

## **Seafarer's Blood** by Albert E. Cowdrey

This story marks the third consecutive issue in which Mr. Cowdrey has had a story ... but he professes to having no rivalry with Robert Reed for being our most prolific contributor. He does, however, admit to being a student of history, which helps explain this story's juxtaposition of old times and new.

The first time they met, the Viking—ice-blue eyes, tangled red beard, arms like hairy cables—strode out of a wintry dusk and right through Eric Mumford, shattering the globe of silence that enclosed him.

For an instant Eric felt penetrating cold, inhaled a smell like an elephant house, heard the *ka-thump* of a single heartbeat and the *crunch* of a heavy footfall in a pile of dirty snow. Then the Viking was gone, his broad leather-clad back vanishing down a battlemented wall, across a wooden footbridge, and through a narrow doorway into a massive stone tower.

*But that's impossible*, Eric thought. Not seeing a Viking—he'd been doing things like that since he was seven. But in all his visions he'd never heard a sound or sniffed an odor. He felt like a moviegoer of the Twenties, accustomed to the gesticulating phantoms of the silent screen, suddenly awakening to the fact of sound. But even that moviegoer wouldn't have inhaled Theda Bara's scent or felt Valentino's hot breath.

In the small, musty den of the row house Eric shared with Chris, he lay still for a while, puzzling over his experience. Then his alarm clock beeped, and he heard Chris in the kitchen down the hall, rattling plates—making breakfast for herself, but of course not for him.

The world that is sometimes called real engulfed him. *Same old wife*, he thought wearily. *Same old life*. Yawning, grunting, scratching his scalp and backside, Eric disentangled himself from his unwashed sheets and stumbled out of bed to confront another lousy day.

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At Pocatelli's Pasta Garden on Fell's Point the lunchtime crowd turned the place to bedlam. Yet even when he was hustling trays, reciting the specials, appeasing obnoxious customers, getting yelled at by the chef and yelling back, Eric's mind kept going over last night's experience. What

exactly had happened, and above all, why?

That evening he brushed his teeth in the little blue-painted downstairs bath he shared with a lively community of small roaches and went to bed as usual on the futon in the den. In the bedroom over his head, Chris was phoning one of her girlfriends, telling her loudly what a rat he was and how unlike Lord Vyvyan Gyles in a romance novel she was reading called *The Mistress of Hardcastle*. And, thought Eric, probably showering her sheets with cookie crumbs and drops of spilled gin, her usual bedmates ever since he ceased to be.

Then his eyes closed, and without any sense of transition he was back on the castle wall.

Alas, the Viking wasn't. Eric hovered inside his usual bubble, hearing and feeling nothing. His immaterial state allowed some crisp snowflakes to pass through him, drifting and spinning. Thirty feet or so away, bearded men-at-arms wearing clumsy wool mittens and ratty-looking cloaks shivered and rubbed their hands over a smoky fire in a black iron bucket. In the fields beyond the castle, dun-colored peasants gleaned the last stalks from the dun-colored earth.

God, how boring the Dark Ages were. Almost as bad as Baltimore.

He awoke in a gelid predawn. Chris was rattling dishes in the kitchen. He stumbled out of bed and went to work. He came home in the wintry twilight, watched the Ravens lose a game on TV, and returned to bed. A week passed, the days falling one by one with the sullen iteration of a dripping faucet. He and Chris had two more fights. He accused her of entertaining other men while he was at work and called her a sleazy slut; she denied the charge and called him a fool, a failure, and a faggot. He threw a lamp at her. She threw a plate at him. Neither connected.

Every night he went back to the wall, where absolutely nothing happened either. It rained or didn't rain, snowed or didn't snow. He might as well have tuned into a ninth-century weather channel.

Then, one otherwise forgettable Tuesday morning, Eric lurched off the futon as usual, only to discover a painful bruise on his right knee. *Where'd I get that?* he wondered. It hadn't been there the night before. His telephone lay on the floor, mournfully beeping. The familiar, battered furniture of the den had been randomly pushed around, and the ratty pale carpet bore damp footprints. When he stepped on one, his foot covered the print precisely.

Shaking his head, Eric staggered loowards, only to find the shower curtain pulled loose and water still trickling in the stall. Baffled, he washed sketchily, dressed, and was heading for the front door when he encountered Chris in the foyer. As a rule, they said as little as possible to each other, especially in the morning. But today she stated—in a screechy voice that was particularly hard on his nerves—that she intended to report his vandalism to Barton U. Scheisster, the lawyer who was handling her divorce.

Eric naturally inquired what vandalism she was referring to.

“You knocked over that antique table in the upstairs hall, the one Aunt Mae gave me. Two legs are broken.”

“I never went upstairs last night.”

