



The Second Lost Tale of Mercia: Ethelred the King
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The Second Lost Tale of Mercia:
Ethelred the King

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“It is said that Dunstan, at [Ethelred’s] coronation, foretold what a wretched time it would be. As long as Dunstan lived, things were a little better; but when he was gone, all the badness and weakness of Ethelred’s character came out. He was perhaps the only thoroughly bad King among all the Kings of the English of the West-Saxon line; he seems to have been weak, cowardly, cruel, and bad altogether. He was always doing things at wrong times and leaving undone what he should have done, so that he is called Ethelred the Unready, that is the man without rede or counsel.”

—Freeman, Edward. *Old English History for Children* pg. 190

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Corfe-Gate, Dorset
978 A.D.

Ethelred watched longingly as his half-brother strode with his men to the exit of the stronghold. They looked so handsome, regal, and powerful. Their spurs chimed over the cobbles as they walked, their soft tunics rippled in the breeze, and their cheeks glowed with the pleasure of fellowship. King Edward, walking in the middle, was in fact the smallest of

the men, and yet he was the center of their attention and devotion. The sixteen-year-old king had grown to fit his beautifully embroidered boots, and the crown seemed to glitter more brightly on his auburn-haired head than it ever had on their father's.

The king stopped suddenly and turned to look at Ethelred, as if he had sensed his younger brother's stare. Ethelred stepped back a little, hiding in the shadow of a stone column, and gulped.

"Ethelred?"

Ethelred could see the smiles gathering on the faces of Edward's soldiers. They wanted to laugh at him, and they were only holding it in because he would have been king, if Edward was not. Remembering this made him straighten up a little and lean into the sunshine. "Yes, what is it?"

Edward strolled closer, hands on his hips. Ethelred noticed for the first time that the king was getting a nice, cherry brown beard on his chin. Ethelred touched his own chin self-consciously; at barely eleven years of age, he was far from being able to grow his own.

"Ethelred, I think you should come hunting with us!"

Ethelred blinked at his half-brother in shock. Could he really mean it? Or was he mocking him somehow? Ethelred glanced nervously at Edward's companions. Were they all playing some sort of big joke?

"Well?" Edward leaned down, planting a thickly-gloved hand on Ethelred's shoulder. "Don't you want to?"

"What, uh ..." Ethelred shifted on his feet, suddenly conscious of how far Edward had to lean down to look him in the eye. "What sort of game will you hunt?"

"Game?" Edward straightened up, letting him go and shrugging. "Whatever game the hawk finds for us!"

"Hawk?" Ethelred's eyes glittered with jealousy. He had always wanted to hunt with a hawk.

"That's right. We don't have a plan, little brother. That's the fun of it."

Ethelred gulped. The notion was exciting, but it also made him nervous. "Mother says a servant should be sent out first, to find the game and—"

"Damn that." Edward curled his lip and spat to the side. "And damn your mother."

Ethelred flushed despite himself. Edward had never gotten along with his step-mother very well, but normally he remained polite about it. Ethelred didn't want to argue with Edward, but could he let an insult

like that slide? He glanced nervously about, uncertain of what to do once more.

"Come now, Ethelred, do you want to come or not?"

"Yes." He felt his heart swelling within him. "Yes. Yes, I will!"

"There's a good boy." Edward knocked his fist against the younger boy's shoulder.

Ethelred's limbs tingled with excitement as he joined Edward and the tall, proud soldiers on their walk outside. A warming breeze kissed his cheeks and he took a deep, happy breath. He saw the horses already saddled and pulled from the stables, waiting for their noble mounts to ride them into the forest. He looked out at the sharply rolling hills and chalky cliffs surrounding the Corfe-Gate stronghold and felt almost like a king surveying his kingdom. He would join Edward and his men on the hunt!

"Ethelred? Ethelred! What is going on?"

Ethelred's heart sank quickly. The voice belonged to his mother, Alfryth. She stormed from the stronghold, her silken veil and black robes billowing in a gust of wind. Her scraggly brown hair blew against her face, splitting her scowl like so many cracks.

