



**The Eighth Lost Tale of Mercia: Canute the Viking**  
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The Eight Lost Tale of Mercia:  
**Canute the Viking**

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*JOMSBORG*  
*1012 A.D.*

Canute's palms sweated as he stood across from his sparring partner. This was the most formidable opponent, he suspected, that he had ever faced next to Thorkell the Tall himself.

They were of a similar age and height, fifteen or sixteen years old, tall and wiry, though Tosti was a bit broader in the shoulders and hips. His most incredible feature, Canute deduced, was his incredible agility. Every part of his body—all except his fierce silver eyes and unwavering smirk—seemed to be constantly moving at every moment. His feet strolled across the wet earth without leaving an indentation in their wake. His fingers fidgeted playfully along the handle of his wooden sword. He tilted his head, back and forth, back and forth, as if to watch Canute from every possible angle. The muscles of his bare torso undulated in the diffused sunshine like rippling water. And all the while, his long blond braids flowed along his chest and back, like snakes writhing about his shoulders.

Canute's own fighting posture was the exact opposite. He stood very, very still, his boots sinking into the mud, one hand clenching his poised sword until splinters bit into his skin. Nothing moved along his pale chest but for glittering trails of sweat. His blue eyes focused on Tosti

through narrowed lids, blinking only as his hair lashed against them, which made him regret cutting it too short to pull back. But beyond this fleeting thought all his concentration centered on Tosti. He tried not to think about the group of young Jomsvikings watching them. He tried not to think about the humiliation he would face should he lose this skirmish.

With very little warning at all, Tosti struck with his wooden sword. Canute lifted his own to block, sinking his weight deeper into his legs. He absorbed the blow and tried to redirect its momentum back on Tosti. The wooden rods creaked as they clashed, and splinters flew as Canute twisted, hoping to offset Tosti's grip. Tosti reacted quickly, shifting his stance completely. He made another lunge with his weapon, and this one swiped Canute across the side. He winced as the wood scraped his skin, struggling not to move.

"Get him, Tosti!" shouted one of the onlookers, and a resounding cheer echoed him.

Canute gritted his teeth, trying to ignore this insult. How dare they? Though only fifteen years old, he was a leader to these men in almost every conceivable way. His father was Sweyn Forkbeard, King of Denmark and Norway. His grandfather was the great Harald Bluetooth, founder of the Christian church of Roskilde. His ancestor was Gorm the Old, the first king of Denmark. His foster-father was Thorkell the Tall, the greatest and mightiest Jomsviking next to his own brother, Jarl Sigvald. Canute's own brother, Harald, ruled as regent of Denmark while their father harried the coasts of Engla-lond with Thorkell.

But now was not the time to wonder how these young men dared cheer against him. He would have to ponder that later.

Tosti continued to dash about the field, hopping from one spot to the next as if he would win by dizzying his opponent. Canute just glared, eyes flicking along with Tosti's movements, and waited for him to make a real advance. He took slow and steady breaths, intent on gathering his energy while Tosti wasted his.

A bird flew through the sky, slicing the glaring sunshine into pieces. Birds were often a sign from the gods.

Canute looked up.

While Canute was distracted, Tosti struck again—this time on Canute's shoulder. Canute cried out, more from rage than from pain, for the blow was not very hard. Tosti drew back just as Canute tried to swipe back at him. This left him in a vulnerable position.

Tosti smacked Canute's rump with the flat of his wooden sword, as if with a paddle, then hopped quickly away.

Canute was so shocked by the humiliation of the blow that he stood petrified for a moment, red flushing his torso and face as if he'd been sunburned in a matter of seconds. Tosti had just ... *spanked* him! He could have done it for no other reason than to make fun of Canute. To win the spar, one of them had to knock the other over. So Tosti had nothing to gain from such a ridiculous move.

Meanwhile, the small crowd exploded with laughter and jeers.

"Oh, look at the great Sweynsson now!"

"Where's Thorkell the Tall when you need him, Canute?"

Seeing through a haze of red, Canute looked dizzily at the faces around him. Is that what they really believed? Did they truly think that without his great fathers and guardians, he was a nobody?

A shout of rage ripped out of his throat, so strong it silenced most of the laughter. Canute didn't notice, for at last he was advancing on his opponent. He lifted his sword high, pulling his feet from the mud at last to run towards Tosti. The look on his face must have been frightening enough, for Tosti froze with terror. At the last moment, he lifted his sword to block Canute's onslaught, but his stance was not ample; Canute's sword knocked Tosti's aside, then it smacked him hard across the side of the head.

Tosti's eyes rolled and he crumpled to the earth, his energy cut off like a waterfall dammed from above.

Everyone around Canute grew quiet. Soon he heard nothing but his own heart thumping in his chest, increasing in tempo. He had not meant to hit Tosti quite so hard. Why didn't he get up?

He felt the unfamiliar feeling of guilt flowing through him. Before today, he had looked up to Tosti, secretly. He had been excited about getting this chance to spar with him. He had anticipated an exciting and enlightening competition. This ... this was certainly not what he'd had in mind. The possibility that Tosti might not get up filled Canute with dread. He wanted Tosti's respect, not Tosti's death.

