

UNDER GOD'S ROCK

UNDER GOD'S ROCK

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and events are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2021 by Tim Urban
Maps © 2021 by Reina Marie Urban

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever without the author's written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Cover Art by Reina Marie Urban

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-0-00-000000-0

ISBN: 978-0-00-000000-0 (ebook)

PROLOGUE

NORTHERN ENGLAND, 25 SEPTEMBER 1066

I killed the man not because I was cold and wanted his coat, but because he was mocking me. His head landed between his horse's back hooves. Turned up to me, his face was still laughing even. So I kicked it as hard as I could. It bounced once on the dirt track, then rolled off so far into the high grass beyond I couldn't even find it. And that was too bad because I wanted to kick it again.

Fat and filthy and stinking of mead, with rings on every finger but no thumb on either hand, he was a thief. A thug. And with his broken old cart pulled by his broken old horse more a scavenger than the ravens I left picking him apart.

None dimmed in my mind's eye, I can still see the Saxon's headless body humped like a dead ox on the muddy ground of that dark English forest as clearly as when I shut his rot-stinking mouth that long-ago day. Just another fly-infested corpse lying amidst the countless battlefield dead he'd stripped of every glimmer of their worldly worth, he got what he deserved.

Lice-ridden and crusted with blood, the Saxon's coat was a shabby thing. More hide than leather. Soot-soaked. The lining coarse wool pricked with straw. And an ill-fit for a fat man, at that. One dead ugly beast wrapped in the skin of another, it was bare worth an acorn's weight of pitted slag. Only, I was a warrior, not some purple-born prince or preening peacock, and couldn't

care less about wearing the stench of another man's filth. Slogging through the numbness of a battle's end. Cold. Wind. Rain. Half-naked and shivering. More of my blood on the ground than in my veins. My pride had no answer for that. So my generous offer to the Saxon: a trade of my hard-earned arm rings for that rat-skin he called a coat—three well-turned serpents all thick with the purest silver.

But for the look he gave me, I might as well have struck him square between the eyes with a rock. A look bewildered. Angered even. His snarl the same as if a fresh pile of mule shit just squished up between his toes. Pushing back his hood to expose his dark, brutish face and red-rimmed eyes, the Saxon opened his mouth like to shout. Yet the absurdity of my thinking a man with a convict's large blackened C branded on his brow might trade for anything only made him laugh.

“What farce!” the Saxon howled. “Give my coat? Look at you—like puked up with the pig's breakfast. Nothing but shit and blood. Why, not a stone's throw farther you'll fall over dead and I'll pluck your parts for free. Pocket all your bits of bead and bone and shine. Then I'll pick that teary little glint right off the black of your cold, staring eyes on the chance there's a fleck of silver in them, besides!”

Mocking me as a whore-suckled swine not worthy of the air I breathed—a lacy-waist—a silk-slippered eunuch—of running like a little girl—cowering in the shadows, yellow as the piss running down my leg—“No courage to die like the rest of those pagan brutes now rotting on the river's edge”—the Saxon then boasted that had he a weapon at hand he would split me wide and rip out my quivering rabbit-heart. “Go home, old woman,” he shouted, “and attend to your loom and spindle, for you are but a pitiful failure in the test that proves a man.” Then, feigning like to hit me with his whip, he spit in my face and laughed.

I didn't bother to wipe my cheek, but his insult was like to burn my flesh.

On any other day, I would have ripped out his tongue with my bare hands and rammed a sword so far up inside him that its gleaming blade would have come wagging out of his mouth instead. Only, I said nothing. Did nothing. For there was truth in the man's charge—my monstrous shame—my skull feeling like to split apart under the weight of dead men strewn into every crevice of my brain.

Unarmed and wearied by the daylong fight at the river, I turned away from the man, his loudmouthed taunts, and continued along the forest track. Only, in my slow, hobbled step, his slop-sided little horse quickly drew even, then passed, the old cart's creaking wood wheels throwing up mud nigh to my waist as they rolled close beside me. Not to be ignored or robbed of his fun, spitting his Saxon filth—"Fish-stinking son of a whore! I've seen more fight in a man strung between two trees with his bloody balls stuffed in his mouth!"—suddenly, the air hissed and I felt the sting of his thick braided whip across my naked back.

Hard-bitten and tearing my skin, for several heartbeats I could not breathe or even see.

