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Fire to Vellum

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FIRE TO VELLUM

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Jessica Lee Warren

May 2019

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FIRE TO VELLUM

English

Missouri State University, May 2019

Master of Arts

Jessica Lee Warren

ABSTRACT

Oswic's simple life changed the day his mother died from poison. After finding a strange cache of trinkets and books in the loft of the barn, he begins to question everything and everyone he has known, including reality. Forced from his land and his home, Oswic takes his plough horse, the few fragments of truth from his life, and leaves Hægelfirth in search of the one person he believes can tell him of his past, the storyteller. But, it won't be his past he needs to worry about when he starts to slip in and out of reality; seeing the future in strange visions. Believing he is witnessing the effects of the old gods' magic on the world, Oswic sets off on a quest to destroy every piece of magical writing that exists in England. Will he succeed?

KEYWORDS: historical fiction, magical realism, Old English, dark ages, Kent, prophecy

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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I dedicate this thesis to Thelma Dawn Falcone, the strongest woman I have ever known.

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Oswic was created on a gray September morning in 2017. The Oxford English Dictionary's word of the day, "cole-prophet," gave me the original idea. "Obsolete. One who pretends, by magic or occult means, to predict the future, tell fortunes, etc.," the definition read (oed.com). The word itself was in use from 1532 to 1614, and I only knew a little about this time in history. Countess Erzibet Bathory de Ecsed was ruling in large areas of Hungary and helping to pay for the king's war against the Ottoman Empire; any more than this, and I was lost. However, I remembered one of my undergraduate professors, Dr. Michael Ellis, telling our History of the English Language class there were very few documents or texts from the Dark Ages in England; only about 200 or so. The Dark Ages is a reference to the time after the Romans abandoned Britain around 400 CE and before the Norman conquest of 1066. It seemed to me that a cole-prophet might be able to exist in this period because of the lack of records. Or, maybe he was the reason for the lack of records.

I was naïve then. I didn't know about the Cotton Library or the Ashburnham Fire of 1731. I didn't remember anyone speaking of the fire destroying one-third of all known manuscripts from the medieval period. Prior to 2017, I had the *Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*, by David Crystal and *A Biography of the English Language*, by C.M. Millward, as my two lenses into the period before the Norman conquest, so I used them. I built Hægelfirth, Oswic's small agrarian village, around the idea of life in a feudal system. Hrothwyn, Oswic's mother, inherited her deceased husband's land because she had a son who would be able to work it once he came of age. Lord Reynold, the landowner, who seems to have some shady

dealings among the townsfolk, was generous to Hrothwyn after her husband's passing. In normal feudal society, this would not have been commonplace.

The idea came to me about creating a constructed language for the novel, like linguist David J. Peterson was conscripted to construct Dothraki and High Valerian into spoken, grammatical languages for the HBO show, *Game of Thrones*. I didn't know how the conlang would work in the novel, however. I thought about creating a cipher and allowing readers to discover language learning. But, it would never be accepted by a publisher. It would be too complicated to read, print, or market. Writing the entire novel in Old English would not work, because it is a dead language; no one would want to take the time to learn OE just to read a book that might not be worth it. I came across a small passage in Millward's *Biography of the English Language* that discussed footwear in the Early Middle Ages (77). It was from this little passage I drew the conclusion I could use words from Old English without overloading the reader, but still helping to enhance the environment of the story-world. I chose words like "paytns" (a form of wooden over-shoe that raised the wearer's foot above mud or water), "beebread" (an Old English translation for honeycomb), "crochan" (an iron hook set in the mortar of a hearth for hanging a cookpot) and "wain" (wagon or cart). Several words were kept in the original Old English spelling, even though they are pronounced similarly to how we say them today. These are words like "æcre," "brec" (which sounds like breech or breeches), and "inne."

The language of the novel is very important. The choice of words, the choice to not use modern contractions, and the slang are all an attempt to seem as authentic to the period as possible. It wouldn't be until the fall of 2018 when I would again pick up writing this story with ferocity. Dr. Jonathan Newman offered a course, Early English Language and Literature, that would finally connect all the dots needed to make Oswic as real as he should be. In my original

version of the story, Oswic was from the far northeast coast of England. I envisioned him living in a cloudy, boggy area where life was hard and cold, but Dr. Newman's course changed that for the better. Reading the language text, *A Guide to Old English*, showed me parts of the culture in England around the time I was wanting Oswic to live. Reading the literature of the time and learning the linguistic aspects of Old English, all led me to put Oswic in the southeast, in Kent. I felt like his chance of survival was greatest there. Throughout the semester, I became more than slightly obsessed with Kent and the Kentish Law Codes of Aethelberht, the first English king to have his laws put down on vellum. It is only available to us now as part of the *Textus de Ecclesia Roffensi per Ernulphum episcopum*, known more commonly as *Textus Roffensis*. It was compiled and written by a scribe in Kent around the year 1120. In 1887, scholar F.L. Attenborough copied the laws and offered translations with cultural notes. This was the version of the law codes I used to build my final research paper for the course. It would also lead to the miniscule details in the story that you would not be able to make up.

I researched Aethelberht's wife, Bercta, and discovered she was a Merovingian (Frankish) princess. Many details of life and culture in Kent in the early 7th century became clear through translations of the law codes for the research paper, and Oswic's world grew from it. It is in the small things where you find details that have very real, cultural significance in Kent around 600. Long hair was thought to be the power behind the Merovingian kings. Bercta may have brought her family's influence with her, because there are laws that refer to women with long hair (women with power) who disrespect themselves in public being forced to pay a fine. Iria, Lord Reynold's daughter and Oswic's apparent love interest, has long hair. She is a woman with power, and I wanted to make sure the accurate cultural representation was made regardless of the audience. Those who know the law codes or have studied culture in the Middle Ages may know

this reference, but it doesn't change how it is read by someone who is not learned in the culture. The wergild Oswic must pay for his mother's passing, the rudimentary market where he sells his beebread, the mention of Bishop Augustus being sent from Rome; these are real, historic events I discovered in the law codes or in my research for the research paper for Dr. Newman.

Why does Oswic have visions, sometimes of the past, sometimes of the future? This offers the story the hint of something happening that is out of the control of the characters. Hrothwyn dies of ergot poisoning. The reader would not understand this until Oswic talks to Helissa in front of Lagot's inn and has the vision of her handing his mother rye flour. We want to believe the protagonist is reliable, but are we sure he is? If Hrothwyn has eaten the poisoned rye bread, then the reader can surmise Oswic has, as well. Are the visions real? Can the reader be sure he's reliable? I hope no one believes him. Oswic will continue to have visions well beyond the 1348 CE plague epidemic in England. On his journey, he will have visions of the future; wars, slavery, colonialism. He will see modern day life and believe that what he is witnessing is the corruption of the magic of his pagan gods. He will make it his duty to convince the king to set fire to vellum. With the help of Bercta's bishop and close friend, Luidhard, and Augustus, they will convince Æthelberht to send expeditions to prominent pagan sites to destroy anything deemed magical, ritualistic, or written on vellum.

This work has been both a blessing and a curse. To create an alternate history (trans-story world migration) in a work of fiction is a vast undertaking. I studied the linguistic structure of Old English and spent hours reading *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, by J.R. Clark-Hall. For weeks I had conversations with an Australian lawyer whose focus is historical law. He was particularly well read on the Salic Law Codes that belonged to Bercta's great-grandfather. During our many deep discussions on the subject we discovered some incredible similarities

between the Salic Law Codes and those law codes belonging to Æthelberht of Kent. We discovered that the body of both law codes are structured the same way: dealing with property of the church and church officials, property of the king, property of a freeman, and property of a woman. There are even explicit fines regarding bodily harm: losing an eye, or a thumb, or a limb. It is clear Bercta had great influence on her husband and the Law Codes, but she's only given credit for Christianizing England. She must have known how to read and write Latin, Franconian, and English. Sadly, she's not known for being literate or influential. Bercta will be influential in *Fire to Vellum*. She will be given a place of esteem regardless of how history looks upon her.

I cannot express enough the reality of Kent in the year 600. As a final closing thought based on my research into the Dark Ages, it is this reality that history washes. Perhaps it is for the best. Many years later, in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, each of the pilgrims had some sort of infected wound, pox, blisters, sores, strange hue to their skin, bumps, marks or smells. I hope to impart a little of this reality into Oswic's world, too. No one was healthy in 600 CE. Not royalty, not peasantry; everyone suffered from one ailment or another. Intestinal parasites were common, cholera, dysentery, tuberculosis. England was often a damp, gray place with good farm land. Tribes butchered each other, there were near constant raids along the coasts, and a good day often meant that you got to eat. Oswic's world is washed, too. My intent with this piece, through the little bit of magical realism in a historical setting, is to remind readers that history isn't always as clear, or as washed, as books make it. I hope to impart a little curiosity into my reader to seek out those things that interest them. They could end up writing a historical fiction book that attempts to rewrite history.

FIRE TO VELLUM

Chapter 1

The rains were heaviest in early spring. The frigid temperatures made the drops feel like stones striking the skin. Merchants shouted their wares from under thick wool cloaks with tight knits and seams; their patyngs the only thing keeping bare feet above the black mud. Hægelfirth was host to one of the local markets. Wooden stands made of splintered logs and warped planks displayed salted fish which were near enough to rancid only the most destitute families ventured near. Long tables with drooping canopies covered clay pots, wrinkled fruit, and small vegetables left from the last autumn harvest. Simple woven robes and cloaks, brec, and thin shirts for the summer months were posted on hooks displaying their muted colors. The smell of fresh-turned earth, rain, and animal dung thickened the air, but beyond the market's muddy paths, unwashed skin, and mite-infested cloth, the world was turning green.

Beebread was Oswic's usual ware, in clay jars with wax-sealed lids, but his mother had been allowed to bake several extra loaves of rye in the lord's ovens, so he was selling them with the hope of acquiring a chunk of meat to add to their pottage. It had been a few weeks since he or his mother had meat, and he could feel the weakness in his bones. She had developed a rich cough since baking at the manor. It is the weather, the change in the seasons, she told him. He was not so sure.

"Three pennies for a jar, eh?" a rasped voice spoke; the words slithering down Oswic's spine.

"Five, not a penny less, ye miser," he answered, looking up to see the old man picking at a strange bump on his face.

“Four, you whelp! No betta’ then!” He spit on top of the stump Oswic was using to display his beebread.

The thick, red-brown mucus dripped down the side of a jar and made Oswic’s empty stomach lurch in disgust. “No, old man, five. I cannot feed my mother on your four pennies.”

He pulled five pennies from a hide pouch tied at his hip and kept them in his hand. “Come work my land; I will give you ten a day. Can bring your mother, too. She still has both ‘er hands?” The old man chuckled at his own joke; the same one he told each time he came after a jar. He had to be of an age with the trees in the forest. As children, Oswic and the others believed he was even more ancient, with his gnarled joints and the hunch to his back.

“We are all in debt to the lords. I will not work for another one. Five, or you can walk off.” The old man passed the five pennies to Oswic and picked a jar from the stump. It was not the one he had spit on, and it annoyed him. He dropped his chin with a grunt and hobbled off, leaving hollow footprints in the mud that disappeared as soon as his weight was gone from them.

“I hear tell you have bread, Oswic?” a sweet voice spoke from behind him as he was trying to flick the mucus from the jar.

If his cheeks had been rosy from the chill in the air, they were now red from a blush. “I hev’. Five loaves of rye. Fresh week. This week, I mean. Fresh this week.” It was hard enough to speak when he saw her from a distance, but when she was this close words bounced around in his head and refused to settle.

