

## THE SPRING TIDE

By Will Dowling

### Chapter 1

23 April 1069

I crept across the ruined Roman bridge to earn my wage—and settle a debt of silver and blood. Needles of starlight glinted on the river below, but it was too dark to see the city walls above the north bank. Good: no light, no patrols.

“Best wrap your face up, Ole. The Kievans won’t quake at that snot-nose.” Baldwin grinned, sharp and white.

My mouth was too dry and my wits too slow to sting him back. Besides, he was right; my nose was streaming from the cold. I wrapped the damp cloak over my scowl. The weave prickled, making me wish I had a beard.

The bridge was half-crumbled into the river, leaving only a narrow, winding passage pocked with boot-biting craters.

Baldwin bumped into Gyldas. “Watch it,” he said, as if it wasn’t his own fault.

“Watch yourself.” Gyldas scuffed his boot, sending pebbles splashing into the Ouse. “We’d be there already if we’d just taken the southern bridge.”

I sighed into my cloak. Water beaded on my cheeks. “The Normans can see that bridge from both forts. If they catch us out tonight, they’ll thrash us and send us right back over the river.”

I didn’t want to worry Gyldas, but I knew they’d do worse. Echoes rose in my mind: the rebels’ cheers at reclaiming Eoforwic; their dying screams when the Conqueror took the city back. I shoved the memories away. The Normans were beyond our reach. The Kievans weren’t.

Gyldas opened his mouth. Halfdan cut him off. “Everyone shut up. Quick and quiet and that’s how it is.” We obeyed Halfdan Karlsson and crossed without another word.

I stepped carefully onto the riverbank. While Gyldas shook stones from his boots, I dug the wealth from my purse: an Eastertide egg. Onion skin and yarn still clung to the red-and-yellow shell. I began peeling.

Baldwin shook his head. “Saint Olaf! Gluttony’s a sin, you know.”

Halfdan nodded. “Here, share it out. As penance.”

For once I was quicker than him. I popped the whole egg into my mouth. “I kept my fast through Lent, and that’s more than you can say,” I said around the yolk. “You just want me to stay hungry so I don’t get bigger than you.”

Halfdan was eighteen, almost three years older—if the monks were right about my age—but we were eye-to-eye. He took after his mother: short and compact, with hair like a bonfire. Karl said I favoured my mother too. I figured that meant she’d been long-limbed like a heron, with tidewater eyes and thatch-yellow hair. But I had no way to know, and hadn’t dared to ask him.

“If I knock you flat on your arse, you’re small. You’ll be bigger when you can knock me down. So—never.”

Gyldas strapped his bootlaces tight. I scrubbed my hands together and hurried uphill alongside the others into the city-smell of middens under smoke.

“Anyway, God will punish you both for your sins.” Halfdan showed the gap in his teeth. “Olaf will eat too many eggs and burst his braies, and Baldwin will kiss the wrong girl and get himself thrown into the Ouse.”

We veered northeast, taking the shortcut through Holm’s ropewalk. “Don’t worry,” said Baldwin. “I’d never kiss your girl.”

Halfdan’s smile vanished behind his rusty moustache. He could be prickly about Tova. He waved toward a long building, new-thatched and limewashed, with a carving above the door that showed a

black dog with a crimson tongue. Karl's alehouse: The Laughing Hound. Alewife Biren hung a broom below that carving each day; to sweep in customers, she said. Now there was only a horseshoe above the door. Halfdan knocked softly on the back door until it opened and Biren beckoned us in.

Bowls and alepots scattered like the losers of a brawl across a stained table. Two allnight logs smouldered in the stone-curbed hearth beneath a pottage that thickened the air with cabbage and onion. Daub patches shone slick on the walls, covering damage from the clash the Kievan Rus had started when they'd swaggered in with silver rings in their braids, sniffing after cheap goods, sneering that English pottage wouldn't pass for pig slop in Kiev. They hadn't yet paid what they owed.

Old Wen, the house's watcher, snored at the foot of the stairs, sleeping away a black eye. I didn't know how he slept; one of Biren's girls was working upstairs and the sound filled the common room, loud and shrill as a flock of gulls. Gyldas reddened from chin to curls. He was still new to the city. I remembered the feeling. This wasn't the sort of thing we'd heard growing up at the priory.

"His oarmates have been out for an hour. Won't quit on the lucky girl." Biren spoke quietly for once. "She's earning double tonight. Walked past your Kievans' ship for me. Only counted three aboard."

"Hell's teeth. I hope your ceiling holds." Baldwine leaned his elbows on the table. A dark lock slipped free of his ponytail, falling across one eye. He puffed it away. "Suppose I'd rather hear her than the fellow she's under. Pour us a round for the road? Only one, mind. I'm already in love with you."

As she poured, Halfdan moved dishes into position and traced patterns in ale spills with his finger, walking us through the plan again. The bowls were small, but Biren was reckoned the finest brewer in Eoforwic for good reason: the ale tonight was dark and sweet and spiced with something tongue-tingling. A kind of seaweed, she said.

