



AND THE

**DRAGON'S
INFERNO**

BY

D E A N Y U R K E

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CHAPTER 1

UTHBERT



LASSA ERIKSON was absolutely terrified, completely and utterly terrified because he was standing in the middle of a Danish battlefield surrounded by an ocean of the fiercest, nastiest, toughest, meanest, ugliest Viking warriors the world had ever seen... and technically, for the past seven and a half hours he was supposed to be one of them too.

Lassa's palms were sweating, his heart was pounding and his thirteen year old legs were trembling so much that he had to lean on his shield to stop himself from falling over. Any minute now he knew he'd be dead. Stabbed - slashed - squashed - burned - boiled - or lanced through the heart by an enemy Saxon spear, dead. Lassa didn't stand a chance.

He looked nothing like the real Vikings. He wasn't taller than a bear, didn't have scars, muscles

or missing limbs, and he still had all of his own teeth. Lassa wasn't a warrior he was a worrier.

And worrying was exactly what Lassa was doing. He kept thinking, hoping, praying that any minute now he'd wake up to another boring day, in his boring little room above the boring and uneventfully safe hay loft on the family farmstead. He scrunched his eyes then opened them, but the army was still there.

Leading the Viking army was the hulking great wall of flesh - General Gorn Skarsgood. He was the six foot four embodiment of the Viking name; broken nose, forked beard, iron plated armor and a four foot long broadsword that he wielded as if it were a toothpick. The Vikings stiffened with pride as Gorn strode past them inspecting their armor. Particular favorites he punched in the arm, hard enough to fell a small tree. Singled out, these massive men swooned with honor.

Pacing besides Gorn was his second in command, the equally menacing Leif Dremhammar. His long black hair matched his long black cape, and made him look like a giant raven. "We're facing eight hundred enemy Saxons, two brigades of archers and a battalion of chariots. They say that unless we agree to halt our unprovoked attacks against England and sign a peace treaty they will destroy the port of Ribe."

Lassa strained to see through the wall of brutes blocking his view. He prayed that by some miracle the battle might be called off and he could forget this nightmare and go home.

"Unprovoked, they attacked us!" said Gorn. "You know where they can shove their peace treaty.

Please tell me that my prize Blood Eagle is with them?”

“Yar. The Saxon Lord Mordred is awaiting your response.”

Gorn gripped the hilt of his sword. Sunlight gleamed over the blade. The word Uthbert was fused into the metal. Gorn smirked, “Uthbert is ready to answer.” But his dark smile was cut short as he noticed something out of place with one of his soldiers. He stomped towards a heavily scarred, gap-toothed log of a man who trembled as Gorn stopped before him.

Gorn stared at the man’s sword which was rusty and trailing along the ground. Instantly the soldier realized his mistake and was about to apologize when - WALLOP! Gorn knocked him out with one swift blow.

Lassa could feel the wind from Gorn’s fist where he stood three rows back.

“Never, never, NEVER let me see a weapon in such a state of disgrace.” Gorn turned to the crowd. “Your sword is your life. Your life is your sword. It holds back the tide of death and you will worship its power as the enemy’s knees buckle before its fury. Its will is God’s will. Its blood is our blood and our blood is VIKING!!!” The ranks erupted with a deafening roar of approval.

However, not everyone was cheering. Lassa couldn’t. His stomach was in his mouth. His limbs were going numb, and he had the sense that he wasn’t in his own body. Everything was turning white and little stars appeared in the corners of his eyes. If he had control of his limbs he would’ve run a thousand

miles. Lassa was thankful he still had control of his bowels.

“Lassa, Lassa? Psst! Oi Lassa?”

Lassa didn't turn, his mind was as numb as his freezing cold toes. Deep down though, Lassa knew that the voice was coming from his overweight, lazy and yet inexplicably likable twin brother Sven Erikson, who was crouched next to a nearby battle carriage. Twin yes, but definitely not identical. Lassa found it hard to believe that they were in any way related. Lassa liked 'normal' teenage things, like studying ancient texts on chemical analysis, books on mathematical theory and structural engineering. He even gave up his weekends to clean the local apothecary for free, so he could learn from his mentor, Choy Yang a master Chinese alchemist.

Sven however had a very different view of Lassa's passion for science - he considered it 'a bunch of old rubbish' and would often warn Lassa that 'nothing good could come from mixing with a sorcerous foreigner...'

Sven was ignorant, small minded and stupid all wrapped into one lazy lump but the thing that Lassa did envy about Sven was that Sven was the most optimistic and laid back person on the planet. Like the human equivalent of a well-fed dog lying by the fireplace with its tail smoldering in the heat.