Iria was the Lord Reynold’s daughter. Two years older than Oswic, she had taken an interest in him from the moment he could walk. He had been asked to the manor-yard to play a few times each season and always left with extra loaves of bread or meat from the kitchen. By

the age she would be learning letters, Oswic had been the only other child in the village that had been invited to play. He often wondered why no one else thought it strange.

Over the last few winters, she had grown into a young woman before his eyes. Her hair grew long and darkened from the light color of youth. Her eyes had the color of fresh peat and were always wide with curiosity. They were surrounded by dark lashes accentuated by chalk powder that decorated the lids. Oswic felt naked when she stared at him. He liked her.

Once, and only once, as children, her father had caught them holding hands and singing in the manoryard. He stormed across the expanse, laid Iria across his knee and beat her rump until she wailed. After sending her off to the manor, Lord Reynold explained to Oswic that he would never again touch his daughter, or she would be given punishments worse than a sore rump. Oswic was the son of a freeman, a replaceable laborer who would never be anything more and the disrespect he had shown was enough to have his family thrown off their land. When the messenger came to take him back to the manor, a few days later, Oswic tried to refuse. The messenger threatened his mother, Hrothwyn, with being thrown from their home and left to the wilderness if Oswic did not obey a direct order from Iria. It was only eight winters past, but it seemed like forever.

“I would have you to the manor for supper, Oswic. Dine with Father and me in the hall,” she said. It was clearly not a question.

“As you say, milady. I do not have attire suitable for such an honor.” He found himself staring at her patyons. They looked strange to him. Instead of having simple bands that wrapped about her bare feet, they were completely enclosed in a hide sheath. She stood above the mud, and her feet were protected from becoming damp! The amazement shone on his face.

“What are you staring at?” She put her hands on her hips and wrinkled her nose as if to reprimand him.

“No, milady, your patyns are the nicest I have seen. You are above the mud by a fair amount, and you have hide wraps. They must have been special-made.” Oswic closed his eyes tight and thought to himself that he sounded as dumb as a mule. They must have shown on his face because when his sight was filled with her once again, she smiled at him in her curious way before hoisting her skirts and looking down at her patyns.

“They were! Father had them made by a cobbler trained in Lundenwic when he passed through on his way south,” she told him, straightening herself and raising her chin. “He said he was going to see a man sent from the church. Augustus. He was sent to speak to King Æthelberht and his wife about the Roman god.”

He wiggled his bare toes in the mud to remind his body they were still there. They were like little blocks of ice stuck to the ends of his feet. It would only be another month before the warmth of full spring would be on them. Her words had made little sense to him after, “a man sent from the church.” He knew little of the Romans, and only enough of their god to know that he was not an angry god. He did not punish his people when they did not sacrifice or give an offering. Oswic’s mother had once told him a story of Roman men coming to burn the places of their own gods and build stone houses in their place.

“Will you walk with me?” Iria asked, tilting her head and swinging her hips from side to side so that her skirts followed the motion.

“I should keep with my wares. I need meat for Mother; she has a cough.” He pressed his lips together knowing she was not going to let him finish his day. It was not that he minded, but he needed the meat.

“If you were less proud, Oswic, you would have asked for help.” She was right. He was proud of his work, keeping his bees, and the sweet honeycomb they produced. He was known four towns out for his ability to stick his hand in a nest without a single sting. Without wasting anything he took, Oswic used the wax to seal the jars he used to store the soft, yellow beebread dripping with honey.

Iria turned to a young boy who had been standing off to the side of the market and waved a hand. The boy sprang to her side but did not speak a word. “Haflor, return to the manor and inform the kitchen I wish for a slaughtered pig to be sent to the woman Hrothwyn and her son.”

“Yes, milady,” he whispered before taking off at a dead run.

“That was not necessary, and you know it,” Oswic said to her with bite.

She faked shock as she playfully admonished him, gripping her throat with a pale hand and sucking in a loud breath of surprise. “Is that any way to speak to the daughter of your lord?”

His eyes narrowed, “It is when you know I am working to fix our problems on my own. How am I to learn if you are always coming to rescue me?” He was serious in his question, and his feelings about her help. It may have come out a bit stronger than he had wished, however.

“You pack up your things and walk, or I will have you strapped to the fence on the north æcre until you can be thankful I care for you.”

His mouth dropped open and moved, but not a sound came forth. He did not doubt her ability to have it done, but it was the last few words that made him need to sit down. There was never a moment in his life when he thought he would hear her say it. He knew better than to reciprocate the feeling. “As you say, milady,” he answered with his head down. Each jar of beebread was wrapped in old linen cloth and set in the basket. His loaves of rye were used as a

cushion between them, so they would not break. The last thing Oswic needed was to have someone swallow clay chips. He would never be allowed to sell in the market again.

It was warmer away from the market and for a moment the sun shone through the gray, rain-heavy clouds above. Oswic wanted it to stay, to make him warm and dry him out, but it was only mere moments before it was gone again. With his eyes panning across the fields, and the forest that created a barrier around the village, he caught sight of a woman wreathed in flames and frantically waving her arms in his direction.

Fear and a surge of energy washed over Oswic. “Do you see her? The woman!” He pointed to a place far across the field. He broke into a trot and then a run as he headed toward the woman he had seen. He had seen a woman. The jars in his basket rattled, and he heard one crack, but if she was on fire, he needed to get to her. His strides weren’t long, but he was fast. Reaching the north fence, he nearly toppled over it to stop himself. “Miss? Milady! Where are you? Show yourself so I may help!” he called into the surrounding thicket, hoping she had not run into it. He climbed over the pickets and ran alongside until he came to the end. He turned and ran back the other direction, only to halt abruptly when Iria cantered up to him looking distraught.

“You are frightening me, Oswic. You said there was a woman, but there is no woman out here,” her cheerful demeanor from before had disappeared. It was only concern that showed on her face now.

“She was on fire!” he shouted. “On fire! You cannot tell me you did not see her!” The woman had seemed familiar to him, if the color of her dress had not been a strange hue, like the sea when the clouds parted, and the sun shone bright. He had never seen a dress made in such a color.

Iria held her skirts in small fists. Made of wool, her dress had been treated with lanolin to shed off the water, along with the cloak and hood she wore. She peered at him from beneath it. The worry lines creased her delicate features, “Perhaps all of this rain has given you the fever, Oswic. You should return home, get warm and comfort your mother.” She seemed tentative and reluctant now that he had taken a mad dash through the field toward nothing.

The clouds poured down in that moment. It was as if they had become so full they could no longer hold the water and tipped over onto the world like a wooden pail spilling its contents. “You may be right,” he said, his shoulders coming up to meet his ears, trying to stave off the cold rain. Drops fell from his nose and chin, blinded his eyes. He couldn’t look at her. He felt shame.

“The meat should be delivered soon. Go on,” she pushed.

He climbed back over the picket and walked away from her. There was little reason to look back; she wasn’t following. His paces were slow and calculated. What had he seen? Had the woman been real? He had not believed she was unreal during those few panicked moments, and he had felt genuine concern for her well-being. What had happened? The path home had sharper stones than he’d remembered from the morning. It seemed each step was trying to stop him from taking another.

When he arrived, the manor’s wain was lashed in front, delivering a flayed pig carcass. His mother, wrapped in every blanket they owned, stood, pale and haggard, on the wood planks of the porch, watching the singular, gaudily dressed manorman unload and carry it into the darkness of their small home. When he returned, he saw Oswic and waved cheerfully before performing a sweeping bow.

“Oswic! The Lady Iria requested the slaughter of Lord Reynold’s fattest hog, for the flaying, and division of meat. Would you like for me to show you how to cut — “

With the soaked wicker basket still on his back and his hair wet and stuck to his scalp, Oswic raised his hand to cut off the manorman, “I plenty well know the innards of a hog, Jacob. If it pleases the Lord and the Lady, I would have you return to them at once and deliver our gratitude.” Oswic was so exhausted, weak, and cold that he did not wait for a response but stepped around him and trudged into the warm darkness of his home.

Jacob frowned but bowed to Hrothwyn on the porch before climbing onto the seat of the wain and cracked the whip between the backs of a pair of massive oxen. It creaked into motion and disappeared along the dirt path which snaked its way back toward the manor.

“You cannot treat the Lord like that, boy,” Hrothwyn wheezed when she came in behind him. He had removed all his clothing and sat in front of the hearth with his feet in a pail of warm water and a cloth on his knee. He didn’t respond to her, instead, he picked up the cloth and tried to wash away the thick, black mud clinging to the skin on his legs and feet. “Are you listening to me?”

He shook his head. “No. It was a troubled day. I would like a wash and a moment, Mother.”

“A moment?” She pointed to the enormous hog that was splayed open on the floor. “You need to get that cut up, salted and hung before it rots. There’s enough meat to last us to winter.”

“I told you, I need a moment,” he said, making sure it was curt enough for her to leave him alone.

“And I told you to get up and salt the hog!” she broke into a fit of coughs that made her sit down.

Oswic looked over his shoulder at her with concern. “Wait until you are feeling better before you shout at me, Mother. Let me get some of the meat in the pottage to cook. You will feel better once your belly’s warm.” She looked worse than the day before, and much worse than when the cough started, the last day she made bread at the manor.

While she gathered her breath, Oswic finished washing off the day’s mud. Instead of the still-wet brec he wore to market, Oswic chose a linen pair he often wore for sleeping and slipped them over his legs. He stood from his chair, took the utility knife from its spot on the stone mantle and cut off a generous portion of hind. Lifeblood oozed onto the plank floor, and Oswic smiled knowing that it was as fresh as could be. As much as Iria frustrated him, she was kind to him and his mother. He knew the meat would make her better.

When he finished salting the meat, Hrothwyn had curled up on the only bed in the home, a single, person-sized wood frame with a linen sack stuffed with straw. They often traded, but since she had taken ill, Oswic would not ask her to sleep on the drafty planks. He poured a cup of warm ale from the pitcher beside the fire and moved to sit beside her.

“Here, drink in. You look sick. I will be needing you to help with the crops; cannot have you wasting away,” he said to her, but her eyes had closed. The sound from her chest was something like a saw cutting through timber. The blankets slipped away from her neck and chest revealing dots on her skin that looked like blisters. He brushed his fingertips over her head and felt intense heat radiating from it.

Hrothwyn grabbed his wrist as he tried to pull away. Her eyes shot open, but instead of looking at him, she looked through him. Oswic attempted to yank his arm free, but she opened her mouth and screamed in his face. The sound was guttural, violent, and terrifying, like a

woman in painful childbirth. He could feel the color draining from his face. The room spun.

“Mother, what is wrong? What is making you act this way? Let go of my arm. Let it go!”

“I will not let them have him, Hollis! He is our son! They can say what they want –! We will leave! We will go north; away fr – away, I said! No!” Her whole body convulsed, but she wouldn’t let go of Oswic’s arm. Her eyes suddenly met his with a ferocious intensity. “One day, Hollis, he will be a great man. One day he will change this world, but it will not be today. They will not take him from me.”

She released his wrist, and with a bellow, her back arched and came off the bed. Her arms contorted, as if the strings inside them were being pulled so tight they were near breaking. Sweat poured from her brow, and her fists clutched at the bedclothes with unrelenting force. For long minutes, she thrashed about wildly, calling out for Hollis not to let them take her baby.

