

# **THE HALF-SLAVE**

**By  
Trevor Bloom**

**A Hookline Favourite**

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Published by Hookline Books 2010  
Bookline & Thinker Ltd  
#231, 405 King's Road  
London SW10 0BB  
Tel: 0845 116 1476  
[www.booklinethinker.com](http://www.booklinethinker.com)

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A CIP catalogue for this book is available from the British Library.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.  
ISBN: 9780955563065

Cover design by **jameshollywell.com**  
Printed and bound by Lightning Source UK

*For Emma and Nicky,  
with love*

## Characters

### Saxons

Aelfric: Ascha's father, hetman of the Theodi  
Ascha: Theod, a half-slave  
Besso: Ascha's uncle  
Budrum: Besso's wife  
Saefaru: Wife of Wulfhere  
Hanno: Ascha's brother  
Hroc: Ascha's brother  
Radhalla: Warlord of the Cheruskkii  
Sigisberht: Nephew to Radhalla  
Totta: Blacksmith  
Tchenguiz: Hun slave  
Wulfhere: Ascha's rival

### Romans/Gauls/Pritanni

Herrad: Octha's companion  
Flavinus: Counsellor to Clovis  
Rufus Basilicus: Roman auxiliary officer  
Syagrius: Governor of Roman Gaul  
Quintilius: Secretary to General Bauto  
Lucullus: High-born slave

### Franks

Basinia: Queen, mother of Clovis  
Bauto: Frankish general  
Clovis: Overlord of the Franks  
Fara: Agent of Ragnachar  
Ragnachar: Uncle to Clovis  
Sunno: Antrustion  
Wacho: Boat master

### Others

Eanmund: Half-Dane  
Gydda: Jute, friend of Ascha  
Kral: Slave master  
Octha: Frisian, merchant  
Eleri: House slave to Basinia  
Dagobert: Frisian, a Frankish agent

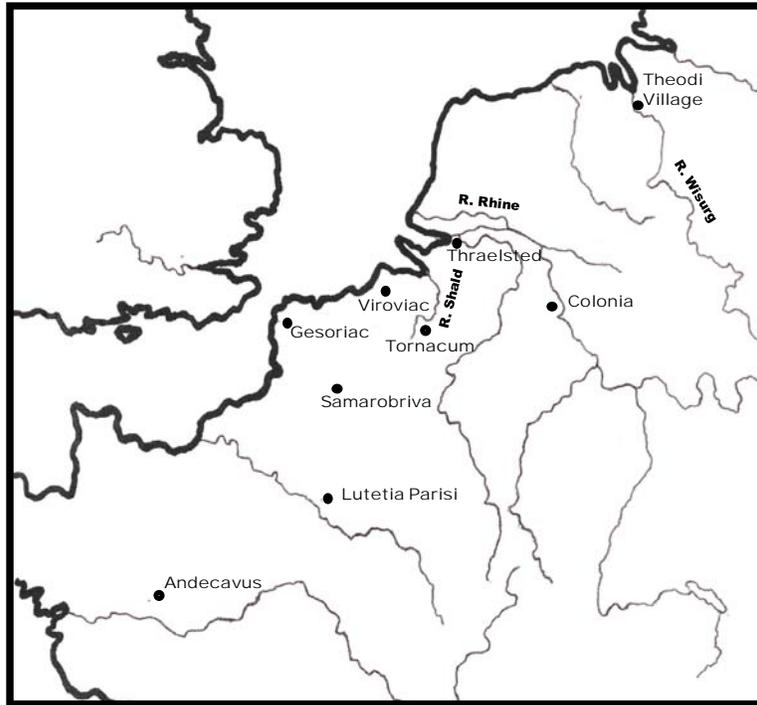
### Place names

Andecavus	Angers, France
Arduenna	Forest of Ardennes, Belgium
Burdigala	Bordeaux, France
Cambarac	Cambrai, France
Colonia (Agrippina)	Cologne, Germany
Gallia	Gaul, roughly modern France
Gesoriac	Boulogne, France
Levefanum	see Thraelsted
Liger	River Loire, France
Lupia	River Lippe, a tributary of the Rhine
Moguntiac	Mainz, Germany
Noviomagus	Nijmegen, Holland
(Lutetia) Parisi	Paris, France
Pritannia	Britain
Radhallaburh	Radhalla's forest fortress
Rotomagus	Rouen, France
Samara	River Somme
Samarobriva	Amiens, France
Schald	River Schelde
Thraelsted	A slave market, also known as Levefanum
Tornacum	Tournai, Belgium, town of the Salt-Franks
Viroviac	Wervyk, Belgium
Wisurg	River Weser, Germany

## Glossary of Terms

Alemanii	Germanic tribe
Armorici	Pritanni who fled from Britain to Gaul
Alani	Eastern tribe
Almost-Island	Jutland peninsular
Bacaudae	Lawless bands of slaves and poor peasants
Burgundii	Germanic tribe occupying part of Gallia
Chaussi	Saxon tribe
Cheruskii	Saxon tribe
Eostre	Spring festival
Faida	Vengeance
Franciska	Frankish hatchet
Gallia	Gaul, roughly modern France
Gesith	War chief's bodyguard
Gesithman	Member of war chief's bodyguard
Heruli	Germanic tribe
Hetman	Tribal chieftain
Mara	Assembly area before hetman's hall
Mansio	Inn
Mischling	Half-breed
Pritanni	Britons
Scara	Frankish army
Seaxe	Saxon long knife
Spatha	Long sword used by horse troops
Suebi	Germanic tribe
Taifali	Saxon tribe
Tiw	Northern god, as in Tuesday (Tiw's day)
Tiwfest	Festival of Tiw
Theodi	Saxon tribe
Vexillatio	Roman troops detached from their parent unit
Walesh	A foreigner

Northwest Europe, 481AD





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**Samarobriva, Roman Gaul 476 AD**

The boy sat in a tree high above the forest, his legs swinging. It was hot, the sky blue and without cloud. A fat bead of sweat slid down his neck like a sluggish insect. The boy wiped his eyes and scanned the horizon. He was numb and ached all over, his lower back stiff as a board, but he could not afford to relax. He was the look-out and knew the clan relied on him to keep them safe.

He wet his lips and shifted his position, carefully stretching out one foot and then the other. He rolled his head to relieve the cramp in his neck.

Once more he ran his eyes over the quivering plains.

Nothing moved.

