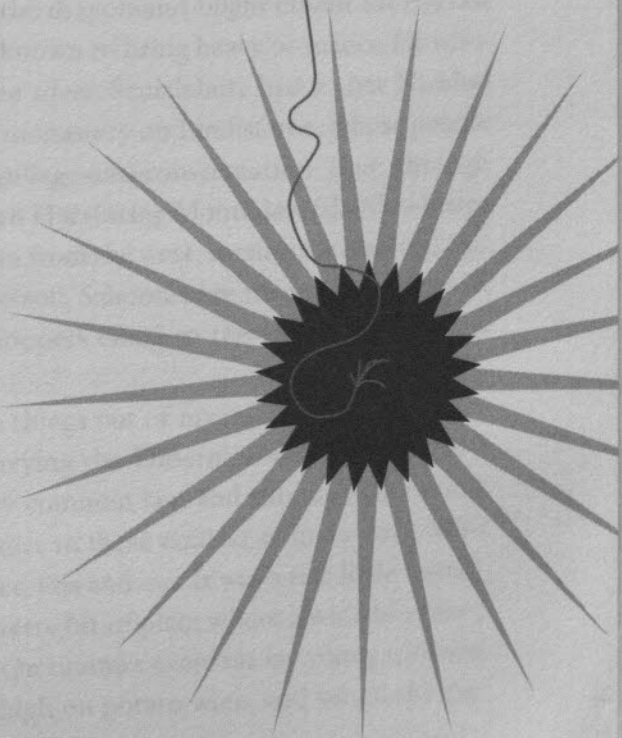


**EVERYTHING  
RAVAGED,  
EVERYTHING  
BURNED**



Just as we were all getting back into the mainland domestic groove, somebody started in with dragons and crop blights from across the North Sea. We all knew who it was. A turncoat Norwegian monk named Naddod had been big medicine on the dragon-and-blight circuit for the last decade or so, and was known to bring heavy ordnance for whoever could lay out some silver. Scuttlebutt had it that Naddod was operating out of a monastery on Lindisfarne, whose people we'd troubled on a pillage-and-consternation tour through Northumbria after Corn Harvesting Month last fall. Now bitter winds were screaming in from the west, searing the land and ripping the grass from the soil. Salmon were turning up spattered with sores, and grasshoppers clung to the wheat in rapacious buzzing bunches.

I tried to put these things out of my mind. We'd been away three long months harrying the Hibernian shores, and now I was back with Pila, my common-law, and thinking that home was very close to paradise in these endless summer days. We'd built our house together, Pila and me. It was a fine little wattle-and-daub cabin on a pretty bit of plain where a wide blue fjord stabbed into the land. On summer evenings my young wife and I would sit out front, high on potato wine, and watch the sun

stitch its orange skirt across the horizon. At times such as these, you get a good, humble feeling, like the gods made this place, this moment, first and concocted you as an afterthought just to be there to enjoy it.

I was doing a lot of enjoying and relishing and laying around the rack with Pila, though I knew what it meant when I heard those flint-edged winds howling past the house. Some individuals three weeks' boat ride off were messing up our summer and would probably need their asses whipped over it.

Of course, Djarf Fairhair had his stinger out even before his wife spotted those dragons winging it inland from the coast. He was boss on our ship and a fool for warfare. His appetite for action was so terrifying and infectious, he'd once riled up a gang of Frankish slaves and led them south to afflict and maim their own countrymen. He'd gotten in four days of decent sacking when the slaves began to see the situation for what it was and underwent a sudden change of attitude. Djarf had been fighting his way up the Rhine Valley, making steady progress through a half-assed citizens' militia of children and farmers, when the slaves closed in behind him. People who were there say he turned absolutely feral and began berserking with a pair of broadaxes, chewing through the lines like corn kernels on a cob, and that when the axes broke, he took up someone's severed leg and used it as a club, so horrifying those gentle provincials that they fell back and gave him wide berth to the ship.

Djarf was from Hedeby-Slesvig up the Sli fjord, a foul and rocky locality whose people take a worrisome pleasure in the gruesome sides of life. They have a habit down there if they don't like a child's looks when he slides from the womb, they pitch him into the deep and wait for the next one. Djarf himself was supposedly a colicky baby, and it was only the beneficence

of the tides and his own vicious tenacity that got him to the far beach when his father tried to wash him from the world.

He'd been campaigning for payback ever since. I guess I was with him on a search-and-destroy tour against Louis the Pious, and with my own eyes watched him climb up over the soldiers' backs and stride across their shoulders, scything skulls as he went. On that same trip, we ran low on food, and it was Djarf who decided to throw our own dead on the fire and have at last night's mutton when their stomachs burst. He'd been the only one of us to dig in, apart from a deranged Arab along as a spell-buster. He reached right in there, scooping out chewed-up victuals with a shank of pine bark. "Greenhorns," he called us, the firelight twitching on his face. "Food's food. If these boys hadn't gotten their threads snipped, they'd tell you the same thing."

