



The Seventh Lost Tale of Mercia: Hildred the Maid
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The Seventh Lost Tale of Mercia:
Hildred the Maid

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“This year was the great famine in England so severe that no man ere remembered such.”

—Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, Entry For Year 1005 A.D.

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Shrewsbury, Mercia
1005 A.D.

On her way to church that morning, anger poisoned Hildred’s devotion. She knew that she was supposed to worship God with a pure and loving heart, but she also doubted that God would notice one way or another. After all, He clearly didn’t see—nor care—what was happening to her body, nor the bodies of her entire family, most of whom were dead.

The majority of the people trudging on the same dirt path to the church suffered more than she. Their skin lay flat on their bones and

their raggedy clothes flapped loose on their joints. This was the worst famine any of them had seen in their lifetimes. Hildred fared better than them only because so many of her own family members had died in the last few years, leaving fewer mouths to feed.

Her eyes stung at the thought, but her physical discomfort overcame the torments of her mind. Her belly ached and her muscles trembled. For weeks she had lived on little more than nuts and water. What money she and her father had, they used to buy milk for the baby. A year ago, Hildred's mother died giving birth to him. Somehow, little Coenred had survived, and lived still. He was growing sick, and he slept much more than a baby should sleep, and every instance he squirmed and cried came as a relief.

When she awoke this morning, she did so with the determination to save her baby brother no matter what. Perhaps that was why she dressed herself nicely today. She donned a soft linen dress that once belonged to her mother. She untangled her long brown hair with a pick and splashed her face with stream-water. She was not even sure why. It was a desperate clutch for pride and hope, she thought. When she knelt and prayed to God, perhaps He would notice her at last. Perhaps He would pay attention. And then He would show her mercy.

She heard a disturbance behind her and turned to see two horses galloping up the road. As they neared the pedestrians, the riders gave half-hearted tugs on their horses' reins, but gave no indication that they would slow down to an agreeable pace. The townsfolk murmured and pushed one another as they tried to get out of the way.

The horses had little choice but to skid to a walk or trample some human beings, so they cast clouds of bitter dust into the air and snorted with dismay. Standing defiantly in place, Hildred glared back at the two riders shuffling closer. One of them was older and more rugged than the other, his wolfish hair and beard shaded gray, his large hand on the hilt of his sword as he yelled, "Make way for Thegn Eadric!"

Her glare fierced. As the dust cleared she saw Lord Eadric, a man near her own age at some nineteen years, his red tunic blazing with color in the light of the sunrise. His long yellow hair was tied back, but still several strands sprang about his cheeks, thick and curly. Her heart gave a little leap at the handsomeness of his face, the bright blue eyes and slightly bumped nose, and she struggled to remember why she ought to dislike him. In truth people said the land-owning swineherd was a good lord: his own estate currently fared better than anyone else's in all of Shrewsbury. But people also whispered that he was a liar and deceiver,

though none of them could prove why. They probably assumed that because he began as a base-born nobody, he must have achieved his position by some evil, unfair means.

Her heart lurched again when she realized that he was staring back at her. Without deciding to, Hildred now stood in the middle of the road, blocking his path completely. People on either side of the road kept him from moving around her, and his horse had slowed nearly to a stop. She shut her gaping mouth and blinked rapidly, as if her lids might protect her from the lord's curious gaze.

"Out of the way!" cried the lord's companion, unsheathing his sword by a notch.

Hildred realized she was being very foolish, and for no other reason than because she was jealous of these rich and powerful men. She did not move from their path because she did not feel that she ought to. But what would she gain from defying them? Nothing but trouble, and she would be even more miserable than she already was.

She deflated quickly, dropping her head and stepping backwards. But even though she got out of their way, for a moment, no one moved. She hardly dared to breathe. She could feel the eyes of everyone watching her, judging her, and hoping to witness an exciting scene, whatever that might entail.

She heard her own heart thudding through her veins. She watched the horses' hooves scuffle in the dirt, agitated, but not moving forward. She glimpsed Eadric's boots clenching the sides of his horse. Why didn't the lord move on?

