

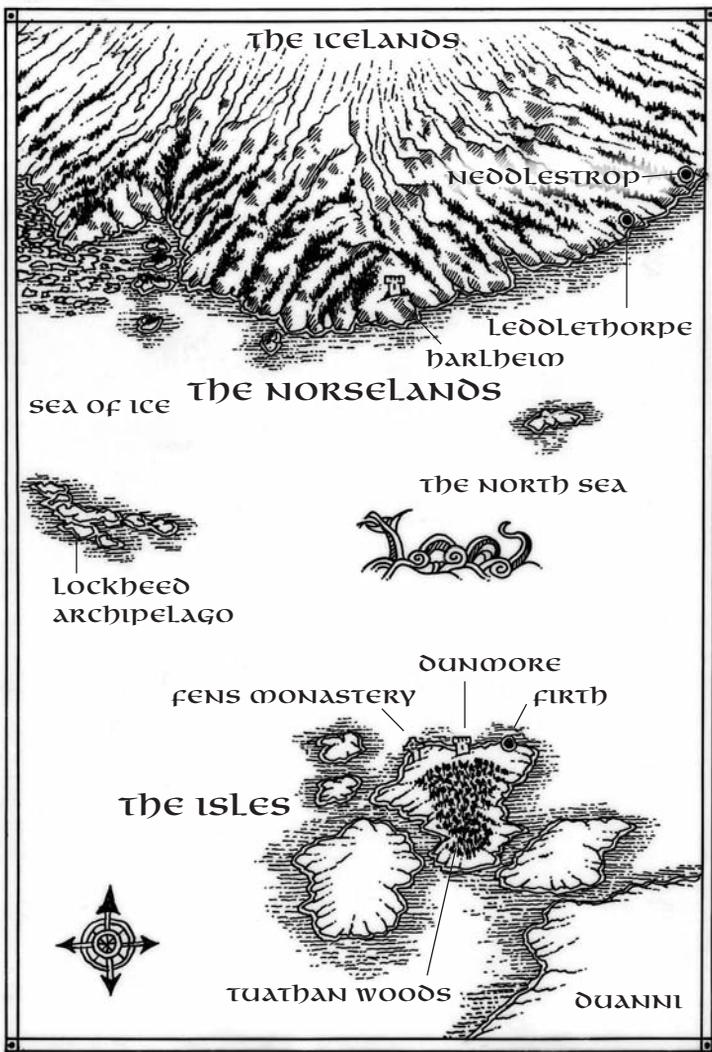
THE RUNES OF ODIN BEN JULIEN



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The NORTHERN LANDS



ONE

PART



Cuimhnich air na daoine o'n d'bhàinig thu
'Remember the people from whom you came'
— common Isles saying



calum

The sword struck high and heavy, thudding into the wooden shield before dancing away to seek an opening below its rim. The shield bearer, a young man with a mane of white-blond hair, jumped backwards with a surprised grunt and waited warily for his opponent to follow up the attack. Instead, the sword wielder opposite him dropped his guard and let the point of the wooden practice sword fall to the churned turf at his feet.

‘I swear, Calum, if you spent any more time backing away and defending, you’d turn into a shield yourself!’

At that, Calum also loosened his grip on his wooden sword and shield and wiped away the sweat stinging his eyes.

‘What, is the mighty Broc ab Karney worried about his reputation?’ Calum exclaimed sarcastically. ‘The mighty Broc ab Karney can’t even hit his little brother?’

‘*Foster* brother! And “little” is correct — you must be all of eight summers and still can’t swing that hunk of wood in your fist,’ Broc replied, as he suddenly brought up his practice sword and charged, swinging a wild roundhouse attack on Calum’s shield-arm.

