

The Time & Space Trilogy concludes with the third book, Tinton Falls. The comatose Terry Morgan is moved to a hospital in New Jersey where he continues to dream of Story Time adventures, this time with a new group of imaginary friends. Who or what is creating his grand fantasies and why? Will he ever recover from his endless sleep or will he spend the rest of his life trapped in an endless nightmare?

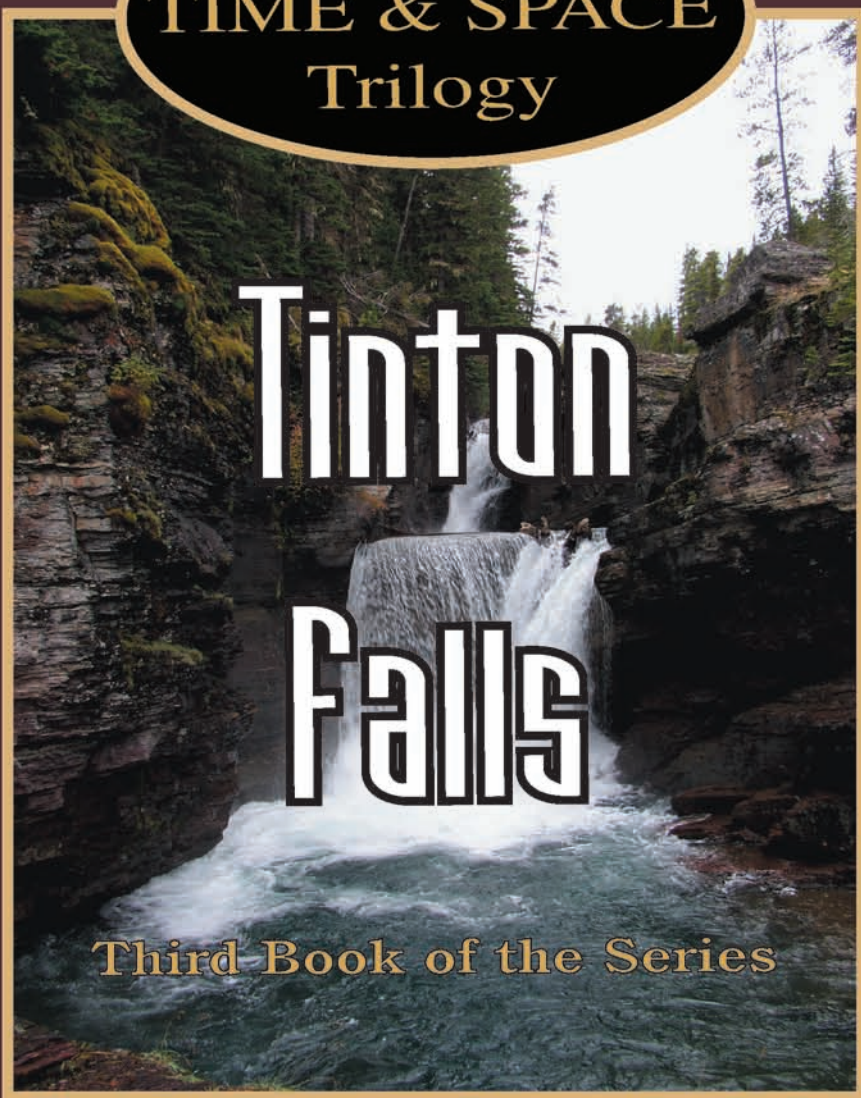
TINTON FALLS: Third Book of the 'Time and Space' Trilogy

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The
TIME & SPACE
Trilogy



Tinton
Falls

Third Book of the Series

John Merlette

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Tinton Falls

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Second Edition

CHAPTER 1

*Tinton Falls, New Jersey
(Sunday, April 10)*

THE PLACE SMELLED like the restrooms at school after the janitor got done cleaning the stalls.

Terry Morgan wasn't too sure about this. Things just weren't what he expected. They didn't 'feel' right. The teacher didn't want to stay, but there was nothing he could do about it. He was two thousand miles from home, from his friends at the *Club Room*. Terry wanted to go back to Wilson to be with his *Story Time* pals, his imaginary friends; Marty, Mike, Larry and the others created in his dreams while lying in a prolonged unconscious state in a Kalispell mental health facility. Terry didn't realize he would miss them so much...and so soon.

Before his incident, Morgan was a science teacher at a rural high school in the northwest corner of Montana. Terry and his wife, Carol, were active, outdoorsy people who adapted quickly to their 'Great

JOHN MERLETTE

Northern' surroundings after moving there soon after both graduated from a teachers college in Maryland.

Terry's life was changed dramatically one blustery fall night when he surprised two young men breaking into the school. During the altercation that followed, a third student, a naïve young girl who was definitely in the wrong place at the wrong time, was accidentally stabbed in the neck by the older juvenile delinquent and died in her teacher's arms.

The young men, fearing for their lives, also attempted to murder the only witness to their crime. They injected syringes full of powerful narcotic and hallucinogenic drugs, their entire supply of stolen goods, into Morgan's body.

Terry Morgan almost died that night, but not quite.

The science teacher survived the drug overdose, but now, months later; he was still imprisoned in a deep, trance-like stupor. Mentally trapped and unconscious, his body tried everything it could to repair itself.

Recovery became Morgan's primary goal in life. As a result of the chemical brain damage and lingering effects of the psychotropic drugs his body had absorbed, Terry's mind began to create a steady stream of bizarre, extremely vivid dreams influenced by visitors to the hospital room. The surrealistic fantasies he subconsciously called *Story Time*, began to occur months after the incident.

The two boys responsible for Terry's incapacitation were eventually captured and confessed to their roles in the murder of Julia Brown and the attempted murder of her teacher. Morgan, who was at first considered the primary suspect in the crime, was later honored by the appreciative community at a festive ceremony for the man's heroic courage to try to save the adolescent hostage.

With the facts in the case finally revealed, the schoolteacher's wife arranged to have her husband transferred to the Tinton Falls Rehabilitation Hospital in New Jersey, where she could better care for him and herself. Both sets of parents lived close by and with the combined efforts of the concerned families they were hopeful Terry would have a better chance of regaining consciousness.

TINTON FALLS

The patient was flown by private jet from Montana to Newark Liberty International Airport in northern New Jersey. After a harrowing flight through extremely turbulent weather, the journey culminated in a terrifying crash on a partially flooded runway.

Carol almost lost her husband again that fateful night. It wasn't just the physical injuries his body sustained during the accident which almost ended his life. The subconscious belief that he was being brutally murdered by a fictional character his mind had created in one of the man's dreams put a tremendous strain on an already weakened heart. As a result of all this turmoil, he suffered a cardiac arrest inside the wreckage and, were it not for the courageous efforts of the flight nurse who was traveling with the young couple, he would have died.

Hours later, after the passengers and crew settled down, an ambulance arrived to take Mr. Morgan to his new home. The teacher's relatives finally got a chance to welcome their hero to the Garden State, but due to the spectacular plane crash and Terry's precarious physical condition, had to leave him in the care of the hospital staff in Tinton Falls until the following day.

That was where Terry was now, unconscious and alone in an unfamiliar place. This translated to prime conditions for more adventurous dreams. Due to his mental state, the schoolteacher was not unlike an infant. He often retreated deeper into his mind for shelter whenever he became frightened. And like a young child with a newly developing brain, the schoolteacher's dreams were sometimes terrifying experiences. The next dream would be no exception.

