

QuickRead

Roland's Time Patrol Mission an excerpt from: **BLACK TUESDAY**



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In The Past: Part One

Off the East Coast of England, 999 A.D. 29 October.

Roland wasn't there, and then he was there, but he'd sort of always been there. It was the best way to explain how he arrived, becoming part of his current time and place without fanfare or excitement among those around him. He was in the bubble of this day, not before, and hopefully he wouldn't be here afterward.

Roland was holding onto a wooden pole and it took him a second to realize it was an oar. That moment of confusion was enough for him to get out of rhythm with the others and earned him an earful of curses which, despite being in a foreign tongue, he could understand. The usual: things to do with bowel movements, his mother, his masculinity or lack thereof, and various sexual acts, most of them anatomically impossible but quite imaginative.

Some things never change among warriors.

Roland caught the beat quickly and lowered his heavy oar into the water in sync with the others. Satisfied he could perform this mindless task—even for him—he took a look about. He was cold and wet, but that didn't bother him. The human body is waterproof. The Ranger Instructors at Fort Benning, then in the mountains of Dahlongega, and finally the swamps of Eglin Air Force Base had shouted it at him enough times that it was now a part of him. His attire of dirty leather trousers and tunic was completely inappropriate for the damp and cold, but quite right for manly Vikings.

Roland could almost hear Eagle: Manly men doing manly things with each other and the goats running scared.

He missed his team, but being with real Vikings, well . . .

A wooden shield hung over the side of the boat next to Roland. At his feet lay his sword, a very long and heavy sword with something inscribed on it. An *Ulfberht* sword, made from fine steel imported from Central Asia via the Volga Trade Route, a long and dangerous journey which made it quite valuable.

Roland blinked. This download stuff was cool.

Still, his head hurt from the download, but he liked the sword. Even more, he liked the idea of wielding the weapon in battle. It was a different form of combat from that of bullets and air strikes and artillery. More personal. Close range. Mano a mano.

Roland looked up from the sword. It was night, but there was a cloudless sky and the stars were out and the moon was half, giving plenty of light. The Viking longship was a *skeid*, with 30 benches for rowers. It was over eighty feet long by fifteen at its widest. Open to the elements, the emphasis was on functionality, not comfort.

Roland smiled at the information his brain was supplying. The team would be pretty damn impressed, even Eagle. The ship was narrow and double-ended, which meant the rowers could simply swing in the opposite way and the boat was just as quick in that

direction, although the rudder was only at the stern, so maneuvering would be a little difficult. Still, Roland knew tactics, and usually if one had to beat feet, or in this case, row a retreat, a straight line was always the quickest.

In Viking fashion the keel was hewn from a single large oak tree and curved. It was carved in a T-shape, the narrow side projecting down into the water to aid in steering a true course. The ribs of the ship were made of solid oak and the hull built with overlapping strakes. It was a strong and flexible vessel designed to handle the pounding and waves of the open ocean while also able to navigate shallow waters and be drawn up on a beach as needed.

Necessity breeds innovation.

Roland vaguely remembered watching some History Channel show about Vikings in the team room back at the Ranch near Area 51 (definitely one Eagle had tuned in to as Roland preferred wrestling, mixed martial arts, or those puppy shows), but he knew this information wasn't coming from memory, but from the data downloaded into his brain prior to infiltration on this mission.

Roland looked up. The mast was twenty-five feet high. The wide sail hung limp, the air still.

Too still, Roland knew. They were in the midst of an unnatural calm. Never good. Roland's warrior instincts were tingling.

In the scant light, he could make out that a large hand silhouette had been imprinted into the sail's cloth with some red dye.

A man came down the center of the ship. He was very large, two inches taller than Roland's six foot-four inches, which made him a true giant in this day and age, a year before the turn of the first millennium. He was carrying a Danish axe with a haft over four feet long. The base of the haft had a metal point so it could be used on that end if needed, but the true working axe end was broad, consisting of a finely honed edge for cutting on one side and a thick blunt end made for crushing on the other.

Roland felt a pang of envy as he eyed the weapon. The sword at his feet looked pretty cool, but that axe was awe inspiring.

Mental note, Roland made, focusing hard, because sometimes he had a hard time remembering mental notes: *Next Viking trip, get a big axe.*

Long dirty, dark hair tumbled over the man's shoulders. He had a square face with a thick, poorly healed scar running down the left side, from temple to jaw. Unlike most of the crew, he sported no beard, just a few days growth of stubble. He knelt on one knee next to Roland and looked at him with surprisingly blue eyes.

He spoke in a low voice only Roland could hear. "I am Ragnarok Bloodhand."

"Roland." Roland considered adding something cool to his name, like Roland the Slayer or Roland the Badass, but it just didn't fit.

"Roland is a good name," Ragnarok acknowledged, which made Roland feel better. Ragnarok looked Roland over, noting the scars. "You are a warrior."

It was not a question.

"That is good," Ragnarok continued. He nodded toward the bow of the ship. "We are only a few hours from England. The sea has been strange along with the winds. We are trusting to the gods that our course is true." Ragnarok smiled. "And to Hrolf the Slayer who steers the ship. He has never let me down."

