

AUSTRGOTALAND, 975AD

The sun stayed veiled behind lead clouds streaked with silver. The rain hissed and the sea heaved, black and sluggish as a walrus on a rock, while a wind dragged a fine smoke of spray into my eyes.

‘Not storm enough,’ Hauk Fast-Sailor declared and he had the right of it, for sure. There was not enough of a storm to stop our enemies from coming up the fjord with the wind in their favour and that great, green-bordered sail swelled out. On a ship with a snarling serpent prow that sail looked like dragon wings and gave the ship its name.

The oars on the *Fjord Elk* were dipped, but moving only to keep the prow beast snarling into the wind that drove the enemy down on us; there was no point in tiring ourselves – we were crew-light, after all – while the enemy climbed into their battle gear. When we saw their sail go down would be the time for worry, the time they were ready for war.

Instead, men kept their hands busy tightening straps and checking edges, binding back their hair as it whipped in the wind. All of Jarl Brand’s lent-men from *Black Eagle* were here, save six with Ref and Bjaelfi who were herding women and weans and thralls away from Hestreng hall and up to the valley, with as much food and spare sail for tentage as

they could carry. Away from the wrath of Randr Sterki and the snarlers on *Dragon Wings*.

I hoped Randr Sterki would content himself with looting and burning Hestreng, would not head inland too far. I had left him wethers and cooped hens and pigs to steal, as well as a hall and the buildings to burn – and if it was the Oathsworn he wanted . . . well, here we were, waiting for him at sea.

Still, I knew what drove Randr to this attack and could not blame him for it. I had the spear in my throat and the melted bowels that always came with the prospect of facing men who wanted to cleave sharp bars of metal through me but, for once, did not wish to be elsewhere. This was where I had to be, protecting the backs of mine and all the other fledglings teetering on flight's edge, from the revenge of raiding men.

Men like us.

Gizur, swinging down from stay to stay through the ranks of men, looked like a mad little monkey I had seen once in Serkland, his weather-lined face such a perfect replica that I smiled. He was surprised at that smile, considering what we faced, then grinned back.

'We should ship oars, Jarl Orm, before they get splintered.'

I nodded; when the ships struck, the oars on that side would be a disaster to us if we left them out. There was a flurry and clatter as the oars came in and were stacked lengthways; men cursed as shafts dunted them and now I saw the great snarling prow of *Dragon Wings* clearly, heard the faint shrieks and roars, saw the weapon-waving.

I was watching them flake the sail down to the yard when two of Jarl Brand's lent-men shoved through our throng, almost to the *Fjord Elk's* prow, nocking arrows as they went, stepping over bundled oars and shoving folk aside. They shot; distant screams made our own men roar approval – then curse as an answering flight zipped and shunked into the woodwork. One of the bowmen, Kalf Sygni, spun half round and clutched his forearm where a shaft was through, side to side.

‘Missed that coming,’ bellowed Finn, hefting his shield as he moved to the prow, clashing ring-iron shoulders with Nes-Bjorn, who was headed the same way; they glared at each other.

‘I am Jarl Brand’s prow-man on the *Black Eagle*,’ Nes-Bjorn growled.

‘You are not on the *Black Eagle*,’ Finn pointed out and, reluctantly, the big man gave way, letting Finn take his place. Across on *Dragon Wings* his counterpart, hero-warrior of his boat, stepped up, mailed, helmeted and carrying a shield, but nothing better than a ship-wood axe.

They had the sail down and the oars shipped, leaving *Dragon Wings* with enough momentum to crash on us, rocking the *Elk* sideways to the waterline, staggering men who had been unprepared for it. Randr’s crew howled and axes clattered over our side, causing men to duck and raise shields – the axe-owners hauled hard at the ropes ringed to the shafts, pulling the hooked heads tight to the inside of the *Elk* with their iron beards, clinching us close as lovers.