Since Morgan was in a severely impaired mental state, he was unaware of the physical world around him even though the patient could understand words spoken within his range of hearing. In the dreamer's next fantasy, he imagined avatars, fictional characters representing people remembered from his past, saying and doing things of their own volition where, in fact, everything that occurred in the dreams: people, conversations and scenery, were controlled entirely by the mind of the sleeping science teacher.

JOHN MERLETTE

Morgan's mind was besieged by swirling, disjointed images. The dreamer realized he had no control over the random bursts of visual scenes that overwhelmed him. The schoolteacher believed he could not focus on anything for longer than fleeting moments at a time. The dizziness was creating in him a feeling of nausea; the thought that his mouth was filling with excess salivation was adding to his distress.

Terry forced himself to relax, to concentrate on a single, pleasant thought. He then imagined himself surrounded by a primitive forest of dense fir trees in early winter, the first heavy snow falling on the ground littered with conifer needles and dying undergrowth, the blades of grass bending under the weight of large, delicate flakes. Morgan loved the sensation as the natural sounds around him were muffled in the brisk air. The dreamer had no idea how long the soothing, peaceful vision his mind had created lasted, nor did he care. The image ended by slowly fading into darkness.

I hear voices...Where am I?

Morgan's perspective of the next scene was from an upper corner of a room. He imagined gazing down at himself and others that were the source of the words he was hearing.

"It won't be long now," advised a priest. "I just spoke to his doctor. Terry will soon experience the rapture of being transported to heaven and welcomed by the gentle embrace of the Lord."

"How soon?" asked a familiar voice.

"Very soon I've been told."

"Thank you, Monsignor. Your words are a comfort to all of us. It was so nice of you to come all this way to administer the sacred sacrament to my brother." Teresa Williams was Morgan's sister in real life and now, in his dream, he imaged his older sibling and her husband, Tony, being there to witness the end of his struggle to live.

"Death is only the portal to eternal life, Teresa. You, Tony and all who believe in Him have nothing to fear as the human spirit lives forever, long after our mortal bodies perish from this earth. There are so many people today who fail to grasp the concept." Shaking his head with dismay the priest added, "It is such a shame they cannot find the time to seek and understand the truth."

"I'm certain that Terry believes in the promise of everlasting life. Look at him, Father, he looks so peaceful. Surely he's without pain."

TINTON FALLS

A male voice spoke up. It was Tony, "I told you, Teresa, the nurses have already seen to that. They've got him so doped up on morphine he's definitely in la-la-land."

Ignoring her husband's comment, the woman continued; "I wonder if Terry knows we're here or has any idea as to what's going on?"

"I don't think he's aware of a damn thing." Tony's awkward movements expressed his discomfort being in the same room with someone so close to death.

They're talking about me!

As Terry Morgan continued the struggle to focus his mind on the surreal scene he imagined waking up to, he began to hear a new sound. It was coming from a clock. The rhythm was deep and slow.

It sounds like one of those big old grandfather clocks.

The schoolteacher focused harder on the predictable sound he imagined coming from the timepiece. It kept getting louder. It then dawned on Terry the clock was only a reminder; his remaining time on Earth was quickly slipping away. The dreamer reassured himself that, because he could hear the ticking, he must still be among the living...*well sort of*. At least the man thought he was.

The unconscious schoolteacher soon became annoyed by the incessant 'tick-tock' sound which had crept into his mind, and was relieved when it ebbed and finally ceased altogether. The silence that followed however, joined the other silence; crushing him with boredom as he lay helplessly waiting for the end to come.

With the passage of time, Morgan regained greater control over his thoughts, next imagining he could hear the sounds of his sister softly weeping and of occasional hushed voices although he could not comprehend any of the whispered words.

After several more minutes of peaceful contemplation, a new thought entered his muddled mind. It put his plight into the proper perspective. He wasn't suffering from some illness or injury that would eventually get better. It was useless to waste time believing better days lay ahead, that he had a future. Recovery was not an option. Soon, Terry would no longer exist in the physical world. All the daily events he had been taking for granted would end. None of his plans had any hope of ever being fulfilled. Conversations with friends and family, fishing and hunting trips, projects thoughtlessly put aside for a more

JOHN MERLETTE

convenient time, all had no relevance any longer. They would never happen. The reality of it savagely attacked him like rats and he reacted with a shudder.

The sudden sensation of someone touching Terry's right hand startled him. The touch felt odd. There was no warmth exchanged. His skin seemed dry... like paper, as though the hand were numb...as though he were holding a severed limb away from his body with his good hand. A feeling of terror filled his being and another powerful wave of cold and nausea cloaked him like a burial shroud.

I'm dying!

The deathwatch was interrupted by the noisy entry into the room of someone new.

"Hi there! I hope I'm not too late. Oh, my God, look at him! Is he dead yet?" The loud young woman uttering the words sounded very much out of breath.

"April! Well how 'bout that, Tony, she finally made it here to see her brother."

"Now don't start with me, Teresa. Just because you got here before I did doesn't give you the right to act snippy."

"We drove all the way up from Toms River, April. We left as soon as we received the call from the police. You live in Freehold which is only a few miles down the road."

"I live in Colts Neck, Teresa. Freehold is where the beer-chuggers live."

"Well, *excuse me!*"

"You won't find many new 'Beemers' like mine in Freehold. I think my neighbors have more class than the rednecks and blue collar crowd over in *that* part of the county."

"Pardon me, but what is going on here? Is there any way I can be of help?"

"Sorry, Father, my sister here seems to have a desperate need to let everyone know how successful she's been at her job."

"I just got a big bonus for being selected 'Employee of the Month'. What do you think 'bout that?" The blonde, silicone-enhanced, Botox-injected, assistant PR director for a local communications firm was beaming now, her radiant smile showing off her perfect teeth.

TINTON FALLS

The priest knew the type. So did Teresa's husband, Tony. The Quality Assurance manager for a large electronics firm had been propositioned at work more than once by super-achievers like April. *Quid pro quo! Indeed they're all looking for that quid pro quo.*

"Did the flowers arrive yet? Where are they? I don't see any flowers!"

"The what? What flowers are you talking about, April?"

"The flowers, Teresa! I ordered a beautiful arrangement from a local floral shop with my new Blackberry. They said they'd send them right over."

"And who would they be for? You or Terry?"

"Terry, of course!"

"Well, I hardly think he's in a state of mind to appreciate them, April."

"That's a very kind gesture, young lady," interrupted the priest in a gentle voice. "I'm sure the lovely scent from the flowers will bring joy to Mr. Morgan." The Monsignor felt obligated to make an effort to put an end to the sibling rivalry, but he had other commitments to attend to back at his church. "I wish I could stay longer and chat, but I really must be running along. It was a pleasure to meet you, April. May the Lord be with you and bless all with peace and kindness during the trying times that lie ahead. I pray especially for Terry's soul, that his next journey will be a blessed one."

"Thank you, Father." Teresa and Tony stood up to wish the priest a safe drive back to his parish. April barely acknowledged the clergyman's presence.

After the priest departed, Teresa reprimanded her sister again for her rudeness.

"He gets paid to do that holy water *Last Rights* routine. It's his job! You don't stand up and shake the waiter's hand after he brings your food to the table, do you?" April didn't think her behavior warranted any more of her sister's sarcasm. "So what's the big deal?"