"You."

She flinched at the sound of his voice, soft yet sharp at the same time. Lifting her head only so far as necessary, she strained to look at him through her lashes.

To her surprise, he was smiling. "Chin up," he said, and winked.

Her mouth fell open again as at last he spurred his horse and galloped onward with his companion. Her blood roared in her ears. Had anyone else seen that? Did the thegn just *wink* at her? His horse flicked a sassy tail and she shook her head in disbelief.

She looked down at herself: at the soft green dress, the freed chestnut hair, and how both of them draped the swell of her chest. Perhaps she had succeeded in looking even nicer than she'd intended. Had she really expected to win God's attention, or was it actually the favor of wealthy thegns that she hoped for?

Whatever the case, she now felt sinful and childish for her vanity. What good could she really achieve by looking pretty? At home, her baby brother lay on death's door. Her father was so miserable that if a chance at death presented itself, he would gladly join the rest of their family in heaven. But the thought of heaven sent chills across Hildred's skin. Perhaps her faith was weak, but the comfort of an afterlife was a faint one; she did not want to die.

She began whispering her prayers long before the church came into sight.

The church was a simple building, its rounded walls made of twigs and clay, but it rested in a thriving valley. The small gardens here, whether through tedious attention or constant prayers, had somehow escaped the rot and malnutrition infecting the rest of Engla-lond's soil. Adding to the paradisaical scene, cattle and sheep dotted the hills, strolling and grazing and lowing with leisure. Hildred's hands clenched at her sides. The mere sight of such healthy livestock made her mouth water. How long had it been since she tasted beef or mutton?

Her family had suffered from hunger for some time now. Last year had been a minor drought, or at least everyone looked back on it as minor; but in their hunger they had eaten the seeds of next year's harvest, and plunged themselves into a worse famine than before. Her father lost his job plowing another landowner's field. The local reeves began to punish people severely for killing too many livestock for meat. Lord Eadric, she recalled, had been one of the harshest enforcers of this rule. No one wanted what had happened to last year's seeds happen to this year's animals. And yet as she stared at them, Hildred could not comprehend the wrongness of taking a single cow and using it to help her small family through the seasons.

She closed her eyes, murmured another prayer, and kept moving.

At the door of the church, she stopped. Her stomach churned within her.

She could smell food.

She knew that a small amount of food would be doled out after the service. The clergy found it a way to ensure attendance to their sermons. And in truth, they owed as much to the people, who had often come to work the church's lands in the past when their sins lay heavy on their hearts. Hildred knew she should be grateful. But it was difficult to be grateful for a small bowl of leek soup after glimpsing the church's gardens and flocks. Surely they could afford to give back more to the people

than that? Didn't she deserve a pouch of milk to carry back to her baby brother?

Sweat beaded her brow, though a cool breeze blew from the graying sky. She remained standing still as everyone else flooded into the meager sanctuary. She glimpsed the monks within their humble habits. Despite everything their cheeks glowed with vigor and their robes remained tight against their forms. She knew that perhaps God intended this, and rewarded these men for their hard work; and yet all of a sudden, she could not stand the sight of them.

She backed away from the church entrance. She turned aside.

As if in a trance, she followed her nose. She was not sure why no one stopped her. Perhaps they were all like her, unable to think of anything beyond the pangs of their own bellies. She walked through the lush fields, though they seemed to lose color around her as the sky darkened above. She wondered if God was watching now, hiding behind the blur of the clouds.

Her worn sandals led her through the dank grass to the kitchens, a more skeletal building behind the church. Her nose flared with the wafting scents and she felt dizzy. Vegetables, bread, fish, and even fruit ... her sense of smell informed her that all of those things were only a few steps out of her reach.

A single man worked in the kitchens now, tending the food while the others worshiped. She could hear him humming as he worked. She stepped into the enclosure, her eyes drinking in the sight of the bowls of stew, the raw ingredients, the stores in barrels or underground compartments. Under the shade of a grassy roof, rays of sunshine shot through and bathed the precious items in golden light.

