

# Fact vs. Fiction in *The Last Shadow Warrior*: Vikings, Beowulf, and Norse Mythology

Written by Sam Subity

*Warning: Spoilers ahead! It is recommended that you read *The Last Shadow Warrior* prior to exploring this guide to the history behind it to avoid ruining any of the surprises.*

## Chapter 1

- Ivar the Boneless was an actual Viking leader who lived in the 800s A.D. The origin of his nickname is not entirely clear but is thought to refer to some physical disability, though not in all likelihood that he was in fact lacking bones. Presumably the Ivar here is indeed boneless since he's...made of wood.
- Viking weaponry: The book opens with Abby practicing with a battle ax, which is the weapon most commonly associated with Vikings today. However, Vikings employed a wide range of weapons including spears, swords, and knives. The short sword or knife that she selects from her wall to investigate the noise upstairs is what is known as a "seax" commonly used by Vikings for close hand-to-hand battle.



- In this chapter you see the term **Grendel**, which is the first reference to the epic poem *Beowulf*, a story set in Scandinavia over a thousand years ago which inspired *The Last Shadow Warrior*. It's never entirely clear in the original story what the Grendel is—a lizard, demon, or some sort of swamp creature—but it's clear that he's not someone you want to meet in a dark kitchen!
- Near the end of the chapter, a rune or Norse letter called Algiz burns an angry red on Abby's necklace. Runes were commonly used in writing as early as the first century A.D. and were said to have been given to humans by the god Odin and have magical properties. The oldest runic alphabet is known as the Elder Futhark, where "Futhark" is a combination of the sounds the first six letters of that alphabet make, sort of like the way we sometimes refer to our modern alphabet as the "ABCs." I borrowed the runes used in this book largely from the Elder Futhark, though taking some liberties.



## Chapter 2

- You'll notice throughout the book that I use several different names and adjectives for the Vikings. For example, you'll see me refer to "Scandinavia," which is a region in northern Europe comprised of the countries Denmark, Norway, and Sweden from which many of the Vikings came, and at times more broadly Finland, Greenland and Iceland where they migrated in later years. Or sometimes I use the word "Norse" which is a more modern term generally applied as a noun to both the people from these regions and as an adjective for their language and customs. But the term "Viking" itself is of uncertain origin and is thought by some scholars to derive from the Scandinavian term "vikingr," or "pirate," though in its original usage it was merely a verb for going on an ocean voyage. Whatever the case may be, the Vikings were not a unified group and had many different names given to them by the people they raided, who were likely too busy running for their lives to care what these giants from the north were called!

## Chapter 3

- Observant readers might pick up on the fact that Abby's new school Vale Hall sounds a lot like **Valhalla**, which was the Viking equivalent of heaven where fallen warriors waited thousands of years for Ragnarok when things would really heat up. As in, the world ending in a huge, fiery battle. Sort of like waiting for summer vacation, eh? But...without the world ending part.
- Okay, so I may have taken liberties with Norse mythology in creating the elite **Aesir** (pronounced "ACE-ear") for my book. The actual Aesir were one of two groups of gods from Norse mythology of which the most well-known Norse gods like Odin and Thor were a part. I have appropriated them into a class of superhumans more like Captain America than the version of Thor from the Marvel universe.

## Chapter 4

- You've probably noticed by the point that Abby asks her dad if he's going to "Hit him with the Oxford Shakespeare" that I've included a lot of references to famous works from British Literature. You may be thinking: "But didn't you say *Beowulf* takes place in Scandinavia?" To which, I would answer: "Well, yeah. But..." The story of *Beowulf* was passed down orally for generations among Scandinavian people until it was first set down in writing as one of the oldest, if not the oldest, work of Old English, which is a precursor to the English that we speak today. In case you're wondering, it's way older than your parents.

## Chapter 5

- The silver braided ring that Bryn shows Abby to clue her in that she's a Viking in this chapter is fairly representative of Viking age jewelry which often featured twisting shapes like knots or snakes. However, metals like silver or gold were usually only owned by wealthier Vikings, while the poor tended to make jewelry from bronze, pewter, or even animal bones. In this way, jewelry was used a way to show off your status in the Viking world, similar to today.

- The phrase “Red sky at morning, sailors take warning” is an actual ancient rhyme used by seafaring people in the time before modern technology. Which makes it fairly appropriate here since the Vikings were legendary for their seafaring skills.

