

Viking 2: Sworn Brother

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Extract

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To my holy and blessed master, Abbot Geraldus,

As requested of your unworthy servant, I send this, the second of the writings of the false monk Thangbrand. Alas, I must warn you that many times the work is even more disturbing than its antecedent. So deeply did the author's life descend into iniquity that many times I have been obliged, when reading his blasphemies, to set aside the pages that I might pray to Our Lord to cleanse my mind of such abominations and beseech Him to forgive the sinner who penned them. For here is a tale of continuing deceit and idolatry, of wantonness and wicked sin as well as violent death. Truly, the coils of deception, fraud and murder drag almost all men down to perdition.

The edges of many pages are scorched and burned by fire. From this I deduce that this Pharisee began to write his tale of depravity before the great conflagration so sadly destroyed our holy cathedral church of St Peter at York on 19 September in the year of our Lord 1069. By diligent enquiry I have learned that the holocaust revealed a secret cavity in the wall of the cathedral library, in which these writings had been concealed. A God-fearing member of our flock, making this discovery, brought the documents to my predecessor as librarian with joy, believing them to contain pious scripture. Lest further pages be discovered to dismay the unwary, I took it upon myself to visit the scene of that devastation and search the ruins. By God's mercy I found no further

examples of the reprobate's writings, but with a heavy heart I observed that nothing now remains of our once-great cathedral church, neither the portico of St Gregory, nor the glass windows nor the panelled ceilings. Gone are the thirty altars. Gone too is the great altar to St Paul. So fierce was the heat of the fire that I found splatterings of once-molten tin from the bellcote roof. Even the great bell, fallen from the tower, lay misshapen and dumb. Mysterious indeed are the ways of the Lord that these profane words of the ungodly should survive such destruction.

So great is my abhorrence of what has emerged from that hidden pustule of impiety that I have been unable to complete my reading of all that was found. There remains one more bundle of documents which I have not dared to examine.

On behalf of our community, I pray for your inspired guidance and that the Almighty Lord may keep you securely in bliss. Amen.

Aethelred

Sacristan and Librarian

Written in the month of October in the Year of our Lord One thousand and seventy-one.

ONE



I LOST MY virginity – to a king's wife.

Few people can make such a claim, least of all when hunched over a desk in a monastery scriptorium while pretending to make a fair copy of St Luke's gospel, though in fact writing a life's chronicle. But that is how it was and I remember the scene clearly.

The two of us lay in the elegant royal bed, Aelfgifu snuggled luxuriously against me, her head resting on my shoulder, one arm flung contentedly across my ribs as if to own me. I could smell a faint perfume from the glossy sweep of dark chestnut hair which spread across my chest and cascaded down onto the pillow we shared. If Aelfgifu felt any qualms, as the woman who had just introduced a nineteen-year-old to the delights of lovemaking but who was already the wife of Knut, the most powerful ruler of the northern lands, she did not show them. She lay completely at ease, motionless. All I could feel was the faint pulse of her heart and the regular waft of her breath across my skin. I lay just as still. I neither dared to move nor wanted to. The enormity and the wonder of what had happened had yet to ebb. For the first time in my life I had experienced utter joy in the embrace of a beautiful woman. Here was a marvel which once tasted could never be forgotten.

The distant clang of a church bell broke into my reverie. The

sound slid through the window embrasure high in the queen's chambers and disturbed our quiet tranquillity. It was repeated, then joined by another bell and then another. Their metallic clamour reminded me where I was: London. No other city that I had visited boasted so many churches of the White Christ. They were springing up everywhere and the king was doing nothing to obstruct their construction, the king whose wife was now lying beside me, skin to skin.

The sound of the church bells made Aelfgifu stir. 'So, my little courtier,' she murmured, her voice muffled against my chest, 'you had better tell me something about yourself. My servants inform me that your name is Thorgils, but no one seems to know much about you. It's said you have come recently from Iceland. Is that correct?'