So Djarf, whose wife was a sour, carp-mouthed thing and little argument for staying home, was agitating to hop back in the ship and go straighten things out in Northumbria. My buddy Gnut, who lived just over the stony moraine our wheat field backed up on, came down the hill one day and admitted that he, too, was giving it some thought. Like me, he wasn't big on warrioring. He was just crazy for boat. He'd have rowed from his shack to his shithouse if somebody would invent a ship whose prow could cut sod. His wife had passed years ago, dead from bad milk, and now that she was gone, the part of Gnut that felt peaceful in a place that didn't move beneath him had sickened and died as well.

Pila saw him coming down the hill and scowled. "Don't need to guess what he'll be wanting," she said, and headed back indoors. Gnut ambled down over the hummocky earth and stopped at the pair of stump chairs Pila and I had put up on the hill where the view was so fine. From there, the fjord shone like

poured silver, and sometimes you could spot a seal poking his head up through the waves.

Gnut's wool coat was stiff with filth and his long hair so heavy and unclean that even the raw wind was having a hard time getting it to move. He had a good crust of snot going in his mustache, not a pleasant thing to look at, but then, he had no one around to find it disagreeable. He tore a sprig of heather from the ground and chewed at its sweet roots.

"Djarf get at you yet?" he asked.

"No, not yet, but I'm not worried he'll forget."

He took the sprig from his teeth and briefly jammed it into his ear before tossing it away. "You gonna go?"

"Not until I hear the particulars, I won't."

"You can bet I'm going. A hydra flew in last night and ran off Rolf Hierdal's sheep. We can't be putting up with this shit. It comes down to pride, is what it comes down to."

"Hell, Gnut, when'd you get to be such a gung-ho mother-fucker? I don't recall you being so proud and thin-skinned before Astrud went off to her good place. Anyhow, Lindisfarne is probably sacked-out already. If you don't recall, we pillaged the tar out of those people on the last swing through, and I doubt they've come up with much in the meantime to justify a trip."

I wished Gnut would go ahead and own up to the fact that his life out here was making him lonely and miserable instead of laying on with this warrior-man routine. I could tell just to look at him that most days he was thinking of walking into the water and not bothering to turn back. It wasn't combat he was after. He wanted back on the boat among company.

Not that I was all that averse to a job myself, speaking in the abstract, but I was needing more sweet time with Pila. I cared more for that girl than even she probably knew, and I was hoping to get in some thorough lovemaking before the Haycutting

Month was under way and see if I couldn't make us a little monkey.

But the days wore on and the weather worsened. Pila watched it closely, and the sadness welled up in her, as it often did when I'd be leaving. She cussed me on some days, and others she'd hold me to her and weep. And late one evening, far toward dawn, the hail started. It came suddenly, with the rasping sound a ship makes when its keel scrapes stone. We hunkered down in the sheepskins, and I whispered soothing things to Pila, trying to drown out the clatter.

The sun was not yet full up in the sky when Djarf came and knocked. I rose and stepped across the floor, which was damp with cold dew. Djarf stood in the doorway wearing a mail jacket and shield and breathing like he'd jogged the whole way over. He chucked a handful of hail at my feet. "Today's the day," he said with a wild grin. "We got to get it on."

Sure, I could have told him thanks anyway, but once you back down from one job, you're lucky if they'll even let you put in for a flat-fee trade escort. I had to think long-term, me and Pila, and any little jits we might produce. Still, she didn't like to hear it. When I got back in bed, she tucked the covers over her face, hoping I'd think she was angry instead of crying.

The clouds were spilling out low across the sky when we shoved off. Thirty of us on board, Gnut rowing with me at the bow and behind us a lot of other men I'd been in some shit with before. Some of their families came down to watch us go. Ørl Stender fucked up the cadence waving to his son, who stood on the beach waving back. He was a tiny one, not four or five, standing there with no pants on, holding a baby pig on a hide leash. Some of the others on board weren't a whole lot older, rash and violent children, so innocent about the world they would just as soon stick a knife in you as shake your hand.

Gnut was overjoyed. He laughed and sang and put a lot of muscle into the oar, me just holding my hands on it to keep up appearances. I was missing Pila already. I watched the beach for her and her bright red hair. She hadn't come down to see me off, too mad and sad about me leaving to get up out of bed. But I looked for her anyway, the land scooting away with every jerk of the oars. If Gnut knew I was hurting, he didn't say so. He nudged me and joked, and kept up a steady flow of dull, merry chatter, as though this whole thing was a private vacation the two of us had cooked up together.

Djarf stood at his spot in the bow, the blood in his cheeks. His high spirits were wearying. Slesvigiers will burst into song with no provocation whatever, their affinity for music roughly on a par with the wretchedness of their singing. He screeched out a cadence ballad that lasted hours, and his gang of young hockchoppers howled along with him and gave no one any peace.