Outside in the alley two casks lay nestled in the cart where we'd left them. Hooded and veiled, we looped wide to avoid the Grapcunt—the brothel row was still bright and busy, even with half of Eoforwic fled or dead—keeping to the packed earth streets. The cobbled Stonegate road was too loud; the stray dogs digging for offal in the Swinegate gutters, louder yet. The dimmest lights drew my eye. A glowing window could expose us. Any spark could be a Norman torch. I winced every time a barrel banged or a wheel squeaked. But we'd planned our route well, walked carefully, and saw no one. We parked beside a wharfside warehouse.

The Kievans' fat-bellied ship sat heavy. The mast and yard were stowed bow-to-stern, cradled atop upright posts at each end of the ship, and the blue-and-yellow striped sail was rigged into a tent over the deck. They'd boasted that their ship was the finest work of the Great City, Constantinople. Aside from the planks covering the hold it looked much like any trader's knarr. Karl's *Vatndreki* was a finer ship, no question. But the traders' sail was richly made; probably worth more than whatever filled the hold. Worth enough to pay the debt these Kievan Rus owed for trashing Karl's alehouse, anyway.

"Sloppy rigging," Baldwine said. "Da would drag a man off the stern for that."

A sailor, blond-bearded and bald, paced the wharf, his torch swaying. "Makes more work for us, sure enough." Halfdan leaned forward, knees bent, eyes tracking the torch.

"Their watchman looks drunk. Should make it easier." I felt as if the seaweed in my ale had sprouted, wagging its fronds on the floor of my stomach.

"He might've raised a horn with his mates tonight," said Halfdan. "Or it's just a sailor's walk. Best not count on a job being easy."

"Well, I think he's drunk," said Gyldas. "Look." The watchman faced the river, fumbling one-handed at his waist.

Halfdan sprang from his crouch, rushing ahead. The peeing watchman turned at the slap of bootsoles on the wharf. Crouching low, Halfdan slammed a fist into the sailor's belly, doubling him over. The watchman wheezed. His torch sizzled into the river.

Halfdan got behind the man and bore him down, kicking a knee, mashing a hand over his mouth, then the rest of us were there to hold arms and legs and ropes until his limbs were bound and his mouth stuffed with rags cut from his own cloak. I was impressed. It had gone so smoothly, I would've thought he'd planned the whole thing, except that his boots were splashed with Kievan piss.

We skulked toward the ship. Biren had said there should only be two aboard, besides the watchman. But I counted three shapes on the deck. I held up a fist and pointed. No one looked. I snapped my fingers; even that felt too loud, but I got their attention. I wagged three stiffening fingers. Baldwine shrugged and pointed at the upright post, tracing from the base to the top. I breathed deep, grabbed the ship's bulwark, and swung aboard.

Nobody rose up to kill me. I let out my breath. Baldwine and Gyldas climbed the upright while Halfdan and I worked the rigging, picking at knots with our knives, careful not to snap the salt-stiff ropes or damage the sail.

Gyldas was working slowly; I'd outpaced him. I grabbed an edge of the slackening sail, trying to pull it back, but only made things worse. The sail twisted and so did my guts as the edge slid away. I hissed as loudly as I dared. Gyldas froze, knife still in the knot. He must've seen what I saw: the corner of the sail, draped across a thickset Kievan's shoulder. He still snored, drooling into his braided beard. We inched the sail back to straighten it.

The Kievan rolled over. The sail slithered off his shoulder and slapped into the face of the form sleeping beside him.

The sleeper—a woman, shorn-haired—startled awake. She grabbed the sail, head snapping side to side. I lunged across the thwarts toward her, too fast for caution. Not fast enough. The woman screamed. The deck pitched as the sleeping crewmen shoved upright.

Swaying with the ship, I spun toward the nearest Kievan. He surged fist-first into my face. My nose cracked. I saw only silver light, as though the moon itself had crashed straight into my eyes.

I staggered back, howling into the hot wool over my face. My vision reddened before it cleared. My heel hit something hard; my feet left the deck. The back of my head hit wood and I went blind again. When my sight returned, I saw the Kievan swinging a cudgel at my knee. I rolled away. My hood snagged. Wood thumped into the stuck cloak, not far from my ear. The trader stepped forward.

Something small and white as a dove flashed up from the hold, snatching at the trader's ankle. He sprawled forward and crashed down in front of me, dropping his club. I snatched it up and lashed into the man's legs to keep him down.

I rose to a crouch. Near the prow, Baldwine struggled with a rosy, hairy-backed man, trying to wrest an axe from his grip, while Halfdan pummeled the figure's ribs. The man near me pushed up from the deck. Gyldas—finally—leapt from atop the mast. Flail-fisted, he drove the trader down. Beside me, the woman still screamed. She had a rope around her leg.

Shorn hair. A rope. That was what had tripped the man. Why the ship sat low in the water. I looked into the hold and saw glinting eyes, teeth, a web of rope. These were the English goods bound for Novgorod. Slaves. I'd seen slaves every market day, but never so ill-treated: filthy and feral, bound like animals.

The closest man, squat and black-bearded, stared up at me. "Help," he said, his accent thick over even that single word. I covered my face with my cloak.