Oswic rose and did chores once she settled into uneasy sleep. He wiped her blistering brow with a cool cloth when she stopped her thrashing and changed her blankets and bedclothes when she soiled them. He set her gently on the floor and covered her, stoked the fire to warm the home, and listened in dismay and confusion as she babbled about bishops, nightmares, and the man, Hollis. In the long hours of the night, she muttered about a storyteller who had stayed the nightmares. He wondered why someone might have nightmares so awful they would need the help of a storyteller to stop them.

The morning light brought with it a gentle rapping on the solid door. Oswic answered without a shirt. Nearly half of the village folk had gathered outside, their arms cradling baskets and sacks. It had been the leatherman’s wife, Helissa who knocked.

“She alright, boy?” she asked, trying to peek into the darkness behind Oswic. “The whole village heard her in the night. Some were afraid the spirits had gotten into her.” Helissa nodded

for emphasis, though she lowered her voice at the mention of the spirits. Even though the Roman god had been introduced to them many years ago, most tribes had gone back to the old ways when the Romans left. Their stone buildings had been almost completely abandoned and with no knowledge of how to maintain them, Oswic's people had left them to fall back into the dirt.

He looked at the people gathered, wondering why they had barely ever spoken to him in their days, but were now worried about his mother's well-being. "She has the fever. If she makes it through the next five nights, she will be fine." His gaze fell back onto Helissa, an older woman who made everyone else's business her own, and he raised a finger when she went to speak. "Those of you who bring gifts, can leave them here on the step. We offer you thanks, and I am sure Mother will thank each of you once she is feeling better."

Hands covered mouths, and shocked gasps escaped from those gathered when a burst of anguished screams rang out from the darkness behind Oswic. Helissa shrank into herself, pulling her fine wool cloak up around her neck.

"Hollis! No! Do not take him from me!" Hrothwyn's bloodcurdling scream echoed across the fields surrounding their home. When the leaves of the trees sent the sounds back to the gathered crowd, it was too much for them to handle. Setting their packages on the planks in front of Oswic, they scurried off in any direction that was not blocked by other objects or people. Only a few looked back over their shoulders, and quickly tucked themselves into cold, wet cloaks. Helissa remained but seemed struck by his mother's shouts.

"Has she been calling for 'im all night?"

Oswic dropped onto the singular wooden step and put his face in his hands, "Yes," he muttered through his palms.

“He was a good, strong man, Oswic. Noble Saxon stock. People would come from the farthest corners of the land, to hear ‘im speak,” she said.

“This Hollis? What do you know, Helissa? Who is he?” Oswic turned to regard her with curiosity and confusion, but her face contorted at hearing his questions.

“Hrothwyn has never spoken of ‘im to you, boy?”

“I asked once, when I was a child, and she told me never to speak of it again.” His eyes fell from Helissa’s face and he tried to find calm looking out across the fields. He was not sure if he would be able to handle secrets. He could feel the ground below his feet shifting, moving toward change that was inevitable, but he did not know what, or why.

“Then I hev’ already said too much. Hrothwyn has ‘er reasons, and it would not be right of me to tell you what she does not want you to know. Especially since she is ill with fever. The gods would never forgive me.”

“Was Hollis my father?” Oswic asked, hoping her nature of talking too much would come through and she would give him something to go on.

“They were together all those years; I assume so.”

He turned to look at her again, “Together? She has never spoken of being with anyone.” A groan of exasperation left his chest. A drop of rain landed on the back of his hand. Another struck him on the top of his head. He looked up and was pelted in the eye with yet another. He begged for a day of sun, but he received a no in the form of a steady rain that he watched sweep across the fields.

“I will stop on the morrow with bread or some vegetables for the pottage. Take care of ‘er, and the fields, or you will lose it all. Good day, Oswic,” she said, standing and moving past him. He did not watch her go; he could hear her sandaled feet sucking the mud with each step.

When he could barely hear the sound any longer, he looked up and saw she had made it to the edge of the village, a half mile off. How long had he been listening that she had made it so far? A cold shiver ran through him, and it was not from the icy rain hitting his bare back, but from his ability to hear her steps from so far away. He continued to listen, concentrating on the sound of her feet when her voice came to his ears, plain, as if she was standing next to him.

Oh, the woman is on 'er deathbed. Poor boy is in denial that she will make it the week. She will be gone before first light. That is right. Then, the Lord will throw 'im out, put up their land and someone better will have it. Mhm! I suppose he could marry, but who would take 'im? So frail and broken. Hollis would be angered at the weakling Hrothwyn has made of his son. There was a faint whispering, like his concentration was bringing another voice into his ear. No one could have known it would happen that way. No one could have expected the boy to have seen it. What was he doing out so late? Hrothwyn was as poor a mother as she was a wife. Now, she will go to 'er grave having destroyed them both.

He let out a howl of anger at hearing Helissa speak poorly of his mother. The voices in his head had stopped instantly. The woman had gall! He was of a mind to take her bread, walk to town, and cram it down her throat. He expected she would never speak of anyone else in such a way ever again. If he killed her, that was another matter altogether; he would not have the scillings to pay her wergild.

Oswic shook his head; what was happening to him? Now he could hear conversations from so far away? Thoughts of ending a woman's life? Holding out his hands, he stared at them, and then his arms. They looked worked, with tone, which created sinewy lines along his limbs. He looked at his feet, bare and calloused; they held him upright with an agile balance he saw few

others with. His steps were defined, and his gait was always steady. He could plow for a week straight with breaks only for meals and drink, from dawn to dusk. How could she call him frail?

Did he make it up? Was his mind playing tricks? Perhaps he had the fever and everything that had happened was in his head. So, he had never seen Helissa, or maybe Mother wasn't sick at all. Why this way sounded better to him was beyond his understanding but taking comfort in the strangeness of the last day amounting to a fever dream eased the weight on his shoulders.

Hrothwyn's screams pulled him back from his spiraling thoughts and made him realize the error in his mind. He was real, his mother was real, and the fever would kill her. He turned to look at the open doorway and frowned before rising to take the step and stride across the planks.

"Mother, I need you to drink and eat, or you will become worse," Oswic told her blistered, clammy form. He had laid a cold, wet cloth over her forehead after coming in the door, and spooned hog and vegetable pottage into a wooden bowl for her to sip from. His hand slipped under her neck, and he lifted her head to the bowl. "Take this, Mother. Easy."

She took several small sips of the broth, but he could not get her to take in the meat or vegetables. Hrothwyn took his wrist in her hand, gently, and looked up to him, "Hollis, he is our son. He has your blood in him, and he will follow the path you hev' seen. Let me keep him a few more years? Please? Jus' until he is old enough to understand on his own."

Oswic almost made sick as he knelt by her bed. He was realizing that knew nothing of his family or his own history, and he could not even ask his mother about it, because she was in the throes of fever. Helissa's words rang in his head that she would not make it another day, and he winced at the possibility of never learning about his past. "You will be fine. Everything will be jus' fine. We will plant the fields when you feel better." He couldn't think of anything else to say.

“I cannot tell him that it was not a nightmare. He will hev’ to find out on his own. No child should ever witness something so wicked. The storyteller – she can – she will tell-” The last few words trailed off, her eyes closed, and she fell into another fitful rest. Oswic was thankful for it this time. His mind needed time to understand everything that was happening to him and around him.

When the day finally cleared, and the sun peeked through the clouds, he decided to begin turning the æcre closest to the house. If Hrothwyn shouted or needed him, he would be nearby. The market could wait. They needed the few pennies he brought in each week, but her survival meant more than beebread. Even gathering more golden honeycomb would take him from her for hours, hours that she might not have. He sought his tools in the barn and carried them to the gate.

The sun glinted off the rain-soaked blades of grass and the leaves of the stubborn weeds that seemed to grow no matter the season. The snow-packed winters left the ground heavy with decay and rich soil that, for the few summer months, grew fertile crops that fed the lords of the land and the vassals who worked it. The markets flourished, and the tradesmen had more orders than they knew what to do with. The summer months were a festive, bountiful time, but the spring was meant for hard work; hard work and loss. Oswic leaned on the fence with his forearms, looking toward the edge of their land, determining how many rows he would need to turn, and which crops he would be choosing for which field.

When he finally stopped for the day, he had turned three of the five æcres and was pleased with the work. He returned the plough horse to the barn, put away his tools, and cringed when he was close enough to the house to hear Hrothwyn moaning from within. With the blankets twisted about her emaciated body and her fingers locked in fists around her woolen robes, she struggled to take a full breath into her lungs. Helissa could not have been right; his

mother was far too strong to let the fever take her. Oswic grabbed a bowl and filled it with broth from the pottage before he knelt beside Hrothwyn's bed.

"Mother, drink this. Please," he said between her moans. She stopped tossing about when he spoke, but she didn't open her eyes or speak. He put the bowl to her lips, and she turned away. He slipped his arm, dirt and sweat stained from the day's labor, under her neck. He tried to turn her face toward the bowl. "You have to eat something, Mother. Even if it is just broth. Try."

Her eyes snapped open, and her head turned slowly to face him. The globes of milk white made his flesh want to crawl from his bones. "Oswic, son of Hollis, Master of Dweomercraeft, Biscop of Hægelfirth, and Keeper of Hydels," by the end, her voice was barely above a whisper, but her inhuman eyes still fixed on his, burrowing into the sockets like rodents in their holes.

"What is wrong with your eyes, Mother?" His voice was high and scared. He shook her shoulders. "What are you saying? Mother! What names are these?" He shook her again, hoping for an answer. Hoping that her eyes would clear, and she would be normal once more. They did give way to their normal color, but with the return, he could feel her slipping away. Her breath came in shallow bursts that caused her throat to clutch and after what seemed like endless moments, the life left her body.

Oswic wept into her shoulder. His other arm slipped around her chest, and he held her, rocked her. He begged her to return to him; he did not want to be alone. He had so many questions about the world and life, their lives, his life. She needed to help with the planting, and he promised he would double his sales at the market if she would just stay with him. He wailed in anguish until his chest heaved and the fluids ran from his nose, but she was gone.

He sat in front of the cold hearth for an entire day and night before emerging from their home into the sunlight. Oswic knew he could not keep her from her forefathers any longer, so he took her to the edge of their fields and set her alight.

Chapter 2

Oswic looked down at the meal on the table in front of him. The skin of the roast fowl still sizzled from the kitchen fires, and the salty drippings that oozed from it pooled in the bottom of his wooden bowl. The bread, freshly baked and warm, soaked up as much as it could, as it lay next to the golden game bird. Two small bowls held seasoned, boiled vegetables, and the intense smell of the entire supper filled the large hall.

Two young girls dressed in livery stood at either end of the table holding deep serving bowls filled with sweet puddings, ready and waiting for a gesture from their lord. Their robes were the common cream color, but each wore a woven belt of emerald at their hips. Just above their right ears were exaggerated purple flowers that matched the color of Iria's dress. It was the color of house Reynold, and the expertly sewn banners that hung from the well-mortared stone walls cemented the knowledge, if there were any doubts. Every man, woman, and child who worked for the Reynold family had been in this room for feast days and celebrations. The torches that lined the walls gave a bright, comforting glow to the drab, chilly stone.

Iria had him sent to the tailor to have a new brec fashioned, a brushed wool coat, and a linen undershirt. Sleeved patyns had been waiting for him, and he laughed to himself, remembering the talk he had with Iria about hers the morning before his mother passed over. He wasn't sure what to make of himself once he was suited for the dinner with Lord Reynold and his daughter, but if it made Iria happy, he would do it.

