

SECOND EDITION

the Briton and the Dane
LEGACY

MARY ANN BERNAL



The Briton and the Dane: Legacy 2nd edition
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For

Alex and Kerry
Alex, Ana and Addy

Dedicated to the memory of

MSG Lance S. Cornett
U.S. Army Special Operations Command
and the fallen
military and civilian heroes
in the ongoing fight against terror

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Novels by Mary Ann Bernal

The Briton and the Dane: Concordia

The Briton and the Dane Trilogy

The Briton and the Dane

The Briton and the Dane: Birthright

The Briton and the Dane: Legacy

Preface

Southeast Britannia Two Years Earlier

The Pilgrims spoke softly amongst themselves as they walked the forest path. Brother Martel had favored the well traveled main road, but their leader chose to save time by following a more direct route through the woods since the tired band of travelers wished to reach the abbey before *Compline*.

Sunbeams illuminated the lush green foliage where soft breezes rustled the leaves in the towering trees while furry creatures scuttled between overgrown shrubs as a doe and her fawn jumped over a fallen tree.

“You seem unsettled,” Sidonius whispered. “What troubles you?”

“We are easy prey,” Brother Martel murmured while pointing to the sloping terrain and massive oaks overshadowing the rock-strewn trail.

Sidonius nodded, but he noticed that Brother Martel kept his hand instinctively upon the pommel of his sword as both men warily searched amongst the trees for any sign of mischief while walking deeper into the forest.

Sidonius kept Tarren protectively close and was grateful that the little ones slept. He whispered comforting words when he saw the fear in her eyes while offering to take Emidus.

“No, carrying two is tiring, but I will give you the boy should the need arise,” Sidonius murmured.

Tarren smiled anxiously, but she grasped Sidonius’ hand as she, too, scoured the threatening landscape. She tightened the wrap carrier when Concordia stirred, comforting the child silently when a flock of chirping birds flew frantically out of the swaying treetops just as mounted warriors rode over the crest of a nearby hill.

Bone chilling howls and war cries resonated throughout the woodland as brigands with drawn swords rapidly approached the startled travelers. Women screamed as they ran amongst the trees, but the men grasped the reins of the seasoned warhorses and tried to unseat their attackers, but they fell to the ground with wounds that would readily mend.

“Save your family!” Brother Martel shouted to Sidonius as he freed his weapon and prepared for battle. “Seek refuge at King Alfred’s court.”

“Leave with us,” Sidonius yelled while freeing his dagger. “You are but one sword.”

“My sword will give you time to flee. Await me in Winchester,” Brother Martel replied. “Go! Quickly!”

Tarren was terrified as a mounted fighter charged towards them, but Brother Martel easily deflected the blow, yet he was not able to defend himself against a crazed fighter who ferociously wielded his sword and savagely slashed the holy man’s eyes. Blood seeped down Brother Martel’s face as the blinded religious stumbled against a warhorse. He instinctively grabbed the reins, his hands grasping for his mounted enemy, but he fell to his knees when a spear penetrated his back.

Sidonius grabbed Tarren’s arm, leading her away from the carnage and headed towards the river. Emidus and Concordia screamed as they tried to wiggle free, but the little ones cried uncontrollably when they failed to loosen the wrap carrier.

Sidonius and Tarren were out of breath when they reached the edge of a cliff where the mighty roar of a waterfall deafened the screams echoing throughout the forest as the women were ravaged by their attackers.

The cool spray gently caressed their faces as Sidonius and Tarren looked upon the gushing water crashing upon the rocks, the turbulent river flowing towards the sea. Sidonius looked at the large boulders along the riverbed, scouring the steep and rocky terrain for overgrown trails and hidden caves.

“Do not be foolish,” a fearsome horseman said while pulling on the reins. “Your choice is simple. Take your chances with me or be enslaved.”

“We would be in your debt,” Sidonius replied while helping Tarren onto the animal’s back.

Tarren cradled Concordia, leaning against the stranger as Sidonius swung himself atop the charger, but Emidus screamed when he found himself wedged between his protectors.

“Fear not, little one,” Sidonius murmured. “We are safe.”

Lucian smiled as the well disciplined animal picked its way carefully along the narrow path that followed the winding river as they disappeared amongst the trees.

“Brother Gervase!” A young monk cried as he ran through the abbey gate and headed towards the sickrooms. “There has been an attack in the woods! I do not know how many have been wounded or slain!”

“Fetch a wagon!” Brother Gervase yelled while grabbing a healer’s bag and running out the door.

It did not take long for the holy men to reach the clearing where the vicious attack had occurred. Brother Gervase saw the vultures circling above the motionless bodies when he reached the crest of the sloping terrain. He ran down the hill, stumbling as he hurriedly approached the first victim. He knelt beside the fallen Pilgrim and gently pressed his fingers against the man’s neck.

“He is with the Lord,” Brother Gervase whispered as he made the Sign of the Cross before approaching the Pilgrim who had been felled by the dreaded spear.

Brother Gervase knelt beside Brother Martel’s body and was surprised that he still lived. Blood trickled from the gaping wound as Brother Gervase deftly removed the formidable weapon. He looked compassionately upon the wounded man’s swollen, blood-caked face, and feared the holy man’s sight had been taken.

“Where is the wagon?” Brother Gervase shouted. “His wounds are grave!”

The frightened monk ran towards the crest of the hill, but he was relieved when he saw the wagon was almost upon them.

“Quickly!” The young monk shouted. “One lives!”

Brother Gervase watched as his skillful apprentices carefully lifted Brother Martel into the wagon. The younger monk nodded to Brother Gervase as he jumped onto the seat, grabbed the reins and hit the animal’s back. The wagon creaked and the wheels squealed as the horse trotted through the vast forest. Brother Gervase wanted to push the horse harder and was tempted to take the reins, but he managed to conceal his growing impatience and silently praised the Lord when they finally reached the abbey gate.

The religious community watched in horror, as Brother Martel was taken to the healer’s dwelling.

“Is he mortally wounded?” One of the women asked.

“His life is in the Lord’s hands,” Brother Gervase told her as he ushered the curious from his quarters and firmly shut the door.

Chapter One

Britannia Present Day

The capital city of Winchester was bustling with excitement as the eagerly anticipated dedication of King Alfred's court school was rapidly approaching. Gwyneth hurried across the busy courtyard, heading towards the King's private quarters, which also housed her chambers.

"Erik!" Gwyneth cried as she burst open the door.

"My lady, what is wrong?" The nursemaid asked anxiously as Roland ran into his mother's outstretched arms.

"Bishop Asmund has arrived!" Gwyneth replied as she kissed her son and carried him up the stairs. "Where is my husband? The King requests our presence!"

"Your husband seeks his wife," Erik said upon entering their quarters.

Erik smiled as he watched their faithful servant escort Roland to the children's bedchamber where Elena peacefully slept. He waited as Gwyneth hurried towards him, and laughed while keeping his balance when the force of her embrace almost caused him to fall.

"Forgive me," Gwyneth blushed as Erik steadied himself. "It is just that..."

"Your excitement is difficult to control," Erik interrupted. "That your emotions still rule."

"You mock me," Gwyneth teased while grabbing Erik's hand and pulling him towards the Great Hall. "Have I not been obedient since my last confinement?"

"I dare say your obedience has been somewhat...lacking!" Erik guffawed, "but then..."

"But then, I do seek your counsel, do I not?" Gwyneth asked. "Is not the King, and my father, pleased with my behavior?"

"You are most wicked," Erik told her mischievously, "but I am pleased to call you wife."

"As I am pleased to call you husband," Gwyneth softly replied as they crossed the crowded courtyard, discreetly entered the Great Hall and waited to be presented to the renowned Bishop of Canterbury.

Bishop Germanus was uneasy as he awaited the King's trusted messenger. Even though two years had passed since the Danish King Guthrum had successfully defeated his bastard son, Rigr, in battle, rumors that the usurper's wife, Dalla, would soon avenge her husband's death, flourished.

It was believed that the remnants of Rigr's army had fled to Mercia where the men had sworn fealty not only to Dalla, but to Kylan of Esbjerg, Rigr's recognized heir. It was also being said that Dalla had recently formed an alliance with a prince from the Danish homeland and that their combined forces would not only defeat the formidable King Guthrum, but would also vanquish the King of Wessex.

Bishop Germanus had accidentally learned the whereabouts of a mysterious encampment in Mercia, which he believed to be Dalla's stronghold. He wondered if Jora's brother, Ulfr, and Rigr's trusted henchman, Loki, were also at the camp, since both men were not found at the villa when Lord Richard's son, Stephen, had been rescued from his captors.

King Guthrum had assured his Godfather, King Alfred, that he would not rest until Rigr's followers suffered a traitor's fate. However, Dalla's men were loyal beyond reproach, and there would be none to betray their mistress as they awaited their brothers from the homeland. Rigr might be dead, but his right to rule his father's kingdom lived on through his wife and acknowledged heir, Kylan.

