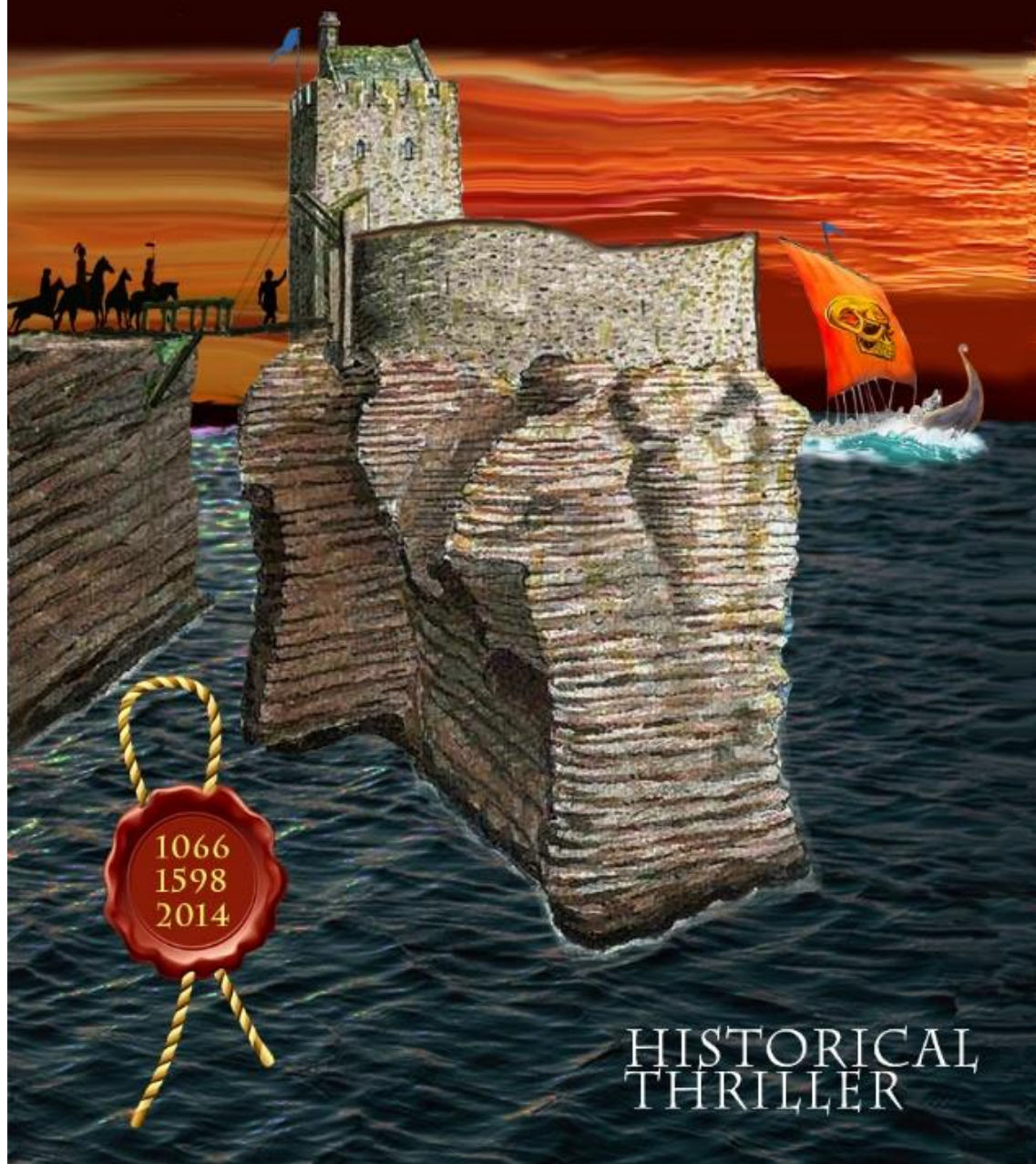


J. RAGNAR NYMOEN

The Will

THE MYSTERY OF
CHRISTIANE STEWART



HISTORICAL
THRILLER

The Will

The Mystery of Christiane Stewart

by

Jan Ragnar Nymoén

2020

© Jan Ragnar Nymoén

ISBN 978-82-690125-8-3 (eBook)

