Chapter 20

Heading for the Nord Ultima

There's the frog who turns into a prince.
And the Sun King's little queen, who turns into a tree frog from the South.
Each to their own.

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So picture me, the girl from the South: I love the sun, the sea and the dolce vita. I was conceived on the Île du Corail, Coral Island, hence my name. I live in *Palmeria*, on the *Presqu'île du Sel*, facing the Îles d'Or and the Croco, between land and turquoise sea, salt marshes and pink flamingos.

Round here, we're laid-back right down to our flip-flops.

We follow the sun, we hop from island to island depending on the time of day.

In the morning, we go for a dip off the Croco, the Île du Levant, bikes only, with its mica beaches. The Provençal markets have a Southern accent, and smell of lavender and olive oil.

At noon, we sail to the Île du Zénith, a fish reserve in a turquoise aquarium. I've soaked in so much seawater my skin tastes of iodine. You can tell I'm coming from the whiff of monoï that walks in ahead of me.

In the afternoon, the umbrella pines sing along with the cicadas, the palm trees dance in the wind, and the sails throw a party in every colour.

In the evening, the Île du Couchant, home to a rare few nudists in love with freedom, at its most expressive. When the pinky-orange sky is reflected in the sea, everything goes up in flames.

In short, the beach is my home, the sand my deckchair, the sea my horizon. So along I come with my warmth and my summer dresses, and the Viking looks me straight in the eye and says:

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Him — Put a fleece on. Come with me, we're off to the Far North! You'll see, it's magical!

What I picture:
a giant ice tray at -30 °C.
Breakfast: frozen dried fish.
Main activity: waiting outside for three hours, bum stuck in the ice,
for the Northern Lights to kindly show their face.

Gulp... Put like that, it does chill the blood a bit.

Me — I'd love to see that breathtaking show, really.

I'm up for the trip, but not for the survival test.
Sorry to be blunt, but just the thought of my backside stuck to the ice at -30 °C, and my bum clenches up on the spot.

I'd rather wait for the sunset at 28 °C! That's magical too, and much *safer* for my little bum, nice and warm in the sand.
Otherwise, I was thinking more of a holiday in Santorini...
(Bora Bora's too far, he'll say no.)

The Viking doesn't know it, but I have magic visions, like his queen the *Völva*. I know exactly what will happen if I go with him, I can see the whole film as if I were there.

The King of the Blizzard carries off the Little Queen of the Sun. Road trip from *Haldorholm* to the *Nord Ultima*.

As we leave the *Soumerland*, I shed a little tear for my worried parents, left behind in the Southern sun.

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My parents — Darling, you'll ring us every day with a full report. We'll switch the GPS to satellite tracking to follow your route second by second!

Him — It's 2500 km as the crow flies!

Me — No problem... Or, here's another idea: we go to the Maldives on an electric scooter.

Him — 3300 km by road one way, 6600 km there and back!

Me — That alone knocks me out cold. It's further than driving across the USA on Route 66!

Him — But I've got a *teardrop* trailer I built myself, hitched on the back. Much more authentic! It'll be like sleeping in an igloo.

Me — I'd love to come... but without heating we'll freeze!

Him — There's no better electric blanket than Big Dog!

Me — Niet! We know you Vikings! You run mainly on anger!

Him — No, on alcohol, actually! My father has his aquavit stash. I've got my beers...

Me — As long as my survival doesn't depend on how tight you did the screws. I'm authentically frozen-blooded, put the air con on 28 °C.

Come on! The GPS says forty hours, so 7 days, one way!

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Me — But we're on holiday, not on a 4×4 rally! What's the point of driving if we can't stop to rest, sightsee, meet the locals? No, that won't do at all! We need to triple the journey time there and back, at least.

Him — Fine, have it your way!

He gets his map out and starts selling me his road trip.

Him — Look, first we cross the *Soumerland*. Easy, it's flat as a pancake.

Then we leave the Kingdom of the *Dauntless Sea Walls*

for the Lands of the Salt Mists.

There we reach the Kingdom of the Furniture Gods. We drive from bridge to bridge, island to island.

Me — I can just see it! I'd love to stop, but we have to keep going.

So we eat smoked herring out of a tin. We have a wee stop by the roadside.

And we drink lukewarm coffee in the sea spray.

Him — We head up to the Great Kingdom of the Calm Woods.

That's where, on the way back, I'll build my log cabin.

Me — Here, I love everything.

The forests of *Norborea* breathe, and the lakes of *Luminör* meditate.

People talk less and listen to nature more.

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Him — But we haven't got time, we have to push on to the Empire of the Roaring Fjords. We'll sleep at my parents', the Viking king and queen. They'll give you their specialities to taste, you'll love it!

Me — Where do they live?

Him — Here, in the Fortress of Fjordgard, right at the top of the black cliffs above the ocean.

