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# **Raven:** Blood Eye

## Giles Kristian

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Extract

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# RAVEN

## BLOOD EYE

Giles Kristian



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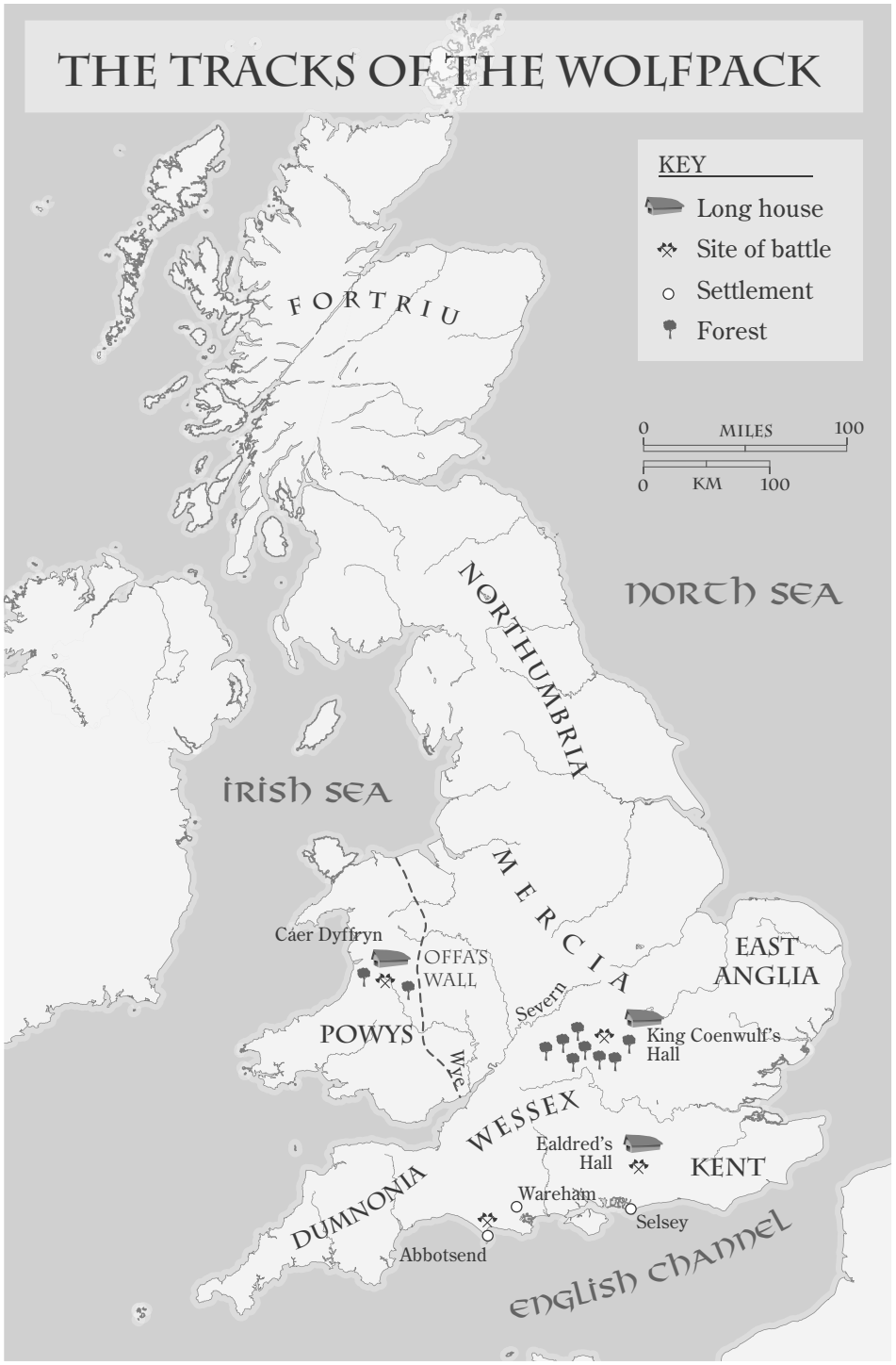
# HISTORICAL NOTE

Although *Raven* features a group of fictional characters, the story's historical context is consistent with contemporary sources and the conjecture of many of today's medieval scholars. Of course, in the tradition of the sagas, *Raven* does not escape the odd embellishment or hyperbole. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is one of the most important documents to survive from the Middle Ages. Originally compiled on the orders of King Alfred the Great in approximately AD 890, it was subsequently maintained and added to by generations of anonymous scribes until the middle of the twelfth century.

The entry for AD 793 reads:

> This year came dreadful fore-warnings over the land of the Northumbrians, terrifying the people most woefully: these were immense sheets of light rushing through the air, and whirlwinds, and fiery dragons flying across the firmament. These tremendous tokens were soon followed by a great famine: and not long after, on the sixth day before the ides of January in the same year, the harrowing inroads of heathen men made lamentable havoc in the church of God in Holy-island, by rapine and slaughter.

