

The Sutton Hoo Stories

Book One: Ætheling

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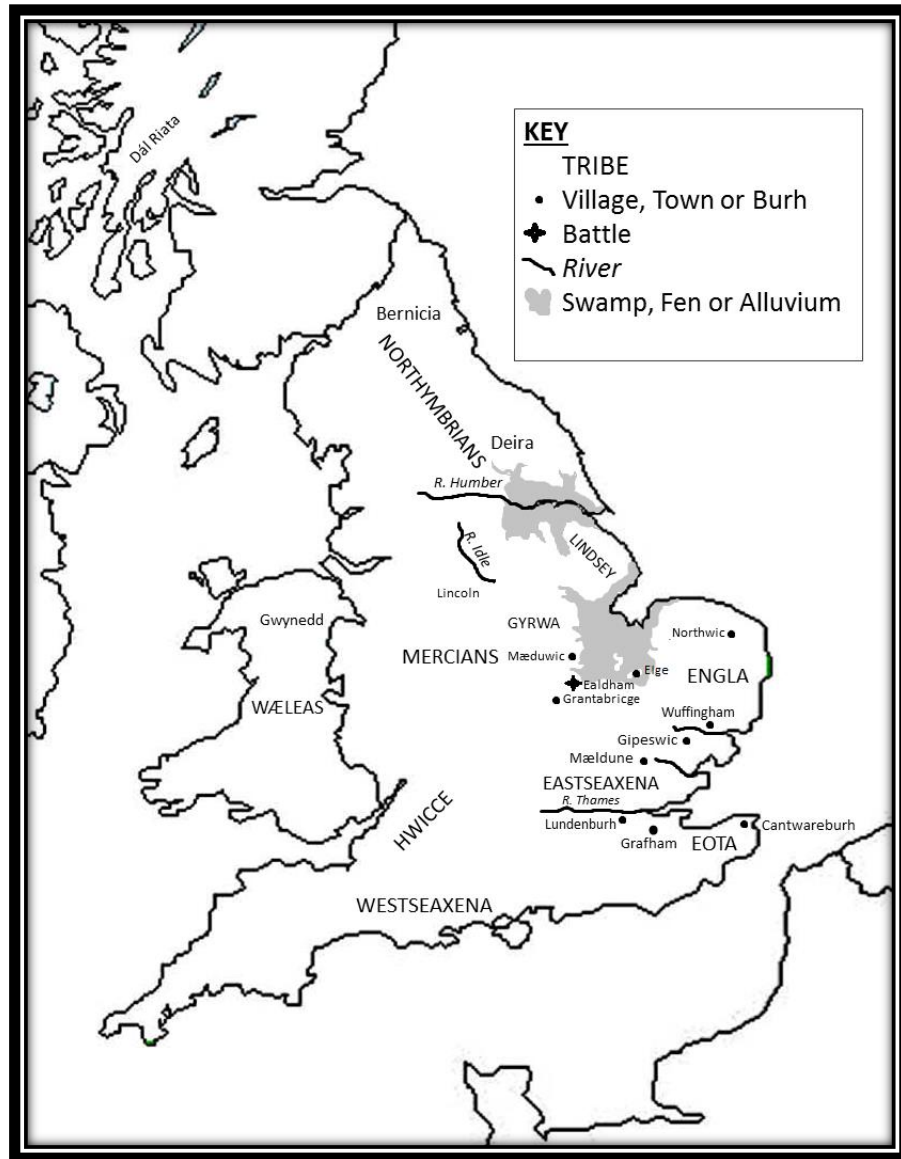
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The British Isles, AD 616



NOTE

This book contains words in Old English. This is not the language of Shakespeare (which is an archaic form of Modern English), nor is it the language of Chaucer (who spoke Middle English). This is the language of *Beowulf*, which can be somewhat intimidating to the casual reader. These words appear in *italics* throughout the book. For the ease of the reader, I have included a pronunciation guide, glossary and list of characters in the appendix to this book.

Old English Pronunciation Guide

Old English	Pronunciation	As in...
Æ/æ	[æ]	C <u>at</u> , bl <u>a</u> ck, <u>a</u> sh
Þ/þ or Ð/ð	[ð] or [θ]	<u>th</u> ere OR <u>th</u> ing
cg	[dʒ]	ed <u>g</u> e
sc	[ʃ]	<u>sh</u> ip, <u>sh</u> ield
g	[g] or [j] or [ɣ]	grave OR y <u>e</u> ar OR [ɣ] (like German or Dutch 'g' sound)

Old English Glossary

Old English	Pronunciation	Definition
ætheling	ah-the-ling	prince/princess, son or daughter of a king or high nobleman
ceorl	churl	Free servant
cwene	kway-n	queen
cyning	kyoo-ning	King
dryhten	drick-ten	chieftain, warlord, commander
ealdorman	ay-al-dor-man	earl, nobleman
flyting	fly-ting	a verbal competition of wits, often involving poetic insults
gedriht	ye-drickt	professional trained warriors
heahcwene	hay-ah-kway-n	high queen
heahcyning	hay-ah-kyoo-ning	high king
hilderinc	hill-deh-rink	warrior
hlæfdige	hla-dee-yeh	lady, princess, noblewoman (archaic form of "lady")
hlaford	hla-ford	lord, chief, leader (archaic form of "lord")
huscarl	hoos-karl	household guard, bodyguard, retainer
Moði	Mo-thee	Diminutive form of mother, like mum or mummy
moot/-mot	moot	meeting, gathering
pening/ peningas	pen-ing/pen-ing-as	unit of currency, equivalent to about £15-20
scylling/ scyllingas	shilling/shilling-as	unit of currency, equivalent to about £100
symbol	sim-bel	a highly ritualized drinking ceremony in a mead hall
thegn	thane	retainers of a king or lord, similar to the later knight
wergild	ware-gild	Fine for an offense against a person (lit. "man-gold")
witenagamot	wi-tana-ga-mot	council

Prologue

Annie waits for me at the top of the steps.

“Do we get a discount if I show them my military ID?” she asks, digging around in her passport bag.

“Nah, it’s free,” I say, but I push a couple of five-pound notes into the Plexiglas donation box.

It is stark white in here, and the sleek, ultramodern glass ceiling clashes weirdly with the majestic colonnaded entrances to the exhibits, but I kind of like the dissonance.

We go left first.

The huge bust of Ramses fills the room, and I start to say the first few lines of Shelley’s Ozymandias before Annie rolls her eyes.

“You’re turning into Mom,” she says.

“God damn it,” I say, “you’re right.”

We work our way through the Egyptian sculpture, and Annie has me take a picture of her in front of the winged bulls with human heads, which guard the entrance to the Assyria exhibit.

“What do they call these?” She asks, pointing to the sculptures. “Read the signs, dumbass,” I tell her.

“You’re supposed to know all about this stuff,” Annie says, pulling me by the neck to take a selfie in front of one of the sculptures. We both pucker stupidly and she sifts through a couple of Instagram filters. She sends it with the caption, “British Museum!” and six or seven little hearts and hashtags and smiley faces and even a smiling poop. She sends the same picture to Zack and Jesse, with the caption *suck it, bitches, we’re in London!*

They respond with some kind words of their own.

“I didn’t study Assyriology,” I say. “Besides, didn’t you see this kind of stuff when you were over in the Gulf?”

“I was only in the hotel in Dubai for like a day before I had to get on the boat,” she says, glancing at a sign on one of the friezes and taking a picture of the dying cat indicated on the slab of brown stone. “After that it was a whole lot of water. I did go to a couple of the museums in Rome though. That was pretty cool.”

My feet start to hurt by the time we finish the Greece and Rome exhibits, and Annie's making suggestions about heading to the gift shop. I shake my head. "We have to go upstairs."

"Ugh. If you only came for the medieval stuff, then why didn't we just go there first?" She asks.

"It's like when you save the big caramel swirl in your ice cream for last."

"Ooh, we should go get some ice cream when we're done here!" she says, and we start to climb the white stairs in the center of the massive atrium.

"Well hang on," she says as I push past her. "I want to look at this stuff."

I don't listen to her. I follow the line of galleries to the end. I push my purse back onto my shoulder, wishing it wasn't so heavy. Annie follows behind me at a trot, muttering something like "nerd."

My fingers find my ponytail, like they usually do when I'm nervous. The room is blue, and the cases are angular and sharp-looking. The artefacts are green with corrosion, sitting neatly on little shelves behind the glass, with clean white signs beneath them.

I want to run around the room screaming, but I'm rooted to the spot as I look at every item.

"Oh cool, I remember this from your thesis," she says, looking into one of the cases.

"I'm surprised you read it," I say.

She shrugs. "It had a lot of archaeology-ish stuff that I didn't really get, but I got the gist."

"That's the whetstone and the stag," I say, pointing to the long stone shaft with a stag-topped iron ring. "We think it came together to make a kind of scepter for the Bretwalda."

"Bretwalda, that was the king right?" she asks.

"Not exactly," I say. "See, back in about the 600s, you have all these separate Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, like Mercia and Wessex and East Anglia and Kent, right, and they kind of do their own thing and run their own kingdoms, but occasionally there is someone mentioned called the Bretwalda. No one's really sure exactly what 'Bretwalda' means but he acted as something like an overlord of all these little kingdoms. There were only a few of these guys, and they seem to crop up when there were periods of turmoil or transition."

"Do you just have like an endless supply of Old English words on hand?" she asks, examining the Anastasius bowl in another of the cases.

"Pretty much," I say. "So anyway, the whetstone would have symbolized strength in battle, like how the Bretwalda could keep his men honed and ready to fight, and then the stag is like the king of the forest, so it's an old symbol of power."

"Oh cool," she says noncommittally.

She doesn't get it. Then, if she took me to tour her aircraft carrier, I probably wouldn't really get it either. She is too nice to show that she doesn't really give a shit.

I am almost afraid to round the corner. If I do, I'll see it, and then I won't be able to leave again. The old janitor will have to sweep me out, and even then, I'll only go kicking and screaming.

I tighten my ponytail again, nervously walking past the carved standing stone. My heart is pounding. My palms are sweating. I'm glad Annie isn't looking.

You can't see much of it anymore. Most of the helmet rotted away in the acidic soil where it had been for the last 1400 years before they dug it up. The ancient iron looks like scales against the plain, featureless mold of the helmet. Nevertheless, the face is still there, a bird with outstretched wings that forms the nose and the eyebrows of the facemask. I forgot how big it was.

The sign above the helmet says, "The Sutton Hoo Ship Burial, Early AD 600s."

This is why I hate archaeology. I get too invested. I get caught up in their lives. I'm not supposed to, but I do. I'm supposed to write papers that no one will ever read, about why this interlace pattern indicates a paradigm shift, or what we can deduce from using Raman Spectroscopy instead of XRF for elemental analysis of artifacts. That's what I'm supposed to do.

I feel the dirt under my fingernails as I prod around in their world. My back aches and the sun burns my neck and flies bite my ankles. I find the broken pieces of the lives that came before me; I look at them under a microscope

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in a sterile lab, and I pick away the dirt that was thrown over their graves. I'm not supposed to hear them. I'm not supposed to watch their lives unfolding in front of me every time I close my eyes. It hurts. And I love it.

Annie holds my hand as I close my eyes.

And there they are.

Chapter One

Eadyth

The great building punctured the sky, crushing the houses, workshops, stables and yards with its shadow. The hillock on which it stood was the highest point for miles on this side of the river, and now that it was crowned with the new hall, it seemed a mountain. Eadyth entered the hall, whose doors were flung wide to let in the light. The serving folk within greeted her with bows and lowered eyes, but she waved them back to their work.

Eadyth had marked her children's growth by the construction of this hall. Sunniva had been a squalling baby in Eadyth's arms while the foundation was being dug. Sigebryht had fought in his first shield wall while the crossbeams were being carved with intricately lacing beasts. Rægen and Eorwald had tried to fly off the newly thatched roof with a pair of pilfered goose wings they had stolen from a butcher. Even though no feasts had yet been held here, it was already filled with memories.

"Æsc," she called, scanning the hall for the *ceorl*. She found him near the back door, admonishing some girl for dropping a bucket of water. The bucket's contents were soaking into the packed earth of the floor, and as Eadyth approached, the girl scurried away. Æsc wore his usual simpering smile when he saw her, and he bowed low in greeting.

"Everything is going smoothly, I hope?" she asked him, "We'll be having some extra men tonight; I'm sure you were told?"

Æsc nodded. "Yes, my *cwene*. There is more than enough food, and they will have room to sleep here in the hall with the other thegns tonight. It is all taken care of."

"Good." Eadyth ticked off her list of chores in her mind. "We will need the chests brought in as well. The *cyning* plans to give out rings tonight, so make sure that the two large caskets are brought out and placed next to the high seat." Æsc nodded, and she continued, "We will need to lock the doors before the ceremony, so make sure that your serving folk are out by noon, if you can. You may leave one or two to tend the fires and the meat, but they will have to use the back door."

"Yes, my *cwene*," he said.

"Finally, before the guests arrive I want you to take one sixth portion of the meat and one fourth portion of the rest of the food and set them aside for the serving folk. Bread and smoked fish and salt, particularly, that way they can save it for later if they wish."

Æsc seemed mildly scandalized. "Forgive me, my *cwene*, but surely that is too much! Might I suggest a tenth

portion instead? That is the usual amount to feed to slaves at a feast.”

Eadyth glared at him. “I know what the usual amount is,” she said, “And you will do as I say, or you will go without food and see how it feels.”

He did not argue. “It will be done.”

“Thank you.” She dismissed him, and he slithered off.

Eadyth left the hall, and found a willowy young woman standing near the door.

“Ah, Milthryth,” Eadyth said, “I was hoping to find you. My good blue dress needs to be aired out, if you wouldn’t mind. I also need you to attend Sunniva today; I don’t know anyone who does hair as beautifully as you do.”

“Of course,” the willowy girl said. “It would be my pleasure.”

“And make sure you have enough time to get yourself ready,” Eadyth called after her, and Milthryth nodded her head gracefully to indicate that she had heard.

Eadyth ran through her list again in her mind during the moment of solitude, but she was interrupted when she saw two gruff looking men approach her.

The bright man reached her first, and kissed her on the cheek.

“Rædwald, have you done any work at all? These are your men we are feasting, and yet you haven’t lifted a finger to prepare.”

“I’ve been making sure our sons are fighting fit,” Rædwald said in an appalled voice. “That is hard and thirsty work.”

“Well then get yourself a cup of ale and go do something useful. I’ve enough to manage right now.”

“You don’t know how beautiful you are when you order people around,” Rædwald said, stepping closer. “I’ve half a mind to follow you into battle.”

“Maybe you should,” she laughed, “I’d bring back more treasure.”

“You wound me,” Rædwald said.

“Well you’ll have to wait to die until later, I’m afraid; I have too much to do right now to tend to your corpse,” Eadyth told her husband. She turned to the iron-haired man and said, “Ricbert, how are you?”

“Very well, my *cwene*,” the grim man said, “I’ve just been taking a beating from those sons of yours. They are turning into formidable warriors. Sige was giving us all a lesson in how to properly handle a spear.”

Yes, Eadyth thought, *Sigebryht’s father was good with a spear too. It didn’t stop him dying on one, though.*

“And the others?”

“Eorwald nearly took my arm off, even with a practice blade, and Rægen is quick as lightning.”

Eadyth grinned. “I’m sure they’ll be well prepared when they see battle,” she said.

“They are truly their father’s sons,” Ricbert looked at Rædwald, who was swelling with pride.

“Well, I think my boys have a little less around the middle than their father,” she poked at Rædwald’s waist, and Rædwald grabbed her by the arm.

“You’ll excuse us, Ricbert,” Rædwald told his friend, suddenly business-like as Ricbert gave one of his rare smiles, “I need to go discipline my wife for her cheek.” In a fluid motion he had lifted her from the ground and flung her over his shoulder.

She tried to tell Ricbert something, but it came out in a squeal as her husband carried her away. She saw Ricbert laughing as Rædwald flung open the door to the king’s temporary house. Eadyth protested, but only feebly, kicking her legs and beating on Rædwald’s back as he carried her, slung like a deer over his back, but her amusement won out over the annoyance.

Her feet crunched the rushes on the floor as he set her down. Within a heartbeat, his mouth closed on hers. One hand was on her back, the other snaking through her hair. She pulled away from him, though with great reluctance.

“Damn your eyes, Rædwald,” she punched his arm, “I don’t have time for this. There’s too much to do.”

“There are hours yet. We have time.” He kissed her again. “You wouldn’t deny your *cynig*.”

“I’ll deny you all I want, you great sot,” her own arms wrapped around his neck and she bit his lip gently. “I am your *cwene* and the mistress of this house.”

“Oho! I’ve always wanted to bed royalty.” He lifted her a second time and tossed her on the furs of their bed.

He lay next to her a while later, his hand across her stomach. “Do you think you could be pregnant again?” he asked.

Eadyth smiled at him but did not say anything.

“If you were pregnant, would you want a boy or a girl?” he persisted.

“I seem to be good at making boys.” She said lightly, but he seemed to sense the sadness in her voice.

“I’m sure it will happen,” he said reassuringly. “You worry too much.”

"I haven't conceived in years," she said. "And you remember what happened the last two times. I think I've given up on that dream."

"We're both still young," said Rædwald. "You've got time for me to get another child on you before we are old and grey."

"I hope you are right. I'm not ready to be a grandmother yet."

"Who said anything about becoming a grandmother?" Rædwald laughed and kissed her, "Our children aren't old enough for you to be a grandmother."

"Our children are grown, and they will be starting their own families soon. There's no escape from the inevitable." She sighed. "Oh, but I do miss the little ones. I miss chasing them and playing with balls and holding them when they fall down. I'm afraid I will never get to do that again."

"Sunki is still young..."

"Sunniva is a woman flowered and grown, and you're blind if you can't see that every man from here to the Fens wants her," Eadyth said, exasperated at the thought of her daughter. "My sons are grown men who have seen battle, and my daughter stopped being a child when she decided to flop onto her back for the first thegn's son to wink at her. What can I do if I am no longer their mother?"

Rædwald pulled her close. "You'll always be their *moði*," he said, "They'll need you differently, but they'll still always need you."

She gave him a wan smile. He would not understand her need, and it was best to let him think he was helping. "Well, in any case I should finish preparing for tonight." She stood and shifted her dress back into place, and combed her flyaway hair back into her braid. "You are such a distraction."

When her husband had gone, Eadyth stripped off her working clothes and washed her hands and face in the basin. She was still flushed, but the cold water and the silence of her room were refreshing. Milthryth floated in a while later, carrying Eadyth's favorite blue underdress, and lifted the impossibly soft linen over Eadyth's head. She loved the occasions when she could wear her finest clothes; the dress was dyed a deep blue, hemmed in silk ribbon and fastened at the wrists with large gold clasps. It hugged her waist and her arms, and pooled like water on the floor. She pulled the bright yellow kirtle over the top and fastened the straps with a large gold brooch on each shoulder.

She sat on a stool in front of Milthryth, who chatted happily about her new marriage and how she might get a baby in her as soon as possible. Eadyth offered what expertise she could; it was up to the gods whether the girl's womb would be full or not, and sometimes the gods withheld. Milthryth wove Eadyth's hair into a series of plaits and knots, securing them with jeweled pins. She hung a three-stranded chain from the brooches at her collarbones, the beads of glass and amber and the garnet glinted in the sunlight pouring in through open door.

Gold bracelets and rings weighed down her hands; she hardly ever wore so many jewels and they felt bulky and ungainly as she fastened her belt around her waist. On one hip rested her seax, her short sword, in its stamped leather sheath, on the other hung her keys and an ornamental drop spindle. Her working spindle lay in a basket of fluffy wool beside the bed, heavy with newly twisted white yarn, but she would not be spinning tonight.