Kylan was a bastard son of a Danish prince who had no legal claim in East Anglia, but it was Rigr's patronage that was acknowledged as the men who served in the usurper's army chose to challenge King Guthrum's right to wear the crown. These men would fight for plunder and glory, but they would also fight for land since the lush, fertile countryside of Britannia was a sharp contrast to the harsh and unforgiving climate of the Jutland peninsula.

Bishop Germanus discovered this new threat to Britannia's shores when he had walked amongst the Pilgrims. He learned that an encampment had been built not far from the Welsh border years past, during the Festival of the Ancient Games. It was said the warrior community was ruled by a heathen prince, that Dragonships were moored in the river, and that soldiers trained for battle upon them. It was said these ships would join an invading fleet as the Norsemen planned to conquer King Alfred's kingdom of Wessex. It was also

being said that fealty was willingly sworn to the usurper's chosen heir after Dalla had knelt before Kylan and acknowledged him as her rightful King.

Bishop Germanus was told that this heathen prince and his warriors rarely attended market day at any of the nearby towns, but the women occasionally left the protected campsite to sell their wares and purchase supplies. Warrior-trained slaves protected the small caravan as they ventured across forest trails. Even though the men were enslaved, they were well treated and willingly served the charismatic Dalla, and they would readily give their lives to protect her and the prince she served.

Bishop Germanus smiled inwardly when the young girl reminded him that a night spent at an alehouse loosened tongues. Two men had been arguing as to which of them was the better warrior when she walked into the crowded room. She had paid them no heed, but she soon found herself in their midst as both men bragged of their prowess and revealed secrets to gain her favor.

Bishop Germanus led the pretty lass towards the private cloistered gardens, identifying the diverse flowers and plants by species as he led her to a stone bench serenely nestled beneath carefully kept bushes. He waited for the woman to speak while noticing her discomfiture when she recalled the festive evening as she repeated the boasting of a drunken warrior.

"I was troubled when he spoke of being trained to fight aboard ships when on the water," the woman whispered.

"Were you told how many were trained and when they might set sail?" Bishop Germanus asked.

"I am afraid not, Your Excellency. I was told he would only be with me the one night and would not return, but he drank overmuch and fell asleep on the bed. I was scared and sought sanctuary in the church, and I stayed with the Holy Sisters until I was certain he had returned to his camp."

"There are maps in the library," Bishop Germanus told her. "Would you be able to point out the location of this camp?"

"Hopefully...but do you believe I am in danger?"

"I pray not," Bishop Germanus smiled, "but I think it might be best if you remain at the abbey until the moon is full...for your own protection."

The frightened lass was grateful to be given succor, but she occasionally glanced over her shoulder for fear of being followed

while walking with Bishop Germanus towards the famed library where she hoped to be of service to her King.

Lord Richard glanced upon the beautiful city of Rome while standing on the balcony outside of the Pope's private chambers. He marveled at the ruins of the Great Amphitheater as sunbeams illuminated the carvings and archways of the colossal structure, which depicted the glory and decadence of the ancient Roman Empire.

"I have found you!" the Bishop of Rome smiled as he approached King Alfred's emissary. "Do you still plan to leave at first light?"

"Yes, Your Holiness," Lord Richard replied. "The mountains will soon be impassable, and the journey is treacherous enough without the winter storms."

"That is the truth, and I pray you will reach the abbey without mishap, but I have hired warriors to travel with your escort. The more swords the better your chances of not being attacked...and I have also engaged these men to accompany you to Britannia."

"I am in your debt, but more swords are needed here. It is your life that is in grave peril."

"I do not fear death, my son; I grow weary of the treachery and accept the Lord's will."

"What of Marius and Remus? I know they have offered their swords to protect you.

"Their offer is admirable, but Marius must be given the choice to return with you or stay with Remus, just as Remus much choose to return to his father or continue his studies at the abbey."

"Remus is still young and might be easily swayed," Lord Richard replied.

"I do not think so, Remus is wise for his years. He serves the Lord but lives still in the world, and he has yet to prove himself in battle. He fears no one and fought well when he was attacked, and by the will of God, his wounds mended. However, he is torn between his love of life and his love of the Lord. Remus must not take the priest cowl unless he is certain."

"I will do my best to counsel the boy," Lord Richard replied as he and Pope John walked the length of the corridor and headed towards the chapel. "I am grateful Marius has been found, but I fear for Sidonius and the children. We have yet to learn their fate."

“Come, we pray,” the Bishop of Rome said as they entered the dimly lit room. “Our Lord is merciful. It will not be long before we discover the truth.”

Remus had enjoyed the time spent under the tutelage of Brother Notker, but he soon realized that he truly desired to fight the evils of the world and not remain safely cloistered behind abbey walls. His heart felt out of place in the religious community even though his mind quickly absorbed everything he had been taught. Remus spent hours in prayer asking the Lord for guidance.

Remus respected Brother Notker who willingly embraced his affliction while serving Christ Jesus. He admired the monk’s instinctive patience when his words barely escaped his lips as the holy man stuttered. Even when Brother Notker stammered while teaching his beloved protégé, his eyes depicted his love of the Lord.

The famed monk was at peace in the Lord’s dwelling, Remus was not. Remus was restless as he recovered from his grave wound, but he was pleased when Brother Notker had recognized his intellectual abilities and requested his assistance in writing about the deeds of the famed Charlemagne, but he was genuinely pleased to have been taught the Frankish tongue.

Remus was not content to remain in the classroom, he wanted to experience the trappings of daily life and to serve not only his God, but also his King. He eagerly awaited messages from His Holiness, and from his father, while longing to meet his kin and giving his sword to defend King Alfred’s kingdom. He was aware of the treachery plaguing the world as evil men sought power and wealth. He had wanted to remain with the Holy Father, to protect him from his many enemies, but he realized he was but one truthful sword in a sea of deception. Remus feared the assassin would ultimately succeed and a new Bishop of Rome would be elected, yet he also realized his life would be readily forfeit once Pope John was found dead.

However, King Alfred could use Remus’ sword to fight the Norsemen whose coastal raids and inland skirmishes threatened to destroy the existing peace. Remus had been told that he was a brilliant military strategist and that his mastery of warfare would prove useful to the Saxon King should he choose to defend his homeland before committing himself to serve the Lord.

Remus was eager to return to Britannia and impatiently awaited the arrival of King Alfred's emissary. He was unsure as to why he was chosen to meet this warrior statesman, nor why it was necessary to offer his sword when Lord Richard was adequately protected by a large retinue of mercenaries.

He smiled as Marius hurried across the courtyard and headed in his direction, but he waited until the man he loved as a brother was by his side before walking towards the kitchens.

"You seem unsettled, my friend," Remus told him as Marius tried to catch his breath. "Has something happened?"

"There has been word from Rome," Marius said between gasps. "It would seem Lord Richard is kin!"

"How can this be? I thought the heathen destroyed your villa?"

"My father and mother were slain, but I have been told my brother and sister were spared. It seems Arista had wed Lord Richard's son, Stephen, but she was slain when her valley was attacked by Rigr's men. Sidonius fled with her children, but their fate is still not known. Lord Richard would have me, us, if you so wish, search for my brother once we return home."

"Our skills are rusty," Remus reminded him. "We are in need of training."

"We shall have to be careful," Marius said. "We should find a suitable place in the forest where the sound of steel against steel cannot be heard."

"The Sheriff's encampment might prove useful, especially since his men train each day."

"No one must know we are trained warriors since we do not know the enemy nor when the assassin strikes."

David and Rollo watched from the Gate Tower as the scouting party left the fortification and galloped towards the river road. Children who played along the river bank had been frightened by a Dragonship that sailed very close to the shoreline and had returned to the village screaming in terror. Women and children ran towards the citadel while the menfolk grabbed their bows, but the Dragonship was nowhere to be seen by the time the archers had reached the river.

David was pleased Rollo had agreed to remain at Chichester with his wife, Inga, and he was delighted when their son, Harald, was born. He was also pleased Rollo had willingly accepted baptism and had agreed to train the young men needed to serve in King Alfred's

standing army. Rollo's allegiance to King Alfred was beyond reproach as was his devotion to duty. It was because of Rollo that David's sons lived, and it was because of Rollo's deception that the usurper, Rigr, had been defeated in battle.

David was thankful Rollo had favored young Brantson and was delighted when the boy became Rollo's charge. He recognized Rollo's warrior mindset and was well aware this seasoned soldier would never willingly give up his sword, but then, David also believed peace would not last since the heathen still coveted the rich fertile land, and the Norsemen would not rest until the kingdom of Wessex fell.

King Guthrum honored the terms of the treaty, but he could not control the many petty chieftains who sought the Saxon King's throne. The Danish King could not thwart the sporadic raids nor could he prevent the battle that had taken the life of his bastard son, but for the most part, the roads were safer to travel and trade flourished. Pilgrims visited the many abbeys and many would journey to the Holy Land, but robbers still roamed the countryside in search of easy prey.

"Do you think it was a scouting party?" David asked Rollo as the soldiers disappeared from view.

"They are from the homeland, if, indeed, it was a Dragonship that was seen. King Guthrum has been faithful to the treaty terms and is mindful of what was suffered when Rigr was defeated."

