

Alaric, Child of the Goths

by

Daniel F. Bowman

Part 1: Gothia

Chapter 1

Two figures stood alone under the fiery sun, alone at the edge of a clearing. This place for so long had been a haven for deer, a safe place from the wild. But the two had heard the Roman trumpets, and they prepared to make their stand here to protect their homeland.

A few patches of snow remained in the shade of the thickest trees where winter held its claim. But the field had the look of life—deep green grass and tiny budding flowers nicknamed snowflakes. But the two knew it would soon change to red as the blood of dead men flowed.

They were two young Tervingian warriors, members of the Gothic race. Dressed for battle, they bravely guarded their people. The two, Alaric and his sister Elvira, faced innumerable foes. Behind them lay their homes and clans. In front, Roman legions under Emperor Valens had returned to attack their land and slaughter their people. Scouts had warned them of the impending attack, then continued to rally other warriors.

Alaric was bare-chested, wearing only trousers. His stout body showed his love of food as well as the strength he would have as an adult. He tied his blond hair in a knot as warriors did. Elvira, too old to be unclothed, wore similar trousers with a linen tunic. She left her brown hair free to blow in the limited breeze. Her body had begun to show the first changes of womanhood, and she was taller than her brother. The two children fought as their ancestors had—armor-less, hair spiked with rancid butter, and screaming the *barritus*, a deafening war cry that made even the bravest Roman wonder what monsters these two were. Fighting the old way, without armor, they could easily

move around their weighed-down Roman opponents. On their left sides, each held a round wooden shield, encircled with iron and covered with hide. On the fronts of these, spiked metal bosses turned the shields into a means of fighting and not merely defending. On their right sides, they wielded spears, stout weapons made for slashing and stabbing from a distance. They also carried along their backs hero's blades, *meki* made by the greatest Tervingian blacksmiths. These long swords simply could not break.

Unlike these two, the approaching Romans wore their full panoply—polished helmets that left their faces open but continued in flaps over their ears, down the sides, where they tied together under the chin. Chain mail shirts for the soldiers were made from tightly joined circles of metal, covering the torso completely. Body-sculpted cuirasses for the officers gave them the look of Olympic champions of old with idealized bodies. Gleaming iron-covered shields, the same size as the Tervingi's, reflected like glass the morning sunlight into the Tervingi's eyes and could deflect all but the most powerful weapons. In their other hands, they carried spears, which they threw at the children before charging. On their military belts, they each carried a *spatha*, a long sword, to be drawn when their spears were spent or broke. They remained in perfect formation as they marched at a quickening pace.

Charging, stabbing, slashing, crushing, Alaric and Elvira broke the line of the armored enemy. The two slammed their spiked shields into the soldiers before them. Their spears flew through the air, piercing weaknesses in the Roman armor and slashing the enemies' exposed faces. The sun continued to beat on their sweaty, yet tireless bodies, bodies that moved as if dancing while they protected their people. Such

trained fighting was itself an art form, practical and beautiful.

With shattered spears now only worth the dying Romans' blood, the two simultaneously drew their *meki*. They made a stand around a flag they had placed in the ground. It flew high above their heads, showing any of their warriors where they fought. Yet, the two continued to fight alone.

"Behind you, Alaric!" Elvira called.

Spinning, Alaric yelled, "You filthy Roman!" as he pierced his foe. "A hundred thirty-five." He spun around, slicing off the head of another. "Hundred thirty-six."

"One hundred fifty!" Elvira shouted in competition.

The two children fought back-to-back as the Roman line bent and threatened to envelop them. They moved perfectly in their teamwork like the multiple blacksmiths who beat swords into shape, each swinging down at the precise moment the other moved his hammer. In this synchronized fighting, the shield of each protected the sword side of the other. Unlike the disciplined Romans who fought behind their line of shields, stabbing at the children, the two Tervingi lunged out, taking down a Roman with each strike of their weapons, swinging both sword and shield with grace and force.

Finally the Romans broke, losing their formation. Alaric raised the flag, signaling the cavalry to charge. He remembered his father saying that an army lost most of its troops not during battle but during a routing, especially when it became as disorganized as this one. Now that the Romans left their shield wall, the cavalry could take them down. Something else his father had taught him—cavalry cannot attack a line of infantry that stands firm. Horses are smarter than men and refuse to charge into anything that is immovable.