The axe Baldwin had fought over lay nearby, beside the moaning Kievan. My hand closed around it. A worker deserves his wages; the monks had taught me that. I swung the axe—and slid it along the deck, into the hold.

Halfdan frowned as the slaves rustled and jabbered belowdecks. “That racket’s like to bring the Normans down on us. Get moving.”

Gyldas and I dragged the Kievan we’d fought to one of the upright posts. Our companions did the same. We left them bound and gagged, their cloaks wrapped around their heads. Baldwin watched them while the rest of us cut the ropes securing the sail. My hands were steady enough, but I felt myself quaking everywhere else, eyelids to arsehole. My cloak stuck to my face. I breathed through my mouth, tasting bile and iron.

We hurried away and bundled the sail into the cart. Silence no longer an option, we clattered to the riverbank, rolling the rumbling barrels behind. At the water’s edge, I ran ropes back and forth along the cart’s axle and through the spokes, while the others lashed the barrels to the wheels. We tucked our boots and clothes inside the sail. Pulling the cloak away stung my face. I felt cold drying blood smeared across my cheeks, hot blood still leaking from my nostrils.

Two tugs proved the barrels secure. The four of us grabbed the wheels, dug our heels into the riverbank, and slid into the Ouse, grunting and cursing the cold.

We clung tight and kicked our raft across a silver and black expanse, the current bearing us away from the enemies we’d made tonight.

## Chapter 2

24 April 1069

My eyelids were millstones. Blood blocked my nose, parching my throat. Held against all that, the boot kicking my ribs was almost a relief.

I groaned and rolled away from the hound I'd been clutching for warmth. Rolf the Sot squinted down at me. His dirty blue eyes looked like piss-holes in snow.

"Up." He spoke like a kick, too.

We left the shed where I'd spent the short night. A merciful cloud drifted across the sun. Judging by its height, it was nearly Terce.

Karl had brought me from Dunholm to his manor: a sprawling hold where a palisade embraced a smoke-seasoned hall, bountiful gardens, and a solar perched like an osprey's nest above it all. But the Normans had buried that before Lent, when the Conqueror retook the city, to clear the land for their second castle. Now we were penned in the yard of a slouching timbered tenement, crowded behind a withy-wattle fence.

The ground floor had been a cooper's shop. Now it served as our hall, where my kin rushed about carrying wood and water, preparing for another Eastertide feast. The squeals and calls of beast and folk floated above the clank and shuffle of the morning's work. We trudged through the din.

Rolf waved at the staircase that curled up past the second story and left me to it. Halfway up, I leaned over the railing and touched the old horseshoe hanging above the door. The air cooled as I climbed. Smoke rolled through the stairs, slow and thick as sap, swirling away under my boots.

Little smoke reached the attic. The roof was blackened, but not by the hearth; something grew in the mist that coated the rafters. Drops gleamed in the mottled light from the hide-covered windows. The other lads were across the room, backs to me, silent and still as a psalter's scene. The sail was folded before them, beside an unlit brazier. Karl faced them, pattern-welded with scars and veins and the seams of age, scalp and cheeks razored clean, his mouth a slash between the iron braids of his moustache. He fixed me with a winter-sky stare.

Baldwine poked at his split lip and winced. "All here, then. Shall I close the shutters against the cold?"

"Crossed miles of fjord-ice on your way here, did you? You've never known a heartbeat of cold. I've seen to that." Karl's foot prodded the sail. "That's why you've brought me this great blanket?"

So that was it. We'd acted on Karl's behalf—but not on his orders. Baldwine had never said otherwise, I realized. He'd only led me to the edge. And I'd pulled Gyldas over with me. I rubbed my eyes. My hand bumped my nose and comets of pain streaked across my face. Halfdan's voice brought me back.

"I'm sorry you're not pleased. But the thing's done, and I'm not sorry we did it. They'll think twice before ignoring a debt."

"Oh, they'll think. When they miss the spring tide, stuck in for weeks, they'll be thinking. Who did this? How can we repay them?" Karl squeezed his thumb until the knuckle cracked. "And if the Normans hear of it? What then?"

That stung my ears. The spring tide had been my plan. Only at the new moon or the full, when the tides swung highest, could the heavy Rus ship sail down the Ouse. I'd made sure they'd miss it, counting the nights as the monks had taught me. The others had called it clever. Now Karl called it foolish. As if we hadn't even planned for the Normans.

"It isn't a Norman ship. Since when do they care about Englishmen or foreigners?" My voice rasped.

"They care about keeping the city quiet. Peaceful. If these traders raise enough noise, by cry or by clinking coins, the Normans will care."

“They’ll spend all their coin on a new sail and food for them and their cargo. Stuck here, you can trade them oats and ale for grape wine and pepper.” My temper heated; I’d bled for this. “Halfdan’s right. Should we have just let them sail away, rich enough to become Princes of Kiev? Let them declare a feast day to celebrate making a fool of—”

“Olaf, stop.” Gyldas folded his hands and raised his eyes to Karl. “We might’ve grabbed a stray dog by the ears last night, but more than that, we broke our Lord’s commandments. In your name. That was dishonourable.” Easy enough for him to daub over the Rus’ sins with scripture. It wasn’t his blood.

