already left, no doubt to hurry home to tell the women to prepare the feast. There would have to be some slaughtering of cattle too to provide the meat.

Neil stayed close to Durston and followed the two men to the hermit's cell.

All day he sat beside them listening to their talk, trying to follow the Norse, understanding at least the chess they played, watching every move of wrist and face, worshipping them. From Durston he had learnt almost all he knew. Since he could remember Durston had been his friend and his instructor. He had opened to him the world of books and had taught him to explore the mind. Through Baldur he hoped he would find the world of action and adventure. Both men ignored him, but neither chased him away.

When it was nearly nightfall he slipped away and returned to the farm. He found it in something of an uproar. Servants were running everywhere. He was shouted at immediately to gather more wood and build up the fires. The cattle were lowing uneasily, smelling the blood of their fellows on the night wind. The horses were stamping, sensing disturbance. The dogs barked incessantly. Neil's mother was shouting instructions and running backwards and forwards. The great hall had

been transformed. An extra long table had been brought in from the kitchen; the benches were rearranged.

Neil had barely time to change into his good clothes before the barking of the dogs reaching a crescendo warned of the coming of the Vikings. Neil could hear the sound of men marching and singing as they marched. He left his room like an arrow from a bow and was downstairs and in the entrance hall before the Norsemen had reached the yard. His father joined him. Neil was relieved to see the hermit beside Baldur. He would be needed as an interpreter.

On his home ground, Neil's father had greater dignity than he had had on the path down to the cove when he was acting in an unfamiliar role. He greeted Baldur and his men with a grave little speech in their own language. Baldur recognized the change in the situation and replied with the few words of simple Gaelic he knew.

Neil felt very proud to be the host of such a grand group of men. Not one of them stood less than six feet tall. Not one of them but held himself straight and proud. They were tanned and blond and seemed to tang of the sea and faraway places.

They followed his father into the hall. They took their places at the long benches and the long tables. A musician played. The servants brought in food. There was a great deal of loud conversation.

Neil himself was very far from the centre table and had to strain his ears to catch what was going on. Only after the feasting was done did he manage to draw

closer to his hero. He placed a stool close to his feet and sat where he could watch every expression and hear every word. The Norseman was talking about his father when Neil first drew near enough to hear what he was saying.

It seemed that at about the time Baldur was describing, the Frankish king had forbidden the export of Frankish swords to Scandinavia. His smiths forged the best swords in the world and they were much sought after, particularly by the Vikings, who lived by the sword. But the king, quite reasonably, did not see why he should sell his best weapons to men who were going to use them against his people.

Baldur's father, Karl, the Wolfhound, at that time only eighteen, was determined to have a Frankish sword. He joined a ship going south on the understanding that it was going to make raids on Frankish ports.

One night they drew in at Calais. They landed in the small hours when no one was about. Karl's shipmates went in search of loot and women, but Karl went in search of a smith.

He found the smithy. The street was dark. The house was dark. The fire in the barn where the smith did his work was still glowing. Karl searched around the neat workshop until he found a sword almost to his taste, but although the weapon was for a nobleman and was of magnificent workmanship, it was not good enough for the Wolfhound.

He left the barn and circled the house. He decided which must be the bedroom and climbed up the thick

stone wall. Delicately he prized open the window with his knife and slithered silently into the room.

The smith was deeply asleep with his whole family in a large lopsided bed. Karl crept across the shadowy floor and gripped the man by the shoulder, at the same time closing his mouth with his other hand so that he could not cry out. The smith's eyes bulged with bewilderment and fear as he realized what was happening, and had no choice but to follow the giant intruder.

In the barn Karl showed the shivering man the improvements he wanted in the sword he had chosen. In vain the smith pleaded that the sword was ordered and already paid for and therefore could not be disposed of to another man.

Karl took out his knife.

The smith started work.

He took the bellows and blew up the fire till it was roaring. The walls became a mass of leaping shadows and flickering lights. It could have been a scene in hell.

The smith honed the blade to its finest, the sparks flew out, the grindstone whirred and howled. He worked all night to get it to a point of such beauty and magnificence that Karl's eyes were dazzled with gazing at it and he was filled with such a lust to possess it he could scarcely wait for the final touches to be put to it.

When it was done and the tired smith straightened his back, wiping the sweat from his face on the sleeve of his night shirt, Karl seized it from him and with his characteristic wolf cry, raised it high above his head. The smith looked up and saw the huge man with a

monstrous shadow behind him on the wall of the barn, the sword aflame in his hand, saw the wolf-gleam in his eye and was deadly afraid. He turned to run, but he was too late. Clean and neat Karl brought down the sword with deadly accuracy on the head of the terrified man and with one movement cleaved him from head to foot.

‘That way,’ Baldur said with satisfaction, ‘he was sure no other sword of like quality would be made.’

Neil’s father looked sick.

Neil’s mother left the room.

Neil himself went a bit pale.

But Baldur was in the mood for stories and told them next how his father’s battle-axe was won.