Unable to help himself, he knelt down and shook Tosti's clammy shoulder. "Hey," he said. He felt the intense stares of the other Jomsvikings bearing down on him, but he tried his best to ignore them. "Hey, wake up!"

Slowly, Tosti's eyes came open. He looked dazed. As his lids parted, Canute studied his deep gray irises for signs of consciousness. His eyes

were a strange color, like stones sparkling with silver grains in the sunlight. But that mattered not. Canute gave him another hard shake.

"Are you alive or aren't you?" the Viking prince demanded.

Tosti reached up suddenly and thrust Canute's hand away from his shoulder. "I'm fine, no thanks to you, you clumsy oaf."

Canute clenched his jaws and stood up. Everyone was still staring at him, waiting for some sort of response. Well let them have it, he thought as his lip curled. "Let that be a lesson to you all," he snapped. In the silence, he was all too aware of how high-pitched his own voice seemed. His voice did not boom like his father's or Thorkell the Tall's. But it had its own strength, its own tenor. "Insult me again, and I'll pay you in kind."

He threw his wooden sword into the grass, then turned and stormed away.

For a reason he could not explain, he felt even more humiliated now than he had before.

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At the night meal, a great number of aspiring young warriors sat near Canute, but very few spoke to him. He chewed angrily on his meat as he surveyed the faces around him. The only young men sitting here were the ones who wanted to sap from his power and renown. None of them cared to engage in conversation with him, nor ask him how his day had gone. They only seemed to exchange such trivialities with one *another*.

One of them bragged that on a recent trip to Jom, the nearby town that the fortress of Jomsborg protected, he had lain with an eager woman. Women were not generally allowed into the Jomsborg stronghold, so encounters with the opposite sex were rare. All the other young warriors hung on his every word. Canute scoffed.

The sound drew a furious glances. The young man, Fromund, who had been the one to lie with a woman in Jom, dared to speak. "What's wrong, Canute?" he said. "Not lain with a woman yet?"

"Lain? No." He threw his meat-stripped bone into the center of the table. "Any woman I have, I will *take*. And that should go for the rest of you, as well. If you want sighing maidens as your bedfellows, you have chosen the wrong profession."

A few of the boys laughed nervously. More of them stared at him with incredulous looks on their faces. Fromund, meanwhile, outright frowned. "I guess that means you haven't," he said. "You obviously don't know what I'm talking about." Some of the other boys snickered.

“Like hell!” snarled Canute. His voice was harsher than he intended, and everyone flinched as he dropped his fist on the table with a loud thump. His blood roared in his ears. Even he didn’t know why he was so upset. Why was everything today going so wrong? He stared in a panic at the faces around him, feeling as if they were all disgusted. Why should they be? “I, uh ... I kissed a girl once, in Jom, after she winked at me. It was ... nice enough.” In truth, as he recalled, it had been quite awkward.

The stares on him did not relent; they only blinked a few times, to return even fiercer than before.

“You’re all a bunch of dimwitted idiots,” he growled, and stood up. Even though he had a few bones on his plate left to clean up, he walked away. He’d lost his appetite.

On his way out of the hall, he glimpsed Tosti a few tables away. Even more unexpectedly, Tosti looked up and stared back at him. Canute felt a physical jolt go through him as their gazes locked. Then he shivered and hurried out even faster than before.

Outside, he leaned against the walls of the hall, listening to the muffled echoes of the laughter and camaraderie through the wood. His fingers pulled angrily at his own tunic, the red fabric soft and tight-woven, heavily embroidered with golden thread and far more beautiful than the tunics of any other Jomsvikings. But for some reason, he wished that he could rip it off. His teeth ground against each other as he reflected upon how the other young men had treated him today, and how their behavior grew worse and worse the longer Thorkell the Tall was away in Engla-lond.

His heart ached as he thought of Thorkell, for he missed his foster-father terribly. What would Thorkell have to say about today’s events? Would he be pleased by the way Canute had handled Tosti’s insult? Or would he have disapproved of Canute’s wild “temper?” He reprimanded Canute often for his temper, saying that no leader should be prone to rash decisions.

Perhaps Thorkell would comfort him, at least, with the reminder that kings were not meant to mingle with all the other boys like one of their friends. It was his place to stand apart, to remind them all of their place, and thus his own.

“Hey.”

He jolted and turned to face the intruder. Under the bright glare of a yellow moon stood Tosti, his gray eyes unreadable in the dark light. He

swayed slightly, his body ever moving, his long braids swishing back and forth across his lithe shoulders.

"Hello," said Canute. He forced a thick swallow down his throat. Why did he feel nervous? He had nothing to apologize for, and yet he fought the urge to say *I'm sorry*, nonetheless. "Good spar today," he managed at last. It was a lie.

"You think so?" A strange laugh came out of Tosti's throat, chiming and carefree. "Don't think I've ever been hit in the head that hard before. Totally blacked out for a few seconds."

Once again, Canute bit back an apology. "You're lucky you experienced it when you did, then. It might happen to you a lot in battle, when your life is on the line."

"Hah." The sound from Tosti's throat was not quite so pleasant this time. A long silence followed it.

