

TORE OLAV ARNESEN

BEYOND
RAGNAROK

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Beyond Ragnarok
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PROLOGUE

To help you understand life in Norway, one of the most northerly of European nations, you need to form a picture in your mind of this exquisitely beautiful “Land of the Midnight Sun” with extreme climatic conditions. Norway is a very narrow elongated country. It is sandwiched between Sweden on the east and the Norwegian Seas of the Atlantic Ocean on the west. The entire length of its rugged western coastline is lined with many spectacular and scenic fjords. The top or northern section of this nation is long and slightly curved, while the southern portion bulges out, making its overall shape somewhat reminiscent of the shape of a butternut squash.

The ancient city of Trondheim is located at the top of the “bulge”, where the narrow stem-like northern portion of the country curves northward toward the Arctic. This historic city is the second or third largest and culturally one of the most significant cities in the country, depending, of course, on whether you talk to someone from Bergen. The vast majority of Norway’s population is located from Trondheim south. This ancient city was founded in 997 by Olav Trygvesen, the first and most famous Viking king. King Olav, as he eventually became known, had been in exile on the Isle of Man in Great Britain. On this memorable date, he made a triumphant return to conquer and eventually impose his rule on Norway. In the year of 1997, Trondheim celebrated its 1000th anniversary.

This story begins in Kristiansund, a city composed of a few small islands just south of Trondheim on the west coast of Norway, which was once a major European shipping and mercantile trading center. Its biggest industry was the production of dried salt cod. In fact, Kristiansund was once the world's leading exporter of this product. You can still see some of the old wooden racks covered with cod suspended from them, drying in the open air, but it was a much more common sight in this small island city's past. Much of the salt cod is produced for export to countries like Spain and Portugal, where it often used in the making of a spicy soup called *bakala*. Sadly, many other cities in Norway, and other countries, have taken over much of this industry, leaving Kristiansund somewhat humbled but still desperately clinging on to its greatly diminished role in this once-thriving industry.

In Norse mythology, Ragnarok represents an apocalyptic end to the world during the final conflict between the gods and the giants. According to this legend, all Earth's creatures, including mankind, will take sides in one final epic battle. A savage fight to the bitter end! After Ragnarok, all life on Earth will be completely destroyed!

CHAPTER 1

“THE BIRTH OF A STORY”

I feel my story coming
It's yearning to be living
A humble birthing
From a painful beginning
Searches for meaning
On this pathway leading
Towards an ending.

(Tore O. Arnesen)

It was February 23, 1997, a particularly cold and gloomy winter day even for this time of year in this part of Norway. On this nondescript afternoon Professor Jens Elfesen, Ph.D. is walking as usual from his apartment through the Trondheim University campus back to his office. Even though it was only 2:00 PM in the afternoon, it was already getting dark. This far north and at this time of year, the sun peeks out briefly for only a few hours. Most days, and this one was no exception, the few meager rays of sunlight available are pitilessly diffused and greatly diminished by an ever-present and always relentless blanket of clouds that inexorably and menacingly float overhead. This, combined with the penetrating cold resulting from the high humidity, was negatively affecting Jens' spirit.

Norway can be a depressing place to live, especially for outsiders not accustomed to its bleak climate, which probably helps explain why Vikings of old were so anxious to travel to and plunder warmer and sunnier locations further south.

Having just finished a hearty lunch of *lappskaus*, a local type of beef stew made from leftovers, Jens was feeling a bit bloated. Being in no particular hurry to return to work, he was listlessly trudging along and idly reflecting on how often he had made this very same walk. Yet, somehow, this day, things seemed a bit different. Perhaps it was because of the intense feeling of melancholy that came over him that Jens found himself more in tune with the natural environment surrounding him than usual; or more likely it was because he may not be making this much too familiar trip for much longer.

The loosely packed snow was making a squealing sound under each footstep, as it only does when it's extremely cold. Hearing a sharp pitched sound, Jens paused, listened and looked curiously around until he realized he had been distracted by a distant sea eagle's piercing calls; he took a deep breath while smelling the salient sea air. He also heard the squealing sound from the tree branches rubbing together caused by the wind blowing through them; he then focused on a group of starkly naked deciduous trees that had been planted in traditional neat formal rows.