“Lassa, Lassa? Hey cloth ears, look.”

Lassa was miles away. Sven's distant voice buzzed around his head like a Baltic mosquito. Lassa knew whatever information Sven was going to impart wasn't going to save him from meeting his maker as soon as the battle started.

But just to shut him up, Lassa answered, “W-what?”

“Lassa, you have got to see this,” said Sven, groaning as he stood up from inspecting the battle carriage. “Look, double rimmed axle covers. Imagine how many bales of hay that could pull on the farm. Nice.”

“What?” Lassa’s pitch rose an octave.

“You should do one of your little drawing scribbles of it.”

“A diagram? You want me to draw a diagram? Were you even listening to a word Gorn said? He names his sword, what sort of person names their sword?” said Lassa.

“It’s an Uthbert, they’re top of the line, worth more than ten farms!”

“We’re gonna die here you know.”

Sven gave Lassa a sly look. “Not us, I have a plan.”

“This one doesn’t involve a ‘free meal’ at the feasting hall again does it?”

“Oh c’mon, I said I was sorry, will you drop it.”

“What’s the worst that could happen, you said? And now this!”

“Do you want to hear my plan or are you going to prattle on like an old woman?”

Lassa did begrudgingly recognize that it wasn’t all Sven’s fault that they had been forced to join the Viking army – just ninety-nine percent his fault – because the Viking army’s recruiters had a very crafty way of increasing their ranks. Recruiters would bake the ‘King’s Coin’ into cakes and leave them casually lying around the local feasting halls. They

would then wait until a greedy oaf ‘accidentally’ took a huge bite out of one and nearly broke a tooth on the coin. Having touched the coin the recruiter would then claim that the victim had willingly accepted the king’s pay and was now enlisted into the Viking army.

Lassa had tried to argue the validity of this with the recruiter but found quickly that it was unwise to point out a legal technicality to someone four times your body weight, especially when their boot was pressing your face into the floor and they were charging you with impeding an imperial officer. The penalty was death or immediate enlistment in King Magnus’s army, which also resulted in death, just a little more drawn out.

Lassa glowered at Sven.

Sven tried his most earnest smile. “It’s a good plan Lassa, trust me.”

Trust Sven!

Never again vowed Lassa. Never again. He’d rather take his chances with the Vikings.

Lassa trained his ears back on Gorn’s rousing speech.

“...These attacks will end here, when this hand prepares the Blood Eagle for each and every one!” Gorn was in full force.

Lassa stared at Sven wide-eyed. “What’s a Blood Eagle?”

“You sure you want to know? It’s a real honor apparently, saved only for the most worthy of victims. When you surrender they slice open your chest, tear out your lungs and lay them either side of your rib cage. Looks like an eagle, and you’re still alive -”

“Sven stop.”

“Takes days to die. It’s the ravens pecking at your flesh that eventually ends your torment. Nasty stuff, I met a fella up at the grub hut who said he survived -”

“Shut up. Please, I’m going to be sick.” Lassa breathed slowly, but it didn’t help. Sven had to steady him. His brother was always there when he needed him, and he was always there when he didn’t.

Lassa looked over at Sven’s hopeful face. However stupid his plan, it had to be better than having your lungs cut out.

“Alright. Tell me your plan.”

Sven took a breath, then announced, “Stay at the back of the fighting.”

“WHAT!?” cried Lassa in a shrill voice. Sven had topped his worst idea ever.

Hearing Lassa’s shout, a slab of a warrior with a bushy red beard, turned round and explained to Lassa, “The General said the sea will overflow with Saxon blood.”

“Cool, wicked. Thanks.” Lassa grimaced then turned back to Sven. Did his brother really just suggest the worst suggestion ever, in the history of bad suggestions? “Stay at the back! That’s your brilliant plan?!”

“Everyone always rushes to the front, let them do the fighting. And try to stand behind someone bigger than you, they always go for the heifers.” Sven folded his arms with pride.

Lassa stood there incredulous, “You really are serious aren’t you?”

“What do you suggest, fighting?”

“Or creating a diversion and running away.” Lassa opened his coat, inside were pockets stuffed with smoke bombs and homemade Chinese fireworks.

“Oh no, you’re not still hanging round with Choy Yang?” said Sven. “You’ll blow yourself up!”

“No, it’s perfectly safe,” said Lassa.

“You stay away from those foreigners. It’s sorcery, that’s what it is.”