"How do I look?" Eadyth asked.

"Queenly," said Milthryth. "How many people are coming?"

Eadyth thought for a moment, ticking the numbers off on her fingers. "There are ten ealdormen, and their wives and children are here as well, plus another twenty thegns and a smattering of huscarls, but they won't bring their families, so there will be at least a hundred, I expect."

"So many?" Milthryth seemed shocked.

Eadyth laughed. "It won't be crowded; the new hall is enormous. Crowds mean there are men who fight for my husband, and that is a good thing." This was only partly true. While Eadyth did appreciate that her husband had the loyalty of so many thegns, the noise of loud boasts and drunken songs usually made her head ache and left her tired for days afterward. The old hall, three miles away by the Wood Bridge, was not large enough to accommodate the numbers Rædwald was expected to host regularly, and more often than not the men were forced to sleep crammed together as though on a ship. The new hall was at least three times as large, and their guests would have room to eat at trestle tables and then curl up comfortably to sleep without being stacked three-deep.

Eadyth instructed Milthryth to find Sunniva to make sure that she was ready, and then Eadyth stepped out into the weak sunshine. It was cool and damp, but the sun had burned away the mist that had lingered during the morning, leaving everything bright and fresh. There was a line of tents and pavilions on the outside of the hamlet where the early arrivals had been staying for the past few nights, and a stream of people were filing toward the great hall and crowding dutifully around the entrance. Eadyth knew they cared less for the blessing than for the feast itself, but no one wished to bring bad luck down on the king's new hall by not attending.

As she expected, Sige was the first of her children to arrive, solemn and stately as ever and wearing the massive

boar's head cloak pin, which had belonged to his father. As she watched him approach, it struck her how much he looked like his father: tall and thin as a spear, with warm brown, Eastseaxisc eyes and flecks of red in his close-cropped beard. The Englisc all seemed to have blue eyes and flaxen hair, and she saw in Sigebyrht an image of her own people. She loved him for it.

He greeted her with a kiss, and was followed by Rægen and Eorwald, joking about something or other. She was sure Eorwald had grown another half a foot since that morning, and he was rubbing his newly shorn head while Rægen's face lit up with a grin. Sunniva followed them, and Rægen caught her by the neck, mussing her long brown hair. She extracted herself with dignity as Rægen and Eorwald laughed and Sige tried to look serious.

"You look very pretty, Sunniva," Eadyth told her daughter. It was a lie. Sunniva was painfully beautiful. Intricate braids pulled the light brown curls away from her face, woven with small gold rings, while the rest of her hair tumbled down to her waist. The blue dress she wore hugged her body, truly that of a woman now. Eadyth glanced around, certain that some man or other would be ogling the girl; Eadyth did not know whether to be protective, or mildly envious.

"Thank you, Moði," Sunniva said brightly, and followed her brothers to join in their jests.

The king arrived, bedecked in as much gold as he could physically place on his body. Gold arm-rings, gold clasps for his cloak, gold and garnet beads; even the ends of the straps that held his sword in place were decorated with small gold studs. At his waist was a gold belt buckle that was as long as Eadyth's hand, ornately decorated with interlaced beasts. He looked a king in every sense. He greeted each of the children in turn, and then came to Eadyth.

"My *cwene*," he said, kissing her hand. "Let us welcome the world."

Sunniva

Sunniva shifted from one foot to the other, a bead of sweat trailing down her spine. It was not warm, but the autumn sun was out and heated the dark cloak so that she felt as if she was being roasted. She looked around at the assembled people, all dressed in their finest clothes and adorned with every gold and silver ornament they owned, staring in rapt reverence at the *godeswif*. The *godeswif* had brought half of these people into the world, after all, Sunniva included, and all assembled had benefitted from the woman's magic and herb lore. Her face, surrounded by blindingly white hair, was lined with wisdom rather than with great age, and she was smiling as she looked at the assembled folk, lifting her long, strong arms into the air as she spoke her blessings.

Sunniva felt her stomach rumble when the breeze changed and brought the scent of roasting meat down from the smoke hole in the great hall's ceiling. She heard the *godeswif*'s voice droning a blessing on the house, but a gnat's buzzing distracted her. She flicked it away and mother gave her a look as to tell her to settle down.

She caught the eye of Wynne, Sunniva's oldest friend, who looked equally bored. Wynne smiled and Sunniva returned it, rolling her eyes in a silent commentary on the ritual. She continued to scan the crowd for faces she knew. Milthryth stood a few paces behind Wynne with her new husband, and she looked pious and willowy as usual. Milthryth's brother Anlaf was staring at Sunniva, a greedy and guilty look on his face. Sunniva winked at him, and saw him go as red as his sister's dress. She had always loved teasing him, sitting on his lap and letting him get hard, then running away to giggle with Wynne. The poor boy was a few years older than she was, around Eorwald's age, and just as infatuated with her as any other boy she knew. He asked her to marry him at least once a fortnight, and Sunniva would give him a kiss and tell him no. Then he would turn scarlet and run home, but would come right back the next day for more punishment. She would have fun with him tonight; that was for certain.

The *godeswif* had turned from the doors of the hall and took a bowl from her assistant. The bowl was filled with the blood of the ox they had sacrificed the previous day, mixed with water from a sacred pool somewhere Sunniva had never heard of. The *godeswif* dipped a fir branch in the water and splashed a few drops on the doors of the hall. She then handed Mother the key ring, and blessed her and Father by smearing a drop of the watery blood on their foreheads. She blessed each of Sunniva's brothers, first Rægenhere, then Eorwald, then Sigebyrht, that Woden grant them wisdom, Tiw give them courage, and Thunor give them strength. She thought it was unfair that Sige always came last, even though he was the eldest; it was of course because Sige was not the king's own son, and only their half-brother, but he was still before Sunniva, the only girl. The *Godeswif* then turned and smeared a drop of blood on Sunniva's forehead, blessing her with fertility and grace in the name of Friga. She was rather envious that her brothers got the strength and courage, but she knew that it would do no good to protest.

"My honored friends," Father raised his hand as the *godeswif* retreated, "I welcome you all to my new high seat,

which I name the Briggweard. I invite you to my board, my beloved warriors, and offer you the gifts of my hearth and my hall. Let us celebrate a bountiful harvest and hope for a healthy and prosperous new year to come.” The words were strange coming out of Father’s mouth, but he had to say them. He spoke with the king’s voice today, all courtesy and boasts and praise and tradition. The crowd cheered, and with the scrape of wood on stone, the king and queen pushed open the doors.

Sunniva’s first memories were of this hall, though the familiar scent of sawdust had been replaced by the thick aroma of roasting meat; the shouts of the workers supplanted by the murmurs of the crowd. It was her home, though she had barely stepped foot inside. Her entire life had been spent waiting for this hall, the greatest work of her father. The years of toil and battle he had spent, the loyalties he had won, were all immortalized in this building. Here was where he would reward his thegns for their service and their loyalty, here he would drink and feast in celebration and sorrow, and here would his bier lie when they said their final farewells. It was a part of him, a part of their family. Long after they were all gone, the great Bridge-Protector would still be there, and men would feast and drink and sing there until the end of days.

Sunniva gave her eyes a moment to adjust to the dimness of the hall. She strode between her brothers and took their hands as they entered the building. She had of course seen the hall during its construction, but she had not appreciated the immensity until now, as she walked its length to the high seat. It seemed as though every wooden beam was carved with figures of boars and bears and wolves and eagles. There was a torch stuck in a bracket on each post, each one aflame. The light made the carvings look almost alive, and the gold and silver ornaments on her father and brothers made them look like they were on fire.

“Magnificent,” she said to herself.

Thick wooden pillars created a central aisle which held the long stone hearth. Trestle tables, benches and stools ran along the central aisle where the floor was sunken, so that at least two hundred men could sit comfortably. Tapestries and curtains hung along the walls to keep out the cold and could be drawn across the alcoves for warmth and privacy. All depicted stories of ancient heroes as well as tales of their own ancestors, the Wuffingas. Mother had woven many of these tapestries herself, or with the help of women from the nearby village of Wuffingham. Sunniva rather wished that she could have played some part in the decoration of the hall, but her deplorable weaving skills meant that her works usually ended up as horse blankets.

She saw several of the ealdormen entering behind them, all wearing a similar expression to her own, of awe and delight. They too were clearly overwhelmed by the beauty of the space. She felt a deep sense of pleasure at the fact that they most likely had never, and would probably never again, enter a house so splendid.

Rægen gave her hand a squeeze, which she returned with an excited grin. She breathed deeply through her nose and her stomach rumbled again. The scents of roasting meat and freshly baked bread filled the hall, and she saw Rægen stealing shifty glances at a pile of honey cakes being brought within an arm’s reach of them.

“Get one for me?” she whispered.

“We’ll eat soon enough,” he said with a pained expression.

Normally Sunniva would have wandered off to eat with Wynne and the other girls, but tonight all of the royal children shared the table next to the high seat with other honored guests. Feasters descended and arranged themselves on pillows and cushions and benches around the trestle tables lining the length of the hall. To Sunniva’s dismay, she would have to wait to fill her growling stomach. Before the food and drink were served, the faithful thegns were rewarded for their service with gifts of gold, land, jewelry and other goods. This was the natural way; they fought and sometimes died for her father and they deserved to be rewarded for their service. This ritual was performed in every hall in the world, as far as she knew, though the ceremony was, in Sunniva’s mind, agonizingly boring. Even so, she was touched at the love they showed the king; it was one thing to fight for a man for the promise of gold and land, but they looked at him just as she did, as a father who loved them.

Eorwald had a look in his eye which bordered on lust when the servants began to bring out the food. The trestle tables were soon heavily laden with hot fresh bread, carrots and onions floating in broth, eels, at least five kinds of fish, thick rashers of bacon, oat cakes, boiled duck eggs, baked plums, butter and honey and flagons of mead and stout beer. Sunniva and her brothers offered the first of their food to the gods, and then Sunniva tried a bite of everything. She was full to bursting by the time the giant roasted cut of the sacrificed ox was brought to the king. She had some of that too, though, and she drank enough mead to make her dizzy.

“You ought to slow down,” Sige told her as she started on her third cup, “you’ll make yourself sick.” He was right, but she would never admit it.

“I’m fine,” she said with a hiccup. She had never been allowed to drink as much as she wanted during feasts, though this never really stopped her and Wynne from pilfering a jug of ale and getting drunk together. She realized that she was having trouble focusing on Sige’s face, however, and decided to slow down.

When the food had been finished, Sunniva saw Wynne waving at her from across the hall, where a knot of girls were standing and gossiping happily. Sunniva glanced over at her mother, who seemed to be deep in talk with Ricbert; and then at her father, who was concentrating on finishing his ale and looking very red in the face. She knew that she would not be missed, and she hurried to her friends, who were all giggling loudly.

"It's the gracious *mædenwene!*" Wynne kissed her on both cheeks, "it's so grand, isn't it? Your father is so generous to share his new hall with us."

"Your father seems pleased," Sunniva told her friend, and Wynne quickly dispatched with the honorifics.

"My father is absolutely dying of happiness right now. If I thought he was devoted to the *cýning* before ..." she said, rolling her eyes in a theatrical but loving way, "six cows, three iron spears, and so much gold I don't think he'll ever be able to carry it home. Look," she held out a thick golden disc, hanging from a string of beads from her neck. "Father's just given it to me."

"Beautiful," Sunniva said, admiring the pendant and sitting down at the table to join her friends in their gossip. A serving girl had just finished filling her cup when Sunniva heard a muffled sob from the corner of the alcove behind them. "Oh, no," she said, "What's wrong with Leofdæg?"

Wynne lowered her voice conspiratorially, "It's that man of hers. You know she's been going on that he'll marry her, but that a *ceorl* could never marry a thegn's daughter, so he was saving to buy more land so that he could provide for her? Well, the king's given him the gift of two acres and a pig after the last fighting season, and he's got a mill on that land, which now gives him the rights of a thegn. And what do you know?" her voice dropped to a bare whisper, "he won't have her."

"No!" Sunniva gasped and she stole a glance at Leofdæg, who was weeping against the wall. "What happened?"

"As soon as the other thegns found out he had land and was going to build a house of his own, they started offering their daughters up for him. He suddenly had very little time for our sweet Leofdæg, I'm afraid."

"I heard she had his bastard in her belly and that's why he had said he would marry her, because her father was going to give him half again her bride wealth." A short, stocky girl named Eoforhild appeared at Sunniva's elbow, eager to join in on the gossip.

"She's not got anyone's baby in her," Wynne said, turning her back on Eoforhild, "stop making up stories, and mind your own business." Eoforhild glowered and skulked away. "Well, she hasn't got anyone's baby in her anymore," Wynne finished in Sunniva's ear.

Sunniva clapped her hand over her mouth. "Tell me?"

Wynne shook her head, the look she usually got when she was sharing a secret slid away to be replaced with a frown. "She told him she was pregnant, and she thought he would be pleased and that he would marry her then, but he said that if she was giving herself to him before they were married she was probably opening her legs to everyone else as well, so he told her he would not claim the babe when it was born. She went to the *godeswif* the very same day and, well, you know..." she trailed off, with a pointed look at Leofdæg.

"The poor thing," Sunniva said, looking at the girl as well. She was sitting quietly, but her face was puffy and red, and she looked as if anything could set her off. Sunniva pulled Wynne's hand, and they sat on either side of Leofdæg, who had a strong honeyed scent of mead on her breath. The girl was staring at a young man who was drinking with the other thegns; she could see why Leofdæg had liked him, but when he looked their way Sunniva shot a venomous glare at him.

"Calm yourself now, my love," Sunniva said, "Dry your tears. No sweet girl should have to be settled with a stupid spotty arse like him." She wiped the girls' tears away with her thumb and gave her wet cheek a kiss. "Let's have a drink and a cake and in the morning we will have forgotten all about him."

They nibbled some honey cakes and talked about boys and complimented one another's dresses and jewels. Leofdæg seemed to feel rather better as they pointed out nice looking young men, thegns and serving *ceorls* alike, and flashed smiles and fluttered their eyelashes, making the men blush or wink back in their direction. A few of her companions sighed and fawned as Rægen picked up the harp and started to sing.

"He's so beautiful," Wynne said next to her, her chin cupped in one hand. Several of the other girls agreed in simpering voices. "And such a nice voice, I could let him sing to me all night long."

Everyone was in love with Rægen, and Sunniva had long-since given up trying to fight their infatuation. He was indeed beautiful, if that was the right word to describe a man; he and Sunniva looked so much alike that they were sometimes mistaken for twins even though he was four years her senior, and Sunniva knew that she was beautiful, because everyone constantly told her so. They shared the same light brown hair and grey eyes, and Rægen was one of the kindest people that Sunniva knew, always jesting and smiling in a way that made Sunniva's friends melt into simpering puddles. Wynne in particular had been obsessed with him since before he had grown a beard, and it tired Sunniva to see her wasting her time.

"You know it's never going to happen," Sunniva said.

"I can dream," Wynne sniffed.

"Why don't you talk to Eorwald? He likes you."

"He's so fierce, though!" Eoforhild piped up again.

"You should want someone fierce!" Sunniva protested. In all fairness, Eorwald was quite fierce-looking, and it wasn't helped by the way he shaved his head and left his beard long, making him look much older than he actually was. She knew that he was a dear, really, but she understood why her friends might be frightened off. "You should want someone strong and brave and protective," she finished.

"Rægen is all of those things!" Wynne simpered. "Plus he's better looking. Especially when he's not got much on." There was an appreciative round of tittering from the assembled girls.

Sunniva rolled her eyes. "Have you actually seen Rægen without a tunic on? He looks like a shaved puppy."

"You just can't see it because he's your brother!" Eoforhild said.

Sunniva sighed. It was a lost cause. "I hope you all enjoy fighting one another for my brother, then," she said, feeling her head swim as she took a long draught of mead. "Meanwhile, I'll go and find a real man."

Her silly friends were talking once again about all the stupid things girls liked, and Sunniva joined in on it with great pleasure. She was feeling quite content and a little bit drunk, when a cool draft fluttered in from the door. A man slipped in, unnoticed by most except for those sitting nearby. The man strode to the high table and was greeted by the king, and then embraced by Ricbert and then by her brothers. He sat at the board in Sunniva's vacated seat and she watched him as he ate and joked with Rægen and Sige; Eorwald seemed to have drunk himself to sleep.

She remembered the man's face, but could not find a name to match. She felt herself smiling as she looked at him, though, and for a moment imagined how those broad shoulders might look without a tunic covering them, how it might feel to wind her fingers through his hair, the color of rusted iron –

Ecgric, she remembered, the dreamy smile turning into a grimace of annoyance. Ricbert's son. Of course, why hadn't she remembered at first sight? She had known him well, years ago, before he had gone to Cantwareburh, when he was still a beardless boy playing with her brothers. He had been so cruel to her back then; she had a sudden desire to punch him when she remembered the last time they had spoken.

"You can't play with swords," he had told her, "you are a girl, so you must play with dolls inside. This is men's work." He had been half a foot taller than Sige, with a wisp of dark hair on his lip that looked like dirt. She had punched him in the cock, she remembered, which was about as high as she could reach at six years old. She had run away, clutching her doll, as he had doubled up on himself. Rægen had doubled up as well, but with a fit of laughter that Sunniva heard follow her as she scampered away.

It was strange to think that the nasty boy who had teased her when she was little was the same one who sat with her brothers now. She knew he had been back to Wuffingham several times in the ten years he'd lived with his mother's people in the land of the Eota, but she had not bothered speaking with him. Perhaps she would do. *Maybe he's grown into less of a horse's arse after his long time away*, she thought, *the South's certainly been good to him*. He'd grown much taller since she'd last seen him, and harder, like he had been re-forged from a thin ash spear into a brutal iron battle-axe. She found it took a long time for her to look away.

She sipped some mead and watched the gathered folk for a while, pleased that the men could not take their eyes from her. She toyed with a stray curl and winked at a few of the younger men, enjoying the attention they gave her. She suddenly felt bored, anxious for a bit of fun.

"Anlaf," she called to the youth as he walked past the knot of girls, "Come and keep me company, I've missed you!" She shared a devious smile with Wynne, who scooted over to make room for him. He hesitated, and his ears turned red.

"I – I'm sorry, *blæfdige*, I don't think – I must go and find my father, please, excuse me," he shuffled away. She was caught off guard at the way he addressed her; hardly anyone used the formal term "*blæfdige*," except in front of the king. She quickly recovered her wits and watched Anlaf's retreating back.

"I don't think my dear Anlaf likes me anymore," Sunniva pouted.

"He seems to have grown weary of starting his night with a *cyningsdæhter* and ending it with his palm," Wynne said sagely. "Your little plaything seems to have moved on."

"I suppose I will just have to find a new plaything then, won't I?" Sunniva said, glancing back up to the high table.

Sigebryht

"I haven't seen so many girls in one place in years," Rægen smiled contentedly, surveying the room. Sige nodded, though without much enthusiasm. There were pretty girls, ugly girls, fat and skinny and everything in between; twenty of them at least, Engla and Seaxe alike, all gossiping happily as if they were sisters.

The Engla girls were fairer, light-haired and blue eyed, common enough sights in the hall, while the dark red and brown hair and honey brown eyes of the Seaxe people were a welcome change. They flitted around, giggling and drinking their mead, flirting with the handsome thegns who flirted back just as heartily.

Sige smirked as his two brothers had a heated argument over which one of the girls might be the most likely to get into bed with one of them. He was happy Sunniva had left to go and sit with the other girls; she would probably give them all a good smack if she heard their conversation. Maiden ears were not meant for the brusqueness of men's words, after all. Rægen had bet on the slight maid with bright red hair and a green dress, while Eorwald favored a sweet looking girl with golden curls and doe's eyes.