At this time of year, any oak, maple, or other types of deciduous trees have long been stripped bare of their normally profuse layers of green leaves, and they contrast strikingly with the many small random clusters of the more robust-looking evergreen trees. The sight of this stark, but magnificent, landscape made him feel insignificant and quite lonesome.

While in this somewhat ethereal state of mind, Jens realized that these trees were easily capable of withstanding the brutal assaults severe Norwegian winters imposed on them! So, as he walked, Jens recalled how last summer these very same trees had been melded together into a large living green mass clearly representing nature's abundance and enduring lust for life. Then, it had been nearly impossible to distinguish one tree from another; now these very same trees seem forbidding and completely independent of one another!

Being mesmerized by his surroundings, reality slowly drifted away, and in this daydream state the trees miraculously transformed, assuming human-like characteristics. One particularly distinctive group of trees became an army of giants. Playfully, Jens selected one unusually large tree from this imaginary army as the leader, while imagining, based on its unique size and form, what kind of imposing and forceful personality it had.

"Hi, Professor Elfesen!" one of two young female graduate students called out to him as they suddenly and unexpectedly come upon him and abruptly forced Jens to stop daydreaming.

Before he could completely compose himself, they'd passed by! Instinctively, but somewhat belatedly, clearing his throat, Jens hoarsely mumbled a pathetically weak, "Hi!" Awkwardly Jens turned away from them to hide his obvious embarrassment, while self-consciously waving his right hand above his head in a shameful acknowledgment of their distracting and very unwelcome salutation. Only partially recovered, Jens cautiously glanced up to see if he recognized them. To his dismay and no small amount of humiliation, he did. They were students of his. He saw them looking back over their shoulders

at him, while trying to conceal muffled giggling sounds. One of the girls even feigned a coughing spell to help cover up her laughter causing a shiver of paranoia chillingly flow up Jens' spine. He shuddered and wondered if he had been talking out loud and that's why they had been laughing at him.

"Damn it! They must think I'm a nut case!" Jens almost inaudibly mumbled. "God, they probably think I'm some crazy nerd who talks to himself!" This time, he was careful not to say anything loud enough for anyone but himself to overhear...but instantly recognized that he'd confirmed the sobering fact that he had been talking to himself! Anxiously speeding up, Jens made a humiliating retreat, all the while continuing to chastise himself for being such an idiot! Yet, he took some small comfort in the fact that he will probably never see them again.

The two young female students, while bemused by Jens' obvious embarrassment, were really more focused on other things, which soon became evident when one of them whispered to the other, "What a hunk! Don't you agree? How tall would you say he is?" Without waiting for an answer, she continued with, "Look at his dirty blond...curly hair. I would love to run my fingers through it."

"Oh, over six foot," the other one responded and added, "What I like best are his eyes. In fact, they are the first things I ever noticed about him. They're so unusually clear...such a stunningly intense light shade of blue. Have you ever looked at the eyes of Malamute sled dogs? They have these very piercing, pale blue...and sometimes very weird yellow eyes that are awesomely riveting the first time you see them. Professor Elfesen's eyes grab your attention and then force you to focus on them in the same way."

“God! I couldn’t agree with you more...He’s a hunk...all right!” the second one eagerly confirmed. “You know, when I went to undergraduate school in the U.S. at the University of New Hampshire, they used to refer to us Norwegians students as ‘square heads’.”

“That sounds pretty insulting.”

“No, it wasn’t meant in a bad way, more in reference to the high square foreheads a lot of us Norwegians apparently have. The real reason I bring this up is because Professor Elfesen appears to meet this description. Don’t you think?”

“I know he’s not married, but I wonder if he’s got a girlfriend.”

“I doubt it. As far as I can tell, he spends most of his time with his damn computer or out rambling around in the woods recording bird songs. I’d go into the woods with him anytime.”

They hooked arms chuckling as the other one responded, “Me too!”

