

BBC
BOOKS

DOCTOR WHO

The book cover features a vibrant red and orange background with a fiery, explosive effect. In the foreground, the Doctor (Matt Smith) is shown from the chest up, wearing his signature brown tweed jacket, white shirt, and purple bow tie. He has a serious expression and is looking directly at the viewer. In the background, a menacing figure with long hair and a beard, wearing ornate, metallic armor, is depicted. This figure is holding a large, curved blade and is positioned behind a structure that resembles a police box, with the word "POLICE" visible on its side. The overall atmosphere is one of intense action and danger.

NO ONE CAN ESCAPE THE BURNING

DARK HORIZONS

J. T. COLGAN

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DOCTOR WHO

Dark Horizons

J.T. COLGAN



*To my best Wallace.
I am sorry I told you
The Family of Blood
'isn't that scary'.*

Chapter One

THE DOCTOR LOOKED down at the board, sighed and gently knocked over the king with one finger. Lost again. That was the problem with playing chess with yourself. You always lost.

And he wasn't playing Bobby Fischer again. That had gone very wrong. Very wrong indeed. He hated it when people bandied about phrases like 'brought the world to the brink of nuclear war'.

The Doctor frowned to himself. What he really needed was someone to play chess with who wouldn't take it too seriously. Someone who wouldn't get really upset when he beat them.

Henrik and Annar stared hard at the board. They were trying to keep it sheltered high up in the prow where there was a little space just underneath the dragon's neck that decorated the front of the longship, away from the bosun's prying eyes. If he knew they were playing with his second most precious piece of cargo, there'd be trouble.

But there wasn't much else to do nearly a full moon's turn out from land, once your rowing stint was over and you'd talked about as many girls as you could mention in one breath, and the meat was turning green and you could scarcely remember a world where the horizon didn't move up and down constantly; where your clothes weren't wet from dawn to dusk, and you ate the same dry bread, dried meat and porridge oats every day, like cattle. Henrik glanced over to the hens in cages along the side of the boat. They'd stopped laying. He frowned. That meant harsh weather was coming.

Henrik cast his eyes back to the board. The chess set had been packed up well; it was being taken to Iceland as part of the dowry gift, as the Duke of Trondheim prepared to marry his daughter, Gissar Polvaderson, to cement the bonds between their two lands.

The Duke of Trondheim's daughter, Freydis, had long hair that looked like it was made out of spun gold. Gissar Polvaderson, as everyone knew throughout the world, was the fattest man anyone had ever seen, who dined exclusively on whale blubber and drank hot mead from the second he rolled from his cot in the morning. It had caused plenty of sniggering amongst the sailors.

'Keep your eyes off those chooks,' grunted Annar to Henrik. 'We're not going to be eating roast hen for a long time, so don't think it.'

'If they're not laying...' said Henrik. Suddenly, the idea of a roast chicken, dripping with juice, roasted over a good fire, with the flatbread his mother used to make back on the farm, was the most wonderful thing he could think of. 'I'd trade a kingdom for that,' he said ruefully, looking down at his pieces. They were beautifully carved from walrus ivory, in the Trondheim style; Gissar, proud on his throne, his fat cheeks showing over his beard.

Even though the carvings were small they were still, Henrik thought, flattering. He had seen the King once; he was short, his belly bulged over his leather windings, and his face was covered in pustules that he tended to fiddle with distractedly whilst giving orders. Henrik had been, on the whole, disappointed. It was the first king he'd ever seen; he'd expected someone a bit more impressive.

And beside him on the board, the carving was of the Princess, Freydis made as queen-in-waiting, her hair curling down over the back of the throne; her expression proud and stern. They had been made over four moons by the finest bone-worker in Trondheim; they were the most precious, beautiful objects Henrik had ever seen. He weighed the heavy piece in his hands. Its cool beauty suggesting

luxury and leisure time. Henrik had never owned much more than his sheepskin and cord boots in his entire life. The idea of commissioning these – for hundreds of crowns – was amazing. He hoped they would be appreciated.

‘Check,’ said Annar.

Henrik cursed. He had been so distracted by the pieces, he’d forgotten to concentrate on the game. He bent his head. But, just as he did so, a sudden, terrible screaming rent the air.

As the men leapt up, startled half out of their wits, hands already halfway to their swords, the beautiful board tipped over, the pieces rattling and scattering all over the deck.

Chapter Two

THE DOCTOR EMERGED from the TARDIS onto a flat stony shore. There wasn't a tree to be seen, and the low land looked cold and desolate. Ahead was a great scree of pebbles, leading off to a wide long beach, and choppy water the colour of steel. Another island could be seen across the water, on land that looked just as flat and as desolate as where he now stood.

Behind the TARDIS was a springy heath without a sign of human habitation, but several leaflimbed rabbits whipped past as the Doctor bent down.

'Hello, Lepus,' he said, crouching down to watch them bounding about, curious, at his feet. As soon as he crouched down, they scattered like the wind.

'Well, there's someone about, then. Rabbits! Brand new to the twelfth century. Perfect!' he said, looking around. 'Something bad clearly happens to you when you meet something shaped like me. Although I'm not very scary,' he added. 'Well, I can be. But very rarely to rabbits, I promise.'

His voice tailed off as he glanced up at the clouds, which were flitting faster and faster across the lowering grey sky. On the opposite island, rain was already clearly falling heavily, and on the heath the heather was starting to stir with the gathering wind. The rabbits had all completely vanished.

'Hmm,' said the Doctor to himself as the first drops began to fall. 'Weather. Weather needs. What is it? It is so much easier when someone else is around to tell me this stuff. Extra clothes. Yes.'

He frowned then popped back into the TARDIS, re-emerging wearing exactly the same tweed jacket and bow tie, but with the addition of a very small yellow checked scarf. He licked his fingers, stuck it in the air, nearly got blown over then took a sniff of the air and headed off in the opposite direction, bent heavy against the rain and the wind.

The screaming continued; grew louder if anything, accompanied by a furious banging.

The rowing men shouted and cursed as Annar and Henrik rushed to the stern of the boat, where a tiny door was rocking on its hinges. Unusually for longboats, this had a small caged section, barred with wood.

Vikings did not normally take prisoners.

The two men exchanged nervous glances.

'You do it,' said Annar. 'It's your turn.'

Henrik looked agitated. 'Maybe we should...'

'What? Open the door? Have that monster marauding up and down the decks? Have you gone mad?'

