

We will not surrender!

The first dragon's prow appeared upon the horizon at the same time that the first stroke of lightning sizzled across the sky and the first mighty crack of thunder drummed throughout the heavens.

And then there was a sea of dragon prows, striking new terror into weary hearts. Tall and savage upon the water, like mythical beasts, they sailed in, raining devastation and slaughter.

Red and white, the Viking sails slashed across the dark and deadly gunmetal sky, defying the vicious wind.

Rhiannon was in her chapel when the first alarm was shouted. She prayed for the men who would do battle against the Danes at Rochester. She prayed for Alfred, her cousin and king, and she prayed for Rowan, whom she loved.

"My lady!" Egmund, her most loyal, ageing warrior, long of service to her family, found her in the chapel upon her knees. "My lady! Dragon prows!"

For a moment she thought he had lost his mind. "Dragon prows?" she repeated.

"On the horizon. Coming for us!"

She felt sick to her stomach. The Danes had descended upon England like a swarm of locusts, and they had brought with them bloodshed and terror. Now they were descending upon her home, and she had no one left to defend it because her people had gone to Alfred. "My God," she breathed aloud.

"Lady, run!" Egmund said. "Take a mount and ride hard to the king. You can reach him by tomorrow if you ride hard. Take your arrows and an escort, and I will surrender this fortress."

"Egmund, we will not surrender. Surrender means nothing to them – they perform the same atrocities whether men give battle or not. I will stay and fight from here."

The huge gates were ordered shut, the few remaining warriors mounted their horses, and the simple farmers rushed about to find pitchforks and staffs. All looked terrified.

The ships moved closer and closer. The sky and sea seemed not to have the power to stop them. The prows alone, with their hideously carved dragon faces, were enough to strike terror into most hearts.



Heather Graham, *The Viking's Woman* (2008)