License Notes:

The author is the sole owner of the English Edition of this eBook. It may not be copied, shared, or sold, without express permission from the author. If you would like to purchase the original hardcopy edition in Norwegian, you may do so at www.araltes.org

Cover: © Araltes forlag - from a painting by Andrew Spratt

Chapter 1

May 9, 2014. The Castle on the Crimean Peninsula

Sergei Shargunov stared down at his right hand, amazed. His fingers were shaking! When did that last happen? Suddenly, he remembered. It was a little more than 30 years ago. He had just turned 19. He'd shot a man from a rival family, in the middle of the chest. A few days later, Sergei got a bullet in the knee. After that, his father promoted him up a notch in the organization, away from petty cash collection and into brute force.

Sergei shook his head, thinking out loud. "I wish my father had lived long enough to experience this."

His words reached the ears of the thin, dark-haired woman standing next to him. Her wavy hair just barely reached the end of her long neck. She tilted her head to look up at him. Her brown eyes shone with anticipation. She didn't say anything but nodded impatiently.

Sergei's left knee had improved considerably in recent days. Nevertheless, he took his walking stick with a firm grip and limped, perhaps from habit, toward the safe. The handle of the walking stick, in the shape of a golden skull, felt strangely hot against his bony palm. A good or bad sign? As he reached the dark stone wall, he threw a glance down at the skull. Today it seemed to smile at him conspiratorially.

Sergei keyed in the secret code. After a few seconds, there was a metallic click. The forty-year-old safe had been built into the 3-foot-thick outer wall of the castle. The addition of the electronic door lock and alarm system convinced Sergei that the safe's content was properly secured. Still, he increased the guard by one more man after securing the last artefact, the one his father had dreamed of getting hold of. The satisfaction of succeeding where his father had failed made him pinch his thin lips into a grin. *Look at me, Daddy. I managed what you could not...*

Just a few days after the successful attack on Korolev, he had travelled to a state-of-the-art clinic in Moscow and was put under the knife, or rather, the laser. Once he had discovered that the artefact was in the possession of a distant relative, the wine-farmer Rostislav Korolev, it was only a matter of time and money; the latter he had more than enough of. The fact that the organization had grown larger and more powerful under his leadership allowed him to fulfil almost any desire.

He rested his walking stick against the rough stone wall. For a brief moment, he imagined he saw a flash of red in one of the skull's dark eye cavities. *On this special day, you too will taste the best fluid!* he thought. His wife hated it when he spoke to the skull, so he avoided it whenever she was present. Instead, he settled for a nod and a smile in secret agreement.

The heavy door of the vault opened silently. Sergei was trembling inside, and he suspected that she shared his excitement. Carefully, he pulled on a pair of white gloves, looking over at his wife with satisfaction. She was wearing that bright, tight-fitting dress he loved. For the occasion, he'd had a suit made in a grey that he noted complemented her well.

Cautiously, he retrieved an item, wrapped in its original silk sheath, that had been in his family's possession for hundreds of years. It was at least a thousand years old. He unpacked the object and placed it into the outstretched hands of Irina. Once more, he reached a hand into the vault and pulled out another item, also wrapped in silk. This silk, however, was brand new, and it held the drinking horn he had just acquired from Korolev. The original sheath was missing, so Sergei had a copy made during his stay in Moscow. He grabbed his wife's hand, and together they moved over to a round table where they laid both items down.

"Irina, would you fetch the champagne? The one specially selected just for the occasion."