Henrik shrugged. 'But she's been shut up there for days.'

'Because she tried to claw out our eyes, remember?'

The screaming and banging continued. 'Let me out! Let me out!'

'The last time we let her out, she bit the captain.'

'That's true, but...'

'And the time before that?'

'The ship's cat,' said Henrik, sadly.

'Don't let her out!'

‘But she might really need help this time.’

‘LOOK OUT!’ The screams grew louder. ‘LET ME OUT! NOW!!!’

‘You might lose an eye, of course,’ said Annar, darkly. ‘But it’s up to you.’

Henrik kept quiet. He could never admit it publicly, of course. But sometimes when he thought of her... well. He might well have behaved the same way himself, under the circumstances. The banging grew louder, her voice more insistent.

‘You HAVE to listen to me. You HAVE to see this.’

But even as she spoke, her words were drowned out by a shouting from the men below decks at the oars.

Oaths and shouting rent the air; many of the men jumping up from their benches and pointing open mouthed, to the back of the ship.

Henrik followed their pointing fingers, and the desperate howling of the woman locked in the area. His mouth dropped open, in shock then, instants later, in an awful, dawning terror.

Inside the tiny locked cupboard – little more than a cage on board the great longship – the prince Freydis shrank against the door, still giving it vicious kicks with her foot as she listened to the murmurs and exclamations outside. Well, she was sure they’d listen to the other *men*. The lowlie poxy serf rower – his opinion was still worth more than hers, and she was a princess. And being a princess meant nothing at sea.

She had kept track of time by carving a line out with the nail of her little finger on the left wall of the tiny space that the men had shut her into as soon as it had become clear that she had no intention of going quietly.

The only light came from a tiny gap in the caulking between the planks and she had used that to tell and tell when was day and when was night. The three servings of oats a day had added to a sense of time, and she had tried to stretch and move around when she was able; the sailors would no longer let her out, in case she tried to attack them again. Which she would, she swore to herself. Her father might have sold her to the Icelandic King – she’d expected to be married off, that was the way of it. But she hadn’t expected to be sold to someone so old, so ugly, the news of whose boils and enormous spilling belly and foul breath had travelled all the way across the great world sea to Trondheim. She had hoped for a young prince from the sweeter Suedan lands, or even a choice in the matter. But the greater peace of their trading kingdoms, as her father had explained in the great hall, in front of the roaring furnaces and all the tribes, was more important than her happiness. Surely, as a daughter of Wolvern, she understood that?

She nodded. But vowed to herself – as a daughter of Wolvern, who had united the warring tribes and brought peace to their region, established trading with their neighbours – that she would fight and never give up.

But this. This was something different. She cringed as far back from her tiny look-out as she could, pressing herself as closely as possible against the door.

‘LET ME OUT BY ALL THE GODS!!!!’ she screamed, her voice deafened by the roaring of the sea, and the helpless shouts of the men above.

Henrik stared. It could not – should not – be possible. But there it was.

A fire was burning above the water. A great line of heat. Through the air, where there was nothing to burn. Witchcraft, whispered someone.

Annar’s curiosity got the better of him. Hypnotised by the extraordinary sight, he leant further and

further over the side, his brain trying to understand what it was actually seeing.

~~All of a sudden the boat lurched to one side and he lost his footing, slipped and fell into the i~~
water. The men dashed to help him but, before they could reach out a hand, the flame suddenly rushed
at him like a living thing; like a snake darting forwards.

Flames shot through his body, contorting him. Even his eyes seemed to spark and glow orange. His
face took on a hideous rictus grin as the skin burned off his very bones, his last cry dying in his
charred throat. A terrible, terrible smell filled the air. The men were too shocked even to scream.

And now, every single oar was on fire.

Chapter Three

CORC, THE VILLAGE chieftain, scratched his beard. He still didn't know what to make of it. None of them did. For the fourth straight day in a row, he'd had the men gather them all in before they started at the runrigs. Now he was trying to persuade his son, Eoric, to get as much of the unexpected bounty – turtles, seals; some sea birds – salted and put away for the oncoming winter.

Eoric, as usual, was complaining about it. He wanted to go and shoot rabbits with his friends and try out his new bow that had arrived on the last trading ship from the mainland. It was willow, pliable and light to carry, and befitted, he thought, the chieftain's son. Corc had simply grunted at that and said he didn't care if his bow was made of peat as long as it filled their pot.

It wasn't fair, Eoric had thought. Life on Lowith was hard enough, and as the chief's son – and possibly chief himself one day, as Corc never stopped reminding him – he was expected to pull his weight more than the others. He never got to go and have any fun, thought Eoric darkly. Plus, if all the turtles had suddenly decided to start washing themselves up dead on the shore, well then, that was great. Surely it meant *less* work?

The bounty had started half a moon ago, washing up the animals, shoals of them, onto the shore. No fish, just the animals who breathed above water. Dead and, oddly, seemingly half-cooked. Some of the women thought it a gift from the Gods, but Corc wasn't so sure about this, or at least was nervous. When the Gods gave a gift, there was usually a debt to pay. Still, there was more in the sea than he would ever understand, so he was simply grateful nonetheless. But whatever was causing it, the unexpected gifts should be salted and stored for hard times, or traded with the mainland for their wool and tools, he knew that much.

'Now, Eoric!' Corc shouted, but his son had already stormed off.

'Later!' he shouted back, rudely.

Corc sighed. How could he be chief of the village when he couldn't even control his own son? And now the food would go to ruin.

Almost as an afterthought he glanced around for his younger boy, Luag, but he was not in the low, dark homestead; no doubt wandering around in a dream cloud as usual, singing, or drawing or doing something else completely useless. Corc sighed and stared again at the large pile of dead turtles. Hela, the boy's mother, had been a hardworking, quiet woman, and he did miss her, though it would not have done to admit it. He wondered if she would have known how to keep the boys in line.

He missed the first yell, or assumed it was just the young village boys, exuberant for their hunt. Then he heard it again. Then he saw what they were yelling it. He dropped his gutting knife, and ran.

The Doctor smiled to himself as he caught the first hint of smoke over the brow of the low dune in front of him. Smoke meant fire, and fire meant tea, in his experience. Although it might be a bit primitive. These were early days, after all. He hoped it wasn't musk tea again. Bark tea he could just about handle, as long as you didn't let it steep. But musk was very difficult. Still, a nice fire would be lovely just around now...

