

The Creation Seekers

BOOK TWO

THE VIKINGS OF LOCH MORAR

By

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“So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living thing with which the water teems and that moves about in it, according to their kinds . . .”

Genesis 1:21, NIV

In loving memory of my mother, Janice Burt, who taught me
the love of God, the love of nature, and the love of words.

Prologue

Over the wind-whipped ocean waves they had voyaged in sleek, high-prowed ships with fearsome figureheads. The seafarers had just pillaged a village on a peninsula jutting from the northeast corner of a dragon-shaped island. A celebration would have been in order, but the slaughter of unarmed holy men weighed heavily on the men's hearts.

Their chief prize was a splendid relic encrusted with gold and precious gems. The old monk had begged them not to take it, telling them of its significance and ancient origins. They listened to his tale of a foreign god of flesh and bone who healed the sick and raised the dead.

In the end, they let him go but slew his defenseless companions. Leaving behind little but ashes and death, they discussed the monk's captivating story amongst themselves as they sailed around the island, searching for a place to overwinter. They also needed to replenish their stores of food and water before setting out again in the spring.

On the isle's western shores, they entered a promising inlet and portaged to a long, freshwater lake dotted with islands and fringed by wooded hills and rugged mountains. Satisfied with the location, they sheltered in a shallow lakeside cave with a stream running through it.

The local natives were quick to defend their territory with clubs and spears, but their crude weapons were no match for the swords of the battle-hardened voyagers. After several one-sided skirmishes, the

lake ran red with native blood. The handful of those unfortunate souls who were captured alive as slaves appeared terrified of the water. When questioned, the captives babbled in their broken pidgin of a nameless horror that inhabited the lake, its islands and its shores.

The newcomers dismissed this fanciful tale as nothing more than primitive superstition. For their part, they found the deep, rambling lake to their liking. Salmon and sea trout abounded in its frigid waters, and red deer foraged for food in the lush forests above it.

Then on a frosty October morning, the seafarers discovered the truth in the local legends. Their chieftain, a bearded giant named Krossbyr, had taken a small boat alone out on the lake to catch fish when its dark waters boiled to a froth, and a nightmarish ship's figure-head emerged from the seething depths. Overwhelmed by waves, the boat capsized, and unable to swim, Chief Krossbyr perished.

His companions buried him with lavish honors and rich plunder in a natural grotto they had discovered beneath the lake. Leaving that ill-fated place, they sailed westward, never to return.

Chapter 1

Intruder

Bong! Bong! At the blaring alarm, Jonathan Oliver scanned the video monitors housed inside the pteranodon observatory's glassed-in control station. An intruder had activated one of the motion-sensitive security cameras mounted around and inside the pteranodons' habitat—but which one? Then Jon spotted the image of a shadowy figure skulking outside the entrance to the “bat cave,” as he affectionately called the creatures' cavernous lair.

Grabbing a tranquilizer gun, he raced out of the observatory and tore down Glen Eagles Road. Somebody was trying to steal his priceless pteranodon eggs again, and Jon was determined to stop the thief.

As GyroSensors' Vice President of Technical Operations, chasing down sticky-fingered intruders wasn't his job. However, GyroSensors' chief of security, Pat Griffith, had suddenly been called away with most of his team to track down reports of an injured pteranodon.

That left only Jon to intercept the egg-poacher.

GyroSensors' world-famous Pteranodon Observatory offered visitors the chance to observe those supposedly extinct, flying reptiles in their natural subterranean habitat. And Jonathan Oliver and his sister, Jennica, knew their care and feeding better than anyone else.

Ever since the world had learned pteranodons were living inside Lake Oswego's Iron Mountain, all manner of profiteers had set about

pilfering their eggs to sell for millions of dollars to salivating zoos and collectors. So far, nobody had succeeded, though one foolhardy fellow had evaded the layered security protecting the reptiles' underground sanctuary, only to face a bevy of irate female pteranodons.

Like Dr. Ingersoll five years earlier, the would-be burglar barely escaped with his life, even after security had rushed him to the hospital. When this failed break-in was later publicized in all its gory detail, most wannabe egg-thieves got cold feet.

