**The Reliquary**

*A William Hammer Horror Crime Novel*

by Jógvan Isaksen

English translation by Marita Thomsen

*Truth is what your contemporaries*

*let you get away with.*

Richard Rorty (1931-2007)

In homage to Donald Wandrei

*The Web of Easter Island*

**THE BOOK OF REVELATION**

And I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four beasts saying in a voice like thunder, ‘Come!’

And I saw, and behold a white horse: and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown was given unto him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer.

And when he had opened the second seal, I heard the second beast say, ‘Come!’

And there went out another horse that was red: and power was given to him that sat thereon to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another: and there was given unto him a great sword.

And when he had opened the third seal, I heard the third beast say, ‘Come!’ And I beheld, and lo a black horse; and he that sat on him had a pair of balances in his hand.

And I heard a voice in the midst of the four beasts say, ‘A measure of wheat for a penny, and three measures of barley for a penny; and see thou hurt not the oil and the wine!’

And when he had opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth beast say, ‘Come!’

And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth.

**THE CHEST IN**

**THE SCORCHED RUIN**

**MARCH 1952**

They’d been working on the foundations for a few days when he came across the chest. The others were off on their coffee break, so nobody heard him calling. To his great good fortune, he thought to himself only a heartbeat later.

The old ware and weighhouses, Vektarbúðin and Sjóbúðin, burned down in 1950, and for the most part remained how the fire had left them. The country was more or less bankrupt, so there was no money to reconstruct the buildings, which had stood here since the 1673 fire. Much of the crew was ill at ease working on this site, they knew it had once been a churchyard and that not every skeleton had been relocated.

He had been poking around in a corner with his shovel when it hit something that gave off a metallic clank. His first thought was of some charred remains from the fire, but as he removed more soil something pale green came to light. He scraped carefully with his spade, and a little oblong chest slowly emerged.

Immediately it struck him that this might be his lucky day. The chest certainly hadn’t belonged to any ordinary thrall. He grew flustered and his hands shook. He suffered a moment of bewilderment, not knowing which path to take. Only one thing was certain, not a soul would be laying their grubby paws on *his* chest.

In the distance he could hear the others returning from the coffee break, and he hurried to push the soil back on top and trample it flat. His workmates didn’t notice a thing, still, the rest of the day he made sure that nobody else went to work on that corner. Come evening he was the last man out, and the one who locked the gate in the fence around the worksite. Whoever locked up usually kept the key until the following morning. And that would be the case today too.

It was nearing midnight when he opened the door to the ruins out on the history-laden Tinganes headland. It was a cold March night, and a gleaming full moon reflected the chill casting both the headland and bay in a lifeless light.

He moved slowly along the dirt floor in the darkness, and it wasn’t until his hands recognised the big stones in the walls on both sides, that he took two steps back and flicked on his torch. He was standing right up against the corner and made very sure that as little light as possible would escape through the window openings out to the bay.

He positioned the torch so it lit up the trampled soil and fetched the spade. Shortly after the chest was out in the open. Though it was no longer than one hand and no wider than half a hand, its weight surprised him. At first he thought it had caught on something, but no. Its sheer heft made it unwieldy, as if it were completely solid and fashioned from some material foreign to him. It was not made of metal, nor was it stone, but something on the border between the two.

He studied his newfound pale green treasure more closely, and in its middle he could make out an etched round shape with lines. Not unlike a cart wheel. But it was difficult to focus on the symbol, because the chest sort of flickered.

He tried both to look and feel for a joint that would let him open the chest. There was none. It seemed solid, so not a chest at all, but what was it then? He held it up and felt it vibrating, and he thought he could hear a murmur in a foreign tongue. He tried to tell himself that it was a fabrication of his mind and that his senses were playing tricks on him. All the while a darkness of the soul oppressed him, and lightened when he put the chest back down.

How could he get at its contents? He glanced around, but there was no answer in sight. Standing here was eerie… He held his breath and felt a, to him unfamiliar, fear that seemed to descend on the surroundings. He fumbled for the torch, but his fingertips hit it first and sent it rolling, and its spinning beam sent bewitched images leaping along the blackened walls.

