



The Fifth Lost Tale of Mercia: Algifu the Orphan

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The Fifth Lost Tale of Mercia:
Algifu the Orphan

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

—The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, Entry for Year 1014

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*Spring, 1014 A.D.
Gainsborough*

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

This single thought struggled to stay afloat as the approaching camp drowned her with physical sensations. The lines of brightly painted shields along the burg walls seared her eyes. Meat-scented smoke

burned her nostrils. The clashing of playful weapons rang in her ears. These sensations pulled her too deeply into a reality that made her doubt the strength of her purpose.

But Canute lost his father, too.

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

Yes, Canute had just lost his father. She had lost her father many years ago, and it had changed her life irrevocably. This would bind her to Canute, she thought, and form a permanent connection. She would be able to help him in a moment of weakness; she would be able to understand what he was going through better than most. She would be able to gain his trust.

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

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“What do you mean, he is busy?”

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

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

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

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

Northampton. I am the daughter of Alfhelm, who once ruled as Ealdorman of York—”

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

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

“I said *go away!*”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What the hell is going on, Gunnlaug?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then, quite unexpectedly, she saw Canute.

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

thought, was jagged: from the edges of his joints, to his jutting chin, and even to the corners of his eyes, narrowed and squinting as he peered through them.

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

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

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

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

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

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

He released her from his fierce gaze and turned back to his food. Even though she felt as if she had just been freed from a harsh grip, she trembled with frustration. She had not come this far so that he could dismiss her. He had heard something in her scream, that roar in which she had bared her soul; otherwise he wouldn't have called her in here. "My father also died before his time, my lord."

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

This made her grind her teeth together and glare at him with a gaze almost intense enough to match his own. But now he did not even notice;

now he only seemed to have eyes for the pretty cup in his hand. “That’s a very pretty goblet,” she hissed. “Someone else’s gift to you?”

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

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

The man she had come here to destroy.

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

He paused, going terribly still.

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

“Tread carefully,” he said.

She lowered her voice, but continued to speak relentlessly. “You miss him, don’t you?”

“Of course,” he snapped. “Now shut your mouth.”

Instead, she sat down next to him and leaned in closer. He tensed, slender fingers tightening around his disgusting prize of a cup. “Were you ready for your father to die, Canute? Were you ready to become king?”

He inhaled sharply, but said nothing.

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

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

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

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

She pulled back, anger stinging her tongue. “And *you*—you’re even more afraid than I am. If you were ready to be a king you would already have a plan. You would have mobilized your men while Ethelred was away, and while the Anlgo-Saxons thought your Vikings were weakened

by their unexpected loss—rightfully so! You could have proved to everyone that you're all the man your father was. Instead you are sulking here in the safety of the Danelaw, getting fat with Easter feasting!"

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

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

He moved so quickly that he must not have been as intoxicated as she thought, after all. One moment his hand was around his cup, and the next it was around her throat, shoving her back and pinning her down to the table. She heard dishes clatter and stools knock over, but then all she could hear was the sound of her own breath, or lack thereof, as she tried to force it past the vice-like grip of his hand.

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

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

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

about, constantly moving. She was rewarded by a profound satisfaction every time she escaped his grasp or returned one of his blows.

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

He groaned and fell back.

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

Canute looked down at himself, his tunic ripped open, his chest beaded with dark blood, his body bent uncomfortably around his aching loins. He seemed at a loss. When he looked at her again, she could not tell whether he was furious or fascinated.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Be more specific."

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

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

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

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

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

Finally he pulled away, a strange look on his face.

"I suppose you'll do," he said.

*

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

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

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

Whatever the case, it seemed as if she had at least been able to spur him to action. He called together the people of Lindsey and invited them to raid and plunder alongside his Vikings. His warriors stretched their limbs and sharpened their blades and she felt the vibrancy of war in the air. The people cheered to Canute and looked to him as their ruler.

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

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

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

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

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

"You have more important things to do."

A roar filled her ears when she heard this, for belatedly, she understood her purpose. Canute wanted an heir, and he wanted it soon. This was probably the reason he had chosen her so quickly, more than from any flare of passion or feeling of "connection." In one sense the notion of

giving Canute an heir filled her with excitement. But at the same time, her ears burned with frustration.

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

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

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

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

"I told you. I hate Ethelred. I want you to be king."

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

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

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

"An *accident!*" Her voice came out like a squeal, and her cheeks flushed with both fury and embarrassment. She could only hope that Canute could not see the extent of her distress in the darkness; but then, Canute seemed to see everything. "And then King Ethelred killed my brother for laughs?"

