

LOST TALES OF MERCIA

by
JAYDEN WOODS

Edited by
Malcolm Pierce

TEN SHORT STORIES
IN THE WORLD OF
“EADRIC THE GRASPER”

NOTES FROM THE AUTHOR

This book is a work of fiction inspired by real events. It is a creative interpretation of what might have and could have been, not necessarily what was. The primary sources of history were *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* written in the 11th century, *The Chronicle of Florence of Worcester*, and William of Malmesbury's *Chronicles of the Kings of England* written in the 12th century. For additional sources, see pg. 202.

This book includes ten short stories that are complementary to the novel, Eadric the Grasper, published October 5, 2010

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THE FIRST LOST TALE OF MERCIA



GOLDE THE
MOTHER

“And this year the king and all his witan decreed that all the ships which were worth anything should be gathered together at London, in order that they might try if they could anywhere betray the army from without. But Aelfric the ealdorman, one of those in whom the king had most confidence, directed the army to be warned; and in the night, as they should on the morrow have joined battle, the selfsame Aelfric fled from the forces; and then the army escaped.”

—The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, Entry For Year 992

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WORCESTERSHIRE

993 A.D.

Even the lazy pigs stirred to life when Alfric and his men came riding over the hills. The hogs rolled and squealed, bobbing up and down on stubby legs as they ran around in mass confusion. The dog barked, lifting wiry haunches from the dirt to point his muzzle and boom his howl of alert. The horizon undulated as the ealdormen’s cavalry sliced black silhouettes against the iron gray clouds. Chills raked down Golde’s skin as she watched, though the breeze brushing her pale hair blew with the warmth of spring.

“Hunwald?” she called. “Hunwald!”

She heard no response from the swineherd: only the thunder of Alfric’s men galloping closer. Then, over the cacophony of thudding hooves, grunting pigs, and barking dogs, she heard a child yelling.

“Mother!”

She turned just as his little hands struck her skirt, pulling and tugging. She looked down at his big blue eyes, unable to be mad at him even though she wished that right now, he would simply disappear. “Eadric, find Hunwald and tell him to put up the pigs.”

“I’ll do it myself.”

Golde shook her head helplessly at the boisterous seven-year-old. Only yesterday, one of the hogs had flattened him in the mud and nearly crushed his chest. Already, he seemed to have forgotten the incident. His thick yellow curls lashed against his face in a visage of defiance. “No,” said his mother, “you’ll *help* him, and then you’ll feed the pigs yourself while Hunwald joins me inside. Can you do that?”

“I suppose.” As if noticing them for the first time, Eadric stared at the war-horses riding closer. Even in the fading sunlight, the chainmail and weaponry of the riders glinted brightly. “What’s this?” The little boy sounded more exasperated than afraid.

“*Off* with you!” She kicked his departing rump with too much force to be playful. Sometimes she wondered whether she had sheltered the little boy too successfully from the horrors of the world he lived in. He seemed oblivious to pain and danger.

All too soon, the riding men reached her, flinging dirt onto her dress as they reined their horses to a sudden stop. Despite their intimidating approach, there must have been only a dozen of them, most of them wounded and weary. Foam bubbled from their horses’ mouths and salt whitened their flanks. She squinted disapprovingly as she searched the score of dismounting men for the one she knew to lead them.

He was not a hard man to find. He had a head of such thick, golden curls that he could have been a second sun rising from the east as he pulled off his helm. He wore a blue mantle, though now it was stained with filth and blood, and a tunic of crushed diamond twills in flax covered his mail. It was a garment any outlaw would risk his life to obtain, so Golde thought he was a fool to wear it. He jangled from the weight of his weapons and jewelry as he blundered towards her.

“Oh, Golde!” he cried.

Before she could stop him, he fell against her and wrapped her in an embrace. He probably intended it as an embrace, at least, but it felt more like he simply threw his weight against her and expected her to hold him up.

“I’m done for—disgraced—humiliated—finished!” He clutched her fiercely, his whole frame trembling.

“You’re ... pathetic!” She put her hands against his chest and pushed him back with all her might. He staggered, sapphire gaze splintered by fury and sorrow. She noted with some amusement that he had tried to grow a beard, though it was more of a vague yellow haze over his mouth and chin.

“You—you—you dare touch me like that? You miserable wench, I am an *ealdorman*!”

“Not for long, by the sounds of it. And in any case, I’ve touched you in worse ways than that, Lord Alfric.”

Even in their wearied and frantic state, some of the men chuckled. Alfric looked around uncertainly, unable to smile himself. Behind her own defiant expression, Golde gulped. Alfric was almost always a nervous wreck, but she had never seen him so anxious as this.

The skies growled above them, darkening with a fresh billow of gray clouds.

“Won’t you invite us in?” said Alfric miserably.

Golde could only shake her head in disbelief at the man who was a proud ealdorman one moment and a cowering victim the next. “I have room for you at my table,” she said, “but not the others. I’m afraid they’ll have to shelter in the barn.”

“With the pigs?” one man complained.

“Or you can stay outside in the rain, if you’d like.” Her blue eyes flashed at Alfric. “Follow me.”

The ealdorman nodded to his men. “Go on then, you spoiled sods—you’ve seen worse!”

And so with great reluctance, Golde led Alfric, the tentative ealdorman of Mercia, into her humble home.

*

She lived in a simple shack, certainly no grander than the average churl’s, but she had never thought of it as impoverished until Alfric entered and curled his lip with disgust. She noticed the poor state of the floorboards, dank with the smell of the salted foods they’d been storing all winter in the sunken pit below. She realized that the lodge seemed smaller inside than it looked outside, crowded by three meager cots, a rickety table, and an ashy brazier. The shutters over the windows squeaked as the wind battered against them.

With a weary huff, Alfric sank onto a stool next to the table. “Ale,” he said.

Biting back her anger, she rummaged through their stores for a canister of ale. They did not have much left, and saved it for special occasions, but she supposed this occasion was as special as any. She grabbed a cup made of alder wood to pour it in, though she was certain he was accustomed to smooth dishes gilt with precious metals. This frugality, at least, seemed to miss his attention; blindly he upturned the goblet and drank deeply, smashing it back down with a sigh.

“Oh Golde,” he said, blue gaze fading into empty space. “The horrors I’ve seen!”

She withheld her judgment as she went to stir the pottage over the brazier. “You may tell me of them, if you wish.”

“They would give you nightmares.”

She gritted her teeth and waited, certain he would describe them, anyway. Outside, the rain began to fall with a gentle whisper. The sound of Hunwald’s horn echoed through the watery curtain, calling the pigs to his side. She hoped little Eadric would stay in the barn and do as he was told. If Alfric were to see him ...

“My fleet and I were in the River Thames, next to Lundenburg.” Alfric’s voice was soft, delicate. She paused mid-stir to listen to hear him over the purring rainfall. “So were the Danes.” He shuddered.

A soft mist drifted in through the shutters, lifting bumps along Golde’s skin. She resumed stirring, her ears alert.

“You should have seen their vessels in the river. At twilight, the prows of their ships looked like a horde of demons. There were dragons, and bulls, ravens ... their eyes seemed to pierce the darkness and find me no matter where I hid, peering out over the black water.”

She wondered if he knew how ridiculous he sounded. Apparently not. “Were you not put in command of all King Ethelred’s fleet?” she asked.

He did not respond, his mind too far-gone in his grisly memories to hear her. Either that, or he was too unwilling to admit the extent of his failure. “King Ethelred wanted our fleet to catch them by surprise. He thought we would corner them in a port and

take the advantage. An advantage over the Vikings!” He cackled. “Foolishness. King Ethelred is a fool, just as the monks foretold at his coronation.”

“Alfric!” Her heart fluttered. In truth she agreed with him, but she had never heard a man of his station insult the king so openly. Of course, this man was Alfric: a man that the king had already exiled once for treachery, but afterwards forgiven. Surely enough, Ethelred was a fool.

Her discomfort only seemed to encourage him. “An idiot,” he snarled, “who would have led us all to our deaths. I was not going to let it happen, Golde. I knew we would not win over the Vikings, but I was not going to let myself be a lamb led to the slaughter.”

She gripped the hot bowl beneath her, her blood already boiling. “What did you do?”

“I did what I had to do. I escaped.” His knuckles turned white as he gripped his empty goblet. “More ale, woman.”

Her hands trembled as she poured more into his cup. Then the door swung open and Hunwald stepped in, kicking water from his boots.

He was an older man, weathered and tainted as if by a permanent layer of filth from the nature of his trade. Nevertheless he had gentle blue eyes, and his face was unassuming even as he looked upon their suspicious visitor. He nodded humbly. “My lord, I am Hunwald, a swineherd,” he said. “What ... event ... should I thank ... for the honor of your ... presence?” Golde winced at the swineherd’s awkwardness.

Alfric looked from Hunwald, to Golde, and back again. “Are you two man and wife?” he asked.

Hunwald opened his mouth to reply, but Golde interrupted him. “That is none of your concern.”

Alfric stared at her in horror a moment, then burst into laughter. “God help you, Hunwald! This wench is spoiled goods. I hope you know that!”

Despite herself, Golde flushed with shame and embarrassment. Normally, she was not embarrassed by such things. Long ago, she had surrendered the sanctity of her body to obtain security for herself in the protection of such men as Alfric—whatever his protection may be worth. For a long time she had

possessed no wealth nor station: to warm a rich man's bed at night was a means of gaining food and shelter. But when she bore her son Eadric, she nearly died in the process. For this reason she had stayed from Hunwald's bed despite all of his kindness, despite his good heart and selflessness. God knew he deserved any pleasures her body could give him more than the nobleman sitting on their stool, yet she had withheld them. That Alfric would bring it up this way filled her with a sensation more vile than any she had felt before.

Unable to stop herself, she reached out and slapped Alfric across the face.

His head hung sideways a moment, suspended as a red wave spread up his cheek. His mouth remained opened, gaping, as at last his eyes twisted to look at her. They gleamed like the points of two blades.

He stood up. She stepped back, but he reached out and gripped her wrist, tightly enough to leave a bruise.

He had never been a particularly violent man, preferring to avoid conflict whenever possible. But he sometimes behaved differently around the few people he perceived as weaker than himself. Without a doubt, that was how he saw Golde. She peered up at him, narrowing her own pale eyes, challenging him.

“Why did you come here, Alfric?” she hissed.

“For food and drink, and anything else I may want.” His hot fingers tightened on the bones of her forearms, and she winced.

Despite all she knew of Alfric, there was a danger in his gaze now that she did not recognize, like a starving wolf spotting the only lamb in a flock that was weak enough to catch. Even so, she did not know what he would have done next, and perhaps never would; for at that moment, Eadric stepped inside.

He stood in the doorway, blond curls long and dripping, small woolen tunic matted to his skin. He stared up in shock at the looming figure of the wealthy ealdorman, sparkling with his diamond-crusted tunic and hanging swordbelt. Even more fascinating to the little boy, perhaps, was the intensity with which Alfric stared back at him.

The lord released Golde suddenly. “Who is this?”

“He, uh ... he is Eadric.” Golde rubbed her sore arms.

“Eadric.” Alfric stepped forward, leather boots squeaking. He grabbed a wet curl of Eadric’s hair in his fingertips, so like his own, and twirled it. Then he pulled away. “Hm.” He juttied up his chin as he turned towards Golde. “Let’s eat, then.”

“Shut the door, Eadric, for God’s sake,” cried Golde.

Eadric obeyed, though by now a wet ring of rainwater lay round the threshold. As he joined everyone at the table, he grinned. “I fed everyone in the barn,” he said.

“Everyone?” said Golde as she spooned out the soup. “The pigs, you mean?”

“Everyone—all of them!”

Alfric looked at the boy curiously. “Even my men?”

Eadric nodded, eyes twinkling. “Yes, lord. I gave them acorns, beechnuts, and grains—just like the pigs!”

Golde went pale with embarrassment, but to her shock, Alfric released a chiming laugh. “Serves them right! Pigs, indeed! Good job, Eadric. That is your name, isn’t it?”

“Yes, lord, and yours?”

Golde clenched her teeth angrily. The boy could be so impertinent! But the ealdorman just smiled. “Alfric. Alfric Alfhereson. And you’re the son of . . .?”

Eadric shrugged his little wet shoulders. “I don’t know!”

Golde set down the bowl with a resounding thump, her stomach churning. “Eat up before it gets cold,” she commanded them, even though she had lost her own appetite. Then she hurried off to fetch the bread.

When at last they were all seated and eating, a terrible silence fell over them. Eadric began kicking his legs under the table. The temporary glimmer of light in Alfric’s eyes faded once more. His mouth drooped with a frown and his jaws bulged as he chewed angrily at his stale bread.

“Eadric, be still!” hissed Golde.

Alfric looked at Eadric again, and this time a strange look fell over his face.

“I think I might stay here awhile,” he declared.

The maid nearly choked on her first bite of bread. “What?” She lifted her own cup of ale and drank desperately. “You’re joking, right?”

“Absolutely not. I’ll stay here with you, and little Eadric—” he tossed the boy a wink—“along with ...” He frowned at Hunwald. “Whatever your name is.”

“Alfric—that’s ridiculous! I don’t understand. You have manors to live in, and a fyrd to command, and reeves and stewards to supervise ...” Her mouth went on flapping a moment before her thoughts could catch up. “You ... you do still *have* all those things, don’t you?”

He picked up his bowl, though there was still a decent amount of pottage left, and flung it against the wall. Everyone stared in horror as the broth dripped down the planks. Even Alfric gazed at his own mess as if it saddened him, his rage spent in his meaningless tantrum.

Golde stood up, chest heaving with anger. “Step outside, Alfric.”

He lifted an eyebrow at her. “What was that?”

“You’re not an ealdorman anymore, are you? You didn’t just ‘escape’ from the Danes, did you? Whatever you did was far worse than that. Wasn’t it?” He looked away from her, face burning. “Get out of this house, Alfric, or God help me I will get on my horse, ride to the king, and tell him your whereabouts myself.” This was a bluff, of course, for she did not even have a horse to ride upon. But she did not think Alfric would realize this.

Her suspicions must have been correct, for Alfric rose so suddenly that his stool flew out from under him. He was frightened now—it did not take much to frighten him. His eyes flicked to Eadric, who simply watched this spectacle with unassuming awe.

“You think King Ethelred will protect you from the Vikings?” Alfric’s voice trembled with passion as he looked from one of them to the next. “He won’t. He can’t. I helped the Danes because they will rule eventually, anyway; and I’d rather it not be over my own dead body!”

Golde could hardly contain her horror. So, he had not only run away; he had “helped” the Danes! Had he given them Ethelred’s plans? Had he supported them with his own fleet? She was not sure she wanted to know. In truth, she hardly even cared about the war; what she cared about was the safety of her own home, and Alfric standing here now as traitor to the Anglo-Saxons

poised too great a danger. If he stayed here much longer he would bring the king's rage upon them all. She stormed around the table and grabbed Alfric's tunic. "*Out!*"

He stumbled as she dragged him through the doorway, then cried out and sputtered as the rain splashed his face. She slammed the door behind them and blocked it with her small but sturdy frame.

He looked miserable, rivers of rain running down his face as he stared at her. Nevertheless, mischief flared momentarily from behind his golden lashes, and his expression reminded her of one Eadric often wore. "Ethelred will forgive me eventually, Golde dearest. I'll talk some sense into him again."

She shook her head in disbelief. "How could he forgive you? You helped the enemy."

She could not see his tears through the rain, but she sensed they were there. He stared up at the veiled moon. "I did. I gave them Ethelred's plans. I told them everything."

"Stop, Alfric I don't want to know—!"

"I took my ships and went with them." He took in a heaving breath. "We all would have died otherwise. It was the only way ... " Helpless, she waited for him to go on. She saw that he could no longer hold it in. "That's what I thought, Golde. I really did. But then the rest of Ethelred's fleet pursued us, and he ... he took ... he took one of my ships ... " He sobbed openly. Golde did not know whether to feel sorry for him, or furious. "He slaughtered everyone on board. And then his ships went after the Danes anyway, and the battle ... oh God." He bowed his head and shook violently. "I escaped my ship, with these men ... but they took my ship, and some of my men were on board ... and now they're dead."

She was surprised to find tears pricking her own eyes. Of course, Alfric had been a fool to act as he had. And yet perhaps he had truly wanted to save his men's lives—on that she preferred to give him the benefit of doubt—and despite everything, he had failed. "Alfric, you shouldn't be here. Not only are you endangering me, but you are leaving your true family to the king's mercy. Get back to your own family. Protect them. Go somewhere safe. But you'll solve nothing hiding here, cramming the last of

your loyal men in a pig-sty. Stay in the barn until morning, if you must, but I want you gone before the cock's crow."

He scowled at that. "You'll regret casting me out when I'm in the king's favor again, wench."

"So be it. Until that time comes, farewell, Alfric."

There was nothing else to say, so she went back inside and bolted the door. She remained leaning against it a moment, trembling.

"Mother?"

Reluctantly, Golde turned to meet her son's gaze. To her surprise, he looked angry.

"Why did you send him away?" demanded Eadric. "I liked him!"

"Because he's dangerous."

"No he isn't! I could tell!"

Golde sighed wearily and sank down onto a stool, dripping everywhere. Her heart ached as she watched Hunwald clean the table without question or complaint. He was such a good man. He did not deserve the trouble she brought to his doorstep. "Alfric is dangerous in an unusual way, my boy," she said. "Better just to forget about him."

"I don't want to." Eadric crossed his arms. "I want to go with him."

"You *what*?"

Eadric set his mouth stubbornly.

"Absolutely not, Eadric! I left him in the first place to keep you far from his wily ways."

His stern expression cracked somewhat, giving way to puzzlement. "What do you mean, 'left' him?"

Golde looked away, suddenly feeling a painful ache in her head. She had lived openly with Alfric once, running to his side whenever he tired of his wife. Those days had been strange for her, and were probably as close she would ever come to living a courtly life. She had met a few important nobles and wealthy thegns of Mercia during her stays in the manor. They all knew she was little better than a whore, and most of them had used her as such, but she was surprised by the inclusion they gave her compared to most women. She wondered whether her shamelessness and openness in

her way of life gave her an unusual status in their eyes. When King Ethelred sacked Rochester and cast out Alfric the first time, she had run to Hunwald for shelter, still wearing a soft linen dress decked with beads and embroidery. The swineherd had taken her for some sort of noblewoman and she had let him believe it. He had not asked any questions when her belly swelled and she gave birth to what was obviously a bastard. She nearly died that day, and he could have let her, giving himself two less mouths to feed. Instead he sent for a midwife to help bring Eadric into the world.

She had dreaded the day she would have to explain any of her past to Eadric. She wanted to go on living as if it had never happened. She had let him assume, to whatever extent he could understand the situation, that Hunwald was his father—although he clearly doubted this, and had said as much to Alfric. She had even let him believe that she and Hunwald were husband and wife, though she never stated as much. How could she explain the complexities of her situation to a boy like Eadric? She had been close to another man before leaving the ealdorman's manor, as well: a wealthy swineherd named Wulfric, who was something of Alfric's friend. How could she tell Eadric with any dignity that she did not even know which one was his father?

Unfortunately, Eadric was too smart for his own good. He watched Golde's face closely. "Tell me, Mother! Could we go with Alfric, too? Could I live with Algar?"

Algar was Alfric's legitimate son, only a little older than Eadric. The two boys had encountered each other a few times while Alfric was away and enjoyed playing together. For a moment Golde wanted to explain everything to Eadric, but found she could not. Her shoulders sagged with the weight of the burden she was unwilling to release.

"I want to wear nice tunics like Algar, and cloaks with pretty brooches, and when I'm older, a swordbelt." Eadric was getting carried away with these notions, and she could see in his eyes that he would keep dreaming if she let him.

"Stop it, Eadric. The cost for those things is very dear, and it is better to forget them. Forget Lord Alfric, forget about Algar, and silly brooches! Go to bed, and don't say another word about them."

She hoped she had given the right advice, but she feared she had not as Eadric scowled fiercely and stormed off to his cot. He kicked off his boots, but nothing else, before plopping down on the hard surface and turning away from her.

Her heart was heavy as she joined Hunwald in silence at the table. Together, they tried to clean up the mess Alfric had left behind.

At last they all laid down in the dark and were blanketed by a heavy silence. She wished they could all go to sleep that night and wake up to a morning like any other, but she already knew they would not. She listened to the sound of her own fast breathing, unable to go to sleep no matter how desperately she wished to.

She looked over at Hunwald's form, turned away in the darkness, and wondered if he truly slept. She wondered whether he saw her presence here as a burden, or whether he had enjoyed the company, despite its limitations. She wondered if he considered himself a happy man, or merely content, or if he ever paused to question his lot in life at all.

Then she looked at her son, his pale curls strewn in the moonlight. She watched his small shape rise and fall, and realized that when it came to Eadric, she did not have to wonder. She knew suddenly, without a doubt, that Eadric would never be as content as Hunwald living a simple life among pigs. He was too smart, proud, and ambitious. He would always want more for himself, she suspected, and part of that was her own fault. She believed, herself, that people were not given a set lot in life: they forged their own paths, whether they realized it or not. Perhaps she had been wrong to cut him off so sharply when he spoke of living a life like Alfric's. The notion that Eadric might ever be in a position similar to Alfric's simply terrified her.

She got up and crawled to Eadric's side. She lay a gentle hand on his head, though he did not stir. Whether he heard her or not, she didn't know; and even if he had been awake, she spoke so softly that her words might not have been audible.

"Eadric," she whispered, "I want you to know something. I think you can achieve anything in this life that you set your mind to, no matter how impossible it may seem. I believe you can eventually have all those things you dream of, if you truly want

them. Most of those things are simply not worth the trouble. All of this fighting and bloodshed ... what is it for? It is foolishness.” She sighed, thinking that she was beginning to sound like a fool, herself. “I suppose all I am trying to say is: be careful what you wish for. Pick your battles wisely. Enjoy what you have and take what you can reach ... and all will be well.”

She thought that her words made very little sense, especially to a sleeping seven-year-old boy, but she knew she said them more for her own sake than his. Feeling a little better, she leaned down and kissed his forehead. After that, she finally slept.

But she woke up much too late. The cock had already crowed. Now the farm was too quiet. Alfric and his men were gone.

And so was Eadric.

*

The pigs had scattered over the hills. She found Hunwald in the barn, the dog whining at his side. He was bleeding from the stomach.

She yelled with dismay as she lifted him up and cradled him in her arms. She rocked him gently, but her mind seemed to spin in circles. “Hunwald? Hunwald!” As she settled him in her lap, more blood spilled from the stab-wound in his stomach. Her eyes widened with horror, too shocked to blink even as tears flooded her vision and nearly blinded her. “Hunwald!”

She practically screamed this time, and at last he stirred. His eyes were even grayer than usual, devoid of life and energy. They seemed unable to focus as he stared into her face.

“I’m so sorry, Hunwald.” Her voice shook with sobs. “Who did this to you?”

“One of ... Lord Alfric’s men.” Golde could not believe Hunwald would bother to call Alfric “lord” after what had been done to him. But such was Hunwald’s nature. “Eadric ... he did not see it happen. Don’t worry.”

She clutched him tighter against her. “Where is Eadric?”

“He went ... with them. He wanted to go, but I tried to stop him ... anyway. That’s why they ...” He glanced down at his wound and groaned.

“Oh, Hunwald ... you never deserved any of this. I am so sorry.”

“Please, look after ... look after the pigs.”

It was silly for a dying request, she thought. But she could not smile. “After I find Eadric, I ... I’ll try.”

It was a promise she was not sure she could keep, but hoped she would, anyway. Her arms shook as she considered abandoning him. She had to go after Eadric. But she could not leave Hunwald to die here, slowly and painfully, while elvish sprites festered his wounds and he writhed in lonely agony until his death. Then his dead body would be fodder for the first hungry animal to come along. No, she could not let that happen.

She braced her legs, and heaved up with a great groan of effort. He sagged against her with a trembling grip. “What ... are you ...?”

“Save your breath,” she growled through her teeth. “I’m taking you to a church.”

Hunwald did not own a horse, but she found a cart capable of holding his weight. She strapped on good boots and took some of his coins. She left the rest behind, hiding them under a firm floorboard, hoping this would give her the motivation to return and fulfill her foolish promise.

Then she left Hunwald’s farm, sadly certain that she would never return. She took Hunwald to the nearest monastery and left him with the monks. She leaned over him and brushed her lips against his, so lightly that afterwards she wondered whether they had ever touched at all. In any case, it was much too late for such sentiments. Her life with him was over, and so too was the hope of any true relationship they could have had together. She had lived in a dream, she realized: a dream in which she was not a whore, and Eadric was not a bastard, and one of his possible fathers was not the most treacherous Saxon in Engla-lond.

She resolved that if she found Eadric—and she told herself she would—their lives would change for the better. She did not yet know how.

But she would think of something.

**

THE SECOND LOST TALE OF MERCIA



ETHELRED
THE KING

“[Ethelred] was perhaps the only thoroughly bad King among all the Kings of the English of the West-Saxon line; he seems to have been weak, cowardly, cruel, and bad altogether. He was always doing things at wrong times and leaving undone what he should have done, so that he is called Ethelred the Unready, that is the man without rede or counsel.”

—Freeman, Edward. *Old English History for Children* pg. 190

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CORGE-GATE, DORSET
978 A.D.

Ethelred watched longingly as his half-brother strode with his men to the exit of the stronghold. They looked so handsome, regal, and powerful. Their spurs chimed over the cobbles as they walked, their soft tunics rippled in the breeze, and their cheeks glowed with the pleasure of fellowship. King Edward, walking in the middle, was in fact the smallest of the men, and yet he was the center of their attention and devotion. The sixteen-year-old king had grown to fit his beautifully embroidered boots, and the crown seemed to glitter more brightly on his auburn-haired head than it ever had on their father’s.

The king stopped suddenly and turned to look at Ethelred, as if he had sensed his younger brother’s stare. Ethelred stepped back a little, hiding in the shadow of a stone column, and gulped.

“Ethelred?”

Ethelred could see the smiles gathering on the faces of Edward’s soldiers. They wanted to laugh at him, and they were only holding it in because he would have been king, if Edward was not. Remembering this made him straighten up a little and lean into the sunshine. “Yes, what is it?”

Edward strolled closer, hands on his hips. Ethelred noticed for the first time that the king was getting a nice, cherry brown beard on his chin. Ethelred touched his own chin self-consciously; at barely eleven years of age, he was far from being able to grow his own.

“Ethelred, I think you should come hunting with us!”

Ethelred blinked at his half-brother in shock. Could he really mean it? Or was he mocking him somehow? Ethelred glanced nervously at Edward’s companions. Were they all playing some sort of big joke?

“Well?” Edward leaned down, planting a thickly-gloved hand on Ethelred’s shoulder. “Don’t you want to?”

“What, uh ...” Ethelred shifted on his feet, suddenly conscious of how far Edward had to lean down to look him in the eye. “What sort of game will you hunt?”

“Game?” Edward straightened up, letting him go and shrugging. “Whatever game the hawk finds for us!”

“Hawk?” Ethelred’s eyes glittered with jealousy. He had always wanted to hunt with a hawk.

“That’s right. We don’t have a plan, little brother. That’s the fun of it.”

Ethelred gulped. The notion was exciting, but it also made him nervous. “Mother says a servant should be sent out first, to find the game and—”

“Damn that.” Edward curled his lip and spat to the side. “And damn your mother.”

Ethelred flushed despite himself. Edward had never gotten along with his step-mother very well, but normally he remained polite about it. Ethelred didn’t want to argue with Edward, but could he let an insult like that slide? He glanced nervously about, uncertain of what to do once more.

“Come now, Ethelred, do you want to come or not?”

“Yes.” He felt his heart swelling within him. “Yes. Yes, I will!”

“There’s a good boy.” Edward knocked his fist against the younger boy’s shoulder.

Ethelred’s limbs tingled with excitement as he joined Edward and the tall, proud soldiers on their walk outside. A

warming breeze kissed his cheeks and he took a deep, happy breath. He saw the horses already saddled and pulled from the stables, waiting for their noble mounts to ride them into the forest. He looked out at the sharply rolling hills and chalky cliffs surrounding the Corfe-Gate stronghold and felt almost like a king surveying his kingdom. He would join Edward and his men on the hunt!

“Ethelred? Ethelred! What is going on?”

Ethelred’s heart sank quickly. The voice belonged to his mother, Alfryth. She stormed from the stronghold, her silken veil and black robes billowing in a gust of wind. Her scraggly brown hair blew against her face, splitting her scowl like so many cracks.

King Edward turned to face her, his men now behind him. He hooked his thumb on his swordbelt, as if resting it there, but Ethelred could not ignore how close his hand came to the hilt of his sword. He said nothing, only glared at her through his cherry lashes.

Desperately, Alfryth turned her fierce gaze on Ethelred. “Son, where are you going?”

“I’m going hunting, mother.” Ethelred stuck up his chin. “Hunting for whatever game we may come across.”

“No, you’re not.”

Ethelred stiffened. He looked to Edward for help, but the young king had only eyes for Alfryth, and those eyes were full of hatred.

“You have matters to attend to,” Alfryth insisted to Ethelred. “Matters for Ealdorman Alfhre.”

Butterflies fluttered in Ethelred’s stomach, and he saw Edward’s hands curl into fists. When their father, Edgar, died a few years ago, various nobles and clergymen had disagreed on which of Edgar’s sons should become king. Ealdorman Alfhre had supported Ethelred’s right to the throne, as the son of Edgar’s latest wife, but Ethelred had been only seven years old. Naturally, most men had supported Edward instead. Though the wise men had come to a peaceful decision, no doubt it was hard for Edward to forget Alfhre’s opposition to him.

Alfryth smiled sweetly, seeing the fear and doubt in her son's eyes. "As you know, these matters are important, my son. Much more important than a young boy's fancy to fill his days with hunting."

"Young boy's fancy!" cried King Edward. He took a step forward, and Ethelred tensed with nervousness. Edward was generally a nice fellow, best demonstrated by how kindly he treated Ethelred, a boy that most would consider his rival. When he got mad, however, he got very mad; and usually he got the maddest about issues concerning his step-mother, Alfryth. "Hunting is man's work, a man's way of practicing for battle. A woman like you wouldn't understand, of course. Right, Ethelred?"

Ethelred stood frozen, afraid to look at either of them.

He did, however, glimpse his mother's smile, remaining firmly on her face as if everything was going according to plan. "I suppose I would not understand. And in any case, I wasn't trying to discourage you from engaging in such ... 'practice,' my lord. Some men must practice for engaging in battle. Others must practice for *leading* men to battle. My son, Ethelred, will be doing the latter, and so he does not need to go riding about in the forest." She held out her hand to Ethelred. "Come on, then, son."

But Ethelred ignored her completely. He could not tear his eyes away from Edward, who wore such a vicious scowl on his face that it brought to mind the horrific depictions of bears on some of the stronghold's tapestries. "Why ... you ... filth-ridden ... *BITCH!*"

And then he lunged forward, and Ethelred cowered, as if expecting to be stricken by whatever tremendous blow Edward seemed about to deliver. But after a moment, he found he was only stricken by a fierce silence, and looked up to see that Edward had stopped himself. He stood with one arm lifted, panting for breath, his fingers inches from Alfryth's throat and curled as if already gripping it. But he restrained himself, and stared blazing into her eyes. Though she stood unflinching, the fear in Alfryth's own gaze was horribly apparent.

At last Edward lowered his arm. He took a deep breath and straightened his tunic. He looked around at his wary soldiers and

his cowering half-brother Ethelred, and a dramatic change came over him. He forced a lilted smile on his still-reddened face. “What a waste of time. We have game to catch.”

His soldiers relaxed visibly and continued on to their horses. Alfryth remained standing at the door of the stronghold, chin lifted in triumph, her dark wimple fluttering in the salty breeze. Edward cast Ethelred one last glance before departing.

“Maybe next time, brother,” he said. But his voice was sullen, and Ethelred did not think he expected a next time, in truth.

Not until that moment did Ethelred comprehend the true extent of his loss. He realized that Edward had sincerely wanted to hunt with him. Until now, Ethelred had still been afraid that it was all some sort of prank—or at least a way to make Ethelred humiliate himself. He had been so desperate to join the king and his men that he had agreed despite these instincts. But as Edward trudged away, he actually seemed disappointed—disappointed that Ethelred wasn’t coming along!

Despite himself, he felt tears prick his eyes.

“Ethelred, what is wrong with you? Come inside.”

“But Mother, I want to—”

“You don’t get to do what you want. If you’re to be king then you’ll have to do a great many things you’d rather not do.”

“I don’t want to be—!”

“*Silence!* I don’t care!” She grabbed his wrist fiercely, then pulled him inside.

He was even more surprised when she led him to his room and told him to stay there. “But I’m supposed to speak with Ealdorman Alfhreth!” he cried. Then, when she scowled at him, his face scrunched up helplessly. “Aren’t I?”

Her expression tore between pity and disgust. “I’ll handle him myself, son. You stay here and practice your reading.” Then, as an afterthought, “Also, consider why your father’s wise men chose Edward to be King over you, even though he was not my son. Think on it long and hard.”

She slammed the door behind her, and though the chill of winter had supposedly lifted from Engla-lond, he shivered.

As his mother had suggested, he stayed in his room and read. He also pondered over the matter of the witenagemot's decision to choose Edward over himself. He thought it made practical sense for anyone to choose the older of the two boys, considering how young they had been at the time, and the fact that no one else of royal blood had been available. On top of that, Edgar himself had said before his death that he wished Edward to succeed him. But on the other hand, Ethelred was the son of Alfyth, the present queen: he really should have been next in line. He wondered whether the wise men's choice to put Edward on the throne had been any fault of his own. Then, filling with shame, he remembered the story of his own baptism.

When the Archbishop Dunstan had held him underwater and offered the holy sacrament, baby Ethelred had defecated in the water. Dunstan had pulled him out and handed him away, crying out with disgust. "By God," declared the bishop, "this will be a miserable man!" Ethelred's ears burned with embarrassment whenever he heard that story retold, but he also felt anger. He had been a baby at the time. He had no control of such things.

As he stayed in his room according to his mother's wishes and read the Holy Gospels, he tried to gather encouragement from them. He wondered whether everything that happened on earth was truly God's will. If so, what power did he or anyone else have to change it? He thought that perhaps he was still too young to understand; adults never seemed to question this paradox, so surely he must be missing something. In any case, he found it comforting to believe that his father's witenagemot had chosen Edward by God's ordinance. If God orchestrated everything, that meant the matters were no fault of his own, at all—especially not the fault of a helpless baby.

Ethelred's scholarly pondering helped the time to pass, at first. But after the sun peaked and fell westward, thrusting its last orange beams through his window, he found himself growing restless. He looked out at the sharp hills of Dorset, their slopes undulating with varying hues of green, brown, and gray. He wondered what a thrill Edward must now feel, riding with his soldiers while a hawk flew overhead and the wild pigs and deer fled in fear. How great it must feel to be a king!

He shook his head of these thoughts, remembering Alfrith. Sometimes, Ethelred's own mother frightened him, and he preferred Edward's temper tantrums to her mysterious ways. Why had she insisted that Ethelred stay home today? Did she simply not want the two boys to feel like brothers? Or did she place so little faith in Ethelred she assumed he would humiliate himself?

Or was something else going on altogether?

He felt a strong sense of foreboding like cold water in his belly; but at the same time, he felt hunger. Had the time not already passed for the night meal? He realized with surprise that the light was waning outside, and yet no one had summoned him to the dining hall. What was going on?

He donned a soft fur-trimmed cloak, which always made him feel regal. He walked to the door and took a deep breath. Perhaps it went against his mother's wishes to leave now, but so what? As Edward had said, what did a woman like her understand? Feeling emboldened, he pulled open the door and strode into the halls.

Something strange seemed to be amiss in the Corfe-Gate stronghold, something he could not fully describe. The servants dared to meet his eyes, then looked away with darting glances. They shuffled about on their feet and did not gossip to each other as usual. Something else was strange, as well. Normally the stronghold was surrounded with royal soldiers, reeves, and hearth companions of all the noblemen and women. But he noticed that many familiar faces, especially those of his mother's retainers, were missing from their usual posts.

Briefly he wandered out to the stables, curious whether Edward and his men had returned yet from the hunt, for the sun was sinking behind the hills. Edward and his men had not yet returned, he found; but even more surprisingly, a great many more horses were gone than Edward had taken with him. A large number of soldiers had gone somewhere. But where?

Puzzled and distraught, Ethelred remembered the ache in his belly, and decided this needed fixing first of all. He headed for the dining hall, hoping to find some manner of food there. A cloud of smoke wafting through the hall doors assured him that

he must have the right idea. But to his astonishment, his mother and several lords sat at the table, huddled closely in heated conversation, and not a single plate of food could be found amongst them. The smoke came only from a blazing hearth-fire.

Alfryth spotted him from afar, and motioned to the men to cease speaking. "Ethelred," she hissed. "I told you to stay in your room!"

He tried to think of something clever and bold to say, but as he stared at the intimidating faces of the war-leaders and clergymen sitting at the table, he found his words lacking. "But I am hungry!"

Alfryth put on a smile, though it was so forced and fake that in a way it was worse than a scowl. "That's true, my boy, a growing man certainly needs his food."

It amazed Ethelred how differently his mother treated him when in the company of other people than when he and she were alone together. He realized that this had always been the case, but it was more noticeable today than ever. He wondered whether something had changed, or whether he was simply growing more perceptive.

Soon his mother was upon him, her sharp nails digging into his arm as she led him outside. The wind battered against them, cool with the coming night. "Ethelred, you are such a little child!" She hissed this to him as soon as they were out of the noblemen's hearing range.

He felt as if he was on the verge of understanding something now that he never had before, and this feeling gave him confidence. He stared back at his mother with all the defiance he could muster. "If you want me to act like more than a child, then you should tell me what's going on!"

She leaned back, the knots of her face untwisting as her eyebrows lifted with surprise. She was silent a moment. Then, exasperated, she declared, "Not today, Ethelred; of all days, not today! You will be plenty involved soon enough, of that I promise you."

"What do you mean, soon enough?"

"For God's sake, Ethelred, not now! Go away, fill your little belly in the kitchens if you must!"

She hurried back inside, and when she was gone, Ethelred remained standing awhile, huffing with anger. He could not comprehend all the emotions roiling through him. Suddenly he felt as if he hated his mother, though he didn't know why, and he silently prayed to God for forgiveness.

Then, having stood still long enough with his eyes pointed to the horizon, he discerned a shape approaching. It was a lone rider, charging through the gap in the hills at full speed; and as he rounded a certain slope, Ethelred was astonished to glimpse the gleam of a crown on his head.

“Edward!” he cried.

He ran down the slope to meet his brother, little fists bobbing at his sides, heart pounding in his chest. He did not even know why he ran with such urgency and yelled Edward's name so loudly.

Perhaps, if he had not, things would have happened differently.