Tripping over rocks and roots and tangled brush with my footfalls landing I knew not where, I stumbled in a deep rut in the road and fell hard to my knees.

Another harsh crack. Once. Twice. Ten times. More.

Spooked by the sound, the Saxon's whip-scarred little roan whinnied and reared up in panic, lurching forward in short, jarring hops. Casks and crates began spilling the cart, cheap birch wine drenching the ground. Out from under a ragged burlap cover, a jumble of steel the mudfoot Saxon had scavenged from the battlefield clanged over the sideboard in a heap: bloodied greaves, gauntlets, helms, and swords splashing down in the mud around me. With blue

eyes wide and blond beard streaked red, the helmeted head of a Norse warrior tumbled to the ground besides.

“Calm, you bastard! Calm!” the Saxon shouted as he whipped the frightened cart-horse with red-faced savagery. Studded with sharp slivers of stone that tore into the roan’s flesh like fangs on bare bone, feral dogs could not have done the work of that whip any bloodier. Mad with pain, thrashing this way then that, the screaming animal suddenly wrenched half around and crashed its flailing, iron-shod hooves against my spine. Knocking me to the ground face-first, the wild-eyed horse then trampled me into the thick, black mud.

All the breath went out of me. Pain came. Then laughter.

Broken in every way, I was ready to die. Wanted to die.

Only, as the Fates, those three old spinners of every man’s destiny, had crossed my threads with those of such a simple-minded beast—all blood and mud and fists and fury without a thought of consequence—the easy kill wasn’t enough for the Saxon. He wanted to have fun doing it. He wanted me to suffer, to beg for mercy. And, like a cruel joke played well, he wanted to laugh long and hard about it.

Just so, bounding down from his upturned cart and whooping out how “no finer coat could such a swine of a man ever hope to wear than a slop of shit-stinking mud!” that foul-mouthed Saxon never really had any choice but to end up with his head splashed down in a puddle of horse piss with a big, dumb smile on his face.

Ignorant. Arrogant. A fool. He didn’t know not to mock a dying man. Not to torture him just to hear his mewling cries. Or that a man so bloodied and beaten could fast make him a ghost.

For Fate! Strange Fate! Like a rock-fall on my head—as I laid clawing at the ground amidst the detritus of battered helmets, hammers, and blood-spattered shields spilled from the

scavenger's cart and scattering the track—impossibly, my hand raked over the distinct downward-pointing quillons of a sword hilt stomped deep into the muck.

Bare trusting but with a heart twice quickened, I squeezed the hilt full round.

Imagining that at any moment its faint, metallic glimmer would be turned into but a cold gray stone by some trick of the gods, I then slowly slid my off-hand along the endless length of the unseen blade pointed straight ahead of me. Shining up out of the murk with an almost ghostlike iridescence—broad and beveled with a deep groove at the centerline, its face serpent-marked and meticulously etched with elaborate filigree closest to the hilt—in every detail it seemed more art than weapon.

That is, until the moment I curled my fingers over its preposterously thin edge.

A sword like no other, a terrifying jag of iron-twisted steel that had been wielded in battle only hours before by my king—a man like no other—my eyes needed not see the sword to know that it was a merciless killer every inch.

Another crack of the whip. Insults. Laughter.

Whirling around, the Saxon's head was on the ground even before the surprise could show in his eyes. I took his coat. I took his horse. I took his whip. And shoved it up his ass.

Two bends down the river, I heard voices, laughter. Three men on a high stone bridge making a raucous game of dropping large rocks on the dead, bloated bodies of my Norse brothers as they floated slowly past.

They never saw me coming.

So began a long night of dogged butchery.

For while I had lost all else that day, I still had my pride—and the bloody sword in my hand. Harald's sword. King Harald. My king. The king of all Norway. The bravest, most ruthless warrior I have ever known. A man I swore to serve. To fight for. To die for.

And a man I failed like no other.

I am Styrkar. The Wolf. Born in the valley of Thorsardalur. Iceland. The son of Kvendulf Skullsplitter. The father of Kalf and Thjodulf. Slayer of the Nord Wood ogre. And while I expect nothing of my life will be remembered to this world, I was King Harald Hardrada's field marshal at the grievous battle of Stamford Bridge. Fought along the banks of a dark Northumbrian river near the English stronghold of York on a cold September day in the year 1066, it was the day my world went black.