Then she saw two more men, and her eyes opened wide. They were Lord Eadric and his companion, standing amongst the food as if waiting for the cook themselves, while their horses grazed in the nearby grass. They were talking with casual smiles on their faces while the chubby cook bounced about, stewing pots with thick fingers and then licking them clean of oil and butter.

She stood there for too long. Of a sudden, Eadric saw her.

His smile drooped to a frown. Hildred forced a gulp through her watering mouth. She trembled but stood firm against his cerulean gaze.

"Hey Aidan," said Eadric. "You've a visitor."

The monk stopped working and turned to look. His round face took a strange slant. She could sense the unease behind his forced smile. "Hello there," he said. "Are you looking for something?"

"I ... I ..." She watched as a slab of butter a few tables away melted in a large, gooey drop. She felt faint. "I need food."

"I know it, my dear, I do." He walked closer to her, his large form blocking the sight of the foods. She was forced to stare into his green eyes, which seemed much too sharp and darting for a man of God. "But it is easy to forget that your soul is in as great a need as your body, or more so! You must offer your soul to God before you expect the fruits of His good will for your body. Go on to church with the others."

"I ... can't." Not needing to exaggerate, she shuddered and fell to her knees. She no longer cared about the handsome nobleman watching, nor what he thought of her. The sharp-eyed cook blinked rapidly with surprise. "I'm ... too weak."

He cocked an eyebrow, growing irritated. She trembled as his green eyes raked her up and down. "You look well enough," he remarked.

"For God's sake," said Eadric, startling them both. Hildred looked up to see, with some relief, that the lord and his man were turning to go. "Give the lady a carrot, Aidan."

Aidan scowled after the departing thegn. "If *you'll* go to church."

"One day perhaps," called Eadric over his shoulder, smirking again. She glared at the thegn as he lifted up sacks of bread and cabbages and secured them to his horse's saddle. Where did the sacks come from? In another breath Eadric hopped gaily onto his horse's back, the brightness of his hair and tunic blinding even in the dull sunshine, and nudged the mount along, followed by his ever loyal companion. How must it feel to live with such comfort and security? She could hardly imagine.

The monk grumbled to himself, but it seemed as if he was, in fact, fetching her some carrots.

Her blood stirred with hope. She couldn't have planned this situation any better if she had tried. The thegn was riding off, the cook's back was turned, and within an arm's reach sat a pail of milk. It was fresh and untouched, filled nearly to the brim, and Hildred thought that she wouldn't need even half that much to save her brother's life.

The problem would be taking it home. She glanced at the cook again; he grumbled and hummed to himself intermittently, and all the while rummaged through a large bag of carrots, no doubt searching for the tiniest and purplest to give her. She saw a skin nearby and grabbed it; it was full of ale. Working quickly, her blood racing faster than time itself, she took a swig of the ale and poured the rest out. Then she dipped it into the pail and watched in awe as the white cream refilled the emptiness.

As the cook turned around she moved herself so that she hid the pail behind her, and all the while she struggled to hide the dripping pouch behind her skirts. At last she managed to secure it under the cord around her waist.

Aidan held out the carrots. "There, soothe your belly, and then go inside and pray to God."

"Oh yes of course ... oh, thank you." Hildred did not care that the carrots were tiny, wrinkled, and purple. They seemed so sweet on her tongue as she ate them, and every crunch sent a jolt of pleasure through her body. All the while she backed away, bowing at the clergyman. "Thank you ... bless you ... "

He nodded and smiled for as long as he could stand to, then eagerly returned to his work. Victory filled Hildred up like a cool drink, and she turned to hurry off.

"Hey ... hey wait!"

She spurred her feet faster, pretending not to hear him.

"Hey! My ale!"

His voice sounded very close, very suddenly. When she paused and felt her own skirts settle around her, sopping wet, she knew she was done for. Desperately, she reached behind her. All was lost if too much of the milk spilled out.

His grubby hands gripped the pouch at the same moment she did; they wrung it in between them and their combined efforts flung it suddenly to the ground.

The last of the rich, white milk soaked into the earth and disappeared.