“Your land is one of the largest in my ownership, Oswic. How do you plan on making sure it is fertile and continues to produce as it has since before your father's great-father?” Lord Reynold said, looking over a leg of his fowl. Juices and grease slicked his well-kept beard, and a piece of the cooked white flesh stuck out from the hairs under his nose. His slate-colored eyes flicked back and forth as he searched Oswic’s face for his reaction.

Oswic lost his appetite. He had accepted the invitation when it was sent after his mother’s ritual of passing because Iacob had said the letter came directly from Iria. He wasn’t well read, of course, no one was, but he had been taught letters from an early age. His mother had been adamant about learning letters and having a basic understanding of words and reading. She had taught him from two small primers she said someone had left behind at her market stand before Oswic was born. *Cyning Æthgar and His Travels*, the first one was called. He couldn’t remember the other, but the cover had pictures of star-shapes within circles, and triangles within circles.

“I will work the land as I have every season since I was a child. Good seed, good soil, rain, and sun.” Oswic answered, still staring at his roast fowl. He couldn’t bring himself to touch it. “I have already turned the first three of the five.”

“Father, Oswic is successful in the market, as well. He brings beebread and folk from three towns over come to buy it. They say he has a gift with the bees. They let him take what he wants because he never takes more than he needs. Is that not right, Oswic?” Iria looked between him and her father with a cheerful smile on her perfect pink lips.

Oswic knew he was staring at her. It was inappropriate, but the way her nostrils flared when she was expecting a reply made his heart flutter. Her thin fingers gripped the delicate bones of the fowl on her dish. He would not have been surprised to be told the bird leaped onto

the spit when it heard it would be her supper. He felt jealousy toward it for getting to be so near her mouth.

“Oswic?” She cleared her throat, cheeks flushing.

“Uh! Yes, beebread!” He shook his head, collecting himself. “Um, I have not been to market or collected since Mother passed, but yes, the Lady Reynold is correct, I do well enough.” He looked at his own bird, still reluctant to stick his fingers into the flesh.

“How will you pay for feed, if you do not go to market and sell wares?” Lord Reynold set down the leg he had been chewing on and fixed Oswic with a look somewhere between a glare and curiosity.

“Mother and I still have feed left from the fall harvest. It will last another two months, unless the rot gets into the barn,” Oswic said, his supper his direct focus. He was not going to put it in his mouth, but it was better than being caught staring at Iria. She said it would be a dinner to celebrate his family’s legacy and the years they had spent working for the Reynolds. She had not told him the whole truth.

“Father let us enjoy this wonderful supper and speak of good things.” Iria tapped her fingers on her bowl and gave a quick laugh to ease the tension she felt between them.

“I expect payment for Hrothwyn’s passing and release you from the land to make your way on your own. You have a month.” Lord Reynold said the words as if he was addressing his thegns. Clear and curt. He was not suggesting Oswic leave – he was demanding it.

Oswic pushed back the tray which held his supper and set his hands in his lap. He hoped irritation showed on his face as strongly as he felt it. “Milord Reynold, after all the generations, my family has toiled these æcres for you? My livestock are healthy, the land is turned, I have food to last until midsummer, and you are still going to make me leave?”

“Father! You will not!” Iria wailed.

Lord Reynold held up a hand to silence his daughter and fixed Oswic with a hard gaze. “This is my land. I do with it as I please, and it would please me to give it to a family with the ability to work it as it should be. You will pay me Hrothwyn’s wergild in the amount of your whole livestock, and you will leave.” Lord Reynold pointed toward the door to the hall. When the shock shown on Oswic’s face, it was enough of an understanding between them that he picked up the leg on his plate once more and shoved it into his mouth, sucking the meat and grease from the bone.

“This is my land. I do with it as I please, and it would please me to give it to a family with the ability to work it as it should be. You will pay me your whole stock, and you will leave,” Lord Reynold said, shoving away his supper tray.

Oswic shook his head, confused, “Milord, why did you repeat yourself? I understood clearly enough the first time.” Iria gently placed her warm hand over his and smiled at him.

“What is wrong, my love? Do you not agree with Father’s decision?” Her eyes glittered with concern and Oswic stared at her in fool’s disbelief. He caught her eyes passing over his shoulder, and he turned to see a young man, no older than his twenty-second winter sitting off to his left where he had been only a moment before. The young man had devious black eyes, and kept his hands clenched in his lap so tight his knuckles bleached white. His gaze slithered across everything in the room, like a snake would pass through grass. Oswic’s skin crawled even though his confusion was profound.

“No, I-. It, uh, is an appropriate decision,” Oswic sputtered. He gaped when he looked up at Lord Reynold. A long, pure white beard rested on his chest and the hair of his eyebrows

had grown wildly. A large belly kept him from leaning too close to the table, only most of the meal he had tried to consume had ended up on the shelf his lap created. Grease made running stains down the sides of his protruding gut, but it seemed he did not care for propriety in his old age.

Realization struck when Iria squeezed his hand a second time. She was touching him, in front of her father. She too, had aged some. Light creases accented her eyes, and the lines around her lips and nose told a tale of smiles and laughter. She was somehow more stunning than he had ever seen her before. Her face shown with a radiance he couldn't explain, until his eyes fell to her breasts and belly. She was with child.

Oswic drew back from the table, his stool falling to the floor behind him with a loud clamor. He looked down at himself covered in fine crimson silk robes, and with heavy gold rings on his fingers. He touched his face and found a groomed beard and his hair which had been drawn back with a cord, lay over his shoulder, heavy with oils and smelling of damp wood. His head spun, and with it the room. He was going to sick up. Was Iria's child his? Who was the young man with black eyes? Why had he aged and did not remember growing old? Where had the years gone?

"Lord Hollisson? Mi'lord Hollisson, are you well?" Oswic could barely hear whoever was speaking to him; were they even speaking to him at all? His head was full of questions and a ringing that grew to the point of being painful. His knees gave out beneath him and he dropped to the wooden planks with a crunch. He put his hands over his ears to stop the ringing and screamed.

His eyes opened to darkness, but he could feel a cold wall at his back. It was so pitch black it felt suffocating. “Hello!” Oswic choked, his throat dry. He wasn’t even sure he had said it.

“Was that you, Oswic? Are you awake?” Iria’s soft voice said from nearby.

Was it Iria? “I am awake,” he answered. “What happened? Where am I?”

“You are in the cells below the manor. Father will not keep you here now that you are awake, but you terrified everyone. You began swinging your arms about, knocking over stools, flipping supper trays. You kept speaking to someone who was not at the table with us. Then you yelled at me for not telling you I was with child.”

His question was answered; it was Iria. “You were! I saw it all. We were married, and wealthy. You were clothed in the finest silks I have ever seen.” He paused a moment, feeling sadness seep in that it was only a dream. “You were beautiful.”

He heard a small gasp in the darkness, and somewhere a torch threw orange and red shadows across wet stone walls. Iria stepped into the light, holding the torch in her hand. “Father would have you executed for even thinking such things, Oswic. Why do you try him so? If there had been other guests tonight...”

“But, there was not. I do not know what’s happening to me, Iria. First the burning woman, then Helissa, now this? I could not control what was happening in my head any more than I could control what was happening to my body. The only person who could have explained these things to me is now dust.” He was sitting on something relatively soft. It felt like a bale of straw with a blanket thrown over it.

“What of Helissa? Did you see something about her too?” She tilted her head in such a way that it made Oswic want to burst through the bars that contained him and kiss her until she

giggled into his ear. With her face in shadow because of the torch in her hand, he imagined her brow furrowed in confusion, her eyes wide. His want of her was almost unbearable. With a groan of frustration, he told her of hearing Helissa and someone else speaking at the market the day his mother passed.

She put a hand over her mouth and spoke quietly, “How did you hear them from so far?”

He shook his head, “I do not know!” The words came from him in a wail. Suddenly, he asked, “How long have I been here?”

Again, the head tilt, “Only a few hours. Does it seem longer?”

“It feels like I have been here for days.” He put his head in his hands, “Will your father take away my land, Iria? Will I be without a home?”

She fell silent, and for long minutes he could not even hear her breathing. The lock on the cell door clicked open, and a long metal squeal shattered the silence. She stepped into the cell with him and finally spoke, “Father is sending you to work for the king. Helissa’s eldest, Dudda, his wife, and their three sons will be taking the land. Do not despair. The king is fair and just. He will place you where you will shine.”

It was the first time she had ever looked down on him. In the cell, the torchlight illuminated her features, but they were not the features he had come to love. These features were hard, aged, and used to sadness. She looked worn, with many deep-set lines, and the wide, curious eyes he knew had gone. What remained were vacant eyes, sunken cheeks, and slumped shoulders from carrying the weight of too many burdens.

Oswic blinked, shaking his head. His vision cleared, and she stood in front of him as she looked only moments before. His heart raced in his chest, and he felt woozy. “Iria, if I leave, I

fear what will happen to you.” The words left his lips nearly as quiet as the silence, but he knew she heard every word.

“If you stay, Father will turn you out, and you’ll forever be a thrall. If you leave, and take work with the king, you’ll have a chance to make something of yourself, of your life.” She knelt in front of him, her hand touching his knee, slowing his heart. “Earn the favor of the king. Return to Father a wealthy man and ask for my hand. I will turn down every proposal until that day comes. No other shall have my heart, Oswic.”

He kissed her. His heart swelled hearing that she loved him as much as he did her. His fingers slipped around her neck, pulling at her skin, and his thumbs pressed her jaw upward, holding her lips against his. The scent of her soaps filled his nostrils, and just behind it was the succulent smell of her skin. It coursed through his body like the strings that pulled his arms and legs, and he felt warm from his head to his toes. His flesh pimples with bumps when her free hand touched his cheek, and her fingers found his ear. She gasped against his lips but did not pull from him. Instead, he yanked the torch from her hand and tossed it to the floor, where it dimmed and threw gray and brown shadows against the walls.

He pulled her up into his arms and held her against his chest. Her head fell against his shoulder and her quick breaths rang bells in his mind. He kissed her forehead, her cheeks, and her lips again and again. For so long, she was off limits to him, a beautiful doll on a shelf far too high for him to reach, and in an instant the shelf had fallen, and she was his. “You will wait for me, Iria?” he asked between kisses.

She giggled next to his ear, “I have waited my life already.”

He squeezed her and let out a burst of laughter. Her lips pressed to his again, and she told him to be quiet lest her father hear, but he did not care! His hands ran over her back and

shoulders, her hips and thighs. He touched her arms and hands, her cheeks and neck. He drank in the smell of her skin, and her soaps, the scent of her clothes, and even how the damp of the cellar rested upon her. He saw the smile lines appear on her face and could only smile at the happiness he brought her.

And then, it was over. She climbed from his grasp, smoothed her skirts, and picked up the torch. “Return for me, Oswic,” she said, and left him alone in the darkness.

When Oswic’s eyes opened, the stillness and damp chill of the spring morning gave him pause. The sun cast long slits of light onto the floor from between the logs that made up the walls, the wool blankets around him were warm, and he knew the hearth had gone out from the smell of cold wood coals. His arms reached above his head, and he let his toes fan open below the blanket. In another moment, he was twisting and writhing in the blissful sensation of stretching out the strings that controlled his limbs. A groan escaped his lips, followed by a sigh that released a week’s worth of tension. He would be free of his land, his duties to market, and his ties to Lord Reynold at the end of the month. Summer had not yet started, but thoughts of carrying water to wilting crops were no longer his concern. Helissa’s children could have all the responsibility.

