

The Shores of Vinland
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Ryan stood before Erik the Red. It was summertime in Eriksfjord, and sheltered from the winds down in this little gully. Dug-in Norse Hobbit-homes were in the background, the magnificent rugged landscape of southern Greenland stretching off to the north.

Ryan spoke into his phone. The World Languages App was having a little trouble parsing Old Norse.

“Yah, Erikken, as I vas saying, I know it’s a marketing ploy, but people see through the scammen quite easily, yah. In facten, schoolshildren the vorld over vill maken this yoke, yah. You’ll be a laughing stock. It’s the oriyinal snake oilen, yah. Or the Niyerian princen. Don’t call it Grønlanden. It’s not green. Yah, Icelanden is already taken, but... Maybe call it Redlanden. After your beard. At least that makes sense. Then you stampen your name on this landen forever, yah. As opposed to it being a bad marketing schemen.”

Erik the Red did not seem to understand. As translated through the phone, he said, “Yah, you Miklagard men have feasten this eve. Ve break open crate of Novgorod vodka to honour your journey, yah.”

Ryan nodded. He said what he’d come to say, even if the app was garbage here. Actually renaming one of the world’s most remote islands was not necessarily harmful, but probably wasn’t desirable either.

Ryan came up to his friend Charlie. Charlie had his arm around a blonde Swedish supermodel with braided pigtails named Ilsa, who had rather taken to the clean-shaven ‘Byzantine’, as she’d named him, with a full smile of gleaming white, straight teeth.

“Well,” said Ryan, “we should actually fill out some sort of report, justify our time here.”

“Take a bunch of pictures,” said Charlie. “I’ll write it up back in Washington. Oh, that guy over there, with the blond beard, that’s Leif Erikson. You’ve got to get a picture of him.”

“How come I’m taking all these pictures, while you just sit here and canoodle with Ingrid?”

“Ilsa. And it’s because she’s got her hand in my back pocket and I’m not about to remove it. Come on, we’re gonna make a quick stop on our way home, it’ll be worth your while.” Charlie grinned wildly.

Ryan grumbled. Charlie was treating this like a tour of an Amsterdam red light district. Granted, Ryan himself liked to party, to schmooze with various figures throughout the ages, but it wasn’t quite the same. He liked women as much as anyone, but Charlie took it to a new level. How exactly does one seek an STD test back in the present? ‘Oh, no doctor, I didn’t use a condom with my last partner. They hadn’t been invented yet. And I’m not sure how many lovers I indulged myself with in that Roman orgy.’ He had to admit, though, Lady Triệu was a hell of a lay. Even if she was not quite as well endowed as the history tracts had recorded.

He left his friend to close the deal with the blonde. Using his phone, he photographed the various homes Erik’s men had dug into the ground, the church, the almost-never-setting summer sun. He took video of a small boat going out into the fjord and fishing.

Climbing over a knoll, he snapped a quick picture of Leif Erikson, conversing with a burly, red-bearded man. Leif was about twenty, his beard longish, though not quite full. A herd of sheep grazed on a green slope. Cattle mooed loudly in the distance.

Seeing Ryan, Leif dismissed the red-bearded man and rushed over. “Yah, Byzantine man, I vant to spoken with you for a minuten,” he said through the translation of the phone.

Ryan smiled amicably.

“My father, he has been banished from Icelanden for a second time, yah. I vas vondering, could you interceden on his behalf? You have to sail back via Icelanden on your return, correct? If you could spoken to the Althing, I may be able to leaven this cold and forlorn fjord.”

“Oh, of course, of course my good lad,” said Ryan expansively. “Say, pose for an instant portrait?”

That evening, after a feast hosted in their honour by Erik the Red, they departed, hiking up the chilly green slope behind the settlement. They were dressed in their one-piece grey neoprene jumpsuits, tightly laced boots, goggles and breathing masks hanging around their necks. The bulky, square pack hung on Charlie's back.

"I got all the pictures," huffed Ryan, hiking towards the rocky outcrop in the distance. "You're writing the report."

Charlie was looking at the pictures taken by his friend, sent to his own phone via peer-to-peer transfer. "We can't use this one of Leif posing like he's a European nobleman. We're supposed to covertly observe, not have them pose for us."

"Ah, he kept rambling on about Iceland and the Faroe Islands. I told him to hold still to take his portrait. Where are we going, by the way? You said we'd have some fun after this."