‘Fourteen summers!’ Calum grunted as he brought his shield up and took the bone-shuddering blow directly in the centre of it. He thrust his own sword back at his older brother in an attempt to slow him down, knowing how rapidly the next blow could come. Broc was right, Calum rarely had the opportunity to strike a blow of his own, mostly because of his opponent’s speed — Broc was acknowledged by all who knew

him as a deft swordsman, agile and daring. He had trained with the sword, shield and spear every spare hour of the day since he was old enough to lift the scaled-down practice weapons, and he was a natural. Calum, on the other hand, was not. He was cautious and methodical, preferring to be absolutely sure before striking — not something that happened often when practising with Broc.

‘Hit! Me! Back!’ Broc punctuated each word with another blow to Calum’s shield. Chips of wood and splinters were flying everywhere and with a last swipe that had all his strength behind it, Broc’s wooden sword snapped and flew off to the side, thudding into the wall of a nearby barn.

Both young men stopped, panting hard, and grinned at each other. There were no more practice swords left in the barrel by the barn and, although for the moment they had no chores to worry about, both knew it wouldn’t be long before Broc’s father, Karney Firth, would be along to give Calum work to do before sunset. Broc himself, older than Calum by four summers, would most likely be ordered to make another barrel of swords.

‘Hey, Broc ...’ Calum began.

‘Yeah, let’s get out of here before my Da comes,’ Broc said, dropping his shield by the barrel and throwing the remaining hilt of his shattered sword on the wood pile along the north wall of the barn. He waited for Calum to do the same, then they both hurried out the side gate of the Firth — the farm and homestead that was almost their whole world.

The path beyond the side gate led through the trees, winding its way up a sharp hill. At the top of the hill the two young men paused to look down into the gorge that opened below them. They had explored its secrets many times, looking for hidden caves, climbing the scraggly trees that grew

at the base, and they had followed it out to the craggy rocks a few hundred metres away where the North Sea crashed its waves. Broc and Calum followed the path until the ground grew too rocky for the trees to grow and a view of the vivid blue ocean was revealed, hinting of far away places and dark powers beneath the angry waves.

As always the view brought Calum a mixture of feelings. The sea was something to be wary of, to be carefully respected, even to be feared as, like everyone he knew, Calum could not swim. Though he lived among the Isles, he had never been on a boat — not that he could remember anyway — and the idea of gliding across the surface of this great, surging, endless expanse of water was both terrifying and fascinating. Something in the ocean before him sang to him, something touched a chord within him that sang back and the power of it was exhilarating, as only the most dangerous things in life were.

Broc was less reflective. ‘Bad fishing today by the looks of it, Calum,’ he said, glancing at the sea as he walked along the path, which twisted away from the gorge along the cliff. ‘Wouldn’t like to be out there today, or any day for that matter! Mad people, those fishermen in Dunmore.’

Broc’s words broke through Calum’s thoughts and he hurried after his foster brother, loving the feeling of the ocean wind on his face, whipping his hair around his shoulders, as Broc continued talking. ‘Still, I love fish.’

The path finally turned away from the cliff and took a straight line toward the road that connected Firth and the town of Dunmore, a day’s walk away. As Broc stepped onto the road, Calum suddenly ran past him, laughing, and headed off away from the road, into the trees.

‘Race you to the acorn tree!’ he yelled, as he dodged through the trees. Never one to avoid competition, Broc

immediately raced after him. He was easily the faster runner, but he knew Calum spent a lot of time on the edge of the woods ahead of them and he found it hard to keep up. In fact, he soon lost sight of the blond-headed figure in front of him and slowed to try to recognise where he was.

Broc had spent his whole life in this area, but mostly to the north of the Dunmore road, away from the woods, generally known as the South Wold. Nobody went to the woods, nobody. Everyone knew how easy it was to get lost amongst the dense foliage. The stories about the *sidbe*, the spirits, who lived among the branches, waiting for the lone traveller, were used by every mother to frighten her children into obedience.

One particular story had made an impression on Broc when he was much younger. His mother had told him about a *sidbe* who appeared as a beautiful young woman to attract boys and men, but then suddenly changed into a hideously ugly old crone and emitted a terrible shriek that killed all who heard it. The *bean sidbe* she called it or a *banshee* as Broc's father, Karney, had said when Broc asked him about the story. Karney had laughed.

