

EXCERPT: AXE OF IRON—THE SETTLERS

Chapter One



Southwestern Greenland, spring, 1008

The sun appeared as a dull orange orb through the haze and sea mist as it began to rise above the horizon. The grey half-light of the northern night yielded to the brightness of the day. A chill offshore breeze, stirred to life by sinking cold air that flowed like a river from the vast inland icecap, began to stir the calm surface water of the fjord.

The last remnants of rotting pack ice dotted the water's surface. Icebergs could be seen shining in the distance as they drifted by the fjord entrance on the current that carried them north along the rocky coast.

A crowd of silent people stood among the rocks and grasses of the hillside. Below them, on the stony beach, a group of six men listened to a red-haired man who stood before them.

"The offshore wind comes off the icecap, and the tide begins to run from Eiriksfjord. It is time to make sail." He looked at each of the men before his eyes came to rest on one of them.

"I am in your debt, Eirik," the man said. "I could not have mounted this expedition without your help. I wish you were going with us."

Eirik turned his head to look at the four ships drawn up on the beach. "I have sailed from many shores in my time," he mused. "There have been many adventures. Too many some would say. No, this is your time, yours and your men's. I pass the sword of adventure and conquest, the spirit of our people, to you and to all those with you. Go now, Halfdan. Set sail for Lysuffjord. Destiny awaits you."

Eirik shook hands with each of the men in turn. He saved Halfdan for last. The two men held each other's eyes for a heartbeat, their hands locked on forearms in a viselike grip. A silent farewell passed between them. Halfdan turned away and followed his men toward the ships.

A groundswell of sound rose from the many throats, from ship and shore alike, as shouted farewells became raucous and tearful.

The mood became pensive as though a shroud settled over the watchers ashore when the long sweeps backed the ships from the beach and pointed their bows toward the mouth of the fjord. Sails rose to the mastheads and filled with the offshore wind. The ships sailed from the fjord into the open sea and out along the

coast to the northwest, to the rendezvous at Lysufjord, Greenland.

Six wooden ships laid sharply over in the brisk northwest wind as they sailed close-hauled on the port tack. Their destination was Leifsbudir, Vinland. Riotous ranks of steep swells surged by, dotted with islands of spume scattered indiscriminately on the surface. Spindrift off the wave tops pelted their hulls as the ships plunged into each deep trough and boisterously rose to the crest of the next swell.

Under the command of Halfdan Ingolfsson, the flotilla had sailed into the western ocean from the northernmost Greenland settlement of the Northmen, at Lysufjord. Halfdan took advantage of the north-flowing Greenland current to sail north along the coast to the narrowest part of the strait between Greenland and Helluland before he turned to the west. Dawn found the ships near the halfway point in the strait as the rising sun chased the twilight of the polar night to the west.

The ships were loaded to capacity with 163 Greenlanders and 152 Icelanders. The complement included men, women, children, and livestock. Each ship carried a share of the supplies and equipment deemed necessary for the establishment of a permanent settlement.

Every person had been carefully chosen to ensure all the trade skills of the Norse people were represented. All were young, as such things are reckoned, and without handicap. Halfdan accepted families among the settlers but refused their kin. Feuds among opposed kinfolk were common in Norse society; a duel with one became a duel with all. He wanted to avoid the possibility of any such trouble, even if it meant fewer settlers.

Halfdan and his second-in-command, Gudbjartur Einarsson, stand together on the bow platform of the lead ship. Their work-roughened hands gripped the ship's rail and forestay as they swayed in time with her roll off the crest of each swell. The bow platform is the only place aboard where people knew not to disturb them. Secluded and apart as much as possible from the normal activity aboard the crowded ship, the two men reflected on the past season and the decision to begin a quest for a new land to settle.

The decision to migrate had been made when new arrivals from Iceland, Vestfold, Gotland, and Svealand, the homelands for most of them, had made it apparent that Greenland could not long support the burgeoning population.

"We have listened to all the councils, Gudbj. We know the mistakes made by others who attempted to establish permanent settlements in Vinland. We must not repeat those mistakes." Halfdan pounded the rail for emphasis.

"If we learned nothing else, we know we are greatly outnumbered by the Skraelings." Gudbjartur's eyes swept the sea ahead. Serried swells covered the surface to the limit of his vision.

