

Chapter 1

Skarfr

A man needs wisdom

if he plans to wander widely;

life is easier at home.

The Wanderer's Hávamál

For the fifth morning since they left home, the sea fret called haar by the Orkneymen shrouded the dragon ship in grey wisps, rolling towards the invisible coast. Blown by the easterly winds that prevailed on this coast, the haar complicated mornings, gliding like an army of ghosts from the open sea towards the land.

If the white army was thickest on his left, then Skarfr reasoned that the shore must be on his right, and they were sailing southwards, on course for the friendly harbour of Grimsby. With such seafaring knowledge, Skarfr fought against his instinctive panic at sailing blind. And he trusted his captain.

He licked the salt from his chapped upper lip in a futile battle against the sea spray as the ship carved a path through the choppy grey waves of the Norð Sea. He ran his finger along the greased cloak stowed below the rowing bench and transferred the rancid grease onto his lips to prevent cracking. As he'd been shown by that ever-practical woman, Hlif, before she sneaked a lightly oiled kiss.

The only woman on the ship, Hlif was now lying on her back between rowing benches. She was also the only person small enough to fit neatly in the sleeping spaces of legroom between the thwarts, apart from the boy who blew the horn. But she was not sleeping.

Ghostly in trails of mist that revealed her face and then covered it, like clouds unveiling the moon,

Hlif was looking upwards, her white face screwed up in concentration.

‘Well?’ asked Rognvald, ship’s captain, Jarl of Orkneyjar and Hlif’s self-appointed guardian.

The plaintive note of a horn sounded from the prow, a regular warning of the ship’s presence. The horn blower blew the long note used in hunting for ‘stag at bay’, translating at sea to ‘Ship ahoy’. Wrecking reefs would pay no heed to the horn, but it would save them from crashing into another vessel. Fourteen horns echoed, each in their turn, indicating the positions of the other ships in the company, behind the *Sun-Chaser*.

Skarfr noticed the upward tilt of Jarl Rognvald’s mouth and guessed why his lord was so cheerful. *Rognvald’s* company of ships was following *his* lead despite the haar. Despite the arrogance of their guide Eindridi, one of the other captains, forced by the weather to defer to Rognvald’s competence.

‘I can feel the swelling waves moving from my left calf to my right shoulder,’ declared Hlif, ‘and some choppy ones in the same direction.’

Skarfr interpreted the information for Rognvald and the navigator. ‘The swell fits the haar so we’re heading slightly out to sea. Sou’-sou’-east?’ he queried, applying his recent understanding of navigation.

Rognvald grunted and muttered to himself. ‘Choppy waves mean we’re not far from the coast. Best keep the sail to a single reef till we can see again.’

From the moment the Jarl had discovered his ward’s skill in sensing the direction of the swell, he’d asked her to check it twice daily, early and late, so their pilot could check the ship’s course.

‘Aye, slow and steady. Hold this course,’ judged the pilot. ‘Take us out until there’s only swell. And with any luck, we’ll be out of the sea fret all the quicker further from land. Another hour or so and we’ll see again.’

‘Praise the gods,’ said Hlif. ‘Another hour on my back checking every roll and dip will be quite enough for me.’

There was a snigger from some unfortunate seaman.

‘I know that’s you, Bandy-legs,’ accused Hlif, ‘and you’ll regret that thought when we break our fast and your share is smaller than it might have been.’

‘Wasn’t me, Hlif, honest,’ the accused replied, with the speed of habit.

Skarfr controlled his equally habitual instinct to punch anyone who insulted Hlif. He hated this pretence that she was no more to him than his liege lord’s ward. He hated that their hand-fasting was secret. But what else could they have done?

Like an otherworldly echo of the horns, a plaintive cry came from the white blanket obscuring the midships. Not just once but repeated, an eerie sound that lodged in a man’s guts and twisted. And it was prowling the ship, nearing the stern and the woman lying vulnerable on the deck.

‘Christ Jesus! That cursed cat!’ swore the pilot, who crossed himself as a furred monster emerged from the mist. Black as an imp save for a white moustache, as if he’d brushed against the mist and some had stuck, the cat homed in on Hlif. He head-butted his mistress and then snuggled under her waterproof cape, complaining loudly.

‘He’s just hungry,’ Hlif translated, as the reverberations of a purring cat replaced the wailing.

‘Then he mun work for it like the rest of us, till we’re out of this fret. We’re all hungry,’ observed the pilot sourly.

He wasn’t the only one who hid his fear of the cat under rough jokes about skinning methods and fur hats but nobody on board ship would disobey Rognvald’s orders or risk Hlif’s anger by harming the beast. And even if the cat’s fur were not marred by a warrior’s fight history, black was little prized. Reluctantly the ship’s crew agreed that the ugly, One-eyed cat was worth more alive than dead.