It was not long before Jacob and two stable hands arrived for the debt of livestock for his mother’s life. As the hands herded the cows toward the path that led back to Hægelfirth, Jacob ushered the mules into the back of the wain. He returned for two of the three of Oswic’s horses.

“Lord Reynold said you could keep the last horse to take you when you leave,” Jacob said. “And several of the hens if you wish to salt the meat.”

Capturing chickens was not easy and Oswic assumed Jacob didn't care to get his livery covered in filth. He nodded and helped to pull the horses to the back of the wain, lashing them securely to the boards.

"You will do just fine under the king, Oswic. Your family has strong blood, and you will see this life through," Jacob said over his shoulder. He secured the straps holding the mules in the back and jostled the boards before cracking his whip over the heads of his oxen.

There was no reason for Oswic to respond. Jacob had ended the conversation. To him, it sounded as if Jacob was saying anything just to keep him calm, no doubt having heard of the incident from the night before. Oswic shrugged, and as half the worth of his land lumbered down the path toward town, he shuffled off toward the barn. The horse that had been left was the only one of the three who was never broken to saddle – his plough horse. It seemed as good of a time as any to train him. His chores had been all but eliminated with his debt paid, so he had time to break the horse in.

The dim interior was warm, and the air smelled dry. Oswic patted the horse's nose and headed up the ladder into the loft. Knots of the yellow-brown hay stood along the walls like militia lining a picket. The heavy scent of dung and thatch went unnoticed as he crossed the planks to the tack wall. Reaching out for the reins, he let a howl of shock when his bare foot fell through the floor. He cursed a list of gods and his own misfortune as he dragged himself out of the hole. The ankle would bruise, he knew, and several thick splinters stuck out from the flesh of his calf. The pain made his teeth scrape together hard enough to hurt his ears.

Oswic was intent on pulling out a particularly deep splinter when something glinting caught his eye in the hole he had just made. An odd phrase his mother had once spoken rang in his ears so loudly it was as if she was standing over his shoulder, "Never trust that which first

catches your eye and draws away your attention. It will always be in the shadows that you find what you need." Pulling back the rest of the broken plank, he reached into the darkness. His fingertips brushed over tanned hide. With a grunt, he wiggled his fingers around the object to pull it from the hole. He was shocked to find a book.

His injuries having been forgotten for the moment, Oswic sat back, opened it across his lap and gasped at the small lettering. Each word on the page had been written by a scholar. A freeman did not know how to read or write, he only knew how to work, and let men better than himself put letters on paper. Oswic cared little for the words; he wanted to know about great battles, and miracles or hole nations destroyed by floods and rebuilt in a few days' time. The book in his hands was not like that.

Each page was marked with a sequence of the moon, and it started the day he was born. Curious, he flipped to the very last page, and it was three days after his sixth birthday. An odd feeling of loss scratched at the back of his mind. A crippling loss, as if his whole world had collapsed. Though, nothing in his life had ever been so tragic and yet he could not help the growing hole in the pit of his belly.

"Hrothwyn was correct; he was not ready. She begged me not to take him, but I would not hear her. He must follow the path. He must. But, he is terrified of what he is capable of. I believed he would embrace it. I was wrong. I was so very wrong." Oswic felt as if he should be used to the idea that there were deep secrets in his family that he would never have known if his mother had not gotten the fever. He turned to pages in the middle of the little book. "Too fast now. He will burn himself out. I have never seen a grown adult draw magic into themselves the way he does, and he is four! A baby!"

The next several pages were smeared with only a few legible letters scattered between them. Oswic did not want to think about what could have done such a thing, and he hoped the reddish-brown streaks were from the inks, and not from lifeblood.

“I think they pushed him. Last moon, angered by the way Reynold spoke to Hrothwyn regarding our payment, the boy set his wain afire. It did not seem to concern my son in the least that he burned a woman to death in doing so. Reynold wrote the King and demanded payment be taken in the form of Oswic’s servitude to his house for the length of his life. I could not agree to such a thing! My son is to be a man of magic, Keeper of the Hydels! He is no thrall! He will live the life of a man of the Word and continue our line!”

Hrothwyn had said he was Keeper of the Hydels while her eyes were milky, just before she passed. He flipped through a few more pages, but it was more babble about how he was too strong, and he was starting to hurt people purposely. He closed the book and stared at the cover. I did these things? I killed a woman and lit Lord Reynold’s wain on fire? Lord Reynold was his mother’s age. How could he have been involved? Unless it had been his father. Oswic remembered a frail old man sitting in a chair in the courtyard of the manor. No one ever paid him any mind, thralls, freemen, and family passed him by without ever pausing to give a second glance. This was strange to Oswic, fathers especially, were the backbone of a family.

It struck him as if someone had hit him in the head with a log. The burning woman, could it have been her? The woman he killed when he was just a boy? He knew now that the strange visions and abilities were something that he was born with, but he didn’t understand anything about what was happening to him. Was it her spirit coming back to torture him, or punish him? He didn’t feel like that was the answer. He was afraid when the burning woman appeared to him. He wanted to help her, to save her, not hurt her. But, the book had said he was using magic to

hurt people on purpose. If his visions had to do with magic, would he turn back into that monster? Oswic shook the questions from his mind and reached for the glittering object still in the hole.

The night air was chilled. Clear skies were such a rare sight this far north. He did not need anything extra to cover his shoulders. Looking down at the tiny hand engulfed by his own, his heart swelled with pride. His boy was going to be a great man; he would council kings, queens, military men and lords. And he would carry his name through the histories. Hollisson.

Oswic's little face glowed in the moonlight. His bright eyes followed every movement Hollis made, like a cat watching a bird in a tree. Everything was easy for the boy; from his lessons with letters that his mother insisted he was taught during the day, to the many hours into the night he spent learning the rituals of the Word.

Hollis knelt before the boy, straightening his dusty shirt, and brushing away a bit of dirt from his sleeve, "Wait here, my boy, hmm? I will just be a moment. I need a book for the 'morrow's lesson."

Oswic nodded, but his features remained unreadable. Hollis tousled his hair before jogging off across the common. The cool grass felt good on his bare feet. He tossed a look and a smile over his shoulder at his son before slipping into the dim interior of the sacellum. The building, large for the village, was simple inside and out. The exterior was made of horizontal planks shaved and fattened on the bottom end to wick away water and snow. The roof, done in the style of the Romans, was made up of baked mud tiles in several layers. It helped to keep the roof clear and warm in deep winter and allowed for quicker heating inside.

The interior held two rows of six benches each; all made of rounded logs set up on stumps. A raised plank floor kept the building above the cold ground, allowing air to circulate

beneath. The far end of the sacellum boasting of its large cobblestone hearth, could warm the entire room in only a few minutes, once it was lit. The fall feast, held on the common, used the sacellum's hearth to feed the merchants, and freemen who lived nearby. By far, the collection of books kept in the alcoves were the highlight of the interior.

Hollis knew each one, each author and from where they had come. There were books written in his own hand, books he could not read because the language was beyond his knowledge, books left by travelers, raiding tribes who had learned letters, and of course, books of the Word. It was for the latter of these that Hollis searched. The cover was blank, a hardened piece of leather pulled tightly over a thin plank of wood and secured with ties made of hide, but it was not in its place. He reached up and brushed his fingers across the line of dust which had been created by the vacancy of space.

Someone had come for it. Hollis knew in that moment, he was not alone. His hackles rose, and he pulled the essence of the Word into himself. It was like being submerged in a pool of warm water, comfortable, and relaxing. The room filled with a white light, but it was because his eyes were enhanced. Panning across the room with precision, he spotted movement. "Halt! Return my book, and I will let you go! Halt!" Hollis did not see, or feel what hit him in the head, but he knew what had happened in the brief second before the world went black.

The Word saved him. Hollis awoke to the mutterings of the Northmen; angry, guttural noises came from their throats. The scar on his wrist, put there by an ancient storyteller, protected him from being pierced by metals made from the earth.

"Return the book," he managed to wheeze. From the corner of his vision the largest of the Northmen, marked as the leader by three fiercely tight bands tied around his forearm, leaned over and spat in Hollis' face. Raucous laughter split the otherwise quiet room.

“Return the book!” Hollis’s command was strong enough this time to echo off the walls and resound in his ears.

A space between two of his ribs was forced open to admit the toe of the leader’s boot. Hollis was not sure, in that moment, if the sound he was hearing was his own voice crying out in agony, or the sound of blood filling his chest cavity. Whichever it was, he could no longer draw forth a full breath of air. Sputtering and choking, his mouth hung open as his whole body convulsed in a vain attempt to draw in. His vision clouded with red.

Oswic sucked in a violent, ragged breath and clutched at his throat with both hands. It took him a few seconds to realize he was sprawled across the planks in the loft of his own barn. His fingers groped about his chest checking for split ribs, bruises, anything that might have happened to him, but there was nothing. His calf throbbed and bled freely from the wound that had been made prior. Sitting up, Oswic prodded it to see if it would gush, but instead, the bleeding slowed.

He must have been thrashing about with Hollis in the vision. Had he been Hollis? The intensity of the feelings faded away as the moments ticked on, but with their leaving, questions were left behind. Who were these Northmen and what had they wanted with the book? What had been in the book?

“...just to check on him. Father took his entire stock today.” Iria. The whisper scratched at the back of his mind, and he knew at once it was her. “I will not be long. Do not tell... No, you do not have to... to the bogs with you, Haflor! I will not be kept on a leash...” Her voice faded out of his mind, and he released a breath he had not known he was holding. After last evening in

the cells, he did not know if he could face her. He hoped Haflor had kept her from coming, and it seemed he had. A good boy, that one.

He stood up and fell back down, but on his second attempt he was more stable. The pain from his calf was blinding as he descended the ladder and left the barn. Training the horse would have to wait for another day. He was surprised to find the sun sinking toward the horizon when he emerged. Too many hours had been spent in the dim interior, and he had a book, a torn sash of some kind, and a small box he had yet to open. It would have to wait. He needed to find the storyteller.

More, he needed to find the man Lagot, the innekeep. His seven-room, two-story, inne kept some of the more unclean types, but he knew everything that was going on three towns up the coast, and five towns down. Each merchant that passed through stopped for supplies at the market or rented a room and a hot meal. Sometimes both.

Oswic had wrapped his calf in strips of cloth, like his mother had done for him when he was a child. First, he boiled the strips in hot water before tying them on, once cool enough to touch. She told him that the heat drew out infections and he would heal faster. It seemed to work; he could not remember getting sick from a wound. While the cloth boiled, he brushed the fabric of his brec so that they were clean and smelled less like filth. A clean shirt, his navy cloak and hood, and his freshly brushed brec afforded him a few looks when he entered the door of The Long Leg.

“I ain’ servin’ your type in ‘ere, Oswic!” Lagot shouted from behind the bartop when he entered. The raucous laughter and bawdy talk stopped, and everyone’s glassy eyes turned on him.

“I just came to ask about your cheese, inneman,” Oswic kept his face expressionless, and motioned toward the man’s stores. “I am wanting your hard stuff that will last more than a few days.”

Lagot, a wide man, but not particularly tall, sloshed ale over his beard on the way to his fat mouth, “Cheese? you be wantin’ cheese? I dun’ want non’a them spells you been havin’ in here. Go outside, I will bring you enough.”

Oswic stood his ground, “No, Lagot, I will see the cheese you have for sale.” He took a step toward the store room. The stout innkeeper was about to shout back at him when he realized Oswic’s meaning in being so stubborn.

