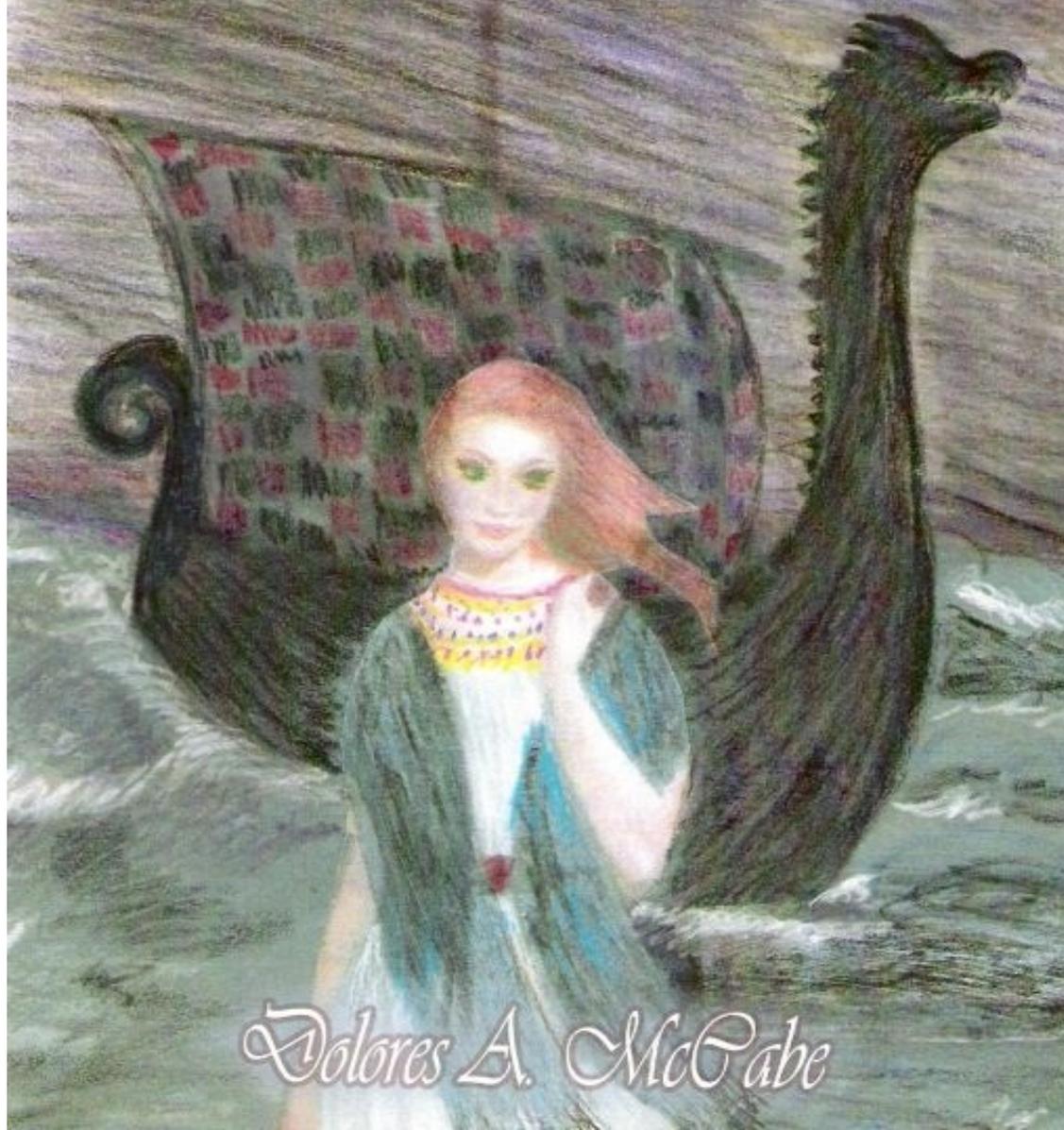




Northwind



Dolores A. McCabe

Chapter Five

Jarl set a steady course south. The ships skimmed over rolling waters while Moira idled hours away watching the wind. It swept the clouds from the sky. It plucked at the Ivarsson flag and sent the screaming hawk into wild flight. It billowed the red-and-black checkered sails. At night they put into shore and built a rough camp. Tents mushroomed, a central fire sprang up. When the work was done, Moira wearily curled up before the fire and peopled the flames with stories while Eirik sharpened his weapons and Harald whittled small figures and Jarl swapped wild stories with his friends.

"Here, Moira," Harald said. "This is for Halvdan."

She turned the string of carved figures over. There was a ship, a goat, and other common-place things. "What is it?"

"Give it to Halvdan. He'll know what to do with it."

Halvdan's chubby fingers closed over the toy. He examined it. He shook it and laughed in wonder at its clatter.

