

PROLOGUE

17th of September, 1066

Aldwyn rode his steed hard through the black, the exhausted breaths of man and horse escaped into the night. The courier's steed had been pushed beyond the limit of its stamina, but they had finally reached the next of his many destinations.

Dismounting, he led his tired mare towards the stables with one hand, the other patting the pouch on his belt to ensure it had not slipped off in the journey. A nearby wooden sign read Rother's Rest and the building it accompanied made for a humble, comforting sight after the long ride.

"Hold, traveller!" a voice called out.

Aldwyn's hand shot to the sword at his belt. "Who goes there?"

"Just a simple innkeeper, friend. What brings you here in this hour?"

"I come on business from the Earl of Northumbria. By his decree, I require a fresh horse from your stable immediately."

“A horse? I’m afraid that I only have one horse and my guests’ horses are off limits.”

It was Aldwyn’s turn to frown. “I have an urgent message for the Crown, sir. You may have my horse in exchange for yours. Does this-”

The courier trailed off as something caught his eye: an enormous head gliding through the darkness. At first glimpse, a less informed man might have mistaken it for a dragon or something equally monstrous. Aldwyn, however, had seen such a shape once before. His eyes trailed down its length to the tell-tale silhouettes of a dozen men standing upon the deck of the ship. Frozen in horror, his eyes lowered further, catching the shapes of several men moving up through the grass. The men stilled and for a brief second he sensed their eyes meet. Silence fell over both groups for a moment before Aldwyn burst into action.

“They’re here!” Aldwyn shouted and leapt onto his horse. As he turned the horse towards the road, pain shot through his leg as a knife blade buried itself in his calf. Crying out in shock, Aldwyn looked down at the innkeeper who had betrayed him. Drawing his own sword, he swung the blade down in a vertical arc just too slow; the innkeeper stumbled backwards out of reach. Without a moment to lose, the courier pushed his exhausted horse into the fastest gallop it could muster.

“So far inland already... I have to warn the King they’re coming!” he thought.

The hostiles were on the road now, a glance backwards told him, and he could see that several of them had brought bows. One arrow shot past him, barely registering as a flash of dark on dark. A sharp pain jolted through his body as the second hit, piercing

layers of padded cotton into his back. A better trained or equipped horseman might have reacted with more calm and been able to stay saddled under pressure, but he was nothing more than a messenger and the impact and pain was too much for him.

Arrows flitted past Aldwyn as his world spun about him, dizzy shock reeling through his head. He tried to twist his body, reaching back to try and feel for the arrow, but only succeeded in losing his safe seat upon the horse. He hit the ground hard and his mouth opened in silent pain as he watched the steed slow to a trot, confused by his sudden fall. Shaking his head, he tried to gather his senses; the arrow was still buried in his back, but there was no longer any hint of pain. In fact, he couldn't feel much of anything in his limbs, which now dangled limply at his side. He tried to move his body but his limbs would not respond however hard he willed them. He was helpless.

The prone messenger could only wait and watch in horror until the shadowed figures of the Vikings appeared over him. Silent and grim, the predators pinned his arms beneath their boots and tore the pouch off his belt. Aldwyn listened as they rifled through the contents, but could not understand their speech. He could only assume that they knew the purpose of his mission. Whimpering, he let out a soft prayer to the Lord, sensing that the end was near. One of the northerners raised an axe overhead, calling out in some barbaric tongue.

“Any last words?” the voice of the innkeeper whispered into his ear.

Aldwyn closed his eyes as tight as he could, whispering “Amen” as the axe fell.

CHAPTER 1: A SHADOW OVER ENGLAND

18th of September, 1066

Rays of bright dawn sun pierced the clouds over the town of Tamworth, bringing a cheerful morning glow to fields of unharvested wheat and the reddened autumn orchards. Sited at the confluence of the rivers Tame and Anker, the town was both the capital of Mercia and the second largest burgh between York and London. Her ancient Saxon fort was situated at the main crossing points of the rivers and served as both a meeting ground for Mercian nobility and a strong defensive position against any invaders.

It was market day and the centre of town was bustling with traders and independent farmers come to sell their wares. Guards sporting the livery of Mercia patrolled the streets, watchful for bandits, pickpockets or anything else that might threaten this important cog in the English economy. Above the fort flew a banner that proudly displayed the wyvern of the King. Flown

just below it was the blue and yellow banner of Mercia, symbolizing the submission of Tamworth and Mercia to the English Crown.

Edwin, the Earl of Mercia, swept his arm in a wide arc across the view for the sake of his guest. "There you are Edgar, Tamworth in all her humble splendour. She is a lovely town, no?"

"It's a good view, Edwin. Not as large or noisy as London or Winchester, but it's a charming place."

