



**The Sixth Lost Tale of Mercia: Hastings the Hearth
Companion**
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The Sixth Lost Tale of Mercia:
Hastings the Hearth Companion

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

—Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, Entry for Year 1004

*

*Norwich
1004 A.D.*

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

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

his eyes was a result of his own sympathy or the burning smoke that the breeze threw against him.

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

But then a breeze blew, as if from the ocean, fresh, salty, and clarifying. Clouds of smoke rolled away, and rays of sunshine illuminated a small gathering of men near the high reeve's hall, meeting and conversing despite their miserable circumstances: the wise men. Hastings heaved a deep breath, dragging himself and his horse towards them.

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

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

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

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

Sighing, Hastings leaned against the ribs of his horse, breathing nearly as heavily as the great beast, and felt a moment of guilty relief. Perhaps, indeed, he had come too late. Perhaps he had no choice but to find shelter, get a full night's rest, and return home to Lundenburg.

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

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

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

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

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

"The who?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Bishop Elfgar is right!" roared Ulfcytel.

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

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

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

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

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

Ulfcytel just blinked in puzzlement.

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

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

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

*

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

"Hastings ... Hastings!"

"I am here, Aydith."

He found her in the darkness, his large hands closing around hers, gripping her tightly. In his dream he could see her, even though it was dark and not a single candle was lit. Her brown eyes shone like copper moons, searching his.

"Hastings, the Golden Cross failed?"

"I am afraid so, my lady."

"But ... I don't understand." Her hands tightened against his, and at first he enjoyed the sensation, their skin pressed so firmly together that he could feel the tiny ridges of her palm sliding against his own. Then

her nails dug into his knuckles, and pain overwhelmed the pleasure. "It is you who failed."

"No, Aydith, please, I did what I could ... !"

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

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

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

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

"Hastings ... "

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

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

"Please," he whispered, and brought his lips to hers.

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

And in such a state he awoke, panting.

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

"Get up," said the soldier. "Sweyn's fleet has broken the truce. The Vikings are sailing for Thetford."

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

"What do you think? We're going after him!"

Hastings grinned from ear to ear.

*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sweyn's men continued to pour through the muddy field, some on horseback, most on foot, slow and leisurely from their recent spoils. They were weighed down by stolen food, gold, and slaves. But they did not seem to care. They did not even hesitate as they came upon Ulfcytel's

army, but kept walking, as if towards a shrub they could easily chop from their path.

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

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

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

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

“Second line, down!” yelled *Ulfcytel*.

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

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

soldiers had volunteered nonetheless, and Ulfcytel claimed that it would catch the Danes by such surprise.

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

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

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

"Advance," said Ulfcytel.

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

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

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

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

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

He moved instinctively, shifting his shield up and down, shuffling his feet as the first Viking sword tried to chop off his toes. Whether it was a

wise battle tactic or not, Hastings did not know, but he found that he survived his first opponent by not looking him in the face at all, nor even staring directly at his weapon. Instead his eyes remained forward, focused on nothing and everything at the same time, and his body reacted accordingly. He moved, blocked, thrust his shield forward, and stabbed. Meanwhile he stayed aware of the man behind him, crouched low and thrusting a spear around his legs. It would be all too easy to slice himself against a friendly blade.

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

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

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

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

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

“Now!” he screamed, and one of Ulfcytel’s warriors rushed by, roaring with rage, chainmail and belt jangling like a thousand bells. The tip of his sword seemed to graze by Hastings’s ear, then plunge into a Viking’s chest. Above the sunken sword, the enemy’s face became locked in a permanent expression of surprise as death seeped into his body.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Aaaydiiith!” he cried.

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

*

Pain became a nightmare from which he could not wake.

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

He groaned, trying to awake, but the reality was even worse. He winced with every breath, which only made him struggle to inhale more deeply, and that hurt all the more. He tried to open his eyes, but one of them was swollen, warping his vision. He saw through a purple, throbbing haze, and it seemed as if he was still in a nightmare. Despite all that, the room around him was painfully bright. A fire blazed nearby, so hot that his skin itched, and the flames seemed to lick all the sweat from his body. He could not remember the last time he’d had something to drink.

“What’s wrong, Hastings? Thought your pagan friends would rescue you?”