Across the valley, he could see the Roman town of Samarobriva, a few rags of red smoke still hanging over the tiled roofs. Beyond the town, the stone road slashed north, disappearing into nothingness. Far above, buzzards wheeled in their constant search for prey. If he turned his head to the right he could see the tightly furled sail of the clan's warboat *SeaWulf* moored on the river. He twisted and looked down. At the foot of the trees, the crew of the *SeaWulf* had stacked their weapons and lay sprawled in the shade, fast asleep.

He listened; his ears keyed to the sounds of the forest, able to sift out anything untoward, the clank of shields and weapons, running feet.

But he heard nothing.

He drew a wooden carving from his tunic and began to scrape at it with a belly knife. He liked to carve. It passed the time and kept him awake. He would start with a chunk of wood and after a few days he would have a long-handled cup, or a longboat, or a wild animal. He held the carving up and studied it: a young woman with flowing hair and a gentle smile. A good likeness, he thought. He would give it to Saefaru when he went home. He was quiet for a moment, his mind far away. A week since the Theodi had left the homeland to go raiding and already it felt like a lifetime.

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He looked down at the sleeping men. The sun had moved and was burning him. Up in the trees it was so hot he could hardly breathe. The air was thick as honey and even the leaves smelled of sunlight. He felt his head nod and his eyes close and he jerked upright with a quick feeling of guilt. You must stay awake, he thought. You must! He lifted his flask, pulled the stopper with his teeth and rinsed his mouth out with water. Replacing the stopper, he looked up, his eyes travelling slowly from left to right across the plains.

He saw movement and stiffened. Hard to make out anything in the haze but then he saw it again, a flicker of motion. He looked away for a moment and then looked again, lifting a hand to his eyes and squinting.

And then he saw them.

Riders!

He blinked and peered again, swinging his head to find a gap in the trees where the foliage was less dense. At least a dozen men, mounted on big warhorses, were swinging round the river bend and coming toward them.

The boy felt suddenly alert, as if his head had been plunged into a pail of freezing water. His mouth dried and he felt a gnawing fear. He twisted and looked down at the ground. The crew were sleeping, oblivious to the danger.

He put his hand to the side of his mouth and screamed, 'Ho! You there below! Riders approaching!'

The cry echoed through the trees and floated gently to the ground. Nobody stirred.

He called again. 'Riders coming!'

Bastards were all asleep. Wake up! Wake up! Damn you.

He peered into the distance. Still coming, and if those horsemen got among the sleeping Theodi, he knew there would be slaughter.

He shouted and waved. Nothing! They couldn't hear him. They'd been rowing all night and were worn out. He felt the panic rise. He screamed and pounded the trunk of the tree with the flat of his hand and waved frantically. Rummaging in his tunic, he found a bone whistle and put it to his lips and blew: a piercing cry, like a bird of prey, the sound scratching at the clammy air. He saw one or two of the clan look up but the rest slept on, their heads wrapped in their cloaks, deaf to his yells.

Come on! Come on!

He looked back. War horses were pounding across the valley floor, black cloaks rippling, lances flashing in the sunlight. Sweet

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Tiw! They're coming and we're not ready and they'll be upon us in no time.

He clambered to his feet and shouted again. In desperation, he hurled the wooden figure at the sleeping men. It bounced, and he saw men look up and then Aelfric was on his feet and staring up at him. Almost sobbing with frustration, the boy jabbed his finger at the horsemen.

'Riders!' he yelled. 'Riders coming!'

Aelfric turned towards the north. He put his head back and a moment later words came curling up. 'How many? How armed?'

'Twenty, maybe twenty five,' he screamed back. 'Well armed and riding fast.'

'Romans?'

He looked again. He supposed they might be Romans. How could you tell?

'They're well mounted,' he shouted. 'And they ride like Romans.'

Aelfric swivelled. The boy heard him bellow the war-call and, as the cry went up, he leaned back and closed his eyes, the relief washing over him. He'd done it. He'd warned the clan.

He glanced down again.

Aelfric was striding up and down, booting the men to their feet. He could hear him yelling, Come on lads! Quick now! Move your arses!

The forest floor was alive with running men. Like kicking over an ant's nest, the boy thought as he watched the Theodi grab their spears from the stacks, heft their shields and run to form a shield-wall.

He felt a quick surge of pride. Aelfric was *hetman* and war-leader of the Theodi. Each summer Aelfric took the the clan raiding, crossing the storm-tossed seas in search of loot and slaves and glory. In the boy's view, the *hetman* of the Theodi was without doubt the finest war-leader among the Saxon tribes.

He shifted his gaze back to the riders. They had left the road, riding past Samarobriva, and were coming straight for them. 'Tiw's breath,' he gasped. They know where we are!

He turned suddenly and looked back at the red smoke drifting over the town and felt a nagging doubt. Could that smoke have drawn the horsemen?

On the ground, men were still running with spears and shields. He could hear shouts, and the clank of weapons against shield bosses. The riders were streaming up the slope toward them. The boy felt a

flash of resentment. He should be there with them, fighting shoulder to shoulder with his clan. But it was forbidden. He scowled and then forgot his disappointment and wondered if there would be a battle. He clenched his fists and bit his lip with excitement. Unable to bear the tension any longer, he began to climb down, one hand passing over another, horny feet gripping the scaly bark. He reached a lower bough and settled with his back to the trunk. Breathless with anxiety, he wiped the sweat from his eyes and waited to see what would happen.

On the forest floor, Aelfric of the Theodi stood with legs braced, watching the men form up. Powerfully built with a great shaggy head, he wore a studded-leather jerkin held by an ancient Roman army belt. Gold arm bands clasped his wrists and at his feet a boar-crested helmet gaped like an open maw.

‘Come on, you bastards!’ he shouted, slapping his thigh with impatience. ‘Let’s go! Let’s go!’

He could see the riders now; pressing hard, no sign of flagging. The boy was right, they did ride like Romans. He grimaced. These were dangerous times. The Roman army was not what it once was, but only a fool would ignore well-armed horsemen.

And he was no fool.

Off to his right, Aelfric’s kinsman, Besso, was pushing and shoving the men into line. That’s the way to do it, Aelfric thought. Old hands in the front rank, beardless youngsters in the wings and rear. The men stood watching him, shield overlapping shield. Some had stripped to the waist to fight. He could see their bare chests heaving. Hear the dry rasp of their breathing. He saw them lick their lips nervously, eyes flicking to the valley, to where the horsemen could now be heard thundering up the slope.