He marched over the springy turf. The settlement was small, and basic. Straw roofs were visible over trench houses dug deep into the earth to keep out of the wind. Openings between the roofs and the

deep houses would let some light in, but also the wind, the rain and anything else that came past. Steps were cut into the earth, and some hardy, scrawny goats and sheep were tethered to each end. Chickens squawked and padded through the rough earth pathways from house to house. There was a large communal fire in the middle of the settlement, with a cauldron swinging gently over it, which the Doctor took to be the focal point of the village. The villagers, however, were nowhere to be found. That was peculiar. Fires burning, animals tethered, poultry still roaming... yet not a single human being to be seen.

The Doctor wiped down his dark wet hair and sighed.

'I really, really wanted that cup of tea,' he muttered to himself, removing his sonic screwdriver from his pocket, and trudging on into the tiny settlement.

On board the longship, the cries from the men above were getting louder. But Freydis, her eye pressed against the hole in the caulking, suddenly stopped screaming. 'By the Gods,' she had shouted. Looking at the water, she thought she understood.

A tall plume was emerging from the water – a plume of fire, shooting straight up in the air, metres and metres high, with flames spitting off the side. It was impossible, unbelievable; the fire burned yellow and red – if Freydis had known of such things, she might have thought it looked like a fountain or a hose shooting straight up through the waves.

It was impossible, and terrifying, and the rowers couldn't seem to move away from it; already ash and cinders were falling on the decks. Freydis could hear the screams of men, hurt. She hardened her heart against them. Not one of them had come to her aid when she had been dragged from her family and friends in Trondheim and put on this prison ship. She had no sympathy now.

And of course, she understood. It was all for her. In the stories, everyone knew. In the stories of the Gods, Siegfried had protected his lover Brynhild by putting a ring of fire around her. What else could it be, this impossible thing in the ocean, but the Gods coming to save her, a princess? This was exactly the kind of thing they did in stories she had heard since she was a child.

She watched, as the first scent of smoke from the burning mast filled the air and raised her chin. She would not be afraid. She would not scream. She would be safe. The Gods had come to save her.

Hastening past the deserted settlement and down towards the water, something caught the Doctor's eye. It was a piece of flint, hastily thrown to the side of the path. He knelt down and examined it closely. On it was drawn, in a shaky, child's hand, a beautifully articulated outline of a long, low boat. The Doctor checked the flint; it was still powdery. He could imagine instantly what had happened.

A young boy, maybe, lingering by the shore, maybe avoiding chores. There would be a lot of chores in a place like this. Sees something unusual on the horizon, draws it – and shows it to an adult who would know instantly, terribly, what it meant.

To wake up one morning as usual, then to suddenly find out, without barely a moment to prepare, that Viking raiders were descending, to burn and take everything; to do nothing but plunder and destroy. The Doctor could only imagine the fear and panic it must cause. How could you keep your wife, your children, your few possessions safe from those who would take everything, and slit your throat for a goblet of ale? Who had made the most extraordinary journey across perilous seas with, in fact, no other goal in mind? The Doctor shook his head. Humans. Their abilities to do astonishing feats for ridiculous reasons never ceased to amaze him. They did make other races seem so... simple.

The Doctor placed the flint carefully back on a rock – the drawing was rather lovely in its innocence – then hared down as fast as he could to the shore to see what awaited them.

Corc, and his son, Eoric, stood at the front of the line on the shore. Corc glanced at Eoric. The latter stood taller than his father now, his brown shaggy hair reaching down past his ears, and his whiskers coming in. His son growing up fast made him feel older. He also looked fearless, with his iron blades strapped tight to his side and a fierce expression on his young features. He was ready to fight, had always been desperate to be a man. Not like little blond motherless Luag, who could be found hanging around the village women's skirts as often as not. A dreamer. Liked drawing and walking around with a head full of sodden clouds in Corc's opinion. It wasn't what they needed on the island, anyway. Not with winter setting in. And this.

He cast his eyes to the right. All the islanders had their eyes fixed on the horizon, as the longboat had moved in past the headland, ominously silent except for a faraway splash of oars on the water. Corc swallowed hard and tightened his grip on his spear. If it was a fight they were wanting, they'd get one. Although he felt too old for the fray these days. Thirty-six; an old man. Still, the young men looked fierce enough.

But they didn't remember the other times. Corc as a small boy had watched in horror from behind the pig stalls as they had carried off, screaming, his mother and his sister, their hut alight, the air full of the smells of burning: burning huts, burning hair, blood and muck and slaughtered animals. He had stayed there, frozen with horror cowering behind the squealing animals, all night and into the next day, when hunger had finally driven him out, into a village he hardly recognised, the people who remained feeling almost ashamed. They had shared what food they could with him, but they could not bring his family back. And he did not want to creep in under someone else's hearth, like a stray seal searching for a new litter. That had toughened Corc up for ever. And they would not pass a second time.

But Eoric was shouting now, pointing; and as the boat rounded the headland they saw something astonishing and unbelievable. There was a fire; a fire on the water. It was impossible, incredible, eyes rubbing absurdly, but there it was – a huge burst of flame, emerging from beneath the waves, and spreading now, beginning to encircle the wooden boat, which no longer looked fierce, with its square striped sail and prow in the shape of a wild dragon of the furthest north, but instead small; human puny against the fire, which was blowing up harsher and harsher into a great wall of terrifying flames. Corc swore by the Beltane Gods; this was what he had wished, fervently, on his enemies these last thirty years. But now it was happening, and even here on the shore he could hear their impassioned shouts even over the roar of the waves and the crackle of the flames, he found something in himself he hadn't even known was there: pity.

On board, the panic was turning the men into animals. They were pushing and shoving over one another to get as far away from the fire as they could, but it was impossible. One man shinned the mast; another ran so far towards the port side of the boat that he tripped and fell overboard. Instantly the wall of flame shot out another ray, and he too was incinerated with an unearthly scream. One boy was huddling underneath the rowing benches, rocking back and forth with his eyes shut, muttering under his breath. The only word comprehensible was 'mother'. Another, the old bosun, had grabbed one of the barrels of mead from the galley area and was gulping down as much of it as he could.

Henrik looked around him in consternation. The flames were licking the stern of the ship now. He grabbed a bucket and started throwing water on the fire, as the captain had already started doing but to his horror, the water had almost no effect on the flames at all; just like Annar, the flames continued to burn, even when wet. Henrik shook his head. Another man, his eyes wild and glistening with the madness of panic, rushed to the side of the boat and executed a graceful dive into the sea. The flames

hit him before he even hit the water; outlining in flickering orange and red his graceful shape, before the skin turned black and crackled and with a final, deafening howl, he was extinguished.

