

CHAPTER 1 - THE SCOURGE OF ROM

Muus halted his horse in the middle of the road, looking past the cluster of houses and the small harbor of Levastra before him, past the expanse of slate-gray that was the Sea of Rom, to the faint, reddish glow in the distance. Over there it was - the goal of his travels, the burning lands of Falrom.

Behind him, Hraab and Prince Otil were full of their usual banter, while only Geir was silent as ever. Muus didn't listen to the boys. The voice of the Kalmanir, the great stone he was seeking, drowned them out, calling him with a terrible insistence.

For a moment, Muus closed his eyes. *I know*, he thought. *I know your urgency. But I'm not ready. Stop pulling me!*

He felt a hand take his and he knew it was Moirra. He looked aside and smiled. 'It's all right,' said he. 'I was just thinking.'

'I know.'

'Come on,' said Muus, with a clumsy attempt at cheerfulness. 'Let's see if we can find a boat for Kartakos.' He set his horse to walking, toward the harbor.

Luck was with them, in the unlikely person of potbellied old Avaristos, captain of the merchant vessel *Kassandra*. The little cog ship lay moored at the jetty, looking gray and worn, and determined never to leave port again.

'You'll find every comfort on board,' said her captain expansively. 'My beautiful ship used to be a Royal transport, bringing important envoys of the King all over the Sea of Rom. No sleeping on the cold deck! You'll enjoy the sea and Sun's warmth, after a good night's rest in your spacious cabin. And...' He lowered his voice confidentially. 'I can offer you a substantial discount if you bring your own provisions with you.'

They didn't have much choice

'Well,' said Moirra with a sigh, as she looked around the cabin.

The cabin wasn't all that large; just an empty, wooden box with a heap of straw to sleep on. It did, however, offer them shelter against the rains that whipped the gray waters all day long. It even boasted a rear window that would have given a fine view over the sea, were it not screwed closed.

'Does it always rain here?' asked Otil later that day, sitting with the boatswain and two sailors, learning how to mend a sail. 'The captain promised us Sun's comfort.'

'Hah,' said the boatswain. 'He always does. 'No, young master, you'll not see Sun over this sea, she won't come. Before the Burning of Rom she loved it here, or so the old tales want us to believe. But no longer. The Firewall chased her away.'

Otil rested his needle. 'What is this Firewall?'

The three sailors looked at him as if he'd suddenly lost his mind, and the boatswain shook his head in perplexity. 'You really don't know? You must come from far away then. They're volcanoes, young master. A long row of fire-spitting mountains, which form a terrible wall all the way from the Barrier Alps in the north down the length of Falrom, across the Flaming Isle, through the sea to the coast past eastern Baljaren. That's the Firewall, cutting the Sea of Rom in halves and barring us from the rich lands in the East. The smoke of these mountains darkens the sky and chases Sun away to other lands. The clouds cry for her absence, and thus it rains.'

'Was that how Rom fell? Volcanoes?'

The boatswain nodded soberly. 'It must have been the wrath of the gods. My family came from Sardinha and the story moved with them to Levastra. A large mountain, hiding away on the

bottom of the sea, erupted and the waters boiled in anger. High they rose, and furious. The sea rolled all over Rom, the whole breadth of the land, smashing and drowning everything. Then the other mountains added their voices. The Stronbule, Vesuvio, Etna, even old White Mountain, all opened their mouths and spat their earthblood over the land. The earth heaved, broke open and belched poisonous gases. Together, these disasters wiped out all of Rom. The Great Burning, they call it; and The Day All Died. Sardinha's quiet old mountains spared my forebears by keeping the sea away from the west coast. Still, when the ashes started to fall, the island became unfit to live on and they fled to Levastra. It was the end of the world, it was.' He nodded at his own words and inspected the work under his hands.

'Has anyone ever gone back to Falrom?' said Ottil.