Roland was still marveling he could understand the man, the words falling on his ears in Norse but processed automatically into English. He looked to the rear of the ship and saw a much shorter man but very broad in the chest with a large belly. He had a hand on the tiller and was peering ahead, as if he could see through to their destination.

Roland the Slayer, Roland thought, and glad he hadn't tried it out on Ragnarok. They already had one. Figured. Frakking Vikings. Acted like they had a monopoly on the crazy warrior thing.

Roland looked at the hard men around him and had to admit: Maybe they did?

Ragnarok put a hand out and tapped Roland on the shoulder. "Do you know what you are to do?"

Roland shook his head and decided to try his tongue. "No. I am supposed to watch and see. But it will be done today."

Ragnarok nodded. "We're heading toward a monastery near a village. There shouldn't be any Saxon troops." He paused as a slight figure wrapped in a black cloak came down the center of the ship. The other Vikings shifted uncomfortably as the figure passed, as if it were a dangerous spirit.

"The Disir desires to speak to you," Ragnarok said in a low voice. "She's been waiting for you. She met us before we sailed. She claims to have traveled half the world, from beyond the steppes of Russia to be here. I am not certain whether to believe her." He said the last hurriedly and in a whisper as the figure arrived.

Roland processed that with a tumble of information that overwhelmed him until he simply focused on the keys: A Disir was a spirit or seer in Norse mythology. A cousin to the Valkyrie in some ways, which caused Roland his own unease.

The figure knelt next to Ragnarok and pulled back the hood. Roland was surprised to see a woman obviously from Southeast Asia. Her hair was shocked pure white and Roland knew that whatever had caused that change was something very terrifying indeed.

"I am Tam Nok. I am here to help you in whatever way I can. I have been waiting all my life for this day. It is my calling."

For some reason, her eyes reminded him of Neeley, and he felt a pang of distance and longing.

"Do you know what it is I am to do?" Roland asked. His brain did a double back flip as it translated what he'd just said, and he realized he sounded more sophisticated speaking in Norse than he did in his native English.

Too bad no one else on the team back in his time spoke Norse.

Tam Nok shook her head. "Not yet. I have not been given the vision with my Sight." She nodded toward the bow. "But I know where we are to land. Mighty Ragnarok Bloodhand, wielder of Skullcrusher, has graciously consented to take us there."

Roland glanced at the Viking leader.

"You have paid us well," Ragnarok said, indicating the extent of his graciousness.

"You said it was a monastery," Roland said to Ragnarok.

The Viking nodded. "Yes. I've been along this coast before. Eight years ago I was with Olaf Tryggvason and his fleet. We killed many Saxons. Three years ago I sailed up the Thames with Svein Forkbeard and we forced a ransom from London. But the Saxons have little left to pillage."

"It is not about pillaging," Tam Nok said.

Ragnarok sighed, somewhere between disgust and frustration. "When you know what *it is* about, let me know. You've paid well but once my men smell blood, I will not be able to hold them back. We take what we take. For now—" He suddenly paused and turned his head, sniffing like a dog. He sprung to his feet. "Half force to arms! Fast beat rowers!"

Every other rower locked down his oar and grabbed shield and weapon. Those still on the oars increased their cadence.

Roland hefted the sword, adjusting to the weight of it and the shield combined. He peered about but couldn't see what had caused Ragnarok's alarm. But he could sense it. He'd felt this before; danger close.

Ragnarok glanced over at Roland. "Stay with me." He smiled. "I sense the opportunity for glory." He pointed at Tam Nok. "Stay behind us."

And here be the monster as a thick, ropy tentacle lunged up out of the water. At the tip was a mouth fringed with sharp teeth, snapping, searching for flesh. It hit one of the Vikings directly into the chest, the teeth boring deep. The man slashed at the creature with his sword even as he died.

The Viking leader was fast to the defense with Roland at his side, almost as fast. They battled desperately as more tentacles came out of the water. Roland sliced through one, stomping down with his leather boot on the snapping end, crushing the teeth. To his right, another Viking was lifted into the air, tentacle wrapped around his chest. The unfortunate warrior was pulled down into the black water, disappearing. The man never cried out in terror or for help, swinging his sword even as he was taken into darkness. It was the way a Viking should be taken, weapon in hand, guaranteeing a place in the hall of Valhalla.

If such a place exists.

But warriors need to believe in something beyond themselves, whether it be country, flag, unit, comrades or Valhalla.

Neeley had told Roland of these creatures, the kraken.

He was elated to finally meet one.

Roland jabbed the point of his sword directly into the mouth end of a tentacle, right between the teeth as it came straight for him. The sword went in and then further in, the teeth snapping down on the steel, getting closer and closer to his hand, finally stopping at the cross-shaped haft before the tentacle pulled back, dripping gore.

Ragnarok was everywhere, swinging his massive axe and yelling orders. "Arrows! Spears! Into the water!" He was pointing over the starboard side with his axe, the head dripping gore.