By the time Rognvald had realised his ship carried a stowaway, home was far behind and his threat of drowning the brute met with an impassioned argument from his housekeeper regarding rodent control, provisions and providence.

‘He has *one eye*,’ Hlif had pointed out with heavy emphasis.

Christian pilgrims they might be but not even Rognvald could ignore this resemblance to Óðinn. And

all knew what punishments had been dealt out by the One-eyed wanderer when he'd sought hospitality and been turned from the door.

Throughout the debate over his future, the cat licked his paws and washed himself thoroughly. When Rognvald qualified his grudging assent with 'but he'd better catch some rats,' the cat bestowed a contemptuous, green, One-eyed stare on the Jarl and settled in. Although Hlif called him One-eye, an indirect reference to his celestial protector, the crew had other names for him.

Cat and pilot had taken an instant dislike to each other from the moment Rognvald had picked up the local navigator at the Tyne port of Newcastle on the previous day. The pilot knew his own worth and was accustomed to telling others what to do. The same could be said of the cat but the pilot felt strongly that his skills as navigator counted for more than rat-catching.

He knew this journey even in darkness as black as the coal he usually carried on such trips. He would pilot them as far as Grimsby, then negotiate a cargo and ship back up the coast to Newcastle. Maybe the captains would find another man to pilot the next stretch of the journey or maybe not. The further south they sailed, the less they'd be bothered by haar and the more Rognvald could use his own men's skills. After all, his fellow-captain Eindridi had sailed this course before, travelled all the way to Jórsalaheim.

Eindridi had inspired Rognvald to make the pilgrimage but would never accept his leadership, whatever the King of Norðvegr's decree. From the ostentatious ornaments on his ship to the patronising advice he offered, Eindridi attempted to take the wind from Rognvald's sails at every opportunity. Rognvald's response was to call on Eindridi's knowledge of the route only when he had to, between gritted teeth.

'Take the steerbord, Skarfr and tell Coal-pilot of any changes Hlif senses,' said Rognvald. From this moment on, the pilot was named more personally than merely Pilot, as was usual. 'I'll let the men know we're fine and pass on the word to the other ships.' Suiting words to action, he picked his way forward, yelling encouragement. The words were lost in the mist but the tone was true. Even the horn

sang out with more confidence.

We're here. We're doing fine. You're doing fine. Follow me.

His hand steady on the steerboard to the right behind him on the stern of the ship, Skarfr watched the rise and fall of Hlif's supine body, wrapped in her oiled bedsack and tried not think along the same lines as Bandy-legs.

In the eerie white of otherworld, he waited for a change in the wave pattern, and words for a poem came to him.

Wave-walkers, Soul-stealers, Wraith-robbers

This time, the scream that interrupted Skarfr's thoughts was no cat's.

Chapter 2

Fergus, Orkneyjar

Fergus was crouching, milking the cow in the far pasture, his thoughts drifting, fluffy as sunny-day clouds, while his hands deftly coaxed a warm stream into the pail. Creamy yellow, rich and buttery. Brigid would be happy and their newly-built dairy would fill with cheeses.

This year's calf was tied to a post beside her mother, impatient for her turn to suckle. Fergus couldn't decide whether he would keep the little beauty or sell her and invest in more sheep. If she were like her mother when she grew up, the calf would be a treasure. If she was well cared for. Rauðka, named after her russet coat, was the proof that a farmer reaped what he sowed, with beasts as with barley.

Having taken his share, a full pail, Fergus unloosed the calf, which immediately latched on to a teat. Rauðka lowed and let down more milk, generous as always.

Pail to the dairy, then water from the well. Fergus listed his last chores for the day, but he could not prevent a niggling worry from surfacing again.

The letter should have reached his master, Skarfr, if the ships hadn't sailed yet. With any luck, Skarfr would have read the words of atonement from the man who'd blighted his childhood and repented on his deathbed. Skarfr's long sea voyage would be blessed with that knowledge and he could forget the past. Or even forgive. Only in his twenties, he was too young to carry such a weight of blood debts, whether for himself and his friend, Hlif.

With all of this in mind, Fergus had granted the old man's last wishes, in Christian manner, despite the cruelty he and Brigid had also suffered when Botolf was their master. But when he handed the letter to the messenger and showed the name on the outside of the parchment, confirming that Skarfr was the recipient, the man had taken his word for that and not even checked.

In unchristian manner, Fergus kept wondering whether such a spiteful master had truly repented on

his deathbed. Botolf knew Fergus could not read. What if the letter contained something quite different? What if those had not been the letters of Skarfr's name? If only the messenger had looked, had read the name aloud and confirmed it. If only Fergus had not been too proud to ask what the writing said.