It had frustrated Ethelred that so many events of the day had developed beyond his comprehension, and that he felt some great significance hanging in the air, but he could not even guess what it was. It filled him with pride that now, he was at the forefront of this new event. Several dozen soldiers peeked from the stronghold to see what all the fuss was about, but Ethelred was far ahead of them. He was the first to reach the king, who slouched strangely in his saddle, and whose brow twinkled with sweat in the fading sunlight.

“Hail, Ethelred,” said King Edward cheerfully, though his voice rasped. Spittle dripped from his stallion's mouth, the hooves of which stomped dangerously close to Ethelred's feet. “Have you anything to drink?”

“I ...” Ethelred patted his tunic uselessly. He had nothing. He had not even eaten his own night meal, after all. “I am sorry, Edward, I don't.” He glanced back to the stronghold, the sharp stones of which cast angry lines against the sky from this direction, and watched as a few men marched out of it. Someone else would provide water, surely, so he hurried to more important concerns while he could. “What happened to your hearth companions?”

"I'm ... not sure." Edward wiped his brow, though it continued to drip. "I don't know what disbanded us. Something must have frightened them, for they disappeared suddenly ... but I would have noticed the tracks of a bear, or wolf. It's, ridiculous, isn't it? A king searching for his own hearth companions!" He laughed, but no humor was in his voice.

Ethelred considered this. "We can get my mother's men to find them!" He thought he was being helpful, but Edward frowned. Then Ethelred remembered that most of his mother's men had been missing, anyway. He frowned as well.

"I think not, little brother." Ethelred began to understand his discomfort when a few soldiers from the stronghold reached the king's horse and surrounded it. Edward surprised everyone by kicking a man solidly in the face who dared seize the horse's reins. The servant fell back with a cry, clutching a bleeding nose. "Away, you filthy churls. Who has some ale? That's all I need."

"We'll fetch it for you," said a man, and Ethelred recognized him as one of his mother's retainers named Osrud, large and strapping. He looked the part of a soldier though he wore none of the usual fittings, except perhaps for the unusually large dirk strapped to his belt. Ethelred was glad to see him go.

"Away!" Edward was continuing to kick at the men lingering around him. At last they all backed off, but Edward drew his sword nonetheless, a dangerous look in his eyes. His horse pranced about uneasily, churning the rocky earth under its hooves, twisting its neck and snorting. Ethelred found the situation very strange and confusing. Everyone was silent as they waited, hearing little but Edward's snorting horse, and the hollow sound of the wind through the hills. Ethelred thought he could even hear the soft crashing of the waves upon the distant shore.

Everyone but Ethelred seemed to be expecting something. Expecting what?

With some relief, he recognized Alfryth's shape coming down the hillside. She held a large goblet in her slender, ringed fingers. Edward watched her approach with a scowl, though the look on Alfryth's face beneath the fluttering veil was unusually sweet. She actually seemed happy to provide the king with this

refreshment. Ethelred wished she would walk faster, for it seemed as if a great deal of time passed before she reached them, at which point the air seemed to thrum tangibly with tension.

“Has the game eluded you?” said the queen mother, pausing with the goblet outstretched. Meanwhile, her servant Osrid kept walking, moving around the horse.

Edward did not answer at first, only flashed his teeth as he put away his sword. Then he leaned over to grab the goblet. “The hunt is still on, Lady, and it will not stop until I—AAAGH!”

The sound that came from the king’s mouth was so terrible, it would ring in Ethelred’s ears for decades to come. Edward drew back, limbs flailing, clutching his side near his back. The goblet fell to the earth, clinking against the stones and splashing water on the horse’s hooves. The horse reared, twisting about, and revealed a shape darting quickly from behind it.

The shape was Osrid’s, and he held a bloody dagger.
“EDWARD!”

Arms fell upon Ethelred as if from the darkness, for night had fallen quickly and the world seemed full of shadows, reaching and grasping at him. “Edward!” he cried again. Hands pulled him back as he struggled, yet he could still hear his half-brother’s moans, and he saw the horse’s thrashing shape, another black mass against the dim red world. It neighed, hooves slicing the sky, and wheeled about. Ethelred gave another great heave to push himself above his captors, looking for Edward as the horse ran away. The king drooped in the saddle, still clinging there whether by determination or some fated mechanism, his auburn hair streaming behind him like the blood pouring from his stab-wound.

Then Ethelred’s eyes were blinded by his own tears, and a roar like thunder from his own pulse deafened him as he was dragged away. His sorrow and rage filled him up, and he was conscious of nothing else.

*

In his room a meal was waiting for him, but he could not bring himself to eat it. He ran to the window, underneath which his mother had posted guards, and he sagged against the wall,

peering uselessly into the gray horizon. Edward was nowhere to be seen.

Edward was dead.

He had stopped crying for a short while, somewhere in the midst of his struggling and attempting to escape while his mother's hearth companions dragged him away and closed him in his room. Now the terrible truth struck him again, and it petrified him. For a moment he was too stunned to even start crying again. Ethelred had not seen Edward die, but he knew without a doubt that he was dead, at least by now. Alfryth would see to it.

Though he still could not move, a shudder shook him. He could hardly believe his mother's cruelty and evilness. She may not have held the knife that stabbed Edward in the side, but she surely orchestrated its movement. He felt so confused and foolish for not seeing her intention before. Was he, in a way, to blame? He knew Alfryth did not like Edward, and wanted her own son on the throne instead, but he never thought she would do something like this to get her way. Had he unknowingly helped her?

The door opened, and Ethelred shrank against the wall, cowering. There in the doorway stood Alfryth, but his mother looked different to him than she ever had before. Perhaps this was because he now saw her for who she truly was. Perhaps it was because she had freed her head of its veil and wimple, and some of her long chestnut hair fell freely around her face and shoulders. Her skin seemed more flawless than ever, glowing with triumph and power; her dark eyes blazed with energy.

And yet, at the sight of Ethelred cowering, her expression soured again.

"Ethelred. My son."

She turned and motioned to the retainers with a flick of her wrist, and they closed the doors behind her.

The dimly enclosed space now looked, to Ethelred, a great deal like how he imagined hell. The moonlight through the window provided a pale white glow to some corners of the room, but the rest of the chamber was filled with glaring orange candlelight and writhing, flickering shadows. Such shadows

moved over the sharp angles of his mother's face as she stared at him, and the sight of her livid face filled Ethelred with both terror and rage.

"How could you?" he cried. The sobs returned to his throat like so many rising bubbles. "My brother. Poor Edward. He was always so kind to us. He could have been cruel. He could have been but he—"

"SILENCE!" Alfryth reached out suddenly, slender arm uncoiling from the heavy folds of her sleeve like a snake, and grabbed a candle. Fortunately, the force of her throw caused the flame to gush out before striking Ethelred's bed. "You are a *king* now! That is worth the death of one man; it is worth the death of hundreds of men! Worth it, at least, if you are a *good* king, and not a sniveling spoiled child. So stop your worthless crying!"

Her words moved him, but only for a movement. True, he would be a king now. He would rise up to fill Edward's shoes. But would he be any better than Edward? He simply didn't understand. "But Edward was a good king. What am I to do differently?"

"Oh *stop* asking questions!" She stormed closer, grabbing another candle and lifting it high. Ethelred flinched, expecting her to throw it again. But it was worse than that this time. She swung it down, and the hot waxy end struck Ethelred's tunic, the flame flaring then snuffing out against the cloth. Ethelred yelled and curled up, shielding himself with the flesh of his back and the thin fabric of his cloak as she struck him again, and again, and again.

The candle snapped apart eventually, and she dropped it with a sickening thud. Her heaving breath roared in the silence. He uncurled slightly, trembling from head to foot. His back ached, and he knew he would have bruises. But he was no longer crying. His eyes were dry now, his gaze strangely vacant. Alfryth might not have noticed, for he could not bring himself to look at her; if she did notice she said nothing.

After a long and terrible silence, at last she turned and walked away. She paused as she pushed open the door.

"I'll ... send you some wine," she said. And then she left.

*

They crowned him at Kingston, where his brother and many kings before him had been crowned, and the people gathered in a great church and sang, their voices resounding against the tremendous walls.

“Glory be to the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost,” they chanted. Some of them turned their eyes heavenwards, hands clasped in supplication; others peered at him from dirty faces, mumbling the prayer with lazy lips. Sometimes their eyes were curious and piercing, sometimes they were simply blank. Ethelred tried not to look at them, for they made his heart race and his palms sweat. He could not afford for his hands to be slippery, for both of them were clasped to the hands of the bishops on either side of him, leading him to the altar.

“Let thy hands be strengthened,” chanted the bishops.

Ethelred tried to stare straight ahead, ignoring all the rest, trying to think of the crown and none of the responsibilities that went with it. He should be proud, his mother had said. He should be grateful. In any case, it was God’s will, he told himself. He must accept it, just like the people here, who accepted him as King even though their eyes and voices lacked love or devotion. So he tried to focus on the kingship alone, the glory of the coronation; but then he saw Archbishop Dunstan, standing at the altar, and even though he had known the archbishop would be there, he thought he might vomit from fear.

Archbishop Dunstan: the same old man who had baptized him as a baby and claimed that he would be a miserable man all his life. The man stared at him now with a blank expression, but Ethelred thought he detected the cold hatred behind the blue discs of his eyes. He was so very old, his shoulders stooped, his skin sagging, and yet he seemed to radiate with power. His heavy pallium glowed with the colors of a distant stained glass window, and glittered with golden pins and brooches.

For a moment, Ethelred feared that this man was more of a king than he was. He looked down at himself: at his soft flowing robes, at the golden-thread embroidery, at the thick brooch on his chest made of gold, blue glass, and garnet stone. Did all these fancy things make him a king? The thought filled him with doubt.

Hands pushed at him, and he realized these were the bishops, nudging him to perform his next act. Remembering his script, he let go and prostrated himself on the floor, fancy robes and all.

“We praise thee, oh God,” sang the people. “We acknowledge thee to be the Lord.”

His cheek pressed against the filthy floor, Ethelred felt inclined to agree with them. As long as the Lord was truly the one in power, all would be well, he thought.

At last the bishops helped lift him from the floor, and he knelt before Dunstan and the great coronation stone at the altar. All of the church fell silent, knowing that his turn came to speak. He took a deep breath and did so, trying not to let his voice waver, trying to fill it with the strength of a king.

“In the name of Christ, I promise three things to the Christian people my subjects. First, that the Church of God, and all the Christian people, shall always preserve true peace through our arbitration. Second, that I will forbid rapacity and all iniquities to every condition. Third, that I will command equity and mercy in all judgments, that to me and to you the gracious and merciful God may extend his mercy.”

“Amen,” said the people, and he exhaled with relief.

The prayers went on, and the smoke of the candles made him dizzy, and his ears rang with the never-ending words. All the while he stared at the foot of Dunstan’s robes, as unwavering and steady as the man himself. Then the bishop held the crown over his head, and Ethelred could hardly find the strength to breathe. He thought he could feel the weight of the large metal piece, though it had not yet descended.

“Almighty Creator, everlasting Lord, Governor of heaven and earth, the Maker and Disposer of angels and men, look down propitiously on our humble prayers, and multiply the gifts of thy blessing on this thy servant, whom with humble devotion we have chosen to be King of the Angles and the Saxons: surround him everywhere with the right hand of thy power, that, strengthened with the faithfulness of Abraham, the meekness of Moses, the courage of Joshua, the humility of David, and the wisdom of Solomon, he may be well pleasing to thee in all

things, and may always advance in the way of justice with inoffensive progress.”

All the words followed the script his mother had described to him; they were all normal and ceremonious statements. But Ethelred heard them now as if he had never heard them before, and they filled his head with a heavy burden. After a short while, he seemed to cease hearing them altogether, for it was too much to endure. How could he do all these things? How could all these people expect him to?

His lips continued to move, playing their expected role; so did his hands, accepting the gifts bestowed upon him. Dunstan continued to hold the crown high while Ethelred received the sword, a great heavy thing which sagged in his fingertips, sparkling with a gilt pommel. “May all the strength of his enemies be broken by the virtue of the spiritual sword, and may thou combat with him, so they may be utterly destroyed,” Dunstan prayed.

And then, at last, the archbishop lowered the crown, glittering as it descended to Ethelred’s head. The breath of the entire congregation seemed to catch and hold.

“May God crown thee with the crown of glory,” Dunstan intoned, “and with honor and justice, and the strength of fortitude, that by virtue of our benediction, and by a right faith of the various fruits of good works, thou may attain to the crown of the everlasting kingdom, through his bounty, whose kingdom endures forever.”

At last the crown fell upon Ethelred’s hair, and he breathed deep, closing his eyes. It was only a thing, he knew; and yet for a moment, he felt as if it filled him with strength, energizing and empowering him.

When he opened his eyes, he saw Dunstan leaning down, the fire of his holy gaze boring into him, and his blood ran cold. When next he spoke, Ethelred did not know if it was loud enough for all the gathering to hear. And yet to him, the words seemed louder than any spoken yet.

“Since you have taken the kingdom by the death of thy brother, hear the word of God.”

Ethelred could only stare up at the archbishop in horror. This was not part of the script, and this did not sound like something that had been said to any other king before.

Dunstan straightened up, eyes scanning the congregation. His voice rose, making the stone pillars tremble. “Thus saith the Lord God: the sin of thy mother, and of the accomplices of her base design, shall not be washed out but by much blood of the kingdom’s wretched inhabitants; and such evils shall come upon the English nation as they have never suffered from the time they came to Engla-lond until then.”

People murmured and whispered to each other; a general wave of moans seemed to float over the room. The sweat of Ethelred’s hands dripped down the precious metals of his new sword. His mother’s sins could “not be washed out but by much blood of the kingdom’s wretched inhabitants.” What could it possibly mean?

Whatever it meant, Ethelred knew it would be terrible.

**

THE THIRD LOST
TALE OF MERCIA



AYDITH
THE AETHELING

“This year there was great commotion in England in consequence of an invasion by the Danes, who spread terror and devastation wheresoever they went, plundering and burning and desolating the country with such rapidity, that they advanced in one march as far as the town of Alton ...”

—Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, Entry for Year 1001 A.D.

*

LUNDENBURG
1001 A.D.

Aydith’s heart seemed to throb in her throat, so completely did her rage and sorrow fill her. Breathing became difficult as she waited for her father to exit the hall, but she stood firm, swallowing down what fear she could. She watched as the various nobles and clergymen exited the room first, their faces cheerful, though she did not see anything to be cheerful about. Some of the faces comforted her, such as Bishop Alphege’s, who wore his usual expression of stoic calm. Others infuriated her, such as the smirk of the man named Lord Alfric, who had betrayed her father once before but now strolled about the palace as if he still ruled Mercia as ealdorman.

Even more troubling, she realized, was the number of faces missing. Recently the Danes had pillaged all the way to Alton and met with a Saxon army, but so many great men died that day, no one could consider the battle a victory. Among the dead was the kind and scholarly Athelward, as well as Lord Leofric of Whitchurch, and Wulfhere the thegn, and high-steward Lord Leofwin, and Bishop Elfy’s son Godwin ... and many more which she could not name. Her arms trembled as she clenched her fists at her sides. Despite the deaths of those brave men, Sweyn Forkbeard

pillaged on with his army of Vikings. From Alton the pagans had marched on to Devonshire, where another one of her father's lords betrayed the Anglo-Saxons. His name was Pallig, and he had been a Dane living amongst the English; perhaps King Ethelred should have seen it coming.

Her fury only raged hotter the longer she waited, as did her determination to speak her mind. And though the men passed by her and she knew almost all of them by name, as they knew hers, they did not bother to look at her or address her, for she was only an eleven-year-old female aetheling standing in the middle of the palace. Even the fact she was an aetheling hardly seemed to matter; after all, Ethelred had ten children in all.

At last, the king himself exited the hall. Her stomach turned a somersault. King Ethelred looked rather pleased with himself: his cheeks were rosy above his fair beard, his blue eyes were crisp and bright, and his crown looked freshly polished. Normally, Aydith would be proud of him, for of course a king should always appear confident, no matter the circumstances. What enraged her was the real reason why he felt victorious, which had nothing to do with the Vikings.

When he saw her, his smile fell. "Aydith?" He scratched at his beard and glanced nervously about, as if hoping to see one of her retainers come fetch her away. "Something wrong?"

"I ... I heard you," she gasped. "I heard everything. How *could* you?"

King Ethelred's cheeks turned deep red. She was not sure if the cause was embarrassment or fury—or perhaps both. "You should not have heard anything," he snapped. Of course, he did not even address her question. He probably never would. "So forget you heard it at all!"

Despite herself, Aydith felt tears filling her eyes, blurring her vision. She knew it was bad for an aetheling to be seen crying, especially with so many important men watching, but she couldn't help herself. "Mother has not even been dead a year."

He straightened himself, which was no small feat under the heaviness of his thickly woven garments. "A king must have a queen."

“But Emma of Normandy! She’s one of them!” Aydith was getting carried away with herself, practically screaming. “Norman filth! The Normans are friends to the Danes! Have you forgotten, Father?!”

“Of course not, you foolish child! These are matters you cannot understand.” Ethelred’s eyes darted desperately around the room, seizing the first available hearth companion he could find. “You, Hastings! Take her to her room, and don’t let her leave your sight, for God’s sake!”

For the first time, Aydith understood the extent of her own embarrassment. She looked around her, glimpsing the smug faces leering and laughing at her, and she realized how she must look to them. She was small and thin, any sturdiness of her frame covered by the loose folds of her dress. She was eleven years old, presuming to yell at her father, the king; and even worse than that, she was a girl. To them she was nothing more than a spoiled, childish *girl*.

Her humiliation filled her up and petrified her. The sobs still wanted to come out, but she restricted them, her body shaking violently as a result. All the while, a man walked forward to take her away. She recognized him vaguely as he came closer, but it was hard to see anything clearly through the deluge of her sorrow. His hands on her shoulders were large but gentle, gripping her and guiding her away from the crowd. His touch was surprisingly relaxing.

“There, there,” he said, though a bit awkwardly, and patted her back.

She bowed her head and sagged under his fingers. What had she accomplished by making such a scene? Nothing. What had she lost? A great deal. Her father would be more strict from now on. The nobles would likely laugh at anything she said, aetheling or not.

Despite the gravity of these defeats, the words of the witenagemot resumed echoing in her head, again and again and again. Her anger trickled back into her veins, granting her new strength. She remembered the way the wise men had spoken to her father, especially that treacherous man Alfric, and how from the start of the gathering to the finish they had all managed to turn the

truth on its head. At the beginning of the meeting, King Ethelred had still been filled with resolve to launch yet another attack on the Vikings, despite his many failures. By the end, everyone had convinced him that he should try a more friendly approach instead.

When at last they reached her room, she broke away from Hastings, storming in of her own will. She grabbed the door and made to slam it, but he put his hand against it. Her fierce brown gaze met his, blazing.

As she stared at him, however, she found she could not remain angry for long. He seemed a strong and noble man, his face kind and devoid of the selfishness and deceitfulness of almost everyone she met in the king's court. In truth, she had known Hastings for some time now, who had served the royal family as a retainer ever since becoming a man at the age of twelve, she suspected. Though she had always seen him about, she had never thought of him much, beyond pondering his somewhat large chin on an otherwise box-shaped face. His eyes were so soft and unassuming, his demeanor so quiet and graceful, that his presence was easy to take for granted. He had shiny brown hair that barely fell below his ears, and a close-cut beard that helped cover the largeness of his chin. This close, she thought the beard looked very soft to the touch.

"My lady," he said, looking somewhat abashed, then cleared his throat. "I'm to watch over you."

She lifted her chin high, but removed her hand from the door, and went inside.

Two of her ladies already loitered within her chamber, having abandoned their weaving work to whisper to each other and giggle next to the brazier. At the sight of Aydith entering with a red, swollen face and a soldierly companion, they hushed immediately and straightened their postures.

Aydith glared at them. She already disliked the maids, but now she disliked them even more, for they had been talking about her older brother Aethelstan and blushing like tavern wenches. Aydith did not not know exactly what they were whispering to each other, but she knew it must be sinful, and even if it was not, it was disrespectful to speak of an aetheling in such a manner. Not

sure what to say, she harrumphed and crossed her arms over her chest, then went to sit at her table and chair.

This table was probably her favorite place on earth to sit. It squatted in a cold corner of the stone room, from which point the rest of the world seemed to grow quiet around her. At the table, she did not have to focus on anything but her wooden toys, and the precious manuscripts from which they were inspired. No matter how bright the outdoors, the table always seemed to collect a gentle glow around its corners, whether from the nearby candles, the lit brazier, or the sunlight forcing its way through the thick tapestry over the window. She sat in her table and took a deep breath, feeling the way a breeze always seemed to flutter here, making everything move and come alive, from the fabric of her dress to the delicate parchment of her books.

Her fingers reached out and found the smooth wooden piece tucked behind the books. She owned a few different carvings: one of a horse, and a church, and a wooden palisade. But most precious to her was the carving of a woman, crafted for Aydith per her request to the royal carpenter. The woman wore a dress, but leather armor was also carved onto her form, as well as a helm over her bound hair. A sword hung from her hip. Aydith traced the rim of the toy sword with her fingertip while staring longingly towards the glowing window.

For a moment she began to feel peaceful and alone once more. Then she realized Hastings stood only a few feet away from her. She had not even heard him approach.

She started, then quickly put the carved woman away. She looked at Hastings with a wary expression. “Don’t worry,” she said. “I don’t think I can escape through the window from here.”

“I am not so sure.” He attempted a smile. “You look very fast.”

“Hmph!” She wanted to be mad at him, but she could not resist smiling, herself. She turned away to hide her expression and a heavy silence resumed. She wished she could return to that quiet place in her mind, but she could not, and it was not entirely Hastings’s fault.

“What was that you were holding?” asked the hearth companion.

“It was nothing,” she said quickly. “A silly trinket. But I’ve grown out of such things.”

She heard the maids across the room start whispering again, and it reminded her of the much louder, but no less shameful, whisperings that took place among the king’s witenagemot, or gathering of wise men. Much against her will, she felt her tears and sobs returning.

“My lady?” Hastings watched her face uncertainly. “Can I ... do anything?”

“I don’t know.” She sniffled and looked at him directly. “Can you? Can anyone?” She shook her head so forcefully that some dark strands of her hair fell over her small face. “My father tried. God knows he tried. He even went across the sea and tried to fight the Danes in their homeland, and I was so proud of him. But he failed. Then he went to Normandy!” She smiled sadly, even as her chin quivered. “He said he would capture Duke Richard and take him back to Engla-lond with his hands tied behind his back, for all that he had done to help the Danes! What changed, Hastings? Is there something I do not understand? What makes my father go back and forth between being a proud and brave king to a cowering fool? Whatever in heaven or hell made him decide to marry Duke Richard’s daughter? Please tell me that my father was right after all, and that I am simply too young and foolish to understand!”

Hastings had a strange look on his face: one of awe, and bewilderment, and a small degree of discomfort. “I ... I wish I knew, my lady. But in truth, I am as puzzled as you.”

She looked at him with fresh eyes, wondering if at last she had found someone who did not think she was foolish. But perhaps he was only being polite, because she was an aetheling and he was a hearth companion, and perhaps she should not be sharing her thoughts with him at all. Before she could make up her mind whether or not to keep speaking, the door flung open, and in strode her oldest brother.

He was only a few years older than Aydith, and yet he was treated with a great deal more respect and given many more responsibilities than she, for of course he was in line to be king. His name was Aethelstan, and he was one of the fairest of the royal

children, taking more from their father than their deceased mother. He still could not grow a beard, she noticed, and had shaved off his last attempt. Nonetheless his face was twisted into such a disapproving expression that her heart sank within her, and if she could have she might have melted to the floor.

“Aydith,” he said, his purple cloak still settling about him from his sudden stop, his fists planting firmly on his hips. Aydith noticed with disgust that her maids were watching him with huge, batting eyes. He was not even a particularly good-looking man, for all that Aydith could judge. But he was a prince. “What’s this Father tells me about your behavior?”

She clutched her table for support, staring at him with a mixture of guilt and pleading. “I am just ... I am just so confused, brother. Aren’t you?”

“I ...” He looked away in thought, lowering his arms. “I understand that Father will be marrying—” He looked uncertainly at the maids, then at Hastings. Aydith thought it foolish he felt inclined to keep it a secret. The decision had been made; the people would hear of it soon enough. Perhaps the king wanted to put off telling everyone so that it would not enrage them, as Aydith thought it should. “He’ll be taking a new bride,” he said hoarsely. “For the good of the country.”

“Do you really believe that?”

“I ... I ...” Aethelstan shook his head helplessly. “I trust Father!”

Aydith sighed. Aethelstan was always so dignified and practical; perhaps he was right. Why couldn’t she simply accept the king’s decisions like so many other people seemed to do? She remembered the way Mother used to act submissive and accepting of all Ethelred’s actions in public, but as soon as she was alone with Aydith, she would curse and swear and insult her own husband. Aydith never wanted to be like that, and she wondered how many other people might be the same way, acting out their lives as they felt they ought to, yet nearly bursting with anger inside. If only people would come together and speak their true minds, perhaps real progress could be made. But would anyone?

She stared at her brother for a long time, marveling at him. He did not seem to be filled with secrets and bitterness like so

many other people. He simply did what he thought he was supposed to do. Surely God must love him dearly. And so did their father.

This thought sparked a new idea in her head. “Perhaps ...” She swallowed thickly. “Perhaps you could talk to him. Tell him to reconsider.”

“Why? Because you miss your mother?” He guffawed, and she felt as if her heart melted. Aethelstan rarely expressed such disdain. “Do you know how childish you sound?”

Aydith set her mouth in a firm line, glaring. “It’s not just about Mother. It’s about our father appearing *weak*.” The word made her blood burn with nervousness. It was a word her own mother had used to describe Ethelred often, but she had never dared repeat it until now. Aethelstan blinked with surprise. “First the Danegald. He took the people’s money and gave it to the Danes to buy peace; but the Danes only come back for more. Now this: marrying a Norman! When the only solution is to keep fighting!”

Suddenly Aydith became all too aware that she and Aethelstan were not alone. She saw the looks of shock on the maids’ faces, and the abashed expression of Hastings, who seemed embarrassed just to hear such things. Meanwhile Aethelstan’s face turned bright red. He was not the sort to get angry, but even he had his limits.

“What—what I mean is ...” Aydith drooped in her chair, her voice slurring to something of a mumble. “What I mean is that these things make him look weak. Not that he is.”

Aethelstan lifted his chin, which seemed to require a great deal of effort, for his body seemed as stiff as clay when cooked to the shattering point. Despite this, he managed to keep his voice at a low, but grating, pitch. “Everyone ... please leave the room.”

Their eyes wide, the maids got up and scurried out. Aydith was relieved, though she shuddered to think how they would gossip about the scene they’d already witnessed. Hastings, however, stood still.

“The king commanded me to watch her, my lord,” he said.

Aethelstan did not seem to care, nor even notice that Hastings remained, for all of his concentration was focused on

Aydith. When the maids were gone, he stormed up to her table and grabbed one of the books.

“Hey—!” shouted Aydith.

He pulled it out of her reach. “You’ve been reading too many of these stories!”

“They’re not stories!” cried Aydith. “They are *history!* They chronicle the past of all Engla-lond, and even some other parts of the world, Aethelstan!”

But because he had picked up the book, his eyes found yet something else: the wooden woman. He seized this next, and Aydith cried out with dismay.

“If those are history, then what is this?” Her brother turned it in his hands, trying to figure it out for himself. “Is this the Lady Aethelfleda you always talk about?”

She clutched for it, but he stepped back so far that she almost stumbled to the floor. “Give it back!” The pitch of her voice rose nearly to a scream.

“I grow weary of hearing you speak of her,” said Aethelstan. “Lady of the Mercians.’ Her story may be history, but it is still ridiculous! The Archbishop was right: reading has filled your head with nonsense.”

Aydith clutched her face, nails digging into her cheeks. “He ... he said that?”

Aethelstan lowered the figurine somewhat, taking her sorrow for submission. “Aydith, women should not lead armies, nor rule in the place of an ealdorman.” He said it so calmly, so matter-of-factly. “Your nature is to be peaceful and supportive. It is the role God chose for you. I thought you knew that?”

She shuddered. “But ... she took Derby ... and built burgs ... and—”

“Her husband was dead,” said Aethelstan. “That was different. There was no one else to do it. Do you remember what happened after she died, and Mercia fell to the spindle side? Her daughter failed to rule, and had to give it up to her brother, and ... oh I forget the rest.” He looked frustrated. “What does it matter? It’s not even your concern!”

“Please, Aethelstan, I’m ... I’m trying to be good.” She felt cold inside out, and trembled uncontrollably. “I’m trying to do what’s right. Tell me what to do.”

He thought about this long and hard. Then his eyes fixed on the figurine. “First, you have to forget about her.” He walked towards the brazier.

“... What?” Aydith scrambled to her feet. “What are you doing?”

Without any ceremony, he opened the brazier and tossed the figurine into the flames. Aydith put her hands over her mouth to cover her squeal.

Aethelstan stared into the brazier with deep concentration, the bright orange light glinting in his eyes. Despite all this, he seemed unsatisfied. He picked up a poker and jabbed angrily at the embers, little sparks and pieces of burning ash spraying up in a gruesome fountain.

“I will do that, my lord,” said Hastings.

Aethelstan blinked with surprise, having forgotten Hastings’s presence. He passed off the poker. “Er, thank you,” he said.

Hastings took up the job of stoking the fire with a grim, firmly-set expression. For some reason, Aydith felt even more betrayed now than when Aethelstan had done it, for she had thought maybe Hastings understood her mind. But of course, that was foolish, and in both instances Hastings was only doing his duty, serving the lord and lady according to their respective ranks.

She crumpled in on herself, feeling her tears return. Her eyes had nearly run dry, she thought. Perhaps that was for the best.

Aethelstan walked up and stood over her. His voice was soft. “Come now, sister. It’s for your own good.”

“I know. Th-thank you, brother.” She could not bring herself to look at him. “Now ... please leave.”

He remained there a moment, unmoving. She did not bother to glance at his expression; she did not care. At last he turned, and she listened to the heavy thuds of his boots as he walked out, and shut the door softly behind him.

Aydith did not budge for a long while. She tried to find some peace and quietude within her mind, not thinking about

anything else. She forgot Hastings was even in the room until she heard him shutting the lid of the brazier, and she shuddered. She had managed to forget the destruction of her figurine until she heard that terrible sound.

“My lady,” said the hearth companion softly.

“Don’t speak to me,” snapped Aydith. She wished she could order him to leave, but she knew she could not. He would follow the king’s will over hers, as he should.

He walked closer to her, his feet treading much more quietly than Aethelstan’s, even though he was a bigger man. She smelled the ash and smoke that must have blown on him from the fire he encouraged, and it made her sick to her stomach.

She she heard a loud *thunk*, and turned to see that he had dropped something on the floor. She gasped aloud. It was blackened with soot, but it did not look very damaged. It was the Lady Aethelfleda.

She reached to grab it, then dropped it very quickly, for it was still hot. Even so, she grinned from ear to ear as she looked up at Hastings. “What ... how ... ?”

“It simply would not burn, my lady.” But his eyes twinkled with mischief as he smiled.

“Oh—oh—oh thank you, Hastings!” Before she could restrain herself, she got up, opened her arms wide, and flung herself against the hearth companion. She hugged him tight, her face smashed against his tunic just beneath his chest, the musky scent of his wools and sweat and leather filling her nose.

She realized after a moment how still he was, and quickly pulled away. This must be very unseemly. She turned around and felt her cheeks burning with a blush. Surely it was not normal for a male hearth companion to be alone with a woman in her chamber, but then again, many of today’s circumstances were not normal. She was only eleven years old, of course; but if she remembered correctly, so was the Lady Emma of Normandy, who would soon be marrying her father. If not eleven, Emma was only a year or two older. Officially, Aydith was of a marrying age, herself. She had already begun her monthly cycle.

Feeling a bit shy and confused, she picked up the wooden figure from the floor—it was cool enough now to touch—and

clutched it close to her. She cleared some of the soot from the wood, and as she revealed the woman underneath, she felt as if Aethelfleda looked different to her now than she had before.

“I ... I know little of history,” said Hastings from the shadows. “Would you tell me about the Lady Aethelfleda?”

Aydith took a deep breath, her heart fluttering. It took no effort to tell the story of Aethelfleda; she did not even have to search her memory. “She was born over a hundred years ago, the daughter of the great King Alfred,” she began. “Her husband was named Aethelred, like my father. Their marriage helped bring the Angles and Saxons of Engla-lond together, and united the kingdom against the Vikings. But he died. After his death she ruled in his place, and the people called her the Lady of Mercia, serving her almost like a queen. She built burgs and walls all around the cities and boundaries of Mercia. She was a brilliant strategist. She led armies against the Danes, and took back the cities of Leicester and Derby. She even fought and recruited the Welsh. She ruled for almost eight years before she died.”

She looked down at the toy in her hands. Suddenly, it had gone from being scorching hot to numbingly cold, and it looked ugly under its mask of black soot.

“And then her daughter, Aelfwynn, tried to rule in her mother’s place. But Aethelstan was right. She was weak.”

She walked back to the brazier and opened the lid.

“My lady?” Hastings took a step towards her, then stopped. “What are you doing?”

“Aethelstan’s right. I shouldn’t keep such toys.”

Her hand trembled as she lifted the figurine over the fire’s glow. She realized the fire was burning even higher than she had anticipated. How had the figurine not burned before? Had Hastings removed it from the fire right away? He must have, so she tried to get mad at him for it, seeking anger to give her strength. He had deceived his own lord, an aetheling! Perhaps he was not trustworthy at all.

She felt a twinge of pain in her heart, then she dropped the figurine into the flames. Before she could change her mind, she threw down the lid.

She looked at Hastings, and he was scowling. His normally kind eyes were narrowed, stinging her like alcohol splashed on an open wound.

“Oh,” she cried suddenly. “I wish you would go away!”

He bowed his head, though his fists were clenched at his sides. Ethelred had told him not to let Aydith leave his sight, and he stayed true to this as he backed away, ever so slowly, moving further and further from the aetheling. Eventually he was covered with shadows, and stood on the far side of the room, and such a quiet fell over them that it seemed as if he truly was gone, after all.

Aydith got up and dragged her feet toward her bed. So much crying and fussing had exhausted her. She collapsed on her knees before even climbing onto her soft sheets, and folded her hands below her forehead. She closed her eyes and whispered, so softly that she hoped Hastings could not hear her.

“Dear Lord, Father in Heaven, show me what to do. Teach me humility and give me understanding. Drive the terrible pagans from Engla-lond. Smite down our enemies with your Holy power, or show me what I can do in your stead. Amen.”

It was a prayer she had muttered a few times before, a prayer she had devised and felt very proud of, but it seemed even more significant now than it had in the past.

Feeling somewhat better, she climbed onto her sheets and drifted promptly to sleep.

*

Nightmares prevented her from resting that night.

She dreamt of the Vikings making their way through Engla-lond, burning homes and stabbing children, stealing food and pissing on what they didn’t want, taking slaves and killing monks.

She relived the horrendous scene she had witnessed when she was four years old. She hid in a church in Lundenburg when Sweyn Forkbeard and his army attacked the old Roman city. They burned whatever they could, and even in the big stone church the smoke stung Aydith’s eyes and filled her chest with a terrible cough. Then some of them broke in, and one of them stabbed a monk until his sword came out the other side, and he didn’t even stop there. His blade opened the monk wide, and even though

Aydith's maid tried to put a hand over the little girl's eyes, she still saw everything, spilling onto the church floor.

Then something strange happened in her dream. She grew up suddenly and became Aethelfleda. She married the ealdorman of Mercia and bore him children. But at the same time, she was already ensuring her role as the Lady of Mercia. She did this by advising her husband and signing his documents. People began to call her the Lady of Mercia long before her husband died and she led armies against the pagans.

Next she led a fyrd against Sweyn Forkbeard, even though he had not yet been born in the time of Aethelfleda. He had fought the men of Hampshire, and killed so many noble men, and his Viking warriors ran all about burning and destroying. But she, this new version of Aydith, knew exactly where they were headed next, and knew how to gather an army there that could stop them. But she could not gather the fyrd herself. She would have to tell her husband to do it.

She woke up trembling and covered with sweat, but even as she clutched her sticky blankets, a smile stretched her face.

“Hastings? Hastings!”

She sat up, searching for him in the darkness. Only a few candles remained lit, and the brazier had faded to the dull red glow of its embers. A shadow moved and she turned hopefully, but she only saw one of her dim-witted maids, peering at her with a weary face.

“He was relieved of duty, my lady.”

Aydith plopped back down on her sheets, strangely disappointed, even though Hastings was not the man to which her dream, and thus God, had directed her.

She had no husband, of course, and her father would not listen to her; but she had two older brothers who were in line to take the throne and could make important decisions. She knew without a doubt that God wanted her to keep talking to Aethelstan, just as Aethelfleda had signed her husband's documents. She would do so more humbly, next time. Just like Aethelfleda, she would provide support to those in power, and they would not even notice what power she obtained for herself, in the meantime.

Besides, power was not the point. The point was to save England from the pagans.

Her eyes peered heavenward, glittering as if with holy light, even as her eyelids drifted shut once more. “Yes, Lord,” she whispered. “I understand. It is Aethelstan who must gather the armies, and I must help him. I must ...”

Her body slipped from her consciousness, and her mind returned happily to her dreams, which were much more pleasant now than before.

**

THE FOURTH LOST
TALE OF MERCIA



ATHELWARD
THE
HISTORIAN

“There, are, indeed, some notices of antiquity, written in the vernacular tongue after the manner of a chronicle, and arranged according to the years of our Lord. By means of these alone, the times succeeding [Bede] have been rescued from oblivion : for of [Athelward], a noble and illustrious man, who attempted to arrange these chronicles in Latin, and whose intention I could applaud if his language did not disgust me, it is better to be silent.”

—William of Malmesbury, *Chronicle of the Kings of England*,
Preface

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HAMPSHIRE, WESSEX
993 A.D.

The intruder entered quietly, but Athelward recognized the footsteps of his dearest servant right away. The servant knew better than to interrupt the ealdorman in the middle of his work, so this must be an emergency. But if this was an emergency, why didn't the servant say something? Silent or not, his presence wreaked irreparable damage. Athelward could not focus on his writing when someone loomed close enough to see over his shoulder, nor when such trivial questions plagued his mind as why the servant entered in the first place. Already, he felt himself slipping from his own stream of thought: a stream consisting of the dazzling rapids of history swirling in harmony with the sophisticated currents of the Latin language.

Athelward's quill quivered with his growing frustration, then at last fell aside. It was too late now; his focus had been dashed upon the rocks and left to dry. Through gritted teeth, he said, “What is it?”

“There is a woman here to see you, my lord. She seeks your aid.” The Celtic servant, Drustan, seemed entirely undaunted by his master’s mood. Very little phased Drustan, who had a smug and rather reckless demeanor for a servant. Despite this, he almost always seemed to know Athelward’s mind, even without being told what to do, so Athelward kept him.