She nodded and walked quickly to the cabinet where the bottle was waiting, gently lifted it out, and brought it to the table. The bottle had cost several thousand, but it was worth every last rouble. The moment was finally here. It had been difficult to postpone the ceremony, but now he was pleased he had managed to wait for Victory Day, the day that marked the anniversary of Nazi Germany's surrender to the Soviet Union. Earlier that day, Vladimir Putin had visited the Sevastopol base. Sergei Shargunov was one of those selected for the honour of shaking the hand of the Russian President. Once again, the Crimean Peninsula was part of Russia. Sergei had felt his heart pounding when he was called forward to meet the evaluating gaze of President Putin. In a way though, he felt disappointed at having received only a short nod and a few words of praise. Still, the moment was perfect for Sergei's private celebration.

After pressing the button that initiated the playing of the national anthem of the Kingdom in the east, he opened the champagne bottle. There was a loud bang as the cork burst out of the bottle and barrelled through the open cabinet doors and into one of the glasses, sending it shattering to the floor with an unsettling crash.

Irina, clearly troubled, looked at her husband. "Not a bad sign, right? I know how much this means to you, dear." After a brief silence, she continued. "No, this is probably just another reason to celebrate. A fair price: one crystal glass in exchange for a new drinking horn of gold!"

Sergei exhaled. *What a discerning wife.* "Of course, that's the way it is. One vessel for another." With his left hand, he grabbed the artefact his family had owned for generations. With the other, he lifted the champagne bottle and let the sparkling liquid flow into the drinking horn in his wife's hand before he poured it into his own. He gently replaced the bottle on the table before solemnly raising the golden horn toward Irina's. A metallic clink sounded when the vessels met.

"Cheers to the Golden Horn, which finally is reunited with its twin!"

Both took a deep sip. Then, as if the rising bubbles from the champagne had tickled her nose, Irina jerked the drinking horn away from her lips. The precious horn slipped, slowly almost, from her fingers and fell to the tiled floor. For several moments neither spoke.

"I'm so sorry! How awkward of me. Please, don't get angry, dear."

Sergei did not move. A few seconds passed before he placed a comforting hand on her shoulder, and a perfect row of teeth appeared. “The horn seems to have its own will.”

Irina visibly relaxed, smiling as she bent down. She picked up the drinking horn carefully and raised it against the light. For a moment, it appeared undamaged. But before any relief could come, Irina’s eyes fixed on a spot at the very top of the rim. She hesitated before speaking. “I’m afraid the drinking horn has suffered a minor injury.” Her hand shook as she handed it over to her husband.

Sergei studied the artefact in depth. Had he not known better, he would have thought it was painted, gilt that had been chipped off. It can’t be! He grimaced. His blue eyes darken from deep inside his skull. His mouth opened, but no sound came through his lips. Hesitantly, he put the nail of his index finger to the damage and poked warily. A larger piece of gold leaf loosened and fell to the floor. When he started to speak, the words didn’t sound like his own: “This drinking horn is not made of gold! Forgery! I’ve been fooled!” In a low voice, Sergei started swearing.

Irina was uneasy and dared not speak. From experience, she knew that it was best to keep quiet.

Eventually, the distressing word flow stopped. Without saying anything, the two sat down into their leather chairs.

Sergei sighed heavily. Suddenly he took her hand in his. The feeling of her soft hand had a calming effect on him.

Immediately after his father’s death, Sergei had the original drinking horn inspected by an expert. There was no doubt that it was made of pure gold and that it was at least a thousand years old. Volume and weight confirmed that it was real. Clearly, its twin was not made of pure gold and was unlikely to be as ancient. Sergei stood up from his chair and limped over to the window where there was mobile coverage. He searched for someone in his contact list, made a call, and after a few minutes, hung up. When he started speaking, his ice-blue eyes had a hard expression.

“This celebration went straight to hell! But really, it’s lucky that you dropped it on the floor, dear wife. I suspect I know who has fooled me!” Without saying anything more, he packed the original back into its silk cloth. He handed the second horn over to his wife while he walked over to the safe and put it away.

