

ONE

Island of Mann, A.D. 979

THREE sheltered in the fish-reeked dim of the *keeill*, cramped up and feeling the cold seep into their bones – but only one of them did not care, for he was dying. Though truth was, Drostan thought, glancing sideways at the red-glowed beak-face of the Brother who lived here, perhaps this priest cares even less than the dying.

‘I am done, brother,’ said Sueno and the husked whisper of him jerked Drostan back to where his friend and brother in Christ lay, sweat sheening his face in the faint glow from the fish-oil light.

‘Nonsense,’ Drostan lied. ‘When the storm clears tomorrow we will go down to the church at Holmtun and get help there.’

‘He will never get there,’ said the priest, voice harsh as the crow dark itself and bringing Drostan angrily round.

‘Whisht, you – have you so little Christian charity in you?’

There was a gurgle, which might have been a laugh or a curse, and suddenly the hawk-face was thrust close, so close that Drostan bent backwards away from it. It was not a comfort, that face. It had greasy iron tangles of hair round it, was leached of moisture so that it loomed like a cracked

desert in the dark, all planes and shadows; the jaws clapped in around the few teeth in the mouth, which made black runestones when he spoke.

‘I lost it,’ he mused, then his glittering priest eyes seemed to glass over and he rose a little and moved away to tend the poor fire, bent-backed, a rolling gait with a bad limp.

‘I lost it,’ he repeated, shaking his head. ‘Out on the great white. It lies there, prey to wolves and foxes and the skin-wearing heathen trolls – but no, God will keep it safe. I will find it again. God will keep it safe.’

Shaken, Drostan gathered himself like a ragged cloak. He knew of this priest only by hearsay and what he had heard had not been good. Touched, they said. A pole-sitter who fell off, one or two claimed with vicious humour. Foreign. This last Drostan now knew for himself, for the man’s harsh voice was veined with oddness.

‘God grant you find it soon and peace with it, brother,’ Drostan intoned piously, through his gritted teeth.

The hawk-face turned.

‘I am no brother of yours, Culdee,’ he said, his voice a sneer. ‘I am from Hammaburg. I am a true follower of the true church. I am monk and priest both.’

‘I am merely a humble anchorite of the Cele Dei, as is the poor soul here. Yet here we all are,’ answered Drostan, irritated. ‘Brother.’

The rain hissed on the stone walls, driving damp air in to swirl the scent of wrack round in the fish-oil reek. The priest from Hammaburg looked left, right and then up, as if seeking God in the low roof; then he smiled his black-rotted smile.

‘It is not a large hall,’ he admitted, ‘but it serves me for the while.’

‘If you are not one of us,’ Drostan persisted angrily while trying to make Sueno more comfortable against the chill, ‘why are you here in this place?’

He sat back and waved a hand that took in the entire

keeill with it, almost grazing the cold stone of the rough walls. A square the width of two and half tall men, with a roof barely high enough to stand up in. It was what passed for a chapel in the high lands of Mann, and Drostan and Sueno each had their own. They brought the word of God from the Cele Dei – the Culdee – church of the islands to any who flocked to listen. They were cenobites, members of a monastic community who had gone out in the world and become lonely anchorites.

But this monk was a real priest from Hammaburg, a *clerk regular* who could preach, administer sacrament and educate others, yet was also religious in the strictest sense of the word, professing solemn vows and the solitary contemplation of God. It stung Drostan that this strange cleric claimed to be the united perfection of the religious condition – and did not share the same beliefs as the Cele Dei, nor seem to possess any Christian charity.

Drostan swallowed the bitter bile of it, flavoured with the harsh knowledge that the priest was right and Sueno was dying. He offered a silent apology to God for the sin of pride.

‘I wait for a sign,’ the Hammaburg priest said, after a long silence. ‘I offended God and yet I know He is not done with me. I wait for a sign.’

He shifted a little to ease himself and Drostan’s eyes fell to the priest’s foot, which had no shoe or sandal on it because, he saw, none would have fitted it. Half of it was gone; no toes at all and puckered flesh to the instep. It would be a painful thing to walk on that without aid of stick or crutch and Drostan realised then that this was part of the strange priest’s penance while he waited for a sign.