Still, he shouldered the pail. *No point crying over spilt milk*. He was probably worrying over nothing.

That's when he smelled it. The wrongness reached his nose first. Then his fluffy clouds darkened to smoky-grey, to smoke itself, acrid and horribly familiar from when Vikings had raided his village in Írland, then torched it.

He dropped the pail. Scanning his surroundings for the source of the smoke, he hardly noticed the precious liquid creaming the spring grass before trickling down long blades to disappear.

Even as he prayed it be not so, he could see birds scattering above a plume of smoke from the direction of the longhouse, where Brigid was cooking their evening meal and waiting for him to bring the milk home. Such luxury they lived in now. The smoke darkened the sky, billowing up from the longhouse as the fire took hold. Greedy for air, the first flames blazed high.

Fergus stumbled into a run as he tried to understand what his senses told him.

How could this be a Viking raid when they lived in Orkneyjar now, not Írland and their master *was* a Viking? His memories must be playing tricks on him and mistaking present for past. Brigid had surely been careless, dried a shirt too close to the hearth-fire or some such accident. Terrible but not as much so as the thing he feared.

Brigid, pulsed his heart as he ran. *Brigid*. He could picture her as a girl, tied up by the raiders, her blue eyes warning him as she lied. Her prattle of his nobility, and of a ransom, won him a place beside her on the enemy ship. As a woman, she'd taken him to bed in this cold longhouse where they slaved on a foreign shore. As his wife, she'd shared in the joy of running the homestead for their young master, now he'd come of age. *Brigid*.

He was half-way across the first field, cursing his fancy for milking outdoors. If he'd brought the

cow to the byre, he'd have been at hand, in time to put the fire out. Now he could see the thatched roof flaming skywards in an evil puppet-play, as if straw figures burned alive above their home.

Then he heard men shouting, laughing, as they do to encourage each other in acts of violence.

And Brigid screamed.

His fears were not wrong. His legs pumped faster and blood pounded in his ears so loud he almost missed the words that came in a desperate shout, words in Irish, cut off by a grunt of pain.

'Remember *Drom Reagh!* Go to the lady across the water. RUN!'

He stopped in his tracks, understanding but rebellious. *Drom Reagh* was their home settlement in Ireland, a reminder that they'd survived worse, that she'd saved him.

But that was why he couldn't leave her to *them*. He would die protecting her.

Exactly so. And her last words had been protecting him. So he wouldn't die.

He turned to run as fast away from the longhouse as he'd run towards it, but he was still in two minds. He hesitated.

What use will you be to her if she lives and you're dead?

But what use is my life if she's dead?

Above the crackle of flames, he heard a man hurl orders while horses whinnied in fear. Then curses and shouts headed his way along with thudding hoofbeats.

Brigid had given away that there was someone else nearby. Did they already know that Fergus lived there with her? Was this attack aimed specifically at them, not just a random raid? Something in Brigid's words was important but he had no time to think. There was no time to do more than follow her last instruction so run he did.

He ran back past Rauđka and her calf, shouted at them, waved his arms around, praying they too would run away. Whether his crazed behaviour had its effect or the whiff of smoke spooked them, he couldn't tell, but they galloped off. For once, Fergus hoped they'd escape as far as possible.

'May God and Dagda protect us all,' he murmured, without any real hope that any gods of Ireland

were looking out for his kin or kine this day.

In the open landscape of Orkneyjar, his only hope of hiding was in buildings or boats. He could not expect his neighbours to shelter a thrall against the men on horseback. He could see the nearest longhouse, an impossible distance away. Between him and the house was an outbuilding, little more than a shed but it would do. They had not seen him yet.

Chapter 3

Fergus, Orkneyjar

His heart bursting, Fergus made one last effort and reached the mud walls. He ducked behind the building, walked to the other corner, then dropped to all fours to head south to the shore, where his own boat was beached. His quarter-turn in direction would throw the raiders off the scent if they carried straight on towards the neighbour's longhouse, as would seem natural.

They were close now, approaching the outbuilding. Only tall grasses were between him and his pursuers. They must surely smell the sweat that stuck his shirt to his body as he crawled stealthily towards his only hope of escape.

The horses drew up and Fergus held still, his cramped muscles protesting.

'Leave him go,' said a rough voice in Norn, the local version of the Vikings' language and one in which Fergus was fluent after years living here. 'The lord said to avoid being seen and nobody will believe a thrall's ravings.'

'Not in the time between him speaking and us stilling his tongue,' said another, then laughed.

'The lord's happy with the one he's got. Let's go before his mood changes again.'

Clicking their tongues, they urged their horses back the way they'd come.