As a child, Jens had been frequently criticized for his frequent bouts of daydreaming. Like most biased parents, his had believed this to be an early indicator of intelligence and creativity. Jens’ daydreams almost always centered on stories about the gods of Norse mythology that were usually found fighting with their archenemies...the giants! He, of course, was always a great Viking warrior, fighting alongside his beloved Viking gods! As he recalled this, Jens involuntarily let out an almost indiscernibly sad sigh, more from disappointment in having been so abruptly brought back to mundane reality than from his recent embarrassment. He resolutely continued on his way back to his office...though somewhat less lethargically than before.

Jens' feeling of melancholy had partially been driven by apprehension about a recent job offer. It was comical, if you thought about it, how insecure even the most successful among us often feel! Sure, changing jobs meant giving up some of the things he'd worked so hard for at the university, but so what! Though he'd probably never acknowledge it, Jens relished the attention he received within Trondheim's small but elite academic community, but he was careful not to repeat the common mistake of confusing academic achievement with intellect. Since Jens had recently completed a major research project, it might actually be the perfect time for making a clean break from academic activities.

Arriving at the lab, Jens saw that Egil Stein was already there. Egil, an associate professor in the linguistics department, was Jens' best friend at the university. He was also the only person Jens had told about the new job offer. Even though Jens was in the ornithology department, they shared an office in the language lab as well as lived together in an off-campus apartment.

Egil looked up from his desk while precariously leaning back on his chair stretching broadly and yawning!

"Did I wake you up?" Jens chided him. Hearing only a groan, he continued with, "Hung over again, huh!" Jens walked over to the adjacent desk, sat down and continued. "Damn it, Egil! You're so insensitive. You just don't understand how rough I really have it" then sarcastically confessed, "All this well-deserved attention and praise being lavished on me is drastically changing my modest and humble expectations about my future!"

Jens paused a few seconds...just for effect ... before continuing. “Yes! Yes! As we both know, I was perfectly content with my simple and very austere existence here before all this unnecessary fuss was being made about me. Recognition by others of one’s very unique and exceptional abilities certainly has a down side. Don’t you agree?”

Egil groaned an “AR—UGH!” again, only this time, louder and more mournfully! While noisily pushing his chair away from his desk, he observed the comically exaggerated pained expression on Jens’ face so responded with, “Jens...You’re breaking my goddamn heart, and if you keep this garbage up, I’m going to puke! I don’t believe I’ve ever heard such a sad and pathetic tale before. Yes, I assure you, I’m completely overcome with pity for you!”

Jens chuckled. “Reindeer turds and troll crap! I can tell by the tone of your voice how little sympathy you really feel... you completely insensitive creature.”

“What do you expect me to do?” Egil asked. “Break down and cry? Perhaps what you would really like is for me to make the supreme sacrifice and take your poor miserable place. That would be fine with me. I just don’t understand what you think you’re leaving here. For God’s sake...look around! What do you see? Here we are with a dungeon for an office, located in the damp basement of what has to be the oldest and most decrepit classroom building on the entire campus, if not in the world.” While failing to muffle a laugh, he added, “It was probably built by one of Dean Blood Axe’s completely mad and utterly stupid Viking ancestors.”

Blood Axe was what Jens and Egil privately called the head of the linguistic department. Besides being an old Viking name,

they felt it appropriate because he was constantly imploring his staff to find ways cut costs and to do things more efficiently, or cheaply, depending on your point of view. They swore that old Blood Axe came in the office after they left to take an inventory of such things as paper clips and rubber bands.

Egil turned his chair and abruptly stood up. With his back toward Jens, he gestured in a most animated fashion. Then, pointing toward the only window, he grandiosely announced, “Look...Look at this! Our magnificent and charming view! Our only goddamn office window looks out into an old and exceedingly decrepit lab space. To make it worse, neither this room nor the stupid...ugly lab has a single window that lets in natural light or fresh air. This goddamn place is more like a morgue than an office! You can’t even tell whether it’s night or day without looking at your wristwatch. Yes...Yes! You poor, suffering bastard! You stay here, and I’ll gladly go to your new job...in your place.” They laughed heartily at this.

