

The Raven & the Wolf is an epic saga-like tale of dark-age conflict, oaths, brotherhood and betrayal, set in the throes of a divided and tumultuous 10th century Britain.

## **The Raven & the Wolf: Blood Oath**

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The  
Raven

& The  
Wolf

chronicle I

Blood Oath

CHRISTOPHER  
SPELLMAN

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# - P r o l o g u e -

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**For me it is twilight. The firmament darkens, my fields fall fallow** and that which is my legacy is now at all times poised to wither in the ignobility of age.

But such is not the way it has at all times been. I once defied all weakness, spurned the fate-weavers when they spun doom as certain as night must fall, shunned the imminence of wolves gathering in the realm of the darkest weald and thwarted the ever-turning circle of ravens that has long foreboded the nearness of death.

But while my lot has at often times turned for the worst I have held defiant even as all about me was mired in dread and futility. Such has been the bequest left by the kindred before me who ran afoul with the gods. And yet I have forged on, over the harshest seas, through the thickest snows and against the bloodiest tides of war.

Though I am old I can still heft a sword ably enough to make young men less learned in battle tremble behind their shields. My beard is as gray as a Northumbrian winter and while I no longer harbor such swiftness as has allowed me to evade the Valkyrie's calling, I am without reluctance to take the field of battle one last time. And there, I expect, shall be where I make my final stand.

I should think that my days ahead are but few and because I know that fate is seldom foreseeable I must never stray far from the reach of my sword or neglect the consolation of an axe under my belt. For even in the quietest hour the threads of my undoing may at long last ensnare me.

I was, so I have come to accept, fated from birth to endure a path not of my own choosing but one that was laid down by those

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who, through a breach of oaths and misdeeds, wrought a legacy of hardship of such great burden that only death may assuage it.

Alas, the river of time runs dry and my ship must founder. Fortune is brittle and though one may long extol the gods in verse, offer sacrifice and exude all manner of homage, none is beyond the influence of Norn-craft.

As my saga shall attest, I have weathered the most onerous trials the gods have sought to impose on any man.

And I bear the scars to prove it.

# 1

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**Bitter was that smoke across the span of night, the screams** competent to curdle blood, the blade-song pealing and unmelodious. Thatch burned and crackled in flicking tongues of flame, sweeping over narrowed lanes, one rooftop to the next and sending hot ash glowing and swirling into the night. Dogs barked, yowled and bayed. Women wailed and wept, cradling infants to their breasts surely as mothers must. The old cowered and shrunk back, dismayed. Men slow to their weapons died.

Peace had ended in that town.

All was in darkness about us and hushed save for a mutter of prayers by one of our younger servants. I felt fingers clawing fretfully about my shoulders - my mother, Hildegard. Opposite me she held tight my elder brother, Hereric. In her embrace I muttered softly, asking for strength from my gods, though we had been taught they were not the sort to lend an ear to our terror.

The uproar had come with suddenness, roiling the stillness of night as we lay together round the hearth, still subdued by a string of skaldic verses recited to us by a bard whom our father had sent earlier that evening. All then had fallen hushed in the dark of that house. The fire dimmed down to embers and our eyes grew heavy until a commotion of voices in the warren of alleyways rose swiftly to a clangor of iron - swords and axe blades - jangling nerves and awakening fears. Soon there screamed the wounded, cut down by those blades, falling into the silence of death while their killers raged, howling as fires roared. We as unarmed innocents scuttled into a corner of the house like helpless mice and could do nothing but linger, waiting for doom or deliverance.

And so we huddled, ignorant yet duly frightened until there drew near a rumbling of hooves outside followed by a row of shouting. Then the weighty, oaken door of the house swung inward

with a rusty moan, flooding the chamber with a tempered haze of fire-orange light.

A tall silhouette spread a soaring shadow across the floor as he towered in the entrance, threads of smoke swirling about him. "Get out!" he demanded in a puff of icy, late winter's breath. Hildegard rose up and dragged the two of us to the door and the servants followed obediently, bolting hand in hand.