King Edward turned to face her, his men now behind him. He hooked his thumb on his swordbelt, as if resting it there, but Ethelred could not ignore how close his hand came to the hilt of his sword. He said nothing, only glared at her through his cherry lashes.

Desperately, Alfryth turned her fierce gaze on Ethelred. "Son, where are you going?"

"I'm going hunting, mother." Ethelred stuck up his chin. "Hunting for whatever game we may come across."

"No, you're not."

Ethelred stiffened. He looked to Edward for help, but the young king had only eyes for Alfryth, and those eyes were full of hatred.

"You have matters to attend to," Alfryth insisted to Ethelred. "Matters for Ealdorman Alfhere."

Butterflies fluttered in Ethelred's stomach, and he saw Edward's hands curl into fists. When their father, Edgar, died a few years ago, various nobles and clergymen had disagreed on which of Edgar's sons should become king. Ealdorman Alfhere had supported Ethelred's right to the throne, as the son of Edgar's latest wife, but Ethelred had been only seven years old. Naturally, most men had supported Edward instead. Though the wise men had come to a peaceful decision, no doubt it was hard for Edward to forget Alfhere's opposition to him.

Alfryth smiled sweetly, seeing the fear and doubt in her son's eyes. "As you know, these matters are important, my son. Much more important than a young boy's fancy to fill his days with hunting."

"Young boy's fancy!" cried King Edward. He took a step forward, and Ethelred tensed with nervousness. Edward was generally a nice fellow, best demonstrated by how kindly he treated Ethelred, a boy that most would consider his rival. When he got mad, however, he got very mad; and usually he got the maddest about issues concerning his step-mother, Alfryth. "Hunting is man's work, a man's way of practicing for battle. A woman like you wouldn't understand, of course. Right, Ethelred?"

Ethelred stood frozen, afraid to look at either of them.

He did, however, glimpse his mother's smile, remaining firmly on her face as if everything was going according to plan. "I suppose I would not understand. And in any case, I wasn't trying to discourage you from engaging in such ... 'practice,' my lord. Some men must practice for engaging in battle. Others must practice for *leading* men to battle. My son, Ethelred, will be doing the latter, and so he does not need to go riding about in the forest." She held out her hand to Ethelred. "Come on, then, son."

But Ethelred ignored her completely. He could not tear his eyes away from Edward, who wore such a vicious scowl on his face that it brought to mind the horrific depictions of bears on some of the stronghold's tapestries. "Why ... you ... filth-ridden ... *BITCH!*"

And then he lunged forward, and Ethelred cowered, as if expecting to be stricken by whatever tremendous blow Edward seemed about to deliver. But after a moment, he found he was only stricken by a fierce silence, and looked up to see that Edward had stopped himself. He stood with one arm lifted, panting for breath, his fingers inches from Alfryth's throat and curled as if already gripping it. But he restrained himself, and stared blazing into her eyes. Though she stood unflinching, the fear in Alfryth's own gaze was horribly apparent.

At last Edward lowered his arm. He took a deep breath and straightened his tunic. He looked around at his wary soldiers and his cowering half-brother Ethelred, and a dramatic change came over him. He forced a lilted smile on his still-reddened face. "What a waste of time. We have game to catch."

His soldiers relaxed visibly and continued on to their horses. Alfryth remained standing at the door of the stronghold, chin lifted in triumph, her dark wimple fluttering in the salty breeze. Edward cast Ethelred one last glance before departing.

"Maybe next time, brother," he said. But his voice was sullen, and Ethelred did not think he expected a next time, in truth.

Not until that moment did Ethelred comprehend the true extent of his loss. He realized that Edward had sincerely wanted to hunt with him. Until now, Ethelred had still been afraid that it was all some sort of prank—or at least a way to make Ethelred humiliate himself. He had been so desperate to join the king and his men that he had agreed despite these instincts. But as Edward trudged away, he actually seemed disappointed—disappointed that Ethelred wasn't coming along!