This, however, was not such a fitting example. Athelward could not believe he had been interrupted for something so trivial, and without more of an explanation. Because he was ealdorman of Wessex, thousands of people desired his aid every day. The fortune of a single woman, when compared to the importance of completing the great literary work Athelward now devoted himself to, was so trivial as to be completely insignificant.

Athelward closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The candles around him fluttered as he exhaled, casting undulating waves of warmth on his face. He did not want to waste his time with a useless conversation right now, especially with a servant he would probably expel from his service on the morrow. Better to simply ignore Drustan’s presence and get back to work. After a few moments, he felt as if he succeeded. He felt the stream of Latin words flowing back into his mind, the stream which flowed to his heart, then through his blood to his fingertips. He brought his quill back to the parchment.

“My lord? Her name is Golde. She says she knows you. She has a child with her, a little boy, and they look very traumatized.”

Athelward put down his quill with an angry smack. He turned slowly around, the wooden chair creaking beneath him, the bones of his back popping and groaning in harmony with the furniture. Usually, tearing himself away from his writing was a smoother and more gradual transition, aided by a long prayer and a little bit of stretching. This interruption was simply inexcusable.

Now that he looked upon Drustan directly, though through a haze of anger, he thought the servant seemed even smugger than usual. His eyes were twinkling, and his gaunt cheeks glowed bright pink. His short straw-like hair, meanwhile,

was a total mess upon his head, like a roll of hay that had been rummaged by a bear. Athelward's eyes squinted even further, for he now felt suspicious. "Golde? I don't recall her. Is she of noble blood? Married to a thegn? Is she a landowner? A churl?"

Drustan shook his head at the first two questions, then nodded at the last.

Athelward guffawed. How much more ridiculous could this get? "What sort of churl? A geneat? A kotsletla? A gebur?" Drustan stared back at him with a dumb expression. Athelward waved his hands frantically in the air. "Saints above, who is she?"

"She said she was a friend of the ealdorman—er, now exiled, I think—who ruled Mercia. Alfric, my lord."

Athelward sat up, attentive at last. Now, he remembered. She was a woman with long blond hair, a beautiful round face, and even less manners than the fool standing before him. Worse, she had been a whore, or something similar enough to be considered equivalent. But worst of all, she was associated with Alfric, and to be associated with Alfric—whose son had recently gotten his eyes removed by King Ethelred's soldiers—was probably one of the most dangerous traits in Engla-lond at this given time.

Athelward bowed his head and crossed himself. When he was done, he looked back up at Drustan, eyes blazing. "What on earth possessed you to think I would want to speak with her, Drustan? Oh, I have a theory—you were not thinking at all!"

At last, with a heave of effort, Athelward pulled himself from his chair. He did not like to think of himself as old yet—though some might call him such—but he was certainly not heavy or unfit. In fact he was quite skinny, and any extra girth or awkwardness came from his somewhat excessive height. Moving from the realm of literary knowledge to the physical world of sensation and sin was simply a difficult maneuver. Once at last he stood and reclaimed his body, pushing back his shoulders and lifting his noble beard, he loomed over his servant and cut a respectable figure.

For a moment, Drustan looked encouraged. He must have thought Athelward was getting up to see the woman. But his

smirk turned into a frown when Athelward took a loping step forward, craning his head low to look the servant up and down. He observed the ruffled state of Drustan's tunic, then the loosened nature of his trousers. "You know better than to interrupt me. How did she persuade you?" asked the ealdorman.

"She, uh ..." Drustan laughed nervously.

Athelward crossed his arms over his chest and stared at the servant in silence.

"Well, she ... um ..." Drustan moved his arms about, then dropped them again, helpless.

Athelward sighed heavily, his suspicions confirmed. "I will see her at church on Sunday and give her some alms, like so many others in need. It sounds as if she needs God as greatly as she needs money, after all. That is all I can do for her, Drustan." He turned to go back to his table, feeling strangely victorious.

"She ... she doesn't want money, my lord. In fact, she says she wants to give you some."

"What?" Athelward turned back around, intrigued despite himself. A wandering churl wanted to give *him* money? "Whatever for?"

"I don't know, my lord. She just told me she walked all the way from Worcestershire—"

The ealdorman saw that it was useless to keep talking, and he had already wasted a great deal of time arguing with his servant, when it would have been faster to see the woman herself and send her away. Without another word, he strode past Drustan and out the door.

The sensations of the world beyond the sanctuary of his scriptorium struck him like a whip as he moved through his manor. At first he simply smelled people: that combination of musky, tart scents emitted by every slave, maid, churl, or thegn who passed through his lodge. As he neared the outdoors, he began to smell wool, its bitter fibres coated with lard and butter to form air that stuffed his nose as he inhaled. This time of year, with the coming warmth of summer, lucky sheep got sheared all across Engla-lond, and anyone with good sense purchased some of the wool for himself. But at last he stepped outside, where the breeze was not cool enough to balance the warmth of the searing

sunshine, but at least it eased the olfactory senses—except, of course, for the occasional wafting odors of hot manure and freshly reaped grass.

Through the glare of bright white sunshine, glowing green fields, and a piercing blue sky, Athelward soon spotted his strange visitor. She had the same long yellow hair he remembered, and lashes so pale they were almost white, which made her blue gaze especially fierce as she turned it on him. He stopped a good distance from the woman, all too aware of her persuasive powers, though he did not consider himself to be easily moved by matters of the flesh. Even so he could not help but admire her: the sturdiness of her small frame as she stood in the wind, the lack of weariness on her face despite the tattered state of her dress and shoes.

Then Athelward noticed the little boy standing next to her, head bowed and downcast, small hands curled into fists at his sides. He seemed as if he did not want to be seen, but Athelward could not suppress a gasp of surprise, for he saw the curliness of the boy's hair lashing in the wind, and it occurred to him that this might be Alfric's son. But no, it couldn't be Algar, whose eyes had been seared out with hot pokers.

Athelward forced his gaze back to the woman, Golde, trying to fill his stare with as much stubbornness as he detected in hers. "State your business quickly or go. If your business involves Alfric I'll not touch it. He was my friend once but his actions have necessitated my opposition to—"

She pulled a pouch from her dress and gave it a quick shake, so that he could hear the jangle of coins within. "This is as close to Alfric as my business will ever come. I took this from his manor when I went there to rescue my own son."

"Are you a thief, then?" The historian felt uncomfortable, for the way she held out the money made her dress poof out and display more of her well-rounded breasts than he cared to see.

"Of course not. Alfric was long gone by the time I found this, his household and all of his belongings were up for grabs to anyone who could snatch them up. Including his poor blinded son, who he left to die."

The little boy made a small whimper, and she pulled him tighter against her skirts.

“Anyway, it’s money, and I have traveled over a hundred miles without using it, all so that I could give it to you.”

“Why would you do that?” he cried.

She stepped closer, her soft lips curling into a smile. “Because I know you respect money, and you will take it in exchange for a service of equal value, even if that service is unconventional.”

He was impressed by the woman’s awareness of his feelings towards money, not to mention her obvious ambition. Some years ago, Athelward—alongside Ealdorman Alfric, in fact—had advised King Ethelred to pay off the Vikings with money rather than to engage in another bloody and meaningless battle. Many Anglo-Saxons had been embittered by this decision; even though it bought them some peace, they suffered the more immediate effect of losing their money, food, and hard-earned wares. No doubt some of the gossip surrounding the Danegald payment, and Athelward’s involvement in it, had been blown out of proportion. “I respect money’s ability to save human lives,” he said. “Nothing more.”

Her eyes seemed to twinkle a little as her smile broadened. “And what if it could save the human spirit?”

Athelward shook his head in puzzlement. “You speak nonsense. I told you, Golde: state your business quickly, or leave!”

“All right, I will state my business. I want you to give my son an education.”

“What!” He felt his own blood drain from his face. “I am an ealdorman. I don’t have time to—”

“You are an ealdorman also known as the ‘historian.’ Unlike any other layman before you, you spend more time reading books and scribbling histories than gathering soldiers and sharpening spears.”

“I ... I ...” Instinctively, he felt the need to argue. She was a churl, and shamelessly sinful. But in truth, her statement made him proud. She recognized his accomplishment as being one of the first dedicated scribes who was not also a clergyman, while

most people—finding it strange, and thus incomprehensible—simply ignored this feat. Perhaps she even had a vague understanding, if skewed, of what he valued. He hesitated too long to form his response, and she found the breath for more words.

“I want to use this money for something even more valuable than a human body,” she went on relentlessly. “I want you to give my boy knowledge, and understanding. I want him to be able to make his life into whatever he wants it to be, despite what other people expect of him.”

Athelward continued to shake his head, harder and harder. “That is not how God made the world! Men must make the best of the blood God gave them.”

“Blood?” She looked puzzled. “If by blood you mean we are not in the family of some great king like you, then that’s all the more reason for you to help him ‘make the best of it.’”

Athelward wanted to keep shaking his head, but a small crowd had gathered, and he found himself in an unusual situation. Her proposal was absurd, but indeed, she offered him a pouch of money, and it would look wrong for him to turn it down. He glanced angrily at the people around him: soldiers, servants, visiting thegns, and a few begging churls. He had made a speech to every single one of them, years ago, that their money could serve a greater purpose than buying mere food and clothing: it could buy them peace from the Danes. Now, a woman stood before him, asking to use her money for something greater than a physical comfort. How could he deny her that, in front of so many witnesses?

And yet, even accounting for his own unusual philosophy, her request was absurd. Surely everyone else could see that? “I am an ealdorman,” he repeated. “I don’t have the time to educate a bastard child.”

Perhaps he had gone too far. He could feel the disappointment of his people around him; they pursed their lips, lowered their heads, and exchanged knowing glances that seemed to say, “I knew he would disappoint us.” Meanwhile, the woman Golde’s cheeks flushed bright red, and when she clenched her

fists, he saw the veins bulge along her forearm. No doubt she possessed more strength than her small figure suggested.

“Time?” she said. A breeze gushed as if from nowhere, rustling her dress and tossing her hair, making the rest of her appear even sturdier. “You bought all of Engla-lond a year of peace—almost a year, at least—with ten thousand pounds. So if time can be money, tell me, my lord: how much of your time is this pouch worth?”

She held it out again, and he felt so flustered that his face burned hot. She was turning his own ideas against him. She was clever, but her primary talent seemed to be throwing his own words back at him, in which case this conversation could go on forever. It was useless to argue, and to indulge her any longer would give the people too much to talk about.

He grabbed the pouch and pretended to weigh it in his hand, calculating. But how could he calculate the worth of his time? The notion was preposterous. He looked at the boy again, clutching his mother’s skirts, big blue eyes filled with something like fear and hopelessness. He was either a churl with worthless blood, or a bastard, and in either case he was not worth even a fragment of Athelward’s time. But he had already caused a great deal to be wasted, nonetheless.

“Bring him to my writing chamber at dawn tomorrow; I will teach him until mid-morning. That is all.”

Clutching the pouch in one hand and his robes in the other, Athelward turned and hurried back inside. He could not erase from his mind the smile of triumph he had seen on Golde’s face before he tore his eyes from her.

He hoped he had not made some sort of mistake.

*

In the morning, Athelward felt strangely nervous. He could not even explain why.

The night before, Golde’s words had echoed at him throughout his entire night meal. His son’s family was visiting that night. His wife had tried to make light conversation and had even asked him about his writing, a topic he normally loved to discuss. But he could not think of much to say. Meanwhile, he had watched his own grandchildren fussing at the table, kicking

each other's stools and playing with their food. Most of all, he stared at his own son, Aethelmaer.

Aethelmaer was large, fat, and dumb as a rock. Most of the time, Athelward managed to ignore this fact. But last night, he could not. He watched Aethelmaer stuff down his food, fail to reprimand the bad behavior of his children, and continue to say stupid and meaningless things. He spoke proudly of his rapacious hearth companions, his cowering servants, and how he was looking forward to an upcoming Saint's festival—but he could not even remember the Saint's name.

Athelward spoke little at night, but at one point, he could not stop himself. He looked his son in the eyes and proclaimed, "I taught you to read!"

Aethelmaer stared at him strangely, as he should have, for the statement had little precedent. The fat son had a big bite of food in his mouth which he forced down his throat with a gulp of wine. At last he said, "Um, yes you did. Thank you."

"Thank you?" Athelward shook his head. "I don't want thanks. I want results. Do you ever read anymore, Aethelmaer? Do you use anything I taught you?"

The young man shrugged his big round shoulders. "Sure I do."

"I mean beyond determining charters and taxes."

"What else is reading for?" Aethelmaer took another desperate draught of wine.

Athelward sighed. "Have you started teaching your own children?"

"They're too young!"

"You were younger than them when I began teaching you."

"Yeah, and I almost forgot everything!" Aethelmaer laughed nervously, flinging spittle across his plate. "Anyway, I'll get a monk to teach them. Unless, that is, you expect me to teach them Latin?" He made a wet sound of disgust. "I don't know why you spend so much time turning history into Latin, Father. Everyone thinks you are mad! I do remember at least one thing you taught me, which is that King Alfred himself wanted history to be written in English, so more people could understand it!"

Athelward had gripped his dirk and seethed with anger; his wife had sensed his mood and put a calming hand on his arm. But he did not know what to say to her. He could not explain what he was feeling, nor why he was feeling it now.

As he sat in the solitude of his writing chamber the next morning, anxiously awaiting the strange boy's arrival, he tried to determine why he felt so upset. He suspected it had something to do with his disappointment in his own son, to whom he had tried to pass off the culmination of his life's studies. The disappointment had been there for a long time, he realized, but he had ignored it until last night. The woman pleading for her poor son's education reminded him of the hopes he once entertained for Aethelmaer. Once, he imagined Aethelmaer becoming wise and clever, using his vast knowledge to impress the king and perhaps become the king's most trusted adviser. He imagined Aethelmaer coming up with brilliant battle schemes, or at least defensive tactics, to push the pagan Vikings from Engla-lond's shores. Instead, Aethelmaer was another man, like so many, who simply did what he was told, and rarely thought beyond his next meal.

Athelward heaved a sigh, and then heard the door creak open.

The boy stood there, hands clasped in front of him, head bowed so that his unruly hair nearly covered his face. He looked cleaner now, either because this room was so dim, or because his mother had meticulously washed him up for this moment. But the patheticness of his hunched form negated any image of dignity his mother had contrived, and Athelward knew for certain that the boy wanted to be here even less than Athelward did. He sighed again, thinking it would be best to get this over with as soon as possible.

"Well then," said Athelward, "come and sit on this stool."

The boy obeyed, but he sank his small body down as if he possessed the weight of a horse. He remained there in silence, head sagging on his little neck, and for a moment Athelward wasn't sure what to do. Then, as he often did when in doubt, he turned to his books.

“I, uh ... I suppose I should start with our ancestors from Anglia, across the sea. Do you know whom I speak of?” He paused to sip from a goblet of water and let the boy respond, but his reluctant pupil did not even look up. “You *ought* to know: the Angles and Saxons are responsible for our existence, you and I, here in Engla-lond. The Angles begot the eastern and midland Angles, and many of the people who now live in Mercia, and most the other people north of the River Humber. Then there were the Saxons and Juts, who lived on provinces on either side of Anglia. Five or six centuries ago, the Angles and Saxons both decided to leave their lands and come to Engla-lond. The Saxons, my own ancestors, claimed the lands of Essex, Middlesex, Sussex, and Wessex—and I, you see, am a descendant of the Saxon royal line of Wessex, the same line as King Alfred the Great!” Again, no response. “In any case, the Angles and Saxons fought the people here—that is the Celts—to claim their own homes. But they also forged alliances, to protect each other against common enemies like the Picts and the Irish ...”

The little boy sniffled.

Athelward realized he was probably speaking to himself. His eyes darted around his table uncertainly. “Boy,” he grumbled, “what is it you want to learn? I could teach you history, or I could teach you a few letters—though that won’t do you any good, as you’ll never be back here again to learn them all. Or you could sit there and waste your mother’s money!” He waved his hands angrily. “You should at least pay attention! Your mother paid a great deal for you to be here. If you’re to learn anything you should sit up straight, and keep your eyes alert, and—”

The boy surprised him by obeying. Then the ealdorman gulped with dismay, for as the boy looked up through his tangled curls, he revealed big blue eyes filled with tears. “My lord, why do people fight so much?” he said.

Athelward cleared his throat and sat up straighter. “For land, and resources, and ... and power, I suppose.”

The little Mercian looked away for a moment, seeming to really ponder this. Then, his eyes rippling with new tears, he said, “Then why did they hurt Algar?”

“Who?” And then, suddenly, Athelward put it together. “Algar—Lord Alfric’s son?”

The boy nodded.

“Oh dear.” He must have meant the same Algar, then, whose eyes had recently been ripped from his skull. He recalled Golde saying she had “rescued” her son from Alfric, which is also when she had stolen the money from Alfric’s abandoned belongings. “Listen, boy ... what is your name, again?”

“Eadric.”

“Eadric. Did you see Algar get hurt?”

The boy’s face scrunched up, as if a certain amount of twisting could keep back his tears. He didn’t say anything, but this was answer enough for Athelward. Either he had seen the violence happen, or he had seen its bloody aftermath.

“I’m sure it’s hard for you to understand what happened to Algar. But it is the perfect example of violence done in the name of power. King Ethelred needed to maintain his power by hurting the man who had wronged him—Lord Alfric. But Alfric escaped, so he punished the next person available.”

“Algar didn’t do anything wrong!”

“He was Alfric’s son.” Eadric looked confused. “Our lineage determines our fate, Eadric. Algar was in the wrong by being born of Alfric.”

“That’s stupid!”

Athelward glowered. He thought he could guess why a poor little boy like this might say something like that. “Was Algar ... was he your brother?”

Eadric stiffened and became very still. “No. Alfric’s not my father.”

It seemed like a recited response: one his mother had instilled in him, no doubt. But one had only to look at him to guess his father. “If Alfric’s not, who is?”

“Um ...” Eadric kicked his feet nervously as he considered his. “Hunwald.”

“Who?”

Eadric grew still again, a fierce scowl creating dozens of lines on his round little face. “Why does it matter?”

“Why does it *matter*?” Athelward guffawed. “Does your mother teach you *nothing*?” He grabbed his goblet of water and drank thirstily, as if this would quell his rising anger. When he slammed it back down, he nearly splashed some drops on his parchment, so furious was he. He waved angrily at his manuscripts. “Our fathers make us who we are, Eadric. My great-great grandfather was Ethelred of Wessex, brother of King Alfred the Great! My name means royal protector. I owned this land, and have the responsibility of overseeing many others, because my father and his fathers passed such things on to me.”

“Can you pass any of that on to me,” said Eadric, “without being my father?”

Athelward’s mouth hung open. He said nothing for a long while, just stared at the boy in utter horror.

Then the little boy did something even more ridiculous. He smiled, tears dissipating as his eyes twinkled. “The look on your face!” he snickered.

Athelward forced his mouth shut, feeling his face turn red nonetheless. “I’m sorry,” he said. “But the answer is no, I can’t pass those things on to you! The idea’s absurd!”

“All right.” Eadric shrugged, still smiling. “I’d rather do something fun, anyway. None of that sounds like fun.”

“Fun! It’s not about *fun*!”

“Then why do you do it?” The boy was looking curiously at the ealdorman’s books.

Athelward followed his gaze to the manuscripts: the carefully blotted ink, the leather and gilt decorations encasing the pages, and all of the ridiculous stories contained within. He could have gone into a long speech about how he was protecting his family’s history, and thus that of Wessex. But he did not. Instead, he felt a little smile crease his face, as if of its own will. “Well ... I suppose it is a little fun.” He felt a warm wave of joy arise within him out of nowhere, filling him up and rising to his throat. “Hah!” he cried. “I suppose it *is* a little fun!”

“No it’s not,” said Eadric, still laughing. “You’re just saying that.”

“Oh, but it is!” Athelward grabbed his quill and raised it up high. “Sometimes, Eadric, it makes me feel like a king!”

“Really?”

“Oh yes! I write about great hordes of people, of armies and battles, and sometimes I feel almost like I am orchestrating them myself! Just now, for instance, I was writing about the Battle of Ethandun.” He leaned in close to Eadric, lowering his voice as if to divulge a secret. “The battle took place after King Alfred and his army had been hiding in the marshes of Wessex for a long and miserable year, while the Danes and their leader, Guthrum, managed to take over most of Engla-lond. Wessex, you see, was the only kingdom still resisting the Vikings, and it seemed as if all was lost. Alfred was so desperate that he disguised himself as a minstrel to sneak into the enemy’s camp. But then he gathered all the peoples of Somerset, Wiltshire, and Hampshire, for Alfred had managed to maintain their loyalty despite everything, and he marched upon the enemy, who did not expect it at all! Now—did they win or lose? My quill can determine the answer!”

Eadric watched with huge eyes, fascinated as Athelward brought the pen back to paper. Teasingly, he wrote a quick word.

Eadric nearly fell off his stool reaching for the quill. “I want to try! I want to make them win!”

Athelward pulled it from his reach, but playfully. “Not so fast, now! You don’t even know how to do it!”

“Let me try!” Eadric stood on top of his stool now, grabbing Athelward’s shoulder for balance as he reached.

Before the ealdorman could help it, the quill had been plucked from his grip. Eadric held it then teetered forward, falling off the stool and towards the table.

“No!” cried Athelward. He watched his bottle of ink tilt sideways, directly over a stack of freshly written pages. A large jolt went through the table as Eadric landed, making the wood shudder, the candles flicker, and the bottle fall.

As Athelward dove forward to catch it, his heart beat uncontrollably, his blood roared in his ears, and his thoughts raced so fast they made him dizzy. As his fingertips clutched for the slippery clay surface of the container, his mind rushed ahead, watching as the ink spilled out and obscured all of his hard work, all of his carefully navigated streams, drowning everything in a

blinding flood like the one God gave Noah, destroying the world so that it could all start anew. He imagined this, and then he realized that he was imagining it, so maybe none of it would happen, and he would stop the ink from spilling in time.

But by then it was too late.

The rush of black ink spilled forth, instantly soaking his pages through, and he was too frozen with horror to do anything about it. He heard the little boy's cries ringing in the air, as if from a distant chamber.

“Oh no! My lord? My lord!”

Little Eadric did what he could to belittle the damage of the flood he had unleashed; he grabbed the pages and flung them into the air, away from the spreading black deluge. But it was still too late: all of the pages had been touched. Even if the words were still legible, the beautiful artistry and cleanliness of them had been ruined; they would look like the work of a sorry layman trying to be a scribe, but failing miserably. It would be a confirmation to everyone who had ever doubted him that they were right to do so: that God never wanted an ealdorman to chronicle history, and He especially did not want one to do so in Latin.

It was like a sign from the Lord that all of Athelward's hard work was meaningless; that his dedication had been nothing but a conceited fancy. In the end, he was a failure.

When sensation returned to him, he felt himself trembling from head to foot. He could hardly find the strength to speak. The little boy was cowering before him, eyes filled with tears again, guessing the horribleness of what he had done.

“Will I ... will I still find out what happened at the Battle of Ethandun?”

“Get out,” rasped Athelward. He took a deep breath, but still he struggled to raise the volume of his voice, which trembled with the exhaustion of utter despair. “Get. Out.”

Eadric obeyed.

In the little boy's absence, the room that had once been his sanctuary felt suddenly like the darkest, loneliest, and emptiest place on earth.

*

Athelward did not speak another word to anyone all day. His servant, Drustan, discovered what had happened and knew better than to ask about it; he cleaned it up and closed the chamber up tight. Athelward sat in his room a long while, staring into nothingness. Eventually, he found it in his heart to pray, though he could not do even this for very long. He was simply too angry. Every once in awhile people knocked on his door, but Drustan guarded it, and told them all that Athelward was busy.

When it was time for dinner, Athelward went, but he sat still and barely touched his food. The sight of his son, Aethelmaer, gobbling down his own meal made him sick to his stomach. The fat man filled the silence by talking on and on, about this and that, this and that, but all of his words passed through Athelward's mind, leaving nothing behind. They were meaningless. Empty.

Perhaps everything, he thought, was meaningless.

He drank a great deal that night to dull his anger and help himself sleep. The Lord must have been in a merciful temper by nightfall, for when he awoke the next morning, he suffered few ill effects for this indulgence.

In fact, he felt better.

He got up and donned his robes while his wife continued to sleep in the bed behind him. He thought about all of the work he needed to do: all of the thegns and abbots he needed to speak to, all of the walls and bridges throughout Hampshire and beyond that needed repairing before fall came. He already wanted to start campaigning for another Danegald to be paid upon Sweyn Forkbeard's next return. That would be much more difficult to arrange without the help of Lord Alfric, who simply had a way of persuading people, which for Athelward required much more effort.

He thought about all of these things because he was looking towards the future again, and he could endure thinking about the future because when he awoke this morning, he found a reason to feel hope. In order to ensure that hope, however, there was something he needed to do first.

He walked outside and found the morning suited his mood. Despite being summer, the sun was low enough that it had

not yet cleared the night's chill. A soft haze covered the horizon, and dew glittered golden on the grass, and bugs thrummed about with the energy of the dawn. He made his way to the servant's lodge, where he knew little Eadric and his mother had stayed the night. He stopped some distance away from it, stayed by its terrible stench. In that lodge all of the servants and maids slept, some on mats, some on the floorboards, and others on dirty rushes. Fortunately, Drustan had followed him, and he told Drustan to go in and fetch what he wanted.

Drustan came back out shortly and said, "They're gone, sir."

"What?" Athelward shook his head angrily. "The sun's barely risen! I thought the woman had more stubbornness than that." He took a deep breath and thought a moment. Then he made his way to the kitchens.

Fortunately, he caught them in time. The woman, Golde, was bartering with the cooks, trying to get as much food as she could before leaving on her journey to who knew where. Little Eadric stood silently by her side, his head and shoulders even more drooped than they had been when he first arrived. No doubt he had been severely reprimanded by his mother for failing her. Emotion and empathy stirred in Athelward's heart.

Golde took some food and thrust it into her sack. Then she grabbed Eadric's hand, and made to leave.

"Golde," said Athelward. "Where are you going?"

He saw the muscles in her arm tauten as she squeezed Eadric's hand; her eyes glittered like the dew as she glared at the ealdorman. "We don't need you. We have a home and a way to feed ourselves in Worcestershire."

"You don't need me?" Athelward smiled as he looked at Eadric, but Eadric refused to return his gaze. "What about giving Eadric an education?"

He was pleased to see her determined expression waver with uncertainty. "But—yesterday—"

"Yesterday taught me something very valuable, Golde," he said. He glanced at the cooks and servants, who were all watching him with awed expressions. "Let's speak in private."

Golde followed him into the field, away from the mouth-watering smells of breakfast being prepared. They looked over the chalky slopes of southern Hampshire, and in the distance, the haze was lifting enough to reveal the tallest buildings of Winchester far away.

“I thought Eadric ruined your precious manuscripts,” said Golde softly. “I thought you would never forgive him.”

“Yes, he did.” Athelward looked fondly at the boy again. “And that’s when I realized that, perhaps, they were *too* precious.”

Golde cocked a curious eyebrow.

Athelward heaved another sigh; remembering the events of yesterday were still painful. “So much hard work ... so many years of study and labor ... gone in an instant.” He watched as a bundle of clouds swept over the sun, casting shadows on the glittering earth below. “I know my work is important, but God taught me a lesson yesterday. It is not quite as important as I hoped it to be. It is not enough to save my knowledge in a manuscript, especially one that no one may ever read, save my cousin Matilda. Perhaps, even if Eadric had not spilled ink on it, it may have perished in the fires of the next Viking raid. No ... it may not be enough to put my work on parchment alone.”

He could sense Golde’s confusion and burning desire to keep asking questions, but she was quiet, and allowed him to gather his thoughts.

“I do not think I successfully passed on my knowledge to my own children. They never understood what a gift I was giving them. They showed little interest, and practically no curiosity. I think this is a chance for me to pass the knowledge to someone who will pay attention to it—perhaps even *use* it. Despite his recklessness ...” He peered around the boy’s thick glowing hair, seeking out his eyes. Reluctantly, Eadric’s gaze met his, huge and gaping with fear. Athelward smiled reassuringly. He remembered how Eadric had asked, before Athelward commanded him to leave, if he would ever hear the full story of the Battle of Ethandun. His own children had never been so curious. It was Eadric’s curiosity that made all the difference in

the world. “Despite everything, I sense a certain amount of potential in Eadric.”

“Really?” Golde sounded breathless. “You’ll teach him to read? You’ll teach him history?”

“I’ll do what I can.” He glanced back at his own manor. “I don’t want what I am doing to be a well known fact. It’s unseemly and would give people ... unrealistic notions. And in any case, I am a very busy man. I truly will not have much time to spend with Eadric, especially now that I will have to rewrite my chronicles.” He grimaced. “My secretary Drustan knows a great deal, however; and if nothing else, I know plenty of monks who owe me favors. When I can, I will teach Eadric myself, and when I can’t, I’ll get a monk to do it.”

He looked at Golde, seeing the sparkle of joy in her gaze; but she was holding it back, maintaining a cautious frown. “Is there a catch? What do you expect in return?”

Athelward shrugged. “I’ll require you to work for me, of course. We’ll find a suitable job.”

“No.” Golde shook her head. “I would rather continue giving you money.”

The ealdorman scowled. “If you plan to go on whoring or stealing, that is out of the question.”

“I left a great number of pigs in Worcestershire. No doubt a lot of them have scattered and been snatched up by now, but I want to salvage what I can. I’m sure I can at least come up with enough money to pay you a second time what I’ve paid you already.”

“Why go through all that trouble?”

“No offense, my lord, but I’d like to ensure a future back in Mercia, once Eadric’s finished here. Less war there, right now. And it’s our home.”

He waved his hands with exasperation. “Do what you will, woman! I don’t care, so long as you don’t vanish and leave him motherless.” He took a moment to consider all of this. She seemed very wayward indeed, so perhaps he needed to give her a few terms, despite making up his own mind. “Come back at least once a year with the money.”

“Very well. I’ll do that for however long it takes.”

“How long it takes for what?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugged. “Until he’s ready.” She reached down and ruffled Eadric’s hair. He, too, was smiling. “So we have a deal?”

“Yes.” The grins were contagious, and Athelward found one on his own face, as well. “We have a deal.”

**

THE FIFTH LOST TALE OF MERCIA



ALFGIFU
THE ORPHAN

“Then came King Ethelred home, in Lent, to his own people; and he was gladly received by them all. Meanwhile, after the death of Sweyne, sat Knute with his army in Gainsborough until Easter ...”

—*The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, Entry for Year 1014

*

GAINSBOROUGH
Spring, 1014 A.D.

Alfgifu of Northampton did not want to admit that she was nervous, but when she saw the Viking encampment looming ahead, her fear burned in her stomach until she could not ignore it. She forced herself to think the same thought over, and over, and over again: Canute lost his father, too. Canute lost his father, too.

This single thought struggled to stay afloat as the approaching camp drowned her with physical sensations. The lines of brightly painted shields along the burg walls seared her eyes. Meat-scented smoke burned her nostrils. The clashing of playful weapons rang in her ears. These sensations pulled her too deeply into a reality that made her doubt the strength of her purpose.

But Canute lost his father, too.

A growl rumbled from her throat, and her thin legs clutched tightly around her horse, making it lunge forward. When she thought about it too much, she wondered if this single fact had truly been reason enough to travel almost one hundred miles and introduce herself to the new King of the Vikings. She had so many hopes for what to accomplish here, but as far as true justifications went—or reasons to believe she might actually succeed—they all boiled down to a mere gut instinct, and the one thought that seemed to accompany it.

Yes, Canute had just lost his father. She had lost her father many years ago, and it had changed her life irrevocably. This would bind her to Canute, she thought, and form a permanent

connection. She would be able to help him in a moment of weakness; she would be able to understand what he was going through better than most. She would be able to gain his trust.

And once she gained his trust, she would be able to turn him against Eadric Streona.

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“What do you mean, he is busy?”

“He’s busy,” repeated the thick-skulled housecarl, gulping from a horn of mead.

“This is unacceptable,” hissed Alfgifu. “I have brought him two hundred pounds. I have brought him horses, and cloaks, and fine blades, and—”

“These are very good gifts, my lady.” The warrior nodded approvingly while running his calloused finger over one of the blades in discussion. “I think he will actually like them, more than most of the gifts he has received. But ... Canute is busy.”

“He cannot be too busy to see *me*.” She straightened as tall as she could, her chest swelling, her chin thrusting high. But this movement felt like a mistake once the housecarl’s eyes began roving her body. He did not seem pleased by what he saw, and this only made her tremble with more fury. People had always told her she possessed a “boyish” figure. She was skinny, her chest flat, her limbs lanky, and on top of all that her face was very square. She could only hope that this would keep the housecarl from thinking about her womanhood, so she forced herself to stand secure and not wither under his gaze. “I am Alfgifu of Northampton. I am the daughter of Alfhelm, who once ruled as Ealdorman of York—”

“And our king just died, so I don’t care who the hell you are, you stupid bitch; go away.”

“*Just* died?” She looked around curiously at the soldiers lounging in streets and lodges they had taken over. The place was filthier than it should have been, she realized: a sign that the army had been here for some time without moving. The men and women labored through their daily chores with sloth and boredom. How long had it been since these Vikings were mobile, she wondered? Had this whole army stayed here since the death of their last king, doing nothing, even though the king of the Anglo-

Saxons had left his own country for a short while? She could hardly believe it. “But Canute has been your king for almost two months,” she observed aloud.

“I said *go away!*”

He shoved her, so hard that she tripped on her skirts, and then she fell into the mud.

She should have been furious. She should have been overwhelmed with shame and outrage. Here, in the filthy, stinking dirt, she faced utter humiliation, which she feared more than death itself. And yet faced with it, she overcame it. She felt as if she had just been pushed off a cliff. Where once the view dizzied her and prevented her progress, she now realized that she would survive the fall to the bottom. She heard men laughing at her, but this only fed her determination to prove them wrong. It gave her the strength to pull herself from the filth. Silent, expressionless, she flapped the muck off her dress and lifted her chin again. The men grew quiet, watching her curiously. She stared back at them, her gray eyes as solid as stone.

She had control of her emotions, though it was not about to seem so. She gathered them all in the pit of her belly. She let them rise up and make her chest swell. Some of it overflowed slightly, making her blood boil and her hands squeeze into such tight fists that her nails pierced the skin of her palms. But when she let it out of her throat, all the rest was worth it. She let out a sound that was more than a scream; it was also the roar of a lion, the howl of a wolf. It was a cry of pain and sorrow—but also of strength.

When it was over she closed her mouth and listened to her own cry echo through the hills. Her vision swam with the exhilaration of her release. The men all around her were dumbstruck, and their eyes were filled with terror. She felt a small smirk on her lips.

She could not say for how long she waited for a reaction. The time passed on and on, but she was in a state of calm, so she did not measure it. She only took note when a distant door swung open: the door of Canute’s own hall. Surely he resided there, for it was the biggest building in sight, and it was guarded by men wearing rings of gold and silver: men who were probably his personal guards, or as the Danes called them, housecarls.

A man peered from the door. She had never seen Canute before, but she did not think this was him. This man looked too old and—in any case—she simply sensed that if it was Canute, she would know it. He only peered at her a moment, then returned inside.

She stood calmly and patiently. Her heart scrambled and thumped in her chest, but otherwise she reined in her feelings. After all, she had just released her emotions in the most powerful scream of her entire life. She could relax now.

After a moment the man walked out of Canute's hall again. Her heart surged, this time with eagerness. He made his way through the mud to the housecarl who had pushed her, and who now wore a very abashed look on his face.

“What the hell is going on, Gunnlaug?”

Alfgifu answered for him. “I am Alfgifu of Northampton. I brought gifts for King Canute, and this man—Gunnlaug—pushed me into the ground for my trouble.”

The king's man looked warily from one of them to the other. Gunnlaug seemed torn between surliness and guilt. “She insisted on seeing Canute.”

Canute's housecarl surprised them both by reaching out and grabbing Alfgifu's arm. “Then she'll see him.” And he started to pull her away.

“Hey!” Alfgifu squirmed until at last she escaped his grip. But he kept walking, and she was forced to scramble after him, feeling humiliated once more. She wanted to insist on bringing her hearth companions along, but if he refused her, it would only increase her embarrassment. Besides, she told herself, she wouldn't need them.

Any remaining fight in her drained from her bones as they walked past a group of freshly captured slaves. They were Anglo-Saxons, captured on raids no doubt, and they were mostly women. Their dresses were ripped, their hair disheveled, and they were so weary and hopeless that they were not even tied up. They were guarded by men who reached out and fondled them, and before her very eyes one of the Vikings pulled one up and dragged her away.

Algifu stared after them curiously a moment, then turned her eyes ahead once more. They were nearly to Canute's hall.

Before they entered, the housecarl stopped her forcefully and searched her with his hands. She gritted her teeth and endured it. For another rare moment, she felt grateful for possessing a body that most men found unattractive. His hand struggled to find her small breasts, and then it did not linger. When he was done, finding nothing of interest beyond her small table dirk, he released her and said, "Go on in."

It was strangely calm inside the hall, and she paused at the entrance to let herself adjust. The air was thick and stuffy with smoke and old wood, but this was softened by the aromas of warm bread and meat, and what appeared to be fresh, clean rushes covering the floor. Nonetheless she felt enveloped by an uncomfortable heat as she continued moving forward, and she wondered if she imagined it, along with the unnatural red glow that seemed to cover everything. The fire in the hearth was low and calm, hardly a source for such a hellish visage. Altogether the hall was very quiet, though occupied by at least a dozen men and women: jarls, housecarls, and the best of the female captives, she suspected.

Algifu felt unexpectedly jealous as she watched these women sit on the men's laps, whispering in their ears or listening to their conversations. These captives had settled more comfortably into their new roles than the ones outside. They were also beautiful, and clean, and had even been given nice linens to wear. But did any of them realize what power they possessed by being here, in this hall? How easily it had come to them, not even of their own will, and yet they wasted it, doing what was expected of them until the time passed. They probably cried themselves to sleep at night, wishing they were back on their old farms tending cows and chickens. Her jealousy turned into resentment, and then to complete hatred. Fools, all of them! They deserved to go back to their little lodges and live the dull, isolated lives from which they'd been plucked. But they would never be able to recognize what was reward and what was punishment, for they were all idiots.

Then, quite unexpectedly, she saw Canute.

She doubted her instincts at first, because he sat all alone, and he looked even younger than she'd imagined. He was not yet twenty years old, if even nineteen yet. He was thin and lanky, though his shoulders were of a sturdy width, and it looked like he would stretch to be quite tall when he stood. But all that was difficult to determine as he was hunched over the table, gripping a gilded goblet, staring through his own mess of thick, jagged hair. Almost everything about him, she thought, was jagged: from the edges of his joints, to his jutting chin, and even to the corners of his eyes, narrowed and squinting as he peered through them.

When he turned to look at her, she struggled not to tremble with fear.