"Don't you mean *when* are we going?" Charlie smirked drolly. "We're gonna see someone who really knows how to drink and party."

While Erik the Red knew how to throw a huge feast, his alcohol supply was pitiful. Supply chains back to Europe were virtually non-existent. The vodka had been an interesting flavour, but not a good one.

"Goggles on," said Charlie. He programmed the machine through the digital screen on his watch. "Ever been to Chicago?"

Then he popped in his breathing apparatus, gave a thumbs up. Ryan stepped in and grabbed his friend by the arm. Charlie pushed the big red button.

A minor electrical disturbance burped out of the pack, followed by a low hum, which gradually grew higher in frequency. At last, the night sky exploded with a brief ball of light, bolts of electricity flashing outwards as the wormhole first sparked as a singularity, and exploded outwards at the speed of light to envelop the two, consuming them bodily where they stood. Then it collapsed in upon itself, vanishing into subatomic space, then vanishing altogether from this superposition within the spacetime continuum.

The portal opened violently, rudely ejecting Charlie and Ryan onto a dusty street in 1922 Chicago. The force of the expulsion tumbled them end over end. Ryan went rolling out into the street, and the old-timey horn of a Model T clamoured at him.

"Get out of the way, you boob!" shouted the driver, swerving and shaking his fist. A horse whinnied on the far side of the road, spooked by the commotion.

Charlie, himself disoriented, got to his feet and rushed into the street to grab his friend, yank him back to the sidewalk.

Pulling out his mask, Ryan gasped, "What the hell was that? That was about as rough as when we used that Pakistani uranium to get us back."

"I don't know," Charlie replied, pulling out his own breathing mask. "Irregularities in the plutoni—"

"*Niflheimr!*" came a vehement shout. "Oh, voe is me, I have been dragged down to the dark pits of the Vorld of Darkness!"

Charlie and Ryan looked over so quickly they nearly broke their necks.

Leif Erikson was standing there, shaking in his bearskin cloak, studying the buildings, the streetlights, the passing automobiles.

He must have jumped through the portal at the last minute, snuck up behind them as they engaged the machine, and leaped in. He'd have had all the air in his lungs ripped out of him, and nearly had his eyes gouged out without the protective gear, but here he stood.

"Oh, shit..." the two travellers said in unison.

Leave it to an explorer to throw himself bodily into a rip in the spacetime continuum not knowing at all what was waiting for him on the other side.

"Uh, Mr. Erikson," stammered Charlie, fumbling for his phone.

"Silence, *draugr!*" bellowed Leif. "I vill fight you til my lasten breath, yah."

Charlie took a step towards the Viking. Leif ducked his head down and rammed into Charlie, hitting him square in the sternum and knocking him over. Then Leif turned and scurried away.

The buildings around them were all brick, few windows. He found a door, scrabbled at it, digging his fingernails into the wood. He didn't know how a modern doorknob worked.

Someone inside opened the door. Leif fell in. He scurried furiously on his hands and knees.

Ryan rushed in after him-

And came face-to-face with a Smith & Wesson revolver. Someone wearing brass knuckles socked Leif in the jaw, while two other goons struggled to hold his arms. Another guy came out and grabbed Charlie, pulled him inside forcefully.

"Who in the hell are you three?" asked the man with the gun. "You prohis?"

"Prohis?" asked Ryan.

"Yeah, wise guy. No one knocks on that door unless they know a guy who knows a guy, or unless they prohis. And you don't look like you know no guys."

It was one in the afternoon. If they were at the place Charlie thought they were at, this probably wasn't a very happening spot in the early afternoon. The – perhaps 'security' would be a polite term – were probably right to be jumpy. Still, open a door and jam a gun in a man's face...

"Easy, Rex," came a new voice.

And there he was. Coming down the main stairs, a cigar in his mouth, was Al Capone, manager of this particular speakeasy.

"What's with the suits, fellas? You look like you're ready to be gassed by the Fritzes. Did no one tell you the war ended four years ago?"

He spoke in an uppity, fast-talking advertisement announcer's affectation. Kind of mid-Atlantic, but more blue-collar. He had places to be, things to do, people to bump off. He had to get his words out quick, on the double.

"What's with this fella? You find him in the woods? Hey, Blondie, you need a trim and a shave, see! The broads will be all over you if we get you a seven-piece suit, with a tie and a hat and an overcoat, see!"