"Monsignor performed the holy sacrament of *Anointing of the Sick* for Terry. It is a big deal, April. It's a very personal and sacred matter."

"Bah! Terry's on his last legs anyway. Serves him right for taking on the President of the United States. Boy, Thornton really did a number on him from what I can see. I watched the news story on my

JOHN MERLETTE

new plasma HDTV at home just before I left to come over here. He beat the crap out of Terry with a baseball bat! Can you believe it?"

"Your brother is a wonderful man. You wouldn't be where you are today if he didn't support you financially while you were struggling to get through college. How many times did he bail you out of trouble with that radical group of revolutionaries you insisted on hanging out with?"

"We were protesting our Fascist government and that war-monger who was President back then."

"Then, to further show your appreciation, you caused Terry unnecessary grief at a most difficult time in his own life." April's sister emotionally worked herself up to a point where she uttered passionately, "For all the pain you've caused, you shall surely burn in hell some day, April!"

"Burn in hell? Pffft! That's just another one of those old fairy tales that the uneducated masses hopelessly cling to. Enlightened intellectuals like me are too wise, too worldly to believe in that sort of nonsense."

"Oh, you poor, unfortunate woman. Without embracing a spiritual belief in our Lord and Savior, when your life ultimately ends you will undoubtedly end up neither wiser nor nobler than any of the ripped and rent road kill that lie at the side of a road splattered with mud and ice. That's really all there is for 'enlightened' people like you to look forward to, isn't it, April?"

After a lengthy period of silence, the blonde girded herself once again and defiantly replied; "I shall leave behind a legacy of great accomplishments that people will remember me by for a very long time."

"All your money and other material possessions will be fought over and gone soon after you're dead, April, and your memory will just as quickly be eclipsed by others who are as selfish as you. People you think are your friends will surely claim whatever noteworthy deeds you do accomplish for themselves to bolster their own self-esteem and financial rewards. Since you have no children, all memories of your existence here on Earth will disappear forever upon the death of your last friend or relative."

TINTON FALLS

“But it’s not supposed to end that way, Teresa.” The sister’s words had suddenly lost their defiance. Tony noticed she looked years older than she did just moments before.

“It always does, April,” Teresa Williams softly replied. “Other than a few exceptional people who have been written about in books and magazines; how many of the millions of other great achievers from the past do you recall? You remember our grandparents, but if you and I and my kids didn’t exist, recollections of their existence wouldn’t happen either. For most people, the only true legacy they can leave behind is through their children and the families that follow after them. Most important records of a person’s time here on earth are found in religious documents like baptism and marriage certificates, and if churches cease to exist, so will many of those important papers. And when they’re gone, so goes the proof of civilized human existence.”

“I kinda’ see your point,” April conceded.

“It’s not too late to change your ways,” Teresa consoled. “Your life doesn’t have to end with your physical death here on Earth. The opportunity is always out there for something better.”

“You really believe everyone has a soul that will exist forever, Teresa?”

“I guess we won’t find out until it’s too late to do anything about it, will we? Are you willing to take that chance? I’d sure hate to find myself in purgatory and then realize I blew my greatest opportunity. Even if the odds are one in a billion, would you want to risk being wrong about that one?”

“I admit; I haven’t really given it much thought.”

“Ahh, but I detect a glimmer of hope within you.”

“Well, I suppose it’s worth my time to at least get better informed about the various religions.”

“The first step is to accept the concept that a spiritual existence just might occur. Like growing an oak from an acorn, there are many people willing to help you cultivate your spiritual life.”

“Would you do it for me? After all the hurtful things I’ve said to you and Terry?”

“Of course! As you change within, your outward appearance changes also. People will notice this and you will discover you’re not really alone in this world after all.”

JOHN MERLETTE

The dream the schoolteacher was remembering was the same as an earlier one. Less than twelve hours prior, the real Terry Morgan had indeed died, even though the loss of cardio function was for a very brief period of time. The fictional story was a recollection of injuries he sustained aboard a Cessna *Citation* airplane when it crashed upon landing. At the time of the accident he was having a nightmare involving a brutal assault by a large man wielding a baseball bat. In reality, he had fallen out of a special medical transportation cot onto the cabin floor of the airplane. The violent rolling and thrashing about of his helpless body caused him to suffer severe physical trauma which culminated in cardiac arrest.

The flight nurse watching over Terry refused to accept failure, and after a truly amazing effort testing her mettle and skills, she managed to successfully revive her patient. It was after Morgan's limp, barely alive body was transferred to a waiting ambulance parked on the tarmac that he mentally recovered enough to create the powerful dream of his impending death for the first time.

Now safe in a hospital bed in Tinton Falls, the science teacher had the opportunity to replay the vision over again. The nucleus for the dream was a memory going back to a time when Terry was ten years old. His parents took the boy to visit his grandfather as the elderly man lay dying.

The residence was very old. It had a parlor with a massive grandfather clock standing in the hallway. The man's bed had been moved downstairs to make it easier for his caretaker to tend to the dying man's needs and to welcome visitors.

While standing beside the bed gazing at the creased, drawn face of the unconscious man, Terry overheard a mouthy relative he had not met before, discussing funeral plans. The woman's name was April. She went on and on about what should be written up in the obituary and shared her thoughts on how best to divide up the old man's assets.

Despite his youth, Terry was shocked by what he heard and wondered what thoughts could be going through the dying man's mind if he could overhear the discussion. He visualized his grandfather suddenly sitting up in bed and telling the inconsiderate woman to *shut the heck up* after slapping her upside the head. The graphic image

TINTON FALLS

caused Master Morgan to smirk which earned him a sharp reprimand from his mother. He wished the annoying sounds from the grandfather clock would shut up too as it was giving him a headache. Suddenly the clock slowly sounded out the noontime with twelve deep-echoing chimes that rattled the young boy's teeth.

Not willing to let the poignant points he had made just slip into the ether, he sought to further explore the mysterious world of death. It was the one passageway that, once transgressed, there was rarely any turning back.

And what about his own future? Were these to be Morgan's last thoughts as an earthly being or would he indeed move on to a spiritual world as he imagined the priest and his sister, Teresa, discussing?

The deeper he thought about it, the schoolteacher developed a greater understanding of Christianity being more than just a specific genre of historical interest. He realized from his story a belief in God was one of the pieces of a virtual jigsaw puzzle that made up every human. Without this vital piece, a person was less civilized, his future less certain, his life less meaningful.

One thought led to many more, and for the next several hours, Terry Morgan restructured his personal beliefs about religion and the afterlife...about 'Time and Space'. He finally realized the purpose of the dream was to help him cope with and prepare for the awesome prospect of death and the hereafter, to put his life in perspective, to understand the importance of spiritual faith before it was too late.

Terry mulled over these thoughts for some time. He prayed he would be blessed with another opportunity to refocus his priorities and to be forgiven for straying from a righteous life.

While dwelling on the subject of life and death, Terry began to assemble the workings of another of his *Story Time* tales. *Story Time* was a term the schoolteacher created for particularly realistic dramas that he imagined sharing with fictional friends at the hospital back in Montana. Instead of a patient ward, he thought he spent all his time in a private *Club Room*.

He recalled some of the history of his ancestors as told to him by his parents and other relatives. He remembered his grandmother pulling down a thick binder from the upper shelf of a clothes closet every time

JOHN MERLETTE

the subject of genealogy came up during visits with her before she passed away. The three-inch thick bundle was a collection of old photographs, hand-written notes and newspaper clippings which chronicled the Morgan family history clear back to sixteenth century Europe. She also would open an old family Bible that revealed many notes written in the margins with ink from a fountain pen.