Fully half the boat was crackling now, the flames growing closer and closer. Henrik blinked as the black smoke stung his eyes. He clasped his sword. If only there was something to fight. If he could do it as a warrior, he could stride through the gates of Valhalla, of heaven, proudly and immediately. But how could you fight this – magic, an impossible thing, a snake – monster made of fire, sent from the Gods themselves? Nonetheless, he drew his sword. Just in case. Then, amongst the commotion and the noise, he realised something. Freydis. The woman. She had stopped screaming. Was she dead? Or was she condemned to die this horrible, horrible death locked up, all alone, in a cage?

‘Hello hello!’

The Doctor strode cheerfully down to the beach. Even though the weather showed no signs of improving, and he hadn’t seen a chess set anywhere yet, the prospect of brokering some kind of reasonable peace deal between some hardworking peaceable island folk and a bunch of marauding Vikings was perking him up no end. Mind you, this was Scotland. A ruckus might be part of the fun. Well. He’d talk them out of it.

When no one from the line of islanders on the beach even so much as turned to look at him, however, he squinted and looked harder.

‘Is that ship *on fire*?’ he said. ‘And no one’s going to help them? I mean, I know it’s cold, but...’

He instantly started taking off his shoes.

Corc turned round. ‘Odin’s tongue, who are you?’

‘Why don’t we do that introductory stuff *after* we’ve saved all the burning humans?’ said the Doctor cheerily, pulling off his shoes, socks and jacket and then charging towards the water. ‘Ah!’ he said, putting a toe in and almost turning around. ‘Next regeneration, I need body fat again,’ he muttered to himself.

‘Hoi,’ said Corc, pointing. The Doctor followed it and saw another sailor, his body illuminated by the shooting finger of flame. The Doctor blinked several times.

‘You don’t happen’ he asked ‘to have a Halotron 1 fire extinguisher kicking about, I suppose?’

Corc and Eoric stared at him.

‘Nope, never mind, forget I asked.’

And the Doctor plunged into the wild and freezing sea.

The boat was lurching now, as more of the thick timber caught, smoking at first then catching fast and faster. There were minutes left, Henrik knew, if as much as that. He lurched drunkenly back down the shifting deck and, slowly, the smoke and the spray almost rendering him blind, pushed back the heavy wooden bar of the cage.

Henrik didn’t know what he was expecting to see in there – possibly nothing, if Freydis too had been incinerated – but not the calm, composed princess, kneeling obediently on the deck. Her face – for the first time he had seen her when she wasn’t screaming or spitting at anyone who crossed her path – was oddly beautiful in the crackling light, and she looked up at him with a dreamy look, as if she had no idea where she was.

‘I am saved,’ she said, her hand over her mouth.

Henrik winced, almost choking on the thick black smoke. ‘Well, I wouldn’t be too sure about that,’ he said. ‘I just...’

Freydis smiled. ‘Oh. Not by you,’ she said. ‘By Odin of course. By the Gods.’

‘Oh. Well. Good,’ said Henrik, suddenly feeling ridiculous. ‘Only I just wanted to...’

But he didn’t get to the end of his sentence. Suddenly the mast cracked from the flames and came pounding down on the deck, making a sickening noise as it landed on several sailors. Even Freydis looked momentarily startled.

‘Come with me,’ said Henrik, barely knowing what he meant. He shot out his hand. And, barely realising what she was doing, Freydis took it, and ducked through the low entrance.

This was no ordinary fire, the Doctor realised, swimming briskly. The flame, if you looked closely, glowed green as well as orange and yellow. No wonder it worked so well on the water. But how... He watched closely, treading water, pained as another man went over the side, then WHOOSH, lit up like a flamethrower. It was an ungodly sight.

He didn’t – couldn’t – make a move to help in time, so instead, murmuring briefly, ‘I’m sorry’, he focused fiercely and completely on the process. At one point he ducked his head completely under, to see what was happening underneath the waves. There was nothing at all, except what seemed to be a tiny glimmer of green, far below, which could be a trick of the light. The fire did not seem to exist under the surface, just above it. But where was it coming from? It seemed to erupt from the surface of the ocean itself, but could not survive immersion. Well, that was information he could use.

Before the flames turned on him, he eyed a section of the deck he could still board, then plunged under again, his feet kicking against the waves.

Henrik and Freydis drew closer together as the flames licked higher, the boat now filling with water as its sides burned away. Freydis was shaking like a leaf.

‘It will be all right,’ she whispered, glancing repeatedly at the sky, as if expecting at any moment the grey clouds to part and the great bridge to Valhalla to open up ahead of her and usher her to heaven.

Henrik swallowed, his mind a jumble of conflicting thoughts at these, his last moments. ‘I’m sorry. I’m glad...’ he said, stumbling, then felt like an idiot for saying this, then wondered why he was worrying about sounding like an idiot when he was facing certain death. Instead of any more talking, they squeezed hands together more tightly, and closed their eyes as the flames burned higher and higher around them.

‘Hallo!’ came a loud voice moments later.

Henrik opened one eye. This wasn’t exactly what he expected from the famous Valkyrie who should be waiting for him, drinking horn in hand, at the gates of Valhalla. Plus, he could still feel the flames beating against him.

No. This tall, pale, clean-shaven creature crouching in front of him, shivering and gesticulating madly, didn’t look like he was welcoming them to anything.

‘Now, I don’t want to hurry you,’ the man continued.

Freydis blinked, opened her wide pale eyes. Then she blinked again, as if she had expected to find herself somewhere else, but said nothing.

‘No, let me start that again,’ said the man. ‘I really, really do want to hurry you. So, if we want to get out of here, and I would recommend us definitely, *definitely* doing that, we need to move pretty sharpish.’ He moved to the front of the burning ship. ‘OK. About here. Here’s what we’re going to do. He called over to the remaining, terrified men, most of whom were cowering. ‘Right everyone. We have to capsize the ship!’

‘Are you crazy? We’ll drown as fast as we’ll burn,’ shouted one man.

‘No, no. It’s the only way. The flames can’t burn you underneath the water. Can’t you see? The only catch light above the waves. They need the air to burn. Once they’re burning, any part of you that’s in air will burn, and jolly well keep on burning. But if we’re all under... with some air...’

Henrik blinked. ‘For how long though?’