Charlie looked around. They stood in the main foyer of a building with four very well-dressed hatchet men and Al Capone. A gentleman's lounge area was to the left, with a bar that assuredly only served seltzer and non-alcoholic beer, wink wink. In the room to the right were various couches and chairs, with a few scantily-clad ladies lounging about.

They were in the right place.

"Hey, boss, this one's got an axe on him."

One of the goons had grabbed hold of the Viking's axe, relieved him of it, handed it over to Capone.

"An axe? This ain't a saw mill, Blondie."

"Mr. Capone," said Charlie urgently, "I apologize for our entrance, we... uh... we came to see you, sir."

His phone was automatically translating this into Old Norse. Leif, ever the shrewd observer, with a few loose teeth, was starting to realize this wasn't what he initially thought. He had calmed down enough to observe his surroundings. He may not know what a revolver was, but he knew goons when he saw them. But even more so, he noticed the girls in the other room. They were all dolled up, heavy makeup, scantily-clad in lingerie and garters, their hair immaculate. Their armpits were shaven.

This was a cathouse, in addition to being a speakeasy. The girls were plentiful and beautiful. No doubt Leif would have heard tales of the fabulous brothels in Miklagard. He held his tongue for the nonce, and didn't struggle against the goons.

Hearing the phone, Capone quirked an eyebrow. "What's that? Rex, bring it here, see!"

The goon removed it from Charlie's pocket and handed it to his boss.

Thinking quickly, Ryan said, "Uh, you were right, Mr. Capone. We're enlisted men. 73rd Division, US Army. We've been field testing some new equipment, in case... uh, in case the Japs try to take Manchuria."

"Army, huh? Well, what are you doing in my joint? And who's Blondie here?"

"He's..." stammered Charlie, "he's a training adviser with... The Royal Danish Legion." He

quickly added, "The Danes toured Japanese Korea as a part of an agreement with the League of Nations."

This gobbledygook just burbled out of him. He had no idea what he was saying. He looked briefly to Ryan to let his friend know he was flailing in the wind, then said, "Captain Erikson is wearing a ceremonial Danish uniform."

"All right, so that explains the trench warfare suits and the bear pelts, but what are you doing in my joint?"

Ryan said, "Because we heard that your joint was the cat's pyjamas."

Al Capone was suspicious. "You tell me you're army. That means you're feds, see. I don't need no prohi agents harassing my girls. This is a fine, upstanding establishment. We're as dry as the desert, see! And these dames are getting ready for a burlesque show later on, see! No crime in that."

"Mr. Capone, we're not prohis."

"Prove it, or scram."

"Do you have a wager placed on the World Series?" Charlie asked, grinning.

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"And the Giants win the World Series!"

The speakeasy erupted in applause.

"What a score!" hooted Al Capone. "A round a Canadian Club for everyone, see! On the house."

The speakeasy was now a lively place, packed full of patrons. More cheers rang out. "Gee, Mr. Capone, you're a swell fella!"

Al Capone turned down the squawky old radio. "You fellas are the bee's knees, I really owe it to you. Sven, you like the gams on that broad? Dame, don't waste that watered-down booze on these fellas. Get them the good stuff."

He looked Charlie straight in the eye. "A fella I know down in Nevada." He snapped his fingers. "Broad, what's the name of that know-nothing town in the desert?"

"Las Vegas," said the bartender.

"Yeah, that's it. Who the hell would want to live down there? That whole state is bunk! Anyway, he drove his Ford down through Arizona and smuggled in some quality stuff from south of the border, see!"

"Tequila?" exclaimed Ryan, smirking.

"Even better, see! This stuff called is mezcal. It's the cat's meow! I'm not selling it, see, 'cause I only have a small quantity. But we're gonna break it out tonight. The three of us, and your furry friend over there."

Charlie looked over. Leif Erikson was enraptured by the topless girl on the couch.

Charlie nudged Ryan. "Maybe we order him a coke instead."

"They had alcohol in medieval Europe," said Ryan in a whisper. "You know what they didn't have? High-fructose corn syrup and cocaine."

"Fair point," acknowledged Charlie.

Al Capone banged on the bar. "Listen here, dame, fetch the Mexican hooch from my office, see! Or I'll throw your body in the harbour, see!"

Promptly, she ran into the back room and came back with a plain-looking bottle of a clear spirit. No ice.

Charlie signalled for the Viking. "Leifen, come over heren, yah," said the phone.