A man screamed as his leg went with such a pull, trapping him like a snared fox against the side while he beat and tugged. Holger, I remembered dully as he screamed his throat out in agony. His name was Holger.

An arrow skittered off the mast and whipped past my head; I wore no ring-coat, for I was not so sure I could wriggle out of it in time if I fell overboard. Botolf, who stood on my right, heard me curse and grinned.

‘Now you know what it feels like,’ he yelled and I laughed into his mad delight, for it was a long-standing joke that Botolf had never found a ring-coat big enough to fit him. Then he threw back his head and roared out his name; Randr Sterki’s men shrieked and howled; the sides of the boats clashed and men flung themselves forward while the locked ships groaned and rocked.

The worst thing about battle, after a few bloodings drive away the first fears of it, is that it is work. The stink and the

horror, the belly-wrenching terror and and savage hatred of it were all things I had grown used to – but the backbreaking labour of it was what always made me blench. It was like ploughing stony ground, where the stones rise up and try to hit you and the whole affair leaves you sick and tremble-legged with exhaustion. The one good part about being jarl was that you did not sink into the grind of it, at least not all at once – but you had to stand like a tree in a boiling flood and seem unconcerned.

I stood rock-still and guarded by Botolf's shield, watching the *Dragon Wings* crew pile forward in a rush, dipping both ships almost into the water with their weight. They struggled and hacked and died on the thwart-edges, my picked men darting in to cut the ropes that bound us together, or shoot out the men on *Dragon Wings* whose task it was to haul us tight.

They were red-mouthed screamers, Randr Sterki's crew, waving spears and axes, garbed in leather and some in no more than makeshift breastplates of knotted rope. They had helms of all kinds, none of them fine craftings, and waved blades as notched as a dog's jaw – even Randr Sterki's ring-mailed prowman wielded no better than an adze-axe. Yet they had the savagery of revenge in them and that made the arm strong and the edge sharp.

Randr stood and roared out unheard curses in the middle of his ship, in the middle of a group as unlike the men round them as sheep-droppings in snow. They made my knees turn to water, those men whose eyes stared and saw nothing, who wore only thick, hairy hides over their breeks, who champed flecks of foam on to the thicket of their beards and hefted weapons with an easy skill and arms blood-marked with strength runes. Some of them, I noted, had swords, well worn and well-earned.

'Bearcoats!' yelled Botolf in my ear. 'He has bearcoats, Orm . . .'

Even as he spoke I saw them, all twelve of them, stir like a wolfpack scenting a kill. Bearcoats – *berserker* – had been

no part of Randr Sterki's crew before. Where had he got them from? My mouth went dry; I saw them snarling and howling, slamming into those of their own side who did not see them in time to get out of the way.

The first of them, tow-haired, tangle-bearded, reached the side and howled out to the sky, then hurled himself over on my men before the cords of his neck had slackened; they hacked at him with the desperate fury of those too trapped to run. The rest of the pack began to follow and Randr Sterki urged them on with bellows from the middle of his ship, his face red and ugly with rage and battle.

'We shall have to kill pig-face,' panted Nes-Bjorn, suddenly on my other side, pointing to Randr. If he was cursing at having been left behind by Jarl Brand to serve with us on this seemingly bad-wyrded day, his cliff of a face did not show it.

'First stop the bearcoats,' I pointed out, as calmly as I could while watching tow-hair carve his way towards me, trailing blood and screams; Botolf hefted his shield and byrnie-biter spear and braced himself on his one good leg. I raised my own sword a little, as if only resting it lightly on one shoulder, while my throat was full of my heart at the sight of a berserker slashing a path straight to me.

'Ach,' said Nes-Bjorn with a dismissive wave of his bearded axe. 'We have our own man for that.'