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

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

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

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

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

"What—!"

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

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

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

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

"No," he said. "You are not."

"Oh—watch me!"

She turned and stormed away.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And her housecarls, my lord?" one asked.

"Kill them."

"Hey!" She scrambled to her feet. "No!"

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

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

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

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

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

*

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

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

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

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

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

Fear seized her limbs. Her heart fluttered in her ribs, weak and rapid like a butterfly’s wings. Suddenly she found it hard to breathe. She hated fear. She wanted to believe it could not touch her. She wished she could forget how it felt, that day the king’s soldiers barged into her beautiful manor, stabbing the men who had been loyal to her all her life, trying to catch her mother Wulfrun as she ran screaming, then grabbing her brother and throwing him to the floor ...

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

“It’s Ethelred’s army,” said the housecarl.

“How many soldiers?” gasped Alfgifu.

“A few thousand. Hard to say—they’re pouring in.”

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

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

“Well go on, let’s fight them!” she cried.

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

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

*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You are?"

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

The housecarl shook his head helplessly. "He's ... talking."

"Talking? To whom?"

He shrugged.

She took a deep breath, pushed back her shoulders, and clenched her fists. "Well I'm going in."

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

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

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

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

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

"You'll show them," he went on. "You're a man. A real man. You'll even have a son soon ... "

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

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

"You won today," she said quickly, as if her heart wasn't racing in her chest.

He paused.

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

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

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

He dropped the knife, which thudded onto the floor.

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

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

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

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

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

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

**

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RELEASE DATES

One Lost Tale of Mercia will release every other Tuesday until October 5, the release of the full story of Eadric Streona and his greatest opponent, the Golden Cross. For more news and updates, visit www.jaydenwoods.com.

The First Lost Tale: **Golde the Mother** (*released May 18*)

The Second Lost Tale: **Ethelred the King** (*released June 1*)

The Third Lost Tale: **Aydith the Aetheling** (*released June 15*)

The Fourth Lost Tale: **Athelward the Historian** (*released June 29*)

The Fifth Lost Tale: **Algifu the Orphan** (*released July 13*)

The Sixth Lost Tale: **Hastings the Hearth Companion** (*July 27*)

The Seventh Lost Tale: **Hildred the Maid** (*August 10*)

The Eighth Lost Tale: **Canute the Viking** (*August 24*)

The Ninth Lost Tale: **Runa the Wife** (*September 7*)

The Tenth Lost Tale: **Edmund the Aetheling** (*September 21*)

****OCTOBER 5th:** The novel, [Eadric the Grasper](#), releases on Amazon.com**

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, as compiled by various monks until the year 1140, were my primary sources of information. So, too, were the Chronicles of Florence of Worcester and the Chronicles of the Kings of England as written by William of Malmesbury. Without the devotion of these men to chronicle the chaotic events of their time, so little of the Dark Ages would be known. For a full list of sources, or to tell me what

you think of my work, visit my blog at [ht-
tp://talesofmercia.wordpress.com](http://talesofmercia.wordpress.com).

From the same author on *Feedbacks*

The First Lost Tale of Mercia: *Golde the Mother (2010)*

"The Lost Tales of Mercia" are ten short stories set in England near the end of the Viking Age, releasing every other Tuesday. Though fictional, they are heavily researched and feature many real historical figures as described in the ancient texts of the "Anglo-Saxon Chronicles." They are intended to portray what might have and could have happened. These quick reads will entertain and educate at the same time. Read the stories in any order; though interconnected, they do not follow each other chronologically, and each tale stands alone.

The First Lost Tale, "Golde the Mother," is about the mother of Eadric Streona. It sheds light on Eadric's strange childhood, and raises the question of who fathered the boy who would become notorious as one of the most treacherous men in England.

The Second Lost Tale of Mercia: *Ethelred the King (2010)*

This haunting short story illustrates the scandalous circumstances surrounding King Ethelred's rise to power at the age of eleven, and reveals why the entire reign of so-called "Ethelred the Unready" seems to have been cursed.

"The Lost Tales of Mercia" are a series of ten short stories set in England near the end of the Viking Age. They can be read in any order. Though fictional, they are heavily researched and feature many real historical figures as described in the ancient texts of the "Anglo-Saxon Chronicles." They are intended to portray what might have and could have happened. These quick reads will entertain and educate at the same time.

The Third Lost Tale of Mercia: *Aydith the Aetheling (2010)*

Aydith's story is that of a young aetheling who, despite her royal blood, can get no one to listen to her willful opinions. With the encouragement of a kind hearth companion named Hastings, perhaps she will find another way to help her ill-fated country.

