

The
CHOSEN
QUEEN

JOANNA
COURTNEY

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MACMILLAN



First published 2015 by Macmillan
an imprint of Pan Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited
Pan Macmillan, 20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Basingstoke and Oxford
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-1-4472-8190-0

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1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

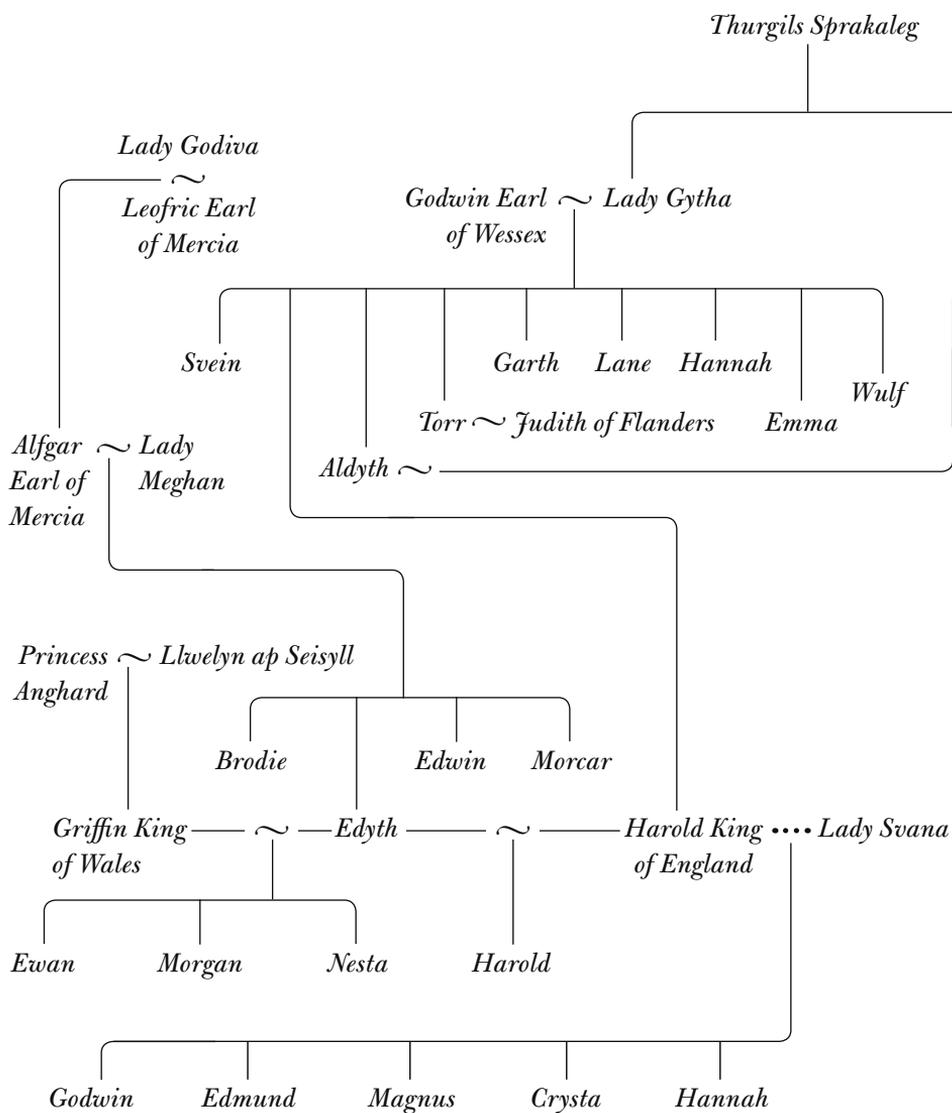
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*For my husband Stuart
who's always believed in me.*