There was an unpleasant silence as they left the tower. Before locking the door, he said, half to himself, “I swear that someone will pay for this, and pay dearly!”

Chapter 2

Who was Christiane Stewart?

“Shit! Now you’ve cut the vein with blue blood.” John-Berg, standing straight-backed with his hands behind him, overshadowed the back of his younger brother who was seated in the office chair in front of him.

Malte glared, obviously agitated, at a paper on the desk in front of him, and he had drawn a large x over it. The man in the chair had dark blond hair that was parted in the middle. He turned the upper half of his body to look over his shoulder and shook his head. To be informed about the mistake in the diagram was a big surprise.

John-Berg had never cared for the family’s ancient link to the Orkney Islands. For several moments they stared at each other without saying a word.

Malte Moddy gently slid a finger over the bridge of his big nose while turning the chair around to face his brother. He leaned back and folded his hands behind his neck, his ruffled hair hanging down over his ears and hiding his smooth, rectangular face.

The events of the past months had pulled Malte out of his foggy and isolated existence in Stavanger. It had been good for him. The pallor of his face had disappeared. He squinted his blue eyes up at the strong figure above him. The two brothers looked like one other, except that the work as a skipper on a whale barge had made the older even larger and stronger – and then there was his well-groomed goatee.

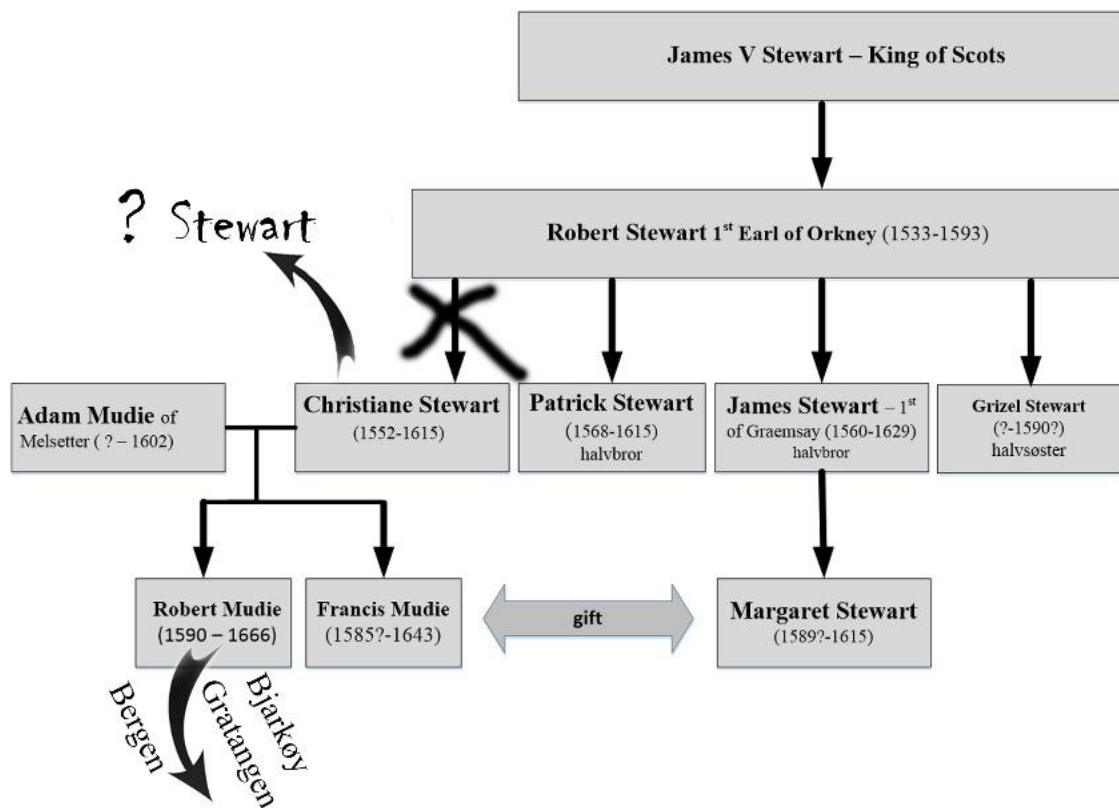
“John-Berg, what’s come over you?”