Canute felt unexpectedly awkward. Tosti must have come out here and addressed him for a reason. But what? If he'd intended to say something, he must have lost his courage, for his swaying had turned to fidgeting, and he glanced all around himself as if he didn't know what to focus on. Whatever the case, Canute felt as if it was his responsibility to fill the silence.

"You're ... you're quite good, you know." His own words surprised him.

"What's that?"

"I said: you're a very good fighter. You move quickly, and you're difficult to predict." Canute forced himself to look Tosti in the eyes. At last the testy youth stilled somewhat. His face looked surprisingly elegant right now, the lines of his lips and jaws glowing in the moonlight. "We should practice together more often."

"Oh? So you can hit me in the head again?"

"Only if you let me get away with it."

It was a challenge, and for a moment he was not sure how Tosti would take it. But then his cheeks lifted with a smile. "Not a chance."

"We'll see, then."

"Yes we will, Sweynsson."

Canute repressed an "oomph" as Tosti reached out and jabbed his shoulder; but the gesture was playful. As Tosti turned and scampered away, he sent a whoop of unrestrained joy into the darkness. Canute found a smile on his own face.

\*

The next day they roamed the land beyond the fortress together.

The woods were sparse, full of old pines and white stones. But the dappled shade held golden surprises as Canute ran through the undergrowth. He felt every rock through the leather of his shoes, sharp and tingling; his short, thick hair lashed his face until it stung; his breath began to burn in his chest, and yet he felt invigorated. Tosti had challenged him to a race, and of course he could not say no.

Out of the corner of his eyes he could see Tosti, flitting through the trees like a bird's flapping wings, pulling ahead step by step. But this only pushed Canute to run harder, and a determined sneer went up his face. He drew an estimate in his head of Tosti's strengths and weaknesses. Tosti was faster now, but he would tire soon, and then Canute would pull ahead.

Tosti did not let it come to that, however. With a howl of victory, he topped the next rise and stopped there, as if deciding this was the finish line.

Canute caught up to him soon, glaring. He struggled to breathe amply through his nose, though his nostrils flared with the strain, while Tosti gasped freely through his grinning mouth.

"Did you wake up with stones in your ankles, Sweynsson?"

Canute ignored him and glanced at the new landscape beneath them. The water level was high in the land below the slope; long flat stones stretched over the earth, smoothed by the shallow streams flowing around them, gleaming as if with a permanent layer of water. It was difficult to discern what was solid and what was not. "This is a poor choice for a playing field."

"I pick this one, you pick the next one."

"No." Tosti looked at Canute with irritation, his curvy lips drooping with an uncharacteristic frown. Canute did not like it when Tosti frowned as much as when he smiled. He lightened his tone. "Let's do it the other way around. We fight here first."

"On this hill?"

"Yes." Canute was pleased with himself. He thought this would be another chance to teach Tosti a lesson.

And as soon that they began fighting, he confirmed his suspicions. Tosti struggled to maintain his unbounded energy while on either side of him, a slope threatened to drop him. He hopped and poked at Canute with his wooden sword, but every large movement made him struggle to regain his balance. Often he had to look down in order to find stable footing, and at these moments Canute struck at him, again and again and again.

At last he plunged the blunt tip of his wooden weapon against Tosti's midriff, who promptly tipped backwards.

Tosti dropped his sword, hands lifting and flapping desperately in a last attempt to right himself. But it was too late: he was about to fall down the slope.

As he fell, he reached out and grabbed Canute's outstretched sword, gripping until he no doubt acquired several splinters. Stubbornly, Canute refused to let go, even as all of Tosti's weight transferred to its tip.

"You—son of a—*bitch!*" cried the Viking prince, as at last he lost his own balance and plunged headlong down the slope next to Tosti.

The slope was not particularly steep, but they rolled in the hopes of slowing their falls to a stop. Worst of all, sharp stones lay interspersed along the soil, which jabbed and pulled at their tunics while littering their flesh with bruises. By the time he came to a stop at the base Canute's blood roared with fiery fury; as soon as he made it to his feet he looked over at Tosti and resisted the urge to kick him while he was down.

Instead, he realized his body ached more than he first gave it credit for. He wondered if he had twisted something. Meanwhile, Tosti sat up but didn't move other than to struggle to regain his breath.

Canute snorted at him. "Whenever you're ready to go again, you let me know."

He strolled over to the nearest pool of water, lapping warmly in the dip of a rock, and splashed it on his face. He hissed as he discovered a raw scrape along his cheekbone.

A bird call split the air, and he looked up, glancing around desperately. In reward for his efforts, the sun half-blinded him.

"What's with you and birds?"

Canute twisted his head to look back at Tosti, glaring. This did not daunt the other fellow in the least.

"You? And birds? One distracted you when we sparred yesterday, as well."

Canute looked away and picked at his nails, as if suddenly this was a task requiring his attention. But Tosti saw right through him.

"Something to do with Thorkell, eh? Always going on about eagles—when he talks at all, that is."

Canute couldn't help but smile at that. Truly enough, Thorkell was not a talkative man, but he did like to tell the story of Thiassi, a giant who took the form of an eagle and stole Iddun and her apples of youth from the gods. Loki managed to recapture her, and afterward, Odin took

Thiassi's eyes and placed them in the sky as stars. It seemed to Canute that his mentor had a strange sort of affection for the legendary rebel. "I'm not looking for an eagle," said Canute. "I'm looking for a raven."