At the age of nineteen Karl was engaged in a war between Swein Long-beard and Swein Nielsson. Although young he had won himself already such a reputation he was treated as Swein Nielsson’s right-hand man, and found himself at noon on the fifth day of the war locked in hand to hand combat with the forty year old Swein Long-beard himself.

All around him men were shouting and sweating, steel rang on steel, wood thumped on bone. Karl himself was wounded in the leg and his blood was soaking into the leather thongs of his boots. The sun was high and shone in his eyes so that he saw his enemy only in silhouette and did not see the bearded and savage face, the sneer of contempt with which the older man regarded his youthful assailant.

With his high pitched wolf howl Karl plunged to the attack and almost in a trance of fury attacked the shadowy figure of the man in front of him.

They fought for nearly two hours, the sun beating down on them, the dust swirling around their feet, other men fighting and falling around them. Once Karl was blooded and twice Swein Long-beard, but neither would surrender. Even when the sun blinded him he fought on, the sweating, heaving figure of the man was presence enough to guide his weapon home. But it was not till the second hour that Karl managed to wrest the advantage from his opponent. Weariness was holding their limbs and slowing their responses.

The older man faltered, lost his balance and fell to one knee. Karl pulled strength from the air, felt it lifting his arms, towered above his enemy, his knife in one hand to parry any blow the other might have for him, his sword in his right hand raised to kill. This time the sun was behind him and Swein Long-beard looked up to see the Wolfhound above him, the sun behind his head, his face black and blank, rays of lurid light outlining his skull. Karl was a terrifying and awesome sight, and in the moment of pause this gave him he plunged, and with a scream that seemed to silence the battle field, Swein Long-beard was slain.

As he fell, Karl himself fell on top of him unconscious.

He knew no more till he was dragged from the body by his fellow warriors and carried shoulder high to Swein Nielsson's tent. He was confused by the noise, the

chanting, the rejoicing. Where was the battle? Where the hate? All around him were smiling faces, hands clapping him on the shoulder, voices shouting congratulations.

Bloody and filthy as he was he was taken into his commander's tent. Voices buzzed in his head and he felt like falling down again, but somehow he kept upright, somehow managed to speak, somehow to take the battle-axe handed to him. It was Swein Long-beard's and was marvellously inlaid with ivory and gold.

'Keep it. You are worthy of it,' he heard Swein Nielson say, and then he keeled over into darkness once again.

When Baldur had told this story Neil noticed that the hall had grown very quiet. Some of the Norsemen were asleep, the fires had almost died down, and there was a somnolent hush about everything. The neighbours and Neil's family were quiet, sobered by the tales of wanton violence the Vikings seemed to regard with pride.

Neil was silent because he was awed.

Brother Durston was silent because he was meditating on the effects of these stories on Neil.

Baldur was silent because he was tired. He gave an enormous yawn and then rose to his feet. He banged his pewter cup against the table loudly, roaring as he did so, and waking the hall up to a kind of uproar. The men who had been asleep sprang up, seizing their knives and looking round for the enemy. The ones who were awake rose quickly knowing that it was their captain's way of

showing that the party was over and they must return to their ship.

As first light came the Norsemen trooped down to the cove and boarded their ship.

Throughout the morning the vessel rode gently in the bay, rising and falling with the swell of the water.

When noon came Baldur arose and went to visit once again with his friend the hermit.

Chapter 3

The escape

The Norsemen stayed several days on the Island. Baldur played chess with Brother Durston, and Neil watched. On the third day, the last day, Brother Durston insisted Baldur should play a game with Neil. It was only after two hours that he finally managed to corner Neil and the game was over. The Viking had won, but not easily.

He slapped Neil on the back with such force that he nearly knocked him flying.

‘You play well boy! Durston, you old devil, you have taught him some neat tricks! What say you to the lad coming with me to Iceland? I could do with such a player during the long hours of the midnight sun.’

Durston looked grave. Neil appealed to him with eager, anxious eyes. He would see Karl, the Wolfhound, he would see Iceland and the Northern seas, he would sail with Baldur and conquer the world!

Durston took a great deal of time to make up his mind. He knew the boy’s longing for adventure. He

knew also he was at his most impressionable. Would he come to love the life of action and violence the Vikings offered, or would he see how empty and unsatisfying it could be?

He decided to take the gamble.

‘You may go,’ he said, ‘but only if your parents agree.’

The boy was wild with excitement and rushed home across the fields, but it was not long before his mood had changed to despair, both parents adamantly refusing to consider him going.

He ate his dinner in silence and retired to his bedroom early. He lay on his bed staring out of the small square window at the moon that rode quietly in a starlit sky. He imagined how it would be to see that moon over the sea, to be following its silver path for league after league till they reached the ends of the earth. He concluded that he could not go on living confined in that little room. He determined to leave in the morning in spite of his parents.

Having made this decision he lay calmer. The room grew darker. The house grew quieter. He lay still till the rest of the household had gone to bed and then he crept up and started packing. There was not much he wanted to take, his sheepskin jacket, the handsome ivory handled knife Baldur had given him, the small handwritten New Testament from Brother Durston, a needle and thread, some apples and some cheese.