Jens got up, reached over, and gently poked Egil in the ribs. “Calm down! You’re killing me...and making me feel sorry for the both of us poor souls.” Putting his arm around Egil’s shoulder and pulling him upward, Jens forcibly led him toward the door. “Come on! Let’s get the hell out of here. Let’s go to the Old Farts Club and you can buy us both a beer to cheer us up.”

“That’ll work!” Egil enthusiastically chimed in as he briskly shoved Jens out the door ahead of him. Then, closing and locking the door behind them, he asked, “Hey! How come I always get to buy the beers for cheering us up?”

Being such a dark old traditional place, Egil and Jens had irreverently named the faculty club the Old Fart’s Club. It was where faculty members congregated, especially the

more prominent senior ones or the ‘old farts’ as Jens and Egil referred to them! It was a good place to hang out and read newspapers, discuss international affairs, and solve the world’s most complex and pressing problems, always, of course, in the most socially correct way! Unfortunately, the ‘old farts’ usually acted much too pompous and self-assured for either Jens’ and Egil’s liking.

Jens abruptly stopped and grabbed Egil’s arm while pulling him backwards. “Come on, stop your whining. I’ll tell you what! I’ll make you a wager. I’ll bet that I can predict what the first person we meet after we enter the faculty club is wearing. What do you say? If I’m wrong, then I’ll buy the beers.”

“All right! I’m game!”

“Okay...he’ll most likely be wearing a conservative brown or gray English tweed jacket, of course with the customary leather elbow patches and matched with a dull tie with wide horizontal stripes.”

“Okay, you’re on!”

When Jens interviewed for the new job, they could not or would not tell him much about the specific nature of the research he would be participating in. “It’s a top-secret government project...having to do with Delphinidae communications.” While walking to the club, Jens explained to Egil, “Studying mammal rather than bird languages offers the potential for a new, and hopefully, much larger professional challenge. Dolphins are such highly intelligent mammals and may offer valuable insight into how our own human languages initially evolved! Do you know what I mean?”

Hearing no response, Jens continued his one-sided conversation. "I've recently read that an American researcher in the western part of the United States found prairie dogs have a language of over 100 words, complete with adverbs and adjectives. Not only have that, but prairie dogs in neighboring western states had similar languages, only with slightly different dialogs. Astonishingly, when brought together for the first time, they can communicate effectively with each other! Based on these findings alone, can you imagine how complex the language of a more intelligent species, like dolphins, has the potential to be?"

Egil simply nodded his head in agreement. It wasn't that he wasn't interested but at this moment he was more concerned about other things. Primarily, he wondered if he should keep the apartment for himself or try to find another roommate.

"Language from highly intelligent mammals, other than man, that is, must be more primitive or virginal than human languages are. Perhaps, even less susceptible to change..." Jens reasoned out loud, more for his benefit than Egil's. "With human languages, it's so difficult to trace our primitive beginnings, probably because we are so frequently conquering and otherwise mixing with one another." Pausing again but still hearing no response, Jens continued, "Human languages are constantly being churned together! Trying to work your way through this jumbled and constantly changing morass to determine their roots are is a nearly impossible task!"

Jens and Egil often had these types of discussions so Egil dutifully answered, "I agree." Falling silent again, they walked in lock step to the faculty club.

When they arrived, Jens pointed toward the first person

they had earlier encountered and stating, “I told you so. Now pay up!”

“Shit!” Egil proclaimed. “I should have known better! That’s what all those old goddamn bastards invariably wear. Damn it! You’ve hustled me again. Have you no conscience?”

“Ah, I can taste those beers already,” said Jens contentedly.

“Don’t get too wound up...I’m only buying the first round!”

They sat at their usual table where Egil ordered a couple of drafts of Hansa beer while taking out his credit card and giving it to the waitress. Jens caught her attention on the way by saying, “Please, don’t ring that up yet. He pointed at Egil. “He’ll be running a tab!”

She looked over toward Egil, who somewhat disparagingly nodded his approval.

After savoring the first couple of swigs, Egil thoughtfully tried to reassure Jens about the big change he was about to make. “I’m sure it will all work out! Sounds like a great job and a very challenging position. Besides, think of all the money I’ll save by not having to buy all your beers!”