Roland dropped his sword and grabbed a nearby spear. He jumped to the side next to Ragnarok and looked down. Just below the surface, in a swirl of blood, was a large eye peering up at him, part of deeper, darker shadow from which the tentacles lashed up.

One of the tentacles darted toward Roland but never made it as Ragnarok swung his axe and severed it with one blow.

With all his strength, Roland thrust down with the spear, almost following it overboard, releasing it at the last second. The tip hit the eye dead center.

There was a flurry of tentacles and then nothing as the creature dove.

For a moment, all was still, the surface of the water settling down to a dead calm.

"Bowmen." Ragnarok was pointing with the tip end of his axe.

To the starboard side, floating in the air, was a ghostly figure about fifty feet away.

This Roland had seen before. "A Valkyrie."

Ragnarok spared him a glance. "You've met such before?"

"I have."

"Since you are here, that means we can defeat it." Ragnarok said it as a statement and Roland didn't have the heart to tell him it had taken a 40mm grenade and a lot of bullets to do that.

Blood red hair flowed over a smooth face with two red bulbs for eyes. Roland knew there was a human inside that articulated, white armor suit. A human from where and when he had no clue.

The twang of bowstrings was the only sound. The arrows hit and bounced harmlessly off the armor.

Tam Nok called out. "You cannot hurt it with your arrows."

"Stop!" Ragnarok called out.

Roland went to the Viking's side and they stared at the creature as Tam Nok joined them.

"It sent the kraken," Tam Nok said.

"Why doesn't it attack?" Ragnarok asked.

There was no answer.

The Valkyrie remained still for a long minute, and then the creature slowly faded away, floating backward into a fog bank.

"Someone knows you're coming," Ragnarok said to Roland. "Other than me and her."

"Why would it retreat?" Roland asked. "We have no weapon to stop it."

Ragnarok hefted his battle-axe and kissed the gore-covered head. "I can hurt it with Skullcrusher."

Roland had seen 5.56 mm rounds bounce off the Valkyries' armor. While he respected Ragnarok's power, he had a feeling the white armor could withstand the axe. "This doesn't make sense."

Ragnarok slapped Roland on the back. Not softly. "You hurt its pet with your mighty spear thrust. It is probably going off to sulk. You are a worthy warrior." He walked off, issuing orders for the boat to get underway. The crew was tossing severed pieces and parts of the kraken overboard.

Tam Nok put her hand on Roland's chest. "You have the heart of a warrior." She tapped the side of her head with her other hand. "I have the Sight. Together we can do what has to be done. It is the way it should be, seer and soldier as one."

"Except you can't see the goal of my journey," Roland muttered.

"We'll know it when we see it," Tam Nok said.

"I do not think you will be able to control Ragnarok and his men."

"They are transportation," Tam Nok said. "Nothing more."

The vagaries of the variables, Roland thought, a rather profound thought at that. He didn't like it. Roland was well trained and experienced in combat, which is controlled chaos, but he usually had a good idea of his mission and who the enemy was.

Whatever happened when they reached England wasn't going to be pretty.

It is 999 A.D. In China, Bao Zheng is born and would become renowned for his honesty and fairness to the point where he would be woven into Chinese legend. Saint Adelaide, the second wife of the Holy Roman Emperor Otto the Great, and then regent of the Empire for her grandson from 991-995, passes away just before the turn of the millennia, which she had believed would bring the Second Coming. Panic over the end of the millennia has many

flocking to monasteries and churches, turning over all their worldly goods in exchange for the blessing of eternal life.

Some things change; some don't.

And here, on a Viking longship, Roland was facing creatures of legend while on a mission whose objective he wasn't exactly certain of. But he had a shield and a sword and he was in the company of fierce warriors in the midst of a battle.

Roland was at home.

And there was a seer. With the Sight. Who couldn't see what he needed.

Roland shrugged. *This was going to be all right*, he thought as he hooked his shield over the bulwark and put the sword down at his feet.

He grabbed his oar and put his back into it.

In the Past: Part Two

Off The East Coast of England, 999 A.D. 29 October

With the disappearance of the Valkyrie, the wind had picked up. Roland and the rest were able lock down their oars and let the wind take the ship west. The Nightstalker had immediately stretched himself out on the bench and fallen asleep, another hard learned lesson for warriors: Sleep when you can.

He woke when the lookout perched on a narrow wooden platform near the top of the sail cried out: "Sail!" He pointed directly forward.

Roland hopped to his feet, picked up his sword (he was thinking he needed to name it, and was considering christening it Neeley, but he wasn't sure whether she would be honored or insulted if he did so—women, hard to figure) and walked forward to join Ragnarok in the bow.

Roland could see nothing on the relatively flat sea, but the lookout had a height advantage on them.

"There," Ragnarok pointed and Roland squinted. There was the slightest smudge on the horizon.

"A small boat," Ragnarok said and Roland could still only make out a speck. But it was coming closer.

"Enemy?" Roland asked for lack of anything better as he began to make out a shape. Tam Nok had joined them.

"Ahh," Ragnarok said in disgust. "Not an enemy. See the sail? Three black lines straight up and down?"

Roland could not. "Yes."

