SWORD of the WAR GOD

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TIM HODKINSON

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Head of Zeus Ltd
First Floor East
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For the Rhinemaidens:
Trudy, Emily, Clara and Alice.

Prologue

AD 422

Kingdom of Asaland, in southern Scythia

THE GABLE WALL was burning. Flames licked its stout timbers as thick grey smoke roiled up into the thatched roof above.

The king's hall was aflame. The battle was lost. The kingdom had fallen.

There was a mighty crack, then the great double doors of the hall crashed open, smashed in by the power of a Hun battering ram. Hun warriors poured in, their mail shirts and iron helmets glinting in the firelight.

Twelve Aesir warriors formed a line across the centre of the hall, their round shields locked together to form a wall. Each shield bore their sacred symbol, an angular knot of three interlinked triangles. Their angry eyes glared at the Huns from behind the iron visors of their helmets. Their spears were levelled and ready for battle.

Standing before them was their king. He was taller than everyone else in the hall. His long iron-grey hair fell around his shoulders and his beard cascaded down the glinting iron mail that covered his chest. Like his warriors, his helm was visored but only one eye – his left – glowered from behind the face guard. A bloodied bandage covered his right eye. The king's sword was sheathed at his waist, his shield was slung across his back and he stood with arms folded across his chest.

At the sight of the waiting Aesir the Huns rushing into the hall paused, reluctant to charge further despite their superior

numbers. For a few moments the two enemy sides regarded each other in silence, the only sound the crackling of the flames that licked the timbers above. Lumps of burning thatch began to drop down from the roof.

A Hun warlord shoved his way into the hall through the throng that clogged the broken door. He was Uldin, cousin of the Hun King and the commander of the victorious army. Despite his rank, he was dressed the same way as his men, in leather and iron. His higher status was shown by the gold rings that wrapped his arms and the necklaces that decorated his neck.

'What are you cowards doing?' Uldin harangued his men. 'They are beaten. Finish them!'

By Uldin's side was a young Hun nobleman. He had long black hair and keen eyes that watched everything with a cold, hungry gaze that at times unnerved even his closest companions.

'Is that you, Uldin?' the king of the Aesir said. 'And is that little Attila beside you? One of Mundzuk's sons? Is King Oktar too scared to come here himself and instead sends his lapdogs?'

'There are enough of us to deal with what few warriors you have left,' Uldin said, his lip curling into a sneer.

'But it seems they're too frightened to attack us,' the king of the Aesir said with a provoking smile. 'Don't you know the first rule of leadership? Don't ask anyone to do what you are not prepared to do yourself.'

Uldin gave a derisive snort. His sword in his right hand and his left thumb shoved into his belt, the Hun commander swaggered out in front of his men, approaching the line of Aesir shields.

'You think I am scared of you?' he said. 'You're finished, old man. Your pathetic little kingdom has been a thorn in my people's eye for too long. You've resisted King Charaton, then King Oktar. Now it is I, Uldin, and my warriors who have brought you at last to your knees.'

'Through the treachery of one of my nobles!' the king of the

Aesir said through gritted teeth. 'Otherwise you would have failed like all the rest.'

'Regardless of how you came to it, defeat is now your lot,' Uldin said. 'Why continue to fight? Surely you know it's hopeless. You fought well. There is no shame in doing what so many other nations have done already. Submit now to King Oktar. Become part of his realm.'

'And live like slaves for the rest of our lives? Never!'

The king of the Aesir's voice thundered around the burning hall as he swept his sword from the sheath at his waist. The slightly curved blade flashed like lightning as it reflected the flames. An audible gasp ran through the watching Huns.

They all knew the mighty reputation of that sword.

'Just hand over the sword and surrender,' Uldin said. 'Save your life and those of your men.'

'Surely you know the legend of this sword, Uldin?' the king of the Aesir said. 'If it is drawn it must taste blood.'

'So that is your answer?' Uldin said, raising his own sword. 'Very well. King Oktar will reward me with my weight in gold when I present your severed head to him.'

Uldin rushed forward, screaming a wild battle cry. Emboldened by their leader, the Huns charged after him. Uldin swept his sword at the king of the Aesir, who countered the blow with his own sword. The two blades met in a clang of metal on metal that resounded around the hall.