In AD 793 a flotilla of sleek longships sailed out of a storm and on to the windswept beach at the Holy Island of Lindisfarne, off England's north-east coast. The marauders who leapt from these grim-prowed craft sacked the monastery there, slaughtering its monks in what was seen as a strike against civilization itself. This event marks the dawn of the Viking age, an era in which adventurous, ambitious heathens surged from their Scandinavian homelands to raid and trade along the coasts of Europe. Fellowships of warriors, bound by honour and wanderlust, would reach as far as Newfoundland and Baghdad, the sword-song of their battles ringing out in Africa and the Arctic. They were nobles and outcasts, pirates, pioneers and great seafarers. They were the Norsemen.


THE TRACKS OF THE WOLFPACK
KEY
Long house
Site of battle
Settlement
Forest
0 MILES 100
0 KM 100
FORTRIU
NORTHUMBRIA
NORTH SEA
IRISH SEA
MERCIA
EAST ANGLIA
Caer Dyffryn
OFFA'S WALL
Severn
POWYS
Wye
King Coenwulf's Hall
WESSEX
Ealdred's Hall
KENT
DUMNONIA
Wareham
Selsey
Abbotsend
ENGLISH CHANNEL

# LIST OF CHARACTERS

## WESSEXMEN

**Egbert,** king of Wessex
**Edgar,** a reeve
**Ealhstan,** a carpenter
**Wulfweard,** a priest
**Alwunn**
**Eadwig**
**Griffin,** a warrior
**Burghild,** his wife
**Siward,** a blacksmith
**Oeric,** a butcher
**Bertwald**
**Eosterwine,** a butcher
**Ealdred,** an ealdorman
**Mauger,** a warrior
**Father Egfrith,** a monk
**Cynethryth**
**Weohstan**
**Burgred**
**Penda**

**Eafa,** a fletcher
**Egric**
**Alric**
**Oswyn**
**Coenred**
**Saba,** a miller
**Eni**
**Huda**
**Ceolmund**
**Godgifu,** a cook
**Hunwald**
**Cearl**
**Hereric**
**Wybert**
**Hrothgar**

## MERCIANS

**Coenwulf,** king of Mercia
**Cynegils**
**Aelfwald (Grey Beard)**

## NORTHUMBRIANS

**Eardwulf,** king of Northumbria

## NORSEMEN

**Osric (Raven)**
**Sigurd the Lucky,** a jarl
**Olaf (Uncle),** shipmaster of *Serpent*
**Asgot,** a godi
**Glum,** shipmaster of *Fjord-Elk*
**Svein the Red**
**White-haired Eric,** son of Olaf

**Black Floki**
**Scar-faced Sigtrygg**
**Njal**
**Oleg**
**Eyjolf**
**Bjarni,** brother of Bjorn
**Bjorn,** brother of Bjarni
**Kalf**
**Bram the Bear**
**Arnkel**
**Knut,** steersman of *Serpent*
**Tall Ivar**
**Osten**
**Gap-toothed Ingolf**
**Halfdan**
**Thorolf**
**Kon**
**Thormod**
**Gunnlaug**
**Thorkel**
**Northri**
**Gunnar**
**Thobergur**
**Eysteinn**
**Ulf**
**Ugly Einar**
**Halldor,** cousin of Floki
**Arnvid**
**Aslak**
**Thorgils,** cousin of Glum
**Thorleik,** cousin of Glum
**Orm**
**Hakon**

## GODS

**Óðin**, the All-Father. God of warriors and war, wisdom and poetry
**Frigg**, wife of Óðin
**Thór**, slayer of giants and god of thunder. Son of Óðin
**Baldr**, the beautiful. Son of Óðin
**Týr**, Lord of Battle
**Loki**, the Mischiefmonger. Father of Lies
**Rán**, Mother of the Waves
**Njörd**, Lord of the Sea and god of wind and flame
**Frey**, god of fertility, marriage and growing things
**Freyja**, goddess of love and sex
**Hel**, goddess of the underworld
**Völund**, god of the forge and of experience

**Midgard**, the place where men live. The world
**Asgard**, home of the gods
**Valhöll**, Óðin's hall of the slain
**Yggdrasil**, the World-Tree. A holy place for the gods
**Bifröst**, the Rainbow-Bridge connecting the worlds of gods and men
**Ragnarök**, Doom of the Gods
**Valkyries**, Choosers of the Slain
**Norns**, the three weavers who determine the fates of men
**Fenrir**, the Mighty Wolf
**Jörmungand**, the Midgard-Serpent
**Hugin** (**Thought**), one of the two ravens belonging to Óðin
**Munin** (**Memory**), one of the two ravens belonging to Óðin
**Mjöllnir**, the magic hammer of Thór

My mother once told me
She'd buy me a longship,
A handsome-oared vessel
To go sailing with Vikings:
To stand at the sternpost
And steer a fine warship
Then head back for harbour
And hew down some foemen.

*Egil's Saga*

THE HEARTH IS SPEWING MORE SMOKE THAN FLAME, SEETHING angrily and causing some of the men to cough as they hunker down amongst the reindeer furs. The hall's stout door creaks open, making a flame leap and tempting the acrid smoke to draw. Shadows edge around the room like Valkyries, the demons of the dead, hiding in corners waiting for titbits, hungry for human flesh. Perhaps they have caught a whisper of death in the fire's crack and spit. Certainly they have waited a long time for me.