'Sounds just like your mother, boy, and she got me too!'

In any case, almost everyone stayed away from the woods to the south. Everyone except for Calum, Broc thought ruefully. And because of him, me too now, he thought, as he emerged into the little clearing among the scattered trees near the beginning of the dense woods. Calum was already climbing into the big acorn tree in the middle of the clearing, plucking and throwing acorns at his newly arrived brother.

'How do you like this for an attack, hey?'' he said as he threw the nuts. 'You still haven't hit me once today!'

Broc laughed and caught a couple of the acorns. He put them in his pocket for later roasting as Calum swung down

from the tree and slumped onto the ground next to him. Broc crouched warily on his ankles, looking at the woods' edge before them.

'I'll never understand what you like about this place, Calum,' he said.

Calum followed his gaze to the woods. 'What's not to like? There're acorns, sweet grass beneath you and the sun on your face ...' he replied.

Broc threw an acorn at him. 'You know I mean the South Wold! This clearing is nothing.'

'Did you know that in Dunmore they call it the Tuathan Woods?' Calum said, looking thoughtful. 'Karney said the Tuatha were the original peoples of the Isles, who were driven out long ago by our ancestors. But they possessed powerful magic and fled into the woods, the earth, the sea and the rocks, and now we call them *sidbe*. Karney said his older brother went into the woods once and saw a *sidbe*. Apparently he was always a little crazy after that.'

'He never told me that! Though Uncle Edan *was* crazy,' Broc agreed, fiddling with a twig from the ground. 'Anyway, if that's true, why do you come here so much? No-one else I know does.'

'I don't know really. There's something about this place, the gorge, and the sea and the beach over at Caer Rocks.' Calum looked away from the woods and back at Broc. 'You know your father, Karney Firth. You know that he came from Dunmore and made a place for himself out here. You know you'll take over from him when he gets old. You know you're the best swordsman in Firth and maybe in Dunmore, even though you're the youngest.'

'Well, I don't know any of that. All I know is that my father died somewhere and my mother brought me here to live and

then died before she thought to tell me who I am. If it wasn't for Karney, I don't know what would have happened to me. These woods, these places, they're *old*, they're full of mysteries and secrets, and ... and they feel ...' Calum struggled to find the word he was looking for, '... *right*.'

Broc looked uncomfortable and shifted his position on the ground. 'You know I was joking before about the foster brother thing?'

Calum smiled. 'Yeah I know, but it's true, anyway!'

'But it's *not* true! Well, I mean, maybe you are my foster brother, but ever since you arrived with your mother out of the storm ten summers ago, soaking wet and bawling your eyes out, you *have* been my brother.' Broc looked straight at Calum. 'And you always will be. Your place is at Firth, never doubt that.'

'I know,' Calum replied. 'I don't want to sound ungrateful, you and Karney are my family, I know. But I can't help wondering about who my parents were.'

'Well, all your mother told us was that she fled from some fighting in the north. She seemed so distraught at the time, my Da said, that they left it at that. She worked hard and never spoke wrong of anyone so she wasn't pushed. Hey, maybe you're really a Norseman!' Broc was laughing now at the thought. 'Calum the Terrible!'

Calum laughed back and jumped at him, pushing him backwards. Broc tumbled and got up, running out of the clearing, taking a different path toward the road.

Calum jumped up with a shout, gathered the acorns he'd picked before and chased off after Broc. Although he couldn't recall ever using that route, Calum was confident he could quickly catch up, despite Broc's head start. He sprinted off through the scattered trees, dodging low-hanging branches and

skipping over protruding roots until he dashed around one particularly wide ash tree and fell flat on his face, crunching into the hard ground beneath. His clothes were covered in dirt and his head pounded from the root his forehead had smacked into. Groaning, he propped himself up with his hands and looked back at what had tripped him. Resting there, partially moss-covered between two wide roots of the ash tree was a smooth, granite rock, chiselled away on top to provide a flat surface.