CHAPTER 2

The Vikings

THE MORGANS were always an adventurous lot. Their history went back in time to the European enclaves of Brittany and Normandy. One part of the clan consisting of devout French Huguenots was forced to flee Roucy in Champagne, France, and move to Leyden, Holland, in 1620. The men of the group were renowned for being master carpenters and stonemasons. Evidence of their fine craftsmanship was still evident in churches and municipal buildings in places like Hanau and Mannheim, Germany.

On October 12, 1662, Gideon Merle, his wife and four children departed from Amsterdam, Holland, and on February 18, 1663, they arrived in New Amsterdam (New York). He and his family traveled to the new world aboard Der Purmerlander Kerck (the Purmerlan Church) captained by Benjamin Barents.

JOHN MERLETTE

In 1674, Gideon became magistrate of a portion of land on what today is known as Staten Island, New York. With his two sons, Josias and Paul, they farmed 256 acres that, centuries later, became a landfill containing debris from the World Trade Center tragedy and the final resting place for the unrecovered remains of the victims.

Merle's granddaughter, Martha, married a new arrival, Silas Morgan, who traveling alone, reached New York from England in 1701. There were no records to be found of the young man's prior history.

Generations later, members of the family would be among the first settlers of Bound Brook, New Jersey. One of them would marry Ida Gano whose colonial forefather was Rev. John Gano, the Baptist minister who served as General George Washington's chaplain throughout the Revolutionary War.

Terry Morgan would sometimes marvel at the odds against his very existence considering the perilous risks that were taken by his ancestors throughout the ages. The schoolteacher was particularly proud of his Northern European heritage. He sometimes wondered if any of his forebears from England or particularly from Northern France, from where he could trace specific ancestors, had mingled with the Norsemen. *The Vikings, the fearsome seafarers that frequently came down from the lands to the north to pillage the farms and villages of what would one day become Normandy.*

As the unconscious dreamer lay resting in a Tinton Falls hospital bed, his mind toyed with his genealogy like a child playing with a Rubik's cube. The history of the Morgan clan offered up many opportunities for *Story Time* adventures.

Sven was born in 882 AD, in a small farming village up one of the fjords on the western coast of Norway. His home was not far from the present day city of Bergen. At the time of Sven's birth, the collection of huts housed only seventeen survivors of the previous winter's brutal weather. The members of the clan were a desperate lot, often working throughout the summers from sunrise to sunset; farming, hunting and fishing, to gather enough food and firewood to sustain them through the following winter. Surrounded by treacherous, rocky cliffs, they had very little opportunity to venture out on a regular basis.

TINTON FALLS

Sven demonstrated an unusual aptitude for woodworking at an early age. He crafted many stout pieces of furniture using the crude tools at his disposal. Encouraged by his father, he constructed his first Viking longship or *drakkar* before reaching the age of twenty. He developed the design for the vessel after thoroughly examining a similar ship which arrived at his village. The longship had been journeying up the fjord when one of the crewmen sustained a serious injury requiring immediate attention. After leaving their companion to the care of the women in Sven's village, the ship departed. For the next two weeks, until the Viking seafarers returned to pick up their shipmate, the young woodworker pestered the hapless man with countless questions about details of the ship.

Sven's longship was twenty-meters long and took two years to construct. With six members of his clan serving as crew, they traveled by the inland waterways to neighboring villages, learning along the way how the others were supplementing their winter stores by trading valuables collected on plundering expeditions to other lands.

The Norseman and his adventurous crew asked if they could join the warships on their next raid. The men possessed outstanding strength and skills with weapons from their years of hunting game in the lowlands along the fjord and felt capable of holding their own in combat. They were told they would be invited provided Sven made several important changes to his ship.

Thus began the saga of Sven the Longbeard.

With the help of his crew, Sven modified his longship during the winter months to make it suitable for traveling out into open water. A removable mast was added and the women in the village painstakingly wove a suitable square sail from wool. He carved a beautifully detailed dragonhead to use as a ceremonial prow ornament. Sven also altered the vessel to accept ten rowers. He obtained commitments from five more adventurous young men from a nearby settlement to join him and his crew the next spring when it came time to set out to sea.

Sven the Longbeard and his crew joined three other ships on raids to small settlements accessible from the English Channel. He and his closest friends: Gunnar, Steinar and Bjorn, observed many of the other

JOHN MERLETTE

Norsemen were unnecessarily brutal in their treatment of their victims. With superior physical strength they wielded axes and swords in a manner that caused most defenders to flee merely upon hearing word of the *dragon ships'* approach.

One of the families that made up the raiding party consisted of a humorless man and his three adult sons. The four often volunteered to lead the attacks on the towns and villages. In preparation for landing, they would don bearskins and smear the exposed parts of their face and hands that weren't covered by the hide with black tar. The men would then stand at the bow as their longship prepared to make landfall and work each other up into rabid frenzy. When they finally leapt off the ship and splashed up to the beachhead, swords flashing in the sunlight above their heads, they looked like possessed demons.

"I do believe they are losing their minds, the way they carry on," noted Bjorn, as he unsheathed his sword to join the other Viking warriors who were already racing up the beach toward a village.

"The others on their ship call those men 'berserkers'," hollered Steinar, who was waist deep in water making his way ashore with a second hawser to tie up the ship.

"Ja, but they are exceptionally fearless, like savage carnivores," observed Gunnar after leaping over the gunwale to assist his friend.

"Did you see how that one crushes his victims with his massive sledgehammer, Sven? Shields are useless against those men."

"They are blessed with superhuman strength, oblivious to pain, I swear."

"I think they welcome the violence," hollered Bjorn who was now waiting by a copse of trees for his friends to catch up.

Sven and his crew of brazen Viking warriors returned to their village after three months at sea with food and treasure aplenty. Longbeard also arrived with festering gashes on his left arm that would take months to fully heal. Unfortunately, they also returned with news that a clansman, one of Sven's cousins, had been slain during their first raid.

The young Norseman learned much from his first taste of being a pirate. After recovering from his wounds, Sven trained hard with his crew and their weapons throughout the remainder of the winter to better prepare themselves for more raids the following year.

TINTON FALLS

Thereafter, the seafarers spent every summer abroad on plundering expeditions. Longbeard's reputation as a fierce warrior and skilled craftsman continued to grow along with his collection of scars that attested to many fierce battles. His maturity and leadership qualities also improved during his voyages to distant lands. Sven's quiet respect for fellow Vikings was reflected in the way the other men and the people of his village looked up to him.

When Sven returned from his third summer abroad, he was informed by his mother that he was to marry a fourteen-year old girl from a nearby village. Ingrid was already quite tall and of slender build, unlike most of the other stout women in the community. The arranged wedding caught the adventurous man by surprise although the charm and beauty of the shy woman-child pleased him greatly.

He and Ingrid took most of the winter to adjust to their new roles in the village. Longbeard was gentle and patient with his bride and when he returned home the following year, he found out he was a father. During his lengthy time away from home, his wife transformed from a meek waif into a strong, assertive and responsible woman that made the Viking leader very proud and the envy of many other young men.

Within a span of seven years, Sven the Longbeard had sired two sons and then a daughter with Ingrid. As the children grew, so did their community as outsiders were drawn to the legendary warrior and his beautiful, outspoken wife.