“Good. Priestly wisdom, like your father’s. From a lad with bloody knuckles.” Karl’s ring flashed green, dim light sparking off the emeralds. “Any road. True enough, the thing’s done. No way out but through.

“You lot, take this sail and pick out the stitching. Then give the wool to your sisters, Baldwine. Give them your filthy cloaks to wash first.” His lips twitched, bending a scar. “Then maybe you can tell me more about the cold.”

We bowed. This bit of women’s work was light enough punishment. Halfdan and Baldwine hefted the sail down the indoor staircase, hands corded from the awkward grip. I made to follow. Karl held me back.

“Oats and ale. Deep thinking, that.” He spoke in Norse now. “I’m glad to see you’re being bold. But you don’t need to be another Halfdan.”

I lowered my gaze and stared at the medallion on his chest: a silver chain and disc set with a slice of opal like a cat’s eye. I clenched my teeth until the opal’s colours blurred. If he wanted me to live as a monk, why hadn’t he just left me at Dunholm?

“It was my plan as much as theirs.”

“So you say. Just remember, only a dead fish always swims with the stream.” He peered at my nose. “You’d best go see Farrah—no, it’ll be Tova today. She’ll get you sorted. Deep breath now.”

I hardly had time for it. Callouses scraped my cheeks as he slid his hands up, thumbs pressing both sides of my nose, cracking it into place with a sharp twist. My throat burned as I held back a scream.

I would not look weak in front of my grandfather.

\*\*\*

“Head forward, I said.” Tova scooped clots from my nose.

I flinched each time the spoon darted at me. My cousin Audra held a bowl under my chin; her little sister Edla kept poking her head between us, squinting at the blood on my cloak.

“Is it going to bleed again?”

“I don’t know. It’s the first time it’s broken.”

Tova smiled at that. I caught myself tracing constellations in her freckles. Then her spoon scraped too deep and I gagged as blood flooded my throat. Tova dropped the spoon and turned Edla around. “Fetch some linen, there’s a good girl.” She tilted my head toward the table. I retched red strings into the bowl and croaked an apology.

Tova laughed, wiping her bloody hands on a cloth. “I see worse every week, Ole. If that turns a man’s stomach, a battlefield must be a gentler place than a childbed. I suppose midwives must say so all the time.”

“They must. I’ve even heard monks say it.”

“Well, we do love to churn old butter. Monks enjoy talk of war and childbirth, do they?”

“They’d know about war,” said Audra. “It wasn’t so long ago the bishop’s house was burned.”

I'd seen Ethelwine's house every day, growing up. Hard to imagine it in ruins. "No, wars don't pass them by. And there were always children in the priory."

Edla snorted. "Monks can't have babies."

"Priests can. Most were foundlings, though. Like me. Or my friend Wee Sim. He was always full of tales, Sim. One time—"

"Why would you leave a baby with monks? A baby should be with her family."

"Edla." Audra took her sister's hand. "Keep quiet so we can work. Watch now. If it's not splinted properly, it'll slide right off his face."

Tova squeezed sticks against my nose. Audra wound a rough bandage tight around my face.

"There. Done. Keep that on for two days. Last lesson, girls. When your charge looks like such a fool, he's probably done something to deserve it."

My squashed cheeks flushed at that. I helped with the washing up while Audra took Edla downstairs, promising to bring back some food.

The monks taught from Galen that fasting cured many ills. Tova insisted otherwise. When Audra returned, balancing cups of ale and hardbread trenchers filled with swine-and-barley pottage, I decided I preferred the midwife's methods.

"Finish what you were saying before. About your friend at the monastery," said Audra.

"What, about Sim? Oh, nothing important." I wondered if Gyldas remembered any tales I'd forgotten. I chased the thought away with a swallow of ale. My voice still scratched. "Just that one time, the three of us found buried treasure."

"You never," Audra scoffed. "Neither of you have any coin." But she leaned in, as did Tova.

"We didn't keep it. But we found it. It was Sim who—well. Let me go back. Did you ever hear how Bishop Ethelwine said the earl 'robbed God'?" Audra nodded. "That was a lie," I said. "Ethelwine's brother was bishop before him. The pair of them dug up a lord's hoard from under a church and stowed it at Dunholm. Sim learned the tale and we hunted out the treasure. But it was the earl who took home the silver."

"Earl Tostig?" asked Tova.

"The same. He visited often." Though never for long.

"I used to watch the processions in Lunden," said Tova. "Tostig always had family ride out to welcome him. Even King Edward sometimes. I wanted a big family like that. Especially after it was just me and Ma. Though maybe that just means there's more blood to go bad."

Hard to say she was wrong, after what had happened to that family. Tova inclined her head toward the dim sound of the bells at Saint Peter's, tolling Sext across the river. "We saw him at church sometimes too, King Edward. He liked to surprise folk at christenings, you see, and any babe that Ma cared for in childbed, she was always there for their christening. I can't recall where she got it, but she'd take this bread to their mothers, full of figs and almonds and never a bit of grit. You'd never see the like in Eoforwic, I swear."