Calum got up, one hand rubbing his head, and looked at the unfamiliar rock. The granite itself was unremarkable, as these small boulders could be found all over the area, mostly grey with black grains mottled through. His eyes, however, were drawn to the centre of the flat surface and he walked closer, his throbbing head forgotten as he peered at what seemed to be grooves and indentations in the rock. There was something about the grooves that fascinated him, reminding him of the feeling he had when he saw the heaving sea or the sinister woods.

He crouched beside the rock and brushed away the moss obscuring the indentations. The cleared surface revealed a series of straight lines carved into it, forming patterns similar to the letters the priest in Firth made him study. Similar, yet they were clearly not the same, and Calum drew a finger along the lines, tracing them in the rock. As he did, the markings seemed to move and shimmer beneath his finger, curving and curling in his vision. A wave of dizziness suddenly overcame him and he fell back, hitting his head on the ground a second time as blackness wiped his consciousness.

NM



LENA

It was strange, watching the gulls flying head-on in the easterly winds as they somehow managed to hover almost in the same place, sometimes dipping and banking with stronger gusts. It was strange, even though it was a sight she had watched and marvelled at for years, perched on the rocky bluff above the surging ocean below, red hair dancing like fire in the gale. How she had longed to join them, to ride the air currents tirelessly and feel the power pass over yet be unmoved by it, using it in fact to remain in the one place, safe yet free at the same time. *Free as a bird ...* isn't that what her father had always said?

The tears streamed down her cheeks again at the thought, and the now familiar sobs convulsed her again. Her father had told her so much, so many things, but she didn't want his memories and his stories, she wanted him to be with her still. She sniffed and wiped the back of her wrist across her cheeks, trying to stop crying. Her father never cried, did he?

She looked back at the gulls as one cawed loudly at some newcomers. Such a strange sight now. Everything was strange somehow. It was like looking at something in the dusk or dawn of a day when the light was different — the normal, everyday objects became somehow other, taking on different meaning. The gulls no longer looked like an impossible freedom, they reminded her of her past life, her life yesterday when her father was still alive. But now he wasn't, and nothing would ever be the same again.

Lena added a rock to the pile in front of her and turned back to the smaller pile a few steps away to get another one. The others had left her some time ago, having helped her with the burial, but understanding that she would want to finish building the cairn by herself. Practically the whole of the Leddlethorpe settlement had been here, proof if any were needed that he was considered one of their own. But now she was alone with just the gulls and her memories for company. Memories that seemed to be all around her now, nearly everything reminding her of her father.

She remembered sitting up here with him, many years before, squealing with delight as she saw a pod of whales break the surface of the dark water. He had looked down at her, smiling at her face.

‘They’re the messengers of Njörd, the god of the sea, Lena. He calls them his orcas and they bring him word of his son and daughter, Frey and Freya, and tell him of anyone or anything who doesn’t pay homage to him.’

Lena had frowned at this. ‘Pay homage? You mean like when Olaf and Norri sail the *knorr* to Harlheim and throw overboard all those delicious fish they caught?’

‘That’s right,’ her father had answered. ‘A big trading ship like a *knorr* would certainly be noticed by the orcas and so they give tribute to Njörd by presenting him with their prize catch. Because of Njörd, we can eat fish and travel to other places. He’s a very important god, but be wary of him — the ocean is more powerful than you can imagine and Njörd even more so. Sometimes it’s easy for someone so powerful to forget you’re there and sweep you away — just like an ant underfoot that you didn’t notice.’

Lena had laughed at the idea. ‘You mean I might be like a god to the ants? Do you think they would pay *me* homage?’