“When are you going to take Hakon on one of your expeditions, husband?” asked Ingrid one evening when the two had a moment alone.

“Oh, that would not be wise, not yet at least. The children are still small. Hakon is barely nine years of age.”

“The eldest is as skilled as you are with wood tools. Surely Hakon would be an asset to you on your seafaring adventures. He will become a great warrior who will make us both proud.”

“Some day, wife, when the time is right. Till then, you must teach him the other skills he must know as a man.”

“All I know is woman’s work. You must teach him what you know about being a fearless warrior as you taught him his woodworking.”

“When Hakon is ready, I promise I will take him with me. I will start preparing him for that time by training him now with everything he needs to know about combat. He must possess superior fighting

JOHN MERLETTE

ability and strength if he hopes to impress the others and return home without injury.”

“I will hold you to your promise, husband.”

Like the reign of the Viking seafarers that finally ended after two and a half centuries, after many years of adventure, Longbeard was beginning to show his age. The battle wounds he received throughout his marauding career were taking their toll on the man’s strength and endurance even though he had yet to reach the age of thirty-nine.

Sven decided to remain at his farm and devote more time to instructing his sons on the proper use of weapons. He also wanted to construct a second longship, this one almost twenty-eight meters in length with room for twenty rowers. The project would provide an excellent opportunity to test the craftsmanship skills of his male children, Hakon and Eirik.

Longbeard’s plans were interrupted when a local agent representing the king arrived at his small village in early October. The emissary had heard of the Norseman’s legendary reputation as a superb warrior and so, he ordered the Viking and his crew to outfit their ship and set sail as soon as possible.

The men were told that their destination was to be the Seine River where they were to provide support to the Norse Chieftain Rollo. A large raiding party had sailed up the Seine to Paris earlier in the summer in a bold attempt to wrest the province of Rouen from the Frankish king. The military reinforcements that Longbeard and the other Viking warriors were expected to provide would enhance the chieftain’s chances for long-term success.

History would show that, after succeeding in the endeavor, the Chieftain Rollo would rule his new lands as an independent domain. It would be named after the North Men known locally as the Normans and their kingdom would become known as Normandy. Its power under Rollo, the duke of Normandy, would ultimately eclipse that of the Frankish kingdom from which it was created.

Sven the Longbeard had a premonition about striking out on such short notice. The waters of the English Channel were treacherous

TINTON FALLS

enough in the summer, but a journey so late in the year was especially dangerous. Nevertheless, he had little to say in the matter. He was obligated to obey the royal family.

The sea journey would take him and his men across the northern coast of France. He had previously made numerous excursions up the rivers there to raid settlements and extract tribute from the inland people.

The outfitting of the aging longship by Sven and his crew was almost completed when Ingrid showed up at the shore with their children beside her. The eager young man, Hakon, who was now fifteen years of age, was carrying a rucksack containing clothing and weapons.

"It is time, husband. You must take Hakon with you on this journey before you die of old age and renege on your promise to me and our son."

"And what promise might that be, wife?" He glanced behind him and noted the warriors had paused their work to listen to the exchange.

"That you will take our son with you on a journey so he might share in the adventures that you have kept to yourself all these years."

Longbeard heard the crewmen chuckle at Ingrid's boldness. The hapless husband was trapped. To deny his son the opportunity to demonstrate his prowess would be considered a sign of weakness and to rebuke his wife in front of his men would also sully his hard-won reputation as an honorable man.

The Viking leader had no choice but to accept his son on the dangerous mission. Although he did so with an impassive demeanor as was expected of a fearless warrior, inside his soul was tormented with fear knowing the peril he was putting the handsome young man into. It was his nature to put worries about his own fate aside, but this was different. This was Hakon, whom he had tremendous pride shared with the woman he deeply loved even though he rarely displayed his true feelings toward either except in private.

As the ship slid quietly away from the shore, Ingrid standing respectfully on the rocks with their son Eirik and daughter Astrid at her side, Sven the Longbeard gazed back at them, wondering what other thoughts he should have shared with his wife. If he had known that he would never see his family again, he would have been more passionate

JOHN MERLETTE

with his parting words. And if Ingrid knew this would be the last she would ever see of Hakon and her husband, she would surely have sacrificed her own life if doing so would have prevented their departure.

Two weeks later, Sven was aboard his longship struggling with a fierce tempest in the narrow Strait of Dover. His vessel was foundering after striking submerged rocks in the English Channel. The square sail became torn and the mast cracked when fierce winds set upon them suddenly. Three of his men were lost overboard. It was apparent to the seafarer that the other two longships traveling with him were sunk, the warriors lost at sea.

He ordered his remaining crew of ten men to cut and stuff a portion of the lowered sail into the splintered hole in the hull adjacent to the keel to stem the flow of seawater into the bilge.

The repairs helped somewhat, however one of the crewmen died from hypothermia after being half submerged, hand bailing the near-freezing water from the ship's hold for hours.

Gunnar stepped forward to talk to his leader. There was terror evident in the man's face.

"What is it, my friend?"

"Another of the men has perished."

"Where's Hakon?"

"It was he who died."

"Hakon!"

"Yes. He told me he knew the ship was finished if someone didn't stay with the repairs."

"Where is my son's body?" The rain whipping against the warrior's face cleansed the tears that were filling his eyes. He lost his strength momentarily and almost fell to the wooden deck when a wave suddenly slammed the port side of the vessel causing it to shudder.

"The men wrapped him in sail cloth as best they could," the fear of a violent reaction to his confirming words evident in Gunnar's voice.

Just then, Steinar rushed up to the two men to inform the pair that the longship would soon be lost. "We can't keep up with the water rushing into the hold. The patch of sail cloth has failed to stem the flow. What are we to do, Sven?"

TINTON FALLS

The Viking leader thought for several seconds, his wet beard resting on his massive chest. "Bring Hakon to me!"

"Why?"

"Just do it, Steinar!" the glare of the captain's blue eyes angrily boring into his shipmates as he spoke.

The body of the young man, pale after prolonged exposure to the harsh elements, was laid out on the deck before his father. The warrior kneeled down before Hakon's body, and after speaking passionate words to the lifeless remains, drew his knife and cut the young man's fur robe exposing his upper body. He was preparing to thrust the blade into his son's chest when he yielded to his angst and collapsed onto the boy in sorrow.

"Let us help you, Sven," said Gunnar, who steadied his leader's hand. "Tell us what you wish done."

"Skin him as you would a bear from here to here," the father pointing with a wavering finger toward the boy's neck and then downward to his abdomen. "Remove his hide and use it to plug the damage to the hull."

The eyes of the men bulged wide with shock, but they were wise not to question the orders. They silently and quickly obeyed the words of their leader, the father of the young man they were skillfully defiling.

The detached piece of tough, pliant skin was removed from the torso of the corpse and then draped over the damage after splinters were hacked off the boards with an axe. The patch was backed by folded sailcloth to compensate for the curvature of the hull. Then a short length of oak planking was placed over the repair and braces wedged in place against the keel and gunwale to press the compliant materials flat to seal the hole.

After bailing the bilge of standing water and blood, the ship was finally able to remain afloat and maintain a heading. The remaining crew plied their oars as though their lives depended on it, which of course they did.

