

Chapter 10

The Viking in Game of Thrones

The Viking — This isn't Care Bear Land!

I do believe I've met the sunshine of my life! Naïve as ever, I land in *Game of Thrones*. The Viking has declared war on his whole family. Each one gets a glorious nickname.

His father, the Viking king, *Narcissus the First, the Flawless*, a megalomaniac who decides everything. The others have no choice: either they follow him, or they clear off. If they succeed, it's thanks to him. If they fail, it's their own fault.

His mother, the Viking queen, *the Lady of the Fjords*. One morning, aged 6, he spotted a bruise on her face, so he decided to help her run away. But his giant of a father caught up with them. The king and the queen had a little chat, then went back to the castle like good children. The father held it against his son: *high treason!* The son held it against his mother, for the same reason. Like father... like son! (Viking logic. Among flawless gods, you'd rather shoot first than be dethroned by your own offspring.)

His ex-wife, *a loser*, incapable of making a decision. (So says *Vik the King*, who makes every decision for his wife. She probably said yes-yes for a quiet life, then did as she pleased. No point arguing with a man who never lets you get a word in edgeways. But it wasn't enough, she followed him until he left her.)

His darling daughter, *the Amazon of the Waves*, who did everything with him: boat races, boozing. When he left her mother, she blew all her university money on parties and drink. She hasn't spoken to him since he refused to pay for her racing longship.

Viking conclusion — Her mother brainwashed her.

(Someday, someone will have to explain the link to me? Because apparently, it's nothing to do with making up for a lack of fatherly love with heavy drinking, or drowning her rebellion in compulsive racing-longship shopping. Her father went off to France, she went off to Australia to sail. She's a chip off the old block. He can't disown her.)

His 18-year-old son, *the Great Translucent Hermit of the Screen*, with whom he had a bare-knuckle fight after cutting the power to his PC to force him to the table. Because he was too offended that his son preferred his games to a meal with him. Since then, radio silence. Not a word. The void. (His mother smothers him and his father ignores him! It's like a David Attenborough documentary.)

Viking logic: there's always someone to blame. But it's never him. *Vik the King* is the last just man in a world of incompetents. He fought the sea monsters in the War of the Scorched Lands. His men died, swallowed by nuclear octopuses, in the desert of fire. A real nightmare! His dragon heart is one of the few survivors... so he drinks to forget... the weepy cries of depressed seagulls. A tragedy! A Viking hero... of happy hour.

I sympathise. I'd never have survived in his shoes... I admire his courage, I feel for him... I must admit, his angel face, his irresistible charm and his off-the-scale charisma more than make up for his little family hiccups. I hope he'll sort it all out, for everyone's sake. But as long as these little red flags don't dent his mood too much, I want to enjoy my trip with my hero. I'm living my dream, and it's wonderful!

Touch is our language. The only one we speak without a translator. We understand each other at once, we brush

past each other, we're drawn together like magnets. He smiles and welcomes me, all warm and snug, into his 2 metres of open arms, on his lap, spooning in bed, or in the queue at the baker's, in pubs, in front of everyone, twenty times a day, he doesn't even notice, and I throw myself in every time, as if it were the first. He never says no. Not once. We're the same.

Him — I love it when she puts her hand on my thigh. She strokes the back of my neck, she runs her fingers through my curls. It's her vice.

Me — He takes my hand and kisses it. The hand-kiss of the demigod of *Soumerland*. He makes me melt, two centuries late: his mating dance knocks me for six.

We discover stunning places! It would take a whole book to describe the charm of this adventure. Locals who smile at me and look me in the eye. Restored pirate ships. Giant fans in the middle of fields. Dyke roads out at sea. Moving walls. And unpronounceable, hilarious accents. Every day he switches between his collection of cars, sailing boats and musical instruments, to make the most of each one. We wander from medieval towns full of flowers, bridges and bicycles, to beaches as long as the country, with dunes as soft as flour. From a chalet hidden in the forest, packed with local giants, to live music festivals... which we very nearly made it to. We come home inseparable. Heads full of memories, phones full of photos, hearts full of love. Have we finally found each other, or found each other again? It's as if we'd always known each other. We're over the moon!

Back home... we swim under the moon. We play in the water, he carries me, he kisses me, we float.

Me — This is my favourite moment: nature, the night, the sea, him. Worth all the gold in the world.

