

In the bottom half of this photograph is a white beluga whale, with his right side turned towards us, submerged in the water. While his pale body is under the surface, his open mouth, bulbous forehead, and snout are above it, in the centre of the frame. The whale's muzzle is met by the head of a bearded fisherman, wearing a woollen hat and jumper, who leans over the side of a boat, gently pressing his forehead against the beluga's nose. In the water, the whale's dark eye looks up, meeting those of the fisherman.

The man smiles at the beluga, and, with its small teeth showing, the whale appears to be smiling back. Behind them, in the background, the deep blue waters give way to green hills, rolling underneath an overcast Norwegian sky.

I took this photograph on a Canon 5D Mark IV on 10 September 2020 at 15.36. It captures the remarkable tale of Hvaldimir, the world-famous beluga whale, and the unlikely bond he forged with this former whaler.

It began in April 2019, when the man in the photograph, Joar Hesten, was fishing near Hammerfest in northern Norway with his father and brother. Among the boats, they could see a large, ghostly shadow moving among the vessels.

While fishermen are used to seeing whales in these waters, they hadn't seen a beluga here before. Usually, to find them in Norwegian waters, you'd have to travel more than 800 kilometres to Svalbard.

As Joar and the others watched the whale drift between boats, the men noticed something wrapped around its muscular, white form. They'd assumed it was a fishing net, before Joar's father shouted: "it's a harness!"

Despite once being a whaler, Joar felt compelled to help. If nobody removed the harness, it could bury itself deeply in its smooth skin, causing untold suffering or even death. "I'm going into the water," Joar told his father.

Using the skills he'd learned to hunt whales, Joar was determined to save this one. With help from the coastal authorities, he put on a survival suit and plunged into the cold waters of the Norwegian Sea.

Following several attempts, Joar, and two men from the coastal authorities, removed the harness. Written on it were the words: "Equipment St. Petersburg". The whale was later nicknamed *Hvaldimir*.

In the months that followed, Hvaldimir, roamed the northern Norwegian coast, visiting harbours, and seeking out people. He'd pick up phones they'd drop in the water and play fetch with them. He became a global phenomenon.

Suddenly, the world was talking about Hvaldimir – on social media, on the news, everywhere. And with attention came theories.

Some believed he was from an aquarium. Yet many insist that the peculiar harness and the interest he showed in boats, harbours and people suggest something more sinister: that Hvaldimir was a spy.

Whatever his origins, Hvaldimir appeared to enjoy the attention.

Joar, on the other hand, didn't. And after fishing season, he moved home, 1000 kilometres south, to Lødingen.

Being a photojournalist and underwater photographer, many believed this would be the ideal story for me. But I don't cover stories that others are covering; and I'll never chase an animal through the ocean.

In the summer of 2020, I was home in Lofoten, just south of Joar's village. The French scientist and free diver Fabrice Schnoller visited me.

He told me Hvaldimir had travelled thousands of kilometres south, and had ended up in the fjord where Joar now lived.

It's almost as though this strange beluga whale had followed his saviour 1,000 kilometres down the coast.

Reunited, Joar had even started helping Hvaldimir. *Now* it was a story I wanted to capture. I told my editors about it, and writer Nils Anker and I went to meet Joar and Fabrice in Ballangen.

Hvaldimir's life wasn't a fairy-tale. He was swimming from fish farm to fish farm, eating the saithe that fed on the leftovers falling from the salmon cages.

And while the offshore farms gave him food and the contact with humans he craved, he'd survived brutal cuts and injuries from boat propellers. Now, Joar was visiting him on the farms as often as he could, and I wanted to document their special relationship.

I knew it wouldn't be easy. Hvaldimir didn't behave like a whale, and he wasn't in a habitat where whales were meant to be.

At first, when I jumped into the water, Hvaldimir would swim at my face. His skin is smooth, cold, and soft. But beneath his softness is power. He was pushy and almost aggressive, repeatedly opening his big mouth over my camera and my head. His tongue is like sandpaper. He was making it impossible.

Repeatedly, we would have to get back in the boat, while he sulked like a teenager in the water.

Gradually, I witnessed and shot his daily routines. I took photos of him under water from a distance. I saw the kind-looking animal dancing under the surface – sleeping, waking up, chasing boats.

I also captured shots of Joar interacting with the whale, taken from above the surface. But I hadn't captured the two worlds as one.

Every time Hvaldimir became too eager, we would return to the boat. This time, I saw Joar's hands coming down into the water from above. Hvaldimir could always tell which hands were Joar's. Accepting them, the whale tilted his large head and pushed his soft, cold skin against the strong and raw hands.

Holding my breath, I could see how Hvaldimir clearly loved Joar's attention. Fascinated, I watched the fisherman move his body closer to the surface. Hvaldimir did the same. His head pushed Joar's hands out of the water as the giant muzzle came up. Joar could tell Hvaldimir wanted more, so he leant over the railings, stretching his head down against the whale.

The fisherman's woollen knitted hat and head met the whale's muzzle. They both opened their mouths, smiles pressing against one other. Beneath the surface, Hvaldimir's eye looks up in affection.

I thought, "Please let the photo be sharp!" Because I was in two worlds at the same time – my lens half under and half above the surface.

It was sharp. And while the composition isn't perfect, the emotion it captures is remarkable. This moment is one I'll never forget, because it shows two creatures from separate worlds meeting in the middle, with love.