The boatswain stared at him. 'Been there? You can't even get near the coast. The vapors would kill you, if the heat didn't. No, young master, Falrom is lost to us forever.'

As the Prince retold the story to the others that evening, Muus shivered. 'I remember the volcanoes from my dreams. I see only fire, smoke and barren rock when I think of Falrom. Yet it must be possible to go there, or the shard wouldn't send me. We'll have to see.' The memory of the heat his dreams caused on his skin, of the crackling fires and the smells coming from the burned earth, made him sick. *Kartakos first. I'm not ready yet.* Fire roared in his ears and mingled with the boiling of the earthblood lakes and the hissing sound of steam escaping the tortured soil. *Stop it!*

Five days out from Levastra, they woke early to a crashing sound on deck, followed by screams and curses. As Muus hurried from the cabin, he saw the yard had come down from the mast, covering the deck with sailcloth and trailing lines. Captain Avaristos stood waving pudgy fists, his face red with ineffective anger. A stream of curses rolled from his lips, many of them completely unintelligible, while on the main deck, the boatswain and his men hurriedly cleared away the wreckage. The yard lay fractured, two ragged endings like the broken bones of a long dead animal.

'Damned luck,' said the captain bitterly to his passengers. 'This will take us all day to repair. Meanwhile we're drifting, the gods know where. We can end up anyplace, helpless. We're not that far from pirate territory.' He cursed again, his face a mixture of anger and despair.

'Pirates?' Ottil looked up. Though he frowned upon murderers like Largassen, going a-viking had been a part of his culture for so long that it still evoked longing in the adventurous.

The captain nodded, his face fearful. 'They're from Sardinha, an island to the north of here. Terribly brutal they are, appearing out of nowhere in their galleys, boarding an unsuspecting ship. Then they murder the crew and ransom the passengers. It is said they have a fastness full of iron cages to lock up their prisoners.' He shuddered.

'How are you going to repair that?' said Ottil, pointing at the broken yard. His practical soul wasn't going to worry about what might be.

'We'll glue it, bolt it and bind it up with rope,' said the captain. 'And then we'll pray it holds until we're in Kartakos.'

Muus frowned. 'You're not carrying a spare?'

'No! These things cost money.'

'But if you sink the ship, it'll cost you much more.'

'We won't sink,' said Captain Avaristos, turning beet red again. 'We'll repair that yard, sail to Kartakos, buy another used yard and replace it. We did it before.'

The sailors worked feverishly to get the yard back in place before they ended up on the rocky coast somewhere.

Near dark, the boatswain reported the repairs finished. Now the yard had to rest through the night to let the two glued halves settle.

‘It’s not a good repair,’ said the boatswain to Ottil’s question. ‘It’s a lousy repair. We should’ve used that yard for the cooking fires long ago. It’s too dry, too brittle. Too damn old, like some.’ He cast a furtive glance at his captain on the afterdeck and spat over the side. ‘We’ll keep watch tonight and tomorrow we’ll see whether it’ll hold.’

‘And if it won’t?’

‘Then we’re in deep trouble, young master. Very deep trouble.’

Next morning, Ottil woke to the sounds of fighting on deck. He prodded Muus. ‘Something’s wrong.’

He made to go on deck, but Muus pulled him back. ‘Stay here, I’ll go.’

Grumbling, Ottil resheathed his sword, while Muus hastily put on his boots.

‘Be careful,’ said Moira, as the Runemaster stepped out of the cabin.

There was a pitched battle going on, saw Ottil from inside the door. Alongside the ship lay a sleek, black-painted galley, looking as deadly as any Norden dragonship. Avaristos’ fear of pirates had been justified. Under cover of the gray of dawn, they must’ve crept near undetected by the sleepy watch, and boarded while most of the *Kassandra*’s hands were still below. The captain himself lay on his face halfway up the companion ladder, looking for all the world like a slaughtered sucking pig. His men fought with desperation clear on their faces, and, outnumbered three-to-one, were rapidly losing the battle.