"Yes, but King Guthrum's warriors farm the land and will not fight their kinsmen unless King Guthrum is threatened," David reminded him.

"If there are more ships, it would be best to attack first, before they come ashore. I would have King Alfred move his fleet and thwart this latest threat at sea. Men can be trained to fight while on ships, and I would be willing to oversee the training."

Brigid remained in the chapel after *Prime*. She was tearful as she gazed upon the likeness of Christ upon the cross while praying for her son, Kylan, and feared for his safety since she had failed to learn his whereabouts.

Her husband, Lord Bayen, made her privy to the role her son had played in the usurper's plot to seize King Guthrum's crown. She was especially unnerved when she was told Kylan had been recognized as Rigr's rightful heir, but she was relieved to learn he

had not taken part in the battle, but had watched the fight from afar with Rigr's wife, Dalla.

Brigid feared King Guthrum's wrath, but the mighty Danish King had given his word he would be merciful when Kylan stood before him. She was ashamed of the part she had played in the intrigue prior to her conversion to the one true faith. She had humbly begged forgiveness before the Saxon King's men and had put her life at risk to prove her loyalty as the treachery unfolded.

She had not expected to fall in love, but she did. She had been somewhat surprised when she discovered Lord Bayen truly fancied her and was overjoyed when he had taken her for his wife. Brigid appreciated her husband's unconditional love and support as she tried to eradicate the evil seeds she had sown. She was also grateful for King Alfred's benevolence when she stood before the mighty Saxon and pleaded for his forgiveness.

Brigid recalled the day when she had begged Erik and Gwyneth to forgive her offense. She remembered falling on her knees before them, with her hands outstretched in supplication. She had been overwhelmed when Gwyneth raised her to her feet and kissed her cheek while Erik graciously pardoned her behavior and gave his word to set things right with Kylan.

However, Kylan remained a threat since his obsessive hatred for the father who had denied him his birthright still burned within his soul. Brigid understood why Kylan chose to support Rigr who had called him son, but was it not her fault that the boy hated the man who sired him? Was it not Brigid who had blamed not only Erik, but also Gwyneth, and was not this hatred the very reason why Kylan had chosen to become Rigr's heir, and was the reason why he would ultimately avenge his mother?

Brigid had heard the stories about a heathen camp that was not far from the Welsh border where a mighty prince commanded seasoned warriors, and believed in her heart, that this prince was Kylan. She also heard whispers of a Dragonship sailing the river to meet an invasion fleet and feared the identity of the man who threatened Britannia's shores.

She wanted to seek out the camp to confront her son, to reason with him, to stop the battle before it began, to prevent her son from being slain, but Lord Bayen and King Alfred would not sanction such a perilous venture. Dalla's reputation was well known. She was ruthless and would slay any who stood in her way as she

avenged her husband's death. Dalla would elevate the boy who her husband had favored, and the bastard son of a Danish prince would avenge the bastard son of King Guthrum. Dalla would sever the mighty Gorm's head and place it upon a pike, to rot in the wind while ravens fed upon his flesh, pecking out his eyes.

Brigid's only hope rested with Rhys who remained confined at Exeter Abbey. Rhys had conspired with Ulfr and Loki and had been made privy to the location of the encampment. He would willingly escort her to the hidden camp, but the Saxon King still refused to lift Rhys' confinement.

Brigid sobbed while reflecting upon the dangerous path she had chosen to follow. She would tell her husband she wished to spend time at the abbey, in prayer with the Lord, while secretly conspiring with Rhys. Rhys could escape, and help her search for her son, but would he risk deceiving King Alfred, once again, and seal his fate? Could Brigid risk losing the trust of the man who loved her unconditionally? Why must she be forced to choose between her husband and her son?

Elizabeth stood in the doorway, glancing upon her sleeping children. Gabriel looked more like her father and Oriana was truly her mother's daughter. She closed the door quietly and headed towards the main room where she poured herself a cup of watered wine, and slowly sipped its contents while gazing at the fire. She absently felt the likeness of the pagan goddess, Freyja, that she wore around her neck, and her thoughts turned to her brother, Sarlic. She was distraught when she learned he had been slain on the battlefield, but her heart was tormented because he had not known she lovingly called him brother. However, her brother, Cerdic, had been made privy to this truth and spoke of their kinship before the battle, and she was at peace with this knowledge.

Elizabeth was unsettled since she did not know how to comfort her husband, Stephen, after he had regained his memory. She was at a loss for words with Aurelius, the man Stephen became when his memory had failed him. She recalled the night of the heathen raid, when Aurelius' wife, Arista, was slain, when Arista's brother, Sidonius, had fled with their children. Emidus and Concordia would be more than three summers, if they still lived, and even though Stephen's men still searched, the children had yet to be found. However, King Alfred had sent Lord Richard to Rome where he

would, hopefully, learn the whereabouts of Arista's older brother, Marius, who had left the family villa at Exeter to serve the Holy Father. She fervently prayed that Marius would succeed where others had failed, that Marius would reunite Stephen with his children, that her husband would finally be freed from the demons tormenting his soul.

Elizabeth was lost in thought and did not hear Stephen's soft footsteps as he walked across the room, but she sought his hand when he stood beside her and kissed the nape of her neck.

"Your mind is elsewhere," Stephen murmured. "What troubles you?"

"Is there word from Rome, from your father? Was Marius found with Remus?"

"I do not know. Cerdic returns soon from court. Hopefully, he brings news."

"I know you grieve still...but remember, I also share your loss."

"You were never betrayed...Aurelius loved Arista and no other, just as I love my Elizabeth and no other."

"The men return," one of the excited women cried as Odulf led the hunting party out of the woods.

The children stared at the carcass of a huge wild boar hanging upon poles that took four strong warriors to carry upon their shoulders. The huntsmen proudly displayed their hunting skills and prowess as they paraded their trophy throughout the camp.

Jora carried a sleeping Freya while running to find her husband, and beamed with pride when Odulf bowed ceremoniously before presenting the Danish King with the bounty of the hunt. King Guthrum guffawed, embracing his most favored subject while the hunters followed the women towards the kitchens. She waited to be noticed while Odulf recounted the brave deeds of the morning's chase.

Jora rocked her daughter gently, but her thoughts wandered to the plight of her brother. She had not heard from Ulfr since Rigr's defeat, nor could she discover his fate. It was not known whether he had fought in the battle and fled with Dalla, or if he had returned to the market town bordering Wales. She was well aware that King Guthrum still searched for the traitors, and it was well known Dalla would not rest until her husband's death was avenged. She feared for

her brother's life as neither King would be forgiving, if he remained loyal to Rigr's cause.

Unbeknownst to her brother, Jora had sworn her allegiance to the Danish King. It was not difficult to apprise King Guthrum of Rigr's plans since Ulfr never questioned her loyalty, and he was also not aware of her love for Odulf. She had agonized over her inevitable decision to confess before the formidable Danish King who was cruel and ruthless, and gave no quarter while protecting his throne. She was relieved when the mighty Gorm had agreed to spare Ulfr's life once his treachery was made known provided her brother repudiated Rigr's unjust claim and swore fealty to the rightful King.

Jora had wanted to return to the market town after the battle, but Odulf refused to seek either King's permission. She would have argued the point had she not discovered she was with child. She would have to wait until the child was weaned before earnestly beginning her search.

Odulf embraced Jora, kissing his daughter on her forehead while keeping his arm around his wife's waist as they walked towards their dwelling. Jora waited until they were close to their quarters before finally speaking.

"It is time."

"I have not changed my mind, if you are referring to Ulfr," Odulf interrupted.

Jora silently entered their chambers, gently placed a sleeping Freya upon the bed, and held back her tears while she quietly closed the door before confronting her husband.

"Do you forget what was promised? Ulfr needs to be told his life will be spared and that he will be given succor."

"I forbid you to search for your brother. Your life was in peril before, it will not be so again. And why would you wish to leave our daughter?"

"There are many here to care for Freya, and Helga is also willing."

Odulf shook his head, pouring himself a cup of mead and slowly sipped his drink while staring threateningly at his defiant wife. Jora did not flinch under his stare as the quiet sound of the crackling fire resonated throughout the still room, and a cool, steady breeze drifted through an open window.

"Have you forgotten about Kylan? Brigid is afraid for her son. You know Kylan's judgment is clouded by his hatred," Jora

whispered. "I wager Kylan and Ulfr are with Dalla, and do not forget there is more at stake than my brother's life."

"How do you know this? Have you gotten yourself caught up in the intrigue, without seeking my counsel?"

"I apologize," Jora blushed as she retrieved a small chest that contained her cherished possessions.

Jora opened the lid, removing a pile of letters neatly tied with a silk ribbon. She handed Odulf the messages before sitting at the table, and quietly watched as he read the ominous words.

"Has Erik and Lord Bayen been made privy to what has been proposed?"

"I do not know," Jora truthfully replied. "Ships from the homeland were seen, and we believe there will be another battle, and that more lives will be lost."

"Their fate is deserved. This is not our fight."

"My brother is my fight!. I leave in two days time, whether or not you agree."