"The Lost Tales of Mercia" are ten short stories set in England near the end of the Viking Age. They can be read in any order. Though fictional, they are heavily researched and feature many real historical figures as described in the ancient texts of the "Anglo-Saxon

Chronicles." They are intended as a creative interpretation of what might have and could have happened.

The Fourth Lost Tale of Mercia: Athelward the Historian (2010)

Lord Athelward, an ealdorman who also wants to write history, finds his peace of mind disturbed when a strange woman named Golde and her young son Eadric show up on his doorstep with a ridiculous proposal.

"The Lost Tales of Mercia" are ten short stories set in England near the end of the Viking Age. They can be read in any order. Though fictional, they are heavily researched and feature many real historical figures as described in the ancient texts of the "Anglo-Saxon Chronicles." They are intended as a creative interpretation of what might have and could have happened.

The Sixth Lost Tale of Mercia: Hastings the Hearth Companion (2010)

A royal hearth companion named Hastings fights on the front lines of battle for duty and the Golden Cross, but he entertains unrealistic notions of how his mistress, Aetheling Aydith, might reward him.

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The Seventh Lost Tale of Mercia: Hildred the Maid (2010)

In 1005 A.D., a terrible famine strikes Engla-lond. When a poor young woman named Hildred grows desperate enough to break the law for her survival, a rising thegn named Eadric takes her fate in his hands.

"The Lost Tales of Mercia" are ten short stories set in England near the end of the Viking Age. They can be read in any order. Though fictional, they are heavily researched and feature many real historical figures as described in the ancient texts of the "Anglo-Saxon Chronicles." They are intended as a creative interpretation of what might have and could have happened.

The Eighth Lost Tale of Mercia: Canute the Viking (2010)

As a teenager, Canute struggles to find his place among a fortress of Jomsvikings and the differing religions surrounding them. An unexpected relationship with another Jomsviking, forbidden by the Christians, may force him to choose a side.

“The Lost Tales of Mercia” are ten short stories set in the Viking Age. They can be read in any order. Though fictional, they are heavily researched and feature many real historical figures as described in the ancient texts of the “Anglo-Saxon Chronicles.” They are intended as a creative interpretation of what might have and could have happened.

The Ninth Lost Tale of Mercia: Runa the Wife (2010)

Runa expects to live her entire life isolated in the woods until she meets Thorkell the Tall. She tries to conform to society through a traditional marriage, but at a very high cost to them both.

“The Lost Tales of Mercia” are ten short stories set in the Viking Age. They can be read in any order. Though fictional, they are heavily researched and feature many real historical figures as described in the ancient texts of the “Anglo-Saxon Chronicles.” They are intended as a creative interpretation of what might have and could have happened.

The Tenth Lost Tale of Mercia: Edmund the Aetheling (2010)

In the tenth and final Lost Tale, young prince Edmund suspects a plot against his father's life. He turns to his siblings, Aydith and Aethelstan, for help, but King Ethelred heeds none of them. Will they ever find someone they can trust?

“The Lost Tales of Mercia” are ten short stories set in England near the end of the Viking Age. They can be read in any order. Though fictional, they are heavily researched and feature many real historical figures as described in the ancient texts of the “Anglo-Saxon Chronicles.” They are intended as a creative interpretation of what might have and could have happened.

Ashes of Dearen: Book 1 (2011)

A red-eyed assassin, an unready princess, a sadistic politician, and an adulterous queen all desire the secret behind a magical dust known as safra. Saffra is said to bring happiness, but these characters' desperate attempts to obtain it will cost them all dearly. Their

salacious and violent deeds bring three great nations to the brink of warfare. And little do they know, their scrambling efforts are being carefully watched by a much greater power: the gods behind the beguiling drug that ensnares them all.

Lost Tales of Mercia (2012)

All ten *Lost Tales of Mercia* set in Anglo-Saxon England can now be read in a single ebook.

A mother defies an ealdorman for the sake of her son. A boy becomes king at eleven years of age through the scandalous death of his brother. A young girl takes desperate measures to manipulate the king's court. An eccentric noble gives a young swineherd a priceless gift in the form of education. An orphaned woman joins the Viking prince to pursue her revenge...

These are only the first five stories of the ten *Lost Tales of Mercia*. They introduce the characters who will fight, love, and betray each other until the rightful king takes the throne of Engla-lond. These stories serve as a complement to the novel, "Eadric the Grasper."



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