

Prologue

Far out from the broad bay, between the wild gusts of snow and the howling wind, a small flame reared and plunged between the waves. Nothing else broke the darkness save this one desperate light struggling for its survival in the teeth of the storm. The longboat pitched and turned amid angry seas, its dragon's head prow gleaming. It had seen seas more violent and relentless than these on more northern shores, where the ice cracked and growled and the waters turned a man's heart to stone should he be unfortunate enough to lose his footing on the treacherous deck and plunge into the blackness below.

On board sat three men, huddled over their oars, their beards white with frost and snow, their eyes swollen and red from the lash of the brine. Every sinew and muscle of their bodies cried out for relief from the elements that ravaged them. They were weary beyond belief, heavy with fatigue but conscious that each painful movement of the oars brought them closer to their inevitable destiny, their appointed task.

The leader of these three, a huge corpulent figure with a face like weathered stone stared out towards the flat bay. He was satisfied that this would serve as the chosen place. It would provide a marking stone, a place of worship for all of them, but particularly the dead whose honour must be revered. He was well pleased. It had been worth the pain and deprivation of this journey. Two had died, one of exposure, the other driven mad by sea water and pushed into the waves because his screams could no longer be borne. The rest sat like marble statues in the boat, praying for their release.

The young man crouched opposite him opened his eyes a fraction. He was deathly cold, his mind had been reduced to a permanent numbness. He would welcome the end appointed him. An honourable death, far easier than his miserable, painful existence. A swift blade cleaving through his flesh, and then oblivion. He turned and stared out over the snow-swept beach through exhausted eyes. This place would be remembered. They would see to it... It was their task.