‘My good man, could we have one deadly issue to deal with at a time? Thank you,’ said the Doctor. ‘Now. Everyone. Jump as hard as you can on the starboard side. And for heaven’s sake, duck! You want to be *inside* when we go over. I’m not sure I can stress this highly enough. Now. One. Two. Three...’

Stunned into obedience by the chaos all around them, the sailors leapt as one and rocked hard on the unstable surface, which nearly tipped them in, but not quite far enough.

‘OK,’ said the Doctor, gesticulating to the captain to roll over the barrel of mead to their side on the boat. ‘One more time.’

And, as the flames licked ever higher, the tiny group on the diminishing boat in the middle of the wide, cold ocean jumped and pushed as hard as they could, until they felt the boat turn turtle, almost agonisingly slowly, the remains of the mast rolling down first, as they clung to stools and planks. The sky above them, already dark with smoke, became completely dark as the boat creaked over, dunking all of them in the water as they held on as tightly as they could.

‘GET UNDER! GET UNDER!’ shouted the Doctor. One poor lad was too late and didn’t make it with them on time. His screams, as the boat crashed down on them, leaving him outside and exposed to the terrible flames, were piteous to hear, but Freydis and Henrik were already underwater, Freydis plunging down down down into the depths, swirling round and round with the caskets, hammocks, oars, planks, bread, chicken cages, boots and axes as they sank through the freezing dark.

Henrik felt his eyes and ears fill up with the icy water as they plunged in, and fought his instinctive urge to panic; instead, he looked for the way the bubbles were going, as his father had taught him, and felt for the boat above his head. He caught a rowing bench, bolted to the keel, and hauled himself up into the air pocket, taking a huge gulp of air. Instantly, though, looking round, he realised that the long golden braids of Freydis were missing. She was not there.

The Doctor always had to resist the temptation to stay under. It was so beautiful, so new down there, so much to see: it was always hard not to stay too long. But he had a large lung capacity advantage over the others, and he had to use it. He dived as far down as he could – he wanted desperately to find out the source of the fire, but first he had to count the heads.

The blonde hair, never cut, swirled round and round in the wake of the fast-moving water. The Doctor grabbed hold of it, coiled it up around his arm like a mythical beast. Freydis looked astonishingly peaceful, sinking in the water, her arms flowing free, but her legs together, wrapped up in her long gown like a mermaid’s tail; her eyes closed, even the faint trace of a smile around her mouth.

‘Oh no you don’t,’ said the Doctor, drawing her to him, wrapping her body gracelessly around his and shooting them both up as fast as he could from six metres down, aiming for the dark under-bow of the longship. ‘Not on my watch, please.’

Chapter Four

IN THE DARK, lapping enclosure, with the hull of the boat overhead, the six surviving men – from an original crew of forty – were staring at one another, wide eyed and panting. Nobody spoke. They could hear the creaking of the wood; the splashing of the waves against the upturned hull... but as the boat had submerged itself in the water, the parts still burning had sheared away and sunk, and the crackling, terrible noise of the fire had gone – at least for now. They panted hard, barely able to believe they were still alive; still too panicky to think beyond, to think of their fellows who had not made it. Except for Henrik. He took a deep breath.

‘I’m going down,’ he said. ‘I have to find her.’

The other men looked at him dimly, without really seeing him. Henrik gulped. He could swim, of course, but he’d learned in the cold, placid fjords, not a wild, endless raging sea when he was already cold and shivering and very, very frightened. He steeled himself... but just as he did so, there was a splashing break in the water and the Doctor popped up, Freydis pale and clasped around his neck.

‘Ha ha!’ the Doctor exclaimed. ‘Here we are! Have you chaps invented the kiss of life yet?’ He glanced at the uncomprehending faces. ‘Thought not. OK. Watch, and pass it on to your descendants etcetera. Can you hold her steady, please?’

Henrik found himself trying to tread water and hold up the princess as the strange man did who appeared to be blowing into her mouth. He decided not to argue as, with a stutter and a quick throwing up of what seemed like pints of seawater, Freydis’s clear eyes twitched and blinked open in shock.

‘There we are,’ said the Doctor. ‘Great. I hate doing that. Salty.’ He instantly turned away. Freydis continued to blink in confusion.

‘It’s all right’ said Henrik, patting her on the hand. Although in the freezing cold and wet darkness with something outside that could shoot flame, it didn’t seem all right at all.

‘Now,’ said the Doctor. ‘First things first. I’m the Doctor, by the way.’

One of the other men, who’d been watching the scene, now put up his hand by way of a greeting. ‘Dorcnor.’

‘Ragnor,’ said a second.

‘Terrific!’ said the Doctor. ‘I love not having to explain my name. Now. Listen. Has anyone noticed that it’s a bit cold in here?’

The skin on the men had gone translucently pale. Most of them were trembling, with chattering teeth. Freydis, ominously, was not.

‘I see you have. Great. You’re way ahead of me. Right, well. Not to spoil your day, but if we don’t get out of this water in the next seven minutes, you’re probably going to go hypothermic and die. But if we do try and get out of the water, whatever that fire thing is, it’s going to go for us. It’s clearly sensing motion on the top of the waves, I’m afraid. So. There’s only one obvious solution.’

Everyone looked at him blankly.

‘We’re going to have to make like fish.’

‘Under the water?’ asked Henrik, stupidly.

‘No, flying fish,’ snapped the Doctor. ‘Yes. Under the water. All the way to shore. Follow the

waves. If you absolutely have to breathe, turn on your back and try and stick nothing up further than your nose. At your own risk.'

The men looked at one another.

'It's a long way.'

'It's a long night, death,' mused the Doctor. 'I'll take the girl.'

Surprisingly, Freydis suddenly seemed to wake up a little more.

'You will not lay your hands on me,' she said, her voice weak but absolutely undeniable. 'You will keep your hands off my person.'

'Yes, I'm sorry about that... kissing thing just there. Unavoidable.'

'You should not have saved me,' said Freydis, furiously. 'This is the will of the Gods. They are protecting me. Calling me to them.'

'By killing all those other chaps?' asked the Doctor mildly. 'Nice fellows your Gods, are they?'

'This is meant to be,' persisted Freydis.

'Don't talk to me of things that are meant to be' said the Doctor, more sternly than he had intended. 'Now. Everyone. You have to take as deep breaths as you can. And quickly, before that *thing* realises there are still people in here. Are you ready?'

'Vikings are always ready,' said Ragnor.