Edwin knew Edgar Aetheling well; he was the cousin to King Harold Godwinson, and although wet behind the ears he was one of the richest and most powerful men in England. Like most of the House of Wessex he was tall, stern-gazed and had a full head of light brown hair. Despite a strong jaw, however, the soft fuzz on his lip and boyish features betrayed his youth. Edgar had only just come of age and was perhaps half Edwin's age. The Aetheling (a Prince in Frankish terms) had demonstrated an interest in strengthening the ties with Edwin and Morcar following a feast nearly a year ago, and truthfully Edwin was surprised that he was so eager to meet him still. The brothers had decided not to support his bid for the throne, instead throwing their lot behind Harold Godwinson, the Earl of Wessex.

"Charming is a word you could use for it, but I wouldn't be fooled by her looks, Edgar. The people of Mercia form the chief bulwark of defence against the mountain men of Wales. They're a tough and hardy lot and have seen frequent war with Norseman and Celt alike," Edwin smiled in pride. "Of course the real jewel is still waiting for when we reach York."

"I'm sure it will be lovely," Edgar mused. "I hope

that your brother will be as accommodating as you have been. Now that Harold has taken the throne, I have to admit, I feel short of friends and allies alike.”

“I can understand your disappointment in being passed over as King, Edgar, but it is better to be Aetheling than nothing, is it not? You are still much, much younger than the King, when he dies it is not impossible for you to become King in his stead. After all, you are grandson of Edmund Ironside and Harold’s sons are no older than you are.”

“I have to assume Harold will leave his lands to his sons after he passes on, in which case there will be no room for doubt that Edmund or Godwine will inherit the throne in my place. Then their sons will be next, and my line will end disappointingly,” Edgar grumbled. He stared darkly over the wall, as if imagining some far-off potential. “One way or another, I must find a way for my name to be remembered throughout history, so that my family lineage will be proud of me. I want to make God proud of me as well, so that I can be welcomed in Heaven as a hero of men.”

“You should not think so bleakly, Edgar Aetheling. Tonight we eat well and drink, and then make for York. Best not to ruin a good celebration with such black thoughts; God will see we all find our place in the end, I promise you that.”

Edgar did not quite smile at Edwin’s words, but he nodded approvingly. “You are a good man, Edwin, and I am honoured to hold the friendship of your family. I hope that God finds a good future for all of us, as you say.”

“What future could be better than Heaven? As for our time here, one can never have too many friends,

that's something I like to think." Edwin wrapped an arm around the other's shoulder. "What of you, is there any news of import from the south?"

"The usual court gossip, I'm afraid. Queen Edith may be pregnant again and I think Gyrth and Leofwine are still arguing over rights to London markets. Just about everyone has been watching the English Channel for signs of invaders. I suppose you heard the Pope has given his blessing and support to William the Bastard?"

That put Edwin off slightly and he wrinkled his nose. "I actually had not. That is bad for the sake of our King, once people hear that the Pope has taken a side in their feud, faith will drop in the House of Godwin's right to rule this land."

"With any luck, the King of France will try to keep the Normans in line."

"Ha, unlikely!" the Earl snorted. "He's just a boy, and they say that he's little more than a prisoner in Paris, prey to the whims of what his larger, more powerful vassals decide is necessary."

"I suppose so..." Edgar paused, thinking his next words through carefully. "I have been meaning to ask you, Edwin. Why is it you have not remarried?"

Edwin exhaled sharply, surprised at the sudden, uncomfortable question. "It is a long story, Edgar, perhaps too long for today. Suffice to say I have not found a woman who makes my heart beat, nor an alliance worth sealing in blood. Besides, as my freedom lasts, there are many eligible women whose beds I can fill yet, eh?" He grinned and elbowed Edgar.

"Ha, it is good to know your time has not gone to waste! You know, there are rumours that the King has

considered you or your brother as a possible candidate for marriage. There are also rumours that you have become estranged from the King and wouldn't be interested in such a marriage..."

Edwin was even more thrown off by Edgar's insistence on pushing the matter. Edwin's reply was made in a far more serious tone. "I say that is a hefty accusation to make, since the King has made no approach regarding his daughters. An opportunity to tie oneself into the Royal House is not turned down lightly, nor do I harbour hatred or disloyalty to our King. Who has said this about me?"

"It does not matter, just idle chatter. No, I suppose it was less the marriage I was interested in and more your stance on the King..." The Aetheling's face twisted into a forced smile. Edwin didn't like it, but he realised he was being probed for answers. "I myself am greatly upset by the situation we find our Kingdom in, and I fear our King has drawn God's anger."

"Our King is...an excellent warrior and a brave, honourable man. Of course, we have always questioned whether support of him was the right decision. Strong as his arm may be, he lacks the kind of diplomatic and political nous to keep our enemies off our backs. How long were his hosts mobilized for fear of a Norman invasion, draining the royal coffers?" Edwin asked.