Audra drained her cup. "Awfully kind. And did she take it to those mothers whose babes were never christened?"

The look Tova gave her would've withered me to a husk. Small wonder; it was hardly decent talk. Audra just rolled her ale-loose eyes, took my cloak, and excused herself.

"I met King Edward too, you know," I said, seeking to soften Tova's glower. "At the priory." She looked up. "King Harold too. Well, still Earl Harold then. Halfdan came with him. Did he ever tell you?"

Tova shook her head. "Never. Tell me."

"Oh, well—" I took a drink of ale and the cup clacked against the splints on my nose. Tova giggled. "I can't tell it today," I said. "Looking at me now, you'd never believe I was such a fool."

Most folk in the hold had been born south of the Humber; everyone except those few of us from Dunholm, and Karl. Their accents filled the hall as they gabbed at the long tables. I stuck to the outskirts, trying to hide my nose; a big family meant sharp eyes and loose tongues. We dropped our broth-soaked trenchers in a barrel by the door. Rolf sat alone, feeding his trencher to a hound under the table. Bad manners. Those scraps were meant for the poor.

When we reached the hut where the lads had taken the sail, Tova called Halfdan outside. Knowing what waited inside, I wanted to linger. But I didn't want to hear these two moon over one another either. No way out but through. I ducked through the doorway.

Baldwine hooted. Gyldas snorted. I slumped to the floor between my cousin and my foster-brother. The linen and sticks of my splint made good kindling; my face was nearly hot enough to catch.

"Fine way to treat a man who's shed blood for you." I picked up a hook. They'd already started on the sail. "Tova and your sisters didn't laugh half so much."

"Even Edla? I don't believe you." Baldwine thumbed away a tear.

"Even her. A girl of eight, more grown than you."

"You shouldn't have brought Tova." Gyldas lifted the sail's edge onto his lap. "We'll likely be done before Halfdan's back to help."

"He's pupped her, you know. Audra says, and she always knows. Guida from the tannery, Holm's wife—even your ma the last time, Gyldas. Never wrong."

"What?" The hook slipped in my grasp.

"You must be the only one in the hold who hasn't caught them yet." Baldwine set down his hook and rubbed at his fingers.

Gyldas nodded. "You probably will, though. No doubt you'll start spending more time sneaking into dark corners. To hide that nose."

I was broad-backed from the hold's chores, calloused and lean from the sparring yard. But picking apart the sail took a different strength. The hook dug a trench into my thumbnail. My fingers numbed, hanging as loose as the threads we plucked. If this was women's work, women were surely blessed with forbearance. I was not. I tired of the work and the jokes.

Mercifully, the teasing slowed. We worked in silence for some time. Even the sounds of Eastertide preparations filtering in from the yard faded away.

"You're moving quickly. The sewing hut suits you," Baldwine said.

Mischief pricked my wits. "That's something, from you. Born in July and all."

He tilted his head. "How's that, now?"

"I guess it is a bit complicated. What the monks teach." I bit back a grin. "The moon sets the tides, of course. Galen tells us blood is a tidal humour—cool and wet." Gyldas rolled his eyes. He'd know already I was spinning a yarn.

"That's why a woman's temper waxes and wanes," I said. "Up and down, see? Attuned to the moon."

Baldwine squinted and set down his hook.

"And Capella tells us," I said, "July is favoured by the moon."

I let the silence drag until he understood. His brow wrinkled. Then he half-roared, half-laughed, lunging at me.

"You can't fight it, Baldwine!" The sail bunched beneath our feet as I scrambled away. "It's the wisdom of the ancients!"

He tackled me to the floor and wrapped both my elbows with one forearm, trapping my arms behind me. My back hit the door and it banged open, tumbling us across the threshold.

As we separated, I realized the hold wasn't only quiet—it was frozen. No splitting wood, no splashing water, no child's laughter. The door slammed, cracking through the silence.

Outside the tenement, Karl stood between two crowds. Our people pressed shoulder-to-shoulder at the hall's threshold. The gate hung open behind the smaller crowd; half were on horseback, mail-clad and red-cloaked, hair cropped short from nape to crown. Normans.

I crept toward the stairs. Baldwin followed me up to the balcony. Men stood sneering between the horses. All wore Kievan braids: some in their hair, others in their beards, a few in both. The Norman leader swung down from his saddle and faced Karl. A red sash crossed his chest from his left shoulder to the satchel on his right thigh; a sword and stout wooden club hung at his other hip.

"Renaud the Frank." Baldwin scowled, his hands tight on the rail. He'd never looked so much like our grandfather.

"I thought he left the city."

"Me too. Been a while since Da caught a fine from him. I guess he only left the docks. The bast—whoreson must be moving up."

I nodded, hating how Baldwin had coddled me. He couldn't know that from him, it stung worse than the word "bastard."

"You deny your dispute with these men?" Renaud spoke with a Northumbrian accent, not the usual stomach-turning mush Franks made of the English tongue.

Karl stood stiff, looking down at him. "They wronged me. I won't deny that." He crossed his arms. "I deny that they are men."