Aelfric put back his head and breathed in deep. Fear had a smoky odour all its own, like a pot of lentils burning. Some of the clan had already pissed themselves. He could see the dark stains spreading down their breeches. But he knew they wouldn’t let him down.

Craning his head, he looked for the boy up in the tree. There! A thick tangle of black hair and pale blue eyes glittering in a white and bony face. Just like his mother, Aelfric thought. The boy had seen him and waved. Always wanting to be noticed, that one. Aelfric waved back, his arm scything the air. He’d done the right thing letting him come on the raid. It was thanks to the boy, they’d not been caught unawares. Tiw! What he’d give to have such eyes!

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Aelfric tightened his belt a notch. He picked up the helmet and pulled it on, fastening with thick fingers the ties under his chin. He dragged on his leather gloves and then thrust an arm through the strap and hoisted his shield. Flicking off the beaded peace-bands that held the hilt, he drew his sword, feeling the sharp thrill as the blade slipped over the sheepskin lining. She was a good sword, blue-bladed and wave-patterned with a pommel carved from the cold whiteness of wolf bone. With this sword, thirty years before, his father had killed five Huns in a single day.

Aelfric breathed in deep. He lifted the sword and brandished it above his head. The wave-blade snatched at the prickling sunlight, dazzling the men.

‘Ready, lads!’ he shouted. ‘Up spears!’

Sixty spears rose in a dense thicket of gleaming spikes. Holding their shields over their mouths to make the sound bigger, the men roared the war cry of the northern clans.

‘*Oot! Oot! Oot! Oot!*’

The cry boomed through the forest, rolling and echoing like thunder

Grunting with satisfaction, Aelfric turned to face the riders.

A silence fell over the forest, broken only by the dull drone of insects, and the noise of hooves drumming on the hard earth.

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The Theodi had left their northern homeland ten days earlier. Dipping their oars in silent farewell to the huddle of onlookers on the riverbank, the *SeaWulf* casts off and slides downriver and out to the estuary. Once at sea, Aelfric sets sail for Gallia. He takes them west along the north shore and then turns south past the dreary lands of the Frisian towards the Rhine mouth. Spray in their faces and the crack of sea ropes in their ears, knifing through choppy seas, the sail swelling before a stiff breeze, running fast.

Three days later, they reach Gannuenta. A holy place, the crew tell the boy, a damp and waterlogged island on the muddy divide between land and sea, a place where men pass easily from this world to the next.

The boy stands in the bow as the boat drifts in over the shallows. He is so excited he can hardly keep still. The keel grinds over sand and gravel, and before the oars can be drawn in and the heavy sail

taken down and stowed, he has leapt out and is splashing through the shallows, urging the others on.

The Theodi splash their way to the shrine, a wooded grove filled with ancient statues ankle deep in scummy water. The boy watches as his brother Hanno lays food and beer before the Goddess and asks her to look kindly on their raid. Hanno is a true believer and speaks beautifully, his arms lifted high above his head, his voice clear and strong. The boy glows with pride.

A slave is led forward and drowned. The boy runs forward to help pin the slave's body down with branches so he will not rise to torment them. After the sacrifice, the crew trade their dried fish for fresh bread and ham and eggs from the women who come each day to sell their wares to the sea-raiders. A Frisian with long arms and a slack mouth tugs at Aelfric's elbow and offers to guide them to a town in Roman Gallia which he swears, on his mother's eyes, has never been raided.

*Samarobriva*, the Theodi think with sly smiles, sounds ripe for looting.

Ubba the Frisian leads them south, away from the Rhine, down the coast. They reach the mouth of the Samara just before nightfall and turn inland. The boy takes his turn on the rowing benches. All through the night, he pulls on his oar, numb to the villages and forests that slide past in the night. No sound but the village dogs howling. Their backs bent under a chill and mizzling rain, the crew do not notice the young Gaul, bundled in a cloak under a tree, watching over his cattle. The herdsman is roused by the cold slap of oars. He sees a boatload of sea-wolves nosing through the mist and runs to raise the alarm.

The clanging of the church bell and the raucous eruption of the rookeries tells them they have been seen. Aelfric does what he can and runs the boat bumping into the river bank. The Theodi pour ashore and charge in a heavy-booted stampede toward *Samarobriva* but, by the time they emerge from the trees, the thick-timbered gates of the town are closing.

When the Theodi realize that their journey has been wasted they go wild. They scream abuse and jeer and bare their arses. The boy joins them, leaping up and down in his anger, hurling every curse he knows. On the walls of the town, stone-eyed farmers stare without emotion while above the jumble of terracotta roofs a thick plume of red smoke already smears the sky.

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The boy watches as Aelfric throws his helmet on the ground and stumps up and down. Aelfric swears at the Gauls for having been too quick and his men for having been too slow. The Theodi look shamefaced. Without ladders, they cannot break into the town and they know the Gauls will never leave the safety of their walls while there are Saxon raiders about.

Aelfric orders the crew to search the surrounding farmsteads. They soon return to say that the Gauls have fled, taking their livestock with them. For a town that has never before been raided, Samarobriva was well-prepared.

The drizzle stops.

Wet grasses steam under the rising sun. Midges and horse-flies the colour of iron rise in clouds. The sky migrates from a dove grey to a deep and impossible blue. Aelfric wipes his brow with the back of his hand.

Nothing they can do.

He orders the boy up the tree as look-out. The boy gives Aelfric a grin and shins up the tree as lithe and quick as a squirrel. The Theodi cheer him on and take bets on whether he will fall and break his neck. At the top, he crooks a leg over a branch, waves to show he is up and settles back against the trunk. He scans the horizon in every direction and then takes a piece of wood from his tunic and a small knife and begins to carve.

The Theodi stack their spears and shields. They eat the last of their bread, chewing in morose silence and then they lie down in the soft shade beneath the trees, drag their cloaks over their faces.

And sleep.

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The riders pulled up when they reached the brow of the hill and saw the Theodi waiting for them in the shield wall. Lodged in his tree, the look-out eyed them with open-mouthed fascination. The strangers' horses were enormous, far bigger than anything in the homeland. Every man carried a lance and shield, an axe in his belt and a *spatha*, the long Roman cavalry sword, at his side. They wore mail shirts or tunics of boiled leather and helmets that gleamed in the sun.

He glanced back at the Theodi. Apart from Aelfric and Besso, they went bare-headed and, while a few had long knives, most were armed only with shield and spear. Compared to the riders, they

were wild and rough-looking. They outnumbered the strangers, but he knew men on foot were always ill-matched against men on horseback. If there was going to be a battle, it could go either way and he felt a jolt of anxiety at the thought that he might have to watch as his clanfolk were cut down in front of him.

