

# FAR SIDE OF THE SEA

BOOK ONE.



REBECCA BURNWORTH

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# CHAPTER 1

## Finn

*Somewhere within the boundaries of medieval Scandinavia  
(modern-day Norway), AD 807*

Finn had heard the stories—whispered tales of a great serpent coiling through the farthest depths of the sea, and just beyond the beast was the icy land of the giants.

These tales came from the Vikings, fierce and certain in their knowledge of the world beyond the waves, but Finn’s mother dismissed them all. Whenever she spoke of their journey across the seas, her eyes grew distant and her voice soft. “There are no monsters, Finn . . . Just a vastness so great it became a monster. At each moment I thought we would rise on a great wave and plummet over the edge of the earth.”

Finn did not know if there was an edge of the world or if there were giants and sea serpents. He only knew that ships vanished on the high seas each year—and since he would soon set sail in the same longship that had taken him from his homeland as a baby, he should be terrified. Strangely, though, he felt at peace.

Perched on a rock under his mother’s favorite wych elm, he

watched the men haul their massive longship towards the sea. Its immense mast rose into the soft blue sky, and its hull would soon be lined with wooden shields painted a variety of colors. The boat's silhouette shadowed the shoreline, where children giggled and wives fussed over their hardworking men. Everyone was preparing for the launch in their own way.

Finn stared across the fjord, which shone like molten gold under the rising sun. The boat slid into the water from the shore, ripples of liquid yellow erupting around its bow.

Having done the majority of the preparation the night before, the men had little left to do, and Finn knew it would soon be time to go.

A gentle breeze carried with it the salty scent of the ocean, awakening something within Finn: hope. All of him was infused with a deep desire to see a world that, as a Viking slave boy, he had only heard of in whispers and stories.

*Freedom*, his mind whispered. A thrill of excitement rippled through him, but it was tinged with wariness.

He did not fear the ocean. Nor did he fear new lands or where the ocean fell into the stars. The only thing Finn feared was never seeing his mother again.

"Perfect place to watch your last sunrise," his mother said as she slid under the wych elm's purple blossoms, several flowers catching in her hair. She sat next to him on their rock. "You'll be leaving soon."

"I know," Finn whispered. He looked at her, covered in petals and smiling brighter than the glistening fjord. "Má," was all he could say.

"I am happy for you." His mother patted his hand. "I have a present." She reached into her cloth belt, and from within she

unfurled a strip of rolled-up leather. Handing it to him, she whispered, “Hurry! Open it before Stigand comes looking for you.”

Not needing much encouragement, Finn unrolled the leather and laid it flat on the rock. Letters formed into words before him on the parchment—words Finn couldn’t read.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Information.” Her brown eyes glowed like wheat in autumn as she spoke. “It is how you will find your father, Fergal . . .” She lingered on the word, as if the echo of her husband’s name disturbed her thoughts. “You’ll need to find someone to read it for you, of course, but where you’re going, reading is far more common than here.” She traced her fingers along the letters. “This is how you’ll find our home.”

“We don’t even know where Stigand plans to raid this year.”

“No matter where you go, people will know our green island, Éire. Find our homeland, and this will help you find your father.” She retrieved the strip of leather parchment, rolled it back up, and slipped it discreetly into Finn’s belt. “Whatever you do, *do not* let Stigand see it. His reading is not strong, but he knows enough. It could lead him directly to our family.”

“What if I lose it?” Finn asked, unsure whether his belt would hold it in place.

His mother shook her head. “You mustn’t lose it!” she whispered fiercely. “But . . . if it is lost, then your only hope is to search for Éire and get help along the way. Find any monastery and ask for Lambay. It is an island off the east coast. If you give our name to the monks there, they should be able to lead you to your father.” Smiling, she slid her hand behind the nape of his neck and pulled him close, their

foreheads touching. “You belong in our home, with your father, your brother, your sister. You do not belong here.” She sighed, her words heavy as she whispered. “When you get the chance, run. Run, and don’t look back.”

“I’ll come back for you,” Finn promised.

“You will do no such thing.” His mother pulled away. “My prayers will be answered if this ship returns without you on it.” She hugged him tightly. “You will be free. That is all I’ve ever prayed for.”

A voice like thunder rolled from beyond the wych elm blossoms. They both fell still and silent, not a word passing between them, as Stigand, the Viking chief, tore a path through the flowers.