"Too long, many say." Edgar shook his head. "I am loyal to our King, just like every other honourable Saxon. Still, I have my doubts about the King's recent decisions. As I said, I fear that God has forsaken us and that we deserved a wiser and more pious King. He's good at fighting, had I been King I would have of

course named him Marshall; he's owed that much as Earl of Wessex."

"Wishing gets us nowhere, and its far better that we have Harold Godwinson than William the Bastard or the Viking kings. I ask you this, Aetheling: do you think you could have done better? Could you have prevented this silent confrontation with the men across the channel?"

"Of course!" Edgar scoffed. "For starters I would not have pledged to support William's tenuous claim to our throne to begin with."

"That's little more than a rumour. There is no proof that Harold ever made such a promise, nor do I find it likely that he would have. If you ask me the Normans likely falsified such a claim so that the power-hungry bastard could put us into this position."

"Maybe, but then why has Harold not denied it with more vigour and tried to turn the church and William's allies against him?"

The two fell into silence and Edwin stared down at the rivers' snakelike forms, watching as sunlight glistened back at him from the water. After a minute of sombre thought, Edwin was finally first to speak.

"I agree, the situation is bad, but what can we do? We cannot change the past, only look to the future," he said.

Edgar opened his mouth, but whatever words the Prince had planned were forgotten as the head of Edwin's advisor Leofric peered through the battlements' access hatch. "Lord Edwin! A messenger has arrived from Sheffield; I...I think you'll want to hear his words personally."

The two nobles exchanged a mutual glance of con-

cern before rushing from the battlements down into the large building. Serving as a single large meeting hall and a resting place for the nobles defending the town, it was well furnished and decorated. Sitting at a table was a bedraggled courier sporting the clotted remnant of a gash across his forehead. Upon seeing the nobles arrive, he immediately dragged himself to his feet and bowed.

“My Lord Edwin, I come bearing grave tidings. Norsemen have attacked Sheffield and several surrounding villages. They came in the night and quickly overwhelmed the watch, slaughtering them and demanding our surrender. I only just escaped with my life.”

“Vikings...” Edwin gritted his teeth. “Trust a beautiful day to hold foul tidings such as this. How many were there?”

“I am not sure my lord. The only other thing I was meant to give you was this,” he said, extending his hand to present a piece of cloth. “It is a scrawling of the banners the Norse carried; the priest who saw it believed it would be important.”

Edgar took the cloth before Edwin could and unfolded it. “Why would simple raiders bear banners? A raven is typical enough, but I do not recognize the other...”

“I do...” Edwin sighed as he looked over Edgar’s shoulder. “That is the banner of king Harald of Norway. This may not be a simple raid, I fear that we face a full-scale invasion. Take this cloth and find another messenger, make a copy of it and then split up. One of you goes to London, the other to Winchester. The King must know about this as soon as possible.”

“What do we do, Edwin?” the Aetheling asked.

“We fight, of course,” Edwin said as he gestured to Leofric. “Send word to all our vassals and compatriots: Mercia and Northumbria must mobilize for war. Levy every man we can spare, for the Vikings would not launch an invasion unless they had brought their full might. They’ll likely march on York first, Sheffield is probably just a distraction to slow us down and intimidate us, or lure us into underestimating the size of their host.”

“So we march on them with every banner we can raise. They won’t know what hit them!” Edgar slapped his open palm with a fist. “My retinue is small, but we’ll join you and see to it that the Norsemen are crushed for good.”

“Underestimating the enemy is exactly what they want you to do, Edgar. War is not a game, and if it were then we would not play it on their terms. If we march against them without the King at our backs, we are likely to find only death waiting for us.”

Leofric laid out a crude but functional map of England. “Here’s York, as you said it is an old Danish city and they’ll see it as a matter of pride to retake it. After that they’ll probably be looking to raid for treasure and supplies. I’d expect...” he said, then stopped to think for a moment. “I’d expect them to meet somewhere around here,” he tapped the map. “Stamford Bridge. It’s the best place I can think of to muster supplies for a march south.”

Edgar continued to grin. “Then Stamford Bridge shall be our place of battle. The Vikings will not likely expect such swift resistance; we can crush them while they’re still celebrating their victory. If the King’s men do arrive, they can help us clean up.”

“Did you not hear any of this?” Edwin gave the young boy a dark look. “It is likely the Norwegians outnumber us considerably, even with Morcar’s forces. We need the King’s aid or there will be no victory, only defeat.”

“If we don’t at least make a show of force and strike at them while they’re vulnerable, then we’re just giving them free reign to attack us when they feel ready. At least if we march out, we make it clear we’re not just ignoring them but are ready for a fight.”

“The boy has a point, Edwin.” Leofric looked at his master sternly. “If we just wait here, they’ll only have more time to prepare for an attack at a time and place of their choosing.”

Edwin looked at their expectant faces, shook his head and turned away. “I’ll make my decision in a few days once the levies begin to arrive. If the King proves unwilling or unable to aid us, then we will do what we have to in order to protect the realm. God help us.”