Even in Valhöll a hush has fallen like a mantle of new snow, as Óðin, Thór and Týr lay down their swords, put aside their preparations for Ragnarök, the final battle. Am I too arrogant? More than likely. And yet, I do believe that even the gods themselves desire to hear the one with the red eye tell his tale. After all, they have played their part in it. And this is why they laugh, for men are not alone in seeking eternal fame: the gods crave glory too.

As though summoned to vanquish the shadows, the hearth bursts into flame. Men's faces come alive in the orange glow. They are ready. Eager. And so I take a deep, bitter breath. And begin.

# PROLOGUE

## England, AD 802

I DO NOT KNOW WHERE I WAS BORN. WHEN I WAS YOUNG, I WOULD sometimes dream of great rock walls rising so high from the sea that the sun's warmth never hit the cold, black water. Though perhaps those dreams were crafted from the tales I heard men tell, the men from the northlands where the winter days die before they begin and the summer sun never sets.

I know nothing of my childhood, of my parents, or if I had brothers and sisters. I do not even know my birth name. And yet, perhaps it says much about my life that my earliest memories are stained red. They are written in the blood that marks my left eye, for which men have always feared me.

I was perhaps fifteen years old and thought myself a man when the heathens came. My village was known as Abbotsend and it was a dreary place. Supposedly it was named after the holy father who climbed into the branches of a tall oak and there remained in penance for three years without food or water, preserved only by his own piety and the will of the Lord. Only when climbing down did the man fall and die from his injuries. And so it was that where he died became the place

of the abbot's end. Whether the story is true or not I cannot say, but I suppose it is as good an explanation for the name as any and more interesting than most. Abbotsend lay on a windswept spit of land jutting boldly into the sea a day's ride south-west of Wareham in the kingdom of Wessex. Though no king would ever have reason to visit Abbotsend. It was a settlement like any other, home to simple folk who expected nothing more from life than food and shelter and the rearing of children. A good Christian might say that such a humble place was ever likely to be blessed and by that blessing suffer, as its namesake had suffered and as all martyrs do. But a pagan would spit at such words, claiming the inconsequence of the place was reason enough that it be culled like a sick animal. For the village of Abbotsend no longer exists and I am to blame for its end.

I worked for old Ealhstan the carpenter, felling ash and alderwood for the cups and platters he turned on his lathe.

'I know, old man. All men must eat and drink,' I would say wearily, interpreting Ealhstan's gesture of banging two plates together and nodding to some passing man or woman, 'and so shall we if we keep making the things others need.' And Ealhstan would grunt and nod because he was mute.

And so I spent most days alone in the wooded valley east of the village, cutting and shaping timber with Ealhstan's axe. I had a roof over my head and food in my belly and I stayed away from those who would rather I had never come to that place, those who feared me for my blood-red eye and because I could not tell them whence I came.

The carpenter alone did not hate or fear me. He was hard-working and old and could not speak, and he would not indulge in such emotions. He had taken me in and I repaid his kindness with blisters and sweat and that was that. But the others were not like Ealhstan. Wulfweard the priest would make the sign of the cross when he saw me, and the women would tell their daughters to stay away from me. Even the boys

kept their distance for the most part, though sometimes they would hide amongst the trees and jump out to beat me with sticks, but only when there were three or four of them and all full of mead. Even then the beatings lacked the fury to break bones, for everyone respected old Ealhstan's skill. They needed his cups and platters and barrels and wheels and so they usually left me alone.

There was a girl. Alwunn. She was red-cheeked and plump and we had lain together after the Easter feast when the only living things not drunk on mead were the dogs. The mead had made me brave and I had found Alwunn drawing water from the well and without a word I took her hand and led her to a patch of tall, damp rye grass. She seemed willing enough, enthusiastic even, when it came to it. But in truth it was a graceless fumble and afterwards Alwunn was ashamed. Or perhaps she was afraid of what her kin would do if they found out about us. Either way, after that clumsy night she avoided me.

For two years I lived with Ealhstan, learning his craft so I could take his place at the lathe when he was gone. I would wake before sunrise and take a rod and line down to the rocks to catch mackerel for our breakfast. Then I would scour the woods for the best trees from which Ealhstan would make whatever people needed: tables, benches, cartwheels, bows, arrows and sword scabbards. From him I learned the magic of different trees, like the way the yew's heartwood gives the war bow its strength whilst the sapwood makes it flexible, until in the end I knew from sight and touch alone whether or not a tree would suit a certain purpose. I would spend hours with the oaks especially, though I did not know why they fascinated me, only that they had some power over my imagination. In their presence, strange half-thoughts would weave a tapestry in my mind, its threads worn, the colour a dull faded brown. I would sometimes find myself mouthing sounds to which I could put no meaning and then in frustration I would name

the trees and plants aloud to steer my mind from the fog. Still, I would come back to the oaks. I was drawn from tree to tree searching for great curving limbs in which the grain would run so strong that the wood could not be broken. But the old carpenter had no use for enormous oak timbers and chided me for wasting my time.

