

THE SHIELDMAID

JOURNEY OF BJÖRN



PART 2

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Chapter 1

The journey begins

Anno 873 in the name of the Lord.

In a small village on the coast of northern Europe, lives a fisherman and farmer named Jasper. He lives there with his family and, as always, he has to make sure that they get through the winter. But this year that turns out to be not very easy.

It is bitterly cold and Jasper looks worried. The last harvest was more poor than good and the drought in summer ruined a large part of his hard-earned cabbage crop. He bought the vegetables from a trader in the Mediterranean. After growing wheat for years, he wanted to try the new vegetable this time. However, if he had known how quickly it would spoil, he probably would have decided against it.

His beloved wife tried to talk him out of it, she disagreed with him from the beginning. "You'd better stick to the wheat, stick to the tried and true," she had harped on him more than once. "I don't know if it's such a good idea to try something new right now."

Now Jasper knows that he should have listened to her better. But who knows how they would be now. They probably wouldn't be any better off than they are now either. The wheat crop was getting worse and worse over the years, it was getting less and less. He just had to try something new to ensure his and his family's survival.

But he is not only a farmer, but also a passionate fisherman. However, it looks with his catch lately also not better. To him, it almost seems as if something wants to prevent even one fish from swimming into his net.

Maybe it's just because he can only use his little boat near the beach. If he goes out too far with it, there is a danger

that he won't be able to get back. With this nutshell, there is no way he can get too far from shore and he is sure that he will never get to see the open sea with it.

The small settlement in which they live has grown steadily over all these years. There were times when people joined them almost every day. Jasper and his wife have actually always been relatively well off. He would even say that they had a few carefree years.

But the recent crop failures now present the family with a major challenge. Jasper lives not only with his wife in the settlement, but also with his children. They are everything to him and to ensure their survival, he would do anything.

Last winter they had to let one of their children go. It died and no one knew why. It was a terrible time for the whole family, but his wife suffered especially. She didn't let on to some extent and remained strong for the other children, but Jasper saw in her eyes the pain of loss.

However, she gave birth to another child the following spring. The little girl made the family complete again. They baptized her with the name Fenja, after which a big party was celebrated.

Here in the area, many people believe in the new God and his son Jesus Christ. The church is gaining more and more influence, but many residents still believe in the old gods. As a result, discord often breaks out between the different faiths. Strife that, in Jasper's opinion, is unnecessary if people did not always insist on imposing their beliefs on others. But that's the way it has always been, and that's the way it will probably always be. What reason should there be for this behavior of the people to subside sometime?

Lost in thought, Jasper sits at the table and watches his family. Normally would not be quiet at all, always someone had something to tell. But today he hangs his thoughts too much.

With a small smile on his thin lips, he looks at his firstborn son Björn. He already has a handsome appearance

for his age. Jasper would be lying if he wasn't proud of him. Björn is already tall and very strong.

No matter what work, he is always a good helper to his father. He learns very quickly and is skilled with his hands. In addition, he asks a lot and Jasper loves it when he can teach his son something new. He is sure that Björn will take over the farm one day. Of course, only when he is ready.

His gaze then wanders to Hendrik. He is the younger of the two sons. He was born a few years after Björn and it shows. Hendrik is smaller, much slimmer and narrower than his big brother. But Jasper is sure that in the course of the next few years he will have just as considerable an appearance as Björn.

As is so common, Jasper lives with his whole family under one roof and he hopes that this will be the case for many years to come. What he could do without, however, is that his livestock is also always with him. But what can he do, that's just the way it is. In the current situation in which they are stuck, they can not afford their own cultivation for the animals.

So they have it also at least nice and warm, because the fire, which burns in the fireplace, was no longer out since the winter has fallen. This is very important for Jasper, because if they now also had to freeze, he would no longer know what he could do to ensure the survival of his family.

Some wealthy farmers have already reached the point where they have housed their livestock in separate huts. Some are even larger than their own houses. At some point, when fishing and the harvest are better again, Jasper also plans to build his own stable for his animals.

He personally does not mind living with the cattle under one roof, but his children and his wife already let him know sometimes when something has to change in this respect. The smell is sometimes very annoying, especially since the excrement of the animals in the summer always unnecessarily attract the flies.

Although his current situation seems hopeless, he is full of great hope that he will start building a stable next spring. If Björn and Hendrick lend a hand, they will soon be done with it.

"We'll build a barn for the cattle in the spring," he assures his nursing wife as she wrinkles her nose at the unpleasant smell coming toward them.

For dinner, as so often lately, there is once again cabbage soup. Jasper doesn't know how long his sons will continue to eat it, because he notices every time that they are almost sick of it. But what can you do? They have to eat no matter what is put in front of them. If they want to survive and become strong, they have to be satisfied with the cabbage soup.