“Oh, can it. After the crash woke me up, I was lying there in the dark listening, pretty scared if you want to know the truth, and I heard you running into things. Drunk again, I suppose. Then you started talking out loud—babbling like an idiot. I ran to the bedroom door and opened it and switched on the light just in time to see that ratty old Dortmund Beer T-shirt you sleep in disappearing down the stairs.”

“You were so soused on gin last night you probably broke that crappy little table yourself.”

“Lying jerk.”

“Boozy bitch.”

On that affectionate note, they parted.

Eric’s journey to Fell’s Point, always dreary, became drearier as he admitted to himself that he’d turned into a sleepwalker. Worse, his stressed-out personality had fractured into components that knew nothing of each other’s doings—which sounded like a formula for lunacy. He was no longer merely an unhappy schmuck, he was now an unhappy nutcase as well. Brooding thus, he arrived at Pocatelli’s, where another workday began.

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That evening he pub-crawled home through the sleaze of Greenmount Avenue, pausing now and then to down a few Dortmunders

and reject the advances of a couple of fat old whores.

In the last bar on his itinerary, a dreggy hole that smelled vaguely like puke, companioned only by three other isolated men and a bartender perusing a racing form, he succumbed to meditation. Usually Eric avoided thinking about the toilet his life had fallen into. But there were times, like now, with some brews in his belly and absolutely nothing to do, when he found himself asking that most depressing of all questions, *Where did I go wrong?*

Maybe, he thought, with his very first vision, back when he was a child. That was when his inner life began the long, slow task of transforming him into a man who was really alive only when asleep. It happened in a small, comfy condo in Homewood, where he and Mama had moved when he was seven. Behind them lay hard years after his Papa, a Norwegian businessman, died in a plane crash before he and Mama could marry. They'd lived on welfare until she found a job keeping patients' records for a surgical clinic attached to Maryland General Hospital. That gave her the credit she needed to buy the condo—and yeah, it was small, but after the slum apartment on West Lombard they'd come from, it looked luxurious.

Eric slept on a cot in the dining alcove, feeling with pride that now he very nearly had a room all his own. On the day after Christmas, 1981, he wasted a lot of time and water in the bathroom, donned Winnie the Pooh PJs, kissed Mama goodnight, and crawled into bed with one of his gifts, a stuffed Scotty named McTavish who wore a tartan ribbon around his neck. Eric's eyelids grew heavy, closed, then seemed to open again on a scene far, far away.

From a grove of vine-draped trees on a jungle hillside he was gazing across a narrow green valley at a flight of wide steps climbing the slope opposite. Only the steps weren't like any he'd ever seen—they were pools of water, and in each, tiny ladies wearing trousers and wide hats were bowing and rising, bowing and rising. Eric wanted to go and find out what the ladies were up to, but all he could do was look. Sunlight vibrated on the terraced hillside and flashed in the water of the rice paddies, but he didn't feel heat. Tendrils of steam rose from the jungle, but he didn't feel dampness.

Fascinated; frustrated; he tried to break through the bubble that confined him. Instead, he *really* woke up back in his bed, breathing air that was chilly and faintly resinous from a small Christmas tree standing in the condo's minute foyer. His sticky eyes met the resentful gaze of two shiny black buttons—McTavish asking silently why Eric had left him behind on his

trip to another world.

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*Another world.* Sighing, grown-up Eric slid off the bar stool and headed home. Chris was nowhere to be seen, so that was okay. Sacked out on the futon, he turned on his side, drew his limbs into the fetal position, fell asleep and for the *n*th time woke up on the wall—where, at long last, things had changed.

The Huns had arrived.

Actually, they might have been any kind of eastern invaders. Eric called them Huns because they rode small shaggy horses and looked ferocious. Below the wall, warriors carrying short maces and braided lariats and heavy curved swords slouched in and out of brown felt yurts. Dark-haired women with chains of silver coins woven into their hair tended campfires or stirred cookpots. Filthy children skittered about like fleas. Goats and other hoofed mammals browsed on remnants of grass while waiting to be milked or slaughtered.

All in silence, of course. But he didn't need sound to realize that the Viking's castle was under siege. And that an attack was imminent.

Ragged slaves were hammering together crude ladders. Hun archers were bending and stringing short recurved bows. Some began taking practice shots at the dozen or so men-at-arms watching them from the wall. A crossbowman replied with a bolt that missed its target but killed a goat. A fire still burned in the bucket, only now serfs wearing garments like gunny sacks were heating oil in a black iron cauldron hanging from a tripod.

Abruptly the Viking strode out of the tower and across the footbridge. He wore a greasy chain-mail shirt over a leather jerkin, a heavy straight sword hanging from his iron-studded belt, and a pointed helmet pressed down on his hayrick of flaming hair. As he passed, Eric merged with him again. Instantly he regained the four senses he'd been missing, and he clung to the inside of the Viking's capacious chest. In the red darkness Eric worked himself up through slippery channels of flesh, until he could look at the world through the eyes of his host.