'Yes, in a way,' I replied tentatively. I paused, for I did not know how to address her. Should I call her 'my lady'? Or would that seem servile after the recent delight of our mingling, which she had encouraged with her caresses, and which had wrung from me the most intimate words? I hugged her closer and tried to combine both affection and deference in my reply, though I suspect my voice was trembling slightly.

'I arrived in London only two weeks ago. I came in the company of an Icelandic skald. He's taken me on as his pupil to learn how compose court poetry. He's hoping to find employment with . . .' Here my voice trailed away in embarrassment, for I was about to say 'the king'. Of course Aelfgifu guessed my words. She gave my ribs a little squeeze of encouragement and said, 'So that's why you were standing among my husband's skalds at the palace assembly. Go on.' She did not raise her head from my shoulder. Indeed, she pressed her body even more closely against me.

'I met the skald – his name's Herfid – last autumn on the island of Orkney off the Scottish coast, where I had been dropped off by a ship that rescued me from the sea of Ireland. It's a complicated story, but the sailors found me in a small boat that

was sinking. They were very kind to me, and so was Herfid.' Tactfully I omitted to mention that I had been found drifting in what was hardly more than a leaky wickerwork bowl covered with cowskin, after I had been deliberately set afloat. I doubted whether Aelfgifu knew that this is a traditional punishment levied on convicted criminals by the Irish. My accusers had been monks too squeamish to spill blood. And while it was true that I had stolen their property – five decorative stones prised from a bible cover – I had only taken the baubles in an act of desperation and I felt not a shred of remorse. Certainly I did not see myself as a jewel thief. But I thought this would be a foolish revelation to make to the warm, soft woman curled up against me, particularly when the only item she was wearing was a valuable-looking necklace of silver coins.

'What about your family?' asked Aelfgifu, as if to satisfy herself on an important point.

'I don't have one,' I replied. 'I never really knew my mother. She died while I was a small child. She was part Irish, I'm told, and a few years ago I travelled to Ireland to find out more about her, but I never succeeded in learning anything. Anyhow, she didn't live with my father and she had already sent me off to stay with him by the time she died. My father, Leif, owns one of the largest farms in a country called Greenland. I spent most of my childhood there and in an even more remote land called Vinland. When I was old enough to try to make my own living I had the idea of becoming a professional skald as I've always enjoyed story-telling. All the best skalds come from Iceland, so I thought I would try my luck there.'

Again, I was being sparing with the truth. I did not tell Aelfgifu that my father Leif, known to his colleagues as 'the Lucky', had never been married to my mother, either in the Christian or pagan rite. Nor that Leif's official wife had repudiated her husband's illegitimate son and refused to have me in her household. That was why I had spent most of my life being shuttled from one country to the next, searching for some stability

and purpose. But it occurred to me at that moment, as I lay next to Aelfgifu, that perhaps my father's luck spirit, his hamingja as the Norse say, had transferred to me. How else could I explain the fact that I had lost my virginity to the consort of Knut, ruler of England, and royal claimant to the thrones of Denmark and Norway?

It all happened so suddenly. I had arrived in London with my master Herfid only ten days earlier. He and the other skalds had been invited to a royal assembly held by King Knut to announce the start of his new campaign in Denmark, and I had gone along as Herfid's attendant. During the king's speech from the throne, I had been aware that someone in Knut's entourage was staring at me as I stood among the royal skalds. I had no idea who Aelfgifu was, only that, when our eyes met, there was no mistaking the appetite in her gaze. The day after Knut sailed for Denmark, taking his army with him, I had received a summons to attend Aelfgifu's private apartments at the palace.

'Greenland, Iceland, Ireland, Scotland . . . you are a wanderer, aren't you, my little courtier,' Aelfgifu said, 'and I've never even heard of Vinland.' She rolled onto one side and propped her head on a hand, so that she could trace the profile of my face, from forehead to chin, with her finger. It was to become a habit of hers. 'You're like my husband,' she said without embarrassment. 'It's all that Norse blood, never at home, always rushing about, constantly on the move, with a wanderlust that wants to look beyond the horizon or incite some action. I don't even try to understand it. I grew up in the heart of the English countryside, about as far from the sea as you can get. It's a calmer life, and though it can be a little dull at times, it's what I like. Anyhow, dullness can always be brightened up if you know what you are doing.'