It's not that the soup is not tasty. On the contrary, his wife is an excellent cook. With a piece of hard bread, she makes completely full. And seeing his family fill their bellies gives him satisfaction. After all, not everyone can claim to go to bed full in this day and age.

Still at the table, when everyone has eaten their bowls down to the last drop, his mother Nele breastfeeds his little sister Fenja. Björn likes the girl, especially when she doesn't cry for once. But as long as she is at his mother's brood, he is sure that this will not happen.

But Björn not only has his little sister, he also has a little brother. He notices how Hendrik, who is sitting next to him, is slowly getting restless. He looks over at him and gives him a smile. His blond hair is getting longer every month, some of it is already hanging in his eyes.

Björn knows what will happen if Hendrik can't sit still. He's sure it won't be long before his parents send them to clean out. And he also knows that it's not just because of his little brother, but also because his father and mother work almost every night to expand the family. Some of that is impossible to ignore.

Björn grins when the time comes.

"Children, it's time to do your chores. Go muck out," his father orders as he gets up and assembles the dinner bowls.

"Yes, Father," the children reply, nudging each other before getting up and running to the cattle.

"Don't be in such a hurry," she admonishes her mother, but they don't even notice that anymore. They are now far too busy taking care of the animals. Björn realizes that Hendrik is very clumsy in his work.

He watches him for a moment. "Hendrik, you must only sweep to one side, otherwise you'll just spread all the crap around," he talks his brother into it. "It's all for nothing then."

Hendrik moves up to him, the flames of the fire make his facial features twitch. Björn thinks this looks funny on the one hand, but on the other it seems alienating. "If you can do it better, then do it on your own," the little boy counters, to which Björn has to stifle a grin. Hendrik doesn't have much strength yet, but his mouth works very well.

He walks up to him and tousles his hair. "Don't be so cheeky with me and make sure that father doesn't hear," he admonishes him. However, he then notices that his parents are busy with something completely different.

Usually they disappear in their bed behind the thick curtain, but today their father takes them on the kitchen table, where they ate not so long ago. They try to be quiet, but still hear their wild moaning.

He squints his eyes and pushes Hendrik behind a post. "Here, take care of the chickens today," he says to his little brother, trying to prevent him from overhearing his parents' wild goings-on.

Hendrik stomps on the floor. "But you always do that, why do I have to ..."

Björn gives him a gentle push. "Because I said so," he replies.

Hendrik rolls his eyes and resigns himself to his fate, while the pigs look after him with a grunt and act as if they are asking themselves the same question Hendrik just asked.

A short time later, his mother joins them. "Well, my little fighters, are you ready yet?" she says in an affectionate tone as she combs her tangled hair with her fingers and then adjusts her dress. Björn is surprised, because usually they take longer.

Hendrik leans his broom against the wall and smiles at his mother. "Yes, we're done," he replies. Björn just nods and puts out another tub of fresh water for the goats.

Her mother waves her over. "Then off to bed, it's already late. There's a lot of work to do again tomorrow. "

Björn blows out the only source of light in the stable while Hendrik runs to his mother, takes her hand and lets her lead him to a small alcove where her bed is. Björn takes one last look at the cattle. It is important to him that the animals are well and that they are cared for. After all, they are important for the family and they depend on them.

He flinches when he feels a hand on his shoulder. He quickly turns around and immediately notices his father. "Father," he says, taking a deep breath.

Jasper pats him on the shoulder. "Go to sleep, son. It's been a long day."

Björn examines him briefly and recognizes worries and concerns in every wrinkle that have adorned his face for a few years. He presses his lips together and nods. "Good night, father. " A blink later he joins his little brother, who is already waiting for him. "Well, have you warmed the bed for me yet?" he asks jokingly, and lies down with him.

Hendrik just yawns, rolls over and also falls asleep immediately. Their beds consist of a few bales of straw and linen sacks. Björn is very happy with this, because not everyone has something like this available. Some can only dream of such a soft bed.

Björn knows that, on the whole, they are still doing quite well. But of course it has not escaped him that no fish are biting and that the harvest has not turned out as his father had hoped. The cabbage soup alone almost every evening tells him that no one wants this vegetable.

But if it helps them get through the winter, he'll keep eating them. A few nights ago he overheard a conversation between his parents. This also told him that they are worried and that they hope that winter will soon be over. Because then one problem, the cold, is already gone.

Björn needs a while before he finally closes his eyes and falls asleep. His parents try to hide their problems and fears for the future from them as best they can. But when you are together day and night, that is as good as impossible. His parents' worries are also his and he will do everything to help them.

The next morning, as usual, the family is awakened by the loud crowing of the rooster. But not only that, the family notices already when they open their eyes that there is a certain restlessness in the air.

Björn is the first to get out of bed and run to the window. Not a breath later, his father is standing behind him. "What's going on?" asks Björn as he watches the nervous villagers outside. Some are even armed, but in some faces Björn can see that they don't even know why.