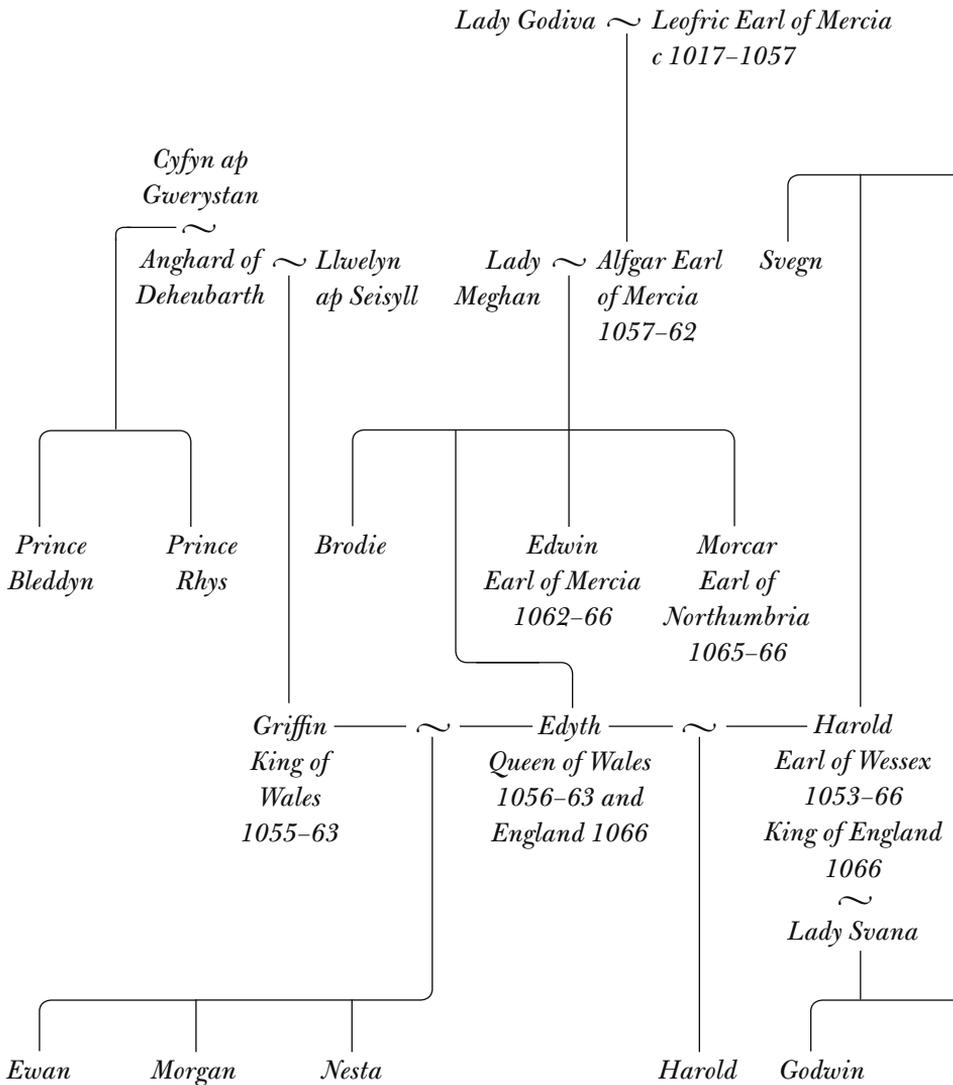
ENGLAND
1066





Queens of the Conquest Family Tree

Note: A dotted line indicates a handfast marriage



Edyth of Mercia's Family Tree

Note: Dates shown are a duration of a reign as Earl/King

Godwin Earl of Wessex ~ *Lady Gytha*
c 1018-53

Aldyth ~ *Edward*
Queen of *King of*
England *England*
1045-66 *1042-66*

Torr Earl of
Northumbria
1055-65
~
Judith of
Flanders

Garth Earl of
East Anglia
1055-66

Lane Earl
of Kent
1057-66

Hannah

Emma

Wulf

Skuli

Ketil

Edmund

Magnus

Crysta

Hannah

THE
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PROLOGUE



Sometimes when she closes her eyes and pictures that night, Edyth cannot tell where memories end and dreams begin. She wonders if she was enchanted. She was only eight after all, her mind still shifting in and out of made-up worlds, but something about that night, played out in firelight beneath a million stars, still feels so solid, so very real as if, rather than being befuddled by it, her mind became truly clear for the first time.