The children let the cavalry finish the fight. Gasping for air, they bent over, hands on their knees. Then their fatigue proved too great and they fell to the ground. Fights like this lasted for hours, each child killing more soldiers than they could count. They began to laugh at the victory they had over Valens, enemy of the Tervingi.

“Get home!” The two were snatched out of their world of glory by their mounted father, Reiks Alavivus.

Alavivus wore his brown hair shoulder length. He claimed it was easier to keep it that length. His facial hair matched, a full beard that covered his neck. He wore a reddish brown cloak held closed by a brooch in the shape of a falcon. Above the brooch hung a necklace decorated with glass beads. His clothing along with his wiry frame hid his power, a force that Alaric had often felt. When Alaric was younger, Alavivus used to throw him high in the air, causing Alaric to shriek. Since then, Alaric often felt that power behind the many punishments his curiosity earned him.

In the voice he used to command warriors and punish criminals, he shouted, “Get home! No need to be pretending when we’ve work to do.” The Roman soldiers vanished, and the weapons changed to what they really were—branches. The children had carved their own training swords, and then burned the blades for strength. These, they pretended, belonged to the heroes of old.

Alaric tried not to roll his eyes at his father’s back.

The children reluctantly picked up their branches and plodded home following their father back into the woods. He must have had something heavy on his mind, for, although he could be a hard man, he was usually a kind father.

“At least there’s food for us. I made your favorite, the cherry sticks,” said Elvira.

These were a crispy dessert filled with the fruit.

Alaric rolled his eyes. "Why be thankful for food? We've never starved."

"What's your problem?"

"Nothing. I just don't see why you try to be so positive when it's back to work for us."

Elvira did not answer her brother, but just smiled.

The two walked past a number of small huts, each building partly buried to make it strong enough to last through the fierce winters of the north and keep out the summer heat, yet easy to move in the years when the horses and cattle needed new land to graze. The huts were made of wattle frameworks and covered with daub.

Their home was in the center of about thirty huts and several shops, a village called a *haims*. Woods surrounded it, but the Tervingi had cleared them far enough to keep safe from wolves. The *haims'* inhabitants all followed Alaric and Elvira's father, Alavivus. Other followers lived in the surrounding areas. Unlike other clans, the Tervingi did not live all together in villages. Each family wanted land to grow, so many lived on isolated farms. With the fickleness of the earth, the inhabitants could not live close together while being assured of a plentiful harvest. Packed dirt roads which served well for the Tervingian wagons equaled the usability of Roman roads except during the rainy spring months when the constant water left gouges in the paths. Along the main road were a variety of shops, where merchants regularly sold their goods and bartered to keep their livelihood.

Alavivus' family used to live in the *baúrgs*, the semi-urban center of Alavivus' dominion. It had encased numerous acres and served as a place of safety. But

Alavivus' wife Roza died giving birth to Alaric, and one year later Emperor Valens attacked. Thus, it no longer held any fond memories for Alavivus. He left the centrality of his *baúrgs* to live among his people. There in the *haims* he built himself a hall where he could hear complaints, hold celebrations, and house his many slaves.

The children reached the hall, which unlike the huts, was made of logs and remained completely above ground. They were relieved for the coming spring, in which the animals could leave their sleeping quarters. Inside the hall where other Tervingi could enter, stone decorated the floors. Though simple, its elegance made Alaric proud of his father.

Alaric yelled, "I'll feed the horses." This left Elvira to get the water from the creek that flowed at the eastern edge of the woods. Though the ice no longer blocked the way, both children hated the water's coldness.

Philip, their father's most trusted slave, had already started the chores. Philip, a Roman captive whom Alavivus had learned to trust, was about fifteen years older than Alaric. His dark skin, black hair, and clean-shaven face made him stand out from the tall, pale Tervingi. Though Philip was a slave, their father respected him and often sought his opinion. "Alaric, you missed your Latin lesson," he said, not as a threat, but just an observation. "But come help me clean out this old hay."