"I'll have to agree with Rægen on this one," Sigebryht told his youngest brother. "Fiery hair means she's fiery down below, that's what they say."

Rægen pounded his horn cup on the table, laughing. "Truer words were never spoken," he said, "Now, little brother; I think you owe me a song."

Eorwald scowled. "I owe you no such thing," he said, "I'm too drunk to remember any songs, anyway. Go on, you can play me to my rest." Eorwald put his head down on the table as Rægen called for the harp and set it on his knee. Those sitting near them hushed as Rægen's practiced fingers danced over the strings.

Sige laughed aloud at the look on the face of the golden haired girl, whom he recognized as one of Sunniva's friends. She leaned on her elbows, her eyes wide and wistful, and a bright pink flush appeared on her cheeks as Rægen winked at her.

"I may have been wrong," Sige muttered to his brother, "That other girl seems keen. You'd better go and claim your prize."

Rægen returned the grin and shook his head, absently plucking the strings, "I'll let them all stew a little longer, I think."

"Well if neither of you want to do anything about it, I'll take them both," a hand clapped Sigebryht on the shoulder. He turned to find a familiar face looming over them.

"Ecgric," he stood and embraced the newcomer. "We wondered if we would see you. We thought you'd been eaten by wolves."

"Near enough," he said, smacking the sleeping Eorwald on the back, causing him to jump awake. "I'd forgotten that the greenway bridge was broken, and had to go another eight miles out of the way to the ford. I practically had to carry the damn nag across; she refused to get her feet wet."

"Your father is probably pleased you've come home," Sige looked round at Ricbert, who was talking with the king. "He never stops talking about you."

"Yeah, he's always going on about what a horse's cunt you are," Eorwald mumbled drunkenly into the wood of the table.

"I see your little brother still can't handle his drink," Ecgric said with a smirk at Eorwald. "Too bad, he's missing the feast. Just look at those girls. Suddenly I'm not just hungry for food." A wicked grin crossed his face. "Oh that sweet little thing in the corner..." he trailed off with a suggestive groan of appreciation.

"Which?" Rægen was squinting, scanning the gaggle of girls once more.

"Over there. Look, in the alcove with all the girls, two along to the right. Brown hair, in the blue dress." He pointed, "She must be one of the Seaxe girls, right?"

"Eorwald is right; you are a horse's cunt," Sige said, "that's my sister you're leering at."

Ecgric stared, a mixture of shock and amusement on his face. "No... that can't be Sunniva. Sunniva hasn't got tits like that."

"Stop it," Sige smacked him on the back of the head. "She's a little girl."

"I hate to tell you this, my friend, but that is no little girl. Last time I saw her she was a knock-kneed little shit. I have been gone a long time."

Sige gave Ecgric a stern glance but Ecgric ignored it, still leering at the knot of women. "Who would have thought, Sunni the little pest, grown so pretty."

"If you don't stop talking about my sister like that I will geld you," Rægen warned.

Ecgric threw up his hands in submission. "My apologies!" he said, "I had no idea she had such fierce

protectors. I'll find a more reachable goal."

The argument recommenced over which girl might be the most likely to be Ecgric's bed warmer that night. Ecgric did not make idle boasts; he was rumored to have been the lover of the *beahcwenne* while he had been in Cantwareburh, and he had probably had half a hundred other women besides. Sigebryht wondered if there were any bastard children born in Cantwareburh with the same iron-brown hair.

The food was cleared away, and the harp was set aside as the hall began to dissolve into subdued drunkenness. Eorwald was slumped over the table, his head resting on his folded arms, and Rægen was trying to balance a stack of cups on his sleeping brother's head.

"Until the morning, my fine friends," Rædwald said as he disappeared with Eadyth through a door at the end of the hall. Many of the young women had departed as well, off to share their secrets and giggles in the *mædenhus* or shunted away by their mothers to their own homes in the village.

The trestle tables were pushed to the side, and serving men brought additional blankets and furs to line the wide alcoves where the visiting thegns would sleep.

"What do you think, should we get our baby brother to bed?" Rægen asked, and clucked at Eorwald. "The poor dear, he'll be so ashamed when we tell him Sunniva out-drunk him."

Sige sniggered and slung Eorwald's arm over his shoulder. "Up you get," he grunted, "Time for bed."

Eorwald struggled fruitlessly, swinging a punch at the air and mumbling something incoherently.

Rægen took him under the other shoulder and they departed the main hall. The Bricgweard had two adjoining rooms to the main audience hall, one small chamber for the king and queen's own use, and a separate house where the royal family spent most of their time when there were no visitors. Bolsters were set in alcoves sectioned off from one another to allow a bit of privacy, and a fire was crackling merrily in the small central hearth, flickering against the dark green curtains hung on the walls. Rægen and Sige unceremoniously hoisted Eorwald into his bed. Ecgric had remained in the main hall, his hand firmly planted up the skirt of one of Sunniva's pretty friends, oblivious to their shouted goodnights.

Sigebryht wondered what the mystical secret of Ecgric's hold over women was. *Perhaps if I understood it, I wouldn't be so damnably awkward around them*, he thought. He did not want to wait until he had married some ugly thegn's daughter to make sure his cock worked properly, but every time he had the opportunity, he seemed to miss the mark.

But that was stupid. He knew his prick worked. He had been with women, not as many as Ecgric perhaps, but he had done it. He scowled at the ceiling when he remembered the last time, remembered the girl with a turned up nose and big blue eyes and yellow hair, and the look on her face as she pulled on him furiously, becoming more and more frustrated. He had blamed the drink, but she had taken it as a personal slight and left in a huff. It wasn't her fault, he thought angrily. It was his. And he hated it.

Eorwald

Eorwald's head pounded, and all he wanted was to go back to sleep. He had woken on his own bed, still fully clothed, a blanket tossed over him and the curtains drawn. He remembered trying to punch Sige as he had ordered him to lie down, but could not recall actually following his brother's instructions.

"We come to bring the word of Christ to your people," the black-robed man was saying. He had a thick accent that sounded Frankisc, with dark olive skin. A shield of hair was shaved from the crown of his head; Eorwald rubbed the stubble of his own hair and thought how ridiculous it was to only shave off a patch of it. Did the man have lice, perhaps, or was this just the fashion in Francland?

"... The salvation of the world, the one who died for our sins upon the Holy Cross..." the man was still talking, and Eorwald's head was still throbbing.

"Oh not this again, the holy cross nonsense..." Sige said, rather loudly.

The Christ man shifted his dark gaze to Sige, "The Cross, my son, the holy beam on which our lord and savior Jesus Christ suffered and died for the redemption of all mankind." The man made an odd movement with his hand over his breast and Eorwald tried to stifle a snort of laughter.

"Wait, so Jesus was hung from a beam?" Rægen looked confused. "I think that you must mean Woden. Woden hung himself from a sacred Oak to learn the magic of the runes, not Jesus."

The man did the strange little motion again with his hand. "Jesus Christ did not suffer for magic, but for the

redemption of all mankind from the sins of the world, the one true God, the Son of God –“

“Now this is just getting ridiculous,” Rægen said. Eorwald nodded fervently, “A man can’t be his own father...”

Their father turned to them and silenced them with a look. Father had been accepting of this Eastern god Christ before they were born and had undergone some strange initiation ritual when Ethelbert had been chosen as *beahcýning*, but he had not bothered to share the lore with them. Mother was the one who had taught them the old stories of the gods and how to pray, and she did not like the Nailed God of the Romans.

“Your ancestors fought the Romans and drove them out of this land in glorious conquest,” she had always told them, “why would we let their devils back into the lands we rightfully claimed?”

Father too, seemed dismissive of the whole thing; though an image of the man hanging by his hands from a plank of wood was placed next to the shrines in the *weoh*, the sacred grove north of the Briggweard.

The Christ man continued. “I humbly ask you, mighty *cýning*, to allow me to preach the Word of God to all that will hear throughout the land of the Engla that they might bow before the one true God!”

“Yes, yes,” the king said wearily. “Go then, tell your stories to my people and let them be baptized if they choose it.”

The dark Eastern man grinned and bowed his head, showing that stupid shaved spot to the king. “You are truly doing the service of the Lord!” he said, pointing two fingers at the king and making the same odd motion again. Eorwald stepped forward at the menacing gesture, his hand on the hilt of his sword.

Rædwald shook his head slightly at Eorwald, and Eorwald retreated. The king addressed the Christ-man once more, “Be warned, though, you will not force any of my people to accept your god, by word or deed, and you will not damage any altars or holy shrines in your journeys. If I find you have coerced anyone, or have damaged any altars to Woden or the other gods –“

“I assure you, *cýning*,” said the Christ man in a greasy voice, “My fellows and I have no such intentions.”

“Off you go then,” the king waved him away, and the Christ man left with his two companions, who spoke excitedly in some strange harsh Eastern tongue.

“What an odd man,” Eorwald mused aloud when the Christians had scurried away, “Father, what was it he meant by ‘you were baptized in the’ ... something or other?”

Rædwald shook his head. “It’s the way they bring people to worship their god,” he said, “they take you into a river or a pool and push you into the water, and say some Latin words and then you’re a Christian.”

“But they did that to you?” Rægen asked, “Does that mean you are a Christian too?”

“I suppose so,” Rædwald shrugged, “I couldn’t understand them. It was something to do with dying and being reborn again, because the story says that Christ rose from the dead and then became a god. I put a shrine to Christ with the other gods, but they need their own *godesmen* to do the rituals, so I haven’t bothered with it much.”

“So what sort of rituals do they do?” Eorwald asked eagerly, “I heard that the Christ men carry a vial of their god’s own blood and drink it on the holy days.”

Father laughed loudly, “No, not exactly. They believe that wine turns into the blood of Christ when the priest says words over it in Latin, and they drink that.”

“That is disgusting,” Rægen said, echoing Eorwald’s own thoughts. “Even if it’s supposed to be magical, they still drink human blood. That’s an abomination in the sight of the gods, to drink the blood or eat the flesh of mankind.”

“It’s just wine, really,” Father reassured them, “they say their words and do their magic, and somehow we are all saved from sin that we never knew we committed in the first place.”

Eorwald thought this was all getting rather preposterous. He wondered why the Christian *godesmen* were so fervent about promoting their strange faith full of blood magic. Decent folk surely would never accept a god who required this of his followers. But then, Father had accepted him...

“Why did you let them baptize you?” Eorwald asked his father. “It seems a strange sort of faith.”

“When you are in the service of a *beahcýning* who thinks that you might usurp his power,” Rædwald responded with a weary sigh, “you will do whatever you can to show that you are loyal. Ethelbert’s wife was a Frankisc princess, and she brought her bishop with her from Francland. I was there when their missionaries were trying to gain followers, and Ethelbert let them baptize him. He told us all that if we were truly loyal then we would submit ourselves to the Christian god and be baptized as well.”

“So you only did it as a show of good faith?” Rægen asked.

“I did,” Rædwald said, “and it served its purpose. I have no qualms with this Christ; all gods can help in times of trouble, after all.”

“Mother didn’t appreciate it, though, did she?” Eorwald asked.

Rædwald smiled reminiscently. "That was before we married. She said it was cowardly to worship a false god simply because the *beahcýning* had lost his mind."

Eorwald grinned. The story had long-since passed into family legend, but it always amused him to hear about it.

"In any case," the king shrugged, "their cult is catching like the pox right now, and it doesn't serve anyone to forbid their priests spreading the message. It's harmless enough as long as all they do is talk. Sometimes you have to pick your battles."

There were few people coming today to speak with the king, but even so it was agonizingly slow. Eorwald pressed his fingers into his eyes in an effort to stop his head from throbbing, to no avail.

A middle-aged farmer with stooped shoulders waddled toward the high seat, followed by a pretty young woman whom Eorwald assumed was his daughter. The man knelt before the high seat and immediately started pleading his complaint.

"It's like this, my *cýning*," he began, his voice crackling, "My wife Steorra here, she is new with child."

"You should be pleased," the king said.

"Begging your pardon, my *cýning*," the *ceorl* interrupted, shaking his head, "Steorra en't let me touch her since our weddin' night, near on two years past." He shot a glare back in the woman's direction, "What's more I seen a man a-stalkin' round my Steorra in the village, and she tells me he done forced himself on her."

"That is a serious accusation," Rædwald said, "Steorra, I wish you to swear on your honor to tell the truth. Is it true that a man forced himself on you?"

The girl nodded without looking up from the ground.

"Did you know the man who did it?"

She nodded again.

"He was..." the farmer began to answer, but the king silenced him with a look.

"Please tell me what happened, Steorra," Father asked the girl, not unkindly.

She glanced at her husband and seemed to flinch away from the sight of him. "He – I met him on market day; I was selling – selling some cloth that I'd woven, and he told me how pretty I was and how fine the wool was..." she blushed, "And I told him I was a woman married but he kept coming round that day." Another flinching look at her spouse, "He told me that marriages could be broken, and if I married him instead I would be a fine lady and he would get me all the best jewels and I would not have to work ever again."

Of course he did, Eorwald thought.

Steorra continued her story, licking her lips and shooting another glance back at her husband. "Then he – well, he took me behind the tent and..." she trailed off, sounding frantic. "I tried to tell him that I didn't want to, but he told me that I ought to ... I ought to be pleased that he was offering me his favors..."

The king seemed to be turning something over in his mind, and it was a moment before he spoke again. "Offering you his favors? What sort of man was he? Was he a man from the village?"

She nodded with another look at her husband, who was glaring at her.

"He was a house-thegn!" the husband cried, "Ceadda, the get of some North Folk whore!"

"You should curb your speech in the presence of your *cýning*," Sigebryht warned the man, who shut his mouth.

Eorwald knew the one being accused, the son of some jumped-up North Folk *ceorl*, an errand rider for the king who had been awarded enough land and livestock to give him the rights of a thegn. If it had been another *ceorl*, the king would not even be involved in the judgment. The free folk settled their own matters of law and honor in the Folkmoot, and usually only appealed to the king when they could not make a judgment themselves. A freedwoman accusing a thegn, now? That was not so easily dealt with.

"Do you know where this man is now?" Rædwald asked.

"I saw him at the feast last night," Rægen said. "I'm sure he's not gone home yet."

"Bring Ceadda to the hall," Rædwald commanded Ricbert, who stood on the other side of the high seat, "he may tell his part and I will make my judgment."

Ricbert nodded and left without a word.

While they waited, Father heard the other supplicant, another freedman who had lost several sheep to wolves and was begging for assistance to feed his family. He had even brought one of the carcasses as proof, a shredded mass of bones and gristle wrapped in a blanket.

"I cannot bring your sheep back from the mouths of wolves," Rædwald told him, "but you will have four months' worth of barley to make up for the lost income from the wool and from the meat you've lost, and you may supplement it as needed from the extra stores. It should get you through the next lambing, at least."

The *ceorl* bowed in thanks and left the hall.

"That's the fourth wolf attack in as many months," Eorwald noted, "I think they are getting bolder."

"Either that," said one of the older thegns, a grey-bearded man named Ælberht, "Or the farmers are lying to get more grain."

"The thought has crossed my mind," Rædwald said, "But I don't think so. Their recompense is not much food, compared to the silver they could have gotten by the sheep. And grain doesn't grow back as quickly as wool. It would not be worth a meagre few months' grain to dispose of a perfectly good sheep, if they don't plan to eat it themselves."

The door opened and Ricbert returned with the *ceorl's*-son-turned-thegn. Steorra's husband had to be restrained as he shouted curses at Ceadda, who was smirking insolently.

"Do you know why you were brought here?" Rædwald asked as the sneering youth approached the high seat.

"I could not begin to guess," he said, "*dryhten*," he added as a latent courtesy to remind everyone that he was a thegn now.

"This woman and her husband accuse you of raping her, and want compensation for the child you put in her belly and the dishonor you've brought on her." Rædwald told him. "You may speak your defense, and then my council and I will pass judgment."

Eorwald felt a strong desire to put his fist through the man's perfect teeth.

"My *cynning*," Ceadda began, "I will not deny sleeping with her, but this woman broke her own troth and dishonored herself when she opened her legs to me." He looked back at the girl, who was staring fixedly at the rushes on the ground. "How could she be with child if she had not enjoyed it? I believe she feared her husband's wrath and now feels remorse for her actions in seducing someone above her own position in life, and now she is crying rape."

Steorra was looking at the ground, tears streaming down her face.

"Is that all you have to say?" Father's voice was cold.

"May the wise counsel of your *witenagamot* prove me innocent," he said lightly. "I took nothing that wasn't given freely."

"Very well, you may all leave while I confer with my council," Father waved them away. "We will call you when we are ready to pass judgment." He then beckoned one of the house-thegns to accompany them; such heated tempers would inevitably lead to a fight if the parties were left alone.

"What a horse's cunt," Eorwald said, more to himself than to anyone else, but Rægen nodded fervently.

"What say you all?" Rædwald asked the twelve assembled men.

"I think Ceadda is in the right," one of the older thegns said, "I would not put it past a pretty girl with a grizzled old husband to open her legs for some handsome young thegn."

"It would not be the first time a girl felt remorse and accused her lover of attacking her. Jealousy? Fear? Anger?" another said.

"I don't think that's the case," said Rægen, "Didn't you see her? She was frightened of both of them. She's got bruises on her face, and she was crying like a river. And you saw how afraid she was of Ceadda. Either her husband beat her for getting pregnant by another man, or Ceadda was trying to keep her quiet, I'll bet my arm-ring on it."

"We aren't debating if her husband beats her," said the old thegn, "If he beats her, she has to press charges on him. That is not what we are deliberating right now."

"She probably believed Ceadda if he told her he would take her away with him. She might have liked the attention." Eorwald thought of his sister, how she flirted and smiled at every man she saw. "She's just a girl; maybe it just got out of hand?"

Rædwald listened to his council argue for a moment, stroking his beard as he often did in thought. "The truth of this lies somewhere in the middle," he said at length. "I think that Steorra might have acted inappropriately with Ceadda; I am not blind to the fact that she is clearly unhappy in her choice of spouse."

"She probably never made the choice to marry that old man," said Rægen heatedly, "flirting with a man gives him no right to rape her."

"She is pregnant," the old thegn said, "It is known that a woman cannot become pregnant if she is raped. She has to be stirred, the same as a man, for his seed to quicken in her, otherwise the woman cannot conceive." He nodded his head with finality.

"That's just a tale they tell to make sure you pleasure your wife, you old fool," Eorwald said, "Women get pregnant all the time without being 'stirred.'"

"Ælberht is a part of this council, the same as you, Eorwald," Father scolded, "He has the right to his voice, even if you two disagree."

Eorwald scowled at the pompous old thegn and thought mutinously how much easier this would be if a woman could serve on the *witenagamot*. Mother would probably defend the girl most vocally, and Father almost always listened to her. He was pleased, however, that only a couple of the older thegns seemed to agree with Ælberht.

“Send them in,” Rædwald told Ricbert, who summoned the feuding men and the nervous woman back into the hall.

“Ceadda of the North Folk,” Rædwald said loudly, “you are accused of the rape of a free woman, and the *witenagamot* have found you to be guilty. The *vergild* for this crime is sixty-five *scyllingas*, which you will pay immediately.”

The smirk slid from the youth’s face as he heard the verdict. It was a steep penalty, and Eorwald wondered if the hefty *vergild* was meant to punch some humility into the little prick.

“Furthermore,” Rædwald added, “You will pay ten *scyllingas* per year at the harvest, until the child you put in this girl’s belly comes to adulthood. I hope this will make you think before you bed a married woman in the future.”

He turned to Steorra, who was smiling behind the tears. “You are not completely blameless in this,” Rædwald told her, “I will leave it at the discretion of your husband to decide if you ought to be punished for his cuckolding.” Her smile disappeared, to be replaced with a look of terror as she glanced at her husband.