Him — You're the gold. My world.

We make love in unison...

The next day, I ask his opinion on my website (6 months' work). He takes an interest in what I do, advises me, gets involved, more than I asked. In 3 days, it's done! Impressed! And relieved. So I trust him... I catch myself following his advice... Maybe he's right?

Sunday Is Showtime!

The journalist — What a family legacy! An explosive cocktail!

The Viking — I didn't come here to cry.

The journalist — Did your father never talk about love?

The Viking — For my father, talking about love means talking about himself: Bjornulf the Flawless. Apart from that, as he tells me: "sort your own mess out, not my problem". He forgives nothing. Either you're strong, or you're disowned. Weakness is taboo. Showing your feelings means losing your power. No quarter: if you've got a heart, you're the weakest link. Goodbye! He humiliates you and casts you out. Full stop.

The journalist — What did you learn from that *Bushtucker Trial*?

The Viking — I never ask for help, I'm never weak. It's the winner's mind game. My father's legacy.

(So he found the way out: call it love. "I love you" is the only permitted way to say "don't leave me".)

The author — You do the same with the people who love you. You lend them your umbrella when the sun shines, and want it back the minute it rains.

The Viking — It's training. If you count on me, you go soft. That's how you forge a real Viking: self-reliant, tough, indestructible.

The author — And if people don't count on you, you take it as betrayal. We're going round in circles! So you put up a wall, you take down a tyre, or you monologue for three hours while emptying a bottle. Great training for your liver!

The journalist — It's a tragicomedy...

The Viking, stung — Go on, laugh. But that's what saved my life when I was a *berserker*, in the War of the Scorched Lands. I saw men crushed with their longships by the sea monsters. With your soppiness, you'd have gone mad. You haven't lived through the horror, so don't judge!

The author — You're right, you were very brave, and you survived all that! Luckily, the war's over now.

The Viking — The war is never over! Watch the news, it's on every day! It could blow up any minute. I've lived through it, I wouldn't wish it on anyone.

The author — I know why he stays glued to *TeleKata* 24/24! In his case, it's a symptom. But round-the-clock violence doesn't solve the problem, and it doesn't reflect reality.

The Viking — I'd rather stay informed and know what's going on, so I can react fast.

The author — But you watch war like a football match! Two sides, a setting, suspense. Kick-off at 8 pm. Anxiety compulsory.

The Viking — This isn't Care Bear Land!

The author — One doesn't rule out the other, I'd rather have the choice. Between your end-of-the-world match and the hummingbirds in my hammock, I've chosen. Humour. A non-violent weapon against groupthink. It turns my anger into perspective. My peace is sacred.

The Viking — Of course. You're all nuance and you don't give a fig for labels. You just hate having one stuck on you.

The author — I just want you to switch off *TeleKata* and come and lie in my hammock, next to me, I've got a gentler programme on...

The journalist — And you, Coraline, how did you grow up?

The author — The opposite of his cold, rainy world. In the sun, in a close-knit, warm pied-noir family.

The journalist — How did you two meet?

The author — He's divorced, he's fallen out with his whole family. He feels lonely, unsteady, he's in transit, rebuilding himself. So he invents adventures to survive his everyday life. And me... I'm the girl who helps, who puts others in the spotlight, who can't say "no". I live in a parallel world, where I dream of adventures. So when I go travelling with my Viking, the adventure comes true!

The journalist — Did you recognise each other?

The author — From the very first evening, we start to see each other's cracks... I see it: his wounded child. His need for reassurance. How tired he is of playing the strong one.

The Viking — And I see her too: her strength, her weakness, it all touches me. That's the truth: we were mirror images, each behind our own wall. Hers: "it'll be fine".

The author — And yours: "I don't need anyone". We recognised each other through the concrete. (It happens.)

The journalist — And what drew you to her?

The Viking — She was different: her energy, her humour, her gentleness... and her strength, even if she can't see it. She made me believe I could be a normal man.

He needed emotion to feel alive. "I love you" and "I hate you" ask the same thing. Feel something for me. Calm kills him. I needed calm to go the distance. We couldn't both win.

The Viking — Wow! Heavy! *Stupid French woman!* You've just killed the mood with your trailer, nobody will read your novel. Work on your punchline, and speak for yourself.



The Hammock and the Hummingbirds

A novel by Karine Baridon



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