He looked like a king that day, Harold. Even in a simple bridegroom's tunic of darkest green he looked like royalty as he stepped up to take the Lady Svana's hand. There was no gold in sight, just flowers; no parade of bishops, just a smiling monk in a sack-robe and bare feet. There was no betrothal contract, no formal prayers, no exchange of lands or elaborate gifts, just the linking of hands joining two people for a year and a day.

'No longer?' Edyth had asked. Marriage was forever, everyone knew that – grumbled about it, jested about it, accepted it.

'Only if we wish it,' Lady Svana had told her. 'Ours is a marriage of hearts, not of laws. If we cease to love, it ends.' Edyth must have looked shocked because Svana had laughed and said, 'Fear not, this union will last to the grave – love prefers to be free.'

Those are the words Edyth still hears, like a fiddler's tune played over that whole night: 'love prefers to be free', and they colour her memories a thousand glorious shades. There had been feasting,

on long tables stretched out across the meadow. Then, as the sun dropped, myriad lanterns had been lit in the trees and there had been dancing. Guests had whirled, maypole-mad, around a giant fire that turned them into tumbling shadows and sent sparks of joy into the night sky until, finally, they'd kindled the dawn and it had all been over.

The next day Edyth had wandered, dazed. Her father had been scornful, covering up a sore head and any memory of the self he had briefly become – a self that had danced with his wife beneath the stars, his daughter on his broad shoulders and his sons gleefully circling. Perhaps he had been enchanted too? If so, the magic had fled with the light of day.

'Ridiculous paganism,' he'd muttered. 'What would the Pope say?'

Edyth hadn't cared. She'd never meet the Pope, far, far away in some mystical city across the seas, but Earl Harold was here and despite being high up in the king's council where all was tangled rules and debates, he'd been content to stand on a hillside, head bared, and marry for love.

'Fool,' her mother had said. 'What connections does she have? What influence does she yield? What use is she to him?'

Edyth had said nothing but it had seemed to her then that Harold glowed when he was with his handfast wife and that it was that glow, more than any gold or land or title, that drew people to him. 'Love prefers to be free,' Svana had said and Edyth had carried that with her ever since. It had been her ideal, lit up by firelight and scented with meadow grass, and now, on the brink of womanhood, she craved such a passion for herself.

PART ONE



CHAPTER ONE



Westminster, March 1055

Dusk was sneaking up the swirling eddies of the Thames, calling the men and women of King Edward's England to their beds. Inside Westminster's great hall, however, no one was listening, least of all Edyth Alfgarsdottir. In a clatter of platters and trestles the formal part of the mid-Lent gathering was being dismantled and for the first time she was to remain until the feast danced itself into bed. Anticipation spiked in her stomach and she pressed herself against a pillar, her fingers nervously tracing the intricate carvings in the wood as she took in every glorious detail of the unravelling court.

The royal hall was old and nearly as ramshackle as the abbey church beyond but tonight the fading rays of the spring sun were pouring into the vast space, making it shine. The light tumbled through the open doors at either end of the room, pooling around the small window openings and sneaking between the thatch above. It caught in the gold trim of the highly painted shields along the walls and danced in the copious jewellery adorning England's wealthiest men and women so that the whole space seemed to Edyth to shimmer with hazy promise.

All around, conversation was rising and twisting as fast as the smoke from the central hearth. The formal bows and handshakes of earlier were loosening into clutched arms and shared laughter. Ladies tugged demurely on fat, corn-blonde plaits or plucked at headdresses, pulling them back discreetly to let a pretty wisp of hair show. Gentlemen tucked eating knives into patterned leather belts, swept back their hair and ran calloused warrior's hands over their moustaches. Edyth searched for a group to join but they were shifting and changing like mice in a barn and she dared not step in.