Down below, a Hun warrior, maybe a clan chief to judge by the barbaric splendor of his lacquered armor, vaulted with acrobatic ease onto his shaggy little horse and shouted a guttural command. The bowmen sent a flight of barbed arrows hissing toward the wall, and a defender went down

with a feathered haft sticking from his neck. He flopped and twisted like a landed fish, but nobody paid attention because the Hun warriors with a ragged cheer were raising the ladders and rushing the wall.

Wood slammed against stone. Serfs muscled the cauldron to the battlements and dumped boiling oil a gallon or two at a time on the attackers. Screams of pain added to the racket. Horns blared and reinforcements came trotting across the bridge from the tower, some carrying hooked lances. The Viking roared orders until the inside of his head resounded like an echo chamber.

The crisis was *now*. Huns were hacking and thrusting and trying to fight their way between or over the battlements. A man-at-arms took an arrow in the eye, and as he fell the Viking dropped his sword and snatched a chain mace from his hand. He whirled it around his head, making it whistle and moan as he ran with heavy jarring steps toward a broad-shouldered warrior with eyes of jet. The spiked ball of the mace smacked the top of the Hun's helmet of lacquered leather and his head collapsed like a building pancaking in an earthquake. He fell back onto the man behind him and both tumbled from the ladder. Two men-at-arms came running with a hooked lance, caught the top rung, and the ladder went over backward and crashed, Huns squirming out from under it like grubs from under a rock. The defenders cheered and beat the stone battlements with the flat of their swords, and—

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Eric woke up.

For a few minutes he lay still, regretting the invention of daylight. Then the door opened, and for the first time in weeks Chris poked her head into the den.

"I thought you might care to know," she said in tones that could have etched glass, "that I've got my old job back, and tomorrow morning I'm moving out."

She took a deep breath preparatory to delivering her standard speech about his deficiencies as a husband, man, mammal, and vertebrate, when involuntarily Eric did what he often did upon awaking. The sound was almost explosive.

"*Oh, you ... PIG!!*" she cried, and slammed the door.

He lolled around on the futon for a while, thinking about how truly rotten their lives had become. But he'd pretty well lost interest in that topic, and anyway she'd soon be gone. So he pulled the foul sheet up to his bristly chin and thought instead about something important—the battle between the Viking and the Huns.

Who'd won? Who'd lost? Had the castle been given up to fire/slaughter/mayhem/rape and all the other customary incidents of warfare, ancient and modern? Or had the Huns taken a beating and gone riding off to plunder somebody else?

His life had suddenly acquired a point of interest, and his feelings of despair lessened. He sang "Stout-Hearted Men" in the shower, and down on Fell's Point whistled while he worked until Mr. Pocatelli made him stop. When evening came, he dined at a quiet bistro, drank two quiet glasses of Merlot, and went quietly home, intending to bed down early and catch the next chapter of his ongoing serial.

In the front hall he brushed by a woman who looked vaguely familiar. When she averted her eyes and said nothing, he realized she must be Chris. Feeling he ought to make up for his faux pas of the morning, he asked, "You need some cab fare for when you scam tomorrow?"

She responded with a look that would have squashed a toad. Anger returning, he snapped, "Well then, don't let the frigging door hit you in the frigging ass when you frigging go."

A banal remark, he reflected while undressing. But satisfying. Relaxed and smiling, he drifted toward sleep, while overhead she was telling her girlfriend about the disgusting and ill-bred comments he'd made that day from both ends of his anatomy. He smiled more broadly—after all, *she* was caught in this crappy life, like a mouse in a glue trap. But *he* wasn't.

He began to recall the places he'd been, the things he'd seen. He had no idea where some of them were. That deserted palace, for instance—the one with the long marble hallway where pale geckos flickered up and down the walls and dead leaves littered the gorgeous mosaic pavement. Or that ancient-looking clock tower where life-sized mechanical men banged out the hour on a big iron bell.

As a child he'd thought he could ask adults questions about his visions and get answers. He soon found out different. When he tried to talk to Mama, she gave him a scornful "Kids!" if she was busy, or a patient "That's nice, Honey," if she wasn't. The man who finally helped him

understand his gift did so only by accident. As a teenager Eric served a lengthy sentence at Dolorosa High, where his religion teacher, Father Dedman—a beady-eyed, blue-chinned cassocked tyrant—one day, while denouncing pagan superstitions, used and defined the word *shaman*.

Christ, what an epiphany that had been. So there were other people like himself, visionary adventurers in the land of Nod!