"You little bitch! Eadric? EADRIC!"

She should have run immediately but she was petrified with horror. As the last drops of milk fade away, she watched as if her own baby brother died before her eyes. Tears filled her vision, making the ground undulate.

Eadric must have been in hearing distance, for soon the thuds of his horses' hooves grew louder. Much too late she turned to run, but she was crying now, sobs choking her throat, salt-water blinding her eyes.

"Go on, Truman," said the thegn, not with much conviction.

She heard the sword-man dismount and felt his boots shaking the earth; she fell to her knees and wept openly. "I'm sorry Coenred," she gasped. "I'm sorry ... "

Truman grabbed her arms and pulled them behind her. He twisted her wrists sharply and she cried out.

"Easy," said Eadric, his horse churning the dirt with irritation.

"Easy?" cried the monk. "She stole my ale—and some milk!"

Hildred groaned as Truman tried to pull her to her feet. She sagged like a dead weight in his arms.

"Come now," said Eadric. "In the end she only spilled it, so far as I can see. Is an accident worth all this trouble?"

"You cowardly swineherd!" raged Aidan. "You're as weak as one of your little piglets if you let this go. Are you a thegn now or aren't you?"

Eadric's teeth flashed with a scowl. "This is the reeve's work."

"Then take her to Wuffa."

"That I will." The lord suddenly had a strange look on his face, firm and distant. She stared at him imploringly, wondering if perhaps she could rouse any semblance of mercy within him, such as whatever had caused him to wink at her this very morning. But he would not even look at her. He seemed to have accepted his duty, and forgotten the rest. "You're coming, too."

"What?" said Aidan.

"I saw nothing. The decision of her innocence must be reached by the magnates. It will be your word against hers."

"But my food, and the congregation—!"

"Then come to town this evening and speak your piece. I'll take care of the rest."

"Good," said Aidan. "I will. I enjoy seeing God's justice be done." He sneered at her. "And as a thief, she'll hang."

She shuddered with one last sob, but then her eyes seemed to run dry. The thought of the afterlife still frightened her. But now, not even the fiery depths of hell seemed so terrible as the miserable world in which she already lived.

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She spent the evening in an old horse's stall in the town center of Shrewsbury, scratching at the wooden walls, catching the whispers of her captors. She understood few of their words and even fewer of their implications. She did not even comprehend the nature of her punishment nor how it would be enforced, beyond that they would burn her hands, and how the burns healed would determine her fate.

Upon bringing her to the reeve named Wuffa, Eadric had spoken kindly on her behalf, claiming that the details of the incident remained unclear to him. "All I saw was the two of them wrestling," said Eadric, "and when I rode closer to investigate, that's when Aidan accused her of theft. I brought her to you because it is my duty to report wrongdoing."

But in this case, I must confess, I am not sure which was the one doing wrong.”

Hildred thought this a strange way for Eadric to describe the situation, as if somehow placing suspicion on the monk. But she did not argue with it. She said nothing at all: not even when Wuffa asked her to describe her own version of the story. She knew she was guilty. To admit it would be to condemn her body. To say otherwise would be to condemn her soul. “You see?” Eadric had said, a strange look on his face. “She is as shocked and confused as I am.”

So it seemed that somehow, either Aidan or fire would proclaim her guilt.

Nearly as puzzling as her portending punishment was Lord Eadric’s opinion of her. Their long journey to town together had confused rather than enlightened her. At first, when leaving the monk, he had seemed cold and dismissive. He discussed the personalities and customs of his neighboring thegns and clergymen with Truman—a man who seemed to be both his swordsman and mentor. He spoke of Hildred as if she was not being dragged alongside them, listening to every word they said. And yet in his next breath he invited her up onto his saddle, helping her mount the horse with her hands still bound, then settling himself behind her. He sat steadfast against her, his stomach and chest lined against her back, his arms locked around her elbows, so that she could not decide whether his posture was an embrace or an imprisoning grip. Whatever the case her blood rushed with heat whenever he spoke, his lips rustling the hair near her ear, and her breath faltered whenever his hands brushed idly over her arms and legs.