The man with the goatee struggled to maintain a mask of seriousness. Suddenly he lost control and burst into laughter as he slapped a big hand down hard on Malte’s shoulder. “You swallowed the bait! You should see yourself, your mouth wide open just like a whale targeting a shoal of herring!”

Malte shook his head and pushed himself up from the chair. “Shit! How did I let you fool me? I know you aren’t concerned about our distant connection with the old Scottish Kings!”

Karin, unlike her husband John-Berg, had a very different attitude about the research on the ancestry she was joined to by marriage. In fact, it was she who had first aroused Malte’s interest. To his amazement, he had since become curious to find out more and look back in time. It wasn’t that he was particularly concerned about whether there was any connection to Scottish nobility or not, but what one discovered when one came across one historical person or another. It uncovered so much – facts that made people become more than just a name with an annual number trailing behind. Either way, the family connection was irrevocably cut across now.

“Christiane Stewart. Who was she?” John-Berg had reached the table. His expression was distant and his eyes were on the family chart.



Malte hesitated for a moment before answering. “Right now, it seems that nobody has the slightest idea. Remember, Christiane lived about 400 years ago. She died sometime in the 17th century. Actually, I was surprised that Karin and I managed to follow the line so far back in time. Now I’m afraid the mystery may be difficult or completely impossible to solve.”

Malte’s mind went back to the last Christmas celebration. Just beforehand, his brother had shown up unexpectedly at his home in Stavanger. In a way, that seemed like an eternity ago. Malte had suffered from a deep depression caused by a mysterious disease. As a result, he had been forced to resign as deputy head of security at the Department of Western Norwegian Oil. Now he felt grateful to his brother’s wife, Karin, who had managed to awaken an interest in his family history. It had pulled him out of the dark that had seemed to envelop him. Together, Malte and his sister-in-law had discovered that Robert Mudie, the brothers’ eighth great-grandfather had emigrated from Orkney to Norway around 1630.

When Malte had woken up that morning, it had been quiet in his brother’s house in Reine in Lofoten. It had given him time to check his email. And just like the days before, there hadn’t been any word from that one person he struggled to get out of his mind. There was, however, a message from another woman, someone who shared some of the same family lines. The lady claimed there were two women named Christiane Stewart. The daughter of Earl Robert Stewart was proven to be married to some John Mowat of Hugoland during the same period of time that another Christiane Stewart was married to his ancestor, Adam Mudie. Initially, Malte had

difficulty understanding this. Only after checking the specified sources several times had he been convinced.

Malte knew Karin wouldn't be happy with the discovery, which severed the link to Robert Stewart, and on to his father, the King. He hoped she'd see this as a new challenge: to find out which Stewart 'our' Christiane is daughter to – even if Malte feared that it may prove impossible.

Chapter 3

The well

The Viking King's priceless heirloom ... Its fate has fallen to me. Korolev had no one else. Coming to understand my role in it all was a long journey, both in time and geographical distance. Still, the backstory hasn't been easy to unravel.

Malte swept a tress away from his face. Once again, he'd let too much time pass since his last visit to the barber in Stavanger. His feet dangled over the dark, rocky mouth of the well below. He looked over his shoulder at the sound of John-Berg's steps behind him. It had only taken his brother a few seconds to fasten a bowline knot around the nearest mountain birch. Gripping the other end of the strong rope, he approached the edge of the well. He glanced over the edge and said in a quiet voice, "I thought I heard something further down the hill. Let's get this over and done with."

