

THE SCAR GATHERER

Extract from *Saving the Unicorn's Horn*

This extract is from chapter 8, when Joe finds out how Vikings keep clean:

"Come on then, boys. Hurry up and finish. We need to get down to the baths. Where's your grooming set, Mattheus?"

Lucy's eldest brother stuffed his bread into his mouth and washed it down with beer. "I'll just get it," he said, still chewing.

"I don't have a grooming set," Joe whispered to Lucy.

"Don't worry." She smiled. "Nor does Peder, and nor do Aine and I. You only get one at fourteen. Before that, you share other people's."

"What is it anyway?"

"Tweezers, nail cleaners, comb, ear scoop."

"Ear scoop?"

"Yes, for getting the wax out of your ears!"

Joe grimaced.

"Why are you looking like that? It's useful stuff, earwax, especially for spinning wool."

"Yuck!"

Her eyes danced with laughter at his disgust.

"Come on then!" Lokki had picked up his cloak and hat and was at the door again. "Time to go. You're coming with us, Joe?"

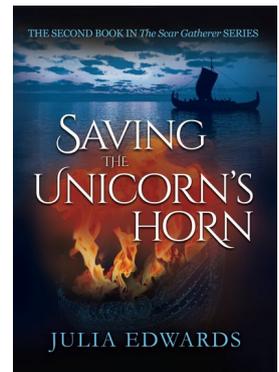
Joe nodded, his mouth still full of bread. He grabbed his own cloak from the peg and followed Mattheus and Peder out of the house.

The bath house was a few minutes walk from Coppergate, a large chalet-like building with wooden walls and a low thatched roof. From one end of the building rose a column of smoke, while a faint mist hovered over the thatch. A line of men and boys huddled outside in the sleet, talking and laughing together. Joe hugged his damp cloak around him and watched what was going on. He felt exposed, being out of the house without Lucy. She might not really understand how alien her world was to him, but she had more idea than her brothers or her father.

Every few minutes a small group of people came out of the chalet and the line moved forward. Soon, they were at the front. Joe wondered what would be inside the building. It wasn't large enough to have a pool of any size.

When the next group of people came out, he followed Lokki and the others in. It was warm inside and they were standing in a small changing area with smoking reed lamps on the walls. Beneath were wooden benches and pegs hung with clothes. Joe undressed, trying not to look as the others took off their undershorts. Even though he'd done this before at Fishbourne, he still felt self-conscious about being naked in front of other people.

Lokki opened a door to an inner chamber and hustled them all in, closing the door quickly behind them. The room was twice the width of the changing area, and similarly dark, but as hot as if they had stepped into a desert. Joe sat down beside Peder on a bench,



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grateful that the heat was dry rather than steamy.

There were twenty men and boys in the room in total, most of them sitting motionless on the benches down either side. Down at the far end was a fire, and above it, the hole in the roof where Joe had seen the smoke escaping. Around the fire were piles of large round stones. Now and then, someone poured a cup of water over them. There was a loud hiss, and the temperature seemed to rise sharply. Joe felt sweat break out all over his skin. He felt a wave of panic, just like in the caldarium at Fishbourne. He concentrated hard on keeping calm.

After a while, Lokki and Mattheus stood up and moved to the middle of the room. From an open box they each picked up a bundle of twigs which they beat against their skin systematically, beginning with their necks and shoulders, and working their way down to their feet. Joe watched, wondering whether it hurt.

When Lokki and Mattheus sat down again, Peder stood up. Joe got up too, and picked up one of the bundles. The twigs were thin and supple, and much less scratchy than he'd feared. Cautiously, he started to flick them against his skin. It didn't hurt. In fact, it felt quite pleasant, a bit like scratching an itch. He began to hit his arms and chest a little harder, copying Peder, though he was mystified by why they might be doing this. By the time he'd worked his way down to his ankles, his skin was tingling all over.

He sat down again beside Mattheus. He and Lokki had been combing their long hair, and offered their combs now to Joe and Peder. Joe took Lokki's. It was carved out of a single piece of bone, short, with long teeth on both sides, all of which were intact. He remembered the broken combs in the glass cases at the Viking Centre and grinned. Archaeologists would give anything to hold a perfect object like this in their hands!

They sat for a while longer in the hot darkness. Occasionally, men left through a door beside the one where they had entered, and others came in. Each man in turn beat himself with the birch twigs.

At length, Lokki stood up and opened the second door. It was much cooler in the small room on the other side. Lokki took a cloth from a peg and dipped it in a bucket of water. Mattheus and Peder did likewise, and after a moment's hesitation, so did Joe. Each of them rubbed their skin all over with the cloth before rinsing it in a second bucket and hanging it back on the peg.

None of them spoke as they dressed again in the changing area, but Joe found that he felt more relaxed than he had done since he arrived.

"Looks like we could be rolling in the snow after next week's bath," Mattheus said, as they emerged into the daylight. Joe looked up at the sky. The sleet had stopped, but the clouds were a heavy grey tinged with yellow. He pulled his cloak close, glad that there hadn't been snow on the ground to roll in today.

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