"Ah, so you can wave a hello to Odin?"

Canute was not sure what to think of Tosti's cynical attitude, so he tried to ignore it. "No," he said, and then grew silent again.

"What then?" Tosti leaned closer to him, hands spreading along the grass. The longer the silence, the more curious he seemed to become.

The Viking prince stopped fidgeting with his hands and paused to consider the truth. It sounded foolish and weak when he reflected on it directly. He did not want to embarrass himself further to someone who had managed to paddle him on the rump only yesterday. Nonetheless, he felt strangely touched that Tosti bothered asking such a question.

He must have remained quiet for so long, however, that Tosti began to give up on him. "How about you tell me why you care so much about damn birds after I beat your ass to dust bits," Tosti suggested.

Spry once more, Tosti hopped to his feet and brushed off his tunic; then, to Canute's surprise, he proceeded to take it off. He had a look on his face of fierce optimism, gray eyes glittering, white teeth flashing, his cat-like nose pinched by an unrelenting smile. Canute could not help but pause and watch for a moment as the young man peeled off his clothes; underneath his skin was even more golden than Canute remembered, its smoothness interrupted by nothing but the flow of his rippling muscles. His body seemed dark against his pale braids swaying in silky ropes.

In a moment Tosti was nearly finished and ready to go again, stripped to nothing but his loincloth. Canute ripped his eyes away and followed his example, flinging off his fine linens with all the gentility he might show a poison-soaked rag. The sun bathed his body, soaking into his veins and filling him with fire. It felt good to bare himself to the sun, and at the same time he felt insecure. Would Tosti find him scrawny and pale? Why did he care?

Tosti smirked at him. "My turn now."

Canute looked back at his wooden sword, discarded on the hillside. "Weapons?"

"No weapons." Tosti wriggled his fingers in the air. "I'll take you down with my bare hands."

"Very well. I weary of those toys, anyway." Canute spat to the side. He rubbed his hands together, then opened them wide. "Where shall we do this?"

“Over there.” He pointed to a smooth stone in the middle of the rocky shallows.

Canute still thought it seemed like a terrible place for a skirmish—not only would it be slippery, but to fall one would risk a severe blow to the head. Nonetheless, they had an agreement.

He made his way out to the stone Tosti indicated, wondering if he would regret keeping his leather shoes on. They sopped wet as he walked, and stole from him the sensations of the stones and soil under his feet. However, they also numbed him to the occasional sharp edge. At last he found his position and made his stance.

Tosti had chosen to take off his own shoes. He strolled along the rocks, his gaze locked on Canute, as if he did not need to look down to determine his footing. Canute scowled at him, and shrugged his shoulders in a gesture of impatience.

Tosti pounced without warning, gliding over the rocks as if they were no more than a slide for his feet. In his surprise Canute shifted drastically, lifting his arms to block, and felt his heels slipping downwards. Trying to right himself only made him slip further, and by then Tosti was upon him, hands gripping Canute’s wrists and twisting them around.

Canute cried out, struggling to regain power over his arms while Tosti shifted to kick at him. He blocked himself with his own leg, though as a result Tosti’s shin struck his knee at a sharp angle, and he yelled again.

The burst of pain fed him strength. He pushed back against Tosti, bending the youth’s arms until his grip folded and Canute burst through, jabbing his elbow into Tosti’s sternum. Tosti gasped for breath and fell back.

Seeing his chance, Canute pushed forward, aiming another blow that would drop his opponent into the stones. But at the last moment Tosti wriggled about, regaining his balance somehow, and slipped to the side like a snake. Canute’s fist swished through empty air and disrupted his own balance; his feet came loose again and he stumbled about, hearing his leather shoes snag against a sharp stone.

In such a manner the two fought for an indefinite amount of time; Canute lost track of the number of times he thought he would throw Tosti for good, only to find himself scrambling and waving his arms like a fool as Tosti slithered about him. They exchanged one blow after another, until Canute’s stomach ached from so many punches, and a number of spots along Tosti’s gleaming torso swelled from the impact of Canute’s knuckles. Canute felt dizzy from all the twisting and turning, and the

longer he fought the less he tried to stable himself, kicking and swinging desperately at Tosti's slippery form.

At one point he threw all of his strength into a punch, but again Tosti slipped out of reach, and as Canute lunged forward with his own momentum he knew he would not be able to recover balance. He would fall on a particularly sharp pile of rocks, maiming himself and ending this match in a humiliating defeat. But all of a sudden Tosti grabbed him from behind, his smooth arms slipping around Canute's back, one arm locking his shoulders in place while the other pressed tight against his throat. Canute wriggled a moment, testing his confines and preparing his limbs for their escape.

Then he heard Tosti's breath against his ears, and felt Tosti's soft lips press against his cheek. Canute froze. What had seemed like a chokehold suddenly seemed like an embrace. Tosti's arms held him tight while he brushed his smirking mouth against Canute's skin. There was nothing to call the gesture other than a kiss.

And just as suddenly, Tosti drew away again.

He released Canute, moved around him, and ducked. With a single deft movement, he kicked Canute's feet out from under him, and the Viking prince went hurtling to the ground.