"Do not forget my wrath is as great as my father's!" Odulf yelled. "Do not make me have you confined."

"Then I will I seek our King's counsel. It is my right."

"Have you forgotten Dalla's need for vengeance? I fear your life will be forfeit once your treachery is made known."

"Do you forget King Alfred's men also search? Yet his enemies cannot be found!"

"And you believe you know where to find Ulfr...and Dalla?"

"I beg you, my husband," Jora pleaded. "Speak to your father on my behalf. Travel with me, if you must, but permit me to find my brother."

"If our King is willing, I will travel with you, but you will heed my counsel. Understood?"

"Yes, my love," Jora whispered. "I am grateful I hold your heart."

Kylan was concerned about the fate of his mother as he restlessly walked throughout the encampment. He remembered the night Dalla waited in the forest while he visited the abbey where Brigid had been given sanctuary. He had managed to control his rising temper when the Abbess mentioned his mother was no longer in her care, but he had not been pleased by the Reverend Mother's

elusiveness when speaking of Brigid's known whereabouts and the priest who protected her.

Kylan had tried to discover the identity of the priest, but the Reverend Mother was not forthcoming, yet he had also been elusive when the Abbess asked where he could be found once his mother returned. He remembered handing the formidable woman a purse filled with silver coins while thanking her for the protection she afforded his mother before taking his leave. He had been lost in thought when he left the visitor's rooms and followed the dimly lit corridor leading to the private courtyard. He remembered the young novice who hurried to catch him before he reached the gate, and he was surprised by her apparent boldness when she came upon him suddenly, grasped his hand and pulled him into a shadowed doorway. He smiled when recalling their brief conversation.

"Were you told where your mother was taken?" Cecelia whispered.

"No," Kylan replied, somewhat amused. "Are you privy to her whereabouts?"

"I am not privy to her whereabouts, but she travels with Father Felix. Lord Richard's man, Henry, protects them both. I suspect they returned to Wareham."

"I am forever in your debt," Kylan replied while taking hold of Cecelia's hand and kissing the tip of her fingers.

"Your mother left willingly," Cecelia blushed as she withdrew her hand, albeit, reluctantly. "Do not be troubled."

He had winked at the startled young woman before taking his leave, but he did glance back at the abbey once he reached the edge of the forest, and he was pleasantly surprised when he caught sight of Cecelia watching him beneath the moonlit sky.

Kylan had shared his concerns with Dalla who was sympathetic to his plight. She had dispatched one of her personal guards to Wareham to make discreet inquiries, but when her trusted warrior failed to return, Dalla could only surmise he had been slain or had been confined somewhere within the citadel.

He did not believe Dalla would be successful in avenging Rigr's death. However, if King Alfred was defeated, he could readily confront his father and free his mother, but that seemed highly unlikely. Kylan had sworn to protect Dalla and he would honor his oath, but he believed her life would eventually be forfeit, if not in the heat of battle, then by the assassin's hand.

Kylan's thoughts returned to Cecelia as he remembered her kindness and wondered if she had befriended his mother. He had noticed a sparkle in her eyes when they spoke, yet he also wondered if her thoughts ever returned to their brief meetings. He wanted to see her again because he wanted her to know she had, somehow, captured his heart, but he did not share his feelings with anyone since he believed her life would be in peril should the truth be made known. One day, after everything was settled, when the need for revenge was satisfied, when his mother was protected and safe, he would seek Cecelia. He would renounce his gods for her one true God, if she gave him her heart and soul.

Cecelia spent most of her free hours within the chapel gardens. She would sit on a bench nestled between the flowery bushes while trying to reassure herself that her decision to take the veil was, indeed, God's will. She would soon be taking her final vows and she was frightened by the finality of her decision.

Because Cecelia believed the Lord had called her to His service, she eagerly sought the Holy Sisters and willingly agreed to follow the strict rules of the spiritual community while following the teachings of Christ Jesus.

Cecelia blushed when she recalled the young warrior who had visited the abbey so long ago. She remembered his fine features and muscular build while standing before the Reverend Mother. She had seen his anger and his resolve to control his emotions while pleading for his mother's plight and begging that she be granted sanctuary, but she had also noticed the veiled passion his eyes depicted on the night he kissed her hand before returning to his world.

She chastised herself because of her uncertainty. Her resolve had been weakened by temptation, she was unsure and frightened, she loved God, but she doubted her sincerity since her heart now belonged to Brigid's son. Could she honestly profess to serve the Lord when, in truth, she loved Kylan and wanted to bear him sons?

Cecelia needed to confess her sin before acknowledging her promise, before committing to a cloistered life for the remainder of her years. She wanted to see Kylan again; she wanted to know if he thought of her, she wanted to know if there was a chance to share a life, she needed to know if her thoughts were wicked.

She remembered the family who sought sanctuary the last night of Gwyneth's confinement when she had been told of a kindly

Bishop who knew well the temptations of the world. She would seek permission from the Reverend Mother to go on Pilgrimage, before professing her final vows, before being locked away forever.

Bishop Thurlac found Rhys grooming the horses in the stables. He felt compassion for the warrior who had chosen to betray his King, but he believed Rhys truly regretted his decision and was truly penitent. Rhys was fortunate King Alfred was forgiving since his life had been spared, but regaining the King's trust was not as forthcoming.

Bishop Thurlac had sanctioned the communication between Rhys and Brigid because he was sympathetic to Brigid's plight. The Bishop was also aware that Brigid had petitioned King Alfred to grant Rhys his freedom and that the Saxon King had yet to make his ruling, but he was somewhat dismayed when Wulfgar had mentioned that Rhys' loyalties were still doubted and his fate uncertain. Bishop Thurlac was also well aware that Lord Bayen would never permit his wife to freely roam the countryside with, or without, Rhys as her escort.

"Good day, your Excellency," Rhys said while walking a horse into its stall. "Have you word from our King?"

"Yes, but I fear your confinement has not yet been lifted. It seems you are yet to be trusted."

"I confess my treachery was grave and I am grateful my life was spared, but I beg to be given the chance to prove my loyalty."

"Be mindful Lord Bayen would never agree, even if our King gave his approval," Bishop Thurlac reminded him, "and I do not have the power to grant what you seek."

"I understand, but Brigid has sent word," Rhys said as he and Bishop Thurlac left the cool darkened stables for the warmth of the midday sun. "Jora searches for her brother as Brigid searches for her son, and Jora is coming here, with Odulf, seeking my counsel."

"Has Lord Bayen sent word to King Alfred?"

"I do not know, but Jora believes you are sympathetic to her plight. Have I your approval?"

"I must speak with Lord Bayen before granting your request, but I fear we must await our King's command."

Chapter Two

Emidus and Concordia proudly carried an empty bucket while following Tarren up the hill. Concordia's eyes sparkled when she gave Tarren the bucket while Emidus fetched a rope that Tarren deftly tied to the handle. The children stood on their toes as the bucket was lowered into the dark well, squealing with laughter when spraying water dampened their clothing as Tarren slowly reeled the sloshing bucket to the surface.

Emidus and Concordia were not yet aware that Tarren could not speak because someone had viciously cut out her tongue. They closely watched the woman, who they believed to be their mother, mouth the words that could not be heard, but they dutifully grasped Tarren's sleeve as they returned to their dwelling.

Seasoned warriors protected the small village nestled deep within the mountainous forest where skilled craftsmen created the warriors' garb while an expert weaponsmith forged the warriors' swords. The people who lived within the secluded community were the property of their overlord, but they willingly tilled the fields and tended the animals since they worked to earn their freedom. There was a hushed excitement within the settlement as word spread that everyone would soon be freed. It was rumored that Lucian and his warriors would return to serve his King, but no one had been privy to which King held Lucian's allegiance.

Tarren was grateful that Sidonius' healer skills had earned him a prominent place in Lucian's service. They were treated with the utmost respect and had been given a spacious dwelling close to where Lucian and his soldiers were quartered.

She acknowledged the warrior heading in her direction and nodded her head approvingly when he took the heavy bucket and led the way to her dwelling. Tarren was not afraid as she silently followed the young soldier because Lucian's laws were followed, or so she thought.

The children tugged at Tarren's dress when they noticed the other children playing in the field.

"Join your friends," Tarren mouthed as Concordia and Emidus ran towards the meadow.

Tarren followed the soldier into the main room and waited for him to leave. However, she was unnerved when he set the bucket upon the floor and firmly closed the door.

“You are lovely,” the warrior said as he pulled her towards him.

Tarren tried to push him away, but he only tightened his hold. She struggled as he kissed the side of her neck, but he became incensed when she bit his face, and he pinned her arms while forcibly shoving her onto the table. She screamed when she felt his weight upon her and was terrified as she gazed into his wild, lust-crazed eyes. She tried to loosen her arms and frantically kicked as he sought to possess her. Tears rolled uncontrollably down her face, but her soundless pleas for help could not be heard. Her assailant laughed at her silent sobs as his hands roughly stroked her curvaceous body.