Alaric and Elvira should have been home earlier, feeding and milking the cows and brushing the horses, but they thought fighting Romans was more important. They usually reenacted Valens' armies attacking their people. Though the actual battles had taken place before Alaric could talk, the reenactments took their minds off their mundane lives. In their battles, unlike the reality of the past, the Tervingi successfully

fought the soldiers, first keeping them from crossing the river Dōnaws, and then severely punishing them, making them wish they had not crossed. Since the battles had taken place before they could take part, the two children often felt like they had missed the most exciting thing to take place in their lives. The rest—learning how to survive in the woods, protect their people, and recite their history—occasionally had some adventure, but they wanted to be part of a story that would get passed down through a thousand generations, a story of their heroism, valor, and cunning. Instead, they often felt like they had to miss it all because the horses were thirsty and they had to get water.

Alaric and Elvira sometimes wished they were Romans, who had slaves to do all this work. Most of the day for those at home was spent preparing food. Fires burned constantly, roasting meat for the last meal of the day, and covering everyone and everything with the strong smoke smell. With all the work, life was never slow, but Alaric thought it was always *boring*.

Early in the morning, earlier than Alaric cared to think about, the cows needed milking. Alaric wished he could just let them milk themselves, but whenever he complained about this, Alavivus reminded him of all the milk products he used and of the pain the animals would experience if he did not milk them. Like with many of the chores, Alavivus often let his slaves help, but he thought it was best for his children to know how to run a farm and to be able to do anything that the slaves would have to. Skills such as caring for the horses would be necessary for Alaric once he became a warrior.

Animals busied themselves around the hut: cows and goats grazed together, acting like nothing in the world was more important than chewing grass all day. That is,

until someone with grain came. Then they acted like nothing in the world was more important than chewing *grain* all day. Chickens scurried around the yard, trying to flee from one person's busy legs but ending up in the path of another. Pigs lay in their sty snorting, wrestling, and eating whatever food was left over from the other animals or from the humans. Horses wandered away from the commotion to graze in the fields, waiting until they were called on to pull a wagon or carry a rider.

Before Alaric and Elvira could eat on the night of their pretend victory, they had to carry water from the creek, brush the horses, and refill the hay. Then they had to refill the buckets, fill the cows' trough, milk the cows, and close the stable area of the hall. By the time they finished, they were glad to have a door directly from the stables to their own sleeping quarters in order to avoid the cold.

They went inside the hall to the large open room where their father often met with his warriors or offered feasts. They passed by walls covered with ornamental wood, looking more like an ancient king's home than anything recently created in a Tervingian village. The designs showed the history of the Tervingi, including art depicting glorious deaths of old. Reiks and kindins shown in their splendor. They passed by a symbol of Cniva, the Tervingi leader who had killed a Roman emperor, and another of Filimer, the leader who brought the Tervingi across the sea. Though the hall had been built many times as the Tervingi were forced to move to better pastures and croplands, it always retained its antiquity.

As they went inside where supper was, their stomachs fell. Their father was not home, so they could not eat yet. They had not eaten all day except for a crust of bread in the morning before going to play. Waiting to soothe their stomachs, they decided to

see what their father was doing. In the past, they had done such spying. They believed they had saved their father from others who wanted to kill him, but he never admitted it. With excitement filling their minds, they could no longer hear their growling stomachs, and they even forgot their cloaks.

They walked in the shadows toward Gaisumers' home, which served as a local tavern and shop, careful to stay away from the moonlight. The sky was filled with clouds, but the light would give them away if they walked in the open. They heard the crowd at Gaisumers', so they snuck into a small storage area which they alone knew a secret opening to. Sometimes they would continue into the small shop it led to and steal things. Gaisumers' had a variety of necessities—milled wheat and dried lentils; apples, pears, and plums that had been stored for the winter; animal skins and Roman cloth; silver and gold armbands, necklaces, and rings; and trinkets that the owner said came from faraway places like Jerusalem, Rome, and Carthage. In all, the shop was like most of the others, except that Alaric and Elvira were able to sneak inside this one. But their father used this place most often as a way to drown pain in *kamon*, a sour smelling drink made from barley. It was an acquired taste, as the children found out the first time they tried to drink with their father.

In the storage area where they hid, there was nothing except unopened chests and barrels. And darkness. From there, they uncomfortably waited, perched on top of the chests, trying to wipe away spider webs and the dust of the storage room. Despite the discomfort, though, and their lack of a view, they could hear what was happening inside the tavern.