The riders sat on their horses for a long while, barely moving, their horses shaking their heads and flicking their tails. Then the boy saw one of the riders kick the flanks of his horse and move forward.

Besso moved to Aelfric's side, his lumpy face encased in a battered old iron helmet.

'What are they? Romans?'

Aelfric shook his head. 'They look like Romans. But I don't think they are.'

'Think we'll have to fight?'

'I don't know,' Aelfric said.

Besso pulled a mournful face. 'Guess we'll find out soon enough,' he said.

When Aelfric looked back he saw that a horseman, a slight figure on a clean-limbed bay mare, was walking his horse towards them. Another rider, a burly man on a big thick-necked stallion, kicked his horse's ribs and followed, staying close.

As he approached, Aelfric saw that the lead rider was a young man, little more than a boy, his face angular with a long nose and a wide mouth, high-born by his clothes and weapons. He wore a mail coat and helmet and a dusty riding cloak draped over his back, pinned with a long-tailed gold brooch. Aelfric noted with envy that for all his slighthness of build, the young man controlled his horse with a touch that was light and sure.

The side-rider was older, a raw-boned brute with powerful shoulders and a hard mouth. Aelfric knew a veteran when he saw one, yet he noticed the older man held back, as if deferring to his young companion.

The riders stopped, and there was an uneasy silence.

The mare shook her head, jangled her bridle and sighed.

'We are of one blood,' the young man said politely.

The dialect was ugly, the voice thin and reedy, but the stranger spoke with confidence employing the formal greeting of the Germanic peoples. Not Roman then, although Aelfric knew that meant little. The Romans often hired *barbari* to guard their frontiers.

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‘We are of one blood,’ Aelfric growled. ‘Who are you and what do you want?’

The young man smiled.

‘We are Franks, known as the Salt-People,’ he said. ‘We serve Lord Childeric, Overlord of the Franks.’

His horse dropped her head and began to crop.

Aelfric knew the Franks of old. A southern tribe who had done well from their closeness to the Romans. The Salt-People lived at the Rhine mouth while their kin-tribe, the River-Franks lived upriver. As the Romans had grown weaker, Childeric’s Franks had grown stronger, wasting no time in grabbing what they could of Roman Gallia. Even the Theodi knew of Childeric as a bloody and slaughterous war leader.

The young Frank gazed at them, as if unperturbed by their silence. ‘Who leads here?’ he said mildly.

Aelfric felt a twinge of unease, unsettled to be addressed so coolly by a mere boy. ‘I am Aelfric, *hetman* and war-leader of the Theodi Saxons,’ he said. ‘This is my captain, Besso.’

The young Frank smiled as if the names were familiar to him.

‘What do you want, Frank?’ Aelfric said curtly.

The boy smiled again. ‘Childeric wishes to speak with you,’ he said. ‘We came to take you to his hall in Tornacum.’

Besso let out a soft gasp. Aelfric frowned. What did Childeric want with him, and who was this boy to tell him, Aelfric of the Theodi, what to do?

The young Frank seemed to sense Aelfric’s distrust. ‘You would be Childeric’s honoured guest,’ he said smoothly. ‘And of course, your safety is assured. But so you may meet with confidence, I will stay here as hostage until you return. And as you do not appear to have a horse,’ he looked pointedly around the forest clearing, ‘you may take mine.’ He gestured to the big Frank at his side, ‘Bauto here will accompany you. But you must leave now. It is a long ride to Tornacum.’

Aelfric saw the shock on Besso’s face. No Theod would dare talk to Aelfric that way. The Frank seemed unabashed. He stared at Aelfric, his expression combining a haughty authority mingled with defiance. But there was something more behind those pink cheeks, a touch of cruelty that suggested to Aelfric that this boy was more than he seemed.

Aelfric rubbed his chin with the back of his fist. He was flattered that the Overlord of the Franks wanted to meet him, but had no

wish to ride into his lair alone. Yet if he refused the boy's offer he would look a coward. He leaned over and muttered in Besso's ear.

Besso cleared his throat and took a step forward. 'We thank you for your offer. It is most kind,' he said in rich and formal tones. 'We have heard of the Lord Childeric. It is a great honour for my Lord Aelfric to be invited to talk with him.'

The boy nodded, but his eyes never left Aelfric.

'But you should know that among my people, Aelfric is a great war leader,' Besso went on. 'In the northlands he is far-famed. He has hewn limbs and split helms and wielded the wave-sword against our enemies more times than there are hairs on my head.' Besso stroked his thinning hair with the flat of his hand. 'If we are to take a hostage for Aelfric, we must have a warrior of equal rank.'

Besso lowered his voice so that only Aelfric and the two Franks could hear. 'You may be high-born, you arrogant little Frankish shit,' he said, his voice dripping with contempt, 'but you're no more than a boy.' He raised his plump hand and gave a delicate, almost feminine, little flutter in the Frank's direction. 'Come back in a few years, when you're a man, huh?'

With a broad wink at Aelfric, Besso turned and stepped back.

The big Frank swore, his face dark with surprised anger, but Aelfric had eyes only for the boy. He watched as the young Frank struggled to contain his fury. Dipping his head in ironic acknowledgement of the insult, the youth gave Besso a thin and bloodless smile and then turned to Aelfric.

'Aelfric is a great warrior, a noble ring-giver, the most generous of men,' he said softly. 'I meant no disrespect.'

Aelfric waited. Smooth as honey, he thought, but where's the sting?

The Frank looked at him. 'But there is something you should know. My name is Chlodwig, known to the Gauls as Clovis, and I am the son of Childeric, Overlord of the Franks.' He paused and then said, 'And my father is not accustomed to being kept waiting.'

Aelfric pulled at his earlobe. This was different, not at all what he had expected.

'Bring Ubba!' he whispered in Besso's ear.

The look-out shifted his cramped limbs. He watched, not understanding, as Besso walked back to the shield wall and

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returned with the Frisian guide. By his walk, the boy could tell that the Frisian guide was nervous and seemed reluctant to be drawn from the safety of the shield wall.

When the big rider saw the Frisian, he let out a roar of rage. His fist fell to the hilt of his *spatha*, and he jerked his reins, forcing his horse back. Alarmed shouts rose among the riders, and the line of Saxon spears lurched forward.