Tarren held her breath when she heard the door open and fearfully looked upon her assailant’s startled face as he was pulled from her. Her breathing was erratic and her body trembled when Sidonius punched the warrior in the jaw. The man stumbled backwards before freeing his dagger and lunging at her savior. Sidonius jumped back while his opponent waved the knife at his throat, but he quickly stepped to his side and grabbed his enemy’s arm. The warrior grasped Sidonius’ face with his free hand as Sidonius brought his arm beneath the man’s throat. The warrior released his grip when Sidonius tightened his stranglehold. The assailant dropped his weapon as he tried to free himself, but Tarren quickly retrieved the fallen dagger and shoved the blade forcibly into her attacker’s back. The warrior grimaced with pain, falling against Sidonius, but Tarren removed the deadly blade and stabbed her attacker in the neck. Blood spurted from the soldier’s mouth as he fell before her. Sidonius stepped over the dead body, held Tarren in his arms, and spoke soothing, comforting words.

“What mischief is this?” Lucian asked upon entering the dwelling, with his drawn sword.

Lucian glanced upon the terrified woman who sought the protection of her husband’s arms, but he was enraged when he identified the body, and was incensed by the time his personal guards came into the room.

“Bury him,” Lucian barked as his men walked towards the body. “Make it known that no quarter will be given, if my laws are not followed.”

“Yes, my lord,” the Captain of the Guard replied while motioning for his men to remove the body before speaking to Tarren.

“My lady, this attack was most...unfortunate, but I would beg you not to fear my men. I give you my word, you will not be harmed.”

Tarren hesitantly touched Lucian’s arm as she silently said, “I am thankful.”

“It is I who am thankful you were not defiled,” Lucian told her. “Perhaps you might want to join me for the noon meal tomorrow?”

“You are most kind, my lord,” Sidonius said as Lucian graciously took his leave, closing the door behind him when he left.

Sidonius lifted Tarren into his arms, carried her into their bedchamber, gently placed her upon the bed, and covered her with a fur.

“Rest,” Sidonius whispered. “I will tend to the children.”

Tarren pulled him towards her and silently asked him to stay. Sidonius remained with the woman who held his heart until she fell asleep, kissing the top of her head before returning to the clearing where the children played.

Sidonius thought of the day when they would be freed, of the day when Stephen would be reunited with his children, of the day when he would learn the fate of his kin, of the day when he and Tarren would be wed, of the day he would claim his birthright and return to his father’s villa.

Brother Martel spent hours in the library where learned scribes laboriously copied and illuminated sacred scripture and ancient texts, not only in Latin, but also in the Saxon tongue. It was King Alfred’s wish that every one of his subjects would be taught to read the sacred scriptures, and it was also well known throughout all of Christendom that the famed Wessex King presented his noblemen with gifts of books written in his own hand.

The steady sound of a quill tip scratching the parchment echoed throughout the quiet chamber while a cool breeze gently caressed the calm flames of thick candles adorning the numerous desks while shadowed silhouettes jumped along the walls as sunbeams competed to illuminate the room.

While Brother Martel was grateful the Lord had spared his life, he was not grateful his sight had been taken, that his body was weakened, that he was still unable to return to his abbey. He was also weary of repeating the same stories over-and-over for the

willing scribes whose only task was to preserve the legendary tales for ensuing generations.

Brother Martel never learned the fate of the family he had promised to protect, but then, who would have been able to discover the truth? The famed abbey at Canterbury was a Pilgrimage center, the last leg of the journey in Britannia where eager Pilgrims willingly risked life and limb to travel to Rome, and to the Holy Land, seeking atonement for their sins.

Brother Martel needed a trusted messenger, a person who would not be noticed amongst the travelers, a person who would protect a secret message to the Pope. However, without sight, it was dangerous to reveal the truth since he never discovered why he and the small group of Pilgrims had been attacked. The warriors could have been Dalla's chosen elite, her personal guard, bent on revenge for his treachery or the assailants could have been merely brigands in need of slaves.

Had the abbey been located within Wessex, he could have readily returned to the King's court, but allegiance was questionable along the southern coast. Did not King Guthrum cast a blind eye when the occasional ship from the homeland sought plunder? Were not the runes still cast? Were not the ancient gods still worshipped, albeit in secret? But there was one, a Benedictine monk who had befriended him, a skillful healer who was honorable and trustworthy, and a true servant of the Lord. Brother Gervase could be found in the sickrooms from dawn to dusk since his only assigned task was to tend to the infirmed.

Brother Martel would have died had it not been for Brother Gervase's healing ministrations. The Benedictine monk kept him in his quarters while he recovered from his nearly mortal wounds. Brother Gervase was aware that he was trained not only in religious dogma, but also in the art of warfare, yet Brother Gervase never asked where he had studied or why he carried a sword. Brother Gervase did not pry; he did not seek answers openly, but waited instead, for answers to be readily revealed.

Brother Martel wanted to take Brother Gervase into his confidence, but he was still hesitant. Brother Gervase was also not as forthcoming as one might expect, yet he was just as secretive as was Brother Martel. If Brother Martel had his sight, he would have been able to share confidences with his savior, but if he had regained his sight, he would have left the abbey in search of the family he had

promised to protect, and he would never rest until he had discovered their fate.

Brother Martel had learned of King Alfred's invitation to Bishop Asmund to dedicate the new court school. He would have petitioned to be included in the Bishop's retinue, but the knowledge that Brother Gervase would never permit such a long journey in his present state had kept him from approaching the Bishop prior to his departure.

Brother Martel no longer had his sword, and he doubted his weapon still remained deep within the forest since his assailant would have, undoubtedly, kept the superior blade, but he did not need sight to train; he could still thrust and lunge, and slit a throat. He longed to feel the grip in his palm, and hear the sound of cold steel as the blade was freed from its scabbard, but the abbey did not house warrior monks; there was not a need since the abbey was protected by its reputation and by its place within the religious community. They no longer feared the heathen who had accepted Baptism and settled the land, but they did fear the Norsemen who still sailed the seas.

Brother Martel heard the soft footsteps as his visitor quietly approached, and smiled as Brother Gervase sat beside him.

"What is so pressing that takes you from the afflicted?" Brother Martel softly asked as Brother Gervase patted his hand.

"More Pilgrims have arrived, and I believe they travel to Rome. Perhaps there might be someone that could be trusted."

"Why would I seek a messenger?"

"I heard your words when you were fevered," Brother Gervase replied. "You cried out many names. None were known to me but one, the Holy Father."

"What was heard? Who else was privy to what had been said when I was rambling?"

"There are none. I speak now because you have yet to trust me, but I would have you know I can be trusted. Are you known to someone in these parts? Is there someone who awaits word of your fate?"

"I dare not put your life in peril, nor do I wish to bring harm to the abbey. I do not know the enemy."

"Come, walk with me," Brother Gervase said as he stood and held out his hand.

Brother Martel grasped Brother Gervase's arm as the healer bypassed the sickrooms and led the sightless warrior monk to his private chambers. Brother Martel did not object when the kindly healer sat him gently upon a bench, but he was curious when he heard the sound of scraping wood as Brother Gervase moved a chest away from the wall, freed a loose stone and carefully removed an object that he placed in Brother Martel's lap. Brother Martel ran his hand over a very familiar scabbard, encircled the pommel and firmly held the grip while freeing the blade. He stood and waved the sword before him, his circular movements flawless as were his thrusts.

"How did you know this was my weapon?" Brother Martel asked while placing the blade into its casing. "How did you come by this?"

"I had returned to find those you protected, but all had been taken. I found your sword beneath a mound of fallen leaves."

"Why now?"

"It is doubtful you will ever regain your sight, but you are a seasoned warrior still," Brother Gervase smiled. "Your body mends and you will soon be fit to travel. Maybe not to Rome, but to Wimborne?"

Brother Martel waved his sheathed sword before him, moving slowly until his trusty blade found the bench and gesturing for Brother Gervase to join him as he sat down.

"Are these Pilgrims from Wimborne?" Brother Martel asked. "Is that why we speak?"

"I serve our Lord and do not care for worldly pursuits. I know trust is difficult because I am not known to you, but only I have been privy to your fevered words, and I have kept your secrets these past summers, and I know your life will not be spared, if your enemies learn your whereabouts."

"There is someone, if you can be trusted."

"I swear upon my immortal soul your secrets are safe with me. You have my word."

"Cerdic...Brother Cerdic," Brother Martel said. "He can be found at Exeter, either at the abbey or at the citadel. Tell him I live...tell him my sight has been taken, but my skills are useful still...tell him to fetch me and take me to Winchester posthaste, there is much to tell our King."

Chapter Three

Lord Richard saw the abbey's bell tower from the crest of the hill, and praised the Lord his journey had been uneventful. He led his horse down the steep, pebbled trail while following the wagon, which carried the treasured books and manuscripts the Bishop of Rome had procured for his chosen favorite, Brother Notker. The abbey at St. Gall was one of the greatest learning centers in all of Christendom and Lord Richard was delighted that he had been given the opportunity to see, first-hand, the great library, the likes of which had not been seen since the days of Charlemagne.