With astonishing speed, the Aesir king lunged forwards, driving the point for his sword into Uldin's right shoulder. It split the Hun's armour as if it were wool and plunged deep into the flesh beneath. Uldin cried out, as much in surprise as in pain. The tendons of his right arm severed, the limb went slack and Uldin's sword clattered to the ground.

The king of the Aesir pulled his sword back. Then with a mighty sweep he severed Uldin's head from his shoulders. It tumbled to the ground, his helmet making a dull clang as it hit the tiles that decorated the floor of the hall.

With a great roar the Aesir warriors charged forwards. The Huns saw the hate in their eyes and knew they had entered the strange fighting trance those warriors were famous for. Once in it they seemed to feel neither pain nor pity. It was a kind of war madness their king inspired, and each warrior somehow took on the strength of ten men and killed without mercy.

The interior of the burning hall dissolved into battle chaos as shields clattered against shields and weapons sang the bloodthirsty chant of steel on steel.

Then came a great groaning sound that drowned out even the din of battle. Attila looked up and saw that the burning roof was collapsing. He stumbled backwards, shoving fighters out of his way as the great timbers began to fall.

Now aware of the danger, the others began to run as well, though the crush of men in the hall meant it was impossible to move fast or far enough to get away. Attila found himself flung to the floor as men fell over others in their desperate attempts to escape. Someone landed on him and all went dark.

With a deafening crash and a blast of scalding hot air the roof timbers crashed to the floor, spreading burning, splintered wood and smouldering thatch in all directions.

Then relative silence descended. The ring of battle was gone and all that could be heard was the crackling of flames and the groans of the dying.

Attila shoved aside the man who lay on top of him and scrambled to his feet. The man was a Hun, but he was dead, his head smashed in by a block of falling timber. Had the other man not fallen on top of him it would have been Attila's skull that block had stoved in.

He looked around at the scene of chaos and destruction. Most of the roof had caved in. There were burning and splintered beams scattered everywhere, burying friend and foe alike. It seemed very few others had survived, and those few were in a terrible state.

Attila's eyes widened as he spotted something on the floor a few paces away. Half covered by shattered wood from the roof lay the great sword the king of the Aesir had borne. It must have been knocked from his grasp as the roof collapsed. A few paces away was the king's body, part of the beam that had felled him lying across his back.

With trembling fingers Attila reached past the burning wood and pulled the sword clear.

Holding it before him, he watched in fascination as the reflections of the flames around him danced along the blade. He felt he could sense the strange power the sword bore within it. It was like it was calling to him, and to *him* specifically, a call that spoke in silence to something that lay deep in his heart.

Attila smiled, continuing to look at the sword for long moments.

'What's that you've got there?'

A familiar voice broke his reverie. Looking around, his face fell into a scowl as he saw Bleda, his older, overbearing brother, had entered the hall through the shattered entrance.

'It's the Sword of the War God, brother,' Attila said. 'And it has chosen to fall into my hands.'

Bleda raised an eyebrow. He held out his hand.

'Well, you'd better give that to me,' he said in a demanding tone. 'It belongs to King Oktar and we must now return it. What of the king of the Aesir? Oktar will reward us greatly when we give him that one's head.'

Attila hesitated for a moment, his eyes flitting back to the beauty of the sword, then with a sigh he obeyed his elder brother and passed the sword to him. He drew his knife and turned to begin the unpleasant task of decapitating the king of the Aesir's corpse.

Attila stopped. He blinked, unable to believe what his eyes told him.

The body was gone.

Part I

Götterdämmerung

Was mich nicht umbringt, macht mich stärker
What does not kill me makes me stronger

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Götzen-Dämmerung*

CHAPTER ONE

AD 437

Vorbetomagus, City of the Burgundars, beside the river Rhine

DRUMS BEAT IN the depths of the forest. Hagan could hear their sound drifting through the night air like the distant hammer of apprehensive hearts, hearts very much like his own.

He gripped his spear, his knuckles showing white in the gloom as he listened to the thumping drums. The chief warriors of his folk – the heroes, champions and noblemen of the Burgundar tribe – were out there somewhere in the great forest that surrounded the city. Out there, away from the gaze of the uninitiated, they were performing the secret war rituals as they and their forefathers had done on the eve of battle since time immemorial.