The look-out held his breath. He saw Aelfric lift a calming hand and the young rider speak sharp words to the older rider. The boy couldn't hear what was said but the older man seemed to bite his tongue, leaning over his pommel and glowering at Ubba. Bad blood there, the look-out thought. Maybe the strangers don't like Frisians guiding Saxon war bands into Roman Gallia.

Aelfric bent his head and spoke to the Frisian. Ubba looked at the foreigners and nodded. Aelfric spoke to Besso and then seemed to come to a decision. He spoke to the young rider who swung his leg over his horse's neck and slid to the ground and held out the reins to Aelfric. Ascha saw Aelfric take them and then hesitate. The boy shook his head. Everybody knew the *hetman* of the Theodi was a poor rider and uncomfortable on horseback.

The young stranger clapped his hands. At once one of the horsemen spurred up the slope, hurriedly dismounted and knelt on all fours. As the look-out watched, leaning so far out of the tree he almost fell, Aelfric stepped on the man's back and clambered clumsily onto the horse and grabbed wildly at the reins. The big foreigner shouted an order, and the strangers wheeled and rode away leaving the young stranger behind.

The boy watched as the horsemen trotted down the valley, Aelfric bobbing in their midst like a bark on a rough sea. They turned onto the Roman road and went north. The boy followed them with his eyes until they were little more than a dark smudge on the horizon. He felt troubled by what he had just seen, without fully understanding why.

Who were those people, he wondered.

And where were they taking his father now?

2

When Aelfric and the Franks had gone, Clovis the Frank unpinned his cloak and carefully spread it on the dry grass. He unbuckled his sword belt, let it fall and then pulled the helmet from his head, revealing a thick thatch of straw-coloured hair. He placed his sword and helmet neatly side by side on the cloak and then lay down, folded his arms behind his head and closed his eyes.

Besso stood for a while, scratching the bristles on his chin and watching the young Frank, as if lost in thought. He wasn't sure what had just happened, but he was afraid that Aelfric had done something very stupid and they were never going to see him again. He ordered the Theodi to disband and then heaved his belt up over his belly and ambled over towards Clovis. Bending down, he put his face very close to that of the young Frank.

'Make yourself comfortable, my fine Lord,' he said. 'But if you do not return Aelfric to us by this time tomorrow, I promise you by Tiw's holy breath that I will stick those skinny feet of yours into a bonfire and I will burn them to the bone.'

Clovis opened his eyes. He looked up at Besso and gave him a cold smile.

'Of course you will, Besso,' he said softly. 'That's what hostages are for.'

The look-out had heard only snatches of what had passed between the Theodi and the horsemen, but he had seen his father ride away and he realized that the young foreigner had stayed with the Theodi as hostage for Aelfric's life. Passing a rope around the trunk, he half-slid, half-climbed down the tree and then dropped. He landed heavily and fell in an untidy sprawl, his legs numb from the time spent aloft.

He sat and chafed his limbs back to life and then got to his feet, enjoying the prickle of grass under his feet. He found his carving and shoved it in his tunic, gasping as the heat closed in around him. Looking back up the tree, he felt a quick pang of regret. As look-out, every man's life had depended on him, but here on the ground,

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he was nobody again. Yet he had shown what he could do and that was something they could not take away from him. But now he was desperate to find out what had happened. Who were the horsemen? Where had they taken Aelfric, and who was the young man they had left behind as hostage?

He looked about him.

Beams of sunshine filtered through the trees creating pools of light on the forest floor. The shield-wall had broken up and dispersed. Now the danger was over, the Theodi seemed to be in a boisterous mood. They wrestled and joked, and Ascha could hear them bragging about how bravely they would have fought if only the horsemen had dared to attack.

He was not so sure.

The strangers had seemed had come on boldly and had not been afraid of the Theodi shield wall. He suspected that, against the Theodi, their big horses and slashing long swords would have caused havoc.

He saw Besso, sitting on a log munching an apple and went to join him. Besso looked up as he approached and waved. The boy could see that the apple was mostly rotten, but Besso did not seem to care. He was a big man with a solid neck and a long face who was known to eat almost anything without getting the flux.

‘Ha! Ascha. Tha did well, lad,’ Besso said in the dialect of the north shore. ‘Thi warning meant we were ready for them, although how tha managed to stay awake, let alone see them, I don’t know. Does tha want an apple?’

Ascha smiled, delighted that what he had achieved had been noticed, and then spoke quickly, the words tumbling out. ‘Besso, who they were and what did they want? And where they have taken my father?’

‘Steady on!’ said Besso. ‘And I’ll tell tha everything.’

Between mouthfuls of browned fruit, Besso explained what had happened. The riders were Franks, he said, and were far from where Besso would have expected them to be. Aelfric had gone to speak with the Overlord of the Franks. Besso spoke slowly and solemnly, as was his way.

Ascha bit his tongue and waited as patiently as he could until Besso had finished.

‘But why does the Overlord of the Franks want to talk to my father?’

Besso sighed. ‘It’s always questions with tha, isn’t it?’

Ascha stared. Of course, he asked questions. How else could you learn?'

'Well, it's a funny thing,' Besso said heavily, 'but just this once the Overlord of the Franks forgot to take me into his confidence.'

He looked up at Ascha and winked.

Ascha sighed. He hated not knowing what was going on.

'Will my father be all right?'

'Course he will,' Besso said.

'What will tha do now?'

'Wait for Aelfric's return,' Besso said, 'It's all we can do.' He gestured with his apple toward Samarobriva. 'Them Gauls won't pay tribute now they're safe behind them gates. The men are hungry, but I can't send them out to look for food when there are horse Franks abroad. They'd pick them off like flies.' Besso suddenly slapped a hand against his jaw and studied the tiny corpse in his palm. 'I have a bad feeling about this. If it was down to me, I wouldn't be happy until we're at sea again and I can feel the ocean kicking under my keel.'

Ascha sighed with exasperation. Besso was never one to shake the tree if he could avoid it. The Theodi had just seen off a Frankish war band, his father had been taken, and all Besso could think of was getting out.

'And him?' Ascha said, turning to the sleeping Frank. 'What is he?'

Besso blew out a pip. 'Says his name is Chlodwig or Clovis, son of Childeric, which makes him a prince, I suppose. Ubba said he was who he said he was, so Aelfric went with them.' Besso put on the slightly astonished look he wore when people acted differently to what he thought wise. 'I told him he were mad, but tha knows what thi father's like when his mind's made up.'

Ascha looked at his uncle and then at the Frank.

'I want to talk to him.'