‘How did you offend God?’ he asked, only half interested, his mind on Sueno’s suffering in the cold.

There was silence for a moment, then the priest stirred as if from some dream.

‘I lost it,’ he said simply. ‘I had it in my care and lost it.’

‘Christian charity?’ Drostan asked without looking up, so that he missed the sharp glitter of anger sparking in the priest’s eyes, followed by that same dulling, as if the bright sea had been washed by a cloud.

‘That I lost long since. The Danes tore that from me. I had it and I lost it.’

Drostan forgot Sueno, stared at the hawk-faced cleric for a long moment.

‘The Danes?’ he repeated, then crossed himself. ‘Bless this weather, brother, that keeps the Dyfflin Danes from us.’

The Hammaburg priest was suddenly brisk and attentive to the fire, so that it flared briefly, before the damp wood fought back and reduced it once more to a mean affair of woodsmoke reek and flicker.

‘I had it, out on the steppes of Gardariki in the east,’ he went on, speaking to the dark. ‘I lost it. It lies there, waiting – and I wait for a sign from God, who will tell me that He considers me penance-paid for my failure and now worthy to retrieve it. That and where it is.’

Drostan was millstoned by this. He had heard of Gardariki, the lands of the Rus Slavs, but only as a vague name for somewhere unimaginably far away, far enough to be almost a legend – yet here was someone who had been there. Or claimed it; the hermit-monk of this place, Drostan had been told, was head-sick.

He decided to keep to himself the wind-swirl of thoughts about his journey here, half carrying Sueno, whom he had visited and found sick, so resolving to take him down to the church where he could be made comfortable; he would say nothing of how God had brought them here, about the storm that had broken on them. It was then God sent the guiding light that had led them here, to a place so thick with holy mystery they had trouble breathing.

The cynical side to Drostan, all the same, whispered that it was the fish oil and woodsmoke reek that made breathing

hard. He smiled in the dark; the cynical thought was Sueno's doing, for until they had found themselves only a few miles of whin and gorse apart, each had been alone and Drostan had never questioned his faith.

He had discovered doubt and questioning as soon as he and Sueno had started in to speaking, for that seemed to be the older monk's way. For all that he wondered why Sueno had taken to the Culdee life up there on the lonely, wind-moaning hills, Drostan had never resented the meeting.

There was silence for a long time, while the rain whispered and the wind moaned and whistled through the badly-daubed walls. He knew the Hammaburg priest was right and Sueno, recalcitrant old monk that he was, was about to step before the Lord and be judged. He prayed silently for God's mercy on his friend.

The priest from Hammaburg sat and brooded, aware that he had said too much and not enough, for it had been a time since he had spoken with folk and even now he was not sure that the two Culdees were quite real.

There had been an eyeblink of strangeness when the two had stumbled in on him out of the rain and wind and it had nothing to do with their actual arrival – he had grown used to speaking with phantoms. Some of them were, he knew, long dead – Starkad, who had chased him all down the rivers of Gardariki and into the Holy Land itself until his own kind had slaughtered him; Einar the Black, leader of the Oathsworn and a man the Hammaburg priest hated enough to want to resurrect for the joy of watching him die again; Orm, the new leader and equally foul in the eyes of God.

No. The strangeness had come when the one called Drostan had announced himself, expecting a name in return. It took the priest from Hammaburg by surprise when he could not at once remember his own. Fear, too. Such a thing should

not have been lost, like so many other things. Christian charity. Long lost to the Danes of the Oathsworn out on the Great White where the Holy Lance still lay among fox turds and steppe grasses. At least he hoped it was, that God was keeping it safe for the time it could be retrieved.

By me, he thought. Martin. He muttered it to himself through the stumps of his festering teeth. My name is Martin. My name is pain.

Towards dawn, Sueno woke up and his coughing snapped the other two out of sleep. Drostan felt a claw hand on his forearm and Sueno drew himself up.

'I am done,' he said, and this time Drostan said nothing, so that Sueno nodded, satisfied.

'Good,' he said, between wheezing. 'Now you will listen more closely, for these are the words of a dying man.'