"Every person must understand. We are too quick to fight. This time we come in peace. We will fight to protect ourselves, but only to protect ourselves."

“They have all been told. It will be as you say.”

“Our planned destination still does not feel right to me. We need to think on it. Perhaps a different area of Vinland would be better than Leifsbudir.”

Both men lapsed into silence as they reflected on the importance of this voyage and what lay before them. Everything they possessed hung in the balance.

Gudbjartur glanced at his chieftain and realized he was in a world of his own. He knew in his heart he had done all he could to relieve the worry and lift some of the weight of command from Halfdan’s shoulders. The final decisions were always Halfdan’s. After careful consideration, he made them without hesitation. But the strain told on his face. Gudbjartur watched the spume of the sea float by for a moment. The ship’s bow sliced through the swells like a sword blade. He left Halfdan leaning on the ship’s rail. *I doubt he will even be aware of my absence*, he thought. He turned and made his way aft to get something to eat.

Halfdan leaned on his forearms across the ship’s top rail, hands clasped in front, oblivious to the icy wind that stung his face and caused his eyes to water. He gazed, lost in thought, on the surface of the sea.

People remembered the eyes when speaking of him. They were like the sky on a clear winter day, a pale blue color that fairly bored into you—intense with a touch of sadness, but also tempered hard as the best steel blade. His eyes, out of long habit, occasionally rose from the surface of the sea and swept the horizon.

His age would have been difficult to determine. Like all his kith, his face was tanned and deeply lined sculpted by the timeless element of his world: the incessant chill wind of the northern sea. The scar of a sword cut turned a strip of his beard white and marred his face as it ran diagonally from his cheekbone through the corner of his lip and down across his chin. This small imperfection served to give him character. He was a handsome man, and his face mirrored a youthful exuberance. This characteristic had lulled more than one adversary into underestimating the man that dwelt within. He emanated the power and force of his will, that which made him what he was, a chieftain.

In the prime of life, he stood about six feet with a powerful build. His shoulder-length, dark brown hair was braided on each side of his face to keep it out of his eyes. A full beard blew freely in the wind.

He wore a dark woolen pullover tunic that reached his thighs, trousers of the same material thrust into soft-tanned, high-topped leather boots. A seal fur leather vest protected him from the raw wind.

A knife and ornately carved scabbard hung from the right side of the broad leather belt that encircled his waist. Large, ornate, silver ring pins—the only indication of his rank—held each of the top ends of his laced vest together over his shoulders.

He thought about the councils he had called the previous summer at both the Eastern Settlement at Brattahlid in Eiriksford and the Western Settlement at

Lysufjord. He and Gudbjartur made the three-day roundtrip sail several times before they found enough people for an expedition to Vinland. They spent most of the summer talking to the widely scattered farmers and gathering the people, ships, livestock, and equipment required for a voyage of settlement the next spring.

Four ships from Eiriksford, including three of last summer's arrivals from Iceland, had rendezvoused with the two ships from Lysufjord. The flotilla set sail with a fair wind on the ebb tide.

Gudbjartur walked up to the group of people clustered aft of the mast, greeted them with a nod, and winked at his wife. He picked a piece of dried cod from a food bag and stuffed it in his mouth. His eyes followed the movements of his wife as he chewed the tough fare.

A tall, young woman, Ingerd's intelligent, widely set blue-green eyes animated her comely face. A single, thick braid and bright blue wool scarf captured her long golden hair. Her angular chin and jaw indicated a firmness of character. The large hands and frame of a worker and the rounded hips and ample breasts of a woman of childbearing age did not detract from what some referred to as an almost regal bearing.

Ingerd was attired essentially the same as all Norse women, although each woman adorned herself in accordance with personal tastes. Available clothing choices were limited by utilitarian necessity. She wore a simple, full-length, long sleeved, pullover shift of pale red wool. She wore no undergarments, nor was such available. A full-length apron covered her front and back. The apron provided additional warmth and served to protect her dress from work related damage. The apron consisted of identical front and back panels fastened with over-the-shoulder looped straps joined together by two large pinned broaches, one above each breast. The dome shaped broaches were ornately incised silver, a wedding present from Gudbjartur.