“Good point!”

“Hell, even if you hate it, I’m sure you can always come back here...that’s if you really want to? You’ve got the broadest background of anyone I’ve ever met. You’re an accomplished scientist, mathematician, computer wizard, linguist, and who knows what the hell else. Damn it! You’ve so many job skills... it pisses me off!”

“Damn it, Egil, I’m really not worried—REALLY! I’m not kidding,” Jens replied. After a brief pause, he changed the subject. “Did I ever tell you why I wanted to become a

scientist in the first place?”

“No, I don’t believe so. Or, if you did, I was so drunk...”

“Well...it has to do with wanting to understand universal issues, such as why the world works the way it does. As a teenager, I first tried finding answers from reading religious texts, such as the Bible, or later the works of great philosophers, such as Descartes and Aristotle. Eventually, I developed this naive belief that the only way to garner this knowledge was through science. What a dummy I was! I was pretty sure I was on the right track until I started to learn more about modern physics. You know relativity theory, quantum mechanics, etc...etc! Then I came upon Pauli’s Uncertainty Principal and finally realized it was all probably a futile quest.”

“You bet! You know, Jens, I went down pretty much the same path. That was until I better understood the role statistics and chance plays in our lives. So much for Einstein’s famous Grand Unifying Theorem or his belief that God’s not playing with dice. Still, some day...or somehow, I still cling to the hope...”

“Exactly! In an instant going from God is not playing with dice...to... well, maybe he is! What a paradox!” Jens looked over the table at Egil and apologized. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt you. I just got carried away!”

“Skol...Well said!” Egil toasted and raised his glass towards Jens as they clinked them robustly together. “Here we are—two lost, very confused and deeply troubled souls about to make our separate ways in the world.”

“Well! I don’t know about all that!” Jens had left unstated, even to Egil that the most important part about the new position was that it offered more pay, much more than he could

ever hope to receive by remaining at the university. As with most young and upwardly mobile professionals, Jens' recent success had brought him a small, but tantalizing, taste of the good life. In fact, he even hoped to soon be able to afford more personal luxury items, and especially to be able to travel or vacation more frequently. Yet, at his present university salary, he rarely had much left over for life's more pleasurable pursuits.

I don't want to leave you with the impression that Jens was a hedonist. It's simply that his over-charged, young hormones were informing him he was in dire need of a change! You see, Jens was more afraid of life passing him by than any uncertainty changing jobs would bring him. Surprising? If Jens needed additional justification for accepting the new position, its close proximity to his boyhood home provided it.

The fact that the Marine Resource and Technology Institute in Kristiansund did top-secret research for NATO and the Norwegian Defense Ministry was well-known. Just the same, little about the actual work being done was public knowledge. While tours could be arranged, the facilities was not normally open to the public.

The city of Kristiansund is located down the coast and just southwest of Trondheim. It consists of three main islands connected by bridges and ferries. Many felt Kristiansund's best years were behind it. New infrastructure improvements had recently begun, such as new bridges and major improvements to several public buildings, but this construction boom was due more to an infusion of national oil revenues from the federal government than a robust local economy.

The Kristiansund Institute's director, Trygve Bjionstal, Ph.D., had been very impressed with Jens' research on song-bird communications and was hopeful Jens' employment would offer the institute a similar breakthrough in communications with dolphins.

Trygve was a natural leader. On first meeting him, you knew immediately he was someone to take very seriously. His pronounced physical features added to the imposing first impression made by his broad-shoulders and barrel-chest. This combination made him appear much larger than he really was! More importantly, Trygve's steady confident gaze peered out below large and bushy eyebrows. This last unique feature inspired Jon Rasmussen, the institute's in-house comedian, while speaking in an exaggerated Gaelic brogue accent, to nickname him "The Scoo...oot's Man from HELL!" Unknown to Trygve, this bold and comical characterization had caught on with the rest of the staff.