## Chapter 7

- Only Norse scholars and authors who spend most of their time writing about Vikings will likely pick up on the fact that the call letters **KNUT** that I used for the radio station where Grimsby works roughly spell the name of a famous Viking king. Cnut the Great was the first Viking to successfully conquer England, which he ruled for nearly two decades along with Denmark, Norway, and part of Sweden.
- **Lodbrok** actually does translate roughly to “fuzzy pants” or “shaggy breeches” and was the name of the legendary Viking hero Ragnar Lodbrok. The nickname comes from the story of Ragnar using a suit of fur clothing to protect himself from a venomous serpent. Does this mean that Chase is somehow connected to the Vikings? Keep reading to find out!
- The Viking sefarer **Bjarni Herjolfsson** is indeed reputed to have discovered North America around 500 years before Christopher Columbus arrived. (The “Bellyflop” part of the name is entirely my invention.) The story goes that he was trying to find Greenland, got lost in a storm, and probably sighted northern Canada before realizing he was way off course and turned around without exploring the new land. Why? Perhaps because Tim Horton’s wasn’t yet serving their famous Double Double coffee, but we may never know. He eventually sold his ship to Leif Eriksson who retraced his voyage and established a small colony in North America which eventually failed due to clashes with the natives already living there.

## Chapter 8

- For Vale’s cafeteria, I attempted to re-create the great feasting halls or “mead-halls” of the Viking age. These were huge structures where warriors would often gather to eat, drink, and tell stories of victories of battle and brave heroes. Much of the action in the opening scenes of *Beowulf* occurs in just such a hall called Heorot which is described as “a hall and a mansion, a mightier house for their mead-drinking than the children of men had ever known.” Within the last decade, archaeologists have discovered the remains of a massive structure which is believed to have been the original Heorot. Does this mean the story of Beowulf may have been true or based on real events??
- The **lutefisk** that Abby has for lunch in this chapter is a real Scandinavian seafood dish made from whitefish that is soaked and boiled until it takes on a gelatinous texture. Or in other words, fish Jell-O. And yes, it’s known to be very smelly. Alas, I could not make a scratch-and-sniff version of the photo here, but that may be for the best.



## Chapter 9

- The part in this chapter about Vikings still being active and working behind the scenes on the world stage? Yeah. I just made that up. Sorry. There are a lot of reasons why the Viking raids stopped. One was that the Scandinavian people from whom the Viking raiders came changed. Even during the Viking age, many of them were farmers and engaged in legitimate trade with surrounding countries rather than raids. Then as Christianity spread through northern Europe, the former “heathens” from the north became less inclined to, well, bloody raids and mayhem. Also, the world around them changed. Kingdoms were forming and centralizing their power, which brought with it armies that could fight off Viking raiders. These are just a few contributing factors, but there are lots of others—hmmm...a fascinating topic for class research?!
- Grimsby advises Abby to drop the word **thrall** in favor of “warrior.” In reality, thralls were the slaves or serfs of Viking society, though I have used the term here to refer to a sort of pre-adult status instead.
- The **svefnthorn** is a mythical object that appears in a number of Norse legends, though their descriptions of this “sleep thorn” and its effects tend to differ. This is probably in large part due to the fact that stories at this time were passed down orally rather than written down, so they tended to change when retold dozens or hundreds of times. Kind of like a huge game of telephone across many centuries. In any case, it is fictional but was still a lot of fun to use in my story!

## Chapter 10

- Remember when I mentioned the Viking heaven called Valhalla above? **Valkyries** were the fictional winged maidens who were said to take you there when you died. But they didn’t just take anyone. To earn a passage to Valhalla, you had to die nobly in battle. In some stories, Valkyries even got to decide who would live or die in battle. So in other words, don’t get on Gwynn’s bad side!
- The name **Asgard** for the Vikings’ secret underground base is another term I borrowed from Norse mythology. *That* Asgard is the home of the gods where Odin sits on his throne observing all that happens across the nine worlds. According to Norse mythology, it is fated to be destroyed in the final battle called Ragnarok.
- All the **advanced technology** that Abby encounters in Asgard is of course not original to the Vikings, though the Vikings were responsible for many innovations in their time. Did you know that this society of what people often think of as unkempt barbarians are credited for inventing the modern hair comb? And while their most significant contribution was perhaps the creation of lighter but sturdier ships capable of withstanding long sea voyages, Vikings also made advances in literature, language, and politics that shape how we think about those disciplines today.

- Fun fact: One of the Viking influences mentioned above was the addition of “-by” to the end of place names. Like **Grimsby**, which is an actual town on the English coast originally settled by Vikings.

- **Trelleborg** is an actual Viking Age fortress that you can visit today in Denmark. As described in the book, it was built in a ring shape and was probably constructed around 980 A.D. as part of a series of similar structures built at the same time, though we don’t know exactly why they were made.