It needed not be said to us that death prowled all through the town. All of us sensed that the toll of ringing blades betrayed danger. Yet to remain inside the house boded a certain doom for any who dared stay. So I, like the others, followed those stark orders given to us by my father, Orvar, who so commandingly stood in the doorway. And as one we burst into the chill of that fateful evening.

"Go with these men," he decreed. "Stay quiet. Neither must you speak nor ask anything of anyone." He hefted a long sword that glittered against encroaching flames, directing us toward waiting horses mounted by shadowy, hirsute men. They clustered on the road behind him in a huffing and neighing gaggle of unnerved steeds. "Soon I shall find you," Orvar promised as we rushed past, hunched in fear of the fires and the volley of shouts and shrieks not far off. "No servants," he said, impeding the path of our three slaves with the sword. "You are free now," he told them, gesturing toward a dark, unhindered alleyway. "Seek for yourselves a new master but never again utter our names." The slave girls bawled, begging to remain but he turned away, abandoning their hastening pleas, leaving them nothing but diminishing hope.

We were ushered toward the horses, snatched up roughly from under our arms and each plunked down on the back of a nervous stallion. There were seven horsemen ready at the reins and all armed with spear, axe or sword. It was those few who would lead us out of the old city.

"Keep off the roads," Orvar ordered them. "Stop for no one and guard them as your kin."

Turning their mounts then, we were bounding off through the rolling wafts of smoke emanating from the fires that leapt over dense rows of thatch and wattle.

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I was saddled upon a horse whose rider's face I could not see in the dark of that night. We galloped toward the high city gate and that horseman shielded me as if I were of his very own blood. We cut across the tight, snow-blemished roads, all but colliding with scatters of townsfolk rushing into the constricted streets as tumult echoed, inciting panic. Our horses neared the gate and there arrayed before it were gathered several men clad and armed for war, garbed in ring-maille coats, torchlight glinting off their spear-points. Shadows darted across the gantry on the walls above and upon sighting us their voices bellowed and cursed. We did not slow nor deviate. Rather our horsemen spurred resolutely and I knew then there was to be no turning back.

Our escorts leveled their spears and cocked their axes, I hunkered down, hands on head, and we dashed into a committed charge. I heard Hildegard scream and I shut rigidly my eyes to the thought of dying.

The warriors arrayed in front of the palisade gate did not react to us until our stampeding horses were upon them. Bodies leapt aside or were run through, cut down in a quick rattle of iron upon iron. Rising up then in our wake came a smattering of injured shrieks that told of men gored. Never did our horses break their stride and when I chanced to look back again I saw the dim outline of the city walls melting away. We dashed further into the cloak of night until the rage of the town faded, giving way only to the clamor of hooves on a thinly veiled, snow-whitened trail.

We had escaped. But from what dire peril we had fled from neither my brother nor I knew. That knowledge was some years off.

The glow of the fires and reek of the smoke lessened as we slogged over icy moorland, the air chilling further with the passing hour. Farther from that bedlam in the city we rode, unspeaking as we had been commanded.

When distant were the walls of the town, blotted beyond the woods, and the row of fighting lost to the sound of the river, I could but wonder what extent of time would pass until my father found his place at our side again, if even he were fortunate to have streaked past the guards unwounded.

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We slowed to a steady canter. My brother was first to break the silence, speaking low from the horse he rode upon. "How might we know that father will find us?" he asked anxiously through the murk of night.

"Because he has promised so," Hildegard assured him, her tone ever certain.

"Is there danger still?" I followed.

"No longer," she said soothingly and I had no reason to disbelieve her for mothers are thought never to lie.

The horses that shepherded us halted little that night, tireless in their slog, guided by the light of a luminous moon that arced across the breadth of the sky like a wandering eye, ditching intermittently behind silvery cloud strands. I have not forgotten that moon for it was our candlelight on that sightless, winter-bitten land nor is it lost to me how Hildegard hummed softly to pacify us; it was the same haunting melody she claimed her own mother had sang to her in her youth.

Short of dawn we rested the steeds at the edge of a mist-clouded wood. There we three huddled, nestled against one another beneath a layer of rough woolen blankets Hildegard had been fleet enough to snatch from the house as we fled. We shivered in that last hour before dawn but before the rising of the sun, exhausted from our night-long journey, we slept.

And I dreamed again.