In the darkness, with only the outside light of torches coming in through an

eyeball-sized hole, Alaric felt around.

“Ow!” Elvira hissed, “What are you doing? You scared?”

“No.”

“Why are you trying to hold my hand?” she teased, as she moved away from him, toward the hole.

Alaric hit her. When she sat in the light from the peephole, it was easy to find a good spot to smack.

All the two could overhear was their father and other Tervingi discussing something about demons.

“What are they talking about?” Elvira asked, still whispering.

Alaric groaned, wanting to hear the men, not his questioning sister. “I have no idea. But they keep mentioning the east.”

Elvira resituated herself. “I wonder if Valens is really coming back.”

“I doubt it. The Romans *aren't* demons. And Father fought Valens back to the river. I bet Valens is scared of us now.”

Elvira huffed. “It all depends on what side of the story you hear. I bet the Romans tell about how they subdued our people and forced us to make a new treaty or something like that. I don't suppose anybody knows.”

“God does.”

Elvira's throat made a sound of annoyance, “Yeah, of course *he* does. I meant a person.”

“But you just said *nobody*.”

“I said *anybody*.” Then she hissed, “Shh.” Her warning silenced them. They both

moved out of the stream of light.

Alaric whispered, "I think someone's coming around here."

"That's why I said *shh*. Keep quiet. Remember what happened last time?"

Alaric slapped a hand over his mouth.

A deep voice inside sounded scared. "Demons. *Demons*? What kind of talk is that? Alavivus, you may remain a pagan, but I no longer fear such things."

Another voice, which sounded calmer, replied, "If it has the eastern Tervingi afraid, it's bad."

The first voice, still scared, said, "But what could move so fast?"

A third voice, which they recognized as the shopkeeper because it was nasally, answered matter of fact, "Cavalry. But whose, I don't know. Must be mounted archers. From the east. Alans? If these *demons* are human."

"But why?" The first man's deep voice was less shaky and more inquisitive.

"That's what we don't know," the calmer man said.

"So are they human?"

The men passed by, and the children could not hear an answer.

Alaric said, "Listen to that! Demon attacks." He paused before adding, in a quieter voice, "Probably not really, right?"

Elvira solemnly replied, "Maybe. You know the stories of things that come out of the east. Remember the—" she began to laugh.

If the lights were on, Elvira would have seen Alaric roll his eyes. "Nice try. I wish I could go and fight them. If I had a sword, I'd kill *hundreds* of them. Like I did earlier against Valens."

“Yeah—in your head. If you fought like that, the only thing that’d happen is that you’d make them all laugh.”

Alaric hit at her. But she had shifted into the darkness some time earlier, so he missed, and he tipped over. In the dark, it was hard to keep his balance. Elvira laughed again.

Then their eyes squinted as someone forced open the door to the storage room. The torches that had been inside the tavern now blazed in their faces. Gaisumers’ nasally voice behind the torches said, “Well, look at this. Two young people having some time to themselves.” He snorted at his own joke. Then he snapped, “Get out!” As quickly as the words reached the children, a whip bit into Elvira’s leg. Another flick of it brought it down on Alaric. The man passed the torch back to an assistant and grabbed each child by the hair. “Trying to steal again?”

They did not answer. Adults never listened, not to them.

When they got out and their eyes adjusted, they saw their father turn his back on them and knew this was only the beginning of their punishment for being there. They both remembered the last time they got in this much trouble, and their backsides ached in the memory.

Alavivus saw his children. “Let them go,” he commanded, “I’ll take care of them.” The children shuddered, and Alavivus knew they expected full punishment for this embarrassment, a punishment that would be worse than anything Gaisumers would do. “Did they steal anything?”

“Doesn’t look like it,” Gasiumers replied, “not this time.” Even with a serious answer to the reiks, his nasally voice nearly made Alaric laugh. Alavivus glared at the

boy.

Alavivus pulled his children away from the others. In a dark area where they could hide from others' torches, he knelt down. The children backed away, but he pulled them close. "You shame me with your stealing."

"We didn't steal. He even said so," Elvira said.

"But it looked like you were trying to. That shames me, since I need to punish thieves and keep peace here."