Lord Richard's thoughts returned to days long past, when he and his beloved wife, Branda, spoke of visiting Rome once the heathen threat was removed, but it was their son, Stephen, who had lived their dream when he had accompanied young Alfred to the Papal City. His eyes were moist when he remembered the night Stephen and Alfred departed for Rome, the night his wife hid her disappointment while reminding him that their son would, one day, be their guide as they explored the ruins of the once mighty and glorious empire. He reflected on the events that had shaped his life and the lives of his children, after the Lord had taken Branda into His loving embrace. Her passing was sudden and unexpected, and was God's will. He never questioned why, when his faith was tested, and remained faithful to the teachings of Christ Jesus.

Lord Richard had spent his entire life fighting the heathen, willingly serving King Alfred as he had once served King Aethelwulf, Alfred's father, but the countless battles had kept him away from his family. He loved all his children, but it was his firstborn son, Stephen, who had fought beside him in battle, and the ensuing camaraderie between father and son had proved difficult to forge with his younger son, David. Gwyneth, on the other hand, had been deeply affected by her mother's sudden death. He indulged her impetuous nature and encouraged her studies, and was thankful when Aethelwitha, Alfred's Queen, had graciously welcomed Gwyneth and David into the royal household each time his sword was needed to fight the formidable heathen.

He was pleased when his King had given him the command at Wareham where he had been able to provide a home for his children. He regretted not having been able to devote as much time with each of them as he would have liked, but he was proud of their

accomplishments as they mastered their lessons not only in the classroom, but on the training field.

Lord Richard was aware that many believed he coddled his daughter overmuch, especially after Branda had died. Gwyneth had been given the same opportunities as her brothers and was as proficient with the sword as she was with the quill, but Gwyneth was ruled by her heart and never considered the consequences whenever her decisions were hasty, but then, Cerdic's true lineage would never have been made known had it not been for Gwyneth. Lord Richard and Lord Edward, Cerdic's father, had not only been brothers in arms, they had been friends, or so Lord Richard thought. And was not Mildrith, Edward's wife, as a sister to his dear Branda? Yet Edward and Mildrith had taken their secret to the grave.

Had not Gwyneth been abducted by Odulf and taken to King Guthrum's camp, the truth would have remained buried. Lord Richard was surprised when the heathen healer, Finna, confessed she had bore Edward a son, and that Mildrith had recognized Cerdic as her own, and that Edward and Mildrith's daughter, Elizabeth, had not been privy to this truth.

But there were more secrets revealed during those days at King Guthrum's camp, of a boy called Remus, the son of Cerdic, whose whereabouts had not been made known since the boy's life was endangered. It was said the mother was of royal blood, a baseborn sister of Wessex's great King Alfred. It was also said Cerdic's son was favored by the Holy Father and was housed at the Papal Court.

Once Stephen wed Elizabeth, Cerdic became kin, as did Remus, and Lord Richard truly wanted to reunite the son with the father. However, Lord Richard had agreed with Pope John that Remus needed to be protected, especially after having learned of the attack on the boy's life when he had traveled to the abbey at St. Gall while wearing the Pilgrim's garb. Robbers might ambush unsuspecting Pilgrims, but would robbers dare attack a King's emissary? Lord Richard and Pope John believed Remus would be better protected by the King's warriors, if he and Marius returned to Britannia with King Alfred's men.

Lord Richard was thankful Remus was still being protected by one of his fellow countrymen. He had learned of Marius through Stephen, after his son had been freed from his captors. The years that Stephen was missing had been difficult for everyone, especially

for Elizabeth who had given birth to their son, Gabriel, shortly after Stephen's presumed death.

It was fortunate that the severely wounded Stephen had been found by Arista's warriors and brought to her sanctuary. She cared for the wounded stranger whose life God had spared, but Stephen had not remembered his past. Stephen became Aurelius, and Aurelius wed Arista who bore him Emidus and Concordia.

Arista died the night the heathen had raided the valley, but her brother, Sidonius, had fled with the children. Sidonius was to have sought sanctuary in Rome because he believed his elder brother, Marius, served the Pope, but Sidonius never reached the Papal City and his fate, and the fate of the children, remained unknown. Aurelius suffered a blow to the head when he had been taken captive, and by the time Lord Bayen had freed Aurelius, his memory had been miraculously restored. Stephen remembered not only the life he lived prior to losing his memory, he also remembered the life he lived when he had been called Aurelius.

Lord Richard silently thanked the Lord for His divine intervention when he discovered the whereabouts of not only Marius, but also young Remus, and he was hopeful that Marius would succeed where others had failed. He was deep in thought as he rode beneath the main gate and approached the open courtyard. Those who comprised the religious community welcomed the weary travelers as they made their way towards the guesthouses. He smiled, tossing pennies at the children who screeched with delight while eagerly picking up the coins.

Lord Richard stopped abruptly when he noticed two men walking towards him; both were of warrior build even though they wore the Pilgrim's garb.

"Marius and Remus at your service, my lord," Marius said. "How was your journey?"

"Long, but uneventful, praise the Lord. Would you know where my men are to be housed?"

"We have been given quarters in this section," Marius told him while pointing to the many dwellings along the street. "You are most welcome."

"My lord, we will stable the horses," the Captain shouted.

"There is food and drink in the kitchens," Remus told the Captain. "You are also welcome to partake of the evening meal after *Vespers*."

“We are grateful,” the Captain replied before heading towards the stables.

“Your chambers are prepared. Would you wish to rest?” Marius asked.

“No, there is much to be done, and we leave in three day’s time, if arrangements can be quickly made.”

“I shall see to it...I do not foresee any difficulties,” Marius told Lord Richard. “What word from His Holiness?”

“Has there been word from my father?” Remus interjected.

“Let us eat and drink while we plan our journey,” Lord Richard replied kindly. “There is much to tell.”

Chapter Four

The flourishing port of Dunwich bustled with activity. The daily influx of ships bearing goods from the European mainland were quickly unloaded, and merchants eagerly bartered their wares in the busy market square while slave traders peddled flesh nearby.

Ulfr awaited Loki's return from Esbjerg at his favorite alehouse. He quietly drank his mead in a shadowed corner and paid no heed to the overzealous seafarers drinking in excess.

"More mead, my lord?" The lovely young serving lass asked.

"Thank you," Ulfr smiled while holding out his goblet, "but I am also hungry."

"We have warm bread...and fish on the griddle."

"Fish and bread suit me well," Ulfr murmured, "but leave the pitcher...and bring another cup."

She placed the flagon on the table before returning to the kitchens while Ulfr watched her making her way effortlessly through the crowded room. He did not mind the boisterous atmosphere as the men recounted past adventures and conquests while passing away the time.

The mood was quite festive when Loki entered the dwelling. He noticed the lone figure at the far end of the darkened room and headed towards his loyal friend, removing his gloves as he sat down while Ulfr filled his cup.

Ulfr's thoughts wandered as he waited for Loki to speak. He remembered the night when he learned Rigr had been defeated and his army vanquished, when everything had been lost because of treachery, and he doubted the outcome would have been different had he and Loki been on the battlefield. He also doubted his life would have been spared had he been captured by the Saxon King's men. King Alfred did have a reputation for being merciful with his enemies, but the Saxon King would have deferred judgment to King Guthrum because he was the mighty Gorm's subject. There would have been no quarter given since King Guthrum's ruthless treatment of his enemies was well known amongst his people.

Ulfr could have sought sanctuary anywhere in Britannia, or he could have taken passage on any of the many ships sailing the coastline. He was a skilled healer and would not have had any problems practicing his trade, but his ties were to the land where he had been born, and his loyalty was to his sister whose fate had yet to

be learned. He regretted having involved Jora in the treachery, but he was hopeful her deception had never been made known and that she remained protected within King Guthrum's camp.

Ulfr was also concerned for Kylan. His surprise was not feigned when he learned Rigr had acknowledged Brigid's son as his rightful heir. He had fancied Kylan's mother and would have acknowledged the boy, but Dalla believed Brigid was a threat and would have had her slain, if she had not vanished mysteriously from the Danish King's camp. Dalla was deluded to think she could succeed where Rigr had failed. King Guthrum remained strong and would destroy her, just as he had destroyed his ill-begotten son.

"You are lost in thought," Loki said. "Are you troubled?"

"It is my sister, Jora," Ulfr told him. "She is not privy to my fate."

"We could visit the market towns. The alehouses are plentiful and someone may remember seeing her."

"That might prove difficult. Do not forget there are many known to me because of my healing skills."

"But what if we wear the Pilgrim's garb? There will be none to heed our wandering."

"Unless we are set upon by robbers."

"We will not be easy prey if our swords are readily seen," Loki smiled. "I do not mind this journey since our brothers are not quite ready to leave the homeland...there is time to search for your sister."

Sven looked upon Esbjerg's flowing waterways from the crest of the mountainous ridge. The lush green forest would soon reflect the golden autumn colors as winter approached. The sound from the shipwrights' hammers resonated throughout the inlets and countryside as the men worked feverishly to finish the warships before the next full moon.