She glanced awkwardly back along the edge of the hall where the elderly and the infirm, whose limbs were too swollen, twisted or sword-savaged to bear them for long, huddled on stiff wooden benches and looked hopefully out of the open doors towards the low sun. It hung reluctantly over the rolling Thames just beyond the hall, but very soon it would drop into the dark water. Then the invalids and children would be able to retire to their beds. Here in the hall, though, the rush lights around the tapestry-hung walls would be lit to keep the evening alive and she, Edyth, would be a part of it all.

Drawing in a breath rich with meat-smoke and spiced apple mead, she forced herself to step out towards the central hearth. The remains of the stag, lowered over the fire to crisp, were spitting fat and a careful space had cleared around it. Through the swirl of mingled smoke and light Edyth spotted her friends waving her eagerly over. Instinctively she moved towards them but then ducked away, wiping a ghost speck of ash from her eye. She wasn't in the mood for prattle tonight. She'd longed for so many years to be part of the late-night life of the court but now she was here she felt edgy and unsettled, slightly apart from the easy gossip. Maybe she'd caught her father's mood – with the great council on the morrow he'd been as nervy as

an unhooded hawk all day – or maybe this restlessness was all her own.

‘Would you like to dance?’

Edyth jumped and stared at the man bowing low before her, the jewel-studded hem of his fine blue tunic sparking in the jumbled light. He straightened, holding out his hand imperiously, and the flash from his amber eyes sent the shining royal hall into tumbling shadows.

‘With you?’ Edyth stuttered.

He took a mock look around the carousing crowd before returning his gaze to her.

‘I’m not in the habit of asking beautiful women to dance with other men.’

Edyth flushed and glanced guiltily around. Lord Tostig of Hereford was part of the Godwinson family, all-powerful in the south of England, and, as such, hated with a fierce and determined passion by her father, Earl Alfgar. Being seen consorting with any of them would be tantamount to treason in his eyes. She faltered.

‘Do you not wish to dance?’ Torr pulled his hand back a little and instinctively Edyth reached up to take it. ‘You do? Excellent. I am not a bad dancer, you know – you can trust me not to tread on your feet.’

‘It is not my feet I am concerned for,’ she shot back and he laughed.

‘Do not believe all you hear around the court, Lady Edyth.’

Edyth blushed and looked to the rush-strewn floor. Lord Tostig was known to all as Torr, or Tower, for reasons that seemed to cause much giggling in the ladies’ bower, and was reputed to hunt down the prettiest ladies of the court as efficiently as he hunted wild boar. Was he hunting her now?

‘If I believed even half,’ she managed, ‘I would have cause to be cautious, would I not?’

He laughed again.

‘That might be true, but caution, Lady Edyth, is much over-rated. Now, shall we?’

His richly ringed fingers clasped tightly around hers as he led her through the tangle of guests around the fire and down to the rear of the hall. The gleemen were tuning up on a raised dais, servants were clearing back the scented rushes from the floor, and all around young men were luring partners forward.

Edyth felt, as much as heard, the buzz of flirtatious chatter and glanced around to see her friends nudging and pointing. She swallowed and drew herself up as tall as she could, willing the other dancers not to question her right to join them. Her gown, a deep russet, cut expensively tight to reveal her growing curves and with indulgently wide sleeves to show off her slim arms, was as grand as any, but still she felt uncertain of her place amongst so many ladies of the court. Lord Torr, however, seemed to see nothing strange in his choice of partner and whisked her confidently into the central line.

‘Trust me,’ he whispered, his lips brushing her ear.

Edyth swallowed. Trust was not something the young lord inspired, though she wasn’t sure exactly why. She was finding the mysteries of adult relations irritatingly hard to fathom. She’d tried asking her elder brother Brodie about it when he’d been sneaking mead from their father’s barrel. He’d flushed scarlet and told her she’d find out on her wedding night. But she was only fourteen; her wedding might be three or four years in the making and she wanted to know now.

She hadn’t dared ask her mother, the purse-lipped Lady Meghan, for she would just say – as she so often said – that Edyth wasn’t seemly and the other girls were just full of made-up stories and half-truths. Lord Torr, she knew instinctively, would answer all her questions if she so wished but suddenly such knowledge felt dangerous. She tried, again, to

pull back but the gleemen had struck up and the dance was being led out. The sixteen couples looked to the lead pair – Torr’s lively younger brother Lord Garth and their sister, Queen Aldyth – for the pattern of the dance and for a little while Edyth was forced to concentrate. Lord Torr, however, proved to be the strong dancer he had claimed and had soon mastered the steps.