“Lika-Loddin. It is bad fortune to cross paths with that ghoul.”

“Does it work for the Shadow?” Roland asked.

“He works for himself,” Ragnarok said. “But since he’s in front of us, we might as well speak with him. He knows more than most what happens on the sea.”

“Only him on that?” Roland asked, impressed someone would be brave enough to venture out in such a small vessel.

“He can handle the sail. If there is no wind, he sits and waits for it. He has great patience. And he is an expert sailor, I will give him that.”

Roland could clearly see the other vessel now. It was a much smaller version of the long ship he was on. Instead of shields on the sides of the vessel, there were several long bundles wrapped in heavy canvas and secured with thick ropes.

A man was in the rear, a hand on the tiller. As he got closer, he locked the tiller down and got to his feet, lowering the sail. He was tall, about Roland’s height. He wore leather pants and a long sleeved leather shirt, both stained black.

“What cargo does he carry?” Tam Nok asked.

Ragnarok spit over the side. “Bodies. He is also known as Corpse-Loddin. He travels the northern seas, recovering the bodies of men lost during the winter or in raids. He is coming back from his first journey of the season. He sells the bodies back to their families so that the departed might move on to the next life in the correct manner.”

Ragnarok raised a hand in greeting and the two vessels met with a slight bump. Loddin threw a rope up and one of the Vikings secured the smaller vessel. The man who plied his trade in corpses scrambled up the side.

“Ragnarok Bloodhand.” Loddin’s voice was hoarse, a man not used to speaking to others, spending most of his time alone on the ocean. Loddin put his hand out and Ragnarok grasped his forearm and they formally greeted each other.

“Lika-Loddin, greetings,” Ragnarok replied. “One hopes you are not carrying any relative of mine.”

“I am not.” He looked past Ragnarok and took in the crew. Then he was staring at Roland and then Tam Nok.

“Are there any supplies you need?” Ragnarok asked.

“Who is she?” Loddin bluntly asked.

“A Disir,” Ragnarok replied.

“Ah,” Loddin said. “Interesting.”

“How so?” Ragnarok asked.

“Strange things are afoot,” Loddin said. “Berserkers are not far away.”

“How far?” Ragnarok asked. “What direction?”

Loddin nodded his head from the direction he’d come and in which they were heading. “They are an hour ahead of you.”

“Ahh,” Ragnarok said. “They will sack and pillage the monastery before us.”

Loddin shook his head. “I do not think that is their goal.”

“What is it then?” Tam Nok asked.

“I think they seek the Standing Stones,” Loddin said.

“What Standing Stones?” Tam Nok asked.

“You will see them just past the beach,” Loddin said. “A circle of stones. Similar circles are here and there among the islands. Strange places,” he added, with a glance at Tam Nok. “It must have something to do with the darkness.”

Roland decided to enter the conversation. "What darkness?"

Loddin looked at him. "I do not know you. What is your family?" He smiled, revealing rotting teeth. "In case I come across you in the course of business."

"His family is far from here," Tam Nok said.

"As is yours, I am sure," Loddin said. He nodded over his shoulder. "There was a fog bank. A most unusual one near the shore. Near the stones. A black fog. I've seen the like before. I always steer clear."

"A gate," Roland said, before he realized he wasn't supposed to say that.

"Yes," Tam Nok confirmed, which helped Roland feel better.

"A gate," Loddin said. "Curious. To where?"

"No one is sure," Tam Nok said.

Ragnarok was a little bit behind and focused on what he did understand. "How many berserker ships?"

"One," Loddin replied.

"Crew?"

Loddin looked around. "Roughly the same as what you have."

"Who are these berserkers?" Roland asked.

Ragnarok shook his head in disgust. "They are Vikings with no home. Who live for war for no cause beyond the fighting and the payment they receive. They have no honor. They wear wolf skins, if they wear anything at all. Some fight naked. Their shields are painted with blood. One will throw himself onto a shield wall, knowing he will die, to break it for the others."

Tam Nok cut to the key issue. "Why are they here? Going to the same place?"

Loddin shrugged. "That is your problem. How would I know their intentions?"

"Whose banner were they rowing under?" Ragnarok asked.

"The black."

Roland could tell the Viking didn't like the answer. "What does that mean?"

"They are serving no one," Ragnarok said. "They are rogue."

Loddin seemed bored with it all. "I would like some salt. And fresh water."

Ragnarok waved a hand and one of his men went to get the supplies. "Will you be returning home?"

Loddin looked at Ragnarok as if he were crazy. "Of course not. I anticipate an increase in business very shortly."

In the Past: Part Three

The East Coast of England, 999 AD. 29 October.

They hit the beach in a thick fog.

An unnatural one as Corpse Loddin had warned them.

Literally hit the beach. Ragnarok knew when they were getting close to shore. They all did. They heard the sound of the surf pounding on the shore, but it came up fast, appearing less than fifty feet in front of them, and then they were scraping up onto the pebbly beach.

Roland was impressed as the Vikings embarked tactically. Five bowmen stood in the prow of the ship, arrows notched. A dozen swordsmen slid over the side and ran in three groups of four into the fog, covering front and both flanks, similar to the way a danger area was crossed in Ranger School.

