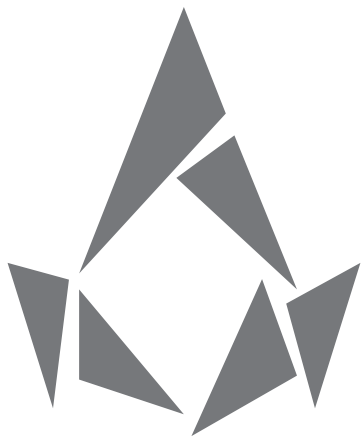


— AN ASSASSIN'S CREED<sup>®</sup> SERIES —

# LAST DESCENDANTS

FATE OF THE GODS



BY  
MATTHEW J. KIRBY

SCHOLASTIC INC.

In bringing this trilogy to a close, I feel grateful for the continued support of this project by an amazing team of fellow storytellers and bookmakers. At Scholastic, Michael Petranek, Samantha Schutz, Debra Dorfman, Charisse Meloto, Monica Palenzuela, Lynn Smith, Jane Ashley, Ed Masessa, and Rick DeMonico have all worked tirelessly to bring readers the best story possible. At Ubisoft, Aymar Azaïzia, Anouk Bachman, Richard Farrese, Caroline Lamache, and Andrew Heitz continue to make me feel at home in the world of Assassin's Creed. Finally, my family and friends, especially Jaime, remain at my side, cheering me on as I begin each new project, and each new adventure. Thank you, all.

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## CHAPTER ONE



Sean had grown accustomed to violence, but he didn't yet enjoy it the way his Viking ancestor did. Styrbjörn gloried in the sights, sounds, and smells of battle: the feel of a shield shattering under a blow from his bearded axe, Randgríð; the cleaving of limbs by his Ingelrii sword; the cackle of ravens flocking over corpses.

In fact, Styrbjörn privately felt glad that the Danish king, Harald Bluetooth, had rejected the terms of peace. It meant the battle could begin at last. Even though Sean did not look forward to the violence of the memory, he could admit to himself that he did enjoy the strength and power he felt in his ancestor's body.

Styrbjörn's fleet waited off the coast of Jutland, at Aros, as Harald's longships rowed out to meet him. The Dane-king's

fortress would never hold against a land assault by Styrbjörn's force of Jomsvikings, and he no doubt believed his larger fleet could easily win an engagement at sea. It was also possible that Harald suspected that Gyrid, his wife—and Styrbjörn's sister—would commit some treachery unless she was kept far from the battle. Regardless of the reason, Styrbjörn smiled at the oncoming ships.

Sean could taste salt in the air as cormorants and pelicans dove into the sunlit waters around him. The journey to this moment had taken him weeks in the *Animus*, traversing years of Styrbjörn's life, seeking the moment when his ancestor would finally gain possession of Harald Bluetooth's dagger, the third prong of the separated Trident of Eden. But to find its modern resting place, Sean still had to learn what Styrbjörn had done with it before his death.

*The simulation is holding very well, Isaiah said in Sean's ear. It appears another battle is imminent. Are you ready?*

"I'm ready," Sean said.

Isaiah had removed Sean from the Aerie facility ten days ago, after it was compromised. Sean still hadn't heard from Grace or David or Natalya, or even learned what happened to them. Isaiah said they had gone rogue, and that Victoria was helping them, possibly even working with the Assassin Brotherhood. It was up to Sean to find the Piece of Eden before it fell into the wrong hands.

*Your fortitude continues to impress me, Isaiah said.*

"Thank you, sir."

*The world owes you a debt of gratitude.*

Sean smiled within the current of Styrbjörn's mind. "I'm glad I can help."

*Let's get to it.*

Sean returned his attention to the simulation, focusing on the flexing of the ship's timbers beneath his feet, and the shouts rolling toward Styrbjörn across the water from Harald's advancing ships. He turned toward his own men, his dreaded Jomsvikings. At the heart of his fleet, he'd ordered two dozen ships lashed together into a floating fortress from which his men could cast spears and arrows. His other ships would engage the enemy in close battle, ramming, grappling, and boarding. Styrbjörn planned to find Harald's ship so that he might engage the Danish king in single combat and end the battle quickly. It wouldn't help Styrbjörn's cause for his men to kill off the very warriors he hoped to command.