Petals fluttered like butterflies around him, and branches broke against his leather armor, snagging in his braids as he stepped onto their rock. He spoke in Norse, each syllable grinding like gravel under a giant’s foot before rolling elegantly into the next. “I heard your muttering,” he rumbled. “I do not like whispered secrets, Anna.” His arms crossed over his chest as he peered down at them. “Lítill, say your farewells.”

Anna bristled and stood. Even though she was nearly two heads shorter than the tremendous man, she crossed her arms and spoke firmly. “Stigand, my son’s name is Finn, not Lítill.”

Chuckling, Stigand shook his head and smacked Finn on the back, knocking so much air out of him that he started to cough. “To my men, he is Lítill, Anna. For he is small as a pebble and surrounded by mountains.”

His mother shook her head and leaned forward to kiss Finn on the cheek. As she did, she whispered in his ear, “Your name is Finn, for you are a foreigner in this land. Do not forget it.”

“Enough,” Stigand barked, pulling Finn away and twisting him towards the shore. “A boy of thirteen must join my raids, even if he is a thrall. Go.” Finn stumbled through the branches and onto a dirt pathway, stealing one last look over his shoulder to see his mother.

She lifted one hand and smiled. “May God be with you, wherever He leads.” She spoke the words in their native tongue before switching to Norse and addressing Stigand. “Keep him safe, Stigand. I will not teach your children to write if you mistreat my son.”

“I will care for him as I do all from my village,” he promised. “Fjallby is home. Lítill belongs to that home.” His voice rose as he spread his arms wide. “And I will return with a treasure trove of books!”

Finn’s mother crossed her arms, managing to smile at the boisterous man. “I would hope so if I must teach your wildlings.”

Roaring with laughter, Stigand caught up to Finn and grasped his shoulder. “Your mother is made of fire, boy.”

They set off down the path, and Finn’s heart grew heavier with each step, but Stigand’s hand was firm as he led him away.

What had been a small crowd of people had turned into a horde as the longship launch approached. Men were hugging their families goodbye as Finn pushed wordlessly through. The crowd was thick, slowing his progress, until, all of a sudden, he was lifted into the air and carried over the mass of people.

Looking down, he smiled at Bjorn, a Viking as big as any bear, if not bigger. The man raised Finn high over his head as he pushed through the crowd, reaching the boat far sooner than Finn would have alone. Placing a barren shield, free of any color, onto the hull, he stepped aboard, the vessel shifting under his weight. With each

foot forward, the ship swayed until they reached the stern, where Bjorn sat Finn down on a bench and settled in next to him.

“Thank you,” Finn muttered.

Bjorn only grunted in response, and pulling out a chunk of bread, he plucked off a piece and handed it to Finn.

“Thanks,” Finn said again, and the man nodded. Then, pulling his shoulders in tight, Bjorn clutched his axe and leaned back. Within seconds, he was snoring.

Finn suppressed a giggle as the peaceful snores joined the chaos of the morning. It was not long until the rest of the Vikings, dressed in thick armor with weapons strapped to their belts, took their positions at the oars and waited for their chief’s command.

Stigand embraced his wife and loudly, for all the villagers to hear, proclaimed, “To a better future!” After one last kiss goodbye, he stepped aboard the longship.

Standing at the bow of the ship, the chief raised a fist in the air and yelled, “To the sea!”

The Vikings roared in response, and with a great heave, the oars ground into the gravel beneath the water’s surface. The ship sliced through the water with impressive speed, leaving only the smallest of ripples in its wake. Aside from when he was a baby, Finn had never been on a boat before, and the shifting of the water beneath him felt strange, as if unseen hands caressed the ship, propelling it forward.

A valley of waters, growing turquoise as the sun climbed higher, spread out around them. At the water’s end, mountain peaks rose so high they disappeared into the heavens. With the warm weather, their snowy tips were melting. Streams trickled down the mountain-sides and transformed into thin waterfalls, which plummeted over

the steep cliffs and evaporated into billowing mists at the mountains' feet.

Finn turned to look at the Viking settlement one last time—the only home he had ever known. Children ran squealing along the shoreline, waving frantically to their fathers. Their happy voices echoed across the waters, but Finn ignored them. His eyes darted along the shoreline searching for the one person he wanted to see.