Once when he heard her stomach growl, he offered her food from the sacks in his saddle. He held a piece of bread to her mouth while she bit from it. As the soft grains filled her belly, she realized with shame that her body hungered for more than just food. She could not remember the last time anyone noticed her, much less touched her, the way that Eadric did. It was silly to assume that a thegn like him thought of her at all, and completely ridiculous that he might somehow care for her; and yet the possibility made her heart sprint against her chest.

What would it matter, anyway, if in a day her hands would be burned? If the monk appeared tonight and spoke to the reeve, he would condemn her to hang by the neck. If not, the question of her guilt would be raised to God. In the morning, Wuffa and the local mertis would bring her to a fire and stick a poker in the flames; once glowing they would put it in her hands and force her to walk nine paces with the poker in her

grasp. After that they would bind her burned hands and throw her back in the stall. If the wounds were not healing in a week, then she was guilty, and would hang.

She knew she was guilty; she knew her wounds would not heal. And even if they did, how could she return to laboring in the fields with scorched fingers? She and her father would both starve to death.

Nothing mattered. Nothing could be done. Her mind spun and spun in circles, and soon it would find silence in the grave.

Hildred's last hope—that the monk named Aidan may not bother coming to town to present his case—shattered quickly when she heard him outside the stall door. The man who responded to his words was Eadric himself. As the two men strolled closer to her prison, she struggled to piece their conversation together from the middle. She sensed from their tones that Aidan had not yet gone to the reeve. Instead it sounded as if Eadric and Aidan were in the midst of bartering.

"I know it meant a lot to you," Eadric was saying, "but there is always more ale."

"I thought you said your supply was low?"

"Indeed, but I can still acquire more. The result is only that it will cost you a few extra cabbages."

"The other monks will start to notice."

Hildred wondered if this had something to do with the sacks of food Eadric had obtained from the monk. Not all monks were allowed spirits, but whether Aidan was allowed them or not seemed beyond the point. One way or another, he was getting more than his fair share, and Eadric was clearly his supplier.

"Perhaps you're right." It seemed they had stopped just outside her door, and Eadric's voice rang clearly through the wood. She strained to see him through the cracks. "I can hardly imagine the life you lead, Aidan. It must be so difficult, going without so many simple pleasures—things I take for granted, like ale and wine and meat whenever I can obtain it."

"Yes." She thought she heard the monk force down a watery swallow.

"You must have so much self-control, Aidan! To think, you are a cook, and yet you abstain from filling your belly until you've served everyone else first. It is truly self-less of you. You deserve to indulge in a few extra spirits on occasion. By God, if I were you I would indulge in much more."

Eadric laughed, and Aidan laughed nervously with him. After a moment, the monk asked, "What sort of things would you indulge in?"

"Ah, my dear Aidan, your mind is so pure you don't even know what I'm talking about! For your own sake I should shut my mouth right now."

"Never mind." The monk sounded testy. "Tell me what you meant!"

Eadric lowered his voice, and yet she could still hear every word. "If I were you I would have taken justice into my own hands today. Did you even see the beauty of the sinful wench who stole from you? I am sure your mind was too close to God to notice how her lips looked as sweet as mead, her flesh as soft as dough, and yet ripe as fruit in all the right places."

Hildred drew back from the door, her stomach turning unpleasantly.

The monk heaved a sigh. A terrible silence followed the sound of his breath.

"If you do notice such things, and resist anyway, I am all the more awed by you," Eadric went on. "Surely no one would blame you for a little indulgence now and then."

When the monk finally spoke again, his voice was weak. "You ... you don't think so?"

"Of course not! Dear God, how innocent you are."

"You know I'm not so innocent," snapped Aidan, as if affronted.

"Don't be so hard on yourself. In any case, to make the maiden pay for her crime with a fate less than death would be a mercy, don't you think?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean!" said Aidan. But he spoke too quickly to be telling the truth.