Moira smiled in delight. "It's late," was all she said. She took the baby with her.

Harald broke the comfortable silence between him and Eirik. "Moira isn't happy."

"Why do you say that?"

"She never smiles. You don't pay enough attention to her."

"That's a lie, Harald. She has my life in her hands. You don't know what you're talking about."

"She needs more than what she has."

"What more can I give her?"

"A home. She wants to go home."

"When I'm rich we can go home."

"When will you be rich, Eirik? When will you have enough money that you cannot spend it all in one winter or even two?"

"Olaf did it! I can, too."

"Olaf had help from his brothers."

"What are you trying to say, Harald?"

"Moira wants to go home."

"I'll take her back to Norway soon!"

"Norway is not her home."

Eirik started up, his expression dangerous. "Yes it is. Don't make trouble for me, Harald."

"Don't make trouble for yourself, Eirik."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I'm going to bed. Go sleep with your wife." He left his brother rudely, without a backward glance.

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Jarl put into shore. "Ota-Thorgestr's-wife is in this camp. I heard it the last time we stopped."

His shipmates were instantly alert. "She gives prophesies!" they whispered among themselves.

The small fleet schooled gracefully for shore. The Vikings gathered in a tight throng around the sybil's house. A tall, war-like man greeted them. Large amounts of silver flowed from the group into his hands. He summoned his beautiful wife. She floated outside. Her hair fell in braided loops, her lavender eyes glowed with sentience. She folded her delicate hands into her sleeves.

Moira watched in mounting alarm. "Eirik, what are we doing in this place?"

He frowned at her. "Shush!"

"No, I won't! Eirik, don't go with them!"

"Moira, don't you worship as you please? Don't you sneak away whenever you can to offer sacrifices to your God?"

Her agitation heightened. "You can't go! I won't let you go!" She clung to him fiercely. "There is only one God and only one Prophecy! Turn to Him or be damned!"

Harald sidled over. "What's wrong?"

"She tells me not to go. She says her God will be angry."

Harald was interested. "Is He so powerful? Will He harm us? He never has before!"

"Have you ever seen Moira's God? There is nothing to fear."

Harald reflected briefly. "I begin to understand. She worships a selfish God. Jarl told me the Irish keep a God of possession. This must be why she is warning you not to go."

Eirik smiled indulgently at his deluded wife. "Stay here with Halvdan. We won't be gone too long."

Moira turned her back on them, muttering of Gaill and damnation.

The forest closed in around them. Ota led the way with certainty, even when the lowering branches obscured the day's light. No birds called from this cheerless part of the woods. Her husband brought up the rear with a skittish horse. A small clearing finally defied the darkness. Trees had been felled in a small circle. Sunlight filtered feebly over the huge stone slab that served as an altar.

Ota chanted. Louder and louder her voice spiraled upward in a mournful canticle of dejection. She screeched. "Whom do you seek knowledge of?"

Her husband tied the horse's head to the stone. The creature whinnied its rising terror.

"Wodin!" they cried.

Ota embarked upon a frenzied litany of supplication. Thorgestr raised his mighty axe aloft. Ota screamed. His arm descended. Blood spurted. It flowed over the altar. The horse's lifeless body slumped. Its head tumbled to the ground. Ota's voice built with rising urgency. Her body stiffened. Her hands were beseeching cups open to the heavens. Her husband lifted her rigid body onto the gory stone.

"It is not Wodin who answers, but the Valkyries!" Ota cried. "Woe! Woe! Woe! Not one man in forty will speak of the battle to come! The Valkyries will feast! Already they gather overhead! Two and two and two! The Valkyries turn their three-headed spears this way, then that! Now they loose Wodin's eagle! Death is in his talons! He is red against the yellow sun, he is gold against the crimson sunset! Wodin has entrusted him with one thunderbolt, and one only! His aim is quick and deadly! Where there are two, there will be but one!"

Jarl's standard-bearer dropped the Ivarsson flag. The red hawk collapsed amidst a flash of saffron background.

Harald and Eirik gaped at each other. They would never be able to recall which of them started the retreat. Suddenly the blue sky opened above them. They flung themselves into each other's arms.

"She was looking right at us, Eirik!"

"She was not! She was looking at Jarl!"

"Jarl's Standard is red and gold! Ivar's is gold and red! Are they going to fight each other?"

"We'll keep out of it, Eirik! Don't let them pull us into it!"

As it happened, Harald was the first one to meet Moira's arcane gaze. He straightened himself. "It's Moira. She's looking at us."

Eirik collected his wits instantly. He stepped away from his brother and straightened his briar-torn clothes.

"What did your seeress say?" she asked quietly.

"Nothing!" they answered together.

She nodded and turned away. "So I thought."

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