Malte nodded, took the rope from his brother, and manoeuvred his body so that his knees rested against the stone wall. Slowly, he began lowering himself into the darkness. As he turned to peer beneath his feet, his headlamp illuminated the shaft. Descending into the well was easy now that he was fully recovered from the disease. Well, at least he wanted to believe himself recovered.

Again, he found himself rehearsing his reasons for being just there at just that moment – descending an old well. He had, admittedly, constructed a somewhat strange justification for his mission: the laws of nature. A wave that moves into shallow water has no direction to send its energy but upward. Likewise, a man without a son to receive his inheritance has to devise an alternative solution. In this case, the solution was one that entrusted Malte with the safeguarding of an oath sworn by two Vikings nearly 1,000 years ago: these treasures will be handed from father to son for eternity.

The result of a Y-DNA test had proven that Malte and a man in Odesa, Rostislav Korolev, had a common forefather in the Viking era. Malte was fully aware of the responsibility that had come with his commitment to this oath, one taken by countless men who had preceded him in this long line. In all the previous generations, the obligation was natural, and now, it must also be for Malte Moddy. Perhaps this was another trait passed down through genes?

I have no son, not yet. But I will do my duty: The artefact will never be sold.

A doubt had once momentarily struck Malte: *Is it right for me to hide this precious object away instead of handing it over to the National Museum? It is undoubtedly an important part of Norway's history. If I carry through with this, doesn't that put me in the same league as that Mafia boss?* Still, for Malte, the answer was obvious. *I swore an oath, just the like the others before me. The chain mustn't be broken.*

Malte gripped the rope so tightly that the knuckles of his broad hands whitened. The darkness closed in on him with each slow movement downward. The air passing through his nostrils was

dry. There was no hint of moisture, unsurprising considering that the well had failed to produce even so much as a bucket of water. This was one of his grandfather's few unsuccessful projects. The ground proved to be too well-drained. Even twelve feet below ground, the soil consisted mostly of rough gravel. Ultimately, his grandfather had given up on the well, or at least that was what he had been told. Could there be some other explanation? Nevertheless, the barren well had been of great use at least once. During the last war, it was here that his grandfather had hidden the radio for the Germans.

Malte's train of thought was interrupted when one of his feet touched solid ground. He glanced upwards. Although it was well after one at night, there was still a slight glow in the sky. Amid the dark silhouette at the edge of the well's opening shone his brother's face. Suddenly, it faded away as Malte lost his balance and fell forward, unable to catch himself. In an instant, the shaft when dark.

"What happened? Did you find the stone blocking the cavity?" His brother's voice sounded strange. It seemed to come from far away.

Malte's hands fumbled in the dark in front of him. He found himself kneeling and his head meeting something cool and hard.

"Malte! Are you hurt?" The voice of John-Berg rang in his ears. "Hell, answer me!"

A beam of light lit the boulder in front of Malte. He shook his head. *Did I faint?* Looking up, he raised an arm to shield his eyes. "You're blinding me! Hell! I'm alright!"

Again it went dark. Malte braced the wall of the well and pulled himself to his feet. "I knocked the damn headlamp against the wall. Toss me yours!"

John-Berg lowered it down. As soon as he got his hands on it, he turned around to examine the unevenly-piled stone blocks behind him. He discovered the opening he was looking for, hidden behind a square stone. Malte struggled a bit to remove the boulder. Suddenly it loosened. Gently he lowered it on the ground. The cavity appeared untouched. The walls seemed just as stable as they had been the last time he was there. He wondered how deep the opening was beyond what he could see. Flat stone blocks framed the rectangular opening, about 15 inches wide and deep. The height was about half the width.

Malte recalled the last time he had been there. Where had the time gone? His late father had brought them with him to this area and pointed out the 4-inch thick layer of turf covering the opening of the well. "The cabin and the well beneath us is part of what you three will inherit after your mother and I have passed. When you get older, your mother has a secret to tell you." When they had descended that first time, the little chamber had been just as empty as now.