Water splashed all around him; the breath puffed out of his chest as his back struck the earth. But it could have been much worse: Tosti could have pushed him against the rocks. Even once he had physically recovered he remained still a while, staring vacantly up at the sky, confused and disoriented.

Tosti leaned over him, grinning.

"What ... what in Thor's name was that?" Canute gasped.

"I don't know." Tosti shrugged. "But it worked."

He reached down, gripped Canute's hand, and pulled him to his feet.

\*

The walk back to Jom seemed much longer when their muscles ached, their bodies were slick with sweat, and they both suffered scrapes on their feet. Canute noticed some blood in Tosti's footsteps, but Tosti did not even seem to care, so he said nothing.

In fact, they were both in unexpectedly jovial moods.

Canute felt elated by the day's events, which were a bright and colorful blur in his mind—all but for the sharp moment still hanging in his memory when Tosti had kissed him. Had he only done it to distract Canute? He had not done anything like it since, even though they had continued to explore the land together and develop their fighting skills.

They had even paused to give each other tips and suggestions. Canute flushed with anger the first time Tosti critiqued his methods for swinging a punch, but he swallowed his pride and found that when he allowed Tosti to help him, he did in fact improve. Never in his advice to Canute did Tosti suggest a tactic so strange as the one he had used to win their match.

A long silence hung over them as they walked, and the sun's waning light surprised Canute, for he felt as if the day had passed in a matter of hours. For the most part he felt more peaceful and fulfilled than he had for a long time, and it calmed him the way he and Tosti never struggled to stay in stride with each other, but walked together with a synchronized rhythm.

At long last, however, Tosti broke the silence. "So tell me about the birds."

Canute sighed. He could not go back on his word now. "When I was born, a runewoman saw a raven perch on the roof of our lodge. The raven stayed there until the moment I came out of my mother's womb and started crying. Then ... it flew away." He grew quiet again.

"So?" Tosti pressed.

"So ... my mother took it as a sign that I was chosen by Odin to become very powerful, even more powerful than my brother Harald. Father, however ... " He stopped walking, grimacing as if his knee was in pain and this was reason enough to catch some respite. He went over to a tree and leaned against it, the bark massaging the bare skin of his back. Tosti propped his elbow against the trunk and stared at him expectantly.

"Sweyn believes in Jesus now," the other offered.

Canute made a noncommittal grunt. His father claimed to be a Christian, but Canute wondered if he only acted as one for political convenience. "He said that if the raven was truly Odin, then Odin chose to abandon me."

"And what do you think?"

Canute turned away, feeling his stomach churn within him. Tosti's granite-like gaze suddenly seemed hard to endure. "I think it means nothing."

"Then why do you keep looking at the sky?"

"Because ... " His chest ached as he took a deep breath. "That is the strangest part. I've never seen a raven in my life."

"What?"

The surprise in Tosti's voice stung. Canute scowled at him. "From a very far distance, perhaps. But never close by. It is as if they are always flying away from me."

Tosti was quiet a moment, then he chuckled softly. Once he started chuckling, something seemed to release within him, and he burst out laughing.

Canute watched him with a curious expression. "Do you find the gods amusing?"

"Sure," he said gleefully. "Don't you?"

The Viking prince considered a moment. "I think the gods are very real. And I think they are no laughing matter."

At last, Tosti stopped laughing. "So you're not Christian?"

"I'm not sure yet. The Christian God seems real to me, as well." He looked up at the sky, its hues shifting to red with the setting sun. "It seems to me that all the gods are fighting now, and Jehova will be the victor."

Tosti's face held a strange expression, torn between grimness and the lingering urge to laugh. Canute turned to face him, and stared at him long and hard.

"The strongest god will be my God. It is as simple as that."

The look on Tosti's face changed again, this time into something completely new. His eyes darted from one section of Canute's face to the next, restless, searching. He leaned closer.

Canute pushed himself from the tree and stepped forward. Tosti glided back slightly, swaying in his usual graceful way, dancing with a moment of hesitation. Then he grew very still. Canute moved closer, holding Tosti's eyes with his own. Tosti breathed quickly, his chest rising and falling rapidly with the strain, his thick lips parting. Canute reached out and put his hand against Tosti's chest, pressing until he felt the racing beat of Tosti's heart against his palm. Tosti trembled, and Canute feared that he might flee. He slid his hand up, around Tosti's neck, and gripped it tightly.

Then he pulled Tosti close and kissed him.

At first Tosti went completely still, his body so stiff it seemed that all the water within him had frozen to ice. But Canute only pulled him closer, gripping him until he melted. Tosti's arms folded around Canute, his braids tickling Canute's chest, his thigh sliding along Canute's.

Their hips locked, only for a moment; then Tosti jumped away again.

Canute felt dizzy, his breath gone as if Tosti had taken it with him. His eyes swam, his hands searched, but Tosti only drew further away.

"Hey ... hey!"

Tosti turned and ran.

"Tosti!"

The young Jomsviking only ran faster.

Canute fell back, his raw shoulder colliding with the tree and knocking the breath back into his body. A tremor wracked him, and he yelled with rage.

He remained there a long while, and did not move again until the sun had nearly fallen.