We had neither horse nor cart. Once, when I moaned about the work, Ealhstan leant back as though he had a huge belly and staggered around the workshop leading an invisible horse and cart. Then he pointed at me and waggled his finger.

'You're not Reeve Edgar and you can't afford a horse to share the work,' I said, guessing his meaning, and he nodded with a grimace, grabbed the scruff of my neck and pointed to the door. 'But you could if you didn't have to feed me?' I hazarded, rubbing my neck. The old man's affirming grunt was warning enough and I stopped my moaning.

And so my back and arms grew strong and the boys who had beaten me took to beating Eadwig the cripple who had been wont to gather the hazel branches they used on me. Though I was strong I was always pleased after a hard day to sit and pedal the pole lathe, which turned the timber this way and that as the old man teased form and shine from rough wood. At night, after a meal of cheese and bread, pottage and meat, we would go to the old hall and listen to merchants swapping news, or men reciting the old tales of great battles and deeds. My favourite story was of the warrior Beowulf who slew the monster Grendal, and I would sit spellbound as smoke from the hearth filled the woody space with a sweet, resinous aroma and tired men drank mead or ale until they fell asleep amongst the rushes, to stagger home at cock's crow.

This was my life. And it was a simple one. But it would not last.

# CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS APRIL. THE LEAN DAYS OF FASTING AND THE LONG MONTHS of winter had been forgotten with the full bellies of the Easter feast. The people were busy with the outdoor tasks that the icy winds had kept them from: straightening loose thatch, replacing rotten fences, replenishing wood stores and stirring new life into the rich soil of the plough fields. Wild garlic smothered the earth in the shady woods like a white pelt, its scent whipped up by the breeze, and blue spring squill sat like a low mist upon the grassy slopes and headlands, stirred by the salty sea air.

Usually, I was woken by Ealhstan's mutterings and one of his bony fingers digging my ribs, but on this day I rose before the old man, hoping to be away catching a fish for our breakfast before having to suffer his ill temper. I even imagined he might be pleased with me for being at the task before the sun reddened the eastern horizon, though it was more likely he would begrudge my being awake before him. Fishing rod in hand and wrapped in a threadbare cloak, I stepped out into the predawn stillness and shivered with a yawn that brought water to my eyes.

'The old goat got you working by the light of the stars now,

has he?' came a low voice and I turned to make out Griffin the warrior leading his great grey hunting dog by a rope which was knotted so that the animal choked itself as it fought him. 'Keep still, boy!' Griffin growled, yanking the rope viciously. The beast was coughing and I thought Griffin might break its neck if it did not stop pulling.

'You know Ealhstan,' I said, holding back my hair and leaning over the rain barrel. 'He can't take a piss before he's had his breakfast.' I thrust my face into the dark, cold water and held it there, then came up and shook my head, wiping my eyes on the back of my arm.

Griffin looked down at the dog, which was beaten at last and stood with its head slumped low between its shoulders, looking up at its master pathetically. 'Found the dumb bastard sniffing around Siward's place just now. He ran off yesterday. First time I've laid eyes on him since.'

'Siward's got a bitch on heat,' I said, tying back my hair.

'So the wife tells me,' Griffin said, a smile touching his mouth. 'Can't blame him, I suppose. We all want a bit of what's good for us, hey, boy?' he added, rubbing the dog's head roughly. I liked Griffin. He was a hard man, but had no hatred in him like the others. Or perhaps it was fear he lacked.

'Some things in life are certain, Griffin,' I said, returning his smile. 'Dogs will chase bitches, and Ealhstan will eat mackerel every morning till his old teeth fall out.'

'Well, you'd better dip that line, lad,' he warned, nodding southwards towards the sea. 'Even Arsebiter here has less bite than old Ealhstan. I wouldn't get on the wrong side of that tongueless bastard for every mackerel the Lord Jesus and His disciples pulled out of the Red Sea.'

I looked back to the house. 'Ealhstan doesn't have a right side,' I said in a low voice. Griffin grinned, bending to rub Arsebiter's muzzle. 'I'll bring you a codfish one of these days, Griffin. Long as your arm,' I said, shivering again, and then

we parted ways, he towards his house and me towards the low sound of the sea.

A pinkish glow lay across the eastern horizon, but the sun was still concealed and it was dark as I climbed the hill that shielded Abbotsend from the worst of the weather blowing in from the grey sea. But I had walked the path many times and had no need of a flame. Besides, the old crumbling watchtower stood visible at the hilltop as a black shape against a dark purple sky. Folk said it was built by the Romans, that long-disappeared race. I did not know if that was true, but I whispered thanks to them anyway, for with the tower in sight I could not lose my way.