“I thank you for your swift justice, lord,” the old man said as he steered his wife from the hall.

Eorwald watched the girl leave, and a wave of pity struck him. The poor woman would go home and be beaten bloody again by the man she had probably never wanted to marry in the first place. She had only wanted to improve her lot by marrying a freedman, and in return she got to be raped and humiliated. It was not fair. It was not right. But it was life.

Chapter Two

Ecgric

Ecgric was growing tired of the continual journeying back and forth from Cantwareburh. The winter rains made each day in the saddle a nightmare, and he wished that he could remain in one place for more than a fortnight before having to set off again. He wondered why the *beahcynning* and the king of the Engla could not simply meet in person to discuss matters of state, but it was not his place to ask.

It was not as if there weren't pleasurable aspects of spending the winter in both Cantwareburh and in Wuffingham, the village affiliated with the Bricgweard. He enjoyed spending time with the *athelingas*, his friends from childhood; they practiced their war-games and went hunting or hawking, and had many a late talk about battle tactics or hounds or horses. Wuffingham was for the men.

But Cantwareburh, that was a completely separate matter. Cantwareburh was where the women were. Cantwareburh was where he had become a man, fighting for the *heahcynning* by day and spending his nights with Bercta, the *beahcynning's* wife. He had been saddened when she died; she had been the one to teach him how to please a woman, after all; but even after her death the pleasures of Ethelbert's hall had not diminished. There were enough girls who had come with the *beahcwenes* from Francland that he did not grow despondent. He might grow lazy drinking and swiving all day, but a soft pair of tits and a wet cunny was prize enough for his indolence.

He had returned to Wuffingham the night before, and had spent an enjoyable night talking about battle tactics with Eorwald and being beaten handily at merels by Sigebryht, and telling Rægenhere about his exploits in the South. Winter nights were always long and boring, but he enjoyed the company and the home-lie pleasures that Rædwald's hall offered. He had even covertly watched the king's daughter, Sunniva, from across the room; once or twice she caught his eye and shot a suggestive smirk in his direction, which he considered returning for a bare instant. He thought about how her long, lithe body would look as she bounced on his cock, but he refrained from acknowledging her, as he had done for the past three months. He had been threatened most violently by her protective elder brothers at the harvest feast and he did not feel like being castrated. He had lasted this long, after all; he could watch her and be content, and then bury his prick between some Eotisc thighs once he returned to Cantwareburh.

The next morning, he sat with Rædwald and discussed the goings on in Cantwareburh, as usual. It was all rather boring; no one fought wars or made alliances during the cold dark damp of winter. What was the point in being an errand boy when there was nothing to report?

The king watched Ecgric for a long while before he spoke. "You won't be returning to Cantwareburh," He said at length, "I am going to have Guthwine go in your place. I think you've done about all you can there, and your presence has been rather heavily remarked upon by Ethelbert."

Of course it has, Ecgric thought, *I fucked his wife so hard I'm surprised the whole country didn't hear her. He probably was more upset when I started on his mistress, though.* "I am sorry to hear that he does not wish me to come back," Ecgric said.

"Yes, well," Rædwald cleared his throat, "I think that you might be more useful to me here than in Cantwareburh. I'm making you an ealdorman. Wigstan has died leaving no heir, and I am therefore giving you his lands north of Gipeswic."

Ecgric did not attempt to hide his pleasure. "Thank you," he said, "I hope I will serve you admirably."

"As you have always done, and as your father did before you," Rædwald said, "This is more than just going to war, though, Ecgric. I want to make Gipeswic a great market town, and I need help doing that. I expect you to strengthen the defenses of the *burh* there, and you will have to provide men to fight for me in times of war."

This was nothing surprising. "Of course, *dryhten*."

"I'm not finished. You will be given the responsibilities of high reeve and you will act as steward of the Bricgweard when I am not here. I also expect you to keep the Gipeswic thegns in line. They are extremely rich, but they are also lazy and seem to think they are in charge, even over the ealdorman. As much as I admired Wigstan, he was not a forceful leader. The landowners thought they could walk all over him, particularly in his old age. You will have to show them that this is not the case."

"I don't entirely understand how I should go about that," Ecgric said.

"They need to be reminded that they are not above the law, no matter how wealthy they might be." Rædwald finished, "I cannot keep wasting my time with them every time they have a petty argument that they refuse to solve in the Folkmoot. That will be your responsibility as their lord."

Ecgric frowned, "I think it's clear that I have little knowledge of problem solving, if it does not involve a sword."

"That is exactly why you are the best man for the job." Rædwald seemed rather pleased at his scheme. "Every other man I've sent to deal with these *ceorls* and petty thegns has been completely useless. I need someone they won't be able to push around or bribe into taking sides. You will be their *blaford*, and you will give them their rewards in times of plenty and punish them for disobedience."

Ecgric nodded, the delight of being raised to the level of ealdorman almost completely fading away. "I will do my best."

After the king had dismissed him, he stomped grumpily from the Bricgweard. The spring sun was bright and burned his eyes after the dimness of the hall.

"Ealdorman Ecgric of Gipeswic," his father had followed him from the hall. "That seems to suit you."

Ecgric laughed at the absurdity of it all. "Gods be fucked, what a terrible idea. What makes him think I would be cut out for that sort of job? I care more about my hounds' shits than I do about the cowsheds and the bridge dues and those *ceorl* sons of whores."

"Perhaps he thinks it will calm you down," Ricbert said, "I asked him to give you something to do here, something that would keep you occupied, but I didn't think he'd replaced his brains with frog spawn."

"So you're responsible for my imprisonment here?" Ecgric was only half-joking. He was thoroughly annoyed that he would be spending the foreseeable future in the land of his birth, which he had been so pleased to have escaped.

"It was time," said Ricbert, "you'll have to settle down someday, and the *cyning* needs more loyal men

around him.”

“They would have gotten rid of me in Cantwareburh in any case,” Ecgric admitted.

“Yes, you seem to have made a name for yourself there, and no mistake.” The familiar crease in Ricbert’s forehead reappeared. “Mind you don’t continue with your taste for highly-born women now that you’re home.”

Ecgric laughed, “Eadyth is beautiful, but I think she would shoot an arrow through my cock if I even suggested that.”

“You know who I mean,” Ricbert had lost his smile. “I saw the way you were looking at Sunniva last night, and I will give you fair warning, the *cyning* will not have it.”

Ecgric scowled, remembering the same threats he had received from all three of her brothers. “Nor will the *æthelingas*, I assure you.”

Ricbert gave him a hard look.

“I have no interest in bedding a child, Father,” Ecgric said wearily, “I am, in fact, capable of restraining myself.”

As he crossed the yard, Ecgric saw Sunniva playing knucklebones with one of the younger girls from the village. They sat cross-legged on the ground, taking turns to throw the bone in the air, and then giggled as they scrambled to pick up the remaining bones from the ground before the thrown one fell. Their twitters made him remember why he had never liked her in the first place. She was just a pest, he remembered. She had always followed them around when they were young; always trying to have a go at swords or to get one of them to play with her toy horses with her. She was an annoying little shit then, and he did not need the threat of castration to stay away from her now.

Even so, he felt restless. He had not had a woman in ages. He thought of Leasið, the *beahcyning’s* mistress. What a sweet thing she was. So pious and gentle, and yet she was already fucking Ethelbert while his wife was coughing blood. He smiled when he thought of the way she would stuff her fist in her mouth to keep anyone from hearing her moans, and how she had failed miserably.

It’s always the pious ones, he thought, the women who cover their hair and fold their hands so prettily to pray; those are the women begging for your cock come nightfall. And every time, they arrange their skirts and say it will never happen again, and then every night they come to you, frothing at the gash for another go. He found himself staring at Sunniva as she laughed at the game, and had to push the thought of her out of his mind.

To relieve the tension, he decided to beat the pulp out of one of the *æthelingas* for a while. He preferred to spar with Eorwald, who was brutal and fearless, but he found Rægenhere and Sigebryht instead. Sigebryht always feinted and dodged, light on his feet but always on the defensive, and Rægenhere was similar; both circled one another, considering weaknesses, before a shout and a slash, then more circling. He watched them for a few moments, pointedly avoiding looking at their sister, and eventually joined in.

The sun was high overhead by the time they stopped. Ecgric pulled off his helm by the nose piece, and tucked it under his arm. As they passed a couple of small hovels, Rægenhere waved at Sunniva, who was approaching them with her yellow-haired friend. “Are you staying out of trouble?” he asked her.

“I always stay out of trouble.” She said, “Although I think that lately it’s just because I’ve run out of silver, and the whores demand payment up front.”

Ecgric could not help but laugh at the foul mouth she had acquired from three older brothers, and Sunniva turned to him in turn, one eyebrow arched. “Of course Ecgric is always up to date on the going rates of whores, aren’t you, Ecgric?” She asked him.

“They usually pay me for the pleasure,” he returned the crooked smile she gave him.

“Oh, do sheep carry *peningas* now?” Sunniva shot back, grinning. “That’s news to me, but it’s good that they pay you for your services, at least.” She turned back to Rægenhere, who was nearly collapsing with laughter. “Well if we are finished talking about Ecgric and his curious affinity for farm animals, I wanted to let you know that Father is looking for you.”

Ecgric watched her as she walked away. Her dress clung to her small breasts and flowed over her hips, her hair bouncing against her back as she trotted away arm-in-arm with her friend. She threw a glance over her shoulder at him, and he saw her grin before she turned back to the other girl and they both started giggling. *She’s half your age, he had to remind himself, and she’s the cyning’s daughter besides. It’s not worth the trouble.*

No matter how beautiful or clever she is, it's better to stay away; even if she is making it extremely difficult to do so.

Sunniva

"I'm so bored!" Wynne sprawled back onto the furs, petulant. "I think the men are practicing in the yard; we could go and watch them ..."

Sunniva wrinkled her nose. "You just want to watch Rægen. It's not going to happen, Wynne. He doesn't like you."

"Yes he does," Wynne pouted, "He kissed me once."

"He kissed you on the cheek, because your father introduced you to the *cyning* and we all happened to be there. If you'll recall, Eorwald and Sige kissed you too, and you don't go on about them all the time."

"Sigebryht is good looking, I suppose, but he's much too old," Wynne said, as if that settled the matter. "And Eorwald... I don't know. He just likes to fight and drink. He isn't sweet like Rægen." The simpering look on Wynne's face made Sunniva want to slap her.

"You'll probably marry an old man anyway," Sunniva told her. "He'll deck you in jewels and gold and then fall asleep on top of you while he tries to bed you." She climbed on top of Wynne, straddling her. "And he'll give you dry little kisses that you'll imagine were Rægen's." She mimed a clumsy act of lovemaking while Wynne shrieked with giggles beneath her. "Oh, my beautiful young wife," she said in a cracked, deep voice, "Oh, yes, yes, yes ..." She collapsed on top of Wynne, and let out a loud snore.

"I won't have to worry about that, because I'm going to marry Rægen," Wynne said confidently.

Sunniva got to her feet, and helped her friend to hers. "Come then, my love, let's see if the sixty-eighth time trying will finally do the trick."

They found Sunniva's three brothers and Ecgric practicing their war games. Rægen and Eorwald were sparring with one another, dodging and striking their blunted iron swords against one another's shields.

Sunniva and Wynne watched as the men whacked at one another for a few minutes, Wynne jumping in alarm every time Eorwald landed a blow on Rægen's thick leather shoulder guards. Sunniva looked over toward Ecgric, whom she was pleased to find had taken off his tunic in the warmth of the day. It was not as if she hadn't seen a half-naked man before, but she liked looking at him. A pattern of interlaced beasts had been etched with ink into his shoulder and chest, circling a large Tiw rune. She had watched Sige receive such a mark after his first battle; it had taken a full afternoon for the *godeswif* to carve the boar design in his back with a needle, and Sunniva had winced on her brother's behalf when the *godeswif* rubbed in the dark dye to make the design permanent. Sige had gotten a few more after the first, and Rægen had one as well, but Eorwald had none, as he had not yet drawn blood in a battle. She wondered how many battles Ecgric must have fought in to have merited such designs. Whatever the number, they had hardened and scarred his body into something fearsome and huge that she wanted to put her hands on.

"Enjoying the view?" Wynne asked her, seeing the way she was staring.

"You're one to talk," Sunniva said, "Why don't you go and ask Rægen to go to bed with you, so you can stop lusting after him?"

Wynne scowled, and returned to her doting.

Eventually, Ecgric seemed to notice a gaggle of other girls, who were watching them practice from the other side of the yard.

"Ugh!" Sunniva said to Wynne, "He's trying to flirt with that cow Freida!"

"Freida the Fire Cunt," Wynne giggled, "Careful you don't take any of her leavings; I've heard she's spread the pox far and wide, and that's why she left the North Folk and came down here."

"I wouldn't doubt it," Sunniva said, vaguely irritated that Ecgric was paying attention to a ginger-minge whore rather than to her.

"If it bothers you so much, then go and claim him!" Wynne seemed exasperated, which was usually Sunniva's occupation. "But you should know those brothers of yours have expressly forbidden him to go near you, so it might be a bit of a job."

"How did you learn that?"

"I heard Ricbert talking to him the other day. I didn't hear the whole conversation, but he was telling Ecgric that he needed to stop fucking his way throughout the countryside or he'd have the *cyning* to answer to. He said to stay away from you in particular."

Sunniva chewed her lip, annoyed. *So my brothers and even my father's damnable friend have decided what men I can play with?* "I'll bet I can sway him. He's a man; he'll start listening to his cock before long and forget anything he may have told my brothers."

"I'll bet my new gold chain you can't," Wynne retorted, "He's an caldorman now, he's probably so high on his own honor he won't look twice at you."

Sunniva glared at her friend, and held out her hand to shake. "This will be just like the time you thought I wouldn't be able to get Anlaf to show me his prick, and you lost a ring," she said.

"You have three days," Wynne said, now grinning. "And I'll know if you lie."

"I won't need that long," Sunniva said. She pinched her cheeks to bring out the color, and found a lock of her hair to twirl around her finger. It was a little thing, but men seemed to love it. She caught Ecgric's eye a couple of times, but he looked away pointedly.

"And what will you give me when you fail?" Wynne mocked.

"Shut up," Sunniva hissed. What was wrong with her? Normally she only had to look up sweetly through her eyelashes or crook a finger and boys would do whatever she wanted. Had she lost her power? Or was Ecgric a new challenge altogether?

"Go and talk to Rægen and leave Ecgric on his own," Sunniva told her friend. Wynne responded with a slightly terrified look.

"Oh, just go!" Sunniva commanded irritably. She waited for a few moments, and was pleased to find that Ecgric was the last to leave the yard, and she grabbed his hand as he passed, pulling him into the space between two houses.

Sunniva felt slightly weak as she looked at the strong shoulders and the iron-brown hair of his chest, and had to stop herself from touching him. It took her a moment before she regained her composure and smiled sweetly at him.

"I hope you're not upset with me," she said in the slightly high-pitched voice she always used to get what she wanted, "for teasing you the other day. I only meant it as a jest." She looked up at him, still grasping his hand and sliding her thumb up the back of it.

"Of course I'm not upset with you," he said, pulling it away but smiling at her, "I was actually rather impressed. You should join in the flyting at the next feast; you'd put all the men to shame with your wordplay."

"Perhaps I will!" She beamed, and after a pause she bit her bottom lip and said, "I'm pleased you've come back. Hopefully you're not too disappointed to be home, after the bustle of Cantwareburh."

"There are some benefits," he said after a pause. He was watching her twirl her fingers around the long lock of brown hair, and she could see the mill-wheel of thought turning in his head. Perhaps she had not lost her magic touch after all.

"Of course, if we are to be friends I feel I ought to warn you ... that girl you were talking to before, Freida, she's ..." Sunniva paused for effect, "well, it's really none of my business, but rumor has it that she's got the pox. I just wanted to let you know that before you decided to do anything foolish with anyone undeserving of your affections." She slid her hand up his arm, but he moved away from her suddenly. He was thinking, hard. It was rather sweet.

She took a step closer. The scent of his body made her breath catch and she looked up into his eyes, which had a glint of fire when she dragged her fingertips across his stomach. The mad idea to push him against the wall and have her way with him crossed her mind for an instant, but she held still, her fingers lingering on his skin.

"I promised I wouldn't --" he began with a pained expression, but Sunniva cut him off.

"You promised my brothers and my father that you wouldn't try to take advantage of me," she finished for him, "but I can assure you that you will take nothing that isn't given freely."

"I don't want to defy them," he said lamely, and she could hear the raw desire in his voice and the effort he was putting into not touching her.

Sunniva's face hardened. "Please, the next time you see my brothers, tell them that they have no right to be making pronouncements on my behalf."

Ecgric seemed surprised, but took it in stride. "They know what's best for you."

She nearly slapped him, but glowered instead. She closed on him again, and this time his back was to the wall and he had nowhere to go. She grabbed the hammer pendant around his neck, and he stared down at her, with a look of such hunger on his face she thought she might be a piece of meat before a starving man.

"I had thought that I knew what was best for me," She said in a venomous whisper, "And the next time you, or my father, or my dear brothers, or any man, decide to make decisions on my behalf, I will take this," she grabbed his cock, which she was pleased to find was straining against the wool of his breeches, "and I will make you eat it." She smiled sweetly at his expression, and met his eyes. She felt his heart thumping beneath her fist where she clutched the Hammer, faster even than her own. She felt the hair under her fingers as she glared up into his eyes, wondering if she had pushed him past desire into fury when she felt him grip her, one hand on the back of her head, the other on her back. He was kissing her, fiercely, angrily, and she let him do it, she wanted him to push her against the wall and fuck her until her legs gave out, but she pulled back from him.

"I'll not make you break your word," she snarled, "but I am the only person who gets to decide how I choose to entertain myself." She rather regretted not being able to take advantage of said entertainments, but she turned her back on him and felt his eyes following her as she left to claim her new chain.

"I don't think that should count," Wynne said, clutching her jewel.

"I won the wager. He kissed me, so I win. Hand it over." Sunniva held out her hand.

Wynne glowered and pulled the chain over her head. "It's not fair; no man can resist you. I shouldn't have made that bet."

"I can't help it if you have a gambling problem," said Sunniva. In truth, Ecgric had resisted her, but Sunniva would never tell her friend that. She slipped the long chain around her neck and looked at it for a moment.

Wynne looked mutinous.

"You know, I don't think this chain suits me," Sunniva said, and pulled it off again. "I'll let you keep it. The knowledge that I won is prize enough." She had never really intended to keep the chain in any case; Wynne's father might have been wealthy, but Sunniva's father was a king. She knew which of them would be more upset to lose that amount of gold.

Wynne smiled at her. "So how was it?" she asked, leaning in.

"Rather rough," Sunniva said, "And not just from his beard, either. I didn't want him to stop, but I needed to punish him." She loosened her braid and combed her fingers through the tangles.

"I'm sure you punished him well," Wynne said, "But what had he done?"

"He seems to be conspiring with my father and brothers to keep me a wholesome maiden forever," Sunniva rolled her eyes, "Everyone seems to be particularly interested in my virtue, don't they?"

"Your virtue is a bargaining point," Wynne said sagely. "Old men want beautiful and pure young wives, not old sluts. I've heard that the Franca check their women before the wedding to make sure they still have a maidenhead. Imagine what it would be like to have some old crone prodding your bits to make sure you haven't been sneaking into a man's bed!"

Sunniva laughed aloud at this. "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard," she said, "If I were a man, I would want my woman to know what she's doing. My father married my mother because he knew she was able to have sons, not because she couldn't figure out where a cock went."

"It's just what I've heard," Wynne said with a shrug, "It's all to do with their gods, I think. One of the Christian goddesses was able to have a child without having sex, so they think all women should as well."