\*

The next day, everyone treated him strangely.

At first, he thought he might be imagining it. He *felt* different, first of all. When he woke up, he was light on his feet, his frown lifted, his eyes bright. The memories of his kiss with Tosti were fresh in his mind, and the taint of Tosti's sudden departure seemed to have vanished overnight. Tosti had simply been overwhelmed and confused. If he had treated the incident casually, it would have given the event less meaning. No: his running away had been a good thing, and given them both a chance to absorb what happened.

He knew that Tosti enjoyed it as much as he had. That had been clear enough when their hips brushed.

But during the day meal, when he went to find Tosti in the main hall, a strange thing occurred.

Tosti ignored him.

While Canute approached, Tosti sat with a group of boys, laughing and snickering to one another. Canute wondered what the joke might be, and hoped for once he might find out and laugh along with them. But as soon as he stopped to take his seat, everyone grew quiet, and no one moved over for him.

Canute looked to Tosti for an answer, but Tosti would not return his glance. In fact, no one would look at him at all.

"Tosti?" he said. His voice sounded strained and cracked in his own ears, and he forced a swallow down his throat.

Tosti's eyes darted to Canute's, only for a second, then his face flushed and he looked away again. "No room here, Canute."

"I see." Canute gritted his teeth, but chose to quell his anger. Tosti felt uncomfortable, and that was understandable enough. "This isn't my place among you, anyway," he recovered.

But as he turned and walked away, he heard the boys behind him laughing again. He paused and considered turning to face them, but

decided against it, gripping his plate fiercely and continuing to his habitual spot on the bench.

His normal coterie sat in its usual place. Their eyes flicked to him, then back to their plates. Soon no one was looking at him at all.

Canute lingered on his feet, struggling not to fume. Once again, he wondered if he imagined the strangeness of their behavior. Normally at a meal, he got his food, sat down, and ate without paying much attention to anyone. He would simply listen in on their conversations, interrupt when he had something to say, and answer any raised questions. Perhaps *he* was the one acting strangely.

Instinctively this possibility disturbed him, but he chose instead to embrace it. "Good morning everyone," he said.

They all shifted uncertainly in their seats. A few muttered "Good morning" back to him. Then an even heavier silence resumed. Refusing to be perturbed, Canute sat down and fell onto his meal with a smile.

A long while passed and he got lost in his thoughts, nearly forgetting the looming presence of his comrades. But eventually one dared address him.

"Canute. Psst. Hey."

Snapped out of his reverie, Canute responded with a glare, then tried to soften his own expression. "Yes, what is it?"

"I asked if you had a good time yesterday with Tosti."

"Yes." Canute studied the faces around him, which were suddenly much too attentive. He pulled off some fish meat with his teeth and chewed roughly. "Yes I did."

The men exchanged glances with one another. Some seemed to be repressing smirks.

"Is there something else you'd like to ask?" Canute spat out a splintered bone.

"Yeah." The young man took a moment to gather up his courage, while the other aspiring Jomsvikings encouraged him with their eager stares. "Who's the girl? You or him?"

Canute froze. Laughter roared around him, but not so loudly as the blood in his ears. He hadn't expected this, and he did not like it at all. The first problem was how everyone knew in the first place. They would only know if Tosti had told them himself. And why would he do that? Canute doubted it would be due to pride, based on the behavior he'd already exhibited. The second problem was that everyone *did* know, and if word got around, Sweyn or Thorkell—or both—would be very displeased. Sweyn would consider it sinful. The Christian God did not

allow men to be with other men. Thorkell simply ... wouldn't like it. But there was yet a third problem, and that was the response of these men to the rumor. Some Jomsvikings took pride in taking other men. Others found it womanly. But these men clearly found the rumors laughably embarrassing, and even worse, they'd grown cocky enough to flaunt such feelings in front of him.

The laughter grew louder, and Canute struggled to contain his temper. Thorkell always told him to keep a cool head. The longer Thorkell was away, the more difficult that practice became. But he endured, and in fact he lowered his voice, so that when he spoke everyone grew quiet in order to hear him.

"I'll buy you a dress," he whispered, "and show you."

The insubordinate Dane gaped and flushed. Some of the men guffawed; a few chuckled uncertainly. But the others only looked upset.

Canute stuffed the last of his food down his mouth, though he had lost his appetite, and left as quickly as he could. He tried to shake the strange morning from his memory, but throughout the day, similar circumstances pestered him. After the meal he supervised a group of Jomsvikings in their practice of battle advances, and though they continued to obey his instruction, they seemed to take longer than usual, and a gleam of rebellion pervaded their eyes.

As soon as he could, Canute sought out Tosti again. He needed to confront Tosti about how the men treated him today, but also ... he simply wanted to see him again, and preferably alone.

He could not find Tosti anywhere. He looked until he had no choice but to start asking around, ignoring the knowing smirks on his inferiors' faces as well as he could.

"He went hunting with a few others," someone told him at last.

Canute felt both disappointed and angry, as if Tosti avoided him on purpose. And perhaps he did.

By the time the day was over and everyone regrouped in the main hall for the night meal, Canute's mood had spoiled completely. A simmering temper, even more foul than usual, had replaced the good spirits he woke up with. His head ached from clenching his teeth and chewing violently on his food; he became glad that no one would talk to him, for he felt that one more sly word would send him toppling over the edge.