At which point came a growling grunt from behind me, so like the coughing charge-roar of a boar that I half-spun in alarm. Then a half-naked figure with skin-marks of power and an axe in either hand launched straight over the heads of my own men, scattering them as he clattered into the howling bearcoat. Tow-Hair went down in a bloody eyeblink and the axes flailed on in Sygg Dusi's fists, his carefully applied skin-marks streaked with blood, as he hurled himself in a bellowing whirl of arms and legs and axes over the side and into the crowded *Dragon Wings*. Men scattered before him.

'Stygg Dusi,' Nes-Bjorn pointed out and split a feral grin

as the man by-named Shy Calm howled and chopped and died hard in the middle of the enemy ship.

‘There are twelve of them,’ I offered and Nes-Bjorn scowled.

‘Eleven now – no, ten, for Stygg has done well. Have you a point to make, Jarl Orm of the Oathsworn, or are you just after showing your skill at tallying?’

Then he elbowed men aside to reach the prow, where Finn, gasping and exhausted, had been forced to step back, ropey strings drooling from his mouth. The *Dragon Wings* prow man was nowhere to be seen.

I listened and watched as Stygg Dusi served out the last seconds of what the Norns had woven for him from the moment he slithered wetly into the world. Everything he had done had led to this place, this moment, and I raised my sword to the life he honoured us with, almost envied him in the certainty of his place in Valholl. *Not yet, but soon*, I was thinking, the old message we gave to all the dying to take with them to those gone before. Very soon now, it seemed.

The last rope was cut; Kalf Sygni, with the arrow still through his forearm, managed to shoot the last rope-hauler and the ships drifted apart from the stern, so that the prow beasts bobbed and snarled, almost seeming to strike out at each other. Men from both crews, trapped on the wrong boat, tried to fight their way to a thwart edge and leap for it.

Everything after that became a blur to me. I remember shoulder-charging a man, sending him flying into the water and it was only when he floundered there that I saw he wore a bearcoat. Finn loomed up, shook slaver and blood from his face, then launched back into the mad struggle, roaring curses and insults.

Hauk Fast-Sailor went down under the frenzied, raving chops of a wet-mouthed trio of bearcoats; Onund Hnufa went over the side, blood streaming from a cut on his head, and a man bound in knotted rope came at me, so that I had to kill him. By the time I looked, Onund had gone and I did not know if he had surfaced or not.

Something small and dark flew at the prow and Nes-Bjorn batted it contemptuously to one side. Flame engulfed him. Just like that. One minute he was roaring invites for someone to face him, the next minute he was enveloped in flame, a pillar of fire staggering about the prow. He fell back and men shrieked; one scrambled away screaming and batting at the flames on his leg, but that only caused his hands to flare. Another flung away a flaming shield, which hit the water and sank – but the water continued to burn in a circle.

‘Magic!’ yelled a voice, but it was no rune-curse, this. I had seen it before and the second little pot smacked into the *Elk’s* prow and burst into flames exactly as Roman Fire was supposed to. I watched the flames leap up the proud horns of Botolf’s carving, saw ruin in them even as the frantic crew of *Dragon Wings* saw those same flames leap to their own ship. Then Botolf yelled out that there was a second ship.

A second ship. Roman Fire. Bearcoats. These had been no part of Randr Sterki before now. I blinked and stared, my thoughts wheeling like the embers of my burning ship while men struggled and slipped and died, raving curses.

‘Orm – on your steerboard . . .’

I half-turned into a wet-red maw, where spittle skeined like spume off a wave. He had a greasy tangle of wild hair and eyes as mad as a kennel of frothing dogs, while the axe in his hand seemed as big as a wagon tree. I swung and missed, felt my sword bite into the wood of the mast, where it stuck.

I got my shield in the way a little, so that his axe splintered it and tore it sideways, out of my finger-short grasp. His whole body hit me then and there was a moment when I smelled the woodsmoke and grease stink of his pelt, the rankness of his sweat. My hand was wrenched from the hilt of my trapped sword.

Then there was only the whirl of silver sky and dark water and the great, cold plunge, like a hot nail in the quench.