His intensity amazed her, and frightened her, and excited her all at once. In a sense he did not look at all as she'd expected him to, but at the same time he seemed everything she could have hoped for. He was not handsome in the typical sense, for he had a somewhat long, hooked nose, and his eyes were so high and narrowed. But from those eyes, a gaze shot from his youthful face like barbed arrows, transfixing her. He seemed to her like a hawk, peering far into the distance, seeing further than anyone else could see.

He looked her up and down, and her skin bristled with bumps as she wondered what he saw in her.

"You," he said. His voice was somewhat high-pitched and soft, but it rang through the room like a bell. "You're the one that made that sound?"

"Yes, my king." She felt she could not bear his gaze much longer, and looked down at herself. But then she felt horrified, for she remembered that she was covered with mud. "I am Alfgifu of Northampton. My father was—"

"I thank you for your gifts," he said, and she realized he had no more interest in her identity than he had for a single thread of his tunic. "I will take them and use them to conquer Engla-lond, and that is how I will repay you. Unless there is something else you want, you should go."

He released her from his fierce gaze and turned back to his food. Even though she felt as if she had just been freed from a harsh grip, she trembled with frustration. She had not come this

far so that he could dismiss her. He had heard something in her scream, that roar in which she had bared her soul; otherwise he wouldn't have called her in here. "My father also died before his time, my lord."

He seemed to pause, only for a moment, before responding smoothly. "That is unfortunate for you, perhaps." He tossed back a drink from his goblet, swaying slightly as he did. Either he had already drunken a great deal, or it did not take much to intoxicate him, for the effect of the spirits seemed to hit him quite suddenly. "My father's death, however, made me a king. Fortunately for me."

This made her grind her teeth together and glare at him with a gaze almost intense enough to match his own. But now he did not even notice; now he only seemed to have eyes for the pretty cup in his hand. "That's a very pretty goblet," she hissed. "Someone else's gift to you?"

His fingers played thoughtfully over the ornate decorations of the rim. "A gift to my father, from Ealdorman Eadric Streona."

The name seemed to flip a switch in her. Eadric Streona. The man who changed her entire life. The man who took everything from her. The man who killed her father.

The man she had come here to destroy.

She swept in closer to Canute, planting her hands on the table, lowering her voice. "Your father's death may have made you a king in name," she hissed. "But do your men think of you as one?"

He paused, going terribly still.

"The man outside, Gunnlaug, he said his king had just died. You have had two months to establish yourself—two months in which King Ethelred was *gone* from Engla-lond, no less—and yet they still think of your father as the king. You have squandered a golden opportunity to overtake Engla-lond."

"Tread carefully," he said.

She lowered her voice, but continued to speak relentlessly. "You miss him, don't you?"

"Of course," he snapped. "Now shut your mouth."

Instead, she sat down next to him and leaned in closer. He tensed, slender fingers tightening around his disgusting prize of a

cup. “Were you ready for your father to die, Canute? Were you ready to become king?”

He inhaled sharply, but said nothing.

“It’s all right, you don’t have to answer. I understand. I know what it’s like to think that you are unshakable, and then discover that you’re not.”

He turned to look at her, slowly this time, the pale discs of his eyes snaking to the edge of his lids. “Do I look shaken to you?” He sounded genuinely curious.

“No, you don’t look it. But I think you are good at hiding it. Just as I am.”

At that, he chuckled, and the sound of his high-pitched chortles made her stomach turn. “No you’re not. You’re practically blue with fear, woman.”

She pulled back, anger stinging her tongue. “And *you*—you’re even more afraid than I am. If you were ready to be a king you would already have a plan. You would have mobilized your men while Ethelred was away, and while the Anlgo-Saxons thought your Vikings were weakened by their unexpected loss—rightfully so! You could have proved to everyone that you’re all the man your father was. Instead you are sulking here in the safety of the Danelaw, getting fat with Easter feasting!”

His smile had long since vanished, and his lips were curling down into a scowl.

“If you were as ready to be a king as you want everyone to believe, you wouldn’t linger here in Gainsborough, hiding your face and hesitating about what to do next. It’s so different now that he’s gone, isn’t it? It’s not what you thought it would be. You thought you were ready. You thought it would feel wonderful to be free from his constant scrutiny, from the need for his approval, from the way you only seemed to matter to other people so long as he was around. But now you got your wish and it’s not at all what you expected. Is it?”

He moved so quickly that he must not have been as intoxicated as she thought, after all. One moment his hand was around his cup, and the next it was around her throat, shoving her back and pinning her down to the table. She heard dishes clatter and stools knock over, but then all she could hear was the sound

of her own breath, or lack thereof, as she tried to force it past the vice-like grip of his hand.

Once she got over the shock of it, she began fighting back. He only had one hand free to protect himself as she reached for his own neck, stretching her nails out as far out as she could, as if they were claws. She could not reach his throat, but she managed to grab his tunic, her fingers scrambling and curling until she had her hands full of the stiff fabric. She yanked at it, unable to pull him closer, but managing instead to rake the smooth skin of his chest with her nails.

He leapt back, hissing with anger. At that moment she pounced on him, flying off the table and swinging for his face. He scrambled back, towards the fire, and when he fell a cry rose about the room, for it looked as if he might fall into it. As she watched, she feared she might have done something truly stupid. And in that moment of pause, he was able to grab her, pulling himself to safety and carrying them both to the floor.

As soon as she began wrestling with him against the rushes she lost track of who did what. They grabbed at each other, pulling, pushing, and twisting. They rolled and scrambled, and while her body seemed to be running over with pain and discomfort, at the same time her blood felt hot and throbbing within her, dulling everything else and replacing it with a numbing exhilaration. She listened to his panting breath, his grunts of effort as he tried to overcome her, and felt as if every part of their bodies touched completely, even though they flailed and rolled about, constantly moving. She was rewarded by a profound satisfaction every time she escaped his grasp or returned one of his blows.

Then he got on top of her, and seemed to have gotten the better of her. He stared down at her through the pale strips of his hair, eyes blazing. In a moment of illumination, she jabbed her knee into his groin.

He groaned and fell back.

Belatedly his housecarls came to his rescue, and before she could move she was yanked up and pinned down again, this time on both sides, her wrists crushed sharply against the table.

Canute looked down at himself, his tunic ripped open, his chest beaded with dark blood, his body bent uncomfortably

around his aching loins. He seemed at a loss. When he looked at her again, she could not tell whether he was furious or fascinated.

“Who did you say your father was again?” he said with heaving breath.

She had never said it to him, as she recalled. He had not given her the chance. “He was Ealdorman Alfhelm of York.”

He frowned with puzzlement, then shook his head. “Should I know him?”

She bit back her anger, which was easy to do when she felt as if a single wrong move would cause the king’s housecarls to break her arm. “King Ethelred chose Uhtred to take over, because he seemed the stronger warleader against the Scots.” She groaned with discomfort, struggling to maintain her composure. “He had my father killed, and then his men took out my brother’s eyes while I watched.”

This did not phase him in the least. “This is of no use to me.”

“Yes it is, you bastard!” This caused the housecarls to squeeze her tighter, but Canute only looked amused. “Despite my family’s exile, I have managed to keep a lot of lands, and a lot of wealth—”

“Be more specific.”

“I own nearly two hundred hides ... I think. In Northampton.” She hurried past this uncertainty. “More importantly I have connections. I know thegns in the Danelaw and beyond because of my upbringing; they are kind to me because they feel sorry for me. I know some who are loyal to King Ethelred.”

At this, Canute came closer, leaning over her splayed, constrained body. She thought she felt his gaze, exploring her more intimately than it had before. For some reason, she did not feel ashamed of her body this time.

“Don’t you see, Canute? I am invaluable to you. And you know you can trust me, because I would never help King Ethelred. I swear it on the blood of my dead family.”

He sneered a little, but her heart raced, for he was so close to her now that she could feel his breath against her neck. Then, without any warning at all, he kissed her.

She had never been kissed before. She was not sure what she should have expected. But this, to be sure, was not it. She was held captive, unable to move, and her arms ached; but there were his lips, stiff against her quivering mouth, cool in temperature. It was anything but romantic or tender. Even so, she would not have pulled away, even if she could have. She felt as if he was testing her, somehow; and considering how long he lingered there, breathing against her, his slitted gaze looking in to hers, she felt as if she passed.

Finally he pulled away, a strange look on his face.
“I suppose you’ll do,” he said.

*

That night, he gave her a bed on which to sleep, and then he shared it with her.

That day and the next few weeks were a flurry of confusion and excitement for Alfgifu. Somehow, she had succeeded in connecting with Canute in a much deeper way than she had ever expected. She was by his side by day and then—a few times—by night. She did not know if he thought of her as a wife, but it seemed as if suddenly, she was one. She overheard his housecarls saying that he had never “chosen” a woman before. He did not act, as far as she could tell, as if he had fallen in love with her. It seemed, indeed, as if he had simply chosen her. He let her follow him around as he executed his affairs; when he was at a loss he turned to her for council. And at night, sometimes when she would last expect it, he would enter the chamber he had given her and invite himself to her bed. Often he would blow out the candles, and carry out his mission very matter-of-factly; but sometimes she would insist on keeping them lit, and then she would purposefully resist him. A struggle would ensue, making her blood roar and her toes tingle, and when he overcame her she suspected he enjoyed it as much as she did.

Alfgifu wanted to feel victorious, but she did not let herself. She knew that Canute was using her, as surely as she was using him. The nature of their relationship puzzled her, as he continued to say nothing of marriage.

Whatever the case, it seemed as if she had at least been able to spur him to action. He called together the people of

Lindsey and invited them to raid and plunder alongside his Vikings. His warriors stretched their limbs and sharpened their blades and she felt the vibrancy of war in the air. The people cheered to Canute and looked to him as their ruler.

Canute was a natural leader, she thought. He had a way of commanding people's attention almost effortlessly, even when he spoke with a quiet voice. He certainly did not lack in confidence; in fact, his surplus of it easily overwhelmed the lack of anyone else's. Despite all this, she worried that he had not yet established himself as king the way he needed to. The people followed him now because they were restless; but what would happen when they faced King Ethelred's forces? Would they stay united under Canute's commands?

More importantly, how would Canute stand against the influence and trickery of Eadric Streona?

Even with the Vikings' eagerness to go raiding and pillaging, she sensed small threads of doubt amongst them. Perhaps, she thought, it was because they still did not know where they would go, even as they made to prepare themselves. When the jarls finally asked aloud where they would go first, Alfgifu leaned close to Canute and whispered in his ear, "Mercia." His eyes flicked towards her, the only sign of acknowledgment; but otherwise he did not respond.

Mercia was the logical choice, after all. The lands of Mercia were lush and fertile, less ravaged than the southern lands, and very, very nearby. Some would even consider their current location to belong to the official earldom of Mercia, as they had once been grouped together, until the Seven Boroughs came together to form the Danelaw. No one would assume that her real reason for suggesting it, of course, was because it was the earldom of Eadric Streona.

Alfgifu had never been raiding before. She felt certain that she would enjoy it. When she told Canute that she wished to pillage and slaughter alongside the men, he laughed at her, though in an affectionate tone. She brought it up again that night as he led her through the grass to her lodge. He stopped, turned to her, and put his hand on her belly.

"You have more important things to do."

A roar filled her ears when she heard this, for belatedly, she understood her purpose. Canute wanted an heir, and he wanted it soon. This was probably the reason he had chosen her so quickly, more than from any flare of passion or feeling of “connection.” In one sense the notion of giving Canute an heir filled her with excitement. But at the same time, her ears burned with frustration.

“You are among Christians here,” she reminded him. He was Christian, himself, or at least wanted to be; she knew because he wore a cross around his neck. But she’d noticed that some of his men still wore the pagan symbol of Thor’s hammer. Without a doubt, it was easy for him to forget how he should act. “They will want a legitimate child, one produced from a marriage in the eyes of God.”

“God sees everything I do, I assure you.” He wore a strange smile on his face. His pale skin and hair seemed to glow white in the moonlight. “If you give me a healthy son, then we’ll see about marriage.”

“That’s not how it works—” she began, but he had already stopped listening, and she bit her own tongue. She would give him what he wanted, so long as she got what she wanted from him, eventually.

“Why did you come here, Alfgifu?” Chills trickled down her body, for it seemed that his eyes, now possessing a tiny twinkle, had seen into her mind. The smile was gone from his face.

“I told you. I hate Ethelred. I want you to be king.”

“Ah.” He gave a small nod, and she thought she had satisfied him. Then he cocked his head at her again. “Is that all?”

Her heart pounded in her chest as if it wanted to escape. Fear filled her. Could he truly read her thoughts? Was it some sort of pagan power? For a moment it seemed to be so.

“I investigated your father’s death. Ethelred did not order him to be killed. Alfhelm died of an accident.”

“An *accident!*” Her voice came out like a squeal, and her cheeks flushed with both fury and embarrassment. She could only hope that Canute could not see the extent of her distress in the

darkness; but then, Canute seemed to see everything. “And then King Ethelred killed my brother for laughs?”

He only continued staring at her intently. “Then what do you think happened?”

“I know what happened,” she snarled. “It was Eadric Streona. He killed my father, and then he covered it up, and Ethelred rewarded him for it.”

Canute chuckled softly. “Eadric Streona. He must be a smart man, if he got away with it. In any case, he is very powerful now.”

Her breath pumped in and out in angry huffs, filling the quiet night like little thunderclaps. “Let’s raid Mercia,” she said, her voice barely rising above her breath, “and find out just how powerful he *really* is.”

“I like you, Alfgifu,” he said, surprising her. Some of her anger drained away and she felt at a loss. “But your intelligence disappoints me.”

“What—!”

He put a finger against her lips, pressing harshly. “You are blinded by your foolish feelings, and that is a grave weakness.” She felt a tremor go through him even as he said this, and as if to hide it, he quickly pulled away. “Eadric is powerful. He is also a potential ally. So I see no reason to fight him.”

She could not believe what she was hearing. It made her sick to her stomach.

“Consider his relationship with Thorkell the Tall, my own mentor. Consider his relationship with the churches. Consider the gifts he gave my father. Consider the way he discourages Ethelred from marching into battle—”

“SILENCE!” She almost wanted to scream again, the way she had done on the day she first arrived. But Canute had a dangerous look in his eyes now, and she did not think that ploy would impress him a second time. She did not think he appreciated being interrupted, either, she realized. She gulped, searching herself for more anger. “I did not come here to become Eadric’s *ally*,” she spat. “And if that is your plan, then I am leaving.”

“No,” he said. “You are not.”

“Oh—watch me!”

She turned and stormed away.

“Algifu!” The strain and fear in his voice as he called after her only encouraged her. She walked faster, disappearing into the night. “Stop her!”

Almost immediately, shapes seemed to form from the blackness and move towards her. She felt unexpectedly calm as she pulled her dirk from her belt and slashed at them. They were large and heavy men, weighted down by their axes and chainmail; she could hear them coming long before they reached her. She smiled with satisfaction as her little blade met flesh, slicing someone’s palm as he clutched for her.

Despite this, the men formed a line that blocked her from fleeing into the city. As surely as she could detect the warriors approaching, so could she also sense the ones lingering nearby. Her own hearth companions were in or near her chamber, and far too few to match Canute’s. Crying out with exasperation, she turned and went the other way.

Her feet carried her of her own will to the dining hall. At first she did not know why. The slaves within, who had been enjoying the leftovers of the night meal in the glow of candlelight, fled in confusion and embarrassment. In their absence, her gaze carried down the littered table to a single goblet, shining amidst the scraps.

She hurried to it, picked it up, and slammed it against the wood.

At first, the jolt only seemed to carry up her fingers and wrist, causing her pain and feeding her anger. Shouting, she struck again. The metalwork of the cup cut into her hands, and she wasn’t sure if the red liquid slipping from her grip was leftover wine or her own blood. It hardly seemed to matter as she beat the table with all her might, hoping against reason that if she struck hard enough, she would break it.

Somehow, through her own haze of huffing and hitting, she felt Canute nearby, standing and watching her. He was not trying to stop her anymore; only witnessing her exercise of futility. She sensed his satisfaction as something finally cracked under her exertions; but it was not the goblet. It was the table.

She yelled with rage, turned around, and flung the cup into the embers of the hearth. Sparks ignited and gushed into the air near Canute. They seemed to reflect in his eyes as he glared at her. They stared at each other a long while, the warmth of the fire in between them. Alfgifu felt that her own hair had spilled below her shoulders, which distressed her, for she hated the thin, frizzy nature of it. Though she normally kept it tightly bound, it must have fallen loose during her frenzy.

“What else did Eadric give you?” she demanded, breaking the silence.

He did not answer her. “If you ever command me to be silent again,” he said, “I will burn your lips with boiling water.”

She flinched as he stepped towards her. She tried to maintain her stream of thought against a crashing tide of fear. She had heard of Eadric’s gifts to the Vikings before; what were they? He had given them livestock, and food, and ornaments, but most importantly, he had given them hostages. Yes, somewhere, there were hostages ...

Canute surprised her by reaching out and grasping her hair. He twisted it in his hand until she cried out, then he pulled her down, forcing her to her knees.

She heard the ring of metal as he pulled a knife from his belt, much longer and sharper than the sort that she carried, and her skin crawled with terror. It glinted in her eyes as he brought it near her face. Then he curved it around her head, and swept it through her hair.

The sensation was strange as the pain of his grip fell away, freed by the blade. She watched with something like wonder as she watched the pathetic, lifeless strands fall to the floor.

When he was done, Canute stepped back and surveyed his work. “Much better,” he said, and sheathed the knife.

He turned and strolled away, tossing one last piece of her hair behind him. She reached up with a trembling hand and felt her neck where it was now bare but for a few ragged edges of the remaining hair. Why had he done that? Would it do any good to wonder? She did not think she would ever know the answer, if there was one. Perhaps he did it solely so she *would* wonder.

His housecarls were waiting for him further down the hall. “Take her to her lodge,” he told them, “and don’t let her leave. I must treat her like a prisoner until she learns to behave.” He turned his head towards her slightly, intending that she hear every word.

“And her housecarls, my lord?” one asked.

“Kill them.”

“Hey!” She scrambled to her feet. “No!”

Canute looked at her curiously. He seemed surprised. “I kill them,” he said, “or you release them of their service to you.”

“I—I—” She felt as if she was tearing apart inside. Canute must have guessed how difficult it would be for her to make a decision like this. She hated the thought of releasing them of their service to her; it was a severe blow to her pride, a destruction of all the work she had done to make them loyal to her in the first place. But was that really worth making them die, instead?

She hesitated so long that the housecarls began to move, assuming that she would not have the will to save their lives.

“I will release them,” she rasped. Her legs were wobbly as she forced herself to walk past them. She did not need to look at Canute to know that he wore an expression of victory.

Perhaps he would win this round, she thought. But he would not win them all.

*

The Vikings and the people of Lindsey had not yet mobilized when King Ethelred attacked with his fyrd.

She was still imprisoned in her chamber when it happened. There was nothing she could do. She awoke to the sound of yelling. She felt heat pour through the wooden walls. She heard horses neighing and blades clashing.

“What’s going on?” cried Algifu to Canute’s housecarls. “Go and see, you fools!”

A few of them obeyed her. A few stayed behind, determined to keep constant watch over her.

The acrid smell of smoke bit the air. People screamed. Swords tolled. Light flashed beyond her shuttered windows.

Fear seized her limbs. Her heart fluttered in her ribs, weak and rapid like a butterfly’s wings. Suddenly she found it hard to

breathe. She hated fear. She wanted to believe it could not touch her. She wished she could forget how it felt, that day the king's soldiers barged into her beautiful manor, stabbing the men who had been loyal to her all her life, trying to catch her mother Wulfrun as she ran screaming, then grabbing her brother and throwing him to the floor ...

Alfgifu flinched as another scream echoed through the walls. She nearly fainted when the door of the lodge opened, but it was only one of Canute's housecarls returning. She glimpsed blood splashing in the air before he closed the door behind him.

"It's Ethelred's army," said the housecarl.

"How many soldiers?" gasped Alfgifu.

"A few thousand. Hard to say—they're pouring in."

All of the housecarls exchanged uncertain glances. They could not stand idly by doing nothing while they listened to their brethren fight and die around them. After all, they loved battle. It was their life, and their death.

Alfgifu wanted to feel the same way they did. Instead, she felt debilitated. She could hardly believe that Ethelred had worked up the nerve to come here and fight Canute after months of exile from his own kingdom. Had she been wrong to come here? Had it all been for nothing? Would Canute's forces be demolished, even more quickly than they had been gathered? Would she lose everything—her loyal hearth companions, her estates, her wealth, her dignity—all for a young Viking who would not live up to his father's legacy?

"Well go on, let's fight them!" she cried.

Most of them fell for it: they drew their blades and ran from the chamber. But one remained behind, sword drawn, determined to ensure that she did not escape.

So the two of them remained in their dark prison, and he alone witnessed the way she trembled and cowered, unable to face the possibility of defeat. Better to stay here in the haze and darkness, she thought, and let it blind her.

*

At nightfall, the noises of battle faded down, to be replaced by the ongoing groans of the injured. At last, hungry and in need of relief, Alfgifu and her escort left the lodge.

In the twilight, they stumbled among the dead and wounded. The blood shone black in the night. Things squished under her feet that she was grateful she could not see. Embers and dying fires glowed throughout the city brighter than the moonlight. A second sky seemed to hover directly over the turf roofs where all the smoke collected in a thick, smothering blanket. Alfgifu coughed and rubbed her stinging eyes, feeling sticky trails on her cheeks where her eyes had already shed rivers of water.

Someone reached out and grabbed her ankle, begging for help. She nearly tripped. Resisting the urge to kick him in the face, she kept going.

Despite all the sobbing, and moaning, and the flames that refused to die, Alfgifu's heart lifted. The number of dead was tremendous, the Vikings' stores destroyed, their new horses scattered; but they still held the city. Whatever had happened, Ethelred's forces had pulled away eventually, and that mattered the most.

Canute was in his lodge, but one would not have guessed by the silence hovering over it. She recognized some of his chiefs lurking outside, their faces either sullen or furious, but all turned away from Canute's door. It was strange to her that not all of them were joined in a flurry of conversation and activity.

The housecarls guarding his door did not let her in at first, though she yelled and argued with them. She should have expected as much; Canute would not talk to his own chiefs right now. Why would he talk to her?

Then one of them stepped forward, and he said, "If she wants to, why not let her?"

This surprised her. She realized that Canute must not have forbidden anyone to enter; they were all simply afraid to. She noticed a dead body very close to the door of the lodge, and thought that it was a strange place for someone to have died from the battle. He had recently been stabbed in the chest, it appeared.

The housecarl followed her gaze. "That's the last man who tried to go in."

"Oh." She gulped. "Well he won't hurt me. I'm carrying his child."

"You are?"

She had no idea, yet. But she thought it was a safe assumption. Canute must have assumed the same, or he might have let her escape the night before. She focused on the task at hand. “Do you know what is he doing in there?” she asked.

The housecarl shook his head helplessly. “He’s ... talking.”

“Talking? To whom?”

He shrugged.

She took a deep breath, pushed back her shoulders, and clenched her fists. “Well I’m going in.”

As her trembling fingers pushed open the door, she reminded herself that she was not afraid of death. Only failure. And it would be a failure if she did not see Canute now, while all of his men were scared to, while he was vulnerable, and while there was no one else on earth he seemed to trust.

She stepped inside, very quietly, and closed the door behind her.

Canute was on the other side of the lodge, pacing back and forth along the floorboards, which creaked as if they might soon break apart and drop him into the sunken earth below. He wore no shirt, and his pale skin was splotched with dried blood and bruises. Surely enough, he was talking, though whether to himself or the hanging crucifix on the wall to which he occasionally cast his glance, she wasn’t sure at first.

“You’re not weak. You’re not idle,” he snarled. “You’re stronger than all of them. You did this on purpose. You let them believe victory was in their grasp. When they see your true strength they will cower. God chose *you*.”

So, she realized, he was indeed talking to himself ... about himself.

“You’ll show them,” he went on. “You’re a man. A real man. You’ll even have a son soon ...”

Feeling more and more uncomfortable, Alfgifu at last announced herself by clearing her throat.

He turned to her with wild eyes. Then with no hesitation, in one flowing motion, he drew a knife from his belt and made to fling it.

“You won today,” she said quickly, as if her heart wasn’t racing in her chest.

He paused.

“You held your ground. That’s what matters. Now you must make it seem as if Ethelred made a mistake by attacking you at all.”

He lowered the knife. His eyes cleared, as if realizing for the first time who she was. “Alfgifu. Did God send you?”

She wanted to gawk at him. He sounded crazy. But she did not think it would be in her best interest to express as much. Instead, she walked closer to him, feigning confidence. “God does everything, doesn’t He?” She could see that this is what he wanted to hear. “And He does it for you, because He wants you to be King of Engla-lond. And Scandinavia.”

He dropped the knife, which thudded onto the floor.

She glared up at him, feeling his own gaze traverse her face, and remembering the way he had held her and chopped off her hair. “You said my emotions made me weak,” she hissed. “You were wrong about that, you know. You’re even more governed by your emotions than I am. It’s not what makes us weak. It’s what makes us strong.”

He flinched as she reached up and put her fingers against his cheek. His eyes were wider than she had ever seen them before, staring at her, desperate, searching. She had him now.

“Make Ethelred regret attacking you,” she whispered. “Show him that he has asked for his own demise. Make it seem as if this attack is what spurred you to raid the countryside. His people will hate him for it.”

“Hm,” said Canute. His gaze wandered off as he considered this.

“And there is another thing you can do.” She clutched his face tighter, pulling his eyes back to hers. Her voice grew even softer, smothered by her emotions, but he listened all the more closely as a result. “The hostages that were given to your father,” she breathed. There were many hostages, as she recalled; but the majority of them had been given by Eadric. They were valuable to him; maybe he even loved some of them. “You must kill them.

And make them die slowly. You must take out their eyes, or chop off their limbs.”

Canute turned his head and kissed her trembling fingertips. “Good idea,” he said.

**

THE SIXTH LOST TALE OF MERCIA



HASTINGS THE
HEARTH
COMPANION

“A.D. 1004. This year came Sweyne with his fleet to Norwich, plundering and burning the whole town.”

—Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, Entry for Year 1004

*

NORWICH
1004 A.D.

Hastings and his horse raced through a hundred miles of wetlands and heath to find their destination obscured in a haze of smoke.

Overnight, the Vikings had reduced Norwich—the seat of the East Anglian government and one of Engla-lond’s greatest cities—to ash and rubble. Families stood next to the remainders of their homes, watching as the unquenchable flames consumed the last beams. People burned their fingers digging through embers for scraps and precious belongings. The injured sat in the ash-ridden streets, moaning helplessly as their wounds festered. Hastings was not sure whether the water gathering in his eyes was a result of his own sympathy or the burning smoke that the breeze threw against him.

Even the high reeve’s hall, on a small hill in the middle of the city, had not escaped the Viking attack. The east wall had been severely damaged, so that the whole building seemed to be leaning, ready to collapse. Hastings wondered if he had arrived too late. Perhaps the witan had already met, or it would never meet, for the wise men would not even have a safe place in which to gather and discuss their future. It was difficult to imagine a future at all when faced with such immediate devastation.

But then a breeze blew, as if from the ocean, fresh, salty, and clarifying. Clouds of smoke rolled away, and rays of sunshine

illuminated a small gathering of men near the high reeve's hall, meeting and conversing despite their miserable circumstances: the wise men. Hastings heaved a deep breath, dragging himself and his horse towards them.

The men took little notice of him at first; no doubt they had to ignore almost everything around them in order to concentrate at all. In addition, Hastings looked more like a worthless beggar than the royal retainer that he was. He had ridden through fens and marshes and mud and filth until he felt sodden by the wet earth from his tunic to his loincloth. But even this did not weigh him down so much as his own exhaustion. His knees trembled underneath him and he could hardly keep his head up. His horse was the only obvious indication of any worthwhile status. A small crowd had already gathered around the important meeting, so Hastings seemed like yet another audience member, straining to get a closer position. Thanks to the horse plodding next to him, people threw him angry looks, but moved out of his way.

By the time Hastings was close enough to eavesdrop, no words were actually being spoken. In a circle stood the East Anglian wise men—thegns, reeves, and members of the clergy—while in the middle a large man paced back and forth, back and forth, his fists clenching and unclenching at his sides. Hastings had probably glimpsed him before in Lundenburg, but even if he had not, he could have easily guessed that this was the high reeve, Ulfcytel. He was a large man, sporting short blond hair and a grizzly beard. The vibrations of his pounding feet seemed to carry all the way to where Hastings stood. His name and fair features were a strong indication of his Scandinavian origin, but despite all that, his lordship over the Anglo-Saxons was apparent by the way he held their rapt attention. When he spoke, his hoarse, booming voice rattled Hastings to his core.

“I am Ulfcytel,” he yelled, “and I say there is nothing else we can do. Gather the Danegald.”

A soft moan of dismay carried over the crowd, adding to the chorus of groans already echoing through the ruins.

Sighing, Hastings leaned against the ribs of his horse, breathing nearly as heavily as the great beast, and felt a moment of guilty relief. Perhaps, indeed, he had come too late. Perhaps he had

no choice but to find shelter, get a full night's rest, and return home to Lundenburg.

But in doing so, he would fail the Golden Cross; and even worse, he would fail Aydith.

He looked up and saw that the wise men were already turning around, ready to walk away, ready to give up.

“Wait,” he rasped. He coughed, trying to clear phlegm from his throat. He needed water. “Wait!” Still no one listened to him, so he grabbed his horse's saddle and pulled himself up. The stallion neighed with dismay, and Hastings increased her agitation by kicking her flank, so the steed reared up and bolted forward, knocking people over and bursting into what remained of the wise men's circle.

Hastings did not think he could have planned his entry much better than that, for now he had everyone's attention. It was not good, however, that Ulfcytel had drawn his sword, and looked ready to chop off his horse's legs.

“Wait!” he cried again. He slid back down to earth, half-stumbling as he righted himself, reaching deep into his tunic for the one spot against his heart that he had kept clean and secure. When he pulled out the scroll, its whiteness seemed to glow through the ashy air, making Ulfcytel's eyes pop open with surprise. “I bring ...” Hastings gasped, feeling dizzy. He had come this far. He had to deliver the message properly. “I bring battle plans from the Golden Cross.”

“The who?”

Hastings righted himself at last, pushing his matted hair from his face, brushing off what mud he could from his tunic. He fiddled with his sword belt for a moment, not because he needed to, but because he wanted to draw attention to its intricacy and ornateness. He was not sure if he wanted Ulfcytel to recognize him completely, for they had briefly encountered each other in the past, but he at least needed to be taken seriously as a member of the noble retainers. “I am one of the royal gesithas,” he said. “I serve his lordship and his aethelings as needed. On their behalf I bring you this military advice, provided by one of King—er, Engla-lond's most loyal battle tacticians, the Golden Cross.”

He had crafted his words carefully, as instructed, misleading the high reeve without lying. He wanted to be taken seriously as a representative of the royal family without ever stating that he was acting on their orders. He also took care not to say King Ethelred's name, despite all of this. Two years ago, Ethelred had ordered that all of the Danes in Engla-lond be killed. Naturally, he had not succeeded, for there were far too many of them, including several in positions of great power, like Ulfcytel himself and other thegns of the Danelaw. Afterwards, many blamed the massacre on a young man named Eadric, said to have advised Ethelred in secret the day before. Hastings knew this meeting had taken place, but he thought it silly to put all of the blame on this otherwise unknown Mercian. No doubt Ulfcytel, determined to keep his lands and power, preferred to blame some poor teen named Eadric rather than the king to whom he remained loyal.

Hastings's carefully planned speech must have worked, for Ulfcytel cocked his yellow eyebrows and unrolled the scroll. He snapped his fingers. A clergyman rushed quickly to his aid. Their eyes perused the scroll together, but Ulfcytel seemed to have difficulty. Meanwhile all the other wise men were straining closer out of curiosity, annoyed that they could not see for themselves.

Hastings filled in the silence. "The Golden Cross urges all of you not to give up hope, even though you have not had time to gather the fyrd against Sweyn Forkbeard. The Golden Cross suggests a new tactic, one that would be available to you without gathering your entire army."

All this while, the bishop was whispering in Ulfcytel's ear, reading the scroll for him. Ulfcytel looked up with a scowl. "He says to put our best men in front? That's ridiculous."

"It would be faster to gather the best of your thegns and warriors, rather than all of the fyrd," Hastings went on. "And even if time was not a factor, think of it: a shield wall with the best men in front would be practically impenetrable."

The clergyman at Ulfcytel's side glared at Hastings. He was thin and gaunt, with beady eyes that were entirely unpleasant. "And once penetrated, the entire army would crumple."

"Bishop Elfgar is right!" roared Ulfcytel.

“But it would also be easy to penetrate the enemy,” Hastings went on. He had rehearsed the speech so many times in his head that the words came out effortlessly. “The front lines could open up and let men out at will, magnificent fighters who could wreak severe damage on the Vikings all on their own.”

Ulfcytel hesitated, considering this. When at a loss, he turned once more to the bishop.

Bishop Elfgar shook his head sadly. “It is too risky. Besides, who is this Golden Cross, and why have I not heard of him before? Does he not have a name?”

“Yeah, and what are these two golden lines at the bottom of the page?” Ulfcytel added indignantly. No doubt he meant the “x” signed with golden ink.

“The Golden Cross’s signature,” said Hastings. “And as I said, the Golden Cross is a brilliant military tactician who serves King Ethelred, and all of Engla-lond. You may have noticed that the scroll was approved with a royal seal.”

Ulfcytel just blinked in puzzlement.

Bishop Elfgar rolled up the scroll with a decisive motion. “Battle tactics are beside the point. The East Anglian witan has made its decision. We will pay Sweyn to leave our shores, and in that way spare the lives of all our best men, God willing.”

Hastings could see that he had lost. Indeed, he had come too late, though he had tried his best, and he wanted his efforts to enable him to face Aydith without shame.

He only hoped that she would forgive him, and not see this failure as his own.

*

In his dream he guarded the aetheling while she slept and listened to the sounds of her breathing. At first it was soft and slow, rising and falling with the carefree gentility of a child’s. But she was not a child anymore; she was fourteen, and sometimes at night she was plagued by nightmares. Her breath grew faster, heavy and deep, and a soft moan escaped her lips.

“Hastings ... Hastings!”

“I am here, Aydith.”

He found her in the darkness, his large hands closing around hers, gripping her tightly. In his dream he could see her,

even though it was dark and not a single candle was lit. Her brown eyes shone like copper moons, searching his.

“Hastings, the Golden Cross failed?”

“I am afraid so, my lady.”

“But ... I don’t understand.” Her hands tightened against his, and at first he enjoyed the sensation, their skin pressed so firmly together that he could feel the tiny ridges of her palm sliding against his own. Then her nails dug into his knuckles, and pain overwhelmed the pleasure. “It is you who failed.”

“No, Aydith, please, I did what I could ... !”

“The Golden Cross, whose mission is that of our Lord in heaven, would never fail. This is *your* failure!”

He cried out, then clutched for her, even though she was the source of his pain. She was also his only source of comfort and healing. She thrashed against his searching grip, evading him. “Forgive me ... please. Isn’t there anything else I can do? Anything?”

She became still very suddenly, and his hands reached further through the shadows, for now everything in his dream had gone dark again. He found her face and stroked it gently. Her cheek felt soft and warm.

“Aydith,” he whispered. “Serving you is the joy of my life. All I want is to give you joy in return.”

“Hastings ...”

“Please tell me what else I can do,” he said. “Please, let me make it up to you ...”

He leaned closer to her, and now he could not only hear her breath, but feel it, too. He could see her again, her eyes sparkling, her face suffused with red, her neck lax in his grip.

“Please,” he whispered, and brought his lips to hers.

Pain seemed to explode across his ribs, as if in his heart, and the agony was excruciating. He screamed and thrashed and flailed.

And in such a state he awoke, panting.

A soldier stared down at him with a disapproving look in his eyes. His boot was in such a position to have kicked Hastings, and awoken him thus. Hastings glared with fury.

“Get up,” said the soldier. “Sweyn’s fleet has broken the truce. The Vikings are sailing for Thetford.”

“What?” Hastings sat up, his heart pounding, the anger draining away from his blood in a flood of excitement. “So ... what does this mean?”

“What do you think? We’re going after him!”

Hastings grinned from ear to ear.

*

Three long weeks later, Hastings stood holding his shield before him, trembling from head to foot. The stench of death already clung to the air, a smell Hastings had quickly come to associate with the Vikings’ presence. Only a few miles away, Thetford already lay in ruin: homes burned to the ground, inhabitants stabbed, blood soaking the earth, food and corpses smoldering.

From the smoke, the first black shapes of the Viking army crawled towards them.

Hastings stood on the front line of the Anglo-Saxon shield wall between the Vikings and their ships, along with all of Ulfcytel’s bravest and strongest men. To be in such a situation seemed to foretell certain death. He wondered how he had ever come to be in such a ridiculous position, and even though the truth was evident, it seemed as if suddenly he could not comprehend it.

As soon as Ulfcytel had learned that Sweyn had turned his fleet towards Thetford, despite having accepted the East Anglians’ terms to sue for peace, he flew into a horrendous rage. He yanked his short hair and nearly ripped off his tunic as he imagined tearing his Danish enemies apart. He was quick to renounce any notion of a Danegald, and declare that he would employ almost any tactic necessary to keep the Vikings from encroaching deeper into his lands.

Ulfcytel’s anger, however, seemed to cloud his judgment. He did not immediately gather the fyrd as he should have, assuming he would not have time. Instead he flung reason to the wind and sent a small band of warriors to try and destroy the Vikings’ ships while their inhabitants were on land. It was a nice tactic in theory, of course, but Sweyn knew better to leave his precious ships unattended, and the mission was an utter failure.

Rather than dealing the Viking king a severe blow, Ulfcytel only managed to announce that he was on Sweyn's trail.

Thus he had gathered what small army he could in the time available and hurried further south. At last he had decided to employ the Golden Cross's advice, and used it to arrange their current position, with all the best men forming the front shield wall while the lesser soldiers protected the back. In the worst case scenario some of Sweyn's men guarding his ships might leave their posts to strike Ulfcytel's army from behind, anyway. What tactics Ulfcytel utilized mattered little to Hastings, as long as they worked. What mattered most, and what would also please Aydith, was that Ulfcytel fought at all.

Now, Hastings wished he had never brought the Golden Cross's battle tactics in the first place, for they were what now forced him to stand at the very front of the shield wall. There would be nothing between him and the Viking army but a simple piece of wood.

Sweyn's men continued to pour through the muddy field, some on horseback, most on foot, slow and leisurely from their recent spoils. They were weighed down by stolen food, gold, and slaves. But they did not seem to care. They did not even hesitate as they came upon Ulfcytel's army, but kept walking, as if towards a shrub they could easily chop from their path.

Hastings hoped that the men around him could not hear his teeth chattering. He did not consider himself to be a coward. But how could he not be afraid when he knew for certain that he would die today? He did not even consider himself to be particularly afraid of death. But this was far from how he had ever expected to die.