On this early May morning, the Iron Mountain trail was awash with shifting shoals of white poplar fluff that filled the air with swirling clouds of snow-like cotton. Tramping down the trail, Jon at first saw no sign of the intruder. After climbing up to the pteranodon tunnel's narrow entrance, he then spotted a dark figure weaving furtively along the ridgeline above. *There he is.* All at once, a rumbling vibration shook the stone outcropping. A black, roiling dust cloud was rapidly rolling down the mountainside. *Landslide!*

With nowhere to run, Jon headed for the tunnel opening. He squeezed inside the passage just as the first rocks came bounding down the slope. With a roar, the landslide descended upon his hiding place. The ground trembled as boulders thudded along the unseen slope above him. Choking dust billowed through the entry. Fearing the roof would collapse on him, Jon fled deeper into the tunnel.

The roof held, though the light did not. Even after the dust had settled and Jon had stopped sneezing, he still saw only blackness around him unrelieved by any slivers or pinpricks of light.

Using his cell phone's flashlight function, he lit his way back to the entrance but found it plugged with rocks and dirt. Having nothing else to dig with, he attacked the blockage with his hands. After an hour, he managed to clear an opening large enough to wriggle through.

Outside, the landscape had completely changed. The landslide had choked the Iron Mountain trail for a distance of fifty or sixty yards on either side, obliterating it. More debris lay heaped on the rock outcropping, crushing the hardy oak trees that had stood there.

All thoughts of the egg-thief forgotten, Jon considered his options. If he tried hiking down to the ruined trail, he risked setting off another landslide and being swept down the steep mountainside. The upslope route carried similar risks, but at least he would be going up and not down—and he'd find plenty of trees and bushes to use as handholds. Also, it was just a short hike to the houses perched at the top.

Crawling and slipping on loose stones and dirt, Jon was making slow progress when he came to a six-foot rock wall at the back of a shallow alcove in the hillside. Scrambling up to the place, he rested for a moment with his back to the wall. A warm spring sun blazed into the protected nook, drying the sweat that had soaked Jon's shirt.

Why hadn't he seen this feature before? The answer struck him like a thunderbolt. *The landslide had exposed the wall and alcove.* They had been hidden on the hillside all along, buried under old debris.

Standing to his full height, he steadied himself against the stone slab, which at first appeared smooth and featureless. Then he noticed some markings marring its face. He assumed they were random

scratches left by the landslide's falling rocks, but caked-on dirt had nearly obscured them, suggesting the marks weren't recently made.

Using his knife, he scraped away the accumulated grime, revealing a series of angular lines that looked something like this:



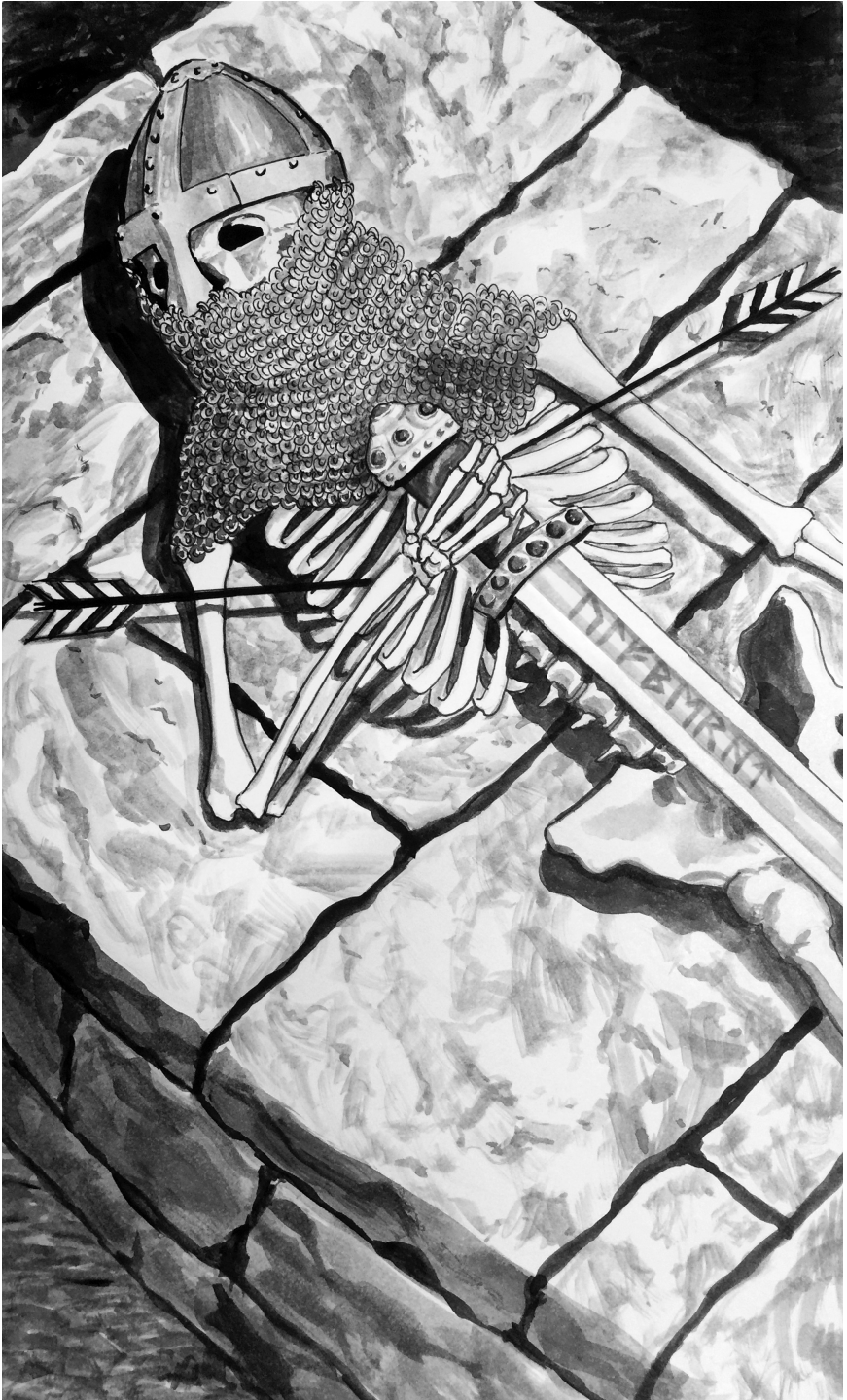
Jon squinted at the mysterious symbols. Who could have chiseled these rough, unpainted carvings into the rock—and why? They didn't resemble any North American petroglyphs he'd seen in old photos, nor even the Maya glyphs depicted in his history textbook. Could they be Greek lettering? But few native Greeks lived in the area.

After photographing the unusual designs with his cell phone, he was about to resume his hike up the mountainside when he felt a breath of cold, clammy air fanning his face. Examining the wall more closely, he discovered a vertical crack running straight down the right side. Cool, dank air was eddying out of it.

He slid his fingers into the gap and pulled. The slab swiveled outward, grating as it moved. *This isn't a wall*, he thought. *It's a door!*

Squeezing through the narrow opening, he found himself in a gloomy, musty-smelling cavern. Directly in front of him, an arrow-skewered skeleton lay in repose upon a leveled platform of basalt blocks and slabs. The skull still bore a conical metal helmet with a nose-guard and chain-mail skirt. The warrior's bony fingers gripped a gleaming sword whose ornate silver pommel was set with blood-red gems. The corpse's clothing had long since moldered away to dust.

The Vikings of Loch Morar



Jon had just finished photographing the skeleton when rocks rattled outside and the door slammed shut with an echoing *BOOM*. *Somebody's trapped me in here on purpose!* Jon realized with a surge of panic. *If I can't force the door open again, I'll end up looking like this fellow here—dry as dust and deader than dead.*

Pressing his shoulder against the rock slab, he pushed with all his might. The wall-door wouldn't budge. He pounded its unyielding surface with his fists, but all in vain. The stone refused to yield.

"Help! Help!" he screamed, but no one answered.

Jon sank to his knees and prayed, *Lord, please help me to find a way out of this crypt. I don't want to die in here. Nobody knows where I am, so they won't know where to look—but You know I'm here.*

He peered back toward the skeleton, half-expecting it to glow in the suffocating darkness. A deafening silence filled the tomb.

After reactivating his cell-phone's flashlight, he scoured the stone door for a release or catch or lever. He found only a sunken handhold near the edge for pulling the door closed—and a few more faint chicken scratches in the smooth rock face: **⚡ < R J T I T X > F R.**

Jon took a flash photo of these markings also. The symbols appeared to have been hastily etched into the stone—but by whom?

Crunch. Looking down, Jon found the answer right at his feet. Another helmeted skeleton lay curled up beside the door. Jon had just stepped on its brittle finger-bones, which were holding a long-handled knife. It was probably the very instrument used to scrawl those cryptic characters in the rock as a farewell message of some sort.