Alavivus removed a dagger from his belt and gave each child ten strikes, five on each leg. Even though he used the flat of the blade, the punishment would make them hobble through the next day, especially after sleeping on it. Yet, neither child cried, knowing such weakness would further anger their father. "Go home. The slaves will get you ready for bed. Eat without me"

Elvira said, "Let's go. I'm starved." She stumbled, trying but unable to run home.

Alaric asked his father, "Where are you going? Can I come? What demons are there?"

"One question at a time." Alavivus' fury at his children made his answer blunter than he intended. But he could not tolerate his son's questions.

"You want me to learn. Can I come?"

Alavivus tried to ignore the boy.

"Are you a hypocrite?"

Alavivus spun around, glaring at Alaric. "Hypocrite? No, / always keep my word. And I don't steal. Where would you get the idea of calling me a hypocrite?"

"That's what you call the Romans. You think they're all liars."

Alavivus finally allowed a smile. “So you *do* listen to me? Alright.” He began walking home.

Alaric ran after. “So, are you going to tell me? Where are you going?”

“Tonight, nowhere. But as of tomorrow, you will not see Gaisumers again. We will ride to Reiks Fritigern’s.”

Alaric knew his own adventure would finally begin.

The next morning, several slaves packed food for the trip, filling skin baskets with hard cheese, dry beef, and hard wheat loaves. Each warrior would keep his own bag of rations, as well as another skin filled with *kamon*. Traveling without pack animals would give them the speed of a messenger, while their number allowed them the safety of a small army.

Alaric joined them, still pulling a cloak over his head. He also held his bow and quiver. Grinning proudly, he reached up and placed his hand on his father’s upper arm. “I’m ready. I can go.”

Despite Alavivus’ previous shame at his son’s actions, he felt proud as he saw him mount. He noticed that his son’s jaw clenched when his legs, still sore from the punishment the previous evening nights before, hit the saddle. But the boy did not complain.

Elvira also joined them, looking sullen. Alavivus knew that she conflicted with Fritigern’s daughters.

Alavivus called for Philip. He counted on Philip for everything, from tutoring his children in Latin to running the house to listening as he spoke his thoughts. He had

been chosen for Alaric's tutor six years earlier because he spoke Latin and Gothic fluently. In less than six months among the Tervingi, he was able to speak with any of them. Slavery was an important business in the north. Normally the Tervingi sold slaves to the Romans for supplies, but sometimes an unlucky Roman like Philip was sent north.

Alavivus, Alaric, Elvira, Philip, and twenty warriors mounted their horses. The Tervingi knew how to ride, but often preferred using their feet. Horses helped speed up the traveling, but the warriors still felt more at home fighting as infantry.

As the group headed south, Alaric asked, "Does Athwaulf know?" Alaric eagerly asked the question.

Alaric looked at Alavivus and smiled. Alavivus remembered all Alaric's talk about adventure. Not only was he in a real adventure now, but he was going to see Fritigern's son Athwaulf, his best friend. They saw each other once or twice a year, whenever their fathers met to discuss each clan's problems and activities. Alaric said he always liked to have news that Athwaulf did not know. This time he could tell him that he was there to stay.

Once they entered the woods, Alavivus' eyes adjusted to the darkness. The thick forest blocked all but the most persistent light, leaving him with an eerie yet enticing feeling even during the day. Each of the riders rode with his *kontois* at the ready.

The steady steps of the hooves helped Alavivus' thoughts flow. The warriors with him knew he needed the solitude to refresh himself from his people's complaints and disputes. And though he did not mind traveling, he rarely talked during it. He needed time to ponder, time to be free from the people around him. A few days earlier, two

farmers had brought him a sheep, each claiming it was his own. These two men came to Alavivus to handle their disagreements every time he took complaints. Alavivus had wished he could split the sheep in half like King Solomon. Fritigern had once told him that this ancient king had threatened to do such an action even to a baby. Alavivus wished he were wise enough to think of such things on his own and to have them work. So, he decided to end the argument by taking the sheep for himself. "For a feast," he had declared. The onlookers praised him and many offered their own goods. The remaining complaints could wait until the next time. The people said they wanted to celebrate their leader's wisdom. Even the two men who wanted the sheep decided this decision was wise enough to end their argument. Many later told him in private that they hoped this decision would end the constant complaints of those two exasperating men.