Hastings squinted in confusion at the shape looming over him. It was Ulfcytel, and he smelled of horse. His beard lay matted against his neck. His eyes seemed to gleam and twirl like a lizard’s. Hastings felt dizzy.

“You’re caught, Hastings. I figured it out. The Danes sent you and that ridiculous scroll. You did it so some of my best men would get killed, and so my cousin—my own brave cousin—would be captured! *Captured!*”

Hastings’s memory tried desperately to make sense of Ulfcytel’s anger. He recalled cheering, and joy, and the elation of being alive. It was one of the last things he remembered before passing out from the pain in his chest and his overall exhaustion. So why was Ulfcytel so angry? A lot of men had died, of course ... so many that it seemed impossible to tell one bloody face apart from the next. But in the end, the Danes had fled to their ships, leaving most of their plundered goods behind, and many of their own mightiest warriors. It had seemed in many ways like a victory.

“What does he want?” growled Ulfcytel. “Money? Women? Why would this Golden Cross want to capture my cousin?”

Hastings moaned, too many thoughts rushing to his brain to speak at once. He wanted to respond, to say that the Golden Cross would never

oppose a man so brave and loyal to the Anglo-Saxons as Ulfcytel, that maybe Sweyn just wanted money for this hostage; who knew? Maybe his men even thought Ulfcytel's cousin would make a good Viking? Whatever the case, Ulfcytel had the completely wrong idea about everything, and Hastings wanted to tell him so; but instead he could not seem to draw breath, much less utter a word, and all that came from his throat was a long drawn-out groan.

Ulfcytel leaned closer to him, as if to try and decipher the guttural sounds from Hastings's mouth. Instead he only grew more frustrated. "Tell me," snarled the high reeve. "Tell me now. Who is the Golden Cross? Whoever he is I'm going to find him, and cut out his heart, and eat it for breakfast. I am Ulfcytel!"

Even Hastings's swollen eye opened wide as he stared in bafflement at the warlord. How was this happening? Where had it gone all wrong? How could the Golden Cross, someone who only wanted to aid the Anglo-Saxons in defending their coasts, seem suddenly like the cruelest of enemies to a man like Ulfcytel? It would have been bad enough for the Golden Cross to go unheeded, for the Vikings to collect their Danegald and sail off with sagging pockets; but this ... this was something far worse.

"TELL ME!"

The tip of Ulfcytel's boot hurled into Hastings's chest.

He felt as if his insides were tearing apart. He could not even cry out with pain. His chest seemed to collapse, and all air and breath with it. His vision flashed red, his body flailed, and then he went still.

Even if he could have talked, he would not have. He would never give away the Golden Cross's secret.

Ulfcytel stood over him a long while, breathing hard. The next time his leather boots creaked against the floorboards, Hastings's heart made a painful lurch of fear.

But then Ulfcytel turned and walked out, and closed the door behind him.

The last of Hastings's breath was lost in a whimper, and his mind spun into unconsciousness.

*

Aydith reached to him from the shadows.

"Oh, Hastings, you have fought so bravely."

Now he only wore thin linens, and the sliding fabric sent ripples along his skin as she raked her nails along it. Her fingers trailed up his torso

onto the bare skin of his chest. When she put her warm palm against the bruise, it ceased to ache.

He reached up and put his hand against hers.

"My lady ... I am glad you are pleased."

"Pleased?" She made a sad sound. She leaned closer to him, her dark hair falling over her shoulders and tickling his chest. Her fingers trailed up, scraping the grizzly hairs of his neck, then cradling his face along her palm. "I would, but I hate to see you in so much pain. You should be rewarded for what you've done."

"My reward is to see you happy, my lady." He slid his hand along her arm, then under the hem of her sleeve. "Although ... "

"Yes?"

His hand kneaded the soft flesh of her shoulder. "I would make you happy all my life if I could," he said. "We could reward each other all our lives, you and I, if ... " He grew still.

"If what?"

"If I was your husband." His hand slid further into her dress.

"Hastings," she breathed, and fell against him with a thud.

"Hastings."

Her hands shook him, then seemed to grow larger. The grip tightened and yanked him across the floor more violently. The pain returned to his chest.

"Hastings!"

