

## Chapter 1

**I**n the mythical days of immortal heroes and god-kings, humankind was also ruled by nature; omnipotent deities of both land and sea were mysterious, austere and often cruel, yet nothing compared to the savagery of superstitious men in the primeval regions of the unknown. And those powerful gods and goddesses of the northern sky must have been eagerly watching her sacred union with Joth, Rinka thought; but did they approve? The great hearth of fire burned brightly overhead, and there was not a shade of cloudy gray to be seen. Had it been damp and dreary, that would surely have been a sign of the god's displeasure. Rinka's tribesmen were gathered around a mossy-stone altar that overlooked the small Targa River, a tributary of the mighty Weser River. Only knee-deep in summer, it meandered through their village, providing fresh water and fish. That day, the natural world seemed to be in perfect harmony with that of man. The forest smelled of pine and juniper, carried on a gentle breeze. Deer ventured into the clearings to graze, while overhead, birds sang a sweet aria. Though a warrior tribe, her Targanchi tribal kinfolk appeared happy, secure and seemingly at peace. Five-hundred strong, their cheeks were rosy tan, while their stomachs bulged with milled grain and the wild game of their ancestral realm.

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Azrika, the tribal high-priestess directed the religious marital rites. She was the spiritual leader of the Targanchi people and also members of the Cherusci tribe, a powerful neighbor and ally. A robust, middle-aged-woman, wore a large ceremonial robe woven from flax and dyed with purple berries. A combination of amber, peridot and hammered-gold jewelry made her red-gray hair appear to be on fire. Azrika then consulted an oracle of the spirits, her link with the gods, the natural world and their departed ancestors. Using a small torch, she ignited sulfur, the stone that burns, and studied the acrid smoke. Azrika scanned the sky and then closed her eyes. After a moment, she reopened them with a look of demonic possession. Her expression was blank and her lips moved as if prompted by a supernatural force. Then, just as suddenly, she appeared to be back in control of her mortal senses.

Azrika bound the young couple's wrists with holly. "The oracle reminds us that this vine survives in winter and summer," she proclaimed. "It is eternal, as will be your loyalty and lives together. And your ancestors will welcome you both, as one, after your many moons of conflict and carnage, contentment and comfort, into the frozen mists of the dead."

Trying to concentrate on the sacred words, Rinka stared into Joth's cobalt-blue eyes and smiled. Returning a caring gaze, he increased his grip on her slightly trembling hands. The young warrior's face was chiseled, and his hair was reddish-brown falling loose at the shoulders. The stubble on his chin showed his desire to grow a man's beard, but at only sixteen, the whiskers didn't disguise his smooth complexion of youth.

"This union comes with great responsibilities; while Joth will protect and provide for the hearth and home, Rinka will bare him many children."

As Azrika described their spousal obligations, Rinka thought about childbirth. The idea was inspirational, yet at the same time very frightening. Would she survive the bleeding from birthing? Would her children be born healthy? Would they survive many seasons to grow up strong and able? And who would they resemble, Joth and his family or her own kinfolk? Rinka looked

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like her parents and sisters. She had bluish-hazel eyes and reddish-brown hair, with only a few freckles when the summer sun somehow changed her skin. The thoughts and concerns made her anxious. Yet with so many unanswered questions, Rinka had known that her body was fertile and that she ached with desire for Joth.

“As in life, Rinka, you’re also Joth’s partner in war,” the priestess professed, summoning Rinka’s full attention.

Rinka turned to Joth and said, “I will be your partner in life and war . . . to make your home and camp, to carry your children and your shield.”

Though he hadn’t yet spoken, Rinka could smell the fragrant barley and herb brew on his breath. Daily drinking of alcohol was common for Germanic men. Whether they were noble or common, a craftsman or a farmer, drinking from dawn to dusk was a way of life for her people.

Azrika placed her hands on the holly vine. “From this day on, Rinka, you and Joth will share work and rewards, worries and joy, good health and the wounds of war.”

“I shall, great priestess,” Rinka proudly said.

Azrika then turned to Joth. She gestured toward a pair of colorfully painted leather shields and short iron spears resting upon the altar. “As husband, Joth, your gift of arms to Rinka, and her gift of arms to you symbolizes your sharing of danger.”

The Old Germanic practice was for the chieftain of a clan to act as priest. They would also host the feasts and lead the rituals. For the Targanchi, however, women were considered to have great spiritual power. They would commonly lead rituals or perform predictions or prophecies. Having foretold of the past two seasons of drought, Azrika was thought to be very powerful by everyone in the tribe.

Collectively, the two-hundred men in the tribe, old and young, tapped their spears onto their shields. The women showed their emotions with smiles and tears. A gaggle of children played at their parent’s ankles, only paying attention when they were corralled by attentive hands. Looking around at everyone who

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came to honor the couple on that day, Rinka felt so proud. It was as if she'd dreamed about the coming of that day all of her life, a short life of only sixteen years.

In the distance, the sound of barking dogs interrupted the celebration. It was coming from the direction of their farms and shelters. Men stopped tapping their iron spears and the women fell silent. At first, Rinka didn't look that way. Only when those yips and yelps became frenzied, however, did they draw the attention of everyone in the tribe. No one knew the reason for the commotion until one warrior among them shouted, "Fire in the village!"

Everyone looked at the thick black smoke, the cause of which proved to be an even greater danger. "Border raiders!" another man bellowed.

Rinka remained before the altar, stunned, unable to move. Azrika let the holly band fall from the wrists of the couple.

"Take your shield from the altar!" the priestess commanded of Joth. The young man did so without hesitation.

Rinka reached for her shield and spear as well, intending to join in their tribe's defense. Before she could do so, Joth seized them leaving her without weapons. "Go with the women and children! Now, Rinka!" he commanded.

"Not without you!" she insisted. Strangely, Rinka felt like she was speaking, yet no words left her mouth.

Rinka watched in silence, as the nearby raid unfolded and her tribesmen scattered. Though she wanted to move, Rinka felt frozen before the altar. By insisting she stay behind, did he fear for her safety? Or did Joth think she was not worthy as a warrior's wife. As Joth charged away with the other men of the tribe, Rinka watched Azrika look to the sky. "Oh, Wodan, warrior God above," she prayed. "Use your powerful magic to save our people."

Rinka felt anger and frustration. Wasn't it her duty to join with Joth in both peace and war? Azrika had just spoken the words to them. However, their ceremony had not yet been consecrated. Was she even married? With so many unanswered questions, her apprehension grew. Preparing for the defense of the village, her fellow tribesmen were racing past her in all directions. Women

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grabbed their children who cried for the safety of a bosom, while the men rallied to defend their homes, cattle and crops. As Azrika continued to pray, no one stopped to give Rinka reassuring words or consolation.

Suddenly, the border raiders came into view. On horseback, and at a full gallop, Rinka estimated their number at more than a hundred. They charged down the trail from the Targa village up the river. Because they were using saddles, uncommon for tribal Germanics, chances were they had Roman loyalties. The horses they rode were robust, angry beasts that appeared to be breathing fire from their nostrils. Their hooves struck the ground as if emitting sparks of lightning.

The riders were clad in leather and steel armor. They had dark helmets with only thin slots for vision, keeping the tribal identity each man hidden. Still, Rinka had no doubt about whom the raiders were. They were rival Germanic tribesmen and mercenaries, plied with Roman weapons and coins as payment for the enslavement of their own race, especially those less loyal to Caesar. Those marauders appeared as soulless demons, sent from Hel, the frigid world of the dead, without caring or remorse. They were there only to plunder, murder, and worst of all, to enslave her people.