Fergus dropped onto his belly in the grass, shaking, unable to move.

The lord? Who had done this?

The one he'd got? Brigid was alive? Taken once more by a raider?

An ant changed course in front of him, crawled up a vertical green blade without slowing down. It crossed the bridge offered by broken cow parsley. Then went down another blade of grass and out of sight, the Fergus-shaped obstacle bypassed and forgotten. If only he could avoid danger so easily.

The bellow of a terrified cow seared his ear-drums. Had the riders taken out their frustration on

Rauðka? The thought hardened something in Fergus. After all he and Brigid had been through, this should not be how their story ended.

He dragged himself to his feet, heedless of whether he might be seen. The raiders had gone.

Their message, however, was visible for miles and local men were running crossing the fields, the word 'Fire!' on their lips. All farmers were neighbours when it came to fighting a common enemy that could destroy their harvest and kill their livestock.

'Here man, take this.' The words were in Norn but the accent was as foreign as Fergus'.

Fergus started at the voice, at the skin held out for him to drink some water. A kindness that came from a different world, where his home had not been burned to the ground.

The speaker was a thrall like himself, a burly low-browed man, slow of speech and slow to anger, nicknamed Ox. Fergus knew him from the baths, didn't know if Ox had any other name.

His master was behind him, showing no interest in another man's thrall when there was an emergency threatening his own homestead.

'Get going, Ox. If that fire spreads, we're all in trouble.' Ox's master didn't wait but ran off himself towards the burning longhouse.

Fergus grabbed the big man's arm, told him urgently, 'My cow and calf, they were spooked by the fire. If you find them,' *alive, please God*, 'keep them till my master returns.'

Ox nodded and left him.

In a daze, Fergus saw men rushing towards him from the other houses in the settlement as word reached the scattered inhabitants. They ignored him and ran past, carrying their spades and buckets, to dig trenches and throw water, to stifle and quench the fiery threat to their own properties.

The house was a lost cause but Fergus was too numb to care. Even so, he had to know what *they* had done, to see for himself – and to see if there was a corpse in the ashes.

He trudged heavily back across the pastureland of which he'd been so proud. He passed the ropes he used to tie up the cow and calf, still dangling from the tethering posts, ominous as nooses. No sign of

Rauðka. He prayed that was good news and continued to the site where his home used to stand.

To the flames, his home was just fire-wood and it had been reduced to ashes in the time it took a man to milk a cow. The wind had done its part too and was still swirling sparks and black specks. Around the charred earth men made a chain, with buckets from the well to wherever sparks flared up anew. Choking, swearing, they pulled their tunics up over their mouths and noses, but they had the spread under control.

The ashes were too hot to walk over but he could see that nothing of value remained. He would have to report to his master one day, when he returned from his long sea voyage, so he itemised the damage as best he could.

Gone.

One longhouse with all contents.

One cow and calf. No corpses, so maybe they had run from the smoke.

One stable. No corpse, so they must have stolen the pony.

One female thrall. No corpse, so they must have stolen her too.

There was still hope for Rauðka and her calf. So a god had heard his prayers, he told himself, which meant there was still hope for Brigid.

Remaining

One stone byre

One spade leaning against the byre

12 sheep, grazing

Two cookpots and the metal chain which hung the pot above the hearth

One male thrall, beside himself with fear and anger, all mixed in a stew

Something glinted on the ground and he stooped to pick it up. One thing of value did remain: Brigid's silver ring with a blue stone in it, that he'd bought her from the market, when he'd been richly paid for his services to a lady. Sapphire, the jewel-seller had told him, and maybe it was. She'd have put it on when she finished her chores, with some daft fancy of looking pretty for him. She always looked pretty to him, although he knew her face was careworn and her body lumpen with years and overwork. The stone matched her eyes, blue, sparkling, as Irish as his true home. He slipped the ring on his little finger.

She'd stopped him spending that pouch of money and true enough, they didn't need to, now they were guardians of the homestead in their master's absence. He'd meant to formally register their freedom with the Thing, their local council, but he hadn't had the time and Fergus hadn't thought it mattered. Maybe it didn't. But now Brigid was missing, maybe it did.

Fergus had listened to Brigid, as he always did, and he'd buried his pouch of money. Not so near the longhouse as to be found by raiders – was that a premonition or caution born from experience? But not so far that others would think it their own land and accidentally come across it.

He walked away from the house to the nearest remaining grass, lay on his back and shut his eyes. But he could not stop seeing. If men spoke to him, he did not reply and they soon gave up. For hours he lay there, until there was silence.

Then he stood up, filled the waterskin Ox had left him, picked up the spade and walked to the place marked by a pattern of stones that looked natural to anyone but the man who'd laid them in that pattern. He moved the stones and dug up his pouch. A pleasing, jangling weight in his hand. He slipped Brigid's ring into the pouch for safe-keeping, until he could place it back on her finger.