Those working with Trygve could not help but be caught up in his enthusiasm and dedication to the institute. Trygve most loved those things directly revolving around his work; as a result he spent all his available time at the institute. Most days, he would work from early morning until late in the evening, and even on most weekends. Nonetheless, he did not expect or require others to keep pace with him. After all, who possibly could?

The only occasions anyone ever saw Trygve out socializing was when it involved or was directly related to activities taking place at the institute, such as fund raising. So, as you can see, the institute was Trygve's life. Yes, Trygve had one very obvious large flaw. Combining all the previous personality traits,

you have the makings of a workaholic or, possibly even worse, a fanatic!

Trygve had slowly come to the realization that the institute was not likely to make a breakthrough in dolphin communications unless it could find a radically new and different approach. “Jens Elfesen’s research method of using computers for interpreting the very subtle variations in vocalizations of songbird patterns is just the novel approach we’re seeking. Something similar could certainly be happening with dolphins,” Trygve had told his staff before making Jens a job offer. In offering Jens a position, Trygve had caused somewhat of a fuss as he had offered Jens the position of a senior research associate. This was unheard of for such a young and relatively inexperienced scientist! Thus, an undercurrent of disapproval and no small measure of jealousy among the other staff members was created.

In his past research with birds, Jens was able to find very subtle and almost indistinguishable patterns in bird songs that were based on minor inflections of sound inaudible to the human ear. Even when these bird songs were recorded and played back very slowly, these slight pattern variations were still not easily recognizable. Only with the assistance of a computer and a solid understanding of music was Jens able to clearly identify the significance of these ever-so-subtle and barely perceptible pattern changes in songbird vocalizations.

Yes, music! Jens found a consistency between the subtle sound pattern variations and subsequent actions made by the bird. In other words, birds have a simple and effective language! To understand this language, Jens relied on his broad scientific background as well as his considerable knowledge

about and passionate love for classical music.

“Bird languages are more than just simple sounds. They have to do with rhythm, tempo and composition,” Jens stated in his research paper. “To understand bird languages, you must first study Beethoven, Bach, Mozart and, of course, our world famous Norwegian composer...Grieg!”

When Jens interviewed for the new position, Trygve appeared to be the perfect boss. Jens felt that Trygve’s obvious enthusiasm and intensity matched his own.

On May 1, 1992, after phoning Trygve to formally accept the position, Jens immediately called his folks to tell them the good news. After a couple of rings, his mother, Sigrud, answered the phone. “Hello!”

“Hi! Mom, I’ve got some really big news. The Kristiansund Institute has offered me a position as a research scientist and I have accepted!”

“Oh...that’s wonderful, dear!” Then Sigrud added somewhat hesitantly, “Are you sure that’s what you want? You’ve been doing so well at the university.”

“You make it sound like you don’t want me to come back home,” Jens teasingly replied.

“No, No! That’s not it! It’s just we’re so proud of you, and you seemed so happy in Trondheim.”

“I know, I am just teasing you, Mom! The new job means lots more money and I’ll be working with sea mammals, such as dolphins. It should be more interesting than working with birds. I’ve been doing some reading, and dolphins are very intelligent mammals. Besides, I need a change! Can you understand?”

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“Well, son, whatever you want is fine with us. You know what’s best! I’ll tell your dad when he comes in. You know we would both love to have you back home again. When will all this happen?”

“I haven’t given notice to the university yet. Trygve Bjonstal, the institute’s director, told me whatever date I work out with the university is fine with him, but the sooner the better. I thought that was nice of him. He seems like a super person, Mom. I’m really looking forward to the change.”

“That’s good! You know, I think your father knows him, but not very well.” After a brief pause, “This must be sad for your roommate, Egil? He’s such a nice boy and you’re such good friends. Make sure you tell Egil to come visit us any time.”

“I will, Mom...and he’s not a boy! Anything else?”

“No! Just let us know...when you figure it all out. We love you!” Having mixed feelings about Jens’ news, she hung up.

Rolf and Sigrud Elfesen, Jens’ parents, are your typical hardworking Norwegian farmers. As alluded to earlier, their little farm was on the island of Averoy, which is very close to and only a short ferry ride away from the city of Kristiansund.