

Greg Wagner

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At The  
End  
Of  
Forever

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I would like to thank (in this order) My Wife Roberta, Wikipedia, Google Maps, and Amazon.com, because without any of the above this novel wouldn't have happened.

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## Chapter 1

### The City of Jerusalem (1AD)

It is the fifth day of Tammuz, in the Year of the World 3761.

*We are leaving the city under the cover of darkness. There is a general feeling of foreboding in the air. Mary is heavy with child and Joseph is receiving threats upon his life because he allowed "The Christ" to be buried in his family's tomb. The hierarchy is incensed. They wanted nothing to do with "the imposter" yet they care where he is buried? What sense does this make?*

*We will be travelling to Gaul where Joseph has already contacted associates who will provide us with sanctuary. A ship awaits us in Jaffa, I have arranged to take cuttings along, and enough fruit to last me. The remaining host has already been entrusted to the "Priory de L'arbre." Since they were the original guardians, I feel it is only proper to remand custody back to them.*

*Mary, Martha, and I will stay in Gaul for the time being. Joseph and his associates plan on continuing to Britannia once we have settled in.*

*Jerusalem is in shambles. The House of David is torn asunder. Thankfully, the House of Benjamin is still on solid ground financially and my family continues to prosper. I have succeeded in liquidating the majority of my holdings here in the city over the last year and I am ready for a clean break. Tonight is the night. Goodbye to my old life, I am leaving you behind.*

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Somewhere off the coast of Europe (1004 AD)

Salt burned Sven Jorgenson's cracked lips as he wiped the ocean's spray from his beard again and peered into the storm's gloom. The great Viking ship bucked and swayed, plowing through the crashing waves.

By order of Clan Leader Erick Erickson, Sven and his crew of ninety stalwarts had set forth on a mission of finding. Three long ships were to travel to the elusive "southlands" in search of fortune.

Sven chuckled at the sight of his crew in action; *By Thor's hammer if this storm does not soon stop, there will be a mutiny, and who could disagree? Ha, and if it gets much worse, I will join them!*

He glanced up at the ever-darkening sky. The rain had fallen for twelve sunsets in a row and supplies were dwindling fast. Fresh water; always a valuable resource at sea, was also in short supply despite the raging storm all around them. The roar of the surf was so intense that it almost drowned out the cries of Rolf Dagarak when he staggered up behind Sven on the undulating deck.

"Sven! Sven Jorgenson, we must turn back!" the Chief Navigator's voice barely cut through the clamor as he stood wide-eyed and soaking wet before Sven.

*"The chart says the Wyrms At The End Of The World lives here and there isn't anything else, it just ends."* Rolf stared at him bewildered, his drenched beard and hair giving him the appearance of a heretic madman pointing at the half-unrolled parchment in his hand.

A great bolt of lightning split the sky, followed almost immediately by the crack, boom, and rumble of the thunder rolling across the water.

Sven waited until the sound had faded to echoes before chuckling disarmingly. “Of course my brother, for you see, we go beyond our ancestor’s limited expectations.” He laughed heartily, slapped Rolf on the shoulder and boomed, “Do not fear, for we will make the charts from here on out and we will become the stuff of legends.”

Rolf looked at Sven doubtfully, but nodded and rolled up his map. “I will do as you say Sven Jorgenson,” he replied simply and with that, turned and made his way back to his post.

The trio of Viking ships sailed on for the rest of the morning and into the afternoon. Sixty-foot longboats plowing through enormous waves as the torrential rain and hurricane gusts continued to thrash them about.

Late in the afternoon, the storm let up.

As the sailors stood at their posts, a silence fell across them. It was as if everything in the world had stopped for just that instant and the heavens opened up. Where before clouds and darkness had ruled; now sunlight and warmth had taken over and spread across the barren seascape. As one, the crew cheered, their cries ringing out to Valhalla, loud enough to rival the thunder itself. The feeling was infectious as even Sven allowed himself the luxury of joining in, shouting out a great victory battle call, and shaking his fists at the sky.

With the clearing weather came a calm that set upon the ships, leaving them bobbing like corks on the surface of an ocean that shined like a mirror for as far as the eye could see.