My mind wandered, though, as I considered taking a skiff beyond the sea-battered rocks next morning to try to catch something other than mackerel. You could pull in a great codfish if you could get your hook to the seabed. Suddenly, a metallic 'tock' stopped me dead and something whipped my eyes, for an instant blinding me. I dropped to one knee, feeling the hairs spring up on the back of my neck. A guttural croak broke the stillness and I saw a black shape swoop up, then plunge, settling on the tower's crumbling crown. It croaked again and even in the weak dawn light its wings glinted with a purple sheen as its stout beak stabbed at its feathers. I had seen similar birds many times – clouds of crows that swept down to the fields to dig for seeds or worms – but this was a huge raven and the sight of it was enough to freeze my blood.

'Away with you, bird,' I said, picking up a small piece of red brick and throwing it at the creature. I missed, but it was enough to send the raven flapping noisily into the sky, a black smear against the lightening heavens. 'So you're scared of birds now, Osric?' I muttered, shaking my head as I crested the hill and made my way through stalks of pink thrift and cushioning sea campion down to the shore. A damp mist had been thrown up to blanket the dunes and shingle and a flock of screeching gulls passed overhead, tumbling down into the murk, leaving

behind them a wake of noise. I jumped across three rock pools full of green weed, the small bladders floating at the surface, then on to my fishing rock where I knocked a limpet into the sea with the butt of my rod before unwinding the line.

After the time it takes to put a keen edge on a knife nothing had taken the hook, and I thought about trying another spot where I had once pulled in a rough-skinned fish as long as my leg with wicked, sharp teeth. It was then that I caught a strange sound between the rhythmic breathing of the surf. I wedged the rod in a crevice, the line still in the sea, and scrambled higher up the rocks above the shingle. But I saw nothing other than the sea-stirred vapour, which seemed alive like some strange beast writhing before me, concealing and revealing the ocean time and again. I heard only the shrieks of white gulls and the breaking waves, and was about to jump down when I heard the strange sound again.

This time I froze like an icicle. My muscles gripped my bones rigid. The breath caught fast in my chest and cold fear crept up my spine, prickling my scalp. The thin hollow note of a horn sounded again, and then came the rhythmic slap of oars. As if conjured from the spirit world, a dragon emerged, a wooden beast with a belly of clinkered strakes, which flowed up into its slender neck. The monster's head was set with faded red eyes, and I wanted to run but I was stuck to the rock like the limpets, fixed by the stare of a great bearded warrior who stood with one arm round the monster's neck. His beard parted, revealing a malicious smile, then the boat's keel scraped up the shingle with a noise like thunder and men were jumping from the ship, sliding on the wet rocks and falling and splashing into the surf. Guttural voices echoed off the rocks behind me and my bowels melted. Another dragon ship must have beached further down the shore beyond Hermit's Rock. Men with swords and axes and round painted shields stepped from the mist, their war gear clinking noisily to shatter the unnatural stillness. They gathered round me like wolves, pointing east and west, their

hard voices rousing shrieks from gulls overhead. I mumbled a prayer to Christ and His saints that my death would be quick, as the warrior from the ship's prow stepped up and grabbed my throat. He shoved me at another heathen who gripped my shoulder with a powerful hand. This one wore a green cloak fastened with a silver brooch in the shape of a wolf's head. I saw the iron rings of a mail shirt, a brynja, beneath the cloak and I retched.

Now, after all these years, I might essay a few untruths. I doubt any still live who could prove my words false. I could say that I stuck out my chest and took a grip of my fear. That I did not piss myself. But who would believe me? These outlanders leaping from their dragons were armed and fierce. They were warriors and grown men. And I was just a boy. A strange and frightening magic fell across me then. The outlanders' sharp language began to change, seemed to melt, the percussive clipped grunts becoming a stream of sounds that were somehow familiar. I swallowed some of the fear, my tongue beginning to move over these noises like water over pebbles, awakening to them, and I heard myself repeating them until they became no longer just noises, but words. And I understood them.

'But look at his eye, Uncle!' the man with the wolf brooch said. 'He is marked. Óðin god of war has given him a clot of blood for an eye. On my oath, I feel the All-Father breathing down my neck.'

'I agree with Sigurd,' another said, his eyes slits of suspicion. 'The way he appeared in the mist was not natural. You all saw it. The vapour became flesh! Any normal man would have run from her.' He pointed to the ship with its carved dragon's head. 'But this one stood here as if he was . . . as if he was waiting for us. I want no part in his death, Sigurd,' he finished, shaking his head.

I prayed they would not see the fishing rod in the crack in the rock and I hoped the mackerel were still asleep, for mackerel

fight like devils and if one took my hook the line would jump and the heathens would see me for what I was.

'I can help you,' I spluttered, buoyed suddenly by the hope that the outlanders were lost, blown off course on the way to who knew where?

'You speak Norse, boy?' Wolf Brooch asked, his strong, weathered face open now. The others were spreading out cautiously and peering northwards through the mist. 'I am Sigurd son of Harald. We are traders,' he said, staring at me as though wondering what I was. 'We have furs and amber and bone. The bellies of our ships are full of good things the English will like. We will trade with them' – he grinned – 'if they have anything we want.' I did not believe they were traders, for they wore ring-mail and leather and carried the tools of death. But I was young and afraid and did not want to die. 'Take us to the nearest village,' Sigurd demanded, his eyes so piercing it took all my nerve to look into them, and, just as no mackerel had swallowed my hook, I knew this man would not swallow my lie.