He had fought in skirmishes before, but he had never fought a battle like this, and certainly not on the front lines. He was not a typical fyrd-man: he was a retainer. A troop of the noble house. A gesitha. A hearth companion. He fought to protect those he cared about, those he swore fealty to, and for them—for her—he would lay down his life. To die in a quick and frantic clash such as this, his life snuffed out in a flare of deaths, did not seem as meaningful to him. He wanted to look his enemy in the eye. He wanted to see

the gratefulness and love of those he saved as he bled his life away. This was not how he wanted to go.

At least he knew that Aydith would be proud of him. It was not enough, but it was all he had. He tried to imagine her face, certain he would never see it again.

It was hard to imagine someone so beautiful and noble, however, as he watched the pagans advance. Some of the warriors on foot were falling back, no doubt the ones weighed down by their plundered goods, while those carrying nothing but axes and spears moved forward. They began to form their own shield wall, the well-known Viking formation, in which the shields were locked tightly together, and the paint on them was so bright it was nearly blinding. That was the purpose, of course: to distract the eye, and to conceal the lines of the wood, so they would be harder to crack apart.

“Second line, down!” yelled Ulfcytel.

The high reeve’s voice, so close and thunderous, set Hastings’s heart pounding. Even Ulfcytel stood near the front lines, only a few men away. When he had decided to heed the Golden Cross’s scroll, he had not done so half-heartedly.

Per Ulfcytel’s instructions, the second row of men crouched down. They did this for several reasons. Some would poke at the Vikings’ feet with spears. Some would crawl through the shields once a clearing was made and plunge directly into the fighting. Better still, some would serve as a platform from which the third row of men could step and jump over the shield wall. To Hastings the idea seemed ridiculous, but some soldiers had volunteered nonetheless, and Ulfcytel claimed that it would catch the Danes by such surprise.

For a moment, the clattering of weapons and scraping of locked shields filled Hastings’s ears as if no other sound existed. But then something incredible happened, and the shield wall became so silent that all Hastings heard instead was the calm, steady breaths of his neighbors. The men were settled now, forming what seemed an impenetrable barrier, as if not even an earthquake would shake them.

“Hold,” said Ulfcytel, quietly now, for he no longer needed to raise his voice.

Meanwhile the Vikings came closer and closer, their faces either leering or emotionless. All of their movements were so practiced they seemed without effort. And though their arrangement did not appear orderly, inconsistent in movement and formation, they nonetheless advanced as if a single beast, knowing each other's minds, connected by a single goal, unbarred by fear.

“Advance,” said Ulfcytel.

The Vikings did not expect them to advance. Even Hastings, who felt so secured by their solid formation, had temporarily forgotten that this was part of the plan. When Hastings began moving his legs, finding an unexpected harmony in the steps of the entire shield wall, his heart surged with joy to see the surprise on the Vikings' faces. Most of them stopped, reconsidering what to do. Their front lines wavered, some of the warriors bumping into each other. A shield wall was meant to be a barrier. It was not meant to move.

Then Hastings thought he saw Sweyn Forkbeard, mounted on a horse and lurking within the haze of smoke. The king of the Vikings wore glittering mail and so many weapons that he seemed to have sharp steel points protruding from every corner of his body. Hastings squinted, hoping to see the man's thick tufts of hair on either side of his mouth for which he was so famous; and even if he could not see it, he imagined it, the forked beard twisting as he scowled with rage.

Sweyn shouted in Danish, and whatever the word was, it made all of his warriors rush forward at incredible speed.

Hastings nearly froze with terror. But his feet kept moving, for he had no choice.

In a jolt that smacked the bones of his arms and overwhelmed his eardrums, the two armies clashed.

He moved instinctively, shifting his shield up and down, shuffling his feet as the first Viking sword tried to chop off his toes. Whether it was a wise battle tactic or not, Hastings did not know, but he found that he survived his first opponent by not looking him in the face at all, nor even staring directly at his weapon. Instead his eyes remained forward, focused on nothing and everything at the same time, and his body reacted accordingly. He moved, blocked, thrust his shield forward, and stabbed.

Meanwhile he stayed aware of the man behind him, crouched low and thrusting a spear around his legs. It would be all too easy to slice himself against a friendly blade.

The dance of the shield wall was a complex one. Just as he could not stare into his enemy's face, he could not ponder all the things he ought to be doing at once, or all of it seemed too complicated. Instinct took over, so that he was little more aware of what he did than a beast would be; and yet his survival was at stake, so his body reacted dependably.

He held his shield in one arm and his sword in the other, though often both arms were braced against the wood, absorbing the blows of the enemy. He had to watch the men who rushed forward with swords and axes, but he also had to watch for the spears flying through the sky. As he blocked himself from an axe at his fore, he glanced a spear descending on him from above. In one fleeting moment he had to decide which part of himself to protect. At last he decided to swipe his sword over his head, knocking away the spear just in time.

The earth at his feet soon became squishy with blood, and now as Ulfcytel's army tried to push forward, they nearly stumbled over the freshly injured. Some of the dying men were their own, but sometimes it was hard to tell; Hastings, less familiar with the faces of the East Anglian men, dared not kill anyone still alive, lest it be an ally. Many of Ulfcytel's men compromised by taking the weapons and shields of the injured. This served two purposes, for it robbed the enemies while reinforcing their own supplies.

"Foist!" Ulfcytel's voice rang over the melee.

Hastings froze in a moment of panic, trying to remember what he ought to do. He heard the sound of heavy boots thundering behind him, and knew that these were the warriors who would break into the front lines of the enemy. No doubt their swords were already bared, and they would run him through if he did not get out of their way. But if he moved too soon, he would expose them to danger. So he watched the lines in front of him and he listened to the shuffling behind him; and when the moment was right, he swept himself to the side, arching his shield around him.

"Now!" he screamed, and one of Ulfcytel's warriors rushed by, roaring with rage, chainmail and belt jangling like a thousand

bells. The tip of his sword seemed to graze by Hastings's ear, then plunge into a Viking's chest. Above the sunken sword, the enemy's face became locked in a permanent expression of surprise as death seeped into his body.

From one end of the shrinking shield wall to the next, great warriors slipped through the openings, their swords clanging in a cacophony against the Vikings' axes, their spears twirling about their bodies like barbed tornadoes. He wanted to watch the strange phenomenon, the brave Anglo-Saxon warriors throwing themselves fearlessly into the heat of the battle, the Vikings scurrying in confusion. It was like nothing he had seen before.

He knew better than to keep watching, but he could not help himself; and of a sudden, he felt a jolt go through his arms as if his bones were shattering.

It was not his bones that shattered, however. It was his shield. In a spray of splinters, the wood cracked and ripped apart. Hastings watched in horror as the edge of a Viking's axe worked its way from the wooden wreckage, then rose up again, ready to split Hastings's unprotected body just as easily.

Hastings dodged aside, twirling his sword like a madman. He made another mistake, and looked his opponent in the face. The man had a blood-speckled beard, and smoke lurked in his eyes like storm-clouds; but worst of all, he wore a sneer, and it filled Hastings's heart with dread. He realized that the Dane had achieved two victories at once, for by breaking Hastings's shield, he had created a vulnerability in the shield wall, and that vulnerability was Hastings.

He considered for a moment what to do. He realized that his opponent had no reason to kill him immediately; the longer he stood there, shield-less and petrified, the more time he gave the Vikings' friends a chance to gather around him, then force their way through him and into the heart of the Anglo-Saxon army. They were already collecting in a chainmailed bundle, prepared to run him over.

There was only one thing to do. Hastings had become a weakness in the shield wall. He had to remove himself.

He tried to picture Aydith again. He hoped she would be proud of him. He imagined her gratefulness and love, as he would no longer be alive to see it.

He screamed and leapt forward, into the writhing mass of Viking warriors.

“Aaaydiith!” he cried.

And behind him, the shield wall closed itself, never to let him in again.

*

Pain became a nightmare from which he could not wake.

When he slept, he remembered the events of the battle as if they were still happening. He tasted someone else’s blood as it splashed into his mouth. He saw steel flashing everywhere: in the smoke covered sun, in the sparks of remaining fires, in the eyes of his enemies. He felt his chainmail digging into his skin, bruising and smothering him. He heard the crack of his own ribs as the blunt of a Viking axe struck him in the chest, knocking out his breath so that he could not even yell.

He groaned, trying to awake, but the reality was even worse. He winced with every breath, which only made him struggle to inhale more deeply, and that hurt all the more. He tried to open his eyes, but one of them was swollen, warping his vision. He saw through a purple, throbbing haze, and it seemed as if he was still in a nightmare. Despite all that, the room around him was painfully bright. A fire blazed nearby, so hot that his skin itched, and the flames seemed to lick all the sweat from his body. He could not remember the last time he’d had something to drink.

“What’s wrong, Hastings? Thought your pagan friends would rescue you?”

Hastings squinted in confusion at the shape looming over him. It was Ulfcytel, and he smelled of horse. His beard lay matted against his neck. His eyes seemed to gleam and twirl like a lizard’s. Hastings felt dizzy.

“You’re caught, Hastings. I figured it out. The Danes sent you and that ridiculous scroll. You did it so some of my best men would get killed, and so my cousin—my own brave cousin—would be captured! *Captured!*”

Hastings's memory tried desperately to make sense of Ulfcytel's anger. He recalled cheering, and joy, and the elation of being alive. It was one of the last things he remembered before passing out from the pain in his chest and his overall exhaustion. So why was Ulfcytel so angry? A lot of men had died, of course ... so many that it seemed impossible to tell one bloody face apart from the next. But in the end, the Danes had fled to their ships, leaving most of their plundered goods behind, and many of their own mightiest warriors. It had seemed in many ways like a victory.

"What does he want?" growled Ulfcytel. "Money? Women? Why would this Golden Cross want to capture my cousin?"

Hastings moaned, too many thoughts rushing to his brain to speak at once. He wanted to respond, to say that the Golden Cross would never oppose a man so brave and loyal to the Anglo-Saxons as Ulfcytel, that maybe Sweyn just wanted money for this hostage; who knew? Maybe his men even thought Ulfcytel's cousin would make a good Viking? Whatever the case, Ulfcytel had the completely wrong idea about everything, and Hastings wanted to tell him so; but instead he could not seem to draw breath, much less utter a word, and all that came from his throat was a long drawn-out groan.

Ulfcytel leaned closer to him, as if to try and decipher the guttural sounds from Hastings's mouth. Instead he only grew more frustrated. "Tell me," snarled the high reeve. "Tell me now. Who is the Golden Cross? Whoever he is I'm going to find him, and cut out his heart, and eat it for breakfast. I am Ulfcytel!"

Even Hastings's swollen eye opened wide as he stared in bafflement at the warlord. How was this happening? Where had it gone all wrong? How could the Golden Cross, someone who only wanted to aid the Anglo-Saxons in defending their coasts, seem suddenly like the cruelest of enemies to a man like Ulfcytel? It would have been bad enough for the Golden Cross to go unheeded, for the Vikings to collect their Danegald and sail off with sagging pockets; but this ... this was something far worse.

"TELL ME!"

The tip of Ulfcytel's boot hurled into Hastings's chest.

He felt as if his insides were tearing apart. He could not even cry out with pain. His chest seemed to collapse, and all air

and breath with it. His vision flashed red, his body flailed, and then he went still.

Even if he could have talked, he would not have. He would never give away the Golden Cross's secret.

Ulfcytel stood over him a long while, breathing hard. The next time his leather boots creaked against the floorboards, Hastings's heart made a painful lurch of fear.

But then Ulfcytel turned and walked out, and closed the door behind him.

The last of Hastings's breath was lost in a whimper, and his mind spun into unconsciousness.

*

Aydith reached to him from the shadows.

"Oh, Hastings, you have fought so bravely."

Now he only wore thin linens, and the sliding fabric sent ripples along his skin as she raked her nails along it. Her fingers trailed up his torso onto the bare skin of his chest. When she put her warm palm against the bruise, it ceased to ache.

He reached up and put his hand against hers.

"My lady ... I am glad you are pleased."

"Pleased?" She made a sad sound. She leaned closer to him, her dark hair falling over her shoulders and tickling his chest. Her fingers trailed up, scraping the grizzly hairs of his neck, then cradling his face along her palm. "I would, but I hate to see you in so much pain. You should be rewarded for what you've done."

"My reward is to see you happy, my lady." He slid his hand along her arm, then under the hem of her sleeve. "Although ..."

"Yes?"

His hand kneaded the soft flesh of her shoulder. "I would make you happy all my life if I could," he said. "We could reward each other all our lives, you and I, if ..." He grew still.

"If what?"

"If I was your husband." His hand slid further into her dress.

"Hastings," she breathed, and fell against him with a thud.

"Hastings."

Her hands shook him, then seemed to grow larger. The grip tightened and yanked him across the floor more violently. The pain returned to his chest.

“Hastings!”

The hearth companion groaned and opened his eyes. He looked through swollen, slanted lids at a face that was bound to disappoint him, for it was not Aydith’s. But it could have been worse. It could have been Ulfcytel’s.

“Lord Aethelstan!” he cried.

In his clearing vision the aetheling was a thing of beauty, freshly groomed and glistening with ornaments, his eyes soft and sincere as they searched Hastings’s body.

“Are you hurt?” asked the prince.

“No, ah—” A hoarse, guttural sound poured out of his throat as Aethelstan started to lift him off the floor. “A little.”

A shadow fell over Aethelstan’s golden hair, and both the men tensed. “Who’s there?” snapped the aetheling.

“It is I, Ulfcytel!”

Releasing Hastings, Aethelstan turned on the high reeve with fists clenched. “I should have you thrashed for treating a royal retainer with such cruelty! What did he do to deserve it?”

“I ... I ... I was confused, my lord. I thought he had tricked me. I thought he had taken something from me. I thought—”

“But now you see that you were mistaken?” Aethelstan hurried on.

“Y-yes, my lord. I see that now.”

Hastings searched his cloudy memories of the last few days. How long had he been trapped in this hot, dusty room? Days? Weeks? People had brought him bread and water. Sometimes he had crawled to the latrine. He had slept a great deal, and had a fever. But he had blocked most sensations and events from his consciousness so that he did not have to think about the pain in his chest. If he searched his memory deeply enough, he did remember hearing things, sometimes. He had heard more celebrating, more good cheer, and at one point he thought he had heard someone announce that Ulfcytel’s cousin escaped and returned home. Later he had dismissed it as a dream, for no one came to release him as he hoped. But after that Ulfcytel had never returned to beat him.

“I’m glad you recognize your mistake.” Ulfcytel flinched as Aethelstan lifted his arm, but it was only to clap the high reeve on the shoulder. “Because altogether, you have done very well, Ulfcytel. I’m sure it would not always be wise, but the decision to put your best men in front in your situation was ingenious! The Danes themselves say they have never faced such masterful hand-play as you gave them. My father is pleased.”

“I—” Ulfcytel looked uncertainly at Hastings, then away again. Hastings just glared at him. “I thank you, my lord.”

“It is King Ethelred who wishes to thank *you*, Ulfcytel,” said Aethelstan. He pulled a scroll from his tunic and offered it up. “He brings you this message.”

Ulfcytel took the scroll, then his eyes doubled in size. He was staring at the seal. “This is your insignia, my lord?”

“Why, yes.”

Gulping, Ulfcytel looked at Hastings. Hastings smirked. Understanding passed between them. The seal on this scroll was the same that had been on the one from the Golden Cross. The high reeve was not very smart, but he seemed to be piecing some things together, nonetheless.

Ulfcytel bowed low. “It was my greatest pleasure to serve your wishes, my lord.”

“Ah ... thank you. And I hope that you will continue to ... serve my wishes, Ulfcytel. For you are to become Ealdorman of East Anglia.”

“My lord!” Words failed the warrior, who planted his fist against his chest and bowed low. “My lord, I am so honored.”

“Good. But we have a great deal to discuss, you understand. The first matter being your marriage to my sister.”

Hastings’s mouth fell open. Surely he heard wrong? He tried to say something, but his words became mangled by the pain in his chest, and all that he said was a painful grunt.

Aethelstan looked over at the hearth companion, concerned. “Before we discuss anything, you should send someone to tend this man’s wounds and provide him refreshment. Go on!”

Ulfcytel bowed his head with a curt motion, then stomped away.

Despite his aching torso, Hastings rose up to his knees and shuffled closer to the aetheling. “Tell me, my lord—tell me I heard wrong!”

Aethelstan’s pale brows furrowed together. “What’s that?”

It was all happening too fast. He felt dizzy. He reached out and gripped the prince’s tunic so he could steady himself. He tried to look the aetheling in the eye. “I don’t ... understand. Marriage, already?”

“Of course.” Aethelstan looked confused. “Doesn’t it please you to see Ulfcytel rewarded?”

“But—Aydith!” Her name came from his lips more desperately than he would have wished, but he could not help himself, so great was his inner torment.

“Oh, not Aydith. Hah!” Aethelstan reached down and gripped Hastings’s hands, which were starting to slip. “No wonder you were so confused, Hastings. Ulfcytel will marry Aetheling Wulfhild.”

“Ah.” Relief wrapped around Hastings like a cooling salve, but left his mind roiling in confusion. “But why not Aydith?”

“Aydith wouldn’t have it,” said Aethelstan. “As soon as she caught wind of Father’s notions to reward Ulfcytel, she made her position painfully clear. If she were married to Ulfcytel, she would make the new ealdorman miserable for the rest of his life.”

Hastings smiled despite himself. “And why do you think she would do that?”

“Because she is a foolish girl, and infatuated with someone else. Apparently enough so to make my father pay attention.”

A tremble wracked the hearth companion. “Did she ... did she say with whom?”

Aethelstan brushed at Hastings’s fingers, clearly tiring of their grip. “I don’t recall if she said it aloud. She didn’t need to. Everyone knows. It’s obvious, isn’t it?”

Hastings felt as if he might faint.

“It was many seasons ago when that strange churl, Eadric of Mercia, visited the palace, and yet she speaks as if it happened yesterday. You remember when he visited Father two years ago? Well, of course you do. It was a horrible day.” Aethelstan grew

silent in respect for the gruesome memories of that Saint Brice's day two years ago.

But instead of feeling reverent, Hastings found himself seething. Eadric of Mercia? What did *he* have to do with anything?

"For whatever reason," Aethelstan went on at last, "Aydith goes on and on about that conceited young swineherd. Although I suppose he's not a swineherd anymore. What does it matter? She keeps saying she'll marry a man of Mercia one day—as if it would be him! By the cross, I am starting to believe that the nobility of her husband would hardly matter, so long as she gets married, am I right?"

Aethelstan laughed, but Hastings only glowered at the floor. He felt as if someone had reached out and punched him in the ribs again. So, Aydith went on and on about Eadric of Mercia? Or at least Aethelstan thought so? Could the prince be wrong? After all, Hastings spent more time with Aydith than her brother did, and he had never heard her say things like that. Or had he? So many of his own thoughts were muddling together in his head that he quickly grew confused.

His breath grew faster and heavier, making him grind his teeth in pain. "Do you mean that?" he growled. Aethelstan stopped chuckling and looked at him curiously. "Would the nobility of her husband not matter to you?"

Aethelstan frowned. "Hastings, you don't look well. You should probably get some rest."

"I'VE RESTED PLENTY!"

He exerted so much breath that his ribs felt as if they were lit on fire, and the aetheling took a step backwards. A long, terrible silence filled the emptiness his shout left behind.

Aethelstan spoke through clenched teeth. "Then perhaps you should eat, and return to Lundenburg. And ... while you're at it ..." He forced his chin up indignantly. "You should remember your place!"

With a turn of his heel, Aetheling Aethelstan strode away.

Hastings groaned and rolled down onto his back. The floorboards were hot and searing against him, yet he felt as if he might never get up again.

Perhaps Aethelstan was wrong. Perhaps he misread Aydith entirely.

His fists clenched at his sides. His muscles constricted along his chest and made the pain all the sharper. For he knew that it did not matter what—or who—Aydith wanted.

Whatever it was, whomever it was, Hastings would help her attain it.

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THE SEVENTH LOST
TALE OF MERCIA



HILDRED
THE MAID

*“This year was the great famine in England so severe that no man
ere remembered such.”*

—Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, Entry For Year 1005 A.D.

*

SHREWSBURY, MERCIA
1005 A.D.

On her way to church that morning, anger poisoned Hildred’s devotion. She knew that she was supposed to worship God with a pure and loving heart, but she also doubted that God would notice one way or another. After all, He clearly didn’t see—nor care—what was happening to her body, nor the bodies of her entire family, most of whom were dead.

The majority of the people trudging on the same dirt path to the church suffered more than she. Their skin lay flat on their bones and their raggedy clothes flapped loose on their joints. This was the worst famine any of them had seen in their lifetimes. Hildred fared better than them only because so many of her own family members had died in the last few years, leaving fewer mouths to feed.

Her eyes stung at the thought, but her physical discomfort overcame the torments of her mind. Her belly ached and her muscles trembled. For weeks she had lived on little more than nuts and water. What money she and her father had, they used to buy milk for the baby. A year ago, Hildred’s mother died giving birth to him. Somehow, little Coenred had survived, and lived still. He was growing sick, and he slept much more than a baby should sleep, and every instance he squirmed and cried came as a relief.

When she awoke this morning, she did so with the determination to save her baby brother no matter what. Perhaps that was why she dressed herself nicely today. She donned a soft

linen dress that once belonged to her mother. She untangled her long brown hair with a pick and splashed her face with stream-water. She was not even sure why. It was a desperate clutch for pride and hope, she thought. When she knelt and prayed to God, perhaps He would notice her at last. Perhaps He would pay attention. And then He would show her mercy.

She heard a disturbance behind her and turned to see two horses galloping up the road. As they neared the pedestrians, the riders gave half-hearted tugs on their horses' reins, but gave no indication that they would slow down to an agreeable pace. The townsfolk murmured and pushed one another as they tried to get out of the way.

The horses had little choice but to skid to a walk or trample some human beings, so they cast clouds of bitter dust into the air and snorted with dismay. Standing defiantly in place, Hildred glared back at the two riders shuffling closer. One of them was older and more rugged than the other, his wolfish hair and beard shaded gray, his large hand on the hilt of his sword as he yelled, "Make way for Thegn Eadric!"

Her glare fierced. As the dust cleared she saw Lord Eadric, a man near her own age at some nineteen years, his red tunic blazing with color in the light of the sunrise. His long yellow hair was tied back, but still several strands sprang about his cheeks, thick and curly. Her heart gave a little leap at the handsomeness of his face, the bright blue eyes and slightly bumped nose, and she struggled to remember why she ought to dislike him. In truth people said the land-owning swineherd was a good lord: his own estate currently fared better than anyone else's in all of Shrewsbury. But people also whispered that he was a liar and deceiver, though none of them could prove why. They probably assumed that because he began as a base-born nobody, he must have achieved his position by some evil, unfair means.

Her heart lurched again when she realized that he was staring back at her. Without deciding to, Hildred now stood in the middle of the road, blocking his path completely. People on either side of the road kept him from moving around her, and his horse had slowed nearly to a stop. She shut her gaping mouth and

blinked rapidly, as if her lids might protect her from the lord's curious gaze.

"Out of the way!" cried the lord's companion, unsheathing his sword by a notch.

Hildred realized she was being very foolish, and for no other reason than because she was jealous of these rich and powerful men. She did not move from their path because she did not feel that she ought to. But what would she gain from defying them? Nothing but trouble, and she would be even more miserable than she already was.

She deflated quickly, dropping her head and stepping backwards. But even though she got out of their way, for a moment, no one moved. She hardly dared to breathe. She could feel the eyes of everyone watching her, judging her, and hoping to witness an exciting scene, whatever that might entail.

She heard her own heart thudding through her veins. She watched the horses' hooves scuffle in the dirt, agitated, but not moving forward. She glimpsed Eadric's boots clenching the sides of his horse. Why didn't the lord move on?

"You."

She flinched at the sound of his voice, soft yet sharp at the same time. Lifting her head only so far as necessary, she strained to look at him through her lashes.

To her surprise, he was smiling. "Chin up," he said, and winked.

Her mouth fell open again as at last he spurred his horse and galloped onward with his companion. Her blood roared in her ears. Had anyone else seen that? Did the thegn just *wink* at her? His horse flicked a sassy tail and she shook her head in disbelief.

She looked down at herself: at the soft green dress, the freed chestnut hair, and how both of them draped the swell of her chest. Perhaps she had succeeded in looking even nicer than she'd intended. Had she really expected to win God's attention, or was it actually the favor of wealthy thegns that she hoped for?

Whatever the case, she now felt sinful and childish for her vanity. What good could she really achieve by looking pretty? At home, her baby brother lay on death's door. Her father was so miserable that if a chance at death presented itself, he would gladly

join the rest of their family in heaven. But the thought of heaven sent chills across Hildred's skin. Perhaps her faith was weak, but the comfort of an afterlife was a faint one; she did not want to die.

She began whispering her prayers long before the church came into sight.

The church was a simple building, its rounded walls made of twigs and clay, but it rested in a thriving valley. The small gardens here, whether through tedious attention or constant prayers, had somehow escaped the rot and malnutrition infecting the rest of Engla-lond's soil. Adding to the paradisaical scene, cattle and sheep dotted the hills, strolling and grazing and lowing with leisure. Hildred's hands clenched at her sides. The mere sight of such healthy livestock made her mouth water. How long had it been since she tasted beef or lamb?

Her family had suffered from hunger for some time now. Last year had been a minor drought, or at least everyone looked back on it as minor; but in their hunger they had eaten the seeds of next year's harvest, and plunged themselves into a worse famine than before. Her father lost his job plowing another landowner's field. The local reeves began to punish people severely for killing too many livestock for meat. Lord Eadric, she recalled, had been one of the harshest enforcers of this rule. No one wanted what had happened to last year's seeds happen to this year's animals. And yet as she stared at them, Hildred could not comprehend the wrongness of taking a single cow and using it to help her small family through the seasons.

She closed her eyes, murmured another prayer, and kept moving.

At the door of the church, she stopped. Her stomach churned within her.

She could smell food.

She knew that a small amount of food would be doled out after the service. The clergy found it a way to ensure attendance to their sermons. And in truth, they owed as much to the people, who had often come to work the church's lands in the past when their sins lay heavy on their hearts. Hildred knew she should be grateful. But it was difficult to be grateful for a small bowl of leek soup after glimpsing the church's gardens and flocks. Surely they could

afford to give back more to the people than that? Didn't she deserve a pouch of milk to carry back to her baby brother?

Sweat beaded her brow, though a cool breeze blew from the graying sky. She remained standing still as everyone else flooded into the meager sanctuary. She glimpsed the monks within their humble habits. Despite everything their cheeks glowed with vigor and their robes remained tight against their forms. She knew that perhaps God intended this, and rewarded these men for their hard work; and yet all of a sudden, she could not stand the sight of them.

She backed away from the church entrance. She turned aside.

As if in a trance, she followed her nose. She was not sure why no one stopped her. Perhaps they were all like her, unable to think of anything beyond the pangs of their own bellies. She walked through the lush fields, though they seemed to lose color around her as the sky darkened above. She wondered if God was watching now, hiding behind the blur of the clouds.

Her worn sandals led her through the dank grass to the kitchens, a more skeletal building behind the church. Her nose flared with the wafting scents and she felt dizzy. Vegetables, bread, fish, and even fruit ... her sense of smell informed her that all of those things were only a few steps out of her reach.

A single man worked in the kitchens now, tending the food while the others worshipped. She could hear him humming as he worked. She stepped into the enclosure, her eyes drinking in the sight of the bowls of stew, the raw ingredients, the stores in barrels or underground compartments. Under the shade of a grassy roof, rays of sunshine shot through and bathed the precious items in golden light.

Then she saw two more men, and her eyes opened wide. They were Lord Eadric and his companion, standing amongst the food as if waiting for the cook themselves, while their horses grazed in the nearby grass. They were talking with casual smiles on their faces while the chubby cook bounced about, stewing pots with thick fingers and then licking them clean of oil and butter.

She stood there for too long. Of a sudden, Eadric saw her.

His smile drooped to a frown. Hildred forced a gulp through her watering mouth. She trembled but stood firm against his cerulean gaze.

“Hey Aidan,” said Eadric. “You’ve a visitor.”

The monk stopped working and turned to look. His round face took a strange slant. She could sense the unease behind his forced smile. “Hello there,” he said. “Are you looking for something?”

“I ... I ...” She watched as a slab of butter a few tables away melted in a large, gooey drop. She felt faint. “I need food.”

“I know it, my dear, I do.” He walked closer to her, his large form blocking the sight of the foods. She was forced to stare into his green eyes, which seemed much too sharp and darting for a man of God. “But it is easy to forget that your soul is in as great a need as your body, or more so! You must offer your soul to God before you expect the fruits of His good will for your body. Go on to church with the others.”

“I ... can’t.” Not needing to exaggerate, she shuddered and fell to her knees. She no longer cared about the handsome nobleman watching, nor what he thought of her. The sharp-eyed cook blinked rapidly with surprise. “I’m ... too weak.”

He cocked an eyebrow, growing irritated. She trembled as his green eyes raked her up and down. “You look well enough,” he remarked.

“For God’s sake,” said Eadric, startling them both. Hildred looked up to see, with some relief, that the lord and his man were turning to go. “Give the lady a carrot, Aidan.”

Aidan scowled after the departing thegn. “If *you’ll* go to church.”

“One day perhaps,” called Eadric over his shoulder, smirking again. She glared at the thegn as he lifted up sacks of bread and cabbages and secured them to his horse’s saddle. Where did the sacks come from? In another breath Eadric hopped gaily onto his horse’s back, the brightness of his hair and tunic blinding even in the dull sunshine, and nudged the mount along, followed by his ever loyal companion. How must it feel to live with such comfort and security? She could hardly imagine.

The monk grumbled to himself, but it seemed as if he was, in fact, fetching her some carrots.

Her blood stirred with hope. She couldn't have planned this situation any better if she had tried. The thegn was riding off, the cook's back was turned, and within an arm's reach sat a pail of milk. It was fresh and untouched, filled nearly to the brim, and Hildred thought that she wouldn't need even half that much to save her brother's life.

The problem would be taking it home. She glanced at the cook again; he grumbled and hummed to himself intermittently, and all the while rummaged through a large bag of carrots, no doubt searching for the tiniest and purplest to give her. She saw a skin nearby and grabbed it; it was full of ale. Working quickly, her blood racing faster than time itself, she took a swig of the ale and poured the rest out. Then she dipped it into the pail and watched in awe as the white cream refilled the emptiness.

As the cook turned around she moved herself so that she hid the pail behind her, and all the while she struggled to hide the dripping pouch behind her skirts. At last she managed to secure it under the cord around her waist.

Aidan held out the carrots. "There, soothe your belly, and then go inside and pray to God."

"Oh yes of course ... oh, thank you." Hildred did not care that the carrots were tiny, wrinkled, and purple. They seemed so sweet on her tongue as she ate them, and every crunch sent a jolt of pleasure through her body. All the while she backed away, bowing at the clergyman. "Thank you ... bless you ..."

He nodded and smiled for as long as he could stand to, then eagerly returned to his work. Victory filled Hildred up like a cool drink, and she turned to hurry off.

"Hey ... hey wait!"

She spurred her feet faster, pretending not to hear him.

"Hey! My ale!"

His voice sounded very close, very suddenly. When she paused and felt her own skirts settle around her, sopping wet, she knew she was done for. Desperately, she reached behind her. All was lost if too much of the milk spilled out.

His grubby hands gripped the pouch at the same moment she did; they wrung it in between them and their combined efforts flung it suddenly to the ground.

The last of the rich, white milk soaked into the earth and disappeared.

“You little bitch! Eadric? EADRIC!”

She should have run immediately but she was petrified with horror. As the last drops of milk fade away, she watched as if her own baby brother died before her eyes. Tears filled her vision, making the ground undulate.

Eadric must have been in hearing distance, for soon the thuds of his horses’ hooves grew louder. Much too late she turned to run, but she was crying now, sobs choking her throat, salt-water blinding her eyes.

“Go on, Truman,” said the thegn, not with much conviction.

She heard the sword-man dismount and felt his boots shaking the earth; she fell to her knees and wept openly. “I’m sorry Coenred,” she gasped. “I’m sorry ...”

Truman grabbed her arms and pulled them behind her. He twisted her wrists sharply and she cried out.

“Easy,” said Eadric, his horse churning the dirt with irritation.

“Easy?” cried the monk. “She stole my ale—and some milk!”

Hildred groaned as Truman tried to pull her to her feet. She sagged like a dead weight in his arms.

“Come now,” said Eadric. “In the end she only spilled it, so far as I can see. Is an accident worth all this trouble?”

“You cowardly swineherd!” raged Aidan. “You’re as weak as one of your little piglets if you let this go. Are you a thegn now or aren’t you?”

Eadric’s teeth flashed with a scowl. “This is the reeve’s work.”

“Then take her to Wuffa.”

“That I will.” The lord suddenly had a strange look on his face, firm and distant. She stared at him imploringly, wondering if perhaps she could rouse any semblance of mercy within him, such

as whatever had caused him to wink at her this very morning. But he would not even look at her. He seemed to have accepted his duty, and forgotten the rest. “You’re coming, too.”

“What?” said Aidan.

“I saw nothing. The decision of her innocence must be reached by the magnates. It will be your word against hers.”

“But my food, and the congregation—!”

“Then come to town this evening and speak your piece. I’ll take care of the rest.”

“Good,” said Aidan. “I will. I enjoy seeing God’s justice be done.” He sneered at her. “And as a thief, she’ll hang.”

She shuddered with one last sob, but then her eyes seemed to run dry. The thought of the afterlife still frightened her. But now, not even the fiery depths of hell seemed so terrible as the miserable world in which she already lived.

*

She spent the evening in an old horse’s stall in the town center of Shrewsbury, scratching at the wooden walls, catching the whispers of her captors. She understood few of their words and even fewer of their implications. She did not even comprehend the nature of her punishment nor how it would be enforced, beyond that they would burn her hands, and how the burns healed would determine her fate.

Upon bringing her to the reeve named Wuffa, Eadric had spoken kindly on her behalf, claiming that the details of the incident remained unclear to him. “All I saw was the two of them wrestling,” said Eadric, “and when I rode closer to investigate, that’s when Aidan accused her of theft. I brought her to you because it is my duty to report wrongdoing. But in this case, I must confess, I am not sure which was the one doing wrong.”

Hildred thought this a strange way for Eadric to describe the situation, as if somehow placing suspicion on the monk. But she did not argue with it. She said nothing at all: not even when Wuffa asked her to describe her own version of the story. She knew she was guilty. To admit it would be to condemn her body. To say otherwise would be to condemn her soul. “You see?” Eadric had said, a strange look on his face. “She is as shocked and confused as I am.”

So it seemed that somehow, either Aidan or fire would proclaim her guilt.

Nearly as puzzling as her portending punishment was Lord Eadric's opinion of her. Their long journey to town together had confused rather than enlightened her. At first, when leaving the monk, he had seemed cold and dismissive. He discussed the personalities and customs of his neighboring thegns and clergymen with Truman—a man who seemed to be both his swordsman and mentor. He spoke of Hildred as if she was not being dragged alongside them, listening to every word they said. And yet in his next breath he invited her up onto his saddle, helping her mount the horse with her hands still bound, then settling himself behind her. He sat steadfast against her, his stomach and chest lined against her back, his arms locked around her elbows, so that she could not decide whether his posture was an embrace or an imprisoning grip. Whatever the case her blood rushed with heat whenever he spoke, his lips rustling the hair near her ear, and her breath faltered whenever his hands brushed idly over her arms and legs.

Once when he heard her stomach growl, he offered her food from the sacks in his saddle. He held a piece of bread to her mouth while she bit from it. As the soft grains filled her belly, she realized with shame that her body hungered for more than just food. She could not remember the last time anyone noticed her, much less touched her, the way that Eadric did. It was silly to assume that a thegn like him thought of her at all, and completely ridiculous that he might somehow care for her; and yet the possibility made her heart sprint against her chest.

What would it matter, anyway, if in a day her hands would be burned? If the monk appeared tonight and spoke to the reeve, he would condemn her to hang by the neck. If not, the question of her guilt would be raised to God. In the morning, Wuffa and the local merris would bring her to a fire and stick a poker in the flames; once glowing they would put it in her hands and force her to walk nine paces with the poker in her grasp. After that they would bind her burned hands and throw her back in the stall. If the wounds were not healing in a week, then she was guilty, and would hang.

She knew she was guilty; she knew her wounds would not heal. And even if they did, how could she return to laboring in the

fields with scorched fingers? She and her father would both starve to death.

Nothing mattered. Nothing could be done. Her mind spun and spun in circles, and soon it would find silence in the grave.

Hildred's last hope—that the monk named Aidan may not bother coming to town to present his case—shattered quickly when she heard him outside the stall door. The man who responded to his words was Eadric himself. As the two men strolled closer to her prison, she struggled to piece their conversation together from the middle. She sensed from their tones that Aidan had not yet gone to the reeve. Instead it sounded as if Eadric and Aidan were in the midst of bartering.

“I know it meant a lot to you,” Eadric was saying, “but there is always more ale.”

“I thought you said your supply was low?”

“Indeed, but I can still acquire more. The result is only that it will cost you a few extra cabbages.”

“The other monks will start to notice.”

Hildred wondered if this had something to do with the sacks of food Eadric had obtained from the monk. Not all monks were allowed spirits, but whether Aidan was allowed them or not seemed beyond the point. One way or another, he was getting more than his fair share, and Eadric was clearly his supplier.

“Perhaps you're right.” It seemed they had stopped just outside her door, and Eadric's voice rang clearly through the wood. She strained to see him through the cracks. “I can hardly imagine the life you lead, Aidan. It must be so difficult, going without so many simple pleasures—things I take for granted, like ale and wine and meat whenever I can obtain it.”

“Yes.” She thought she heard the monk force down a watery swallow.

“You must have so much self-control, Aidan! To think, you are a cook, and yet you abstain from filling your belly until you've served everyone else first. It is truly self-less of you. You deserve to indulge in a few extra spirits on occasion. By God, if I were you I would indulge in much more.”

Eadric laughed, and Aidan laughed nervously with him. After a moment, the monk asked, “What sort of things would you indulge in?”

“Ah, my dear Aidan, your mind is so pure you don’t even know what I’m talking about! For your own sake I should shut my mouth right now.”

“Never mind.” The monk sounded testy. “Tell me what you meant!”

Eadric lowered his voice, and yet she could still hear every word. “If I were you I would have taken justice into my own hands today. Did you even see the beauty of the sinful wench who stole from you? I am sure your mind was too close to God to notice how her lips looked as sweet as mead, her flesh as soft as dough, and yet ripe as fruit in all the right places.”

Hildred drew back from the door, her stomach turning unpleasantly.

The monk heaved a sigh. A terrible silence followed the sound of his breath.

“If you do notice such things, and resist anyway, I am all the more awed by you,” Eadric went on. “Surely no one would blame you for a little indulgence now and then.”