'Well, that is excellent. Come on then. Follow me.'

Looking back, Henrik would remember that long passage under water as if it were a dream; the tightness in his chest; following the Doctor's long slim form with the waves ahead of him; feeling his blood pounding his body as he forced his legs to kick, every sinew of him straining to breathe, to lift his head above the waves, to breathe in – water, air, it scarcely mattered – the Doctor occasionally letting them turn over and risk a tiny mouthful of air under the up-turned boat, which ended up a mouthful of saltwater as often as not – and being dimly aware at last, at last, that the water was getting shallower; the waves crashing on the shore; and finally the sea spitting him out up on the cold white beach; he, and his fellows, and a bursting, panting Freydis, washed up with the tide and the detritus from the boat; casks and corks and chess pieces, scattered all around.

*

The Doctor was the first to stagger to his feet onto the shore; the swim had affected him less than the others. He jumped around to stare out to sea, but there was nothing left; no trace of the proud Viking boat that had been there – the burnt hull was in their arms; her mast, proud sail and goods long gone along with the men who had sailed her, and the extraordinary plumes of fire that had devoured her.

'Well,' he said, clasping his hands together. 'I do think this calls for a cup of tea.'

He turned round again, and found himself face to face with Corc, chief of the isle of Lowit, standing at the head of a line of village men, swords drawn, faces of stone.

'Here they are!' he said jovially. 'All saved and grateful.'

The Viking survivors were coughing and gasping their way up the beach, the cold taking root in their very bones. They were human flotsam amidst the wreckage washed to shore: odd spears, pieces of charred wood, chess pieces.

Corc shook his head. 'Why?' he said simply. 'Why did you bring them here?'

The Doctor glanced from one group to another, confused. Then he remembered.

'Oh yes,' he said. 'Viking raiders, pillage and burning all that stuff. Oh, I wouldn't worry about

that. I think they'll be so grateful for a hot cup of tea and perhaps a blanket of some kind...' he added hopefully, pulling his shirt back on, 'that you'll all be best of friends in no time.'

'They came before,' said Corc, not moving. 'I swore they would not come again. Not while I stand.'

'Well, yes,' said the Doctor, a hand moving to adjust his bow tie. 'Is this on straight, by the way?'

'Is what on straight?' grunted Corc.

'Um, never mind.'

'Who are you? Are you one of them? The advance party?'

'No,' said the Doctor. 'No, no, no, no. I'm...'

He took out the psychic paper. He looked at it for a long time, but it remained frustratingly blank.

'Runic society. Gah!' he said to himself. The paper apologetically produced a picture of a rabbit.

'Rabbit inspector? I don't think so.' He looked back at the hard man and round at the hard landscape and reluctantly put the paper away. 'I'm a friend,' he said. 'I just turned up at the same time, that's all. A traveller. I'm a friend who wants to help.'

He turned out to the grey sea. 'Did you see that thing?'

Corc met the Doctor's steady gaze. 'I did.'

'Have you ever seen anything like it before?'

'Fire that moves upon the water?'

It was his pause that gave him away.

'You have.'

Corc blinked. 'I haven't seen it,' he said.

'But?'

'But... well... at first...' he said. 'At first it was the turtles.'

'What about the turtles?'

'More than we had ever seen before. Washed up, dead upon the shore. Ready for eating too. Like a gift from the Gods.' He snorted.

'Interesting,' said the Doctor. 'Creatures that float above the waves. No fish, though?'

Corc shook his head. 'Turtles and seals mostly. Do you think it was a gift from the Gods?'

'So what did you do?' said the Doctor, ignoring the question.

Corc began to feel rather stupid. 'Well, we took it, of course. And left the water God well alone.'

'You just took it and crossed your fingers?' said the Doctor.

Corc didn't understand this, and looked at the Doctor impassively. His hair was dark. Perhaps he came from one of the fabled countries overseas where everything grew and everything could be eaten and life was soft and easy. He had heard of these places. Someone from there could not begin to understand what life was here.

'Do you think...?' asked the Doctor softly, 'Do you think now your water god, or whatever he actually is, has found that he can feed on human flesh, that he will leave your sons alone? Do you think that he is only here to deliver fish now?'

Corc stared at the group of desperate figures on the shore. The Doctor implored him.

'Look. Something is wrong. You know it is. You can feel it. You can see it. The reckoning is here for your free food. And I can help. I can help you figure out what it is, and how to stop it. Altogether. You can do it... but you can't... you really can't, I'm afraid, leave a load of human beings on a beach to die.'

Corc eyed the coughing, shaking men and the figure of the girl lying on the shoreline. The Doctor gave him a long look. There was an even longer pause. Then Corc raised his spear and turned to face

his people.

Chapter Five

‘WE WILL SAVE them,’ Corc announced loudly to the long row of men and women standing on the shore. There was an audible intake of breath.

‘No!’ came a young voice. It was the sullen Eoric, his son. ‘No! We shall not show mercy! They would not do the same for us! They would leave us all for the birds, dead in our beds without thinking about it for a second. They are the animals; the animals of the furthest north.’

‘And we are *not* animals’ said Corc, turning to face his son. ‘The osprey cannot have mercy, but we can.’

‘Father, you will build up their strength then they will turn, pounce and kill us all,’ said Eoric. Several of the other men of the village were clearly agreeing with him. The Doctor stood poised, unable to leave the negotiations. He caught, though, out of the corner of his eye, a trace of movement and he smiled.

Corc looked around. He was a hard man – he had to be – but this stranger was right. They needed to find out if there was a threat to them – a threat more serious than the Vikings.

But more than this, he could not be publicly challenged by his son. One day, yes. But not yet.

‘*Do it!*’ he roared.

Eoric felt his stomach lurch, but he stood firm. He wasn’t a child any more, and his father had to realise that. Suddenly, however, one of the women gasped and pointed. Down by the water’s edge, a small boy was already darting in and out of the sailors, comforting them and trying to cover them up with his own clothes.

‘*Luag!*’ roared Corc in disbelief at his younger son. But once Luag had begun the work, the women of the village followed him too, taking off their woven head coverings and long brown and dark coloured cloaks. The Doctor’s lips twitched. Corc gave him a shrewd look. Eoric spat once on the ground and made an unusual pointed gesture with his second and fourth fingers off the tip of his cheekbone that the Doctor had never seen before on Earth, but was nonetheless recognised as profoundly offensive in more than 4,000 cultures in the universe. Eoric then stormed off in a sulky mood. Several of his buddies followed along behind him.