The sounds of the battle were all around Rinka; she could hear the shrill screams of the fleeing, the pounding of hooves, the clashing of arms, and the butchery of the Targanchi defenders. Terrified and unarmed, Rinka finally took a step away from the altar. The violent world seemed to be literally moving around her in all directions.

“Run, Rinka, run!” she heard someone exclaim. Rinka looked in the direction of the voice. It was a pregnant Targanchi woman, ushering along her two terrified young daughters. “To the river!” she shouted. “The women and children are hiding upstream.”

Rinka immediately remembered the advice of her chieftain-warrior father, Hrothgar. If chased by raiders, hide in thick woods, never in the open, where the horsemen can easily travel. Instead of following the woman and her daughters, Rinka charged toward a

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nearby pine ridge. Moments later, she heard a chilling scream. She looked back to see the fleeing woman had been cut down by a raider's lance. Several horsemen dismounted and converged around her, as she lay writhing in agony, desperately clutching for her daughters. While the girls were bound and gagged for transport, one marauding butcher unsheathed his short sword. Rinka watched as the man slashed his blade across the woman's pregnant abdomen.

"One less bitch to breed more Targanchi warriors!" he declared in Germanic. His words brought inhuman cheers from the other raiders, as two of them secured the squirming girls to the backs of their saddles.

The abhorrent sight sent Rinka into a panic; she had to find safety in the woods or she would surely be captured. At a full sprint, she stumbled over the body of a fallen Targanchi warrior who lay face down in the patchy forest grass. A sword had slashed his back, exposing gristly muscle and bone. The man was still clutching his bloodstained spear. Seeing the weapon, Rinka thought she could use it for defense. Her father had taught her how to throw with great accuracy. She grabbed onto the iron shaft, but it was immovable, seemingly frozen in place. Rinka kept pulling as though her young life depended on it, until finally, exhausted, and feeling sharp pains throughout her body, she let go, and tumbled to the ground near the corpse.

While trying to maintain her senses, never could she have recalled a stronger sense of disorientation and fear. And she felt so alone at the tree line, with only the bodies of the slain, littering the ground, like leaves from the trees in autumn. The fire from the burning farms had darkened the sky, like the onset of night. The distant sound of the battle and of fleeing villagers filled her with guilt and despair. She never should have run away, Rinka thought. She should have performed her duty as the wife of a warrior. She wanted to go back to where they all were, where Joth was fighting, to where her father and family were making their desperate stand. Where was her father? She reasoned. Her parents had been standing proudly by the altar, yet she hadn't seen them since the

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raid. Shouldn't her father be protecting her even though she was now married to Joth? She wanted to go find her family, yet in the smoky woods, she wasn't sure how to get there. It had become darker and she was completely disoriented. She wanted to call out for someone, anyone who would help her find a way to safety.

Suddenly, Rinka felt a hot breath wash across the back of her neck. She attempted to stand, but couldn't move. She wanted to call out for help, but she couldn't speak. Without control of her voice and body, she could only feel that tepid air upon her skin. Sensing a distinct presence, she got a terrifying chill. The hair on her arms and neck stood on end. There was someone, or something, directly behind her.

Ever so slowly, Rinka turned around, prepared to face the entity she felt. The world seemed to be moving slowly, as if every moment was many times its true length. In the dark silence, an image finally filled her vision. Just above her head it appeared, staring down at her, menacingly. At first she saw a horse's iron bit, with sharp armored barbs protruding like fiendish teeth.

The air around her turned cold like a winter's night, yet its breath turned steamy hot, like a boiling caldron. Its two nostrils were the size of fists and were black as the midnight sky. An ebon warhorse the size of which she'd never seen before towered over her. Upon its high leather saddle was a huge border raider.

Rinka's feet felt as if they were frozen in blocks of ice. Still, she couldn't move. Though the border raider possessed a sheathed sword and round iron shield, he held only a black leather whip, coiled up like a snake in his mammoth hand. She stared up at him trying to see his face. He wore an iron helmet with a pointed crest, leather straps affixed to each side, and only a thin, cross-shaped slot for his vision.

The raider raised the whip up over his shoulder, letting the leather uncoil. The tip appeared to have two beaming eyes and the forked tongue of a serpent. It had the form of a black water snake and she even imagined hearing it hiss. When the raider held up his arm to strike, Rinka could see that two other young maidens had already been tied over his saddle. The captives were wearing

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wedding clothes woven from flax. They had holly strands wrapped around their golden-red hair.

“No, you won’t take me,” she insisted. “I won’t go!”

Foretelling the same miserable fate, she somehow found the strength and ability to move. She sprang to her feet as the fiendish leather was unleashed. It barely missed her waist. The snapping crack was thunderous, shaking the ground at her feet. Keeping her balance, she started to run. Dodging trees and her dead kinfolk, she ran as fast as she could, as fast as her feet would allow. The woods were dark but she continued on, not even sure of the direction she traveled. She only knew that the colossal black warhorse was keeping pace, pounding the soft earth of the forest. Again, the whip smashed the ground with the ferocity of thunder, and she could once again feel the burning air from the beast’s nostrils upon her neck.

Still she was free, running for her life into the darkness that lay beyond her senses. The shaking continued as the horse hammered the ground, knocking down trees and moving large boulders in its path. The shaking grew with intensity, and once again the whip cracked with a ripping burst of thunder. In the distance Rinka could see a trail. Maybe it was a way back to the possible safety of Joth and her father, she imagined. With the phantasmal beast directly behind her, she had no choice but to continue that way at a full sprint. The humid breath on her neck grew wetter, like drizzling rain. The whip crashed with another thunderous burst, and the ground continued to shake.

Suddenly, she felt the hand of the raider brush her neckline, as if he was close enough to yank her up onto the saddle. Either way, she was nearly out of time. Directly in front of her was a high stone ledge at the end of the trail. She was familiar with the terrain, even in the darkness, as the precipice was filling her vision. She had played there as a child and knew the high ledge over the granite cliff. That familiarity was in no way comforting though, as the danger was real, and her capture seemed eminent. When the raider took one more swipe at her, she had no choice but to continue toward the cliff.

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Though the fall meant certain death, she preferred that to capture, only to face a life of rape and torment as a slave; she didn't even hesitate. Then, after another step, she felt herself tumbling down into the darkness. She could see the seemingly endless abyss spiraling below her feet. Her stomach ached from the sensation of falling and the fear was like nothing she'd ever experienced. She continued to plummet down the crevasse into the darkness, until finally in a fitful rush of consciousness, she awoke from her nightmare.

Rinka was lying on the straw-filled mattress that was her bed. Beside her, one at each shoulder, were her nine-year-old twin sisters. Ada had her small hand pressed against Rinka's back and neck, while Lorelei was sleeping snugly against Rinka's stomach.

The sound of thunder had traveled from the dream world into that of the living. Lightning from an early morning summer storm slashed through the humid air. Rinka touched the dampness on her neck near Ada's fingers. Rain had soaked through the thatch roof of their oak-posted house and was leaking into their bedding. Rinka rolled away from the moisture, prompting both of her sleeping sisters to automatically move with her.