The night seemed endless. He tried to sleep, but he was so afraid he would miss first light that even when he

did doze off he jerked awake almost immediately and his eyes flew to the square of window. At last there was a slightly lighter patch and he crept up, gathered his things together, and left the room. The passages and stairs were pitch dark and clammy cold. He eased his way inch by inch through the sleeping house and reached at last the scullery window. He stood on a barrel and passed his belongings out on to the ample ledge, and then wriggled and struggled through himself. He stood still for a while on the damp earth outside listening and trying to regain his breath. In order to avoid the dogs he had to clamber up the steep bank that closed in the kitchen area. The back of the house was built against a hill, rather like Durston's cell, and the hill had been cut away for the kitchen. Several loose pebbles and bits of earth scattered down as he climbed up. He was terrified he would be heard. At last his fingers found the grass of the top and he pulled himself up, his belongings very much muddied and dirtied, but still intact. He paused again at the top to listen if he had disturbed anyone and to gather his strength. The house lay like a great black hulk below him. The dawn was steadily growing and the fields were grey rather than black. He hurried away treading as lightly as he could, trying to keep from dislodging stones.

As he sped across the fields towards the cove the grass and moss was springy beneath his feet. The light was steadily increasing on the eastern horizon. He felt brave and powerful, as though he could withstand anything and anyone. But then he experienced a twinge

of fear, and the enormity of what he was doing dawned on him. He clutched his bundle closer and walked faster, afraid he might lose his courage and his determination.

By the time he reached the lip of the cliff above the cove the light was strong and he could see the ship riding easily at anchor and the men busy about her. He could hear their voices very faint, and far away, but clear.

Durston and Baldur were already on the beach. He realized he was late and hurried down the cliff path, the pebbles scattering from under his feet. Durston looked up and waved at him. Baldur turned and looked too. The two men said something to each other. Neil hoped they would not ask if he had his parents' permission.

'Ah, lad, we thought you were not coming,' Baldur said.

'I am sorry I am late,' panted Neil.

'I am glad to see you have your sheepskin jacket. You will need that,' said Durston. 'Come, you hold the chess set. Baldur will be too busy with his ship to take proper care of it.'

Neil accepted the beautifully carved box reverently.

'And here is the box of herbs and medicaments. You had better take them with you. You will have more need of them than I.'

A sailor called Othar helped him aboard and showed him where to stow his things. He noticed that there were no thwarts for the rowers to sit upon, but near each oar was a seaman's chest fastened to the floor. He presumed each man sat upon his own belongings when he was

called upon to row. Neil was relieved to see he was not expected to row, and his chest was under a kind of awning. He looked quickly round and saw there was a big chamber with a bed in it with four carved bed posts for the captain, and smaller storage chambers on either side. But there was no time to look at everything. Everywhere was bustle and noise.

He went to the side to see if he could see Durston. He was still on the beach and there was water between him and his friend already. The tide was coming in rapidly and the ship was lifting to it. He rather wished he had not been so hasty to get on board. His friend the hermit seemed a long way away and he was beginning to feel afraid.

Baldur was roaring out orders. It seemed Neil had come only just in time. Another half hour and they would have missed the tide, or rather Neil would have missed the boat, because Baldur made it quite plain that they would not have waited for him.

Ropes were cast off.

Durston waved and Neil waved back. The hermit felt a lump in his throat. The boy looked so slight and small beside the men. The breakers came in rapidly as the ship moved off. The wood creaked, the waves slapped, the pebbles rattled on the beach, the rowers sang out. All was happening too quickly. He felt he had not taken leave of the boy properly. There were all kinds of wise words he would have liked to give him as counsel against the strange experiences that would come his way.

Neil watched Brother Durston on the beach growing smaller and smaller, out of reach, the cliffs retreating, the hills behind melting together till he could scarcely distinguish where his house was. The sea birds, the kittiwakes and guillemots, followed them out, crying mournfully as though warning him against something. Around him the rough voices of the men were speaking in a language foreign to him, a language he had to strain to understand. Baldur was taking no notice of him. Everyone seemed to have a job and to know what he was doing.

Although the weather was good the ship rolled considerably and Neil found it very difficult to keep his balance. After a long while of trying to keep upright with some idea that, standing, he would be ready if anyone needed him for anything, he decided to sit, and perched on his sea chest, leaning his back on the wall of a store room. He waited and watched. The rowers began to sing and the deep rhythmic throb of their voices became part of the sound of the sea. It beat like a pulse into Neil's heart and he began to feel less lost, less afraid.

He was no longer part of the land.

There was no past, only the future.

**That's the end of the sampler. We hope you enjoyed it.
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Moyra Caldecott was born in Pretoria, South Africa in 1927, and moved to London in 1951. She married Oliver Caldecott and raised three children. She has degrees in English and Philosophy and an M.A. in English Literature.

Moyra Caldecott has earned a reputation as a novelist who writes as vividly about the adventures and experiences to be encountered in the inner realms of the human consciousness as she does about those in the outer physical world. To Moyra, reality is multidimensional.

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