The feast filled hungry insides, as food had been harder to come by in the years since Valens' attacks. Though a full seven years had passed, much land remained fallow, still unable to produce. And many of the orchards, some left over from the times when Romans lived north of the Dōnaws, were gone for good. So, full stomachs stopped the complaints, bringing joy even to the haggard Alavivus. He did not show his fatigue among his people, but his children knew. And when his wife Roza was alive, she knew, too. She had known his pain and how to fix it. Now he felt so tired, not just in need of solitude, but her presence, to rejuvenate his tired heart. When he did not get this rest, he felt like he had to continue pulling out his heart and rubbing it on everyone who needed his help, draining himself of blood, energy, mind, and being.

Noticing the slowing pace of the horses, Alavivus' mind came back to the present. The evening light began to dwindle, but a full moon was rising. He saw the

familiar family of birch trees in front of their path. The horses knew they could drink from the spring. This was the first mark toward their journey's end. He had been keeping the horses moving fast, and the warriors were not used to riding long distances.

Alaric directed his horse over to his father's so both horses could drink. Alaric had not talked since starting the journey. "Are you worried about me leaving?"

Alavivus looked confused. He was having trouble transitioning from his thoughts to the question. Then, "Not worried. But you need experience and training."

Elvira teased, "All your play fighting won't matter when you meet a *real* warrior in battle."

Alaric glared at her. "How long will I be there?"

Alavivus said, "Two years."

Alaric could not hide his smile. Alavivus knew that his son would rather be at Fritigern's than at home.

Alavivus watched Alaric pull a piece of the dry beef the size of his hand out of the pouch by his saddle.

Elvira asked, "Are you eating your food already? We still have two days of riding."

"It will be quiet without you around, Alaric."

Elvira added, "And that will be nice."

Alavivus drew in a deep breath to break up their sarcastic comments, but Alaric stopped the oncoming lecture, short though it would be. "What were you thinking about on our way here?"

"The past." Alavivus spoke deliberately, as if speaking slowly could give him back some of his loss.

“I don’t have much past to remember. I wish I could remember mother sometimes.”

“She looked stunning, like Elvira.” Alavivus’ voice became irritated as he saw Alaric’s disbelieving face. “I’ve told you that before—Elvira as a woman.”

Alaric looked disgusted, as if the thought of Elvira as a wife made him sick.

“You look like your mother, too.” Seeing Alaric’s glare, he said, “Not in a feminine way. But you have a fuller face than me, and you have her blond hair.”

Alavivus stopped at that description. It hurt so much to think of the wife he still adored. And he tried so hard not to blame Alaric, who killed her during birth.

The horses turned from the water and began munching on the tall, rich grasses that grew by the spring. Alavivus thought they looked so content, not disturbed by past troubles or future worries. They only knew that if the present was safe, life was good.

Alaric changed the conversation. “How do you keep our people together?”

“What do you mean?”

“You judge people, lead them in battle, care for their needs. Maybe more. That’s all you tell me.” Since Alavivus did not immediately answer, Alaric continued, “How do you do all that and keep our people together?”

“Reiks Fritigern, like the Christian priests, would say they don’t know why God puts us into the hard times, only that he is sovereign and knows best. Our job is to do good in the world. My task is to lead with justice.”

“Do you?”

Alavivus was shocked by the bluntness. It was easy to trick himself into thinking he did everything right. But fathering was the hardest. The few days he had time for his

children, he felt like he had already rubbed his heart dry on everyone else. The only reason he did not snap at Alaric now was that the silent journey had begun to revive his heart again.

“I try.” Alavivus did not mean to strain the words so hard. But it stopped Alaric from asking anything else.

Once the horses ate a little more, the Tervingi band continued toward Fritigern’s. Due to the rumors circulating about raiders, Alavivus wanted his band to reach Fritigern’s without wasting time on the way.

Two days later, they reached Fritigern’s land in the south. Fritigern was on friendly—perhaps non-hostile was a better way to state it—terms with Rome. His clan inhabited the land along the lower Dōnaws, and he ruled over a number of reiks who controlled the land further from the great river.