He pictured his soul slipping into a sort of Platonic realm where distance was abolished, where time's arrow could fly in any direction. The idea enthralled and seduced him. He developed a sudden passionate interest in history and dead languages, and his grades soared, though at a heavy price, for he was more than ever separated from the interests of the other boys at Dolorosa. As for girls, he didn't help himself in that department by adding to the doubtful attractions of his gauche manners and weedy frame the round-shouldered look of a scholar. Too arrogant to ask for help, and convinced nobody would believe him anyway, Eric comforted himself by making frequent love to his own right hand, and went his isolated way.

By sheer hard work he won a fellowship to Johns Hopkins, and as soon as possible selected a major in World Literature and Classics. Mama correctly pointed out that such studies formed an eight-lane highway to oblivion. But he paid no attention to her, for by then a chill had crept into their once warm relationship. What had happened was this:

One day when she was at work and he was home, he started going through drawers and cabinets, looking for stamps or loose change or something. In a little desk in her bedroom he came across a faded brown envelope bearing a cancelled stamp that said Norsk and the postmark Ålesund. For a few seconds he stood paralyzed, wondering if he could possibly be holding a long-ago message from his Papa. He shook the envelope, and out fell a faded color shot, not of the well-attired businessman Mama had described to him, but of a young guy with a merchant seaman's cap perched on his mane of yellow hair, hands jammed into the pockets of a pea jacket and an arrogant grin splitting his horsy face. Eric turned the picture over and found on the back, written with a blue ballpoint pen in a semiliterate's careful, clumsy script, *From Your Frogg-Prinz, 1973*.

What did it mean? Eric had never seen anybody who looked less like a frog. Or less like a prince, for that matter. The date, on the other hand, spoke only too clearly—he'd been born in 1974. Norwegian businessman, hell. Clearly, he owed his earthly existence to nothing whatever but the fact



that his Mama had hooked up with a transient sea rover who, in the way of his kind, had screwed her and sailed away.

Adolescent Eric was profoundly shocked. How could she have dared to be as young and inexperienced and dumb and lustful then as he was now? Did she lack common decency?

So he was in no mood to listen to *The Old Bitch*, as he now thought of the woman who had borne, loved, and supported him for eighteen years. Anyway, he'd won the scholarship by his own efforts, and was supplementing it by working as a busboy at Pocatelli's. For once he was paying his own way, and his hereditary Nordic pig-headedness increased exponentially. He went for the classics in the hope that soaking up the languages and lit of bygone times might stimulate his shamanism—the only part of his life that really felt real.

And it worked. His visions became more frequent, also more varied. He watched soldiers on the Western Front in World War I slog through a pelting rainstorm, their tin hats lowered like the heads of cattle enduring a storm. He saw ladies in bustles twirl and giggle at a gas-lit Victorian ball. One night he fell asleep over Boswell's *London Journal* and found himself in a murky, low-ceilinged tavern crowded with red-faced periwigged men drinking coffee—one of them sufficiently big, pockmarked, ugly, lumpy, jerky, and all-around peculiar to be Dr. Samuel Johnson himself! Alas, it was still a mime show, so he couldn't hear the Great Bear lay a crushing retort on anybody, including Boswell (who might have been the fat young man standing just behind him).

Otherwise his life continued drab. For months after he started working, he came home after midnight so exhausted, his flimsy scholar's muscles so racked by hefting big trays of dirty dishes, that he thought of nothing but Tylenol and sleep. Then his muscles hardened up, his frame lost flab and gained heft, and he began to look—well, more than a little like his Papa.

His newly broadened shoulders won him the attention of a plump and smiling young woman named Chris Malone, whose freckles and impish grin had already caught his eye in the bursar's office where he went to collect his stipend once a month.

Soon he and Chris were wandering hand in hand through Druid Hill Park. Or sharing lunch beside the Inner Harbor. Or downing steamy bowls of *frutti di mare* at Pocatelli's. Like a pedestrian stepping into a manhole, Eric fell headlong into that most agonizing and delusive of states, long

overdue first love. Chris was the only featherless female biped he'd ever met who wanted him in her bed, and that was enough. After a courtship marked by naïve lust on her part and premature ejaculation on his, they decided to marry.

When he told his Mama, she snapped, "You're quitting school to marry that lazy nitwit? For God's sake, why?"

"Well, uh, she, uh, wants to."

"You," said his loving mother, "are without doubt the second biggest fool I've ever known in my life."

Eric wondered who was the first. Maybe, in view of the Frogg-Prinz, herself.

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The memories faded. Sleep came on little cat feet. Eric was back on the wall again, only to find—*Goddamn it!*—that he'd missed everything important.