Three days out, the sun punched through the dirty clouds and put a steely shimmer on the sea. It cooked the brine out of our clothes and got everybody dry and happy. I couldn't help but think that if Naddod was really as serious as we thought he was, this crossing would be a fine opportunity to call up a typhoon and drown us all like cats. But the weather held, and the seas stayed drowsy and low.

We had less light in the evenings out here than at home, and it was a little easier sleeping in the open boat without an all-night sun. Gnut and I slept where we rowed, working around each other to get comfy on the bench. I woke up once in the middle of the night and found Gnut dead asleep, muttering and slobbering and holding me in a rough embrace. I tried to peel him

off, but he was large, and his hard arms stayed on me tight as if they'd grown there. I poked him and yelled at him, but the big man would not be roused, so I just tried to work up a little slack to where he wasn't hurting my ribs, and I drifted back to sleep.

Later, I told him what had happened. "That's a lot of horse-shit," he said, his broad face going red.

"I wish it was," I said. "But I've got bruises I could show you. Hey, if I ever come around asking to be your sweetheart, do me a favor and remind me about last night."

He was all upset. "Go to hell, Harald. You're not funny. Nobody thinks you're funny."

"I'm sorry," I said. "Guess you haven't had a whole lot of practice lately having a body beside you at night."

He rested on the oar a second. "So what if I haven't."

Thanks to the easy wind bellying our sails, we crossed fast and sighted the island six days early. One of the hockchoppers spotted it first, and when he did, he let everyone know it by cutting loose with a long, obnoxious battle howl. He drew his sword and swung it in figure eights above his head, causing the men around him to scatter under the gunwales. This boy was a nasty item, with a face like a buzzard's, his cheeks showing more boils than beard. I'd seen him around at home. He had three blackened, chopped-off thumbs reefed to his belt.

Haakon Gokstad glanced up from his seat in the stern and shot the boy a baleful look. Haakon had been on more raids and runs than the bunch of us put together. He was old and achy and worked the rudder, partly because he could read the tides by how the blood moved through his hands, and also because those old arms were poor for pulling oars. "Put your ass on that bench,

young man," Haakon said to the boy. "We got twelve hours' work between here and there."

The boy colored. He let his sword arm hang. He looked at his friends to see if he'd been humiliated in front of them and, if he had, what he needed to do about it. The whole boat was looking over him. Even Djarf paused in his song. The other kid on his bench whispered something and scooted over. The boy sat and took the oar. The rowing and the chatter started up again.

You could say that those people on Lindisfarne were fools, living out there on a tiny island without high cliffs or decent natural defenses, and so close to us and also the Swedes and the Norwegians, how we saw it, we couldn't afford *not* to come by and sack every now and again. But when we came into the bright little bay, a quiet fell over all of us. Even the hockchoppers quit grab-assing and looked. The place was wild with fields of purple thistle, and when the wind blew, it twitched and rolled, like the hide of some fantastic animal shrugging in its sleep. Wildflowers spurted on the hills in fat red gout. Apple trees lined the shore, and there was something sorrowful in how they hung so low with fruit. We could see a man making his way toward a clump of white-walled cottages, his donkey loping along behind him with a load. On the far hill, I could make out the silhouette of the monastery, which still lacked a roof from when we'd burned it last. It was a lovely place, and I hoped there would still be something left to enjoy after we got off the ship and wrecked it up.

We gathered on the beach, and already Djarf was in a lather. He did a few deep knee bends, got down in front of all of us and ran through some poses, cracking his bones and drawing out the

knots in his muscles. Then he closed his eyes and said a silent prayer. His eyes were still closed when a man in a long robe appeared, picking his way down through the thistle.

Haakon Gokstad had a finger stuck in his mouth where one of his teeth had come out. He removed the finger and spat through the hole. He nodded up the hill at the figure heading our way, "My, that sumbitch has got some brass," he said.

The man walked straight to Djarf. He stood before him and removed his hood. His hair lay thin on his scalp and had probably been blond before it went white. He was old, with lines on his face that could have been drawn with a dagger point.

"Naddod," Djarf said, dipping his head slightly. "Suppose you've been expecting us."

"I certainly have not," Naddod said. He brought his hand up to the rude wooden cross that hung from his neck. "And I won't sport with you and pretend the surprise is entirely a pleasant one. Frankly, there isn't much left here worth pirating, so, yes, it's a bit of a puzzle."

"Uh-huh," said Djarf. "Can't tell us anything about a hailstorm, or locusts and shit, or a bunch of damn dragons coming around and scaring the piss out of everybody's wife. You don't know nothing about any of that."

Naddod held his palms up and smiled piteously. "No, I'm very sorry, I don't. We did send a monkey pox down to the Spanish garrison at Much Wenlock, but honestly, nothing your way."

Djarf's tone changed, and his voice got loud and amiable. "Huh. Well, that's something." He turned to us and held up his hands. "Hey, boys, hate to break it to you, but it sounds like somebody fucked something up here. Old Naddod says it wasn't him, and as soon as he tells me just who in the hell it was behind the inconveniences we been having, we'll get back under way."

"Right." Naddod was uneasy, and I could see a chill run