Then Tosti returned.

He did not sit down to eat, even though he entered the hall with a group of his friends, who did. Instead he caught Canute's eye from afar and cocked his head towards the exit. Canute, who was already half-

standing, threw down his scraps and followed him out. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he knew that almost the entire hall was watching him. None of that seemed to matter so much as seeing Tosti again.

Outside he slid to a stop, looking every which way for the hasty fellow. He saw a trail in the grass and hurled himself around the corner, hands curling into angry fists before he caught sight of his prey.

"Canute, listen—"

Canute grabbed his shoulders and thrust him against the wooden planks of the hall. He wouldn't let Tosti run away this time. Tosti grunted but lifted his hands in surrender.

"*What* did you tell them?" cried Canute, sounding more hurt than angry, which was not what he'd intended.

"I told them ... what happened."

A tremble weakened Canute's grasp. His gaze drew to Tosti's plump lips, even though he should have been looking Tosti in the eye, measuring his sincerity. "Why?"

"Don't know. I wanted to hear what they ... thought of it, I guess."

Canute's hands slipped from Tosti's shoulders, his grip becoming a light caress. He stepped closer, as if to entrap Tosti with his own body. His voice lowered further. "All that matters is that they respect you. Beyond that, you shouldn't care what they think."

"Don't *you*?"

Canute wanted to say "Of course not." He wanted to scoff and kiss Tosti again, to embrace him, to press against him completely. Instead, he felt the presence of the Jomsvikings nearby like the heat of a fire. He turned his head slightly, and stiffened at the sight of dozens of them, lingering near the exit of the main hall and shamelessly watching the two men together.

Involuntarily, Canute drew away. And as soon as he did, he flushed with shame. He had just demonstrated the truth to Tosti, without ever saying a word.

When he looked to Tosti again, however, he found the young Jomsviking's face soft with empathy. "Canute." He grabbed Canute's shoulder with a firm hand. "I want to show you something."

"Show me what?"

"Something ... something that made me feel better. See ... I was a Christian, yesterday. I didn't want to do something forbidden. But I found something today ... a sign from *our* gods."

Canute frowned. He did not care for surprises. "What *is* it?"

"You'll see."

The Viking prince looked uncertainly at their growing crowd.

"Let them see, too," said Tosti. "You will be glad they did."

This made him even more uneasy; but Tosti reached out and clutched his hand, squeezing it gently where few could see, and this gave Canute the strength to respond. "Very well."

Tosti grinned, his wiliness returning as his hand slipped away again, and then he dashed into the dimming light. "This way!" Struggling not to look too eager, Canute made after him.

And behind him, several dozen Jomsvikings followed after.

Tosti led him away past several shacks, through various sparring and weaponry arenas, until they approached one of the primary living lodges, in which most the men slept. Canute hesitated. "What in Valhalla would be *here*?"

Tosti only paused at the entrance to wave inward. "Come and see!"

"Don't be stupid," he growled, though Tosti had already disappeared within the lodge. He realized he spoke to no one but himself. Once again he sensed the large crowd behind him like a cliff's edge; one step back and he would fall into the abyss. "Too late now," he muttered.

He followed Tosti into the darkness of the lodge.

The building smelled of sweat and dirty blankets, as it usually did. His lips curled and he kept moving. He thought that if Tosti was given the choice, surely he would want to stay in more comfortable quarters, like Canute's. Fortunately, the lodge was mostly vacant of bodies right now—at least until Canute and his followers arrived.

Tosti knelt down by what must have been his own bed and rummaged through a pile of belongings next to it. Canute struggled to repress his trembling. What on earth did Tosti have to show him? For some reason, Canute dreaded finding out.

"Here!" cried Tosti, and held up a sack. Only a small object seemed to occupy the sack—but that small object was moving. Tosti grinned from ear to ear as the bag swayed in his hand. "Close the doors!" he called.

Someone obeyed, trapping them all as witnesses to whatever was about to occur.

When Tosti opened the sack and the black bird flew out, Canute did not feel surprised. He did not feel much of anything.

There, captured and released for Canute's own sake, was a raven.

His breath fled his body and left him standing, transfixed, watching the dark wings flap. The raven's reach extended further than he had imagined; it seemed a tremendous creature, almost monstrous, within the confines of the lodge. It cast a sharp silhouette against the waning

sunlight, trickling weakly through the cracks of the walls, slicing at the brightness like so many knives.

But the sound emitted suddenly from its gullet was the most awesome, and terrifying, feature of all.

No one else in the room dared make a noise, anyway; but even if they had all raised their voices at once, the caws of the raven would have cut through the sound. It shrieked with the agony of a magnificent creature contained for a day within a woolen sack; it screamed with the rage of its injured pride; but most of all, it cried out with the despair of a dying soul.

Its caws grew louder and louder, shriller and more piercing, until it released the power of its wings in a sudden burst. It sped through the air like a dark streak of lightning, propelled towards the largest beam of light from the wall.

But the raven struck the wood, its cry stopped sickeningly short. The beast bounced back, drooped, and plummeted to the floor.