Enduring two more days and nights of gale force winds and temperatures that hovered slightly above freezing, the crew managed to make their way forty miles farther to the southwest. In the early morning hours of the third day, the air temperature dropped, sleet

JOHN MERLETTE

changed to snow, and the men were kept busy cracking and removing ice that was building up to a dangerous thickness on the prow. The weight was making it difficult to keep the vessel on a heading and threatened to swamp it in the turbulent sea.

The sleep-deprived seamen were frequently collapsing upon their oars from exhaustion when Longbeard spotted a familiar bay. With renewed purpose, the warriors rowed and reached the Somme River outlet. They continued up the estuary for nine miles until they arrived at a somewhat protected shoreline that was suitable to moor the ship. They then quickly set up camp on the deck. The exhausted men rigged what was left of the square sail to create an overhead shelter from the storm.

After a cold, damp night Longbeard awoke and then quickly checked the condition of the survivors.

“Arne has succumbed to the cold, Sven. What shall we do with his body?” The weather was causing every man’s breath to be visible as bursts of white mist.

“Leave him be, Gunnar. We will give him and Hakon proper burials when the weather breaks.”

“That is if any of us survive to do so,” uttered Bjorn, his voice a hoarse whisper.

“Ja, I have the shakes too,” croaked Steinar, his breathing changing to unnatural gasps from the effort it took to speak. “I fear I will not make it to see another sunrise.”

“We cannot start a fire as the smoke will bring our enemy to us as sure as wolves to fresh meat,” Sven warned, his eyes downcast despite his supreme effort not to acknowledge the hopelessness of their situation. “If we are discovered it will surely be the end of us all.”

After several moments of silence, the leader made another attempt to rally his men, “Gunnar, can you and Bjorn rouse the men who are able and gather bundles of those tall reeds on the shore? If we place the dead grass around us it will provide better shelter from the wind.”

“We will do as you ask. The sky looks like we’re in for more bad weather, of that I am certain.”

Just as the men predicted, before long the conditions deteriorated and they were once again beset by raging winds and sleet that continued to pelt them throughout the night and into the following day.

TINTON FALLS

Five days later, the dank camp was finally discovered by a band of local farmers who were out hunting for game. Steinar and another Viking had succumbed to their fevers leaving just Longbeard, Gunnar, Bjorn and five crewmen barely clinging to life.

Seeing that the warriors were close to death and of no threat, the farmers moved their prisoners to the nearest village.

Sven, deranged from his fever and barely lucid, begged his captors to tend to the other men, his own life offered up in sacrifice to save the rest. "I also give you my ship and all the weapons and tools aboard in return for your mercy," he beseeched, conveying his message using signs and the few words he knew of the local language.

"You are in no condition to offer terms, Northman," scoffed one of the farmers transporting the Viking warrior in a litter. Sven did not comprehend any of the bitter words uttered by his captors.

Once in the village, a curious crowd soon gathered around the gravely ill invaders who were carelessly deposited in the mud at the town square. Sven had lost consciousness again and his body was rolled onto his back by an onlooker to better observe his face.

"I have seen this Northman before," bellowed the eldest man of the village after elbowed his way past a tightly knit group of women and children. "I watched with my own eyes as this warrior slew my nephew...ran the poor fellow through with that wicked sword of his, he did."

"Thou weren't the only witness to the blood spilled by these savages, Abraham," another man seethed. "I lost family also."

"What shall we do with these murdering animals?" challenged a younger villager, the end of his wooden spade prodding Gunner's ribs. The pain caused the warrior to squirm slowly in the muck, his hacking cough jerking his body into a fetal position.

The awestruck villagers continued watching in silence, waiting for at least one of the prisoners to die.

As night approached and the cold drizzle continued to fall, the Vikings were moved into a horse stable and laid on straw. The change was more for the comfort of the guards assigned to watch over the gravely ill men than any concern regarding the fate of the enemy.

JOHN MERLETTE

That evening, the community leaders assembled to further discuss the prisoners. The sentiment of many was to execute the men immediately. This plan was agreed upon but, since it was already dark outside, the Viking warriors would be put to death the following day at noon in a public display.

The next morning, at daybreak, three of the villagers snuck out through the light fog to the abandoned longship to scavenge what they could from the vessel. They discovered there the remains of Hakon wrapped in sail cloth and several other bodies buried beneath bundles of marsh grass and reeds aboard the vessel. The scavengers reacted with revulsion at the gruesome evidence of what appeared to be brutality and cannibalism.

Unaware of the true circumstances surrounding Hakon's death and mutilation, the villagers secreted all the corpses through the fog to a soft bog where they buried the remains. Being highly superstitious, uneducated people, they feared the ghosts of the dead warriors would seek out their village and bring more misery and death to their own people. They vowed an oath of silence amongst themselves regarding what had been seen and done.

Not long after the three scavengers returned to the village, as preparations were being completed for the execution of the captors, one of the men confessed to the village elders, "I fear the spirit of the mutilated young man that we discovered will find and harm us all."

"This news is shocking. You did the right thing by letting us know," answered one of the leaders.

"I fear the spirits of the dead will seek us out if we somehow thwart their vengeance upon those wicked cannibals," remarked another.

"He's right," Abraham Robbe replied as he turned to address other elders of the village. "We might all die at the hands of what must surely be a most powerful spirit."

"I've heard tales of entire villages being wiped out in one night; their tongues severed and their bodies disemboweled."

"Aagh, we must not interfere, don't you agree, Phillip?"

Another town leader nodded his head in the affirmative.

TINTON FALLS

"So what shall we do?" asked one of the farmers who discovered the bodies.

"Nothing! We just keep the prisoners alive and wait for the spirits to have their way with them," Phillip lustily replied. It appeared to the others that their countryman was looking forward to having the ghosts from the netherworld capture and destroy the souls of the Viking prisoners. "I've heard too that after the spirits are done with their victims the bodies are often discovered the next morning with their eyes outside their skulls, their jaws ripped wide and their hair turned white as the winter snow."

Not only did the retribution never occur, but with time, the prisoners actually began to show signs of improvement. Five days after his entry into the village, Sven the Longbeard recovered from his unconsciousness and awoke to find a guard, a young farmer not more than sixteen years old, gazing into his blinking eyes from just an arm's length away. The Norseman's instincts girded his body to swiftly strike out at the enemy, but before he could attack, the sentry had Sven pinned beneath the tip of his spear and hollering out to others for help.

Soon the stable was filled with armed villagers, crude weapons at the ready. None of the prisoners were going anywhere what with the ropes that bound them hand and foot.

"Where am I?" Sven uttered hoarsely.

Not understanding the foreigner's words, the villagers shook their heads dismissively.

Longbeard took several minutes to recall what little he could of his capture; restoring his awareness of where he was and who he was among. Despite his suffering from fever and other aches, he was able to communicate successfully with his captors using his limited knowledge of various northern dialects that he and one of the village elders shared.

"My men and I are entirely at your mercy. You obviously have good reason to take our lives for the mistreatment of your people that was committed by me and my people in the past. But allow me to make amends by offering to share with you our vast knowledge of craftsmanship and other useful skills in return for your sparing our lives."

The simple offer made sense to the wise elders of the village. They long had envied the superior weaponry and tools of these strange

JOHN MERLETTE

people and now were being given a rare opportunity to covet the same for themselves. Dead, the Vikings were of no use to anybody.

Besides, the spirits of the dead might yet visit upon these savages, considered the elder, Abraham Robbe.