The priests condemned such practices as apostate returns to paganism but they still happened. Hagan had lived through nine winters when his people had embraced the faith of Christ and forsaken their old gods. Six more winters had passed since but Hagan still knew the names of the old gods and sometimes, in times of worry or fear – times like now – he would whisper the name of Tiwass or Ingwass, just in case they still listened and might grant him the courage or luck he needed.

He would need both when the sun rose. When the morning came Hagan would fight in his first battle.

Tonight, he had to wait on the edge of the forest, holding his father's cloak and bag. Godegisil was now out in the

woods with the other Burgundar warriors. The rituals they performed steeled their hearts for the slaughter and terror of the impending battle and would also – with luck and the blessing of the old gods – bring victory. Hagan could only wait for them to return. This was not because he was too young. Initiation as a warrior only came after a Burgundar had fought in a battle, and, more importantly, made his first kill. Even then only the bravest were chosen.

Hagan rubbed the stubble at the back of his shaved head. When he had killed a man he would be allowed to let his hair grow; long hair marked out the warriors from the priests, the farmers, and the rest of the ordinary folk and the slaves. Hagan longed for that day, when he would go into the woods alongside his father and undertake the initiation ritual. He would become a Burgundar warrior. That day would be the proudest of his life and, he hoped, his father's.

That though was a dream for the future. Hagan's wildest ambition at the moment was just to survive to see the next sun set.

Hagan adored his father. The big man was a lord of the Dagelung clan, one of the five great kindreds of the Burgundars. He was not incredibly wealthy like some of the other nobles but what he lacked in gold he made up for in skill, courage and aggression. Godegisil was the chief of the Burgundar champions. The next morning he would lead the Burgundar War Horde onto the battlefield and bring honour to him and glory to all their folk.

To Hagan, who was still growing to his full potential, his father was as big as one of the great oak trees in the forest and just as stout. Others thought Godegisil stern, war-mad, even terrifying, but Hagan and his little brother Raknar saw another side to him at home. For someone who had killed so many men, Godegisil was always kind and encouraging to his own family, and he protected them with even more ferocity than he protected the whole tribe.

Of the very few sources of pride in Hagan's life, this was the greatest. All his friends were more wealthy, more good-looking, or more talented – in swimming, feats of strength or fighting. Hagan was a good hunter and a passable fighter but that was about it. Yet the fact that it was his father who led the war horde, who bore the very honour of the tribe on his shoulders, meant Hagan could hold his head up among his peers. He knew some of his friends – friends like the son and daughter of the king – would not seek his company if his father was not such a great man.

Hagan inhaled a deep breath of the warm summer night air, smelling the sap of the trees and the scent of the green leaves that covered their branches. Life had returned to the world after winter. It was hard to think that Death also lurked in the forest, waiting to end the lives of so many in the morning.

Out there in the darkness were the enemy too: the Romans. The Burgundars had caught nine Roman scouts that morning – a very propitious number – and their severed heads now sat on top of spikes outside the gates of the Burgundar's city, Vorbetomagus.

The Romans had pitched a great camp in the forest which blazed with light. Its glow reached up through the trees into the sky as if the sun that usually set beyond the horizon had settled that night amid the forest instead. The wind carried the distant sound of voices shouting orders in their foreign tongue, as well as the sound of an army preparing for war: the hammering of rivets into armour, the scraping of blades on sharpening stones and blasts on their signalling horns.

Through it all came the relentless thump of the Burgundar drums. The Romans would hear them too and would know they meant death. As the night drew on, Hagan began to feel the cold. He huddled inside his cloak as he sat against a tree trunk. There were a few other lads around him, also waiting for fathers, uncles and brothers. Though none of them would admit it, Hagan had no doubt their silence was due to their

churning stomachs and fluttering hearts at the thought of the battle to come. He felt exactly the same.

The moon rose high in the sky, bathing the canopy of trees in silver light. It was so bright it cast shadows on the earth, the tree branches looking like skeletal fingers reaching out, as if Death was already trying to claim what was his.

At long last the drumming slowed, then stopped altogether. The young lads started to become restless, knowing that the older men would soon return. Sure enough, before long figures began to emerge from the shadows beneath the trees.

