

Chapter 9

Overstag!

The Viking and the cat

Say what you like, the mating dance to woo the female works on me 100%!

Two days after we arrive in *Lower Valhalla*, we're towing his flat-pack *hobbit-cat* behind us, to sail on Lake *Submersheim*. His old *Vol-vik*, faded storm blue, with seats as squishy as you like, is comfy, shock-absorbing and just my size. I feel as snug in it as in my hammock, a real cosy cocoon (German quality, according to him, built like a tank).

But the *accu* (the battery) is about to die any second. So the Viking puts his foot down all the way to the *Royal Yacht Club of Soumerland*. It's the oldest sailing club in *Lower Valhalla*. Its *old school* silhouette, with a very *British* charm, is a little gem gracing the peaceful lake. I admire its walls steeped in history, which tell of sailing races with passion. Since it was founded, the winners' names have been engraved in brass for eternity.

While the Viking, a seasoned sailor, meticulously assembles his flat-pack cat and *checks* every last detail as if he were sailing round the world, my eyes are spoilt for choice.

I marvel like a little girl at these classic sailing boats, the flat-bottomed *Vannheim*, made of mahogany, brass and grace. I admire their sails hand-sewn by elves, and their polished hulls. I think what touches me most is the Vikings' love in caring for these jewels, which they see as their living ancestors. Gleaming relics of bygone days, they look straight out of the dwarves' workshop in Asgard...

We have a coffee on the terrace facing the jetty. Curious passers-by come to admire the pretty, slender lines and aerodynamic curves of our *hobbit-cat*. From here, it looks like an elegant dragonfly resting on the water, winking at us to cast off...

And we're off! A breeze blows, all sails full, light as a feather, the catamaran tips up onto one float. Hanging from a rope, we fly, balanced over the void. Every five minutes, my skipper lets out his war cry in Valhallan:

— *OVERSTAG!*

It's the signal to tack. The wind whistles, the boom swings, the sail cracks. Like two fearless tightrope walkers, we hop from one hull to the other, carefully dodging the trampoline, stiff with salt and too worn to take our weight.

The catamaran shoots across the fresh water, a strange fluorescent green. It's full of silt. It's the home of the *Nøkk Nykur*: the water spirits who enchant every sailor in the land. An ode to life that fills our lungs with oxygen and pep. It's the best-kept secret of the Vikings' legendary strength.

After two hours of flat-out gliding, we drop anchor in the harbour for a coffee break and a cold beer. Barefoot on the grass, facing the jetty: happiness exists... It looks like the peace and calm of this magic lake, which calls us back on board.

So we hoist the sails and head off again, to spend the day gliding like tightrope walkers from an island to a windmill, from a lighthouse to a harbour. The course changes, the fun goes up tenfold. In this idyllic setting, the real

challenge comes in the evening, when we have to get the boat out of the water and back onto its trailer.

The crank snaps clean off, seized with rust: it hasn't been used since the *planetary siesta*. The Viking jams a screwdriver in its place, then straddles the trailer, bends double and grabs the catamaran, heavy as an anvil, with his bare hands. And shouts:

— *GO! GO! GO!*

I turn the screwdriver flat out, it screeches on the rusty metal, the towrope goes taut to haul the *hobbit-cat* out of the water. I turn round to check he's all right, and there, I see him: every vein bulging, muscles rippling, wind in his face, hair flying, his angel face haloed with salt-and-pepper curls, and I hear him let out a war cry fit to wake his Viking ancestors.

— *ARGHHHHHHH!*

Thor lifts his 250 kg longship, a tonne and a half, soaking wet! But its hull stays stuck fast like a suction cup to the surface of the lake. The water spirits' little joke. So, by brute strength and sheer conviction, he wrenches it out of the prankster waters! It's surreal! A Monty Python sketch, live!

Doubled up, I crack, and fondly nickname him: "The Viking".

Chest puffed out, panting, the angel with a child's smile turns to me and says:

— Ta-da!

Say what you like, the mating dance to woo the female works on me 100%! I fall head over heels all over again!

Pleased as Punch, he comes over to me and says:

— It's all in the mind! You need to toughen up, *Klein France vrouw!*

With him, I never know if I'll get flowers or the chop...

I've won a kiss!

Sunday Is Showtime!

The journalist — The Viking is an archetype! Like Thor, the demigod, a hero of mythical strength, ready to take on any challenge.

The Viking — You're only saying that because you're jealous!

The author — *Vik the King* is also a big kid, hiding a soft heart behind all that muscle.

The Viking — It's true, I've stayed a bit of a kid, I admit it! I love tinkering with my old *Vol-vik* and my flat-pack cat, so we can have good times together.

The author — Irresistible! Passionate, a jack of all trades and a bit barmy. He builds a world his own size, with his hands and his heart.

The journalist — And that towing business, not too hard on the back?

The Viking — Oh no, it's in my genes! I get it from my ancestors. When you sail a longship, you have to face the unexpected, it comes with the job. Viking honour means showing our courage and our superhuman strength, to overcome the obstacle.

The author — Admit it, you love to show off your heroics... so people will love you.

The Viking — Everybody loves me, I'm a demigod! It's in my nature!

The author — Absolutely, you're my hero, and so modest! In fact, the nickname I gave you honours your bravery. Even if your strength is your armour to show your worth, you're still a big kid. And I admit I rather like that duality. You're the genuine article.

The journalist — What do you think, *Vik the King*, do you agree with Coraline?

The Viking — I couldn't agree less. She's hit the nail bang on the head, by missing it completely. I'm not weak! I'm in control of the situation and I protect her. I'm not letting her carry the boat on her own. We share the weight together, we move forward together. And when it gets too heavy, we breathe and we set off again together...

The author — Every time I think back on it, it makes me laugh, I can't help it!

The Viking — And why does it make you laugh so much?

The author — I suppose it's to defuse the tension... the sexual tension... I must say, he's a real Viking, he rather intimidates me... So I'm careful... I want to stay in one piece. Laughing brings us closer, we weave a stronger bond!

The journalist — And what do you suggest to the reader?

The author — To make up your own cry for changing course, and try it out for a week*!

The Viking — A week? That's far too long! Me, I change course every five minutes! You've got to react fast when the wind turns!





The Hammock and the Hummingbirds

A novel by Karine Baridon



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