Ragnarok waited, Roland at his side.

Finally, one man from each of the three groups appeared, waving an all clear.

"Which way is the target?" Roland asked.

Ragnarok pointed to the right. "I would have preferred to go along the shore, but in this fog we could get hung up on a sand bar offshore. Then we would simply be a pile of shit for the English pigs to descend upon like flies. It has happened."

"And the Standing Stones?" Tam Nok asked.

"I know of no Standing Stones." Ragnarok was obviously irritated. "Loddin said they were over the dunes."

"The berserkers?" Roland was more interested in the warriors.

"Their ship will be on the beach wherever they landed," Ragnarok said. "Unless they put it back out to the sea for security." He'd gone from irritation to frustration. "If either of you would tell me what we must do, I can make a plan."

Tam Nok held up a hand while she closed her eyes. As the rest of Ragnarok's crew deployed, other than a handful to guard the ship, she turned slowly in a complete circle. She took a deep breath, and then opened her eyes. "The stones are there." She pointed inland, to the right.

"The monastery is there," Ragnarok countered, pointing inland but further to the right. "That's where you told me we were to go. The men expect to plunder it."

"The stones first," Tam Nok said.

Ragnarok turned to Hrolf the Slayer. He signaled in the direction Tam Nok had indicated. Without hesitation, Hrolf issued orders and the party moved out.

Roland walked next to Ragnarok. Tam Nok at first walked behind them, but then she came up and walked at Roland's side.

"Do you have a weapon?" Roland asked, always the practical one.

Tam Nok tapped the side of her head. "Yes." She leaned closer. "And I have a dagger inside my robe."

Roland grunted, a response he'd learned a long time ago to give when he had no clue what to say.

He missed Neeley.

He missed Nada.

He missed his team.

Because even Roland sensed something wonky about Ragnarok. He glanced at Tam Nok and she looked back, inscrutable.

The fog was troublesome because it indicated trouble was nearby.

The Vikings and company clambered up through the dunes.

Right into the ambush set up by a contingent of berserkers.

Roland caught a glimpse of someone charging in from the right. He wheeled, sword at the ready, and caught a naked man wielding an axe on the point of his blade. Roland twisted the blade hard and instead of taking the impact of the charging berserker, he twisted and ripped through the man's spine and cut him in half, letting both parts fall to the ground and stepping over him to take on the wave of attackers that followed.

"Behind me," he yelled at Tam Nok as he clashed sword with a berserker wearing just a wolf skin tunic. As the two were in stalemate for a moment, sword to sword, Roland took advantage of his opponent's obvious weak spot and kicked him in the scrotum.

Even a berserker could feel that.

As the man doubled over in pain, Roland decapitated him with one powerful stroke.

It was a good sword.

The ambush was over as quickly as it had started. The dozen berserkers were dead except for one who ran away into the mist. Two of Ragnarok's men were dead, one wounded.

Tam Nok went to the injured man to tend to the wound, but Ragnarok beat her to him and voided her mission by slitting the man's throat.

"We don't have time for wounded," Ragnarok said. "And they don't survive the journey back."

Tam Nok stared at him without expression. "Why would they attack like that?"

"I told you," Ragnarok said. "Berserkers make no sense. Under a standard, when they are paid, they follow some order. But on their own, when rogue, they are unpredictable."

But Roland knew there was a very valid military reason for such an attack if one was willing to take the losses: The lone survivor who'd run now knew the strength and capabilities of the Viking war party.

They moved through the dunes, wrapped in the unearthly mist.

Suddenly a tall stone, about two meters high, appeared out of the fog. And then others, each stone roughly shaped, placed in a circle. In the center was a three-meter high stone, but it was angled almost 45 degrees, pointing.

Ragnarok halted. "I sense something."

"I do too," Roland said. Not the feeling of unease that the mist was giving off, but something ancient and powerful.

Tam Nok was almost in a trance. "These are from the original people. Our ancestors. Who sailed the oceans in vessels we can only imagine. When there was a great land in the middle of the great sea to the south and west of here."

"I have heard of such a land," Ragnarok said. "Green Land. It is said—"

Tam Nok cut him off. "This land no longer exists. It was destroyed. But the survivors spread out across the Earth." She pointed. "These stones were placed here by those survivors." She walked forward, into the circle, until she was standing underneath the angled stone. She closed her eyes and remained perfectly still.

There was grumbling among the Vikings, who had not made this journey to stare at stones set in the ground.

"My men want to attack the monastery," Ragnarok said.

Roland shook his head. "We have a mission."

“And you need my men to do it,” Ragnarok reminded him. “And the rest of the berserkers are around here somewhere. They did not come here for stones either. They are probably pillaging the monastery while she does...whatever it is she is doing.”

“This is more important than that,” Roland said. “You’ve been paid.”

Ragnarok spit. “Not enough. I am taking my men. You can meet us at the monastery.”

With that he signaled and the Vikings disappeared into the mist, heading north, leaving Roland alone with Tam Nok.