Despite himself, he felt tears prick his eyes.

"Ethelred, what is wrong with you? Come inside."

"But Mother, I want to—"

"You don't get to do what you want. If you're to be king then you'll have to do a great many things you'd rather not do."

"I don't want to be—!"

"*Silence!* I don't care!" She grabbed his wrist fiercely, then pulled him inside.

He was even more surprised when she led him to his room and told him to stay there. "But I'm supposed to speak with Ealdorman Alfhre!" he cried. Then, when she scowled at him, his face scrunched up helplessly. "Aren't I?"

Her expression tore between pity and disgust. "I'll handle him myself, son. You stay here and practice your reading." Then, as an afterthought, "Also, consider why your father's wise men chose Edward to be King over you, even though he was not my son. Think on it long and hard."

She slammed the door behind her, and though the chill of winter had supposedly lifted from Engla-lond, he shivered.

As his mother had suggested, he stayed in his room and read. He also pondered over the matter of the witenagemot's decision to choose Edward over himself. He thought it made practical sense for anyone to choose the older of the two boys, considering how young they had been at the time, and the fact that no one else of royal blood had been available. On top of that, Edgar himself had said before his death that he wished Edward to succeed him. But on the other hand, Ethelred was the son of Alfryth, the present queen: he really should have been next in line. He wondered whether the wise men's choice to put Edward on the throne had been any fault of his own. Then, filling with shame, he remembered the story of his own baptism.

When the Archbishop Dunstan had held him underwater and offered the holy sacrament, baby Ethelred had defecated in the water. Dunstan

had pulled him out and handed him away, crying out with disgust. “By God,” declared the bishop, “this will be a miserable man!” Ethelred’s ears burned with embarrassment whenever he heard that story retold, but he also felt anger. He had been a baby at the time. He had no control of such things.

As he stayed in his room according to his mother’s wishes and read the Holy Gospels, he tried to gather encouragement from them. He wondered whether everything that happened on earth was truly God’s will. If so, what power did he or anyone else have to change it? He thought that perhaps he was still too young to understand; adults never seemed to question this paradox, so surely he must be missing something. In any case, he found it comforting to believe that his father’s witenagemot had chosen Edward by God’s ordinance. If God orchestrated everything, that meant the matters were no fault of his own, at all—especially not the fault of a helpless baby.

Ethelred’s scholarly pondering helped the time to pass, at first. But after the sun peaked and fell westward, thrusting its last orange beams through his window, he found himself growing restless. He looked out at the sharp hills of Dorset, their slopes undulating with varying hues of green, brown, and gray. He wondered what a thrill Edward must now feel, riding with his soldiers while a hawk flew overhead and the wild pigs and deer fled in fear. How great it must feel to be a king!

He shook his head of these thoughts, remembering Alfryth. Sometimes, Ethelred’s own mother frightened him, and he preferred Edward’s temper tantrums to her mysterious ways. Why had she insisted that Ethelred stay home today? Did she simply not want the two boys to feel like brothers? Or did she place so little faith in Ethelred she assumed he would humiliate himself?

Or was something else going on altogether?

He felt a strong sense of foreboding like cold water in his belly; but at the same time, he felt hunger. Had the time not already passed for the night meal? He realized with surprise that the light was waning outside, and yet no one had summoned him to the dining hall. What was going on?

He donned a soft fur-trimmed cloak, which always made him feel regal. He walked to the door and took a deep breath. Perhaps it went against his mother’s wishes to leave now, but so what? As Edward had said, what did a woman like her understand? Feeling emboldened, he pulled open the door and strode into the halls.

Something strange seemed to be amiss in the Corfe-Gate stronghold, something he could not fully describe. The servants dared to meet his eyes, then looked away with darting glances. They shuffled about on their feet and did not gossip to each other as usual. Something else was strange, as well. Normally the stronghold was surrounded with royal soldiers, reeves, and hearth companions of all the noblemen and women. But he noticed that many familiar faces, especially those of his mother's retainers, were missing from their usual posts.