- One of the stops on our tour of Asgard in this chapter is **the forge** where all their cool weapons are made. The blacksmith was a key part of Viking society as the source of not just weapons but also nails for building ships and houses, ploughs for farming, and iron pots for cooking. It’s hot and dirty working with fire and superheated metals all day. But with their role being so critical to daily life, you might even say that when establishing a new Viking colony, the blacksmith was a guy (or girl) you didn’t want to “forge-t”.
- It’s hard to avoid mentions of food with Grimsby around, so we see more examples of Viking culinary influences during their tour of Asgard. One of these is **haggis** which is sheep’s or calf’s intestines boiled in a bag that traditionally is the animal’s stomach. Though it is now most often associated with Scotland, some food historians believe it originally was a Scandinavian dish introduced to Scotland in the Viking Age. Sadly, as far as we know, Vikings probably did not invent the Slurpee.

## Chapter 11

- Although they’re a very real influence on Abby’s life, the Grey Council is an entirely fictional Viking governing body. In actuality, the Vikings were typically ruled by chieftains or kings, or later a meeting of all free men of a country or region called a **Thing** or “Althing” where disputes were resolved or political decisions made—one of the earliest examples of democracy. In fact, the Icelandic Althing founded in 930 A.D. is the oldest continuous legislature in the world!
- At the beginning of the chapter, Abby worries about what punishment may be awaiting her, and for good reason! **Viking punishments** were legendary for their, at times, harshness and even brutality. At best you might get away with a fine or exile from your community. For example, a famous Viking you may have heard of named Erik the Red had a bad habit of killing his neighbors over petty disputes and therefore was banished from an entire country. Twice. But sometimes Viking discipline included losing a hand or other appendage, or more gruesome sentences that I won’t get into here!

- As I mentioned earlier, I borrowed the Aesir name from a group of gods from Norse mythology, but the existence of an order of **secret guardians** called Aesir including Beowulf who protected the human race from Grendels is entirely my creation.
- The name of **Unferth** who we meet in this chapter is borrowed from Unferth from the Beowulf legend, a man who questioned Beowulf's abilities, much like my Unferth does with Abby.

## Chapter 12

- The **aebleskivers** that Grimsby has trouble pronouncing but no problem eating here are real Danish treats that are essentially as he describes: Balls of dough like doughnut holes that are traditionally sprinkled with powdered sugar and served with raspberry or strawberry jam. Readers with a fondness for baking can find many aebleskiver recipes online such as this one: <https://www.allrecipes.com/recipe/11037/aebleskiver/>.
- Fun fact: Fans of the Minnesota Vikings football team might recognize the dog's name **Skol** as the team's famous battle cry. The term originated from the Swedish word "skal" which translates literally as "bowl" and was used as a toast equivalent to "cheers."

## Chapter 13

- While Valkyries may have taken departed souls to Viking heaven, there are no **dark Valkyries** in Norse mythology. I just thought it would be fun to expand the Valkyrie mythology to a new type that steals the souls of the living like Granny V. There are actually many legends of Valkyries interacting with the living and even sometimes marrying them, such as the most famous Valkyrie, Brynhild.

## Chapter 14

- You may recall me mentioning **runes** as a Norse alphabet way back in chapter 1 in relation to the rune that burned an angry red on Abby's necklace. In addition to signifying sounds, their runes often carried a symbolic meaning as well, though the meanings varied widely by region and often changed over time. In this chapter we encounter two new runes. I have ascribed the rune **Laguz** with the meaning of "water" or "renewal," but it could also mean many other things such as "chaos" depending on who you asked and when. Similarly, **Eihwaz** is identified with "the tree of life" but was also a symbol for strength. Do you think these other meanings could have also related to Abby's quest?

## Chapter 16

- It's no coincidence that Vale Hall's field house is nicknamed "the **longhouse**." As is mentioned in the chapter, the real Viking longhouses from a thousand years ago were a sort of heart of the

community and family life, which gives you an idea about how important knattleikr is to the Vale community! The original longhouses could be almost as long as a football field and house a large extended family, multiple families, and sometimes their animals too under one roof. They were constructed of wood or clay, with wooden or turf roofs and no windows due to the cold climate.

- In this chapter I delve into a bit more Norse mythology with the story of **Loki's murder of his brother, Balder**. The legends vary about whether Loki directly killed him, or engineered the murder by tricking his brother Hod, but the outcome is the same. The connection to Beowulf is entirely my own, but I couldn't pass up the strong thematic connection of an outcast enraged by jealousy that is central to both stories. And thus I made Loki the father of the race of Grendels, thereby connecting Beowulf back to an even more ancient struggle of good versus evil.
- At the end of the chapter, Doc gives Abby jersey number 27 which is powerful as a multiple of nine. Like other mythologies, Norse mythology ascribes power or importance to certain **numbers**. Nine is important because there are said to be nine worlds, including Midgard where humans live. In Norse stories, you will often see the number nine or its multiples, such as Odin's 18 charms.