Normally calm water was the sailor's bane, but Sven viewed it as a blessing as it could be used to assess any damage that the storm had done, and make much needed repairs. He ordered all hands on deck and had the crew working for the rest of the day to set the ship to rights. Just before sunset, a cry came from the lookout sighting land on the far horizon.

When darkness fell and they had a clear nighttime sky to navigate by, Rolf Dagarak and his men reported that they were still on course and fast approaching the land of the Moors. It wasn't until late in the evening that they came within hailing distance of the continent's vast shoreline.

Earlier excursions had indicated a large settlement near the southernmost tip. It was at Sven's discretion whether to use diplomacy when making contact or to just go in and take what they needed. Since supplies were dangerously low and there wasn't much chance that the natives would give them what they needed, Sven ordered raiding parties to make ready.

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Seattle, Washington (Present Day)

He'd been at it all night.

The morning sun was just a faint glimmer on the skyline when Norton Halbred finished typing the remaining snippet of computer code into his waiting laptop. He crossed his fingers and hit the enter button for the last time in a sequence of keystrokes that would set the whole process into motion.



The network monitoring system that he used, supplied real-time information, displaying the most important aspects of the deployment with a series of impressive if overdone digital graphics. What the program was actually showing him was the progress of some specially crafted data-worms as they replicated and proceeded to infiltrate the target website.

Norton is what some people would call a criminal.

If he had chosen to do the same thing, but for the forces of good, he would be considered a computer genius or at worst a hacker, which while still derogatory, was in some circles considered the ultimate in cool titles.

Norton didn't care too much about cool. *Yeah sure, back in the day "cool was the rule,"* he thought running a hand through his long red hair, *but these days cash is the name of the game.*

He laughed nervously. For some reason he couldn't help feeling a little on edge despite the apparent ease of the task before him.

*No big deal right?*

He'd done it hundreds of times.

Go to a popular internet watering hole and look for a vulnerability in that website's code. Once located, perform an SQL injection using some of the code that's already there. After that, just sit back and wait for people to visit the site and become infected.

"Infected" usually meant that the computer in question automatically downloaded a specially programmed .exe file that would remain dormant on that system until activated. Once a target has been acquired, all

Norton has to do is wake up the infected little sleeper computers out there and point them in the right direction.

For no apparent reason, Norton's computer screen went black. He tapped a few keys and wiggled the mouse, but nothing happened. He checked the power cord. A shiver ran down his back as a strange white dot slowly started growing in the middle of the blank screen.

*What the hell is that?* He thought.

The white dot now filled the entire screen; bold black text scrolled "marquee style" across the display and stopped.

*Oh shit!*

Norton jumped up and violently yanked the network cable out. Once he was sure the laptop was disconnected from the internet, he focused on what the text said.

\* \* \* \* \*

**WARNING!**

This device has been used to commit a crime of the USA PATRIOT Act. If you cooperate with us and turn yourself in immediately, leniency will be considered.

United States Federal Bureau of Investigations  
Office 1-800-CALLFBI (225-5324)

\* \* \* \* \*

*Shit shit shit!* Norton thought as he scrambled around the living room of the anonymously rented safe house wantonly sweeping his belongings into garbage bags. *I can sort it all out later, hopefully.* When he was

done, he stopped for a second and looked around the room one last time before sprinting for the exit.

Norton opened the front door a tiny crack and tried to look out into the street. Once he thought it was safe, he stuck his head out all the way, looked both directions, then ducked back in, slammed the door, and locked it. There wasn't anyone out front, but just to be safe, he slipped out the back door and hurried down the fire escape. This led to a breezeway that opened up into a narrow alley that ran in between the houses on the block. When he got to the end of the breezeway, he peeked around the gate at ground level and didn't see anyone. In spite of the overwhelming urge to run for his life, Norton stood up and slowly stepped out into the alley. He walked calmly down to the end of the block, trying not to look around too much. Once he felt he was far enough away, he circled back around, finally ending up across the street from the safe house.

He crouched behind a low wall at the side of the Chinese grocery store and waited. After a few minutes and no sign of trouble, Norton let out the breath that he had been holding and leaned back against the wall. He allowed his gaze to wander up to the second story window behind him. *Probably where the store's owners live*, he thought abstractly.