'Brother, I am a mere monk. I cannot hear your Confession. There is a proper priest here . . .'

'Whisht. We have, you and I, ignored that fine line up in the hills when poor souls came to us for absolution. Did it matter to them that they might as well have confessed their sins to a tree, or a stone? No, it did not. Neither does it matter to me. Listen, for my time is close. Will I go to God's hall, or Hel's hall, I wonder?'

His voice, no more than husk on the draught, stirred Drostan to life and he patted, soothingly.

'Hell has no fires for you, brother,' he declared firmly and the old monk laughed, brought on a fit of coughing and wheezed to the end of it.

'No matter which gods take me,' he said, 'this is a straw death, all the same.'

Drostan blinked at that, as clear a declaration of pagan heathenism as he had heard. Sueno managed a weak flap of one hand.

'My name, Sueno, is as close as these folk get to Svein,' he

said. 'I am from Venheim in Eidfjord, though there are none left there alive enough to remember me. I came with Eirik to Jorvik. I carried Odin's daughter for him.'

Sueno stopped and raised himself, his grip on Drostan's arm fierce and hard.

'Promise me this, Drostan, as a brother in Christ and in the name of God,' he hissed. 'Promise me you will seek out the Yngling heir and tell him what I tell you.'

He fell back and mumbled. Drostan wiped the spittle from his face with a shaking hand, unnerved by what he had heard. Odin's daughter? There was rank heathenism, plain as sunlight on water.

'Swear, in the name of Christ, brother. Swear, as you love me . . .'

'I swear, I swear,' Drostan yelped, as much to shut the old man up as anything. He felt a hot wash of shame at the thought and covered it by praying.

'Enough of that,' growled Sueno. 'I have heard all the chrim-loosening cant I need in the thirty years since they dragged me off from Stainmore. Fucking treacherous bitch-fucks. Fucking gods of Asgard abandoned us then . . .'

He stopped. There was silence and wind hissed rain-scent through the wall cracks, making the woodsmoke and oil reek swirl chokingly. Sueno breathed like a broken forge bellows, gathered enough air and spoke.

'Do not take this to the Mother of Kings. Not Gunnhild, his wife, Eirik's witch-woman. Not her. She is not of the line and none of Eirik's sons left to the bitch deserve to marry Odin's daughter . . . Asgard showed that when the gods turned their faces from us at Stainmore.'

Drostan crossed himself. He had only the vaguest notions what Sueno was babbling, but he knew the pagan was thick in it.

'Take what I tell you to the young boy, if he lives,' Sueno husked out wearily. 'Harald Fairhair's kin and the true line

of Norway's kings. Tryggve's son. I know he lives. I hear, even in this wild place. Take it to him. Swear to me . . .'

'I swear,' Drostan declared quietly, now worried about the blood seeping from between Sueno's cracking lips.

'Good,' Sueno said. 'Now listen. I know where Odin's daughter lies . . .'

Forgotten in the dark, Martin from Hammaburg listened. Even the pain in his foot, that driving constant from toes that no longer existed – clearly part of the penance sent from God – was gone as he felt the power of the Lord whisper in the urgent, hissing, blood-rheumed voice of the old monk.

A sign, as sure as fire in the heavens. After all this time, in a crude stone hut daubed with poor clay and Christ hope, with a roof so low the rats were hunchbacked – a sign. Martin hugged himself with the ecstasy of it, felt the drool from his broken mouth spill and did not try to wipe it away. In a while, the pain of his foot came back, slowly, as it had when it thawed, gradually, after his rescue from the freeze of a steppe winter.

Agonising and eternal, that pain, and Martin embraced it, as he had for years, for every fiery shriek of it reminded him of his enemies, of Orm Bear-Slayer who led the Oathsworn, and Finn who feared nothing – and Crowbone, kin of Harold Fairhair of the Yngling line and true prince of Norway. Tryggve's son.

There was a way, he thought, for God's judgement to be delivered, for the return of what had been lost, for the punishment of all those who had thwarted His purpose. Now even the three gold coins, given to him by the lord of Kiev years since and never spent, revealed their purpose, and he glanced once towards the stone they were hidden beneath. A good hefty stone, that, and it fitted easily into the palm.