“It’s alchemy. There’s no such thing as magic!”

Gorn concluded his bloodthirsty speech, “For King Magnus and for victory!”

The Vikings pounded their swords on their shields creating a roar of oak and iron. So as not to stand out, Lassa followed suit but accidentally hit his thumb with the hilt of his weapon and dropped the shield.

Sven raised his eyebrows. “If you’d spent more time building up your muscles in the field and less time staring at them, umm, foldy things, you’d be fine.”

“Books. They’re called books,” said Lassa.

“They’ll never catch on. Learn by doing Lassa, not by reading.” Sven twirled his spear.

Viking horns sounded all around them. The army welled in anticipation of glorious war. This was it, the end of Lassa Erikson.

As Lassa looked out at the multitude of snarling, brutal faces who moments from now would certainly kill him, he considered that maybe he’d been too quick to dismiss the ravings of his imbecile brother and that perhaps, just possibly, Sven’s plan wasn’t the worst idea ever.

How wrong he was.

CHAPTER 2

THE GLORY OF THE GREAT DEED



ON THE opposite enemy hillside the Saxon Lord Mordred rode his huge warhorse along his lines of English troops. He wore battered armor and his face was ugly and scarred. White hair. Grey beard. Black heart.

The thousand men he commanded stood shoulder to shoulder determined to free their families from the ever increasing sneak attacks of the Viking dogs. Mordred couldn't understand what character of man attacks women and children in the black of night, unseen like cowards? The last thing Mordred wanted was a full on war, but these attacks had to be stopped.

Mordred reared his horse to a halt in the center of his men. He gave the order and rows of archers lit their arrows. He glared across to the Vikings, rage boiling. He lowered his arm and a flaming cloud of fire was unleashed into the sky.

But the arrows weren't heading for the Vikings. They zipped through the air aiming at the Saxon's own fleet which was moored in the harbor of Ribe. The projectiles riddled the decks and the Saxon ships burst into flames.

Smoke billowed across the fields.

On the other side of the hill, the Viking army roared with laughter at their seemingly incompetent enemy.

Lassa wasn't laughing though. Choy Yang had once lent him the ancient scroll called *The Art of War*, a secret Chinese textbook on military strategy. No boats meant no way back. Without any way to retreat the Saxon army would have to win today or they would die. Nothing motivated an army more than being doomed. His palms sweated even more. He stared over to Sven who was rubbing dirt into his hair. It was showtime.

Gorn gave the order for silence and the jeers of a thousand men fell dead.

An eerie stillness blanketed the battlefield.

Then came a single drum.

The steady beat rose as the sun glinted across a sea of swords.

Gorn's voice boomed across the downs as he rallied the troops by quoting the Viking poem Havamal;

*“Cattle die, kindred die,
Every man is mortal:
but one thing never dies,
the glory of the great deed.”*

His men seemed to grow a foot taller. He lunged Uthbert into the air and gave the order to, “CHARGE!” With a roar like thunder the Viking army piled down the slopes towards the Saxons.

Across the hill, his enemy Mordred clutched a dragon shaped amulet under his tunic for luck, then gave the same command, “CHARGE!”

A pounding avalanche of men poured down the hillside.

The Saxons and Vikings gained momentum with every step, speed building and building until they finally reached the bottom and crashed together in an ocean of ripping, tearing, stabbing, slashing madness. The clash of swords and guttural screams were deafening. An endless torrent of carnage and pain.

But not for everyone...

Because at that moment Lassa's run was slowing down and the frenzy of Vikings were rolling past him. In a ballet of absolute cowardice he emulated his brother Sven and dodged behind the largest and dumbest looking Viking he could find. Sven was a master at the art of deception. To most it looked like he was fully engaged in the attack; hacking with his sword, letting out exquisitely timed grunts, yelling hate filled put-downs, sweat pouring from his deliberately mud covered face. But Lassa was less successful in his ruse, and if you caught him from behind you'd have seen that he was never in any real danger of even the mildest of scrapes. Luckily for him it was impossible to detect his actions, unless of course you were the enemy attacking from behind. Lassa smiled to himself. For once one of Sven's crazy ideas was actually working.

That thought lasted for almost exactly one-third of one second, it was then that Lassa heard the pounding hooves of a rapidly approaching enemy Saxon warhorse directly behind him. Lassa turned round to see Mordred holding its reigns, his mouth foaming even more than the horse's. Mordred pointed his sword right at Lassa and bellowed, "If there's one thing I hate more than a Viking, it's a miserable Viking COWARD!"