Well, thought the Doctor, there wasn’t time for that now. He grabbed his jacket and wrapped it around Freydis, as the islanders welcomed their sworn enemies, helping them back up to the settlement and added huge mounds of gorse and peat to the fire, which crackled up comfortably high.

The Vikings shot glances at each other – six men, one woman – as gradually they began to return a sensation back into painfully chilled fingers and toes. One of the women brought round a bark tea that they gulped gratefully, and a hot mutton broth with spelt bread that tasted to Henrik better than the sweetest honeyed mead. The captain, Ragnor, could converse a little in their language, which sounded a bit like home and a bit like something else to Henrik, but he mastered the pleases and thank yous easily enough.

Henrik noticed that the tall, oddly dressed stranger – who had taken an enormous gulp of the bark tea, then (obviously believing himself unobserved) spat it out behind a patch of gorse, sighing heavily – sounded completely at home in either language. He wondered who the man was.

What were they going to do now, Henrik thought, once he could feel his fingers again. It could be months before another boat was sent out; King Gissar wasn't expecting them for weeks. Trondheim wouldn't send a boat, it would just assume they'd all died at sea. Which most of them had done. It struck him suddenly that they might never see their homeland again.

The Princess, Freydis, wearing the stranger's jacket, had warmed herself up and drunk a tiny bit of tea but refused the meal and had now taken herself off to sit on a nearby rock, and stare moodily into the middle distance. He had thought that perhaps being rescued from certain death might make her slightly less disagreeable, but clearly that was not the case. Freydis herself was trying to puzzle it out. She had not seen the great stone bridge to Valhalla open in the sky. And yet... and yet, here she was. Alive, and no longer on the way to marry Gissar. She felt tricked out of what she had felt was her certain fate – and yet her fate had changed nonetheless. She glanced curiously at the tall stranger, a dressed figure conversing at high speed. Could it be?

Attention had turned to the curious stranger.

'Why do you speak our tongue? Are you a Norseman? You have no beard. Are you a child?'

'I think he's a fish,' grunted Ragnor. 'Did you see the way he swam out there?'

'Well, I...'

'He's our saviour,' said Dornor, raising the cup to him. 'Thanks, friend.'

'Well, I...'

'Well, how do you know he didn't start that fire?' said another. 'It had to come from somewhere...'

'Well, I...'

Freydis turned round imperiously from where she was perched on her rock. 'I know who you are,' she said.

Everyone, including the Doctor, looked at her expectantly.

'You have many faces,' she said quietly.

The Doctor raised his eyebrows. 'Yes,' he said almost to himself. 'Most, it has to be said, a bit more straightforward than this one.'

Freydis glanced at Corc, who was deep in conversation with a small tight group of suspicious-looking men-folk.

'You talk to him, you talk to us, you talk to the fishes as far as I can tell,' she said. 'But you talk to no one's side. I know who you are.'

Everyone stared at her.

'You are Loki. You're a God.'

The Doctor looked slightly embarrassed. 'Now, don't talk nonsense,' he said. 'You've had too much dowsing.'

'You are the trickster. The shape shifter,' said Freydis. 'The joker.'

'I... uh, well...'

'What Siegfried has done to protect me, you will seek to undo.'

The Doctor scratched his head. 'What Siegfried... Oh!' he said. 'Of course. The ring of fire to protect his maiden. And you're Brynhild requiring rescue, is that it?'

Freydis stared hard out to sea. 'I am nothing but traded goods,' she said.

The Doctor moved closer.

'Stay away, trickster,' said Freydis, turning to look at him.

'You're cargo?' he asked gently.

‘I was bought and paid for in Trondheim.’

‘But no one will know where you are now.’

Freydis ran her fingers through her heavy hair.

‘They’ll find us,’ the Captain Ragnor said heavily. The other Vikings were muttering round the fire. ‘She’s too precious a cargo to run without an escort.’

‘But how?’ said Henrik. He glanced at the men of the settlement, who were still staring at them with hostility. ‘And when?’

‘Hello,’ said the Doctor, bending down to talk to the small boy who had been the first to help the visitors. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Luag,’ said the child. ‘What are you wearing?’ He was eyeing the glint of the Doctor’s buttons in the firelight.

Solemnly the Doctor looked down at his shirt and pulled off the very bottom button. ‘They’re buttons,’ he said. ‘Would you like one?’

The boy, who seemed to be around six or seven, nodded eagerly. ‘I won’t show Eoric,’ he said decisively. ‘He’s too rough faced today.’

‘Is that your brother?’ asked the Doctor.

Luag nodded. ‘He’s *amazing* at fighting,’ he said confidently. ‘But a bit grumpy.’

The Doctor nodded. ‘He’s a teenager. That’s not a concept that’s due to become fashionable for about twelve hundred years, but it really just means grumpy. And reckless, without impulse control and occasionally aggressive...’

He shot a quick anxious look into the woods where Eoric had retired with his friends. ‘But most of all, delightful,’ he added, hastily. ‘And what about you? You were very good at helping those people.’

‘That water gets bad cold,’ said Luag. ‘Even the *seals* get cold.’

‘Oh I *love* seals,’ said the Doctor. ‘They’re *brilliant*. With the clapping and the little balls and everything.’

Luag nodded. ‘Yes, delicious,’ he said.

‘Oh, yes,’ said the Doctor. ‘Now, I think we should get the Viking captain and your dad to talk, do you think?’

‘What about?’ said Luag.

‘What do you talk about with your friends?’ said the Doctor. He looked at the two groups of men, one huddling, looking defeated and anxious, but still defiant; still Vikings. And the other, curious and angry with remembered humiliations of the past; a desperation not to lose face or be invaded by strangers. Of extending hospitality to those who had killed; burned; taken. He was not sure he could hold the two sides apart for long.

‘Bladderball!’ said Luag, his face lighting up.

‘What?’ said the Doctor. Then he realised what he meant. ‘The game?’

‘I can get the bladder!’ said Luag. ‘It makes you nice and warm too.’

‘You know’ said the Doctor. ‘I think you might have cracked it, my friend.’

The Doctor watched from the sidelines. He was torn – there was a mystery here, something needed sorting out. But the most urgent thing right now was to make sure the locals and the Vikings played nicely together. Literally. However much it irked him, the fire would have to wait.

At first the two sides looked at each other nervously. It had taken all of the Doctor’s persuading and geeing-up to get them to even consider it. But as soon as the ball – a sheep’s bladder welked with

tar – was thrown in the air, neither side could help itself.