Before the villagers could respond to the Viking's offer, Sven suddenly grew weak from the effort it took to converse with his captors and collapsed again upon the bed of straw.

The Norsemen remained imprisoned throughout the winter months while their infirmities slowly healed. Sven used the time to improve his skills speaking the Germanic language of the villagers and striving to understand their cultural, religious and political practices. Keeping his promise, he and his fellow seafarers freely shared their bountiful knowledge and skills with the Franks. As the sharing improved, so did the town's treatment of the prisoners.

Terry Morgan interrupted his *Story Time* dream once again so as to review his recollection of historical facts from that period. He rummaged through the storehouse of memories residing within his brain from what he remembered of European history during his years at college. He recalled that the injection of the Norse culture into the Frankish community ultimately created the medieval organization of society known as the feudal system. The fictional Vikings in his dream relinquished some, but not all of their pagan traditions while accepting many practices of the Christian faith of the majority.

A year later, when it was evident that the prisoners were fully assimilated into the community, they were set free. The first thing the men did was to build a Viking longhouse at the edge of the settlement. It wasn't long, however, before the domesticated men had taken wives from the village and were producing children.

"I wish to return to the village of my birth to see my children again and to tell Ingrid about our brave son, Hakon."

"How will you return, Sven?" asked Gunnar.

"I must wait for a raiding party to arrive willing to take me back."

"What will you do in the meantime?" asked Bjorn after swallowing a sip of wine from a goblet made from a dried gourd.

TINTON FALLS

“What I do best. Working with wood is certainly better than chasing flocks of sheep and children around the village like you both seem to enjoy.”

“There is greater opportunity here amongst these people than back on the fjord,” said Gunnar, his jesting set aside for the moment. “Life is not as harsh and food more plentiful. I wish to stay here.”

“Judging from the shape of that woman you have been sharing a bed with, I must say you are enjoying life here very much,” quipped Bjorn, the ribbing of his fellow warrior earning him another hearty laugh from his friends.

Given the opportunity, Sven the Longbeard delved into his skills at woodworking in earnest. He started out by crafting simple furniture, but found the primitive tools he had available to work with inadequate. He fashioned new woodworking tools from metal salvaged from the ship. Thereafter the quality of his work far exceeded that of other craftsmen in surrounding communities. He constructed a shop and soon had eight apprentice carpenters working under his tutelage.

Sven loved the aroma of oak and he relished every opportunity to work with the hard wood. Late one afternoon, the Norseman and three of his young helpers from the village went into the forest to cut down an oak tree for the lumber. Everything went well until the tree started to fall. It crashed into another tree causing it to get hung up in the branches. The apprentices attempted to complete the felling of the tree by pushing on the side of the trunk, but it was too massive and wouldn’t budge.

The Norseman hollered out to the boys to stay clear of the leaning tree, “It is probably hung up on those branches that broke when it struck the other one. Stay back over there while I look to see what we need to do to cut it free.” The Viking was pointing to a tripod of poles, block and tackle and a cart to be used to hoist and transport segments of the felled tree back to the village.

Longbeard then got underneath the leaning oak and spotted the snag that appeared to be the cause of the problem. “I can see where just one broken limb is holding it up. I think I can break it loose with a long pole.”

“I’ve got one here master,” hollered a young boy who was advancing toward his teacher dragging one of the poles they brought with them.

JOHN MERLETTE

"Whoa, get back, boy! That tree could—"

C-r-a-a-a-c-k!

The weight of the massive oak tree suddenly snapped the one branch holding it up. The oak slowly rolled around the standing tree toward the side that was in line with the eager young helper who had stopped to gaze up."

"Oh, no!"

The lad was frozen with terror from the crashing sounds and sight of exploding branches above him. Sven dove beneath the falling tree and managed to shove the child safely out of the way at the last second.

"Master! Master!" hollered the two other young boys into the mass of violently swaying limbs as the tree came to rest amidst a cloud of dust and leaves. They quickly found their dazed friend and easily pulled the shaken boy out from beneath leaves and outermost branches.

From the main body of the tree, hidden below a canopy of foliage, came the guttural sounds of a man in obvious pain.

Wide-eyed with terror, the boys hopped around the fallen oak in confusion and worry. Their cries to their leader were not being answered. They were afraid to get too close for fear of what they might find. Suddenly, one of the boys turned and ran back toward the village. The other two followed closely behind.

Twenty minutes later, ten men including the master carpenter's friends, Gunnar and Bjorn, arrived at the scene and, after considerable effort, managed to extricate the mortally wounded Viking from beneath the tree.

"Sven, wake up! We have rescued you from your wooden prison."

"Nuuuuuhhh!" the victim was lying on his back on soft moss lolling his head slowly back-and-forth.

Ten minutes went by and Longbeard finally began to recover from his stupor. He spoke in a soft whisper, his slurred words giving evidence to the serious damage to his lungs. Despite his injuries, he maintained his dignity by making light of his predicament, "Why aren't you fellows out tending your sheep?"

"We figured you could use an extra hand felling this little tree," replied Bjorn, his fingertips delicately touching the jagged ends of broken ribs that were protruding from the chest of his leader.

TINTON FALLS

“I think my stupidity finally caught up with me,” the words ending in a dry cough that caused the man to grimace, flecks of blood visible on his dry lips.

“Try to rest,” said Gunnar as he helped lift the Norseman onto a large bearskin pelt that he brought with him to use as a litter. In preparing it for use, he folded and tied the sides of the rug over parallel log poles.

During the short hike back to the village, Sven came to the realization that his remaining days were few. He rubbed the palms of his hands slowly over the soft fur and thought about his wife, Ingrid, and his two remaining children whom he now knew he would never see again.

The legendary hero and famous craftsman didn't die until four days after the accident. The warrior's last thought was; *I hope Hakon is deemed worthy enough to join me in Valhalla.*

Being a leader of his clan and an accomplished warrior, Sven was entitled to a traditional Viking funeral. He and his tribesmen believed that upon a hero's death, Valkyries, the fearless daughters of Odin, would transport the souls of brave warriors such as himself to Valhalla, Odin's banquet hall in his spiritual kingdom. There the soul of Longbeard would serve Odin in his army and in return, be served mead by the beautiful Valkyries, including Brunhild, the most beautiful of Odin's daughters.

The surviving crewmen and woodworkers from the carpenter's guild spent several days building a small-scale replica of the Viking longship that brought them to the village. The original had been dismantled for the wood and other parts soon after their arrival. The new ship was outfitted with ornate woodcarvings in true Nordic tradition and to pay tribute to the master carpenter.

Sven's body was carefully laid out on an elevated platform amidships. The local villagers brought baskets of flowers and laid them inside the boat around the fallen warrior.

When the preparations were complete, Gunnar, Bjorn and the remaining Norsemen put their shoulders to the wood and pushed the funeral ship out from shore into the slowly moving current of the river. The five surviving members of the crew then ran quickly to an

JOHN MERLETTE

overlook and lit oil-soaked rags that were wrapped around the tips of arrows. The strings of their longbows were drawn and the flaming missiles arced across the twilight sky above the river. With echoing 'thunks', all five arrows struck their mark spilling their flaming packages into the hold of the vessel where tar covered boards quickly ignited. Within minutes, the entire funeral ship was ablaze, and as the villagers and Norsemen silently watched, many with tears in their eyes and down their cheeks, the remains of Sven the Longbeard disappeared beneath the swirling water.