Just then, a cute little Asian girl of five or six appeared in the window and smiled down at Norton, giggling, and hiding her face, oblivious to his predicament.

He smiled and waved back.

Just as he was getting up to leave, a shiny black SUV came screaming around the corner and slid to a stop at the intersection not twenty feet away from him, blue and

red lights flashing, heavily tinted windows concealing its occupants. Two seconds later another SUV came screeching up at the other end of the block, effectively cordoning off the street in front of the safe house.

When a SWAT team truck and more unmarked cruisers showed up Norton knew it was time to leave. As he hurried to his car, he fished out his keys and pushed the start button on the custom remote fob. Around the corner and a little ways down the block, the ancient starter of his 1962 Volvo station wagon ground over a few times and the engine came to life. By the time he reached the door, the little four-cylinder was purring quietly.

When Norton left town, he took the roundabout way home, in case anyone was following him. Less than an hour later, he climbed out of his car and walked calmly through the front door of his modest suburban split-level home. As soon as the door was shut, he leaned back against it, closed his eyes, and barely resisted the urge to scream.

Once he had calmed down a little, he went to his backpack and pulled out the infected computer, plugged it in, and quickly went to work formatting/erasing its hard drive. When he was sure that it was reformatted, Norton powered the computer back up, only to have the same message flash across the screen again.

“This device has been used to commit a crime of the USA PATRIOT Act ...”

He shut the computer down again and turned it back on, this time going in the back way to clean it. After he was sure the machine had been successfully wiped

completely clean of everything, including the operating system, he turned it back on.

“This device has been used to commit a crime of USA PATRIOT Act ...”

*What the hell? He thought, Oh come on, that isn't even possible.*

Norton frantically jabbed the power button and yanked the cord out as he ran for the door. He hopped in his car and drove down to the 5<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge where it crosses the river at the edge of town.

As he was driving out over the water, he opened the window and threw the laptop “Frisbee” style as hard as he could, watching as it arced away, hitting and skipping across the surface of the water a few times before sinking quickly into the darkness.

*Well, I guess that takes care of that, Norton shook his head, I hope. In the meantime I think I'm gonna need to get out of town for a little while.*

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Gibraltar, Spain (1004 AD)

Sven Jorgenson waited patiently until the Goddess Sol left for the Netherworlds before ordering his warriors to make landfall. From the landing craft, he could see fires blazing brightly across the water separating the Vikings from their prey. The aroma of roasted meat wafted heavily in the air, teasing the recently ship-bound crew, who after weeks of reduced rations, were looking considerably skinnier than when they left the Motherland.

Shadows grew tall on the shore and danced among the treetops that lined the beach, making its inhabitants

seem like giants out for a nighttime stroll. Sven ordered his team to make landfall downwind of the village. A hush fell as they approached the settlement and crept quietly up on the main clearing. Sven signaled them to hold off for a moment while he gazed up at the stars and made an appeal to “Odin the One-Eyed All Father” and “Thor the Storm Bringer,” asking for their guidance and blessings.

The attack must have seemed like Ragnarök for the natives. The Vikings with their fearsome helmets and armor, proportionately colossi compared to the small black skinned men who stood helplessly around the fires. The first wave of Viking warriors drove straight into the center of the village and out the other side, mercilessly mowing down any opposition like stalks of wheat before the scythe. The villagers fought bravely, but were no match for the Norsemen’s fierceness. No sooner had the fighting started, and it was over. Sven paused to wipe the sweat from his brow as his first mate Janson Skorvald ran up.

“Sven Jorgenson you must come quick,” and as fast he appeared, he was gone. Sven shook his head wearily and loped off into the darkness, following his first mate through the low-hanging early morning mists drifting up from the water.

Some of the huts were still ablaze, in most cases torched by the fleeing villagers themselves in an attempt to deprive the raiders of what they could not take with them. The flames were quickly running out of fuel as Sven passed the main meeting area and abruptly came to another part of the village that he hadn’t seen before. There, near the back of the clearing and looking completely out of place, was a small building made out of red clay bricks.