‘So, Lady Edyth,’ he said, leading her confidently across the set, ‘are you ready for what the morrow may bring?’

Edyth jumped. At the royal council on the morrow a new Earl of Northumbria would be chosen and her father, currently earl of lowly East Anglia, was determined that the appointment would be his. The anticipation was making him in turns excitable and irascible and, reminded of her treacherous choice of partner, Edyth looked nervously around for him. The crush of the crowd was protecting her, but for how long? Torr pulled her close.

‘Who but God can ever know what the morrow will bring, my lord?’ she responded, struggling to breathe.

He chuckled.

‘Very good, Lady Edyth. Earl Alfgar has made quite a politician of you.’

‘My father is a gracious man.’

‘But is he a wise one?’

‘My lord?!’

Again the chuckle.

‘You need not answer that. I would not like my own boys to comment on myself or my wife.’ He smiled easily, seeming to find nothing strange in talking about the slim and stately Judith of Flanders whilst his fingers whispered caresses across her own. ‘And we must all seek advancement. I, for one, lag forever behind my smooth-tongued older brother.’

‘Earl Harold?’

Edyth frowned. Ever since his faerie wedding she'd had a quiet liking for the easy, affable Earl Harold of Wessex. She'd noticed him at court Crownwearings and seen how men were drawn to him, how they looked up to him. Women, too, flocked to his side but, though he was always polite, she had never once seen him charming them, as Torr was surely charming her now. Earl Harold's favours, even after all these years of marriage, were kept for his slim, ethereal handfast wife and Edyth loved to see them together when the Lady Svana joined him at court.

The soft-faced lady often smiled at her, even waved, but with her father grumbling about the Godwinsons Edyth had never quite dared approach, preferring to watch from afar. Even Earl Alfgar, though, had been heard to grudgingly call Harold 'the best of the Godwin bunch', so surely Torr was reading his brother wrong? Yet his eyes had clouded and his steps had slowed and, given how she had suffered at the hands of her own patronising elder brother, she felt suddenly sorry for him.

'Maybe you will be granted East Anglia tomorrow?' she suggested as they paused at the top of the dance and to her delight his eyes sparked alight.

'You think so?' She nodded keenly and he smiled, a slow, fox's smile. 'But is that not your father's earldom, my lady? Is he, then, planning on going elsewhere?'

Edyth's gut twisted; he'd trapped her.

'No! I mean, who knows. Maybe, in the fullness of time, God willing . . . ?'

Confused, she glanced around the packed hall. Some politician she was! She suddenly caught sight of her father, his wide back thankfully turned as he talked earnestly with a handful of other men at the fire. Her skin flared as if it was she who were so close to the flames and she willed him not to look until she'd moved down the dance. Thankfully Torr spun her away.

‘Worry not, Edyth, this conversation is for our ears alone. Such a shame, is it not, that Earl Ward’s son, Osbeorn, was lost in battle and could not inherit his earldom?’

‘Indeed,’ she agreed, grateful for the change of subject. It was the death of the legendary northern warrior, Earl Ward of Northumbria, that had brought the council together to choose his successor. ‘To die at the hand of the Scots is a terrible thing.’

‘A dreadful necessity, I fear.’

‘Necessity, my lord?’

‘King Edward is very keen that young Prince Malcolm should reclaim his throne from the traitor Macbeth and as Earl Ward fostered him in his exile, he and Osbeorn were eager to fight. It is good that Lord Malcolm has been nurtured by Englishmen, do you not think? An ally over the border will be of great value to the crown, you know, and to the new Earl of Northumbria, whoever he may be.’ He pushed her away again but his fingers never left hers and barely had she stepped from the line than he was pulling her back in. ‘I am very well acquainted with Lord Malcolm. I was also fostered by Earl Ward for my training, so spent several years with him. A smart young man, keen to negotiate – with the right people.’