Rinka arched her head and looked over to the bed where her mother and father were soundly sleeping. Feeling comforted by the sight, she once again closed her eyes, but the strange visions were still fresh in her mind. She did not understand the dream about Joth, a young warrior in her tribe.

"I don't even like Joth," she whispered to herself, "let alone want him as a husband."

She admired the caring way her mother Gelda and her father lovingly merged their bodies across from where their daughters slept. In the middle of the night, when the girls were asleep, they would perform the ritual of marital union. However, Rinka was often roused by the sounds. For her parents, the act seemed so natural. Until only recently, Rinka thought the expression of physical unity was odd, even unpleasant; say nothing of sharing such tenderness with Joth. However, the feelings of womanhood were stirring throughout her entire body. Why, she did not know. It

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was just happening. She attempted to clear her mind of those confusing thoughts in exchange for sleep, as there was much work to be done at sunrise. Yet another bolt of lightning and the continued leakage of the rain left her wide-awake. Though she would drift in and out of her uncomfortable repose, before long, the storm let up, the birds were singing and the new day had dawned.

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A few hours later, Rinka heard the rustling of thatches above her head. A hint of sunlight then warmed her face. She looked up to see that her father was already outside working to patch the gaps in the thatch. The humidity was growing, compounded with the damp moldiness of the lumpy bedding beneath her back. Those were the conditions Rinka knew and she never thought to complain. Her family was luckier than many in the Targanchi village with less wealth. Even so, she had been taught that complaining did little to change one's home or prosperity.

Ada and Lorelei both stirred at the same time; sitting up, they both squinted in the light of the new day. The two had slept the night peacefully away, without it seemed, a care in the world. While the twins appeared eager for more sleep, Rinka rose from the bed. She placed her feet on the cool, flat fieldstones that made the floor. Rinka could smell the acrid smoke of the cooking fire through the deer-skin partition that separated the hearth from the beds. Although the ceiling of the round dwelling had a hole to allow smoke to escape, the hearth was always sooty, worst of all in summer. Still, the animal skin partition helped keep the bedding free from ashes. Had it not rained and filled their home with dampness, her mother would have started a cooking fire outside, but the dry heat would help chase away those bad smells.

Rinka dressed in her linen cloak, made from yellowish-white flax, and sewn with bone needles. Like her sisters, she had slept without her cloak, using only linen cloth for comfort. In winter,

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when her mother burned the fire throughout the night, the family would sleep with layers of clothing and animal skins. Where summer could be hot and uncomfortable, by contrast, winter was a hauntingly dark and mysterious time of the year for everyone in the tribe.

Rinka stepped around the deerskins into the central living area and yawned.

“Good morning,” Mother said alertly.

Gelda, the protector of the family hearth, was a healthy woman with Rinka’s features. She had tattoos on her arms made from soot dye and bone needles, depicting a maternal goddess nurturing a flame. The home Gelda protected was simple and functional. The stone hearth was in the center of the structure. The furniture consisted of an oak dining table with two wooded benches. There were two oak-framed beds where they all slept, and near the hearth, four hand-carved stools were placed. The only light was from the flames and the ceiling vent, and when the season allowed, they would open the animal skin door flap. Stag antlers adorned the sod and clay walls, while her father’s collection of spears and shields added some color to the brown and gray interior. There was an oak shelf that supported clay drinking cups, plates and bowls, and the wood, bone and iron utensils they used for cooking and eating.

Because her father was a skilled warrior, hunter and farmer, they enjoyed many creature comforts bartered for or purchased: quality clothing, ample lodging, furnishings, a sod and thatch stable for horses and goats, and enough food, despite two bad crop seasons. Some of their “less-civilized” tribesmen still slept in the structures where they kept their animals, an old-fashioned tradition. Many of the Targanchi who relied more on grain than wild game were going hungry because of Roman taxation, border raids and a blighted barley harvest. Even Rinka’s uncles, aunts and cousins who lived in a larger round dwelling directly downstream, had only a fraction of the prosperity. Mother often said it was because of their laziness.

“Good morning, Mother,” Rinka replied with another yawn.

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Gelda placed dried kindling on the embers under the iron kettle. "Did you sleep well?" she asked. "I hope so, because there are many chores to be done this morning."

"I had strange thoughts in my head," Rinka answered with a hand on the door flap. "But I was able to sleep."

The morning light was hazy and hurt her eyes, as she slowly stepped outside.

"After you freshen at the stream, best help me if you're hungry," Gelda ordered through the opening.

Gelda was a kind woman but was strict with her eldest daughter. It bothered Rinka because, by contrast, the twins were less burdened with chores. Rinka was not one to complain, though, as she was obligated to work hard for the family. She knew it was good training, because one day, when she was married, she would have a hearth of her own to protect.

And there was a great deal of work to be done every day. Her family was more isolated than most of the other Targanchi. They raised crops and livestock a few miles from the central village. The Targanchi tribe lived in a loose collection of homes and farms dotted around their river, with a backdrop of rocky hills, boggy swamps and thickly-forested land.

Just outside their dwelling was a wood post corral for the family's six horses. Nearby, there was a stable where another smaller corral sheltered the same number of goats. Running freely, twenty hens provided eggs and meat. The last of the family's feathered animals was kept in a cage made from twigs and twine. It was placed on a pine stump in the warming sunlight near the front door. Father's pride and joy was Munin, a raven he'd purchased from another tribesman in the north, during his days serving Caesar's auxiliary legions. Hrothgar had told Rinka that Munin was named after Odin's mythological bird symbolizing thought. Hrothgar spoke often about his travels to the north and meeting tribesmen similar to the Targanchi. Though their language was different, their customs and beliefs were similar. And since Roman occupation, Hrothgar had said that the world was becoming a smaller place.

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Rinka peeked into the birdcage, crafted from thin birch branches and a hand-carved oak base. Munin was a very smart creature, and Rinka believed, as father claimed, that the bird would speak to him.

“Did you get wet from the rain this morning?” a muted male voice came from nowhere, as if by magic.

“Father?” Rinka called out. Seeing no one, she turned her head in all directions.

“Behind you,” he whispered.

“You tricked me,” Rinka gasped. She could see that Hrothgar was working down in the stone cellar adjacent to the house.

Hrothgar opened the thatch cover and popped his head into view. “A perfect hiding place,” he remarked. He then climbed up the wood stepladder, returning to ground level. With braided red-brown hair, he was tall, muscular, and so warrior-like. He had slashing scars on his face, legs and arms; they were a lifetime’s worth of battle trophies.

“I should call you Loki,” she suggested, “the trickster companion of the Gods.”

Hrothgar smiled at her reference to the mixed mythology. Since the years of Roman occupation, and the introduction of Jupiter and Mercury, it seemed old fashioned, even peasant-like to acknowledge only their Germanic ancestral deities. That was certainly true of the next Targanchi generation, growing up in a Roman world.

“Repeat those words in Latin for me,” he insisted.

Rinka rolled her eyes. She was not yet awake enough for a lesson but she did as her father requested, and with perfect diction.

“You mean Munin didn’t tell you where I was hiding?” Hrothgar then asked in the language of Roman Gaul.

Rinka had to think for a moment as the words came slowly. She smiled and then glanced over at the watching bird. “He’s loyal only to you, Father,” she replied in Gallic.

“Now show me the Roman letters in the word Gaul.”