Ambushed, outnumbered, and poorly armed, we were whipped and the memory is bitter—a thousand shapes of death haunting me like the shrill echoes of a scream. Mutilated bodies floating the river, bloodless and naked and jagged bone jutting. An arm, a leg, a headless torso—an ax-head impaled—being shunted this way then that by the rippling red eddies. Men squirming in piles, crawling on their bellies, desperate for cover like maggots fleeing the light of day. The spattering strikes of broadsword on bone and spear-thrusts to kill. Ghost white hulks slopped in gore. Screams of agony growing faint, then no more. Norwegians, Danes, Icelanders, Greenlanders, Shetlanders, Orknians, Faeroes, Swedes, and Scots—so great was the feast of Norse flesh spread upon the banks of that unhumble stream as to feed the ravens the land over.

So it was, in the dead of a moonless night, I rode that headless Saxon's old cart-horse down the river's wooded bank and, killing anyone foolish enough to try to knock me off its back, returned to the massive fleet of warships I'd left anchored under guard near an abandoned village far to the south. First, I saw the bright orange glow in the sky. Then the tall fires raging on the

water. Hearing the enemy before seeing them, rooting around like wild pigs along the swampy edge of the little village, I watched in horror as the ships were being burned by giddy, torch-bearing Saxons determined to kill every Norseman they could find.

No matter. For, I would gladly die to be rid of the burden of my soul-crushing dishonor. So did I unsheathe my bloody sword, put my spurs to the screaming little roan, and charge straight at the stunned Saxons. Galloping through a gauntlet of spearmen, swordsmen, ax-men, and archers amidst a volley of vulgar threats to make my gruesome end, I shouted back at them that “no true son of the mighty Thor will ever have his skull hung from a gatepost without a fight!” And what a gruesome end it was, as all those Saxons who dared to close within the arc of my massive scything blade left their heads rolling in my wake.

Beating a fast path to the *Great Dragon*—my king’s ship, a thirty-five bench beast with a belly filled with treasure won in battles the world over—I rode that half-dead cart-horse straight out into the middle of the river before clambering off its sinking body, grabbing hold of a halyard dangling from the warship’s bow, and pulling myself up over the gunwale.

A much smaller ship—a river raider—was roped to the *Great Dragon*’s sternpost. It would slow my escape, but it was too late to do anything about it. For, knees high and splashing through the shallow water, the Saxons were closing on me fast.

Putting the *Great Dragon*’s small surviving crew to oars amidst a rain of spears and flaming arrows, I promised those English bastards that I would be back—and that there would be a massacre. I shouted at them that I had ten good men with me and that I would be returning with ten thousand more. “Mark my words,” I said. “Led by the Lord of Hosts himself, Odin’s legions of undead warriors will march down on you out of the great hero’s hall in the sky in such numbers as to feel their footfalls shake the very Earth!”

And I meant it, every word.

Only, not two hours into our undermanned attempt to sail King Harald's huge dragon-ship back across the rough waters of the North Sea to our beloved Norwegian homeland, the sea goddess Ran held us to account for our battlefield failure, loosing a storm upon us like none before or since. With our sail shredded and our masthead snapped in half and fallen into the sea, we were at the mercy of the voracious water. So it was, in the black of night being driven by the howling winds we knew not where, the Fates delivered us into the jaws of pure evil.

Wrecked on the rocks of an enemy shore far opposite that from which we sailed and immediately attacked by a hard-charging army of horse-born men across a wide, stony beach, we were in a fight for our lives. Amidst a rain of flaming arrows, a man of seemingly great self-importance pulled up his massive black stallion at the water's stony edge, stood in his saddle, and began shouting threats at us. Tall and round with a blunt nose, and wearing a bright blue tunic under his steel jerkin, he had a long-sword in his hand, and fire in his eyes. Speaking a crude Norse dialect mixed with bits of French, I could hear only snatches of the endless insults he was bellowing at us between the roaring gusts of wind.

“Norse scourge! ... Pestilent dogs! ... As claimed by ... the Comte de ... lord of the sovereign state of ... Your ships and their contents ... now the property of Ponthieu ... and so demand ... lay down your weapons or suffer—”

In the next moment, any notion of our surrender to these little fops dancing around on the shore with their fancy head feathers blowing in the wind was emphatically quelled when my iron-tipped spear ripped into their fearless leader's throat and shut his mouth forever.