He found her under their wych elm, embraced by purple blossoms that danced in the breeze, which tossed her hair in front of her face. She moved a hand to gather her charcoal locks in place, but a lone strand swept in front of her mouth. The only thing visible was her eyes, which glowed with hope. Finn clung to that hope, holding it close to his heart as he silently promised, *I will come back for you, Máthair. Even if I am free, I will not leave you.*

A hand squeezed his shoulder, and Stigand leaned forward to whisper in Finn's ear, "You will see her soon, boy. No one knows the monstrous sea as well as I. Stick with me, and you'll be safe."

*I do not fear the sea,* Finn thought as he peered out to where the great mountains formed a gateway into the ocean. *I only fear us never being free.*

# FAR SIDE SEA

OF THE

-BOOK ONE-

In the Middle Ages, when Viking raids relentlessly threaten the people of the British Isles, two boys living on opposite sides of a formidable sea have their courage and strength put to the test. Traveling on a Viking longboat, Finn seeks a chance to escape his captors and find the beloved father he was separated from as a child. Malachy, an Irish boy raised by monks in a remote cliffside monastery, wishes simply to defend the only life he knows. As the boys' lives are inescapably connected, fighting from opposite sides of the battle, they must each carve a path to discover where they belong within the Lord's plan.

  
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# FAR SIDE OF THE SEA

BOOK TWO.

REBECCA BURNWORTH



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# CHAPTER 1

## Malachy

*Autumn, somewhere off the coast of southern Éire (modern-day Ireland), AD 807*

The first breath of winter whispered over the waters, a warning of the months to come. Every so often the whisper turned into a roar as a sudden angry gust thrashed against the longship's sails. Tendrils of white erupted over the top of each wave as a wall of night, thicker than a morning fog, chased them in the distance.

An icy burst sliced into the longship, and it jolted, sending Malachy reeling into the mast with his bucket of water, which sloshed all over the back of a nearby Viking.

"Watch it, boy!" the man snapped at him.

After living among the Vikings for months, Malachy understood the man word for word.

"I'm sorry," he muttered, as he rushed to offer the man some water. The man snatched the spoon and scooped water into his mouth before shooing Malachy away with a grunt.

Unfazed, Malachy moved up and down the ship's center, providing water, food, and encouragement. All around him the

Vikings breathed heavily, their shoulders quivering as they heaved their oars rhythmically up and down, propelling the ship through the angry waves.

Stigand roared from the bow, “Just past the skyline, men. Show this storm what the North is made of!”

The Viking chief’s golden braids writhed like living beings under the wind’s touch, and his hand, thick as stone, rested on the monstrous prow. Intricate carvings in the wood formed the menacing head of a dragon, and the creature sliced mercilessly through the ocean waves as if spurred on by its chief’s touch.

“There it is!” Stigand pointed to a distant strip of black land emerging on the frothy skyline. “Put your backs into it! We’re nearly there!”

Malachy dropped the bucket and hurried to the back of the ship to gather his things.

At the stern, he found Sven—Stigand’s son—who scooted over and patted the open space between him and the sleeping Bjorn. The gentle giant snored without a care, heedless of the oncoming storm, his head lolling back and forth with the waves, in perfect peace despite the chaos around him.

Sven grinned at Malachy as he sat between them. “I don’t think Bjorn has opened his eyes once today.” He nudged Malachy’s ribs with an elbow. “It’s like the story of Jesus sleeping during a storm.”

“He can’t calm the storm like Jesus did, though,” Malachy quipped. The two of them laughed, but their laughter was cut short by Brother Tómas, who sat on the other side of Bjorn.

“If the Lord can calm the waters, He can guide us safely through the storm. If the Lord can calm the waters, He can guide us safely

through the storm. If the Lord can calm the waters . . .” The monk shivered violently as he muttered the same sentence over and over again. Malachy knew the shivers were not caused by the icy winds alone.

Sven nodded to the monk. “He’s been like this since the storm appeared behind us.”

A nearby Viking, face red from exertion and impatience, barked harshly at the monk, “Quiet, you!”

Brother Tómas shriveled into himself at the man’s command.

Bjorn snorted awake, and upon taking in the Vikings’ desperate efforts at the oars, he twisted to look at the sea behind them, his eyes settling upon the storm. With a gentle hand, he grasped Brother Tómas’s arm, quieting him with his touch before offering the monk a small piece of crusty bread from a small pouch. Brother Tómas took it and fell silent.

As always, Bjorn handed a small piece to Malachy and another to Sven.

“Thank you,” the boys said together.