Briefly he wandered out to the stables, curious whether Edward and his men had returned yet from the hunt, for the sun was sinking behind the hills. Edward and his men had not yet returned, he found; but even more surprisingly, a great many more horses were gone than Edward had taken with him. A large number of soldiers had gone somewhere. But where?

Puzzled and distraught, Ethelred remembered the ache in his belly, and decided this needed fixing first of all. He headed for the dining hall, hoping to find some manner of food there. A cloud of smoke wafting through the hall doors assured him that he must have the right idea. But to his astonishment, his mother and several lords sat at the table, huddled closely in heated conversation, and not a single plate of food could be found amongst them. The smoke came only from a blazing hearth-fire.

Alfryth spotted him from afar, and motioned to the men to cease speaking. "Ethelred," she hissed. "I told you to stay in your room!"

He tried to think of something clever and bold to say, but as he stared at the intimidating faces of the war-leaders and clergymen sitting at the table, he found his words lacking. "But I am hungry!"

Alfryth put on a smile, though it was so forced and fake that in a way it was worse than a scowl. "That's true, my boy, a growing man certainly needs his food."

It amazed Ethelred how differently his mother treated him when in the company of other people than when he and she were alone together. He realized that this had always been the case, but it was more noticeable today than ever. He wondered whether something had changed, or whether he was simply growing more perceptive.

Soon his mother was upon him, her sharp nails digging into his arm as she led him outside. The wind battered against them, cool with the coming night. "Ethelred, you are such a little child!" She hissed this to him as soon as they were out of the noblemen's hearing range.

He felt as if he was on the verge of understanding something now that he never had before, and this feeling gave him confidence. He stared back at his mother with all the defiance he could muster. "If you want me to act like more than a child, then you should tell me what's going on!"

She leaned back, the knots of her face untwisting as her eyebrows lifted with surprise. She was silent a moment. Then, exasperated, she declared, "Not today, Ethelred; of all days, not today! You will be plenty involved soon enough, of that I promise you."

"What do you mean, soon enough?"

"For God's sake, Ethelred, not now! Go away, fill your little belly in the kitchens if you must!"

She hurried back inside, and when she was gone, Ethelred remained standing awhile, huffing with anger. He could not comprehend all the emotions roiling through him. Suddenly he felt as if he hated his mother, though he didn't know why, and he silently prayed to God for forgiveness.

Then, having stood still long enough with his eyes pointed to the horizon, he discerned a shape approaching. It was a lone rider, charging through the gap in the hills at full speed; and as he rounded a certain slope, Ethelred was astonished to glimpse the gleam of a crown on his head.

"Edward!" he cried.

He ran down the slope to meet his brother, little fists bobbing at his sides, heart pounding in his chest. He did not even know why he ran with such urgency and yelled Edward's name so loudly.

Perhaps, if he had not, things would have happened differently.

It had frustrated Ethelred that so many events of the day had developed beyond his comprehension, and that he felt some great significance hanging in the air, but he could not even guess what it was. It filled him with pride that now, he was at the forefront of this new event. Several dozen soldiers peeked from the stronghold to see what all the fuss was about, but Ethelred was far ahead of them. He was the first to reach the king, who slouched strangely in his saddle, and whose brow twinkled with sweat in the fading sunlight.

"Hail, Ethelred," said King Edward cheerfully, though his voice rasped. Spittle dripped from his stallion's mouth, the hooves of which stomped dangerously close to Ethelred's feet. "Have you anything to drink?"

"I ... " Ethelred patted his tunic uselessly. He had nothing. He had not even eaten his own night meal, after all. "I am sorry, Edward, I don't." He glanced back to the stronghold, the sharp stones of which cast angry lines against the sky from this direction, and watched as a few men marched out of it. Someone else would provide water, surely, so he hurried to more important concerns while he could. "What happened to your hearth companions?"

"I'm ... not sure." Edward wiped his brow, though it continued to drip. "I don't know what disbanded us. Something must have frightened them, for they disappeared suddenly ... but I would have noticed the tracks of a bear, or wolf. It's, ridiculous, isn't it? A king searching for his own hearth companions!" He laughed, but no humor was in his voice.