Malte squinted when he noticed something in the bright path of his flashlight. A smaller stone in the rear wall seemed loose. He moved closer and tugged it gently. He gasped when he discovered a black metal case. As he pulled it toward him, he noted that it was hinged in the back. The lid opened smoothly. Malte jumped when he saw the contents. *But why is this hidden here?* Carefully, he picked up the item, which just fit in the palm of his hand. The flashlight flickered a bit and shone a bit less brightly. He cast a glance down at the object in his hand and turned it around. On the back, it was engraved: 'Christiane 1956'. Mother's baptism gift? Of course, his sister Nelle was meant to have this. He thought back to his parents' funeral. He shook his head and sighed deeply.

His brother's voice dragged his mind away just as he began reimagining his parents' car being hit by a fully-loaded semi-trailer. "Have you fallen asleep down there? We've got to get away from here. I heard a dog barking down on the hillside."

Malte forced his mind into the present. He shook his head wondering. *Could this be what Mother was going to tell us about?* Suddenly, he found it difficult to breathe. He placed the object back into the metal case before shoving it into the pocket of his windbreaker. "Yeah, everything's okay. Let me have the drinking horn."

The treasure that would be hidden here in the well was more valuable than anything that had ever existed in Lofoten, and perhaps the country.

John-Berg lowered the precious cargo to him slowly. Malte quickly looked down into the bag. The light from the headlamp became even weaker. Nevertheless, the light reflected off the object in a soft, golden sheen. *It'll be safe here, at least until I find a better hiding place.*

Up at the little mountain lake, there were no other cabins. The place his grandfather had built was the only natural plot. Other than the two brothers, no one living knew about the well. They had searched for nearly five minutes before the iron rod hit the heavy slab of flat stone four inches beneath the turf. A strong man would be able to move the stone alone. Together, they managed in less than a minute.

When they left the site, it was almost impossible to see that the turf had been replaced. Fortunately, no one had seen them. *It must have been a wild dog that John-Berg had heard.* Malte felt confident that the Byzantine treasure was well hidden. The Golden Horn, the drinking horn that Harald Hardrade had brought back to Norway in 1045, was safe. Malte thought back to the amazing story of the Viking King once more.

Upon returning to Norway after 15 years abroad, Harald Hardrade returned with Elizaveta Yaroslavna, the woman he had finally been granted permission to marry. Elizaveta, known as Elisif in Norway, was the daughter of the mighty Yaroslav I 'The Wise' of Kyiv. She would become the queen of Norway.

Malte could not help wondering what had happened. When he first met with Korolev and heard the amazing – almost unbelievable – story of the four drinking horns, he hadn't fully understood the intentions of the wine-farmer.

*

The night before returning to Stavanger, Malte sat with John-Berg and Karin in the living room and talked about the events in Ukraine. The two children, Ida and Aage, had gone to bed after the late dinner.

John-Berg stood up from his chair. "The occasion merits a celebration!" He picked up a bottle of Scotch whiskey, poured generous measures into three glasses before he turned to his wife, and said, "You do not know it yet, but the Moddy family has something to celebrate!"

Karin leaned forward and stared accusingly at her husband. "Ever since Malte appeared, I've wondered what the two of you have been keeping undisclosed. And after you went up to the mountains, refusing to tell me what you were up to, I've become more and more curious." She stopped and shook her head slowly, awaiting a response from her husband. Receiving none, she turned her eyes, half reproachfully, on Malte.

Malte, still a bit hesitant to tell anyone other than his brother, cast a glance at the living room door. He spoke softly and told her everything, starting with Harald Hardrade's escape from the palace in Byzantium through to Malte's flight from Warsaw, during which the treasure was hidden away in one of the magnum bottles he carried with him.