Jasper rubs his beard and can't explain the whole mood either. Still, it's clear to him that something must be wrong, because the residents aren't reacting so upset for no reason. "I have no idea, my boy." He turns away from Björn and retrieves a well-shaped wooden club and an axe from a chest.

"You stay here with Hendrik," he says to his wife, who is holding Fenja in her arms and looking at him with a worried look. "I'll go with Björn to see what's going on."

No sooner have his words ended than he presses the wooden club into his eldest's hand, keeping the axe with

him. And before Björn knows it, he is already outside the house and follows his father in the direction of the village center. He didn't quite know what to make of it all. It wasn't the first time that people in the village had raised unfounded alarms. But so far he had never been allowed to go with his father.

That's why he's all the more concentrated. His eyes dart from left to right. He looks closely at all the people who cross their path to find out who does not belong to their community. He peers into every little passage to spot an enemy. To do this, he keeps his club in a fighting position, so that he is ready to fight at any time.

But the closer they get to the center of the village, the more Björn notices that they are not under attack at all. There is no threat to them. On the one hand, the boy is very relieved, but on the other hand, he would also like to fight for once.

The reason for all the commotion in the morning was a trek of merchants who appeared at the edge of the forest. Only now, when all the tension falls off Björn notices the icy cold that flows through his veins. Through all the commotion, he didn't even have time to put on a coat when they left the house.

Björn dares a glance at his father, who is talking to another resident. Jasper is no different, and he would argue that it is even colder today than the day before. All residents know that winters in the north can be cold and harsh. But when you really get into this situation, you are always amazed and astonished.

Despite the early morning cold, the whole village is on its feet by now. As soon as things have calmed down a bit, Nele also joins them with Fenja and Hendrik. Jasper presses a kiss on his wife's forehead when she hands him and Björn a fur. He loves her more than anything and he loves very much about her that she always thinks of others first. Not many people have this ability.

Now the village is no longer in a frenzy of fear, but of joy and nervousness. Because traders mean trade and money. Because it's not just Jasper's family that's living on the edge. It has also hit many others in the village hard.

However, some people's anticipation fades when they realize that they don't have much to trade. The last summer was simply far too wet and a large part of the harvest has gone moldy. The winter will be a hard test not only for some family, but for the whole village.

However, some women in the village know how to earn quick money. Some do it gladly, others do it only to ensure the survival of their family. They had no other choice. While these women prostitute themselves in the village's only tavern, the men try to make a good deal.

Many of these people will not survive the winter, Hartmut thinks to himself as he adjusts his pants and leaves the tavern. He takes a deep breath of the cold air and looks around. As he does so, he observes the people and wonders which of them will still be standing on two legs next winter. He would be surprised if half of the village makes it.

Hartmut is one of the traders of the trek. This time he was even guarded by mounted men, which does not happen very often. Most of the time the merchants have to defend themselves. But this time there are some wealthy ones and they can afford to carry their own bodyguards. Why shouldn't he benefit from that?

Their destination is the Orient and Hartmut is sure that the trek will grow in the course of the journey. By the time they reach their destination, there could be twice as many as there are now. He has nothing against company. It's better to travel in company. But only as long as the traders behave. He always dislikes it when someone brings trouble into a trek. But so far he has been spared.

A smile forms on Hartmut's face. He closes his eyes briefly and banishes the cold from his skin and the stench of dung from his nose. *Oh yes, the Orient*, he thinks to himself. There is heaven on earth for him, paradise. It's warm there and the women smell of fresh blossoms.

He opens his eyelids again and nods at a young woman walking past him. Yes, he has to admit that he feels a little sorry for them. Unfortunately, they don't smell of blossoms; they stink of cow dung. But strictly speaking, they can't help it.

Again he has to smile as he thinks of the petite and young woman he fucked in the tavern. Whether she stank or not, he just had to mount her and get some relief. After all, he doesn't know when he would get to do it next.

How the woman is doing now is of little interest to him. She got her money and that was satisfaction enough for Hartmut. He is and has never been a child of sadness and he takes what he can get. He would never say *no to* a good number. So also today not.

With a clearing of his throat, he climbs on his carriage and asks his two horses to run. For him it was time to slowly look for the town exit again. He got what he wanted here. Some residents crossing his path still offer him their wares, but he declines each time with a nice nod.

However, a very specific house then gets his attention, whereupon he orders his team to stop. In front of the door he catches a woman breastfeeding her baby and two other adolescent boys together with their father. They offer their dry fish and some wooden tools to the passing merchants.

A pitiful sight, Hartmut thinks to himself, and decides to drive on so as not to be exposed to the misery here any longer. But then his gaze falls on the eldest son of the couple. The boy is of considerable stature for his age, he realizes.

Hartmut gets an idea. He gets off his carriage and approaches the family. As soon as the man notices him, he