Ethelred considered this. "We can get my mother's men to find them!" He thought he was being helpful, but Edward frowned. Then Ethelred remembered that most of his mother's men had been missing, anyway. He frowned as well.

"I think not, little brother." Ethelred began to understand his discomfort when a few soldiers from the stronghold reached the king's horse and surrounded it. Edward surprised everyone by kicking a man solidly in the face who dared seize the horse's reins. The servant fell back with a cry, clutching a bleeding nose. "Away, you filthy churls. Who has some ale? That's all I need."

"We'll fetch it for you," said a man, and Ethelred recognized him as one of his mother's retainers named Osrid, large and strapping. He looked the part of a soldier though he wore none of the usual fittings, except perhaps for the unusually large dirk strapped to his belt. Ethelred was glad to see him go.

"Away!" Edward was continuing to kick at the men lingering around him. At last they all backed off, but Edward drew his sword nonetheless, a dangerous look in his eyes. His horse pranced about uneasily, churning the rocky earth under its hooves, twisting its neck and snorting. Ethelred found the situation very strange and confusing. Everyone was silent as they waited, hearing little but Edward's snorting horse, and the hollow sound of the wind through the hills. Ethelred thought he could even hear the soft crashing of the waves upon the distant shore.

Everyone but Ethelred seemed to be expecting something. Expecting what?

With some relief, he recognized Alfryth's shape coming down the hillside. She held a large goblet in her slender, ringed fingers. Edward watched her approach with a scowl, though the look on Alfryth's face

beneath the fluttering veil was unusually sweet. She actually seemed happy to provide the king with this refreshment. Ethelred wished she would walk faster, for it seemed as if a great deal of time passed before she reached them, at which point the air seemed to thrum tangibly with tension.

“Has the game eluded you?” said the queen mother, pausing with the goblet outstretched. Meanwhile, her servant Osrid kept walking, moving around the horse.

Edward did not answer at first, only flashed his teeth as he put away his sword. Then he leaned over to grab the goblet. “The hunt is still on, Lady, and it will not stop until I—AAAGH!”

The sound that came from the king’s mouth was so terrible, it would ring in Ethelred’s ears for decades to come. Edward drew back, limbs flailing, clutching his side near his back. The goblet fell to the earth, clinking against the stones and splashing water on the horse’s hooves. The horse reared, twisting about, and revealed a shape darting quickly from behind it.

The shape was Osrid’s, and he held a bloody dagger.

“EDWARD!”

Arms fell upon Ethelred as if from the darkness, for night had fallen quickly and the world seemed full of shadows, reaching and grasping at him. “Edward!” he cried again. Hands pulled him back as he struggled, yet he could still hear his half-brother’s moans, and he saw the horse’s thrashing shape, another black mass against the dim red world. It neighed, hooves slicing the sky, and wheeled about. Ethelred gave another great heave to push himself above his captors, looking for Edward as the horse ran away. The king drooped in the saddle, still clinging there whether by determination or some fated mechanism, his auburn hair streaming behind him like the blood pouring from his stab-wound.

Then Ethelred’s eyes were blinded by his own tears, and a roar like thunder from his own pulse deafened him as he was dragged away. His sorrow and rage filled him up, and he was conscious of nothing else.

*

In his room a meal was waiting for him, but he could not bring himself to eat it. He ran to the window, underneath which his mother had posted guards, and he sagged against the wall, peering uselessly into the gray horizon. Edward was nowhere to be seen.

Edward was dead.

He had stopped crying for a short while, somewhere in the midst of his struggling and attempting to escape while his mother’s hearth

companions dragged him away and closed him in his room. Now the terrible truth struck him again, and it petrified him. For a moment he was too stunned to even start crying again. Ethelred had not seen Edward die, but he knew without a doubt that he was dead, at least by now. Alfryth would see to it.