Sunniva tried to wrap her mind around that bit of information, but it was too ludicrous. "Idiotic," she said, and shook her head. "Anyway, that's not the point. I am a grown woman, and I won't have anyone deciding who I can take as a lover."

Wynne raised her eyebrows. "You want to take him as a lover?"

"So what if I do?" Sunniva said, now unsure. "I should be able to make that choice for myself."

"You like him," Wynne giggled, "You do!" she squealed when Sunniva scowled at her, "You're probably wishing he would come in right now and have his way with you."

There was no denying that Sunniva wanted him. Everything about him was powerful and hard and slightly dangerous, and she felt a slight stirring below her navel when she thought of the way he had kissed her, or how she had to hide her surprise at the size of his cock when she threatened to cut it off. She wondered vaguely how it might feel to have him inside of her. She had never had sex with a man before, but she wanted to try it.

She felt woefully naïve about it, even though she pretended she knew what she was doing. The extent of her knowledge was the time she had persuaded Anlaf to show her his prick; he had blushed furiously when he had dropped his breeches and she giggled to see it standing straight out from the mat of dark golden curls, long and skinny like him. She had lifted her skirt on a whim to let him put it in her, just to see what it would feel like, but he became so excited at the very idea that he spurted his seed onto her thigh before he could get close. The fancy disappeared as quickly as he had come, and she had immediately gone to tell Wynne. Poor Anlaf. Now he would never have a chance at her, now that she had decided on her prize.

"It's just a game," Sunniva said, "I was trying to prove a point. A man will throw out all oaths in exchange for a chance with a pretty woman."

Wynne raised an eyebrow. "Well, I don't think Ecgric's the type of man who will let that game go on for long. Men like that tend to take what they want."

Sunniva decided that this would not, perhaps, be a bad thing.

Eadyth

Eadyth enjoyed the soft breeze as it rushed past her bare legs. She wore a knee-length tunic and short trousers, as it was pointless to try to wear a dress when assisting the *ceorls* in the fields. It was warm, and she felt sweat starting to bead on her forehead before she had gone even a furlong.

The farm which supported the royal household was only about a league from the Bricgweard, and she had Eorwald and Sunniva for company, so the hour-long walk passed pleasantly enough.

Eadyth knew they were nearing the farmhouse when she began to sneeze violently at regular intervals. The haymaking and the newly blooming summer flowers always made her sneeze and her eyes grew red and itchy from the dust. Eventually they arrived at the farmhouse and found ÆEsc ordering people about, as usual.

"You two ought to go find something to do," Eadyth told her children. She knew that it would be easier to deal with ÆEsc when he didn't feel harried. Sunniva and Eorwald left to assist the *ceorls* who were ploughing one of the empty fields.

"I see things are going well," Eadyth said, examining the stacks of hay and the *ceorls* working in the field. "You've started the second fallow ploughing?" There was a definite line where the trodden, light-brown dirt had been churned into the thick, rich earth that would be used for planting next year. A couple of small children were making little piles of mud, and Sunniva went to join them as Eorwald helped to stack hay. It was nice to see her children doing something useful; she had always encouraged them to remember the poor folk who kept food on their table, and was pleased when they took to it so happily.

ÆEsc nodded, starting Eadyth out of her thoughts. "And the haying is nearly complete; there should be plenty of fodder for the winter, even after the sheep got into the field and ate half of it."

"What naughty little lambs," Eadyth said, as she let ÆEsc lead her behind the field to where twenty sheep had been corralled in a fenced area. They were all in need of shearing, and looked like fat brown and white clouds jostling together before a storm, bleating in annoyance.

"Ah," ÆEsc said, "We are behind on the shearing, unfortunately. Only I just don't have the labor to

spare on it yet, as we are all so busy with the haymaking and ploughing.” He seemed more annoyed about the delay than Eadyth was, but she pursed her lips as a way of showing her solidarity with his frustration.

“It’s still early,” Eadyth said distractedly. She had seen the shaved pate of Paulinus the priest helping a *ceorl* to hold a screaming sheep still while the man sliced the thick mats of wool away with a sharp, hooked knife. When the animal had been stripped of its heavy clothing, the priest and shepherd stood.

“Wulbeorn,” she said to the man holding the knife, “I hope you and your family are well.”

“Aye, my *cwene*, I am well enough,” he said, grinning.

“I seem to remember you had a little one on the way, last time I saw you?”

“Yes, my wife had the baby two months ago. A little *mædencild*,” Wulbeorn said, beaming, “And as fat and pretty and sweet a girl as anyone could have wished.”

“Have you given her a name?”

“No, no,” he said, “she’s not old enough yet, but when the harvest comes we will give her a proper name. We just call her Gæten, Little Goat, for now. She does bleat like one when she’s hungry!”

Eadyth laughed, “I’m sure it fits her quite well.”

Wulbeorn smiled and returned to his shearing. Eadyth then turned to Paulinus. “I did not expect to see you here,” she said, speaking rather more coolly than she had done to Wulbeorn. “I had assumed you preferred the contemplative life to the work of the hand.”

Paulinus smiled greasily. “Ah, my *cwene*, but the work of the hand is indeed a form of contemplation and prayer. Anything I can do to help my fellow men, is the work of God.” He lifted his eyes to the sky, as if his god sat on a cloud.

“Well, we must be in agreement there,” she said. “There certainly is enough that needs doing, and your help is appreciated. Did you do much in the way of farming back in ... where is it you come from?”

“Close to Rome,” he said, “And no, I did not do much in the way of farming before I entered the service of the Church. My father was a *ductus*, what you might call an ealdorman, and I was but a third son with few prospects before the Spirit of God moved me to join a monastery.”

“So they make you become a farmer if you join a monastery?” Eadyth asked. She had made a concerted effort to not learn anything about this foreigner or his god, but as she helped to pick briars and bits of sheep shit from the sheared mats of wool she could not help but wonder about the strange land with such strange men as Paulinus.

“Everyone is equal within the confines of the monastery,” Paulinus said, “Even princes and noblemen learn to tend fields and brew ale and shear sheep, for we all have a responsibility to our brothers.”

“Even the men brew ale? What, do they spin the wool and bring up the children as well?” She shared an amused look with Wulbeorn, who chuckled to himself.

Paulinus smiled patiently. “When you live in a community of men, sometimes you must take women’s responsibilities. But there are nuns who help us with certain tasks, and we live in harmony with them, though they are separated from us.”

“That’s right,” Eadyth said, “you folk aren’t allowed to have sex, are you?” This was one of the first bits of trivia she had learned about Christians, and it amused her greatly.

“We take vows of celibacy upon entering the service of God, yes,” he said “though some men find it harder to follow than others.”

“So you’ve never been with a woman? Never been in love, even as a youth?”

Paulinus narrowed his eyes. “The love of my God is all the love I shall ever require. I have little interest in women, as I wish to keep my body and my mind pure so that it can be filled with the spirit of God.”

“And so you think that being with a woman will contaminate you?” She asked. She could not help but become slightly offended at this.

“All women carry the mark of the first sin on this earth,” Paulinus said gently. He closed his eyes as he spoke, as if she would contaminate him with her very presence. “All women are daughters of Eve, the first woman, who brought sin into the world by defying the Lord. This is not to say that women cannot be holy, but it is only when they accept that they must be inferior to men that they can come closer to God.”

Eadyth’s mouth dropped open, but she shut it again hastily and glared at him. “That must be why there are no female priests, then, isn’t it?”

Paulinus had the audacity to look pleased, as if he was teaching her something very important and she

finally understood him. “That is correct, my *cwene*. Women must be silent in the temples, so says the word of the lord. It is important that your folk remember this; it is not fitting for women to act as a priest, as your *godeswifes* do. That is one of the primary reasons that our two faiths cannot intersect, you see.”

Eadyth could not help but to stare at him in disgust for a long while. “If women are not permitted to speak with the gods, then how do they do their duties? You cannot use herbs without knowing the lore behind them, and you cannot heal sick people without knowing the proper spells, or help women through childbirth without communing with the gods. Don’t tell me that your priests know how to lessen birthing pains,” she said, failing to keep a mocking jeer out of her voice.

“Such practices are an affront to God,” Paulinus said, still in that knowledgeable tone that so infuriated her. “Women are given pains during childbirth as a punishment for Eve’s sins. It is known. It is the sacred duty of the missionaries of Christ to put a stop to these practices.” His voice had the barest hint of fire behind it, and Eadyth decided it was best not to pursue the question further; it only served to make her angry.

“So tell me, Paulinus Priest, why did you decide to come all the way across land and sea to this place? Surely you had not planned to shear sheep for an Englisc king, when you took your vows. I am sure that there are plenty of, as you say, pagans, back where you come from, that you would not have to come all the way here.” She rather wished he would go back where he came from.

“No indeed, my *cwene*,” he said, “I had planned to spend the rest of my life at Monte Cassino, and devote myself to Christ in solitude and contemplation, but I was chosen by his Holiness the Pope to come and bring the light of God to the Seaxe.”

“You ought to get down to where the Seaxe live, then,” Eadyth said, “You’re in the land of the Engla, not the Seaxe.”

“You are Seaxisc yourself, are you not?” Paulinus asked, but held up his hand as if to beg for forgiveness for his slight. “Please forgive me; the language is difficult for me. We foreigners tend to call all men from this land Seaxe.”

Eadyth shrugged. “I understand. I tend to call all of you people Dirty Easterlings in any case.” She grinned, and he thankfully understood the joke. “You are right, though. I am Seaxisc, though no one really cares much about that sort of thing, unless you get it wrong. We are all kin, in the eyes of the gods.”

“My people believe the same thing,” Paulinus said. “All children of God.”

Eadyth did not believe that this was the same thing, but gave him a very forced smile before she stood to leave him. “Well, I thank you for your help in the shearing, Paulinus, and for your ... interesting conversation.”

“May the peace of the Lord be with you, Eadyth, Engla-*Cwene*,” he said to her, and she could not help but raise an eyebrow in amusement at the stupid hand gesture he always performed when he said those words.

“I – well, thank you.” She left him there, and uttered a silent prayer to Woden in thanks for the wisdom he had given her, that she was not as deluded as this priest.

Eorwald decided to stay behind and finish helping Wulbeorn with the sheep, as Paulinus had gone to do something priestly. Sunniva was still playing with some of the small children, her dress caked in mud from their play. The *ceorls* were waving goodbye to Sunniva and to Eadyth, and a little yellow-haired girl hugged Sunniva around the waist.

“You must be a good girl now, Ælfheah,” said Sunniva, “and the next time that brother of yours tries to knock down your mud house, do that trick I showed you, and he won’t do it ever again!” She gave a wicked grin to the little girl, who shared it. Sunniva handed her a basket of food to take to her mother, and a bit of honeycomb. The girl gave them a wide, toothless grin and scampered away.

“You have the makings of a good *cwene*,” Eadyth told Sunniva as they began their journey home, “People love a generous heart and a generous hand.”

“I just want them to love me like they love you.”

Eadyth laughed. “You’re well on your way then,” she said, “That’s the benefit of being a *cwene*. You get to be their loving mother, rather than their stern father. You can offer them bread and a place to sleep when they have no home, and never have to punish them or deny them anything.”

“But you have to be stern sometimes,” Sunniva said, “I mean, you hold court in father’s place when

he's gone, and you don't get to be the doting mother then."

"Well, being stern is part of being a mother too," Eadyth said. "If you let your children run wild, they will end up hurting themselves, or hurting you. It's a fine balance, but it's all for their benefit."

"How did you learn to be a *cwene*?" Sunniva asked after they had walked a while in silence.

"Trial and error," Eadyth said, shrugging. "Mostly error. Again, rather like being a mother. You'll never know how stupid you are until you have a child."

"I would be completely inept at being a mother," Sunniva said, "I like children, but only when they've grown up a bit and can play and run about, but once they start crying I would rather hand them back to someone else. I don't think I would want to have children at all."

"You feel differently once they're your own," Eadyth said, giving her daughter a hard look. "And unless you decide to abandon that man of yours and live a life without love, you'll end up a mother eventually."

Sunniva tensed. "I don't know what you're talking about," she said, "I don't have a man."

Eadyth rolled her eyes. "Your father may be oblivious, but I'm not. If you want to go sneaking around with Ecgric, that's your business. But you will have to marry someday, and it's best not to have a bastard hanging on your skirts when that day comes."

"You had Sige and father still married you," Sunniva said indignantly.

"Sgebryht was born to me by my husband," Eadyth reminded her, "not the product of some youthful dalliance." She sighed. "Listen, I've realized I can't control what you do. You're too much like me, and I think if someone told me I couldn't take a lover, I would do it anyway out of pure spite." Sunniva had slowed her pace, and Eadyth knew she had hit the mark. "If you like him, I won't stand in your way."

"I don't need your permission, mother," Sunniva said. "I'm a woman grown and I can make my own choices, though apparently everyone seems to have forgotten that fact."

"You're also a *cyningsdæhter*, and as such you are not always given a choice. The time will come when you have to do your duty and make sacrifices for the sake of your family and your people. You are what the gods have made you, and you must be a peace-weaver."

"Why?" Sunniva asked, "Why should that responsibility fall on me? I thought that was why we had sons in the first place, because peace is fickle and war always wins out anyway? What is the point of me marrying some fat old Mercian so that we can have a few years of feigned alliance, when we will just end up fighting them again?"

Eadyth drew a steadying breath before she responded. "What if I told you, that by securing an alliance with one of our enemies, even for a few years, you could prevent a battle? What if, by you choosing your own fun and pleasure over the duties of the daughter of a *cyning*, that battle took the life of one of your brothers, or your father, or the lover you chose over your responsibilities?"

Sunniva glowered at the ground, having stopped walking completely.

"You know I am right," Eadyth said.

"Of course you are right," Sunniva said irritably. "It doesn't mean I have to like it. There is no glory in preventing a war; the glory comes from fighting in one. No one will sing about me doing my duty."

"It's the lot you were given," Eadyth said, and knew the sadness in Sunniva's voice as her own. "Sometimes I wish we could have lived in the elder days when women would take up swords of their own and fight alongside men, and we could be given the glory of dying in battle, rather than preventing it. But we women are made from harder stuff. We don't get to follow our brothers and our sons and our lovers to the halls of the gods, we have to stay behind and tell their stories and pick up the pieces they leave behind. Men will not fight without the hope of renown, and yet we do it every day."

Sunniva said nothing. Eadyth put her hand on her daughter's shoulder, and gave her a small smile. "If it were easy, men would do it," she said, and Sunniva could not restrain a laugh.

Chapter Three

Ecgric

Ecgric plunged his horn into the barrel of mead. It was the fourth or fifth time, but he was not drunk yet, and he wished to be. The light was fading quickly, but the ring of trees was illuminated by the massive bonfire glowing in the center. A few girls rushed past him in a blur of white and gold, holding hands and giggling as they heard the sound of the harp. Rægenhere must have had a few drinks himself by now, Ecgric thought; Rægenhere's fingers always ended up on the strings of harp after his head was filled with ale.

Ecgric broke through the circle of people around the fire and sat down, and was not surprised to see Rægenhere standing next to the flames, the circle of eyes trained on him.

"The mind alone knows what lies near the heart; he alone knows his spirit. No sickness is worse for the wise men than to have no one to love him."

"Come to me, I'll love you!" one of the maidens piped up, to general laughter from the crowd.

Rægenhere grinned at the girl, and went on, *"That I found when I sat among the reeds, and waited for my desire; body and soul the wise girl was to me, nevertheless I didn't win her."* He frowned theatrically, and Ecgric rolled his eyes as another of the girls let out a sympathetic whimper. He scanned the pile of white-clad women, most of who were gazing in rapt attention at Rægenhere and his recitation of the wisdom of Woden, when he met the gaze of a pair of grey eyes beneath a ring of yellow flowers.

"The Giant's girl I found on the bed, sleeping, sun-radiant; the pleasures of a lord were nothing to me, except to live with that body," Rægenhere continued.

Sunniva did not take her eyes away from Ecgric's. She stood, leaving her friends behind, disappeared outside of the circle of people. Ecgric rose from his seat and found her alone, somewhat apart from the mass of people listening to the singing. She wore a circlet of marigolds on top of her unbound hair, which cascaded down to her waist and flowed over her bare arms. Sunniva took the horn from his hand without a word, and drank. "Blessed Eostre," she said when she had finished, a drop of the sweet liquid clinging to her bottom lip. He had to restrain the ludicrous urge to kiss it away.

"And to you," he paused for a moment. "You look beautiful."

She raised an eyebrow. "Yes, I am aware of that, funnily enough." She began walking away, and he

could not be entirely sure if she was jesting or not.

"Would you rather I tell you that you look ugly?" He asked, keeping pace with her.

"No, I enjoy being told I am beautiful, just as much as any girl," she shook out her hair, "But it's hardly original."

"He who flatters gets favors," Ecgric said, "Or do you doubt the words of Woden?"

"The All-Father lost his eye to bring us poetry, and you squander his gift by telling me the same words a hundred other men have given before you?" She smirked in that crooked way she did when playing at riddles. He felt his head swimming, though he doubted it was from the drink.

"I could say that I have never owned a ring that could match the silver of your eyes." It sounded stupid in his head, but she seemed pleased.

"Hmm, you're nearing the mark now," Sunniva said. "I think the All-Father would be pleased that you are at least attempting to make his sacrifice worthwhile."

"I am no poet," Ecgric told her, "I'm a warrior. My poetry comes from my shield and sword, not from my mouth."

"And yet I would rather have your mouth touch me than your shield or your sword," she said, stopping to look at him. She leaned on one leg, her head cocked slightly to the side, making her dress curve over her hip in an effortlessly seductive way as her finger made a trail down to his belt. "I know what you want," she said quietly, "Why do you deny yourself something when it's offered freely?"

"You know why," he said, trying to push her away, "You're not just some *ceorl's* daughter or a whore that I can just have whenever I please, you are a ..."

She cut him off, "I know very well what titles we both hold, thank you." They were far away from the bonfires and the revelers now, and the waning moon was the only light. "Gods be good, Ecgric, you act as if I wanted you to marry me."

"Don't you?" he asked, bewildered. That was usually what girls wanted, after all, and it was usually his offer if he wanted to get one of them into bed.

"I happen to be the daughter of a *cyning*, unless you've forgotten," she said, "And I think I deserve to enjoy myself before I get sold off to some old man."

"No man will have you if you aren't a maiden," he told her, "I don't want to ruin your father's chance at an alliance in exchange for a night with you. I have some integrity." He vaguely registered that they had made their way back up the hill to the Briggweard. It was deserted now as everyone had gone down to the bonfires.

Sunniva laughed, "I think you'll find that ship sailed a long time ago." He could not be certain if she was lying or not. She had drawn closer, but he did not move away this time. "Let me keep you as my secret," she whispered, pushing open the door to the deserted hall.

Ecgric did not realize what he was doing until he had touched the bow of her lips with his own, still tasting the honey of the mead clinging to them. He was drunk on the scent of her body and the way her hands began to wander as she pulled him into one of the deep alcoves separated by long green hangings from the rest of the hall. She was trying to pull off his tunic, but he kissed her again, slowly and deliberately, which only served to make her more eager. Every time she tried to reach down his trousers, he stopped her. He delighted in the crease of annoyance that had appeared between her eyebrows as she grew more and more frustrated.

Ecgric pulled the shoulder of her dress down, kissing the arc of her neck as he revealed the small white mounds beneath, each tipped in a dark bud that hardened as he ran his thumbs over them. He touched his lips to one of them, and heard her sigh as he drew it into his mouth, lifting the hem of her skirt and searching out the soft patch of hair at the apex of her thighs. It cost him a considerable effort to pull his hand away; he wanted to bury himself in her when he felt the wetness there, but the look on her face amused him. He deliberately traced the contours of her hips, her breasts, kissing her as he felt her chest rising and falling in ragged bursts. She was annoyed, she was unsatisfied, and she wanted him. It was perfect.