The clink of coin had made him so happy once, imagining what this money could do to make Brigid's life better. He had earned it too, rowing at night across the dangerous waters of the Pentlandsfjord to save a lady's life. His master had said her husband would kill her if they did not take her to safety on

the mainland and so the two of them had rowed the small faering with only the Lady Inge herself to steer them.

The lady across the water.

He knew what was being asked of him. Brigid wanted him to go to Inge, to Ness on the mainland. The lady would shelter him because of what he'd done for her.

But there was more than that. Fergus ran the day's events through his memory again, the raiders' words. *Their lord.* Not wanting to be seen.

And there it was, clear as day. Someone bearing a grudge had torched the longhouse. Inge's husband must have found out what they'd done.

Someone had told Thorbjorn Klerk *who* had helped his wife escape. Thorbjorn Klerk, who was the godfather of Orkneyjar's Jarl Harald and the real power on these islands while Fergus' master and *his* lord, Jarl Rognvald, were away at sea. No wonder Brigid wanted Fergus to leave the islands.

But why now? Who could have told Thorbjorn? Had one of Inge's servants noticed and betrayed them? If so, they'd have spoken out at the time, years ago, and claimed a reward. Why would Thorbjorn take revenge now?

Fergus tried to recall the sequence of events. His master Skarfr had arrived in a hurry at the longhouse, with Hlif, the woman who'd come with him before, and with Inge, her friend. Brigid had fed them all before the two men left to row across the sea with Inge, leaving Hlif to recover overnight and put up with vicious tongue of the old man, Botolf.

Fergus checked himself. *Botolf.* What if that feckin' letter had been no act of repentance but a last act of spite from the old man, the hearth-worm. Botolf, who had been Skarfr's guardian and teacher, and as harsh a master to his ward as he was to the two thralls. Once Skarfr came of age, he had allowed Botolf to stay in the house from pity. Then Fergus had buried his body with due rites, from pity.

And had carried out his last wishes regarding a letter, left with Fergus to be delivered after Botolf's death. Fergus had believed it was for Skarfr and honest. True enough, no good deed went unpunished!

Bile rose as Fergus realised what the name must have been, the one he did not know how to read. The messenger must have read the name, assumed Fergus was mistaken and had delivered the letter betraying Skarfr directly to Thorbjorn. Fergus had indeed carried out an old man's last wishes – for revenge, not for atonement.

His stomach heaved. This day's events were his fault. And however many years Skarfr took sailing on his pilgrimage to Jórsalaheim, Thorbjorn would be waiting for him when he returned. There would be a reckoning because of the mistake he, Fergus, had made. Because he couldn't feckin' read.

Only two people would understand. One of them was in Thorbjorn's hands. The other knew intimately what the unthroned ruler of Orkneyjar was capable of. Fergus made his way to the beach, to catch the tide. He must once more battle the Pentlandsfjord in a rowboat to reach the lady across the water, Inge Asleifsdottir. He had nothing to lose and if he drowned in the attempt this time, so be it. He would rather die than give up on Brigid.

Chapter 4

Skarfr

*Value a ship for its speed
a shield for its protection,
a sword for its sharpness,
and a woman for her kiss.*

The Wanderer's Hávamál

After the scream came a splash, and a silence that was not absence of noise. The creak of wood and whoosh of the wind still marked the ship's course. But no human voices could be heard. Men were listening, and straining to see what was out there in this sea of clouds.

Something knocked against the ship, an insistent 'Let me in' rat-a-tat on wood. The men nearest the noise cursed or prayed.

'It's one of Eindridi's men, Captain. They called him Fire-starter. He's dead!' yelled Black-hammer, a swarthy veteran of many raids and no pilgrimages.

'Drowned?' Rognvald's tone held a question that should not have been needed.

'No.' Black-hammer's answer confirmed what the scream had suggested. 'The water's red around him. There's a chest wound. He was stuck with a blade.'

'Push him away from the ship,' ordered Rognvald, his face grim. 'We can do nothing for him now but pray. May the lord have mercy on his soul.'

Under his breath, he added, 'For I shall have none on whoever did this.'

In glimpses through the swirling mist, Skarf could see two shipmates using an oar to push the corpse

away from the side of the ship, swearing as it returned each time to gently knock, knock against the wooden barrier.

Let me in, brothers.

Finally, after the men used two oars to push the corpse away from the ship, it found its own course, bobbed along like a fishing-float and disappeared from sight.

‘Turn against the current,’ Rognvald told him, ordering the ship further out to sea and away from whatever remained of Fire-starter. The pilot made no objection.