In The Past: Part Four

The East Coast of England, 999 A.D. 29 October

Tam Nok opened her eyes after a few more minutes. She didn’t appear surprised to see Roland standing there alone. She signaled for him to come to her. He walked over. There were markings on the stone faded by time, a form of the hieroglyphics that they were using at the Possibilities Palace but too faint to read.

“Do you feel it?” Tam Nok asked.

“I feel something,” Roland allowed, mainly pissed at Ragnarok for abandoning them.

Tam Nok reached up and placed her hands on either side of Roland’s head. “Clear your mind. See the possibilities.”

Roland immediately knew the crack Mac would make about that, which indicated Mac didn’t know Roland as well as he thought he did.

For a moment there was pure white in Roland’s mind. Then flames. He saw a battle, Vikings versus berserkers and caught in the middle the people who lived outside the monastery and those inside, the monks, dying without fighting back. There were also nuns, and the vision zoomed in on one young woman, at the end of her teens, her hair shorn tight, wearing a plain brown dress. She was cowering in the corner of the chapel, a cross held in front of her as a form of protection.

A figure was approaching her, but Roland couldn’t see who it was. The figure was all black, a silhouette moving with purpose and rage. A hand knocked the cross aside. Her dress was torn. She screamed.

The vision blinked black, and then showed the same young woman, lying on a straw bed in a hut. A mid-wife was between her legs and a baby was brought forth and—

A young boy, sitting in a room, a monk, switch in hand, looming over him, teaching, making him read scrolls and—

A warrior teaching the boy swordsmanship, a whip at the ready to correct any mistake, and—

The boy, now in his mid-teens, strapping, powerful, but without the full muscle adulthood would bring, wearing armor, riding into battle and—

The man riding out of battle, blood and gore-covered, obviously reveling in the combat and—

The man wearing fine armor, standing behind a pulpit, exhorting a crowd of soldiers and priests and monks and nuns and—

The man wearing a crown, now an emperor, of what wasn't clear, but there were armies following him and—

Ships sailing from England, filled with soldiers, but also with priests among them, priests wearing a strange emblem around their necks: a silver cross inside an iron circle with an iron slash across the top of it all and—

Ships landing; slaughter; conversion forced upon those who surrendered and—

Roland staggered back as Tam Nok pulled her hands away.

"What was that?" Roland demanded.

"That is a possibility that springs forth from this very evening," Tam Nok said, "if it is not stopped."

Roland, as usual, had a simple solution. "Then let's stop it."

In the Past: Part Five

The East Coast of England, 999 AD. 29 October

A dozen swords pointed at Roland, high odds against him, especially since he wasn't particularly trained on the use of his own sword. The men wielding those weapons were dressed in a mixture of pelts and hides or nothing at all. Some were painted, or it could be they were simply horrendously dirty.

They really smelled bad.

Roland missed his M248 machinegun, his M4, his pistol...a grenade perhaps?

"I will kill as many as possible." Roland spoke in a low voice to Tam Nok, his sword at the ready. "You make a break for it. Get to the chapel. Hide the girl."

"I can hear you," one of the berserkers said. "You will die quickly and so will she if you resist." He stepped forward. "You are our prisoners."

"I don't think so," Roland said. He lifted his sword, but Tam Nok put a hand on his forearm.

"We go with them," she said.

For Roland to give up his sword was like parting with one of his limbs, but he realized she was right. He might kill some, but not all, and then this mission ended here, now, and the vision he'd glimpsed would bring the deaths of many more. As long as they were alive, they had a chance.

He dropped the sword. One of the berserkers picked it up. Another grabbed Roland's arms and tied his wrists behind his back. The rope was tight and dug into his skin, but Roland barely noticed it.

"Come," the leader said.

Led like animals, Roland and Tam Nok were pulled forward through the mist.

They came over a low rise and in a gully were thirty more berserkers. Roland could smell them before he saw them. One of the group, a tall, thin man with a naked torso and a wolf skin covering his waist and below turned to them. His body was crisscrossed with innumerable scars. He was missing one eye, a gaping socket surrounded by scar tissue.

The other eye peered at the two of them, as if deciding how to slice a prime piece of meat. "I am Halverd One-Eye." He grinned, as if his obvious name were a joke.

Screams echoed out of the mist from somewhere ahead. Women, children crying out. Men pleading. Vikings yelling in exultation. The primal agonized cries of the mortally wounded.

"Bring them," Halverd ordered.

Roland realized they were getting closer to their objective, the chapel inside the monastery, although the mode of that approach needed some improving given he was weaponless and his hands were tied.

The guide ropes were pulled. Roland and Tam Nok stumbled forward as the berserkers strode over the edge of the gully. Below them, flames flickered from straw roofs set on fire. Bodies littered the ground in front of the monastery. The gates were wide open, indicating either poor security or a vain attempt by the inhabitants to throw themselves on the mercy of the Vikings.

The sounds of the assault came from inside those gates, behind the three-meter high wall surrounding a large building.

Roland was a bit surprised at the action of the berserkers. They were spreading out, no yelling, no running, just long purposeful strides. Halverd was in the middle, in the lead, and Roland and Tam Nok were prodded along right behind him.