Sunniva let out a growl of frustration. "You're toying with me," she said in a hoarse whisper.

"Now you know how I've felt all this time," he said in her ear as she squirmed against his hand. He enjoyed this, seeing a flush creep up from her breasts into her cheeks as he touched her, but she soon became too impatient to let him continue and she pulled their bodies together with surprising force for someone so

small.

Perhaps it had been the long while since he had been inside a woman, or perhaps it was the torment of watching her for so long without being able to touch her, but he was spent within moments.

He wanted to sleep, but she sat up and cleared her throat loudly.

“What?” he asked.

She glared at him and he laughed at her frustration. “Where are my manners?” he sat up and kissed her again. She knew what she wanted, and she guided his hand to find the bud nestled beneath the soft brown hair between her legs. He held her close to him even when she tried to move away, and she bit the skin of his arm as her lithe body became taut. She gasped, let out a low, musical groan, and then she relaxed with a shudder. Everything about her was beautiful, from the way she bit her lip to the way her back arched and the way she had sighed and closed her eyes when it was over. She rolled onto her stomach, stretching languidly with a look of perfect contentment on her face. She was done with him, but he reached out to stroke the skin of her back, wanting her all over again.

Ecgric drifted in and out of sleep, a battle being waged in his mind as he felt Sunniva’s body next to him. He should not have done it; he should have resisted her. It would have been for the best.

But why should he feel so guilty? It was not as if he had raped her, after all. He should not be punished for having sex with a woman who brought him into her bed willingly.

He looked over at Sunniva, who was facing away from him as she slept, tendrils of hair falling down her back and pooling onto the bed behind her. He rolled onto his side, snaking his arm over the curve of her waist and pulling her closer. He knew that shouldn’t have let this happen, but as he breathed in her scent and felt the warmth of her skin against his, the words Rægenhere had sung earlier came back to him: *the Giant’s girl I found on the bed, sleeping, sun-radiant; the pleasures of a lord were nothing to me, except to live with that body.*

Gieva

Gieva had not thought that she would miss waking up with Leoma’s feet against her head. Leoma was always kicking and rolling about, and the last time Gieva had shared a bed with her sister she had kicked so hard that she left a bruise above Gieva’s knee. That was the night that Leoma had fallen ill, when she had kicked and cried and burned in her sleep. And then she was cold, and the bruise on Gieva’s leg started to fade, first purple, and then edged with yellow, and then gone.

Gieva smoothed the blanket across her bed and pulled on shoes. She stoked the fire, hung the cooking pot, and sat outside to spin while it warmed. The morning was cool and quiet, and the feel of the soft wool between her fingers was soothing.

Father appeared from the direction of the stream, carrying a bucket. “Is your mother up yet?” he called as he approached.

Gieva did not look up from her work, but shook her head as she picked a piece of straw out of the newly-formed thread. Mother wasn’t likely to get up today. “I think she has a headache,” Gieva said, as her father sat nearby and set to cleaning the eels in his bucket.

“Ah,” said Father, and he whacked an eel against a stone to keep it from squirming.

Gieva pursed her lips and flung her spindle again. “She thought I was her sister last night. She kept trying to talk to me about her mother, and then she got confused and started crying. It was an hour before I could calm her down, and then she kept asking for Leoma.”

Father said nothing. “It’s not getting any better, either,” she finished with a note of impatience.

“I know,” Father said after a while.

“It’s been weeks and weeks. She keeps forgetting where she is, and she...” Gieva could not finish. She set down her spindle in her lap and watched her father tearing the guts out of the eels. He seemed to be pointedly avoiding her gaze.

“It’s hard for her. She’s just lost a child. You won’t know what that’s like until it happens to you. I hope

it never does.”

“It’s hard for me too,” Gieva said, “Can’t you talk to her? Can’t you make her ...?”

Father tossed the last eel into the bowl and wiped his hands. “I don’t think it will do much good,” he said, “Your mother needs time, that’s all. Losing Leoma was a deep blow for her, but she will be back to normal again.”

Gieva frowned, but not at her father’s words. She thought she heard something far off, though at this distance she could not be certain of what it could be. Father turned and looked in the same direction, squinting.

“Is that a horse?” she asked.

“I think so,” he said, “Take these inside,” Father handed her the bowl and she obeyed, as he walked down the path from their house toward the sound.

Gieva set down the bowl on the table inside, then stood in the doorway as Father waited for the rider to approach. It had indeed been a horse that they had heard, and she saw the weak morning sun reflect off the helm of the huscarl as he approached, the mount frothing beneath him. When Gieva recognized it as her cousin Ælfhelm, she retrieved a waterskin and rushed forward.

“What is it?” Father was asking.

“Cynhelm’s farm has been attacked,” Ælfhelm said, dismounting. “Along with several other houses along the rivers Cam and Granta. I was with Cynhelm’s family at their farm when the house was raided.”

Gieva handed the skin to her kinsman, and he drained it. Several serving folk had appeared from their work, eager to see what the fuss was about.

“When did this happen?” Father asked, “You must have ridden through the night if you came from Cynhelm’s farm.”

“Past midnight,” said Ælfhelm, “Everyone had gone to bed except for two guards. It was a quick and brutal raid; twenty or so men. We don’t know who they were, but their speech sounded like they came from the North. I can’t be sure, though.” He gentled his horse, which was nickering and waving its head in agitation. “His wife and his young son went missing after the fight.”

“Where is Cynhelm? I thought he was supposed to be in Grantabricge until midsummer.” Father said, anxiously twisting the horse’s reins.

“That’s where I’m headed, if you can give me a fresh horse,” Ælfhelm said. “I’ve been sent to tell him what’s happened.”

“Of course you’ll have a horse,” Father said, and was silent for a moment, thinking. “Has word been sent to the *gyning*?”

Ælfhelm shook his head. “You know as well as anyone that Cearl is useless. I know a message was sent to king Rædwald of the Engla, but who knows if he’ll help us. It might only be a raiding party from Lindsey, and nothing we cannot handle on our own.”

Father nodded grimly. “I’ll have my horse saddled for you,” he told Ælfhelm, “but first go with Gieva and have something to eat and drink before you go; you look half a corpse.”

Gieva took him back into the house while Father led the sweating horse to the stable. “I’m glad you’re safe,” she told Ælfhelm while busying herself next to the fire; “I wonder why they would have taken Cynhelm’s wife? If it is just a raid, wouldn’t they be looking for gold and weapons?”

“Sometimes I forget how little you know of the world,” Ælfhelm said, though not unkindly. “Even outlaws know that an ealdorman’s wife and son are worth their weight in gold, if a little more difficult to carry off. You ought to be careful or they’ll have you next.” Gieva’s alarm apparently showed on her face, because he added, “It’ll be well in the end, don’t worry,” and he began to wolf down mouthfuls of the pottage Gieva had placed in front of him. “There is a rumor that they are *mycingas*, mercenaries sent to find some contender to Athelfrith’s throne who was said to be in Mierce, but they have been burning houses and attacking Gyrwas just for the fun of it, it seems.”

Fear gripped Gieva, and she found herself staring at her kinsman. “You don’t think there will be a war, do you?” She asked him, her voice barely a whisper. “What if they come here?”

Ælfhelm clenched his jaw. “I hope it doesn’t come to that,” he said. “But only time will tell. Are you protected here?”

Gieva nodded. “My father is here, and we have at least twenty men from nearby who can hold a

sword. And I can use a shield,” she said proudly, and Ælfhelm nodded.

“I hope you won’t have to use them, but you should all be on your guard. I don’t know why those men attacked Cynhelm’s hall, but you might be next. You should prepare for the worst.”

Father did indeed seem to plan for the worst. Within an hour of Ælfhelm’s departure, he had sent out messengers to the neighboring farms, telling the inhabitants to make their way to the nearby village of Ealdham as quickly as they could. If Cynhelm had been attacked, how long would it be before the northern raiders started attacking the local thegns?

“It is best for everyone to stay together,” Father said. “These *nycingas* may burn our houses and steal our goods, but our people are the priority. Ealdham is fortified, and better able to withstand an attack than scattered farms are. You have to get your mother and go to the village as soon as you can. I will take some men with me, but I’ll leave a few in your company to protect you. I don’t want too many going at once, or it will only draw the eye of attackers. A message will have gotten there by now and the village hall will be open for those who live in the farms. You’ll be safe there.”

“Aren’t you coming with us?” Gieva asked him, following him outside to the stable. She could not entirely hide the note of alarm in her voice, even though she attempted to sound calm and business-like.

He shook his head. “As we don’t know where Cynhelm is, I will have to raise the *fyrð*.” He motioned for a serving man to help him onto the saddle of Ælfhelm’s horse, now watered and rested. “Last news was that the invaders were headed down to Grantabridge, and so that is where I will go. I will go to Ealdham as soon as things are settled.”

Gieva bit her lip as her father looked down from his saddle.

“Fight bravely and die well, if die you must,” she said.

Father bent down to kiss the top of her head. “It will all be well, my girl. I’ll see you soon.”

Gieva watched the horse trot down the path, and her father and his men disappeared from sight. She registered a rising feeling of panic, but breathed deeply to wash it away. Now was not the time to get flustered. She set about doing as her father had asked; wrapping loaves and dried meat and salted fish in bundles and packing them into a bag, gathering traveling clothes, and finally, collecting her mother.

Gieva had to shake her a few times before she opened her eyes. “Godrinc?” Mother said, looking around the room. She was pale and thin, wearing only a shift and looking quite confused.

“Father is outside,” Gieva lied, “Mother, you have to get up; Cynhelm has been attacked and we think that they might come here next. We have to get to Ealdham, in case they come here.”

Mother sat up, bleary-eyed. “Hand me my dress, then,” she said, “and make sure you tell Leoma to bring her spindle when we go, she’s always forgetting it. If we are to be stuck in a hall I won’t have you two being unproductive.” Her voice was light and touched with annoyance, as if it were all just a minor inconvenience.

Gieva felt a twinge of pity for her mother as she gathered her things. She had known an old woman in the village who had gone quite mad in her old age, and saw ghosts and spirits wherever she went. It worried her more than she cared to admit, to see the same tendencies in her mother, who was still so young. Rather than correct her, though, Gieva helped her mother gather her things and they set off up the road to Ealdham.

Eadyth

Eadyth seemed to spend as much time fixing her daughter’s mistakes as Sunniva spent making them. “You have to stop being so impatient,” Eadyth told her, “There’s a rhythm to it, and you have to make sure you don’t catch any of the vertical threads or it will fray. Like this,” she showed Sunniva how to slide the long needle through the hanging strands of thread so that it caught each of them. “Now help me push it up,”

she said, “evenly, now.”

“It looks terrible,” Sunniva complained, looking at the lumpy waves in the fabric where it differed from Eadyth’s own work, “What if I just went back to spinning? I can spin while you weave and it will go twice as quickly.”

Eadyth held back a sigh. “Big pieces like this are a two-person job, and I need your help. And don’t roll your eyes at me,” she scolded Sunniva, “You’re going to have to learn to do it properly eventually, so you might as well practice.” She watched as Sunniva started to slide the needle back through in the opposite direction. It would be years before Sunniva could even attempt to use the man-high loom on her own, Eadyth knew, and Sunniva wasn’t exactly patient. A crease formed between the girl’s eyebrows, and she was chewing her bottom lip in the same way her father did when he was concentrating. A feather of light brown hair had fallen over eyes and she brushed it away.

“And we push up again,” Eadyth said, and they added another row.

An hour later, Sunniva had finished a hand’s breadth of the fabric; it was still uneven in places and she had missed a few strands of the warp threads, but she was improving despite her impatience.

“I’m going outside,” Sunniva said, stretching her back, “Wynne is waiting for me.”

Eadyth continued her weaving as Sunniva bounced from the room, and Eadyth heard Ecgric’s voice outside the weaving house. Sunniva greeted Ecgric and Eadyth heard two sets of footsteps retreat around the back of the weaving house, and her weft thread tangled as Eadyth was distracted, certain of what her daughter was getting up to.

She swore and picked the knot apart, as she heard the door open again. Rædwald entered and sat down on Sunniva’s vacated stool, his ever-present smile sliding off his face.

“You seem upset.” He was always adept at stating the obvious.

“It’s just a knot,” Eadyth said, finally freeing the tangled thread, but then she sighed, “And our daughter.”

Rædwald’s mouth set in a line behind his beard. “Ah.”

“I think she’s old enough that we need to try to find her a husband,” Eadyth said. She saw him chewing the inside of his cheek, as he often did when he was thinking about something unpleasant.

“What?” she prompted, “Do you think she’s too young? She’s well old enough to be married; I don’t know what we are waiting for.”

Rædwald said nothing, but she got her answer.

“That girl has more men following her than a battle commander,” Eadyth said. “If we don’t do something she’s going to end up with one of their bastards in her, and then no one will have her.”

“No, Sunniva wouldn’t... She’s a good girl.” Rædwald seemed mildly horrified, which amused Eadyth despite herself. “You don’t think she’s ...”

Eadyth gave up the knot as a bad job and tossed her hands in the air. “I don’t know what our daughter might decide to do, but I know what men tend to do when a woman gives them the opportunity,” she said, “if she doesn’t lift her skirts for one of them, eventually one of them will do it for her.”

He frowned. “None of my men would dare touch my daughter,” he said, “especially against her will.”

You sweet, stupid old man, Eadyth thought, you’ve seen so many things in your life and yet you don’t think any of your men would rape our daughter half a hundred times if given the chance. “I don’t doubt the honor of your thegns,” Eadyth lied, “I just think it is time we set up a marriage for her. She is young and pretty, and could give us a powerful alliance with one of the Seaxisc kings, or even with the Eota. Ethelbert has a son, doesn’t he? Let’s look into that.”

Rædwald frowned. He doted on Sunniva, his sweet little girl, and Eadyth knew that he would be reluctant to send her off to some old man a world away. Of course Eadyth loved Sunniva as much as a mother could love her child, but that did not mean she was blind to her daughter’s activities, and the girl would have to be married someday before the charm of youth and beauty wore away.

“I’ll consider it,” Rædwald said after a long pause.

“That’s all I ask, my *cýning*,” She kissed him on the top of the head. He grabbed her wrist and looked up at her from the weaving stool as she made to leave.

“I know it’s hard for you,” he said, “she’s a good girl, really, but I know mothers and daughters

sometimes have trouble getting along.”

Eadyth sighed. “You couldn’t have just given me more boys?” She asked playfully, “Boys are easy. Boys love their mothers and grow up strong and handsome, and you don’t have to worry about teaching them to run a household or about their bride wealth or whether they’re going to ruin everything because they are relentless flirts...”

“But boys die,” Rædwald reminded her, “brave, strong sons do not always survive, even if they love their mothers.”

“Women die in their own battles,” Eadyth said, thinking of her own mother, who had bled to death trying to bring a son into the world. “Sunniva will fight just the same as Rægen or Eorwald or Sige.”

“And you seem to be well eager to send her forward to those battles.” Rædwald said sullenly.

They glared at one another for a while before Rædwald held out his hands to her. “Calm yourself, my love,” he soothed, “Let’s not fight. Our children are growing up, and it is a challenge on both sides.”

“It would be less of a challenge if we had a daughter who actually listened to her mother,” Eadyth complained.

“If she listened to her mother, I would know she was not your child,” Rædwald said with a hint of a grin.

Eadyth snorted. “No, I listened to my mother. I did not hoist my skirts for every man who called me pretty.”

“You did for one.”

“Yes, and look where we ended up!” She said, smiling at him, “But you were a *cyning*. How could I refuse?”

“You did refuse,” he said, “Often, and loudly.”

“I wanted to know you would fight for me.”

“My greatest victory,” Rædwald said, smoothing a flyaway hair back behind her ear.

Eadyth looked at her husband for a long while. Sometimes she forgot how much she loved him, from the strands of grey in his red-gold hair to the beard that tickled her cheeks when he kissed her, to the little soft belly he got when he hadn’t been fighting much; every part of him. He was the one who had given her two brave, strong sons and an infuriatingly beautiful daughter, and who had treated her boy as his own for over twenty years. She never knew she could have loved him when they married, but she did now.

“Does it still count as a victory if I surrendered?” she asked, and he grinned at her. “Now,” she said, leading the way out of the weaving house, “you didn’t come here to watch me weave and hear me complain about our children. What have you got to tell me?”

“We’ve had a messenger from Grantabricge.”

“And?”

Rædwald answered in a rather long, single breath, as if he were waiting for her to hit him about the head. “Cynhelm needs help. There have been groups of warriors starting fights and burning farms along the Granta near the *burh*, and the messenger says that they had nearly closed in on the fortress when he left.”

And there it was. He was asking her permission to leave. “You’re needed here,” she said, not looking at him. “Send Ricbert. Or give up this farce of trying to make Ecgric your steward and send him.”

“I am the *cyning*,” he said grumpily, as if he had been denied a sweet. “And those are my people; I can’t just force them to fend for themselves while I sit and feast and milk the cows and pretend nothing is happening.”

“They’re not your people, though, are they?” she reminded him, “Those are not Engla in Grantabricge, and Cynhelm is sworn to Mierce, last I looked.”

“I don’t care if Cynhelm has sworn allegiance to a bloody Wælicsman,” Rædwald said, “He has always been an ally to us. I won’t leave him and his people to be slaughtered.”

“You’ve already made up your mind about this, haven’t you?” Eadyth asked him irritably.

“I wanted to tell you first. It won’t take more than a couple of days, a week at the most. I just want to see what’s going on, and help Cynhelm if I might.”

“Are you taking the boys?”

“They need to see battle at some point. Real battle, not those little scuffles we had before in the West. Sigebyrht has already asked to come; he was there when the messenger arrived. As for the others;

Eorwald has never fought in a shield wall before, and Rægenhere needs to learn to command. It will be good for both of them.”

Eadyth stared at him. “Command?” she said, incredulous, “No. He’s not ready. I won’t have him leading men into battle when he’s barely fought in any himself.”

“Rægenhere won’t be leading anyone, you silly woman,” Rædwald said, “But both of them have got to learn at some point. You can’t think they should sit in the back of the ranks and watch, now they’re men grown? My sons will never shame themselves that way. They are Wuffingas.” He said it defiantly, and with a finality that she could not overrule.

She narrowed her eyes, but nodded, and he took her in his arms again. “As your queen, I command you to come back in one piece,” she told him, “And bring my sons back safely as well.”

“You have my word,” he told her.

Chapter Four

Eorwald

They stood, shoulder-to-shoulder, on a ridge of land near the River Granta. The captain of the opposing side had stepped forward in a gesture of peace, and Father had met him between the two shield-walls to discuss terms.

“Can you hear what they’re saying?” Rægen asked beside him, squinting stupidly, as if that would help him hear what was going on.

Eorwald shook his head. “I don’t even know who they are,” he said, “They don’t look like any Mercian shields I’ve ever seen.”

“They’re not Mercian,” Ecgric said from the other side of Rægen, “They’re from Bernicia, or Deira. It’s all basically the same thing, now. All Northymbrian scum.” He was idly clanging the handle of his battle-axe on the inside of his shield. “Hurry up,” he said under his breath.

Eorwald chewed his lip again, and glanced back to see Sige standing a few paces behind them, an arrow knocked but his bow unbent, waiting.

It was taking too long, why was Father still talking? Eorwald wanted to run at them, to hack his way through their lines. He ran his eyes up and down the wall of men, searching for a weak point as he had been taught to do. For a moment, he worried that they would not see battle; that he would go home without giving his sword a name. Rægen had named his sword Wælcyrige for the men she had sent to Woden’s hall; but the blade in Eorwald’s hand had seen no battle and had spilled no blood. This would be his first real fight, if his father would stop talking and get back into the line.