One of the saddest villagers was a young lass less than eighteen years of age. Margaret Billiou was carrying the Viking warrior's legacy within her. The unborn child would one day grow up to be a well-respected carpenter following in the footsteps of his father. Sven's son would then have several sons of his own and five generations later, the village would be flourishing with Longbeard's progeny, fine craftsmen all.

The legend of the heroic Viking warriors, Sven and his son, Hakon, would circulate throughout Normandy and then the villages that lined the fjords of Norway for many centuries thereafter. His wife, Ingrid, would die before the saga reached her village, but Eirik and Astrid were alive to receive word of the fate of their beloved father and brother.

In 1066, an invasion fleet of Norman warriors under the command of William the Conqueror assembled in the Bay of the Somme at Saint-Valery-sur-Somme. Among the men preparing for battle were two of Longbeard's kin.

Five and a half centuries after that, in 1600 A.D., a descendent of the heroic warrior was forced to flee France rather than relinquish his Christian beliefs. The master carpenter who led his Huguenot family to safety from the country of their birth would someday include in his lineage a respected educator by the name of Terry Morgan.

While dwelling on the lavish scene he had created of the Viking funeral, a new scene coalesced within Morgan's fertile mind. He thought of his own funeral.

All humans eventually die so why not make it memorable?

TINTON FALLS

Morgan decided he would one day like to participate in a Viking funeral himself to honor his ancestors. He envisioned an alpine setting in northwest Montana with fir trees encircling a large, freshwater lake. Attending the ceremony would be the schoolteacher's friends, many of whom also had Norwegian or at least northern European bloodlines.

At the water's edge was the funeral barge, in this case an old cedar canoe in such bad repair that it would barely stay afloat. It was equipped with a box centered within with a handcrafted, wooden bowl secured to the stand. Within the bowl were the cremated remains of Terry Morgan.

There were other items placed inside the ceremonial canoe beside the container of ashes. His buddies from the *Club Room* had placed a dozen Barbie dolls, all dressed in traditional Scandinavian costumes.

"What's with the dolls?" someone was foolish enough to ask of the group's spokesman, Marty Shaw.

"We looked all over Flathead County and couldn't find us one dang adult virgin," the robust old man answered with a boisterous laugh. He then took another long drink from his wooden tankard of beer; creamy-white foam sticking to his walrus mustache.

"That's not quite right," jokingly argued another virtual *Club Room* member, Larry Stevens. "We just couldn't find any gal dumb enough to take us up on our offer and willingly sacrifice herself like a Viking hero's maiden."

"Hey, I tried to talk Candy into filling in as the designated virgin, but she had a lame excuse."

"I thought she couldn't make it here," remarked the third and last surviving member of the original group, a lawyer by the name of Mike Thomas. "Where is she?"

"She's over there with that brother of mine. Wade's the reason she's no longer a virgin."

"So, looks like we're stuck with these silly plastic dolls," lamented Thomas.

Larry Stevens then looked down into the canoe with an amused expression on his face, "Sorry, Terry, ol' buddy, but them's the breaks."

"Yeah, maybe next time, pal," added Marty Shaw.

JOHN MERLETTE

Morgan's friends did manage to obtain several bottles of Mack beer imported from Norway and a few old issues of *Field and Stream* which they slipped into the canoe, *just in case there was any truth to the old Viking legends.*

Terry imagined several family members and friends taking turns at a podium reading appropriate verses from the Bible and giving stirring testimonials. The gathering then sang sacred hymns of Christian music to put the affair into the proper context. A local priest and a minister who were both known to the honoree delivered passionate eulogies that reminded the guests of the import role religion plays in a person's life and death.

The guests then lined up to each toss a rosebud into the canoe which was propped up on a viewing stand. Several framed photographs of the former science teacher were placed on temporary display beside the container of ashes. Then six of the stronger men in attendance including the surviving members of the *Club Room*, lifted the flower-laden watercraft off its stand and carried it into the lake.

After lighting ten squat candles that were affixed to the bottom of the hull, symbolic of the *Ten Commandments*, the pallbearers then silently pushed the funeral barge toward the middle of the lake. The candlelight caused the canoe to acquire a mystical aura, like a large luminary, in the fading light of dusk.

By the time the canoe drifted out a hundred feet from shore, the sun was winking on the western horizon and an evening chill had descended over the crowd.

“Ready!”

The single word was hollered out by Morgan's best friend, Marty Shaw. Twenty archers, all recreational hunters outfitted in plastic, horned helmets, brightly-colored flannel shirts, Carhartt coveralls and rugged leather boots, lit the tips of their arrows from the flames of burning logs in a fire pit. They pulled back on their powerful compound bows and aimed the missiles out over the water. On a second signal from Shaw, they released the projectiles. The twenty flaming arrows soared in a brilliant arc, far beyond their target and entered the lake with hisses of steam.

One of the bowmen, the president of a local bow hunter's association, complained to the retired engineer, "I told you, Marty, we

TINTON FALLS

can only shoot in a straight line with this equipment. Trying to arc arrows out over the water is like trying to lob bullets from a hunting rifle onto a postage stamp laying on the ground."

"I saw you get a few shots fairly close to your target during practice this afternoon, Paul. Besides, flaming arrows arcing across the sky just looks more appropriate. If ancient Vikings could do it, why can't you? Watching those arrows soar like that reminds me of ICBMs rocketing toward our enemy. Damn, it gives me the piss-shivers just thinking about it."

"Well, my friend, maybe if we had us some longbows we could give you what you want. You should have explained your plan better."

"We haven't time for debate. Look, it's almost dark out and the crowd is getting cold and restless."

"So, what do you want us to do?"

"Alright, Paul, okay, tell you what. Have the other guys send another volley just like before and you and another guy aim straight at the target."

"Thank you, Marty." The legendary bow hunter was visibly relieved.

"Just be sure you don't knock over the bowl of ashes," the commander of the archery brigade said in a parting shot.

Undeterred, the bowmen nocked new arrows into their bows, set the tips afire and released another volley of missiles out toward the drifting canoe. This time they succeeded. Several of the arcing arrows actually entered the water within twenty feet of the target but two, the pair released by Paul and another straight shooter, struck inside the vessel and ignited the accelerant that had earlier been brushed onto the interior.

The audience watched in silent awe as the fire inside the canoe quickly spread and within seconds, the entire wood structure was ablaze with flames reaching fifteen feet into the air. The glow had only begun to ebb when water filled the canoe after the fire burnt through the thin cedar shell.

Less than thirty seconds later, the last of a centuries-long dynasty of Morgans disappeared beneath the tranquil surface of the alpine lake.

JOHN MERLETTE

"The flames are very symbolic," remarked the minister to several members of his congregation. "It's the energy, indeed the spirit of Terry Morgan, rising up to be welcomed by his Savior."

The attendees retreated to a nearby house to warm up after the affair was ended. There were many toasts of beer and whisky offered to honor the departed neo-Viking, his ashes now peacefully lying at the bottom of the lake, his soul in Heaven where it belonged.

The Time & Space Trilogy concludes with the third book, Tinton Falls. The comatose Terry Morgan is moved to a hospital in New Jersey where he continues to dream of Story Time adventures, this time with a new group of imaginary friends. Who or what is creating his grand fantasies and why? Will he ever recover from his endless sleep or will he spend the rest of his life trapped in an endless nightmare?

TINTON FALLS: Third Book of the 'Time and Space' Trilogy

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