The blood drained from Lassa's skin and his world went into an awful slow-motion nightmare. He watched the sweat drip from Mordred's blood splattered horse as the beast barreled forward. It stopped in front of Lassa and reared up like a massive wave about to crash, but at the apex, a stray lance flew towards its neck and pierced the creature dead. The horse crumbled and Mordred was thrown into the air. Miraculously the unstoppable Mordred landed square on his feet and charged towards Lassa in a rage. With a gleam in his eye direct from hell, Mordred raised his sword.

In his second out of body experience of the day, Lassa looked down upon himself in a trance. He stared at his virgin sword then back to the meanest, scariest, nastiest Saxon he'd ever seen.

With his body frozen, Lassa's mind whirled at all the things he'd never get to do; the discoveries he'd never make, the scientific secrets he would never unlock. Didn't this Saxon realize that the world needed Lassa Erikson? No, he couldn't let this be his end. He had to make a stand right here right now. No longer would Lassa let fear control his life, no longer would he allow others to control his destiny. This day, this hour, this minute would define him for the

generations to come. Today Lassa would become a true Viking. Today he would fight, fight, fight!

But as the tip of Lord Mordred's sword sliced through the air, Lassa's body had a different plan - ruuunnnnnnnnn!

Lassa screamed at the top of his lungs and bolted away as fast as his skinny legs would carry him. In a blind panic Lassa barreled past Sven, he barreled past the throngs of Vikings and he barreled straight towards the front lines.

Lassa's screams caught Gorn's ears as Lassa flew by in a wild rage. Gorn watched him tear towards the battle ahead. "That's the spirit boy! Right to the front lines!" Gorn turned to Leif who was hacking away at the Saxons, "If we only had a hundred like him... Berserkers."

"They get younger every year," noted Leif.

Lassa slalomed through the din. He could hear Mordred closing in; for a big man he was lightning fast. Lassa quickened his pace but then realized he was on a collision course for the front lines, a slaughterhouse of steel and carnage. Lassa banked to the right. He hopped over fallen bodies, dodged twelve foot pikes and ducked beneath stray arrows that whizzed overhead. But Mordred was gaining with every step - that man was bewitched! Then it struck him - Lassa's eyes lit up, "Alchemy!"

Lassa opened his jacket and grabbed one of Choy Yang's smoke bombs. He yanked the rip cord and the pouch caught fire. Lassa lobbed the smoke bomb into the air above him, the pouch sparked then, WHOMP! The pouch exploded and a billowing smoke cloud forty feet across fogged the battlefield.

Lassa looked behind at the cloud and smiled, everything was buried in haze. But his heart sank as Mordred burst through the smoke and pelted towards him at full speed. Remarkably that was the least of Lassa's problems because at that moment he felt burning on his chest. Smoke fumed from inside his coat. He flapped it open. The rest of his smoke bombs were on fire!

Lassa fumbled for the burning pouches and tossed them out in a panic - WHOMPF, WHOMPF, WHOMPF - the smoke bombs exploded all around him. He was totally blind, swallowed in the fog.

Lassa scrambled to escape, his heart about to burst with adrenaline. He looked over his shoulder to check Mordred's position, but with his head turned, Lassa's foot tangled in a tree root and he slammed into the mud!

Sprawled on his back, he gripped his sword, its point jutting into the air.

He struggled to get up from the mud, but it was too late - Mordred's booming voice was upon him, "You miserable little runt--!"

Mordred tore through the fog, but he too tripped on the same root and his hulking frame came crashing down on top of Lassa's sword!

He was skewered right through his black Saxon heart. His body landed on top of Lassa and his head cracked into Lassa's skull.

As Lassa fell into unconsciousness the last thing that spiraled through his mind was, *why did I ever listen to Sven!*

CHAPTER 3

A HERO IS BORN



SEVERAL HOURS later, Lassa jerked awake.

Then wished he hadn't.

Mordred's bloated dead face stared him in the eyes. Lassa tried to scream but Mordred's hairy dead arm was squashing his neck making it almost impossible to breathe, let alone shout for help. Lassa twisted and wriggled but he couldn't shift the weight. The massive corpse pinned him to the ground, as if Mordred wanted to crush Lassa in revenge for ending his life.

From the lack of screams Lassa assumed the battle was over, and from the sound of familiar accents, the Vikings had won. But his thoughts were broken by another more ominous sound – the sound of metal slicing through bone and armor.

Lassa stared under Mordred's putrid armpit and saw Leif and Gorn driving their swords through dead Saxons who littered the smoky battlefield. They were just a few bodies away.