They passed the first bodies. Men, women, and children. The slaughter was indiscriminate. Halverd reached the open gates and paused. He then signaled, left and right. A contingent of a half dozen berserkers disappeared into the growing darkness in either direction.

This was not some unorganized melee as the ambush had been.

Then Halverd gestured with his sword at the gate and the remaining berserkers rushed through. He looked over his shoulder and smiled once more at Roland and Tam Nok, and then led them through into the courtyard.

The Vikings were caught in mid-pillage, so the initial assault was heavily in favor of the berserkers. Vikings were cut down from behind even as they were killing monks and villagers.

Roland tested the ropes binding his wrists, but couldn't get them to budge. He looked at Tam Nok, but she was staring at the horror unfolding before them.

Roland considered ripping free of the man holding the end of the rope and charging Halverd. Perhaps he could batter the man into the ground with a bull rush?

Hrolf the Slayer appeared with a solid squad of Vikings, forming a shield wall in front of a large doorway which led into the monastery. The battle became more balanced now and Roland had hope that the shield wall would hold.

But then the flank parties Halverd had sent earlier appeared *behind* Hrolf and the squad, coming from inside the monastery. Surrounded, Hrolf and surviving Vikings began to fight back to back.

Halverd seemed uninterested in all of this. He walked around the swirling battle, the two controlling the ropes forcing Roland and Tam Nok to follow. Just before they entered, Roland saw Hrolf go down, an axe sticking out of the top of his head.

Candles flickered here and there, intermittently lighting the stone interior. Halverd didn't hesitate. He stepped over the body of a monk, whose head had been savagely separated from his body. He turned right at a junction where several bodies were clustered. Tam Nok was bumping against Roland as they maneuvered around this, and he felt her half turn her back to him and then a sharp pain as a blade scraped along his arm, drawing blood. He couldn't see what she was doing in the dark, but then again, neither could the two guards. The blade went from his flesh to being jammed into the knot binding his wrists together. Stumbling their way down the stone corridor behind Halverd, Tam Nok was trying to cut Roland's wrists.

Roland saw the stone hall widen ahead to a tall set of wooden double doors. Two Vikings were standing guard and they spotted the berserkers. Halverd stopped. "Attack," he ordered the two holding the ropes. They let go and ran forward.

Tam Nok increased her speed, cutting through the rope as a brief battle erupted. By the time she finished, everyone was dead except Halverd. He finish slicing the throat of one of the Vikings and stood up, turning to face them when Roland placed the blade of Tam Nok's dagger against his throat.

"You'll never get inside," Roland said.

Surprisingly, Halverd smiled, a cheerful fellow for a berserker. "I do not wish to go inside. That is *your* task."

Roland had been ready to cut the berserker's throat when the import of those words struck home. "Who are you?"

"Halverd of the Patrol," the berserker leader said. He looked past Roland at Tam Nok. "You picked the wrong man to lead you here. In fact, you led the wrong man directly to the wrong place, but fate is strange in that way. We are all here now. I suppose that is what is supposed to happen."

Roland tossed the knife back to Tam Nok and grabbed an axe from one of the bodies. He pulled open one of the large doors. Numerous candles lit the interior of the chapel, just like his vision. The nun was cowering in the corner, holding up her cross, pleading for mercy. But now what had been just a dark silhouette in the vision became a man: Ragnarok.

"Do not touch her," Roland warned.

Ragnarok spun about, Skullcrusher in his hands. He was splattered with blood. He nodded. "Ah, the strange one from another place and another time. You fools brought me here. I supposed I should thank you for that. Go back to your bitch."

"You do not get her." Roland pointed at the nun. "Your men are all dead. The berserkers have killed them all."

Ragnarok shrugged. "A small sacrifice for what will come of this." He nodded toward the nun.

"Your death will come of this," Roland said and then he charged.

He swung the axe and it hit Ragnarok's own swing, the two heavy heads of metal clanging loudly. Roland's arms shivered from the impact and he almost dropped the axe.

Ragnarok seemed unaffected and he shoved his axe forward, the flat top, slamming into Roland's chest, knocking the wind out of him. As Roland gasped for breath and brought the axe up to defend himself, Ragnarok exclaimed in surprise.

He turned, staring down at the slender form of Tam Nok. Her dagger was stuck in his side and seemed more an unexpected irritant than a serious wound.

Roland took advantage of that moment and attacked.

And Ragnarok swung back to him, blocked his swing, the impact knocking the axe from Roland's numbed hands.

"You're a fool," Ragnarok said as he lifted Skullcrusher to deliver a final blow.

A blow which never landed as a half dozen arrows snapped past Roland and into Ragnarok's chest. The Viking staggered back a single step, looking down at the shafts protruding from his body.

Halverd was next to Roland. "I am not impressed with what has been sent from the future to deal with this," he said as if commenting on the weather.

A group of berserkers were next to him, their bows already notched for a second volley.

Ragnarok was shaking his head. "No. No."

Then he fell to his knees.