Olaf and Norri hadn't laughed when she repeated the story to them later, but she remembered that her father had laughed then — unexpected, delighted laughter, so unusual for him. In fact he hadn't laughed more than a handful of times as far as Lena could recall. She had once asked him if the reason he didn't laugh like the other men was because he didn't drink as much ale as they did. He had shaken his head ruefully and said that he wanted to save up his laughter for special occasions.

'But why don't you drink like the other men do, Papi?'

He had looked at her seriously then. 'They drink to forget and to relax. I don't want to forget and with you ... I can't afford to relax!'

It was only later that she found out her father was not like the other men in more substantial ways. He was not a landsman like them, he was *bonded*. This, she found out, meant he belonged to the Hauldr, the chieftain of Leddlethorpe and couldn't just do whatever he liked. He was required to harvest the Hauldr's meagre strips of barley, tend to the fields to make sure the grass grew thick and tall and to keep the cattle and goats in good health. However, the Hauldr wasn't too strict with his bondsman, and as long as her father had tended to his owner's land, he was free to help others for small payment. In this way, Lena's father had saved and saved, and on her tenth birthday she had accompanied him into the Hauldr's longhall in the centre of the settlement by the ocean.

She remembered the day well because it was another time her father had laughed. Walking down the aisle of the great wooden hall, they passed by the cooking and heating hearths in the centre and approached the small area at the back where a raised platform had been built. There an ornate, heavy oak chair was placed, along with two other lesser chairs. The Hauldr was sitting in his chair, one arm casually resting on one

carved serpent arm, the other holding a horn of ale as he chatted to another landsman next to him. He was an impressive sight, big and blond, with a heavy coat of fur draped over his shoulders to keep out the cold. He had looked up at her father's approach, drained the horn in one long gulp, tossing it into a wooden pot next to him. He had squared his shoulders, arranging the animal skin around him more comfortably before bellowing in his customary huge voice.

'So, Johann. In all the years we've known each other, this is the first time you've come into my hall unasked for. Should I get my axe? Am I in danger?'

He was jesting, Lena had thought, because of the big smile on his face. He was also unsurprised by her father's reply, suggesting he knew all along what her father was doing. Johann pulled out a clinking bag from his hide coat and set it down at the Hauldr's feet.

'I believe you could best me with one bare hand, my lord, and so, unarmed as I am, you have more to fear from falling over from too many horns of ale, than from any action I might take.' Johann's light tone changed then. 'In fact, as you will see in this offering I bring, I have brought you the price of my bond. Through your own good graces, I have managed to save these past years and would buy back my bond from you.'

The Hauldr was silent then, and Lena remembered gripping her father's hand more tightly, scared that he would say no. But then the big chieftain's bearded face broke into a smile and he laughed.

'Took you long enough! I was wondering when you would finally get around to asking me!' Leaning over to pick up the bag, he had opened it and inspected the contents with a grunt. 'Granted! You've been the best bondsman I've ever had and my fields will be the worse for your freedom, but you've

earned it, no denying it. Least I'll have your service a while longer yet, until you earn enough to buy some land off me!

Lena recalled the next part the most vividly. It was one of her favourite memories and the one she used to play over and over again in her mind during the long darkness of the winter months.

'I'm sorry, my lord,' her father had begun, 'but if you are willing, I'd like to buy the land around my hut now with the remaining silver I've saved.' With those words, Johann had produced a second bag of silver and placed it where the first had been. The Hauldr had erupted in laughter, practically falling off his great chair and startling his companion sitting next to him.

'Johann the Hoarder, I'll call you from now on! By Thor's beard, I'd wondered why you hadn't approached me sooner — now I know! When I need silver to buy more ships, I know who to come to!' Hauldr's boot pushed the bag of silver back to the edge of the platform. 'The silver's yours, Johann, the land too — a better man to work it, I don't know.'

Her father had laughed then, some pent-up tension released, but had declined the silver, though he was unable to leave without accepting Leddlethorpe's best cow. And so he was a bondsman no longer. *Free as a bird*, but seemingly happy to stay in the same community where he was once a slave.