When the monk finally spoke again, his voice was weak. “You ... you don’t think so?”

“Of course not! Dear God, how innocent you are.”

“You know I’m not so innocent,” snapped Aidan, as if affronted.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. In any case, to make the maiden pay for her crime with a fate less than death would be a mercy, don’t you think?”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean!” said Aidan. But he spoke too quickly to be telling the truth.

“I’m sure I don’t know either.” She could hear the smirk on Eadric’s voice, and it made her blood turn cold. How horrible it seemed to her that earlier today she had been eager for his attention, and enjoyed the touch of his breath! Now she thought his tongue must drip poison. She felt as if she could hear the monks’ mind turning, even in the heavy silence, and she shivered through her core.

“What do you think, Aidan?” said Eadric after a time. “Should I fetch the reeve so he can hear your accusation? Or do you think you could find some manner of forgiveness within yourself?”

“I ... I don’t know.” The monk sounded breathless. Hildred backed further and further from the door until she was against the far wall of the stall. His shadow filled the cracks. Now, he was the one peering through the wood. “Is she in there now?” asked Aidan.

“And her hands are bound,” said Eadric. “Perhaps ... I should give you some time to think it over?”

“Perhaps.”

“I see. I’ll stall the reeve until you’re ready, then.”

As Hildred listened to Eadric’s departing footsteps, she felt as if she melted into the rotted hay, and she wished that she actually would.

She could hear Aidan shuffling around on the other side of the door, and if she listened too closely she could hear him breathing heavily. The sound filled her with disgust and dread.

“I suppose you heard all that,” he said at last. His voice was terribly faint, not much stronger than a whisper, but it struck her like a slap. “Perhaps a little indulgence would do us both some good. After all, you don’t want to hang, do you?”

She didn’t know what to say. Why had Eadric done this to her? Now she knew that he was even more vile and cruel than people suspected him to be; he was completely evil. When he let her share his saddle and eat his bread he must have been toying with her, enjoying the extent of her humiliation and despair. She felt as if she truly wanted to die now; and yet some cruel survival instinct kept her from muttering a sound, kept her from saying, “Yes, I’d rather hang.”

Aidan’s fingers fumbled with the door lock. His voice fell even lower. “You must promise not to make a sound. If you do, this doesn’t have to be so bad. After all, I’m sure you’ve done things like this before, haven’t you? Why else did you dress all pretty today? You like tempting men, don’t you? And you deserve to be punished. But it’s true, I am merciful; merciful enough to keep you from hanging, if you’ll do what I ask.”

The door creaked open and his shadow fell over the hay. Just as quickly he closed the door behind him, though now it was unlocked, and thicker shadows fell over his shape. Hildred wondered if it was better that way. She could not see his face as he moved closer, though she imagined his fierce green eyes, now blazing with lust.

She knew she should scream. Doing so would save herself from this foul violation, but she would condemn herself to hang on the noose tomorrow. She thought of little Coenred. She wondered if he had survived the day. She wondered if there was any way yet she might save him, if she lived.

She flinched as his fingers found her knee. He drew back again. She realized even he feared the repercussions of his behavior.

“Well?” he hissed. “Do you want to do this or not?”

Something strange happened then. Behind the monk’s looming form, another shadow filled the cracks of the stall doorway. But she had never heard anyone approach.

“Do ... do what?” She was not sure how she found her voice, but there it was, wheezing out of her throat.

“You know full well, you little witch.” She repressed a whimper as his hand found her breast, bolder now, and squeezed. She felt a tremble go through his grip.

She glanced at the doorway again, but Aidan was too far-gone to notice. The shadow was still there, moving slightly. Someone definitely stood outside. Spite filled her as she imagined Eadric, listening in on her torment. Perhaps he had encouraged the monk to do this so that he could enjoy the show. She hated him with all her being.

“I want you to say it,” she managed at last. “I want you to swear to God that you’ll let me go if I .. if I ...”

“Give yourself to me?” His other hand reached out, pulling at the fabric of the dress. “Yes,” he said, more urgently now. “Yes, I swear I’ll let you go after this, if you don’t make a sound ...”

The door behind him creaked open. His fingers froze in place, his body going as tense as a yanked rope, as torch-light spilled onto his figure. He turned slowly, his horror only rising as

he looked upon the intruder. For there behind him stood none other than the reeve himself, Wuffa.

Next to the reeve stood Eadric, a somewhat pained and disgusted look on his face.

“What the devil is going on here?” cried Wuffa.

Very belatedly, Aidan drew his hand from Hildred’s chest. “I ... I ... I ...” He swallowed thickly.

“I don’t know about you, Wuffa,” said Eadric, “but I heard very clearly what was going on.” His voice sounded strained. “The monk said it himself.”

Flinching with rage, Aidan straightened somewhat and found his voice. He left Hildred’s dress gaping open, and she burned with the shame. But the sight of her exposed chest made Aidan look all the more guilty to Wuffa. “She stole from me,” Aidan burst at last. “She’ll hang tomorrow, so I might as well —”

“Not anymore, she won’t,” snapped Wuffa. Hope stirred within Hildred, but the sensation was faint beneath her ongoing humiliation. “Eadric tells me he saw nothing but the two of you wrestling, and suspected you had some trick like this up your filthy sleeves. Get out of my sight before I tattle to your abbot.”

Aidan’s lips blubbered helplessly a moment. “But ... you wouldn’t!”

“I will, unless you hurry along, pig!”

The monk let out a very fitting snort, then stormed away per Wuffa’s advice. When passing Eadric, he paused, but the young thegn did not look at him.

“You—you!” cried Aidan, as if he could not even think of an insult. Then he rushed out.

Wuffa, long wearied of the entire affair, turned to follow the monk’s footsteps. On his way, his shoulder knocked forcefully against Eadric’s, as if on accident, but he did not bother to apologize. Eadric did not acknowledge this. He stood still with his head bowed, saying nothing and staring into the floor until only he and Hildred remained.

At last, Eadric looked at her. “I’m sorry about that,” he said weakly. “I wouldn’t have let it go much further ... but of course you didn’t know that. Good move on your part, making him state

his ... intentions.” He grew quiet again, and she realized he was staring at her breasts.

She flushed, drawing her knees up to cover herself. The slight movement made her realize how violently she was shaking.

“Sorry again,” said Eadric. “Perhaps you should turn around?”

Feeling faint, Hildred lifted herself to her knees and turned as he suggested. The hay rustled as he moved towards her, causing a fresh onslaught of tremors to wrack her body. His touch was so gentle on her wrists that she thought she imagined it at first, and when his grip tightened she did not flinch; then with a sharp tug, he sliced a dirk through her bindings.

She scurried away, using awkward fingers to shut her dress and tie it back together. Now that she was freed, a feeling of urgency overcame her. “My brother,” she gasped. “He’s only a baby. He’s dying.”

“Of starvation, I suppose? And that’s why you stole the milk?”

She glared at him, tears of rage and sorrow flooding her vision. “What would you know of it? You, whose tenants and livestock are the fattest in the land! Did you achieve that with lying and deceit as well?”

“How could you say that?” He actually looked hurt, his blue gaze crinkling. “I helped you, didn’t I? I saved you from the noose!”

“You really did arrange all that on purpose?” She couldn’t help but be impressed.

He shrugged. “I know Aidan well. I knew what he would do.”

Her anger returned to her. “In that case you tempted a monk into sin,” she said, “like the devil himself.”

“Oh really?” He crossed his arms over his chest and cocked his clean-shaven chin. “And was it the devil who made you steal?”

“I ... I ...” She wiped her tears from her cheeks. “I suppose so.”

“No it wasn’t,” snapped Eadric. “It was you who stole, and you did it to save your brother, which sounds to me like a noble

cause. And if you're still feeling proactive, perhaps we should go and check on him."

"We?"

"Unless you'd like to walk home in the dark, while you're still half-starving?" His tone was sharp now, reprimanding her. Feeling duly humbled and grateful for his help, Hildred bowed her head and followed him out.

This time, when they rode together, she sat behind him. She tried at first not to grip him, but sometimes she had little option but to wrap her arms around his stomach so she didn't fall off. He offered no reaction, nor said a word for a long time. The sun fell behind them, and the fields took on gradient hues of green and gold. In this light, they did not seem so withered and rotten as they truly were.

It occurred to her to wonder why Eadric had bothered to help her. After all, he had benefited from his underhanded dealings with the monk; why turn on him now? Was it because he had truly run out of ale and thus would get no more business from Aidan anyway? Was it because he wanted something from her? Or perhaps he had never made a plan to help her at all, and simply played along with the events as they unfolded? She could not figure it out, but she did not think Eadric was the sort to do something without reason.

Eventually her small home peeked out from behind a slope of shrubs, its thatched roof glowing with the warm colors of the sunset. But the sight did not comfort her, for sitting outside was her father, his head clasped in his hands.

Eadric reined his horse to a stop. Hildred slid to the ground and rushed to her father's sobbing form. She held him, and together they wept until the moon appeared in the pale sky, taunting them like a freshly-minted coin beyond their reach.

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By nightfall the tiny, stiff bundle that was once Hildred's baby brother lay buried underground alongside the mother who died bearing him. Hildred and her father knelt at the freshly churned earth a long while, crying until their eyes ran dry and muttering nonsensical prayers.

When Hildred heard someone approaching, for a moment she panicked. She had forgotten Eadric's presence, or assumed he left some time ago. But there he stood, and he had been watching them from afar all the while.

"How do you make your living?" he asked Hildred's father.

The man looked up with no expression at all, his eyes vacant, as if his soul had long since fled his body. "I'm a free man," he said, "but for a long while I made my living reaping Thegn Sigbert's crops. He dismissed me a few months ago, saying he could no longer afford me."

"So this is your land?"

"Yes."

"Then it will be mine now." The confidence in his voice shocked Hildred, but her father did not react at all. "In exchange your daughter will come work for me on my estate, and I'll supply her enough food to feed you both. I will also give you seeds to plant here."

"It's too late to plant," her father said.

"I speak of the future." Irritation grated on Eadric's voice. "In a year I'll expect you to pay me my dues as your lord, and such charities to you will cease. Do you agree to this or not?"

Her father hesitated.

"Yes!" cried Hildred. Such elation filled her that her soul seemed to peer down on her body from afar. She could hardly believe this was happening. Only hours ago she had looked upon Eadric as the most vile man on earth, but now she wondered if he was an angel sent from heaven. Enough food to feed her and her father for a year? Seeds for next year? A chance for her father to get back on his feet? She had never heard of such a proposal from any other lord before, but that didn't matter. The alternative was poverty and destitution.

Even so her father looked upon the land with sadness; he did not want to lose it. But he must have realized, too, that there was no better option left to him. At last, he bowed his head in assent.

"Yes."

“Very good.” Eadric exhaled, and Hildred realized he had been holding his breath. Perhaps he was newer to all this than he seemed. She must have been glowing with excitement, for when his gaze fell upon her, it narrowed. “As for you, er ... what is your name?”

She lowered her gaze. “Hildred.”

“Well, Hildred ...” He tilted his head to a ridiculous angle until she could not help but look at him. Then he gave her a playful smirk. “If you ever steal from *me*, bear in mind I will not be so forgiving as when you steal from someone else.”

Despite everything that had happened, despite the old and fresh graves in the ground next to her feet, Hildred felt a grin winding up her face. “Yes, of course, my lord.”

“Dear God!” said Eadric.

Fear coursed through her veins, and a frown returned to her face. “What? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Please smile again.”

Though now she was fidgeting with nervousness, she forced herself to smile.

“There.” She tensed as he reached up with one hand, but his touch was gentle as he brushed his knuckles across her cheek. “When you smile, you have dimples. Did you even know that?”

“I ... I ...” Hildred wanted to laugh at this ridiculous observation. But sobs welled unexpectedly into her ribcage. *I forgot*, she might have said. Instead, she turned aside, away from his touch, tears flooding her eyes. She found it difficult to speak at all. “I’ll start work on your estate tomorrow,” she managed, just barely.

“Very well.” She could not bear to look at him as he returned to his horse; she wondered if he thought her silly and foolish for crying again so suddenly. But how could she explain that she did not remember the last time she smiled?

As Eadric rode away, her father held her, and they stood together until her sobs faded once more to silence. She drew a deep breath, and exhaled as the wind stirred the dark world. She harbored the brief hope that from now on, she would find reason to smile more often.

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THE EIGHTH LOST
TALE OF MERCIÀ



CAPUTE
the VIKING

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JOMSBORG

1012 A.D.

Canute's palms sweated as he stood across from his sparring partner. This was the most formidable opponent, he suspected, that he had ever faced next to Thorkell the Tall himself.

They were of a similar age and height, fifteen or sixteen years old, tall and wiry, though Tosti was a bit broader in the shoulders and hips. His most incredible feature, Canute deduced, was his incredible agility. Every part of his body—all except his fierce silver eyes and unwavering smirk—seemed to be constantly moving at every moment. His feet strolled across the wet earth without leaving an indentation in their wake. His fingers fidgeted playfully along the handle of his wooden sword. He tilted his head, back and forth, back and forth, as if to watch Canute from every possible angle. The muscles of his bare torso undulated in the diffused sunshine like rippling water. And all the while, his long blond braids flowed along his chest and back, like snakes writhing about his shoulders.

Canute's own fighting posture was the exact opposite. He stood very, very still, his boots sinking into the mud, one hand clenching his poised sword until splinters bit into his skin. Nothing moved along his pale chest but for glittering trails of sweat. His blue eyes focused on Tosti through narrowed lids, blinking only when his hair lashed against them, which made him regret cutting it too short to pull back. But beyond this fleeting thought all his concentration centered on Tosti. He tried not to think about the group of young Jomsvikings watching them. He tried not to think about the humiliation he would face should he lose this skirmish.

With very little warning at all, Tosti struck with his wooden sword. Canute lifted his own to block, sinking his weight deeper into his legs. He absorbed the blow and tried to redirect its momentum back on Tosti. The wooden rods creaked as they clashed, and splinters flew as Canute twisted, hoping to offset Tosti's grip. Tosti reacted quickly, shifting his stance completely. He made another lunge with his weapon, and this one swiped Canute across the side. He winced as the wood scraped his skin, struggling not to move.

"Get him, Tosti!" shouted one of the onlookers, and a resounding cheer echoed him.

Canute gritted his teeth, trying to ignore this insult. How dare they? Though only fifteen years old, he was a leader to these men in almost every conceivable way. His father was Sweyn Forkbeard, King of Denmark and Norway. His grandfather was the great Harald Bluetooth, founder of the Christian church of Roskilde. His ancestor was Gorm the Old, the first king of Denmark. His foster-father was Thorkell the Tall, the greatest and mightiest Jomsviking next to his own brother, Jarl Sigvald. Canute's own brother, Harald, ruled as regent of Denmark while their father harried the coasts of Engla-lond with Thorkell.

But now was not the time to wonder how these young men dared cheer against him. He would have to ponder that later.

Tosti continued to dash about the field, hopping from one spot to the next as if he would win by dizzying his opponent. Canute just glared, eyes flicking along with Tosti's movements, and waited for him to make a real advance. He took slow and steady breaths, intent on gathering his energy while Tosti wasted his.

A bird flew through the sky, slicing the glaring sunshine into pieces. Birds were often a sign from the gods.

Canute looked up.

While Canute was distracted, Tosti struck again—this time on Canute's shoulder. Canute cried out, more from rage than from pain, for the blow was not very hard. Tosti drew back just as Canute tried to swipe back at him. This left him in a vulnerable position.

Tosti smacked Canute's rump with the flat of his wooden sword, as if with a paddle, then hopped quickly away.

Canute was so shocked by the humiliation of the blow that he stood petrified for a moment, red flushing his torso and face as if he'd been sunburned in a matter of seconds. Tosti had just ... *spanked* him! He could have done it for no other reason than to make fun of Canute. To win the spar, one of them had to knock the other over. So Tosti had nothing to gain from such a ridiculous move.

Meanwhile, the small crowd exploded with laughter and jeers.

"Oh, look at the great Sweynsson now!"

"Where's Thorkell the Tall when you need him, Canute?"

Seeing through a haze of red, Canute looked dizzily at the faces around him. Is that what they really believed? Did they truly think that without his great fathers and guardians, he was a nobody?

A shout of rage ripped out of his throat, so strong it silenced most of the laughter. Canute didn't notice, for at last he was advancing on his opponent. He lifted his sword high, pulling his feet from the mud at last to run towards Tosti. The look on his face must have been frightening enough, for Tosti froze with terror. At the last moment, he lifted his sword to block Canute's onslaught, but his stance was not ample; Canute's sword knocked Tosti's aside, then it smacked him hard across the side of the head.

Tosti's eyes rolled and he crumpled to the earth, his energy cut off like a waterfall dammed from above.

Everyone around Canute grew quiet. Soon he heard nothing but his own heart thumping in his chest, increasing in tempo. He had not meant to hit Tosti quite so hard. Why didn't he get up?

He felt the unfamiliar feeling of guilt flowing through him. Before today, he had looked up to Tosti, secretly. He had been excited about getting this chance to spar with him. He had anticipated an exciting and enlightening competition. This ... this was certainly not what he'd had in mind. The possibility that

Tosti might not get up filled Canute with dread. He wanted Tosti's respect, not Tosti's death.

Unable to help himself, he knelt down and shook Tosti's clammy shoulder. "Hey," he said. He felt the intense stares of the other Jomsvikings bearing down on him, but he tried his best to ignore them. "Hey, wake up!"

Slowly, Tosti's eyes came open. He looked dazed. As his lids parted, Canute studied his deep gray irises for signs of consciousness. His eyes were a strange color, like stones sparkling with silver grains in the sunlight. But that mattered not. Canute gave him another hard shake.

"Are you alive or aren't you?" the Viking prince demanded.

Tosti reached up suddenly and thrust Canute's hand away from his shoulder. "I'm fine, no thanks to you, you clumsy oaf."

Canute clenched his jaws and stood up. Everyone was still staring at him, waiting for some sort of response. Well let them have it, he thought as his lip curled. "Let that be a lesson to you all," he snapped. In the silence, he was all too aware of how high-pitched his own voice seemed. His voice did not boom like his father's or Thorkell the Tall's. But it had its own strength, its own tenor. "Insult me again, and I'll pay you in kind."

He threw his wooden sword into the grass, then turned and stormed away.

For a reason he could not explain, he felt even more humiliated now than he had before.

*

At the night meal, a great number of aspiring young warriors sat near Canute, but very few spoke to him. He chewed angrily on his meat as he surveyed the faces around him. The only young men sitting here were the ones who wanted to sap from his power and renown. None of them cared to engage in conversation with him, nor ask him how his day had gone. They only seemed to exchange such trivialities with one *another*.

One of them bragged that on a recent trip to Jom, the nearby town that the fortress of Jomsborg protected, he had lain with an eager woman. Women were not generally allowed into the Jomsborg stronghold, so encounters with the opposite sex

were rare. All the other young warriors hung on his every word. Canute scoffed.

The sound drew some furious glances. The young man, Fromund, who had been the one to lie with a woman in Jom, dared to speak. “What’s wrong, Canute?” he said. “Not lain with a woman yet?”

“Lain? No.” He threw his meat-stripped bone into the center of the table. “Any woman I have, I will *take*. And that should go for the rest of you, as well. If you want sighing maidens as your bedfellows, you have chosen the wrong profession.”

A few of the boys laughed nervously. More of them stared at him with incredulous looks on their faces. Fromund, meanwhile, outright frowned. “I guess that means you haven’t,” he said. “You obviously don’t know what I’m talking about.” Some of the other boys snickered.

“Like hell!” snarled Canute. His voice was harsher than he intended, and everyone flinched as he dropped his fist on the table with a loud thump. His blood roared in his ears. Even he didn’t know why he was so upset. Why was everything today going so wrong? He stared in a panic at the faces around him, feeling as if they were all disgusted. Why should they be? “I, uh ... I kissed a girl once, in Jom, after she winked at me. It was ... nice enough.” In truth, as he recalled, it had been quite awkward.

The stares on him did not relent; they only blinked a few times, to return even fiercer than before.

“You’re all a bunch of dimwitted idiots,” he growled, and stood up. Even though he had a few bones on his plate left to clean up, he walked away. He’d lost his appetite.

On his way out of the hall, he glimpsed Tosti a few tables away. Even more unexpectedly, Tosti looked up and stared back at him. Canute felt a physical jolt go through him as their gazes locked. Then he shivered and hurried out even faster than before.

Outside, he leaned against the walls of the hall, listening to the muffled echoes of the laughter and camaraderie through the wood. His fingers pulled angrily at his own tunic, the red fabric soft and tight-woven, heavily embroidered with golden thread and far more beautiful than the tunics of any other

Jomsvikings. But for some reason, he wished that he could rip it off. His teeth ground against each other as he reflected upon how the other young men had treated him today, and how their behavior grew worse and worse the longer Thorkell the Tall was away in Engla-lond.

His heart ached as he thought of Thorkell, for he missed his foster-father terribly. What would Thorkell have to say about today's events? Would he be pleased by the way Canute had handled Tosti's insult? Or would he have disapproved of Canute's wild "temper?" He reprimanded Canute often for his temper, saying that no leader should be prone to rash decisions.

Perhaps Thorkell would comfort him, at least, with the reminder that kings were not meant to mingle with all the other boys like one of their friends. It was his place to stand apart, to remind them all of their place, and thus his own.

"Hey."

He jolted and turned to face the intruder. Under the bright glare of a yellow moon stood Tosti, his gray eyes unreadable in the dark light. He swayed slightly, his body ever moving, his long braids swishing back and forth across his lithe shoulders.

"Hello," said Canute. He forced a thick swallow down his throat. Why did he feel nervous? He had nothing to apologize for, and yet he fought the urge to say *I'm sorry*, nonetheless. "Good spar today," he managed at last. It was a lie.

"You think so?" A strange laugh came out of Tosti's throat, chiming and carefree. "Don't think I've ever been hit in the head that hard before. Totally blacked out for a few seconds."

Once again, Canute bit back an apology. "You're lucky you experienced it when you did, then. It might happen to you a lot in battle, when your life is on the line."

"Hah." The sound from Tosti's throat was not quite so pleasant this time. A long silence followed it.

Canute felt unexpectedly awkward. Tosti must have come out here and addressed him for a reason. But what? If he'd intended to say something, he must have lost his courage, for his swaying had turned to fidgeting, and he glanced all around himself as if he didn't know what to focus on. Whatever the case, Canute felt as if it was his responsibility to fill the silence.

“You’re ... you’re quite good, you know.” His own words surprised him.

“What’s that?”

“I said: you’re a very good fighter. You move quickly, and you’re difficult to predict.” Canute forced himself to look Tosti in the eyes. At last the testy youth stilled somewhat. His face looked surprisingly elegant right now, the lines of his lips and jaws glowing in the moonlight. “We should practice together more often.”

“Oh? So you can hit me in the head again?”

“Only if you let me get away with it.”

It was a challenge, and for a moment he was not sure how Tosti would take it. But then his cheeks lifted with a smile. “Not a chance.”

“We’ll see, then.”

“Yes we will, Sweynsson.”

Canute repressed an “oomph” as Tosti reached out and jabbed his shoulder; but the gesture was playful. As Tosti turned and scampered away, he sent a whoop of unrestrained joy into the darkness. Canute found a smile on his own face.

*

The next day they roamed the land beyond the fortress together.

The woods were sparse, full of old pines and white stones. But the dappled shade held golden surprises as Canute ran through the undergrowth. He felt every rock through the leather of his shoes, sharp and tingling; his short, thick hair lashed his face until it stung; his breath began to burn in his chest, and yet he felt invigorated. Tosti had challenged him to a race, and of course he could not say no.

Out of the corner of his eyes he could see Tosti, flitting through the trees like a bird’s flapping wings, pulling ahead step by step. But this only pushed Canute to run harder, and a determined sneer went up his face. He drew an estimate in his head of Tosti’s strengths and weaknesses. Tosti was faster now, but he would tire soon, and then Canute would pull ahead.

Tosti did not let it come to that, however. With a howl of victory, he topped the next rise and stopped there, as if deciding this was the finish line.

Canute caught up to him soon, glaring. He struggled to breathe amply through his nose, though his nostrils flared with the strain, while Tosti gasped freely through his grinning mouth.

“Did you wake up with stones in your ankles, Sweynsson?”

Canute ignored him and glanced at the new landscape beneath them. The water level was high in the land below the slope; long flat stones stretched over the earth, smoothed by the shallow streams flowing around them, gleaming as if with a permanent layer of water. It was difficult to discern what was solid and what was not. “This is a poor choice for a playing field.”

“I pick this one, you pick the next one.”

“No.” Tosti looked at Canute with irritation, his curvy lips drooping with an uncharacteristic frown. Canute did not like it when Tosti frowned as much as when he smiled. He lightened his tone. “Let’s do it the other way around. We fight here first.”

“On this hill?”

“Yes.” Canute was pleased with himself. He thought this would be another chance to teach Tosti a lesson.

And as soon that they began fighting, he confirmed his suspicions. Tosti struggled to maintain his unbounded energy while on either side of him, a slope threatened to drop him. He hopped and poked at Canute with his wooden sword, but every large movement made him struggle to regain his balance. Often he had to look down in order to find stable footing, and at these moments Canute struck at him, again and again and again.

At last he plunged the blunt tip of his wooden weapon against Tosti’s midriff, who promptly tipped backwards.

Tosti dropped his sword, hands lifting and flapping desperately in a last attempt to right himself. But it was too late: he was about to fall down the slope.

As he fell, he reached out and grabbed Canute’s outstretched sword, gripping until he no doubt acquired several

splinters. Stubbornly, Canute refused to let go, even as all of Tosti's weight transferred to its tip.

"You—son of a—*bitch!*" cried the Viking prince, as at last he lost his own balance and plunged headlong down the slope next to Tosti.

The slope was not particularly steep, but they rolled in the hopes of slowing their falls to a stop. Worst of all, sharp stones lay interspersed along the soil, which jabbed and pulled at their tunics while littering their flesh with bruises. By the time he came to a stop at the base Canute's blood roared with fiery fury; as soon as he made it to his feet he looked over at Tosti and resisted the urge to kick him while he was down.

Instead, he realized his body ached more than he first gave it credit for. He wondered if he had twisted something. Meanwhile, Tosti sat up but didn't move other than to struggle to regain his breath.

Canute snorted at him. "Whenever you're ready to go again, you let me know."

He strolled over to the nearest pool of water, lapping warmly in the dip of a rock, and splashed it on his face. He hissed as he discovered a raw scrape along his cheekbone.

A bird call split the air, and he looked up, glancing around desperately. In reward for his efforts, the sun half-blinded him.

"What's with you and birds?"

Canute twisted his head to look back at Tosti, glaring. This did not daunt the other fellow in the least.

"You? And birds? One distracted you when we sparred yesterday, as well."

Canute looked away and picked at his nails, as if suddenly this was a task requiring his attention. But Tosti saw right through him.

"Something to do with Thorkell, eh? Always going on about eagles—when he talks at all, that is."

Canute couldn't help but smile at that. Truly enough, Thorkell was not a talkative man, but he did like to tell the story of Thiassi, a giant who took the form of an eagle and stole Iddun and her apples of youth from the gods. Loki managed to

recapture her, and afterward, Odin took Thiassi's eyes and placed them in the sky as stars. It seemed to Canute that his mentor had a strange sort of affection for the legendary rebel. "I'm not looking for an eagle," said Canute. "I'm looking for a raven."

"Ah, so you can wave a hello to Odin?"

Canute was not sure what to think of Tosti's cynical attitude, so he tried to ignore it. "No," he said, and then grew silent again.

"What then?" Tosti leaned closer to him, hands spreading along the grass. The longer the silence, the more curious he seemed to become.

The Viking prince stopped fidgeting with his hands and paused to consider the truth. It sounded foolish and weak when he reflected on it directly. He did not want to embarrass himself further to someone who had managed to paddle him on the rump only yesterday. Nonetheless, he felt strangely touched that Tosti bothered asking such a question.

He must have remained quiet for so long, however, that Tosti began to give up on him. "How about you tell me why you care so much about damn birds after I beat your ass to dust bits," Tosti suggested.

Spry once more, Tosti hopped to his feet and brushed off his tunic; then, to Canute's surprise, he proceeded to take it off. He had a look on his face of fierce optimism, gray eyes glittering, white teeth flashing, his cat-like nose pinched by an unrelenting smile. Canute could not help but pause and watch for a moment as the young man peeled off his clothes; underneath his skin was even more golden than Canute remembered, its smoothness interrupted by nothing but the flow of his rippling muscles. His body seemed dark against his pale braids swaying in silky ropes.

In a moment Tosti was nearly finished and ready to go again, stripped to nothing but his loincloth. Canute ripped his eyes away and followed his example, flinging off his fine linens with all the gentility he might show a poison-soaked rag. The sun bathed his body, soaking into his veins and filling him with fire. It felt good to bare himself to the sun, and at the same time he felt insecure. Would Tosti find him scrawny and pale? Why did he care?

Tosti smirked at him. “My turn now.”

Canute looked back at his wooden sword, discarded on the hillside. “Weapons?”

“No weapons.” Tosti wriggled his fingers in the air. “I’ll take you down with my bare hands.”

“Very well. I weary of those toys, anyway.” Canute spat to the side. He rubbed his hands together, then opened them wide. “Where shall we do this?”

“Over there.” He pointed to a smooth stone in the middle of the rocky shallows.

Canute still thought it seemed like a terrible place for a skirmish—not only would it be slippery, but to fall one would risk a severe blow to the head. Nonetheless, they had an agreement.

He made his way out to the stone Tosti indicated, wondering if he would regret keeping his leather shoes on. They sopped wet as he walked, and stole from him the sensations of the stones and soil under his feet. However, they also numbed him to the occasional sharp edge. At last he found his position and made his stance.

Tosti had chosen to take off his own shoes. He strolled along the rocks, his gaze locked on Canute, as if he did not need to look down to determine his footing. Canute scowled at him, and shrugged his shoulders in a gesture of impatience.

Tosti pounced without warning, gliding over the rocks as if they were no more than a slide for his feet. In his surprise Canute shifted drastically, lifting his arms to block, and felt his heels slipping downwards. Trying to right himself only made him slip further, and by then Tosti was upon him, hands gripping Canute’s wrists and twisting them around.

Canute cried out, struggling to regain power over his arms while Tosti shifted to kick at him. He blocked himself with his own leg, though as a result Tosti’s shin struck his knee at a sharp angle, and he yelled again.

The burst of pain fed him strength. He pushed back against Tosti, bending the youth’s arms until his grip folded and Canute burst through, jabbing his elbow into Tosti’s sternum. Tosti gasped for breath and fell back.

Seeing his chance, Canute pushed forward, aiming another blow that would drop his opponent into the stones. But at the last moment Tosti wriggled about, regaining his balance somehow, and slipped to the side like a snake. Canute's fist swished through empty air and disrupted his own balance; his feet came loose again and he stumbled about, hearing his leather shoes snag against a sharp stone.

In such a manner the two fought for an indefinite amount of time; Canute lost track of the number of times he thought he would throw Tosti for good, only to find himself scrambling and waving his arms like a fool as Tosti slithered about him. They exchanged one blow after another, until Canute's stomach ached from so many punches, and a number of spots along Tosti's gleaming torso swelled from the impact of Canute's knuckles. Canute felt dizzy from all the twisting and turning, and the longer he fought the less he tried to stable himself, kicking and swinging desperately at Tosti's slippery form.

At one point he threw all of his strength into a punch, but again Tosti slipped out of reach, and as Canute lunged forward with his own momentum he knew he would not be able to recover balance. He would fall on a particularly sharp pile of rocks, maiming himself and ending this match in a humiliating defeat. But all of a sudden Tosti grabbed him from behind, his smooth arms slipping around Canute's back, one arm locking his shoulders in place while the other pressed tight against his throat. Canute wriggled a moment, testing his confines and preparing his limbs for their escape.

Then he heard Tosti's breath against his ears, and felt Tosti's soft lips press against his cheek. Canute froze. What had seemed like a chokehold suddenly seemed like an embrace. Tosti's arms held him tight while he brushed his smirking mouth against Canute's skin. There was nothing to call the gesture other than a kiss.

And just as suddenly, Tosti drew away again.

He released Canute, moved around him, and ducked. With a single deft movement, he kicked Canute's feet out from under him, and the Viking prince went hurtling to the ground.

Water splashed all around him; the breath puffed out of his chest as his back struck the earth. But it could have been much worse: Tosti could have pushed him against the rocks. Even once he had physically recovered he remained still a while, staring vacantly up at the sky, confused and disoriented.

Tosti leaned over him, grinning.

“What ... what in Thor’s name was that?” Canute gasped.

“I don’t know.” Tosti shrugged. “But it worked.”

He reached down, gripped Canute’s hand, and pulled him to his feet.

*

The walk back to Jom seemed much longer when their muscles ached, their bodies were slick with sweat, and they both suffered scrapes on their feet. Canute noticed some blood in Tosti’s footsteps, but Tosti did not even seem to care, so he said nothing.

In fact, they were both in unexpectedly jovial moods.

Canute felt elated by the day’s events, which were a bright and colorful blur in his mind—all but for the sharp moment still hanging in his memory when Tosti had kissed him. Had he only done it to distract Canute? He had not done anything like it since, even though they had continued to explore the land together and develop their fighting skills. They had even paused to give each other tips and suggestions. Canute flushed with anger the first time Tosti critiqued his methods for swinging a punch, but he swallowed his pride and found that when he allowed Tosti to help him, he did in fact improve. Never in his advice to Canute did Tosti suggest a tactic so strange as the one he had used to win their match.

A long silence hung over them as they walked, and the sun’s waning light surprised Canute, for he felt as if the day had passed in a matter of hours. For the most part he felt more peaceful and fulfilled than he had for a long time, and it calmed him the way he and Tosti never struggled to stay in stride with each other, but walked together with a synchronized rhythm.

At long last, however, Tosti broke the silence. “So tell me about the birds.”

Canute sighed. He could not go back on his word now. “When I was born, a runewoman saw a raven perch on the roof of our lodge. The raven stayed there until the moment I came out of my mother’s womb and started crying. Then ... it flew away.” He grew quiet again.

“So?” Tosti pressed.

“So ... my mother took it as a sign that I was chosen by Odin to become very powerful, even more powerful than my brother Harald. Father, however ...” He stopped walking, grimacing as if his knee was in pain and this was reason enough to catch some respite. He went over to a tree and leaned against it, the bark massaging the bare skin of his back. Tosti propped his elbow against the trunk and stared at him expectantly.

“Sweyn believes in Jesus now,” the other offered.

Canute made a noncommittal grunt. His father claimed to be a Christian, but Canute wondered if he only acted as one for political convenience. “He said that if the raven was truly Odin, then Odin chose to abandon me.”

“And what do you think?”

Canute turned away, feeling his stomach churn within him. Tosti’s granite-like gaze suddenly seemed hard to endure. “I think it means nothing.”

“Then why do you keep looking at the sky?”

“Because ...” His chest ached as he took a deep breath. “That is the strangest part. I’ve never seen a raven in my life.”

“What?”

The surprise in Tosti’s voice stung. Canute scowled at him. “From a very far distance, perhaps. But never close by. It is as if they are always flying away from me.”

Tosti was quiet a moment, then he chuckled softly. Once he started chuckling, something seemed to release within him, and he burst out laughing.

Canute watched him with a curious expression. “Do you find the gods amusing?”

“Sure,” he said gleefully. “Don’t you?”

The Viking prince considered a moment. “I think the gods are very real. And I think they are no laughing matter.”

At last, Tosti stopped laughing. “So you’re not Christian?”

“I’m not sure yet. The Christian God seems real to me, as well.” He looked up at the sky, its hues shifting to red with the setting sun. “It seems to me that all the gods are fighting now, and Jehova will be the victor.”

Tosti’s face held a strange expression, torn between grimness and the lingering urge to laugh. Canute turned to face him, and stared at him long and hard.

“The strongest god will be my God. It is as simple as that.”

The look on Tosti’s face changed again, this time into something completely new. His eyes darted from one section of Canute’s face to the next, restless, searching. He leaned closer.

Canute pushed himself from the tree and stepped forward. Tosti glided back slightly, swaying in his usual graceful way, dancing with a moment of hesitation. Then he grew very still. Canute moved closer, holding Tosti’s eyes with his own. Tosti breathed quickly, his chest rising and falling rapidly with the strain, his thick lips parting. Canute reached out and put his hand against Tosti’s chest, pressing until he felt the racing beat of Tosti’s heart against his palm. Tosti trembled, and Canute feared that he might flee. He slid his hand up, around Tosti’s neck, and gripped it tightly.

Then he pulled Tosti close and kissed him.

At first Tosti went completely still, his body so stiff it seemed that all the water within him had frozen to ice. But Canute only pulled him closer, gripping him until he melted. Tosti’s arms folded around Canute, his braids tickling Canute’s chest, his thigh sliding along Canute’s.

Their hips locked, only for a moment; then Tosti jumped away again.

Canute felt dizzy, his breath gone as if Tosti had taken it with him. His eyes swam, his hands searched, but Tosti only drew further away.

“Hey ... hey!”

Tosti turned and ran.

“*Tosti!*”

The young Jomsviking only ran faster.

Canute fell back, his raw shoulder colliding with the tree and knocking the breath back into his body. A tremor wracked him, and he yelled with rage.

He remained there a long while, and did not move again until the sun had nearly fallen.

*

The next day, everyone treated him strangely.

At first, he thought he might be imagining it. He *felt* different, first of all. When he woke up, he was light on his feet, his frown lifted, his eyes bright. The memories of his kiss with Tosti were fresh in his mind, and the taint of Tosti's sudden departure seemed to have vanished overnight. Tosti had simply been overwhelmed and confused. If he had treated the incident casually, it would have given the event less meaning. No: his running away had been a good thing, and given them both a chance to absorb what happened.

He knew that Tosti enjoyed it as much as he had. That had been clear enough when their hips brushed.

But during the day meal, when he went to find Tosti in the main hall, a strange thing occurred.

Tosti ignored him.

While Canute approached, Tosti sat with a group of boys, laughing and snickering to one another. Canute wondered what the joke might be, and hoped for once he might find out and laugh along with them. But as soon as he stopped to take his seat, everyone grew quiet, and no one moved over for him.

Canute looked to Tosti for an answer, but Tosti would not return his glance. In fact, no one would look at him at all.

"Tosti?" he said. His voice sounded strained and cracked in his own ears, and he forced a swallow down his throat.

Tosti's eyes darted to Canute's, only for a second, then his face flushed and he looked away again. "No room here, Canute."

"I see." Canute gritted his teeth, but chose to quell his anger. Tosti felt uncomfortable, and that was understandable enough. "This isn't my place among you, anyway," he recovered.

But as he turned and walked away, he heard the boys behind him laughing again. He paused and considered turning to face them, but decided against it, gripping his plate fiercely and continuing to his habitual spot on the bench.

His normal coterie sat in its usual place. Their eyes flicked to him, then back to their plates. Soon no one was looking at him at all.