The king turned back to the shield wall, looking disappointed. There would be no fighting today. Eorwald’s shield arm dropped slightly, but he immediately raised it again and let out a cry as a spear flew past Rædwald, barely a foot from his ear. The king’s face flashed but he did not look back, and in one fluid motion he plucked the javelin from where it stuck in the ground a few paces in front of him, and returned to the center of the shield wall.

“Looks like they are unwilling to accept my terms,” the king said, and then raised his voice. “Shields up, boys!” he shouted, turning on the spot and sliding into place between Rægen and Ecgric. A shout went

up, and Eorwald grinned. He saw the men opposite them through the gaps between the shields.

"Which one was it?" Father asked quietly, "Which one threw the spear?"

"Boar shield, with the red, in the second rank, three along to the left." Eorwald told him. He had not seen the man throw the spear, but he saw several angry Northmen staring at a sheepish-looking warrior. The man wore no helm, and his face was nearly as ugly as the misshapen boar painted on his shield.

"I am going to kill you," Eorwald told the man, though no one heard it except the gods.

The men in their line stepped forward as one, on each clatter of weapon on shield. "These men are flies!" Ecgric called, "And they tried to sting the arse of your king. What do we do to flies?"

Shouts of "crush them!" and "squash them!" rose up, along with a "Fuck them up their arses!" from one man, which made them all laugh rowdily. They were twenty paces away, and Rædwald called to halt. "Wall!" he shouted, and Eorwald dropped to one knee as the second rank overlapped their shields with the first. "Fire!" Sige shouted from behind them, and he heard the whistle of javelins and arrows fly through the air, and the satisfying sound as a few stuck in the enemy shields. He heard a cry from behind him as an enemy arrow soared overhead, and glanced back to make sure it had not been Sige, but Sige had dived behind him, his shield a roof over their heads.

He heard the shouts of the Northerners as they edged closer, and then stopped. He looked through the gap in the shields to see them, stopped like idiots and making their own wall. He was struck with the absurdity of it, like two crabs facing one another on the beach.

"Oh this is ridiculous," he heard Ecgric voice his own thoughts.

"You're right," Rædwald answered. "Let's end this," he shouted. The back rank pulled away, and the front formed into a V-shape behind Rædwald. "On my command," he said, as they readied themselves. "*Onðringa!* Forward!"

Eorwald followed just behind Rægen, overlapping his shield as they rushed forward, his nameless sword held tightly in his hand. "*Engelcynn!*" he shouted, and the men took up the cry as they built up speed. He felt his shield crash into the opposing wall, and thrust it up to knock the axe out of a Northymbrian hand as it tried to pull his own shield down. He stabbed his sword underneath into the exposed thigh of his attacker, wrenched it free, and pushed forward. The wall had given way, and he heard Rægen's voice call to regroup. Eorwald ran toward the voice, but felt a blade bite at his back as he ran. He spun around, seeing the deformed boar's head shield. He smashed the man's shield out of the way, knocking him to the ground.

"You fucking coward," Eorwald shouted at the man, "you can't attack anyone unless his back is turned? You're no better than a criminal," he stomped on the man's hand as it reached for the sword, and kicked it away, "Filthy *wearg*."

The man stared up at him as Eorwald thrust the point of his sword into the man's throat. He spat on the corpse as it twitched. "Death take you, coward," he said, stepping over the man and returning to his brothers, now reforming on the other side of the Northymbrians.

He prepared to lock his shield again, but the Northymbrians were in chaos. Several had raised their hands in surrender, and Rædwald had to shout at one of the huscarls who was about to snick the head off of one of them. "They've submitted!" he called, and the huscarl stayed his blade with a look like he had been denied a sweet, grabbing the Northymbrian by the back of his hair and pushing him toward the king.

Eorwald's shoulder stung where the boar-shielded man had struck him, and he could feel the cool air as it snuck through the leather and wool. He wiped the cursed coward's blood from the blade, and realized it was no longer nameless. He kissed the hilt of *Weargbana* and slid her into her sheath.

The Northymbrian leader had been slaughtered, but his lieutenant was kneeling before the king. He had a broad, scarred face and was giving the king a look that would have curdled new milk.

"Who are you?" the king's voice was dangerous. "Speak up, you sniveling piece of pig shit." He aimed a kick at the man, who grunted, "Ulfric, son of Ulfric."

"And why did you and your men decide to attack me when my back was turned?" he asked, "Is that the way you northerners fight now, Ulfric, son of Ulfric?"

"Do not hold the rest of us accountable for Wiglaf's folly," Ulfric said defiantly, though the wind had been taken out of him by the force of the king's boot.

"Yet when this Wiglaf decided to start a battle, even after terms had been agreed upon, you and your men did not silence him, but decided to fight anyway. I know that Grantabrigge is a lovely part of the country, but

was it really worth losing half your men needlessly?"

"We didn't come for Grantabrigce," Ulfric said, "We came for the *atheling*."

"That wasn't what your *dryhten* told me when I discussed terms with him."

"My *dryhten* had his reason for keeping the truth from you. I have no such qualms. We come for the *atheling*, I will not deny it."

Rægen looked around. "Well, you've got two of us, how about you take your pick?" he grinned at Eorwald. "I'll have you know though, my brother is much better in bed."

Ulfric spat on the ground at Rægen's feet, earning a smack across the side of the head from Eorwald. "The traitor *atheling*, Edwin," he said, "We were on orders from our *cynig* Athelfrith to track him down. Rumor was that he was traveling your way. You should not have interfered."

Rædwald gave a mirthless laugh. "You're saying that I should have stood idly by while you harried my people? That I should have let you go on raping their wives and killing their greybeards while you pretended to look for some stupid boy?"

"Edwin is dangerous," Ulfric said.

"Edwin was killed years ago," Rædwald shot back, "Come up with a better lie and I might refrain from sending Athelfrith your head."

"He is alive!" Ulfric's voice had an edge of panic now. "He was in Mierce, and we had word that he was coming this way. I only did as I was bid, and that was to find Edwin and bring him back to Deira to be charged and executed."

"And you thought he might be hiding under the skirts of some woman in Grantabrigce?" Eorwald asked.

"Enough," Rædwald said. "I will let you live, Ulfric son of Ulfric," Rædwald told the kneeling man, "and you will take a message to your *cynig*."

Ulfric frowned. "What is the message?"

"You will tell him that the next men of his that I find in my lands will be given the Blood Eagle and dragged back to the north by goats."

"But Edwin —"

"It is not my fault that your king cannot keep track of a single man roaming the country," Rædwald cut him off. "If he is still alive, I doubt that he will come to a land that has never been friendly to his family. You might want to work on a better excuse before you try attacking my allies again. Get out." He motioned for the man to be sent free.

"You're just letting him go?" Eorwald asked, when the man had been taken away, "You can't trust him; he ought to be taken prisoner like everyone else."

"I won't waste any of my men on a fool's errand to the North," Father explained, "It's not a matter of trust. He won't go anywhere else, alone and surrounded by enemies. When he arrives back in Northymbreland with his superior dead and his army captured, he will have to explain to Athelfrith what has happened. I don't care if he repeats my words exactly; the message will be clear."

Eorwald scowled. "You should have sent his head back instead, if you only wanted to send a message."

"That would serve little purpose."

"It would tell Athelfrith not to try this again," Rægen put in, "It would show him that we are not to be challenged!"

"The gods frown upon killing prisoners needlessly," Father said, "As do I. You two have the blood-joy now, and it clouds your judgment." Eorwald and Rægen shared a look of impatience, but Eorwald knew that Father was probably right. Once the smell of death and smoke and blood had left him, he might feel differently.

They rounded up the ten or so men who had submitted, and herded them into a cowshed and set guards on them. The bodies of the Northymbrian warriors were stripped of their valuables, but buried with their swords. Even though they were enemies, most had still died well and should be afforded at least some dignity, Rædwald had explained.

That night Cynhelm feasted them in his hall in thanks for his deliverance from the Northymbrians. In an

act which surprised and delighted those Englisc men assembled, Cynhelm knelt before Rædwald and placed his sword upon the king's knee.

"Rædwald *Cyning*," he said in a carrying voice, "I, Cynhelm, Ealdorman of Grantabrigge, hereby swear to you, in front of these assembled men, my loyalty and my love from this day forward. When I called for aid, you were the only one to answer. Let me swear by the sword in my hand that I and my family will serve you and yours from this day forward, forswearing all other false oaths."

Rædwald beamed and handed the sword back to Cynhelm saying, "I accept your oaths and I hereby swear my own, that you will always have a place in my hall as my retainer and as my friend. *Wes ðu hal, Cynhelm eorl, Begen Rædwaldes!* Hail, Ealdorman Cynhelm, thegn of Rædwald." Rædwald lifted a horn of mead and shared it with Cynhelm.

The king then offered his men gifts for their bravery, those trinkets and rings which they had won from their defeated foes. Eorwald cheered them as they approached and received rings and promises of livestock and lands, and was cheered in return when his father called him forth.

Eorwald knelt before the high seat, and felt his father's hand on his head as the king's voice rang out over the crowd. "Today was my son's first battle, and he slew the coward who tried to skewer me. I wish to recognize him for his deeds," he pulled from his mathom chest a coat of burnished rings and handed them to Eorwald. "I am sure you will continue to make me proud, my son."

Eorwald grinned and received the gift from his beaming father, and thanked him. He took the coat of rings and rolled it carefully, placing it with his other gear. He wished he had been able to wear it today; if he'd have worn something other than his leather jerkin he might have been able to avoid the pain now dully thudding through his shoulder. He did not mind. He had earned this, and he knew that it would serve him well in all of the battles to come.

"You need a woman," Ecgric said, clapping Eorwald on the back right over the wound, and it made him wince. "You never sleep so well as after a battle, and it's doubly so if your bed is warm."

Eorwald shook his head, "I don't think so. I don't like the idea of rape."

Ecgric grabbed the hand of one of the cup-bearers as she passed, and she giggled as he pulled her onto his lap. "You wouldn't be raping anyone," he told Eorwald, flipping the girl's hair back over her shoulder, "What's your name?" he asked her.

"Ælfflaed," the girl answered.

"That's a pretty name," Ecgric told her, and she giggled again. "Now Ælfflaed, I have a serious question to ask you, and you must answer truthfully." Her eyes widened conspiratorially as she nodded. "If our handsome *atheling* here asked you to share his bed tonight, would you go with him?"

Ælfflaed raised her eyebrows as she surveyed Eorwald. "If that is what my *atheling* wishes," she said, "I would be happy to keep him company. After all, you and your brave friends saved us all. It is the least I could do." She rose from Ecgric's lap and plopped into Eorwald's.

Eorwald felt like punching the wide smirk off of Ecgric's face, but he enjoyed the feel of the woman, and as she led him into a quiet corner of the hall, he knew that he would indeed be sleeping very well that night.

Eadyth

Drops from the smoke hole in the roof plunked into a bucket as the house was steadily deluged. Eadyth wondered vaguely if she ought to check that the main assembly hall had not been flooded, but she was comfortable in the small room and reluctant to leave her seat by the fire. Occasionally, the rhythm was punctured by the sound of thunder from outside, and the dripping mingled with the whisper of the thread sliding through her fingers. Eadyth stitched a patch on a pair of breeches and listened as Sunniva sang to herself, a tune that kept time with her movements as she flung the spindle and wrapped it with the newly formed yarn.

"Do you hear that?" Sunniva cut her song off short, and Eadyth looked up.

"I think they're back!" Sunniva set her distaff and spindle on the floor and ran to the door.

The rain fell in sheets onto the yard and the paths outside, and Eadyth waited for the men to make their way up the steps. She held her breath as they entered, accounting for her sons and her husband, and even Ricbert and Ecgric, who were leading the horses away. Satisfied that they had all returned safely, she was able to breathe again.

Rædwald tried to kiss her, but she held him off. "Go and dry yourself. You look like a beached walrus," she laughed, "and you three as well," she nodded to her sons. She followed Rædwald into their room, and helped him to shrug out of his sodden clothes. As she hung them to dry, he draped a blanket around his shoulders and sat on the edge of their bed.

"Come and warm me, my love," he said, "I'm chilled to the bone." Eadyth sat on her husband's lap, and he wrapped the blanket around them both.

"Did you settle everything in Grantabrigce?" she asked, shivering slightly. His bare skin was chilly against hers.

Rædwald looked as if he had developed a sudden headache. "A stupid bloody mess, that was," he said, and when he had seen the look of concern on her face added, "We took care of it, don't worry. I'll explain it all when I've had a drink in me."

She nodded and did not press the matter. "Thank you for coming back to me," she said, "And for bringing my sons back to me safely."

"I promised you I would, didn't I?"

"You know I worry."

Rædwald paused for a moment, "I missed you," he said, and rested his head on her shoulder. "It was hard not to have you there."

"Then let me go with you next time," she stroked his beard, "you know that men always fight more bravely if they know their woman is close by, and you've always taken me with you before."

"It was too dangerous this time," he said, "this wasn't a normal fight; it was an unknown quantity, and I didn't want to risk it."

"I know how to use a shield," she said it in jest, but a crease appeared between his eyebrows.

"And I never want you to have to use it," he said, and then paused. "I did miss you though, truly. I missed your smile and your voice, and I missed your body," he kissed her, sliding a hand underneath her skirt. She felt a flush creep over her chest and up to her cheeks as he moved it higher. His kisses became more urgent; his hands roamed her body under the dress. She stroked his damp hair, thanking the gods, as she always did, that she still had him.

The storm was still whistling outside, but they were warm and comfortable as they sat in the hall next to the hearth. Sunniva sat between Eadyth's knees spinning while Eadyth combed out her daughter's long hair. Rædwald told them the story of Bældæg, the son of Woden, who was killed by a lowly shaft of mistletoe; he could not, however, remember most of the tale and Sunniva had to remind him, eventually taking up the story herself. Sige and Eorwald played at merels while Rægen heckled them both for their poor moves. She lived for these moments, and lost herself in the sound of the quiet pattering of rain and the crack of the fire and the laughter of her children.

Sunniva finished the story, and was silent for a moment before she asked her father, "Will you tell us what happened in Grantabrigce? This lot won't say a word!" She looked reproachfully her brothers.

Rædwald's jaw clenched. "It was nonsense, really. The whole thing started because that horse's arse Athelfrith thinks his nephew Edwin is hiding out in our lands, and he sent a smattering of *nycingas* to track him down."

"I thought Edwin was Athelfrith's brother, not his nephew?" Sige asked.

"How in Thunor's name am I supposed to remember?" Rædwald said, taking another draught of his ale. "It was some relation or another. Anyway, there were thirty or so men; much more than I would have expected to track down one lost *atheling*."

"They were ready to surrender," Sige put in, "But some stupid bastard decided to be a hero and try to attack the *gyning* when his back was turned."

Rædwald nodded. "No doubt he wished for renown, but it put his whole company in danger. It was

all needlessly bloody, but we couldn't accept that sort of insult. At least your boy got to prove himself." He raised his cup to Eorwald, who grinned. "Eorwald did us all proud and took him down. He's a good fighter."

"He should be," Eadyth beamed at her youngest son, and then turned back to Rædwald. "So what became of the Northymbrians?"

"Father sent one back to tell Athelfrith to stop poking his nose where it doesn't belong," said Rægen, "and the rest are captives of Cynhelm. Father let him do with them as he would, provided that he didn't send any back North."

"Were any thegns?" Eadyth asked, "You could have gotten a ransom for them at least."

"Wouldn't be worth the trouble," said Rædwald, "The less I have to do with Athelfrith, the better. Cynhelm can ransom them if he wishes, or sell them for slaves in Francland. He'll need the gold to rebuild Grantabricge more than I need it, in any case."

"And Edwin?"

"This was the first I had heard of him in ten years," Rædwald said, shrugging. "I knew that he was driven out of Deira after Athelfrith took the crown and united the two kingdoms, but I had heard he was dead. He was half a boy, if I remember. If he's alive he must be round about Sige's age, or just a little older."

"Obviously he's not dead if Athelfrith's looking for him," Sunniva said. "But why would he be in Grantabricge?"

"That's what we wanted to know," Eorwald piped up with a note of impatience in his voice. "They told us that Edwin was dangerous, but I don't understand how a single man could pose much of a threat to someone half a hundred leagues away?"

"Any man can be dangerous if he can get enough men to follow him," Rædwald said.

Sige's frowned. "Perhaps they heard that Edwin was raising an army?"

"That would explain why they needed to send a host to find him," Rægen agreed, "What do you think, Father?"

"I think Athelfrith is frightened for his hold on the north, and wants to make sure he's able to rid himself of claimants, even if that means chasing ghosts." Rædwald finished the ale in his cup and set it on the table. "Now, if we are done speculating, I am going to bed."

Even weeks later, the rains continued. It was cold and damp, but her husband's body was warm against her bare skin as he held her. Eadyth always slept better with Rædwald snoring rhythmically beside her, but she still found herself caught in strange dreams, in which Sunniva declared she would fight in the shield wall with her brothers and Ricbert had brought the girl back dead ...

Eadyth almost cried out when she saw Ricbert standing in the doorway, the rushlight in his hand illuminating his gaunt face. Eadyth had to pinch herself a couple of times before she realized she was no longer dreaming.

"What is it?" she asked Ricbert as she touched Rædwald's back to wake him.

"I'm sorry to wake you, but the *cyning* is needed outside. It's urgent." Ricbert said.

Rædwald snored loudly, oblivious, and Eadyth smacked him gently on the back, "Wake up, you old fool," she said, and Rædwald snorted out of sleep.

Eadyth stood and pulled a cloak around her shoulders, and Rædwald got blearily to his feet. "It can't wait until morning?"

"I'm afraid not. You'll understand when you see." Ricbert turned and left the room.

Grumbling, Rædwald crossed the hall to the large oak doors, which were standing partway open. A puddle of water was forming on the threshold as the rain entered the hall. The two of them walked onto the topmost step, to find Ricbert standing at the bottom, accompanied by four men whom Eadyth had never seen before. Ricbert's face seemed to register a queer mixture of amusement and mild distaste.

"You got me out of bed for four damp Wælescmen?" Rædwald asked, making no attempt to hide his annoyance.

"Tell them who you are," Ricbert demanded of the kneeling man in the center. He was younger than the others, no more than thirty years, but clearly the leader of the men.

"We are only travelers from Mierce," he said; his voice was deep and rhythmic but with no trace of a Wælisc accent. "We are lost, and came to beg for shelter and safety for a night or two."

Rædwald looked at them shrewdly, and then at Ricbert, who shook his head slightly. "If you were merely travelers," Rædwald asked them, "Why didn't you stop at one of the farmsteads along the way? Surely anyone would have offered you a bed or a dry barn to sleep in. It's not as if you couldn't pay them," he gestured toward the rings around the man's wrists and the weather-stained but expensive clothing. "Why travel twenty miles out of the way to come here? Who are you?"

The kneeling man held Rædwald's gaze for a long time, as if deciding something. "I think you know why I came here," he said, "And I think you know who I truly am."

Rædwald studied him, and then turned to Eadyth with a mirthless laugh. "Wife," he said, "I believe we have the pleasure of meeting Edwin, the lost *atheling* of Deira."

Eadyth's eyes narrowed, but she said nothing. A slight wave of panic caught her; if this was Edwin, then Athelfrith's men had been telling the truth when they justified sacking Grantabrigge. Rædwald had been so sure that Edwin was dead, and yet here he was, kneeling in the mud before them, his breeches soaked to the thigh and caked in mud, his cloak weather-stained and torn, and tied in a Wælisc style. She thought it was appropriate; his haggard face looked rather more like some Briton slave than a prince.