The hearth companion groaned and opened his eyes. He looked through swollen, slanted lids at a face that was bound to disappoint him, for it was not Aydith's. But it could have been worse. It could have been Ulfcytel's.

"Lord Aethelstan!" he cried.

In his clearing vision the aetheling was a thing of beauty, freshly groomed and glistening with ornaments, his eyes soft and sincere as they searched Hastings's body.

"Are you hurt?" asked the prince.

"No, ah—" A hoarse, guttural sound poured out of his throat as Aethelstan started to lift him off the floor. "A little."

A shadow fell over Aethelstan's golden hair, and both the men tensed. "Who's there?" snapped the aetheling.

"It is I, Ulfcytel!"

Releasing Hastings, Aethelstan turned on the high reeve with fists clenched. "I should have you thrashed for treating a royal retainer with such cruelty! What did he do to deserve it?"

"I ... I ... I was confused, my lord. I thought he had tricked me. I thought he had taken something from me. I thought—"

"But now you see that you were mistaken?" Aethelstan hurried on.

"Y-yes, my lord. I see that now."

Hastings searched his cloudy memories of the last few days. How long had he been trapped in this hot, dusty room? Days? Weeks? People had brought him bread and water. Sometimes he had crawled to the latrine. He had slept a great deal, and had a fever. But he had blocked most sensations and events from his consciousness so that he did not have to think about the pain in his chest. If he searched his memory deeply enough, he did remember hearing things, sometimes. He had heard more celebrating, more good cheer, and at one point he thought he had heard someone announce that Ulfcytel's cousin escaped and returned home. Later he had dismissed it as a dream, for no one came to release him as he hoped. But after that Ulfcytel had never returned to beat him.

"I'm glad you recognize your mistake." Ulfcytel flinched as Aethelstan lifted his arm, but it was only to clap the high reeve on the shoulder. "Because altogether, you have done very well, Ulfcytel. I'm sure it would not always be wise, but the decision to put your best men in front in your situation was ingenious! The Danes themselves say they have never faced such masterful hand-play as you gave them. My father is pleased."

"I—" Ulfcytel looked uncertainly at Hastings, then away again. Hastings just glared at him. "I thank you, my lord."

"It is King Ethelred who wishes to thank *you*, Ulfcytel," said Aethelstan. He pulled a scroll from his tunic and offered it up. "He brings you this message."

Ulfcytel took the scroll, then his eyes doubled in size. He was staring at the seal. "This is your insignia, my lord?"

"Why, yes."

Gulping, Ulfcytel looked at Hastings. Hastings smirked. Understanding passed between them. The seal on this scroll was the same that had been on the one from the Golden Cross. The high reeve was not very smart, but he seemed to be piecing some things together, nonetheless.

Ulfcytel bowed low. "It was my greatest pleasure to serve your wishes, my lord."

"Ah ... thank you. And I hope that you will continue to ... serve my wishes, Ulfcytel. For you are to become Ealdorman of East Anglia."

"My lord!" Words failed the warrior, who planted his fist against his chest and bowed low. "My lord, I am so honored."

“Good. But we have a great deal to discuss, you understand. The first matter being your marriage to my sister.”

Hastings’s mouth fell open. Surely he heard wrong? He tried to say something, but his words became mangled by the pain in his chest, and all that he said was a painful grunt.

Aethelstan looked over at the hearth companion, concerned. “Before we discuss anything, you should send someone to tend this man’s wounds and provide him refreshment. Go on!”

Ulfcytel bowed his head with a curt motion, then stomped away.

Despite his aching torso, Hastings rose up to his knees and shuffled closer to the aetheling. “Tell me, my lord—tell me I heard wrong!”

Aethelstan’s pale brows furrowed together. “What’s that?”

It was all happening too fast. He felt dizzy. He reached out and gripped the prince’s tunic so he could steady himself. He tried to look the aetheling in the eye. “I don’t ... understand. Marriage, already?”

“Of course.” Aethelstan looked confused. “Doesn’t it please you to see Ulfcytel rewarded?”

“But—Aydith!” Her name came from his lips more desperately than he would have wished, but he could not help himself, so great was his inner torment.