A beautifully worked bronze ringlet necklace hung about her neck. Beyond its decorative value, it also provided a handy place for the bronze ring that held the keys to the family's chests. Scissors, tweezers, and needle case—the tools of all Norse women of her station—hung from a silver chain connected between her broaches. In addition to this chain of tools, Ingerd had belted about her waist, on the outside of her apron, a pouch containing flax and wool thread, spare ring pins, comb, hair brush, and a knife scabbard. Her feet were encased in the ankle-length, soft tanned leather shoes common to both men and women. Her position as the wife of Gudbjartur ensured others deferred to her.

“What were you two talking about?” Ingerd asked. Her eyes studied her husband's face.

“This voyage. I will tell you about it later, Ingerd, when we have a few minutes alone.”

“All right, I will hold you to that.” She smiled at the man she loved above all else.

Gudbjartur bent down to look forward under the bottom edge of the tightly braced sail. He noted that Halfdan remained in the same position.

He turned his attention back to the food. He stooped to pick up a medium-size wooden trencher from a pile near the mast step. From the open food bags he selected four chunks of dried fish and the same of dried meat.

The usual fare at sea was dried fish or dried meat, boiled eggs when available, and water. There was no set time for meals; people ate as they felt the need.

“Do you want a couple boiled eggs to go with that meal, Gudbj?” Thora asked. A solidly built woman with reddish-blond hair, she was one of several cooks who prepared the communal meals when the company was ashore.

“Aye, Thora. Make it four.” He watched her ladle the eggs from the cask of whale oil that preserved them. She plopped the eggs, still in their shells, onto his trencher with a generous amount of the rich oil.

He made eye contact with her and smiled. “Dribble a little oil over the fish and meat. We need to keep up our strength.”

She snorted at his humor and did as he bade. In spite of the lively action of the ship’s deck in the quartering head seas, she did not spill a drop of oil. Whistles of appreciation came from those who witnessed her adeptness.

Gudbjartur grinned at the smug expression on Thora’s face. He lifted his chin to Ingerd. She stepped over to him and planted a kiss on his hairy cheek.

They held the rail and stepped forward out of earshot. “Halfdan and I are discussing our destination. We may not go to Leifsbudir. Keep this to yourself until we make up our minds.” Gudbjartur spoke to her in a low voice.

“No matter, you will decide what is best.” An impish sparkle shined from her eyes. “You had best watch Thora, Gudbj. She wants a man and she would be happy to have you.”

Gudbjartur stopped and turned around to appraise Thora. At that moment she happened to have her head thrown back to laugh at something said by a member of the group gathered near the mast. Her long reddish-blond hair blew in the wind. He got an eyeful as her ample breasts strained against the confines of her apron, each nipple plain to see. Of medium height, her hair framed an average looking face dominated by unusual pale brown eyes with green flecks—cat eyes some called them. Her nicely rounded hips and wide shoulders bespoke the strong, solid build of a worker. Thora was known as a woman who appreciated a good joke, especially at another’s expense. Quick to laugh, the sharp tongue of a born wit and quick to anger—these pretty well described her.

“She looks very good from here. Perhaps I can have two of you. That way, if one is uncooperative, I will have a spare, to fill in, so to speak.” He grinned at his wife.

“You!” She walked away in a huff.

“Me? You started it.” He continued toward the bow and shook his head over his wife’s reaction. It is impossible to predict how she will take something. And she brought up Thora, not me. He chuckled to himself at the thought. His free hand

gripped the rail while he tried to balance the full trencher against the antics of the ship. Gudbjartur sat the trencher on the raised bow platform. “Here, Halfdan, you have thought long enough. I have brought food and water.”

Halfdan selected a piece of meat from the trencher. “I did not realize I was hungry.”

“Nor I. Food has a way of making us know that we are hungry.”

They sopped their selection in the puddle of whale oil, gripped bite-sized chunks firmly in their teeth, and cut off the excess with their knives. This process was not without a certain element of danger, as evidenced by the scarred noses and lips of more than a few of those aboard.

By comparison, the fish was easy to consume. It, too, had been salted, smoked, and air-dried to the consistency of leather; however, when soaked in the puddle of whale oil for a short time, it gave up much of its toughness.