After Malte finished, Karin looked to her husband before turning back to Malte. "I don't understand. I'm with you through to the diversion and the manoeuvre you made. But the security check at the airport in Kyiv – all of the hand luggage would have been scanned. How could you take the chance that the drinking horn would be discovered there? That gangster, he has contacts!"

Malte leaned back in his chair and took a sip of whiskey before explaining. "It was Rostislav Korolev who came up with the solution. Several years earlier, he had removed the bottom of a magnum bottle and hidden the drinking horn inside of it. Afterwards, he filled the bottle with red wine and melted the bottom into place. At Warsaw Airport –"

"You have already said all this! Get to the point!" Karin said, getting up from her chair.

The brothers exchanged worried looks. During dinner, Karin had been drinking red wine. That, in addition to the whiskey, had apparently been too much. John-Berg leered at her. She sank back in her chair with a disturbed expression on her face. An embarrassing silence ensued.

After a moment, Malte coughed and continued. "Rostislav got help from an old friend, a man who works in security at the airport. The man brought some bottles of wine with him when he arrived at work that day and arranged for a third person to bring them into the departure hall to meet with me. We swapped duty-free bags in the toilet. The bags appeared to have identical contents: the same type of wine in identical magnum bottles, at least from the outside. Then everything went on as planned."

Karin seemed to have regained her self-control because she straightened up in her chair. "What a story! I can hardly believe that such a valuable artefact now belongs to our family! Us! I almost can't ..."

Her husband raised his hand. "Remember that it was Malte who was chosen by Korolev."

Once more, there was an embarrassing silence. Karin nodded grimly before she grabbed the whiskey glass and emptied it in a long sip. She grabbed the whiskey bottle and poured more, but only for herself. She took another sip of the golden fluid. She shook her head before she, clearly drunk, pushed herself upright. She scowled at her husband.

What she said next was said in a loud, nasal voice. "Malte said that Korolev was relieved when he heard that you, my dear husband, already have a son. Malte on the other hand ..." She gazed at the younger of the brothers in silence. Though she didn't say it, Malte could feel that at that moment, she hated him.

"He has no children. Moreover, you are the oldest!" She took a shaky step to the side, nearly losing her balance. The half-empty whiskey glass slipped out of her hand and fell on the thick carpet without breaking. She grabbed a chair to steady herself.

John-Berg's cheeks flushed red when he turned to Malte and said, barely audibly, "My dear wife has had way too much to drink. I can barely remember ever seeing her like this. Sorry, Malte. I'll take her to bed."

Karin, now resting both of her hands on the back of the chair in front of her, blinked her blurry eyes several times before she focused, with apparent effort, on her husband. “My suggestion is that we sell this item! As brothers, it’s only right and proper that you two should own half of this each. We could have a new car, and then you could pay off those loans for the new engine of that cursed ship. Furthermore –”

John-Berg had reached Karin. He laid a gentle hand on her shoulder as he whispered her something in the ear.

She tore herself loose and threw a furious glance at him. “Don’t touch me! Leave me alone!” She took a few unsteady steps away from him, raising a hand. Even as Malte watched, he could not believe what happened next. He heard a loud thud as her fist met her husband’s cheek. John-Berg stumbled backwards, his mouth sagging open. She took another step towards him, raising her fist for another strike. Abruptly, she halted. No one moved. After a few seconds, she lowered her hand and shook her head before she buried her face in her hands and began sobbing.

John-Berg took a few hesitant steps forward. Nothing happened. Gently, he took her upper arm with a firm grip. She did not protest when her husband guided her to the bedroom. At the doorway, he turned to face Malte and shook his head apologetically before pulling the door closed behind him.

It was nearly ten minutes before he returned, clearly embarrassed.

“There is nothing to worry about, Malte. Tomorrow she will not even remember anything. I cannot recall seeing her so drunk since we were teenagers. So sorry. The artefact cannot ever be sold. You are the owner. And of course, it must be passed down to your sons, just as you promised Rostislav and his daughter.”