A slight rain drizzled steadily as day broke above the eastward river. There was a grating of hooves scraping into the icy mud nearby and when I peered from beneath the blanket to see the horses snorting and exhaling in ghostly puffs of fog there rumbled the steady cadence of a distant but approaching gallop. The men who had led our exodus from the town rose quickly to their feet, hands on axes and spears, and darted to the edge of the wood to gaze out across the heath. A single horseman manifested like a ghost from the mist.

"It is him," I heard it said and a second man turned to offer us a relieved grin.

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A smile broke across Hildegard's own drawn and meek face and she leaned over to shake us awake, unaware that I had already roused from the mire of my nightmare. There, ensnared within that den of sleep, I had been encircled by the same yellow eyes and fanged teeth that so often came for me, probing and drooling, tightening their loop.

"He did not lie," I said groggily to her and she touched an icy hand to my face, the three of us watching Orvar leap down from his horse, his arm-rings raking beneath the maille coat that protected him. He wore a battered, iron helm upon his head and his weary face was made more exhausted by a smattering of scrapes and what looked to me like the dark stain of blood that had sluiced through his beard and froze to black along his jaw. He said nothing to anyone as he rejoined us nor even bade an embrace. His eyes were set low and grim; he looked a ragged haunt but it mattered not to me. He was alive, I was free from the grip of my dream and there were no true beasts closing upon me.

Our journey resumed, solely Orvar knowing it seemed, where lay the absolute end of it. My father was a man of few words, ever stern and unyielding in his expectation of loyalty. From each of us he commanded a respect that was garnered as much out of fear as wonder for to us he was what a true warrior represented. Of imposing height, he stood slender but sturdily built, with pale brown hair that fell past wide shoulders. Beneath his tidily kept beard was a stout jaw that flexed when perturbed. He saw the world through quick, sea-green eyes that were bottomless and outwardly vigilant. When roused to anger a deep cleft darkened between his brows - a scowl sufficient to make bones tremble. Nearly always did he speak in authority and his words left nothing uncertain to anyone.

On that indeterminate trudge across Northumbria's breadth we held our tongues, Hereric and I, despite an unbounded longing to make sense of that dire, inscrutable night. But before our horses started off again the morning of his return Orvar uttered to us a decisive decree. "Never ask of that night for it belongs forever in the past."

Yearn as we did we dared not seek to circumvent his word through an appeal to Hildegard for answers. She too, he commanded, was not to make mention of what had driven us from Jórvík - the old city, though I believed always she knew well what had sparked our flight from its dark walls.

It was not until the sixth day of that westward journey across Northumbria's shifting run of hills, rambling moors and shadowy forests that we sallied up the shallow grade of a damp meadow to discover an earthen-hemmed settlement on its opposite fringe. That place, Orvar told us as we gazed wearily, was to become our home.

But we were no longer in Northumbria. The village was a secluded enclave within western Mercia, a tributary kingdom of Wessex occupied by a differing people, those not considered friendly to we who were Northumbrian Danes.

I whispered nervously to Hereric as Orvar dismounted, stripping away his ring-maille and sword in a gesture of peace before he started alone toward the settlement where men with spears stood watching us. "Might those be enemies?" I asked my brother.

"The gods are with us," Orvar assured me, overhearing my concern.

My father had invoked the gods on that final day's journey. It was they who had brought deliverance, leading us from the jaws of some unfixed doom. Those gods who, we had been taught, were many - Odin, Thor, Tyr and a glut beyond. They were the gods of our father and his father before him, and all those leading back toward the time that Midgard - the world - was still young. And they were to remain our gods always and without regard to the influence of the common faith of England.

Hildegard, for reasons unknown to Hereric and I, worshipped the Christ-god and wore his effigy discreetly about her neck - a crucifix, she called it. But in our presence she was barred from speaking of that faith for it threatened ours, Orvar had warned her. He endeavored to tolerate her beliefs; she after all was his wife. Though never would he consent to us bowing before any but the old gods just as had our ancestors. We were called heathens by the Christ-worshippers for they were said to fear the fury and spite that

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our gods had spawned on that isle. Orvar made no apologies for the gods of his choosing. And we as his children would live as heathens and equally die as heathens.