Henrik charged first. It had already been the strangest of days, but he too had felt the awkward atmosphere with the islanders – had heard, too, from older men back in Trondheim of victories won and women kidnapped from the many settlements dotted over the bony head of the Celtic isles over the years – and anything that might dispel the tension without spilling blood on either side seemed a good thing to do.

Ragnor too had jumped up, keen as mustard. Luag had acted as throw-in then played exuberantly for whichever side seemed to be winning, as did his little friends who spilled out of the local homesteads as soon as their mothers realised the strangers were not here for the usual reasons.

The Lowith men, at first grudging, were pretty soon very keen to show their strength, and the game – a fairly free-running mixture of football, rugby and punching – went overwhelmingly in their favour until the Doctor joined in on the Viking side to even it up a bit. He didn't mean to show off – well, not in as far as showing off was entirely essential under the circumstances, he rationalised. Probably doing that finger-spinny thing the Harlem Globetrotters had taught him in 1978 was overegging the pudding but the little ones had enjoyed it, and the adults had been mostly admiring.

Freydis ignored it all, staring out to sea. Her certainty that she was being saved by the Gods – where were they? Apart from this... her gaze passed over the Doctor with something like disdain. If he was here to take her to Valhalla, she wished he'd get a move on. And if he was going to take her as his bride, well, he was better than Gissar that was for sure, though not what she'd have chosen...

Anyway, the stranger showed absolutely no inclination in that direction either, judging by the exuberance with which he'd just hit a sheep's bladder towards a tor of rocks whilst whooping and throwing his hands in the air. She sighed, feeling very lonely, even as a young woman from the village came up and, smiling, and with a few words, indicated that she was welcome to stay with them.

The game was evening up, but night was falling fast; the pitch ball was getting harder and harder to see. 'Last run!' shouted someone, and Henrik, his limbs tired but strong after weeks of rowing, found it hurtling in his direction. He leapt up, gracefully, his blond hair rippling down his back, and found it just in time, sending it thudding straight into the winning tor, where it bounced off and found itself in Freydis's lap. Amidst great cheers from the Vikings, he advanced forward to retrieve it, bowing low before her.

'My lady,' he said.

Freydis tried to pretend she had not been watching, had not caught sight of his tall, strong body leaping in the air. His face was pink from exertion and blushing, his hair rippling from his head in a long mane. He grinned at her, showing very white teeth, then remembered her status and dropped his head and his knees. It felt strange here, in the middle of nowhere, miles from everything they knew, after facing almost certain death, to be observing the courtesies of a faraway court. But they did. And both sides, suddenly, started to applaud.

Corc hailed his guests to the great hall. It was nothing on the large, brightly coloured wooden buildings, many of more than one storey, that populated their home town of Trondheim, but they were polite and grateful enough not to mention it. The long low building was thatched with gorse and made of peat, and had as few window openings as possible to keep out the harsh westerly wind. A large fire in the centre made the space smoky, lit as it was by seal-rendered candles; but there was the hearty smell of fish and a huge cauldron of rabbit stew which made the men as hungry as only those saved from certain death, taking a long swim then hurled into a ball game can be. They advanced with mer-

hearts.

Corc had to first find Eoric. He excused himself by saying he was going to the privy then headed off to their low homestead. Eoric was mooching around talking to his friends, but one glance from Corc and they shuffled off, heads bent low.

‘My son,’ said Corc. ‘It did not... I did not like the way you defied me today.’

Eoric looked sullen. ‘Well, I didn’t like the way you welcomed in those killers,’ he spat.

‘They are human beings,’ said Corc. ‘There was a lady aboard. It seemed the right thing to do.’

‘So they can eat our food and drink our mead then when it’s done burn us all to the ground for jape? Like they usually do? Because you’re too scared to fight?’

‘I am scared of no man,’ said Corc, thinking to himself that whilst that was true, he had been terribly afraid of the flames he had seen on the water. ‘But I do believe in mercy. I hope you can understand one day.’

Eoric had taken the loss of his mother hard, which Corc had found difficult. He was hardly the first babe-in-arms to lose a parent. Luag was bad enough, baaing around the place, but Eoric was five, and should have borne it better. At least his mother had died in the normal way, childbirth, rather than being carted off kicking and screaming... Corc put the memory away. The men in his village now were not those men. They were their guests. Therefore they would not behave like those men.

He had to tell himself that.

Eoric’s posturing and fighting poses had only ever been an attempt to cover up his sadness. Corc loved the boy, in his rough way. He remembered his father too. How, when he was that age, he thought everything his father said was foolish. But he would never have dared to mention it; his father would have whipped him spare. Maybe that was the problem. He’d been too soft on him, and little Luag. But he knew what it was to grow up without a mother; when the other boys had someone to soothe their hurts and listen to their childish prattling, the three males together had just had work to be getting on with. It was what it was.

‘Son,’ he commanded. ‘You will obey me. And you will show a good face to our visitors.’

‘Never,’ said Eoric. He looked at his father with a burning loathing in his eyes. ‘Never.’

‘Fine,’ said Corc, in a voice that had gone dangerously quiet. ‘You still need to light the braziers.’

The two braziers on the easterly side of the island were a sign to the other islands further inland: Harris and Skye, which in turn could pass on to the mainland a warning: do not come. Things are dangerous. One brazier lit meant send help; two, a simple admonishment – we have disease, or war, stay away.

Corc saw no reason to invite his neighbours; if there was a monster haunting the waves, it could bring a slaughter. And he couldn’t imagine the other island folk would be able to help; he had never heard tell of anything like this. The strange man called Doctor was the only one who seemed confident that everything would be all right.

‘I will not,’ said Eoric. ‘I’m going to drink mead at Gren’s.’

‘You are *not*,’ said Corc, suddenly incandescent with rage. ‘You will take your work seriously for once and do as I say, or you will feel the flat of my sword, and don’t think for a moment that you’re too large or that I won’t do it. I assure you I will.’

Eoric saw in his father’s eyes that he had pushed it too far. He exhaled loudly. ‘I’m not breaking bread with those murderers,’ he grunted.

‘Very well,’ said Corc. ‘You’re barred anyway. I don’t want you sitting there huffing and ruining all. Just light the damned brazier then you can do what you like. I wash my hands of you.’

Eoric, furious and embarrassed all at once, stormed out of the homestead, stopping only to give his

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