As if having an invisible writing tool, she used her index finger to draw the four letters. “G-a-u-l,” she repeated as she wrote.

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“Good old Munin,” he then remarked in their native Germanic tongue. He carried an armful of thatches past the cage toward the house. “That bird helps me remember what my aging senses forget, and you have learned the languages and letters of the Roman Empire very well. I’m a proud father and teacher.”

Rinka smiled with warm pride. “Can I help you weave the thatch?” she asked eagerly, forgetting that she had not yet eaten, let alone relieved herself of morning water.

“Does your mother need help with your sisters?”

“I didn’t ask. Ada and Lorelei were still in bed.”

He stroked his thick red-brown beard. “You know if she finds you helping me, and not her, then *I’ll* get the punishing stick across my bottom.”

“Oh, Mother would never . . .” She stopped herself, realizing he was only teasing.

He removed a long bone needle that was threaded to his linen cloak and handed it to Rinka. He next removed a small spool of thick flax cord used to weave together new sections of thatch. Before either of them could take one step closer to the ladder, leading up onto the roof, Gelda poked her head outside.

“Rinka, come inside and help with your sisters,” she insisted.

Rinka passed him back the cord and needle. “The girls are awake,” she sighed.

“One day, Rinka, you’ll have children of your own to raise. Your mother only wants you to be prepared,” Hrothgar assured.

She turned toward the door flap. “I know.”

Before she went inside, Hrothgar asked, “Rinka, you remember what today is, yes?”

She turned to him and squinted, unknowingly.

“After our morning chores, we go to the house of Dakken to help escort his body to our sacred altar.”

She nodded, appearing uneasy. “Yes, I remember.”

“It is an important ceremony, returning the body of Dakken from where he came, back to the Gods who will receive him.”

“It is important, I know,” she said respectfully.

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He returned a curious look. “You’re troubled by the idea, Rinka?”

“Now that Dakken has left the world of the living, does this mean his responsibilities will become yours?”

Hrothgar stepped away from the ladder and pinned the needle to his cloak sleeve. He placed his hand lightly on her shoulder. “If the tribal council finds me worthy,” he replied. “Does this worry you?”

She stared at her feet, not wanting to show him the concern she felt. “These are such uncertain times,” she said quietly.

“It is an uncertain world, in which we live, Rinka.”

“Father . . . you’ve taught me about how Roman occupation has affected everyone in our lands. If you become our chieftain, will Caesar punish you when our people can’t pay tribute to Rome?”

“You’re worried about the harvest?” he asked. “Well, don’t be afraid. Romans like Caesar Augustus, General Tiberius, and now Governor Varus I believe are reasonable men. Like our tribesmen, they are mainly interested in peace and prosperity.”

“For what the Romans can’t take from us in grain, will they instead take our people as slaves? I think about the stories you’ve told us . . . the stories about how you once fought with Caesar’s legions and how brutal Caesar’s generals were to the people in occupied lands. What’s to keep the Romans from treating us the same way?”

“The Targanchi people, like our Cherusci kinfolk, fight for Rome, Rinka, as allies. We are part of the Empire now. That’s why I’m teaching you and your sisters to speak Latin. Only the people who take up arms against Rome, and resist Caesar’s laws are punished and enslaved.” He put his hand under her chin, lifting her face. “That’s why we’ll need strong leadership to protect the alliance.”

She stared into his eyes. “But the Romans don’t care if the Targanchi or any other Germanic tribes survive. They pay grain, salt and coins to the border raiders who want to enslave us all.”

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He casually leaned back against the side of their dwelling. “Now, what do you know of border raiders?” he asked in a way intended to put her young mind at ease. He sounded as if they were only talking about imaginary things.

“Sometimes my cousins tell me stories about raiders coming to steal naughty children from their beds at night.”

“And you believe them?”

“I had a dream last night. It was really terrible,” she confessed.

“More like a nightmare, I would say from your questions.”

“Do the Romans pay mercenaries to raid the tribes northeast of the Rhine?”

Hrothgar appeared to ponder the question for a moment before answering. He held up his hand to show her the Roman ring that bore his mark. There was the etching of a war bird, and above it, the Latin letters RT were stamped in the gold. “The Romans do hire Germanic warriors, Rinka, but only to help keep the peace in our region. As you know, I fought for Caesar, as did many of our Targanchi and Cherusci kinfolk, not long ago.

“How could I forget? You left home with the Roman auxiliaries when I was twelve and Uncle Wandal tended to our lands.”

The name Wandal appeared to distract Hrothgar for a moment. “All of us live in Roman lands now, Rinka,” he stated.

“I understand,” she said with a gentle smile.

Hrothgar positioned his ladder against the dwelling wall. While climbing up to the roofing, he said, “You should be thinking about marriage, Rinka, and not Rome and tribal politics. There are many Targanchi houses, with brave warrior sons who would take you as wife. As a pretty young woman, you show no interest in suitors.”

She stood near his feet as Hrothgar started repairing the thatch. “Sometimes I think about marriage. But I’d rather be a warrior, like you, serving our Gods and Goddesses, and defending our people. Even though I’m not a man, why can’t I take up arms

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in our family name? I'd like to make our ancestors proud on the battlefield, not at the hearth."

He stopped sewing and looked down at her. "You make me very proud, Rinka. The Gods saw fit that I have daughters, not sons. And you would make a great warrior, fighting on the battlefield. I taught you to properly throw a spear and now you're more accurate than many Targanchi men. But your place, Rinka, by custom and tradition, is first making a home for a warrior husband, and only then, fighting by his side."

Hrothgar offered a reassuring smile. "Put your mind at ease, girl. You have nothing to be afraid of —"

"Rinka!" Gelda commanded from the hearth. "I'm not going to tell you again. Come help me with your sisters."

"— Except maybe Gelda," Hrothgar said with a wink. "Now, go and help her. Let me worry about the Romans and our politics. You can make our ancestors proud by one day being a good wife and mother."

Rinka had heard those words as long as she could remember. Though she didn't like them, it wasn't her place to argue. Returning toward the hearth, she passed Munin near the opened front door. Gelda had already taken down the flap skins for drying. While passing, Rinka felt the eyes of that large black bird. She stopped and stared at the cage for a moment, waiting for the bird to speak, as Father claimed it could. Munin cocked its head and blinked, but offered no words, Latin, Germanian or otherwise. Still, Rinka felt an odd affinity with the creature. She sensed that old Munin was inside her head, telling her to be brave in the face of uncertainties to come, despite her father's assurances. Remembering the punishing stick, and still not having freshened at the stream, she then hurried along to start the daily chores that never seemed to end.

\* \* \*

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The ritual of Dakken's passing was to be performed at midday, when the summer sun was high in the sky. After the family had eaten, cleaned and dressed, Hrothgar transported them on their horse-drawn cart to the house of their fallen chieftain. Nearly a mile from Rinka's farm, the noble house of Dakken was the largest and wealthiest of the Targanchi tribe. Only Segestes and Segimer of the neighboring Cherusci tribe had more local power and wealth. Dakken's kin had much livestock and a large store of crops in a tunneled earth cellar. While Rinka's surviving grandparents lived with her cousins, aunts and uncles down the trail from her, the oak-post house of Dakken was large enough for fifty kinfolk. To protect their wealth, a barricade of pine timbers with pointed tops formed a ringed wall around their property. Though Rinka had never been inside those fortifications, Father described the house of Dakken as the grandest in the village.