By the time he had the torch back in hand, sweat was trickling out from under his cap. He no longer cared if anyone saw the light. He worked here, so it was nobody’s business. That people might find it odd for him to be rummaging around the site in the middle of the night, alone, no longer crossed his mind. Something altogether more pressing took precedence. And it came from the strange brick.

His nerves gradually steadied and he began to ponder how he would get his find home. Carrying the chest was out of the question. The beast was heavy, and there was also some weird power at play, and his house was all the way out by Kinabrekkan Hill, it was a long walk. He spotted a wheelbarrow, and there was the solution.

All the way home he fantasised about the potential value of his discovery. His fancies only interrupted by a terror that gripped him whenever the chest seemed to emanate a green glow. Those moments were fleeting tough, surely nothing but the reflections of the moon and stars that regularly peaked out from behind drifting clouds.

He wasn’t sure what he’d expected his wife to say. In fact, he hadn’t spared it a single thought. That she would refuse to let him bring the treasure into the house had never crossed his mind. For a while they quarrelled loudly, as they usually did, because the neighbours they had were few and far between. In the end, he promised that first thing the next morning he would go to the National Museum and tell them what he had unearthed. Only then did his wife reluctantly agree, but she was not pleased. Said she could sense a sinister reek from that iron lump he’d dragged home. She would much prefer if he’d leave the wheelbarrow with its contents in the yard. But he refused, someone might take the treasure. Instead, he placed the wheelbarrow right inside the basement door, locked it and stuffed the key in his pocket. Then he went upstairs and into the bedroom to his wife, who had gone to bed. Not a word was spoken as he undressed, and when he was under the duvet, he could hear the heavy breathing of his sleeping wife. For his part he tried to conjure up a future in riches, but he didn’t quite manage. He was so restless and ill at ease that he couldn’t focus his mind. His thoughts kept creeping in otherworldly directions and unfamiliar images crowded his mind. Eventually, he did fall asleep.

The few who passed the house that night, were gripped by an alarming unease. When they looked around to find out where the sensation stemmed from, they saw a pale green light shine from every window of the solitary house. Though it was dead still, the garden gate slammed like in a storm, and the sound brought rabid dogs to mind. No one paused for more than a breath. Without really knowing why, they started walking faster and faster. Their paces accelerating until they found themselves running. Away, away into the darkness to hide.

The following morning the man didn’t show at work, and the others couldn’t access the foundations, as he had the key to the gate. A nimble footed lad was sent out to Kina to fetch the man, or at least the key to the padlock. There was no answer when he banged on the door, so he went in, but leapt right back out. An acrid pong filled the house, a stench he’d never come across before and it was unbearable. Once he’d kept the front door open for a bit, he braved the threshold again, though he was in no doubt that there was something dreadfully wrong here. Yet, apart from the smell, there was nothing unusual about the place, until he stepped into his crewmate’s bedroom and got a shock that stayed with him for the rest of his life. A green glow pulsated in the room, and on the double bed lay the phosphorescent remains of what had once been two people. That very instant a transformation of the remains seemed to take place in front of his terrified eyes. Flickering as in waves of heat they melted and changed from flesh to a less stable state, from people, to animal, to stone, and sent the young man fleeing head over heels in abject terror.

Later, when the authorities had examined both the skeletal remains and the house, the conclusion was that something highly unusual had occurred here. Thunder had probably struck and hit the couple. Nobody mentioned that it had been a dead calm night and no thunder had been heard. The only other unusual aspect was the presence of a melted wheelbarrow in the basement, and here too the conclusion was that thunder had struck. Nobody felt like questioning the assumption. Everyone sensed that this was an incident best forgotten in a hurry.

**A DEAD**

**POLITICIAN**

**1**

September 2022

Monday

‘Did you hear that Sjúrður Mortensen was found dead last night,’ said Chief of Police Anton á Heyggi.

‘The politician?’

‘Yeah, he was found dead by the kitchen sink.’

‘No, I didn’t. It wasn’t mentioned on the radio this morning, and I haven’t switched on my computer yet.’

‘Thought maybe Dejan had told you. He was the one who found him.’

‘I haven’t seen Dejan this morning, besides, what’s he got to do with Sjúrður Mortensen?’ I wondered.