From his familiar, silent bubble, he viewed the aftermath of a hard-won victory. Again the time was dusk. A slow, cold rain was washing the once bloody stones. Under a hastily constructed lean-to the fire bucket glowed dully, lighting in silhouette a single sentry leaning on his spear. Below the wall the tents of the Huns had vanished, leaving burned-out campfires, piles of dung, remnants of slaughtered animals, and the sodden embers of what might have been a funeral pyre.

Then he felt a tug. A gentle pull. He drifted slowly along the wall, following some sort of shamanistic scent-trail, his motion random-seeming like a butterfly's. He bobbed and wove across the bridge to the tower, finding at the end a closed gate, a latticework of rusty iron strips. He was puzzling about how to proceed, when—very quietly, as if he'd done it a dozen times—he passed through the gate like a puff of wind.

The tower was the castle keep. Just inside, a guard slept on a wooden stool, his gap-toothed mouth open and his long mustache quivering. Down a narrow corridor a heavy door stood half open, outlined by firelight. Eric drifted that way and a familiar bird's nest of red hair came into view. Exhausted by the battle, the Viking lay asleep on a wide, crude wooden platform under a heap of tanned animal pelts with the fur turned down.

He slept profoundly, hardly breathing. Eric drifted closer, surprised by his youth. Not much more than a boy—twenty at most. But the product of a hard life. Scars seamed his face and gray nits like seed pearls peppered his shaggy eyebrows. His thick right hand lay exposed, deformed by a veinous pink membrane between index finger and thumb. Eric slipped briefly inside his head, found nothing happening there, and slipped out again.

Curious, he drifted around the room. The firelight came from glowing coals in an iron brazier. A gray wolfhound the size of a small pony snoozed beside the bed, ignoring a restless army of mice scuttling through the moldy straw that served for a carpet. A battered shield and sword leaned against the wall. A narrow window looked out on the sea, where a longboat with a pale furred sail bobbed at anchor.

Suddenly the dog jumped up, eyes blazing. Eric didn't need hearing to know he was barking madly. He galloped to the door, nosed it open wider, and disappeared. Eric was staring after him when a door hidden behind a piece of crude tapestry slammed open and either Brünnhilde or her twin sister erupted into the room.

A huge blonde with swaying breasts that had never known the constriction of a bra. A swirl of red robe trimmed with greasy ermine. Madly blazing blue eyes, bee-stung lips, discolored teeth, bare powerful arms. She rushed through Eric, pulling him along in her slipstream, and he heard her shrieking like a berserk steam engine. She grabbed the Viking by his long hair and began to shake him, volleying over and over, *Hrothgar!* *Hrothgar!*—a word that began with a growl and ended with a throaty trill. When he didn't respond, she dropped him, seized the sword and shield and followed the wolfhound. Swept along in her wake, Eric followed, down the corridor to the iron gate—now standing open—across the bridge, and back onto the wall.

Armed men were swarming over the battlements in a tsunami of leather and iron. The Huns had just been fooling: they'd galloped away only so they could return and stage a surprise attack under cover of darkness.

Brünnhilde rushed them like all the Valkyries combined, smacked one in the face with the boss of the shield and knocked him over backward. Not pausing a beat, she swung the sword blade down on the neck of another Hun and he hit the stones in three pieces, the third being his helmet, which went bouncing and skittering away from its former contents. The dog, shedding flecks of foam, grabbed the leg of a third invader and Brünnhilde

attacked the leg's owner, wielding the heavy sword like a flail.

Yet things were looking bad. The Huns had outsmarted the defenders and kept expanding the area of the wall they controlled. They had a solid foothold, and it was growing. If this kept up Eric knew the castle was lost, and without bothering to think about the matter he joined the fray in the only way he could.

He sped back into the room where Hrothgar lay, entered the Viking's head and tried to make him move. At first he felt like a quadriplegic occupying a body that would not respond. *Come on, he thought, move, move, move, you big son of a bitch!* And all at once Hrothgar did move. His muscles began to jerk like speared frogs. The whole huge body began thrashing around, entangled in the verminous skins that served as bedclothes and also in a long, itchy woolen nightshirt he turned out to be wearing.

Eric felt like a kid who climbs aboard some idle piece of earth-moving equipment and—half scared, half delighted—finds it starting to shudder and move underneath him. Gradually he mastered the wiring of the right arm, then the left. The legs stopped their poisoned-roach kicking and began to coordinate. He got the Viking untangled and onto his feet—no, he fell down again. Three times in fact, on his face, on his back, and on his butt. The mice infesting the straw fled squeaking. On the fourth try, Hrothgar rose and began lurching like the Frankenstein monster toward the door.

His heavy bare feet thumped hollowly across the footbridge. He started roaring, the only sound Eric knew how to make him make. He had no weapon, no armor, and in a flash of panic Eric realized that he'd probably killed the Viking by driving him into the fray unarmed and helpless.