“No sign of him General, perhaps Mordred escaped?”

“No way, he’d fight to the last. He’s here, I know it,” said Gorn.

Lassa panicked. The general and his second in command were skewering the dead to make sure no enemy survivors were hiding in the carnage. Lassa realized that he was invisible under Mordred’s body and if he didn’t do something soon they’d stab him too.

A thousand calculations raced through Lassa’s mind, but all of them needed a lever or a pulley to shift Mordred’s body.

He tried again to call for help but all he could manage was a wheezy breath due to the choking weight of Mordred’s arm. Lassa shook his head and kicked with all his might. The body wouldn’t shift. The only thing that moved was Mordred’s black tongue which flopped out and licked Lassa’s cheek like a cold dead fish.

Lassa heard Gorn and Leif’s boots stomp down beside Mordred’s mud splattered body.

Leif raised his sword and prepared to drive it through the dead Saxon below him.

Lassa closed his eyes tight.

This was it, for the third time today he was about to meet his maker. He thought he’d be used to it by now.

Leif grunted then drove down the blade -- but at the last moment Gorn pushed it aside and the sword slammed harmlessly into the dirt.

“Wait! That’s the Saxon royal coat of arms. It’s him. It’s Mordred!” said Gorn. “Who stole my kill? I

wanted to Blood Eagle him myself! I bet it was Olof Brikval, he's always trying to out do me."

Leif crouched to inspect the body. He spotted Lassa's hand. "There's another."

He rolled Mordred's body over and revealed Lassa underneath, still gripping the sword that killed Mordred.

Lassa screamed.

Then screamed again.

Gorn and Leif stumbled backwards.

Lassa gulped for air, giddy at his freedom. "YES!"

Gorn started to laugh. "I recognize this champion, it's the Berserker! Such courage for just a boy."

Lassa gasped for breath. "Wha..?"

"Take it easy son." Gorn lifted him by the arm and shouted to the Vikings. "Brothers, behold a gift from God. A great warrior walks amongst us. A noble man of honor has torn my enemy from the Earth. By this very hand the Saxon Mordred is dead!"

The Vikings cheered, half from respect, half from fear of Gorn's wrath if they didn't. Gorn towered over Lassa. "What's your name?"

Lassa wobbled in a daze. "L-Lassa, but I didn't do --"

Gorn boomed to the warriors, "All hail Lassa the, umm..." Gorn looked him up and down, pursed his lips and thought a little too long. Leif gave a polite cough and Gorn finally proclaimed, "...Lassa the Valiant."

The Vikings beat their shields and chanted, "Lassa, Lassa, Lassa..."

Lassa blinked at the smoky lines of his countrymen. This had to be a dream.

He watched Gorn pull a gold chain from around Mordred's neck. A strange dragon amulet hung off the end. It looked like a baby bird dipped in gold with holes running along the sides. Gorn held it in his hand and toyed with it longingly. "Mordred's amulet. They say he stole this from a witch and its magic would protect him from a dragon's fury. Ha! Didn't protect him from a Viking berserker, eh lad! Superstitious idiots. Still, this prize has eluded me until today."

Gorn removed the amulet and admired it in the golden evening sunlight then turned to face Lassa. "But now your bravery and courage have truly earned it. This belongs to you." Gorn hung the amulet on Lassa.

It draped heavily around Lassa's neck. "No, no, it's okay, I don't deserve this, you can have it. I never re--"

"Come now, don't be modest." Gorn grew impatient.

Lassa felt terrible. "You should keep it. I didn't really do anything. It was more of an accid--"

"SIR! SIR!" Just then Sven pushed through the crowd, red faced, encrusted with mud, and sporting the bloody remnants of a few self-inflicted nicks on his eyebrows. "General, sir, permission to speak? He's confused sir, must have taken a knock to the head. I was right behind him during the battle. Oh and what a magnificent duel it was sir. Slash, slash, parry - like a mad bull in spring."

Sven acted out Lassa's imaginary swordfight.

Lassa looked at him confused. “What are you talking ab-- OWWWT!”

Sven stamped on Lassa’s foot. “Trained by the spell casters from the East he is sir. Powerful magic, a sorcerer some say. It’ll come back to him sir. I think he needs rest and perhaps, umm, grub for... his health!” Sven gave a hopeful smile.

Gorn looked suspicious but conceded. “Aye, the lad looks like he could do with a meal.”

Sven licked his lips. “We did do learnings from ‘books’ together sir, I’ll gladly tend to him.”