Sven was not the only warrior dissatisfied with the petty squabbles existing amongst the many chieftains who vied for control of his homeland. He was tired of the bothersome raids while fighting to protect his lands from young upstarts seeking glory in battle. He was familiar with the stories repeated on the mead bench. The rich land of Britannia lay within his reach, and he coveted the fertile country. He grew tired of waiting for King Guthrum to die a natural death, when conquest of his lands could be easily attained, when his offspring could be easily defeated. The siblings would fight each

other for the crown and their armies would be divided, and it would not be difficult to remove the apparent heirs and place himself upon the throne.

Sven would never have abided to the terms of the treaty King Alfred had implemented after the Saxon had defeated his enemy, but then, Sven would never have been vanquished. He believed the mighty Gorm was no longer fit to rule, believing his power had waned because of his humiliating defeat.

He had been aware Rigr sought to wear his father's crown. He could have sworn fealty to the usurper and could have fought for the pretender's cause, but he chose to wait. It was Sven who deserved to wear the crown, not some baseborn issue. He was a true prince of the homeland, his lineage above reproach, and he was favored by Odin, just as his brother was favored.

Sven and his men were growing impatient when Rigr's trusted henchman had arrived at his village after a perilous journey across the North Sea. He listened quietly when Loki had revealed Dalla's proposal, believing Loki's interest in Dalla involved more than his sworn duty, but he had been genuinely surprised when Loki swore him his allegiance and offered him his sword. Loki had been forthright when he confessed that Dalla's army would not be able to defeat King Guthrum, or King Alfred, in battle. She could only achieve victory with an unforeseen invasion force, because there would be none to stop the ships since the feared Norsemen still controlled the seas.

He was also surprised to learn that Dalla would provide a warship to join his fleet should he agree to invade Britannia, and he had been truly intrigued when he discovered that her warship was ready to set sail, and that her warriors were well trained to fight not only on land, but also aboard seafaring vessels.

Sven did not believe Dalla would readily swear him fealty once he sat on King Guthrum's throne, but he had accepted her allegiance, nonetheless, believing her need for vengeance on the man who had killed her husband was an obsession that might prove useful once he landed on Britannia's shores, but then again, he had found the prospect of Dalla slaying King Guthrum quite appealing. Why spend another harsh winter in the homeland when a friendlier climate beckoned? Dalla could be easily dealt with once his invasion proved successful.

“My prince,” Runolf gasped as he reached the crest of the hill. “I bring word from the master shipwright.”

“It seems you are in need of training,” Sven guffawed. “You grow soft!”

“That may be,” Runolf blushed while catching his breath, “but you forget the climb is steep!”

“What word do you bring that cannot wait?”

“The last warship is finished and the fleet is now ready to sail! What are your orders?”

“The men must train...many months have passed since our last campaign,” Sven reminded him. “Send word to Dalla that we will sail a fortnight earlier than planned. If she is not ready, she will wait until I send for her.”

“What of our women...and the children?” Runolf asked.

“What of them? They will be sent for once my throne is secured, not before. I will not endanger their lives.”

Chapter Five

The church was filled to capacity crowds as the people waited for the procession to begin. King Alfred and his family, along with Erik and Gwyneth, stood not far from the solemnly decorated altar. The children from noble families who would study in the new dwelling lined the aisle while the King's invited guests stood quietly in the nave as they anxiously awaited the presence of the Bishop of Canterbury.

A cool breeze flowed through open windows and sunbeams danced upon the floor, decorative sconces adorned the altar and walls while flickering flames created imaginative shadows throughout the holy dwelling.

Suddenly, the bells chimed with majestic splendor while a choir of monks sang songs of praise to the Lord. The smoke of burning incense filtered throughout the room as Brother Aidan carried the processional cross upon entering the church. Father Felix carried the Book of the Gospels and placed the holy text upon the pulpit while Bishop Asmund and Bishop Lupus solemnly walked the length of the aisle and approached the altar. Bishop Asmund began the ceremony when he made the Sign of the Cross and sang the familiar words.

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost."

The Lord's faithful softly chanted the appropriate response before Bishop Asmund recited the preparatory prayer, and the talented choir sang the ancient and venerable hymns, glorifying God with their angelic voices.

Bishop Lupus bowed before Bishop Asmund and received the blessing before reading the words from the Gospel. Bishop Lupus kissed the holy book after concluding his reading, and King Alfred solemnly chanted the responses while encouraging his subjects to sing the appropriate words.

Bishop Asmund stood before the center of the altar, reciting the offertory prayers. Incense encircled the worship table as Father Felix swung a thurible when the Lord's Supper was remembered. The eerie stillness signaled the holiest part of the service when the offered bread and wine became the body and blood of Christ. After the Bishops received the Sacred Host, distribution of the consecrated bread and wine was received by the religious community and assembled followers of the Christian faith.

Bishop Asmund chanted prayers of Thanksgiving before giving the final blessing. The choir of monks sang the Great Amen, then chanted the recessional hymn as the Mass was concluded.

Brother Aidan carried the processional cross while Father Felix carried the Book of the Gospels. Bishop Asmund and Bishop Lupus kissed the holy altar and followed Brother Aidan and Father Felix out of the church. The assembly bowed before King Alfred and his Queen as they walked slowly behind the solemn procession, but the King's subjects waited until the royal children left the church before hurriedly making their way to the school.

King Alfred's subjects cheered as the procession walked along the winding streets while the revered holy men led the way to the new building. Small children shyly offered the Queen bouquets of daises and lavender, and flower petals floated in the air. The solemn mood turned festive once the minstrels played joyful tunes and sang cheerful songs.

Gwyneth and Erik followed the royal children, but they stopped abruptly once they reached the impressive dwelling. King Alfred had designed a three-level building the likes of which had yet to be seen in all of Britannia. There were five rooms on the first two floors, but it was the third floor that held the King's dream. Shelves not only lined the walls, but were also positioned in long rows across the solitary room, and the library contained volumes of works that had not been seen in one location since the days of Charlemagne.

King Alfred had procured a vast collection of books, subjects ranging from astronomy and mathematics to medicine and scientific study, and works of Greek philosophers and Roman scholars shared the shelves with translated, ancient Jewish text.

Bishop Asmund walked into the main room where he took the thurible from Brother Aidan. Bishop Asmund incensed the rooms while Bishop Lupus chanted softly.

King Alfred beamed with pride as he followed the religious men up the stairs. The King was especially pleased when Bishop Asmund commented on the impressive size of the library, with its shelf space and number of books. Bishop Lupus directed Bishop Asmund towards the exquisitely carved stand where an illuminated copy of the Books of the Gospel that had been translated into the Saxon tongue was displayed.

Gwyneth and Erik stayed with the royal children as the small retinue followed the King and Queen throughout the rooms, but they

remained near the doorway once they reached the library. The Queen smiled, glancing at Gwyneth when Bishop Asmund examined the beautiful book.

“Are you pleased, Your Excellency?” King Alfred asked as Bishop Asmund admired the illumination.

“This work is impressive,” Bishop Asmund said. “Would this be your work, my King?”

“No, but the gifted scribe is present,” King Alfred replied.

“Bishop Lupus, then?” Bishop Asmund questioned while King Alfred beckoned Gwyneth to come forward.

Gwyneth blushed when her talent was recognized by her King, and she smiled at Erik before approaching the famed Bishop.

“My King,” Gwyneth bowed. “Your Excellency.”

“This is the Lady Gwyneth, Lord Richard’s daughter,” King Alfred said.

“Your work is...impressive,” Bishop Asmund told her. “Perhaps you would be willing to illuminate a book for my abbey?”

“I would be most pleased,” Gwyneth whispered.

“It is settled, then,” King Alfred grinned while Bishop Asmund turned his attention to the task at hand.

Bishop Asmund led the small retinue out of the library and returned to the main floor before stepping into the crowded street with King Alfred and his Queen following at a discreet distance while the King’s subjects cheered their approval.

“There is food and drink for all,” King Alfred shouted to the crowd. “Tables have been prepared in the courtyard. Make merry!”

The people stepped aside as their beloved King and honored visitors returned to the King’s private chambers to share a celebratory meal.

Erik paid no heed to the faces in the crowd as he returned with his wife to the King’s private quarters. It was not until they were almost upon the Great Hall when he heard a familiar voice shouting his name.

“My prince,” Rollo said. “It has been too long!”

“That it has,” Erik replied. “Come, we will eat first, and then we will speak.”

“My presence is not seemly...I will await you in your private chambers.”

“King Alfred and his Queen are most gracious,” Erik replied while leading Rollo inside the room. “You are most welcome at their table.”

Chapter Six

Elizabeth sat beneath the shady oak tree where she watched the children playing in a golden meadow. Gabriel shrieked with delight when he kicked the ball away from his opponent just before falling to the ground. The boys' laughter floated in the air as they chased after the ball, but nimble feet kicked the ball towards the center of a flowery field and away from the nearby trees. She smiled at her sleeping daughter, brushing away a falling leaf, yet when she glanced at Oriana, her thoughts turned to Emidus and Concordia, and she quietly prayed they still lived.

Elizabeth was quite perceptive and understood Stephen's devotion to duty, and she was aware her husband would serve his King before serving the needs of his family. She could only imagine the turmoil raging within his soul because he could not join in the search for his children.