Canute lingered on his feet, struggling not to fume. Once again, he wondered if he imagined the strangeness of their behavior. Normally at a meal, he got his food, sat down, and ate without paying much attention to anyone. He would simply listen in on their conversations, interrupt when he had something to say, and answer any raised questions. Perhaps *he* was the one acting strangely.

Instinctively this possibility disturbed him, but he chose instead to embrace it. “Good morning everyone,” he said.

They all shifted uncertainly in their seats. A few muttered “Good morning” back to him. Then an even heavier silence resumed. Refusing to be perturbed, Canute sat down and fell onto his meal with a smile.

A long while passed and he got lost in his thoughts, nearly forgetting the looming presence of his comrades. But eventually one dared address him.

“Canute. Psst. Hey.”

Snapped out of his reverie, Canute responded with a glare, then tried to soften his own expression. “Yes, what is it?”

“I asked if you had a good time yesterday with Tosti.”

“Yes.” Canute studied the faces around him, which were suddenly much too attentive. He pulled off some fish meat with his teeth and chewed roughly. “Yes I did.”

The men exchanged glances with one another. Some seemed to be repressing smirks.

“Is there something else you’d like to ask?” Canute spat out a splintered bone.

“Yeah.” The young man took a moment to gather up his courage, while the other aspiring Jomsvikings encouraged him with their eager stares. “Who’s the girl? You or him?”

Canute froze. Laughter roared around him, but not so loudly as the blood in his ears. He hadn't expected this, and he did not like it at all. The first problem was how everyone knew in the first place. They would only know if Tosti had told them himself. And why would he do that? Canute doubted it would be due to pride, based on the behavior he'd already exhibited. The second problem was that everyone *did* know, and if word got around, Sweyn or Thorkell—or both—would be very displeased. Sweyn would consider it sinful. The Christian God did not allow men to be with other men. Thorkell simply ... wouldn't like it. But there was yet a third problem, and that was the response of these men to the rumor. Some Jomsvikings took pride in taking other men. Others found it womanly. But these men clearly found the rumors laughably embarrassing, and even worse, they'd grown cocky enough to flaunt such feelings in front of him.

The laughter grew louder, and Canute struggled to contain his temper. Thorkell always told him to keep a cool head. The longer Thorkell was away, the more difficult that practice became. But he endured, and in fact he lowered his voice, so that when he spoke everyone grew quiet in order to hear him.

"I'll buy you a dress," he whispered, "and show you."

The insubordinate Dane gaped and flushed. Some of the men guffawed; a few chuckled uncertainly. But the others only looked upset.

Canute stuffed the last of his food down his mouth, though he had lost his appetite, and left as quickly as he could. He tried to shake the strange morning from his memory, but throughout the day, similar circumstances pestered him. After the meal he supervised a group of Jomsvikings in their practice of battle advances, and though they continued to obey his instruction, they seemed to take longer than usual, and a gleam of rebellion pervaded their eyes.

As soon as he could, Canute sought out Tosti again. He needed to confront Tosti about how the men treated him today, but also ... he simply wanted to see him again, and preferably alone.

He could not find Tosti anywhere. He looked until he had no choice but to start asking around, ignoring the knowing smirks on his inferiors' faces as well as he could.

"He went hunting with a few others," someone told him at last.

Canute felt both disappointed and angry, as if Tosti avoided him on purpose. And perhaps he did.

By the time the day was over and everyone regrouped in the main hall for the night meal, Canute's mood had spoiled completely. A simmering temper, even more foul than usual, had replaced the good spirits he woke up with. His head ached from clenching his teeth and chewing violently on his food; he became glad that no one would talk to him, for he felt that one more sly word would send him toppling over the edge.

Then Tosti returned.

He did not sit down to eat, even though he entered the hall with a group of his friends, who did. Instead he caught Canute's eye from afar and cocked his head towards the exit. Canute, who was already half-standing, threw down his scraps and followed him out. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he knew that almost the entire hall was watching him. None of that seemed to matter so much as seeing Tosti again.

Outside he slid to a stop, looking every which way for the hasty fellow. He saw a trail in the grass and hurled himself around the corner, hands curling into angry fists before he caught sight of his prey.

"Canute, listen—"

Canute grabbed his shoulders and thrust him against the wooden planks of the hall. He wouldn't let Tosti run away this time. Tosti grunted but lifted his hands in surrender.

"*What* did you tell them?" cried Canute, sounding more hurt than angry, which was not what he'd intended.

"I told them ... what happened."

A tremble weakened Canute's grasp. His gaze drew to Tosti's plump lips, even though he should have been looking Tosti in the eye, measuring his sincerity. "Why?"

"Don't know. I wanted to hear what they ... thought of it, I guess."

Canute's hands slipped from Tosti's shoulders, his grip becoming a light caress. He stepped closer, as if to entrap Tosti with his own body. His voice lowered further. "All that matters is that they respect you. Beyond that, you shouldn't care what they think."

"Don't *you*?"

Canute wanted to say "Of course not." He wanted to scoff and kiss Tosti again, to embrace him, to press against him completely. Instead, he felt the presence of the Jomsvikings nearby like the heat of a fire. He turned his head slightly, and stiffened at the sight of dozens of them, lingering near the exit of the main hall and shamelessly watching the two men together.

Involuntarily, Canute drew away. And as soon as he did, he flushed with shame. He had just demonstrated the truth to Tosti, without ever saying a word.

When he looked to Tosti again, however, he found the young Jomsviking's face soft with empathy. "Canute." He grabbed Canute's shoulder with a firm hand. "I want to show you something."

"Show me what?"

"Something ... something that made me feel better. See ... I was a Christian, yesterday. I didn't want to do something forbidden. But I found something today ... a sign from *our* gods."

Canute frowned. He did not care for surprises. "What *is* it?"

"You'll see."

The Viking prince looked uncertainly at their growing crowd.

"Let them see, too," said Tosti. "You will be glad they did."

This made him even more uneasy; but Tosti reached out and clutched his hand, squeezing it gently where few could see, and this gave Canute the strength to respond. "Very well."

Tosti grinned, his wiliness returning as his hand slipped away again, and then he dashed into the dimming light. "This way!" Struggling not to look too eager, Canute made after him.

And behind him, several dozen Jomsvikings followed after.

Tosti led him away past several shacks, through various sparring and weaponry arenas, until they approached one of the primary living lodges, in which most the men slept. Canute hesitated. “What in Valhalla would be *here*?”

Tosti only paused at the entrance to wave inward. “Come and see!”

“Don’t be stupid,” he growled, though Tosti had already disappeared within the lodge. He realized he spoke to no one but himself. Once again he sensed the large crowd behind him like a cliff’s edge; one step back and he would fall into the abyss. “Too late now,” he muttered.

He followed Tosti into the darkness of the lodge.

The building smelled of sweat and dirty blankets, as it usually did. His lips curled and he kept moving. He thought that if Tosti was given the choice, surely he would want to stay in more comfortable quarters, like Canute’s. Fortunately, the lodge was mostly vacant of bodies right now—at least until Canute and his followers arrived.

Tosti knelt down by what must have been his own bed and rummaged through a pile of belongings next to it. Canute struggled to repress his trembling. What on earth did Tosti have to show him? For some reason, Canute dreaded finding out.

“Here!” cried Tosti, and held up a sack. Only a small object seemed to occupy the sack—but that small object was moving. Tosti grinned from ear to ear as the bag swayed in his hand. “Close the doors!” he called.

Someone obeyed, trapping them all as witnesses to whatever was about to occur.

When Tosti opened the sack and the black bird flew out, Canute did not feel surprised. He did not feel much of anything.

There, captured and released for Canute’s own sake, was a raven.

His breath fled his body and left him standing, transfixed, watching the dark wings flap. The raven’s reach extended further than he had imagined; it seemed a tremendous creature, almost monstrous, within the confines of the lodge. It cast a sharp

silhouette against the waning sunlight, trickling weakly through the cracks of the walls, slicing at the brightness like so many knives.

But the sound emitted suddenly from its gullet was the most awesome, and terrifying, feature of all.

No one else in the room dared make a noise, anyway; but even if they had all raised their voices at once, the caws of the raven would have cut through the sound. It shrieked with the agony of a magnificent creature contained for a day within a woolen sack; it screamed with the rage of its injured pride; but most of all, it cried out with the despair of a dying soul.

Its caws grew louder and louder, shriller and more piercing, until it released the power of its wings in a sudden burst. It sped through the air like a dark streak of lightning, propelled towards the largest beam of light from the wall.

But the raven struck the wood, its cry stopped sickeningly short. The beast bounced back, drooped, and plummeted to the floor.

Thud.

No one moved for a long while. No one said a word. Canute delayed inhaling for breath until his head swam with dizziness. Meanwhile his eyes remained locked on the black, unmoving shape on the floor, like a blot in his vision blinding him to everything else. Sensation returned to his limbs first, trembling; then stretched to his fingertips, curling; then came rushing out of his throat.

“*No!*” he cried.

He rushed to the crippled creature before he even became aware of what he was doing; he pushed gawking men aside in order to make his way to the beast. He swooped down to its side and reached out, hands shaking, to grab it. He gasped as it jerked against his palm in response.

He stood with the bird clutched to his chest. He turned to everyone and grinned desperately at them. “No, look—it’s still alive. See!”

He held out the raven’s body, which after a long while, twitched again. This time the spasm was so violent the creature

slipped from his hands and back to the floor, where it continued to thrash about in the throes of death.

As Canute gaped down at it, the world seemed to spin. Tears filled his eyes and blurred his twirling surroundings yet more. He did not merely look upon a dying bird. He looked upon a dying god. He looked upon a dying god!

Then he heard everyone laughing.

At first the sound filled him with confusion. Why would anyone dare laugh at an omen like this? He glanced desperately from each of their faces to the next. Then he realized they were not laughing at the raven. They were laughing at *him*.

“Oh no, look out, it’s Odin!” someone called.

“Guess he couldn’t stand being in the same room as Canute!”

“No, no, look!” Everyone turned to look at this speaker, who sounded quite serious. But then his voice changed to mimic Canute’s. “*I think it’s still alive!*”

A new howl of laughter, even louder than before, rang over the congregation.

Canute breathed so hard now that he might have opened his mouth, if not for his clenching jaws. So they knew about the raven, too. Tosti had not only told them about their physical connection; he had shared one of Canute’s most intimate secrets. There were reasons why his father had not made the runewoman’s sighting common knowledge. It was incriminating. And for the truth to come out like this, with a raven twitching to death at Canute’s feet after a desperate attempt to escape it was more humiliating than anything he could have imagined.

Canute unsheathed the knife at his belt. He hesitated only long enough to regain everyone’s attention.

Then he knelt down and plunged his dirk into the raven’s chest.

The bird gave one last spasm, then went very still.

Canute pulled out the blade. The wound he left behind was not so much a fountain of blood as a damp indentation. But the edges of his dirk gleamed red with the liquid, and he found this to his satisfaction as he stood again, holding the blade aloft.

He looked past its tip at Tosti, who stood petrified with horror.

Canute did not feel any sort of expression on his face, but the look in his eyes must have been terrifying enough, for Tosti trembled. “Canute ...” he gasped. “I didn’t mean for any of that to happen. I thought ... I thought it would be a good thing. I wanted ...”

Canute did not want to hear him speak another word. The sound of Tosti’s voice brought too much pain. And his own inclination to respond revealed that he could not trust his feelings. He pulled back the knife, then flung it.

Tosti’s fast reflexes saved him. Canute rarely missed a target. He had better than normal vision, and his hands grew steady when aiming, no matter his circumstance. His blade would have pierced Tosti through the eye. But Tosti darted out of the way; he ducked, swerved, and then ran away. He was almost gone by the time the knife plunged into the far wall and stuck there.

Despite his exceptional eyesight, Canute’s vision blurred again, and he blinked rapidly to push back a film of thickening moisture. His calm composure wavered. He felt the weight of all the Jomsvikings’ eyes upon him, and thought that if he stood there too long, he would buckle underneath it.

“You fools,” he said. “There is no Odin. Not anymore. It should be as clear to you as it now is to me. The one God is so powerful, there is no room for another.”

Nor was there allowance for the relationship he had nearly had with Tosti, he recalled. He took a deep, shuddering breath.

“And so ... He is my God now. If any of you feel differently, I welcome you to worship this miserable corpse.”

He kicked the dead raven towards them, and everyone scattered from it.

Canute already had the men’s respect again, he realized; their expressions changed, their interpretations of the night’s events morphed into something new. Canute turned a defeat into victory. Thorkell would be proud. Such transitions came easily to

Canute, and he sensed they would be even easier now, with the one true God on his side.

But he could not bring himself to smile as he turned and walked away, leaving them all in silence.

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THE NINTH LOST
TALE OF MERCIA



RUIPIA THE
WIFE

*

JOM
1001-1006 A.D.

She awoke in his heavy arms, and at first she panicked. The memories of the night before came back to her in shattered pieces. He chased her through the woods. She jumped on him from a tree and they fell in a breathless tangle. The underbrush scraped her back. His wiry beard tickled her stomach. They laughed, they groaned ... they grew silent.

Now his breath roared and faded behind her, up and down the back of her neck, steady as an ocean current. She looked down at his large hands, still clasped around her stomach. He was the most magnificent man she had ever met. Thorkell the Tall ... they did not call him so without reason. Her small fingers traced the thick, golden hair of his arms. He had returned to Jom with the rest of his army, victorious over Olaf Tryggvason. He had proved himself a mightier Jomsviking than his own brother, Jarl Sigvaldi, chief of Jomsborg. He could have had any woman he wanted, willing or otherwise. But she had not even given him a chance to choose. She wanted him for herself, so she lured him into the woods and she took him. Now what?

Now she was done with him.

She took hold of his hand and slid it like sand from her body. He sighed and shifted, but otherwise showed no signs of waking. The rumble of his breath almost made her want to fall back against him and drift into his dreams, but she resisted. She slipped gracefully from his relaxed grip and into the free air. She draped her dress over her skin, a light gray garment that looked blue in vivid sunshine and left very few lines of her body to the imagination. She left her hair loose and ruffled, a swirling and tangled mass of pale yellow strands, as wild and free as her own spirit. Then she tip-toed away.

Only once did she glance back at Thorkell, his partially-clothed body draped across the forest bed. His skin looked coarse where the shadows fell upon it, but seemed to gleam as smoothly as gold in the sunshine. The muscles of his torso were a sight to behold, bulging and tightening with the slightest motion, yet softening into a gentle ripple of his strength when he relaxed. She had observed this phenomenon many times the night before.

Leaving him now would be an unfortunate loss. But that loss was little compared to her freedom.

With a sad smile, she turned and hurried away.

*

Close to the shore, she sat facing north and cast the runestones into the soft earth. She watched the shapes roll and settle, their stony surfaces gathering a film of soft yellow dust. Then she studied the lines and drew her own conclusion from them.

She did not believe the stones had any magical power. She imagined that the gods perhaps nudged them one direction or another, with their knowing winds and earthly pull, but she cared little for the source of their design. No matter why they fell a certain way, the runes always spoke to her. Runa would always find a reflection of herself in the words and ideas they conjured. Often, her own interpretation of the runestones' casting would reveal more about her inner hopes and fears than any other form of insight.

What she saw troubled her, so she closed her eyes and listened to the distant whisper of the ocean. She breathed deeply of its salty breeze. Her mind swam to the rhythm of the far-off crashing waves. She saw two different fortunes in her mind, but she did not understand how they could both be true, when in fact they strongly opposed each other. Two futures lay ahead of her, forged by her own decisions and willpower.

In one future she lived a settled life, in a single home, with a man who loved her and a community that supported her. She left the wildness of the fields and forests for the stability of a town and market. In her second future she traveled far, far away, further than she had ever imagined traveling, over the roiling ocean to some distant shore. She began a new life, doing whatever she

willed, controlled by no group of people, inhibited by no man. She took what she wanted and left the rest to burn. She was a Viking.

She shuddered and opened her eyes again, steadying them on the knife-like edge of the horizon. Both futures excited and frightened her. She wanted both. She wanted neither.

And so she would not worry about them, she decided. She collected the runestones and returned them to her pouch. She stood and brushed the twigs from her dress. As she glanced at the ocean she thought of Thorkell the Tall, sailing the vast seas with his Viking army, gathering gold and reducing his enemies to puddles of fear. Bumps lifted along her arms, making her sensitive to every slight brush of the wind. She trembled and shoved him from her mind once more.

She slipped back into the woods, to the cave in which she lived alone, to the safe abode in which no one supported her, nor constricted her.

*

Runa waited for the winter to break. She waited and waited. She ate the last of her stores. She ravaged the last pieces of food from the cold earth. But she could not do enough to support herself. Her body rejected her. She rejected it. She ate strange flowers and herbs, even though she knew they would make her sick.

She and the baby would not last another fortnight unless she sought help.

By the time she walked to the fortress of Jomsborg, her dress hung in ripped tatters. Bruises and scrapes covered her skin. Her elbows were sharp enough to rival a pair of spear-tips. She was thinner than she had ever been in her life—except for her belly, protruding from her body like some sprite-infested mass. Between her legs, blood trickled out and caked on her thighs. She didn't even know when the bleeding had begun.

The guards of the land-gate stared at her with a mixture of disgust and fascination.

“I'm here ... for Thorkell the Tall,” she said.

“Er ... no women in Jomsborg,” said one.

“Then I'll sit right here and wait for him to come out,” she said.

Once she sat she fell asleep, and her mind became lost in the evening's cold embrace.

She awoke in a peasant's lodge and smelled food. Her stomach flipped within her. The sensation felt strange ... like her body had changed shape. She touched the swollen lump of her belly and groaned. The ceiling flickered above her with the orange light of the fire. Shadows flitted over her vision and made her head ache.

"Drink this." A woman's hand touched her clammy forehead. She poured cool water down Runa's throat. Runa struggled not to gag.

"It's killing me," she rasped, her fingernails digging into her own stomach.

"No," said the woman. "I think you're killing it."

This seemed inexplicably true.

Runa's dizzied gaze fell on a large man standing in the corner. She recognized the towering frame and soft gray eyes of Thorkell the Tall. She tried to smile at him.

Her pain overcame her and swept her away. Her body writhed and jerked in the clutches of agony, battling itself, struggling to expel the fetus like a poison from her body. She became lost in the struggle and thought of nothing else. She roared a battle cry. Her muscles ached and stiffened, as if they became rods of ice cold steel twisting within her. Her vessels throbbed. Her loins heaved. The blood flowed.

By morning she expunged the baby's small, dead body from her womb.

She heard Thorkell's heavy breath next to her. It heaved less steadily than she recalled. His hands enveloped hers, coarse but comforting. She looked to him, her lids heavy, but her gaze bright. She saw tears on his cheeks. She wanted to reach out and touch one, but she felt too weak.

He met her stare and jerked with a sob. It was strange to see the giant cry. "It ... was a girl."

"It was nothing," said Runa. "A lifeless piece of flesh."

He did not have a naturally expressive face, but his eyes crinkled and his lips twisted with despair, shifting his yellow

beard. Her heart lurched, giving her the strength to squeeze his hand. Water stung her own eyes, and it was an unfamiliar feeling.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. She thought of the plants she had eaten, knowing they would weaken her body. “I didn’t want it.”

He squeezed back against her fingers, a gesture that sent pain up her arm, but she ignored it. “Why not? Why did you go away?”

She didn’t respond at first, only stared at him, not judging, only observing. Had he really missed her all this time? She thought he would have forgotten her, written off their night together as a meaningless jaunt through the trees, and yet she could she see in his eyes that he had searched for her, longed for her. And she had longed for him as well, though she had tried to ignore the feelings as trivial lust, when in truth they ran deeper. The warrior had raided helpless villages, slaughtered innocent people, and taken what did not belong to him. But somehow, he did not frighten her. He was a Jomsviking. It was his job. As for the rest ... she trusted him completely.

“I don’t know why,” she said at last. “But maybe I’ll stay this time.”

*

At first she did not stay by choice. She remained sick. Two well-off peasants of Jom took care of her on Thorkell’s command. With rest, and food, and Thorkell’s kind attentions, she felt well again by the time winter lifted and the morning dew ceased to frost.

By then she was restless, and ready to leave. She longed to return to her forest home, no longer burdened by the energy-sucking weight in her body.

As she walked from the hut one morning, ready to leave and never come back, her knees buckled underneath her. She fell into the wet grass and wept.

Thorkell came to see her that evening. The smell of fish and butter filled the peasants’ lodge as they prepared the night meal. Thorkell and Runa huddled in the corner, far away from the quiet couple who had been caring for her.

“I want to leave,” said Runa. She glanced at her hosts again, and they glared back. They were more than ready for her to leave, as well.

Thorkell nodded. “I know. I have found a place for you.”

She reached out and ran her fingers over the gold and silver rings encircling his wrists and arms, reminding herself of how rich he was. “What sort of place?”

“A home. Where I can visit you.”

Her hand fell away from him. “And if I didn’t want you to?”

His face went so still she could hardly read it at all, only speculate. She had come to see that he could hide his emotions completely, if he wanted. But she knew they were in there somewhere. His ability to do this infuriated her, and she suspected he knew it.

She growled. “Thorkell. I don’t understand what you’re giving me.”

“I think you do.”

She pitied their eavesdroppers on the other side of the room, who no doubt heard the reverberating grumble of his voice, but probably could not understand the conversation. Neither, however, could she. Her eyes searched his desperately for clarification, but she could not find it. “Thorkell!” she cried. “I would not be your bed-slave!”

Without a doubt, their listeners understood *her* words. Runa hoped she would embarrass them enough to go away. But they were too stubborn to leave their own home.

Thorkell, however, achieved her desire by simply twisting his head and staring at them. The inhabitants seemed to understand immediately; they wiped their hands of fish and walked outside.

“Not a slave,” he said in their absence. “A wife, in the eyes of Frigga.”

She shrank back against the wall. The smell of fish guts seemed to grow too strong very suddenly and nauseate her. This was far too much, far too quickly.

“But ... but ... I have nothing to offer you. Not even ...” She did not want to admit it. Whether he guessed it or not, she had

no idea. But she did not want to give him confirmation of the truth: that she had no family.

Then she understood that despite his great status—or perhaps because of it—this mattered little to him. He had nothing to lose by taking a wife of low status. He could marry again, and again. He could have as many wives as he wanted. She would be nothing more than a possession to him, whether he called her a wife or a concubine. From her perspective, the two seemed very much alike.

Sweat beaded along her brow. Her heart palpitated against her ribs. Her head spun. “No,” she gasped at last. “I won’t do it.”

She got up to go. He caught her arm, and perhaps he tried to be gentle, but his grip lurched her to a halt.

“Live there for a month,” he said. “I’ll leave you alone. Then you decide.”

The simple kindness of his request melted her resolve. Pulling against him, her eyes drawn away as if to her thorny home in the woods, she marveled at the choices in front of her, and cursed herself for nearly making the wrong one. A Jomsviking chief wanted her as his wife. She practically killed his child, and yet he had nursed her back to health. So far he had not requested a single thing from her—only given.

She leaned into his strength, sweeping herself towards him. She wrapped her arms around him, then her legs. He held her against him effortlessly, as if she was a part of his own body. She breathed with him, their breath flowing back and forth long before their lips touched.

He carried her down to the floor, then pinned her there. She could not have escaped if she wanted to—but she did not want to. She laughed, thinking of the poor peasants outside the door, and pulled him closer.

*

Her new lodge was a wonder to her, and very much to her liking. Thorkell kept his promise to her and did not visit her for a month. Instead, she visited him. She was not supposed to, of course—“no women in Jomsborg.” And yet she delighted in breaking the rules. She prided herself in the fact that she was quiet and agile enough to slip past the legendary Jomsvikings. Once,

Thorkell said to her, “Perhaps you should be a Viking, too,” and he laughed, a pleasant sound that shook the bedframe. But his chuckles faded quickly when he realized she was not laughing with him.

She did not need to work much, for Thorkell provided more than enough. But she engaged in various tasks for her own pleasure and satisfaction. She tried to mingle with other women in the village, sometimes helping them churn butter or dye a piece of fabric. She quickly learned that she could not make friends, even if she wanted to. Most of the women regarded her with suspicion and distrust, especially once they learned she had spent most of her life in the woods. And even when some of them grew interested in her, going out of their way to be kind, Runa found herself lashing out at them, stirring up trouble against her own intentions.

When she could no longer endure the frustrations of such acquaintances, she wandered into the woods. As she did not need to spend much time hunting for food, she began work on a new creation, one she had visualized for a long time but never had the means to produce. She decided that this would be her gift to Thorkell on their wedding day. Normally, a wife would give the groom a sword that had been passed down her family. But she had no family, let alone an heirloom.

The time eventually came for her wedding, at which point the support of the community surprised her. Thorkell had assured her that it did not need to become a large event, and yet everyone seemed to know about it. In the morning a group of wives from the town led her to the bath-house, where they scrubbed her with soap, and sprinkled water over hot stones to fill the room with steam. Once Runa was both sweating and sopping, they led her into a cold pool to douse herself, and she cried out with delight.

She put on a dress embroidered with golden thread, and she wore a crown on her head beset with crystals and flowers. She had never felt so extravagant in her life. When she saw Thorkell waiting for her on a soft loping hill, she found herself blushing. She had never felt so honored—and yet so incredibly vulnerable—ever before.

She tried not to discourage herself with the fact that very little of his own family or great following had come out to witness their union. To them, this wedding did not matter. They gained nothing from it. And yet at least a few warriors did leave the fortress to represent him, and she knew from the way they all joked and teased each other that they were among his dearest of friends. They were the ones who cared about Thorkell's well-being, so perhaps it was best this way.

They sacrificed a goat for Thor, and the priestess dipped her hand in the bowl of its blood and flung it upon the congregation. Then they exchanged gifts. Thorkell gave her a sword, and when she took it in her hands, the weight of it spread like a shock through her body. She knew it was meant for their son one day. She did not want it for a son. She wanted it for herself. But she ignored this, and continued with her role. She could hardly wait to give him her creation. When she presented it, everyone in the field grew quiet, so that nothing could be heard but the rustling wind. For a moment, Thorkell only stared at it, his gray eyes wider than usual.

Runa ran her hands longingly over the wood. "It is a bow," she said. "The best bow you will ever use. Look ... you can even set the string, so it can be shot at a whim."

She was speaking too quickly due to nervousness, and she bit her lips shut. Thorkell recovered from his surprise and took it, balancing it uncertainly in his grasp. "Thank you," he said at last, and the ceremony continued.

For the most part, the rituals meant little to her, and she carried through them easily. When it came time to say her vow, something changed within her. A terrible fear washed away all the warm feelings of joy and pride that had thus far collected, replacing them with a gut-piercing panic. Suddenly she wanted to bolt away, away from all these staring eyes, away from Thorkell. But he must have sensed her urge, and he reached out and clutched her arm. No doubt his touch appeared casual, based on the effort he put into it, but his constraint was absolute. In a sense she was grateful, and knew he was right: she had had her chance to change her mind, and she had not taken it. And so she professed her devotion.

Nothing went wrong until time for the wedding feast. At this point the men and women split into separate groups and raced to the feasting hall. It was a competition filled with laughter and shouts of joy. Thorkell and his Jomsviking friends ran further and faster than most of the women. But the mood began to change when Runa pulled ahead of all of them. Her crown flew from her hair and she did not pause to retrieve it. She pulled up her skirts to free her legs. She sped over the fields, and when the hall's threshold appeared before her, she did not slow down—she only raced faster. She had heard that the groom was supposed to bar her way with a sword and lead her inside, as a sign of his guardianship. Instead, she made to race through the door on her own.

Then she stumbled over the lip of the doorway.

The crowd behind her fell deathly silent, but for their panting breaths, which turned into gasps and sighs of dismay. The wife's entry to the hallway signified her transition to the life of her wife-hood. The way Runa had stumbled indicated the interference of evil spirits; her union with Thorkell would be full of conflict and hardship.

Thorkell appeared next to her, reaching to help her to her feet. She flung herself away from him and hurried inside. She heard the grumble of Thorkell's voice, and words which were something like, "I guess I'll serve the ale, then," and people began to laugh nervously. But she trembled with rage and frustration. Why had she been so careless? Why had she ruined everything that seemed to be going well, as she so often did? She did not understand herself. It was almost as if she did not want to be happy.

Perhaps it had not been her fault, she thought with trepidation. Perhaps her marriage with Thorkell truly was doomed.

*

Their first year together was one of happiness. She cooked and mended his clothes for him. Sometimes, even though she did not need to, she hunted for them with the great bow she had created. Often she played games with him—or at least, he thought of them as games at first—in which he would teach her some of his fighting skills. At first he would tease and trifle with her,

seeing such an activity as little more than foreplay. But he began to see that she progressed steadily from one skirmish to the next, and their games became something more like training sessions. Thorkell enjoyed training her, because it was a form of practice for him, as well; soon he would receive King Sweyn Forkbeard's own son, Canute, to train and foster like his own.

Runa even made friends with another woman in town named Halla. Halla was an old runeswoman, full of strange tales and mythical knowledge. She taught Runa the names of many of the flowers and herbs she had long gathered in the forest and showed her new uses for them. She also demonstrated new ways of reading the runestones.

During one such lesson, Halla stopped suddenly, looking deep into the criss-crossing patterns before her.

"What's wrong?" asked Runa.

"There is evil in your past," said Halla in her dry, scratchy voice. "You ran away from it, but it lingers within you."

Runa's heart thudded in her throat. She reached down and tossed the stones with a sweep of her hand. "A vague reading," she snapped, somewhat breathless. "You could say that of anyone!"

"Perhaps," said Halla. "But you ..."

Runa glared at her until the old lady grew silent. Soothsayer or not, she could see that the subject should be dropped. And because she did, she remained Runa's friend, and their meetings continued peacefully so long as Halla did not broach the topic. When Halla ran out of herbs and recipes to teach her, she began to teach Runa English, for the woman knew the language well. At first she did not know why Runa would ever wish to learn it, and Runa did not have a good answer. But her lessons continued, nonetheless.

Every time Runa began to tire of Thorkell and the monotony of her life with him, he would leave for some sort of battle or voyage. In his absence she would long for his kind words, his playful roughhousing, and his surprisingly gentle embrace. When he returned she would throw herself upon him, just as she had in the woods the night of their first encounter.

Then she became pregnant again.

At first she did nothing. She did not tell Thorkell. She tried, even, to shut it from her mind, as if ignoring the fact would make it go away. She was able to do this until one night, she had a horrible nightmare.

The darkness trapped her. A monster called to her through the walls. Breath became scarce but she could not leave the dark hole. She pressed her lips to the cracks and savored the slightest breeze. Screams of the tormented echoed from the shadows. The same victim cried again and again for help. She recognized the scream. She knew it by heart.

She awoke to Thorkell's arm, heavy around her waist, and she thrashed from his grip. He stirred but did not awake as she slipped from the bed, sweating and panting. She dressed and grabbed her most important belongings. Then she left, not sure when she would return—knowing only that it would not be anytime soon.

At the break of dawn she visited Halla on the edge of town. She paid the woman for a large supply of pennyroyal. Halla knew well enough not to ask too many questions, but she could not refrain from saying something before Runa hurried off.

“Perhaps you should stay here, so I can care for you through the sickness.”

The offer tempted Runa, but she fled from it, before she could say yes.

Returning to her cave caused a strange emotion to stir within her. She expected to feel cozy and nostalgic. Instead she felt alienated, as if she was no longer the same woman and this dank hole belonged to someone else. At the same time this saddened her. She did not belong here anymore, but nor did she belong in the city of Jom, pretending to lead a normal life as the wife of a great Jomsviking. She belonged nowhere.

She stayed in the cave only long enough to build a fire and brew her tea, infused with all the pennyroyal Halla had given her. She drank until her stomach burned and sloshed when she walked.

As the sickness seized her, she spread out on the forest floor. She rested upon the incredible weight of the earth beneath her, reveling in the little sensations of bugs and worms scuttling beneath her and causing the surface to ripple with life. She fed

herself on the warm breeze and loosed her moans to its sway; she cried openly and shamelessly, releasing her pain into the soil and wind because she could not endure it all herself.

When it passed—perhaps over two nights or several days, she wasn't certain—she found a stream to wash away the blood between her legs. She used the next few days to gather berries and nuts, catch birds and rodents, and slowly nurse herself back to health.

At last she returned to Jom.

Thorkell was not home at first. Anxiously, she passed the time by throwing herself back into her daily chores. He did not arrive until the sky outside glowed orange with the sun's descent.

At the sight of her, a strange look came over his face. She tried to decipher the emotions beneath his pale brows as well as she could. First, she hoped, there was joy. But this was fleeting, and replaced quickly with anger. And once the anger appeared, it would not go away. Such fury flared in his stony irises that she felt the nausea of fear in her belly—an unusual sensation, for not much frightened her more than all she had already endured.

“Thorkell ...” She struggled to find her breath. “I'm back.”

He slammed the door behind him so hard she jolted. He did not speak for a long time, and the boom of the door continued to resound in her ears like a thunderclap in the distance, foretelling the oncoming storm.

Then a shudder went through him, and he rushed forward, capturing her in his arms. “Runa ...” he gasped. “Runa, I worried ...”

She closed her eyes as his fingers massaged the tangles of her hair. “Don't worry,” she said. “I'll always come back. And if I don't ... consider me dead.”

He held her tighter to him, and did not pester her with the questions she feared. He did not even try to make love to her. He simply held her, as if he never wanted her to escape again. And for a time, she did not mind.

After that her life felt normal again, for the most part. She tried to pretend as if her disappearance into the woods had not occurred, and it seemed as if Thorkell ignored it, as well. When they met again, Halla gave her a disapproving glance, but also one

of relief; then she proceeded to provide Runa with all sorts of elixirs—herbs that would cleanse her body of the remaining toxins, she hoped.

But Runa could not cleanse herself of what she had done, and it continued to plague her, more than any toxin could have.

She told herself that her decision had been for the best. A child would trap her. A child would pull out the monsters within her and reveal her ugliness to all. A child would be in danger of getting hurt by her in return. It had been for the best.

And yet her nightmares worsened, and she dreamt of the baby she might have had, warm in her lap as she cradled it. When she awoke her empty stomach felt cold and knotted.

Young Canute Sweynsson arrived at Jomsborg the next year and fell under Thorkell's tutelage, a responsibility which greatly benefited the married couple. Runa rarely saw the boy, for he remained mostly in Jomsborg, but Thorkell cared for him as if he had acquired his own son. He picked out gifts for the young prince and spent his short nights with Runa speaking of him. She had never heard Thorkell speak so much about anything.

Runa only met the boy a few times, but he made her uncomfortable. Most kids did, but he even more so. Though well-behaved, his eyes glittered with a conceit that struck her core with fury. It was a conceit that made everyone around him a means to an end, a toy to play with, and nothing more. If such a characteristic was so strong now, when he was but a boy, and if all the people around him—even Thorkell—fed such unfounded pride, how much worse would it become once he was grown? It made her want to hurt the boy, to poke a hole in his bulging sack of confidence, to watch him squirm when no one could raise a hand to help him. She recognized such self-importance from the monsters of her nightmares, but at least in her sleep, the monsters chased her and no one else. The monsters within Canute chased after everyone.

She managed to keep her impulses at bay for a long while, and Thorkell stayed away often, and Runa enjoyed her freedom. But one night something changed. Thorkell had unusually high spirits. He seemed full of hope and joy, so much so that he brought Canute home and told Runa that he would be staying the night.

“Why?” snapped Runa.

“Because,” said Thorkell. “He has been a long time without a mother.”

Fear gripped Runa’s heart like ice. There was no use in arguing, she knew. Thorkell’s love for the boy blinded him.

So that evening she fiddled with her bow, and in the morning she took Canute outside to use it. “Set the string like so,” she told him. She even demonstrated, dropping a bird as it flapped through the sky. She could see by his expression that he was truly impressed. “Now you try. Put your face here, so you can aim properly.” She handed it to him, struggling to suppress her smirk.

“I don’t see any more birds,” the young boy said grumpily.

“Shoot that tree, then.”

“Easy,” he snorted. He aimed and pulled the switch, as she had demonstrated. But the string flew back and snapped him in the face. He cried out as the arrow spiraled uselessly across the grass.

“What was that?” said Runa. “You did it all wrong!”

“I did what you told me!” He blinked back tears as he touched the swelling welt on his nose. “It’s the stupid bow’s fault!”

“No it’s not, and no, you didn’t do it right.” She took it from him, set another arrow, and shot it cleanly forward. He stared in awe as it sank into the trunk of a distant tree.

“But—!” His shock became outrage. “Give it!”

He grabbed the bow. He set another arrow. When he released it, once again, the string smacked him in the face, this time even harder. He dropped the bow and staggered backwards.

A long silence hung in the air. Then proud little Canute burst into tears.

Runa couldn’t help herself. She grinned.

“What happened?” Thorkell stormed from the house. Runa had a sinking feeling that he had been watching for some time.

Canute just sobbed and sniffled. Runa attempted to meet Thorkell’s gaze with defiance, but found she could not.

Thorkell clenched his fists, his knuckles bulging like spikes from a mace. Canute just kept crying. The sound had been entertaining at first, but now it grated on her. She wished he would simply grow silent.

“Canute,” growled Thorkell at last. His voice sent chills down Runa’s back. “You used the bow like she showed you?”

“Yes, Thorkell, I did!” cried Canute.

“And yet it hurt you anyway?”

“Yes!”

“Then it is a danger to you,” said Thorkell. “Or something here is.” His eyes remained on Runa. “And what do you do to something that is a danger to you?”

Canute stopped crying. Joy flared suddenly in his eyes, but Runa went cold with fear. Canute looked at her, a sneer crawling up his puffy red face. Then he picked up the bow.

“No!” shouted Runa.

But Canute scurried away, taking the bow with him. He found the nearest rock and smashed the bow against it. Nothing happened at first; Canute was too little to put much strength in the swing. But he swung again, and again; and at last, a *crack* split the air.

“You little bastard!” Runa moved towards him, but Thorkell stepped into her path, and she dared not cross him. She seethed at him with fury and even hatred, staring into the black silhouette of his shape against the searing blue sky. Pain sapped the strength from her voice. “It was my *wedding* gift to you!”

“Much good that did us,” he said.

She was not exactly sure what he meant. She was not sure she wanted to know. The bow *cracked* again, finally splitting in half, and Canute laughed with triumph.

Runa turned away, hoping to hide the sorrow consuming her, along with the unquenchable urge to enact some manner of revenge.

*

The time she slept with another man was the night Thorkell changed his attitude. She had been gone for several days and nights again, as happened somewhat often. But this time had been different. This time, not every night had been spent in the woods.

Thorkell knew. In a sense she had planned on it. She had slept with a man dumb enough to brag about bedding the wife of Thorkell the Tall.

She strolled through the door feeling as proud as a cat. Thorkell sat next to the hearth-fire, his large shoulders slouched, his eyes staring deep into the blaze. The flames illuminated his hair like threads of copper. She yearned for him suddenly, but she stayed away, and her blood quickly grew cold again.