*Thud.*

No one moved for a long while. No one said a word. Canute delayed inhaling for breath until his head swam with dizziness. Meanwhile his eyes remained locked on the black, unmoving shape on the floor, like a blot in his vision blinding him to everything else. Sensation returned to his limbs first, trembling; then stretched to his fingertips, curling; then came rushing out of his throat.

"No!" he cried.

He rushed to the crippled creature before he even became aware of what he was doing; he pushed gawking men aside in order to make his way to the beast. He swooped down to its side and reached out, hands shaking, to grab it. He gasped as it jerked against his palm in response.

He stood with the bird clutched to his chest. He turned to everyone and grinned desperately at them. "No, look—it's still alive. See!"

He held out the raven's body, which after a long while, twitched again. This time the spasm was so violent the creature slipped from his hands and back to the floor, where it continued to thrash about in the throes of death.

As Canute gaped down at it, the world seemed to spin. Tears filled his eyes and blurred his twirling surroundings yet more. He did not merely look upon a dying bird. He looked upon a dying god. He looked upon a dying god!

Then he heard everyone laughing.

At first the sound filled him with confusion. Why would anyone dare laugh at an omen like this? He glanced desperately from each of their faces to the next. Then he realized they were not laughing at the raven. They were laughing at *him*.

"Oh no, look out, it's Odin!" someone called.

"Guess he couldn't stand being in the same room as Canute!"

"No, no, look!" Everyone turned to look at this speaker, who sounded quite serious. But then his voice changed to mimic Canute's. "*I think it's still alive!*"

A new howl of laughter, even louder than before, rang over the congregation.

Canute breathed so hard now that he might have opened his mouth, if not for his clenching jaws. So they knew about the raven, too. Tosti had not only told them about their physical connection; he had shared one of Canute's most intimate secrets. There were reasons why his father had not made the runewoman's sighting common knowledge. It was incriminating. And for the truth to come out like this, with a raven twitching to death at Canute's feet after a desperate attempt to escape .... it was more humiliating than anything he could have imagined.

Canute unsheathed the knife at his belt. He hesitated only long enough to regain everyone's attention.

Then he knelt down and plunged his dirk into the raven's chest.

The bird gave one last spasm, then went very still.

Canute pulled out the blade. The wound he left behind was not so much a fountain of blood as a damp indentation. But the edges of his dirk gleamed red with the liquid, and he found this to his satisfaction as he stood again, holding the blade aloft.

He looked past its tip at Tosti, who stood petrified with horror.

Canute did not feel any sort of expression on his face, but the look in his eyes must have been terrifying enough, for Tosti trembled. "Canute ... " he gasped. "I didn't mean for any of that to happen. I thought ... I thought it would be a good thing. I wanted ... "

Canute did not want to hear him speak another word. The sound of Tosti's voice brought too much pain. And his own inclination to respond revealed that he could not trust his feelings. He pulled back the knife, then flung it.

Tosti's fast reflexes saved him. Canute rarely missed a target. He had better than normal vision, and his hands grew steady when aiming, no matter his circumstance. His blade would have pierced Tosti through the eye. But Tosti darted out of the way; he ducked, swerved, and then ran

away. He was almost gone by the time the knife plunged into the far wall and stuck there.

Despite his exceptional eyesight, Canute's vision blurred again, and he blinked rapidly to push back a film of thickening moisture. His calm composure wavered. He felt the weight of all the Jomsvikings' eyes upon him, and thought that if he stood there too long, he would buckle underneath it.

"You fools," he said. "There is no Odin. Not anymore. It should be as clear to you as it now is to me. The one God is so powerful, there is no room for another."

Nor was there allowance for the relationship he had nearly had with Tosti, he recalled. He took a deep, shuddering breath.

"And so ... He is my God now. If any of you feel differently, I welcome you to worship this miserable corpse."

He kicked the dead raven towards them, and everyone scattered from it.

Canute already had the men's respect again, he realized; their expressions changed, their interpretations of the night's events morphed into something new. Canute turned a defeat into victory. Thorkell would be proud. Such transitions came easily to Canute, and he sensed they would be even easier now, with the one true God on his side.

But he could not bring himself to smile as he turned and walked away, leaving them all in silence.

\*\*

## READ MORE

*One Lost Tale of Mercia will release every other Tuesday until October 5, 2010, when the full story of Eadric the Grasper releases on Amazon. For more news and updates, visit [www.jaydenwoods.com](http://www.jaydenwoods.com).*

The First Lost Tale: **Golde the Mother**

The Second Lost Tale: **Ethelred the King**

The Third Lost Tale: **Aydith the Aetheling**

The Fourth Lost Tale: **Athelward the Historian**

The Fifth Lost Tale: **Algifu the Orphan**

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

The Seventh Lost Tale: **Hildred the Maid**

The Eighth Lost Tale: **Canute the Viking**

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

Though Canute the Great is a real figure of history, and a fascinating one at that, one can only speculate as to his true personality. This is my creative interpretation of Canute's life, and though my goal is to never contradict what events definitely occurred, this short story is pure fiction speculation.

For a full list of consulted sources, and/or to let me know what you think of my work, please visit <http://talesofmercia.wordpress.com>.

## From the same author on Feedbacks

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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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 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 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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