That is the account of how we came upon that remote place, an unassuming hamlet near the uncertain boundary between the two Mercian dominions - east and west - arriving in flight from something neither my brother nor I understood. The kingdom of Mercia had been divided through force when Danes and Norsemen encroached from the sea, ravaging the eastern shores and driving looting armies inland to establish deeper their command of the land.

The settlement we arrived at was but a small ring of meek houses and hovels. Stables, sties and pastureland lay situated adjacent a westward marshland, one that gave way to a broadening wood we thought never to know the end of.

On a day unhampered by the common mists, when the wind swept the haze from the paddocks, we brothers took to standing upon a low crest on the meadow northeast of the settlement. It was from that same knoll we had first seen the village's hearth smoke coiling, and from there we took in the wild plains, gazing in reflection back towards our old homeland. But the old city and its kingdom were now all but a memory and from where we watched only the distant smears of smoke rising from a scatter of towns could be seen, reminders of our Danish kin that dwelt there.

It struck as odd to both my brother and I that we as Danes had fled to and settled in the very lands inhabited by folk who had warred with our kin. By then, though Mercia had been split by blood and faith, Dane and Saxon were both subject to the ruler whose throne lay in Wessex for nearly the whole of the isle's kingdoms had fallen under the influence of that king called Æthelstan the Faithful.

Across the gulf of untilled land I so often lent my gaze over persisted a thorny and uneasy peace. But I neither worried of the affairs of kingdoms or those who ruled them. There was on balance a much greater unease closer at hand.

Upon the advent of our settling an untold pact was forged between my father and the village chieftain, a senescent man called

Leofwig. But how the land given to build our home upon was granted was never revealed to us.

The men that had accompanied us out of Northumbria, who Orvar called his oathmen, had lent the work of their axes and the sweat of their labor, and after many days had come and gone there stood a modest dwelling of timber and thatch; ours to live in. Within its draughty space were a stone-lined hearth and a complement of sleeping benches. But that house was not like the home we had abandoned, which I had thought of as the grandest of all for it edged near to the river, was airy and ornamented in war panoply and tended by tireless, dutiful thralls. In Mercia we had but a scanty roof above our heads, far from the ship-going waterways and the greatness of Jórvík's thriving markets. From the palisade of the old city I had watched the gulls soar and plummet toward the river where rowed the creaky merchant vessels arriving from far-flung ports. Now we lived facing westwards toward a deep and dusky weald, a forest that lay beyond a stretch of wetland. It was, by our standards, a dwelling fit for mere ceorls and never in my memory had we lived like peasantfolk in Jórvík.

My father's men, those who were our protectors in the journey out of Northumbria, had stayed not long in our house. Short of a week beyond the raising of the walls they rode out on the rain-washed plains with no pageantry to honor their toil, never again to be seen and, as before, we were admonished to ask not of what had become of them.

No simple matter was it either that we brothers found friendship in that village. The Christian faith of the Mercians was in opposition to ours and though our language was near enough to theirs, we still endured for many weeks the stares and whispers of the folk wary of our coming. Finally, when it came to pass that there arose an exchange between us and others in the settlement it invoked a shared distrust, or so it seemed to me. When asked from whence we had come by the children of others we could only lie for it was Orvar's mandate that we should not betray the name of the old city.

The past was forbidden. Unspeakable.

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Though it seemed otherwise then, there had been a renewal, though we no longer lived nearly as well as I remembered. Within the lands of Mercia, in that unremarkable commune of middling abodes and guarded people, the untold threat, whatever it had been, seemed spent. Life then should have proven less onerous for us as brethren.

The seasons had come and gone and the dim, winter-gray skies were shining brighter, the frost-filled nights ending sooner and the chill mornings warming. Hildegard was hopeful and my father seemed more untroubled by the day. Yet not all between my kin and I boded well. Another matter was that altogether. Less of a brother was Hereric becoming and I, though ever fighting its draw, was dreaming again, more often and dreadfully.

That is how things stood that early spring in Leofwig's village, an unadorned haven set on a greening swathe in the northwest of Mercia; all but a nameless refuge in the dominion of England.

And the year was nine hundred and twenty eight.

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