“Runa ...” He took a deep breath, and she was surprised to hear it shudder as he exhaled. “Did I do something wrong?”

This reaction surprised her. She had expected an argument. Her mouth flopped open and closed a few times before she could form her own words. “You broke my bow.”

“You hurt Canute. You leave my bed cold whenever you feel like it. And now ...” She thought that he, too, was trying to be angry. But his beard quivered. “Now you’ve betrayed me.”

All of her defiance, anger, and rebellion melted immediately away. She trembled from head to foot and struggled not to fall and splash at his feet like a puddle. “Oh Thorkell ...”

“I don’t understand, Runa. I tried to give you anything you wanted. I tried to let you do what you want. But ... this ...”

She cocked her head as high as she could. But he wasn’t even looking. “And what will you do about it?”

“I already killed him.”

She stiffened again.

“I had to. Everyone knew. Someone had to be punished: either him or you. Now that he’s dead, all they’ll need to do at the next *husting* is pardon me. And they will.”

She felt her anger strengthening her once more. “You’re the one who wanted to marry. Did you think I would change? Did you think I would become a different woman than the one that tackled you in the woods? Well I won’t. No one can change me. No one can restrain me!”

“Then perhaps we should divorce.”

His words shocked her. She had expected a greater argument, she realized. She had expected him to explode, to become violent, or perhaps to attempt to enact some sort of restraint on her. She thought perhaps she would provoke him to some sort of evil. Had she actually *hoped* for as much? The revelation made her sick to her stomach. She had wanted to prove to Thorkell that he was a bad person; that by making her his wife,

somehow, he had trapped her. She clutched her own arms, as if suddenly cold. How often did she cause trouble simply to provoke other people into believing the world was as dark as she thought?

“I ... I ...” She forced a swallow from her dry mouth. “I don’t want a divorce.”

“Then what do you want?” For the first time since her return, he looked at her. His gaze undulated with emotion. The sight broke her heart. “I love you, Runa. I don’t want to change you. But ... I can’t let you keep doing this.”

Restrained tears burned in her nose. “You *won’t* let me.”

His gaze became simple, pure. “Divorce me,” he said, “or stay. But if you stay, have a baby with me.” His voice grated with bitterness. “A baby we’ll know is mine. And if you ever think you’re pregnant by another man, you’ll kill it.”

She covered her mouth to stifle a gasp. So this mattered to him most? Or was it simply a desperate request? Somehow she suspected the former. Perhaps she had hurt him a great deal more than he could ever hurt her. And if he had figured out that she knew how to “kill” a pregnancy ...

Something within her gave way. She fell against him, pressing her cheek to the sharp edges of his beard, raking her fingers along his biceps. “I’ll try.” A sob wracked her frame. “I’ll try. I’ll try ...”

At last he reached up and held her, and she wondered whether she had lost the argument, or won something greater.

*

When they had their first baby together, she wept, and named him Harald. She brushed his perfect skin with her fingers, holding his warmth to her breasts, and marveled at his beauty while hot tears rolled down her cheeks. The baby’s life was a miracle, she realized; a miracle she had denied herself, as well as Thorkell. Here was a human being not yet tarnished by the world, unmarked by the evils of other people, unscathed, even, by the evil she knew to be within herself.

She spent long days and nights holding him, rocking him, singing to him. One night Thorkell found her thus and walked up behind her, wrapping them both in his arms.

“I’m sorry, Thorkell,” she whispered. “I didn’t think it would be like this. I never thought I would create something so ... so ...” She could not find a word for it, so she didn’t try. Thorkell nuzzled his beard against her shoulder and kissed her neck.

At first she enjoyed staying with little Harald always. She even tolerated his crying throughout the night, and his constant thirst throughout the day.

But one day she longed for the woods again. And then she realized she was trapped.

She paced round and round the lodge, listening to Harald scream, wondering what to do. She couldn’t just leave him. But now that she wanted to for the first time, her inability to do so filled her with rage. What other options did she have?

She stayed with the baby, but by the time Thorkell came home, she was seething. In the past, she had never told Thorkell before she left him for days on end. She never had to deal with him asking her not to leave, for she never bothered seeking his permission or approval. All she had to do was leave, and then when she returned, he would be so happy to see her that all would be well. This time, she had to state the truth.

“We need to find someone to look after Harald whenever I’m ... gone.”

The baby seemed to sense the distress in the room. He wailed, only quieting when Thorkell picked him up and rocked him. The father glared at her over the writhing form. “But you’re his mother.”

“Would you rather I leave him alone?”

Thorkell got the baby to quiet again, and gently returned him to his bed. He spoke softly, though it was a strain to do so. “He needs you to feed him.”

“Another woman could do that, as well.”

A terrible silence followed her words. His response struck her like a splash of cold water in her face. “Then perhaps I’ll marry another woman.”

She struggled to breathe. This was the first time he had ever threatened her with such a thing. She never had to say how strongly the idea revolted her, for he had already guessed.

“There’s an offer,” he went on relentlessly. “From Chief Asgaut of Denmark. For his eldest daughter.”

She bit back her words of argument. She could not forbid him to do it. She had already shared herself with another man, so she had no right. And in truth, she wanted him to be as free to pursue his desires as he allowed her to be. She simply did not think she could endure it.

She turned to leave.

“Runa.”

Something in his voice stopped her.

“What do you want?”

The question surprised her. What did she want? She thought the answer would be simple. Freedom. But that wasn’t all she wanted. Freedom alone did not make her happy. There was more she wanted to do with her life, more that she wanted to see and accomplish, which she simply had no opportunity to achieve on her own, no matter how much time she could spend as she pleased. The answer arose from deep within her, where it had already been for a long time. “I want to cross the seas. I want to see Engla-lond. I want to plunder and rape.” She laughed at the silliness of it all. But her eyes sparkled with joy as she turned them back to Thorkell. “I want to be a Viking.”

He blinked with surprise. As well as he knew and understood her, this came as a shock to him.

She walked over to him, gripping his arm in her excitement. “Think of it, Thorkell. I am already a master of the bow. You have also trained me with a blade. We could have so much fun together.”

He looked away, his jaws grinding. She knew that “fun” had been the wrong word to use. Thorkell did not find any of the pillaging and killing “fun.” It was his job, his duty, and so he did it. She was not even sure she would find it fun, herself. But she had to try it at least once. It was her ultimate act of defiance against society, against her father ... against everyone.

She stroked his neck lovingly, twirling his hair in her fingers. “I’ll stay with the baby until your next voyage to Engla-lond, if you would let me go with you.”

He took a deep, heaving breath. “Very well,” he said at last. “If it means that much to you.”

She let out a helpless cry of delight. She pushed him back into a chair and straddled his lap, the poor wood creaking under their weight. “It does,” she said.

To her surprise, a smile tugged at his mouth. “You understand that if you’re in my army, you’re mine to command.”

“Am I? I suppose that’s true.” She leaned against him and nibbled at his ear. “Then I am yours.”

His hands slid up her waist, but when another thought struck her, she pulled back again, tensing. “You must do what you must,” she said, her heart racing nervously in her chest. “But I have to know. Would you really marry another woman?”

He chuckled. “By the mercy of Thor,” he said, “not if I could help it. You’re all the wife I can handle.”

She fell back against him, losing herself to the pleasure of his embrace. When next she slept, she dreamt of the shores of Engla-lond, and awoke knowing that she would live to see them.

**

THE TENTH LOST
TALE OF MERCIA



EDMUND THE
ÆTHELING

“... it was told the king, that [the Danes] would beshrew him of his life, and afterwards all his council, and then have his kingdom without any resistance.”

—*The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, Entry for Year 1002

*

LUNDENBURG
1002 A.D.

Edmund put his hand over his mouth to trap his own breath, but his lungs continued heaving like a blacksmith’s bellows. His gloved fingers clutched the sword at his belt, a heavy thing that normally seemed presumptuous for a boy thirteen years of age, but now seemed the only thing capable of saving his life. Its primary flaw was that pulling it from its sheath would cause noise—noise he could not afford to make.

The boots around the corner shuffled against the stone, steel trinkets clinked, a cloak whooshed ... and then all sounds faded as the source retreated.

A groan of dismay ripped from Edmund’s throat as he removed his hand from his lips. He clutched his chest as if his heart might escape. He could not believe what he had just overheard. It would take him a long while to make sense of it—time he was not sure he had.

He stumbled as he made his way back into the palace, his feet like blocks of wood on his legs. He went over the words in his memory over and over again, trying to unroll the plot they contained. But the more he unraveled the strings, the more easily they seemed to tangle in his mind.

As he walked by the king’s hall, a great stone chamber surrounded by the old Roman structure, his stomach growled. He

could smell honey-glazed meats and spices. Even the rustic scent of ale hanging over everything added to his hunger. He could not explain why he had skipped tonight's dinner, nor many other nights lately, at least not aloud. But he knew he hated listening to the noblemen's drivel. All his father wanted to discuss was how to raise money for the next Danegald so that he could pay off the Vikings rather than fighting them. Then he would go on about food and women—topics that seemed trivial at a time of war. Edmund preferred to stop by the kitchens and pick out his victuals than to sit through such nonsense.

At last he reached his father's bedroom. It was surrounded, as usual, by retainers and hearth companions. Many of them slumped from the weight of their drinking; others laughed with each other, sometimes putting their ears to the door of Ethelred's chamber, then laughing some more. They stank of grease and unwashed clothes. Edmund remembered how when his mother had been alive, she made all the royal retainers take better care of themselves.

They frowned uncertainly as Edmund approached, noting how his face was long and blanched, his boots muddy and his cloak falling askance. "I need to speak to Father," the young aetheling gasped. "Now."

"Then go on in." The man who spoke wore a smirk on his face. Chuckles spread through the group.

"I will, thank you." Refusing to be daunted, Edmund stormed to the door and grabbed the handle. Immediately, a sound from within stopped him cold.

"Oh yes, right there."

The voice belonged to a woman. But then he heard a grunt, which he suspected came from his father.

"Oh yes—yes!"

Edmund flushed and jumped from the door as if from a physical blow. The men roared with laughter, and yet even over their chortling he could still hear his father and the maiden squealing like pigs. Their joyous cries seemed to follow him down the hall as he raced away, his fists clenching even more violently than before. King Ethelred had only recently married Queen Emma of Normandy, but Edmund knew with certainty that those

were not her moans carrying down the stone walls. She was only twelve years old.

He neared his own bedroom, but he could not bring himself to go inside. Instead he paced in front of the doorway, left and right and left again. He felt as if he might go into some sort of frenzy. He had such important information in his head, information that needed to come out, needed to be made sense of. And yet he could not think of what to do with it. His father's behavior infuriated him, though it came as little surprise. And as for the men of his father's court, he trusted none of them—especially after what he had heard today.

He snapped his fingers with a sudden revelation. "Aethelstan," he said aloud. Yes, his older brother would at least listen without betraying him, and that was certainly something. He rushed down the hallway again, his cloak dragging heavily behind him.

On his way down the hall, however, he passed several of his own retainers. He glowered at them, for they had not been there to protect him when he needed them most. No doubt they were also angry at him, however, for wandering off so often, and not dining in the great hall like the rest of his family.

Then he saw Aydith. She stood staring out of an aperture at the moon, sadness making her pale face even whiter than usual. His heart stirred with sympathy for his younger sister, and he almost stopped to say hello. But his purpose demanded that he continue, so he passed her by.

"Edmund? Edmund!"

With an angry huff, he stopped and turned to see Aydith hurrying towards him.

"Edmund, what's the matter? Where have you been?"

"I ... I ... I have to speak to Aethelstan."

"What happened?"

He couldn't hold it back anymore. "Lord Egil of Nottingham. I think he's plotting to ... to *do* something to Father."

Aydith turned a notch paler, but did not yet panic. "Do what?"

"I'm ... not sure. Something bad. I heard him talking about it, and worse, he addressed the man he spoke to as Lord Alfric."

“That bastard!” Aydith blushed a little and crossed herself. “We’ll need proof. What specifically did you hear?”

It irritated Edmund that Aydith required some sort of proof and didn’t immediately believe him. “I should be talking to Aethelstan,” he grumbled.

“Very well then,” she said. “I’ll go with you.”

Together, they completed the weary procession to Aetheling Aethelstan’s room. For whatever reason, Edmund wished his sister would go away. As dearly as he cared for her, she always made matters so complicated, and tended to get even more frustrated than he did when plans went awry. Nevertheless, he could not refuse her help.

Aethelstan had already gone to bed, which nearly set Edmund off again. But Aydith promptly entered the room anyway, shushing away his bower-thegn, then shook their older brother awake.

He blinked sleepily through his pale lashes, already crusted from deep sleep. “What? What’s the matter?” He sat up and rubbed at his face. Aydith walked around the room lighting candles.

Aydith opened her mouth as if to speak, then thought better of it, and turned to Edmund.

“I think Father’s in danger,” he said as the light flared around them.

“Oh no! In danger of what?”

“Assassination,” Edmund hissed, though at Aydith’s prompt gasp, he regretted saying so. He only *suspected* that an assassination attempt was afoot based on what he had heard. But he could not be certain.

“Oh my God.” Aethelstan scratched his pale hair again, and seemed to be at a loss.

Aydith fixed Edmund with her fierce brown eyes, eyes she’d inherited from their mother. “Tell us everything you saw and heard,” she said. “Starting from the beginning.”

“Wait,” said Aethelstan. “Shouldn’t we be talking to Father about this?”

“He’s ... he’s busy.” With a sigh that was a half growl, Edmund returned his concentration to the origin of the night’s

events. “Here’s what happened. I was taking a walk around the palace around dusk. I ventured away from the walls into Lunden town—”

“Without your companions?” Aethelstan reproached him. “You know Father doesn’t like that!”

Edmund ignored this and forged on. “I saw men I recognized outside a tavern, though at first I couldn’t place their names. But they were Danish nobles, and they’ve been contributing to the witenagemot for the last few days—that much I knew. One of them I never learned the name of, but I heard him call the other man Egil, and then I realized he was Lord Egil of Nottingham. Anyway, I heard them talking about Father. They called him *weak*, and *stupid*, and *incompetent*.” The very words made him tremble with rage, even though he was not quite sure what the last one meant. “They said they needed to *do* something about him.”

He let this sink into his siblings’ ears, both of them growing paler as it did. After a short while Aydith said, “Weren’t there any specifics?”

“They lowered their voices after that,” said Edmund. “Which means it must have been bad! So I tried to get closer, and hid myself around the corner of the tavern.”

“What else did you hear?” said Aethelstan, his voice heavy with desperation.

“Only bits and pieces. They talked about Saint Brice’s Day coming up. They spoke of the food that would be served. Oh—and then a third person joined in! But I didn’t see his face.”

“Alfric!” breathed Aydith.

Edmund nodded grimly. “I did hear them call him Alfric.”

“There are lots of Alfrics,” said Aethelstan grumpily.

Aydith came to Edmund’s rescue. “There aren’t many Alfrics who would be plotting something with two Danish nobles,” she hissed. “He has had trouble getting Father to forgive him for his last offense, and I am sure he is eager to avenge the death of his son.”

“Yes,” said Edmund, grateful now that Aydith had come along, after all. “That’s exactly what I thought!”

Aethelstan now wore a deeply-set frown. “What else did they say about the food?”

“They said, ‘Think of how many people will be eating it.’ As if the more people they poisoned, the better.”

Aydith held up her hand and shook her head firmly. “Wait. Did you ever hear them say ‘poison’?”

“Well ... no.”

She grunted. “Then this is all speculation.”

“Who the hell cares?” cried Edmund. “They’re obviously up to something!”

They scowled and looked to Aethelstan for help, whose frown only deepened. He heaved a sigh, then at last said, “We must go to Father. We’ll speak to him tomorrow during breakfast.”

Aydith turned a deep shade of red. “But we need more information before we go to Father. Otherwise—”

“Hush, Aydith.” Edmund was not very pleased with Aethelstan’s solution, either, but it was a plan, voiced by someone of authority, and at least now Edmund knew he could go to bed without tossing and turning all night. The burden no longer lay completely on his own shoulders. “Aethelstan’s right. We’ll talk to Father tomorrow.”

Aydith scowled so fiercely that Edmund actually moved back a step. But she saw that her brothers had made up their minds, and wisely pinched her lips together to avoid arguing anymore. “Very well,” she said at last. “Good luck with that!”

She turned and stormed out.

The brothers exchanged weary looks, then retired gladly to their own beds.

*

In the morning, Edmund at last got his father’s attention. Most of his wise men had not yet arrived for the ongoing witenagmot, so the palace and dining hall remained mostly empty.

Nonetheless, addressing his father was no easy feat. King Ethelred seemed to suffer from wine-poisoning and lack of sleep. He chewed grimly upon his morning meal, waving away most of the people who yapped for his attention, the curls of his beard bouncing rhythmically as he struggled to chew away his breakfast.

He yanked at the cloak and brooches around his neck as if they were choking him.

Edmund addressed his father with a timid voice, seeing little reaction in Ethelred's gray eyes despite the urgency of his voice. "I have something very important to tell you." Ethelred just grunted, but at least that meant he was listening. Aethelstan sat nearby, nodding his encouragement. Edmund leaned close to their father, his fine linen sleeves crushing the crumbs of the table. "The Danes are plotting against you."

Ethelred's eyes turned sluggishly towards his son. Beyond this, he did not seem taken aback at all. "Yes, and?"

Edmund drew back, blinking rapidly with surprise. "And you should *do* something!" His blood roared in his ears, deafening. Here was his chance to tell his father everything, and he was ruining it.

Aethelstan came to his rescue, speaking in calm and reassuring tones to the king. "Edmund doesn't mean just the Vikings, Father. He means there are Danes living nearby who wish to do you harm."

Ethelred looked from one young teen to the next, drool collecting on his lips as he delayed chewing. "And this is news to you both? For heaven's sake, the Danes try to cut my throat every chance they get. Edmund—tell me how your sword lessons have been going. Have you improved your parrying skills yet?"

Edmund could not even come up with a response, so confused was he by the turn of conversation. His lips flapped open and shut, but no words escaped.

Aethelstan made another attempt at salvaging the conversation. "Father, Edmund overheard one of your most trusted men, Lord Egil ..." He looked to Edmund for approval, and Edmund nodded. "Lord Egil seemed to be plotting something wicked, Father, on Saint Brice's Day."

"Wicked? How?" asked Ethelred. But now his eyes were darting about, infused at last with energy. They fixed on Edmund. "What did you hear?"

Edmund gulped. Should he say that he heard them planning to poison Ethelred? But what if he was wrong? And what if he sent his father into a senseless panic, before anything useful

might be done? “They were ... talking about the food, Father,” he whispered. “And ... and how many people were going to be eating it.”

Ethelred stared at him a long, long time. He didn’t move at all. His nose turned red from the cold air and lack of blood circulation.

Edmund could not guess what was going on behind the king’s petrified expression. Was he convinced? Or did he need something more? “And ... they were talking about all this to none other than Alfric of Mercia!” he blurted.

Ethelred dropped his dirk with a tremendous clatter. His elbows sank onto the table and his head fell between them. Edmund sensed victory and exchanged a look of excitement with Aethelstan; but when they looked back at their father, they found him trembling violently.

“Father?” Edmund reached out a hand to the king, but dared not touch him.

“I think I’m going to be sick.” Ethelred got up suddenly, his chair falling behind him. He turned, fell to his knees, and retched upon the floor.

Edmund turned away, cringing with disgust as the royal breakfast of sausages and eggs plopped from Ethelred’s mouth into the rushes. Once the king’s hacking and spitting spent itself, Ethelred got up and groaned, “Well, clean this up!” A few servants rushed uncertainly forward to do what they could with their woolen washcloths.

King Ethelred returned to his chair with a resounding thump.

Edmund and Aethelstan sat in a state of suspended wincing as they stared upon their father’s drooping face. He exhaled heavily, and Edmund resisted turning from his foul breath.

“Alfric has been well-behaved lately, and very helpful to me,” said Ethelred. “I think that he regrets the wrong-doings of his past, and he’s full of fresh ideas for the future.” Edmund could hardly believe he was hearing such words. Had Alfric already worked his way back into the king’s good graces? “As for Egil,” the king continued relentlessly, “I like him. I like him a lot.”

He surprised them by looking up and fixing Edmund's eyes with his own. Life flared briefly from deep within the wells of the king's gaze. "Tell me, Edmund: are you certain that he means me harm? Would you put your hand on a holy relic and swear that Egil is working with Alfric to kill or otherwise dethrone me?"

Edmund had not expected this. He realized, with much surprise, that he had not really expected to get through to his father at all. All of his huffing and heaving had been a desperate attempt to get his father's attention. Now that he had it—now that Ethelred took him seriously—he could not bring himself to say, *Yes, I swear*. He just couldn't.

He could not even sustain his father's gaze. He looked down into the wood of the table. He couldn't look at his brother, either. He wondered if Aethelstan was disappointed in him. He knew without a doubt that Aedith would be.

"Just as I thought," Ethelred sighed. "You boys are becoming as fearful as I often feel. Why should I trust anyone these days? I don't. And yet I have to." A servant gave him a new goblet of water. He picked it up and downed it in a few gulps, loosing silver streams down his beard and necklaces. He lifted a hand to push back his frizzy hair, but this small movement betrayed a violent tremor in his arm. "I live from one day to the next, my sons. Sometimes that is all we can do. It's all we can do."

Edmund no longer felt upset or angry. He did not even feel very anxious. He simply felt depressed.

"What would you have me do?" Ethelred looked up as if posing the question to God Himself. Edmund and Aethelstan might as well have left the room. This was now between the king and the only power greater than himself. "Have Egil beheaded or exiled without reason? Think of what they'll say of me then. 'Paranoid.' 'Cowardly.' Bah! Perhaps I should just declare war on the Danelaw. What do you think of that?" He drained down another goblet of water, as if it was ale that could wash away his sorrows. But it gave him no such relief. When he next spoke, the coarseness of his voice brought bumps to Edmund's skin. "'The sin of thy mother shall not be washed out but by much blood of the kingdom's wretched inhabitants; and such evils shall come

upon the English nation as they have never suffered from the time they came to Engla-lond until then.’ Hm.”

Then he stared out the window, and seemed to forget that anyone else was present.

Despite the warmth of his clothes and the glow of a nearby hearth-fire, Edmund felt cold to his core. He drew away from the table, his appetite gone, again.

He could not think of anything else to say, and Ethelred no longer seemed in the mood to listen, anyway.

So he turned and left the hall.

*

Aydith found him dragging his feet through the courtyard, kicking occasionally at the frosty mud. A group of chickens squawked and scattered away from him. A few royal retainers loitered nearby, watching him reluctantly.

When he saw her approaching, he sighed with dismay, then steeled himself.

Unexpectedly, she did not release a torrent of anger upon him. She looked just as sad and miserable as he did. And for awhile, she simply stood there next to him, not saying a word.

“What do we do?” Edmund surprised himself by being the first to speak, and asking such an important question while doing so.

Aydith’s lips twisted from side to side as she considered this. It amazed Edmund whenever he saw his sister do child-like things, for she was so mature that she often seemed like a grown woman. “First, we need to figure out exactly what Egil is up to.”

“Oh, forget about Egil! Father *likes* him,” he sneered, “and I was probably just being *paranoid!*” He picked up a stick and threw it at an unsuspecting hen, who attempted to escape by flapping her flimsy wings.

Aydith fixed him with a level stare. “I don’t think you’re paranoid,” she said. “I believe you completely. Even if he’s not out to poison the entire witenagemot, I think Egil would do something against Father if he had the chance.”

“You *think*,” said Edmund. “But do you *know*?”

“Yes!”

“How?”

Her little nose pinched as she restrained her frustration. “I just ... do.”

“See? You’re as bad as the rest of us. Forget it. Forget everything.”

“Edmund.” A tone of pleading entered her voice. “Maybe we could get Father to do something so we didn’t have to. It just needs to be something ... definite. But also something non-confrontational.”

“Oh *enough!*” It all sounded even more ridiculous coming from his sister’s childish mouth. He wanted to laugh about it but he couldn’t. All he could do was walk away.

“Edmund!”

He heard the *chinks* of shifting metal as his companions moved to follow him, but he whirled on them quickly. “Leave me alone. All of you!”

He hurried away, and it came as both a relief and a disappointment that no one bothered to follow him, after all.

He spent most of his morning hacking at a dummy with his sword, practicing his techniques and stances, but mostly just hacking. He pretended that it had a real face, and that face took the shape of various people he knew, like Egil, or Alfric, or even his father.

Once he’d exhausted himself with the sword, his stomach growled desperately, so at last he went to the kitchens and ate. Then he paced about the palace for a long while, and even tried listening in on the witenagemot. He did not get far. The doors were shut tight, and the retainers around the area gave him warning glances. Edmund scowled back. He could have attended the witenagemot from the start if he really wanted to, but if so he would not have been allowed to leave, just as he could not now interrupt them. The thought of listening to the wise men’s useless quibbling all day made him sick to his stomach.

He decided to walk to town again, even though it was a strange time to do so. He knew he would get strange looks from people who saw a young teen strolling the streets alone wearing fancy clothes, but today he did not even care. He yearned for a sense of normalcy beyond the stifling walls of the palace.

He had not gone very far when he ran suddenly into Alfric.

He didn't recognize the man at first. Edmund had only seen him as a young boy, after all, and one of his most striking features—his hair—had been largely removed, chopped clean off his head. Edmund would have passed him by without a second thought, but Alfric was not about to let that happen.

“Greetings, Aetheling.”

Edmund squinted at the dark shape outlined by the sinking white sun. Then he blinked with surprise at the stubbed yellow curls remaining around the man's forehead and the pinched, angled smile hovering above his chin. The prince froze, all but for his hand, which twitched involuntarily towards the hilt of his sword. Alfric's eyes flicked to watch the movement. He took a step closer, his long red cloak spreading behind him. Edmund gulped.

“I'm so glad I ran into you,” said Alfric. “I need to talk to you about something.”

“Step back.” Edmund scrambled away, nearly embarrassing himself by tripping over a stone in the road.

“Easy. I just don't want anyone to hear us. Maybe we should talk over there?”

He pointed to a dark alley between buildings, and Edmund's heart jumped into his throat. How foolish would he be to follow Alfric to a place like that? “We can talk here,” he said, struggling to sound firm. “Or back in the palace.”

“That would be even worse,” said Alfric. His expression twisted into one of impatience. “I'm not here to play games, boy. Will you hear me out or not?”

Edmund hoped he did not look as terrified as he felt. He glimpsed the sword under Alfric's cloak. It was smaller and simpler than his own, despite the sizes of their respective owners, but in that case it would be even easier to quietly unsheathe and use to slit someone's throat. He wished desperately that he had brought along his companions, after all. But it was too late for that now. Either he toughened up and listened to what Alfric had to say, or he ran away and wondered for the rest of his life whether he could have uncovered an important secret.

“Very well,” he breathed at last.

Alfric bowed his head and swept his hand towards the alley. "After you, my lord." How quickly his tone had changed!

Edmund wanted to insist that Alfric go first, but he saw a gleam of amusement in Alfric's eyes, as if that was exactly what he hoped for. He would not give him that satisfaction. Feeling miserable enough to die anyway, Edmund trudged ahead. Soon he stood in between two walls and a large stack of wood, so that there was only one way out, which quickly became closed by Alfric.

Alfric filled the space happily, though he feigned a grave expression as he leaned against the wall. "Now Edmund," he said. "I think you've met Lord Egil."

Edmund tried to swallow, but found his mouth too dry.

Alfric leaned close, lowering his voice almost to a whisper. "He's up to no good."

The aetheling resisted the urge to step back from Alfric's piercing gaze. "You'll have to be more specific."

"I spoke to him only yesterday. He's going to do something to the food on Saint Brice's Day."

Hope stirred in Edmund's belly, but he doused it quickly. "Do *what*, damn it?"

Alfric smirked. "Poison it, of course."

There. Someone had said it at last. The truth was revealed. And yet as he looked at the smile pulling one corner of Alfric's lips, a shiver went through Edmund. He should not trust this man at all. This man had once taken his father's battle plans directly to the Vikings. His son had paid the price for the crime. And now he was back ... for what? What if Aydith was right? What if he wanted revenge? Or what if he was truly so cowardly he didn't even care for that; he simply wanted to gain Ethelred's favor once more, whatever it took?

If Aydith were here, Edmund thought, she would pester Lord Alfric with questions. It always annoyed Edmund when she asked lots of questions. But she also seemed to know about everything as a result. So perhaps he should ask some questions, himself. "Um ..." He shifted about on his feet, then crossed his arms over his chest. "How do you know?"

"I heard him say it," said Alfric. "Yesterday." He cocked an eyebrow, as if he and Edmund shared a little secret. Edmund

wondered whether the banished lord knew about his conversation with Ethelred that very morning. Edmund guessed that he did.

“So why did you wait this long to tell someone?”

“I wanted to find out more. So I did. Egil has a network of other Danes helping him; they will all work together to poison the soup. I don’t know who all of them are, however.”

“Oh God,” said Edmund.

Alfric nodded gravely. “I can think of only one way to surely escape this. Ethelred, his family, and his most loyal men must go somewhere else to feast. It need not be suspicious, though you must of course keep it quiet. I know of a great manor down the river. It could be like a retreat, if you will.”

The idea was simple enough. If a plot was afoot in Lundenburg, why not just leave for a little while? Then Edmund clenched his fists. It was a coward’s way out—just like Alfric to suggest. And in the end, it would not destroy the threat, only delay it.

He felt he had heard enough of Alfric’s driveling. He needed to go somewhere else to think about it. He doubted Alfric would tell him anything else useful, and the dark confinement of the alley grew stifling. “I will think on this,” he said. He made to go, moving around Alfric to the best of his ability.

He flinched with surprise as Alfric’s hand wrapped around his arm. “I haven’t finished speaking with you,” he snarled.

“But I have finished with you,” said Edmund. He looked desperately about, but no one in the streets so much as glanced his direction. Did they not care what was going on here?

Sensing the aetheling’s hopes, Alfric tightened his grip and swung Edmund back in front of him, so that no one from the street would see him at all. A white mist spread around Alfric’s face as the air froze his huffing breath. “Listen Edmund, I’m giving you a way to save your family! And you’re just going to walk away like you never even spoke to me?”

He shook Edmund hard, and the aetheling flapped about like a rag-doll. Much to his own shame, he felt weak and helpless with fear. Why was Alfric doing this to him? Why was this happening to him at all? “What do you *want*?” he cried.

Alfric stopped shaking him, his voice calming slightly. “I want you to do as you should. Save your family. Do what I’ve suggested. Let me *help* you. Be a hero, Edmund.”

Edmund stared with terror into the splintered colors of Alfric’s irises. A horrible possibility entered his mind. What if this suggestion was a trap in itself?

“Edmund?” His brow furrowed with concern. “Do you not trust me? Is that it? Well ... consider this, aetheling.”

Alfric pressed him to the wall with one forearm, while his other hand yanked his sword from its scabbard. A cry ripped from Edmund’s throat in harmony with the ringing steel. Alfric replaced the arm against Edmund’s throat with his blade.

“What do you think of this?” Alfric leaned close to him. “I could kill you, Edmund, right here, right now. No one would know. I could strip you of your valuables so you looked like the corpse of a miserable peasant. I could even give myself a little nick on the arm and claim I tried to save you from the thief that did it. Perhaps your father would welcome me back with open arms for my bravery.” Edmund moaned with dismay. “But I won’t do any of that, of course.”

Alfric stepped back and re-sheathed his sword with a quick and clumsy movement. Edmund realized the lord was shaking nearly as violently as himself. As relieved as he was to be released, spite filled his veins, for he knew the only reason Alfric did not do such a thing was because of his own cowardice.

“You see, my lord?” The ealdorman’s voice cracked slightly. “I wish you no harm. All I ask is that you do not ignore my warning, and tell me what you want to do next, so I may plan accordingly.”

“I ... I ...” Edmund could hardly think straight. His fear blurred all of his thoughts like a thick, white veil.

“Edmund, tell me what you’re going to do.”

“GO TO HELL!”

Edmund shoved blindly at Alfric, throwing himself forward with all of his might. He was not exactly sure how it happened, only that for a moment his limbs tangled with Alfric’s, and then suddenly he was free. Then he took off running.

He did not care where he went, so far as it was far away from Alfric. He did not even care to run towards the palace, either. What would he do once he returned? Tell his family what Alfric had said? And what if Alfric was only leading his family into another trap?

He listened to the wind gush past his ears as his thoughts roared within his head. The more he thought about it, the more perfect he realized such a plan would be. Alfric could lure out all of Ethelred's "most loyal men" away from their their guards and retainers, who would be suspected of consorting with Lord Egil. All of them would go to an isolated spot, and there they could easily be slain. It seemed a bit far-fetched, even for Alfric. But Edmund would not put it past him. And even if the trap was not so cruel as that, what else bad might happen? No matter how politely Ethelred went about it, such a gesture would send a clear message to all of the men left behind—mostly Danish nobles of the north—that he did not trust them, nor care for their company in a feast.

People gave Edmund strange looks and yelled at him, but he did not stop until exhaustion overcame him. In truth he was still not very far from the palace, but his fear and despair drained him more than any physical effort. He collapsed on a wooden step, crumpling under the weight of his responsibilities, and broke down in tears.

He did not know for how long he cried. It felt incredibly good, somehow, and he did not know when he might have another chance to cry like this without his companions or someone else of importance watching. He felt sad for himself, and his entire family, and all they had to endure. How could they protect Engla-land when it was so hard just to watch their own backs? He thought of all the horrible things people said about the king; he thought of how many times he had felt equally mad at his father. But how could one function when plagued with so much doubt and uncertainty? How could Ethelred act wisely from one day to the next when at any moment, his own friends could turn on him?

"What's this?" called a young man. "What ails you, my friend?"

Edmund looked up, annoyed by the interruption. But the sight of the churl who addressed him gave him pause. The peasant,

only a few years older than himself, stood and spoke like a nobleman. He had long curly hair that reminded him of Alfric's, though he quickly forced this thought away, recognizing this as the paranoia his father had warned him about. The fellow seemed to be on hard times, whatever his station, for his clothes were ill-fitting and coming apart at the seams. The horse he held next to him carried a casket of wine, leaking a small red river down the its belly. But none of these misfortunes seemed to phase the young man, whose eyes twinkled with optimism.

“Who are you?” Edmund grumbled at last.

“Eadric of Staffordshire.”

Edmund did not recognize the name. But if he was here from Staffordshire, might he be a thegn hoping to make a name for himself at the king's witenagemot? Or even one of the lesser wise men?

“Now tell me who has wronged you,” Eadric went on. “A lord? A churchman? Or perhaps a woman? I can help you with any of the above—especially the last.”

“Can you help me with a father?”

“I know little of fathers.” Eadric's face pinched as if the word put a bad taste in his mouth. “But what has he done to you?”

“He has done nothing to me, but everyone else complains of him. They call him foolish and incompetent.” He glared at Eadric. “I bet you don't even know what that word means.”

“It means he cannot do his job.”

Edmund scowled. He hadn't realized the word was so insulting.

“If you ask me,” Eadric went on, “a job is a job. What matters is whether he can protect himself, and his family. A job is only a means to an end. Do you follow?”

“I ... think so.” He didn't. But he wanted to.

Eadric smiled. “Cheer up, my friend. The purpose of a job is to buy bread and live a comfortable life. Therefore its purpose is to be happy, and so it must be useless, if it makes no one happy. Consider the king. He is a king! And yet do you hear how people ridicule him?”

Edmund blinked with surprise.

“When the king asks people to pay money to the Vikings, and thus delay the next attack, everyone shouts and complains. But the king is only doing what he must: protecting himself and his own. In any case, he wants his people to be happy, and if they stopped complaining, perhaps they would be.”

Could it be? Someone who actually approved of his father’s actions? “They say he should fight more. But he won’t.”

The young man shifted about uncertainly. “And do you blame him? Why, if I was the king, I wouldn’t fight much at all, I think.”

“Then you’re a coward!”

Eadric crossed his arms over his chest. “Am I? Think about it, friend. Our Saxon kings tried to fight the Vikings for over two hundred years, and it hasn’t accomplished a thing.”

“Then what would you do?”

Eadric’s grin stretched from ear to ear. “Whatever method was fastest and easiest, I suppose: a method that certainly would not be found on the battlefield.”

Edmund thought of what Aydith had said. Ethelred needed to do something both definite and non-confrontational. Was that the sort of thing this poor noble had in mind?

Eadric shook his head lackadaisically. “Don’t think on it so much. The king does what he must to protect and feed us; I am sure your father is the same. And if he isn’t ... then to hell with him!”

It was the last unexpected nugget thrown Edmund’s way: this fellow truly had no idea who he was talking to! Unable to endure any more surprises, Edmund got up and ran off again.

This time he aimed his feet towards the palace. The strange teenager’s cheerful and cocky mood had gotten through to him somehow. If Eadric had not known who he was speaking to, then perhaps he actually meant what he said about Ethelred? Perhaps he could actually be trusted?

And perhaps if this Eadric—who despised fighting and liked easy solutions—had an idea of any value at all, then might King Ethelred actually heed it?

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, as compiled by various monks until the year 1140, were my primary sources of information. So, too, were the Chronicles of Florence of Worcester and the Chronicles of the Kings of England as written by William of Malmesbury. Without the devotion of these men to chronicle the chaotic events of their time, so little of the Dark Ages would be known.

I also want to thank the historians and authors listed below. Their research and writings helped to shed light on an otherwise dark and mysterious time as I sought to find Eadric's story.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jayden Woods is the pen name for Jenny Gibbons. She grew up on a farm in rural Tennessee, then pursued her dreams of film-making in Los Angeles. After receiving a BFA in Screenwriting from the University of Southern California and working on a primetime TV show, she decided to return to her original passion of writing novels. Since then she has lived in St. Louis with her wonderful husband and three beautiful pets, throwing all her will and energy into becoming a successful writer.

www.jaydenwoods.com

Praise for “Eadric the Grasper”

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“In the debut of her Sons of Mercia series, Woods tells a ripped-from-the-chronicles story—most of the characters and major events are factual—with an entertaining blend of period realism and Zorro-ish dazzle.”

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“A surprisingly easy and quick read considering the epic nature of the novel, Eadric the Grasper takes the reader through the twisted journey of an intelligent peasant (a swineherd) ... If I was forced to make a comparison, I’d say the book, in theme, feels like the Historical version of the award winning American television show, “Breaking Bad.” A good man, forced by situations far beyond his control, makes the the best decisions possible, but they lead him down the dark rabbit hole ...”

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“Many of the characters refer to [Eadric] as a coward, but I never thought of him in that way. If anything, he acted boldly and through astute observation of the swift changes coming to England, he did his best to forge a good life for him and his family. Still, his boldness accompanied a strange and dangerous naiveté that did not allow him to appreciate the full consequences of his actions at times. As in life, Jayden Woods’ Eadric remains a complicated character.”

—Lisa Yarde, Author of On Falcon’s Wings