"You army fellas and your new-fangled army gear," said Al Capone. "Amazing what they come up with these days."

Leif Erikson came over. Charlie handed him a glass of Oaxacan mezcal.

Al Capone raised his glass, said, "To you two great fixers. What flimflam! Whatever line you got with The Brain Rothstein, cut me in on the action—"

He was probably going to add "See!" onto the end of that, but before he could, Leif took the mezcal, shot it back in one gulping swig, swallowed it, and slammed the glass down on the bar,

upside down, so hard he broke it. Shards of glass splattered across the bar. He cut himself on the palm, but seemed not to care or notice.

“Holy shit,” gasped Ryan, judging the depth of liquor in his own glass.

“Yah,” said Leif through the phone. “This vine is amazing, yah! It... ooooh... strongen, but I liken the smoken it leaves in my mouth, yah! Oooh, really strongen. Alphonse Caponesson, sir, I would very much liken to yodel into the fjord of your shieldmaiden, yah!”

The gangster looked like he was half-ready to pull out his Tommy-gun and blow the bastard away. He held his mezcal in the toasting position, his face blank. “This mope’s all right!” exclaimed Al Capone. “Lucy, doll, take the bearded one upstairs, see!”

Capone sipped his mezcal. Charlie and Ryan both did as well.

“That’s an amazing selection, Mr. Capone,” said Ryan.

“Uh, Mr. Capone,” Charlie cut in. He turned to the hooker. “Uh, Ms. Lucy, hang on a minute, doll. Mr. Capone, sir, Captain Erikson has been placed in our care... uh, by the Danish government. While your dames are quite exquisite, we can’t exactly have him going back to Copenhagen talking about speakeasies and American... uh, pro skirts.”

Ryan grabbed Charlie’s arm, spun him around. “Let the man have some fun. He grew up in Iceland and Greenland – the most frontiersman frontier that’s ever frontiered. Nature selects for women with thicker bushes up there to protect them from the cold. The women here have pushup bras and waxed upper lips and dildos and... well, not my cup of tea, but they probably know where the prostate is.” He nudged Charlie on the shoulder with a knowing wink, as if Charlie should select himself a pro skirt.

Charlie whispered back, “We can’t exactly send a Viking back to medieval Europe with syphilis.”

“Who’s to say that whore’s got syphilis?”

“Please – lady of the evening. And who’s to say she doesn’t?”

“It’s mid-afternoon,” said Ryan, poking fun at his friend’s sensitivity towards the prejudices towards loose women.

But, unfortunately, Charlie was right. After a second, he turned back to Al Capone. “Mr. Capone, my friend is, unfortunately, right. Your fine ladies shouldn’t be on the menu for our European friend. But there is something we could do instead that he would like.”

Thirty minutes later, after Leif had vomited twice out the window of Al Capone’s Ford (and fuelled up on more delicious mezcal), the gangster laughed maniacally as his Thompson sub-machine gun blasted ruthlessly into the broadside of a dilapidated barn. “Mwahahaha!”

Leif was half-petrified, the sound of the gun furious, but also intrigued. The power in such a crossbow – it was unfathomable. He was starting to think this wasn’t Miklagard – in fact, he was quite sure of it.

Ryan took a turn with the submachine gun, blasting the rotten boards. Al Capone poured himself more mezcal.

“You’re a gracious host, Mr. Capone,” said Charlie.

“Hey, I made a bundle off you fellas, thanks for the tip.”

Ryan loaded the gun once more. Leif chugged more of the mezcal, burped, then grabbed the gun from Ryan’s hands.

“There you go, Sven. You have firepower like this in Copenhagen?”

The Viking gripped the gun like how he’d seen Capone do so, squeezed the trigger and unleashed hell. It exploded with fury. Leif observed with delight as boards on the barn splintered and shattered, and he cackled maniacally. “Ahahahaha! This! This is what I needen to settle new lands in Ireland or Normandy! Ahahaha! More vine, yah!”

“I think you’ve had enough ‘vine’,” said Ryan, very cognisant of the submachine gun in the Viking’s hands.

The gun clicked empty. Ryan came and took it from his hands. “We need to reload it. Put more... arrowheads into it.”

Al Capone lit a couple cigars, passed them around. He sipped more of his mezcal. They chatted

as Leif took his axe and charged at the eviscerated barn shrieking a war cry.

“What do you mean you want to wear a sheepskin with my broads?” Capone exclaimed.