'Talk to him, why?'

Ascha wasn't sure why. He was curious and realized that he was also a little envious. The Frank was the son of an Overlord, and Ascha couldn't help but notice how self-assured he had seemed a short while ago. The Frank had ridden up to the Saxon shield-wall completely without fear. Ascha shrugged and said, 'No reason.'

Besso gave him a baffled look and then said, 'Go ahead, but watch thi step. There's more to that one than meets the eye.'

The stranger lay on his side and seemed to be asleep, eyes closed, one arm folded beneath his head, thin lips pressed together. An armed guard stood nearby. Ascha ran his eyes over the Frank with a mix of awe and fascination. They were about the same age, the Frank maybe a little younger. He was tall and lean; clean and seemed untroubled by the heat. Ascha noticed that he wore his hair loose to his shoulders, not greased and coiled on top of his head as the Theodi and other Saxons did. His tunic was in a fine and closely-woven material, dyed black, and his helmet and chain mail looked as if they had been made for him. Both had been sand-scrubbed until they gleamed. His sword alone was worth a fortune, the hilt heavily decorated with a rich red metal, framed in gold.

But it was the stranger's boots which struck Ascha most. They were made of soft doeskin, finely stitched and hobnailed, the tops rolled over to show a lining of badger fur. Silver spurs at each heel. Ascha felt a sluggish swell of jealousy pass through him. In the homeland, men would kill for boots like those. Plain to see, this Frank had never had to struggle.

Filled with a sudden anger, he kicked the Frank on the foot. 'Chlodwig, son of Childeric?'

The Frank opened one eye and studied him. 'Ah, the look-out,' he said in a flat and drawling voice. 'And in these parts, I am known as Clovis.'

Ascha was shocked. He realized that Chlodwig or Clovis or whatever he called himself had not been asleep and had been watching the Theodi all along. He would have seen the Theodi fooling in the sun and had listened to what they were saying. He would have seen Ascha come down from the trees and would have known it was he who had had warned the Theodi of the Franks approach. He experienced a vague sense of unease, as if caught doing something he shouldn't.

'What does your father want with Aelfric?' he said.

The Frank sat up and hugged his knees. 'Who wants to know?'

He spoke with a thick Frankish dialect, but Ascha could understand him well enough. For a moment, Ascha considered not telling him, and then said, 'I am Ascha, Saxon of the Theodi clan.'

The Frank looked him up and down. 'You're a Saxon?' he said with surprise in his voice.

'Of course.'

'You don't look much like a Saxon,' Clovis said bluntly.

'Well, I am!' Ascha said.

He was stocky and broad-shouldered, but with his black hair and blue eyes he knew he did not look Saxon. He tightened his jaw, annoyed that the Frank had already succeeded in getting the edge over him.

Behind the Frank, he saw his brother Hroc coming across the clearing, angling towards him. Hroc was the younger of his two half-brothers. He was older than Ascha and had, so Besso always said, his mother's wheaten hair, his father's temper and a cruel side that was all his own. Between Hroc and Ascha there was a raw and mutual dislike, neither knew how it had started and neither cared. It had just always been there. Ascha hated and loathed his brother Hroc almost as much as he adored his elder brother, Hanno. And Hroc equally despised Ascha, never letting Ascha forget that he was younger and of lower rank.

Ascha scowled. Talking to the Frankish prince had been his idea, and he had no wish to share him, least of all with Hroc.

'What does your father want with Aelfric?' he repeated.

Clovis got to his feet, rising in one sinuous movement. The Frank, Ascha saw with dismay, was taller than him by at least a head. Clovis put his fists in the small of his back, closed his eyes and stretched like a cat.

'Why do you care?' Clovis said. 'He is your warlord and makes his own decisions.'

'Because Aelfric is my father,' Ascha said softly.

The Frank paused in mid-stretch, and Ascha noted with huge satisfaction the look of astonishment on the Frank's face. 'Your father is Aelfric, the *hetman* of the Theodi?'

'He is.'

'And your mother?'

Ascha was not prepared for the question. 'What business is it of yours who my mother is?' he said with a sudden burst of anger.

Hroc had come up behind Clovis. He stood with his hands on his hips, leaning forward slightly. Big-bodied and thick with muscle, Hroc wore a *seaxe*, the long knife worn by all freeborn Saxons, stuffed into his belt and carried an axe by a braided leather cord around his neck. Seeing him, Ascha felt uneasy. His brother had a belly-hatred of all foreigners. Saxons were the only people he trusted, and then only so far.

The Frank continued as if unaware that Hroc stood behind him. He swept his arm in a wide arc across the landscape. 'All these are Childeric's lands!' he said in his languid drawl.

On the voyage down, Ascha had plagued Besso and Hanno with questions about previous raids they had been on in Gallia. Now, he struggled to remember what they had told him. 'Not so!' he said. 'These are Roman lands. They are open to all'.

The Frank gave him a thin and superior smile. 'They were Roman,' he agreed. 'But Romans no longer rule here. These are our lands. Raid here and you steal from us.'

Hroc stepped forward and pulled on the Frank's arm, spinning him round. 'Tha's lying!' he said. 'Frank land is to the north. This land is Roman, and northerners have raided here for generations.'

'Not anymore,' Clovis said. Taller than Hroc, he held Hroc's glare with bleak indifference. 'They now belong to us. We protect this territory.'

'And if we pay no heed?' Hroc snarled.

Clovis smiled again. 'Ah, that would not be wise.'

'Not wise?' Hroc moved closer. 'And what will you do to stop us, you little turd? The Theodi have raided here for generations. We sail the whale's road and nobody stops us. When we find what we want, we take it.'

Clansmen were beginning to wander over, drawn to the raised voices. Alarmed, Ascha scanned the clearing. Things were getting out of hand. Hroc was spoiling for a fight. Ascha recognized the signs. His first instinct was to leave them to it. What did he care if Hroc slugged it out with the arrogant Frank, but he knew a fight would put his father's life in danger? If Hroc killed or injured Clovis, the Franks would take revenge on Aelfric. They would send men to stop the *SeaWulf* sailing downriver, and the Theodi would die here.

'Come away, Hroc,' he said, laying a hand on his brother's arm. 'Tha doesn't need this.'

Hroc shook him off. 'Go take a piss, little brother. This do not concern tha.'

Anxiously, Ascha searched for the guard but the man had slipped away as soon as he saw Hroc approach. And where was Besso? He was the only one who could restrain Hroc when he was riled.