King Alfred had been sympathetic as was Lord Richard, but Stephen's sworn allegiance was to his King and to his country. While men had been hired to search the land, only Stephen and Rhys could recognize Sidonius, especially since Arista's brother was not from these parts, yet Rhys' loyalty remained suspect because of his treachery. Elizabeth did not understand why Rhys could not be forgiven. Was not Rhys truly penitent as her brother, Cerdic, was truly penitent? Did not Cerdic prove his loyalty many times over since he had been forgiven? And how could Rhys prove his loyalty while being locked away in a monk's cell?

Elizabeth removed Brigid's letter from her pouch, reading the anxious words of a worried mother. While it was true that Kylan was of age, his fate remained unknown, and Brigid would not rest until she learned his whereabouts, but neither the King, nor her husband, would ever sanction what was being planned. She wondered if Lord Bayen was aware that Brigid had communicated with Jora, but then, she had yet to share Brigid's letters with Stephen, and she was still uncertain about seeking her husband's counsel. Elizabeth could not fault Brigid. Was it not a mother's right to ensure her children's safety? Were not men still searching for Emidus and Concordia? Brigid should be permitted to search for her son, and Jora should be permitted to search for her brother.

Elizabeth was also aware of the danger, not so much from marauding heathen raiders, but from the robbers who preyed upon

unsuspecting travelers. But what of King Alfred's laws? Since King Guthrum's defeat, a semblance of order prevailed throughout the kingdom. Did not the Festival of the Ancient Games entice travelers from as far away as Greece? Were not the roads patrolled by the King's men?

Besides, Rhys had knowledge of the many camps Rigr and Dalla had established, and he also could identify Sidonius. Was it not possible that Arista's brother had sought refuge in Mercia rather than risk the perils of a journey to Rome? And what of Jora? Surely her brother would have knowledge of Sidonius' whereabouts.

Stephen would never prevent her from visiting Exeter, but on what pretext? She dare not mention the abbey since Stephen might wish to pray at Arista's crypt, and she could not travel with Gabriel and Oriana, the danger was too great. She wanted to return to the market town and visit the valley, and see for herself how Sidonius had managed to flee the carnage, but she also wanted to follow the river and see where the boat may have come ashore. She was aware Lord Richard's men had thoroughly searched the area, but they had never been able to discover the truth, yet someone must have seen something, but they might have been too frightened to come forward. She believed a witness might speak to a woman who did not pose a threat, especially since it has been more than two summers since Sidonius vanished.

Elizabeth paid no heed to the holy monk and holy sister walking across the meadow. She was watching Gabriel with his friends while considering which path to follow, and was startled by a very familiar voice.

"Elizabeth," Jora said.

"Jora? Odulf?" Elizabeth asked. "Is it truly you?"

"Do we not look the same?" Odulf smiled while sitting beside Oriana and gently brushing his finger across the child's face. "Is this child your daughter?"

"Yes... and there is Gabriel," Elizabeth replied, pointing to her son as he kicked a ball across the knee-high grass. "Are you thirsty? I have wine."

"Thank you," Odulf said. "The dust settles in one's throat!"

"Have you word from Brigid? Have you been apprised of the plan?" Jora asked.

"Yes, but I have yet to seek Stephen's counsel."

“Stephen’s consent is not likely,” Odulf interjected. “Ulfr and Kylan are the King’s enemies.”

“Do not forget King Guthrum’s promise,” Jora reminded him. “Their lives are to be spared.”

“That might be true,” Odulf replied, “but if Elizabeth agrees to this plan, her deception could be perceived as treason.”

“How so? I do not need the King’s permission to travel these lands,” Elizabeth said uneasily. “Besides, I do not want to rule a kingdom, but I do want to find my husband’s children.”

“Has your decision been made?” Jora asked. “Will you meet with Rhys at the abbey as discussed?”

“I...I am not yet certain,” Elizabeth replied. “I do not like keeping secrets from my husband.”

“We will stay at the church tonight,” Odulf told her. “Be at the chapel after the morning meal. We will abide by your decision.”

“Elizabeth,” Jora said softly. “This plan is dangerous. Your life is forfeit should you stand before Dalla, and I dare not think of the consequences you will suffer once your husband and your King discover your deception. Your risks are truly great and I understand if you choose not to join us.”

“It saddens me that you cannot join us for the night meal,” Elizabeth whispered. “Stephen was most grateful for your loyalty when he was missing.”

“When this is finished, we will be most pleased to return with our daughter,” Jora smiled.

“Oh, Jora, I am selfishly remiss,” Elizabeth replied. “How is Freya?”

“She is walking and does not like being confined.”

“She is a handful,” Odulf laughed. “I fear for Helga and the boys.”

“You are most wicked,” Jora interjected. “Our daughter is much loved.”

Stephen and his Captain walked throughout the training field and headed towards the Gate Tower. There had been an unending influx of young men who wanted to learn how to wield a sword and throw a spear before the heathen returned to plunder the land. Stephen appreciated the discipline on the field as did the seasoned warriors who trained to keep in shape and hone their skills. Rumors

of an invasion fleet crossing the North Sea flourished since village children had been frightened by a Dragonship sailing the rivers.

Stephen's thoughts turned to Gwyneth when he glanced upon the Keep as he remembered the days when his father commanded the fortification, when he trained with David and secretly watched Gwyneth learning to wield a sword under David's tutelage. He was proud of his little brother, the seasoned warrior, who was in command of the fortification at Chichester, just as he was proud of his sister who had challenged her father and two Kings to protect the man who held her heart.

Stephen dismissed his Captain as he approached the Gate Tower. He climbed the stairs and glanced across the countryside, and laughed loudly when Gabriel kicked the ball away from his playmates. He saw Elizabeth beneath the tree and noticed that Oriana appeared to be asleep, but he did not recognize the two religious figures sitting beside his wife, yet he readily identified Cerdic riding through the gate.

"Cerdic!" Stephen shouted. "Join me."

Cerdic dismounted and was soon standing beside his sister's husband. He, too, laughed as his nephew chased the ball across the meadow, but he also saw Elizabeth with her companions. He believed the strangers might be known to him, but their faces were not readily seen.

"Has there been word from Rome?" Stephen asked. "Has Marius been found?"

"It is Marius who protects my son," Cerdic told him. "They await your father and will return with him, but they must first visit Charlemagne's palace at Aachen since King Charles wishes to meet King Alfred's emissary. However, King Alfred has already dispatched a ship, and it will not be long before they grace these shores."

"That is good news, Cerdic. Hopefully, I will be permitted to search with Marius. Do you believe my children live?"

"There is always hope, Stephen. Bishop Germanus meets daily with the Pilgrims, and he is confident he will discover the truth. Someone had to have seen a man traveling with two little ones, someone must know their whereabouts."

"I cannot thank you enough. What are your plans?"

"I leave for Exeter in two days time, once the ship is ready."

“Elizabeth and I would be most pleased if you would stay with us, if your duties permit.”

“Most certainly. Besides, I must not disappoint my nephew!”

“Come, we will join Elizabeth.”

Stephen and Cerdic were in good spirits as they headed towards the open gates while Elizabeth returned to the citadel carrying Oriana and holding Gabriel’s hand, but Gabriel broke away from his mother’s grasp and ran towards his father and uncle. Stephen knelt, waiting for his son with outstretched arms, and laughed heartily when Gabriel hit him with the full force of his body, but he was grateful for Cerdic’s steady hand, which kept him from falling backwards. Stephen warmly embraced his son while Elizabeth rushed towards her husband and brother.

“Cerdic! I am most pleased to see you,” Elizabeth exclaimed. “How long is your visit?”

“Two days, dear sister. I have been given chambers in your quarters, if you have no objections.”

“Why would I object?” Elizabeth chided before noticing a devilish grin. “You both are most wicked.”

“I have a sword,” Gabriel proudly interjected as Stephen led the way towards their private quarters. “I am being trained to fight.”

“Would you care to train with me,” Cerdic winked.

“I would train now,” Gabriel replied while grabbing Cerdic’s hand and pulling him in the opposite direction.

“Gabriel!” Elizabeth said. “This is not the time. Your uncle is tired from his journey and is in need of rest.”

“I am sorry, uncle,” Gabriel whispered. “I meant no offense.”

“There is no offense,” Cerdic told the boy. “I am anxious to see what you have been taught.”

Elizabeth was at peace while walking between the only men she loved unconditionally. She silently thanked God for sending her brother to her on this very day, since she needed someone to confide in, someone she could trust, someone who could, hopefully, advise her as to which path to follow, yet fearing Stephen’s wrath once her treachery was made known, and fearing her husband’s torment once he learned of her betrayal.

She knew in her heart, that her brother was trustworthy. Had not Cerdic suffered much and learned from his trials? Cerdic understood deception and falsehoods just as he understood forgiveness and redemption. She would need to speak to Cerdic

alone, after the evening meal. She would seek his counsel because she trusted him, she would rely on his wisdom and seek his help should Stephen be unforgiving once her husband learned of her duplicity.