Skarfr’s arm muscles tensed as the steerboard fought the slight turn and his dragon tattoo rolled like a swelling wave, sending the dragon’s strength through him in fire and smoke.

Smoke, he thought, and suddenly the otherworldly whiteness was no threat but an element in which he could find his way, trust the dragon in himself. The veil between worlds was but dragon breath.

‘It’s clearing.’ Hlif staggered a little as she stood up beside him and Rognvald lurched back to join them. Visibility had indeed improved but the future was still dark and their course dangerous.

‘I’ll get you some food before you set the watch,’ Hlif told the Jarl and she scrambled up to the storage section midship, where she kept the company’s stock of dried fish, bread and ale. As house-keeper, she was in charge of provisions and rations. Between meal-times, she curled up between the thwarts and kept out of the way. Whenever the ships pulled up onto the sands, Hlif was queen, organising scavenging forays and cookfires, storing leftovers for the next day’s voyage. On the occasions the company reached a port, she took the opportunity to trade and to restock.

She’d worked hard over the years to win respect from Rognvald’s people despite her father’s infamy but not all of the ship’s company considered her an asset. Beside Skarfr in the stern, Jón Halt-foot watched Hlif with disapproval. Married to Rognvald’s sister in Norðvegr, Jón bestowed opinions like largesse on less fortunate companions. However, the Jarl tolerated and trusted Jón, so his crew did likewise – and marvelled at the unlikely relationship.

Jón’s halting gait came from a wound given to him by his brother-in-law, back in the times when

they were related only by a long feud and a violent clash. Had they really resolved their dispute with a marriage? The alliance had been a gesture of truce, apparently accepted by both. Jón's loyalty over the years since could not be disputed so maybe miracles did happen. Skarfr could only hope that, when they reached Jórsalaheim, Rognvald would show the same magnanimity to him as he had to Jón.

'This is no place for a woman,' Jón complained to Rognvald. 'How she talked you into it I'll never know. Thank the lord she's ill-favoured and past marrying age or you'd be dead of exhaustion fending off would-be suitors.'

'She knows marriage is forbidden her,' said Rognvald. 'As do my men. And she's a good housekeeper.'

Skarfr watched Hlif stagger past the ropes and stanchions and brace herself for the motion of the heaving deck so as to bring them food. She opened the cloth wrapping and offered the bannocks and fish to Rognvald first. The Jarl took his share and washed it down with a swig of ale from the skin she'd passed to him.

Struggling to hold his peace, Skarfr sipped some water from the leather bottles they all kept with their packs. His throat was as salt-dried as his lips. Ensuring fresh water was replenished was another of Hlif's responsibilities and they were lucky to have her on board, he silently rebuked Jón.

Did the man think Hlif was deaf? Apparently so, as Jón continued, 'And at least she's sensible. Despite wearing that *thing*. It doesn't behove a pilgrim. And Bishop William has made his opinions clear.'

Luckily, the bishop was at the other end of the ship, no doubt taking the lord's name in vain every time he spotted One-eye. His antipathy to the cat rivalled Coal-pilot's and Skarfr didn't blame either of them.

Still holding her food parcel, Hlif's hand moved protectively to the wand attached to her practical belt, where it jostled weights, scissors and other tools of her trade as housekeeper. With its iron tip and ash stem, the wand could be as useful a weapon as a dagger but its true value in protecting Hlif was in

making men wonder what otherworld powers she could call upon. Her sharp tongue completed her armoury and she was fully capable of looking after herself on a ship full of men.

Tiny, indomitable, she ignored the aspersions cast on her appearance and shouted over the wind and creaking planks. ‘If your great-granny hadn’t sailed on a longship, you’d not have been born, Jón Petersson! Nor would Grimsby be a friendly port, if Norðwomen hadn’t settled there.’

She held out the open cloth and added, ‘If you know a man who can trade, store and ration provisions better than I can, drop me off at Grimsby Port and I’ll take up employment with someone who appreciates my skills.’

Jón took his portion of food, spitting bits of bread as he muttered, ‘Worse claws than her cursed cat. I pity her husband if she *was* allowed to marry. She’s her father’s daughter.’

Rognvald passed the ale-skin to Skarfr without comment at the same time as Hlif offered him food. Hlif, the cursed daughter of the man who’d killed Saint Magnus. She’d worked so hard to gain respect from those who feared her and yet still her father’s crime tainted her..

‘Thank you,’ Skarfr told her, his eyes saying more. They could only steal moments together when they beached the ship. On board, there was nothing more than covert glances, or an accidental brush of hands; undercurrents as dangerous as those of the Norð Sea.

She grunted acknowledgement but kept her attention on Rognvald.