It's beautiful, you'll see! Up there it's nothing but wind and salt, angry waterfalls and gods asleep in the ice.

Me — Isn't that where the baby birds throw themselves off the cliffs to learn to fly?

Him — Yes, it's brilliant! Vikings use the same technique: we invented wingsuit flying and base jumping! It's our quickest way to get supplies. We land right on our longships and go fishing. Want a go?

Me — Shut up, or my heart will stop!

Luckily he changes the subject.

Him — Look west, that'll be our next adventure! The island of the Kingdom of Frozen Fires. Where the earth's breath smokes, where the vulkaviks spit out molten lava.

Me — Apparently the elves have civil rights and ride about on tiny horses. Is that true?

Him — We'll go and check together next time. We haven't got time.

Look, here's Aurorelia, where the lights dance in the sky! We're sleeping in an ice hotel!

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Me — What? But I'm already at the end of my tether! Are you trying to finish me off?

Him — Exactly, it keeps you fresh! You'll see, it's beautiful!

We're not far now, it's the last stop before the *Nord Ultima*!

Look, here we are, at the Kingdom at the End of the Sun, on the Throne of the Great Cold, where the road ends and the sea and sky melt into one.

Me — Are you telling me we've slogged 3600 km to reach the end of a road that leads nowhere? You're having me on!

Him — But we'll see gorgeous reindeer, caribou, elk.

I'm going to hunt a moose and stick its antlers on my 4×4.

We'll eat the meat, we'll be totally self-sufficient for the whole trip!

Me — You mean we'll drive around all day with a corpse on the roof!

No way! I'd rather have fresh fish, I'll buy some from the fly fishermen, there are lakes galore, rivers everywhere.

Him — Fine, that way everyone's happy!

Me — So now all we have to do is turn round?

Him — Well, no, while we're here, I'm dying to cross the sea of ice and discover the Gros Noland!

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Me — THE GROS NOLAND!!! But we didn't come in the Blizzard!

And I can't build an igloo, or drive on skis. I haven't even got a snowmobile licence. In fact, I can't even ski!

Let's save that for another road trip, all right? Let's not have all the fun at once! Come on, let's turn round and enjoy the way back!

Him — Fine, we'll see when we get there, but all right! Off we go again!

Let's go and build my log cabin in the forest!

I can't wait to saw the trunks into logs, it's going to be awesome!

Me — I'm not convinced, *not-at-all-at-all*!

(I have visions, but I can't tell him.)

Him — Is it being alone in the middle of nowhere, with no one around, that puts you off?

Me — No, I like meditating, reading, writing... I won't get bored!

Him — Is it the log cabin?

Me — No, I love treehouses... quite the opposite.

But I can hear it from here, with the noise of the trees crashing down.

You'll set off a migration. The *Norborea*ns will ban you for life!

Him — That's totally mad!

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Me — Not at all! We'll be thrown out and banished for life. It's not funny!

And on top of that, there's no signal! My parents ring me every night.

They'll send Interpol after me, to check I'm all right.

I've got an idea! Why not build your wooden house on stilts in Sardinia or Bora Bora? I'll help you, and at night we'll sleep under the stars in my hammock.

We'll gaze at the starry sky, like Robinson Crusoe!

Him — No, there won't be any problem!

Come into the forest with me, you'll see, it's peaceful.

There's no one for 500 kilometres around.

Me — Well, that's exactly the problem.

I'm not risking an extreme-survival holiday anymore, only to end up as frozen fish in your Nordic Bushtucker Trial. And above all, I don't fancy being thrown out at -30 °C.

I can see very clearly who I'm going to become: *the shield-maiden*.

That warrior who treks 500 km on foot, battling 3 metres of powder snow to find sled dogs, has very little chance of meeting any in a 25,000,000-hectare playground! So before I commit, I have that famous conversation:

Me — And what if something happens to me?

Him — You'll survive. You're not some delicate little thing. You're with The Viking!

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Me — Yes, but the Queen of the Blizzard is just a little tree frog from the South.

The only survival gear I've packed is a mask and a snorkel.

Handy for fishing through ice holes: certain death.

Just in case, I write a little posthumous letter to my darling parents:

— Mum, Dad, I love you. I'm leaving you a keepsake of me, Iceland frozen-salmon edition.

So I said:

Me — Whoa there! Stop!

I was picturing more of a holiday on a Mediterranean island, or in the Caribbean, or even on the *Île du Croco*, anything goes!

A little restaurant with my feet in the water, white sheets flapping in the wind, fish grilled in the sun, a swim in the turquoise sea. I survive better at 28 °C by the sea, toes in the sand.

So if you want to do your there-and-back rally to the *Nord Ultima*, to build your log cabin in the middle of the tundra, go ahead, with your longship buddy.

Me, I'll wait for you in my hammock watching the hummingbirds, on the veranda of my cabin on stilts, facing the sea, with a gorgeous sunset! Bliss!

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