Lassa did a double take. Sven couldn’t even tie his own shoelaces let alone decode Latin texts.

Gorn laughed. “Well, as there are no women here, take him to rest in my carriage.”

Sven smiled back looking like the cat who got the cream.

Lassa was about to protest but then thought better of it. He felt incredibly guilty for the praise he was getting but the last time he’d tried to explain facts to the authorities he’d ended up pressganged into the Viking army. Honesty wasn’t always the best policy when it came to staying alive around Vikings.

As Sven led Lassa towards the battle carriage, Gorn slapped him on the back. Lassa choked as the wind was knocked out of him. “Don’t worry, we won’t keep you away from battle for long,” said Gorn. “I’ll line up some spectacular missions for you once you’re back on your feet, my young warrior.”

Lassa’s legs almost gave in. Sven steadied him and grimaced.

“Back to Trondheim,” bellowed Gorn to his troops, “where we will celebrate our victory with King Magnus!”

Sven pulled Lassa into the back of Gorn's battle carriage. "Food, rest and a free ride home! I love it when a plan comes together."

Lassa's stomach churned in anticipation of what Gorn had planned for him next. He sighed.

The drivers riled the horses and the procession headed into the dusky sunset.

CHAPTER 4

ACROSS THE POND



SPARKS FROM clashing swords rained down on two masked swashbucklers as they dueled like lightning down a tapestry lined corridor in England's Ashby castle.

Clad in leather armor, the two Saxon warriors jumped on tables, swung from chandeliers and slid down banisters. Their blades whipped the air as they fought down stone halls, twisting and turning towards the kitchens. As they burst into the sculleries, maids ran for cover. Sacks were sliced and flour puffed into the air.

One of the duelists somersaulted onto a table, narrowly missing the others blade by a hair's breadth, then to avoid another deadly blow, jumped up to swing from the pot-rack like a gymnast but slipped and smacked into a towering urn of wine.

The five-hundred-gallon jar wobbled and started to topple -- both fighters raced to steady it.

They managed to balance it temporarily against the wall as loud and determined footsteps rounded the corner and the elderly, battle-worn and somewhat annoyed King Harold entered the room. “Ann! Meghan! No fighting in the kitchens!”

The swashbucklers froze then turned slowly to face him, careful not to let go of the jar. They raised their fencing masks to reveal two embarrassed and out of breath girls, fourteen-year-old Ann, and her twelve-year-old sister Meghan

Ann, with scruffy red hair and piercing green eyes, was obviously of her mother’s Celtic ancestry. Meghan shared her Father’s Anglo Saxon bloodline of tangled black hair and smiling grey eyes. Although Ann loved her younger sister dearly they weren’t adverse to a little sibling rivalry, and if you define a ‘little’ as hacking at each other with razor sharp swords then you’d be well at home with the future heirs to England’s throne.

King Harold stood with his hands on his hips perplexed. “If cook finds you in here she’ll have your guts for garters.” Harold stared at Ann’s blade. “Not again with the swords. You’re supposed to be getting dressed for your birthday feast!”

Ann sheepishly hid her sword behind her back. Her other arm strained to keep the giant urn propped up undetected. “I was defending your honor father, Meghan said that now I’m fourteen you were going to marry me off to the first prince who’d take me. You wouldn’t would you?” She bit her lip. “Would you?” Ann shuddered at the thought that he would use her as a political pawn, marrying her off to some sweaty old hairy prince to bolster a peace treaty or gain new lands in the north. Her stomach churned at

the prospect of a life of servitude. And a little anger rose in her veins directed at her father.

Meghan broke her thoughts as she stomped her foot. "I didn't say that! All I said was that you're of age, and I want your bedroom you're so sensitive!" Meghan lowered her mask. "Let's fight for it."

Ann's eyes gleamed as she raised her sword with both hands ready to continue the duel but then remembered too late that she was supposed to be preventing the massive urn from falling.

All three of them watched open mouthed as the urn crashed to the floor and a sea of very fine wine flooded the kitchens.

THAT NIGHT Ashby castle looked glorious lit by hundreds of torches in celebration of Ann's birthday. Cheerful sounds of lyres and flutes filled the colorfully decorated courtyard. The smells of roasted boars, pigeons and geese wafted from rows of benches and pavilions filled with merry villagers.

Ann sullenly trailed after Meghan and their father as he made his way through the procession towards the stage with the royal table. Ann and Meghan looked much more regal and 'ladylike' in flowing gowns with pointy veiled hats. Ann felt the constraint of every stitch.