His words seemed to Edyth like snakes, whipping dangerously around her feet, too slippery to grasp, and now she regretted eschewing her friends. The dance was turning faster and faster and as Torr spun her expertly, the rush lights on the walls flickered at the edges of her vision, multiplying dizzily as they caught in the highly polished bosses of the shields hung all around.

‘I could introduce you if you like,’ Torr purred. ‘He’s quite a handsome man, Lord Malcolm, athletic too, and he’ll be in need of a wife.’

‘I think I can trust my father to find me a suitable husband, thank you.’

‘Of course, of course, but you are an important asset to England, Lady Edyth. Does your father know Malcolm as I do? He’s well on his way to reclaiming his throne you know, *well* on his way. You could be Queen of Scotland, Edyth. You’d like that, I’ll wager. You’d be grateful, wouldn’t you?’

His hand dropped, slinking down from her waist to pick out the curve of her buttocks. Edyth felt a thrill rush straight between her legs and hated herself for it.

‘I would rather be Queen of England,’ she retorted stiffly, pulling away.

‘Would you now? I think you are a little late for that.’

‘I did not mean . . .’

‘My wife’s niece has beaten you to it.’

Edyth stopped, shocked.

‘The Lady Matilda? But she is wed to Duke William of Normandy, is she not?’

‘Indeed she is. Duke William, who has been promised the throne of England.’

‘Nonsense.’

Surprise had made her blunt and she bit at her tongue but Torr just laughed, then leaned further forward so his mouth was close to her ear.

‘It’s true, Edyth. He came to England and it was promised to him. He was here. Four years ago, in 1051, he was here for Christ’s mass. Do you not remember?’

Edyth shifted uneasily as the other dancers wound around her. She’d been young then, just ten, but she *did* remember. It had been a strange Yuletide, stiff and formal, the sharp-nosed Normans stifling the usual exuberance of the Saxon celebrations, but there’d been no promise surely? No ceremony?

‘You do remember,’ Torr pushed, seeing her face. ‘I don’t

though. I wasn't here. None of my family were. We were in exile.' He shook his head. 'Forced into exile by bitter men.' He ran a finger down her cheek, flaming her skin. 'It's desperate in exile, Edyth, far away from all you know and love. No wonder Malcolm wanted to fight for Scotland.'

Edyth blinked. This whole conversation was still twisting like an adder and she felt caught in its coils.

'No one concerns themselves with Duke William now,' she managed as Torr steered her into the dance once more. 'Whatever was said, it is past. No one thinks he is King Edward's heir.'

Torr smiled, a slow, lazy smile that tore at her guts.

'Duke William does. And tell me, who else is fit for the throne? Harald Hardrada, King of the Vikings, perhaps? There's certainly no one from the lauded English line of Cerdic. The king has no children, Edyth, no nephews even, just some distant cousin trapped in darkest Hungary. If Edward dies, England is wide open – *wide* open!'

Edyth jerked away, stepping off the dance floor and onto the piled rushes at the edges.

'You should not talk like that, my lord. It's not right. The king isn't going to die and even if he does we won't have a Norman duke in his place. No one would allow it.'

'Of course not.' He followed her so closely that she backed into the timber wall and felt her head clang against a shield edge. She put up a hand to ward away both the pain and her partner but Lord Torr was not so easily rebuffed. 'Hush now, sweetheart,' he said softly. 'Do you want your father to hear such talk on your lips?' He pressed a finger lightly against her mouth. 'You should not fret. Let's leave politics and think more of . . . pleasure.'

He dipped his finger so that the tip grazed Edyth's tongue and she felt the contact like a touch paper to a deep well of

kindling somewhere uncomfortably low inside her. She fought to make sense of it but could not think with him standing so close over her. It was much darker against the wall than out on the floor and with the whirl of dancers separating them from the others of the court they were all but alone.

‘Pleasure, I am told,’ she managed, though her voice was annoyingly husky, ‘is a transient thing.’