"I count at least two hundred ships," Palnatoke said beside him, hardened and gray. In the years since Styrbjörn had defeated the chieftain and assumed leadership of the Jomsvikings, the two men had arrived at a grudging respect for each other. "No, more than two hundred ships. Are you sure about this?"

"I am. But if it comforts you, last night several of the men made an offering to Thor. One claimed he was shown a vision in which I reached the coast of my home country with Harald Bluetooth tied to the mast of my ship like a dog." Styrbjörn removed his outer fur, then pulled his axe, Randgríð, free of his belt. "Harald's fleet will be mine."

Palnatoke grunted. "I wonder if the Bluetooth has made offerings to his White Christ."

Styrbjörn gestured across the water toward the oncoming ships. "And if he has, does that worry you?"

"No," Palnatoke said. "The Christ is not a god of war."

Styrbjörn scoffed. "Then what good is he?"

“To which god do you make offerings?”

Styrbjörn looked down at his axe. “I need no god.”

The beating of Harald Bluetooth’s drums grew louder, the rhythm by which his long ships heaved across the waves, and Sean let himself be swept up in the current of Styrbjörn’s fury. He raised his axe and roared a battle cry with his ancestor’s voice, and the Jomsvikings echoed his terrifying eagerness for battle. He gave the order, and his fleet charged ahead, their dragon prows clawing through the waves, sea spray salting Styrbjörn’s lips.

The distance between his ships and Harald’s collapsed quickly, until the enemy came within range. Styrbjörn waited until the precise moment, and then he gave the order. The forward ships dove to the side, cutting across the waves, opening a corridor to the fortress at the center of his fleet, and the archers and spearmen there loosed their missiles. The surprise barrage fell hard upon Harald’s fleet, causing havoc, breaking up the rhythm of his oarsmen and the direction of his ships. Some of his vessels collided with one another, rocking and tossing men over.

Styrbjörn held his satisfaction in check and gave the second command. His forward ships surged back into the breach without breaking stride and rammed into the disorganized enemy at full speed. Harald’s vessels, still struggling to recover from the rain of spears and arrows, took the impact broadside, splintering shields and capsizing a few ships. Within moments, the sea roiled with the violence of a battle storm, the cries of drowning men, and breaking wood.

Amid the chaos, Styrbjörn searched the horizon for Harald’s banner, and when he found it, he ordered his vanguard into action. Two ships to either side of his formed a wedge and broke

the enemy line, allowing his oarsmen to muscle his ship deep into Harald's ranks. Styrbjörn had to reach the king quickly, seizing the remaining moments of confusion before the Danes regrouped and found a Swedish ship at the heart of their fleet.

The Jomsvikings behind Styrbjörn plowed the waves silently, without chanting or drums, their red vision honed. Styrbjörn gripped his axe with one hand and leaned against his ship's dragon figurehead with the other, bracing himself. He drew nearer to Harald's ship, but before he reached it, shouts of alarm flew among the Danes. Then arrows and spears fell on Styrbjörn's ship. Their iron teeth sank into wood and flesh, and though some of his oarsmen were hit, none cried out, and the rest of them kept rowing. Styrbjörn stepped backward, away from the prow, readying himself.

He saw Harald now.

Then Harald saw him.

But a Danish vessel leapt between them, protecting the king and blocking the way.

Unable to stop, Styrbjörn's ship rammed into the new enemy, and the eruption of wood and waves tossed Styrbjörn into the sea. Sean tasted briny seawater that burned his lungs. He choked and coughed, the water around him black and cold.

The simulation went blurry.

*Steady, now, Isaiah said. You're fine. We know your ancestor didn't drown.*

Right. Sean dove back into the memory, letting the waves overtake him, and clawed with Styrbjörn toward the surface. His armor and weapons dragged at him, pulling him down, but he managed to breach the waves and hook the rail of a passing ship with Randgríð's fang. He then used his axe to heave himself

out of the sea onto the deck of the ship, where he rolled to his feet, heavy with water.

Harald's ship still lay within reach, but Styrbjörn would have to cross the decks of two Danish vessels to reach him. He had lost his shield in the water, but had his axe and pulled his dagger from its sheath just as the first two Danes rushed him.

He ducked and parried, throwing them both off-balance, and managed to stab one of them in the back as he stumbled past. In a different battle, on a different day, he would have stayed to finish them, but he could not waste the time. He rushed down the deck of the ship, shouldering men aside, blocking and dodging their blows, letting Randgríð taste their blood when he could.