But then Hrothgar's reflex systems came to life. Combat was all he knew and it roused him, set him moving on his own. He began to dodge and weave. A Hun arrow flicked by him. He snatched an axe from a man-at-arms and whacked off another head. This time the victim stood absolutely still for an instant while bright arterial blood spurted ten or twelve feet into the air, then crumpled like a puppet whose strings had all broken at once. The men-at-arms gave a hoarse cheer and closed around their leader with shields raised. Brünnhilde and the wolfhound joined them, forming a solid wedge that drove the attackers back into their comrades still coming over the wall. The Huns got entangled, tripping over themselves and one another. The confusion was lovely to see.

Eric was ecstatic. The weedy kid, the hump-backed scholar, the

visionary dweeb, the tray-hustling waiter, the despised spouse—all his previous selves evaporated. He'd never felt this way before. No past, no future, hope and fear forgotten, everybody thrusting and hacking and roaring, metal squealing and crumpling, gobbets of spit and sweat and skin and blood flying through the air. *When your life's on the line*, he realized, *that's when you really live*.

And the tide was turning. New men-at-arms came swarming out of the castle keep, jumping straight from bed to battle, barefoot and wearing only ragged shirts plus a helmet and a piece or two of armor they'd grabbed at random. In twenty minutes of mayhem, the Nightshirt Army threw the last of the Huns off the wall.

It was time to caper and howl. But Eric had only a few seconds to enjoy the triumph. All at once Hrothgar began shouting unfamiliar words, then stringing the words together into sentences. The men at arms turned toward him gaping and grinning. *They* understood what he was yelling. Something hit Eric like a soundless explosion, and he popped out of the Viking's skull like a cork from a bottle of warm champagne.

Suddenly he was seeing Hrothgar from outside. The big man was a mess—disheveled, a gash down one arm, a barbed arrow embedded just under his left clavicle where a scarlet bloodspot was soaking the gray wool of his shirt. He panted like some huge exhausted animal, sweat pouring off his glowing face and dripping from the tips of the coppery hairs of his beard. And then—

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Eric awoke.

Only not on the futon. He woke upstairs, among the cookie crumbs and the romance novels, lying beside Chris's recumbent form.

They were both starkers. Her rosy flesh exhaled a kind of post-coital steam. She turned over slowly, smiling, giving little grunts of sowlike contentment. The bed looked like Bull Run the day after the battle. She, he, and it smelled like a rutting camel, or the way Eric imagined a rutting camel smells.

Morning light poured through a dusty window. For a time he just lay there, inhaling marshland odors and feasting his eyes. He'd almost forgotten how good Chris looked when attired solely in her brown aureoles, fuzzy delta, and big bare bottom. Eric's whole midsection from navel to

knees existed in a state of bliss it hadn't known for many months. The languor of the afterglow suffused his being. *But dammit*, he thought, *I can't remember what we did to make the old prostate sing.*

Then he forgot about his prostate, seminal vesicles, and attached plumbing. He and Chris were together again, not fighting, and utterly at peace. A moment more and her eyelids fluttered open, and she murmured, "Well, *you're* full of surprises."

How musical, after all, her voice could be when it sank below the hinge-like screech of anger to a husky, sexy contralto. Even her morning breath smelled kind of sweet, maybe from all the cookies she'd been eating. Husband and wife edged closer. "I ought to charge you with rape," she murmured, but then drew the poison of that remark by planting a brief, damp kiss upon his bristly chin. Thus encouraged, he was soon able to resume lovemaking—and this time he was fully conscious throughout.

Afterward both of them remembered that morning as the starting point of a new life. Only a starting point, of course, but enough to show that they were utterly weary of hating each other and wanted to get on with their lives. With their life—singular. Their life together.

Toward noon, Eric put on jeans and dragged the futon into the alley for the trash men to take away, while Chris used the phone to dump Mr. Scheisster (who billed them anyway for services not rendered). A month-long second honeymoon ensued, leading to a far deeper reconciliation when Eric and Chris discovered that she was pregnant.

After the customary gestation period, she gave birth to a fine fat babe duly named Eric, Jr., but always called Little E. Eric had not quite shed his old suspicion that Chris might have had a lover, back in the days when they were fighting. Was it possible that somebody else had begotten Little E? He secretly had a swab of the baby's abundant spit tested and the DNA compared with his own. The results left him feeling ashamed, because—by odds of billions to one—Little E really was his child.

Despite the stinking diapers and the nightly squalling, Eric's cup ranneth over. The year that followed transformed the Mumfords' lives in another way. Eric needed badly to make more money, and his Mama—as wacko as any other woman over her first grandchild—not only reconciled with Chris but used the savings of a lifetime to help him embark on a new career. With her loan and a ton of practical advice from Mr. Pocatelli, who'd followed Eric's marital trials with the breathless interest of a soap-opera

addict, Eric and Chris opened a steak-and-seafood house in Annapolis they called Beefeaters. After a slow start it began to do pretty well, serving besides steaks such standards as Maryland crab cakes and surf'n'turf and stuffed potatoes with chives and sour cream.