Though he still could not move, a shudder shook him. He could hardly believe his mother's cruelty and evilness. She may not have held the knife that stabbed Edward in the side, but she surely orchestrated its movement. He felt so confused and foolish for not seeing her intention before. Was he, in a way, to blame? He knew Alfryth did not like Edward, and wanted her own son on the throne instead, but he never thought she would do something like this to get her way. Had he unknowingly helped her?

The door opened, and Ethelred shrank against the wall, cowering. There in the doorway stood Alfryth, but his mother looked different to him than she ever had before. Perhaps this was because he now saw her for who she truly was. Perhaps it was because she had freed her head of its veil and wimple, and some of her long chestnut hair fell freely around her face and shoulders. Her skin seemed more flawless than ever, glowing with triumph and power; her dark eyes blazed with energy.

And yet, at the sight of Ethelred cowering, her expression soured again.

"Ethelred. My son."

She turned and motioned to the retainers with a flick of her wrist, and they closed the doors behind her.

The dimly enclosed space now looked, to Ethelred, a great deal like how he imagined hell. The moonlight through the window provided a pale white glow to some corners of the room, but the rest of the chamber was filled with glaring orange candlelight and writhing, flickering shadows. Such shadows moved over the sharp angles of his mother's face as she stared at him, and the sight of her livid face filled Ethelred with both terror and rage.

"How could you?" he cried. The sobs returned to his throat like so many rising bubbles. "My brother. Poor Edward. He was always so kind to us. He could have been cruel. He could have been but he—"

"SILENCE!" Alfryth reached out suddenly, slender arm uncoiling from the heavy folds of her sleeve like a snake, and grabbed a candle. Fortunately, the force of her throw caused the flame to gush out before striking Ethelred's bed. "You are a *king* now! That is worth the death of one man; it is worth the death of hundreds of men! Worth it, at least, if

you are a *good king*, and not a sniveling spoiled child. So stop your worthless crying!"

Her words moved him, but only for a movement. True, he would be a king now. He would rise up to fill Edward's shoes. But would he be any better than Edward? He simply didn't understand. "But Edward was a good king. What am I to do differently?"

"Oh *stop* asking questions!" She stormed closer, grabbing another candle and lifting it high. Ethelred flinched, expecting her to throw it again. But it was worse than that this time. She swung it down, and the hot waxy end struck Ethelred's tunic, the flame flaring then snuffing out against the cloth. Ethelred yelled and curled up, shielding himself with the flesh of his back and the thin fabric of his cloak as she struck him again, and again, and again.

The candle snapped apart eventually, and she dropped it with a sickening thud. Her heaving breath roared in the silence. He uncurled slightly, trembling from head to foot. His back ached, and he knew he would have bruises. But he was no longer crying. His eyes were dry now, his gaze strangely vacant. Alfryth might not have noticed, for he could not bring himself to look at her; if she did notice she said nothing.

After a long and terrible silence, at last she turned and walked away. She paused as she pushed open the door.

"I'll ... send you some wine," she said. And then she left.

*

They crowned him at Kingston, where his brother and many kings before him had been crowned, and the people gathered in a great church and sang, their voices resounding against the tremendous walls.

"Glory be to the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost," they chanted. Some of them turned their eyes heavenwards, hands clasped in supplication; others peered at him from dirty faces, mumbling the prayer with lazy lips. Sometimes their eyes were curious and piercing, sometimes they were simply blank. Ethelred tried not to look at them, for they made his heart race and his palms sweat. He could not afford for his hands to be slippery, for both of them were clasped to the hands of the bishops on either side of him, leading him to the altar.

"Let thy hands be strengthened," chanted the bishops.

Ethelred tried to stare straight ahead, ignoring all the rest, trying to think of the crown and none of the responsibilities that went with it. He should be proud, his mother had said. He should be grateful. In any case, it was God's will, he told himself. He must accept it, just like the people here, who accepted him as King even though their eyes and

voices lacked love or devotion. So he tried to focus on the kingship alone, the glory of the coronation; but then he saw Archbishop Dunstan, standing at the altar, and even though he had known the archbishop would be there, he thought he might vomit from fear.