“Aye. Follow me,” Lagot said, slapping the hand of another patron who reached for his mug the moment his back was turned. “Damned wælas, stealin’ at my ale! Git you own! One drop is missin’, I will take you outside and wallop you backside like you mum!” With that said, the room burst into laughter and the joviality returned. Oswic slipped into the store room behind Lagot, with little attention paid.

“Boy, you be lookin’ for trouble comin’ in ‘ere. Your damned cheese is ...” Lagot’s voice sounded much like his appearance, rounded, deep, and wide. The man had barely a wisp of hair left on the top of his head, but his beard reached to his belly. Streaks of white garnished the wiry strands coming from his chin.

“I do not want you damned cheese, Lagot. I need some information,” Oswic hissed.

Lagot turned around and looked at him, his eyes narrowed. “I hev’ real patrons out there, and you call me in here for some gossip? Boy, you lost your mind,” the wide man tried brushing past Oswic, but there was not enough room.

Oswic put a hand on Lagot’s shoulder to halt him, “The storyteller, where do I find her?”

“What do you want with the witch?” Lagot’s tone changed to curiosity. He stopped trying to force his berth through the small space between Oswic and the doorway. “No good can come of it, you know? She’ll hev’ your brains for supper and make you think you wanted ‘er to do it.”

He sighed, “I found a book...”

“A book!” Lagot laughed in his face, spittle landing in his own beard. “You found a book, now you need’n the storyteller? What kind of book you find, boy?” When Lagot’s belly quit in its shaking, he patted Oswic on the shoulder, and tried once again to move by. “You best head back home now. It is getting on and you mum be worried.” Lagot realized what he had said the moment the words left his mouth. Regret washed over his face, “Oswic, I did not mean... um...”

It was Oswic’s turn to narrow his eyes, “I am aware my mother is dead, Lagot. I am also old enough to have the land on my own, try to act like you are speaking to a patron. Where can I find her?”

“In the hills beyond Furthenhal. Take the road south for a day, get to the village. Speak with Brun, the inneman at The Wild Hound, tell him I sent you. He will give you supplies for the trip. She is a witch, boy. She will be wantin’ somethin’ for ‘er services. Do you hev’ a couple scillings?”

Oswic was about to answer yes, he did have a few, but his wits were with him, “What does a witch in the woods need with coin?”

Lagot chuckled, and dry-washed his hands, “We all need things from the merchants, even witches. Where do you think she gets her flowers’n chicken feet?” It was a lie.

Oswic took a moment to think about his response, “I’ll go to Lord Reynold and offer a chicken. He may give me a silver for it.”

Lagot shoved him against the frame, and muttered, “I knew you did not have a penny to your name, Hollisson. Your mum was good for nothing. Did n’t teach you a lick, did she?”

The bartop burst into flames as Oswic turned to watch the fat man lumber toward it. The patrons of The Long Leg knocked over chairs and drinks, scrambling over each other to back away. Some bolted through the door, mugs in hand.

“My mother was a kind and gentle woman. She lived a hard life and made even harder choices. She sacrificed herself so that I would have a chance. Do not speak ill of the dead, or you may end up on the pyre as swiftly as she did,” Oswic told the round man. He was not sure how he was doing it, but he knew the fire reflected the anger in his mind. There was no time to question whether the bartop was burning. Consciously, Oswic attempted to move the flames toward Lagot, who stood horrified and fixed. The flames moved over the edge of the bar and onto the floor. Much like a snake would ease through the grass on a warm summer afternoon, the flames slithered toward him. He took a step back.

“Now, hear me, boy! Stop this, at once! I told you where she was! Enough, Oswic!” Lagot was shouting at him, but he was not sure if he wanted to answer.

The flames snaking across the floor felt good in Oswic’s mind. It felt as if he was watching a cat toy with a mouse in the fields. There was always a weak hope the mouse would escape and find a hole to scurry into, but the cat always won because it had patience and perseverance. Which one of them was the cat, and which was the mouse? Lagot had tried to be the cat, asking after his coin so he could send his goons to steal it. Had that been his intention? Regardless, he had taken it a step too far. A man knew better than to insult another’s mother. And now, Oswic was the cat, the executioner, and he waited for the sound of hundreds of tiny bones crunching between sharp teeth.

There was nothing stopping him, and the anger felt so good, only, in the back of his mind he heard a small voice. It was not external; he was not hearing someone else talking in the distance. This was his own mind trying to remind him of something, something important. Oswic struggled to hear the voice. Lagot backed himself into a corner, and the man was now weeping and waving his arms. There was no one else left in the room, but the two of them. Come back for me, the voice said. Iria.

The flames on the bartop, and the line from it to Lagot disappeared in a heartbeat. There was no damage to the inne, or to Lagot himself. It was likely his pride had taken a beating.

“Get out of my inne, Oswic Hollisson, and never return,” Lagot screamed, wiping tears and snot from his face. “If I find so much as a scratch on anything I own, I will come and take it out of your hide!”

Oswic, walked past him and out into the night. He did not get far. The entirety of Hægelfirth stood gathered around the entrance holding torches and pails. Helissa stood at the front, holding a torch in front of her.

“On behalf of Lord Reynold, Oswic Hollisson, you are to leave before dawn, and turn over all lands and rights. You have broken the contract of freemen. Leave now.” She wore a brilliant, satisfied smile.

Something in his mind must have shown across his face because she stepped back when she finished. “Am I free now, Helissa?” Could she tell he wanted to light her on fire? “Did you tell them my mother did not have the fever, but that you poisoned her, so your son could have our land? How many nights did you lay with Reynold for his favor? How would your husband feel if he knew where you went in the dark?” Gasps rippled through the crowd as wives tugged husbands and children away from where she stood.

“You speak lies! You cannot prove anything, Hollisson!” she spat at him. “You don’t think we know what you are?” Her head swiveled back and forth looking for anyone who remained at her side. When she found herself alone, she turned on the villagers. “Have you all forgotten what they brought upon us? Have you forgotten what we lost?” She shot a finger toward Oswic, who still stood in front of the inne door, “His father invited them to steal your children, burn your homes! Have you forgotten?” Her voice cracked with the stress of her emotions, but no one moved.

Oswic could hear her mind screaming in panic though he was not able to discern anything comprehensible. An image of his mother kindly accepting rye flour from Helissa flashed into his mind and was gone. He didn’t really think she had poisoned his mother, at first. He said it to bring doubt to the validity of her words against him. He had spoken in spite! He was not so sure now that he had not spoken the truth. “They no longer want to hear your lies, Helissa. How many of them know what you did to my mother? Do you expect them to help you, knowing they might be next?”

The villagers whispered to each other in the shadows of their torches, the flickering light creating strange looks on their faces. Several of the men walked off, leaving their wives and children behind, likely going to grab manormen to maintain order. Helissa spent another few minutes screaming at the villagers, demanding that they help her, otherwise she would see them all removed from the town, but Oswic wanted no more of it and walked off. Lagot emerged from the inne looking exhausted but was happy to call everyone back and offered a tankard each for free.

The cabin was cold when he entered, the hearth having burned down to coals. Seasoned logs and twigs brought it back in moments, and he put the kettle of pottage on the crochan. His

last hot meal in the only home he had known. He found the wicker basket he used to carry beebread to market and began packing it with supplies and clothes. He knew better than to travel with too much, but a week or more worth of salted pork, the cheese he had managed to steal from Lagot, while the man was not looking, and three jars of the sweetest beebread that could be found in the land. Two brec, several linen shirts, an extra cloak, and a pair of soft boots rounded out the whole of the basket. A small satchel he found tucked away among his mother's things allowed him to pack the journal, box, his old learning primers, and the cloth with the gold crosses. He did not have a vision when he folded and tucked it away – and he was thankful for it.

No eye bothered to pass over him as the massive plough-horse plodded through the mudded roads of Hægelfirth. He remembered not long ago wanting to be anywhere else but in the market; wet to his knees in mud. Now, though, knowing that he may never return, something in him considered apologizing to Lord Reynold and ask for his land to be restored. Hægelfirth was his home. He had never been much farther than its borders, and it was where Mother had raised him. Where she had died. Had been murdered. It was where she had been murdered. Oswic only suspected that Helissa had poisoned his mother, but when she failed to deny his accusations in her own mind, he knew she was capable of far worse things than murder. Had she brought the raiding party who killed his father? Maybe she murdered his father, too.

Oswic's stomach clenched and turned over on itself like he was going to sick up, but he swallowed hard to keep the minimal contents where they were. Being sick on horseback with the rocking motion might make for the most horrible trip he had ever taken. The first one.

The plough-horse came out from the southern side of town. When the road changed from supple mud to hardpack, he danced and tried to step off into the grass. Oswic let him. He was doing well for a horse that had never worn true tack, not the yoke and bindings of the plough. In

the softness of the grass alongside the road, the horse settled from his dancing and chewing at the bit in his mouth into a quick walk. Oswic patted his neck generously.

In the distance, moving farther away, was Reynold manor, and Iria. He wondered if she knew he had already been forced to leave. He thought he would see her in town as he passed through, since she had a knack for being where he least expected her, but she had not been. It was likely because he wanted her to be. He had to find the storyteller, he had to meet the king, but most of all, he had to return to her. Helissa might hatch some terrible plot to get Iria out of her inheritance, or worse. Oswic shivered at the thought of harm coming to her and pulled his cloak closer to his body.

Besides, her father would treat her better with him not around, and maybe he would see through Helissa's schemes. Oswic's face must have showed his irritation because those who passed by gave him quick looks before bustling off at a faster pace. There was still time for him to turn around and apologize to Lagot and Lord Reynold. He could offer to work in the inne for a room in the back, or –

He was alone now. With no ties to anyone but the king himself. Would the king be a man of honor? Would he deserve Oswic's loyalty? What if he was miserable and corrupt to his people? He did not know if he could serve a man who did not put his people's needs before his own. The merchants who passed through Hægelfirth would have told stories if he was a bad king. Was it stranger that he had never heard much about him at all? Perhaps he had not listened, or paid attention when someone spoke of him. He put the king out of his mind and attempted to remember what Lagot said about the storyteller, but his mind had other ideas for what he was going to think about.

A man clothed in fine linen robes and adorned with gems and silver stood atop a dias in the center of the chamber. He spoke with his arms raised toward the domed ceiling and his rich, bronze skin glistened with warmth in the light of the torches affixed to the walls. His hair was long and thick, but brushed, oiled, and it set perfectly in place. His eyes were closed, and his mouth hung open, moving to form strange words.

“Fayoka-sin voa!” he said toward the ceiling. The large group of robed men and women who were gathered around the dias came into focus a few at a time. They answered the gilded man, as one.

“Fayoka-nah voa!”

The flames of the torches flared, enveloping the chamber and the gathered in a red-orange glow.

“Se-ha ne vin’cal!” the gilded man called out.

“Fayoka-nah voa!” the group answered.

Along the south side of the chamber, the gathered split to allow entrance to a young woman in dirty linens. She had bright eyes and bound hands. Biting-rope kept her hands clasped together as if in prayer. She stumbled, her legs giving way beneath the small frame of her body. It appeared she had not used them in a long time, and she was fighting to remain upright with every step.

The gathered turned in her direction, faces cloaked in the shadow of the torches. All but one. One man among them looked uncomfortable with the woman’s presence. He shuffled his feet, tugged at his sleeves and looked between the gilded man, and the bound woman.

“You have been charged for crimes against the name Valor and his magics. You are hereby pronounced guilty of unrestrained use of spells which have been decreed heretical by his

Law. For your crimes, your lifeblood will be loosed upon this sacred stone until it flows from you no longer,” the gilded man told her.