With numb fingers, Malachy lifted his piece of bread to eat. It was damp with salty mist.

“Will they be raiding today, Brother?” Brother Tómas asked Malachy, his gaze not leaving the distant shoreline.

“I don’t know,” Malachy said, his tone short and words sharp, earning a raised brow from Bjorn. Sven lowered his piece of bread and averted his eyes, while Bjorn rested a hand on Malachy’s shoulder and squeezed. Malachy knew exactly what the gesture meant.

*Forgive him.*

But Malachy did not know how to forgive him. Night after night, the memory of his father falling limply to the ground in jagged beams of moonlight played in Malachy's mind. His sister's anguished screams split Malachy's dreams. So many sleepless nights. So many unnecessary tragedies. All because of one man.

Malachy took a deep breath as he focused on the mist that coated his cheeks, the icy winds that chilled him, the yelling Vikings as they rowed. He whispered Brother Eamon's gentle promise.

"Wherever the Lord leads."

The words steadied his thoughts, and Bjorn squeezed his shoulder, the man's brow pinched in worry as the wind flung his dark braids across his face.

"I'm fine," Malachy said.

The ship jolted to a sudden stop, and the two turned their focus to the beach as the hull ground against the sand.

Vikings rose from their benches, gathered their weapons, and leapt into the tumultuous waters. Some pulled the ship further inland, while others ran up the reed-filled embankment towards what Malachy assumed was another settlement.

"Looks like it will be another raid," Sven said, and Brother Tómas nodded stiffly as he watched the Viking horde tear up the embankment and across the windswept plain.

The four of them—Bjorn, Malachy, Sven, and Brother Tómas—gathered their bags and followed behind the Vikings. Malachy attempted to jump into the water, but Bjorn snatched him, lifting Malachy into his arms and, with a grunt, setting him onto the dry beach before turning to do the same for Sven.

Wet sand wrapped around Malachy's bare feet, freezing them

further as a wall of shadows stretched over the rising sun and a sudden night fell upon them. Shrieking winds slammed into them, and they all ran up the embankment onto a grassy plain. All around them the wind swirled the long grass into a frenzied sea, waves of green lashing at Malachy's ankles.

In the center of the grassy plain sat a small rath, wrapping around three small huts. Only a few animals wandered within, and unlike other raids, when the Vikings approached, no people fled in fear. In fact, there was no one to be seen anywhere. It was only then that Malachy saw something that stilled the raging world around him.

Around the outside of the rath, three large sticks were plunged into the ground, and at the tops of each were strips of torn black cloth—makeshift banners that snapped in the wind as blackened warnings.

*This place is marked*, Malachy thought, and his insides turned to stone.

But heedless of the flags' message, the Vikings ran over the mound of earth and headed straight for the three huts at its center.

The wind snatched at the cloths, their movements growing more violent, as if desperate to warn the strangers. The sight amplified Malachy's fears, and shivers crept down his spine. It was as if his fingertips were being struck by hundreds of tiny needles.

He dropped his bag and ran toward the Vikings, waving his arms frantically as he yelled.

"Stop! Stigand! Stop! You can't go in there!"

Not needing any further explanation, Bjorn rushed past Malachy, plowing through the grass as he waved his arms in an effort to catch the men's attention. He ran far faster than Malachy

could ever hope to, but without a voice, he had no chance of stopping the Vikings.

“What’s wrong?” Sven screamed as they charged through the grass together, but Malachy did not answer him.

Desperately, he yelled at the Vikings to stop, but his words were drowned out by the wailing winds.

A mournful howl echoed in the distance as the Vikings stepped into the first hut, and Bjorn stopped sprinting as he looked back at Malachy, a question in his eyes.

“What is it?” Sven asked, his eyes wide with panic as he watched the men enter one hut after another.

Through painful gasps, Malachy yelled over the storm. “Sickness . . . Sickness is here.”

# FAR SIDE OF THE SEA

BOOK TWO

Two brothers must step into lives they never imagined. Finn travels to the lake monastery of Inishmore, and as his father remains unconscious, his sister keeps disappearing, and rumors of a Viking informant stir unease among the monks, he wrestles with his newfound freedom.

Meanwhile, Malachy sails as a Viking thrall with the traitor monk, Brother Tómas, and each day, it seems a new and greater danger arises.

Separated by the sea but bound by family, both boys must learn what it means to love broken people and choose faith even when the odds seem impossible.