"I'm sure I don't know either." She could hear the smirk on Eadric's voice, and it made her blood turn cold. How horrible it seemed to her that earlier today she had been eager for his attention, and enjoyed the touch of his breath! Now she thought his tongue must drip poison. She felt as if she could hear the monks' mind turning, even in the heavy silence, and she shivered through her core.

"What do you think, Aidan?" said Eadric after a time. "Should I fetch the reeve so he can hear your accusation? Or do you think you could find some manner of forgiveness within yourself?"

"I ... I don't know." The monk sounded breathless. Hildred backed further and further from the door until she was against the far wall of the stall. His shadow filled the cracks. Now, he was the one peering through the wood. "Is she in there now?" asked Aidan.

"And her hands are bound," said Eadric. "Perhaps ... I should give you some time to think it over?"

"Perhaps."

"I see. I'll stall the reeve until you're ready, then."

As Hildred listened to Eadric's departing footsteps, she felt as if she melted into the rotted hay, and she wished that she actually would.

She could hear Aidan shuffling around on the other side of the door, and if she listened too closely she could hear him breathing heavily. The sound filled her with disgust and dread.

"I suppose you heard all that," he said at last. His voice was terribly faint, not much stronger than a whisper, but it struck her like a slap. "Perhaps a little indulgence would do us both some good. After all, you don't want to hang, do you?"

She didn't know what to say. Why had Eadric done this to her? Now she knew that he was even more vile and cruel than people suspected him to be; he was completely evil. When he let her share his saddle and eat his bread he must have been toying with her, enjoying the extent of her humiliation and despair. She felt as if she truly wanted to die now; and yet some cruel survival instinct kept her from muttering a sound, kept her from saying, "Yes, I'd rather hang."

Aidan's fingers fumbled with the door lock. His voice fell even lower. "You must promise not to make a sound. If you do, this doesn't have to be so bad. After all, I'm sure you've done things like this before, haven't you? Why else did you dress all pretty today? You like tempting men, don't you? And you deserve to be punished. But it's true, I am merciful; merciful enough to keep you from hanging, if you'll do what I ask."

The door creaked open and his shadow fell over the hay. Just as quickly he closed the door behind him, though now it was unlocked, and thicker shadows fell over his shape. Hildred wondered if it was better that way. She could not see his face as he moved closer, though she imagined his fierce green eyes, now blazing with lust.

She knew she should scream. Doing so would save herself from this foul violation, but she would condemn herself to hang on the noose tomorrow. She thought of little Coenred. She wondered if he had survived the day. She wondered if there was any way yet she might save him, if she lived.

She flinched as his fingers found her knee. He drew back again. She realized even he feared the repercussions of his behavior.

"Well?" he hissed. "Do you want to do this or not?"

Something strange happened then. Behind the monk's looming form, another shadow filled the cracks of the stall doorway. But she had never heard anyone approach.

"Do ... do what?" She was not sure how she found her voice, but there it was, wheezing out of her throat.

"You know full well, you little witch." She repressed a whimper as his hand found her breast, bolder now, and squeezed. She felt a tremble go through his grip.

She glanced at the doorway again, but Aidan was too far-gone to notice. The shadow was still there, moving slightly. Someone definitely stood outside. Spite filled her as she imagined Eadric, listening in on her torment. Perhaps he had encouraged the monk to do this so that he could enjoy the show. She hated him with all her being.

"I want you to say it," she managed at last. "I want you to swear to God that you'll let me go if I .. if I ... "

"Give yourself to me?" His other hand reached out, pulling at the fabric of the dress. "Yes," he said, more urgently now. "Yes, I swear I'll let you go after this, if you don't make a sound ... "

The door behind him creaked open. His fingers froze in place, his body going as tense as a yanked rope, as torch-light spilled onto his figure. He turned slowly, his horror only rising as he looked upon the intruder. For there behind him stood none other than the reeve himself, Wuffa.

Next to the reeve stood Eadric, a somewhat pained and disgusted look on his face.

"What the devil is going on here?" cried Wuffa.

Very belatedly, Aidan drew his hand from Hildred's chest. "I ... I ... I ... " He swallowed thickly.