She noticed that most of villagers there were very old because mothers with children were being sent away to the country to keep them safe from the increasing attacks, and men of fighting age were away defending the realm either from the Picts in

Scotland or from the constant Viking invasions along the shores of eastern England.

Quite frankly Ann would've been much happier standing amongst those men making a difference, rather than being the center of attention at a party. Just because she was female didn't mean she couldn't fight too, just like the legendary Queen Boudica who repelled the Roman army from England six hundred years earlier.

King Harold reached the stage. The music died and a hush fell upon the crowds. Harold didn't wear a crown, he didn't need one, he had a presence that immediately commanded respect. The people hung on his every word. "Good people of Ashby, the stench of the Viking is upon us. And it grows stronger with every passing breath. They burn our villages when our men are away in battle. They destroy our livestock, take our families. They leave nothing but misery and their stink! But the tide is turning. Right now my brother Lord Mordred is leading an attack on their soil!" The villagers cheered in support of Mordred, but secretly were glad the terrifying brute of a man was three hundred miles away across the North sea.

"And five thousand more troops in Scotland led by the magnificent Duke of Wessex." He paused and looked at Ann encouragingly. Odd thought Ann. He continued, "are soon to return to bolster our defenses from the imminent invasion by the Vikings. So the next time a Viking steps foot on our blessed soil they will drown in their own blood. We may stand in dark times, but we stand together. And we will stand victorious!"

The villagers rose to their feet and clapped. King Harold smiled warmly then picked up a goblet. "But to happier times, today we celebrate my beautiful daughter's birthday. Her mother would've been the proudest woman in all of England... to Ann! To the princess."

The crowd raised their goblets, then rumbled their feet and cheered. Ann blushed, hating the attention, and hated being called 'beautiful', that was probably why her father really didn't want her fighting, a dueling scar along the cheek might lower her value on the marriage market. One of these days she feared he'd even marry her off to a filthy Viking if it would guarantee his kingdom.

The rumble grew louder and stronger so much so that jugs began to vibrate on the tables, one slipped off and crashed to the ground. The villagers rested their feet, but the rumbling didn't stop, and it got even stronger.

Everyone looked around concerned. Ann held onto her chair, an earthquake, in England? Just then a scorching wind blasted through the stands and the rows of torches were blown out, leaving them in total darkness.

There was silence.

The calm before the storm.

Then, began the terrible screams.

In the moonlight, flashes of steel cut through the villagers. The silhouettes of dozens of hooded figures swept through the crowd like a tornado. The stands toppled. Ann and Meghan were hurled to the ground. Plumes of fire shot through the pavilions and the courtyard became an inferno.

The hooded figures dragged villagers kicking and screaming into the castle. Locals ran to escape but were torn to pieces by the unseen enemy in the darkness.

King Harold raced to protect his daughters but a Viking shield whacked him in the head and he was knocked out cold. A shape in the night dragged him away. It cackled with a voice like death, "Let's see how he likes it in his own dungeon!"

Ann watched aghast as more cloaked bodies descended upon Meghan too and dragged her towards the castle dungeon. Ann raced after her, the heavy formal dress slowed her down so she ripped off the restraining layers leaving her in just her corset and petticoat, she didn't care how she looked, someone had her sister! But Ann was blocked by the burning stands. She kicked at the flaming beams but was trapped by the fire. Meghan saw her and cried out, "Ann help!" Ann shielded her face from the flames but several more shadows were closing in on her. She was surrounded. Meghan called again, "HELP!"

"We need Mordred! I'll get MORDRED!" cried Ann.

"HURRY!" shouted Meghan, then she was swallowed into the castle and her words were silenced.

Ann clenched her teeth and stared at the circle of figures drawing closer, their outlines blurred by the heat from the scorching fires. She closed her eyes and took a deep mind cleansing breath. There was no way to save Meghan or her father on her own; she would need an army. And the closest was with Mordred in Ribe. She had to sail for them immediately.

Her thoughts were broken as a figure leaped through the flames heading straight for her. Ann was weaponless. She snapped off the nearest flagpole and held it like a javelin. She drove it with all of her strength through the chest of the hooded figure. It was enough to kill any mortal, but the figure carried on towards her -- what were these Norsemen made of?

Ann felt sick to her stomach. These creatures had to be from a dark corner of hell. Sorcery was afoot. She knew now that it was impossible for her to rescue her family without help. With a renewed determination Ann focused all her strength on reaching Mordred. She somersaulted over the railing and ran across the cobbled courtyard away from the castle.