Truth be told, putting bravado aside, the situation was desperate. Kill or be killed. With our massive sea-dragon floundering on the rocks amidst a vicious hand-to-hand fight against the

dead man's bloodthirsty minions, I would not give up my king's ship or the gods-bequeathed riches aboard to the sea or any number of men. Fighting with a murderer's zeal, I was determined to redeem myself for my battlefield loss, to restore my lost honor upon those bloody gunwales, to be victorious, or die a death the world would long remember.

I accomplished none.

Broken and burning, the *Great Dragon* was doomed. With my men grabbing up one ponderous oak chest after another filled with King Harald's treasure from below-decks as fast as they could and piling them in the hold of the sleek, little river-raider lashed to the warship's sternpost amidst a crash of waves, we'd moved hardly half of the vast hoard when the smaller boat's beam began to sag badly and its hull to creak; riding low in water now splashing over its top-strakes, it could bear no more weight. Shouting "Abandon ship!" whilst slashing my sword at the swarming Ponthievins, determined to leave nothing aboard the *Great Dragon* but their severed heads, I watched as my men struggled to load the last of seven identical wooden chests marked with the runic symbols for *Gydingaland*—Norse for the "Land of the Jews." I knew them to be much heavier than all of the other treasure chests, for I had helped to carry them out of a cavernous vault carved in the rock beneath King Harald's hilltop palace in Nitharos just hours before we set sail from Norway in our ill-fated attempt to conquer England. There was no thought whatsoever that I would leave the chests behind as I knew them to be filled with enough pure gold looted in the Holy Land to buy the city of Jerusalem itself.

With my brave warriors being cut down one after, I ordered the men "To oars!" as one last, small chest was heaved over the *Great Dragon's* gunwale and dropped on the deck of the overburdened river raider. A simple stone box seemingly of great antiquity radiating a strange,

golden glow through the squall's swirling mists, the chest was like no other salvaged from the *Great Dragon* that day; the treasure it held within seeming to be not of this world.

With a great shout to the raging sky, the last man alive on the savaged king-ship, suffering a whirlwind of slashing Ponthievin steel, then selflessly cut the thick hemp rope lashed to the smaller boat lest we all sink to the seafloor together. With its hull moaning, weighted down by the remainder of Harald's hard-won treasure, the *Great Dragon* then disappeared in a froth of whitewater and blood.

Ordering my seven remaining men to push off with their oars against the huge boulders littering the Ponthievin shore, with a loud cracking of beach stones under the raider's dragging hull, we then began rowing out to sea with an arm-burning fury. Shunted this way then that by rocks unseen as the violent, up-and-down hogging over the crashing waves threatened to break the boat apart amidships, at last, the seafloor fell away, and the incessant banging against our keel stopped when the last rock was breached.

The rain dwindled to a drizzle. The wind diminished. My stroke count slowed.

When far removed from the perilous shore, I gave the order to raise the oars.

The men fell back off their benches, gasping for breath, exhausted. One brave warrior, his guts running out so fast you would think a pit of vipers nested inside him, was slumped dead over his oar. Quick-slipped into the water with his sword tied to his hand, he was fast on his way to Valhalla even before the circling vultures of the sea took their first bite.

Slumped down with my head rocked back against the gunwale, I too was tasting blood. A tooth was missing. My jaw ached. And my throat was gashed nigh to the windpipe. Just so, I was their *Styramathr*—their captain—and I would betray no weakness to my men. With the ship rising and falling on the heavy chop, we sat in silence, not a moan, not a prayer.

Suddenly, off our stern, voices shouting in the darkness.

The unnerving sound of oar blades slapping on the water.

The Ponthievins were coming.

In a voice as harsh as ever, I ordered the men back to their oars.

They did so without a moment's delay.

I felt for a small iron key deep in the pocket of my tattered britches. One by one, I approached my hacked, bloodied men at their benches. Showed them the key. Asked them if they were ready to go to Valhalla. To sit at the long table in the great Heroes Hall in the sky. To eat and drink with the greatest warriors that ever called the Northland home.

Six times I heard a deeply convicted "Yes."

"There will be no capture of our king's treasure," I said in a rising voice as I shackled each man to his oar. "Even if we have to row this ship to the bottom of the sea."

"Fight. Die. And then fight again!" they cried out in unison.

And, O! How those six brave men earned the skald's eternal glory-shout in those next murderous hours!