‘One more day,’ said the pilot. ‘Then we’ll be in Grimsby.’

‘You’ll like Grimsby,’ Rognvald told his ward. ‘Good trading.’

Then he asked Skarfr, ‘Have I told you about the time I met a young Norðvegr man in a tavern there? We drank and spouted poetry like young men and he confided he was the king’s son, born on the left side. I thought this a great joke and we parted good friends.’

Skarfr smiled. He’d heard the story before but he didn’t mind. Repetition helped him commit it to memory, shape it into part of the saga that would one day be Rognvald’s memorial.

‘When Gilli became King of Norðvegr, you could have knocked me down with a feather. But all he

said was true. He was King Bare-legs' bastard and stayed as true a friend to me as any a man I've met.'

Something in Rognvald's tone alerted Skarfr to the change, a wistfulness. Sure enough, his lord's face showed in furrows how many hours he'd been guiding the ship.

'My lord,' said Skarfr softly. 'If I take this watch while you sleep, you'll be ready for the entry to harbour.'

'You'll wake me if I'm needed?' The question was acceptance. Rognvald needed sleep.

'Aye.'

'Keep up the horn till it's clear,' Rognvald yelled, and the message was passed on from the stern through the midship and as far as the horn blower, who answered with the customary long note.

Skarfr imagined him at the prow, puffing mist and mournful notes, a replacement figurehead for the carved dragon that had been unscrewed and stowed during what should be a peaceful passage.

Fourteen horns echoed the first. Fifteen ships and their captains, in harmony – while the fog lasted.

'Hlif,' Rognvald commanded. 'You get some sleep too.'

Skarfr sighed inwardly. He'd hoped to talk to Hlif without worrying as to what they might let slip.

It would be a very long voyage.

One more day. Then another. And it had just begun.

Chapter 5

Skarfr

*Where the beaches are small
it's a small sea that washes them -
and so it is with little minds.*

The Wanderer's Hávamál

What a luxury to pull the ship up to a wooden jetty in a calm haven rather than drop anchor off an unknown shore or run her up a beach at the whim of wind and tide. The port of Grimsby was on the south side of a wide river mouth, which was silting up enough to make wooden walkways a necessity rather than a bonus.

Armód was in fine skaldic form and composed a poem for the occasion. The lines were repeated and passed on from man to man. Such rousing verse lifted even Skarfr's spirits, which were still troubled by the memory of Fire-start's corpse in its shroud of fog. Armód's poem exaggerated somewhat the size of the waves but what good story did not grow in the telling? And he had reminded them all what adventures they were living, unlike those who'd stayed behind to endure endless Thing council meetings.

*Up the white-capped mountains
we climbed to reach the Hvera's mouth.
Our oak masts bent like reeds till
the low land calmed the waves*

with long sand fingers.

Our eyes are blind with salt-spray

while the stay-at-home youths

plod hearth-ward from the Thing-meet.

Jón Halt-foot threw the rope to the man ashore, who tied up the *Sun-chaser* to one of the mooring posts. The slap of water and clunk of wood against wood told of fourteen other ships finding berths where they could, between the merchant ships and fishing boats. A ferry had just set off for the north bank, leaving a tempting space but Eindridi's *Crest-cleaver* was turned back by gesticulating dock-hands. The place was reserved.

Gulls and other sea-birds complained of the disturbance, swooping down in search of titbits. A cormorant quit her perch on the furthest wooden post and flew low enough past the *Sun-chaser* for Skarfr to see her blink green eyes at him. Until that moment of re-connection with his cormorant, he had not known he felt adrift, so far from the only home he'd known.

He knew that a man could not claim respect from others if he had not seen the marvels of the wide world, but he had not expected to feel this backwash of home-longing that hit him sometimes. He fought it by telling himself the sagas of adventures lived by past heroes and by imagining those yet to come. If his cormorant travelled with him, all would be well.

With the ease of years as an apprentice, and an unleashed imagination, he shaped the words that would tell of this voyage. Of the ship and of the cormorant.

Foam-flyer, sea-skimmer, depth-dipper.

Hlif gave him a knowing smile as he helped her off the ship, as if she'd heard his thoughts, not just seen the cormorant.

All knew the tale of how Skarfr was given his name, meaning 'cormorant': the strangeness of his second birth, when the black bird added an abandoned baby to her brood, and his human mother found

him in a nest. But only Hlif knew that the connection crossed worlds.

When the cormorant spoke, Skarfr listened. And if all she said was, 'I'm here,' then Skarfr was on the right path. He felt buoyant once more as he jumped out of the ship after his liege lord.

However, Jarl's mood had changed in the opposite direction. Skarfr sensed Rognvald's coiled anger as they waited on the wooden walkway at Grimsby harbour for the other ships to be tied up.