Rinka understood that Gernot, brother of Dakken, was the heir to his authority; he was also Hrothgar's only rival for the selection of the next Targanchi chief. Though Gernot and his heirs were the wealthiest among the tribesmen, Hrothgar's level-headedness and Roman-taught-warrior-skills were highly favored in those dangerous times. Ultimately though, it would be up to the council of elders, advised by high-priestess Azrika, to decide who would represent them to Caesar.

A loose procession of carts for the wealthy, and on foot for the rest, moved along the wooded trail leading to the clearing where the sacred altar to their ancestors was erected. As Hrothgar drove the family down the narrow trail, he and Gelda chatted while the twins played with hand-carved dolls. Rinka was in her own world, thinking about her nightmare and the surrounding forest through which she'd fled from the ghostly raiders — she believed those woods were haunted — haunted by the ancestors of her body, those of her father, and the generations of deceased relatives of everyone in their small village near the river.

Their small river, the Targa, was named after her small tribe, Targanchi, and wandered into the Weser River a day's journey to the southwest, on the border of Roman occupied Germania. The

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Targanchi were close kin to the larger, more powerful tribe, the Cherusci. And their nobles had the most influence with Rome. In their part of the Germanic world, the forests were thick with towering pines and ageless oaks. Where the rugged hills were not obstacles, swamps and boggy morasses hindered the progress of the traveler. It was a harsh land, breeding a hearty stock of the Low Germanic, Old Saxon tribesmen.

Nature and the surrounding natural world was a pervasive force in the lives of those barbarians, as their Roman overlords referred to them. Historians disagree over the origin of the word barbarian, either having evolved from the *bar-bar* sounds of foreign speech, or more likely, reflecting the Greek word *barbaros*, meaning, *anyone not Greek*. In spite of the etymological questions, all civilizations, including those of the barbarians, ultimately stem from specific beliefs. While the Romans had a pantheon of Gods not far removed from that of the Greeks, the pagan Germanics identified more closely with nature and the Old Gods of the North. Stone temples and hallowed halls were not seen as places to worship the Germanic ancestral spirit, but were in essence oppressive to the dead. For the Targanchi, a simple stone altar was sufficient for worship and sacrifice.

Where the Romans built great stone structures to separate themselves from the elements, the Germanic people sought to be one with nature. The Targanchi believed the spirits of their ancestors dwelled in the forests, especially the mighty trees that reached up from the soil and scratched the cobalt sky. The roots would suckle from the fertile ground and soak up the water, the earth, and the ashes of the deceased. Using select woods for a funeral pyre, a lifeless Targanchi body would be placed upon wood-bundles to be burned. The ashes would then be entombed, and in time, that transformed body of a dead tribesman would become part of the brown wooden trunks, prickly green needles and colorful broad leaves. The spirit would travel onto the afterlife, but using a tree as an embodiment, would often return to keep a watchful eye on the living. So said the high-priestess of their realm, and Azrika knew everything about the natural world of

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which they all were an integral part. Rinka wondered how many spirits were presently watching over her where she stood.

Nearly all of the five-hundred people from Rinka's small village had gathered there in the wooded clearing, downstream from their huts and hearths. Dakken, the elder village chieftain had passed from the living two sunrises before and was to be cremated upon the ground of that sacred place they traveled to by procession. It was the place where every dead villager had departed that world to the next for as long as anyone could remember. From there, the deceased would embark on a long journey to find their station in the afterlife.

Rinka watched as a handful of village men lifted Dakken from an ox cart and then placed him on the wood bundles that were stacked before the gray stone slab of the high-priestesses' altar. The old man was gray in color like the rocks themselves. Because of his high station in the village, he was wrapped in bearskin to keep him warm, and his wrinkled flesh had been anointed with juniper, elderberries and birch resin. His face was uncovered, showing his long white hair and beard, and a lifetime of battle scars. He possessed an iron spear, or *framea*, the weapon of choice for the Germanics, and his brightly colored leather shield lay squarely over his chest. A leather bag at his waist was filled with barley grain, a leather beer pouch, and smoked stag meat, all meant to be consumed along the way. For the most part, the Germanics were pragmatic people and chose not to needlessly burn great amounts of wealth with the dead, though on occasion, a deceased warrior's body would be burned with that of his favorite horse. But times were difficult and every animal was needed, as Tiberius, Caesar Augustus' ruthless but skilled general, had for years, levied high taxes on their Germanic subjects in the way of tribute and to pay for the Roman administration of the frontier.

Rinka looked down at her skin, toned and firm upon her arm. By contrast, Dakken's body was without taut muscle. He had been sickly and feeble for many full moons before passing. Out of honor and respect, he was still called chieftain, but power had already devolved to other warriors in the Targanchi tribe, including

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Rinka's father. Long before the season Rinka was born from her mother's womb, Dakken had lived as a strong fighter, a skillful hunter and a leader of men in the village. In the afterlife, he would walk that path with the same able body of his youth, unencumbered by aging and how mortal time had left him.

Like Dakken had in his youth, Hrothgar now personified the Germanic tribal warrior. He was rugged like a tree trunk, with steel-blue eye color of a polished sword. He had red hair and a reddish beard that made it look like his face was casting out flaming arrows. Over Dakken's cloak, he wore the tanned skin of a bear he had fallen. It was a mighty beast, larger than any seen by his fellow tribesmen before or after. Rinka and her family looked on as Hrothgar stood at the altar helping arrange Dakken in the proper funerary position; his head facing east to the rising sun, and feet pointed west to the direction of the many life steps already taken.

Near Hrothgar was Joth, the young villager of her dream who had recently come to manhood. During the last tribal gathering, he had successfully danced the blades and displayed his skill and courage without being cut. In that bizarre ritual of sport, naked youths moved between swords and lances that could easily slash and kill them. Like many of the Targanchi, Joth was tall and lean with red-brown hair and blue eyes, and perhaps the most handsome among them. It was no coincidence that those Germanic people appeared so similar. There had been little ethnic mixing over the centuries, leaving their features unique and distinct.

Though Joth had teased Rinka in their youth, as he matured, he sought the favor of Hrothgar by being his follower and thus treated her with greater respect. As a custom with the Germanics, the young men of the tribe often served powerful counselors like Hrothgar, and in return, those youths were trained, armed and given the respect of manhood. Since maturing herself, Rinka had a whole new perspective on Joth, one that she felt in strange, internal places. The Germanics, however, traditionally married for station and not for romance. Though she couldn't understand why, Rinka secretly dreamed of Joth in some romantic way, as she had the

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night before. In the waking hours, she chased those dreams away, knowing they were improper; plus, she thought Joth was a bit arrogant.

Just as the clouds had soaked them that morning, the sky was quickly turning gray above the ceremony; it was a powerful shade of gray that also resembled the stone altar and hue of Dakken's flesh. A stiff breeze brought momentary relief to the moist heat of the day, while suddenly a lightning bolt illuminated the densely humid summer air. Rinka had a flashback to her nightmare, but once again she tried not to think about that malevolent horseman.

Hrothgar returned to his family as the priest performed a last ritual to the god Odin in hopes that Dakken would be received in the great hall of Valhalla, to be feasted by Freyja, Odin's wife. Across from the family of Hrothgar, were Dakken's brother Wandal and the extended family that resided with him. Wandal was tall like Hrothgar, but had darker features and was overweight from food, drink and complacency. With much of the tribe struggling after a few bad harvests, Wandal and his eldest son, Odalric, looked as though having to leave the barley beer cask and fresh stag shanks for Dakken's ritual was inconvenient. Behind them, Wandal's subservient womenfolk watched without words.

