

Chapter 8

The Road to Lower Valhalla

Osa Johnson — *I Married Adventure*

This is it, I'm here! This time it's for real! My lifelong dream is finally coming true. I'm off on an adventure for two! My heart leaps for joy. Nothing and no one on earth can top my happiness.

Three weeks after we met, we set off in the *drak-car* for his village, *Haldorholm*, in the *Soumerland*. Behind us, we tow his flat-pack *hobbit-cat*, to enjoy on the lakes of *Lower Valhalla*.

While my Viking tells me his life story in English, he strokes my thigh. The radio is singing *L'aventurier: And suddenly, facing the wind, up springs the true hero of all time...*

The Viking doesn't know it, but while he gives a running commentary on our route, I imagine I'm Osa Johnson, author of *I Married Adventure*, and he's Martin, her husband: two explorers from a bygone age. Or Christina Columbus on the *Santa Maria*. I dream of discoveries! I inherited the travel bug... My imagination goes into overdrive. Of course, it's not the tropics or the equator, but near enough! I'm the heroine of my adventure novels. So I scan the landscape to flush out the elves.

Him — Look, we're crossing the *Nether Plains* of *Lowlandia*...

Me — Oh yes! Flat as a pancake! Go on, keep going, tell me what happened next.

Him — So, after my divorce, I went out with a woman who watched telly every night. It was never going to work. We went to Italy, she loved luxury hotels. Not my thing at all. Her son ate ice cream in front of the telly. I couldn't stand

it, we split up. Look, this is the *Land Beneath the Sea*, the queen is a *Völva*, she has visions.

Me — Incredible! The legend's true! (I'm careful not to tell him I have visions too. Maybe I'm a *Völva* of sorts? Oh, I think I'm going to like it here!) Go on, where were you?

Him — Ah yes! In winter, I redid my whole kitchen, but I slipped on black ice and broke my hip.

(Stands to reason: hips are the foundations. He divorces, it all goes pear-shaped, and *Whoosh! Crash, bang, wallop!*)

Him — Here, we've kept our royals, like the British, and the *Thing*, the people's assembly: whoever shouts loudest wins! We go in with earplugs. The loudest get the most say. The hoarse, too bad for them. The mute write in sound effects. *The Empire of the Dauntless Sea Walls*, that's our republic.

Me — Wow, you lot are poets!

Him — It's tradition. With Vikings, it's GLORIOUS or bust.

Me — To impress the enemy? Hmm... effective! And then? What happened?

Him — For the whole *planetary pause of suspended time*, during the *global siesta*, I was stuck at home in a wheelchair, couldn't move. So I planned everything! I brought back a whole trolley of baked beans, to last the winter. I stocked up on protein to rebuild my bones!

Me — Blimey: a life sentence of cold sausages and beans! Bit of a pong, I bet!... And where are we now?

Him — We're coming into the *Soumerland*. Here, the land is below sea level.

Me — Brilliant! I brought my mask and snorkel! The mermaid hasn't said her last word: *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, look out, I'm in a storybook mood!

Him — We'll soon reach the kingdom of *Lower Valhalla*...

Me — The kingdom of...? At this rate, I'll start thinking I'm a princess. Tell me more!

So, long story short: after his convalescence, for *World Kissing Day*, in honour of *Pyjama Liberation*, he threw himself at a jazz-singing model half his age, to flatter his ego. But she tried to get him to mind her kid while she partied at Glastonbury. Big mistake. He turned into the green-eyed monster! Hell, especially for him! She clearly couldn't care less, too happy enjoying her musical freedom with her freshly thawed girlfriends.

Him — We split up. I wasn't going to play nanny while she drank beer without me (I can picture it, sacrilege!) and went out with the singer from the rock band! (Well, naturally...) And here we are, *Haldorholm*! Welcome to my kingdom, as my name says: Sverre af Haldorholm!

Me — Good grief, it's all consonants, it's unpronounceable! Don't take it badly if I call you *Vik the King*!

Him — No problem, I'm used to it, I'm a demigod.

He cuts the engine outside his boathouse to unload his *hobbit-cat*. Ever the gentleman, he opens my door to help me out after 1,500 km. All fired up, my very own Belmondo, *The Magnificent One*, sweeps me off my feet

and kisses me passionately, without letting me catch my breath.

His 300 m² haven of peace is unreal! Everything here is a collector's piece: vintage sailing boats, patinated brass, classic cars... He restores it all himself! It looks like Thor's hangar. I half expect the dwarves Brokkr and Sindri to pull *Mjölhnir* out of the boot. The magic hammer that smashes mountains and flies back like a boomerang into the demigod's hands. Nicknamed *Return to Sender*, it always comes back at you, in the face, the kisser or the gob, depending on the emotion you threw it with.

Him — It'll be our loft on rainy days. We'll sleep in my home-made igloo trailer, which I tow behind my *drak-4×4* on my expeditions to the *Nord Ultima*. We'll go and discover *Norborea* together, you'll love it!

Me — OK, if you say so. And why not put in a picture window over the *kingdom of the waters* to light the hangar? A 180-degree sea view would be magnificent!

Him — No, the wall's reinforced concrete, to protect my treasures from storms... You'll have to go outside to see the sea. The loo is in my office, 500 metres away, right at the top of the lighthouse. Come on, I'll show you. We can have a coffee before we head for the *drak-car* camp, if we want to get there before dark.

Thirty minutes later, we land on a green polder at the foot of the rolling dunes, at the edge of the beach, in the heart of a nature reserve for migrating birds. It's paradise: everything breathes chlorophyll and peace. The Viking is in his element.

Him — Come and have a nice cold beer, we've earned it! As you can see, the bay is sheltered by the sea walls, so we've been sailing since we were kids. The little *Viks* come home at sunset with the clouds of birds. Cheers, and enjoy the show!

Me — It's true! It's magnificent! My heart melts at so much beauty! Such poetry! I turn my head discreetly and shed a little tear. Confirmed: this is it, I'm here! My dream for two has begun. This time it's for real! Tomorrow is a glorious day. Long live adventure!

The Hammock and the Hummingbirds

A novel by Karine Baridon



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