I should have guessed her meaning, but I was too naive; besides, I was smitten by her sophistication and beauty. I was so intoxicated with what had happened that I was incapable of asking myself why a queen should take up with a young man so rapidly.

I was yet to learn how a woman can be attracted instantly and overwhelmingly by a man, and that women who live close to the seat of power can indulge their craving with speed and certainty if they wish. That is their prerogative. Years later I saw an empress go so far as to share her realm with a young man – half her age – who took her fancy, though of course I never stood in that relationship to my wondrous Aelfgifu. She cared for me, of that I am sure, but she was worldly enough to measure out her affection to me warily, according to opportunity. For my part, I should have taken heed of the risk that came from an affair with the king's wife, but I was so swept away by my feelings that nothing on earth would have deterred me from adoring her.

'Come,' she said abruptly, 'it's time to get up. My husband may be away on another of those ambitious military expeditions of his, but if I'm not seen about the palace for several hours people might get curious as to where I am and what I'm doing. The palace is full of spies and gossips, and my prim and prudish rival would be only too delighted to have a stick to beat me with.'

Here I should note that Aelfgifu was not Knut's only wife. He had married her to gain political advantage when he and his father, Svein Forkbeard, were plotting to extend their control beyond the half of England which the Danes already held after more than a century of Viking raids across what they called the 'English Sea'. Aelfgifu's people were Saxon aristocracy. Her father had been an ealdorman, their highest rank of nobility, who owned extensive lands in the border country where the Danish possessions rubbed up against the kingdom of the English ruler, Ethelred. Forkbeard calculated that if his son and heir had a high-born Saxon as wife, the neighbouring ealdormen would be more willing to defect to the Danish cause than to serve their own native monarch, whom they had caustically nicknamed 'the Ill-Advised' for his uncanny ability to wait until the last moment before taking any action and then do the wrong thing at exactly the wrong time. Knut was twenty-four years old when he took Aelfgifu to be his wife, she was two years younger. By the time Aelfgifu invited me to her

bedchamber four years later, she was a mature and ripe woman despite her youthful appearance and beauty, and her ambitious husband had risen to become the undisputed king of all England, for Ethelred was in his grave, and – as a step to reassure the English nobility – Knut had married Ethelred's widow, Emma.

Emma was fourteen years older than Knut, and Knut had not bothered to divorce Aelfgifu. The only people who might have objected to his bigamy, namely the Christian priests who infested Emma's household, had found a typically weasel excuse. Knut, they said, had never properly married Aelfgifu because there had been no Christian wedding. In their phrase it was a marriage 'in the Danish custom', *ad mores danaos* – how they loved their church Latin – and did not need to be set aside. Now, behind their hands, they were calling Aelfgifu 'the concubine'. By contrast Knut's earls, his personal retinue of noblemen from Denmark and the Norse lands, approved the dual marriage. In their opinion this was how great kings should behave in matters of state and they liked Aelfgifu. With her slender figure and grace, she was a far more attractive sight at royal assemblies than the dried-up widow Emma with her entourage of whispering prelates. They found that Aelfgifu behaved more in the way that a well-regarded woman in the Norse world should: she was down to earth, independent minded and at times – as I was shortly to discover – she was an accomplished schemer.

Aelfgifu rose from our love bed with typical decisiveness. She slid abruptly to the side, stepped onto the floor – giving me a heart-melting glimpse of her curved back and hips – and, picking up the pale grey and silver shift that she had discarded an hour earlier, slid the garment over her nakedness. Then she turned to me, as I lay there, almost paralysed with fresh longing. 'I'll arrange for my maid to show you discreetly out of the palace. She can be trusted. Wait until I contact you again. You've got another journey to make, though not nearly as far as your previous ones.' Then she turned and vanished behind a screen.