A dark-braided Kievan started forward; a Norman blocked his path. Renaud scratched his chin. "All my life, England has bled from the North's feuds. I would've thought you'd learned the cost of such things, serving Earl Harold. A merchant like you."

At the denial of King Harold's title, Karl snapped taut like a hound on a halter. "I know the cost of many things. A merchant like me reckons for himself."

Renaud was clean-shaven, in the Norman way. Perhaps that was why his smile seemed so broad. "Of course, Karl. We all deserve our scales balanced. I'm only here to see justice done properly." He folded his hands like a bishop, as if his presence was a blessing. "I wish you'd come to me first. We know one another, after all. Your ship berths beside my father's old spot. God rest him. Why, had your hold been two paces further north, we'd be neighbours!"

He lived in the fort built on the bones of Karl's grand hall. The hall where I'd learned that I had a family. I gripped the rough-grained railing, wishing it was a Norman throat.

Renaud dug in his satchel and pulled out a wax tablet, the sort the monks used to teach sums. "These guests in our city have petitioned for the king's justice." He tapped a stylus against the tablet. "What choice do I have? I'm bound to act. These traders returned to their ship last night and found it lacked its sail. I can't account for that, Karl, can you? That would strand them at the wharf."

All this over their sail? Karl was right. We'd been careless. The plan, the work, the blood I'd shed. For nothing.

"They found the ship riding high in the water. When they boarded, their hold was empty."

The slaves must've escaped. Led by the one I'd helped, no doubt. That was why Karl didn't keep slaves; he didn't trust them. "Treat a man like a dog and he'll grow fangs," he said. I was glad they'd escaped, in a way. The misery I'd seen belowdecks was no fit fate for a man. But how could I ever pay the fee for their loss? I didn't even know if Karl could.

"I should say: not entirely empty. Seeing a trail of blood aboard, they followed as any man would. Their crewmates were in the hold. Carved to ruin."

Had the Kievans turned on each other? Or had a rogue in the night heard their boasts of silver? Surely the slaves wouldn't be so bold. It hardly mattered. Those men hadn't deserved much, but their crimes against us didn't merit death. I blinked, seeing it in my mind: the men we'd bound, gutted and hanging upside down from the mast like swine in a smokehouse.

Karl was hard to read across a table, never mind at this distance. But he had to know we hadn't killed anyone. He hadn't been that angry. And he'd known enough killers to recognize whatever change murder wrought in a man.

"You see what a mire we're in, don't you? None but you had any quarrel with these traders. I just wish... Ah, Karl. I could've helped, you know?"

"The king's justice is clear: one of your house committed this crime. Unless you give up the murderer within three days, your holdings are forfeit—to be seized as wergild at King William's pleasure."

## Chapter 3

30 April 1069: Terce

I knelt beside Father Marsten, turned my heart to the Lord, and set to thatching the roof. Skillful in his work, Marsten tied his bundle of reeds in place. I layered another overtop and cinched it tight. Dust rose; its dry smell was a ticklish comfort. Below us, the yard stretched wide under the first warm day of the year. The scrapes of Rolf weaving withy-wattle, the snap of Elswyth's loom, Edla and Vance calling after their favourite pig; all rang with a rhythm that knit the hold together.

At the roof's edge, Gyldas worked from a ladder beside the piled thatch. He hauled up a bundle, peered into each end, then shook his head and dropped it. The second bundle he slung onto the roof. Marsten hefted it into place.

"Can't imagine how Karl got along without you, Father." I twisted a hazel spar into a staple. "Whoever strips this roof next will come away cleaner than they started."

A bucket of water hung from a purlin. Gyldas leaned over and ladled a drink. "Who was his builder before us? More seedcorn in that thatch than in the field, I swear. More mice than the barn."

Stripping the roof had been a horror of gnawed stalks, squirming tails, and needle-sharp skeletons. Marsten had grumbled that it was unforgivable to have a leaking smokehouse, so we'd scraped away the damp and stinking straw on a day when he'd ridden to Dunholm.

"I don't like what I'm hearing. We're building a roof that need never be stripped!" Marsten shook a fist. "Focus on what's ahead, my boys. Gossip makes a man poor." He pinned the thatch with my staple. "Though hard work brings a man wealth, and I haven't raised you to be greedy. Gab as you like, if your hands stay busy."

"I doubt Karl had a builder. The family that rented this place left after the rebels took Eoforwic. Not long before you came from Dunholm." I snipped a length of string with my knife. "I'm not sure if they paid him." I wasn't sure Karl had paid for this place, either. He claimed properties when their owners quit the city; he'd done so ever since Earl Tostig ruled, or so Halfdan said.

"Is that so? Kind of him to keep a roof over those families. If the owners of these homes return, they'll surely thank him for his care." Father Marsten's face was mild, fixed on his work, but his voice held an edge.

"He's kept a roof over us, hasn't he?" Though I wondered if that roof was as neglected as the smokehouse. There were puddles in the attic sometimes.

"He has. On the nights you choose to sleep under it," said Marsten. "When you're not busy with Karl's business. Robbing yourself of sleep."