Murmurs of anticipation rippled through the crowd, through all but the single man, who was having trouble keeping his anxiety at bay. He seemed to want to harm the gilded man more with each passing word.

“Speak, Hrothwyn of Suð! Proclaim your innocence so that we may open your flesh and see the truth with our eyes!”

The woman remained silent, only twisting the biting-ropes about her wrists so they became slick with lifeblood.

“Declare your innocence, woman! Or we will watch you perish!” he bellowed, but she remained calm. The man with his silver and gems waved a hand and two men stepped forward, slipping long knives from sheathes on their hips. They each took one step toward her.

The succulent sound of both men’s skulls caving from the force of striking the chamber wall at either end came at a moment when the room had gone silent. The gilded man stood frozen in horror upon his dais.

Hrothwyn of Suð turned her face toward the ceiling of the domed chamber, her arms outstretched toward both dying men. When her chin lowered, level with the gilded man, she somehow looked regal. Her eyes were pure, milk white. The dirt and tattered linens she wore were as clean as if they were just woven, the biting-ropes were gone from her wrists, however, each one still dripped lifeblood from the wounds. A radiant glow surrounded her, illuminating the chamber and those gathered. The torches dimmed in comparison.

“I am the Mother of The Child. The Child Foretold will come from my womb. Harm me, and the world will curse every moment you live with pain unending. He will lead each of us into the future. He is the one who is prophesized.” Hrothwyn of Suð said.

The man among the gathered who had seemed anxious stepped forward and spoke, “He is my son, and I will care for him.” Hrothwyn of Suð turned and smiled at the robed man, a loving smile.

“You?” the gilded man spat. “Your lifeblood will feed the stone as well, Hollis. You dare openly defy his Law? You speak for this woman and the demon-spawn wiggling in her belly?” He turned. “Seize them both and open their flesh! This blasphemy will not be spoken while there is still life in my body! Be thankful I am to show you mercy, and not turn you over to them!”

Hrothwyn of Suð lowered her arms and met the gilded man’s stare, “I carry The Child Foretold in my belly. He will walk us into the future. No one would make the mistake of moving against me. What if my words are true? What human would agree to ending the world?”

“Hollis and I will leave quietly, raise him in the ways of magic, and when the time is right, he will know his path, and will have the wisdom to walk it alone.”

“If you truly carry The Child Foretold, I cannot let either of you leave,” the gilded man told her. “We have waited a thousand years; you will be kept in the manor’s cells until he is born.”

A blinding white light engulfed the chamber. The gathered burst into flames from the inside and as the wails of agony waxed and waned, Hollis stepped forward taking Hrothwyn of Suð’s hand in his own. He pressed his lips to her forehead and the wounds around her wrists from the biting-rope were healed. “They will never let us have peace, my love. They will always come for us, for him.” He placed his open palm on her belly.

“I will burn them, everyone, where they stand,” she squeezed his hand to reassure him.
“They can have him over my dead body.”

Chapter 3

Furthenhal was just as much mud as it was wood, brick, and thatch. The trees hung heavy with spring rain, and the smell was no different than it had been in Hægelfirth: decay, unwashed bodies, and dung. As Oswic’s horse struggled to plod through the town, the smell of fear crept up the back of Oswic’s spine. Each step harder and harder to take, it was obvious that the horse felt the unease just as much as his rider.

The air was as thick as pottage, and from the shadowed places between buildings, sets of eyes watched him from beneath wet woolen cloaks. Few people passed him on the road, but those who did seemed to be heading north were doing so quickly. Oswic leaned down to a woman scurrying by with a basket of wrinkled fruit and politely asked where he could find The Wild Hound. She turned her face up to his and screamed with such ferocity the horse danced a few feet from her in the opposite direction. With a twisted smile she walked off, leaving him feeling embarrassed and empty.

“Who is he?”

“He does not look like one’a ‘em. Do you think he is?”

“Neither did the last one. Remember?”

“Who is he? Did he come with them?”

“Should we get the manormen?”

“Wonder how much coin in his pocket.”

They all came at once, the flood of whispers in his mind. Oswic gagged as a wave of sick cut through him like an axe halving a piece of seasoned wood. He looked around in a vain attempt to locate even just one voice. If someone had spoken to him, he wasn't losing his mind, but he couldn't find anyone close enough to have heard them whisper. His knuckles gripped the reins tighter, and his thighs locked against the horse. He closed his eyes, intent to find a quiet place and breathe.

“Around the bend, follow it west, up from the smithy.”

Oswic shook his head in confusion, not sure if the voice was in his head, but this time, when he swiveled frantically in his saddle to find the voice, it was real. His eyes landed on a girl a few years younger than himself, standing next to his horse. With a bow slung over her shoulder, rain slicked hair, and an axe at her hip, she looked about as well-worn as the rest, even if the light in her eyes was a bit brighter.

“You are kind, miss. Thank you.”

“I am not a bit, I have just seen enough death this week. The rest of ‘im’ll string you up, if you don’t get out of sight.”

He questioned her and looked around. The shadows seemed to be changing and there were more sets of eyes in them than before. He could still hear the whispering, but it was faint, as if he was hearing a tavern down the street.

“What happened here?” Oswic asked the girl, “Why is everyone so afraid? Was there a raid?”

The girl didn't look up at him, but started off. “I told you where the inne is, stranger, now be on your way.”

The rush of whispers returned in his head the further away from him she went. He tugged the horse around to follow her. “Girl! What is your name?” he called.

“You needn’t know my name. We’ll never see each other after this.” It wasn’t exactly a threat, but more as if she was assured of it.

The horse *thucked* through the mud toward her. “No, I need to know your name. I wish to speak to you after a time. Do you know the town well enough?”

“I would like t’think so.” She shifted her bow against her back and moved the string of rabbit carcasses she had tied to a rope on her hip, opposite the axe. She wasn’t about to give him anything.

“Alright,” he said, sighing. He turned the horse back the he needed to be headed, “your directions were enough. Good day to you.”

“I’ll meet you there just before dark. You will buy me an ale, and we will talk,” she said over her shoulder.

He was not sure if he had heard her in the way she had intended, but it was forgotten completely as he rounded the bend leading to the inne.

“Where is this one from?”

“How much do you think he has in that basket?”

“The horse would be worth the meat to butcher. Haven’t fed the baby in two days. Yulia, where is your father?”

“What stories could he tell?”

“How many are camped outside the walls?”

“Did someone send for manormen?”

It was frustrating, hearing the whispers in his mind. They sounded like bees buzzing in their hives, something he knew well, only, these bees wanted to harm him, or take from him. Some of these bees even wanted to do unspeakable things to him in exchange for coin! Oswic wished the girl would have shown him the way to the inne, she seemed to keep them at bay, the whispers. Shaking his head, he hoped to knock them all away, but as his head righted itself, he saw the inne.

The sign was simple, just as all other signs. Letting patrons, local or not, know where it was. There was no gallantry, it was only a crude weather-worn carving of a dog. Whomever had built the low inne had thought long and hard about its construction as there were raised boards in front of the entrance for knocking the mud from your soft boots. Oswic wondered if The Wild Hound was funded by the lord of the land.

The hall was surprisingly light and airy. Several boys and girls skittered about the room with a tray of this or a pail of that, rearranging tables, shoving about benches, and pushing piles of dirt across the plank floor. The bar, which was grand by its own standard, stretched completely across the hall with a small break at each end for the comings and goings of the thralls. A woman, dressed in a tan linen top, clean, dark brecs, and an apron about her trunk, eyed him with wary annoyance.

“You needin’ a room, a drink or a girl? The only thing I cannot help you with is trouble. If you want any of it, you’ll hev to go up the road,” she pointed to the wall as if that was going to help him decide a direction.

“The price?” he dug into his coin purse, which held little.

“Rooms or girls?” she said, wiping out a tankard with a cloth that looked as if it needed a wash more than the cup.

“Rooms!” he blurted, startling the girl darting past him. She looked at him wide-eyed as she disappeared through a doorway.

The woman stopped and looked him over for the first time. “You run off from you mum? What are you needin’ in Furthenhal?”

He needed a room, and a meal, and the truth from the storyteller, those things he needed, but he did not need an innekeep asking after his business. It made him anxious. “I ‘em needin’ a room. Someplace warm and dry to sleep. If you can.”

The woman leaned in and scrubbed at the bartop with the same rag she had used to wipe out the tankards. “Three pennies for a roof. An extra if you want a meal.”

Oswic had pulled out two silvers from his pouch. He opened his palm to show her.

Before he could pull his hand away she swiped them from him, “Looks like a roof and a hot meal. Go on up,” she motioned toward a sturdy looking ladder at the far end of the hall. He didn’t bother to wait, she seemed to want him to move on, so he started for the ladder. “You’ll want the bed closest t’the front or the back, up by the wall. Thatch is newest there. You do not want the bugs or rodents fallin’ on you in the middle of the night, hmm?” She laughed, and Oswic smiled to himself. It was one of those cheerful laughs, perhaps with a bit of discomfort or nervousness mixed in. “What’s your name, boy? Did you tell me?” She said just as he put a foot on the bottom rung of the ladder.

He thought about giving her his real name, but it could have come along before him on the lips of a merchant or gossip. “Reid,” he told her, holding his breath that she would believe him. Then again, why wouldn’t she?

“That right?” she nodded, waving him off. “You can call me Carin. I keep the inne when my husband is out doing whatever it is he does for the lord. If you lookin’ for anythin’, just ask. I ‘em sure I can find something for you.”

“Is your husband Brun?”

Carin looked across the hall at him, her brow furrowed in question, “Aye, boy, he is. Why is his name on your lips?”

“Lagot—”

“Lagot! Lagot the Lout! You not be speakin’ that name in the Hound, boy! I’ll hang you off’n the eaves by your toes if’n I hear you speak his name again!”

Oswic drew his shoulders up, spooked at her outburst, “He told me to come looking for Brun, that he’d be able to help me find the sto—” he was not able to finish.

“That lazy thief! He came in here spouting off about his cheeses and gave us the wormrot! They got into our flour’n grain, lost a month’a stock! Lagot! Hmph!” Carin wiped the bartop again as if it were as dirty as the road out the front door. “Lazy, no good bastard. Hope the last six teeth rot in his mouth,” she muttered to herself, once again paying Oswic no mind. He reached for the second rung of the ladder and pulled himself up, hurrying to the top and releasing a sigh the moment he was upright in the long, dark space.

He could not see to the opposite end of the expanse, but there were multiple sleeping mats on both sides of the roof. Each space had a small chest with a lock and key, but Oswic would use his pack for a pillow. He wouldn’t need to lock up his things. Drawing out the hardy wool blanket, he shuffled along under the thatch until he reached the end of the space, closest to the main entrance, but also the side that faced the warming morning sun. Bugs and vermin would be less likely to hide in the side that dried out and became warm quicker than elsewhere. He

prodded the mat, which was little more than two thin blankets sewn together and stuffed with straw, with his toe. Nothing scurried from under it, so Oswic was satisfied to lay out his own blanket atop the mat. The thatch smell was heavy and bitter with a touch of urine. Lagot had once told him at market, urine kept away small animals that liked to nest in it.

A hard kick to the bottom of his softboot jolted him awake.

“Didn’t I say dark, stranger?”

Oswic sat up on the straw bed and rubbed his eyes with the heel of his palms. He yawned but in the darkness of the room, he couldn’t even tell if it was day or night. It occurred to him that he hadn’t had a dream, or a nightmare while he napped. He was thankful. “How did you get up here?” he asked.