'Hurry, boy, we have much to give the English,' a giant red-haired heathen with rings on his arms said, grinning and clutching the sword's hilt at his waist.

So, with a sickness in my stomach and a spinning head, I led these Norsemen towards my home. And in my heart I knew I should have let them kill me.

I stumbled across the rocks and shingle, trying to keep my footing as the Norsemen pushed me on. I guessed there were about fifty of them, though half stayed with the ships as the rest of us climbed the grassy dunes where red-beaked oyster-catchers trilled noisily, fleeing their scrapes among the tufts as we approached. The Norsemen gripped spears, axes and shields as though off to battle, none speaking now as the dunes gave way to solid ground and we climbed the scree-covered path leading to the summit of the hill overlooking my village. I let my mind tell me they would have found the place without

my help. Abbotsend was just the other side of the swell and if they had taken to the high ground they would not have missed it. But the truth was I was leading them, as Griffin's dog might lead him to a badger's sett, and if there was blood it would be on my hands, for I had lacked the courage to die.

The Norsemen stopped on the ridge by the old crumbling watchtower, taking in the small settlement: a loose clutter of sixteen thatched dwellings, a mill, a hall and a small stone church. That was Abbotsend, but it must have been enough, for some of them grinned. The grip on my tunic was released and I seized my chance. I hared down the hill, throwing my arms out for balance and yelling to wake the dead. Folk looked up, then scattered, their panicked cries carrying up the hillside. Even back then we had heard of the heathens' savagery and thirst for plunder, and now the Norsemen were running too, to reach the village before its people could hide their possessions or find their courage.

I tripped sprawling into the mud between the houses where some of the men of Abbotsend were already forming a thin shieldwall. Others grimly hefted axes and forks, anything sharp enough to kill a man. I got to my feet as Siward the blacksmith lumbered from his forge, a bundle of swords in his heavily muscled arms, some without grips and pommels, others still black, yet to be polished and honed. He was handing them to any man prepared to stand and face what was coming. I ran to him.

'Out of the way, boy!' Griffin growled, grabbing Siward's arm before the blacksmith could give me a blade. I tried to take the blade anyway, but Griffin growled again and Siward turned his back on me and took his place beside the warrior. 'Hold the line! Straighten up, lads!' Griffin yelled to the eight men now standing with him. Griffin was the most experienced fighter of our village, but he had had no time to fetch his mail shirt or his shield and so stood armed only with his great sword. Arsebiter was beside him, his yellow teeth bared in a rolling snarl.

Ealhstan appeared at my shoulder, his eyes twitching madly.

'They said they were traders,' I said. By now, the Norsemen had formed their own shieldwall facing Griffin's, but theirs was longer and two men deep.

You brought them here? Ealhstan's eyes asked. The old man crossed himself and I saw he was trembling. They don't look like traders, boy! his face said. By Christ, they don't!

'They would have killed me,' I said, knowing they were the words of a coward. Ealhstan hissed and pointed towards the eastern woods but I ignored him and he hit me with a bony fist, again pointing to the trees. But I had brought the heathens over the hill, and if I ran it would make me less than cuckoo spit.

'What do you want here?' Griffin demanded. There was no fear in his voice. His chest swelled beneath his tunic and his eyes narrowed as he assessed the men facing him. 'Go now and leave us in peace. Whoever you are, we have no quarrel with you. Go before blood is spilled.' Arsebiter's hackles bunched as he echoed his master's warning with three coarse barks.

Sigurd, his sword still in its scabbard, glanced at the beast, then stepped forward. 'We are traders,' he said in English, his accent thick. 'We have brought furs and much deer antler. And walrus ivory, if you have the silver for it.' The Norsemen behind him bristled with violence, like hunting dogs themselves straining at the leash. No, not dogs but wolves. Some began thumping their sword pommels against the backs of their shields in a threatening rhythm. Sigurd raised his voice. 'Will you trade?' he asked.

'You don't look like traders to me,' Griffin answered, spitting on the earth between them. 'Traders have no need of war shields and helmets.' Griffin's men murmured in agreement, taking heart from their leader's defiance. More village men had gathered now, having seen their families safe, and some of them had shields. These pushed into Griffin's line, whilst others stood behind armed with hunting spears and long knives.

Sigurd shrugged his broad shoulders and grimaced. 'Sometimes we are traders,' he said, 'sometimes not.'

'Where are you from?' Griffin asked. 'We don't get many outlanders here.' I saw him glance away and realized he was buying time for the village women who were dragging their children towards the eastern woods, though a slamming door said at least one had chosen to stay.

'We are from Hardanger Fjord. Far to the north,' Sigurd said, 'and as I told you, we are sometimes traders.' The word *sometimes* cast the shadow of warning.