By the time the old monk coughed his blood-misted last at dawn, Martin had worked out the how of it.

Hammaburg, some months later . . .

Folk said it was a city to make you gasp, hazed with smoke and sprawling with hundreds of hofs lining the muddy banks and spilling backwards into the land. There were ships by the long hundred lying at wharfs, moored by pilings, or drawn up on the banks and crawling with men, like ants on dead fish.

There were warehouses, carts, packhorses and folk who all seemed to shout to be heard above the din of metalsmith hammers, shrieking axles and fishwives who sounded as like the quarrelling gulls as to be sisters.

Above all loomed the great timber bell tower of the Christ church, Hammaburg's pride. In it sat a chief Christ priest called a bishop, who was almost as important as the Christ priest's headman, the Pope, Crowbone had heard.

Cloaked in the arrogance of a far-traveller with barely seventeen summers on him, Crowbone was as indifferent to Hammaburg as the few men with him were impressed; he had seen the Great City called Constantinople, which the folk here named Miklagard and spoke of in the hushed way you did with places that were legend. But Crowbone had walked there, strolled the flower-decked terraces in the dreaming, windless heat of afternoon, where the cool of fountains was a gift from Aegir, lord of the deep waters.

He had swaggered in the surrounds of the Hagia Sophia, that great skald-verse of stone which made Hammaburg's *cathedral* no more than a timber boathouse. There had been round, grey stones paving the streets all round the Hagia, Crowbone recalled, with coloured pebbles between them and doves who were too lazy to fly, waddling out from under your feet.

Here in Hammaburg were brown-robed priests banging bells and chanting, for they were hot for the cold White Christ here – so much so that the Danes had grown sick of Bishop

Ansgar, Apostle of the North, burning the place out from underneath him before they sailed up the river. That was at least five score years ago, so that scarce a trace of the violence remained – and Crowbone had heard that Hammaburg priests still went out to folk in the north, relentless as downhill boulders.

Crowbone was unmoved by the fervour of these shaven monks for he knew that, if you wanted to feel the power of the White Christ, then Miklagard, the Navel of The World, was the place for it. The spade-bearded priests of the Great City perched on walls and corners, even on the tops of columns, shouting about faith and arguing with each other; everyone, it seemed to Crowbone, was a priest in Miklagard. There, temples could be domed with gold, yet were sometimes no more than white walls and a rough roof with a cross.

In Miklagard it was impossible to buy bread without getting a babble about the nature of their god from the baker. Even whores would discuss how many Christ-Valkeyrii might exist in the same space while pulling their shifts up. Crowbone had discovered whores in the Great City.

Hammaburg's whores thought only of money. Here the air was thick with haar, like wet silk, and the Christ-followers sweated and knelt and groaned in fearful appeasement, for the earth had shifted and, according to some Englisc monks, a fire-dragon had moved over their land, a sure sign that the world would end as some old seer had foretold, a thousand years after the birth of their Tortured God. Time, it seemed, was running out.

Crowbone's men laughed at that, being good Slav Rus most of them and eaters of horse, which made them heathen in the eyes of Good Christ-followers. If it was Rokkr, the Twilight, they all knew none of the Christ bells and chants would make it stop, for gods had no control over the Doom of all Powers and were wyrded to die with everyone else.

Harek, who was by-named Gjallandi, added that no amount

of begging words would stop Loki squirming the earth into folds and yelling for his wife to hurry up and bring back the basin that stopped the World Serpent venom dripping on his face. He said this loudly and often, as befits a skald by-named Boomer, so that folk sighed when he opened his mouth.

Even though the men from the north knew the true cause of events, such Loki earth-folding still raised the hairs on their arms. Perhaps the Doom of all Powers was falling on them all.

Crowbone, for his part, thought the arrogance of these Christ-followers was jaw-dropping. They actually believed that their god-son's birth heralded the last thousand years of the world and that everyone's time was almost up. Twenty years left, according to their tallying; good Christ children born now would be young men when their own parents rose out of their dead-mounds and everyone waited to be judged.