“The same way you did. The ladder,” she said.

“You should give me a name to call you.”

“I should.” She extended a hand to help him up. “Your wicker, where will you leave them when we go down for ale?”

He didn’t think she was serious until he realized, after standing, the lockbox next to the bed wasn’t large enough to hold the basket itself. “Hmm... I guess I’ll have to take the important things out and lock them away. Hope no one takes the rest.”

The young woman stood back a few paces from him as he moved the gold sash, box, and clothes from his basket to the lockbox. His extra blanket would not fit, but he rolled it out over his other one on the straw mattress and was satisfied.

“You done? Like watchin’ my great-mother mend leggings; slow and miserable.”

Oswic laughed in a quick burst, “I could see it.”

The hall was quiet when they came down the ladder. She chose a table near the center of the long room. Oswic noticed she had no bow this time, nor did she have the rabbits, but she did have the axe. He nodded to it when she shifted its haft to sit on the bench, “Expecting a fight?”

She lofted an eyebrow at him, “Expecting one to not break out is a death sentence, stranger. What do I call you?”

He shook his head, “Not until you give me your word I’ll hear yours. What is it about your name that keeps you from telling me? Are you wanted? Do people know you from a poor reputation?”

She rested the flats of her arms on the table and leaned close, as if to tell him something in a whisper, or maybe a secret. “There is power in a name. This world is not a quiet hollow in the trees to the north. There are men with golden chariots, and those who ride beasts as big as this hall into battle. There are machines that launch balls of fiery tar upon stone walls and armies so large, they would fill three or four Lundenwics.

“To you, my name is what you would call me, but to that man,” she turned and pointed to a fat man in a leather tunic shoving stew into his mouth, “my name is my honor. It is my bloodline, and it proves my worth to those around me.” The fat man looked up just in time to see her point at him. He looked around confused but decided to mind his own business and return to his food.

“You said you would give me information,” Oswic was irritated. “Yet, here we sit, and you won’t even offer your name.”

“No, I said I would meet you here after dark, and I hev’ done both. you seem to think I owe you something, stranger,” she said.

“Why did you come here if you were just going to lead me nowhere?” His irritation turned to frustration. “This is a waste of time.”

She laughed. “I thought the same when you steered your horse around to ask me more questions.”

A man, bulky enough to be considered so, hurled himself through the space behind the bar, looking for something. He looked a bit like a tree, with a stout trunk but full about the shoulders, neck, and chest. Oswic watched as the man launched a full cask of ale up onto his shoulder from the plank floor and hurled himself back in the opposite direction, only to disappear through a doorway.

“Brun,” she said. “That’s the innekeep. His name is Brun.” She looked, uninterested, at the empty table in front of her before she waved over a serving girl with cups and a full clay pitcher. “He’s an honest one. The lord leaves him alone. His payments are made in ale and gossip.” She lifted her cup and emptied it, motioning for the girl to leave her pitcher. The girl bobbed a curtsy and disappeared.

“I came looking for him. Our innekeep said to seek his help when I arrived. His wife,” Oswic motioned toward the doorway in which Brun had disappeared, “said the two were no longer friends.”

“Aye. The whole village was mad for a time. Wormrot is hard to be rid of. I ‘em not sure how the lords finally dealt with it.” She seemed more concerned by this than anything else they had yet spoken of.

“I had never heard of it before coming here. Grain and dairy? Oh, no, just grain, yeah? Brought in with the cheese,” Oswic mused aloud. “Why would Lagot do such a rotten thing to a good man?”

“The talk was he ‘ad taken up with a woman whose son was set to inherit a large land for planting grains. He wanted the market to grow in the north. If Furthenhal has wormrot, no one will get grain or bread from here, they’ll follow the road an extra day.”

Oswic was stunned. Helissa had been planning to be rid of him and his mother for a long time. What type of sorcery was this that a woman could meddle so deep without being put back into her place? She had good, honest men doing awful things to other good, honest men. How did her husband not know what his wife had been doing? He tried to remember how long it had been since he had seen the leatherman before leaving Hægelfirth. It had been quite some time. A moon cycle, at least. Maybe he had gone away for Lord Reynold. Often, but more as of late, lords sent trusted men to do their bidding. Fighting, carrying messages, protecting wain loaded with goods meant for other lords, thegns did all these things. Some more wealthy lords had thegns who only did a lord’s bidding, and they were said to be able to live from the spoils. The life of a thegn was a good one. If he returned to Lord Reynold with the title, would that be enough to marry Iria? Could he be given the title, or was it specific to each lord? He knew little about how the system of titles worked, only that him and his mother had been pretty close to the bottom.

A heavy hand clasped his shoulder, pulling Oswic from his spiraling thoughts. “You might watch yourself with this young lady, my friend,” a full-throated voice said above his shoulder. “That ‘un there’s the lord’s daughter.”

Oswic stared at her, the corners of his lips twisted in anger. She gave him an apologetic shrug.

“I am Lulle Hatte.”

When they reached the cottage, far out in the woodlands, they noticed first that there were still clothes swaying on a line drawn out to a tree. The clothes looked weather-worn.

“Lulle Hatte!” The leader of the group stood up in the driving-seat of the wagon. He shouted toward the cottage. “Lulle Hatte, the village is worried for you! Come out to greet us!” There was no reply.

The leader turned to him. “Hollison, your mother smelled like goats, you head in, put on the mask.”

He climbed out of the back of the cart, each step a precise and calculated movement. Slipping and falling in the mud would have made the day worse. Verdrich had tried to make the mood lighter in saying his mother smelled like goats, but there was no ease to the sinking darkness swallowing the group.

They had already visited nine homes in the village, and only one person might survive to the end of the week. The villagers called it the Great Mortality, claiming it was a punishment from God for the sins of man. He wouldn't believe it. Man had been sinning the same way since God created him. Why would He choose to punish us now, in this way? There was no sense in it. Not a week past, he had brought an infant into the world, only to have her grow black boils under her arms and on her thighs. The black spread to her fingers, toes, her nose. She had cried every moment of her short life. As her mother held her, with the boils on her own neck, under her own arms, and on her thighs, the infant passed and her mother only a second after. There was no sin to be had for that child. The holy men said it was the sins of her father that rested on her shoulders, but that is far less believable. Her father, a strong man who worked the fields, did well by his young family. He did not carry a sin that would warrant God's wrath in this way. It may have been a little mercy that he died in the field days before the birth of his daughter.

Mother and child never left the birthing bed, and it became their deathbed. Hollison had burned the cottage and all its contents.

The doorway to the Hatte home had been painted above with a fat red-brown smear on the wood. He had seen it before; in the village proper. In the hopes that God would allow the disease to pass them by as He had with the first born of the Israelites in Egypt; families slaughtered lambs and smeared the blood over the top of doorways.

It had helped none. If this had been the Roman God's work, he was as vindictive as the god of Abraham, and the gods of the Norsemen. His mask itched his face, it was made of vellum, and he often developed a rash from it, but Hollison knew better than to stick his fingers under it to scratch. Not this close to the pestilence.

The wood-slat door creaked open with ease, the hinges emitting a loud but sustained squeal. He noted in his mind that they should be oiled, though he did not think the day would end with the task being done. Four basic wood-post beds lined the walls of the main room. Each bed large enough for three adults, and each had linen bags stuffed with straw or hay for padding to rest on. If it were not for the pungent, distinct odor of human decay, Hollison may have believed the cottage was cozy. The fire had died off more than a few days prior, and the pottage rotted in the pot hanging from the crochan. In a neat, somewhat orderly pattern, the family fanned out around the hearth. Jars of leeches lined the floor at their heads; bloated, wriggling things, filled with the blood of their last meal. The blood of the Hatte family.

Lulle Hatte, and her farmhand, were each farthest from the hearth, wrapped in thick woolen blankets, with only their faces showing. Blank, empty eyes deep in their sockets, their gray skin, and thin lips pulling back from browned teeth, were the only parts he could see. He knew what had taken them. Lulle's father lay next to her, his face covered in blanket, but his

gnarled gray feet stuck out from the opposite end. His exposed right foot showed the distinct marks of bloodletting; the raised triangle puncture encircled in red. Hollison counted nine, just on the single foot. If the boils started on the right side, the leeches were attached on the right side. It was the only way to balance the humours. It clearly did not work for these folks.

Three children to each side leading closer to the hearth; six in total. The oldest, in her teens, was black on her face, her feet, and her hands. Her trunk was covered in boils, and black pocks. She suffered longest and was uncovered from thrashing in fits and fever. Her limbs were strangely bent, the muscles hard, taut. Her face, even in death, was twisted in agony. She may have not even known when the rest of those around her had perished. The poor girl had experienced pain like no one should have to.

He wished he did not have to see it. The two youngest; twin boys. No more than four or five years old. Their twisted bodies, with the marks of bloodletting, boils, and pocks, lay out on their mats. Not being able to help himself, he paused to pull the blankets up over their little blue faces. No god would do this to a child.

A rat scurried past Hollison on the floor, causing him to leap back in fear. Rats were abundant in the woodlands, and in the cities alike. He had seen hundreds of them. He was just startled by it. He didn't need to check the other three children. They had been gone for at least a week.

"What have you found, Hollison?" Verdrich said from the doorway.

"Death," he answered.

"So much of it of late."

"Too much of it of late."

Disoriented and uncomfortable, Oswic sat up, gripping his head from the swirling feeling deep within. He was no longer in the hall with the girl or the innekeep. A sinking feeling gripped him when he saw he was in a small room with a heavy wood door. A thick layer of rancid smelling straw rested under his backside, but that was all the room contained. “Ello!” he called.

“Oy shut you trap. Cryin’ like a babe in there all night, the rest’a us need ta’rest!” A gruff, feminine voice answered his call. She did not sound like someone he would like to mess with. Her accent was strange though. Oswic absently wondered if she was from the north.

“Where are we?” he asked.

“Look’eh ‘here, Boy, you keep us up all night through with your cryin’ and your yappin’ ‘bout black boils’n dead babies. Shut you trap so’s we can sleep.” There was a long pause before she answered his question, “In the cells, Boy. you in the cells.”

Oswic sighed and moved himself against the wall farthest from the door. Iria would not be sitting outside waiting for him to wake. Iria. A vibrant vision of her spinning in circles in the æcre of her father’s manor passed through his mind and gave him a small comfort. He was lost in quiet thought of her when the door swung open to admit Brun, the innekeep.

“I dun want no more trouble, hear?” he said, his cask-carrying hands on his hips. “No more a’you trickery. No more fires and no more screamin’ about death.”

Oswic stared at him confused, shaking his head, “I cannot control what happens when they take over. They come and go without my knowing.” Brun opened his mouth to speak but the woman with the brusque voice interrupted.

“Sounds like the spirits have hold’a’ya, boy. Who has gone and died on you recent?” she called.

Why should he answer her? How would she know to ask about someone dying? Oswic's curiosity about the woman in the next cell was halted as Brun pulled him to his feet. "She's a storyteller. Always spewing one lie or another." He raised his voice for her to hear, "Last week, she ran naked through the south district screamin' 'bout the coming of a prophet. Woman's been out there in the forest too long, eating too many mushrooms." Brun nudged me, pointing to his head and rolling his eyes around.

Hrothwyn's voice sounded in Oswic's mind, "Never trust that which first catches your eye and draws away your attention. It will always be in the shadows that you find what you need." The storyteller. Was she the one he was looking for? Would Brun help him get her out? What payment would he expect for such a feat?

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