"Why did you come here?" Rædwald asked coolly, "If you are who you say, why would you come to me? The Engla have never been friendly to your people. Why would you think I would help you now?"

"You may not have been friendly to my father," the man said in a measured voice, as if it had been rehearsed, "But I have heard you are a just lord and loyal to those who serve you. I am *seledreorig*; I have no lord and no lands and no home, and I wish to offer you my friendship and my loyalty in exchange for a place in your hall as one of your retainers."

Rædwald frowned, and looked at the three thegns who accompanied the man. "And must I give these men a place as well?"

"No," Edwin said, "These men are sworn to Cearl of the Mierce, and they were only bound to bring me here safely and in secret. They will return to Cearl when their errand is complete."

"You want me to take you into my service, and yet I do not know you. You want me to challenge Athelfrith by openly supporting you." Rædwald's face was stony. "I am sorry. I cannot invite the wrath of the Northymbrians on my people for the sake of one exiled *atheling*," Rædwald said after a long pause. "Especially if Athelfrith has the might of Deira and Bernicia behind him. We would never be able to withstand him. I have to think of my own people first."

The man's shoulders slumped, his head bowed. "I understand," he said quietly.

"But," Rædwald continued, "I would not be in danger if a nameless man of the North Folk appeared at my hall, wishing to become one of my thegns. I would give him a place at my board and welcome his service, and give him every honor I would normally give to one of his station. Provided, of course, that he did not tell anyone his true identity."

Eadyth felt uneasy. The man had already been driven from Deira, then from the far western land of the Wælisc, and then through Mierce, dogged relentlessly by Northymbrian swords. Surely he had been disguised then as well, and yet Athelfrith's men had found him. What would stop them from coming here, to take their quarry and destroy those who had harbored him?

The young *atheling* stood and offered his thanks to the king, and Rædwald ushered him inside and ordered a servant to find food and bedding for Edwin and his companions in the hall. Eadyth took her husband by the arm, and whispered in his ear, "Please, think about what you're doing. We will gain nothing by helping him, except the fury of Athelfrith. You know that."

He turned and whispered back, "I have a duty to protect those in my lands, and those who seek safety in my hall. He swears no one knows he is here except for his loyal men."

"Men talk. And besides, they are not his; they are sworn to Cearl of the Mierce. You know Cearl hates you after you took Cynhelm away from him. No, it's best not to trust anyone you don't know."

"What do you want me to do?" he asked her, his voice tinged with anger, "I'm not going to turn him away; he's done nothing to offend or harm me or my family."

"Except to exist as a contending heir to Deira," Eadyth reminded him, "Athelfrith wouldn't send assassins to kill him if he was not a threat; *nycingas* who will kill our people if we stand in their way. Don't

deny it; you have seen it happen already, Northymbrian raids spurred by the mere memory of this man.”

“I’m not going to discuss this with you, Eadyth,” Rædwald said, “I have made my decision. We will keep quiet on his identity. No one needs to know who he is, and therefore we will be in no danger. I will not deny him a respite from his flight.”

They had re-entered their bedroom, and Rædwald pulled off his cloak, scowling.

“And what if he wants you to lead an army against Athelfrith?” Eadyth pressed on, “What if he expects you to fight his battles and win back his crown? As you’re feeling so generous –“

“Enough, woman!” Rædwald rounded on her. “Do not presume to tell me what to do, I am your *cyning*!”

“If you raise your hand against me, I will cut it off,” she warned him coldly, before softening her voice, “You may be my *cyning*, but I am your wife, and I only want to protect our family and our people.”

Rædwald chewed his lip before replying, “I will allow him to stay, for the time being,” he held up a hand to stop the angry response Eadyth had perched on her lips, “But if it becomes clear that danger follows him, I will look to my own people first.”

Eadyth scowled, but could not find a suitable argument to that.

“He will be just another of my thegns,” Rædwald assured her. “We’ll introduce him to the boys, I’m sure they’d enjoy the company.”

Yes, Eadyth thought sarcastically, *we will put my sons in the company of a man marked for death; that will keep them safe from harm.*

Sunniva

Sunniva pulled her spindle from her belt, and began to pull some fibers from the distaff, twisting them between her fingers before flinging it to set the twist. She sat with her legs crossed, her arms held aloft as the fluffy band of wool twisted itself into a fine thread. She watched Eorwald and Ecgric as they shot arrows from short bows at the wooden wall that bordered the yard. A full-sized figure of a man had been daubed onto an old bolster, and most of their arrows had clustered together around the neck, chest and groin.

“Why do you always aim for the cock?” Ecgric asked Eorwald.

“Because it would be the last place you’d want to be hit, and yet it’s always the least protected,” Eorwald said. He pulled the bowstring back and loosed, and another arrow ended up in the painted crotch of the target.

“It wouldn’t matter much if you got hit there,” Ecgric said, and his own arrow hit the neck of the target. “You never use yours.”

Sunniva chuckled under her breath at their conversation, and found that her thread had become lumpy and uneven as she had become distracted watching Ecgric.

“I use mine plenty, I just tend not to boast about it like you do.”

“I am able to please women; I’m not going to be ashamed of that fact.” Ecgric gave half a glance in Sunniva’s direction.

“Like that girl you had in Grantabrigge, what was her name?” Eorwald said, knocking another arrow.

“Widsith,” Ecgric said. He had a reminiscent look on his face which Sunniva did not like at all. He must have thought she could not hear his conversation, otherwise he would not be boasting about other women. Or perhaps he simply did not care.

“That’s right,” Eorwald drew the bowstring with a smirk and loosed. The arrow stuck in the wall, a foot away from the target. “Damn,” he said, “Now you got me thinking of her, with those perfect tits and that sweet little mouth of hers.”

“She was a screamer, too,” Ecgric said, loosing his own arrow.

“I won’t be able to concentrate now. Too bad she’s so far away, eh?” He grinned at Ecgric, who chuckled appreciatively in answer.

Sunniva saw Ecgric glance at her again, but she did not meet his eyes. She tried to act as if she had not heard their conversation, but her fingers trembled around the wool, and when Ecgric's eyes had left her she had gathered her distaff and spindle and left the two men to their archery. She stomped into the weaving house, and threw them against the wall in her fury. The room was mercifully empty, and she felt tears sting her eyes. She cursed her own stupidity; of course he had been with other women, it was stupid to assume that just because she had opened her legs for him that he would not continue in his old habits.

It had meant far more to her than it had to him, clearly. Perhaps she ought not to have lied about being a maiden. She had wanted to seem mature, worldly; she had wanted him so badly that she had not cared if he would take it seriously when he went to bed with her. She had not had a maidenhead to break; she assumed that it had been lost on her own fingers during her youthful explorations, but perhaps if he knew how much it had meant to her, he might not have been so quick to move on to the next one as soon as Sunniva was unavailable. She wanted to find this Widsith, with her perfect tits and sweet little mouth and knock all of her teeth out.

Don't be stupid, a voice said in the back of her mind, *that girl is not your enemy*. The girl had most likely been a whore, or some stupid *ceorl* who thought Ecgric might whisk her away to a better life. Sunniva was still angry, but not at this unknown Widsith. She was angry at herself, and at Ecgric, and decided that she would punish him.

That night there would be a few visiting thegns to the Brigweard. Not a large feast, but there would be enough people that Sunniva decided to dress carefully for the occasion. Rather than draping herself in her more costly *peplos*-style dress, which hung over her body rather like a richly embroidered sack, she opted for the shapely apron-style which hugged her curves and pressed her breasts together so that they looked bigger than they actually were. She wore no tunic or underdress, leaving her arms bare and festooned with rings as they had been on the first night she had bedded Ecgric. As she glanced in the polished bronze mirror, she grinned. Her parents would be appalled at her choices in clothing, but they were not there. She loved the way she looked. She twisted the ends of her hair so that they coiled into a thick ringlet, shaking her head to let the curls flow over her naked shoulders. Ecgric liked her hair. He liked when she wrapped a curl around her finger, or when she slung it over one shoulder, leaving the other shoulder bare for him to explore. The thought of it made Sunniva's breath catch for a moment, but she recovered herself. She hated what the thought of him did to her, and wondered if she would be able to carry out her plan if she couldn't control herself.

Everyone of importance sat at the high table as the king had taken Rægen to visit some ealdorman or another in the South. Mother had given her a condescending look when she saw what she was wearing, but Sunniva ignored it. Her mother could lecture her on appropriate wardrobe choices later; she had more important things on her mind.

Sunniva positioned herself across the table from Ecgric and next to a thegn named Ealdwine. Ecgric greeted her, and she was pleased to see that he looked rather apprehensive, like a dog who knows he has done something wrong and is waiting for a kick. She nodded coolly in acknowledgement, though before he could say anything she turned to Ealdwine.

"You come from Blythburh, isn't that right?" she asked him. He was rather good-looking, she found. His hair was the color of hay, and his beard was so pale that it seemed to disappear when he turned his head just the right way, but he had a pleasing face and gave her the same look most men did when she turned on her charm.

Ealdwine nodded, "Yes, that's right. My father is the ealdorman of Blythburh."

"I heard that your father owns a few ships," Sunniva felt Ecgric's eyes on her, but she ignored him. "I've always wanted to sail in some great ship. I've only ever been in little cargo boats before, and only down the river. I should like to visit the sea someday." She brushed her hair over one shoulder, and took a sip of mead as the poor man began to tell her about living on the sea and how much more convenient it was when one wanted to travel, and about how rich they were getting from trade with the Franca, or some such boring talk. He was rather sweet, and she might have had some fun with him once, but she was more interested in the matter at hand.

Sunniva reached for some bread, and stretched out her leg under the table. She knew she had found her mark when Ecgric shifted slightly. She half-listened to Ealdwine, so that she could respond at just the right moments or giggle when appropriate, but the other half of her mind was more intensely occupied. She turned her smirk into a sweet smile at Ealdwine when Ecgric grabbed her foot and pushed it away. She moved it back again.

She saw Ecgric trying to make conversation with Eorwald, but he kept glancing at her. She had gotten some honey on her finger, and she put it in her mouth, drawing it out slowly, sliding it across her lip. She was aware that Ealdwine had stopped talking and was intently watching her, so she smiled sweetly and asked him to tell her more about himself.

When the meal had finished, most everyone migrated to the benches and cushions near the hearth, and Sunniva stood as if to join them. She caught the eye of Ecgric, who was still seated, and mouthed, "Weaving house." She extracted herself from the attentions of Ealdwine, who was now quite drunk and kept making motions as if to kiss her, and before he could approach her again she slipped out of the hall.

Sunniva shook out her hands to stop them trembling, and took a deep breath as she entered the deserted weaving house. Ecgric was at her heels and followed her inside.

Without a word, and with rather more force than she intended, she pushed him into one of the low stools, his back against the wall. She bent at the waist and kissed him ferociously, lifting her skirts and sitting across his lap. He was already hard and ready for her and she had to shake the lust from her mind.

"This is a pleasant surprise," he said as he slid his hand up her leg. "I had thought you might be cross with me."

"Shut up," Sunniva said, pulling his breeches halfway down his legs. He was attempting to pull her into his lap again when she pulled away and knelt in front of him. She did not see his face when she touched her mouth to his cock, but heard the deep rumble of a groan and felt his hands twine through her hair as she sucked it, as she had sucked the honey from her finger before. She had no idea what she was doing; she had never done this sort of thing before, but he seemed to enjoy it immensely, and she became strangely excited as she did it. That was not good. She ran her tongue along it a last time and straddled him again, his time lifting her skirt and guiding him inside of her. Only when she had begun to slowly move her hips did she speak.

"Did she fuck you like this?" she said, trying to keep the pleasure out of her voice. He opened his mouth to retort, but she made a fist around his hair and pulled his head back, clamping her mouth on his to stop his words. She moved a little faster now, and sucked the skin at his neck so hard it left a dark bruise and elicited another low sound from deep in his throat.

"You don't understand," he tried to say, but she put a finger to his lips.

"Think about what you want, Ecgric," she said very quietly in his ear, "You can have this any time you want," she squeezed her legs together and was quite satisfied at the look on his face as she did so, "but you must be mine, and mine alone. I will not share you." She knew he was on the edge, and she abruptly stopped moving. She forced herself to stand, even though every part of her wanted to stay and ride him until they both found oblivion, but she stepped back and let her skirt fall back around her ankles.

"But if you would prefer a string of whores," she said sweetly, "You're a grown man, and you can make that decision for yourself. Good night." And with that she left him sitting on the weaving stool, with his mouth hanging open and his cock out, and Sunniva knew that she had won.

Ecgric

Rædwald was waiting for him in the Briggweard, sharing a meal with Eadyth. The king motioned for Ecgric to come and sit down to join them, pushing a cup toward him. Ecgric took it with thanks, and helped himself to bread and smoked fish, before Rædwald spoke.

"When were you last in Gipeswic?" the king asked.

"About a fortnight ago," Ecgric said, "for market day. It was the biggest I've seen yet. You'd be

pleased.”

“Good, good,” Rædwald said. “All local vendors, I assume?”

“All but one. There was a cloth vendor from Francland, though he came by way of Cantwareburh. I think he was associated with *Heahcwenne* Bercta’s men. I do remember seeing him when I was in The South, now I think on it.”

“They’re still here?” Eadyth asked, “I thought all those Franca went home as soon as the *heahcwenne* died.” She said it with a note of distaste in her voice.

Ecgric shrugged. “Perhaps Ethelbert wanted to keep those foreign trading connections. You know as well as anyone that the Franca are useful, if a bit uncouth.”

Rædwald nodded appreciatively. “I hope you made sure that they paid their dues,” he said, “How much did you make off of them?”

“They paid in silver,” Ecgric said, “a pound of it. I gave most to Ceolwine in order to improve the village hall, though. The locals didn’t appreciate having their Folkmoot under a leaking roof, for some reason.”

“For someone who hates administrative duties, you seem to be quite adept at managing them,” Eadyth said, grinning. “I think I want to go and see the progress you’ve made, on the next market day.”

“I’d be glad to make the preparations,” Ecgric said, without much enthusiasm. “Will your whole household be coming as well?”

“Just us,” Eadyth said, “and perhaps Sunniva would like to come as well.”

“We ought to feast the thegns while we are there,” Rædwald mused, “how have you found them, Ecgric?”

Ecgric sighed. The thegns and landowners near Gipeswic had been a source of bother for him, but as their *blaford* it was his lot to have to deal with them. “They don’t appreciate the tariffs on the docks,” he said, “They think that since they have used the Gipeswic port for so long, they shouldn’t suddenly be forced to pay a tax to use it.”

“They need to pay tax so that there will be a dock for them to use in the first place,” Rædwald said irritably. “How can we make improvements with nothing to fund them?”

“It’s not as if they don’t have the gold,” Eadyth said, “What do they expect us to do?”

“They think that we ought not to give so much to the poor,” Ecgric said, feeling a headache coming on, “that diverting the funds we have toward the market would bring in more wealth to Gipeswic, which would benefit the poor in the end.”

“That’s idiotic,” Eadyth said.

“I won’t punish people who have had ill luck by taking away the little help we can offer them,” Rædwald said. “If traders don’t like the port tax, they can take their goods overland and save a *scylling*”

Ecgric’s headache was starting to take hold. “That’s what I told them,” he said. “I wouldn’t worry too much. They’ll grumble, but they’d still rather use the river than try to take their goods in a wagon.”

A serving woman had come to clear away the remains of their meal, which Ecgric had abandoned. He took his leave from Rædwald in order to send out a messenger to Gipeswic to ready the village hall for the king’s arrival. Once he had dispatched the messenger, he went back to the training yard. The whole business had left him with a throbbing behind his right eye, and he needed to hit something.

The whole thing left him in a sour mood, and even after he had sparred with Eorwald and with Edwin, the newcomer from Deira, for an hour, it did not relieve his annoyance. He did not give two shits about the stupid market in Gipeswic. He wanted to do something useful. He wanted a real fight. He wanted to feel the sweet, intoxicating feeling of impending battle. He wanted to bathe in treasure after a successful raid, with a horn of ale in one hand and a woman in the other. But instead, he got to negotiate taxes and tell off petty thegns for being spineless cunts.

As he put away his practice sword and armor, teasing Eorwald about his tactics, he noticed Sunniva holding court over a knot of girls at the other end of the training yard, looking so beautifully seductive that he wanted to hit something all over again.

It was beginning to get out of hand.

Ecgric had promised himself, when she left him sitting half-naked and open-mouthed in the weaving

house, that he would not give her the satisfaction of knowing that she had gotten to him. She had heard Eorwald mentioning the thegn's daughter from Grantabricge, and she had exacted a revenge which could only have been pulled off by a masterful mind who knew his every weakness. Ecgric knew that she had planned every moment of it, from teasing him in the hall, to flirting with the poor thegn, to leaving him unsatisfied and looking a complete fool in the weaving house. He would not let her think that she could control him this way. She was just a spoiled, manipulative little girl, and he would not give into her tantrums.

She had ignored him almost completely over the next few days, but he found himself watching her talking to her stupid friends or sitting outside spinning, or flirting with the assorted thegns and *ceorls* who frequented the Briggweard, and thought of her when she wasn't there, and she began to invade his thoughts so frequently that he found his mind wandering when he should have been doing more important things.

The red-haired girl named Freida came to talk to him, and he found himself glancing at Sunniva, who gave a minuscule shrug of her shoulders as she had done that night, as if to say, "It's your decision." The thought infuriated him, and the red-haired girl left, looking dejected.

Perhaps she had seen him dismiss Freida, because she had followed him back toward the Briggweard, with one eyebrow raised and an insolent smirk on her lips. He tried to shake her off, walking around the back and between two outbuildings. "Go away," he said, but when she did not move, he rounded on her. "This isn't a game, Sunniva. I am not your plaything, and I won't let you manipulate me like you do everyone else."

Her face registered no change, and the way she smirked at him made him unsure whether he wanted to hit her or fuck her.

"I guess I have my answer then," she said, "That's a pity. I do love that cock of yours." She looked him up and down appraisingly with a smirk, and then sighed. "Well, it's been fun. Enjoy your whores."

She started to walk away, but he felt such a surge of anger and raw lust that he grabbed her arm and spun her around. He caught her by the throat and pushed her against the wall of the Briggweard, not hard enough to hurt her but enough to make her eyes widen in surprise. But it was odd; she did not seem frightened that he might hurt her; rather there was a fire in her eyes that dared him to try.

She had won. They both knew it. He moved his hand away and replaced it with his mouth on the hollow of her collarbone. Lifting her easily and pushing her against the wall, he found the sweet place between her legs. She bit his lip and her fingers wound through his hair, pulling as he pushed into her, again and again, her legs tightening around his torso. He felt her soft cunt slide around him over and over, breathed in her scent like honey and sweat and sex and earth.

"Swear to me you won't fuck other girls anymore," she said into his ear as her sex clenched and tightened around him. "Swear to me that you're mine, and mine alone."

"I swear," he panted, "oh by all the gods, I swear it."

He did not let her down right away, but kept her pressed against the wall, panting into the sweet-smelling hollow of her neck. She kissed him as her feet found the ground once more, as sweetly and as innocently as a maiden even as he felt the marks of her fingernails on his shoulders and her wetness clinging to him.

They heard movement from the other side of the hall, and he set her down quickly, and she rearranged her skirts and disappeared almost immediately. Ecgric leaned a hand against the wall as if he had been having a piss, when Rægenhere rounded the corner.

"There you are," he said, as Ecgric laced his breeches. "Your father was looking for you." After a moment, he added, "You look like you've just run a mile."

Ecgric cleared his throat to give him time to think up a lie. "I have. Never challenge Sigebryht to a race," he said, "You'll never win." It seemed to work, as Rægenhere chuckled. Ecgric hardly thought that the proper response would have been, "well, I was just fucking your sister," after all.