'You are outsiders,' Ascha heard Clovis say in a grating voice, 'and we will destroy you as we have destroyed all northerners who raid our shores.'

Ascha couldn't help but notice that Clovis had a smile on his lips and his eyes were shining. Ascha stared at him in astonishment. Was the boy mad? Did he have no idea what he was doing? Hroc

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had been known to knock down an ox with a single blow of his fist and leave it stretched with blood streaming from its ears. But Clovis seemed unaware of the danger he was in. Either that or he was playing some kind of game with Hroc, seeing how far he could push him. But this was a game that could easily spin out of control.

‘We raid where we choose,’ Hroc roared, spittle flying. ‘And we give way to nobody.’ He poked Clovis in the chest as if to emphasize each word. ‘And...never...to...a... pox-ridden...Frank!’

Years later, when Ascha looked back on the events of that day, it occurred to him that it was the chest jabbing that had done it. Clovis always hated being touched, especially by men like Hroc who he considered lower than an animal. As Hroc went to raise his fist once again, Clovis, his face pale, swatted Hroc’s arm away.

‘We own these lands,’ he said, making no attempt to hide the scorn in his voice. ‘So go back to your filthy marshes and eat frogs or fuck your sisters or do whatever it is you bog-folk do. There is nothing for you here. Do you understand, you Saxon prick? Nothing!’

Silence.

Hroc let out a terrifying scream of rage. An axe appeared in Hroc’s fist, and Ascha saw the heavy blade arcing down towards the Frank’s bare head. Without thinking, he flung himself forward. Ramming into Hroc, he wrapped both arms around his brother’s barrelled chest and drove on with all his strength. The force of the rush hit Hroc like a sail-boom, knocking him sideways and hurling them both to the ground with a bone-jarring crash. Somehow, Ascha twisted as he fell and Hroc’s crushing weight rolled into him driving the breath from his body in one *whoof* of exploding air. There was a sharp stab of pain as his collarbone gave way and then a tumult of yells. Somewhere far off he heard Besso bellowing. The world was spinning, a dizzy whirlpool of legs and faces and trees and sky. Hroc’s face, warped with rage, rose above him. Ascha saw his brother’s arm swing back, saw the fist coming and felt a massive blow to the side of his head. There were flashes behind his eyes and a dull roar like an undertow in his head.

And then the darkness slid over him.

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Ascha’s homeland is made up of limitless marshes, wide rivers and mewing gulls. It is bounded by ocean to the north and woods to the

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south and scattered with *terpen*, the mounds on which the Theodi build their homes to keep them safe from the storm-floods. Dykes hold back the sea, criss-crossing the fields like runes scratched on antler bone.

The Theodi are not a large clan – two hundred and fifty people, all tied by blood and bone – but they know who they are. Long ago they migrated from the Almost-Island and settled between the two rivers. They became guardians of the *hearg*, the sacred pool that lies on their land, and are known by the other north shore folk as the shrine people. The Theodi are proud of their past, and every child is taught the story before they can walk.

The clan fish and they farm. They make salt in the salt-pans and they trade with the summer-traders. Every year the women pack the men off to raid, Gaul usually, sometimes Hispania, or the damp islands, Pritannia or Hibernia. They sail across the ocean and follow the rivers, penetrating deep inland. They fall on isolated villages, loot and slaughter and take their plunder home. Raiding gives meaning to a hard life and provides food and warmth when the rivers freeze and birds fall dead from the sky.

The Theodi view the Pritanni and the Gauls, nations who have allowed themselves to be conquered by the Romans, as weak and wealthy. The clan's northern neighbours – Saxons, Danes, Frisians, Svea, Jutes and Engle – are considered near-kin and are rarely raided. To the east are primitives who worship snakes and live in holes scratched in the earth. These, the Theodi regard as too poor to raid and are left alone.

Ascha grows up as tough as a weed. He has his slave-mother's pale skin and crow-black hair, also her sharpness and strength of mind. But among the Theodi, his broad shoulders, big hands and startling blue eyes mark him as a son of Aelfric.

When he is ten, his brother Hroc takes *waepndag*, the spear-giving festival which marks a boy's passage from child to man. Before a crowd of family and friends, all packed in like salted herrings, the boys line up in Aelfric's great hall. Ascha pushes and shoves his way to the front. As if in a trance, he watches as Hroc and the other boys lay their right hand on the sacred bundle and swear that they will be loyal to Aelfric and the clan.

'In the eyes of Tiw and of this clan, you are now men,' Aelfric says gruffly. 'With this spear and this shield you become whole, a warrior and a free man. From this day forward, the lives of our

women and our children will depend on your courage. Remember this for as long as you shall live.'

As the women chant the weapon-song, Aelfric presents each boy with a new spear and shield. The men clash their weapons against their shields, the mothers sniffle happily and Hroc's grin stretches from ear to ear.

Ascha thinks it is the most exciting day a boy can have.

When Hroc comes to bed that night the fire is a dull orange glow, and the floor is thick with sleeping revellers. Hroc thumps Ascha awake. He is drunk and wants to talk. 'I'm a man now, little frog, and tha must treat me wi' respect.'

Hroc talks of what he will do now that he is weaponed. Ascha listens for as long as he can. When his eyelids droop, Hroc kicks him and tugs the blanket away. Unable to bear the cold any longer, Ascha gets up and goes down the hall to where the slaves sleep. He clambers over Tchenguiz, his father's Hun slave, and lies down beside him in the straw.

All that night, Ascha lies awake, thinking.

The next day Ascha goes to where his father sits by the door, his head in his hands, recovering from the drinking of the night before. He waits until Aelfric looks up at him with bleary eyes and then says, 'When will I be given a shield and weapons like my brothers?'

His father looks at him. 'Don't be stupid, boy,' he says. 'How can tha be given a shield?'

'Why not? Hroc and Hanno are weaponed.'

'They are freeborn,' Aelfric says stonily.

'But I am thi son, as are they. We are all of thi blood.'

Aelfric's eyes bore into his. 'Tha's of my blood, but thi mother is a slave,' he says, speaking slowly as if Ascha were deaf or stupid. 'Tha's half-free, a half-slave. Tha can niver carry weapons or a shield. The right to bear arms is denied those who are not free born.'

Ascha stares at his father. His eyes burn and his throat swells. He begins to realize what he has suspected for a long time. He is not and never will be the equal of his brothers. Although the son of the *hetman*, he is slave-born and will never have a spear-giving like Hanno and Hroc. He is a half-slave, trapped in the murky borderland between slave and free.