Along the way, Eric and Chris found that working together—really *working*—did wonders for them and their marriage. Properly motivated, the lazy nitwit he'd married turned out to be a shrewd and incredibly energetic young woman. During Beefeaters' tough startup days, he often watched her in the restaurant office—balancing the books, making out tax forms, taking reservations, sweet-talking creditors, and pausing now and then to change the baby or pop a nipple into his rosebud mouth—feeling the sight was more astounding than any vision he'd ever had. And speaking of visions, Eric stopped having them. He was too busy and too absorbed in real life and too damn tired when he went to bed for anything but sleep.

In order to be close to their work, he and Chris moved to an Annapolis townhouse with an egregious mortgage. Their first Christmas night in a burb named Camelot was warm and cheery and Dickensian, even though the chill and murky waters of a brackish tidal inlet called South River lapped at the development's communal dock. The night of the twenty-fifth, with the restaurant closed after dispensing turkey and cheer, Chris was in the kitchen making nog while Eric's Mama held Little E in her arms and tried to con him into a smile. The minute fireplace flared and shadows flickered on a sheepskin rug, and the Christmas tree, exhaling the scent of boreal forests, shimmered in the baby's wide blue eyes with Druidical splendor.

Sprawled on the couch, Eric was browsing a present he'd just received, a scrapbook Mama had made him, with records and pictures of his early years. He viewed again the Frogg Prinz, and Mama at long last told him the true story of their fling, and his father's name, which she felt almost positive had been either Ragnar Harmunsson or Harman Ragnusson. Eric asked casually why she called him the Frog Prince, and she explained that he had webbing between his index fingers and thumbs, "just like Kermit."

Eric, she added, had had the same defect, but the surgeons at the clinic where she worked had fixed the problem, and because he was so young at the time, the scars had healed invisibly. Little E didn't have the webbing, but then it sometimes skipped a generation.

"Don't worry, your grandchildren will probably be bullfrogs, too," she concluded. "Just don't let them eat any flies."

Eric tried to smile, but suddenly the contents of his head were whirling

madly and rearranging themselves, like a well-shaken kaleidoscope, into entirely new patterns.

\* \* \* \*

Tired as he was, he lay awake for hours that night, brooding about his ancestor, the Viking. He wondered how he could have failed to spot the connection long before.

It wasn't just the webbing, though that was what gave him the clue. It was everything—the way Hrothgar channeled for him, the way that Eric could rouse that alien body, set it moving, even take it into battle. Across the vast gap of forty or so generations, the barbarian and the steakhouse proprietor were linked, cell to cell, by the molecular chain that binds the ages. And if Hrothgar was his ancestor, then surely Brünnhilde must be his ancestress. Why else could she have channeled for him too?

So far, so good. Only ... that wasn't the whole story, was it?

He grunted and rolled over and gnawed one thumb. A green-lit clock said three-twenty-nine. What obsessed him now was that long-ago sleepwalking episode. What if—Eric rolled over again, drawing a murmur of protest from Chris, though she didn't wake up—what if shamanism, like the webbing, were hereditary? What if Hrothgar had visited Eric's world in his absence, had floated into a strange (yet not *totally* strange) body, had gone blundering around a house full of baffling objects, accidentally turning on the shower, tracking up the rug, busting Aunt Mae's stupid little table, leaving his host with a large painful bruise on one knee and no recollection of how it got there?

There was worse to come. What if he'd visited again during that long, deep sleep of his following the first day's battle? What if he'd waked in the rowhouse in Baltimore—more knowledgeable this time, believing the fight was over, in a mood to revel, and well aware that a woman was sleeping upstairs? What if, while Eric was saving the big stinking barbarian's castle, Hrothgar was cuckolding him *and using his own body to do it*?

Was that why Eric found himself in bed with Chris next morning, awaking *post coitum* with no memory of doing the *coitum*? Was that right? Was that fair? And did a raping and pillaging barbarian give a monkey's fart whether it was right and fair or not?

The more Eric thought about it, the madder he got. Maybe it was fighting the Huns, or maybe it was sheer bloody-minded macho rage at this



fugitive from the Iron Age snatching his body, screwing his woman, begetting his child for him. By morning, Eric had determined on revenge: he would return to the Viking's castle, watch for an opportunity to take over his smelly carcass, and do unto Brünnhilde what Hrothgar had done unto him. So it was incest, so what? Could you commit incest at a distance of forty generations?

“Two can play at that game, big guy,” he muttered.