'Do not threaten us, heathen!' boomed Wulfweard the priest, marching from his church holding a wooden cross before him. He was a huge man, a warrior once some said, and he set himself before the Norsemen like a squared stone from his church. He eyed Sigurd fiercely. 'The Lord knows the blackness of your hearts and He will not let you bring blood to this peaceful place.' He raised the wooden cross as though the very sight of it would turn the Norsemen to dust, and in that moment I believed in the power of the Christian god. The priest turned to me, plain hatred twisting his face. 'You are one of Satan's minions, boy,' he said calmly. 'We've always known it here. And now you have brought the wolf into the fold.'

Ealhstan grunted and dismissed Wulfweard's words with the flick of an arm.

'He's right, Wulfweard,' Griffin said. 'They'd have come anyway and you know it. The lad never rowed 'em here!'

Sigurd glanced at me as he drew his sword with a rasp, and Wulfweard looked at the weapon scornfully. 'You pagans are the last of the Devil's slaves and soon you will be dust like all non-believers before you.' He grinned then, his trembling red face full of the power of his words. 'The armies of Christ are washing your filth from the world.'

Some of the Norsemen shouted for Sigurd to kill Wulfweard then, as though they feared his strange words were the weaving

of some spell. But to show he had no fear of words, Sigurd turned his back on the priest, lifted his great sword and thrust it into the earth before his men. Seeing this, the Norsemen took their own swords and spears and plunged them down with grunts of effort, sinking the blades into the soil where they quivered like crops in the breeze. Sigurd turned back to Wulfweard and threw his round shield at the priest, who jumped back. It struck his shin and must have hurt, though he showed no sign of it.

'We have come to trade,' Sigurd announced to the English shieldwall. 'I swear on my father's sword,' he said, placing a palm on the earth-sheathed weapon's silver pommel, 'I mean you no harm.' He glowered at Wulfweard. 'Does your god forbid you from owning fine furs? He is a strange god who would have you freeze when the first snows cover this village.'

'We would rather our blood froze in our veins than trade with Satan's underlings,' Wulfweard spat, but Griffin stepped from his line and thrust his own sword into the earth beside Sigurd's.

'Wulfweard speaks for himself,' he said, never taking his eyes from Sigurd, 'and that is his right. But the red deer are thin on the ground this year because our king covets the silver they fetch and his men hunt them greedily. A good fur can keep a man alive. We have families.' He flicked his head towards the men behind him. 'We will trade, Sigurd.' And with that he stepped up and gripped Sigurd's arm and the two men smiled because instead of blood there would be trade. I exhaled and slapped Ealhstan's back as the folk of Abbotsend welcomed the outlanders with gestures and handshaking, and the relief of those who have avoided death by a hair's breadth.

Wulfweard strode off back to his church muttering damnation and Griffin watched him go, shaking his head. 'He's the custodian of our souls, Sigurd,' he said, 'but a man must look to his life, too. We're not dead yet. And whether you and yours pray to a dog's balls or a twisted old tree means

nothing to me if we can take from each other,' he held up his hands, 'peacefully and in good faith, the things that make life better.'

Sigurd nodded. 'Ah, my own godi chews my ears often enough, Englishman,' he said, batting a hand towards Wulfweard's back. 'Let them have their sour apples. They trade in misery. We'll have our silver and furs.'

'Agreed,' Griffin said, then he frowned. 'We will have to send word to our reeve, of course. He'd spit teeth if he found out you'd landed here and not paid him his taxes.' Sigurd's own brow furrowed and he scratched his beard. 'Don't worry, Norseman,' Griffin said, putting a hand on the man's shoulder. 'If we're quick we can make our trade and you can leave before Edgar gets his fat arse down here.' He shrugged. 'We are not going to stop you sailing off, that's for sure.'

Sigurd turned. His men were pulling their weapons from the ground and cleaning their blades. 'We will keep our weapons sheathed,' he assured Griffin who, along with some of the other Englishmen, seemed suddenly anxious.

'Your word is good enough for me, Sigurd,' Griffin said with a solemn nod. 'Now I will speak to my people.' Sigurd gripped Griffin's arm in a final gesture of trust before Griffin turned and began to receive the questions of the other influential men of the village.

Sigurd turned to me. 'What is your name, red-eye?' he asked in Norse.

'Osric, lord,' I said, 'and this is Ealhstan my master,' I added, nodding at the old man and marvelling at how I had found the words in the heathen's language.

'You serve that tongueless old goat?' Sigurd asked. He grinned. 'Ah, I understand. You don't like being told what to do.'

'I assure you, my master has other ways of getting what he wants,' I said with a smile as Ealhstan prodded my shoulder irritably and waggled his hand like a fish. I shook my head and

the old man grimaced crabbily before shuffling off. He would have to forgo his mackerel now and he was not happy about it.

'How did you learn our tongue?' Sigurd asked.

'I did not know I could speak it, lord,' I said, 'until today.'

'That priest of the White Christ does not like you, Osric,' he said, rubbing a thumb along his sword's blade to clean the mud from it.

'Most of the people here fear me,' I said with a shrug.

Sigurd pursed his thick lips and nodded. I had never seen anyone like him. He looked like the kind of man who would fight a bear with his own hands. And win.