Lena placed the last rock on the knee-high cairn covering her father's body. She had wanted to bury him here, despite the protestations of Ingrid, the Hauldr's wife. The ground on the bluff was too rocky to dig deep and return the body safely to the earth's embrace. The bluff was their special place where she and her father had come. It was also facing out over the ocean, Njörd's domain, where if she could fly like a gull she would eventually come to where her father had been born. He



hadn't told her much of his past life, but she knew enough to know that he was taken from a place called the Isles, and that he was happier away from there. He would point out the gulls flying from the south and east, from the Isles, and say they were free as birds, but that freedom was an illusion; that only our thoughts were free, but everything else was bound. *We are all bondsmen to life*, that was his favourite expression. Funny thing was, when others heard that they became sad, but he seemed content saying it. When she had asked him why he had bought his freedom, if freedom were only an illusion, he had shaken his head and returned to his work. She had gone to the Hauldr to ask him instead, the only time she had ever approached him on her own, and he had replied as though it were obvious.

'Why, he's bought your future, lass!'





calum

CALUM opened his eyes and squinted at the bright sunshine shining through the leaves overhead. He was lying flat on his back on the ground beneath a tree, a root was digging into his back and his head throbbed as if Broc had given him a beating with the practice swords.

‘Caaalluumm!’

Broc! He could hear his brother calling him from afar, and abruptly remembered where he was and what had happened. With a jerk, he jumped to his feet, instantly regretting his haste as the throbbing in his head redoubled. Through the haze he felt, he looked at the granite rock at his feet and wondered what had happened. Those markings — he could have sworn they had *moved* as his finger had traced them. Almost of its own accord, his hand reached out again to the rock and he felt the smooth, cool surface again. What had happened to him before? All he had done was follow the sharp lines of each indentation with his finger ... like this ...

‘Calum! Where are you?’

Calum’s head snapped up, his hand dropping to his side, the trance he was in broken, leaving him drained and not a little scared. Suddenly, he wanted nothing more than to be gone from this strange experience. A startled finch fled through the branches above him as he sprinted off through the trees towards Broc’s voice.

‘Sounds like you don’t spend *enough* time south of the Dunmore Road if you’re going to trip and fall over every little tree, little brother.’

Back at the homestead, Karney Firth, head of the farms and small community along the north-eastern cliffs of the edge of the Isles known as the Firth, or ‘arm of the sea’, looked up from his evening meal at his jesting son. Aillig, his priest, had been discussing the latest news from Dunmore, having just returned from there only that morning. Aillig was a man of the Desert God, respected and even feared for the knowledge he had, for his ability to intervene with the One God on behalf of the Isles people, but he stopped talking at the slight gesture from Karney.

‘What’s this about spending time south of the Dunmore Road, Broc?’ Karney’s voice called out, cutting through the din of eating and talking in the longhall that served as the gathering place for Karney’s men.

The hall quietened, as the men and women eating at the long table glanced at Karney’s son.

‘Calum found us some nice acorns for roasting, Da, at least that’s what he says! I think he’s looking for the *sidhe* myself!’ Broc yelled back, elbowing Calum in the ribs, who reddened at the attention drawn to himself.

Aillig looked up at that. ‘You’d both be better off remembering your duty to your father, to God and to me and attending to your lessons, rather than some old mythical stories like the *sidhe*.’ Aillig focused his gaze on Calum. ‘You seem to have missed your writing lesson with me this eve, Calum ab Bera.’

Calum looked up, pulling the acorns out of his pocket and placing them on the table next to Broc’s.

‘I apologise, Father Aillig, we both thought you were returning tomorrow from Dunmore, not today,’ Calum said.

Karney snorted. ‘It seems Aillig needs to teach you to tell the time too. I’d like a word with you later Calum, please.’

An hour later, when the food scraps had been given to the hounds lying on the yellow rushes beneath the long table and the men and women were still gathered drinking and talking, Calum sat down next to Karney at the back of the longhall in front of the big fire.