He leaned a hand against the wall above her, curving his hips towards hers.

‘Mayhap you are right, Edyth. Better, I am sure, to find love – real love.’

‘Like Earl Harold and the Lady Svana?’

‘Like Harold and his little handfast woman, yes, but then my brother is the steadfast type. Loyalty comes naturally to him along with responsibility and duty and all those boring traits.’

Despite herself Edyth giggled.

‘You cannot say such things – you’re a lord.’

‘For now.’ Torr’s eyes flicked briefly over his shoulder to the packed hall then shot straight back to her. ‘But you are politicking again and it is a waste. What is life without pleasure, Edyth Alfgarsdottir?’

His amber eyes met hers and Edyth felt herself pulled towards him. Her head swam. She felt as giddy as if she were still dancing and as blind as if it were the depths of night but then a low growl caught her ears and with horror she recognised the rumble of her father’s ever-ready temper nearby. Tearing herself away, Edyth stepped firmly sideways.

‘I have taken too much of your time, my lord,’ she said, curtsying. ‘Your wife will, I am sure, be missing you and my father looks for me.’

For a moment Lord Torr looked angry and the heat in Edyth’s belly turned to ice, but then he chuckled.

‘You are a dutiful daughter, Lady Edyth, that is good. You will need to support your father tomorrow.’

‘What do you mean?’ she demanded. Alfgar was pushing between the dancers and was nearly upon them. ‘What do you mean, my lord?’

But, with a low bow and wicked wink, Torr was gone, leaving Edyth alone as her father descended with the force of a Viking fury, seizing her arm and yanking her sideways.

‘What on earth are you doing, young lady?’

‘Dancing, Father,’ she stuttered out, trying to extricate herself.

‘Dancing? Parading yourself like a hoyden, more like – and with *him*?’

Alfgar’s face was wine-red and his hand raked through his hair in a gesture she knew all too well; it meant the rise of his fiery temper.

‘Lord Torr was very courteous,’ she said nervously.

Alfgar spat into the rushes.

‘I’ll wager he was and I know why too.’

Edyth opened her mouth to protest but for once she caught herself.

‘Why, Father?’ she asked instead, widening her eyes.

‘Why?’ Alfgar looked startled, then flushed an all-new shade of red. His voice softened. ‘Never you mind, just stay clear of him. Now, what did he say to you of Northumbria?’

‘Northumbria?’ she stammered. ‘Not much.’

‘Not much? What does that mean? He did say something. Tell me!’

Edyth felt tears prickle. Her beautiful amber-studded brooches were heavy on her shoulders and her eyes stung with the smoke from the fire and the tang of mead on her father’s heavy breath. She scrabbled for answers but could find only snake scales – whispers of inheritance and exile.

‘He just said I was to, to support you tomorrow.’

‘Support me? What does that mean? What’s he insinuating?’

‘I don’t know, Father, truly.’

And now the tears came. She brushed one furiously away but it was enough. Her father loosened his grip on her arm.

‘Ah there now, Edie, do not cry. I’m sorry. You are young, a girl yet – which is all the more reason why that oaf Torr should not . . .’

‘No, I – I’m not, Father.’ He was looking around for her mother. He was going to send her to bed like a baby and she couldn’t allow that. Forcing the tears down, she pushed her shoulders back and straightened her neck. ‘I think we need to watch him, Father. I can help you with that.’

He shook his head indulgently but his eyes returned to her face; she had his attention.

‘You do not know what you would get yourself into, child.’

It was true but no use saying so now.

‘I could cope with it, Father. For you I could cope with anything.’

She smiled up at him and, with a soft chuckle, he swept her into his arms, suffocating her with the mingled scents of wool and mead and sweat.

‘I could dance with *you*, Father?’ she suggested sweetly.

‘Oh no!’ Alfgar backed away as she had known he would. ‘No, your old man is too stiff for dancing these days, Edyth. Find yourself someone younger, but not – *not*, do you hear me – a Godwinson.’

‘Yes, Father.’

She dropped a swift curtsy and escaped. The rest of the evening was hers; let the morrow worry about itself.



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