Several robed enemies gave chase with inhuman speed. Ann threw anything and everything across their path to slow them; baskets, benches, even chickens. She raced along an alleyway and sliced the brakes off a burning hay cart. It rolled back down the narrow street behind her and crashed into a wall. Its bales of flaming straw landed on barrels of oil which caught fire. They exploded and filled the road with a wall of flames and the hooded figures were blocked.

As Ann escaped into the night, she glanced back at the castle one last time. Then she slowed, an icy dread crawled over her pounding heart.

She was being watched.

Ann squinted through the flames - the outline of a towering man in golden armor warped and twisted in the heat. She could almost feel his eyes piercing her soul from inside his full faced helmet.

But those were not the eyes of a man, she swore they were the slits of a reptile.

More flames rolled between them and the vision disappeared in the sulfurous heat.

Ann shuddered.

Every fiber in her body wanted to stay and fight to save her family but she tore herself away and ran towards the coast. There was only one way to win this battle and rescue her sister and father, she must find a boat, reach Mordred and bring back his army.

Their lives and the future of England lay in Ann's hands...

CHAPTER 5

THE NEW PLAN



“SVEN, WHAT are we gonna do! Gorn thinks I’m a Berserker. He’s going to send me on a mission. This is crazy! Why didn’t you let me tell him the truth?!”

Sven nearly coughed out the leg of lamb he was gnawing on. He and Lassa were alone in the back of Gorn’s battle wagon as it gently bobbed along a forest road. Sven lounged on fox-fur pillows surrounded by delicious pies, strudels and creamy jugs of milk. Conversely Lassa sat with his feet tucked beneath his chin, rocking backwards and forwards trying to sooth himself. Wolf pelts lined the walls to keep out the frigid night but they made Lassa feel like he was encircled by rabid dogs and any moment they’d spring back to life and devour him.

Sven got his breath back. “Tell Gorn the truth! Are you mad? You’ve seen what Gorn does to deserters. Imagine what he’d do if he found out that a spineless coward like you, no offense, just killed his

mortal enemy? Wake up Lassa, I just saved your life.”

Lassa could hear Gorn outside cheerily singing an ancient Nordic battle chant. To Lassa, Gorn’s song sounded eerily like the Christmas carol ‘Good King Wenceslas’;

*“A mighty sword is sharp and keen,
all the good for cleaving.
To tear a victim’s head from neck,
deep and crisp and even...”*

But the merry song did nothing to lift Lassa’s spirits.

“I’ve got it,” said Sven. “We’ll play up the bash on the head thing. Maybe Gorn’ll give you compassionate leave, you know, a rest in the country.”

“Compassionate? Gorn?!” Lassa’s reaction was so loud that the singing outside stopped. Sven and Lassa held their breath and listened intently for any reaction from Gorn. It was deadly silent except for the rhythmic clippity clop of hoofs and a horse fart. Well Lassa presumed it was a horse because of the volume and duration, but alas he was quite wrong as Gorn took full credit for the mighty blast before he proudly resumed his singing.

Lassa stared at the back of the carriage. “Let’s just make a run for it and head back home.” He lifted the fur curtains to peek outside. They were trailed by hundreds of grinning soldiers marching behind. They recognized Lassa and chanted, “Lassa, Lassa, Lassa.”

Lassa grimaced, gave a pathetic wave with his wrist then popped back inside. Guess being a celebrity isn't everything it's cracked up to be.

"Head back home and have half the Viking army pillaging the farmstead looking for us?" continued Sven. "Not blinking likely. Anyway, knowing our dad he'd sell us out for gallon of brandy anyway."

Then Lassa remembered, "Choy Yang!"

Sven nearly choked again and looked round nervously. "Where?"

"Trondheim! When we get to Trondheim we'll get Choy Yang to help."

"No thanks, I don't want him turning me into a frog."

"For the last time, Choy doesn't do magic. But his shop, the apothecary, we could hide there. Then maybe he could ship us off to China?" A trace of hope returned to Lassa's voice.

"Ya know what, that's actually not a bad plan... dim sum, Peking duck, crispy wontons, yum. I ain't getting on no boat though. No way. I'd rather walk." He raised his leg of lamb in a toast.

"You walk, that'd be the day." Feeling three percent less anxious, Lassa lay back and looked up through a crack in the roof. He watched the vivid stars roll overhead. On a normal night he would have wanted to study the constellations and make notes for his almanac, but tonight his thoughts were on reaching his master. He had a plan and that was enough for starters.

He closed his eyes for a second, and was asleep before his head hit the pillow. This day couldn't be over with soon enough.