When he reached the front of the building, he could see that the hinged door had been forced open.

Sven was confused when he entered the room, until his eyes adjusted to the light and he noticed the skinny white man chained in the corner.

The prisoner looked up. Apprehension filled his eyes and he dropped down to his knees begging and pleading in the universal trader's language. "Please, please, let me live, I beg you, let me live and I can..." the man stopped suddenly and looked down at his hands. When he looked back up there was a twinkle in his eye, "I can give you everlasting life."

Janson Skorvald growled, drew his sword, and started toward the prisoner, muttering gruffly. The man looked frantically back and forth between Sven and his would be executioner.

"No, no, please, I know where the Tree of Life is, I can lead you to it, I swear."

Sven raised a hand, and his first mate reluctantly stood aside. He stepped closer and bent down, glaring at the prisoner hard for a long moment. The man squirmed under his gaze and smelled strongly of fear. Sven wrinkled his nose in distaste.

Judging from half-starved appearance and the scars on his back, it looked like the little man hadn't been treated very kindly in captivity. As Sven listened to him babble, he kept thinking about the Viking legend of a "Tree of Life" called the Yggdrasil. Some consider the tree to be the center of everything. It is also said that the Yggdrasil bears fruit that when eaten gives one eternal

youthfulness. He scowled, *but what could this man know of the legends?*

After briefly weighing the possibilities, he gestured for his men to bring the prisoner along back to the ship.

*If what he says is true, I could gain much fame in the Motherland, Sven nodded and smiled grimly, thumbing the edge of his sword, and if he is lying, then I will send him off to the gods myself.*



## Chapter 2

Hagerstown, Maryland (Present Day)

Sixty-seven year old Elijah Brooks sat beside his wife's hospital bed. The nurse had just given her another shot of morphine and she finally drifted off to a fitful, if not peaceful sleep. He sighed and watched her in slumber.

*She's so beautiful.*

Looking at her lying there, he remembered back to when they first met.

Elijah was attending college studying for his master's degree in Archaeology and had sprained his ankle the day before playing rugby. Instead of using the stairs to get to his class on the fifth floor, he headed for the elevator. He reached the alcove and punched the button just as it was coming down. When the door opened, Elijah realized the elevator was already in use and that the current occupant was on crutches. They had a briefcase and several bags lying at their feet.

"Oh, I'm sorry I'll wait," he stood back.

The woman hobbled around to face him and he was immediately struck by how pretty she was. She reminded him of a pixie with her short-cropped brown hair and delicate facial features. She made an attempt to gather her belongings together, "No, no, here, I can slide over a little, just gimme a sec."

She leaned down to retrieve her briefcase and several books fell out of her open backpack.

“Here let me help you with that.” When Elijah bent over to pick up the books, she accidentally dropped one of her crutches and it hit him in the head.

“Oh I am so sorry,” she reigned in the errant crutch and finally wrestled her stuff into the corner. “There, come on in, I don’t bite.”

Still seeing stars, Elijah shuffled in and stood against the far wall. The door swished shut and the elevator started going up. He couldn’t take his eyes off her. At one point, she caught him staring and smiled back shyly. Without warning, the elevator ground to a halt. The lights in the ceiling flickered once and went dark. He fished out his pen light.

“What happened?” he looked around wildly accidentally shining the light in her eyes, then at the control panel.

“I think we’re stuck.” The woman stabbed the buttons and checked the emergency phone. “It’s dead.”

“Oh no,” Elijah gripped the railing tightly.

“What?”

“I think I’m claustrophobic.” His head started spinning as the tiny elevator became even smaller. His breath was coming in short shallow bursts until he felt a soft hand on his shoulder.

“Calm down,” she said, his world coming back into focus at the sound of her voice, “why don’t you tell me about yourself? It might help you focus your thoughts.”

“No,” he shook his head trying not to throw up, “you first.”

“Well ok. Hi my name is Elizabeth, I’m a Political Science Major, and I’m going to be the first woman president.” She stuck out her hand.

“Wow, that’s ambitious,” he shook it and chuckled, “but what will you do for an encore?”

“I don’t know maybe planetary overlord or something along those lines.”