“Oh, not Aydith. Hah!” Aethelstan reached down and gripped Hastings’s hands, which were starting to slip. “No wonder you were so confused, Hastings. Ulfcytel will marry Aetheling Wulfhild.”

“Ah.” Relief wrapped around Hastings like a cooling salve, but left his mind roiling in confusion. “But why not Aydith?”

“Aydith wouldn’t have it,” said Aethelstan. “As soon as she caught wind of Father’s notions to reward Ulfcytel, she made her position painfully clear. If she were married to Ulfcytel, she would make the new ealdorman miserable for the rest of his life.”

Hastings smiled despite himself. “And why do you think she would do that?”

“Because she is a foolish girl, and infatuated with someone else. Apparently enough so to make my father pay attention.”

A tremble wracked the hearth companion. “Did she ... did she say with whom?”

Aethelstan brushed at Hastings’s fingers, clearly tiring of their grip. “I don’t recall if she said it aloud. She didn’t need to. Everyone knows. It’s obvious, isn’t it?”

Hastings felt as if he might faint.

"It was many seasons ago when that strange churl, Eadric of Mercia, visited the palace, and yet she speaks as if it happened yesterday. You remember when he visited Father two years ago? Well, of course you do. It was a horrible day." Aethelstan grew silent in respect for the gruesome memories of that Saint Brice's day two years ago.

But instead of feeling reverent, Hastings found himself seething. Eadric of Mercia? What did *he* have to do with anything?

"For whatever reason," Aethelstan went on at last, "Aydith goes on and on about that conceited young swineherd. Although I suppose he's not a swineherd anymore. What does it matter? She keeps saying she'll marry a man of Mercia one day—as if it would be him! By the cross, I am starting to believe that the nobility of her husband would hardly matter, so long as she gets married, am I right?"

Aethelstan laughed, but Hastings only glowered at the floor. He felt as if someone had reached out and punched him in the ribs again. So, Aydith went on and on about Eadric of Mercia? Or at least Aethelstan thought so? Could the prince be wrong? After all, Hastings spent more time with Aydith than her brother did, and he had never heard her say things like that. Or had he? So many of his own thoughts were muddling together in his head that he quickly grew confused.

His breath grew faster and heavier, making him grind his teeth in pain. "Do you mean that?" he growled. Aethelstan stopped chuckling and looked at him curiously. "Would the nobility of her husband not matter to you?"

Aethelstan frowned. "Hastings, you don't look well. You should probably get some rest."

"I'VE RESTED PLENTY!"

He exerted so much breath that his ribs felt as if they were lit on fire, and the aetheling took a step backwards. A long, terrible silence filled the emptiness his shout left behind.

Aethelstan spoke through clenched teeth. "Then perhaps you should eat, and return to Lundenburg. And ... while you're at it ... " He forced his chin up indignantly. "You should remember your place!"

With a turn of his heel, Aetheling Aethelstan strode away.

Hastings groaned and rolled down onto his back. The floorboards were hot and searing against him, yet he felt as if he might never get up again.

Perhaps Aethelstan was wrong. Perhaps he misread Aydith entirely.

His fists clenched at his sides. His muscles constricted along his chest and made the pain all the sharper. For he knew that it did not matter what—or who—Aydith wanted.

Whatever it was, whomever it was, Hastings would help her attain it.

**

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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** (*released 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: Eadric the Grasper releases on Amazon****

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 <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.

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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 Fifth Lost Tale of Mercia: Algifu the Orphan (2010)

In the wildest Lost Tale yet, we jump to the year 1014. Algifu of Northampton joins forces with Canute, the new and young king of the Vikings. Algifu believes that her father was murdered in cold blood by Ealdorman Eadric Streona. How far will she go to obtain her revenge?

“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 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.

Last Tales of Mercia 1: Emma the Queen (2012)

Queen Emma's own son, King Edward, has been turned against her by Goodwin of Wessex and Archbishop Robert from Normandy. Edward accuses his mother of treachery and adultery with an English bishop. To prove her innocence, Emma must walk barefoot over nine scalding ploughshares and come out unscathed.

Set in the Dark Ages of Engla-lond, the "Last Tales of Mercia" are ten short stories featuring real historical figures and characters from the "Sons of Mercia" series. Though strongly connected to the series, they can be read independently.

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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