A simultaneous crack of thunder prompted Hrothgar to say, "Thor is paying his respects to our fallen chieftain."

As the women of the tribe customarily bewailed his passing, and as several priestly torches ignited the pyre, in silence, the stoic men reflected upon Dakken's greatness. He had earned the respect and trust of the Romans, and collectively they hoped the next chief would be able to do so as well.

The rain pelted the growing flames, sounding as if the twigs were black water snakes hissing in a twisted nest. Rinka thought of the serpent whip she saw in her nightmare. The dry wood fiber had been soaked with petroleum that gurgled up naturally from the earth. The flames quickly grew to an inferno sending a thick black funnel of smoke into the crying sky. Aside from the scent of hardwood, Dakken's flesh soon began to cook; it filled the air with a familiar smell of roasting animal flesh. None of them cringed or

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backed away from the scent; it was simply a part the natural world in which they were so deeply connected.

“He’s journeying to the sacred place all great warriors go,” Hrothgar said to Rinka while patting her shoulder.

She looked back up at him. “In that form . . . twisted and burned?” she whispered.

“No, Rinka, but young and skilled, like my follower Joth. The fire will carry his transformed body from this world to the next. Dakken is once again ready to hunt and fight as a young man, but with the wisdom and experience already gained in this life.”

“Death is a good thing then?” she replied.

“It’s not good and it’s not bad. It’s a change, like the caterpillar becoming a butterfly. It has the wisdom from its life crawling upon the bark, yet the freedom of its newfound wings. Dakken will feast in Valhalla with the honors earned in this world.”

Rinka understood Hrothgar’s words quite clearly. He was wise and a good father, and despite being a vicious warrior, he was a kind and gentle man. She was sure he would be the next chief of their tribe should the council of elders decide so. Hrothgar already had most of the young warriors of the tribe, like Joth, as followers. His only competition was from Gernot, a noble warrior near Hrothgar’s age and kin of Dakken. But Gernot enticed his followers with bellies of grain instead of wisdom and skill. He was more allegiant to Caesar and felt the influence the empire had on the Germanic people was beneficial. Gernot had been to Rome and thought running water and great public buildings were a true definition of civilization. He even went so far as shaving his face and cutting his hair like a Roman male. His womenfolk wore Roman wigs, gold jewelry, and fine clothing, all the latest fashions purchased at the Roman market near the Rhine winter headquarters, less than three days travel to the west. As was the case with many Germanic tribes, the Targanchi people were deeply divided about how beneficial subservience to Rome actually was.

Rinka watched as Dakken was transformed from a familiar form to a less recognizable one. His hair singed leaving him oddly

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bald. His eyes boiled then shriveled away leaving empty skull sockets. His fingers, once long and pointed, melted into little more than lumpy palms. Soon his ritual tattoos darkened like his roasting flesh and became uniform black skin. Parents didn't try to cover the eyes of their naked children; those wards, with stringy red-gold manes, and blue eyes like the cobalt in their iron, were otherwise hairless and without shame; they were not sheltered and deceived about the true nature of life.

As the raindrops trailed from her shoulder onto her nearly exposed breast, Rinka adjusted the linen cloak she wore, leaving her arms and legs bare. She could feel the weight of the water loosen the thorn that held the garment closed. The men had similar dress, except many of them wore animal skins over their stitched cloaks. The women wrapped themselves in extra linens embroidered with purple thread. Otherwise, the Targanchi, like their Germanic tribal neighbors northeast of the Rhine, wore little else. Fashion for them was not prioritized like the sophisticated tunics and togas worn by the Romans.

At sixteen years on the Julian calendar, Rinka was of marrying age, and frequently lived that day in her dreams. Without a husband, she stood near Gelda, Ada and Lorelei, feeling like a child herself. Rinka was tall for a young woman, and her muscular build had prompted other children to tease her, calling her a boy. However, she was also strong and the teasing didn't last when she matched the combat skills of those very boys who taunted her. She strongly resembled her father, showing little similarity to Gelda, Ada and Lorelei. This left her feeling awkward, compounded by the fact that she was already taller than her mother, though several inches shy of her Father's height.

Hrothgar had trained Rinka in the art of war and the language of Rome, perhaps out of his desire for a male heir, one Gelda had not yet provided. He was a patient teacher and like the other followers he instructed, Rinka had learned well. Gelda however saw little need for education in Rinka's future role as wife and mother. A Germanic woman's place was in the home at the hearth.

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She was to share in the danger of battle by being near to and defended by the fighting men, not to take up spear and shield.

As Dakken was consumed by flames, Rinka watched quietly, as did the men, and she felt no inclination to wail. While the smoke funnel grew, carrying with it the flesh and spirit of Dakken, more thunder was heard, except these were not bolts cast down from Thor. The noise caused the Targanchi crowd to look in that direction. Moments later, the explanation for the violent pounding became known to them.

“It’s a Roman frontier squadron,” Hrothgar calmly stated, as if their overlords were simply paying their respects to Dakken.

His words, however, were followed by gasps and grunts, none of which were welcoming. Rinka glanced over at Gernot where he was standing with his followers and womenfolk near the altar. Oddly, he appeared eager for the arrival. When Rinka’s eyes met Gernot’s, he looked away sharply and then put on a more stoic façade.

At the same moment, Rinka saw a Roman commander and his men approaching on cavalry mounts. They were coming from the northeast, having followed the trail that led from one of the summer garrisons near the Weser and Ems rivers, through the Cherusci realm to Targanchi. At a gallop, those heavy horses weighed down by armored Roman soldiers, literally shook the earth they crossed. The riders were not auxiliaries, but Romans, battle-hardened from service in the constant border warfare led by Tiberius, and were the pride of Augustus and the Empire. Rinka felt the desire to move away from the riders, but thought of her proud Germanic heritage and stood firm. However, both of her sisters darted behind Gelda’s legs, hiding their faces inside her cloak.

The patrolling squadron of nearly fifty horsemen came into view. Seeing the grandeur of those men and their mounts, Rinka felt tightness in her breathing. The sensation was that of the utmost fear and resentment. But also respect as one had to be impressed, as the supermen in crimson and gold appeared in complete contrast to the dingy and animal skinned Targanchi. Some wore round

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cavalry masks, ornate bronze disks with decorative faces hammered into the metal, and slots cut for the eyes, nose and mouth. Though used for training and parade purposes, the masks also were meant to instill fear in the local population at the hands of faceless men.

The commander abruptly stopped his ghostly white horse causing the beast to rear up, exposing its powerful underside. After the animal settled, the man held up his leather-clad hand. Behind him, the standard bearer waived the cavalry unit banner, prompting the rest of the squadron to assemble in the wooded opening behind their leader. One rider among them was not Roman; the man had Germanic features and wore a blended dress of native skins with a Roman tunic. Rinka knew his name to be Tolki, and his pointed features reminded one of a possum or a mole — he was officially an interpreter for the Romans and nobles, yet was known to be an informer as well — the most appropriate animal comparative would be that of a vicious rat.

The commander trotted his horse toward the burning funeral pyre and then raised his nose as though taking offense to the scent. He possessed the air of a deity among sub-humans; in reality he was the head of the occupational force's secret police and the Roman policy enforcer, a far from godlike role.