"I don't know about you, Wuffa," said Eadric, "but I heard very clearly what was going on." His voice sounded strained. "The monk said it himself."

Flinching with rage, Aidan straightened somewhat and found his voice. He left Hildred's dress gaping open, and she burned with the shame. But the sight of her exposed chest made Aidan look all the more guilty to Wuffa. "She stole from me," Aidan burst at last. "She'll hang tomorrow, so I might as well—"

"Not anymore, she won't," snapped Wuffa. Hope stirred within Hildred, but the sensation was faint beneath her ongoing humiliation. "Eadric tells me he saw nothing but the two of you wrestling, and suspected you had some trick like this up your filthy sleeves. Get out of my sight before I tattle to your abbot."

Aidan's lips blubbered helplessly a moment. "But ... you wouldn't!"

"I will, unless you hurry along, pig!"

The monk let out a very fitting snort, then stormed away per Wuffa's advice. When passing Eadric, he paused, but the young thegn did not look at him.

"You—you!" cried Aidan, as if he could not even think of an insult. Then he rushed out.

Wuffa, long wearied of the entire affair, turned to follow the monk's footsteps. On his way, his shoulder knocked forcefully against Eadric's, as if on accident, but he did not bother to apologize. Eadric did not acknowledge this. He stood still with his head bowed, saying nothing and staring into the floor until only he and Hildred remained.

At last, Eadric looked at her. "I'm sorry about that," he said weakly. "I wouldn't have let it go much further ... but of course you didn't know that. Good move on your part, making him state his ... intentions." He grew quiet again, and she realized he was staring at her breasts.

She flushed, drawing her knees up to cover herself. The slight movement made her realize how violently she was shaking.

"Sorry again," said Eadric. "Perhaps you should turn around?"

Feeling faint, Hildred lifted herself to her knees and turned as she suggested. The hay rustled as he moved towards her, causing a fresh onslaught of tremors to wrack her body. His touch was so gentle on her wrists that she thought she imagined it at first, and when his grip tightened she did not flinch; then with a sharp tug, he sliced a dirk through her bindings.

She scurried away, using awkward fingers to shut her dress and tie it back together. Now that she was freed, a feeling of urgency overcame her. "My brother," she gasped. "He's only a baby. He's dying."

"Of starvation, I suppose? And that's why you stole the milk?"

She glared at him, tears of rage and sorrow flooding her vision. "What would you know of it? You, whose tenants and livestock are the fattest in the land! Did you achieve that with lying and deceit as well?"

"How could you say that?" He actually looked hurt, his blue gaze crinkling. "I helped you, didn't I? I saved you from the noose!"

"You really did arrange all that on purpose?" She couldn't help but be impressed.

He shrugged. "I know Aidan well. I knew what he would do."

Her anger returned to her. "In that case you tempted a monk into sin," she said, "like the devil himself."

"Oh really?" He crossed his arms over his chest and cocked his clean-shaven chin. "And was it the devil who made you steal?"

"I ... I ... " She wiped her tears from her cheeks. "I suppose so."

"No it wasn't," snapped Eadric. "It was you who stole, and you did it to save your brother, which sounds to me like a noble cause. And if you're still feeling proactive, perhaps we should go and check on him."

"We?"

"Unless you'd like to walk home in the dark, while you're still half-starving?" His tone was sharp now, reprimanding her. Feeling duly humbled and grateful for his help, Hildred bowed her head and followed him out.

This time, when they rode together, she sat behind him. She tried at first not to grip him, but sometimes she had little option but to wrap her arms around his stomach so she didn't fall off. He offered no reaction, nor said a word for a long time. The sun fell behind them, and the fields took on gradient hues of green and gold. In this light, they did not seem so withered and rotten as they truly were.

It occurred to her to wonder why Eadric had bothered to help her. After all, he had benefited from his underhanded dealings with the monk; why turn on him now? Was it because he had truly run out of ale and thus would get no more business from Aidan anyway? Was it because he wanted something from her? Or perhaps he had never made a plan to help her at all, and simply played along with the events as they unfolded? She could not figure it out, but she did not think Eadric was the sort to do something without reason.