Had they not seen the men when they entered the forest, Hagan and the others might have been frightened by the sight of the returning warriors. Their chests were bare and their bodies were smeared with black paint. Some wore masks made from the heads of wolves or bears, others had their faces painted black, the whites of their eyes standing out in contrast. They carried spears and the blades had likewise been painted black. All wore the pelts of animals around their shoulders. Each warrior bore a large round shield painted with the emblem of whichever of the five Burgundar clans he belonged to: the bear for the Dagelungs, the wolf for the Volsungs, lightning for the Leuhtungs, the Sun Wheel for the Solungs and the eagle for the Nibelungs. Around the edges of the shields magic words were painted in runes, the ancient letters of their folk, not the Roman letters they had started to use along with their new faith in Christ. Most prevalent among them, Hagan saw, was the rune that looked like an arrow pointing up to the sky: the symbol of Tiwass, God of War. These would have to be washed off before the priests came to bless the war horde in the morning.

This was all visible in the light of the moon, whose silver beam somehow made the scene even more eerie. Just what happened during the warrior rite was a secret guarded tighter than the river oysters in the Rhine guarded their pearls. From the sweat that streaked the paint on the men's bodies and faces,

though, Hagan could tell that whatever their ritual entailed, it had required exertion.

Hagan smiled, spotting his father approaching with the others. Godegisil was a head taller than most of the other warriors and as the leader of the Dagelung bear clan, he wore the pelt of a black bear around his shoulders.

The lads got to their feet, each one reuniting with the male relative he had been waiting for and handing them the cloaks or hats they had been minding for them.

Hagan held his father's cloak out. Godegisil took the bear pelt off. Sweat steamed into the night air from the big man's shoulders as he took the proffered cloak and wrapped it around himself. Hagan turned to follow the others who were returning to the city but his father laid a hand on his shoulder.

'Stay a moment, Hagan,' his father said. 'I wish to talk.'

Hagan frowned. Godegisil almost always regarded Hagan, Raknar and their mother, Gunteka, with a half-smile on his face, as if he was pleased with his family. Now his face was serious. His eyes did not twinkle. Like most fathers and their sons, they laughed, they joked, they shouted and they fought, but they never *talked*. The prospect made Hagan even more nervous than the thought of going into battle in the morning.

Godegisil gestured that Hagan should retake his previous seat with his back to the tree. As Hagan sat down again his father sat on a tree stump opposite. He did not say anything as he waited for all the others to leave. Whatever he had to say, it was only for his son to hear.

The champion looked up at the sky. Some stars were managing to make themselves seen through the glare of the moon.

'Do you remember when you were young, lad?' Godegisil said. 'We used to gaze up at the stars and I'd tell you stories about the shapes they made and what they meant.'

'I think I can make out the wagon of Tiwass,' Hagan said,

a fond smile coming to his lips. 'And there is the magic boat Wade the cunning smith sails around the sky in.'

His father brought his gaze back to earth and fixed his son with a steady glare. Hagan swallowed.

'I saw a strange thing today,' he said. 'Years ago, when I was a little younger than you, I was hunting in the forest with my father. Not this forest. One far to the north of the Rhine. We Burgundars have not always lived here at Vorbetomagus, as you know. That day I had outstripped everyone else while hunting a stag. I was always like that.'

He gave a little sardonic grunt. 'Always had to be first. Always had to be better. But I got that stag. I caught up with it in a clearing and killed it. I stabbed the big brute through the heart with my spear. I turned around and saw a great black bear had come into the clearing behind me. He was huge. Much taller than me on his hind legs and with a streak of white fur down one side of his face from some old injury. Just like me.'

He ran his forefinger down the long scar that snaked its way down his left cheek.

'Naturally I panicked,' Godegisil continued. 'I tried to pull my spear out of the stag but it wouldn't move. The blade was lodged behind his ribs.'

'So what did you do?' Hagan said, leaning forward, eager to hear how his father had got out of this dangerous situation.

'I thought to myself: *Godegisil, this is it, lad. You're dead*,' his father said. 'But the bear just looked at me. Looked me right in the eye, the way I'm looking at you now. Have you ever seen a bear's eyes, lad? They look like a man's. It's like there is a human soul in there behind all that fur, claws and teeth. Then he turned and ran off into the forest.'

Hagan frowned, disappointed at this anticlimax.

'I told my father about it,' Godegisil said. 'He said he reckoned it wasn't a natural animal at all. He thought it was my *fetch*. My spirit animal. The thing is, when we were hunting

those Roman scouts this morning I rode into a clearing in the forest. There was a bear there.'

Hagan felt a shiver like icy water run down his spine.