Tam Nok stepped forward and slid her dagger across his throat. Blood spurted forth and he tumbled forward, dead at their feet.

"It's done," Roland said.

"No," Halverd said. "It is not done." He was looking at the nun.

"Surely you—" Tam Nok began.

Halverd signaled and the second volley went into the nun, pinning her against the wall. The cross tumbled from her lifeless hand. Tam Nok took an involuntary step back, shaken by the ruthless act.

Halverd turned to Roland. "My time is a dark and vicious time. I don't know of your time." He nodded at Tam Nok. "You believed the wrong man. And you, my large friend, must understand there is no mercy in time. There is only the time that must be protected. She was half of a dangerous equation. It is best to eliminate both elements."

"She had the sight," Tam Nok said. "The blood of a Defender in her veins."

"What?" Roland was a bit behind.

Halverd turned for the door. "I wish both of you well."

"Wait," Tam Nok said.

Halverd turned. It seemed as if he were looking at her with not only his one eye, but also his dead socket.

"Let me come with you?" Tam Nok asked. "This was my task and it is done."

"Not done well," Halverd said

Roland stepped up. "But it *is* done. And it would not be so if she hadn't shown me the vision of possible futures. You were standing outside, waiting for me to come in and deal with this."

Halverd frowned. "I would have entered if you had not shown up."

"But *you* didn't," Roland said. "So it has turned out as it had to turn out. The mission has been accomplished and Tam Nok was a key element in that."

Halverd nodded. "Her vision could be useful." He smiled. "As I have only one eye, an extra set will be helpful." He looked at Roland. "And you, warrior, I wish you a safe journey back to whence you came."

And then they were gone, leaving Roland alone amidst the bodies.

The Return

Roland was sliding through the tunnel of time, forward. To his own time. There was something off to one side. Images appeared, like an old movie flickering on a black and white television.

Roland didn't quite understand or comprehend the changes to his history he was seeing in that other possibility if he had failed in his mission: a Reformation starting in the year 1015 A.D. instead of 1517. England becoming the religious center of Europe. A kingdom rising, one that sent crusaders across the world. The Catholic Church crushed, and a new warrior-religion taking its place.

Flames. Bodies. A worldwide Inquisition.

And then nothing.

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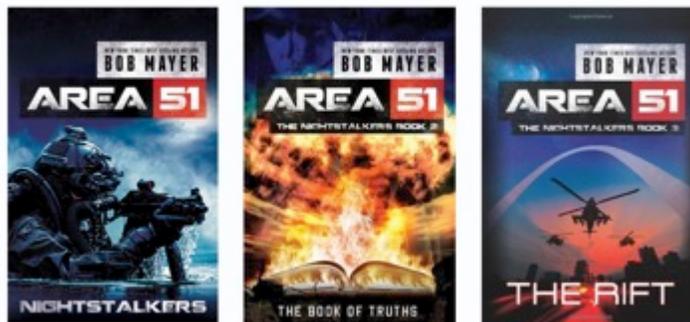


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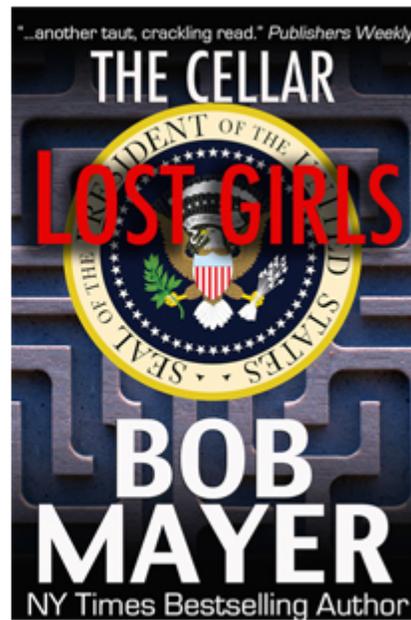
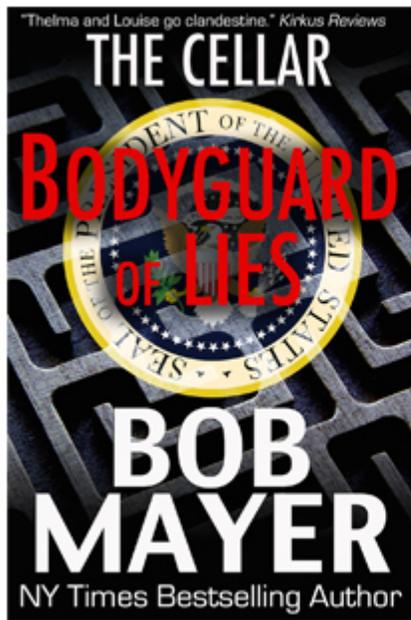
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About Bob Mayer



Bob Mayer is a NY Times Bestselling author, graduate of West Point, former Green Beret (including commanding an A-Team) and the feeder of two Yellow Labs, most famously Cool Gus. He's had over 60 books published including the #1 series Area 51, Atlantis and The Green Berets. Born in the Bronx, having traveled the world (usually not tourist spots), he now lives peacefully with his wife, and said labs, at Write on the River, TN.

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