Crowbone was hunched moodily under such thoughts, for he knew the whims of gods only too well; his whole life was a knife-edge balance, where the stirred air from a whirring bird's wing could topple him to doom or raise him to the throne he considered his right. Since Prince Vladimir of Kiev had turned his face from him, the prospect seemed more doom than throne.

'You should not have axed his brother,' Finn Horsehead growled when Crowbone spat out this gloomy observation shortly after Finn had shown up with Jarl Orm.

Crowbone looked at the man, all iron-grey and seamed like a bull walrus, and willed his scowl to sear a brand on Finn's face. Instead, Finn looked back, eyes grey as a winter sea and slightly amused; Crowbone gave up, for this was Finn Horsehead, who feared nothing.

'Yaropolk's death was necessary,' Crowbone muttered. 'How can two princes rule one land? Odin's bones – had we not just finished fighting the man to decide who ruled in Kiev and all the lands round it? Vladimir's arse would never have

stayed long on the throne if brother Yaropolk had remained alive.'

He knew, also, that Vladimir recognised the reality of it, too, for all his threats and haughtiness and posturing about the honour of princes and truces – Odin's arse, this from a man who had just gained a wife by storming her father's fortress and taking her by force. Yaropolk, the rival brother, had to die, otherwise he would always have been a threat, real or imagined and, one day, would have been tempted to try again.

None of which buttered up matters any with Vladimir, who had turned his back on his friend as a result.

'There had been fighting, right enough,' answered Orm quietly, moving from the shadows of the room. 'But a truce and an agreement between brothers marked the end of it – at which point you axed Yaropolk between the eyes.'

But it was all posturing, Crowbone thought. Vladimir was pleased his brother was dead and would have contrived a way of doing it himself if Crowbone had not axed the problem away.

The real reason for the Prince of Kiev's ire was that Crowbone's name was hailed just as frequently as Vladimir's now – and that equality could not be allowed to continue. It was just a move in the game of kings.

Crowbone fastened his scowl on the Bear-Slayer. A legend, this jarl of the Oathsworn – Crowbone was one of them and so Orm was *his* jarl, which fact he tried hard not to let scrape him. He owed Orm a great deal, not least his freedom from thralldom.

Eight years had passed since then. Now the boy Orm had rescued was a tall, lithe youth coming into the main of his years, with powerful shoulders, long tow-coloured braids heavy with silver rings and coins, and the beginning of a decent beard. Yet the odd eyes – one blue as old ice, the other nut-brown – were blazing and the lip still petulant as a bairn's.

‘Vladimir could no more rule with his brother alive than I can fart silver,’ Crowbone answered, the pout vanishing as suddenly as it had appeared. ‘When he has had time to think of this, he will thank me.’

‘Oh, he thanks you, right enough,’ Finn offered, wincing as he planted one buttock on a bench. ‘It is forgiveness he finds hard.’

Crowbone ignored the cheerful Finn, who was clearly enjoying this quarrel among princes. Instead, he studied Orm, seeing the harsh lines at the mouth which the neat-trimmed beard did not hide, just as the brow-braids did not disguise the fret of lines at the corners of the eyes, nor the scar that ran straight across the forehead above the cool, sometimes green, sometimes blue eyes. The nose was skewed sideways, his cheeks were dappled with little poxmark holes, his left hand was short three fingers, and he limped a little more than he had the year before.

A hard life, Crowbone knew and, when you could read the rune-marks of those injuries, you knew the saga-tale of the man and the Oathsworn he led.

Unlike Finn there was no grey in Orm Bear-Slayer yet, but they were both already old, so that a trip from Kiev, sluiced by Baltic water that still wanted to be ice, was an ache for the pair of them. Worse still, they had snugged the ship up in Hedeby and ridden across the Danevirke to Hammaburg, which fact Finn mentioned at length every time he shifted his aching cheeks on a bench.

‘Did the new Prince of Kiev send you, then?’ Crowbone asked and looked at the casket on the table. Silver full it was, including some whole coins and full-weight minted ones at that. Brought with ceremony by Orm and placed pointedly in front of him.

‘Is this his way of saying how sorry he is for threatening to stake me? An offering of gratitude for fighting him on to the throne of Kiev and ridding him of his rival?’