As he reached the stern, he slashed the man at the rudder with his knife and vaulted over several yards of ocean to the deck of the next ship. The Danes there were ready for him, and a mass of them blocked his path. Beyond them, Harald's vessel had already started to retreat. Styrbjörn sheathed his weapons. Then he wrenched a heavy oar from its spur and, holding it across his chest, he charged at his enemies, using the oar as a bull uses its horns.

He smashed into their line, dug his heels into the deck, and drove the enemy backward. Some went overboard, and some fell and were trampled by Styrbjörn and their own kinsmen. Those that managed to stay on their feet tried to strike at him with their weapons, but he kept them in retreat and none of their blows landed. His back and arms and legs strained, the heat of his muscles turning the seawater in his clothing to steam, until he'd pressed the enemy line all the way to the bow.

Within the power of Styrbjörn's memory, Sean found



the feat he was experiencing almost unbelievable, and if he'd read about it he would have dismissed it as an exaggerated legend. But the strength he experienced in his ancestor's body was very real.

Styrbjörn now stood at the bow and realized Harald's ship had already rowed too far away to make the leap. But he couldn't let the king escape. This battle had to end with Harald's defeat at Styrbjörn's hand, and no other way.

Styrbjörn tossed the oar aside, and before any of the Danes he had plowed under could rouse themselves, he dove into the sea. The cold snapped at him, and the waves shoved him, and the depths reached for him, but he surged through the water toward Harald's vessel, and soon arrows and spears split the water around him. Before he had reached the king's ship, an arrow bit deep into the back of his thigh.

Sean and Styrbjörn let out a roar of pain, but the Viking kept swimming. Moments later, he pulled Randgríð free and used her once again to pull himself onto the ship.

He landed hard on the deck, exhausted, soaked, and bleeding, but still he towered over the shocked Danes. They gaped as Styrbjörn wrenched the arrow from his leg and tossed it into the sea, but after the shock of that moment had passed, two of them attacked. Styrbjörn felled them both before he charged at Harald.

"You are neither man nor king!" he roared.

The intent of those words could not be mistaken. Harald, shorter than Styrbjörn by two hands, flinched and faltered, giving ground before combat had even begun, and in that moment Styrbjörn knew he had won. But Harald had to know it, too. The Danes had to know it.

Styrbjörn did not wait for his opponent to recover his footing before attacking. The first blow from Randgríð cracked Harald's shield, and the second shattered it. Harald raised his sword in a meager posture of defense, but his arm had no strength, and fear filled his eyes.

Styrbjörn laughed so that it filled the ship. "Do you yield?"

"I yield!" Harald said. His sword clanged against the deck. "I yield to you, Bjorn, son of Olof."

Styrbjörn nodded. "Then give the signal before any more of your Danes die."

Harald stared up at him for a moment before nodding to one of his men, who raised a large horn, and then the order of surrender sounded across the waves, picked up, and carried to the edge of the fleet. Several minutes later, the clamor of battle had ceased, Dane and Jomsviking ships rising and falling with the waves.

"It didn't have to come to this," Harald said.

Styrbjörn let out a heavy sigh. "You would prefer I go on raiding your villages?"

"We could have reached an agreement."

"I tried to reach an agreement with you. My sister, your wife, tried to persuade you—"

"You asked for too much, Styrbjörn."

"But now I have everything," he said.

"You want my crown? Is that it?"

"My sister already has your crown. I came for your fleet."

"To attack your uncle? You would take my men to Svealand?"

"Yes," Styrbjörn said. "And you will come with them."

Sean felt the rush of his ancestor's victory, in spite of the pain in his thigh, but he also noticed the dagger at Harald

Bluetooth's belt. It had an odd curve to it, and it obviously wasn't an ordinary blade, but Harald clearly had no idea what it was, or how to use it. That dagger was the entire reason for this simulation, and at some point, it would come into Styrbjörn's possession. A part of Sean wanted to simply reach out and grab the Piece of Eden now, but doing so would desynchronize him from the memory and throw him violently out of the Animus. Instead, he had to wait, as patiently as he could, and let the memory unfold just as it had happened. There wasn't anything Sean could do to change the past.

But the past could change the present. And the future.