Archbishop Dunstan: the same old man who had baptized him as a baby and claimed that he would be a miserable man all his life. The man stared at him now with a blank expression, but Ethelred thought he detected the cold hatred behind the blue discs of his eyes. He was so very old, his shoulders stooped, his skin sagging, and yet he seemed to radiate with power. His heavy pallium glowed with the colors of a distant stained glass window, and glittered with golden pins and brooches.

For a moment, Ethelred feared that this man was more of a king than he was. He looked down at himself: at his soft flowing robes, at the golden-thread embroidery, at the thick brooch on his chest made of gold, blue glass, and garnet stone. Did all these fancy things make him a king? The thought filled him with doubt.

Hands pushed at him, and he realized these were the bishops, nudging him to perform his next act. Remembering his script, he let go and prostrated himself on the floor, fancy robes and all.

"We praise thee, oh God," sang the people. "We acknowledge thee to be the Lord."

His cheek pressed against the filthy floor, Ethelred felt inclined to agree with them. As long as the Lord was truly the one in power, all would be well, he thought.

At last the bishops helped lift him from the floor, and he knelt before Dunstan and the great coronation stone at the altar. All of the church fell silent, knowing that his turn came to speak. He took a deep breath and did so, trying not to let his voice waver, trying to fill it with the strength of a king.

"In the name of Christ, I promise three things to the Christian people my subjects. First, that the Church of God, and all the Christian people, shall always preserve true peace through our arbitration. Second, that I will forbid rapacity and all iniquities to every condition. Third, that I will command equity and mercy in all judgments, that to me and to you the gracious and merciful God may extend his mercy."

"Amen," said the people, and he exhaled with relief.

The prayers went on, and the smoke of the candles made him dizzy, and his ears rang with the never-ending words. All the while he stared at the foot of Dunstan's robes, as unwavering and steady as the man himself. Then the bishop held the crown over his head, and Ethelred could

hardly find the strength to breathe. He thought he could feel the weight of the large metal piece, though it had not yet descended.

“Almighty Creator, everlasting Lord, Governor of heaven and earth, the Maker and Disposer of angels and men, look down propitiously on our humble prayers, and multiply the gifts of thy blessing on this thy servant, whom with humble devotion we have chosen to be King of the Angles and the Saxons: surround him everywhere with the right hand of thy power, that, strengthened with the faithfulness of Abraham, the meekness of Moses, the courage of Joshua, the humility of David, and the wisdom of Solomon, he may be well pleasing to thee in all things, and may always advance in the way of justice with inoffensive progress.” (*)

All the words followed the script his mother had described to him; they were all normal and ceremonious statements. But Ethelred heard them now as if he had never heard them before, and they filled his head with a heavy burden. After a short while, he seemed to cease hearing them altogether, for it was too much to endure. How could he do all these things? How could all these people expect him to?

His lips continued to move, playing their expected role; so did his hands, accepting the gifts bestowed upon him. Dunstan continued to hold the crown high while Ethelred received the sword, a great heavy thing which sagged in his fingertips, sparkling with a gilt pommel. “May all the strength of his enemies be broken by the virtue of the spiritual sword, and may thou combat with him, so they may be utterly destroyed,” Dunstan prayed.

And then, at last, the archbishop lowered the crown, glittering as it descended to Ethelred’s head. The breath of the entire congregation seemed to catch and hold.

“May God crown thee with the crown of glory,” Dunstan intoned, “and with honor and justice, and the strength of fortitude, that by virtue of our benediction, and by a right faith of the various fruits of good works, thou may attain to the crown of the everlasting kingdom, through his bounty, whose kingdom endures for ever.”

At last the crown fell upon Ethelred’s hair, and he breathed deep, closing his eyes. It was only a thing, he knew; and yet for a moment, he felt as if it filled him with strength, energizing and empowering him.

When he opened his eyes, he saw Dunstan leaning down, the fire of his holy gaze boring into him, and his blood ran cold. When next he spoke, Ethelred did not know if it was loud enough for all the gathering to hear. And yet to him, the words seemed louder than any spoken yet.