Hlif stood quietly beside her guardian. She had metamorphosed into a demure maiden, her hair neatly hidden under a brown scarf. Drawing her cloak tighter, she studied the planks underfoot as if to memorise the grain patterns in each one. Sure signs that human storm clouds were on the horizon.

Jón Haltfoot also joined Rognvald on the shore, watching the other captains organise their men as the ships bobbed gently. He too had sensed the atmosphere and tempered his words more carefully than usual.

'You could wait until Bishop William is with us, for support?' he suggested.

'I need no support,' growled Rognvald.

The first captain to jump ashore was Eindridi, his face aglow as he greeted the Jarl. 'You must have thought we'd be stuck in that hell-fog forever – and so we would have been – but the gods heard my prayers. Let's go and celebrate!'

The Jarl's stillness should have given forewarning, but Eindridi was either unobservant or rash and he bestowed a radiant smile on his leader.

'One of your men floated past my ship, dead. How did that happen?' Rognvald's tone was calm but his fists were clenched.

Eindridi looked puzzled at the Jarl's slow-wittedness and raised his voice. 'As I said, I made an offering to the gods and it's just as well someone took action. I'm sorry if your men were spooked.' The sneering tone made the accusation clear: Rognvald was incompetent and his men were weak-stomached.

Eindridi shrugged and acknowledged, 'He should have been disposed of more efficiently.' His eyes

gleamed. ‘I can make an example of the crewman who threw the body overboard and my men can demonstrate how an offering should be sent out to sea. Is that what you want?’

‘No more men are to be wasted,’ Rognvald snapped. ‘And I doubt Bishop William will look kindly on your *offering*.’

Bishop William’s opinions could only be inferred as he was among those left on watch aboard ship, based on the assumption that he was able to control the crew, his appetites and the ship’s cat, better than less pious mortals.

Showing no sign of deflation, Eindridi said, ‘Tell him we sacrificed to the Christian God like whatever the man in the bible – did his name begin with Abe or something? – and Fire-start’s death was more useful than his life, not a waste at all. He was nothing but trouble and won’t be missed. Far from wasted.’ He shrugged again. ‘The gods accepted the sacrifice and the fog cleared.’

Then he turned to the men pouring onto the jetty and yelled. ‘Here we are – Grimsby! So let’s make the most of meat, ale and beds that don’t buck like a horse with a saddle bur.’

‘I wouldn’t mind a buck in bed,’ said one joker and Eindridi threw his head back in a teeth-baring show of laughter. Men from all the other ships crowded behind him as he reached the small group formed by Rognvald, Skarfr, Hlif and a handful of the Jarl’s crew. The majority of the *Sun-chaser*’s shore party was heading into town, an advance warning of the sea-rovers’ arrival.

Eindridi swaggered towards Rognvald, as if he would walk through him unless the Jarl moved aside.

Before the two leaders could physically clash, Skarfr moved between them, hand on his dagger hilt, his head reeling from words thrown like a torch on thatch, a lethal mix of blasphemy and arrogance.

Four heartbeats measured time, then Eindridi laughed and stepped back. ‘Call off your dog, Rognvald. I was going to suggest we drink together, and I can tell you tales of Jórsalaheim and Mikligard to whet your appetite.’

The two leaders were attracting attention from their men, who must have sensed the tension even if they couldn’t hear the conversation.

Brushing past Skarfr, Rognvald gave Eindridi a hearty clap on the back and then grasped his arm in a friendly way. For the growing audience of men around them, he raised his voice. ‘I remember your tales well. You convinced me that a pilgrimage was a saga in the making and I thought you a true follower of the White Christ. You inspired me to lead this expedition.’

The grip on Eindridi’s arm tightened. Rognvald whispered, ‘And by God, you will not dishonour it. You will sacrifice no more men, to the gods or to your own vanity. You can’t help your ignorance but you will not spill blood because the sea makes fog. Do you spill blood to make sure the wolf chases the sun across the sky each morning? No, because you know this is nature’s way, not caused by your prayers. We are not savages. We are pilgrims! Do I make myself clear?’

Skarfr readied himself for the coming fight. This moment had been inevitable since Eindridi defied the orders of the King of Norðvegr and ordered a new boat to rival Rognvald’s in splendour, from the gilt weather-vane on the prow to the carved serpent’s tail on the stern. Not that Jón Halt-foot believed any ship could out-do Rognvald’s *Sun-chaser* – he’d built it. And he was fingering his axe as if he’d like to chip corners off Eindridi, the moment Rognvald released the offender.

The only way Eindridi could free himself from that vice-like grip would be in open wrestling or by drawing his dagger – awkward with his left hand. Either movement would be an act of treason which he would have to follow through to the death.