## Chapter 17

- **Knattleikr**, or literally "ball game," was a real sport played by the Vikings. Unfortunately there are no surviving records of the rules. Or the equipment. Or even how it was played exactly. Which leaves a lot of room for authors to create their own modernized version! What we do know is that it was played with sticks that probably had nets of some sort on one end and a small ball called a "knottr," so it's assumed to be something like modern lacrosse or rugby. Today there are actual leagues where modern knattleikr enthusiasts attempt to recreate the game as played over a thousand years ago.

## Chapter 18

- In Norse mythology, an enormous tree named **Yggdrasil** stands at the center of the universe. Its roots and branches connect the nine worlds including Midgard where humans live and Asgard where the Aesir gods live. I adapted this concept to create my all-knowing Iggy, although the real world tree is not known to talk, sing, or eat tacos for that matter. But nonetheless it was a tree that the gods visited for wisdom, so it seemed like a fitting place for Abby to seek help on her own quest.

## Chapter 19

- Okay, so time to dispel a common misconception about Vikings. You know those pointy **horned helmets** you always see them wearing in movies and TV shows? Those were probably not really used by Viking warriors. Just imagine charging into battle with giant horns on your head. Aside from being awkwardly heavy and getting in the way in the middle of a fight, they'd probably also

be great handles for someone who wanted to grab your helmet off right before bopping you on the head! Our modern-day image of Vikings largely comes from an opera from the 1800s based on Norse mythology in which the Vikings wore, you guessed it—horned helmets. And ever since, they have been depicted in popular media that way.

## Chapter 20

- Here we get to see Abby join in an actual **Viking raid!** I wanted to make this depiction exciting but still as historically accurate as possible. Hopefully you can feel some of the terror of the villagers as they wake up to a ship on the horizon filled with heavily armed Vikings. For hundreds of years, the Vikings' quick ships allowed them to perfect the "hit and run" style of raid where they would swoop in and quickly take whatever plunder they could and then make an escape before any sort of armed resistance was organized.
- Because weapons were expensive, the defenders of these coastal communities might be seen going into **battle** using basic household items and farming implements like pitchforks and wagon wheels, just like I show in this chapter. But they didn't stand much chance against a Viking shield wall which the raiders deploy here to break through the defenders' battle line.

## Chapter 24

- Today we generally only use the word "weird" as an adjective to mean "odd" or "strange." But in Viking times, "weird" was more commonly understood to refer to destiny or fate. So it makes sense that the "Well of Urðr" (or "**Well of Weird**") from Norse mythology was a mystical pool whose waters were used to help determine what fate had in store. I borrowed that concept for this chapter both to show Abby's attempt to see what her future had in store and a symbolic putting aside of her childhood fears and fully embracing her quest. But then things don't turn out exactly as she expects. Weird, huh?

## Chapter 26

- We get glimpses here that the Grendel may not be everything he appears to be on the surface. But what was his true form? A creature like the one from *Swamp Thing*? A person like you or me? The Beowulf legend doesn't really give us a detailed description. Maybe that's because, as I've suggested, he descends from Loki who was the ultimate master of disguise, able to fluidly change form from human to horse to fish and more. In fact, **shapeshifting** is fairly common in Norse mythology with many gods and giants frequently disguising their true selves. Which may make one wonder: Who else at Vale Hall may be hiding their true selves?



## **For further reading:**

### **Norse Mythology**

#### *Younger readers*

- Alexander, H. H. (2018). *A Child's Introduction to Norse Mythology: Odin, Thor, Loki, and Other Viking Gods, Goddesses, Giants, and Monsters*. New York: Hachette Books.
- d'Aulaire, E. P., & d'Aulaire, I. (2005). *D'Aulaires' Book of Norse Myths*. New York: The New York Review of Books.

#### *More advanced readers*

- Gaiman, Neil (2017). *Norse Mythology*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

### **Beowulf Translations**

#### *Younger readers*

- Rumford, James (2007). *Beowulf: A Hero's Tale Retold*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

#### *More advanced readers*

- Morpurgo, Michael (2006). *Beowulf*. Boston: Candlewick Press.

### **Vikings**

- Romero, Libby (2018). *National Geographic Readers: Vikings (L2)*. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Partners.
- Higgins, Nadia (2015). *National Geographic Kids Everything Vikings: All the Incredible Facts and Fierce Fun You Can Plunder*. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Kids.
- Margeson, Susan (2009). *Viking* (DK Eyewitness Books). New York: DK Publishing.