Cunning was needed. He couldn't leave Chris open to a second, uh, Viking raid while he was off conducting one of his own. Fortunately, Beefeaters closed for inventory between Christmas and New Year's Eve, and Mama Malone in Timonium—suburban jewel of Baltimore County—had been begging Chris for a visit, with cherub, of course. Next morning she was easily persuaded to take Little E and make a day-and-night of it.

That evening Eric's preparations were cool and deliberate. He drank Bass ale instead of wine, and ate a couple of sandwiches of stone-ground bread and partially charred cow from the restaurant freezer. At bedtime he dropped *Carmina Burana* in the Bose, hit the button that made the CD repeat *ad infinitum*, and went to bed with a dusty volume of medieval literature left over from his college days. He was deep in Chaucer's bawdy masterpiece “The Miller's Tale,” when—as usual, without any sense of transition—he fell asleep, and found himself back on the wall.

\* \* \* \*

The distant woods were leafless and dour. A shower of slow sullen rain was drifting away with the sullen clouds that had made it. Every sign of the besiegers had vanished and the castle looked, and somehow felt, empty.

Eric drifted to the wooden bridge, passed through the gate—it was standing open, no guard—and into the Viking's chamber. No Hrothgar, and yet he felt that old sense of something drawing him on. Again he looked out at the slow ripples of a leaden sea, then passed—leisurely as a cloud—through the arrow-slit window. He floated over the castle's seaward wall, and finally saw where everybody was. They were down below, crowding a narrow strip of gray shingle around the prow of the half-beached longboat.

On deck, surrounded by piles of firewood, Hrothgar's body lay stiffly. His face and hands, pale as ivory, protruded from a robe embroidered with runes. So that single Hun arrow, by puncturing the subclavian artery, had

been enough to do the big man in. Death came easily in the Dark Ages, even to the strong. Beside the Viking rested the body of the wolfhound, slain to free its spirit to go hunting with him again, once he reached Valhalla.

*Oh shit*, thought Eric. *There goes my revenge.*

Gently as an autumn leaf, he drifted over the crowd of ragged serfs, men-at-arms leaning on spears, hefty women cradling naked babies, young warriors with thick red hands and corn-silk beards, girls adorned in bright tresses and bright dresses. Brünnhilde stood beside the ship, gorgeously arrayed in scarlet and ermine, brooches and buckles of hammered gold glittering on her robes, a silver fillet binding her torrent of yellow hair. She held a burning torch, and as Eric drifted down beside the Viking's body, her powerful arm flung it into the firewood.

Young men put their shoulders to the longboat's bow and shoved until it floated free, spun once and drifted slowly on an ebbing tide toward the glimmering horizon. Around Eric the flames crackled and roared up, but he didn't feel heat or smell smoke, because his channeler was dead and gone, and he would never hear or feel or smell this world again. He floated free, rising above the pyre into a stray weak sunbeam that had penetrated the clouds. Suddenly the air was opalescent and glittering and a rainbow formed, making the bridge the Vikings believed connects Earth to heaven.

And Eric woke, back in his bedroom.

Only ... something wasn't right.

His body lay sprawled on the bed, breathing stertorously. But Eric couldn't seem to enter it. He tried to push his way in, but somebody was pushing back.

All at once he understood what was happening. Raging, he forced his way into his own head, shouting silently, "You can't steal my wife, my son, my life!" In reply, a burst of probably obscene Old Norse issued from his own mouth.

He and the warrior grappled, two ghosts fighting for a single machine. The body that was their field of battle tumbled out of bed, came to its feet, gave itself a hard punch in the eye, growled like a dog, bit itself on the right forearm, got itself by the throat, pulled its hand loose, crashed into a wall, crashed into another wall, tumbled and flopped around the floor like a freshly landed tuna, tried without success to kick itself in its own balls, used both hands to pound its own head against the floor. Then the body was up

again, and the dresser fell over and the bed collapsed as it threw itself down to finish the fight on the mattress.

And quite suddenly, everything went quiet.

\* \* \* \*

“Good Lord,” said Chris next morning, staring at the man who opened the front door for her. “What happened to you? And why in the world are you naked?”

A bitter wind redolent of ice, salt, and dead marsh grass swept up the Chesapeake and across South River and whistled through the doorway. But the man standing there in his bare skin only smiled, exhibiting the loss of one front tooth to complement his two black eyes. He put a finger to his lips, took the baby in its carrier from her and set both on the floor by the Christmas tree. At his movement, the ornaments winked, little bells tinkled and green branches stirred. The smell of resin was intense.

He licked a drop of blood off his remaining teeth and drew her masterfully into his arms.

“Here? On the rug? Now?” She sounded both outraged and fascinated. “Well, at least let me close the door!”

The door slammed. The Viking raid proceeded. But which Viking it was, she only found out later.