Eventually her small home peeked out from behind a slope of shrubs, its thatched roof glowing with the warm colors of the sunset. But the sight did not comfort her, for sitting outside was her father, his head clasped in his hands.

Eadric reined his horse to a stop. Hildred slid to the ground and rushed to her father's sobbing form. She held him, and together they wept until the moon appeared in the pale sky, taunting them like a freshly-minted coin beyond their reach.

*

By nightfall the tiny, stiff bundle that was once Hildred's baby brother lay buried underground alongside the mother who died bearing him. Hildred and her father knelt at the freshly churned earth a long while, crying until their eyes ran dry and muttering nonsensical prayers.

When Hildred heard someone approaching, for a moment she panicked. She had forgotten Eadric's presence, or assumed he left some time ago. But there he stood, and he had been watching them from afar all the while.

"How do you make your living?" he asked Hildred's father.

The man looked up with no expression at all, his eyes vacant, as if his soul had long since fled his body. "I'm a free man," he said, "but for a long while I made my living reaping Thegn Sigbert's crops. He dismissed me a few months ago, saying he could no longer afford me."

"So this is your land?"

"Yes."

"Then it will be mine now." The confidence in his voice shocked Hildred, but her father did not react at all. "In exchange your daughter will come work for me on my estate, and I'll supply her enough food to feed you both. I will also give you seeds to plant here."

"It's too late to plant," her father said.

"I speak of the future." Irritation grated on Eadric's voice. "In a year I'll expect you to pay me my dues as your lord, and such charities to you will cease. Do you agree to this or not?"

Her father hesitated.

"Yes!" cried Hildred. Such elation filled her that her soul seemed to peer down on her body from afar. She could hardly believe this was happening. Only hours ago she had looked upon Eadric as the most vile man on earth, but now she wondered if he was an angel sent from heaven. Enough food to feed her and her father for a year? Seeds for next year? A chance for her father to get back on his feet? She had never heard of such a proposal from any other lord before, but that didn't matter. The alternative was poverty and destitution.

Even so her father looked upon the land with sadness; he did not want to lose it. But he must have realized, too, that there was no better option left to him. At last, he bowed his head in assent.

"Yes."

"Very good." Eadric exhaled, and Hildred realized he had been holding his breath. Perhaps he was newer to all this than he seemed. She must have been glowing with excitement, for when his gaze fell upon her, it narrowed. "As for you, er ... what is your name?"

She lowered her gaze. "Hildred."

"Well, Hildred ... " He tilted his head to a ridiculous angle until she could not help but look at him. Then he gave her a playful smirk. "If you ever steal from *me*, bear in mind I will not be so forgiving as when you steal from someone else."

Despite everything that had happened, despite the old and fresh graves in the ground next to her feet, Hildred felt a grin winding up her face. "Yes, of course, my lord."

"Dear God!" said Eadric.

Fear coursed through her veins, and a frown returned to her face. "What? What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Please smile again."

Though now she was fidgeting with nervousness, she forced herself to smile.

"There." She tensed as he reached up with one hand, but his touch was gentle as he brushed his knuckles across her cheek. "When you smile, you have dimples. Did you even know that?"

"I ... I ..." Hildred wanted to laugh at this ridiculous observation. But sobs welled unexpectedly into her ribcage. *I forgot*, she might have said. Instead, she turned aside, away from his touch, tears flooding her eyes. She found it difficult to speak at all. "I'll start work on your estate tomorrow," she managed, just barely.

"Very well." She could not bear to look at him as he returned to his horse; she wondered if he thought her silly and foolish for crying again so suddenly. But how could she explain that she did not remember the last time she smiled?

As Eadric rode away, her father held her, and they stood together until her sobs faded once more to silence. She drew a deep breath, and exhaled as the wind stirred the dark world. She harbored the brief hope that from now on, she would find reason to smile more often.

**

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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: **Alfgifu the Orphan** (released July 13)

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

The Seventh Lost Tale: **Hildred the Maid** (released 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.

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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?

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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 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."

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.



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