I scowled at Gyldas. "What's he told you, then?"

"I didn't say anything. But did you think it was a secret?" Gyldas finally tossed the bundle, right at me. "I wouldn't lie to my father. Not for you, even."

I caught it and overbalanced, one foot sliding backwards along the rafter. Father Marsten set one hand against the ridgepole. He swung his leg over the thatch and grabbed my belt.

"Gyldas. You could've hurt your brother. Besides, I was speaking to you as well." I had my footing again. Marsten sat back, working his ties. "Someday, I hope you both have defiant sons."

"What a thing to say. Are you cursing me now?" Gyldas asked.

"Would I curse my own son? If ever you have a lad like yourself, you'll be all right." Marsten crawled to the roof's peak. Here, the thatch could not simply lie flat. It had to be wrapped over the ridgepole and pinned so the reeds kept their shape without springing away. Father Marsten did it perfectly.

"If I thought Karl was a wicked man, I wouldn't serve him. A man must provide for his family, and the Lord set him a hard path. But what's happened..." Marsten shook his head. "At Dunholm you only had scrapes and bumps, no more than a lad ought. Here, I've seen you slink home beaten

bloody more than once. And Gyldas! Sneaking about all hours—well, trying to sneak. You think that’s what family asks of family?”

“Isn’t it?” I asked. “To provide for one another?”

“Even the Disciples reaped on the Sabbath.” Gyldas spoke quietly as he trimmed the roof’s edge.

Marsten tugged his beard. “It ought to be easier to know right from wrong. The wrong ought to repent and prosper alongside the righteous. But you’re old enough to know different. Just... if something you’ve done makes you sleep through Vigil, think hard if it’s worth it.”

It was easier than he said to know right from wrong. The good Father was always right.

We talked and joked and built the finest roof that ever rose above that yard. From here I saw the pattern of Eoforwic: streets, cart-tracks, our neighbours’ homes, the ancient Roman walls and sprawling farms beyond. The new Norman hillfort loomed a furlong to the east, the other across the Ouse, its silhouette like a clenched fist. Further north, Saint Peter’s jagged belltower looked thin as a blade of grass. The Normans had robbed the church’s silver when they sacked the city. Bishop Ealdred had saved his gospels, though, worth more than any gilded goblet; he’d read from them at Eastertide, after the play of the Three Marys.

The gate squeaked. It always did, loud enough to hear throughout the hold. Better than a hound, Karl said. Baldwine sprinted across the yard, shouting my name. I grabbed the roof’s edge and dropped into the discarded thatch. Baldwine met me halfway.

“The guards. That Renaud, he—” Baldwine rested his hands on his thighs, sweaty palms darkening his tunic. “You’d better come and see.”

\*\*\*

Cynric stared at the snarling prow, as though he willed the fanged figurehead of *Vatndreki*—*River-Dragon*—to turn and devour the intruders on her deck. Normans crawled over her strakes. They shouted in their foreign tongue, squalling like gannets. It had taken Renaud more than the three days he’d promised, but he claimed his king’s wergild.

“One of Hardrada’s fleet, wasn’t she? It makes one think,” said Renaud. “Among the Greeks, Hardrada was little more than a nursemaid with an axe. When he returned home his people called him a king.” He shook his head. “Then Eoforwic called him a king too, and opened her gates. Never mind that he rode with Tostig, the tyrant who’d bled us dry. No, he too was a hero. Northumbria never knew a wiser or gentler lord, said the English.

“Then both were struck down.” He stroked his chin. “By whom, I wonder? Do you recall, Karl?”

“I do.” Karl stood between Baldwine and Cynric. “As would you. Had you done more than stand behind Eoforwic’s open gates.”

Renaud’s cheek twitched. “I mean to say, a man must move with the sea or drown. Don’t you think, captain?”

Cynric’s stare never strayed from his ship. Renaud tapped his iron stylus against his forehead.

“I nearly forgot.” The wax tablet slid from Renaud’s satchel. “There were some irregularities with the cargo. Nothing contraband, of course. Nothing of the sort. Only that there’s no record of duties or fees paid on the goods in *Vatndreki*’s hold. Don’t fret. I’m sure it’s just an oversight. An honest man’s oversight.”

He patted Cynric’s shoulder. “King William will be pleased with this ship, have no fear of that. But he would be as well pleased—more, surely—with the man who broke his peace.”

Renaud shouted some harsh nonsense, sounding like a man speaking Latin with a burned tongue. Nine Norman guards snapped to attention. “My men will be by to collect the outstanding fees tomorrow.”

Mail rustling, they marched away. Baldwin spat. “Off to fine children for unlicensed smiles, no doubt. Sorry, lad—King William’s claimed every third tooth in England, let’s have them.”

We stayed until we were alone on the wharf, watching *Vatndreki* slice away.

“I stood at King Harold’s side, and together we saved England. I had that ship from his own hand. Never even sailed the damn thing. Sailing was never for me.” Karl barked a laugh that almost covered Cynric’s sob.

“It was all I was ever good at.”

“Ah, Da.” Baldwin coughed the tremor from his voice and hugged his father. “How can you say so, with a son like me?”