“A practice we picked up in France,” insisted Ryan. “I actually prefer it.”

“Is Sven here still excluded? I’m as good as my word – a girl for each of you and we’ll finish this Mexican hooch.”

“Even if we let him,” mumbled Ryan, “he’ll be waaay too drunk to perform.”

“I’m out as well,” said Charlie. “Save your pro skirt. I appreciate the offer, but give her the night off instead.”

“You fellas are queer, you know that. You haven’t even drunk that much.”

To be fair, these broads belonged to Al Capone. What Ryan was planning to do might not be as copacetic as what Charlie and Ilsa had done earlier. Maybe, for her sake, it’s not the best idea.

“There was... um, a secretary on our post, earlier today. Her name’s Ilsa.”

“You can’t take two broads in a day?” Then Al Capone cackled wildly.

Leif was hacking at a fence post with his axe, screaming maniacally.

“This fella charge into battle with that thing? How’s it fare in the trenches?”

“It’s more ceremonial,” said Charlie.

“What about you fellas? They got any new superweapons in the military? Although, we ain’t never going to war again. The League of Nations is gonna stop all that, see?”

“Wanna bet?” smirked Ryan.

Charlie gave him a whack on the shoulder. Then he thought for a second. This was an opportunity. Turning to Capone, he said, “Funny you should ask. You want to see something... uh... that’s the cat’s meow?”

He called to Leif. Bringing up the history catalogue on his watch, he entered the last coordinates, stabbed the button. His pack began to buzz and hum, static electricity wild all around him. Then, at the last moment, he dove out of the way. The pack tore open the wormhole, which rapidly expanded and engulfed Leif Erikson, but did not touch Charlie or the pack itself.

Leif briefly screamed as he saw the black-violet sphere devouring him, yet it was so quick that he couldn’t form a single syllable, much less step out of it.

He was engulfed, lightning blasting from the sphere, wind whipping through the nearby trees. Then everything was as it had been, but Leif was nowhere to be found.

“Nerts!” shouted Al Capone. “You killed the bastard! Completely disintegrated him! You fellas are a couple of cold-hearted sons of bitches! I love it! Poor Sven, but he did get vomit all down the side of my Ford. I was gonna make him pay a century for a dame tonight, am I right fellas? Say, what say the three of us go back to my joint? My pally Charlie in New York got me some of this powder, it’s the bee’s knees!”

Ryan beamed. “The best way to do that is off one of your... uh, dames’... uh, bosoms.”

There, he made his mind up. He wouldn’t toss the broad the pepperoni, as Capone might say, but surely she’d be okay with a little snort. He’d tip well.

“Hey, now there’s an idea! I like the way you fellas think, see!”

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They couldn’t drive the flag into the ground. It was barren rock. Cold, a wasteland, a desert of stone. To make due, they propped up the flagpole with loose stones.

Leif said, “Ve vill call this place Helluland, place of the great flat rocks.”

Ingvar said, “Yah, Leif, this is not the place of the vines you described.”

Indeed. It had been nine years since Leif had glimpsed Valhalla and suckled at the glorious wine. He’d travelled farther west than he ever had before – than *anyone* had before. Still no luck. Nothing but rocks and ice bergs, and a few white-coloured bears.

He turned back to his men, fifteen of them in all. “Yah, my brethren. I told you there vere lands farther afield than Eriksfjord. Vas I not right? Have ve not planted our flag on new lands no Viking has yet set foot upon? Ve vill go south.”

“Ve vant to go back to Eriksfjord,” growled Einar, a rugged, red-bearded man with only half his teeth.

“May the Valkyries take you,” cursed Astrid, a heavily-robed shieldmaiden. “Let us go back to Iceland.”

“The Faroes!” barked another.

Leif looked out onto the bay, his longships clustered below. Suddenly he exploded. Stamping his foot down, he snarled, “All you weaklings can go back to the cold fjords of Iceland or Svalbard if you vish. I have glimpsed a far greater vorld. I have suckled at her bosom, and I vill press on, vith or vithout you. Do not forget – I have told all of you of my vondrous journey. The crossbow vvhich can rapid-fire. Ve could take Miklagard itself vith such a thing.”

He scolded them further, recounting that glorious night once more.

With finality, he said, “Ve vill go farther south. I swear it exists. ’Tvas not a great deception by Loki – it is real. Vinland is out there for us, lads.”