‘Not likely,’ Orm declared simply, unmoved by Crowbone’s attempt at bluster.

‘You were ever over-handly with an axe and a forehead, boy,’ Finn added and there was no grin in his voice now. ‘I warned you it would get you into trouble one day – this is the second time you have annoyed young Vladimir with it.’

The first time, Crowbone had been nine and fresh-released from slavery; he had spotted his hated captor across the crowded market of Kiev and axed him in the forehead before anyone could blink. That had put everyone at risk and neither Orm nor Finn would ever forget or forgive him for it.

Crowbone knew it, for all his bluster.

‘So whose silver is this, then?’ Crowbone demanded, knowing the answer before he spoke.

Orm merely looked at him, then shrugged.

‘I have a few moonlit burials left,’ he declared lightly. ‘So I bring you this.’

Crowbone did not answer. Moonlit buried silver was a waste. Silver was for ships and men and there would never be enough of it in the whole world, Crowbone thought, to feed what he desired.

Yet he knew Orm Bear-Slayer did not think like this. Orm had gained Odin’s favour and the greatest hoard of silver ever seen, which was as twisted a joke as any the gods had dreamed up – for what had the Oathsworn done with it after dragging it from Atil’s howe back into the light of day? Buried it in the secret dark again and agonised over having it.

Because Crowbone owed the man his life, he did not ever say to Orm what was in his heart – that Orm was not of the line of Yngling kings and that he, Olaf, son of Tryggve, by-named Crowbone, had the blood in him. So they were different; Orm Bear-Slayer would always be a little jarl, while Olaf Tryggvasson would one day be king in Norway, perhaps even greater than that.

All the same, Crowbone thought moodily, Asgard is a little

fretted and annoyed over the killing of Yaropolk, which, perhaps, had been badly timed. It came to him then that Orm was more than a little fretted and annoyed. He had travelled a long way and with few companions at some risk. Old Harald Bluetooth, lord of the Danes, had reasons to dislike the Oathsworn and Hammaburg was a city of Otto's Saxlanders, who were no friends to Jarl Orm.

'Not much danger,' Orm answered with an easy smile when Crowbone voiced this. 'Otto is off south to Langabardaland to quarrel with Pandulf Ironhead. Bluetooth is too busy building ring-forts at vast expense and with no clear reason I can see.'

To stamp his authority, Crowbone thought scathingly, as well as prepare for another war with Otto. A king knows this. A real jarl can understand this, as easy as knowing the ruffle on water is made by unseen wind – but he bit his lip on voicing that. Instead, he asked the obvious question.

'Do you wish me to find someone to take my place?'

A little more harshly said than he had intended; Crowbone did not want Orm thinking he was afraid, for finding a replacement willing to take the Oath was the only way to safely leave the Oathsworn. There were two others – one was to die, the other to suffer the wrath of Odin, which was the same.

'No,' Orm declared and then smiled thinly. 'Nor is this a gift. I am your jarl. I have decided a second longship is needed and that you will lead the crew of it. The silver is for finding a suitable ship. You have the men you brought with you from Novgorod, so that is a start on finding a crew.'

Crowbone said nothing, while the wind hissed wetly off the sea and rattled the loose shutters. Finn watched the pair of them – it was cunning, right enough; there was not room on one *drakkar* for the likes of Orm and a Crowbone growing into his power and wyrd, yet there were benefits still for the pair of them if Crowbone remained one of the Oathsworn.

Perhaps the width of an ocean or two would be enough to keep them from each other's throats.

Crowbone knew it and nodded, so that Finn saw the taut lines of the pair of them ease, the hackles drift downwards. He shifted, grinned and then grunted his pleasure like a scratching walrus.

'Where are you bound from here?' Crowbone asked.

'Back to Kiev,' Orm declared. 'Then the Great City. I have matters there. You?'

Crowbone had not thought of it until now and it came to him that he had been so tied up with Vladimir and winning that prince his birthright that he had not considered anything else. Four years he had been with Vladimir, like a brother . . . he swallowed the flaring anger at the Prince of Kiev's ingratitude, but the fire of it choked him.