‘But if I am not weaponed, I cannot be whole,’ Ascha says, feeling the panic rise. ‘I cannot own land. I cannot marry who I choose. I will always be less than my brothers. I have no future.’

His father shrugs. ‘It’s the law,’ he says, rubbing his chin. ‘Nothing I can do about it.’

‘But you are *hetman*,’ Ascha insists. ‘Tha can do anything!’

The muscles in Aelfric’s jaw tighten. ‘Tha is what tha is,’ he says. ‘And that’s the end of it.’

Ascha shakes his head, tossing out his father’s words as if they were water in his ears. He feels cheated, as if something precious has suddenly been stolen from him. ‘I am thi son!’ he screams. ‘But without a weapon, I am nothing!’

Aelfric makes as if to leave.

Ascha grabs his father’s arm and hauls him round. ‘What kind of father does this to his son?’ he shouts. ‘Tiw’s breath! What kind of man is tha?’

Aelfric’s fist catches Ascha below the ear and hurls him across the room. He blinks and shakes his head and then gets to his feet and rushes his father, arms flailing. Aelfric takes a step back and hits him again, a hard slap across the face. Ascha flies across the floor and hits the wall with a dull thump.

‘Stay down, boy,’ Aelfric says, glowering. ‘Stay down if tha knows what’s good for tha.’

Ascha scrambles to his feet and stands there, chest heaving. His mother comes running. She sees the two of them glaring at each other with murder in their hearts, and her hand flies to her mouth. She screams, a wail of fury and fear, and throws herself between them.

Aelfric stands clenching and unclenching his fists. He points to Ascha but speaks to her, his face flushed with anger. ‘Tha should’ve taught him to accept what he is,’ he growls. ‘He is not free-born and niver will be. Best he learns that now before it’s too late.’

Sobbing with rage, Ascha would have flung himself again at his father, but his mother wraps her arms around him, holds him tight and gives his shoulder a hard squeeze. ‘No, Ascha!’ she says.

He bites his lower lip but makes no further move.

His mother closes her eyes and opens them again. She turns to Aelfric and in a bleak whisper she says, ‘If you ever lay a finger on my son again, as God is my witness, I will kill you and everything you hold dear!’

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Aelfric's face passes from fury to bewilderment and something else. He sighs, blows air from his lungs and lets his fists drop to his side 'Ach, woman,' he says, shaking his head. 'Sometimes tha pushes me too far and one of these days tha'll regret it.'

And he turns and leaves.

Ascha angrily pushes his mother away. He touches his cheek. There is a burning feeling in his jaw and a taste of iron in his mouth. He is ashamed because she has saved him from a beating. He is surprised to see that she is trembling. Her eyes are bright and her mouth is open and she is panting slightly. He touches her briefly on the arm and leaves.

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When Ascha came to he was lying on the grass under a small leather tent, his head resting on his own rolled short-cloak. There was a foul and sticky taste in his mouth, and his head throbbed. For a moment he did not know where he was and then he remembered Hroc and the young Frank and he groaned.

The sunlight streaming into the tent told him it was long past daybreak. Flies circled and droned. The air in the tent was stale, heavy and hard to breathe.

He lifted a hand and gasped as the pain hit him, a blunt ache that began at his cheek, ran along his jaw and down his neck.

'Tha's awake, little brother?'

A face appeared at the end of the tent, rimmed in sunshine. Hanno, Ascha's elder brother, was tall and lean with yellow hair and an easy smile. He was a poet and a warrior, everything Ascha admired in a man.

Hanno came in and sat down, folding his long legs beneath him. Despite the oppressive heat, he looked as fresh as a daisy. He pulled out a flask and offered it to Ascha with a giant smile. Ascha took it, pulled the bung with his teeth and upended the flask. The water was cold and fresh, and he drank greedily.

He blinked and peered at Hanno with gummy eyes.

'What happened?' he mumbled, the pain rolling over him in a bone-softening, swell.

Hanno gave a dry laugh. 'Tha stopped Hroc from cracking that Frank's skull and avoided a bloodbath. That's what happened.'

Ascha groaned. 'Where's father?'

'He's back and is well.'

‘And Hroc?’

‘Kicking his heels in the forest somewhere,’ Hanno grinned. ‘We were lucky. If Hroc had killed that Frank, they would have slaughtered us all before we reached the river mouth.’ Hanno gave Ascha a vacant smile. ‘Odd thing is, he blames tha. He thinks tha humiliated him in front of the clan.’

Hanno laughed suddenly and slapped his thigh.

Ascha thought Hanno had everything a man could want: high rank, good looks and the lazy charm that women adored, but he often found his brother’s easy-going nature irritating. For all his viciousness, Hroc knew what he wanted and fought to get it.

Ascha tried to sit up but groaned once again as the pain hit.

‘Easy, now,’ Hanno chuckled. ‘Tha took it on the jaw and probably cracked a rib or two when tha fell. Besso thinks thi shoulder may be broken. It will mend soon enough and is unlikely to ruin your chances with that girl of yours back home.’

Ascha missed Saefaru more than he cared to admit. He would give anything to have her here by his side. He snuffled the air. He could smell the thick red-black aroma of roast meat.

‘I’m hungry,’ he said, closing his eyes. ‘Is there any food?’

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Ascha spends his last evening before the *SeaWulf* sails with Saefaru. They sit together on the riverside and watch as the *SeaWulf* is turned, ready for the morning tide. It was he who carved the prow, a long-necked dragon with gaping jaws and wild eyes, a hard ridged spine and flared nostrils. He is proud that his prow dragon will lead them to Gallia and bring them home again. He will sleep under the stars, he will hear the crash of spears on shields. There will be plunder and comradeship, a chance to make his father proud of him.

‘Will you miss me?’ Saefaru says, poking a finger between his ribs.

She asks him the same question whenever they meet. Since spring, their feelings for each other have turned from friendship into something more, although nothing that either of them could put a name to. Her father disapproves, thinking Ascha is unworthy, but Saefaru takes no notice and Ascha loves her for it. He likes being with her. She is warm, high-spirited and good to be with. She draws

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him out of himself and makes him laugh. When he is with her he feels complete, less of an outsider.

Saefaru is on her feet, pulling him up, urgent now. 'Come, Ascha,' she says. 'Quickly.'

Off to the west the sun is dropping below the horizon, the sky going from purple to the colour of pewter. He goes with Saefaru, her slim hand in his, back into the soft darkness.