Karney was carving a pipe out of a small piece of yew, flicking the unwanted slivers of wood into the fire. 'Calum,' he began, without stopping his carving, 'I don't want to lose any men looking for you in the South Wold. You know what I think about that place.'

'Yes sir ... I ... I wanted to ask you about something I was thinking about before,' Calum said, shifting on his stool. 'I was thinking about what you said to me about the Tuatha and how they used to live here.'

'Don't let Aillig hear you say I told you that!' Karney interrupted.

'Well, I was wondering if they could write like you and Aillig can. Maybe they had their own writing language?' Calum asked.

Karney looked at his foster son, remembering all the questions about the world and its creatures he had been asked over the years since Calum had arrived out of the storm with his half-crazed mother, Bera. Of all the questions, this was perhaps the strangest, but even so, Karney could guess its source.

'You want to know about Wodan's Runes, don't you?' he asked, but continued at Calum's look of incomprehension. 'The language of the Norsemen, given to them by the old gods, the chief of whom we call Wodan, though they use a different name, Odin. The old runes are markings in wood or stone formed by cutting straight lines in different patterns,' Karney demonstrated with his knife as he talked, 'because

curves are too difficult to cut through the grain of the wood, while ink and parchment for writing curved letters are new inventions.'

'The Norse? But, I thought maybe the Tuatha ... how could the Norsemen leave their writing here?' Calum asked, thinking about the stories he had heard of the terrible raiders from the cold, northern reaches of the sea.

'Well, we don't know, but since there are runes to be found in hidden places all over the Isles, Aillig's theory is that the Isles used to be inhabited by the damned Norse, but they withdrew a long time ago for some reason — wars? Sickness? Who knows,' Karney said, as he put down his carving knife and newly formed pipe and sat back in his armchair.

'Calum, there's a lot we don't know about the world and our place in it. We know we came here a long time ago out of the southern lands, fleeing a great horde of people who wanted our lands. We know we found these islands and made a life here. We know we used to worship the old gods, like everyone else, before the true faith of the Desert God was revealed to us. It may be that the Tuatha used to live here and we pushed them out, or maybe the Norsemen used to live here, we don't know exactly. All I can tell you is the legends, the rest is for you to make up your mind about.'

Calum stared into the flames, thinking about what his foster father had said, and what had happened to him today near his acorn tree clearing. Mostly he thought about the shimmering markings on the granite rock.

'You said "Wodan's Runes" — I've never heard of Wodan before.'

'I'm not surprised you haven't. As I said, Wodan was the chief of the old gods. They still worship him in the North Lands. He was the father of his family of gods, known as the

Aesir, but he was also leader of another group of gods, the Vanir, of whom the sea god Njörd was the father. According to the Norse and old legend, this world that we live in is part of the Yggdrasil, the World Tree, a mighty ash tree of magic and fertility.

‘To become as powerful as he was, Wodan hung himself from Yggdrasil for nine days and nine nights, crucifying himself to understand the tree and the world it supported. At the end of the nine days, Wodan came to understand the runes, the markings that pass on meaning to others and also hold power over the elements. And so we call them Wodan’s Runes, which he gained from the Tree of Life, Yggdrasil.

‘Old legends, Calum, old gods. They were once ours, but not any longer. Even though our languages are similar, the Norse are a race apart. Most likely any runes you see here in the Isles are from the Norsemen,’ Karney finished, accepting a wooden cup of ale from a serving man who then proceeded to stoke the fire.

Calum stared at the dancing tendrils of flame, and the sparks that flew up as the man pushed in more wood. From long experience with his foster son’s moods, Karney left him to think about the legends and went down amongst his men and women, chatting to a few of them.

Calum stayed there by the fire, thinking about what Karney had said, ‘... *markings that pass on meaning to others and also hold power over the elements ... Wodan’s Runes, gained from the Tree of Life, Yggdrasil.*’

What had happened to him when he touched the markings today?