'I swear by all I believe in that it was the same one,' his father went on. 'Same colour. Same size. Same white streak down his face. He had not changed at all. But I am twenty years older. Again he just looked at me, then ran off. You know what that means, don't you?'

Hagan swallowed again. It felt like there was something stuck in his throat. He nodded. A fetch visited the human it watched over twice: once when you were young and once more, just before you died.

'This is all nonsense,' Hagan said. 'Father Ulfius teaches us that fetches are demons of Hell,' he said. 'Like all the spirits, giants and gods of the older days. They were sent to deceive us and lead us astray.'

'That old goat Ulfius knows about being led astray alright,' his father said with an amused smile. 'The nuns in the convent lead him off the straight and narrow path almost every night. No, Hagan, it looks like my time has come. There is a battle tomorrow, and I will not survive it.'

'You will!' Hagan said. 'We've beaten the Romans before. We will beat them again.'

'We have beaten them indeed,' his father said. 'And we will beat them this time too. But men die in war and it seems that my time will come tomorrow.'

Hagan glared at his father. For the first time ever he saw not the all-powerful champion of the folk, the invincible hero, but just a man who was ageing. His eyes were sinking into his face and lines spread from their corners.

'Why are you telling me this?' Hagan said. He was unable to hold back a sob.

'Because if I am to die, Hagan,' Godegisil said, 'there is something you must know. Look at me.'

Hagan, ashamed of the tears gathering in his eyes, had

dropped his gaze. He looked up again and locked eyes with his father, who glared at him, the scar that ran down his left cheek livid in the moonlight.

'Hagan, I am not your father.'

Hagan gasped. His mouth dropped open.

'What?' His voice was choked.

'I've always treated you as if you were my son,' Godegisil said in a hurry. 'I've raised you as if you were. I've never thought of you in any other way. I've always tried to be a good father to you.'

'And you have been…' Hagan said. Nausea crawled like a worm around his jaw muscles. *Until now*, a bitter voice within his mind said.

'But you are not my son in the natural way,' Godegisil said. 'I was away. Fighting in the wars in the west. I left Gunteka behind. When I came back she was pregnant with you. She told me she had been forced into bed. I believed her. I still do. It was not her choice. Your mother is a good woman. You know that.'

Hagan bit his lower lip. He tasted the iron flavour of his own blood.

'It was partly my fault,' Godegisil said, shaking his head. 'I left her alone.'

'So who is my real father?' Hagan said.

'I don't know,' Godegisil said. 'Your mother never told me. She swore an oath that she would not. She said it was for my protection. You know what that means, don't you? He must be someone we know. She knew if I found out who it was I would kill him and that whoever it was is powerful, or dear to me. I wouldn't care if I died after I got revenge for her but she said she didn't want to lose me. She said perhaps one day she will tell me but until then she made me swear an oath never to ask. And I did. I do know one thing, though.'

'What is that?' Hagan asked, he felt desperation grasp at his heart.

'You know that amulet she wears?' Godegisil said.

'The bronze one with the strange horse and bird on it?' Hagan nodded. His mother seldom took off that piece of jewellery, yet despite its beauty she never flaunted it. In fact, she did the complete opposite. Whenever she left their home she always tucked the amulet away under her dress as if she did not want anyone to see it.

'Aye,' Godegisil said. 'She tore it away from the man who forced himself on her. He was so lost in his lust he did not realise she had it.'

'She wears it in remembrance of him?' Hagan said, shaking his head.

'No,' Godegisil said. His voice was cracked and Hagan could sense the impotent rage that boiled in the big man's chest. 'She says she wears it so she never forgets what was done to her – as if she ever could! And she says that one day she will wear it in front of everyone and bring shame down on him for what he did. That of course proves that it was someone we know.'

Hagan felt sick and dizzy. He looked down at his feet and pressed his hand to his forehead.

His father – or the man he had always thought of as his father – placed his hands on his shoulders.

'Hagan, I know this must be hard for you,' he said. 'I thought perhaps I would tell you all this some time far in the future when we have lived our lives. But I have seen my fetch for the second time now. Tomorrow night I could be on my funeral pyre and you will have to light it. You had to know now.'

Hagan looked up. His eyes sparkled with tears. He did not know what to say. All he could do was shake his head.

'We should go,' Godegisil said. 'The morning is coming and with it we will go into battle.'