Cynric swatted his son’s belly. Karl threw an arm over them both. I stood apart until Baldwin fumbled one arm back and pulled me into the huddle.

Karl’s voice was quiet. He spoke in Norse. “I’ll pull an oar for you yet, son.”

The casks of the Laughing Hound were open to *Vatndreki*’s crew today, to drown their grief. We trudged toward the alehouse atop the plank-covered gutters. Sailors were always a lively crowd. I almost believed I could laugh today. As we approached the Hound, I didn’t hear laughter. Shouts and curses spilled around the corner.

The sailors were lively, sure enough. Twelve men hurled abuse at each other across the Hound’s yard. Cynric’s crew spoke Norse, to ensure the Kievans knew without doubt that they were low, craven worms. Biren the alewife was levering herself up from the mud. Rus traders roared demands, something about the blood-price for their crewmates. Two others took turns slamming shoulders against the brew room door.

I didn’t care to hear their whining about the balance of accounts. The Normans had squeezed enough from my family today. And these slavers owed us.

Before the nearest Kievan could turn to face me, I slammed my shin upward into his balls. He crumpled with a shriek. Baldwin seized another by the braid and dragged him backward and down, bouncing his head against the boardwalk.

The Rus whirled, caught between us and the sailors. They couldn’t keep up. Cynric’s crew rushed them. Keeping my fists by my face, I edged toward the alley. Karl and Baldwin followed. The pair in the alley gave up on the door and turned toward us. They were as big as Karl; one all gut and gristle, the other timber-built.

Karl rushed them. The fat man swung. Karl leaned back and the fist caught only air—but Karl caught the fist. He hurled his weight against the man’s arm, smashing his elbow into the corner of the alehouse. A crack and a scream filled the alley as the fat Kievan’s arm bent the wrong way.

Karl ducked a blow from the other big man. I elbowed Baldwin, pointed with two fingers, and ran down the alley. Dropping to a crouch, I launched myself at the big Rus’ knee. Baldwin hit the other shin, and the three of us tumbled into the dirt. The man flailed his legs. Thuds sounded above my head, and the thrashing legs went slack. Karl, grinning, hauled me to my feet.

Boots pounded the boardwalk. English shouts and Norman jabber flooded the yard. Guardsmen shoved in, grabbing arms and legs, hauling men apart, back to opposite sides of the yard. They were firm enough with me, but kept their hands off Karl.

Renaud stood in the centre of the yard and turned a full circle. “What seems to be—Quiet!” His voice cracked like a scourge when a Kievan began to jeer. He pointed at a rawboned Rus with hearth-ash braids and the eyes of a fowl. “Why have you disturbed the peace of these citizens?”

“We—this house cost us crew,” said the scrawny Rus. “So we come for wergild.”

“Wergild? You are guests here. This entitles you to peace, unless you break it. Only that. The king has already granted you justice. Today you are thieves, and you have wronged this house. Bind them and take them to the fort.”

He said something in Norman; his orders again, I guessed. The Rus shouted as they realized their plight, but the Normans were already holding them helpless. The knots were an afterthought. Half the patrol led them away.

Renaud helped Biren upright. He was careful dusting her off, touching nothing indecent.

“These foreigners do take liberties, don’t they?” He tutted and gave her elbow to one of his men, who took her into the alehouse. The rest of us were herded to the doorway.

He’d taken our ship as punishment for collecting what the Kievans owed us, to defend the honour of his King who’d destroyed our home. All the while playing our dutiful servant. When I’d seen the state of the slaves in the Rus’ hold, I’d thought no man deserved that fate. Maybe Renaud did.

“Brave to come in swinging your sword when you know you’re safe.” I saw that Karl was inside the alehouse already. Soldiers walled us off from one another. I should’ve stayed silent.

Renaud wheeled.

“Who—oh. The bastard, is it?” He was quick to smooth his smile, but I’d seen it begin as a snarl. “Born to a nun, I hear. Though she didn’t call herself one when it counted. Did she?”

My throat closed. He didn’t deserve the fate of the Rus’ cargo. He deserved the fate of their crew.

Renaud stared as if he held me underwater, waiting for my breath to stop. “Something tells me this mess all began with you.” His thumb scratched the corner of his mouth, not bothering to hide his grin. “Yes. I’m sure of it. You have a... dangerous look.”

He snapped a command in Norman. Hands seized my arms and forced me to my knees.

“Well.” Renaud smirked down at me. “Now I feel safe.”

The Normans at the doorway lurched, shoved by unseen hands, but nobody broke through. Renaud reached for his sword. I hauled forward, the muscles of my back and arms tight as rigging, but couldn’t move. Karl’s voice, Baldwine’s, and more shouted, the words running together, meaningless. My teeth clenched so hard I thought they’d shatter; they were so dry that my lips stuck to them. If I was to die now, I hoped I at least looked defiant.

Renaud’s hand slipped from the grip of his sword to the club that hung behind it. He swung. A keening rang in my right ear; half my face went numb. The hot centre of a fire blazed in my temple.

The Normans hauled me up from the mud and dragged me away. I heard a loud nothing, then only silence.