In Latin he proclaimed, "I am General Xanicus, recently sent here from Rome with the banners of Caesar Augustus, and protector of Governor Varus and his tax collectors. Who is this dead man among you?"

Tolki translated the words into Germanian. Hrothgar, versed in Latin, stepped forward and responded: "It is Dakken of Targanchi, our noble village chieftain and friend of Tiberius. As humble servants to the emperor and Rome, we welcome you to our village, General."

Xanicus appeared offended to hear his native tongue spoken among such filthy barbarians. He looked over at Tolki and the little man only shrugged.

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“And who are you and how is it you speak the language of Rome?” Xanicus asked indignantly; there was nothing about the general’s demeanor that could be found pleasant or civil.

“I am Hrothgar of Targanchi. I served with Caesar’s auxiliary units in the tribal wars only four years past. Now, I am allied with Armin of Cherusci; to the legions he is known Arminius, the decorated Roman knight and leader of our auxiliaries,” he replied respectfully. “Our elders are soon to name chief Dakken’s successor, until then, I can speak for my kinfolk.”

After Hrothgar spoke the words, once more, Xanicus turned to Tolki. “Arminius is a Cherusci noble and Roman citizen,” the little man said to Xanicus in confidence. “He holds the rank of the Equestrian Order. The deceased Targanchi chief Dakken also appeared before the court of Tiberius before the great Governor Varus arrived nearly two years ago.”

“I may be new to these lands, but I know of *the great* Arminius,” Xanicus quietly grunted. His tone was resentful, bordering envious. “As for this corpse, who can tell what filthy chieftain from the next?”

Not to be outdone, Gernot also stepped forward to address the Roman. “We are yet to decide on our new tribal chief, great General.” His words were spoken in accented Latin.

“And who may you be?”

“I am Gernot, and as a member of the house of Dakken, I would also like to welcome you to our humble village.”

Xanicus did not look pleased by the friendly regards; it appeared as though he was actually eager for some kind of confrontation, or a display of Roman might. He did not directly comment about Arminius, Dakken, or the two men speaking Latin. Instead, he insisted: “This village is behind in its tribute to Rome and your emperor, Caesar Augustus.” Tolki repeated the words in Germanic for the rest to hear.

A murmur traveled through the group of villagers massed around the crackling fire. Azrika and her fellow prophets at the altar, dressed in the skins of wolves and other predatory beasts, lowered their heads in shame. With Xanicus’ words came another

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flash of lightning and crack of thunder. It was as if the Old North Gods were unhappy with the words and the fact that their people were so subservient.

Hrothgar stepped closer to the general. He approached with his head respectfully lowered and his hands at his side. “Great Xanicus, the wise and just, Governor Varus gave his word to Dakken and the people of this village that since our grain harvest of last year had blight, we would have a full season to recover. Our children are hungry and we feed them as best we can, but we have little left for tribute.”

Xanicus appeared unreceptive to the plea, and Gernot dared no further words. The general scanned the watchful eyes of the villagers then prompted his horse closer to the sacred altar and the raging fire before it. “Quinctilius Varus is a patient man but his patience wears thin. I now speak for *him* and *he* answers to Rome. Whatever *alleged* promises he made to the man who burns like wild game, matter not; your tribute is due.” The Romans did not cremate their honored dead during this time period; they considered it disrespectful. The general’s impertinent tone seemed to reflect that sentiment.

Once again, a rumble of concerned murmurs was heard over the flames and drizzling rain. The villagers exchanged uneasy glances while Xanicus recited his demands: “If full payment of coin or grain tribute is not made when I return with my men on the morrow, your beasts of burden will be collected. And if your nags are not valuable enough, I will take your children as slaves to Rome.”

His dictates, and the translation of them delivered by Tolki, were followed by fearful cries from the women and angry grunts from the men.

“Please, General Xanicus,” Hrothgar implored in Latin, “if you and Quinctilius Varus could find it in your hearts to forgive our debts this year, as Tiberius had when he justly governed this realm, upon harvest next, we will more than make up the difference. Certainly, if generous hearts do not guide brave Romans, the promise of future profits should.”

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Listening closely to every word, Rinka understood her father's Latin. Hrothgar's sensible plea and respectful tone seemed to irritate Xanicus. He didn't have a reasonable argument for demanding tribute after a bad year, instead of simply seeking more for Caesar the next. The general pressed his lips together tightly and squinted. Raindrops ran down from his golden helmet and collected on his smoothly shaven chin under the leather strap. His eyes were brown and intense with loathing. His olive complexion was red with anger. He appeared frustrated, as if waiting for any reason to make a show of force.

Xanicus yanked on one of the reins prompting his white mare closer to the flames. When the horse hesitated, Xanicus jammed a razor sharp spur into the animal's soft underside, causing it to rear up wildly. Hrothgar stepped closer to help the general get his horse under control. The mare violently reared away from the raised hands of the Germanic, sending Xanicus tumbling from his saddle. The Roman landed face down in the filthy Targanchi mud, soaking his crimson cape and tarnishing his golden armor.

Several of the Roman cavalymen dismounted and rushed to their superior's aid, while at the same time, a collective gasp traveled through the mouths and ears of the watching villagers. Then, a complete silence befell them as Xanicus struggled to his feet. Not even the raindrops, it seemed, could be heard as the general secured his footing then jammed his right hand on his short-sword handle. In a fit of rage, he pulled the steel weapon from its leather sheath, prompting all those within his wielding radius, Germanic and Roman alike, to step back. Hrothgar, however, did not move. The unassuming spokesperson for the Targanchi remained there, in front of the general, with his head lowered respectfully and his hands hanging at his sides.

Rinka watched in fearful awe, as did the others — her father was calmly standing before the infuriated Roman general whose sword was drawn — she wanted to call out to her father and beg him to back away. It was obvious to everyone watching that Hrothgar was only trying to help General Xanicus, but instead, he spooked the mare further. That fact did not seem to matter to the

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general, and his rage was not dissipating, but in fact, growing with intensity. Even Tolki, the vile Germanic informant, seemed to be unsettled by the degree of unchecked anger his superior was displaying.

Again Rinka wanted to call to her brave father as Xanicus began raising the sword. Not only had he been embarrassed by the fall, but he had also drawn his weapon. Putting the blade away unstained would only perpetuate his humiliation. Would he appear rash in judgment, or worse, afraid to use it?

His face tensed and his mouth formed an angry, pressed frown as he arched the blade above his head. Rinka could not believe her eyes. It was as though the Gods were playing a trick on her and had slowed the speed of events to a mere trickle of time, like the slow river in a summer drought. The general let out a grunt, then with all his weight, leveled a downward thrust.

It was only at that precise moment that Rinka felt the words leave her aching stomach, projecting from her mouth: "No, Father, no!"

In spite of her call, he did not move away nor flinch, but instead looked up ever so slightly. He found her eyes directly and met them without a hint of fear, but only of fondness. And in the most horrific moment of her young life, she watched that Roman short sword swing through her father's neck without slowing, as though the flesh was as soft as goat's cheese. The sound was a dull thump, followed by the splash of the head falling into the mud. From the severed neck, blood sprayed until the body became dead weight and fell to the ground.