“Since you have taken the kingdom by the death of thy brother, hear the word of God.”

Ethelred could only stare up at the archbishop in horror. This was not part of the script, and this did not sound like something that had been said to any other king before.

Dunstan straightened up, eyes scanning the congregation. His voice rose, making the stone pillars tremble. “Thus saith the Lord God: the sin of thy mother, and of the accomplices of her base design, shall not be washed out but by much blood of the kingdom’s wretched inhabitants; and such evils shall come upon the English nation as they have never suffered from the time they came to Engla-lond until then.”

People murmured and whispered to each other; a general wave of moans seemed to float over the room. The sweat of Ethelred’s hands dripped down the precious metals of his new sword. His mother’s sins could “not be washed out but by much blood of the kingdom’s wretched inhabitants.” What could it possibly mean?

Whatever it meant, Ethelred knew it would be terrible.

**

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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** (July 27)

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

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

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

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

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

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, as compiled by various monks until the year 1140, are my primary sources of information. So, too, are 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. Other important sources are listed below. A full list of consulted sources is posted on <http://talesofmercia.wordpress.com>.

WORKS CITED

Freeman, Edward A. *Old English History for Children*. London, MacMillan and Co., 1869.

(*)Silver, Thomas. *The Coronation service or Consecration of the Anglosaxon Kings as it Illustrates the Origins of the Constitution*. Baxter, Printer, Oxford. 1831

From the same author on Feedbacks

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 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 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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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 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 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.

The Fifth Lost Tale of Mercia: Alfgifu the Orphan (2010)

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

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

The 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 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.

Ashes of Dearen: Book 1 (2011)

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

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

Last Tales of Mercia 3: Elwyna the Exile (2012)

In the late 1040's, the first group of Norman lords arrives in Engla-lond. King Edward believes they are allies. But as Lord Richard FitzScrob begins to construct the first Norman castle in Engla-lond, the conflict between Normans and Anglo-Saxons builds slowly to one of the greatest wars in English history.

In Last Tale 3, Elwyna--the exiled wife of Lord Godric--lives quietly in the woods with her lover, Dumbun, until a group of Norman soldiers come to the woods to obtain timber for Richard's castle. The Norman knights treat everything in Elwyna's home as their own--even Elwyna herself. Not sure what to do, Elywna realizes she must go crawling back to Godric for help or somehow take matters into her own hands.

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 and each other, they can be read independently.

Last Tales of Mercia 5: Osgifu the Sister (2012)

Osgifu finds out that her sister, Elwyna, may soon be hanged for murder. She faces a hard decision of whether to leave matters to fate or oppose the Normans herself.

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.

Last Tales of Mercia 2: Richard the Norman (2012)

In 1051, King Edward calls upon the lords of Engla-lond to protect him from the rebellious earl of Wessex, Lord Goodwin. Richard FitzScrob is a Norman lord who has only been in Engla-lond for a few years and struggles to provide military support. Eager to teach his son the pride and culture of their Norman heritage, he determines to strengthen his stance in Engla-lond, no matter what the cost to the Saxons beneath him.

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 and each other, they can be read independently.

Lost Tales of Mercia (2012)

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

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

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

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.

Last Tales of Mercia 4: Ralph the Knight (2012)

When a fight between a Norman and a Saxon gets out of hand, Sir Ralph must employ the help of a knight named Geoffrey to cover up the unfortunate incident. 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.

Last Tales of Mercia 6: Hereward the Wake (2012)

Young Hereward ("the Wake") finds out that a Norman castle is being built in Shropshire and rides with a group of rowdy boys to cause trouble. 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.

The Key to Castle Krondolee (2013)

A foreigner surprises everyone in Castle Krondolee when she claims to possess the key to a room that has remained closed for centuries, its contents unknown. Arken Jeridar, descended from the god of greed, schemes to win the key for himself and the queen's love all at once. But success may come at a far greater cost than he ever expected.



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