'Well,' said Orm into the silence. 'I have another gift, of sorts. A trader who knows me, called Hoskuld, came asking after you. Claims to have come from Mann with a message from a Christ monk there. Drostan.'

Crowbone cocked his head, interested. Orm shrugged.

'I did not think you knew this monk. Hoskuld says he is one of those who lives on his own in the wilderness and has loose bits in the inside of his thought-cage. It means nothing to me, but Hoskuld says the priest's message was a name – Svein Kolbeinsson – and a secret that would be of worth to Tryggve's son, the kin of Harald Fairhair.'

Crowbone looked from Orm to Finn, who spread his hands and shrugged.

'I am no wiser. Neither monk nor name means anything to me and I am a far-travelled man, as you know. Still – I am thinking it is curious, this message.'

Enough to go all the way to Mann, Crowbone wondered and had not realised he had voiced it aloud until Orm answered.

'Hoskuld will take you, you do not need to wait until you

have found a decent ship and crew,' he said. 'You have six men of your own and Hoskuld can take nine and still manage a little cargo – with what you pay him from that silver, it is a fine profit for him. Ask Murrough to go with you, since he is from that part of the world and will be of use. You can have Onund Hnufa, too, if you want, for you might need a shipwright of his skill.'

Crowbone blinked a little at that; these were the two companions who had come with Orm and Finn and both were prizes for any ship crew. Murrough macMael was a giant Irishman with an axe and always cheerful. Onund Hnufa, was the opposite, a morose oldster who could make a longship from two bent sticks, but he was an Icelander and none of them cared for princes, particularly if they came from Norway. Besides that, he had all the friendliness of a winter-woken bear.

'One is your best axe man. The other is your shipwright,' he pointed out and Orm nodded.

'No matter who pays us, we are out on the Grass Sea,' he answered, 'fighting steppe horse-trolls, without sight of water or a ship. Murrough would like a sight of Ireland before he gets much older and you are headed that way. Onund does not like looking at a land-horizon that gets no closer, so he may leap at this chance to return to the sea.'

He stared at Crowbone, long and sharp as a spear.

'He may not, all the same. He does not care for you much, Prince of Norway.'

Crowbone thought on it, then nodded. Wrists were clasped. There was an awkward silence, which went on until it started to shave the hairs of Crowbone's neck. Then Orm cleared his throat a little.

'Go and make yourself a king in Norway,' he said lightly. 'If you need the Oathsworn, send word.'

As he and Finn hunched out into the night and the squalling rain, he flung back over his shoulder, 'Take care to keep the fame of Prince Olaf bright.'

Crowbone stared unseeing at the wind-rattling door long after they had gone, the words echoing in him. *Keep the fame of Prince Olaf bright* – and, with it, the fame of the Oathsworn, for one was the other.

For now, Crowbone added to himself.

He stirred the silver with a finger, studying the coins and the roughly-hacked bits and pieces of once-precious objects. Silver *dirham* from Serkland, some whole coins from the old Eternal City, oddly-chopped arcs of ring, sharp slivers of coin wedges, cut and chopped bar ingots. There was even a peculiarly shaped piece that could have been part of a cup.

Cursed silver, Crowbone thought with a shiver, if it came from Orm's hoard, which came from Atil's howe. Before that the Volsungs had it, brought to them by Sigurd, who killed the dragon Fafnir to possess it; the history of these riches was long and tainted.

It had done little good to Orm, Crowbone thought. He had been surprised when Orm had announced that he was returning to Kiev, for the jarl had been brooding and thrashing around the Baltic, looking for signs of his wife, Thorgunna, for some time.

She had, Crowbone had heard, turned her back on her man, her life, the gods of Asgard and her friends to follow a Christ priest and become one of their holy women, a nun.

That had been part of the curse of Atil's silver on Orm. The rest was the loss of his bairn, born deformed and so exposed – the act which had so warped Thorgunna out of her old life – and the death of the foster-wean Orm had been entrusted with, who happened to be the son of Jarl Brand, who had gifted the steading at Hestreg to Orm.

In one year, the year after Orm had gained the riches of Atil's tomb, the curse on that hoard had taken his wife, his newborn son, his foster-son, his steading, his friendship with the mighty and a good hack out of his fair fame.