‘Watch out!’ cried the Prince.

Muus evaded a slashing pike and turned to go inside again, when a wild looking pirate jumped down from the afterdeck and cracked the Runemaster on the skull. As Muus fell, Ottil darted outside, his sword at the ready, but the pirate had disappeared in the fighting. Without hesitation, Ottil gripped Muus’ ankle and dragged him back into the cabin. He slammed the door shut, while Moirra knelt by the unconscious body. Taut-faced, she sought for damage. Finally she sat back on her heels. ‘He lives. The skull is intact, but there’s a large bump. I don’t know how long he’ll be out, but he’ll have a concussion. He...’ Terrible screams from outside made her stop and everyone looked at the door. The cries broke off as suddenly as they had started, and moments later, the door crashed open. A scarecrow of a man stood in the opening. He was tall and bone-thin, dressed in mismatched clothes that had seen better days, his hair in long rattails. It was the bloodied sword in his hand, though, that drew their eyes.

‘Passengers,’ said the pirate with some satisfaction. ‘I hope you make my efforts here worthwhile after all. Tell me, are you bait or booty?’

‘Bait?’ said Ottil. ‘Explain, please.’

‘Food for the fishes,’ said the pirate calmly. ‘Like the crew. Or else you’re important enough to warrant a ransom.’

‘In that case we’re booty,’ said Ottil. ‘I’m the nephew of the King of Gaul.’

The pirate grinned. ‘Good try, boy. The King of Gaul has but one nephew, and he’s in the Norden.’

‘He is not. The Norden is rife with rebellion. I am Prince Ottil Vidmersen.’

The pirate gripped Ottil’s chin and peered in his eyes. ‘You’re not a-lying, boy?’

‘Unhand me,’ said Ottil as frostily as he could manage.

Laughing, the pirate stepped back. 'At least you're not afraid, I like that. You bought a bit of life with your claim, boy. I'll take you to Sardinha. We have some Nords who can ask the right questions. Who are the rest of you?'

'My retinue, of course,' said Ottil haughtily. 'Even in exile you can't expect me to travel alone. My uncle will pay well for every one of them.'

'All of them? Even that redhaired beanpole with the looks of a farmer?'

Ottil smiled reassuringly at Geir. 'Captain, he's not a farmer. His father is a proper Norden nobleman.'

'Is he now...? Well, you'll all stay here. There is no lock to the door, but the first one who sets a foot on deck will be killed.' The chill look in their captor's eyes told them he wasn't joking.

Ottil stared back at him. 'In that case, have someone bring a bucket. You can't expect me to crap in a corner.'

The pirate threw his head in the neck and roared with laughter. 'A bucket, alright, lad.' Then he looked sharply at the Prince. 'What's with that yard?'

'It split yesterday morning,' said Ottil. 'The men spent the whole day gluing and bolting it and they were planning to hoist it again early today.'

'Right, then we'll see if they did a good job of it.' The pirate turned to go.

'I told you my name, eh... captain,' said Ottil. 'May I know yours?'

The pirate stared at him. 'You may, youngling. I'm Austu Threefingers, Captain of the *Rejusta*. The sea bottom is littered with my victims.'

'Are you really pirates?'

Threefingers laughed. 'Really. The Scourge of Rom they call us. Feeding on bloated merchants for as long as there are ships at sea.'

'Thank you, Captain Austu.'

Abruptly, the pirate left the cabin.

Ottil sighed and silently Moirra clasped him in her arms for a moment. 'You were wonderful,' said she.

'Indeed.' Hraab patted the Prince's shoulder. 'I'm proud of you, son.'

'Son!' Before Ottil could say more, the door opened and a big man with a scarred face dropped a wooden bucket in their midst. He said something they couldn't understand, but his gestures were explanation enough. Grinning broadly, he left again.