'We are the first among our people to take our dragons across the ill-tempered sea,' he said, 'but even we are not without fear. Do you know what I fear, lad?' I shook my head. Surely nothing, I thought. 'I fear a dry throat. Fetch us something to drink. Mead greases the barter.' He smiled at the giant Norseman with the red hair and beard, who grinned back, and I turned to go and fetch mead from Ealhstan's house. 'Don't put a curse on the damn stuff, Satan's minion!' Sigurd called after me, mimicking Wulfweard. 'I'm thirsty!'

The Norsemen fetched goods from their ships while the local children and even some of the men buzzed around them, marvelling at their sleek dragon-prowed vessels, the likes of which they had never seen. The children helped carry the heathens' goods back to the village where noisy clusters of women waited, eager to see what these strangers had to sell. The outlanders' deer furs were thick and full and their whetstones were fine-grained, though Siward the blacksmith insisted they were not as good as English stones. They threw down leather skins and covered them with amber, much of which had been fashioned into beads, and leather jacks full of honey. There was dried fish, reindeer bone, and walrus ivory which proved very popular with the village men, for they bought every piece on show. Having obtained it cheaply they would

later pay Ealhstan to carve the ivory into smooth or patterned hilts for knives and swords, or amulets for their wives. The last women and children abandoned their hiding places in the eastern woods and came to join the throng and barter with the Norsemen. They brought their scales to weigh coin and beads and gestured fervently, trying to make themselves understood, though Sigurd was needed to resolve several confusions and did so willingly, a smile etched in his strong face.

'Osric speaks their tongue,' Griffin announced above the bustle, winking at me, and soon the folk of Abbotsend forgot that I was Satan's minion in their rush to employ me as a translator to grease their trade. But I was pleased to do it and I wondered if these same folk who had shunned me would treat me well when the Norsemen left, because I had helped them. At first finding the words was like rooting for berries after the birds have been, but the more I listened the more I understood. I was too immersed in men's negotiations to wonder what strange magic was at work.

Old Ealhstan made a sound in his throat and nodded, fingering an oval brooch of bronze which a Norseman had thrust into his hands. At the heathen's feet dozens of the things sat on a smooth hide, glinting in the late afternoon light. Most of the trading was finished, but the village was still buzzing as folk compared their new goods and boasted about how cheaply they came by them.

'I don't think he sold many of these, Ealhstan,' I said, seeing how keen the Norseman was to sell a woman's brooch to a mute old man. Ealhstan made the sign of the cross, curled his dry old lips and pointed off in the direction of the church.

'The women feared they'd get too much earache from Wulfweard for wearing them?' I asked as he handed me the brooch. 'God-fearing women sporting pagan brooches.' I tried to imagine it. 'Wulfweard wouldn't like that. Wouldn't like it one bit.'

To the heathen's disappointment I placed the brooch back

on the hide with the others. All were longer than a finger and some had projecting bosses of amber or glass shining amongst intricate, swirling patterns engraved in the metal. 'Where is Wulfweard, anyway? I haven't seen the red-faced bag of wind since this morning.'

Ealhstan shrugged his bony shoulders and wagged a finger at me. 'I know, I know, Wulfweard's a man of God,' I said. 'I should show more respect. Even though he wouldn't piss on me if I were burning.' A child squealed and we both spun to the sound. 'They're just playing,' I said, laughing as the giant flame-haired Norseman growled like a bear to scare the three children who were clambering over him, one on his back and the others on either arm.

'Come here, Wini,' one of the boy's mothers called nervously and in no time all three children were shepherded away, leaving the Norseman beaming from his great shaggy beard.

'They don't seem like devils, Ealhstan,' I said. Ealhstan's white eyebrows arched. You didn't think that this morning, those hairy caterpillars said. They're bloody-minded heathens and you'd do well to stay away from them.

But I did not want to stay away.

Griffin had waited until the sun was in the west before sending a man out to tell Edgar the local reeve that strangers had moored, meaning taxes were owed, and Sigurd had agreed to spend the night ashore sharing mead with the men of Abbotsend. In any case, his ships were beached and he could not sail until the next high tide, so would risk the reeve's taxes for a night on dry land. Word spread that the men were to gather in the old hall when it got dark and I watched the heathens pack their remaining goods in chests and skins. It seemed they were even more eager to begin drinking mead than they had been to sell their wares.

'You'd better join us, Osric,' Griffin called from behind two thick, folded reindeer skins in his arms. Arsebiter was at his

master's heel. 'We'll need you to make sense of the heathens' babble. How is it you understand them, lad?'

'I don't know, Griffin,' I said. 'I've no way of explaining it.'

He shrugged. 'Well, I'll see you later.' He grinned and jangled an amber necklace that was looped over his wrist. 'When Burghild sees this she'll not mind me spending all night drinking with those devils! Least, that's the idea.' The dog looked up at Griffin doubtfully.

'Maybe you should have bought her a brooch, too,' I said, stifling a smile, 'and some of that reindeer antler. Maybe one of those silver pins.'

Griffin peered round the skins at the amber necklace, then back to me, a dark frown gathering on his face. Then he turned and went on his way, with Arsebiter following him.