Rinka felt as though she were literally frozen where she stood, like the whitish-blue ice on the river's edge in the dead of winter. Her eyes followed Hrothgar's head to the ground. Even more grotesque than the beheading itself, was the fact that his lips and eyes appeared to be twitching and moving, as though trying to communicate. Finally, blood stopped surging from the torso and the head became perfectly still. And at the same moment, gentle raindrops sprinkled down upon the scene, like tears from the North Gods.

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The Targanchi men, never without their broadswords, framea spears, and shields, raised their weapons while all the Roman soldiers responded with their arms. Joth sprang forward with his framea blade leading the way, only to be stopped by older, more reserved tribesmen. Though Joth was renowned for his ability to throw, he was at a great disadvantage to the high-saddled horsemen. None of the other Targanchi attempted an advance, but instead beat the iron of their blades against painted shield leather. Shocked and bewildered, the women and children of the tribe, including Rinka, could only look on with horror, confusion and dismay.

“No, this is not the way!” Gernot demanded of his people. Seemingly out of respect for Gernot’s leadership, the furious tribesmen refrained from charging the Romans.

Keeping his sword drawn but backing away from the pounding shields of the Targanchi men, Xanicus said, “An assault against a Roman officer is an assault against Caesar Augustus!”

Tolki repeated the words for the Targanchi as the general was helped to his horse by one of the dismounted soldiers. Had the tribe not been a small one, and had the men not already been weakened by hunger and outmatched by the cavalymen, they would most likely have ignored Gernot, and attacked the Romans. However, they were slowly becoming accustomed to their oppression, and whenever there had been Germanic uprisings in the past, Rome’s reprisals were swift and total. Often entire villages would be leveled, and those among the inhabitants not killed outright, were sold off in the lucrative slave trade.

Rinka seized her mother’s trembling hand as the woman cried in anguish. Both of her sisters still had their heads hidden from sight and were fortunate to not have witnessed the brutality of their father’s slaying. Near them, several of her extended family members, some who Hrothgar had feuded with, looked on with horror, but offered only tears with no words of protest. Rinka on the other hand, wanted to cry like Gelda, but she fought back the tears — she was not about to give the satisfaction to the Roman

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brutes — even the mounted soldiers appeared surprised by their squadron commander's rash action, but none would dare criticize.

Settling into his saddle unchallenged, Xanicus wiped Hrothgar's blood from his sword. Wrapping his reins firmly in his bloodstained leather palms, he barked his orders directly to Gernot: "I will be back on the morrow for Caesar's tribute, Gernot of Dakken, or Targanchi, or whatever tribe you now lead. Upon my return, I shall go from house to hut collecting Caesar's tribute, and any other insurrectionists will also find themselves without a head." His words were spitefully mocking, repeated by Tolki, and left a rancid taste in the mouths of the beleaguered Targanchi who were virtually powerless to act.

The cavalry squadron assembled in twos and trotted away from the stone altar down the trail with Xanicus leading them. The last few horses disappeared from sight, leaving only deep prints in the black mud. The men who had saved Joth from likely losing his life finally released him. Rinka's eyes followed him as he sprinted to the body of his fallen leader. "We have to do something!" Joth shouted.

His words were sporadically repeated, yet the sound of the dogs throughout the village quickly reminded them of the Roman's departure and promised return.

Gernot eyed the young follower of his rival Hrothgar with disdain. "You know nothing, boy. Lucky your actions didn't cost you your head, or the head of others," he insisted.

There was a subtle, though collective agreement among many of them to accept the slaying. Rinka wanted to scream out in protest. She couldn't understand why they all weren't enraged by her father's murder. She wanted someone to do something, but Joth was the only one who spoke out. She studied all the tribal faces. Hrothgar's other young followers lowered their heads in shame. Joth had been the only one among them to be brave, or perhaps rash enough to demand action.

Joth appeared to be seething with anger; his face was blood-red and his lips were pressed into a hateful pucker. "The Romans led by this demon Xanicus will be back on the morrow to take

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everything we have. I say we ambush them on the trail into Targanchi!" he demanded. "What have we to lose other than our livelihoods and maybe our freedom? We will have our honor intact."

"And what about when Caesar learns of this revolt?" Gernot replied. "He will dispatch an entire legion to kill or enslave every man, woman and child in this tribe."

"Then we flee, north of the frontier," Joth replied, pointing.

Rinka couldn't believe he was speaking such brave and bold words. She was reminded of Hrothgar, when he was occasionally, he two could angered to the point of frenzy in the pursuit of a just cause. Joth appeared to be exhibiting the same noble, yet sometimes rash, qualities.

"And leave the sacred lands of your Targanchi ancestors?" Gernot asked rhetorically. "Obviously, the man you followed did not train you to think with the clarity of a warrior but with the rashness of a barbarian."

With his spear still drawn, Joth stepped closer to Gernot. "Hrothgar was no barbarian," he insisted.

Rinka was shocked by the manly tone of this young warrior in the face of an elder. For a moment she was actually distracted from the horrific sadness of her father's slaying and her mother's weeping.

Seemingly empowered by the crowd's failure to support Joth, Gernot acted in a way that shocked everyone. He walked over to the putrid, muddy and bloody body of Hrothgar. By the long red-gold braids, he lifted the head of the slain, and displayed it to the tribe. "His ways were not Roman," Gernot commanded. "His were the old ways — the ways that are gone forever — Jupiter is our God now, as is Augustus, a God among men. No mortal can challenge his power, or . . . the power of Rome."

Like he was possessed by angry demons and shamed by the utter disrespect for Hrothgar in front of his suffering kin, Joth marched over to Gernot and snatched the head from his hands. "I do challenge the power of Rome!" he demanded. "I will not stand by like you, Gernot, and watch the destruction of my people."

## Peter Scott Harmyk

Hrothgar had chosen the bravest youth among them, Rinka thought, having watched Joth stand-up to such a powerful elder. For that moment, she finally felt a slight measure of comfort and of pride.

“Then take the head of your barbarian leader into the woods with you when you go, Joth. Your insidious words and reckless anger are not welcomed here.”

Rinka immediately understood what Gernot was referring to, and by Joth’s surprised reaction, he must have as well. Gernot meant to banish the young warrior from the tribe. It was a radical action only the tribal council of elders could take, and in the most dire of circumstances. Joth’s kinfolk, also standing among the crowd, reacted to the words with spears upon shields and jeers from the women; however, the rest of the tribesmen failed to join in their sentiment.

With spear and shield in hand Joth took one step closer to Gernot so that he was nearly face to face with the Roman sympathizer. “I know your words alone mean nothing . . . not until the tribal elders speak. But if staying with this tribe means doing so in the face of brutal dishonor, better I die with my shield glistening with Roman blood, than to die like a whimpering dog.”

In one final display, Joth knelt down at the corpse, removed the Roman ring from Hrothgar’s finger then wiped clean the dirt and blood. He walked over to Rinka, and without saying a word, took her limp arm and placed the ring in her palm, closing it firmly.

Joth’s male kin appeared proud, but saddened, while the womenfolk only cried in sorrow. Rinka felt a tear roll down her cheek, although she stoically fought her emotions. Joth went to his family cart where his silvery-colored horse had been tied. He mounted the saddle with an athletic leap while keeping his shield at his side. With utter contempt, as the Romans who had departed shortly before, he bolted away from the collection of stunned mourners, and then disappeared into the hazy-gray drizzle of that tragically-unforgivable afternoon.