Crowbone studied the dull, winking gleam of that pile and wondered how much of it had come from the Volsung hoard and how bad the curse was.

Sand Vik, Orkney, at the same time . . .

THE WITCH-QUEEN'S CREW

The wind blew from the north, hard and cold as a whore's heart so that clouds fled like smoke before it and the sun died over the heights of Hoy. The sea ran grey-green and froth flew off the waves, rushing like mad horses to shatter and thunder on the headlands, the undertow smacking like savouring lips until the suck was crushed by another wild-horse rush.

The man shivered; even the thick walls of this steading did not seem solid enough and he felt the bones of the place shudder up through his feet. There was comfort here, all the same, he saw, but it was harsh and too northern, even for him – the room was murky with reek because the doors were shut against the weather and the wind swooped in through the hearthfire smokehole and simply danced it round the dim hall, flaring the coals and flattening flame. It made the eyes of the storm-fretted black cat glow like baleful marshlights.

A light appeared, seeming to float on its own and flickering in the wild air, so that the man shifted uneasily, for all he was a fighting man of some note, and hurriedly brought up a hand to cross himself.

There was a chuckle, a dry rustle of sound like a rat in old bracken and the night crawled back from the flame, revealing gnarled driftwood beams, a hand on the lamp ring, blackness beyond.

Closer still and he saw an arm but only knew it from the dark by the silver ring round it, for the cloth on it was midnight

blue. Another step and there was a face, but the lamp blurred it; all the man could see clearly was the hand, the skin sere and brown-pocked, the fingers knobbed.

That and the eyes of her, which were bone needles threading the dark to pierce his own.

‘Erling Flatnef,’ said the dry-rustle voice, rheumed and thick so that the sound of his own name raised the hackles on his arm. ‘You are late.’

Erling’s cheeks felt stiff, as if he had been staring into a white blizzard, yet he summoned words from the depth of himself and managed to spit them out.

‘I waited to speak with my lord Arnfinn,’ he said and the sound of his voice seemed sucked away somehow.

‘Just so – and what did the son of Thorfinn Jarl have to say?’

The moth-wing hiss of her voice was slathered with sarcasm, for which Erling had no good reply. The truth was that the four sons of Thorfinn who now ruled Orkney were as much in thrall to this crumbling ruin, Gunnhild, Mother of Kings, as their father had been. Arnfinn, especially, was hag-cursed by it and had merely brooded his eyes into the pitfire and then waved Erling on his way without a word, trying not to look at his wife, Ragnhild, who was Gunnhild’s daughter.

Erling’s silence gave Gunnhild all the answer she needed. As her face loomed out from behind the blurring light of the lamp he was unable even to cross himself, was paralysed at the sight of it. Whatever The Lady wanted, she would get; not for the first time, Erling pitied the Jarls of Orkney and the mother-in-law they wore round their necks.

Not that it was an ugly face, aged and raddled. The opposite. It was a face with skin that seemed soft as fine leather with only a tracery of lines round the mouth, where the lips were a little withered. A harsh line or two here and there on it, which only accentuated the heart-leaping beauty that had

been there in youth. Gunnhild wanted to smile at the sight of him, but knew that would crack the artifice like throwing a stone on thin ice. She used her face as a weapon and clubbed him with it.

‘I had a son called Erling,’ she said and Erling stiffened. He knew that – Haakon Jarl had killed him. For a wild moment of panic Erling wondered if she sought to raise the dead son and needed to steal the name . . .

‘I have a task for you, Flatnose,’ she said in her ruin of a voice. ‘You and my last, useless son Gudrod and that Tyr-worshipping boy of yours – what is his name?’

‘Od,’ Erling managed and mercifully Gunnhild slid away from him, back into the shadows.

‘Listen,’ she said and laid the meat of it out, a long rasp of wonder in that fetid dark. The revelations left him shaking, wondering how she had discovered all this, awed at the rich *seidr* magic she still commanded – the gods knew how old she was, yet still beautiful and still a power.

Later, as he stumbled from the hall, the rain and battering wind were as much of a relief as goose-grease on a burn.