Dejan Vuković was an officer at the special investigation unit Skansadeildin, where I was the lead. Well, lead might be saying a lot, at present it was just him and me. Dejan had Serbian parents, but grew up in Vágur village, so he had a Faroese passport.

‘You know that we’re sometimes short-staffed, Dejan is one of the people we occasionally call on for a hand. He gets paid, obviously. Yesterday he took a night shift, and he was the one who found the deceased.’

We were at the old fortification, Skansin, where my department was based. There were usually three of us, in addition to myself and Dejan there was Gunnleyg, we had a son and lived together. But she was away these days.

‘How did he find him?’

‘Sjúrður Mortensen lives, lived, in a house on Spógvavegur Street. One of the neighbours who knows Sjúrður, knew Sjúrður,’ he corrected himself, ‘was wondering why the tap had been running in Sjúrður Mortensen’s kitchen all day.’

‘How did this neighbour manage to hear water running inside another house?’

‘The neighbour, it’s a woman, said that the kitchen window was ajar, and when you passed the house you could hear the tap. She’d been over to knock, but didn’t get a reply and the front door was locked. She’d also tried calling Sjúrður, but he didn’t pick up. So she came down to the Station last night, it’s only a stone’s throw from Spógvavegur, adamant that something was wrong at Sjúrður’s place. Dejan phoned a locksmith and accompanied the neighbour back up to Spógvavegur. Shortly after the door had been opened and there lay Sjúrður Mortensen dead by the sink in blue-striped pyjamas. A shattered glass was on the floor and the tap was, indeed, running.’

‘So he keeled over.’

‘He did, but why?’

‘Heart attack?’ I ventured.

‘William, my boy, cardiac arrest is virtually useless as a diagnosis. Everyone’s heart stops sooner or later. The question is rather what made the heart stop?’

The Chief gazed inquiringly at me, but I kept mum. Didn’t know what to say.

‘Dejan is a bright officer, perhaps a touch hotheaded,’ Anton added with a grin. ‘Never mind. Dejan was suspicious of the glass. Got Karl to come over and he carefully collected the shards.’

By Karl he meant forensic technician Karl Petersen, who was both competent and easy to work with, as opposed to the head of the Criminal Investigation Unit. But that’s another story.

‘Sjúrður Mortensen’s body was sent to pathology, Karl examined the shards in the meantime. Late last night we got his reply, the glass contained a neurotoxin, and he was almost certain it was Novichok.’

‘The Russian nerve agent?’ I spluttered.

‘Correct. The self-same that became notorious after the attempted assassination of double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter in Salisbury in 2018.’

‘And was shortly after released into Faroese salmon farming cages,’ I added. ‘The Ukrainians did that. Wanted us to suspect the Russians.’

‘This time I doubt the Ukrainians had a hand in anything. This time it’s the Russians, or their lackeys.’

‘Are you seriously saying that Sjúrður Mortensen was assassinated by the Russians?’

‘Well, it’s at least probable, because assassinated he was.’

For once it was a calm and dry day, so we were standing in the yard outside the lichen-covered stone house Skansahúsi. Anton á Heyggi ambled up the grass clad bulwark where the old canons stood, from there he could take in the whole panorama of Nólsoyarfjørður Fjord.

‘Why would the Russians murder Sjúrður Mortensen? I don’t recall him being particularly vocal on the topic of the Russians?’

‘No, he wasn’t,’ the Chief said, ‘but for some reason he’s changed his position and thinking along the way.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘For years he held a seat in Parliament for The People’s Party and there he supported cooperation with Russia and fisheries agreements with them. But this winter he joined the Social Democrats and now he wanted to sever all ties with Russia. Suddenly Russian ships weren’t to be allowed to tranship fish in Faroese ports, and all agreements were to be voided. Now the Russians were war criminals.’

‘Maybe the attack on Ukraine changed his mind?’

‘Not really, he switched loyalties and positions back in January this year, and Russia hadn’t yet gone to war against Ukraine. Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, but back then, and for several years after, Sjúrður continued to support Russia. Why he changed tack shortly before the Ukraine invasion on February 24th, I don’t know, but something stinks.’

‘Stinks?’ I was baffled.

‘Stinks of some devilry, I just don’t know what.’