As he continued to hold her hand, his nausea eased. He smiled and forgot all about his panic.

Elizabeth smiled back and nodded hopefully, “Ok, now you.”

“Hi my name is Elijah, I’m studying for my masters in Archaeology.” He shrugged uncomfortably, “I don’t exactly have much of a plan yet, except maybe to teach someday.”

“Teach?” She nodded, “That’s nice.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

He thought he saw her smirk, “No seriously, What?”

Instead of answering, she put her hands on her hips and gave him an intense look “Let me ask you something Elijah. Do you dream?”

“Not really, I don’t have time with all the studying and...”

She cut him off, “What do you want from life?”

“I don’t know, I always did have a fantasy.”

“Good, tell me.”

“No, it’s silly.”

She touched his arm. Suddenly he felt ten feet tall. Without thinking, he blurted out as one long word, *“I want to be like Steve Banning from the original mummy movies raiding tombs and uncovering artifacts. It sounds so exciting.”*

“Yes it does,” she grinned, “you wouldn’t happen to be looking for a sidekick in the tomb raiding business?”

He shrugged, “Sure, if you’re interested. I guess I’m going to need someone to help carry all the gold and jewels I find.”

They both laughed. There was a tapping sound up in the ceiling. A piece of tile slid aside and a balding head dropped down through the hole. “It’s gonna be a little while folks, the power is out. If you’re in a hurry, you can climb out this way.”

Elijah looked at Elizabeth and she frowned, “No thank you, we’re fine for now.”

They spent the next three hours talking. When the elevator was finally working again, they emerged hand in hand. The two were married the next spring. Shortly following graduation, Elijah accepted an assistant professor’s position in the Archaeology wing at Maryland State University and Elizabeth went into politics.

They have been married for more than forty years.

Elizabeth may not have become president yet, but she has served four terms in the U.S. House of Representatives and is now in her second term as the U.S. Senator from Maryland. Elijah works as the head of research in the archaeology department of the internationally prestigious Farwell University.

Their life together has been a fairy tale. Joined at the hip from the start, the two of them have weathered life's ups and downs, including the death of their daughter Rebecca when she was in her twenties. *That was a sad time*, Elijah shook his head, *but nothing compared to the thought of losing my wife.*

Elizabeth became violently ill just weeks ago. She was diagnosed with a very aggressive type of cancer. Doctors couldn't really say specifically what kind of cancer it was; just that it was affecting her marrow and it vaguely resembled acute lymphopenia, a condition characterized by abnormally low levels of lymphocytes in the blood. Because of the nature and rapid onset of the cancer, the doctors only gave her six weeks to live.

Elijah was devastated.

He lived for Elizabeth. Without her, he was just a "half a person" trying to fill up a "whole" body. He immediately took an extended leave of absence from the university.

Over the next week, the cancer metastasized and spread to her lymphatic system. Elizabeth was steadily getting worse with traditional methods, so she opted for a more controversial, but natural method of treatment. In order to keep his mind off the sickness and his time away from Elizabeth, Elijah became obsessed with a rather unconventional and possibly helpful line of research.

Trees have always played a major role in legends going all the way back to the dawn of time. Throughout his many years as a research archaeologist, Elijah occasionally found references to eternal life associated with those trees. Though most of the references were vague at best, some

actually appeared to have a grain of truth attached to them. One in particular, stood out among the others, “The Tree of Life” from the Christian Bible. Elijah discovered that according to many ancient sources, this magical tree once actually existed and might still be out there somewhere. As impossible as it sounded, Elijah threw himself into the new line of research, hoping against all hope for anything that might help him save the woman he loves from this merciless killer.

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Greg Wagner lives in a tree house with his wife Roberta and their three dogs Esme, Abby, and Olivia on the side of Wagner Mountain (more like a really big, really steep hill) in Maysel, West Virginia.

When he isn't plotting to take over the world or in search of spiritual enlightenment, Greg manages to find time to spin yarns of wonder and amazement. In whatever time is left over, Greg enjoys riding his motorcycle, reading, splitting firewood, playing music and making glass beads, ( <http://www.oneofakindnecklaces.com> ).

His books can be found at <http://www.gregwagnerbooks.com>